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The Role of Christian Communities in Diminishing Poverty: The Advantages and  
Disadvantages of Inherent Characteristics of Christian Communities

A Case Study of Reverend Eugene Rivers & the Azusa Christian Community, Dorchester Massachusetts

# Washington and Lee University

In the foundational text of Christianity, the call for social justice is clear. In the United States, the Christian Church is one of the largest institutions in existence. This paper explores the advantages and disadvantages of inherent characteristics of the institutions of the Christian Church in poverty relief efforts. With analysis of Reverend Eugene Rivers' work that brought about what is referred to as the "Boston Miracle," this paper seeks to understand how Christian Churches can take advantage of inherent characteristics and how those same characteristics hinder the efforts of anti-poverty work.

### I. In Summary, the Work of Reverend Eugene F. Rivers III

During the decade of the 1990's, Boston Massachusetts experienced an unparalleled drop in crime. Behind the union of police and local ministers stood a black Pentecostal minister, Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III.

While attending Harvard, Rivers started the William J. Seymour Society with other students to arrange public lectures, to start reading programs, to build a food distribution center, to initiate marches and protests, and to work directly with inner-city youth.<sup>1</sup> Rivers often visited the impoverished Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. Once, while getting a tour from Selvin Brown, a local drug dealer, Rivers received insight that turned out to spur Rivers to action. In that conversation, Rivers asked “how the church ever lost such bright young minds as Brown's and why it continues to lose so many

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, Pamela. “Their Mission is in the Streets Young Black Professionals Join in an Urgent Urban Ministry.” The Boston Globe. 12 December 1989.

bright, promising children to the streets.”<sup>2</sup> The dealer responded, "I'm there when Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for Mama. I'm there; you're not. When he needs a new pair of gym shoes, I'm there, you're not. When he simply needs somebody to talk to, to unload what's on his mind, I'm there and you're not. I win, you lose.”<sup>1</sup> Rivers dropped out of Harvard and started the African People’s Pentecostal Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. He recruited Harvard and MIT students to do outreach in the parks, stores, and various areas of Roxbury and Dorchester.<sup>1</sup> The volunteers are motivated by a belief in the grace of the Christian God. Michelle Barnett, graduate of Harvard Law school said, "I really believe the benefits, the privileges that we've gotten are sort of luck of the draw, blessings from God, and that it is our responsibility to use those resources to help those who don't have them. For us to just go out and do our individual things would be meaningless.”<sup>2</sup> The outreach work involves visits to re-enroll in school, support for single mothers, buying school supplies, going to the movies, meal sharing, and jail visits. Additionally, most live in the community they serve.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Page, Clarence. “To Reach Troubled Young Souls, You Have to Be Where They Are.” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 28 July 1998: A9.

Rivers himself cites spiritual motivations for his work, he says, "There is one force mighty enough to break through the pain, despair and viciousness of the lives of young African-Americans in the inner city, and that is the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> He eventually moved to Dorchester where he founded the Azusa Christian Community. Rivers' work in the community included efforts in response to drug abuse, hunger and unregistered voters.<sup>4</sup>

Not limiting his work to endless symptom checking, Rivers also pursued changes in the structural causes of Boston's poverty. He says, "drugs and poverty are symptoms of a larger phenomenon."<sup>5</sup> Rivers acknowledged and harnessed the power of churches in

Boston. In 1990 he said, "There's 160 churches in Boston, do you realize that if every church simply said, 'We will monitor the activities at the four corners of our church, that is 640 street corners that will be safe in this town. And when you get safety, you get life

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<sup>3</sup> Higgins, Richard. "A Ministry Under the Gun Dorchester Pastor Links Area Churches to Combat Violence." The Boston Globe. 25 June 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Staff Writers. "9 New Bostonians a City Becomes A Community Only When People Get Involved; Here are Some Newcomers Who've Rolled up Their Sleeves." The Boston Globe. 9 Oct 1988: C26

<sup>5</sup> Gerson, Michael. "Democrats and Faith." Newsweek. 3 Jul 08

again.”<sup>6</sup> The breadth of churches in the area, Rivers argued, possessed the manpower to bring peace to neighborhoods. Rivers spearheaded an alliance between the Police Department and a group of black inner city ministers known as the Ten Point Coalition. Crime rates dropped 77 percent between 1990-1999. At the same time, racial tension was at its lowest.<sup>7</sup> Murders committed by teens and young adults plunged from 152 to 43 between 1990 and 1997. The initiative focuses on imprisoning hardened criminals. In “Operation Cease-Fire,” fifty Boston policemen and fifteen from other areas working undercover, pressure past offenders in instances of gun violence. In “Operation Night Light,” probation officers and policemen make surprise visits to young probates. The idea behind the stop-ins is that youths will perceive an involved, watchful justice system. Lastly, the “Ten-Point Coalition,” made up of 47 churches and 300 ministers, provides mentoring for young community members. Policemen and college athletes engage with youth in basketball programs, choirs, and other community activities. The idea behind the coalition is that the youth will interact with people who have grown up in another cultural community. The whole initiative is what writer Maria Elena Fernandez declares

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, Derrick Z. “Wake Up, African Americans – And Act It’s Time to Turn Disaster into a Moral, Cultural and Intellectual Renaissance.” The Boston Globe. 16 Dec 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Osborne, David. “How the Pastor Patrol Pacified Black Boston.” The Independent. 7 Mar 1999.

“the result of tough enforcement that conservatives preach and social outreach that liberals espouse. It's a mix that works.”<sup>8</sup>

Rivers also responded to the need for after-school activities. The Ella J. Baker house opened in 1995 in an old Victorian house. It offered computer training and a safe place for kids to go after school. It provides both after school and youth outreach programs. Motivated by what Rivers understood as the powerful intangibles, love and hope, Rivers intended to free the community members from traditional avenues.

Reverend Bruce H. Wall, a cohort of Rivers' stated, "Our goal was to liberate the streets.

We never said that we were going to force these kids to stop selling drugs, but to liberate

them and reach these kids with love.”<sup>9</sup> And lest such feelings be categorized as inept or

fleeting, Rivers continued his work and residency in the Dorchester area despite repeated

shootings of his home and the risk to his family such activism engendered. Far from the

characterization of Rivers that William H. Simon cites in The Community Economic

Development Movement, that “For Rivers, discipline is everything, and it depends on

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<sup>8</sup> Dickerson, Jeff. “Precedent Has Been Set Atlanta Can Follow Boston’s Lead in Saving Kids.” The Atlanta Journal. 26 August 1997. A06

<sup>9</sup> Jordan, Robert A. “Street Corner Persuasion.” The Boston Globe. 12 July 1991

faith,”<sup>10</sup> Rivers embodies the principle that interpersonal relationships, structural changes, and many other factors play an important role in poverty alleviation.

Ultimately, Rivers received national attention, and during the 1990s, he was one of the most famous preachers in America. He had the cover feature of Newsweek, "God vs. Gangs: What's the Hottest Idea in Crime Fighting? The Power of Religion." To this day, coverage of Rivers' opinions and institutions is found in newspapers and media outlets throughout the nation. A guest on the MSNBC inaugural special in 2009, Rivers

was asked to evaluate Obama's performance and vision for the country. Rivers' influence extends beyond the community in which he brought much change to the country that

acknowledges the success of his model of change, a model that harnessed the power of the institution of Christian Churches in America.

## II. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Churches as Established Institutions

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<sup>10</sup> Simon, William H. The Community Economic Development Movement. Duke University Press. Durham, 2001. p.52

In regard to poverty relief efforts, Christian Churches in American have the advantage and disadvantage of being an established institution in the American mindset.

In fact in 2001, 76.5% of adults in America identify as either Protestant or Catholic.<sup>11</sup>

Even the various political parties do not hold such a singularly large statistical identification amongst Americans. In 2001, the percentage of Americans that identified as Republicans was 29% and Democrats, 34%.<sup>12</sup> Church involvement and involvement in

politics are on par, with 60% of Americans attending religious services at least once a month<sup>13</sup> and 68% of Americans say they always or nearly always vote in national

elections.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, the previous statistics vouch for an established United States institution with participation that rivals the political system that establishes life in

American. However, the pervasiveness of Christian Churches in America can have both positives and negatives.

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<sup>11</sup> PR Newswire “Graduate Center Survey of Religion in America Complements U.S. Census.” 25 October 2001.

<sup>12</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Democrats Gain Edge in Party Identification.” 26 Jul 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Faith-Based Funding Backed, But Church-State Doubts Abound” 10 Apr 2001

<sup>14</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “The 2004 Political Landscape.” 5 Nov 2003



The power of Christian Churches as an American institution allows for alliances with other powerful organizations. Though the United States Constitution and constituency has an aversion to the interaction between Church and State institutions, with two-thirds of Americans expressing “reservations about the clergy speaking out on partisan politics or issues,” a majority (72%) point to the “care and compassion of religious workers as an important reason for supporting the concept of faith-based groups receiving government funding.”<sup>3</sup> While many are averse to the proselytization of religion and the national espousal of religious beliefs indicated by government support, common ground is found in aid to the poor. Though specific doctrine may motivate churches to take action, doctrinal agendas do not always get in the way of alliances between churches and the states. “It is a case where faith based institutions can serve secular purposes as a function of the fact that they have extraordinary numbers of volunteer resources.”<sup>15</sup> Eugene Rivers’ Ten-Point Coalition is an example of the cooperation of government institutions, the police force, and church institutions. The common goal of community reform rather than garnering disciples of Jesus Christ allowed for a powerful, effective alliance.

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<sup>15</sup> Martin, Michael. “Ministers Study Obama's Plan for Faith-Based Groups” [NPR: Tell Me More](#). 11 July 2008

Moreover, the participation in Christian Churches as established institutions provides a resource of manpower. Unlike Community Economic Development Movements, for instance, which struggle when “citizen-participation goals” are “never realized” and “ongoing involvement in the program” is limited,<sup>16</sup> churches sustain a consistent, committed base. And that base tends to get involved in civic life. Those who are heavily involved in activities at their church or house of worship are among the most likely to volunteer their time in youth programs, with the poor, with the sick, with the homeless, and in community group.<sup>3</sup> In fact:

Thirty-nine percent of those who are highly involved in religiously-based activities, reported having volunteered for a child or youth development program, such as a day care center, school or sports league, in the past month. This compares with 24% who are modestly involved in extracurricular religious activities and only 18% of those with low involvement.<sup>3</sup>

Those who engage in religious activities are motivated to also engage in anti-poverty efforts. The core base of participants within the churches offers the advantage of having a

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<sup>16</sup> Simon, William H. The Community Economic Development Model. Duke University Press. Durham, 2001. p. 14

group of people present and committed, a population disposed to answering the problem of poverty.

Alternatively, the established nature of Churches can be a disadvantage as the institutions become complacent to community needs. For the most part, those who comprise Church institutions are members of the community in which the Church is located. By default, impoverished communities make up churches of impoverished peoples. Activism in the church therefore largely depends on a transformative message or leadership of dynamic outsiders. The principle is typified in Eugene Rivers, a Harvard-educated, socially intelligent, driven, and talented leader. Although, as the statistics previously cited state, the message received by church participants seem to translate into a measurable difference in anti-poverty efforts. Admittedly, such efforts can be described more as band-aids than actual foundational changes. Ideally, reform of people leads to reform of institutions that contribute to poverty. Ultimately, the socio-economic background of church members tends to be a disadvantage to the local institutions.

Lastly, the institutional aspect of Churches as establishments of spiritual purpose do not necessarily portend that its mission will be to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned.<sup>17</sup> And, even if they do, as stated above, such efforts may not lead to the structural changes necessary to bring about pervasive change.

### III. The Values and Disadvantages of Churches as Intentional Institutions

Fostering church community is at the base of the Christian mission. In fact,

Robert Putnam, a political scientist and professor at Harvard University, states, “the biggest task of pastors is to build connections.”<sup>18</sup> Churches hold brunches after services, Pastors are trained on how to reach out to members of the church, trips to water parks are planned, and the Gospel calls for neighborly care and concern. Putnam argues, “In communities where people are connected, the schools work better, the crime rate is

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<sup>17</sup>Matthew 25:37 New International Version

<sup>18</sup> Buchanan, John M. “Hanging Out.” Christian Century. Vol. 121 Issue 3 p.3. 10 February 2004

lower, the economic growth rate is higher. The power of social networks is a remarkable discovery of social science over the past decade or two.”<sup>19</sup> What is referred to as social capital, “the tangible and intangible benefits of community involvement,”<sup>1</sup> is an indispensable tool of the Christian Churches.

The advantage of the inherent characteristic of intentionality in personal relationships for poverty relief efforts is undeniable. Rivers’ work is highly centered upon interpersonal relationships. He lives in the same community as the people he serves.

Washington and Lee University

The church makes an expressive effort in “walking the hoods, engaging the gangs,

pulling kids out. Instead of bickering with police, the ministers vowed to work with

them, identifying the hardest cases.”<sup>20</sup> Rivers emphasizes the importance of constant

physical presence and interaction, a heavy investment in relationships. Rivers sees his

constituency as being “10,000 poor black kids whose interests and needs are being

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<sup>19</sup> Wood, David. “Let’s Meet.” *The Christian Century*. 10 Feb 2004, pp. 24-29

<sup>20</sup> Kalb, John Leland Claudia. “Saviour of the Streets: Fighting Crime with Religion in Boston, Massachusetts” *Newsweek*. 1 June 1998, 20.

inadequately served in the city, who go largely to our public schools and need more effective advocacy.”<sup>21</sup> Powerful advocacy involves a huge amount of time and investment of people. That kind intentional work with people springs easily from the structures within Christian Churches that are in place to build community.

Yet, at the same time, intentional relationship building requires a huge sacrifice, one usually found in only church leadership or exceptional individuals. The men and women working with Rivers give their lives to the Baker House. Rivers comments:

## Washington and Lee University

Bob Moses and SNCC, Fred Hampton in Chicago, these folk laid their lives down. My understanding is that those acts of heroism were very Christian acts, in the tradition of the martyrs. I live in Dorchester and have weathered what we've weathered because that's my understanding of radical discipleship. There is no crown without the cross. Most folk aren't ready to hear that.<sup>22</sup>

The commitment is radical and calls for a large amount of time and energy. According to Rivers, the Azusa Christian Community Center has “a core of 20 who can get more done

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<sup>21</sup> Walker, Adrian. “Rev. Eugene Rivers: Like Him...Like Him Not.” The Boston Globe. [Boston] 5 July 1998: E3

<sup>22</sup> James, Royson. “What Rivers Got Wrong; Two Sides Not as Far Apart as they Look” The Toronto Star. 19 Jan 2006: B1

on the ground than a church of 20,000. The vast majority live in the neighborhoods, they are committed to 70- and 80-hour weeks in the neighborhoods as professors of political science, the neurosciences, math educators.”<sup>4</sup> The commitment to live in dangerous neighborhoods and work for an immense amount of hours per week that intentional community building efforts entail is out of the reach or feasibility for the majority of church members.

#### IV. The Values and Disadvantages of Churches’ Sustainable Motivations

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Though different Christian denominations may emphasize differing aspects of the Gospel, the central idea that Individuals within Faith-Based movements are motivated by what they perceive as a call and command from God to care for the physical needs of the poor. The God of Christianity is called “the refuge of the poor,”<sup>23</sup> a God who commands, “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.”<sup>24</sup> The Christian

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<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 25:4 New International Version

<sup>24</sup> Zechariah 7:10, New International Version

Savior commands a man, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven,”<sup>25</sup> he commands his disciples, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.”<sup>26</sup> The Gospel proclaims that through Jesus’ sacrifice, those with faith in Jesus Christ receive the grace to go beyond their own selfishness and obtain the ability to answer that need out of altruistic motivations. Adherents to the Christian faith receive a strong call and motivation to engage in anti-poverty efforts.

Fortunately, this call has many benefits. Numerous movements for both structural and short-term responses to poverty have been supported by religious faith. For example:

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), played an active role in public, nonviolent resistance to segregation, disfranchisement, poverty, and later the Vietnam War. In addition, many grassroots, ordinary civil rights and political leaders and activists, symbolized by the Mississippi ex-sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer, were motivated by their religious faith, as were people in the older human rights groups, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mark 10:21, New International Version

<sup>26</sup> Luke 14:13, New International Version

<sup>27</sup> Laderman, Gary; Leon, Luis. *Religion and American Cultures*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003. *History Reference Online*. ABC-CLIO. 26 Apr 2009 <<http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/?bookid=9781576078549&loc=12&format=page>>.



The religious faith produced sustained, effective movements. Rather than being motivated by high pay, prestige, academic study, superficial sympathies, or other self-derived motivations, Christian Churches teach a care that finds its source in eternal love and justice. Secular philosophies of poverty relief and the reason why people should engage in such efforts do not accommodate Christian categories, as a reporter argues, “If Rivers’ mishmash of political views doesn’t fit neatly into any ideological container, that because it’s not an ideology. It’s a theology – or, more specifically, Pentecostalism.”<sup>28</sup>

Rivers’ Christian denomination is described as:

Pentecostalism has become among the most vibrant and influential branches of the Christian faith in the nation and around the world. Although it is composed of adherents from countless denominations and thrives in many different cultures, the distinguishing characteristic of the movement is its commitment to an additional experience following personal salvation called the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. This event is often accompanied by the practice of “speaking in tongues” (also referred to as *glossolalia*). The Pentecostal movement is relatively young. During the late nineteenth century, it emerged as men and women with roots in many different traditions began to separate from their mainstream Protestant brothers and sisters.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Foer, Franklin. “The Problem with Black America’s Best Hope: Right Reverend?” The New Republic. 7 May 2001, 17-20.

<sup>29</sup> Laderman, Gary. *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003. *History Reference Online*. ABC-CLIO. 26 Apr. 2009 <<http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/?bookid=9781576078549&loc=217&format=entry>>.

As the encyclopedia notes, Pentacostalists consist of a number of denominations. The central message of the gospel, as outlined above, motivate Rivers' work. Rivers makes the conservative call for morals and the liberal call for compassion, as the gospel itself does. The strength and sustainability of faith as the impetus for anti-poverty efforts within Christian Churches proves to be beneficial, arming those who rise to the call. The personal relationships and time commitment required of bringing about change finds sufficient resources in faith.

However, the vigorous motivations can also become obstacles to anti-poverty movements. A reporter aptly sets out the issue as follows:

For example, churches are used for penitence and repentance. Rivers' call to black men who are not adequately caring for their families to repent for their sins will find resonance in the church, so keep it there and in the outreach by the faith community. Meanwhile, jointly push for the common cause - an end to the violence.<sup>30</sup>

When the focus is largely on conversion and repentance, perceived spiritual needs, rather than physical needs, many people are turned off or unwilling to provide aid. Individually, Rivers sees his, "relationship with Boston is as a pastor," with the express goal to, "to

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<sup>30</sup> James, Royson. "What Rivers Got Wrong; Two Sides Not as Far Apart as they Look" The Toronto Star. 19 Jan 2006: B1

take my pulpit into the street. I'm not going to do it with cameras and strobe lights.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, sixty percent of Americans “express concerns that religious groups would proselytize among recipients of social services.”<sup>32</sup> The faith-based motivation behind serving the poor may be the same motivation that exploits the need of the poor in order to force faith, causing the motivations to be a disadvantage to anti-poverty relief. Although, many are aware of the delicate balance: “In the early days, Rivers pushed religion harder on the kids, but found that it intimidated-and turned off-many of them. So now he keeps preaching to a minimum. But the men and women who are giving their lives to Baker House still see faith at the heart of their mission.”<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the balance is hard to pin down and can easily be tipped in the wrong direction.

## V. In Conclusion

Although Christian Churches comprise a formidable United States institution, for the most part they fail to effectively answer the call of social justice. Many of the

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<sup>31</sup>McGrory, Brian. “The Streets are Calling.” The Boston Globe. 27 March 2007: B1

<sup>32</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Faith-Based Funding Backed, But Church-State Doubts Abound” 10 Apr 2001

<sup>33</sup> Kalb, John Leland Claudia. “Saviour of the Streets: Fighting Crime with Religion in Boston, Massachusetts” Newsweek. 1 June 1998, 20.

inherent characteristics that exist within Christian Churches prove to be a great advantage that is not utilized. The need for a dynamic leader and response to a radical sacrifice proves to be an obstacle in making change in the structure perpetuating poverty in the United States. While many would advocate funding faith-based organizations as a whole on the bases of the perceived advantage of the inherent characteristics of the organizations, it appears as if a case-by-case effectively standard should be applied and funds directed to those organizations that best take advantage of the institutionalism of the Church.

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