

# A Challenge for the Black Middle Class

Who's better situated to help the black poor?

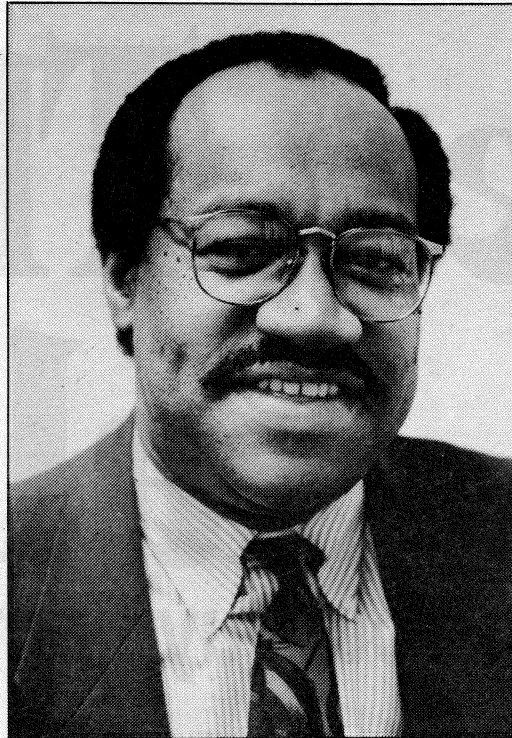
BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**E**ugene Johnson directs the Office of Disadvantaged Business Programs for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. He earned a bachelor's degree in economics from LeMoyné-Owens College in Memphis and a master's in urban land economics from UCLA. In 1983, he was ordained a Pentecostal minister and now serves the Madison Pentecostal Assembly as pastor. The church is located at 21 Nygard St. in south Madison. He is married to Carolyn, and they have four children ranging in age from 8 to 26. He wanted to discuss the growing African-American population in Madison and its impact on the community.

"I think the emergence of the minority population in Madison, particularly poor African-Americans with heavy needs, is testing the claim that Madison is a liberal town.

"There are people here who are liberal, and there are people here who are conservative. Conservative is not bad. I think the African-American community in Madison is very, very conservative. African-Americans are probably not as liberal as the white community.

"I get very incensed when I hear people say that a lot of the poor—especially the black poor—don't want to work. A lot of the poor do work and will work when given the opportunity. If hard work is to be viewed as



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**Johnson: 'Too many in the middle class have become comfortable with their state of affairs.'**

conservative, then the black community is one of the more conservative groups around. There are black people here working two jobs, three jobs, if that's what it takes to survive.

"The needs of the poor place a great burden on Madison, on the institutions, the schools, the churches, the business community and so forth. I don't know if Madison is prepared to deal with those needs.

"I do know that there's both a poor black community in Madison and a middle-class black community in Madison that should be helping the poor

community. I personally believe that the middle-class black community is not concerned enough about the plight of poor African-Americans here.

"I take this attitude as a pastor. It does seem that too many in the middle class have become comfortable with their state of affairs, comfortable with the quality of their life, and comfortable with the fact that they don't have to associate with the poor.

"If the plight of the poor is to be addressed and dealt with, it must be by the hands and the resources, the love and the participation, of other concerned African-Americans right here in Madison.

"We cannot leave the plight of the poor to the government, to the school system, to the nonprofit agencies like United Way and Briarpatch and family service groups.

"The problems of the poor are intense, complicated problems, and many middle-class African-Americans understand those problems because they came out of the same poverty themselves. We need to reattach ourselves to institutions that address the problems of the poor.

"That should include the church. But when I look at the African-American church in Madison, I don't see a large number of middle-class African-Americans. Neither do I see a large number of the poor.

"There have been efforts by some middle-class African-Americans to address the needs of south Madison through the South Madison Neighborhood Center. That should be a clarion call for all middle-class African-Americans to come back and redouble our efforts and get involved with the poor.

"We need to ask poor people if they

will allow us to help them, allow us to work with them, to mentor them. We need to support and sustain the poor.

"Too much of our involvement in the African-American community has been dependent upon public funding of our efforts to help the poor. When that funding dries up, sometimes the effort by those who are helping also dries up.

"Public funding was never designed to liberate anybody. Basically, public funding comes with strings attached. Oftentimes, those strings are not pulling you up; they are pulling you down.



Sometimes, those strings should be cut.

"I believe blacks should mobilize themselves and go back and help whether there's funding or not. I think we really have to live up to the African proverb that 'it takes the whole village to rear a child.'

"White flight is basically a geographical flight. Black flight is not geographical. We're still here, but I think there's too much apathy in the African-American community. Ours is a flight away from commitment.

"The only question that has to be asked is: How can I get involved with the poor? As we say in the church, love finds a way. Call Orlando Bell [of the South Madison Neighborhood Center]. Call the Urban League. Call the NAACP. Call the African-American churches. Call the Inner City Council for Drug Abuse. Call the African-American Children's Festival. Call me.

"That's my expectations for the black middle class. My expectations for the white middle class are none. Just don't run!" ■