



HBCUs and the Black Church

Echoes of Faith: Church Roots Run Deep Among HBCUs (B. Denise Hawkins)

In the years after the Civil War, there were millions of newly-freed Black children and adults who emerged from slavery worn but eager and determined to get something they never had—a chance to learn how to read the Bible, write their names and words on a page, and be educated. Even before the Civil War, some Blacks in the North were pressing their way forward into church-basement-turned schools and rough-hewn wood frame rooms established just for them mostly by benevolent White Christians.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were established in the late 1800's to educate and transition African Americans into society upon the end of slavery. Black people, who at that time were primarily slaves, had been deprived of access to virtually every level of formal learning. Prior to these schools being established, the opportunity for an African American to receive a higher education was rare. Christian churches played a key role in the establishment of HBCUs incorporated in 1854. Ashmun Institute (now Lincoln University in Pennsylvania) was technically the first HBCU.

The Board of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in November 1866, thought nothing was more urgent than responding to the emancipation of 4 million slaves who were now “at our very door.”

Led by their “consciences and hearts,” the Board of Bishops declared they would act to rescue and educate Blacks. They didn’t wait for Southern states to decide whether they were going to

“make some provision for the education of the colored children now growing up in utter ignorance in their midst,” they wrote following that November 1866 meeting.

With the support of the Freedman’s Aid Society, the United Methodist Church responded by establishing 70 schools in the South and Southeast for Blacks between 1866 and 1882. Eleven of them remain.

Today, Bennett College for women, Bethune-Cookman University, Claflin University, Clark Atlanta University, Dillard University, Huston-Tillotson University, Meharry Medical College, Paine College, Philander Smith College, Rust College, and Wiley College are affiliated with the United Methodist Church (UMC). These institutions “are supported by every United Methodist Church in the United States,” says Cynthia Bond Hopson, executive director of the Black College Fund of the United Methodist Church.

In 1866, the first Black institution that the church started was birthed in the basement of Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, where Moses Adams, a Black preacher, was the pastor. Rust College in Holly Springs, Miss.—named for Richard Rust, then secretary of the denomination’s Freedman’s Aid Society—is steeped in distinction. It’s the oldest of the 11 UMC-affiliated Black colleges and universities, the second oldest private college in Mississippi, the oldest Historically Black College in the state, and one of the remaining five Historically Black Colleges in America founded before 1867.

Today, more than a century separates them from their church founders. But on campuses like Rust College, Bethune-Cookman, and Claflin, denominational heritage is proudly on display, says Hopson, who also enjoys listening to a little bit of church-Black college history when she calls some of her institutions and is put on hold or visits campuses where the iconic UMC symbol—a cross and flame—has a public presence.

Excerpts from the book *An Introduction to Black Church Studies* (Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Juan Floyd Thomas):

Schools founded by black churches:

- Shaw University (1865), Morehouse College (1867), Bishop College (1881) by the Baptists
- Morgan State University (1867) and Bennett College (1873) by the Methodists
- Fisk University (1866), Talladega College (1867), and Hampton University (1868) by the AMA
- Knoxville College (1875) by the Presbyterians
- Wilberforce University (1863) and Morris Brown College (1885) by the AME Church
- Livingstone College (1879) by the AMEZ church

By the end of the nineteenth century, these institutions had become the foremost sources of African American professionals, especially in terms of ministers (overwhelmingly Black men) and teachers (mostly Black women).

Educational Enterprises and the Black Church Traditions

Black church leaders used enterprise and church traditions as a tool for removing the social and emotional shackles, it has been and continues to be typical for local churches and denominations to establish schools of various descriptions. Like public boycotts, lawsuits, and social protest, establishing and maintaining schools is a strategy of resistance and revival. Historically, schools were established as enterprises that would empower and reeducate the mis-educated. Examples of such educational enterprises and approaches, a great majority of Black churches has acknowledged education for its capacity to equalize social and economic inequities.

