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AFRICAN AMERICANS

We've Come This Far by Faith



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Christian Reformed Church

**Race
Relations**

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This Far by Faith and Moving On

The choir marches in step down the middle aisle as congregants clap their hands and join in the festive singing. The bass pedals of the organ provide the cadence and heartbeat of the entire congregation's movement. As the choir reaches the pulpit, it divides into two sections and remains in place while singing. Then the singing is brought low, almost to a whisper. A minister offers a prayer of consecration while congregants insert responses of "Amen" and "Yes, Lawd." The choir then enters the stand to conclude what is called the "processional." What follows is a strict liturgy in a non-liturgical setting: another selection, deacons read the Scripture and pray, and then the entire congregation stands and sings together a hymn of praise; next is another selection, pastoral reflections, and then the offertory; then another selection; and then "the next voice you will hear . . ."—it's preaching time! In this typical Black church liturgy (or order of worship, as it is called), the sermon is central. It is near the end of the worship service, and it is the hallmark of African American evangelical traditions.

When one thinks of the Black church, one may usually think of singing—and there’s good singing in Black churches. Yet preaching has been the primary historic mark distinguishing the Black church. By “the Black church,” we mean Protestant and evangelical churches that sprouted from plantation missions as well as independent churches that came into existence in antebellum times. African enslaved persons began to join Protestant churches during the Great Awakening (1730s-1770s) in the United States. Great Awakening preachers in the North and South preached to audiences composed of whites, African enslaved persons, and Native Americans. They emphasized that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and that all need to be born again. With such an egalitarian gospel message, many enslaved Africans received Christ and joined churches. As they did so, some enslaved men became licensed preachers in Methodist and Baptist churches, and enslaved women, though barred from becoming licensed preachers, led prayer meetings outside of the church and “exhorted” a message of holiness.

Before the Civil War, the vast majority of African American Christians in the South worshiped either with whites or as a separate branch of a white-supervised church. After the war, the situation changed. As African Americans achieved their freedom from slavery, they exercised this freedom by organizing independent Baptist churches, and, in the North, African Methodists planted new churches. The Black church that was once an “invisible institution” during slavery in the South was now a viable and flourishing institution. Moving into the 20th century, the Black church continued growing as African American Baptists increased to well over 11 million. And by the late 20th century, Black Pentecostals and Methodists numbered in the millions as well.

On Being Black and Reformed

While it is true that the 20th century saw great growth among Black Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals in the United States, the same century also witnessed the entrance of African Americans into the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The first documented CRC ministry to African Americans began in 1949 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in Buckley Chapel. In 1962 the chapel was renamed Grace CRC. Buckley, like other chapels in urban communities, sought to reach out to community members affected by the double whammy of racism and poverty. But reaching out to Black community members did not necessarily mean welcoming or developing Black leadership. Another 20 years passed before Grace hired its first Black pastor, Rev. Don Sherow, in 1982.

And it was only in the year before that, 1981, that three African American men became the first African American pastors in the CRC.

The relationship between African Americans and the Christian Reformed Church has been a journey of twists, turns, disappointments, and celebrations. A significant disappointment occurred in the 1960s, when African American students were discouraged from attending Timothy Christian Schools in Cicero, Illinois. Today, however, after a momentous struggle within the denomination, there is not only that disappointment but also a victory, as 20-30 percent of the student body is now Black. Celebrations elsewhere in the church have occurred with the installation of each African American pastor, the creation of the Black/Urban ministries team, the development of the Dance of Racial Reconciliation antiracism program, and the appointment of an African American as the CRCNA Director of Ministries and Administration in 2015.

Some African Americans have joined the CRC attracted by its theological emphasis on grace and the sovereignty of God, only to leave because the church did not feel like “home.” CRC churches, historically populated with Dutch immigrants, have verbally welcomed their African American neighbors but have struggled to incorporate the culture of these new members. Both African American congregations and pastors have left the church. For some, becoming a part of the church was like being asked to move into a new house but not being allowed to have a say in how the house was decorated and not being allowed to bring any personal belongings into the house. Feelings of isolation, marginalization, and tokenism pushed people from individual congregations in spite of a denominational commitment to be inclusive. While some have left the church, many have stayed and have found a home. African Americans are in the church to stay, and the number of African Americans who are joining and staying is increasing with every decade.

Moving On: Implications for the Church

The story of African Americans in the Christian Reformed Church is ongoing. Most of the religious people in Jesus’ day were mad at Jesus because he insisted on being who he was: fully human and fully God. The tension of all African Americans in the CRC is to be fully black and fully Reformed. When we acknowledge this tension, we can begin to walk with maturity and with hope that African Americans in the CRC will help the denomination to

become a house of prayer for all people. As African Americans in the CRC, our creed is this: We've come this far by faith!

(Reggie Smith in *Learning to Count to One*, pp. 111-112)

Echoing a song popular in Black churches several years ago, these words (“We’ve come this far by faith”) speak of a deep faith and trust in God by a people who have endured hardship but are unwilling to stop walking with God or to abandon the church. With the help of the Spirit, African Americans will not only find ways to be fully Black and fully Reformed but will also be fully accepted as members of the Christian Reformed Church. Getting to that day will be a journey with hills and valleys. Getting to that day is necessary if the church is to represent the diversity and unity that God has already ordained for his church. Getting to that day will take trusting in the Word of God, leaning on the Lord, and persistence. However, getting to that day could happen more quickly if the church would consider the following:

- Individually and collectively exploring what God’s Word has to say about race, ethnicity, social justice, and racial reconciliation.
- Becoming more knowledgeable about African American history and culture.
- Refusing to ignore racism, whether in its local or national or historical or contemporary manifestations or other contexts.
- Listening deeply to the experiences of African Americans, and responding in ways that demonstrate humility and promote healing.
- Building cross-racial relationships based on shared faith.
- Assessing worship services. Are there barriers to inclusion?
- Exploring what it means to be a multicultural church.
- Beginning the work of racial reconciliation and cultural sensitivity before the first Black person joins the congregation.
- Creating opportunities to grow together.
- Celebrating small and large victories.
- Bathing all efforts in prayer.

We come in bodies decorated in shades of the rich soil found across the face of the earth. Our skin is buff, sand, tan, tawny, copper, bronze, brown, caramel, coffee, and much more. Our eyes are the color of fresh charcoal, blue skies, green oceans, and brown fields. We are the descendants of a people ripped from the west coast of Africa, a strong people who survived the Middle Passage, outlasted slavery, fought for our freedom, and became citizens of the United States of America.

We are your brothers, your sisters, your neighbors, your friends. . . . And many of us have found a home, though not without disappointments and struggles as well as blessings and victories, in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. African Americans are in the church to stay, and by God's grace our numbers are increasing with every decade. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we'll continue to find ways to be fully Black and Reformed, becoming fully accepted as members of the Christian Reformed Church.

This is the second booklet in a series on ethnic minorities within the Christian Reformed Church produced by the Office of Race Relations. These booklets are produced as resource materials for the individual, congregation, or classis serious about understanding and ministering cross-culturally.



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