

Colored Church Work in New York

By Lida R. McCabe

The past decade has wrought radical changes in the religious life and service of the Afro-American. Naturally, the innovation is more strikingly apparent in the North than in the South. Emotion—the basic motor of the religious life and worship of the negro of bondage—is now yielding on every side to systematic, practical work, in which altruism has no small part. Varied causes have contributed to this change. The introduction, in 1880, of ritual by the Methodists in their public worship suppressed extemporaneous prayer and voluntary song. The method of raising funds has been greatly improved, making possible to all colored churches a dignity and freedom unknown to their tentative days. “Lifting a collection” is rapidly disappearing. The practice is dubbed by the advanced negro “cruel, positively cruel.” In this ancient method of financing a table was placed in front of the pulpit, around which the elders gathered. An old-time preacher then exhorted the congregation to lay their worldly treasures above. “Brethren, ye cannot take this world’s goods beyond the grave.” Stirring hymns were then sung, and, in the emotional paroxysm that invariably followed, the people often put their last penny on the table. Some New York churches still set a table in front of the pulpit to incite contribution by example, but exhorting is a tradition. Financial support is now secured by systematic monthly contributions. Presbyterians and Roman Catholics rent pews; in the churches of other sects seats are free.

A change is also noticeable in the character of the attendance. Formerly a large portion of the people were wont to drop into service in a spirit of levity. Now all take a respectful if not a devotional part in the exercises. The church is the colored people’s chief if not only social center. Excepting, perhaps, the adherents of the Episcopal Church, the negro has little or no social life outside his religious affiliations. The limitation is largely due in New York City to the public sentiment, no less than the poverty, which relegates the masses to ostracized tenement districts. White landlords exact excessive rent from the negro ambitious to better his environment.

All pastors recognize in this vitiated home life, imposed upon their people by prejudice and extortion and poverty, an almost unsurmountable obstacle to the spiritual growth of the black man. The most practical effort yet made to better this deplorable condition is now maturing at New Bethel. The church trustees are negotiating for the lease of a block of flats in a healthy neighborhood, which they propose to re-rent to desirable colored families of limited income. All the churches are, in many respects, employment bureaus.

The problem of livelihood for the rising generation, educated beyond their heritage and their surroundings, confronts the Church in all its perplexing phases. The efforts it is making to modify this difficulty, brought about

by the abnormal development of the race, is not the least interesting of modern sociological experiments.

The rise and development of the colored race in New York City, exemplified in their church organizations, is rich in suggestiveness, far-reaching in possibility. The population numbers 40,000. It supports at present twelve incorporated churches and various missions. The first and oldest church, Zion, celebrates next year its one hundredth anniversary. Previous to its organization in 1796 the colored people were relegated to the galleries of the white churches.

The first step towards independent worship was a petition to Bishop Asbury, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, asking permission to hold meetings in the intervals of the regular preaching hours of their white brethren. Accompanying the petition was a request that the meetings should be presided over by one of their own race. Under the jurisdiction of the white Methodists, Zion passed through many vicissitudes until 1820, when its members withdrew. The Afro-American Methodist Episcopal Church was then founded, under the exclusive control of the negro race. Zion Church became at once, what it continues to be, the Mother House of one branch of the Afro-American Episcopal Church in America.

The most formidable obstacle it encountered at the outset was the Allenites, a name given to the followers of Richard Allen, a zealous negro blacksmith of Philadelphia, who held meetings in his shop, and later erected on his own ground, at his own expense, a meeting-house.

This movement met much opposition from the white Methodists. The meeting-house, however, was opened for divine service by Bishop Asbury, and Richard Allen became pastor. Subsequently he was ordained the first negro Bishop in America.

The Allenites early invaded New York. In 1819 they crystallized in Mott Street under the name Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. To-day there are two Afro-American Methodist Episcopal Church organizations. Each has its own Bishop, and is thoroughly independent. Their tenets and discipline, however, are identical. Union is now the desire of the progressive elements of both organizations. Old Zion and Old Bethel have shifted quarters many times since their primitive beginning, when they were financially dependent upon the whites. Both are now prosperous and own valuable property. New York has four African Methodist Episcopal churches, only two of which, I believe, Zion and Bethel, are under the jurisdiction of colored Bishops.

A personal difference between a pastor of old Zion and the Bishop of the diocese led, twenty years ago, to the formation of an up-town mission. The rebellious minister put the infant under the jurisdiction of the white Methodist Episcopal Conference. It waxed strong, and, as St. Mark's Church, has become a power. It abandoned last year its former site in West Twenty-fifth Street, and purchased St. John's Methodist Episcopal Church in West Fifty-third Street. It took possession of its new home free of debt, the price received for the old church more than paying for the new property.

The congregation of St. Mark's, which numbers four hundred regular communicants, is composed chiefly of New York born colored persons.

Most of the colored pulpits are filled by young men imbued with the modern spirit. A year since, Bishop Tanner sent to Old Bethel in Sullivan Street—recently sold to Catholic Italians—one of the most progressive young men in the colored ministry. Owing to the up-town migration of the colored people, Bethel had been struggling against lessening numbers. Three of the ablest men available in the Methodist Episcopal Church were sent in succession to retrieve the prosperity that was Bethel's when it was the center of the social and the religious life of the colored people.

It remained for the Rev. J. M. Henderson, M.D., a native of the Buckeye State, to rekindle the dying embers and put a "spirit of youth in everything." Eight months after his installation, Old Bethel was sold. Last Easter the congregation took possession of a new home in West

Twenty-fifth Street, the former property of the white Presbyterians. That the trustees of New Bethel are men of business sagacity is evidenced by the success with which they conducted this, the largest real estate transaction ever made by Afro-Americans in New York. The legal part of the sale was transacted by a negro lawyer of the church, Mr. T. McCants Stewart.

New Bethel has various clubs of literary, philanthropic, and social aim. In its efforts to relieve distress it seeks to remove the causes rather than alleviate the results of poverty by inculcating the young men and women with the desire and the determination to seek self-respecting employment.

The adherence of the colored people to old-time funeral customs is encouraged and utilized by modern pastors as a direct means of reaching the lowest classes. New Bethel admits any funeral to the church, for the sake of gathering in the delinquents. While breaking away from emotional lines, Dr. Henderson shows rare wisdom and tact in permitting the old people, who often grow restless under the restraint of modern ritual, to emerge from the Amen corner the first Sunday of the month, and indulge their emotional natures in old-time exhortation and voluntary song.

Early in colonial times old Trinity welcomed the black man. The history of St. Philip's is largely parallel with that of Trinity Church. It was organized in 1818. It grew out of a colored Sunday-school of old Trinity parish. Its first colored rector was the Rev. Peter Williams. The colored population of New York at that time was less than 1,200. Of this number only sixty persons were taxed, while but sixteen were qualified to vote. The consecration of the first colored Episcopalian church, together with the ordination of the Rev. Peter Williams, son of a tobacconist in Liberty Street, made a decided impression upon the community. St. Philip occupied four churches and six meeting-houses in succession before it purchased, six years ago, its present site in Twenty-fifth Street, a block west of Trinity Chapel. The rector, the Rev. Hutchins C. Bishop, is a native of Baltimore, a cultured gentleman of varied resource. He keeps pace with the growing ritualism of the Episcopal faith. St. Philip's has an altar, candles, vestments, and a superb vested choir of forty voices. One-fourth of the congregation are natives of the West Indies. A large number were born Roman Catholic, but, owing to the tardy establishment of a colored Catholic church, they naturally drifted with their kind into the Episcopal communion.

The Young Men's Guild of St. Philip's has 107 members. Bishop Potter recently dedicated their parish house, a beautiful structure, replete with club, cooking-school, and kindergarten facilities. There is no place in the city for young colored men to assemble, outside the saloon. The parish house is in a thickly settled negro neighborhood devoid of healthful influences. To overcome the saloon by the attraction of the club-house is the main purpose of the Guild. A colored physician and a colored oculist have addressed its monthly public meetings. Most of the members are messengers in down-town offices, clerks, etc.

A boys' club has recently been started. As quickly as funds are available a kindergarten and cooking-school will be opened. Women are recognized on the Boards of many colored churches. "Women do the bulk of church work, why shouldn't they have a voice in its administration?" asks an advanced pastor. Certainly they have no small part at St. Philip's. There are mothers' meetings, sewing-schools for girls, a class in ecclesiastical embroidery, Dorcas, Altar, and Female Assistant Societies. Dr. Bishop does not agree with Mr. Booker T. Washington that the colored people should meekly accept conditions. "I find," he says, "nothing in the history of races to show that development has ever been attained by submission, the humble acceptance of existing conditions."

There are four Baptist churches. The largest and most influential is Mount Olivet. It was organized in 1805. Dr. Wisner is pastor. It has 1,200 communicants. Most of the members hail from old Virginia and maintain "befo' de war" traditions. Presbyterianism began to attract the

negro in 1822. The first church was erected at Elm and Canal Streets. It was shortly foreclosed by mortgages and subsequently converted into a Jewish synagogue. In 1831 a second church was organized, under the pastorate of the first colored graduate of Princeton College, the Rev. T. S. Wright. When Presbyterianism divided into the Old and New School, this church went with the New. It flourished seventeen years. A third church was founded in 1848, and the property deeded to Shiloh Church. The pastor was Dr. Pennington, a graduate of the Heidelberg University, which conferred upon him in 1840 the degree D.D. He was succeeded by Dr. Garnet, distinguished as the first colored preacher to address the House of Representatives. This was in 1865. The last official act of President Garfield was the signing of Dr. Garnet's commission as foreign minister to Liberia. The outcome of internal dissensions which disturbed Shiloh until 1891 was the organization of an independent church, of which the Rev. P. Butler Tompkins, a graduate of the Union Theological Seminary, is at present the energetic rector. It is in the heart of the "Tenderloin" district, which includes three-fourths of the colored population.

An Irish priest is the only white minister laboring among the colored people. The Rev. J. E. Burke, pastor of the twelfth colored church, St. Benedict the Moor, voluntarily gave up an attractive parish up-town to cast his lot among the negroes of Bleecker Street. Father Burke, unlike the majority of colored pastors, has his residence and lives his life in the heart of his parish. St. Benedict the Moor, established in 1883, is the first Catholic colored community north of the Mason and Dixon Line. There are 3,000 colored Catholics in New York. A comparatively small number commune at St. Benedict. Belonging for the most part, like all the race, to the serving class, they have followed rapidly the up-town migration.

Negroes worship in all Catholic churches. The faith that recognizes the equality of all men in Christ makes the black man as welcome as his white brother, and this universality the Catholic negro feels. Father Burke early recognized that if enduring results were to be attained work must begin with the children. To this purpose St. Benedict's Home for Destitute Children was founded in 1886. From humble beginnings in McDougall Street it has now a beautiful site at Rye. It has the warm approval of all sects. The Catholic Church has ordained two colored priests. Contrary to expectations, they have failed to find favor with their own race, and been forced to take up pedagogical work. The last and most signal altruistic work undertaken by the colored churches is the McDonald Memorial Hospital, the first colored hospital of New York, and the fifth in the United States. It is situated at 230 West Twenty-fifth Street. All the churches are pledged to contribute to its support. It begins with a free dispensary. As soon as funds can be secured, a training-school for colored nurses will be added. The hospital will recognize neither creed nor race in its free ministrations. It is founded to bring advanced medical science closer to the people. The medical staff is composed solely of colored physicians. It has the highest indorsement of the medical journals, and the foremost white physicians and surgeons of New York have offered their services in its consulting staff.

Since the war \$35,000,000 has been expended by Protestant sects in educating and Christianizing the colored race. No small factor in this missionary movement is the Afro Methodist Episcopal Connection of the North, which, at the close of the war, sent equipped men and women to the South to instruct former slaves. It has founded twenty-two schools and colleges; it publishes its own literature and owns its own plant. One of its bishops educated the son of his master.