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**FAITH, PRACTICE AND TRANSFORMATION:
A THEORY-BASED EVALUATION OF FAITH-BASED TEEN PROGRAMS**

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INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the efficacy of faith-based programs for dealing with society's most intransigent social problems. Even less is known about the importance of the faith component of these programs. Research has been done on the effects of faith-based programs on a number of outcome factors (Johnson et al., 2002). Most research, however, focuses on what Johnson et al. call organic religion, showing how people living in religious systems and structures are affected by their religions. Intentional religion is found in programs that aim to bring religion and faith into individuals' lives with the aim of changing those lives. Johnson's report, surveying previous research, suggests that organic religion generally has a statistically significant association in the expected directions with criminal behavior, teenage pregnancy, and achievement while little is known about the effects of intentional religion. Other research on teen pregnancy, crime, and drug use, shows connections among beliefs and behavior, and among religious involvement and life practices. Little information, however, exists on the impact of intentional programs.

This paper employs a theory-based evaluation (Suchman 1967, Weiss 1972, Sayer 1992) of four programs for inner city minority youth. We, specifically, examine the involvements of minority females. Theory-based evaluation seeks to determine whether evidence can be found indicating that the mechanisms that a theory posits to be important in a program actually exist. Specifically, we examine whether an adolescent female's faith commitment and religious understanding affects how she thinks either about moral issues and/or life plans. In a theory based evaluation it is not possible to assess how strong their effects may be. If the hypothesized mechanism does not appear to be operating, however, this is potentially strong evidence against the program's efficacy.

Our data do not allow us to assess whether religion either directly affects behavior or whether it indirectly affects their behavior through their moral perspective or life plans. Other research, however, does support the claim that moral perspective and life plans do affect behavior (Nonnemaker et al 2002, Johnson 2002), even if not perfectly.

Our data is based on both interviews and participant observations. Youth were interviewed from four different programs. The authors were also participant observers in three of the four programs, and had discussions with youth leaders; the exception was Discover Yourself.¹ One of us (Reynolds) was

¹ Names have been changed for both the programs and individual girls to protect privacy and maintain integrity of the research

involved in 1999-2002 with interviewing a number of teen girls. For each program studied, we have information from between 4 and 5 girls. All youth were African-American, and between 12-20 years of age; younger and older girls were interviewed from each program. For one of the programs (Summer of Hope) we rely mostly on previous research from interviewed teens. Karyn Lacy (1997) conducted interviews of these youth and did participant observations². Below are descriptions of the programs.

Boston Project. This program is part of the community service umbrella organization at a local university; enrichment programs are run during the term and full-time in the summer. Students come from housing project areas in Dorchester. The program is totally secular. While the girls are all generally familiar with the Bible, only one attends church. They have opportunities to attend different Bible programs, and all seem to have some religious practices.

Summer of Hope. This faith-based program was launched by Boston's Ten Point Coalition and ran for three summers. An initial goal of the program was to use religion as a mechanism for helping high school students understand their lives. Optional prayer times as well as periodic religious discussions occurred. Youth were often placed at church sites to do work, and the directors were religious leaders. There were also weekly spiritual sessions, which appear to have used lecture-style teaching. This is a program with a religious environment, supportive of religious belief and practice, but not directly religious.

Discover Yourself. This faith-based program challenged youth to think about the role of faith in their lives. It involved girls who were at risk for pregnancy, violence, drug use, or court involvement. According to both the director and the girls, it was not a "religious" program. The youth spent time writing and thinking about their lives, reading about the lives of others, having speakers from the community speak/meet with them, and going on trips. The girls typically built strong relationships with the women leaders. The program encouraged participants to think about the relationship between their faith commitments and religious understanding and their moral values and life planning, without any of its own religious pedagogy or practices.

Connecting Youth. The final faith-based program, located in Washington, D.C., has been in existence for 15 years. Run through an evangelical church, the program focused on many of the same goals as the other programs – community service, breaking of class barriers, and involving faith in personal decisions. Less than half were involved with the church initially.³ Faith and prayer were crucial elements; direct teaching on sexual activity also existed. An important difference between this program and the other three is the mixed ethnic and social class composition of this group (Black and White,

² Because the information in the next chapter on the girls' beliefs from Summer of Hope is from Lacy's research, it is not cited specifically each time.

³ Only Tina from our sample was originally active in the church because of her family

Lower and Middle class).

We found that in three of the four programs, there are only weak or moderate connections between the individuals' religious understandings and faith commitments and their moral values and life plans. A moderate connection existed in Discover Yourself, where participants were encouraged to make connections between their faith commitment and their behavior. A stronger connection was found in Connecting Youth, where connections were encouraged, religious understanding was emphasized, and religious practices established.

However, we also found that it was not the lack of faith commitment of belief that was the key issue, but rather, the inability to make a connection between their faith, religious understanding and practices, and their moral values and life choices. Strong degrees of faith were present among all the girls interviewed.

Our findings redefine the debate on faith-based programs in contradictory ways. On the one hand, our limited analyses suggest that only the most fully faith-infused programs are likely to be successful in enhancing the effect of religion on individuals' lives. On the other hand, our research suggests that such programs need not focus on proselytizing and the instillation of belief. For the girls in this study at least, a strong degree of faith and belief are already present. The issue, then, is helping these girls connect their faith to their moral values and life plans.

ANALYSIS

The Religious Lives of Black Adolescent Girls

*Basic Beliefs*⁴. Regardless of the programs in which they are involved, religion was present in the lives of all of the girls. All of them believe in God, openly profess this faith, and believe God is active in their lives. They have little doubt that God exists, even though they have a lot of questions about God; they most often view him as a protector, provider, or judge.

They "believe in God 100%" as one asserted. They know God is out there, and even as they are not sure which religion is true, they know God is real. These girls say of God that He is "looking out for me," and He "helps us with everything." They thank God for the simple things like waking up, for food, for keeping them safe. One girl admitted that "if it was not for God I would not have been here." The girls in Discover Yourself seem to have more questions about religion, but have more developed opinions and descriptions of the God they believe in.

The girls in Connecting Youth have the same belief in God as the other girls, although they seem to equate that belief with Christianity and the Bible. In asking about their belief in God, they responded with "Yes, I believe in the Word of God." or "I believe in Jesus." They also mention their relationship

⁴ Some information was missing for those involved with the Summer of Hope program.

with this God more. One girl stated: “I have a relationship with Jesus... I think of people – they need Jesus – when I see them doing bad things too.”

Religious Knowledge and Understanding. With respect to deeper beliefs, the girls have a hard time understanding or expressing what they believe, and, in general, have a weak understanding of Christian doctrine. The girls would often respond “I don’t know” in the middle of trying to explain theology, although most all of them expressed an interest to know more, even asking questions of us during the interviews.

Those in the non faith-based program asked the most questions. They are informed through such things as a commercial at a teen center, where one describes “God being killed on a cross. Because he wanted to do good things and they didn’t want him to.” They mention Bible studies as being good, and one girl says of the Bible that “It tells you about God and how to respect him and your family. Do what’s right for your family and don’t be a pain and God will love you for who you are.” But another seemed to represent another set of opinions, saying that “Some of the stuff in it is true, some I don’t understand.”

Girls in the Summer of Hope program and Discover Yourself have a little more religious knowledge, most likely from the religious natures of their program and possible religious backgrounds. They expect their peers to know about the Bible. Lacy (1997) in her assessment of the program Summer of Hope finds that the teens knew their religious teaching quite well, but did not understand as well how to apply it to their lives. Those in Discover Yourself are similar – they describe Jesus as a savior, claiming that He “does good and He died for us.” But more unique to Discover Yourself is the combination of traditional religion with non- traditional views. One says she “don’t know what to believe really,” and that the church cannot really tell her about God. Another says the Bible has “a lot of contradictions ...but I can’t pick out the contradictions exactly... I don’t have a problem with believing it though.”

In the Connecting Youth program, youth have strong connections to the beliefs of the church and a more concrete understanding of God, although many come from non-religious homes. They still ask basic questions about theology, like the question of creation, but they have a solid understanding of Christianity. One explained that “He died for me and He sent his only Son to help me not get punished for the sins I committed.” Another older girl explains the basics of salvation, the reasons she still sins, and why Christians should not have sex; she is involved with talking with other younger youth about decisions she has made. Another girl, in speaking about church, appreciates most understanding the application of faith: “One Sunday morning we were talking about hunger. Those are everyday issues. Put it into teaching.”

Prayer and Religious Practices. The girls in all four programs are similar in that they all believe in their ability to communicate with God through prayer; they pray because they sense that God is there and hears and answers them. Most do not equate prayer with religious activity, but see it as a normal

aspect of life. With the exception of the secular program, some girls come from more religious families and church exposure while others do not. And with the same exception, each program stresses building important relationships with a sort of spiritual mentor.

Most all of the girls discuss prayer as a way to lift up their family and their own safety. Most girls pray daily. Their prayer lives range to more basic in Boston Project to more involved with Connecting Youth. One girl from the secular program says she prays regularly, although God “just says hi.” Another girl prays “just that I am able to take care of my son and see another day.” They pray for help getting through the day, and for “everything good and bad.”

While girls from all four programs made comments like those above, the girls in Discover Yourself often talk about other prayers – prayers for guidance, for help in making decisions. And those in Connecting Youth pray more regularly, in groups, and talk about the reasons they pray. One girl said that “Sometimes I pray for events coming up or if there is something wrong in my life or some else’s life... I pray ‘cause praying for them lets God know what I think about and my opinion on it and lets him know what I need help with...”

In regards to other religious practices, most of the girls in the programs who go to church seem to go due to a family requirement or personal obligation. This is especially true for the secular program and Summer of Hope. Those in Discover Yourself seem to rarely go, unless it is something that is important to them. In the two faith-based programs, Summer of Hope and Discover Yourself, there is cynicism towards organized religion. They discuss the hypocrisy that exists among people in the church. One girl in Discover Yourself stated that “Home is my church and I pray to my God and for my household,” although she attends on the ‘Lord’s Days.’

The religious involvement of those in Connecting Youth is different than that of the other girls; they come to church frequently, often taking public transportation or walking. While they still spot the hypocrisy, they come to church frequently, attending church on the weekends and programs during the week; all of the girls belong to a Bible Study and seem to be part of the youth community and larger church community. They participate in other events, such as sexual purity pledges, retreats, fasting, or mission projects.

Moral Values and Life Plans

Moral Values. Interviews with the girls involved discussions of right and wrong behavior, which appear to be self-defining to them. Yet there is some variation in how the girls think about their own personal morality. Girls in both the secular program and Summer of Hope seem to define morality primarily in relation with other people or criminal activity. One of the more reticent girls listed “Don’t hit, swear, don’t hit people, don’t fight them. That’s all I think.” Bad people, according to one, are “parents

who give kids up, do drugs, don't care about self, don't have a life." Drug use and stealing are bad. For some, it is the "bad people" who need to be in church. Those in Summer of Hope accept the teachings of the church as valid in general, and they have problems with interns and adults who do not follow these. Alcohol does not seem to be a problem, and one girl in Summer of Hope mentions liquor stores as a good thing. Their morality seems to be influenced partially by the teachings and philosophy of the church, although not often in regards to teenage sexuality. Many plan to have children without being married. In the secular programs, all girls desire boyfriends, one claiming it impossible to be single for a month.

Those in Discover Yourself, much like the other two groups, are influenced by religion. Girls often arrive at their values through their own understanding. They do believe that Christians are called to high moral standards, even if they do not identify themselves as such. The program does appear to have affected their actual behavior however – one girl receives better grades, and gets in less trouble for "talking back, being too loud, disrupting the class, not doing work." Another girl discussed the "filthy mouth" she had before starting the program, and the change in her dress. In accordance with the Bible, one stated a belief in treating other equally, and another cited the 10 commandments as good rules to live by. With regards to teenage sexuality, none mentioned this topic, and several discussed the idea of children outside of marriage, and possibly even before graduating.

Girls in Connecting Youth appear to have a slightly stronger link between their religious beliefs and moral choices, and definitions of moral behavior deal more directly with their personal decisions. They list the same issues as the girls in the other programs. Among the things they believe as wrong are typical: stealing, murder, killing, lying, gossiping. Specific religious-related morals come up in the area of sexuality, which they all discuss. Olivia has spoken in testimonies before other youth about her choice to remain sexually pure and all that entails (dress, decisions for social interaction). Another girl in the program, who was not interviewed, after admitting sexual involvement, decided to change her behavior and meets regularly with a youth worker. For some it is a desire to love God that propels them to do right – for others, it is because God is a judge and they must do the right things.

Identity. The girls acknowledge that they are at-risk in many ways – many have been referred to as ghetto children, and some even take these names on proudly as their own, while others express frustration with such expressions. The idea that their identity is at-risk is quite different for the girls in the church program. They conceive of their identity as more connected with their morality, which is important in understanding their hopes and life plans.

In the secular program, one girl had the Project Born epithet decorating her personal items; most seemed to have this at-risk identity. Religious identities seemed nonexistent. The girls from Summer of Hope also do not have a religious identity, but rather see their identity as tied with "people who live around here." Lacy (1997) suggests that the teens seem to have somewhat limited understanding of what

it means to be African-American, and allow it to place limits on them. Indicative of this attitude, one student commented “White culture is like, more rich, it has more roots in it.”

Several of the girls in Discover Yourself have a spiritual identity, although they also hesitate to see themselves as religious. One explained that she was religious within herself “100%.” Another girl, who hadn’t been to church in years, still responded “I’m Catholic.” Most of the girls identified as Christians. While they may not see these ideas as connected to religiosity, it seems they have a religious identity, albeit non-traditional one.

The girls in Connecting Youth have a religious identity, based within the community. One teen has ‘God’s lil Child’ on her bags. One of the older girls stopped using make-up during Lent one season to get a better sense of belonging to God. Yet another in describing her identity said, “I’m a Christian... Jesus dies for me.” She says she “gave [her] life to Christ.” One girl, seeing herself as very religious, claims that her values are her own, shaped by her family and herself, and not dictated by the church. This sentiment – that their values belong to them – was shared by most of the girls.

Life Plans. For many, religion and faith do not appear to significantly affect their thinking about marriage, family, sexuality, and future career plans. Within all of the groups, the older girls have more sophisticated visions regarding their futures.

The goals of girls in the secular program are limited. A few mention college, “to learn more and do more,” to “find a job... to know more when you get the job.” The oldest girl in the program, who already started college, answered that her goal is to “write music. Doesn’t matter.” Still another who wanted to go to Harvard weeks earlier, now wants to be a “construction worker like my grandmother because they make a lot of money.” Relationally, they all mention that kids are something they want, even above career goals, with a few mentioning a “nice boyfriend,” and most not even thinking of marriage.

The youth in Summer of Hope appear similar in some ways. It is difficult for them to see how religion might change their own lives. One girl, in talking about how life choices could be different for younger blacks in their community (concerning food choices), commented, “No. No because it’s too late for them. You have to start early teaching them that. The white people start early.” Their identity – where they already are, or how they see themselves – is not malleable. At the same time, there is a hope for opportunities that may “come out of nowhere.”

In Discover Yourself, there is a direct emphasis on thinking about the future. These girls seem to be able to express their visions for their lives. One girl detailed her reasons for wanting to become a medical biller (as well as the process) because of her affinity for computers and the respectable pay rate with years of service. Another wants to study drama in college to be an actress, while yet another talks about going to beauty school with the hope of opening her own salon. They also have a stronger sense of short-term goals, as one talks about hoping to be a leader in the program. Regarding the family, most

mention children, although they also mention the need to be financially stable, and they seem to hope for marriage if possible.

Finally those in Connecting Youth have slightly different ideas of their futures. Most are younger than those in the Discover Yourself program, but still have detailed goals. Those in junior high take part in selecting their middle schools based on things such as an entrepreneurial focus, sign language courses, or a good art program. One of the girls with a lesser sense of vision this year made a commitment to earn better grades, and her report card went from Fs to As, Bs, and Cs. As these girls discuss things like family, most mention a husband, and most discuss plans to stay sexually pure as well. All of those interviewed have signed pledges accordingly. Because of the program, and maybe not their own initiative, they have plans to follow through with some of the plans they have.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper we have carried out what is known as a theory based evaluation of three different faith-based programs. Specifically, we have examined the degree to which, for adolescent girls in these programs, there is a connection between their faith commitment and religious understandings and practices with their moral values and life plans. We found that girls in all of the four programs have strong beliefs: their belief in God is virtually universal. However, the girls seem to find it difficult to connect the religious dimension of their life to their moral values or life plans. In two of the programs, we found little or no evidence that girls were able to connect these different domains. In Discover Yourself, a program that focused on the relationship between beliefs and morals values and life plans, we found that girls were at least to a moderate degree able to make the connection. In Connecting Youth, a program that emphasized the relation between religion and other aspects of life, we found girls were most successful in connecting the religious domain to other domains in their life.

Our findings, if they can be generalized to other contexts, have important implications for faith-based programs. While we do not see a need for programs to focus on instilling beliefs, our research does suggest that it is faith-based programs with explicit religious content that are likely to be effective in helping individuals use their religious identity and beliefs to connect to the rest of their lives. In our study, it was programs that aided in religious understanding, teaching, and establishing practices that were effective in connecting faith with moral values and life choices.

We argue that faith-based programs, to use their potential, should be more faith-infused. We list three policy suggestions, described in greater length in the full article. The first need is the need to increase the girls' understanding. Teaching, Bible studies, and discussion are crucial. A second need is for the practice of community, encouraging the girls in faith and linking them with important relationships and in a faith community. Finally, there is a need to practice spirituality. This involves involving them in more religious practices, including prayer, worship, service, and study.

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