

**“JUST SOMETIMES OUR PRESENCE . . . :” AN
INTERVIEW WITH H. WARD GREER ON THE ROLE
OF BLACK CHURCHES IN BUILDING COMMUNITY**

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INTRODUCTION

Albany, New York is characteristic of other urban areas in the United States: it is highly segregated and African Americans in particular tend to live in impoverished, high-crime ghettos. In 2000, for example, only 13% of Albany's white residents lived in integrated neighborhoods, whereas 78% lived in nearly exclusively white neighborhoods.¹ Another way to consider the intensity of Albany's segregation is that at least 50% of the city's black population would need to move into other (whiter) neighborhoods in order for integration to occur. This, of course, ignores the larger metropolitan context in which blacks are concentrated in the City of Albany, making the suburbs nearly all white. Segregation exists within the city, and especially between the city and its suburbs. As it stands, the black neighborhoods of Albany are the most economically depressed and suffer the highest crime rates. The predominantly black Arbor Hill neighborhood had the highest rates of homicide and robbery in the city in 2000. Eight of the city's 13 homicides² occurred within a short walk of the Albany United Methodist Society (AUMS), an urban ministry dedicated to ameliorating the social devastation of this area. We interviewed the director of this ministry, the Rev. Dr. H. Ward Greer, as well as some of his staff, to gain insight into the role of the black church in rebuilding such a troubled community.

AUMS was formed in 1960. Dr. Greer became its Executive Director in 1993. Before coming to Albany, he had pastored congregations in Ohio, Maryland, and Delaware. We were joined in our interview with Dr. Greer by Peter Fish, the Deputy Director of AUMS, and the organization's caseworker, Rev. Senley Jack. We began the interview by asking

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¹<http://www.albany.edu/mumford/census/>

²Statistics provided by the Albany Police Department.

Dr. Greer about the community's relationship with the police. As it turns out, tension with the police galvanized some of Dr. Greer's activism.

WG: In November 1999, what provided the energy [for our organizing] was the constant abuse by police of African-American people in our neighborhoods. That's what fueled the fire. Do you remember the fellow who was accused of trying to shoot two police officers out here?³ There was nothing short of a siege, a state of emergency. There was knocking in of doors. There was beating up of potential suspects right on the spot. Mrs. Garland, a respected member of the community was hit over the head by a police officer. Her son was punched. All of this because they were looking for [the suspect]. So finally we got together in November of 1999 and said this is going to stop. But it's not slowing down. It seems to be on the increase. We've got to do something as an African-American culture. These are our people. These are our members. These are our constituents. Even if they are not our [church] members, they're our community. And so that was the catalyst, the constant. It's an attitude among the police that if it's a black neighborhood, we can do anything we want to do. And we kept saying, if this was a white neighborhood y'all wouldn't go on like this. You wouldn't do it cause you wouldn't get away with it. Because everybody in a white neighborhood is not a suspect, but everybody in this neighborhood is a suspect. They are either guilty themselves or they are accomplices in hiding them. And we finally just said enough is enough. And it was through this anger – yeah, it's okay, anger is good; it's appropriate. So, I, along with two or three other people, principally Methodists, created the framework: the mission statement, the purpose statement, the vision, and the 10 or 12 issues that we intended to address. It all came out of this moment of anger. We now meet once a month [Albany African American Clergy United for Empowerment].

ORIGINS OF AUMS

Though founded over four decades ago, AUMS as it exists today was shaped by the events described above which energized its community organizing and brought together a network of concerned black clergy in the Capital District.

WG: I think we have about 25 or 30 members of the Albany African American Clergy United for Empowerment. It's Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of God, there is a black Jewish congregation in town. Historically, in Albany, there have been movements of African-American clergy that come together but they generally come together just within a denomination. The clergy who have been here for several decades – I'm talking about 30 to 50 years – to a person believe that this organization has the momentum and the focus that is long overdue in Albany in terms of the black community.

So it is the African American Clergy coming together to make a critical difference in the quality of life and living for people of color in Albany. [We focus on] how criminal justice issues, voter rights and registration, jobs, education, a full range of what we think

³On November 13, 1999, Tracy Grady shot two police officers and fled the scene. According to the Albany Times Union, "A nationwide manhunt ensued [and] an elite SWAT-type force of heavily armed city officers turned Arbor Hill inside out looking for Grady and anyone with information on his whereabouts. Community leaders cried for relief from what they termed heavy-handed tactics" (Carol DeMare, 2001, "Man Accused of Shooting 2 City Cops Goes on Trial." *Times Union*. Albany, New York, p. A8).

are the issues that, if they are addressed thoroughly, will turn things completely around. What I think the group is saying is: nobody really cares but us, nobody really knows but us and if anything is going happen in our communities positively, then we have to do it – and that's the clergy, churches, or communities of faith.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMPOSITION OF AUMS

One of the issues advocacy groups wrestle with is how to organize efforts to address challenges in communities, whether to look outside or inside the community for resources, guidance and leadership. Such issues are particularly challenging in settings like West Hill and Arbor Hill with relatively few resources and where outside organizations have historically done little to help. In thinking through such decisions, organizations must conceptualize their own role in a community and the role of those they serve. Dr. Greer spoke about how AUMS conceptualizes such relationships.

WG: We're in a predominantly black neighborhood. We serve a predominantly black constituency. It is not by design but we are just here and that's who is here. When I came in '93, I had a board of 70 people, one of whom was African American. I said, "there's something wrong with this. There's something radically wrong with this." And it took me three years to convince the Bishop that there was something wrong with that. Once I got the new Bishop's ear, we brought in a consultant and went through a year-plus of training, to which we invited all of those 70 board members. As a result of that training we came out deciding: (a), that we needed to re-establish who we are; and (b) that we needed to completely reconsider and rewrite our bylaws. Don't know how much you know about Methodists, but that is radical stuff for Methodists. Methodists don't like to rewrite anything from the ground. They rewrite what we call the Book of Discipline every four years but that's not starting from scratch, that's taking what's there and perfecting it. We completely destroyed the old set of bylaws because it was the white community telling the black community what was best for it. There were no decision-makers of color.

When we had 70 on the board, you could be the president of the board and never set foot in the city and never set foot in the building. Now, the 15-member board is designed to have community participants, staff participants, and supporting church participants. My first three years were hell because I was proclaiming and preaching and saying one thing, then functioning out of an institution that was all together different. That was the tension. So I said, I am either going to have to leave or change the institution. And so we, through struggle, triumph, and education, created the change. But we can't be in the community where we are if we didn't do that internal, structural paradigm shift. We would not be as effective as we are. People wouldn't come to us like they do if we didn't do the hard work of changing how we operate. It just wouldn't happen.

OUTREACH

AUMS is a "tentacled" institution with five related programs which include the following advocacy in the criminal justice system and liaison between the city and the neighborhood; pre-school and after-school programs for children and youths; food/clothing distribution; work referral and counseling; and the Jeremiah Partnership (encompassing house refurbish-

ing, car repair, and technical training). In all of this work, the organization struggles to adjudicate among the tensions between forces and constraints external to the neighborhoods it serves and challenges derived from within the neighborhoods.

Below Dr. Greer refers to the organizing premise of the AUMS' Food Store. Those who visit the store are afforded a limited number of "credits" which allows them to purchase items of their choice. The combination of choice and finite resources reflects a nuanced notion of social covenant according to which the service provider asks something of and gives something to those being served.

WG: I'm not saying all we do is address issues of racism and classism but, let's face it, when you're dealing with human service, if you don't confront issues of classism and racism you're not doing anything for the people with whom you work. You are just perpetuating an old system. So that informs everything we do. The food distribution is a good example of that. How do most food pantries operate? Based on your Social Security number, the number of children you say you have, and all this documentation. You are stripped bare before these people and then they decide what you are going to feed your children. I was in a pantry one day a few years ago and I looked at a woman with four children, all of whom were under six, and I just said, "what right do I have to tell this woman what to feed her children for the next four days?" They have survived; the woman knows what to feed her children.

So we have a store. All the food banks in the Capital District do not like us. They don't like us because we are not cut from the same cloth. First of all, they don't understand us, that we set the pantry up like a store. There are shelves. There are prices. People come and shop. Well, no wonder we don't have enough [staff] to serve the people who come. To a person, they feel different when they leave the store than when they leave a regular pantry.

LOCAL CHURCH SUPPORT

One of the challenges for urban churches that take their social mission seriously is asserting a meaningful presence in the lives of young people. We discussed the role of the Church with Dr. Greer in light of the following anecdote. Eugene Rivers, a Pentecostal minister in Boston and founder of the 10 Point Coalition, has illustrated such challenges by referring to a conversation he had with a drug dealer. Rivers wondered why the young kids go to the dealer and not to him?" And the drug dealer replied, "I'm there. [out on the street.] You're not."⁴

WG: Exactly. And that may sound a little trite but part of the challenge is that "church people" aren't out there. People don't feel comfortable. You know, in a lot of urban churches – take the United Methodist Church for example – we used to have 9 or 10 churches in this area; now we have two. People don't live in the neighborhood where they attend church. This is mainline Protestantism down the line. This is in every major city. Most of the congregants are not part of that community; the community knows that the Church knows that. And there is nobody building bridges between that suburban community coming in to worship and the community around the church.

CJR: How would your colleagues in Albany African American Clergy United for Empowerment think about this?

⁴John J. Dilulio (1998). "The Lord's Work: The Church and Civil Society." pp. 50–58 in Ed. E. J. Dionne. (1998). *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America*.

WG: I'm not sure to a person that they would necessarily play the kind of role that I would play. In conversation, [black clergy] might suggest that that is the Church's role, generally speaking. But, I don't think they would personally feel that they would have the time. That is not where they are. I mean rhetorically and theologically, generally they would say yes, it is the Church's role to be an advocate but I'm not sure personally that is where they would be.

In terms of what I do and the way I do it, because of our effectiveness, I have not felt any moment where I have not had their [the national Methodist Church] support. That comes out a lot of ways. There's support to the agency. There's support to me personally. I've never been called on the carpet for going too far in one direction or another in terms of being an advocate for those who otherwise would not have an advocate. But part of that may have to do with who I am and how I relate both to those in the courtroom and those who sit in the offices that oversee the work that I do. I think that's important. There are those who can do the work in the streets and among the people who need assistance and advocates but who don't relate to their superiors.

THE BUSH AGENDA

In recent months, the Bush Administration has proposed several new policies for supporting faith-based organizations in their community outreach. We inquired about the promise of that agenda as it pertains to AUMS.

WG: I don't believe that when Bush says "faith-based initiatives," that is really what he means. I think he defines it very narrowly, meaning evangelical Christian right wing thing. I think that is what he's talking about when he says "faith-based". That may not be fair because it hasn't played out yet but the reason he backed off moving forward is because of that constituency.

I mean he is politically savvy. Some of my colleagues are getting excited about what that might mean for their own coffers and their own agenda and their own programs. I'm not excited. I'm not enthusiastic. I'm not going to do things differently because we have a President now who, at least rhetorically, says something about faith-based initiatives. Because of the way we do things in the United Methodist Society, it would not benefit us, number one, because we are not in that evangelical right wing and number two, because our agenda has nothing to do with American civil religion.

REGIONAL INITIATIVES

A number of challenges that pose difficulties for cities like Albany and neighborhoods like West Hill are indicative of urban problems throughout the country. Such common ground offers a promising basis for organizing that draws different communities together behind issues that affect all of them. We discussed the practices and prospects of such possibilities in the Capital Region.

WG: There is a regional effort to organize churches, to organize communities around significant community initiatives. It is called ARISE - A Regional Initiative in Support of Empowerment. It is probably the largest effort of its kind in this region. To

try to get faith communities to organize their communities around issues that are relevant to, not their local church constituency, but the neighborhoods where they're located. I don't know what your interest in this area is and I don't know how you look at this Capital Region but this has got to be one of the most parochial racist communities I've ever worked in bar none. And with ARISE trying to get everybody involved, [it is] one difficult time getting black churches and black pastors. That's why they spent a lot of time with me trying to get some other people at the table. It's a tough sell because black folk are suspicious and white folk are suspicious and some for good reason. Others just aren't educated enough.

COMMUNITY JUSTICE

In addition to its social justice work, AUMS is actively engaged in the politics of criminal justice. We asked Dr. Greer about local policing, the treatment of blacks in the downtown court, and his vision of justice for local offenders and the community. In his view a full embrace of community policing is necessary as is fair treatment in the courts, and restorative justice.

CJR: What kinds of changes are needed in response to the Grady incident?

WG: I think you need a more culturally-educated police force as well as court system because in Albany, you don't have a culturally diverse, let alone sensitive group of police officers.

CJR: Do they subscribe to community policing in the Albany police department?

WG: They will say they do. Yes. But that's their perception. Our perception is that they don't. The building of the North Station was one of their goals in community policing.⁵ The purpose was to decentralize and to make present the trauma units and the police officers. But the community doesn't know the police officers. Officers that we come across want to do anything but stop and talk to you. And I'm the known quantity, so for them to ignore me means they are ignoring everybody. So that's community policing in the neighborhood.

CJR: Are they hiring black police officers for this neighborhood? Are there any?

WG: Statistically, there probably are more black officers but they're not being deployed in black communities.

CJR: Are the officers in their cars or on foot?

WG: As much as they can be, they are in their cars, as much as they can get away with.

CJR: Is there any partnership between AUMS and the police?

WG: We started dealing with them, the police unit. That is, if we call the Police Chief or the Commissioner of Public Safety, the top brass, they will respond to us. That level of relationship is intact. What is not intact is our relationship with the officers who are deployed to this community. It is like pulling teeth to get those officers to come to a reception that we held in their honor. They said they felt like they would be walking into an ambush or something. This is 2000. Come on, guys. We just want you to meet the folks and the folks meet you. What's up with that? We just want a fellowship. They are really paranoid. So we have a good relationship with the administration in the police department but we still have not broken the barrier of a real relationship between the police officers who are deployed in the community and the community itself.

CJR: What is the benefit you would see from having that fellowship?

⁵This is a satellite police station located in the Arbor Hill neighborhood.

WG: Some think that if the officers get to know the people in the community, they will begin to relate to the community differently. Arrests will look different. Who they stop will be different. What they stop people for will be different. Harassment will cease. There's a constant harassment of people, well, you know that. We call it, "walking while black". or "driving while black". That is as real in Albany as it is in any city, perhaps more so. We're hoping that will change once the officers get to know the community and the community gets to know them.

CJR: Can you talk about the offenders from this immediate community who go to prison and then return, do they come back to this neighborhood? Do you have any experience working with them in particular?

WG: [Let me tell] a story that relates to one of those gentlemen. In the time he spent in the place we call the County Hotel, the way his peers were being treated by the DA's office and the attorneys assigned, to a person, they never felt that they were fully represented. That's number one. Number two is they were given sentences that made no sense based on the crime. We are talking about people that get jailed for a year for traffic violations; we're not talking about armed robbery here. We're talking about traffic violations, okay? But when they are released, of course, they come back to the community. But they're back in [jail] in another three or four months, almost 85% of them. Let's take the case of this gentleman a little further. He had a job. It wasn't paying a lot, but it was providing a living for his family. He lost his job so when he comes out, he has to start all over again. That is the aggravating part of it. And the judge says, "Well, either pay the fine or go to jail". Well, if you go to jail you can't pay the fine because you will lose the job. So, I don't understand the rationale. There are no black judges. None. So, anyway it's just a cyclical process.

CJR: And have you been working with the courts, with prosecutors, and defenders to respond to some of the problems?

WG: We've been working with the judges but not the defenders. They are not really interested in defending the people they are defending. They are not interested in defending the criminal, they are interested in moving on to something else so they spend their time in the [public defender's] office and then they find their place inside and move on. But this fellow's concern is that our people are not being defended. There's never any conversation with them. This guy has a stack of material; he has cases. They file motions without discussing anything with the defendant, whether or not he wants to go this way or that. And they only see them when they get to the court. They don't even go to visit them or talk to them on the phone. This is 2001, by the way, not 1945. This is 2001 and I thought the Constitution provided for them. Isn't that right? It's simply not happening. We do go to court often with people. I don't know what the numbers are but Senley Jack has been to court several times. The judges know him, in fact and so we have been able to get certain cases assigned to us rather than sending them to prison.

CJR: What does that assignment mean?

WG: Well, in one case it was anger management. The person goes through that and faces the judge again and, if everything goes okay, then that's the end of it.

CJR: So is that the church's role here, to provide reassurance to the court that the person will be supervised or worked within the community?

WG: Yes. Because when we can't be there, we've often provided written documentation that we are responsible for the person, and what the services are that we would provide and can provide. I do that probably a dozen times a year.

SJ: And in some cases, if there are situations where we physically can't provide those services, we ask the judge to allow us to refer those cases to other agencies that we deal with. We collaborate.

- WG: Generally speaking there aren't a lot of churches that are willing to do that. When one case was communicated last February, in which a dozen or so people were arrested, at the arraignment the next day I was the only minister there. Just sometimes our presence, because the judges know who we are, affects the way they adjudicate the case, which suggests to me that we are advocates for the person as much as we are a conscience for the judge, if that makes any sense. If somebody isn't standing there with the person who is being adjudicated, then he is just another number. But if I'm there, then some importance is given to the case. And I don't think we're that powerful; that's not the issue, it's that we were there.
- CJR: If you had full control of the decision-making process and someone from the community robs some little old lady from down the street and that case comes before you and the perpetrator comes before you, how would you handle it?
- WG: Well, restorative justice would approach it in a way that would get the victim and the perpetrator in a conversation in some non-threatening venue and determine a way that the victim could be compensated by the person who robbed them and to restore that relationship. And then keep that person in the community and find ways to build a support system, a network around the offender so that the person is not put into an institution that forever criminalizes him. What happens in our system now is that someone, say a purse-snatcher, becomes a life criminal because [jail] is all we know what to do with them, especially if they are a person of color. There's a sense that there's no bone in that person's body that is good, or is restorable, or renewable.
- CJR: The standard conservative response to that is, if you're looking out for the welfare of this community and the welfare of that victim, why would you want to keep that offender around? Isn't that the last person you would want to keep in town?
- WG: Well, that person is a part of the community. If "community" is just those people who never did anything wrong, then you have a pretty small community. That person is part of the community. We need to help people understand what community is, and who that community is.

Biography

John Brueggemann is Department Chair and Associate Professor of sociology at Skidmore College. His research interests include comparative historical sociology, stratification, and social movements. Recent work includes: "The Power and Collapse of Paternalism: The Ford Motor Company and Black Workers, 1937-1941" (2000) (with Cliff Brown); "Strategic Labor Organizing in the Era of Industrial Transformation: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Unionization in Steel and Coal, 1870-1916" (2000) (with Terry Boswell); "Labor Market Segmentation and the Cultural Division of Labor in the Copper Mining Industry, 1880-1920" (2000); and "Committing Sociology: Community, Advocacy and Imagination in the Liberal Arts" (Forthcoming).

David Karp is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York where he teaches courses in criminology and criminal justice. He conducts research on community-based responses to crime and has given workshops on restorative justice and community justice nationally. Currently, he is engaged in a research study evaluating Vermont's community reparative probation boards and is a member of the New York State Community Justice Forum. He is the author of more than 30 academic articles and technical reports and a trilogy of books on community justice: *Community Justice: An Emerging Field*; *The Community Justice Ideal* (with Todd Clear); *What is Community Justice? Case Studies of Restorative Justice and Community Supervision* (also with Todd Clear). He received a B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Washington.