

REDEFINING THE BAPTIST TRAINING UNION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

This article will examine discipleship training in African American Baptist churches. While not an exhaustive survey of the discipleship training that is occurring in these churches, an attempt has been made to review the training in African American Baptist churches of various sizes to determine the various forms that this discipleship training is taking.

Introduction

The African American church has a rich heritage of worship, preaching, teaching, fellowship, and service. It is intellectually stimulating to read individual church histories and see how ordinary persons (with modest financial means) are able to unite together for the purpose of establishing places of worship throughout the United States, minister to countless numbers of persons, erect magnificent edifices, and make an everlasting impact on the communities in which these churches are housed. Churches are adhering to the mandate to feed the hungry--Matthew 25:35 (NRSV): "For I was hungry, and you gave me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in."

Similarly, the gathering together of churches into various organizations, including associations, state conventions, and national conventions represented monumental undertakings as individuals and churches with

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meager resources were able to pool their resources and fulfill a variety of mission and Christian education goals. The function of the Christian education arms of these entities was to provide Christian workers with the skills and abilities to actively seek the lost and nourish those who have been found. Several of the discipleship-related courses offered by the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (under the umbrella of the National Baptist Congress and the Sunday School Publishing Board) include courses such as #7010—Introduction to Discipleship, and course #7011: Developing a Discipleship Ministry (CLS Manual, 2010, p.104).

An excellent historical resource for the development of one of the National Baptist Conventions is Dr. J. H. Jackson's *A Story of Christian Activism: The History of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.* (1980). Throughout the history of the denomination (African-American Baptist) Christian education has had a predominant role in discipleship training. This discipleship training has taken a variety of forms that include Sunday school, Church school, Baptist Training Union (BTU), Baptist Young Peoples Union (BYPU) and Nurture for Baptist Churches.

A review of the literature depicts a movement away from the Baptist Training Union modality. Typically, Baptist Training Unions took place on Sunday evenings and consisted of classes for various age levels that presented the tenets of the Baptist faith—Baptist Doctrine, the Articles of Faith, and other classes to help students become 'better Baptists'. It seems that within the past several decades, however, there has been a gradual shifting in the emphasis being placed on fundamental Baptist training. In *A Manual for Nurture for Baptist Churches* (1995) the writer, Dr. Amos Jones Jr. cites a survey that was conducted by the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. to determine the "training activities ...going on at the local church level" (xv). Results of the survey showed

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“...that the conventional five o'clock BTU hour on Sunday was virtually dead” (xv).

This assessment seems to be borne out in the African American Baptist churches. While this falling away can be attributed to a variety of causes, which is a subject for a more detailed study, the purpose of this article is to explore ways that this Baptist training function can become a viable part of the local church's mission once again.

As with all training, the church must acknowledge the need for and function of discipleship training. Ephesians 4: 11-12 places discipleship training in its proper perspective:

¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

The purpose of discipleship training is to prepare disciples for the work of the ministry. In order for Baptist church members to become effective servants, they must learn what it is that they must do and how to effectively conduct each ministry. Because there are differences in the beliefs that members of the various denominations hold, it is important to know what it means to be a Baptist. The members of our congregation must understand the tenets of the Baptist faith. Those who would work in the church must be guided into their responsibilities. If the church is to house a thriving food ministry, for example, the leaders of this food ministry must learn about the various resources available and how to access those resources.

Moreover, it is the job of the church leadership to train its disciples to be effectual ministry workers. Discipleship training, therefore, must become a priority within the church. It must become a priority in terms of the time and attention afforded the training, and it must become a priority in terms of the budget dollars assigned to the training. The discipleship

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training arm of the church must be adequately funded to implement viable training programs.

A typical time for the Baptist Training Union is on Sunday evenings. Around five or six o'clock church leaders and members gather, and after a brief devotional period, students go to their classes to learn about Baptists, Christianity and ministry. The First Baptist Church of Guilford in Maryland has a Baptist Training Union on Sunday evenings. On the website, the following information is included about the Baptist Training Union at First Baptist:

The Baptist Training Union ministers and offers training to all ages in the history, beliefs, and the doctrine of the church. The Articles of Faith and Church Covenant are just a few to name among many other Christian aspects that are encompassed in this study. The BTU is designed to inspire, edify and enrich all ages. The Baptist Training Union's aim is to serve the needs of the church and its community. This ministry provides a challenging and comprehensive study for individuals and groups. We are challenged to study diligently. We are challenged to stand dutifully. We are obligated to search the WORD and live accordingly.

Disciple training is designed to provide discipleship training for everyone. The training offered involves Bible 101, Evangelism, Teacher Development, Stewardship, and Leadership Development.
(http://www.fbcog.org/min_btu.html).

Sunday evenings, in present-day society, however, are not always a convenient time for the church's members. In *What Makes Christian Education Exciting*, Brennetta C. Williams, Associate Minister of the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, points to a valid consideration that churches must have: Christian Education ministries must be taught in a way modern learners can

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interpret. Christian families, especially those with children, have sundry activities in which family members are involved, and they cannot always spend a designated chunk of time on Sunday evenings to come out to the church for discipleship training.

For this reason, some church leaders have sought another time during the week for discipleship training. Saturday mornings has become another popular time for related training. The Friendship Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, schedules Saturday morning “Christian Life and Service Seminars.” The following seminars are listed on the church’s website:

- Class 101—Discovering Membership
- Class 201—Discovering Maturity
- Class 301—Discovering Ministry
- Class 401—Discovering Missions
- Class 501—Stewardship and Tithing

These classes are also provided on Sunday mornings at 9:30 am. The website also points out that all ministry leaders must take Classes 101-501 and that Classes 101 and 102 are required for all new members (prior to their receiving the right hand of fellowship). (<http://www.friendshipcharlotte.org/CLASS.cfm>)

One church—the Kaighn Avenue Baptist Church in Camden, New Jersey, offers discipleship classes every Sunday morning from 8:30-9:30 am. These classes include “Baptist Doctrine,” “Salvation,” “Baptism,” “Communion,” “Stewardship,” and “Church Covenant.” According to the church’s website, “Discipleship classes are a series of six classes that are required for new members to take in order to qualify for the Right Hand of Fellowship. However, these classes are available to any member who is looking to increase their knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (<http://kaighnavenuebaptistchurch.net/discipleship-classes>)

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Friday evening is another time that can be set aside for discipleship training. The Emmanuel Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois, according to the website, holds the Baptist Training Union on Friday evenings (<http://emmanuelbaptistchicago.org/>). Friday evenings are ideal because Friday is the end of the work week, and Fridays usually represent a time when members of the family have not scheduled other activities. Discipleship training can be offered for all ages and can be coupled with other church activities. For example, while the parents are participating in a discipleship class, the youth can be involved in recreational activities. In a similar fashion, while the youth are engaged in youth ministry, the parents can be enjoying a night of Christian recreation at the church.

Another day during the week can be designated for discipleship training. Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield, Texas, holds discipleship training classes on Tuesday evenings (<http://www.bethlehemmansfield.org/education>). Those Tuesday classes, which begin at 7:30 pm, include the following classes for the spring 2014 semester: Articles of Faith, Experiencing God, Faith Evangelism, How to Study the Bible, Mind of Christ, and When God Speaks.

The church can determine which night of the week is best for its members. Discipleship training does not even have to occur every week. One church, Spring Street Baptist Church in Toledo, Ohio, has scheduled the Baptist Training Union on the fifth Sundays after the morning worship. Fifth Sundays occur four times a year, so that insures that during this concentrated period, the church members are being introduced to areas that will assist them in their ministry. According to the website, the Baptist Training Union "...is open to all church members of all ages. We learn more about the Baptist faith and its origins, as well as current expectations of us as members of the Body of Christ." (http://www.springstreetbaptistchurch.org/ministries/bible_studying_discipleship).

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The church can prepare dinner on that Sunday, so that families can attend the discipleship training and then have a period of fellowship. Providing dinner helps because families do not have to go home and prepare a meal.

Another structure for the Baptist Training Union (discipleship classes) is a hybrid structure—that is, the designation of a variety of time periods throughout the week. The New Hope Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, offers Family Discipleship classes primarily on Wednesday evenings, according to the Director of Christian Education Ministry, Sis. Jacqueline Mack. Small groups are provided for adults. In addition, classes on “What We Believe as Baptists” are offered during the Church School hour on Sunday morning. Other topics covered include “Fighting Spiritual Battles,” “I am a Church Member,” and “Baptist Doctrines.” The focus this year is the study of the afterlife.

In summary, the goal of these classes is discipleship training. While a designated time period for this training is ideal, the goal is to nurture those disciples who have been evangelized. The church leadership will need to determine the specific training needed. After examining the possible times when training can be offered—for example, Sunday Church School hour, Wednesday evening Bible Study hour, other evenings during the week, Friday evening, Saturday morning—classes can be assigned to specific times throughout the week. Perhaps Saturday morning is a better time for the men to meet for training. It could be determined that the youth group is available for training on Friday evenings. Married couples may want to have their discipleship training on Saturday evenings.

In conclusion, discipleship training is essential if the church and the members are going to be equipped to minister in this present age. Recognizing that members are not always available during the typical time for the Baptist Training Union (Sunday evenings), the church must explore other avenues to provide this training. It is not enough to simply say that since

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members cannot attend, one will no longer have Baptist Training Union. The operative question is, "When can our members come"? Some married working couples may not come to the church during the weekday, but seniors and other retired persons can. So why not have a Tuesday morning discipleship training class for the seniors of the church? Youth attend school during the week and often have sports activities on Saturdays; so Friday evenings may be an excellent time period for youth discipleship training.

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- Kaighn Avenue Baptist Church, Camden, New Jersey, website—
<http://kaighnavenuebaptistchurch.net/discipleship-classes/>.
- National Network of Youth Ministry (N.N.Y.M.)- a youth ministry support group

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Spring Street Baptist Church, Toledo, Ohio, website—
[http://www.springstreetbaptistchurch.org/ministries/bible
study discipleship](http://www.springstreetbaptistchurch.org/ministries/bible-study-discipleship)