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**REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY: ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM OF GOD  
AMONG MIGRANTS, WOMEN AND WORKERS, 1910-1946**

By

Julia Robinson Harmon

A DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM OF GOD: MIGRANTS, WOMEN, AND WORKERS AND THE LEADERSHIP OF REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY, 1910-1946**

By

Julia Robinson Harmon

The history and activities of Second Baptist Church under the dynamic leadership of Reverend Robert L. Bradby demonstrates how one black religious institution evoked fundamental changes in the social, cultural and political milieu of Detroit during two major periods in American History--the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Reverend Robert L. Bradby's leadership of Second Baptist established him as a forerunner of the black "self-help" tradition in Detroit and exposed the latent power of the Black Church to transcend its private domain and evoke changes in the public sphere of Detroit's black community. At the core of Bradby's actions and the ministry of Second Baptist Church were theological imperatives of liberation and resistance. For Bradby and the members of Second Baptist Church, resistance and liberation were divinely sanctioned initiatives inextricably connected with the gospel message of the New Testament.

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## **DEDICATION**

**To the Members of Second Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work represents a tremendous amount of support and encouragement over a number of years on my behalf. Family, friends, colleagues and professors have offered support in ways too numerous to count. Yet, the very first acknowledgement I make must be to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am first a servant and minister of the Gospel within the Baptist and Presbyterian Faiths. One of my highest educational goals is the pursuit of the knowledge of God in order to walk in the calling of a “preacher/evangelist.” For me, Jesus Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit has brought me to this place in life and I am thankful to him for this privilege.

This study also represents the many prayers and words of support given to me by my husband, parents and mentors. Without their sacrifice of time, money and love, I would not have been able to put the many hours of research into this work.

The foundation of my doctoral education and the progress of reaching this phase in my career are credited to my doctoral committee, Dr. David T. Bailey, Dr. Darlene Clark Hine, Dr. Wilma King, Dr. Joseph Scholten and Dr. Dinah Ramey. Words cannot express the depth of gratitude I have toward all of you for allowing me the opportunity of studying and being mentored by you. Each of you has offered not only your skill as historians, but also your wisdom of life and your friendship. I am blessed by each of you and I am humbled by the experience to have learned from you. I am especially thankful to Dr. David T. Bailey for his continued support and help throughout my tenure at Michigan State University. He has been my mentor as well as my friend. His encouragement will always be cherished.

I also want to thank Dr. Nathaniel Leach, church historian of Second Baptist Church in Detroit for gathering and organizing a lifetime of historical materials on Second Baptist Church. His efforts for over 66 years cannot go unnoticed for he has been instrumental in preserving the Christian cultural heritage of black Detroit and one of the earliest histories of the northern black institutional religion.

Another individual I must thank is Reverend Jesse Perry, Chaplain of Alma College in Alma, Michigan. Rev. Perry has opened many doors of opportunity for me in life. He has been my mentor, friend and confidant. It is impart to his presence in my life that I began thinking about graduate studies. His early mentorship and support of my educational goals cannot go unnoticed. I am truly thankful to him for sparking a light in me to pursue higher education.

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Finally, I want to thank all of the members of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Lansing, Michigan, St. John's Presbyterian Church in Detroit, Michigan, the David Harmon Memorial Scholarship Fund and the many friends and family who have prayed and supported me through the years. My achievements reflect the time, talent and love that have been imparted to me from all of you. Thank you all for granting me the honor of studying the life and history of African American culture.

## **PREFACE:**

As an African American woman growing up in Detroit, Michigan, the Black Church secured a central purpose in my upbringing. My parents agreed early on that they would keep their respective church homes. My father was a Baptist, born and raised in the church, whereas my mother, Annetta Marie Robinson and grandmother, Marie Frances Jackson were Presbyterians. As Presbyterians, my mother and grandmother attended the first black Presbyterian Church established in Michigan, St. John's Presbyterian Church. As a child, I grew up alternating churches on Sundays. I was a Presbyterian on most occasions, but the songs and fervor of the Baptists drew me closer than the sometimes-stoic services of the Black Presbyterians.

Being an African American Christian, I was always fascinated with how my parents and the ministers of both the Baptist and Presbyterian churches understood the Gospel message in relationship to the black experience of discrimination in America. Black History month was always a big event in both churches. The sermons I heard during February of each year would intertwine the teachings of Jesus with black the struggle for freedom. The Exodus story and Jesus' death and resurrection were themes that told of God's willingness to free black Americans from inequalities. Pictures of black Jesus' laced the walls at Second and even in some classrooms at the Presbyterian church where I was member. The one question that kept playing over in my mind was did Jesus really teach the equality of all people, especially black people? As I grew older, I began to search for the answer to this question in the preaching and teachings of black ministers in my respective churches. Second Baptist held a longer history of black clergy who were activists, so my thoughts turned more toward Second Baptist.

My father, grandmother and grandfather on my paternal side attended one of the most prestigious black churches in Michigan, Second Baptist Church of Detroit. The church's 1940 History booklet lists the names of my paternal grandparents, Dora and William Robinson, on the active member list. Attending Second Baptist Church was what started my fascination with the history of the Black Church. Second Baptist already had a rich history when I was a little girl attending the church. Tradition held that it was the first black church ever started in Michigan, and the last stage in the Underground Railroad during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tours were always being conducted at the church for curiosity seekers and history buffs who wanted to see where Second Baptist hid the runaway slaves coming up from the South and trying to get to Canada.

Another impetus for my interest in the Black Church and particularly that of Second Baptist was the relationship my father and grandfather had to the church and to the Detroit automotive industries. My grandfather, William Lensey Robinson was a painter at Ford Motor Company during the 1920s. He named my father after Henry Ford and his son Edsel Ford, which made my father's name Edisel Henry Robinson.

What I remember most about my grandfather were his hands. On one of his hands, his index finger was cut almost down to a nub. As a child, I would ask him to tell me the story of how he lost his finger. He would reply that he lost his finger working at the Ford Motor Company in the company's stamping plant. Sometimes, my grandfather would look wistfully at his nub of a finger and smile sometimes. Ford Motor Company had compensated my grandfather for the loss of his finger, and he had been able to open up a community store in Detroit's "Black Bottom." Grandpa Dao Dao would tell me other stories about his time at Ford Motor Company, how he worked in the paint department as

a spray painter. He would laugh sometimes about having to take two and three showers just to get the funny smell of paint off of his body.

My grandfather came to work at Ford Motor Company right after World War I. Receiving an honorable discharge at the rank of sergeant from serving in the Army during the war, my grandfather was hired in Ford Motor's paint department. He worked there from around 1918 to 1926. When my grandfather joined Second Baptist right after World War I, Reverend Bradby was in his eighth year as pastor of the church and had just built a relationship with Ford Motor Company through its chief executive Charles E. Sorenson. My family always believed that my grandfather received a recommendation from Reverend Bradby for employment at Ford Motor Company and the rest, as they say, is history.

The combination of being an honorary member of Second Baptist, knowing part of its rich history and the relationship between my father's name and the Ford Motor Company began an intensive interest in finding out more about Second Baptist's history during the time my grandfather worked at Ford Motor. Rumors of the power and influence of one of Second Baptist's greatest pastors, Reverend Robert L. Bradby, heightened my interest in the church's history. One rumor in particular spurred me to write this dissertation and put all the pieces of my grandfather's employment, my father's name, and the role of Second Baptist together in order to tell the full story behind my families connection to the church and the Motor city. The rumor was that Bradby was one of Henry Ford's top employment recruiters for black labor in Detroit. According to Second Baptist church historian Nathaniel Leach, Reverend Bradby had a lucrative relationship with Henry Ford that paved the way for thousands of African Americans men, like my grandfather, to gain



jobs at Ford Motor Company. It was said that a recommendation from Bradby was all one needed to gain employment at Ford, which paid twice as much as any other job a black man could obtain in the 1920s.

These rumors created a lot of questions in my mind. How did my grandfather gain employment at Ford Motor Company? Was it true that Bradby wrote him a letter of recommendation to Henry Ford? Did my grandfather's appreciation to Henry Ford and Reverend Bradby influence him not only to remain a loyal member of Second Baptist for over seventy years, but also to even name his own son after Henry Ford and his son Edsel Ford? These questions pushed me to find an answer and to investigate further the life and history of Reverend Robert L. Bradby and Second Baptist. My initial investigations into these areas yielded far more insight into my family, my culture and the black community of Detroit from which I grew up. My findings exceeded my expectations and deepened my understanding of the power of the Black Church within the African American community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Black Church has been one of the most prominent institutions within the African American experience. Scholars have herald it to be the seedbed of black culture and identity. Its foundation has its baptism in the institution of slavery and its formation in the early years of Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup> As C. Eric Lincoln states, “The black man’s...religion was the organizing principle around which his life was structured. His church was his school, his forum, his political arena, his social club, his art gallery, his conservatory of music. It was lyceum and gymnasium as well as sanctum, santorm”<sup>2</sup> The social and historical conditions in which African Americans lived created a locus of space and power that offered protection, understanding, and even methods of resistance in the face white oppression. Many African Americans founded this locus of space and power in the religion of Christianity. By the early twentieth century, African Americans who found empowerment in doctrines of Christianity had firmly established one of the most dynamic and prominent institutional forms of their beliefs in the black church. During the Reconstruction Era, the Black Church became one of the primary cultural bases of black identity, respect and empowerment.

The black pastor became the central figure who embodied these ideologies. The black pastor/preacher became a living symbol of black empowerment, respectability and even resistance. He or she was the leader and visionary of the Black Church, and subsequently the black community. Undergirded by those whom John Dittmer calls the “local people,”

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, Foreword to Leonard E. Barrett’s, *Soul Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*, (New York: Anchor Press, 1974), viii.

the black preacher welded considerable power and influence on behalf of his people and against those forces which sought to disenfranchise the black community.<sup>3</sup>

Although at times the Black Church and its leadership has been criticized for being seemingly accommodating to the white power structure in its social- political perspectives, it has steadily engaged in radical agendas of self-empowerment and modes of black resistance in the face of white oppression. These radical agendas of self-empowerment reflect what Gayraud Wilmore, Vincent Harding, and Manning Marable refer to as “spiritual strivings.” These “spiritual strivings” within the black community encompass the black struggle for freedom and equality and mirror the tenuous movement of a body of water. For Harding, “There is a River,” and for Marable the struggle is mirrored in the image of “Blackwater.” For Wilmore, the ebb and flow of the waters of freedom and equality bubbled up within the black worshipping community and rose in its depth in the Black church and its affiliated agencies.<sup>4</sup> For Wilmore, the black church reflected three characteristics of what he calls the “radical tradition” in black religion: the struggle for independence from white power structures; the revalorization of Africa; and the acceptance of protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for black freedom as well as for all oppressed groups.<sup>5</sup>

Wilmore’s contention that the acceptance of protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for black freedom speaks to the dynamic hermeneutical principles African Americans gleaned from the message of Christianity and later established as the fundamental social practices of the black church, particularly in the early twentieth

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<sup>3</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, (Harcort Brace Jovanich, 1981).; Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), xiii.

century. The pursuit of freedom and equality was not just a political agenda in the minds of black churchmen and women. It was a divinely appointed “call” of God upon those whom God had chosen to carry out the task. The black pastor was accepted and held responsible by God and the community to fulfill this “calling.” Functioning in the “calling” of Moses as seen in the book of Exodus, the black pastor/preacher was understood to be divinely appointed to lead the oppressed people of God out of the proverbial white racist Egypt, and teach them how to conquer and possess the “Promised Land” of black enfranchisement and equality. Just as Moses and Joshua lead the Hebrews in war against the Canaanites in possession and maintenance of the Promised Land, so the black pastor was to lead his congregation in radical resistance against the “Canaanites” of white oppression.

Yet, the black pastor was understood to operate under a new methodology than that espoused in the Old Testament. As a follower of Jesus Christ, the black pastor was to engage in radical methods of resistance that reflected the non-violent revolutionary activities of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Radical methods meant standing against the “status quo.” For black America this meant resistance against inequality and racism in America through non-violent black “self-help” agendas such as social service programs, which gave blacks educational, housing and employment opportunities. These black self-help agendas constituted avenues of protest and agitation against abusive white power structures.

Protest and agitation agendas espoused and even carried out by the black church were steeped in theological imperatives founded upon the Old and New Testament. It is clear that Jesus of the New Testament and Moses and the minor prophets of the Old Testament

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xiii.

are the focus of black clergy and Christians who believed that God was on their side. The social actions of the black church established a means by which African Americans could effect change in American society. As Gayraud Wilmore argues,

“But there is little doubt that the data support the contention that there were distinctive and disruptive survival and liberation motifs in the development of religion among Afro-Americans, and that whatever impetus for fundamental change in American society did come out of the black community had indispensable support, if not its inception, in black religious institutions.”<sup>6</sup>

This study investigates an important example of the religious institutions to which Wilmore alludes in his statement. Specifically, this work addresses the role and response of one African American church within the city of Detroit, Michigan during the early twentieth century. The history and activities of Second Baptist Church under the dynamic leadership of Reverend Robert L. Bradby demonstrates how one black religious institution evoked fundamental and far reaching changes in the social, cultural and political milieu of Detroit during three major periods in American History--the Great Migration, World War I and II, and the Great Depression which transformed the secular spheres of black women, migrants and workers in the city of Detroit, Michigan.

Chapter one of this work analyzes the life of Reverend Robert L. Bradby and his tremendous influence as a pastor and race leader in early twentieth century Detroit.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by the ideology of Progressivism and the theology of the Social Gospel, Bradby's brand of leadership blended these two concepts into a Christian social imperative that spoke to the needs of black Detroiters during the early years of the Great Migration and sustained them through the Great Depression. Chapter two traces the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Race leader is defined as one who seeks the social, political, cultural and economic advancement of their race through mediums of protest, accommodation, and resistance. In this narrative, race leader refers to African American men women who engaged in activities that promoted the economic, political, social and cultural welfare of the African American community.

activities of Second Baptist during the Great Migration, emphasizing Bradby's uncanny ability to harness white power structures and local people to the needs of thousands of black migrants pouring into Detroit. Under the leadership of Bradby, Second Baptist became known as the "home of strangers," a place that welcomed the black newcomer with both the love of the Gospel and a social service program that fulfilled the social, cultural and economic needs of the migrant. Chapter three describes one of the most powerful triangular relationships ever established between the black church, the black community and the automotive industrial world—that of the relationship between Reverend Robert L. Bradby, Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company and the Detroit black community. Handpicked as a representative of the Detroit African American community, by one of the most powerful whites in the nation, Bradby used his connection to Henry Ford to exercise considerable power and influence in the Detroit community. Bradby's recommendations to Henry Ford on behalf of black workers changed the automotive industrial world and made the black worker permanent part of the industrial working class. Chapter four addresses the foundation of Bradby's leadership powers and the effectiveness of Second Baptist's in Detroit by looking at the role and dynamic activities of black churchwomen in Second Baptist. In doing so, chapter four addresses the informal power structures within the black church that sustained and even enhanced black male leadership and the effectiveness of the black church. Black churchwomen at Second Baptist and the many church auxiliaries and self-help groups they lead, constituted the driving force behind Second's successful ministries to Detroit blacks and the "unspoken" power that backed Bradby's leadership.

The conclusion of this work addresses the multiple layers of ideology within black church theology. Issues of liberation and resistance and the rhetoric of the Social Gospel are prominent features in Second's theology. In fact, these three motifs are fundamental to Bradby's understanding of the "kingdom of God." Second's theology also reflected an African American Christianity that balanced biblical parallels drawn from both the Old Testament and New Testament.

The history of Second Baptist during the inter-war years brings to light a new aspect of Migration History, .i.e., the religio-cultural experiences of black migrants as they entered Detroit. There has been tremendous work done in regards to the massive migration of African Americans from the South to the North. Many of these studies have looked at the lives of black migrants as they came to settle in places such as Chicago, Philadelphia and even Detroit. Yet, the majority of these works have ignored the activities of black pastors through the local church during the early part of the twentieth century. Few if any studies have addressed the role of the Black Church during one of the most crucial periods of African American History, that of the Great Migration. Those analyses that have paid heed to the actions of the Black Church and the black pastor during this period, have only given a cursory investigation black male Christian leadership and the support networks that sustained them through the church.

There is a need within scholarly circles to re-address the movement of the Black Church during the early twentieth century, particularly during the eras of the Great Migration and the Depression. An investigation into these areas will provide a deeper perspective of the role of the urban black church in the lives of African Americans, specifically in terms of the nature and power exemplified in leadership of the black



pastor. For many migrant families, the locus of black cultural formation and identity was predicated upon the theology and social-political experiences of the black pastor.

Historian Milton Sernette laments this hiatus in historical scholarship, stating “Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the impact of the Great Migration on churches in the North and in the South.”<sup>8</sup> Sernette’s words hold weight when one takes an in-depth look at existing migration scholarship. Traditionally, historiography on the Great Migration has focused on the socioeconomic aspects of the massive movement, while other works have tended to look at “race relations” imperatives. This vein of scholarship on black migration has emerged from urban studies programs, which limit their observations to issues of notions of race, class, and ghetto formation.<sup>9</sup> Throughout these studies, there has been very little attention given to the cultural experiences of African American migrants.

To date, Milton Sernett's *Bound for the Promised Land* ( 1997) offers the first full investigation into the role of the twentieth century black church in the Great Migration. His work breaks new ground within scholarly circles of African American history and American religious studies with regard to the role of the Black Church during the Great Migration. His conclusions herald the Black Church's awesome impact on the social consciousness of black southern migrants; as well as on their ability to thwart racists agenda's in their pursuit of the "*Promised Land*." He writes, "The emphasis on the role of black churches in social action, a theme dominating the civil rights and Black Power generations, can also be found in the Great Migration era."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration*, (London: Duke University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 247.

Clarence Taylor's *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*, which also notes the role of black churches in Brooklyn, New York during the Great Migration, presents a surface investigation of the actual experiences of black migrants and the specific roles the black church played in the migrant's life.<sup>11</sup>

Works offering a gendered analysis of the black church during the Great Migration are also limited in fully ascertaining the impact of the northern black church in the lives of migrants. Although many of these studies note the informal power structures black churchwomen wielded in supporting northern black churches, through church auxiliaries and clubs these works neglect to provide deeper insight into the part black churchwomen played in helping the church meet the needs of migrants. Again such works as Darlene Clark Hine's *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950* (1981), Anne Meis Knupfer's *Toward A Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood* (1996) and Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham's *Righteous Discontent* note the power of black churchwomen and women's clubs in the advancement of black uplift and self-help programs. These works speak to the impact of black women in sustaining the church to meet the needs of migrants. Hine and Higgenbotham's work do a much stronger job than Knupfer in defining the informal power structures that black churchwomen had in supporting the black church and racial advancement. Higgenbotham's study further addresses the theological imperatives behind black Baptist women's participation in the black church, lending more insight into

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<sup>11</sup> Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

the support systems of black church and the theology that informed black women's religious experience.<sup>12</sup>

Another study by Hine, *Hine Sight Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (1994) has a chapter on "Black Women in the Middle West." A section of this chapter focuses on the contributions of black churchwomen and clubwomen in helping migrants adjust to urban life. Her work even touches on the lives of some of the most prominent churchwomen at Second Baptist, such as Lillian Johnson and Fannie Richards.<sup>13</sup>

Although studies like Hine's, Knupfer's, Higgenbotham's and Taylor's address the black church, and the activities of black churchwomen during the Great Migration and the Depression, these treatises do not completely lend themselves to an in-depth analysis of the theological imperatives behind black churchwomen's response to southern migrants, particularly in places like Detroit. Victoria Wolcott's *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (2001) is the first work that looks in detail at the role of black churchwomen in Detroit during the Great Migration and Depression. Building on Hine's study, *Hine Sight* (1994), Wolcott combines social black history with a gendered analysis that embraces the religious life of black Christian women. Her work

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<sup>12</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950*, (Indianapolis: National Council of Negro Women),; Ann Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tender Humanity And A Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-the-Century Chicago*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

sheds more light on the role of women and the black church during early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Wolcott, however, does not offer a full narrative on the nature of the local black church in Detroit and the interconnectedness of black male Christian leadership with that of black churchwomen in the migrant community during the interwar years. Wolcott does address the social imperatives behind the activities of black churchwoman and clubwomen in Detroit, though arguing that at the forefront of their efforts in black self-help agendas were issues of respectability. For Wolcott, the “remaking of respectability,” becomes one of the driving forces behind black churchwomen’s support of the black church and their outreach to Detroit migrants.

Key examples of this drive for respectability among Detroit women are found in Wolcott’s chapter entitled “Neighborhood Expansion and the Decline of Bourgeois Respectability in the 1920s.” In this chapter, Wolcott devotes a section to looking at black churchwomen and their club organizations; specifically, she investigates the role of churchwomen at Second Baptist and the leadership of Rev. Bradby. According to Wolcott, the activities of black churchwomen were instrumental in helping migrants survive urban life and offering a variety of social service programs to the Detroit black community.<sup>15</sup> Crucial here is that Wolcott notes that religious imperatives are intertwined with issues of respectability and agendas of black self-help. In chapter four of this work, I argue that Christian imperatives of establishing the kingdom of God are the

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

foundation of Second Baptist's churchwomen clubs programs promoting respectability in the community.

Wolcott's study constitutes the third scholarly publication on the activities of Second Baptist and the leadership of Rev. Robert L. Bradby. Although she devotes an entire section of her work to addressing the experiences Second Baptist's churchwomen and Bradby's leadership in establishing a settlement home for migrants called the Baptist Christian Center, her work does not go into any depth with respect to the life of Bradby and his leadership strategies.

To date, there has not been a significant body of literature produced on the life and ministry of Rev. Robert L. Bradby and Second Baptist church, outside of a few references to Second Baptist and Bradby in masters theses and dissertations. Contemporary scholarship, such as Wolcott and Sernett, devote a small space to Bradby, mentioning his connection with Ford Motor Company and its impact on the Detroit Community. Outside of these scholars, Richard Thomas' work *Life for Us Is What We Make It* (1992) gives a bit more insight into the leadership activities of Bradby and Second Baptist, especially with regard to the rise of unions in black Detroit.<sup>16</sup>

Older works, produced in between the late 1960s and early 1980s by labor and Detroit historians, note the influence of Bradby and Second Baptist on the Detroit community in the early twentieth century. Such works as David Allan Levine's *Internal Combustion*, August Meier and Elliot Rudwick's *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (1979), Elizabeth Ann Martin's *Detroit and the Great Migration* (1993) and Oliver Zunz's *The Changing Face of Inequality* (1982) present a cursory analysis of the

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

activities of Bradby and the ministry of Second Baptist. These historians note Bradby and Second in relation to black community building in Detroit and the automotive industry.<sup>17</sup>

Second Baptist's church historian, Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble's *Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1836-1976* presented the very first in-depth analysis of Bradby's life and ministry and the role of Second Baptist in early twentieth century Detroit. Published in 1976, this work addresses the history of Second Baptist from its establishment in 1836 to up through the late 1970s.

The authors based their narrative on a number of personal interviews and writings from prominent members and pastors of Second. This work is rich in historic details of Second, Bradby's life and ministry, and the many church actions of Second's clubs and auxiliaries. Despite the richness of information gathered by the authors, this work lacks a broader interpretative analysis. The impact of broader historical context such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, the Great Migration, World Wars I and II and even the Civil Rights Movement are not addressed in this work. Leach and Gamble's studied a micro-history of a micro-history. Neither author related the history of Second Baptist and its prominent members and ministry to overall Detroit History and black community building. In 1988, Leach produced a revised addition to *Eyewitness History*, entitled *Second Baptist Connection*, which made minor corrections and adding twelve more years of church history to the book. Leach's study, however is extremely rich in primary resources and detailed documentation, making the work a fundamental part of the historiography on black church history, Black Detroit history and local black church

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<sup>17</sup>David Allan Levine, *Internal Combustion The Races in Detroit 1915-1926*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); Oliver Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, (Chicago: University Press, 1982).; Elizabeth Ann Martin, *Detroit and*

history.<sup>18</sup> In addressing local church history, scholars have a better picture by which to assess community formations in urban contexts.

Cara Shelly's article, published in 1990, "Bradby's Baptist," was the second full length study of Bradby and Second Baptist during the interwar years in Detroit. Shelly's article not only addressed Bradby's early life, but the impact of Second Baptist in the black community and Bradby's relationship with Ford was explored as well. However, like Wolcott, Shelly's investigation lacked deeper insight into the nature of Bradby's leadership and the social-historical forces that shaped his pastorate. Moreover, Shelly's work ignored the role of Second's churchwomen in helping Bradby meet the needs of migrant newcomers. Both scholars neglected to note the impact of Progressivism and the Social Gospel upon the actions of Second Baptist and Bradby.<sup>19</sup>

Although Wolcott's work presented a better job of addressing gender dimensions with ministry of Second Baptist, her assessment of Bradby is only peripheral. Like Shelly, Wolcott did a surface reading of Bradby's ministerial activities towards migrants. Both works also neglected the theological realities and imperatives in Bradby's leadership and the ministry of Second Baptist. Further, neither of these studies fully noted Bradby's impact on labor relations in Detroit and Second's impact on the automotive industrial world.

Outside of published works referencing Bradby and Second Baptist, unpublished works such as master theses and dissertations also touched on the life of Bradby and his

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*the Great Migration, 1916-1929*, (Dearborn: The Bentley Historical Library, 1993); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History, Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1836-1976*, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.; Nathaniel Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection: Revised Edition Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988).

activities through Second. Cara Shelly's article was based on her master's thesis. Other studies addressed Bradby's ministry in the field of Labor and Urban history. For example, Lloyd Bailer's dissertation "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry and Norman Kenneth Miles' "Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929," gave a cursory investigation into the life of Bradby and the role of Second Baptist in the lives of migrants and Detroit community building. Bailer's work looks a bit deeper into Bradby's leadership of Second and his impact on the black working class in Detroit.<sup>20</sup>

This present work presents a fuller assessment of the life of Bradby and Second Baptist. The ultimate goal of this study is to bring the life and ministry of Rev. Robert L. Bradby to the fore in scholarly circles of investigation. For the leadership of Bradby and the ministry of Second Baptist impact multiple fields of scholarly inquiry. His life and leadership activities through Second Baptist offer a window of analysis by which to gain more insight into such fields as Labor History, Black Intellectual History, Religious History, African American Religion, African American Religious History, Black Intellectual History, Migration History and even Reform Theology. Further, this work adds to the corpus of materials on Black Urban History of Detroit. Progressivism, the Social Gospel Movement, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, World Wars I and II, the rise of the Detroit black working class and the push for unions during the twentieth century all find resonance in the dynamic history Second Baptist Church of Detroit and the leadership of its 19<sup>th</sup> pastor Rev. Robert L. Bradby.

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<sup>19</sup> Cara Shelly, "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1910-1946," *Michigan Historical Review*, 17, no. 1 (spring 1991): 1-33.

<sup>20</sup> Cara Shelly, "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1910-1946," (master's thesis, University of Michigan, 1990).



This study addresses the role of Second Baptist and its leading pastor in response to these tumultuous periods. I approach this task always addressing the theological underpinnings behind the historical activities of Second Baptist and Bradby. In this respect, this work is the first of its kind in blending history and theology in addressing Black Detroit during the early twentieth century. A two-dimensional perspective of the social historical contexts in which African American existential realities incorporated theological premises for survival, resistance, identity, culture, and even respectability provide a larger window by which to understand the nature of the Black Church and African American Christianity.

Pulling together the strands of information cited in master's thesis, dissertations and sections from secondary sources about the life of Bradby and Second Baptist, this narrative will build up on these works in presenting a clearer picture of local black Christian leadership in the black church. Through such archival materials as journals, letters, anniversary booklets, church minutes, and church newspaper articles, I have pieced together the dynamic activities of Second Baptist during the interwar years in Detroit. Minutes from church events and National Baptist meetings, mini biographies and sketches of Bradby's early life are joined together with bits of information from dissertations, books and master's thesis to present the reader with the full life of Rev. Robert L. Bradby and the forces that shaped his life.

Most importantly, this study can provide a format for the analysis of prominent black religious leaders in older communities that were shaped by the Great Migration. This is crucial in giving a more rounded perspective of black Christian leadership and the structured networks by which these leaders cradled the events of the Great Migration.

## **CHAPTER ONE: REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY FORERUNNER OF THE BLACK SELF HELP TRADITION**

John Hope Franklin and August Meier argue that black leaders of the twentieth century were “propagandists, in that they sought through their speeches, writings, and other activities to mobilize blacks to struggle harder for racial advancement and freedom.”<sup>1</sup> Franklin and Meier’s assessment points to a significant facet of black leadership. Black leaders of the twentieth century used the pen as well as their oratorical skills to direct the minds of African Americans toward actions of black self-help and racial advancement. Although the anthology covered many outstanding figures in black leadership during the twentieth century, the work admittedly noted that the leadership of black ministers was not addressed.

Though acknowledging the absence of this aspect of black leadership, Franklin and Meier’s understanding of the nature and impact of twentieth century black leadership is incomplete without recognizing the power and dynamic partnership between the black preacher and the Black Church. Black leadership in America has its roots in the Black Church. Even from the earliest days in slavery, the black preacher was understood to be the leader and mobilizer of what E. Franklin Frazier and Albert J. Raboteau term “the Invisible Institution.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the most recognized black leader of our time, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prime example of the influence a black preacher could wield when backed by the local power of the Black Church.

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin and August Meier, *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), x.

<sup>2</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Church in America*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Yet, years before Dr. King rose to take the baton of leadership in the black community, there were other ministers who walked the struggle for freedom. Ministers such as Richard Allen, Alexander Crummell, and Bishop Henry M. Turner were forerunners of black leadership and black self-help in the Christian tradition. Central to the influence and success of these men was their connection with the Black Church and their deep-seated faith.

This section addresses the life of Reverend Robert Lewis Bradby of Second Baptist Church in Detroit who stands in the shadows of these forerunners of black leadership. Rev. Robert L. Bradby used the Black Church as a vehicle for black empowerment and enfranchisement in the lives of black Detroiters. Bradby's effective use of the black church to enfranchise the Detroit community was based on his drive to advance what he understood as the "call" to establish the "kingdom of God." Biblical motifs taken from the Old and New Testament informed Bradby's brand of leadership through the black church.

For Bradby, the fight against racism and black disempowerment was a fight to establish the Kingdom of God, a reality where the principles of righteousness, equality and justice were practiced and maintained within all aspects of African American existential realities. The Lord God Jehovah through his son Jesus Christ had proclaimed through the Bible that all those who called themselves his followers must fight for the establishment of his kingdom by resisting oppression, fighting for justice and proclaiming salvation to the poor and hopeless (Amos 5:11-12, 24). The writings of the minor prophets of the Old Testament held resonance for Bradby and he drew the heart of his theology from their perspectives on justice, mercy and righteousness. In doing so, Bradby

lived his theology out through practical means of preaching racial uplift, creating social service programs, and publicly speaking out against discriminatory policies in the Detroit community.

One of the most fundamental manifestations of Bradby's theology of the "kingdom of God," were the numerous letters he wrote on behalf of his congregation, his uncanny ability to mobilize white support, and his skills in organizing his parishioners to struggle for racial advancement through church auxiliaries and organizations. Bradby's leadership of Second Baptist demonstrated the powerful influence that black leadership exercised when sustained by and through the local black church. Second Baptist Church was known throughout the city of Detroit as a place of racial uplift and power among whites as well as blacks. Reverend Robert L. Bradby was a quintessential "Race Man" who under divine/sacred initiative fought against the subordination of blacks.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, Bradby's leadership of Second Baptist filtered through the black community of Detroit and splashed over white power structures in a fashion reminiscent of Vincent Harding's "river" and Gayraud Wilmore's "bubbling and meandering stream." What is more poignant is the theological imperatives inherent within Bradby's leadership and the social activities of Second Baptist Church, which mirror what theologian Ched Myers refers to as radical discipleship.

According to Ched Myers, "radical discipleship" means approaching the Bible with social, political and economic questions in mind. Thus, biblical scriptures are understood to be authoritative only in the sense that it leads society to "repentance" and "resistance." For Myers, "repentance" means a turning away from abusive power structures that

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<sup>3</sup> A "race man" is an individual, typically a black male who pursues justice, equality and political power primarily on behalf of the African American community.

subvert justice and legitimate the oppression of peoples of color. “Resistance” is understood to be a divine mandate of rejecting and standing against oppressive ideologies and entities that that fight against equality and freedom. Although Myers posits these oppressive forces as “imperialism” with all its multifaceted manifestations in society, this work recognizes that for individuals like Bradby and the members of Second Baptist imperialist realities were dressed up in white racist social, political and economic policies that oppressed the African American community in Detroit.<sup>4</sup>

Bradby’s theology demanded that he confront and combat these racist policies through aggressive and progressive agendas of black self-help and resistance. For Bradby, these agendas of protest and agitation were biblically based in the New Testament Gospels and in Christian doctrine. Again, a key ideology held prominent in the mindset of Bradby and demonstrated in the Gospels was the theological concept of the “kingdom of God.” In the preface of Second Baptist’s Church History booklet, celebrating its 104<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Bradby writes of establishing “a larger and more extensive program of the “kingdom of God.” He claimed that God had given him and his church this challenge and that they are humbly dedicated to completing this task. For Bradby, this divine initiative of establishing the “kingdom of God” is God’s will and the destiny of his church. All members of Second Baptist are “called” to this task and demanded to “surrender” to God’s will, following His divine mandate “whithersoever He may lead.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although this work understands Bradby and his leadership of Second Baptist to be a reflection of Myer’s “radical discipleship,” it does not agree with Myer’s perception of the authority of scripture with regard to radical discipleship. Bradby as well as those who followed him did not limit biblical authority to issues of repentance and resistance. On the contrary, they understood biblical authority to extended its truths beyond these two issues and encompass a multiplicity of realities that impacted African American existentialism.

<sup>5</sup> Reverend. Robert L. Bradby, “Preface,” *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

This epitaph, written in 1940, heralded not just the future aspirations of Bradby and Second Baptist, it also reflected the tremendous efforts of the Church in years past. Under the leadership of Bradby, Second Baptist became the foremost place of refuge and social uplift for black Detroiters and migrants during the interwar years and the Great Depression. The church held the reputation among black Detroiters and southern migrants newly come to Detroit of being the “Home of Strangers.” Bradby’s guidance of this “Home of Strangers” reflected his understanding of the “kingdom of God,” and demonstrated a theological perspective grounded in liberation motifs. The “program of the kingdom of God” for ministers like Bradby was most assuredly tied to the social-political and economic uplift of its parishioners and especially of the surrounding black society. For Bradby, the kingdom of God was established when black Detroiters gained voting rights, were accepted in white establishments and were afforded the same opportunities for schooling, housing and employment as their white brothers and sisters. Bradby’s leadership was founded upon a social political reading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Bradby’s early life and conversion experience had a tremendous impact on his understanding of God and his vocation. The record of Bradby’s early life paints him as a pauper growing up in a small farming community, who faced many challenges, yet eventually overcomes these obstacles to become a prominent minister in Detroit. Bradby worked extremely laborious jobs to support himself. He also suffered tremendous losses of loved ones before he finally came to settle at Second Baptist. He is portrayed as an extremely hard working individual, ambitious and self-sufficient.

Bradby's life was shaped by a number of forces. Growing up during the Progressive Era in Canada, his early life was shaped by the reform activities and sentiments of black and white Christian evangelicals bent on changing the world for God. Religious reformers throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century were looking to put order back into society. The Second Great Awakening spurred many of these reformers black and white, to engage in benevolent acts such as feeding the poor and educating the illiterate.

Black Baptist churches in Canada reflected the sentiment of the times and were actively engaged in reform activities within their respective communities. Many of the black Canadian Baptists crusaded against slavery during the 1840s and actively encouraged fugitive slaves to take refuge in their communities, especially after the 1850 fugitive slave law. An act of the British Imperial Parliament in 1833 abolished slavery throughout the British colonies, and gave much strength to black Canadians reformers in speaking out against slavery in America.

Many of the leaders of black Canadian reform, efforts were African American Baptist ministers of small congregations throughout Ontario.<sup>6</sup> These small congregations emerged from numbers of fugitive slaves entering Canada from Detroit, via the "Underground Rail Road." Hundreds of fugitive slaves crossed into Canada at Windsor, and at Fort Malden, located at Amherstburg. Along with fugitive slaves were many Native Americans living around Windsor. Blacks, Native Americans and many other

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<sup>6</sup> Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada A History*, (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 338.

nationalities were found to intermingled and settled in the surrounding areas around Windsor.<sup>7</sup>

Black Canadian reformers and ministers living around Windsor, Ontario were particularly active in black uplift and the fight against slavery during the early 1800s. However, by the late 1860s, black Canadian reformers were experiencing a loss of equality and freedom. According Robin W. Winks, the Emancipation Proclamation sparked fear in the hearts of white Canadians, ironically in those who had earnestly waited for the end of slavery in America. Winks argued that President Lincoln's proclamation, it was feared "would foster a "general irruption" of Negroes into Canada West." As a result, many Canadian whites began to "exclude black children from common schools, refused work those few new refugees who did arrive, and encouraged those already present to return to the dis-United States."<sup>8</sup> Black Canadians continued to suffer loss of freedom and equality throughout the late 1800s. As Winks notes, "the Negro in Canada found himself sliding down an inclined plane from mere neglect to dislike."<sup>9</sup> Racist stereotypes of blacks from America filtered into Canada and tainted the perspectives of traditionally liberal white Canadians. By the early twentieth century, "evil moved with as much grace as virtue, and the Negro sank to his nadir in Canada."<sup>10</sup>

Born on September 17, 1877, Robert Lewis Bradby opened his eyes during this nadir of black life in Canada. The only son of James and Mary Eldridge, Bradby was reared in a log cabin house in a small village bordering an Indian Reserve in Ontario, called Middlemus, about 100 miles from Windsor. Like the many other black families

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<sup>7</sup> "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940," p. 1-2, reel 2, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada A History*, 289.



living in Ontario, Bradby's parents may have crossed into Canada from America, "bringing their families and household goods in wagons drawn by ox-teams."<sup>11</sup>

Surviving the early death of his mother when he was five years old, Bradby grew up under the tutelage of his father, grandmother, two uncles and one Aunt. Bradby's father was a logger and a cook in a sawmill, who sang church hymns when Bradby was a boy. Bradby's father singing of church hymns may point to some of the religious practices of black Canadians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many black settlers in Canada were known to "assemble themselves together to give praise to their God, who had delivered them from the bonds of slavery..."<sup>12</sup>

Living in Middlemus, farm work, such as raking and forking hay, driving teams and harvesting grain were daily activities for the young Bradby. Working for twenty-five cents a day, Bradby relates minding cows and driving them up a night for a pound of butter a week, and gathering eggs for the farmers for one egg out of a dozen.<sup>13</sup> Around age fourteen, Bradby joined his father at a logging camp in Inwook, Ontario. He was made his father's partner in cutting wood and logs for three dollars a week. He then, moved with his father to another section of Inwook, when his dad became head cook and he became second cook in large saw mill camp.<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1890s, Bradby was twenty years old. He moved to Chatham, Ontario where he worked as a butcher and then as a molder and striker in the brick mills. Chatham was one the locuses of black life in Canada. During his time in Chatham,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940," p. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Subject of Schetch: Reverend Robert Lewis Bradby," Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Bradby attended the common schools of Canada and finished high school. It was in Chatham that Bradby had his first experience with God. He writes that one-day while walking down the road he was arrested by the Spirit of God, who put him in remembrance of the hymns his father sang. The encounter changed Bradby's life forever. He writes of being forced to leave the cattle he was driving, and of going straight to the First Baptist Church of Chatham where he gave his life over to Jesus Christ under the leading of Reverend J. H. Penick. Bradby was twenty-two years old at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, Bradby's conversion is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's "Damascus Road" experience in the New Testament. Saul, who became Paul as the scriptures relate, encountered the Spirit of God while traveling down the road to Damascus. Saul's encounter with the Spirit of God created sweeping changes in his life, so much so that even his name was changed. Indeed, Bradby took on a whole new identity himself from his own experience with God. Choosing to be baptized on Easter Sunday in 1899, Bradby solidified his commitment to Christ by submerging his body in the creek that ran at the back of the church. From there he dedicated himself to working in the church's youth organizations and was eventually elected superintendent of the Sunday School. Later, he was elected deacon of the church.<sup>16</sup>

First Baptist was the first black church established in Chatham, under Elder William White. Winks notes that the black church in Chatham arose because of the rising number of blacks in that area around the 1840s. Founded in 1843, First Baptist "rendered great service, as a soul saving and life-saving station" in Chatham's black community.<sup>17</sup> The church was known for its active Sunday School, organized in 1882, and its Women's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

missionary society established in 1883. With a membership of 184, First Baptist of Chatham had as many as thirty ministers serving at its senior pastor. Bradby was the 18<sup>th</sup> minister to serve as senior pastor of the church..

Having established himself as a strong, upstanding member of the black worshipping community in Chatham, Ontario, Bradby soon felt the “call” to preach the Gospel. The church speedily granted his preaching license. In fact, First Baptist Church in Chatham was so smitten with the young preacher that it elected him as its pastor soon after his licensing.

As an established preacher and pastor, Bradby soon married. On May 14, 1900 Bradby was wed to Miss Maud Snell. Two years later, he received a call to pastor the First Baptist Church of Windsor, Ontario. It was during his time in Windsor that he attended McMaster University, a Baptist College and Seminary in Toronto, Ontario. Bradby was one of ten African Americans ever to attend the prestigious university.<sup>18</sup> Some years later, Bradby received an honorary Doctors of Divinity degree from Virginia (Lynchburg) Theological Seminary and a law degree from Wilberforce.<sup>19</sup>

Bradby’s tenure at First Baptist Church of Windsor lasted seven years. The church was very supportive of Bradby’s educational pursuits and granted him a leave of absence to finish his studies. The Amherstburg Regular Baptist Association also provided financial assistance to Bradby while he attended MacMaster University. The black churchwomen of the Amherstburg Association, the Women’s Home and Foreign Mission

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<sup>17</sup> “Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,” p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> “Subject of Sketch: Reverend Robert Lewis Bradby,” Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Society, were especially supportive of Bradby's education, giving as much as \$300.00 in one year, a phenomenal amount in the early 1900.<sup>20</sup>

During his time at McMaster, Bradby was ordained as a minister by an ordination council. Dr. Holland Powell, then pastor of Second Baptist Church of Detroit was part of the ordination council.<sup>21</sup> Soon after, Bradby received a call by Second Baptist Church of Detroit to be Dr. Holland Powell's successor in the pastorate. Bradby, however turned down the opportunity and opted to gain more experience in Windsor.<sup>22</sup>

Bradby's leadership abilities began to grow during his time as pastor of First Baptist Church of Windsor. Bradby's resume notes that he began to definitely "build himself and his work into strength and real helpfulness to humanity."<sup>23</sup> Bradby's promoted changes within the small church. A new Bible was purchased for the pulpit, pews received new hymnbooks and a banister was built around the stairs entering the Church. The church even received a new coat of paint, a rebuilt school-room to the cost of \$1200.00 and a new stone walk.<sup>24</sup>

Bradby even rejuvenated stagnant church auxiliaries and started new ones. He is noted for establishing a Sinking Fund Treasury for the needy and a Literary Society. He re-established the B.Y.P.U. and the Ladies Aid and Women's Home Missionary Society.

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<sup>20</sup> "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,"p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Note: Reverend Holland Powell originated from Richmond, Virginia and was married to Rebecca Morton a Washington D.C. schoolteacher. He was Second Baptist's 17<sup>th</sup> Pastor in December 1901. Powell recalls that when he was first called to Second, he arrived one month late because he "previously preached at the ordination services of an energetic young man—Robert L. Bradby—in the First Baptist Church in Windsor."; Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History: Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1976), 17, Reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>22</sup> "Subject of Sketch: Reverend Robert Lewis Bradby," Second Baptist Historical Collection.

<sup>23</sup> "Resume of Rev. R.L. Bradby in the Ministry," *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby...November 7-14, 1915 Commemorative Program*, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Under his pastorate, First Baptist was known as a Church that saved many souls and raised substantial proceeds for its membership and surrounding community.<sup>25</sup>

Bradby's ministry skills at First Baptist also impacted the lives of two African American men, who were so inspired that they decided to follow in Bradby's footsteps. One, S. L. McDowell, was converted, licensed to preach and later ordained to the ministry under Bradby's charismatic leadership. In 1910, Reverend S.L. McDowell became the pastor of University Avenue Baptist Church in Toronto, Ontario. Another man, C.L. Wells, was also converted under Bradby's pastorate. Wells was licensed and ordained to the ministry under Bradby and then became Bradby's successor at First Baptist. Bradby's mentorship of Reverend C.L. Wells was so successful that Wells led the church into building a new house of worship by raising about \$14,000.00, a phenomenal monetary figure for an African American community in 1915.<sup>26</sup>

By 1909, Bradby had received another call to pastor at the Third Baptist Church of Toledo, Ohio, which he accepted. Pastoring only eleven months, from December 1, 1909 to November 1, 1910, Bradby began to show signs of his leadership abilities by establishing plans for the erection of a new church building and helping establish another African American church in Canada. In 1909, Bradby along with another minister named Rev. Edward Burton helped to organize the Appin church. Under Bradby's help the church was established with fourteen charter members and was accepted into the Amherstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby...November 7-14, 1915 Commemorative Program*, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church.

<sup>27</sup> "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,"p. 34.

In 1910, however, Second Baptist of Detroit issued Bradby another call to its pastorate. Second Baptist's persistence impressed Bradby and he accepted the position on November 1, 1910.<sup>28</sup> Although Bradby left his position in Canada, he still continued to hold connections with the Amherstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association.<sup>29</sup> He continued to be an active member of the Association throughout his ministry activities in Canada. During the years 1906 and 1907, Bradby served as moderator. In 1916, he was one of the keynote speakers of the Amherstburg Association Baptist Young Peoples Union (B.Y.P. U.), encouraging young African Americans in the church work and in the Baptist doctrine.<sup>30</sup> While pastoring at Second Baptist, Bradby sought to strengthen his connection with his Canadian Christian brothers and sisters by "extending an invitation to the Association to join the Wolverine Convention of Michigan in 1920. Bradby then, was the "Fraternal Delegate" of the Convention.<sup>31</sup> The Amherstburg Association accepted Bradby's invitation and "for the next four years or five the two Associations worked together, being called the "Michigan and Ontario Convention."<sup>32</sup> Although the Michigan

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<sup>28</sup> *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby...November 7-14, 1915*, Second Baptist Historical Collection.

<sup>29</sup> Delegates from the Amherstburg, sandwich and Detroit Baptist churches organized the Amherstburg Association in October 1841. These individuals meet in the home of John Liberty and "Believing that the time is now come that we should form ourselves into an Association because we cannot enjoy the privileges we wish as Christians with the white churches in Canada." Under the direction of Madison J. Lightfoot, Anthony Binga, and William C. Monroe, the association grew from 47 members to over a thousand representing almost twenty churches, with only five in the United States.; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada A History*, 342.; and "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,"p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> "Minutes of the Amherstburg Association, Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,"p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> The Wolverine Convention of Michigan operated as an association of black churches in Michigan. The Amherstburg Association accepted Bradby's invitation, but later severed its ties in 1924 or 1925 due to the influx of ministers leaving Ontario to go serve in the United States. The members of the Amherstburg Association related that "this connection with the Wolverine Convention proved rather costly...for in some of our ablest young ministers attended sessions, made new contacts, were offered more attractive positions...thus many of our pulpits were left empty."; *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

and Ontario convention split around 1925, Bradby was still very active in the Amherstburg Association. In 1924, Bradby was made a lifetime member of the Amherstburg Association, further solidifying his ties to his Christian Canadian heritage.<sup>33</sup>

Bradby's early life and ministry in Canada reflected the powerful influences of the Reform movement, the legacy of the Second Great Awakening, and black racial reform efforts. Growing up during the one of most tumultuous periods racial attack against black life in Canada, Bradby encountered God personally, like that proclaimed by Protestant evangelicals. His personal relationship with God and his experience within the black Baptist faith predisposed Bradby's personal theology and sense of vocation. Bradby grew up in a black Christian tradition that had always condemned slavery as a moral evil and had always pursued black uplift. Black Baptists in Canada were activist a best and race leaders foremost. Moreover, black Canadian Baptists were reformers, seeking to change the status quo through educational and Christian means. Like their white Christian brothers and sisters, Canadian Baptist sought to rid the world of evil and affect a benevolent social order. Canadian Baptist joined and organized the Amherstburg Association in response to ecclesiastical racism and the need to educate and uplift the black race. In response to racism, the founding members of the association wrote, "Believing that the time is now come that we should form ourselves into an Association because we cannot enjoy the privileges we wish as Christians with the white churches in Canada."<sup>34</sup> Educationally, the association declared, "That we admire education in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

highest degree, and recommend our ministers to seek to become educated.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Bradby matured and learned the principles of Christianity in the social-political contexts of “protest,” “resistance, and “black uplift” through education. It is these perspectives housed in Christian principles and practices that Bradby brought to ministry of Second Baptist. Maintaining ties at home, Bradby steadily built the ministries of Second Baptist through his Canadian Christian background as its 19<sup>th</sup> pastor. Bradby’s experience and Second Baptist’s tradition of “racial self -help,” went hand in hand. For Bradby stepped into one of the first African American religious centers ever established in Michigan.

Protest, praise, and agitation were the foundation of Second Baptist’s inception and ministry. The rise of Second Baptist had its roots in the 1833 Blackburn Affair in Detroit, Michigan. During the incident, the charter members of Second Baptist formed a bond around what Gayraud Wilmore notes as agendas of praise, protest, and agitation, which eventuated in the organization of the first black church, established in the state of Michigan.

Fugitive slaves, Thornton and Ruth Blackburn escaped to Detroit in 1831 from a plantation in Louisville, Kentucky. Two years later, the Blackburns’ master sent his agent to Detroit to retrieve his property, the Blackburns. Following a short trial, the Blackburns were arrested on Friday, June 14, 1833 and held in the jail on “Saturday since the steamer would not arrive until Monday to take them (the Blackburns) back to Kentucky.” That Sunday, two free black women, Mrs. Madison J. Lightfoot and Mrs. George French paid a visit to Mrs. Blackburn at the jail. Mrs. Blackburn “walked out of jail with Mrs. Lightfoot after Mrs. French had “exchanged clothes with her secretly. While Mrs.

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<sup>35</sup> Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 343.



Blackburn escaped, Mrs. George French was arrested, released on a writ of habeas corpus, then re-arrested. She later escaped to Windsor, Canada.<sup>36</sup>

On June 16, 1833 Mr. Blackburn was escorted to the steamboat to be taken back to Kentucky. While being transferred a “mob of Negroes took him by force and helped him to escape to Sandwich in Canada.” During the mob, violence erupted leaving one African American shot and the sheriff, John Wilson “with a fractured skull and missing teeth.” The Blackburn Affair caused mass panic among Detroit whites. Rumors of blacks shooting white men and even killing the sheriff spread through the streets of Detroit and caused “every colored man in the streets to be arrested and jailed. Those sentenced had to work on the street with a ball and chain at their feet.” Mr. Lightfoot was jailed for three days “because he refused to tell who gave Mrs. Blackburn a pistol. Mr. French fled to Canada to be with his wife until 1835 when they returned to Detroit.”<sup>37</sup> Mr. French’s flight to Canada reflected the plight of many blacks involved in the Blackburn Affair. Mayor Marshall Chapin “ordered out of town all Blacks who could not produce Certificates of Freedom or Bonds of Good Conduct.” Thornton Blackburn was arrested in Windsor and later released. Later, he traveled to Amherstburg and then to Toronto, Ontario where he became a property owner. In 1843, Blackburn traveled back to Louisville, Kentucky to help his mother escape from slavery.<sup>38</sup>

The Blackburn Affair sparked the free black community of Detroit to push for greater levels of freedom. This was especially the case with regard to the Church. Lightfoot and French were activists against black oppression and intertwined their beliefs of black

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<sup>36</sup> “William C. Monroe,” in Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1836-1976*, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

freedom with that of Christianity. Their participation in the Blackburn Affair was an overflow of their Christian beliefs. As Christians, the Lightfoots and Frenches were active members of First Baptist Church of Detroit, Michigan organized in 1827.

Two years after the Blackburn Affair, First Baptist dedicated its new brick church building on Fort and Griswold Streets in Detroit in 1835. Nathaniel Leach records that the church's minutes spoke of a small black membership that "expected complete integration, complete freedom." The Lightfoot and French families, being prominent black members at First Baptist, continually fought for greater freedom, respect and equality at the church. Joined by William C. Monroe, another free black member at First Baptist, these families gathered to form the first black worshipping community in Detroit.

In February 1836, William C. Monroe confronted Rev. Robert Turnbull, then pastor of First Baptist, with his "intentions to be a minister of the gospel and to help my people gain complete freedom."<sup>39</sup> Monroe's goal of gaining complete freedom meant freedom from being forced to sit and worship in First Baptist's balcony and freedom to be respected on an equal level as the white members of First Baptist. On March 5, 1836, Monroe along with the Lightfoots and Frenches as well as other black members of First Baptist "severed connections with First (Brick) Baptist Church signing our petition to the Legislature to organize the Society of Second Baptist Church of Detroit. Thirteen blacks signed the petition—Robert Allen, Jacob Brown, William Brown, Daniel Buckman,

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<sup>38</sup> Nathaneil Leach, *Second Baptist Connection Revised Edition Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Leach and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*.

Richard Evans, Mr. and Mrs. George W. French, Mr. And Mrs. Madison J. Lightfoot, William c. Monroe, William Nash, Benjamin Reed, Samuel Robinson.<sup>40</sup>

These thirteen pioneers sought to escape the racial discrimination they experienced at First Baptist, and petitioned the Society of First Baptist Church to approve a new church of their own for them to worship. On March 23, 1836 the thirteen ex-slaves were allowed to establish a church by the approval of the Territorial Legislature of Detroit and referred to themselves as the Society of Second Baptist Church. This momentous decision established Second Baptist Church as the very first African American Church in Michigan.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, the minutes of First Baptist record that the church did not accept the petitioner's request until October 6, 1838. It appears that the black members of First Baptist continued to worship at the church from 1836-1838. In April of 1837, for example, First Baptist records meeting with "colored brethren wishing to hold meetings on Sunday and Thursday evenings. Church requested the colored brethren to report to church at the next meeting in writing, whether they wished to continue their standing with church or whether they wished to separate from the church."<sup>42</sup> William C. Monroe related that the thirteen members of the Society of Second Baptist "meet in each others homes" with Monroe as pastor and "Madison J. Lightfoot and George French as Clerk and Deacon respectively."<sup>43</sup> Yet, this group maintained its membership with First Baptist

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<sup>40</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection Revised Edition of Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> "William C. Monroe," in Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1836-1976*, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

while it held private meetings, even voting to build their own church at the cost of \$480.00.

Despite maintaining connections with First Baptist, Monroe and Lightfoot were bent on establishing their own church. Monroe wrote of wanting complete freedom as reason for his intention to establish a separate church group. The minutes of First Baptist reflected Monroe's claim for more freedom in the church. In July 6, 1837, the minutes of First Baptist noted a request by the church that Madison J. Lightfoot and the other black members of the church "sit in the gallery." Struggling to maintain ties at First Baptist and gain recognition in church meetings and conferences, the black congregants of First Baptist were consistently denied equal rights even within sacred spheres. Lightfoot response was recorded to "plainly refuse(d) to accede to the rules of the church." <sup>44</sup>

In response to such ecclesiastical racism, the black congregants of First Baptist limited their attendance at church meetings. On Sunday, September 16, 1837, First Baptist appointed a committee to address "why they (colored brethren) so frequently absented themselves from meetings of the church."<sup>45</sup> Due to the lack of attendance by black congregants, First Baptist decided to "appoint Bro. French to notify the colored that they could sit below with the other colored members for meetings." Other black congregants were still relegated to the notorious gallery. For example, in that same year, an African American male named Cornelius Mitchell requested the church's permission "to sit below with the other colored members for meetings."<sup>46</sup>

The continual denial of all African American congregants to sit on the floor with white congregants at First Baptist was a constant reminder to black leaders like Monroe

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<sup>44</sup> Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

and Lightfoot of the need to separate from such racist treatment within Christian contexts. The Gospel held no room for discrimination in the worshipping community for Monroe and Lightfoot. The actions of First Baptist toward black congregants struggle for higher levels of freedom modeled a total antithesis to the Gospel message. For example, in Lightfoot's refusal to sit in the gallery during church meetings, the church's response was "to exclude Madison J. Lightfoot from all fellowship connection and communion with the church."<sup>47</sup> Although some black congregants were allowed to sit on the floor with whites, blacks were continually restricted to the balcony.

The dynamics between the black congregants and First Baptist is telling. Through praise, as seen in black members forming their own group with their own pastor and deacons to worship, black congregants' of First Baptist praised God free of white restraint and yet created a form of protest against ecclesiastical racism. Protest came in resistance to being relegated to the gallery of the church during meetings and forming their own worship services in the homes of black church members. Agitation was reflected in the constant vocal protest of members like Monroe and Lightfoot against unfair treatment at church meetings and even refusing to attend church functions. Protest and agitation were also seen in black congregants petition to form a church independent from First Baptist.

The agitation against First Baptist's racial policies and the protest of this discrimination came through agendas of praise. In November of 1837, First Baptist recorded the request of Brother George French "for the colored to meet together on Lord's Day and one evening during the week." First Baptist granted the petition with the stipulation that the "colored being present at covenant meetings and Communion

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

sessions.”<sup>48</sup> The black congregants of First Baptist continued to push for more opportunities to worship free from white racial constraints, eventually moving steadily toward separation from First Baptist.

Although Second Baptist’s church history proclaims March 5, 1836 as the founding date of its organization, the minutes of First Baptist reflect that the thirteen members of the Society of Second Baptist did not leave the church all at once. Historian Nathaniel Leach notes that “some Blacks deliberately remained on the roll fighting eighteen months for full rights and privileges.”<sup>49</sup> The minutes of First Baptist also note that the petition was granted without the church’s full approval. The only reference to the petition for the Society of Second Baptist being fully granted was in October 6, 1838 where “by the request of the colored brethren and sisters, in writing, the following persons were by vote dismissed from the church with the privilege of uniting with a sister church of the same faith, or uniting in the constitution of a church of the same faith.” Among those “colored brethren and sisters” were George French, Maria Evans, Rich Evans, Eliza Walton and Betsey Hanister. Madison J. Lightfoot was dismissed July 6, 1837, being expelled from the congregation.

Despite the slow beginnings, the thirteen members of the Society of Second Baptist declared their Articles of Incorporation on March 18, 1839 “at that Meeting House on Fort Street on a lot now held by George French on Beaubien Farm between Beaubien Street and St. Antoine Street in the City of Detroit.” At this momentous meeting, the thirteen members of the Society of Second Baptist voted to “be forever called and known by the Title and designation of the Trustees of the Second Baptist Church of the City of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Detroit.” George French, Jacob Brown, Richard Evans, Madison J. Lightfoot, Robert Allen, Danial Buckman, William Brown, William Nash and Samuel Robinson were “declared duly elected Trustees of the Church.”<sup>50</sup>

From these tumultuous beginnings Second Baptist of Detroit reflected the tenacity of early free blacks in Detroit who fought against racism and oppression wherever it reared its head. Maintaining the sanctity of Gospel, the black congregants of First Baptist joined together through praise, protest and agitation to establish the first black independent Christian institution in Michigan. As such, Second operated as a vehicle of black enfranchisement, hope and freedom in Michigan. By the 1840s, Second had united with the Detroit Anti-Slavery Society, and its first pastor, William C. Monroe was one of the Underground Railroads’ station masters. Throughout the antebellum period, Second Baptist operated as one of the last stations in the Underground Railroad.<sup>51</sup> As Monroe wrote, “My work was threefold: preaching, teaching and railroading. Throughout the South, Detroit and Second Baptist Church were known for slave smuggling. In Michigan there were refuge stations every fifteen miles. I had the unique honor of being a station master, hiding, feeding and instructing the passengers during the day, then taking them to the waiting barges and canoes during the night.”<sup>52</sup>

Second Baptist was designated as the last station on Route No. 1 on the Underground Railroad, which was a network of white and black anti-slavery supporters who helped

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<sup>50</sup> Leach and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*

<sup>51</sup>It should be noted that Second Baptist was founded one year before Michigan gain statehood. And during that year, the Michigan Territorial Law of 1827 was in acted. This law was essentially a “Black Code,” and “Act to Regulate blacks and mulattoes and to Punish the Kidnaping of Such Persons. “ Slaves unable to gain their freedom as a gift or purchase chose to run away toward the North which was free or Canada. Historian Dr. Nathaniel Leach states that Second Baptist assisted over 4,000 slaves to freedom during a thirty year period. ; Ibid., 16 and 20.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

slaves escape from the South to Northern free states by hiding them in homes and other places from fugitive bounty hunters. Slaves who came through Second were routed over to Ontario through towns such as Windsor, Amherstburg (Fort Malden), Colchester, Dresden and London.<sup>53</sup> Through the Underground Railroad, Second Baptist continued its tradition of praise, protest and agitation against black oppression. It joined with other anti slavery adherents in Michigan who fought against the April 13, 1837 law which forbade black from residing in the Michigan territory without a certificate certifying their free status.<sup>54</sup>

Seventy years later, Bradby stepped into the shadow of great Christian race leaders like William C. Monroe. The very founding of Second reflected a tradition embedded in protest against black oppression and the struggle for black freedom. Continually building Second's membership in the 1840s, Monroe proclaimed, "Our church membership increased slowly—even cautiously, taking in dedicated freedom workers—from 13 to 15 in 1840, and 15-17 in 1841 adding William Webb, William Lambert, George DeBaptiste and Dr. J. Ferguson."<sup>55</sup>

In 1910, Rev. Robert L. Bradby continued the tradition inherent in Second Baptist's ministry to the Detroit Community. As one of its "dedicated freedom workers" Bradby exemplified the brand of Gospel reflected in the early activities of Second's charter members. Praise, protest and agitation were the tools of Bradby's fight for freedom and his understanding of the Gospel brought to the fore God's kingdom in the ministries of Second Baptist. For Bradby, freedom, righteousness and justice were realities to be sought after and struggled for within the African American reality. As a preacher, Bradby

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



took these beliefs into the pastorate of Second Baptist during the second decade of the twentieth century.

The first few years of Bradby's pastorate were tempered by personal tragedy. Three years before his becoming pastor of Second Baptist in Detroit, Bradby's father died in January 1907. Four years later and one year into his new position at Second Baptist, Bradby's wife, Mrs. Maude Snell Bradby, died on July 4, 1911. While she lived, Maude Bradby was active in Second Baptist's Altar Circle. She was one of the charter members of the Altar Circle, yet her failing health prevented her from taking a more active part in the group. Members of the Altar Circle remember Maude Bradby referring to her husband as "elder" on many occasions, demonstrating her love and respect for Rev. Bradby and his calling as the pastor of Second.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these setbacks, Bradby continued his pastorate at Second and married again one year later to Mrs. Louise Taliferro. Mrs. Taliferro was Canadian born, but moved to Detroit during her childhood. Her mother came from Kentucky, a member of a well-respected family named Butcher. When Miss Taliferro met Bradby, she was a member of Second Baptist and a Sunday school teacher. Together, she and Bradby produced four children: Robert Lewis, Katherine, Bernice, and Martha Bradby.<sup>57</sup>

The early years of Bradby's ministerial career had already predisposed him to meet the needs of church members and the surrounding community. His efforts to improve the church educational groups and even raise money to fix church buildings provide a glimpse into Bradby's understanding of Christianity. For Bradby, true Christianity called

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "Cavalcade of Second Baptist Church," 29 March 1937, p. 12, reel 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

for practical expressions that touched every day experiences, as seen from fixing the stone walk to the church door to establishing an literary group to enhance the educational development of the community.

It is clear from the beginnings of his life as a pastor that Bradby reflected the teachings of the “Social Gospel.” Although it is uncertain whether or not Bradby ascribed to this teaching during this period, it is very likely that he may have been influenced by the rhetoric of the Social Gospel. Bradby reached adulthood at the height of the Social Gospel Movement and his Canadian Christian background experienced the actions of black Canadian racial reformers.

What is clear is that Bradby understood biblical mandates to be actively lived in meeting practical needs of the community, particularly the black community.<sup>57</sup> In this respect, the Social Gospel as well as Progressivism influenced Bradby. These two influences caused Bradby to engage in a social-political reading of the Gospel early on in his vocation. Moreover, his sense of “calling,” as a preacher and his sense of leadership took root from the ideology of Progressivism and the Social Gospel.

Accepting the pastorate of Second Baptist in 1910, Bradby steps into Detroit at the height of the Progressive Era. Evangelical reformers calling themselves “Progressives” engage in a series of movements that seek the restoration of American Society. The

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<sup>57</sup> *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby...November 7-14, 1915*, Second Baptist Historical Collection.

<sup>58</sup> The rise and rhetoric of the Social Gospel or what scholars refer to as social Christianity came to the fore between 1865-1920. Social reform movements also developed during this period. At the heart of some social reform movements was the rhetoric of the Social Gospel. According to Shailer Mathews, an adherent of the teaching, the social gospel is the “application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of the Christian salvation to society, the economic life, and social institutions...as well as to individuals.”; Shailer Mathews, “Social Gospel,” *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, edited by Shailer Mathews and Gerald Birney Smith, (New York: 1921); Ronald C. White, Jr. “Social Christianity and the Negro in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1972); Ronald C. White, Jr., *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel( 1877-1925)*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), xvii..

values, behaviors and institutions of America are sought to be reformed according to Christian, moral principles. Like many cities across the nation, Detroit's industrial world while sparking massive productivity, had also created an unequal distribution of wealth, goods and services. Further, crowded neighborhoods, poverty, crime and disease began to blanket Detroit communities. Immigrants and southern migrants crowding the streets of Detroit as well as the nation exacerbated these ills of society and caught the attention of courageous Progressives who tried to address these problems. Avenues of Progressive reform emerged in traditional institutions such as churches, schools, charities and the revalorization of the family.

At the heart of Progressive reform was the ideology that society was the responsible party for the problems of the world. As such, it was society's responsibility to address and reform, if necessary, the wrongs of society. Institutions had the power to transform society and advance individuals toward higher levels of morality. Urban reform was the primary concern among Progressives. Education and social justice were targets in bettering urban society.<sup>59</sup>

Bradby was a man of his times and progressive ideology fueled his belief in black equality and liberation. As a race leader, Bradby walked a moderate line in his acceptance and operation of Progressive ideals. His role at Second Baptist reflected both the mindset of ex-slave Fredrick Douglass who believed in "ultimate assimilation through self-assertion, and on other terms," and the mindset of educator Booker T. Washington,

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<sup>59</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order, 1877-1920*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 2 and 63. For more information concerning the Progressive Era see: Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935*, (Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order*; Allan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).

who promoted a strategy of “black self-help.”<sup>60</sup> Bradby understood, then, that ultimate assimilation was contingent on black self-help agendas. Like Booker T. Washington, Bradby believed that part of black self-help agendas were tied to temporarily accommodating white power structures.<sup>61</sup> As a minister of the Gospel, Bradby incorporated the ideals of accommodation and black self-help in his leadership methods.

His acceptance of the pastorate at Second Baptist established him as the nineteenth pastor of the historic church and gave him an area by which to promote his social-political theology for black uplift and the establishment of God’s kingdom. Like many of his white counter-parts in the ministry, Bradby was a promoter of progressive ideals. As historian Richard Hofstadter notes, “As practical participants and as ideologists and exhorters the clergy made themselves prominent, and a great deal of the influence of Progressivism ...may be charged to their place in its councils.”<sup>62</sup> Robert Wiebe supports Hofstadter’s point declaring, “In a sense, reforming clergymen served as the honorary chairmen of progressivism. It was still important for most Protestants to feel the presence of a Christian justification, and progressives regularly urged the ministers to join them, not as advisers but as sponsors who could spread that distinctive aura of righteousness about the cause.”<sup>63</sup>

Beyond progressive ideals, the type of Gospel Bradby preached centered itself on the theology in the rhetoric of the Social Gospel. Theologian Walter Rauschenbush’s writings appear to have heavily influenced Bradby’s theology and leadership of Second Baptist. A white Baptist preacher, Rauschenbush wrote of a social Christianity, a Gospel that

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 152.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*(New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 208.

manifested the attributes of the kingdom of God practically. During his tenure at Rochester Theological Seminary, Rauschenbush produced “some of the most influential statements of the new social Christianity.”<sup>64</sup> His work entitled “Christianity and the Social Crisis (New York, 1907), may have impacted the young Bradby. For Rauschenbush states that “There are two great entities in human life—the human soul and the human race—and religion is to save both. The soul is to seek righteousness and eternal life; the race is to seek righteousness and the kingdom of God.”<sup>65</sup> As to the role of the minister of the Gospel Rauschenbush asserted “He can soften the increasing class hatred of the working class. He can infuse the spirit of moral enthusiasm into the economic struggle of the dispossessed and lift it to something more than a “stomach question.”<sup>66</sup>

Bradby’s leadership of Second Baptist and the many auxiliaries he organized reflected Rauschenbush’s mandates of the social minister. For Bradby, the kingdom of God was most concerned with the struggles of the dispossessed. African Americans constituted one of the communities of the dispossessed. Even the writings of Rauschenbush recognized this reality. As Rauschenbush notes, “We have been cursed for a generation with the legacy of sectional hatred, and the question of the status of the black race has not been solved even at such cost. If Pharaoh again hardens his heart, he will again have to weep for his first born and be whelmed in the Red Sea”<sup>67</sup> The young Baptist preacher Bradby recognized this fact and blended his understanding of the Social

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement 1900-1915*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 79.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Gospel with addressing “the status of the black race” through Booker T. Washington’s self-help ideology.

A fundamental aspect of Bradby’s Washington-Rasuchenbush theology was the concept of the kingdom of God. Writing one year prior to Bradby’s tenure at Second Baptist, Social Gospel leader, Washington Gladden, considered the “father of the Social Gospel,” and Frank Mason North proclaimed the basic concepts of the Social Gospel Movement, particularly as it related to urban ministry. Frank Mason North’s address entitled “The City and the Kingdom” was presented at Chautauqua, New York on July 9, 1909.<sup>68</sup> North’s address posited “the centrality of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus and how that message related to the church’s mission in the city.”<sup>69</sup> For North, “the way to the Kingdom is not over the ruins of the city, but through its streets...the Kingdom is coming! We dream of it, we work for it. The city is here, the very heart of the divine strategy, the key of the mighty campaign.”<sup>70</sup>

The “divine strategy” was the city and the minster of the Gospel was called to reform the ills of urban life through practical manifestations of the teachings of Jesus. In October of that same year, Washington Gladden’s sermon to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions carried North’s theology of the kingdom further stating “the nation is to be an important agency in the kingdom.”<sup>71</sup> For Gladden, the nation had a divine mandate to advance the kingdom of God. As historian Donald K.

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<sup>68</sup>Frank Mason North, “The City and the Kingdom,” in ed. Harry F. Ward, *Social Ministry: An Introduction to the Study and Practice of Social Service*, (New York: Eaton & Mains; 1910), 293 318.; Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900-1920*, (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 124.

<sup>69</sup> Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 125.

Gorrell affirms, "In social-gospel thought, the nation, city, and church were all instruments to be utilized to achieve the larger kingdom of God."<sup>72</sup>

Bradby's theology and leadership agenda at Second Baptist mirrored the philosophy of North and Gladden. The very organizational structure of Second Baptist during the 1920s and 30s functioned under Gladden's social-political theology and North's racial consciousness of the black race. For part of North's address spoke to the plight of African Americans. He warned "the Negro will not be a successful factor in our modern civilization unless he can survive the test of the city...Through sea and desert he may be led, but he comes to the Kingdom only through the conquest of the high-walled cities."<sup>73</sup>

Taking up North's concern, Bradby made sure that the black community of Detroit would have ample opportunity to conquer the "high-walled city" through the many self-help agencies and organizations he established through Second Baptist. Further, Bradby made a point of living out the very precepts of Gladden's beliefs about the kingdom of God. For the kingdom of God to Gladden was, "Every department of human life--the families, the schools, amusements, art, business, politics, industry, national policies, international relations---will be governed by the Christian law and controlled by Christian influences."<sup>74</sup> Bradby's leadership of Second Baptist applied Christian principles to the very departments of human life Gladden referred. As the following analysis will show, the family, school, amusements, business, and even industry were areas of reform and uplift by which Bradby applied Christian principles to effect change.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>73</sup> Frank Mason North, "The City and the Kingdom," in ed. Harry F. Ward, *Social Ministry: An Introduction to the Study and Practice of Social Service*, (New York: Eaton & Mains; 1910), 311-312.

<sup>74</sup> Washington Gladden, *The Church and the Kingdom*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1894), in Robert T. Handy, *Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920: Gladden, Ely, Raushenbusch*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 104.

At the age of 33, Bradby took over the leadership of a church that was drastically losing members, conducting services within a building in bad need of repair and situated right in the middle of the “Red Light” District of Detroit, a spot full of gamblers, prostitutes, and thieves. Added to these tensions was the racial climate of the city. Detroit was racially divided, yet growing and experiencing an industrial revolution that caused the lines of division to overlap one another.

One of the primary causes of this reality was the automotive industry. For Detroit, the automotive industry created immense changes in the city’s social patterns. Immigrants and migrants began to flood the city looking for new opportunities for wealth. The impact of these two groups pushed Detroit to establish new sanitary, health, and educational programs to facilitate the growing numbers of people. These two groups also resulted in Detroit having over crowded housing, making immigrants and migrants alike seek other means of financial assistance and accommodations.”<sup>75</sup>

The influence of the automotive industry also created a shift in the distribution of economic power in Detroit. Merchant capitalists were no longer the power holders in Detroit; names like the Fords and Dodges became forces of influence throughout the city. Despite the power and influence the automotive industry brought to Detroit, it also created a vacuum for racial tensions to develop. Racial tensions emerged between the white and black factory workers, especially within the automotive industry itself. White factory and autoworkers resented having to work with African Americans. Many whites demonstrated their resentment by harassing and even threatening blacks with death threats.

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<sup>75</sup>Melvin G. Holli ed., *Detroit*, (New York: A Division of Franklin Watts, 1976), 120.



Despite the growing racial tension, Detroit continued to undergo immense changes in its character and growth. The city was filled with real estate brokers, wholesalers and lumber barons as well as the city's economic elite.<sup>76</sup> These groups reflected the earlier Detroit, a commercial city run by old merchant aristocracy and small time peddlers. However, a new class of workers entered Detroit by the turn of the nineteenth century. By 1900, Detroit began to come under the influence of the automotive industry. As a result, a population explosion took place," Detroit was propelled into becoming the foremost rank-jumping city in the nation. From thirteenth in population in 1900 it leaped to ninth in 1910 and then to fourth in 1920."<sup>77</sup> By 1904, the United States Census Bureau reported "the total number of factory employees was 60,554, of which the automobile industry registered 2,232."<sup>78</sup> The State Labor Department estimated that the total value of manufactured product of Detroit was at \$1.45 billion.<sup>79</sup>

Amid the wealth and growth of Detroit's economy, Second Baptist struggled to adjust to its new surroundings. As the new pastor of Second, Bradby and his church were faced not only with the vices of the "Red Light" district and the dilapidated building, but also the growing needs of thousands of black migrants entering Detroit to take their share of the new wealth that flowed through Detroit's expanding economy.

Described as a "broadgagued, catholic-spirited gospel preacher, full of the spirit of human kindness, ever ready to co-operate heartily in every effort for the advancement of

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid..

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

the Redeemer's Kingdom and the uplift of his fellowman;"<sup>80</sup> Bradby was up to the challenge as he skillfully mobilized his church to meet the momentous tasks before them. The advancement of the "Redeemer's Kingdom" was at the heart of his radical plan to meet the needs of Detroit's black community and disciple the massive influx of migrants coming into Detroit.

For Bradby, the advancement of the "Redeemer's Kingdom" was tied to the social-political and economic uplift of the Detroit African American community. Jesus Christ exemplified a life dedicated to meeting the needs of the poor and oppressed of the world. Bradby embraced Christ's example and immediately began enhancing the ministerial structure of Second Baptist to meet the massive needs of oppressed and disenfranchised African American migrants, workers and women living within the Detroit community.

During the first few months of his pastorate at Second Baptist, Bradby ran a series of revivals, and organized a committee to raise money for church renovations. By the time Bradby stepped into pulpit of Second Baptist in 1910, the church was losing in membership, dropping from 300 members during the 1880s to 250 members by 1910.<sup>81</sup>

Bradby's skill in preaching inspiring sermons and his ability to organize effective ministry gained him a membership of over 1000 members within the first five years of his tenure at Second. Charles T. Cole Jr., of Cole Funeral Home in Detroit and relative of Bradby noted, "Uncle Robert was well known for his hellfire and damnation sermons,

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<sup>80</sup> "Resume of Rev. R.L. Bradby in the Ministry," Second Baptist Historical Collection.

<sup>81</sup> Norman Kenneth Miles, "Home at Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 195.; *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby*, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church.

preaching the evils with which we are surrounded.”<sup>82</sup> Many of Second’s new congregants witnessed a pastor who took delight in interacting personally with his membership. Member and Treasurer of the Gymnasium at Second, Frank L. Mooris, noted “Rev. Bradby took great interest in our class, and donned his gym apparel to engage with us in exercises.”<sup>83</sup>

Some of Bradby’s success in recruiting members to Second was due to his boldness in evangelism on the streets of Detroit. Following in the footsteps of one of the foremost black spokesman for the Social Gospel, Reverdy Ransom, Bradby would evangelize through some of the worst parts of Detroit.<sup>84</sup> It was not unusual for Bradby to go witnessing door to door on the streets of Detroit spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ and inviting people to become members of his church. Bradby preached on street corners, offering timely sermons on the corner of St. Antoine and Gratiot in an effort to transform the “Red light” district in which his church was surrounded. Like Ransom, Bradby even entered pool halls, gambling rooms, local bars and even prostitution houses were specific appointments on Bradby’s lists of evangelical visitations. Bradby also had a gift for finance. In 1910 he sparked his small congregation to contribute \$500.00 per month to fulfill the financial needs of the church. The church’s Fifth Anniversary Program reported the membership contributing only \$348.00 during this time. However, by 1915, Bradby

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<sup>82</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection, Revised Edition Eyewitness History*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988), 68.

<sup>83</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 69.

<sup>84</sup> Reverdy C. Ransom was an outstanding church leader, black activist and writer. Throughout historical scholarship of black social protest and black Christian leadership, Ransom is herald as the black “father of Social Gospel.” Graduating from Wilberforce University in 1886 and attending Oberlin College, Ransom was trained as a preacher in the A.M.E. Church. In 1924, he was elected as the 48<sup>th</sup> Bishop of the Church and remained in the position until his retirement in 1952.; Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White American Racial Reform, 1885-1912*, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 173-174.

had inspired his congregation to give over twelve times that amount making an annual contribution of \$4252.63.<sup>85</sup>

One motivation behind his activities was to provide a positive alternative to places migrants might look to for assistance and livelihood. Bradby's strategy was to target the massive influx of migrants from the South in an effort to steer them clear of the vices of the Red Light District. The task Bradby assigned himself was to say the least, momentous. Four years into his pastorate at Second, World War I began and with it a mass recruitment of young white males for the armed services. The automotive industry needing to replace its white labor supply and began looking toward African Americans in the South. From 1910 to 1920 the African American population in Detroit had more than tripled, jumping from 5741 in 1910 to 40, 838 by 1920. Out of this group, 18,472 were young black males over 21. African American women accounted for 12,107 over 21 years of age.<sup>86</sup>

In meeting the needs of southern migrants Bradby began to structure his support network with capable men and women. John H. Fairfax, the treasurer of Second Baptist was a graduate of Detroit Business College. Miss Winifred Cooper was a skilled secretary and aid to Bradby Reverend Edward C. Simmons was one of Bradby's most proficient assistant pastor, and Green Davis Jr. was a prominent businessman in Detroit, who oversaw all the financial records of Second Baptist. Bradby utilized these capable black men and woman as the organizing structure of his ministerial efforts at Second. The church secretary and assistant pastor were full time paid staff under Bradby.

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<sup>85</sup> *Fifth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Robert Lewis Bradby*, , Second Baptist Historical Collection.

<sup>86</sup> *The Negro In Detroit: Report of the Major's Committee on Race Relations*, Detroit: Detroit Bureau of Government Research, 1926.

In fact, Second was one of the few churches that had full time employees outside of the pastorate. Bradby was the highest paid black minister in Detroit, making a salary of over \$4,000.00 a year.<sup>87</sup>

The talents of these men and women under Bradby helped him create a strong ministry to Detroit migrants. Heavily influenced by the achievements of Reverdy Ransom, Bradby orchestrated the ministries of Second like that of Chicago's Institutional Church and Social Settlement founded in 1900. The Chicago church was designed by Ransom to "served both new migrants and middle-class black Chicagoans."<sup>88</sup> Mirroring Ransom, Second Baptist expanded its facility to include a large auditorium, a kitchen, a gymnasium, and other large rooms. And like Ransom, Bradby organized and even encouraged men's groups, women's clubs, "a nursery, a kindergarten, clubs for boys and girls"...employment networks, "concerts, classes in sewing, cooking, and music," and even lectures by leading black speakers such as Dr. Mordecai Johnson, then President of Howard University.<sup>89</sup>

Bradby's power, backed by the local church made him a prominent figure in social, political and economic arenas in Detroit. Influential figures such as Henry Ford, Mayor Frank Murphy and the Detroit Urban League all sought Bradby's leadership skills and ability to amass the local black Detroiters for change. Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company solicited Bradby's leadership in supplying the company with black labor during World Wars I and II. Mayor Frank Murphy attempted to pursue Bradby for black voters during his campaign. The Detroit Urban League not only called on Bradby to

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<sup>87</sup> Cara Shelly, "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1910-1946,"32.

<sup>88</sup> Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White American Radical Reform 1885-1912*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

assist their efforts in providing Detroit economic industries with skilled, unskilled and domestic black labor. The Urban League also utilized Second as a meeting place and rallying center for black self-help efforts in Detroit.

Bradby made a point of positioning Second Baptist to be at the forefront of black self-help efforts with regard to new migrants. From 1910 to 1946, Bradby "dedicated himself to helping migrant greeting all inbound trains and offering migrants the services of Second Baptist."<sup>90</sup> Seventy-five year member Irene Cole Croxton remembers these committees meeting trains around the clock and bringing them to Second to feed and house them. Croxton even relates, "Many of them slept on the church benches until Rev. Bradby could find them homes to stay in. He tried to find jobs for them."<sup>91</sup> Another member of Second, Mildred Dillard Croff states that Bradby organized a "program of Education and Social Service to help these brethren from the South."<sup>92</sup>

Bradby also collaborated with white ecclesiastical organizations in an effort to advance the needs of migrants. The Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches, established in 1919, was organized to address the issues of poverty and social reform among Detroit communities. The organization operated under the ideology of the Social Gospel movement, which sought to advance the teachings of Jesus Christ in resolving social evils such as injustice, racism and equality. A key component of the Council's understanding of the Social Gospel was the advancement of the "kingdom of God." Like Bradby, the council believed, "by this fine cooperation of the churches, through the Council, a manifest force and dignity to the great enterprise of the Kingdom of God in

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<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Ann Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1929*, (Dearborn: Bentley Historical Library, 1993), 37.

Detroit are secured.”<sup>93</sup> Bradby’s presence on the committee was instrumental in shaping “white perceptions of the African American community and establishing reform programs to meet the needs of new migrants entering Detroit.”<sup>94</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, Bradby continued to be a minister actively engaged in confronting and combating racism. This point is especially evident when he accepted the position of president of the Detroit branch National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1925. For Bradby, the uplift of the race was tied to destroying racist agendas. Moreover, Bradby believed that if he could get the black church to back the efforts of the NAACP, black Detroit could make significant strides in overcoming white power structures. One hundred percent NAACP church membership was part of Bradby’s goal. Bradby was president of the NAACP from 1925 through 1926.<sup>95</sup>

Bradby believed in the power of the black church to change society so much that he ran for the office of city councilman that same year. Yet, the power latent within the black church did not come to the fore for Bradby. He was voted out of the primary election.<sup>96</sup> The reason for such a defeat, especially when the candidate was backed by one of the largest churches in the city, is unfathomable. It quite possible, though, that race or

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<sup>91</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, p.45, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>93</sup> “Detroit Protestantism in United Effort, 1920-1921,” pg. 6, box I, folder I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Papers, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>94</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 66.; “Detroit Churches Illustrate Value of Christian Cooperation,” 1922-1923, box I, folder I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Papers, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.; Wolcott cites the following quote from the Detroit Council of Churches Papers, “The Social Service Committee has aided materially in the reorganization of the Detroit Good-Will Industries during the year. It has worked among the colored people, particularly the newcomers from the South, and has endeavored to strengthen the church and social service agencies which are working among the colored people.”

<sup>95</sup> Dr. Nathaniel Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 39.

denominational prejudice played a hand in the election. It appeared that the Detroit community still wanted a definite separation of church and state. Regardless of the reasons, Bradby never ventured back into the political arena.<sup>97</sup>

Despite this set back, Bradby's leadership was recognized four years later in 1929 by the chief executive of the State of Michigan, Governor Fred W. Green. Governor Green appointed Bradby as a representative of the National Inter-Denominational Alliance of America. The alliance sought leaders of all races throughout the country to be participants. It is not surprising that one of the highest officials in Michigan recognized the dynamic leadership and influence of Reverend Bradby. In all respects, by 1929 Bradby had definitely established himself as one of the prominent black leaders of the African American community.<sup>98</sup> His position was unique in that he was both a black Christian leader of African Americans, and a "hand-picked" representative of powerful whites, such as Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company.

Yet, the most potent aspect of Bradby's power to impact and invoke changes within the Detroit community was made evident through a weekly church newsletter called the *Herald*, of which Bradby was the chief editor. Through the weekly articles of the *Herald*, Bradby was able to speak out against racist practices in the Detroit community, persuade his congregants to support various fundraisers, political candidates, local black entrepreneurs and to attend cultural events. The *Herald* was even used as a literary pulpit, by which Bradby could address the New Testament Gospel message to such issues as tithing, thrift, respectability and the coming "kingdom of God." In essence, Bradby and

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<sup>96</sup> *Records of the Detroit Election Commission, 1920-1925*, Old County Building, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>97</sup> Cara Shelly L. "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1910-1946," 29.; Norman Kenneth Miles, "Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929," 6.



the *Herald* were one voice speaking to the Detroit community. As such, the *Herald* became one of Bradby's greatest tools of protest and agitation against white power struggles, while also operating as medium of "radical discipleship" among the black community. Liberation, the "kingdom of God," and the call for "black self-help" were primary themes running throughout the *Herald*.

For example, Bradby made sure that the *Herald* promoted his readers to vote and even offered instructions in filling out voting ballots. The *Herald* also encouraged its readers to back certain candidates that were cognizant of black social and political agendas.<sup>99</sup>

During the Great Depression, Bradby urged members to keep hope in the Lord to meet their financial needs and continuing giving their tithes to the church. He writes, "If you do not have a quarter, bring a dime...the price of a few packages of gum, the admission to a show, the cost of a few cigars...that can well be done without."<sup>100</sup> He goes on to encourage their faith in God to provide for them saying, "God will take care of you if you will obey Him...No matter how dark the world becomes, no matter how the harvest fail, or how hard the times are, we can go right on rejoicing in the Lord. All shall work together for our good...Crushed flowers emit the sweetest odors; trimmed vines, though they may bleed, bear the most luscious fruit."<sup>101</sup> Here Bradby relies heavily in his address on biblical passages from the Old and New Testament (Romans 8:28 and

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<sup>98</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 20 January 1929, No. 2, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>99</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 9 October 1927, 3 June 1928, 9 September 1928, 17 February 1929, 6 October 1929, reels 9 and 10, Second Baptist Collection, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>100</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 12 July, 1930, 5 October 1930, 26 June 1932, reel 10, Second Baptist Collection, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>101</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 10 August 1930, 16 August 1931, 26 June 1932, 14 August 1932, 4 March 1934, Reel 10, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Michigan Historical Collection.

Habakkuk 17-18), adapting the meaning of these passages to the social-economic realities of his parishioners. It is clear here that Bradby approaches biblical texts from a social-political perspective in an effort to encourage the migrant community and his congregation.<sup>102</sup> Hunger, poverty and hardship were all realities experienced by God's people in the Old and New Testaments, yet God proclaimed help and aid through his prophets and the divine power to transform the oppressive circumstances of his people into a means of benevolence and benefits.

Bradby's leadership continued to demonstrate strategies of resistance, agitation and protest against white power structures in the pursuit of black freedom. Outside the *Herald*, Bradby's letters was the second most powerful weapon welded against black disenfranchisement in Detroit. Under girded by the largest black church in Detroit, Bradby's letters carried a weight unlike any other black minister in Detroit. His letters commanded the respect and attention of the highest political and economic officials in the Detroit community. According to Martin, a letter of recommendation from Bradby was "considered tantamount to securing a job at Ford (Ford Motor Company)."<sup>103</sup>

Men like Henry Ford, Mayors Frank Murphy and James Couszen, Governor Fitzgerald, and the city treasurer, Charles L. Williams took note and even collaborated with the pastor of the largest black church in Detroit. Many of the letters written to these men were on behalf of needy migrants and church members under Bradby's care. Writing to one of Henry Ford's black employment officers, Donald J. Marshall, Bradby recommends a young African American male named B.B. Brown for employment at Ford

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<sup>102</sup> Romans 8:28 reads according to the New International Version of the Bible, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."; Habakkuk 3:17-18 reads "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines though the

Motor Company. Bradby request Marshall to “kindly investigate his (B.B. Brown) name and do whatever you can for him. With grateful appreciation, R.L. Bradby.”<sup>104</sup>

Another letter, written in 1925, calls the attention of Major Frank Murphy to the plight of a Mrs. Carrie Poole, a homeless mother of six children. Bradby requested any assistance that the Mayor could provide for this mother and her children. Bradby even solicited the help of the Governor Fitzgerald on behalf of the Detroit black community. He requested that Fitzgerald fill one of two vacancies in the Circuit Court Commission of Detroit with an individual that was cognizant of the needs within the African American community. Bradby’s letter is quite bold in his address to the governor. For in his letter, Bradby not only reminds the governor of the support that the Detroit black community has given him over the years, but also criticizes him for the lack of consideration the black community has received from him in the past. Bradby writes, “I am very sure that as you look over the work in Michigan you will agree with me that our group with the potential strength it has with the earnestness and loyalty with which it has supported your cause is deserving of...more consideration that we have received.”<sup>105</sup>

In addition to securing jobs for his community and pushing government officials to elect candidates who supported the black community, Bradby’s ministries extended to paying off the debts of church members as well as keeping agencies from foreclosing on their houses. During the mid-1920s and early 30s, black workers in Detroit became easy targets for white installment salesman--“Black workers, therefore bought many goods on

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olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Ann Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916-1929*, 21.

<sup>104</sup> Letter, R.L. Bradby to Mr. Marshall, October 18, 1926, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor.

<sup>105</sup> Letter to Governor of Michigan, Mr. Fitzgerald, October 7, 1935, reel 3, Second Baptist Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

the installment plan, which kept them perpetually in debt. Such indebtedness forced employers to garnishee black workers' wages more than any other group. This especially hurt them during recessions and depression."<sup>106</sup>

Bradby's letter to Colonial Department Store in Detroit, supports this' claim. Writing to Colonial Department Store in Detroit on behalf of his church member Samuel Maya, who has been delinquent in his payments to the store, Bradby informs the store that Maya's delinquency has been due to his being out of "work for some little time." In effort to get the store to give Maya time to repay his debts, Bradby ask for the store to extend Maya's credit with the promise that if payment is not made in a timely manner, that Second Baptist itself will pay off the debt. Bradby's letter is telling in that he positions the economic and social power of the black church in meeting the needs of one of his members.<sup>107</sup>

Economically, Bradby realized that Second Baptist, with a membership of over 2000 could more than pay off the debt of one of its members. Socially, though, Bradby established for his parishioners respectability in the eyes of the Colonial Department store by positing a sacred institution and the good recommendation of a minister behind the character of Maya. Maya's example is one of many incidents that Bradby addressed with respect to his members. In many cases, Bradby used Second Baptist's position as a sacred institution to lend respectability and creditability to the social status of his congregants and even migrants.

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<sup>106</sup>Richard W. Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992),46.

<sup>107</sup>Letter R.L. Bradby to Colonial Department Store, October 8, 1931, reel 3, Second Baptist Papers, Michigan Historical Collection..

Other letters written on behalf of church members are addressed to the Detroit City Treasurer and certain judges. In 1931, Bradby writes Detroit City Treasurer, Charles L. Williams on behalf of Mrs. Annie Jenkins, a widow who is in danger of losing her home. Judging from the date of the letter, Bradby writes the City Treasurer during the Great Depression. Many of his members and migrants are under great financial stress during this period. In an effort to support his members, Bradby writes not only to the City Treasurer, but to judges, employment superintendents of stores and the like pleading with these agencies to extend credit, provide employment and even parole family members of his congregants who are incarcerated.

Writing to the City Treasurer, Bradby explains the plight of Mrs. Jenkins expressing, "All her life savings are in this home. It would be tragic if she lost it, and I will thank you very sincerely for whatever help you can give..."<sup>108</sup> To Honorable Judge Edward Jeffries, Bradby writes on behalf of a female congregant's son, named Sonny Thomas who has been sentence to Jackson prison from one to fifteen years. Bradby reminds the judge that the Parole Commission has agreed to free Thomas based on the recommendation of the judge who sentenced him. Bradby pleads with Judge Jeffries to recommend that Thomas is freed based on the good standing membership of Thomas's mother at Second and her need for the services of her son. Bradby closes his letter to the Judge Jeffries by reminding him of the need for justice. He writes, "If your honor can see the justice in this move, I will very greatly appreciate it."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Letter, R.L. Bradby to Charles L. Williams, May 13, 1931, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>109</sup> Letter, R.L. Bradby to Judge Jeffries, July 8, 1931, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

Another female member of his church finds help in Bradby's letters when he writes to Superintendent Murphy in hopes of providing her employment. Bradby explains to Murphy that his member is a recent widow, supporting two daughters and in danger of losing her home. He ask Murphy to find her a job as a maid in the J. L. Hudson Company stating, "I am sure that there will never be any cause for regret if she is employed, and I will consider it a personal favor if there is anything that you can do for me in this matter."<sup>110</sup>

Throughout the years of the Great Depression and early part of the 1940s, Bradby continued his correspondence, continually working to support the black community in whatever way he could. A journal of his writings reflect numerous letters recommending individuals for jobs, seeking clemency from traffic officers, and asking judges and wardens for parole. On February 7, 1941 Bradby wrote a judge "advising him to consider a Negro case."<sup>111</sup> On January 24, 1941 Bradby took measures to pay a widow's balance on a debt she owed.<sup>112</sup> In October 22, 1943 Bradby recommends another member for an internship; and in April of 1944, Bradby wrote another recommendation for a job for another individual.<sup>113</sup> These letters were written all on behalf of his congregants and those within the migrant community.

Despite the tremendous strides Bradby made in establishing self-help efforts in the Detroit community, the years of the Great Depression began to take their toll upon the effectiveness of Second Baptist and Bradby's health. During the late 1920s, Second's

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<sup>110</sup> Letter, R.L. Bradby to Superintendent Murphy, June 4, 1934, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>111</sup> Address book and memoirs, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Bentley Historical Library.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

financial status began to wane. The church was behind in its utility payments and Bradby was writing letters pleading with creditors to wait until the church could raise enough money. He usually requested creditors to wait until certain holidays such as Easter or Thanksgiving to raise money for the church expenses. However, by the 1930s, Second was definitely in financial trouble. Bradby writes one of the church's creditors, a coal supplier, stating, "I can't ask you to be patient because you have, but I hope you will believe in the absolute certainty of getting your money."<sup>114</sup>

By 1933, Bradby had voluntarily taken a pay cut in his salary. The threat of financial ruin of his church and his own inability to even pay his son's college tuition caused Bradby undue stress, and eventuated in a nervous break-down between 1930-1931. Second Baptist weekly newsletter the *Herald* made constant remarks about the failing health of Bradby, "urging members to try to keep him in good condition through cooperating with him every way we can."<sup>115</sup>

A slow depression began to build within Bradby as he found himself and his church unable to meet the needs of his congregation. The many loans Bradby had given or even cosigned for needy parishioners were going into default. Many members blamed Bradby directly for the lack of funds during the Depression. Bradby took the censure of his members to heart and began to feel greatly unappreciated. Writing to his former associate pastor, Bradby lamented, "It is a pity but it seems true when we try to do our best we are the least appreciated."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Letter, Bradby to Green Davis, November 24, 1931, Reel 3, Second Baptist Papers, Bentley Historical Library.; Cara Shelly, "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1910-1946," 38.

<sup>115</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, February 8, 1931, August 16, 1931, September 6, 1931, reel 10, Second Baptist Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>116</sup> Letter, R. L. Bradby to R.A. Mood, April 23, 1931, and R.L. Bradby to Jessie Strudie, November 30, 1931, reel 3, Second Baptist Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

Insult adding to injury, Bradby began showing signs of a bad heart condition. Nevertheless, he continued most of his daily activities, even holding a rally in favor of presidential candidate Herbert Hoover in 1932. A known Republican, Bradby boasted an attendance of over a thousand people at the rally. Despite the reforms of the New Deal, historian Cara Shelly notes that Bradby's message to Second continued to "favor racial self-help and Christian sharing. 'Service, brotherhood, sacrifice unending until the redemption of the race,' ran the litany."<sup>117</sup>

These themes continued to be at the forefront of Bradby's self-help activities through Second Baptist. By 1945 Bradby's health took a turn for the worse. His failing heart condition continued to worsen causing him to limit some of his ministerial activities at the church. The change in Bradby's work habits came too late. On June 3, 1946, around 9:30 a.m. Bradby sat down to do his last sermon and died in the process of tailoring the word of God to the conditions of his people. His successor, associate pastor Allan A. Banks Jr. remarked at Bradby's passing that he was "a man of sterling qualities...a learned scholar, possessing a melodious baritone voice."<sup>118</sup> Yet, Bradby's congregation saw more in their pastor than just a scholar. The members of Second Baptist understood Bradby's continuous drive to bring forth the kingdom of God in their lives. Therefore the members of Second memorialized Bradby to the world as main steadily advancing the kingdom of God even until his last breath. They write, "He went like the engineer of a Gospel Train—his hand upon the throttle and his eye upon the rail."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Cara Shelly, "Bradby's Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit 1910-1946," 42.; *Second Baptist Herald*, September 6, 1931, January 1, 1933, April 8, 1934, reel 10, Second Baptist Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>118</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 40.

<sup>119</sup> "Obituary of Reverend Robert L. Bradby," Box 10, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



Bradby orchestrated the ministries of Second Baptist to improve the quality of freedom of black migrants and Detroiters. His church made a concerted effort through its auxiliaries and church programs to established the “humanity” of the black community in the eyes of white Detroiters. Bradby and the members of Second understood that God’s love was connected to God’s call for justice and righteousness for all peoples. For Bradby humanity dignity was a divinely proscribed biblical right and he structured the very foundations of his ministry to met this biblical mandate.

His participation and support of the Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches clarified his beliefs. The Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches, established in 1919, aimed to address public interest through biblical mandates. These biblical mandates were couched in the rhetoric of the Social Gospel Movement. According to Wolcott, Bradby joined the council in order to influence white opinions of African Americans and assist in developing reform programs that targeted black migrants.<sup>120</sup>

Bradby’s participation in the council gives more weight to the assertion that the nature of Bradby’s leadership was steeped in Christian theology, social reform and the theology of the Social Gospel. His ministerial activities clearly reflect a social political reading of the gospel. Wolcott notes that Bradby and his connection with the Detroit Council of Churches reflected a massive institutionalization of the Social Gospel Movement. She further argues that Bradby’s joining of the council “help shape white perceptions of the African American community and developed reform programs that he felt would aid recent migrants.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 66-67.

<sup>121</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 66.

Although historian Richard Thomas claims that Bradby was “shortsighted” in his strategy to meet the needs of the black community, he does note that Bradby was one of many black leaders desperate to search for empowerment of the black community. Thomas’s assessment may hold weight in some aspects of Bradby’s vision, yet one cannot deny that Bradby made a powerful impact and transformation on the lives of African American migrants and the black Detroit Community. Bradby’s leadership was an instrument of black enfranchisement in Detroit and he used the latent power of the black church to gain levels of opportunities unheard of in the black community in the past. Bradby was an activist and his preaching and his pen were his weapons of choice in the fight for black freedom and racial uplift. However the most powerful impetus behind his efforts was his theology. Bradby was not an “other-worldly,” “pie in the sky” preacher. He was a “this worldly” preacher, one concerned with the here and now of his people. Bradby was a man who understood that at the heart of the gospel message was God’s plan to establish a kingdom which exemplified justice, righteousness and equality, was a call to “radical discipleship.” For Bradby, God demanded that he train and rise up individuals who went against oppressive status quo formations in society. Individuals, who withstood injustice, spoke out against the oppression of the poor and powerless and preached righteousness.

Bradby’s letters in protest and agitation against racial discrimination were calls to repentance by white oppressors. His establishment of social services programs that met the needs of thousands of migrants were acts of resistance against white oppressors in the South. His recommendations to Ford on behalf of jobless blacks in the city were tools of

empowerment and examples of God's provision to those who trusted in the God of the Exodus to deliver them from the slavery of black disenfranchisement.

His life and ministry reflect the actions of other black religious leaders of his time. Black social gospel adherent Reverdy C. Ransom and even the activities of Father Divine find resonance in the leadership of Bradby. Sparked by Christian imperatives, Father Divine fed thousands of homeless people black and white through his Peace Mission Movement. During the Great Depression, Father Divine enabled many blacks to obtain jobs as domestic servants in Sayville, New York. Pastor Reverdy Ransom, through Chicago's Institutional Church and Social Settlement, created outreach programs to the black community, providing employment, housing and even food to poverty-stricken migrants.<sup>122</sup> Influenced by the rhetoric of Social Gospel and Progressivism, both Ransom and Father Divine embrace the Christian motif of the "kingdom of God." Bradby's actions at Second Baptist mirrored his contemporaries in this respect, linking the ideology of Booker T. Washington to the theological premises of the Social Gospel. During his tenure at Second, Bradby continued to add to his accomplishments in advancing the kingdom by serving as "the vice president of the National Baptist Convention and the Liberty Life Insurance Company, trustee of Roger Williams University (Nashville, Tenn) and the Utica Normal and Industrial Institute (Utica, Miss), member of the Negro Business League, the Negro Sanhedrin and other Detroit Progressive organizations."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Berly Satter, "Marcus Garvey, Father Divine, and the Gender Politics of Race Difference and Race Neutrality," *American Quarterly*, 48, no. 1 (1996): 43-76.

<sup>123</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1836-1976*, 21.

In this respect, Bradby stands in the circle of black Christian leaders of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although not as violent in his approach to black advancement and racial uplift as such forerunners of black Christian leadership as Denmark Vessey and Nat Turner, he does reflect the non-violent revolutionary actions of black race leaders such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Alexander Crummuell, Jarena Lee, Rebecca Cox Jackson and Fredrick Douglas. These men and women tied the tenets of the Gospel to self-help agendas of black uplift and advancement. Education, social mobility and practical application of Christian truths were the means for the uplift of the race. The concept of a righteous kingdom established by God where justice and equality also ruled as prominent ideals within the minds of these black Christian leaders.

Yet, Bradby stands out as a race leader unlike his forerunners in that his drive for racial advancement was not a goal in an of itself. For Bradby, the advancement of God's kingdom and his rule upon the earth was of primary importance; the racial uplift of black Detroiters was just one facet of the advancement of God's kingdom. For his contemporaries and his predecessors sought black freedom and equality as a goal unto itself, while Bradby first and foremost sought the kingdom. Black uplift was a by-product of the overall pursuit of the kingdom of God.

Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson remarked on the potentialities of the black church to become the greatest spiritual force in the United States. However, Woodson noted that the "...potentialities were dependent in large measure upon the leadership as expressed in the Negro pulpit."<sup>124</sup> Reverend Robert. L. Bradby's leadership of Second Baptist Church demonstrates the potentialities that Mays and Nicholson knew

lay dormant in the black church. Bradby's tenure at Second brought the power of the black church to the fore and constituted a dominant spiritual force in the Detroit community transforming the public realities of migrants, women and workers in Detroit. He continuously walked a continuum of radical and accommodationist agendas in his leadership of Second. His Rauschenbusch-Washingtonian theology, which tied the Social Gospel to "black self" strategies, presented a race leader who sought the advancement of his people and reflected the ideologies of his time. Progressivism, "black self-help," and the Social Gospel were ideals and theologies that were manifested in life of Second Baptist and the leadership of Bradby.

Reverend Robert L. Bradby stands as the forerunner of black self-help in Detroit and an exemplary of the power of gospel to impact the social-political contexts of its adherents. The leadership of Bradby and activities of Second Baptist mirrored the larger black self traditions of America. As early as the 1700s, the "black church provided the spawning ground for the earliest black self-help activities."<sup>125</sup> Black pastors such as Richard Allen helped to establish a medium of mutual aid and empowerment within the black family and the community through the black church. Race leaders and prominent organizations built on racial pride and advancement were created in the pews of the black church. Like his predecessors, Bradby entered a Detroit church that had a long history of black self help. Second Baptist and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church were the first black institutions to establish black –self help agendas in education. These churches held schools in their respective basements. Second and Bethel also established and

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<sup>124</sup> Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, "The Genius of the Negro Church," in Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: Documentary Witness*, Second Edition, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 434.

connected with national black organizations such as the National Baptist Convention and the Phyllis Wheatley Home. They organized outreach programs to needy migrants and even sought to gain housing and employment opportunities for the black community.

Like other black self help organizations in Detroit such as the Detroit Urban League, the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, the Detroit Negro Business League and the Housewives League of Detroit, Second Baptist, under Badby's direction, joined in a long line of black self-help organizations in Detroit and worked in conjunction with these groups to advance the progress of the black community. The life and ministry of Bradby through Second stands in a cloud of witnesses in black Detroit that advance the black self help tradition and laid the foundation for this tradition throughout the later part of the twentieth century.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Richard W. Thomas, *The State of Black Detroit: Building From Strength, The Black Self-Help Tradition in Detroit*, (Detroit: Detroit Urban League, Inc., 1987), 3.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 and 24.

## **CHAPTER TWO: MIGRANTS, REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY AND THE MINISTRY OF SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH OF DETROIT**

In 1918, one of the founding fathers of the National Urban League issued a challenge to Detroit black churches. George Edmund Haynes called for the implementation of dramatic social programs by Detroit local churches in order to address housing, employment, and issues of respectability among the thousand of the migrants pouring into Detroit. Reverend Robert L. Bradby took up Haynes challenge and instated programs of black self-help through the ministries of Second Baptist Church. Thirty-six years later, Second Baptist member Mary Etta Glenn, remembered how Bradby and Second met Haynes' demand. She states, "Second Baptist has been of service in advisory capacity in every phase of community life. Under the leadership of its late pastor, R.L. Bradby, education has received a boost among students in the Baptist church. The membership is organized into many worthwhile auxiliaries, which promote practical functions advocated from the pulpit."<sup>1</sup>

This chapter addresses exactly how Bradby met Haynes' challenge and argues that Bradby met and supplied the needs of thousands of migrants through the black church. This chapter further argues that one of the primary motivations behind Bradby's mission to the migrants was his agenda of establishing the "kingdom of God," since racial uplift and advancement were tied to biblical motifs of God's kingdom of justice, righteous and freedom. In Bradby's mind Haynes' challenge was just an echo of the divine mandate

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<sup>1</sup>"Negro Church in Detroit," 2 February 1946, Box 9. Folder I, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library.

given in Matthew 28: 18-19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>2</sup>

Bradby made a point of organizing church auxiliaries and groups to meet the overwhelming needs of black migrants and the Detroit black community. Bradby’s actions reflected the urgency of Haynes’ challenge. The challenge Haynes made came at a very crucial time in Detroit migrant history. Detroiters were faced with the problem of adjusting to and accommodating the needs of thousands of southern migrants pouring into Detroit almost by the hour.

The first wave of the Great Migration came during the First World War. By 1918, it was estimated that more than 500,000 southern migrants left the South for Northern cities. Detroit, Michigan was one of those principle cities to which black southern migrants flocked to in large numbers. Many of these sojourners came to Detroit in response to the economic devastation of South due to low cotton prices, floods and the tenacious boll-weevil. The combination of these catastrophes eventuated in the economic disenfranchisement of hundreds of African Americans in the South. Other migrants came to Detroit to escape the “Jim Crow” conditions of the South. Southern blacks faced disempowerment socially and politically through the experiences of mob violence, racist agendas in the court system, and poor housing and schooling for their children. These burdens drove southern blacks to leave the inhospitable conditions of the South and seek a better quality of freedom in the North.<sup>3</sup>

The automotive center of the world in 1918, Detroit became a locus of refuge and economic prosperity in the minds of black migrants. African Americans beat a well-

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 28: 8-19, New International Version.



trodden path to Detroit from southern places as far away as Florida. Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama were also places from which black migrants came to Detroit.<sup>4</sup> Southern black migrants came in masses to Detroit seeking to better their condition in life. One of the major draws for these migrants was the “five dollar a day” promise issued by Ford Motor Company to eager laborers seeking employment. This was unimaginable to black workers, who in the South had worked for far less than that amount in a week. Moreover, the worst working conditions at Ford were five times better than any job blacks held in the South. The words of a 1920 social worker proclaim, “In Detroit, they made from six to eleven dollars a day. ‘There are hundreds of Negroes in Detroit, who are making more money in one day than they made in the South in one week.’”<sup>5</sup>

The majority of these migrants were young men between the ages of 18 and 40.<sup>6</sup> From 1916 to 1929, Detroit experienced a great influx of blacks into its metropolitan areas. In fact, “between 1916 and 1930, an estimated one million Black Southerners migrated to northern cities. Detroit’s black population experienced an explosive increase between 1910 and 1930.”<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, reported that in 1910 there were 5,741 blacks living in Detroit. By 1930 the Bureau records an overwhelming increase of 120,066 blacks living in Detroit.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George Edmund Haynes, *Negro New-Comer in Detroit, Michigan: A Challenge to Christian Statesmanship A Preliminary Survey*. (New York: Home Mission Council, 1918), 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> George Edmund Haynes, *Negro New-Comer in Detroit, Michigan*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Richard W. Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 31.

<sup>6</sup> “The migrants who flocked to Detroit between World War I and The Great Depression included more than sharecroppers and other assorted types of common labor. Some were business and professional people.”; *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Anne Martin, *Detroit and The Great Migration 1916-1929*, (Dearborn: The Bentley Historical Library, 1993), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1926*; I

Despite massive opportunities proclaimed in Detroit for black migrants, many faced white prejudice and rising animosity, causing some migrants to struggle in maintaining a positive perspective of the North. Discrimination confronted them at every turn. White businesses, despite their willingness to hire blacks for unskilled jobs, almost never hired them for skilled positions. Even the education systems, with their segregation laws, sought to establish black migrants as handicap and retarded in their ability to learn. Furthermore, real estate codes restricted these migrants to live in housing areas, which were at best intolerable even for animals to inhabit.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of such an influx of black migrants into Detroit doubled the city's population in less than a decade. In 1910, Detroit census estimated a population of about 465, 766. By 1918, the city had increased its population to around 800,000. With the increase in population came tremendous community problems for Detroit. Housing became one the most pressing problems. Food and clothing and even jobs were readily provided through agencies such as the local black church and the Detroit Urban League, but shelter was a whole other issue. Many of Detroit's black population were already housed in crowded residences of the "Negro District." Streets such as St. Antoine, Hastings, Rowena, Macomb, Lafayette, Beaubien and Rivard were areas where black migrants were crammed into along with older residents of Detroit's black community.

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<sup>9</sup> Although more jobs were now available to Blacks, they were usually the jobs with the longest and most grueling duties. Employers used stereotypes about Black migrants to justify placing them in the least desirable positions. Some employers gave Blacks the toughest assembly jobs, claiming that African-Americans were faster than anyone else in performing "rhythmic" tasks. Others, conversely, complained that the African-American worker was 'too slow.'" Employers also used stereotypes as an excuse to place blacks in the hottest jobs. It should be noted however, that working class whites were also migrating to Detroit during and after World War I. Interestingly, these white migrants also came from the South to the North in search of jobs. Nevertheless, the mid -1920s showed Detroit to be a rapidly growing community.; Elizabeth Ann Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1929*, 16 and 4.

Adding insult to injury with regard to the impact of the black migrant on Detroit, older residents of Detroit strongly resented the coming of what the Director of Negro Economics with the Depart of Labor, George Edmund Haynes terms the “Negroes of the undesirable type.”<sup>10</sup> According to Haynes, some of the migrants were disreputable characters, gamblers who were drawn to the race-track. These groups tainted the already tenuous relationship with white Detroiters and cast a bad light on the whole of the black community.

As Director of Negro Economics with the Department of Labor, Haynes produced a survey on the conditions of migrants in Detroit in 1918, with guidelines and questions on how best the “Christian church thru its members and organization so extend its service to these people as to help them make the necessary adjustments....in obtaining those ethical and religious ideals which will make them an asset and not a liability to the community into which they have come.”<sup>11</sup> Many of these ideals came from white bourgeois ideals or respectability.

Haynes’s survey reflected the plight many migrants faced once they entered Detroit as well as the mindset of many older residents of Detroit to the new migrants. Outside of population swells and job opportunities, black residents of Detroit were primarily concerned about the housing of these migrants and the impact they would have on their current status in the eyes of white power structures of Detroit. Previously, old Detroiters had enjoyed a level of acceptance and accommodation from whites in Detroit. By 1918, Haynes noted that white perspectives had changed as a result of black migration to Detroit. Older black residents built up resentment against black migrants due to white

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<sup>10</sup> Haynes, *Negro New-Comer in Detroit, Michigan*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

tendencies to increasingly segregate all black Detroiters. As Haynes notes, "With the large increase in the number of Negroes and the coming of many of the less desirable type, there was a reaction of these older residents against a gradual tending toward segregation of all Negroes. There was also a class feeling growing out of their more favorable conditions."<sup>12</sup>

Overcrowded housing, unemployment and the subtle but steady loss of respectability and acceptance by white Detroiters of the black community pushed individuals and agencies like Haynes to call for the Christian Church to help in meeting the overwhelming needs of the black southern migrant and the existing black community of Detroit. He declared that the plight and well being of every African American is tied up in the plight of the black worker, especially those who are on trial in the industrial agencies of Detroit. For Haynes, black workers are the testing ground of the legitimacy and respectability of the Detroit black community and for that reason alone they must "make good" in the eyes of their white employers. Haynes issued a charge to the Black Church stating, "This is largely the work of preachment from the pulpit and the platform. What a world of service is open here to the Negro churches!"<sup>13</sup> Many migrants came "from states which were largely Baptist in their religious faith, and as a result a large percentage of these Negroes, having religious affiliations, were Baptists...Thus it came about that early in the great migration, the social agencies of Detroit came to look to the Baptist leadership and service in this tremendous social and religious problem."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-192*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> "Baptist Christian Center," box 6, folder I, United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Situated in the middle of a rising industrial city full of racial prejudice, and flooded with black migrants starved for work and housing, Reverend Robert L. Bradby of Second Baptist Church in Detroit took up Haynes' charge and geared the church's ministry to meeting the aforementioned needs of the black migrant. Bradby used his church as a vehicle of resistance and transformation within the lives of African American migrants, women, and workers. Though operating as a sacred institution, Second Baptist moved its influence to the public arenas of the Detroit business and industrial community and subsequently transformed the secular realities of migrants, women and workers in Detroit, Michigan.

Under Bradby's guidance, Second Baptist became a medium of black enfranchisement and racial up-lift through "launching an extensive program of education and social service to help their brethren from the South."<sup>15</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott asserts that "under the leadership of Bradby, the Second Baptist Church played a key role in the assimilation of migrants—second only to the Detroit Urban League."<sup>16</sup> Bradby and the ministry of Second continued a tradition of "racial self-help" among black Detroiters during the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> By the 1900s, Second Baptist Church evolved to become the corner stone of the black community in Detroit in the early twentieth century. In 1910, Second's

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<sup>15</sup> *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1949*, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan, 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Bradby and the Detroit Urban League maintained definite ties, making Second Baptist one of the main centers for black labor recruitment by the League. In fact, historian Richard Thomas notes that Bradby even "extended an open invitation to the League to use the church auditorium for public meetings." Bradby also donated gym equipment to the Urban League to support Forest Washington's plan to build a community gym.; Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 59.

membership had tripled, growing from the thirteen scant individuals to 3500 with a building fund of \$1000.00.<sup>18</sup>

Continuing the tradition of “black self-help” that Second Baptist upheld for its earlier years, Bradby endeavored to protect and uplift the inexperienced migrant coming into Detroit. He pushed Second Baptist to become the foremost place of black “self-help,” thereby becoming what migrants termed the “Home of Strangers.” Bradby’s action reflected the times. Progressivism, social reform and the Social Gospel became influential forces driving his push for Second Baptist to become the locus of self-help in Detroit.

As early as 1904, Second Baptist had already begun to operate as a “Home of Strangers.” In that year, Mrs. Etta Taylor, long-time member of Second Baptist, organized the Christian Industrial Club with the purpose of providing young men and women with assistance newly coming to Detroit. The club’s emphasis however was on meeting the needs of young women migrants entering the city. The Christian Industrial Club assisted these women in finding jobs and safe lodging. The club also established another support for young migrant women in the Frances Harper Inn. The Inn operated as a boarding house for employed women. Second Baptist assisted the Inn through a small monetary fund in order to keep the Inn open. Although the Inn provided a safe means of housing for women migrants, it was poorly funded and was known by only a few members of the black community.<sup>19</sup> Bradby ensured the continuation of the Industrial

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<sup>18</sup>Mary Branton Tule, “Second Baptist Church Eyewitness History,” reel 3 Second Baptist Church Papers-Pastor’s Papers R. L. Bradby, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History: Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1976), 17.

Club and encouraged the group to extend its support as the migration population began to explode in Detroit.

During the first wave of the Great Migration, Bradby helped to establish one of the most outstanding ministries to migrants between 1917 and 1919. During these crucial years, “the church launched an extensive program of education and social service to help their brethren from the South.”<sup>20</sup> One facet of this program of education and social service was the establishment of committees within the church that were sent out to meet “every train coming into Detroit to greet and offer assistance to the Negroes arriving here.”<sup>21</sup> Second Baptist became the “chief center with committees to meet incoming trains to offer the assistance of the church.”<sup>22</sup> Bradby had committees meet migrants at bus depots and train stations around the clock. Many of these newcomers spent their first night in Detroit, sleeping on Second Baptist’s church benches, some even staying in Second’s lower auditorium, the church gym.<sup>23</sup>

Fully aware of the plight facing black migrants in Detroit, particularly women, under Bradby’s leadership another effective ministry was established. Although there were many other women lead clubs and auxiliaries that Bradby help to establish, none was as impactful as the Big Sisters Auxiliary. Organized in 1919, the aim of this group was to maintain a home for young migrant women and other young girls in need. The group provided protection and instruction to the young black women of Detroit, giving them

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<sup>20</sup> “Preface,” *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Second Baptist Church of Detroit Members Manual,” Second Baptist Church Papers, p. 9, reel 2, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>23</sup> Leach and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, 45, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.; Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 37.

examples in respectable womanhood. Bradby allotted a certain amount of church funds to the maintenance of the Big Sisters home which was located on 2141 St. Aubin in Detroit. Many migrant women found protection from the Red Light District of Detroit as well as solace from women who adhered to Christian principles.

Bradby's ministry to migrants was so effective that his church services were filled to capacity, thereby creating a need for associate ministers, the first being Reverend Charles A. Hill, 1919-1920.<sup>24</sup> One member, Dr. Nathaniel Leach stated, that it was quite common back then for the church to have to turn away hundreds of worshippers from the church doors because the church was so crowded.<sup>25</sup>

Bradby also helped to orchestrate the Baptist Christian Center to meet the needs of migrants. In August of 1918, during one of the hottest afternoon that month, Bradby met with W.P. Lovett, of the Detroit Citizens League, and Rev. H.C. Gleiss, Superintendent of the Detroit Baptist Union, to discuss how best to accommodate the needs of migrants pouring into Detroit by the thousands.<sup>26</sup> This meeting sparked the establishment of the Advisory Council for Negro Work of the Detroit Baptist Union, which organized the Baptist Christian Center. The center operated as a vehicle of Christian socialization within the lives of newcomers.<sup>27</sup> The main emphasis of the center was to "meet the

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<sup>24</sup> Other associate ministers acquired by Second under Bradby's tenure were Reverend Lee T. Clay, 1920-1922, Reverend H.L. McNeil, 1922-1926; Reverend Robert A. Moody, 1926-1929, and Reverend Edward C. Simmons, 1935-; "Preface," *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Nathaniel Leach, Interview, April 18, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> It was estimate that during the summer of 1918 black migrants were pouring into Detroit at "the rate of about 2000 or 2500 per month. The number of Negro Baptist churches increased from two in 1916 to 88 in 1935, from a membership of about 900 to at least 30,000."; "Baptist Christian Center," box 6, folder I. United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>27</sup> Note: The Advisory Council for Negro Work of Detroit Baptist Union consisted of 56 churches, all from the Baptist denominations both black and white within Detroit. Despite the interracial make-up of the council, the center consisted of an all black faculty. The headquarters of this group was at 1718 Russell



social needs of the Negro migrant who came to Detroit in such large numbers during the 1918 and 1919; to provide a place where the underprivileged and needy Negroes could be assisted, and to secure employment.”<sup>28</sup> The center targeted three main groups of newcomers: children, young people and adults. The catalyst for Bradby’s support and implementation of the Baptist Christian Center was the theological imperative of establishing the “kingdom of God.” The center believed, “the child is the future disciple of the kingdom, related in a vital way to the purposes of God...his education both in faith and works of Christianity, is tremendously important.”<sup>29</sup>

Here, we see aspects of the theology of Social Gospel in Bradby’s ministry works towards migrants. The Baptist Christian Center was geared toward educating young migrants and church members in the fundamentals of respectability and Christianity. The center proclaimed and operated on the premise that the principles of Christianity must be lived out in everyday situations. Here, progressive reform principles were manifested. Classes in the Bible, Missions, Theology for women and young ministers, English classes, dressmaking, art, cooking and music were taught at the center.<sup>30</sup> Even a class on “Health and Home Nursing,” was taught every Thursday with an attendance of twenty-five women.<sup>31</sup> Bradby gave his total support to the Baptist Christian Center, even

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Street. In 1933, center moved its location to Joseph Campau & Andt Street .; “Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services Papers, Central Files, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

<sup>28</sup> Mattie G. Anderson, “Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services Papers- Central Files, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

<sup>29</sup> “Christian Center of Detroit Michigan-Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

<sup>30</sup> “Christian Center of Detroit Michigan-Baptist Christian Center,” p. 2, United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

<sup>31</sup>It should also be noted that Mattie G. Anderson, head of the Baptist Christian Center, related that “in the fall of 1934 to the summer of 1939 a Nursery School for under-nourished children of preschool age was conducted at the Center. This school was staffed entirely by WPA workers and the food for these children

participating in the March 25, 1935 Rededication Ceremony of the Center as its main speaker.<sup>32</sup> According to Wolcott, “the Baptist Christian Center was designed to be “purely a social application of Christian teaching.”<sup>33</sup> The social application of Christian principles at the Baptist Christian Center reflected Bradby’s social political reading of biblical. At the core of the center’s ministry to migrants was the understanding that the center operated as a “settlement house, which has as its primary purpose the promotion of godliness among its members; but happily it seeks to do this through...practical activities.”<sup>34</sup>

For Bradby, the Baptist Christian Center was another arm of the black church and reflected the church’s mission to establish the kingdom of God by meeting the needs of the black community, migrants, women and workers. Bradby pushed Second Baptist to create schools, clubs, social groups, literary societies and other social services groups that functioned as mediums of black “self-help” in the lives of migrants. Affiliates of the Baptist Christian Center credit Second Baptist and Bradby for making “heroic efforts to cope with the situation. They organized themselves for institutional work. They put in play equipment and enlarged their staff...”<sup>35</sup>

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was furnished by the same organization.”; Mattie G. Anderson, “Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.; Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Rededication Baptist Christian Center,” box 6, folder I, United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>33</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 66-67.

<sup>34</sup> Butzel’s report on the activities of the center note that “athletics, music and elementary handicraft, and even “cooking,”...all these are connected up with religion. For example cooking is combined with a bible class. At the moment the girls are learning stories and passages from the book of Mark; when they have committed the required materials to memory, they will cook a food beginning with the letter M, macaroni this time.”; Rosalie K. Butzel, “The Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

<sup>35</sup> “Baptist Christian Center,” United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

Undergirded by a few full time staff members, trustees and deacons, Bradby began organizing ministry committees that addressed every need known to the migrant. Under Bradby, Second began to expand its Sunday School in order to accommodate the massive number of migrant children pouring into the city. The leadership of black women replaced the patriarchal leadership of the past in the school, and thrust Second Baptist to extending its ministry into the very homes of its parishioners. By 1940, the Sunday School consisted of over 800 students with ten separate divisions. Sections of the Sunday School started from “cradle rollers” up through adult and leadership training. Each department held its own worship periods and quarterly departmental meetings. Indeed, Bradby ran his Sunday School along the lines of a large scale university.<sup>36</sup>

Second even established a Social Service Department designed not only to address issues of housing and employment for the black community, but also to train the teachers of the Sunday School Department. Training was primarily based in preparing young people, particularly women in dressing making, home nursing, public speaking, basic electronics and stenography. The overarching emphasis of this training was the development of job skills among the Detroit black community for employment purposes.<sup>37</sup>

Black women were key participants in many of the ministries, but nowhere as much as in the Second’s Sunday School department. Black women operated as leaders and teachers within the Second’s Sunday School department and overwhelmingly outnumbered black men in the same positions. Black churchwomen became the locus of

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<sup>36</sup> “The General Sunday School of Second Baptist Church,” p. 43., *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>37</sup> Cara Shelly, “Bradby’s Baptist: Second Baptist church 1910-1946,” (Ph.D., diss, University of Michigan, 1990), 23.

power behind Bradby's effectiveness within the Detroit community, especially with regard to the newcomer and the nuclear black family. As stated earlier, the Big Sisters' Auxiliaries was established under Bradby to maintain a settlement house for black migrant women.

Another effective ministry under Bradby that was headed primarily by black churchwomen was the Home Department of the Sunday School of Second Baptist. The Home Department was designed to take the teachings of the Sunday School into the homes of families whose parents and children did not attend Church or Sunday School. The Home Department also distributed religious tracts and magazines, visited the sick and shut-in at hospitals, sanatoriums and even held socials with programs designed to discover new talents.<sup>38</sup>

Mrs. Birdie Wilson operated as the first superintendent of the Home Department, organizing Sunday School literature to be distributed in various homes and even setting up lessons to be taught by workers. Other leaders of this department were Superintendents, Mrs. Daisy Woodward, Mrs. Clara Banks; and Mrs. Ella M. Harris. These women consisted of Second's main outreach program to the Detroit migrant community. As leaders under Bradby, these black women understood prayer, faith in God, and volunteer service as the basis for their work. Because they had access to the homes of black Detroiters, they were instrumental in alerting Bradby and the church to the conditions of black congregants and their needs.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>“Home Department of the Sunday School,” *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Bradby was also instrumental in establishing clubs that trained members and migrants in respectability and godliness. The Dress Well Club, the Baptist Training Union, The Baptist Christian Center, and the Cultural Committee of Second Baptist Church were organized for the direct purpose of orienting members to exemplify behavior that reflected biblical mandates and respectability. In 1919, one of the men's group of Second Baptist Church, the Loyal Christian Brotherhood joined with the Young Negroes Progressive Association to form the Dress Well Club. This group was organized to create a more positive image of black newcomers in society, stressing the importance of correct public behavior, dress, and personal appearance. The Club was open to all black persons in Detroit. The one rule of the club was that its members had to carry a card listing sixteen guidelines to be observed at all times. According to Miles, these points emphasized "the most pressing behavioral problems in the black community of a non-criminal nature."<sup>40</sup>

1. Dress well-don't wear dirty clothes on street cars, or flashy clothes
2. Don't wear overalls on Sundays
3. Don't sit barefooted in front of your house or loll around barefooted on Belle Isle
4. Don't allow women to go out in bungalow aprons or boudoir caps
5. Don't braid children's hair in knots, alley, and canals
6. Don't loaf-get a job at once
7. Don't talk loud in public places
8. Don't keep children out of school
9. Don't send for family unless you have a job
10. Don't think you can keep a job unless you are sober
11. Don't fool with patent medicines
12. Don't fail to be an active church member
13. Don't buy on installment
14. Start a savings account
15. Don't spend all the money for pleasures
16. Call on the Urban League if you need help

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<sup>40</sup> Norman Kenneth Miles, "Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929," (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1978), 170.

“These rules will help blacks make good, and keep down prejudice, race friction, and discrimination.”<sup>41</sup> Although under the guidance of the Detroit Urban League, Reverend Bradby strongly encouraged the formation of the Dress Well Club and even published some of the ideology of the Dress Well Club in the church’s weekly newsletter, the *Second Baptist Herald*.<sup>42</sup> For Bradby, respectability was a reflection of Christian morality and of the Social Gospel.

In February of 1933, Bradby oversaw the establishment of the Baptist Training Union. Under the leadership of Mrs. Mary E. Cole General Director, this group had as its objective the training of new members in the fundamentals of Christian service. New congregants were trained how to be upstanding participators in the various church ministries and social functions. The Baptist Christian Center operated along the same lines as the Baptist Training Union, yet sought to extend the principles of Christian living beyond the doors of the church into the community.

Another ministry to the growing migrant community was organized in September 1937. The Cultural Committee of Second Baptist was launched to sponsor programs designed to enhance and introduce the black community to the art of public speaking, dramas and cantatas. Biblically based, this committee felt it had a divine mandate to nurture the cultural consciousness of its fellow parishioners and the surrounding black community.

The establishment of such dynamic ministries unto migrants solidified Second Baptist as being the “Home of Strangers” in the eyes of black migrants. Yet, as in any family, strife and conflict occur at times, and this was the case at Second Baptist. Despite the

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<sup>41</sup> Dress Well Club, Dress Well Club Card, 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

draw of Second Baptist to southern migrants, the church known as the “Stranger’s Home” held some members that were hostile toward new migrants. Resentment arose between Old black Detroiters and the “New” Detroiters newly come from the South. Much of this resentment sprung from inter- and intra-racial tensions. Members of the “old guard,” those Detroiters who had settled in Detroit during the antebellum period, had integrated into the white community with a small degree of acceptance and privilege. Many of these blacks held prominent positions in social-political arenas of Detroit’s society. However, with the influx of rural southern migrants into the city, white elites began to perceive all African Americans as one group. Whites made no distinction between what they understood as “uncultured” migrants and the “Old Detroiters.” Old Detroiters recognized the change in white perceptions of black Detroiters and began to create class distinctions within the black community, especially within the church. New Detroiters felt the rejection from Old Detroiters and developed disdain for those blacks they felt were interested more in their own advantages than in the welfare of the whole community.<sup>43</sup>

Bradby was optimistic about the relationship between Old Detroiters and newcomers within his congregation. He believed, like other ministers in his day, that the importance of cooperation would impact the minds of both groups for the advancement of the race. Cooperation and racial uplift was Bradby’s goal, especially as it related to the economic prospects of his growing migrant church community. The Holy Scriptures in the Bible upheld the principles of cooperation and racial uplift. God pushed for racial uplift when

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<sup>42</sup> Cara Shelly L. “Bradby’s Baptist,” 29.; Keith, “Home at Last,” 169-170.

<sup>43</sup> *The Negro In Detroit: Report of the Major’s Committee on Race Relations*, Detroit: Detroit Bureau of Government Research, 1926. ; and Cara Shelly L. “Bradby’s Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1910-1946,” *Michigan Historical Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 7-8.

he freed the Israelites from Egyptian tyranny. Bradby understood God calling him to do the same for the African American community. Yet for Bradby, part of this divine duty to uplift the race was tied to issues of respectability. Historian Victoria Wolcott notes that the Detroit Urban League worked in tandem with Second Baptist in promoting in a discourse of respectability that emphasized domesticity, thrift, outward appearance in an effort to help migrants integrate into urban life. According to Wolcott, Second Baptist was the major institution, outside of the Urban League, that promoted an ideology of respectability among the black community. As the head pastor of Second Baptist, Bradby establishment of ministries such as the Christian Industrial Club, the Dress Well Club, Big Sisters Auxiliary and the Baptist Christian Center was clearly a reflection of his adherence to Christian beliefs and issues of respectability. These two realities became the foundation of his understanding of “racial uplift.”

These components of Bradby’s theology and his understanding of “racial uplift” can also be seen in his editorial writings. As head editor of the church’s newspaper, the *Herald*, Bradby wrote powerful editorials and articles encouraging his members to adhere to the ideologies of thrift, respectability, and entrepreneurial ship. One article recites a member asking if going into business for oneself was a good idea. The *Herald* answers with an affirmative “yes, if you are able to work hard and save your money.”<sup>44</sup> Bradby’s control of the *Herald* ensured that there were weekly articles and advertisements that reflected the business interest of the black community. Even the church’s anniversary booklets were filled with prominent black entrepreneurs.

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<sup>44</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 5 September 1926, 3 October 1926, 17 June 1928, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.



Bradby took his drive to enhance the economic status of migrants within Detroit to another level when he made connections with Ford Motor Company. A man of vision and tenacity, Bradby recognized opportunities for advancement. He was not blind then to the positive prospects of interacting with one of the most powerful forces within the Detroit community. Receiving a luncheon invitation issued by one of Ford's top executives, Bradby stated that he walked into the office of C.E. Sorenson. Sorenson showed Bradby a drawer full of knives, guns and other paraphernalia used as some of the African Americans employed in the plant against white workers. Sorensen asked for Bradby's cooperation in quelling the violence, while asking if Bradby would recommend more suitable black workers for employment at the plant.

The luncheon was the beginning of a lucrative relationship between Bradby, Second Baptist and the Ford Motor Company. By 1919, Ford had issued a new policy of employing blacks in all hourly wage classifications. The five-dollar a day wage Ford paid to its workers attracted large numbers of black men. Yet Ford was looking for trustworthy African Americans to employ in his plant. Historian David Allen Levine, writes that the "men at Ford, as always, sought to ensure a supply of sober, efficient, dependable workers...More and more Henry Ford came to rely on another means of screening workers. He developed close relations with Detroit's respectable clergy."<sup>45</sup>

Bradby, as the pastor of one of the largest, if not the largest African American church in Detroit, figured prominently in Ford's hiring practices. For Ford, Bradby could

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that African American ministers have been utilized in recruiting strategies in other industries such as steel and meat-packing. Yet, Henry Ford's connection with black clergy stands as the most expansive and prominent use of black ministers in employment practices. "Remarks by R.L. Bradby," 28 September 1931, Second Baptist Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.; David Allan Levine, *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit 1915-1926*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1976), 97.; Lloyd H. Bailer, "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry," (Ph.D., diss., University of Michigan, 1943), 113.

supply hard working, respectable black men to his plant, while Bradby could provide church members with jobs and receive other monetary support from the company. In the early stages of the relationship, both the Ford Motor Company and Second Baptist benefited greatly from their interaction. As historian Oliver Zunz writes, “Ford was the only employer in the city (Detroit)...to develop openly a hiring network among Blacks in Detroit through Reverend Bradby of the Second Baptist Church.”<sup>46</sup>

It is important to note that Bradby was not the only minister to enjoy Ford’s solicitation. His connection with Ford placed him at the top of black ministers whose influence could shape an entire community. Ford eventually began to solicit the help of another outstanding black ministers, Father Everard Daniel of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church and Reverend William Peck of Bethel A.M.E. Bradby, however, was to have recruited the largest number of African Americans for Ford Motor company.<sup>47</sup> A more thorough discussion of the Bradby-Ford relationship is found in chapter three.

Despite the achievements made for migrants through Second at places like Ford Motor Company and other industrial agencies, by the early 1930s the Detroit African American community was feeling the economic devastation of the Great Depression. Bradby’s weekly mailing itinerary is filled with letters to business owners, mortgage companies, and installment companies on behalf of his members. Many of these letters plead with

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<sup>46</sup> Oliver Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 396.

<sup>47</sup> Levine notes that “The Reverend Bradby was a personal friend of some of the top officials and Father Daniel was a favorite of Henry Ford himself. Mr. And Mrs. Ford visited St. Matthew’s annually, and Ford made several substantial contributions to the church. The St. Matthew’s parish house was Ford’s gift. More over, the Negro-Relations executive of the Ford Motor Company, Donald Marshall, was a member of St. Matthews.” ; Levine, *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit*, 98.

utility companies and the like to extend installment agreements in order to keep his members from being evicted or the heat being shut off.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the strains of the Depression, Second Baptist maintained an uncanny ability to accommodate the needs of many migrants and blacks within Detroit. Much of this ability was attributed to the influence of numerous letters Bradby wrote on behalf of migrants and hurting church members. Poverty, unemployment, imprisonment and racial discrimination were catalysts that sparked Bradby's pen to move in resistance and protest against black disenfranchisement and oppressive white power structures on behalf of his members. Bradby's letters reflected the growing needs of the Detroit community and provided him an aggressive tool by which to promote the justice and equality that God's kingdom demanded in the lives of African American migrants.

Bradby's letters are written to some of the highest officials within the community of Detroit. One letter, written to Detroit Prosecutor Harry S. Troy speaks out against the racial discrimination experienced by some of his members at a local delicatessen. Bradby writes, "They insistently refuse to serve colored people sitting at the counter. Their excuse always is that the seats are reserved, which of course it is not true. I have just come from there...the assistant manger's exact words to me were: "I will be dead a thousand years before a nigger will ever sit down at my counter."<sup>49</sup> Bradby urges the prosecutor to write to the establishment and remind the racist owners of the dangers of disregarding the rights of African Americans according to the laws of the State of Michigan.

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<sup>48</sup> "Addressee record book listing problem and date of letter," Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Bradby attacked racism wherever it reared its head. Writing to Miss Vilena McDonald, the supervisor of Health Education at Northwestern High School, Bradby strongly protest the segregation and mistreatment of students in Class B-9. He writes, "I am sure that you will not continue to segregate the children because they are colored and thereby add further humiliation to what they already have to suffer because of American Prejudice."<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, Bradby continued to wage war against racism and black disenfranchisement within Detroit society. Writing to C.J. Winniegar, Superintendent of the Personnel Department at Dodge Motor Car Corporation, Bradby requested that the Superintendent rehire a recently laid off African American man, named Mr. Alfred Ryan. The letter allows a glimpse into the character of Bradby, for he writes this letter on behalf of an individual who is not a member of his church. Mr. Alfred Ryan is a struggling African American man trying to survive during the Great Depression in Detroit. He has no claim on Bradby, apart from being a soul in need of comfort and salvation through the multifaceted ways Bradby can dispense it.

In the letter, Bradby relates how the Depression has seriously crippled the financial stability of Ryan, who has been a diligent elevator operator for twelve years at the Dodge Motor Car. Using the power of his recommendation, Bradby reminds the superintendent of his parishioner's loyalty to the company and personal credibility, stating, "I have

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<sup>49</sup>Letter, R. L. Bradby to Harry S. Troy, March 27, 1931., Second Baptist Papers, Reel 3, Bentley Historical Library.

<sup>50</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Vilena McDonald, 25 September 1926, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection. .

known him for a great number of years and he is one of the finest men I have ever known.”<sup>51</sup>

Bradby’s desire to meet the needs of the migrant community even reached the highest of political officials in Detroit. In 1931, Bradby wrote a letter to the mayor of Detroit, John W. Smith, in hopes of gaining employment for A.J. Bell and Thomas M. Harris. He wishes to have the two placed as “motormen.” Bradby also request a position for a black male with an artificial limb. He writes, “I am keenly interested in getting them a position where their worth and quality will speak for itself..... If you assist me in this matter, I shall consider it a favor that will demand my life-long gratitude.”<sup>52</sup>

Bradby knew the power he could wield on behalf of his community. He makes no blatant boast about his charismatic influence on his large church community, yet his letter implies that the mayor would be wise in meeting the demands of Bradby, if for nothing else to gain the support of the most influential connection to black voters in Detroit.

Over a hundred of Bradby’s letters operated as either a weapon against racist agendas or as a stimulant to the consciences of white officials who withheld the means of existence from those they had exploited. His correspondences also alerted him to the growing needs of the migrant community. In response, the ministries of Second Baptist were continually expanded to address the conditions of the black community.

Bradby’s ministry to black migrants in Detroit demonstrates what historian Milton Sernette notes as a “fusion” between two understandings of the church’s mission within the black church. “Praise” and “protest” are two African American church traditions that

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<sup>51</sup>Robert L. Bradby to C. J. Winniegar, 26 May 1931, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection..

<sup>52</sup>Robert L. Bradby to Mayor John W. Smith, 7 January 1925, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

merged together in the North as a result of the Great Migration. The praise and worship of the God of the Old Testament was blended together with non-violent revolutionary protest activities of Jesus in the New Testament. Both realities became fluid entities within the theology of the early twentieth black church that intermingled with each other through physical manifestations of preaching, social service programs and black pride. As Sernett notes, “There were Pharaohs on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line preventing an African American exodus of significant magnitude until World War I.”<sup>53</sup> Bradby and the church community of Second knew well the oppression of the “Pharaoh” in the North.

However, in the new Promised Land, Bradby understood that God was still the god of the oppressed, and that he sent his son Jesus to redeem black humanity from white racial oppression. Jesus’ life and journey to the cross provided Bradby with the example and the means of this redemption through non-violent actions of protest and agitation on behalf of the poor, powerless, and oppressed of Detroit.

Bradby orchestrated the ministries of Second Baptist to function through the mediums of “protest” and “praise” in order to improve the quality of freedom of black migrants and Detroiters. Praise was manifested through preaching and teaching of Christian worldviews, values and principles through church organizations as the Baptist Training Union or the many groups with Second’s massive Sunday School programs. Protest came through courses designed to train migrants in domestic services, reading and writing and even in respectable behavior. Protest also came in the form of Bradby’s mighty pen, his many letters in protest of racist treatment of his members, his recommendations on behalf

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<sup>53</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Bound For the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 248.

of jobless migrants and members, his writings pleading with financial agencies to extend credit to poverty-stricken congregants during the Depression.

In all these actions, Bradby fulfilled his goal of establishing the kingdom of God in the Detroit black community. Through Bradby, thousands of black migrants experienced a better standard of living than they ever had in the South. As far as the industrial corporations of Detroit are concerned, Brady was instrumental in reshaping the social patterns in the work place. Blacks and whites worked together at Ford and Dodge. They gained employment working for the city and education board, jobs that were heretofore unattainable by blacks.

Bradby and the ministry of Second Baptist enabled black migrants to experience a rebirth in their economic and social situations. In the South, they were utterly segregated, whereas in the North they could hold jobs in the same company as whites. Bradby's ministries also helped to establish the church of Second Baptist as a cornerstone in the black community of Detroit. Historian Milton Sernett supports this point, writing, "On the whole, African American churches in the North did extend a helping hand to migrants...Aiding migrants to find housing and employment was seen as a racial duty...Finally aid rendered was viewed as a necessary extension of the traditional practice of Christian benevolence."<sup>54</sup> Bradby took Sernett's view of Christian benevolence further and linked it to the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Robert L. Bradby personified the Social Gospel's theology of social salvation and the kingdom of God, both aspects, which are found in the contemporary teachings of liberation theology. Bradby manifested the cry of liberation theologians and reformers of the Social Gospel. Adherents of the social gospel believed that God had sanctioned

them to fight for justice and righteousness in all areas of man's life. The ultimate fulfillment of this mandate was the establishment of the kingdom of God. According to social gospel theologians Walter Rauschenbush, Washington Gladden, and Josiah Strong, true Christianity was not simply relegated to the spiritual, it was lived and visualized as taking shape in the present physical world. The immanence of God and God's rule according to the dictates of the scripture in all areas of life must be established. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ constituted the principles of the kingdom. Jesus' life was understood to be one divinely sanctioned to fight against every form of social injustice and inequality.<sup>55</sup>

In each movement of his pen and in each development of a new ministry unto the migrant community, Bradby exemplified the doctrines of the Social Gospel. By speaking out against racism, fighting for jobs on behalf of black migrants, maintaining connections with the political officials, and even working to free blacks who were incarcerated, Bradby created an indigenous movement for justice which entailed working for the social-economic stability of blacks as well as the eradication of racial discrimination. Bradby embodied Rauschenbush's "social salvation." He was not just a preacher that was concerned over the redemption of souls; he was a social gospel reformer and a race leader. And he combined these roles to advance the black race and pursue Christian mandates that spoke to issues of black uplift and freedom.

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<sup>54</sup> Milton Sernett, *Bound For the Promised Land*, 245.

<sup>55</sup> Walter Rauschenbush, "Belated Races and the Social Problems," *Methodist Review Quarterly* (South), LXII (April. 1914), 252-259.; Ronald C. White Jr., "Social Christianity and the Negro in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920," (unpublished dissertation: Princeton University, 1972), 2-3.



### CHAPTER THREE: BLACK WORKERS, REVEREND BRADBY AND HENRY FORD

Richard Thomas's *Life for Us Is What We Make It* presents a conceptual framework that explains the dynamics of early twentieth century Detroit and the evolution of the black community. His understanding of what he terms the "community building process" speaks to the totality of historical "efforts of black individuals, institutions, and organizations to survive and progress as a people and to create and sustain a genuine and creative communal presence." At the core of this process is the drive by the black community to fulfill its vision of freedom and equality. It is a continual massive movement toward freedom, a better quality of freedom than that experienced in the past. Thomas argues that the black Detroit community building process must be seen in "the sum total of the historical efforts of blacks in industrial Detroit to survive and progress."<sup>1</sup> These historical efforts must be addressed in a variety of contexts with emphasis on the relationships between "proletarianization, institutional life, politics, race relations, and particularly ghetto formation."<sup>2</sup>

The leadership of Rev. Bradby and the activities of Second Baptist Church, particularly in connection with Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company, constitute one context by which the black struggle for survival and progress can be assessed within the Detroit community. The intersection of the black struggle for freedom within Industrial Detroit and that of institutional life as it is understood in and through the black church

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<sup>1</sup> Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

provides a framework in understanding the nature of black self-help and the pursuit of freedom during the early twentieth century.

Rev. Bradby organized Second Baptist as a vehicle of black progress and survival in Detroit. Under his leadership, Second became a medium by which African Americans could enter into the industrial working class, an area heretofore restricted to them. Survival was manifested in Second's massive self-help organizations as seen through its many church auxiliaries.

The most lucrative relationship created on behalf of the Detroit black community that promoted the survival and continual progress of the black community in Detroit was between Bradby and Henry Ford. Here, we have a relationship between secular (Ford Motor Company) and sacred (Second Baptist Church) institutions, which eventuated in the advancement and survival of the Detroit black community. Many of the migrants filtering into Second Baptist's ministries were given recommendations by Bradby to Ford Motor Company. Bradby constituted a direct medium for African Americans to enter the industrial working class, thereby creating both a means of economic survival and advancement for blacks into the Detroit industrial working class.

Bradby nurtured his relationship with the Ford Company over a 23 year period. As a result, Second Baptist soon became known as the place where one could get a job at Ford. Bradby understood himself to be a significant part of the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford and general manger Charles E. Sorenson for the most part, reflected Bradby's sentiments and provided special favors to him such as theatre tickets and the like.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Charles E. Sorenson, 7 June 1929; Robert L. Bradby to Charles E. Sorenson, 14 October 1937; Charles E. Sorenson to Robert L. Bradby, 5 October 1937, accession 38, box 125, Ford Archives, Dearborn, Michigan.

Bradby's influence in relationship to black enfranchisement within the automobile industry was seen in the power of his pen. A personal recommendation from Bradby was tantamount to being guaranteed a job at Ford. But Bradby made it a point to recommend only those who exemplified good moral character, maintained regular church attendance, and demonstrated responsible behavior. As historian Milton C. Sernett notes, "Bradby promised to recommend "very high type fellows" to the company."<sup>4</sup>

Bradby's recommendation action in itself, became a means of empowerment for blacks in Detroit. Blacks were proud to hold a city or factory job, especially at Ford. It was a sign of prestige and honor to be recognized as a factory worker. Historian Nathaniel Leach notes that members at Second would proudly wear their Ford badges on their arms to Sunday morning worship.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the self-esteem and perspective of the black community began to experience a gradual change. Migrants began to support themselves and maintain their families, while at the same time give money back to the church.<sup>6</sup>

Bradby's connection with Ford and the power inherent in his recommendation allowed Bradby to make definite strides in establishing the "kingdom of God" within the Detroit black community. Economic empowerment in an area heretofore denied black migrants were now made available through his dynamic relationship with one of the most powerful individuals in the nation. Bradby realized that he had the opportunity not only to increase the financial stability of his church community, but also to combat derogatory images of

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<sup>4</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). 148.

<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Leach, interview by author, Detroit, Mich., 18 April 2001.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that in 1927, Ford laid off over 1500 black workers, due to the Great Depression. However, those blacks that maintained their jobs continued to view working at Ford as a status symbol of progress.

African Americans in the eyes of white power structures by providing the industrial giants with individuals who exemplified the tenets of respectability. These men and women dressed well, held good church attendance, behaved respectfully, and even were trained in church-taught courses on thrift and domesticity.<sup>7</sup> These attributes that Bradby promoted reflected a middle-class bourgeois mentality. As Victoria Wolcott asserts “Within the boundaries of the Second Baptist Church, a bourgeois discourse of respectability remained central to reform work, especially as it applied to girls and women.”<sup>8</sup>

Many of these individuals were migrants who had been transformed in appearance and behavior by the preaching and teaching of Bradby. Respectability and Christianity went hand in hand for Bradby in establishing God’s kingdom among the Detroit black community. Justice and equality on a certain level was now being established for Bradby by his relationship with Ford.

By 1929, Bradby had formed longstanding ties with Ford Motor Company and established the black laborer as a prominent resident among Ford employees. The Second Baptist *Herald*, Second’s weekly newsletter, gave front-page recognition to this fact, reporting, “It is a matter of record that the policy of Ford Company is to employ a fair percentage of colored employees. We rejoice in the spirit as shown here. This rejoicing carries with it the hope that the conduct of our laborers will be such as to increase the

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<sup>7</sup> Outside of the establishment of the Baptist Christian Center and the Industrial Club, Bradby also pushed the development of Second Baptist’s Social Service Educational Institution in 1926 to 1929. The institution was staffed with 18 teachers with an average enrollment of about 150 students. Courses taught ranged from home-making, cooking, to reading and writing.; “Church History,” *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 161-162.

employed ratio.”<sup>9</sup> The black worshipping community at Second rejoiced in the new economic opportunities opened to them.

In the solicitation of black ministers as employment recruiters, Henry Ford gained a direct line to black labor, which compensated Ford Motor’s labor shortage due to World War I and II. Bombarded with government contracts for war parts, and faced with losing many of his labor supply to the draft, Ford was eager to find another source of cheap labor to sustain his growing company.

Many in Detroit society began to criticize Bradby, remarking that he pushed to increased membership roles and his pockets through connection with Ford. Earlier perspectives of Bradby equated him with both black and white ministers who operated in the same vein as unscrupulous politicians. In this view, the shady preacher and the immoral politician sought amicable relations with industrial magnets who could provide their members with jobs, thereby increasing church attendance which would in turn increase the revenues of the church and swelled the pockets of the pastor.<sup>10</sup> Bradby heartily denied these accusations and posited that only a small number of his recommendations were on behalf of his members.<sup>11</sup>

By 1931, General Major C.E. Sorensen and Bradby had developed such a lucrative relationship that Bradby wrote a personal letter of thanks and appreciation to him and Henry Ford for employing so many of his members. He writes, “I want you to know how

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<sup>9</sup> *Second Baptist Herald*, 12, no. 1 13 January 1929, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd H. Bailer, “Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry,” 113.; Levine, *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit*, 98.; Robert L. Bradby to Donald Marshall, Special Investigator in Personal Department, 20 November 1931, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.; and Shelly “Bradby’s Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1910-1946,” 17.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Donald Marshall, 20 November 1931, Second Baptist Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

happy we all are to know the attitude of the Ford Motor Company toward the unfortunate members of our group. I think it is one of the most outstanding pieces of work that has been done in the attitude of the company to people in Inkster.”<sup>12</sup>

In the beginning stages of the relationship, Bradby specifically established church auxiliaries and committees in Second Baptist Church to sustained and even advanced the economic goals of the Detroit black community, thereby building up the Detroit black community. The Bradby-Ford relationship was an intergral part of what Thomas’s coins the “black community building process.” This relationship also reflected the theological foundations inherent in some facets of black community building in Detroit. Black church leadership in Detroit understood that the advancement of the black community was contingent upon the advancement of God’s kingdom. Therefore, biblical mandates were the cornerstone of black self-help agendas and community building through the black church.

At the core of Bradby’s relationship with Henry Ford were theological imperatives based on his understanding of the “kingdom of God.” For Bradby, the advancement of the kingdom of God was connected with the advancement of black community in Detroit. This is why towards the end of a twenty-three year relationship between Second Baptist and Ford Motor Company, Bradby writes of establishing “a larger and more extensive program of the “kingdom of God.”<sup>13</sup>

This “more extensive program” Bradby refers to includes Second Baptist’s church auxiliaries and committees as well as his associations with influential people. By 1940,

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<sup>12</sup>Robert L. Bradby to C.E. Sorenson, General Manager of Ford Motor Company, 8 December 1931, Papers of Henry Ford, Acc 285, Box 1274-12BRAA BRADF, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village Research Center, Dearborn, Michigan.

however, Bradby spoke of enhancing Second's ability to meet the needs of the black community by expanding the church's many programs, auxiliaries and committees. An integral part of this program expansion was Bradby's drive to strengthen his relationships with influential white leaders in Detroit, such as the Charles E. Sorensen, General Plant Manager of Ford Motor Company, Mayor Frank Murphy and Governor Fitzgerald. For Bradby, influential relationships with white leaders and the expansion of Second Baptist's programs to better benefit the black community are all part of establishing "God's Kingdom." Bradby understood that God had given him and his church this challenge. He held all of his membership responsible for completing this divine task, claiming that all are demanded to "surrender" to God's will, following His divine mandate "whithersoever He may lead."<sup>14</sup>

On the most fundamental level, the experience of my paternal grandfather with Rev. Bradby and Ford Motor Company reflected Thomas' understanding of black community building and the theological mandates driving Bradby's connection with Ford. My grandfather needed a job, and Bradby saw a way meeting my Grandfather's need by giving him a recommendation at Ford Motor. Bradby realized the power in his recommendation to Ford Motor Company to not only sustain the welfare of my grandfather but to advance the survival and progress of the black community.

Bradby used the black church to invoke change not only in the social, political, and economic landscape of Detroit, but also in the spiritual arenas of Detroit. Bradby understood that African American life was infused the reality of spiritual as well as that

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<sup>13</sup> Reverend. Robert L. Bradby, "Preface," *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

of the social, political and economic. The growing Detroit black community in the early twentieth century conceptualized the concepts of freedom, progress, and survival through theological motifs of the Old and New Testament. Southern black newcomers to Detroit held conceptualizations of the “Promised Land” found in the book of Exodus, that were tied to the pursuit of freedom, equality, and black enfranchisement. Bradby and the leading bodies of Second understood the biblical motif of the “kingdom of God” to be the black pursuit of freedom and equality and economic advancement in Detroit.

Bradby understood black freedom and advancement to be so inextricably tied to God’s kingdom that he preached and wrote about these realities in one of Second Baptist’s most prominent publications, the *Second Baptist Herald*. In 1929, Bradby preached a series of sermons on the impact of the black church in Detroit. Throughout the latter parts of May and June, Bradby preached three series entitled: “The Detroit We’ve Made,” “The Detroit As Headed,” and “The Detroit Which Can Be.”<sup>15</sup> Following these sermons, Bradby preached a series on the life of Moses. In the June 16, 1929 edition of the *Herald*, Bradby writes “The records dealt with during the next few Sunday morning services will be taken from the book of Exodus, and the study will evolve around the life of Moses...Remember as you read it the significance of the parallel which today is to be found as pictured in the Egyptians and the Israelites.”<sup>16</sup>

Bradby’s sermon progression moves from black advancement in Detroit to the life of Moses with a call to the black church community to note the similarities in relationships between Egyptians and Israelites with that of blacks and whites in Detroit. His sermon

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<sup>15</sup> “Pastor to Initiate A Series of Vital Addresses,” *Second Baptist Herald*, 12, 5 May 1929, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 5, reel 10, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



progress ties together black pursuits of freedom and community building with God's advancement of the oppressed Hebrew community in freeing them from Egyptian domination in order to build a godly community of believers in the Promised Land. Brady links biblical conceptions of God's deliverance and providence to twentieth-century black progressivism with freedom and community building as ultimate manifestations of God's desire to establish a godly kingdom,.e.g., the Promised Land in Canaan.

Bradby manifested these biblical conceptualizations in practical expressions in and through the black church. Second Baptist became a vehicle by which Bradby could not only preach this brand of theology, but could put it into practice through mobilizing his congregants into a variety of self-help communities on behalf of the black community.

The connection between my grandfather, Reverend Bradby and Henry Ford reflected a triangular relationship that was developed over and over again among African American men coming into the Detroit during the early twentieth century. During this period, many African American men and even some women sought and even solicited the help of Reverend Bradby to obtain employment at Ford Motor Company. Like my grandfather, many of these men were returning from the war, but many others were coming up from the South. Both groups were tantalized by Ford's five dollar a day promise issued on January 5, 1917.

Automotive industries like Ford were seeking ways to alleviate the prevailing labor shortage caused by World War I and the post-war years. Other factors causing wide spread labor shortage was the cessation of European immigration during this period.

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<sup>16</sup> "Many Are Catching the Gleam," *Second Baptist Herald*, 12, 16 June 1929, Second Baptist Papers, box 5, reel 10, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Automobile firms, especially, were prevented from soliciting foreign sources of labor as they had done in the past. The massive influx of African Americans into the major urban centers of the North caught the attention of automobile industries, particularly Ford Motor Company. According to Lloyd H. Bailer, “thousands of southern Negroes left their homes, some bound for the automobile centers, others in response to the rising general demand for labor obtaining throughout the North.”<sup>17</sup>

Second Baptist worked in tandem with white and black labor organizations such as the Employers Association of Detroit and the Detroit Urban League in an effort to recruit southern labor for Detroit Industries. The Employers Association of Detroit worked in connection with the Detroit Urban League and even subsidized the salary of the League’s industrial secretary.<sup>18</sup>

In return, Bailer noted that the League supplied the Employers Association with black labor.<sup>19</sup> The Detroit Urban League encouraged black southerners to seek the comforts of Detroit industries through public statements and through agents sent to the South. Bailer writes of old Detroit residents remembering League owned trucks cruising through black neighborhoods offering jobs at some of the major industrial plants in Detroit.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the director of the Detroit Urban League, Forrester B. Washington made sure that the newspapers and other public agencies proclaimed the advantages of working in Detroit, particularly declaring the high wages black workers were afforded in the automobile

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<sup>17</sup> Lloyd H. Bailer, “Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry,” (Ph.D., diss., University of Michigan, 1943), 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

industries.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the leagues recruitment efforts, Second Baptist played an integral part, becoming one of Forrester B. Washington's main support networks in publicizing and recruiting black labor. For Bradby, this connection with the Detroit Urban League was crucial in his plan of establishing God's kingdom among the black community. Through this relationship with the Detroit Urban League and Ford Motor Company, Bradby could advance God's agenda by building up the black community through affording them employment opportunities. This was especially the case in regard to Ford Motor Company.

According to Bailer, the Ford plants held the greatest attraction for black migrants. Ford's five dollar a day wage caught the attention of many newcomers to Detroit. During the first wave of migration between 1916-1919, and the second wave between 1921 and 1924, Second Baptist under the leadership of Rev. Bradby became a beacon of hope to Detroit newcomers. Rumors of a black minister who could gain black men employment at Ford with just the swipe of his pen spread fast among the black community in Detroit. Southern migrants and other men returning from the war sought help and membership in the church known as the "Home of Strangers" among black Detroiters. Historian Richard Thomas notes "If blacks wanted a job at Ford-and just about everybody did-they had to go to one of the black churches (Second Baptist or St. Matthews) which Ford had blessed with the privilege of recommendation system."<sup>22</sup> Historian Elizabeth Ann Martin writes that Bradby's recommendation was "considered tantamount to securing a Ford Job."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Ann Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1929*, (Dearborn: Bentley Historical Library, 1993), 21.

The foundation of Bradby's relationship with Ford Motor Company was housed in his power to write recommendations on behalf of African American community. In granting Bradby the power of recommendation, Ford enabled Bradby to develop a lucrative triangular relationship between Bradby, the African American community and Ford Motor Company, which in turn helped Bradby advance "God's kingdom."

By 1919, the pews of Second Baptist were swelling with the influx of black newcomers to Detroit seeking the "Promised Land" and looking for their black Moses to lead them to the "milk and honey" of economic enfranchisement. Reverend Robert L. Bradby constituted a new kind of "Moses," a man of God who held connections with a "pharaoh" who was willing to offer a level of economic and social freedom unknown to the black community in the past.

Prior to 1917, the majority of African Americans were excluded from working in industrial companies. Jim Crow laws and racist sentiment in the North kept African Americans out of the predominantly white industrial labor classes. Henry Ford's five dollar a day promise and his willingness to hire unskilled black labor changed the face of the industrial labor class forever.

Suffice it to say that Henry Ford's hiring policy towards blacks and his solicitation of the local black church changed the economic, social, and political landscape of Detroit and exposed the power latent within the black church to effect positive economic changes within the black community. Through Bradby's connection with Ford, Second Baptist became a sacred institution, which had far reaching effects into the secular economic and social realities of its congregants. In essence, Second Baptist became a vehicle of black

agency and power during the early twentieth century through Bradby's relationship with Ford Motor Company.

This triangular relationship was the first of its kind in the automotive industrial world and it transcended secular and sacred boundaries in its inception and operation. As historian Oliver Zunz states, "Ford was the only employer in the city who initiated a new policy in 1919 of employing Blacks in all hourly-wage classifications, and the only employer to develop openly a hiring network among blacks in Detroit through Reverend Bradby of Second Baptist Church." <sup>24</sup>

Although Zunz argues that the relationship between Ford, Bradby and Second Baptist "had only a limited impact on the sociological composition of the Black community," the relationship did expand the power of the black church to transcend its sacred boundaries and positively impact the social-economic realities of the black community on a level not experienced in the past. Zunz notes that the power of the black minister to amass a large labor class through the black church was recognized by industrial magnets like Henry Ford. Henry Ford made it a point to contact Reverend Bradby because he knew well the potential of black Christian leadership to amass the "local people," as historian John Dittmer terms, and mobilize them for action, whether that action be for social freedom or for economic advancement. A letter from Charles E. Sorsenson, General Plant Manager for Ford Motor speaks to this fact, stating, "the contact you have had with us in the industrial work in our plant, is one of the angles that I

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<sup>24</sup> Oliver Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 396.

like to see attached to the work of a pastor, because it certainly gives him a broader opportunity to help his congregation.”<sup>25</sup>

Bradby was not the only minister contacted by Ford to recruit a black working class for Ford Motor Company. Reverend W. Daniel of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church was also an associate of Ford Motor Company with regards to black labor. Ford Historians Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, write that “Henry Ford and Sorensen (Ford’s chief general manager) developed special confidence in two colored pastors of Detroit, the Rev. R. L. Bradby of Second Baptist Church and the Rev. Everard W. Daniel of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, who help them find capable men, break up the use of knives, and compose differences between the races.”<sup>26</sup> This “special confidence” that Nevins and Hill refer to was particularly evident in Ford’s relationship with Bradby. Henry Ford found his relationship with the dynamic black minister so beneficial that the connection between them lasted for twenty-three years.

The beginnings of this relationship reflected the vision and hunger of one black minister determined to advance the social-political agendas of the kingdom of God among his congregants. Economic and racial uplift were prime aspirations in the agenda of the kingdom. Bradby saw in Ford an opportunity to fulfill this divine mandate and advance the realities of God’s kingdom in the lives of his people. Bradby saw within his connection with Ford an opportunity to resist black economic disenfranchisement in Detroit and enhance the quality of freedom experienced by the Detroit black community.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles E. Sorsenson to Robert L. Bradby, p. 38., 2 November 1925, in “15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Souvenir Program,” Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>26</sup> Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge 1915-1933*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 540.

In 1918 he did not refuse an invitation by Charles E. Sorenson, plant manger of Ford Motor Company to come a luncheon with some of the top Ford officials.

Bradby remembers walking into Sorensen's office and watching him pull out a drawer full of large knives, guns and other instruments used as weapons. Bradby relates that these weapons "had been carried...by members of our group that were creating an unusual disturbance within the boundaries of that organization."<sup>27</sup> Sorensen asked that Bradby assist in quelling the tensions between black and white workers. Bradby offered his connections and his ability to recommend only the "highest type" of African Americans to Ford Motor Company. In Bradby's words, his connection with Ford enabled him "to do some very definite things for a large number of the members of our group."<sup>28</sup> Those "members of our group" of course, were the Negro newcomers flowing into Detroit and the Detroit black community. As Second Baptist member Frank L. Morris states, "Fortunately he (Bradby) had the personal friendship of Henry Ford and was, therefore, placed in very favorable position to secure jobs for many of these migrants. Hundreds were beneficiaries of these efforts, which became known throughout the Southland, making Bradby a very popular person, a popularity that continued throughout his lifetime."<sup>29</sup> Another member, Mildren Dillard Croff, notes that Bradby not only provided migrants jobs at Ford, but he also gained them employment at other factories.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>"Remarks by R.L. Bradby," 28 September 1931, Second Baptist Church Papers, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection, Revised Edition Eyewitness History*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988), 69.

<sup>30</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Second Baptist Church Eyewitness History*, p. 46, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

For twenty-three years, Ford continued to uphold Bradby's recommendations and solicited his help during times of racial conflict at the plant. Over this twenty-three year period, thousands of black migrants flooded Detroit, many finding employment at Ford Motor Company.<sup>31</sup> Migrants especially looked to the motor company as a new means of economic and social mobility. Large companies like Ford and Dodge eagerly took up the influx of cheap labor from black migrants.<sup>32</sup>

Bradby's connection with Ford helped to turn the flow of black labor into Ford Motor Company. This lucrative triangular relationship was bittersweet at best for black workers at Ford Motor. Despite Bradby's success on a certain level in resisting black poverty and providing black Detroiters with a higher level of economic freedom, he could not eradicate racial inequalities inherent in Ford hiring policies and treatment toward black workers. Many African American families benefited from the five dollar a day wage at Ford, yet they paid for these benefits at extreme cost to their mental and physical health.

Charles Denby, a black worker living in Detroit in mid 1920s writes in his journal, "But everybody knew Ford was a "man-killing" place...Every worker could identify Ford workers on the streetcars going home at night. Every worker who was asleep was working for Ford. You'd see twenty asleep on cars and everyone would say, "Ford workers," On Sunday Ford workers would sleep on the way to church."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>"Ford was the largest employer, having sixteen thousand African-Americans on its payroll in 1925."; Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 14.

<sup>32</sup>According to historian Richard Thomas, World War I and the lack of European immigrant-labor created a need for a cheaper labor substitute. Companies usually identified the South and its black surplus as an adequate substitute.; Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Denby (Matthew Ward), *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*, (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989), 36, 35.



Denby's recollections reflected the harsh realities of working at Ford. Many black laborers at Ford were put in the most undesirable positions at the company. In 1926, the Mayor's Inter-racial Committee Report, under the direction of Forrester B. Washington, published a survey on the African American experience in Detroit. In the survey, it was noted that Ford Motor Company employed approximately 6,000 black men and no black females. The majority of the six thousand men were employed in unskilled manual labor.<sup>34</sup> Typically, these unskilled jobs were the most undesirable and dangerous positions in the plant. As historian Elizabeth Martin notes, black workers were given the longest and most grueling jobs. Blacks were typically given the toughest assembly jobs, under the racist notion that blacks were faster than whites and performed tasks rhythmically. Martin relates, "Employers also used stereotypes as an excuse to place blacks in the hottest jobs."<sup>35</sup>

Martin's analysis highlighted the attitude of most white officials at Ford Motor toward African American workers. An interview of a field investigator at Ford Motor stated, "Yes, some jobs white folks will not do; so they have to take niggers in, particularly in duco work, spraying paint on car bodies. This soon kills a white man. I inquired if it never killed Negroes. "Oh yes," he replied. "It shortens their lives, it cuts them down but they're just niggers."<sup>36</sup>

The sentiment of the investigator exposes the underlining perceptions of white workers towards black workers at Ford and the rationale for placing black workers in the

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that members of the Mayors-Inter-racial Committee included individuals such as Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr, Pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church, Bishop William T. Vernon, Pastor of African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Donald J. Marshall, Employment Officer, Ford Motor Company.; "The Negro in Detroit," Report Prepared for the Mayor's Inter-racial Committee by Special Survey Staff under the general Direction of the Detroit Bureau of Government Research, Inc., Section III, (Detroit, Michigan, 1926).

<sup>35</sup> Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration*, 16.

most hazardous conditions at the plants. Lloyd Bailer's work notes that in the 1930s, black automobile workers were primarily placed in the worst foundry positions possible, even at Ford Motor Company. He writes, "As in the industry generally, Negroes constitute a higher portion of all Ford foundry employees than any other departmental group...Negro production workers are found in the greatest numbers in those divisions such as foundry, where the most disagreeable production jobs (even though skilled and semi-skilled ) exist."<sup>37</sup> At Ford, Bailer notes that 55% of black workers were placed on the two toughest jobs in the foundry, that of the reels and the shakeout.

Richard Thomas notes that although the majority of black workers were placed in strenuous jobs, Ford Motor Company was the only industry that afforded blacks positions in all facets of the plant's operations. Thomas writes, "They worked on assembly lines, in drafting rooms, as bricklayers and crane operators, mechanics, electricians, and tool and die workers. At a time when few blacks could gain entry to apprentice schools in Detroit and other cities, Ford welcomed them."<sup>38</sup> Ford Motor Company had more black foremen than any other industry and even hired the first black salaried employee in the automotive industry, James C. Price. Price became the company's purchasing agent of abrasives and industrial diamonds in 1924. Opportunities were rich for black workers on

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<sup>36</sup> Bailer, "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry," 52.

<sup>37</sup> Bailer provides an in depth analysis of the effects of foundry work on the worker. He writes, "Yet foundry work has a notoriously high death rate." Citing from a report conducted by Louis I. Dublin and Robert J. Vane of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Bailer notes that "Fumes, dust, and especially sudden and extreme variations of temperature are highly conducive to the contraction of respiratory diseases. ...The dust count on some foundry jobs is almost unbelievable... The shakeout, an operation in which the casting is removed from the mold, is by far the worst in his respect. ..The heat, however, is intense. This operation, of which there are sever variations, was performed exclusively by Negroes in those plants visited."; Ibid., 62 and 68. For the report given by Louis I. Dublin and Robert J. Vane, Jr. see, Louis I. Dublin and Robert J. Vane, Jr. *Causes of Death by Occupation*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, R. 507 (1930), 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*, 274.

some level at Ford, yet the majority of black workers continued to operate in the most hazardous conditions at the Company.

Despite the harshness of the labor and the incredibly dangerous working conditions, Bradby continued to recommend black workers to Ford in an effort to better their conditions and provide them greater level of freedom. And black workers continued to flock to Ford Motor Company. In 1930, for example, an African American named Dock Hornbuckle wrote Bradby stating, “I called the church this morning but could not get you. Ford Motor Co. has started to hiring and I want you to get me on there please...I wish you would get me on at Ford’s Plant. Thanking you in advance for this favor,...”<sup>39</sup>

By the 1930s, Ford Motor Company was the largest employer of black labor in the nation, and black ministers like Bradby were in large part responsible for this reality. As Bailer states, “Personal recommendations from individuals known to company officials...have been instrumental in enabling men to secure jobs...The Negro minister and, to a lesser extent, the politician, both white and Negro, have figured prominently in this practice.”<sup>40</sup>

In certain respects, Bradby’s activities with Ford Motor Company mirrored Joshua’s predicament in the Promised Land in the Bible. Just as Joshua had to struggle and conquer the Canaanites before possessing the Promised Land, so Bradby’s recommended workers had to fight through barriers of racial discrimination at the Ford Work place and endure hardship through labor in an effort to realize their dreams of freedom. For Bradby, his relationship with Ford was seen as fulfilling God’s divine mandate in providing blacks out dense poverty and advancing God’s kingdom.

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<sup>39</sup> Dock Hornbuckle to Robert L. Bradby, 1 April 1, 1930, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Thomas posits a different view of Bradby's effectiveness in helping black Detroiters realize their dreams. In fact, Thomas argues that instead of Bradby bringing about the kingdom of God, "Bradby and Second Baptist Church became the gates to the kingdom of Ford."<sup>41</sup> For Thomas, Ford's solicitation of black ministers like Bradby, to quell racial conflicts evolved into a "strategy of corporate paternalism grounded in black community dependency."<sup>42</sup> According to Thomas, the black community was made weak and subservient to white power. Any freedom of self-initiative was stripped from the black community once connected to Ford's supposed benevolence.

Although Thomas recognizes that Bradby's power of recommendation strengthened "Bradby's and the Second Baptist Church's influence and power in the black community," he argues that this power of recommendation served to put black Detroiters "into a state of economic and political dependency."<sup>43</sup> For Thomas, Bradby's recommendations constituted "pact(s) with the Devil,"<sup>44</sup> and the Kingdom of Ford was paternalism and a gradual eroding of the agency and self-sufficiency of the black community.<sup>45</sup>

Thomas' language is strong and his assertions hold some level of truth in hind-sight. However, Bradby did not perceive his connection with Ford as crippling the black community. On the contrary, Bradby understood that his recommendations to Ford were providing financial stability and sustenance to anxious black migrants looking for work,

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<sup>40</sup> Bailer, "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry, 112.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*, 274.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 274.

food and housing. As one scholar notes, “Those black people who were in a position to recommend people for jobs in the plants felt that they were rendering a real service to the community, and were careful not to do anything which would jeopardize their good standing with the industrial giants.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Thomas fails to acknowledge that during the interwar years there were few alternatives for black economic advancement. The black church and those few agencies that were willing to hire blacks in the 1920s were the only avenues blacks were afforded.

Although the work was strenuous and housing poor, black Detroiters were afforded a level of economic and political freedom unattainable in the past, especially southern black migrants. The recommendation system was one of the few avenues presented to black leaders in advancing the black community during this period. Thomas concurs with this fact stating, “Given the alternatives, black leaders adopted the most prudent and creative strategy of community building by aligning themselves to Ford.”<sup>47</sup>

What is at issue with Thomas is the longevity of the recommendation system in enhancing the viability of the Detroit black community. Thomas argues that by the 1930s, the system was no longer effective, but extremely detrimental to the economic and political sufficiency of the black community, which manifested in “corporate paternalism.” Thomas’s perspective holds weight in this respect. Despite Bradby’s shortsightedness, one is hard pressed to deny that Bradby effected tremendous positive changes within the Detroit community, even into the 1930s. Thomas even acknowledges that the Ford family reached out to the blacks in Detroit in an effort to solidify ties and

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<sup>46</sup> Norman Kenneth Miles, “Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929,” (Ph.D. diss, University of Michigan, 1978), 81.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*, 277.

benefit the black community. Black women's and black church groups were invited to the Ford family mansion. Henry Ford put blacks over Ford exhibits at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. Thomas further notes that "among all the contributions Ford made to the social and economic well being of the black community, nothing excelled his assistance to blacks in Inkster during the Great Depression."<sup>48</sup>

Second Baptist Church and the Robert L. Bradby were the primary mediums by which the black community gained assistance through Henry Ford. Bradby was an integral part of Ford's contributions to the black community. As one scholar, Norman Kenneth Miles notes, "Bradby and Daniels (Father Daniels of St. Matthews Episcopal Church) were familiar figures around the Ford Company, and were occasionally asked to tour the plants and lunch with executives."<sup>49</sup> Historian Nathaniel Leach, seventy year member of Second Baptist, writes of Bradby roaming the Highland Park and Rouge Plants in the Detroit area, "resolving interracial conflicts and tensions and instilling behavior patterns."<sup>50</sup> Bradby even went as far as holding church meetings in which workers learned how to be more efficient in maintaining their jobs. Thus, in Bradby's mind, his presence at Ford and his recommendation ability was not only doing a service to the black community.

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<sup>48</sup> During the Depression, Thomas notes that Ford established a commissary to provide food to the black unemployed. Many of the unemployed at Inkster were given jobs at the Rouge plant. Ford even paid off debts, built schools and set up a free clinic within the depressed black community. On Christmas day, Ford gave out trees and presents to the black children of Inkster. These activities increased black loyalty to Ford and created a level of prosperity in the black community. In fact, Thomas notes that Ford became somewhat of a "super-figure" in the community. He writes, "Henry Ford visited the project on many occasions and was always "mobbed" by the black children. It should be note however, that Thomas understands these acts as fostering corporate paternalism within the black community.; Ibid., 275.

<sup>49</sup> Norman Kenneth Miles, "Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 81.

<sup>50</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 37.

Racial tensions between black and white workers slowly began to build a wedge between Bradby and Henry Ford, creating a hindrance to Bradby's divine call. White workers became more and more disgruntled with the increase in black workers who were found to compete with them for jobs. In 1929, Glenn Carlson noted that tensions between black workers and foreigners were excessively high. Bailer argues that these tensions were between African American and Polish workers. He writes, "Both of these were relative newcomers to the northern industrial scene and therefore have come into the most direct contact with Negro labor in the competition for job."<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the late 1920s and early 30s these tensions between black and white workers escalated. Historian Elizabeth Martin notes that, "Racial violence soon erupted among working classes in several cities, including Philadelphia, Houston and East St. Louis."<sup>52</sup> Racial tensions grew even more volatile as white union organizers pushing industries for higher wages and better working conditions in a period of high labor demand grew furious with black migrants who sought any means of immediate employment.<sup>53</sup>

These racial tensions were exacerbated by the continual push for unions and effects of coming the Great Depression. These pressures created a tremendous strain on the relationship between Bradby and Ford's top officials. The first manifestation of this strain came in the 1931 election, when Frank Murphy was running for Mayor. Officials at the Ford Motor Company were against Murphy and supposedly anyone who voted in

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<sup>51</sup> Glenn E. Carlson, "The Negro in the Industries of Detroit," (Ph.D., diss., University of Michigan, 1929), 142-143; and. Bailer, "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry," 78.

<sup>52</sup> Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1929*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> "The city government employed 2, 745 African Americans in 1926, including 486 in the Post Office and 2,200 in the Department of Public Works, most of whom worked as street-cleaners or did minor repair work."; Ibid.

support of him. Black employees at Ford heard rumors that anyone who did not vote the way Ford demanded would forfeit their job. Many members brought their concerns to Bradby who set up a church meeting where he could address the rising anxiety of black workers at Ford.

On September 28, 1931, Bradby stood before his membership and related that he had just come from a meeting with Ford's top officials. These men, he assured his congregation, claimed that the rumors were lies. Bradby posited that he was not speaking for himself, but on the very authority of the chief executive C.E. Sorenson. Bradby went on to say that in his meeting with Ford officials he spent three hours pointing out the dangerous ramifications if such a policy were promoted at Ford Motor Company. He writes, "I plainly told him that he as a leading citizen of America would not want to drive the Negro that far back into slavery."<sup>54</sup> Ford or more than likely Sorenson's response was that the company did indeed want the cooperation of the black workers in this matter, but "we know we can't get it that way...we are willing to go to the last inch for their support, but...we are not seeking to use our influence as a big stick over the heads of anybody."<sup>55</sup> Bradby related these sentiments to his congregation, somewhat alleviating his congregant's fears for a while.

However, two and half months later Bradby was shocked to find black workers who supported Frank Murphy jobless. In Bradby's mind this could not have been the desires of C.E. Sorenson and the other officials who had assured them of their fairness. Writing to his childhood friend Mayor Frank Murphy, Bradby states, "I am sure that neither Mr. Ford nor Mr. Edsel Ford have any knowledge of the treatment that is being accorded to

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<sup>54</sup> "Remarks by R. L. Bradby," 28 September 1931, box 2, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection,.



Negroes in his company because they voted for you...But I know of many instances where colored men are being turned out from the Ford Motor Company just because they are supposed to have supported you. I can furnish the names of individuals who have been told that they were dismissed because they were disloyal to the best interests of the company.”<sup>56</sup>

Bradby attributed actions as a gross mistake on the part of one of Ford’s first black employment officers, Donald Marshall. According to Bradby, Marshall was to blame for this outrage, primarily because Marshall was openly anti-Murphy. Marshall was one of Ford’s top hiring official for blacks and he publicly attacked Bradby for insinuating himself into the business affairs of the company. Bradby, however, pushed aside his initial dislike of Marshall in an effort keep the lines of opportunity open for black workers.

Writing in November of 1931, Bradby’s frustration and disappointment in the breakdown of communication between himself and Marshall can be seen between the lines of his letter. In the opening of the letter, Bradby apologizes to Marshall for addressing him at his home. Bradby’s words, however cannot await formal notices at Marshall’s job because Marshall has publicly slandered Bradby accusing him of taking bribes from Ford. Marshall accused Bradby of taking bribes from Ford such as coal for over nine years, building up his church membership through Ford’s influence, slandering

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Mayor Frank Murphy, 17 November 1931, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

fellow ministers such as Father Daniels of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and starting a petition at Ford to get him fired from his position as employment officer.<sup>57</sup>

Marshall's assertion may have some grounds, but Bradby adamantly denied all of Marshall's claims stating, "Of course my church was the same size it is now before I even started to cooperate with you." Bradby then denied taking coal from Ford for over nine years, claiming that the company only gave the church coal one time and "The fifty ton I received from this year I gave them a check for at cost." In response to claims of slandering Father Daniels, Bradby claims, " I never said anything about Father Daniels except to say that I respected his sternness and positiveness." Bradby was especially sensitive to this claim by Marshall, because Father Daniels' retaliated in making Bradby the subject of an entire Sunday service.<sup>58</sup>

In answer to Marshall's biggest claim that Bradby tried to get him fired, Bradby states, "Now with regard to the petition. May I say to you very humbly and very earnestly that I knew nothing of it and under no condition would I be party to it. It is rather hard for you to believe, but if they were bringing pressure on you to lose your job, I would be one of the men to defend you..."<sup>59</sup>

Bradby's elaborate response to Marshall is filtered with tones of reconciliation and even anxiousness to stay on an even keel with one of Ford Motor's main employment officers for blacks. Bradby attempts to assuage Marshall's anger, while at the same time alerting him to the necessity to continue to help black Detroiters find employment. This is the heart of Bradby's concern, for he writes, "Ford Motor Company can live without

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<sup>57</sup>Robert L. Bradby to Donald Marshall, 20 November 1931, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

any of us. It might be a struggle but we would live through without them. But we do want to give our best support to their organization because of certain fine things that they are willing to do and are doing without discrimination.”<sup>60</sup>

The conflict between Bradby and Marshall mirrored the growing tensions developing between black workers and Ford Motor Company. The election of 1931 alone began to make black workers more conscious of a need to unite with unions that would protect their jobs as well as their right to vote. This growing consciousness among black workers and the racial tensions at Ford was an omen of things to come between Bradby and Ford.<sup>61</sup>

In an effort to continue his agenda of establishing the kingdom of God among black Detroiters, Bradby steadily maintained his relationship with Ford; but by the mid-1930s this relationship was on extremely shaky ground. The effects of the Great Depression seemed to exacerbate the tensions in the relationship. Black workers in Detroit were the first to be hit by the Depression, especially Ford Workers.

Writing to Bradby in 1932, Thomas H. Jairison pleads, “I am out of work and buying the home my son occupies, and he has been laid off from the Ford Motor Car Co. since last June. He has 6 children under 12 years of age...I would appreciate a job with the Ford Motor Car Co. and pledge my experience, cooperation and loyalty to the Company and its material and moral interest.”<sup>62</sup>

Bradby received numerous letters like this one during the Great Depression. Despite tremendous pressures on the financial stability of his own church and family, Bradby

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<sup>60</sup>Tbid.

<sup>61</sup> “Remarks by R. L. Bradby,” 28 September 1931, reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.; and Cara Shelly L. “Bradby’s Baptist: Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1910-1946,” *Michigan Historical Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1-33.

continued to try to gain employment for blacks at Ford. Writing Donald Marshall in 1932, Bradby recommends an African American man named James Gaffney stating, "This man, James Gaffney, is the man about whom I was talking to you yesterday special...I was wondering since he has been off so long, he is such a fine chap...if you could not place Gaffney...Mr. Sorenson's secretary asked me to send his record through and I did that."<sup>63</sup>

The combination of Ford's layoffs of black workers and the effects of the Great Depression created urgency among black workers to join in the push for unions at Ford Motor Company. These forces eventuated in the demise of the Bradby-Ford relationship and curtailed Bradby's further establishment of the kingdom of God in this respect. Ministers like Bradby and Daniels were Henry Ford's spoke persons in the black community and knew that the interest of black communities was tied to Ford's political and social appetites. During the 1920s and early 1930s Ford's interest and that of the Detroit black community were on an even keel. The rise of black trade unionism shook the very foundations of the black community- Ford relationship, so much so that Bradby and Henry Ford never recovered from its impact.

By the mid-1930s, the triangular relationship that had worked so well in the past, benefiting the black community was filled with tension. The black church, Henry Ford and the black community, were at odds with how to relate to one another. Reverend Robert L. Bradby found himself in the center of this tumultuous triangle. Bradby became a black leader torn by his associations and his theological agenda. He was torn between

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<sup>62</sup>Thomas H. Jairison to Robert L. Bradby, 1 May 1932, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley.

<sup>63</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Donald Marshall, 3 May 1932, Second Baptist Church Papers, box 2, reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection.

his loyalty to the black community, his friendship with Henry Ford and what he thought God's kingdom warranted in the best interest of his people. For over fifteen years, Bradby and Henry Ford had believed in a mutual relationship where both parties would benefit. The rise of black unionism created an imbalance in the advantages of the relationship. Ford felt threatened by black unionism and Bradby was confused as to what step to take next.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) came to Detroit in 1936 and 1937. At the time, only a few black workers participated in the sit-down strikes in Detroit during these years. By June of 1937, however, the UAW had attracted a massive following among Detroit black workers due to its policy on racial equality. Jack B. Kennedy, head of the Ford unionization drive, announced at a meeting at Union Hall that, "Negroes have been assured their rights by their inclusion on all important committees of the union."<sup>64</sup> According to Thomas, Kennedy outlined a policy of "complete equality with white workers."<sup>65</sup> This policy of racial equality was the catalyst for the drive of black unionism and the beginning of the end of the Bradby-Ford relationship. Black unionism created conflicts with the black community and especially within the black church over whether blacks should join the union or maintain ties with Ford.

In the beginning of the controversy Bradby remained openly loyal to Ford, even threatening to boycott the 1937 NAACP Twenty-Eight Annual Conference in Detroit if the president of the UAW, Homer Martin spoke. Yet within a year's span, Bradby's position and influence had changed at Ford Motor Company.

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<sup>64</sup>Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*, 279.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 276.

Historian Nathaniel Leach, a member of Second Baptist for over 70 years remembers Bradby's dilemma with black unionism and Ford. He writes, "Necessity brought Rev. Bradby and Ford's together; unionism caused them to stray apart."<sup>66</sup> Leach argued that Bradby was neutral in his positions on black unions, despite the fact that Bradby considered himself an extension of Ford Motor Company. He writes, "Reverend Bradby could not afford to displease Henry Ford. So he tried to be neutral."<sup>67</sup> Bradby's neutrality eventually caused him to lose power. By 1938, Leach reports that Bradby could no longer send blacks to get jobs at Ford.<sup>68</sup>

Bradby's loss of influence with Ford stemmed from the bullying tactics of Ford officials against the blacks in support of unionism. Black Ford officials such as Donald Marshall threatened to fire blacks who voted in support of unions and even discredit the recommendation system at those churches who allowed UAW speakers to address their congregations. Ministers like Bradby and Father Daniels felt the brunt of Ford's fear of unionism. As Leach states, "This edict was bitter to those preachers whose members wore their Ford badges to church with great pride."<sup>69</sup>

The black community initially looked to ministers like Bradby and Daniels to set the tone of response for such actions at Ford. For up until the 1930s, the black community had been unanimously supportive of Henry Ford and openly shunned unions. By late 1930s, opinions had changed. Black congregants began to see the loss of power welded by Bradby and Daniels. Moreover, the Reverend Charles Andrew Hill, previously the

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<sup>66</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 40.

<sup>67</sup> Elaine Latzman Moon, *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community 1918-1967*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 97.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 40.

associate pastor at Second Baptist in 1919, had now become one of the leading spokespersons for black unionism in Detroit. Since leaving Second Baptist in 1920 to pastor Hartford Avenue (now Memorial) Baptist Church, Hill had established himself as one of Detroit's leading pro-union ministerial activists. By 1936, Hill had grown in stature and was openly hosting union meetings in Detroit.

Bradby, on the other hand, had remained loyal to Ford and silent on the subject of unionism. While his protégé Hill was being threaten by Ford official Donald Marshall, that he would “fire every black in the neighborhood if he allowed the UAW” to hold meetings in his church, Bradby said nothing about the strikes and conflicts taking place at Ford in which many of his membership were involved. Leach states that “Rev. Bradby was regarded as anti-union by silence regarding back-to work by Blacks to break strikes and conflicts: 1937 Battle of the Overpass at Ford's; 1939 strike at Chrysler Motor Company; 1943 strike at Packard Motor Car Company.”<sup>70</sup>

Throughout these years, Bradby made it a point not to exacerbate tensions at Ford but went as far as to proclaim Ford's generosity and benevolence to the black community. In January 1941, Bradby was presented as one of the main speakers at pro-Ford banquet hosted by Donald Marshall and Willis Ward. During the banquet, Bradby declared “If Henry Ford hires one colored for every ten whites, I am for him first, last and always. It will be a sad day for us if the Ford Company changes its policy.” Donald Marshall attempted to solidify Ford support by issuing a veiled threat to “black ministers that their future was tied to Ford's victory over the union.” Detroit historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick note that the banquet was quite effective in gaining community support

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.; Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make*, 293.

for Ford. They write, “Two days before the Ford walk-out began, the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance publicly endorsed Henry Ford’s position.”<sup>71</sup>

As time went on, however, and Ford began using harsh striking breaking tactics, support of Ford’s position began to change. The Detroit community was disgusted with Ford’s strategy of pitting blacks against unionists. As a result, other black ministers, such as the reverends Horace White and Malcom Dade in Detroit were now joining the ranks of Rev. Hill and pulling many other ministers with them in support of unionism. Meiers and Rudwick note “even Robert Bradby failed to deliver his customary public defense of Ford and maintained uncharacteristic silence,” in the face of Ford’s strikebreaking tactics.<sup>72</sup>

The UAW finally swayed black opinion to their cause. Further, the union’s promise of fighting for black worker’s rights and equality on the job drew not only the support of black workers, but the support of black leaders who had traditionally been against unionism. The endorsement of so many black leaders, especially ministers, played a key part in curbing the victory for pro-union sentiment among black Detroiters. Bradby’s growing silence towards Ford’s position was one of the factors in shifting support to black unionism. It appears as the UAW made greater strides at Ford Motor Company, Bradby began to settle into a slow acceptance of black unionism and realization of his waning influence at Ford.<sup>73</sup>

In retrospect, historian Richard Thomas paints ministers like Bradby as black leaders who failed to keep up with the times and found themselves in a world of perplexity when

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*, 293.; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 85.

<sup>72</sup>Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 94.



blacks began to push pass traditional means of empowerment. In the beginning of black unionism, Bradby may have lost his perspective of Detroit's industrial climate with regard to the black community. However, by the start of World War II, Bradby's awareness of black progress through the UAW was becoming more evident. For example, when the Baptist Ministers Conference issued two statements in support of Ford Bradby's name was conspicuously absent from the statement. And although encouraging his membership not to back Rev. Charles A. Hill's endorsement for the Detroit branch of the NAACP's presidency in 1942, Bradby eventually became part of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in his continued effort to help the black community and usher in God's kingdom, especially in the lives of black women which would be discussed in the following chapter. Bradby's slow reconciliation with black pro-union leadership in Detroit was reflective of the tenuous movement and interactions between black leaders who all had the goal of advancing and building the black community. As Meiers and Rudwick state, "As months passed, in the changed milieu following the Ford strike, the adversary quality that characterized the relationships between black groups and the union's highest leadership...would be replaced by united efforts to secure forceful action from the war manpower agencies and the FEPC."<sup>74</sup>

Thomas posits Bradby as a "good shepherd" who had fashioned a strategy of black community building that made good sense at the time. The "good sense" that Thomas refers is the belief that the "interest of blacks were best served by depending on powerful whites." Bradby may have ascribed to some part of this belief, but in essence Bradby's belief was based on far more than just powerful white benevolence. Bradby operated

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>74</sup> Meiers and Rudwick refer to the Ford strike of 1941 and the impact of the race riot of 1943.; Ibid., 119.

from a deep seated faith in the God of Exodus and Jesus in the Gospels. Bradby understood that God's kingdom demanded the uplift and advancement of the black community through whatever means God had ordained. When Ford issued an invitation to Bradby back in 1919, Bradby saw the hand of God opening a means of opportunity for his people. Bradby understood his connection with Ford as God's way of establishing his kingdom in the lives of black Detroiters. In 1919, Second Baptist was bombarded with migrants seeking the 'Promised Land.' Bradby saw in Ford a way to bring the 'Promised Land' to his people on some level. For Bradby, when black migrants and congregants received food, housing, employment and even a level of respectability in Detroit, it was a sign of God's providence. In this way, Bradby reflected Booker T. Washington's strategy of accommodating white power structures as a means of black self-help.

Bradby's perception of God's kingdom began to evolve beyond Ford when black unionism emerged among black Detroiters. His acceptance of this new move of God was reflected in his growing silence in the face of black unionism. His participation in the FEPC reflects this point and places Bradby's faith outside the context of Ford's "corporate paternalism." Bradby's belief was in the God who would advance his people in the face of white oppression. For a time, Bradby's connection with Henry Ford accomplished this task. As Thomas notes, "By 1933, Second Baptist, still under the leadership of Rev. Bradby, had raised and spent more than half a million dollars in serving the black community in Detroit."<sup>75</sup> A phenomenal figure for a African American church community trying to overcome racial discrimination and the strains of the Great Depression.

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<sup>75</sup> Richard Thomas, *The State of Black Detroit: Building From Strength, Black Self-Help Tradition in Detroit*, (Detroit: The Detroit Urban League, Inc., 1987), 11.

Bradby's relationship with Ford was one of the foundations of Second Baptist's effective ministry to the black community in Detroit. Black workers at Ford brought their tithes into Second Baptist to financially supporting the many outreach programs of the church. In Bradby's mind this was "sanctified money," money that God had provided through giving Second Baptist favor with Henry Ford.<sup>76</sup> The black industrial working class made tremendous strides toward the building up of the black community in Detroit between 1915 and 1930.<sup>77</sup> Thomas further notes that, "Black industrial workers became permanent fixtures in Detroit's industrial society by the middle of the roaring twenties. Captains of Detroit industry no longer considered black workers as temporary relief for labor starved mills and factories." For a significant period of time, the Bradby-Ford relationship was the foundation of African American presence in Detroit's industrial society and the bedrock of black community building in Detroit.<sup>78</sup>

Key here was the unusual power of the black church and black Christian leadership to invoke change in the social, political and economic landscape of urban centers during the twentieth century. The present Detroit black community and the Detroit industrial community both had its roots in the social-political activities of the black church, particularly that of Second Baptist under Rev. Bradby. Moreover, the Bradby-Ford relationship can be seen as the bedrock, not only for black industrialization in America, but also the formation on black community building predicated on theological imperatives espoused by the black church in Detroit. Reverend Bradby stands as the forerunner of black progress in Detroit through his connection with Ford. Despite the rise

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, David T. Bailey, (19 July 2002).

<sup>77</sup> Richard Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

of black unionism and Bradby's eventual dislike of Ford's strike breaking tactics, Bradby recognize how much the black community had benefited from his connection with Ford. This fact alone caused Bradby to hold Henry Ford in high esteem. Norman Miles supports this fact writing, "Black preachers found it more expedient to adopt an accommodationist posture with the white community in order to protect the gains already made." <sup>79</sup>As church historian Nathaniel Leach states, Rev. Bradby was a forceful leader against discrimination and segregation who in the end "remained loyal to his old friend"—Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Norman Kenneth Miles, "Home at Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 222.

<sup>80</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 40.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY, BLACK CHURCHWOMEN AND THE MINISTRIES OF SECOND BAPTIST**

In 1938, Second Baptist's church secretary Mrs. Winifred Cooper writes of a "God-called servant" who "came into this field ready to do whateversoever his hand found to do..." What this "God-called" servant found to do was support the teachings of the Gospel by securing places of employment for men and women and raising "hundreds of dollars" for "food, clothing, shelter and medicine to the hungry, sick and needy in our city. Mrs. Cooper's "God-called servant" was known none other than Robert L. Bradby, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Detroit.

Cooper's glowing tribute to Bradby highlights a lot of what the dynamic minister did in the lives of the Detroit black community. However, Cooper's tribute fails to alert the reader to the true source of power behind Bradby's ability to meet the needs of men and women in Detroit throughout a 36-year pastorate. Bradby's effectiveness was dependent upon the constant labor of black church women who ran Second Baptist's many church auxiliaries, Sunday schools and "self-help" groups. These black Christian women constituted the practical "grass-roots" power behind Second Baptist's influence in the Detroit community and Bradby's leadership abilities.

Many scholars writing on the history and impact of the black church have studied remarks such as Cooper's and been blinded to informal power structures behind black religious leadership in America. Darlene Clark Hine notes, "Although much has been written on the institutional life of black Midwesterners—the African American

church...too little attention has been devoted to the critical involvement of black women.”<sup>1</sup>

The leadership abilities of Rev. Robert L. Bradby and the effectiveness of Second Baptist Church reflect the tremendous power that black churchwomen wielded at Second Baptist. This chapter addresses the reality of that power and the dynamic relationship between Bradby and the women of Second Baptist in effecting racial advancement and self-help agendas in black Detroit. In doing so, this narrative argues that the women of Second constituted the stabilizing force behind Rev. Robert L. Bradby’s effective leadership abilities and subsequently the local black church. An analysis of informal power structures and formal power structures within the black church will be of primary focus. It will be clear from the following analysis that black male leadership in the local church is primarily a product of black churchwomen’s support and labors. As Hine states, “The church...depended heavily upon the labors, commitment, and support of black women, even when males occupied all visible positions of leadership.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter also discusses the nature of black churchwomen’s theology in the early twentieth century. The women of Second Baptist pursued agendas of racial self-help and progress out of a need to fulfill theological mandates prescribed from the Bible. Like, Bradby, the women of Second took inspiration and initiative from a Christian based faith that like historian Patricia A. Schechter notes about Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “gave rise to a “visionary pragmatism” that sustained a lifetime of agitation for social justice.”<sup>3</sup> Anne Meis Knupfer’s work on African American Women’s Clubs in Chicago also notes “club

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<sup>1</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Hinesight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Hinesight*, 83.

women articulated their own vision—rooted in the community mores of “other mothering,” and “a deep seated Christianity.”<sup>4</sup>

The women of Second Baptist most definitely ascribed to a deep-seated Christian faith and this faith drew them to support and even carry out many of Bradby’s visions to meet the needs of the Detroit black community. In doing so, Bradby came to realize the strength of his power to make positive changes in the lives of the black community through the mighty efforts of Second’s black women. Bradby’s recognition of black women’s power within his church caused him not only to support their interests, but also to seek and protect the interest of African American women in the Detroit black community.

This chapter highlights not only Bradby’s efforts for social change on behalf of black women in Detroit, but also the activities a few outstanding women, women auxiliaries and black church groups at Second that became the power source behind the extraordinary leadership abilities of Rev. Bradby and the impetus behind Second Baptist’s effectiveness. Black churchwomen operated from a theology that tied racial uplift, respectability, and womanhood to biblical motifs of justice, righteousness and Christian identity and purpose. Through these divine mandates, the women of Second established settlement houses, literary clubs, fund raising activities, musical concerts, church missions, day care, health services, domestic training in cooking, millinery work and even schools for the Detroit black community. The black churchwomen of Second Baptist sustained the church and were the primary networks by which community

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tender Humanity And A Nobler Womanhood: African American Women’s Clubs in Turn-the-Century Chicago*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 7.

building occurred in early twentieth century Detroit. The central focus of their activities through the black church was an agenda black “self-help” based on Christian imperatives. The women of Second understood that black “self-help” was a God-ordained calling among Christian women of the black community. Thus, these women understood that “other-mothering,” the establishment of settlement houses for young women and migrants, Christian education, domestic training and lessons in “respectability” were tied to God’s divine mandate to “make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey” all the teachings of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> As historian Anne Meis Knupfer states, “many of the African American settlement workers discussed how their practices were informed by a deep-seated Christian faith. Their religious expressions were reflected in the range of social service institutions...church missions, social centers, and settlements. The settlement founders and workers especially nurtured these church affiliations...creating collaborative webs of community institutions and support.”<sup>6</sup>

Many of Second Baptist’s self-help groups and organizations were established by black churchwomen and were founded long before Bradby stepped into the pastorate of the church. Second had always held powerful black women in its pews that lead the way for the black self-help tradition in Detroit. As early as 1901, women like Mary Branton Tule, Etta Foster Taylor, Fannie Richards, and Irene Cole Croxton, were powerful forces within the Second Baptist community and laid the foundation for Bradby to effect change within lives of black migrants and the Detroit community. These women functioned in what historian Milton Sernett is part of the black church tradition. He writes, “In the black church tradition much of the burden for assisting the poor and needy and building

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<sup>5</sup> “Matt. 28:19-20,” NIV.

<sup>6</sup> Knupfer, *Toward A Tenderer*, 9.



up new missions fell to women.”<sup>7</sup> As forerunners of black self help at Second Baptist, these black churchwomen laid the foundation for extensive networks of black advancement, by which Bradby could expand and build upon in meeting the needs of the Detroit black community.

Second Baptist’s first foreign missionary to Africa was a Ms. Mary Branton Tule. Born in Chatham, Ontario on February 18, 1860, Tule was described as “an energetic and earnest Christian worker, ever ready to do her duty in the activities of the church.”<sup>8</sup> From an early age, Tule spoke of “being called to the mission field in Africa.”<sup>9</sup> Pursuing her “calling,” Tule joined Second Baptist in 1893. In 1895, Tule fulfilled her “calling.” Second Baptist sent Tule as a missionary to Cape Town, South Africa, where “she could break unto them the Bread of Life.”<sup>10</sup> Amid many hardships Tule and her husband John Tule established a “Mary Branton Tule School.” Tule spent over ten years ministering in Africa, nine of those years around Cape Town, South Africa. Tule would have ended her missionary career in South Africa had she not been barred from the country. The nation South Africa barred all “Negro Missionaries from South Africa” in 1922. Undaunted, Tule continued her missionary activities in Monrovia, Liberia, until her death on May 25, 1923.<sup>11</sup> Tule was a pioneer in black women foreign missionary activities in the black church.

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<sup>7</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 115.

<sup>8</sup> “Minutes of the Amherstburg Association: Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth, 1841-1940,” p. 68, reel 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Tule's activities in South Africa as a missionary reflect her drive for universal racial advancement through Christian mandates. Here, the great commission of the Gospel is blended with black uplift through establishing an educational program with the black South African Community. Tule's brand of Christianity was reflective of the ideology held by other black churchwomen of Second Baptist. The goodnews of the Gospel in its practical manifestation meant black uplift, especially through educational opportunities.

Fannie M. Richards was another female congregant of Second Baptist that also understood the Gospel to be connected with black self-help agendas. Like Tule, Richards realized that the Gospel was made alive to the black community through educational opportunities. Born October 1, 1841 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Richards traveled with her mother, Maria Louise Moore (Richards) to Detroit in 1851. Maria Richard left Virginia for Detroit because of the enforcement of the 1838 law in Virginia that "prohibited the return to that State of those Negroes, who after the prohibition of their education had begun to attend schools in other parts. According to historian W. B. Hartgrove, Moore had been secretly sending her fourteen children to schools, many of them attending clandestine meetings around Virginia.<sup>12</sup> By the time her children reached Detroit, "all of them were well grounded in the rudiments of education and given a taste of higher things."<sup>13</sup> Fannie Richards came from a background that predisposed her to fight for the education of blacks. Her mother, determined to resist the law that forbade "any one from either sitting or standing to teach a black to read," would have Fannie Richards along with her other children lay "prostrate on the couch to teach them."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> W. B. Hartgrove, "The Story of Maria Louise Moore and Fannie M. Richards," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (Jan., 1916), 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Moore's decision to move to Detroit was not just based on furthering the educational opportunities of her children. In 1851, her husband, Adolphe Richards died, leaving Moore the burden of raising all fourteen of her children alone. The less restrictive Black Codes in Detroit and employment opportunities drew Moore as well as other prominent blacks in Fredericksburg, Virginia to move to the North.<sup>15</sup> Once in Detroit, "the Richards colony easily prospered."

Fannie Richards benefited from the move from Virginia more so than anyone else in the family. Traveling to Toronto to further her education, she studied history, English and needlework. Returning to Detroit in 1861, Richards joined Second Baptist at the age of 21 under the care of the church's seventh minister, Rev. Supply Chase.<sup>16</sup> During her first two years at Second, Richards attended the Teachers Training School in Detroit.

Through Second Baptist, Richards was able to carry on her mother's passion for education. Sparked by the opening of a colored public school under a white man named Whitbeck, Richards opened her own private school for black children in 1863.<sup>17</sup> Ranking the highest in her application for the school, Richards was the first African American women to be hired by the Detroit Board of Education in 1865.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Moore's husband Adolphe Richards was a native of the Island of Guadaloupe. When Moore left for Detroit, she traveled with prominent black citizens of Fredricksburg such as the "Lees, the Cooks, the Williamses and the DeBaptistes." These families became some of the leading black groups in Detroit prior to the Great Migration. In fact, the Williamses and the De Baptistes were instrumental in supporting and even becoming members of the first black churches in Michigan, that of Second Baptist and Bethel A.M.E. in Detroit.;Ibid., 26.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. Supply Chase was a white missionary from the First Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan.; Nathaniel Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection: Reaching Out to Freedom, Revised Edition Eyewitness History*(Detroit: Second Baptist Church), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Richards' school was said to be located on Riopelle Street, near Macomb, holding 80 seats averaging 77 students attendance. Richards' salary at the time averaged around \$400.00 annually. White teachers were paid a salary of \$600.00 annually in 1871.; Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 22. and also cited in Hine, *Hinesight*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> The following is a detailed account of Richards employment by the Detroit Board of Education. "Going to her private school one morning, she saw a carpenter repairing a building. Upon inquiry she learned that it

Richards had won the right to teach black children through much struggle, even to the extent of petitioning the Michigan Supreme Court. Helped by “Providence,” liberal whites such as “tobacco manufacturer (and later Michigan’s governor from 1873-1876), John Bagley,” and the members of Second Baptist, Richards was able to raise enough money to file a lawsuit against Detroit school segregation.<sup>19</sup> When the case of *Joseph Workman v. The Board of Education of Detroit* came before the Michigan Supreme Court on May 12, 1869 the ruling reflected the desires of the petitioners. Segregation in public schools was declared illegal according the dictates of the Fourteenth Amendment. That same year, the Board of Education offered Richards the first teaching contract ever offered to a black woman.<sup>20</sup>

Richards taught school to both black and white children for over forty-three years, ending the latter part of her career at Everett School in Detroit. Retiring in 1915, Richards was noted for being a “pioneer,” and an “innovator” who was “dedicated to the improvement of her people.”<sup>21</sup> Second Baptist member, Sadie Throgmartin Curley Terrell was six years old when she enrolled in Richards’ first grade class at Everett. She remembers Richards as “a strict, non-nonsense teacher” who found time to take a

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was to be opened as Colored School Number 2. She went immediately to William D. Wilkins, a member of the board of education, who impressed with the personality of the young woman, escorted her to the office of superintendent of schools, Duane Doty. After some discussion of the matter Miss Richards filed an application, assured that she would be notified to take the next examination. At the appointed time she presented herself along with several other applicants who hoped to obtain the position. Miss Richards ranked highest and was notified to report for duty the following September. Early one morning she proceeded to her private school in time to inform her forty pupils of the desirable change and conducted them in a body to their home.”; Hartgrove, “The Story of Maria Louise Moore and Fannie M. Richards,” *Journal of Negro History*, 31.; and also cited in Hine, *Hinesight*, 67.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.; Darlene Clark Hine, *Hinesight*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Hartgrove, “The Story of Maria Louise Moore and Fannie M. Richards,” *Journal of Negro History*, 31.; Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 22.

personal interest in her, making a dress for Terrell so she could be in the school concert.<sup>22</sup>

Terrell also had Richards as a Sunday School teacher at Second attending class in the Sanctuary balcony.<sup>23</sup>

Richards' achievements coincided with her work at Second Baptist. During her fifty-three year career, Richards taught Sunday School at Second Baptist. She taught biblical lessons in another Sunday School class named Class of Ruth No. 4, as well as worked in tandem with Mary McCoy, a club woman activist and Lottie Wilson Jackson of Bay City, Michigan to found the Phyllis Wheatley Home in 1898. These three women began organizing this home for elderly black men and women at Second Baptist in 1897.<sup>24</sup> Richards was so supportive of the home in advancing the needs of elderly blacks, that she served as its' first president of the home.

The life of Fannie M. Richards stands as a prominent exemplar of the black self-help tradition at Second Baptist, leading the way for Bradby to build upon the advancements already accomplished by black churchwomen. Richards was "among the first female professionals in...urban communities, (that) worked for racial advancement on a variety of fronts."<sup>25</sup> One of the many fronts that Hine alludes to was the black church. Richards was able to advance not only the establishment of a black private school through her church connections, she was even able to transform the "laws of the land" through the black church by rallying around her prominent black church members who raised funds and publicly supported her petition against the Detroit Board of Education. Richards

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid..

<sup>24</sup>Hine, *Hinesight*, 68.; Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 22.

<sup>25</sup>Hine, *Hinesight*, 66.

realized the power of black church, when undergirded by savvy black churchwomen and men to effect change in the black community.

Etta Foster Taylor was another prominent member at Second who perceived black uplift, black self-help and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as three inseparable realities in the life of the black community. Receiving “divine” visions in 1901 and 1903, Taylor felt lead by God to pursue extensive church work. Following her divine inspiration, Taylor organized the Christian Industrial Club in 1904. The club was designed to offer financial assistance and support to the church. Ten years later, on December 14, 1914, the club founded the Frances Harper Inn, a “home for employed girls.

Taylor's visions were sparked by divine imperatives. She and the black churchwomen of her group sought to meet the needs of young African American women as they entered the industrial working classes based on Christian principles. Thus, social reform practices in the church were based on biblical initiatives as well as issues of bourgeois respectability.

Black churchwomen like Mary Branton Tule, Fannie Richards, and Etta Foster Taylor were forerunners to Bradby’s black self-help agenda and “calling” to establish the kingdom of God at Second. They paved the way for Bradby to expand their ministries and help organize Second into a more effective medium of black-self help in the early 1900s. For in the first five years of Bradby’s pastorate, he writes “from 1910 to 1915 I concentrated on the social betterment and moral uplift of our members, on helping the

sick, poor, and unemployed, creating auxiliaries, increasing missionary funds and improving financial conditions.”<sup>26</sup>

Contemporaries of Bradby instrumental in establishing Second Baptist and Bradby as mediums of racial uplift and black self help were black churchwomen such as Irene Cole Coxton, Lillian E. Johnson, Jarene Macklin, Mary Etta Glenn and Marie Louise Reid. As historian Victoria Wolcott notes, “The church’s female congregants founded numerous other women’s clubs in the late 1910s and early 1920s to draw new members...All of these clubs remained active many decades to come, forming the backbone of community organizing that, like the Urban League, was based on the tenets of female uplift.”<sup>27</sup>

One such woman that Wolcott alludes to is Irene Cole Croxton. Croxton was not only a contemporary of Bradby, she was one his female congregants who stood by him through the many years of his pastorate, helping him establish church auxiliaries, feed the homeless and even rebuilding the church after two devastating fires. In short, Irene Cole Croxton functioned as one of the “backbones” of Second Baptist.

Arriving with her family in 1893, Croxton remembers Detroit having “wooden sidewalks,” “tall red brick houses with high front steps” and “tall gas towers for street lights.”<sup>28</sup> Her family took up residence on Detroit’s east side on St. Antione Street. While on St. Antione, Croxton’s family became acquainted with Second Baptist member and

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<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History, Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1836-1976*, p. 18., reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>27</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 65.

<sup>28</sup> Leach and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, p. 44., Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

Sunday School teacher, Mary Jennings.<sup>29</sup> One day, Jennings asked Croxton's mother if she could take her to Sunday School. The invitation inaugurated Croxton's seventy-five year sojourn with Second Baptist. Jennings was Croxton's first Sunday School teacher and sparked within the young Croxton a love for God and the ministries of the black church.

Croxton's early years at Second were filled with timely lessons from the Bible and practices for Christmas plays. She writes, "The little folk had a Christmas play. I was an angel in the play: I wore a white dress with wings and a gold crown."<sup>30</sup> Croxton seems to have loved her time in Sunday school, she writes of receiving little cards with "Bible pictures on the front and our lesson on the back."<sup>31</sup> Yet, the most enduring incident of Croxton's early life at Second was her conversion experience under Rev. Bradby.

During the first series of revival meetings Bradby preached at Second, Croxton attended a Tuesday night meeting on March 12, 1911. Prompted by the Spirit, Croxton approached the Mourners' Bench where Bradby stood praying for three or four other people. He then shook her hand asking her if she was ready to give her heart to the Lord. Croxton answered "No." Typical of Bradby's tenacity for the kingdom, his response was to tell her, "I will pray with you again."<sup>32</sup> According to Croxton, Bradby's second prayer made "the heavens opened and Jesus came down and entered my heart, and the Glory of

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<sup>29</sup> Mrs. Mary Jennings was a long time member of Second, teaching Sunday School, organizing Red Cross services and even establishing a girls bible class, ages 12 to 16, called the Class of Esther.; "History of Second Baptist," p. 56, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>30</sup> <sup>30</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



the Lord shone round me, all my sins were washed away.”<sup>33</sup> When Bradby closed in prayer, Croxton was ready for his second inquiry as to whether she was ready for the kingdom of God. Her response was an undeniable “Oh yes!” For Croxton, Bradby “was the one who took time to save my soul.”<sup>34</sup> She confirmed her newfound salvation and Bradby’s power as a preacher of the Gospel by being the first one of his converts and the first member to be baptized by him.

Croxton’s conversion experience under Bradby made her a life-long member of Second and a staunch supporter of Bradby’s ministry agendas throughout his forty-six year pastorate. She was so supportive of Bradby that she accompanied him on his trips through Detroit’s “Red-Light” districts. She recounts that one Sunday Bradby asked members of the choir, including Croxton, to go with him to sing on the corner of St. Antione and Gratiot Streets, filled with pool rooms, gambling and prostitution houses were situated. That afternoon, the only person from the choir to show up for Bradby was Croxton. She writes, “When it came time to start, nobody came but him and me, so he preached the gospel and I sang the hymns. (That is how I got my Hedges and Highways experience).”<sup>35</sup>

Croxton ministered with Bradby on numerous occasions in Detroit’s “Red Light” district, traveling with him door to door offering the salvation message. One door that she and Bradby knocked on was the house of a white woman living next door to Second.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> According to member Frank L. Morris, Bradby “believed in going to the highways and byways to “bring them in.” So he carried the Message of Jesus Christ to the people by preaching on street corners on Sunday afternoons during the summer months.”; Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 69.; each and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, 45.

Bradby introduced himself and the Gospel message to the woman. The following day, Croxton relates that the woman came to Bradby's office declaring to him that she was starting a new life and that if he were interested in buying her house, she would sell. Bradby accepted the woman's offer making an addition to Second on the west side of the church.<sup>36</sup>

According to Croxton, Bradby's presence closed many doors of "sin" in Detroit's "Red Light" district and drew many within those doors to join the church. She relates that an owner of a pool and gambling room closed his place once he met up with Bradby, and joined Second with his wife and daughter. For Croxton, salvation stories like this one herald Bradby as a "Crusading Minister, a spiritual power in the community."<sup>37</sup> Yet Croxton was herself part of Bradby's spiritual power in the community. Her support and presence in the "street corner" ministry helped Bradby convey the Gospel to the Detroit community and lend credibility to Second Baptist.

In fact, Croxton did more than just "street ministry" for Bradby. In 1917, Croxton along with her former Sunday School teacher, Mary Jennings, help to organize the Second Baptist Red Cross Unit during World War I. Croxton served as "the chairman of the Surgical Department making pneumonia jackets and abdominal bandages to send to our boys overseas." In 1918, Croxton along with other churchwoman at Second "brought grapes by the bushels in the Fall and made all the communion wine for the year."<sup>38</sup> She then joined with Eva Peters, member of Second Baptist, in organizing the Deaconness

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Board. Peters was the board's first president. Croxton proudly wore the Deaconness' first identification badge, a blue armband.

During the first wave of the Great Migration, Croxton along with other churchwomen at Second, helped Bradby meet incoming migrants at train stations round the clock. Croxton remembers bringing "the homeless people to our church to feed them. Many of them slept on the church benches until Rev. Bradby found them homes to stay in."<sup>39</sup> Because of Croxton's efforts and the labor of other black churchwomen under Bradby, many of the needs of migrants were met through the church. As a result, black churchwomen like Croxton, help expand the membership of Second Baptist, thereby adding to the power and influence of the church as well as its minister Rev. Bradby. As Croxton writes, "Many of them (migrants) joined the church. Soon the church was filled to overflowing congregation. From a membership of 250 it grew to 3, 800."<sup>40</sup>

Croxton's labor at Second are too numerous to convey in total. Suffice it to say that she stood by Bradby and supported the ministries of Second Baptist with all her might, even emotionally supporting Bradby during two of the church's fires.<sup>41</sup> The last church fire in 1918, Croxton remembers standing next to Bradby as they both watch the church burn. She writes, "We were able to get down the stairs and everyone got out of the church safely. And for the second time Rev. Bradby stood across the street with tears streaming down his face and watched the flames destroy his life's work again."<sup>42</sup>

Croxton's faith in Bradby and her Lord, was reflective of the mindset of many churchwomen at Second. The members of Second joined together to rebuild once again,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Second Baptist has had three church fires in its history: The first in 1854, the second on January 16, 1916 and the third on January 17, 1917. ; Nathaniel Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 56.

the sanctuary that had brought them so much help. As Croxton writes, “With God’s help and Rev. Bradby’s courage, we rebuilt the Sanctuary as it now stands where we all worship today.”<sup>43</sup>

Throughout her tenure at Second, Croxton understood that her labor at the church and her support of Bradby’s ministry agendas were in essence her service unto the Lord. For she states, “I have served my Lord in this one church under two pastors, the late Rev. R. L. Bradby and our present pastor Rev. A.A. Banks for sixty-five years.”<sup>44</sup> During those years Croxton, added to her labors the positions of choir member and singer (35 years), Prison Social Reform Worker (7.5 years), Hedge & Highway Missionary (64 years), Director of Young People (4.5 years) and Extension work in Billy Graham Prayer Band (22 years).<sup>45</sup> Croxton stood in the light of her predecessors at Second Baptist. Black churchwomen like, Mary Branton Tule and Etta Taylor, all of whom understood church work and church club organization as part of the “divine calling” to uplift the race and glorify God. Croxton never saw her labors on behalf of her church or her pastor a burden. She asserts, “I have never asked for or received any remuneration for my services. My labor has been a labor of love for God and man.”<sup>46</sup> Here, again, is another example of Christian imperatives being the driving force behind black churchwomen clubs and organizations in the church. From making homemade communion wine and organizing a Deaconess Board to feeding hungry migrants and singing in the choir, Irene Cole Croxton’s labors at Second were a reflection of her drive for racial advancement and her need to fulfill the “call” of God upon her life.

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<sup>42</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Lillian E. Johnson, another member at Second who tied her labors for the Lord to her labors at the church and church club organization. As vice president of the Earnest Well Workers of Second Baptist, Johnson lead the black churchwomen of Second in supporting the financial obligations of the Church through fund raising. Johnson understood that the Earnest Well workers constituted one of the fundamental levels of missionary work through the church. Meeting the financial needs of the church in order to meet the needs of the community were of utmost importance. Bradby realized the necessity of church groups like the Earnest Well Workers and made it a point to promote their agendas for the establishment of what he understood was the “kingdom of God.” The Earnest Well Worker’s motto was “I am the Walking Lady, I am on my way to the Earnest Workers Club, Second Baptist Church. Please don’t stop me please give me a donation.”<sup>47</sup> And donations is what the Earnest Workers provided for Second. Through “fundraising, charity events and good will,” these churchwomen helped sustain the many ministries that Second offered to the Detroit community. Outside of the Earnest Worker’s club, Johnson served as the president of Second Baptist’s Class of Esther. Organized in February 1908 by Mary Jennings, the class was geared toward young black girls ages 12 to 16 teaching them biblical principles.

Lillian E. Johnson was also one of the founding members of the Detroit Study Club. The Detroit Study Club was organized specially as a literary club initially to study the works of poet Robert Browning. Writing in a hasty hand, Johnson remembers Mrs. Gay Lewis Pelham, founder of the Detroit Study Club approaching her for membership in the club while she was on her way to the streetcar line. Johnson states “of course I was glad

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

to join a literary club and later was notified of my acceptance, the time and place of the next meeting.”<sup>48</sup>

In the Detroit Study Club, Johnson saw another opportunity to promote racial advancement and black uplift among young black women. Her leadership of the club was just another extension of her church work. For Johnson not only inspired women to enhance their intellectual abilities through her leadership in the Detroit Study Club, she also infused these agendas with Christian motifs espoused by the church. For example, in 1928 Johnson lead the Detroit Study Club in examining the history of Christianity from its beginning and development.”<sup>49</sup> Later on that same year, she engaged the club in a debate over the topic “Resolve That Christianity Is An Asset to Society.” The thirtieth anniversary booklet of that same year records Johnson in support of the belief that Christianity did constitute an asset to society.<sup>50</sup> Johnson’s Christian theology was inseparable from her drive to uplift her race through literary knowledge. Her establishment and leadership of the Detroit Study Club and the Earnest Workers is a reflection of the theological imperatives held by most black club women in Detroit, who worked in tandem with the church to advance their race and effective change in their local communities. These social spaces afforded black churchwomen were crucial outlets in black female Christian agency in resisting black oppression. Historian Victoria Wolcott notes that Lillian E. Johnson “remained in leadership positions throughout the

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<sup>47</sup> “Scrap Book, History of the Earnest Worker’s Club of Second Baptist Church, 1908-1946,” Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>48</sup> Lillian E. Johnson, “The Founding,” typescript, 19 March 1938, Detroit Study Club Collection, box 2, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>49</sup> Lillian E. Johnson, “Reminiscences,” typescript, 2 March 1928, Detroit Study Club Collection, box 2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>50</sup> “Detroit Study Club Thirtieth Anniversary 1898-1928,” Detroit Study Club-Lillian E. Johnson Collection, box 2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

interwar period.”<sup>51</sup> Wolcott’s statement is a testament to Johnson’s thirst to continually institute black self-help agendas through the church and throughout the Detroit community.

Another black churchwoman at Second who sought to raise the intellectual consciousness of the black community was Mrs. Jerene Gurley Macklin. Under Bradby, Macklin organized The Cultural Committee of Second Baptist Church. The cultural committee’s motto was “A Life of honor and of worth, has no eternity on Earth.” Under Macklin, the committee’s main goal was to sponsor programs that would “develop talent in the church and community in the art of public speaking, dramas, and cantatas.”<sup>52</sup>

Macklin’s leadership of the Cultural Committee was so successful that Bradby openly commended her for her leadership skills. Celebrating his 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Second, Bradby makes mention of Macklin’s achievements stating, “The members of the organization have done a fine piece of work under the leadership of Mrs. Macklin and others cooperating with her in bring to our city such outstanding characters as they presented last year and are presenting this year.”<sup>53</sup> One of those outstanding characters Dr. Mordecai Johnson, then president of Howard University, who was the quest speaker for the committee forums for five consecutive years.<sup>54</sup> Macklin definitely stands as one of the cornerstones in Bradby’s use of the church to supply educational program to the Detroit black community.

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<sup>51</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> “The Cultural Committee of Second Baptist Church,” *History of Second Baptist Church 1836-1940*, pg. 37, Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>53</sup> Robert L. Bradby, *Souvenir Program, The Second Annual Fall and Winter Forum Series Presented by the Cultural Committee of Second Baptist Church October 15, 1944-April 22, 1945*, box 10, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>54</sup> “The Sands of Time,” *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cultural Committee, Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, box 9, Folder I, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Second Baptist member, Mary Etta Glenn was another strong laborer under Bradby, supporting the church's ministries. Glenn became a member of Second Baptist around 1918. She migrated from Bibb County, Georgia to Detroit in 1917. When Glenn arrived in Detroit, it was under the prayers and hopes of her mother, grandmother and aunt. Throughout her life, Glenn mirrored the complex values instilled in her by distant family. Unlike tradition pictures of isolation, Glenn's life revealed that the mail became a medium of emotional support, and a spiritual spring to her familial roots. All three women left Glenn a legacy of faith in the God of the Bible. They encouraged Glenn as she embarked on her new journey in the North to call upon God and his guidance in her life. On January 29, 1922 Glenn's aunty writes, "Let me urge you, entreat & beseech that you continue to pray asking God for his comforter that his guiding arms will be around you his eye will direct you to the better paths of life...with all our prayers and carefulness we are made to live the path of righteousness. But as I for said take Jesus with you all the way and he will make us serviceable of our wrongs..."<sup>55</sup> Her grandmother, Rosetta McKinney writing in 1922, prays for "God to be with us until we meet again."<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Glenn came to Detroit with a deep-seated Christian belief. This faith becomes a manifested reality when she begins involving herself within the ministries of Second and supporting Bradby's "kingdom" agendas. The prayers and advice that Glenn's aunt and grandmother sent in the letters sustained Glen as she spent almost ten years searching for a place of solace. These prayers finally brought Glenn to her destination as she came to

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<sup>55</sup> Aunt Sarah to Mary Etta Glenn, 29 January 1922, box 17, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>56</sup> Rosetta McKinney to Mary Etta Glenn, 27 August 1922, Box 17, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



the doors of Second Baptist in 1932. She writes, “I became a member of Second Baptist Church in September 1932. Became a member of the Deaconess Board two years later.”<sup>57</sup>

Glenn was one of the thousands of women migrants pouring into Detroit during the first wave of the Great Migration. She like many others had heard of the massive job opportunities in Detroit and of a black pastor that was able to provide housing, employment and sustenance for the soul. Mary Etta Glenn decided to unite herself to Second Baptist and gain the resources the church offered to incoming migrants like herself. Historian Victoria Wolcott notes, “Glenn was an active member of Detroit’s Second Baptist...whose pastor hired social workers and developed programs to instruct new migrants in cleanliness, domestic skills, and deportment.”<sup>58</sup> Under Bradby, Glenn was instrumental in organizing black self-help programs for neighborhood improvement. She was an active member in the Earnest Workers Club of Second Baptist, holding the positions of chairman and president; she was also president of the Foreign Missionary Society of Second Baptist and member of Second Baptist’s Altar Circle and Deaconess Board. During her later years at Second, Glenn served as the vice president of the Second Baptist Credit Union, the chairman of the Personnel Committee, and the vice chairman of the Constitution & By-Laws Committee of Second Baptist Church.<sup>59</sup>

Glenn’s labors at Second Baptist even included promoting black intellectualism in the church, exposing the congregation to one of the great black thinkers of our time. As an

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<sup>57</sup> “Scrap Book, History of Earnest Worker’s Club of Second Baptist Church, 1908-1946, Second Baptist Collection.

<sup>58</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Outside of Second Baptist Glenn writes that she was a sustaining member of the NAACP, YWCA and the Patron of Arts Club as well as the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. She held the position of supervisor at the Detroit Post Office in Detroit, maintaining “membership in the National Association of Postal Supervisors, Detroit Branch National Alliance of Postal Employees and its women auxiliary.” Glenn was also the” founder of the South Eastern Improvement Association and chairman of its Civic Committee”; Mary E. Glenn, “Mary E. Glenn,” box 10, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.

active member of the Association For the Study of Negro Life and History, Glenn helped organize lectures highlighting the achievements of Dr. Lorenzo Johnston Green and Carter G. Woodson.<sup>60</sup> Woodson corresponded regularly with Glenn in an effort to build up the membership of the association. He wrote, "We desire to thank you for whatever cooperation you may give, and to assure you that the results obtained from the effort will be productive of great good in prosecuting the study of the Negro scientifically that the race may not become a negligible factor in the thought of the world."<sup>61</sup> Carter G. Woodson spoke many times in Detroit. In February 8, 1948, he spoke at a mass meeting at Second Baptist Church at 4:00 p.m. Among those in attendance were some of the prominent black churchwomen of Second, such as Lillian Johnson and Mrs. Mary E. Glenn herself.

Glenn was definitely a woman of social conscience and action in the church and her efforts help Second raise the level of racial uplift among its congregants. Her work and connection with the Association for Negro Life and History enabled Bradby to support black self help efforts and raise racial advancement through the church. Regular correspondence from Glenn to Bradby showed the labor of one black churchwoman who supported and even empowered the effectiveness of Bradby's leadership.

For example, in 1943 Glenn worked as part of the convention committee for the Association. Writing a letter to Bradby, Glenn informs him of the upcoming Negro History Convention in Detroit on October 29, 1943. Outstanding black leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, then National President of the Association of Negro Life and

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<sup>60</sup> "Sign Up Sheet for Attending the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History at Second Baptist Church," 8-15 February 1948, box 16, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.; "Memorandum-Lorenzo J. Greene," box 17, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.

History(ASALH) and Carter G. Woodson were in attendance at the convention. Glenn reminded Bradby that even Charles Wesley, then President of Wilberforce University, would be present at this momentous occasion. Glenn asked for Bradby's assistance in publicizing the event, writing, "if you would mention the time and place of the convention with any other facts which you may care to add...I 've been shown many curtesies with undertaking but, I still NEED the "emphasis" of the Pastor of Second Baptist."<sup>62</sup> In still another letter, Glenn wrote, "please help publicise this conference by announcing it to any group...and urge your congregation to attend the sessions."<sup>63</sup>

The letters demonstrate the dynamic power structures within the black church. Here, a prominent member of Second Baptist, a black churchwomen who runs in circles of the black elite, must still implore the formal power structures in the church (pastor) to advance change and progress in the community. Bradby, in turn recognizes the informal power structure in the activities of black churchwomen like Glenn and utilizes them to advance not only his leadership of Second Baptist, but to impact the surrounding black community. This is reflected in Bradby's letter to Glenn. In January of 1943 Bradby writes of looking forward to Glenn's return from vacation, stating "I shall be praying for you...be glad when you return."<sup>64</sup>

The life and ministry of Second Baptist's second missionary, Mary Louise Reid stands as another example of how black churchwomen supported and even advanced the power of Bradby and Second Baptist to effective positive change in the black community. Mary

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<sup>61</sup> Carter G. Woodson to Mary Etta Glenn, 1 February 1938, xox 16, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Etta Glenn to Robert L. Bradby, 15 October 1943, box 16, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

L. Reid came to Second in 1920 from the American Baptist Home Mission Society of New York. Reid was sent to Michigan to do missionary and social service under the care of the Detroit Baptist Union. Second Baptist was her first point of contact and ministry center.<sup>65</sup>

Reid was especially instrumental in supporting Bradby's ministry to migrants. She not only reached out to Detroit newcomers during the 1920s, she even assisted Bradby in his daily pastoral responsibilities. Her journal records numerous trips to the sick and shut-in of the church, new members, hospital visits and teaching morning bible classes.

Reid even supported Bradby's efforts to establish the kingdom of God among black migrants in Detroit. Bradby's vision and leadership eventuated in the establishment of the Baptist Christian Center. As the first director of the Baptist Christian Center, Reid oversaw the running of one of the first black settlement house established for incoming migrants in Detroit.<sup>66</sup> The center's purpose was to minister to incoming migrants assisting them in securing employment and training them in Christian principles. One of the primary groups the center targeted was young black females and mothers. Reid was responsible for instructing not only the children of migrants, but teaching the women in classes on cooking, sewing, gardening, music, Negro history and housework. Many of her courses fell under the title "Domestic Science Class."<sup>67</sup>

A typical day for Reid consisted of teaching morning Bible class at Second, visiting a new member, making a house visit and then holding domestic classes at the Baptist

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<sup>64</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Mary Etta Glenn, 28 January 1943, box 17, Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection.

<sup>65</sup> "History of Second Baptist," Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>66</sup> "Baptist Christian Center," box 6, folder I, United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>67</sup> "Missionary Social Worker (reid), 1925-1926," Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

Christian Center between 7:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Reid even ministered to black mothers suffering with supposed delinquent children. One 1927, journal entry in particular, related Reid making a special visit to “police headquarters with a Mrs. Tate concerning her son.”<sup>68</sup> It appears that Reid made personal crisis visits when Bradby could not.

Yet Bradby was found to be very interested in the social welfare of the young women and mothers at the Baptist Christian Center. In a report on the activities of the center dated October 28-December 31, 1921, Bradby writes of holding forty personal talks with mothers and girls at the center. He goes on to note that over 4, 553 students, many of them women, receiving training that year in some department of the center.<sup>69</sup>

In November of 1928, Second Baptist sent Reid as their second missionary to Africa. Following in the footsteps of Miss Lula Cooper in 1923 (Second’s first missionary), Reid was sent as a representative of the black Baptist faith to the Foreign Field, subsidized on a monthly stipend of sixty-five dollars. Other church auxiliaries under the leadership of black churchwomen gave Reid the extra money and supplies she needed to “support a Mission School in Monrovia, Liberia.”<sup>70</sup> Reid spent three years working in Liberia, when she had to return home to Second Baptist after a bout with fever in 1931.<sup>71</sup>

Adding to her other achievements at Second, Reid continued to advance racial uplift through the church by establishing church groups such as the Naomi Circle and the Young Peoples Missionary Society (renamed Missionary Society No. 2 in 1931) in 1920

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Robert L. Bradby, “Report for Quarter, Oct 28-Dec 31, 1921 of Baptist Christian Center,” 28 October – 31 December 1921, box 75, folder 21, United Community Services-Central Files Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>70</sup> “History of Second Baptist Church,” p. 7., Second Baptist Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

and the Mother's Club in 1931. <sup>72</sup>The Mother's Club evolved into the Second Baptist Women's Council in 1934. She was also a teacher for Second's Ladies Bible Class.

Kate Johnson was yet another black churchwoman at Second that supported Bradby's kingdom agenda in meeting the needs of migrants and the Detroit Community. On November 25, 1919, Bradby issued a call to the woman of Second to attend a mass meeting at the church in order to discuss how best to meet the needs of migrant women flowing into Detroit by the hundreds. Over one hundred woman attended the meeting. From this meeting, the Big Sisters Auxiliary was organized with Kate Johnson elected as president. Johnson was instrumental in mapping "out the work for the organization, meeting with the approval of all members." Johnson supervised fifteen sub-groups under the Big Sisters Auxiliaries.

The main focus of the Big Sisters Auxiliary reflected the theological and social concerns of Bradby. Bradby was anxious over the young migrant flowing into Detroit and being targeted by houses of prostitution from the "Red Light" district. He wanted to curb the flow of these desperate young women going into the Detroit's dangerous night-life. More over, Bradby wanted to advance the economic and social opportunities for these young women by giving them other alternatives than that offered by the "Red Light" district. The Big Sisters aimed at "maintain(ing) a home for young women or such other help for the uplift of the Race." Bradby wanted a place where young migrant women could stay while finding respectable employment and permanent housing in Detroit. <sup>73</sup>

Kate Johnson rallied to Bradby's goal and over the next four years oversaw the recruitment of more than "four hundred Christian women" who helped to raise five

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<sup>72</sup> Leach, *The Second Baptist Connection*, 39.

thousand dollars “for the purpose of buying a home on the corner of St. Aubin and Antietam Streets.”<sup>74</sup> As Wolcott states, “The women of the church engaged in charity work throughout the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on young women in the community who, they felt, needed to be guided through the dangers of a new city.”<sup>75</sup>

Under Johnson’s leadership and Bradby’s vision, the women of Second Baptist were able to purchase a twenty-one thousand dollar house, which stood as “a beacon-light for the protection of our girls.” The black churchwomen of the Big Sisters Auxiliary established the home to “stand as a monument to our splendid women of Detroit.”<sup>76</sup> Their motto mirrored the National Association of Colored Women’s motto, “Lifting As We Climb.” Like Bradby’s racial self-help agenda, the motto of the Big Sisters reinforced the tenets of racial uplift through Christian practices.<sup>77</sup>

Women like Kate Johnson, Irene Cole Croxton, Lillian Johnson, Mary Glenn, Mary L. Reid and Jerene Gurley Macklin constituted the informal power structures behind Bradby’s formal power within the community. In fact, Bradby’s effectiveness and power was contingent upon black churchwoman and their “grass-roots” power. Thus, the black churchwomen of Second functioned in the same capacity a historian, Clarence Taylor notes about the black churches in Brooklyn. He writes, “Despite the effort to exclude women from positions of formal power in the mainline churches, women forged a leadership and helped continue the religious, social, and cultural mission of these

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<sup>73</sup> “Cavalcade of Second Baptist Church,” 29 March 1937, p 14, reel 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>74</sup> “Cavalcade of Second Baptist Church,” p. 14., Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>75</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 65.

<sup>76</sup> “Cavalcade of Second Baptist Church,” p. 14., Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

churches. By doing so, they helped build the institutional structure of the churches and were able to gain recognition and distinguished positions.”<sup>78</sup>

Other informal power structures enhancing Bradby’s leadership effectiveness were the many church auxiliaries that were organized and led by black churchwomen of Second. Like Taylor’s assessment, these church auxiliaries created leadership among black women at Second, while at the same time supporting the church’s mission to the Detroit community. Bradby even writes of openly encouraging and occasionally personally directing the organization such churchwomen lead auxiliaries such as the Naomi Circle, Altar Circle, Silver Leaf Club, Ladies Usher Board, Ladies Aid Society, Big Sisters Auxiliary, Worthwhile Club, the Christian Women Workers Club, the Baptist Training Union, the Cultural committee and the Women’s Council.<sup>79</sup> According to Wolcott, “all of these clubs remained active for many decades to come, forming a backbone of community organizing....that was based on the tenets of female uplift.”<sup>80</sup>

These clubs were based on more than just female uplift. Female uplift was a manifestation of a deep-seated Christian faith that linked black uplift, respectability, and womanhood with divine mandates from the Bible. Many of the clubs forged in and through black churches like Second, reflected the attributes and were even based on female characters in the Bible.

At Second Baptist, such groups at the Class of Ruth, No. 4, taught by Fannie Richards, the Class of Esther organized in 1908 by Mary Jennings, and the Naomi Circle founded in 1920 by Mary L. Reid were based on female biblical characters found in the Old

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<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that Kate Johnson was also one of the charter members of the Altar Circle at Second Baptist. This women lead group supplied furnishings for the altar and pulpit during Sunday Services.; “Cavalcade of Second Baptist,” p. 13., Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection

<sup>78</sup> Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xix.



Testament.<sup>81</sup> The Class of Ruth, No. 4 and the Naomi Circle were taken from the book of Ruth, and the Class of Esther was from the book of Esther in the Bible. Ruth, Naomi and Esther were all godly women in the Old Testament that shared a deep faith in God and were preservers of Israelite culture. Ruth and Naomi were not only blessed women of God, but these women were also instrumental in ushering in the savior of Israel and the Christian world, Jesus Christ. For Jesus of Nazareth can trace his lineage back to the book of Ruth. Black churchwomen, looking to uplift their race and womanhood found validation in their identity as black Christian women modeling their lives after mighty biblical women God had used to raise, and even uplift Israelite culture.

The Naomi Circle was first called the Mother's Guild. This group was designed to teach and train women in the tenets of the Christian faith as well as offer good role models of Christian women to the black community. The Naomi Circle then evolved to provide Bible study, missions work, teaching and evangelism. Bible study was combined with missions' work that included educational programs to raising money for the church.

The Altar Circle, the Silver Leaf Club and the Ladies Usher Board were other women lead groups at Second that supported Bradby and Second Baptist in response to Christian imperatives. Interestingly, these groups were started in the homes of black churchwomen, thus expanding their private sphere into the public arena of the black church. Further, the private sphere of the homes of these black churchwomen was infused with the sacred as the activities of the local church many times took life from the very living rooms and kitchens of black churchwomen.

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<sup>79</sup> Leach and Gamble, *Eyewitness History*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 66.

<sup>81</sup> "History of Second Baptist Church," p. 55 and 82, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church.

For example, the Altar Circle was started in the home of Second Baptist member, Mary Osby.<sup>82</sup> Osby called seven women in the church to a meeting along with Rev. Bradby. On December 13, 1910, Bradby meet with “the following ladies: Mrs. Kate Johnson, Mrs. Emma Cole. Miss Louise Taliaferro (now Mrs. Bradby), Miss Sadie Taliaferro (now Mrs. Coleman), Miss Ethel Johnson and Mrs. Mary Osby.”<sup>83</sup> At the meeting, Bradby was made chairman and Mary Osby the president. Under Bradby, these women “furnished Sacramental Wine of the Communion each month, purchase altar scarfs, decorated the church for special occasions, and contributed to the church whenever we could.”<sup>84</sup> On other occasions the group sent Christmas baskets to the poor, and supplied “the special water phosphate for pastor on Sundays.” On the whole, these women were crucial to the weekly upkeep and maintenance of the sanctuary. In short, this group was one facet of the informal power structures that supported Bradby and Second’s formal power.

The Silver Leaf club was organized in the home of Elizabeth Ecclestone, in March 1915. Second Baptist members Eva Peters, Mamie Ridley, Sadie Hardy, Pearl Bexley, Racel Cash, Frances Davis and Horace Cash meet to organize a group that would “help in the church wherever and whenever needed.” The group organized under Eva Peters as president and Harriet Milton as vice-president. Under Peters, one of the first accomplishments of the Silver Leaf Club was to “put carpet down the aisles of the church, curtains in the pastor’s study, furnish the ladies rest room.”<sup>85</sup> The Silver Leaf

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<sup>82</sup> The Altar Circle had its inception on March 14, 1909 under Rev. W. J. Jones. Originally called the Pastor’s Aid Circle, the group fell dormant just prior to Bradby’s coming to Second Baptist in November 1910.;Ibid., 74..

<sup>83</sup> “Cavalcade of Second Baptist,” p. 12, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 16.

Club's colors were silver and green and they functioned under the motto "Nothing great is easy."<sup>86</sup>

Cornelia Holland Lindsey held the first business meeting of the Ladies Usher Board in her home, 712 Russell Street in February 1, 1916. Eight members were in attendance and the first elected officers were Florence Cortney as president, Marie Wright, as secretary and Mamie Clark as the group's treasurer. The duties of the Board were to "render services in any way that was needed, assist the pastor, congregation and the church in its financial support by paying dues, giving socials and personal donations from each individual."<sup>87</sup> From its inception in 1916 up through 1937, black churchwomen held leadership positions in the group, providing tremendous help to Bradby and the church, even to the point of donating \$300.00 for the purchase of chimes for the Second's church organ.

Other notable churchwomen at Second Baptist who supported Bradby were Frances Gaskins Smoot who organized the Ladies Aid Society in February 28, 1918, and Mrs. Jackson who founded the Worth While Club in May 1931. Like other women lead groups at Second, Smoot organized the first meeting of the Ladies Aid Society in her home on a Thursday evening. The Ladies Aid Society primarily supported Bradby and the church through financial contributions. This group, like the others sought to "aid the pastor and church in every way we can financially."<sup>88</sup> The Worthwhile Club's goal was to

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 16.

“cultivate the missionary spirit in the church, to encourage systematic missionary giving, and to promote missionary education”<sup>89</sup>

The Christian Women Workers' Club and the Second Baptist Women's Council were also lead by notable women at Second. Mrs. L. W. Tyrell called a meeting at her home on December 30, 1931. From that meeting the Christian Women Worker's Club was organized. The club's aim was to “elevate standards of womanhood by promoting love, peace and harmony.”<sup>90</sup> The church's second missionary, Mary Louise Reed, organized the Women's Council of Second Baptist. On March 5, 1934, this group was organized to “assist with youth programs, spiritually and financially.”<sup>91</sup>

Such groups as the ones aforementioned constituted major power sources under Bradby and helped him to effect change within the Detroit community. Bradby utilized the strength of women leadership in the church to meet the needs of migrant and the Detroit black community. Without the black churchwomen of Second, Bradby's effectiveness and his leadership abilities would have been limited to a great extent. Yet, Bradby new the power of churchwomen and encourage strong leadership among them.

This is especially seen in his participation in the Seventh Annual Session of the Woman's Division of the Metropolitan Baptist Association in 1926. Members of the association were Second's outstanding church women such as Elizabeth Eccleston, Irene Croxton, and Sadie Ewell to name a few. Bradby not only gave his support to the women's division of the Baptist Association, he actively participated in the Association. As the State president of the Metropolitan Baptist Association, Bradby was asked to give

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<sup>89</sup> Second Baptist Church of Detroit Members Manual,” p.46, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>90</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 61.

remarks at the Seventh Annual Session of the Women's Division. On July 8, 1926, Bradby gave remarks at the meeting, recognizing the "struggles and hardships" the churchwomen "had undergone to try to build up" the Association. Bradby encouraged the women to "consecrate" themselves "for the Master's work and get in closer touch with God."<sup>92</sup>

President Sadie Peoples and vice-president A. J. Bryant took up Bradby's challenge and brand of theology in a variety of ways.. The Association agreed to apply the lessons taught by various churchwomen at the meeting in order to better the race and raise the level of womanhood. A paper given by Mary E. Cole, entitled "A Mother's Interest in a Modern Girl," was read and discussed by the Association. Bible lessons titled "Hope lessons," and Israel's Home Training," all sought to blend the sacred with the domestic sphere of black churchwoman in an effort to advance black uplift in the community.

Mary E. Cole blended motherhood, the Gospel, respectability and racial advancement in her paper to the Association. She writes,

"Every mother should in early childhood teach her girl Christian Education...Christian education means to know Jesus Christ, to love Him, and to serve Him...if we save a girl, we save a soul plus a life and generation...yes our modern girls who must and will make and shape the future generation; the girls who must cradle the future MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL, psychologists, physicians, philosophers and poets; yes the girls who must give to the world the future Booker T. Washington, L.K. Williams and Nannie H. Burroughs—what about them?"<sup>93</sup>

According to Cole, the young women of the black community must be raised and instructed in a way that would continue the advancement of the race, nurturing men and women who follow in the foot-steps of black leaders like Burroughs and Washington. Respectability and the ministry of the Gospel were avenues of training for young black

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<sup>91</sup> "Second Baptist Church of Detroit Members Manual," p. 45, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>92</sup> "Minutes of the Seventh Annual Session of the Women's Division of the Metropolitan Baptist Association held with the Second Baptist Church Ypsilanti, Michigan," p. 17., 7-10 July, 1926, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

women. As Cole states, "Mothers, if you desire your girls to be IDEALS, you must set the examples...If we are to save our girls, we must lower our skirts, wash SOME of the paint from our cheeks and lips, stop dancing, playing cards, and getting intoxicated. Then we will have few marriages on style and fashion; less divorces on cruelty and non-support; happier homes and healthier lives."<sup>94</sup> Coles' statement mirrors what historian Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham notes about Baptist's women's moralistic emphasis. She states, "The Baptist women's moralistic emphasis and concern for "respectable" behavior translated into a belief in the primacy of spiritual over material progress, and yet their emphasis offered each striving soul an attempt to gain personal dignity and worth in this world despite its racism and poverty."<sup>95</sup>

Cole's paper reflected the overall mindset and theology carried by Baptist churchwomen in the North, especially those at Second Baptist. The message of Jesus Christ was inextricably tied to issues of respectability, womanhood, and racial advancement. Respectability was not a goal and issue unto itself in the minds of black churchwoman, it was just another facet of the "call" by God to be upstanding righteous women who reflected godly attributes of justice, righteousness, and equality. For Bradby, these goals were all tied to the biblical motif of the "kingdom of God." Black Baptist women of the North understood Bradby's reality of the Gospel and even ascribed to this belief themselves. As Cole writes, "We have the opportunity to create in her (young modern girls) CHRISTIAN IDEALS, so she will CREATE A CHRISTIAN

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 25

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., . 27.

<sup>95</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "Religion, Politics, and Gender: The Leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs," in Judith Wisenfeld & Richard Newman, editors, *This Far By Faith: Readings in African American Women's Religious Biography*, (New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 146.

CIVILIZATION. This is our privilege and our task.”<sup>96</sup> The advancement of the black race, for black churchwomen was quintessentially the advancement of the “kingdom of God.” Black churchwomen conception of “the kingdom of God,” i.e., “Christian Civilization” was based in a theology that drew upon the ideals of black uplift, Christianity and the cult of true womanhood. As historian Anne Meis Knupfer states, “Club women thereby created intricate layers of social uplift...they emphasized not only their own but all women’s responsibility in race elevation”<sup>97</sup>

Nationally acclaimed religious leader Nannie Burroughs also understood the theology behind black advancement and heralded Bradby for his efforts toward the race and his support of black woman leadership. As secretary of the National Baptist Women’s Convention and founder and president of the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in Washington D.C., Burroughs stood as the leader of black churchwomen in the Baptist faith and was herald a race leader of her time. Higgenbotham heralds Burroughs as the “finest representatives of the black Christian tradition. Nannie Burroughs is the feminine in our religious tradition.”<sup>98</sup> Burroughs recognized the accomplishments and support of Bradby toward the her race and her gender. Writing in November 7, 1925, Burroughs congratulates Bradby on his 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Second. In her letter, Burroughs applauds Bradby for his service in Michigan and his brand of theology. She writes,

“My Dear Doctor Bradby, Congratulations upon the occasion of your anniversary as pastor of the Second Baptist Church...Your theology is modern in its construction and dress, but apostolic in its content. Your sermons sparkling with originality, expressed in terms of modern thinking,

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<sup>96</sup> “Minutes of the Seventh Annual Session of the Women’s Division of the Metropolitan Baptist Association held with the Second Baptist Church Ypsilanti, Michigan,” p. 27, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>97</sup> Anne Meis Kupfer, *Toward A Tender Humanity*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, “*Religion Politics and Gender: The Leadership of Nannie Burroughs*,” Judith Weisenfeld & Richard Newman, *This Far by Faith*, 154.

with Christ as the center. I observe that you have a passionate enthusiasm for moral righteousness and social justice.”<sup>99</sup>

Bradby carried his enthusiasm for moral righteousness and social justice into the many letters he wrote on behalf of Second’s churchwomen and young migrant girls. In these letters, Bradby addressed job discrimination, employment needs, he petitioned top white officials to help pay debts or withhold foreclosure on women’s mortgages during the Depression and even petitioned parole officers on behalf of black women’s sons.

Second Baptist member Sadie Throgmartin Curley Terrell credits Bradby for helping her gain employment as “the first black clerk in the Mechanic Bank located on Mechanic at St. Antione Street in 1926.”<sup>100</sup> In September 30, 1929, Bradby wrote a letter to the Detroit Conservatory of Music on behalf of Florence Shumake stating, “Mrs. Shumake is very worthy and will I am sure reflect credit upon any effort that we may put forth to help her.”<sup>101</sup> Another letter written in 1931 asked for employment for Second Baptist member Myrtle Jackson, stating, “It is our understanding that she is now seeking a position with the Welfare Department of the City of Detroit, and we are very happy to add our word of recommendation to her character and worthiness.”<sup>102</sup>

Other letters written on behalf of widows during the Great Depression by Bradby are sent to the Detroit City Treasurer. Annie Jenkins was the beneficiary of one of Bradby’s letters in May 13, 1931. Jenkins owned \$88.83 for 1928 taxes. The city was foreclosing

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<sup>99</sup> Nannie H. Burroughs to Robert L. Bradby, 7 November 1925, “Souvenir Program 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Second Baptist Church, 1910-1925, p. 43, reel 3,, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>100</sup> Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 71.

<sup>101</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Mrs. Clemments, 30 September 1929, reel 3, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>102</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Whom it May Concern, 21 April 1931, reel 3, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.



on her home due to back taxes. Bradby writes the City Treasurer pleading, "All her life-savings are in this home. It would be tragic if she lost it, and I will thank you very much sincerely for whatever help you can give."<sup>103</sup> Bradby pens another letter to the Department of Welfare on behalf of Eutella Nay. Bradby first addresses the harsh treatment Nay received at the hands of a white social worker. He writes, "if what she reports with regard to his treatment of her is true, it is hardly less than slavery days." Referring to her financial condition Bradby states, This woman is living in a room without even anything to cook with. She has not always been in this position. Her husband was once a minister. He is dead. If there is any adjustment you can make in this case I will appreciate it. If not I am going to take it up with the Welfare Commission and the mayor."<sup>104</sup>

These letters are telling in that they demonstrate Bradby's concern for the plight of African American women and his power to call upon some of the highest white power structures in their defense. Bradby battled discrimination on behalf to black women, especially his church members on every front and sought their social and economic advancement wherever he could.

This is especially seen in his efforts to gain employment for African American women at Ford Motor Company. Ford's hiring practices toward black females mirrored that of other industrial companies, only hiring white women at best. In 1942, when the Ford Plant Willow Run began hiring female labor, black women were excluded. Black leaders like Bradby fought hard to open Detroit war production industries to African American

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<sup>103</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Charles L. Williams, 15 May 1931, reel 3, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

<sup>104</sup> Robert L. Bradby to Miss Cavanaugh, 15 November 1931, reel 3, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection.

women. Bradby came to the fore again for racial justice on behalf of black women. Joining the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), Bradby along other black and white leaders from the Detroit FEPC Council approached one of Ford's top officials at the time Harry Bennett for bettering hiring policies toward black women. According to historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, Bennett's patronizingly praised, Bradby "for his early "constructive influence" on Rouge's Negro workers, noting how the company "didn't have hear as many knifings as they used to."<sup>105</sup> Despite Bennett's sarcasm, Bradby and the FEPC did receive a cursory promise that "Negro females would be hired, "as soon as Negro groups, whose sole interests are political, stop their agitation."<sup>106</sup>

Although Bradby and the FPEC continued to wage an uphill war against Ford's hiring practices towards black women, the progress of the campaign was slow and arduous. Bradby's participation in the FPEC reflected his theology that sought the advancement of both black men and women through protest agitation based on biblical mandates.

As a race leader, Bradby was heavily supported by the effectiveness of Second Baptist and its ministries to the Detroit black community. Second Baptist enabled Bradby to advance the needs of the black community and gave him a lot of power and influence in social political circles of white power structures. His leadership and effectiveness in the Detroit community and at Second Baptist was sustained and supported by the black churchwomen of Second Baptist. Second Baptist's longevity financially, socially and politically were due to the labors and efforts of its churchwomen and their effective leadership in the church. As Darlene Clark Hine affirms, "Black women propelled the

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<sup>105</sup> August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 138.

church towards service as a welfare agency and shaped it into an institution for social as well as spiritual uplift. The black women bore the responsibility of urging, cajoling and guiding the church towards assumption of leadership in the amelioration of the causes of poverty, sickness, illiteracy, crime, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency.”<sup>107</sup>

Second’s black churchwomen like Fannie Richards, Lillian Johnson, Irene Cole Croxton as well as the many women lead church auxiliaries and clubs at Second Baptist were the virtual “back-bone” of the vitality and life of Second Baptist and the leadership of Bradby. These women were the true power behind Bradby’s formal power and Second’s status as the foremost black church in Detroit. As Hine states, “despite the undeniable importance of black male preachers, the strength and vitality of black churches rested in large part on the constant support of black women.”<sup>108</sup>

Scholars have in large part ignored the role of black churchwomen in the local black church. There is a need within scholarly circles to continue to address the role of black churchwomen in the black church, for if one pays close attention they will see that the black pastor wields no power and effects no lasting change without the labors of black churchwomen. The interconnectedness of these two figures in the black church has yet to be fully addressed as they relate to activities of black self-help and uplift in twentieth century America.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>107</sup> Hine, *When the Truth is Told*, 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 20.

## **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS BEHIND THE MINISTRY OF REVEREND ROBERT L. BRADBY AND SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH**

The life of Rev. Robert L. Bradby and the history of Second Baptist speak to the larger role that black churches played in urban community building in the twentieth century. As one of the main agencies of black self help, the local black church became the seedbed of black agendas of racial advancement, social mobility, and resistance against white racism. Second Baptist was a medium of empowerment that afforded the Detroit black community higher levels of enfranchisement on a number of levels. Bradby stood as a Christian activist that pursued the advancement of black needs.

His life and his church lend insight into the theological foundations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century black church and herald the evolution of black theological thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter presents an overview of those theological foundations resonant in black churches like Second and reflect upon how the nature of early black Christian theology in the church mirrors contemporary concepts found in Liberation Theology.

A product of his times, his ministry and theology reflected the ideals of Progressivism and the theology of Social Gospel reformers such as Reverdy Ransom, Walter Rauschenbush and George Gladden. Combining the ideologies of these men with the social-political strategies of Booker T. Washington, Bradby effected black progress in Detroit through avenues of praise, protest, resistance, agitation and accommodation.

Praise was demonstrated in the many sermons he preached. Protest came through the power of his pen as he wrote letters decrying racist treatment of his members. Resistance and agitation were the attributes of his letters as well as the many auxiliaries and clubs he set-up. Accommodation was manifested through his relationship with Henry Ford. The recommendations he wrote on behalf of jobless migrants, bankrupt widows and blacks

seeking educational opportunities were all reflections of what Gayraud Wilmore terms "the radical tradition" in the black church. For Wilmore, "It is this radical thrust of blacks for human liberation expressed in theological terms and religious institutions that is the defining characteristic of black Christianity and black religion in the United States..."<sup>1</sup> The radical tradition was the black pursuit of freedom and equality in America through means of protest and agitation. Protest and agitation were actions grounded in Christian principles based on the activities of God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament. The reform activities of black progressive ministers like Ransom and Bradby mirror Wilmore's understanding of the radical tradition and address the fundamental foundations of black institutional religion in America.

Although black uplift methods at Second Baptist were at times seen as accommodating white power structures, such as Bradby's relationship with Henry Ford, such accommodation carried undercurrents of resistance and black empowerment. Through accommodating Ford's need for labor, Bradby used Second Baptist as an employment agency in an effort to financially help jobless migrants and resist black disenfranchisement.

Bradby's accommodation spoke to the dynamic continuum of accommodation/protest that the black church has operated on throughout its history. As C.E. Lincoln writes, "Sometimes accommodation also meant that black preachers were manipulated and used by whites. But the pole of resistance meant that it was possible to resist the accommodative forces and pressures of American mainstream. Politically, resistance has

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<sup>1</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, Second Edition, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), x.

included both self-determination and self-affirmation.”<sup>2</sup> Bradby’s leadership of Second Baptist did both. His connection with Ford, the letters he wrote on behalf of the black community and the ministries he set up to assist the community all reflected actions of self-determination and self-affirmation; yet these actions also accommodated the needs of white power structures like Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford wanted to influence the Detroit black community, so he targeted the most prominent and influential institution within its culture, the black church. Ford gained influence and cheap labor, the Detroit community resisted poverty and unemployment to a degree.

The significance of Bradby and Second Baptist’s reflection of the radical tradition in black culture speaks to contemporary understandings of black Christian leadership, and African American hermetical understandings of God in relationship to the black experience. In Christian contexts, the African American experience of racism colors biblical texts and perceptions God and Jesus Christ. The activities of Second Baptist and the black self help ministries the church established to assist the Detroit community give insight into the nature of black church theology in the twentieth century.

What is clear is that the brand of theology espoused and practiced by Bradby and Second Baptist was grounded in the African American experience of social, political, and economic disenfranchisement. This aspect of Second Baptist provides insight into the interpretative frameworks African Americans have held toward the tenets of Christianity throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such they reflect contemporary motifs found in Liberation Theology.

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<sup>2</sup> C.Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (London: Duke University, 1990), 15.

Theologians Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner assert, “the poor are privileged in the eyes of God.” They state “While this divine preference is seen in the legal prescriptions of the Torah and in the condemnations of the canonical prophets of Israel’s social arrangements, it is affirmed particularly in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus is said to affirm in the poor and in doing so, he claims that they are the inheritors of the “kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup>

For liberation theologians, God is understood to correct human mistakes by advancing his kingdom through acts of justice and resistance to oppression. Key biblical texts such as Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God;” and Micah 6:8: “Has he showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God;” were drawn upon to understand the mandates required by God. Moreover, Jesus stands as an example of a poor man who serves God by pursuing the kingdom of God. Jesus is not resigned to poverty, but takes up this condition in order to give others hope of rising above their own poverty. Liberation theologians do not glamorize poverty, but define it as a “lack of resources necessary for life.”<sup>5</sup> God is revealed as one who ushers in his kingdom “first and foremost for those who, by virtue of their situation, have most need of it: the afflicted, the hungry of this world.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the kingdom of God comes to impact and change the existential realities of the poor and oppressed.

The members of Second Baptist embraced Jesus as the radical who challenged oppressive conditions in the “status quo” and modeled the very theological foundations of

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 91.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:3, New International Version of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 47-48.

their ministries to reflect his revolutionary activities. Rev. Robert L. Bradby preached sermons that challenged his membership to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, resisting injustice in every facet of life and invoking structural transformations in society in pursuit of a higher level of freedom for the black community, the poor and impoverished. Sermons entitled, "The Detroit We've Made," "The Detroit As Headed." And "The Detroit Which Can Be," focused on the doctrines of the Gospel and the social uplift of the black race.<sup>7</sup>

Bradby's declaration in 1940 stating that the ultimate goal of Second was to continue a "larger and more extensive promotion of the program of the Kingdom of God, was in essence a program of the "social betterment and moral uplift of our members on helping the sick, poor, and unemployed, creating auxiliaries, increasing missionary funds and improving financial conditions."<sup>8</sup> These actions constituted non-violent, revolutionary ways of combating economic and political disenfranchisement among Detroit blacks and reflected biblical mandates from the Old and New Testament.

Church auxiliaries such as the Big Sisters, Missionary clubs, the Second Baptist Educational department, the Baptist Christian Center and the many committees set up to meet incoming migrants around the clock at train and bus stations were manifestations of the advancement of the Kingdom of God. These church auxiliaries and clubs were mediums of resistance to white oppression and empowerment toward the black community. The church committees, who met incoming migrants and took them into the church to feed, clothe and even house them for a night were radical resistance activities

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Leach and Edith Gamble, *Eyewitness History, Second Baptist Church of Detroit, 1836-1876*, reel 3, box 2, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan,.



against poverty. The many letters Bradby wrote on behalf of migrants and church members for jobs and housing, educational opportunities or even in protest against discriminatory practices were quintessential acts of justice and protest against the evils of society which reflected theological imperatives in biblical texts such as Amos 5: 24: "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"; Zechariah 7: 9-10: "This is what the Lord Almighty says, Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other;" and Matthew 25: 44-45 "They also answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you? He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'" Justice on behalf of the poor, and meeting the needs of those hungry, sick and thirsty in society was part of Jesus' great command to his followers. Bradby took these divine directives to heart and modeled the ministries of Second Baptist to fulfill the scriptural mandates proclaimed by the minor prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Bradby's letters and the ministry of Second Baptist also eventuated in structural transformations within social and economic circles in Detroit. Through Second, Bradby's lucrative relationship with Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company shook the automotive industrial world, making the black worker a permanent fixture in the Detroit automotive industrial working class. Second Baptist's ministry to incoming migrants changed the social- political and demographic landscape of Detroit. The overall population in Detroit from 1910-1918 tripled in size. The black community increased almost a hundred fold

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<sup>8</sup> Reverend Robert L. Bradby, "Preface," *History of Second Baptist Church, 1836-1940*, Second Baptist Historical Collection, Second Baptist Church, Detroit.

due to opportunities made available through such agencies as the black church and the Detroit Urban League. In fact, to some degree poverty and social-political disenfranchisement was successfully resisted through the actions of churches like Second and black Christian leaders such as Bradby.

Bradby's leadership and the ministries of Second Baptist mirrored Gayraud Wilmore and Vincent Hardings concept of the "radical tradition" in black religion. The "spiritual strivings" of freedom and equality that Manning Marable alludes to are manifested in the "radical tradition" of the black worshipping community through "praise" and "protest." Coupled with Bradby's letters of "agitation and protest," addressing employment, housing needs and discriminatory practices; were sermons of "praise" relating how the black community could build a better Detroit with the help of God. The many church committees and auxiliaries he organized and encouraged reflected the radical tradition of pursuing avenues of freedom and equality for the Detroit black community. Through the radical traditions of "praise," "protest," and "resistance," Second Baptist and Bradby refused to accept the status quo of white racism and black disenfranchisement. These actions of praise, protest, and resistance constituted the advancement of the "kingdom of God," and were marked manifestations of justice and the pursuit of freedom in the black community.

This radical tradition was also found in the activities of black churchwomen who upheld the formal structures of leadership in the black church. Black churchwomen welded considerable agency in Second, so much so, that they were the very cornerstones of church ministry. For in expanding the private spheres of their homes to embrace the social-theological and political agendas of the black church, these women became the

“backbone” not only behind Second’s effective, but also the power supporting black male Christian leadership. It cannot be ignored that the majority of Second Baptist’s church clubs and self-help groups were organized and lead in the homes of black churchwomen. Mirroring the activities of black women church clubs in Indiana, Darlene Clark Hine affirms, “Black women meeting in each other homes week after week for ten, thirty and more years developed much more than leadership skills, positive self images and strategies for organizing communal charity. They nurtured and created a black female community and cultural network identified by its own special style, substance and language.”<sup>9</sup>

Building on Hine’s assessment, I argue that part of the “substance” of these black churchwomen groups were founded in Christian theology based on biblical imperatives. Many of the meetings black churchwomen held were opened and closed with prayer. Typically, the prayer would be a request that the God of the Bible would bless, strengthen and give insight into how the group could best meet the needs of the “kingdom,” the church and the black community. Prayer and petition to God for change and guidance were translated into black uplift agendas that withstood racism, derogatory images of black females and provided African American women with an empowered identity, even a divine identity in some respects. For the black churchwoman was first a Christian, a daughter of God who had God’s stamp of approval upon her personhood through her personal belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, black churchwomen were also part of the oppressed black race. Black women, especially black churchwomen suffered not only from racism, they also suffered from ecclesiastical sexism in the

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<sup>9</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women’s Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950*, (Indianapolis: The National Council of Negro Women, 1981), 27.

church. Black women at Second, although afforded leadership positions in the educational departments and other auxiliaries of the church, were systematically kept out of key leadership roles such as Associate Pastor or Pastor. Societal mores based on patriarchal notions of women's inferiority and conservative readings of biblical texts such as II Timothy 2: 12 kept black women from leadership positions in the church.

Black churchwomen identified with the oppressed groups of the Bible. Many times they would read scriptures in the beginning of their meetings focusing on the role that Jesus or God played in delivering the oppressed from bondage, or supporting the needs of women in the Israelite community. As theologian Renita J. Weems writes, "the Bible has some power on its own, and it is certainly true that it has been able to arrest African American female readers and persuade them to make their behavior conform according to certain of its teachings. Where the Bible has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication"<sup>10</sup> The black churchwomen of Second embraced the biblical motif of the kingdom of God, and like Bradby, understood that its manifestation came through protest, resistance and reform.

This interpretative tradition also reflected the reality of African Diaspora consciousness among early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American Christians, especially black Baptist. The aspect of African Diasporic consciousness manifested within the Black church is realized in what philosopher John Mbiti terms as the African worldview or cosmological thought. Specifically, it is the blending of secular and sacred spheres into

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<sup>10</sup> Renita Weems, "African American Women and the Bible," in Cain Hope Felder, editor, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). 63 and 70.

one unified whole within the African's psyche that is seen in the theological perspectives and actions of the 20th century black church.

Philosopher John Mibiti declares, "Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament."<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the black church then, this African mentality transformed the doctrines of Christianity and overshadowed African American hermeneutical perspectives with regard to biblical texts, thereby making Christianity into a mechanistic religious reality in their lives. It is this African worldview and cosmological thought that contemporary scholarship argued was carried over within the Diaspora, and which resides in and continues to reside in the minds of African Americans.

Second Baptist and the leadership of Reverend Bradby is one reflection of the reality and continuity of African Diasporic consciousness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century black community. Under the preaching and teaching of Bradby, Second Baptist understood Christianity as a faith that transcended the sacred and embraced the secular world and all of its experiences. Christianity became a means of "salvation" and empowerment in the face of white racial oppression and black disenfranchisement. Thus, the African American practice of Christianity functioned in the same capacity that traditional African religion had functioned.

Overall, the nature of the black church and its drive for freedom and equality are rooted in biblical mandates. Traditionally, scholars have interpreted the spiritual

strivings of the black church solely as a pursuit of freedom and equality. The activities of Second Baptist and the leadership of Bradby speak to something beyond the mere pursuit of freedom and equality as a goal unto itself. Black self-help agendas in the church geared to freedom, equality and overall black uplift were tied to the ultimate pursuit of establishing God's kingdom on Earth. As Rowland and Corner state, It is impossible for the Kingdom of God to come on earth within the hearts of individuals, without its being expressed in the social relations that govern their lives as individuals."<sup>12</sup>

Another facet of Bradby's perception of the kingdom was drive to establish the humanity of African Americans in early twentieth century Detroit. For Bradby, black humanity was tied to black freedom and these two concepts were founded upon biblical understandings of God's love and justice. As theologian Allan Boesak contends, "Human dignity for all is a fundamental biblical right... In the Bible there is a close connection among God's love, God's justice or righteousness, and human rights."<sup>13</sup> Bradby believed this and for him the establishment of black humanity was connected to issues of respectability and black equality.

In helping establish such groups as the Dress Well Club and the Baptist Training Center, Bradby sought to teach migrants the tenets of respectability. Although his methods may have reflected white middle class bourgeois perceptions, the foundation of his actions were based his theological understanding of righteousness and humanity. Righteousness meant right living and right behaviors according the scriptures. For

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<sup>11</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, ( New York: Praeger, 1969), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, edited by Leonard Sweetman, (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 6-7.

example, Paul writes that he becomes all things to all men and do not like your good be evil spoken – all in order to reflect Christ to the world.<sup>14</sup>

Bradby knew that the gospel of Jesus Christ upheld the struggle for black humanity in America. As Boesak points out, “black Christians knew that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not deny the struggle for black humanity, and it was with this light from God’s word that they went into struggle, both within the church and outside it.”<sup>15</sup>

Bradby realized that the gospel of Jesus Christ was commiserative with the struggle for black liberation and black humanity. This constituted the kingdom of God for Bradby and he set the course of his leadership agenda but the pursuit of it. Black liberation, equality and the establishment of black humanity was the kingdom of God. For Boesak asserts, “The church is called to proclaim this kingdom with its justice, love, peace, wholeness...under all circumstances to follow in the footsteps of the Lord whose kingdom it proclaims...It cannot but proclaim a message of liberation from misery, oppression, poverty, domination, exploitation, fear.”<sup>16</sup>

Reverend Robert L. Bradby and the ministry of Second Baptist to southern black migrants reflected this understanding of liberation theology and gave practical expression to its truths. Second Baptist fulfilled Hayes charge to the church of applying the

“principles of the Christ to a concrete religious and social situations...to secure or train in spirit and technique men and women of vision to assist in the exacting, executive and administrative work which the joint community organization...should undertake. The expansion of work in employment placement, training courses for those employed...”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I Cor 9: 19-23 and Rom. 14:16.

<sup>15</sup> Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> George Edmund Haynes, *Negro New-Comer in Detroit, Michigan: A Challenge to Christian Statesmanship A Preliminary Survey*. (New York: Home Mission Council, 1918), 37 and 39.

Bradby accomplished these directives through his leadership of Second Baptist. The Detroit migrant and black community made tremendous strides under the care of Second and gave validity to power of the black church to transform the secular spaces of African Americans in a racially divided world. Under Bradby, Second Baptist's ministries to the black community reflected the seeds of liberation theology taking sprout long before the term was ever coined.



## CONCLUSION: SECOND BAPTIST AFTER BRADBY

**“Onward Bradby, Onward”**  
(Tune: “Onward Christian Soldiers”)  
Presented by Senior Choir, 1923  
Dedication to Rev. R. L. Bradby

Onward, Bradby, Onward  
Onward to the fray.  
Never stop to whimple  
Never say thou ‘Nay’  
Just press on and upward  
Whatever men might say.  
You just preach true gospel  
Till the final day.<sup>1</sup>

The “final day” for Bradby came on June 3, 1946. The last sermon he preached at Second Baptist was on Palm Sunday, June 2, 1946, entitled “The Kind of Church I would Like to Help Build.”<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Bradby succeeded in building the kind of church he had envisioned. For Second Baptist became one of the most successful black churches in Detroit during the early twentieth century. By 1943, Bradby had “served in 1,716 Sunday services, preached 3,432 sermons, pastored 11,715 persons for Church membership, baptized 2,244 Converts and united 1,617 Couples in Holy Wedlock.”<sup>3</sup> These numbers do not include the thousands of individuals and families that received employment and housing through Bradby’s recommendations not only to Ford, but to other agencies in Detroit.

A staunch Progressive and adherent to the Social Gospel, Bradby lived out reform agendas through his theology of the kingdom of God. His life and the ministry of Second

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Leach, *Second Baptist Connection Revised Edition Eyewitness History Second Baptist Church of Detroit*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1988), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>3</sup> “Program of the Thirty-third Anniversary of Dr. Robert L. Bradby. D.D. L.I.D.,” reel 3, Second Baptist Church Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Baptist demonstrated how one black religious institution evoked fundamental and far reaching changes in the social, cultural and political milieu of Detroit during three major periods in American History---the Great Migration, World War I and II and the Great Depression. Reverend Bradby's leadership established him as a forerunner of the black "self-help" tradition in Detroit and exposed the latent power of the Black Church to transcend its private domain and evoke changes in the public sphere of Detroit's black community. At the core of Bradby's actions were theological imperatives of liberation and resistance. For Bradby and the members of Second Baptist Church, resistance and liberation were divinely sanctioned initiatives inextricably connected with the gospel message of the New Testament and the proclamations of the minor prophets in the Old Testament.

Bradby's successor Rev. Allan Arthur Banks Jr. carried on Bradby's kingdom agenda and reflected the continuous tradition of black self help at Second Baptist. Born in Bryan, Texas, Banks grew up as the son of a Baptist preacher and public school teacher. He attended High School in Pocatello, Idaho and then returned to Texas to gain his Bachelor of Arts Degree from Bishop College in Marshall, Texas. He received his Masters of Arts Degree in Economics at Howard University, Washington D.C. During his tenure at Howard, Banks felt a "call to the ministry." He then went on to receive a Bachelor of Divinity Degree from the Howard University School of Religion. Some years later Banks received an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from Bishop College and Arkansas Baptist College.<sup>4</sup>

In 1943, Banks received an invitation from Second Baptist to come an interview for the position of Associate Pastor. The invitation came to Banks while he was working at

Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington D.C. under senior pastor Rev. Early L. Harrison. As the Assistant Pastor and Director of Religious Education at Shiloh, Banks grew in his leadership abilities and even married Victoria Allen on August 30, 1942. That same week, Banks took up Bradby's invitation and went to Detroit to be interviewed for the position of Associate Pastor and Director of Religious Education at Second Baptist. The interview included the preaching of a "trial sermon." On June 20, 1943, Banks preached a sermon entitled "The Mizpah." This was a timely sermon for Second was in the midst of the 1940s Race Riot in Detroit. His second sermon, "Living in Two World," gained him the position of Associate Pastor. From 1943 to 1946, Banks assisted Bradby as Second's fifth Associate Pastor, a position held vacant since 1929. On a salary of \$35.00 a week, Banks oversaw the massive educational ministries of Second Baptist.<sup>5</sup>

Three years into his duties, Banks was faced with Bradby's unexpected death. Six months later, Second Baptist elected Banks as the church's 20<sup>th</sup> pastor on January 2, 1947. During Banks tenure, Second continued to move forward in advancing black progress. In 1949, church member Ralph Bunche put Second Baptist on the map when he received the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP). One year later, Ralph Bunche received the Nobel Peace Prize, the world's highest award ever received by an African American.

Other advances made in the Detroit community through the ministries of Second Baptist were such organizations as the Downtown Business and Professional Club. Under Banks organization, this club supported black businesses in downtown Detroit. Another ministry through Second came through Bank's wife, Victoria Banks. In 1952,

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<sup>4</sup> Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

“Governor G. Mennen Williams appointed Mrs. Banks as a member of the Michigan Social Welfare Commission” in an effort to provide economic support for more of Detroit’s African American families. Second Baptist even participated in early Civil Rights Movement, walking in protest marches and contributing \$2600.00 to the Martin Luther King Montgomery Improvement Association on December 9, 1956.<sup>6</sup> In 1956, Second Baptist also purchased another property to accommodate its growing congregation. Located in the heart of Detroit’s Greektown, Second bought property at 461 and 419 Monroe with a \$400,000.00 bank loan, a phenomenal sum to be loaned to a predominantly black institution at the time.

Second tore down its property at 419 and 461 Monroe, eventually expanding and rebuilding a larger edifice at 441 Monroe Avenue, still in the heart of Greektown. It is this church building that as a little girl I attended with my father and Grandfather. As a little girl, I heard the glorious stories of Bradby and the power of Second Baptist in Detroit. Although Rev. Banks led Second through another successful tenure, over time, the church’s membership began to wane.

By the time I sat in the pews of Second in the early 1980s, many of Second’s ministries erected under Bradby had been disbanded. In 1928, Second boasted of a membership around 3,000. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Second has maintained a membership just under 900 congregants. Many of these members seem to live off the memory of Second during its “Golden Years,” under Bradby, where hundreds of congregants would form lines two hours before service just to get a seat; and black workers at Ford proudly wore their Ford emblems as armbands during Sunday Service. Second Baptist’s church historian Nathaniel Leach remembers turning away hundreds of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 43.

worshippers from the 11:00 a.m. Sunday service, simply because there was just not enough room. Many black congregants, he recalled, would stand wall to wall during morning services just to hear Bradby preach.

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the membership of Second continued to decline. When I spoke at Second's Annual Women's Day Service in the Spring of 2002, the church pews were barely filled with members. Under the pastorate of Second Baptist's 23<sup>rd</sup> pastor, Reverend Kevin M. Turman, the church has leveled off to a membership of 880. Although not as active as it was in the past, under Rev. Turman Second continues to provide spiritual substance and social-economic assistance to the Detroit Community. Turman has caught and continued the tradition of black self-help through the divine initiatives inherent in the Christian motif of the "kingdom of God." Celebrating Second's 159<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, he stated,

"It is difficult to fully grasp the meaning of having been in the kingdom building enterprise for these many years. Consider that back before there was a Civil War in America, there was a Second Baptist Church. Our doors remained opened through two World Wars. The Great Migration which brought hundreds of thousands of African-Americans to the North. The Industrial Revolution, The Civil Rights Movement, the Detroit riots, and the protest of the 1960s and 1970s are all events during which we have continued to lift up the cross of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

Turman's words ring true, for Second Baptist still continues to uplift the black race through establishing God's kingdom. On the most fundamental level, Second Baptist established a dynamic black Christian institutional base in Detroit. Second Baptist was the "Mother" of Detroit black Baptist churches. From its rise in 1837 to the middle of the twentieth century, Second Baptist has mothered over 30 black Baptist's churches in Detroit. This record alone reflects the church's tradition of constantly establishing the "kingdom of God" in the Detroit community.

As an African American woman preacher, I have had over three opportunities to preach and teach at Second Baptist. It has been an honor to grow up connected with such an historic church and rich history. As the first African American woman to ever speak on the church's anniversary, I felt privileged and humbled to be a part of Second Baptist's history. This work hoped to capture the Golden years of Second Baptist and the power within Second's theology that kept it thriving though so many "dangers, toils and snares."

As honorary member of Second, its history is as close as home. My father and grandfather's connection with Second Baptist ordered my steps to investigate and put to pen the marvelous triumphs of the black church in Detroit. My father, who is now deacon of Second Baptist, was privileged to know Bradby and other influential church members such as Mary Etta Glenn and Irene Cole Croxton. He, like other members of Second Baptist, seemed to run in circles of powerful black activists. As a brand new baby coming into the world, my father, Edisel H. Robinson was delivered by none other than Dr. Ossian Sweet, who lived just three blocks down from my grandfather on Chene and Madison Street, in what was know as "Detroit's Black-Bottom." Dr. Sweet was the first African American property owner to successfully beat a murder charge and maintain the right to protect his home.<sup>8</sup> Supported by the NAACP, assisted by Rev. Bradby, and legally represented by one of the greatest defense lawyers in the country, Clarence Darrow, Sweet won the right to live in a predominantly white neighborhood and protect

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<sup>7</sup> "A Word From Our Pastor...Rev. Kevin M. Turman," *Second Baptist 159<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Souvenir Book*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1995), 3.

his property in 1925. Second Baptist supported Dr. Sweet during his ordeal. Bradby offered his church for a meeting place for the defense team and assisted Sweet's family during the trial, which took place from October 30 to November 4, 1925.<sup>9</sup>

After the trial, Sweet moved back into Detroit's Black Bottom where he continued to practice medicine. On April 12, 1934 Sweet's path crossed with the Robinson family when he delivered my father in my grandfather's home on 1955 Madison Street off of St. Auburn and Orleans. As a boy growing up on the streets of Detroit, my father remembers running into Dr. Sweet at times. Sweet would look at my dad and exclaim, "Don't I know you, your one of my boys aren't you?" My father would laugh and acknowledge that Sweet was right.<sup>10</sup>

During the church's 159<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, my father served as the chairperson of Second's Anniversary Committee. Cherishing his time at Second he wrote,

"I am thankful to God for letting me be a part of a church, that has since 1836 been showing the way, the truth, and the light to all people. Second Baptist Church should shine bright, with the remembrance that she has confessed and been baptized in slavery, edified and tested in the Reconstruction period, and has been certified and ordained to witness to the forgiveness, power, and the love of God from "1836 to Eternity."<sup>11</sup>

My father's words are telling, for Second Baptist has existed throughout major historical periods in American History. It is humbling to trace the power of black agency through the black church and see one's own reflection. This work offers a glimpse into one facet of the African American experience during the tumultuous periods of the interwar years. It presents a micro-history of a larger narrative of African American Christianity and Institutional Religion. The history of Second Baptist and the activities of

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Turrini, "Sweet Justice," *Michigan History Magazine* (July/August 1999); 23-27.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Edisel H. Robinson, Phone Interview, July 28, 2002.

its 19<sup>th</sup> pastor provides a window by which to understand the nature of the black church in American and black Christian leadership. This work also notes how the urban black community of Detroit, Michigan found part of its roots in the “Mother” of black churches in Detroit. Black community building in the early twentieth century is inextricably tied to the local black church, for in the beginning of the twentieth century the local black church was the seedbed of black life, power and identity. The history of Second Baptist reflects this reality and speaks to power of the Gospel to speak to the multifaceted dilemmas faced by the African American community. As the words to the following song declare:

**“Second Dear Second”**

(Tune: “Juanita”)

By Victoria Banks

Written 1957; Adopted 1958

In Detroit City  
Stands the Second Baptist Church,  
Where Freedmen worshipped  
With the Master’s touch.  
Here in downtown Detroit,  
Eighteen-thirty-six, the year,  
When they called on Jesus  
Both in songs and prayers.  
Then, Dear Second,  
Through the years, you’ve stood the test;  
Second, Dear Second, you deserve our best!<sup>12</sup>

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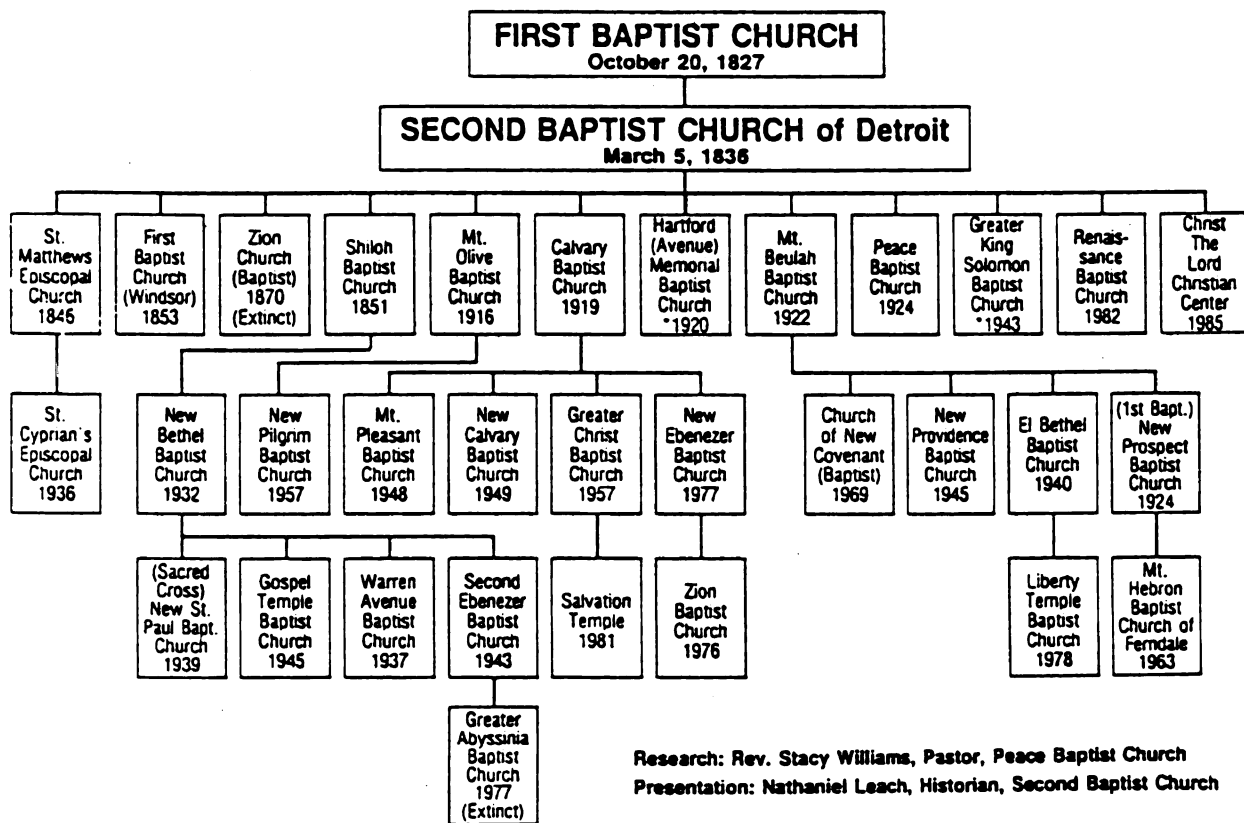
<sup>11</sup> “Our Chairperson Edisel H. Robinson,” *Second Baptist 159<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Souvenir Book*, (Detroit: Second Baptist Church, 1995), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Leach, *Second Baptist Connection*, 90.



## APPENDICES

### Second Baptist — “Mother” of Detroit’s “Black” Churches



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- Ford Archives, Dearborn, Michigan. Correspondences of Henry Ford and Ford Motor Company.
- Glenn Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. Includes correspondences and miscellaneous materials of Second Baptist member Mary Etta Glenn.
- Papers of Henry Ford, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village Research Center, Dearborn, Michigan.
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