African American Religious Experiences

African American Religious Experiences: A Case Study of Twentieth Century Trends and Practices

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PREFACE

The study of religion and the African-American experience is one of the most fascinating studies in American history. Not only is this the study of religion, it is the study of a belief system that brought comfort to a race held in captivity. This research explores religion as a survival tool and supports the argument that the black church is distinctively unique because of its manner of establishment, worship styles, and contemplative practices all reflective of the vial role religion played in the lives of blacks during the slave era and beyond. Through the church, blacks gained the structure for advancement and economic gain necessary to survive in a society of humiliation and oppression.

Mississippi County's residents have much to share. Located in the Mississippi Delta know as one of the poorest areas in the South, poverty rates triple those reported nationally. The Delta is known for, not only it high poverty rates, but also its mistreatment of African-Americans. According to Charles Regan Wilson, the Delta produced a vibrant culture that helped sustained African-Americans through hard times. Delta residents produced the black church and the blues, two of the most popular products of southern tradition. Black churches in the Delta were also unique. They insulated believers from the traumas of living under white oppression and offered a sense of self respect and esteem for a race seeking entitlement from society.

Initially, the struggle for identity proved difficult for African-Americans plague with different living condition and concerns. Enslaved Africans sought a coping method to endure the harsh injustice of slavery. Their solution, the black church, evolved as a means to develop and, as a result, black religion grew into the most powerful force in the African-American subculture, possibly accounting for Mississippi County's unwillingness to relinquish traditions practiced around the turn of the century.

Whereas trends and patterns throughout the nation have changed dramatically, religion remains central in the lives of African-Americans. Preachers delight in oral performances witnessed in early West African griots. Congregations retain a vast amount of information and history on the ideological, oral, and physical practices of blacks in the rural South. Based on statistical data, Mississippi County is most suitable for research

compared to other parts of the region, because of demographic make up and high levels of poverty and illiteracy. Based on these traits, religion takes a different twist in Mississippi County. A study of African-Americans in Mississippi County better enables us to understand religious practices and the black church over the years.

INTRODUCTION

W. E. B. Du Bois describes the church as one of the few stable and coherent institutions to emerge from slavery and defines it as the strength of the black family.[1] While the African-American church is most essential to the community, there is little written history on its impact in small rural areas like Mississippi County, Arkansas located in a southern area known as the Mississippi Delta.[2]

Many scholars have published information about geographical and racial matters in South. However, few major sources examine African-American religious bodies in Arkansas. This research explores religious practices that impact African-American religious bodies in Mississippi County. **T**he influence of the church in the development and preservation of the black community has been studied nationally, but limited studies exist on religion in the Arkansas Delta. Religion is the bonding element through which groups and communities define themselves around a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals. The church furnishes outlets for social expression and provides a place for discussion on political and social issues.[3] To fully understand the black religious experience in Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta, we must analyze past and present practices.

The major hindrance to local African-American religious studies is the lack of published documentation, especially for the early twentieth century. The United States Census Bureau and other agencies published statistics on African-American religious bodies; however, most data is incomplete and inconsistent. Over the years, African-Americans in Mississippi County failed to record and maintain an accurate account of church history. Religious leaders in Mississippi County and throughout the state provide no clues to locating early church records. Documents were lost, burned, or destroyed because of intentional and unintentional neglect. This practice will remain a major problem until future generations learn the importance of preserving church documents.[4]

Information gathered by the United States Census Department and the Glenmary Research Center of Nashville, Tennessee reveal reports of African-American religious bodies; however, some data is incomplete and inconsistent. Some statistics do not include data on youth or blacks who worship with majority white congregations. In 1926, census reports for black churches were compiled separately from white churches, with less

detail and accuracy.[5] The *2000 Report of Religious Bodies* compiled by the Glenmary Research Center does not include membership data on Baptist congregations because Baptist officials failed to comply with the 2000 publication deadlines.[6]

In 1926, the census indicated a total of 42, 585 African-American churches in the United States with Baptists leading as the majority denomination (see appendix). When reviewing state statistics, Arkansas memberships reflect trends similar to national statistics with Baptists as the leading congregation and Methodists, all branches, ranking second. In 1926, Arkansas reported 134, 720 members in the African-American Baptist Church, 25, 249 African Methodist Episcopal members, and 10,887 Colored Methodist Episcopal members. Mississippi County reported a membership of 5,774 Negro Baptist bodies, 761 African Methodist Episcopal and 305 Colored Methodist Episcopal in the same census report.[7] Census data, although incomplete and inconsistent, is essential to the study of the black religious experience in Arkansas.

According to the *Census of Religious Bodies: 1936,* Baptists ranked highest in the state, although many members left to form other denominations or migrated north. Baptist reported a total of 1,155 churches out of the total 1,939. Throughout the state, Baptists comprised the greatest numbers and Methodist groups rank second. Although statistics have changed drastically over the years as church membership fluctuates, Baptists continue to maintain the largest population.

In Mississippi County, like other parts of Arkansas, the Baptist church holds the majority of the black population. In 1936, Mississippi County reported 2,969 Negro Baptist bodies (a significant decrease from 1926 reports), 766 African Methodist Episcopalians, 879 Colored Methodist Episcopalians, and nine African Methodist Episcopal Zion members.[8] After African-American communities were established in the early twentieth century, citizens formed religious bodies. Many began in homes until funds were acquired to build permanent structures. The Baptist Church usually initiated religious services in newly established communities; later, as populations increased other religious bodies followed. Members of the community contributed to the construction of the religious structure by donating cash, time, and use of equipment. [9]

In the 1930s, the population of Mississippi County increased as blacks traveled to Arkansas from Mississippi and Tennessee in search of agricultural and lumber job opportunities. Over the years as mechanization increased and the demand for farm laborers decreased, blacks journeyed north causing a decrease in the religious population. This change is reflected in *1980 Census of Religious Bodies:* Arkansas reports 27 AME

Zion Churches, and 98 CME churches.[10] Early census data provide clues about church membership in the Arkansas Delta, but reveal little about the religious values that form its culture. In an attempt to fill this void, the survey of the African-American church will discuss social and economic issues pertinent to the African-American church.[11]

Because of inequalities in the Delta, religion formed differently in the South than in northern areas. According to Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, author of *American Congo*, whites seeking cheap labor subjected blacks to a harsh system of peonage, murder, and theft. Blacks encountered problems with whites like O.T. Craig of Mississippi County, Arkansas who exercised great power over his tenants. One African-American sharecropper, Henry Lowry, came to Arkansas from the neighboring state of Mississippi. Henry Lowry, realized first-hand the consequences of confronting whites in Arkansas. Lowry engaged in a serious quarrel with Craig, the white land owner. The African-American sharecropper, who had been mistreated, killed Craig and wounded the white man's daughter in gun fire. This episode of a black man murdering a land owner and injuring a little white girl angered citizens in the areas. Lowry attempted to run from the furious mob, but later faced death at the hands of angry whites. After capturing Lowry, they slowly burned and tortured him for hours; finally, they poured gasoline on his upper body to create a dramatic effect that would intimidate other sharecroppers. The NAACP and other organizations attempted to help Lowry, but they were no match for the powers of injustice that ruled in the Delta.[12]

In an effort to prevent such further inequalities like the Lowry incident, the church continued to establish and support societies which aided communities in times of social and economic injustice. Organizations were formed to fight lynching, discrimination, and other manifestations of racial oppression. These social and political movements were strengthened through the church. Political leaders evolved from the church as pastors addressed racial and economic issues pertinent to survival of the black community. As a result, religion became the main source of hope known to African-Americans in Mississippi County and the Delta.

A place of worship held significant value to African-Americans. The church was the nucleus for most activities held in the community, especially educational events. Most churches in Mississippi County held dual roles in religion and education. Pilgrim Rest, located in Blytheville, served as an educational facility until funds were available and a new school was constructed. In 1902, blacks attended school in a one-room building for a three month period during the non-harvest season. The school could not accommodate the large number of children so additional

classes were housed at Pilgrim Rest Church until 1950, resulting in an inseparable bond between religion and education in the black community.

When considering issues that affect African-American religion in Mississippi County, education ranks high on the list. The two major schools in the area were Blytheville Rosenwald School and Osceola Rosenwald. With church support, many students were able to continue their education by attending Arkansas Baptist College and Arkansas AM & N, currently known as the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Blacks became teachers and doctors, returning home geared for success and ready to train other children on the importance of education. Dr. Helen Robinson Nunn graduated from AM & N and returned as a secondary school teacher in the 1960s, later pursuing a Ph. D. and becoming a full-time professor at Memphis State University. Dr. Agnes Wiley Abraham, a native of Blytheville, attended the University of Arkansas Medical School and returned as the first black female doctor in the county. In an effort to increase awareness, ladies formed several organizations for young girls and boys throughout the county.[13]

The church played a major role in the formation of social and educational organizations in Mississippi County. Organizations such as the O.C. Shivers Club met in the church and used it as their source to communicate the importance of community functions. Social functions were scheduled around church activities so children could experience a wide range of activities, both religious and social. Ladies in the church expressed a great interest in the social well-being of their young children. They encouraged children to develop good oratory, musical, and social skills and formed several organizations to accommodate them in this quest. The Blytheville Social Arts Club, organized by Mrs. Jimmie Robinson, represented a cross-section of the community by sponsoring multiple services and programs for children and adults. The club provided activities to encourage girls to render community service and participate in literary, instrumental, and vocal music contests on a state and national level. The Rebecca Williams' Arkansas Baptist College Club, named after its founder, was organized to promote higher education and social skills. The O.C. Shivers Club, organized by its namesake a former teacher, currently functions in Blytheville and serves to promote good social skills for young girls in the community.[14]

In addition to education and racial equality, economic matters were of great importance in Mississippi County. In the early days, most families made meager wages working on plantations as sharecroppers and farm tenants. Most churches received money by fundraisers and private donations from rich whites. Members sold fried chicken plates on Saturdays

and Sundays to support all departments in the church. Because of limited funds and support from members, buildings were usually constructed by members of the church and lacked modest conveniences and adequate space. Educated blacks were wealthier and able to enjoy a better way of life than those who worked on farms and in domestic settings. Nevertheless, the church experienced a slow rate of financial success as blacks failed to understand the importance of supporting the church financially. Many held on to early African-American traditions that did not teach tithing, instead they paid dues, usually one or two dollars, to the church and the pastor.

Members were asked to pay church dues, usually at a rate of three dollars per month. Two dollars supported church affairs and one dollar went to the pastor. When possible, members paid additional funds of five or ten dollars monthly to support special programs. This rule applied to most denominations and carried well into the 70s for most congregations. Later, pastors began preaching the importance of paying tithes and supporting the church, without seeking donations or hosting fundraisers. As a result, new buildings were constructed and missionary programs were established. Improvements have occurred over the years; however, financial matters remain a major problem for most congregations in Mississippi County.[15]

A great number of churches are struggling financially because of low membership and limited financial support. Membership has declined, but churches refuse to close their doors; therefore, they operate with twenty to thirty members until forced to shut down. Members are usually elderly and unable to provide adequate financial support to the church so buildings go without needed repairs. Many buildings in Mississippi County are old and dilapidated with leaky roofs and poor interiors and exteriors (see Photo Gallery). One of the most distinguishing aspects of black churches in the area is the close proximity of church buildings. Because of the large number of churches, they are usually arranged within one mile of each other, regardless of denomination. Some congregations are housed in store front buildings, old school buildings, and funeral parlors while others are meeting modern standards with newly constructed buildings and outreach programs (see Photo Gallery).

Religion has held great significance for many years. Approximately 30 churches were established prior to 1930. Many have overcome the obstacles of time and are currently in operation. The St. Paul Church, organized in 1928, continues to flourish with a large membership of approximately 300 members. They recently constructed a new facility and have several programs designed to improve the community. Pilgrim Rest,

the oldest church in Blytheville, has a membership of approximately fifty individuals and continues to meet in the original structure. Most of the members are elderly and not active in community improvement programs. There are several small congregations in Osceola, and surrounding areas, similar to Pilgrim Rest. Most are small Baptist groups, with a majority elderly population. A major difference in current denominational trends is the increase in non-denominational churches.

Current congregational statistics are similar to those of the early twentieth century, with Baptists holding the greatest membership. Non-denominational churches have increased over the years because of disputes over traditional practices regarding behavior and gender. As members dispute traditional teachings, they retaliate by abandoning traditional institutions and establishing or joining non-denominational congregations. Traditional practices are viewed as gender specific rules designed by men to control females. Women are instructed on behavior, attire, and social activities. Non-denominational organizations do not impose strict rules regarding attire. Pants, jewelry, and make-up are all acceptable behaviors and women are not subjected to gender specific social and religious standards regulated by the church.[16]

There are several topics of interest to consider when conducting research on religion in Mississippi County. The black church has a unique history in regards to preaching, worship styles,, and gender roles. All contribute greatly to the African-American religious experience and its importance in the lives of African-Americans.

Notes

[1] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, (New York: Bedford Press, 1997), vii.
[2] Mississippi County is part of two southern regions, the Mississippi Delta and the Arkansas Delta Both regions are known for poverty and racial subordination
[3] Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 68.
[4] Pastor Horace Howard (First Baptist Church, Blytheville), interview by author, tape recording, Blytheville, AR, 24 September 2005.
[5] Religious Bodies: 1926 - Volume 1, Summary and Detailed Tables, United States Department of Commerce (United States Government Printing Office).
[6] Glenmary Research Center Institute, Nashville, TN, telephone call, October 2005.
[7] Religious Bodies: 1926 - Volume 1, Summary and Detailed Tables, United States Department of Commerce (United States Government Printing Office).
[8] "Religious Bodies: 1936, Volume I, Summary and Detailed Table," (United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census), 723.

[9] Bell Carter, interview by author, Steele, Mo, September 2005.
[10] "Report of Religious Bodies 1980", United States Department of Commerce.
[11] Horace Howard, interview by author, tape recording, Blytheville, AR, 24 September 2005.
[12] Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African-American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 110-114.
[13] Faye Ford, interview by author, Blytheville, AR, September 2005.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Horace Howard, interview by author, Blytheville, AR, tape recording, September 2005.
[16] Marilyn Harvey, Interview with author, Blytheville, AR, tape recording, March 2003.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The black church made an overwhelming impact in the development of the black community. It promoted spiritual and moral strength as well as served as the center for total life, guidance, and leadership.[1] Methodists and Baptists owe much to the silent, but potent influence of millions of blacks. W.E.B. DuBois writes about the significance of the African-American religious experience and how it carried the responsibility of social enhancement:

> It is generally agreed that the Negro church is the greatest institution developed by Negroes on American soil. It has held in common unity more Negroes than any other organization, and it has had more influence in molding the thought and life of the Negro people than any other single agency….[2]

Researchers have studied the influence of the church in the development and preservation of the black community, but there is need for additional analysis of this religion, which is considered the bonding element through which groups and communities define themselves. To fully understand the black religious experience we must study past and present practices, identifying patterns that are significant to American history as indicated by Lincoln and Mamiya who explain:

> A good way to understand a people is to study their religion, for religion is addressed to that most sacred schedule of values around which the expression and meaning of life tends to coalesce. The study of a people's religion is not guaranteed to provide all of the answers to what gives a culture its characteristic definitions, of course, for religion is essentially a subjective experience, and an external study or investigation will inevitably miss some of the critical nuances experienced (and value) only by those on the interior or belief. [3]

Common to other southern communities, churchgoers in Mississippi County depended on religion and religious institutions as their source of hope.[4] Black churches represented life in the African-American community and rendered an outlet for the emotions of common people and relief from the humiliation and deprivation that shadowed everyday living. Religion promised salvation, justice, and rewards for faithfulness and upright behavior and instilled a positive approach to life.[5] Congregations sponsored musicals, theatrical performances, educational contests, and more. Controversy exists about how and why the church remained such an object of strength in Mississippi County over the years and why religious practices, most based on tradition, survived over time. To address this topic of religious significance, we must learn more about the county, its religious history and African-American population.

Located in the upper part of Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta, and named for the river, the county consists of 898 square miles of land, with a population of 51,979, based on 2000 census reports. The country's topography is flat. Once largely seasonally inundated forest, the landscape is now predominately agricultural. Throughout the twentieth century, the county experienced the emergence and subsequent transformation of the new plantation agriculture as the area experienced a shift from underdeveloped timber region to plantation economy, later sinking into poverty.[6] The demographic and economic changes associated with this transition resulted in Arkansas's First Congressional District, of which Mississippi County is a part, becoming the poorest in the state.[7]

Statistics from 2000 census data reveal a large percentage of middle-aged couples residing in Mississippi County, with a median age of thirty-three years and 50 percent of the population being married couples. The median income for a household is $27,479, and the per capita income is $13,978, with 23 percent of the population and 19 percent of the families below the poverty line, the later number being three percentage points higher than the state average.[8] Additionally, a 1999 population survey revealed that 41.3 percent of the county's people of color lived in poverty. Despite the fluctuation, the size and relative stability of the county's black population makes it an ideal location for a study on the religious experiences of African-Americans in Arkansas.

The county is divided into three regions: west, south, and north (see Table 1: Mississippi County Population by Race on page 7). The western region is the area west of Big Lake (see maps below). This region includes the towns of Manila and Leachville. Based on 2007 statistics, the western region is predominantly white with a small percentage of

Hispanics and African-Americans. It has experienced very little economic growth and relies heavily on income generated by farming.[9]

Illustration 1: Map of Arkansas (Depicting Arkansas Counties)

Illustration 2: Arkansas, denoting Blytheville and bordering neighboring states of Missouri and Tennessee

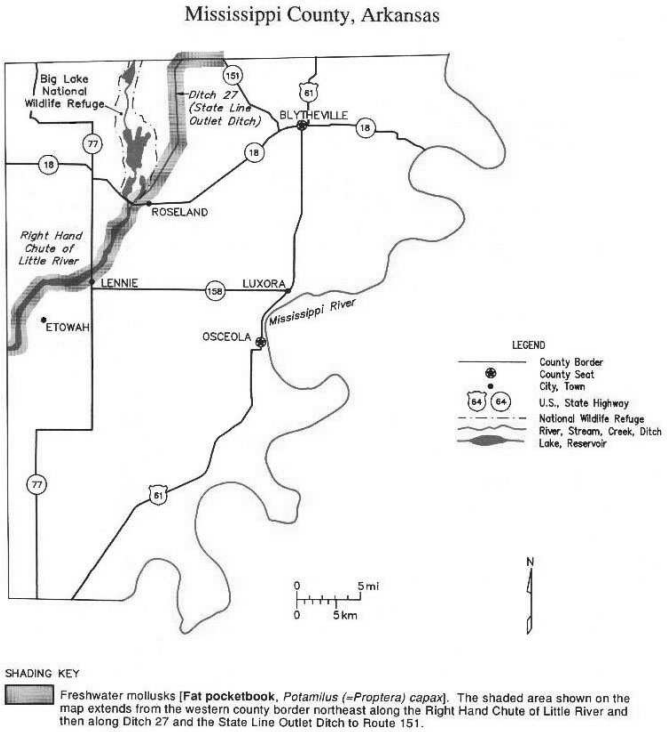

Illustration 3: Mississippi County and its close proximity to the Mississippi River

Mississippi County's southern region includes Osceola, Wilson, and several small towns. Racial composition varies depending on geographic area. Osceola and Luxora, respectively, are 51 percent and 56 percent African-American; whereas Bassett, Victoria, and Wilson are predominantly white (see Table 1: Mississippi County Population by Race on page 7). This region has experienced a drastic decrease in its overall population and an increase in its elderly population as citizens relocate to communities with greater economic potential. Previously existing farm towns such as Driver and Nadena are now lost communities as a result of black migration and decreased agricultural labor needs. The southern region experienced moderate industrial success as American Greeting, Cyro Industries, and Denso Manufacturing Corporation relocated to this area.

Mississippi County's northern region includes the cities of Gosnell and Blytheville with a predominantly African-American population, 52 percent,

and Gosnell with a majority Caucasian population of 80 percent. It is reported that in recent decades white residents of Blytheville relocated to nearby Gosnell and Armorel. This shift is consistent with the idea of "white flight," a means to escape the increasing black population. Armorel, an unincorporated area with a majority white population, is an industrial site for the area and home to residents who earn the highest incomes in the county. The closure of Eaker Air Force Base in the 1970s triggered a major economic decline, but the region recovered to a degree with the arrival of steel manufacturing companies such as Maverick Tube, Nucor Yamato, and Nucor Steel Company. This development boosted economic conditions in the region, affecting the lifestyles of residents, including African-Americans, influencing religious trends in Mississippi County.

The inter-county regional differences notwithstanding, Mississippi County has and has had a large African-American population. During the first three decades of twentieth century the county experienced increases in its black population. This segment of the population remained relatively stable through mid-century, but over the next thirty years these numbers declined significantly as the need for agricultural labor diminished and northern industry opportunities lured blacks to leave. In recent years this trend has slowed and the 2000 census reveals that the county's population is 32.7 percent African-American, the largest concentration of blacks in Northeast Arkansas (see Table 1: County Comparison of African-American Population on page 12).

Table 1: County Comparison of African-American Population
(Taken from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau)

Neighboring Areas	**Black Population (%)**
Greene County, Arkansas	.2
Poinsett County, Arkansas	7.3
Craighead County, Arkansas	9.3
Cross County, Arkansas	23.8
Mississippi County, Arkansas	32.7
Shelby County, Tennessee	48.5
Pemiscot County, Missouri	26.2

Table 2: Mississippi County Population by Race (2000)

	Population (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Hisp (%)	Other (%)	Median Household Income	Families Below Poverty (%)
County Totals	51,979	32.70	64.45	2.25	2.81	27,479	19
POPULATION OF CITIES AND TOWNS							
Bassett	168	0	98.81	.60	1.19	$31,607	18.4
Birdsong	40	100	0	0	0	$6,806	57.1
Blytheville	18,272	52.15	45.15	1.31	.9	26,683	23.3
Burdette	129	17.05	82.17	0	.78	40,625	10.3
Dell	251	1.20	89.64	.79	.71	26,607	10.6
Dyess	515	2.14	90.1	9.51	.23	25,000	25.3
Etowah	366	1.37	94.81	.82	2.5	21,563	13.3
Gosnell	3,968	15.15	80.12	3.45	5.6	31,423	15.5
Joiner	540	45.93	52.78	.74	1.3	26,875	27.7
Keiser	808	4.46	92.45	2.85	2.6	35,517	10.4

	Population (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Hisp (%)	Other (%)	Median Household Income	Families Below Poverty (%)
Luxora	1,317	56.04	40.93	2.73	3.81	20,304	30.7
Manila	3055	.30	98.2	1.08	2.1	24,896	13.4
Marie	108	29.63	69.4	0	.93	38,333	21.9
Osceola	8,875	51.3	47.39	1.34	1.89	23,163	26
Victoria	59	0	98.3	1.69	1.69	28,750	0
Wilson	939	26.3	73.27	.96	1.33	33,625	10.7

Taken from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census

The dominant religious groups in Mississippi County are Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals (see Appendix: Table 1: Directory of African-American Churches). To this day, there is little record of involvement in Catholicism, Islam, or other smaller denominations; therefore such data is omitted from this study.

Over the years, African-Americans in Mississippi County failed to maintain accurate accounts of church history. Church records are an excellent primary source, yet, rare within black communities. Religious census data, publications, and manuscript collections are highly desirable and similarly would facilitate this research, but little data of this kind exists on blacks in Mississippi County during the twentieth century. Telephone directories, newspaper, and church directories offer limited assistance because during the early-to-mid twentieth century black religious bodies in Mississippi County could not afford telephones and African-American denominations were seldom included in literature printed by white organizations. The Mississippi County Public Library has a variety of directories, dating back to the 1950s, from social clubs, schools, and other associations; yet, information on blacks is scarce.[10] Oral interviews are effective for looking at black experiences in Arkansas because they provide the opportunity to uncover specific facts, past and present, about lifestyles and religious practices. They also allow us to explore life at home and church, uncovering areas of social change. For example, women give personal accounts of their struggles as preachers in male-dominated organizations and male preachers reveal why they refuse to relinquish pulpits to women. Individuals who contributed interviews are listed in the Mississippi County Interview Participants [see Appendix: Table 2].

This paucity of primary source materials notwithstanding, the biggest research challenge involved identifying African-American churches in Mississippi County. A finding of remarkable significance is the large number of churches in the county when compared to black population statistics. Interviewees questioned about the large number of black churches almost always provide variations of the explanation offered by Christine Bennett, Pastor of the Naked Truth Church of Gosnell.

> I do believe there are an excessive number of churches in Mississippi County, especially Blytheville. That is one of the main reasons why our congregation relocated to Gosnell. We are the only black church out here. The problem is everyone wants to be a leader. Every preacher wants to have their own church. Then, people can't get along so they go out and start their own church. I have not seen this problem in any other area of the state. I grew up in Helena and there were turf problems with Helena

> and West Helena, but we did not have problems with churches and people starting churches as a result of conflict like they do in this area.[11]

It is difficult to identify the exact number of black religious facilities in rural areas like Mississippi County during the early twentieth century because research did not reflect actual African-American churches and no effort was made to enumerate black memberships within white congregations or include youth. Data published by the United States Department of Commerce Religious Bodies: 1926 confirm of the total 42,585 African-American churches in the United States, Baptists were dominant with 22,081 followed by 6,708 African Methodist Episcopal, 2,518 Colored Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion at 2,466, in addition to other groups (see Table 4: African-American Churches in United States by Denomination). Rural churches outnumbered urban churches with 10,158 compared to 32,427 black rural black churches in the United States and women exceeded men 100 to 62.[12]

Mississippi County memberships reflect trends similar to national statistics with Baptists leading and Methodists, ranking second (see Table 5: African-American Religious Memberships, 1926 on page 30 and African-American Religious Memberships, 1936 on page 31). The 1926 Census of Religious Bodies revealed 14,558 members in Mississippi County, all denominations of both races. Of this number 5,774 are black Baptists, 761 African Methodist Episcopal (AME), 305 Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME), and no African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ).[13] Ten years later another census indicated that the county's church membership totaled 13,296. This time, however, the number of black Baptist had declined by 51% and men are outnumbered by women, one to three. Depression related migration probably accounts for the black Baptist decline.[14]

Table 3: African-American Churches in the United States by Denomination

DENOMINATIONS	1926	1936
Baptist	22,081	23,093
African Methodist Episcopal	6,708	4,578
Colored Methodist Episcopal	2,518	2,063
African Methodist Episcopal Zion	2,466	2,252
Colored Primitive Baptist	925	1,009
Church of God in Christ	733	772
Disciples of Christ	487	No Report
Congregation and Christian	No Report	233
United American Free Will Baptist	No Report	213
Presbyterian USA	450	No Report
Others	2,474	3,864

Taken from US Census on Religious Bodies, 1926 and 1936

While these memberships furnish a measure of denominational vitality, they reveal little about the churches' contributions to the spiritual and social development of the black community. Soon after relocating to Mississippi County, blacks began construction of religious facilities. Often, blacks used their homes to conduct church services until buildings were constructed. As one member recalls, Baptists were usually the first denomination organized. Residents contributed cash, time, and use of equipment with additional assistance by white landowners. Blytheville's First Missionary Baptist Church, organized in 1912, began in a blacksmith shop on Main and Franklin Streets in an area known as "Sawdust Bottom."

Pleasant Grove in Luxora, the oldest church in Mississippi County began in 1862. Like many churches, it was built on land donated by a white plantation owner.[15]

Enoch Chapel, African Methodist Episcopal, the oldest Methodist church, originated during the 1800s on a farm in Gosnell. Here, it remained until 1905 when members moved to accommodate population trends in Blytheville. West End Baptist Church in Blytheville (see photo below) opened its doors in 1910.

Figure 1: West End Church, Photograph by author, 2005.

The church, housed near the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, began holding services in a member's home until construction of its structure in 1911.[16] Members purchased land by selling "chicken plates" to lumber company employees. The church is one of a few congregations that continue to hold services in their original structure. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal originated when Methodists felt the need to organize in the east section of town. The church, founded in 1905, continues to meet in the original building on Coleridge Street in Blytheville.[17] In 1903, Henry T. Blythe, a white minister and founder of the City of Blytheville, honored his cook, Mrs. Jane Holoman by donating the first twenty-five dollars to construct Pilgrim Rest, the oldest Baptist church in Blytheville (see photo below).[18]

Figure 2: Pilgrim Rest Church established in 1903, Photograph by author.

During the early twentieth century, churches sprouted all over the county as African-American residents aimed to establish a place of worship favorable to their denomination Partial lists of black churches are available, but county, city or religious officials lacked a full compilation with the names of churches, pastors, or addresses, possibly due to the large number of storefront churches with utilities and rental agreements registered in individual names instead of church names. To address this situation and to compensate for the lack of primary source materials, a survey generated information the county's African-American religious community. Approximately 120 individuals from all over the county completed the survey. Results did not come easy. Many participants returned incomplete surveys, and this made necessary follow-up conversations to obtain data. The effort proved beneficial, however, as the survey furnished information about trends and practices in the local black churches. For example, the survey provides written descriptions of behaviors, songs, and sermons. Moreover, photographic images have been compiled whenever possible to provide illustrative information to complement survey findings.

Finally, the survey data, when combined with interviews, current telephone directories, information gleaned from local newspapers, and county-wide geographical searches revealed that there are over seventy black churches and serving approximately 17,000 African-Americans in Mississippi County, excluding those who attend predominately Caucasian

affiliations. This data, compiled to produce the Mississippi County Directory of Black Churches [see Appendix] revealed that Baptist churches still predominate both in terms of number of churches and membership. Methodist affiliations have declined, but those of independent non-denominational organizations are increasing changing the religious history of areas like Mississippi County as religion continues to make a major impact on social, educational, and economic development in the black community.

A look at changing demographics and religious trends in Mississippi County allows us to obtain a better perception of African-American life and why research is critical. In order for this study to enlighten us on African-American religion in Mississippi County, we must first review the origin of Christianity in the lives of enslaved Africans forced into bondage in America and examines how religion served as a strengthening force from early years of slave importation to this day.

Notes

[1] *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, Theology and Black Consciousness. (October 1971), pp. 453.
[2] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, quoted in *The Black Church and the African-American Experience*, 92.
[3] Ibid., xi.
[4] The term religion refers to the use of Christianity by African-Americans.
[5] William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana University Press, 1993), 344.
[6] Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo*: *The African-American Freedom Struggle in the Delta.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003); Donald Holley, The ***Second Great Emancipation*: *The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South*** (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), xv, 55-56***;*** and Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood, ed., *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox.* Fayetteville, Arkansas (The University of Arkansas Press, 1993) .
[7] Institute for Economic Advancement, A Census State Data Center: Population by County, http://www.aiea.ualr.edu/census [accessed 7 November 2005] and Mississippi County, Arkansas, [accessed 14 January 2006].
[8] United States Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999, 2000, and 2001, www.census.gov/hhes/poverty [accessed 22 March 2006].
[9] Ibid.
[10] Horace Howard, interview with author, Blytheville, Arkansas, September 2005.
[11] Christine Bennett, interview with author, Blytheville, Arkansas, 12 October 2006.