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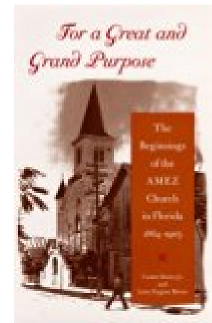

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Building Zion in the Sunshine

In recent years, historians have produced a growing body of literature on the history of African Americans in the state of Florida. The team of Canter Brown Jr. and Larry Eugene Rivers, historians at Florida A&M University, has added an important volume to that collection with their work, *For a Great and Grand Purpose: The Beginnings of the AMEZ Church in Florida, 1864-1905.* Few general histories exist of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and none of its presence in Florida. To that end, Brown and Rivers have provided an invaluable service to historians of religion, African Americans and Florida, in their painstaking documentation of the AMEZ Church's formative years in the sunshine state.

The AMEZ Church should not be confused with its better known sister, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. However, the two cannot be understood apart from each other, Brown and Rivers tell us in their book's opening pages. As the authors explain, the two denominations differed most in their areas of geographic dominance. The AMEZ Church predominated in New York, North Carolina, and Alabama, whereas the AME Church was strongest in much of the South and Southwest. Similarly, the churches differed in their geographic strongholds within particular states. The AMEZ Church flourished in urban spots while the AME Church spread broad roots throughout the rural areas of a state. This, naturally, gave the AME Church an advantage in the post-Civil War South, but Florida offered an exception because, as Brown and Rivers explain, it was steadily becoming the most urban southern state in the years of Reconstruction and following. Thus, the AMEZ Church could flirt more closely with an institutional balance with the AME Church in Florida than they could in any other southern state. Brown and Rivers carefully delineate the first four decades, the "formative years" (p. 1), of that institutional history in Florida, and while doing so they shed new light on Florida political and economic history; the rise of Jim Crow and the encoding of a white supremacist state; and the general field of African-American religion.

Rivers and Brown begin their work with a brief history of the AMEZ Church in the years before its appearance in Florida. The authors trace the denomination's origins to a church in New York City established in the early 1800s. African-American churches flourished in northern urban areas during the early decades of the nineteenth century, and talk soon spread among various church leaders of creating an umbrella organization to connect some of them. Members formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1821. The denomination renamed itself in 1848 with the appellation that would hold: the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. From its inception, the AMEZ remained fervently abolitionist with its ministers and laymen both serving as central participants in the Underground Railroad, and it counted Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass as either lifetime AMEZ members or temporary associates of the church.

Not until the last years of the Civil War would the

AMEZ Church venture into the South. Joseph Jackson Clinton, an AMEZ minister in Philadelphia, urged the southern expansion of the denomination because of his firm conviction that the church "carried an immense responsibility to slavery's victims" (p. 13). Like many of the AMEZ's ministers, Clinton had never personally experienced slavery. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Clinton had attended some of the finest schools in the city and answered the call to ministry at the age of fifteen. When he was in his late thirties, the AMEZ general conference elected Clinton as one of its three superintendents, and he immediately began pushing the denomination to expand, with particular emphasis on the untapped market of the South. In response to Clinton's encouragements, the church established two southern missions in 1864. The North Carolina Conference included its namesake state as well as Tennessee and Virginia. All areas of the South below North Carolina were organized under the Louisiana Conference. Shortly after this structuring, Superintendent Clinton became aware of an African-American congregation in Key West, Florida, that required a minister. Clinton seized the opportunity to draw the church into the AMEZ fold and to establish the first institutional presence of the AMEZ Church in Florida.

Key West was an optimal locale for the AMEZ Church to transplant its northern roots because the island was a Union stronghold during the Civil War and had a large presence of free blacks. Brown and Rivers point out that Key West was anything but typical of the rest of the state, much less the South. Unlike the rural, agricultural majority of the Confederacy, Key West was a cosmopolitan port town, with just forty-four residents less than the biggest town in Florida, Pensacola. But unlike that Panhandle town, Key West was an ethnically diverse place where African Americans comprised 20 percent of the population and benefited from a flexible racial environment that afforded them many opportunities for economic advancement. It was in such a setting that a northern, abolitionist-minded denomination could take hold even during the Civil War.

In the years following the war, the AMEZ Church seized on opportunities to expand its reach throughout Florida. Much of the expansion happened via the annexation of fledgling congregations such as a small group of black Methodists in Tampa that had withdrawn from a white congregation there. In fact, much of the AMEZ Church's growth in the late 1860s came from the exodus of black congregants from the large, but white-controlled Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The statistics that Brown and Rivers cite are impressive. In 1861, eight thousand of the ME South Church's nineteen thousand members (or, 42 percent) were African Americans. By 1869, African-American membership in Florida's ME South Church had plunged to below five hundred. Both the AME and AMEZ denominations benefited as thousands of ex-ME South African Americans found their way into both churches.

But other factors limited the growth potential of the AMEZ Church in Florida during this same period. For one, the large majority of Florida's African Americans lived in the former plantation district of Middle Florida. While financial limitations and personnel inadequacies hindered the AMEZ Church's pursuit of these potential members, the AME Church seized on the opportunity to scoop Methodist congregations into the AME fold and secured the denomination's dominance of rural Florida. Additionally, AMEZ leadership tightly controlled who in its service had the authority to perform marriages for other people. This was a disastrous miscalculation on the part of AMEZ's leadership. In the years following the Civil War, freedmen and women quickly took advantage of the new legal opportunity to marry, and the recently betrothed often joined the church that had performed their union ceremony. But the AMEZ Church only allowed its ministers to perform weddings, and, in a denomination struggling to fill its clerical openings, the church cut short its potential reach to possible pew fillers by forbidding members from performing this important community function. Lastly, while the AMEZ Church encouraged its members to seek political office and to participate in the Republican Party, its ministers shied from the same opportunities while clergy from both the AME and Baptist churches routinely ran for office and immersed themselves in Republican Party leadership, thereby spreading the influence of their churches. So extensive was the AME Church's political involvement that Brown and Rivers quote one of its leaders as bragging in 1871, "African Methodism is about to rule Florida" (p. 38).

Like today, however, the issue of church involvement in politics was not a settled one in late-nineteenth-century Florida. Critics of the AME's increasingly political mission abounded. "Ministers cannot spare the time to enter the political field, because the enemies of the cause of God and goodness are too strong and numerous," one critic intoned in the 1880s, "our duty, as ministers, is to capture the world for Christ, and not for political purposes" (p. 74). Though AMEZ ministers, unlike their AME counterparts, steered clear of running for office and refused to issue church endorsements of political

candidates, they did enthusiastically embrace certain political issues that they believed to be particularly critical for the cause of Christ and the future of the race. Temperance, not surprisingly, was the most wholeheartedly espoused. AMEZ ministers worried that alcohol undermined racial progress and destroyed men and families. Abstaining from tobacco and extramarital sex were also heavily emphasized, and the church partnered with other organizations, like the International Order of Good Templars, to wage battle against these sins. But Brown and Rivers note that this was a political decision with devastating effects. While AMEZ ministers crusaded against alcohol, Florida, like much of the South, was undergoing a bigger political crisis as Democrats began to wrest control of state governments back from the Republicans and to enact the brutal Jim Crow laws that would haunt the South for decades. (During the same period, lynchings in Florida escalated. By 1900, Florida ranked first among the states, on a per capita basis, for lynchings.) Although Florida's African Americans suffered from the misprioritized political involvement of AMEZ's ministers, who attacked moral excess while refusing to tackle the revivifying white supremacist Democratic Party, the denomination actually benefited institutionally during this disastrous political moment. Because the AME Church had been the more overtly political denomination, with its ministers and members filling the ranks of the Florida Republican Party, it was judged more harshly as having done nothing to prevent it. In some cases, it was deemed to have aided the election of Democrat Edward A. Perry, a former Confederate general, to the governorship in 1884 as well as the encoding of Jim Crow laws. AME congregations throughout the state split over arguments regarding how the denomination had turned away from its heritage of political engagement at the most crucial hour, and angry members exited the AME denomination in protest. Though the AMEZ Church had a far weaker history of political involvement, the lack of many other alternatives meant that many AME members turned to the AMEZ Church for their new home of worship.

While *For a Great and Grand Purpose* is a close institutional account of the AMEZ denomination (the book also offers in-depth biographical accounts of the various bishops who served the church in the state), its lens often opens up a wider history of late-nineteenth-century Florida to the reader. Most compelling is the exploration of the state's economic transformation in the decades following the Civil War. Though the state remained overwhelmingly agricultural, burgeoning industries in timber and cigars concentrated around the urban areas of Pensacola and Key West, respectively. Brown and Rivers show how these industries made an impact on the Reconstruction-era economy of Florida and how they permitted rare economic opportunities for the new freedmen. And the emergence of these industries influenced the AMEZ Church because its membership drew largely from those employed in such areas. These industries also connected urban centers and the people who lived there to rural outposts and their residents, thus widening the AMEZ network from its original city-oriented base. This changing membership demographic, coupled with the influx of politically active AME members, influenced how the AMEZ Church responded to the period of labor turmoil around 1886 and 1887. Forsaking its politically neutral past, the national AMEZ Church endorsed the Knights of Labor, and when the union organized a branch in Pensacola, an AMEZ member quickly won election as its leader. A new era in the AMEZ Church had commenced.

Yet for all the church's triumphs, there were nearly as many setbacks. In the 1890s, Florida's Bishop Thomas Henry Lomax restructured the state conference into two divisions and presided over many successful religious revivals. However, the problem of clergy shortages, which had challenged the denomination from its inception, continued. Desperate to meet the needs of its laity, church leadership allowed women, who had always comprised the great majority of AMEZ's membership, to become preachers, though not ordained. Also, economic hard times diminished the church just as the boom times had benefited it. The Panic of 1893 and the Great Freeze of 1895, that decimated the Florida citrus industry, wreaked havoc on the financial vitality and membership roles of the AMEZ Church. Always resilient and with a deep faith, though, the AMEZ Church pressed on into the early years of the twentieth century where Brown and Rivers conclude their study. By 1905, African Americans comprised 50 percent of Jacksonville's population, half of Pensacola's and over one-third of Orlando's. Into the twentieth century, the AMEZ Church in Florida would continue to look to these urban centers as the base on which to build its future.

Brown and Rivers' greatest challenge in completing this work, they write, was the paucity of source material available to consult. Sadly, nearly no primary source materials remain from the church's first two decades in Florida. Neither have any letters, diaries, or memoirs from any AMEZ leaders or members in the state come to light. Instead, Brown and Rivers must rely on the scant annual conference minutes that have survived as well as

articles from newspapers, both religious and secular, for the bulk of their evidence. Public documents of deed, tax, and marriage records provide additional illumination of state and local matters. Still, the authors admit, the materials leave them with "many gaps in the understanding of church complexities" and require "a great deal of informed speculation" (p. 7).

Perhaps because of the available materials, Brown and Rivers have produced a largely institutionally minded history. Dates, membership figures, financial statistics, and biographical reviews of important leaders dominate this work. This surely was painstaking work to uncover and flesh out, and the authors have assembled a detailed and thorough explanation of how the AMEZ Church operated during its first decades in Florida. Still, there is more to religious history than parish and pastor, and *For a Great and Grand Purpose* would have benefited from a more thorough examination of the theological and socio-cultural histories of the denomination. It is surprising, in fact, how little is said about the church's theology. Some questions that remain after a reading of the work include: how did the AMEZ Church's theology depart from its Methodist legacy? How was it distinguished from that of its close sister but constant nemesis, the AME Church? How did AMEZ theology change through the years, particularly in response to pivotal political developments in the post-Civil War South? Historians of religion must remember that theologies themselves are historical subjects, adapting and transforming over time and space and, thus, are ripe for historical interpretation.

These are not so much criticisms of Brown and Rivers' work as they are suggestions to future researchers of the AMEZ Church of starting points from which they might commence their own inquiries. One particularly ripe area of investigation for which Brown and Rivers have laid a foundation is the subject of gender in the AMEZ Church. The authors detail the abundance of women who bolstered the church during its fragile first decades, some even becoming pastors. Brown and Rivers explain this largely as an institutional need in the wake of a crippling dearth of male pastors. But what of the theological implications of such a move? Did the presence of women pastors, even if not ordained, ignite doctrinal discussions of gender? Did new emphases of AMEZ teachings emerge? Were some old teachings abandoned or rethought? And apart from theology, how did this wealth of women members and ministers affect the church sociologically and politically? A future researcher of the AMEZ Church might consider such questions and, in doing so, connect this denomination to a larger narrative of African-American religion in the late nineteenth century. Whatever future studies emerge, Brown and Rivers have provided an invaluable foundation upon which new works of the AMEZ Church, in particular, but also African-American and southern religion, in general, will be built.

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