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Impact of African American Diaspora Church in the African American Community

Abstract

To many, the church has a very standard and general view. It is seen as a house of worship. It is where different individuals, irrespective of class, come together to worship a common deity. Based on the religion, each church has its own practices, customs, and rituals. However, to some, a church means more than just a place of worship. To some, the church is life. To be clear, this isn't to be confused with asserting that some view God as their life. No. The church itself is their life. In other words, all of their hope, reasons to live, encouragement, opportunities and more come from their church. By looking at both the history of Abyssinian Baptist Church and the struggles experienced among the African American people during their immigration over the years, this paper looks to show how a diaspora church in the African American community serves as a pillar for the African American community it resides in. The diaspora symbolizes more than just worship. It symbolizes hope, positivity, and a beacon of light in the darkness. The church means to the African American community something that may never be explainable to one on the outside.

Introduction

Abyssinian Baptist Church is an African-American Baptist church, currently located in a landmark Gothic and Tudor in Harlem, New York. It is regarded as the first African-American church in the state of New York, and one of the oldest across the United States. Today, it continues to serve as a place of social activism, cultural expression, and worship. The continued

incorporation of more than just religious services continues to show the direction of the church and how the church sees itself in the community. Through the attended services, observed interactions, and limited conversation with individuals among the congregation, it is clear that the church itself is more than just a church. Instead, it seems to be more of a central hub that brings the people together. While many organizations tend to be radically separated from their history to the point that the history doesn't align with the present, the same can't be said about this church. Their history, along with the history of the African American people themselves, truly shape the vision of the church.

Church History

The church has a very unique story when it comes to its founding. The church began in 1808 by a group of 16 African Americans (12 women and 4 men). The reason behind these 16 individuals deciding to start a church is because of the fact that they refused to accept segregated seating in the First Baptist Church of New York City. Consequently, they preferred to start a new church where they didn't have to undergo such treatment (stories like this does prove that Rosa Parks wasn't the only or first individual to stand for what they believed in). The church name was inspired by the ancient name of Ethiopia, Abyssinia. Thus Abyssinian Baptist Church was formed and was initially located in lower Manhattan on 40 Worth Street. As a fellow African American located in Boston, Reverend Thomas Paul aided this newly formed congregation in purchasing this first home, and also in its overall organization and structure as the first African-American Baptist church in New York State. Reverend John VanVessler became the church's first senior pastor. The church stayed at the aforementioned location for about 50+ years before moving on to Broadway Tabernacle, and different locations on Thompson and Spring Streets.

Throughout their 200+ year history, there are some noteworthy events which transformed the church into what it is today. They have a very rich history, and it is because of that history that they are able to have such a high standing in the community today. Between 1856 and 1885, the church membership hit 1600 congregants. In 1902, under the direction of Reverend Dr. Charles Satchell Morris, they were able to purchase a new church building and apartment house further uptown in New York City. This purchase signaled a migration of the african americans and an increased black population in the uptown parts of New York City. In 1908, Reverend Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, the church's 17th pastor, ushered in a very important transition piece of the church's history known as "The Powell Years". The church underwent a reorganization to not only just be a house of worship. Instead, he wanted to create a model church that not only responded to the religious needs of the African American population, but also their social needs. The idea of a "social gospel" became a blend of both the social aspects of the church along with the religious aspects. This transformation really kickstarted a change in the ongoing mission of the church.

By 1937, the church grew to over 10,000 church members. By 1941, the church hit 14,000 members. This made Abyssinian one of the largest and most influential black churches across the country. It is also still regarded as one of the largest Protestant churches in the world today. Over the next 20 odd years, the church had a number of representatives that slowly found their way into politics. This gave the church more of a voice not only among the religious aspect, but socially and politically as well. This also aided in the African-American pursuit of equal rights. The church itself was able to develop strong affiliations which allowed it to be linked with the National council of Churches as well as the World Council of Churches. This affiliation helped with addressing the concerns of those who were oppressed both locally and globally. In

1993, the church became a landmark, and built a high school in New York City. Other highlights include creating development organizations for urban construction, funds to help those abroad and more. As one can see, the church has been very active over its lifetime, which allowed it to rise to prominence as quickly as it did.

African composition in NY

When it comes to the composition of the African American population globally, New York City continues to be an area that has a very strong African American presence outside of Africa. African Americans make up one of the longest running ethnic backgrounds present in New York City. Additionally, by quite a significant margin, New York City is the home of the largest urban African American population outside of Africa. Based on a census done back in 2010, New York City has the largest populations of blacks across the United States with over 2 million (this is in spite of a decrease since 2000).

Post 1827 and Pre Civil War, which was when slavery was totally abolished in New York, New York City quickly became one of the largest concentrated areas of African Americans. Emancipated African-Americans were able to establish communities for themselves in the present day area of Central Park in Manhattan, and pockets of Staten Island as well as Brooklyn. As one can imagine, post slavery a lot was up in the air and not yet established. Though the slavery laws were abolished, there were still many ways in which the people were still slaves of some sort. They had limited rights, including not having a right to vote. To help combat this, many institutions were put in place in order to help advance the community and help them settle into their new lives. Unfortunately, not everything that started remained and succeeded. For example, a journal was established in an effort to serve as a powerful voice on behalf of and for the African American community.

Post Civil War, there was even more migration activity amongst the African American population. In the late 19th century and early 20th, what became known as the Jim Crow laws were passed. In a nutshell, these laws were passed in the Southern part of the United States that enforced racial segregation, and generally stayed in effect until the 1960s. Consequently, a mass migration occurred which drove many African Americans away from the South and up to the northern metropolitan areas. Coincidentally, this migration coincided with the power transition among the African American community. Their center of power and overall demographic concentrations shifted from other cities to the city of Harlem. The biggest contribution to this was when the Afro-American Realty Company was established. This company had a Robin Hood-like mindset where it bought and leased out houses in different areas of Harlem post house crashes in 1904. Another reason is because of the fear of different anti-black riots occurring again in the southern parts of Manhattan.

The General Role of the church in the African American Community

When black churches first came about in this country, there was little interest in having the church mingle in political and social affairs. Given their history, one could easily picture a couple of reasons as to why this was the case. However, circumstances caused the people of the church to rethink this mindset. The Great Migration happened to be one of those circumstances. The Great migration occurred during the 1910s until the 1970s. During this time period, approximately six million African Americans migrated from the southern parts of the United States to the Northern, Western and MidWestern states. As previously mentioned, this migration was driven by the desire to escape racial violence while also seeking out better opportunities. This huge influx of people was not coordinated or planned. It was not a vacation being spent with family, friends, or relatives. Instead, it was just a complete uproot from one vaguely

unfamiliar place, to a completely unfamiliar place. There were no preparations or arrangements made beforehand to receive them. Thus, where were the people going to and how would they manage to survive? The government was not their help. Thus, the only thing that could help the people were the most powerful institutions that existed among the African American people: the church. The church had a choice to make: it could either idly stand by and watch its own people struggle in a situation and potentially never make it out, or engage in the migration and help the people get on their two feet. After all, the institutions that were already there had their own battles they faced. They were trying to fit into the larger demographic which they lived in. It is likely they could have felt that helping out their fellow immigrants could have slowed down, or completely erased, all of their progress.

Whether it be for selfish reasons, the church ended up choosing the latter. The church realized that worship services alone are not enough to justify itself as a church. Preaching the gospel should also be reflected in their day to day activities. After all, the church must have recognized that if they wanted to grow, it would have to be able to at least appeal to its own demographic. One can only wonder what the reputation of the church (and the people) would have been if neither was willing to help the other. Nevertheless, the decision for the church to eventually help the African American immigrants was crucial. The aid came in more ways than one. Churches became shelters, food pantries, transportation, social service centers, and more for a number of people. Churches assisted in helping people broaden their skillset, with the hopes of making them more qualified for a wider variety of jobs.

Remembering that most of the people were once slaves, the church was dealing with people who probably didn't care much at the time about the spiritual aspects that the church had to offer. It may seem that there was no benefit for the church from all of the work they were

doing. On the contrary. The church did gain some benefits from engaging in these activities. First and foremost, it did help increase their congregation. All of the people that they helped would inevitably stay at the church that helped them. Secondly, the church was able to no longer just build the soul, but also the mind. Not to say that the church was now in charge of people, but they were able to help guide the people in a manner they felt was appropriate and according to their religion. Social activities were conducted by the church, so it was easier for the church to guide the activities people participated in. The church became what people were so dependent on. Lastly, the church was able to transform people and transform them into their idea of what looks to be a reflection of their church. The church was dealing with people who were broken, discouraged, hopeless, and both emotionally and physically deflated. It's as if the church was given babies to raise. The church was a safe haven for people that felt that better days would be impossible to come by. The church served as an opportunity for people to be able to create an identity for themselves. It also gave the church an opportunity to become more in tune with what the community actually needed. The sermons and singing only helped so much. It was clearer to the church what was expected of them.

The church slowly established itself more and more as a pillar of the community. This can potentially be one reason why Black mega-churches started to emerge, and become more and more mainstream in African American Christianity. Overall, churches received a great profit from engaging in so many activities. They were able to gain more of a voice, and even more credibility because of how much they influenced the community. Considering the people they were helping had very dark pasts and suffered greatly, the church became the hope of the community. And considering the number of people the church was affecting, it gave the church a higher standing in the community.

Abyssinian Baptist Church

The church in the African American community is more than just a church to the people in the community. Based on the environment in the Abyssinian Baptist Church, one can quickly realize how evident this is. The website for the church seems to have more information about what goes on in the church and how the church can help anyone that comes as opposed to the nature of the services. One can be forgiven for finding it difficult to find where the information about the service schedule is. The church services themselves emphasize a lot on the different things that go on in the church. There is a very welcoming feeling upon entering the church. It is as if one walked into a 5 star hotel and was received by the chief of the hotel. People seem so familiar with one another that a visitor seems to stick out like a sore thumb. The reception

Additionally, just based on several conversations, one wonders if people's desire for going to church has to do with their willingness to get closer to God, or if it has more to do with their desire to find a sense of family. Several conversations that occurred while visiting are worth noting. In one conversation, an individual, of African descent, mentioned their experience which made them stay in their church. They originally were not Baptist because of their parents' belief. They mentioned they had a bad experience which made them choose to search elsewhere for a place to worship. That ultimately led them not only to a different place of worship, but a completely new religion. When asked why, it actually had nothing to do with the beliefs, customs, services, or anything religious for that matter. It actually had to do with the people themselves. The individual mentioned they didn't receive any reception from the people in the church. They were originally presented as a visitor, but ever since, nothing happened. They felt that the church was only looking to grow in members, but never did anything to preserve those members.

One wonders if this constitutes a reason enough to look for another church. Ideally, when going to a place of worship, whether one stays or goes should be determined more by whether or not the person feels the presence of God in a way they like. However, this is not the case here. The individual went on to say that their reason for coming and staying at Abyssinian Baptist Church is because there was a feeling of a family. The individual recounted that when they first attended the church, they were in the process of moving. The church offered to assist in their moving process. Though the individual declined, they were amazed at how they were offered something within a month of attending a church that they weren't offered at their previous church home of 5+ years. Overall, the individual mentioned that the church itself felt like a home to them. They are in the country by themselves, but no longer felt that as much since going to this church. The church became a one stop shop for the person and they felt they found everything they needed right there and then. The church connected the individual with other people in the community, different opportunities they couldn't find on their own. All of this was mentioned, but not once was anything mentioned about the worship when speaking about either church. The influence the church had was more than just the services. Relatively speaking, the church doesn't have as many services as one would expect for a church of its size. And based on what was said, it doesn't seem like that is essential.

Another conversation with another individual highlighted one interesting aspect of the African American culture in church. Most churches would ideally refer to their leaders based on their title (i.e - Pastor, Reverend, Bishop, etc). Here though, it seems many refer to the senior leader as "Father" or some sort of fatherly figure name. This title is more than just a title. It isn't clear if it is something that was started by the pastor themselves, or just the way the congregation views their leader, but this title is more than just a title. This is actually how the people view

their leader. Multiple times the individual referred to their pastor as father. When speaking on things they do and don't do, it is a matter of "Father said do..." or "Father said not to do..". Going further, it also seems like the people in the church do (or do not do) something only if the senior pastor gives permission for it to be done. If the pastor says no, then it can not be done. The most interesting part about this is that it seems like everyone is willing to adhere to this. There's very little resistance to this policy, regardless of age. Even those who are not of African American descent seem to willingly comply with these same rules. It doesn't seem forced based on conversations, but rather something people openly enjoy. It's beautiful to see how attached the congregation is to each other and to their leader. In many mega churches, that is usually uncommon simply because the congregant to pastor ratio is exorbitant. On the other hand, it does make one wonder if a church going down this path is losing its spirituality and is becoming more pastor-centric. In all conversations, very little was said about what people loved about the service. Conversations with people show exactly how people see the church and what hits them most.

Conclusion

The African American Diaspora church plays a critical role in the African American community which dates back to the history of its people. Some may fail to realize that even though one may refer to it as "history", certain events are still fresh in the mind of a number of people. The African American community is still very much so aware of their history, and some witnessed it first hand. The church is an institution that didn't just give the people a place to worship, but a place to feel as if they belong. These experiences have shaped the church and its vision into what it is today. The church is not just a church. It gave the community life and an identity. Up to date, it still continues to do so.

Field Visit #1

- Haven't been to a church like this in over a decade. I can see architectural structures that make this place different from the rest. The building stands out on the block
- Seems the church still practices social distancing and wearing masks.
- I've been to a Baptist church before, but this one is very different on the inside from what I've known until now. There's a lot more decor and the altar is a lot more heavily decorated. A lot of decor, chandeliers, candles, etc.
- From what I've come to know about Baptist churches, this one was the exact opposite. In my culture, baptist churches tend to be very somber services. You'd be forgiven for thinking you mistakenly entered into a funeral service instead of a church service. But for this service today, it was not that at all. Very lively. The director of the service was very lively, engaging the audience. The praise and worship team did not just sing very quiet and soft songs. They did incorporate some lively songs as well. This did take me back when I first arrived.
- The sermon that I heard today was very practical for everyday life. I am not sure if other sermons or messengers are like this, but this sermon today was less theoretical and more practical. I've only been to one other baptist church, and that itself was much more theoretical than anything else. Was actually one of the reasons I didn't want to go back.
- The messenger was very lively. Outside of the awkward joke attempts, you can tell the messenger wanted to keep the audience engaged. Everyone stands up when the sermon is finished, which I find to be interesting.
- Being a visitor was fun. Received some special attention and a nice reception.

Field Visit #2

- Again came back for a service. Will probably be only attending Sunday morning services.
- The congregation is very diverse, which I didn't expect to see.
- One thing that I didn't note in my first field visit is the fact that this is the first English service I've been to in about 15 years.
- The service involves a lot of different people. Some churches tend to only have one person do everything from start to finish. This church is the exact opposite. I must have seen at least 6-7 people come on the pulpit in one service.
- I had the opportunity to attend a baptism service by chance. Several things that stood out
 - All the women dressed in all white
 - Men dressed in all black. Not something I would have expected
 - Two people seem to have been getting baptized while only coming to church for the second time. Perhaps I am old schooled, but I wouldn't have expected something like that to happen. I do believe it is important for someone to know the decision they are making and what it means before actually doing it.
 - I usually see a confession of faith done by the one who is getting baptized before they get into the water
 - I guess I am used to the baptism class taking a long time. This one must have taken 2-3 minutes at best.
- In general, I saw a number of people dressed in all black. People who were active in the service. I do wonder if that is a cultural thing.

- A lot of announcements about so many different activities. Church is very active

Field Visit #3

- I did have a conversation with a member of the church that I ran into. Will be useful for the final paper. Notes on this conversation are as follows:
 - The individual has been in the church for about a year, but was not always a Baptist.
 - Prior to being a Baptist, the individual was a Jehovah Witness for several years
 - African descent. Immigrant. Here by themselves
 - Really enjoy their current church.
 - Mentions how they are active in a number of different activities in the church and how it helps them get to know more people
 - Considering they are here alone, they enjoy finding friendships in the church.
 - The church environment is very welcoming and friendly.
 - They were shocked at how easy it was for them to integrate into the church.
 - They mentioned that there are a lot of events that happen continually, and the events tend to have a good turnout.
 - There's really a sense of community and family among the church
 - Although there are issues, the issues don't tear people apart. If anything people are willing to resolve issues where possible.
 - They did invite me to join in a couple of events. Had to decline unfortunately
 - They did introduce me to a couple of people they knew

Field Visit #4

- Last visit. Once again, came to a Sunday morning service
- One observation for me is that I don't see many youths around. Probably something I should have asked, but I am wondering if it is because there is a separate youth service. Think I am young enough to join.
- They are really active in the community. That is evident from the different activities they have coming up.
- They also do touch on a wide range of activities. You can tell they probably have a lot of ministries.
- The way people stay in church and seem to not leave, it is apparent that a lot of people really do enjoy the church and seem to not want to leave.
- This was the first time I left a bit late, but I realized that people who were active in service interacted with the congregation after service finished.
- One thing that I found interesting during my four visits is that had I not known beforehand, I wouldn't have realized this was an African American church. There wasn't much that stood out to me that made me feel this was an African based church. I am not sure if this is by design, or if in general African churches in America are like that. But I would have liked to have felt that I walked away with an experience that is unique to African culture.

