

# Spirituality: A Source of Resilience for African American Women in the Era of Welfare Reform

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper, the authors examine the meaning and role of spirituality in the lives of eight women of color, participating in a welfare-to-work program. Although largely ignored in social work practice in the context of welfare reform, these women indicate through in-depth interviews that spirituality is a vital source of resilience for them. They articulate their meaning of spirituality, spiritual practices, spiritual experiences with material hardships, and how spirituality helps them to cope with manifestations of poverty and welfare reform. The authors conclude that by building on the spiritual strengths of women of color, social workers can be supportive witnesses to peoples' ability to heal themselves, and appropriately respond to welfare reform. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.Haworth Press.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Women of color, poverty, meaning of spirituality, how spirituality helps

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The authors thank Sharon Barfield and Philip Dybicz for their help with interviews in this study.

Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, Vol. 13(2) 2004  
<http://www.haworthpress.com/web/ECDSW>

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J051v13n02\_03

## INTRODUCTION

When thirty-three-year-old Catherine recently lost her night-shift job at a retail store, she re-applied for welfare assistance to take care of herself and her three pre-teen children. Her protracted, intermittent welfare history required her to be a mandatory welfare-to-work client in order to be eligible for public assistance. Disgust with the entry-level wage labor scene, as well as a desire to take good care of her growing children, led Catherine to choose to participate in the Micro-Entrepreneurial Training (MET) Program, to learn how to start a day care and become self-employed. Although she felt the tremendous pressure of a welfare reform “work first” environment, Catherine says: “. . . I still have my faith and my belief in Him—that He’s not going to let me suffer, not give me more than I can handle. I know He’ll be there . . . He sees that I’m a good person, that I’m trying. I don’t think He’s going to let me fail.” Catherine’s strong faith is rooted in her “relationship with God,” which in turn keeps her “motivated.” Catherine says that if she did not believe in God, she “probably would have given up on a lot of things.” Despite current financial hardships, her faith enables her to remain “determined” to try, so she does not lose her house and her three children. Accordingly, her faith in God heightens her sense of responsibility to raise her children well, “so they’re not out there doing drugs and things they’re not supposed to be doing.” Last but not least, spirituality influences Catherine’s life philosophy—do unto others as you’d have them do unto you. Catherine admits she may not always be good to others, but she continuously strives to live this philosophy, and instill it in her children. Catherine is not alone in her efforts to live her spiritual philosophy of life in the face of poverty and restrictive welfare reform policies. The authors interviewed other women who, like Catherine, found spirituality to be a source of resilience. Thus, the purpose of this inquiry is to explore themes related to spiritual resiliency in the face of welfare reform.

### *Background*

The reforming of the welfare system began in the 1980s as public welfare policies began increasingly to require work or work-related activities as a condition for receiving cash assistance (Bane and Ellwood, 1994; Schorr, 2001; Stoesz, 2000). Welfare reform, or the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, P.L. 104-193, 1996), was the culmination of many years of piecemeal change toward reducing the welfare rolls. The stipulations of this ver-

sion of welfare reform included life “time limit” on welfare availability, and a mandate to “work first”; states determine the definition of both time limit and work first.

In Kansas, individuals who had been on assistance for 24 months or more continuously, had two to three barriers to economic self-sufficiency (such as no GED, no or poor work history, issues with substance abuse, domestic violence, health/mental health), and had children over two years of age were categorized as “welfare-to-work,” and required to work first. Such individuals were referred by the local welfare office to the local employment office, which funded the MET Program as a job readiness training component of welfare reform (see Banerjee, 2001 for details on the MET Program). The MET Program worked with two groups of participants per year. Each phase had 6 weeks of visioning, 12 weeks of business training, and 4 weeks of business plan completion. Program participants met as a group for three hours per week for 18 weeks. Of these three hours, one hour was reserved for support group meetings in which participants discussed their personal life issues associated with starting a micro-enterprise. During these support group meetings, participants often brought up their own spirituality, and how they relied on it to survive issues related to poverty and welfare reform.

Over three years of working with about 60 women participating in the MET Program, the authors repeatedly heard references to the central role of spirituality in their lives. Many participants shared with group members and staff how their spirituality helped them to cope with personal difficulties associated with lack of money, including welfare reform. Given the repeated references to spirituality and the knowledge that spirituality can be a vital source of resilience, although largely ignored in social work practice in the context of welfare reform, the authors decided to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the lives of women of color participating in the last session of the MET Program as they coped with welfare reform.

## ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

### ***Welfare Reform***

While welfare reform programs vary by states, they have a goal of “work first,” and generally utilize strategies such as job search, job readiness, and in some cases job training programs. Much has been written about welfare reform’s shortsighted philosophy, which some state does

little, if anything, to address the fundamental causes of poverty (Cancian, 2001; Fitzpatrick and Gomez, 1997; Jimenez, 1999; Stoesz, 2000). These critics argue that the welfare reform policies are primarily aimed at reducing the welfare rolls; that the welfare reform services are designed to offer a “band-aid” or to find a “quick fix” for what is oftentimes the effects of long-term poverty for families, and particularly single women of color; and that these services ignore structural barriers. They argue that welfare reform affirms that the answer to poverty is to put women into the low-wage labor force and encourage them to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” while disregarding the internal and external barriers that exist for women, especially single mothers of color (Piven, 1999). The external barriers include institutional racism, violence against women, lack of available jobs together with safe, affordable childcare, and access to transportation, to name a few (Fitzpatrick and Gomez, 1997). Also, Garcia and Harris (2001) remind us that ethnic groups have been differentially affected by welfare policies. While some of the external barriers are occasionally addressed by public policy, such as provisions for battered women (Kurz, 1999), these policies vary from state to state and community to community and, therefore, are not guaranteed to all women. Internal barriers include educational deficits, lack of work experience, job-skill deficits, personal or family members’ health and mental health concerns, substance abuse problems, and inadequate communication and conflict resolution skills (Jackson, Tienda, and Huang, 2001; Rife, Scullion, Law, and Thombs, 1996; Wijnberg and Weinger, 1998; Zedlewski et al., 2003).

As a way to shed light on helping individuals overcome many of these barriers, during the last decade, some writers have drawn on the strengths perspective to write about women living in poverty, i.e., focusing on the internal and external resources of individuals as opposed to their deficits or pathologies (Nesto, 1994). In addition, in the post-1996 welfare reform era, a few have emphasized working from a strengths model with women receiving benefits (Postmus, 2000; East, 1999; Rogers and Ronsheim, 1998). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of qualitative or quantitative studies that reveal the strengths of women who are coping with the specifics of welfare reform, such as time limit and work first.

### ***Resiliency and Spirituality***

There is a keen and growing interest in recognizing spirituality as a source of strength and resilience in social work practice. For example,

in their study of female survivors of sexual abuse, Valentine and Feinauer (1993) noted several resiliency themes, one of which was spirituality. One participant in this study discussed the role that religion and spirituality played in her survival: "It was my belief that we can handle anything that's thrown at us that helped me through it" (p. 220). Other participants said that their spirituality helped them believe that they were worthy, despite the abuse that they experienced: "I know who I am on a very deep, spiritual level, so I know nothing can destroy me" (p. 220).

Also, Banerjee (2003, p. 418) reported that a participant in the first phase of the MET Program, who had successfully started a graphic design micro-enterprise stated that its Director was her "Lord, God, friend and mentor—Jesus Christ." Despite numerous personal difficulties, health issues, stigma of being on welfare, and being treated poorly by welfare office case managers, she identified that it was her "spiritual relationship with God that got me up."

### *African American Women and Spirituality*

Frame, Williams, and Green (1999) remind us that African American spirituality is unique in that it is based on a strong sense of communalism reflected in strong kinship ties, emphasizing their relationship to others, as opposed to White, middle-class society's values of independence and self-sufficiency. Schiele's (1994) work on a paradigm of Afrocentricity "underscores interdependency, collectivity, and spirituality and places this world view in an excellent position to promote equality" (p. 5). Frame and colleagues (1999) emphasize the importance of exploring with African American women the oppressions in their lives, such as racism and isolation from other people of color, as a way toward emotional and spiritual healing.

Focusing on their relationship with God, Black (1999) writes an ethnographic narration of elderly African American women living in poverty. She noted: "God is perceived as intimately knowledgeable about the details of their lives. God's concern for them engenders self-esteem, certain expectations about life, and optimism despite adversity" (p. 441). Black's narratives reveal that the women's spirituality is a source of survival as much as it is a source of liberation. Also, O'Brien's (1995) study of African American women who were long-term residents of a public housing complex emphasized the importance of looking at the strengths of African American women.

In spite of this, there is very little in the social work literature that specifically addresses the spiritual needs and strengths of women living in poverty (Black, 1999), nor are there practice models offered for working with low-income African American women's spirituality. Although there is growing understanding of spirituality in the profession, coupled with sharp critiques of welfare reform policy (Abram, Oxford, and Roffle, 2001; Boris, 1999), no study to date has inquired into spirituality and its role in the lives of low-income women as they cope with welfare reform. This study proposes to fill in this void by exploring the meaning and role of spirituality among women of color facing welfare reform.

## **METHODS**

### ***Sample***

Two doctoral students and the authors of this article contacted all the 10 women participating in the 6th and last session of the MET Program to participate in a discussion on spirituality. Eight (8) of the 10 women volunteered to participate in the study and gave their consent to be quoted. All eight participants identified themselves as African American. Their ages ranged from 28 to 45 years, with the average age being 34.6 years. All were single mothers, and had between one and five children, the average being 2.9 children. Three of them did not complete high school, while five had some college education. They had held between six to 16 jobs in the secondary labor market. On an average, they had been on welfare for nine years on and off. At the beginning of the MET Program, the women decided to call themselves collectively, "Sisters on a Mission." All ten women chose their own pseudonyms.

### ***Data Collection***

An interview guide was used for face-to-face interviews with each participant. They were asked to discuss their meaning of spirituality, spiritual practices, and how spirituality helped them to cope with poverty and welfare reform issues. These conversations were held between October and November 2001 and lasted about two hours. With participants' consent, each interview was tape recorded. Additionally, the investigators took notes during the interviews and maintained a methodological log of the study.

In addition to these face-to-face interviews focusing on spirituality, the authors had worked with these women over six months with at least a three hour per week contact with each woman. Through such extended contact, the authors learned about their intergenerational poverty living in inner-city Kansas City, Kansas. The women were dealing with manifestations of entrenched poverty—hunger and malnutrition; unstable, low-paying jobs; unstable housing; health issues; mental health issues, including chronic depression; domestic violence; the effects of childhood sexual assault; substance abuse; children diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); racism; neighborhood violence; and gang activity. These factors are known to seriously impede people's ability to work and to necessitate intermittent reliance on welfare assistance (Bane and Ellwood, 1994; Danziger and Seefeldt, 2000; Jackson, Tienda, and Huang, 2001).

### *Data Analysis*

First, the taped interviews were transcribed. Both authors reviewed these transcripts several times before they were unitized, coded, and analyzed for themes (Rodwell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that the transcripts were reduced to minimal units of meaning and then cut and pasted on a note card with a code (source of unit or data). These cards were then reviewed for similarities and differences in ideas and put into categories and sub-categories (for example, meaning of spirituality, belief, learning and living, state of mind). Finally the categories were juxtaposed with one another to arrive at themes that gave an overall understanding of the study. Next, the authors drafted a brief report and made it available to the women for review to ascertain its trustworthiness. The women fully corroborated with the credibility and the accuracy of the authors' interpretation of their spirituality. This preliminary report formed the basis of this article.

## *FINDINGS*

### *Meaning of Spirituality*

In a broad sense, the women in this inquiry believe that spirituality means a belief or faith in a higher power. Specifically, for them, spirituality means a relationship or a loving relationship with a higher power, learning how to live and to be, as well as a state of mind.



*Spirituality is belief in God.* All eight women share that spirituality basically means belief or faith in God or Jesus. Six explicitly use the term belief or faith to express the meaning of spirituality, whereas two use other terms to explicate the meaning of spirituality in their lives. For example, Catherine, Casey, Kim, Michelle, Lisa, and Delores state that spirituality simply means a belief in God. But, Casey and Lisa elaborate on their notion of spirituality to indicate a relationship with God, and a love for God. According to Casey spirituality means, “dealing with God. Letting out your feelings to God. When you think everything isn’t going your way, you can talk to Him. He’s the only one who really will listen.” Lisa says spirituality not only means belief and faith, but also “a love for Jesus Christ.” She explains that she believes in Jesus because “the Bible tells you that if you accept Jesus as God then you’ll be saved. I accepted Jesus because I wanted to be saved . . . an eternal life and numerous other things here on earth . . . peace of mind . . . And, I’ve received some of the blessings and promises because of my belief.” All, except Madame X, express the belief that God is looking out for them and carrying them through their financial hardships as they live through welfare reform.

*Spirituality is learning and living.* Others express a different meaning of spirituality. For Somber, spirituality means “an everyday living thing. It’s learning and living every day. . . [It encompasses] every aspect of your life—your children, your job, your friends, your family, your neighbors, even yourself, ‘cause you’re learning how to deal with people and their differences.” Somber says that sometimes she disagrees with the stipulations and methods of accomplishing tasks set by her welfare case manager and her supervisor at work, but her spirituality allows her to understand that there is “good in each and every one of us.” This understanding helps her to calmly listen to their differing perspectives instead of arguing with them and make changes to her behaviors or thoughts as she sees fit.

*Spirituality is a state of mind.* While Madame X’s state of mind was entirely different from the other women at the time of this conversation, nonetheless, Madame X states that spirituality means a “state of mind,” which reflects “the way you view yourself and your own God.” Madame X was extremely depressed at the time of the interview in large part because of the seriousness of her health issues. Her physicians were unable to adequately diagnose her ailment. (It is likely that Medicaid was a barrier to her getting better access to doctors and other healthcare services. She had also been temporarily cut off from her Medicaid benefits during this time.) Her legs and feet were so swollen that she could



not walk, and was, therefore, interviewed at her home to hear about her spirituality. What she said at the interview was considerably different from her optimistic expressions of spirituality in the support group sessions of prior weeks. On the day of the interview, she started by sharing that her spirituality was at a low level, and read a poem she had written:

I'm at a point in my life where my spirituality is at its low.  
 All my dreams, my hopes, and future I don't know.  
 My spirituality has been sucked up, chewed, and spit out.  
 It has been replaced with misery and doubt.  
 Every day, every single day, I'm faced with more turmoil.  
 My mind is wrecked, my heart, and soul boil.  
 If I had to measure my spirituality, it would not exist.  
 Feels like God has us bottled up in his fist.  
 Sometimes I even forget the feeling of grace.  
 Pain and despair constantly snapping me in my face.

Yet, she also shares that there have been times in her life when her spirituality was more elevated, especially when her daughters were born, and at “the peak of good jobs and careers.” She continues that her world is only comprised of her two children now, unlike when she was healthy and was involved in her community, including her involvement as a counselor for youth and a neighborhood block mother (Banerjee and Pyles, Under Review). But now, she laments, “I’m tired—it’s time for me. I’m sick.” Madame X died at a hospital about six months after this interview. (The authors attended her funeral.)

### ***Spiritual Practices***

The details of the women’s spiritual practices—whether outside or inside the home—such as attending church, reading the Bible, singing or listening to Gospel music, and teaching children about spirituality vary somewhat. However, all the women pray at home, although there are variations in their praying styles as well.

*Outside the Home: Attending Church, Singing, Fellowship, and Witnessing.* Casey and Lisa attend church more frequently than the others, whereas Catherine does not go to church at all. Casey goes to church three times a week, and Lisa attends two to three times per week; Delores, Michelle, and Somber attend church once a week; and Kim and Madame X attend church sometimes. Somber’s words aptly capture the sentiments of the women who attend church. She says:

Church is very important. Church is like a filling station. I'm like the vehicle being filled up for what is to come the following week . . . When I don't go I feel empty, I feel lost. I don't handle situations very well, when I don't go to church.

Not only do the women's church attendance patterns vary, but also several have attended multiple churches over the course of their lives. Michelle has only recently started attending church because of her mother's prodding, while Lisa has been attending the same church for about six to seven years. Lisa says, "it's a Bible-believing church" that emphasizes "a lot of prayer." Lisa, Casey, and Somber describe similar church services at their respective churches. In Lisa's words: "We start out with praise and worship. So we sing, and clap, and we praise. Our music is a ministry all the time. We get a chance to share in the singing and that gives us a chance to lift up Jesus' name." Casey shares that because she has a powerful voice, she often gets to sing in church. The singing allows her to bring her feelings out, makes her feel "on top of the world," and instills in her the belief that she "can do anything." Although Somber does not sing solos at church, she values the opportunity to sing with others:

Worship is singing and praising God, and lifting your hands up to Him. That is a very important part 'cause I feel Him when I do that. My sister explained to me, when I was a young girl, that's the way God enters. I do it at home too, the same thing happens. It's an un-describable feeling. It's a feeling I wish I could feel all the time. It's like taking the load off your body. He lifts it up. It actually feels light.

Michelle, Somber, Lisa, Casey, and Delores share that they find answers to their questions related to life issues by listening to the sermons, through prayer, reading the Bible, and singing. Lisa says, "there is always a message in there for you. Something to uplift you, or to encourage you, or to bring something to your attention." Also, they all agree with Lisa that "church is a place where you go to learn, to grow, to feel love, and to share everything that is going on in your life. It's a place to pray for yourself and others . . . It's a place where believers can go worship together."

Moreover, Delores and Somber specifically share the value of fellowship with other churchgoers. Somber says that fellowship with others helps her realize that she is not the only one going through troubles.

Thus, it helps her to get a different perspective on her own life issues, and the “bonding” and praying together for one another help her feel better and stronger rather than weak and helpless. Delores adds that, “the church will sometimes treat you better than your own family. I feel like I’ve known these people for so long, and it’s not that they’ve done anything for me, except for helping me to increase my faith in God. They always greet you; I feel different.”

Kim and Madame X feel somewhat guilty for not attending church regularly. Kim states that she feels good when she goes to church because it gives her an opportunity to thank God for all the things that He provides for her. But, Madame X says she feels “sad” and “depressed” when she attends church because “people sing sad songs and tell you, you’re going to burn in Hell. I don’t want to hear that. I’ve gone through enough hell.”

Michelle’s words sum up all the women’s (except Madame X’s) experiences with church attendance: “uplifting,” “reassuring,” and “comforting.” However, Michelle also finds church attendance “tricky.” She explains that her childhood best friend attends the same church too, but because they are not on talking terms with one another, they have to pretend to not see one another, which is “difficult.” Her ambivalence about church attendance is again reflected when she says, “some people say church people are the worst people.” Similarly, Delores shares that her boyfriend says that people who attend church are “hypocrites.” Thus, mixed feelings about church attendance are heard from the women as well.

Yet, Michelle, Delores, and Lisa discuss their church involvement with pride. Michelle is an usher, a nurse’s aide, and has kitchen duties, while Delores is on a church committee at the pastor’s request; Lisa is an usher. Both Delores and Lisa also are involved with witnessing or giving testimony to God’s presence in their lives to others. Lisa says:

We go out and we witness on Saturdays. Sometimes we send letters to our visitors, we try to communicate with the community. And we have outreach ministry . . . Lift up Jesus and spread the word. Going out witnessing is a very blessed experience because it’s fun. We meet all kinds of people and get a chance to share God’s word with people.

*At Home: Praying, Reading the Bible, Singing, Listening to Gospel Music/Radio, and Teaching Children.* All eight women pray daily at home. Michelle prays in her own way—when she wants and with the

words she wants. She says, "If I'm having a bad day, I stop what I'm doing, and say a little prayer and keep going." Casey routinely prays in the morning, out of sheer habit. She prays "to have nothing hold me back from what I want to do in life 'cause it's always something out there." Her family and friends sometimes interfere with her drive to get off of welfare. She says they call and say:

'hey you've changed, you don't spend any time with us.' I know it's for the best 'cause I'm trying to better myself for my kids. So, it's nothing but the devil trying to make me go back there. So, I got to pray over it. And just give in to Him 'cause if I don't, I'll get back in that track.

Like all the other women, Casey finds praying to be comforting: "leave it alone, don't talk about it no more, don't worry about it no more. Just tell Him what you want or what you need, and leave Him with it. Don't keep talking about it 'cause it ain't going your way."

Everyday, Lisa prays and reads the Bible both by herself and with her children. Lisa believes, "Prayer is a direct communication between you and God through His son Jesus. So if you talk to God, He will answer your prayers. Now if you don't ask Him, He can't help you. So that's why I keep saying that things change when you start praying." Despite her spirituality being severely depleted at the time of the interview, Madame X prays, "everyday in the morning." Also, she prays "during the day when the pain is unbearable and when I'm depressed. That's when I pray and ask God to take it."

Six of the eight women—Michelle, Kim, Katherine, Lisa, Somber, and Delores—read the Bible at home. Kim, who attends church sometimes, says that she reads the Bible whenever she has time, to "feel like I'm staying in touch with God. It helps me." Michelle reads a women's Bible because it is easier for her to understand than the King James Version: "it has every subject—love, friendship, anything, and it directs you" to life's questions.

Catherine, who does not go to church, listens to Gospel music at home with her children for some part of the day on Sundays. She says, it "helps me, I enjoy it. Some of the words are motivational." Moreover, it is her way of positively influencing her kids to aspire for better things instead of listening to "rap all day," especially since "a lot of things in that music are not positive." Lisa and Somber listen to gospel music in addition to their other practices. Lisa only listens to "the Christian radio," and Somber listens to her "Christian music" "when I get off

work.” Catherine and Somber agree that gospels “uplift” their spirit. Somber says it “lets me know that it’s still going to be okay regardless of what it might look like. That God has the ultimate plan in His hand and that even if I fall, I need to get back up.” Also, sometimes Somber listens to Christian music with her youngest daughter and grandson: “We sing along together and I read to them.”

Michelle, Catherine, Lisa, Somber, and Madame X share that they teach their children to pray at home. Michelle teaches her children to pray at night, and with pride and amazement in her voice says that her one-year old daughter tries to repeat after her. Lisa reads the Bible with her children and has a Bible lesson with them. She hopes this will help them to “to try to do what’s right,” and “grow up and remember that they had scripture and prayer at home, and remember to pray in all situations.” Catherine teaches her children to “do unto others as you’d have others do unto you.” Madame X makes sure that her daughters “pray before they go to bed.”

### ***Spiritual Experiences Associated with Material Hardships***

All the women share that their spiritual beliefs have fluctuated somewhat during their lives, but they also say that their life experiences have strengthened their faith in God. Catherine, Michelle, Kim, Lisa, and Delores share powerful stories illustrating their belief that a higher power is looking out for them. For example, Catherine states that when she separated from her husband in Germany where they were stationed at a military base, she came to Kansas hoping to find and live with her mother. All she had was her mother’s address; she did not know whether her mother still lived there, and she did not have her mother’s phone number. She traveled with two very young children and was pregnant with another. She says that she met her “angel,” on the train in the East Coast, who helped her out with the children during the long journey. Upon reaching the train station in Kansas City, for the first time in her life, she met another “angel” who dropped her off at her mother’s address, and waited until she was able to verify that her mother actually lived there. Catherine says:

Without those two people I don’t know what I would have done. They both gave me money to help me with my kids. They got me to where I needed to be. It’s just by the grace of God that everything turned out fine ‘cause I didn’t have any clue what I was going to do if my mother hadn’t been there. I felt He had something to do

with it because you don't see a lot of that anymore, and they didn't have to help me.

Kim's testimonial of God's presence strongly echoes Michelle and Delores' stories about financial hardships, and temporary solutions through some friend, relative, or the welfare office coming through to provide the aid they need to survive. Kim states:

When my kids needed new coats, and I wasn't going to get any money until the next week, I was really worried. I got a [welfare] check that day, and I didn't expect it. . . There have been times when I worried about food, and someone came through for me. It's a lot of different things that happen to me that makes me feel there is definitely a God.

### *How Spirituality Helps the Women*

For the women, faith, belief, a relationship with God, and various practices together constitute their spirituality. Faith, belief, and practices have a reinforcing relationship in that the practices—church, prayers, scripture, singing—help them feel better, which in turn strengthens their faith in a higher being, and likewise faith encourages them to practice spirituality. The women share the ways in which their spirituality helps them to live and cope with life's twists and turns, and still be strong and caring people.

*Coping.* In this era of welfare reform, the women report that their spirituality helps them to manage their difficult situations by reassuring them that a higher power is looking after them and their children, which seems to be most comforting for them. Delores notes, "so much of the trials and tribulations that I'm having, instead of getting upset like I used to, I've learned to pray about them and let them go. And it's worked its way out." The following words of Delores' echo Casey, Somber, and Catherine's reasons for believing in a higher being: "because that's what's going to get us through these hard times. You can depend on God." Michelle says it is important for her to understand "where your help is coming from. And, that your higher power is what you need to get through day to day. And things will just start happening for you." Referring to her 16-year-old son, Kim says, "I thank God that my son is not in any type of gang, doing drugs, or anything like that. He's never been in trouble. I feel like God is in my son's life, and He's

watching out for him.” Like others, Lisa says, “I just couldn’t probably make it if I didn’t have that belief and that faith in Jesus.”

Also, spirituality helps the women to deal with life’s issues by directing them to the right paths. Michelle and Delores each give examples to illustrate how their spirituality helped them to find solutions to their life issues with men. Michelle says she “was in a bad relationship, and for the last three to four months of the relationship, I prayed every day that he would leave, and he finally left.” During her relationship with this man, she had begun to abuse alcohol. She quit drinking because, as she says, “God put that idea in my heart.” She also realized that she was running away from problems at home, and believes God gave her the direction that she needed to change, and stay at home and take good care of her children as she used to before her relationship. Delores too shares that she asked God for guidance when she had a lot of trouble with her boyfriend. In her case, she prayed that should he be the right person for her, God would send him back to her. When he returned, she believed God had sent him back because it was meant to be. Michelle and Delores state that they find directions or answers to their questions through dreams and signs, as with the return of Delores’ boyfriend.

Moreover, the women’s spirituality helps to lessen the impact of problems on them. Michelle says that her daughter has sickle cell anemia and is often sick, which requires hospital stays for about six days a week, every three months. To cope with this situation she “had to pray every day and get through it ‘cause she cried a lot and was in a lot of pain.” She adds, “Ever since I had her prayed for, she’s been fine.” Delores says prayers help her accept life by lessening life’s blows: “I’ve been in situations where I’ve been upset and I’m crying and crying, what am I going to do? I find if I get the scripture and go read my scriptures, and then say a prayer, turn my light off, and go to sleep, I wake up the next morning, and all my troubles are gone. It might not be gone completely, but they are where I can understand.”

*Inner Peace.* Spirituality helps the women to find inner peace, especially in the context of the pressures of welfare reform. Six of the women volunteer that spirituality brings about peace in their otherwise difficult lives. Casey says, “He’s the Prince of Peace. He gives you that peace that you normally wouldn’t have . . . it’s the type of peace that the world can’t give you, and they can’t take it away. I’m glad He’s the Prince of Peace, and I’m His child.” Praying helps Catherine gain “inner peace because I know that I’m doing what I’m supposed to do.” Like Catherine, Delores states that praying helps her to deal with the difficul-



ties of having a caseworker who is supposed to be helping her access resources that are allowed under the rules of PRWORA, but does not follow through with ensuring she receives these resources. She says, praying “help[s] me accept, deal with things—even when I was promised something [by a caseworker], and that didn’t come through, it doesn’t upset me. I just look at it, as maybe that was not the time that it should’ve come through. Since I have learned to depend on prayers, things have worked out better for me.” Lisa reiterates the role of prayers in finding peace: “if you have any type of challenges you can go to God. He gives you that peace that you normally wouldn’t have.” Michelle echoes: “it helps me get an inner peace. . . I’ve calmed down a lot. I don’t worry any more. If things are going to happen, it’s going to happen . . . trying to take care of myself, and my kids. I don’t let anything bother me anymore. As long as I have a house and food I’m fine.”

Somber, Casey, Lisa, Catherine, Michelle, and Delores share that spirituality helps them to calm down instead of being angry with people who are rude or are behaving in an unacceptable manner at the welfare office or at their workplaces. Somber’s words reflect the other women’s views on spirituality and how it helps them to calm down in the face of financial worries and other woes:

It’s a freedom you feel when you worship God. It’s like you’re in His arms, and you know He’s going to take care of everything. Just that you abide in him and do what he tells you to do, continue to go to work, and take care of your children . . .

God is going to carry me regardless. He was carrying me when I was on (welfare) assistance because that still wasn’t sufficient. It still was not enough. I still had to ask family members to help me. Sometimes friends too help me . . .

Spirituality causes you to be calm when you want to go off, when you’re just fed up with things, when you just don’t think that you can keep going. My spirituality makes me know that God is in control no matter what the situation looks like, and that to keep pushing on and asking for his strength so that I don’t quit.

*Self-esteem.* Spirituality helps the women to build their self-esteem. Referring to her childhood experiences of sexual abuse, Casey says that despite it, she was able to get her life together: “I came a long way. Low self-esteem, had my head down all the time, then it was real bad. I guess

God helped me through. He helped me build up my self-esteem to where nobody, never brings that down.” It is her faith in God that helped her build her innate sense of worth and it continues to allow her to retain it. In the context of welfare reform, Somber states: “He just lets me know that because I am who I am I’ll be able to have a job, and be able to support myself without (welfare) assistance. He reassures me of that. As long as I keep Him in my life, He gives me the health and strength to wake up, He gives me the mind to do what I need to do. He makes me feel good about myself.” Similarly, Delores says that her spirituality makes her “a better person.” Moreover, Delores’ spirituality helps her in other ways as well: “It keeps the anger inside of me more subdued. It keeps me more passionate, it makes me have more feelings and understanding, it helps me to keep from criticizing . . . Judge not for you know not.” Madame X understands self-esteem and faith in a higher being as “all one. One doesn’t work without the other.”

*Perseverance.* Spirituality helps to nurture hope in the women and motivates them to keep going, despite barriers. Catherine says she reads the Bible to find out what God expects of her and from people in general and then acts accordingly. In other words, her spirituality motivates her to “keep trying” and not give up despite manifold problems with employers, caseworkers, and children’s schooling in the context of welfare reform. Somber says: “My spirituality makes me know that God is in control no matter what the situation looks like, that to keep pushing on, and asking for his strength, so that I don’t quit.”

*Helping Others.* Last, spirituality helps some women by creating a desire in them to help others. Michelle, Catherine, and Madame X make the point of wanting to help others. Michelle says, “I really try to help everybody else. So, that’s where I get my peace, by helping others.” Catherine too says, “I try to help everyone even though I’m not in a good situation. I still try to help others hoping that it may come back to me.” Aware that it may not come back to her she adds, “but at least I know I’ve done my part.” Madame X says, “Because we’re all connected, if there was anything that I could do to help somebody not endure or experience what I’ve experienced in life, then my spirituality—that’s when it shines.”

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the meaning, practices, and role of spirituality in the lives of eight women of color who were facing the welfare reform.

The study demonstrated the central role of spirituality in their lives. Based on extended relationship with these women, the authors surmised that spirituality is a source of strength for them. More importantly, spirituality is the source of their resiliency that helps them immensely to cope with their poverty and the implications of welfare reform. The study showed that spirituality helps the women to cope, achieve inner-peace, harbor self-esteem, as well as motivates them to help others and persevere against life's odds. Saleebey (1997) defines resilience as "the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges" (p. 298). Others note that to study resilience is to learn how individuals have developed or positively adapted despite profound, ongoing environmental stressors (Miller and MacIntosh, 1999; Haight, 1998). Two elements are required to develop resilience: (1) exposure to risk factors and (2) the presence of protective factors. This study revealed that spirituality provides the women with such protective factors, including a sense of direction, protection, inner peace, and self-esteem. It helps them cope with the stresses and oppressions in their lives and persevere through difficult times, particularly in this case, the trying times of welfare reform. Spirituality provides tangible help and intangible guidance in dealing with difficult personal and social lives, including help with poverty, relationships, and parenting.

Further, one important finding about spirituality was that there is a multiplicity of ways to express spirituality. For some women, this may involve a strong connection to a formal religious institution, such as a church with its varied activities, while for others, spirituality is expressed and supported in other ways, such as through listening to gospel music at home. Also, it needs to be noted that the depth of the women's spirituality could not be gauged by the quantity or quality of their spiritual practices; rather, what the women said about the meaning of spirituality and how it helped them in their lives was the ultimate revelation of the depth of their spirituality.

Not only did the women's spirituality provide otherworldly guidance, but also it directed, helped, and inspired the women to perform actions, and to make practical changes in their lives, such as Michelle's divinely-inspired decision to quit drinking. Most importantly, spirituality was not a passive aspect of the women's realities; rather, it helps them to take charge of their lives. Much of the rhetoric about welfare recipients, particularly African American welfare recipients, includes the construction that they are lazy and passively accept their situations (Jimenez, 1999). This inquiry revealed, on the contrary, that these women of color

are dynamically making changes in their lives and moving forward with the help of their spiritual beliefs and practices. They are not sitting back and accepting their situations, instead they are resisting their burdens through active and experienced spiritual practices. This resistance is often set in motion by their faith, trust, and relationship with God.

Moreover, some methodological lessons were evident in this inquiry. While Madame X's beliefs about spirituality appear unique as compared to the other women, they do not tell the whole picture about her spirituality. Because of the lengthy relationship with the women, the authors know that at the time of the interview, Madame X was at a self-described spiritual low point in her life, asserting in her poem that her "spirituality has been sucked up, chewed, and spit out." And yet, one must note the depth of spiritual insight that she reveals in her poem—"sometimes even forgetting the feeling of grace." Although she did not specify this, it is possible that, like singing for some other women, writing poetry is a spiritual practice for Madame X. Perhaps because she knew and felt safe with the authors, she could dare to share this poem. Thus, the authors wonder how much researchers can get to know peoples' realities and their beliefs through one-session in-depth interviews, even in qualitative research.

Similarly, two of the non-participants' silence also deserves scrutiny in this context. It is important that research not only amplify people's voices, but that it is also truthful about silences, for silence always communicates something. Soraida (who is Latina, not African American) and Nicolya (who is African American) did not participate in the study, despite many attempts to include them. What could be the reasons for their non-participation? Both are younger than the other women (22 and 25 respectively), although their life problems are similar to the other eight women. Could their age have anything to do with their discomfort to discuss spirituality? Maybe they have not arrived at a point in their lives yet where they see the critical importance of spirituality? Might they be refusing to go along with the power hierarchy that inevitably exists between researchers and participants, feeling like they would not be able to be honest about their spirituality, or skeptical about what would be done with their stories? It could be the case that the two women simply had something else going on the days the interviews were conducted.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK***

Lately, the social work profession has become more interested in and attuned to the spiritual realities and needs of clients, i.e., the bio-psy-

cho-social-spiritual person (Canda and Furman, 1999). More and more, there is concern for and attention to the spiritual resources and needs of marginalized populations, including women, minorities, and low-income individuals (Black, 1999; Frame, Williams, and Green, 1999). The writings in this area have come to reflect an understanding that spirituality is a source of strength and resilience for women who are facing multiple threats including "sexism, racism, and economic injustice" (O'Brien, 1995). In fact, the unique and strong spiritual practices of the low-income African American women in this study arguably grew from their oppressive situations.

Given the gross limitations of public social policy such as welfare reform and the fact that addressing social barriers, such as racism, is painstakingly slow work, it seems important to address the personal barriers faced by women living in poverty in the time of welfare reform. This is not to imply that the women are to blame for their situations, but on the contrary, we must understand that their personal barriers exist as a result of sexism, racism, and economic injustice they have experienced throughout their lives. Recall the words of Madame X: "My spirituality has been sucked up, chewed, and spit out. It has been replaced with misery and doubt. Every day, every single day, I'm faced with more turmoil. My mind is wrecked, my heart, and soul boil." This is also not to say that social workers need not continue to address the gross inequities in the systems that are responsible for the conditions of the women in this inquiry because engagement in both micro and macro practice is always crucial. For example, while the legislative sentiment about the new welfare reauthorization appears to remain a "work first" sentiment, communities and states still have the ability to alter their welfare plans to include less emphasis on "work first" and more emphasis on building personal resources. This can include exemption from work to acquire higher education or vocational skills as well as conflict resolution skills while recognizing, emphasizing, and building on poor women's spiritual wholeness.

By building on the personal and inter-personal strengths of women, in this case their spirituality, social workers can be supportive witnesses to their natural ability to heal themselves. Recall Somber's words: "Spirituality causes you to be calm when you want to go off, when you're just fed up with things." This faith will strengthen the resilience of women, and thus increase the likelihood of their being more successful in their public, work life. Fraser and Galinsky (1997) point out, a resilience-based practice would focus on reducing risk and strengthening protective factors. By strengthening this important resource of spirituality, women may feel

more confident in the long run with the choices they want to make, and be better able to cope with the realities of making a living and raising children in the inner city. Instead of looking for a “quick fix” and perpetuating the problems of the welfare system by propelling women into the low-wage labor force right away, i.e., “work first,” energy would be better spent by supporting their spiritual strengths and promoting their resilience, and thus putting the women in a better position to make choices for their lives, whether those choices involve non-traditional employment, wage employment, marriage, micro-enterprise development, or combinations of these.

The social work literature offers numerous methods and approaches to spiritual assessment (Ortiz and Langer, 2002; Dunn and Dawes, 1999) of clients. However, more needs to be written about how to actually work with the spirituality of poor women, particularly women of color, in the time of welfare reform. Based on this study, the authors offer a provisional practice model that has the elements of practice, research, policy, advocacy, and education. This practice model involves six basic activities. One, social workers need to do their own social justice work by examining their personal lifestyles, patterns of consumption, racist attitudes, and beliefs. They should recognize that we live in a culture that is racist and classist and that this is ongoing work to which the profession must remain committed. By doing this difficult work, it allows social workers to more authentically connect with low-income women who are different from them. Two, it is necessary for social workers to do their own personal spirituality work. This means social workers need to examine their own spiritual beliefs and practices and scrutinize their own attitudes, and biases about the spirituality of women who are different from them. Such self-understanding would allow them to refer to spirituality as is appropriate for their clients as they deal with welfare reform. For example, when someone is very agitated over the rude and unacceptable behaviors of case managers or supervisors, social workers could teach them conflict resolution skills as well as remind them to draw on their spiritual practices to deal with the current turmoil. Three, social workers need to look at the ways in which the culture of agencies, policies, and use of language serve as facilitators or hindrances to understanding the whole person. Doing a spiritual inventory of an agency can involve looking at agency policies about spiritual assessment, finding out whether social workers are talking about spirituality openly, and whether resource lists of religious and spiritual institutions are available. They could consider use of hand-holding and prayer to start group sessions to bring in unity and strength to the group



if the women request it. These steps will help social workers address the whole person. By looking more deeply into these issues, social workers can more authentically work with poor families and thus do a better job of meeting and respecting their spirituality which may be quite different from their own (or lack thereof). Four, social workers should make connections with African American churches (Frame, Williams, and Green, 1999) as a way to build bridges and to utilize and learn from what is an obviously important resource for some women. This could be done by attending or organizing ecumenical discussion groups about spirituality that would include representatives of local churches and other spiritual groups. Also, social workers can do their own research by finding out about the African Methodist Episcopal Church or the Southern Baptist Church (two common denominations of lower income African Americans) by getting on-line, going to the library or going to the church directly and finding out about their practices. Five, it is necessary to account for the time-specific institutional restraints and “work first” stipulations that are placed on women by welfare reform policies in their localities. Social workers need a thorough understanding of their local welfare policies and procedures so that they can help guide their clients through the system. This may take the form of attending trainings and workshops, connecting with practitioners from these agencies, as well as doing one’s own research. For example, the state welfare agencies make many of their policies available through the internet. These policies and programs can be studied and imparted to their clients. It can also allow community practitioners to advocate more competently for policies that are more reflective of women’s realities, such as a higher education option instead of “work first,” safe, affordable child care, and transportation. Six, the foundation of this work of building on the spiritual resources of poor African American women should be that social work educators continue to teach spiritual diversity in their curricula with particular emphasis on a diversity of approaches to spirituality, including African American spirituality. Reading works of both fiction and non-fiction writers such as Alice Walker and Bell Hooks offer students an opportunity to reflect on the complexities of the lives of women of color and the healing role that spirituality plays.

In conclusion, the authors suggest that the ongoing personal social justice and spiritual work by practitioners be at the center of this provisional practice model, thereby making practitioners more open and aware of the diversity of spiritual resources of clients. Then, workers need to work their way out by connecting with clients and accessing appropriate social, spiritual, and religious resources in the community and



promoting spiritual diversity in social work education. In a time when reactionary politics is prevailing in social welfare policy, for the women in this inquiry, spirituality might just be their best prospect to escape, or at least to cope with, poverty and welfare reform.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

It is important to keep in mind that this study utilized a relatively small sample size of eight women. This was a conscious choice on the part of the researchers in order to obtain the depth of insight achieved. This is a virtue of non-positivistic qualitative research, which also does not seek broad generalization of its in-depth understanding (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Consequently, it is important to note that this study's findings are not generalizable to other populations. This sample emerged from a medium-sized Midwestern city with its own distinctive culture and norms. The women of this community have unique resources, both individual and community-based, that may not exist in other communities, such as in a large Northern city or a small Southern community. This study ought to be considered an exploratory pilot study, and thus a starting point for other studies on this topic. These other studies may be both quantitative and/or qualitative. For example, a quantitative study might focus on the intersections of race, poverty, and levels of spirituality. Also helpful would be an outcome study that assesses the effectiveness of spiritual assessments and interventions with women with regard to self-efficacy and income level.

### ***AUTHORS' POSTSCRIPT***

The authors wonder about the effects and implications of our "gaze" as researchers, our acts of peering into a world that appears different from our own. We are both middle-class academics. (One is an Indian-born Hindu, and the other is an American-born Buddhist practitioner). We are reminded of Deloria's (1969) cutting words about the preferability of applied research over pure research, and a caution against the researcher who believes that "people are objects for observation . . . and are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation . . . like so many chessmen available for anyone to play with" (p. 81). And so, where we go from here becomes our most critical choice of all. In our process of self-reflexivity, we have inquired into

our own intentions and blind spots around who the women are in our study, how we want them to be understood by our readers, and who we are in relation to the women and to this inquiry as a text. We realize that it is frighteningly easy to depict the women as enchanting in their poverty, exotic in their spirituality, or captivating in their “noble savagery.” In spite of these concerns, we remain grounded in the belief that a study such as this should have a place in a larger research, professional, and social movement that involves a shift in consciousness about the way society, policymakers, and practitioners think about poor, single-mother African American women and spirituality. As we have struggled with re-presenting their story to our audience, we have continually tried to attend to our own standpoints as academics with privilege.

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