

1. MEN ON THE MOVE

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HISTORY

Men on the Move (MOM), a spirit-based organization in Hyattsville, Maryland, is designed to empower men to be better fathers, sons, husbands, lovers and friends. MOM serves the diverse needs of men as they address issues of developing relationships with themselves and others, and builds support groups to facilitate their healing and growth. The major focus of MOM is to provide support for men who are engaged in the challenges that are part of the Journey of Manhood—a journey men often engage in alone because masculinity dictates that they face their challenges single-handedly. Men are the lone hunters, providers, and at all costs must keep their hurt and pain to themselves. Adeyemi Bandele, Executive Director of MOM, admits, "The pain and anger that so many men experience has not been unfamiliar to me. My father left home when I was about 13. I completely shut him out of my life until I was an adult. My current wife shared a spiritual principle with me, which was that the work the Creator gives you to do usually has to do with your own "stuff." I am the father of seven children—six boys and one girl. So I have had to walk the talk with my children." MOM recognizes the value and importance of an intergenerational mix when working with males, allowing for a recycling of ideas and for young men to experience older men in a setting without the masks of ego and fear. The targeted population is, therefore, males from the ages of 14 to the elderly.

This case study details the various services Men on the Move offers to fulfill its goals, examines strategies for resolving the conflicts inherent in both challenging and supporting men in their healing and growth, and offers anecdotes from one of the services, A Gathering of Men, as evidence of the value of such work.

SERVICES OFFERED

Men on the Move offers an array of services designed to support fathers and families in their growth and development.

- A Gathering of Men creates a climate where men gather to develop the practice of meeting to share challenges, as well as successes.
- Similar to A Gathering of Men, A Gathering of the Family examines the impact of relationships on parents and their children when they are involved.
- In the Teen Dads Workshop, young fathers learn the developmental stages of a child, how to relate to the baby's mother, financial and emotional support, rights regarding visitation, and caring for the baby.
- Fathers and Sons: A Celebration and Healing offers fathers and sons the opportunity to share in celebrating healthy, wholesome father/son relationships and assists in the healing process for challenged relationships.

BALANCING CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

If an organization is trying to achieve change within a body of people, how does it realize the balance necessary between challenging those people and supporting them? How do the services listed above both challenge men to be better fathers, sons, husbands, lovers and friends, while at the same time supporting and addressing their needs? Adeyemi Bandele describes some of the ways his organization challenges men: "Relationships, parenting, and habits are the issues the men find most challenging. Now, we view that men becoming primary caretakers has been seen as a non-traditional role for men. However, here we see this as a new paradigm for men. We particularly encourage men to be very active in the lives of the boys when they reach the age of 12. We do not permit men to express "she made me do it" remarks. Responsibility and choices are key issues that we encourage men to face. I suspect that some of this may be challenging traditional understandings these men have."

Bandele is very clear, though, that none of the challenges to men are effective unless they feel accepted and supported. MOM achieves this balance by allowing men first to be clear about where they are. "You must first be clear about where you are before you can go anywhere else," Bandele claims. "Reading a compass requires knowing where you are. Where am I, and which way is north? Once the man is clear about where he is, we support him in determining where he wants to go." MOM does this by then having the group of participants identify other men who will support him during those times when he feels like giving up and returning to the old behavior. The group does not challenge the man. The group instead listens non-judgmentally and encourages him to challenge himself. Bandele observes that, "We all have our own baggage, so we don't need to point fingers. We empower men by providing them with the space to identify their own issues. If they request assistance, then and only then, do we contribute."

A GATHERING OF MEN AS CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

The "Gathering of Men" is an intergenerational gathering designed to support participants in the challenges and joys they experience on the journey of manhood and is an example of the context in which MOM both challenges and supports men. The group forms a circle and responds to the theme of the gathering—"What you are most afraid of," for example—and the "talking stick," allowing a participant to speak, is passed from person to person. The format is spirit-based, meaning that participants call upon the Creator for guidance and direction, which allows the men to share from their hearts as opposed to their minds. Participants are asked about how things feel rather than about the drama of an incident/experience. When a participant does share an experience, the group supports the act of sharing. If someone wants to respond, he must first ask permission.

Many times the act of sharing is vitally important. Bandele recounts a memorable experience in Atlanta where a participant shared an experience and then informed the group that he had not been able to tell it to anyone in over 25 years. Again, the space was created for the sharing. One of the most challenging experiences, Bandele suggests, was the death of one of the Gathering members to prostate cancer, which encouraged members to focus more attention on the issue of men's health and how they can support each other in being more loving to themselves through taking care of their health.

Often, the most intense sharings come from the young people. According to Bandele, "The young people take very seriously their sharing, and for me it is profound. The most recent incident occurred when a young 10-year-old shared that he was 'challenged' by not hearing from his dad. His dad and mom had been arguing. Whenever this occurred, his dad would not call him. He missed hearing from his dad and could not understand why when they argued his dad would not call him. (The dad lives in Alabama). His sharing wiped everyone out." In turn, this was an excellent opportunity for the older men who had children and had carried on the same way to hear from someone who was experiencing what it felt like. A brief survey of the group indicated that other young men had similar experiences, and several of the older men had acted in similar ways toward their children.

On occasion, Gatherings will combine with some of the other services offered by MOM, like the Fathers and Sons process, which specifically aids in healing challenges in relationships between fathers and sons. According to Bandele, the father need not be present or alive. One incident involved a young man who had refused to respond to his father's request to come and visit him in the hospital before he died. The son refused to go. He carried the guilt of the experience with him for many years. He brought this up in a Gathering, and participants encouraged him to write about his feelings and to share with his family. He reported back that his opening up and sharing had brought his family closer together.

The above young man was seated next to another young man who had refused to speak to his dad at the Gathering with him. The father and son got in the middle of the circle, and the son was encouraged to share from his heart, and the father was encouraged to just listen and to honor what was said. He need not agree. The important thing was the sharing. This occurred for both of them. Dad was seen to be defensive and acknowledged this. The two of them began a discussion with the support of the group that could lead to a healing in their relationship.

FOSTERING HEALING AND GROWTH

There is a growing and diverse fatherhood movement in the USA that differs in emphasis and approach. Some organizations focus on developing job skills, while others commit their resources to bolstering the institution of marriage. Men on the Move's spirit-based approach, grounded in fostering the healing and growth of men in their relationships with each other and their families and friends, offers unique services that attend to supporting the emotional development of men—a process that Bandele describes as "filling up the tank." He claims that, "For me, I tend to get more out of the experience than most, simply because the act of sharing and being responsible for a healing process has a healing property for me." This healing benefits men, women, and children.