Black Churches and Neighborhood Empowerment In Boston, Massachusetts 1960s and 1970s

Lessons for Today

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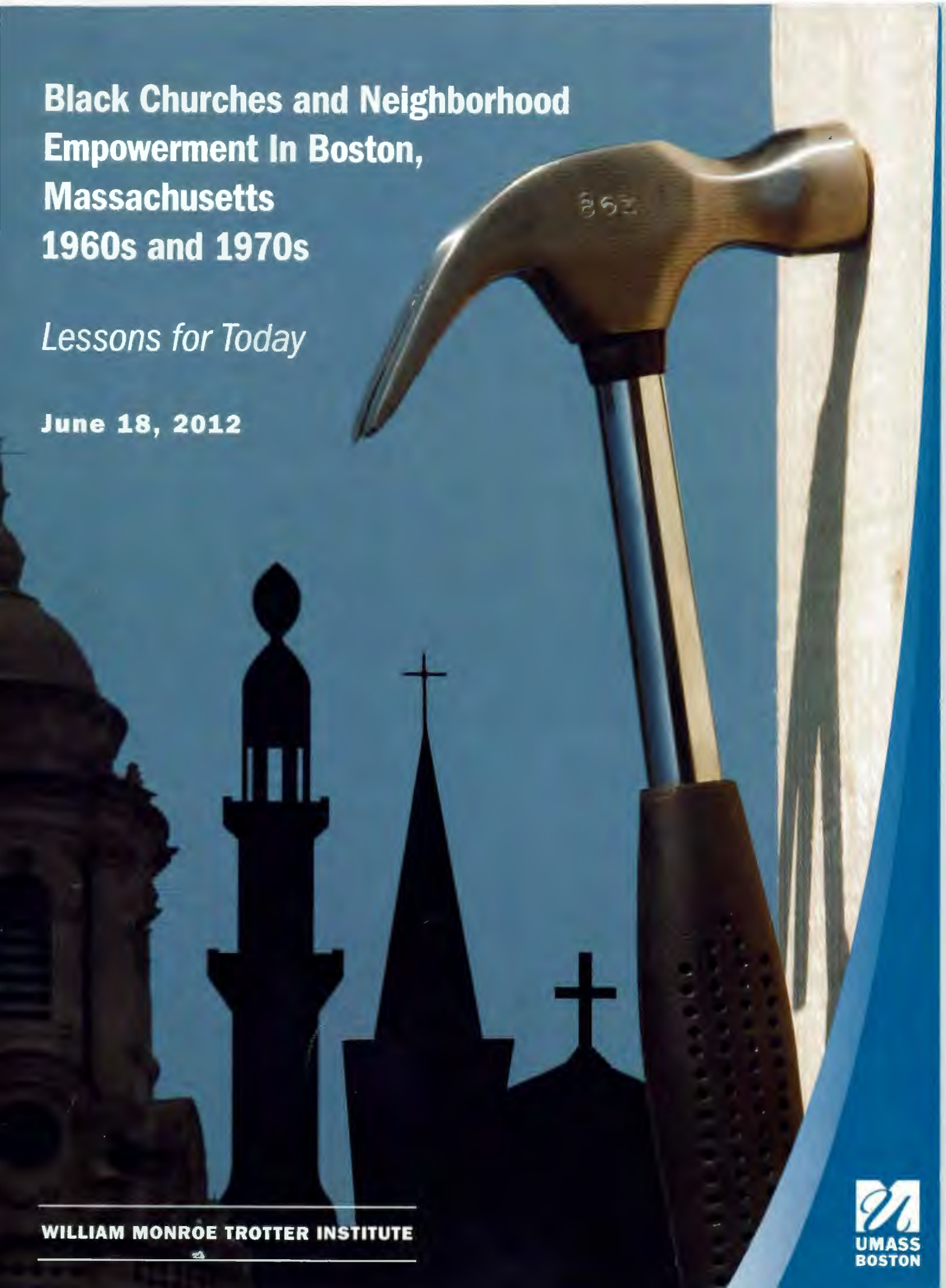

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Black Churches and Neighborhood Empowerment In Boston, Massachusetts 1960s and 1970s: Lessons for Today

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The Black Church is the bastion of support for black people, the custodians of black culture, the initiator of black experience. The black people's church is their school, forum, political arena, social club, art gallery, conservatory of music. It is their lyceum and gymnasium as well as the sanctum sanctorum... Thus in Boston, for example, black churches not white ones, have built low and moderate income housing for the elderly and for families on limited incomes. (1972)

Rev. William E. Alberts, Old West Church
Rev. William B. McClain, Union United Methodist Church)[1]

Introduction

The Obama administration is moving toward changing the orientation of urban policy from people-based to place-based strategies. Examples of this shift include the Promise Neighborhoods initiative in the Department of Education, and the Choice Neighborhoods program in the Department of Housing and Urban Development.[2] This shift means that there will be greater focus on strengthening neighborhoods and their organizations, schools, and businesses than has been the case over the last three decades. There is a growing policy awareness that problems associated with continuing and persistent poverty and racial inequality in urban areas require comprehensive community-based strategies for effective responses. As neighborhoods and cities across the nation strategize about these new kinds of initiatives to strengthen neighborhoods, are several key lessons found within the history of some Black churches that offer insight regarding strategies to empower neighborhoods.[3]

In order to understand these lessons the author conversed with, and interviewed, eleven elder Black activists familiar with Black community development initiatives in the city of Boston

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[1] "These ministers say the white Christian churches are dying" *Boston Sunday Globe,* July 9, 1972, p. 19.
[2] See "Secretary Arne Duncan Testifies Before the House Budget Committee on the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Request," http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/03/03122009.html for description of the Promise Neighborhoods initiative in the federal Department of Education and Choice Neighborhoods in Housing and Urban Development.
[3] The term, *activist* Black churches, is used in order to indicate that not all Black churches seek to become involved in civic and neighborhood affairs; and, even within this framing, there are many differences regarding the degree or type of civic involvement. See James Jennings, "Black Faith-Based Coalitions in Boston: Civic Advantages and Challenges" in R. Drew Smith and Frederick C. Harris (eds.), *Black Churches and Local Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

during the 1960s and 1970s. Elder Black activists involved with Black neighborhood issues during this period were interviewed in 2010 and 2011. This paper represents an attempt to capture the voices and ideas of these individuals regarding how their reflections on the Black church and local economic development in the 1960s and 1970s might be relevant for local economic development today. The paper is primarily based on oral history provided by these elder activists. The individuals include ministers, educators, civic leaders, former elected officials, and business leaders who worked on a range of neighborhood issues and were also involved with city politics. They all worked in Boston during a period of major demographic, political, and economic transition in terms of race and class, and public education.[4] There were selected for interviews on the basis of a content analysis of news articles on the Black community in earlier periods as well as a reputational approach, with some individuals selected for initial interviews suggesting other key names.

Boston has a long history of Black church involvement and activism in civic and political affairs in the pre- and post-World War II periods, and in ways that focused on neighborhood empowerment. This history includes electoral breakthroughs supported by Black churches, the provision of local social and human services, the establishment of independent Black schools, and collaborative efforts with other sectors in Boston civic life.[5] This activism is important to document and analyze because it has been too often overlooked in some academic scholarship; but it is also significant because what Black churches accomplished, or attempted, in terms of community revitalization in this period can have implications for community development today.

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[4] Mel King, *Chain of Change: Struggles for Black Community Development* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1981).
[5] See Robert C. Hayden, *Faith, Culture, and Leadership: A History of the Black Church in Boston* (Boston: Boston Branch of the NAACP, 1983); also, James Oliver Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1999); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); for a more contemporary overview, see Roger A. Clemetson and Roger Coates, *Restoring Broken Places and Rebuilding Communities: A Casebook on African-American Church Involvement in Community Economic Development*, (Washington, DC: National Congress for Community Economic Development, 1993).

During the Sixties the Black community was growing in terms of total population size and also physically moving from the neighborhoods of Roxbury and the South End into Mattapan. The individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this study were all participants in the city's transformation and were directly or indirectly involved with the work of activist Black churches as well.[6] How did these activists remember the role of Black religious organizations in neighborhood revitalization during this period? What were the broad factors molding the work of activist Black churches in the area of neighborhood empowerment? How were such efforts connected to the broader Civil Rights Movement during this period? And did they offer insights about this period that may be relevant for more effective neighborhood revitalization strategies today?

Black Churches and Neighborhood Revitalization

There are two reasons why it is important to query elder Black civic leaders about the role that activist Black churches played in the area of neighborhood revitalization during this earlier period. First, it is generally recognized that some Black churches across the nation have had major involvement in a range of local economic issues. Andrew Billingsley documented extensive involvement in neighborhood-building activities on the part of the Black church throughout the South, and in some Northern cities.[7] This kind of partnership was noted much earlier by George E. Haynes in 1928 in his article, "The Church and Negro Progress," which

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[6] Interviewees include Doris Bunte, the first Black female state representative in Massachusetts; Ken Guscott, business leader and former president of Boston Branch NAACP; Robert C. Hayden, historian and journalist; Rev. Michael E. Haynes, pastor emeritus, Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury; Joyce Johnson, community activist and educator; Dr. Samuel Otis Johnson, mayor of Savannah, Georgia; Hubie Jones, educator and founder of several Black community-based organizations and agencies; Mel King, former state representative and candidate for mayor of Boston in 1979 and 1983; Byron Rushing, historian and state representative; Sarah Ann Shaw, journalist; Minister Don Muhammad, minister, Mosque # 11 in Roxbury; and, Jean McGuire, educator and former executive director of Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO).

[7] Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

provided examples of how the Black church was intricately involved in the building of economic power in local communities.[8] Valerie Myers writes that

> *Black churches have played a pivotal role in the African American community since slavery* (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Franklin and Moss, 1994; Blackwell, 1991). *In addition to their spiritual mission, these organizations served as community centers that promoted a sense of belonging and helped members cope with existential crises. As a result, Black churches engaged in secular activities related to economic, social and intellectual development, arts and entertainment, social welfare, health, psychological well-being, and, most notably, political activism* (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Blackwell, 1991). *Although historic data about the actual number and types of programs that Black churches offered is scant, the persistence of certain programs in contemporary churches suggests remnants of historic cultural values.*[9]

In addition to Black churches as religious entities, they also represent institutions with assets, such as land, volunteers, civic spirit, and congregants that can be transferred to neighborhood empowerment strategies. As Hayden points out in his study, certain Black churches have a tradition of community involvement in Boston; they own land and have committed volunteers to work on a host of issues.[10] Historian Aldon Morris showed how Black churches provided organizational resources that helped to propel and sustain the Civil Rights Movement.[11] The latter also represented a framework for Black churches to provide leadership and engagement in the economic development of Black neighborhoods. Neighborhood-based issues represented but another face of the Civil Rights Movement, as suggested by the late James Button in his discussion of how local issues unfolded in Florida local communities under the framework of the Civil Rights Movement.[12] Button argued that the Civil Rights Movement had very localized faces in terms of the actual issues raised by neighborhood residents. Although he

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[8] George E. Haynes, "The Church and Negro Progress," *The Annals*, vol. CXXXX, no. 229 (November 1928).
[9] Valerie L. Myers, "Black Church Culture, Social Programs and Faith-Based Policy: Using Organization Theory to Reconcile Rhetoric and Reality," *African American Research Perspectives,* 10 (Fall, 2005).
[10] Hayden, op cit.
[11] Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).
[12] James W. Button, *Blacks and Social Change: Impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern Communities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

was describing Black communities in Florida, the observations by the elder Black activists confirm that it is an apt conceptualization for understanding the role and function of activist Black churches in Boston. In effect, and within the backdrop of historical context, Black churches provided a translational bridge between the Civil Rights Movement and Black neighborhood economy.[13] Thus, while a national social movement emphasized goals and challenges to the nation regarding ideas like integration and equality, Black churches utilized this framework to pursue concrete economic initiatives at the local level.[14]

Limited Research on Black Churches and Neighborhood Revitalization

A second reason for this study is the presumption in some scholarship that the Black church's current involvement in community development and neighborhood revitalization is relatively recent. For example, Nicha Botchwey writes that, "Since the 1980s, congregations and FBOs [faith-based organizations] emerged as important partners in neighborhood revitalization. These organizations are present in many communities, are aware of local needs, and are working to provide solutions."[15] In fact, in places like Boston, certain Black churches took the lead or were leading partners in a host of neighborhood revitalization efforts long before the 1980s. An informative report issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), *Faith-Based Organizations in Community Development,* incorrectly notes that "relatively few

[13]George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994); see Chapter 8, "Colored Churches. Is There Any Necessity For Their Existence?"

[14] This relationship is different than the idea of "locality" critiqued by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang regarding Civil Rights Movement historiography. They challenge the proposal by some scholars that the Civil Rights Movement could be conceptualized and explained as aggregated local struggles representing a network of smaller (my term) social movements; see Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Struggles" *Journal of African American History*, Vol.92, No.1 (Winter 2007).

[15] Nicha D. Botchwey, "The Religious Sector's Presence in Local Community Development," *Journal of Planning Education and Research,* vol. 27, no. 1 (2007), p. 38.

faith-based organizations participate in community development activities."[16] In terms of all faith-based organizations, this claim might be technically correct, but the report also gives the incorrect impression that this is a totally new area of neighborhood-level endeavor for Black churches.

Some local observers describing the role of activist Black churches in Boston similarly suggest that involvement in civic and political issues is relatively new, with issues like youth violence and other neighborhood challenges nonexistent until the 1990s.[17] Unfortunately, the misperception has been carried forward across the nation in numerous journalistic accounts of Black churches in this city. One journalist for the *Star Tribune,* based in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, asserted: "Just when did Boston's neighborhood activists and Black churches take an aggressive role in fighting gang violence? It wasn't 1989 . . . it wasn't 1990 . . . it was the Morning Star [Baptist Church] incident of May 14, 1992." And even one of Boston's major newspapers, the *Boston Globe,* has perpetuated this same notion. In an editorial, "New Partners for the Police," (February 18, 1998) it was claimed that Black churches were new at involvement with community issues and tackling problems in the Black community. This claim was made in spite of numerous earlier articles praising the civic involvement of individual Black ministers and Black churches, including its work with the Boston Police Department, in previous periods, throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The observation of Otis Samuel Johnson–who now serves as mayor of Savannah, Georgia—about Black churches in Boston and social welfare in the 1950s and 1960s remains valid today: "The history of social welfare activities of most of the churches [in Boston]... has

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[16]Avis C. Vidal, *Faith-Based Organizations in Community Development,* Prepared by The Urban Institute for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research (August 2001), p. 1.
[17] Michael Jonas, "The Street Ministers," *Commonwealth Magazine* (Fall 1997).

never been written down, though it may remain alive in oral history."[18] Johnson sampled 36 churches in Boston and categorized social welfare along three dimensions: involvement with delivery of social services; integrating church activities or leadership with the work of community agencies; and involvement in social action. He found that Black churches in Boston were among the key and sometimes only actors in the delivery of social services or work on strengthening neighborhood infrastructure. Johnson found that 61 percent of the churches surveyed ranked social service activities as moderate or high. The types of social welfare activities included starting and supporting day care services and kindergartens; recreation programs; employment referral services; legal services; housing development; financial assistance; and the establishment of credit unions.[19] Unfortunately, there are not ample studies examining this facet of Black churches in some Northern cities, including Boston. This aspect of local Black church histories has not been emphasized in scholarship. This research shortfall is one reason Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard call for "expanding the civil rights narrative" in relation to Black churches in the South and North, since their focus was not exclusively on desegregation, but also on building economically vibrant Black communities.[20]

The Case of Boston: Voices of Black Church Activism in the 1960s and 1970s

This is a period in Boston's history when some Black churches, spanning various denominations, spearheaded and implemented a range of neighborhood revitalization strategies. In examining how Black churches in Boston were involved in neighborhood-based "bread and

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[18] Otis Samuel Johnson, *The Social Welfare Role of the Black Church*, diss. Brandeis University, F. Heller Graduate School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare, 1980, p.79.
[19] Johnson, p.126.
[20] Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, "I'd Rather Go to School in the South: How Boston's School Desegregation Complicates the Civil Rights Paradigm," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 126; regarding this kind of oversight, also see Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post-War Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

butter" issues during the Civil Rights Movement, the earlier cited work by Hayden must be highlighted as seminal.[21] Commissioned by the Boston Branch NAACP in 1983, this remains one of the most important studies and analyses of Black churches in Boston and how they were involved in neighborhood-based bread and butter issues, even before the Civil Rights Movement emerged powerfully at the national level. Hayden compiled a comprehensive institutional history of ten prominent Black churches that were established in Boston between 1805 and 1913 and remained active as civic players in a range of neighborhood issues before and during the Civil Rights Movement. The churches include: African Meeting House (1805); Peoples Baptist Church (1805 and 1915); Union United Methodist Church (1818); Charles Street A.M.E. Church (1833); Columbus Avenue A.M.E. Church (1838); Twelfth Baptist Church (1840); Ebenezer Baptist Church (1871); Saint Mark Congregational Church (1895); Church of Saint Augustine and Saint Martin (1884, 1899, 1908); and Saint Cyprian's Episcopal Church (1913).

Byron Rushing, a historian and current member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, explains that Black churches in Boston were capable of pursuing local economic development initiatives on behalf of neighborhood residents due to their access to concrete and independent economic resources:

> *Ownership of church building and land is probably the first and remains the most typical economic investment of Black churches. And raising money from its members is the typical source for the funding of those investments. After real estate, the Black church's role in community economic development is as the most common established institution for networking among African-American business people.*[22]

He adds that in Boston,

> *...before WWII, two congregations used this combination of real estate and regular fundraising to establish social service centers. St. Mark Congregational Church founded*

[21] Hayden, op cit.
[22] Email correspondence with author, August 20, 2010.

St. Mark Social Center and Fourth Methodist Church (which later became Union Methodist) established Cooper Community Center.[23]

Again, as noted by Rushing, "In the early 1960s in Boston, except for the Prince Hall Masons and three women's organizations [Women in Community Service, the Women's Service Club, and the Harriet Tubman House], Black churches were the only Black organizations which owned their land and buildings. So when the federal government wanted to work with nonprofit organizations to sponsor housing [such as Section 221(d)3 housing],...they approached churches." He also reminds us that the names of many affordable housing developments in Boston incorporated the names of the church sponsors: thus, we have Marksdale (St. Mark Congregational); Chalame (Charles Street A.M.E.); and Methunion (Union United Methodist). St. Cyprian's Church-sponsored Roxse Homes. The Holy Episcopal Church worked with Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) to establish the Mattapan Family Service Center.

The involvement of Black churches in the building of community-based economic and political influence is reflected in a range of activities. Indeed, "...evidence of some of the social welfare activities that Black churches have engaged in during this period will show that the Black church was not passive in working with its own people. By the early 1900s, the Church of God, Saints of Christ Church,...owned and operated a home for widows and orphans, and rented a grocery store, a dry goods shop and a restaurant...In the 1920's, the Women's Home

[23] Ibid.

Missionary Society, part of the Fourth Methodist Episcopal Church, was begun by Deaconess Hattie B. Cooper. This was later to become a settlement house known as the Cooper Community Center and associated with the present day Union United Methodist Church."[24] Other Black churches operating within this vein included the United House of Prayer, the Holy Spirit Episcopal Church, and certainly the Nation of Islam. The United House of Prayer, along with the Nation of Islam's bakeries, established and maintained a number of retail outlets. The United House of Prayer opened a cafeteria in the 1960s on Shawmut Avenue in the South End neighborhood of Boston.

Although initially based in Philadelphia, the Opportunities Industrialization Centers started by the eminent Rev. Leon Sullivan enjoyed a strong base in Boston. In the summer of 1966, an OIC site was established in Roxbury and led by Rev. Virgil Wood of the Blue Hill Christian Center, as its first executive director. The mission of the OIC was "to train unemployed residents of the ghetto and to place them in jobs."[25] OIC was strongly supported by Black clergy, including Rev. Lee Siler of the Ministerial Alliance, Minister Don X of Muhammad's Temple #11 of Boston, Rev. Gilbert Caldwell, Rev. Earl W. Lawson, and Byron Rushing—who at the time was director of the Commission on Church and Race of the Massachusetts Council of Churches— because it reflected a mission of neighborhood empowerment, and a mission that had yet to be considered by White clergy or White organizations.

In another instance of how Black churches were involved with neighborhood-based economic development, the Commission on Church and Race in Boston published a directory of Negro businesses in 1967. The directory, *Who's Black in Boston Business*, was spearheaded by a group considered the "community organizing arm" of the Commission on Church and Race. It is

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[24] Johnson, p.101.

[25] "OIC Dedicates New Building," *Bay State Banner*, July 23, 1966, p.1; also see, "O.I.C.," *Bay State Banner*, June 18, 1966, p. 6.

this group, along with the Cooper Community Center and the Roxbury Federation of Neighborhood Houses, which led to the establishment of the Lower Roxbury Community Corporation.[26] In many cases, Black citizens had access to local human services only through Black church-based initiatives.

This is explained by Mel King in his historiography of Black politics in Boston. He describes a *service* stage, followed by an *organizing* stage, and then an *institution*-building stage. King wrote that a service stage is when Black communities were simply being responded to by agencies not controlled by Black residents or voters: "Most of the private agencies in our community were founded by outside church groups and philanthropic institutions, or by individuals who have kept their hands on the steering wheel (and the purse strings) of services to the poor, maintaining a majority of board members from outside the immediate service area..."[27] But, he adds, "During the middle sixties we began to organize. We began to see ourselves differently. In this organizing stage, we understood that not only are we *deserving* of services in our own right as members of this society, but we are also *capable* of serving ourselves on our own terms."[28] In these stages, the Black church actually represents an important political resource for the Black community precisely due to its independence. As concluded by prominent urban scholar and civic leader Hubie Jones about Black churches circa 1960s and 1970s, they "...are the major form of social organization in the black community which possesses autonomy and independence from white sources of power."[29]

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[26] "Roxbury Assoc. Prints Directory of Negro Businesses," *Bay State Banner* (February 18, 1967).
[27] King, op. cit., p. xvii.
[28] Ibid., p. xxvi.
[29] Hubie E. Jones, "The Status of Institutions in Boston's Black Community" in Philip L. Clay, et. al., *The Emerging Black Community*, edited by Phillip L. Clay, et. al., Institute for the Study of Black Culture: University of Massachusetts Boston, 1985, p. 302.

Along the latter line, longtime and renowned Boston-based journalist Sara Ann Shaw described how many banks were reluctant to provide finance and credit to African American businesses during this period, but Black churches provided financial resources for various kinds of economic initiatives.[30] This was emphasized by another interviewee, Joyce Johnson, to one of the study's research assistants, Eugenia Gibbons. Johnson was very active in education reform. She described some Boston churches as facilitators for local economic development activities, although they might not become involved with managing the projects they supported.[31] This is related to an observation by the former state representative and respected community leader Doris Bunte, who recalled that Black churches in Boston represented venues where individuals and organizations involved with neighborhood-based economic activities and those engaged with broader facets of the Civil Rights Movement could communicate and collaborate with each other.[32]

The Black church in the 1960s and 1970s represented an important social and economic resource for the latter two stages in King's political framework. The Black church provided space where strategies associated with the organizing and institution-building stages could unfold. Again citing King, "We developed a very good approach to organizing people in public housing through church groups and community-based housing, such as Marksdale Gardens and St. Mark's Church."[33] Black churches were instrumental in helping develop the processes related to the development and creation of sustainable communities that recognized the contributions and value of all of their members.

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[30] Interview with Sarah Ann Shaw (April 14, 2010).
[31] Interview with Joyce Johnson (April 14, 2010).
[32] Interview with Doris Bunte (May 12, 2010); Bunte was elected as the first Black woman to the Massachusetts State Legislature and also served as administrator of the Boston Housing Authority between 1985 and 1991.
[33] Ibid., p. 83.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and later decades, Black churches worked in the areas of youth services, public safety, housing, education, and economic development. The need for these kinds of social and human services grows as urban Black communities grow rapidly as a result of migration and segregation. Mayor Johnson lists and discusses a few developments involving the Black church in social welfare and community development activities in the 1960s; note, for example, news stories like "Twelfth Baptist Church announces plans to build housing in the Washington Park area" (*Bay State Banner,* October 9, 1965), and, "St Mark's Congregational Church begins after-school programs" (*Bay State Banner*, October 16, 1965); and, in June 1969, the same church announces "workshops in conjunction with Summerthing, a senior citizen's program."[34]

The neighborhood history of Black churches in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s allows Hubie Jones to observe that in the 1980s: "Black churches provide social services, employment assistance and educational programs. Today, the only educational alternatives to the public schools in the Black community are church-operated: St Joseph's School, Berea Academy (Seventh Day Adventist), Owens-Roberts Educational Center (Peoples Baptist Church), Clara Muhammad School (American Muslim Mission)."[35] He adds: "Their existence attests to the staying power of black churches. All of the private, independent schools established in the black community during the 1960s (Highland Park Free School, New School for Children, Roxbury Community School) have closed for financial and other reasons."[36]

The late journalist George M. Collins emphasized the role of Black churches and community development in an article published in the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, "Black

[34] Ibid., p. 106.
[35] Jones, op. cit.
[36] Ibid. p. 303.

religion: It's the tie that binds, and the symbol of survival and hope in America's ghettoes."[37] Collins reported that "Religion and its institutions are the most important ingredients gluing the black community of Boston together. Take out of Roxbury, North Dorchester and the South End the programs, housing, social and religious thrust of the churches and their related institutions and not much would be left." Further, "Since 1962 almost 7800 units of nonprofit housing for low and middle-income families have been built or rehabilitated in the Boston, Roxbury and Dorchester areas of the city. Out of the 7800 units of low cost non-profit housing built here in the past nine years, black churches and black churchmen and women have built or are building 3600 of them."[38] This construction was taking place before the advent of community development corporations and other contemporary organizations working in the area of neighborhood revitalization.

In 1967, Rev. Vernon Carter organized a march from the All Saints Lutheran Church in the South End to Trinity Church in Boston, and nailed the "Ghettos Theses" on its front door. This included the statements of several community-based organizations and Black ministers challenging religious denominations to address social and economic inequality. As director of the local Urban League at the time, King urged that the church support the "development of black owned and controlled institutions, and second,...make sure that the goods and resources of the Church are not in fact supporting financial [sic] industries that are operating and exploiting the poor and non-white in our society."[39]

During this same period, the Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston (BMA) represented a network of churches working on civic and economic issues in the Black community. The mission of this association of faith-based organizations was to provide

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[37] George M. Collins, *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 29, 1971, p. A3.
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Rev. Carter Nails Ghetto Theses to Doors of Trinity Church," *Bay State Banner* (November 2, 1967).

advocacy for the Black community in the areas of political affairs, human services, education, housing, economic development, youth services, and spiritual life. It was the work of this coalition of Black religious leaders that laid the foundation for a range of community development strategies and activities today.[40]

In the summer of 1969, the Black Ecumenical Council was established as a result of a call for greater self-determination on the part of the Metropolitan Boston Committee of Black Churchmen.[41] Its first major conference was themed, "Toward a Relevant Black Church," and focused on how churches could become more involved in the social, economic, and political empowerment of Black communities. Regarding this episode, Jones writes:

> *The Black Ecumenical Commission, established in the late 1960s, is another important organizational base for the black church. Its mission is to work with black churches to assist them in responding to the problems of poverty and disenfranchisement experienced by Blacks and other minorities in Massachusetts. It has developed programs in the areas of elderly care, energy conservation, child care, voter education, civil rights, advocacy and prison ministries. The Commission has facilitated the collective purchasing of goods by black churches in order to obtain discount prices. It provides technical assistance and organizational support to black churches concerning empowerment work such as the famine relief project [in Africa].*[42]

According to Viola Osgood, a reporter for the *Boston Globe* during this period, "The Black Ecumenical Commission [BEC] is an organization formed to assist black churches in their role as instruments for change and progress in their communities. The commission's stated aim is 'to

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[40] Prior to becoming known as the Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, the organization was called the Interfaith Ministerial Alliance and, previous to that, it was called the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Shortly after becoming president of this organization in 1994, Rev. Wesley A. Roberts, pastor of the Peoples Baptist Church, proposed changing the name of the organization, originally called the Interfaith Ministerial Alliance. This name was chosen because the Nation of Islam was a founding member of the organization and members wanted to ensure that the name allowed for the inclusion of their religious leaders. Rev. Roberts proposed the name, Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, which was accepted by the membership.

[41] "Black church confab set," *Bay State Banner* (October 23, 1969).

[42] Jones, p. 304.

develop relationships in black communities throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, leading to empowerment, unity, and self-determination of the people in these communities.'" [43]

BEC reflected a focus on combating unemployment and community empowerment as noted by one prominent supporter, Bishop Edward G. Carroll, retired head of the Methodist Church in Massachusetts: "We are at a point where empowerment is most important and we're farther away than we've ever been," said the bishop; "We're poorer in terms of the numbers of (black) people being in places of power and influence. There is great danger in the vast amount of unemployment in our communities. If this organization (BEC) is to mean anything, we have to make empowerment number one on our agenda."[44]

The connection between Boston's Black churches and local economic empowerment is illustrated again in the winter of 1969 when the Urban League reported that it had received its very first grant ($7,000) from a *Black* organization that also happened to have a religious affiliation– the Black Affairs Council of the Unitarian-Universalist Church. In supporting the Urban League, the representative of the Black Affairs Council Heywood Henry noted, "We made the grant because we feel that the program approach which the League uses in black community development is one of the significant in the country, certainly in Boston."[45]

Black churches could provide the base and resources for protest regarding local living conditions for the Black community in Boston, but also towards organizing and implementing direct social and education-related services. Many sports leagues and youth counseling services in the Black community, for example, were organized by religious institutions. An earlier organization for youth known as "The Exquisites" was started by Rev. Michael E. Haynes and a colleague, Clarence "Jeep" Jones, at Twelfth Baptist Church. This club provided recreational

[43] Viola Osgood, "Black Ecumenical Group Discusses New Church Roles" *Boston Globe*, September 20, 1981, p.1.
[44] Ibid.
[45] "Black church grant to New Urban League," *Bay State Banner* (Dec.18, 1969).

opportunities and academic advising and tutoring to youth.[46] As a local journalist wrote, "Twelfth Baptist provides services for people of every age. For the senior citizens, there is a social, recreational, and referral service. For children ages 4 to 12, the church provides educational and recreational programs, six days a week. And for the young adults, there are courses in black history, sewing, and sex education."[47]

Writing for the *Bay State Banner,* Hayden described some of the neighborhood accomplishments of St. Mark Congregational Church during the Sixties and Seventies under the leadership of Reverend Samuel Leroy Laviscount: "Being a person of great social concerns, Rev. Laviscount expanded the social program of the church from one contained in a small building attached to the parsonage to an on-going one of many facets operating out of a new building with a gymnasium, a game room and two new bowling alleys."[48]

In another example of the Black church's role in local economic development, Peoples Baptist Church is highlighted because it is an exemplar of the multiple roles and responsibilities that a Black church can have within a community. This local Boston church chose to become involved in all activities that impacted the individual and collective lives of its constituency in Boston. Johnson reported that "People's Baptist Church has a long history of social welfare activities...During the 1929 depression, People's ran a soup line and fed scores of people each day at noon from the church vestry, and during World War II, it became a haven for service men from all over the world. The years 1948 to 1955 showed a growing concern on the part of People's church to devote energy to causes for human betterment, and it joined with other social

[46]Kimberly R. Moffitt, "A Profile of the Reverend Michael E. Haynes of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury Massachusetts," *Trotter Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Boston, MA: The William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, Spring 1997), p. 44; also see, Carol Pearson, "There is No One in the Minority Community Who Has Done More for Young People," *Boston Globe* (December 9, 1985); and Patricia A. Smith, "From Roxbury with Love: Mike Haynes Exquisite Hand Pulled At-Risk Young Men Out of the Maelstrom" *Boston Globe* (July 7, 1992).

[47] Cynthia Bellamy, *Bay State Banner* (July 12, 1973).

[48] "Rev. Leroy Laviscount honored at St. Mark's," *Bay State Banner* (May 25, 1978).

and civic organizations toward this end. In November of 1960, on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its founding, People's Baptist Church presented $1,000 to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference...in March of 1971, it dedicated Camfield Gardens, a one hundred and thirty-five unit housing project, sponsored and built by People's, the first time in this state such a project had been undertaken by a Baptist Church."[49]

King recalls that Marksdale Gardens, Camfield Gardens, Roxse Homes, and Methunion, as affordable housing developments, emerged from the work of a number of churches in the Black community, including Union United Methodist Church and St. Mark Congregational Church. [50] Black churches were places for raising independent funding to buy land for the purpose of housing purposes. King offered that the building of low- and moderate-income housing during the 1950s and 1960s represented a major achievement on the part of churches in Boston. Very importantly, King points out that this kind of work was not done in isolation. Rather, Black churches and their leadership and other civic activists saw themselves as part of a linked network with the purpose of improving local living conditions.

These kinds of activities were not confined to Boston. It is a development that was occurring across the nation and very much part of the national Civil Rights Movement as reflected in "The Report of the Theological Commission of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen" issued in Dallas on November 1-3, 1967. The release issued by the National Committee of Black Churchmen in Chicago a few months later (March 31, 1968), "The Urban Mission in a Time of Crisis," also shows how Black churches sought to be bridges between the

[49] Johnson, p. 105.
[50] Leibiana Feliz interview with Mel King (July 10, 2008); Mel King was a former state representative, and mayoral candidate for Boston in 1979 and 1983, when he became the first Black candidate to qualify for a run in the general mayoral election.

Civil Rights Movement and local economic concerns facing Black people.[51] Both statements offer justifications and visions about how the Black church is obligated to strengthen local urban communities along education, economic, and political dimensions.

As suggested above, a number of Black churches in Boston have long records of involvement working with neighborhood issues in the areas of helping youth, providing services for the elderly, building affordable housing, and sustaining local Black economic development. Peoples Baptist Church is a good example of such. Again Hayden, "From 1948 to 1955, Peoples Baptist Church was concerned not only with its spiritual and material development, but it reached out into the larger community. Juvenile delinquency prevention, race relations improvement, and fair employment opportunities for Black people in Boston were church programs. The church joined with a number of social and civic organizations to provide human rights and community development. Involvement with and support of the Boston NAACP was a major activity of the church in the 1940s and 1950s. Rev. [Richard McLaughlin] Owens headed Peoples NAACP membership competition among the churches to see which one could bring in the most new members. "'That was a big thing,' recalled Rev. Owens, who had served as the First Vice President of the Boston Branch in the early 1940s."[52]

Hayden adds: "...the membership voted in 1962 to take on the added responsibility in the renewal process—an ambitious housing construction program. This was done in cooperation with the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Saint Mark Church was one of the first organizations in Boston to take up the challenge of helping to provide new housing under the Federal Housing Act for moderate income tenants...Marksdale Gardens, an 82-apartment complex sponsored by

[51] Johnson, p. 62; also see, R. Drew Smith, *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
[52] Hayden, op. cit., p. 9.

the Saint Mark Development Corporation, was dedicated on Sunday afternoon, October 27, 1963."[53]

Led by Rev. Richard McLaughlin Owens, Peoples Baptist Church illustrated through its community activities the role and impact of church leadership and activities on neighborhood revitalization issues. Hayden reported that Rev. Owens was one of the founders of the Opportunity Industrialization Centers, a major neighborhood revitalization initiative in Boston. As Rev. Owens explained, "One of my most rewarding achievements was helping to form the Opportunity Industrialization Centers (OIC) in 1968 and serving on its Board of Directors for many years. My proudest achievement, but maybe my biggest headache, was the 135-unit Church-sponsored Camfield Gardens Housing Project on a lot next door to the Church. Our goal was to give people displaced by urban renewal a place to live."[54]

Rev. Haynes, who served as senior pastor of the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury from 1964 to 2004, is another prominent example of a religious leader involved with a range of neighborhood development issues over many decades. Rev. Haynes affected many community issues in the area of education and community development. Rev. Haynes' work with youth in Roxbury is legendary in the Black community, where he helped many youth, some of whom became highly-respected leaders in a wide range of professions and public life. Rev. Haynes was elected as state representative in the Massachusetts Legislature for three terms between 1965 and 1970. He served on the State Parole Board and the Board of Pardons for sixteen years, and under three governors. In 1989 Mayor Raymond Flynn appointed him to Boston's Fair Housing Commission.[55]

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[53] Ibid., p. 41.
[54] Robert C. Hayden and Katherine Watson Frederick, ed., *I Wanted to Preach: Richard McLaughlin Owens, An Autobiography* (Boston: Select Publications, 1996), p. 56.
[55] Richard Higgins, "Salute for a Sheppard Restored" *Boston Globe*, November 6, 1990.

Yet another example of how a Black religious organization has been involved in economic development and neighborhood revitalization is Mosque #11 in Roxbury under the leadership of Minister Don Muhammad beginning in 1965. This Minister focused his religious work on working with youth, including those that had been imprisoned or in gangs. But he and members of Mosque #11 have also been widely recognized for leadership and participation in the economic development of the Roxbury neighborhood over several decades. Minister Don Muhammad was feted in 1986 when Mayor Flynn presented him with the city's Paul Revere Bowl, an award for outstanding public service on the part of an individual citizen. The work of Mosque #11 and Minister Don, as well as that of the Nation of Islam, in the area of economic development was touted in a study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.[56] This religious organization played a major role in the establishment of "Grove Hall's Mecca," a 65,000 square-foot mall built on a budget of more than $13 million and an example of local economic development benefiting local residents and businesses and the entire city of Boston.

These kinds of neighborhood revitalization initiatives and activities take place in other cities, as well.[57] Marjorie Lewis reported that "Black churches offered programs to meet the community needs which include: 1) the provision of food, clothing, and shelter; 2) services for poor families; and 3) youth and elderly programs."[58] Many Black churches pursued a "holistic ministry" and sought to provide a range of services to the community in the areas of health, housing, education, and economic development as part of their history and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. These efforts again emphasize that the national Civil Rights

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[56] "Faith-Based Economic Development Initiatives in New England," *Communities and Banking* #27 (Boston: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Fall 1999).
[57] For examples of such see, Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shares Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); and Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest 1954-72* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[58] Marjorie B. Lewis, "Public Sector and the Black Church Partnerships: A New Public Policy Tool," *Trotter Review,* vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring 1997).

Movement's focus on civil rights was part of the pursuit of economic justice at the local level. These two domains were conjoined by the activities of some Black churches. Generally, this represented a very different approach than that reflected in urban renewal, under which many Black urban neighborhoods were cited as blighted and then destroyed. Those Black churches that have been involved with neighborhood revitalization explicitly reject this framework and instead focus on the building and sustaining of resources that serve to strengthen and nurture the social and economic capital of Black communities.

Conclusion: Lessons for Neighborhood Empowerment

When the author of *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood* (2003) responded to the following online question, "So what's the relationship of these churches to their urban neighborhood, like Four Corners [an inner city area in Boston, Massachusetts]?," he stated: "For the most part, churches do not identify with the neighborhood as such. The churches didn't even know they were in a neighborhood called Four Corners. They only knew they had found a place to worship where rents were low and crime was high. Unlike the traditional parish church, these churches do not lay claim to their neighborhood and compete for local residents."[59] Omar M. McRoberts is referring to his study of churches' involvement with social and community issues in one of the poorest Black neighborhoods in Boston during the 1990s.

McRoberts' observation does not negate the involvement of Black churches in a range of neighborhood development issues in Boston. This is a local history that has not been adequately documented or analyzed in terms of its accomplishments and implications for how community

[59] This is from an interview conducted by the University of Chicago Press with McRoberts: "An interview with Omar M. McRoberts, author of *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*" http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/562166in.html .

development and neighborhood improvements are conceptualized and approached in the current period. In fact, a review of Boston's Black churches during this period indicates that they represented a vanguard in terms of neighborhood revitalization; they were involved with economic and business development, the building of affordable housing, as well as the provision of human and social capital.

There are at least three key findings emerging from this brief historical review and reflections on the part of the elder Black activists who participated in this study. One is that there was a very strong connection between some activist Black churches and focus on local economic development. Some Black churches, like the United House of Prayer and the Nation of Islam, especially, integrated their theology with a focus on local economic development. Other Black churches were more indirectly involved with neighborhood revitalization. They all represented a critical link between national discourse and debates about social and economic democracy and the programmatic meanings of such in local communities in the areas of housing, economic development, education, social services, and youth development. They were involved in the key civic discourses about the future and vision of neighborhoods and cities. In the 1950s to the 1970s, Black churches in places like Boston provided an institutional infrastructure where the Civil Rights Movement could be *operationalized* at the neighborhood level. This institutional infrastructure— also built on a long historical foundation—predated the establishment of other kinds of community-based organizations, such as community development corporations and social service delivery agencies.

A second finding is that when Black churches strategized economic development and neighborhood revitalization it was on the basis of resources that they controlled. This facilitated the design and implementation of revitalization strategies for Black churches to operate as peers

with government, philanthropic, and corporate sectors rather than merely as recipients of grants or social services. Government and foundation leadership were not the drivers of what might be the most preferred strategies and activities for the Black community and its economic empowerment. Rather, Black churches made decisions about the most effective way to help the community and proceeded accordingly. This sector did not chase grants or let the chasing of such determine their neighborhood development agendas. Long-time Black business leader Ken Guscott lamented that this piece of history has been forgotten and, thereby, according to him, Blacks are accepting a notion of Black economic development that is not dependent on resources controlled by community-based stakeholders.[60] Instead, too many initiatives in the Black community are relying on "grants" to build economic development strategies on behalf of their neighborhoods. But Guscott warns: "Those who give out the grants also control what one can do, how they can do it, and when they get paid."

Third, the focus of church-initiated neighborhood revitalization was not on one or another specific service area but more comprehensively on the well-being and future of the Black community. In other words, *community* was the primary unit of analysis. Black churches did not seek to develop specialized roles in specific service delivery area. This is not to suggest that specialization is necessarily a problem today. But strategies for helping communities to become empowered focused on strengthening the social and economic infrastructure of these places, versus selecting or favoring one or two nonprofits in a service area and just working to make such organizations more efficient and effective in the delivery of services, the paradigm that is now being challenged by greater emphasis on place-based revitalization.

[60] Ken Guscott is the founder of Long Bay Management Company, a real estate and development firm founded in 1973.

Today some Black churches in urban areas, as well as a growing number of Latino churches, are seeking to sponsor and initiate neighborhood-based services for older and newer members of their congregations. As suggested here, tapping the voices of Black activists from earlier periods may provide some strategic direction for churches and other civic organizations considering how to utilize their resources for the improvement of neighborhoods. Given that Black urban communities continue to be challenged by extensive poverty and inequality throughout the United States, and that there may be a renaissance of interest on investing in neighborhoods, and places, the information and reflections shared by some of Boston's elder Black activists may still be relevant for planning effective neighborhood strategies.