

## DEVELOPMENTALLY SPEAKING:

### The Afro-American Gospel Choir: Achieving a positive campus climate for African American Students

Myron L. Pope, Cynthia Moore\*

*For African American students, matriculation at a predominantly White institution of higher education can be quite intimidating. Religion is important in providing comfort and encouragement for many of these students. This article describes the Afro-American gospel choir at the University of Alabama and its role in providing a more positive campus climate for African American students.*

Religion has consistently been shown to play a significant role in the daily lives of African Americans. Based on a variety of data from the National Survey of Black Americans, African Americans, compared to the general population, attend religious services more frequently; have higher rates of church membership; are more likely to perceive themselves as religious; and participate more extensively in private religious activities, such as prayer, reading religious material, and viewing religious programs (Taylor, 1986; 1988a; 1988b; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) suggest that these higher levels of religious behavior result from the unique social, political, and historical experiences of this population within American society. Consequently, religion has served as a source of comfort and encouragement during tumultuous periods for the race. These levels of religiosity for African Americans also create unique social networks in which church attendance, church membership, and religious affiliation are conducive to feelings of coherence, control of one's life, a sense of belonging, physical health, and self-esteem (Chatters, Levin, & Ellison, 1998; Ellison, 1991, 1993, 1998; Levin, 1994).

Research has demonstrated that both nonacademic (Allen, 1988; Hughes, 1987; Oliver, Smith, & Wilson, 1989) and academic (Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1987; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985) factors have contributed to the perceptions by African American students of the racial climate at predominantly White institutions where they are enrolled. These factors, whether positive or negative, contribute to the educational experiences

---

\* Myron L. Pope is the assistant vice president of student affairs at University of Central Oklahoma. Cynthia Moore is advisor to the Afro-American Gospel Choir and assistant director of Rural Scholars Programs at University of Alabama. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Myron L. Pope, Ed.D., Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, University of Central Oklahoma, 100 North University Drive, Box 158, Edmond, OK 73034-5209.

of and subsequent outcomes for African American students. Thus, it is important that this group of students receive support and encouragement, especially through natural settings and environments, such as through religion. One such outlet at the University of Alabama is the Afro-American Gospel Choir.

### History

In the summer of 1971, a group of 12 African American students at the University of Alabama entered a talent show sponsored by the Afro-American Association. They chose to sing a gospel song representative of the source of their faith. During the following fall, some 40 to 50 other students joined the original 12 to form what today is known as the Afro-American Gospel Choir. During its inaugural year, the choir performed concerts in various cities throughout Alabama.

Since its inception the "Afros," as they are affectionately called, have had a powerful presence on the University of Alabama campus and throughout the southeastern United States. The choir's travels enable them to interact with students at other institutions, represent their own institution, and provide support and encouragement for one another. The choir was founded on the principle of togetherness and has provided support for members to overcome difficulties through faith in God.

Membership in the choir is not restricted. Past members included White, international, and non-Christian students. In 2002-2003, membership consisted of 50 young people from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Algeria. This number of active participants makes the choir consistently one of the largest African American student groups on campus.

### Assessment

To gain a better understanding of how the choir influenced the collegiate experiences of the students who participated in it, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 former members who had graduated from the institution. These members' involvement in the choir spanned the past three decades, with some having participated during the early 1970s and some who have graduated within the last couple of years. The interviews had three purposes: (a) to understand the reasons students elected to become involved in the choir, (b) to identify the personal gains that the former members perceived as a result of being involved in the choir, and (c) to determine former members' perceptions of the benefit of the choir to the African-American student population and the campus as a whole. Despite the fact that these former members participated in the choir at various periods throughout the history of the organization, their comments on the questions presented to them were quite similar.

### *Reasons for Involvement*

The primary reasons given by most of the participants in this study for getting involved in the choir were social. New students joined the choir on the advice of friends. One student noted:

A friend of mine was in the choir, and she encouraged me to get involved, so I decided to join because I thought it would be fun. It was an opportunity for me to hang out with her while meeting new people as I became adjusted to campus. (Sylvia, 1996 graduate)

Others joined the choir because they saw it as a close knit group that promoted a positive environment. One former member expressed it this way:

I saw the choir perform, and I wanted to be a part of the positive things that it was doing on and off campus. The members seemed to be very close, and they seemed to share similar values as myself. The choir presented a positive image of African-Americans on campus. I wanted to be a part of that. (Michael, 1985)

Although social reasons were mentioned by most of the students as their reason for involvement in the choir, others joined because they liked to sing. One female student explained,

I sang in the choir at my previous university (the Black Christian Fellowship Gospel Choir at the University of California-Davis). I have sung in various school and church choirs since age seven. I still sing in the choir at my church today. I could not imagine life without the choir. I love to sing! (Grace, 1974)

For many students, the choir also served as a connection to their religious lives. These students explained that involvement in an organization with people who were like themselves religiously was very important to them. This student was explicit on this point:

I love to sing, and I wanted to be in an environment with my peers where everyone loved to do the same thing I did – to sing and to worship God. I checked out other organizations and ministries, but I knew the choir was the one for me because it would keep me seeking God. (Rufus, 1993)

### *Personal Benefits of Membership*

The preceding section described students' reasons for joining the choir, based upon their pre-existing expectations. Next we turn to the actual benefits that members received once they were in the choir.

Most of the participants in the study mentioned the social benefits of being involved in the choir. They noted that the choir provided its members an

opportunity to come together twice a week in a “family away from home.” Almost all participants emphasized that lifelong friendships developed from their involvement in the choir. One female student summarized these benefits of membership this way:

You have a family away from home whether you are from Tuscaloosa or not. I had a support system and a bond that was so strong that it will forever remain with me. I knew I could rely on the choir for anything I needed, as long as it was in their power. The bond that I had and continue to have with members is in a way stronger than the bond I have with some of my sorority sisters. (Allison, 1999)

Some former members commented that participation in the choir also helped them develop social skills. One female participant articulated how the choir helped in this way:

Being a part of the choir helps those individuals who may be a little shy evolve into social butterflies. The choir encourages each individual to be him/herself. You don't have to be someone you're not ... something that I felt I had to do in certain other student groups on campus. (Lillian, 1981)

A former male choir member echoed these sentiments regarding the social benefits of being in the choir to a degree in his statement.

My social skills did improve during the time I participated in the choir. With the choir you are able to go into the first rehearsal and have people hugging on you and welcoming you to the choir, so you have immediate opportunities to improve your social skills. After you spend at least a semester with the choir and other new people join, you will be the one who is going over to the new people and hugging and welcoming them to the choir. (Ralph, 1992)

Other students said that being a part of the choir helped them to be more conscious of other cultures. Even though the organization was mostly composed of African American students, there were experiences which prompted members to appreciate other groups. They gained this experience both on campus and during travels around the country. One former female member explained this cultural awakening:

The travel broadened my cultural views, as well as experiences on campus. I can specifically remember the cultural festival that we participated in at the University. It was entitled “Flava Fest.” The event brought together various cultures, ranging from Indian, African American, Mexican, Japanese, and many others in one location. It was a very good experience and one I wouldn't trade for the world. I now have a greater appreciation for the cultures of others. However, I must add that I would not have

attended this event if I had not been a part of the choir, as just a regular student. (Stacy, 2002)

Finally, some students indicated that the most significant benefit of their being in the choir was related to their connectedness to religion. One student commented,

As a member of the choir, I kept close to my spiritual upbringing. This was good because I needed that one day per week when we got together to practice to remove stress out of my mind and enjoy a good sympathetic, friendly atmosphere. The choir was a constant source of strength for me, and it provided a link to a cultural base many of us were accustomed to. Therefore, when I was faced with the unknown and uncomfortable situations, the Afro-American Gospel Choir was a tremendous support group. When times got tough in school, the songs we sang always gave me strength – “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.” (David, 1989)

Another former female member, who was one of the charter members of the organization, stated that the choir provided these benefits and more, especially during the period that she was a member.

Organizations like the Afros add unequivocally to the overall social and academic integration of African Americans to traditionally White institutions of higher education. Many of us felt like “the lone rangers” surrounded by unfriendly White faculty and students. Just imagine 30 years ago.... It was only a scant decade since George Wallace stood in the school house door and said, “Over my dead body will a ‘nigga’ attend UA!” The choir was our refuge, our strength, our hope, our release. We sang, prayed, and supported one another through all kinds of turmoil. We studied together, ate lunch together, and even partied together. We all knew each other very well. It provided a framework for our social and academic integration. (Shirley, 1973)

A more recent member stated that the choir assisted her in development of a more positive perception of the University:

At first, I joined the choir for support in general, but because of opportunities presented to us to render selections at various campus events, I gained a small sense of appreciation. I felt appreciated on campus for a change. The University recognized us as an officially sanctioned student organization, and we received support to practice in, as well as to travel. Also, I felt we were representing the University every time we traveled to different locations to perform. I felt better about my relationship with the University of Alabama based upon these experiences. (Michelle, 2001)

### *Institutional Benefits of the Choir*

The former members also noted that the choir benefited the entire university, and not just its own members. A former male member explained the benefits of the choir and other African American groups as follows:

By joining the Afros and other groups like it, students feel more a part of the campus. As many of the general activities are more mainstream, and geared more toward White students, I would never have joined one of them. I don't think that I would have gone to the quad on homecoming had it not been for my being in the choir and performing there. I would never have gone to Bama Blast (orientation program) and a gymnastics meet. I think that many African American students who participate in activities like the Afros will say the same thing. It makes us feel that the University values us as students because they support our groups and allow us to participate in such major events. (Marc, 2000)

Other respondents had similar statements emphasizing the importance of these organizations in supporting African-American students. A couple of participants said that if it were not for organizations like the Afros, they and many of their friends would not have remained at the institution.

The choir also was significant in providing cultural exposure to other students on campus. The former members reported that students of other races frequently approached them to say how much they enjoyed their performances and commented that they were unfamiliar with the kind of music performed by the choir. One former member stated that these encounters made him feel good that he was being accepted for who he was for the first time. This former member said, "They finally understood." (Rufus, 1993)

### **Conclusion**

For many African American students, going to college, especially to a PWI, can be a culture shock. It is imperative that institutions of higher education establish and support programs that are conducive to the total development of these and all students. As religion is a natural source of comfort and encouragement for many African Americans, the support of organizations such as the Afro-American Gospel Choir at the University of Alabama helps students feel that they belong at the institution. This is important because these students may be hesitant to get involved in more traditional student programming. The availability of a religiously based group such as the Afro American Gospel Choir provides an avenue for student involvement, thus promoting a more positive campus climate and long term affiliation with the institution.

## References

- Allen, W. R. (1988). Improving Black students access and achievement in higher education. *Review of Higher Education, 11*, 403-416.
- Chatters, L. M., Levin, J. S., & Ellison, C. G. (1998). Public health and health education in faith communities. *Health Education and Behavior, 25*, 689-699.
- Ellison, C. G. (1991). Religious involvement and subjective well being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 32*, 80-99.
- Ellison, C. G. (1993). Religious involvement and self-perception among Black Americans. *Social Forces, 71*, 1027-1055.
- Ellison, C. G. (1998). Religion, health, and well-being among African Americans. *African American Research Perspectives, 4*, 94-103.
- Hughes, M. (1987). Black students participation in higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 28*, 532-545.
- Levin, J. S. (1994). Religion and health. *African American Research Perspectives, 1*, 15-21.
- Lincoln, C. E., & Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The Black church in the African American experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Oliver, M. L., Smith, A. W., & Wilson, K. R. (1989). Supporting successful Black students: Personal, organizational, and institutional factors. *National Journal of Sociology, 3*, 199-221.
- Pascarella, E. (1980). Student-faculty informal contact and college outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 50*, 545-595.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sedlacek, W. (1987). Black students on White campuses: Twenty years of research. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 28*, 484-495.
- Taylor, R. J. (1986). Religious participation among elderly Blacks. *The Gerontologist, 26*, 630-636.
- Taylor, R. J. (1988a). Correlates of religious non-involvement among Black Americans. *Review of Religious Research, 30*, 126-139.
- Taylor, R. J. (1988b). Structural determinants of religious participation among Black Americans. *Review of Religious Research, 30*, 114-125.
- Taylor, R. J., & Chatters, L. M. (1991). Religious life of Black Americans. In J. S. Jackson (Ed.), *Life in Black America* (pp. 105-123). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tracey, T. J., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1985). The relationship of noncognitive variables to academic success: A longitudinal comparison by race. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 26*, 405-410.