

Reason to Be:
The African Baptist Association
as a
Response to Systemic Racism

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For many years now I have been using the phrase “history becomes habit” to describe the life of the church. This is a system theory comment; that the patterns of how institutions function are derived from events. People continue to function in such a ways determined by those events with or without knowing the reason why.

A good illustration of this has been the systemic racism of white Baptists toward Black Baptists, in particular toward the African Baptist Association. The particular habit is for white Baptists make decisions for Black Baptists without consulting them, for White Baptists to avoid being present with Black Baptists, and for White Baptists to assume that Black patterns of ecclesial life are the same as theirs.

The roots of the African Baptist Association go back to Loyalist migration to old Nova Scotia when a Seventh Day Baptist Church consisting of Black members came to Beaver Harbour in what is now New Brunswick¹ and the Rev. David George came Shelburne, Nova Scotia. George established a church in Shelburne

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1 Beyond their names and church affiliation in New Jersey, nothing is known of them. Robert G. Gardner, *Baptists of Early America: A Statistical History, 1639-1790* (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1983), p. 351.

with branches of his church in Fredericton, Saint John, and Halifax. Most of the congregation left with him when he settled in Sierra Leone in 1792.²

The ecclesiological definition of this church is difficult to determine, but reflects an attitude of Black Churches of which the Rev. Dr. Peter Paris once reminded me—that Black Churches are never segregationist. For me the sign that a church can be considered Black is the refusal of white's to attend it. This was true of George's church. But, the discrimination which the church received, did not prevent William Taylor from joining it, nor prevent the Church from seeking the assistance of the Philadelphia Baptist Association.³

While the majority of George's church went with him to Sierra Leone, in 1794, John Burton, a missionary from the Lady Huntington Methodist Connexion, came to Halifax and gathered a black congregation. During a fund raising tour to New Jersey in 1794, he converted to the Regular Baptists. Upon his return to Nova Scotia, he organized Regular Baptist churches in Halifax and Shelburne in 1795.⁴ This congregation was a mixed church racially with the blacks in the majority. The meetinghouse was in Halifax, while Burton's "chief ministrations were among the coloured people at Preston and Hammond's Plains."

2 John Rippon, ed., *The Baptist Annual Register*, Vol. 1 (London: Dilly, Button, and Thomas, 1793), pp. 473-484. One issue of racism in the story of the Sierra Leone migration was Hector Peters becoming a slaver. Grant Gordon, *From Slavery to Freedom: The Life of David George, Pioneer Black Baptists Minister* (Wolfville: Acadia Divinity College, 1992), pp. 156, 158.

3 David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, Vol. 1* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1813), p. 295. A. D. Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, from A.D. 1707 to A.D. 1807* (1851; rpt. Atlas, Mich.: Baptist Book Trust, 1976), p. 22.

4 Some of the Loyalist Blacks were Huntingdon Methodists. F. W. Butt-Thompson, "Early Religious Influences in Sierra Leone," *The Baptist Quarterly*, 16 (1955-1956), 314. I. E. Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces* (Saint John: Barnes & Co., 1888), pp. 26, 176-178. The best discussion of both George and Burton is to be found in Stephen Davidson, "Leaders of the Black Baptists of Nova Scotia 1782-1832" (B.A. Honours thesis, Acadia University, 1975).

I have often been asked if this was truly a Black Church. White response to it would suggest that it was. There is a, possibly apocryphal, Judge Haliburton quotation to illustrate. He is supposed to have presented the minister in Burton's church “. . . as charging the brethren in the gallery to spit over their shoulders today, for there were white gentlemen sitting below them.”⁵

The practice of the time was for Blacks sit in the balcony, which were the free pews. The 1833 “Meetinghouse Covenant” of the Baptists of the Baptists in Digby and Clements included

That there shall be a place reserved for the colored people in the gallery on the north side of the house and at the west end and that no pew holder may sell his pew to colored people.⁶

The implication of the Haliburton quotation is that people were not often seated below them – gentlemen or not.

As Burton aged, it was his intent that his congregation would be merged with that of the Granville Street Baptist Church which opened in 1827, the spacious balcony in the new chapel being an attraction. What is left out of the usual histories of Granville Street Church's founding prior to 1974, and Steve Davidson's Acadia Honours Thesis, is that on the evening of the opening of the chapel, about two hundred people expected to be at the service failed to attend. They set up a service of their own with Robert Davis, Burton's Welsh assistant as their leader. This service was supported by the blacks of Burton's Church.⁷

5 *Halifax Churches*, "Historical facts about the First Baptist," Evening Mail (Halifax), May 21, 1887 (PANS Vertical Manuscript File: First Baptist, Halifax).

6 *Meetinghouse Covenant*, Digby Joggins Baptist Church, 1833 quoted in Charles W. Deweese, "Prominent Church Covenants of Maritime Baptists, 1778-1878, *Baptist History and Heritage* XV (1980), No. 2, p. 32.

7 Davidson, op. cit., pp. 77-78. Burton's Letter to Council of February, 1828, op. cit., p. 9.

Seeing the desire of his congregation, Burton decided to continue his church, which set up a battle between he and Robert Davis, over who led the true First Baptist Church Halifax. Two Church Councils, the Baptist court system, were held and ruled in Burton's favour. While Burton continued to minister in Hammond's Plains and Preston, after 1828 the African Baptist Church met in Halifax under the leadership of Richard Preston.⁸

First Baptist Halifax continued in this way until Burton's death. In 1841 the following notice appears in the minutes of the Nova Scotia Baptist Association:

Instead of First Halifax, which is now to be discontinued, Second Hammond's Plains and Preston, are entered on the minutes.⁹

While the Preston Church no longer exists, as far I can determine, the Second Hammond's Plains is now known as the Lucasville United Baptist Church.

The above action as one that was part of the plans made when the Granville Street Baptist Church was founded. This was a reorganization of First Baptist Halifax. Similar reorganizations have taken place among white Baptist Churches, but the church or churches created have always been allowed to keep their founding date. Yet, Lucasville has never had its 1795 founding date recognized. To make the image of systemic racism even more clear, when the church changed its name from Second Hammond's Plains to Lucasville, the Association minutes initially tried to give the change of name date as the date for founding.¹⁰

8 See Philip G. A. [Griffin-]Allwood, "Joseph Howe is their Devil: Controversies Among the *Repent and Believe: The Maritime Baptist Experience*

9 Nova Scotia Association Minutes 1841.

10 Systemic racism? White Baptists rejected the idea that the oldest church in HRM was Black—and that it was the mother church for all Baptists churches in HRM. The recent action of the First Baptist Halifax, originally 3rd Baptist Halifax, to acknowledge its roots begins to deal with this issue.

The 1827 congregation led by the white preacher Robert Davis, at least the blacks in it, did not return to First Baptist after it continued. They continued meeting in Halifax under the leadership of Richard Preston, who had been one of Burton's assistants.

In 1831, Preston went to England, and at the request of the church was ordained there. When he returned to Halifax in 1832, the church adopted the Articles of Faith and Practice of the Nova Scotia Baptist Association and applied for membership. The Church in Halifax was refused admission in the Nova Scotia Association because its members were considered to be under discipline by the First Baptist Church of Halifax. In response the African Baptists formed their own association in 1854 as the congregational membership expanded beyond Halifax and new churches were organized.¹¹

It would be easy to pass the reason for rejection off as an internal Black debate, First Baptist versus African Baptist. But in none of the decisions of First Baptist were Black Baptists involved in the decision making. Whites made the decisions for them. In many ways the founding of the African Baptist Church in Halifax was a desire to move from the balcony to the pew, for the Black Baptists to make their own decisions.¹² That desire for a Black Church with Black leadership would be the impetus for the division of the African Baptist Association.

When Richard Preston died, his successor was the Welsh James Thomas. The Thomas family had been part of First Baptist and had stayed with the African Baptist Church after the division. Thomas became a travelling associate of Preston.

Thomas was ordained in 1857 and continued his evangelistic work. Following Preston's death in 1861, he was elected to the

¹¹ Boyd, p. v., 27.

¹² Support for this hypothesis may be found in the February 25, 1833 petition from the trustees of the African Baptist Church (PANS Petitions, 1831-1837, Vol. 42, Series "P," Miscellaneous "B." My thanks to Savannah Williams for informing me of the existence of this document.

pastoral offices held by Preston; Halifax, Hammond's Plains, Preston, Beech Hill, and Campbell Road Churches.¹³ With the position came leadership in the African Baptist Association and a split within the African Association.

MacKerrow described the controversy between the two as over “petty jealousies.”¹⁴ Frank Boyd described the dispute as over Thomas' succession of Richard Preston.¹⁵ The place of focus for the split was Preston.

In 1866 Benson Smithers, who was minister of the 2nd Preston, or Preston South, church made his case to the association and in 1867 he was excluded from the African Baptist Association.¹⁶ Eleven others were excluded at the same time and in 1871.¹⁷ At the 1867 meeting of the African Baptist Association “some of the brethren said that they wished to withdraw themselves from the Association and follow Smithers . . .”¹⁸ This led to their later exclusion.

In 1867 Smithers organized a second African Baptist Association with held its first annual meeting in 1868 with churches, in addition to 2nd Preston, from Granville Mountain, Bear River, Digby Joggins, Weymouth, Yarmouth (Salmon River), and Campbell Road.¹⁹ With the exception of 2nd Preston, the other

13 MacKerrow, p.32.

14 MacKerrow, p. 35.

15 Boyd, p. 32-33

16 Boyd, p. 32.

17 Boyd, p. 32.

18 *Minutes of the African Baptist [Cornwallis St.] Association 1867*, p. 4.

19 *Minutes of the Proceedings of the African Baptist [Second Preston] Association 1868*. To maintain the distinction between the two associations, the leading church of each is put in square brackets.

churches technically retained membership in both African Baptist Associations.²⁰

In 1871 George Neale was excluded because “said brother . . . connected himself with the Rev. Smither's body, the same being clandestine, and at variance with our body.”²¹ Smithers’ African Baptist Association welcomed Neale and his First Preston Church in 1870, “which have come out boldly from the Rev. James Thomas.”²²

That leadership was the source of the division is clear, but it involved more than race. Thomas and Smithers exercised two different definitions of associational leadership. In 1871 the African Baptist [Second Preston] Association declared “That the Rev. Benson Smithers be Bishop of our Association.”²³ Thomas on the other hand used the designation Chairman to describe the presiding office of the African Baptist [Cornwallis St.] Association.²⁴ Richard Preston had been the Moderator, and for one year, Bishop, of the Association.²⁵

An underlying issue was the relationship with the Nova Scotia Baptist Associations. The minutes of the Central Baptist Association, one of the three parts into which the Nova Scotia Association was divided in 1851, show renewed reference to the Hammond's Plains and Preston churches beginning in 1864.²⁶ The

20 See the printed *Minutes* of the two associations.

21 Boyd, p. 33.

22 *Minutes of the Proceedings of the African Baptist [Second Preston] Association, 1870*, p. 1.

23 *Minutes of the Proceedings of the African Baptist [Second Preston] Association, 1870*, p. 3.

24 *Minutes of the African Baptist [Cornwallis St.] Association, 1873*, p. 12.

25 See the *Minutes of the African Baptist Association* prior to Preston's death.

26 The minutes note the request from Hammond's Plains for assistance in construction of a meeting house and from Preston for the ordination of Carvery. *Minutes of the Central Baptist Association 1864*, p. 21.

Reverend David Shaw was appointed to conduct missions among the “coloured population” in the late 1860s.²⁷ His work though was not wholeheartedly welcomed by the African Baptist Association. Referring to report by Shaw in the 1865 Central Association minutes the Association noted that “. . . we believe it was purely from selfish motives that could have induced him to make such wide mistakes.”²⁸

As behalf his African Baptist Association, Thomas visited with the Central Nova Scotia Baptist Association in 1871. This would have been the first time that the churches from the 1827 schism would have met together in the same associational gathering without reference to the disfellowship of one by the other. The trip to the Central association had included a formal application for membership in he association. The Central Baptist Association “appointed [a committee] to investigate the reasons why we wished to unite with them.”²⁹

While the tensions between the two African Baptist Associations would prohibit reunion, reconciliation did take place on the local level. Those in the Neale led First Preston who wished to remain in fellowship with the Thomas led African Baptist Association would unite with the Central Association's First Preston Church to create the Fulton Church.³⁰ The symbolic importance of this comes from the latter First Preston being the 1795 Church which had been the discipliner of those who had created the African Baptist Church.

27 *Minutes of the Central Baptist Association 1866*, p. 42, 1868, p.35.

28 *Minutes of the African Baptist Association, 1865*, p. 5.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 5 and *Minutes of the Central Baptist Association, 1871*.

30 The move of the Neale led First Preston Church meant that in 1871 there were three Black Baptist churches using the name First Preston: the African Baptist [Second Preston] founded by Richard Preston, the African Baptist [Cornwallis St.] consisting of a remnant of the former recongized by the African Baptist [Cornwallis St.] Association as First Preston, and the Central Association church which had been founded by John Burton.

Despite this union, which was less than a reconciliation, union with the Central Baptist Association did not take place. Because of the existence of two African Baptist Associations, nothing happened until after the death of Thomas. And when it did, it was not associational union.

In 1882, the African Baptist Association requested assistance from the Baptist Convention of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.³¹ The Home Mission Board responded by granting aid to the African Baptist churches.³² In 1884, the African association became a member association of the Convention.³³

An identity crisis resulted among the African Baptist churches over whether they should integrate with the regional associations of the Convention or maintain a separate association. In 1887, after debating a motion to dissolve, the association decided to keep their separate associational identity within the Convention.³⁴ Thus, in my opinion, avoided the marginalization which took place in New Brunswick.³⁵ Through it all, no discussion concerning the previous disciplinary action occurred.³⁶ But unlike 1827, Blacks themselves made the decision.

But the question of a separate trans-regional association would not go away. In the period before the Second World War, as segregation gained fresh strength in the United States, Black

31 *Baptist Year Book 1882*, p. 22

32 *Baptist Year Book 1882-1884*.

33 *Baptist Year Book 1884*, p. 15, 155.

34 Minutes of the African Baptist Association, 1887, pp. 4-5 and *Baptist Year Book 1887*.

35 "Still Beseching of God to Bring in Many More": The Marginalization of African Baptists in New Brunswick." *The Religious Mosaic of Atlantic Canada: A Conference on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Diocese of Saint John*, October 2, 1992. Publication anticipated.

36 *The Baptist Year Book of the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1884*, pp. 15, 117.

Convention Churches were encouraged to join the African Baptist Association. This was occurring while the Home Mission Board of the Convention made the African Churches a particular focus for support.³⁷

Perhaps the illustration of systemic racism as racial separation in this period has been the failure to acknowledge that the first ordained woman to exercise ministry in the Maritimes was the Rev. M. E. Johnson.³⁸

After the Second World War the question of AUBC existence, gained impetus. In 1947, the Halifax District minutes record:

“Prior to taking up matter of the program for the District meetings, there was a discussion on the matter re colored churches relationship with the district. It was suggested that Rev. H. L. Denton unofficially approach colored ministers to ascertain their feelings regarding the matter.”³⁹

In the fall the minutes note:

“Rev. H. L. Denton then gave a report on the relations of the colored churches to the District, and the opinion was that it is advisable to leave the relationship as it now stands, the colored brethren working with us upon invitation and vice versa. Agreed that the secretary send notice of meetings and extend invitation to attend.”⁴⁰

37 See the *The Baptist Year Book of the Maritime Provinces of Canada* during this period. I am indebted to either Rev. Dr. Wrenfred Bryant or Rev. Dr. Joseph Mack for making the connection with American practice.

38 Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in late-19th-Century Halifax County". XXII, 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 61-83.

39 Entry for April 14, 1947, Records of the The United Baptist District Meeting of Halifax County, N.S. 1944 - Oct. 23, 1951.

40 Entry for September 22, 1947, Records of the The United Baptist District Meeting of Halifax County, N.S. 1944 - Oct. 23, 1951.

The issue was dormant for the next decade until 1958 when the Board of Social Services brought a report recommending dissolution of the African Baptist Association, apparently without consulting the association. The section on the “Racial Question” was deleted before the report was adopted.⁴¹ In response to this attempted action a “Conference on the Social Welfare of the Negro Race” was held.⁴² The Social Services position was that the African Association was segregationist entity and should not continue in existence. The leadership of the African Baptist Association present clearly outlined the *raison d’être* for the Association.

In response to this meeting, the Board of Social Services, became an advocate for Home Mission Board support for full time ministry among the African Baptist Association churches and encourager of the anti-racist initiatives of the AUBA.⁴³

But the issue of African Baptist and regional Association relations did not end. In the 1961, the Convention adopted a report on the merger of Districts and Associations in the Executive Committee report.⁴⁴ As a report of this report a committee met with the executive the African Baptist Association to discuss how this would effect their churches.

The formal reply read as follows:

Dear George :-

We had a very good meeting with your committee and after you retires [sic] we formulated the following Resolution which you can forward to your committee as well as Rev. Renfree to be notified and he can inform the Moderator and Clerks of the New Nova Scotia Associations.

41 Minutes of the Convention, *The Year Book 1958* p. 26.

42 Minutes of the meeting are in the papers of the Rev. Earle MacKnight.

43 *The Year Book, 1959-1963*.

44 *The Year Book, 1961*.

“We the Members of the Executive of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia having heard the Committee on Re-Formed Associations, heartily urge and encourage our African Baptist Churches to accept fellowship in the newly formed Association, in their own area.

(This resolution may sound contradictory but we feel there would be no disadvantages to hold fellowship in two Associations)

I trust this will pave the way to bringing us closed together in unity, fellowship, and Christian concern.

Thanking you and your Committee for coming and having this meeting.

Yours very sincerely,

H. D. Thomas⁴⁵

As far as I can tell, this letter is the source of the dual affiliation myth. The decision was to promote fellowship, rather than actual membership in the reorganized associations. This is confirmed in 1965 by the following discussion:

“Rev. McGray brought up the matter of the continued practice of listing Hfx-Dartmouth Churches of the African Association separately in the Year Book from other churches in this Association. Some discussion took place & the Clerk read a letter to the African Association advising them of our motion of the Spring 1964 meetings in which we asked them to consider a joint listing. No reply has been received and Rev. Bryant, speaking on the matter, stated that his meetings with the Executive of the African Association led him to conclude that if a reply were forthcoming, it would be in the negative. Rev. Matthews expressed the view that the listing could have been corrected at the time of the original drawing together but now that the letter had been sent, it would be

45 Letter from H. D. Thomas to George McGray, April 3, 1962.

quite impossible to take action now. Moderator offered to pursue the matter in the afternoon session but the consensus was against."⁴⁶

Despite this rather clear action, the Halifax-Dartmouth Association proceeded to roll call the African Baptist Churches. This process continued until about 1982 when during the preparations for the 150th anniversary celebration of the Cornwallis Street United Baptist Church, it became clear that there had never been a decision by the Church to dually affiliate. Instead of the presumptuous roll calling, the Association began an intentional effort to build bridges.⁴⁷

The above refers to the Halifax area. There were AUBA churches which were happy to dual affiliate. In the case of Acaiville, it was denied admission to the Annapolis-Digby Association until the late 1980s.⁴⁸

The systemic racism to which the African Baptist Association has been constantly responding has been the belief by white Baptists that Black Baptists cannot make their own decisions and if they make one, white decision makers could overturn or ignore it. Often this has been caused by a mistaken white belief that separation is the only form of racism. Perhaps the most glaring recent illustration of this systemic racism was the publication of *Baptists in Canada* with its false statement that John Burton had "passed the torch" to Richard Preston.⁴⁹

Two statements illustrate why the Association persists. The Rev. Don Fairfax at the 1958 meeting stated:

46 Book III, Records of the Halifax County United Baptist Association, Entry for May 1, 1965.

47 The author was pastor of the Seabright United Baptist Pastorate at this time.

48 The author was minister of the Lawrencetown United Baptist Church when Acaiville finally joined the association.

49 Harry A. Renfree, *Heritage and Horizon: The Baptist Story in Canada* (Mississauga: Canadian Baptist Federation, 1988), p.151.

The Association is our heritage; it was no mistake; it was perhaps the only way for our people to be brought to Christ. And we are also brought closer to the white people this way. Our people must continue to keep their identity. We must remember the mission of our people, that its only voice has been through the church, and our families have been strengthened in Christ. Our own Executive must get to discuss the problems of our own people.⁵⁰

The second is the only reference to the issue of dual affiliation or merger with the Districts which is found in African Association minutes. Moderator W. P. Oliver's address in 1964 includes:

There is confusion as to the justification as to whether it is right or practical to be maintaining an African Baptist Association . . . As long as there are Negro families living in isolated communities there is a need for the Negro Church and the African Baptist Association. The Church grows out of the Family Life as while family life remains as it is, there is a task for our Association to do . . . In conclusion let us take pride in ourselves and do the task that is before us.⁵¹

50 Special Meeting of the Executive of the African Baptist Association of N.S. And Members of the Social Service Committee of the Mar. Baptist Convention, January 27, 1959, p. 5.

51 *Minutes of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia 1964*, p. 11.