

## **OPERATIONAL UNITY UNDER THE UMBRELLA CONCEPT**

### **The Structure of the National Black Evangelical Association - Chicago Chapter**

The NBEA—Chicago Chapter has launched a new conception of local NBEA ministries. In order to join us in the task we believe God has set before us, it is important to understand a basic principle underlying NBEA. Among God's directives is this: Commitment to an urban strategy and to helping our churches do a better job by sharing our expertise and pooling our resources. To do this effectively, we must experience unity in the midst of diversity. A rationale for the umbrella concept, written by William H. Bentley (past Chairman of the Board) is given below.

The idea of the umbrella is seen to be a catalytic concept in that its major purpose is to provide a forum and a platform on which varying viewpoints may seek to arrive at optimal operational unity. The idea itself is a recognition that honest differences, some of them almost basic, exist within the camp of both Black and white Christendom and that if those differences are either minimized as though they are of little importance, or if they are allowed to become barriers to fellowship among those who otherwise are within the same theological camp, polarization will increasingly become the rule rather than the exception. Under such a condition, everyone loses.

The idea itself, although more widely in use in the secular context, is nevertheless clearly within the mainstream of the biblical revelation. In the New Testament, Jesus fleshed out the concept by choosing widely different personalities to become his disciples. Among the apostles were the pragmatic Thomas, the impetuous Peter, the dynamic James and John, the conciliatory Andrew, and the "radical" Simon the Zealot — widely differing, and in some cases, even divisive personalities. But under the masterful control of the Lord all of them, a motley band of individuals, became a precision instrument of profit for the kingdom of God. It is this we have in mind in our efforts to articulate and to demonstrate the viability of the umbrella.

Divisiveness is the scandal of the Christian community. Indeed, it is a contradiction of the ideal community. Unity, however, does not mean slavish conformity. The Christian ideal as given in Romans 12:1-2 is transformation, not conformation! All sides of Christian opinion recognize the fact that God is able to transform us, but too few of us recognize the complementary fact that all need to be disciplined by our brother's or sister's convictions even when they contrast or contradict our own. Since none of us know it all, or have it all, or are able to comprehend it all, of necessity there must be room at the communion table for honest expression of conviction coupled with a sincere and deep willingness to "comprehend with all saints." It is equally true of radicals and conservatives (and also those who fall somewhere in between the extremes) that we all "know in part." Our little must not be seen as the whole!

Thus, NBEA has hopefully moved from an organization of "conservatives" through a stage where it was recognized by others as a "radical" organization, to a stage where these extremes as well as all gradations in between can find theological and ideological shelter and a community of faith — where all are welcomed, respected, and mutually enriched. From this base of unity, all of us can go out to fulfill the Lord's commandment to make disciples of all nations. The very diversity of our unity will make us a force not only to be reckoned with, but one which cannot be easily or summarily resisted. The richness of our mutual fellowship and faith and commitment — both to God and to one another — will be the mark which will attract all types of men and women, from all walks of life, to the cause which we collectively represent.

The watchword is "collective interdependence!" Together we can demonstrate that not only is there no necessary contradiction between faith and action; but positively speaking, we demonstrate the effectual outworking of that faith in all levels and qualities of service to God through our fellow man.

### **Basic Principles of the Local Structure**

The common ground, or the operational framework or infrastructure for all our work is:

1. A born-again experience;
2. A biblical perspective — accepting the Bible as normative;
3. A view of the Gospel as wholistic, meaning the spiritual covers all areas of life;
4. A genuine affection for winning the lost to Christ, and serving them in matters of eternal value;
5. A basic loyalty to the Kingdom of God on earth, whose interests we serve through our particular denominations;
6. Total commitment to the Lord and to each other;
7. Although our ministry is wholistic in scope—dealing with every aspect of life and relating to all classes of people, we nevertheless, like our Lord Jesus, accept the particular call to minister to the needs of the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed, especially as related to Black people;
8. God has given gifts to all His people, and we operate on the principle of freedom in areas of expression of the gifts.