

end by executive proclamation. As a consequence of the presidential action and the later constitutional amendment, American blacks—for the first time in any significant numbers—were given an opportunity to determine their own destiny. Legal and extralegal restrictions were to limit this freedom, and its exercise was to prove hazardous in many localities. Nonetheless, the Emancipation Proclamation marked the beginning of a new era.

## The Growth of African American Churches

In the decades after the Civil War, spirituals, a key feature of black worship, became a less common feature in black congregations. This change was due in part to blacks' determination to distance themselves from slavery, and partly because their worship in the institutionalized churches that they joined was more highly structured than plantation worship and therefore less accommodating of the spontaneity that had produced spirituals. Worship remained lively, however, and singing endured as a central feature of worship within black congregations.

Black churches grew steadily in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and very rapidly in the period 1890–1930. Membership increases in the black churches far outpaced those in other churches. Prior to the Civil War, the percentage of blacks who were church members was less than half the percentage of whites who were church members. By 1916, this percentage was slightly larger, having increased from about 11 percent to approximately 43 percent of the black population. Over 90 percent of the church-going blacks were Methodist or Baptist. The popularity of the church among blacks stemmed at least in part from the fact that it was one of the few institutions that was exclusively their own. Cut off from most areas of social and political life, blacks found in the church the opportunity for self-expression, recognition, and leadership. It was hardly a coincidence that until well into the twentieth century, most of the outstanding black leaders had been ministers, for the ministry provided one of the few opportunities for leadership open to blacks. Furthermore, the church was the primary agency of self-help in the community, in a society in which the family had historically been undermined by slavery—families routinely were broken up for sale—and by the vast migration of individual family members to the North, which began in the late nineteenth century.

The emergence of black denominations in the early nineteenth century set the stage for the large-scale movement of freedmen to institutionalized religion after the Civil War. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1816 out of a separation from other Methodists that had occurred in Philadelphia in 1784. It numbered 20,000 persons in 1864, and by 1884 had grown to a remarkable 400,000 members. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which was formed in 1821 following a

separation from a New York congregation, experienced even more rapid growth, from 6,000 to 300,000 members during approximately the same period. The Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church emerged out of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the 1860s, with about 50,000 members. During Reconstruction, black Baptist congregations—small, poor, and rural—arose in numbers that led quickly to a Baptist majority among ex-slaves. One feature of the Baptist churches that made them attractive was the ease with which they could be organized. African Baptist congregations had been formed in Boston in 1805, in New York in 1807, and in Philadelphia in 1809. In the West, regional Baptist associations had been established between 1835 and 1855. In the South, very few separate black churches were organized among either Baptists or Methodists before 1865, however; and most black Baptists and Methodists worshiped alongside whites in churches where whites sometimes were a small minority. Reconstruction changed that pattern. By the late 1860s, every southern state had its own black Baptist convention, and in 1886, a majority of the members of these conventions joined together as the National Baptist Convention.

The increase in black membership in the churches was an outcome of the concentrated efforts of denominational missionary societies, the involvement of the federal government through the Freedmen's Bureau, and, especially, the American Missionary Association (AMA) which was supported largely by northern Congregationalists. Lewis Tappan, treasurer of the AMA in 1861, had sent a representative, the Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood, to investigate reports of black refugees at Fortress Monroe, in Virginia, shortly after the Confederate shelling of Fort Sumter. Noting that the blacks he encountered there had "a great thirst for knowledge" and recognizing the possibilities for Christianizing them, he engaged Mrs. Mary Peake, who at the time was active in a black Baptist church in Norfolk, to teach reading, religious songs, and the Bible to black children and adults. As the initial effort of what became a missionary enterprise on a grand scale, Peake's school, and Peake herself—she rejected her physician's advice to abandon her work and died in 1862—set the tone for AMA activities among southern blacks for the rest of the century.<sup>12</sup>

In attempting to reach the 3.5 million freedmen after the war, the AMA had put 83 teachers into the field by late 1863. By 1867, the number had increased to 528. Among the surviving institutions that the Association begat are Fisk, Atlanta, and Tougaloo universities; Talladega College; and Hampton Institute. Methodist and Baptist organizations also contributed to establishing black educational institutions, and they were aided by modest contributions from other denominations. The fluid race relations of early Reconstruction soon gave way, however, to a hardening of sentiment

<sup>12</sup> See Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861–1890* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1986), 4.

against the education of blacks and to the passage of Jim Crow laws, which actively excluded blacks from white society. The AMA and other organizations continued their involvement in black education, largely through the efforts of women such as Mary Peake. These missionaries and teachers included Etta Payne, who was trained in medical schools in Boston and Philadelphia; Laura Stebbins, from the English Classical School in Springfield, Massachusetts; Eliza Summers, who had taught in public schools in Woodbury, Connecticut; and a host of female workers from Mount Holyoke Seminary, Oberlin College, and the ranks of primary and secondary schoolteachers. The AMA also continued financially to assist black congregations, typically in poor, rural areas, as in the case of a church built in Liberty County, Georgia, in 1874, which was announced in the local *Gazette* in a way that stressed the northern involvement: "The colored people below no. 3 A&G. R.R. [Atlantic and Gulf Railroad], with commendable zeal, have started to erect a large church. The building which is to be fifty feet long, and thirty-five wide, is to be located near Arcadia. . . . This enterprise, which is under the charge of the Congregationalists, has received material aid from the north."<sup>13</sup>

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, black communities suffered increasing abuse and subjugation as white supremacists consolidated power in the South and the federal judicial system sanctioned segregation. Beginning in the 1890s, in the wake of a series of crop failures, large numbers of blacks began resigning tenantry and sharecropping on southern farms and moving to urban areas, especially in the North, where there was demand for factory labor. The membership rolls of black churches in Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other cities doubled or tripled over the course of the Great Migration. Black Baptist and Methodist churches, the AME and AMEZ, and various other congregations expanded rapidly, constructing or enlarging houses of worship, organizing social programs, providing basic education, and assisting with housing. Accordingly, a primary function of these churches was to facilitate the adaptation of rural migrants to urban industrial life.

Revivalistic religion flourished in the growing black urban congregations. Pentecostal and Holiness Christianity proved particularly attractive. These "sanctified" churches, which originally included both African Americans and Caucasians, promoted a highly emotional style of religion and dictated strict standards of virtue. They also enlarged the worship service to include a variety of musical instruments and reiterated the role of shouting, dancing, clapping, and physically demonstrative praise, which

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Thomas F. Armstrong, "The Building of a Black Church: Community in Post-Civil War Liberty County, Georgia," in *African-American Life in the Post-Emancipation South, 1861-1900*, vol. 9 of 12 vols., ed. Donald G. Nieman (Carland, N.Y., and London, 1994), 164.

were in increasingly short supply in Baptist and Methodist churches. Emphasizing a "baptism in the Holy Ghost," the majority of these congregations practiced speaking in tongues and expected healing and prophecy as "gifts of the Spirit" as well. Among the many churches that were formed along these lines, the Church of God in Christ, founded by Charles Harrison Mason, stands out. Mason, born to former slaves who had been converted during the Second Great Awakening, experienced conversion in 1880 and subsequently became a Baptist minister. In Lexington, Tennessee, in 1897, Mason preached to a growing audience, which survived the pistol and shotgun attacks during their meetings in an abandoned cotton-gin house. This audience became the core congregation of the Church of God in Christ when Mason incorporated his church later that year. Ten years later, after attending the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles led by the black Holiness preacher William J. Seymour, Mason introduced into his church the practice of speaking in tongues that he had witnessed among the black and white participants at Azusa Street.

During the period 1890 to 1940, an assortment of messiahs—persons claiming to be God or to possess divine powers—came to prominence in the black community. Some, such as S. D. Grace and Father Divine, developed organizations that expanded to a variety of urban settings. Others remained local and fleeting in their influence, and not all were African Americans. In 1889, Jacob Orth, a white man in coastal Georgia, convinced as many as a thousand blacks that he was the messiah and that the end of the world was imminent. The "Christ Craze" that he kindled was reinforced by a series of natural disasters, economic downturn, violent white supremacy, and a person being struck by lightning. Orth predicted that the world would end on August 16. Prior to that he was arrested and committed to the state asylum in Milledgeville. Edward James, a black man, took Orth's place, but after August 16 the Christ Craze disintegrated.<sup>14</sup>

While some blacks participated in movements such as the Christ Craze, others found their way into roles less messianic. In 1891, Charles Randolph Uncles became the first black Roman Catholic priest ordained in the United States. By the end of that decade, Mrs. Julia A. Foote and Mrs. Mary J. Small had become the first women ordained to the ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Prince Hall Freemasonry attracted a growing number of bourgeois black men, who, like Protestant males in the white lodges, found community and identity in the fraternal rituals and programs. African Americans from churches around the country connected their religious faith to social reform and the civil rights

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas F. Armstrong, "The Christ Craze of 1889: A Millennial Response to the Economic and Social Change," in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, eds. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, Conn., 1982), 223-45.