

Union Baptist Church Church History



Beginnings in 1860

The church struggled as it attempted to form a community after slavery. The first pastor was Rev. Harvey Johnson who served as pastor for 50 years until 1910. From 1910-1967 the church grew into an active inner city African-American Church. Baltimore was an actively racist culture and the church was a place for Africans-Americans to worship together as well as socialize.

Rev. Baxter Matthews was the Pastor from 1940 to 1967. He became sick in 1965 and Rev. Dobson was installed as the Pastor in 1967. Rev. Matthews built the Harvey Johnson Center. Rev. Dobson served from 1967- 2007. He actually began working at the church in 1958 as a social worker and he became the first director of the Harvey Johnson Center.

1960s and 1970's

Union Baptist Church was energized by the 1960s Kennedy-Johnson Civil Rights-Great Society Era. Rev. Dobson immediately got the church involved in the politics of the time. Parren Mitchell, a leading civil rights leader and head of Johnson's Model Cities Program began to work with Rev. Dobson and Parren Mitchell began to steer funds to Union Baptist.

Some future leaders of Baltimore (like Joe Howard, Samson Green, Linwood Ivy, and Walter P. Carter) began to hang out at the Harvey Johnson Center, which had a gym. Thus, Union Baptist served as a catalyst where important ideas were formed. The Harvey Johnson Center was new and in its prime, up to date, and provided activities for young people in the city.

When Martin Luther King was killed in 1968, Jesse Jackson met with Rev. Dobson and together they started Operation Bread Basket. The fact that Jesse Jackson knew Rev. Dobson and he knew some leading Baltimore civil rights activists is important. The church flourished in the 1960s as people came to church to hear Rev. Dobson speak about civil rights. It was a spiritual place, but of greater importance, it was a place for political activism.

The Church also became involved in People United to Save Humanity. Moreover, it became actively engaged in the 1960s Great Society. For example, the Church developed and continues to operate a Head Start Program.

In the 1970s Rev. Dobson put together a City Wide Coalition and continued the 1960s program. The area surrounding the church began to gradually change; poverty increased, crime increased, and drugs became a fixture in Baltimore neighborhoods. Moreover, the physical structure of the church began to age. Many of the congregation moved away and younger people did not attend.

1980s and Forward

Ronald Regan was elected President and the Civil Rights movement ended. Most of the Great Society's Programming ended with Regan's block grants. Basically, the money from Washington dried up. This posed a significant problem for Union Baptist as Rev. Dobson had utilized grants and special funding from Washington during the 1960s and 1970s.

Nehemiah Housing did take place in the 1980s and Parren Mitchell was in Congress and Charles Mac Mathias was a U.S. Senator. These two men had connections to Union Baptist. But in general, the 1980s signaled the end of funds from Washington and the end of political activism.

The neighborhood around the church began to further decline and leading families moved out of the neighborhood. Younger people lured by the street and not interested in church did not come to fill the Sunday morning pews. The Church budget declined and the building deteriorated.

Al Hathaway began to work with other local churches, including Union Baptist to raise money for the Industrial Areas Foundation. He was not yet formally connected to Union Baptist. Rev. Dobson began to age in place, which led to further church decline. Once heavily active, he reduced his activism and was unable to meet the challenge of a politically and socially active church that was living in a less politically and socially active world.

Meanwhile, Al Hathaway served, beginning in 1994 as Assistant Pastor of Pennsylvania Avenue AME Zion Church. He moved to Union Baptist in October of 2004. Al would become the only Pastor of the Church as Rev. Dobson retired. Basically, Al took over a church that was in decline; membership and donations were falling.

While the church is in decline, Al oversees three affiliate organizations in addition to Union Baptist, a Head Start program that began in 1955 and is attached to the Church, a Healthy Family Program at Mondawmin and a Healthy Starts Program. Al is in charge of all three, but has program managers that run the day to day operations of each.

Each organization has its own budget, which is technically independent of Union Baptist. However, Al is the signatory on all fiscal transactions of the organizations and holds an important place in the governing of these organizations.

Current Situation

Whereas Rev. Dobson devoted a great deal of his efforts towards social justice and social programs; Al is working to develop a servant theology based on Philippians 2. Whereas Rev. Dobson held a Bachelors Degree; Al holds a Masters in Theology, and a Ph.D. He is attempting to help people develop their own personal religious identity. Thus, there is a significant change taking place at Union as Al focuses on the spiritual lives of its members. Al recognized the need for this change, whereas Rev. Dobson did not.

Union has a Board of Trustees and there is also a Board of Deacons. Al is actively involved with both and helps to appoint them. Al talked about wanting these Boards to take on a greater leadership role in the church and allow him to focus on the greater development of the church.

Union Baptist church holds quarterly meetings in which church decisions are ratified. However, it is doubtful that the congregation would vote against a decision of the Pastor. Al says he wants to move away from Union Baptist's historical hierarchical structure towards a greater "flattening." In other words, the church is in transition.

One of the particular challenges for AI has been the finances of the church. Giving has slowly declined and today the church has a difficult time supporting itself. The building is in significant disrepair, the congregation is declining and aging, and the church budget is declining.

AI is putting in place a process that will lead to the church joining the American Baptist Church (ABC). The ABC is a historically liberal progressive church. One of the reasons to do this is because the ABC offers more comprehensive retirement funds, medical programs, and insurance programs. Thus, AI is attempting to create a new environment that will enable Union to better meet the needs of its congregation and move into the 21st Century.

A particular concern of AI's is the church budget. In 2007; the average gift per person was \$30.00. In 2008, AI has been able to raise the contribution to \$50.00 a person. The Church averages about 80 people, which suggests the church is raising about \$4000 a week, which translates into about \$208,000 a year. The challenge is in the actual attendance. On some Sundays, the church draws less than 80 people and on some Sundays it draws more. Every church also has people who contribute who do not attend. AI admits he has been losing some people, but he maintains that the people he is gaining are contributing more than the people he lost.

AI is head of the Baptist Minister's Conference which is primarily African-American. This group is active politically and supports political candidates, such as Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Thus, AI wants to maintain some of Union's historic activism. However, he wants to focus on developing a greater sense of spiritual direction for the church.

Conclusion

Union Baptist is at the crossroads, if it continues like it has it will continue to decline; however, AI definitely has a vision, which could lead to growth. Its greatest challenge is its location. It is in a deteriorating area of the city and its membership is in decline, thus AI has to somehow minister to the needs of the surrounding community and draw them into the church as well as maintain the kinds of ministries that continue to draw people that have belonged to the church for decades.



Copyright (c) 2010 Faith and Organizations Project

University of Maryland, Department of Anthropology, 1111 Woods Hall, College Park, MD 20742

Phone: 301.405.7121 Email: faithandorganizations@anth.umd.edu