

New Faith-Based Frontiers: Black Lives Matter & "Dying of Whiteness"

Stanley Carlson-Thies' essay discussing the evolution of the federal government's faith-based initiative had the effect of sending me down "memory lane." As a pastor/journalist/policy grunt whose work revolved chiefly around criminal justice issues and their impact on the church and civil society as a whole, I became involved very early in discussions surrounding what such an initiative might look like "on the ground." In particular, I remember working with John Dilulio, the inaugural director of the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, and marveling as he buttressed moral, economic, and constitutional arguments in favor of a faith-friendly federal policy with the creation of a model mentoring program designed to serve the children of my inmate-congregants. The Amachi Program, which achieved great acclaim under the leadership of former Philadelphia mayor W. Wilson Goode Sr., was designed to be the embodiment of the faith-based initiative: a nonpartisan, public/private partnership aimed at serving those whom Jesus referred to as "the least of these", to the benefit of society as a whole. In the past two decades Amachi, in its various permutations, has served hundreds of thousands of at-risk children and youth, and served as the model for the (now defunct) federal Mentoring Children of Prisoners program.

However, as with most things, the devil got into the details. As I noted in a 2007 PRRUCS report, from that hopeful beginning the faith-based initiative soon "became steeped in a greater-than-usual harangue of political misinformation and hyperbole. Far from seeing the initiative as an opportunity to supply service providers who labored on the front lines of poverty and social dysfunction with much-needed funds, talking heads from both sides of the political aisle weighed in with jeremiads that warned of an apocalypse in social policy."

Carlson-Thies does an excellent job of summarizing the regulatory and structural iterations that the partnership initiative has undergone through the years. Yet as an interested observer who argued in favor of the policy and sought to influence its development in op-eds and little-noticed white papers, I'm of the opinion that we haven't gotten it quite right yet. Perhaps more to the point, we've gotten away from what I believe was the defining vision of the policy.

Amachi, as I stated earlier, was designed – quite intentionally – to be a visual reminder of what the policy could look like in practice. Irrespective of one's political position on crime and incarceration, for example, who could argue with all parties coming together in a low risk, high yield partnership to provide mentors for those whom Dilulio and others have described as "the most at-risk youth in America"? It was low-hanging fruit, a win-win for all stakeholders involved, including entities that are often at odds with one another, such as police, politicians and community groups. That the mentoring program would operate primarily in houses of worship --which included representatives from the above stakeholder groups among its members, and would issue inspirational calls to action from their pulpits – made the image complete. To be sure, not everyone bought into this model, including many churches for whom such service stretched their understanding of ministry. But that's not the point. The important

thing is that the program provided the policy with a broad-based, nonpartisan vision to which to aspire.

In 2021, such a unifying notion is much-needed and in short supply. The juxtaposition of the Black Lives Matter movement on one hand, and the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building on the other, provides frightening imagery as to the nation's racial and cultural divisions. Having spent many years as an African American inner-city pastor, and having extensively researched the confluence of issues that made the BLM movement necessary – including, but not limited to, [changing demographics and the phenomenon of “suburban poverty”](#); [the strong correlation between white fears and police violence against blacks](#); and [the challenge to the church in facilitating healthy police/community relations in both urban and suburban communities](#) – I was reasonably confident in my assessment of (though without solutions to) that particular problem.

Even as I conducted my research, however, I found myself increasingly stymied by the anger and seeming intransigence of many of my white, evangelical friends. On several occasions I was “unfriended” on social media by long-time friends with whom I'd shared a common faith (or so I thought) because they couldn't seem to understand that I identified with people of color who were dying at the hands of police. The seemingly messianic view they had of then-President Donald Trump was a point of contention as well.

To be sure, I was aware that many whites, particularly in rural communities, are themselves facing dire circumstances. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, for example, have written extensively about the rise among working class whites of unemployment, cohabitation (without benefit of clergy), out-of-wedlock births, and addiction to alcohol and drugs (particularly opioids). In his book, *Dying of Whiteness*, psychiatrist Jonathan Metzl goes further, arguing that the dynamics leading to what Case and Deaton have described as “deaths of despair” often reflect personal statements of defiance by refusing to accept government-funded medical treatment and benefits that, in their minds, put them on the same level with minorities. To them, such sacrifices were made in defense of what Civil War-era Confederates might have called “the noble cause”: “I met many people...who were dying in various overt or invisible ways as a result of political beliefs or systems linked to the defense of white “ways of life” or concerns about minorities or poor people hoarding resources. People...who put their own lives on the line, rather than imagining scenarios in which diversity or equity might better the flourishing of everyone.”

In other words, for many poor and working class whites life in America is viewed as a “zero sum” game. Policies that serve a broad range of Americans – immigrants and minorities, as well as poor under-educated whites – are deemed by many to undermine the notions of racial superiority that they apparently embrace. For them, to give to immigrants and minorities means, by definition, to take from whites. Thus the oft-quoted statement by Emory University historian Carol Anderson that “If you've always been privileged, equality begins to look like oppression.”

How, then, do we bridge this gap? How do we come up with a unifying vision that both BLM activists and Proud Boys can embrace? The truth is that we probably can't. What we may be able to do, however, is to develop what criminologist Jeremy Travis called in another context, "[mirror support systems](#)". In Travis' vision, judicially-mandated internal and external supports – e.g., drug treatment, anger management, and other treatments – would be available to inmates both while in prison and upon their re-entry to the community, as a condition of parole and with a view toward reducing recidivism.

What is proposed here borrows Travis' phrase but appropriates it in a different way. What I propose is a faith-based policy that emphasizes community-level, on-the-ground engagement and a public/private toolkit of research-based services and opportunities that could serve as the public, on-the-ground face of the administration in targeted, stressed communities irrespective of race, ethnicity or locale.

For example, in the wake of former Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin's second-degree murder conviction in the death of George Floyd, the Biden Justice Department has announced a "pattern or practice" investigation into policing in that city. In the past, such investigations, depending on their findings, have often led to the creation of consent decrees stipulating strict guidelines regarding police behavior, with a view toward curbing abuses. The Trump administration famously backed away from Obama-era consent decrees, vacating one and refusing to vigorously enforce the federal monitoring provisions set forth in others. While current [Attorney General Merrick Garland has ended Trump-era restrictions on consent decrees](#), perhaps an appropriate use of faith-based staff might be to work in conjunction with DOJ personnel in monitoring the situations in several communities where such agreements are in place (e.g., Minneapolis, Seattle, Ferguson, etc.). Specifically, faith-based personnel could meet with stakeholders – clergy, police, citizens groups, etc. – to learn and assess the concerns of those groups. Equally important, staff could -- where stakeholders deem appropriate -- make available a range of research-based tools to help augment and facilitate existing community efforts.

Regarding rural communities, research has shown that among the effects of the opioid crisis has been the rise in crime and incarceration among white men and women. Indeed, studies have documented [that white women now constitute the fastest growing segment of the nation's prison population](#). This increase is skewed largely toward poor white women, and, because of the resulting effect on child custody, often has a disproportionate impact on their children and families. This, within a context where drug courts and other sentencing reforms are largely unavailable in counties with fewer than 100,000 residents. One approach to addressing this problem might be for DOJ and faith-based staff to work with targeted state and county courts to develop innovative sentencing alternatives, while simultaneously working with community stakeholders to augment wraparound services.

An array of research-based services could be utilized to assist in each of the above efforts, as needed. Among those I have worked with:

- [Amachi](#) – Trains volunteers from religious congregations, law enforcement and civic organizations to serve children and youth severely at-risk of delinquency, crime and incarceration.
- [Healing Communities \(HC\)](#) – In partnership with the [Philadelphia Leadership Foundation](#), HC trains religious congregations to serve their members who have been affected by crime, incarceration and re-entry from jail or prison. Provides a framework to creatively address police/community issues.
- [Community Investment Network \(CIN\)](#) – [In connection with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#), seeks to redefine philanthropy in distressed communities by encouraging the creation of small donor-advised funds known as “giving circles” specifically designed to serve needs in those communities.
- [Minding Our Business \(MOB\)](#) – In association with the [National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship \(NFTE\)](#), MOB provides at-risk middle- and high school students with training in entrepreneurship through classroom instruction; opportunities for product development, marketing, and retail sales; and professional mentoring. The effect is to provide kids with a “hook” to complete their education (at least through high school), while increasing their self-confidence and communication skills.

Each of the above programs works with and often as a part of congregationally-based ministry. For example, both Amachi and HC are designed not only to train congregational members, but also to function as extensions of church ministry. A major premise of CIN in its effort to redefine philanthropy for poor populations is that African American churches – through scholarship funds, benevolence committees, and the like -- traditionally serve as models of philanthropy in the black community. CIN thus works with black churches in particular to both leverage and build upon that tradition, often resulting in the creation of several giving circles in a given congregation.

Regarding MOB, a personal anecdote is in order. I served for many years as the president of the Trenton Ecumenical Area Ministry (TEAM), a small faith-based intermediary and advocacy organization. In 2009, in response to a rise in crime and violence among our city’s youth, TEAM worked with MOB, two local churches, and the local school district to develop Empowering Youth Options (EYO), using entrepreneurial training as an incentive for learning. In the ensuing years, MOB – which had its own programming, fundraising apparatus and 20-year track record – essentially adopted EYO, even providing a faith-based curriculum for our students, separate from their own students, combining business principles with biblical ethics. At the same time, TEAM – which raised its own funds for our portion of the programming – worked with the congregations to provide a range of wraparound services, such as workshops on life skills, conflict resolution, gang awareness, and intergenerational substance abuse.

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The above programs and others like them are road-tested and proven effective. Many have been around for decades but operate below the radar of most policymakers. Even more important, they are nonpartisan and can work in most any setting, whether urban or rural.

Through the years, my involvement in the faith-based initiative has been guided by the words of Proverbs 31:10-11 – “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

It is in that spirit that I share these proposals.

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