

Michael Eure Show: Episode 33 – Role of Churches in Social Change

INTRODUCTION: Hello, this is Michael Eure, and I'd like to invite you to the Michael Eurre Show, featuring student hosts and very special guests talking about a variety of interesting topics. You can find us on the Eagle Stream YouTube channel.

MICHAEL EURE: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Michael Eure Show. Today, our very special guest is Reverend Charles W. Brooks. He is an adjunct professor at Saint Augustine's University and also the pastor of Poplar Springs Christian Church. So, Reverend Brooks, tell us a little bit about yourself.

CHARLES BROOKS: Yeah, good afternoon, Michael, and thanks for an opportunity to join you in this forum. I am Charles Brooks. I am a pastor of Poplar Springs Christian Church. That's located in Raleigh on Old Stage Road. I've been there now for 30 years, serving as pastor. My wife is Regina, who works for the state of North Carolina, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Child Development Division. She manages IT over in that area. Three children, Charles II, Renita and Brianna, all three graduates of HBCUs.

EURE: Wow. Well, you made me think about one of your members, Rene Daughtry. He's at Cisco, but he talks about you and your church as "Cisco in the Sanctuary." That's what he calls it. So, we're gonna talk about a lot of things with churches today, but one thing I wanna talk about is Saint Augustine's. It's such a historic school because it's, it's a historically black college. But it's the only one in North Carolina actually named after person of African descent. Tell us a little bit about Augustine, bishop of Hippo.

BROOKS: Yeah, Bishop Hippo Augustine is who you are talking about, Augustine of Hippo. He was initially not a devout Christian. His mother was Christian; his father was not. And Augustine had went to a, what we would call today a revival, and in that particular service, he was sort of transformed. He was a converted, and from that particular revival he, he went on to do great things in the church. He had people to focus on the poor. He understood the needs of the poor and service to the poor. And this came all about because his mother, being the devout Christian that she was, prayed for him. History records that she really, really prayed for him and really was in the background. And, and from there, all of the work that he had done, the "Confessions," which was the name of the literary work that he had done, many, many other things that he had done in the Christian faith, it's befitting that Saint Augustine's University is a named after him, an African descent individual. We're proud of that history.

EURE: Well, I thank you, and I think that is very interesting, and even parallels today, you have what we call the church mothers, right? They do all the praying bring the folk into the fold. So ...

BROOKS: You know, they, they, they say next month is Women's History Month, and when we focus on women, but I tell you, the church nationwide, worldwide has been strong because of our mothers.

EURE: And to the audience, if you have any questions, please type them in the chat. And I'm asking you to do this early because we're gonna move along, and it's gonna get kind of busy. And, and, and Reverend Brooks has so much information, and we're gonna go right out into the 1860s with the Civil War and how these, particularly church-related, HBCUs were founded. And could you tell us a little bit about that? And Saint Augustine's is one, but so was Shaw and many other schools. You wanna talk about that a little bit?

BROOKS: Oh, sure. I can tell you, right after the Emancipation Proclamation, which history records, issued by Abraham Lincoln, you had, like, 4,000 slaves in the South who are, who are dismissed from those plantations with no skills, no education, nowhere to go, you know? And so, we will find in the 1860s, after 1865, several of those churches had helped start educational schools, starting off with the name of "Normal School" or, or, or whatever before now becoming colleges and universities.

But those churches were funding those schools or funding the starts of those schools, like the Episcopal Church did for a Saint Augustine's University around 1867, I believe. It was in the 1860s, right after emancipation, these slaves needed skills, and so they needed education. They needed ability to read and, and to write to be able to function and all of that. You will find an argument between W.E.B. DuBois and George Washington Carver, you know, as to what is the best route to go. Should we focus on education, or should we focus on a skill?

In my philosophy classes, I always have the students to look at that great debate, and it's interesting how they tie it to modern times of, of what people should do. Most, most of the students, they fall on the DuBois side – get that education, you know. It is, well, Booker T. Washington, I'm sorry, Booker T. Washington, fall on his side – get that education, you know? And that's, that's what's important.

So, so the churches played a major role in helping forming these schools so that these

society rejects, as, as they were treated and we were treated, would have a place to be educated, so that we could have a future, a chance at life. The church played a major role in getting that done. A lot of our HBCU schools now, my son went to Morehouse, it has that history Had a daughter at Tuskegee who graduated also, it has that history. And the youngest one from North Carolina Central University, it has that state connection, but the church is involved in there somewhere. But even to the missionary societies of, of America, all played a role in helping get these schools formed and found it so that our children and our people could have a secure future.

EURE: All right. And you brought up some things, we have a question, and this is from Dr. Chris O’Riordan-Adjah, “Is this the same, same Saint Augustine some of us know back in Florida? I know that had a Spanish connection.

BROOKS: Yeah, I, I don’t, I don’t think so. No, I don’t think so.

EURE: That’s pronounced Saint, Saint Augustine. I know it’s two different people, and one is Augustine and the other is Augustine.

BROOKS: Yeah, we, we, we play with that name – Saint Augustine, Saint Augustine, you know. But the one I’m talking about who our school is named after, he was from what is called now, Al, Algeria, North Africa.

EURE: Well, thank you, Dr. Chris. Chris is the head of our Department of Engineering at Wake Tech, and I thank you for that question. Also, something that we didn’t talk about is the, the significant landmarks. For example, Tarboro Road goes up to the very front of Saint Augustine’s University, but the school’s history comes out of the Saint Luke’s Episcopal Church, out of Tarboro. And sometimes we don’t really pay attention to these little things, but it makes a difference.

So, now let’s talk about the civil rights movement and, and how these schools were involved with that. And in many, many ways, it wasn’t just in the ‘60s, but way before then, these schools were economic engines, and they were putting out principals and teachers and ministers. And we didn’t talk about the ministers that came out of Saint Augustine’s. Let’s do that first. Let’s talk about that. Bishop Delaney, and then there’s you. Michael Curry didn’t come out of Saint Augustine’s, but, of course, he he is a bishop with the Episcopal Church of Af, he’s an African American. He married, what is it? Princess who and who?

BROOKS: Yeah, yeah, he hangs around Saint Augustine's University quite a lot. They, they often have him come over and speak and share and all that, and, of course, we are very, very proud of that. He's a resident right here in Raleigh, and we're very proud of that.

But going back to the 1865, the emancipation and having slaves freed. Ministers really played a major role in leading our people to where they are today, up to the civil rights movement. And all, and these ministers had to be educated. A lot of these schools that we enjoy today, the HBCU schools that we enjoy today, started off with their focus on religious teachings, you know, religious education, should I say. And a lot of clergy came out of that. Clergy went to their various churches and recreated educational boards and institutions, and, and, and you can find, well, African American education tracing all the way back, you know, to the church, with the ministries being educated first and then the ministers educating the people, and, of course, the people starting their own things, and education just growing, growing, growing, growing.

We have moved away from that, and that saddens my heart and breaks my heart. Too many times now, current ministers focus on selfishness, building their mansion, driving Rolls Royces, laying out the red carpet, with very, very little concern for the people. But they claim that they are there for spiritual growth and spiritual development, you know? Where I believe our forefathers would really argue about that, you know, if you really care, educate. Educate. First get yourself educated, and then educate your community. I still think that's the key. That is the thing that has brought us thus far.

So, the ministers played a major role. There have been significant, I mean the roll call is just too massive, you know, to talk about each one.

EURE: And, and then we wanna talk about a little bit about Bishop Delaney. But I'm talking also about the Delaney sisters, Sadie and Bessie. And they were very prominent trailblazers and grew up on the campus of Saint Augustine's and went to New York. And I think one became the first African American teacher and the other one was in the medical field. I can't remember the details, but you might have it since you actually [indecipherable].

BROOKS: Let, let me say to all of our students and all of those in education, buy the book. Get the book, "Having Our Say." The Delaney sisters, I mean, they talk about their experience growing up even as children on that campus, that historic campus of Saint Augustine's College, and even the roles they played as professionals, they talk about their experiences. And all of that you will find in the book, "Having Our Say." I, I definitely encourage you to get that and read it for its rich history. These are real people with real

experiences, but who grew and became powerful forces, you know, not only in our history, but even in the city of Raleigh and the community and beyond North Carolina.

EURE: All right. And said we're not gonna spend all our time on Saint Augustine's. We're gonna go into other things, but I thought about Ralph Campbell a minute ago because he's a graduate of Saint Augustine's, is that not correct?

BROOKS: Yes, yes. Ralph Campbell definitely was a force in the political community. Now, are you talking about the father or the son? Both were, both were very, very active in our history in Wake County and in North Carolina. And having those roots with Saint Augustine's, went out to lead the communities and speak for communities. And the older Campbell was out there as a civil rights leader, as a leader of fighting and demanding justice for the people and for people's opportunity right here in Wake County of North Carolina.

EURE: Right. And, and then Ralph became one of the representatives on the State Council.

BROOKS: That's correct. That's correct.

EURE: For the whole state.

BROOKS: That's right. That's right.

EURE: We have another question, and thank you for asking, oh, Chris again. "With every effort made these days to separate religion and education, I'm glad we're having this conversation. But are some of these older institutions holding their ground to keep religion?" And, and, and you could talk about Saint Aug's. Don't you, there's no bachelor of arts in religious studies that's offered there.

BROOKS: Yeah, there, there is a religious studies program there in, in which a student can matriculate through there. But more directly to the address the question is, which I think is a, a very good question, a lot of schools have a pulled away from the religious perspective and focus more on, on education and not much allegiance to the religion part. But as the question asked about separating religion and education, yes, the religious institutions are, are struggling to keep their identity and to keep their presence known in society.

Unfortunately, unfortunately, hoping I don't get in trouble with this, Michael, but you asked the question, the conservative movement, in my own opinion, have done major damage.

Done major damage in terms of the way that people think, in terms of, of destroying the Christian faith so that their own children don't have much faith in it at all. I, you know, I, I, I really worry about that, if, if the church can sort of regain its stature of in the present time. It's, it's very difficult now because we've mixed politics into religion. I think if we focus on, I'm a Christian, if we focus on Jesus and Jesus' ministry and what Jesus is all about, he probably would be labeled as a socialist in the 21st century America, which is not a good sound or a good term. But he genuinely cared for people, and that's what the Christian faith is all about, that we're supposed to take care of our fellow man. We're supposed to encourage our fellow man, not encourage him to be lazy and not work or educated and all of that kind of stuff. But we're supposed to be more encouraging than we are.

So, we do have this struggle now. This continuous struggle, continuing struggle as to the church, politics and education, when, I believe, at one time, they, they all worked together for the common good of the people. Now, you have that split, and I think that split, you asked me, I think that split began with Ronald Reagan and Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority and all of that group. This has led to what we are experiencing right now. That's my opinion.

EURE: OK. Well, we're gonna follow up with that question about the historic chapels that are on these campuses. Many of them, like Saint Augustine's Chapel and Shaw has a chapel and Johnson C. Smith. Are they, because we know that they have athletics and music and bands and everything, how, what role do these facilities play? I know that it's probably diminished, but just just talk about, is that an intricate, integral part of the institution's experience?

BROOKS: I, I think at Saint Augustine's, we are, we are working hard to try to refurbish and to regain the presence of the church. Even on a state campus, I mentioned my daughter went to North Carolina Central University, but even on that campus, HBCU campus, you will find a chapel. It is a, a symbol of how important religion played in the life of people who were students at that time. And I think that the church can play a major role in these institutions today. There needs to be a lot of change, a lot of moving away from old, traditional stuff to stuff that is more attractive to the younger person, a message that is more attractive. And I believe you can take the same gospel message of Jesus Christ, you know, and apply it to modern times, where the message is not distorted but the hearts of the people are touched and people are moved to carry out, you know, that mission of the church, that is in caring for God's people.

EURE: And, and that's the picture of the historic Saint Augustine's Chapel.

BROOKS: This is the historic chapel, which people came on the campus and built themselves, you know.

EURE: And students were involved, I believe, with this?

BROOKS: Yes, yes.

EURE: And the red doors, I understand, symbolized that it was a safe space for people to come that were traveling. We know about the Green Book, but that's the red door.

BROOKS: It's a lot of history there. It's a beautiful chapel. If you go into it, you get a sense of being back in time of history and the sacredness of, of the chapel. We have a, a chaplain now. She's a very beautiful young lady who is leading. She's only been there for maybe about a year and a half, and she has reconnected with the students and is doing very, very well, and we're proud of her.

EURE: Well, thanks for, for letting us know. And we didn't talk a lot about, you just brought up the religious right, but during the civil rights movement, we had all of these churches very much involved, black churches and white churches, ministers, different denominations. What do you think that, were you, were you able to experience that in any way, and is it still the case?

BROOKS: I think that it is still, the church that is, is still very active in our world politics and, and community and even in our, our social life, you know. The church played a major role in the '60s and the civil rights movement because that was the meeting place around the country where African Americans gathered. That is the place where Dr. King, Martin Luther King, would meet people and organize organizations to help in the fight for civil rights. It, it was a landmark place, the church, the church. And that church has produced politicians. The church has produced a lot of what you might say are lead people in, in the African American communities: our singers. A lot of our pop singers and all, all of them got their start with that gospel music in church. All of that played a role in putting us on the world stage. I hope that we don't lose that touch or that reach, you know. I hope that the church will still be there for people, but the church has to not be selfish and start to focus on the people itself, if that makes sense to you.

EURE: Of course. And back to North Carolina Central, and we, we, we know that it was actually founded as a private school, the National Religious Training School in Chicago,

and later was absorbed by the state. But it, but as you mentioned, even the state-supported HBCUs have a strong history with the church.

BROOKS: Yes, yes.

EURE: And still do, all of them. So, tell us a little bit about Poplar Springs. What kind of things are going on with that church? And are you involved in the community as a church?

BROOKS: Oh, most definitely. That's what we do. I can't preach this stuff and not practice it, you know. I'm a firm believer in practicing what you preach into our social involvement. Poplar Springs has a history that goes back to what we were talking about earlier, the 1860s. In 1865, when all of this emancipation began for the slaves and all, Poplar Springs was there, one of the churches. Land was donated to the church to start with a brush arbor and move toward what we have actually today. At one time, it was also associated with a school that it had where it educated people, you know, across the road of where the current site is now. There was some school that was built and people actually went to. A lot of my members who've passed and gone on now remember those days and had told me about those days, which I did not know initially. But the church was there. Poplar Springs was part of this sprouting community coming out of a history of slavery and coming out of a history of, of, of Jim Crowism and all of that kind of stuff.

Currently, today, Propel Springs rests at 6115 Old Stage Road in Raleigh, right in a sharp curve, and it is heavily involved into social and community activities. Number one, we do our North Carolina food bank. Our North Carolina food bank has made us one of the flagships because of what we're doing. We serve so many people, you know, month by month, week by week, and putting groceries in the hands of people and feeding families. North Carolina food bank has made several donations, not financially, but in food and in refrigeration to store the food and all of that kind of stuff, so that we can really do what we believe our mission and motto is, and that is to be the hands of God and to serve people.

We do Habitat for Humanity. We join in with the forces to build houses for, for people. You know, there are several other things that we're involved in. My wife is the team leader for Race for the Cure, and we have, for the last five, six years have been the number one faith-based community fundraiser for Race for the Cure. We do Relay for Life, we do the Heart Walk. I just have Poplar Springs really out there in the community doing things for people. To me, that speaks louder than a sermon. One of my favorite poems is, "I'd rather see a sermon than to hear one any day," and that's what we practice.

EURE: And, and, and Poplar Springs is very close to our original campus, the Southern Wake Campus of Wake Tech.

BROOKS: That's right, very, very close. Matter of fact, that, that's where I did my some of my funeral service courses, early courses. I would leave my office there at Poplar Springs and take the back road down Old Stage and come in to Wake Tech the back way and get in there and out of there for class.

EURE: Very happy that you were able to participate in our campus experiences, and, hopefully, we'll be able to connect our students to you or can ...

BROOKS: Oh, yes. Yes, I would love that. Yes, yes.

EURE: Because we believe ...

BROOKS: The school played a major role in, in my life and my education and my career. I should never forget. Every time I pass on 401, it's so massive now. I'm like, "Wow, is that the same place?"

EURE: Well, the school has grown, and they have a model now, which is Reach and Rally. And so, they wanna go to every section of Wake County, even those that maybe we have not traditionally touched. So, you're gonna be one, even though we touched you, we're gonna do more.

BROOKS: Let me know how I can help. I love that vision.

EURE: OK. Well, look, it's all winding down now, and if we don't have any more questions, I'm gonna let you kind of give, oh, we do have, oh, Renita Brooks. "How has the pandemic impacted the church?"

BROOKS: That's my Tuskegee daughter.

EURE: OK.

BROOKS: Tuskegee daughter, she is in Dallas, Texas, now. She works for AT&T. And the impact of the, upon the church has simply been that of really taking away the fellowship. We miss the fellowship with each other, and I don't think we're the only congregation. I think the, most of the congregations throughout the United States miss that weekly

fellowship with one another. Even though we have things like livestream and Zoom, you know, and Microsoft Teams and all of those forms that we can come together, it's not the same as being in fellowship person to person. That way we have been impacted.

Now, financially, a lot of the ministers have told me, financially, the churches are doing better because people now are engaged into electronic giving or giving through their electronic devices, such as Tithely, which is what we do, and other kinds of forms. So, the impact financially may be down a little bit, but each of the churches, I think, are holding strong still.

EURE: Right. "What changes can we expect to see from the church once we return back to normal?"

BROOKS: Well, I think one of the hardest things to get people unused to is this form of not having to dress up and not having to fix up just to come to church when they can just stay home and pull it up on an app and pull it up on a, a television or a computer and still get the sermon. You know, it's going to be hard to pull people back in. I think, initially, they're gonna jump right back in and want to worship, but then they're gonna come back to this form.

EURE: And a lot of people that probably have not traditionally attended church probably are attending now that it's virtual.

BROOKS: Yeah.

EURE: I'm gonna make a quick announcement, and Sarah, if you can put the books on the screen for Wake Tech's Black History Month. I will be working with another gentleman, and we're gonna be doing some book discussions. This one, "The Hate You Give," is gonna be on the last Wednesday of February. It's gonna be from 12 to 1 and 5 to 6. Then we have another, "Dear Martin," and that's gonna be on the last Tuesday, again from 12 to 1 and 5 to 6. And then, for the last show, which is the last Thursday, we have "The Mississippi Byrd." Shedrick Byrd, he is a, a retired military person that is from Mississippi, but [indecipherable] graduated from Norfolk State and was the first director of public relations for the CIAA, which is the oldest athletic conference for HBCUs in the country.

So, now, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm giving you the last words Reverend Brooks.

BROOKS: Well, I do thank you for allowing me this opportunity. Mike is an old friend of mine. Most definitely appreciate what you're doing there at Wake Tech, and we do miss you

at Saint Aug's. And thank you for allowing me to talk about Poplar Springs a little bit. Please look us up. I think we have our, there it is, our organization there. Please look us up at poplar-springs.org and come join us for a service. Come join us in our mission to serve the community and the entire world. Thank you, Mike.

EURE: Thank you. And we'll see you all again on the last Thursday.

BROOKS: OK.