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The Church and Negro Progress

by George E. Haynes

The marked progress of the Negro in America in which the church has been a factor has been of three general types. The first is intra-group advancement in such phases of life as education and wealth. The second is inter-group adjustments between the Negro population and the white population in such matters as economic relationships, citizenship rights and privileges, interracial contacts and fellowship. There is a third type of progress which touches both the internal and external life of the Negro group such as the cultural contributions of Negroes which have gradually been incorporated into our common life. There are, of course, the emotional attitudes, the growing group solidarity and consciousness, the development of moral customs and similar mental and social factors which the church has profoundly influenced but which are not measurable by the data and objective tests now available.

Educational Progress

In the educational progress of Negroes the church has performed two functions: (1) Financial support and administrative development of schools of several grades and of colleges; (2) An organized channel for distribution of information and emotional stimulation to the rank and file of the Negro group. In the first field the white Protestant churches of the North have performed the larger part of the service, but the distinctly Negro churches have had an increasing share. In the second field obviously Negro churches, both those in distinctly Negro denominations and Negro congregations in mixed communions, have been almost entirely the means of group service.

The Protestant Church missionary societies following the Civil War opened schools with curricula and teachers that introduced the idea of popular education in the South. Upon that pioneer work has been built the public elementary schools for Negroes now gradually gaining support from public taxes in southern states through the stimulus of such agencies as the Jeanes-Slater Funds, the Julius Rosenwald Fund and the General Education Board.

Negro high schools are still largely dependent upon church agencies for support and supervision. The rapidly growing county training schools that are attaining high school standards have accelerated the sentiment among whites for public support. The effect of the church support upon provision of high school opportunities for Negroes in the South is shown by the fact that in 1915 there were probably about 45 four-year course and 18 three-year course public schools in thirteen southern states. There were about 100 four-year course private high schools and a similar number of private schools offering some secondary work of three years or less, at least three-fourths of these private high schools were church-supported.

Twelve years have witnessed some improvement as is shown in figures compiled by W. A. Robinson[1] for 1926–27 for the sixteen southern states: There were 167 public and 84 private state accredited four-year course high schools for Negroes. But these should be contrasted with 4,760 public and 547 private state accredited four-year high schools for whites. The Negro population of these states was 9,008,096 and the white population 28,596,689 in 1920. Meager as it is, more than one-third of real secondary education among Negroes of the South today would disappear if high schools now supported by church educational and mission boards were discontinued.

The public schools during preceding decades have been largely supplied with teachers from normal and industrial schools and colleges all of which, except about thirty-four land-grant colleges and normal and industrial schools receiving largely state aid, were founded and nurtured through infancy by churches or were the direct offshoots of institutions so founded. The history of such institutions as Hampton Institute, Howard University, Fisk University, Talladega College, Wiley College, Virginia Union University, Morehouse College and Knoxville College, to name only a few examples, bears eloquent testimony that the church nurtured Negro educational development. The fact should be added that these schools are receiving increased financial support from Negro church constituents, and that such institutions as Wilberforce University, Livingstone College and Texas College were founded and developed by the Negro churches. It may be safely asserted that up to 1910 the trained leadership of the Negro people in America, with a few exceptions, was the product of schools and colleges fostered by white and Negro churches, and that a major share of the present higher educational training of Negroes is in institutions largely supported by the churches.

Influence of the Negro Church

The influence of the Negro church as an agency for distribution of information to the rank and file of the Negro group has long been recognized by the business and professional classes. Negro business enterprises ally themselves with Negro churches, cultivate their ministers and seek Negro church fairs, bazaars and picnics as occasions to advertise their wares. Negro doctors, dentists, lawyers and politicians of both races for obvious reasons frequent these churches, speak in their meetings, and contribute liberally to their collections. In many cases they criticize the Negro churches and ministers, but realize they can reach and influence a larger number of Negroes through this channel than any other.

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The significance of this mass contact is shown by the figures of Negro church membership the past thirty years. Of denominations exclusively Negro in 1906, there were 2,311,172 members enrolled in Baptist church bodies; 869,710 enrolled in Methodist church bodies; and 24,165 enrolled in other church bodies. In 1916 there were 2,967,085 in Baptist church bodies; 1,077,324 enrolled in Methodist church bodies, and 38,869 enrolled in other Negro church bodies. Incomplete United States Census figures for 1926 give for two exclusively Negro Baptist bodies an enrollment of 3,240,801 members; for eight exclusively Negro Methodist bodies, 1,235,789 members; and for twelve other Negro church bodies 181,880 members.

Of Negro members in communions having mixed membership, in 1906 Baptist bodies enrolled 43,617 Negro members; Methodist bodies enrolled 312,421 Negro members, and other bodies enrolled 83,507 Negro members. In 1916, Baptist bodies enrolled 53,842 Negro members; Methodist bodies enrolled 323,713 Negro members; and other bodies enrolled 103,216 Negro members. Figures for Negroes in mixed communions in 1926 are not available at this writing.

The total enrollment of Negroes in church membership is larger than their membership in any other organization, and probably as large as the membership of fraternities, clubs, insurance companies and similar organizations combined. Church members, furthermore, by no means embrace all who attend church meetings. Probably three-fourths of the Negro population of more than eleven millions regularly or occasionally attend meetings in churches.

The Negro church as a channel for distribution of information and of emotional stimulation is indicated by the figures of mass grouping just outlined and emphasized by a description of the activities that center in the church of the Negro community, separated as it is from most of the other intellectual, political and emotional avenues of expression. The Negro as a worker makes contact with the white world when on his job and receives information, instruction and stimulus so far as his occupation influences his ways of life. All his leisure-time activities that condition intellectual development and emotional motivation under present conditions of segregated Negro life, must find their channel mainly through the principal community agency the Negro has—his church.

These activities vary in the rural district, the small towns and cities and the larger metropolitan centers. In each rural area there are at least two small Negro churches, a Baptist and a Methodist Church, each having religious services once or twice a month and receiving inspiration from an absentee minister on his occasional Sunday visits. The meetings, however, are occasions for exchange of gossip on local events and for the spread of news and stimulation from the larger world. School, home and farm affairs are here discussed. During the summer when weather and roads allow it, sociables and picnics center around the church or are fostered by it.

In the small towns and cities larger group life is feasible, schools are better, houses and homes are often more comfortable. The Negro churches with resident ministers become the centers for musical and literary entertainments. Stereoptican or moving picture shows, traveling musicians and lecturers, church fairs and other exhibitions become the means of community culture. In the large metropolitan cities the Negro church, of course, comes somewhat into competition with the moving picture theatre, the dance hall and other places that cater to leisure. In a scientific survey of Negro life in Detroit in 1926, the Mayor's Interracial Committee reported that the Negro "has been humiliated in so many public and privately owned institutions and amusement places that he has resorted to the church as a place in which he can be sure of peacefully spending his leisure time. To a large extent it takes the place of the theatre, the dance halls and similar amusement places, and fills the vacancy created by the failure of the public and commercial places of recreation and amusement to give him a cordial welcome. Consequently, the average Negro church in Detroit keeps its doors open constantly for the use of the community. Numerous suppers, lectures, recitals, debates, plays and the like are given by clubs and individuals from within and without the congregation."[2]

Functions of the Negro Church

Similar outlet for leisure-time activity is being provided by Negro churches in Jacksonville, Fla., Atlanta, Gal, Baltimore, Md., Washington, D.C., Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York, Springfield, Mass., and many other cities. Many of these are institutional churches with programs, equipment and personnel both volunteer and employed, that compare favorably with the best in popular educational and recreational provision for city neighborhoods. These examples, however, should not lead to the conclusion that the 47,000 Negro churches, or a majority of them, have embraced the programs, technique and policies required to serve the health, housing, recreational and other community needs of the Negro. Progress in this adjustment of the Negro church has been slow due in good measure to the past policy and practice of white philanthropists and social work leaders. With the background of the limited function of the church among themselves, they have subsidized community efforts for improvement of the Negro masses apart from the Negro church, the principal agency that commands the loyalty of the Negro people. Consequently much of the efforts of communities to elevate the Negro have missed the mark and the main agency for his group advancement has not been adequately developed for the social power it can wield.

That many churches have served these needs and are slowly adapting their programs to meet rapidly changing conditions with the migration of Negroes to cities is clearly indicated by such facts as these: For about ten years the white women of the Southern Presbyterian Church have held annual institutes of seven days each for Negro women in the southern states. In 1927 these institutes were held in thirteen states to train colored

women for community leadership in such matters as child training, food conservation, health and domestic science. The total attendance in ten states in 1925 was 429. The women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, have fostered community centers in several southern cities in cooperation with Negro churches and schools. The Methodist Episcopal Church has a full-time secretary with assistants who are studying conditions, holding social service institutes with its Negro ministers and fostering church projects in community betterment. The Protestant Episcopal Church has a training school for Negro social workers, and the Congregational churches are seeking to establish a line of churches North and South for serving the social needs of Negro communities. These samples indicate the connection of the Church with Negro life and a growing adaptation to meet their needs.

The relation of Negro churches to Negro progress in wealth may be seen in the value of church property estimated by the Negro Year Book in 1926 at $100,000,000. This includes school property and parsonages owned by Negro churches as well as buildings used for worship, religious education and social service. Most of this property has been accumulated from small contributions of millions of volunteer givers. It represents the oldest and most continuous, if not the largest and most significant, thrift effort of the Negro group. This combination of thrift funds from small givers worked out in the church has been applied elsewhere, and largely out of it has grown the Negro fraternal beneficial organizations which in 1926 had $218,984,213 benefit certificates in force, $9,349,051 of assets, and paid $2,727,929 in sickness and death benefits. Were the facts available, the encouragement for other wealth accumulations of the group could probably be traced to Negro churches. While proof from statistical data is not available, general observation leads to the impression that Negro educational progress outlined in the preceding paragraphs has had its collateral effect in the increase of wealth among Negroes, especially the professional classes, and in narrowing the margin of poverty among wage-earners.

Economic Relationships

In the advancement of interracial adjustment perhaps the church would not usually be thought of in the field of economic relationships. While difficult to measure, the Negro church has been, nevertheless, a powerful factor in organized economic expression of the group. The Secretary of the Detroit Urban League in 1918 testified that in the placement of about 10,000 Negro workers, men and women, for the fiscal year ending November 15, 1917, those secured through church channels were the most satisfactory; so much so that the employment recruiters of the city turned from pool rooms, saloons and similar places of rendezvous to the churches as the principal source for their labor supply. The Negro worker is still hesitant, because of past experience, about entering heartily into labor organizations with white workers. His church is a working-class institution and is still his avenue of collective action. If that church becomes more conscious of its working-class character it will become a significant factor in industrial relations of the two races. In the farming areas of the South the Negro church is recognized as the one agency that sways the mass of workers. This has, of course, often been used to the disadvantage of the Negro peasant. That is not always the case, however. For example: The farm demonstration movement has received the cooperation of Negro churches; in plantation areas wherever Negro tenants have sought better terms in any concerted way their efforts have centered around a Negro church.

Civic Relationships

Space allows only a few illustrations of the influence of the church in the Negro's struggle for free citizenship status. Henry Ward Beecher and his more illustrious sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, received their inspiration and did a large part of their great work for freedom of the slave through the Church. One of the pioneer Negro advocates of unqualified enjoyment of citizenship rights and privileges was H. M. Turner, himself a freed slave, a Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This same organization for more than a hundred years has had a line of prelates known within and without the Negro world for their uncompromising stand on civic rights and privileges for the race. The present-day tendency of many Negro voters to show their political independence by allying themselves with the Democratic Party had its inception largely in the dramatic bolt to the support of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 of Bishop Alexander Walters of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, who announced his stand in an address at a mass meeting which crowded Carnegie Hall in New York, and by a spectacular procession to the Baltimore Democratic Convention with his followers, of them prominent Negro churchmen. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People during nearly a score of years of work for equality of citizenship for Americans of color has leaned upon the Negro churches for meeting places, for large parts of its audiences at public meetings and for financial support.

Interracial Cooperation

Interracial contacts under influence of the Church between whites and Negroes, especially in the South, have been important since the days when many white churches had pews for slaves and many able Negro preachers "broke the Bread of Life" to white parishioners. After emancipation the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, attended the birth of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and ordained its first bishop as a communion for the freedmen who had formerly been members of the southern body. (Throughout the years since there has been comity hetween clergy and laymen of the two denominations locally and nationally.) While not so formally organized as the Methodists, the white and Negro Baptists, North and South, have sustained contacts which embraced cooperation in action and comity in

religious doctrine.

The growing liberal opinion in the South on the race question had its inception and continues to get its stimulation largely through the contacts of churchmen, white and colored. The outstanding men and women of this movement, especially among southern white people, have been officers and laymen of prominence in the churches, and some of the most important public utterances of organized groups of whites on the race problem the past twenty years have been from church groups such as the College of Bishops, the General Conference and the Women's Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Women's Auxiliary of the Southern Presbyterian Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Northern Baptist Convention, the National Council of Congregational Churches, and the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In recent years the churches have recognized that the very success of sixty years of educational work they have shared in rendering the Negro people has developed a highly intelligent, cultured class and has raised the level of intelligence of the whole group. With corresponding reduction of poverty and serfdom has come a growing and insistent demand for participation in all the varied departments of American life. White and Negro church leaders for the past twenty years through more than twenty-eight denominations have been experimenting in effective methods of education in friendly racial attitudes and in practical constructive programs of peaceful race adjustment toward this end. The first line of action has been a participation in the campaign to abolish the lynching evil and remove the racial discrimination in the courts of law, as the first step toward security of person and property.

The church leaders, however, have visualized a larger and more positive program and have been laying a foundation for it by an educational campaign of conferences, study and discussion groups, the preparation and distribution of books and pamphlets, etc. Conservative estimate places the number of church constituents already touched by this educational effort as between four and five millions. The dominant idea of these interracial contacts has not been the desire of the whites to exploit the blacks, nor the patronizing policy of superiors who would uplift the lowly, but a clear recognition of mutual advantage of remarkable artistic creations from Bible interaction on the horizontal plane themes where both races have substantial values to contribute.

Partly as a result of these efforts to adjust racial relations there has been increased church support for Negro education, in a rapid multiplication of interracial committees and groups for various community and cultural enterprises of mutual interest in the study of the problems in more than sixty southern white colleges, and in the participation of the Negro both as contributor and beneficiary in the welfare programs of almost every state and city where there are Negro populations of large proportions.

Cultural Developments

The contributions which Negroes have made to American culture have had a unique relation to the Negro church. Negro spirituals in Negro church meetings were born out of the yearning for self-expression which the Negro found only in religious group worship. These songs yield spiritual as well as musical substance of universal value. Adaptations and art compositions, too numerous to mention here, based upon these Negro creations have delighted music lovers in Europe and America. Negro musicians, poets and prose writers and artists found encouragement from Negro church audiences years before the white public knew they existed. Roland Hayes, one of the world's great singers, largely served his apprenticeship in concerts under such auspices. The budding of Fine Arts produced by Negroes has, fortunately, had the stimulus of school instruction and some philanthropic support, but Henry O. Tanner, the Negro artist who has so far achieved the widest recognition, is the son of a Negro bishop, received his nurture in the church and has rewarded him with remarkable artistic creations from Bible themes.

Attitudes and Morale

To venture upon a discussion of emotional attitudes and the growth of group consciousness in relation to the church is too hazardous in view of the meager data and objective tests. That the Negro church has heen the means of increasing group organization, solidarity and power to serve a growing group consciousness of values and purpose is indicated by the increasing membership, especially in church denominations exclusively Negro; by the increase in Negro church property estimated by the NegroYear Book in 1926 as $98,500,000 since 1866 and by the number, the independence and the aggressiveness of Negro church leaders.

Throughout the three centuries of hectic Negro life in America the Negro church and religious life has given a motivation born of hope in the future and faith in the present that has sustained the morale and lengthened the patience of the Negro under conditions which either broke the Indian's spirit or drove him into the revolt of despair. In his church services the Negro felt the elevation of his belief in God who respected his personality while the surrounding world humiliated and exploited him. The Negro minister usually was deficient in the erudition of the schools, but he shared the humiliations and trials of his people and knew from experience how to reach the motivating forces of their imagination and emotions and to energize them for the trials of their present plight by the promises of freedom, peace and plenty in a Better Land. Probably this same factor has made the Negro church such a powerful force among Negroes migrating to southern cities and to northern industrial centers. Cases are on record of whole church congregations moving North in a body and bringing their pastors with them.

In another direction the Negro church has given social compensation for the restrictions of the segregated, handicapped life of Negroes in America. The Negro group has potential leaders seeking creative expression far

beyond the opportunities the white world allows under the existing social pressure of race prejudices and taboos. In economic life the higher paid employment and the executive and managerial positions are closed to Negroes. In the broader fields of education the avenues to leadership in administration, research and instruction are not open to them. Similar situations have confronted the Negro aspirant for leadership in many other fields. Gradually the Negro doctor and dentist won places through Negro patronage, but even here the social pressure of the color line still operates in some medical schools, in hospitals and in nurse training schools. Until recent years, therefore, Negroes with talent for leadership found their main outlet in church organizations. The rapid growth of Negro church membership during the past thirty years, in the face of the multiplying distractions of modern living and the changed conditions of urban residence, is partially explained by the church as a field for leadership excluded from other avenues and by the motivating force of emotional and imaginative self-expression in Negro church exercises.

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In the phases of life touched upon here, and in others not mentioned, the church has influenced favorably Negro progress. It has sometimes affected Negro life unfavorably, conserving forces and sustaining practices upon which social progress had pronounced sentence. The divisive force of zealous denominationalism, the consequent weakening of leadership and the multiplication of edifices ill adapted for serving present needs are all faults chargeable to the church.

In spite of these weaknesses, however, no one institution has probably contributed as much to Negro development. In the development of education and thrift, in the interracial adjustments between white and Negro populations and in the interdependent give-and-take of cultural life in America, as well as the less tangible social factors of interracial contacts, of group organization, racial attitudes, solidarity and motivation, the church and especially the segregated Negro church, has been a powerful ally of Negro progress.

Notes

[1]W.A. Robinson. "Four-Year Accredited High Schools in the South." *The Bulletin of the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools*, volume viii, number viii, (June/July 1928).

[2]Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, Inc. *The Negro in Detroit*. (Detroit: Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, 1926).

George E. Haynes served as secretary of the Commission on the Church and Race Relations for the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America during the writing of this article in 1928.