

Models of Collaboration: Churches, City Hall and Community Change¹

Cheryl Sanders was among the twenty religious leaders who met with George W. Bush at the First Baptist Church of Arlington Texas in December 2000 to discuss the idea of a new faith-based initiative. After a prayer by one pastor thanking God for Mr. Bush's election, religious leaders seized the moment to advise the President-elect on how to build a stronger partnership between government and faith-based organizations to serve the nation's urban poor.

Mr. Bush posed a candid question. 'I realize that there are a whole lot of people among your constituents who didn't vote for me. What can I do now as president of all the people.' His eyes turned to Rev. Sanders. She responded not with a political strategy, but personally and directly. "You're exactly right, we did not vote for you," she said. "But however you were elected, you *are* now the president of all the people. You need to understand where we sit, who we are, and the difference between the life chances of your children versus the life chances of my children."

Since 1984 Sanders has served as Professor of Christian Ethics at Howard University School of Divinity. She also has served for seven years as the Senior Pastor of the Third Street Church of God, a congregation located in the predominantly Shaw section of the District of Columbia. One of her congregation's church partners is National Presbyterian Church where Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and his family attend. When Sanders had dinner with Senator Frist, she invited him to worship at the Third Street Church. The Senator accepted, but the Frists have yet to experience the multi-ethnic worship of Sanders' church, which is located less than a mile northwest of the Senator's office on Capitol Hill.

Having grown up in D.C., Pastor Sanders' life experience and theology have made her deeply aware of the multiple barriers separating her church from Capitol Hill. In August of 2002, for example, when she attended a hearing of the Congressional Black Caucus, Sanders was struck by how few black congressional representatives had gone

¹ *This case was written by Dr. Brent Coffin, Director of the Joint Program on Religion and Public Life at Harvard University's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations. It was prepared for the Executive Session on Faith-Based and Community Approaches to Urban Revitalization meeting in October 2003. This case is to facilitate dialogue on how public religious leaders engage in cross-sector collaboration with government officials rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective strategies for addressing particular issues.*

that extra mile. Speakers addressing the CBC hearing unleashed a torrent of criticism against the Bush faith-based initiative—seeing it as a Republican ploy to circumvent anti-discrimination laws, provide a smokescreen for tax cuts, and shift public responsibility onto churches. A pause came when Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D. Ill.) expressed bafflement that this was the first issue in his political career on which he was getting opposition from black clergy. Speaking as a black pastor, Sanders picked up on Jackson’s comment, stood, and asked a question: “My question is, ‘Who has analyzed the faith-based initiative from the point of view of the poor?’ I might as well have asked them who has traveled to Mars and back,” Sanders later said. “It wasn’t even in the conversation what poor people think, their opinion, or the impact on them.”

Sanders has been critical not only of political elites who stand behind ideological barricades and debate poverty policy without engaging the poor. She has been equally critical of religious elites: “...[The] same churches who address their liberation rhetoric in the form of statements, resolutions, protests, pickets, and boycotts have failed to engage the poor directly and have little to offer with respect to the practical task of reforming communities.”²

A minister in the Holiness tradition, Sanders espouses an ethics of liberation in service to God’s mission of reconciliation throughout the world. The guiding norm of her public ministry is the commitment to struggle for the inclusion of the poor and marginalized as full participants in a reconciled community:

We must cultivate an awareness of how racism, sexism, ignorance, and prejudice delude Christians into excluding others from vital spheres of God’s blessing and work. The true end or purpose of our efforts to overcome these barriers is the acknowledgment that God made us all and loves us all as bearers of God’s divine image. And special programs and efforts are needed just as long as blind and narrow-minded people refuse to believe, practice or honor this end of making sure no one gets excluded from what God is doing.³

Bridging the Gap between Government and Faith Communities

Religion is often thought of as a private matter—something individuals carry around in their hearts and minds, or practice within the walls of synagogues, mosques and churches. In a free society religion certainly is deeply personal—and diverse—but not exactly private. Religious organizations and affiliations make up about half the bonds of trust and cooperation, the social capital, in the United States today.⁴ Religious organizations receive by far the largest portion of individual charitable giving and investment of volunteer time.⁵ In the District of Columbia, the Yellow Pages record over

² Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 126. Hereafter “SIE”.

³ Cheryl Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 103.

⁴ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁵ See *Giving USA* (New York: American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel, 1999).

a thousand religious communities, a conservative number since small, storefront churches are underreported.

Political leaders thus find it difficult to avoid coming to grips with the religious landscape of their cities, and may find it useful to do an asset inventory mapping the resources of faith-based institutions from the large social service agencies like Catholic Charities to the small store-front churches abounding in low-income urban neighborhoods. At the same time, faith communities are not merely instrumental resources for public managers to leverage scarce public dollars more effectively. They have their own identity, mission, and agenda—not the least their *de facto* competition with one another for members, funds and legitimacy. Still, by knowing the religious landscape of the city, public officials may be better able to work with religious leaders in finding innovative solutions to some of the toughest problems confronting urban communities.⁶

Forming such partnerships requires a “bi-lingual” capacity that doesn’t come naturally to many political or religious leaders. Astute politicians have to develop an “ear” to hear the religious mission of faith communities, and to identify credible and effective religious leaders as potential partners for community problem-solving. Religious leaders likewise face difficult challenges in pursuing cross-sector alliances with business, civic and political groups. How do they sustain their congregations while investing considerable resources in risky partnerships? Should a faith organization pursue a cross-sector alliance independently and through the formation of an interfaith coalition? How can religious leaders exercise influence that helps to shape a public agenda while maintaining their theological integrity as spiritual leaders?

Cheryl Sanders’ public ministry demonstrates critical engagement with four conceptually distinct models for pursuing partnerships between the faith community and city government: special access, community organizing, exilic separation, and collaborative negotiation.

- A special access model is at play when powerful religious leaders trade their support for resources or favors from city government.
- A faith-based community-organizing model seeks to mobilize the poor, by means of grass-roots organizing through communities of faith, to assert collective power forcing the government to address priority issues identified in low-income communities.
- A separatist or “exilic” model operates when the faithful refuse to engage in, or are excluded from, political participation; their spiritual salvation will not be compromised for token political gains.

⁶ For example, the case of the Ten Point Coalition in Boston. See Christopher Winship et al., “Religion and the Boston Miracle: the Effect of Black Ministry on Youth Violence. In Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin and Ronald Thiemann, eds., *Who Will Provide? The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2000).

- A model of collaborative negotiation emerges as key religious and political leaders engage in dialogue, build trust, come to understand one another's perspectives, and negotiate an operational agenda for cooperative action.

To see how Sanders' public ministry critically engages each of these approaches, she was asked to identify one of the many issues in her teaching and pastoral work—issues ranging from the renovation of her church's buildings and its ministry to the homeless at the local level, to gentrification of her church's neighborhood that will force low and moderate-income minorities out of the Shaw neighborhood just as they were forced out of Georgetown beginning in the mid-20th Century, to international issues like protesting the U.S. military action in Iraq. What keeps her awake at night? "Do you want to know what my most pressing issue of the moment is? It's parking!"

Parking? "That's very mundane," Sanders admitted. And yet... "the basic identity of the church is at stake here," she said. "[If] we can't resolve this parking issue, we're gone." If so, the seemingly mundane issue of parking offers a window for seeing how a religious leader works through four distinct—not necessarily incompatible—models for bridging the faith community and city government. Which is she disposed to adopt or to avoid? Which would allow her most effectively to shape a public agenda while maintaining her integrity as a spiritual leader?

Models of Partnership

Special Access. Historically, powerful urban regimes have established backdoor alliances with prominent and powerful religious leaders, offering access, recognition and resources in exchange for political support.⁷ Without necessarily shutting backdoor access, a mayor can pursue a front-door strategy of working with the faith community in one of two ways—by creating a formal structure or through *ad hoc* interaction.

When Anthony Williams, a practicing Roman Catholic, took office as mayor of the District of Columbia, he recognized the difficulty of working with D.C.'s vast and diverse faith community. "...[When] you're mayor, you basically have to be comfortable with processes where there are casts of thousands," said Williams. "On the one hand, you're trying to get things done as quickly as possible; on the other hand, you're trying to involve as many people as possible. They sound mutually exclusive, but you have to do it."

Succeeding the charismatic Marion Barry who had strong ties with black church leaders, Williams also recognized the importance of his administration reaching out to the faith community: "You have to engage with your faith leaders. Particularly in the middle and lower income communities, they are the only functioning institutions."⁸ Mayor Williams decided to adopt a formal front-door approach. He did so by creating the

⁷ See Fredrick C. Harris, "Strategic Action Under Constraints or Narrow Self-Interest" The Civic Engagement of Black Ministers and Churches in Chicago." A paper commissioned for the Public Influences of African-American Churches Project, 2003.

⁸ Interview, August 2003.

Mayor's Interfaith Council and recruited the Rev. Carlton Pressley to launch the new forum.

Pressley was at home in the world of both religion and politics. Before joining the Williams' administration, he was a real estate developer in Winston-Salem, a candidate for the North Carolina state legislature, an attorney and an ordained minister. When he came to Washington, Pressley brought ambitious goals for the Mayor's Interfaith Council. He believed it would allow the mayor to reach out to faith communities; bring a myriad of religious bodies together; provide faith leaders a forum for "speaking the truth to power"; and be a catalyst for getting large and small congregations to work together in developing greater technical capacity to provide social services to poor communities. Without a staff of his own, Pressley envisioned his office growing to resemble the White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives with liaisons in each of the city's fifteen agencies building partnerships with the faith community.

Pressley laid the groundwork for the new Interfaith Council by first meeting in person with some 500 faith-leaders across the religious spectrum. On February 24, 2002, the Mayor's Interfaith Council was formally launched when Rev. Jesse Jackson addressed a crowd of 1500 people in the sanctuary of the Metropolitan Baptist Church, challenging them to "speak the truth to power." The formal Interfaith Council consisted of 65 religious leaders representing a wide array of denominations and traditions, including atheists. Pressley himself convened the council's monthly meetings, which were deliberately held on the neutral ground of Howard University School of Divinity. The council elected its own executive committee. Rev. Edwon Brown, senior minister of Mount Sinai Baptist Church was elected chairperson and Rev. Cheryl Sanders vice-chairperson of the executive committee.

The site of the council's founding event signaled both continuity and change—political and religious. The large and prestigious church that hosted the inaugural event, Metropolitan Baptist Church led by the Rev. H. Beecher Hicks, was where Marion Barry attended church after his drug rehabilitation. Barry then attended the Union Temple Baptist Church headed by the Rev. Willie Wilson, the black Baptist minister who challenged Mayor Williams in the 2002 Democratic Party primary.⁹ Hicks and Wilson were part of the old Barry coalition of African-American religious leaders who saw Mayor Williams' agenda as the "Georgetown gentrification" of low-income, minority neighborhoods. In organizing the Interfaith Council, Carlton Pressley was reaching out to the old guard while trying to broaden Mayor Williams' base within the religious community.

Yet fundamental changes were also underway in D.C.'s religious landscape. Historic Metropolitan Baptist Church would soon not be available to "speak the truth to power." It was joining other large black churches relocating from urban D.C. to suburban Prince Georges County. A precipitating issue behind the decision to move was the problem of parking.

⁹ Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in D.C. by 10:1. (*Washington Post*, 10/24/02).

As vice-chair, Rev. Cheryl Sanders found herself wondering if Mayor Williams' Interfaith Council would be simply another version of the special access model. Soon after its founding, Sanders received a call from the Mayor's office asking her to attend a political rally in support of Anthony Williams. She refused. If the Interfaith Council had any viability, Sanders felt, it should not be used as a vehicle for electioneering. Sanders was never informed how the members of the Interfaith Council had been selected. She knew, however, that Carlton Pressley had been careful to consult the old-guard leadership while recruiting the 65 members who made up the new body. Pressley wanted every member of the council to hold some form of leadership position, but did not work with the seven-member executive committee to develop its strategic planning and leadership functions. A top-down style of operating became apparent as Pressley prepared each monthly agenda without consulting members of the executive committee.

Basically, Sanders took the same stance toward the Mayor's Interfaith Council she had taken toward the President's faith-based initiative—cautious optimism. She knew that the ministry of reconciliation required her continually to practice the art of critique and cooperation in building partnerships. Cooperation would keep her in the conversation, but in the conversation as a *critical advocate*. She wanted no part of the old backroom model of special access that allowed a few prominent clergy to exchange their moral authority for political access and prominence. A genuine forum would have to represent all the folks in her community, particularly the poor.

Community Organizing. When Anthony Williams assumed office, he faced a number of challenges to reform the government of the nation's capitol—a jurisdiction straddling two states, lacking congressional representation, with a population ranging from the poorest to the most powerful. For example, in 1995 a federal court had put D.C.'s child welfare agency into receivership for gross mismanagement of the foster care system. Upon entering office, Mayor Williams moved quickly to regain control of the agency. He recruited competent managers to revamp an expanded Child and Family Services Agency through regulatory, budget and staff reforms. By October 2002 Williams' administration had met all the federal court's requirements to end the probationary period and regain control of the agency. It then began a process of internal reorganization to coordinate child and family welfare services between the federal government, two states, the city council and the mayor's office.

More broadly, Williams initiated a city planning process to increase civic engagement, define priorities, and demonstrate accountability. "I had two summits," Williams recalled. "We had about four thousand people at each summit. They came to the convention center; they set major goals for the city. [These goals] were then translated into a performance plan for the city and for individual neighborhoods. And in the city as a whole you have these major engagements by nonprofits, business, faith leadership... [based on] a very detailed performance planning process."

The Washington Interfaith Network (WIN), however, did not exist simply to implement the mayor's strategic plan. Through grassroots organizing, its mission is to empower and mobilize disenfranchised communities to exercise political power around

the most critical issues afflicting low-income neighborhoods. Affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), WIN is part of a faith-based organizing movement in thirty-three states and the District of Columbia.¹⁰ Faith-based community organizing has proven effective in areas like San Antonio, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn. East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC) was able to produce 2300 single-family homes.¹¹ If Rev. Jesse Jackson's aim for the Mayor's Interfaith Council was "speaking truth to power," WIN's aim was mobilizing power through effective strategies that address the interests of those not represented in strategic planning processes. However, expanding earlier IAF successes in more cities poses difficult challenges for community organizers.¹²

In the fall of 2002, WIN had laid the groundwork for a major commitment rally with the city government. In attendance were over half the members of the city council, the mayor's director of economic development, and Mayor Williams himself. Most of the politicians on the podium played to the crowd, expressing their support for WIN's demand that the city commit \$200 million to neighborhood revitalization. Mayor Williams responded to WIN's demand with cautious commitment.

It was easy to have a commitment rally and endorse broad objectives. Clearly, the city would be investing \$200 million in neighborhood revitalization in one form or another. The real issues were operational. How do community organizers and city officials negotiate specific objectives with common understanding of the tradeoffs and constraints these will entail? As one senior official in the D.C. government put it, commitment meetings make everyone feel good. But what happens the day after? How do community organizers and city officials move from confrontation to achieving realistic outcomes?

The Rev. Lionel Edmunds, pastor of the Mount Lebanon Baptist Church located directly across from Sanders' church on Third Street, was co-chair of the Washington Interfaith Network. Edmunds was not a member of the Mayor's Interfaith Council. In turn, Sanders was not active in the faith-based organizing movement led by her former student and ministerial colleague. A pastor-scholar with two full-time jobs and a family can take on only so much.

Yet there were more fundamental reasons behind Sanders reluctance to pursue the IAF organizing model. Having long resisted pressure to be *either* a pastor *or* a scholar, Sanders constantly struggled to integrate theology and ministry. That led her to be critical of clergy who "issue prophetic calls devoid of the practical guidelines their commitments

¹⁰ On the Industrial Areas Foundation, see www.iafnw.org.

¹¹ Richard L. Wood describes the scope of faith-based community organizing: "With 133 local or metropolitan-area federations linking some 3,500 congregations plus 500 public schools, labor union locals, and other institutions, faith-based organizing can plausibly claim to touch the lives of some two million members of these institutions in all the major urban areas and many secondary cities across the United States." (Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 6.) See also Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² See Diana Barrett and Arthur Segel, "The Nehemiah Strategy: Bringing it to Boston." Harvard Business School Case N9-303-130 (June 2003).

to political change would entail.” On the other hand, Sanders’ theology of reconciliation made her unwilling to engage in confrontational politics that reduced human beings and relationships to a *real politic* power struggle. Her theology requires a constant critique of power—its subtle interplay in interpersonal relations, organizations, and social structures—which function to exclude women, minorities, and the poor from being part of “what God is doing in the world.” Her distance from WIN, then, was not a matter of naiveté concerning power. More fundamentally, it was rooted in Sanders’ experience in the Holiness tradition of African-American Christianity that true power—the saving, liberating, transforming power of the Holy Spirit—creates refuges of reconciliation in churches where saints are called to be in but not of the world.

Separatist-Exilic Communities. On Sunday, July 21, 2002, the Rev. Sarah C. Britt was called to be the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Deanwood. The historic event was reported the following week in the *Washington Post*: “As far as anyone can tell, Britt is the first woman to be elected head of a prominent Baptist church in the District of Columbia. Of the more than 400 Baptist Congregations in the city, at least 50 have a membership of 500 or more. The Deanwood church, with 545, is one of them.”

In her role as professor of Christian ethics, Sanders had written extensively on the struggle women face breaking through the “stained glass ceilings” of sexism to attain positions of senior leadership in historic black churches. In 1996 she became the first woman to serve as senior pastor of the Third Street Church of God. However, Sanders’ congregation is not to be confused with black mainline congregations like Rev. Britt’s. It belongs to the Holiness/Pentecostal tradition of American Christianity. Specifically, the congregation belongs to a branch of the Holiness-Pentecostal Christian tradition called the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), a fellowship of 221,346 members in 2,295 congregations as of 1995.¹³ The fact that 20% of its congregations and 15% of its members are black makes this fellowship an anomaly in the American landscape of racially segregated denominations.¹⁴

Cheryl Sanders walked calmly down the side isle greeting members and visitors as the sanctuary filled for the 11:00 a.m. service. This sunny morning, June 22, 2003, the church was celebrating its 93rd anniversary. The service began as the choir, twelve women and three men dressed in rich crimson robes, processed down the isle, the women first, singing “Woke Up This Morning.” Of the nearly 200 young and old filling the sanctuary, perhaps two-thirds were women and all were black—save eight Campus Crusade youth and one other white visitor who were warmly welcomed by the charismatic student minister and members alike. Pastor Sanders, wearing a black and gold robe symbolic of the spiritual and academic authority esteemed in the Church of God tradition of learned ministry, sat calmly behind the pulpit as three other ministers, all women, lead the congregation in worship.

¹³ SIE, 21.

¹⁴ Worldwide, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing movement in Christianity, encompassing more than 400 million adherents. See Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

When Pastor Sanders asked for prayer concerns, several “saints” stood to offer praise, testimony, and ask for prayers as voices responded “Amen!” Sanders demeanor changed as she began praying, as if coming alive in the Spirit as she talked with God. In chanting cadences not unlike a sermon, the pastor offered praise and intercession for the next ten minutes, lifting up every person and need mentioned earlier, beseeching the Holy Spirit to surround “our Mayor Tony Williams,” to bring courage and prudence to those advising our President, to bless those embarking on a mission to Ghana, to anoint the saints gathered here that each be transformed, healed, and empowered by holiness to make a truthful witness to the Holy God.

The energy and joy of worship did not make it incongruous for the saints to be asked to “give hilariously”—give not once, twice, but threefold. There was the regular tithe to support the church; a special world ministries offering going to the Church of God headquarters in Anderson, Indiana; and support for two members of the congregation, a doctor and nurse, preparing to spend two weeks working at a health clinic in Haiti. At the close of the service, the trustees led the congregation in a symbolic burning of the church’s mortgage on the repaid loan secured to buy the church office building up the street. The event was reminiscent of the day in May 1959, before Martin Luther King, Jr. announced his dream at the Lincoln Memorial nearby, when Pastor Benjamin celebrated Third Street Church’s final ownership of its modest sanctuary by burning the mortgage on the building where “the saints” now gathered. A poster on the wall reminded members they had now raised \$214,082 toward the \$1.5 goal of the Nehemiah Fund for future renovation and expansion of church facilities. A celebrated past was linked to a hopeful future that the Third Street Church would extend its presence in the Shaw neighborhood far into a second century.

In the Holiness tradition to be a “saint” is not to claim perfection but a liturgical and ethical identity. Saints are saved when they repent, ask for forgiveness of sins, and confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. They are sanctified when they receive the personal blessing to commit to a distinctive ethical identity of being set apart for God. For that to be possible, however, the saints must be filled with the Holy Spirit by experiencing total initiation into the worshipping community evidenced by personal confession or manifestations of spirit possession. Worship is thus the heart of the Holiness church. As systolic and diastolic pulsing circulates life-blood through the human body, the rhythmic dances, songs, and shouts of the saints gathered on Sunday “doing church” is where the Spirit sanctifies and empowers a holy people “to be in but not of the world.” Holiness can only be found in community, the heart of community is worship, and the climatic event of worship is preaching when the pastor speaks the Word of God.¹⁵

In a society stratified by race, gender and class, the egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit makes the Third Street Church of God a space of refuge and reconciliation.¹⁶ In this space those who are called to be saints—“in but not of the world”—experience spiritual formation as they liturgically rehearse sacred truths.¹⁷ The ethics of holiness is

¹⁵ SIE: 58, 56.

¹⁶ SIE, 35-48

¹⁷ SIE, 149.

three-dimensional, “mandating not only holy living for individuals but also holy worship in the churches and holy justice in the social order.”¹⁸ The three dimensions of the ethics of holiness structured Cheryl Sanders’ sermon marking the church’s 93rd anniversary that morning.

As if hearing a melody and entering the rhythms of a familiar dance, the sermon, based on a close exegesis of Psalm 93, transformed a composed scholar into an impassioned preacher. God is enthroned for all eternity, a basic fact greater than anything human beings can do. God’s reigns—rules and overrules—subduing the forces of chaos over which we are powerless...overruling the oppression that exiles us. How is it that God’s rule is manifest everyday? Sanders builds the climax of her sermon on the final verse of Psalm 93: “Your decrees are very sure;/ holiness befits your house,/ O Lord, forevermore.” God is holy and through God’s presence we are to be a holy people. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit, here and now, frees us, empowers us, and mandates us to live the threefold ethics of God. Each person is a temple of the Spirit, yet holy living is no individual, private affair. The saints are gathered here to experience God’s refuge and reconciliation, to rehearse the ethics of holiness for everyday life. Holy people, therefore, are called to holy boldness, to manifest the reign of God in the public sphere. The Word of God is true and the Spirit empowers the saints to bear a faithful witness inside, in the refuge of the sanctuary, and outside in the public square.

But what happens when a separatist church finds itself threatened by the forces of economic development? Can a minister in the exilic tradition exercise real influence in shaping an agenda of urban revitalization?

Dialogue and Collaboration. The Third Street Church of God was born in 1910 in the home of Sister Cherry Lites Lee Johnson on Six and One-Half Street, Southwest. When Sister Johnson and her family migrated to Washington, D.C., from Charlotte, North Carolina in the first decade of the century, they were determined to continue their Holiness Tradition as a sanctified people, in but not of the world.¹⁹ Elder Charles T. Benjamin, a traveling evangelist born in the British West Indies and based in New York, was invited to become the founding pastor of the small flock. In 1913 the growing congregation moved to the Westminster section of the Shaw community, a neighborhood with well-to-do black families and numerous black-owned businesses. The Mission’s three-story brick row house provided a parsonage for the pastor and his wife, housing for saints and newcomers to the area, and a facility for worship and Sunday school.

President Bush’s faith-based initiative seeks to promote faith-based social service, especially through grassroots organizations working with children and families in poor urban neighborhoods. Yet from its earliest days, the Third Street Church has pursued a mission that combines spiritual salvation, moral instruction, and material assistance in urban D.C. Under the leadership of Pastor Benjamin,

¹⁸ SIE, 132.

¹⁹ This history is drawn from Sanders’ *Saints in Exile*.

the ...Mission acquired a reputation not only in Washington but also throughout the United States, especially in the South, as a place where persons coming to Washington for jobs or education could receive assistance and support. They required cleanliness, discipline, respect, and shared responsibility of the residents of the mission home. However, it was clear that all these strict rules and regulations of the household were enforced and followed in the context of Christian love. Residents did not live there free of charge, and proceeds from the rental rooms were used to defray the expenses of the church. Their style of pastoral ministry can perhaps best be described as communal parenting.²⁰

The close-knit congregation composed of about fifteen core families totaling about 100 members moved to its present location in 1928, what is today 1204 Third Street, Northwest. It took the saints more than three decades before they were able to burn the mortgage on the Third Street property in May 1959. In 1967 after 57 years of leadership, having pastored one congregation longer than any other minister in the Church of God, Elder Benjamin retired.

Samuel George Hines, like Benjamin a native of the West Indies, became the second pastor of the Third Street saints. Affirming his predecessor had built a strong foundation, Hines believed his calling was “to take a maintenance-oriented church to turn out a mission-oriented church.”²¹ Hines modeled his mission by working with government agencies, community organizations, and ecumenical groups, serving, for example, as the local representative of Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). With reconciliation the guiding theological motif of his leadership, Hines challenged his congregation to become “Ambassadors for Christ in the Nation’s Capitol.”²² Hines and the Third Street saints established two programs that embodied the congregation’s commitment to bring the powerful and powerless together in a ministry of reconciliation: the Urban Prayer Breakfast; and United Neighbors Involved in Quality Urban Experience (U.N.I.Q.U.E). Hines’ 26-year ministry ended with his sudden death in 1995.

In 1997 Cheryl Sanders became just the third pastor to serve the Third Street Church. Today the surrounding Shaw neighborhood is less made up of families that migrated north to escape racial segregation and find economic opportunity. Neighbors are more likely to be homeless, drug dependent, or holding on to the bottom rung of the job ladder. It is in this changed urban environment that Sanders’ congregation continues its ministry to neighbors through the two programs begun under Pastor Hines.

The Urban Prayer Breakfast, which members of the Third Street Church have hosted for 25 years, puts “poor and homeless persons in fellowship with persons from other...diverse backgrounds.”²³ Volunteers arrive at 6:30 a.m. every weekday

²⁰ SIE, 36.

²¹ SIE, 40.

²² SIE, 40.

²³ Cheryl Sanders, “The Urban Prayer Breakfast at Third Street Church of God.” (A paper delivered at the Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, June 2003.)

throughout the year—including Christmas and New Year’s Day—to prepare a substantial “soul food” breakfast. The average attendance is about 100 persons, 90% of whom are black males, most living in the nearby shelters or on the streets of the community. Worship begins at 7:30 with Scripture songs like “He Is Exalted” and “Celebrate Jesus.” After thirty or forty minutes of singing, a member of the ministry team preaches a sermon exhorting guests “to seek the kingdom of God, to choose Jesus Christ as Savior, and to acknowledge that poverty is no excuse for failing to follow the Lord.”²⁴ After breakfast ends at 8:30, dozens of volunteers, some who are themselves homeless, clean up and restock the kitchen for the next day. The paid staff includes a program director, a social worker and two custodians. Rev. Arthur Brown, the full-time social worker, follows up with persons attending the Urban Prayer Breakfast by conducting support groups and providing individualized referrals to social service agencies in the area.

“We do not operate a ‘soup kitchen’,” noted Sanders; “what we have is a daily offering of table fellowship among the poor.” A practice of reconciliation: “The ecumenical and interracial nature of the ministry is striking. The volunteers come from many churches and denominations; some are local and others come from various regions of the United States. It seems easy for them to put aside doctrinal, liturgical, racial and cultural differences in order to come together with Washington’s poor to lift up the name of Jesus.”

Not everyone in the neighborhood would agree. Some members of the Shaw Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) working on urban revitalization have expressed their growing concerns to Sanders. They see the Urban Prayer Breakfast as a magnet drawing the homeless poor to Third Street, slowing the process of neighborhood gentrification. One suggested solution would be for the area churches to pool their resources and sponsor an ecumenical ministry to the homeless in a common facility. Then Sanders’ church would not need to expand its facilities, or even continue a program that leaves the homeless poor congregating on Third Street each morning. Ecumenical collaboration can allow faith organizations to build capacity and efficiency—for example, a job-training program is sponsored by an interfaith coalition that includes Sanders’ church. But a strategy to move the homeless off Third Street, and eventually out of the Shaw Neighborhood, would violate the essence of the Third Street Church’s historic mission. “The urban prayer breakfast remains the centerpiece of the church’s ministry of reconciliation,” Sanders insists.

The U.N.I.Q.U.E. (United Neighbors Involved in Quality Urban Experience) Development Corporation was spawned by the Third Street Church in the 1960s to build a model community based on the reconciliation concept. The CDC continues to operate Third Street’s second program, one that addresses the problem of public school education in urban D.C.

Cheryl Sanders attended local public schools in the city through eighth grade. That summer she experienced poetry and Latin in a program at Exeter Academy as one of two students hand-picked by her English teacher, the only woman and African American

²⁴ SIE, 47.

on the faculty of the Exeter summer program. Excited for more, Sanders' mother agreed to help her attend a private high school. The admissions director of the prestigious Sidwell Friends Day School agreed to accept the application but made clear that Sanders' test scores were so low as to make the process a waste of time. Sidwell's principal later interviewed and admitted Sanders, placing her on the advanced math track. After Sidwell, Sanders chose to attend Swarthmore College, earned her Master of Divinity and doctorate in theology at Harvard, before returning to join the pastoral staff of Third Street Church.

Most children in the neighborhood are not so fortunate. Shaw's Dunbar High School is an engineering magnet school. Less than 6% of Dunbar students achieve levels of proficiency or advanced proficiency on the Stanford Nine Achievement Test. 94% of students score below proficiency; 80% score below basic proficiency.²⁵

The Third Street Church's UNIQUE Learning Center (ULC) provides mentoring and tutoring for 35 children in the Shaw neighborhood. Each day after school kids in grades K through 12 come to the three-story building several doors from the church. Led by a full-time director and small staff of paid assistants, the ULC depends heavily on volunteers. They provide a safe "home away from home" and tutor kids in their schoolwork. More importantly, volunteers are mentors who form one-to-one relationships with the kids. Such relationships can be demanding on volunteers. From time to time, the ULC provides intensive learning and social support for middle and high school kids so far behind they require virtual "home schooling." The goal is always to return children to the classroom. But achieving that modest goal requires more than tutoring from 3:30 to 6:30 each day and Tuesdays until 9:00 p.m. The full-time paid staff works with these children 30 hours a week.

It is important to note the fundamentally different content and funding structure of the Third Street Church's two programs. Because of its explicitly religious nature, the Urban Prayer Breakfast is supported entirely with private funds—for example, from the National Presbyterian Church where Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and his family worship. In contrast, the UNIQUE Learning Center is a separate 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation with a secular educational mission. As such it qualifies to receive funding from private and public sources.

One reason Sanders adopted a stance of "cautious optimism" toward the Bush faith-based initiative was her awareness that urban congregations need more resources to serve the poor in their communities: "...[It] must be recognized," she wrote, "that small urban congregations of saints that aggressively evangelize the poor typically lack access to the facilities, funding, and bureaucratic support of the more affluent mainstream denominations. Third Street Church of God, for example, has yet to marshal adequate human and fiscal resources to provide the full complement of services, monitoring, and support needed by the homeless people who worship there daily."²⁶

²⁵ *The Washington Post*, District Weekly Section, September 4, 2003.

²⁶ SIE, 129-30.

At the same time, Sanders' experience with government funding has not been positive. When the Third Street Church received a \$40,000 grant from Housing and Urban Development, HUD required the grant to be administered by the D.C. government. "That was a bit of a letdown for us," Sanders said, "because we just knew it was going to be wrapped in red tape." Sanders believes most government agencies do not recognize that a small urban church of 300 members has the ability to run two different programs, each consistent with its mission, but each using a different funding approach. She views the problem of "capacity building" primarily as a challenge to government, not churches:

The most pressing (and frustrating) challenge in my opinion is the notion of 'capacity building.' Most often that term is used to characterize the need of faith-based organizations to staff and structure the administration of government grants and partnerships; however, it is apparent to me that the government has a lot of 'capacity building' to do of its own if the proposed partnerships are to be fruitful ones.²⁷

What models or approaches could Sanders use to help build a fruitful partnership between the faith community and the city government? Could the Mayor's Interfaith Council develop the capacity to foster such partnerships? Could it become a forum for faith leaders and public officials to negotiate a common agenda? The mundane issue of parking would provide a test case.

Rubber Hits the Road

Religious leaders and city officials unexpectedly collided on the streets of D.C. in March 2002. The city held its inaugural marathon on Palm Sunday, the beginning of Christian Holy Week. With streets blocked off and lined with crowds, runners wound their way through the city. But many were unable to drive to Sunday services, leaving collection plates noticeably down.

Six weeks later, President John Stanley of H2O, the Arlington based firm running the yearly marathon, received an email from a District special events task force saying Carlton Pressley, along with Mayor Williams' Interfaith Council, "would have to approve the logistics, including the date and time of the 2003 marathon before any approvals were granted" by the city.²⁸ The 2003 marathon was again scheduled for a Sunday, though not a religious holiday. Four days before it was to take place, H2O cancelled the event, citing security and safety concerns.

On May 28th, allegations that Pressley had solicited a \$5000 payment from H2O to fund a clergy award ceremony were reported in *The Washington Post*. After investigating the charges, the Mayor's office determined that Pressley had not adhered to protocol, violating the executive order guidelines issued in January 2002. Pressley was terminated from his position as the mayor's point person to the religious community. Cheryl Sanders

²⁷ Issue note written for the Harvard Executive Program on Faith-Based and Community Approaches to Urban Revitalization, February 2003.

²⁸ *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2003: B1.

had been nominated to receive a clergy leadership award sponsored by the Mayor's Interfaith Council. The annual award was discontinued after Pressley was fired.

Mayor Williams was candid about the need to replace Reverend Carlton Pressley as his liaison to the faith community. "Carlton had his issues, but they were more Carlton's. On the other hand, he was enormously successful in creating the initiative, in getting a first-rate group of faith leaders on board, really inter-denominational. And I'm now building on that. I'm just in the process of selecting his replacement." In Williams' view, the further development of a formal structure of interacting with the faith community would continue to serve two purposes. "When I appoint a new director [of the] Interfaith Council," said Williams, "one of his or her jobs is going to be focusing on how we can use the council not only as a lightning rod to hear the complaints and concerns of the faith community, but also as a way of engaging the faith community in the strategic plan of the city."

The mistake of holding the city's first marathon on Palm Sunday had two consequences. It precipitated events leading to a change in leadership of the Mayor's Interfaith Council. And it enraged religious leaders because many of their members could not get through the crowds to "do church." Congregations must constantly adapt if they are to survive. They do so either by renewing their mission where they are or by moving to a different location.²⁹ Such choices are driven by religious vision and mission, but also by practical considerations: Where do congregants live? How far will they drive to attend bible study and choir rehearsal? Will their children feel at home in Sunday School?

Reversing the out-migration to the suburbs in the 1960s, Abe Pollin, owner of the Washington Wizards basketball team, recently purchased the Turner Memorial A.M.E. Church for \$5 million to reconvert the building into a synagogue.³⁰ Turner Memorial Church was joining Metropolitan Baptist Church, where the Interfaith Council was born, in deciding to relocate from urban D.C. to suburban Prince Georges County. Such changes were prompting fears, especially among blacks, that gentrification was displacing the poor and working class residents of the Shaw neighborhood as it was gradually becoming the next Georgetown.

The problem of parking was heightened when the new convention center was built four blocks from the Third Street Church. It had only 100 parking spaces, not even enough for employees, much less thousands of visitors. To make matters worse, plans were under discussion to replace the current MCI Sports Center downtown with a new sports stadium that would be built just three blocks from the Third Street Church.

To address the rapidly growing problem of parking generated by such development, city officials have imposed a two-hour parking restriction on the entire Shaw neighborhood around the convention center. In this context, the seemingly

²⁹ See Nancy Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

³⁰ See Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.)

mundane issue of parking has begun to take on greater significance for faith communities. It has become a crucial factor affecting whether urban churches will be able to maintain their presence and continue their mission amid urban revitalization.

How should religious leaders go about addressing such a “mundane” religious issue? One prominent pastor in the Shaw neighborhood proposed that congregations take an independent, interfaith approach. They could pool their resources, build a large parking facility, and shuttle worshipers to their respective churches. The proposal had a plausible business rationale: industry members forming a multi-stakeholder coalition to build new infrastructure essential for future competitiveness. It also had echoes of the neighborhood leaders who proposed that the Urban Prayer Breakfast adopt a more unified approach to keep the homeless poor from gathering each morning on Third Street.

Religious leaders began to explore other strategies for pursuing a solution to the parking problem with city officials. An *ad hoc* group of clergy from the Shaw neighborhood, which included Cheryl Sanders, met to discuss how they could get the parking issue on the city’s agenda for negotiation. Assuming they would have immediate access, a small delegation of the *ad hoc* group went to City Hall without an appointment, asking to meet with Mayor Williams. They discovered the mayor was not available.

The Shaw clergy group next decided to broaden its coalition by meeting with city council members, like Jack Evans, who were sympathetic to the deeper significance of the parking problem. A stronger coalition of local religious and political leaders might be able to reframe the issue of parking with city officials, opening up a dialogue on collaborative strategies. While Sanders and other clergy were in the process of strategizing with council members, the Downtown Cluster of Churches, an ecumenical network of mainline congregations to which Sanders also belonged, was beginning to discuss how to raise the parking issue as a religious concern with city officials.

In June 2003, Rev. Sanders received an informal invitation from Marlene Jefferson to attend a special meeting. Jefferson also was one of Sanders’ former students and the Mayor’s director of operations. She was serving as the interim director of the Mayor’s Interfaith Council. Recent council meetings had been consumed with the Pressley resignation. On this occasion, however, Jefferson urged Sanders to attend a special meeting of the Interfaith Council that would focus on the parking issue.

A busy minister cannot attend four meetings a week on parking. Still, Sanders knew that the problem of parking had serious implications for congregations that were committed to staying in urban neighborhoods—not just on marathon day, or Sundays, but every day of the week. Amid urban revitalization, would the Third Street saints be able to continue their mission of experiencing holiness, having table fellowship with the poor, and mentoring kids in the Shaw neighborhood?

As vice-chair and a public minister with strong credibility, Sanders could be an important player in helping to develop the Interfaith Council during a period of transition. Yet how? “My inclination is to go to the mayor’s meeting because potentially that’s the meeting where the decisions are going to be made to make a difference,” said Sanders. “But I don’t want to disrespect my colleagues in the community who are meeting with the councilmen, which we have strategized as the proper way to try to get this done.”

How could religious leaders work with public officials to develop a forum for dialogue and collaboration on parking and other issues—issues of political and religious importance for urban revitalization?