INTRODUCTION

The first twenty-first-century president, George W. Bush, brought a different approach to welfare reform and social service provision. His new poverty agenda, which is characterized by "compassionate conservatism,"¹ has its genesis in early nineteenth-century American society where both voluntary associations and religious-based organizations provided facilities that met the needs of the disadvantaged and disconnected as part of their benevolence ministries (Spain, 2001). Bush’s specific agenda is to “enlist, equip, enable, empower, and expand the heroic works of faith-based and community groups across America”² in community revitalization. This program is being administered through the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI),³ and two legislative proposals: the Community Solutions Act of 2001 (HR 7) including an extension of the controversial Charitable Choice Expansion Act of 1996, and a modified Charity Aid, Recovery, and Empowerment Act of 2002 (S 476).⁴ The OFBCI serves as the locus of “compassion in action” rallying the “armies of compassion,” over the nation by expanding opportunities for faith-based organizations (FBOs)⁵ to engage in partnerships with the government to provide social services. Bush’s political strategy is to broaden the networks of collaborative partnerships with both sacred and secular community-based organizations for urban revitalization projects, as well as create new opportunities for investment in declining/stagnant communities by reaching out to new constituents, such as black churches⁶ and their affiliated FBOs, to proactively engage as innovative partners in long-term social service provision.

From an institutional perspective, which classifies FBOs according to their implicit and explicit connections to faith, many vary in the level of
faith/religion that is incorporated into their mission, programs, and identity; and the primary factors that most commonly typify these organizations focus on the environmental, administrative, financial and programmatic elements associated with them (Scott 2002). Both Chaves’ (1999) and Vidal’s (2001) institutionally based studies found that congregational participation in providing social services such as: housing, shelter and clothing for those in need is greater among worship communities that are larger, are in low-income neighborhoods, are theologically liberal, have supportive pastoral leadership, and are primarily composed of African Americans.

Making a distinction between non-monetary contributions, which represent the volunteers, human capital, and technical assistance that congregations provide and monetary resources—including both the direct and indirect financial support for social service delivery—the literature has shown that these resources and social service activities depend, at least in part, on the type and characteristics of the organization and the type of activities in which FBOs are engaged (Scott 2002). Broadly speaking, roughly 14% of FBOs today are engaged in what we characterize as traditional community economic development (CED) activities7. Over half sponsor housing developments through affiliated community development corporations (CDCs) or in partnership with other like entities (Vidal 2001). Only a few CDCs are engaged in such specific CED activities as health services, crime prevention, educational programs, job creation through workforce/entrepreneurial training, consulting support and technical assistance on loan programs, and establishing credit unions/financial institutions (Cisneros, 1996, 14; Ramsay, 1998, 610; Reese and Shields, 1998; Smith, 2001). A few large African American urban-based FBOs have formed consortia to pool their individual assets to provide broader comprehensive programs, including community supermarkets, fast-food franchises, banquet facilities, real estate development, investment clubs, shopping malls, and small business incubators for their communities (Reed, 1994, 17; Fraser, 1998, 190). However, the range of these activities may be limited to a particular congregation’s approach to distributing social services, which is usually through small donations, in-kind goods and services, or on a volunteer basis that is incongruous with the skills, knowledge and time required to successfully administer large-scale CED projects and activities (Vidal, 2001; Chaves, 1999).

Situated within the context of Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” agenda and the expanding prominent role of religion in public life, the purpose of this qualitative work is to describe the community economic