

A Guide to the The Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church Papers 1876-1974

Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church Papers, 1876-1974
1876-1974

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Descriptive Summary

Collection number

1980-36

Language

English

Abstract

The Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church papers contain minutes, reports and the church's history projects during almost a hundred year span from the church's organization. Included in these papers is an unfinished history of the church's existence, minutes from a conference dating back to 1876, and minutes from the Sabbath schools that were formed.

Physical Characteristics

This collection contains ca. 200 pieces.

Repository

Special Collections and Archives, Johnston Memorial Library, Virginia State University

Administrative Information

Access

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

James Oliver Allen gave these papers to the Virginia State University Archives/Special Collections Department in hopes of a publication of a book on this denomination. They are to be preserved, administered, and used by the Virginia State University Archives/Special Collections under customary practices and guidelines of general archival administration. Copyrights were transferred to Virginia State University by Deed of Gift in February 1980. Accession Number: 1980-36.

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History of the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church

James Richard Howell established the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church in 1869, although the beginnings of its foundation can be traced back to 1865. James Howell was a native of New York City where he was an elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Elder Howell, who was an abolitionist, envisioned a church to evangelize the Southern "Negro."

Elder Howell left his home in New York City and boarded a train heading south. Several hours later he had arrived in the town of LaCrosse in Mechenburg, Virginia. This is where he began to form the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church. Howell began to talk with individuals concerning the church he envisioned. These individuals appeared to have been interested in his idea. On April 1, 1869, a delegation including ministers from various denominations, assembled in Boydton, Virginia to consider Howell's plan of union.

The plan of union was accepted by the delegation with exception of some matters relating to the episcopate government. Elder Howell won suggestion of his new denomination, the Zion Union Apostolic Church. The name came from many of the scriptures that Howell read. Zion was the stronghold of ancient days, therefore, Zion would be the stronghold of God's people in this age. As Christ taught oneness of himself and the heavenly father and his oneness with his followers, so, too, shall his church dwell as a union.

During October 1869, a second meeting was held at the Zion Society to complete the work of a Zion Union Society. At this meeting guidelines for the general rules were adopted and Elder Howell was elected to a four-year term as President of the "Zion Union Apostolic Church of America."

The denomination was divided into three major factions, the liberals, who had withdrawn from the Episcopalian communion, the conservatives, who had been in the white Methodist church, and the fundamentalists who had come from the Baptist churches or were new converts to Christianity. The three factions made almost unceasing war on each other. The liberals were perhaps a decade ahead of their time in plans and ideas. The fundamentalists were determined to fight for local church sovereignty and the immunity of the pastors from any authority except local congregations. The conservatives hued strictly to the Methodist line, in doctrines and in practices. Bishop Howell was almost a faction within himself. He used his powers of appointment, silencing and expulsion of ministers as a sledgehammer to drive the stakes of Zion according to his own designs.

Controversy became rampant and even bitter. The struggle between the bishops and the elders became more divisive to the church when a movement grew to merge the Zion Union Church with the Episcopal Church. Bishop Howell fought with an abrasive tenacity and the division was so sharpened that some Elders and churches withdrew from Zion.

Bishop James Howell released himself from his duties of bishop from 1880-1881. Bishop William Howell was a man considered agreeable to conservatives, liberals and the fundamentalist. Bishop Howell immediately approved ineffective with the opening of the conference of 1880. His first order of business was the merger of the Episcopalian government. After four days of meetings on the matter, a motion prevailed that the Common Book of Prayer would be adopted. The conference ended with the Zion Union Apostolic Church being organized into thirty-eight Episcopalian churches and missions. and purposes.

The merger, however, was as a yet one-sided affair. James R. Howell came out of the Conference more determined than ever to save his beloved Zion. When the Annual Conference of 1881 was called to order, Howell had done little on the merger except the rather astringent efforts of opposition. Once returned to office of Bishop, James R. Howell used his powers to batter his opponents. The shock of his fury tore the church asunder. The Conservatives found it necessary to go to the Bishop and once again point out the grave situation. Howell acceded. He set to work to hear the breach in Zion. He successfully arranged a Conference in 1882 to put Zion Union on one accord. The Conservative leadership took over once the Conference was called to order and set in motion plans, which would free Zion Union of discord. The Conference ended with differences worked out, a return to presidential government and complete rejection of the merger. From this conference, the church was known as the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church. However in the Conference of 1884, the Episcopacy government was restored with the ruling that is shall never be eliminated.

Scope and Content Information

The Reformed Zion Union Church papers (1876-1974) are vital papers about the formation of a denomination after the Civil War. These papers give a detailed account about the beginnings of this denomination and its founder James Richard Howell.

Howell, a former member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, envisioned a church where all could go to worship regardless of race, creed, or color. Howell determined to see his vision come true, set out to find a place for this church. He boarded a train and found himself in LaCrosse, Virginia and this is where the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church denomination began.

These papers document the origins, purposes and functions of a uniquely African American Christian church. They represent a church that was not in existence until 1869. These papers have a distinct worth because it gives you an understanding of how a church was established after the Civil War.

These papers include minutes from Annual Conferences, Sunday School Conventions, Home Missions and Educational Convention, Women's Home Mission and Educational Society, the Reformed Zion Union Sabbath Schools, and Rising Zion Young Peoples Society.

The papers are useful not only to members of this denomination but anybody who is interested in how black churches were formed after the Civil War. These materials also help to inform us of the structure of the African American community after the Civil War. These materials document some of the activities in Virginia's black belt. Also, these papers may also be useful for genealogical work because quite a few names are used.

Series Description

In series one of the Reformed Zion Union Apostolic papers, there are detailed records of the church's history. In these records an unfinished publication of the church's history and a brief history of the denominations formation and James Richard Howell. Included are many projects that the church was working on along with financial reports from these projects. Some minutes from annual conferences are added in this series.

The second series contains minutes from annual conferences, Sunday school conventions, Women's home Mission and Educational Society, Home Mission and Educational Convention, the Reformed Zion Union Sabbath Schools and Rising Zion Young People's Society. These minutes are from the first and second district. These records date from 1876-1970.

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