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Catholic Marriage Ministry with African Americans

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Introduction

Marriage ministry in the Catholic Church in the United States is mainstream with the Church's outreach. That is, it is directed toward and relevant to those who are in the mainstream of the Church. The resources developed in this area of ministry are also relevant and directed to the mainstream. Despite the growing number of African Americans in the mainstream of U.S. society, African-American Catholics, in general, are marginal in the Church in the U.S. And the outreach to marriage by the Catholic Church misses the mark in addressing the issues of the rapidly declining family life in the African-American communities across the country.

This essay attempts to address the struggles, cultural impediments and structures that systemically frustrate effective marriage ministry with African Americans by the Catholic Church. Drawing from my personal experiences as a lifelong Catholic who is African-American, insights from more than 25 years of service to the Church in various areas of ministry, and as a father and husband who has struggled with and benefited from Catholic marriage ministry, I hope to shed light on structures and systems that will assist the Church in the 21st Century in effectively ministering with African Americans.

My personal journey

I am currently the coordinator of Marriage Ministry in the Family Ministries Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago. My employment began in 1999. But, my service to the Church through the Family Ministries Office extends back to 1981, when Terri, my wife of then six years, and I, with a team of couples and clergy, initiated PreCana for the African-American Community. This program was the first diocesan marriage preparation program by and for African Americans.

Ancillary to this work was our ongoing effort to promote Marriage Encounter in the African-American community. We had attended a Marriage Encounter weekend retreat in 1978 and found it to be transformative to our marriage and our faith life. That initial experience and the subsequent ongoing formation in the form of monthly sharing groups were socially and culturally challenging. And we grew significantly from it. Facing those challenges were part of an enculturation and assimilation process that had begun for us individually through school and work experiences. Our collective enculturation and assimilation into the "mainstream" had picked up momentum with our moving from Chicago's Southside to suburbia in 1977 in our second year of marriage. The subsequent experiences with Marriage Encounter were part of our "suburbanization" in the early years of our marriage. Our efforts to proliferate the profundity of our Marriage Encounter experience among African Americans were done with naiveté and a

surety that other African Americans would find the same magic we had found. Such surety came from other African-American married couples who joined us in that effort, few though they were, who acted from a similar naiveté.

In the 1980s, Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME) experimented with the short-lived African-American Expression weekend under the leadership of Ken and Gretchen Lovingood of Santa Barbara, California. Terri and I were privileged to be a part of its maiden voyage in Los Angeles. We also assisted in bringing the program to Chicago.

Despite the rubrics as designed by WWME to ensure a qualitative marriage enrichment experience, we observed dynamics among the African-American couples that were beyond what we had experienced with the “standard” Marriage Encounter. The prescription against couple to couple interactions and the stressing of intra-couple dialogue seemed naturally violated by the African-American couples. And rather than it diminishing the marriage enrichment experience, our breaking of the rules enhanced it. Loyal to a fault, our assessment of this phenomenon was to imagine how even more powerful the experience could have been if we had stayed within the rubrics.

It was after getting consistent feedback from African-American couples who were persuaded by us and others to attend standard weekends (Worldwide, National and Joliet Marriage Encounter) that we began to rethink our roles as promoters of Marriage Encounter in the African-American community. Feedback suggested that the experience was stifling, that it was “too white” and that they didn’t relate to middle-class, white, suburban mindset upon which the teams’ heartfelt testimonies were based.

However, it was our participation in a monthly “Community” group of “encountered” African-American couples that gave clarity to the couple to couple dynamics we experienced with other African-American couples. The prayerfulness and playfulness within the group, the importance of music and inter-couple dialogue, and facilitation that flows with the energy of the group rather than the structure of an outline, all had us consider what Marriage Encounter would be like if it were designed with African-American proclivities in mind.

In the mid-1980s, Terri and I were invited to address the governing board of WWME to report our experiences as promoters of Marriage Encounter among African Americans and make recommendations for future actions. We shared with them our frustrations and suggested that they “tear up the outline” and create a process with African Americans in mind. We discovered quickly that our suggestions were tantamount to blasphemy and we were abruptly asked to leave. This was a moment of liberation for us. We no longer felt obliged to work within the Marriage Encounter structure. With the encouragement of the priests with whom we had collaborated, i.e., Father Larry Duris, Father Wilton Gregory, Father Tom McQuaid, Father Mike Pflieger and my uncle, Archbishop Jim Lyke, and with the assistance of our marriage ministry team, John and Pam Ashford, Martin and Pat Redd, Leonard and Beverly Richardson, Martin and Helen Dumas, and Maurice and Dorothy Carter, we designed marriage enrichment programs for the African-American Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Chicago.¹ The earliest programs were titled, “The Best Is Yet To Come” and included elements borrowed from Marriage Encounter, but stressed inter-couple sharing and included well prepared prayer services and rich, prayerful music.

In 1993 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin we inaugurated Arusi, a marriage enrichment retreat that incorporates African-American cultural elements, with a group of African-American married

¹ We also got encouragement from Bishop Joseph Francis, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, Bishop Leonard Olivier, Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, DC and several other priests with whom we discussed this issue.

couples. We had refined the design of the program to include principles for facilitating, which include the principle of process over content². The process was the gathering of the couples, the respectful listening and sharing, the table discussions during meals and our openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The content was the program outline, time frames and the structured aspects of group sharing. The principle demands that when there is a clash between the two, we should always let the process win. An important element of the program was reconciliation as an ongoing process in marriage as a means of restoring the relationship—restoration from major breaches, certainly, but also forgiveness for our not meeting the original promise of the earlier marriage and expanding ourselves to make room for our flaws and to live well with them. Fifteen years later we are still conducting Arusi, which means “marriage celebration” in Kiswahili, in dioceses around the country.

While the Arusi model has proven to be effective with African Americans, we have found it very effective with other cultures. In January of this year we presented it for several white couples for a parish in Libertyville, Illinois. Most recently on September 14-16 in Beaumont, Texas, six white couples were among a group of nineteen couples who attended an Arusi. For whites Arusi is not only an effective marriage enrichment, it is also culturally enriching.

Despite our being convinced that our approach to marriage enrichment with African Americans is better than Marriage Encounter’s, we don’t claim to have a formula to absolute knowledge on the matter. I am reminded of what Jacob Bronowski said in *The Ascent of Man*: “There is no absolute knowledge, and those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy.”³

Why does culture matter?

White people and black people are culturally different, and it is naïve to proceed in this serious work of the Church without an appreciation of those differences. Within ethnic cultures are verbal and nonverbal communication patterns that may be easily misread by a person outside that culture without an understanding of those patterns. To complicate matters even more, those patterns are nuanced by other cultural layers, i.e., regional, generational, religious, and so on.

This is true of any culture. However, in the United States of America, at least among the majority, there is a hidden culture that exists in the guise of being generic. It is perceived by its constituents as non-cultural and the basic empty shell from which culture contrasts. I am referring to white culture. For white people, generally speaking, white culture is enigmatic. However, it is hardly so for people of color. Again generally speaking, people of color can readily identify white culture—white speech patterns, white walking, white dancing, white facial expressions, etc. Though doing so may very well express unflattering stereotypes and may cross the line of what is deemed socially acceptable interracial discourse. What’s important here is the contrast of perspectives between white people and people of color. The differences are such that it would be unwise to ignore them.

Edward T. Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* says:

[I]t is possible to live life with no knowledge of physiology, speak a language well without knowing linguistics or even schoolteacher’s grammar, or use a TV set, a telephone, and an automobile without a clue to electronic or mechanical know-how. It is

² Process over content is a concept I learned in a class taught by Leif Kehrwald as part of a certificate in Family Ministry program at Loyola University-Institute of Pastoral Studies in Chicago in the early 1990s.

³ Bronowski, Jacob. *The Ascent of Man*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1974.

also possible to grow up and mature in a culture with little or no knowledge of the basic laws that make it work and differentiate it from all other cultures.”⁴

There are “mechanics” of culture that we can’t explain but we know they exist.

Hall also outlines the differences between high context cultures and low context cultures. Generally speaking of African Americans in varying degrees, they are of a high context culture. That is to say that there is much in the interplay of a conversation that is “understood” without explicit words spoken or written. The context of the culture is part of the message. There are some things that just don’t have to be stated. There is a community base of wisdom, knowledge and understanding that is generated from shared histories and common experiences.

On the other hand, and again generally speaking, white people are of a low context culture. The content of messages communicated is more explicit in words and obvious gesturing than what is implicit in the community base.

This cultural difference alone, if taken into consideration, would have us approaching marriage ministry with African Americans differently than with whites. When a program is designed and presented without consideration of the high context of African-American culture, it’s easy to dismiss it as for “white folks.”

Terri and my experiences presenting programs and facilitating processes with African Americans and “general” audiences illustrate this well. There are striking differences in facilitating a group of African-American couples and a group of white couples. An example: when presenting our retreat program with whites, proceeding without providing a written agenda or itinerary induces anxiety in the group. Creating safe space is enhanced by providing even a skeletal outline of the program. Whereas having a written agenda doesn’t matter as much with African-American groups.

With mixed groups, whites are more assertive in group sharing. Making use of the “Mutual Invitation”⁵ process helps to balance group dynamics in multicultural settings. Below is an explanation of this process.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Objectives: | To facilitate sharing and discussion in a multicultural group. |
| Type of Group: | Any |
| Size of Group: | 4-15 |
| Setting: | Participants should sit in a circle. |
| Materials: | Newsprint and markers. |
| Time Required: | Depending on the size of the group. A good way to tell how much time will be required for each round of sharing is to multiply the number of participants by five minutes. |

How to Proceed:

- A. Let participants know how much time is set aside for this process.
- B. Introduce the topic to be discussed or information to be gathered or question(s) to be answered. Write this on newsprint and put it up on a wall so everyone can see it.
- C. Introduce the process by reading the following:
In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to

⁴ Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday, 1976

⁵ Law, Eric H. F. *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993

speaking, we will proceed in the following way: The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

If this is the first time you use this with the group, it will be very awkward at first. The tendency is to give up on the process and go back to the whoever-wants-to-talk-can-talk way. If you are persistent in using this process every time you facilitate the gathering, the group will eventually get used to it and will have great fun with it. A good way to ensure the process goes well the first time is to make sure there are a couple of people in the group who have done this before and, as you begin the process, invite them first.

Problems to Anticipate:

This process addresses differences in the perception of personal power among the participants. Some people will be eager for their turn, while others will be reluctant to speak when they are invited. If a person speaks very briefly and does not remember to invite the next person, do not invite for him or her. Simply point out that this person has the privilege to invite the next person to speak. This is especially important if a person "passes." By ensuring that this person still has the privilege to invite, you affirm and value that person independent of that person's verbal ability.

Making use of this process honors cultural and personality differences and helps facilitate groups, even when participants are of the same culture. This demonstrates how benchmarking at the margins can serve the center.

Racism in the 21st Century

The U.S. Bishops in 1979 stated: "Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church. Despite apparent advances and even significant changes in the last two decades, the reality of racism remains. In large part it is only external appearances which have changed."⁶ This statement is as true today as it was in 1979.

Nonetheless, the strides gained in race relations since the Civil Rights Era are significant. Personally, I reject notions that "things are the same" because of what I have observed and experienced in the world since the end of Civil Rights. However, I also reject any notion that the work necessary to end racism in the United States is completed. While strides from whence we have come are great, there are yet as great strides to make to accomplish the goals of racial equality and Dr. King's dream of a new social order.

The bishops state further:

"Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you" Indeed

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. Washington, DC: 1979.

racism is more than a disregard for the words of treat others the way you would have them treat you. Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.”⁷

Today’s “battlefield” against racism is not the Jim Crow South. That’s abolished. Though, vestiges of it insidiously remain in the culture in some communities, e.g., the Jena Six.⁸ Still, the struggle against modern day racism is not about exposing cross burning, hooded horsemen intent on preserving a social order of white supremacy. A clear, definitive result of Civil Rights is that legally sanctioned apartheid is extinct in this land. When we look at the externals of American culture there is evidence that African Americans are in significantly larger numbers among people of economic privilege. Gone are the days when the telephone “grape vine” would go abuzz within African-American communities because Sammy or Ella or Duke or Diahann or Sidney was on TV. Especially among young people today, American entertainment culture, including sports, news, theatre, screen and music is well bridged into the African-American community.

The Struggle today is primarily wrestling with systemic issues through which racism maintains its grip on American society. Racism that manifests within the structures of institutions and systems is our new focus. Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, addresses institutional racism in his 2001 pastoral letter on racism “Dwell In My Love” where he states:

Patterns of social and racial superiority continue as long as no one asks why they should be taken for granted. People who assume, consciously or unconsciously, that white people are superior create and sustain institutions that privilege people like themselves and habitually ignore the contributions of other peoples and cultures. This “white privilege” often goes undetected because it has become internalized and integrated as part of one’s outlook on the world by custom, habit and tradition. It can be seen in most of our institutions: judicial and political systems, social clubs, associations, hospitals, universities, labor unions, small and large businesses, major corporations, the professions, sports teams and in the arts. In the Church as well, “...all too often in the very places where blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asians are numerous, the Church’s officials and representatives, both clerical and laity, are predominantly white.”⁹

Sometimes, with a genuine desire to be more inclusive, one or two black, Hispanic, Asian or Native Americans are asked to fill leadership positions in order to change the internal culture of an institution. But the racist disposition of the institution can remain largely unaltered when the non-whites do not acquire full participatory rights. Without rising to levels of influence that can change the entrenched attitudes, approaches and goals of the institution, they live with and even have to preside over policies, procedures and regulations that leave the institution in a basically racist mode. Often, when these select

⁷ *Brothers and Sister to Us*.

⁸ The Jena Six refers to a group of six black teenagers who have been charged for the beating of a white teenager at Jena High School in Jena, Louisiana, United States. On December 4, 2006, Justin Barker, a white Jena High School student, was assaulted at school. Barker, according to witnesses, was struck on the back of the head knocking him down, a group of black students then repeatedly kicked him while he was on the ground. The beating followed a series of racially-charged incidents in the town. The six black students were initially charged with attempted second degree murder and conspiracy to commit attempted second degree murder.

⁹ *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, p. 11.

few people of color exhibit qualities of morality, intelligence and skills, which contradict the low expectations of the racial stereotypes applied to their cultural groups, they are viewed as “exceptional anomalies.”¹⁰

The Catholic Challenge

In the Catholic Church in the United States, having that one black bishop in New Orleans, Harold Perry, SVD, was an anomaly in the 1960s that intrigued black Catholics. Today there are 14 living African-American bishops, of whom 6 are active ordinaries of their dioceses and 2 are retired ordinaries. Since Harold Perry’s episcopal ordination in 1966, there have been 20 African-American bishops ordained for dioceses in the United States.

Currently there are approximately 1,300 African-American Catholic parishes in the U.S.; 250 African-American priests; 300 African-American sisters; and 380 African-American deacons. All are in service to a church with about 3 million African-American Catholics.¹¹

Despite these significant strides and numbers in the Church in America, African-Americans Catholics are still marginal. In my home diocese, the Archdiocese of Chicago, in a city that is so very Catholic and with such a strong and vibrant African-American political base (the current and past presidents of the Cook County Board are African-American Catholics.) being black and Catholic is still an experience in the margins and not the mainstream. It’s a paradox that exists in communities around the United States. I dare not try to unravel the complexities that create this paradox. It’s far beyond our agenda for this symposium. But, I would like to address one aspect that contributes to this situation and is central to our purpose: structural impediments to effective outreach by the Catholic Church to African-American families, particularly marriage.

African-American families are on the front line of the cultural assault on American families. 41% of African-American adults are married, compared to 62% of whites and 60% of Hispanics (2000); Twenty-three divorces per 1000 African-American couples per year, 19 for whites (1990); 69% of African-American births are to unmarried women, compared to 25% for whites and 42% for Hispanics (1998); 55% of African-American children live with single parents, compared to 23% of white children and 31% of Hispanic children (1998)¹²

In short, the institution of marriage is broken in the African-American community. And despite our Catholic understanding of marriage, which elevates it as a Sacrament of service to the world and for which the Church and society gives support and protection, Catholic marriage ministry hasn’t any significant inroads into African-American communities and the families of which they comprise.

At the 2005 National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers 25th Anniversary Conference in Chicago, I presented the opening keynote where I highlighted past accomplishments of the organization and presented some challenges for the future. I excerpt a portion of that presentation to include in our conversation:

¹⁰ George, Francis Cardinal, OMI. *Dwell In My Love: A Pastoral Letter on Racism*. Archdiocese of Chicago, 2001.

¹¹ Research done by the Catholic African World Network. The principal resources used were: The World Christian Encyclopedia edited by D. Barrett; The 2004 Catholic Almanac edited by Matthew Brunson, D.Min.; The African-American Secretariat of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference; the Internet and global in the field research.

¹² Research gathered from various sociological studies for the African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative, a project of the Administration for Children and Families in the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

When considering the frightening degeneration of marriage among African Americans, one would think that marriage ministry with African Americans would be on the front burner of an evangelizing Church. In our 24 years in marriage education and leading a national apostolate to African-American marriage, my wife Terri and I recognize structural impediments in the Church for this work. While this may not be the case in all dioceses, it is generally true in the Church in America that Offices for Black Catholic Ministry and their equivalents don't do marriage ministry, and Family Life Offices generally don't do direct ministry to African Americans. So when it comes to this segment of our population, which is on the front line of the war that is waged on marriage and family life, no one is minding the store in the Catholic Church.

It's not that we don't care. But, we are blinded by structures that have unintentionally screened out this segment of our population for marriage ministry. It's not about what's in our hearts. If it were a matter of the heart, we would have dealt with this long ago. But, we are crippled in this area by the purview assigned by structures that miss this need in this population.

Let me share with you some wisdom from a prophet of our recent past, the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who was considered the spiritual director of the Civil Rights Movement. Please pardon the lack of inclusive language that typified texts of this era:

“It seems to me that experience reveals a potent half-truth; namely, that the world can be made good if all men in the world as individuals become good men. After the souls of men are saved, the society in which they function will be a good society. This is only a half-truth. Many men have found that they are caught in a framework of relationships evil in design, and their very good deeds have developed into instrumentalities for evil. It is not enough to save the souls of men; the relationships that exist between men must be saved also.

“To approach the problem from the other angle is to assume that once the relationships between men are saved, the individual men will thereby become instruments of positive weal. This is also a half-truth. The two processes must go on apace or else men and their relationships will not be brought under conscious judgment of God. We must, therefore, even as we purify our hearts and live our individual lives under the divine scrutiny, so order the framework of our relationships that good men can function in it to the glory of God.”¹³

The framework of our relationships with each other, other apostolates and agencies in the Church, and resources in the community at-large is an impediment to effective outreach to marriage in Black families. The solution to this problem is not to simply throw up our hands in frustration. Nor is it to dismantle the framework and start from scratch. What's needed is creativity and imagination that would have us look

¹³ Fluker, Walter Earl and Tumber, Catherine. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, page 33.

beyond convention and seeks new partners, new delivery systems and new levels of collaboration to transform the framework.¹⁴

Before sitting to write this essay, I contacted several African-American Catholic directors of Offices for Black Catholic Ministries (OBMs) in dioceses across the United States. My purpose was to get their feedback on the hypothesis presented above. In my letter to them I stated:

“I don’t propose that this situation results from malicious intentions from any group, agency or persons. Rather, the structures of chanceries and the priorities of those agencies present situations where effective outreach to African-American marriage by the Catholic Church are not mainstreamed and, if such efforts were to happen, they would be ‘special’ projects with little, if any, follow through.”

The conversations that ensued from that letter suggest to me that while there is general consensus among the OBMs to the verity of my assertion, there are examples of successful collaborative ventures. Those collaborations emanated from personal relationships between personnel of those agencies. Still, what is lacking is the mainstreaming of those programs into the central work of those agencies. Yet to be explored is the general resistance from pastoral ministers in Catholic parishes that serve in the African-American community experienced by diocesan workers who have attempted to do marriage ministry there.

Those conversations have inspired hope. I intend to enlist the assistance of and collaboration with the National Association of Black Catholic Administrators (NABCA), of which most with whom I spoke were members. We in the African-American Catholic community are also encouraged by the prophetic words of His Holiness, John Paul the Great who addressed an assembly of black Catholics in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1987:

“I am sure that you share with me a special concern for that most basic human community, *the family*. Your faithful Christian families are a source of comfort in the face of the extraordinary pressures affecting society. Today, you must *rediscover the spirit of family life* which refuse to be destroyed in the face of even the most oppressive forces. Surely that spirit can be found in exploring your spiritual and cultural heritage. The inspiration you draw from the great men and women of your past will then allow your young people to see the value of a strong family life. Know that the Pope stands united with the black community as it rises to embrace its full dignity and lofty destiny.”¹⁵

My hope is that the conversations of this symposium will bring about more attention to this issue and further, more qualitative studies will result. In the meantime, I share with the symposium my thoughts regarding necessary change in church practices for this effort.

What can we do?

Following the logic that says that if we continue with our current strategies we will get the current results, “thinking outside the box” is what is needed. We need to challenge

¹⁴ Lyke, Andrew. *Then and Now – Retrospective and Prospective*. National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers 25th Anniversary Conference, September 21, 2005, Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, Chicago, Illinois

¹⁵ Apostolic Journey to the United States of America and Canada: Meeting with the Black Catholic Community of New Orleans *Address of His Holiness John Paul II*, "Louisiana Superdome" Stadium, Saturday, 12 September 1987

conventional ways of doing things and reconsider partnerships, delivery systems, and general assumptions about marriage and family life. How might what is thought to be culturally generic be in fact white? How open are we to the “stranger” whose ways are foreign to us? With whom should we be collaborating? How is our hospitality presented and received? These are just a few questions to consider as we do the work of marriage ministry with African Americans in the 21st Century.

No matter how profound our expressions of the “Good News”, if the people we are serving don’t relate to our analogies, idioms and premises, even though we all may speak English, we might as well be speaking a foreign language.¹⁶ This work should be perceived as mission work. There are characteristics of mission that should be fully appreciated and operative, i.e., the expressions of the super-ordinate role of the host and subordinate role of the guest – the *stranger*. Let me explain: To be a host assumes a role that has an upper hand, one who has something to give – hospitality. Another assumption is that to be a host is to be in relationship with another who is the stranger. That relationship is inherent in the definition of being a host. There are rights and duties for being a host, the one who holds the initiative. For the host there is a *home team advantage*. There is an indebtedness the stranger has to the host. This is intrinsic to the relationship between host and stranger.¹⁷

The role of the stranger is as defined by Anthony Gittins thusly:

To become a stranger effectively and with dignity entails two unfamiliar processes. First, the learning process that transforms us as we encounter a new reality. This involves *understanding* and *standing under*: the former, the familiar absorption of external information; the latter, the willingness to be absorbed into another world, even if one does not fully understand it. The second process required of us as strangers is the suffering process that allows us to grow as we negotiate the necessary discomfort and distress. This involves both risk and trust.¹⁸

Gitten outlines in greater detail characteristics of the roles of the host and the stranger in *Ministry at the Margins*. I leave it to the reader to explore more fully those characteristics. For the purpose of my recommendations for future actions, I succinctly summarize that for effective mission work, both roles need to be mutually owned by those who minister and those who are ministered to. Otherwise the role of the host becomes domination.

In this interplay of mission as both host and stranger all parties involved benefit and are benefactors, give and receive, teach and learn, and grow as a result of the encounter. Certainly there is much African Americans can benefit from what the Catholic Church offers in marriage ministry. Catholic theology resonates with the history, lived experiences and proclivities of African Americans. The African-American understanding of *village* and community accountability fits well with Catholic understanding of *sacrament* and communal character of human vocation.¹⁹ As many African-American Catholics can attest, the experience of being both authentically black and authentically Catholic is not a stretch of the imagination. Nor does it require remedial approaches in catechesis and evangelization. Being black and Catholic is a natural fit. The African-American community, churching as well as un-churched, is a vineyard with much promise for Catholic evangelization.

¹⁶ Gittins, Anthony J. *Ministry at the Margins*. New York: Orbis, 2002, page 40.

¹⁷ *Ministry at the Margins*, pp. 121-141.

¹⁸ *Ministry at the Margins*, page 127.

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Chapter 2, Article 1.

I believe that African Americans, precisely because of our history and current experiences as oppressed people, have a prophetic role in the broader society. For example, the Civil Rights Movement transformed the American conscience and re-calibrated America's moral compass. The legacy of African Americans also belongs to all other Americans. Ours is a story of promise and hope that serves all who claim it for themselves.

Again I excerpt from the NACFLM 25th Anniversary Conference keynote:

Being prophetic is not just about attending to those who come to us—those who are present, those gathered. Avenues and processes of ministry designed for the mainstream are often ineffective and rejected in the margins. Good ministry in the Church of the 21st Century also recognizes who is not present. It reaches to the margins to benchmark the work. For when we serve the margins well we serve everyone better. What we learn on the edge is put to good use in the center. To do this we need to consider new ventures with new partnerships.²⁰

The dyadic relationship between the Catholic Church and the African-American community is one where African Americans play a prophetic role as host and where the Church is the stranger. This role reversal is necessary to live out the mission. This mutual exchange is what is commonly felt deeply by African-American Catholics and white Catholics who serve in those communities.

Conspicuously absent among those *strangers* ministering with African Americans are Catholic family life ministers. Thinking outside the box for family life ministers might mean seeking new partnerships with whom we collaborate for the sake of serving African-American families. The Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through its Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) and African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), is indeed a strange bedfellow in the effort to strengthen African American marriages in partnership with Catholic family life ministers. Despite this being a promising opportunity to advance the Church's mission on behalf of marriages and families, and despite the fact that the Special Assistant for Marriage Education at ACF who is the lead person in the HMI and AAHMI, Bill Coffin, is a former director of Family Life for the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, the participation of Catholics in these federally funded initiatives is well below what was anticipated when the initiatives were taking shape. Among Coffin's initial overtures for forming coalitions to qualify for federal funding for serving at-risk families in general and African-American families in general were to his former colleagues in Family Life Ministry in the Catholic Church.

Our future promise for effective outreach to African-American marriage is in saying "yes" to such opportunities and reshaping our work and our vision to make these new ventures central to what we do. This is what is happening in the Family Ministries Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago. We are partners in two coalitions, both of which have placed demands on our human resources, which has had us question at times whether it was worth it. However, the ministry experience itself has been so profound that we have found ourselves learning new and better ways (stranger) of doing that for which we are perceived to be the experts (hosts). This work is now becoming central to what we do and transforming us into better service providers on the margins as well as the mainstream.

These kinds of new opportunities can be the needed common ground for diocesan Family Life Offices *and* OBMs. Therefore, the challenge is not just for us in Family Life Ministry.

²⁰ *Then and Now – Retrospective and Prospective*

These new partnerships should include OBMs and their functional equivalents. Formal conversations with members of NABCA may fuel this. But, if we are to really think outside the box, partnerships may include Offices of Peace and Justice, Catholic Charities and perhaps even Offices for Catechesis and Offices for Ecumenism.

Our Spirituality and Its Gifts

Below is an excerpt from the 1984 pastoral letter on Evangelization by the then ten African-American Catholic bishops, *What We Have Seen and Heard*:

"Black Spirituality" has four major characteristics.

1. Black Spirituality is contemplative. Prayer is spontaneous and pervasive in the Black tradition. Our ancestors taught that we cannot run from God, we must lean on him and surrender to his love.
2. Black Spirituality is holistic. The religious experience is one of the whole human being - feelings, intellect, heart and head.
3. Black Spirituality is joyful, a celebration in movement, song, rhythm, feeling and thanksgiving. This joy is a sign of our faith.
4. Black Spirituality is communal. In African culture individual identity is found within the context of the community. The good of the community must come before personal profit and advancement. In the same way worship is a celebration of community with no one being left out or forgotten. Community also means social concern and social justice. Our spiritual heritage always embraces the total human person.

The Family:

The heart of the human community is the family and the Black family has been assailed. In the African tradition, family has always meant "the extended family" -grandparents, uncles, aunts, godparents, all related kin and close friends. Circumstances often required childcare to be the responsibility of many. Despite the erosion of our family life we as a people still have a strong sense of family bonds. This carries over to our Church where we see ourselves as brothers and sisters to one another.²¹

The bishops express well the gifts from the African-American community available to the Catholic Church. The mutual gifts of Church and community make for "good church" and a wealth of opportunities strengthen families.

Conclusion

Part of the richness in being Catholic is universal membership that gives "ownership" beyond our local experience. For me being Catholic as an invitation to reach beyond myself, beyond my culture, and even beyond my own traditions to at the very least acknowledge my brothers and sisters who are strangers, and perhaps be enriched by their culture and traditions. It invites me to be a gracious host in reaching out to others. It encourages me to risk being the stranger and be open to learning from others.

It is from this stance that Catholic marriage ministry will find its place with African Americans. From this stance the systemic impediments for such ministry will organically crumble. The frightening downward spiral of marriage among African Americans indicates a

²¹ Black Bishops of the United States. *What We Have Seen and Heard*. USCCB, 1984.

state of crisis that demands Catholic Family Life ministers and OBMs to take action to transform those structures and collaborate for the sake of all of the People of God, for whom it is our privilege to serve.

Because we are an evangelizing church we need to always reach out to the margins. Adapting our work to be effective on the margins will strengthen our work and make us more authentic as one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Amen!