

History and Development of the African American Disciples and How This Has Impacted The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

African Americans were introduced to the Christian Church primarily as slaves enrolled by their masters as members of a particular congregation. However, there were a small number of Black Disciples, preachers and people who were free. The history of the African American church cannot be recovered accurately at this date, but from the scant fragmentary records available. A dim outline can be formed from the records we have been able to discover. Black membership was in practically all of the first churches where the Disciples movement began. Therefore, one could say that the early Disciples church was a model church in so far as all people being under one shelter: the master, the freedman and the slave all worshiped together.

Between 1830 and 1900 much work had been done culminating in support from the organized agencies of the Christian Church. After the Civil War, concern for the evangelization of Southern Blacks grew and as Disciples saw other denominations evangelizing Blacks they felt they should do as much. Disciples generally agreed during the 1870s that the best approach to evangelizing Blacks was to support Black preachers who would preach to the Black Community.

The American Christian Missionary Society cooperated in supporting African American Evangelists. The Society employed Preston Taylor as National Evangelist. He held evangelistic meetings, established new congregations, recruited other evangelists and gave Disciples a sense of belonging. As these evangelists organized new congregations, their success only underscored the need for pastors trained in evangelism and in ministering to newly organized congregations.

The General Convention (white) in 1890 formed the Board of Negro Education and Evangelization with headquarters in Louisville. The Board appointed Clayton C. Smith as Field Secretary to give guidance to Black work. This operated until 1900 when the Christian Women's Board of Missions was asked by the Convention to assume responsibilities for the work among Black Disciples. At that time there were five schools for education of Blacks. There was a marked gain in the number of churches and members; from churches in five states to churches in fifteen states; from about 7,000 to approximately 20,000 members. When the CWBM took over the work in 1900 and for the next two decades the African American Church made its greatest progress.

In 1914 both the CWBM and the Bible School Dept. of the American Christian Missionary Society were asking for persons to serve as field workers among the women of the churches and the Bible Schools. In answer to the request of the CWBM Miss Rosa Brown was chosen to work among women. Mr. P. H. Moss was selected to serve the Bible Schools beginning October 1. Within a very short time after these two workers were placed on the field, African American work began to move forward everywhere.

Preston Taylor and Malcolm Ayers spoke often before the General Convention (White) asking for shared leadership with the White controlled missionary societies for the work among Blacks but with little results. The interest of Whites was not sustained at any given time which led to a certain resentment from Blacks.

Along with the growth in congregations and membership, there developed a desire by African

American leaders to share in directing their own affairs, dissatisfaction with the type of education offered in schools and the desire for a national fellowship like other church bodies were enjoying (Methodists and AMEZ).

By World War I Black Disciples work and program seemed dormant. Much of the evangelical zeal and appeal of earlier days was missing. Leadership was not generally available when it was greatly needed; the best known and ablest Black Disciple leaders were growing older. Only one other school for Blacks had been established, this in a rural area of east Texas and named Jarvis Christian after the donors of the land.

At this point there were approximately 600 congregations comprising some 48,000 members, representing between 4 and 5% of the total Disciple membership. Recognizing that their participation in the larger program saved them from isolation, still there was a desire for a national organization.

As a result, in 1917 two calls went out to organize a national convention; Preston Taylor sent out a call from Nashville, Tennessee, for a meeting to be held there in September. William Alphin sent out a call for a meeting to be held in Kansas City in connection with the International Convention in October. The people rallied to the call of Preston Taylor and proceeded to organize a National Convention. Many of the White leaders were present and participated in the organization of this convention. Among them were: Mrs. Anna Atwater of Christian Women's Board of Missions; Mr. Robert M. Hopkins of the American Christian Missionary Society; Mr. Stephen J. Corey of the Foreign Christian Missionary Society, and Mr. J. B. Lehman, Superintendent of African American Work.

Preston Taylor addressed the convention saying: "The White Church establishment has failed in their approach in developing Black leaders because of their lack of commitment." Rather than unsubstantiated accusations, he provided statistical data to prove this. He went on: "Blacks have been participants in the Disciples of Christ movement over 100 years, but have very little to show for it. Black congregations number approximately 600, yet there is no mention of this in the latest Yearbook. Although there are six Disciple related African American schools, at this time none offers higher education. Furthermore, it is impossible to produce first class leaders with third class methods." Taylor further said that this was why Blacks with a vested interest must organize for work. If the development of Black leaders does not become a major focus, then he viewed the outlook for them as a dim one. "It is foolish to continue saying that Blacks are not ready. For those who hold this position, should ask the successful Methodists and Baptists if they are ready"

Several were present for the Kansas City meeting and voted approval of the National Convention, which was organized in Nashville as an auxiliary of International Convention.

The purpose of the National Convention was to cooperate in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to promote the causes of evangelism; to foster and maintain a program for Christian education, missions and benevolence among the Christian Churches of the brotherhood; to perform such general supervisory functions as the best interest and work ___ require; and to

cooperate with the International Convention, the United Christian Missionary Society, Unified Promotion, and other brotherhood agencies and boards movements for the furthering of the world program of the church, and to work with other religious movements for the furthering of the world program of the church, and to work with other religious movements chosen by the brotherhood.

To promote a closer spirit of cooperation and fellowship among our own churches.

To provide a larger opportunity for the development of leadership, and responsibility for building the kingdom of God.

To provide a cooperative medium of self-expression and development that our best contribution might be made to the work of the church in the world.

To provide e a medium through which we can interpret the needs and concerns of the people.

To provide a channel for integrating the members of our churches into the total life of the brotherhood.

The work among the congregations was carried out by J.B. Lehman, Rosa Grubbs, P.H. Moss and Deetsey Blackburn. This staff was expanded with the addition of William Alphin and Vance Smith.

But in 1935 Robert Hayes Peoples became the first African American secretary of All African American work. In this capacity he touched and guided many young men and women into Christian Church leadership. Soon after, Peoples was joined by Carnella Jamison (now Barnes) as the field secretary for women's work.

In 1943 R.H. Peoples resigned and recommended the following:

~That the United Christian Missionary Society and other cooperating boards (such as Pension Fund, Church Extension, Higher Education and Christian Board of Publication) employ a staff adequate to help plan and administer the program work among Negro churches and education institutions. He recommended as a minimum: a general worker, a women's worker, a young people's worker, a children's worker, an evangelist and a promotional worker.

This report was referred to a Long Range Program Committee chaired by S.S. Myers. Following meetings and conferences with Dr. Robert H.

Hopkins, President of UCMS, Mr. W.M. Wickizer, Secretary of the Department of Home Missions, Mr. George O. Taylor and Mr. Virgil E. Havens. As a result of these conferences, we submit the following report.

1. That the National Board of this convention take over such functions of the Negro Work now being done by the UCMS and other brotherhood agencies as may be agreed upon by the National Board, UCMS and such “other agencies.” That the Board employ its own staff and establish its own headquarters office, location to be determined by the National Board. That the staff direct the programs of Evangelism, Religious Education, Church Development, Pension Fund, Benevolence, Scholarships, Church Extension, Higher Education, Financial Resources, Enlistment of full-time workers and the Christian Plea.

2. That the constitution be amended to allow representation from UCMS and such other brotherhood agencies cooperating, membership on the National Board.

A search went out for what R.H. Peoples had termed “general worker to handle general administration and work with the ministers and church boards.” In the meantime, C.L. Parks was employed in 1944 to do part of what R.H. Peoples had been doing.

Emmett J. Dickson, a Jarvis College faculty member in 1945, was eventually chosen to become the first (and only) executive secretary of the National Christian Missionary Convention. Carnella Jamison was already serving as national women’s worker. Lorenzo Evans of Atlanta, Georgia came to the staff in 1946 as the director of Christian Education. In 1949 Charles H. Webb of Winston-Salem, N.C. made his first report as the new director of church development and evangelism. Ruth Ratten succeeded Carnella Jamison, and Alva Shackelford Brown succeeded Ruth Ratten.

National Headquarters were established in Indianapolis and then in Missions Building.

By 1947 the principal program and promotional areas were covered. A director of Religious Education who would also promote the interest of CBP and DHE. A director of Missionary Education and organizations and promote NBA. A director of Church Development and Evangelism to promote Evangelism, the program of Church Extension and Pension Fund.

The second phase of R.H. Peoples’s vision had to do with Agency relations.

To further facilitate this a commission was appointed which became the Merger of Program and Services Commission which approved and recommended to the two boards the following:

1. The three program staff of the National Christian Missionary Convention be transferred from the direct supervision of the NCMC to the UCMS and that those staff persons would maintain the same professional status and relationship as other staff members carrying similar portfolios.
2. the UCMS be requested to maintain in its employ a minimum of four staff on an executive level; (Includes the Executive Secretary)
3. The UCMS be requested to set up a staff committee including Black staff members to deal with problems that may arise in regard to program services growing out of Merger;
4. Black representatives selected as board members on the policy-making boards of all church agencies, especially the UCMS;
5. The Council of Agencies, in cooperation with NCMC, be asked to create an Interracial Commission for the purpose of furthering complete integration. (Approved by both parties in 1960 and started July 1, 1960).

In June, 1961 Willard Wickizer, the UMCS Executive Secretary of the Division of Church Life and Work, was pleased to report that since July 1, 1960, Emmett J. Dickson had been employed as national director of church relations on the staff of the Division of Church Life and Work. Lorenzo J. Evans had been appointed National Director of Field Services in the department of Christian Education, following the resignation of Anna Belle Jackson. Carrie Dee Hancock was doing interim service until Lois Mothershed would become full time on June 15, 1961. At that point, no one had been secured to fill the portfolio once carried by Charles Webb, Sr. John Compton had become the first Black trustee board member of UCMS and Emmett Dickson had been seated as a member of the UCMS cabinet. The merger of program and services was underway, but the Disciples of Christ, like everyone else in Christendom, were heading into rising winds of social and cultural change that would radically change the priorities of mission at home as well as the manner in which they were to be achieved. The mammoth march on Washington declared that after more than one hundred years had passed and yet Blacks were not free. The strivings of the nation to come to grips with the tremendous issues being raised by the Civil Rights

movement, plus the struggle of the National and International Conventions to find their true calling as part of the body of Christ, provided a climate for Disciples to deal courageously with the race issue.

It is understandable that against the backdrop of the turbulent social currents the 1963 National Convention appointed a committee to develop a design for renewal and growth. The report of this committee outlined program goals and strategies in evangelism, church establishment and development, Christian education materials and methods, recruitment of ministers and state and national organizational relationships.

Out of the discussions of program and structure, which produced the Design for Renewal and Growth, interest was expressed for a merger of all National Convention structures. Thus, a Joint Committee on Merger and New Brotherhood Relations was formed in January 1966 for the express purpose of getting the two concentrations together. In July of the same year the following commitment was agreed upon:

In recognition that the ultimate unity of the International convention of the Christian church (Disciples of Christ) and the National Christian Missionary Convention is one essential purpose, we recommend to the International Convention of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Christian Missionary Society and the National Christian Missionary Convention the following:

1. That all business procedures of the National Christian Missionary Convention move to unification with the International Convention of the Christian Churches by 1968; however,
2. That other functions vested in the present annual gathering of the NCMC shall continue under a new name, such as, National Christian Missionary Fellowship
3. For the purpose of fellowship of program service and development; and that the newly named organization meet biennially on years other than those years that the International Convention, or its successor, hold its General Assembly.

The mood of the moment in the Black communities and churches across the country was Black empowerment and self-determination. Thus, there was much discussion of the issues raised by members of the Joint Committee.

Some advocated an open debate in order to safeguard the unity of the Fellowship. Others felt it was a waste of time. After extended discussion, the report of the Joint Committee was accepted by the Board of the National Convention as a "progress report," and instruction was given for the committee to further work on the proposal and bring it to the next annual session of the National Convention.

The Joint Committee on merger continued to meet and developed the following for consideration by the National Christian Missionary Convention meeting at Jarvis Christian College in 1968:

1. That the National Christian Missionary Convention and the International Convention take enabling action at their 1968 meetings to provide for the merger of the National Christian Missionary Convention's business functions with the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) or its successor...
2. That the National Christian Missionary Convention become the National Christian Church Conference which shall be directly related administratively to the International Convention of Christian Churches and shall meet for purposes of providing a forum for the discussion of pertinent issues related to Negro life in the context of the total church life; program promotion; leadership training; fellowship; and such other general purposes as shall support and strengthen the congregations involved in the total mission of the church..
3. That, with the mutual agreement of the National Christian Church Conference and the United Christian Missionary Society, the International Convention shall employ an administrative secretary...whose responsibilities shall include:
 - a. Serving as administrative secretary of the National Christian Church Conference.
 - b. Bearing national administrative responsibility for developing consultations with states/areas to the end that state/area structures, programs and services be effective to Negro congregations in each state/area...

The National Convention Board of Trustees met in Hawkins, Texas, April 1969, received the report of the drafting task force, and developed the following merger recommendations to be forwarded to the final meeting of the National Convention in Lexington, KY 1969:

1. The name of the organization shall be the “National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)”.
2. The General Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) should proceed with the necessary steps to name an administrative secretary with executive portfolio to carry responsibility for the National Convocation of the Christian Church.
3. Whenever naming such an administrative secretary, the general office shall consult with the executive committee of the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the administration of the United Christian Missionary society.
4. The establishment in the General Office of the position of Administrative Secretary for the Convocation should include an adequate job description...
5. Negotiators shall be conducted between the General Office of the Christian Church and the United Christian Missionary Society regarding the funding of the new office, but programming for the Convocation School of Faith and Life should continue to be developed through regular program channels!
6. Consultations should continue to determine the future administrative focus and resources of the “Star Supported” program in order to preserve its value and to increase its effectiveness.
7. Specific legal procedure for continuing the legal integrity of the National Christian Missionary Convention Corporation have been developed with legal counsel.
8. Upon approval of the Articles of Operation by the National Christian Missionary Convention Assembly, the National Christian Missionary Convention Assembly should adjourn sine die (indefinitely), and the first meeting of the National Convocation be convened to elect officers under the Articles of Operation.
9. The General Office of the Christian Church should proceed with implementation of the merger dealing with employment, appoints and elections.

In order to clarify the provision in the merger agreement that “the legal integrity and the purposes of the National Christian Missionary Convention,

Disciples of Christ, Inc. be preserved,” some additional stipulations were added under item two in the original document. These recommendations were brought to the 1969 session where they received a unanimous adoption.

During the historic final session of the national of the National Christian Missionary Convention held on the campus of Transylvania University in Lexington, KY, President Raymond E. Brown greeted those attending with these words:

We meet representing what may be called a predominantly Black Convention seeking to implement a merger with what may be called a predominantly white convention. We meet at a time when it is unpopular for Black people to be anything short of proponents of separateness; when it is popular to create unreset; when tensions between peoples are mounting higher and higher; when there are those who want to be where the action is, and yet be true, faithful and just to the principles and heritage of those who established both the church and the National Christian Missionary Convention; but more especially to Him whom we have committed our lives.

The president’s greeting had aptly described the socio-religious conditions within which the final session of the National Christian Missionary Convention convened.

The early 1970’s were the years when Black Disciples of Christ set their mission sails for the holy task as peer Christians in the whole church and the whole world. Acting within the institutional body of a Christian church which was striving to be true to God’s high calling was a very new thing for most of the National Convocation leadership. However, they marched then and still march to a goal articulated very well by Dr. Emmett J. Dickson:

1. To share in the administration of Brotherhood agencies by being on policy-making boards and committees...
2. To share in the work and employment at all levels...
3. To share in the drama and exhibition of the work of the church as performed by the organized life of the Brotherhood...
4. To share in the financial support of the causes and concerns of the church...and
5. To share faithfully and loyally in the activities, fellowship, and aspiration of the Brotherhood as we move toward complete integration.

*By Raymond E. Brown with excerpts from Journey Toward Wholeness by
Brenda M. Cardwell and William K. Fox, Sr.*