

Chapter 2

THE AFRO-CHRISTIAN CONNECTION

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IT IS COMMONPLACE to read in the historical writings on the United Church of Christ about German immigrants who came to American shores seeking economic well-being. They established the Reformed Church in America in the eighteenth century and the Evangelical Synod of North America in the nineteenth century. It is equally commonplace to read about the Pilgrims who left their homes in England in quest of religious freedom. They landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 and subsequently established the Congregational Churches. A fourth stream fed into the formation of the United Church of Christ: the Christian Church, the first indigenous American denomination.

The Christian Church itself resulted from a “flowing together” of three different groups, in Virginia, New England, and Kentucky. These groups all had strong feelings about democracy in church government and the importance of Christian character for church membership and agreed that denominational concerns and labels were unnecessary. They took the simple name Christian.(1)

Life in nineteenth-century America was not simple, however. In the South, where there were many Christian churches, blacks were influenced by this movement. The Afro-Christian Connection began even before the Emancipation Proclamation.

The story goes back to Providence Church in Chesapeake, Virginia, which was established in 1852 by free black persons. Most Afro-Christian history, however, documents the movement of black people from the slave balconies of the white churches in North Carolina and Virginia to an abandoned cabin, stable, or “bush arbor.”

Whatever else may be said about African people, they are notoriously religious. African scholar John S. Mbiti writes that it is never correct to speak of any one African religion. Africa throughout its history has been replete with a wide variety of religions that shape the lives of its people.(2) So it is not surprising that after the Civil War former slaves of African descent developed their own indigenous religious response to the God of their ancestors in ways appropriate to their needs in their new environment. The founders of the Afro-Christian Connection did not assimilate completely the Christian religion of their slave masters because they were not welcomed into the established Christian household of faith and because they yearned for the religious experience of their forebears.

It is not surprising, therefore, that "when the war closed in the Spring of 1865, Blacks began almost immediately to organize churches of their own, after the Master's denominational pattern."(3) Although early Afro-Christians patterned their organization after the white Christian churches, they developed their own idiom, style of preaching, liturgy, and worship, which still prevail in many of the one hundred fifty original Afro-Christian churches.(4) Soulful preaching from scriptural passages, long-meter hymns, ardent rhythmic prayers, Negro spirituals, and later, gospel songs were all part of the joyful, shouting services of worship in Afro-Christian churches.

EARLY HISTORY

Afro-Christian churches experienced rapid growth and development in North Carolina and Virginia during the decade after the Civil War. The Southern Christian Convention made a paternalistic response of conscience to its black sisters and brothers by appointing three white ministers —W. B. Wellons, J. W. Wellons, and H. B. Hayes — to assist the "Colored brethren" in organizing churches of their own and in organizing the Colored Conferences in keeping with the Cardinal Principles of the Christian platform.(5) These men were widely accepted by the early Afro-Christians and gave instructions in the licensure of the first black preachers and the ordination of black ministers. They helped to establish the Colored Christian Conference (predecessor of the Afro-Christian Convention), founded several black churches, and became their pastors. As "fraternal messengers" from the white Christian Convention they attended sessions of the Colored Christian Conference during the first decade of its existence and participated in discussions and transactions. A major influence of these three ministers can be seen in the theological and doctrinal principles rigorously adhered to by Afro-Christians. These principles were taken verbatim from the Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church.(6)

Apart from the Bible these Principles, which are given below, provided the most essential basis for church polity, discipline, preaching, and teaching.

1. Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church.
2. Christian is a sufficient name for the Church.
3. The Holy Bible is a sufficient rule for faith and practice.
4. Christian character is a sufficient test for Church membership and fellowship.
5. The right of private judgment and the liberty of conscience are rights and privileges which should be accorded to and exercised by all.

By 1867, under the guidance of the North Carolina Conference, a conference of Negro people was formed and named the Colored Christian Conference. When the Colored Christian Conference convened at Christian Chapel in Wake County, North Carolina, in 1873, twenty-seven ministers were listed. At the same meeting a new conference was recognized in Eastern North Carolina, and it was decided that the name of the Colored Christian Conference be changed to the Western North Carolina Colored Christian Conference. In the same year a group

of Afro-Christians in Virginia met at Mount Ararat Church in Suffolk, Virginia, to form the Virginia Colored Christian Conference. Here again, the reverends J. W. Wellons, H. B. Hayes, and W. B. Wellons were present as “fraternal messengers” from the white Southern Christian Convention. Six churches, two ordained ministers, and six licentiates of the Afro-Christian Connection participated in this organizing effort. (7)

It is remarkable that within a decade after the Civil War ended this small group of former slaves, many of whom could not read or write English, had moved out of the “Nigger” balconies of their former white masters’ churches, established more than fifty churches, organized three conferences, and ordained forty ministers in North Carolina and Virginia. With a minimum of technical assistance from their white Christian counterparts, the Afro-Christians demonstrated that what they may have lacked in formal education and material resources, they compensated for by their faithfulness and dogged determination to develop and expand a Christian Church that captured and perpetuated something of the glow and exuberance of the African religious experience.

WORSHIP

Preaching was central in the service of worship in Afro-Christian churches. It consisted of exegesis of biblical texts and vivid stories of biblical characters and racial oppression. The preacher did not always make application to the broad social issues of the times, but application was always made to what was perceived as personal Christian morality and ethical behavior. In this regard the Afro-Christian preacher was as severe as any New England Puritan. No Afro-Christian preacher would conclude a prayer or sermon without sounding a clear eschatological note of hope. The congregation never departed without being assured that despite the oppression, the suffering, and the pain experienced daily in this life, joy will surely come in the morning. The following quotation is a classic example of the expressions of hope with which Afro-Christian preachers concluded their sermons:

But things will be alright bye and bye
Bye and bye, when I come to press my dying pillow
After while, when I’m done climbing the rough side of the mountain
After while, when the big bell tolls in Zion
Bye and bye, when I’ve prayed my last prayer and sung my last song
Bye and bye, when I’ve come down to the chilly stream of the Jordan to pull
 off mortality and put on immortality
I’m going to be done with the troubles of this world
I’ll hear the welcoming voice of Jesus saying, “Come ye blessed of my Father.
 You have been faithful over a few things. Now I’ll make you ruler
 over many. (8)

A typical prayer handed down orally from generation to generation and usually a part of the

worship service every Sunday morning went like this:

This morning, our heavenly Father,
It's once more and again, that a few of your handmade servants
bow humbly before your throne of grace.

We come before you this morning,
not for form nor fashion
not for outside show to the world,
But to confess our sins as wayward children
and to ask you to forgive us and
try us one more time.

We want to give you some humble and sincere
thanks, O God, for waking us up this morning
with your finger of love.

We want to thank you for waking us up in
time and not in eternity.

So that our bed was not our cooling board
and our covers were not our winding sheet.

We want to thank you this morning, Holy Father,
for articulation of speech and the blood
that still runs warm in our veins.

We want you to come by here this morning, O Lord
and baptize us with the Spirit from on high,
Bless the preacher who shall stand in the
shoes of John this morning,

Lower him in the deep treasures of your love,
Crown his head with wisdom and give him
the utterance to call sinners to repentance.

Visit the sick in their affliction, and cool their
scorching fevers,

raise them up from their beds of suffering and pain,

Visit the prisoners and care for the dying
and I will be careful to give you the praise.

This is my prayer. Amen and Thank God.

This prayer, as well as the preaching and singing, was of high emotional intensity so characteristic of the African dance and music. Preaching and singing were always punctuated with loud amens and shouts of joy.

EDUCATION

During the early years of Afro-Christian formation a deep and abiding concern for the education of ministers and laypeople of the churches was paramount. The yearning for an educated and enlightened ministry reached its fruition in the period from 1871 to 1873, when the Conferences of North Carolina and Virginia decided to tax each member ten cents a year to purchase a site and build a school at Franklinton, North Carolina. This action proved to be the most significant event of the Afro-Christian Connection.(9)

The post-Civil War South was very poor. The economic condition of the ex-slaves was even more desperate but not so much as to dim the vision of a people whose determination to build a school far exceeded their economic means. By 1880 the Afro-Christians, assisted by modest contributions from Christian Church members in the North, had raised enough money to purchase land, erect a building, and move to the new location.

The American Christian Convention took a firm hand in governing the Franklinton school. It appointed a Board of Control to manage the affairs of the budding institution and sent George Young, a young, white minister of the Eastern Christian Conference of New York, to serve as the first principal. A prominent black minister, Henry E. Long, became his assistant. The school was incorporated in 1883 under the name of Franklinton Literary and Theological Christian Institute. During its early years the Institute attracted more than two hundred students, ranging in age from five to forty-five. Fathers, mothers, and children often attended as families, studying a wide variety of subjects from the alphabet to Latin, algebra, physiology, and theology. None was turned away, no matter how poor.

Letters published in the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, a publication of the American Christian Church, indicate that widespread interest and support existed among northern white Christians for this pioneering effort in black education and leadership training at Franklinton.(10)

After visiting Franklinton the Rev. John G. Wilson, of Philadelphia, wrote:

The school building occupies the most eligible site in the area. The ground is sufficiently elevated to command a prospect of the entire village, and large enough for the building of a first-class college and campus which it may become someday. At all events it bids fair to attain the rank of the Literary and Theological Institute of the North Carolina and Virginia African Conferences of the Christian Denomination.

The Rev. W. G. Clements, pastor of a white Christian church in Wake County, wrote in a letter to the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*:

For some of the brethren and sisters of the North who have given material aid to the Colored Christians of North Carolina, I thought it might be of interest to

those donors to know that the Lord was blessing their efforts to do good. Having been raised up among the Colored people, and having watched their progress since the Civil War, I think I can speak advisedly as regards their improvements, and I do not hesitate to say, when we take into consideration the means at their command, they have made fair improvements. There is much ignorance among them yet, but where they have had an opportunity of going to school they have generally learned very well.... Those who have given their money to this institution of learning [the Franklinton school] have done a great work.

Another white visitor to Franklinton, the Rev. D. L. Putman, wrote:

This school is no longer an experiment. A fine location, suitable buildings and three years of school, in which there has been with each successive year an increasing interest and a permanent growth in numbers, have placed Franklinton permanently among the institutions that be. The work done has been excellent, equal to that of any institution of its character and advantages. The proficiency made in the studies in academic and theological departments has been highly commended. The Franklinton School is a great power for good.

Fourteen years after George Young arrived to serve as the first principal of the Franklinton school his assistant, Henry E. Long, became the first black president. From 1904 on great progress was made under Long's able and inspiring leadership. The Afro-Christian Conferences of North Carolina and Virginia gave one thousand dollars to purchase a new site for the school, now called the Franklinton Christian College. Gifts from the Northern Christian Churches and the Afro-Christian Churches were used to erect buildings. The years between 1905 and 1930 were the golden years of Franklinton Christian College. Although it never achieved the full status of college by reputable standards, it provided the essential education and training for pastoral and lay leadership for the Afro-Christian Church. Franklinton also provided strong institutional support for the substantial growth in the number of churches and membership in North Carolina and Virginia, without which the organization of the Afro-Christian Convention would have been impossible.

In an eloquent address to the Afro-Christian Convention in 1916, the Rev. Smith A. Howell, who later became the president of Franklinton Christian College, articulated the importance of Franklinton and the necessity for an educated ministry.

The Schoolhouse is the foe of ignorance whether in or out of the pulpit. Rapid intellectual advancement of the pew is an imperative call for a trained ministry. Is the calling of the ministry of less dignity and importance than the call of such honorable professions as law, medicine, etc.? Possessing the opportunities so earnestly desired by our fathers, what justifying excuse is

there for a lack of intellectual training on the part of the ministry of today? We are persuaded that our ministry is so well aware of these truths that no argument is needed to enforce the ammunition to scrutinize with care the candidates for admission to our Conferences and insist on a high standard of qualifications. The future of our church largely centers upon the School of Theology at Franklinton Christian College. This school is to be considered the theological center from which goes a trained ministry. There is an imperative need that there be a thorough awakening to this truth. Our plea is for an educated ministry! An educated ministry!! An educated ministry!!! On this the respectability and influence of our church depends. (11)

When the school closed in 1930, in the depths of the depression, a dream was shattered and the hope for an educated Afro-Christian ministry was lost for many years to future generations. Afro-Christians had no way of compensating for this loss. They were denied access to Elon College, the prominent educational institution of the white Southern Christian Convention. Bricks Junior College, in Enfield, North Carolina, an institution established by Northern Congregationalists, through the American Missionary Association, for the education of black Americans, had also closed. After the merger of the Congregational and Christian Churches, in 1931, theological seminaries were open to blacks, but few were considered to be qualified for admission. In the absence of an educational institution of their own, many Afro-Christians reverted to a mischievous anti-intellectualism and spiritualism to compensate for their lack of formal training.

Compare these words of the Rev. J. J. Farmer to the Eastern Virginia Conference of Afro-Christian Churches in 1946, with those of the Rev. Smith A. Howell, quoted above:

All I have heard at this annual meeting is education. Education! I'm sick and tired of hearing about it. I want to hear about Jesus. He's the source of my salvation, not the college or seminary. I want to tell you that you can go to the college and you can go to the school, but if you ain't got the religion of Jesus, you're an educated fool.(12)

This burst of anti-intellectualism received some loud applause but did not go unchallenged. The Rev. Zanda P. Jenkins, a new breed of Afro-Christian minister, with college and seminary training, eloquently challenged what he called "that anti-education garbage unfit for consumption by those who love Jesus and care about His Church."

Although the educational level of the pastoral leadership and membership of the former Afro-Christian Churches within the United Church of Christ has improved substantially, many churches continue to bear the tremor of the closing of Franklinton Christian College.

THE AFRO-CHRISTIAN CONVENTION

In May 1892, at Watson Tabernacle, New Berne, North Carolina, the various black conferences organized into the Afro-Christian Convention. By that time the Eastern North Carolina Conference had become the Eastern Atlantic Christian Conference; the Western North Carolina Conference had returned to its original name — the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference. The Eastern Virginia Conference continued under the same name.(13)

Two other conferences had come into being: the Cape Fear Conference, which eventually faded out of existence, and the Georgia-Alabama Colored Christian Conference, organized in 1887. In 1910 the Lincoln Conference was formed by mutual agreement with the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference and a group of churches located in the Burlington, North Carolina, area. In 1912 the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York Christian Conference was organized. By 1916, according to the oldest minutes of the convention that have been found, there were seven conferences, four mission churches in British Guiana, South America, and one mission church in Trinidad, British West Indies.(14)

The Afro-Christian Convention experienced significant growth and expansion under the able leadership of the Rev. Smith A. Howell, who was elected president in 1914 and served in that office for twenty years. During this period the number of churches grew to more than 150, with a membership of 25,000. Included in the Convention were 185 ordained ministers and licentiates; 150 Sunday schools and Christian Endeavor Societies; more than 12,000 Sunday school pupils; several Sunday school conventions; a Woman's National Home and Foreign Missionary Convention, which organized and trained the women of the church; and an active Afro-Christian Publishing Association, which was based in Franklinton, North Carolina, and served the churches and organizations of the Convention.(15)

BLACK CONGREGATIONALISM

Before the organization of the Convention of the South, a later union of black Congregationalists and Afro-Christians, the Afro-Christian Convention operated virtually independently of both the Christian Church and the Congregational Churches, despite the Christian and Congregational merger of 1931. Afro-Christians separated from their black Congregationalist sisters and brothers and from their white Christian counterparts for different reasons.

Black Congregationalists were beneficiaries of the education, acculturation, and religious orientation of the American Missionary Association (AMA), whereas Afro-Christians were the victims of neglect by their white Christian counterparts. The AMA schools founded for the education of blacks in the South were oases of racial goodwill in an otherwise hostile, white racist society. The late Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, distinguished president of the black Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina, used to describe her school as “a little hunk of New England Congregationalism in the deep South.” Black Congregationalists identified freely with New England Congregationalism, and for many years they were considered objects of mission by the Congregational Church.

Afro-Christians had no such sense of identity with the white Christian Church. They had no alternative but to build their own church connection. Even after the organization of the Convention of the South, black Congregationalists remained virtually separated from Afro-Christians by maintaining their own separate Associations. As late as 1957, at an annual meeting of the black Western North Carolina Association of Congregational Churches, the Rev. W. M. McRae reminded the Superintendent of the Convention of the South, Dr. J. Taylor Stanley, that “we are not Christians, and despite your efforts to make us so, we remain American Congregationalists.”

THE CONVENTION OF THE SOUTH

In 1941 there were 106 black Congregational churches, scattered throughout the South in eleven states, with a total of 6,975 members; there were 129 black Christian churches, concentrated almost entirely in North Carolina and Virginia, with a total of 12,640 members.

Comparisons between Black Christian and Black Congregational churches in the South were inevitable. The average membership of a Congregational church was sixty-six; average membership of a Christian church was ninety-nine. Nearly all Congregational pastors had had at least some college and seminary training; many had both college and seminary degrees. Very few Christian pastors had training above the high school level; none had completed requirements for a seminary degree. The Congregationalists had had large financial assistance toward ministers' salaries and church buildings and facilities, as well as opportunity for liberal educational and religious training in church-related schools and colleges, conveniently located throughout the South. The Black Christians paid the meager ministers' salaries themselves, built their own churches, and developed their own church organizations, with very little encouragement, financial or otherwise, from their white Christian neighbors.(16)

The birth of the Convention of the South of the Congregational Christian Churches, in 1950, was pivotal in the history of the Afro-Christian churches. Up to this point Afro-Christians had not only operated virtually independently of the Congregational Christian denomination but also had had little contact with black Congregationalists. Under the able and sacrificial leadership of J. Taylor Stanley, the Convention of the South was organized in Greensboro, North Carolina. This organization brought together all black Congregationalists and Afro-Christians in the South, from Virginia to Texas. A few Afro-Christian churches in New Jersey and New York were also included. For the first time a mechanism for the inclusion of Afro-Christians in denominational life and work was in place. Even though the divisions between Afro-Christians and black Congregationalists persisted among the older generation, the young people began to discover a common Congregational Christian identity through Pilgrim Fellowship, youth rallies, and youth camps and conferences. By the mid-1950s the new generation of Afro-Christians was reclaiming the aspirations for higher education that was characteristic of their forebears who had founded Franklinton Christian College. The adults began to identify with the denomination through

Woman's Fellowship and Layman's Fellowship groups that were keyed into national programs. Christian education training institutes and workshops and pastor training events contributed to a new level of consciousness and a sense of common identity.

Another event that facilitated the transition was the merger of the remnants of Franklinton Christian College with Bricks Junior College, in the early 1950s. This new conference center, Franklinton Center at Bricks, North Carolina, provided the institutional support for the training of pastors, youth, and adults of Afro-Christian and Congregational backgrounds. At Franklinton Center, Afro-Christians were grounded in the history, heritage, theology, and mission of the Congregational Christian denomination. Church school superintendents and teachers were introduced to denominational curricula and taught how to use them creatively. Increasingly, new patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving appeared. "Congregational Christian" began to replace "Christian" on the bulletin boards of the churches, Pilgrim Fellowship replaced Christian Endeavor Society, the Kansas City Statement of Faith began to replace the Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church, and in some instances the assortment of "Christian" hymnals were replaced by the *Pilgrim Hymnal*.

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Throughout the 1950s the Convention of the South moved toward becoming a self-supporting and self-directing conference of black Christians and Congregationalists. In 1957, when the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches formed the United Church of Christ, there was concern that the new denomination be inclusive as to race and previous religious and cultural background. The UCC constitution, adopted in 1961, insisted that all conferences and associations include all churches within stated geographic bounds. This decision fragmented the Convention of the South.

Most of the churches of the Convention of the South became part of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ when it organized in 1965. Thirty-two churches from the Convention eventually related to five other conferences within the new denomination. Although this inclusiveness was right in the minds of many Afro-Christians, it made it even more difficult to keep the Afro-Christian tradition alive.(17)

THE AFRO-CHRISTIAN LEGACY

From the beginning of Afro-Christian church life, immediately after the Civil War, until the formation of the United Church of Christ, Afro-Christian churches preserved their essential character. This legacy can be summarized in four statements: They were fiercely independent; they maintained simple organizations; they upheld the centrality of Christ; and they preserved the African idiom.

Afro-Christian churches and leaders guarded their independence and autonomy with great zeal. Unlike many of their Congregational sisters and brothers, who had become dependent on subsidies for pastoral leadership and church buildings, Afro-Christians graciously declined such subsidies in rigorous regard for their pride, dignity, and independence. Until recently, they rejected aid from the denomination, fearing that help from sources other than local church members had strings attached that might infringe on their freedom and autonomy. They were suspicious of centralized ecclesiastical authority located in the conference, convention, or national bodies. As a consequence of such zeal for independence, Afro-Christian churches suffered a lack of educated pastoral leadership and adequate facilities.

Afro-Christians were deeply committed to fellowship and covenant while at the same time insisting on autonomy and independence. Annual meetings of Afro-Christians showed this paradox. Heated debates revolved around the authority of the Conference over local churches. But the high quality of fellowship at worship and at meals sustained a deep and abiding sense of covenant that usually led to consensus.

Organization, worship, and mission in Afro-Christian churches were simple, never complex. Informality characterized these structures. The deacons in charge of the church's affairs were ordained for life. The chairperson of the board usually remained in that office until death. The essential role of the pastor was to preach, care for the sick, and bury the dead.

Complicated, formal processes of planning were conspicuous by their absence. The congregation met to transact business when urgent matters required action by the membership. Otherwise, the congregation trusted the deacons to "fix it." Members of the congregation were informed on essential matters and often voted during the regular worship service, which usually followed this pattern:

Prayer and Praise Service

Opening Congregational Hymn

Prayer

Hymn

Scripture

Negro Spiritual

Deacon's Prayer

Negro Spiritual

Announcements

Congregational Hymn

Sermon
Opening Doors of the Church (music)
Poor Saints' Offering
Regular Offering
Pastor's Remarks
Closing Hymn
Benediction

Such worship services moved at a slow pace, with little regard for a time to begin and end. It was not uncommon for a service to last three hours.

The preaching, teaching, music, liturgy, and mission of the Afro-Christian churches all evolved out of the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Church. Sometimes this Christocentric rhetoric got in the way of the formation and pursuit of an explicit social vision. Furthermore, the rhetoric was not always matched by the behavior and attitudes of the deacons, who ruled with an iron hand. Even charismatic pastors sometimes forgot the first Cardinal Principle as they led the "flock."

The Christocentric affirmation of Afro-Christians was not only a theological focus, but also served as a mechanism for the containment of overly aggressive and assertive pastors and deacons. When a pastor or deacon exceeded the limits of power and authority, he was reminded by members of the congregation that "Jesus Christ is the Head of this church, not you."

The preaching, singing, and shouting in the Afro-Christian churches were related to African experiences. The preaching and singing looked back to African chants; the shouting was closely akin to African dance. The feeling aspect of religion dominated. One of the gifts that Afro-Christians brought to the Convention of the South, and subsequently to the United Church of Christ, was their capacity to feel religion and express the same with fervor and great joy.

Great changes have and are taking place in the former Afro-Christian churches. Their relatively small numbers and limited geographical focus precluded their high visibility in the formation of the United Church of Christ. The unique character of these churches, however, continues to provide an invaluable presence.

With the formation of the United Church of Christ, Afro-Christians, by and large, accepted the mandate to become an integral part of the new denomination. They have contributed to the rich pluralism, social vision, viable congregational polity, and "soul" of the United Church of Christ.

NOTES

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10. Letters reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 63—68.
11. In *ibid.*, pp. 71—72.
12. Percel O. Alston (Notes on the Eastern Virginia Conference of the Congregational Christian Churches of the Convention of the South, Newport News, Virginia, 1951].
13. Morrill, op. cit., p. 271.
14. Stanley, *History of Black Congregational Christian Churches*, pp. 57—60.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.