Brief histories of local black churches

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church: The oldest black church in Champaign-Urbana, Bethel AME at 401 E. Park St., C, is part of a denomination that dates back to the early 1700s in Philadelphia.

Before this country was founded, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination was organized by a slave named Richard Allen after he led a walk-out at the St. George's Methodist church in Philadelphia. At that church, black members could sit only in the balcony and could not take communion until after the whites. They were also not allowed to worship before the altar.

THE REV. W.T. WHITSITT

Allen held his first church meetings in a blacksmith shop, preaching from behind an anvil. Today the anvil remains a part of the AME church symbol. There are AME churches around the world today, said the Rev. John Nettles Jr., minister at Bethel. AME is widely held to be the oldest black denomination in America.

Salem Baptist Church: At 500 E. Park St., C. Salem is the second oldest black church in Champaign-Urbana and was organized in 1867 with help from white Baptist churches here and in Mahomet. The old portion of the church dates back to the turn of the century and is the longest-standing black church in the community. A large brick addition with a new sanctuary and meeting rooms was completed three years ago.

St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal: The CME denomination was started in Tennessee in 1870. CME, which stood for Colored Methodist Episcopal until 1954, sprang from a predominantly white Methodist denomination called the Methodist Episcopal South.

The St. Luke CME church at 809 N. Fifth St., C, was organized in 1909. Most of the members of the original congregation came from Kentucky. One of its first ministers, the Rev. W.T. Whitsitt, was a tall, lanky man who could have passed for white, but joined the movement to create a local church for his people.

— BECKY MABRY