

Bush's Faith-Based Program Helped Children of the Incarcerated

In his commentary "The Biden Partnerships Plan is Faith-Based Initiative 5.0," Stanley Carlson-Thies traces the federal government's partnerships with faith-based and neighborhood programs to create a more civil society. Indeed, as Carlson-Thies suggests, one must take a longer look starting with President Bill Clinton. At that time, the concern many government officials had was the separation of church and state issue – whether government should fund programs that involved religious organizations. A big step was taken in 1996 with Bill Clinton and the Charitable Care Act that gave birth to Charitable Choice. Essentially, Charitable Choice specified the equal eligibility of faith-based organizations for federal funding. Moreover, there would be no bias either against or for religious applicants. In fact, under Charitable Choice, faith-based groups could accept federal funds without suppressing their religious identity. It went further – persons entitled to services could receive them without religious discrimination.

This Act was significant since it reformed funding rules that made it possible for churches and other religious organization to collaborate with the federal government without losing their religious identity.

Carlson-Thies is correct in stating that it was really George W. Bush, by creating the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiative, who changed the game for faith-based organizations' involvement in the community. It enabled the executive branch to establish policies, priorities, and objectives for the federal government's comprehensive effort to enlist, equip, empower, and expand the work of faith-based and other community organizations.

This paper will provide the story of Amachi and how the action of George W. Bush impacted at least 6,000 congregations across the country and impacted more than 350,000 young people who had one or both parents in prison.

In 1999 Public/Private Ventures (PPV), led by Senior Advisor and board member Dr. John J. Dilulio, Jr., and Vice-President Joseph P. Tierney, and with generous funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, began developing a mentoring program for children whose parents were incarcerated or formerly incarcerated in Philadelphia. The initiative was named "Amachi," a Nigerian Ebo word that means "who knows but what God has brought us through this child." Amachi adopted the motto, "People of Faith Mentoring Children of Promise." On September 1, 2000, PPV recruited me, Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr. – former Mayor and Deputy Assistant Secretary of U.S. Department of Education, to lead the effort of the Amachi Program.

The project was a partnership of P/PV, BBBSA, and the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society (CRRUCS) at the University of Pennsylvania, an organization that conducted research on the role of religion in contemporary urban America.

W. Wilson Goode

Volunteer mentors would be recruited from inner-city congregations to provide one-to-one mentoring to the children. Beyond being a source of mentors, the congregations would be key partners in the initiative. There were several reasons for turning to churches in this way. In the communities where the children lived, the church was often the most important remaining institution, and many of the churches had been strong supporters for communities as well as a source of volunteers who were already forces for positive change. Volunteers from local congregations had helped feed the hungry, provided shelter for the homeless, run day-care centers, built housing for senior citizens, and operated after-school programs. Thus, it was logical to believe that congregations, which saw their missions extending beyond the walls of their buildings and into their communities, would respond to Amachi's vision of providing crucial support for children in their neighborhoods.

The recruiting of churches began in November 2000 and by April 2001, the first mentors enrolled were meeting with their mentees. On July 4, 2001, President George W. Bush visited program participants and the Amachi staff at the Greater Exodus Baptist Church at Broad and Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia. Later that same year in December, President Bush returned to Philadelphia, this time at Bright Hope Baptist Church, where the late Congressman Rev. William H. Gray III was Pastor, and met this time with the mentors and mentees. The following January, President Bush in his State of the Union address, proposed funding a 50 million dollar program for children of prisoners. By the end of January 2002, Amachi was operating with 42 churches and had almost 400 matches.

Amachi's impact also reached beyond the congregations and the children who were directly involved. The program's start up in Philadelphia coincided with President George W. Bush's stated policy goal of stimulating faith-based initiatives as a means of addressing many social ills, he drew upon the unique blend of traditional community presence and compassion found in congregations across the United States. Subsequently, in his 2003 State of the Union Address, the President specifically proposed a \$150 million initiative that would bring mentors to 100,000 children of prisoners. This led the federal Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) to create a Mentoring Children of Prisoners (MCP) program, which supported approximately 220 programs in all 50 states.

At that time, statistics showed that about 10.7 million U.S. children, ages eighteen and under had at least one parent who was under some form of supervision by the criminal justice system. In addition, more than 1.7 million of those children had a parent who was incarcerated either in a federal or state prison or a local jail. The majority of the children in these situations were very young - more than half were less than ten years old, and more than 20 percent were younger than age five.

Many of these children shared the challenges faced by the larger population of this country's at-risk youth, including poverty, violence, limited opportunities for an adequate education, and a future that appeared to hold very little promise. However, children with a parent who is incarcerated or under supervision often faced additional difficulties. In many cases, they suffered the unique trauma of seeing a parent arrested and taken away. And with a parent's incarceration, their connection to an essential adult in their lives was cut off. In the interim, while a parent is in prison, children might live with a grandparent, aunt or uncle, the unincarcerated parent, or in a foster home or other facility. Some were separated from their siblings or shifted from one caregiving arrangement to another and often the caregivers were also living in poverty and lacking personal resources, which resulted in the children suffering from feelings of anger, sadness, shame, guilt, and depression. Consequently, they often acted out inappropriately, had classroom behavioral difficulties and low academic performance. Not surprisingly, many of the youth in these circumstances would find themselves in serious trouble as well. In fact, according to a U.S. Senate report, children of prisoners are six times as likely, as other children, to be incarcerated at some point in their lives. Without effective intervention strategies, as many as 70 percent of those children would become involved with the criminal justice system. At one prison in Eastern Pennsylvania, men from three generations of the same family – a grandfather, his son, and his grandson – met for the very first time when they found themselves locked away in the same prison.

It was for that reason that the Amachi Training Institute was established, to build the capacity of mentoring organizations on a broad scale. Each Amachi program began with a day and a half of training followed by technical assistance to help programs recruit volunteers and identify children via their parents in local prisons. That hands-on partnership put the training into action. All programs also received training on the appropriate use of government funds.

Amachi conducted 141 Amachi training sessions for 3,536 people from 1,026 organizations in 559 cities in forty-seven states, as well as Canada, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. In addition, Amachi conducted 268 site visits, provided technical assistance to 226 agencies in 116 cities in forty-two states and the District of Columbia, resulting in rapid program replication and growth. Since 2001, more than 350,000 children have been served by the 359 agencies in the Amachi program.

At the time, studies of the Amachi model in the state of Texas reported that 97.6 percent of children participating in Amachi programs were promoted to the next grade level, 78.7 percent of adults reported an improvement in child self-confidence, 52 percent of children were less likely to skip school, and 47 percent of children reported better academic performance. Through the second year of the three-year longitudinal study, none of the Amachi youth had been referred to the juvenile justice system.

W. Wilson Goode

Amachi's success demonstrates that President George W. Bush was accurate in believing that when churches and faith organizations partner with government, children with parents in prison can be transformed through mentorship at a critical stage in their lives. Likewise, Amachi's success with children of the incarcerated is not unique, other organizations have had similar results. Thus, when local congregations are involved in resolving problems for children at risk, the outcome can be dramatically changed. This is one example of how government partnership with churches and communities can change the outcome for the many youth at-risk across the nation.

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President & CEO – Amachi, Inc.
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Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr. is the President and CEO of Amachi, Inc., a nationally acclaimed faith-based program for mentoring children of incarcerated parents; and Chairman and CEO of Self, Incorporated – a nonprofit corporation dedicated to serving homeless men and women. Dr. Goode is Chairman and CEO of the Philadelphia Leadership Foundation. He is a Senior Fellow at the Fox School at the University of Pennsylvania. He was the first African American member and Chairman of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission. He broke racial barriers again in 1980 with his appointment as Managing Director for the City of Philadelphia. He became the City's first African American Mayor in 1984 and served two terms. He subsequently spent 7 years as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Education in the Clinton Administration. Goode has been a member of the First Baptist Church of Paschall for 67 years.