Black church

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
(Redirected from African American church)

The term **black church** or **African-American church** refers to Christian churches that minister to predominantly African-American congregations in the United States. While some black churches, such as African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Churches, belong to predominantly African-American denominations, many black churches are members of predominantly white denominations, such as the United Church of Christ (which developed from the Congregational Church of New England.)[1]

Most of the first black congregations and churches formed before 1800 were founded by free blacks - for example, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Petersburg, Virginia; and Savannah, Georgia.[2] The oldest black Baptist church in Kentucky, and third oldest in the United States, was founded about 1790 by the slave Peter Durrett.[3]

After slavery was abolished, freed blacks continued to establish separate congregations and church facilities, creating communities and worship in culturally distinct ways. They had already created a unique and empowering form of Christianity that creolized African spiritual traditions. In addition, segregationist attitudes in both the North and the South discouraged and, especially in the South, prevented African-Americans from worshiping in the same churches as whites.

The tradition of African-Americans worshipping together continued to develop during the late 19th century and continues to this day despite the decline of segregationist attitudes and the general acceptability of integrated worship. African American churches have long been the centers of communities, serving as school sites in the early years after the Civil War, taking up social welfare functions, such as providing for the indigent, and going on to establish schools, orphanages and prison ministries. As a result, black churches have fostered built strong community organizations and provided spiritual and political leadership, especially during the civil rights movement.

African American topics

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American Society of Muslims
Nation of Islam
Black Hebrew Israelites
The Nation of Gods and Earths
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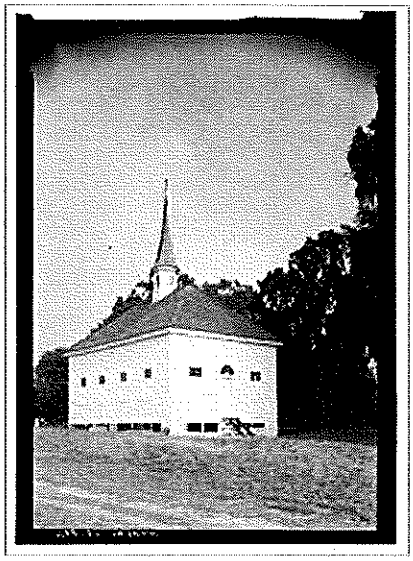
Slavery

See also: History of slavery in the United States

Evangelical Baptist and Methodist preachers traveled throughout the South in the Great Awakening of the late 18th century. They appealed directly to slaves, and numerous people converted. Blacks found opportunities to have active roles in new congregations, especially in the Baptist Church, where slaves were appointed as leaders and preachers. (They were excluded from such roles in the Anglican or Episcopal Church.) As they listened to readings, slaves developed their own interpretations of the Scriptures and found inspiration in stories of deliverance, such as the Exodus out of Egypt. Nat Turner, a slave and Baptist preacher, was inspired to armed rebellion, in an uprising that killed about 50 white men, women, and children in Virginia.[4]

Both free blacks and the more numerous slaves participated in the earliest black Baptist congregations founded near Petersburg, Virginia, Savannah, Georgia and Lexington, Kentucky before 1800. The slaves Peter Durrett and his wife founded the First African Church (now known as First African Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky c. 1790.[5] The church's trustees purchased its first property in 1815. The congregation numbered about 290 by the time of Durrett's death in 1823.[5]



African American Baptist Church, Silver Hill Plantation, Georgetown County, South Carolina

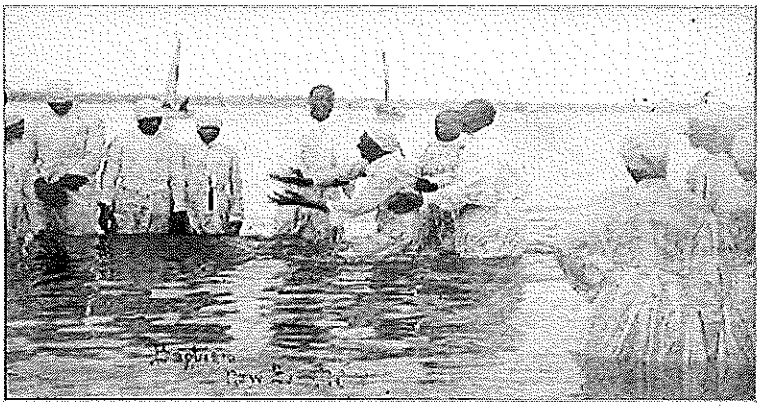
Following slave revolts in the early 19th century, including Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, Virginia passed a law requiring black congregations to meet only in the presence of a white minister. Other states similarly restricted exclusively black churches, or the assembly of blacks in large groups unsupervised by whites. Nevertheless, the black Baptist congregations in the cities grew rapidly and their members numbered several hundred each before the Civil War. (See next section.) While mostly led by free blacks, most of their members were slaves.

In plantation areas, slaves organized underground churches and hidden religious meetings, the "invisible church", where slaves were free to mix evangelical Christianity with African beliefs and African rhythms. They turned Wesleyan Methodist hymns into spirituals.[*citation needed*] The underground churches provided psychological refuge from the white world. The spirituals gave the church members a secret way to communicate and, in some cases, to plan rebellion.

Slaves also learned about Christianity by attending services led by a white preacher or supervised by a white person. Slaveholders often held prayer meetings at their plantations. In the South until the Great Awakening, most slaveholders were Anglican if they practiced any Christianity. Although in the early years of the first Great Awakening, Methodist and Baptist preachers argued for manumission of slaves and abolition, by the early decades of the 19th century, they often had found ways to support the institution. In settings where whites supervised worship and prayer, they used Bible stories that reinforced people's keeping to their places in society, urging slaves to be loyal and to obey their masters. In the 19th century, Methodist and Baptist chapels were founded among many of the smaller communities and common planters.[6] During the early decades of the 19th century, they used stories such as the Curse of Ham to justify slavery to themselves.[6] They promoted the idea that loyal and hard-working slaves would be rewarded in the afterlife. Sometimes slaves established their own Sabbath schools to talk about the Scriptures.[*citation needed*] Slaves who were literate tried to teach others to read, as Frederick Douglass did while still enslaved as a young man in Maryland.

Free blacks

Free blacks in both northern and southern cities formed their own congregations and churches before the end of the 18th century. They organized independent black congregations and churches[7] to practice religion apart from white oversight.[8] Along with white churches opposed to slavery, free blacks in Philadelphia provided aid and comfort to slaves who escaped and helped all new arrivals adjust to city life.[9]



"Wade in the water." Postcard of a river baptism in New Bern, North Carolina, around 1900.

In 1787 in Philadelphia, the Black church was born out of protest and revolutionary reaction to racism. Resenting being relegated to a segregated gallery at St. George's Methodist Church, Methodist preachers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, and other black members, left the church and formed the Free African Society. It was at first non-denominational and provided mutual aid to the free black community. Over time, Jones began to lead Episcopal services there. He finally led most of its members to create the African Church, in the Episcopal tradition. It was accepted as a parish and on July 17, 1794 became the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. In 1804 Jones was the first black priest ordained in the Episcopal Church. (Butler 2000, DuBois 1866).

Richard Allen, a Methodist preacher, wanted to continue with the Methodist tradition. He built a congregation and founded the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). By July 29, 1794, they also had a building ready for their worship. The church adopted the slogan "To Seek for Ourselves." In recognition of his leadership and preaching, in 1799 Bishop Francis Asbury ordained Allen was ordained as a Methodist minister. Allen and the AME Church were active in antislavery campaigns, fought racism in the North, and promoted education, starting schools for black children. Finding that other black congregations in the region were also seeking independence from white control, in 1816 Allen organized a new denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first fully independent black denomination. He was elected its first bishop in 1816. While he and Jones led different denominations, they continued to work closely together and with the black community in Philadelphia.

Petersburg, Virginia had two of the oldest black congregations in the country, both organized before 1800 as a result of the Great Awakening: First Baptist Church (1774) and Gillfield Baptist Church (1797). Each congregation moved from rural areas into Petersburg into their own buildings in the early 19th century. Their two black Baptist congregations were the first of that denomination in the city and they grew rapidly.[2][10][11]

In Savannah, Georgia, a black Baptist congregation was organized by 1777, by George Liele. A former slave, he had been converted by ordained Baptist minister Matthew Moore. His early preaching was encouraged by his master, Henry Sharp. Sharp, a Baptist deacon and Loyalist, freed Liele before the American Revolutionary War began. Liele had been preaching to slaves on plantations, but made his way to Savannah, where he organized a congregation.[12] After 1782, when Liele left the city with the British, Andrew Bryan led what became known as the First African Baptist Church. By 1800 the church had 700 members, and by 1830 it had grown to more than 2400 members. Soon it generated two new black congregations in the city.[13]

Before 1850, First African Baptist in Lexington grew to 1,820 members, making it the largest

congregation in Kentucky. This was under its second pastor, Rev. London Ferrill, a free black,[3] and occurred as Lexington was expanding rapidly as a city. First African Baptist was admitted to the Elkhorn Baptist Association in 1824, where it came somewhat under oversight of white congregations. In 1856 First African Baptist built a large Italianate church, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.[14] By 1861 the congregation numbered 2,223 members.[15]

Reconstruction

See also: Reconstruction era of the United States

After emancipation, Northern churches founded by free blacks, as well as those of predominantly white denominations, sent missions to the South to minister to newly freed slaves, including to teach them to read and write. For instance, Bishop Daniel Payne of the AME Church returned to Charleston, SC, in April 1865 with nine missionaries. He organized committees, associations and teachers to reach freedmen throughout the countryside. In the first year after the war, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church gained 50,000 congregants.[16] By the end of Reconstruction, AME congregations existed from Florida to Texas. Their missioners and preachers had brought more than 250,000 new adherents into the church. While it had a northern base, the church was heavily influenced by this growth in the South and incorporation of many members who had different practices and traditions.[17] Similarly, within the first decade, the independent AME Zion church, founded in New York, also gained tens of thousands of Southern members. These two independent black denominations attracted the most new members in the South.[18]

In 1870 in Jackson, Tennessee, with support from white colleagues of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, more than 40 black Southern ministers, all freedmen and former slaves, met to establish the Southern-based Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church (now Christian Methodist Episcopal Church), founded as an independent branch of Methodism. They took their mostly black congregations with them. They adopted the Methodist Doctrine and elected their first two bishops, William H. Miles of Kentucky and Richard H. Vanderhorst of South Carolina.[18][19] Within three years, from a base of about 40,000, they had grown to 67,000 members, and more than 10 times that many in 50 years.[20]

At the same time, black Baptist churches, well-established before the Civil War, continued to grow and add new congregations. With the rapid growth of black Baptist churches in the South, in 1895 church officials organized a new Baptist association, the National Baptist Convention. This was the unification of three national black conventions, organized in 1880 and the 1890s. It brought together the areas of mission, education and overall cooperation. Despite founding of new black conventions in the early and later 20th century, this is still the largest black religious organization in the United States.[4] These churches blended elements from underground churches with elements from freely established black churches.[7]

The postwar years were marked by a separatist impulse as blacks exercised the right to move and gather beyond white supervision or control. They developed black churches, benevolent societies, fraternal orders and fire companies.[21] In some areas they moved from farms into towns, as in middle Tennessee, or to cities that needed rebuilding, such as Atlanta. Black churches were the focal points of black communities, and their members' quickly seceding from white churches demonstrated their desire to manage their own affairs independently of white supervision. It also showed the prior strength of the "invisible church" hidden from white eyes.[22]

Black preachers provided leadership, encouraged education and economic growth, and were often the primary link between the black and white communities.[*citation needed*] The black church established and/or maintained the first black schools and encouraged community members to fund these schools and other public services.[7] For most black leaders, the churches always were connected to political goals of advancing the race. There grew to be a tension between black leaders from the North and people in the South who wanted to run their churches and worship in their own way.[23]

Since the male hierarchy denied them opportunities for ordination, middle-class women in the black church asserted themselves in other ways: they organized missionary societies to address social issues. These societies provided job training and reading education, worked for better living conditions, raised money for African missions, wrote religious periodicals, and promoted Victorian ideals of womanhood, respectability, and racial uplift.[4]

Civil Rights Movement

See also: American Civil Rights Movement

Black churches held a leadership role in the American Civil Rights Movement. Their history as a centers of strength for the black community made them natural leaders in this moral struggle. In addition they had often served as links between the black and white worlds. Notable minister-activists of the 1950s and 1960s included Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, Bernard Lee, Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt Tee Walker and C.T. Vivian.[24]

Ralph David Abernathy was a Baptist minister involved in the American Civil Rights Movement.

Politics and social issues

The black church continues to be a source of support for members of the African-American community. When compared to American churches as a whole, black churches tend to focus more on social issues such as poverty, gang violence, drug use, prison ministries and racism. A study found that black Christians were more likely to have heard about health care reform from their pastors than were white Christians.[25] Black churches are typically very conservative on sexuality issues, such as homosexuality.[26]

Most surveys indicate that while Blacks tends to vote Democrat in elections, Black churches as a whole are more socially conservative than white evangelicals, especially when it comes to issues of Nationalism.

Black liberation theology

One formalization of theology based on themes of black liberation is the Black liberation theology movement. Its origins can be traced to July 31, 1966, when an *ad hoc* group of 51 black pastors, calling

themselves the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), bought a full-page ad in *The New York Times* to publish their "Black Power Statement", which proposed a more aggressive approach to combating racism using the Bible for inspiration.[27]

Black liberation theology was first systematized by James Cone and Dwight Hopkins. They are considered the leading theologians of this system of belief, although now there are many scholars who have contributed a great deal to the field. In 1969 Cone published the seminal work that laid the basis for black liberation theology, *Black Theology and Black Power*. In the book, Cone asserted that not only was black power not alien to the Gospel, it was, in fact, the Gospel message for all of 20th century America.[28][29]

In 2008, approximately one quarter of African-American churches followed a liberation theology.[30] The theology was thrust into the national spotlight after a controversy arose related to preaching by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, former pastor to then-Senator Barack Obama at Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago. Wright had built Trinity into a successful megachurch following the theology developed by Cone, who has said that he would "point to [Trinity] first" as an example of a church's embodying his message.[31]

As neighborhood institutions

Although black urban neighborhoods in cities which have deindustrialized may have suffered from civic disinvestment,[32] with lower quality schools, less effective policing[33] and fire protection, there are institutions that help to improve the physical and social capital of black neighborhoods. In black neighborhoods the churches may be important sources of social cohesion.[34] For some African Americans the kind of spirituality learned through these churches works as a protective factor against the corrosive forces of poverty and racism.[35] Churches may also do work to improve the physical infrastructure of the neighborhood. Churches in Harlem have undertaken real estate ventures and renovated burnt-out and abandoned brownstones to create new housing for residents.[36] Churches have fought for the right to operate their own schools in place of the often inadequate public schools found in many black neighborhoods.[37]

Traditions

Like many Christians, African American Christians sometimes participate in or attend a Christmas play. *Black Nativity* by Langston Hughes is a re-telling of the classic Nativity story with gospel music. Productions can be found at black theaters and churches all over the country.[38][39] The Three Wise Men are typically played by prominent members of the black community.

Historically black denominations

Throughout U.S. history, religious preferences and racial segregation have fostered development of separate black church denominations, as well as black churches within white denominations.

African Methodist Episcopal Church

Main article: African Methodist Episcopal Church

The first of these churches was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). In the late 18th century, former slave Richard Allen, a Methodist preacher, was an influential deacon and elder at the integrated and affluent St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia. The charismatic Allen had attracted numerous new black members to St. George's. White members had become so uncomfortable that they relegated black worshippers to a segregated gallery. After white members of St. George's started to treat his people as second-class citizens, in 1787 Allen, Absalom Jones, also a preacher; and other black members left St. George's.

They first established the non-denominational Free African Society, which acted as a mutual aid society. Religious differences caused Jones to take numerous followers to create an Episcopal congregation. They established the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, which opened its doors in 1794. Absalom Jones was later ordained by the bishop of the Philadelphia diocese as the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church.

Allen continued for some years within the Methodist denomination but organized a black congregation. By 1794 he and his followers opened the doors of the all-black Mother Bethel AME Church.

Over time, Allen and others sought more independence from white supervision within the Methodist Church. In 1816 Allen gathered four other black congregations together in the mid-Atlantic region to establish the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church as an independent denomination, the first fully independent black denomination. The ministers consecrated Allen as their first bishop.[8]

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Main article: African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion or AME Zion Church, like the AME Church, is an offshoot of the ME Church. Black members of the John Street Methodist Church of New York City left to form their own church after several acts of overt discrimination by white members. In 1796, black Methodists asked the permission of the bishop of the ME Church to meet independently, though still to be part of the ME Church and led by white preachers. This AME Church group built Zion chapel in 1800 and became incorporated in 1801, still subordinate to the ME Church.[40]

In 1820, AME Zion Church members began further separation from the ME Church. By seeking to install black preachers and elders, they created a debate over whether blacks could be ministers. This debate ended in 1822 with the ordination of Abraham Thompson, Leven Smith, and James Varick, the first superintendent (bishop) of the AME Zion church. After the Civil War, the denomination sent missionaries to the South and attracted thousands of new members, who shaped the church.[40]

National Baptist Convention

Main article: National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

The National Baptist Convention was first organized in 1880 as the Foreign Mission Baptist Convention in Montgomery, Alabama. Its founders, including Elias Camp Morris, stressed the preaching of the gospel as

United States Christian bodies

United States Interchurch

National Association of Evangelicals
National Council of Churches
Churches Uniting in Christ

an answer to the shortcomings of a segregated church. In 1895, Morris moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and founded the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., as a merger of the Foreign Mission Convention, the American National Baptist Convention, and the Baptist National Education Convention.[41] The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., is the largest African-American religious organization.[42]

Church of God in Christ

Main article: Church of God in Christ

In 1907, Charles Harrison Mason formed the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) after his Baptist church expelled him. Mason was a member of the Holiness Movement of the late 19th century. In 1906, he attended the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. Upon his return to Tennessee, he began teaching the Pentecostal Holiness message. However, Charles Price Jones and J. A. Jeter of the Holiness movement disagreed with Mason's teachings on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Jones changed the name of his COGIC church to the Church of Christ (Holiness) USA in 1915.

At a conference in Memphis, Tennessee, Mason reorganized the Church of God in Christ as a Holiness Pentecostal body.[43] The headquarters of COGIC is Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. It is the site of Martin Luther King's final sermon, "I've Been to the Mountaintop", delivered the day before he was assassinated.[44]

Other denominations

- African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church and Connection
- Apostolic Faith Mission
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A.
- National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.
- National Missionary Baptist Convention of America
- Pentecostal Assemblies of the World
- Progressive National Baptist Convention
- Spiritual Israel Church and Its Army
- United House of Prayer for All People

S. Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America
North Am. Presbyterian & Reformed Council

Anabaptist & Friends

Brethren Church
Church of the Brethren
Evangelical Friends International
Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches
Friends General Conference
Friends United Meeting
Mennonite Brethren Churches
Mennonite Church USA
Old Order Amish Mennonite Church

Baptist & Stone-Campbell

Baptist

Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Association
American Baptist Churches
Baptist Bible Fellowship International
Baptist General Conference
Baptist Missionary Association of America
Conservative Baptist Association of America
General Association of Regular Baptist Churches
National Association of Free Will Baptists
National Primitive Baptist Convention
North American Baptist Conference
Southern Baptist Convention

African-American Baptist

National Baptist Convention of America
National Baptist Convention, USA
National Missionary Baptist Convention of America
Progressive National Baptist Convention

Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ
Churches of Christ
International Churches of Christ

Catholic & Anglican

Anglican Church in North America
Episcopal Church
Old Roman Catholic Church
Polish National Catholic Church
Roman Catholic Church

- United Holy Church of America, Incorporated

See also

- African American culture
- African American
- Black Madonna, certain European depictions of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary
- The Josephites, a Roman Catholic religious order established to minister to African Americans
- Oblate Sisters of Providence, an order of Roman Catholic nuns created by women from Haiti.
- National Black Catholic Congress
- Religion in Black America

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Holiness & Pietist

Christian and Missionary Alliance
Church of God (Anderson)
Evangelical Covenant Church
Evangelical Free Church of America
Church of the Nazarene
Salvation Army
Seventh-day Adventist Church
Wesleyan Church

Lutheran

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Methodist

African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
Free Methodist Church
United Methodist Church

Orthodox

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Orthodox Church in America
Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia
Serbian Orthodox Church

Non-Chalcedonic

Armenian Apostolic of Am.
Armenian Apostolic Diocese of Am.
Coptic Orthodox Church

Pentecostal

Assemblies of God
Church of God (Cleveland, TN)
Church of God in Christ
Church of God of Prophecy
Full Gospel Fellowship
Intl. Church of the Foursquare Gospel
Intl. Pentecostal Holiness Church
Pentecostal Church of God

Oneness Pentecostal

Pentecostal Assemblies of the World

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United Pentecostal Church Intl.

Presbyterian & Reformed

Christian Reformed Church in North America
Conservative Congregational Christian Conference
Cumberland Presbyterian Church
Evangelical Presbyterian Church
Korean Presbyterian Church in America
International Council of Community Churches
National Asso. of Congregational Christian Churches
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Presbyterian Church in America
Reformed Church in America
United Church of Christ

Other

Church of Christ, Scientist
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Community of Christ
Grace Gospel Fellowship
Independent Fundamental Churches of America
Jehovah's Witnesses
Messianic Jewish Alliance of America
Plymouth Brethren
Vineyard USA
See also: Non-denominational Christianity

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