

*Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches*

Organizing Congregations  
to Create Change

LAM is a significant movement within the African American church community. At the present time, there is a period of transition from older pastors to a new generation of leaders.

This generation does not have clear-cut leadership and traditional organizations, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, have lost clout within the community. LAM is a movement that is actively creating a generation of empowered pastors and lay leaders among small and mid-size congregations. It has one major success under its belt and is poised for future success.

## *Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches*

# Organizing Congregations to Create Change

*Center for Religion and Civic Culture  
University of Southern California*

## Introduction

**E**ven though I was an outside observer, I felt some anxiety as I turned east off of the Harbor Freeway and headed to Mount Olive Second Baptist Church in the heart of Watts. Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke had failed to appear at several previous meetings to signal her support of the GED initiative—a bill before the California legislature that would require, as a condition of probation or parole, that non-violent offenders would have to pursue basic literacy skills. District Attorney Gil Garcetti had publicly indicated his approval of the bill that had been introduced by Assemblyman Carl Washington. But Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM), the moving force behind this bill, wanted Supervisor Burke’s support also. After she failed to respond to their last invitation, members of this coalition of small and mid-size African American churches

staged a prayer vigil on the steps of the supervisor's office building.

As I entered the church nearly every seat was taken. There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air. Mount Olive's choir entered the sanctuary and sang two inspired songs, followed by Pastor E. Winford Bell stating the purpose of the meeting. The agenda was carefully scripted. Praise and worship was to take ten minutes. The call to order and prayer was three minutes. Pastor Bell had five minutes, and from a prepared text he stated what everyone already knew: namely, that seventy percent of all repeat offenders have one common trait: they cannot read! He concluded his statement by saying: "The purpose of this meeting is to demonstrate to our public servants that LAM is serious about this initiative. We understand as an organization that large numbers of disciplined people acting together is the most effective method of demonstrating our seriousness. We thank God for your presence and prayers. To God be the glory."

Indeed, the power of God and the mandate of biblical narratives had been cited at previous meetings I had attended. At one of the strategy sessions, Reverend Bell told how he had been caught that afternoon in the crossfire of youths shooting, and that he had to duck below his dashboard to avoid the flying bullets.

This incident was graphic testimony to the turf wars associated with drug dealing, an obvious symptom of what happens to illiterate young men who have difficulty pursuing legitimate employment. Far from being discouraged, however, those present at the meeting began quoting scripture: "No weapon formed against thee will prosper. Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." And amidst the prayers that closed the meeting there was an overpowering sense that "God is on our side."

Remembering these words, I nevertheless worried that Supervisor Burke had not yet arrived. Mary Neal had taken four minutes to explain what the audience should expect to occur at the meeting. Dale Gooden had concisely outlined the ground rules for the "action."

At exactly 7:30 p.m., Erica Byrd extended an invitation for Supervisor Burke to come forward to the podium. The room was abuzz with anticipation, and then the room fell silent when there was no response and no obvious sign of Supervisor Burke or her deputies. In one of the side aisles of the church I noticed Eugene Williams, founder and executive director of LAM, in a quickly called caucus meeting with LAM board president, Reverend Richard Byrd, and several other leaders.

At 7:36 p.m., Reverend Bell walked to the podium and

announced, "Supervisor Burke has arrived," and he turned to the choir which belted out the song "Jesus is Real," while the audience spontaneously jumped to its feet and clapped and joined them in festive praise. During the closing refrain of the song, Supervisor Burke entered the sanctuary with an entourage of three deputies and responded affirmatively to each of the questions asked by Mrs. Byrd:

"Do you agree to make a public declaration of support for the GED initiative sponsored by Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches?"

"Do you agree to introduce a resolution concerning LAM and the GED initiative prior to the county supervisors' recess?"

"Do you agree to assign a person to assist in the design of a pilot program?"

Then a final question was addressed to the audience: "Are we satisfied with Supervisor Burke's response?", which was followed by an eruption of applause and a standing ovation.

On September 15, 1998, Governor Wilson held a press conference in which he signed into law the GED initiative, culminating an organizing process that had begun in 1992 when Eugene Williams, an organizer for the Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO), traveled to Los Angeles

from Philadelphia. After dozens of one-on-one interviews by Williams with pastors and community leaders, Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches was founded on August 15, 1994. Four years later, twenty-seven small and mid-size churches demonstrated what can happen when civic leadership is developed within the faith community. Currently, there are nearly forty churches partnering together in Los Angeles, and similar movements are starting in San Diego County, Riverside County, and San Bernardino County. In addition, LAM has launched its next major organizing effort, One Church One School, which is an effort to involve parents and churches in taking responsibility for the condition of schools in their neighborhoods.

As part of its documentation of LAM, the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California asked Jerry Berndt, an internationally renowned photographer, to attend two recent LAM-sponsored public actions in Compton, in support of the One Church One School initiative. The next few pages of photos portray the interface between faith and civic responsibility, followed by the Center's report assessing two years of documenting the organizing process of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches. As executive director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, I am grateful to The James Irvine

Foundation for providing the funding which has allowed myself and research assistants Orlando Love and Lezlee Cox to spend a number of hours observing LAM events and interviewing the inspired leaders of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches.

Professor Donald E. Miller, *Executive Director*  
*Center for Religion and Civic Culture*  
*University of Southern California*





Prayer is inseparable from action in LAM's strategy. In fact, prayer *is* action. During the GED initiative campaign, LAM conducted "prayer actions" with hundreds of people.





**F**aith and hope are the foundation of a new program called One Church One School. The initiative links congregations to local schools, providing tutoring, safe environments, and parenting classes to improve the educational experience for children.

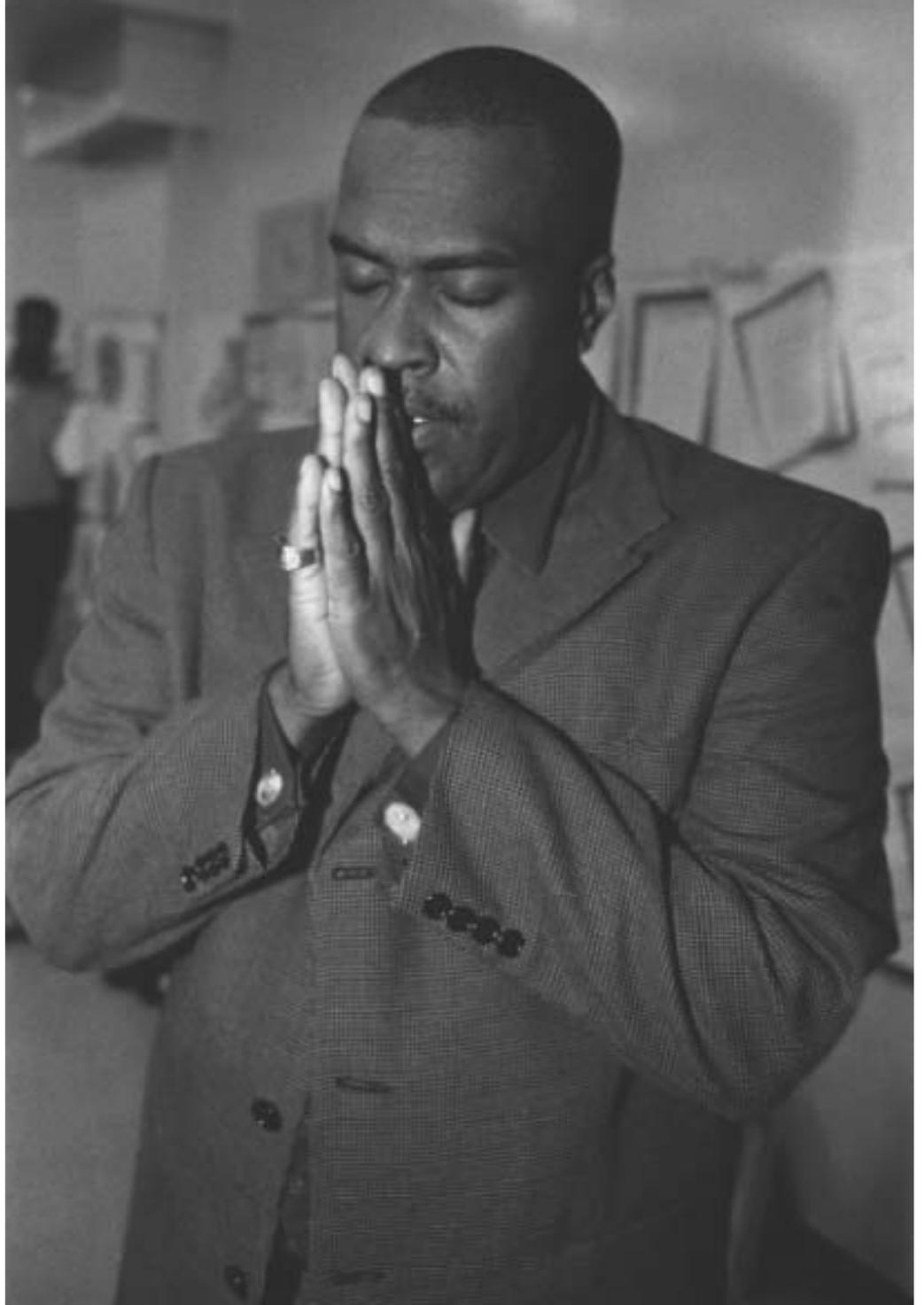


We know that Black churches must do something to change the tide from negative to positive, from despair in the present to hope in the future." — *Rev. Richard Byrd, LAM President*



LAM acknowledges the church to be one of the major social institutions for transmitting common values, culture, and educational excellence.”

— *Rev. Eugene Williams III,*  
*LAM Executive Director*





**T**rain a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." — *Proverbs 22:6*



LAM's clergy and lay leaders have an aggressive agenda for community change. In addition to education, the organization promotes health and wellness strategies for neighborhood residents and increases technological capacity for its member congregations through grants of computers, fax machines and other equipment. Future initiatives will encourage fair lending practices by large banks and promote environmental justice in South Central Los Angeles.

**B**uilding the capacity of clergy and lay leaders is central to LAM's mission.





LAM believes that pastors and congregations must become inspired citizens who work for change in their churches and in the community. Instead of being religious consumers, congregants are called to prophetic service within their neighborhoods.



Small to mid-size churches have a wealth of untapped human capital. Working together, representatives from LAM's nearly 40 member churches have captured the attention of local, regional, and national politicians.





Your young men shall  
see visions, your old men  
shall dream dreams."  
— Acts 2:17



Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.'

— *Nehemiah 2:17*



**T**he Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) at the University of Southern California is pleased to submit this final report to the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM). CRCC received a subgrant to document LAM's activities, provide research assistance, and host a roundtable on its proposed General Educational Development (GED) legislation during the period March 12, 1997 to December 1998.

## Methodology

**D**uring the period of the subgrant, the Center for Religion and Civic Culture documented events, visited member churches, hosted a policy forum, and engaged with LAM staff in informal discussions. In order to document LAM's activities, CRCC researchers attended nearly 20 events, taking detailed field notes, meeting participants, and conducting informal interviews. These events ranged from public "actions" with hundreds of participants to private debriefing sessions with LAM leadership. CRCC also conducted interviews with key staff and leaders to gain their perspective on LAM's work and its impact on their community and congregations. CRCC staff researched legislation and history related to the GED initiative and facts on the criminal justice system in the United States. This research was incorporated into a position paper supporting the GED legislation. Additional research, interviews, and writing culminated in a written history of LAM's work in Los Angeles. LAM distributed several hundred copies of this document to its member

churches and potential funders. This document was the first written history of the organization.

CRCC provided additional support to Rev. Eugene Williams through informal discussions and networking. For example, Dr. Donald E. Miller, CRCC's executive director, offered conceptual comments and feedback on funding proposals that LAM was preparing for submission. The Center and LAM also had many mutually beneficial conversations, envisioning future partnerships and joint activities.

## Overview

LAM is a nonprofit corporation that engages small to mid-size African American churches in efforts to transform communities. LAM, through a process of faith-based community organizing, encourages pastors and congregations to become involved in community change. Churches that have traditionally focused only on their internal issues have gained a powerful vision for revitalizing their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. With the churches as its base of power, LAM has won a well-publicized victory for its GED initiative that will affect the entire California criminal justice system. These churches are also involved in emerging programs, including a new partnership with three Los Angeles area school districts.

LAM's mission is "to train and develop the capacity of clergy, lay and community leaders to revitalize their communities." To accomplish this goal, LAM trains clergy and lay leadership in community organizing techniques and strategies. Initial training is provided by the Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations, a national community organizing network based in Philadelphia. LAM and its staff locally administer subsequent trainings. According to Rev. E. Winford Bell of Mount Olive Second Baptist Church, a LAM board member, "Leadership training gives us the skills to fight intelligently. It trains us to commu-

nicate to others and to be heard. It teaches us the process...and it works!"

Leaders are trained in congregation-based community organizing. Pastors learn to discuss social issues from the pulpit and receive a theological basis for their work with LAM. They receive direction on conducting public meetings and are oriented to the dynamics of interacting with elected officials. Rev. Richard Byrd of Christ Unity Church says that people "feel a lack of power in their lives" and that leadership training is a way to develop a sense of power. Pastors are also trained to identify leaders in their congregations and get practical lessons on how to recruit people for "actions" and meetings.

The term "action" includes several types of activities for LAM. "Research actions" are practical learning experiences where a small group of LAM leaders meets with an individual who can help them understand a particular issue. For example, Eugene Williams and a group of pastors met with the warden of the state prison in Chino in order to understand her position on inmates and work projects that benefit corporations. "Training actions" are trial runs for larger public events; for instance, a group from LAM might meet with a deputy from a politician's office to gain support for a particular initiative, thus developing leadership and boosting confidence in preparation for future meetings with the elected official. Other actions take the form of large community meetings with hundreds of people where LAM attempts to gain support from public officials for the issue at hand.

LAM obtained its nonprofit status in December 1995 and has steadily expanded its staffing and infrastructure since then. It had at its inception only one staff person, Rev. Eugene Williams III. Today, there are six full-time staff working for the organization, plus a cadre of experts in fundraising, banking, and communications retained as short-term consultants to boost staff capacity. The organization currently shares office space with Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, a community development corporation on Central Avenue.

Rev. Williams is the organization's executive director and the

founding staff member. He is an experienced community organizer, an associate pastor of Mount Olive Second Baptist, one of LAM's member churches, and is the national director of the Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO). RCNO staff are community organizers employed by local agencies and work on local efforts in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and other cities. Rev. Williams, a strong leader himself, is primarily concerned with developing leadership skills among his staff and the pastors and congregations of the 39 churches comprising the LAM network.

Williams was raised in Philadelphia and had early experience in community organizing as a youth in Philadelphia. He and his mother, Juanita Tate, organized tenants in Philadelphia's largest public housing projects. Prior to joining LAM, he had seventeen years of labor union and community organizing experience in Philadelphia and other cities, focussing on Afro-centric education, banking, community development block grant allocation, and other issues.

To Rev. Williams, there is a significant difference between "community development" and "community transformation." Traditional community development efforts, he says, focus predominantly on "bricks and mortar," or larger scale construction projects. At times, community development corporations become enemies of the very communities they seek to change when they stop communicating with their constituents. In contrast, he defines community transformation as "changing the fundamental nature of relationships between public officials and people on the ground." The practical outcome of this definition is that political and business leaders are responsive to local community intentions and desires. "Power," as he often says, "is the ability to define reality and have others respond to your definition as if it were their own" and community transformation is primarily about shifting power.

Another of LAM's central goals is helping pastors and churches shift their views on the relationship between pastors and congregations. A traditional "worship model" views congregations as

consumers of church services. The more appropriate model, to Williams and LAM, is the "prophetic service model" where congregations become proactive community citizens and initiators of change within the church and the community.

At the time of this report, LAM has 39 member churches, all of which are African American and located in Los Angeles County, predominantly in South Central Los Angeles. The churches are in the small to mid-size range with less than 200 members. Each church signs a covenant agreement that indicates their agreement to pay a \$300 membership fee, participate in planning meetings, and commit to send participants to quarterly planning meetings, community actions, and other LAM events.

From the perspective of traditional community organizing, small to mid-size churches seem an unlikely focal point for the organization. The smaller churches do not have "marquee" pastors, large coffers, or impressive physical plants, and many bi-vocational pastors also face the challenge of balancing a secular career with the duties of the church. What the churches do have, however, according to Williams, is "untapped human capital." They often provide services without government or foundation support and often have closer neighborhood ties than their larger counterparts.

Smaller churches are more likely to speak out since they have less to lose in the political and funding arenas. Some of the largest African American churches have community development programs that require significant funding from the local government, making public comments and community organizing campaigns potential blocks to future funding. In addition, Williams believes that larger churches and "mega-ministries" are often more concerned with maintaining the size of their congregations and their physical plants.

## Early History of the Organization

Rev. Williams began a series of interviews among African American pastors in 1991 in order to explore their interest in forming an organization of small to mid-size churches in the Los Angeles area. After the outbreak of the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles, Williams suspended his research because he believed that many other organizations would be formed as a result of revived concern for L.A.'s inner city areas and an increase in funding opportunities. In 1993, however, Williams renewed his interview efforts. During this time some of the small to mid-size churches expressed frustration that larger churches that they perceived to be far west of South Central were receiving the greatest share of funding and attention. Instead of maintaining an antagonistic position toward the larger congregations, Rev. Williams encouraged the churches to create the infrastructure for an organization that would meet their own needs. In all, he conducted almost 100 interviews and recruited 25 pastors to participate in RCNO trainings in Pennsylvania.

As he conducted the interviews, he met simultaneously with respected senior pastors in the African American church community, namely E.V. Hill, William Brent, Jim Lawson, and the late Thomas Kilgore. In essence, he approached them to receive their approval — approval that would later translate into clout with local congregations and pastors. Many pastors of smaller congregations did not have a history or knowledge of community development or faith-based organizing. Thus, acceptance from these senior figures was a significant step toward legitimacy. Williams' experience as a Baptist minister was another component of the early success. Through this crucial point of connection, he was able to gain trust and explain the principles of organizing as a member of the African American church leadership.

August of 1994 marked the official founding of LAM. (It would not be incorporated until December 28, 1995.) In true community organizing fashion, Williams discerned the “groans of

the people” (a reference to the Israelites crying out to God to free them from Pharaoh in the Old Testament Book of Exodus.) through interviews with local congregations and pastors. Many of the pastors were particularly concerned, in fact hopeless, about the lack of young men involved in the lives of the congregations. As this issue continued to arise in interview after interview, Williams and other LAM members began to see a connection between this lack of participation and the large numbers of African American young men incarcerated or elsewhere in the correctional system. Rev. Williams was somewhat dubious about undertaking such a huge policy project on this issue, because at the time, he was the only staff person and he was not receiving a salary. Rather, he was supporting himself through consulting work with Los Angeles organizations. Nonetheless, he decided to invest his time and effort to undertake a public policy campaign with LAM.

The early days of the organization were “tough sledding” according to Williams. One stumbling block was that some discounted the validity of community organizing solely in the African American church. Instead of creating racial divisiveness, however, he believed that organizing these congregations would allow them to participate in civic discourse and address issues of diversity in due time. Williams made a strategic decision to develop the strengths of the smaller African American churches with the intention of preparing them for the time when they would sit at what he calls “the table of diversity.” The early development of the organization set the stage for the General Educational Development (GED) initiative, its first major effort.

## GED Initiative

LAM's four-year campaign to implement the GED initiative in California culminated in a bill signing ceremony with Governor Pete Wilson on September 15, 1998. LAM members stood behind the governor and looked on, some smiling, some pensive, some struck by the weight and formality of the occasion. At the signing, Governor Wilson said, "No one knows how many people turn to crime out of desperation, out of sheer hopelessness in the face of what they deem a lack of prospects and opportunity. We do know, however, that the more educated a person is, the less likely he or she is to commit crimes, and the more likely to find good jobs and keep them." The GED initiative is remarkable because it mobilized a relatively small group of small to mid-size African American churches, yet it caused a shift in public policy that will impact California for at least the next five years.

The GED initiative was the result of felt needs and a response to disturbing statistics. California has the nation's largest prison system in the Western industrialized world, as well as the highest recidivism rate in the country: a disturbing 70%. Moreover, a Department of Justice study states that 70% of repeat offenders are functionally illiterate. For African Americans, especially for young men, the criminal justice statistics are even bleaker. Nationally, 32.2% of African American males between the ages of 20-29 are in prison, on probation, or parole. Forced to confront these statistics, Williams and other LAM members were compelled to act.

Throughout the three-year battle, there were many significant moments and memorable tableaux. At one meeting, an empty chair with Supervisor Yvonne Burke's name on it sits before a frustrated congregation. At a University of Southern California conference, the leading law enforcement figures in Los Angeles sit in a crowded auditorium answering question after question from an invigorated audience. In another public meeting,

District Attorney Gil Garcetti sits pensively in the front pew of the church. The following vignettes demonstrate LAM's effectiveness and the style of their approach to community action.

## Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite-Burke

In the fall of 1997, LAM identified Yvonne Brathwaite-Burke, a member of the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, as a key supporter for the GED initiative. The initiative desperately needed local support because funding for future programs would come from local governments rather than the State of California. Initially, Burke's office declared support for the effort, but later wavered in its commitment.

On October 18, 1997, LAM was prepared to meet with Supervisor Burke. Before the meeting, however, Burke decided to send her deputy, Rory Kaufman, to discuss her position on the initiative. The mood was festive and nearly 400 people packed the sanctuary of Mount Olive Second Baptist Church. Several choirs in full Sunday-morning regalia waited their turns to perform. The air of anticipation was palpable.

Rev. Williams approached the pulpit and articulated some of the rules for the meeting. He described who would represent LAM to the press. He said that Burke's refusal to attend the meeting was "just like Pharaoh's refusal to respond to Moses when he pleaded on behalf of God to let the people go." If Burke's representative were late or unprepared, he would be ushered out of the sanctuary. If the deputy supervisor were unable to respond, the congregation would respond with one voice and demand to meet with Supervisor Burke. These ground rules had been described at a meeting the week before to 40 of LAM's leaders and lay people, and that evening Williams reinforced the message. "Discipline and order" were to be maintained at all times.

After Williams concluded, a young deacon introduced the participating choirs and a worship serviced commenced. The singing ended and LAM members made presentations, on the purpose of the meeting, repeated the ground rules, and gave a brief history of LAM's role in the GED initiative. Finally, Erica Byrd (wife of Rev. Richard Byrd) invited Rory Kaufman to come forward. He was not in the room. First there was silence, then murmuring and agitated sounds spread through the congregation. Rev. Byrd placed an empty chair with Burke's name on it in the middle of the dais, then he returned to the pulpit. "As your children would say," Byrd said, "you've been dissed." ("Disrespected" in street parlance). He then asked the congregation what they desired. In a resounding and unified voice, the congregation yelled: "We want a face to face meeting with Supervisor Burke in six weeks!" After this vocal declaration, several speakers made announcements and attempted to rally the crowd, but the mood had turned sour.

Afterward, approximately 40 leaders met to debrief the event in a meeting hall. Many were disappointed and the mood was somber and quiet. Williams asked everyone in the room to say one word that described the earlier meeting. After this, he asked them to describe the attendance at the meeting. He admonished the leaders to return to their churches and to remind them that the day's event was a "test of their faith." He asked them if anyone was afraid to conduct a "prayer line" to disrupt the next meeting of the Board of Supervisors. Some were afraid of being arrested and others were reluctant to commit to such extreme measures.

Williams took the opportunity to preach, beginning by quoting a litany of scripture. The emotional atmosphere began to shift from fear to courage and a desire for action. Another pastor amplified the theme and challenged those present to be like the biblical figure Joshua who led a group of spies to survey the Promised Land. A select group was then chosen to attend the next meeting of the Board of Supervisors. There was a renewed boldness in the group as a whole and the meeting ended with a

fiery prayer from one of the pastors, as the LAM leaders overcame momentary despondency and set the stage for the next steps in the campaign.

LAM conducted several small-scale meetings with Burke deputies and communicated their displeasure with Supervisor Burke for her inability to make it to a scheduled meeting. LAM called another meeting for December 10, 1997 and Burke's office confirmed that she would attend. On the appointed day, more than 300 people again filled Mount Olive Second Baptist Church. Once again, the atmosphere was festive as LAM anticipated that Burke would voice her support for the initiative. The black-robed choir stood for two songs and then Rev. E. Winford Bell addressed the crowd. Others followed him with a description of the meeting and a summary of the ground rules.

At precisely 7:30 PM, Erica Byrd invited Supervisor Burke to the podium, but there was no response. Burke was not in the room. Eugene Williams walked the aisles and other LAM staff discussed how they would proceed. After six minutes of agonizing silence, Rev. Bell announced that Burke had arrived and the choir broke into song. After the singing ended, Supervisor Burke entered the sanctuary with her entourage in tow. She stopped to greet the twelve pastors seated in the first two pews and made her way toward the microphone. Mrs. Byrd asked her a series of questions about her position on the GED initiative. Without hesitating, she pledged her support and immediately received a standing ovation. The GED initiative was moving forward as the result of carefully applied and politically adept pressure.

At the debriefing meeting after the momentous occasion, a voice was strangely absent. Rev. Eugene Williams arrived, but went to the back of the room. He was silent while Everett Bell, lead organizer, helped the pastors and lay leaders debrief the meeting. As people spoke, they often looked to Williams and asked him directly for his opinion of the occasion, but Williams deflected questions to Bell and others. Some of the pastors were frustrated wanting his approval and blessing after the victory. His silence, however, was not for a lack of things to say. He was

effectively communicating the central point: the mantle of leadership was not Williams' alone. Leadership belonged to Everett Bell, but more importantly, it belonged to the members of LAM who achieved the victory together.

## Public Policy Forum

In March of 1997, the Center for Religion and Civic Culture hosted a public policy forum on criminal justice reform. To the LAM organization and to the member congregations, the forum was more than just another session of talking heads. First of all, the panel was extraordinary, representing the highest echelons of the criminal justice system in Los Angeles and including a key figure in the national debate on justice, Mayor Edward Rendell of Philadelphia. The panel also included California Assemblyman Carl Washington, District Attorney Gil Garcetti, and the late Sheriff Sherman Block. The audience included more than 150 clergy, lay people, students and academicians. Almost half of the audience was participating in a Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations training session scheduled to coincide with the event.

As Mayor Rendell entered the room, the television cameras followed him to the stage. Later, the media, including a major radio station, interviewed several of the participants. The panel began with a round of opening statements by each panelist. Each one gave a carefully crafted message to the audience. Next, Donald Miller posed questions to members of the panel. Sheriff Block and others declared that a "prison industrial complex" was an absurd idea and that no private enterprise benefited from the growing pool of inmate labor. (The African American media have often articulated the connection between business and prisons, and the December 1998 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* shows that the notion of a "prison industrial complex" has reached a broader audience.)

Finally, there was a question and answer period where the audience was invited to ask questions of the panelists. It was far from traditional. As soon as the question and answer period was announced, more than 20 people jumped from their seats and rushed to the microphone. They felt empowered to address panelists as equals and asked follow-up questions with a sense that they, as a movement, had arrived.

The LAM membership gained a sense that their work had broad implications. They realized, some for the first time, that they had indeed gained power and the ability to engage the policy-makers on issues that were important to their churches and communities. This forum gave them a sense of their own ability to form the discussion and shape the agenda. They had demonstrated the power of their movement.

## One Church One School Initiative

For its next public issue, LAM has decided to focus on a new set of issues in the local communities. Education, especially primary education, is an important issue to the congregations. Williams cites some disturbing statistics on four Los Angeles Unified School District clusters in South Central: Fremont, Crenshaw/Dorsey, Jefferson and Manual Arts. In these four clusters, regardless of race or ethnicity, students enter the school system performing at the 38th percentile and leave the 5th grade performing at the 18th percentile, a rapid and steep decline. LAM has already secured participation in the One Church One School program in the Compton and Inglewood school districts and is involved in a campaign to win support from the Los Angeles Unified School District board of education.

To begin with, 15 churches will each adopt one school to provide tutoring, computer training, and other educational services. Each local program will thus have unique components as churches work directly with their local school. A variety of programs

will be implemented at each church. As part of their involvement in LAM, each church has already received computer equipment, fax machines, and internet access in order to facilitate computer training for children.

A second aspect of the One Church One School program is the formation of safe corridors. These corridors are coordinated by congregations, law enforcement officials, schools, and neighbors to give children safe passage from home to school and back. One of the goals of this program is to link the churches with the surrounding community, for instance in building partnerships between the African American churches and their Latino neighbors. If LAM receives continued funding, this could be an appropriate focal point for CRCC's continuing research.

## Banking Initiative

LAM is in the process of creating a loan pool for church-related finance, that is for new facility development, debt restructuring, and limited rehabilitation of existing church structures. Initial funding for the banking initiative came from Home Savings of America, which provided a \$50,000 grant to retain a consultant with significant financial experience in the Los Angeles area. LAM is in negotiations with Broadway Federal Bank for the first \$2,000,000 of the loan pool, and will be approaching larger banks, including Bank of America/Nationsbank, Wells Fargo and Washington Mutual Bank, for the remainder of the pool. LAM hopes that the pool will grow to between \$8 and \$12 million, and will be administered by another agency

## Other Initiatives

Rev. Williams is a visionary and has several other large-scale initiatives that he and LAM will pursue in the future. The first initiative will be Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) challenges in California neighborhoods. LAM will review and challenge banks to see that they are indeed meeting their responsibilities under fair lending legislation. A second project is a national campaign against exploitation of prisoners by the large phone companies. An October 1998 article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that inmates are charged, on the average, 47% more than the general population for collect phone calls. In December, *The Atlantic Monthly* stated that calls by inmates generate over a billion dollars a year for the phone companies. LAM plans to target the phone companies for funding to support the GED initiative. In addition to these major initiatives, Rev. Williams has also researched a concept called "restorative justice." This concept, currently being used in Vermont, focuses on the relationships between offenders and victims of crime and engaging the broader community in the justice process.

## Recommendations

LAM's organizing among the small and mid-size churches has resulted in a renewed concern with the civic life of the community. It has revived a segment of the population that felt hopeless about its ability to impact its own neighborhoods, much less California's legislative agenda. It has developed leadership among congregations and has been a catalyst for shifting existing paradigms. Pastors, many of whom were concerned with the mere survival of their congregations, have gained a vision for addressing community needs beyond the walls of the church.

Traditionally, the small and mid-size churches have been ignored by community organizing efforts. While the church has become a focal point for community organizing, especially in older networks like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the focus is on larger congregations. These larger congregations are perceived to have greater influence in their communities and a larger pool of people for mass action. In addition, the African American church community has been outside the scope of many recent organizing efforts. Williams attributes the absence of the African American churches to a lack of understanding of “cultural prerequisites” by the respective organizing networks. They lack culturally relevant idioms and underlying premises that resonate with the community.

It is remarkable that after mobilizing only small to mid-size congregations, LAM has won its GED legislative battle and has initiated an important program in the Los Angeles Unified School District, one of the region’s largest and most cumbersome bureaucracies. LAM has the opportunity to gain even greater influence in the life of the city and fundamentally change the way civil servants and elected officials view their constituencies.

At the same time, LAM faces issues that it must address to ensure its future success. One of the central issues is staff capacity. Rev. Williams has said that he and the board are preparing for the time of his departure in 36 months. He is currently working to create versions of LAM in San Diego and San Bernardino counties that will become part of a regional network of churches. He will maintain a strong presence in the local organizations but will assume a coordinator role among the three areas. In the meantime, he has a large task in helping his staff gain expertise in organizing techniques and in the basics of running a nonprofit corporation. Displaying its vision for developing leaders from among its ranks, LAM’s board has admonished him to seek every opportunity to hire from within the ranks of member congregations. This pool of talent has great potential, but does not have individuals with highly developed skills. Everett Bell, lead organizer, is an outstanding example of the strategy to develop truly

indigenous leadership.

Bell, according to Williams, will be the organization’s next executive director. He is also a product of one of the member congregations. While he does not have a long tenure as an organizer, he is exceptionally gifted. He worked previously in the financial services sector and has a deep passion for community organizing as a way to demonstrate his concern for the community. While he lacks experience, Bell is developing his skills and earning the respect of LAM’s membership.

A second major issue is long-term funding. For a young organization, LAM’s fundraising efforts have thrived. Most of the funding, however, has been used to meet expenses rather than building the infrastructure. One positive note is that Nancy Berglass, formerly a program officer with a regional foundation, has been retained as a consultant. As part of her assignment, she will assist with fundraising, and will work with Williams, to develop LAM’s development department. Since LAM is growing in influence in L.A.’s African American church community, it may receive offers to pursue a variety of new funding opportunities. Without long-term core operating support for the organization, LAM could face the temptation to chase new funding opportunities beyond the scope of its mission.

A third issue is the tension between maintaining the focus on building the African American church network and incorporating the area’s Latino congregations into the effort. The shifting demographics of South Central Los Angeles is a well-documented phenomenon and LAM recognizes the necessity of working with the Latino ascendancy in the area. One challenge for LAM pursuing this strategy is the absence of Latinos on the board and staff.

We believe that LAM has been effective in a segment of the church that has been largely ignored in community organizing circles. The small to mid-size African American churches, through LAM, are developing a unified vision for addressing social problems. They are finding their collective voice and have gained significant momentum following the GED victory.

Despite the victories, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done. According to the 1994 IDEA/Church Growth Studies Program Database, in South Central alone there are 1084 African American congregations. While the congregations range from storefronts to mega-churches, the majority of them fall into the small to mid-size range. These churches are fertile ground for LAM's expanding circle.

We believe that a transition from organizing within the African American community to multiethnic organizing would be a difficult one and in fact, it could severely dilute the effectiveness of the organization. Williams has discussed the possibility of working with Latino congregations to create an organization similar to LAM. CRCC supports this effort. We also believe, however, that the decision of LAM to work solely with African American congregations is one of its strengths. LAM is strategically positioned to continue its outreach to small and mid-size congregations. It has the infrastructure and staff required to work in this particular ethnic community. An expansion of their existing effort would require a tremendous shift in staffing levels, board participation, and church membership. This shift would be beneficial in some ways, but might also cause LAM's momentum to falter and force it to reorganize its efforts completely.

The issue of growth in the LAM network is a fascinating one. Williams is relatively unconcerned about growth in the number of congregations. He predicts, even plans, for a further paring of the numbers. A recent strategic planning session, with board members and other key LAM leaders, emphasized that the strength of the relationship between the member churches was more important than increasing numbers. At the same time, he is discussing with several large churches the prospect of incorporating them into the LAM network. Although he believes that larger congregations will never be at the forefront of LAM's work, they represent an area of potential growth for the organization.



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