

Explorations in Baptist History: Adam Clayton Powell Sr.

The Abyssinian Baptist Church surely is among the great congregations to rise up and minister to the urban multitudes in the history of New York City churches.

Among their past ministers, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. is among the most visionary.

He led the church to move to Harlem to replant the congregation amid neighborhoods changing rapidly with the influx of African Americans moving into the city as part of the great migration in the early 20th century.

Among those Powell influenced was a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose worldview was reshaped by hearing Powell's sermons and experiencing the ministry of Abyssinian during his brief sojourn in the U.S.

Certainly, many biographers connect Powell as a main motivator of Bonhoeffer's decision to return home to Germany as part of the resistance to Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Powell was not without his detractors, however.

In his award-winning book, "The New Abolition: WEB DuBois and the Black Social Gospel" (Yale University Press, 2015), historian Gary L. Dorrien recalls Powell's challenges within the congregation and among his fellow African-American Baptist clergy.

Early on, he dealt with a faction of the church that wanted to bring back his predecessor. The church also was resistant to his vision to relocate the church out of midtown Manhattan, even as Powell rightly predicted the shifts of the city's African-American populace to Harlem.

As part of the social gospel movement of his time, Powell envisioned the church far more engaged in the community and dealing with social needs and challenges.

Holding a meeting for potential stakeholders, Powell found stiff resistance among the 100 black Baptist leaders, Dorrien notes, including "one minister [who] delivered a 15-minute tirade against the idea of a community center before asking

what it was.”

Powell’s vision of “a place where the people of the community could learn things and be together” did not match many clergy’s vision of the church as a place for evangelism alone.

All but eight of the visiting African-American pastors declined further involvement with this project, leaving Powell primarily dependent on partnership with the then predominately Euro American organization, the Baptist New York City Mission (presently known as the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York, one of the ABC-USA’s most diverse regions).

Powell would found a food pantry, create programs and grow Abyssinian’s presence in Harlem throughout his ministry.

Nonetheless, the lack of support from his fellow pastors must have been painful. He did not seek further outreach to his black church colleagues for the next 11 years, Dorrien reports.

While the social gospel is often associated readily among Baptists with Walter Rauschenbusch’s body of writings, Powell incarnated the precepts of a progressive and evangelizing ministry in his many years at Abyssinian.

Perusing the [website](#) of Abyssinian’s current-day ministries and mission, the legacy of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. is well evident.

Powell credited his ministry and pastoral passion to the experience of growing up in difficult circumstances, Dorrien explains.

At 19 years old, Powell was living hard and playing hard as a miner in Rendville, Ohio. A chance encounter with a powerful preacher on a Sunday morning “sent an arrow of conviction to his heart.”

He credited his rediscovery of faith as a key element to his rising up from a troubled youth and becoming a pastor.

Particularly, Powell credited the mentorship of G.M.P. King, president of the Wayland Seminary and College (later known as Virginia Union University).

Under King’s influence, Powell recalled, “To me, [King] possessed the magnetism

of the polestar. His life radiated beauty, goodness, courage, honesty, truth and love. These virtues cannot be taught by words. They can only be imparted by a life which possesses them in abundance.”

Exploring the life and legacy of Adam Clayton Powell Sr., we discover how a good mentor helped a young person connect with the ways that move many, not just the one, forward.

Influenced by such a “polestar,” Powell multiplied the gospel message through the many ministries coming out of Abyssinian and into the neighborhoods around Harlem and well beyond.

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