

**The Tradition of
Social Action in
Windsor's British
Methodist Episcopal
Church**

by E. Andrea Moore
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Dedication

In memory of my great-great-grandmother,
Carolyn Jackson Dunn,
one of the women who hauled water from
the Detroit River and helped mix the mortar
when the old church was built on McDougall
Street.

The Tradition of Social Action in Windsor's British Methodist Episcopal Church

The journey of Canadian blacks has been one of a series of passages, beginning with the initial separation from society in Africa through the great period of slavery (mainly in the United States) to legal freedom in the "promised land", Canada. Once in Canada, "there grew the painful realization that the legal freedoms acquired as Canadian residents did not imply social acceptance."¹ There were many problems facing Blacks, related to housing, employment and education--externally imposed problems over which they seemingly had no control. The state in which Blacks found themselves --stranded on the periphery, unable to truly attain integration into the mainstream of Canadian society -- might have had devastating ramifications had it not been for the Black church. The Black church was a unique institution born out of the tragedy of slavery. It provided solace for its communicants, who were frustrated by the conflict between their goals and ambitions and the reality of their socio-economic status. It emerged as a stable institution that would, out of necessity, serve the secular as well as spiritual needs of its people.

By using the British Methodist Episcopal Church as an example, we may examine the traditional role that the Black Church has played in Windsor, Ontario in the realm of social action.

First, it is necessary to relate, in brief, the background of the development of the Methodist Episcopal Conference and then that of the local Methodist Episcopal Church, in order to better understand the significance of that institution in the cultural

makeup of the Black Canadian people of this area. Blacks had become increasingly disappointed in the white Christian churches in the United States due to the general unwillingness of these churches to participate actively in the fight against slavery. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Black members began withdrawing from those churches and forming separate bodies.² In 1816, Richard Allen and Daniel Crocker founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Philadelphia.³ At the General Conference of 1828 in New York, a report was given on the four AME churches in Canada (the nearest to Windsor being Malden with 85 members).⁴ During the next few years, AME classes and societies increased in number. The Upper Canadian Conference was, therefore, organized under the guidance of Bishop Morris Brown at Toronto on July 21, 1840.⁵ This Conference was composed of twelve churches at the outset. The travelling elder assigned to the Western District was James Harper.⁶

The large influx of refugees after 1850 was reflected in the expansion of the AME Church in Canada: in 1852, there were 18 churches serving 793 members; and by, 1855, there were 2,000 members.⁷ Rapid growth created a need for reorganization of the circuits. In 1853, the Sandwich Circuit included churches at Dawn, Sandwich and Windsor, reducing the Colchester Circuit to the churches at Colchester and Amherstburg.

Owing to the fears generated by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850⁸ and a general desire for autonomy, a movement began in the Canadian churches to separate from the AME Church, which was based in the United States. "At the 12th Session of the Canadian Conference in 1851, the Conference was in great difficulty as every member was impeached for rebelling against the AME

Church by electing Samuel H. Brown to superintend the AME Church in Canada until the next General Conference. After being rebuked, all were forgiven."⁹

Later, the Canadian churches approached the issue in a more orthodox manner. The last Annual Conference of the AME Church in Canada assembled in the town of Chatham, on the 23rd of September, 1856. It dissolved on September 29th. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, a convention was organized to consider the question of separation from the AME Church. On the fifth day of its sessions, the Rev. George W. Brodie presented the following resolution:¹⁰

Whereas, we have, by a unanimous vote, elected to the office of bishop, the Rev. Willis Nazrey, one of the bishops of the AME Church in the United States, to preside over the new organization in Canada known as the British Methodist Episcopal Church; and
Whereas, we believe that we have fully contemplated the idea and spirit advanced by the General Conference, therefore
Resolved, that in view of the same, we must earnestly solicit the Bench of Bishops, and the brethren whom they may select to sit in council with them, to grant us our request.

This document was adopted without debate.

In compliance with the request, the following document was read by Bishop Payne as the "report of the bishops and elders appointed by resolution of the General Conference of 1856 to determine which of the bishops shall preside over the BME

Church."¹¹

Whereas, the representatives of the Canadian churches did at the last General Conference of the AME Church most respectfully request and petition the said General Conference to allow or grant Rev. Willis Nazrey, if it be his pleasure to withdraw from it, to superintend the church in Canada; and

Whereas, the said representatives did resolve in reply the following answer:

This General Conference does not feel authorized to give one of its bishops to that portion of the connection unsolicited, therefore

Resolved, that when we shall be solicited for one (if before the next General Conference), all our bishops shall meet, with three elders selected by them, and decide which of the bishops shall serve in Canada, in accordance with the wishes of the Canadian Church. We say, in obedience to the above resolution and decree of the General Conference, and also the resolution of the BME Church, passed by a unanimous vote on Tuesday morning, the 3rd of October, 1856, that we, the undersigned met in the church at Chatham. Having duly considered the important question submitted to us, we have concluded to "decide" that the Rev. Willis Nazrey, of the Bishops of the AME Church, shall serve in Canada, in accordance with the wishes of the Canadian Church.

This document was signed by three who were in accord with the resolution -- Daniel A. Payne;¹² Thomas Sunrise¹³ and Richard

Warren,¹⁴ as well as Elisha Weaver,¹⁵ who signed under protest.

Willis Nazrey served as BME Bishop while keeping membership in the AME Church of the United States.¹⁶ Many of the Canadian members were quite unhappy with this situation. The pastor at the Windsor church, Rev. A.R. Green,¹⁷ led the opposition against Nazrey. In May of 1861, Rev. Green and his ardent followers called upon S.S. Macdonnell,¹⁸ who gave counsel to Green and his people in a series of lawsuits involving Nazrey.¹⁹ Rev. Green had set himself apart as leader of the BME Church of British North America. On May 12th, 1869, the name of the aforementioned church was changed to the Independent Methodist Episcopal (IME) Church.²⁰

In spite of the opposition, under Nazrey, the BME Church flourished. By 1864 there were 42 preaching stations and over 3,000 members.²¹

While the preceding events were taking place, the Black Methodists of Windsor had formed a congregation and were meeting in homes to worship God. The first record of a purchase of property by this congregation dates back to November 23, 1852.²² The bill of sale for farm lot 85, Plan 106, Lot 38 was between August Tregent of Detroit, gentleman and Wiley Reynolds, Jacob Jones and Martin Mitchell, all of Windsor, yeomen. These three were trustees of the AME Church. Another deed was registered on April 13, 1854 for the adjacent parcel from August Tregent to Wiley Reynolds, et al. A small frame church was erected on the site (on the west side of McDougall Street, between Assumption and University Avenue). Rev. A.R. Green was the pastor.

After the British Methodist Episcopal Church was established on September 29, 1856, the Windsor congregation dated itself from the following day, September 30, 1856.²³ Bishop Nazrey appointed Rev. Thomas Jefferson to the charge in Windsor (ignoring the fact that Rev. A.R. Green had been serving that congregation).

Under the leadership of Rev. Jefferson, the members of the local church decided to build a new brick church. The women hauled water from the Detroit River and helped mix the mortar. The men of the congregation worked diligently under the supervision of a contractor, George Moore (white), and a Black carpenter, John Reid. By 1863, the cornerstone was laid by Mrs. Elizabeth East.²⁴ The church opened for worship in 1868. The trustees at that time were Wylie Reynolds, Washington Flenoy, Isiah Keyes, Ransome Coleman, and Richard Shoecraft.²⁵ Among the members was James L. Dunn, Windsor's first Black alderman.

Over the years, the local church went through a series of physical changes.²⁶ In 1900, the floor of the church was raised to make room for a Sunday School auditorium. Later the plain windows were replaced by elaborate stained glass. A movement to acquire the great pipe organ was initiated by Rev. Moses Newsome in 1916. The organ was installed in 1917, during the pastoral charge of Rev. I.H. Edwards. The church walls were re-inforced and buttresses built in the 1920's because it was found that vibrations of the organ were weakening the walls.

Apart from the attention given to the physical needs of the church, to the spiritual needs of its members and to the governing system within the Conference, the congregation of the local BME Church (called Ontario Chapel) began to focus attention on the social and economic needs of the people within

the community. They began actively participating in the formation of the Coloured (later "Central") Citizens Association²⁷ in 1929. That body first met in the BME Church on July 15, 1929. Its first president was Robert L. Dunn and the president of its Executive Advisory Board was the BME pastor, Rev. F.O. Stewart.

This organization's main concern dealt with the employment of Blacks in area services and businesses. It succeeded in finding employment for individuals at the Windsor Utilities Commission, the Windsor Police Commission, M & P Stores, Purity Dairies, the Post Office of Canada, the Norton Palmer Hotel, the City Board of Works Department, and the Jaeger Shop. The Association interceded for the elderly with regards to obtaining Old Age pensions and with the needy applying for relief from the City. It secured an end to discriminatory practices at the YWCA and subsequently made yearly donations to that organization. Regular donations²⁸ were also given to the Red Cross and the V.O.N. as well as the Children's Aid Society. The Association was active in community and civic affairs. Some of the speakers²⁹ at their monthly meetings included Roy Hicks (W.U.C.), Mr. Leach (General Motors), David Croll (Mayor of Windsor and a future Senator), Col. Wigle, Rabbi Framm, George F. MacDonald (co-founder of Bartlet MacDonald and Gow and a noted historian), U.S. Congressman Oscar DePriest, Frank Begley, Rabbi Schulman and Norman McLarty, M.P.

Another organization, which grew directly out of the BME Sunday School, was the Hour A Day Study Club.³⁰ This club's concerns related to the welfare, guidance and education of Black children and youth in the community. It gave credence to its aim by providing career information to high school students through

a series of youth rallies and by providing annual scholastic awards to Black graduates of Windsor secondary schools. The club was formed in February of 1934 and became affiliated with the Local Council of Women in 1935.

The BME congregation went through a bleak period, when in June of 1959, the City of Windsor expropriated the church property to make way for a County Building.³¹ The historic church, in the City's Redevelopment Area No. 1, was demolished in 1961, after an arbitration hearing which awarded the church more than \$60,000.00.³² The congregation was further disheartened when, rather than a County Building, a parking lot was installed at the site of their old church home.

After worshipping for two years in the North Star Masonic Lodge,³³ the congregation held a ground breaking ceremony³⁴ on June 2, 1963 at the site of their future church home. Construction began a week later on property purchased from the Windsor Board of Education at the corner of Louis and University Avenues. The congregation moved into the new church building in October of the same year.

Because of the success of organizations such as the Hour A Day Study Club and newer groups such as the National Black Coalition (Windsor Chapter), the church has played a diminishing role in the area of social activism and has adapted itself to a more orthodox ecclesiastical role.

The BME Church is representative of other Black churches in this community. It has for decades served as a physical and psychological centre of Black cohesiveness or community. At this time, the question may arise, relative to whether the church

still plays the role that it once did in representing the pulse of the community and serving as a vehicle to help meet its needs.

NOTES

1. D.S. Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer*, p. 25. Jordan Station: Paideia Press, 1983
2. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
5. S.R. Drake, *The Doctrine and Discipline of the British Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada*, p. 25. Toronto: William Briggs, 1913.
6. Shreve, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
8. Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom Seekers*, p. 32. Agincourt: The Book Society of Canada, 1981.
9. W.C. Shreve, *Origin of the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada*, p. 1, unpublished, 1962.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. Daniel A. Payne, Bishop of the Philadelphia Conference (AME)

13. Thomas Sunrise, member of the Bench of Bishops
14. Richard Warren, member of the Bench of Bishops
15. Elisha Weaver, member of the Bench of Bishops
16. D.S. Shreve, op. cit., p. 81.
17. Ibid.
18. S.S. Macdonnell, lawyer, reeve of Windsor, 1854.
19. Augustus Richardson Green, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Independent Methodist Episcopal Church*, p. 4. Zanesville, Ohio: Moorehead and Willey, 1873.
20. Ibid., p. 31.
21. D.S. Shreve, op. cit., p. 82.
22. W.C. Shreve, op. cit., p. 4.
23. Ibid.
24. J.T. Dawson, "Local Church Built at Night by Former Slaves", Windsor: Border Cities Star, October 1, 1920.
25. W.C. Shreve, op. cit., p. 5.
26. Ibid., p. 8.

27. The minute book of the Executive Advisory Board of the Colored Citizens Association gives detail of its origin and purpose on the first page.
28. Included with the minute book of the Colored Citizens Association gives detail of its origin and purpose on the first page.
29. The names of the speakers are recorded in the minute book.
30. Hour A Day Study Club, *Hour A Day Study Club, Fiftieth Anniversary*. Windsor: Ringrose Press, 1984. The Hour A Day Study Club celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on February 10, 1984. Guest speaker for the occasion was Shirley Chisholm, former U.S. Congresswoman. A historical sketch of the club was included in the anniversary booklet.
31. Neil F. Morrison, "Downtown Windsor Loses Three Historic Landmarks", Windsor: Windsor Star, March 3, 1962.
32. "Final Service Will Be Held This Sunday in 107 Year Old Building", Windsor: Windsor Star, October 25, 1961.
33. W.C. Shreve, op. cit., p. 10. (The church received offers from the North Star Lodge, the North American Lodge, Tanner AME Church and Sandwich Baptist Church to hold services in their buildings until a new church was built.)
34. "150 Attend -- Sod Turned For New Church", Windsor: Windsor Star, June 3, 1963.

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