

Episode 3: African American Lutherans Post-Civil War: Stories they Could Tell

Despite the large number of Black people in the South Carolina Synod before the Civil War, most Black people after emancipation, like those in other white southern denominations gradually left and formed churches of their own which were not Lutheran.

The “War between the States” had a significant impact on African American Lutheranism. As free Americans, Lutherans of African descent after 1865 had a newfound voice. In the southern states, two distinct strategies were established by synods in dealing with their members of African descent who were now free.

The First Strategy was to pretend that nothing had changed in terms of the White church structure relating to Black people.

+ One way this was carried out was to maintain the congregation’s multi-racial worship experience with the **opening up** of seating arrangements.

+ The second strategy was to encourage black Lutherans to form their own congregations.

Regarding the first strategy, in South Carolina where there were the greatest numbers of Lutherans of African descent: Signs of the growing friction were seen in the Lutheran newspapers and even in: St. John’s, Charleston, where the Vestry received complaint of ‘the habit of encroaching on white seats and mixing in the same pews with the whites by the freedmen. The living out of a multiracial Christian community within South Carolina ended in 1869, when the synod’s parochial reports omitted the columns for colored membership and changed their constitutions to allow only “male white” membership. The second synodical strategy of establishing ethnic-specific new starts (to use the nomenclature of the ELCA) was used successfully by the North Carolina Synod in 1868, when the synod licensed Michael M. Coble, who was also allowed to administer communion, and he seemed to do well. A few black men were licensed over the following years, but none were ordained. In 1880, the General Synod ordained D. J. Koontz of the North Carolina Synod. In 1884, Nathan Clapp and Samuel Holt were added to the ever-so-small group of black Lutheran pastors, but they still were not allowed to take part in synodical functions, and they received little -- to no -- financial support. So, in a sign of self-determination, the African-descent pastors (we referred to, a moment, ago) sought permission from the North Carolina Synod to establish a non-geographical synod (I’m using ELCA nomenclature, once again) called: The Alpha Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Freedmen in America. This self-determinative synod survived for only one year, from 1889 to 1890, due to the death of Pastor Koontz and the resignations of Pastors Holt and Clapp under pressure from Pastor Bakke (a white man!), who was the director of colored missions of the Synodical Conference.

Now, there have been a number of times in the twentieth (and) twenty-first centuries when Lutheran clergy and seminarians of African descent have, in assembly, called for a “resurrection” of the Alpha Synod. But clergy and seminarian voices go silent, however, when the issue of financial sustainability of such a synod is raised. Just as the colored missions of the Synodical Conference in North Carolina held sway via its financial clout, so too --- the churchwide units of the ELCA in their financial support of black congregations create a barrier to self-determination that is difficult for congregations of African descent -- to cross.

The post-Civil War period brought evangelization, within a Lutheran context, among African-descent people in the North, as well. In 1880, the first Negro congregation in New York State to apply for synodical membership was Trinity Lutheran in Greenport, Long Island. When, however, Trinity’s [White] mission pastor left for Hartford, Connecticut, the synod rejected the African American congregation’s membership in the synod and added [insult to injury] by giving the synod’s financial support to the white congregation in Hartford in order to ease their congregational debt. The rationale given by the Committee on Applications for re-allocating the funds was that -- if they gave the money to the black people there would be congregational/synodical difficulties to follow. The Synod Conference, however, rejected the committee’s recommendation and received the African-descent congregation into synodical membership. But, **where to find a pastor of African descent?** So, in subsequent years, “Trinity” extended invitations to Methodist and Baptist clergy to serve as their pastors, allowed by synod rules for the ordination of clergy. But, **the relationship** between these candidates for ordination and synodical staff **never** developed, and in 1885 the Greenport colored church, not having reported to the synod assembly for three years, was dropped from the rolls. But, that same year (1885) saw better news regarding outreach to the African-descent community in Washington, DC. “Luther Place Memorial Church” attempted to reach out to the Lutherans of Caribbean descent coming to the mainland as students at Howard University, an historically black institution of higher learning. Luther Place’s Vestry decided to call Daniel Wiseman, a Lutheran from St. Croix, the Dutch West Indies, as their assistant pastor **with sole responsibility** == that’s SOLE RESPONSIBILITY for beginning a mission church among Lutherans of African descent. Pastor Wiseman and his wife not only served in a pastoral role among Howard’s students who were Lutherans of many generations on the islands of the Caribbean, but also used their home as a bed and breakfast for many students over a forty-year period.

Pastor Wiseman established the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer in 1885. It stands as the oldest existing indigenous African American Lutheran church on the mainland of the United States of America. Yours, truly is proud to have served as its fourth pastor in its one-hundred-and-thirty-four-year history!