RUNNING HEAD: Developing a Faith-Based Response to Domestic Violence

Developing a Faith-Based Response to Domestic Violence in the Black Church

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ABSTRACT

The Black church is the cornerstone of many African American communities and provides a place of refuge to address domestic violence. However, many churches have provided conflictual messages about domestic violence not honoring the powerful role it can play to end domestic violence. This paper provides information about the Faith-Based Community Domestic Violence Initiative (FBCDVI), a project funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop a better understanding of domestic violence and its impact on the Black community and to create a preliminary curriculum for Black churches on how to address domestic violence. The paper will focus on how the Black church can enhance its response to end domestic violence and the conditions necessary to be most effective.

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Domestic violence and the Black church received forthright attention in August 2007 when the story of Juanita Bynum made headlines (Dewan, 2007). There was a public outcry when Bynum, one of the most notable Black evangelists in the United States was publicly beaten by her husband, Bishop Thomas Weeks III. The idea that the devil could make someone be abusive was discussed in the press (Dewan, 2007). The idea that someone becomes abusive because of what the survivor does was brought into question. The idea that the Bishop should be forgiven without suffering any criminal consequences was confabulated. The idea that not only was domestic violence occurring but that church leaders could be engaging in this type of behavior was illuminated. Finally, the idea that Bishop Weeks was received back into his church immediately following the incident to a standing ovation of predominantly female congregants was underscored. For many, this incident was not shocking or unfamiliar. Instead, it affirmed that domestic violence occurs within and among church goers and that the church has a critical role to play in responding to domestic violence. While this incident occurred among Black faith leaders, it should be noted that domestic violence occurs across all communities and is not unique to African Americans or any particular religious denomination (Ellison, Bartkowski & Anderson, 1999; Nason-Clark, 2004; Rennison, 2003).

The Black church is the cornerstone of many African American communities (Hill, 1999; Martin & Martin, 2002). Black churches have historically been a place of refuge and have offered a consistent presence in communities long after formal service providers have come and gone (Carlton-LaNey, 2001). Black churches performed many social service functions in their early history: teaching slaves how to read and write, providing health and burial insurance to

members of the church, and stressing the importance of civic engagement (Billingsley, 1999).

Contemporary Black churches continue this tradition of not just ministering to the soul but also

providing concrete needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and advice about how to handle and

address day-to-day issues. As a place where comprehensive care is common, the notion of Black

churches responding to domestic violence is of critical importance. In fact, there were some

Black churches in the Progressive Era that developed a response to domestic violence through

the public reprimanding of men that abused women (Gordon, 1991). Black churches have an

important and captious role to play as it relates to domestic violence. The Black church is

uniquely positioned to help stop the abuse of victims and hold perpetrators accountable for their

actions.

Description of FBCDVI

The development of programs to support healthy relationships has been a major

component of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This paper

provides information on a project focused on the development of a culturally competent faith-

based intervention targeted towards stopping domestic violence in the Black community. The

Faith-Based Community Domestic Violence Initiative (FBCDVI) sought to provide Black

churches with community education and awareness about domestic violence and to develop

strategies rooted in church doctrine and practices to address this serious problem. The project

was funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for

Children and Families, Office of Community Services (Grant No. 90EV0202/01). The project

provided Black churches with an opportunity (1) to learn more about domestic violence and its

impact within the Black community, (2) to discuss how domestic violence can be adversely

reinforced through the ill interpretation of church doctrine, biblical Scripture, and remarks

regarding the role and presence of men in intimate relationships and roles within the church, and (3) to examine how to develop responses to the problem using a faith-based approach.

Literature Review

The Black church provides a necessary and important role to eradicate domestic violence in the African American community. The literature review will center around three areas: (1) the prevalence of domestic violence in the Black community and how African Americans are specifically impacted by domestic violence, (2) the difference between spirituality and religion and how both can be abused to negatively impact women struggling with this issue, and (3) the response of the Black church to addressing domestic violence.

African Americans and Domestic Violence

African Americans are more likely to suffer lethal injuries, serious health consequences, and death as a result of domestic violence than other populations (Rennison, 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). African Americans often experience barriers to care and limited access to formal service providers that impede their ability to address this issue within the professional community (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Williams, 1999). Services are often not geographically accessible and not integrated with other needed services, such as mental health counseling and play therapy groups. Black women have been turned away from shelter services due to negative stereotypes of Black women (West, 1999). Black women have also been reluctant to reach out to child welfare workers for help due to the fear of disproportionate child removal (Bent-Goodley, 2004). In addition, limited culturally competent services and poor service provision have resulted in African Americans turning to their families for support first and their religious communities next to deal with domestic violence (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; West, 1999). Services often do not recognize that socio-cultural, historical and spiritual factors have led many

African American women to forego traditional services and instead turn to their faith community

for support.

Spiritual and Religious Abuse

Spirituality is "the sense of the sacred and divine" (Martin & Martin, 2002, p. 1).

Religious expressions of faith are generally rooted in church attendance and participation in

church activities (Billingsley, 1999). Religious abuse may occur if the perpetrator does not allow

the woman to go to church or if he berates her faith and expressions of faith. When women turn

to their religious community, they are often met with conflictual messages (Nason-Clark, 2001).

They may hear interpretations of biblical Scripture that reinforce staying in the relationship

(Ammons, 1999; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; West, 1999). They may also be encouraged to

endure the abuse in support of Black men that are already disregarded and discriminated against

in society or because they are told it is the role of the women to support her partner through the

tough times (Bent-Goodley, 2007; West, 1999). Further conflictual messages include being told

that divorce is a sin and represents giving up on one's faith or that with such a small number of

eligible Black men available, women should just hold on to the man they are with and disregard

his faults in order to not be alone (Love, 1998; McClure & Ramsay, 1998). These messages

cause many women to question their faith – their spiritual basis which is rooted in their belief in

God. As a result, many of these women are at even greater risk for serious injury and increased

violence.

The Response of the Black Church to Domestic Violence

Churches are increasing their discussion of domestic violence. The Black Church and

Domestic Violence Institute (www.bcdvi.org) offers sermons that pastors can model and also

offers trainings and conferences to address domestic violence and increase more impalpable

responses when abuse has occurred. In addition, churches have organized local events where sermons focus on domestic violence, or where domestic violence forums are held to publicize resources (Miles, 2000). Some churches even have active domestic violence ministries focused on bringing light to domestic violence and finding creative ways of addressing abuse. The project being described in this paper is one effort made with three churches in an urban area to educate and identify strategies to address domestic violence.

<div align="center">Research Objectives</div>

The primary research objectives of the FBCDVI project were as follows: (1) To develop a preliminary curriculum of a faith-based response to domestic violence within the Black community; (2) To better understand the dynamics of domestic violence within the context of the Black church environment; and, (3) To examine some of the barriers and opportunities to addressing domestic violence within the Black church.

<div align="center">Description of Data and Methods</div>

The project consisted of Christian-based churches, specifically the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), Church of Christ, and Baptist denominations. This is not a comprehensive representation of the diversity of faith communities in the African American community. However, it provides a beginning for how to engage faith leaders on this sensitive topic. First, the participants completed a survey that assessed their knowledge, beliefs and experiences with domestic violence. Second, the participants had an opportunity to participate in Community Education Groups (CEG), which formed the basis for the seven-week intervention. The curriculum items explored the following topics (see Table 1): (1) the purpose of the program and its importance, (2) understanding domestic violence, (3) examining domestic violence within the African American community, (4) exploring strategies of what constitutes a faith-based response

to domestic violence in the Black community, (5) identifying domestic violence, (6) exploring

how to bring public awareness to domestic violence, and (7) evaluating the project. Following

the implementation of the intervention, three focus groups were conducted to obtain feedback of

the CEG topics and discussion.

During the CEG, the participants examined the faith-based and the community

components of the project. The participants explored scriptural interpretation within the context

of keeping women safe from violence. They examined different biblical passages and discussed

how the passages could be used as an oppressive tool or as a tool of empowerment for women.

By examining both sides, the participants were able to explore how Scripture has been used to

reinforce women staying in abusive relationships and they were able to see how the Scripture

could be used as the basis for empowering women and families. It was clear that church

leadership has a choice when interpreting scripture and the importance of recognizing who is

doing the interpretation and from what context and experience. Next the participants had an

opportunity to share what they learned with the broader community, using a train-the-trainer

model. Flyers were dispersed in the community to invite community members to learn about

domestic violence. While the numbers from the broader community were low, the participants

did get an opportunity to share what they learned through the CEG and offer new insights

tailored to the unique needs of the respective community.

<div style="text-align:center">Findings</div>

There were 122 participants: 62% female and 38% male. Most of the participants had

Bachelors Degrees (57%). All were African American from diverse age ranges (see Bent-

Goodley, 2007 for complete descriptive information). Nearly one-fifth (17%) of the respondents

had a rigid sex-role perception, which means that they had a specific idea as to appropriate roles

for men and women based on gender, that was linked to more lenient perceptions about domestic violence. One-third of the participants had experienced physical abuse by an intimate partner. Over one-third had experienced emotional and psychological abuse. Close to one-third (27%) identified as having been physically abusive towards an intimate partner. The majority of the participants had never sought any help from a formal provider for these experiences. The men identified a male code of conduct that often inhibits men from confronting other men about abusive behavior even when they know it is wrong. These findings have been discussed in depth in two previous publications (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). However, the unique role of the Black church in responding to these findings has not been fully explored. In addition, conditions by which churches are best positioned to respond to domestic violence have also not been explored.

<div align="center">Implications</div>

The implications of this research include (1) the need to develop more culturally competent faith-based initiatives, (2) to strengthen the ability of professional communities to engage the religious community to provide services, (3) the need to better engage men in finding solutions to end partner violence, and (4) to develop community education initiatives that are culturally competent and respectful of diverse religious and ethnic communities.

<div align="center">The Need for More Culturally Competent Faith Based Initiatives</div>

Churches are an opportune place to address domestic violence for three major reasons: they are a place of refuge, diverse populations are often present in Black churches, and churches can help to facilitate healing from domestic violence. First, churches represent a place of refuge. The church is still viewed as a place where women can go and seek help. Even if the woman chooses to stay in the relationship, she can find some sense of refuge or safety within the church.

This can be critical as women struggle to find ways of dealing with abuse. In those moments, she can search herself and her spirit to consider how the abuse is impacting her and her family. Churches can provide this safety at critical times. Churches provide a venue where one can reach diverse groups of African Americans.

Second, churches are one place within the Black community where many individuals from many diverse economic, educational, and social backgrounds come together for one purpose on a consistent basis (Billingsley, 1999). Many of these individuals are not likely to show up at a social service or public agency to receive services. They may not have any interaction with the social service or criminal justice systems despite the need for help. Churches offer a trusted mechanism whereby diverse within group populations can be reached.

Third, churches can support healing. Many domestic violence programs focus on stopping the violence, holding the perpetrator accountable and prosecuting violent acts. These are all relevant and important functions. At the same time, healing is often not addressed. More research is needed that explores what it means to heal from domestic violence, what it looks like, what it feels like and how environments can be created where that can happen. The church offers a place where healing can take place as it has historically offered a place for comprehensive supports, providing for spiritual, social, psychological, and even biological needs. Helping people connect the healing process to their spirituality is critical as spirituality is very much a strength and part of the collective experience of people of African ancestry (Martin & Martin, 2002). Healing, as an outcome of program intervention, must be explored and the Black church can play a critical role in developing what it looks like and how it can materialize.

Strengthen Professional Communities' Ability to Work with Churches

The church also offers a place of protection and not just from the person that is abusive but also from social service systems. The church has long served as a gatekeeper for the community. It can sanction and broker support from formal service providers and agencies. The church has historically stood as a place where individuals can find the support to battle systems that have traditionally not been supportive or fair to African Americans (Billingsley, 1999). It is critical for the Black church to continue in this capacity. Black communities need a vanguard that can provide them with the advocacy and supports needed when formal service provision is geographically inaccessible, lacks cultural competence, or is not prepared to address the range of needs of the person seeking help. Professionals need to learn how to engage this system and work in partnership with them to provide for individuals experiencing, witnessing, and perpetrating abuse.

The Need to Better Engage Men

The church is in a unique role to address the male code of conduct. Notions of Black masculinity, fatherhood, the role of men in relationships and the need for healthy relationships are critical issues. These discussions are increasingly being led by fatherhood groups. While important, the Black church has been a place for Black men to be affirmed, leadership nurtured and supported. These are all critical functions. However, Black churches are also places that can crack the code of conduct and help reaffirm the positive role and nature of Black men in the home, community and the church. The church can be a place where men can come together to create processes to heal and strengthen Black men, advance opportunities, and address discrimination. The church can continue to be a place that supports the development of Black men and creates opportunities for them to lead and be recognized. All of this must continue to happen but not at the demise of Black women. These discussions need to take place within a

context of supporting the development of Black families and Black women that are equal to and

respected by males. The roles of Black men and women should be discussed within a context of

understanding how the roles benefit the entire family and the community, how the roles are

complimentary, what roles are culturally based and how the community needs to evolve to

confront those structures that are not congruent with the contemporary cultural and societal

context. The male code of conduct is critical to understand. Men can play a powerful role in

engaging other men, holding them accountable, and supporting their development.

<div align="center">Developing Community Education Initiatives</div>

The church provides an anchor and is still recognized as a bedrock in the community.

Churches provide a grounding for generations of community members. They help to anchor

people in the community and connect them to something bigger than themselves. As such, the

church can help women struggling with this issue to be anchored within an institution. Being

anchored and grounded in the community is a critical cultural context for Black people (Bent-

Goodley, 2005; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Hill, 1999). It allows them to have hope that is rooted in a

collective understanding of what is valued and what is important. Being connected to the church

can allow survivors to feel less isolated. Being less isolated can increase responsiveness, address

issues before they escalate, and help to facilitate obtaining resources and monitoring them for

their ability to positively and effectively respond to needs. This process can be helpful to those

that are abusive as well. Churches can be a place for those that perpetrate violence to be

collectively sanctioned and collectively supported to find healthy, non-violent solutions to

difficulties which arise from being in a relationship. As a result, not only is the individual being

held accountable but there is a community holding the individual accountable and availing itself

to respond to issues when they arise. Many batterers' intervention programs do not take this into

account. Often the batterer is treated and released as if he is "cured" by attending a yearlong

treatment program. However, without the community supports in place, the individual is left to

self-monitor, self-engage, and self-regulate without the communal supports necessary to support

sustained change. Churches offer the sense of groundedness that reinforces the notion that you

are not in it alone but that you are connected to something much bigger than yourself that will

both hold you accountable and support you. As a result, community education is necessary.

Communities must have an opportunity to hear definitions of domestic violence, share their

definitions, dispel myths about domestic violence, and identify viable resources available to deal

with abuse. Community education is necessary to facilitate long-term sustainable change.

Conditions for Sustainable Change

While the role of the church is critical, there has to be a willingness to examine how

church leaders and church environments can be strengthened to really support the work of

addressing domestic violence. One cannot be abusive and preach non-violence. One cannot be

oppressive and preach for equality and justice. One cannot use Scripture to justify violence

against women and dismiss the use of Scripture to justify slavery. There has to be a sense of

continuity, authenticity, and self- and institutional-reflection before committing to address

domestic violence.

The following are conditions to consider as churches embrace addressing domestic

violence: The church must have a violence-free environment for both church leaders and

congregants. That is, church leaders must be held accountable for living as agents of non-

violence. They cannot be abusive. Positive messages are diminished when the leadership is

using violence as a means of controlling others. Minimally it creates confusion to think that one

could promote Christ and use violence to control and diminish others. This contradiction can

create a sense of confusion, not just in terms of intimate relationships but also in terms of the relevance and the authenticity of the faith community. These issues can put people in a place where they begin to question the intention, the power, and the ability of God. While church leaders are in no way comparable to God, they do serve to promote the Word of God in their words and their deeds. And so, they are called on to provide positive examples and to not create confusion or contradiction but to illuminate what is good and just. When one makes the choice to do something different, it should be acknowledged as the choice the individual made and not the workings of the devil.

Church leadership has to make domestic violence prevention a priority. People are suffering in congregations, silently coming each week, tithing, shouting, dancing, reflecting and leaving to go home to an abusive environment. Domestic violence cannot be left in the hands of women alone. Instead, domestic violence has to be acknowledged as an issue that impacts men, boys, girls, communities, and nations, as well as women . It has to be acknowledged that domestic violence is linked to disproportionality of African Americans in other systems, such as child welfare, HIV rates, and juvenile and criminal justice systems. Church leadership has to have the foresight to link these issues and develop and prioritize concrete responses that include and go beyond a domestic violence ministry. If church leadership does not make this a priority, then the issue will continue to traumatize congregants and the pain and suffering of church members will be silenced and ignored in church pews.

Albeit there is great resistance, there has to be an open dialogue about sex-role perceptions and gender inequity within the Black church. This issue is a delicate and challenging conversation because of the ways in which Black men have been disenfranchised in the larger society. However, creating the disenfranchisement of Black women is not the solution. Black

churches must find ways to address imbalances in power and decision-making. There has to be an environment where women can talk about these issues openly and without retribution. Most of the female participants did not want to talk about gender inequity because it was such a sensitive topic. The notion that this will not change and that it will be misunderstood if discussed has to be addressed.

There has to be a discussion about the role of Scripture and how it used and interpreted in church teachings. It is clear that the same Scripture can be interpreted and used differently depending on who is discussing it. It is neither practical nor expected that all ministers will interpret Scripture identically. However, there can be some discussion and agreement that Scripture should be used to empower, strengthen, and fortify all people, regardless of gender. There can be agreement to discuss these interpretations with people that are empowered to respond and critique what is being said. Bible study groups can provide some examination of scripture and how it is used within the church. These opportunities are available through structures already in place.

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a pervasive problem that denies the ability to foster healthy relationships. Faith-based initiatives to address domestic violence are critical towards finding effective strategies to address the problem of domestic violence. Historically, African American women have utilized their faith community for support, so more must be done to develop effective strategies for churches within the community to combat domestic violence. More culturally competent faith-based initiatives must be developed in order to reach more economically, educationally, and socially diverse African Americans. Professional service providers must be strengthened in their ability to engage religious communities to provide

services. This understanding of how to best engage diverse religious groups is crucial in building effective partnerships within the overall community. If domestic violence is to be alleviated, then men must be better engaged in the process in order to find solutions to stem the tide of violence and develop effective mechanisms, programs, and structures to keep women and children safe, while investing in the development of men. Lastly, if the community is expected to play a critical role in the alleviation of domestic violence, community education initiatives must be developed that are culturally competent and respectful of diverse religious and ethnic communities. Churches must be willing to examine ways in which they can truly support domestic violence prevention and intervention. Churches must not only remain violence free among the leaders and congregants, but use the powers of the church to uplift the community. Church leaders must make domestic violence a prevention priority by openly discussing gender inequality and by linking domestic violence to other issues that disproportionately affect the African American community.

The Black church is a powerful tool in the prevention, education, and healing of domestic violence. In order for the church to be actively engaged in the battle against domestic violence, church leaders and congregants must choose to make this a priority. The eradication of domestic violence is a community effort; the church, which plays a critical role for social change in the Black community, must take this lead in addressing domestic violence and partnering with the community to end this epidemic.

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Table 1: Curriculum Areas

Topic	Content Covered
Purpose of the Project/Intervention	• Philosophy guiding the project • Importance of the endeavor • Purpose and description of the project
Understanding Domestic Violence	• Defining domestic violence • Discuss myths about the causes of domestic violence • Discuss prevalence and statistics about domestic violence • Examine local statistics related to domestic violence
African Americans and Domestic Violence	• Explore domestic violence within the African American community • Discuss myths about domestic violence in the African American • Examine some of the unique challenges about domestic violence in the African American community
A Faith-Based Response	• Discuss the difference between religion and spirituality • Explore what is meant by spiritual and religious abuse • Discuss how to use scripture as a form of empowerment, identify and examine specific scriptures • Discuss how to engage the Black Church on this issue
Identifying Domestic Violence	• Examine the Cycle of Abuse • Identify and discuss warning signs that someone is in a domestic violence situation
Media Awareness	• Examine ways of engaging the public on this issue • Explore how to promote domestic violence awareness and violence free relationships from a cultural perspective
Evaluating Efforts	• Discuss how to continuously evaluate how you are addressing this issue in your Church