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Father Peter Spencer: Portrait of an Unknown Pioneer African Methodist Leader

Although Peter Spencer figured prominently in the rise of African Methodism in America, he has been virtually ignored by both black and white church historians. The unfortunate result of this is that we have very few reliable data on his life and work. Even more disturbing is the fact that Spencer has been overlooked in almost all of the sources which focus on the history of African Methodist movements. Such sources have traditionally focused on pivotal figures like Richard Allen, Morris Brown, Daniel Coker and James Varick, thereby creating the impression that Spencer was only secondary in importance to these men.[1] The lack of attention given Spencer attests more to the abysmal ignorance of church historians concerning him than to his lack of importance as a church founder and leader. Spencer played a far more important role in furthering the cause of black ecclesiastical independence, particularly as it found expression in African Methodism, than is usually known or imagined. The complete story of African Methodism in America will not be known until he is considered on an equal level with Allen, Brown, Coker and Varick.[2]

This essay will demonstrate that Peter Spencer, who emerged as the father of the independent black church movement in Delaware, exercised more than a feeble influence on the rise and shaping of African Methodism in America. Indeed, it will show that he, not Richard Allen, succeeded in organizing and incorporating the first completely independent African Methodist connection. Spencer and his small band of followers,

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[1] Fleeting references are made to Peter Spencer in two fairly recent studies of African Methodism, but they are slightly marred because of the degree to which the authors were unfamiliar with this phenomenal figure. See Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion And American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, And The Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1975), pp. 123 and 145; and Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism As It Developed Among Blacks In America* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), pp. 79-80 and 83-84.

[2] This author is presently working on the first biographical sketch of Peter Spencer's life. The study will constitute a major contribution to religious literature in America.

after breaking with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1813, organized and legally recorded the Union Church of Africans in Wilmington, Delaware. By the end of 1813 that church had assumed connectional form with the addition of congregations in New York and Pennsylvania.[3]

While this essay proposes to accord Spencer proper recognition among early African Methodist leaders, it does not aim to accomplish this by ignoring the importance of Richard Allen as the father of African Methodism. To be sure, African Methodism was born in the mind of Allen as early as 1786, when he endeavored to unite African Methodists in Philadelphia for the purpose of prayer and instruction. In his final years he recalled:

> February, 1786, I came to Philadelphia. . . . I preached at different places in the city. My labor was much blessed. I soon saw a large field open in seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long forgotten people and few of them attended public worship. I raised a society in 1786 for forty-two members. I saw the necessity of erecting a place of worship for the colored people.[4]

But Allen's importance as the father of African Methodism does not erase the fact that the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized and incorporated as a connectional body in 1816, three years after Spencer's church had become a connection. No one can earnestly deny Allen the honor of being the father of African Methodism, but to Spencer goes the distinction of being the father of the first fully independent African Methodist connection.

Early Life and Church Involvements

Peter Spencer was born a slave in Kent County, Maryland in 1782. He remained in bondage until he reached early manhood. His freedom was granted upon the death of his master. After securing his freedom, Spencer left Maryland and settled in Wilmington, Delaware, where he was trained as a mechanic. Through a stringent program of self-education, he also gained knowledge of law. In time, he became a fairly competent mechanic and teacher. His work in these fields was incidental to his work as a minister and church organizer.[5]

Soon after arriving in Wilmington, Spencer affiliated with the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, the so-called "Mother of Methodism in the

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[3] Daniel J. Russell, Jr., *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church* (Philadelphia: Union Star Book and Job Printing Company, 1920), pp. 5 ff.; and Lewis V. Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism: A History of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches, 1805-1980," A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois (August, 1980), Chapters I, III, and IV.

[4] Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Reverend Richard Allen* (New York: Reprint by Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 23-24.

[5] Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, pp. 5 and 17; Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware, 1609-1888*, Vol. II, (Philadelphia: L. J. Richards & Company, 1888), p. 730; and John Pae Predow, "A Brief History of the Spencer Movement," An Unpublished Paper completed at Wilmington, Delaware, Spring, 1979, pp. 1-5.

State of Delaware," and a church with a rapidly growing black membership. Due to his outstanding leadership qualities, he quickly emerged as the shepherd of the nearly 100 black members at Asbury. He came to regard himself as an *ecclesiasticus* (churchman), divinely called to provide spiritual guidance and instruction for his oppressed African brethren. He and William Anderson, who assumed titles as lay preachers, were selected as class leaders for the black members. After serving in that capacity for a few years, they witnessed an increasing tendency toward discriminatory policies and practices. This became eminently clear in June, 1805, when the white members at Asbury issued several complaints against the black members, charging them with the destruction of church property. The charge against the black members was recorded as follows:

> Whereas, in consequence of meeting the classes of black people on the lower seats of this church, a number of the benches have been broken, and the house so defiled by dirt, etc., as to render it unfit to meet in, and if any longer tolerated, more injury may be sustained.[6]

In response to this charge, the following resolution was passed by the white trustees:

> Resolved, that no black classes shall hereafter meet on the lower floor of Asbury Church; and if they refuse to meet in the gallery, the sexton shall inform them that the door will not be opened for their reception, and furthermore, the leaders of the same are requested to respect this resolution and govern themselves accordingly.[7]

This move by the whites at Asbury was not altogether unexpected, because the steady increase in black members was destined to create racial tension in the long run. Most of the black members agreed to abide by the resolution confining them to the gallery, but Spencer, Anderson, and 40 others resented the idea of such a seating arrangement. They walked out of Asbury in search of a meeting house where they could worship God free of the serious restraints posed by racially proscriptive policies and practices. A drive to solicit funds for a new house of worship was launched immediately. At that time Spencer and his followers had no intentions of organizing a completely separate denomination, but, rather, a black church which would function under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Conference. While preparing to build, they held services in a little grove between Lombard and Pine Streets in Wilmington. They also, in a manner similar to the earliest Christians, met occasionally in private homes to hold services. Soon sufficient funds were secured and a small building was completed at Ninth and Walnut Streets. The new church became known locally as "The Old Stone Church," but was dedicated as "Ezion," a name derived from Ezion Gaber, a town in

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[6] Rev. John D. C. Hanna, ed., *The Centennial Services of Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, Wilmington, Delaware, 1789-1889* (Wilmington: Delaware Printing Company, 1889), pp. 137-138 and 144-148; and Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, pp. 5 ff.

[7] Hanna, ed., *Asbury Centennial*, pp. 144-148.

the Land of Edom where Solomon's vessels were built. The Spencerites also referred to the church as "The African Methodist Episcopal Church," a name previously adopted by Richard Allen and his followers in Philadelphia.[8]

Once Ezion was constructed, it was made clear that the new church would operate as a "mission church" under the direction of the M. E. Conference. This meant that preachers supplied by the M. E. Conference were required to serve Ezion as well as the Asbury M. E. Church. Initially, Spencer had no serious reservations about this arrangement, because, as he understood it, both black and white preachers authorized by the M. E. Conference, and approved by the blacks at Ezion, could exercise ministerial rights and responsibilities at the new church. This represented a positive step because blacks with homoletical skills were not to be denied the right to employ those skills as had been the case at Asbury.[9]

The most attractive side of the arrangement gave Spencer and his followers the authority to make decisions on matters concerning Ezion M. E. Church. The deed to the property of the church, recorded at New Castle County, Delaware on June 25, 1805, stated in part:

> And it is hereby further provided that none but persons of colour shall be chosen as trustees of the said African Methodist Episcopal Church . . . , nor shall any person be eligible to the office of trustee of the said church but such as are received and acknowledged to be members thereof by the resident elder and trustees of the aforesaid church in Wilmington. . . .[10]

In accord with this provision, the following blacks were chosen as trustees of Ezion: Peter Spencer, Joseph Nicholson, Francis Bailey, Jacob Morgan, Scotland Hill, Stephen Harris, and Thomas Brown. These men were given the right and responsibility to hold the property and to manage the internal affairs of the church.[11]

In keeping with the arrangement between Ezion and the M. E. Conference, Spencer and Anderson expected to be ordained and placed in charge at Ezion. As it turned out, they were not ordained, nor were they allowed to ascend the pulpit. Nevertheless, Spencer, Anderson, and the other blacks decided to remain and risk working with the white elders who were appointed from time to time to exercise pastoral charge at Ezion. For about six years all went well. New members were taken in at various times, and tension between the black members and white elders was kept at a minimum. When a white elder from the M. E. Conference in Philadelphia was appointed to serve as Ezion's pastor, problems arose. Spencer and his followers found themselves facing the same problems the

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[8] Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church,* pp. 5 ff.; Hanna, ed., *Asbury Centennial,* pp. 173-174; Frank R. Zebley, *The Churches of Delaware* (Wilmington: Published by the Author, 1947), p. 103; and *Deed to the Property of Ezion M. E. Church,* The New Castle County Recorder of Deeds, May 25, 1805, C 3, p. 226.

[9] *Deed to the Property of Ezion M. E. Church,* p. 226.

[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 226 ff.

[11] *Ibid.*

Allenites confronted in their dealings with the white elders who were placed in charge at Bethel Church in Philadelphia. Dispute after dispute surfaced at Ezion, sometimes over the rights of the black members, and often over the rights of the white elder. By 1812, the internal bickering was of such magnitude that both parties were compelled to go to court. The problem which led to the court appearance, as Spencer and Anderson later described it, was caused by the elder's unwillingness to honor the arrangement previously made between Ezion and the M. E. Conference - an arrangement which allowed the blacks at Ezion a major voice in their church affairs:

> We thought we could have the rule of our church, so as to make our own rules and laws for ourselves; only we knew that we must help to support the preachers that were stationed in Wilmington to preach at both churches, which we were willing to do. We then thought that we had the power to refuse any that were not thought proper persons to preach for us; but the preacher that was stationed in Wilmington to preach told us plainly that we had no say, and that he must be the entire judge of all. Then that body of us who built the meeting house could not see our way clear, to give up all say, and for that reason our minister said we had broken the Discipline and turned out all the Trustees and Class Leaders, and never allowed us a hearing. This was done in December, 1812, and after many sorrowful times, and amongst all the rest a small party, the most of them strangers, that knew but little of the cause that we built a house for, told the Elder that they were willing to be governed by the Discipline, and do what he told them; and then things went on worse and worse, till at length, we were brought before the court, which cost us much loss of time and money.[12]

The fierce legal battle between the black members and the elder brought tempers to the breaking point. Because of the religious character of the case, the court refused to render a final decision on it. Spencer and most of Ezion's blacks, unlike the small group who agreed to follow the instructions of the elder, were unwilling to compromise their dignity and freedom as human beings. They joined forces and walked out - a move which amounted to a declaration of independence from the Methodist Episcopal structure:

> We then saw that, if we did not let that church go, we might look for nothing but lawing, unless we could comply, and let the preacher do as he pleased. For the sake of peace and love, and nothing but that, we all soberly came away, and we mean that all shall see that we want nothing but peace. . . . We had no thought of pursuing this course, until we saw no other way; no one directed us in this but the Lord, and to him, be glory forever and ever.[13]

The break with the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal structure signaled the beginning of a new phase in the ministerial career of Spencer. From that point, the twenty-three year old ex-slave moved on to become the father of the first independent African Methodist connection in America.

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[12] Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, p. 7; and *The Discipline of the African Union Church in the United States of America and Elsewhere*, Third Edition Enlarged, (Wilmington: Porter & Eckel, 1852), pp. I-III (Introduction).

[13] Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, pp. 7 ff.; and *The Discipline of the African Union Church, 1852*, p. V (Introduction).

As Founder of the First Independent African Methodist Connection

Immediately after leaving Ezion, Spencer and several of his male followers began their search for a new meeting house. They soon purchased a pigeon coop from a man in South Wilmington. The "old pigeon coop," as it was called, was first brought to Tatnall Street where it remained for a short time. On July 21, 1813, a new church site was purchased on French Street between Eighth and Ninth Streets in Wilmington, and Spencer and his followers organized "with due forms and ceremonies."[14] A new building was soon constructed and the body was incorporated under the name of "The Union Church of African Members" on September 18, 1813. The list of trustees recorded on this historic date included Peter Spencer, John Kelly, John Simmons, Scotland Hill, David Smith, Jacob March, and Benjamin Webb. By December, 1813, two other congregations in New York and Pennsylvania became affiliates of the new church, and the Union Church of African Members - variously called "The Union Church of Africans," "The African Union Church," "The African Union Methodist Church," and "The Union Methodist Connexion" - had distinguished itself as the first fully independent and incorporated African Methodist connection in America.[15]

Spencer and his small group were remarkably innovative in the naming and organization of their church. They carefully avoided use of the titles "Methodist" and "Methodist Episcopal" on their church's certificate of incorporation, fearing that such marks of identification would only provide a loophole for the further denial of their independence as African Methodists. They employed the name "Union Church of African Members" to avoid the appearance of a link with the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Conference, and to provide a measure of safety against the encroachment and interference of that conference.[16]

The influence of the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition was powerfully evident throughout the structure of the Union Church of Africans. After a few minor revisions, the Book of Discipline was adopted with its Articles of Religion and General Rules as drafted by Methodism's founder, John Wesley. The African Union Hymnal, which was revised and enlarged by Spencer in 1839, included numerous selections from the poems of both John and Charles Wesley. The multiple Conference system, the system of classes and class leaders, and the methods and modes of trustee election were also inherited from the Methodist tradition.[17]

Spencer deviated from the Methodist model at a number of points in

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[14] Hanna, ed., *Asbury Centennial,* p. 173; and Zebley, *The Churches of Delaware,* pp. 103-104.

[15] *Articles of Association of the African Union Church* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1813), pp. 1-6; Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church,* pp. 9-11; *Colored American,* New York, New York, May 20, 1837, p. 2; and *Colored American,* October 14, 1837, p. 2.

[16] *Articles of Association of the Union Church of Africans, 1813,* pp. 1-6.

[17] *The Discipline of the African Union Church, 1852,* pp. 1 ff.; and Peter Spencer, Compiler, *The African Union Hymn-Book,* Third Edition Enlarged, (Wilmington: Porter & Naff, 1839), pp. 1 ff.

his approach to the organization of his church. He refused to adopt the traditional Methodist system of bishops and presiding elders because he felt that these offices had inherent undemocratic tendencies. Furthermore, they were not in accord with his conviction that ultimate authority should rest with the congregation. "The preachers instead of being bishops and masters," reported a nineteenth century Wilmington newspaper editor, "were servants of the people."[18]

Likewise, Spencer rejected the itinerant system of Methodism. He strongly opposed the idea of his preachers traveling from place to place covering circuits. Instead, he encouraged them to serve churches diligently without any limit to the period of their service. This they did with indefatigable zeal. Levi J. Coppin, the Maryland ex-slave who became the 30th bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, vividly recalled the tremendous dedication displayed by Spencer's preachers:

> His preachers would work in the fields all the week and preach on Sunday, sometimes after walking many miles, and only receive the few pennies that would be thrown into the collection basket. They were encouraged to be very spiritual, with the idea that "the letter killeth, but the spirit maketh alive." I often heard them preach during my residence in Wilmington, Del., the original home of Father Spencer, and his church.[19]

Finally, Spencer chose not to adopt the Methodist practice of connectional authority, which placed all church finances and properties under conference control. He remembered how Ezion had been lost simply because its finances and properties were under the control of the M. E. Conference. Eager to avoid a similar problem, Spencer introduced a policy whereby all local church properties and finances would rest in the hands of local church trustees. This policy later proved disastrous as most congregations in the Union Church of Africans broke away to form the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church.[20]

According to the Book of Discipline of the Union Church of Africans, there were to be three orders of preachers: elder ministers, deacons, and licensed preachers. All who held these offices were subject to congregational approval. Spencer and William Anderson were set apart as the first elder ministers which meant that they, being the ministerial equivalents of bishops, "were invested with the general superintendance of all the societies composing the African Union Church."[21] They were also granted authority to ordain all deacons and to license all preachers recommended and approved by the congregation. The church functioned under this brand of polity until 1866, when it merged with the First Colored Methodist Protestant Church.[22]

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[18] *The Morning News,* Wilmington, Delaware, August 26, 1889, p. 7.

[19] Levi J. Coppin, *Unwritten History* (Philadelphia: The A. M. E. Book Concern, 1919), pp. 264-265.

[20] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapter V.

[21] *The Discipline of the African Union Church, 1852,* pp. 1 ff.; *and The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church,* First Edition, (Wilmington: Henry Eckel, Printer, 1867), pp. 1 ff.

[22] *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Union First Colored Methodist Protes-*

During the early years, a meeting of all the congregations comprising the Union Church of Africans was held quarterly. Of the four meetings held, one was set aside at which time a general reunion and religious revival of the entire community of the Union Church of Africans took place in Wilmington. Thus originated "Big August Quarterly," "Delaware's oldest folk festival," and one of 19th century America's few major black religious festivals. Spencer inaugurated this great day of jubilation in August, 1814, one year after incorporating the Union Church of Africans. He chose the last Sunday in August for the annual festival for obvious reasons. The time was late Summer, the grain had been harvested, fruits were ripening, subsistence was cheaper, and black workers, slave and free, could take the weekend off to attend the services and festivities connected with the celebration.[23]

Hundreds of blacks from Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania attended the first Big Quarterly, and in subsequent years the number who attended reached well into the thousands. Before the means of quick transportation were supplied by the railroads and steamboats, the pilgrimage to Wilmington was a matter of a week's visit for many. Slaves from lower Delaware and upper Maryland walked long distances and came into Wilmington feet sore and dusty. Others came in hay wagons, ox carts, and on mule-back, bearing passes and other papers of identification granted by their masters. The strong slave-retrieving efforts exercised in Kent and New Castle Counties by the legendary Patty Cannon and others gave masters the necessary confidence to allow their slaves to attend the festival. Once in Wilmington, slaves and free blacks sang, preached, shouted, engaged in ceremonial dances, created bonds of friendship and community, and consumed large quantities of chitterlings, spare-ribs, collard greens, roasted ears, watermelons, and other types of "soul food."[24] All of the rich ingredients of black custom, folklore, and tradition were abundantly present. Wilmington soon earned an admirable reputation as "the Mecca of the African race." In later years, the festival continued to offer an opportunity to worship God, to conduct unfinished church business, to meet friends and relatives, to commemorate the founding of the Union Church of Africans, and to honor the memory of Peter Spencer.[25]

After the Union Church of Africans was established, Spencer and William Anderson set out to extend its boundaries throughout the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Preachers such as Moses Chippey, Ralph Gilmore, James Hill, and Daniel Russell, Sr. were dispatched into

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tant Church, 1867, pp. 1 ff.

[23] Alice Dunbar Nelson, *Big Quarterly in Wilmington* (Wilmington: Published by the Author, 1932), pp. 2 ff; *The Delaware State Journal,* Wilmington, Delaware, September 2, 1845, p. 3; *The Delaware Gazette,* Wilmington, Delaware, September 1, 1846, p. 3; and *The Morning News,* August 27, 1883, p. 1.

[24] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters IV, V, VI, VII, VIII; and Nelson, *Big Quarterly in Wilmington,* pp. 2 ff.

[25] Nelson, *Big Quarterly in Wilmington,* pp. 1-5; and *The Morning News,* August 26, 1889, pp. 7-8.

parts of Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York to start new congregations. Between 1813 and 1837, 24 congregations were added. Spencer and Anderson took charge of the growing number of churches in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, and Isaac Barney from New York was set apart as a third elder minister to supervise those in New York and New Jersey. Although the Union Church of Africans, unlike the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Zion connections, did not become a "national church," it did distinguish itself as a strong regional denomination. When Spencer died in 1843, the number of congregations in the Union Church of Africans had reached thirty-one.[26]

The growth of the Union Church of Africans in the mid-Atlantic states was equaled only by its involvements in the black freedom struggle. Spencer, Anderson, and Barney, like the A. M. E. and A. M. E. Zion leaders, were deeply involved in issues relating to colonization, black economic development and black education. They were also active in anti-slavery meetings and Underground Railroad activities.[27] The issues and concerns addressed by the Negro Convention Movement between 1830 and 1860 became a part of the agenda of the Union Church of Africans - issues and concerns such as temperance, moral reform, frugality, and self-help.[28]

Spencer emerged by far as the most authoritative figure in the Union Church of Africans during his lifetime. His power in his church was almost legendary even in his own time. In 1837, the editors of *Colored American,* a reputable black newspaper headquartered in New York, wrote the following concerning Spencer and his church:

> The Rev. Peter Spencer of Wilmington is looked up to as their Presiding Elder. He is the Patriarch of the connexion, having obtained this consideration among his brethren, more by his usefulness, and zeal, and science, and fervent piety, than by any formal appointment to office.[29]

Only eight years after Spencer's death, one of his contemporaries, a Wilmington historian, produced a statement which was equally revealing as far as his influence in his church was concerned:

> They are independent, though Methodist. For years Peter Spencer, an exemplary Colored man, was their ruler. His tact to govern was wonderful, and his influence unbounded. When death summoned him from his useful sphere, all classes of citizens lamented his departure.[30]

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[26] *Colored American,* October 21, 1837, p. 2; and Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church,* pp. 13 and 19.

[27] *The Morning News,* August 26, 1889, pp. 1 and 7-8; L. R. Mehlinger, "Attitudes of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," *Journal of Negro History,* I (1916), pp. 283-286; and Carol Hoffecker, *Delaware: Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 98.

[28] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters III and IV.

[29] *Colored American,* October 21, 1837, p. 2.

[30] Elizabeth Montgomery, *Wilmington: Reminiscences of Familiar Village Tales, Ancient and New* (Cottonport, Louisiana: Polyanthos, Inc., 1971; originally published in 1851 by T. K. Collins, Jr., Philadelphia), pp. 252 ff.

Involvements in the Wider Context of African Methodism

Spencer's involvements in African Methodism extended beyond the boundaries of the Union Church of Africans. Between 1813 and 1816, he and William Anderson led a movement in Attleborough, Pennsylvania which resulted in the establishment of a separate African Methodist church. Spencer was also in sympathy with African Methodist movements which developed in Baltimore, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Salem, New Jersey. When the leaders of the various African Methodist churches met in Philadelphia to organize a large connection known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church in April, 1816, Spencer was noticeably present. The fact that a union did not take place between Spencer and the Allenites is open to speculation. This author does not know exactly why, but several possibilities seem worth noting.[31]

First, it is conceivable that Spencer disagreed with the final plan of union adopted at the Philadelphia meeting. The followers of Richard Allen were clearly in the majority, and they felt that it was in order for all representatives present to join the Allenite movement. Considering that Spencer had already organized and incorporated his connection, and had settled upon a Discipline and mode of church government, he undoubtedly felt that it was incumbent upon the Allenites to join his movement. "He and his followers," wrote the editors of *Colored American,* "had no intention of unshipping matters a second time, but preferred to remain as they were."[32]

Secondly, Spencer and the Allenites differed strongly on matters relating to church organization and polity. The Allenites favored the inclusion of the episcopacy, the itineracy, and the principle of connectional authority in the structure of the A. M. E. Church. Spencer passionately opposed this approach to church organization and polity.[33]

Thirdly, political considerations probably made union highly unlikely, if not impossible. It was apparent from the outset that all who joined the A. M. E. connection had to submit to the authority of Allen, who was determined to be its first and only bishop. Such an arrangement undoubtedly did not appeal to Spencer. For union to be consummated, he would have had to be set apart as the spiritual head, or as one of the spiritual heads. His authority and influence as the spiritual father of the Union Church of Africans were well-established, to say the least. To relinquish that authority and influence by becoming a part of a connectional body in which Allen would easily emerge as the authoritative figure would have been politically inexpedient.[34]

Fourthly, the forceful position taken by the Allenites may have deterred Spencer. Richard Allen and the majority present adopted a resolution stating that all who joined their movement had to unite under the

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[31] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters III and IV.
[32] *Colored American,* October 21, 1837, p. 2.
[33] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters III and IV.
[34] *Ibid.*

banner and style of the A. M. E. Church. It read: "That the people of Philadelphia, Baltimore, and all other places who should unite with us, shall become one body under the name and style of the African Methodist Episcopal Church."[35] Spencer not only had problems with the style of the A. M. E. Church, with its episcopal office and itinerant system, but also its name. He felt that the inclusion of the title "Methodist Episcopal" would encourage further encroachment and interference from the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Conference. He was of the opinion that it was possible, and indeed less risky, for African Methodists to be essentially "Methodistic" in doctrine, style, and practice, without assuming the most obvious appearance of Episcopal Methodism.[36]

Finally, Allen's personality may have been a factor in preventing union. He has often been labeled "authoritative, dogmatic, and egotistical." According to one of his biographers, there is probably basis for the charge, "for he does seem tenaciously to follow his own views. Neither Absalom Jones nor Peter Spencer, nor the Zionists could turn him aside."[37]

After concluding that union between his followers and the Allenites was not possible under the circumstances, Spencer returned to Wilmington. He spent the remaining twenty-seven years of his life building the Union Church of Africans, and thus established himself as a major pioneer of the African Methodist movement. Despite his great work, however, Spencer never emerged on the national level as the most conspicuous figure of the African Methodist movement. Allen held that distinction above both Spencer and James Varick, the father of the A. M. E. Zion Church. Even so, the origin, expansion and adaptability of African Methodism cannot be entirely understood without attaching equal importance to all three.[38]

The Final Years

The final years of Spencer's life were devoted to church extension work. He spent long hours overseeing the organization of new churches, and traveled many miles to speak at dedications and special services. He suffered a serious setback in March, 1843, when William Anderson, his dear friend and close associate, passed on to his reward. Four months later, on July 25, 1843, Spencer died. The pilgrimage that had begun in slavery many years earlier had now ended.[39]

The news of Spencer's death shook the entire city of Wilmington. Two of the city's major newspapers memorialized his passing with statements

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[35] Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: A. M. E. Book Concern, 1891), p. 14.

[36] *Articles of Association of the African Union Church, 1813,* pp. 1-6.

[37] Charles H. Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom* (Washington, D. C.: The Associated Publishers, 1935), p. 249.

[38] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters I, III, and IV.

[39] *Ibid.;* and Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church,* pp. 11-15 and 20.

of respect and appreciation. On Friday, July 28, 1843, *The Delaware State Journal* reported:

> Died in this City on Tuesday last, Rev. Peter Spencer (colored) aged 61 years, and six months. He bore an excellent character, and was extensively known as the most active and influential minister of Union Church (colored) in this city, branches of which are spread throughout several of the surrounding states. His death has produced a serious vacancy, and it will be difficult to find any person who will fill his station with the industry, ability and influence which he did.[40]

The Delaware Gazette, dated August 4, 1843, was equally generous in its tribute to Spencer:

> Peter Spencer was, we believe, a practically good man, and exercised much influence over the colored population of this section of the country. He was perhaps the Bishop, or the highest clerical officer of the church in the United States to which he was attached, and has died leaving behind a "good name."[41]

The loss of Spencer was a severe blow to those associated with the Union Church of Africans. On August 1, 1843, *The Delaware State Journal* assessed the impact of his death upon his church and his people:

> The "union" deeply deplores this loss which they consider almost irreparable. Peter Spencer has long been active in this church, exercising his great influence for the improvement of people of his own color, and acting with great decision and wisdom, in all the vicissitudes to which his charge were subject.[42]

The deaths of Anderson and Spencer were greeted with probing questions as to whether the Union Church of Africans could survive and continue to grow. Isaac Barney, the elder minister from New York, remained as the only leader. James Hill and Ralph Gilmore were set apart as replacements for Anderson and Spencer. For eight years all went well. Church extension work continued and nine additional congregations were added, increasing the number to forty. In 1851, however, the seeds of dissension began to sprout in the Union Church of Africans. By this time, James Hill had passed and Ralph Gilmore had retired, leaving Barney as the only active elder minister. Internal bickering surfaced in the church when Ellis Sanders, sometimes known as "Saunders," a preacher from Christiana, Delaware, claimed the right to associate with Barney "in charge of the societies composing the 'African Union Church'."[43] The majority in the connection supported Sanders claim, but most of the members in Wilmington denied that he had been properly set apart as an elder minister, and vowed to disallow him the opportunity to preach and administer the ordinances. The dispute resulted in "The

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[40] *The Delaware State Journal,* July 28, 1843, p. 3.

[41] *The Delaware Gazette,* August 4, 1843, p. 2.

[42] *The Delaware State Journal,* August 1, 1843, p. 3.

[43] *The Case of the Union Church of Africans, in Wilmington, Before the Superior Court for New Castle County, Comprising the Petition of Ellis Sanders for a Mandamus, the Return Thereto; Brief Notes of the Argument and Re-Argument of Counsel, and the Final Decision of the Court Awarding the Mandamus* (Wilmington: Henry Eckel, 1855), pp. 1-24.

Case of the Union Church of Africans," which was first argued before the New Castle County Superior Court in May, 1852. At the end of the November term, 1853, the court issued a Writ of Peremptory Mandamus, commanding the trustees of the Mother Church in Wilmington to restore Sanders to his position as elder minister. The case was re-argued in the Court of Errors and Appeals and, in 1855, that court reversed the decision of the Superior Court, arguing that the religious character of the case made it inappropriate for the courts to render a final decision on it. The time was right for a major schism.[44]

By 1856 it was apparent that the dispute within the Union Church of Africans would not be resolved. Sanders and Isaac Barney broke away with 31 of the 40 congregations and organized the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church (U. A. M. E.). The remaining nine congregations continued as the African Union Church. In 1866, those nine congregations merged with the First Colored Methodist Protestant Church of Baltimore, and the resulting body became The African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church, ordinarily called the African Union Methodist Protestant Church (A. U. M. P.). The A. U. M. P. and U. A. M. E. Churches have survived down to the present as small connections located primarily in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Though rooted in the Spencer tradition, both churches presently function on the basis of an episcopal structure.[45]

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[44] *Union Church of Africans Vs. Ellis Sanders, Court of Errors and Appeals,* June Term, 1855, (Wilmington, 1855), pp. 100-138.

[45] Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapter V.