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THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH  
IN CHAMPAIGN-URBANA

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CHAMPAIGN-URBANA:

SALEM BAPTIST AND BETHEL A.M.E. CHURCHES

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Historically, the church has been the most important institution in the American black community (McDaniel, 31). The church has not only provided spiritual nurturing, but also social and emotional stability. Through various ways, such as Sunday services, Sunday school, and Bible studies, it has continually offered spiritual guidance for blacks. The church has also opened the door to leadership opportunities for blacks in a very white-dominated America. Most importantly, the church has played a significant social role in the lives of blacks. This paper explores that role. It was the first form of black education and first to provide a meeting place for blacks. Today, black churches not only provide meeting places and ways for blacks to gather socially, but also offer financial and material sustenance to the needy of the community. Different programs and projects have been established to relieve some of the effects of generations of racial discrimination. Black churches in the North End of Champaign, Illinois have been no exception. Two of the larger churches, Salem Baptist, 500 E. Park Street, and Bethal AME Church, 401 E. Park Street, since their start, have provided this special social function for its members.

Before being enslaved in America, blacks in Africa led very different lives in a very different culture. Their

religion was encompassed by spirits. The spirits would make demands that had to be followed, or harm would come to oneself (Huggins, 132). Blacks feared these spirits and lived their lives trying to please them. When brought to America and forced into slavery, blacks experienced a radical change in life. They could no longer <sup>relate</sup> to gods whom they feared. They needed a religion that they could participate in and one that gave them a bright outlook towards the future (Huggins 133). Most masters insisted their slaves follow their religion, and as a result slaves religion began to parallel their masters' beliefs (Gillard, 221).

Religion played the most important role in a slave's life. Their religion "furnished the one and only organized field in which the slaves' suppressed emotions could be released, and the only opportunity for him to develop his own leadership" (Faust, 98). Due to the constant shuffling back and forth from plantations of slaves, no distinct Black Church <sup>was</sup> ever established (Gillard, 221). It was not until after the Civil War when slavery was abolished that the black church could develop. It was then that the distinct Black Church began to form.

After the War and especially in the 20th century, there was a tremendous migration of blacks to the North. Many families packed their things and moved North to take advantage of the unskilled labor opportunities available there and the perceived

racial equality. In Northern cities especially, many small black churches appeared. These "store front churches", as they came to be known, were made up of a handful of members and one minister who met in old run-down shops (Spear, 175). Larger black churches appeared as well. These churches worked toward helping the Negro adjust in the world toward helping the Negro adjust in the world (Fullin-Wider, 34). Although slavery had been abolished, problems for blacks still existed, and the churches helped in dealing with these. Generally the minister's duty was to "attempt to lift people from slum conditions and surround them with a new atmosphere and give them an upward push" (Fullinwider, 35). They were to be spiritual as well as social leaders.

The development of these black churches was a great stride for the black community. An autonomous black church allowed members to initiate educational programs and political agendas without white interference (Harris, 7). This power to control the church without any white influence gave them a sense of self-respect (Spear, 226). It also provided leadership opportunities for blacks which had never been given to them before (Spear, 226).

Most importantly the black church developed a social aspect. Because of the beliefs of blacks at the time, blacks had no place to meet, no public amusements, and no blacks were ever mentioned in a positive way in the press (Gillard, 221).

In Atlanta, Georgia. It has provided many opportunities to

Blacks needed a way to meet other blacks for social and business needs (Gillard, 227). The black church began to provide these needs. Blacks could gather, socialize, help children meet other children, and form business ties. Men could also get help finding jobs through the church (Gillard, 227). It was the black church that was most helpful in opening the doors to blacks.

As in the past, the church today is still the center of social life in black communities (Gillard, 228). It is still used as a meeting place, it still provides education through various programs such as Sunday schools and guest lectures, and it still provides strong social ties through church musicals and festivals (Gillard, 229). However, the church has extended its social aspect to helping the needy. It has helped the needy in the past, but today it plays a much larger role and it is now considered a major role of the church. It has almost become a welfare agency (Gillard, 228). Various churches have developed many different ways to help the poor in their community. Today's black church also has programs that try to get more members involved in the church (Gillard, 228). It is common for churches to hold such things as food and clothing drives and to be active supporters of the Salvation Army or relief programs for other countries. In reviewing selected churches across the country, the social impact of the black church is clear.

One such example of a black church is First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. It has provided many opportunities to

the blacks of its community. It was responsible for first allowing black boys to join the Boy Scouts (Middleton, 10). First Baptist Church was also responsible for opening the first public library to blacks in Atlanta (Middleton, 10). One group within the Church known as Servetta, serves the needs of the young, single mothers of the community, such as baby-sitting (Middleton, 12). Since its beginning in 1867 (Middleton, 10), First Baptist Church has opened the door for many blacks in its community and has continually provided services for its needy. (Brown, 33).

In the Promiseland Community of South Carolina, two main black churches - Mt. Zion and Crossroads - have been "the center of all the community for over a century" (Bethal, 263). Although the Promiseland Community is very poor, the two churches do their best to help. Mt. Zion has a Missionary Society in which the women of the community monitor the welfare of the members (Bethal, 264). They have a special fund which is used to help any of those in need (Bethal, 264). Mt. Zion also holds fundraisers to help collect money to send kids to college (Bethal, 264). The Crossroads Church has <sup>its</sup> ~~their~~ own school which is financed through Sunday collections (Bethal, 276). This allows the children to get some education. In her book Promiseland, Elizabeth Raul Bethal found that one major aspect of life in Promiseland was "the overriding sense of social responsibility which dominated church and community"

(Bethal, 82). taken each Sunday for the Our Gang Day Care

The belief that the church plays a very important social role in America is widespread. Through a survey taken of twenty-one churches in Washington, D.C., it is seen that members as well as pastors stress this social role. Fifty-eight percent of the pastors felt that their most important role was to improve the black community (Brown, 15). Ninety-four percent of the members questioned said the church should get involved in the community, and seventy-seven percent felt that the church was involved (Brown, 53). gives the name and

In the black community of Champaign, Illinois, two prominent black churches, Salem Baptist and Bethal A.M.E., play a vital social role. Salem Baptist was started in 1864, when services began on East University Avenue and at the Old Coffee Place on Park Avenue (Champaign News Gazette). It was started by Sister Susan Franklin Johnson, Kitty Lee, Brother T. J. Shores, J. W. Randolph, and Martin Dandrage (History of Salem Baptist). By 1869 they raised enough money to build a church. In 1902 the original church was destroyed by a fire and the building which stands today was built (Champaign News Gazette).

Today Salem offers a variety of programs to the elderly, youth and needy to their community. In 1958, under the direction of Reverend Eugene Williams, an annex was built which provided ten classrooms (History of Salem). Today, a



collection is taken each Sunday for the Our Gang Day Care Center in the community (Clerk, Salem Baptist Church, 1988).

In order to promote education and involvement of black youth in the church, an annual awards banquet is held to honor the youth (History of Salem). This recognition encourages young blacks to continue their education. Furthermore, an education program called "Operation Excellence" offers tutoring to students of all ages (Rev. Claude E. Shelby Sr., 1988).

Salem is also very active in helping senior citizens. The church bulletin, "Salem Speaks," gives the name and addresses of the sick and infirm, and encourage members to write, call, or visit (History of Salem). They also offer "Peace Meal," a hot lunch service each day at the Douglass Center for senior citizens. This ensures the elderly of at least one hot meal a day and provides the opportunity for senior citizens to socialize. Salem is currently a member of the Council of Congregation<sup>s</sup>, which is a collection of churches. Each church has a representative who does volunteer work, including driving the sick to hospitals and writing letters for those unable to do so (Clerk at Salem Baptist Church, 1988).  
Most importantly, Salem makes a major contribution to helping the poor of their community. They contribute money to the Men's Winter Shelter in Champaign, collect cans to raise money for families during the holidays, and collect



gloves for the children. They have also been a part of a "Bread for Jesus" program for several years. A few times a year, volunteers from different churches go out into the community and paint or do some house repairs. This helps those in the older, run-down houses who cannot afford repairs. Each church also pledges an amount of money to be raised which is sent to Brazil. Every first Sunday of every month they make a special collection called the Benevolent Fund. The money is then used anytime anyone in the community, not necessarily a church member, faces an emergency. It can be used for food, clothing, bus fare, car repairs, or whatever the person may need (Clerk at Salem Baptist Church, 1988).

For over a century the Salem Baptist Church has aided, not just spiritually but socially as well, the black residents on the North end of Champaign. It has perpetuated the traditional role of the black church in America: to offer education, clothing, and social support to all members of the black community.

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is another black church in the North end of Champaign whose social programs are many and varied. It began in the early 1860's, when a small group of blacks in Champaign met weekly to conduct church services. They finally raised \$600 to build a small building on the property of Mr. Jake Taylor at 405 East Park Avenue. In 1877 the church had expanded and was able to purchase a

bigger lot where the church stands today, 401 E. Park (Conference 2). Records show that in 1892 five trustees, William Lee, J. H. Walder, Clay Brown, John Moss, and General C. Lee took action to build a new church (Conference, 2). In 1919 funds were borrowed to build a new parsonage. Six years later two long-time, faithful parishioners, Sarah Watson and her husband Henry, willed their property in Urbana to Bethel. With the sale of the land Bethel was able to pay off all its debts (Conference, 2-3).

It was not until 1959 that another church was built, this is the one which stands today. The money was raised through various fundraisers such as the Helping Hand Club. This provided meals for Sunday School in the basement of Bethel. The last additions to Bethel came in 1969 when the land next door to the church was purchased, and in 1977 when the parsonage was built (Conference, 3). All of the buildings for Bethel came through hard work and contributions of its members.

The activities of Bethel's former reverend, Alfred E. Johnson, who served the church between 1981 and 1988, reflects Bethel's deep concern with social issues. Reverend Johnson was president of the Champaign chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (Kemp, 1988). He was also a member of the Worship Committee, which organizes the black community's celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday (Stiggers, 1988). Although Reverend

Johnson was not a member of the Board of Education, he attended many board meetings and played a very vocal role in their policies (Stiggers, 1988).

Reverend Johnson was also an active member in Ministerial Alliance (Stiggers, 1988). This is a local group of ministers who have joined together to effect social change in the community. One program is the exchanging of pulpits. A minister will go to another church and preach (Kemp). Generally a white preacher will go to a black church and vice versa. These programs are used as a way of uniting the churches. It allows the chance for blacks and whites to learn a little about each other's church. All of Reverend Johnson's various activities show how actively he was involved in the community. He considered a great responsibility of his job as pastor was to be involved in these social programs.

The education of Champaign's young blacks was also a great concern of Reverend Johnson's. For several years Bethel has offered tutoring in the basement of the church for those who wish to obtain their G.E.D. This is a test for those who dropped out of high school and wish to obtain their diploma. Johnson organized this program and recruited volunteers from Parkland College to do the tutoring (Latham, 1988). He also served on the board of the Champaign Boys Club. Bethel has a program called the Youth People's Division (Y.P.D.). Its members are young parisioners from ages 2-26, separated

into 4 age groups (Stiggers, 1988). A large part of Y.P.D.'s emphasis is on community service for the needy. Each year they hold a food drive around the holidays and go caroling to deliver the baskets of food to the elderly (Stiggers, 1988). They also have fundraisers to raise money for the McKinley Foundation shelter for the homeless in Urbana and the Salvation Army. This year the Y.P.D. organized a national program for Trick or Treat (Kemp). Children were given fluorescent stickers to wear on their costumes at night, and the children were given boxes to collect donations while trick-or-treating. All the money collected was donated to Unicef, the United Nations Childrens Fund (Stiggers, 1988).

However the Y.P.D. has another aspect besides benovolent causes in the community. It is not just a program to raise money, but it also strives to bring the children closer together. Every year they host a Halloween party with a haunted house and a breakfast with Santa. The children are in charge of organizing and putting together the whole thing, so they hold fun activities also, such as bowling and basketball (Stiggers, 1988). This helps many of the men in the parish get involved with the youth.

Most importantly the Y.P.D. strives "to develop the young to be leaders, especially in the missions" (Stiggers, 1988). By teaching them organizational skills, parliamentary procedure, and mostly the Bible, they hope to teach them to be good citizens.

They also want to instill in them to "develop an intrinsic need to do mission work" (Stiggers, 1988). Through workshops and seminars they want to teach them to be leaders. Another important message that people want to convey to the young people is pride in their history. The Bethel Y.P.D. recently took a trip to Chicago to visit the DuSable Museum of Afro-American History (Amen Corner). They want to expose them to their culture and teach them about Afro-American History. Two years ago the Bethel Y.P.D. put on a play of the role of the black church in history. The play taught them about different black role models such as Rosa Parks. Every February is black history month and they have a history contest against St. Luke's youth auxiliary (Stiggers, 1988). The children are encouraged to learn as much as they can about Afro-American history. The Y.P.D. is a tremendous asset to Bethel because it develops pride in the youth for themselves and the community. Yet it also instills in them a responsibility to teach these things to the next generation.

Bethel also has a missionary society which has a study program and an activity society. This year the study program is concentrating on poverty in Africa. They hold different lectures and seminars to teach members of the severe problem of poverty in Africa (Stiggers, 1988). The activity society hosts various social programs for the community. They began a "Meals on Wheels" program which delivers meals to sick, elderly, and needy (Amen Corner).

The Steward board, officers of Bethel appointed by the minister, holds extension projects to help the church. Their newest project is a Queen Bethel contest. It is a ten month project in which nine women raise as much money for the church as they can. They raise the money in various ways such as auctions. The woman who raises the most money for Bethel will be crowned queen (Kemp, 1988). This program allows the women to get more involved in the church.

Bethel, as with black churches of the past, has a very important social role in the community. They have a number of fundraisers for the poor, education of the black youth is highly stressed, and the minister plays an active role in the community. For years they have exemplified this social role and continue to do so today.

The black church began as a way for blacks to release emotion. It grew to have tremendous social impact. It gave blacks a chance to congregate, provided leadership opportunities, encouraged education, and became a welfare agency to the community. Today Salem and Bethel churches exemplify this social role. Both provide meeting places for its members and offer various programs to encourage black youth education. Not just Salem and Bethel, but most black churches today provide welfare for the poor through typical programs as fundraisers and food drives. As blacks progress in the world, leadership opportunities for blacks in the church decrease,

because opportunities in other areas have opened. Yet discrimination is still very prevalent today and the role of the church as a way for blacks to release emotion is still essential. Due to President Reagan's recent cutbacks in federal funding, dependency on the church as a welfare agency has increased. The social role of the church has increased throughout history and it seems as though it will continue to expand.

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<sup>h</sup>  
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