Can the Church Save African American Families?

Robert M. Franklin

According to the developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, healthy and fulfilled adults all have an important characteristic in common, they work to ensure that the world will be a better place for all of our children. They make sacrifices to nurture and guide the next generation. He labeled such individuals "generative" men and women.

Erikson’s words came to mind while reflecting on the recent death of former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson. Jackson was the product of a relatively comfortable family, received an elite education, and moved in high-powered financial and political circles. But, instead of ignoring the plight of less-privileged people, he took action on their behalf.

Unfortunately, Jackson's devotion was more the exception than the rule. Too many well-known African American public intellectuals, civil rights leaders and media personalities have done little to jump-start the internal conversation that African Americans should be having about the future of black families. For a fitting legacy to Jackson and other selfless leaders, I nominate African American congregations and their leaders to be the coordinators and catalysts for an ongoing conversation – and resulting actions – that address this troubling issue.

The statistics beg action:

Seventy percent of African American children are born to unmarried mothers. At least 80 percent of all African American children can now expect to spend at least a significant part of their childhood years living apart from their fathers. The number of African American youths living in extreme poverty is at its highest level in over two decades.

Calling upon the Church

The 70,000 black churches and mosques in the United States possess a long list of assets necessary for sponsoring a series of conversations: meeting space, talented leaders, armies of potential volunteers, track records of service and effectiveness, community credibility and trust, financial assets, and the moral
authority to instruct, admonish, and empathetically guide people in regard to that which is right and wrong, good and bad, blameworthy and praiseworthy.

The appeal to African American congregations resonates with something Columbia University’s esteemed economist Ronald B. Mincy said to me recently: "I don't believe the marriage and fatherhood agenda will go very far without a religious foundation. The black community expects that moralizing will have religious roots. But, the failure of the black church to get out front and speak up hampers the efforts of other professionals who wish to help black kids."

Do Not Disturb: Village Dialogue in Progress

How would such a conversation begin?

Congregations need training and user-friendly materials to inform their perspectives on the complex issues of marriage and family-formation in contemporary society. The village dialogue will cover material that is emotionally charged, intellectually demanding, and theologically complex. This work will demand study and the discipline of listening carefully.

Congregations will need a curriculum or discussion materials in order to focus the dialogue and ensure that it is properly informed. I suggest a version of the 1998 Morehouse report titled "Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America," with expanded analysis of religious and moral dimensions of sexuality, marriage, parenting, and childhood.

Congregations should consider using a collaborative leadership model and co-sponsor community-based dialogues. The burdens of such community service could and should be shared by many resource people.

Congregations should take seriously the opportunity for healing the community and do everything possible to practice an ethic of hospitality, patience, and reconciliation. They must restrain themselves in love not to simply re-impose traditional stigmas or moral judgments on those who have experienced moral failure of various sorts. A great deal of healing could come from church leaders and members courageously admitting their own shortcomings and failures in this arena of life.

Finally, congregations would benefit from role models who demonstrate how and why the dialogue is important and valuable. Media personalities, sports stars, Hollywood glitterati and artists could dramatize and celebrate the process of having a conversation about difficult topics. For example, during the Million Man March in October 1995, a great number of such "stars" were present to lend credibility to the ongoing work of "atonement" that was the selected focus of the day. Their blessing helped to inspire local "stars" and grassroots leaders to sustain the good work initiated in the mass meeting.
I recommend that discussion, preparation, and planning start now to prepare for a series of conversations that might begin within 18 months. I recommend further that either Black History Month or the season of Lent be employed as a symbolically appropriate time to engage the conversation over a several week period. Congregations could organize and localize the conversation to reflect their unique histories and circumstances. Organized philanthropy could be called upon to assist in supporting this critical process.

By leading this conversation, the black church has the opportunity to generate the enlightenment necessary to change the status quo – and begin the hard work of saving the African American family.

I believe there are sufficient resources within and outside the African American community to reverse the current trend of declining marriage, rising divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births. If the most respected and influential leaders of the most powerful institution in the black community can be persuaded that this is God's work for this time and place, miracles can happen. Let us see if they will heed the call.

Robert M. Franklin is a Senior Fellow, Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion, & Presidential Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.