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Articles

Lyceum Guild: A Ministry on a Mission

by E. Paulette Isaac

Introduction

According to Andrew Billingsley, author of *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (1999), from their beginnings in the 1790s, African American churches “became and have continued to be the focal point of virtually every movement for change that affects their communities.”¹ Undoubtedly, some of these churches played a significant role in the election of the first African American president in 2008. President Barack Hussein Obama’s election came after an intensive and creatively crafted campaign. Many organizations were instrumental in encouraging people to vote, providing transportation to the polls, and educating people on the issues at hand. In St. Louis, Missouri, for example, many churches hosted rallies, panel discussions, and forums in preparation for the election. For those unfamiliar with the African American Church (AAC), these practices may appear to be a new phenomenon, but a close

examination reveals that, historically, political activism and education were paramount to the AAC. As the center of African American life, it was a refuge and spiritual temple and it served an important educator role. In fact, the Church is one of the largest informal educational settings among African Americans. It warrants, therefore, a historical examination of the important role it has played in not only offering spiritual guidance, but also in educating and enlightening entire communities.

Traditionally, formal adult education was reserved for the privileged.² Thus, those without the financial means or, as in the case of the United States prior to 1865, individuals who were enslaved, were unable to capitalize on the educational benefits of the upper class. Hence, other means were used to obtain knowledge. For African Americans, community voluntary organizations and the Church served as informal learning institutions. Education and religion

have long been paired in the Church.³ The AAC engaged African Americans in informal learning through forums, newsletters, fairs, workshops and seminars. Through its ministries, the Church has enabled African American adults to develop leadership and job skills. In addition, adults have had occasion to develop what Robert A. Franklin refers to as “a sense of personal pride and value”⁴ based on pedagogy in the Church. The purpose of this study was to examine how one Church ministry, the Lyceum Guild at Washington Tabernacle Baptist Church in St. Louis, used informal learning to educate members of the African American community.

Informal Learning

Adults engage in learning in a variety of settings. Mündel and Schugurenksy (2008) state there are three common subsystems of educational activities: “Formal education refers to the highly institutionalized, curricular-based instruction that takes place in schools and postsecondary institutions.”⁵ On the other hand, “non-formal education refers to the realm of workshops and short educational sessions where learning is a recognized outcome of the activity.”⁶ Finally, informal learning consists of all other learning activities such as “self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialization.”⁷

For Tusting (2003), informal learning “has been used in a number of ways” and can “refer to different things.”⁸ Shrestha, Wilson, and Singh (2008) state that informal education “involves the intentional, purposeful, and structured learning opportunities provided

outside of formal education systems and takes as its focus learners who live in a particular location or share a common social or educational need.”⁹ Livingstone (1999) asserts informal learning is “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of institutions providing educational programs.”¹⁰ He goes on to say that “the basic terms of informal learning... are determined by the individuals and groups that choose to engage in it.”¹¹ Hence, informal learning involves individual or group learning exclusive of “externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorised instructor.”¹² Tusting (2003) divides informal learning into four major areas:

1. Setting/Context – referring to setting or context outside of formal educational institutions in which learning occurs;
2. Unplannedness – no specified curriculum is set prior to the learning experience;
3. Accreditation and Assessment – “learning which is not accredited in formal means of assessment”¹³; and
4. Styles, Roles, and Relationships: “learning in which the teaching is delivered in an informal or colloquial style, construction non-formal or non-hierarchical relationship between teacher and student.”¹⁴

Zepke (2006) believes that “the expectations of the [informal] learning culture can differ markedly from those learning in formal programmes.”¹⁵

In their examination of the National Center for Education Statistics study, O'Donnell and Chapman defined informal learning activities as those taken for personal interest and with the absence of an instructor. These activities included tutoring using computer software, reading manuals, watching videos, and participating in clubs and/or support groups.¹⁶ As this discussion suggests, informal learning can happen at any time and anywhere and can, as Lohan (2000) suggests, be "structured or unstructured."¹⁷

Historically, African Americans believed education would open doors that had traditionally been closed. There was also a belief that it would improve their economic status. With the establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), African Americans were able to participate more formally in adult education.¹⁸ And, while HBCUs were instrumental in helping African Americans realize their educational goals overall, the masses were unable to attend. Some were unprepared for advanced formal learning, and undoubtedly, some were unable to attend for financial reasons. Furthermore, the formal classrooms may not have been as conducive to in-depth learning and discussion of current issues and injustices that blanketed the African American community. Thus, other forums had to be utilized.

Informal Learning of African Americans

Community voluntary organizations emerged in the early 1700s providing adult education for free African Americans. Their primary purpose was to use pragmatic means to alleviate the constant

afflictions of African Americans.¹⁹ However, it was not until the 1800s that there would be an explosion of these organizations. Many organizations served free African Americans as well as those in bondage. One such organization, the Free African Society, provided security to its members who were employed in seasonal, unstable, or low-paying jobs. Since African Americans had limited funds, the Free African Society stressed the importance of thrift, among other things.²⁰

In the early 19th century, a few African American organizations were created for the purpose of intellectual enhancement. For example, literary societies sought to improve the mental and moral conditions of African Americans. They used reading rooms and libraries to disseminate information. In 1838, according to one study, "there were approximately 80 self-help organizations" in the U.S.²¹ They offered help through public lectures which covered such topics as politics, chemistry, geography, and logic. Many organizations, including the African Lodge and the Odd Fellows, provided informal educational programs.

During the antebellum period, free African Americans were offered adult education in many forms. Several organizations served as conduits of adult education. Free African Americans were able to participate in adult educational activities to improve their well-being, show pride in their cultural heritage, develop consensus on appropriate behavior and living standards, and develop self-protection against laws and acts of

violence.²² Their motivations included personal development and a better way of life in general. Also, they appear to have included a desire to have a basic understanding of their human and civil rights; because although they were free, this freedom did not include equal treatment under the law.

Although there were many institutions providing formal adult learning, throughout the 20th century, many organizations surfaced to provide education that addressed the existing injustices. As a result of the influx of informal educational contexts, African Americans were afforded a wide range of learning opportunities by various community organizations, private individuals, and the AAC. By 1950, for example, the NAACP and the Urban League were well established. The NAACP, born in response to racial violence, was concerned about intercultural education. It promoted activities that enhanced the status of African Americans and provided instruction for the uplift of people.²³ The Urban League strove for the betterment of the community and interracial relations. Branches of the Urban League provided different programs based on community needs. However, some branches stressed literacy and training and provided instruction in areas that would lead to viable employment.²⁴

While some organizations and groups focused primarily on vocational or industrial training, others had different agendas. The Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association (UNIA) and African Communities

League advocated education for self-ethnic reliance and programs focusing on, among other things, economic development.²⁵ Founded by Marcus Garvey, the UNIA's purpose was "to unite the African race through an educational program that focused on race pride and unity, economic development, and the redemption of Africa."²⁶ Other civil rights groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Black Panthers had a somewhat similar mission. Space limitations do not allow for an exhaustive list of educational programming among these organizations; however, programs included voter education, self-ethnic identity, self-esteem, civil rights, consumer education, and legal services, just to name a few.²⁷ These and other organizations were successful in aiding African Americans, but the AAC had positioned itself as an educational hotbed.

During the mid-20th century, the United States was experiencing turmoil. African Americans, in particular, not far removed from Reconstruction, were still facing persecution. African Americans found themselves behind in every aspect of life worth measuring. And, while conditions have improved, as D'Apolito (2000) suggests, "African Americans still represent a seriously disadvantaged group," this "in spite of all the social and legal changes that have occurred as a result of the Civil Rights Movement."²⁸

In the post-Civil Rights Era, according to Sellers (2007), Christian churches have not been

the most innovative organizations in terms of programming or outreach. He further states that “churches often lag behind the rest of society in adopting new things.”²⁹ However, an examination of the various educational strategies and techniques used by the AAC would challenge such a statement. The Church, according to Franklin, “has been and continues to function as the hub of civil society and remains the center of social life in many Black communities.”³⁰ Franklin also states, “Against the strong opposition of southern states and citizens who sought to exclude or not provide support for Black education, Black churches and clergy became advocates for, providers and supporters of elementary, high school, industrial, agricultural, and college education.”³¹ Just as important, the Church provided education outside the purview of formal settings. In doing so, it had to be creative in its strategies to aid and educate African Americans.

Although several of the colleges and universities established by the Church are now defunct, in the 21st century, the Church remains a central informal learning ground, adopting and incorporating different educational programs and techniques.

Rowland (1999) states,

From the days of religious gatherings on hilltops, cotton fields, and barns to revivals in open fields or abandoned shacks to the worship services in modern stately buildings, the Black Church has been a place with worship, a place of teaching and learning.³²

Thus, from its clandestine beginnings until now, the AAC has provided the means with which African Americans could acquire knowledge, gain understanding, and/or develop or hone skills, and discuss current events and critical issues. It took visionary and committed church leaders to make it happen. Such was the case with Rev. John Nance, pastor of Washington Tabernacle Baptist Church. He understood that education was one of the many roles of the Church.

The Lyceum Guild of Washington Tabernacle Baptist Church

Church ministries or auxiliaries serve as conduits for education in the Church. *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary defines ministry as “a person or thing through which something is accomplished.” Historically, in church auxiliaries...“members learned to handle money, speak in public, and work on behalf of the less fortunate. Auxiliaries provided a space in which members socialized, developed strong bonds, and worked on tasks in a supportive atmosphere.”³³ Hence, they give support and serve as an aid to others. Ministries are often established based on a perceived need. And, they often are extensions of the religious body with which they are associated. For example, many African American churches have a health ministry that provides health-related services such as health fairs and seminars.³⁴ Health fairs can enable members and community residents to be screened for prostate cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Ministries can be created by a member of the Church. It is not unusual, however, for them to be established by the pastor. At Washington Tabernacle Baptist

Church (WTBC) in St. Louis, Missouri, it was the pastor who had the foresight to establish a ministry called the Lyceum Guild.

Historically, lyceums were created as open forums to educate the masses. Research by Taylor (2008) suggests, “after use by various natural history societies, the term *lyceum* was appropriated by Josiah Holbrook for an adult education venture that he publicized in the October 1826 *American Journal of Education*.”³⁵ In the U.S., lyceums were considered an elaborate experiment because of their innovative nature to diffuse knowledge on a broad scale.³⁶ Knowles (1994) states that between 1780 and 1865, “Perhaps the most spectacular offspring for the hunger for knowledge...was the lyceum.”³⁷ People would gather from nearby towns and communities to participate in this learning venue.

Organized in 1902, WTBC has witnessed many changes in its 100-plus years. However, “the church membership has always been involved in many activities, within its walls as well as within the community, e.g., civil rights movements, voter registration drives, community support, hot meal programs, political education.”⁴⁰ Presently, it has about 600 members.

The Lyceum Guild of WTBC enabled its members and others to gain knowledge as well. Established in 1950, it was the brainchild of the pastor Rev. John E. Nance. A graduate of Morehouse College, whose initial professional goal was to become a medical doctor, Rev. Nance clearly understood the plight of African Americans. He dared to demonstrate his loyalty

to the uplift of his people. As such, under his leadership,

During the Civil Rights Movement, national leaders held strategy sessions and mass meetings at our church. Included in these rallies were such notables as A. Philip Randolph and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King spoke to over 4,000 individuals at the church on May 28, 1963 and again, on March 25, 1964.⁴¹

Rev. Nance wanted to help eradicate the injustices that were being leveled against African Americans in his community and throughout the U.S. The Lyceum Guild would be one strategy to level the playing field.

The Lyceum Guild was formed during a time of racial upheaval and overt discrimination. It was created with the purpose of further informing, promoting, and stimulating the membership of “the Church and Community by fostering discussions and lectures and current issues” and enlisting a group of men and women of the Church who were interested in this type of service that all might become better citizens.⁴² Furthermore, the Guild sought to “encourage competent, intelligent participation by Church members in the spiritual, political, economic, social, civic and cultural life of the community, and to assist them in the development of these interests.”⁴³ With some modifications, in 2005, its purpose was to:

...inform, educate, stimulate, and promote understanding within our church and

community. Through lectures, forums and printed materials, we discuss issues and events that affect our citizens on the local, state, national and global levels. We do, therefore, encourage competent participation in the areas of spiritual, civic, political, economic, social and cultural life within this community. Our continual theme and ongoing assertion is that it is 'The Right of All People to Know.'⁴⁴

The pastor selected 15 individuals to serve as charter members of the Guild. The group included educators, government employees, and an attorney. In 2005, the makeup of the membership was similar. Traditionally, the Guild met monthly during the fall, winter, and spring. In addition to learning opportunities at monthly meetings, the Guild hosted panel discussions, forums, luncheons, and fairs and published a newsletter. If the role of the Guild was instrumental in the education of African Americans, then it is important to understand how it used informal learning as a mechanism for adult education.

Methodology and Findings

Using Wiersma and Jurs' four-step approach to historical research, involving both internal and external criticism of primary documents, this study explores the contributions of the Lyceum Guild in using informal learning to educate adult learners. Primary documents were reviewed for their validity (external criticism) and their meaning and purpose (internal criticism).⁴⁵ I analyzed a variety of documents such as

programs, church bulletins, newsletters, minutes, brochures, correspondence, and other Guild materials used between 1950 and 2005.

As indicated in its purpose, the Guild sought to inform, educate, and promote understanding. A review of the documents indicates they did so by providing knowledge, skills, or understanding in six categories; (a) spiritual, (b) civic, (c) politics, (d) economics and finances, (g) social, and (h) cultural. With that in mind, I sought to examine how the Guild used informal learning to educate African Americans within these six areas. Led by the motto, "The Right of All People to Know," the Guild provided many informal opportunities to learn, engaging in valiant efforts to make certain that its members and the community were "in the know." A discussion of the categories follows.

Spiritual

For purposes of this study, spiritual was defined as any activity that related to worship, the Church, or religious education. During its formative years, Guild members often attended other churches. These visits generally took place once a year. Sometimes they visited predominately white churches. This gave them an opportunity to see how others lived. Once a year, the Guild sponsored Guild Sunday, a special worship service. During the worship service, the Guild's purpose was outlined, and there would be a special guest preacher or speaker. At an annual luncheon, the guest speaker spoke on the topic of Christian education in the African American community. While celebrating the

Church's 100th anniversary, a presentation topic at another luncheon was "Celebrating 100 Years of Christian Faith."

Civic

Civics consisted of knowledge relative to community affairs and civic responsibilities. Numerous ideas were discussed relative to this topic. They included the justice system, taxes, educational opportunities, and neighborhood improvement. During the Guild's annual luncheons, speakers addressed such issues as housing and Black-on-Black crime. They often hosted voter registration drives. It was not unusual for new St. Louis Public Schools Superintendents to speak at Guild events. In 2005, a representative from the Social Security Administration office discussed the future of Social Security.

Politics

The Guild was active in political matters. It was not unusual for the Guild to bring in current or potential elected officials. For example, they hosted political forums for mayoral candidates. There was a political forum on President Bill Clinton in 1993. Other speakers have included mayors, a deputy mayor, and a judge of the Missouri State Supreme Court. In 1981, one of the Guild members spoke about Senate Bill 1187. This bill affected redistricting in Missouri. The speaker discussed how it would affect African Americans in the state.

Economics and Finances

As commonly accepted, economics is associated

with goods and services. Finances relate to money matters (i.e., how to get it, manage it, etc). In December 1955, as part of Lyceum Guild Sunday, the Guild hosted a panel discussion on employment equality. Speakers included the Director of Adult Counseling at a local university; the Industrial Secretary for the Urban League; and the Research Director of the St. Louis Joint Council of Teamsters, American Federation of Labor. During annual luncheons, topics covered St. Louis' economic status and consumerism. At its 43rd annual luncheon in 1992, an African American columnist for the local paper discussed "the President's New Economic Plan (As Related to Blacks)."⁴⁶ At a dinner in the spring of 1981, a District Director of Equal Employment Opportunity discussed coping with inflation. A topic addressed at a luncheon was "The Advantage of Being a Wise Consumer." The speaker, a member of the Guild, discussed where to purchase food, how to determine its freshness, and which businesses to boycott. During the tax season, IRS tax advice was often given.

Social

This category of learning is associated with the welfare of people. Under the theme of social learning, topics included protective services for the elderly. One member employed with the Housing Authority provided literature to educate the members on housing developments. The literature informed members of homes that were for sale or rent. Mental health of African Americans was discussed. Relative to the family, topics included child abuse and its effect on

the Black family, building strong families, and support systems for children.

Cultural

The Guild sought to educate African Americans on African American history, events, or people through their cultural activities. It often held or sponsored special programs during February. However, at its annual luncheons, topics included “Acknowledging the Contributions of Black People to the History of St. Louis.” Its monthly newsletter contained information on cultural and Civil Rights activities. For example, a 1965 newsletter lists the names of individuals killed at the hands of White racists. They included a Rev. James Reeb who “died on March 11 as a result of a beating inflicted upon him by four white racists in Selma, AL” and a Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, who, at age 39, was “shot to death on March 25 while driving between Selma and Montgomery, Alaska Mrs. Liuzzo went to Selma to participate in the Selma-to-Montgomery march. She was a member of the Detroit Branch of the NAACP and a dedicated civil rights worker.”⁴⁷

Discussion and Conclusion

Generally conducted outside the confines of a structured educational system, informal learning contexts are an important educational vehicle for many adults. Venues for these informal learning contexts include museums, libraries and community centers. Although African Americans were able to attend formal institutions of higher learning, many relied on community-based programs to gain knowledge and skills.

Organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, the Black Panthers, and the African American Church provided job training, literacy skills, and economic enhancement.

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) indicate the AAC is involved in all aspects of African American life, including politics, economics, and education.⁴⁸ Consequently, it has supported education and was instrumental in the establishment of formal educational institutions on all levels. Although different African American denominations support higher education institutions, they reach even more adults through informal learning practices. Between 1950 and 2005, the Lyceum Guild of Washington Tabernacle Baptist Church sought to inform and educate African Americans about civic, political, cultural, social, and spiritual issues as well as economics and finances.

The Lyceum Guild demonstrates the significance of informal learning contexts not only in the lives of individuals, but also in communities and society in general. Church scholars and historians as well as Christian, religious, and adult educators can use ministries like the Guild to expand our general knowledge about the Church’s educational role and informal adult education activities. Religious education has been a staple of the Christian Church. According to Livingstone, adult educators “should take this detectable informal learning into greater account to develop more responsive... education opportunities.”⁴⁹ The Guild demonstrates how an informal learning context can indeed offer responsive educational opportunities.

Hence, contexts such as these can provide more opportunities for research and subsequently the prospect of coalescing theory and practice. As Livingstone suggests, “If our big education and

training ships do not increasingly look out for the massive, detectable icebergs in the sea of informal learning, many of their programs may sink into Titanic irrelevancy.”⁵⁰ ❖

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