Increasing Black Male Engagement In Religious Organizations

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Background and Description of the Problem

Although the Black Church has invested in generations of African American men by way of job training programs, scholarship funds, family assistance during economic uncertainty, and support in other life situations, the current perception of the Church is not positive in the eyes of many African American men. The current state of the Church is not attractive to African American men or men in general. Podles (1999) believes the Church, in its current structure, cannot reach men's greatest needs of comradeship and friendship because of the feminization of Christianity (more women in senior leadership roles), which attracts women, but repels men. So, comradery and friendship is sought at work, through sports and working out, secret society organizations, and other options that at one time were not available to African American men because of racial bias and societal injustice.

As African American attendance in Church has decreased, so has their participation in the family nucleus. The Church was the gatekeeper, the circle of accountability, and the support system for many men when it came to their family responsibilities for both the spouse and the children. Wilcox and Wolfinger (2016) came to the conclusion that the men who are most active in their churches are those most likely to be employed, married, and out of jail. This speaks to the benefit of church engagement that extends beyond the Church to the family, the community, the economy, and many other areas.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was twofold: (a) to assist churches in understanding the environmental elements more likely to attract African American males to small-to-midsize churches in the Church of Christ (Holiness) USA (COCHUSA) and (b) help them take the necessary steps to build enduring relationships with Black males. Relationship building in the church reaps several benefits: spiritual, communal, family, economic, political, and evangelical. All these factors must be considered when ideating a solution for this dilemma.

Methodology

For this study, the self-determination theory (SDT) was the theoretical framework. This theory, based on the tenets of autonomy, competence, and connection, assumes the need for growth drives behavior and internal motivation is important (Cherry, 2021). Using the SDT framework, secondary data collected from the Pew Research Center and the University of Central Washington was analyzed, seeking to determine motivational elements for Black male religious involvement.

Research Findings

Regarding the research findings on the obligation to be active in religion, 93% of respondents somewhat or strongly agree no one pressures them into being religious, and only 20% report feeling pressure from friends and family to go to religious services. Thirty-three percent of those surveyed feel pressure to attend religious services or think friends or family will be upset if they do not attend religious services. Also, 67% of respondents report they somewhat or strongly agree with the sentiment that important people in their

lives do not influence if they attend religious services. This data suggests that for African American males to become engaged in religious organizations, it will not result from social pressure but from a personal decision, directly aligning with the SDT.

Socially, only 13% of African American males in the data set report going to church to make friends, and 73% somewhat or strongly agree they do not go to church to make friends. Even with assumed established friendships, only 7% somewhat or strongly agree with the statement "they go to church to make and see friends." This information is beneficial because the partner organization currently seeks to attract African American males through building relationships, which has proven not to be a good strategy. Analysis of the data confirms the reason for past failed initiatives in COCHUSA.

Research Conclusions

After summarizing the data findings, it can be confirmed African American male religious engagement should be expected to increase when the COCHUSA church is actively engaged in the surrounding community, and not because of opportunities to build relationships within the religious organization or church. Considering the target group does not engage in religious organizations to establish relationships, to emphasize small groups and other relational activities would not help achieve the objectives of the partner organization. The better strategy seems to focus on activities outside of the church worship service. This suggests African American males engage in organizations where they can contribute or add value, which is a positive sign.

Research Implications

The data in this study suggests engagement is directly linked to contribution, not relationship. The ability to take ownership of an assigned task and follow it through to completion is more likely to encourage long-term engagement (beyond 6 months) than an appeal to organizational commitment. In the workplace, this suggests on-the-job training may prove more useful and encourage organizational loyalty than classroom learning. In academic settings, problem-based learning or service-learning activities may prove to promote persistence to graduation more than traditional lecture-style classroom settings. More targeted to this ADP, if small-to-midsize churches in COCHUSA get Black males involved in labor-intensive, athletic, or mentorship activities within the organization, there is a great chance of positively encouraging their organizational engagement.

These recommended changes within the COCHUSA organization could also encourage men to invite other peers to actively engage within the organization. That engagement would produce multiple benefits. It would promote spiritual growth among those actively engaged, encourage Black males to become more active within their families, and allow the small-to-midsize church in COCHUSA to financially prosper, leading to more opportunities for growth and development of even more Black males. The potential benefits are valuable to the partner organization and to the community at large.

References

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