

Lack of Faith: The North Carolina Fund's Inability to Involve the Church

Henry Eng
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The North Carolina Fund, an antipoverty organization set up by Governor Terry Sanford in 1963, was designed to be an extremely experimental in its strategies to combat poverty. This was especially true in the community action programs. Besides its own statewide programs, the Fund selected, financed and guided eleven communities within North Carolina in the War on Poverty. Each community had its own antipoverty community action programs (CAPs), custom-designed to correct each community's individual problems. Though these community action agencies had different strategies, the main goal to alleviate poverty was the same. Effective community action in combating poverty does not only provide the lower-income class with the opportunity, resources, and skills necessary to improve socioeconomic status, but also mobilizes the lower-income class in an effort to motivate change within the self, as well as, the power structure. With the majority of the lower-income class attending church, the CAPs could have used the church as a useful infrastructure to help mobilize the poor. Despite the church being the obvious starting point, especially among the black poor, it was not utilized to its full capacity to fight poverty in many of these communities.

However, examining Craven and Buncombe county areas shows that the failure to use the church was not due to a lack of recognition of its power. Some of the staff members in the Fund, and some of the community action team staff were fully aware of how helpful the church could be in effective community organization. In spite of this cognizance, the local power structure within these two communities prevented any significant involvement with the church from taking place. Those who had political and economic power felt that effective community mobilization would threaten the current power structure. Frightened by the change religion could potentially bring, as well as the

black church's association with the civil rights movement, the existing power structures curtailed community mobilization through the church. As a result, supporters of the church in antipoverty efforts had to involve the church in an extremely indirect nature. The Fund staff and CAP members were often forced to find other creative solutions to utilize the church's resources without upsetting the local elite. Given the political circumstances, community action's involvement with the church did, in fact, reach its full potential.

These progressive staff members realized that community mobilization is often more successful through the support of preexisting community groups. Yet despite the fact that eighty to ninety percent of the lower-income class was involved with the church in Craven and Buncombe, those CAPs were prevented from using the church as an effective mobilizing force to motivate and engage the lower-income class.¹ If the local power structures had not blocked any efforts to involve the church, the CAPs would have been able to formalize the church into their antipoverty efforts. Likewise, the Fund could have more effectively pushed CAPs to utilize the church. Because the lower-income class was so involved in religion, the North Carolina Fund and CAPs could have used the church as a natural organizing platform for many of their programs. Not only could these antipoverty programs have reached a greater section of the lower-income class through the church, but these programs could have also provided many of the services and much of the skills training at these churches as well. As a place to touch base with the lower-income class, the church would have also provided more credibility and fostered greater trust with the CAPs. The church, for the most part, had the trust of the lower-income class and would have been a tremendous force in organizing and motivating them more.

Historically, the lower-income class and the church have been deeply involved. Religion provided an outlet for many, as Roger Gottlieb stated, “in the religious imagination, poverty, humiliation and drudgery became less real . . . [and the] present [is] seen as merely temporary.”² However, with religion, there is also the danger of a false sanguinity. If the belief of otherworldliness is too strong, those in oppressed situations may use religion as an excuse for accepting the status quo. Unlinked from social, political, or economic variables, religion serves, as Marx stated, as “an opiate for the masses.”³ Yet, when combined with a social cause, religion can be transformed into the ultimate catalyst for change.

For the African American community during slavery, religion served as a coping mechanism, instead of as a vehicle for rebellion. Religion provided a way of dealing with the oppression of slavery and racism. However, the churches, according to Gottlieb, “first came into being as protest organizations and later some served as meeting places where strategy was planned, or as stations on the Underground Railroad.”⁴ Religion transformed from a coping mechanism to a proactive tool. This renewal in religion was civil in nature, thereby creating a religious nationalism, helping the black community define its existence within the political community.⁵ The church was by no means the dominating force in the civil rights movement, but instead served as a forum to help unite, mobilize, and inspire the black community.

Those closely involved in the church were already established indigenous leaders within the African American lower-income class. The civil rights movement demonstrated how effective community mobilization requires the involvement of the influential among the lower-income class to help motivate the poor. Because the

majority of civil rights leaders were natural leaders of the poor, ordained ministers and divinity students, the civil rights movement was able to gain tremendous momentum. The synergistic effect of religion and a sociopolitical cause created a “powerful mass movement – even among those who possess little social standing or clout.”⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., and other religious figures helped inspire young people to risk jail, violence, and possibly even death in the fight to end racial inequality.

While the church proved to be an effective mobilizing tool for black community, the southern white church population was much more conservative. White churches did not have the reasons for social change that their counterparts had. However, like the black poor, a huge majority of the white lower-income class frequented the church. Though the southern white church was never mobilized to a similar degree as the black church, community action agencies still had a viable platform for contacting the white lower-income class. The church would have provided tremendous access to the majority of the poor, and an opportunity to garner their trust, as the white lower-income class believed in their church leaders.⁷ Utilizing the white churches might not have been effective as the black churches, but doing so would have been just as viable as any other program designed to mobilize the white poor.

Most of the lower-income class in North Carolina, both white and black, was primarily Protestant. The major denominations included Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. While conservatism ranged among these denominations, all of these religious groups were willing to help alleviate poverty.⁸ Though antipoverty actions among these churches might have varied based on their ideological views, efforts to combat poverty would have been taken nevertheless. Most churches were ready and

willing to partake in the war against poverty together, but still the CAPs never had the opportunity to fully utilize these churches. Even though there was recognition of the church's utility, examining these two CAPs shows the difficulty many of the CAP members faced when dealing with the local power structures.

The Opportunity Corporation, Inc., worked in the Buncombe and Madison county areas, located in the western mountain area of North Carolina. In 1960 Buncombe had a population of 130,074, with 60,000 of these residents in the city of Asheville. A mere 17,217 lived in Madison. There were two primary types of poverty in the Buncombe area: urban, African American, ghetto poverty and rural, Caucasian, Appalachian poverty. Asheville had "shocking contrasts of wealth and poverty . . . [where poverty was] concentrated in pockets, with the highest density in inner-city slums and in public housing projects." Twenty-seven percent of the white population and sixty percent of the blacks had less than \$3,000 in income, and thirty-six percent lived in inadequate housing. The area industrialized as many manufacturing plants were created, but even so, the pockets of poverty remained unchanged. In rural Buncombe and Madison, agriculture was the main occupation, and there existed a large-scale migration of rural whites to Asheville and other urban areas.⁹

In Craven County, the community action team, Operation Progress, Inc., dealt with poverty along the eastern coastal plain of North Carolina. New Bern, 16,000 large and primarily African American, was the only urban area within this region. Seventy-three percent of the population in the Craven area lived rurally, and the rest resided in New Bern. The median income for white families was \$4,656, and less than \$1,000 for black families. Education showed similar disparities on racial lines, as three times as

many whites finished high school. Highly dependent on agriculture, many of the rural poor were “forced off farms by increasing mechanization and cuts in tobacco acreage,” leaving plenty of unskilled, untrained workers. The only industrial stimulus came from a United States Marine Air Station. Since Craven County was unable to attract any other major industries, there was extreme instability within the labor force, further complicating the poverty matter.¹⁰

Despite the impoverished state of these two communities, the lower-income class still sought out better lives, and the majority had far from given up. A survey taken in both the Buncombe area and Craven County shows that while the white and black poor tended to self rate their lives (economically and politically) extremely low on a scale of one to five, both groups strived to improve their lives. The lower-income class was by no means content with remaining in the same socioeconomic state. The poor in these two communities aspired for better – not only for themselves, but for their children as well, though realizing that this was not likely (See Table 1).^{11, 12}

This desire for improvement suggests that the lower-income class would be responsive toward community mobilization, if it was enacted properly. Individually, most were willing to work harder to improve their lives. Though the poor wanted to alleviate their poverty, the lower-income class did not embrace many government and institutional programs because of a lack of trust. Without complete trust, many community plans were not as efficient or effective in fighting poverty. In these communities, most felt religion was more helpful in combating poverty than the government.¹³ The lower-income class believed in and trusted the church. The poor believed that religious leaders held the lower-income class’ interests at the forefront and

helped the lower-income class cope with their poverty. With the trust between the lower-income class and the church already in place, the poor would be responsive to most antipoverty programs through the church.

In both of these communities, one in the western mountains, the other along the eastern coast, members of the lower-income class were avid participants in the church. Several surveys conducted by the Fund show that in different areas of Asheville anywhere from eighty-six percent to ninety-six percent of the white and black population attended church at least once a month. Meanwhile, less than thirteen percent were involved in other types of civil or fraternal organizations (See Table 2).¹⁴ Similarly, in Craven County, in three different areas, ninety-five percent to ninety-six percent of the respondents attended church with some degree of regularity. Again, less than ten percent engaged in other civil or fraternal organizations.¹⁵ While other indigenous groups existed, none of these organizations had the penetration of the church. Community mobilization of other groups might have been effective, but only among ten percent of the population. Nobody should have been asking how to reach the poor; the church was an obvious inroad to the lower-income class community.

The North Carolina Fund was meant to be experimental, focusing on getting the poor involved so they could “contribute in the decision making of what they need[ed].”¹⁶ However, according to Billy Barnes, Public Relations Director of the Fund, there were “no spectacular instances of getting churches involved in community action.”¹⁷ Despite never formalizing the use of the church in the war against poverty, the North Carolina Fund and the local communities were still fully cognizant of the church’s benefits. As B.J. Branch, a summer volunteer in Pitt County, remarked, the church was an “excellent

way to ‘infiltrate’ the community.” With other volunteers, Branch would attend a small Baptist church and during announcements would “speak on [their] specific projects . . . to the accompaniment of ‘Amen’ and ‘Tell it like it is, brother!’” Branch’s minimal utilization of this particular church garnered more viable results in alleviating poverty by publicizing these antipoverty programs.¹⁸ Had his CAP been fully involved with the church, perhaps, there could have even been better results.

Despite the high level of involvement of the poor in the church, the North Carolina Fund apparently eschewed direct linkage to the church. Only in its later years of existence did the Fund speak out on the need for CAPs to involve and get input from indigenous groups such as the church. The North Carolina Fund originally did not envision itself as a direct agent for change, though change was its primary objective. The Fund began in a “coordinating role in community action,” and later evolved into “a role of advocacy of the poor.”¹⁹ Eventually the Fund pushed for more lower-income class involvement within the CAPs. However, the Fund’s initial inability to focus on community mobilization partially led to its lack of success. Only after realizing the politics involved in each of these communities did the Fund feel that it should work more directly with the poor themselves.

At its onset in July 1963, the leaders of the Fund believed it was a coordinator of these CAPs and would foster these programs to be more effective. Despite the fact that there were some progressive thinkers on the Fund’s staff, they initially did not have the chance to implement these ideas within individual communities, themselves, as these CAPs were independent. During its first year, most of the community action agencies had no representation of the poor on their respective boards or staffs. With the start of

the first Community Action Technician Program (CAT) a year later, the Fund realized the “need to encourage community organization to involve representation of the poor.”²⁰ In its advisory letter to the community action agencies, the Fund recommended “participation in program formulation and execution by the representatives who would be aided by the program.”²¹ William Koch, director of the Fund’s Community Development branch, expected indigenous leaders among the poor to be trained in community mobilization.²² Most of the poor leaders also happened to be leaders of the lower-income class churches.

In April, 1965, the North Carolina Fund began to push for more community organization and involvement, when the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) called for “maximum feasible participation.” The Fund took on a much more activist orientation. In the fall of 1965 OEO pushed even harder for community involvement. OEO required, rather than advised that, “representatives of the poor and minorities be appointed to local . . . boards.” OEO also suggested the neighborhood groups such as churches and civic clubs for program operations and increased opportunities for the poor to participate in the community agencies.²³

Because of its association with the civil rights movement in focusing on ending black poverty, and its activist nature, OEO became the subject of political criticism, especially offending the more conservative legislators. The OEO’s support of community action, for instance, caused an extremely negative political reaction from the local politicized communities when it refused to fund CAPs nationwide that had inefficient representation of the poor.²⁴ However, OEO’s actions had a tremendous effect on the Fund. According to George Esser, “prior to the fall of 1965, I think you might say

that some of the leadership in OEO was ahead of the Fund in terms of objectives and methods.”²⁵ The Fund had “to make a run to catch up with ‘maximum feasible participation’ . . . but from October 1965, [it] got ahead of OEO,” as OEO spent more and more time defending itself against the conservative politicians.²⁶ The North Carolina Fund shifted its goals and techniques toward community mobilization.

By this time, most of the Fund staff believed it should focus its efforts on helping to empower the poor rather than concentrating on community action programs. There was increased stress on “the need for more grass-roots organizing to bring the poor into the decision making processes.”²⁷ While not singling out churches, the Fund was well aware of the church’s broad base among the lower-income class. However, any direct involvement of the church drew protest. With the civil rights movement causing tremendous controversy at the time and the movement’s deep connection with the church, any church association would be sure to draw fire. Esser and his staff had to be extremely careful; any press depicting the Fund as a civil rights organization would be sure to draw fire.

A reorganization occurred in 1965 so that the Community Development Department in the Fund would focus on running the community action teams. With a tougher attitude toward poor representation, this department decided to withdraw financial support from any community action agency if its board did not represent the lower-income class. In fact, in 1966, the Fund felt so estranged from some of these community programs that the Community Support director, Jim McDonald, requested to Esser that the fund stop funding for all eleven community agencies.²⁸

In its last year, the North Carolina Fund had fully moved “from a safe services approach to the tumultuous arena of institutional change.”²⁹ However, without direct control of the various community action teams, the Fund had to fight a political battle. In many of its reviews of various communities, the Fund recommended greater community involvement and, in some cases, directly listed churches as first organizing platform these agencies should utilize.³⁰

The Fund even hired former church leaders in its staff to help garner the trust of current church leaders. For example, John Murray, a retired minister, was hired by the North Carolina Fund to speak to various community middle-income class groups to “explode myths, which perpetuate apathy” among the poor and push forward community organization. Murray’s primary role was to deradicalize the idea of community mobilization so that the agencies could incorporate the lower-income class churches with less resistance. Murray was especially important in garnering support in the white community. One of Murray’s most difficult tasks was convincing various white community groups that antipoverty programs were for antipoverty, and not Civil rights. Traveling from city to city, Murray was most effective with the white church groups.³¹

However, many CAPs felt threatened by the Fund’s increased support for indigenous community groups. Most North Carolina Fund community areas believed that the individual poor person needed to change, not the social structure. As a result, the existing power structure was to be kept in place. These community agencies would fight poverty by training the individual, not mobilizing the poor. Even as the Fund moved to a formal program involving lower-income class groups, primarily through the church and other indigenous organizations, the Fund had only one year remaining and found itself

squabbling with different CAPs, rather than creating productive change.³² Those within the CAPs who believed that effective community mobilization was a necessary weapon in the war on poverty had little success in evoking change.

Like the Fund, the Buncombe and Craven agencies had progressive thinkers as well, who attempted to involve the church and other lower-income class organizational platforms. However, these two regions also had to contend with a political power structure that prevented them from doing so. The same powerful elite within these communities that blocked the Fund from community organization in its later years was the same elites that prevented agents of change within the community from doing the same thing.

A few local community action programs attempted to get the church involved, but could never do so directly. While the church might have proved to be a powerful weapon against poverty, religion was also seen as a dangerous threat to the preexisting power structure. To those already in power, mobilizing the poor, through whichever medium, meant a loss of power. As a result, many of these CAPs had to play a game of politics in order to serve the poor, while compromising with and sometimes placating the rich and powerful. Direct use of the churches would have led to retribution from those local elite, and could have hampered the fight against poverty, even more so than the political tightrope walking many of the CAPs faced.

The Buncombe area was no different than most of these communities. The Opportunity Corporation was significantly affected by the existing political structure, which stifled much potential progress. Weldon Weir, the city manager of Asheville exerted “tight control over the political system . . . extend[ing] beyond the city.” Weir’s

group of political elite included Robert Bunnelle, the publisher of the local newspaper; John Spicer, Wachovia Bank; Gerald Cown, one of the wealthy elite; Philip Stull, American Enka; and W.F. Talman, Talman Office Supply Company. With a very “effective patronage system,” Weir maintained control of the area, by either giving direct employment or granting favors. Weir also was linked to a small racketeering group and allegedly rigged local elections with marked ballots and stuffed boxes.³³

For the Opportunity Corporation to invoke any significant change, it would come into direct conflict with Weir and his cohorts. Even in its final report, the North Carolina Fund remarked, “any agency working within the political structure controlled by Weir would probably find it impossible to produce meaningful changes.” Weir jumped at the opportunity to create a community action program to get more funding for the Buncombe area. However, his initial proposal to the Fund was deemed inadequate, and his second proposal met severe criticism for failing to involve the community in planning the program and failing to understand the basic problems as poverty. The Buncombe area’s proposal was categorized as “paternalistic.” Despite the proposal’s inadequacies, Asheville was still the only major metropolitan area in the Eastern mountain region; and, as a result, the Opportunity Corporation still received funding in August of 1964.³⁴

Weir handpicked the board of the Opportunity Corporation to ensure the entrenched elite would retain power. A conservative, William Highsmith was the first chairman of the board, and Ora Spaid served as the executive director. During his tenure, Spaid tried his best to keep the Asheville power structure happy. As a former journalist, Spaid maintained good public relations and believed in working within the power structure. Mobilizing the poor would only lead to undesirable social scars that would be

irreparable. The board originally consisted of representatives from various city agencies, governing bodies, and banks. The lack of lower-income class representation on the board was so egregious that it was “necessary for OEO to hold up funds for almost a year,” and the Opportunity Corporation to restructure the board twice.³⁵ Despite this restructuring, the remaining thirty percent of businessmen and professionals retained power on the board and worked for the existing figures in power. All of the “reorganizations of staff and strategy . . . [there was] hindered consistent development of the community organization effort and . . . lessened the confidence of the people in the dependability of the Corporation.”³⁶

Some members of the Opportunity Corporation recognized the need to create a “contact point with the poor,” as well as a central meeting place, but Weir and the board usually blocked their efforts.³⁷ As a result, the absence of the church in the community programs was of no surprise. In its first few years, the board even failed to incorporate clergy members. In its final two years of existence, the board of the Opportunity Corporation only had one minister in 1966 out of forty-five board members, and two clergymen, one of which was African American, in 1967 out of twenty-four members. The rest of the board members were not involved in any other community groups that would have helped to foster community organization. Not surprisingly, “many leaders of the poor [who] supported the concept of community action . . . [were] negative and distrustful of the commitment and ability of the Opportunity Corporation staff.”³⁸

In its interactions with the Buncombe program, the North Carolina Fund was as disappointed and distrustful as many of the indigenous poor leaders. In a 1966 review, the Fund remarked that there was no firm approach to community action, real

involvement, or effective organization of the poor; and the community action agency had not made its presence known. The Fund even suggested using church groups as the main base for involving the poor.³⁹ Support of indigenous leaders was absolutely crucial to give the poor independence and organizational strength to deal with significant issues. However, Spaid resisted the Fund's recommendations, and even went as far as saying in one interview that the Fund "hired [the Opportunity Corporation] to run an antipoverty program, so why in the hell won't they leave us alone so we can do our job?"⁴⁰ In another interview, Spaid was "tired of being second guessed;" and the rest of his words consisted of "excuses, complaints, excuses and complaints . . . [until realizing] the direction of the conversation was toward community organization," where Spaid then stopped the interview.⁴¹

The only success in incorporating the church was in the Opportunity Corporation's final year when Reverend William S. Jones was elected to be chairman of the board. A white pastor at the Calvary United Presbyterian Church and head of civic affairs committee of the local Ministerial Alliance, Jones did embark on a major reorganization of the community development efforts by creating neighborhood centers in the Buncombe area. Yet, even with his efforts, Jones failed to have truly effective community organization and found himself in a precarious position of trying to placate the rest of the board, while mobilizing the community. Any direct efforts involving the church were associated with civil rights and frowned upon by the rest of the board. As a result, the Fund's staff noted that Jones' actions were "delayed, stifled, and often misdirected, primarily because the philosophy of the board of directors and the executive director is incompatible with the development of effect community organization

efforts.”⁴² Despite no endorsement from the Opportunity Corporation, some churches tried to involve themselves anyway. Several churches in East Asheville came together and proposed that they become a “full time community organizer to encourage participation” among the poor, “organize and articulate community needs,” and attract the funds to do so. Needless to say, the Opportunity Corporation board did not endorse the idea.⁴³ The lack of community organization was so apparent that the majority of the lower-income class in the Buncombe area was unaware of the Opportunity Corporation. Those who did recognize the community action agency were, for the most part, disillusioned with its programs.⁴⁴

Craven Operation Progress, Inc., had a bit more success in utilizing the church to mobilize the poor, but again the existing power structure thwarted any real progress. D. L. Stallings, a member of the city council, was the chief promoter of the community action agency from the start. Fully aware of the increasing welfare load in Craven County, Stallings organized welfare, school, and health administrators as well as interested citizens to submit a proposal to the North Carolina Fund in 1963. William Flowers, then principal of New Bern High School, served as chairman of this proposal committee. Craven County was much more progressive than most other communities in tackling poverty. With Stallings leading the proposal campaign, well before most other counties, Craven County had several in-depth meetings before submitting their final proposal to the North Carolina Fund. While the first discussion included no minorities, the committee quickly agreed that it should be a racially integrated group, “although this was contrary to local tradition.”⁴⁵

In the first official meeting on December 20, 1963, there were forty community members present, including representatives from the New Bern Civic Council, New Bern Ministerial Association, and other minority groups, such as the NAACP and the Craven County Civic League. This proposal committee met informally for the remaining month focusing on ideas of education, job training, and family mobilization. Though the church and African Americans were involved, the committee failed to include the rest of the general public, including the poor, in these early deliberations. However, the proposal committee was so thorough that the Fund was extremely impressed and pushed for immediate funding, making Craven County one of the seven original communities to receive financial assistance.⁴⁶

The first project director of Craven Operation Progress was James J. Hearn, who had previously served on the President's Task Force on the War against Poverty. Familiar with government bureaucracy and officials in OEO, Hearn had a knack for getting his proposals approved and funded relatively quickly. However, Hearn was not the most charismatic individual and failed to communicate effectively with the board of directors of the community action agency. Many board members felt excluded by Hearn's actions as he rarely consulted them in decision making.

However, Hearn's intentions were for the sole benefit of the poor people, especially the African American poor. Discontent with the Craven board's racial makeup, Hearn pushed for more minorities on the board. For Craven Operation Progress, it was imperative to "locate indigenous low-income leaders," many of whom were brought together for community leadership training.⁴⁷ Hearn also recognized the importance of the church from the beginning by contacting every black minister in the

Craven County within his first month as project director. James Hearn felt it necessary to establish close relations with the local black leaders, churches, and civic clubs to help mobilize the African American community. Recognizing religion as a tremendous organizing platform, Hearn felt that the lower-income class could funnel its energy through the church to tackle poverty head-on. In addition, Hearn believed that by contacting “natural leaders, [inferring] the Ministers of Religion, etc.,” Craven Operation Progress could develop trust between the community agency and the lower-income class much more easily.⁴⁸

Despite his efforts, the board felt Hearn was pushing civil rights rather than antipoverty, failing to see how the two issues were related. Garnering a great amount of support from the African American community, Hearn threatened the existing power structure. The original chairman of the board, Larry Pate, disagreed fervently with Hearn’s actions. As a wealthy tobacco farmer, Pate was part of the white elite in the Craven community that was afraid of losing power to a mobilized lower-income (and minority) class. The tension came to a climax in the summer of 1965 when the white board members forced the resignation of Hearn, despite black members’ protests. Robert Monte, a former board member, took Hearn’s place and took steps to reverse Hearn’s policies. The OEO, a strong supporter of Hearn, looked upon Monte with extreme suspicion; and this lack of trust led to an unproductive, disharmonious relationship.⁴⁹

Seen as elite among the Craven community, Monte was known as a member of the exclusive “Yacht” Club and his upper-income class background. Conservative in his beliefs, Monte did not advocate any new programs. Monte’s interest lay with the white power structure; and, as a result, communication with the black churches ceased. During

Monte's time as director, a former minister, Robert Pugh, assumed chairmanship. However, Pugh, recognizing the backlash against Hearn, did nothing to re-involve the churches. Because of Monte's hostile attitude toward the churches, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a group of religious leaders in the Craven area, dissociated itself from Operation Progress. Originally, SCLC was extremely supportive of Hearn's initiatives and wanted to help alleviate poverty. However, Monte countered any progress Hearn had made with this religious organization. Not only did Monte ignore the lower-income class churches, he vetoed a program for volunteers to teach a basic education class, and in New Bern ordered staff members to stop any community organization activities. Monte was "too much for the Negroes" and resisted the North Carolina Fund's efforts to force him to involve the community.⁵⁰ His actions were so controversial and such a regression from Hearn's era, despite the board's support, that Monte resigned from office in 1967. Monte's replacement, James L. Godwin, was a moderate in between the likes of Hearn and Monte. However, direct community organization was never again established. Afraid of sharing the same fate as his former predecessors, Godwin was careful not to upset the lower-income class or the existing power structure.⁵¹

Over these years, Hearn successfully placed two clergymen on the board before being ousted. However, after his resignation, board representation did not improve. Likewise most of the businessmen and professionals dominated the board's decisions. Toward the end of Operation Progress, there was very little community participation in any of the community projects. With Hearn's efforts to mobilize the community, especially through the church, being rebuffed, most of the lower-income class was

disillusioned with Craven Operation Progress. While the Community Involvement division of this community action agency did have some success after Hearn's departure, not enough effort was placed in community organization. After all, such mobilization would create conflict between Operation Progress and the power structure.

The failure to formally include the church in community organization can be attributed to the nasty web of politics within the local communities. Some churches, especially African American churches, were ready and willing to be major players in the War on Poverty. During the Fund's existence, there was a growing commitment of North Carolina denominations to the black and white poor, and the Fund believed that the "church in North Carolina – in particular the traditional white church – can take a stronger role in the solution of problems of poverty and racial strife."⁵² Church ministers were eager to respond, with constant efforts to support poor neighborhoods by any means possible. In the Downtown Church Project in Winston-Salem, seven churches came together to study how they "might better minister to the social needs of the city."⁵³ Yet, there never were any formal programs linking the church to these CAPs. Churches were "very, very often used for meetings for low-income families," and "most boards had black ministers, because these tended to be the leaders in black communities." Many day care centers were housed in churches, and these churches sponsored needy teenagers in the Neighborhood Youth Care project. Still the churches were "never formalized" into various antipoverty programs as an organizational platform.⁵⁴ As a result, the churches and community action teams never worked directly together to fight poverty, and some community action programs that might have been successful under the guise of the church, struggled as an independent program.

Religion played too controversial a role in the fight against poverty. Keeping church involvement informal was perhaps the best way of using this organizational platform without upsetting the current power structure. With the fight for civil rights ongoing, many of the powerful and elite associated the black church with a tumultuous movement. The local community leaders simply “wanted to preserve old nineteenth century ways [and power structure].”⁵⁵ The civil rights movement had already eroded some of the entrenched power, and effectively mobilizing the lower-income class to fight a War on Poverty would weaken the power structure even further. OEO’s progressive attitudes caused political turmoil that only reduced its feasibility during its latter years. Similarly, whoever promoted direct usage of the church would garner the same political heat. In Buncombe, the old power structure was so embedded in the area, that community organization through whichever medium was never an option. James Hearn of Craven County attempted to directly involve the church, and within a year he was forced to resign from office. The “ups and downs that Craven Operation Progress has seen . . . can be traced to the [struggle between] the white middle-income class public and the pressures applied by the organized Negro community.”⁵⁶

The Fund did not face the local political pressure many of the community action programs did. As an independent entity, the Fund had some power in determining financial allocation. Though in charge of funding the CAPs, the Fund still had issues involving the church directly. In its earlier years, the North Carolina Fund did not have a proactive enough stance toward representation and involvement of the poor, allowing the community action boards full freedom. By the time the Fund came around to recognizing churches as a “potentially powerful but largely untapped resource,” it was in its last year

of existence.⁵⁷ As a result, the Fund spent more time bickering with community boards rather than invoking effective change. Perhaps if the North Carolina Fund had lasted longer, it would have made more progress with these CAPs; but because of the Fund's limited life, the local communities could easily rebuff any ultimatums.

As a result, the church never got directly involved. Nothing formal was ever created. Any sort of full embrace of the church simply led to a retrenchment, as seen with Robert Monte in Craven County. This threatening regression forced the church to get involved as a meeting place or day care center, rather than a community force for the poor. CAPs never had the opportunity to tap into the church resources. Those who did believe in the use of the church in the war against poverty attempted to involve the church as much as possible without upsetting the local power structures, leading to creative, but limited solutions. The local elite may have very well wanted to help the poor, but only on an individual level. Any sort of community organization was threatening. Well aware of religion's mobilizing effectiveness, the community power structures demonstrated an astounding fear of the power of faith.

¹ North Carolina Fund. *Characteristics of individuals in areas served by the Asheville Buncombe County Community Action Program*. Durham: North Carolina Fund. 1967.

² Gottlieb, Roger S. *Joining Hands: politics and religion together for social change*. Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2002.

³ Ibid 98.

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Table 1: Perceptions and Attitudes*

	Self-Rating	Desired Rating	Desire Children	Expect Children
Buncombe				
Asheville I	2.44	3.93	4.24	3.17
Asheville II	2.1	3.7	4.24	3.42
Woodfin	2.52	4.01	4.59	3.76
Sandy Mush	2.23	3.9	4.86	3.15
Craven				
Rural white	2.52	3.7	4.32	3.7
Rural black	1.81	3.12	4	3.36
New Bern black	1.8	3.9	4.8	4.05

*Ratings are mean values on a scale of 1-5. Asheville I consists of the white poor in Asheville. Asheville II consists of the black poor in Asheville. Woodfin is a rural area located in Buncombe County. Sandy Mush is a mountain cove in Madison County.

Table II: Religious Involvement*

	Regularly	Occasionally	Never
Buncombe			
Asheville I	38%	50%	12%
Asheville II	63%	23%	14%
Woodfin	45%	46%	9%
Sandy Mush	50%	46%	4%
Craven			
Rural white	56%	39%	5%
Rural black	70%	26%	4%
New Bern black	64%	32%	4%

*Occasionally defined as one a month. Asheville I consists of the white poor in Asheville. Asheville II consists of the black poor in Asheville. Woodfin is a rural area located in Buncombe County. Sandy Mush is a mountain cove in Madison County.