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Shiloh church, Northumberland County. This church
in the open country has over 1,100 members

The Negro Church in Rural Virginia

By C. HORACE HAMILTON and JOHN M. ELLISON

THE VIRGINIA AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION AND THE VIRGINIA STATE
COLLEGE FOR NEGROES COOPERATING

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By C. HORACE HAMILTON, *Assistant Rural Sociologist*, and JOHN M. ELLISON, *Special Assistant*

I

INTRODUCTION

The church has always occupied more than an ordinary place in the community life of the American Negro. It was their first community organization, and indeed, for a long time their only organization. In it has been centered not only their religious life, but their social life as well. It has been the prime medium through which Negro people have given expression to their emotions, hopes, and aspirations and through which they have exercised their powers in almost every phase of life.

The reason for this prominence of the church in Negro life is not difficult to understand when we remember that during the long period of slavery the church service was the chief, and in most cases the only, diversion that the slaves enjoyed. Through the years, in the face of most serious social and economic handicaps, the rural church has remained the Negro's principal religious and social center; and in its various organized forms, still serves as an integral part of the rural community life of Negro people.

In more recent years, the facts seem to indicate that the Negro church has lost some of its prestige and influence. Other agencies, especially schools and lodges, have arisen and claim their share of interest. The Negro church, being always conservative and often primitive, has not kept pace with progress in the social and intellectual life of the Negro. The younger people, in particular those with education, are turning away from the church. The program of the church has not been made with the growing boy and girl in mind. Rather it has been framed for and dominated by the older generation. The appeal of the message of the church has been to the emotions of elderly people and not to the social and intellectual needs of youth.

In this report we attempt to analyze in detail some of the problems of the Negro rural church. A general summary of rural church conditions has already been presented in Bulletin 267 of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, "The Role of the Church in Rural Community Life in Virginia."¹ That bulletin, however, gave only passing attention to the peculiar problems

¹ Bulletin 256 was the first; bulletin 267, the second; and this is the third publication in a series on Rural Organization in Virginia. In order to get a complete picture of the Negro rural church problem, Bulletin 267 should be studied in close connection with this one.

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of the Negro church. Since it has so many distinctive problems of its own, it was felt that a more intensive analysis of the problems of the Negro church should be made. As a basis for such analysis, intensive case studies of Negro churches and communities have been made in the following counties: Northumberland, Culpeper, Powhatan, Brunswick, Caroline, New Kent, Nansemond, Gloucester, and Pittsylvania. We have also used in preparing this bulletin a special tabulation of the 1926 U. S. Census of Religious Bodies.²

This bulletin is the joint product of several workers. Dr. W. E. Garnett, rural sociologist of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, directed the study; H. J. McGuinn, professor of sociology, Virginia Union University, did the field work in, and prepared preliminary reports for the following counties: Caroline, New Kent, Nansemond, Gloucester, and Pittsylvania; J. M. Ellison, professor of sociology, Virginia State College for Negroes, did the remainder of the field work and prepared an extensive report on the entire Negro phase of the church study; C. H. Hamilton, assistant rural sociologist, Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, analyzed the data obtained from the U. S. Census of Religious Bodies and prepared this bulletin with the collaboration of J. M. Ellison and W. E. Garnett. Many others contributed to the study in various ways. We wish to thank in particular the various denominational and educational officials who gave generously of their seasoned judgment in planning certain phases of the study.

II

MEMBERSHIP STRENGTH

General situation good.—According to the 1926 census of Religious Bodies, over 271,000, or 56 per cent of the rural Negro population³ of Virginia were reported as church members. This figure compares very favorably with 38 per cent for the urban Negro, 42 per cent for the rural white, and 57 per cent for the urban white population. From the standpoint of nominal church membership, therefore, the Negro rural church is in a very favorable situation. There is some question, of course, about the weight to be given church membership figures taken alone. What the church is doing with and through its membership is obviously the more important question. In another section we expect to evaluate the program of the church. The membership ratios given here must, therefore, be evaluated in the light of the later section. However, there is also some danger of under-evaluating the significance of the high church membership percentage for rural Negroes. It means that

² The special tabulation of church census data furnished the Experiment Station by the Census Bureau included 7,348 church organizations, or a little more than 97 per cent of the 7,565 reported for the state. The remaining 3 per cent are churches of denominations having less than 25 organizations in the state and could not be economically tabulated by machinery. The statistical data in this bulletin, therefore, will not tally exactly with the final data published by the Census Bureau. The difference, however, is negligible.

³ See footnote No. 2 on page 13 of Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267 for method of arriving at population data for 1926.

the church does have some sort of social contact with the vast majority of rural Negro people. It means that the leaders of the Negro church have a great responsibility on their shoulders. It means that they have a great opportunity for social service—adult education, inspiration for higher ideals and standards of living, and general economic improvement. In short, the very fact that the church has constant contact with 271,000 rural Negroes in Virginia, means that the church holds the key to the solution of many serious social and inter-racial problems.

Membership low in certain areas.—Figure 1 shows the membership situation in Virginia counties and cities. In 16 counties, it will be seen, less than 25 per cent of the Negro rural population were reported as church members; and that 11 other counties were below 35 per cent.

Statistical analysis shows that the following factors are the most important in determining Negro church membership: Percentage of Negroes in the population, farm tenancy, and topography. Other factors, to be sure, have some influence but the three factors just mentioned account for the largest amount of variation in membership. Church membership decreases with the decrease in the percentage of Negroes in the population.⁴ Church membership decreases with an increase in farm tenancy.⁵ Church membership decreases with an increase in the roughness of the topography.⁶

Other factors, which observation indicates affect Negro church membership adversely, are: Extreme instability of the population, type of roads available, and the absence of strong leadership.

Sunday school membership low.—Figure 2 shows that Sunday school membership is very low in the country. Only 22 per cent of the rural Negro population was reported as Sunday school members. This percentage exceeds that for the urban Negro which is only 15; but is much lower than the corresponding percentages for the rural and urban white church, which are 34 and 37, respectively. It is obvious that the Negro church has had neither the time nor the resources with which to develop the Sunday school. The leaders of Negro people have spent most of their energies in the more fundamental work of eliminating illiteracy and strengthening the school system. With further advancement in the educational status of Negroes, the church program will, no doubt, put less emphasis on the emotional type of preaching and more emphasis on religious education. Such a tendency is clearly seen in the more progressive Negro churches. It should be noted also that the Negro school in many cases carries on informal religious and moral education. The value of such training, however, varies with the personality of the teacher.

⁴ The coefficient of correlation was found to be $.59 \pm .04$. (Considered a high correlation).

⁵ The coefficient of correlation was found to be $-.23 \pm .06$. This is considered a low correlation, but if (by partial correlation) the percentage of Negroes in the population is held constant, the correlation is raised to $-.45$.

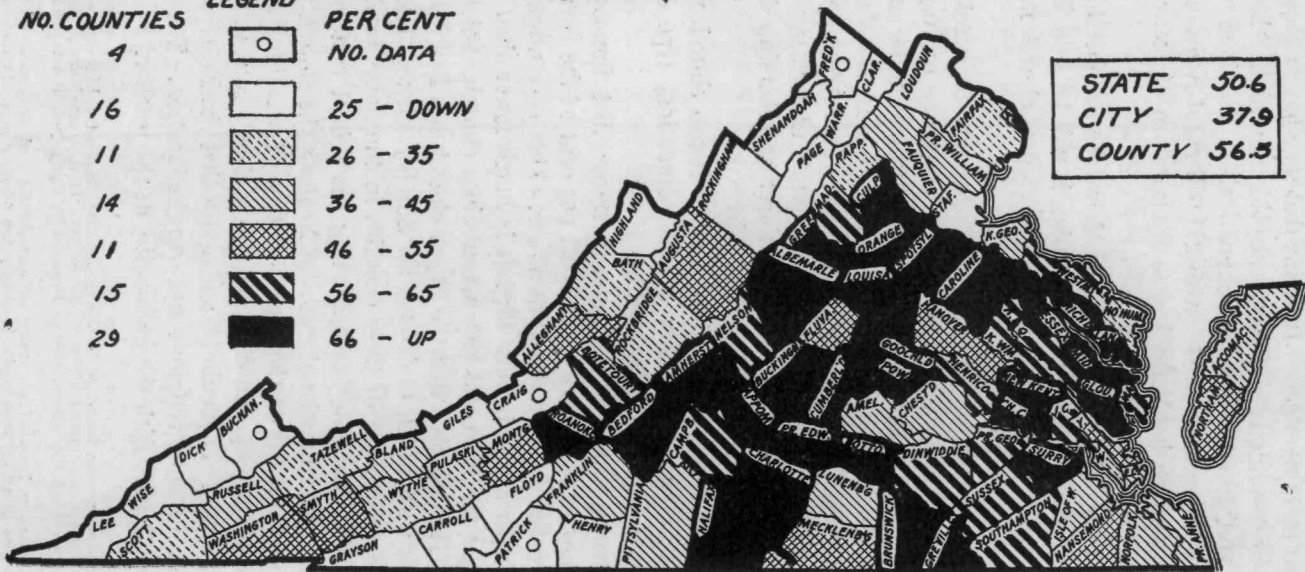
⁶ The coefficient of correlation between an index of topography and church membership was found to be $-.47 \pm .07$. The index of topography is merely the number of times that vertical and horizontal lines, spaced two and one-half miles apart, cross a five-hundred-foot contour interval per 100 square miles.

PER CENT NEGRO POPULATION IN CHURCH

VIRGINIA, 1926

NO. COUNTIES	LEGEND	PER CENT
4		NO. DATA
16		25 - DOWN
11		26 - 35
14		36 - 45
11		46 - 55
15		56 - 65
29		66 - UP

STATE 50.6
CITY 37.9
COUNTY 56.5



INDEPENDENT CITIES

Fredericksburg	99	Bristol	58	Petersburg	42	Staunton	24
Buena Vista	87	Alexandria	51	Radford	40	Newport News	19
Clifton Forge	74	Charlottesville	49	Lynchburg	40	Harrisonburg	17
Danville	73	Roanoke	46	Portsmouth	35	Winchester	12
Suffolk	65	Richmond	43	Norfolk	29		

Source: U.S. Census of Religious Bodies; 1926, Estimate of Population, 1926.

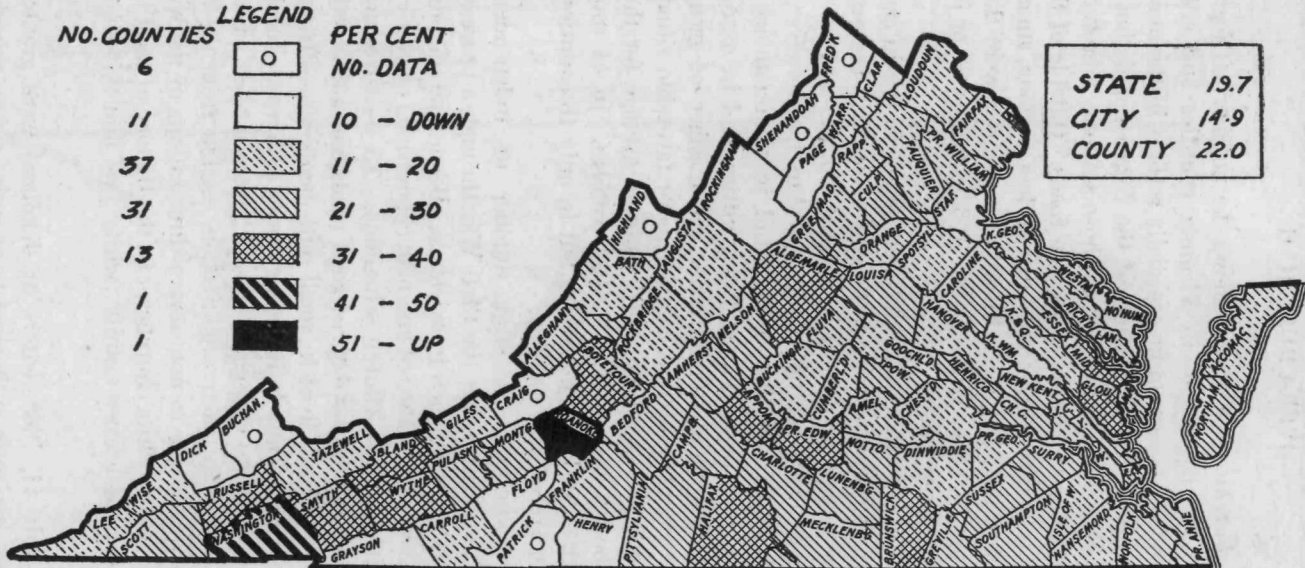
Fig. 1.—Per cent of Negro population in church

(6)

PER CENT NEGRO POPULATION IN SUNDAY SCHOOL VIRGINIA, 1926

NO. COUNTIES	LEGEND	PER CENT
6		NO. DATA
11		10 - DOWN
37		11 - 20
31		21 - 30
13		31 - 40
1		41 - 50
1		51 - UP

STATE	19.7
CITY	14.9
COUNTY	22.0



INDEPENDENT CITIES

Newport News -----	53	Buena Vista -----	31	Radford -----	16	Petersburg -----	7
Fredericksburg -----	48	Charlottesville -----	25	Lynchburg -----	14	Portsmouth -----	5
Clifton Forge -----	42	Suffolk -----	23	Richmond -----	14	Harrisonburg -----	4
Danville -----	37	Roanoke -----	22	Norfolk -----	14	Staunton -----	3
Bristol -----	32	Alexandria -----	18	Winchester -----	10		

Source: U.S. Census of Religious Bodies, 1926

Fig. 2.—Per cent of Negro population in Sunday school

III

OVER-CHURCHING

Extent of over-churching.—Figure 3 shows the number of Negro church organizations per 10,000 population in Virginia counties and cities. The problem of over-churching is seen to be especially serious in the mountainous sections of the state where the proportion of the Negro population is small. See Figure 4. More churches are justified in those sections, however, because of the difficulty of travel over winding mountain roads. Outside of the mountainous sections of the state, over-churching is less serious among Negro churches than among white churches. In only 14 counties were there 30 or less white churches per 10,000 population; but in 33 counties, 30 or less Negro churches per 10,000 were found.

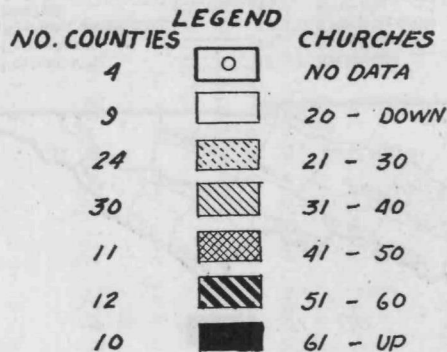
Figure 5 shows the average membership per Negro church in each county of the state. The larger churches seem to be concentrated in the eastern part of the state—especially in the northern Tidewater counties and on the Eastern Shore. There is a moderate number of large churches, however, in Piedmont Virginia. The small churches were found in mountainous counties, sparsely populated counties, low-membership counties, and in over-churched counties. From the standpoint of size, i. e., the number of members per church, the Negro rural church is in a much more favorable situation than the white rural church; the Negro church having an average for the state of 158 members and the white church only 109 members. In 44 counties the average Negro church exceeds 150 members; but in only 16 counties does the average white church exceed that number.

Causes of over-churching.—A large number of independent Negro churches sprang into existence after the Civil War through a process of withdrawal from the white churches then in existence. Denominational differences in the white churches were perpetuated and many conditions of over-churching also had their origin in white church situations. To be sure, more small churches were justified before the days of good roads and automobiles. Also Negro people in many counties lived in small settlements some distance apart; and, as many had to walk to church, it was necessary to have a church in each settlement. Many small Negro churches, however, were formed when the size of the group did not warrant their organization. Aside from the matter of over-churching, it is interesting to note several illustrations of the withdrawal of Negro members from the white churches. In the History of the Union Baptist Church of Achilles, Gloucester County (white), we find this short memorandum:

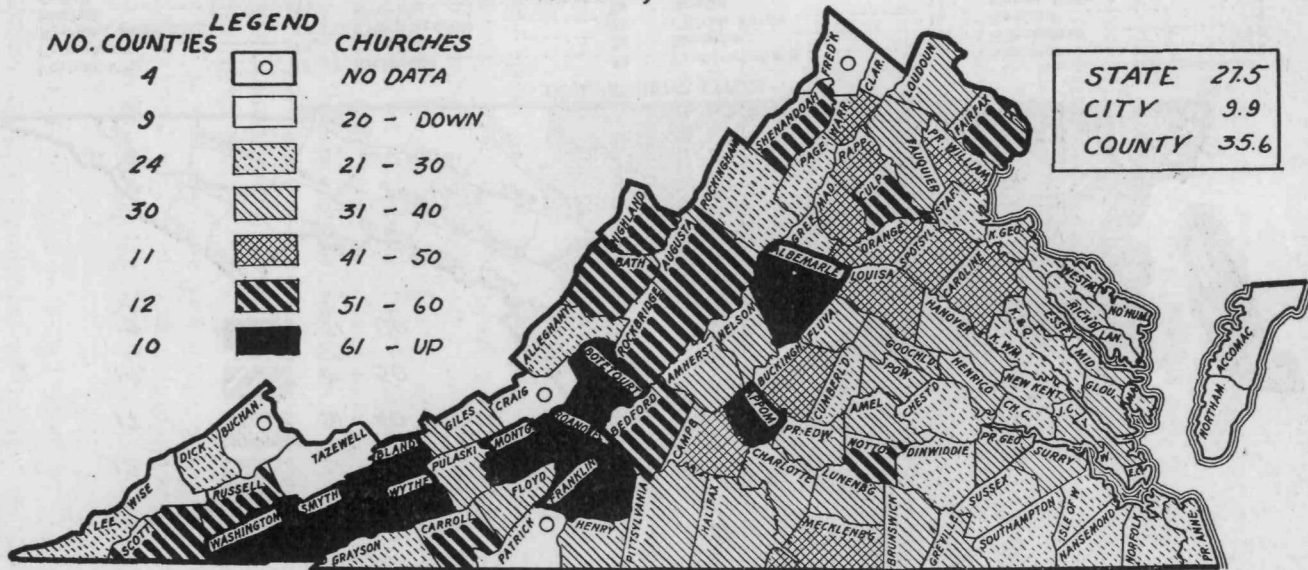
“On Saturday, July 11, 1868, letters of dismissal were granted to the colored members and they were authorized to organize a new church of their

NUMBER NEGRO CHURCHES PER 10,000 POPULATION

VIRGINIA, 1926



STATE 27.5
CITY 9.9
COUNTY 35.6



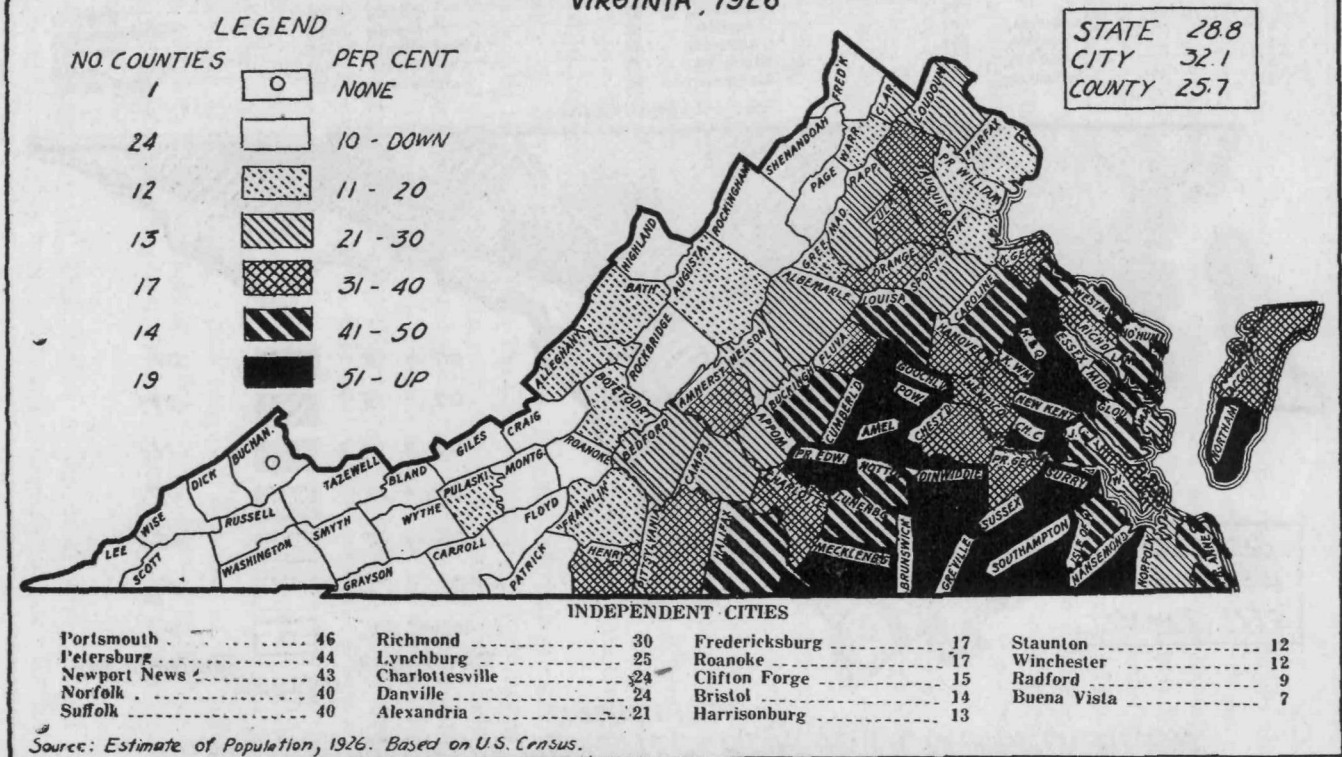
INDEPENDENT CITIES

Buena Vista	32	Winchester	23	Lynchburg	16	Richmond	8
Fredericksburg	30	Alexandria	22	Charlottesville	15	Newport News	7
Danville	28	Clifton Forge	21	Staunton	15	Norfolk	7
Harrisonburg	23	Bristol	20	Roanoke	15	Portsmouth	5
Radford	23	Suffolk	19	Petersburg	12		

Source: U.S. Census of Religious Bodies, 1926. Estimate of Population, 1926.

Fig. 3.—Number Negro churches per 10,000 population

NEGRO PER CENT IN POPULATION VIRGINIA, 1926



(10)

Fig. 4.—Negro per cent in the population

NUMBER MEMBERS PER NEGRO CHURCH

VIRGINIA, 1926

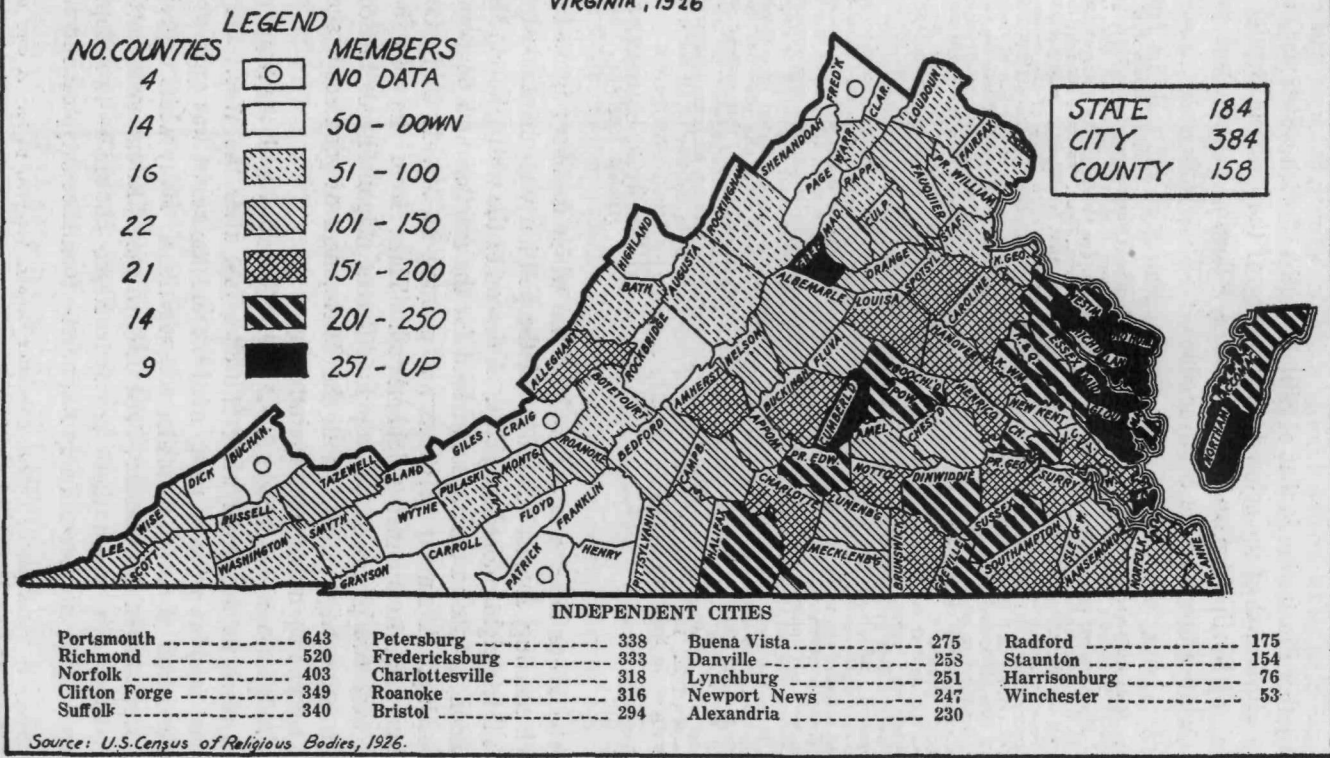


Fig. 5.—Number members per Negro church

own. The Morning Star Colored Baptist Church, which is located about a mile from Union, was organized by the retiring members.”⁷

Another illustration is that of Shiloh Baptist Church which was organized by the withdrawal of the colored constituency of the Fairfield Baptist Church (white) of Northumberland County. The following petition was presented to the white church by the Negro members:

Poplar Stage, July 7, 1867.

To Elder Wm. Kirk and the Members of the Fairfield Baptist Church:

Beloved Brothers: Grace be unto you and peace from God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. From an earnest desire to act in all things with an eye single to the glory of God and for the unity of that common faith which constitute us in Christ Jesus, we have thought it advisable to counsel on the subject of our future church relation. So that whatever may be done we may at least preserve that peace and harmony which ought to characterize those of the same faith and order and promote the prosperity of that cause which, through your instrumentality had been the means of calling us into the light and knowledge of the glorious gospel of the Son of God. Without alluding to the Providence that so mysteriously changed our social and political relation, we conceive that under the new order of things we are not only advanced in our religious privilege, but that solemn and weighty responsibilities impose upon us a new class of duties in which we should be wanting in fidelity if we did not seek to place ourselves in that position in which we could best promote our mutual good, both in reference to ourselves and our posterity. In this new relation the subject of a separate church organization presses itself upon us as the best possible way in which we can best promote those indispensable interests, such as an ordained ministry, a separate congregation with all the privileges of a church organization, stated church meetings, regular religious service, Sabbath schools, etc. But just at this point the question arises: Can we not do this and preserve the unity of the faith and continue in church fellowship with our white brethren; and thereby perpetuate our church identity, so that in all the general interest of the church we may be mutually interested and to some extent co-laborers? To effect this may require the concurrent action of all the members of the congregation concerned; and the object of this communication is to ask your attention to this subject, with the hope that such an arrangement can be made as to induce a general church meeting at some convenient time and place for this purpose, that our identity may be preserved or perpetuated if possible; and if not, that we may receive your parting benediction and blessing, as well as your endowment (endorsement) of our Christian character and standing. All of which is most respectfully submitted for your prayerful consideration and action. Hoping that unerring wisdom may guide us in the way of all truth, we remain, dear brethren in the bonds of Christ.

Yours Fraternally,

SAMUEL CONWAY, Secretary.
HIRAM KENNER, Chairman.

The above letter was received by the white members in their regular church meeting, August 10, 1867, and the petition was unanimously granted to the thirty-eight colored members. A deacon of the white church, Mr. Henry Bloundon, granted a small plot of land for the erection of a temporary place of worship. A similar privilege was granted by Mr. T. D. S. Covington, a white man in another neighborhood. Thus, from the very beginning there were two places of worship in different neighborhoods but controlled by the same congregation. With the development of good roads such situations led to a condition of over-churching.

Church schisms.—Matters did not move smoothly with the Negro churches which were formed from white churches just after the War. For various reasons, factions arose in many of them and the result was quite frequently the formation of new and smaller congregations. Many white churches have also originated in this manner. The little village of Kilmarnock, Northumberland County, in which there are four Negro churches—two Baptist, one Methodist, and one Seventh Day Adventist—furnishes a typical illustration of

⁷ History of Union Baptist Church, Gloucester County, Virginia, p. 16. A copy of this history was secured from the minister of the church.

church splitting. The two Baptist churches are the result of a church dis-sension led by the minister. The minister, who had been with the flock for several years, resigned to take another position. After a while he became dis-satisfied with his new position and decided to go back to his former parish to resume his duties as pastor. But some of the members felt that inasmuch as the pastor had of his own accord resigned, he should not be accepted as their pastor again. Soon two factions arose, one led by the pastor in his own interest and another led by a prominent layman against the pastor. After a series of heated church battles and much bitterness, the inevitable result was a church split or division. Across the village soon a new and imposing church edifice was going up under the direction of the defeated pastor and a few devoted followers. The village of Kilmarnock with not more than 150 Negro families has now two struggling Baptist churches! There is little or no co-operation between them, for the old animosity that caused the division has not entirely disappeared.

Another typical illustration of the division of church congregations is found in the origin of Crooked Run Baptist Church of Culpeper County, which started from a split in the White Oak Run Baptist Church. In 1907 the White Oak Run Church building was burned. A dispute arose over the location of the new building. After a long and heated controversy, one group withdrew and organized the Crooked Run Baptist Church. The two churches are only two miles apart with 150 and 90 members, respectively. Neither church has a resident minister or preaching services more than once a month.

The Morning Star Baptist Church of Northumberland County was born of a split of a different character. There is no particular controversy connected with its history; yet there was never any need for its existence. It is recognized as an offshoot of the First Baptist Church from which it is about three miles distant. It grew out of the ambition of a transient, unemployed minister who desired the honor of having founded and organized a church. Hence, he called together a few members of the First Baptist Church, most of whom lived in the Brown's Store neighborhood, and organized them into an independent church. This action was much to the regret and against the will of the parent church. The new church has only forty or fifty members, and since its organization, has barely existed in the face of most serious handicaps.

The Morning Star Baptist Church of Westmoreland County originated in a difference of interpretation of the Scriptures, which in turn was the result of a sort of backwash of religious fanaticism from the city. Certain members of the Siloam Baptist Church of Westmoreland County, made frequent visits to the north and came in contact with certain fanatic religious groups—the "Holy and Sanctified Cults." The members of these cults with their emphasis on mystical experiences and with their aptitude at learning and quoting verbatim passages of Scripture won many of the migrants to a new idea of religion. When they returned home contentions and disputes began to arise. The

deacons of the Siloam Church attempted to discipline the heretical members, who in turn defended their views with abundant references to Scripture. The final result was a church split. The people of the newly formed organization selected one of their number as minister. He had only about a sixth grade education.

Other examples of church divisions are not needed to show their relation to the problem of over-churching. It should be mentioned here, however, that church splits seem to be on the decline. The lack of educational background is a basic cause of church splits; and the increasing education of Negro people has no doubt been chiefly responsible for their decline.

IV

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Figure 6 shows the average expenditure per member in 1926 for Negro churches in Virginia counties and cities. It will be seen that the average rural member contributed only \$4.14; while the urban member contributed \$10.13. It is interesting to note here that the average Negro rural church budget was only \$654.00; and that of the urban church, \$3,890.00. The average rural church building was valued at \$3,717.00; and that of the urban church at \$26,012.00.

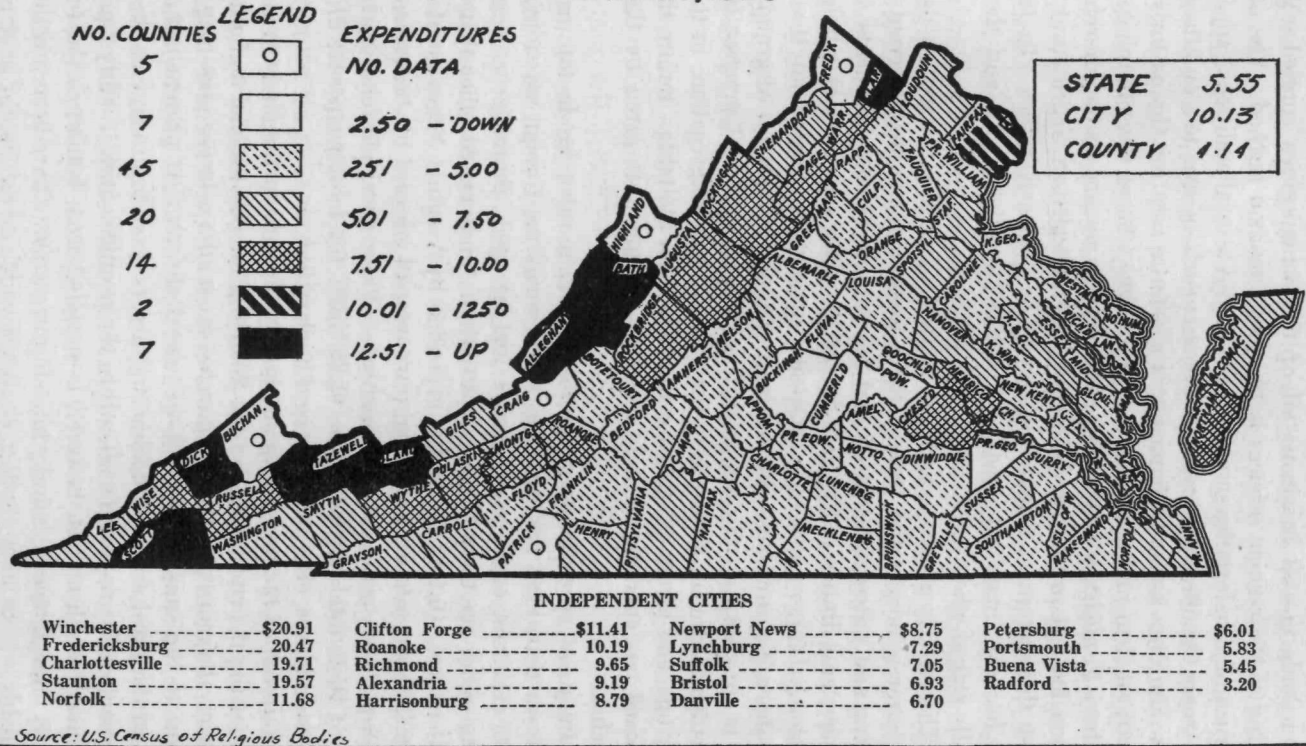
It is pointed out in a previous bulletin that the average rural church member, both white and Negro, has insufficient income to support adequately a modern church program.⁸ The problem of financial support of the rural church is becoming an even more serious problem with the increase in expenditures for many other institutions and organizations; such as, schools and colleges, health and welfare agencies, and recreational groups. Financial support of the Negro rural church is an even more serious problem than the support of the white church. All available data on the wealth and income of Negroes in Virginia show them to be quite poor. According to the 1925 U. S. Census of Agriculture, for instance, Negroes constituted more than one-third of the population of 60 counties having a per capita value of all farm property of \$1,100.00 or less; but one-sixth of the population of the counties showing more than \$1,100.00 per capita. All of the 19 counties in which Negroes constituted more than 50 per cent of the population showed a per capita value of farm property less than \$1,100.00; and 13 of the 19 counties, less than \$800.00. Wages of Negro laborers are also known to be unusually low; and a large percentage of Negro people are laborers.⁹

Devices for raising funds.—Due to the difficulty of raising funds, Negro ministers and leaders have had to resort to many devices in their efforts to

⁸ See Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267, chapter III.

⁹ For a full discussion of Negro wages see Chapter IV of *The Negro in American Civilization*, by Charles S. Johnson. For the same kinds of unskilled labor the same wage is usually paid to white and colored alike; but Negroes do not have an equal opportunity for advancement and when work is short, are said to be the first ones laid off.

ANNUAL NEGRO CHURCH EXPENDITURES PER MEMBER VIRGINIA, 1926



(13)

Fig. 6.—Annual Negro church expenditures per member

keep the church going financially. Very few churches, however, make a budget or have a definite system of raising funds. One or the other of the following methods prevail in almost all of the communities studied. Voluntary offering at the regular services is the most common method. The offering is often counted before the service is closed and several additional appeals made to increase the offering to an even amount; such as, five, ten, or fifteen dollars. A few churches assess their members a definite sum for the pastor's salary—the largest item in rural church expenditures. Some few churches ask their members to pledge a certain per cent of their income to the church, but the method has not proved very successful. Practically all Negro rural churches follow the custom of conducting annual or quarterly rallies. In fact, many churches rely upon this method to meet any emergency; and the rally is usually staged when the emergency arises.

The rally is a most interesting method of raising money. It usually extends over a long period (two or three weeks) and is characterized by much begging and soliciting of funds and the holding of entertainments, ice cream suppers, and dinners. The last day of the rally especially is a momentous occasion. Dinner is served. A special preacher is invited for the occasion. Neighboring churches are invited to attend, and an element of group competition is injected into the campaign. An almost universal practice is for the individual members to march to the front of the congregation, in the eyes of every one, and lay an offering for the church on the table. Before the service is closed, an announcement is made of the amounts given by the various churches.

Purposes of expenditures.—Most churches raise funds for many other purposes than local maintenance. Home missions, foreign missions, associational expenses, orphanages, homes for the aged, church schools, and ministerial relief are the principal objectives of funds raised other than for local maintenance. Out of \$1,112,109 expended by Virginia Negro rural churches in 1926, 81 per cent went for local purposes; 16 per cent for benevolences, etc.; and 3 per cent could not be classified. White rural churches spent 72 per cent of their total expenditures (\$5,223,548) for local purposes; 27 per cent for benevolences, etc.; and 1 per cent unclassified.

Solution of the financial problem.—If the same principle is to be adopted in financing the rural church as in financing the rural school and other public agencies, the more prosperous churches must allot a larger percentage of their income to the support of the Negro rural church. At present, about 25 per cent of the rural school budget is supplied from state funds, i. e., the prosperous people help support the schools in the poorer counties. Only 2 per cent of the rural church budget, however, is supplied from home mission funds. As yet city church members and white church members have been unwilling—and justifiably so—to help support churches which never should have come into existence or churches whose program is too conservative and ineffective. In

other words, there is a great gap in the philosophy of religion held by city people and that of rural Negroes. This fact suggests that the problem must therefore be attacked indirectly, i. e., through an improvement of the Negro public school and other educational agencies. Such increase in the educational opportunities of Negro people should make them capable of and willing to put on a church program worthy of the support of their white and colored brethren in the city.

Nevertheless, it is our opinion, that more mission funds should now be allocated to Negro rural missions. If improvement of the rural school will raise the educational level of Negro people, the improvement of the rural church, made possible with more funds, should perform a similar function in its field. It would make it possible, for instance, for rural churches to pay higher salaries to their ministers and consequently get better trained and more capable ministers. The income of the present group of Negro ministers in the country is certainly not very attractive to a capable young Negro who is on the verge of selecting a vocation. As a matter of fact, we are informed by educational leaders among the Negroes that many young people turn away from the ministry because of the great financial sacrifice involved. It seems justifiable to conclude, therefore, that a great deal more mission money could be effectively used now in improvement of the Negro rural church.

V

MINISTERS AND LEADERS

Religious leadership in rural communities is almost entirely confined to the minister. He, more than any other person, has the ear of the people of the community. His counsel is sought on almost every phase of life. This is logically so because the church is still the dominant institution in the life of Negro rural people.

A tribute should be paid here to the small number of capable ministers who in the face of almost insuperable obstacles have fearlessly and effectively preached a constructive gospel. They have not always been the most popular men, but in the long run their work will bear the most fruit. Such men have not only been church leaders but also community leaders. They have inspired the building of schools, establishment of institutions of social welfare, and have worked tirelessly for progress in every phase of community life. It was shown in Bulletin 267 that relatively more Negro than white ministers take an active part in rural community affairs.¹⁰ Twenty per cent of the white, and 26 per cent of the Negro ministers were reported to have been active in one or more phases of rural life development.

Lay leadership in the Negro church is at present undeveloped. Sunday school teachers and young people's leaders, where such are found, have almost

¹⁰ Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267, pp. 122, 123.

no training for their task. This is considered a serious situation and church leaders are urged to give much thought to its improvement.

Training and salary of ministers.—The training and salary of most Negro rural ministers is appallingly inadequate. Capable men are not attracted to the rural ministry by the low salaries; and the low salaries do not permit those already in the ministry to take advanced theological training. In Brunswick County, for instance, out of eight ministers interviewed, only one was a college and seminary graduate; three had no formal training at all for the ministry; one had finished a normal school course; and three had had some seminary training. Only one of the ministers lived in Brunswick County.

The annual salaries paid the Brunswick County ministers is also quite low—the average paid by each church being only \$193.00. Since the average minister serves less than two churches, the total salary must be much less than \$400.00 per year.¹¹

In Powhatan County only one of the ministers had any formal training and the average salary received from each church was only \$112.00. The average salary paid by Mecklenburg churches was \$195.00. Most Negro ministers must therefore, work at some other employment than the ministry in order to make a living. Similar conditions as to salary and training of ministers were found to exist in most of the areas studied, but there are several outstanding exceptions.

In Northumberland County the rural ministers have relatively good training and receive substantial salaries. Of the eight ministers interviewed there, four were college and seminary graduates, one had taken special courses in a seminary; one had a high school and a seminary course; and the other had merely completed high school. One church in Northumberland County pays its minister \$125.00 a month; another pays \$85.00 per month and furnishes a parsonage; another, \$75.00 per month and parsonage; and two others pay \$90.00 a month. Two other striking facts about the Northumberland County ministers are that they are on the average about 15 years younger than ministers in the other areas studied, and are all resident ministers. The average age of Brunswick County ministers was 56 years; Powhatan, 60 years; and Northumberland County, 43 years. The unusually good situation in Northumberland County is due to the lack of over-churching there; and to a fortunate period of strong leadership during the entire history of its churches. Much better than average conditions were also found in Caroline and New Kent Counties. All of the ministers in Caroline County, with one exception, have had seminary training. One church in New Kent County has as its pastor a professor at Virginia Union University who holds a M.A. degree from the University of Chicago.

Results of non-resident ministry.—The Negro rural church is suffering

¹¹ The 1926 Census of Religious Bodies showed that there were about 6 Negro ministers for every 10 Negro churches in Virginia.

from a non-resident ministry. The effects of a transient leadership are also much in evidence. Of nineteen Baptist churches in Brunswick County, twelve of them reported non-resident ministers who visit their congregation once a month and on special occasions—such as funeral services. Of eleven churches in South Hill and vicinity, there is not a single resident minister. The minister who lives nearest his church is fifteen miles away. With the exception of Northumberland County, the non-resident problem is just as serious in other areas of the state. It is also interesting to note that, according to the 1926 Census of Religious Bodies, only 69 Negro rural churches in Virginia reported parsonages. Over 1,100 white rural churches reported parsonages.

Not only does the fact that the minister is non-resident create a problem, but the distance that he lives from the community intensifies the problem. Their other interests, represented by other churches or other means of livelihood, reduce their interest in a small rural church which may be 50 or 100 miles away. One or two illustrations will serve to reinforce this conclusion: One of the ministers of Brunswick County also served a church in the city of Norfolk where he was supposed to hold regular services twice each Sunday. Another minister serving two country churches in Brunswick County also holds two services each Sunday in a Petersburg church. Another minister serving Brunswick churches, is the pastor of a large church in Richmond which should require all of his time. A Petersburg minister who preaches twice each Sunday in his city church was found to be serving a church 75 miles away in Mecklenburg County and another in a county nearby. The pastor of Zion Unionist Church in the small village of Alberta lived in North Carolina—40 miles away. Similar conditions hold for most of the other sections studied. In northern Virginia, many of the ministers preaching in rural sections lived in either Baltimore or Washington and were employed in other occupations which required practically all of their time.

The consequences of an absentee leadership are quite serious. In the first place, men who live in the city are hardly in a position to enter sympathetically and understandingly into the life and problems of the farmer. It is only natural that they are void of the rural mind and outlook. In the second place, most of these absentee ministers must necessarily give very little attention to their country charges. It is not surprising, therefore, that religious education activities are very meager in the rural church. In the third place, city ministers who serve country churches are an agency for urbanizing the thinking and attitudes of country people. It might be argued that such urbanization is desirable, but our observation indicates that the rural church and the rural community lose more than they gain in this process of urbanization. A few city ministers may bring better ideas of church organization and religious education to the country people, but the large majority indirectly cause rural people to be dissatisfied with country life. Their sermons must necessarily be filled with references to and stories of city life, and young people are there-

by given non-economic and perhaps false incentives for migration to the city.

Results of inadequate training.—Not only is the education of Negro ministers small in quantity, but it is also inadequate in quality. Their education has not been directed to meet rural situations. Ninety per cent of the ministers serving the communities studied were country born and perhaps have a general idea of the problems involved in a rural parish. Of all the men interviewed in the several communities of the six counties, however, not a single man had had a course in agricultural economics, rural sociology, or religious education. If the men going out from the theological seminaries are to meet successfully and intelligently the rural problem, and if they are to exercise the leadership in rural districts that they should, their courses of study in the seminaries must be revised and redirected. The present problems of the rural Negro call for an unusual insight into such problems, and ability to develop practical programs to deal with them. Unless rural ministers receive a better type of training and a salary commensurate with that training, the rural church will never make the contribution to the improvement of Negro life that it should. The rapid improvement in the Negro rural schools and in the agricultural extension service may partially fill the gap left by the ineffective church; but that is no justification for the failure to develop a strong rural church program. If we are correct in the assumption that the church has its definite and peculiar contribution to make to country life, the church should certainly make an effort to secure just as strong a leadership as have the school and other agencies. It is no little problem that church leaders are facing here, and the solution of it will test the mettle of their statesmanship as well as the vitality of their religion.

VI

THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROBLEM

The majority of young people in the Negro rural church are nominal members, i. e., inactive members. They are generally considered by older members as being incapable of assuming leadership and responsibility in the church. This attitude on the part of the older group toward the younger element has caused the latter to feel that the church is primarily an organization for adults. The program of the average church is arranged for and by adults. Very little intelligent interest is shown in the problems of young people. The increasing educational attainments of the younger group intensifies the problem. Many of the younger people are going to high school and college. Such outside contacts make the young people more and more dissatisfied with the usual type of rural church program.

Another reason for the inactivity of young people is that the church, i. e., the older leadership, has always put a ban on the social interests of youth. What are now considered harmless amusements, have been condemned in a

wholesale fashion by the church and nothing offered as a constructive substitute. The church has constantly and vehemently stressed negatives. In one community, thirty young people were interviewed as to their estimate of the church in their community. Fifteen very frankly stated that they felt that the church was too hard on what they considered innocent amusements: baseball, croquet, card playing, and dancing. Six took the position that the church was all right for old people but did not mean much to them. Five assumed a neutral attitude, saying that they had never given it any thought whatever. The other four said that the church was a good institution, but is so often misused that it does not mean what it ought to mean to the people.

Young people have also been led to believe that any improper or immoral conduct on their part not only unfitted them for leadership but also for membership. One young man interviewed expressed himself conscientiously and emphatically in this way: "I once belonged to the church but I don't now. I am not living right. I break the rules of the church. When I decide to do right I am going back to the church."

Urban migration of young people.—The migration of large numbers of young Negroes from farms has been one of the major causes for the backwardness of the Negro rural church.¹² As a result of this migration, the rural church tends to be composed largely of old people and children. The church loses in three ways as a result of this migration: (1) A loss of potential leadership; (2) A loss of vitality in church activities; and (3) A loss in financial support. The weakness of the Negro Sunday school and the preponderance of religious activities suited to older people are also perhaps direct results of this migration.

Fully seventy-five per cent of the families studied in this survey had sons and daughters who were living in the north—the majority living in the cities. Of sixty families surveyed in Brunswick County, all of the older children except in one case, were away from home—most of them having gone to the northern cities. The extent of the urban migration of Negro youth is indicated by Gee and Corson in the University of Virginia study of *Rural Depopulation in Certain Tidewater and Piedmont Areas of Virginia*.¹³ It was found in that study that 46.2 per cent of the Negroes above school age studied had left their original county home. About 73 per cent of the migrants had left the state and, for the most part, had gone to reside in northern and eastern cities. In practically every area studied they also found that Negro migration had exceeded white migration. The 1920 census showed that three counties out of every four in Virginia lost in Negro population during the preceding decade.

¹² This migration in a small way might also be considered a result of the backwardness of the country church. The problem of economic opportunity is also involved, affecting Negroes and whites alike.

¹³ *Rural Depopulation in Certain Tidewater and Piedmont Areas of Virginia*, by Wilson Gee and John J. Corson, 3rd, published by the Institute of Research in the Social Sciences, University, Virginia, 1929.

There is very little that can be done by the church in regard to this migration problem. Fundamental changes and fluctuations in our national economic organization have been mainly responsible for the population movement. Other factors, some social, some psychological, have operated to speed up or to retard the movement. The general dissatisfaction of Negroes with their social position, the lure that the city holds for the country boy and girl, and the lack of comparable social satisfactions in the country have all played a part. Many churches, where they have competent leadership, can prevent the complete depopulation of their community by furnishing a better type of social and recreational life for its younger members. Doubtless many young people go to the city when they could fare much better on the farm; although the industrialization of the south will continue to pull many young people into the cities and towns.

VII

CHURCH SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES

The program of the church is limited by such factors as inadequate finances, over-churching, untrained and absentee leadership, migration of youth to the city and by the general educational level of the membership. Good preaching depends on the ability and training of the minister. But there are two great obstacles to obtaining well trained capable ministers. In the first place, rural Negroes with their present educational outlook and religious attitudes will not tolerate, to say nothing of demand such leadership. In the second place, even if rural people would tolerate progressive leaders they would not be able to support them because of low income and over-churching. The description of church services and activities given in this section, therefore, is not intended as negative criticism, but rather as a presentation of the inevitable result of such conditions as have been described in previous sections. An improvement in the church program cannot be made unless those underlying conditions are themselves changed for the better.

Frequency of church services.—Most rural churches have a regular service (worship and preaching program) only once a month. Of the fourteen churches studied in Powhatan County, for instance, thirteen had services only once a month, and the remaining church had services only twice a month. Of eleven churches in South Hill and vicinity, three hold services twice a month while the remaining eight hold services once a month. Northumberland County churches hold services more often because over-churching does not prevail there. Of eight churches in that county, two hold services every Sunday and the remaining six hold services twice a month. Churches in Gloucester and Mathews Counties also hold services more than once a month as conditions in those counties approximate those in Northumberland County.

Type of preaching services.—Preaching is the central feature of the regular Sunday services, although singing is a very important factor. Little needs to be said about the character and type of preaching done by Negro ministers. It varies with the ability and training of the individual minister. We have already shown that the typical Negro minister is inadequately trained. The few well trained Negro ministers preaching in the country, however, were found to be just as effective and outstanding as white rural ministers. The typical church service conducted by untrained ministers is characterized chiefly by emotional preaching and singing on the one hand, and evidences of crowd behavior on the other. Such ministers consider the service a success if they can stir the emotions of the crowd to a state of religious frenzy characterized by shouting, ecstatic dancing and convulsions. Some of the typical religious services observed by the investigators in this study are described below.

The first illustration of church services is that of a small church in Caroline County. The service was conducted in a conservative manner by a seminary graduate and a teacher in the county high school. The church was a small structure, having a seating capacity of about two hundred and fifty people. It was clean, painted and furnished with stained glass windows. A combination organ and piano furnished music for the choir which, though not well trained, played a leading role in the singing. Approximately eighty persons attended. The crowd was described as small and interest in the church lagging, as it always does for several weeks before a protracted meeting. As the investigator entered, the congregation was singing, "Come Ye Disconsolate." After concluding the hymn, the minister took as his text, "And His Name Shall Be Called Wonderful." He outlined his sermon as follows: (1) He was wonderful in His birth; (2) wonderful in His works, and (3) wonderful in his death and resurrection. Under the second topic passing attention was paid to practical life problems. The minister possessed a good voice and a vivid imagination. Near the end of his sermon, he made obvious attempts to make the congregation happy. In speaking of Christ's ascension, he said, "And then one morning gravitation turned Him loose and He mounted the clouds to glory. On His way up His natural body was transformed to a body glorified and, thank God, He now sitteth on the right hand of God and makes intercession for our sins." During the sermon, murmurs of "yes," "tell it," and "preach it" ran through the congregation. After the preaching, an offering of \$25.41 was raised which was followed by a missionary offering one-third as large. A deacon then led in the singing of "Jesus, My God, My Strength, My All." After dismissal there was a general shaking of hands for a few minutes and the congregation went out. Such a service as just described represents a transition to a dignified and worthwhile program which the better educated ministers are working for in the country. It is quite a contrast to the service described below.

A church in Gloucester County, when visited by the investigator, was without a regular minister and a "Boy Evangelist" from Baltimore was in charge of the services. He preached from the text: "For when the day of His wrath is come, who shall be able to stand?" He resorted to repetition and whanging to move the emotions of the congregation. Such expressions as the following were interspersed through the sermon: "Great God Almighty, I guess I'll say something after awhile," "I heard, I heard, I heard Him say, 'Weep no more John'," and "Who! Who-oo-oo! is worthy?" When he made the inevitable appeal to the sinners, he led in the singing of "Lord, I wonder will my mother be on that train," and "cake-wilked" from one end of the rostrum to the other. He stopped singing long enough to say, "Oh, gambler! Oh, liar; Oh, women with dancing feet! When the last train rolls into Glory, I wonder will you be on that train."

Another illustration, taken from Gloucester County, is that of a union service held every fifth Sunday. The particular minister in charge of the services that day preached from the text: "And when the spirit of truth is come He will guide you into all truth." The subject which he had been assigned seemed too heavy for him and his theological definitions of the Holy Spirit must have had small value for the lay mind. He compared the Holy Spirit to a dynamite tip on a match head, and to the work of a dynamite man in building a road over rocky ground. A characteristic melody sung at this service was, "I wish everybody would get in a hurry. Great God; my time ain't long." The congregation did not respond as vigorously as the leader had wished and he remarked, "You all been talking about the Spirit, but He ain't here, ain't no use to try to fool me." Another song which was sung with fervor to the rythm of the music and patting of feet, controlled perfectly by the leader was, "My loving brother, when the world's on fire don't you want God's bosom to be your pillow?" The closing prayer offered by another was intelligent in tone and meaning.

A fourth illustration is that of a small church in Pittsylvania County. The church had no musical instrument and the singing was done in common meter, the patting of feet taking the place of an organ. The services were rather orderly considering the attempt of the pastor to play on the emotions of his congregation. The minister stressed the point that Jesus could cure all ills whether in family life, business, or community social life. "When crops are failing, it ain't no use to turn to science, take your troubles to Jesus in prayer. See Jesus!" was a characteristic remark made by the minister.

Revival meetings.—A description of religious services is inadequate without mentioning the revival. The annual revival, coming late in the summer after harvest, is to many rural Negroes the most important feature of religious worship. It is regarded and looked forward to as the spiritual festival of the year. In many communities it is a home coming day. Former inhabitants of the community who have moved to other counties or to the city make their

annual pilgrimage back to their home community during the revival meeting. It is a general holiday season. Employees in many cases give up their jobs just to be present at the "big meeting."

An important factor in determining the size of the revival crowd is the revivalist who conducts the meeting. If he happens to be a man who is modest in his style of preaching and presents the gospel in a simple and instructive manner, that virtually puts an end to the meeting. But such is rarely the case. The typical revivalist is a man of extravagant gifts and unrestrained emotions. He speaks fluently and loudly; he is not always careful as to the meaning of his words; and his imagination runs wild. He is usually a gifted singer of songs commonly known as "shouts," such as: "The train is coming, you'd better get your ticket," "The storm is passing over," "The same train that carried my mother will be back tomorrow," "I may live to see New Year's Day, I don't know," "Little David killed Goliath," and "My soul is a witness for my Lord." These songs are arranged to tunes which have a rhythmic swing that carry the congregation in a sweep of emotion. Such songs are commonly considered "revival songs" in distinction to classical songs which are considered appropriate only for the Sunday school or more formal religious services.

The sermons usually consist of Bible stories colored by the imagination of the preacher. Such subjects as the following are common: "Daniel in the Lion's Den"; "The Three Hebrew Children in the Fiery Furnace"; "The Handwriting on the Wall"; "The Prodigal Son"; "And Dives Lifted Up His Eyes in Hell"; "The Wages of Sin is Death"; etc. In the course of such sermons, the minister dramatizes the gospel story. The dramatic action supplemented by extravagant word pictures has the desired effect on the congregation. They feel as if they actually see the hand as it writes the doom of sinners on the wall, Daniel in the lion's den, or the three Hebrew children walking about in the fiery furnace. The preacher also employs peculiar vocal emphasis, intonations, and repetitions of words and phrases all of which have their effect. During the tirade of preaching, the congregation frequently becomes frenzied with emotion; men and women scream and cry, embrace each other, and dance. Men as well as women faint and those who are more composed have to take the fainting ones out of the church and bring them back to consciousness by applying cold water and fanning them. In one revival meeting, which the investigator visited, the revivalist had just reached the climax of the sermon when a peculiar wail was heard in the back of the church. A man jumped up and ran up the aisle of the church three times—from the rear to the altar. Each time that he reached the altar and the back door, he jumped up from the floor three or four feet. The third time he leaped out of the door and with all possible haste ran to a nearby woods and embraced a pine tree. As he returned he was frothing at the mouth like a mad man and talking very rapidly. He claimed that the Lord had suddenly appeared to him and given him a message, which he proceeded to proclaim in a dramatic fashion.

In other revival meetings which were visited by the investigator, similar events occurred. In the course of a fiery sermon, a young woman arose quickly from her seat in the rear of the church and ran toward the altar and fell prostrate on the floor crying, "Lord have mercy." In another meeting, two little boys were at the mourner's bench. Twelve men and women were gathered around them clapping them up, as their leader (a large man of two hundred and fifty pounds) led in singing, "Is there anybody who loves my Jesus, Is there anybody who loves my Lord?" In the midst of the singing a woman from the "Amen corner" began to shout and after running the length of the aisle, sank exhausted in her seat. The minister gave an explanation of the way of salvation to the little boys and called on the whole church to sing together and pray together until the spirit should come. He led in singing and clapping, "there is power in the blood" until the boys came through. The pastor then turned to the mother of one of the boys and said: "Annie, yesterday you were worried but today you can go home in peace. That boy held out until God done bust the water out of him and he had to come away from there."

Although the type of revivals which have just been described are still common, there is a growing sentiment among the more intelligent and the better educated Negroes to demand a better type of program.

In New Kent County, for instance, some expressed their disgust with the methods of a revivalist who had told the people during a meeting: "It is your meeting; shout, sing, kick over as many benches as you please, and have a good time." Others seemed to support the minister, however, because the singing and clapping during the meeting could be heard at a distance of one and one-half miles!

Results of revivalism.—Many young people come into the church under the emotional excitement of the revival. The intellect plays little if any part in their choice to live a Christian life. They have never been taught what it means to be a Christian. As they go on through school and perhaps to college, they develop a growing indifference toward that superficial emotional experience that has been labeled for them *religion*. Many of this group testify to a feeling of shame that they were ever the victims of such emotional orgies. They not only revolt against that type of religion but against any religion regardless of its value. Their conversion in the revival thus becomes a negative or destructive influence in their lives rather than the constructive influence it purported to be.

Songs of the rural church.—W. E. B. Dubois in speaking of Negro Spirituals says: "The rhythmic cry of the slave stands today not simply as the sole American music but as the most beautiful expression born this side of the sea. What are these songs and what do they mean? They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of the death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways. In them the slave spoke to the world. . . . Far from his

native land and customs . . . experiencing the pang of the separation of loved ones on the auction block, knowing the hard task master, feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in life to come for ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions, of rich and poor, of proud and meek, of master and slave. The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity, patience, forbearance, love, faith and hope." ¹⁴

The quotation from Dubois suggests the psychological and sociological basis of not only Negro songs but of their religion as well. The social repression of the Negro today, although very mild in comparison to the oppressions of slavery, is a factor to be considered in a study of Negro religion and Negro songs. The extreme emotionalism in rural revivals is not due alone to ignorance or racial backwardness. It is probably due just as much to the many repressions which Negro emotions undergo in social and economic life of today. The songs of the Negro thus act as a channel of release for emotions and feelings which are not satisfied in other phases of their life. These songs, however, are more than a vehicle for emotional release or satisfaction. They are now recognized the world over as the distinctive contribution of the American Negro to culture, to art, to music. They have thus raised the prestige of the Negro race in the thinking of appreciative men and women everywhere. Negroes, even those who have gone a long way from the primitive revival, are literally singing their race to world recognition—and using some of the very songs which originated in what would otherwise seem a fanatical expression of religious emotion.

This contribution of the Negro race to music and hence to American culture has undoubtedly helped to gain for the Negro a stronger position in the economic and political life of today. To be sure other racial qualities and social conditions have helped considerably in such progress; but the Negro spiritual originating in humble rural churches has played a leading role.

Sunday schools and auxiliary organizations.—Attention has already been called to the fact that only 22 per cent of the rural Negro population was reported as Sunday school members in 1926. This low percentage of Sunday school membership is also a rough index of the type of religious education given through Sunday schools. Most of the Sunday schools surveyed were mere makeshifts. The churches are usually small and far too inadequate both in architectural arrangement and size to offer educational facilities. All the classes, of both young and old, are forced by circumstances to assemble in the same room. And in the midst of noise and confusion attempts are made to teach the Sunday school lesson. The teachers for the most part are either untrained, or at best poorly trained. It is not unusual to find persons who can scarcely read trying to conduct a class in Bible study. The attempted

¹⁴ W. E. B. Dubois, "Souls of Black Folk," pp. 253-257.

teaching usually takes the trend of a general exposition of Bible passages. Sunday school quarterlies, leaflets, and other supplementary literature are slavishly followed in teaching.

Auxiliary organizations play a minor part in the rural church's program of religious education. Some of the most common auxiliary organizations are young people's societies and clubs; such as, the Baptist Young People's Union, the Christian Endeavor, and the Epworth League, the Sunbeam Society, the Golden Rule Club, etc. These organizations usually put on a weekly literary or musical program with some little discussion. Occasionally they include a special speaker on the program. The most serious weakness of these organizations is their lack of trained leadership. The level of their educational influence is most usually that of their parent church.

Religious education tests.—In spite of the apparent inefficiency of the Negro Sunday school, Negro young people seem to be just as well informed on the Bible and ethical questions as are white young people who have had better Sunday school advantages. In a comprehensive religious education test given to over two thousand young people, white and Negro, high school and college, the following grades were made:¹⁵

Group	Number	Biblical knowledge	Ethical knowledge
White high school students -----	1,143	51.4	57.2
Negro high school students -----	235	50.8	51.0
White college students -----	743	65.6	70.7
Negro college students -----	136	66.1	69.6

It is also interesting to note that on the same test, Negro college students showed a more liberal attitude toward the social function of the rural church.¹⁶

Religion and social life.—The emotional type of church worship has very little influence on the practical social life of Negro people. The praying, shouting, singing, and exhortation have no definite connection with social morality—except possibly a negative influence. Such a great emphasis on the emotional phases of religion has always been associated with extreme otherworldliness and individualism. But in spite of primitive religious beliefs and practices, the church as an institution has been of considerable benefit in the social life of Negro people. The role of the church in the life of Negro people is well summarized by George E. Haynes, who said:

“In the development of education and thrift, in interracial adjustments between white and Negro populations, and in the interdependent give and take of cultural life in America, as well as in the less tangible social factors of interracial contacts, of group organization, racial attitudes, solidarity and

¹⁵ For a more complete summary of the results of this test, see Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267, p. 70 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-149.

motivation, the church and especially the segregated Negro church, has been a powerful ally of Negro progress.”¹⁷

But will the church continue to play such a conspicuous part in Negro progress? Present tendencies seem to indicate that it will not. The increase of other social agencies and organizations, the rapid growth of Negro schools and colleges, and the development of good roads and fast transportation are some of the forces which seem to be eclipsing the social function of the Negro church. E. B. Reuter summarizes the situation as follows:

“There are other meeting places and means of amusement. There is better music to be heard outside the church. Other men are better trained than the ministers, and individuals no longer turn to the churchmen for information and instruction. Places of amusement are developing and with them the church cannot compete. The fraternal and secret orders take much time formerly devoted to the church and they satisfy certain exhibitionist tendencies even better than church activity. There is a growing distrust of the ministers and their motives even among the masses of the race and a growing tendency to restrict the sphere of their influence to religious affairs and so reduce the power of the church in racial life.”¹⁸

In the light of such tendencies and conditions mentioned above, what place can the church be expected to fill in the social life of the rural Negro? Perhaps it can render the most service by inspiring the rural Negro to wholesome ideals of living in a world where constant readjustments are necessary. More concretely, the church can inspire better ideals in family life, recreational life, social organization, mutual helpfulness and cooperation, health and sanitation, racial relations, and in the cultural and esthetic realms. None of the other agencies or organizations serving the Negro are as yet adequately performing such a function. It will mean, of course, that the church must specialize more and more in religious and adult education; but on the other hand, it will mean that the church will touch in a more vital way the total social and moral life of rural Negroes.¹⁹

VIII

THE CHURCH AND RURAL ORGANIZATIONS

The church today has considerable competition from various rural organizations, such as, lodges, aid societies, school leagues, agricultural clubs, and farmers' organizations. Many of these groups include in their membership people of all ages and both sexes, and thus compete with the church for their interest, time, and money. The church is faced with a serious problem here. Some of these organizations have come into existence because the church was failing to meet the social needs of the community. Others are the inevitable

¹⁷ *The Church and Negro Progress*, Annals of the American Academy, Vol. 140, p. 271.

¹⁸ *The American Race Problem*, p. 333.

¹⁹ See Ch. IX of Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267 for a further analysis of this problem.

result of the general increase in socialization of rural life. What attitude is the church to take toward this constantly increasing volume of organization? Does the church still have left a field of effort large enough to claim so much of the interest and resources of the community? Will not the progressive church find a solution to the problem by active cooperation with the most useful of these organizations? Here we believe is an opportunity for service which only the church can meet, i. e., to encourage a higher type of rural organization and to inspire rural people to make the fullest possible use of their services. There will still be left plenty of work for the church in the field of religious education and worship.²⁰

Secret fraternal orders.—Secret organizations are very prevalent among rural Negroes. It is a common thing to find in a single community five or six secret organizations. In one community of Northumberland County, for instance, there are fifteen lodges with an average membership of approximately thirty members. One individual is often a member of every secret organization in the community and becomes known as a “society” man or woman. These fraternal orders have several means of appeal to the prospective member; such as, sickness and burial insurance, secrecy, colorful dress, elaborate ceremony, and social life. Membership in such organizations gives the individual a sense of social prestige. This is especially illustrated by the holding of feast days on special occasions. Such days are the high lights in the life of the organization. The members dress in colorful, and sometimes gaudy, costumes and parade around the church or hall where the service is being held. The history of the society is given; its activities for the year are reported in glowing terms; its service to its membership and to the community is magnified. The spectators look with awe and reverence upon these performances. It is a day of advertisement for the order. Usually a sermon is preached by an invited minister who emphasizes in his sermon the virtues of the particular order. Many new adherents are won for the order on such days.

Most Negro lodges hold bi-monthly meetings—the men’s department meeting at night and the women’s during the daytime. The lodges usually have a juvenile department which is managed by one of the women members. At the age of fifteen or sixteen years the children are turned over to the adult departments. Meetings are ritualistic in form. The social service activities of these lodges are confined almost wholly to caring for the sick and burying the dead. Many of these secret orders also contribute liberally to the support of local schools and to worthy boys and girls who go off to college.

Charity aid clubs.—Charity aid clubs, although not as prevalent as lodges, are quite common. For the most part they are composed of women but it is not unusual for them to include men as well. Their main purpose is to aid the poor and needy. A typical illustration is that of the Home Aid Community Club of Mohemenco, Powhatan County. It was organized in 1922 and now

²⁰ See Chapter IX of Va. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin 267.

has a membership of twenty-six women. It meets bi-monthly and on special occasions. Its activities and programs include a variety of things; such as, sewing, general conversation, prayer and song services for the sick, the old and the "shut-ins" of the community, sacred concerts once a year, and financial aid to the poor.

The organization is financed by taxing its members a monthly fee of five cents and by the sale of garments made during the sewing periods. The garments are sold to the highest bidder and all the proceeds go into the club treasury. Since its organization the club has collected \$237.00 and paid out for charitable purposes \$189.00. The club bears no direct relationship to the church; yet it does hold its annual sacred concert at the community church.

A similar organization in Powhatan County is the Auxiliary Home Protective Association. It is a state organization and has headquarters at Elk Hill, Virginia. Its local membership is composed of seventy-five men and women between the ages of sixteen and sixty—the women predominating. The meetings are held monthly and are characterized by discussions—usually concerning the expansion of the organization. The members pay a monthly fee of 35 cents most of which goes to help the poor and needy of the community.

Many church auxiliary organizations operate in a manner similar to charity aid clubs. The main tendency however, is for the stronger clubs to be entirely separate from the church.

School leagues.—The importance of school leagues is shown by the fact that during one year (1927-28) all of the leagues in the state raised for school purposes, \$106,000.00. As a matter of fact, their principal activity is aiding in the support of education. The recreational and social features of their program are by-products or a means to raising money. In Northumberland County the leagues have raised over \$10,000.00 during the past ten years and are responsible for the erection of the Northumberland County Training School. About 88 per cent of the patrons of the training school are members of the league. The league in Northumberland County is perhaps the strongest in the state. Other leagues however, have made commendable achievements. The junior and senior leagues of South Hill in Mecklenburg County raised in 1928 about \$600.00 for the benefit of the County Training School which is recognized as being the social center of the community. The leagues of Powhatan County in 1927-28 raised \$748.00 for school improvement. The church has in many cases cooperated with school leagues but the present tendency seems to be in the opposite direction.

Agricultural clubs and organizations.—County and home demonstration agents and teachers of vocational agriculture promote various clubs and organizations which compete with the church for the time and interest of rural Negroes. In 1929 there were about 180 adult clubs and 200 4-H clubs in Virginia organized by Negro county and home agents through which they carry

on their work. These organizations need the backing of the church; but as yet, it takes very little responsibility in such matters.

Other agencies.—Besides the organizations mentioned above there are a number of public and private agencies representing a variety of interests—agencies which are gradually extending their efforts to the furthest rural community. Public health work, public welfare work, university and college extension departments, the Red Cross, the Tuberculosis Association, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, are some of the more important of these agencies. The church can render a valuable community service by helping to bring rural people in contact with such sources of aid.



Fig. 7.—Shiloh church parsonage, Northumberland County

IX

A SUCCESSFUL RURAL CHURCH

SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH, NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY

In this section is presented a description of perhaps the best type of Negro rural church service that is to be found in Virginia. This illustration of a successful rural church shows what can be done by capable trained leaders in the rural community. Shiloh Church (see Figure 7 and the front cover page picture) is located in the open country. It has had only four ministers since

it was organized in 1867. It has over 1400 members. Needless to say it has a long record of community service to its credit.

Shiloh church community.—The community which is served by the Shiloh Church comprises seven well defined neighborhoods: Burgess' Store, Edwardsville, Lilian, Ophelia, Reedville, Sunnybank, and Fairport. Six of these neighborhoods are of the open country type having a small store, garage, or school at the center. Reedville is a small town of about 800 inhabitants—all white—and serves as the chief trading center for the entire section. There are on the river nearby several fish factories which constitute the principal industry for both white and colored of all the neighborhoods mentioned. The community as a whole is only semi-agricultural as most of the people make part or all of their living from water industries. Although water industries constitute the main source of cash income, nearly every family does a little farming and a few farm quite extensively. The church thus has better than the average financial support. Such is also the case in other counties located on or near the water; such as Lancaster, Mathews, Gloucester, Northampton and Accomac. Northumberland County, along with other Tidewater counties, also has nearly a fifty per cent Negro population.

Historical sketch.—The Shiloh Church was organized in 1867 at the request of the Negro constituency of Fairfield Baptist Church (white).²¹ The first worship service was conducted by two unlettered ex-slave exhorters—Hiram Kenner and James Robinson. But very soon the church called as its pastor the Reverend Pyramus Nutt who was also a carpenter. It was under his leadership that the first church building was erected. In the meantime, however, the members selected one of their own young men, Levi Reese Ball, for their future leader. At the request of the church and with the encouragement of the white people, young Ball entered Howard University in the early seventies and prepared himself for an unusual period of service to the church and to the community. After returning from college he remained with the Shiloh Church for thirty-seven years. How well he led is attested by the devotion of the people to him, the progress of the community, the unity and growth of the church during his years of leadership. Like many early rural leaders of the Negro race, he was not only a minister in the church but he was a community leader. He helped to mould the social institutions and race relations for years to come. He encouraged the Negro people to buy land, build homes, send their children to school, and above all to be true to the church and to remain united on all matters of community welfare.

The fruits of his preaching of unity and cooperation are evidenced in the fact that until this day there has never been a division or a split in the Shiloh Church. In 1867 it started with only 38 members, while today it has over 1,000 members. There is no problem of over-churching among Negro churches in the lower end of Northumberland County. If other Negro churches

²¹ See page 12.

had had competent leadership in their early history, they would also have had fewer splits.

In 1912 under the pressure of the weight of many years of strenuous toil and declining health, Reverend Ball offered his resignation, but the church, out of deep gratitude to him, begged him to remain "until death us do part." He yielded to their solicitations on the condition that the church would give him an assistant pastor of his own choice. The church agreed, and Reverend Ball chose a young man, J. M. Ellison, a member of the church and a native of the community, who at that time was a student in the Virginia Union University at Richmond. The Reverend Ball died in June, 1917, and Reverend Ellison, who had been his assistant for five years, was elected to the pastorate in full charge of the church. He remained at this post until September, 1926, when he resigned to become director of religious activities at the Virginia State College at Petersburg.

Recent development of the Shiloh church.—During the Reverend Ellison's fourteen years in the community, there was a general awakening in all lines of church and community life. The church was not only reorganized and enlarged, but its program was modernized and its social service activities extended. The program was so arranged as to have two services each Sunday; one in the morning at eleven-thirty o'clock and the second, in the afternoon at three o'clock. The morning service was a preaching and worship period; while the afternoon service was commonly used for special features; such as, young people's meetings, lectures, plays and educational meetings. The church also maintained a lecture bureau with moderate success. Prominent educators and ministers were brought in as often as it seemed expedient.

Educational contributions.—The Shiloh Church, with capable leadership, has taken the lead in the educational development of lower Northumberland. The four schools in that area are all the product of the work of the church. One of the four schools is the Northumberland County Training School. The establishment of the training school illustrates the part the church has played in the larger community life. When Reverend Ellison became active in the church, there was no well defined educational program for the community. Plans were on foot, however, for the erection of a consolidated graded school building. The training school idea was new in the state at that time and practically unknown to the people of this particular section. When the counsel of the minister was sought he advised that the community look forward to the establishment of a county training school instead of the graded school. The state supervisor of rural education for Negroes was also asked for advice and assistance. Soon the construction of a substantial building was under-way. The completed building included six large class rooms and an assembly room; the total cost being \$13,000.00. The county school board gave the land and five hundred dollars; \$1,500.00 was received from the Rosenwald Fund; and the remainder—\$13,000.00—was raised by the patrons of the school.

When the building was ready for use, the school board purchased new furniture for the white school and gave the old furniture to the Negro training school.

The school was reorganized, the children re-classified; and for the first time in Northumberland County, instruction above the seventh grade was provided. During nine years since the school was opened more than forty boys and girls have completed the course of study given in the County Training School and matriculated in institutions of higher learning. Many of the young women have returned to the country as teachers; but the boys, for the most part, have settled in other places because of the lack of professional opportunities in the country.

Mr. Ellison and other community leaders made an effort in connection with the school and church to conduct a motion picture program—showing educational pictures. It was hoped that such a program would provide a much needed type of recreation for the young people of the community. But the project met with the disapproval of the deacons and older church members. Brother ministers in adjoining communities and churches severely denounced the project. It had to be abandoned, therefore, because of the conservative attitudes of the people. Such a case illustrates very well the statement, made earlier in this bulletin, that rural people will not now fully support progressive leaders.

X

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social and economic handicaps.—The progress of the Negro church is hindered by the difficult social and economic conditions under which Negroes live. The white rural church labors under many handicaps but the Negro rural church has doubly as many because of the Negro's low economic, educational, and social status. The meager economic resources of the average Negro community results in poor equipment, inadequate salaries for Negro ministers, and finally in a deficient church program. A second serious handicap is the low educational level of Negro people—especially the older generation who grew up before the day of county training schools, the Rosenwald Fund, the Jeanes Fund, and other recent developments in Negro education. Even where a capable and educated minister is willing to spend his best years in the country he soon finds that his ideas are too progressive for the people. The progressive minister is also thwarted by not being able to find capable lay leaders to assist him with the various auxiliary organizations of the church. A third handicap to the progress of the Negro church is the irregular distribution of the Negro population. The Negroes are in the minority in eighty-one counties of the state. In the western mountain counties the small percentage of Negroes results in small churches and in many cases a low

percentage of church membership. It is true that the Negro population is somewhat concentrated in the eastern part of the state, but from the standpoint of church efficiency, the Negro population should be even more concentrated in a few counties. The recent migration of Negro people to the northern cities intensifies the population problem. A fourth handicap to the church is the existence of undesirable and anti-social racial attitudes on the part of both white and Negro people. On the one hand we have attitudes of superiority and antagonism which generate on the other, attitudes of resentment and hate. Whether such attitudes are justified or not, it is very difficult to develop ideals of brotherhood and social mindedness in the face of such conditions.

A constructive program.—A constructive rural church program will face frankly the difficulties and weaknesses of the rural church organization and program. The chief difficulties and weaknesses, by way of summary, are: The lack of education among the people; lack of adequate financial support; over-churching; non-resident and poorly trained ministers; inadequate lay leadership; the traditional emphasis on emotionalism and supernaturalism; the almost total lack of a program of religious education; the lack of sympathetic understanding of the problems of young people; and finally, the insufficient attention given to problems of rural community life.

General nature of the program.—Although the progress of the Negro church gives hope for its future, the handicaps and weaknesses indicate that the task of speeding up that progress is a Herculean one. The program requires unified effort on the part of not only all Negro denominations but of white churches as well. It will of necessity be a "long time" program, but such a fact might easily become an excuse for doing nothing. The program must include definite projects and the responsibility for executing these projects should be assigned to interested groups (either organized for the purpose or existent groups who will take the responsibility). And finally the program should not be confined to one or two lines of effort. The Negro rural church problem is one of many ramifications, and it must be attacked on many fronts. As a matter of fact, the task of salvaging the rural church is one with the salvaging of rural society. The rural church can "save" itself only by "saving" rural society.

Economic opportunity and standards of living.—Before the Negro rural church problem is solved the Negro must have wider economic opportunities and his standards of living must be raised. This involves an increase in economic reward for things that the Negro does well; the elimination of psychological or sociological barriers that prevent Negroes entering various occupations and professions; and the development of higher ideals among Negroes as to how their income should be spent. This task is primarily one of education and will include among other things the following definite procedures: (1) Improvement of Negro rural schools through increased state or county aid; (2)

Provision of better library service for rural people—white and colored. (3) Employment of more agricultural extension workers for Negroes; (4) Enlargement of the present program of rural health work among Negroes; (5) Development of community organization among Negroes; (6) More scholarships for deserving Negro youth; (7) More study by white people of the conditions and needs of Negro people; together with a wider development of inter-racial committees on a county or district basis.

Responsibility of the white church.—Christianity as well as other religions teach that the strong should help the weak. The problem of the Negro's standard of living, and in particular difficulties confronting the Negro church, should challenge the intelligent and sympathetic interest of white church members everywhere. The white group has a selfish, as well as an altruistic, motive in helping to raise the Negro's standard of living, and hence, aiding in the solution of the church problem. The low standard of the Negro is one cause of the low standard of poor white people. The Negro who farms or labors for a low economic return, comes in competition with white farmers and laborers. The situation is similar to one which would exist were a large number of Chinese or Japanese farmers with abnormally low standards of living, suddenly imported to any one section of this country. White people, therefore, should in self defense help in the task of raising the Negro's standard of living.

Immediate financial assistance.—An educational and social program for raising the Negro's standard of living is a long time task involving a more or less unified program by many different agencies. In the meantime, the Negro church needs substantial financial assistance wisely administered. There are several ways in which such financial assistance might be secured and used. White church groups in their own local communities could assist in the employment of Negro ministers and church workers.²² A state wide "equalization fund" might be raised under the auspices of the Home Mission Council and expended in some such manner as state aid for rural schools. At first the use of an "equalization fund" might be confined to a few projects; such as, the employment of rural church specialists, holding of leadership and pastor's training schools, subsidizing the building of new consolidated churches, or in the establishment of demonstration rural parishes.

Religious education.—Immediate attention should also be given to the improvement of the religious education program of the Negro church. The first steps should include such projects as, leadership training schools, district secretaries of religious education, construction of Sunday school rooms and buildings, and the use of well graded literature. Later development should include vacation church schools and week-day religious instruction. It should

²² Many white churches, to be sure, make some contributions to Negro churches; but the total amount of such funds is only a small per cent of what is needed.

be emphasized here that the young people of the church should be given more consideration and more responsibility in the church program.

Training for leaders and ministers.—Due to the low pay of the rural ministry, particularly so in the Negro church, some means must be found to attract and hold well trained ministers in the country. Obviously a state-wide fund, such as mentioned above, should be made available for the purpose; at least until rural Negroes are more able to support their ministers. The ministers who are thus aided should, as with white ministers, be given a type of training that will enable them to understand and deal with rural problems and situations. Local lay leaders and Sunday school teachers should also receive more adequate training in rural community problems.

Further recommendations.—Other recommendations and suggestions for the Negro rural church may be found in Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 267, "The Role of the Church in Rural Community Life in Virginia," chapters XI and XII. Especial attention is called to the sections (pages 184-187) dealing with consolidation, the larger parish plan, interdenominational adjustments, relation of the church to community life, relation of the church to other agencies and institutions, responsibility of city church members, and the responsibility of church boards, conferences, synods, and other groups.

The future of the Negro church.—A survey of church conditions inevitably emphasizes the negative side of the situation. We cannot close this bulletin, therefore, without calling attention to the progress of the Negro church and pointing out some of the developments which we might reasonably expect in the future. In spite of many serious handicaps, the Negro church has made material progress in the country. A large percentage of the rural Negro population are church members. Over-churching is not as serious as in the white church. A definite decline in the number of church divisions and splits has been noted. The extreme emphasis on emotionalism seems to be passing; and the educational emphasis seems to be growing—though all too slowly. Rural ministers are better trained than ever before. It is not unusual now to find Negro ministers with higher degrees serving in the country parish. The church has made a great contribution to education; and its efforts are beginning to bear fruit in a better educated leadership—and membership as well. Thus, from the standpoint of past accomplishments, and in the light of present tendencies we cannot say that the Negro rural church is a decadent institution.

We do not, however, hold a "Pollyanna" attitude about the future of the Negro rural church. The progress which we have mentioned is all too slow to justify extravagant predictions. The future of the church depends on the future of rural life itself, and on the social ingenuity that is used in the solution of the problem. Adjustment to changing conditions will undoubtedly come, but all too slowly. If distant rumblings mean anything we may safely

dict that sooner or later many rural churches will consolidate. Since about nine-tenths of the Negro churches in Virginia are of the Baptist faith, consolidation is not obstructed seriously by denominationalism. We may also expect with the continued development of good roads, that many small rural churches will be abandoned—a necessary and desirable step in rural community enlargement. There is less hope for a solution of problems of financial support, leadership, and religious education for the church. The Home Mission Council, the Rural Church Conference Board, or the Virginia Council of Religious Education, might conceivably undertake the task of raising an "equalization fund" or some similar project. Since these organizations already have their work blocked out, however, it might be better if an entirely new interdenominational agency (including both white and colored churches) should undertake to deal with these problems. A State Federation of Churches, modeled after the Federal Council, has been suggested.

The obstacles in the way of such an agency suggest a final point. A constructive rural church program will never be put on a practical basis until the laity and the leadership alike are fully sold on the need and the possibility. The first step, therefore, in initiation of a long time rural church program is education. Every group interested in the problem should make an effort to get the facts before its membership. Church conferences, leadership training schools, local church groups, and college seminaries should all be concerned enough to put in some serious study on the question. If such a thorough educational program should be organized and carried out, there would be no question about the future of the Negro church in the country. Can it be done? The challenge is to church leaders and officials who frame and guide the policies of their respective denominations.

XI

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