

RELIGION

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Black identity key to church growth

Black identity can be key to a Black church's growth, according to pastors of three of the fastest-growing congregations in the 1.7 million member United Church of Christ.

A predominantly-white denomination, the United Church has shown overall membership declines during the past decade, slipping from 1.9 million in 1973. But thanks to striking gains in some congregations, its Black membership has increased from 43,400 in 1973 to 53,450 in 1981.

The reason is Black theology, community service activities and Black music augmented by use of the media for evangelism, say the ministers of Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago; Shaker Heights Community United Church of Christ, Ohio, and People's Congregational Church, Washington, D.C.

"New members at Trinity are taught, 'We are unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian,'" pastor Jeremiah Wright points out.

"As a result of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, Blacks started affirming their own roots and heritage," he explains. "Our members asked themselves, 'Are we going to be a Black church in the Black community or a white church in Black face?'"

"They opted to discard the upper-middle-class 'typical congregational parish' that specializes in European liturgical forms, European music and an occasional 'Negro spiritual,'" he reports. "Instead, they adopted a worship style that speaks directly to the Black community, incorporating Black preaching and Black music."

Trinity has over 3,600 active members today; it had 87 in 1972. The church was recognized as the United Church's fastest-growing congregation at the denomination's 1983 general synod.

Membership at Shaker Heights Community Church has jumped from six people in 1980 to 625 currently under the leadership of Charles Reese, who also rejects domination by mainstream theology.

"Black churches have had to strug-

gle between white European theology and theology true to themselves," he remarks. "Most of us have opted for white European theology."

Some Black churches, however, "have done a tremendous job in adjusting theology," he points out. "It needs to be more explicitly done in the United Church of Christ."

At Peoples Congregational Church, where membership has leaped from 700 in 1968 to 1,600 today, pastor A. Knighton Stanley joins his colleagues in distinguishing Black theology from white theology.

"Most white preaching does not get many people to aspire to a higher internal spiritual order and only occasionally addresses social justice issues," he notes. "Black ministers preach to the aspirations of people, telling people how to be better about love, power and justice."

Such issues are also reflected in the community services Peoples Congregational provides. They include day care, free food and clothing programs, a youth foundation and a social service training program for lay members.

Similarly, Trinity has a food co-op, a credit union and is developing low-income housing. Shaker Heights has senior citizens and alcohol abuse programs, a hunger center that feeds 250 people a month, a clothing center and financial counseling.

In line with their theological emphases, the three churches blend Black anthems, spirituals and hymns with European music.

"One can't separate music from Black theology," Mr. Reese feels. "We don't ignore Beethoven, Strauss and Bach because all music is for Black folks, but what we bring to it is our very soul."

Mr. Stanley charges white churches with believing that "no cultural expressions in religion are valid except European expressions."

"On any given Sunday at Trinity, the worshiper will hear the full spectrum of Black music, from the common meter hymn, to the traditional songs, up to the latest Andre Crouch



Bishop Steiner speaks to school children during his visit to St. Andrews Church. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

St. Andrews honors patron

by Robert Lothian

November 30 is St. Andrew's feast day, and each November 30th, St. Andrew Catholic Church does something special to honor their patron saint.

This year the fifth and sixth graders from St. Andrew School conducted the Friday morning mass, on the theme "Friendship and Serving Others." They were joined by a special guest, auxiliary bishop of the Portland Catholic Archdiocese, Kenneth Steiner, who gave the homilie.

Under a bright red banner proclaiming Martin Luther King's "I have a dream," the children read from the 23rd Psalm and other Bible selections, and led those assembled in prayer.

Steiner, dressed in white robes, directed thoughts of friendship to other countries — Ethiopia, Latin America and Poland. "If we realize that everyone in the world are our brothers and sisters, there would be no poverty or starvation," he said.

"God's friends are our friends, and that means we should be friends with everyone. . . we all belong to one human family."

Steiner then blessed presents which the students later presented to the staffs of the St. Andrew social service programs — Health Help medical clinic, the legal clinic, and the Jesuit volunteer house. The children delivered the presents and messages of thanks for work performed by the social services during the year.

Among the special presents was \$10.66 raised by the students themselves at a Thanksgiving party, which they entrusted to bishop Steiner to be sent for famine relief in Ethiopia.

Steiner had recently returned from the Catholic Bishop's conference in Washington, D.C., which produced the historic pastoral letter on the economic state of the U.S. and the world. The letter calls for sweeping reforms to bring economic justice to the poor. Instead of staying at the Hilton with most of the other bishops, the

Northwest delegation stayed in Black parishes in the Washington area during the conference, said Steiner.

While at St. Andrew, Steiner visited classes at St. Andrew School, accompanied by principal James S. Harrison. "I do try to get around to the different classes and schools," said Steiner. "The children usually have plenty of questions about what a bishop does."

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW CHAPTER 1

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.
22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,
23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Christmas concert set

The Chancel Choir of Mount Olivet Baptist Church, under the direction of Carl T. Harris, presents its Christmas concert, December 9th, at 5 p.m. at Mount Olivet Baptist Church, N.E. 1st and Schuyler Streets. No admission.

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The "Keep Christ in Christmas" festival will hold its 31st Annual Christmas Advent festival in the downtown Portland Hilton Hotel ballroom, Sunday, December 9, 1984, 12 noon till 8 p.m. Admission is free. For information, please call 281-6543 or 254-8312.

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