



An Innovative Response to the Challenges of Dramatic Increases in Immigration from Africa to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota

Dr. Gary B. Reiersen
President, Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches
Collegeville, Minnesota
reierson@gmcc.org

Abstract

The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul has the fourth largest and fastest growing African immigrant population, and the largest Liberian population, in the United States. This has brought greater diversity, cultural depth, and a stable work force for Minnesota businesses. It has also presented challenges to the community in multiple ways, for example, the need to expand social services, the conflicts between and among African immigrant groups, the conflict between African immigrants and the existing African-American population, and the threatened end to the temporary residency status granted to refugee Liberians by the Department of Homeland Security.

One innovative response to these challenges was the construction and opening of a Center for Families in Minneapolis by the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches in 2006. In 2008, the Center for Families served 22,798 visitors in just its third full year of operation. Thirteen partner agencies helped immigrant families find housing, jobs, child care, and other help. Another 33 partners—many West African immigrant organizations—helped spread the word throughout the community.

The Center for Families is a unique service model for the Twin Cities and, quite possibly, for the nation. It is a unique offering in that it is inter-jurisdictional, cross-sector, multi-cultural, and inter-disciplinary.

Paper

This paper focuses on how globalization, as expressed in the migration of people to the United States from West Africa, has impacted both immigrants and a local community and how that community organized to respond. The community is the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, and one response to the challenges presented by the large influx of West African immigrants was the construction and opening of a Center for Families in Minneapolis by the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches in 2006.

The origins of this project are in a strategic planning process begun by the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches in 2002. The Strategic Planning Committee, in doing an environmental scan of the greater Minneapolis area, identified emerging community issues which the faith-based community could uniquely and effectively address and which the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches had both experience and skills to provide leadership in addressing. One of the identified issues was the dramatic growth in the number of immigrant families who have settled in the Twin Cities metropolitan area over the previous ten years.



The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul has the fourth largest and fastest growing African immigrant population, and the largest Liberian population, in the United States. This has brought greater diversity, cultural depth, and a stable work force for Minnesota businesses. It has also presented challenges to the community in multiple ways: the need to expand social services, the conflicts between and among African immigrant groups, and the conflict between African immigrants and the existing African-American population.

In 2002, no public or private agencies were focusing on immigrant families from West Africa and representative leaders of these national groups, as well as service providers, confirmed the urgent need for the support and services. West African immigrants in the Minneapolis area number somewhere between 70,000 and 110,000. While combined they are more numerous than east Africans, they had received neither the visibility nor organized services East Africans had received in the Twin Cities. Service providers and West African immigrants alike encouraged the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches to focus on this population.

Key stakeholders in this project were the Minneapolis Public Schools, Hennepin County Social Services Department, the City of Minneapolis, a cluster of nonprofit service providers, and the broader church community.

One church partner emerged early: Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, a congregation of an historic African-American denomination, which was building a new facility in the center of the West African and African-American populations and which was motivated to reach out to build bridges between the two groups.

Having the support of West African immigrants, the African-American community, and various public and private stakeholders, the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches launched a capital campaign in 2003 to raise the resources to build a facility focused on providing the missing services. The \$7.5 million campaign was completed in 2005, and the Center for Families opened in early 2006 on the campus of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

The Center functions as a decentralized, consolidated program site offering a diverse range of services to immigrant families from West Africa. It helps any family needing the services provided, but its focus is on West African immigrant families. The programs of the Center were developed through cooperative relationships with community agencies that were interested in improving the quality of services provided to the immigrant community. These agencies utilize the facilities of the Center and participate in the ongoing coordination of services.

A consolidated site model enables client families to access available programs and resources more readily. Aligning multiple services at a single site facilitates improved communication between providers, leading to increased performance on outcome measures. Center staff are responsible for ensuring that all programs delivered through the Center for Families are culturally sensitive and appropriate.

The Center for Families offers a comprehensive program designed to address the particular needs that immigrant families have identified for themselves. The five basic program services are:



community integration, early childhood development, academic support and assistance, and employment and housing services.

Thirteen entities occupy the facility and provide service to families. Another 33 entities, primarily small, emerging African immigrant organizations, are formal partners of the Center, and they are organically related to the Center with an innovative “virtual office” connection. This virtual office, offered for a token amount monthly, allows these small organizations to have their mail address at the Center, an email address, a voice mail account, their meetings in the facility, the use of office equipment at cost, and access to computers and telephones for receiving email and voice mail messages. These “virtual partners” are a primary vehicle for reaching out to the West African community and making the services to families known broadly.

We set as a goal to serve 3,500 people the first year. One measure of the remarkable success of the Center is that we served 17,000 people the first year (2006) which had increased to 23,000 in 2008.

The Center for Families is a unique service model for the Twin Cities and, quite possibly, for the nation. It is a unique offering in that it is:

- inter-jurisdictional (involving four public sector entities),
- cross-sector (involving faith-based, non-profit, public and private partners),
- multi-cultural (building bridges among immigrants from West African nations of origin and between African immigrants and African-Americans), and
- inter-disciplinary (including social services, education, and health).

Since opening, profound social isolation has emerged as an important concern, primarily within the West African community, but secondarily within the African-American Community. Research conducted by the Minnesota Department of Health revealed that, compared to the general population, groups who experience prolonged social isolation and historic hostilities, show an increase in mortality rates, depression, and other physical and psychological ailments. Socially isolated groups usually have low quantity, low quality social relationships outside their identified group.

The Center’s concern with social isolation, historic hostilities among ethnic groups, and the diminished health of members of those groups has informed our decision to adjust the Center’s role. Instead of staff acting merely as direct facilitators between the various groups, they now function in support roles within a decentralized model. This model encourages groups and individuals to work directly with one another for their mutual benefit. Reducing social isolation and defusing historic hostilities requires that groups are empowered to become the decision makers in the process, and work with one another toward shared goals.

Here are two key examples of what this work has accomplished, and the results of those efforts:

First, the Center for Families staff works with the West African partners in a program developed in 2006 and expanded each year since, called the West African Collaborative. The Collaborative is made up of leaders of eight West African national organizations. This group’s mission is to bring West African communities and organizations together to collaborate, build capacity, and address shared needs and vision. It works to build capacity in the organizations and expand partnerships between the organizations.



Second, the Center for Families staff also played a key role in carrying out a Pan African Summit last November 22nd. Approximately 100 persons attended—a broad mix of African Americans and African-born community members. The goal of the event was to bring together members of these two populations in order to educate each other on the history of each group, break down barriers between these groups, and to begin a process of reconciliation. The evaluations reported a very positive, healing day. It is hoped to follow up with this summit in 2009 with more conversations in this community and especially to involve youth.

The inter-jurisdictional, cross-sector, multi-cultural, and inter-disciplinary approach to providing coordinated services in a consolidated site; the support of dozens of emerging immigrant organizations through a “virtual office” relationship; and the facilitation of dialogue and activities addressing the conflicts between and among African immigrant groups and the conflict between African immigrants and the existing African-American population—all these are distinctive features of the response of one community—the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota—to the influx of large numbers of immigrants to its community.