

2006

Liberating Visions: Religion and the Challenge of Change in Maine, 1820 to the Present

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University of Southern Maine, Susie Boch, Joseph S. Wood, Maureen Elgersman Lee, Howard M. Solomon, and Abraham J. Peck

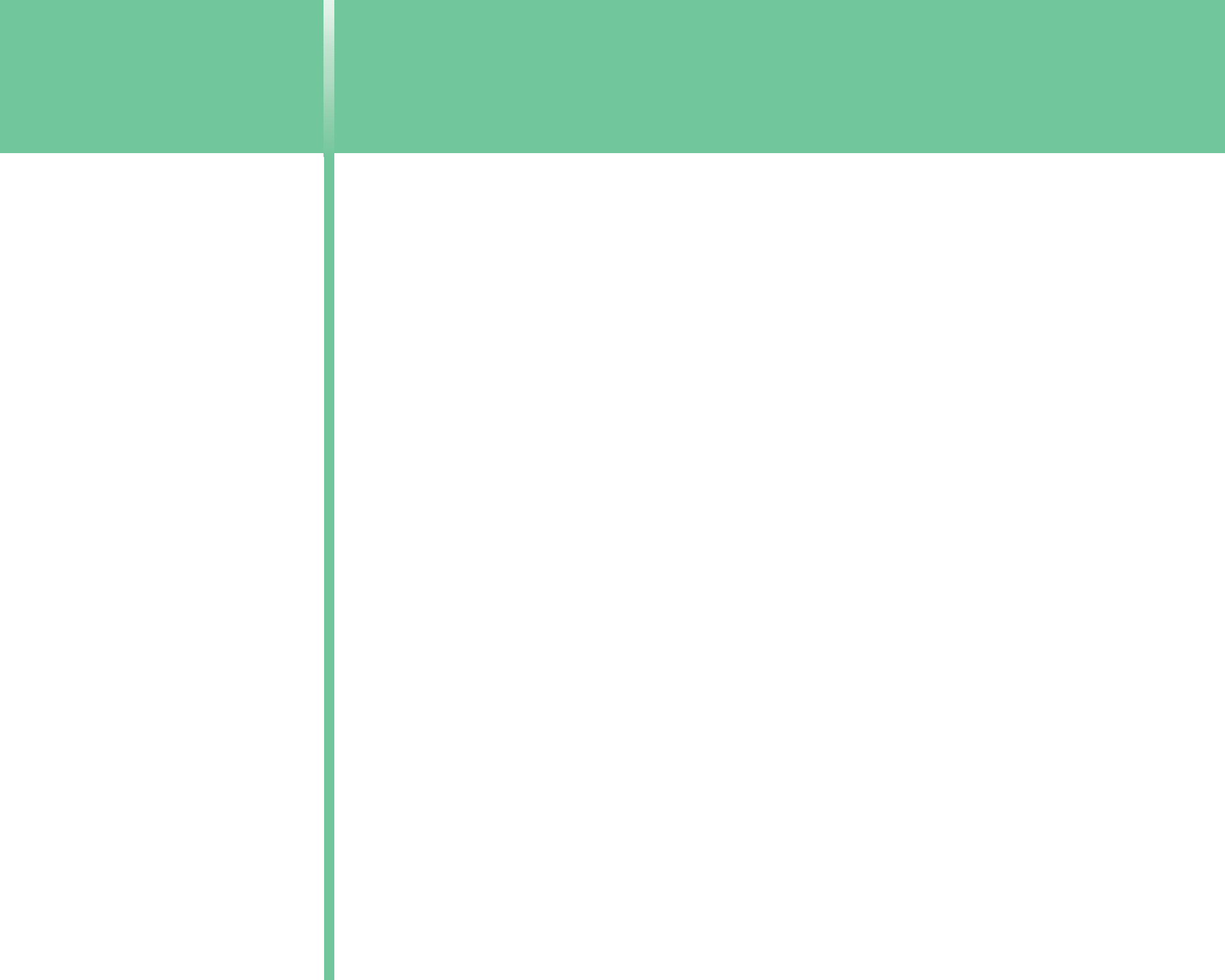
Liberating Visions: Religion and the Challenge of Change in Maine, 1820 to the Present

Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine

Exhibition 2006



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MAINE





Special Collections Reading Room

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Religion and Transformation

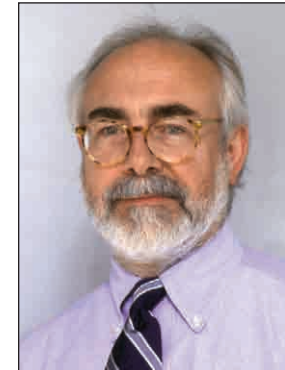
Religion strongly frames human interpersonal relationships. Whether one is religious or not, and regardless of denomination, one's values and behaviors find context in religion and are affected by the values and behaviors of others. All of us operate in society according to or at least within the boundaries of rules of engagement with one another that derive from some religious heritage. Such rules build from and reinforce, in one's identity, whether heritage, age, sex, sexual orientation, or physical ability. Religion has history and geography. It has cultural, psychological, sociological, economic, and political manifestations. It affects gender roles and food ways and health issues. It drives some to wage war and others to seek peace. Few public policy issues are independent of some religious belief, orientation, or perspective.

That is why religion should be a subject of great academic interest in the University. And that is why USM is pleased to host the 2006 Sampson Center for Diversity annual event focusing on

“Liberating Visions: Religion and the Challenge of Change in Maine, 1820 to the Present.” Each of the Sampson Center's three scholars has crafted an original essay related to one of the Sampson Center collections—African-American, Judaic, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender—thereby reflecting on how religious institutions have fostered minority identity and have framed social and cultural transformation.

I hope you will find the work of these three scholars and the exhibit their essays support transformative for you as well.

—Joseph S. Wood
Provost and
Vice President for Academic Affairs



Joseph S. Wood

Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine Programming



Susie R. Bock

The Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine's annual event has become the cornerstone of the Center's programming. The annual event combines an exhibition, opening reception, published catalog, and lecture series that use the Center's collections, documenting Maine's African American, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and Jewish communities.

Although the Sampson Center sponsors a wide range of programs, we have found we can use the annual event to create other ways to engage the community.

Last year's annual event, "The Ties That Bind: Experiences of Family in Maine, 1900 to the Present," was used in programming for the University and local community, public school students, University students, and life-long learners. Maureen Elgersman Lee used last year's annual event to do a presentation for Williams Temple Church of God in Christ's HYPE, Hard-working Youth Pursuing Excellence. The Sampson scholars, working with the Maine Humanities Council, created a workshop for public school teachers on using the Center's resources to bring diversity into their curriculum. We turned the annual event into

a course for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Howard Solomon repeated his annual event lecture for students at the University of New England and the University of Maine, Orono.

This year's theme, "Liberating Visions: Religion and the Challenge of Change in Maine, 1820 to the Present," should appeal to religious institutions, and exploring spirituality and liberation will appeal to a wide range of public and private organizations. We also hope to pursue pedagogical models encouraging active learning (such as students analyzing books as physical and intellectual objects to give them experience with academic research) and community engagement (students working with community organizations whose archives we hope to preserve in the Sampson Center). Such pedagogical concepts fit in well with a Center whose mission is to support diversity and civil rights, values which require proactive citizens. The Sampson Center annual event has become the foundation of an ever expanding program to educate and empower.

—Susie R. Bock
Director, Jean Byers Sampson
Center for Diversity in Maine
and Head, USM Special Collections



The annual LGBT Collection open house featured an exhibition of local artist and AIDS activist Tom Antonik (in the center speaking to Marty Sabol). In the background USM Professor Wendy Chapkis examines a self-portrait of the artist while faculty-in-residence for the collection Howard Solomon chats with USM Professor Bruce Fithian, a member of the Maine Gay Men's Chorus.



At the opening reception for the Sampson Center's first annual event in 2005, Provost Joseph Wood chats with visiting scholar Dr. Lee Knefelkamp who has written widely on intellectual development and cultural diversity, while in the foreground Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education Judy Tizon chats with Kathleen Roberts, executive director of the Office of Campus Diversity and Equity.



At USM's Martin Luther King, Jr. annual event in January 2006, faculty scholar for the African American Collection Maureen Elgersman Lee, Portland Branch of the NAACP president Rachel Talbot Ross, Portland Mayor Jill Duson, longtime member of the Portland NAACP June MacKenzie, and a USM law student discuss a film on the local NAACP.



The 2006 USM annual Martin Luther King, Jr. event, in which the Sampson Center again sponsored and participated (see faculty scholar Maureen Elgersman Lee on the far right of the panel) drew students from the University and local public schools.



Rev. Margaret Lawson ministers to her parishioners.
Anchor of the Soul Collection, African American Collection of Maine.

Change in Maine's African American Churches

When Bishop Richard D. Williams, Jr. founded Maine's first Church of God in Christ congregation in Bangor in the late 1940s, he began a new chapter in the Black church's tradition of religious perseverance. The Bangor church was short lived, and Williams relocated to Portland in 1950. Known then as Christ Temple, Bishop Williams's church occupied various spaces in Portland—on Lancaster, Franklin, and Wilmot streets. Ultimately, the church found its permanent home on Terrace Avenue, and was renamed Williams Temple. Bishop Williams lived to see the church built on its permanent site, but died within a few years of this institutional milestone. Mother Louvenia Williams, Bishop Williams's wife, worked to further the vision for the church. She was known to encourage the congregation with the saying, *There's a blessing in pressing*. Mother Williams was certainly right. Pressing (or faithful perseverance) paid off for the Church of God in Christ. There are currently three Church of God in Christ churches in Maine: Portland's Williams Temple, Auburn's Christ Temple, and Brunswick's New Life Pentecostal. Elder Steve Coleman, who was officially installed as Williams Temple's pastor in 1987, was consecrated as Bishop in 2004.¹

The history of Williams Temple is not unlike

that of other historically Black churches in Maine. This essay focuses on five particular churches, the Abyssinian, Green Memorial African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, Williams Temple Church of God in Christ, Christ Temple Church of God in Christ, and New Life Pentecostal Church

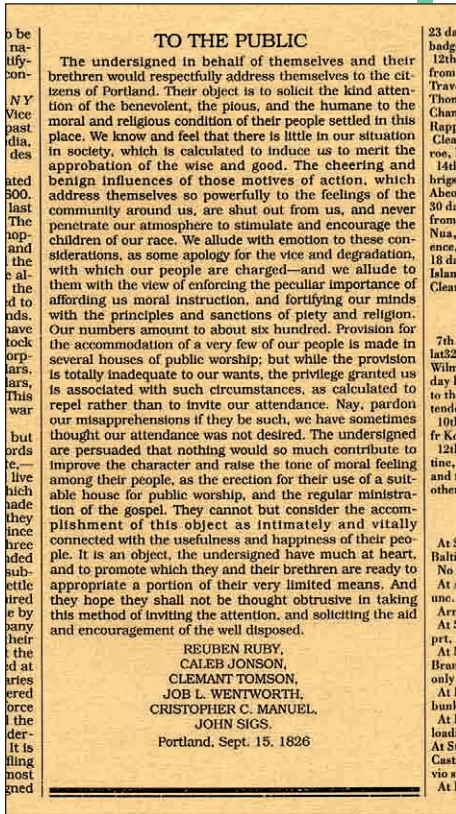
African American Collection of Maine

of God in Christ. While each institution has its own unique history, all have endured in their own ways to reap the blessings of pressing.

The Abyssinian Church

By the early nineteenth century, Blacks in the Portland area knew about pressing as they met xenophobia and discrimination in maintaining their spiritual lives. In Portland, free Blacks put their perspectives in print and made the very public statement that they felt part of a religious environment seemingly designed *to repel rather than invite* their presence.²

It is out of this type of aversion to their presence in the mainstream church that African Americans in Portland created their own house of worship. Blacks created the Abyssinian Church in 1828, and it affiliated with the Congregational Church a few decades later. The Abyssinian began with a small congregation, and although its numbers grew during its almost one-hundred-year



Anchor of the Soul Collection, African American Collection of Maine.

existence, one of the themes of its history is the struggle to maintain economic buoyancy. Clara Merritt Deboer, a historian of northern abolitionism, characterizes the institution as follows:

Portland's Fourth Church was a weak one. Its members were poor; most of the men were seamen who spent much time at sea. Many were illiterate, unable to read the Bible. More than a third of the members were widows or widowers, some living in great poverty.³

Despite the reported paucity of financial resources among Abyssinian members, the church played a critical role in the lives of its members. In addition to serving its principal role as a religious institution, history records that the Abyssinian, like other Black churches of its day, was a multi-purpose institution. It served as the meeting site of various social groups, including a sewing circle, temperance society, and antislavery society. It also served the educational needs of the Black community by serving as a school for local Black children. The Abyssinian played an important part of the larger Colored Convention Movement (1830-1861), a movement that saw Blacks gather in major American centers to discuss issues of concern to them, one of the most pronounced of these topics having been the abolition of slavery.⁴

Buoyed by various supporters like Reuben Ruby and led by a string of clergy that included Amos Beman, Amos Freeman, and John G. Wilson, the Abyssinian saw some of its best days in the first few decades after its founding.⁵

Members of the Abyssinian Church pressed on and faced challenges beyond the economic. In

July of 1866, fire ravaged Portland's waterfront and eastern promenade. A variety of business and financial institutions in this busy port city burned to the ground, but after the flames had subsided, the Abyssinian Church stood erect and virtually unscathed in the ashes of its neighboring buildings. The Abyssinian survived another crushing blow—at least initially—when the ship *S.S.*

Portland went down in a violent storm off the Massachusetts coast in November of 1898. Various members of the Abyssinian Church, many of them ship employees, died, reportedly leaving a void in the both the size and the spirit of the congregational body.⁶ For reasons related or unrelated to the sinking of the *Portland*, the Abyssinian Church faltered during the early 1900s and finally closed in 1917.⁷

Green Memorial AME Zion Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is known popularly as the AME Church. It may be the denomination considered most distinctly African American in the sense that its very origin was the product of the discrimination that Blacks faced daily in the United States and of the aversion some European Americans had to them, their fellow parishioners. The creation of the AME Church was also uniquely religious or institutional, as Blacks' relegation to peripheral pews or galleries—places that were in some regions of the country dubbed *nigger heaven*—bore witness to Whites' aversion to the social intimacy that worship allowed. The event that was pivotal to the creation of the AME Church actually took place in

late-eighteenth-century Philadelphia. African American religious historian Albert Raboteau summarizes this critical historical moment as follows:

On a Sunday morning in 1792 or 1793, the [B]lack members of St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia learned to their surprise that they could not sit in the benches they normally used. Instead, they were ordered by the sexton to sit upstairs in the gallery recently added at the rear of the church... As the opening prayer began, one of the white trustees told Absalom Jones, a respected [B]lack parishioner, to get up and move from the front to the back of the gallery. Jones, a dignified man in his forties, asked the trustee to wait until prayer ended, but the white man insisted he move immediately and motioned for another trustee to help him lift Jones from his knees. As soon as the prayer was over, Jones and the rest of the black worshippers stood and walked out of the church in a body.⁸

Despite the central role that Jones plays in Raboteau's account, Richard Allen is the figure more popularly associated with the Philadelphia incident and the creation of the AME Church thereafter. Allen was worshipping at St. George's that morning and although Jones and Allen together founded the Free African Society, they eventually parted company. Jones went on to become a pastor of the Presbyterian Episcopal Church while Allen became the first bishop of the AME Church.⁹ Richard Allen's church, Mother Bethel AME Church, still stands in Philadelphia as both a functioning church and an historic site. The church has its own museum and the bodies of Allen and his wife are interred in the building.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was

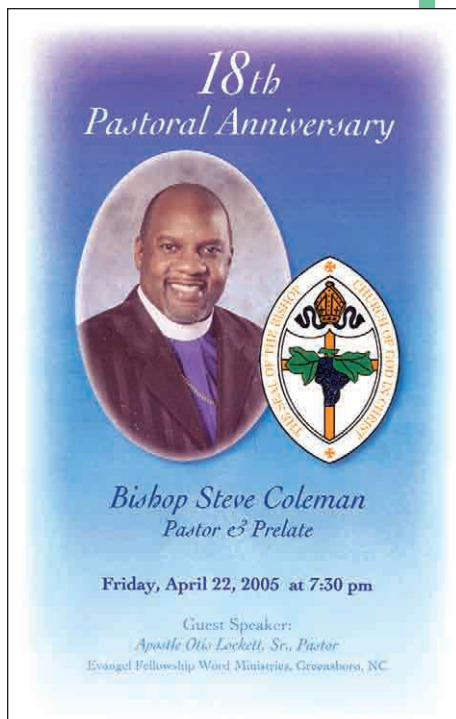
officially established in Philadelphia in 1816. This was part of a larger trend of Black religious self-determination, as Blacks in Wilmington, Delaware, had organized the Union Church of Africans the year before and Blacks in New York City would found the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1821.¹⁰

These two strains of African Methodism, the Episcopal and Episcopal Zion, continue nationally in the twenty-first century.

In Portland, the decline of the Abyssinian Church coincided with the beginnings of the AME Zion Mission. Officially organized in 1907, the AME Zion Mission was renamed Green Memorial AME Zion Church in 1943 in honor of Moses Green, one of its most dedicated parishioners and financial supporters. Moses Green worked for more than fifty years shining shoes at Portland's Union Station, and local history records that for much of that time he was the lifeblood of his church.¹¹

Green Memorial seemed to have inherited some of the same challenges of the Abyssinian, including a relatively small congregation and allegedly limited finances. At the same time, however, the history of this Munjoy Hill church witnesses to the dedication, labor, and resourcefulness of its members.

History reveals that some great African American institutions have been built on the stomachs of their communities. In early-twentieth-century Daytona, Florida, club woman Mary McLeod Bethune helped build Bethune College by



Program of Bishop Steve Coleman's 18th Pastoral Anniversary.

Courtesy Williams Temple Church of God in Christ.

selling chicken dinners. This same recipe for success has been employed at Green Memorial to achieve a number of financial ends, including paying the church's mortgage and campaign fund raising. Green's culinary delights are known to have had people lined up out the church doors and down the block. At times, sale proceeds supplemented the church's budget; at others, they comprised it.¹² Pastored in the recent past by Reverend Margaret Lawson, Green Memorial is currently led by Reverend Kenneth I. Lewis. The historic church continues to be an important presence in Portland; some might even say it is in the midst of a renaissance.

The Church of God in Christ

Like the AME Church, the Church of God in Christ is another historically African American religious institution. Founded by Charles Harrison Mason in 1897 and reorganized in 1907, the Church of God in Christ has become a global religious presence with congregations *throughout the United States, in every continent, and in many of the islands of the sea.*¹⁴

According to its own history, Maine's first Church of God in Christ was established in Bangor in 1948 by Bishop Richard D. Williams, Jr., who had in the same year been appointed overseer of the Church of God in Christ in Maine. The Bangor locale was short lived, for Bishop Williams moved to Portland in 1950 and established Christ Temple. After a series of moves involving a variety of different city locales, Bishop Williams secured land on Portland's Terrace

Avenue. On this site, a new church was built and renamed Williams Temple.¹⁵

While Williams Temple may not have the same historical resonance as either the Abyssinian or Green Memorial, the church is enjoying increased prominence as one of the city's historically Black churches. Christ Temple, Maine's second Church of God in Christ congregation was established in Auburn; another New Life Pentecostal, was recently founded in Brunswick. The three congregations are very close and each is buoyed by the presence of the other.

The Challenges and Blessings of Pressing

Historically, the church has been one of the few institutions over which African Americans have been able to exercise control and ownership. Because the church stands at the intersection of many of the social, economic, and political interests of African Americans, the church is also the stage for both the challenges and blessings of pressing on. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, Green Memorial AME Zion Church served as the site for various organizational meetings. Various members of the NAACP, including its ranking leaders, have belonged to Green Memorial and the Church of God in Christ, making the church as an institution a natural crossroads for political activism. In the 1960s and 1970s, Blacks in Maine actively protested discrimination against Blacks in the state and across the country. Support for such high profile events as the freedom rides and the March on Washington was manifest in Maine. There were also protests against unfair

housing and employment, as well as mass grievances for Martin Luther King, Jr., after his April 1968 assassination.¹⁶

The challenges of pressing are not limited to the quotidian demands of life outside the church. Often the challenges are found within the institution itself. For various churches, the deaths of ministers and parishioners have weighed heavily on surviving parishioners. The movement of worshippers between churches and to new locales outside of Maine also impacts the church's sense of stability. Other challenges to the church include its ability to compete with the allure of larger mega churches and its ability to remain spiritually relevant in an age of conspicuous consumption and ostentatious materialism.

However, the blessings of pressing are greater than its challenges. And the Abyssinian, Green Memorial, and the Church of God in Christ have all reaped rewards. While the Abyssinian has been closed as a house of worship for almost a century, the Committee to Restore the Abyssinian's commitment to preserve the building—one of the oldest African American meeting houses in the country—has resulted in historic preservation status. Green Memorial is bringing the joy back to Munjoy Hill. Bishop Steve Coleman, who had begun in the 1980s as Williams Temple's interim pastor, is also pastor and jurisdictional prelate. Auburn's Christ Temple continues to flourish under the current leadership of Elder Albert Jackson and in the absence of the late Elder Isaac Jackson. New Life Pentecostal, the third Church of

God in Christ body, is led by Elder Christopher Tate.

While all of the churches have seen individual benefits, perhaps one of the greatest rewards of pressing by the respective churches has been a renewed spirit of unity among them. Mother Louvenia's adage, *There's a blessing in pressing*, did not imply that perseverance was easy. To continue in the face of societal, congregational, and economic change can test even the most unwavering of believers. Pressing takes faith, and faith, by definition, is the conviction of things not seen. The histories of the Abyssinian Church, Green Memorial AME Zion, and the three Church of God in Christ congregations bear out that when it comes to pressing, blessings do follow. Things come to pass, not to stay. And joy does come in the morning.

—Maureen Elgersman-Lee
Associate Professor of History and Faculty Scholar
for USM's African American Collection of Maine

1. The History of Williams Temple Church of God in Christ, n.d.
2. Shoshana Hoose and Karine Odlin, *Anchor of the Soul: A Documentary About Black History in Maine*. Videocassette. 1994. 60 mins.
3. Clara Merritt Deboer, *Be Jubilant My Feet: African American Abolitionists in the American Missionary Association, 1839-1861* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 226.



Emblem of Williams Temple.

Courtesy Williams Temple Church of God in Christ.

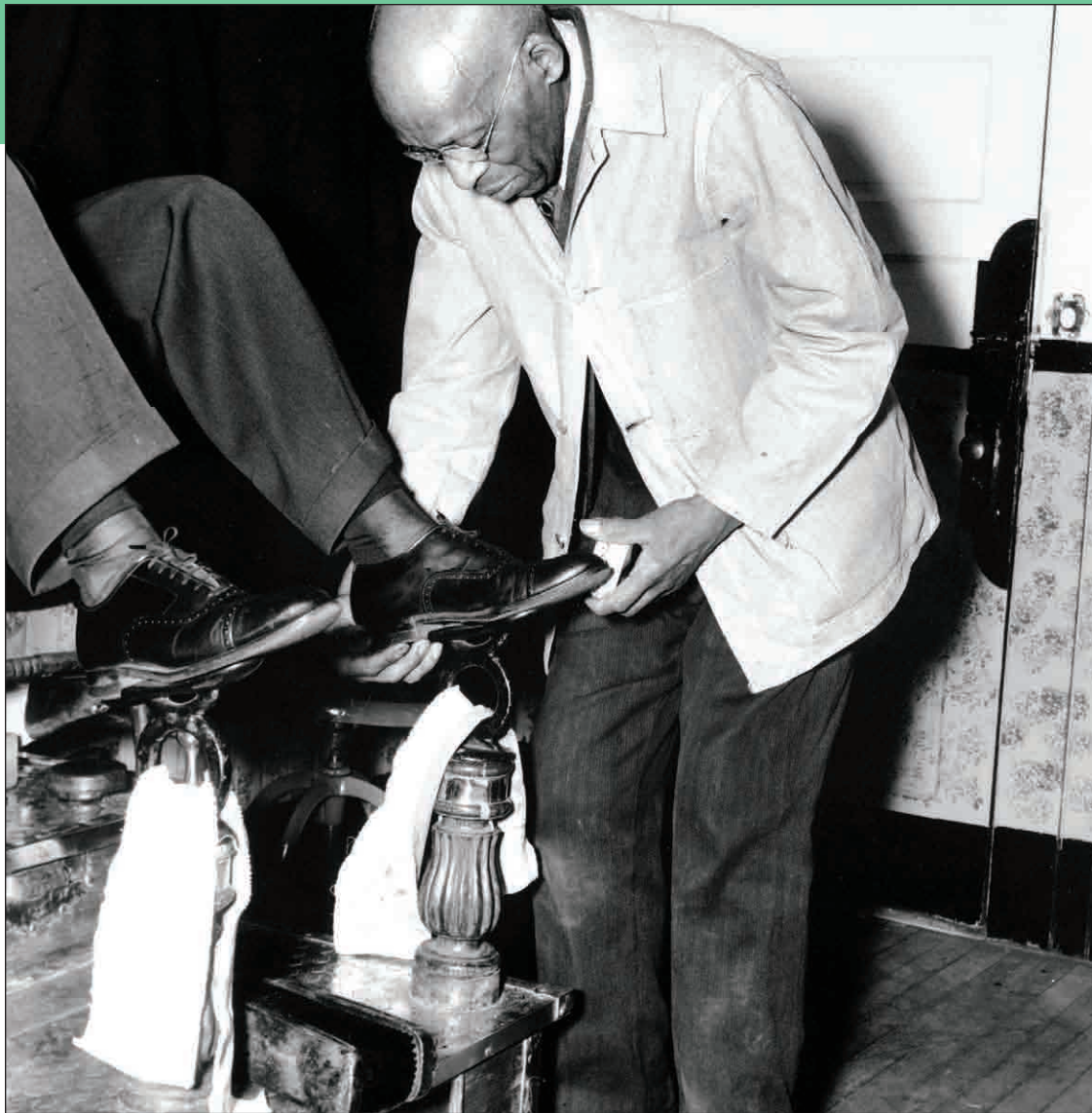


Maureen Elgersman Lee

4. *Anchor of the Soul*; Howard Holman Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement 1830-1861* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 42, 105.
5. See various materials on Ruby, Beman, Freeman, and Wilson in Box 1, Folders 7, 8, and 22, *Anchor of the Soul* Collection, African American Collection of Maine, Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine, University of Southern Maine Library. See Rev. J. G. Wilson, "Abyssinian Congregational," in *Centennial Celebration of Portland, Maine, 1786-1886*, ed J. T. Hull (Portland: Owen, Strout Co., 1886), 85. See also *Articles of Faith, Covenant, and Regulations of the Fourth Congregational Church in Portland* (Portland: A. Shirley and Sons, 1841), Maine Historical Society. Select photocopies can be found in Box 1, Folder 22, *Anchor of the Soul* Collection.
6. *Anchor of the Soul*; Herb Adams, "S.S. Portland," *Portland Monthly Magazine* (Winter 1999): 10, 12, 14-19, 21-23.
7. *Anchor of the Soul*.
8. Albert Raboteau, "Richard Allen and the African Church Movement," Chapter in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 79.
9. Raboteau, "Richard Allen," 80-92.
10. Raboteau, "Richard Allen," 92-93; Quarles argues, however, that the establishment of the New York City Episcopal Zion Church predated the Philadelphia church by a number of years. Quarles related that a Methodist congregation organized in 1800 named it the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and in 1821 organized as an independent Methodist body (whose popular name would be A.M.E.Z.) See Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 101.
11. "Moses S. Green, Bootblack Here More Than 50 Years, Dies at 89," *Portland Press Herald*, 13 March 1942; *Anchor of the Soul*.
12. Elaine M. Smith, "Mary McLeod Bethune," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* Vol. 1, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, 115. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. *Anchor of the Soul*. Bethune College merged with Cookman College in 1923 and is known today as Bethune-Cookman College; see Sheila Y. Flemming, "Bethune-Cookman College," in *Black Women in America* Vol. 1, 127-128.
14. Church of God in Christ, "COGIC History: The History of Our Church." 2001-2002. Elsie W. Mason, "Bishop C.H. Mason, Church of God in Christ," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2d ed., ed. Milton C. Sernett, 314-324. Durham: Duke University Press.
15. "The History of Williams Temple Church of God in Christ," Williams Temple COGIC pamphlet, n.d..
16. *Anchor of the Soul*.



*Newbury Street's Abyssinian Church. Illustration by Kate Merrick.
Anchor of the Soul Collection, African American Collection of Maine.*



Porter turned boot black Moses Green supported the AME Zion Church faithfully.

Anchor of the Soul Collection, African American Collection of Maine

Zion Church Named For Moses Green

The African Methodist Zion Church was renamed for Moses Green, born in slavery, at a memorial service Sunday night for the bootblack who worked 52 years at Union Station.

The church was dedicated the Green Memorial A. M. E. Zion Church by Bishop William J. Wall of Chicago, William A. Wheeler, general representative of the Boston and Maine and Maine Central Railroads, the Rev. Howard O. Hough, pastor of the First Radio Parish, the Rev. Gilbert H. Coffey, pastor of the church, and Max L. Pinansky were among the speakers.

Green, who died in 1943 at the age of 89, worked tirelessly for the church and was one of its principal benefactors. His widow, Mrs. Martha Green, received a bouquet at the service. Green came to Union Station two days before its construction was completed and was retired on a pension in January, 1940.

After his death, the Sheridan Street church was renamed in Green's honor.

Anchor of the Soul Collection, African American Collection of Maine



In Portland, as across the country, religious and civil rights interests often intersected.
Gerald E. Talbot Collection, African American Collection of Maine





“Orthodox and Yet thoroughly Liberal:” Jews and Judaism in Maine Between Tradition and Change

Within the long sweep of American Jewish history, several overarching themes have emerged that characterize the three and one half centuries of Jewish life in the United States (1654-2006):

- A belief in the promise of America
- Faith in the pluralistic nature of America
- A quest for economic and professional success
- A commitment to the survival of the Jewish community

But the unwavering continuity of these themes over the past 350 years has been challenged by a set of ongoing tensions that have highlighted and strained the basic values that distinguish a Jewish and American identity:

- Assimilation versus the continuity of Jewish identity
- Tradition versus religious change and reform
- Majority rule-minority rights (is America a “Christian nation?”)
- The historical Jewish experience and the notion of American exceptionalism (Is America different for the Jews?)

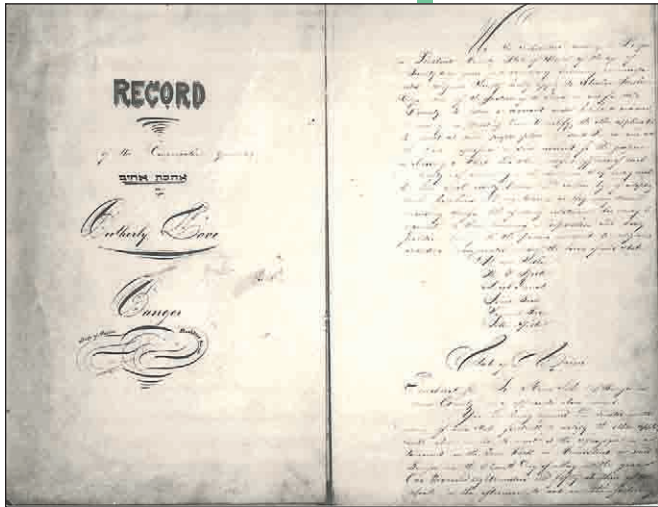
Although never more than 10,000 strong, Maine’s Jewish community has always reflected these particular themes. Maine Jewry has sought to balance its American social contract, the notion of being a “good American,” with the understand-

ing that they were part of a “holy community,” whose essential purpose was to “be a light unto the nations,” and that those nations would understand that redemption could only be achieved through the moral and ethical life, individually and collectively.

Judaica Collection

Beginning in the 1840s, a small number of Jewish peddlers, tailors, and dry good merchants from German-speaking lands came to Bangor, Maine, “the Queen City.” By 1849 they had established a synagogue and a cemetery. Neither the peddlers nor the synagogue remained very long and both were gone by the late 1850s.¹

For those few German Jewish immigrants, and those who began to come to Maine from Eastern Europe in the 1860s, many of them to escape from the oppression of Czarist Russia, the state seemed a reassuring haven. When Portland celebrated its centenary on July 4, 1886, Barnard Aaronson, designated to speak for the small Jewish community of the time observed: “We number sixty families, and over the majority portion being of the middle or poorer class, yet content with their lot.... The form of religion is Orthodox, and yet [we] are thoroughly liberal in thought and action.” In looking back at the twenty



Minute book of Achavas Achim (Brotherly Love) in Bangor, Maine's first Jewish congregation, 1849

Courtesy American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

years since the Great Portland Fire of 1866 had attracted a group of Jewish merchants and peddlers to help the city's efforts in rebuilding,

Aaronson could only find a positive relationship to his Christian neighbors: "...our city fathers have in the past fully merited the good will and affectionate esteem in which they are held by us."

Yet, Aaronson was more cautious about the future: "We sincerely hope nothing will occur in the future to mar the harmonious feeling now existing between the denominations...."²

He had every reason for such caution. As two of the other speakers during the program recounted, the religious past had been, at best, a difficult one.

The Reverend J. G. Wilson, representing the Abyssinian Church, one of the first Black churches in America, spoke of a Portland past that included slavery, physical violence, and religious and racial exclusion.³

No less appalling was the history of the Roman Catholic presence recounted by Bishop James Augustine Healy (1830-1900), of Portland: "In those days [1830s and 1840s] it was difficult, almost dangerous, to show a kind face or fair dealing to Catholics." Healy concluded his frank his-

torical assessment, "Let us remember... when the name Catholic was like a badge of ignominy in our town." He was less frank, and with good reason, about his racial background, which was one-half black, the result of his mother's status as a slave in Georgia.⁴

But Aaronson's optimism was not an illusion. Unlike Jewish life in Europe, where Jews were by far the most visible and persecuted minority over a two thousand year period, Jews in Maine could be comforted in the knowledge that other groups, especially Roman Catholics, often stood ahead of them as victims of religious and sometimes racial intolerance.

The Jerusalem of America and the North?

The contentment and optimism of which Barnard Aaronson spoke in his 1886 speech was reflected in a sense of study, learning, and pious synagogue worship, a piety that earned Portland Jewry the nickname of the "The Jerusalem of America," or "The Jerusalem of the North," a designation that could also apply to the Orthodox communities of Bangor, Lewiston, Biddeford, and Old Orchard, among others. But it was a contentment that was mixed with the realization that Maine's native Anglo-Saxon population would allow little or no challenges to its social, political, and religious dominance. As Judith Goldstein explained it in *Crossing Lines*, her study of three Jewish communities in northern Maine, the upper class "Yankee" populations "firmly exercised their control."⁵

Maine Jewry's distance from the great organized Jewish communities of the Northeast also gave it a sense of "second-class" identity, a factor that was emphasized by Benjamin Band in his pioneering study of Portland Jewry: "The growth of the Jewish community in Portland...has been recorded inadequately by Jewish historians. The reason for this is [that] Maine was considered to be beyond the periphery of the general history of American Jewry...."⁶

But it was not only American Jewish historians who seemed to overlook Portland and Maine's Jewish histories. An even more stereotypical picture of Portland Jewry and New England Jewish life in general was recorded in 1924 by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, a giant in the history of American Jewish life. The founder of the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism, Kaplan came to Portland to participate in the installation of his brother-in-law, Rabbi Phineas Israeli, as the rabbi of the Etz Chaim synagogue.

Israeli, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinic seminary of American Conservative Judaism, had come to Portland with the intention of introducing reforms which seemed to have support from progressive-minded members of his congregation.

But Kaplan was not optimistic about Israeli's chances for success, either before his hiring by Etz Chaim or in the future. In his diary entry of December 10, 1924, he wrote about his brother-in-law that, "I attribute his lack of success to his intellectual shortcomings."⁷ Kaplan was even more

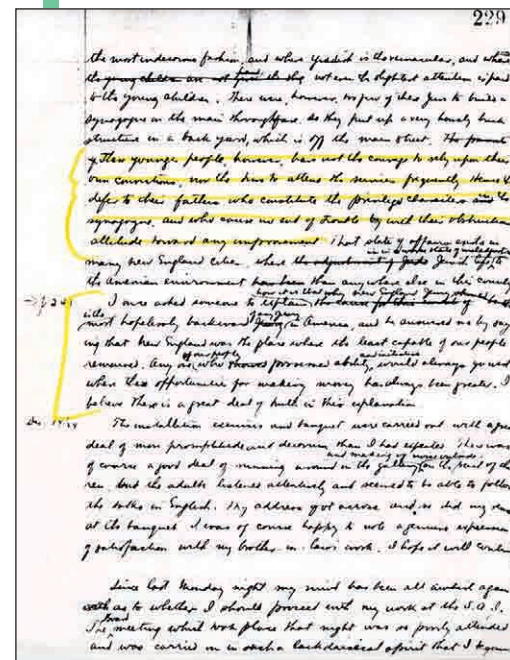
negative about his impressions of New England Judaism. He sensed that there was a war of wills being waged between Maine and New England's pioneer generation and that of its sons and daughters:⁸

"[Such a state of affairs] exists in many New England cities, where Jewish life is in a worse state of maladjustment to the American environment than anywhere else in this country. I once asked someone to explain how it is that New England Jewry is the most hopelessly backward of any Jewry in America, and he answered me by saying that New England was the place where the least capable of our people remained."

One must ask then: was the image of Judaism in Portland, and perhaps in all of Maine, a convenient smokescreen for the control of synagogue life by a group of "old [not-quite-dead] Jewish European men" who understood as their mission the need to keep their religious communities in the same state of observance as in the year 70 AD when the second and last Jerusalem Temple was destroyed?

Documents that are still extant reflect a certain truth in this statement. They reflect a war of the generations, one between mostly fathers and sons, a war where the first generation of Jewish immigrants to Bangor, Portland, Lewiston, and Biddeford, among others, turned inward and saw only their way as the correct way of practicing the Judaism of their fathers.

America, after all, was a *treifa medina*, an "impure state," in the eyes of many East European



Diary entry of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan during his visit to Portland, December 10, 1924

Courtesy Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York

rabbis of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They believed Jews who left for America were as good as lost to Judaism.

The Jews who came from the various parts of the Russian Empire in the years between 1882 and the early 1920s, nearly two and one-half million of them, came with a certain chip on their shoulders. They carried little nostalgia for the *blotte shtetlach* (villages filled with mud streets) they had left, but those who came with a desire to keep Judaism alive as they knew it in the “Old Country” were prepared to beat back any

efforts to change what they had always known and believed.

Small cracks in the religious armor appeared nevertheless. At the cornerstone dedication of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh on September 14, 1904, Dr. Elias Caplan, perhaps the most learned and outstanding member of the congregation, delivered the keynote address, in place of the invited speaker, Rabbi Charles Fleischer, a Reform rabbi from Congregation Adath Israel of Boston.

A Reform rabbi was a strange choice for a strictly Orthodox synagogue. Not only was Fleischer a Reform rabbi, but he developed a Sunday lecture series that contained so many liturgical elements that Sunday soon became the main day of worship at Congregation Adath Israel. The Sunday worship service was adopted by some

Reform congregations in the United States, replacing the traditional Saturday Sabbath service.

The words spoken by Dr. Caplan, most probably written by Rabbi Fleischer although he was unable to attend the ceremony, reflected an American patriotism as clear as any Reform Jewish declaration: “We are witnessing today in this great country the dawn of a new era. . . The institutions of this mighty republic are our institutions, its laws are our laws, its flag, the flag of the free and the brave, our flag.”⁹

The words were reminiscent of a talk delivered in March 1841 by Reverend Gustavus Poznanski, the religious leader of Charleston, South Carolina’s Congregation Beth Elohim, the first Reform congregation in the United States: “This synagogue is our temple, “ Poznanski exclaimed, “this city our Jerusalem, this happy land our Palestine. . . .”¹⁰

Michael Cohen has argued that from its founding, Shaarey Tphiloh was committed to the creation of an American Orthodoxy, what we would today call Modern Orthodoxy, that sought to “allow its members to balance their identities as Americans and Orthodox Jews.”¹¹ But, I would argue, only on its terms.

This becomes clear when one considers the case of the Modern Synagogue Society, later known as Temple Israel. The driving force behind the Modern Synagogue Society was Max Pinansky, a Harvard-trained lawyer from Boston who met and married Annie R. Bernstein, a native of Portland, in January 1913.



The building that housed Congregation Beth Judah, Portland’s first synagogue, founded in 1883

Courtesy Tax Assessor’s Office, Portland

Conservative Judaism understood itself as an answer to the growth of Reform Judaism in the United States, which by the beginning of the twentieth century was the largest movement in American Judaism. The Reform movement was seen as a danger to the survival of Orthodox Jewish life in the United States, but Conservative Judaism was seen as an even greater danger by the traditionalists.¹²

There was a clear reason for such an Orthodox reaction. Conservative Judaism saw itself as a proponent of the “Historical School,” a view that championed the retention of Jewish law but also advocated certain religious reforms that were deemed acceptable and practical.

Conservative Judaism also understood itself as a palliative against the continuing encroachment of Reform Judaism with its often radical reforms and religious practices into the life of traditional American Judaism. This meant, however, that it was also much more acceptable to the members of “modern Orthodox” congregations like Shaarey Tphiloh.

Pinansky was part of a small but prosperous and highly successful group of Portland Jews who met and worshipped in the Pinansky home. At first, there was hardly any reaction from the Shaarey Tphiloh leadership. But in 1915, members of the Modern Synagogue Society, now calling itself Temple Israel, addressed the Shaarey Tphiloh board and asked it to “collaborate with them to improve Yiddishkayt [the state of Judaism] in Portland.”

Ultimately, Temple Israel and the idea of a service that was held in English and where men and women sat together, was utterly rejected by Shaarey Tphiloh and its rabbi, David Essrig. By 1919 Temple Israel was no longer in existence.¹³

Yet, other Maine congregations that called themselves Orthodox were able to introduce changes to the synagogue service. Lewiston’s Congregation Beth Jacob, organized in 1907, provided, from the first, mixed seating of men and women in its permanent synagogue, built in 1925.¹⁴

A Need to Reach Out and Look Inward

It would take Portland until 1948 to establish Temple Beth El as a lasting Conservative synagogue, and it would take Bangor even longer, when Beth Israel officially became a Conservative congregation in 1969.¹⁵ The reasons for their creation ranged from the increased expectations of a large group of returning American Jewish GIs with young families to the continuing movement of those families from the city to the suburbs.

The decades of the 1920s through the 1940s were tumultuous ones in American and in Maine Jewish history. The 1920s marked the resurgence of the national Ku Klux Klan and Maine, too, suffered through a decade of Klan activities. Because there were so few African Americans in the state, Klan activities focused on threats and cross burnings against Roman Catholics, but at least one case of intimidation against a Portland Jewish shop owner.¹⁶



Two views of the cup presented to Barnard L. Shalit, the first president of Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue, at the dedication ceremony, June 4, 1905

Courtesy Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue, Portland



Abraham J. Peck

The noxious presence of the KKK in Maine for nearly a decade may have been the driving force behind the creation of Portland's Interracial Fellowship of America. The group was founded in 1930 by the extraordinary Max Pinansky, who by the Fellowship's founding had become only the second Jew in history appointed to the Maine bench.¹⁷

The Interracial Fellowship of America was devoted to the "need of some organization of or at least the recognition of the different nationalities represented in this city." Especially important in the existence of the group was the participation of numerous Protestants and Catholics, including both the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Bishops of Portland and Maine.

But for the most part, Maine's Jewish communities and their synagogues focused on developing their economic status and in building communal organizations that would better serve the young. Both Portland and Bangor created Jewish Community Centers in the 1930s, institutions that were essentially designed to increase social activities for Jewish adults and young people. The JCCs, as they were known, promoted Jewish education, adult and children's programming, and even social action, and took them from a religious to a secular location.

The 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were momentous times in the history of Maine Jewish life. The destruction of six million Jewish lives and the creation of a 2000-year-old Jewish dream, the State of Israel, all occurred within less than two decades.

Maine's Jewish synagogues, like all of American Jewry, were traumatized by the one event and electrified by the other. The years after 1945 saw a slow but clear shift in the needs of Maine's Jewish congregations: women began to demand a greater voice in the affairs of synagogue life, from participation in religious services to leadership positions on congregational boards and finally, to ordination as rabbis and cantors. The era of civil rights and social action and the movement to break down the doors of exclusion to certain "Christian only" clubs and lodging establishments went ahead full force and with much success.

Congregation Beth El in Bangor and Bet Ha'am in Portland were founded in 1981 and 1985 as Reform congregations. Women began to lead congregations in Maine in the 1990s and soon were the spiritual leaders of Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues and temples as they struggled to understand the new issues facing their congregations and their communities, including intermarriage, assimilation, interreligious dialogue, and basic institutional survival.

Maine's Orthodox congregations were still in existence, but only one, Congregation Beth Abraham in Bangor, had a predictable future in 2006. Yet no matter what their denominational status, all of Maine's Jewish congregations continue to adhere to the notion that Judaism is a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). The Jewish historian Philo depicted Israel "as a nation destined to pray for the world so that the world would be delivered from evil and participate in what is good."

Serving as a “light unto the ‘non-democratic’ nations of the world has also been an important watchword of the American republic.¹⁸ Both visions have seen Judaism and America lead by example in a divine and in temporal sense. Both visions have asked their communities to work toward a time of redemption, a future of peace and freedom.

Yet it has not been easy being a “light unto the nations.” Indeed, it is an awesome responsibility—both a blessing and a burden. Have American Jews and Maine Jews faced the task and pursued it with success? Clearly, the task has been made easier by the existence of America and its own, sometimes difficult, vision as a second “light unto the ‘non-democratic’ nations.” For Jews in this nation, both visions translate into an understanding that being a better Jew is important in being a better American. But the verdict is hardly in. American Judaism, including Jews and Judaism in Maine and America, are still being judged—by others and by themselves.

—Abraham J. Peck

Director, Academic Council for Post-Holocaust
Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Studies and
Scholar-in-residence for
USM’s Judaica Collection

1. Judith Goldstein, *Crossing Lines. Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York, 1992) 44

2. John T. Hill (ed.), 1766-1886. *An Account of the Municipal Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary*

of the Incorporation of the Town of Portland (Portland, 1886) 145

3. Reverend J.G. Wilson, in Hill (ed.) *An Account of the Municipal Celebration*, 84-85. Wilson mentioned African Americans held as slaves in Gorham and Windham, the punishment in a pillory of another African American, George Peters, and the dismissal of twenty-two Black members of the Second Parish Church in the late 1820s. See also H. H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot (eds.), *Maine’s Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People* (contribution by Valerie Cunningham) (Gardiner, Maine, 2006) 144-145

4. The Right Reverend James Augustine Healy, Bishop of Portland, in Hill (ed.) *An Account of the Municipal Celebration*, 131-138. See also Price and Talbot (eds.), *Maine’s Visible Black History* (contribution by Patricia J. Thompson) 161-163

5. Goldstein, *Crossing Lines*, 14

6. Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry. Its Growth and Development* (Portland, 1955) 4.

7. Michael Cohen, “An Analysis of Religious Modernization in Portland, Maine’s Jewish Community,” Honors thesis, Brown University, 2000, 66. My thanks and gratitude go to Michael Cohen for revitalizing the scholarly study of Portland Jewry. Along with Julia Lipetz, whose 2002 senior thesis at Amherst College, “A Time to Build Up and a Time to Break Down: The Jewish Secular Institutions of Portland, Maine,” is a first-rate study of another aspect of Portland Jewish life, Cohen has continued the pioneering work of Benjamin Band but with the eye of the trained 21st century historian of the American Jewish experience.

8. Quoted in Cohen, “Jerusalem of the North,” 6. Diary entry of December 10, 1924.

9. Quoted in Michael Cohen, “Adopting Orthodoxy to American Life: Shaarey Tphiloh and the Development of Modern Orthodoxy in Portland, Maine, 1905-2005,” 14-15

10. Quoted in Solomon Breibart, *The Reverend Mr. Gustavus Poznanski* (Charleston, 1979).

11. Cohen, “Adopting Orthodoxy to American Life,” 2.

12. The fact that Rabbi Solomon Schechter stayed at the Lafayette Hotel in Old Orchard Beach, Maine, a few miles from Portland in August 1912, brings up the possibility that he met with Max Pinansky during that time. See the letter from Solomon Schechter to J.H. Goodkowsky, the owner of the Lafayette, August 28, 1912. I am grateful to Harold “Babe” Goodkowsky, the son of J.H. Goodkowsky for making the letter available to me.

13. Cohen, “Jerusalem of the North,” 38-52.

14. Paul H. Gottlieb, “Maine Jewish Community. A People in Transition,” 6. I am grateful to Phyllis Graber Jensen and Tim McCall of Bates College, Lewiston, for alerting me to the existence of this document.

15. On Congregation Beth Israel, see its centennial publication, *Congregation Beth Israel, 1888-1988* (Bangor, 1988), 47-63.

16. Interview with Dr. Benjamin Zolov, “Portraits of the Past,” Jewish Centennial Project, directed by Dr. Konnilyn Feig, 1976-1977. Interviews located in the Portland Room, Portland Public Library.

17. Again, I am grateful to the research done by Michael Cohen on the history of the Fellowship in the Max Pinansky papers located at the Maine Historical Society, Portland.

18. See the remarks by President Ronald Reagan at the opening of the Statue of Liberty Celebration in New York on July 3, 1986: “I’ve spoken before of the tiny Arabella, a ship at anchor just off the Massachusetts coast. A little group of Puritans huddled on the deck. And then John Winthrop, who would later become the first Governor of Massachusetts, reminded his fellow Puritans there on the tiny deck that they must keep faith with their God, that the eyes of the world were upon them, and that they must not forsake the mission that God had sent them on, and they must be a light unto the nations of all the world.... We dare to hope too that we’ll understand our work can never be truly done until every man, woman, and child shares in our gift, in our hope, and stands with us in the light of liberty...guiding millions still to a future of peace and freedom.”

Maine										New Hampshire										
PRELIMINARY	COURSE OF INSTRUCTION	NAME	AGE	SEX	RELIGION	EDUCATION	INDUSTRY	PROPERTY	REMARKS	PRELIMINARY	COURSE OF INSTRUCTION	NAME	AGE	SEX	RELIGION	EDUCATION	INDUSTRY	PROPERTY	REMARKS	

Statistics of the Jews of the United States collected by the Board of Delegates American Israelites and The Union of American Hebrew Congregations

1875-1876

Statistics of the Jews of the United States collected by the Board of Delegates American Israelites and The Union of American Hebrew Congregations

1875-1876

Pages from the first census of Jews in America with statistics from Maine and New Hampshire, 1875-1876

Courtesy American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio



Members of Congregation Beth Israel, Bangor, bring a new Torah scroll into their building, circa 1930

Courtesy Bangor Public Library

INTER-RACIAL FELLOWSHIP OF AMERICA
 For Justice, Amity and Understanding between the Many Groups that Compose America
 PARENT ORGANIZATION - PORTLAND, MAINE CHAPTER
 178 MIDDLE STREET
 PORTLAND, MAINE

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Letterhead of the Interracial Fellowship of America founded in 1930

Courtesy Maine Historical Society, Portland

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA
 234 WEST 87TH STREET AND WEST 79TH STREET
 NEW YORK CITY

August 28, 1912.

My dear Mr. Goodkowsky:

I just came from the hospital and am grateful to say that the boy is getting on very nicely, thank God.

I should like to ask of you the following favor: I took a small box of candy from Mr. Miller where we had service last Saturday. Of course, I did not pay him. Will you be so kind and call on him to pay him for me, and add this to my bill and send it to me. And give him my apologies for not seeing him before I left.

I take here the opportunity to thank you and Mrs. Goodkowsky most heartily for all the kindness you have shown to me. I wish only that the stay with you could have lasted longer.

With best regards and wishes of *Shalom*, and repeated thanks,

Yours sincerely,
Solomon Schechter

J. H. Goodkowsky, Recd.
 Hotel Lafayette,
 Old Orchard, Me.

Letter from Rabbi Solomon Schechter, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York to J. H. Goodkowsky, Old Orchard, Maine, August 28, 1912

Courtesy Harold Goodkowsky, Old Orchard, Maine



Coming Out, Going In: Spirituality and Religion in Maine's LGBT Communities

Ask someone who is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender who they are and, sooner or later, they will tell you their coming out story. “Coming out” – the process of coming to terms with one’s authentic sexual and gender identity—is at the core of LGBT

some LGBT activists have created communities to strengthen their religious and spiritual roots, while others have fought mightily against the influence of religion in public policy and electoral issues. From the beginning of gay organizing in the early 1970s through the enactment of anti-discrimina-

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Collection

(Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender) personal histories, especially since the so-called “birth of the gay rights movement” in the late 1960s.¹ Coming out describes the metaphoric journey of moving out of the closet. For most LGBT Mainers, however, it describes a profoundly inward spiritual and religious journey, as well.

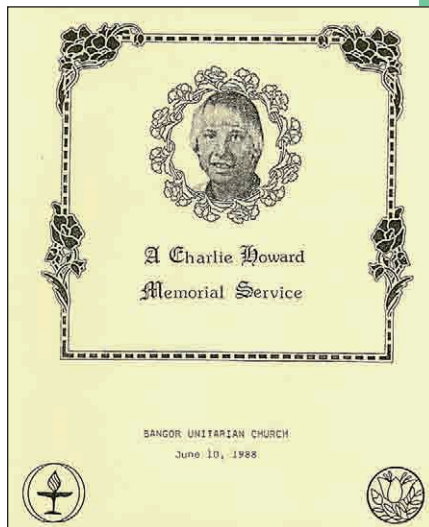
Many LGBT Mainers have struggled to remain within, or have rejected, the religious traditions in which they were raised. Others are working to transform their churches and synagogues, and still others are creating radically new forms of spiritual expression and community. There are not many LGBT people in Maine whose innermost private lives have not been touched—for good or for ill—by religion. Nor are there many Mainers—queer or straight—who have not been affected by the impact of organized religion in the public sphere.²

Mainers have drawn upon religion to further “gay rights” issues as well as to oppose them;

some LGBT activists have created communities to strengthen their religious and spiritual roots, while others have fought mightily against the influence of religion in public policy and electoral issues. From the beginning of gay organizing in the early 1970s through the enactment of anti-discrimina-

Being Gay in a Religion—Is It Really a Nightmare?

In April 1973, the Wilde-Stein Club, a student group at the University of Maine at Orono, organized a highly-publicized conference on LGBT issues and, a year later, the first state-wide Gay Symposium. Rev. Benjamin Bubar, of the Christian Civic League, warned that the Wilde-Stein program “could lead many innocent and unsuspecting young men... to being recruited and enslaved”; Rev. Herman C. Frankland, of the Bangor Baptist Church, fulminated against the “Sodom and Gomorrah conclave on our Maine Campus.”³ Their letter-writing campaign spilled into the State Legislature, threatening a \$35 million appropriation for the University of Maine System unless university trustees shut Symposium down.⁴ The trustees held firm, the Legislature



The fourth anniversary of Charlie Howard's death: Bangor Unitarian Church, 1988.

passed the appropriation, and the crisis eventually passed, but LGBT people had become front page news. The Wilde-Stein/Symposium brouhaha in many ways marked the coming out of an organized LGBT movement in Maine. It also set a pattern which has continued since then—LGBT issues contextualized in the public sphere as religious and moral issues, and only secondarily as political, or social, ones.

A handful of individual Maine clergy and lay leaders quietly advocated on behalf of LGBT issues, and by the mid-1980s some even supported LGBT groups within their denominations. Nevertheless, most LGBT Mainers led their religious lives in invisibility and silence — Christians enduring anti-gay sermons drawn from St. Paul, Jews attending Yom Kippur services and hearing same-sex relations described in Leviticus as “abominations” worthy of death. No wonder there was such fear and loathing among Maine’s gay activists about religion. Rev. Doug Strong, of All Soul’s Church in Augusta, captured the dilemma in a workshop he offered at Maine Lesbian and Gay Symposium IX, in 1982: “Being Gay in a Religion—Is It Really a Nightmare?”⁵

The “Culture Wars” of the 1980s and 1990s

Our Paper, a recently-founded gay newspaper, carried two major stories in its August 1984 issue: the Unitarian Universalist Association, meeting in Columbus, Ohio on June 28, becoming the first major denomination to affirm services of union of gay or lesbian couples; and the drowning of Charlie Howard, in Bangor, on July 7.⁶ Maine’s

Unitarian Universalist churches were leaders in welcoming gay people and supporting gay-related issues. In 1984, for example, during the flurry of political organizing following Charlie Howard’s death, the Bangor LGBT community met regularly at the Unitarian Church (which Charlie had attended) and, in Portland, 500 gay people and their straight allies gathered at First Parish Church for the first large-scale LGBT demonstration in Portland’s history.⁷ Brunswick’s Unitarian Church was hosting meetings of the Brunswick Women’s Group as early as 1973,⁸ and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Unitarian Church in Augusta provided a safe haven for MLGPA, Maine Speak-Out Project, and a host of other groups advocating for Maine’s LGBT citizens. Today, several of Maine’s 27 Unitarian Universalist churches have completed the UU “Welcoming Congregation” process.⁹

For the last decade and a half, religion has been at the center of America’s “culture wars,” and no more so than in Maine’s equal rights referenda campaigns: state-wide, in 1995, 1998, 2000, 2005, and locally—Portland in 1992, Lewiston in 1993, South Portland in 1998, Westbrook in 2002. Religious advocates of extending civil rights protections to LGBT people typically asserted ethical and moral arguments. For example, in the February 1998 campaign, the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination invoked “the moral right of gay men and lesbians to enjoy the same human rights protections as everyone else,” and asserted that “supporting human rights for gay men and lesbians is reasonable, compassionate, and a faith-

ful stance.”¹⁰ Religious opponents, on the other hand, were more likely to invoke their rights of free speech in asserting doctrinal and Scriptural arguments against homosexuality. In the words of Concerned Maine Families, in 1995, a vote to oppose equal rights legislation “will help safeguard, among other things religious freedoms—yours and mine.”¹¹

LGBT People within Mainstream Denominations

Political opponents, sadly, spent most of their time talking past each other. Nevertheless, the non-stop legislative and referendum campaigns linked LGBT issues and religious issues inextricably together in the public sphere. The same linkage happened in the private sphere, as well, as innumerable Mainers integrated an activism honed in political campaigns more directly into their spiritual and religious lives. For most Maine congregations, LGBT participation remained an abstraction—something that happened only in the pages of *Time* or *Newsweek*—until a new or long-time LGBT congregant came out, or straight people with LGBT family members pressed the issue.

In 1988, members of Portland’s Society of Friends (Quaker) marched in the second annual Gay Pride parade in Portland, as a result of Quaker consensus to stand “with the gay and lesbian community in its struggle for human and civil rights for all people regardless of sexual orientation.”¹² Quakers grappled with the issue of Gay Pride participation again in 1989 and in 1990. This time, however, several lesbians and gay men, most of them new to the Quaker communi-

ty, experienced some of the comments as extremely painful, and questioned how deeply Portland Friends Meeting really did welcome them.

Quakers now radically broadened the discussion, and after months of meeting and prayerful silence, approved a resolution welcoming commitment/marriage ceremonies for same sex couples “under the care of the Meeting.”¹³

In Auburn, in 1991, a long-time member of Temple Shalom Synagogue-Center, who had come out as a lesbian, felt unwelcome for herself and her son. On one hand the board of the Conservative synagogue affirmed that “membership is open to all persons of the Jewish faith, and gay/lesbian Jews are fully welcomed as members,” but on the other reiterated adherence to the principles of Conservative Judaism—which did not recognize gay unions or the ordination of LGBT rabbis. In particular, it made the point that Conservative Judaism “discourages the formation of ‘ghetto’ gay/lesbian congregations, and encourages homosexual Jews to join mainstream congregations, such as ours.”¹⁴ More so than Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, the Reform movement has historically been welcoming to LGBT people. Today, Congregation Bet Ha’Am, in South Portland, is “recognized for [its] outreach to Gay and Lesbian Jews”¹⁵ and Temple Beth El, in Bangor, has a Lesbian rabbi.¹⁶

Statements of inclusion notwithstanding, in the late 1980s and early 1990s few of Maine’s LGBT Jews felt at home in mainstream congregations. In 1989, three lesbians responded to a notice in *Maine Times* to form an LGBT group,



Rev. Mother Rosemary Ananis celebrates Easter Vigil with the Faith Community of St. Francis of Assisi, in Wells, 2004.

Courtesy of Faith Community of St. Francis of Assisi



Howard M. Solomon

which grew into Am Chofshi (Hebrew for “An Out People”). Am Chofshi’s first Passover Seder, in Portland, attracted over 50 people. Am Chofshi members marched in Gay Pride parades, spoke at various synagogues, celebrated holidays and potlucks “with humor and good food, [finding] in each other the families we need, with the strength and compassion we deserve.”¹⁷ Am Chofshi ceased to exist in 1998, as many of its members were integrating fully into congregations which they had experienced as less-than-welcoming just ten years earlier.

In 1996, Somesville Union Meeting House, on Mt. Desert Island, became the first United Church of Christ (UCC) in Maine to become an “Open and Affirming Congregation”: “We recognize, and welcome into our fellowship persons of all sexual orientations, be they single, in committed partnerships, or families, including those which are nuclear, blended and extended. We affirm relationships and behavior based on mutual love, responsibility, trust and loyalty.”¹⁸ Their process was similar to what Quakers and Unitarians had gone through: a handful of members (one of whom had a lesbian daughter) for whom the issue was intensely personal; a highly-committed minister; a nucleus of people who received the support of the church council to move toward the goal of voting to become “Open and Affirming”; guidance from national church bodies; and nearly two years of meetings, conversations, editing sessions, and prayer. Today, 15 of Maine’s 171 UCC congregations are “Open and

Affirming,” at least three of which have LGBT people as ministers.

Of all of the major denominations in Maine, the Roman Catholic Church has been the most visible, and vehement, in its opposition to LGBT participation in church life. In October 1986, the Vatican characterized homosexuality as “an objective disorder,” and ordered American bishops to exclude Dignity, an LGBT organization, from church facilities.¹⁹ Founded in 1969 and comprising nearly 80 chapters, Dignity/USA now felt called to “a prophetic stance,” and went on public record “as a group of homosexual but self-affirming and practicing Catholics” in opposition to the Vatican position, “therefore [giving] hope to other gay and lesbian Catholics.”²⁰ Dignity/Maine struggled to remain active, drawing upon a diminishing number of volunteer priests to celebrate the weekly Mass – now in the chapel of St. Luke’s Cathedral (Episcopalian) in Portland – and continuing to produce a newsletter, participate in Gay Pride, do educational outreach and advocacy. In 2003, Dignity/Maine ceased to exist. As Rosemary Ananis, one of its long-time leaders, put it, LGBT people “can make a contribution [to the Roman Catholic Church] only when that contribution is accepted.”²¹

Moving Beyond the Mainstream

Rev. Rosemary Ananis now serves the Faith Community of St. Francis of Assisi, in Wells—affiliated with the American Catholic Church of New England—as an ordained priest. Her church strives to be “a model of progressive Catholicism

at work in the world...welcoming to all the sacraments, those marginalized by many other churches, including divorced and remarried people, lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgendered persons, women and married persons.”²²

Rev. Antoinette Pezet is also engaged in a life of Christian ministry, through Circle of Hope/Metropolitan Community Church. Pezet is helping build a faith community which draws upon all parts of her life as a former “Roamin’ Catholic” (i.e., raised as a Roman Catholic, with encounters with Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Unitarianism along the way), a Transgender activist, a social change organizer, and the great grandchild of a full-blooded Mohawk.²³ Metropolitan Community Church was founded in Los Angeles, in 1968, as the first church group with a primary, positive ministry to LGBT persons: Circle of Hope, in Portland, and Northern Lights, in Vassalboro, are two of over 300 MCC congregations worldwide.²⁴

Rt. Rev. Dr. David Bellville is vicar of the Church of the Good Samaritan, in Brunswick. “Good Sam,” as it is fondly known, draws from the traditions of Protestantism, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism; its brochure proclaims “The word is out! Gay men and women together with their friends are creating a church in Brunswick, Maine.” Like Ananis and Pezet, Bellville has moved through, and beyond, mainstream denominations (in his case, the Methodist and Episcopalian churches) in integrating his spiritual calling with his gay identity.²⁵

Ananis, Pezet, and Bellville all recognize elements of the primitive Christian Church in their small faith communities—financial and institutional fragility, to be sure, but also a theological and communitarian “edginess” which they find spiritually exciting. They all have a special ministry to LGBT people, but reject creating LGBT-only congregations. And, in varying degrees, they all draw upon non-Christian traditions—including native American traditions—in their Christo-centric worship.

Many LGBT Mainers, however, journey even further beyond mainstream Judaeo-Christian spirituality. There are self-help and recovery groups in which LGBT people find spiritual homes they have not found in the churches and synagogues. There is a vibrant LGBT Buddhist community in Maine, part of Soka Gakkai International (SGI, translated as “Value Creation Society”).²⁶ There are gay men’s groups, including the Beautiful Tribe in Penobscot Bay and Gay Men Together in Gardiner, which integrate spiritual ceremonies and discussions into their activities; and GAYLA, an annual conference under Unitarian auspices, in Saco, which for 28 years has celebrated gay spirituality in chapel worship and discussion groups, drag performances and memorial services for departed brothers. Finally, there is the Feminist Spiritual Community of Portland, a ritually and theologically eclectic community founded by Eleanor H. Haney and others, where, since 1980, women have been able to support, nurture, and heal each other, remembering and evoking the



**The word is
OUT!**

**Gay men and women
together with their
friends are creating
a Church in
Brunswick, Maine**

Brochure of The Church of the Good Samaritan, in Brunswick.

Courtesy of Rev. David Bellville

goddess language of “religious traditions that are alternatives to the dominant ones.”²⁷

Maine is being enriched by the spiritual and religious journeys of its LGBT citizens. Whether through mainstream denominations or independent faith communities, the deepening of Judaeo-Christian practices or the adoption of non-European traditions, LGBT Mainers are forging spiritual lives barely imaginable a generation ago.

—Howard M. Solomon

Adjunct Professor of History and Faculty Scholar
for USM’s LGBT Collection

1. See, for example, Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Roy Cain, “Disclosure and Secrecy among Gay Men in the United States and Canada: A Shift in Views,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 1991), 25-42.
2. This essay’s focus upon Christian and Jewish Mainers is largely a function of Maine’s ethnographic homogeneity (according to the 2000 census, 96.9% of Mainers are of European origin). However, it is important to recognize that Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, among others, approach issues of gender and sexuality considerably differently from Judaism and Christianity.
3. “Civic League Disapproves of Sanction of Homosexuals,” *Portland Evening Express*, December 31, 1973; Advertisement in *Bangor Daily News*, March 10, 1974.
4. “Gay Conference at UMO Drew National Attention,” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, May 12, 1974.
5. *Maine Lesbian and Gay Symposium IX*, March 26-28 1982.
6. *Our Paper*, Vol. I, No. 12, August 1984.
7. *Our Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 12, August 1984.
8. Madeleine Winterfalcon interviews: Susan Henderson (June 22, 1999); Stan Fortuna and Peter Prizer (June 4, 1999).

9. The Unitarian Universalist Bisexual Network (UUBN) was headquartered in Portland and Boston, from its founding in 1990 until it merged with the UU G/L organization to form the current lay organization, Interweave. Email from Bobbi Keppel, November 3, 2005.
10. *Say ‘No’ to Discrimination*. Pamphlet: Religious Coalition Against Discrimination in Maine, 1997.
11. *Stop Special ‘Gay Rights’ Status: Vote Yes on Question 1*. Pamphlet: Concerned Maine Families, 1995.
12. *Portland Friends Meeting Newsletter*, May, June, 1988.
13. Interview: Sara Jane Elliott and Rita Clifford, August 16, 2006.
14. *Ma Chadash/What’s New?*, *Temple Shalom Synagogue-Center Newsletter*, December 1991; Am Chofshi Papers, LGBT Collection.
15. Web site, Congregation Bet Ha’Am. www.bethaam.org/
16. Interview: Rabbi Darah Lerner, August 18, 2006.
17. Gail Kass, “Am Chofshi Statement of Purpose,” June 10, 1993. Am Chofshi Papers, LGBT Collection.
18. Margaret MacDonald and Doty Kay Stillman, “Welcoming Process: As Maine Goes, So Goes the Nation?” *Open Hands*, nd.
19. “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc
20. *Catholicism, Homosexuality, and Dignity: Questions and Answers About Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered and Catholic*. Pamphlet: Dignity/USA. 1996.
21. Interview: Rosemary Ananis, August 11, 2006.
22. Web site, American Catholic Church of New England. www.accne.net/index
23. Interview: Antoinette Pezet, August 1, 2006.
24. Metropolitan Community Church. mcccchurch.org.
25. Interview: David Bellville, August 19, 2006.
26. SGI draws its inspiration from the Buddhism of Nichiren (1222-82) which places the highest emphasis on the sanctity of life. www.sginewengland.org
27. Eleanor Haney, *Vision and Struggle: Meditations on Feminist Spirituality and Politics* (Portland: Astarte Shell Press, 1989), 123.



Circle of Hope/MCC members participate in an Abenaki Powwow, 2005.
Courtesy of Circle of Hope/MCC



Rev. Antoinette Pezet officiates at a service of Circle of Hope/MCC (Metropolitan Community Church), in Portland, 2005.
Courtesy of Circle of Hope/MCC



Christian fundamentalists picket Bangor Pride, 1995.
APEX Collection



Portland Friends Meeting participates in the Gay Pride parade, 1990.
Courtesy of Tom Antonik



Am Chofshi celebrates Passover Seder in Portland, 1990
Am Chofshi Collection



Members of the SGI Buddhist community (Soka Gakkai International) march in Southern Maine Pride parade, 2006.

Courtesy of SGI Portland

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