Episcopal Church. Diocese of Alabama. Birmingham Public Library Archives. Selected Excerpts

1595.1.10  Journal of the 51st annual convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama, April 26-29, 1882. Extract from Bishop Wilmer’s address to the 1882 Convention

Bp. suggests some organized effort directed toward Blacks, for example a suitable building and “such a service as is adapted to the needs and tastes of this people.” Service should be “in large part choral” because this people is “peculiarly responsive and imitative.” He bemoans the loss of ties of sympathy and complains that the economic nexus is all that is left.

Committee’s reply to Bishop’s address says the African is a man, a son of Adam, it is our duty to help him. Why should the Church concern itself about “the present pitiable condition of the African?” “The answer is, that the vindication of its claims to be a Church, and not a sect, largely rests upon the action we take in this matter. If we are, in fact, as we are generally supposed to be, the rich folks’ sect, then we freely grant that the question has no standing in this assembly. But if we are, indeed, a branch of the Catholic Church of Christ, then we shirk this duty at the peril of losing the presence of the Spirit of God among us.” The approach to this work must be gradual, through education, winning the confidence of “men of influence among them,” organizing Sunday schools for them, a parish for the Colored people.

RG1.2.1Journal of the Proceedings of the 29th annual convention of the Protestant Episcopal church in the Diocese of Alabama, Selma, May 3-5, 1860.

Bp. Cobbs’s report mentions his confirmation of 84 colored persons, the largest number ever in one year. He hopes it will be the beginning of a “great and good work of the Church amongst a people that have such strong claims on our Christian sympathies and efforts.” He is “gratified and encouraged by the increased interest manifested by masters and mistresses in the religious improvement of their servants.” There are now 1650 white and 214 colored communicants in the diocese.

RG1.2.1  Journal . . . 1883.

Parochial reports

Faunsdale Chapel, Marengo County. Rev. W. A. Stickney, Rector, Colored congregation.

He reports one Eucharist. His report is written in a frustrated tone.

“I am at a loss to know what to do in this field of labor. For the past twenty years I have been practically familiar with various of the experiments recommended on paper in different quarters of the church. My strength and deepest concern have been expended on them. With the beautifully ecclesiological structure erected on the plantation in the days of slavery, I have had, and used, the opportunity of dealing with it as a regular parish – baptizing and instructing the children, celebrating the Holy Communion, visiting the sick as physician to both soul and body, solemnizing marriage, and burying the dead. In settling their quarrels, counseling them through difficulties, and in all my doings – my going out and coming in among them – the staple of my conversation has been their responsibility and allegiance to their Creator, as taught by our Redeemer.

I have found it easy to bring forward classes to confirmation. The picture is attractive to them. Outwardness has a charm for their, and the more of it, the greater their avidity to participate in it.

But emptiness, sham, hypocrisy, are about all that I have yet seen come of it. I am paralyzed in any and every attempt to induce this race of people to realize that God requires the keeping of His Commandments as a condition of pleasing Him. They will flock to the Holy Communion besotted in bestial depravity, unless I can find it out and repel them. It distresses me to invite them to the pure
participation of that holy Sacrifice. I have hence reported but one celebration the whole past year, and I
can not actually frame a list of communicants, as may be seen in my statistics above.

This is not the report of a missionary toiling among the heathen on Afric’s shores. But it is the
exhibit of Americanized Africans, that have been instructed from childhood with Catechism on this
plantation. I have in my view successive crops of the young – children’s children – who have thus been
tried, and I fail to see one step gained for or by them in purity of life and common morality.”

Journal . . . 1884.

Bp.’s address reports building a church in Mobile for the Colored (Good Shepherd). He goes on to
address the situation of “this people” and the Church’s mission to them, quoting extensively from his
address on the subject to the Board of Missions in Philadelphia.

His earliest ministry in Virginia was among them. He feels himself their debtor. Their violently
acquired freedom led to a “most natural impatience of subordination.” They were “puffed up by political
demagogues” and became “inflated” and “misconstrued every effort to do them good as a tribute to
their self-importance.”

Now the storm having abated, his former position of standing still is past. There is no prospect
that “this people” will “come to us in great numbers,” not because this church does not have what they
need, but because “they are already attached to, I might almost say engulfed by, religious systems
which, however ill suited to instruct and elevate, are powerful to fascinate them.” But a few will come,
and with education, these few ‘will become centers of good influence and like salt, help to season the
race. But this must be the work of time and patience, as well as a labor of love.”

Blacks have “drifted away from the pilotage of their white brethren” to emotionalism, turned to
so-called revivals. “We must confess to our shame that the black man has never to any great extent
been brought under the church system. It is not altogether our fault, for these ignorant creatures have
been persistently taught that there is no religion among us. We gratefully accept the statement that
there is no such religion taught by us as they are seeking for. But a new era opens. The present religious
systems have for the most part confessedly failed to produce even a decent morality.” So we shall try to
do something. “We must build them attractive churches and give them modes of worship suited to their
responsive natures. We must also educate their children and give them that self-respect without which
there is no basis for common morality. We must give them church homes for the aged and helpless
young.”

What shall we do with the few who remain with us? Separate organizations are not in keeping
with the Church’s doctrine.