

Anti-Poverty Policy and Practice: Ethnographic Case Study of Churches  
In Appalachia, Kentucky and South-Central, Los Angeles

A Preliminary Report

by

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“. . .we're here not just for ourselves, you want to be a part of something that outlives you. Some of these broad, grand-sounding statements – are very true. The fact that there is in the Kingdom of God, justice--that *justice* is something that is very real, that really exists.... [When I've helped someone] a spark was there! Something was there. And it's not a matter of hearing, 'oh thank you, I appreciate it,' because that doesn't happen. But at the same time you see there's some kind of a something exchanged that is so blooming contagious that you want to see it again. . . .It is a time of great, of *great* value. A contagious moment. Everybody rejoices.”

-- *Lay Leader, St. James Episcopal, Floyd County, KY*

“The families we serve right now are experiencing some benefits [from the new welfare legislation]. Our church is working with the government in its effort to create these programs locally. We are also encouraging people to be self-sufficient and to give back to their communities. We have some great success stories. Marginal students that were told to go to trade school are doctors and lawyers today. . . .our motto to our kids is that no young person has the right to be unproductive. Bottom line: get off your duff and make your contribution.”

-- *Minister, College Prep for At-Risk Youths Outreach  
First African Methodist Episcopal, Los Angeles, CA*

Shortly after President Clinton signed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996” (PL-193) into law, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Commissioner Donna Shalala informed readers of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “in many policy debates, research plays an important, even decisive role. . . .*But when it comes to welfare [policy], research has cast a shorter shadow, for several reasons.*” The ambiguity and conflicting interpretations of human behavior which social science research offers is the reason why “policy makers often have to make leaps of faith.” Indeed, Shalala continued, research has not provided complete answers for policy makers “because welfare reform is fundamentally about changing the culture of our welfare system—created more than 60 years ago—to insure that it accurately reflects 21st-century realities and values” (Shalala, 1996, emphasis added). This claim, which has been echoed elsewhere, reveals the need to research the cultural dimensions of welfare. The non-profit welfare service delivery sector has grown apace with the public welfare system throughout the 20th century (Salamon, 1995). Faith-based non-profit organizations have significantly contributed to this growth yet have been woefully under-researched (Salamon, 1995). The implications of understanding religious responses to poverty are enormous in light of 1996's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. This new legislation authorizes States to purchase social services directly from religious organizations, including church congregations. Often called the “Charitable Choice” part of PRWO, Title I, Section 104 has somehow escaped much controversy. This ethnographic study of two culturally

dissimilar Protestant churches and their community relations illuminates values issues that are central to welfare policy decision-making and documents activities that contribute to knowledge of faith-based non-profit organization roles in social welfare.

The best way to learn about church-based anti-poverty initiatives is to talk with, observe and document activist congregations in the most impoverished regions in the country. The Southern and Western regions of the country contribute disproportionately large shares to the nation's total poverty population so this study focuses on churches in poor areas in California and Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> First A.M.E. of South Central Los Angeles is a 16,500-member African-American Protestant congregation located within the impoverished epicenter of the urban eruptions and fires sparked by the Rodney King police brutality issue of 1992. It currently stewards more than \$40 million in community resources and operates on an annual budget of more than \$7 million. In contrast, St. James Episcopal is a congregation of thirty-seven Caucasian, confirmed adult communicants in the Central Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky. It is located in Floyd County among coal mines, mountain hollows and tobacco patches characteristic of the most impoverished rural region in the country. Its annual average operating budget of \$45,000 puts it among the more financially healthy churches in its area. It would be difficult to find two more culturally dissimilar groups. These congregations differ in terms of race, region, size, denomination and community composition. Yet, the lay leaders and ordained ministers of both groups agree more often than not, about key features of the new welfare legislation. The reasons they give for their attitudes and activities are grounded in similar theologies which seem to overcome their cultural differences. Welfare policy makers can learn from these people who strongly believe that "the poor will be with us always" and who also dedicate their lives to fighting poverty. As the lay leader and minister indicate in their statements above, serving others in need assumes existence or creation of a relationship. This study examines the nature of these kinds of community-building relationships.

This study is guided by the question, are these culturally diverse congregations, St James and First AME, more similar than different, in the core ways that affect their anti-poverty activities? This paper reports responses from congregational leaders to questions regarding new features of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.<sup>2</sup> It begins by setting out the research questions investigated and summarizes preliminary insights that have emerged in field research thus far. Relevant literature is then reviewed and the study's methodology is detailed. A case study describes in detail each church's programs in its particular community context. The final section discusses policy implications and future research.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1994 the South had the highest regional poverty rate. Since 1994, the West has experienced a poverty rate not significantly different from the South. In 1996, 15.4% of the residents in the West and 15.1% of the residents in the South were poor. The South's share of total population is 35% and South's share of poverty population is 39%. The West's share of total population is 22% and the West's share of poverty population is 25%. The East and North account for 43% of total population and 36% of poverty population (WSL Bulletin, p.74).

<sup>2</sup> This preliminary review is of one part of the author's Church, Need and Response Project. This study of congregations in Los Angeles and Appalachia is supported by a Small Grant from the Joint Center for Poverty Research, Northwestern University and University of Chicago. An allied comparative case study, supported by the Louisville Institute, was begun simultaneously with this study. It examines the anti-poverty programs of four rural, Protestant congregations of comparable size in the West and the South. All four churches are United Methodist Churches. The two Caucasian churches in southeastern Colorado are ministered by a woman pastor as are the two African-American churches in Georgia. Plans for fieldwork in a white, ethnic Roman Catholic congregation in Boston are underway. Additionally, fieldwork has been completed that examines Mormon social service provision in Appalachia. The aim of the CNRP is to examine and report on faith communities that on the surface, differ as much as possible to see whether their beliefs about issues central to anti-poverty practice and policy do also.

## **Research Questions, Responses & Emergent Themes**

This study is guided by the question: Are these culturally diverse congregations, St James and First AME, more similar than different, in the core ways that affect their anti-poverty activities? To operationalize this general question we ask three questions. First, is there consistency in the congregation's definitions of "dependency" and "self-sufficiency"? Secondly, how do these congregations' understand and articulate "poverty" as it relates to "family"? How do they compare and contrast? Finally, is there more agreement or less agreement between the theological assumptions that drive the meanings reported and revealed by congregation leaders regarding the concept of "service"? If these concepts are similarly theologically informed, and motivate the policy and programs of each congregation, then the issues of race, region, denomination and church size recede in significance.

Textual analyses have begun on each of the questions posed in the study. While it is too early to report detailed findings of the pattern of responses to them, preliminary responses are offered. First, religious leaders in both congregations speak of dependency and self-sufficiency in remarkably similar ways. Interestingly, the themes that emerge out of these statements and stories are intimately related to images of community, government and God. When people talk about "community" they inevitably reveal where they locate themselves. Some people describe community as including themselves and others describe it as excluding themselves. An "us versus them" model of community is often used. Consequently, expression of attitudes about dependency and self-sufficiency is rich with "us and them" language.

Government social welfare programs and provision are viewed in paradoxical terms. On the one hand government is cast as an unapproachable monolithic system and on the other government is personal. Everyone intimately knows people who work for government social services offices and/or receive public assistance benefits. This was true in both the city and the country. Of particular interest to the concern with dependency and self-sufficiency, however, is the relevance of an image of God that assumes a radical dependency on the part of the believer. Both groups of church leaders feel strongly that public assistance programs have in the past nurtured dependency among program recipients and instilled an anti-work ethic. On the other hand, while some voice support for an idealized notion of self-sufficiency, there is deep suspicion. As several leaders noted, there is something wrong with demanding that poor people demonstrate greater self-sufficiency than anyone else is able to attain. For Christians, a state of dependency is a given. So how can this be reconciled with a goal of encouraging people to imagine themselves able to achieve an irreligious autonomy? Thus, the issues of dependency and self-sufficiency are fraught with ambiguity.

Secondly, these church leaders viewed poverty and family similarly although their perspectives differed in important ways. Many additional issues interweave with these two topics. Speaking about poverty inevitably sparked both groups of leaders to reflect on issues of work and economic opportunity as well as their personal obligation and duty to serve others. Discussion about poverty was most often cast in terms of defining poverty as having both spiritual as well as material dimensions. This raised issues of the proper role of the church and how it might as well as how it ought to respond. These congregation leaders support Michael Ignatieff's claim that "questions of need are always questions of obligation" (Ignatieff, 1984). Additionally, discussion of poverty was viewed in terms of family.

Family issues are enormously complicated. Yet, as Ellwood's pivotal work and more current studies affirm, "poverty is a family-based concept in the United States" (Blank, 1997, p.

10; Ellwood, 1988) . In turn, family and work issues were inseparable in almost all of the conversations as indicated in powerful studies (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Browning, Miller-McLemore, Couture, Lyon, & Franklin, 1997; Carr & Leeuwen, 1996; Stackhouse, 1997) . This was overwhelmingly true for leaders in both congregations. On the one hand, a very conventional image of the structure and purpose of a nuclear family is upheld by both sets of leaders. On the other hand, the assumptions of what “family” actually looks like in each case is so infused with racial, regional and ecclesiological particularities that focusing on the commonalities between these groups will not be done without due attention to the distinctions between them as well.

The final primary concept around which questions cluster is “service.” Preliminary review of the data texts suggests that this is a multi-layered, ambiguous concept from which numerous controversies arise. The St. James and FAME leaders vary between and among themselves in defining service. Stories of duty and obligation infuse discussions of serving others. Issues of self-sacrifice intertwine with language of self-interest. Biblical warrants are offered, and some scripture seems to be invoked more often than others -- even if the passages appear to contradict one another. These leaders locate their thinking about service in terms of how need is defined as well as how they define who their neighbor is. Consequently, the issues raised earlier about “us” versus “them” arise implicitly in a variety of contexts. These questions regarding dependency, poverty, family and service appear to lead to additional core themes which will be explored as this project unfolds.

## **Literature Review**

The rising enthusiasm for volunteerism and hope that community-based, non-profit organizations will increase their contribution is evident in the increasing calls for public-private partnerships; (Blank, 1997; Brooks, Liebman, & Schelling, 1984; Skocpol, 1995; Smith & Lipsky, 1993) some specifically argue for increased religious-based partnerships with government groups (Carlson-Thies & Skillen, 1996; Jeavons, 1994; Monsma, 1996b; Perkins, 1993) . PRWO’s shift from federal to state responsibility also signals greater local participation. If the voluntary and non-profit sectors are going to play larger roles in social welfare provision, they will also play larger roles in framing the very definitions of the problems which call for resolution. Given the magnitude of the religious-based non-profit and voluntary social welfare efforts, greater knowledge about religious groups is needed (Monsma, 1996a; Netting, 1982).

Poverty is variously defined, depending on how “need” is perceived. How much income is needed and/or enough? What difference does income make in the life of an impoverished family? Current analysis reveals that once a base line of material sustenance is obtained, families make choices that have long term economic consequences which may or may not result in social difficulty (Mayer, 1997) . Poverty has been described as one of several familiar “intractable policy controversies” (Schon & Rein, 1994, p. xi). Schon and Rein (1994), Roe, and Lipsky (Lipsky, 1980; Roe, 1994) persuasively argue that innovative policy solutions can come from analysis of the narrative frameworks of experienced policy implementors. Conflicts and continuities among the narrative assumptions of these ‘street-level bureaucrats’ can point to alternatives previously unexplored. Anti-poverty policy makers need fresh interpretations of the problems, solutions and goals which can come from listening to groups actively engaging issues of poverty, which have been for some time, mute. Faith communities with anti-poverty programs have something to teach policy makers in this area. But why study Christian congregations?

A polling study based on more than 9,600 interviews from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press recently concluded: “Religion is a strong and growing force in the way Americans think about politics. It has a bearing on political affiliation, political values, policy attitudes and candidate choice. . . . More specifically, religion has a strong impact on the political views of Christian Americans who represent 84% of the voting-age population” (Kohut, 1996, p. 1 emphasis added). Policy makers tend to care about such large groups of voters. Religious values have long been part of American public life (Yankelovich, 1994) . The reason it is necessary to focus attention on Christian attitudes now is because they are increasingly driving policy attitudes. Indeed it is has been found that religion’s “increasing influence on political opinion and behavior rivals factors such as race, region, age, social class and gender (Kohut, 1996, p. 1 emphasis added). How is this influence manifest? What might this claim mean for decision-makers? If some of the very categories researchers have come to rely upon to distinguish political attitudes (race, region, location) are trumped by religious values, then when it comes to a particular policy area, more must be learned about how religious values operate. This comparative study of two cultural divergent congregations offers a beginning in the anti-poverty policy area.

While congregation studies is a relatively recent area of research within the sociology and history of religion fields, many discoveries of how congregations operate have been made (Alexander, 1991; Ammerman, 1997; Ashbrook, 1966; Benson & Dorsett, 1971; Browning, 1991; Browning, 1994; Dolan, 1994; Gilkey, 1994; Hadaway, 1982; Holifield, 1994; Hopewell, 1987; Marty, 1994; Warner, 1994; Wind & Lewis, 1994) . More recently researchers have begun examining congregations’ anti-poverty policies and programs. Rogers and Ronsheim report on African-American church partnerships with community social service providers in Pittsburgh (Rogers & Ronsheim, 1998). Cnaan and Wineburg have looked at programs in North Carolina (Cnaan, Kasternakis, & Wineburg, 1993; Cnaan & Wineburg, 1997; Wineburg, 1990-91; Wineburg, Spakes, & Finn, 1983) . Individual church member’s attitudes toward poverty have been studied, of these Wuthnow and Stackhouse’s studies are particularly informative, (Stackhouse, 1997; Wuthnow, 1991; Wuthnow, 1994a; Wuthnow, 1994b; Wuthnow, 1995; Wuthnow, 1997; Wuthnow & Hodgkinson, 1990) . One thing is clear, a majority of Protestants believe that “the poor will be with us always” (Wuthnow, 1994). Of the numerous social issues researched, the Pew Center polling research found the issue of “the plight of the poor is a common theme in most religious traditions, and was the issue most commonly mentioned by church-going respondents as being discussed by clergy (87%). . . .” (Kohut, 1994, p. 29 emphasis added). This area at the intersection of religion and politics is fertile ground for researchers and policy makers.

## **Methodology**

This study is an exploratory, comparative case study. The social sciences have increasingly used ethnographies and case studies. They are particularly helpful in the generation of new theoretical constructs (Adler & Adler, 1987; Hersen & Barlow, 1976; Kazdin, 1981; Rank, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1981). The goal of this comparative method is twofold. The first goal is to develop a “thick description” of each subject congregations’ responses to poverty in their context (Geertz, 1973a; Geertz, 1973b). These descriptions are primarily based on transcribed tape recorded interviews between fieldworkers and congregation leaders (both ordained and lay). All participants in recorded discussions signed Informed Consent forms approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board.

To systematically organize and compare the two congregations' responses, we loaded into NUD\*IST, the qualitative research software program, sixty transcribed interviews from First A.M.E. and fifteen transcriptions from St. James Episcopal.<sup>3</sup> Text searches gathered all individual responses to key concepts (e.g., need, poverty, family, dependency, self-sufficiency, service, work, government, church, neighbor). Specific questions and responses were coded in each transcript and then culled from all of them to create detailed reports for analysis. We are now in the process of organizing these reports into theme clusters that are more amenable to comparison across the field sites. The second methodological aim is to use French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's interpretive method to analyze the content of the data. This form of content analysis is detailed below.

### *Developing the "Thick Description"*

The case studies describe two congregations' practices, programs and principles. It follows the lead of recent congregational, qualitative studies (Ammerman, 1997; Ammerman & Roof, 1995; Bass, 1997; Browning, 1991; Browning, et al., 1997; Couture, 1991; Roof, 1993). The practices of a religious organization and the stories organization members tell about their practices provide insight into how it "thinks" about problems, solutions and objectives. In Schon & Rein's terms, the metaphors, assumptions, continuities and discontinuities revealed through the stories regarding the practices provide the "frame" within which the policy dilemma is understood. Consequently we have explored what the congregations do as well what they say about it. Indeed, analysis of the texts collected in the field have revealed this frame or in Paul Ricoeur's terms "reference-level" understandings.<sup>4</sup> The remainder of this section details fieldwork procedures and describes application of Ricoeur's interpretive model.

### *Field Work*

Field data was collected August 1997 through March 1998. Field work took three forms, formal interviewing, informal observation and gathering of relevant archival document and congregation written sources. Seventy ordained and lay leaders of FAME participated in interviews and twenty clergy and lay leaders of St. James participated in interviews. Qualified researchers already known to the subject congregations facilitated access to each community. All of the fieldworkers are women and were supervised by the Principal Investigator. The P.I. conducted some interviews although most of them were conducted by fieldworkers who were of the same race, faith and region of the respondents. The fieldworkers hold leadership positions in the churches they studied. The P.I. developed the interviewing instruments and coordinated their

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<sup>3</sup> Some interviews were conducted with two people present. In these cases written interview forms were made for each participant. The transcripts of the tape recordings identify statements made by each participant in the interview discussion. Seventy people from FAME participated in sixty interviews and twenty people from St. James participated in fifteen interviews.

<sup>4</sup> For additional exploration of the use of interpretive method in social sciences see: Klemm & Schweiocker, 1993; Krueger, 1998; Maranhao, 1990; Mishler, 1979; Mishler, 1986; Morgan, 1993; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987; Ricoeur, 1981b; Ricoeur, 1991; Riessman, 1993; Sherman, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Weiss, 1994) and policy studies. D. Schon and M. Rein's groundbreaking *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*. G. Majone's earlier, *Evidence, Argument, and Persuasion in the Policy Process*, S. Schram's *Words of Welfare: The poverty of Social Science and the Social Science of Poverty*, and E. Roe's *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* provide guidance to this study (Majone, 1989; Roe, 1994, Schoe & Rein, 1994; Schram, 199). These contribute to the hermeneutic method of analysis developed by Paul Ricoeur and used in this study.

field use at the different locations. Fieldworkers tape-recorded every interview conversation. They also completed a written interview form for each participant. On the written form is recorded participant responses and fieldworker's comments. Some interview discussions were with two church members. Both written and taped recordings were done to increase the quality of information gathered. Most interviews lasted thirty to forty minutes. In a few cases they extended to two hours.

Selection of interview participants was done collaboratively between fieldworker and P.I. The goal was to interview senior ordained and pastoral staff and lay leaders of each church. Interviewing senior pastoral staff in both churches was accomplished without impediment. Identifying lay leaders was accomplished at FAME by tracking down organization leaders and staff members listed in the 1996 Annual Report of membership and financial activities. Leaders of fifty-five organizations and church staff departments were interviewed. Fewer than a dozen groups were not involved in interviews. This was due to logistical difficulties, rather than respondent refusal. Every person asked to participate in a formal interview agreed to do so. The groups not represented in the interviewing pool are all very similar to the groups that are represented (e.g., Boy Scouts and Girl Scout leaders were included, Cub Scouts wasn't available). The leadership of the larger organizations, (e.g. the five choirs which total 400 members) tend to also have active involvement in other parts of congregation life so often reported on a variety of group activities.

Identifying lay leaders at St. James was relatively simple. The most active members of this small congregation are also the ones that make financial commitments to the parish. Eleven households pledged a specific financial commitment for 1997. All of these households were represented by the eighteen non-pastoral staff participants that were interviewed. The participants at both field sites represent ordained and lay leadership. They do not necessarily represent the "person in the pew" or "bi-annual Christians" (congregants who attend services at Easter and Christmas only) attitudes and experiences. We wished to learn about the congregation's active programs so we asked those most active to tell us about them. They were gracious enough to do so.

### *Formal Interviewing*

The interviews took place at the church facilities or in church members' homes. The interview guide raised questions in three areas: church program, the new welfare law, and theology. Questions were used as probes to provoke conversation and revelation of personal experience stories. Some were open-ended questions and some were forced-choice questions. Participants were asked, for example, "What do you think is the biggest challenge facing families you serve now?" and "Some people feel that the old welfare laws encouraged "dependency" among recipients of public assistance. What do you think they mean by this?" and "Some people feel that the new welfare laws will encourage "independence" or "self-sufficiency" among recipients of public assistance. What do you think they mean?"

Forced-choice questions include such items as, "Do you agree or disagree with the bible verse, 'the poor you will have with you always'?" and "Who do you think should take primary responsibility for serving the needs of poor people, our churches or our government?" and "There are two common points of view about the best way to approach social problems such as crime, violence and poverty. Which one is closest to your perspective? (A.) The best way to address these problems is by changing the hearts and actions of individuals. (B.) The best way to address these problems is by changing social institutions and structures." Participants were also

asked to respond to a set of statements regarding specific theological beliefs. Adapted from studies by, Benson & Williams (1982), these items are arranged in a five point, Likert-like format. Participants were asked to assess “How true each statement is for you. Not True At All? Not True? Neutral. True? Extremely True?” Examples of the statements include: “God is faithful and dependable,” “God is judgmental”, “Wealth is a sign of God’s favor,” “Poverty is a sign of God’s judgment.”

### *Informal Observations*

Fieldworkers and the P.I. kept field notes of their informal observation of a variety of congregation activities. These activities included: worship services, conversations, food pantry distributions, meetings, bible study and education classes, tours of neighborhood public housing, a denominational conference, a local conference on the new welfare law and eating meals. Additionally, 240 photographs were taken at the field sites to document the physical environments and to capture worship and service activities.

### *Collection of Archival Documents*

The goal of document collection was to gather current materials (dated or used in 1997) that would be able to support or modify information provided in the formal interviews and observed informally. This ‘triangulation’ of sources serves to strengthen the accuracy of the information and interpretations emerging from the ethnographic work (Greene & David, 1984; Kazdin, 1981; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) . Types of documents collected include: worship service bulletins, announcements of organization’s meetings and reviews of activities, recent newspaper articles that feature or mention the congregation and annual financial reports. Not all of the documents collected have been used for preparation of this report.<sup>5</sup> Sermons preached and hymns used in worship services have been collected. In addition to sermon texts provided by preachers, numerous sermons have been transcribed from tape recordings made of the worship service. A total of more than fifty sermons from 1996-97 have been gathered. Future studies will explore relationships among these texts of proclaimed positions, the archival documents and the church leaders’ opinions expressed in formal interviews. This study is primarily informed by the analysis of the formal interview transcripts and field observations and only cursory review of the sermons and hymns. Only documents revealing financial and program participation have aided in preparation of this report.

### *Text Analysis*

The case studies generated a great deal of texts. Transcripts of the seventy-five interviews and fifty sermons were loaded into a NUD\*IST qualitative research software project. Text searching and organizing functions as well as transcript coding have been used to create reports which compile specific text passages. These reports either include all references to a major study theme (need, poverty, family, dependency, service, etc.) or all passages of particular question and answers (e.g. all responses to and discussion of the question, “Do you agree or disagree with the Bible verse, ‘the poor you shall have with you always?’). The interview transcripts have been multi-coded so that passages may appear in all relevant reports. Coding and organization of sermon transcripts is still in progress. Twenty-one “nodes” are included in the NUD\*ST project

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<sup>5</sup> Two student researchers, J.C. and A.C. did the tedious task of compiling notebooks of the documents and developing reports listing particular features of various document sets. Their work is much appreciated.

which now contains 150 documents. This stage of data organization provides the basis for the descriptive phase of this comparative case study.

But how shall the content of these texts actually be understood? To interpret them, I rely upon the hermeneutical method developed by French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, “to understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says, to what it talks about” (1981b, p. 218) . Ricoeur envisions these two points (sense and reference) on the line of a circle. If the circle were a clock, we might say the points are situated at “9:00” and “3:00.” The movement of the analysis begins at 9:00, the sense level. It then moves up through noon and over to 3:00, the reference level. The return move begins at 3:00 passes down through 6:00 and ends up at the point of origin, 9:00. Ricoeur provides elaborate philosophical ground for this interpretative process, but following the movement from sense to reference is the essence of the project.

The sense level of a text is the specific level of “what it says.” Analysis of the sense of a text takes the form of literary criticism which honors the detail and richness of the language structures. What is said is also analyzed in terms of how it is said. For example, words in a text might carry meanings that are specific to the culture in which it was written. Unpacking these meanings is done at the sense level of analysis. The reference level of analysis is quite different.

The goal of the reference analysis of the text is to determine “what it speaks about,” i.e. the particular components of the “world to which the text refers.” This is not a matter of uncovering a meaning that is hidden “behind the text.” It is rather a matter of discerning a meaning that is “in front of the text” which is disclosed by the text to the reader. “Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds. In this way, disclosure plays the equivalent role for written texts as ostensive reference plays in spoken language. Interpretation thus becomes the apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text” (1981a, p. 177 emphasis added). But this is not the final step in the analysis.

To complete the hermeneutic circle we are traversing, the final step is to make the return trip to the sense level of the text. This is a crucial move because what has been disclosed in the analysis of the world to which the text points now informs what was learned in the analysis of what the text says. Understanding the text’s reference now enables an in-depth re-interpretation of the text’s sense. What the text says and what it speaks about is clearly more than what the author intended. Additionally, this process provides a degree of objectivity that could never be claimed by the early hermeneuticists.

Ricoeur fully acknowledges that there can be disagreement about interpretations of a text. However, his method differs significantly from the classic hermeneutists Schleiermacher and Dilthey because they envisioned the hermeneutic circle as an encompassing of two subjectivities: the mind of the reader and the mind of the author. Ricoeur’s method is also distinguished from interpretation that is viewed as “the projection of the subjectivity of the reader into the text itself” (1981a, p. 178). Instead, he argues, “an interpretation is not authentic unless it culminates in some form of appropriation, if by that term we understand the process by which one makes one’s own what was initially other or alien.” Appropriation is modeled not “on the fusion of consciousness, on empathy, or sympathy. The emergence of the sense and the reference of a text in language is the coming to language of a world and not the recognition of another person” (1981a, p. 178 emphasis added). Thus Ricoeur’s hermeneutic circle leads the reader into a new world, rather than leading the reader into the psyche of the text’s author. “The circle is between

my mode of being--beyond the knowledge which I may have of it--and the mode opened up and disclosed by the world of the work” (1981a, p. 178).

In similar fashion the reader does not project her/his subjectivities into the text because the reference of a text is not hidden behind the words, but is rather disclosed “in front of” them.

The reader understands himself in front of the text, in front of the world of the text. To understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one’s own beliefs and prejudices; *it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself. . . .* (1981a, p. 178 emphasis added)

The implications of what may seem to be metaphorical hair-splitting, are actually enormous. Ricoeur has displaced the issue of interpretation from a subjectivist level onto an ontological one. This model also retains a strong objective moment in the interpretative process that is necessary but not sufficient. The purpose and process of interpretation is not to discover new insights into the way an author’s mind works, to merely facilitate description, nor to experience new feelings while reading the text or to merely notice elegant language. The purpose and process of this method is to discover the otherness of a text in a new way, one that is universally available. This is the methodological objective of this investigation of the texts of the transcribed interviews, sermons and field notes of these two case studies.

Through use of varied narrative analytic methods, policy analysts Roe, and Schon & Rein, both ultimately conclude that the need for doing such analysis is justified by the richness of innovative solutions that become revealed. As one argues,

when policy controversies are abstracted from their situations, as in academic discourse...they exist in a kind of vacuum where it is hard to imagine how they might ever be resolved. . . .In [one of our studies] we found not only a pragmatic resolution of policy controversy but one that worked by effecting a synthesis of conflicting metacultural frames. What is it about situated policy practice that lends itself to such a process and makes such an outcome possible? When policy controversies are situated in the fruitful mire of an actual policy arena, a great variety of processes open up and many different kinds of outcomes become possible. [Schon & Rein, p. 176].

Discovering and then analyzing the anti-poverty initiatives of two culturally divergent organizations reveals new paths for anti-poverty policy-makers. New theory needs to be developed which re-positions the importance of variables such as race, region, class status and religion as they relate to anti-poverty solutions. The following case study which describes each congregation in its context is followed by a discussion of preliminary findings.

## **Case Studies**

### **A. St. James Episcopal Church, Floyd County, Ky Central Appalachian Region<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>6</sup> This description is based on *in vivo* observations and interviews with twenty active clergy and lay members of St. James. Annual reports, service bulletins and other archival documents have also contributed. See the appendices for a list of interview respondents representing the organizations and activities cited. Population figures are 1990 U.S. Census Data available at <http://venus.census.gov>.

I've [lived here all my life] and I don't remember a single person that I know had to go into welfare that died in welfare. . . .poverty is relative -- it is based upon comparing what I have to what someone else has. I grew up poor. I never knew I was poor because everybody around me was poor. I think its true, you know, that 'poor people will be with us always' but that doesn't say that we should not do anything about it. Jesus never once says 'well the poor is going to be with you always--forget them!' . . .I think its a solvable problem. I really do. Maybe... even if it seems insurmountable, we shouldn't stop working on it.  
-- Rector, Johnnie Ross, St. James Episcopal Church  
Floyd County, Kentucky

Rector Johnnie Ross is a part-time Episcopal priest who serves St. James Church in the town of Prestonsburg, Floyd County, Kentucky. He has lived in Appalachia all of his life. The ubiquity of poverty has shaped his life and now informs his vocation. St James' has become highly regarded in Kentucky as a church of dynamic energy. They are "small but feisty" as the Pastoral Associate declared. St. James is part of the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington and so its story must be told in its diocesan context.

At its centennial anniversary in December 1995, the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington Kentucky counted 6,777 communicants distributed among thirty-six parishes and missions. Its reach spans the eastern half of the commonwealth, about 20,000 square miles. The congregations cluster into three geographic areas, north, central and east. The northern Kentucky area is adjacent to Cincinnati, Ohio and the Central Bluegrass Region of Fayette County includes the city of Lexington (the third largest population center in the state). The eastern area encompasses the Appalachian region of Kentucky. Mountains, coal mines, and tobacco farms are dissected by ribbons of highways. In the eastern reaches of the area is Floyd County, population 44,000, one of the most impoverished regions in the country. The county's 1993 poverty rate of 32.4 percent considerably exceeds the statewide rate of 19.7 percent.<sup>7</sup> The city of Prestonsburg serves as the Floyd County seat and numbers almost 3600 residents. Of these, 97 per cent are Caucasian and 3 per cent are African-American (no other racial groups are identified in the 1990 Census).

The founders of St James Episcopal gathered in worship for six years in various Prestonsburg locations prior to establishing their current home in 1973. The church facility includes the nave which accommodates about seventy worshippers, office and classroom spaces, and a kitchen and fellowship hall. The Fishes and Loaves Food Pantry, housed in a modest room, is accessible to the outside of the building as well as to the fellowship hall. The congregation is led by Reverend Johnnie E. Ross a recently ordained priest. He is assisted by a candidate for ordained priesthood who serves as the Pastoral Associate. Both ministers are "bi-vocational." They maintain part-time status with the church and full-time status in a related occupation. Father Ross served eighteen years as the Chief Environmental Inspector for the area Environmental Protection Agency and in 1998 accepted the Chief Environmental Technologist position with the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, Department of Highways. He views this work as stewardship of natural resources. The Pastoral Associate is a social worker who works with victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Sixty-two people are on St James' official membership rolls, of which thirty-seven are confirmed, adult communicants who are actively involved in the congregation's life.

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<sup>7</sup> (Zimmerman & Samson, 1998).

Financially, the church maintains assets of \$234,000 which include its real property and operating cash accounts. Annual operating expenses average around \$45,000; 1997 revenues, including restricted funds, totaled \$134,000. In 1997 St James spent an additional \$14,000 on social outreach programs at the local and diocesan levels. Twenty-four worshippers make regular financial contributions. Thirteen households/individuals have pledged to give a total of \$15,800 in 1998.<sup>8</sup> The balance of the operating expenses is supplied by plate offerings, organizations' fund raising contributions and invest income.

In socio-economic terms, the St James congregation is disproportionately middle-class compared with Floyd County although it is equally racially homogenous. In many cases, economic success has been achieved by the generation currently active at St. James. They grew up in impoverished and modest families that have worked hard and completed college and in some cases, graduate degrees. State government, education, health and environmental services and industries related to mining are the primary occupations represented in the congregation. St. James' active membership was raised in a variety of Protestant traditions. A minority are "cradle Episcopalians," members of the denomination from birth. Membership is gender balanced, given the prominent presence of married couples. The ministry team includes one male and one female. The Rector and the Pastoral Associate both entered the Episcopal Church as adults emerging out of a Baptist and Christian Church/Church of Christ tradition respectively. St. James contributes to its community through material support, family and community support and education, and spiritual exploration.

#### *Material Support*

Housing support, clothing and food provision are the primary outreach programs at St. James. The Rector serves on the local administrative housing boards that own and operate apartments for eligible, low-income families and residents over age 65. This housing program developed in the 1970s through federal (H.U.D.) and local partnerships. St. James, a local United Methodist church and a Prestonsburg Presbyterian church joined together to attract the funds and manage the program. One of the multi-unit developments is located across a field from St. James. Most of the residents are regular patrons of the Fishes and Loaves Food Pantry which St. James operates.

The majority of the active adult St. James members participate in the Fishes and Loaves Food Pantry program. Participation appears to distinguish the active from the inactive members of the congregation. Located in the church building it has entrances to the fellowship hall and out to the parking lot. The Food Pantry is open four times per month and requires a minimum of two volunteers to operate. A wall separates the waiting area and service counter from the supply storage. People standing in the waiting area cannot view the products which are stocked on shelving arranged like an extravagant walk-in closet. On average, the volunteers serve 114 people per month. The size and contents of the food parcels is individualized according to family size and composition. A volunteer compiles each parcel while the recipient waits. When recipients make request specific items such as a particular brand of cereal or type of juice, the volunteers attempt to accommodate them. Recipients are provided food only once per month, in accordance with governmental regulations. The volunteers record recipient participation on a note card allocated to each household. They have also only recently begun requiring proof of income, (to satisfy a Federal Emergency Management Administration (F.E.M.A.) requirement).

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<sup>8</sup> "1997 Parochial Report" St. James Episcopal of Prestonburg, Diocese of Lexington, KY.

They find such accounting irksome because the congregation members wish to give as completely unconditionally as possible. They ruefully accept, however, that adherence to guidelines in large measure enables them to receive the public funds necessary to engage the activity. It is a price they agree to pay.

Food parcels include canned and dried goods, cereals, juice, bottled water, baby food and frozen meat. Periodically, Fishes and Loaves also distributes personal use products and cleaning supplies which cannot be purchased with food stamps. During planting season, the volunteers also distribute vegetable, fruit and flower seed for recipients' gardens. They estimate that the majority of the recipients have gardens that significantly supply their kitchen tables. St. James responds to the immediate needs of hungry people yet is cognizant that the structural causes of the poverty that sends people to them remain untouched by their food pantry efforts. As the Pastoral Associate said,

...we talk about seeing Christ in the faces of the people we serve, and I think that it's really true. I think that we see ourselves doing, in whatever way we can, even in a small way, lightning the burden of the people who live in our community. Even if it's only to let them know that somebody cares for them as a person. We know that we're not, you know, 'saving the world' with our three boxes of cereal and one bag of dried beans and apple sauce. . . .

Sharing of food is done in a context of relationship. Even though none of the food pantry recipients participate in the weekly liturgical worship life of St. James, given small-town life, recipients and congregants all know one another. Indeed, three times more people congregate in the food pantry per month than do in the nave on Sunday mornings. Fishes and Loaves is increasingly becoming a location of spiritual encounter for St. James Episcopal.<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with many church traditions, St James also provides food to financially struggling community members through Thanksgiving Basket distribution and Christmas gift-giving and dinners. The Rector also uses a small discretionary fund for small gifts of food or cash in response to individual emergency requests. Food is also provided in the semi-annual Food For Finals project. Given close proximity to a community college and state college, St James began offering to students, faculty and staff, meals and refreshments for each semester's final examinations week. This project has gained in popularity over three years and has become an enduring part of St. James' place in the community.

#### *Family Support, Community Support and Education*

Members of St James are quick to appreciate that family structures and gender roles have shifted away from conventional nuclear family models. The congregation itself, however, is primarily composed of conventional, intact, nuclear families. One of the most active lay leaders is a single parent but her situation is not the norm. St. James seeks to support family life as evidenced in sermons preached by the Rector and Pastoral Associate and congregants expressed strong support in interview statements. Such support is practiced informally rather than through specific church program.

Given the limitations of energy and resources, St. James creatively expresses its commitment to family strengthening by supporting family-oriented community organizations.

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<sup>9</sup> Fr. Ross notes that some parents with children who receive publicly-funded breakfast and lunches in the local schools also eat these meals in the school cafeteria. Parents pay \$1.00 for breakfast and \$2.00 for lunch. This policy encourages family participation in children's school lives and also helps families financially.

Even though the congregation does not employ a single full-time employee and most weekdays the church doors are closed and locked, it is a rare weekday evening that the church is quiet. St. James sponsors a Cub Scout pack and a Boy Scout troop which both use the church. Two Girl Scout troops meet at St. James as does the Floyd County Youth Soccer Board. A grass-roots political organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, holds its local meetings at St. James. In addition, community-wide, self-help support groups are regular residents. These include large chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon.

Periodically, often in the spring and summer, St. James hosts out-of-state groups volunteering in the Appalachian region. Examples of such groups include volunteers with the Christian Appalachia Project and AMERICORPS. Recently a Boston, Mass. church group of thirty young adults sprawled out in sleeping bags throughout the church (atop pews as well) for a week. They were in the community to build a Habitat for Humanity house. St. James provided meals and held a joint worship event. This congregation is known for its hospitality.

St. James expresses its commitment to education in at least two ways. The Rector serves on the Floyd County School Board and the church offers its members religious instruction. The Problems of school mismanagement recently caused the Kentucky state public education authorities to take over administration and management of the Floyd County schools. The state authorities appointed a new, four-member board. St. James' Rector was appointed due to his stature in the community. School Board meetings are now broadcast locally on television. Following meetings, county residents contact board members to express their views. This leadership has heightened public awareness of St. James community leadership.

Within congregational life, St. James is committed to religious education for its members. The Episcopal Church Men group sponsors active, weekly Bible Study and Sunday morning Adult Sunday School attracts most of those who attend worship services. Children's Sunday School is provided although it is less prominent a program compared with the vitality of the adult programming. A chapter of the national adult women's organization, "Daughters of the King," which includes education and service activities is in the process of formation.

### *Spiritual Exploration*

St. James offers its community a theological and liturgical alternative to evangelical Protestant and conventional Roman Catholic congregational life. Appalachian Christianity is not known for its social justice orientation (McCauley, 1995; Poage, 1995; Scott, 1994). As the Pastoral Associate relates, "Appalachian churches tend to be much more concerned with the, 'heavenly reward' of a virtuous life and are not as concerned with social justice issues. We're counter-cultural, because we are very consciously, very concerned with social justice issues." This focus has attracted members and is the way the group defines itself. Even though people of various Protestant denominations have combined to create the congregation, they tend to agree on central belief issues. They agree on a Trinitarian image of God that is immediate, personal and authoritative. They affirm that God comforts and nurtures, but more importantly, God challenges them to serve others. Matters of faith are not determined by literal biblical interpretation or legalistic application. The ministry leadership expresses an attitude of critical questioning and appreciation of ambiguities. Congregants engage in spirited discussion during study gatherings yet tend to agree with one another in the end.

Liturgically, St. James experiments with worship practices within the perimeters of the Episcopalian tradition as set out in the Book of Common Prayer and the denomination's primary Hymnal. Three years ago it began using the additional Episcopalian hymnal, *Lift Every Voice*

*and Sing II: An African-American Hymnal*. It is a creedal church and one that interprets its faith through the interplay of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. St. James upholds the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, eucharist, marriage, reconciliation and unction (Barr, 1995; Roland S. Homet, 1992).

St. James offers the Prestonsburg community leadership through its individual members, its social outreach programs and its provision of a space for community gatherings. A Protestant theology of service drives this congregation's decision-making, program development and social service provision. In this regard it parallels an urban, African-American congregation hundreds of miles away.

## **B. First African Methodist Episcopal Church, South Central Los Angeles<sup>10</sup>**

The driving force of authentic ministry is to make the intangible, tangible. . . . To make the Word become flesh. . . . That of course takes a programmatic approach. It will not be done by spur of the moment inspiration. . . . If we can create that dollar in the community, the jobs in the community, then people are half way on their way. We have to provide for the immediate needs for those in this community. . . . the government cannot do everything that has to be done.

*Senior Minister, Cecil L. ("Chip") Murray, August 1997*

*First African Methodist Episcopal, Los Angeles, CA*

Everyone at First A.M.E. Los Angeles means Reverend Dr. Cecil L. (Chip) Murray when they refer to "Pastor." Pastor Murray is the well-known leader of this social activism powerhouse. The FAME story is very much a part of Los Angeles' recent history so we locate the church within its context. The City of Los Angeles, California spans 464 square miles and touts a population of 3.5 million people. Currently a robust, multi-ethnic city, it has transformed in twenty-five years "from the whitest and most Protestant of America's big cities to a majority Latino and Catholic city. . . . L.A.'s black population declined from 505,000 in 1980 to 487,000 in 1990 while the Latino and Asian populations doubled to 1.4 million and 341,000 respectively" (Siegel, 1997) p. 145. Enduring African-American political leadership, the strength of black-owned businesses (L.A. leads the country), and the relative size of a prosperous African-American population (L.A. blacks are twice as likely to live above the poverty line as Chicago blacks) are countered by memories of racial violence. Prominent in the nation's imagination are the legacies of the 1960's Watts riots and the 1992 civil disturbance in South Central, sparked by verdicts in the Rodney King police brutality case. Downsizing devastated large segments of L.A.'s economy in the 1980s and early 1990s. Federal spending was reduced by \$6 billion and eliminated three hundred thousand jobs. Between 1990 and 1993, wages plummeted 14.5% (Siegel, p. 117).<sup>11</sup> South Central is among the most impoverished areas in the state and is home to numerous faith communities. Corporate and political leaders have called upon many of these

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Rev. Dr. Murray and 70 FAME leaders August-December 1997 and *in vivo* observations provide the information for this section. Direct quotes are attributed to particular individuals. They are from the transcription of the recorded interviews and are not individually cited in this paper. Financial statistics and numbers of people served are published in the First A.M.E. of Los Angeles, 1997 Annual Report, available from the church office. Additional FAME organization internal reports and Sunday service bulletins have also been consulted. Los Angeles population figures are 1990 U.S. Census Data available at <http://venus.census.gov>.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars disagree on the precise boundaries of South Central Los Angeles. A guide is provided by Cannon (1998, p.615). South Central and the adjacent cities of Hawthorne, Inglewood, Ladera Heights, Culver City and Compton, South Gate., Cudahy and Bell, is circumscribed by the Santa Monica Freeway (I-10), the Harbor Freeway (I-110), the San Diego Freeway (I-405) and the Long Beach Freeway (I-710). FAME sits between I-10 and I-110.

groups to facilitate community re-development (Cannon, 1998) . Rev. Dr. Cecil L. Murray and the First A.M.E. congregation has emerged to take both local and state leadership.

Former slave Bidy Mason and twelve kindred souls founded the first black Protestant church in the City of Los Angeles, First African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1997 FAME celebrated it's 125th anniversary and honored the 20 year ministry of it's Senior Minister, Rev. Dr. Cecil L. Murray. Under Pastor Murray's lead, membership has grown from approximately 300 members to its present apex. First A.M.E. includes more than 16,500 members and is organized into forty-two outreach ministries, six non-profit corporations and one for-profit corporation. Pastor Murray is supported by Assistant Pastor Reverend Earl Greene and a thirty-two member Ministerial Staff of Itinerant Elders (10), Local Elders and Deacons (6) and Itinerant Deacons, Student Ministers (9), and Admissions Ministers received from allied denominations (7). The current life of the church has been significantly shaped by its visionary role during and since the 1992 civil unrest that rocked South Central neighborhoods. FAME's local leadership has expanded particularly in the areas of economic development and investment, service provision, low and moderate-income housing ownership/management and work with youth and against drugs. Membership has more than doubled since 1991. FAME is a leader within the A.M.E. denomination.

The church's financial position is strong and has experienced explosive growth in the 1990s. The operating budget tops \$7 million and is complemented by the Cecil L. Murray Education Center (annual budget \$750,000); FAME Assistance Corporation -- Renaissance (total liabilities and net assets \$3 million); FAME Venture Capital Fund of \$7.5 million, FAME Housing Corporation (total liabilities and net assets \$5.3 million); FAME Good Shepherd Housing Development Corporation (total liabilities and net assets \$3.6 million); FAME Manor Ltd. Partnership (total liabilities and partner's equity \$9 million); FAME Gardens Ltd. Partnership (total liabilities and partner's equity \$17.2 million); FAME Operation of AIDS Prevention and Education Corporation, (total liabilities and net assets \$21,000); and FAME Forever Inc. (total liabilities and shareholder equity \$96,000 and 1997 gross revenues of \$750,000). Led by ordained clergy and other religious professionals these organizations and dollars combine to create formidable social activism fueled by a Christian commitment that seeks to encounter God through relations with others in community. Walking through the halls of the FAME Renaissance building, one is as likely to overhear conversations sealing an agreement for a million dollar program with a corporate or governmental partner, as to hear mediation among church members and youth street gang leaders.

The FAME congregation, African-American with some exceptions, spans the urban, socio-economic spectrum. Most of the worshippers are female (6000 males of 16,500), most of the ministers are male although several female ministers are prominent in worship and on staff. Former prostitutes and drug dealers stand and kneel in worship alongside of media celebrities, politicians, working-class, middle-class and affluent professionals and families. In many respects, FAME is typical of mainline, urban, African-American Protestantism. As a mega-church (a label variously defined but usually denoting congregations in excess of 5000 members), however, its size shapes its functions and expressions of belief. According to FAME's Chief Financial Officer, of the 16,500 members on the membership rolls, about 8000 plus are registered and financially active, and about 2000 are unregistered yet regular donors. Of the total, "about four or five thousand [people] support 80% or so of the church's budget [excluding the affiliated organizations] and 1200-1300 people account for maybe 60% of it." This fact alone paradoxically renders FAME unique and typical. It is unique in congregation size and somewhat

typical in the distribution of its financial burden.<sup>12</sup> It reflects its community and actively works to improve it. Above all, as the Chief Financial Officer declares, FAME is “a place of spiritual encounter.”

FAME’s vision touches the daily lives of the residents of South Central L.A. through material support, family support and education, economic development, environmental protection, and spiritual exploration.

### *Material Support*

Response to the basic needs of shelter, food and health takes many forms at FAME. The church owns and supervises or manages twenty-two church properties. These include 262 apartments which provide housing for families of low and moderate-income. Emergency food and clothing is available throughout the month at the church and FAME’s Missionary Society distributes \$50 food parcels to 500-600 households two mornings a month. FAME’s Bread for the World group does political and fund raising activities aimed at local, national and international policymakers and agencies. Health care assistance is accomplished through education (e.g., CPR-First Aid Training) and service (e.g. provision of free flu shots, free mammograms, blood pressure and prostate screenings). The FAME Tobacco Project aims to “remove tobacco products from shelves in South Central L.A....through hosting press conferences and meeting with politicians and tobacco companies.” The FAME Operation of AIDS Prevention and Education program, funded through the county, through classes, peer education training, and one-on-one consultations, “targets African-American youth, ages thirteen to nineteen in the South L.A. area.” A task force on substance abuse increases awareness of residential detoxification and drug treatment programs, support groups and counseling for users seeking to become drug and alcohol free. Between 1993 and 1997 the Substance Abuse task force served 750 people. In addition, FAME sponsors a Cocaine Anonymous weekly support group for those struggling with addiction recovery. As this litany of programs illustrates, all of the church’s response to basic needs seeks to satisfy individuals in need and to also engage in systematic policy change that increases community strength.

### *Family Support, Community Support and Education*

Supporting families is central to FAME’s identity and mission. In addition to the pastoral messages emphasizing strong, nuclear families that responsibly raise children, the church runs a parochial school and has myriad adult and youth programs. The church’s Youth Department has placed over 1500 youth (ages 17-20) in living-wage jobs at Disneyland and Walt Disney Studios. The Cecil L. Murray Education Center (CMEC) is a pre-K to 9th grade facility. Its twenty-three staff members serve 112 students, was launched in 1994 and does outreach partnership projects in the community, including some with west side neighbor, Temple Isaiah. Education goals are also met through the Enhanced Studies Program tutoring for homework problems, college-preparation, and public school teacher certification. Family support in the community is also provided through the Adoption and Foster Care Committee which recruits African-American adults of faith to adopt children and/or offer foster care. Additional youth programs include music lessons, summer camp, periodic retreats (‘lock-in on values’ for ages 7-18), Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Children’s Bible Study, Youth Bible Study, College Prep Program, FAME’s Debutantes and Masters for Christ (cotillions every other year), Imani Phi Christ (a sorority of

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<sup>12</sup> On Protestantism, poverty, wealth and church finances, see (Wuthnow, 1994a; Wuthnow, 1994b; Wuthnow, 1997).

Christian women ages 14-22) and Jesus Phi Christ (a fraternity of Christian men ages 14-22), and Manchild and Womanchild Rites of Passage programs of adult-youth mentoring. Sunday School for children and adults is also part of the church's life and enrolled 850 students in 1997. Numerous adult organizations and clubs are also active, including the Crusaders men's group, the Richard Allen Men's Society, the Sarah Allen Women's Missionary Society and the Single Adult Fellowship. One of FAME's goals for 1998 is to create a Family Resource Center which will offer counseling and referral services.

Family support and neighborhood economic development grow interdependently in FAME's vision. Pastor Murray repeatedly emphasizes that authentic Christian ministry requires "making the Word flesh" and this is facilitated through concrete, specific programs that, "...create that dollar in the community, the jobs in the community, then people are half way on their way. We have to provide for the immediate needs for those in this community." The FAME Assistance Corporation, known as FAME Renaissance and directed by Mark Whitlock, is the umbrella non-profit corporation responsible for "enhancing business and economic development in South Central L.A." FAME Renaissance administers eight programs: Legal Services, Business Resource Center, Venture Capital Fund, Entrepreneurial Training, Commercial Property, Immediate Needs Transportation Program, Environmental Protection Department and the only FAME for-profit venture, FAME Forever Inc., a personnel services company. Free legal referral and consultation services are provided through partnership with Temple Isaiah, a Jewish faith community on L.A.'s West Side.

The Business Resource Center and Entrepreneurial Training programs fund and assist both new and existing businesses which cannot qualify for bank credit. Technical assistance as well as business loans served 237 people in 1997. Loans of \$1.9 million have been made and 2,000 people have participated in small business development workshops. In 1998, two new projects have caused particular economic news. The FAME Renaissance Business Incubator Building supplies 48,000 square feet of commercial office space to twenty minority business owners, at low lease rates. To increase its investment opportunities in the community, FAME Renaissance has developed a Venture Capital Fund that is capitalized at \$7.5 million. FAME Renaissance partners with the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Small Business Administration, the California State Department of the Treasury, Wells Fargo Bank, the Walt Disney Company and twenty other banking institutions.

FAME Forever, Inc., a personnel services company, provides full-time and temporary employees to public and private client companies. Aggressive job networking, workshops, and personal counseling matches individuals with specific skills with employers needing to fill jobs. The FFI Director emphasizes that the individualized service FFI offers gives it a competitive edge. In 1997 FFI began supplying new employees to Dreamworks, SKG a new business in L.A.'s entertainment industry. FFI staff trains people with whom it works, "...we explain to them how the workforce works, office etiquette, what we call, 'soft skills.' We go over this all the time with our employees. How to dress, we have people who think that just because they like dreadlocks, you know, that they can go to IBM in dreadlocks, and you know, you just can't. Companies have an image, and they are perfectly within their legal rights to uphold that image." As with many of FAME's programs, mentoring through personal relationships combines hard-headed pragmatism and faith rooted in realist Christian thought.<sup>13</sup> FAME Forever has placed over two thousand adults in living-wage jobs since its inception.

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<sup>13</sup> For exploration on Christian realism see (Lovin, 1995; Niebuhr, 1953; Niebuhr, 1972).

As the economy continues its mid-1990s robust recovery, FAME is poised to contribute through help to individuals and businesses. FAME provides community development and care through additional vehicles, including transportation and environmental programs. The Immediate Needs Transportation Program supplies financially strained members of the community with taxi vouchers and bus tokens. Travel for medical or employment-seeking purposes are supported as are other needs not adequately served with conventional public transportation. In 1997 the program served 50,000 people through distribution of 28,000 vouchers and 22,000 bus tokens via 300 non-profit community-based organizations. The program administers a \$2.5 million grant annually. Concern for community health and the hazards of a host of pollutants in the city sparked FAME's development of an Environmental Protection Department. Water conservation, education and used oil collection for recycling are the major initiatives managed by this group. It is supported by public and private grants in excess of \$120,000. The nitty-gritty work of counting out thousands of bus tokens and hefting hundreds of gallons of used motor oil onto a truck is not the kind of social outreach expected of most church staff and volunteers. Indeed, why is a church in the business of such activities? FAME leaders, staff, volunteer and ministerial, tend to respond to such questions with a consistent, coherent statement of theology and responsibility.

### *Spiritual Exploration*

The seventy FAME leaders interviewed in this study, ordained and non-ordained, volunteers and staff, show remarkable consistency in their response to theological statements of belief.<sup>14</sup> They agree on a Trinitarian image of God that is immediate, personal and authoritative. Spirit-centered spirituality is strong and core Christian themes mediated through historical African-American experience of oppression and liberation are articulated in word and action. FAME leadership agree on the paradoxical presence of both good and evil in humanity. They believe that their Christian faith commands them to actively serve others and to seek to improve humanity's lot in this life. For these congregational leaders, faith is not a matter of obeying a set of rigid rules, nor is it private. Their faith is worked out through relations with others which enable encounter with the sacred. It is a public faith. Focus on "living in to the Kingdom of God" in this life is balanced with attention to individual virtue and the nurturing of personal and family spiritual and social function.<sup>15</sup> Corporate praise and worship offers opportunity for experience of the sacred. Pastor Murray states that FAME seeks to "call people from the tomb of death to the womb of life." FAME's often-repeated motto is "First to Serve." It takes seriously its historical pioneering role in African-American Christianity in Los Angeles and it strives to lead in applying its faith to African Americans and other contemporary Christians and community challenges.<sup>16</sup>

FAME celebrates three Sunday worship services per week which are attended on average by 6000 people. One to two dozen ministers in robes, preside in the pulpit and a different sermon

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendices for sample questions from the interview instrument.

<sup>15</sup> See Evans (1992) for useful elaboration for these themes in the context of African-American experience of Christianity as revealing a message of liberation.

<sup>16</sup> For analyses of contemporary African-American church life, see (Franklin, 1994; Franklin, 1997). The discussions of the practices typical of A.M.E. churches are informative and consistent with this study's fieldwork experiences.

is preached at the center of every service. Pastor Murray does most of the preaching and additional preaching is supplied by the ministerial staff and occasional visitors. The liturgy follows the A.M.E. denominational service book and hymnal. The ministry of music is expansive, including participatory singing and clapping led by instrumentalists (fourteen musicians on staff, drummers, saxophonist, organist, pianist, etc.) and a robed, choir located behind the pulpit. Seven different choirs (400 total members) participate throughout the month so that the music varies among a variety of styles, traditional and contemporary in African-American Christianity. Breakfast is served in the fellowship hall below the nave to neighborhood residents and church members after two of the three services and the Food Services Director reports that approximately 250 people partake of it. Three mid-week Bible Study and Praise worship services attract over five hundred participants. Church-operated vans transport congregants in need and the church's parking lots are staffed by uniformed attendants during services. The Media Department makes sound and video recordings of the services available for purchase. The Protestant traditions of baptism, communion, marriage and burial are observed. Spiritual ministries serve people in particular situations, (e.g., those with terminal illness or those serving time in prison) and in particular groups (e.g., street gangs, adult men, single adults). Prayer and bible study are a part of the majority of these leaders' daily routine.

## **Discussion**

This discussion, albeit preliminary, aims to outline the research questions, themes uncovered thus far and the areas of policy recommendations that appear potentially fruitful. The Church, Need and Response Project (CNRP) aims to examine and report on Christian faith communities that are taking local leadership roles in providing economic development and social service provision to their impoverished communities. The goal is to describe, analyze and compare worship groups that, on the surface, differ as much as possible to see whether their beliefs about issues central to anti-poverty practice and policy do also. We are attempting to uncover and interpret meanings of concepts that are central to the definition of impoverishment and to the development and/or implementation of anti-poverty policy. These core issues include: poverty (and definitions of need), dependency (and its corollary self-sufficiency), family (structures and ideals), work (as it relates to well being, upward mobility and family life) and service (individual, church, and government). Three questions frame initial textual analyses:

- Is there consistency in the congregation's definitions of "dependency" and "self-sufficiency"? Does theology play a role in these? If yes, how do the congregations compare/contrast?
- How do these congregations' understand and articulate "poverty" as it relates to "family"? Does theology play a role in these? If yes, how do the congregations compare/contrast?
- Finally, is there more, or less, agreement between the theological assumptions that drive the meanings reported and revealed by congregation leaders regarding the concept of "service"? If yes, how do the congregations compare/contrast?

Early insights suggest that St. James and FAME exhibit strikingly similar theological understandings of dependency and self-sufficiency that relate to attitudes toward anti-poverty efforts. While leaders of both congregations define and describe relationships between poverty and family in many corresponding ways, their stories are culturally distinct. For example, in general, the family structure assumed to exist in most of the FAME discourse is single-female-headed household. Absent fathers, social pressures on African-American men, and

adoption/foster care are more immediate concerns for FAME leaders. A heterosexual, multi-generational, nuclear family, in general, is assumed in most of the St. James narratives. Extended families that are separated because distant employment opportunities lured family sub-groups out of the mountains is an Appalachian version of impaired families that have to struggle to maintain ties and regional identity. Issues of domestic violence are close to home for both congregations. The conventional family structure ideal they both lift up, is very similar and is fairly described as “middle-class” (Hewlett & West, 1998; Hochschild, 1998; Wolfe, 1998) . The rhetoric of “church as extended family” permeates accounts in both congregations and clearly provides structure for the delivery of some of their community support and services. Ambivalence regarding integration of mothering with non-home employment is a tangled issue for both congregations. The similarities are striking and the differences are rich and engaging. Further examination will hopefully bring additional clarity to these issues.

The most difficult question of comparison is the final one regarding service. On the one hand, many statements made by these leaders sound as if they were uttered halfway across the country in the halls of the other’s church. Many of these people in both groups move almost immediately from attempts to define need and poverty to declarations of personal duty to be of service to others. Explanations for this link are primarily cast in religious terms. The religious terms, however, often suggest very different theological commitments. The difference between a Kingdom of God, social orientation and an individualized, charitable Virtue-based orientation is often quite clear. It is tempting simply to categorize the congregations as either one or the other. The problem is, both congregations exhibit quite overt tensions between both orientations. Sometimes the tension is evident in the discussion within a single person. These images need further investigation. In addition, both congregations respond almost identically to a theological question about sin and salvation. Proportionally, both groups have about the same sized sub-groups which profess either the belief that one “earns” salvation through good works or the belief that one must merely faithfully “accept” divine grace and express its fruits in lifestyle choices. This classic split between a “works” theology and a “grace” theology seems to serve as a dynamic tension in both these congregations. The question, yet to be resolved, is how these orientations relate with the type of programs these congregations develop? These religious leaders offer a variety of explanations and stories to justify their community service. Do the programs that emerge out of different faith commitments reflect these commitments? How might the program goals be influenced. What might policymakers benefit from as these questions are added to anti-poverty program consideration?

At this point it is too early to see specific policy recommendations arising from the questions and preliminary textual analyses. There are suggestive directions on the horizon, but in no sense definitive paths. A few observations are, however, in order. First, the relation between the questions and the emergent themes seems to offer new categories or concepts that may prove productive. For example, the dependency/self-sufficiency tension can ping pong back and forth interminably; and in the conversations in this study, it does. One perspective that seems to transcend the conundrum, while including its components, has something to do with what I’ll call for the moment, a connectedness-contribution construct. Secondly, the widespread support for many features of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act suggest these congregations can offer resources not fully explored by the nation’s social services leadership. Finally, additional research that uncovers faith-based social service provision must provide responses to questions policy-makers raise.

### *Reframing Conceptual Assumptions -- Connection/Contribution*

As the epigraphs from St. James and FAME which launch this report reveal, a passion to connect with others is one of the individual forces driving service to others. The lay leader from St. James has encountered the sacred through his work with impoverished peoples. Shortly after declaring affirmation of a central religious image regarding social justice he reveals a highly personal experience. "There's some kind of a *something* exchanged that is so blooming contagious that you want to see it again. . . .It is a time of great, of great *value*. A contagious moment. Everybody rejoices." It is clear that the encounter was perceived as constellated between the two people as a shared moment. It is not described as merely a warm feeling experienced by a philanthropic giver. The Pastoral Associate describes something similar from the opposite direction. "Dead in the eyes" is the way "burned out social workers around here describe" particularly difficult clients. Workers' inability to make personal connection depresses rather than invigorates their work with clients. This issue of connection is at an individual level of service. The shared experience of connection that mutually honors the dignity of both participants in an encounter seems to transcend the tension of dependency and self-sufficiency. Dwelling on designing programs that avoid disincentives and nurture dignity re-focuses the issue. Preliminary review of the texts suggests links between connection language and the ambivalences surrounding the dependency/self-sufficiency conundrum. While the individual level is important, it is not isolated from systemic concerns. This is where the issue of contribution appears.

Leaders often made overt, derogatory statements about women who abuse welfare. Often times, negative comparisons were made as the speaker compared her own success in briefly using public assistance as distinctive from those "who cheat" the system. The negative judgments of public assistance recipients, particularly mothers, is difficult to understand when those making them are cognizant that their "church leader" status sparked their participation in the research conversation. Why would these congregation leaders make strong negative pronouncements? The moralistic quality of Protestantism that judges individual virtue and vice is clearly one explanation. The dilemma is that negative judgments were often cast in terms of frustration at various "system" failures. The "family" had failed "these women." Or "the system [of Social Services] was sloppy." Or, "downsizing" has swept any possibility of hope out from underneath these folks. At the same time, there is cautious optimism that employment outside of the home will benefit the mother, her family and the community. As one of the FAME ministers cited in the epigraph above claims, ". . . our motto to our kids is that no young person has the right to be unproductive. Bottom line: get off your duff and make your contribution." This is not an individualistic statement as much as it is an expectation of social responsibility. It assumes that every individual has a contribution to make and that it will serve beneficial ends. The Director of FAME's Coalition of Health Professionals puts it slightly differently.

I think if [welfare recipients] enter the work force and they're accomplishing, I think they'll benefit, you know, in terms of how they feel about themselves. They'll feel better about themselves. So I see a lot of benefits [from the new welfare law] for the individual, for their families, their friends, their children, their loved ones. You know, their community.

Other comments regarding economic development, employment and family appear are concerned with analogous issues. Mothers are expected to contribute positively to the common weal. As a lay leader put it,

I was brought up in a single-headed family and so I know what it feels like, as a son. . .  
.[But] we have to say to mom, ‘we value you raising your child, but at the same time you have to take on the responsibility of going out and learning something that will be able to create some income. We believe that you can do both.’

The contribution expected and its incumbent social benefits are particularized in some statements. This theme of contribution seems to hold some promise. It differs from a notion of ‘responsibility’ and is not as elastic as ‘community.’ It appears in conjunction with the themes of connection just often enough to indicate further exploration. How might welfare programs be structured to include these dimensions of “contribution” in tandem with the ethic of “personal responsibility” the PRWO now calls for? Church leaders can offer suggestions and model programs that may warrant widespread adoption. How policymakers might apply some of these themes will be explored as the project unfolds.

### *Support For PRWO*

Church leaders in both congregations were in strong agreement with several features of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. Teenage pregnancy, time-limited cash assistance and non-home employment are three areas of particular concern to these leaders. Teen pregnancy and the options young women have in this situation is of serious concern for all these church leaders. They agree with PRWO’s intent to reduce the number of both teen pregnancies and teen abortions but are uniformly in disagreement that cash incentives to States can do the job. The belief that communities need to discover and use the contributions of all its members must be creatively applied to the issue of teen life. These leaders contend that if young people participate in dynamic community building activities, they will envision their futures with greater optimism and expectation of productivity. First A.M.E.’s programs of youth mentoring, educational tutoring, and youth church and community service all attempt to accomplish these goals. The church’s sorority and fraternity explicitly recruit high school students that are attracted to violent youth gangs (“gang wannabees”). Several hundred young people have successfully participated in these programs. These leaders know that a “midnight basketball” orientation is not the final answer to poverty and dysfunctional social institutions. They also know, however, that transforming the effects of poverty requires a richly-woven tapestry of faith, neighborly duty, economic development and economic opportunity. They envision their programs as a part of a much larger effort.

Time-limited cash assistance is an issue that sparks strong but ambivalent attitudes. While most of the church leaders agreed with the PRWO time limits, they also know firsthand the dismal employment effects of corporate downsizing (especially in Los Angeles), mechanization (especially in Kentucky) and the flight of capital out of impoverished communities (in both locations). Employment opportunity and robust local economies are necessary for “welfare to work” programs to succeed. These leaders expressed concern that time limits would cause great individual suffering and that job opportunities at appropriate skill levels would not sufficiently accommodate the influx of such large numbers of people seeking work. On the other hand, the leaders also believe that unlimited cash assistance should be offered to only the most severely impaired people in a community and that in general, the lack of cash assistance time-limits has had more negative consequences than positive ones.

Finally, the law’s mandatory non-home employment has strong though qualified support. This feature of the PRWO is viewed positively because it eliminates the patronizing assumptions

of previous welfare practices. Encouraging adult members of publicly-supported families to participate in a community's economic life evokes general agreement among these church leaders. Most, however, felt strongly that government programs to facilitate entry in to the work force must accompany the new work requirements. They are prepared to work in partnership with government agencies and many projects such as those reflected in this project's Case Study have already begun. Leaders in these two culturally dissimilar congregations surprisingly agree with one another on most of the core issues of anti-poverty response. This is surprising because of the racial, region and denominational differences that separate these groups. More research in this area will provide insights that will lead to specific policy recommendations.

### *Questions for Further Research*

The influence religious ideas and practices have on policy matters has often stalled at the exchange of name-calling (e.g., conservatives are "fundamentalist extremists"; liberals are "secularists"). My interest is in uncovering and articulating the specific meanings that socially active Christians express in both word and work. My assumption is that the insights derived from systematic analysis of the stories of carefully selected congregations can offer policy-makers assistance in conceptualizing responses to impoverishment. Some church congregations' anti-poverty community efforts have had stellar success. Why? Is it because they are religious or because they are well-structured, efficient, social service providers? Is volunteerism a contributor or inhibitor of provision? What, if anything, differs from social service provided by faith-based organizations versus public or private ones? How does the congregation's environment influence its program? These questions and others ought to be investigated to contribute to future policy development. For now, it is clear that there is much to learn from these faith-based leaders who assume that human society will never eradicate poverty and yet work with great passion to serve those who are impoverished.

## Appendix

### Sample of Interview Discussion Questions and Forced-Choice Questions

#### **I. Congregation's Social Outreach/Anti-Poverty Programs**

To begin, please tell me about the service program you are most involved with, here at [church name].

[after initial response-be sure that the following areas have been touched upon]:

- \* program goals
- \* program structure
- \* program finances
- \* program history
- \* how person is involved in the program & office they hold in the group, if any

In what situations do you deny service to someone?

[\* and then what happens?

\* do you refer to other groups? If yes: are these church-based, secular, govt., etc?]

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing families you serve now?

[\* How does your church/program respond to this?

\* Is it appropriate for church programs to serve families? Why? Why not?]

#### **II. New Welfare Legislation: Impacts on Church & Community**

Do you think the new welfare legislation is going to have any effects on your church's programs?

\* Please describe what you think may happen. [encourage specific detailed, stories]

Do you agree or disagree with the bible verse, "the poor you will have with you always"?

\* Why? Why not?

Some people feel that the old welfare laws encouraged "dependency" among recipients of public assistance. What do you think they mean by this?

Some people feel that the new welfare laws will encourage "independence" or "self-sufficiency" among recipients of public assistance. What do you think they mean?

Who do you think should take primary responsibility for serving the needs of poor people, our churches or our government?

Do you think any of the families your group works with will be negatively affected by the new law? If so, how? [encourage specific detailed, stories]

What about beneficial effects? Do you think any of the families you serve will experience benefits? [encourage specific detailed, stories]

Do you think the plan to "move people from welfare to work" is a good idea?

[Circle one]                      YES      NO      NOT SURE

What do you think will happen when this plan takes effect?

Do you think the law to limit the number of years people can receive cash assistance is a good idea?

[Circle one]                      YES      NO      NOT SURE

What do you think will happen when this law takes effect?

### III. Theology<sup>17</sup>

T.1. Here is a list of descriptions. [Give card #1 to Participant]. I'm interested in hearing how true each of these phrases about God is for you. As I read each one, please indicate how true it is for you by using a number from 1 to 5. "One" is not true at all and "Five" is extremely true. [Read aloud "God is" with every choice of A-R]

God is...	Not True At All	Not True	Neutral	True	Extremely True
faithful and dependable	1	2	3	4	5
unapproachable	1	2	3	4	5
distant	1	2	3	4	5
aware of everything I think & do	1	2	3	4	5
close	1	2	3	4	5
in my life more as a symbol or an idea than as a real presence	1	2	3	4	5

T.2.-19. Now here is a card with a range of responses. [Card #2-19] [Very True; True; Neutral; Not True; Not True at All!]. Please use these choices to indicate how true each of the following statements are for you. Feel free to comment.

	VT	True	Neutral	Not True	NTAA
Wealth is a sign of God's favor	VT	T	N	NT	NTAA
Poverty is a sign of God's judgment.	VT	T	N	NT	NTAA
Jesus was human and divine and lives today	VT	T	N	NT	NTAA

T.21. The following statements are about human nature. Please indicate how true each is for you by selecting a number from 1 to 5. "One" is not true at all and "Five" is extremely true.

People are...	NTAA	Not True	Neutral	True	ET
A. ... mostly evil	1	2	3	4	5
B. ...selfish, competitive	1	2	3	4	5
C. ...mostly good	1	2	3	4	5
D. ...loving, cooperative	1	2	3	4	5
E. ...perfectible, given the right social conditions	1	2	3	4	5
F. Not perfectible, there are no social conditions that can overcome evil	1	2	3	4	5

T.20. Here is a card with several statements about sin and salvation [Card #20]. Which statement best describes your understandings of these? [Circle option that Participant selects.]

- A. Sin and salvation don't have much meaning to me personally.
- B. Sin is a helpful way of talking about people's capacity to harm themselves and others, and salvation is a helpful way of talking about hope for a better future.
- C. I believe all people are inherently good; if sin and salvation have any meaning at all, it has to do with people realizing their human potential for good.
- D. Although people are sinful, all people participate in God's salvation regardless of how they live their life, even if they do not believe in God.
- E. All people are sinful but need only to believe in and ask God's forgiveness to be saved.
- F. All people are sinful and if they are to be saved must earn it through living a good life, devoted to God.

T.22. There are two common points of view about the best way to approach social problems such as crime, violence and poverty. Which one is closest to your perspective?

- A. The best way to address these problems is by changing the hearts and actions of individuals.
- B. The best way to address these problems is by changing social institutions and structures.

<sup>17</sup> This is an edited sample of the questions discussed with study participants. The theological perspective questions used in this study include more parts than this truncated presentation. The complete questions are from: (Benson & Williams, 1982; Carroll, Dudley & McKinney, 1986).

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