Transforming the hood: faith-based organizations in New Orleans and community development

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TRANSFORMING THE HOOD:
FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN NEW ORLEANS
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by
Jaime Petenko
B.A., University of Notre Dame, 2003
December 2005
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ABSTRACT

New Orleans is one of the most culturally unique cities in America. However, amidst its rich history and lively traditions, there exists extreme poverty and violence. The objective conditions of New Orleans such as poverty, unemployment, violence, poor healthcare, segregation, inadequate housing, drugs, and racism have created a cycle of despair that many in New Orleans cannot escape. These conditions are not isolated in New Orleans but reproduced and reinforced through the basic structure of American society, governmental and institutional policies, and ideologies. While all poor residents in New Orleans internalize and shape the oppression and marginalization they experience on a daily basis, some New Orleans residents have redefined the limitations, oppression, and exclusion they experience through violence, drugs, and a destructive lifestyle. The values, beliefs, ideals, and behaviors of these residents are often in direct opposition to mainstream culture. While only a small percentage of individuals in New Orleans embrace this type of lifestyle, their actions have powerful and influential effects on all residents in New Orleans.

Throughout New Orleans, there are numerous community organizations that work to alleviate the conditions of poverty and provide outreach to at-risk youth. This research critically examines and evaluates the philosophies and community development efforts of three faith-based organizations in New Orleans. These faith-based organizations in New Orleans are Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries. All three organizations are part of the Christian Community...
Development Movement, a national Christian movement dedicated to bringing the love of Christ to poor communities across the nation. The structure and mission of these organizations is shaped by their conservative Christian theologies and critical interpretation of the Bible. This research examines the ways ministers and staff at these organizations use Christian spirituality in their outreach and community development programs for youth in some of New Orleans’ poorest communities. The research also examines how the complex concepts of race and community impact the community development approaches of these organizations.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As an adult, I forgot how candid children can be. I forgot how they want to tell stories and share the details of their lives with people they trust and respect. After spending the summer working with inner-city children, I was constantly reminded of how much the children wanted to tell. Some of the children shared the saddest details of their lives because they had yet to realize their life circumstances were not normal. They had yet to develop the embarrassment and shame that plagues many teenagers and young adults living in similar circumstances. Others shared stories because they craved my attention. No matter their reasons for sharing, the children’s stories were all sadly very similar. To the children, it seemed an accepted part of life to have a father, brother, or uncle in prison. It was normal for them to have a relative who had been stabbed, shot, or even killed. It was part of life to have a baby at fifteen, a mother addicted to drugs, or a father selling drugs. The children would talk with one another and compare the ways their mothers’ beat them, arguing whether a belt or television antennae hurt worse. They would talk about where they live, one child sharing how he lived with his mom and seven brothers and sisters in a hotel room, three in one bed, four in the other, and him on the floor. And like all children, they shared their hopes and dreams for the future. While some of the children dreamt of being an architect or a chef, others shared their visions of joining a gang, living in prison, or getting shot on the streets.

While the children I worked with this summer were from New Jersey, their stories are no different than children living in impoverished inner city ghettos all over the
country. Statistics alone, without the real-life narratives, are shocking. One would expect children living in America, one of the richest nations in the world, to at the very minimum have their basic needs met. However, despite the international economic prowess of America, there are astonishingly high levels of poverty within this country. While the average rate of poverty across America is 12.7%, some areas of the country experience rates double and triple this average. Of the 37 million Americans living in poverty, 15.3 million Americans live in extreme poverty, defined by incomes halfway below the poverty line (US Census Bureau 2005b: 10). While numbers are shocking and speak to the extent of poverty in America, they do not compare to the real life moments when one sees a child picking through the garbage for uneaten fruit or stealing food out of the kitchen for his brothers and sisters at home.

Poverty, in a very simple sense, is a matter of economics. Although there are numerous other issues, conditions, and factors related to poverty, at its most basic level, poverty is the lack of money to meet all of one’s needs. In using the term lower class to describe those living in poverty, the term is only a reference to the economic status of individuals. Poverty is not caused by the color of one’s skin or the religious beliefs that one holds. That said however, it should be noted that compared to whites and other minorities, the percentage of African Americans living in poverty is higher than any other group. In 2004, the percentage of African Americans living in poverty was one of the highest in the United States at 24.7%, compared to a rate of 10.8% for whites (US Census Bureau 2005b: 10). Researchers have found correlations between high rates of poverty and a lower quality of life (Williams 2003; Lever 2004; Furdell 1996; Danzinger and Haveman 2002). It is common for people living in high poverty areas to be unable to
afford medical insurance or to have access to adequate medical care. This often results in higher levels of disease, mental illness, alcoholism, and death. Studies have shown those living in poverty to smoke, be obese, and suffer from elevated blood levels and chronic diseases more often than those not living in poverty (Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL) 2002: 12).

Besides the tragic effects of poverty and a related low quality of life, many living in the inner city are victims of both structural oppression and physical violence. Inner city populations are largely made up of poor residents and minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics (Public Broadcasting Service 2003). Many living in the inner city experience racism and discrimination as well as limited access to the most basic educational and job opportunities. The structure and cyclical nature of the system hinders the upward mobility and success of those who are forced to rely on the system for survival. In addition, the physical environment of the inner city provides an added daily obstacle. Those living in poverty often find themselves physically and socially isolated from not only the more affluent areas of the city but also from basic services. Over the past thirty years, the inner city environment has further changed as people have begun to pursue alternate family living situations. Many children today are raised by single mothers and grandmothers who rely on extended kin networks and close relationships with friends and neighbors (Stack 1970). Additionally, life is complicated by violence, drugs, and illegal enterprise that play a powerful role in the structure and life of the inner city.

Children and youth are the most vulnerable and impressionable population to violence and poverty. Although children make up only 25.4% of the total American
population, they account for 35.4% of the people living in poverty. According to 2004 statistics, 17.3% of children live in poverty in America, with children under the age of six experiencing the highest level of poverty at 19.9% (US Census Bureau 2005b: 10). For many of these children, their world is shaped by the violence they observe and experience on a daily basis, whether it is in their homes, schools, or outside their windows. Statistics speak to the magnitude of poverty and violence experienced by children. In America, a child is killed every two hours by a firearm (Hogan 1999). This rate of firearm death for American children under the age of fifteen is 12 times higher than that of the other 25 industrialized nations combined (National Education Association Health Information Network 2005). In a given year, more than 10 million children will witness domestic abuse (Hogan 1999). And homicide has now become the number one cause of death for African American males, ages ten to twenty-four (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2005). Something has gone astray within our society when the probability of death for a fifteen-year old African American male on the streets of America is higher than the probability of death for soldiers who fought in WWI, WWII, Vietnam, or the Iraq War (Davis and Muhlhausen 2000).

Louisiana is no stranger to the violence and poverty that plagues many American places. In report after report, Louisiana ranks at the top of the list for poorest and most violent places to live (CABL 2002). Louisiana has an exceedingly high level of concentrated poverty, second only to Washington D.C. (US Census Bureau 2005a: 3). The state also has the fourth highest percentage of children under 18 living in poverty, a rate of 25.5% (US Census Bureau 2004). In Louisiana, a child is born into poverty every 29 minutes and a child suffers neglect or abuse every 42 minutes (Children’s Defense
Fund 2002). As with other poor areas in America, this high level of poverty correlates to a lower quality of life, evident by the fact that Louisiana, at 18.9%, has one of the highest percentages of residents living without medical insurance (US Census Bureau 2005b: 27). Large numbers of uninsured citizens are an indicator of low-paying employment and a poor economy. These two economic measures are also reflected in the fact that Louisiana has the largest percentage of individuals in America receiving food stamps (CABL 2005).

In 2004, Louisiana ranked as the second most dangerous state and New Orleans the eighth most dangerous city in the nation (CABL 2005). With the highest murder rate in the country, it was no surprise when New Orleans was named “The Murder Capitol of the US” (The Gambit 12/7/04). Over 50% of the murders in New Orleans occurred within a 7-square-mile area, nicknamed the “Murder Crescent” where police claim “life is cheap” (The Gambit 12/7/04; Young 2004). Compounded with the violence, New Orleans has the third highest child poverty rate in the nation with over 40.5% of children living in poverty (US Census Bureau 2000c). And like many other inner cities, the youth of New Orleans are the most susceptible population within the city to become victims or perpetrators of violence. Peter Scharf, director of the University of New Orleans Center for Society Law and Justice, pointed out just how serious the issue of youth violence in New Orleans has become. He said, “The reality is we have had periods [in New Orleans] where a young black male has a greater chance of death or injury from violent crime than a soldier in Fallujah” (The Gambit 12/7/04).

While the picture painted by the statistics and the media appears quite bleak for New Orleans, there is a very important piece of the picture missing- the organizations and
individuals who have taken a stand against the violence, poverty, and oppression. Despite high rates of murder and violent crimes, the residents of New Orleans have chosen to take an active stance against the overwhelming conditions threatening their city. They have begun to fight a battle with “street culture.” Numerous organizations across New Orleans such as the Juvenile Justice Project, Total Community Action, the Innocence Project, and Catholic Charities are reaching out to people across New Orleans and encouraging them to unite and form partnerships to take back their streets, protect their children, and create a brighter future for the city as a whole. These organizations are listening to the youth’s stories and attempting to make a difference in their lives.

It is at this crucial intersection of poverty, violence, and community that this thesis begins. Initially, I had set out to investigate memorial t-shirts and the different meanings and functions that residents of New Orleans assign to memorial t-shirts. Memorial t-shirts are shirts made to memorialize a recently deceased person who has tragically died at a young age. The t-shirts are not only an expression of the grief and sadness of losing a loved one, but they serve a function on a political level as well. The t-shirts are a message, a proclamation documenting the epidemic of young African American males losing their lives to the streets of New Orleans. While I still consider memorial t-shirts to be worthy of future study and an important part of New Orleans culture, my ethnographic research led me down a different path. I realized that I had access to far richer sources and data involving the efforts of both individuals and community organizations to take a stand against the social problems of New Orleans. As I gathered data, I became interested in the ways faith-based organizations involved themselves in the lives of youth and how these organizations use a spiritual or faith-based
component in their outreach efforts to both youth and the surrounding community. Whereas the production and wearing of memorial t-shirts is more of a reactionary measure to the high levels of violence, the faith-based organizations are attempting both reactive and proactive measures to protect youth from the street and build strong futures for them.

One additional reason I was unable to conduct research on memorial t-shirts is that I failed to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on this topic. The IRB had two reservations with my project. First, the IRB felt that by talking to people about death, especially the death of their family and loved ones, people might become emotionally upset and contemplate suicide. Secondly, the IRB was uncomfortable with me talking to random people wearing memorial t-shirts on the street. They felt that I had no way to ascertain the ages of t-shirt wearers and ran the risk of speaking to people under the age of 18 without parental consent. This stipulation of the IRB made research on memorial t-shirts extremely difficult. Because of this, I refocused my research onto faith-based community organizations in New Orleans. In conducting research at these organizations, I faced the same stipulations and was not approved by the IRB to speak with youth without parental consent. Realistically, in the communities where I was conducting research, the chances of receiving parental consent were very slim. Not only would it have been difficult to track down parents to sign papers, but it would have also required a long period of time to develop relationships with parents where they would have trusted me and understood why I wanted to speak with their children. Although speaking with youth at these organizations would have added a
unique perspective to my research, it was not feasible within the constraints of the IRB and my project.

Based on these restrictions, the intent of this thesis is to understand and critically examine the efforts and philosophies of three faith-based organizations in New Orleans, namely Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries. Although each of these organizations is a unique and independent entity, the three organizations share similar philosophies and dedication to helping youth in New Orleans. While it is essential to understand how these faith-based organizations attempt to empower and protect the children from the streets, it is also necessary to contextualize the efforts and philosophies of these organizations within the environment and circumstances of New Orleans. All three faith-based organizations structure their community development efforts based upon a critical interpretation of the Bible and strict adherence to conservative evangelical Christian theology. It is impossible to examine these organizations without understanding the challenges, and to a certain extent, the culture within which and against which these organizations operate. To this extent, this thesis also explores “street culture”, race, and community in effort to understand how these very complex issues intersect to both aid and hinder the outreach efforts of these three faith-based organizations.

Trinity Christian Community, Desire Street Ministries, and Urban Impact Ministries are located within the heart of the poorest neighborhoods in New Orleans. The three faith-based organizations are spread out across the city with Trinity Christian Community located uptown, Urban Impact Ministries in Central City, and Desire Street Ministries located in the 9th ward (Figure 1). Each of the organizations, despite dealing
with similar issues and problems, faces challenges that are unique to the communities and neighborhoods where they are located. In confronting the problems facing the city, the three organizations share a similar philosophy and methodology rooted in evangelical Christian faith and the Bible. Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries are active members in the Christian Community Development Association, the founding association of a national Christian faith-based development movement. In addition to their similar spiritual beliefs, these three faith-
based organizations share a unique similarity; all three organizations are comprised of a majority African American membership yet are headed by white ministers.

**METHODS**

I conducted research for this thesis using traditional ethnographic methods of interviewing and participant observation. I had the opportunity to speak with numerous people from many different sectors of New Orleans. This included law enforcement agents, teachers, school board members, members of citizen watchdog groups, and workers at community organizations. At each of the faith-based community organizations, I was given a tour and the opportunity to observe youth participating in the programs. Besides the research I conducted in New Orleans, I also spent the summer working at a community organization in New Jersey. The children at the organization were from New Jersey, but they came from similar backgrounds and faced many of the same issues as youth in New Orleans.

Several people were especially helpful to me in this research process. At this point, I will briefly introduce these individuals. Throughout the remainder of this thesis I will provide more information on these individuals’ experiences and perspectives. Three teachers, Ms. B, Ms. H, and Ms. S, were instrumental in providing insight into the ways youth create identity and view their situations and futures in New Orleans. All three teachers are white and members of Teach for America, but they taught at majority African American schools deemed academically unacceptable by the Louisiana Department of Education (Louisiana Department of Education 2004). In addition to the three public school teachers, Agent Smith, a law enforcement officer, was fundamental in providing information on crime and the criminal component in New Orleans. Agent
Smith has spent his career working in the most violent and high-risk areas of New Orleans. Through his interactions with both law-abiding residents of the city and criminals, he has begun to comprehend New Orleans culture and the underground economy on which so many people rely. Although Agent Smith does not condone the behavior of those engaging in illegal activities, he attempts to understand why they are doing so.

I also had the opportunity to interview a representative of each of the three faith-based organizations. At Trinity Christian Community, I interviewed Kevin Brown, the director of the organization. Brown moved back to New Orleans in 1998 to continue the work started by his father, the founder of Trinity Christian Community. In speaking with Brown, I heard many stories about Hollygrove, the surrounding neighborhood, and the obstacles youth face growing up in New Orleans and that Brown encounters as a director of a faith-based community organization. He also discussed his philosophies and commitment to a spiritually based outreach program. At Urban Impact Ministries, I spoke with Michael Robinson, the head of the youth high school program. Originally from Dallas, Robinson grew up in much the same environment as the youth he is attempting to reach in New Orleans. His personal background combined with his deep commitment to Christianity allows him to approach community development and youth outreach from a unique perspective. At Desire Street Ministries, I spoke with several different people. Stephanie McLeish, the head of the ministry division, provided me with the greatest amount of insight into Desire Street’s programs and outreach. Others within the organization, like Kendrick Levy, shared their personal stories and experiences as youth who were raised up to be leaders through Desire Street Ministries’ programs.
These staff members also relayed the history of Desire Street Ministry and the role they believe the ministry will play in the community in the future.

In addition to interviews and participant observation, I also had the opportunity to live in New Orleans for a year and experience life in New Orleans first-hand. My house was located at the intersection of Claiborne and Carrollton Ave., a half a mile from Hollygrove, a notoriously dangerous neighborhood in New Orleans. Living in New Orleans, I quickly fell in love with the vibrant culture and people in the city. Once I stepped back and took in my surroundings, I realized the very things I was researching and writing about were right outside my front door- the homelessness, the poverty, the drugs, and the violence. I did not need to travel across the city or down the road to see them. The homeless in my area spent the night on park benches in the park across the street from my house. They spent the days on the corner talking, drinking, or pan handling. I never will forget the first time I was sitting on my front porch and I saw a man make a meal out of food in the trashcan. Also, people would frequently sell and use drugs in the park. Walking through the park after a particularly busy weekend, dime bags and beer bottles littered the ground. However, people were always friendly and would stop and say hi whenever they passed. Police officers rarely patrolled the park and would only respond when there was an incident. But hardly a night went by when I didn’t fall asleep to sirens in the distance from police activity in the surrounding neighborhoods.

By living in New Orleans, I was able to develop a better understanding of New Orleans culture and what life is like in New Orleans for young people. By always being in the environment of what I was studying, there were often no boundaries between research and everyday experiences. Even the most mundane and common activities like
running errands or walking the dog presented themselves as research opportunities, as a way to better understand the people of New Orleans and the circumstances of their lives. Despite living in New Orleans, as a white middle class female, I cannot fully understand what life is like for poor African Americans. I do believe however, by combining everyday experiences, participant observation, and interview data, I was able to develop a perspective on New Orleans youth that combines the different backgrounds and experiences of my informants as well as my own. Living in New Orleans not only exposed me to the negative factors and often tragic circumstances affecting the city, but it also allowed me to experience the rich and unique culture, traditions, and strengths of New Orleans residents. Things as simple as watching people walk to church on Sunday mornings, dancing in second line parades, or attending a crawfish boil were constant reminders that the people I was studying were not isolated and secluded research subjects but real people.

As an anthropologist, it is my job to study and understand these faith-based organizations from a critical perspective. However, in being critical, it does not necessarily mean that I need to be negative about or find fault in these organizations. Instead, being critical implies an attempt to clearly examine these organizations with as little prejudice as possible from both the perspective of the organizations themselves and from the perspective of an outsider. So despite any critiques I may have about Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, or Desire Street Ministries, I believe it is extremely important to note the enormous amount of admiration and respect I have for those who work with these organizations. After researching these organizations, it is clear to me that ministers and staff care deeply for and believe strongly in the youth of
New Orleans. Ministers and staff at these faith-based organizations have dedicated their lives to helping youth and enacting change in the poorest neighborhoods in New Orleans. They go beyond the call of duty to help youth through whatever situations they find themselves in. While there are no tried and true methods for protecting at-risk youth, two of the most important things we can provide youth are a place to go and good people to talk with. I commend those who work at Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries for their efforts, resolve, and dedication to youth in New Orleans despite the frustrations, challenges, and obstacles they face. I have nothing but respect for these organizations and the work ministers and staff perform. Furthermore, I owe much gratitude to these individuals for opening up their organizations to me and sharing their experiences and perspectives on New Orleans.

**OVERVIEW OF THESIS**

The course of this thesis begins in Chapter 2 with an overview of “street culture” and the conditions of life in New Orleans. In this chapter I provide the background to understand the challenges residents face living in New Orleans as well as contextualize the work of these faith-based organizations. Within the chapter, I also attempt to locate the concept of “street culture” within the discourse of faith-based organizations and social science literature. In Chapter 3, I explore the history and tenets of the Christian Community Development Movement, the spiritual foundation of the New Orleans faith-based organizations. I describe how Christian theology and Scripture shape the community development efforts of the movement. Building on this information, in Chapter 4, I describe the programs, outreach, and important individuals at Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries. From
there, I examine in Chapter 5, how these three organizations conceptualize and engage with the concept of community. I devote the second half of the chapter to examining the organizations’ spiritual-based approach to community development and how this approach both aids and hinders development efforts. From this concept of community development, I focus on the ideals of hope and vision in Chapter 6. I detail how social scientists have understood the ideals of hope and vision over the past fifty years as well as why ministers and staff at the faith-based organizations believe hope and vision are so important to youth in New Orleans. Additionally, I look at the methods Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries use to instill hope and vision in New Orleans youth. In Chapter 7, I address the concept of race and its relationship to the field of anthropology. I focus on the racial makeup of these faith-based organizations and the ways ministers and staff attempt to overcome racial barriers. In this chapter, I examine the ways both staff at these organizations and public school teachers interact with youth and understand how New Orleans youth construct racial identities and racial categories. I end the chapter by discussing racial reconciliation and the prospects of it occurring in New Orleans through these three faith-based organizations. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis.
CHAPTER 2
DEFINING THE STREET

As part of the canvas of culture that currently exists in New Orleans, another culture has risen to find its place in what the Council for a Better Louisiana referred to as “one of America’s most culturally unique cities” (2002:1). “Street culture” has come to play a major role in the lives of youth and residents of New Orleans. “Street culture” is a very complex concept that represents both the positive, unique aspects of life in New Orleans as well as the negative and violent aspects of a street-oriented lifestyle. In this chapter, I discuss the different ways “street culture” is conceptualized by faith-based organizations and scholars. I begin by describing the objective conditions in New Orleans that have led to a cycle of poverty. From there, I discuss social science perspectives on the underclass and street culture. And finally, I conclude the chapter with an in-depth look at the criminal element of street culture.

STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION

To begin to understand life in New Orleans for the poorest residents, it is necessary to examine the objective conditions within New Orleans that have contributed to the creation, reproduction, and continuation of street culture. These conditions include poverty, violence, racism, substance abuse, joblessness, poor healthcare, segregation, inadequate housing, government and bureaucratic policies, incarceration, sub par education, and a poor economy. These conditions exist at the most basic, structural level and are rooted in the “basic relations of institutional and collective power, i.e. the political, economic, and cultural” (Total Community Action (TCA) 2004:7). Each
condition feeds and grows off of other conditions to create a continuous cycle, which many find impossible to escape. Because of the coexistence and interdependence of these conditions, they can be referred to as a syndemic, “a set of mutually reinforcing interconnected epidemics” that are drawing the most desperate people of New Orleans deeper into the cycle of poverty (Romero-Daza et al 2003: 235). Each condition in New Orleans is further exacerbated by other conditions so that it becomes harder to address or fix any one single problem. Furthermore, these structural disadvantages reflect ideals and attitudes that are larger than any single social force or institution; they are part of “the system.” Anthropologist Sherry Ortner explains that the system is a “relatively seamless whole.” The system embodies institutional, political, economic, cultural, and symbolic forms which make up and reflect the whole of American society, both past and present (1984: 148). Ingrained into these different forms, institutions, and social relations are inequalities, power differentials, and ideologies that support oppression, marginalization, segregation, classism and racism.

While statistics are no substitution for the lived and narrated experiences of real people with real stories, they do provide a starting point for exploring the depth of structural oppression, disempowerment, and entrenchment of these oppressive conditions within New Orleans society. According to the 2000 US Census, African Americans account for 66.6% of the total New Orleans population of 484,674 (US Census Bureau 2000a). While the racial makeup of the city is lopsided, the greatest differences in New Orleans are based on class. People in the lower class experience the devastating effects of institutional polices and structural oppression at much higher rates. In New Orleans, more African Americans suffer from higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and
incarceration because they make up a larger portion of the population. Several social scientists, including Philippe Bourgois (2003) and Douglass Massey (1998), highlighted the emergence of apartheid in America based on class and race. Sociologist W.J. Wilson noted the growing racial and class divide between the suburbs and city, whereby the suburbs are associated with the middle class and urban areas are associated with poor people of color (1999: 37). New Orleans and its surrounding suburbs speak to this characterization. In surrounding parishes like Jefferson and St. Charles, African Americans account for no more than 25% of the population. In St. Bernard Parish, African Americans account for as few as 7.6% of the population (US Census Bureau 2000a). Median incomes of residents of Jefferson, St. Charles, and St. Bernard Parishes are almost $10,000 more than median incomes of residents in Orleans Parish (US Census Bureau 2000b). Within New Orleans, the most concentrated areas of poverty are often almost exclusively African American, evidence of segregation by class and race.

As the average American living standard has steadily increased over the past forty years, poverty is still a very real and perceived condition within New Orleans society (TCA 2004: 3). Currently, 28% of the New Orleans population is living below the poverty line set by the US Department of Health and Human Services (TCA 2004: 6). This rate is over double the national poverty average of 12.7% (US Census Bureau 2005b: 10). The African American poverty rate in New Orleans is 35.1%, almost three times as high as the white poverty rate of 11.5% (State University of New York 2003). The poverty line, as defined by current standards, has drawn considerable debate in
recent years\(^1\). Many scholars and activists contend it is not an adequate measure of the income level needed to survive. They believe there are actually many more people living in poverty than statistics suggest (Foster 1998; Madden 2000; Zheng 1994). Consequently, even families designated by the government as not living in poverty, constantly struggle to meet their needs. To further exacerbate the continued high levels of poverty in New Orleans, there has been an increase in income disparity between the richest and poorest residents, making it even harder for the poor to escape the “cycle of despair” (CABL 1999). This increase in income disparity can be related to the departure of most white and middle class families from inner city New Orleans. W.J. Wilson commented in his books, *The Truly Disadvantaged* and *The Bridge over the Racial Divide*, that the flight of the middle class from the inner city has led to more racially segregated and impoverished populations inhabiting the inner cities (1991; 1999: 36).

Children are among those populations most vulnerable to poverty in New Orleans. 40.5\% of New Orleans children are living in poverty, a rate more than double the national average of 17.8\% (US Census Bureau 2000c; US Census Bureau 2005b: 9). Numerous studies have shown the devastating effects of poverty on children, in terms of their

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\(^1\) 2005 HHS Poverty Guidelines

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<tr>
<th>Persons in Family Unit</th>
<th>48 Contiguous States and D.C.</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
<th>Hawaii</th>
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cognitive and social development, health, education, and long-term success (Duncan and Gunn 1999; Gunn et al 2002; Huston 1992). Children born into poverty are faced with limited choices, often leading them down a path where they find themselves as adults, living and raising children in much the same environment in which they were born and raised thus continuing the cycle of poverty. Many of the poorest children in Louisiana live in single-parent households. In 2001, Louisiana ranked highest in the nation with 36% of children living in single-parent homes. In 2002, Louisiana ranked second highest in the nation with 47% of the children being born to single mothers (CABL 1999).

The cycle of poverty in New Orleans is recreated and reinforced by many structural forces. A lack of economic progress and a slow economy are two factors that have powerful effects. The New Orleans service-based economy provides few opportunities for well-paying, secure jobs where one can improve one’s position and salary within a company. The lack of manufacturing and low-skill jobs in the area also increases competition for service-industry based jobs. Many of the poorest residents lack an adequate education or the skills necessary to compete for this much sought after employment. Currently, only 51.8% of the eligible labor force (residents age 16 and over) is employed in New Orleans. Of this population, 9.8% are employed in retail, 12.1% in the service industry, 11.8% in education, and 14.1% in health care and social services (US Census Bureau 2000b). Additionally, New Orleans has one of the slowest job growth rates in the state; over the past ten years, the job growth rate has actually decreased by 3% (CABL 2002: 6). Marginalized from the traditional labor force by their inability to find and secure a financially and emotionally fulfilling job, many residents turn to the underground economy as a way to pay their rent and bills, buy food, and meet
their children’s needs. Within New Orleans, there is an underground economy that among other activities includes an active drug trade. The widespread drug trade in New Orleans has earned it the designation from the federal government as one of thirty-one High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas in the country (Office of National Drug Control Policy 2004: 2).

Along with the economy, the public education system of New Orleans continues to contribute to the cycle of poverty. 82% of the children of New Orleans attend public school; 96% of this group are children of color (Teach for America 2004). The New Orleans public education system is under funded and poorly managed. Public school teachers report youth are not receiving an adequate education or even learning necessary life skills due to overcrowded classrooms, lack of discipline, little teacher support from upper level staff, outdated curricula, few supplies, and absenteeism. The Louisiana Department of Education declared that 70% of the New Orleans elementary schools and 38% of the New Orleans high schools are “Academically Below the State Average.” 44% of the high schools are “Academically Unacceptable” (CABL 2002: 10-11). These ratings are based upon academic assessments, staff assessments, graduation rates, and absenteeism. The unacceptable level of instruction students receive is reflected in the startlingly low number of students passing exit exams like the LEAP (Louisiana Education Assessment Program). During the 2000-2001 school year, 54% of students passed the English/ Language Arts portion and only 38% of the students passed the math portion of the exam (CABL 2002: 11). These low percentages of passing students not only reflect a poor school system but also a growing attitude among some in New Orleans that there is little value to education. When high school graduates can only
secure jobs at fast food restaurants or hotel chains, it seriously calls into question the notion that they are receiving a quality education and that education leads to increased opportunities.

In addition to the factors already discussed, the housing situation in New Orleans contributes to the cycle of poverty as well. New Orleans has a considerably low home ownership rate of 46.5%, compared to the national average of 69.2% (CABL 2002: 6; US Department of Commerce 2005). The homeownership rate is partly low due to the large number of residents, mainly African Americans, living in housing projects and Section 8 housing. Within New Orleans, there are nine housing projects. Sister Lilianne Flavin of the Hope House, estimates that despite the amount of public housing, there are over 10,000 households on the waiting list for subsidized housing (The Times-Picayune 2003). Over the past ten years, the city has begun plans to redevelop the majority of housing projects. However, moving families, knocking down dilapidated buildings, and rebuilding them with fancy, bright colored houses is not going to erase the history or change the future of class and racial segregation. While the public housing population has been reduced in the past ten years from 1 in 10 residents of New Orleans to 1 in 20, tens of thousands have still lived a significant portion of their lives in the projects (Russell 2004b: 1). Over the course of decades, their lives were shaped by the high concentrations of poverty and violence as well as the social and political forces that have historically ruled over these types of spaces. Although only the Desire and Florida projects are completely physically isolated from the city, all housing projects have experienced social isolation, corrupt systems of management, poor upkeep and maintenance, and increased crime and violence. In New Orleans, individuals living in the
housing projects are among the most disenfranchised and marginalized residents in the city.

The criminal justice system is yet another forum for the manifestation and reinforcement of structural oppression. Both law enforcement agents and residents of New Orleans agree the criminal justice system operates on two different levels, one for whites and the other for African Americans. There are large disparities in the incarceration rates and treatment by law enforcement of these two populations.

Louisiana, as a state, ranks highest in the country for its incarceration, with a rate of 814 per 100,000 people, 21.45% higher than the national average (National Institute of Corrections 2004). In Louisiana, there is a 4 to 1 ratio of African Americans to whites incarcerated even though the ratio of African Americans to whites in the general population is 1 to 2 (Juvenile Justice Project Louisiana 2004). This means in Louisiana, African Americans are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than whites. These statistics lend evidence to claim that the criminal justice system works differently for whites and African Americans. Over the past 32 years, the overall number of inmates in America has continued to grow. America currently has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world with 1 out of every 138 Americans incarcerated. African American males between the ages of 25 and 29 are most affected with the highest incarceration rate of 1 in every 8 males (The Sentencing Project 2005). Besides having the highest incarceration rate in the nation, Louisiana has notoriously pernicious youth correction facilities. Tallulah, one of the worst juvenile detention centers in the state, was shut down by Governor Blanco in July 2004. The Juvenile Justice Project, a New Orleans-based law and advocacy center dedicated to juvenile justice reform (along with the US
Department of Justice and Human Rights Watch) successfully lobbied to shut down Tallulah and expose the abuse, mistreatment, and harm done to juveniles at the detention center. Although Tallulah may have been the worst of the detention centers, Human Rights Watch found abuses at all juvenile centers in Louisiana (2000).

POVERTY AND THE URBAN UNDERCLASS

Over the years, there has been considerable debate among social scientists regarding the roots of poverty, its perpetuation in American society, and whether an underclass culture exists. Within the literature, several different terms, including lower class, urban underclass, ghetto class, slum culture, oppositional culture, alternative culture, and street culture, are used to describe a subset or marginalized group within the larger impoverished group (Mincy 1994: 109). Social scientists differ in their perspectives on the existence and impact of an urban underclass (Mincy 1994: 126-128). Some deny the existence or impact of this group altogether. Others position themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum, blaming the underclass for “undermining the country’s productivity capacity, family life, social integration, and ultimately, its political stability” (Peterson 1991: 623). Along the continuum of perspectives, social scientists describe and theorize the underclass in several different ways, grounding their ideas in structural, behavioral, geographic, cultural, and political explanations.

Research in the area of poverty and the urban underclass in the early 1970s focused around the existence and nature of a “culture of poverty.” While Oscar Lewis initially proposed this theory, similar ideas in support of ghetto life were put forth by Ulf Hannerz (1969), Elliot Liebow (1968), and Lee Rainwater (1970). Lewis, in a study of Puerto Rican families living in New York, explored the idea of a culture of poverty and
outlined the characteristics of such a culture. Lewis used the term “culture of poverty” to describe the lives of the poor people he studied. He viewed the culture of poverty as “an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society” (1966: xliv). Characteristics of the culture of poverty include a lack of involvement in the institutions of wider society, a low level of literacy and education, low income, unemployment, mistrust of the government, hatred of the police, mother-centered families, and promiscuity. Lewis believed the culture of poverty passed from generation to generation largely due to children internalizing the values and beliefs of this culture from such a young age. Children then find themselves trapped as adults in the same environment and conditions they grew up in because this is all they knew. Lewis’ conceptualization and use of the term “culture of poverty” has been misunderstood and misused since his work was first published. Many social scientists interpreted Lewis’ work as blaming the poor for their own situations or equating the root of poverty to the culture of poverty because it differed from mainstream values. However, Lewis did not make such claims about the culture of poverty. In his work, he did note that much of the culture of poverty has developed as creative adaptations to “problems not met by existing agencies and institutions” (1966: xliv). Lewis acknowledged both the individual responsibility of the poor for their situation as well as the larger structural, political, and historical forces that shape the lives of the poor. Although he did not celebrate the culture of poverty, he did show it to have some positive characteristics. Furthermore, Lewis clearly distinguished between poverty and the culture of poverty. Being poor did not automatically include one in the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty “refers to one way of life shared by poor people in a
given historical and social context” (1966: xlviii). There were many poor people who adopted different lifestyles and values from the culture of poverty. Since Lewis first introduced the theory of the culture of poverty, its use has steadily declined over the past forty years.

Compared to the 1970s, the approaches to poverty in the 1980s were quite different. The worsening conditions and growing impoverished population were attributed to the governmental programs, referred to as the Great Society Programs, designed to aid and eliminate poverty. While this theoretical perspective is largely attributed to Charles Murray in his 1984 book *Losing Ground*, other advocates included Lawrence Mead in *Beyond Entitlement* and Nathan Glazer in *The Limits of Social Policy*. Far from viewing the underclass as an agentless group of individuals, bound by their cultural values and norms, Murray saw them as actively choosing not to seek employment because of the widespread availability of governmental assistance programs. These “perverse incentives provided by welfare assistance” included cash assistance, disability, food stamps, Medicaid, housing subsidies, social security, and welfare (Peterson 1991: 623). According to Murray, it was economically more advantageous to forgo employment in favor of receiving governmental aid. Murray attributed the reliance on governmental subsidies to the development of socially dysfunctional behaviors such as having more children or not getting married, in order to receive larger amounts of aid. Also, because men failed to seek employment, they developed attitudes and behaviors that if employed, would not be acceptable according to mainstream standards and norms. Because of the development of these behaviors and values, Murray blamed the government for the increase in problems surrounding the
urban underclass (Peterson 1991: 629). While governmental aid and subsidies have had an undeniable impact on the plight of the poor, they are not the sole factors in the creation of an urban underclass (Stack 1970: 127-129). Although Murray did not blame the poor for being poor, he sold them short by attributing their poverty to a conscious choice to forgo mainstream employment and values in favor of free handouts. Since Murray published his research, empirical data has been used to disprove some of his conclusions (Newman 1999; Shipler 2005).

Still working in the 1980s, William Julius Wilson approached poverty and the underclass from a more structural perspective than Murray. In several well-recognized works, including The Declining Significance of Race (1980), The Truly Disadvantaged (1991), When Work Disappears (1996), and The Bridge Over the Racial Divide (1999). Wilson focused on the economic and geographic barriers that sustain poverty. Wilson argued that the shift from a manufacturing to service-centered economy negatively impacted urban African American males due to a decrease in the number of low-skilled and high-skilled labor positions and an increase in competition for service industry jobs. Unemployment among this population further increased due to relocation of many manufacturing related jobs to the suburbs and outside the United States. Wilson linked the increase in unemployment of African American men to lower marriage rates as well as an increased number of female-headed households. Single-parent households also led to an increased reliance on the welfare system. To further complicate the situation, many middle and upper class African American families moved from the city to the suburbs. With the exodus of the socially mobile, the urban poor found themselves increasingly isolated from mainstream society causing poverty to become even more entrenched.
within the inner city (Wilson 1991, 1996). Under these conditions of economic, social, and political isolation what resulted was an urban underclass- “a disproportionate concentration of the most disadvantaged segments of the urban population”, who created a “social milieu” that fostered dysfunctional and destructive behavior (Jargowsky 1997: 18). Wilson’s theory has become a cornerstone for research on the urban underclass, though not without criticism. One shortcoming of his theory is the exclusion or downplaying of the role of racism as a major contributing factor to poverty (Mincy 1994: 114).

In the many different perspectives of the poor, especially that of the media, there appears to be a growing distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Recent works, such as Kathleen Newman’s *No Shame in My Game* (1999) and David Shipler’s *The Working Poor* (2005), described the poor who struggle daily, working low-paying dead-end jobs instead of receiving governmental aid. These works attempted to highlight the difficulties and limitations this often ignored segment of the population faces as well as shatter common misconceptions about the poor. Others have used these works to justify classifying different segments of the poor population. They differentiate the working class from the underclass as more deserving or honorable. In Herbert Gans’ work *The War Against the Poor* (1995), he pointed out that by stigmatizing the unemployed or those receiving welfare as undeserving, American society can justify their treatment of this population. Gans argued that society continues to embrace an ideology that blames the poor for their own situations in order to deny the institutional, political, and economic policies that have shaped the lives of the poor. Mainstream media often
characterizes inner city residents as undeserving because their ideals, values, and beliefs are different from mainstream conceptions of “honorable” or “deserving.”

More current theories have moved from trying to understand the root causes of poverty and the creation of an urban underclass to examining the urban underclass from the perspective of structure verses individual agency. Sociologist Elijah Anderson, whose studies are rooted in the street culture of Philadelphia, argued street culture arose out of despair that was “pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of ‘the street,’ whose norms are often consciously opposed to that of mainstream society” (1999:33). The “despair” Anderson spoke of is the everyday circumstances of life for the poor. Anderson devoted little discussion to the larger structural forces of society, but he did provide examples of structural forces at work through his stories. Despair is seen as caused by the lack of sustainable employment, race stigmatization, drug use and abuse, and lack of public services (Anderson 1999:32). Also, Anderson’s purpose for defining street culture was different from other social scientists. Rather than defining it to examine its deeper meanings and root causes, Anderson defined street culture for the purpose of creating a framework to explore a single aspect of the culture, the informal code of the street. Anderson focused his study on the code of the street because the code structures interactions and relationships on the street; it “provides an element of social organization” (1999: 27). The code of the street provides a framework for managing life on the street. It is a set of rules dictating violence, respect, and street justice. Because Anderson defined street culture for this select purpose, his discussion fell short of the deeper description and analysis found in other scholars’ work.
Furthermore, Anderson’s argument about street culture’s “conscious opposition” to mainstream society is questionable. By defining conscious opposition as the main driving force of this culture, it denies the culture complexity and heterogeneity. Members of the culture appear as one-dimensional participants, lacking creativity and expression beyond the purpose of opposition. This definition denies individuals and street culture any other reasons for existing at the same time as it trivializes the situations, despair, and larger structural forces that have unconsciously shaped the lives of these individuals. Anderson failed to analyze the different meanings and functions that members of street culture assign to behaviors and beliefs. He also failed to fully understand the motivations of members of street culture.

Philippe Bourgois’ conceptualization of street culture in *Selling Crack in El Barrio* (2003) shares some similarities to Anderson’s but also some significant differences. Bourgois described street culture as “a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interactions, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society” (2003: 8). Bourgois’ approach stressed the structural forces of society and their power in shaping the lives of the poor at the same time as he recognized individuals as “active agents of their own histories, not passive victims” (2003: 17). What distinguishes Bourgois’ and Anderson’s conceptualizations is that for Bourgois, street culture is not developed consciously as an opposition to mainstream culture. The conditions of society, exclusion, marginality, and isolation, shape the lives of the poor, leading to the development of behaviors and ideals. Bourgois places more emphasis on the larger structural forces while Anderson focuses more on individual agency. Bourgois described the behaviors and ideals of street culture
as a set of “spontaneous rebellious practices [which] in the long term emerged as an
oppositional style” (2003: 8). Therefore, the development of street culture was mainly an
unconscious accumulation of these practices. By defining it from this perspective,
Bourgois stressed that even though street culture is an oppositional or alternative culture,
this is not its sole defining attribute. It is a culture of expression, creativity, and
resistance that defies racism, fosters personal dignity, and rejects economic and social
marginalization (Bourgois 2003: 8).

Bourgois’ conceptualization of street culture also stressed the inherent irony
within the culture. At its roots, street culture emerges as resistance, rejection of racism
and marginalization, and a search for personal dignity, qualities that ideally would make
an individual and community far better off. Ironically, using these very ideals, street
culture has become an “active agent in personal degradation and community ruin”
(Bourgois 2003: 9). Instead of lashing out at larger society, members of street culture
“direct their brutality against themselves and the community rather than against structural
oppressors” (Bourgois 2003: 326). Members of street culture are simultaneously victims
and agents of destruction (Bourgois 1996: 255). At the same time that street culture
serves as an expression of resistance to mainstream exclusion, it also “guarantees
exclusion by requiring its participants to be semiliterate, expressively aggressive,
unexploitable, and enmeshed in substance abuse and violence” (Bourgois 1996: 250).
The contradictory nature of this culture is perhaps the reason why it has become so
volatile.
NEW ORLEANS “STREET CULTURE”

In New Orleans, it is not just a segment of the population that has been marginalized and excluded; New Orleans, as a whole, has been excluded from mainstream America and pursuing the American dream. Compared to other cities in the nation, New Orleans appears forgotten. It lags behind other cities economically, politically, and technologically and is plagued by extreme poverty and violence. African Americans are not excluded in New Orleans. They have a place in the economy, culture, and society of New Orleans. They have long played a part in the history, traditions, and rituals of New Orleans and have heavily influenced New Orleans vibrant culture. The majority of workers at hotels, restaurants, tourist services, and public works are African Americans. This is mainstream employment in New Orleans, but working these types of jobs does not pay enough to support a family or put savings in the bank. Full-time New Orleans city employees still qualify for food stamps and subsidized housing. The New Orleans Police Department provides loans and grants to supplement officer’s low salaries so that they can purchase houses (Young 2003). It can be argued that what is mainstream in New Orleans is poverty and its related conditions. Poverty and its related conditions are what have shaped and continue to shape some of the most unique aspects of New Orleans culture.

The term “street culture” is a very complex and convoluted term that many people use in different ways. Because of its different uses, the term has come to mean different things. First, I would like to explore the term from a social science perspective. I find it difficult to determine whether street culture is a separate culture from New Orleans culture or a cultural adaptation for select individuals in New Orleans. I lean more in
favor of street culture being a cultural adaptation to the conditions of poverty in New Orleans rather than a separate culture. One support for this claim is that many aspects of street culture are also defining characteristics of New Orleans culture. Also, in studying street culture, it becomes visible how individuals shape the limitations and oppression in their lives by adapting their beliefs and practices to their situations. Individuals choose to adapt to their situations in both positive and negative ways. In Anderson’s and Bourgois’ conceptualizations of street culture, they fail to highlight the positive aspects. In New Orleans, there are many creative, positive ways street culture is expressed. Some examples include second line parades, jazz funerals, Mardi Gras, music, dance, clothing, and food. Street culture, however, also encompasses negative or destructive adaptations. These adaptations include violence, drugs, promiscuity, and living by the code of the street. It is the case in New Orleans that members of the same family may embrace distinctly opposite adaptations within street culture.

Street culture is about people and the ways they have redefined symbols, values, beliefs, and ideologies. Street culture serves as the context from which a group of people in New Orleans understands their lives and the circumstances they encounter. Street culture exists at the “interface between structural oppression and individual action” (Bourgois 2003: 12). Individuals choose to what degree they want to accept and express different values, behaviors, and ideals in street culture. So while many of the poor are faced with similar objective conditions, their own individual agency shapes the way they perceive these conditions, limitations, and oppression in their lives. Some choose to embrace the more creative and positive rituals and beliefs in street culture while others act out in violent, destructive ways. Sherri Ortner explained that “culture powerfully
constitutes the reality that actors live in” (1984: 153). Within street culture, meanings, values, and symbols are adapted to represent new things. The symbols do not “exist apart from how they are conveyed and…. participation in them and with them constructs not only their power but their very meaning” (Schudson 1989: 154). For example, jazz funerals have become an accepted ritual in street culture to celebrate the passing of a loved one. To those engaged in illegal behaviors, activities like selling drugs have become “a badge of pride” and means to gain respect (Bourgois 2003: 130).

The interplay of structure and agency has come to be a dominant theoretical issue in the social sciences. Anthony Giddens described the complex relationship between structure and agency as “one of the ‘central problems’ of modern social theory” (Ortner 1984: 145). Scholars such as Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, and Giddens have made contributions to interpreting and theorizing the complex relationship between structure and agency. Practice theorists like Bourdieu and Giddens attempted to understand and explain the relationship between human agency and the larger system and to highlight the inequalities and power differentials present in this relationship (Ortner 1984: 148). Bourdieu emphasized how “sociocultural life is a product of both societal structure and individual agency” (Knauft 106). People are shaped by the larger structure of society but they also reproduce and shape this larger structure. The ways the larger structure of society shapes people’s beliefs and actions reveals economic, political, and symbolic inequalities. In the case of street culture, adaptations partly emerged because of the limitations and exclusions imposed on the people by the larger structure of society. Members of street culture unconsciously shape how these forces define their lives through their everyday activities.
Staff at Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries do not conceptualize street culture in the same manner. These organizations do not acknowledge that there are positive aspects or merit to street culture. They view street culture, in its entirety, as a destructive and violent culture, not as an adaptation to life circumstances. These organizations conceptualize street culture as the opposite of what they are. The faith-based organizations are holy and good while street culture is evil and what these faith-based organizations must fight against. Instead of distinguishing the criminal component of street culture from the majority of members of street culture who do not engage in illegal behaviors, these organizations have lumped all members together into a homogenous group. By doing this, these organizations are not encouraging or allowing their youth to engage in the positive aspects and influences of street culture that are very much a part of life in New Orleans. They are also exhibiting a lack of knowledge and understanding about the people and environment where they work.

It is difficult to quantify or even qualify this criminal component of New Orleans street culture. One reason for this difficulty is that much of the information on this group stems from the New Orleans Police Department, the District Attorney’s Office, federal law enforcement agencies, and the media. I am certain that information from these agencies is different from reality. Having access to speak to this group of individuals however is quite difficult. Journalists in a February 2004 *Times-Picayune* special report on violence estimated there to be a “small, self-contained cadre,” between 1,000 and 1,500 young men, who are responsible for the majority of murders and violence in the city. These men appear to represent the most active criminal component in New Orleans.
Comparative to the relative size of the New Orleans population, this number appears quite small. Even though the number of individuals engaged in crime appears quite small, people throughout the city are affected by their actions on a daily basis. In *Selling Crack in El Barrio*, Bourgois described how the destructive members of street culture are “carving out hegemony on inner city streets” (2003: 11). Daily displays of violence affect all residents of New Orleans. Even youth who are not involved in such a lifestyle are forced to act a certain way and portray a certain image so as not to appear vulnerable. Additionally, constant exposure to violent acts begins to normalize violence. Anderson remarked that the more people who participate in the destructive behaviors of street culture, the more “normal” and accepted the culture will become (1999: 134). Street culture is also detrimental to the overall image of the poor. The media and politicians focus on the violence and extreme aspects of street culture and use these representations of street culture as misrepresentations of the entirety of inner city poor (Bourgois 2003: 34). The media shows few stories that highlight the positive and creative aspects of street culture and ways that the majority of members speak and act out against the violence. Politicians use the destructive extremes of street culture to enact and reinforce policies that further limit opportunities for the poor. By using these extremes, politicians incorrectly paint a picture of an “undeserving,” homogenous poor population.

For those who engage in violence and criminal actions, their lives are ruled by a code of the street where respect, honor, and loyalty are expected and required (Ritea and Young 2004; Anderson 1999: 33). Members work in the underground economy selling drugs, stealing, and hustling. Women are spoken of and treated in much the same
manner, like “hoes” and “bitches” (Ritea and Young 2004). Violence is the enforcer on the street and is perhaps, the most disturbing expression of street culture. Registering the highest per capita murder rate in the country, New Orleans earned the designation of the Nation’s Murder Capitol in 2002 and 2003. While the number of homicides has decreased from 275 in 2003 to 269 in 2004, there is still cause for alarm. To emphasize how extreme this murder rate is, New Orleans would have to register only 36 murders a year to have a murder rate comparable to New York City (Johnson 2004). Those engaged in criminal activity do not respect or at times even acknowledge the legal power of the police or governmental institutions. According to Agent Smith who has significant experience working in the housing projects, individuals engaged in these behaviors view the police in much the same manner as they view rivals on the street. Police have no more power because of their gun or badge. To these individuals, a gun and badge do not symbol authority; but instead are viewed as part of the uniform of a rival gang. Justice rules the street through a cycle of violence, retaliation, and revenge. Violence and the code of the street dictate every situation from something as trivial as an argument to market competition for a better drug-coping corner.

Selling drugs is a significant source of income for many engaged in a criminal lifestyle. With such high youth unemployment rates and low paying jobs, it is difficult to make ends meet legally. Others do not participate in organized dealing, but do use and often abuse drugs. Drugs, especially heroin, crack, and crystal meth (crystal methaphetamines), become an outlet for the pain, suffering, and frustrations of daily life. Using drugs to numb emotional suffering is no different than mainstream culture. These highly addictive and destructive drugs are many people’s entrance into the despair and
violence that is taking hold of New Orleans. To dealers in the city, drugs are a business and businesses have a code of conduct. As Capt. James Scott, commander of the 3rd Police District, stated, “On the street, they [dealers] cannot be in the business and allow someone to rip them off” (Filosa 2004). A dealer allowing a user to rip him off is similar to a merchant allowing a customer to steal and then taking no measures to prosecute the thief (Filosa 2004). Even minor thefts are dealt with extreme punishments because credibility is gained for dealers through public displays of violence. One only has as much honor and respect as others give to him. Dealers increase their credibility by making an example of customers as a message to others to respect the code of the street. The threat of violence serves to deter others from disrespecting or cheating the dealer.

Besides violence towards customers who disobey the rules, dealers engage in turf wars with other dealers due to a decentralized drug market. The turf war can be small scale and spontaneous like someone selling $50 bags of weed on someone else’s corner to something as large as an all-out city war. Public housing developments are “arguably some of the most fought after real-estate” (Ritea and Young 2004). Michael Perlstein, a reporter for The Times-Picayune, has documented a generations long drug war within B.W. Cooper, formerly known as the Calliope. The war began in 1987 with the murder of the Calliope’s “first drug kingpin of the crack cocaine era,” Sam “Scully” Clay. Since his death, numerous drug families have formed and been eliminated by the next most powerful family in a series of murders and violence (Perlstein 2004). Currently, drug trade within the Calliope is dominated by the 3 ‘n’ G, but they have begun to experience competition from a group of West Bank dealers with Calliope connections. There has also been an increase in turf wars due to the redevelopment of many housing projects.
With the destruction of the St Thomas and Desire projects, many of the residents have been moved to the St Bernard projects. This move has fueled existing rivalries between residents of the different housing projects, leading to heightened violence. In addition to these two rivalries, there is also an uptown/downtown rivalry that has resulted in several car chases and violent shootings. Uptown and downtown are relational terms and while they are loosely associated with geographic areas, the people living in these areas characterize themselves and each other as distinct groups.

With drugs however, it is not just the dealers who are engaged in violence and crime. As the addiction grows, the need for the drug increases, leading many users to resort to violence or illegal means when the money runs out. Out of desperation for their next hit, users will steal money, rob stores, or even steal drugs to get what they need. A representative of Project Safe Neighborhood, a federally funded movement to reduce gun violence, explained that guns are being sold for as little as five or ten dollars on the street, depending on the seller’s desperation for cash. Rampant drug use is reflected in New Orleans arrest and homicide records. In 2003, 78.4% of males and 59.8% of females arrested tested positive for cocaine, heroin, marijuana, PCP, or crystal meth (Office of National Drug Control Policy 2004). Four out of ten homicide victims tested positive for illegal substances with cocaine being the most common illegal substance found. Cocaine was even more common than alcohol (Filosa 2004).

Drug-related behaviors and violence highlight one of the main aspects of the code of the street. According to Anderson, “the code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one’s own safety begins” (1999: 34). Police and the criminal justice system are not respected or feared. Traditionally in New
Orleans, the police have been understaffed and corrupt. There are only 3.14 officers per 1,000 residents compared to cities like Washington DC where there are 7 officers per 1,000 residents (CNN 2005). New Orleans city officials are having difficulty recruiting quality officers to increase the NOPD ranks. As a result of both an understaffed force and the failures of officers on the force, the most dangerous areas of the city do not receive the police power necessary, allowing crime to go unchecked and criminals not to fear arrest or imprisonment (Schleifstein 2004; Russell 2004a). A representative of the Metro Crime Commission, a citizen watchdog group that monitors police officers, the district attorney, judges, and politicians, explained that despite a sky-high number of arrests in New Orleans, very few of these arrests actually lead to convictions. Officers find it frustrating and demoralizing to repeatedly arrest the same offenders. The Metro Crime Commission cites a breakdown of communication between the NOPD and the District Attorney’s Office as one of the reasons “the criminal justice system fails to put violent and habitual offenders behind bars” (Metro Crime Commission 2005: 4).

Because of the failings of the police and judicial system, justice, instead, plays out according to the code of the street. Above all else, the values of respect, honor, and loyalty are seen as a foundation to all aspects of life. Respect is viewed as a “form of social capital” that is hard earned and easily lost (Anderson 1999: 66). Demanding respect is a means of asserting power and plays a role in every interaction and behavior individuals engage in from something as simple as wearing certain clothing and walking down the street in a certain manner to interacting with the opposite sex and buying and selling drugs. Helen Regis described one of the negative aspects of New Orleans street culture as a “street-based ethos of fierceness and honor backed by guns” (2001: 760).
Displays of violence bring respect by not only bolstering one’s status on the street through aggression and power but also by instilling fear in others. Loyalty and respect are demanded from every member of this group. It does not matter who the person is, even if it is your best friend, once loyalty is betrayed and disrespect is shown, the only choice left is violence. Violence is not arbitrary and random however. If this were the case, it would have no symbolic meaning or capital and eventually everyone would kill each other. The code of the street provides a framework for when violence should be used and what type of violence should be used (Anderson 1999: 33). In committing violent acts, members must always take into account that their actions will bring consequences in the future in the form of revenge and retribution.

Even people outside this lifestyle recognize the importance of respect. Ms. H, a public high school teacher, noted that fighting and violence erupt within her classroom over what she would consider minor incidents or trivial episodes. For example, she noted how one fight began when a female student accidentally bumped into a male student as they were entering the classroom. The male student took the bump as a sign of disrespect and verbally started to assault the female student. The incident might have escalated to violence if the teacher had not intervened. Another high school public school teacher, Ms. S, explained how interactions with her students have been far more productive and successful since she began assuring them that she was not trying to disrespect them. She would preface her criticisms and suggestions by saying, “I am not showing you any disrespect, but…” This not only assured students they were not being publicly challenged by their teacher, but it alerted others in the classroom to the situation as well.
It showed that the student being addressed was not weak and was still maintaining his level of respect even if he chose to take the teacher’s suggestions into account.

Law enforcement agents have also noted the importance of respect in interactions. Agent Smith spent numerous months working in a housing project and came to know the residents of the project fairly well. He spent everyday walking around the project, sitting and talking with older residents, hanging out with the children after school, and conducting surveillance of known murderers living in the project. Agent Smith stressed the importance of respect in his interactions with residents. He realized soon after beginning his work that by showing others respect, he was shown respect. Recognizing that respect was social capital, he and his partner made efforts to show respect to the residents by not carrying their guns and badges around the project, not carrying out undercover surveillance or wire taps, not making arrests for minor infractions like marijuana, and genuinely being interested in the lives of the people they were trying to protect. He also tried to show respect by trying to learn and understand as much as he could about life in the projects. Through these efforts, the community showed the officers respect by not engaging in certain illegal activities in their presence and providing them with information that enabled them to convict the most destructive and dangerous criminals in the area. From the information that Agent Smith and his partner gathered, prosecutors were able to convict six murderers to life sentences. Agent Smith believes his investigation would have failed if he had not shown residents the respect he had.

Agent Smith commented that in his experiences, this type of interaction between law enforcement and poorer residents of New Orleans is very rare. There is widespread
mistrust of the police and criminal justice system. This mistrust is partly due to the large number of negative experiences many have had with a corrupt police force and a criminal justice system that continually fails them. As recently as the nineties, corruption within the New Orleans police force was so bad that it earned the department a place on the Human Rights Watch list (1998). Although supervisors at the NOPD claim corruption has been considerably reduced, it is difficult to erase the mistakes and experiences of the recent past. In interviews, incidents of corruption in the NOPD from the early 1980s still surface. One well-know incident is that of the Algiers 7 where in November 1980, Officer Gregory Neupert was murdered outside the Fisher Projects. In an effort to find the officer’s killer, police terrorized residents of the Fisher Projects, knocking down doors, arresting youth, and beating up residents. In an early morning raid of one apartment, police killed two male suspects and an innocent woman. In the wake of these murders, the Police Superintendent resigned and seven officers were indicted on civil rights charges for their treatment of Fisher residents. However, no legal action was taken against the officers for the wrongful death shootings of the three individuals in the Fisher Projects (Grady 1990). The lack of actions taken by the District Attorney’s office sent a powerful message that still resonates today among people in New Orleans.

In a city where much time is spent outdoors on the porch or the street, it is often the case that the entire community observes interactions between police officers and suspects. Agent Smith explained how the worst misconceptions and rumors start from these observations. Often the community will not witness the entirety of an interaction. They witness the worst part of the arrest, the white cop beating up the poor African American from the project. The community does not see the initial altercation where the
suspect may have had drugs, a gun, or tried to assault an officer. With such large populations of people living so close together, word quickly spreads about incidents with the police and mistrust of the police grows even stronger within the community. While Agent Smith does not feel that police deserve as bad a reputation as they have, he did admit that many NOPD officers still beat up suspects and make arrests based on little grounding. He added that many officers have become so frustrated with conditions in New Orleans that they have resorted to picking up people who they “think” may commit crimes. Police make arrests based on the “broken windows theory.” They believe that if they can arrest criminals for petty crimes, they can remove them from the street before they are able to commit major felonies. This practice accounts for the NOPD making over 100,000 arrests last year (NOPD 2005).

Justice on the streets does not play out in the courtrooms of New Orleans either. More often than not, justice is carried out through a system of retribution and revenge. The New Orleans Metro Crime Commission found witnesses rarely come forth because they are not willing to risk their lives for a system that has repeatedly failed to convict. Witnesses would rather leave justice to the streets, where often a suspect in a murder is found dead weeks later, probably out of revenge for his initial acts. This aspect of justice in New Orleans particularly struck Agent Smith. He related one story about a resident of the housing project where he patrolled. A mother, whose son was murdered in the project, knew who committed her son’s murder. Rather than going to the police, she sought out the killer herself and reminded him that she would forgive him but she would never forget. A few weeks later, this killer himself was murdered. A representative of the Metro Crime Commission explained that because witnesses are afraid to come
forward and testify against hardened criminals, these criminals are repeatedly arrested and released due to a lack of evidence. The statistics speak to the witnesses’ fears. In 2003-2004, only 7% of those arrested were sentenced to prison time. And of the total number of convictions, only 5% were for violent crimes (Metro Crime Commission 2005: 1). Furthermore, Agent Smith noted how each time a criminal is arrested and released his status on the street goes up because he has essentially “beat the system.” Agent Smith does not believe criminals think twice about committing another crime because they suffer no punishments for their behaviors. In the housing project where he worked, residents who were released from Angola, a maximum-security prison in Louisiana, enjoyed increased street status because surviving prison life spoke to their fierceness and aggression. Their prison time in Angola bolstered their credibility.

New Orleans street culture is also expressed in the material possessions of individuals. Most individuals, whether they are engaged in the positive or negative aspects of street culture, dress in a certain manner. Drug dealers spend money on cars, clothes, and flashy jewelry. Public school teachers remarked the importance of shoes to their students. According to the teachers, the very same students that are receiving reduced school lunches are spending hundreds of dollars on designer-label shoes. These items, the clothing and the cars, are seen as extensions of the person and respect of them is required as well (Anderson 1999: 71). Music is also an important factor in street culture. Music includes many different genres such as rap, blues, funk, and brass bands. In the case of rap music, the lives of rappers and the lyrics of their songs, work to produce and narrate the violent and destructive lifestyles some engage in. Rappers like Juvenile, Master P, C Murder, and Soulja Slim were born and raised in New Orleans.
From their self-given names to their lifestyles, they embody street culture and serve as “icons” of New Orleans street culture. Though some of the artists have found success in the music world, others have lived out the brutal lyrics of their songs. Soulja Slim, born James Tapp, was tragically gunned down outside his mother’s house on November 26, 2003. C Murder is serving a life sentence for the murder of a sixteen-year-old teenager and is currently on trial for a second murder in Baton Rouge. In March 2005, Master P was arrested on gun possession charges in Los Angeles (Harris 2005).

The lyrics to these rapper’s songs showcase “the ubiquitous terror and hardship of life” in New Orleans that many experience (Regis 2001: 760). The artists rap about violence, drugs, the projects, the police, the afterlife, money, and women. Interestingly enough, their songs incorporate an aspect of faith and spirituality; in more than one song, rappers ask their mothers to pray for them because of the fierceness and violence they encounter in street culture. Although aspects of their music glorify the most destructive aspects of street culture, the lyrics of the songs do indicate rappers are aware of the destructive nature of their lifestyle and the often tragic way lives end for many rappers. In “Pray for your Baby,” Soulja Slim sings, “Dear Mama, won’t you pray for your baby/ I’m tired of being broke/ So I’ma keep mines out here with this weed and coke.” In another part of the song, Slim sings, “Mom I love you cause you made me/ But pray for your baby cause this ghetto got me crazy” (Give it To ‘Em Raw 1998). In the song, “Can’t Touch Us,” Slim sings, “Find us thuggin’ in the projects like blood & crips/ I mean me & my niggas we be hustlin’ to eat/ Cause these No Limit soldiers who be runnin’ these streets.” (The Streets Made Me 2001) In all of his songs, Slim makes
reference to the irony of street culture. He feels he needs this lifestyle to survive and make money but at the same time he knows that it will ultimately be his demise.

One of the saddest complications of the violent aspects of street culture is the children. On a daily basis, many of the city’s children witness violence and incorporate the values and behaviors of street culture into their lives, both consciously and unconsciously. Children are vulnerable and impressionable. Public school teachers tell stories of children imitating adult behaviors, singing inappropriate rap lyrics, and using adult language. Ms. B, a second grade public school teacher related that although students use adult language, they often do not understand what they are saying. Children also emulate adult behaviors. One disturbing incident, in September 2004, involved an eight-year-old student at Laurel Elementary School who sold a gun to ten-year-old student for $2.00. Hours later, the ten year old student was spotted on the playground with the gun in his waistband, threatening to kill other students (*The Times-Picayune* 2004). At such a young age, these children have already incorporated many of the behaviors and ideals of their elders into the repertoire of possible actions for their lives.

Even at a young age, children recognize and imitate the behaviors they see people around them engaging in. Street culture is a powerful socializing force for children in both positive and negative ways. Anderson noted how younger children learn from older children and how “street-oriented adults shape and reinforce children’s understandings of the street” (1999: 70). In Ms. B’s classroom, children have already incorporated the ideas of retaliation and retribution, even though they do not fully understand them. If one student says something about the other’s mother, this verbal assault cannot be brushed aside. A retaliatory comment must be made. At the same time, extraordinary events
have already become commonplace in these children’s lives. Teachers report that children talk with them each week about not having a place to live, their mother’s boyfriend hitting their mother, fires breaking out in their house, a relative being shot, having to go to bail someone out of jail, or something as sad as their mother dying. Children talk to their teachers about these situations as if they happen to everyone. Constant exposure to such events normalizes them to children and children incorporate them into their value and belief systems. Because of the life experiences they had at such a young age, children have already incorporated cultural ideas into their lives and formed their own ideas on violence and life. The Gert Town Community Center asked children in their summer program to explain what violence meant to them. At the young age of eight, these children already understood the way some aspects of street culture work. One youngster defined violence as “when a person kills another person and that person heard that and they want to go back and kill his family and he will never think of killing anybody who has family again” (Montoya 2004: C1). However, on a brighter note, children also recognize the perverse irony of their own community members being the ones to cause destruction in their community. One fourteen year old boy, who has lost numerous family members to violence, writes, “I think we need to stop the violence because the way I see it, it’s like we’re holding ourselves back. If we’re holding ourselves back, then who’s going to step up and say or do something about it? If no one else is willing to take the chance, I will” (Montoya 2004: C1).

The destructive aspects of street culture and the oppressive conditions of poverty in New Orleans are not without a counterpart. Numerous organizations within the city operate programs to meet the needs of New Orleans residents. In the next chapter, I will
detail the history, philosophies, and methodologies of one such development movement in New Orleans.
Across New Orleans, numerous programs, organizations, and community centers operate to alleviate the conditions of poverty. These organizations not only physically aid residents of New Orleans, but they also attempt to reach out to victims of structural oppression and marginalization and empower residents to create better futures. Much focus of these community programs is centered on the youth of New Orleans. The organizations provide outreach and assistance to protect youth from the violence and the destructfullness of street culture as well as to offer youth alternatives to the street. These organizations try to counter the negative influences of street culture on New Orleans youth. Within New Orleans, three faith-based organizations, Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries, share a common philosophy and vision to their work with youth and residents. The foundation of these three faith-based organizations rests upon the tenets of the Christian Community Development Association. To appreciate the work of these three faith-based organizations, it is important to first understand the Christian Community Development movement. To do this, I begin Chapter 3 with a brief description of American Evangelicalism to locate the development movement within a broad faith-based context. From there, I provide an overview of the Christian Community Development Association, detailing its history, philosophies, and methodology. Analysis of the movement will be discussed in Chapter 5.
To better understand the Christian Community Development Movement, it is helpful to briefly explore evangelicalism. Although there is no official claim of affiliation between evangelicalism and the Christian Community Development Movement, the beliefs and philosophies of movement members closely resemble those of evangelicals. The term evangelicalism is a “wide-reaching definitional canopy that covers a diverse number of Protestant groups” including Fundamentalists, Born-Again Christians, Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, and many other Christian denominations (Eskridge 2000). Because the term encompasses so many different and varied Christian denominations, it is difficult to ascertain how many people associate with evangelicalism. Sociologists, theologians, and political scientists have conducted surveys to determine membership but results of the surveys vary significantly depending upon how the study defined evangelicalism. Leaders at Wheaton College, a private interdenominational Christian college, assert that evangelicalism is practiced by 35-45% of the American population, which roughly calculates to between 80 and 100 million people. Leaders at this institution feel this statistic might underestimate the number of practicing evangelicals, but they prefer to underestimate rather than overestimate the population (Eskridge 2000).

Evangelicalism has a long history in America. It was most popular during the 18th and 19th centuries and can be said to have “shaped American culture during the 19th century” (Marsden 1991: 2). Evangelicals were most powerful before the Civil War and are often credited with a strong presence and leadership role in social reform movements of the early 19th century such as temperance, abolition, and the early women’s movement.
Because of the large number of evangelicals in early American society, evangelical beliefs often influenced the dominant moral standards of the time (Marsden 1991: 2). Following the Civil War, evangelicalism began to decline due to new political, intellectual, and theological developments as well as a sudden increase in non-evangelical populations within America. However since the 1960s, there has been a return to evangelicalism in America. Through the use of technology and the media, evangelicals are spreading their message across the nation. Evangelical leaders, such as James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, have become outspoken about politics and the morality of the American public. In the most recent presidential election, evangelical groups such as the Christian Coalition, played a significant role in promoting anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, and a return to moral Christian values (Eskridge 2000).

Because evangelicalism is such an all-encompassing movement, it is difficult to determine exactly which beliefs or tenets are common to every denomination or believer within the movement. Overall however, evangelicals place great importance on the Bible, especially the New Testament. The very word evangelical comes from the Greek word evangelion, which means “the good news” or “the gospel” (Marsden 1991: 2). According to a study conducted by Emerson and Smith, 97% of self-identified evangelicals believe “the Bible is inspired by God and without error” (2000: 22). And it is through the Bible, they believe, that God communicates the way he wants people to live. Many evangelical denominations believe the Bible is not just the true word of God but a true record of the history and events of the past (Noll 1986: 143). This belief in the authority and message of the Bible is the foremost tenet of evangelicalism.
In addition to the Bible, much importance is placed on the role of salvation. As George Marsden pointed out in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, “Central [to evangelicalism] is the proclamation of Christ’s saving work through his death on the cross and the necessity of personally trusting him for eternal salvation” (1991: 2). For evangelicals, Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and it is through the New Testament and forming a personal relationship with Christ that one can achieve salvation (Emerson and Smith 2000: 24). Evangelicals also place great importance on spirituality in all parts of one’s life, not just Sunday morning at church. Evangelicals are expected to take an active role in promoting spirituality, evangelism, mission work, and within some denominations, social reform. One’s relationship with Christ and devotion to living as shown in the Bible should be evident in one’s day-to-day life.

As stated previously, the Christian Community Development Association makes no official claim of connection to evangelicalism. The similarities between the movement and evangelicalism are greater than the differences. The most important similarity between the two is the extreme importance placed on the Bible. Not only is the Bible viewed as a tool to communicate the word of God but it is also used as a framework to establish a standard of living in accordance with God. For organizations within the Christian Community Development Association, the Bible dictates their language, their actions, and their beliefs. This is made apparent through the extensive use of Biblical passages in Christian Community Development documents, language, websites, and even adorning the walls of organization buildings.

The most significant difference between the movement and evangelicalism is the stress placed on social reform and racial diversity by members of the Christian
Community Development Association. Within evangelicalism, there is a rift between white and African American congregations as well as between lower and upper class congregations. One of the chief criticisms of evangelicalism is “the reality of racially segregated evangelical congregations across the Western World” (Smith 2004: 189). White and upper class evangelical congregations have been accused of neglecting poor and African American populations in America (Balmer 1989: 150). The Christian Community Development movement, on the other hand, has designed their missions and philosophies specifically for poor populations around the country. They have also established racially diverse organizations. Members of the movement consider community development and social action as chief responsibilities inseparable from spirituality and Christianity.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

Officially, the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) was not founded until 1989, but its beginnings trace back decades before this. CCDA began with the efforts of Dr. John Perkins and his “call from Christ” to return home to his state of birth, Mississippi (Balmer 1989: 140). After living the beginning years of his life in poverty and suffering the deaths of both his mother and brother, Dr. Perkins left Mississippi in 1946, headed to California. In California, Dr. Perkins set himself on the path to middle-class living; he married and had five children, served in Korea, found successful employment, and established himself as a leader in the community by serving as a union organizer. Despite his successes in California, Dr. Perkins felt a “calling from Christ” to return to Mississippi. So in June of 1960, Dr. Perkins and his family moved
back to Mendenhall, Mississippi (Figure 2) where he found much the same conditions of poverty and oppression that he had left thirteen years prior (Balmer 1989: 140).

Although Dr. Perkins intended to return to Mississippi to help African Americans, he had not intended to become the founder and leader of a large Christian development movement. He had always relied on his strong sense of faith to aid him in facing oppressive conditions, but he did not begin to take an active leadership role within Mississippi until he took a job picking cotton and realized the extent of African American oppression. He started Voices of Calvary Missions where he began to organize social
and religious programs for the African American residents in Mendenhall. During the 1960s, Mendenhall, like many other southern towns, was a town divided along racial lines where African Americans experienced extreme poverty and racism at the hands of white Mississippians. Dr. Perkins began his ministry in an effort to aid African Americans spiritually and physically. Through the principles of redistribution, relocation, and reconciliation, referred to as the three R’s, Dr. Perkins helped raise up members of his community as leaders by nurturing their faith, aiding them in their education, and welcoming them home to Mendenhall. With the help of the community leaders, he was able to establish co-op housing for African Americans, an African American run thrift store, a Summer Enrichment program for children, and a farm that not only provided much needed food but taught skills of agriculture and management (Balmer 1989: 142).

After a near-death beating by the Mississippi Highway Patrol following a civil rights protest, Dr. Perkins relocated Voices of Calvary Missions forty miles west to Jackson, Mississippi. He also expanded the mission of his ministry to not only meet the spiritual and physical needs of African Americans but to attempt to transcend the black/white racial line. Dr. Perkins encouraged reconciliation between the races, “resolving to take a gospel of love to whites filled with hate” (Balmer 1989: 145). In Jackson, Dr. Perkins continued many of the programs he started in Mendenhall and expanded his outreach to include programs that encouraged ownership among African Americans like creating a health center and youth ministry. In 1980, the governor of Mississippi recognized Dr. Perkins for his efforts, awarding him the title of Outstanding Religious Leader of the Year (Balmer 1989: 149).
After realizing the successes of his efforts, Dr. Perkins called upon Christian leaders from across the nation who shared a dedication to the same goals and beliefs. Bonded by a commitment to “express the love of Christ in America’s poor communities,” the Christian Community Development Movement has grown strong over the past several years promoting social responsibility, aid to the poor, and racial reconciliation through the Christian faith. The association now boasts a membership of over 3000 individuals and 300 ministries in more than 100 cities (Perkins 1995: 239). The programs and services offered by these ministries cover a wide spectrum of needs including creating jobs, finding and building housing, working with youth and the elderly, financial assistance, and educational enrichment. Membership within CCDA is interracial and open to anyone who wants to become involved with the movement.

In order to offer both physical and spiritual aid to communities in need, CCDA recognizes the importance of understanding social inequality, poverty, violence, racism, and structural oppression under which these communities operate. In his book, *A Quiet Revolution*, Dr. Perkins explained the complex situation of structural oppression using the metaphor of a house of cards. He wrote:

I remember that when we used to try and make houses of playing cards, stacking and balancing just right, the least wrong movement or puff of wind or cough and they’d fall. And for the masses of black people in Mississippi, life is being lived in a house of cards. All the things that give structure to life—education, employment, income, health, housing, leadership, transportation, and nutrition—are for the most part flimsy excuses for survival, built upon and against each other, so that when one falls they all fall and are rebuilt only to fall again... We begin to see poverty surround them, reached into every structure of their lives, and affect the complete psychology of a whole community (1976: 87).

While social science perspectives identify similar societal forces, there is a key difference in the social science perspective from that of CCDA. Members of CCDA
believe that faith is a large part of the solution to these problems. For members of this organization, spirituality is a fundamental component to the structure of life. It is essential that people have employment and housing and the things Perkins listed but it is also necessary, from his standpoint, that they have spirituality and faith as a concrete foundation from which to build these physical components. As Philip Reed, President of Voice of Calvary Ministries, pointed out in his essay, “The true needs of a person are not being met if they do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ” (1995: 28). Similar to evangelicalism, CCDA stresses spirituality not only as the foundation of one’s life but as incorporated into every aspect of a person’s life.

It is from this viewpoint, the belief that the structure to one’s life is Christ, that CCDA frames the majority of their work and beliefs. The stated mission of the association is “to inspire and train Christians who seek to bear witness to the Kingdom of God by reclaiming and restoring under-resourced communities.” In order to achieve this mission, CCDA takes a “wholistic” approach to meeting the needs of community members. The term “wholistic” refers to meeting the needs of the whole person, not just the physical needs or the spiritual needs. To this extent, CCDA’s ministry deals with the spiritual, social, economic, political, cultural, emotional, physical, moral, judicial, educational, and familial issues of each person (Gordon 2005). CCDA members draw on the “wholistic” nature of the gospel or the belief that the gospel targets the whole person, as support of this all-encompassing approach. It is not clear however how this “wholistic” approach differs from a holistic approach that many other faith-based organizations embrace.

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CCDA’s first step in carrying out its mission is to meet the felt needs, or the most important needs, of the community where they are working. CCDA attempts to meet these needs first in order to establish trust and understanding and develop relationships with community members who will aid them in their mission. CCDA recognizes three universal needs: the need to belong, the need to be significant and important to someone, and the need for security. Although it is not stated anywhere in CCDA literature, these felt needs are very similar to Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs. CCDA’s approach to meeting these needs is through the community’s children. Not only are the children the most vulnerable population in the community, but CCDA stands strongly behind the philosophy that by loving the children of the community, the parents are drawn into the organization. CCDA purports that by meeting these universal felt needs, it reaffirms the dignity of a person and motivates one to take responsibility for his life.

While I agree that meeting the needs of the community is of utmost importance, I could not find any official documentation from the association that describes the criteria or methodology members of CCDA use for determining felt needs. An article by Dr. Wayne Gordon discusses conducting community meetings to determine the talents of community members as well as the areas where community members would like to focus, but overall he provides nothing more than broad generalizations for determining felt needs. The way staff at these faith-based organizations determine the felt needs of the community is critical to the relationships these organizations form with the community. I do know that in the case of Trinity Christian Community, workers at the organization conducted door-to-door surveys of the direct neighborhoods surrounding the organization to determine the felt needs of the community. Ministers and staff then used the survey
responses as a starting point for the creation of outreach programs. Trust, relationships, and interdependence cannot be built between community members and staff at the faith-based organization if leaders of these organizations assume a paternalistic position to the community, telling the community what they need. By telling the community what they need rather than asking, leaders reinforce power differentials and continue to make the same mistakes as politicians and government agencies. Though the leaders of CCDA organizations are well intentioned, they often are not indigenous members of the community. Indigenous members of the community have the greatest amount of knowledge about their communities and it is only through asking and speaking with community members that organization leaders can determine what the community needs and how to best work with the community to meet their needs. CCDA champions the idea that community members see themselves as the solution to the problem but their methodology of community development does not exactly match this philosophy.

Along with meeting the felt needs of the community, it is the mission of CCDA to bring the concept of salvation to these communities. CCDA operates under the belief that salvation is a community event. Based on CCDA’s reading of both the Old and New Testament, salvation is the forgiveness of one’s sins and deliverance from one’s enemies and destructive forces like poverty and social injustice. CCDA commonly cites the Biblical passage Psalms 27:1, “The Lord is my light and my salvation- whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life- of whom shall I be afraid?” to support the idea that salvation can only be achieved through Jesus Christ (Reed 1995: 37-38). CCDA leaders believe by living one’s life for Christ and “doing the work of the Kingdom of God,” one can achieve salvation (Noble and Potter 1995:45). To fully realize salvation, there are
many components that must be drawn upon including justice, evangelism, economic development, social action, and answering God’s call to return to the inner cities. In achieving salvation, both the individual and society is transformed (Reed 1995: 38). CCDA leaders hope that by bringing the message of the gospel to these communities that they can also bring salvation to those who embrace the word of God. CCDA’s biblical concept of salvation is very similar to that of evangelicalism.

In order to achieve their goals, CCDA works through three principles, known as the three R’s: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. Relocation is the belief that members of CCDA must live in the communities of the people they are trying to help. By living in the community, those ministering to the community can better understand the problems and become part of the solution. Reconciliation is the practice of “reconciling people to God and bringing them together” (Gordon 2005). It is the belief that a person’s love for Christ should break down any physical, mental, or social barriers that one may face. Redistribution occurs when people, who love Jesus Christ, move back into the communities and bring with them their resources, skills, principles, and education. Using the three R’s, CCDA also promotes the idea of indigenous leadership or developing leaders from within the community.

The foundation that structures Christian Community Development is both a conservative Christian theology and the belief in the Bible as the ultimate word of God. Members have decided who needs to be helped, why they should be helped, and how they should be helped based upon a critical interpretation of the Bible and deep spiritual Christian values. Members of the movement have decided they are the ones responsible for aiding the poor and helping them to develop a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ.
Together, their spiritual ideals and Biblical interpretations, structure and shape community development efforts. These efforts are channeled through the three principles of the movement, relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. The Bible and their spiritual beliefs provide the context from which members understand and experience all aspects of their lives. Members of the Christian Community Development movement maintain that their spirituality cannot be separated from who they are and how they live their lives.

THE BIBLE

For CCDA and its numerous faith-based organizations, the Bible is the supreme source of authority, power, and wisdom. These organizations find their strength and vision in the word of God. For members of these organizations, “The Bible is the Word of God in a cognitive, prepositional, factual sense” (Noll 1986: 6). Members of CCDA, like evangelicals, believe the words of the Bible are the actual words of God. Members of CCDA use the Bible as a tool, a medium for the interaction of spirituality and worldly living. They use the narratives of the Bible to provide a standard of living for residents of the community. Members of CCDA also look to the Bible for answers to their problems and strength and resilience in dealing with difficult situations. By using the Bible in this manner, members view it as a code of life or a code of faith to live their lives by. Similar to the way the code of the street serves members of street culture, CCDA considers the Bible as the ultimate guide to how Christian members should live their lives, the principles and ideals they should embrace, and the way they should treat other people. For CCDA members, the Bible is so important that it could be said that members...
adopt a “Biblical worldview” whereby they view their life experiences through the scope of the Bible (Emerson and Smith 2000: 124).

While it is not the purpose of this thesis to determine the truth or validity of the Bible, it is necessary to recognize that there are many different interpretations of the Bible. Hundreds of different religions exist, all claiming to be based essentially on the same book. Theologian Robert Schreiter also points out that “the gospel never comes alone to a culture; it is always brought by someone who is part of some cultural form of Christianity” (1989: 745). Because of this, it is important to recognize that the language of the Bible can be manipulated to produce desired effects. As Susan Harding pointed out in her book, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, “Preachers convert the Bible into spoken language, translating it into local theological and cultural idioms and placing present events in the sequence of Biblical stories. Church people borrow, customize, and produce the Bible into their daily lives” (2001: 12). The very words or interpretation of a Biblical passage that a leader of a faith-based organization uses sends a powerful message to those he is trying to help. His words have the power to frame the viewpoint of listeners and achieve desired results. Also, leaders of faith-based organizations have the power to manipulate Biblical stories and messages to fit the communities and people to whom they are ministering (Patillo-McCoy 1998: 768). The ways that leaders can manipulate Biblical passages serves as evidence that the Bible is far from a fixed and unchanging text.

Furthermore, while CCDA purports using the Bible as a standard for living and morality, it is difficult to determine if anyone actually lives their life in such a way. A basic idea in anthropology is that there are often discrepancies between what people say
they do and what people actually do. Though ministers and staff at these faith-based
organizations may live their lives according to the Bible, it is unknown whether
community members have embraced such a philosophy and lifestyle. It is difficult to
determine how exactly New Orleans members of this movement have appropriated the
Bible. It is also difficult to access the power the Bible has in people’s lives. Leaders at
CCDA believe a strong faith in the Bible and a strong spiritual foundation can lead to
success in other areas of one’s life. However, they do not elaborate exactly how a strong
belief in Jesus Christ translates into a better job or adequate housing.

RELOCATION

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of
the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) ³

Since the 1960s, there has been an ongoing exodus from American cities. As a
result of the civil rights era, many middle and upper class African Americans as well as
whites achieved significant social and economic advances and moved from the cities to
the suburbs. With them they took much of the skill, education, and spirit from the inner
city, leaving the poor, isolated and helpless in their desperate condition (Stack 1996;
Wilson 1999, 1990, 1996). This exodus of the socially mobile created a “vacuum” that
the poor have not been able to fill (Lupton 1995: 76). Many of the social programs
created to aid the poor over the past forty years operated under the philosophy that
success was equal to the number of individuals who left the inner city, further fueling the
exodus of the most talented and skilled. Even the church became caught up in
encouraging members to take advantage of new opportunities available in the suburbs
like better housing and education. Dr. Robert Lupton, a founding member of CCDA and

³ ibid
now President of FCS Urban Ministries in Atlanta, wrote in his article, “Relocation: Living in the Community,” “The American dream became the practical theology of the people of faith and upward mobility became the sign of God’s blessing upon the faithful” (1995: 77). Members of CCDA believe that along with the exodus of the socially mobile went the ideas of neighbor and community. The middle and upper class became lost in the individualistic ventures of the American dream: to find a better job to buy a bigger house to lease a more luxurious car and to provide your children with a better education than you had (Brown 1/10/05). With their departure from the inner city, it also became easier for the socially mobile to forget about the poor.

In looking at the continued decline of conditions in the inner city, members of CCDA recognized that programs and ideas of upward mobility were not solving the crisis. Instead, CCDA adopted a somewhat radical approach- move back into the inner city. Thirty-five years after its implementation, this approach still remains the core development philosophy of CCDA. Commonly referred to as incarnational ministry, this approach is one of the most challenging for workers. For those who have struggled and worked to move out of poverty, it seems absurd to willingly put oneself back into an impoverished environment. For those who have never experienced living in the inner city, fear coupled with an inability to even fathom the challenges one might face is often immobilizing. But it is the position of CCDA that the most effective way to serve the community is to be a part of it, to have a vested interest in its transformation. Hence, relocation is a “non-negotiable” part of Christian Community Development (Lupton 1995: 76).
According to CCDA, relocation is defined as “the need to live and work among those whom we are attempting to bring the hope of the gospel” (Reed 1995: 36). Being a Bible-based Christian ministry, CCDA considers Jesus the ultimate example. According to the Bible, Jesus relocated to earth to save his people, as it states in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (Reed 1995: 37). Members of CCDA attempt to live their lives as it says in the gospel, resembling as closely as possible the life of Jesus Christ. For them, living the gospel means bettering every aspect of their lives, but it also means sharing in the pains and hardships of other people’s lives. They believe the only way to do this is to live interdependently with the people they are trying to help. By doing this, members can better understand the problems people are facing and take part in creating solutions. Furthermore, it is the position of CCDA that when you love your neighbor like yourself, as it says in the Bible, it raises the stakes in community development. Not only do you want more for your neighbor, but you expect more of him as well.

When members of CCDA move into the communities they are trying to help, they bring with them their resources, skills, education, and families. These aspects of the members’ lives are “rewoven into the fabric of the community and become part of its color and strength” (Lupton 1995: 82). Members put down roots in the community and make it their home, the place they always want to return to. CCDA members believe this initial step of reentering the community where so many people have left serves as a powerful message to one’s neighbors that hope and faith are alive in the community. CCDA is aware that it may take years before workers are considered full-fledged community members but by living in the community, they are no longer outsiders. More
importantly, they serve as a bridge, connecting the isolated and discouraged community members to the resources they need to help their own communities.

RECONCILIATION

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14: Bible, New International Version)

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10: 27: Bible, New International Version)

Racial tensions, attitudes, and stereotypes have existed between different racial groups in America. These tensions have been especially high between whites and African Americans since Africans were first brought to America as slaves. Despite the years of progress African Americans have made in securing civil rights, they are still victims of racism and structural oppression. CCDA leaders believe that these racial tensions are at the core of many current social problems. Because of this, racial reconciliation is recognized as an important goal to improve the lives of those living in poverty and violence. Accordingly, CCDA recognizes racial reconciliation as one of the greatest symbols of the truth and power of the gospel, considered by many “the heart of racial reconciliation” (Perkins and Rice 1995: 108). Members of CCDA strongly believe that if the gospel cannot reconcile people across man-made barriers, then it is not the true gospel of Jesus Christ. In this regard, the two commandments found in the Bible, to love yourself and your neighbor, are the essence and foundation of Christianity (Perkins 1995b: 22). Vinay Samuel, a church leader, spoke to the place of the gospel in reconciliation at the Lusanne II Conference of World Evangelism:

One sign and wonder, biblically speaking, that alone can prove the power of the gospel is that of reconciliation…They [other religions] cannot supplicate the miracle of black and white together, of racial injustice being
swept away by the power of the gospel…Our credibility is at stake…If we are not able to establish our credibility in this area we have not got the whole gospel. In fact we have not got a proper gospel at all (Perkins and Rice 1995: 113).

Racial reconciliation is not only one of the most important goals of CCDA, but also one of the most challenging and difficult. CCDA envisions racial reconciliation along a continuum, moving from complete racial segregation to integration and then on to racial reconciliation. In churches where integration has occurred, there are still strong emotions over racial issues and there may even continue to be a divide between groups. Chris Rice, research associate at the Institute of Race and Social Division at Boston University, wrote, “Even though the walls are torn down, people never learned how to step over the rubble” (Perkins and Rice 1995: 107). According to CCDA members, in order for true reconciliation to begin, there needs to be trust, mutual support, and forgiveness. People have to be willing to take the extra step forward to confront the most difficult and pressing issues surrounding race. Both groups need to admit that racism and segregation still exist within American society as well as acknowledge stereotypes as the basis of misunderstandings and miscommunications. They need to take ownership of their feelings and acknowledge the feelings of members of other groups. Discussions of these feelings are often emotionally explosive and difficult, but they are the first steps in the process of healing and reconciliation.

In CCDA’s continuum, after admitting racism still exists, the next step is submitting to God. They consider reconciliation a truly spiritual journey “that tackles some of the worst human tendencies with some of the best that God has to offer his people” (Perkins and Rice 1995: 123). At the very core of this spiritual journey are forgiveness and repentance by both groups. However this will not occur overnight and
may take years of building trust and relationships. Also, part of the spiritual journey is acceptance, acceptance of the differences between groups and recognition of the opportunity to learn and grow from these differences. Older versions of cultural diversity and integration use the metaphors of a mixing bowl or salad, but CCDA views reconciliation and cultural diversity as a stew pot, “where each ingredient, simmering in one church, at the same time retains its distinct taste, takes on the flavors of other ingredients, and corporately becomes a new and different creation” (Perkins and Rice 1995: 129).

**REDISTRIBUTION**

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”
(Psalms 24:1 in Reed 1995: 33)

“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality”

It is the position of CCDA, based on Biblical principles, that all wealth on earth is God’s. When people live their lives according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, redistribution will naturally occur between the people. As defined by CCDA, redistribution “means putting our lives, our skills, our education, and our resources to work to empower people in a community of need” (Reed 1995: 34). Redistribution is not the rich giving to the poor to increase their monetary wealth; it is about redeveloping people. Redistribution focuses on communities to increase social capital and create a healthy community environment, mentally, socially, and physically. It is about providing opportunities and creating networks of people to realize their full potential by using the skills and know-how of people in the community. As Dr. Mark Nelson, a CCDA charter
board member and founding President of Bethel New Life Inc, wrote, “We know that without ownership, without opportunity for gainful employment, and without opportunity to build a future for the children, people in our communities will continue to live in despair and frustration” (Nelson 1995: 144). Redistribution attempts to create these opportunities.

One of the most important factors affecting redistribution and its success is the presence of an economic base within each community. In communities that do not have their own economic base, CCDA members need to find ways to empower these communities to use the skills, resources, and education of community members to construct their own solutions and find creative avenues to start local businesses and organizations. CCDA advocates providing guidance and leadership in the creation of new businesses and enterprises, but they do not want to provide charity. Within communities that have an economic base, there are many avenues through which redistribution can occur including creating jobs, supporting local enterprises, improving schools, and increasing home ownership. By creating businesses and jobs in the local community, money stays in the community. What one person spends at one business goes to paying the salary of local people working at that business, who then in exchange spend the money they make at other local businesses. Local employment and businesses increase the economic viability of the community. CCDA defines economic viability as “the capacity of the community, through sustained, interdependent relationships, to sustain itself” (Nelson 1995: 141).

Redistribution is the most underdeveloped of CCDA’s principles. In the past, CCDA has had mixed success with economic ventures. The organization found itself
having to make difficult decisions because economics and moral principles were often at odds. Despite CCDA’s mixed results in the past, they still recognize the value and importance of a strong economic base in the community. To this end, they suggest creating partnerships with economic development organizations and financial experts. CCDA also suggests ways to approach community development and redistribution. Although they have had failures, they consider their approach to be important because of three unique strengths: local knowledge, moral authority, and ministry motivation. Dr. Mary Nelson, in her article, “Empowering the Community,” further expanded on this, listing the ways in which CCDA could use local knowledge, morality, and ministry to become involved in economic and community development. She included starting up and operating enterprises in the community, acting as a broker-developer for a site, training people for existing jobs or to start up their own businesses, assisting local businesses in expansion and access to loans, participating in community efforts of local churches and organizations, and investing in local companies (1995: 151).

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

Along with the principles of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution, the development of indigenous leadership is a benchmark of Christian Community Development. Indigenous leadership development works to develop leaders from within the community at a young age. Similar to the philosophy of relocation, CCDA stresses that the solution to the community comes from within the community. CCDA’s mission is to seek out leaders and empower them with the resources and skills they need to help transform the community (Gordon 1995: 182-183). CCDA advocates that the most effective way to fill the “vacuum of moral, spiritual, and economic leadership” within
poor communities is to rise up youth as Christian leaders. By nurturing and aiding youth in the community from elementary age through college and creating opportunities for them after college, CCDA leaders encourage youth to remain active in their spirituality and faith and take a leadership role (Perkins 1995b: 23). CCDA supports its mission of indigenous leadership development by drawing extensively on the Bible, especially the Gospel of Matthew (Gordon 1995: 184-185). Indigenous leadership is still a relatively unexplored area of Christian Community Development because it is believed to take at least fifteen years to raise a leader.

In the next chapter, I will provide descriptions of each of the three New Orleans faith-based organizations. These include Trinity Christian Community in Hollygrove, Urban Impact Ministries in Central City, and Desire Street Ministries in the 9th ward. I will also explore how these faith-based organizations incorporate the components of Christian Community Development into their work.
CHAPTER 4
THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MOVEMENT IN NEW ORLEANS

In the last chapter, I provided an overview of the history, philosophies, and tenets of the Christian Community Development Association. This larger movement serves as the foundation and structure for the programs and outreach of the faith-based organizations in New Orleans, namely Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries. In this chapter, I will provide a detailed description, gathered through participant observations and interviews, of each of the New Orleans faith-based organizations. The description includes the history of each organization, details about the surrounding communities, and discussion of programs and outreach efforts specific to each organization.

TRINITY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

From the road, Trinity Christian Community (Trinity) does not look like much. It is a small, nondescript brick building nestled on a tiny side street in Hollygrove, a neighborhood in the Uptown/Carrollton area of New Orleans (Figures 3 and 4). The area was originally swamplands, but in the mid 1900s it was developed into residential housing for the working class. Most of the houses in the neighborhood are small, one and two family houses. Upkeep of the houses in the Hollygrove neighborhood varies greatly; some houses have fresh coats of paint and well-manicured lawns while others are dilapidated and falling down. The Hollygrove neighborhood, sadly, is best known for its high levels of violence and an active drug trade. Some residents in the neighborhood are
major players in the uptown/downtown drug rivalry. The following statistics provide a broad overview of neighborhood demographics: 95% of the residents are African American, 45% of the residents are under the age of 35, 28.4% of the residents live in poverty, 42% of grandparents are the sole caregivers for their grandchildren, and 65% of residents hold a high school education or less (US Census Bureau 2000a, 2000b).
Meeting the needs of the Hollygrove community is not a simple task. To my naked eye, Trinity appeared a small building on the very outskirts of Hollygrove with nothing to offer (Figure 5). But after speaking with the director of the organization and visiting the organization, I have come to realize that looks can be deceiving. As I entered into the organization building, I was struck by the contrast between the inside and outside of the building. The plain, nondescript brick on the outside gave way to a colorful and vibrant inside. The first thing my eyes centered on as I entered into the main room was a picture of a lion covering the entire back wall, bearing the proverb, “The Righteous are as Bold as a Lion” (Proverb 28:1). This passage is the unofficial motto of Trinity (Figure 6). Biblical passages and pictures like this one adorned all of the walls and staircases at
Trinity. These pictures were painted by workers at Trinity and volunteers in the community. Besides the Biblical pictures, children’s artwork decorated the walls of most rooms in the building.

As I mentioned, Trinity is not a large place. It has two floors. The top floor consists of bedrooms and bathrooms, which are used by a few staff members who live at the organization and visiting mission groups. Downstairs, there is a large main community room, a teen room with a pool table, televisions, video games, a large commercial kitchen, a dining room, a computer room, and a literacy room/library. Behind the center, there is a patio for gardening and mechanic activities, a full size basketball court, a playground, and a large field for running around. While none of the
furniture or equipment at the center appears brand new, it does feel comfortable. The atmosphere of the building and the attitudes of the staff members made me feel welcome and invited.

Trinity’s founding dates back to 1967, a time of great change and unrest in New Orleans in terms of civil rights and desegregation. Reverend William Brown founded the center in Hollygrove after he and his family moved to the neighborhood after living in a housing project. In 1998, Kevin Brown took over his father’s position as the Executive Director of Trinity. At first glance, Brown appears a friendly, reserved white man. He is, perhaps, the last person I would think of as a leader working in a violent, dangerous neighborhood. But as I spoke with Brown in the community room and he recounted his path in life that led him back to his hometown and neighborhood, his deep concern and motivation to help this community find a different way became evident. Whether speaking about the achievements of the staff or the relationships he has formed with neighborhood children, there is an energy or as he calls it a “synergy.” Brown has a
presence in the room with his insightful explanations and vivid examples as well as his ability to relate the Bible and spirituality to every aspect of his life and work.

Before returning to New Orleans in 1998, Brown had what many would consider an ideal career. He originally left New Orleans in 1979 to pursue an education at Wheaton College in Illinois. After graduating from Wheaton in psychology, he went on to earn his Master’s Degree in Social Work from the Jane Adams College of Social Work and enjoy an extremely successful career in the field of psychotherapy. Besides authoring four books, he hosted his own talk show in Chicago, called “Talk it Out” on the second largest Christian station in the nation. He traveled the world speaking on family and adolescent issues and had a clientele that included Hall of Fame athletes and televangelists. In 1998, he felt the need to give up his career and return to Hollygrove and work at Trinity. Despite these impressive credentials, once Brown began to talk about Trinity, I found it hard to imagine him anywhere else.

Through private donations, grants, and the resources, skills, and creativity of staff members, Brown attempts to fulfill the mission of Trinity. The mission:

In obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ and on behalf of the citizens of New Orleans, Trinity Christian Community, through programs of evangelism, discipleship, and compassion, empowers inner city youth to become mature, confident Christian leaders who can effect positive change in the urban communities of New Orleans.4

On a daily basis, staff at Trinity use their philosophies and programs to challenge youths’ views of themselves and to provide youth with opportunities and experiences that foster hope for the future and a path away from the street. As Brown explained, “We’re trying to create opportunities where none exist” (Wilkinson 2000). Opportunities exist for these youth in other parts of New Orleans but youth are limited in seeking them out due to a

lack of finances and transportation. Operating under the general tenets of CCDA, staff at Trinity hope that by offering opportunities to youth, they will develop strong Christian leaders who will transform Hollygrove. They hope youth will spend less time on the corner exposed to street culture and more time thinking about their futures. To this end, Brown notes the hard work and determination of his staff, mainly Americorps workers, who put enormous time and effort into the operation and success of the center.

Americorps, created in 1993 by President Clinton, is a network of over 3,000 non-profits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. Every year over 70,000 Americans volunteer with these organizations in the areas of education, public safety, health, and the environment. The Americorps workers at Trinity come from all different areas of the country and provide support not only to the organization but to local public schools as well.

Trinity began its mission of meeting the community’s felt needs by conducting door-to-door surveys to determine the most pressing issues of the residents of Hollygrove. Residents identified a lack of youth programs, pervasive drugs and violence, and inadequate housing as the three most serious issues in the Hollygrove community. By allowing the neighborhood residents to identify the most prevalent issues within the community, Trinity is fulfilling one of the principles of Christian Community Development. This method not only tapped into the knowledge of the community but gave residents power in the decision making process. Trinity addressed the first issue of a lack of youth programs by developing an extensive youth outreach program to meet the needs of all ages of youth in the neighborhood. Everyday there is an after school program, run by Americorps workers and volunteers, for children in the first through

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This program provides tutoring and instruction beyond what youth receive in the classroom in the areas of math, literacy, computer training, Bible study, and moral character building. Trinity views moral character building as the incorporation of Biblical virtues and spirituality into the daily lives of youth. Trinity teaches youth qualities like patience, compassion, and other Christian principles as a way for youth to develop a strong spiritual foundation, which they believe will aid youth in other areas of their life. Besides the educational and spiritual programs, children engage in safe, recreation activities like basketball, pool, internet use, and video games.

Teens of the neighborhood are also welcome on a daily basis to hang out in the recreation room and enjoy an alternative to the street. Ministers and staff at Trinity believe the more time youth spend at the organizations, the better chance at success they will have. On select nights of the week, Trinity runs programs targeted to middle school and high school age youth that develop leadership, promote sexual abstinence, and provide teens with an outlet to express problems and a place to develop meaningful relationships. One such program is the Jesus Christ Clic. This is a small group of middle school aged boys who engage in leadership, service, and Christian commitment. The motto of the group is James 1:19, “Quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” This is reinforced through weekly Bible study, camping, fishing trips, and mentoring. Another program Trinity offers is the Purple Heart program. This is an abstinence based, Christian sexual purity program for youth. One activity for this program was the “Baby Think it Over” weekend. This was a sexual abstinence weekend where both males and females pledged sexual abstinence until marriage. Teachings for this weekend drew heavily upon the Bible. To reinforce this pledge, youth not only wore
a Sympathy Belly to understand what it would be like to be pregnant but also were responsible for a simulator baby to understand the commitment a baby requires.

Trinity also provides youth of the neighborhood the opportunity to take part in enriching activities and events they may not have otherwise been exposed to like symphonies, operas, ice-skating, and New Orleans Hornets’ games. During the summer months, Trinity offers a summer day camp for neighborhood children, block parties, basketball tournaments, and Vacation Bible School. Summer camp activities are designed around the talents and interests of Americorps workers. Brown shared that over the years activities have included making movies, cooking classes and competitions, computer graphic design, and creating and recording CDs. In addition, youth involved in the leadership programs and Jesus Christ Clic participate in retreat weekends with other faith-based organizations in state parks around the area. Trinity also organizes community activities to raise money for food and to promote overall community involvement.

Furthermore, Trinity is working to develop programs and strategies to meet the other community designated needs of drug and violence prevention and adequate housing. When I spoke with Brown in the early part of the year, Trinity had begun a new drug education program aimed at the youngest members of the organization. Also, Trinity recently completed its first project in the area of housing. Trinity purchased and renovated an abandoned crack house in the Hollygrove neighborhood. The house was then sold at cost to a family from the organization. The family was selected based on their involvement in the organization and commitment to the Hollygrove community. Staff at Trinity assisted the family in securing loans and taking homeowner classes. By
selling the house to a family from the organization, Trinity promoted the ideas of redistribution, ownership, and community. Currently, Brown is in talks with a local realtor about partnering up to buy deserted homes, refurbish them, and resell them to neighborhood residents. If the deal goes through, Brown hopes to begin a program where young males in the neighborhood can receive training in the construction business by renovating the houses as well as completing classes to earn their GED.

**URAL IMPACT MINISTRIES**

Housed in a renovated bank building, Urban Impact Ministries (Urban Impact) is easy to spot compared to the surrounding buildings and homes. Although the Central City area is experiencing an explosion in terms of development and renovation, many buildings still remain deserted and falling down. Most of the homes on the side streets are little more than shotguns, badly in need of repair. Abandoned cars, broken bicycles, overgrown weeds, and trash litter the side streets. Urban Impact, however, appears anything but deserted and run-down. Located on the corner of Oretha Castle Haley Blvd and Terpischore Street in Central City (Figures 7 and 8), Urban Impact is a grandiose building with intricate architecture and a full-size basketball court. The building looks as if it belongs more in the Garden District than on the corner where it stands.

Oretha Castle Haley Blvd (formerly Dryades Street) was once a bustling business center of Central City. Up until the 1960s, Dryades Street was a main commercial thoroughfare for African American and minority shoppers, boasting over 200 businesses (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) 2005). During this time period, white merchants ran most of the businesses on Dryades Street. These white merchants rarely employed African Americans even though African Americans made up
the majority of their business. The Urban League confronted the merchants about their hiring practices but found the white merchants unwilling to adopt new practices. After negotiations fell through, the New Orleans Consumer’s League organized one of the first marches for civil rights in New Orleans, boycotting the white businesses on Dryades Street. After business went dead for the merchants, they slowly gave into the demands of the Urban League and began employing African Americans (Rogers 1993: 67). But at that point, it was too little, too late. The boycott marked the beginning of the end for Dryades Street. With desegregation and the boycott, African Americans took their business to other areas of the city not formerly available to them. Both African American
and white middle class residents left the city for better opportunities. Most of the businesses on Dryades Street were forced to close or relocate. Sadly the street became known for its falling down buildings and housing projects; CJ Peete was built in 1941 and the Guste projects in 1964.

Over the past few years, efforts have been made to revitalize the street and make the area a celebration of African American history, culture, and achievements. Urban Impact has played a significant role in the redevelopment of the area, working with fellow organizations on the street to welcome others to the neighborhood. The street is now home to the Ashe Cultural Arts Center, New Orleans Mission, YMCA, Living
Witness drug rehab, Barrister’s Art Gallery, Café Reconcile, the Juvenile Justice Project, and in December 2004, the Hope Community Credit Union, backed by CCDA. City officials have also proposed turning the Myrtle Banks School in the 1300 block of Oretha Castle Haley Blvd into a civil rights museum. Despite the recent renaissance in the Central City area, the demographics still paint a bleak picture. In Central City, 87.1% of residents are African American, 44% of residents are under the age of 35, 49.8% of residents are living in poverty, 57.7% of grandparents are the sole caregivers for their grandchildren, and 70.1% of residents have a high school education or below (US Census Bureau 2000a, 2000b).

Urban Impact has not always been located in Central City. Reverend Glen Schreiber first began Urban Impact in 1989 in eastern New Orleans. The ministry was taken over by John and Wendy Gerhardt in 1992 and moved to Central City. The Gerhardts chose the Central City area for their ministry after accompanying a youth mission trip to New Orleans from Minnesota in 1991. After the trip, they realized their call in life was to serve the New Orleans inner city poor through Christianity. Originally from the Midwest, they packed their belongings and moved down to New Orleans. In 1992, Urban Impact opened its doors to youth and residents in the badly deteriorated and crime-ridden Central City. Since the organization first opened, it has grown considerably in size. Many new staff members have joined the organization from all areas of the United States, feeling a similar call to spread Christianity and help the poor. Today, the organization has a staff of fifteen as well as numerous volunteers.

The organization has grown physically as well since 1992. In 1998, John Gerhardt expanded his outreach by founding the Castle Rock Community Church, which
operates in partnership with Urban Impact. The organization also expanded into a second building called the “Yellow House,” located a block down on Terpischore Street. Additionally, Urban Impact is at the beginning of a project to build a much larger, state of the art facility closer to the Superdome, near I-10. This building will allow them to meet the needs of a larger, more diverse population as well as open an elementary school for the youth in the surrounding neighborhood.

From the moment I entered Urban Impact, I was greeted by almost every staff member. They were enthusiastic about sharing their responsibilities at the organization and very open to discussing their personal spiritual beliefs. One of the first things I did at the organization was take a tour of the two buildings. Michael Robinson, the high school youth director, led me on the tours. The building on Oretha Castle Haley houses the staff offices upstairs and the Castle Rock Community Church downstairs (Figure 9). There is also a large literacy room, filled with books from floor to ceiling, where tutoring and education classes are conducted. Outside of the bank building is a large, full-size basketball court. From the bank building, we walked five minutes down the street to the Yellow House. In the short walk between buildings, we encountered about ten people from other organizations on the street. These people were friendly and freely spoke not only of the work of Urban Impact but the general improvement in the Central City area. Compared to the bank building, the Yellow House was much more formal. The house was decorated with classic art and more traditional, elegant pieces of furniture. Whereas children’s artwork adorned the walls and voices filled every room in the building on Oretha Castle Haley, the Yellow House displayed no signs of children. Robinson
informed me that this building is used to house interns and hold Bible study and small group meetings.

Operating under the basic tenets of CCDA, staff at Urban Impact have spent the last fourteen years working to “Transform the Central City of New Orleans through spiritual development, Christian Community Development, and strategic ministry partnerships.”\(^6\) Transformation is at the center of Urban Impact’s approach. To this end, the organization hopes to transform the inner city by “moving people to reach their God-given potential, fulfilling their hopes and dreams, and by strengthening people in their spiritual, emotional, and intellectual character.”\(^7\) Through its youth programs and ministry, workers at Urban Impact attempt to teach the youth of Central City an alternative path from the street. They attempt to expose them to something different than the everyday conditions of poverty. Organization staff also attempt to physically

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\(^7\) ibid
transform the community by helping to clean up the surrounding area and encourage economic revival of Central City.

Staff at Urban Impact put the majority of their efforts into youth programs and outreach. Michael Robinson, youth director at Urban Impact, explained the basis of Urban Impact’s programs is “to value people and empower them.” There are several different programs offered for youth of all ages. Four afternoons a week, staff and volunteers at Urban Impact operate a reading program, focusing on literacy and writing, to aid students from Pre-K through the twelfth grade. Included in this program is a money management training program for students. Older students have the opportunity to take part in a Career Explorations Program where they learn to identify their abilities and strengths and match these strengths to the opportunities available to them. This program also includes a college orientation program, career fair, and internship opportunities. Staff at Urban Impact have successfully aided sixteen Central City residents with attending and completing college. During the summer months, there is a summer school program available to students of all ages. This summer program focuses on reading, writing, and math. As part of the summer program, students devote time to developing an individual project. Students in the younger grades publish their own books while students in the upper grades create and film their own movies. Any student who has participated in the summer program has been a part of these projects.

Throughout the school year and summer months, elementary age students are expected to attend Bible Study on Friday afternoons. At Bible Study, students engage in games, music, skits, songs, and a Bible lesson. One of the signature activities of Urban Impact ministry is the Challenge Circle. The Challenge Circle is the “recreational
outreach arm” of the ministry and is designed after the Awana circle games. The circle is separated into four sections and laid out on the basketball court. Each section is assigned a different color and represents a different biblical truth. Red is Jesus died for me; blue is all people are sinful; yellow is I need Jesus as my best friend; and green is God loves me. The workers at Urban Impact use the colors of the circle to play games and create cheers to encourage young kids to become enthused about Jesus Christ. Besides being fun for youth, the circle teaches teamwork and perseverance. Ministry leaders also bring the circle to housing projects and other youth hot spots as a way of recruiting youth into their ministry.

Additionally, activities at Urban Impact are specifically targeted to older youth in middle school and high school. Staff at Urban Impact recognize older students need more than fun and games. Because of this, staff create activities that allow youth to develop deeper relationships with each other and grow in their spiritual relationship with God. The middle school program operates through group meetings on Tuesday nights called SLAM and small Bible studies “to give people the opportunity to know Jesus and develop a strong relationship with their Savior.”8 The high school program works through one-on-one study, small groups, recreational activities, and large club events. The primary goal of the high school ministry is “to intentionally build mentoring and discipling relationships where we are a part of helping them to determine who they want to become.”9 In addition to these ministries, there are other youth program opportunities available. In an effort to “glorify God through the arts,” Urban Impact offers a dance team, a drama team, and drum line. Interestingly enough, the increase in arts programs at

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8 ibid
9 ibid
Urban Impact matches a decrease in arts programs in New Orleans public schools. Arts education has been shown to aid youth in dealing with the difficulty of conditions in New Orleans as well as aid them in academic achievement (LeGardeur 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Urban Impact also attempts to meet the spiritual needs of the adult members of the Central City community. It runs a ministry for college-age students called Crossover. This ministry aims to aid believers “crossing over from death to life spiritually.” It involves retreats, Bible study, and discipleship. Besides this, there is an intern program called the D-team or Discipleship team. This is a nine-month program for 18-25 year olds. Interns in this program are expected to raise money for the organization and bring new ideas to the faith-based organization. Part of the internship involves extensive theological training as well.

At Urban Impact, I had the opportunity to speak extensively with Michael Robinson, the director of the high school ministry program. Robinson has been working at Urban Impact for eight years, starting off first as a volunteer. Robinson’s own life experiences provide him with unique insight, motivation, and dedication to helping the youth of New Orleans. Growing up in the poorest part of Dallas, Robinson was smart enough to do well in school, but made the wrong decisions and became involved in gang banging and illegal activities. After high school, Robinson left Dallas to attend Xavier University and has remained in New Orleans ever since. Robinson’s life stories exhibit his connection to and understanding of youth in New Orleans. In Dallas, he experienced many of the same feelings of isolation and oppression youth in New Orleans experience. Growing up without a father, he never felt as if he had a strong male role model. He was however involved in an urban ministry program. He credits his escape from street culture
to the relationship he developed with a mentor in the urban ministry. Robinson relied on his mentor to get him through difficult times, especially after he became involved in criminal activities. Working at Urban Impact, Robinson hopes to have the same impact on youth in New Orleans as his mentor had on him.

Judging by his interactions with people on the short walk between ministry buildings, Robinson appears well liked and well respected. Though it is hard to describe, he has a presence in the room. Whether interacting with other staff members, youth, or myself, he was charismatic and took command of the conversation. At the same time, he was open to questions and respectful of others’ opinions. In answering questions and speaking about Urban Impact, Robinson often used Biblical passages as a way to explain larger concepts and ideals. Like others in ministry, Robinson described Christianity and mentoring to youth, not as a job, but as part of his life. He expressed a deep devotion to Christ that along with his life experiences, motivates him to reach out to youth and develop meaningful relationships. As a young, African American male, Robinson understands what life is like for these youth. This understanding coupled with his own experiences remind him of the high stakes involved in life on the street and the risks these youth face in making just one mistake. Robinson laid out the stakes for me, “You mess up, you can die. You can get locked up. You can get thrown out of school. There is no second chance. A mistake can kill you, literally” (Robinson 1/25/05).

**DESIRE STREET MINISTRIES**

After driving across a bridge, over several train tracks, and through street after street of abandoned and half-torn down buildings, I finally found Desire Street Ministries (Desire Street). With its modern, brightly colored buildings, Desire Street is a welcome
contrast to the run-down, industrial feel of the surrounding neighborhood. A writer for The Gainesville Sun captured the stark contrast of the neighborhood, calling the ministry “an oasis, a neat patch of green, surrounded by stark gray vacant lots and warehouses” (Kirkland 2003). The ministry is housed in two buildings on the corner of Desire Parkway in the 9th ward (Figures 10 and 11). In addition to the buildings, there is a large gymnasium on the property grounds. Surrounding the buildings, is a well-manicured lawn with landscaping, an uncommon vision in the Desire neighborhood.

Desire Street was originally started in 1990 to meet the needs of those living in the Desire Projects. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Desire projects were among the largest and most dangerous housing projects in the nation.10 Despite street names like Desire, Abundance, Pleasure, and Piety, the projects were known for their extreme poverty, high levels of violence, and unchecked crime (Beauliea 1980; Woods 1988). Since their conception in 1949, the Desire projects have had a long and troubled history. From the beginning, the public protested the choice of location for the project, arguing that it was completely isolated from the city by train tracks on all fours sides, the Industrial Canal, the Florida Canal, and limited transportation. Officials also made a decision to cut building costs for the 262 buildings by constructing the buildings out of wood with only a brick veneer. Poor construction coupled with the New Orleans Housing Authority’s lack of upkeep of the buildings led to the projects quick deterioration (Atkinson 1979; Eig 1989). The projects also began to experience increased crime and poor policing. In 1970, tensions between the city and the residents of the project escalated after two standoffs occurred between the police and the Black Panthers (Arnold 1970; *The Times-Picayune* 1970).

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In the decades that followed, the relationship between the city and residents of the Desire projects deteriorated further. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the extreme police brutality and corruption of the New Orleans Police Department earned the Desire projects a place on the Human Rights Watch list (Human Rights Watch 1998). In 1995, the Department of Housing and Urban Development approved a Hope IV grant to relocate the 14,000 residents of Desire, tear down the Desire projects, and completely redevelop the area. Most of the Desire residents were moved to the Florida or St Bernard
projects, adding fuel to the existing tensions and rivalries between the housing developments. As of 2004, 107 new units of subsidized housing had been constructed where the old Desire Project used to stand. The following demographics, although no longer accurate due to relocation, provide a glimpse of what the Desire neighborhood was like for many years. 98.1% of residents were African American, 63.6% of residents were under the age of 35, 62.5% of residents were living in poverty, 88.4% of grandparents were the sole caregivers of their grandchildren, and 84.3% residents had a high school education or below (US Census Bureau 2000a, 2000b).

In 1990, Mo Leverett and his wife Ellen began Desire Street. While at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, Leverett spent considerable
time in New Orleans and felt a draw to the city as a place where his ministry could really help. After completing his religious training, Mo and his wife traveled the country raising funds and drawing support for the urban ministry they planned to carry out in New Orleans. After arriving in the city, Leverett began his ministry as a football coach at George Washington Carver High School, a public high school located on the edge of the Desire projects. Leverett began to offer players Bible Study after practice. After a few weeks of Bible Study in the locker room, Leverett moved the outreach to his home where he offered players “food, fun, and faith.” By 1993, the ministry had grown to more than 200 students and moved back to Carver High School to accommodate its growing size. Along with Bible Study, Leverett offered tutoring programs, assistance in applying to and attending college, and juvenile assistance programs. The ministry continued to grow and once again moved, this time to a local warehouse. At this point, staff at Desire Street began to envision a ministry that reached youth in more ways. They envisioned opening a school for the youth of Desire. With the addition of football great Danny Wuerfell to the ministry as development director, the ministry raised over three million dollars in private donations towards their vision. In 1998, construction began on the current buildings that now house a large auditorium/gym, offices, and classrooms for the Desire Academy.

Over the past fifteen years, Desire Street grew from a group of football players in a school locker room to being “a major feature” of the Desire neighborhood. Desire Street’s mission since the beginning has been “to revitalize the Desire neighborhood through spiritual and community development.” Embodied in this mission is “a vision to
see Desire become a desirable place to live.”\textsuperscript{11} To this goal, Desire Street focuses development on five specific areas: health, housing, education, economic development, and recreation. Interestingly enough, they do not list spiritual development although it is one of the many areas stressed within the ministry.

Currently, Desire Street focuses the greatest amount of energy on the area of education. In 2002, the ministry opened the Desire Street Academy, to exclusively meet the needs of boys from the Desire neighborhood. The school opened with 70 boys in the seventh and eighth grades. The school has since expanded to include all grades and has reached an enrollment of 192 students. The school promotes the idea of “pursuing excellence in academics, athletics, and the arts in a Christian context.”\textsuperscript{12} Boys from Desire receive discounted tuition by meeting certain criteria such as participating in athletics, maintaining a 3.0 GPA, and having family members volunteer at the Academy. Desire Street places a strong emphasis on the family as a way to transform the community. Besides general classroom instruction, the Academy offers after-school tutoring, ACT preparation, and college preparatory classes. Desire Street has concentrated their efforts on males from Desire because they consider young males to be the most vulnerable and at-risk population in the Desire neighborhood. Young males are the least likely to attend college and the most likely to be incarcerated. Because of this, McLeish, a worker at Desire, explained that through the Academy, Desire Street is “raising up an army of men building God’s Kingdom” (McLeish 2/4/05). At Desire, all after-school programs are exclusively run by indigenous male leaders from the Desire projects who have attended college. These men serve as role models to the boys for what they can

\textsuperscript{11} ibid
\textsuperscript{12} ibid
achieve in the future. Desire Street hopes to someday open a school for girls in the area.

Besides education, Desire Street uses recreation as a tool to minister to youth. Year round they have AAU basketball and during the summer months they offer adventure camps at the ministry.

In terms of the other areas of development, staff at Desire Street consider themselves at an exciting turning point. Desire Street has finally raised the funds they needed to put many projects into action. In terms of healthcare, Desire Street opened the Kids First Pediatric Clinic in 2001, located across the street from the ministry. The clinic is operated in partnership with Charity Hospital, the main provider of healthcare to the poor and uninsured of New Orleans. Charity Hospital staffs the clinic while Desire Street funds and controls the day-to-day operations of the clinic. In addition, the Children’s Hospital of New Orleans sends a mobile dental program called the Tooth Bus to the area once a month to provide free dental treatment to youth at the organization.

To meet the housing and economic needs of the neighborhood, Desire Street created a parent company, SURGE (Social and Urban Renewal through Growing Entrepreneurs). This company has only recently set up its first business, Brother’s Realty. The realty company is in charge of improving the housing in the area, encouraging home ownership, and securing loans for those interested in buying a house. Exactly what services and assistance this company will provide has yet to be determined. In the future, SURGE hopes to open a gas station, auto shop, and thrift store to create an economic base in the community. Overall, this branch of the ministry hopes to promote ownership among residents in the Desire community.
Because this is a faith-based organization, staff place great emphasis on spiritual development. Every Sunday there is a church service. Bible Study is a daily part of school instruction. It is also offered on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons as an extracurricular activity. The ministry offers adult Bible study to provide spiritual guidance to older residents. Because Desire Street firmly supports the idea that strong families transform the community, they offer parenting groups and marriage retreats run by indigenous role models of the community who have successful marriages and strong families. Additionally, Desire Street is the founding organization of CURE (Churches United for Revivalism and Evangelism). This is a group of pastors from local New Orleans churches who believe that the church has a responsibility to address social issues within the community. The churches work together to address issues that are too large for one church to handle.

At Desire Street, I was able to meet with many staff members and observe the students in action. Watching the students at the Academy, they seemed like any other children in New Orleans schools, loud and energetic. While at the school, I did not see any children fighting, but I did observe a punishment system that involved paddling and requiring the children to complete physical tasks like push-ups and sit-ups. Two people who I spoke with extensively at the ministry were Stephanie McLeish and Kendrick Levy. Although united in their work and mission at Desire Street, McLeish and Levy are quite opposites; McLeish is a small soft-spoken white woman and Levy is a loud, African American man the size of a bear. Both McLeish and Levy currently live in the Desire community, but Levy grew up in and out of different New Orleans projects. McLeish became part of Desire Street about six years ago and now heads CURE, working mainly
with the spiritual development component of Desire Street. Levy, on the other hand, is the head youth minister, a teacher and a football coach at the Academy.

Levy, like Robinson at Urban Impact, knows all too well what youth in the Desire neighborhood face on a daily basis. Levy spent the first part of his life living in the Calliope projects with his grandmother. At age eleven, he moved from the Calliope to the Desire projects to live with his father. From a young age, Levy became involved with his brothers stealing cars and committing armed robberies. Things changed for Levy when he met Coach Leverett junior year at Carver High School. Though he was skeptical of a white man at first, Levy began participating in Bible Study and spent more time studying and practicing then committing felonies. With Leverett’s guidance, Levy went on to play football in college, spending his summers interning at the ministry. Levy also turned to the ministry for support and guidance when two of his brothers committed suicide and a third was murdered. Levy remarked that without the ministry and the support of Leverett through these difficult times, he does not know where he might be today. The ministry is what saved his life. Because of his deep connection to Leverett and Desire Street, Levy decided after college to forgo professional football career and return to the Desire neighborhood to work at the ministry. Since then, Levy has married and begun a family. He serves as an example of what one can achieve with hard work and the support of people who care. To the youth and their families at the Academy, he is a role model and a success story.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how ministers and staff at the faith-based organizations conceptualize community and the importance they place on becoming part of the community. In the second half of the chapter, I will examine the community
development efforts of these organizations and begin to examine and analyze their Christian spiritual-based approach to community development.
CHAPTER 5

A SPIRITUAL-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The previous chapters provided an overview of the history, philosophies, and approaches of both the Christian Community Development movement and three New Orleans faith-based organizations, namely Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries. As faith-based organizations committed to community development, Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street must engage with the concept of community. In this chapter, I first examine the concept of community employed by these faith-based organizations. I then compare this concept of community to concepts employed in the social sciences. From there, I discuss how relocation, the faith-based organizations’ primary approach to community development, relates to their concept of community. In the second part of the chapter, I investigate and analyze how Christian spirituality and faith structure and define Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street’s community development efforts.

RELOCATION AND THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street conceptualize community as connected to both a specific geographic location and the shared experiences of people living in this location. Ministers and staff believe community is created through these two factors and the development of a collective identity by members of the community. Ministers and staff recognize the city of New Orleans as one large community and the different areas within New Orleans as smaller communities.
Between these smaller communities, they believe there are significant similarities and differences. Staff explain differences between the communities as largely based on geographic dissimilarities which affect shared experiences and collective identity. For example, while both the Central City and Desire communities have housing projects and similar types of residents, the two communities are distinct. The Desire neighborhood experienced higher degrees of isolation from the surrounding city which affected not only the experiences of residents living in the Desire community but the relationships residents formed with each other and the city at large. These experiences and relationships, in effect, carved out a collective identity for the community of Desire that is distinct from the Central City community. Likewise, the Hollygrove community is distinct from the Desire and Central City communities partly due to the layout of the neighborhood and its location in the city.

The concept of community embraced by these faith-based organizations is not unlike concepts social scientists have employed in the past. Social scientists have long attempted to understand what community is, how people distinguish communities, and the place of community in people’s lives. As Brett Williams noted in a review, “Social scientists have explored, reified, deconstructed, and debated ‘community,’” (2002: 348). Because the media, government, and academicians alike overuse the term, it often has contradictory and ambiguous meanings. Suzanne Keller, in her book Community, referred to the term as a “chameleon term” to capture the contradictory usages of the word (2003: 1). The overuse of the term is not new to recent times. As early as 1955, sociologist Greg Hillery had identified ninety-four different definitions for the term community (Smith 2004: 185).
Ministers’ and staff’s understanding of community as both tied to a geographic place and created by shared experiences falls between the traditional approach to community as location and the more postmodern approach to community as a process. Social scientists originally placed central importance on geographic location as the single most defining characteristic of community. Dennis Poplin referred to community as “a spatial unit, as a cluster of people living within a specific geographic region or simply as a ‘place’” (Poplin in Proctor 2005: 4). Thomas Bender had a similar interpretation of the concept, citing “territorially based social organization” as defining a community (Bender in Proctor 2005: 4). Early concepts of community focused on a geographical location being the sole basis for shared identities and feelings of belonging. However, this concept of community, based solely on geographic location, began to crumble with the emergence of communities that exist based on shared identities with no geographical similarity such as internet groups, professional associations, and ethnic organizations.

With the emergence of communities unrelated to geographic locations, social scientists have broadened their perspectives on the concept. Whereas traditionally, community was viewed as fixed and rooted, today it is conceived of as dynamic, layered, and ever changing (Williams 2002: 344). Community, like so many other aspects of our lives, can be viewed as a social construction. Anthony Cohen, in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, defined community accordingly:

> Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of fact. By extension, the distinctiveness of communities, and thus the realities of boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms” (1985: 98).
According to Cohen, community exists in the minds of the members of the group; they create community and give meaning to it through their everyday actions, values, norms, etc. To interact and share values, members of a group must exist in the same space, but this space is not limited to a defined geographic place (Paulliac 2003: 276).

Community, in this sense, is viewed as a process. Rather than being a thing, community is something you do (Williams 2002: 344). Social historian David Sabean described that what becomes common in community is “the fact that members are engaged in the same raisonnement, the same discourse” (Sabean in Paulliac 2003: 276). The interactions, relationships, conflicts, and experiences of a group of people become the process of creating community and giving meaning to community. At the same time as individuals give meaning to the collective, the collective community influences its members and the meanings they create. These two entities, the individual and the collective, exist in a reciprocal yet competing relationship. Brett Williams described this relationship by noting “community is always a site of disengagement and struggle as well as attachment and belonging” (2002: 348). This reciprocal relationship shapes both the collective identity of the community and the individual identities of community members.

Focus on community in the social sciences has also centered on the idea of community decline or “the myth of community loss” (Smith 2004: 186). Researchers have attempted to connect the decline of community to a host of issues including industrialization, crime, violence, the breakdown of the family, increased urbanization, and urban regeneration (Colombo 2001: 458; Smith 2004: 186). Recently much attention has been focused on Robert Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, where he discussed the decline of social capital in America.
Social capital is defined “as the social ties that engender civil society” and contribute to the well being of both individuals and communities (Lockhart 2005: 46). Using the metaphor of bowling, Putnam attempted to illustrate the breakdown of social networks and social bonds among individuals, families, and groups within American society over the past three decades. While Putnam’s arguments continue to be debated, he has brought attention to the role of community in people’s lives. Research is now being devoted to understanding how feelings of community affect emotions, participation, empowerment, quality of life, and community development. Generally however, community is regarded as a “positive meaningful entity” in people’s lives (Colombo 2001: 460).

Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street recognize the importance of community in people’s lives and employ relocation into the community as the principal means of community development and transformation. Relocation, as discussed in the previous chapter, is based on John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Gordon 2005). Relocation draws on the theological principle that Jesus Christ came down from heaven and lived among the people. Members of Christian Community Development believe that to live as true Christians, they must live their lives as closely as possible in the image of Jesus Christ. They believe Christ came down to earth to help his people so they believe they should move into inner city communities to help the poor. They believe one of the principle problems in New Orleans is that people no longer have a sense of community because many people have left the city or become distraught and demoralized by the conditions of New Orleans. CCDA members believe
that only by living in the community can one begin to develop meaningful relationships with residents, experience what life is like for community members, and begin to look for solutions to community problems. In living together in the community, “People become the environment for each other” (McLaughlin 1994: 109). Their experiences, knowledge, resources, and skills mesh together to transform the community into a better place to live.

Robinson, the youth director at Urban Impact, believes bringing all types of people together to live in the community is the one effort that truly has potential to transform New Orleans. He explained:

Relocation… I think this is the fundamental priority. Fundamentally that’s what’s going to change neighborhoods. It’s when you get people, I believe, who are believers in Christ, and move them back into the poor neighborhoods. You know… heaven ain’t gonna have a rich and poor end. Fundamentally, that might be the deepest rooted part of American culture, the fact that you should live around people who have the same amount of wealth as you. These kids, this neighborhood, they need to see. I don’t care what race it is. If you get people moving back into this community, then I think that changes a whole lot. That would do a phenomenol amount (Robinson 1/25/05).

Robinson and staff at Urban Impact take relocation one-step further with an emphasis on “the porch.” In their recent financial campaign to raise funds for a new building, Urban Impact has been advertising that it needs to build a bigger porch. Through the concept of the porch, Urban Impact stresses the importance of not only moving into the community but also becoming an active part of the community. Robinson described the idea of the porch, “It’s when you are sitting on someone’s porch and you are like right there on the street with someone… Fundamentally, that’s the core what this is all about” (Robinson 1/25/05). Urban Impact’s approach tries to capture the idea of a neighbor as not just someone living next door, but as someone within the same community who cares about
what happens to the people living around them. A neighbor is someone who is invested in his or her neighborhood.

The philosophy of relocation is similar to the ideas of social reformers in the creation of settlement houses in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sam Barnett founded the first settlement house, Toynbee Hall, in 1884 in the slums of East London (Streiff 2005: 5). Barnett’s purpose in establishing the house was to promote the idea of community where both college students and residents of the local slum could live and work together to improve conditions. A few years later, settlement houses sprung up in cities across America in an effort to deal with a growing poor and immigrant population (Streiff 2005: 9). As in England, American volunteers moved into poor neighborhoods with the hope of assisting the community using their skills and resources along with those of community members (Streiff 2005: 10). Since World War I, the settlement house movement has been on the decline. Today there are few existing settlement houses in America; most have been converted into neighborhood centers. One of the main factors leading to the decline of settlement houses was the fact that workers moved out of the community because they found it too difficult to deal with the changing urban and social landscape. Once the workers were no longer residents in the community, programs began to collapse because they were no longer a community venture. The community was the link that held people together. Workers became disconnected from the community and were viewed as outsiders trying to fix an inner city problem (Streiff 2005: 50). CCDA has attempted to revitalize this idea of living in the community as well as stress a participatory approach in seeking solutions to social problems.
Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street view relocation into a community as the most effective way to transform impoverished communities. Brown of Trinity relayed, “If we had twenty people living in the area, not just twenty people who really wished they had a better neighborhood, but twenty people who intentionally moved into the community from outside to bring in their gifts and skills, this place would be different for everyone” (Brown 1/10/05). By moving into the community, ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street believe they become insiders to the community. Dr. Perkins, the leader of the Christian Community Development movement, stressed the importance of this insider status. He wrote, “Relocation transforms ‘you, them, and theirs’ to ‘we, us, and ours’” (1995b: 22). Dr. Perkins believes that by becoming an insider to a community, organization members exhibit dedication and commitment to the community. Brown expanded on this idea by noting dedication and commitment become evident when organization members purchase houses in the community, send their children to public schools, and become engaged in the life of the community.

This distinction between insiders and outsiders to the community raises several issues. Numerous community organizers have cited that to truly have a sustained impact in the inner city, one needs to be a part of the inner city. One community organizer commented, “It is impossible for an outsider to know what it feels like to live in the inner city” (McLaughlin 1994: 5). Staff at the New Orleans faith-based organizations claim to be insiders but are they? Organization members may consider themselves insiders once they buy a house in the community, but it remains to be determined whether community residents consider them insiders. Staff at the faith-based organizations view community
as rooted in a geographic location, but what if the people they are attempting to help view community in a different way? What if community members conceptualize community based on shared identity? Organization members who do not fit the criteria will not be considered insiders. If these faith-based organizations are trying to be community organizations, they need to look for ways to better understand how residents define belonging and insider status. Furthermore, what determines when one becomes an insider in a community? There are no prescribed time limits or ritual practices that distinguish a status change from outsider to insider.

Being an insider to a community, as Lee Staples described in “Insider/Outsider Upsides and Downsides,” has both its benefits and limitations. By being an insider, there is less concern about gaining trust, local knowledge, or acceptance. He stressed that both insiders and outsiders in community development must be careful how they navigate power differentials, legitimacy issues, and barriers that exist between groups (2000: 32). Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street have to tread delicately in navigating these issues when representing New Orleans communities. Although they may consider themselves insiders to the community after living there for an extended period of time, it is still questionable whether they have the authority, power, or knowledge to act as representatives of these communities. Ministers and staff took it upon themselves to decide where to set up the organizations and which communities need to be transformed according to their standards. Although Trinity did conduct surveys to determine the needs of Hollygrove, neither Urban Impact nor Desire Street drew on the knowledge of community members to determine the greatest needs of the community or how these needs should be met. Ministers and staff may live in these communities and
share experiences with community members, but for the most part they are not poor, oppressed, or marginalized. Can they understand what residents are experiencing and feeling to adequately represent them?

Furthermore, while these faith-based organizations advocate for relocation and living in the communities they are trying to help, they employ practices that are contradictory to their philosophies. For example, both Trinity and Urban Impact have established programs that allow for long-distance mission groups to travel to New Orleans, stay at the organization centers, and volunteer for anywhere from a weekend to an entire summer. These long-distance mission groups provide much needed resources and manpower, but there are implications to this practice. On the one hand, these mission groups can be viewed as positive. They send a message to those in New Orleans that throughout the country people are linked through their similar spiritual beliefs and are willing to travel great distances to help one another. On the other hand, it is questionable who benefits more from these long-distance mission groups, the mission group or the New Orleans community? In Charitable Choice, Bartkowski and Regis detailed the benefits mission groups derive from their mission work. Mission groups learn first-hand about poverty by being exposed to different classes of people and ways of life, making them “sharply aware of their own privilege” (2003: 82). By working as a group, they learn the value of teamwork and grow in their spiritual relationships with one another (Bartkowski and Regis 2003: 82-84). Although these mission groups often do aid the communities where they work, it seem as if the poor community is being exploited. Mission groups travel to experience life in the inner city as if it is an interactive adventure where they get to see what it is like to be poor for the weekend and then return home on
Monday. The fact that poverty is reality for many people seems lost in these type of interactions. In this sense, it appears as if the mission groups are fulfilling their own needs more than those of New Orleans communities.

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SPIRITUALITY**

Understanding how ministers and staff engage with community is important to understanding how these faith-based organizations approach community development. Before discussing the community development efforts of the New Orleans faith-based organizations, I will first begin with a brief discussion of the concept of community development. Within the field of development, there are several different definitions and theories of community development. Theories range from focusing on individual and grassroots organizing to structural reform and community ownership. Many different definitions exist but most contain key elements such as social justice, economic development, and community participation (Hudson 2004: 251). For example, Alison Gilchrist described community development noting “at its most basic, community development is the development of ‘community’- the capacity of local populations to respond collectively to events and issues that affect them” (Hudson 2004: 251). Love Chile defined it “as a set of conscious planned actions to bring about desired transformation in society with the primary objective of improving the conditions of existence of the people, particularly the poor” (2003: 2). Lewis Williams suggested that community development is “an incremental process through which individuals, families, and communities gain the power, insight, and resources to make decisions and take action regarding their well-being” (2004: 349).
Taking these varied theories and definitions into account, Kim Hudson argued for an understanding of community development as relative to the environment where the development is being carried out. She asserted that key elements of development like social justice, economic development, and community participation, are shaped and influenced by three different entities: the community workers, the structure and beliefs of the community organization, and societal factors like culture, ideology, and politics (Hudson 2004: 258-259). These three entities influence community development, but at the same time are influenced by development efforts. Because each organization, community, and worker is unique, community development must be studied as relative to each specific development situation (Hudson 2004: 261). In her conclusion, Hudson suggested that because “community development is a dynamic process that is both adaptive and reactive to the many variables and influences found in a given situation,” it should be understood as “forming a range of community development ‘discourses’” (2004: 262). Based on this perspective, this section will be devoted to a discussion of how spirituality, and more specifically CCDA philosophies, structure the community development efforts of Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street. Spirituality and faith act as both an asset and a limitation to the organizations’ efforts.

Recently, the American government recognized the increasing role that faith-based organizations play in meeting the needs of Americans. On January 29, 2001, President George W. Bush established a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, whereby he declared, “Faith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods” (Bush 2001). While there is much debate over the exact role faith-based
organizations should assume in providing social services, it is important to examine how a spiritual based approach impacts community work and community development. There is a large amount of literature devoted to comparing faith-based and secular programs in terms of services offered, length of commitment, and other objective factors, but there is little literature that explores the more subjective factors and the impact of spirituality on both development workers and the communities they are trying to help (Beek 2000).

To investigate the spiritual or faith-based component of community development, it is essential to first consider what one means when speaking of spirituality and faith. Spirituality and faith are terms that are difficult to define concretely because they often mean different things to different people. As Toni Cascio and Terry Tirrito explained in *Religious Organizations in Community Services*, spirituality is the “human sense of and search for transcendence, meaning, and connectedness beyond the self” (2003: 24). Similarly, Love Chile and Gareth Simpson remarked that spirituality “involves the relationship between the individual, the collective, and the universe” (2004: 319). A report by the Canadian International Development Agency described spirituality as “the oneness of God, of people, of universe, a personal experience at the level of spirit or soul” (2004: 320). The term faith can be used somewhat interchangeably with spirituality. Faith is the basic belief in something for which there is no proof. Faith can be the belief in nothing beyond humanity or it can be the belief in God. In the Bible, Hebrews 11:1 reads, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Smith 2000). For faith-based organizations, spirituality and faith are deeply connected to a belief in God and the afterlife. Spirituality and faith also shape one’s view
of oneself as well as the relationships one develops with others and greater society (Chile and Simpson 2004: 322).

Although spirituality and faith are expressed in religion, this is not the sole medium of expression. Both spirituality and faith predate organized religion by hundreds of years (Chile and Simpson 2004: 319). Religion, as defined by Edward Canda and Leola Furman in their book *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice*, is “an institutionalized pattern of beliefs, behaviors, and experiences, oriented toward spiritual concerns, shared by a community, and transmitted over time in traditions” (1999: 37). The authors expand on this definition later in the book, describing religion as the “codification of spirituality” (1999: 51). Religion is viewed as much more structured and influenced by the social environment than spirituality or faith (1999: 18). Religion requires ritualized practices and organized meetings and worship whereas spirituality and faith have a much looser structure, if any structure at all, and can exist at the level of the individual or the collective.

Spirituality and faith have been a foundation for many African Americans since Africans were first brought to this country as slaves. Spirituality and the church have served “as anchoring institutions in the African American community” (Patillo-McCoy 1998: 769). Numerous social science researchers have documented the history, role, and impact of faith and the church socially, politically, and economically within the African American community (Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Nelson and Nelson 1975). There have been two distinct types of churches that have functioned within the African American community. On the one hand, there are the socially mindful churches that have attempted to create for their members what society has long denied them as
minority citizens: social justice, equality, belonging, identity, and power (Hill 1994; Chatters and Taylor 1994: 1). These churches have attempted to aid members in achieving these ideals by modeling themselves as institutions for social action and reform. Since the times of slavery through the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, these churches have been involved in activities that go beyond Sunday morning services. Spirituality has served members “…as a source of power, not locked behind stained-glass windows, but used wherever Black people seek God’s will and respond to his way” (Carter in Patillo-McCoy 1998: 769). The power of these churches is evident in the great leaders and reformers who have risen from the church like Nat Turner, Denmark Vesssey, Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. (Balmer 1989: 149).

It is the case however, that not all black churches have identified with a social action agenda. This distinction is often masked by the homogenous representation of the black church. The black church is often referred to in the singular when in fact, there is and always has been great diversity among black churches. On the opposite end of the spectrum from churches supporting a social action agenda are those churches that identify more readily with a conservative agenda. These churches advocate for an acceptance of the African American’s place within American society, preaching redemption and salvation in the after life as the ultimate form of justice. Church is viewed more as a sanctuary to worship and praise God than as a forum for embracing spirituality and social action. These more conservative churches do not believe that African Americans are being treated equally but they believe that the ultimate form of judgment will be in the after-life where God will bestow upon his faithful, paradise (Murray 2005).
Following in the traditions of the socially active black churches, Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are attempting to provide a place for youth to congregate safely, exchange ideas, develop values and self-confidence, and seek empowerment. Staff at the faith-based organizations are extending their reach into civic society using Christianity as a tool to deal with social inequality and its effects upon the community. Using Christianity to deal with society’s ills traces back to Biblical times. Members of CCDA believe their approach is unique because of relocation, reconciliation, redistribution, and the development of indigenous leadership. It is the belief of not just these faith-based organizations but others as well that spirituality and faith are unique assets in community development (Chile and Simpson 2004). For organizations in the Christian Community Development movement, Christian spirituality frames their approach to community development. Their interpretation of the Bible and Christian theology dictates who should help the poor and how they should be helped. Staff at faith-based organizations contend that they have special resources and qualities to offer in terms of community development because of their morals, spiritual values, and standards. Advocates for faith-based organizations list “a robust sense of community, high standards of moral integrity, close-knit relationships among coreligionists, holistic views of personhood, and connectedness to local communities” as special resources and qualities of faith-based organizations (Bartkowski and Regis 2003: 5).

In addition, it has been recognized that faith is a powerful foundation for social capital formation (Candland 2000: 129). Numerous researchers have shown how participation in faith-based groups strengthens existing social relationships and promotes the formation of new relationships (Lockhart 2005: 47). Social relationships are the basis
of social capital. More importantly, faith-based groups have the power to promote “bridging social capital” (Lockhart 2005: 46). Whereas most relationships exist within one’s social group, bridging relationships form across social groups. This type of social capital is especially helpful in poor communities because it allows people to gain access to opportunities and resources beyond their means (Lockhart 2005: 46). At Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street, the creation of bridging social capital occurs on a daily basis. Ministers and staff, who are mostly middle class and educated, attempt to develop relationships with community members, who are mostly lower class, by living in the community and acting as role models and mentors to the youth in their programs. Staff hope these relationships aid community members in accessing better opportunities and necessary resources. Furthermore, as Bartkowski and Regis stressed, the voluntary nature of membership in faith-based groups is conducive to creating collective bonds and mutual trust (2003: 20)

For those who work at the three faith-based community organizations, Christian faith and spirituality have a special place in their life and work. In speaking with Brown of Trinity, he explained that he needs his faith and his belief in Jesus Christ to appreciate the good as much as he needs them to hope through the bad. He said:

I believe my faith in Jesus Christ gives me a perspective on things and I really believe miraculous things happen. Like people coming from Rockville, Illinois to build a playground or people coming from Pela, Iowa to install basketball hoops, people coming from elsewhere to build bunk beds. Naperville, Illinois is coming this summer to put three new doors in to replace these crappy doors we have. That kind of stuff, you can’t explain that. How did Pela, Iowa end up in Hollygrove, New Orleans? It doesn’t make sense (Brown 1/10/05).
People need faith and spirituality to explain what for them, cannot be explained. As Chile and Simpson commented, “The spiritual dimension of human existence provides purpose and meaning for existence” (2004: 325). People need justifications or explanation for events in their lives. For example, Brown uses his faith to explain the good deeds of others. Ministers and staff at the other organizations exhibited a similar reliance on faith in explaining both the bad and good they have encountered.

In a pilot study conducted of youth participating in a faith-based organization, youth described that faith and spirituality are important to them because it gave them the power to believe in themselves. With their faith and spirituality they felt equipped to conquer whatever obstacles or challenges they may encounter in life (F. Smith 2004). Likewise, in interviews of self-proclaimed evangelicals, believers stressed the importance of faith and spirituality in giving them vision and power to achieve their goals. One evangelical summed up the ideas of many. “Faith gives security. A purpose. A meaning for life. A reason to be here. A fellowship with him. A standard to follow. A fundamental life orientation. Faith is kind of like a guidepost or a direction, a model, a resource on where to go when I am confused” (Emerson and Smith 2000: 26). For believers, spirituality and faith are the basis for life. Every life event, relationship, and experience is viewed through the scope of spirituality and faith.

For Robinson of Urban Impact, he cannot separate and isolate his spirituality from other parts of his life. Spirituality is the foundation of his life from where all else stems. In his opinion, community development without spirituality, without targeting the inner self, is useless. Because of this belief, he incorporates spirituality into every aspect of his
outreach and daily work with youth and residents of the Central City community. He said:

To me, God is able to deal with the total aspect. You know, even dealing with Christian philosophy, they believe you deal with the inner person then all other persons are faithful. There is no separation. There is no religious life and then the life you live outside the church. Ministry is life…The Biblical example they use is the overflow. The words should come out of you like words of living water. Another great example of ministry is that God said, “What you leave in your wake.” What that is, is that if you ever see a boat go from shore to shore, point to point, it makes a wake. And the shore feels the wake, but it is not the purpose of the boat to make a wake. The purpose of the boat is to go from point to point. The wake is a bi-product. The belief is that if you live your life and you gain in your relationship, grow in your knowledge in your relationship with God, that is automatically going to have a bi-product on how you deal with other people (Robinson 1/25/05).

Robinson’s words illustrate his belief that by living his life for Christ, he is an example to all the youth he ministers. He believes his inner spirituality affects not only himself but the individuals and community around him. Robinson believes by growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ, one learns how to deal with the outer self.

Many within community development view spirituality as an asset because it provides a support system or coping mechanism for those who believe. For youth living in dangerous neighborhoods, spirituality provides an outlet to deal with the constant reality of death they face. Youth are able to connect with people who hold similar values and beliefs and draw on the strength of these values and resilience of other believers (F. Smith 2004). Similarly, women in a study of single, urban African American mothers, cited the supportive relationships with clergy and other church mothers as an important part of their coping system (Brodsky 2000: 207). They felt their spiritual beliefs coupled with the support of workers at faith-based organizations enabled them to develop feelings of protection and blessing. Support staff also helped them deal with limitations in
protecting their children from the street (Brodsky 2000: 213). Mothers relied on the faith-based organizations to reinforce values and standards in their children’s lives. Additionally, these mothers noted the support they found in the words of God through the Bible, in prayer, and in communal activities. Ministers and staff of the New Orleans faith-based organizations agreed that the Bible and prayer offered a support system to adults and youth in their organizations. I did not, however, have the opportunity to speak directly about this with any members of the organization.

Additionally, spirituality provides the most important component of a support system- hope. As McLeish of Desire Street explained, “Faith gives the ability to have hope” (McLeish 2/4/05). Members of Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street agree that hope is an intricate part of the foundation for change in New Orleans. They believe hope is in the verses of the Bible, the words of community leaders, the dreams of children, and at the heart of community development. By incorporating spirituality and community development, workers and residents can foster hope and turn it into a reality. Levy of Desire Street explained how he only began to have hope for a better future after Leverett, director of Desire Street, shared the Bible with him. Reflecting back, Levy realized he was on a one-way road to prison until he started attending Leverett’s Bible Study and witnessed Leverett’s conviction to reach out to him and support him. Leverett, through his Bible Study, planted the seeds of hope for Levy. As Levy has grown in his spirituality and witnessed the growth of so many others in the community through Desire Street, his hope has grown even stronger.

For leaders of the faith-based organizations, spirituality is an important component of community development because it raises the level of accountability.
Leaders view themselves as accountable to God. Members of these organizations are expected to hold themselves and others up to the standards of the Bible, not only for the limited hours of the day when the community comes together, but every minute of everyday. Members are expected to live their lives in the image of Christ. For Brown, these high levels of commitment, standards, and accountability are what distinguish a faith-based organization from a secular organization. From his perspective:

People are committed to other social causes, but not the way faith-based people are committed. Faith based people are committed because it is their life. Other people are committed because it is their ideals. It is a philosophical viewpoint versus an inextricable part of who we are as Christians (Brown 1/10/05).

Greg Smith supported this claim in his article “Religion and the Rise of Social Capitalism.” He wrote, “People of faith believe their spiritual motivation provides an extra degree of commitment and perseverance in the community work they undertake, as well as a different quality of care” (2000: 173). Based on Brown’s and other faith-based leader’s views, it would appear they believe community development cannot successfully exist outside the spiritual realm.

This higher level of accountability is reflected in the ways these leaders are available 24 hours a day. All of the workers recounted instances when they were woken in the middle of the night by a phone call asking for help. Whether it was meeting a child at the hospital who had been shot, picking someone’s brother up from jail, or just listening to someone talk, these workers explained they never say no. This is their life and they find strength and resilience from their beliefs in Jesus Christ. They believe Jesus Christ never said no to the people who needed him. In the pilot study conducted of youth in faith-based organizations, youth identified leaders who “went the extra mile” as
the most important revelation of the nature of faith and trust. Never before did they have someone willing to be there for them no matter what. They understood this commitment of their leaders as a fundamental part of spirituality (F. Smith 2004).

Another significant component to spirituality and community development is that it relates the individual to the collective. It has been shown that “depriving the individual leads to the impoverishment of the collective” (Chile and Simpson 2004: 327). By combining spirituality and community development, an emphasis is placed on the interconnectedness of these two entities. “By promoting the well-being and contributions of all members of society, it reaffirms the inalienable worthiness of the person which is central to personal identity, the most critical basis upon which a good society is built” (Chile and Simpson 2004: 323). Spirituality brings to the community the ideas of equality, personal security, respect for human rights, personal dignity, social justice, and empowerment (Chile and Simpson 2004: 324). Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street believe that to deal with the individual as a whole, one must address spirituality. Robinson explained, without tending to the inner person, the outer person can never achieve their full potential and satisfy all their needs. When both the inner self and the outer self are satisfied or whole, the individual can feel powerful and important and make a more meaningful contribution to their community.

Lastly, spirituality is seen as an asset to community development because faith-based organizations have the ability to create extensive networks and partnerships to aid larger groups of people (Bartkowski and Regis 2003: 14-15). Within the CCDA network there are over three hundred organizations. This network has the power to draw on a larger wealth of resources than a single institution because so many more people are
involved. Although Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are their own unique organizations, they often at times work together because they are so much more powerful as a partnership. These organizations have been known to work with Café Reconcile, the Juvenile Justice Project, and Living Witness church. Desire Street has also set up a program known as CURE, Churches United for Revitalization and Evangelism. This program unites local neighborhood churches that share a common view of the church’s responsibility in the community to work together to accomplish larger tasks in New Orleans.

**LIMITATIONS TO A SPIRITUAL-BASED APPROACH**

Leaders and workers at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street believe Christian spirituality is the most important component of community development. For them, community development cannot occur without spiritual development. However, some of the claims these organizations make about spirituality and development are difficult to prove. Incorporating spirituality into community development also places limitations on development efforts. One of the main areas of contention is whether spiritual development and community development are one and the same. In their article, Chile and Simpson argued in favor of linking spirituality and community development because the core dimensions of community development (economic, social, political, spiritual, cultural, and environmental) are strongly influenced by spiritual values such as holism, diversity, and social justice (2004: 318). Despite being influenced by similar values, spiritual development and community development are not the same thing. Although they share a similar philosophical basis, the methods of implementing community
development and the desired effects of development are not linked to spirituality or spiritual development.

However, I do not believe ministers or staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, or Desire Street would support the idea that spirituality and community development are not linked. They are so fully committed to the idea that community development cannot occur without spiritual development that some of the programs they offer overlook the realities of the conditions of New Orleans and concentrate solely on developing the inner self and a relationship with Jesus Christ. Robert Silverman cited this as a common problem of faith-based organizations, noting, “Faith-based organizations articulate broad platforms based on social justice and elimination of poverty, however these issues were often subordinate to the religious mission of a given organization” (2002: 159-160). Staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street claim they meet the physical needs of residents but there is no evidence that they provide services such as food, clothing, or employment.

Taking into account the population of youth that Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are serving, I find it problematic that the programs and outreach of these organizations are not more directed towards the daily situations youth face like drugs, guns, fighting, and violence. The organizations claim to be “transforming the hood” and “making Desire a more desirable place to live,” but this does not seem to be the main focus of their activities. Instead, they are more concerned with the morality and spirituality of the people in their communities. They are concerned with transforming the people into good Christians rather than addressing social injustices. Providing a place for the youth to go after school for two hours is a significant step, but what about equipping these youth for the other hours of the day when they are alone and face the pressures of
their peers and the street. I understand by teaching youth Christian principles, organization leaders expect youth to make smarter decisions, surround themselves with Christian people, and aim to avoid confrontational situations but how realistic is it that youth will be able to achieve these ideals? How much are Scripture and theology going to aid youth in dealing with situations they cannot control? Are Christian ideals and the Bible going to tear down the walls of apartheid that are already forming? Its as if these organizations are giving youth a fake shield of Christianity to go out and fight the world. These youth need strong education programs, job opportunities, financial assistance, and respectable role models. Some of the programs at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are beginning to aid youth in these areas, but overall, the organizations need to be more realistic about the situations youth will face and how prepared youth are to deal with them.

Some of the programs Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street offer are more in-tune with Christian spiritual values than the reality of life for New Orleans youth. For example, Trinity offers a sexual abstinence program to youth as young as third grade. I applaud them for discussing such an important subject as sex with young children, but the program fails to discuss important issues youth will encounter like sexual abuse, harassment, rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and pressures from their peers. Inner-city youth, especially young girls, are vulnerable to pressures to engage in sex at a young age as a way to fit in, receive attention, and feel loved. Young girls often view having a baby as a way to make their lives better and have someone to love them. If Trinity is attempting to have a holistic program that targets the needs of these youth, their program needs to move beyond promoting sexual purity until marriage to addressing the reasons
why youth engage in sex at an early age. Staff at Trinity need to provide youth with a reliable, broad spectrum of information that allows youth to make responsible decisions. Staff also need to concentrate on ways to boost self-esteem and self-worth so youth are empowered, strong, and resilient and do not give into peer pressures.

Similarly, Desire Street has proposed running a basketball tournament to allow young men from the neighborhood to become involved in the ministry. Staff have recently observed a rise in burglary and vandalism in the areas surrounding Desire Street and have attributed the increase in crime to young men having nothing better to do. As a way to reach out to these men, the ministry is organizing a basketball tournament at the Desire Street gym. At the tournament, there is going to be ministers preaching to the men about the Bible and salvation and encouraging them to find God and become involved in Desire Street. I am skeptical about how many young men are going to find God and transform their lives in the Desire Street gym. In organizing this tournament, it appears Desire Street is more concerned with gaining converts to their organization than addressing the reasons why people may be committing crimes. While lack of entertainment may be a reason for an increase in crime, I doubt it is the only factor causing people to become involved in crime. Desire Street needs to address these other issues if they really want to make a difference in the Desire community. Organizing a basketball tournament is like putting a band-aid on a gaping wound. What is even more troubling about the tournament is how leaders at Desire Street automatically assumed that because crime increased, young men from the neighborhood must be the culprits. This type of thinking shows no faith in the men of the Desire community. It reinforces stereotypes of poor young African American males as criminals. In organizing the
tourney for these men, it appears Desire Street is more concerned with the failures of men themselves than with the circumstances that have shaped the men’s lives (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 571).

The strongest programs Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street have to offer are programs directed at the community that encourage ownership, empowerment, and commitment to the neighborhood. Ironically, these are the programs that appear to be least based on Christian spirituality or faith. For example, Trinity’s renovation and sale of a crack house in Hollygrove sent a powerful message to the Hollygrove neighborhood that Trinity is committed to change. Members of the organization were willing to put in the hard work and time to renovate a house and make it a place that someone in the Hollygrove neighborhood would be proud of. By renovating this house, staff and volunteers have set an example for other residents of Hollygrove. Not only have they encouraged residents to take ownership of their neighborhood and transform it using their skills and resources but they have also opened the door for residents to seek out Trinity’s help on future projects. Additionally, many of the activities for youth at Trinity are aimed at cleaning up Hollygrove and helping the residents of the neighborhood. To the best of my knowledge, neither Urban Impact nor Desire Street encourage youth to volunteer in such a way within their communities. These two organizations appear more heavily focused on spiritually developing the youth through Bible study than creating ways that the youth can learn hands-on that they are valuable members of the community.

Incorporating spiritual development into community development also causes these faith-based organizations to limit the population of people they serve. Despite a somewhat progressive approach to community development with the principle of
relocation, their heavy emphasis on conservative Christian theologies and the Bible deters non-spiritual people from becoming involved. Though these faith-based organizations do not turn away anyone in need, the spiritual undertones of these organizations are embedded in every aspect of outreach and assistance. Greg Smith highlighted this problem of inclusion/exclusion in faith-based organizations. He wrote:

Exclusive theologies which define a single narrow way of salvation militate against serving the whole local community, let alone involving them as partners in the work or decision-making about community life. (2000: 174).

If the goal of a faith-based organization is to help create healthy and successful communities, these organizations need to find methods that allow them to reach a larger segment of the community. These organizations have limited partnerships with agencies that do not exhibit similar spiritual beliefs. Along these same lines, Bartkowski and Regis pointed out in Charitable Choices that while faith-based organizations have the ability to generate social capital, they also can “effectively withhold the ‘investment’ of social capital in persons perceived to be outside the network or undeserving of trust” (2003: 20). People who do not embrace and use spirituality in the way these organizations prescribe might be denied participation in these organizations. By excluding and isolating people who organization staff feel are unworthy of receiving their services, they further limit the population of people who they can help.

Furthermore, Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street operate based on the position that because they incorporate spirituality into development, they possess resources and assets that secular organizations do not have. They claim to be connected to the community and have close-knit relationships among organization members because of their spirituality. Like many faith-based workers, they believe that faith is the “key
driver” or only source of altruism (Smith 2004: 193). Short of comparing secular and faith-based organizations on an organization-to-organization basis, there is no way to prove these claims are true. As a practical matter, most people who become involved in providing social services and community outreach do so because they are dedicated to helping people. Dedication, compassion, resilience, and strength are qualities that do not depend on a person’s spiritual beliefs (McLaughlin 1994). Workers at secular organizations, like faith-based organizations, often go beyond the call of duty and develop meaningful relationships with the people they are trying to help.

Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street support a position that their organizations are better or more equipped to help communities because they are faith-based. This position can be viewed as ethnocentric. It is hard to describe, but workers from the faith-based organizations have an attitude that their way is the right way or the only way because they have God on their side. Greg Smith noted in his article that this view of “the church as the elect or chosen people” has often been expressed by faith-based organizations (Smith 2004: 189). As an anthropologist, it is difficult to contend with the views of the members of these organizations when they are unwilling to recognize that their way is not the only way or the best way to help residents of New Orleans. Because their entire world is viewed through the narrow scope of Christian spirituality, ministers and staff cannot step away from their beliefs long enough to consider any other way.

Brown of Trinity made a distinction between faith-based people and non-faith-based people that illustrates this ethnocentric viewpoint. He felt the difference between the two groups of people is a difference between being committed because it is who you
are and committed because it is your ideals. Brown feels that because spirituality is embedded in every component of his life, there is an extra level of commitment for him that a non-faith based person could not possess. For him, faith-based and non-faith-based people are two different groups of people with two different potentials to help a community. This is a very problematic statement. First off, it can be argued that a person’s ideals cannot be separated from a person’s beliefs and actions. Others might argue that spirituality is an ideal. What is most troublesome about the statement however is the fact that Brown distinguished between people based on faith. In my opinion, one’s potential to help a community is not contingent on one’s spirituality. Judging people based on such a factor is another form of inequality and prejudice. Such a belief will not encourage partnerships between groups and will only separate the community even more. It is also possible that this view can be extended not just to community workers but community members as well. Community members with different beliefs may be deemed less worthy of aid.

Although I believe ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street have good intentions in helping New Orleans communities, there are some parallels between their work and that of Christian missionaries. Like missionaries, ministers and staff at the New Orleans organizations are concerned with evangelizing and spreading the word of God as their foremost mission. They believe their message of Christian spirituality is the best. Even when ministers and staff incorporate indigenous people into their organizations, they incorporate them to preach the organization’s beliefs and message. Ministers and staff claim to encourage the community to participate in development efforts, but like the missionaries, they have decided what would be best for
the community. They have decided which communities need to be transformed, how they should be transformed, and what they should be transformed into. In colonial lands, Christian missionaries did the same thing and promoted their “own visions of civilization.” In present day New Orleans, ministers and staff continue this same practices by promoting their own visions of a revitalized New Orleans (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 569). Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are paternalistic organizations that are attempting to resist one form of hegemony by enforcing another, that of Christian theology and spirituality. Because these organizations concentrate so heavily on transforming the inner self, it leads one to believe that they see the problems in New Orleans communities as a problem with the residents themselves. Their approach emphasizes transforming the inner person rather than addressing the larger structural failings of the system.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the ideas of hope and vision and their importance to New Orleans youth. I will look at the ways Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are trying to create hope and vision for youth.
CHAPTER 6
CREATING HOPE AND COLLECTIVE VISION

In the last chapter, discussion centered on the idea of Christian spiritual based community development. Ministers and staff at the faith-based organizations view spirituality as an inseparable component of community development. Because of this, much of their community development efforts are focused on the inner person or the inner self. As part of this development approach, New Orleans organizations attempt to instill hope and vision in New Orleans youth. Hope and vision give youth purpose and have the power to protect youth from the criminal component of the street. In this chapter, I begin with a brief description of works of social scientists that have documented hopelessness and frustration among the lower class. The second half of the chapter focuses on how hope and vision in New Orleans are affected by societal factors. The chapter concludes by examining the ways staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street work to empower youth with hope and a positive vision for the future.

DOCUMENTING HOPE

Residing in the alleged “Murder Capitol of the United States,” it is difficult for young African American males living in the poorest of New Orleans neighborhoods to imagine the future. Surrounded on a daily basis by poverty, despair, violence, and drugs, it becomes difficult for youth to imagine a future different than the present. Faced with almost incomprehensible odds and limitations, many young males envision their futures as having one of two paths: jail or death. It is the sad reality of structural oppression and violence that many youth consider the possibility of a higher education or a secure job,
unattainable and unrealistic. As sociologist Jay MacLeod wrote in his book *Ain’t No Makin It*, “The American dream is a hallucination” for inner-city youth (1987: 3). Hampered by so-called insurmountable challenges, limited opportunities, and an inescapable past, youth live for the present and short-term gratification. At times, youth appear hopeless, directionless, and powerless as much by their own agency as by the oppressive structure of society.

Hopelessness and frustration are not unique to inner city youth of New Orleans. There are numerous ethnographic studies within the fields of anthropology and sociology that document feelings of hopelessness and futility among the lower class. Though most of these early studies are now out-dated, exaggerated, incorrect, or at times racist, they do provide documentation of the effects of structural oppression and limited opportunities on the lower class. In the 1960s, ethnographers such as Oscar Lewis and Elliot Liebow wrote about the inner city poor and their beliefs that they had little control over their lives and little opportunity to make things better or different (Bolland et al 2001: 238). Lewis included feelings of fatalism, helplessness, dependency, and inferiority in his characterization of the culture of poverty (Polednak 1997: 45). Liebow expanded on this characterization in *Tally’s Corner* (1968), showing that the present-oriented style of living, which he believed to be characteristic of inner city African American males, was not culturally transmitted from generation to generation, but rediscovered within each successive generation. In trying to provide for the future, each successive generation of males experienced first hand the feelings of hopelessness and futility that characterized the preceding generation (1968: 223).
In Edward Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City Revisited* (1974), Banfield went so far as to define the present-oriented lifestyle of the lower class as a defining characteristic of the social group. He defined the lower class by their moment-to-moment lifestyle, ruled by impulse rather than rational and logical thought and planning (1974: 61). Banfield characterized the lower class’ conception of the future as beyond their control, something that happened to them, not something they could control or make happen. He included in his characterization that members of the lower class had no desire for a successful future. Quoting Herman Hyman, he wrote that the lower class individual “doesn’t want much success, knows he couldn’t get it even if he wanted to, and doesn’t want what might help him get success” (Banfield 1974: 62). Banfield’s description of the hopelessness of the lower class makes it appear as if these emotions or characteristics are inherently part of the nature of the poor rather than the effects of the larger structures of society.

More recent ethnographic literature includes hopelessness, frustration, and a present-oriented style of living as part of its description of the lower class, but it attempts to analyze and interpret these emotions beyond simple description. Jay MacLeod in *Ain’t No Makin’ It* (1987), wrote about the aspirations of two groups of young men, one white and one African American, living in a housing project in a Northeastern city. MacLeod showed how the group of white young men had low aspirations and little hope for a successful and positive future while the group of African American men had high aspirations and dreams of realizing middle class success. By the second printing of the book ten years later, both groups of men were experiencing low aspirations and little hope for the future after facing the realities of limited economic opportunities, racism, and classism present in American society. Through the lives and aspirations of these
young men, MacLeod explored social reproduction theory and how poverty and inequality are perpetuated, sustained, and recreated from one generation to the next.

Alex Kotlowitz, in *There are No Children Here* (1991), wrote about the lives of two young brothers, Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers, and their experiences growing up in the Henry Horner Homes in Chicago. Kotlowitz had met the young boys when he was writing a series for the *Wall Street Journal*. He was so taken with their story that he returned to write a book on their lives. In the book, he captured the horrors of growing up in the housing projects, surrounded by poverty, drugs, violence, and gangs. He showed how the young boys struggled to overcome their circumstances and the strategies they employed to survive against great odds. In his work, he was also able to show that although the boys were acutely aware of the challenges they faced, they still had hope for a future and the strategies they employed to survive reflected this hope. As Kotlowitz wrote in his introduction, Lafayette at age ten was already aware of the one-way path that many African American youth travel in the inner city. When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, Lafayette replied, “If I grow up, I’d like to be a bus driver” (1991: x). Note here, not when I grow up, but if I grow up.

Hope is a difficult entity to describe or quantify. Part of what makes us human is our ability to believe that something abstract and imagined can actually cause something else to happen. As Anthony Reading wrote in *Hope and Despair*, “The fact that a nonmaterial entity, such as a mere belief, can have such a material effect seems to defy all laws of physics” (2004: xi). Hope has a powerful way of shaping human behavior and thinking. It is a unique quality that allows people to detach themselves from their present situation, imagine a future that is different, and then base their behavior on the hope that
these imagined scenarios will come true (Reading 2004: xii). In imagining different scenarios for the future, people unconsciously construct mental representational models of the world inside their heads. These mental constructs are what allow people to “disengage from the present, reflect on the past, and forecast the future” (Reading 2004: xii). In having hope, people can desire to achieve one of two outcomes, either the desire to bring about a pleasurable condition or the desire to alleviate an adverse condition.

Hope is often closely associated with faith, spirituality, and religion. This can be due, in part, to the fact that faith, like hope, is based on belief. Hope is an inherent part of the nature of faith; it is a theological virtue (Desroche 1979: 5). Faith is what helps people endure adverse conditions and suffering because it gives them something to look forward to and it gives them a sense of purpose and meaning. As Durkheim explained, “Religion is not only a system of ideas, it is above all a system of forces. Religious life implies the existence of very specific forces…when a man lives a religious life, he believes he is participating in a force that dominates him, but which at the same time supports him and raises him above himself” (Desroche 1979: 16). Hope is one of the forces that allows a man to rise above his current situation and believe in something bigger and better. Furthermore, hope, in terms of faith, can also be viewed “as an alliance between man and God” (Desroche 1979: 9). It can be understood that God gives man hope to not only believe in a better life on earth, but to believe in the salvation and justice that will come in an existence beyond earth. As evidence of this, hope is mentioned over one hundred and fifty times in the Bible (Reading 2004: 8).

While hope gives a sense of purpose to life and allows people to imagine their futures, the absence of hope has a profound effect on people’s thinking and behaviors.
As the ethnographic literature has shown, feelings of hopelessness, futility, and frustration are often found among the lower class. Research within the field of psychology has also documented that a present-oriented style of living is more common among the lower class. In one study conducted among youth in a southern housing project, over 75% of the youth agreed it is best to live for the moment and not worry about tomorrow. 57% of the youth agreed the future is too uncertain to make any long-term plans (Bolland at al 2001: 240). Psychologist W. Friedman also noted among the poor, “a similar sense of futility about trying to influence the future and a greater commitment to short-term rewards” (Reading 2004: 7). Additionally, psychologist Philip Zimbardo, both through his own life experiences growing up poor and research he has conducted, postulated that a present-oriented lifestyle is one of the distinguishing factors between lower class and middle class living. In his work, he noted, “Lower class individuals often mix hedonistic living for the moment with a fatalistic pessimism of never being able to influence the agencies that control their lives” (Reading 2004: 7).

**HOPE AND VISION IN NEW ORLEANS**

It is easy to see how hope is a treasured commodity among inner city, poor African American youth in New Orleans. The social structure of American society, lack of role models within New Orleans, and social and physical isolation of the poorest neighborhoods act as inhibiting factors to the development of hope among inner city youth. As staff at the faith-based organizations explained, it is not that youth have lost complete hope, but they lack vision necessary for hope to develop and flourish. Vision is the ability to imagine a future that is meaningful and satisfying. It is the ability to connect current behaviors and thinking to consequences and outcomes in the future. As
Robinson of Urban Impact explained, “Hope translates vision.” Without hope, there can be no vision of the future. But even with hope, youth need guidance and encouragement to set goals. Brown of Trinity connects the problems plaguing the city of New Orleans to a lack of vision among youth and older adults. He explained:

The Bible says it this way, ‘Without vision, people perish.’ Another translation says, ‘Without vision, people cast off restraint.’ And we look at our inner cities and we say those people have no morals, they have no restraint and I would say, ‘Well duh, they have no vision.’ When the white folks moved out, not just the white folks, but anybody who’s got resources, moves out and the vision then, the strength then…if the strength moves out of the community, the vision moves out (Brown 1/10/05).

As Brown explained, if people do not have a purpose in life, a sense of who they are and what they plan on achieving, they have no reason to restrain from activities that might be dangerous or morally challenging. Sadly, many youth growing up in New Orleans envision their life as having two choices, jail or death. Because they do not have a vision or a hope for any different kind of life, they do not seem to care what kind of behaviors they engage in. Robinson described that when he was “gang-banging” in Dallas, no one wanted to get shot or die, but gang-bangers accepted the consequences of the street as part of the life they had chosen. They took the attitude that they face death everyday so they rather live for the short-term gratifications their lifestyle provided—money, respect, and women. These were the parts of their life where they felt they had control. Soulja Slim reiterated these ideas in his song *Street Life*, “I called my moms today/ She asked me did I pray?/ I told her I got to/ cause the streets I’m roamin’ on is one way.” Later in the song, Soulja Slim raps, “Live my life for the day/ cause there ain’t nothin’ promised for tomorrow” (Give it 2’Em Raw 1998).
Youth growing up in New Orleans face limitations and obstacles. It is hard for youth to grasp a strong vision of the future when they have to worry whether they will make it through the school day safely. For young African American males, there are few role models to look up to. Most youth are raised in female-headed, single family households where their fathers have been absent from their lives. Besides this, New Orleans has lost an extraordinary number of males to death or the criminal justice system. When the only males a young boy knows are dead, imprisoned, or absent, there are few examples to shape his thinking in a positive direction. Youth must also deal with the pressure of the street. Many young males act tough so as not to appear vulnerable or weak. Robinson experienced these pressures and challenges first hand growing up. Although he was intelligent and school came easy for him, he was drawn to the violent, flashy lifestyle he encountered on the street. He relayed:

> It still was a struggle to shake loose of what I saw from day to day. Street culture, it was beautiful to me. Even if it wasn’t my own, it was still beautiful. Sure I didn’t want to get shot. I don’t want to get shot, who wants to get shot? But definitely you want the girls, you want the money, you want people to notice you. That really turned me on. Something else, older men really noticed you. The older guys in the neighborhood really, I always hung out with older guys. What’s tangible is the guy on the corner who says what’s up to me everyday. Or the dope dealer that’s always giving little kids money. If you’re a kid and you have no daddy ay home and some guy gives you a dollar, it’s like, ‘Wow, a dollar’ (Robinson 1/25/05).

Even for youth who resist becoming caught up in violence and drugs, their visions are developmentally challenged. As Brown of TCC explained, “Every kid is going to be a pro basketball player when they grow up or a rapper because that is what they see as a model of success.” Youth, especially males, have no role models. As noted earlier, African American males have one of the highest incarceration rates in the country.
Successful African American sports stars or entertainers are the most exposure many inner city youth have to an example of a successful African American. Robinson described when he was growing up, it was hard to imagine being successful and not being a sports star or rap star. He explained, “Did I know a doctor? No. Did I know a lawyer? No. Sure you can sit in a classroom and have the teacher say, ‘You can be a lawyer.’ But it doesn’t mean anything realistically, tangibly” (Robinson 1/25/05).

Besides the lack of role models, youth in New Orleans experience isolation and lack of opportunities. Living in physical and social isolation, these youth only know the environment and conditions which surround them. Within this environment there is little opportunity or resources to rise above your current situation. For most of the youth growing up in the city, they will never leave New Orleans. Even though they may know that life exists beyond poverty and the inner city, they have never experienced this type of life to even imagine what it could be like. For these youth, hope is the ability to detach oneself from the current situation and imagine a different future. But youth cannot imagine anything much different from what they now know because they have never experienced anything different. Robinson realized after working with youth for over eight years now that New Orleans is a unique situation because “most of these kids never leave New Orleans, never leave the neighborhood unless they are going to another poor neighborhood. And what’s tough about New Orleans is you don’t have the money right here. Yeah you can go down St Charles into certain neighborhoods and see the houses, but it still looks not too different than where you’re living” (Robinson 1/25/05).

At the same time, it is difficult for youth to have vision when they are constantly sent the message that everyone else has given up on them. Their own frustrations and
disappointments are “reinforced by the negative expectations that rain upon them from the community, the school, and the media” (McLaughlin 1994: 208). Mainstream society is quick to condemn these youth as hopeless because of their circumstances. The media sends a powerful message to these youth when they use words like animal, derelict, and pathology to describe them and their living environment. Youth in inner cities across America believe no one cares if they live or die (McLaughlin 1994: 207). Ironically, the system that condemns these youth as hopeless is the same system that has continually failed these youths. It has failed to provide youth with a quality education and necessary skills training to secure a job. It has created and implemented policies and laws that continually isolate and marginalize the most socially and economically disadvantaged citizens of society. And rather than investigating the underlying causes of social ills and creating measures to prevent further problems, the system creates harsher and longer punishments for younger and younger youth.

Realizing that hope and vision are essential to transforming the community and securing a more positive future for youth, staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street try to create and instill these qualities in youth through their programs and values. Through their interpretation of the Bible, staff use Christian spirituality to transform the inner person and “infuse vision” into the lives of these youth. Robinson of Urban Impact teaches all his youth Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know well the plans I have declared for you says the Lord, plans to prosper you not harm you, to give you a future and a hope.” He follows it with verse 13, “When you look for me, you will find me. Yes when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord, and I will change your lot.” Staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are trying to empower the youth,
through Christianity, to have hope and be “active agents in the enrichment of their own lives” (McLaughlin 1994: 91). Staff do not want youth to become victimized. They want them to be empowered by hope and vision and to create a place for themselves in the world.

By providing opportunities to youth that otherwise would not have been available, staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street believe they can create hope and vision where there is little. They offer education-related enrichment as well as extracurricular activities to expand youth’s horizons and open their imaginations to life outside of inner city New Orleans. Educational tutoring and enrichment provides youth with the skills and resources they need to not only set meaningful goals but realize they have the resources to achieve the goals. Through these programs, staff are trying “to touch and nurture the potential of inner city youth” (McLaughlin 1994: 89). All three of the centers offer literacy tutoring. Without the basic skill of reading, youth have no future. Both Urban Impact and Desire Street offer college preparation courses for high school age children. Literacy and educational achievement are pathways youth need to realize their goals and potentials. By providing youth with the necessary resources, staff help youth begin to conquer their fears of failure and insignificance. They also try to reinforce the idea to youth that they are valuable and contributing members of society.

Besides educational programs, Trinity offers opportunities like attending the symphony, plays at the State Theatre, ice-skating in Baton Rouge, and trips to the zoo. These experiences are aimed at allowing youth to realize the world that exists beyond inner city New Orleans. These opportunities allow youth “to break out of the boundaries imposed by their isolation” and raise their own expectations of themselves and what they
can achieve (McLaughlin1994: 106). Brown of Trinity believes he is planting seeds for youth that he hopes will one day bloom. Trinity is also, as discussed in an earlier chapter, working to start an alternative education/trade program for youth in Hollygrove. This program will provide youth with the education and skills they need to get a job. Programs like these give youth hope that someone cares and they are not forgotten.

By treating each youth as “a potential agent of change and hope in the community which they live,” Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street can make a difference. Staff believe by viewing the youth of the community with “kingdom eyes,” they can discover youth who have potential to become leaders and enact change in their communities (Gordon 1995: 183). Developing indigenous leadership is considered one of the most important activities of CCDA organizations. The CCDA philosophy of indigenous leadership, like many other philosophies, is based on a Biblical passage. In Isaiah 61, verse 5, it reads, “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations” (Reed 1995: 31). The “they” in this passage is the people of the cities. CCDA believes Jesus Christ is seeking out people in New Orleans to fix and transform their communities. It is the job of ministers and staff at faith-based organizations to spread the gospel to the community and find the youth who have the potential to be leaders so that they can embrace the word of God and help “rebuild and renew” New Orleans communities.

New Orleans faith-based organizations begin to develop indigenous leaders from as young as five years old. They nurture and aid youth in their education and relationship with Jesus Christ. They help them to become empowered and develop necessary skills to successfully lead their communities. CCDA expects ministers and staff to spend
extensive time with these youth, bringing them into their own families, traveling with them, and exposing them to experiences which test their leadership skills. CCDA considers the ultimate sign of success to be youth who attend college and upon completion, return to their communities to assume a leadership position within a CCDA organization. They believe this not only speaks to the strength of the faith-based organization and indigenous leader, but to the strength of the message that community members have the power to change their communities.

Indigenous leaders are considered the most powerful leaders in a community. They possess the knowledge and commitment a community needs for transformation because they have spent their whole lives in the community, developed relationships, and become a part of community’s culture and history. They also serve as important role models and examples to other youth. Developing indigenous leadership is not unique to Christian Community Development. Other community organizations use such an approach because of its positive effects. Indigenous leaders “become tangible examples of makin’ it, moving off the streets, of effective problem solving, of handling disappointments and challenges that enter their lives in any setting… They are not idealized sports heroes or rappers. They are individuals who live and work in the neighborhood, have faults and strengths, and show themselves as survivors and optimists” (McLaughlin 1994: 120). Above all else, indigenous leaders embody hope. They prove a person from a poor community has the power, opportunity, and motivation to achieve something great despite the obstacles. Indigenous leaders share their success and achievements with everyone in the community by being leaders.
All three New Orleans faith-based organizations have programs that encourage indigenous leadership development. All three organizations have indigenous leaders on their staff, but Desire Street by far has the most indigenous leaders. At Desire Street, indigenous leaders run the programs that are most visible to the residents of the Desire community. Indigenous male leaders run all of the after-school programs at the Desire Academy. Staff at Desire Street believe it is important that youth spend time each day with men who can serve as mentors and role models. Additionally, female indigenous leaders run parenting classes for other women in the Desire community. Indigenous leaders in the community who have successful marriages and strong families run marriage and family classes. Indigenous leaders have a closer connection to the residents of the Desire community; they have lived in the same buildings, attended the same schools, and experienced many of the same disappointments and frustrations. McLeish of Desire Street agreed that advice given by indigenous leaders is received much better than when outsiders give advice.

Indigenous leaders have the potential to be very powerful leaders within their communities. One concern that surrounds the issue of indigenous leadership however is whether or not indigenous leaders are true representatives of their communities. First and foremost, indigenous leaders are representatives of the faith-based organizations where they have spend much of their lives. “They are invaluable repositories of the organization’s ethos and skills” (McLaughlin 1994: 115). Indigenous leaders are trained and nurtured from the age of five through the time they assume a leadership role to spread the message and work towards completing the mission of the ministry. They are the agents of the organizations. Because they have had such special treatment from staff
at the organizations, their experiences growing up and being in the community might be
different from that of other community members. Although the leader may have been
raised in the community and be indigenous to the community, they may not be a typical
community member. There representations may be more connected to the faith-based
organization than the community.

Having hope and a vision for the future is tied to the opportunities and
experiences one has in their life. These opportunities and experiences are affected by
one’s racial identity. In the next chapter, I will examine the concept of race and its place
in the structure of America. I will also explore ways New Orleans youth understand
racial identity and racial categories.
Chapter 6 focused on the importance of hope and collective vision for youth in New Orleans and the ways staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street try to instill these ideals in youth. Having hope and vision affects not only the future for these youth but the present day as well. Race and racism are tied to ideas of hope and vision for the future. Consequently, this chapter explores the concept of race and racism in America. The chapter examines, through the experiences and words of public school teachers and staff at the faith-based organizations, how youth construct and perceive racial identity. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of racial reconciliation in New Orleans and the prospects of it occurring through these faith-based organizations.

ANTHROPOLOGY, RACE, AND RACISM

Race is an issue that Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street must address in their outreach to the community. New Orleans’ racial history is both unique and complex compared to other Southern cities, but New Orleans has not escaped the tensions that have existed and still exist between different racial groups (Dent 1976; Hollandsworth 2001; Rogers 1993; Waller 2000). Ministering to the poorest neighborhoods of New Orleans puts Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street in direct contact with a minority population that has experienced great amounts of oppression and disenfranchisement in white America. Within American society, institutional policies of racism continue to privilege white Americans. The issue of race also takes center stage at these faith-based
organizations because the ministers and most of the staff are white while the majority of community members are African American.

In the 21st century, race continues to be what acclaimed author and radio broadcaster Studs Terkel called an “American obsession” (1992). Within American culture, the concept of race is fraught with conflicting meanings, competing definitions, and misconceptions. In *From Savage to Negro*, anthropologist Lee Baker summed up the complex nature of race. He wrote:

Race in the US is at once an utter illusion and a material reality, a fiction and a ‘scientific’ fact. It is a political wedge and a unifying force. It is structured by legislation yet destabilized by judicial fiat, shaped by public opinion but also configured by academic consensus. Though historically contingent, it is constantly being transformed (1998: 1).

The conceptions of race in present day American society have a long and complex history within the discipline of anthropology. Since the creation of the discipline in the late 1800s to the present day, race has been a central theme of anthropological research, inquiry, and theory (Baker 1998: 2). Once considered a purely biological concept by early anthropologists and scholars, race is now more widely accepted as a social construction, defined through collective action, ideology, institutions, and personal practices of society (Rothenberg 1998: 15). Throughout the past century, the construction of race and understandings of racism have changed tide with the larger social transformations, historical processes, and political changes experienced within the country.

Early on, British and American scholars, as well as the general public, accepted race as a biological concept. People believed there were innate differences between races not only in terms of physical appearance and bodily makeup but also in personality,
intelect, and character (Rothenberg 1998: 10). Anthropologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s devoted their research and theories to identifying and ranking the races. Physical anthropologists drew on the work of other scholars in the scientific world like Philadelphia physician, Dr. Samuel Morton, to support theories that African Americans were genetically and biologically inferior to whites, thereby justifying their unequal treatment (Baker 1998: 14). Also popular during this time period was Social Darwinism, proposed by Herbert Spencer. Social Darwinism relied on the ideas of natural selection as a mechanism to examine society and culture. Spencer ranked what he considered to be the different world races into three categories, savages, semi-civilized, and civilized, based on how he perceived the race’s intellectual, social, and biological characteristics (Baker 1998: 30).

In looking at the construction of race and racism in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it is important to understand that popular culture was using the work of anthropologists as “scientific” support of the inferiority of non-white groups. Ideas of race held by early anthropologists were not specifically racist viewpoints, but were interpreted by both the general public and later scholars to be racist. Many early anthropologists carried out extensive research and study with Native American tribes trying to show the value and importance of their cultures. However, many early anthropological ideas on race were incorrectly used to perpetuate racial stereotypes, rationalize and justify the unequal treatment of minority groups, and intensify the importance of racial categories within American society (Baker 1998: 54).

By the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologists began to support a more explicit anti-racist agenda. Support of this position is largely credited to Franz
Boas and his attacks on evolutionism, although there were other anthropologists with similar theoretical viewpoints. Boas steered theories away from racial inferiority, fighting “against the disparagement… of blacks in the United States by valorizing their customs and showing these to be at least as sophisticated and intricate as our own” (Knauft 1996: 21). Boas argued in favor of the doctrine of cultural relativism, the belief that every culture deserves to be studied on its own terms, not in comparison to other cultures (Knauft 1996: 18). Additionally, Boas was instrumental in limiting “race’s meaning to biophysical and morphological characteristics” (Harrison 1995: 52). Based on studies measuring the head shape of first generation Americans, Boas asserted there were no causal links between race, language, and culture. Boas’ research marked an important starting point in the attempt to expose the concept of race as a social construction, largely influenced by the ideologies and stereotypes of American society.

Besides Boas, W.E.B. DuBois was a significant figure in refuting racial ideology in the early part of the twentieth century. Although his contributions have largely gone unrecognized for the greater part of the century, they were critical “to laying the foundations for research that changed the discourse on race and culture in the social sciences” (Baker 1998: 114). DuBois was one of the earliest people to acknowledge that race was not a biological concept. He instead blamed racial inequality on slavery. He argued that a color line existed as “a form of institutionalized alienation” which prevented “Negroes from gaining any political, economic, or social equality” (Baker 1998: 111). DuBois has also received attention for the prominent role he played as an activist, arguing in favor of political rights as a means to gain social equality for African Americans (Baker 1998: 107). Despite similarities between Boas and DuBois and
As the twentieth century progressed, scholars within the discipline of anthropology became increasingly vocal in supporting an antiracist position. Anthropologists embraced cultural relativism and spoke out in favor of racial equality. Around the time of World War II, anthropologist Ashley Montagu called into question the validity of race as a biological concept. He argued that race was a “dangerous fallacy” and “no really separative or divisive biological differences between the major, or ethnic, groups of mankind” existed (Harrison 1995:53; Montagu 2001:109). Montagu argued that racial prejudice and the problem of race were social problems with no biological groundings (Montagu 2001: 107). In his 1962 Presidential Address to the American Anthropology Association, Sherwood Washburn continued to challenge the notion of race as a biological concept. Washburn declared “race as a product of the past” and urged anthropologists to explore human evolution in terms of population genetics (Washburn 1963: 531). Like many other anthropologists, Washburn took an antiracist position and argued racism was “based on profound misunderstandings of culture, of learning, and of the biology of the human species” (Washburn 1963: 528).

In the decades leading up to the 1990s, anthropologists embraced a no-race or “color-blind” theoretical position (Baker 1998: 7). Anthropologists instead focused on ethnicity, tending to “euphemize, blur, and even deny how racial categories emerge and persist” (Baker 1998: 210). In taking such a position, anthropologists did not fully explore the ways politics, economics, science, the media, and social science influenced the construction of racial categories and how these racial categories reinforced
stereotypes and ideologies of these institutions (Baker 1998: 2). In the 1990s, anthropologists began to return to studies of race and racism, recognizing social categories of race as powerful factors in American culture. In her article “The Persistent Power of ‘Race’ in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism,” Faye Harrison highlighted the ways in which anthropologists are overcoming their denial of the existence of socially constructed racial categories and beginning to make contributions to current race discourse. Not only have anthropologists begun to recognize significant contributions by people of color but they have also begun to explore issues such as the articulation of race and identity, the dynamics of racial inequality, and the impact of racism and race discourse on the personal, national, and global level (Harrison 1995: 47).

With this renewed interest, anthropologists have devoted much attention to racism. Today, racism is understood as an “ideology of racial domination.” The ideology consists of the belief that “a designated racial group is biologically or culturally inferior to the dominant group.” The dominant group then uses this belief as a way “to rationalize or prescribe the racial group’s treatment in society and explain its social position” (Wilson 1999: 14). In more simple terms, racism is “prejudice plus power” (Bartkowski and Regis 2003:130; US Commission on Civil Rights 1981: 132). A racial ideology that both privileges white skin and tips the balance of power in the direction of whites has become a permanent hegemonic fixture of American culture (Rothenberg 1998: 17). This ideology runs deeper than personal interactions between people to the very structure and foundation upon which American society has been built. Within American society, racial categories exist based on an ideology that dictates what groups have access to power, opportunities, and resources (Baker 1998: 1). And though racial
ideology is being constantly transformed and recreated, it continues to reinforce the superiority and privileging of whites and the subordination of people of color by whites (US Commission on Civil Rights 1981: 132).

Taking into account the complex history of race and racism in America, it is understandable that ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street identified the challenge of overcoming a difference in skin color as initially one of the hardest obstacles they had to face. They credit their ability to overcome such differences and bridge racial gaps to their Christian spirituality. By employing a faith-based philosophy in their outreach, the ministers believe they have been able to use their Christian spirituality as a tool to aid them in the challenges they face addressing racial dividing lines. As discussed earlier, these faith-based organizations place great importance in the words of the gospel and their love for Christ as a way to overcome man-made barriers (Perkins 1995b: 22). In addition to their spirituality, these ministers acknowledge that their understanding of race and race issues aids them in their work. As an example, Brown of Trinity discussed the unfair privileging of white people in New Orleans simply based on their access to better resources.

Traditionally in the Deep South, ministers have been bestowed with high status and accepted as leaders in African American neighborhoods. Since the times of slavery in America, the black preacher has filled the roles of “educator, liberator, political leader, physician, advocate, and spiritual leader” (Lincoln 1974: 66). In a recent paper, Spataro and Anderson discussed how groups allocate high/low status to members.

Groups develop an implicit consensus, based on their shared values, as to which individual characteristics best reflect those values and therefore merit higher status. The group then allocates high and low status positions.
according to whether individuals possess relatively more or less of those characteristics” (2002: 4).

Because religion and spirituality have historically been a large part of life in New Orleans, I suspect residents place importance on the values most related to spirituality and faith. Because ministers often possess these characteristics to the highest degree, they would be considered as high status within the community. Traditionally, preachers and ministers within the African American community have been considered to be close to the people. They are respected and trusted because people understand them to be “someone God had raised up in their midst,” someone who shared in their adversity but also denounced evil and oppression (Lincoln 1974: 67). Likewise, the ministers at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street, despite having a different skin color, still try to relate to residents on this level by living in the same communities and experiencing the problems of their neighbors. Brown of Trinity remarked how he felt his status as minister gave him credibility and allowed him to connect with the people in the community. He felt his similar belief in God allowed the people he is helping to look beyond skin color and accept him into the Hollygrove community.

Furthermore, Kevin Brown shared that much of the contact he has with the community is because he is a minister. This occupation has helped him to gain access to the residents. He believes people confide in him and share their troubles with him because he will listen to them and be able to guide them towards solutions to their problems. Due to his religious training and status as a minister, he feels as if people look to him for spiritual guidance. While Brown acknowledged that much of his energy is devoted to the youth of Hollygrove, he does try to make himself available to anyone who
calls upon him. He related the following story as an example of a common everyday encounter with residents of the Hollygrove neighborhood.

I’m standing out front, I was going to park the van the other day, last week on Thursday. Someone was walking by and he said, ‘Stop for a second, let me ask you something.’ He started telling me the story of his life and his different problems. This is just a guy who barely knew me but really wanted to talk. This guy is kind of pacing around, telling me his whole life story, just some guy off the street. Other people come and knock on the door and ask us to pray for them” (Brown 1/10/05).

In sharing the story, Brown expressed his belief that people trust him because he is a minister. Also, the example is significant to him, in terms of crossing racial barriers, because an African American man was confiding his life story in a white man whom he barely knew. From what Brown has encountered and experienced, this is not a common practice (Shillington and Dotson 1994).

While their status as ministers initially opened doors, ministers needed to take further steps to overcome the obstacles related to their skin color and become a meaningful part of the community. Even after working at these faith-based organizations for many years, ministers attest that the challenges have not gotten any easier and it still requires resilience in the face of hardship. White ministers and staff had to deal with two very critical issues in addressing their difference in skin color. First, they had to overcome the mistrust that has developed due to African Americans being exploited by whites for hundreds of years. Secondly, they needed to have knowledge and an understanding of the people they were working with in New Orleans and their daily situations. Ministers and staff also had to deal with critics who do not believe that a white person can adequately address these issues and therefore should not be attempting to represent people with different skin colors. Critics of white organizers in African
American communities claim, “There is no way they [white organizers] can have adequate knowledge about the grinding effects of centuries of exploitation on the community” (Shillington and Dotson 1994: 129). To these critics, a white person can never adequately meet the needs of an African American community because he/she has never experienced being African American.

Ministers and staff were aware they had to earn the residents’ trust. Ministers had to overcome the image of the “Great White Hope” coming to save the inner city poor. At first, residents questioned their motives and how long they were going to stay. Residents were reluctant to trust a white man and often did not expect the ministers or staff to provide anything more than short-term solutions. They expected them to stay for a year or two, do some charity work, and then pack up and leave ‘when the going got rough.’ In her honor’s research in history, Tulane student Leslie Garrote noted when Leverett of Desire Street began to minister, the residents did not understand what he was doing there. She wrote, “The presence of this white evangelical southerner in New Orleans’ most desperate neighborhood baffled residents both inside and outside of its boundaries” (Garrote 2002: 46). For all of the ministers, the challenges of overcoming a difference in skin color were even greater in the beginning because many of the poorest neighborhoods in New Orleans are highly segregated by class and race and geographically isolated. The presence of a white person in these neighborhoods does not occur on a daily or even weekly basis. Ministers relied on the belief that by showing up everyday in these neighborhoods, at the very least they would be noticed and hopefully begin to make a difference.
Kevin Brown summed it up when he said, “Once people get to know me, know my heart, get to know my family, know that we have been back here for longer than many people, the challenge is met, more than met. And once the people see the work we are doing, my skin color ceases to be an issue” (Brown 1/28/05). While skin color may cease to be an issue in the case of relationships between ministers and staff and the participants in the organizations, it does not cease to be an issue in the everyday interactions of people living in this neighborhood. People in the neighborhood still experience institutionalized racism on a daily basis. All white people are not like the ministers and staff and all African Americans are not like residents of these neighborhoods. In all actuality, what I suspect has occurred is that ministers and staff at these organizations have succeeded in becoming a part of the community, in spite of their white skin color. Rather than shattering racial divides, these ministers and staff have breached the boundary between insider and outsider by becoming part of the community. Skin color is no longer as big an issue, not because racial reconciliation is occurring in the larger society, but because ministers and staff have proven themselves to the community.

RACIAL IDENTITY

To attempt racial reconciliation between whites and African Americans, it must be understood that life is different for the two groups. As discussed in the introduction, African Americans suffer from poverty at a rate of 24.7% compared to a white poverty rate of 10.8% (US Census Bureau 2005b:10). The median income for African American households is $30,134 while the white household median income is $48,977 (US Census Bureau 2005b: 4). African Americans experience an unemployment rate of 10.6%, a rate
almost double the white unemployment rate of 4.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005). Additionally, African Americans only represent 11% of college enrollment compared to whites who represent 68% of the total enrollment (US Department of Education 2003). These differences are even more exaggerated for African Americans living in poverty.

In the most impoverished areas of New Orleans, the population is almost completely African American. As Levy of Desire Street explained, the little contact African Americans have with whites is often with either a white police officer or a white news reporter. Outside of these two professions, most people with whom poor African Americans come into contact with on a daily basis are African American. Ms. S, the public high school teacher, remarked how angry her students were on the first day of school when they realized their teacher was white. “My kids last year really hated [me]… when they saw me the first day of school they were really pissed off. They had never had a white [teacher] and they were so mad like really, really mad acting. There are very few white teachers at the school. They hated it and the other white teacher was a really mean lady” (Personal communication 2/13/05).

Sadly, what many African Americans and whites know of other races is what they see on television or the news because they do not have extended interactions with outsiders of their group. Many of the poorest and most dangerous areas of New Orleans are isolated from other parts of the city. WJ Wilson in *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide* showed that since the 1960s, the proportion of whites and middle class African Americans within cities has steadily declined (1999: 34). As more and more middle class families move out of the city, the city becomes more isolated and impoverished (1999: 36). This movement of middle class African Americans and whites out of the city has led
to a growing racial and class divide between the suburbs and the city (1999: 37). Take for example, the Desire Street neighborhood, which is almost 100% African American. In 2000, 63% of the neighborhood lived below the poverty line, although this statistic has changed since the Desire Projects were torn down (US Census Bureau 2000b). This neighborhood is almost completely cut off from the rest of New Orleans by two canals, railroad tracks, and a limited transportation system. Living in this neighborhood, youth have little opportunity to interact with others outside the neighborhood. Because of this, the poorest children never get to witness middle-class African Americans and the way they live. Likewise, children in the poorest neighborhoods rarely see a white person living in these neighborhoods, working at a fast food restaurant, or waiting in line for food stamps. Wilson pointed out that the increasing isolation of minority groups within these urban environments has led to racial tensions and stereotyping becoming concentrated in the poorest areas (1999: 37). Limited contact between people of different races and classes also further exacerbates miscommunications, misunderstandings, and stereotypes.

Political scientist Andrew Hacker in his book *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (2003), addressed the very notion that whites and African Americans exist in two separate and unequal worlds. Hacker described the misconceptions white Americans have of African Americans as well the inequalities and differences between groups in America in terms of education, economics, and political gains. Hacker argued that white racism against African Americans has led to “America’s version of apartheid.” One of the most interesting and telling facets of Hacker’s book is the way he illustrated the stigma attached to the color of one’s skin. Hacker asked white
students if they had to spend the rest of their life as a black person, what would be fair compensation, fifty million dollars or one million dollars for each year they were black. Students agreed that neither sum of money was adequate for having to live with black skin. This study demonstrates the value white people place on their skin. By valuing their skin color so highly, whites acknowledge the privileges and power society affords them because of their skin color. Hacker’s study also shows the stigma white people attach to black skin.

Racial misconceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs are formed early on by observations and experiences in childhood. Ashley Montagu, in the 1960s, commented that racial prejudices and hostilities were “to a large extent generated during the early childhood development of almost every person.” They are “produced during childhood by parents, nurses, teachers, or whoever else participates in the process of socializing a child” (Montagu 2001: 99). Observations and experiences not only shape children’s views of other races, but their understanding of their own racial identity. Agent Smith, the law enforcement agent whose worked primarily in the projects, told me that youth growing up in the projects learn to associate white with rich and poor with black because they have never experienced anything different. He found that residents assumed that he was a millionaire based solely on his white skin. Ms. H, another public high school teacher, recounted stories from open discussions about race with her students. Often, she found herself answering questions like “Is it true all white people have security alarms? Or why do all white people hate black people? Or why do white people dance like that?” On the surface these questions appear strange and funny, but they actually are indicators of the gross misunderstandings and little contact that occurs between African Americans
and whites in New Orleans. Although several anti-racist organizations, such as Erace and The People’s Institute, operate in New Orleans to address and improve race relations, it is obvious there is still much work to be done.

Ms. H realized early on the stereotypes her students held of white people and she worked from the beginning to prove these stereotypes wrong. She said:

When I first started at my school, I was the only white teacher in the entire school. And so...the kids really tried me at first I think because they have a lot of really bad stereotypical ideas of white people. Like they’re weak, they’re afraid of black people. Not only are they afraid of black people but they hate black people. Especially my first couple of days, I put a kid out. There are two white students at my school, everyone else is black, no Asians. Everyone in my classroom was black. A kid was acting up in my classroom and I put him out and he said, ‘You just put me out cause I’m black.’ They thought they could play the race card and when they realized I wasn’t afraid of them, then they started being like..oh, okay. And when they realized that I wasn’t afraid of them and that no matter how bad they were, I wasn’t going to leave, then they were really okay (personal communication 2/16/05).

As Ms. H explained, because her students had never had a positive, extended relationship with a white person, they did not know a white person could treat them with respect. Many of her students shared with her that she was one of the first white people they could confide in and trust.

These skewed views whites and African Americans hold of each other are complicated even further when interactions between the two groups leave a negative impact. In several different stories, Levy of Desire Street recounted to me and to another researcher how he knew what other people were thinking of him and the fear that he could evoke in white people. “We would go out to Metairie and crossing the street all you would hear is car doors locking. We always got the impression that white people don’t like us so we didn’t like them” (Garrote 2002: 58). In another instance, he was
stopped by a police officer in his neighborhood for speeding. He explained to the officer that he was late for school and gave him his license and school identification card. But still, the officer put him on the hood of the car, searched the car, and ran his plates. Somehow, the officer found out that he worked at Desire Street, apologized for the trouble, and let him go. The white officer treated Levy two different ways because of his preconceived notions of African Americans. Only after the officer found out about Levy’s work in the community was he released. Levy noted how experiences like these leave lasting impressions. Even though Levy knows all white people are not like this officer, he cannot ever forget the way he was treated because of his skin color. For Levy, who is working to promote racial reconciliation, these experiences are painful and discouraging.

For youth in New Orleans, racial identity is not as simple as skin color. Richard Wright, poet, novelist, and one of the first African American writers to receive international acclaim, wrote in his autobiography that “his first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when [he] was quite small.” Though he was born with dark skin, “it was up to others to define the meaning of being black” (Wright 1945: 10). Youth in New Orleans reiterate this idea that racial identity is more than just the color of one’s skin. The construction of racial identity is a complex process that involves the combination of past experiences and observations, societal beliefs and attitudes, and one’s relationship with people. While skin color is a part of it, racial identity is also conditional on the way a person acts or behaves. For the most part, America has moved past the overt racial ideology that differences in skin color explain differences in intellect or achievement but racial stereotypes still exist. Wilson maintains that while Jim-Crow style racism may
have declined, “implicit racist assumptions” based on skin color still influence American beliefs and practices (1999: 16).

As Ms. S, the public high school teacher, explained, “Being white isn’t about the color of your skin; it’s about everything besides that, it’s how you live your life” (personal communication 2/13/05). In discussions throughout the year with her students, she discovered many of her students associate white people with being weak, scared, and hateful. For these students, being white means acting in a prescribed way in terms of talking, dancing, walking, and behaving. They view white people and white culture as a homogenous entity with no diversity or divergence from the norm. When a white person does not embody these so-called white characteristics many African Americans have come to expect, it does not change African American youth’s beliefs and opinions of white people. Instead, it challenges the label they put on the person’s skin color. These youth find it difficult to imagine a white person who does not fit into their “white-person mold.” When they encounter this type of person, they cannot believe the person is white, even if their skin color appears white. To believe the person is white would challenge every aspect of their belief and value system. Likewise, whites hold these same beliefs of the homogeneity of African American culture and are more likely to dismiss a person as African American than change their views of the entire group. The fact that the system works like this is evidence of a racial ideology that dictates the makeup and characteristics of racial categories and identities.

Ms. H, another public school teacher, also encountered this type of thinking in her classroom. She described one such incident.

By the end of the year, we were reading something that had to do with race issues and we were talking about race issues again. And someone
said white and everybody went ‘augh (gasp),’ and one kid said, ‘Sorry Ms H.’ And one kid raised their hand, no they just kind of piped in and said, ‘It doesn’t matter Ms H isn’t white anyway.’ And if you look at me, I am the palest person you have ever seen. I don’t tan even if I’m in a tanning bed. And so then they started this whole fifteen minute conversation about how I wasn’t white, how I must be mixed or something. How I was just a couple of shades lighter than so and so’s dad. Because to them white isn’t skin color, it’s lifestyle and attitude (personal communication 2/16/05).

To these students, their teacher was not white. She did not fit into the “white-person mold.” She was there when her students needed her, both inside and outside the classroom. She treated them with respect, valued their opinions, listened to their problems, and genuinely cared about their lives. She also expected no less from them because they were African American or from the projects. She was not afraid of them. It is likely that no other white person treated these students in the same way.

Being referred to as white, for these youth, carries a very negative meaning. Clarence Page, in his book *Showing My Color*, wrote, “White has long meant ‘uncool’ in the language of blacks.” He even went so far as to associate the word white with “the enemy” (1997: 114). Ms. S learned the negative connotation that the word white carried, in a conversation with one of her students in the classroom. She explained:

> I had this kid Joshua. And one day, I started making white jokes about myself in class. I was like, ‘Man that was such a white thing to do.’ And the kids would laugh at me, joking around except Joshua would get really offended and upset. And one day he came to me and was like, ‘Ms S you shouldn’t say you’re white, you should say you’re pink-skinned because I think of you as having pink-skin, not white. Don’t say that about yourself.’ I was like…wow it’s so horrible to be white that they don’t want me calling myself white” (personal communication 2/13/05).

This story reveals how this student did not want to associate his teacher as being white because of the negative connotation of the word. Again, this youth would rather think of his teacher as anything but white, rather than challenge his own views of white people.
Ms. B, a public elementary school teacher, noted how children already understood the negativity and degradation associated with the word white from an age as young as eight. In her classroom, children would make reference to each other being white as a way to insult each other. It was common practice that “if a light skin kid is being annoying and someone wants to say something about them, they will say like shut your white self or something like that” (personal communication 1/27/05).

Public school teachers and staff of the faith-based organizations spoke about racism in New Orleans only from the perspective of African American youth’s beliefs, understandings, and feelings towards whites. By taking this approach, these individuals make it appear that racial problems stem solely from the beliefs and views of African Americans. Although they may not be aware that they are sending this message, they make it seem that if African American youth find ways to overcome their personal prejudices towards whites, racism and racial ideology in New Orleans will change. However, this is far from the reality of race in New Orleans. These individuals are missing out on a large portion of the picture. Teachers and organization workers failed to speak about or question their own beliefs on racism or white people’s misconceptions, fears, beliefs, and ideologies on race. Teachers and staff did not acknowledge that whites are still powerful players in present day racism or the perpetuation of racial ideology in America. Without acknowledging these issues, nothing will ever change in America. This appears to be a common problem people make when speaking about or addressing racial ideas and racism. It becomes easy to critique and examine other’s views before examining and questioning our own.
In another example, Dione Joseph, an African American member of Desire Street, recounted to Tulane student Garrote that it was during her childhood when she learned to understand being white as a bad thing.

“What made me conscious of race when I was younger was when the kids in the project started calling me a white girl. So, I knew that there was something different about white people. I didn’t really know anything about white people; I don’t remember there being any white families in the projects. I felt that there was something bad about the white race because of the way they would call me ‘white girl’” (Garrote 2002: 71).

Even though she did not have any personal negative experiences with white people, she learned that white was associated with bad by the way other children used the word to tease and taunt her. She then carried this understanding into her adulthood.

Teachers and staff at the faith-based organizations all agree that after they were initially accepted by youth, their differences in skin color no longer presented a problem. I suspect that as youth began to know them and their personalities, the youth accepted them as people but not as white people. Teachers and staff at the faith-based community organizations did remark however, that when the youth would get angry or frustrated, one of the first comments they would make would involve race. Ms. H shared an incident where a student called her “a white bitch” when he became enraged that she was suspending him. Brown of Trinity noted, “When the kids get mad, I am a white guy. Most of the time though I am just Mr. Kevin.” Some of the workers believe youth use racial comments because they are most accustomed to hearing these types of comments in their everyday environment. Whatever the reason, both teachers and workers at the organizations agree that the majority of time they just brush these comments off. It is interesting to note that although teachers and organization staff worked with youth in different capacities, both groups appear to have had similar experiences with youth and
arrived at similar conclusions regarding the way youth understand racial categories and racial identity.

**Racial Reconciliation**

Racial reconciliation, defined as harmony between the races, is one area where Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street contend they focus much of their attention. Ministers and staff believe harmony between the races will eliminate racism and create equality. Whether reconciliation will ever be achieved in New Orleans is a question that at this point remains to be answered. In New Orleans, faith-based groups also have to deal with the tensions that exist within the African American population. Many of the crimes committed by African Americans are against other African Americans. Still however, racism is implicit in the social, economic, and political structure of America and is very much a part of people’s thinking.

Even at public school, where one would think students are learning liberal, progressive ideas, stereotypes are still being reinforced. Ms. B, the second grade teacher, related how other teachers, unconsciously, are still teaching the wrong ideas about race.

All of my kids go to different classes for literacy. One of mine came back and was like, ‘Ms B, I forgot to give Miss X my homework,’ and I looked at it, her homework, and they had to copy from the board this thing on African American history and the US. And it was all like- the white people hated the black people because they did this, the white people had slaves, the white people made the black people drink from different fountains. And this little girl copied this from a teacher she idolizes. I asked her where she got this and she told me it was her homework and she had to write this (personal communication 1/27/05).

Historically, this description the teacher provided as homework is a fair representation of what really occurred. But in presenting it to young children who do not have the capacity to make distinctions between white people a hundred years ago and white people today,
this language is racially charged. I doubt this teacher was consciously trying to instill a hatred of whites in her students, but it is an example of the ways racially charged ideas can become a part of youth’s belief system.

It is almost impossible to think about where to start to try and transform the city of New Orleans in terms of racial ideologies and beliefs. Members of Christian Community Development start with the fundamental Biblical assertion that all people are equal. Spiritually instilling this belief in residents and in themselves allows them to begin to transform on a personal level. There needs to be a complete transformation in the way people think about each other and treat each other. This transformation has to occur at the very core of the structure, institutions, and practices of American society. It has to occur on a national level, a local level, and a personal level. At the same time, in advocating for racial reconciliation, we cannot deny differences between people. Many African Americans take great pride in being African American. To not notice them as African Americans would be robbing them of a special part of who they are and how they identify themselves. However in noting difference, it does not mean that people need to be treated differently. A balance needs to be achieved between appreciating and celebrating difference and joining together as one people; this is where racial reconciliation occurs. Sadly, many people in New Orleans, or America for that matter, will never be open to accepting all other races unconditionally. For this reason, all three faith-based organizations have begun their work with children and youth because they show the greatest promise for a different future. However, transformation and reconciliation requires not just working with African American youth, but youth of every
ethnicity. By only addressing a select group of African American youth, these organizations incorrectly imply that racism lies only in the African American community.

Levy of Desire Street is a leading advocate for racial reconciliation in New Orleans. He strongly believes that the only way racial reconciliation is going to occur is through faith-based organizations. For him, everything starts with the church and with the spiritual guidance of Jesus Christ. He believes the church and faith-based organizations have the power “to break the wall that exists right now.” In his opinion, New Orleans needs more faith-based organizations across the city in order for racial reconciliation to occur. Similarly, Robinson of Urban Impact has his own ideas on racial reconciliation. Coming from a background where he experienced many intense, often violent, situations between African Americans and whites, Robinson advocates for Christian Community Development as a solution to racial reconciliation because relocation is a fundamental aspect of their approach. By living among people, you share their problems and develop lasting, meaningful relationships that move beyond skin color. He encourages people to embrace the Christian doctrine of “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Robinson noted however, people in New Orleans need to learn how to talk about racial issues with one another before they are going to be able to make any advancements towards reconciliation.

Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street’s approach to racial reconciliation raises two issues. The first problem is besides relocating into the community, these faith-based organizations have no programs that specifically target racism and racial ideology. There is no methodology or concerted approach towards racial reconciliation. Urban Impact holds meetings four times a year for African American and white members to discuss
issues, but beyond this there is nothing. These organizations do not acknowledge the power and pervasiveness of racial categories, racial ideology, and institutional racism within American society. Instead their approach to reconciliation relies on the assumption that the problem of racism is solely at the individual or personal level. For these organizations, racism does not exist beyond personal prejudice. They do not acknowledge that racism, as Dr. Regis explained it, is part of “the institutional structures of equality.” The faith-based organizations tout their spirituality and Christian theology as powerful enough to bridge racial gaps, but the mere presence of a white man in an African American neighborhood is not going to end racial divides and create unification. The presence of a white person does not address the power differentials and inequalities that are so much a part of American society. African Americans within New Orleans are so divided by the effects of poverty that they first have to unite as a group before they can address reconciliation with whites. Also, it is the case that these ministers and staff are not typical of white America. It is unrealistic and paternalistic to expect African Americans to trust white America because the white minister in their neighborhood is a good person. Though ministers and staff at these organizations claim to recognize and understand the racial ideology that dictates life in America, their own approach to transforming or fighting racial stereotypes does not fit the reality of race in America.

By approaching racial reconciliation in this manner, ministers and staff have adopted a paternalistic position in relation to the residents of the neighborhoods they are trying to help. They are using their position as a white minister as a position of power to push their own Christian evangelical theology onto African Americans as a solution to racial problems and poverty. These ministers are addressing the stereotypes African
Americans may have of whites, but they fail to recognize that it is white people’s views which dictate dominant racial ideology and public policy. The stereotypes, behaviors, and beliefs of white people are what need to be addressed in order for any change to occur in the structure of the system. Instead of changing racial ideology, these ministers are reifying the dominant ideology of race by using their position as white ministers as justification for the actions they are taking in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, there are no reciprocal African American programs. There are no faith-based organizations that are run by African American ministers who attempt to relocate into white neighborhoods and transform them. The very structure of American society does not grant African Americans the power to do such a thing. If an African American minister moved into a white neighborhood and proceeded to tell residents how to live their lives, whites would be outraged.

The following chapter brings together the ideas discussed throughout this thesis. The chapter will include a discussion of areas for further research as well as where these faith-based organizations see themselves in the future.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one of the largest natural disasters in America’s history, national attention is focused on poverty, class, and race in New Orleans. In a speech given on the floor of the Senate, Illinois Senator Barack Obama said, “I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane. They were abandoned long ago- to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness” (Alter 2005: 42). There is no question that much of the country failed to recognize or ignored the conditions that have long existed in New Orleans. However in acknowledging this extreme oversight, one must also recognize the people and groups who never abandoned New Orleans and have been attempting to improve life for the poorest and most marginalized residents of New Orleans. Long before a hurricane centered the national spotlight on New Orleans, advocates, not-for-profit workers, government workers, and academicians alike attempted to call attention to and seek solutions to the pervasive problems of New Orleans like violence, crime, poor education, limited job opportunities, drugs, teenage pregnancy, lack of healthcare, and a host of other problems.

However, finding solutions to the problems in New Orleans requires looking beyond the city itself. The problems and conditions of New Orleans are complex and intertwined and run deep to the core and structure of American society. Disparities and
inequalities exist in all levels of society between the upper and lower classes as well as between different racial groups. Disparities are so extreme for different groups in America that several authors have referred to an American apartheid or a “Second America” (Jones and Newman 1997: 200). People in New Orleans have not passively accepted the oppression and limitations that are placed upon them by society. Residents shape and redefine the limitations and oppression in their lives. Some members of street culture redefine and shape this oppression in violent and destructive ways. They live their lives according to their own rules and standards rather than the standards and status quos of mainstream society. The destructive behaviors of some individuals in New Orleans have both direct and indirect effects on all residents of New Orleans.

Grounded in the theologies and philosophies of the Christian Community Development Association, Trinity Christian Community, Urban Impact Ministries, and Desire Street Ministries have attempted to provide an alternative to the street for youth in New Orleans. Ministers and staff from these organizations have moved into New Orleans communities with the hope of meeting the physical and spiritual needs of community members, empowering youth to become leaders in their communities, and transforming New Orleans communities into healthier, more desirable places to live. They have set up educational programs, Bible Studies, recreation activities, and summer day camps to encourage youth to embrace Christianity as a solution to the problems of everyday life in New Orleans.

Throughout this thesis, I have looked at the ways these organizations have structured their community development efforts around Christian spirituality. In evaluating their community development efforts, it is important to emphasize that my
criteria for examining these organizations is different from the ways these organizations evaluate their own efforts. Ministers and staff at Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street believe spirituality is an important factor in breaking the cycle of poverty. They believe that a lack of spirituality and faith in one’s life is a contributing factor to poverty. Because of this, ministers and staff believe transformation and change can only occur through community development programs that have spirituality at their foundation. Ministers and staff at these organizations view despair of the inner self, not the larger structural and material factors of society, as the main problem of those living in poverty. In order to combat despair, organizations promote development efforts like Bible study, indigenous leadership development, and discipleship programs. These development efforts reflect and reinforce these organizations’ conceptualizations of poverty as well as the belief that it is only God who can heal those living in poverty.

The development efforts of these organizations are designed around goals that these organizations attempt to meet. The primary goal of CCDA organizations in New Orleans is to bring God and Christianity into the community to redeem New Orleans residents. These organizations attempt to meet their secondary goals through the introduction of God and his message into the community. Secondary goals include alleviating poverty, transforming the community, and bringing about racial reconciliation. Ministers and staff at these organizations hope that through Christianity, youth will find the motivation, strength, and desire to go to college, find secure employment, and remain in New Orleans to help better their communities and serve as role models. Leaders at these organizations admit that it may take twenty years before they know if something they said or did made a difference in the lives of youth, but they continue on with their
ministry. While they attempt to target groups of youth in their respective neighborhoods, organization staff do not shy away from approaching poverty on an individual-by-individual basis. They believe if they can change the life of just one youth in the community, their work is a success.

Brown of Trinity related the story of James* as an example of why he continues to do what he does. He recounted:

There are a whole lot of lives that have been enriched. I can tell you individual stories like James whose momma is a crack addict, who spent three of the first five years of his life in jail. He's raised by his grandmother. And now one of our donors has taken him under his wing and he is at St. Joan of Ark School, making straight A’s. For his first date, he wants to take his girlfriend to Commander’s Palace. How would he have known about Commander’s Palace otherwise? How would he have made straight A’s in parochial school? He’s got college on his mind. He will go to college because he is capable. And his behavior is radically different. He is just a different kid because of the thousands of dollars of resources poured into his life. But more importantly a lot of people have given love to him, shared a vision with him, and given him ideas for his future. And his future is bright. No one in his family has been to college and he will graduate from college (Brown 1/10/05).

This story about James is a model of how these faith-based organizations address poverty. They believe that by bringing God into one boy’s life, they can change his life and circumstances and have an impact on future generations. Stories like James or Kendrick Levy of Desire Street indicate that these organizations are achieving some of the goals they have set for themselves. First and foremost, these organizations are bringing God into impoverished communities in New Orleans. They are spreading his message to youth across New Orleans and changing the course of life for individuals in their organizations. In terms of their secondary goals, these organizations are just beginning to see whether their efforts paid off through the individual success stories of youth escaping the cycle of poverty in New Orleans.
While these faith-based organizations are meeting most of the goals they have set for themselves, my evaluations of their community development efforts are based on a different set of criteria. My conceptualization of the cycle of poverty in New Orleans is focused on the structural and larger societal factors such as a poor education system, a lack of employment opportunities, and institutional racism, that contribute to the continuation of poverty. From my perspective, the possibility for transformation and development in New Orleans lies in public education, social action, and programs that address larger issues in society, not just in the spirituality of individuals and their redemption by God. While I think it is important that organizations develop programs that address inner feelings, this cannot be the primary goal of their organizations. For community transformation to occur, there needs to be programs and efforts directed at larger groups to help create new economic opportunities, change bureaucratic policies, demarginalize the impoverished in New Orleans, and encourage a different way of thinking about the poor and the reasons they are trapped in poverty.

Based on my conceptualization of poverty and my criteria for evaluating community development, the programs and development efforts of Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street are not as effective as they could be in enacting transformation and development in New Orleans. Their Christian theologies and Biblical interpretations limit the ways they can transform New Orleans communities and the people they reach. Often, it appears ministers and staff are more concerned with redeeming residents and their moral failings than the actual conditions in New Orleans contributing to poverty. In evaluating the organizations’ development efforts, it is questionable whether these organizations are meeting the needs of the community or reinforcing the imbalance of
power and privilege that exists in American society through their actions. These organizations claim to understand how society restricts and limits the lives of the poor, but as has been shown, their development efforts do not mirror this type of understanding of poverty as a societal and structural problem.

Although I do not believe these organizations are transforming New Orleans according to my criteria, I do believe that the ministers and staff at these organizations have an extremely high level of conviction and dedication to New Orleans youth. Many of the people working at these organizations moved across the country, gave up their careers, and chose to live in poor neighborhoods in New Orleans because they are committed to their beliefs in Christianity and their desire to enact change in New Orleans. These members believe they are living their lives in the image of Jesus Christ and are committed to spreading the message of Christianity in New Orleans. Staff at these organizations also believe in youth and their ability to escape poverty in New Orleans. They transfer this message to youth every opportunity that arises. Additionally, these individuals were instrumental in aiding me in my research. Without their time, patience, and willingness to share their experiences and beliefs, I would not have been able to develop the understanding of these organizations that I have.

Despite being critical of their community development approach, I do believe ministers and staff at these organizations deserve an enormous amount of credit for what they do. Even if they are only reaching a small percentage of the New Orleans population, ministers and staff are impacting youth’s lives. For two hours everyday, these faith-based organizations play a critical role in the lives of youth. They provide a safe place for youth to go when the school day is over. They provide an environment
where youth can develop relationships with adults who care about them, respect them, and listen to them. They provide encouragement and guidance. Brown of Trinity shared, “I am daddy to a lot of kids and Ms. Sandy, my wife, is momma to a lot of kids” (Brown 1/10/05). These are the types of relationships that will enable youth to develop self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence, and a vision for the future.

Sadly, the future of these organizations is not as bright as many would like. After Hurricane Katrina, ministers and staff of Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street find themselves at a crossroads. All three faith-based organizations suffered damage from the hurricane. Although I have not been able to speak with anyone from these organizations, I have been able to follow what has happened to these organizations through pictures and online journals they have posted on their websites. All three organizations played an important role in evacuating the people in their communities. They also used their websites to locate and connect people who were scattered across the country. In terms of physical damage, Urban Impact suffered the least damage, losing several portions of their roof to the storm. Unfortunately, Trinity and Desire Street were not as lucky. Trinity and the Hollygrove community suffered flooding and structural damage. Almost everything inside Trinity’s building was covered in mold, destroyed, or looted. Staff at Desire Street have not been able to assess the damage to their building. It was located close to a levee break and staff believe it suffered extreme damage. Ministers, staff, and members of these three faith-based organizations have drawn on their faith in God to give them strength through these difficult times. They are now faced with new obstacles that are beginning to reshape their missions in helping residents of New Orleans. Desire Street has moved the Desire Academy to Niceville, Florida to continue to provide education and
stability to youth of Desire. Urban Impact and Trinity have begun to purchase housing in New Orleans for the poor residents of their communities. They are trying to prevent the poor from being excluded and marginalized in the rebuilding process. All three organizations face serious financial crises that unfortunately may impact their ability to help the community.

Further research needs to be conducted to understand how spiritual development, spirituality, and community development intersect. It would also be useful to further investigate the ways community organizations understand the problems of poverty, violence, and social justice. In this thesis, I explored the ways Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street understand poverty and community development in New Orleans from the perspective of ministers and staff at these three related faith-based organizations. This research can serve as a baseline for further studies that examine more extensively the ways these faith-based organizations function in New Orleans. One avenue for future study of these organizations could be to approach them from the perspective of the New Orleans residents and youth who are members of these organizations and participate in their programs. By determining whether residents have embraced the philosophies and teachings of CCDA and how they feel about the organizations and their efforts in the community, it could greatly enhance our understanding of these faith-based organizations and community development in general. A second avenue for future research could also be a comparison between faith-based organizations and secular organizations in New Orleans. A comparison would further breakdown the role spirituality plays in community development and the differences and similarities between faith-based and non-faith-based organizations in the community.
In terms of the future, it remains unclear what lies ahead for Trinity, Urban Impact, and Desire Street. Over the past two months, New Orleans has changed and continues to change in ways that nobody prepared for or imagined. At this point in time, it is still unknown what parts of New Orleans will be rebuilt, how they will be rebuilt, or who will return to live in the city. Despite this uncertainty, opportunities exist for these faith-based organizations to serve and aid residents living in New Orleans and cities across the nation. These organizations can still play a critical role in the lives of New Orleans youth. However, while opportunities still exist for these organizations, it remains to be seen whether they will be able to meet the new challenges they will face. Ministers and staff at these faith-based organizations remain positive but they acknowledge that the coming years will not be easy. Leverett, director of Desire Street, continues to keep his faith. He wrote on his website, “But we do not grieve as those without hope. In the midst of darkness, as always, the light of God shines through.”
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