

# Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century

The purpose of the Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century Focus Group is to convene an intergenerational group of faith-based leaders to help identify solutions to perplexing problems that are confronting Chicago's African-American Community.

Traditionally, the Black church has existed as a safe harbor, a place of spiritual empowerment and as an impetus for community development for generations of African-Americans. Yet, we find that currently the myriad issues devastating the black community have generally overwhelmed the resources of local churches. Today, many African-American churches are struggling to survive in economically strapped communities, lacking the financial and personnel resources required to provide fundamental services to enhance ministry outreach into their immediate environment.

In their eagerness to serve, the pastors of these churches tend to commit an enormous amount of their time, energy, and personal resources in efforts to meet the needs of their parishioners. Yet, research shows that if pastors are also able to focus their attention on the needs of the surrounding community, their congregations will likely follow their lead and involve themselves in community activities as well (C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, 1990; Walter Malone, 1994).

Because of the vital role that the Black church plays in the community, the State of Black Chicago Congress determined that it was important to convene meetings with local pastors, explain the mission of the SBCC and solicit their support.

## **Pastors Support SBCC's Mission to Mobilize**

Seventy (70) African-American pastors who currently lead churches in metropolitan Chicago completed the survey. The respondents' congregations are predominantly African American and all of the churches are located in Black communities of the Chicagoland area. By a large majority, the pastors surveyed expressed support of the SBCC's mission (Chart 1.).

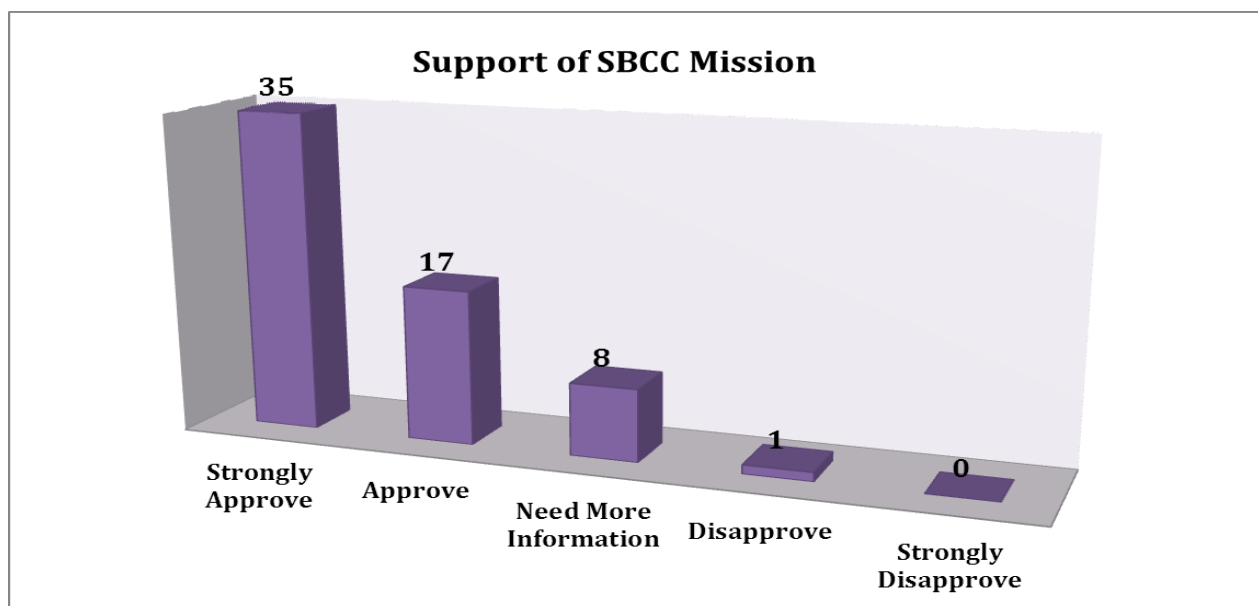


Chart 1

At the core of the SBCC’s mission is the call for group mobilization, therefore it was suggested that Black churches form interfaith collaborations in order to leverage their limited resources to address the social ills that are plaguing neighborhoods.

To maintain its role as a community leader, it is incumbent upon the Black church to not only be able to responsibly address the critical issues of the Black community but also to be viewed as spearheading the efforts to ameliorate these issues.

### **Black Churches are concerned about Local Communities**

The Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century Focus Group developed a survey to gauge the perceptions of local pastors about their churches’ current levels of involvement and/or influence on the larger African American community, and their willingness to participate in collaborative, interfaith efforts to benefit Black Chicago.

The survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Chicago’s Black churches are concerned about the social and economic issues affecting African American communities beyond their local congregation (Chart 2).

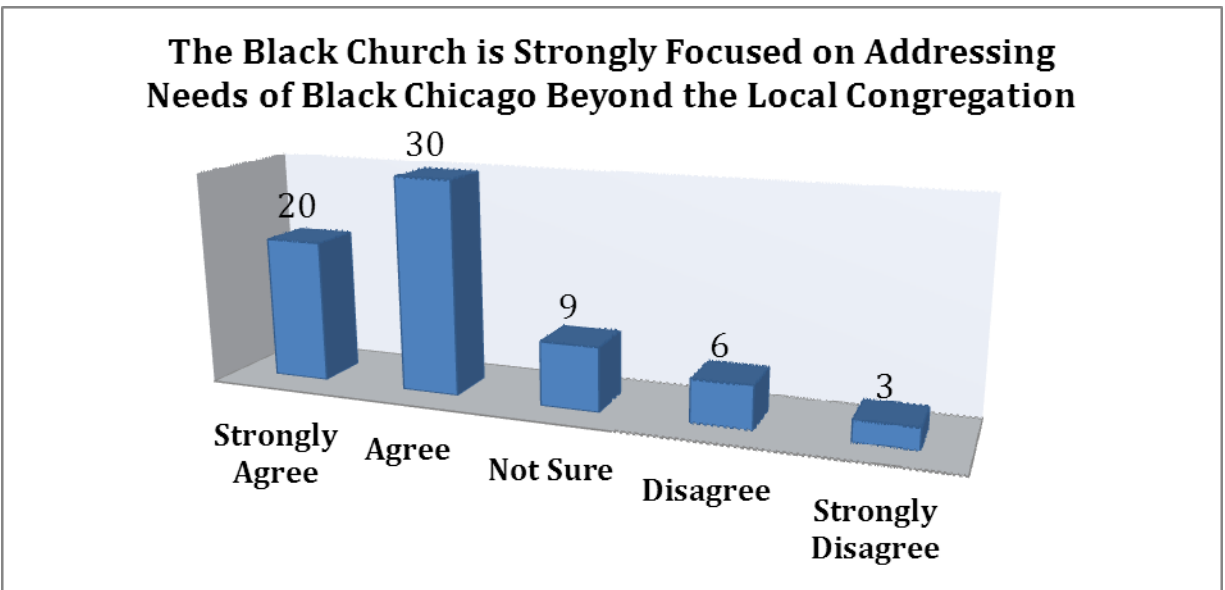


Chart 2

## Ranking of Most Urgent Needs in Chicago's Black Communities

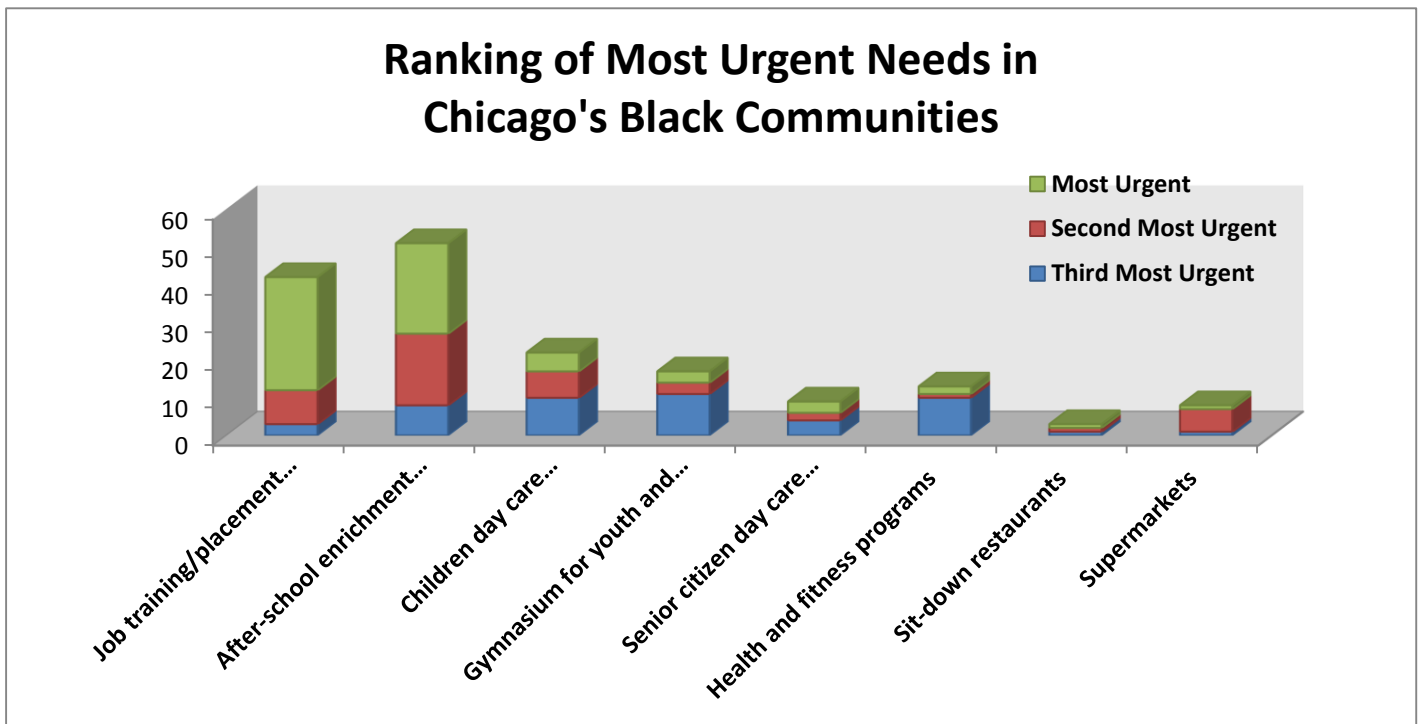


Chart 3

### Identifying and Responding to the Urgent Needs of Black Chicago

Asked to rank eight examples of community needs in terms of urgency, “1” being most urgent and “8” being least urgent, the majority of respondents (54%) indicated that **Job Training/Placement** is the most pressing need in the Black community. The respondents pointed out the second most urgent need as being **After-School Enrichment** programs. **Childcare/nurseries** were noted as a distant third ranked need (Chart 3).

The respondents were then asked to list the various types of programs their churches provide. This query was useful in gauging how closely the churches’ programs and services are aligned with addressing the greatest perceived needs of their parishioners as well as the surrounding communities.

Interestingly, although the need for job training and placement programs was ranked by the pastors as the most pressing concern for Black Chicago, such programs were not indicated to be frequently offered at the churches. This area of concern is not completely ignored, however, with some churches providing job-related activities, such as business seminars, job development, jobs information, computer classes, labor union support, cosmetology, job training/placement for ex-offenders, and youth employment.

A larger number of respondents indicated that After-school and youth programs are provided by their churches. Additionally, the respondents listed several activities that their churches offer for young people, including youth basketball and other sports, youth ministry, mentoring groups, and youth development.

Only one respondent indicated children’s day care was offered at his church.

Not surprisingly, the number one program offered at the respondents' churches is Bible study. Food pantries and feeding the hungry services was the second most offered program. Several respondents pointed out their housing and neighborhood development programs. Various education programs were regularly noted, such as GED classes, life skills coaching and helping members get back into school.

Although the issue was not ranked as an urgent need in Black Chicago, violent crime is having a major deleterious impact on the city's communities, and is compelling Black churches to respond to the issue. Peace Rallies, anti-violence campaigns, CAPS meetings, and marches against violence were frequently listed among the respondents' community-related church programs.

Another area of community need that many of the respondents state that their churches provide for is drug and alcohol abuse ministries. Accordingly, 12-step programs and other such substance abuse rehabilitation/treatment services were mentioned as being offered at least 20 times.

### **Consideration for Building the Capacities of Black Churches**

Comparative analysis of answers pertaining to the perceived needs of Black Chicago versus the type of programs offered at Black churches reveal that the churches more than likely continue their traditional role of addressing the emotional and spiritual matters of the community, rather than focus on the economic viability of the community. Although employment and job training is listed as the greatest concern within the Black community, few African-American churches have programs in place that meet that need.

It can be assumed that the typical Black church in Chicago may not feel equipped to provide employment and job training services. While some churches make informal referrals to job training programs in the city, most churches do not have the experienced staff or adequate infrastructure to establish functional job training sites, or to build the relationships with area businesses to facilitate job placement for trainees.

Ultimately, the survey results show what the respondents' perceive as an urgent need and, at the same time, reveal their perceived inability to meet that most critical need. This situation could be viewed as a deficit; however, it creates an area of opportunity.

It was suggested that forming collaborations among Black churches would be an effective way to build in the capacity necessary to deal with the most pressing issues of the African-American community. The survey respondents were asked whether they would be interested in the creation of an interfaith organization for such a purpose. The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this concept (Chart 4).

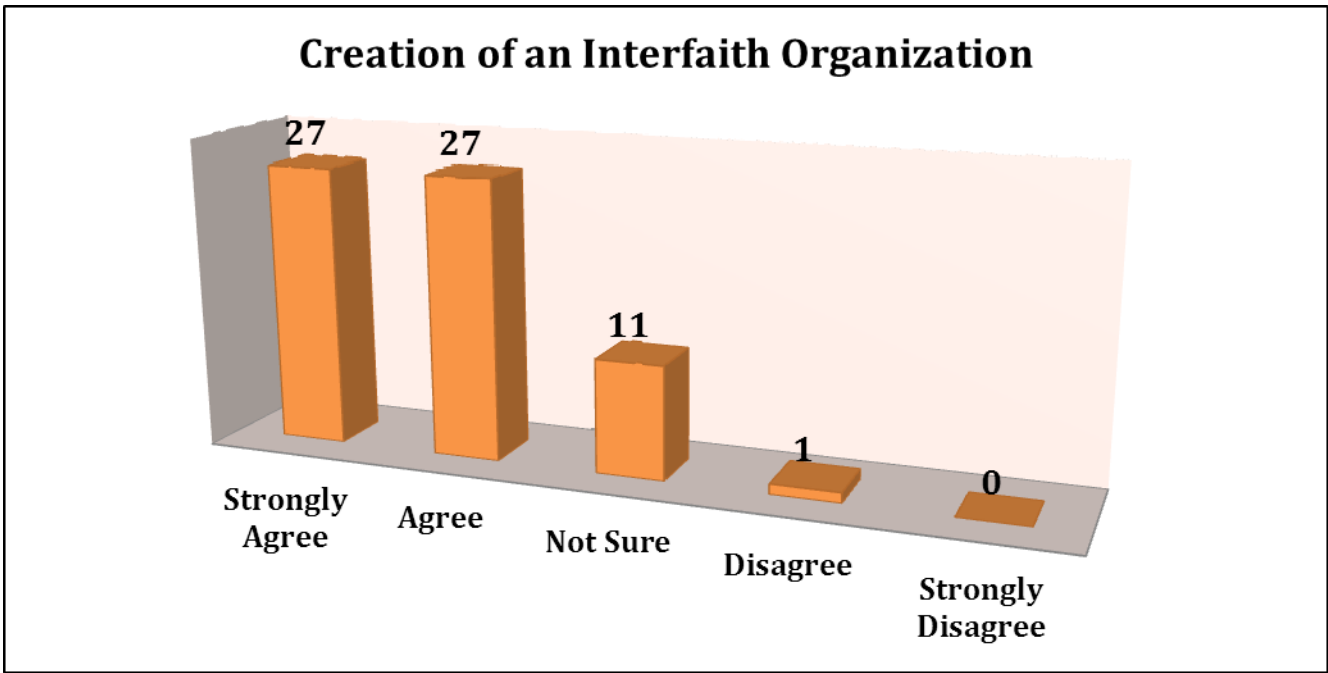


Chart 4

### Recommendations

**Short Term and Long Term Solutions to Resolving the Problem.** In the short term, the Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century Focus Group must achieve consensus from pastors of Black churches on what can be realistically accomplished to address the urgent needs of the community in a given timeframe that will yield measureable results. It is suggested that the group should focus on one to two practical goals. Then the group should consider the following strategies for long-term solutions to resolving the most critical problems affected Black Chicago.

**Strategies.** The Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century Focus Group is excited about the possibilities that have presented themselves through the group interactions and personal interviews that took place among African-American pastors throughout Chicagoland. Based on the accumulated data, the following strategies could be an effective course that can be pursued to transform the conditions of Black Chicagoans.

- Link Black pastors to programs and services that are available in their areas of interests in order to build and strengthen relationships among the church, the community and other entities as the foundation for future collaboration on urgent needs.
- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of interested pastors' experiences and skill-sets in community development collaborations in order to determine readiness.
- Conduct a thorough community needs assessment in order to ensure that an area's most urgent needs are given adequate attention.
- Provide pastors with training that would enhance their understanding of the connections between ministry and community development.

**Key Stakeholders** -- The key stakeholders who are responsible for the implementation of the Spirituality, Religion, and the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century focus group consist of the following: concerned citizens, African-American community/political organizations, elected officials, African-American businesses, law enforcement, schools, youth centers, job training centers, etc.

**Sustainability** – The survey results have clearly demonstrated a willingness of pastors to participate in interfaith efforts to improve the quality of life for black Chicagoans. Pastors also expressed their willingness to combine their resources as a means of collaborating on projects that are designed to address the unmet needs in the African-American community.

However, the sustainability of the collaboration will depend on the ability of the key stakeholders to organize a Board of Directors comprised of recognized community leaders who can attract resources to the organization. People selected for the Board must have a passion for peace and justice issues as well as community economic development activities. The board can be instrumental in bringing attention to the issues being addressed by the collaboration.

For example, several pastors recommended that the key stakeholders work together to identify space to house the headquarters of the proposed interfaith organization. In this connection, the board will be responsible for ensuring that the organization has operating capital to pay staff and meet operating expenses. Additionally, the board will work with key stakeholders to identify skilled personnel, particularly those with fund-raising skills, who can establish a professional development department. Leadership and staff positions should be filled with highly qualified people who will be committed to the change effort. The staff will be responsible for implementing the required systems and structures that support the efforts of the collaboration.

Secondly, board members must work with staff to determine where there are gaps in community services and whether or not there is an effective service delivery system in place to deliver limited resources to the people who are most in need. The collaboration should also explore the feasibility of organizing Black Chicago into Leadership Education Zones. These zones would allow the collaboration to respect the diversity of black Chicago and design initiatives that are adaptable to the needs of local residents.

Moreover, the collaboration should sponsor initiatives that contain an entrepreneurial component. The sustainability of the collaboration is going to depend on its ability to generate revenue.

Finally, the evaluation design will be a critical component to the success of the collaboration because each initiative should be monitored to ensure the collaboration is producing positive results.