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Reflective-Generative Practice

A Framework for Congregation-Based Social Services

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Abstract

Despite emerging interest in congregations as social service providers in communities across the U.S., recent studies have offered troubling critiques of congregation-based social services, namely that they exhibit limited participation from community members and consist largely of short-term programs. In response to these critiques, this paper will suggest Paul R. Dokecki's framework for reflective-generative practice as particularly applicable to congregation-based services. Following important ethical considerations for professional practice and congregation-based services, this paper discusses features of reflective-generative practice related to increased community participation and temporal-spatial generativity in congregation-based services.

Introduction

[1] In the wake of President Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, there has been an emerging interest in the role of congregations¹ as social services providers in their communities. More specifically, there has been interest in and speculation about the possibility that congregations might replace, or at the very least supplement, secular community social service providers. Much of this speculation, and much of the political rhetoric surrounding faith-based community initiatives, rests on assumptions about

¹ Chaves (2004) rightly points out that many different religions, in the American religious landscape, take on the "congregation" model of organization and practice. Thus, the term "congregation" can be used to refer to Christian communities, as well as Jewish communities, Muslim communities, etc.

the quantity and quality of the social services provided by congregations – namely, that congregations are intensely involved in social services provision and offer a more “holistic” brand of social services (Chaves 2004). Previous research in this area has thus sought to identify the types of services provided by congregations (Saxon-Harrold, Wiener, McCormack, and Weber, 2000; Chaves and Tsitsos, 2001; Cnaan, Sinha, and McGrew, 2004; Unruh, 2004), the types of congregations more likely to provide these different services (Brown; Stewart-Thomas; Tsitsos), and the actual effectiveness of these services (Chaves 2004; Cnaan and Boddie; Wuthnow, 2004).

[2] Despite popular rhetoric about the effectiveness of congregation-based social services, several prominent studies have presented evidence that the actual social service activities of congregations are quite limited in scope and effectiveness. Chaves (2004) found, for example, that the bulk of social services provided by American congregations are carried out by a limited number of volunteers, focus on a defined set of tasks that address only immediate needs, and rarely involve anything more than short-term, fleeting contact between congregation members and service recipients. Similarly, Wuthnow (2004) finds that, while many congregations are indeed involved in at least some degree of social services provision, the services provided by congregations are more restricted than commonly assumed. He further concludes that congregations function more as gateways to participation in other social service organizations than as the actual grounds for social services. While there are limitations and exceptions to these findings – Chaves (2007) admittedly overlooks more informal services offered by many congregations, and these findings do not invalidate the community-engaged, long-term focused social services provision clearly exemplified by many congregations across the U.S. – they invite further reflection on how congregations might reevaluate their role within their surrounding communities and on how they might go about providing valuable and much-needed social services to these communities.

[3] My aim in this paper is to put forth such a reflection, and to explore several ways in which congregation-based social services might be refocused in response to Chaves’ and Wuthnow’s (2004) critiques. More specifically, this discussion is grounded in Paul R. Dokecki’s ethical and methodological considerations for the caring professions in *The Tragic-Comic Professional*. My central thesis is that Dokecki’s framework for reflective-generative practice should be considered as a framework for community-engaged, long-term congregation-based social services provision, particularly as this framework directly addresses the above-noted tendencies in congregation-based social services to create social distance between congregation members and service recipients and to offer only short-term or immediate services. I argue that reflective practices invite increased participation from and partnership with service recipients, and that generative practices compliment these partnerships by moving services from a short-term focus to a more developmental, longer-term focus. It is important to note that the effectiveness of this particular framework at the congregational level is not yet empirically established, and that it is not the intent of this paper to assume such effectiveness. Rather, this paper represents a preliminary discussion of a set of promising avenues for services provision. It is my hope that this discussion will lead to further exploration into congregation-based social services and a more diversified conversation thereof.

Values and Exclusions

[4] Lest my discussion herein unintentionally invalidates the various important community engagement and service provision efforts of congregations across the U.S., it is critical to note at the outset that congregations should not be disparaged for offering short-term, immediate-need services and/or services that entail limited community member contact and engagement. Indeed, the provision of short-term services – food pantries, clothing provision, medical transportation – are vitally important to the individuals who receive those services, as well as to the religious foundations out of which those services are offered (many Christian readers and service-providers will recall injunctions in scriptural passages such as Matthew 25, to cite one example, and the community outreach implications thereof). Furthermore, the recommendations for congregation-based social services put forth in this paper will be more appropriate for certain congregational settings than for others. The inclination and ability to carry out various types of social services will vary from congregation to congregation. Studies have shown, for example, that congregational engagement in community services has been mediated by such factors as the size of the congregation's membership, congregation operating budget, staffing and physical space requirements, and theological commitments (Cnaan, Sinha, and McGrew; Wuthnow, 2004). Therefore, this discussion proceeds in recognition that there is no single “best type” of service a congregation may provide, that value judgments are best left to those who directly seek out and utilize those services, and that the type and degree of congregational services vary considerably and may be dictated by factors beyond the immediate control of a congregation. Still, the complexities and variations of congregational activity do not close off consideration and discussion of promising pathways to effective services provision, particularly in response to more troubling critiques of congregation-based services.

[5] My discussion in this paper, and the reflective-generative framework put forth by Dokecki, are rooted in the discipline of community psychology, which suggests specific values and modes of community examination and engagement. Most relevant for the present discussion, community psychologists generally value participatory community research and action in which community members, the direct recipients of community intervention, have a voice in the shaping and implementation of that intervention (Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker; Christens and Perkins). This value clearly undergirds my slant toward reflexivity and my insistence that congregations, in providing services to their surrounding communities, involve community members in the shaping and provision of those services. Furthermore, community psychologists traditionally adopt a social-ecological approach to research and intervention, an approach that seeks to locate individual and community issues within a complex web of social processes and structures ranging from individual-level processes to larger institutional structures (Bronfenbrenner; Lounsbury and Mitchell; Schensul and Trickett). This approach guides much of my understanding of generativity and the suggestion that congregations develop a more systemic, spatial-temporal awareness in services provision. These values, while not without their own detractors and viable alternatives, should orient the reader to some of the assumptions directing my discussion.

[6] Several substantive limitations to the present discussion should be briefly noted. First, this paper represents a cursory exploration and application of Dokecki's reflective-generative

framework; it is not within the scope of this paper to give a full exposition of his application of this framework. For the sake of expediency, I focus on the elements in Dokecki's work that are of immediate interest, namely his compelling argument for the complementarity of reflexivity and generativity in the caring professions. Second, the reader may observe that transposing values and practices focused at the individual level to the organizational/congregational level leaves unexamined a number of fundamental differences between individual behavior and organizational behavior, such that what is effective practice at the level of the individual may not necessarily be effective practice at the level of the organization. Despite this legitimate concern, I contend that congregations and other organizations often exhibit many of the same qualities and behaviors as the human individual, and that such a comparison may not be as difficult as some would suggest. Schensul and Trickett, for example, liken community organizations to human individuals, as they possess "financial and social resources, mission, interrelationships, community role, community capital" and are able to "gain and manipulate power" (247). Consistent with this line of reasoning, it is my aim to suggest Dokecki's reflective-generative framework is equally relevant for congregations and individuals. It is my hope that the sources and examples provided herein will confirm that relevancy.

The Tragi-Comic Professional and the Comic Congregation

[7] Beginning necessarily with the ethical roots of practice suggested by Dokecki, both professional practice and congregation-based social services are embedded in and must contend with an imperfect human world. Dokecki, building on Farley's concept of the tragic, argued that professional practice takes place within a practice setting driven simultaneously by both tragic and comic human conditions. In this setting, the professional manifests the tragic when they are animated primarily by external goods (e.g., money, professional advancement, personal gratification) at the expense of the internal goods of professional practice (e.g., caring for the other). The comic outlook, however, can balance and seek to overcome the tragic dimensions of human life by transcending immediate situations of suffering and despair and in hoping in a world better than the present one. It allows us to look past human depravity and self-centeredness and see in the other "persons worthy of love, respect, and care" (41). In other words, it places on humanity the ethical demands of mutual responsibility and compassion. Client-professional transactions, Dokecki concludes, are thus situated in a context in which the professional, while acknowledging and wrestling with the tragic elements and tendencies of human existence, moves with the client through hope and transcendence toward mutual love and care.

[8] In similar fashion, Hopewell, in his seminal study on congregational life, put forth several narrative models through which congregations interpret their collective lives and practically function in the world. One such narrative model, the comic (or gnostic) model, closely mirrors Dokecki's tragi-comic worldview. The comic congregation, in tragic fashion, begins by acknowledging the brokenness and suffering in the world. The cancer patient faced with inevitable death, to use Hopewell's example, experiences the tragic mortality of human existence. However, the trajectory of the comic congregational narrative moves toward a "happy ending" (58) and envisions the eventual fate of the world and humanity in terms of unity and harmony. "Its (the comic narrative) direction is opposite to the disintegrative

course of tragedy; it moves from problem to solution” (58). Additionally, far from being merely a state of belief in eventual universal harmony, the comic narrative has implications for the ways in which congregations and their members function in the present and in the midst of disunity and suffering. The comic congregation and its members are impelled through hope and faith to work toward harmony in the here and now, to make the world more equitable by ameliorating poverty, social inequality, and injustice.

[9] Dokecki’s tragi-comic professional and Hopewell’s comic congregation worldviews provide similar ethical groundings for professional and congregational practices of care. Of considerable importance to congregations specifically, the tragi-comic and comic worldviews find consistency with a number of influential theological and ethical thinkers within the Christian tradition. Theological-ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr, in putting forth several Christ-modeled frameworks for Christian ethical orientation to broader civilization, presents the image of Christ as transformer of culture. The transformative Christian – consonant not only with Christian scripture (e.g. the Gospel of John), but also with such Christian thinkers as Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards – acknowledges the brokenness of humanity and the existence of human sin (both individual and social) in culture. Yet they also maintain hope in the innate God-created goodness of humans and the world, as well as the potential for transforming in the here and now the evil, self-seeking culture and cultural institutions of humanity (I argue that Niebuhr’s “culture” to include all central aspects of human community life – the social, political, and economic). These Christians seek to bring about the “kingdom of God” in the present, rather than being oriented merely to the past or future. The transformative Christian, therefore, seeks change in present day governments and political and economic systems, and “calls for positive, confessional, God-oriented practice in church and community” (229).

[10] Though much more could be said about Niebuhr’s conceptions of sin and universalism, for the purposes of this paper I simply draw a clear connection between the ethical roots of professional practice and of congregation-based social services – particularly as they are related to Dokecki’s reflective-generative framework – and to ground them both in the broader Christian tradition that gives shape to much of the congregational activity discussed herein. The tragi-comic professional and the comic congregation certainly differ in significant ways. Dokecki focuses more on the tragi-comic as manifested in the practitioner’s balancing of the internal and external goods in professional practice, whereas Hopewell never explicitly identifies the tragic with the service-oriented activities of the congregation. However, these discussions emphasize the importance of moving from tragedy toward transcendence and hope in a better world. This “better world” is not a utopian vision for some distant future, but rather a world that can be realized in the here and now through practices of compassion and care. Moving forward from these common ethical foundations, reflective-generative practice, as conceived by Dokecki, will now be discussed as a framework useful for congregations as they seek to find effective ways of living out their calling to compassion and care in their communities.

Reflective-Generative Practice

[11] As noted above, the particular activities and social settings of practitioners and congregations can have notable areas of dissimilarity. Still, I suggest that the congregation is

a natural analog to the practitioner. The practitioner, according to Dokecki, “is a professional person who engages in a practice to do good . . . to promote human development and community” (14). The congregation engaged in social services provision – which may include such services as food pantries, clothing closets, soup kitchens, educational tutoring, and programs for drug and violence rehabilitation (Cnaan, Sinha, and McGrew) – fits well within this broad conceptualization of professional practice. It is therefore helpful to consider the ways in which the ethical role Dokecki’s practitioner directly applies to the ethical role of the congregation. For Dokecki, this role entails two tasks: “(1) to subordinate egoistic concerns in favor of enhancing the client’s human development and (2) to contribute to the development of community” (23). These tasks are related to practices of reflexivity and generativity, respectively, and will now be discussed at both the professional and congregational levels.

Reflective Practice

[12] Looking first at reflexivity, Dokecki’s conception of reflective practice is greatly indebted to Schön’s recasting of the role of the professions in *The Reflective Practitioner*. In this seminal work, Schön argues that the professions were facing a crisis in legitimacy and confidence. More specifically, traditional views of the professions as exclusive possessors of knowledge and expertise were becoming outdated, and divergent views of both knowledge and problem solutions were becoming more widely accepted. Schön suggests, furthermore, that the situations in which professionals practice are inherently unstable and ever-shifting, and that each situation encountered by the practitioner is endlessly and unpredictably complex and unique. These “shifting” situations of practice, therefore, require professional knowledge that is able to shift according to the particular practice setting. In this newly emerging role for the professional, perhaps most importantly, there is an increased emphasis on the knowledge and expertise of the clients themselves. This increased diversity of perspectives within the treatment setting lends itself to solving problems that by their very nature have a number of potential solutions depending on the particular social context and the particular people involved (Rappaport; Cornwall and Jewkes; Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker).

[13] Dokecki distinguishes between two models of professional practice. The first model, rooted in more traditional assumptions about the professional-client relationship, conceives of the professional as expert and the client as passive recipient of services. This model takes a top-down approach to treatment and represents a significant power imbalance in the professional-client relationship. The client is merely a problem to be fixed and contributes little of their own voice or expertise. Contrasted to this is a second model of professional practice that emphasizes “reflection-in-action” (93). This model seeks a more substantial role for the client in the treatment setting, allowing for more direct client participation. “The client and the professional enter a partnership that involves joint exploration of the situation. The professional has some expertise yet realizes that this knowledge is incomplete without the unique perspective of the client” (93). This model represents a dramatic shift in the role of both the professional and the client, and requires further consideration on the part of the professional regarding how knowledge is generated, how problems are defined, and how solutions are discovered.

[14] This less traditional casting of the role of the professional has important implications for the role of the congregation as social services provider and, subsequently, the role of the community and those receiving services. As previously noted, congregation-based social services are often characterized by infrequent and fleeting contact between congregation members and service recipients and minimal recipient participation in the worshipping life of the congregation (Laudarji and Livezey; Chaves 2004). Ammerman similarly notes the social distance that often exists between congregations and their communities. She found that few congregations were directly involved in community programs and that few were aware of the predominant social concerns in their surrounding communities. Some church members, in fact, found their neighbors “rather mysterious” and “were pretty sure that their neighbors were different from themselves and had different needs, but . . . were not quite sure what those needs might be” (142).

[15] These trends can be partly explained by the changing nature of American civic participation in recent decades. Putnam notes the declining numbers of Americans involved in various civic activities, suggesting that American society tends toward isolationism and weakened community bonds. Wuthnow argues instead that civic participation is not necessarily declining, but rather that the forms of civic participation are changing. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, civic participation consisted largely of membership in service clubs and organizations (e.g. Rotary, Lions) focused on “helping the needy, promoting better health and education, encouraging national exchanges, and supporting local charities and youth organizations” (9). Most importantly, these organizations placed significant time demands on members, requiring weekly participation in community activities, meetings, dinners, etc. Willingness to commit time to community service organizations has waned significantly in recent decades, Wuthnow argues, resulting in a dramatic decline in memberships for these types of organizations. Replacing these forms of civic participation are forms of participation focused on less demanding, less intensive services, services that arguably lead to looser bonds between community members. “Instead of cultivating lifelong ties with their neighbors, or joining organizations that reward faithful long-term service, people come together around specific needs and to work on projects that have definite objectives” (8).

[16] To illustrate this phenomenon, Lichterman conducted a study of congregation-based social services groups and their attempts to connect with other community organizations and community members to address the deleterious effects of the welfare reforms of 1996. Group initiatives included creating new low-income housing developments, “adopting” low-income families, and developing educational programs to inform congregation members on America’s growing income gap. The success or failure of these initiatives were, interestingly, largely dependent upon the ways in which congregation-based groups interacted with other community organizations and community members. Lichterman distinguishes between *volunteering* and *reflective action* and argues for differential outcomes for these two disparate styles of community interaction and participation.

[17] Volunteering, Lichterman suggests, consists of short-term, “detachable” activities (e.g., serving meals at a shelter) centered on single issues and involving fleeting interaction between congregation members and community members. Congregation-based initiatives consisting of these types of interactions inevitably folded, or failed to achieve significant,

long-term goals, precisely because they lacked any discernable community member input and participation. While these volunteer activities were certainly not without benefits and positive effects in the community, they:

Did not cultivate volunteers' ability to collaborate *with* diverse other people over time. They did not give volunteers practice being interdependent with other people in a wider social world, doing things together. Instead, the volunteers often wondered what they should be doing, with whom (253).

This form of congregation and community interaction can be compared to the more traditional professional/client relationship – the first model in Dokecki's framework – in which services are delivered in a top-down fashion and in which the client passively receives help. Important to note here is Lichterman's suggestion that short-term, fleeting activities translate into diminished collaboration with and participation from service recipients.

[18] In contrast to the volunteering model, Lichterman presents reflective action as a method for congregation-based social services that focus on community interaction and participation. Congregations engaging in reflective action, he suggests, exhibit more flexibility, or willingness to change, dependent upon the specific demands and particularities of the service environment. More importantly, these congregations value the input and participation of service recipients. The Park Cluster, a group of congregations committed to building a new neighborhood school in what was labeled the "Park neighborhood," to cite one of Lichterman's examples, gradually developed reflective practices over time as it increasingly included neighborhood members and leaders in meetings and decisions involving the development of the school- building project and other ancillary neighborhood projects. The Park Cluster changed its mode of interacting with its surrounding community as it "became more and more uneasy talking about the good of the neighborhood without neighbors at the table" (257).

[19] Encouragingly, other scholars in the field of congregation-based social services are beginning to lean in the direction of reflective congregational action (Dudley and Ammerman; Sider, Olson, and Unruh; Rusaw and Swanson; Unruh and Sider; Singletary). Rusaw and Swanson as well as Dudley and Ammerman, in their guides for congregations seeking improved effectiveness in community services provision, suggest that congregational leaders first talk to community residents in attempting to identify areas of community need. Rusaw and Swanson recommend talking to other community organizations already familiar with and actively engaged with community needs, as well as staying informed about community events and issues through local newspapers and other media. Dudley and Ammerman discuss the importance of systematically cataloguing the various populations and groups represented within the congregation's community as a means of staying informed on the context of the particular congregation's community. Finally, Singletary proposes an "emergent" model of congregation-based social services which entails, among other things, building relationships with stakeholders in the community and recognizing the ever-changing nature of community contexts and social services provision. This model is contrasted to a more "rational," outcomes-based model of services provision analogous to the more traditional, top-down model discussed earlier.

[20] Many studies stop short of advocating for sustained community member participation throughout the services provision process – perhaps limiting the role of community members to merely identifying needs in the beginning stages of social services program development. Others advocate for the inclusion of community member perspectives at all stages of social services provision. In sum, the growing body of literature is increasingly aware of the diminished expertise of the congregation in identifying and implementing social services and the value of knowledge about and the expertise of the recipients of social services.

Generative Practice

[21] The second dimension of Dokecki's framework is concerned with the generative nature of ethical professional practice. Generativity, as Dokecki presented it, is the ability of the human person to develop or grow over their lifetime in such a way that they are able to both contribute to the greater common good and “meet life's tasks” (37). In other words, generativity in the human person signifies personal strength and self-determination. Furthermore, generativity functions simultaneously on two planes: the temporal and the spatial. Temporally, the generative person is oriented to the past, present, and future. Dokecki notes:

We live in a constantly moving present infused with traditions, memories, and influences from the *past* . . . that is oriented intentionally and teleologically to a *future* filled with possibilities, purposes, ends, goals, and projects (105).

Spatially, the generative person possesses an awareness of being ecologically embedded, or situated within a particular social and natural environment. This creates in the generative person an appreciation for interdependence with their environment and the implications of this interdependence for the ways in which they interact with their environment.

[22] Important for Dokecki's conceptualization of generativity is Browning's (1974) discussion on generative man (*sic*). Browning, expounding on Erik Erikson's concept of generativity, defines generativity simply as generating and maintaining a world, “but in such a way as to include and yet transcend one's own issue, one's own family, tribe, nation, and race” (145). The generative person, then, far from being concerned only about her or his own survival and development, is concerned with creating a world that will benefit, and be maintained by future generations. Thus, as in the tragi-comic and comic worldviews discussed above, the generative person possesses an orientation toward and hope in the future. “Generative man (*sic*) has a discernible experience of time. The center of his time perspective is in the present, but it is a present that grows out of the past and actively leans toward the future” (197). It is important to further note that the generative person does not lean toward the future passively, but rather *actively*. This speaks to the supposed capacity within the human person to regulate the future, or to shape through the particularities of their hope certain facts about the future. This, circling back to Dokecki's discussion on generativity, is an important facet of the temporal orientation in ethical professional practice – hope in a better future that animates the practitioner in the present to actively work to effect change in that future.

[23] Chaves findings suggest that, in terms of generativity, congregation-based social services generally lack a longer-term, future-oriented focus. He concludes:

Congregations are much more likely to engage in activities that address the immediate, short-term needs of recipients for food, clothing, and shelter than in programs requiring more sustained and personal involvement to meet longer-term needs, such as programs in the areas of health, education, domestic violence, substance abuse, tutoring or mentoring, and work or employment (2004: 59).

Addressing *only* short-term, immediate needs to the exclusion of a more systemic and temporal perspective on services provision is potentially a significant generative limitation of the social services activities of many American congregations. There are, however, several notable exceptions to this trend that suggest promising ways forward.

[24] Cnaan, Singa, and McGrew and Stewart-Thomas find that congregations with women clergy and/or women board members were more likely to offer social services that were more generative in focus. Stewart-Thomas finds, for example, that congregations with women board members were more likely to offer longer-term social services. Furthermore, congregations with women pastors and/or women board members were more likely to offer social services in such areas as health and education. These findings are attributed to, among other things, the gendered expectations that may be placed on women clergy and leadership relative to the ways in which they carry out their roles within their congregations. Gender stereotypes may suggest that women exhibit behavior more nurturing or caring in nature, which at the congregational level could be manifested in increased involvement in social services provision and, more specifically, social services aligned with practices of generativity. Though restrictive gender roles mentioned here should certainly be noted and avoided, the emphasis in women-led settings on “caring” and “nurturing” services is helpful to consider at the congregational level.

[25] Another notable exception to the above trend is the tradition of social services provision in Black congregations in America. Research has shown that many Black congregations, though not necessarily engaged in more social services provision than other congregations, are more likely to offer certain types of social services focused on developmental, longer-term solutions to individual and community needs (Ammerman; Brown, 2008; Chaves 2004; Chaves and Tsitsos; Tsitsos). Tsitsos’s study was the first to examine the specific types of social services programs offered by congregations by the proportion of blacks attending those congregations. He found that Black congregations were more likely to offer programs in non-religious education, job support, substance abuse rehabilitation, and mentoring, noting that these types of programs are more intensive than the social services programs offered by most other congregations. Brown (2008) further developed these findings by adding comparisons to congregations of other ethnicities (e.g., Asian and Latino), again finding that Black congregations were more likely to offer “longer-term impact programs” (104) such as educational tutoring and job training, and that Black congregations were more likely to offer these types of services than White, Asian, and Latino congregations.

[26] Possible explanations for these trends warrant brief discussion. Reminiscent of Dokecki's temporal plane of generativity, Barnes (2005) situates the Black church's culture and community action in a social context that is both rooted in history and tradition and yet "leans" into the future in hope and faith. Black spiritual lyrics during American slavery, for example, functioned by first reminding slaves of God's prior faithfulness throughout history and then instilling in slaves hope in a future in which God would once again prove faithful and be victorious over the forces of evil. Through the singing of spirituals:

Slaves were remembering – reminding themselves not to lose hope, reassuring each other of a future time when slaveholders would reap what they had sewn, and reinforcing beliefs that their faith would eventually manifest in a society where they would be free (973).

Perhaps the most famous recent illustration of this phenomenon, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, evidenced the use of spirituals and gospel hymns for animating Black communities to social action. This example also highlights the important point that expressions of Black church culture and religiosity – e.g., spirituals, sermons, scriptural references – were far from passive expressions of hope in some future, better world. Rather, these religious traditions and expressions spurred Black communities to social action and community organizing in order to realize a better world in the here and now. In other words, leaders of the Black churches intentionally utilized these religious and cultural "tools" in such a way that these tools were "strategically implemented toward specific outcomes" (975).

[27] This temporal generativity in the Black church recalls Browning's (1991) practice-theory-practice framework for congregation-based practical theology. In Browning's framework, congregations enrich their current organizational identity and collective sense of purpose by systematically reflecting on the particularities of their own religious tradition and organizational history (Browning's "systematic theology" and "historical theology"). By intentionally and systematically engaging their tradition's central texts and narratives, and bringing these texts and narratives into conversation with present day issues and organizational activities, the congregation arrives at a renewed sense of identity and purpose and a clear direction for future activities and services. Relating these systematic theological practices to congregation-based community services more specifically – a process labeled "hermeneutic of care" – Browning examined the ways in which an African American Pentecostal church in the Chicago area used Christian scriptures, sermons, moral codes, and other tradition and history-laden sources to shape their social actions in the present day in ways meaningful to the needs of their community. "The theological ideas of the Apostolic Church *accomplish work and get something done*. They gather the experience of the congregation, interpret that experience, and then search the tradition hermeneutically to establish a new horizon" (261).

[28] Brown, on the other hand, offers a more spatially-oriented explanation for the types of social services frequently provided by Black congregations. Finding that Black congregations offer longer-term services than congregations of other ethnicities, she suggests that this is due in part to a greater awareness in Black congregations (and Black communities, more generally) of the social systems or structures underlying many of the disparities and needs in their surrounding neighborhoods and communities. Whites and White congregations, she

argues, tend to have an individualist understanding of poverty and poverty amelioration and, as a result, tend to offer “programs that assist individuals recover from poor decisions that lead to temporary misfortune” (97). Contrasted to this, Blacks and Black congregations, through historical and present day experiences of racial discrimination, tend to have a more structuralist understanding of poverty that emphasizes the “sinful” and discriminatory nature of society and social institutions. This structuralist understanding of poverty (and other related social issues) is expressed through a prophetic theology (Barnes 2004), focuses on political, economic, and social liberation, and results in social services programs that seek to effect more structural, rather than individual and immediate, changes in society.

[29] Brown may be unfairly generalizing to all Whites and White congregations, glossing over White congregations that have actively engaged in combating more structural forms of inequality and social injustice (Findlay). Still, her evidence for the significant differences in social services provision between Black congregations and congregations of other ethnicities lends convincing support to her general argument. Though this discussion on the Black church is somewhat simplified and cursory, its implications for other congregations and their provision of social services are important. Frequently exhibiting generative practices that are both temporal and spatial in orientation, Black congregations highlight the value of social services practices that are (1) rooted in the past and yet leaning into the future through hope in a better world and (2) cognizant of the social and/or natural environments giving shape to the issues they seek to address. Congregations, in seeking to implement social services more generative in nature, should therefore pay greater attention to these temporal and spatial aspects of social services provision.

Conclusion

[30] As Dokecki states, at its most fundamental level professional practice serves to “promote the common good through the enhancement of the client’s human development and of community” (vii). This, I argue, can also be construed as one of the fundamental purposes of the social services provided by congregations across the U.S. The ways in which congregations provide these services, I have shown, will certainly vary across social settings and from congregation to congregation. Still, despite this wide variation in types and degrees of congregation-based social services provision, it is helpful to reflect on effective methods for providing these services that may find wide applicability across settings and in different types of congregations. I suggest that Dokecki’s framework for reflective-generative practice is particularly applicable to the congregational setting and finds important points of connection to the critiques often noted relative to congregation-based social services. In particular, congregations and congregational leaders should give further consideration to reflective practices that place a premium on community participation and to generative practices that orient social services both temporally and spatially. Through these practices, the better world imagined by the reflective-generative practitioner, and the reflective-generative congregation, may indeed be within reach.

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