

Damien Strecker, "The South Bronx, Edler Hawkins and the Formation of St. Augustine Church: 1938-1958"

This essay will explore the strategies employed by Rev. Hawkins that helped him grow a thriving Presbyterian church in the midst of an ethnically changing neighborhood. The demographic shifts taking place in the south Bronx during and after WWII were dynamic. Traditionally a white, Jewish, working class neighborhood, the south Bronx became a sought after residence for Harlemites, Black migrants from the South, Afro-Caribbean, Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricans. Within all of this transitioning, Hawkins created a powerful Black Presbyterian congregation within a predominately white denomination.

I argue Hawkins gained a large following and political influence due to his theological training, church programming, and political activity. He offered a highly trained theological message to a burgeoning Bronx African American population. The Black middle class in the neighborhood flocked to him because his educational achievements and demeanor mirrored what they themselves hoped to become. Second, he catered his programs towards the practical needs of the community. Through exploring his work with Camp Bohaton, a summer camp for St. Augustine kids, and other programs devoted to giving positive structure to the youth, I argue Hawkins filled a social void for many African Americans in the neighborhood. Lastly, Hawkins embraced racial justice causes that affected his congregation. He worked to end the exploitation of informal day laborers in the Bronx during the end of the Great Depression and post WWII era. I also highlight Hawkins affiliation with the American Labor Party, and pursuit of political office as a part of his desire to ameliorate problems in the community.