

Celebrating 150 Years of African Methodism

Midyear Conference 2018
13th Episcopal District
African Methodist Episcopal Church

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On June 17, 2015, the nation's attention focused on Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina when white supremacist Dylann Roof attended a bible study in the church and while there, then calmly murdered the pastor and eight of his members. For a brief moment, the nation experienced another 'incident' of mass murder except it was in an historic religious location. Committed to God and community service, Historic Mother Emanuel was not unlike the entire AME Church.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church traces its roots to 1787 when a group of free blacks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania organized a self-help organization entitled the Free African Society. The Society set about helping each other and attending local churches such as St. George Methodist Church. [NEXT SLIDE] At the time, Methodists usually did not support slavery and thus many local blacks saw them as more friendly. In 1791, some of the black Methodists in Philadelphia starting planning to build their own worship site but continued to worship at St. George's and contribute to the church financially and spiritually.

However, in 1792 (there are debates about the actual date), an incident occurred in which the Free African Society black members of St. George Methodist Church were told to stop praying at a spot in the church reserved for whites and to return to a racially segregated section of the church. [NEXT SLIDE] Richard Allen and Absalom Jones as leaders of the Free African Society worshipping at this church, led black members from St. George's and by 1794, subsequently formed their own place of prayer in an old blacksmith's shop. Allen, a former slave born in 1760, retained his belief in the Methodist tradition of spirit-filled preaching by serving as a circuit preacher. Jones eventually left the group and became an ordained Episcopalian minister.

By 1816, these black Christians decided to create a Wesleyan-based Methodist body with an episcopal structure. The support for this organization came from Rev. Francis Asbury, an important figure among white Methodists who would ordain Allen as itinerant elder in 1799. Despite this step, the new denomination's existence was challenged by white Methodists in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. The court would sustain the existence of the AME body. Rev. Richard Allen would serve as the first presiding bishop with his consecration by Rev. Asbury. (NB: The fair-skinned Daniel Coker was elected first but resigned in favor of Allen.)

In 1801, he would marry his wife Sarah Allen and both became the central leaders in its creation and expansion southward. [NEXT SLIDE] Both Allens are now interred in Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia which is four short city blocks from Constitution Hall and remains today as one of the oldest properties continuously owned by African Americans in the United States.

What has happened to our church established by Philadelphia blacks—then called Africans—since then? Based on the spiritual activism and social leadership of Bishop Richard Allen and his successors, AME clergy fought to end slavery, engage in serving the needs of the poor and in the twentieth century, sought to end both *de jure* (legal) and *de facto* (practiced) racial segregation. Incidentally, the Brown in the famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling finding school segregation based on race illegal was Rev. Oliver Brown, a Topeka, Kansas AME minister suing for his daughter Linda. In the two centuries of AME activism to save souls and human beings there is a remarkable list of African American personalities with AME connections:[NEXT SLIDE]

- **Roy Wilkins**, NAACP leader during the 1950s and 1960s [NEXT SLIDE]
- **Vernon Jordan**, National Urban League leader[NEXT SLIDE]
- **Rev. Charles Harris Wesley**, an ordained AME elder/pastor, Louisville-born college president at two colleges, Harvard Ph.D. who helped Dr. Carter G. Woodson to establish African American history month. [NEXT SLIDE]
- **Rev. Henry McNeal Turner**, 19th century AME bishop, Civil War chaplain and supporter of emigration to Africa.
- **Rosa Parks**, AME deaconess in Montgomery, Alabama whose arrest in 1955 sparked nonviolent protests against segregated buses and is considered by some as the mother of the modern civil rights movement.

There are literally thousands of other AMEs lay and clergy in the United States and worldwide who have contributed locally and nationally to positive change

in business, military, government and society since its 1816 incorporation in Pennsylvania.

While most of us in this room are familiar and take some pride in our own local AME churches, when did the AME Connectional Church have a Kentucky historical presence? Since 1867, the AME Connectional Church sought to expand its first congregations to multiple locations in large and small Kentucky towns. Today, the AME Church in the Commonwealth celebrates its 150th year and now comprises the Kentucky Conference of the 13th Episcopal District of the AME Church. And yes, I am aware that the Tennessee Conference held its first Annual Conference in August 1867 at St. Paul AME Church in Nashville and that all three Tennessee Conferences have a rich histories of community activism and spiritual activism deserving a similar treatments. This morning, however, I will, as an Kentucky historian, provide **brief**, selective tidbits about some of the Kentucky Conference churches their members and their roles in 150 years of African Methodism. [NEXT SLIDE]

- Two churches, St. Paul AME Church in Lexington and Quinn Chapel AME Church in Louisville, have unique histories and congregations in which its members were significant contributors to the wider communities they serve.
- St. Paul AMEC began in 1820 as a group of black members of Hill Street Methodist Church in Lexington which was then affiliated with Methodist Episcopal Church South. Its black members formed their own church but remained in the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The members finally decided in 1866 to join the Ohio Conference of the AME Church and named

the church St. Paul AME Church on the property they had purchased earlier. Before joining the AME Connectional Church, the congregation members secretly participated in the Underground Railroad by hiding escaping slaves in the sanctuary. [NEXT SLIDE]

- Quinn Chapel AME Church in Louisville began very much like historic Mother Bethel in Philadelphia. Quinn Chapel's original worship site in 1838 was in a room over a public stable at Second and Main Streets. [NEXT SLIDE] By the way, the logo of our church contains an anvil—the basic tool found in a stable. [NEXT SLIDE]
- Quinn Chapel has moved five times since 1838 with most recent location being at 1901 West Muhammad Ali Blvd. During each move, it made spiritual and secular advancements for the community: it established the first school for blacks in Louisville; fought racial discrimination and became known as the abolitionist church with slaveholders forbidding their slaves to attend; protested racial discrimination on streetcars (1870); housing discrimination (1914); public accommodation (1961) and in 1967, the staging point for protest marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to City Hall for open housing.

There were individual Kentucky AME members and clergy who were involved in diverse occupations: [NEXT SLIDE]

- **Ora Frances Porter** (1879-1970) was born in Butler County, Kentucky and at age ten moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky where she completed her elementary and secondary education. After completing nursing training at

Tuskegee Institute School of Nursing in 1904 and additional training in New York, on the recommendation of Tuskegee President Booker T. Washington, she served as family nurse for the family of oil baron John D. Rockefeller. On her return to Bowling Green, according to one medical history source, she was believed to be in 1916 the first registered nurse of any race in the state of Kentucky. While involved in several civic groups in the black community, she was an active member and officer of Bowling Green's Taylor Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church until her death in 1970.

- **Rev. Bartlett Taylor** was born enslaved in Henderson, KY. He and his mother were owned by his white father. Although enslaved, young Bartlett learned the butchering trade and subsequently bought his freedom. During his lifetime, he became a family man and an ordained itinerant elder in the AME Church. He built churches in Bowling Green, Cynthiana and Louisville. In Shelbyville, he helped the local community to build a school for blacks where there was none before. He died on July 3, 1901. [NEXT SLIDE]
- **Rev. Edward Ellsworth Underwood** was born in Mt. Pleasant, Ohio in 1864. After completing his high school education, he started teaching in the local schools. Licensed to preach in the AME Church (just as his father), he served the AMEC in various capacities including the AME General Conference. After completing his medical training at (Case) Western Reserve University in Cleveland, he established a successful medical practice in Frankfort, Kentucky from 1891 to 1942. His community service included fighting segregation in railroad travel and serving as Frankfort's assistant city

physician from 1897 to 1900, thus becoming the first black to hold this position. He was an active Mason, United Brothers of Friendship member and Republican. [NEXT SLIDE]

- **Rev. William E. Summers III** (1917-1996) was an ordained AME minister whose professional career involved print media with the *Louisville Defender* newspaper and then with the WLOU radio as sportscaster. He worked his way up in the Rounsaville Radio Company which owned seven black format stations. His Summers Broadcasting Inc. bought the station and an FM station. His pastoral appointments included St. Paul AME Church in Louisville from 1968 to 1986. He made his presence known in the Louisville Urban League, Boys Clubs of America, YMCA, Kentucky Derby Festival and marched in Selma with Dr. Martin Luther King. He received too many awards to mention here.

Where does our African Methodist Episcopal Church stand today? Although incorporated in 1816 Pennsylvania, our AME Connectional Church has become worldwide with 20 episcopal districts in 39 countries, with churches in the United States, Europe, Canada, Africa, Caribbean and India. The AME church has members from all races-black, white, Asian, Hispanic and others.(NEXT SLIDE) Its motto in 2018 reflects this worldwide, spiritual focus: “*God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit Our Comforter, Humankind Our Family.*”

Thank you.

