

The State of the Church
September 12, 2019

To: Bishop Jeffery N. Leath, the 128th Elected and Consecrated Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Presiding Prelate of the 13th Episcopal District

Dr. Susan J. Leath, MD., Supervisor of Missions

Reverend William R. T. Hale, Host Presiding Elder, Commonwealth District; Reverend Kenneth Jerome Golphin, Co-Host Presiding Elder, Bluegrass District

Reverend William Easley Jr, Associate Presiding Elder, Louisville District

Reverend Dr. Robert A. Strode, Host Pastor, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lexington, Kentucky

General Officers

152nd Session of the Kentucky Annual Conference

State of the Church 2019

The Kentucky Conference came into the Zion on September 27, 1873; reconfigured over the years yet remains impactful.

Rev. A.W. Wayman, Rev. J.P. Campbell, and some of the elders of the A.M.E. Church will meet in Convention all ministers and delegates representing churches who are favorable to the formation of a Conference in the State of Kentucky, to be called the Kentucky Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church." ~ [source: "Kentucky Conference of the A.M.E. Church to be formed," *The Christian Recorder*, 06/16/1866]. It would take a few years before the Kentucky Conference of the AME Church was established on September 27, 1873, in Louisville, KY, under Bishop Daniel A. Payne. The officers of the conference were Rev. Robert G. Marshall, John W. Asbury from the Ohio District, and Charles Porter. Six sub-committees were formed, and a fire-proof safe was purchased by the trustees of Asbury Chapel (Louisville, KY) for the deposit of the Kentucky Conference archives. In 1880, the West Kentucky Conference split from the main conference, which resulted in the Kentucky Conference with 60 preachers, and West Kentucky Conference with 36 preachers.¹

¹ History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (The Black Church in Action) by H. D. Gregg. <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2497>. From NAAA, Notable Kentucky African Americans Database (main entry) accessed 8/30/2019.

At the seat of the 151st Kentucky Annual Conference, the Lexington District was split into two districts; Commonwealth and Bluegrass. Three districts make up the Kentucky Annual Conference: Louisville, Commonwealth, and Bluegrass.

Member issues

Through conversations and articles, there are many reasons that attribute to declining memberships or commitment to attendance and service within the church. While some leave due to heavy politics, and uncaring and hypocritical souls, there are some who stay in complacency. Whatever the reason, the church must always return to its biblical roots and mission ordained by God.

The church should be the heart of the community with the community at heart; a place where the weary and faint at heart are welcomed.” All are welcomed” are more than words and the church should care well for all in need. It is evident that on life’s journey we are stronger together, and we need each other to survive. Then if this is true why are our local churches battling member issues? The church is NOT an only on Sunday gathering and celebratory events, but a body with many parts (I Corinthians 12) who worship and serve a Missional God. The Bible speaks of “members” as “now you are the body of Christ and individual members of it. God placed members in the church (I Corinthians 12:27-28).” Every individual is valuable and has much to contribute to the whole. Some are eyes, some are ears, some are feet, some are hands. Each of us has a different role and function but designed to always work together. When we do not work together the body suffers.

Our Zion’s Viability

The viability of the church lies in her faithfulness. “The church’s job is to be faithful. The growth of the church, survival is predicated on the will and power of God. The church’s job is to be the church.”²

With membership on the decline in some of our districts, the church must always understand and know its primary mission: to spread the Gospel and be a witness for Christ in our congregations, to our neighbors, and communities where we reside. We must reflect evidence of love, peace, joy, and unity. Our biblical teaching must be consistent and clear. Everything we do must honor God and be within His will for the church. We should never get so caught up in the administrative ministry that we ignore the real issues. Yet in prayer to God, we can ensure divine planning and strategizing for our spiritual and numerical growth as we plant and water knowing God always provides the increase. As the A.M.E. Church continues to decline in members, the church of God it is critical, and we need to focus on evangelism in our communities and share the word of God.

Immigrants are part of our community. For almost 20 years, people around the world have celebrated World Refugee Day on June 20. Four percent of Kentucky’s population is comprised of immigrants. Most immigrants in Kentucky live in the Lexington and Louisville areas.

Our Zion has congregations on every continent, yet most of our congregations in the United States are predominately African American. Kentucky is a refuge state. As immigrants leave these continents the church has an opportunity to come along-side them, making their transition smoother. The church must reach out to the immigrants entering Kentucky to embrace

² In a culture where churches are expected to grow into mega churches, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is lost. “The church’s job is not to grow, thrive, or even survive. Suttle, Tim. Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture.2014.

them and make newcomers welcome in our local congregations. We must welcome and care for the stranger; both foreign and domestic.

African Methodism's impact

We are anchored in God and African Methodism is anchored in rich Christian history. African Methodism is declared the first independent Protestant denomination founded by black people, birthed out of racism, destined to fight against social injustice and stand up for civil and human rights. We are a people not silenced by threats, but vocal through political engagement and social improvement for all minorities.

African Methodism has something worth propagating and has something worth learning from. African Methodism is so important that propagation to other contexts in its current version is necessary. Methodists thought that way in the Second Great Awakening. Richard Allen and those who followed him thought in the same vein. We must pick up the banner and run with it.

We must move from normalcy. We are a royal nation, a peculiar people. We are filled with the Spirit. Led by the Spirit. The Spirit is ever-present.

Summary

Yes, we have churches that are dying and in hospice care, but there are areas where we have not explored; have not witnessed. We cannot stop being the church. As our congregations' growth ebb and flow, we must continue to explore new territory, seek out places as our fore-parents did, planting churches where people gather. The churches in Kentucky were planted where the populations of people were. In rural eastern Kentucky the churches were planted in the areas where coal miners worked. The coal mines are gone, and many people moved away because of lack of employment. Many churches in those areas closed. The church is more than a

building. The church is the people. When one church closes, the members who remain gather and join other churches. When we trace our history, we see this happen time and time again. African Methodists may plant new churches, merge churches, but never give up the mission of the church.

Humbly submitted,

Reverends

Louise Spencer
Kent Burley
Joshua Hale
Linda R. Jackson
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Sisters

Betty Cook
Rose Embry
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Brothers

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