

INITIAL REPORT: CENTRAL FLORIDA'S CHANGING RELIGIOUS PROFILE

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The Settlement

Religion in Central Florida has been continuously responsive to the perceived needs of its people. Just as the Conquistadors brought Franciscan friars and priest with them, so the settlers inland along the St. John's River built churches soon after their trading posts. As cattle ranchers, citrus farmers and soon "winter visitors" settled in small communities in the post Civil War period, roughly 1870-1894, they wanted places where they could worship as was their custom and conviction. If there were not enough Methodists, Presbyterians or Baptists to warrant churches for each, they would combine their forces. In 1856, when Orlando was founded as the county seat, a leading landowner donated a choice lot to the subscribers of a "Free Church." But whether the church would be a community chapel or Congregationalist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal, its dominant architectural style would be Carpenter Gothic. To this day, Central Florida's towns and landscapes are dotted with these quaint, simple but elegant wooden buildings, painted white, with steep roofs, steeples, pointed arches and window tracery. The buildings said something about the people who constructed them: they were serious, stable, believers.

The Boom Years

The disastrous freeze of 1894 reduced the immediate flow of permanent or semi-permanent settlers. The next group were wealthier, oriented more toward living in larger towns. Through the boom years in the 1920's more imposing churches were built but more in a mediterranean style. Mostly, the churches were denominational affiliated although the strategy of establishing "community churches" was often followed in the smaller villages. Many of these subsequently affiliated with one or another of the major denominations.

In the African-American communities, kept to the outskirts of white settlements, churches proliferated in this period, from unaffiliated Primitive Baptists to more organized African-Methodist Episcopal groups.

Post World War II

The developing churches in Florida, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestant, reflected national trends in growth and organization in the Post-War period. In 1947, the Florida Council of Churches was organized, now with some 26 member churches affiliated. It defines its mission as promoting and facilitating "the oneness of the Body of Christ while celebrating the diversity among the various confessions." Its concentration is "to manifest creatively God's good and just purposes." Rather than engage in doctrinal disputes, the Council's efforts focus on issues of social justice. The support of the Florida Christian Migrant Ministry, farm-worker organization, and more recently, settlement of refugees and rebuilding a hurricane ravaged communities are its central concerns. The Council cooperates with the Roman Catholic Dioceses on social projects lecture series, even though no "organic relationship" is involved.

Similar to national trends, mainline denominations have experienced erosion in rates of growth if not total membership since the 1970s while the "evangelical" churches have

undergone exponential growth. The most visible consequence is the rise of mega-churches such as the Calvary Assembly of God, the First Baptist Church, or the determinedly unaffiliated Northland Community Church, all of which report Sunday worship attendance in the thousands. The patterns of worship are upbeat, expressive, informal and the music lively with small orchestras and large drum-sets and hand-clapping choral groups. Many churches now list "contemporary" as one of their services on the Sunday schedule.

The message of the "evangelicals" seems to have undergone a change. In place of the personalism of the challenge to "accept Jesus as your personal savior" the challenge is now more social, enlisting the believer in the great messianic battle with the forces of evil. This is "the Struggle behind the Struggle," a theology conducive to the concerns of the religious right.

At the Macedonia Baptist Church in Eatonville, the preaching tends to "this-worldly pragmatism". Also upbeat and musically exciting, the service includes appeals to members to pledge their help to rebuild a family's home recently ravaged by fire. Time is taken for the recognition of each student whose latest report card listed two A's or more, with student after student coming forward for a certificate and a round of applause. The sermon may be on prayer but it is about effective prayer.

The Current Scene

Examining the schedule from the "inspiration" pages of the Orlando Sentinel evokes some surprises. Non-traditional Jewish synagogues and marginal Christian churches are listed with the traditional groups. The New Age is a perceived presence in listings for Eckankar and Wicca. Islam and Hinduism are included. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness meets at the Shanti Mandir although its leading devotee disparages an altarful of images as all representing "impersonalism." In the newspaper, the religion editor profiles a church each week, providing insights into typical practices of one's neighbor's religious worship.

Within the religious community are some organizations that can help transform the pluralism of obvious observation to a pluralism of normative attitude. 1. Among them is a functioning "National Conference" of Christians, Jews and Muslims, which has over the last decade sponsored discussions on post-Holocaust theology and meetings in which leaders and laity from each group engage in dialogue about their beliefs, festivals, and ethics. 2. The "Interfaith Alliance", affiliated with the national organization but locally supported, offers an alternative to the religious right on views concerning social policy. The alliance provides resources for parents countering moves by school boards to prohibit or compromise the teaching of evolution and has issued statements supporting abortion rights. 3. In the suburban community of Winter Park, since 1970 a Winter Park Council of Churches and Synagogues has functioned, promoting patterns of interfaith cooperation and respect. The celebration of diversity must affirm as well as tolerate difference. We can see some evidence of that in Central Florida's changing religious profile.