

## HERSTORY OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY IN AFRICAN METHODISM

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This presentation covers the evolution of leadership roles for Protestant women with specific reference to African Methodist churches.

Although the Second Great Awakening in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century created greater opportunities for women to be involved in worship, social norms and Biblical injunctions were generally used in antebellum society to justify the exclusion of women from public roles or offices in Protestant churches. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women began moving into new arenas of lay leadership in home and foreign missions as well as religious education but barriers to ordained ministry remained. Denominations with free church polity and religious groups of a more charismatic nature were more amenable than the more hierarchical churches to permitting new forms of female leadership.

Antoinette L. Brown became the first American woman to be fully admitted to the Christian ministry when she was ordained in 1853 to serve the Congregational Church at South Butler, New York.

Anna Howard Shaw was the first Methodist woman to be ordained. After being denied ordination by the Methodist Episcopal Church Conference in 1880, she was ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church but was so disillusioned she did not remain active in the church. It was not until 1924 that the Methodist Episcopal Church began granting women ordination as local preachers.

Among the African Methodist denominations<sup>1</sup>, the AMEZ Church was the first to ordain a woman. Julia A.J. Foote was ordained a deacon in the New York Conference in 1894 and an elder in 1900. Mary J. Small was ordained a deacon in the Philadelphia/Baltimore Conference in 1895 and an elder in 1898. The AME and CME Churches did not begin to ordain women until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Women with callings to ministry emerged soon after the inception of the AMEC in 1787.

- Jarena Lee, the first preaching woman, was allowed by Richard Allen to preach and was licensed but was refused ordination.
- Sophie Murray and Elizabeth Cole of Bethel, Baltimore
- Rachel Evans of New Jersey
- Harriet Felson Taylor of Union Bethel in Washington

Both women and men sought to persuade the church to recognize the call of women to the preaching ministry.

- An 1844 petition to the General Conference to license women was rejected
- In 1848 the Daughters of Zion women's society petitioned the General Conference and faced opposition led by Bishop Daniel Payne
- In 1852 Bishop Paul Quinn tried unsuccessfully to get a resolution approved to license women
- In 1864 the General Conference let a resolution to license women die

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<sup>1</sup> African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), and Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Churches.

- In 1885 In 1885 Bishop Henry McNeal Turner ordained Sarah A. Hughes a deacon in the North Carolina Conference but this was overturned by the 1888 General Conference

Not until 1888 did the AMEC General Conference approve the licensing of women as local preachers but it prohibited them being assigned and defined their role as evangelists.

The AMEC began ordaining women as local deacon in 1948 and local elder in 1956 but not until 1960 were women ordained to itinerant orders. [Rev. Gertrude Bryant of Louisville in the 13<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District who was ordained in 1956 into her 80's carried around with her a 1952 Disciple which read: "Women are included in the provisions for the ordination of local deacon. In no case shall they (women) be given itinerant relationship."]

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the African Methodist Churches established the first official position for women with the creation of the office of stewardess for women to assist the pastor and male stewards and class leaders in certain capacities, as well as to attend to females in the church. This was done by the AMEC in 1868.

The revival of the Early Church order of deaconess created an additional arena of lay service for Protestant women. In 1900 the AME General Conference set up the office of deaconess as a position of special status for women to perform full-time church and charitable work.

Women also served as exhorters, missionaries, and evangelists. In 1878 the Women's Parent Mite Missionary Society was organized, and in 1896 the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society was established.

However, these were structural alternatives to ordination that kept women in a subordinate role subject to strict male control and authority, and did not allow for full inclusion and equity in the leadership of the church.

Some women left the church for denomination that accepted their calling. For example, Rebecca Cox Jackson joined the Shakers.

Though women today are ordained for the deaconate and elder's orders and comprise approximately 20% of the clergy across the Connection, we still experience opposition, denial of our gifts for ministry, and questioning of the validity of our calling.

The reality that women in ministry face is the glass ceiling that limits our upward mobility in the church. Female pastors have demonstrated their capability for church building and church growth. However, most women are assigned to small to medium size churches. Location at a church that pays a smaller budget excludes women from certain positions such as preaching or leading worships at some events, membership on the finance committee, election as General Conference delegate/alternate, membership on the General Board and major commissions.

WIM are engaged in a diversity of ministries – teaching, chaplaincy, counseling, evangelism, etc. – but in a hierarchical clerical setting, opportunities for leadership are generally given to pastors of larger churches who are predominantly men.

The first female Presiding Elder in the AMEC, Rev. Dorothy Morris of the Guyana Conference (16<sup>th</sup> District) was appointed in 1973 by Bishop Frederick H. Talbot. The first in the U.S., Rev. Cornelia Wright of the West Virginia Annual Conference (3<sup>rd</sup> District) was appointed by Bishop Vinton R. Anderson in 1983. The first on the African continent, Rev. Esther Ntinda of the Northeast Zambia Conference (17<sup>th</sup> District), was appointed by Bishop Richard A. Chappelle in 1990. To date, a total of some 30 appointments have been made, and approximately 19 women actively serve as Presiding Elders.

Only until recently female candidates for Bishop been taken seriously on a connectional level. Increasing acceptance of the fact that it was time for women to sit on the Bench of Bishops led to the herstoric election of Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie in 2000, and of Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry and Bishop Sarah Francis Davis in 2004.

With our struggles and accomplishments, we can celebrate the increasing number of women in ministry in the AMEC, the diversities of ministries which they are performing, the number of women clergy holding Annual Conference offices such as Dean of the Board of Examiners, the growing number of female Presiding Elders, the seating of women in the General Board, and the greater presence of women in the Episcopal District delegations to the General Conference.

### HERSTORY AND OBJECTIVES OF AME/WIM

Efforts over the past two decades to affirm the role and equality of women in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and to address the need for eliminating discrimination and injustices based on gender were initiated at the 1976 General Conference held in Atlanta, Georgia when a position paper written by Rev. Dr. Jacquelyn Grant was presented on the status of women, and the female ministers of the A.M.E. Church met to voice their concerns about the lack both of representative participation in the governing process of the Church and of incentives for females to enter A.M.E. ministry.

When a delegation of women (including Reverends Grant, Nurjhan Govan, Alyson Browne Johnson, Mary Ann Bellinger, and Jeane B. Williams) took these issues before the 1977 session of the Council of Bishops, held in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Council reaffirmed its interest in women's concerns and appointed Bishops John Hurst Adams and Frank Madison Reid, Jr. to work with the Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Ministry as advisors. Between 1977 and 1980 the Committee, headed by Rev. Dr. Jacquelyn Grant and then Rev. Jeane B. Williams as Acting Chairperson, conducted research on the herstory of women in ministry in the A.M.E. Church and compiled information on the location of women across the Connection.

Women in ministry representing eight episcopal districts met at the site of the 1980 General Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Rev. Jeane B. Williams of the First Episcopal District was elected Chairperson of a restructured Steering Committee which began working with the Bishops to have coordinators appointed to represent the female clergy in their episcopal districts as well as compiled a directory of women in ministry and planned a conference of clergywomen in the AME Church in Atlanta, Georgia in January 1983. Rev. Williams provided leadership until 1984 with oversight assigned to Bishop Vinton R. Anderson, Chairperson of the Commission on Liturgy and Worship.

Rev. Williams was succeeded by Rev. Carolyn Tyler Guidry (now Presiding Elder) of the Fifth Episcopal District who served from 1984 to 1988 under the leadership of Bishop Frederick H. Talbot, Chairperson of the Commission on Ministry and Recruitment. During her term of office a connectional conference was held in Atlanta, Georgia in January 1986, the directory was updated, and drafting of the bylaws and policy for AME/WIM was initiated.

Rev. Lillian Frier Webb of the First Episcopal District was elected President of the Connectional AME/WIM organization in 1988 and served until 1996.

The General Board at its 1989 meeting in Houston, Texas voted to establish a 19-member Commission on Women in Ministry and appointed Bishop Robert Thomas, Jr. as Chairperson. In 1992 at Orlando, Florida, the 44th Session of the General Conference took the herstoric step

of accepting the resolution to admit the Commission on Women in Ministry. Bishop McKinley Young was assigned as Chairperson for the 1992-1996 Quadrennium.

The by-laws governing the Connectional AME/WIM were also adopted by the General Conference at that time, thereby empowering the organization to pursue the following objectives:

1. To recognize and support women in ministry as an integral part of the AME Church.
2. To raise the consciousness of the A.M.E. Church on women's issues.
3. To address the issue of sexism in the A.M.E. Church.
4. To address issue of opportunities for women in ministry in the A.M.E. Church.
5. To support women in the pastoral ministry.
6. To affirm specialized ministries, for example: chaplaincy, writing, teaching, counseling, research, prison, youth, geriatric, singles, street, health care, family/life relations, music, homeless, HIV/AIDS and religious education ministries.
7. To encourage academic training for ministry.
8. To sponsor a connectional conference at least once during each quadrennium.
9. To support and provide assistance and outreach to women in ministry in the Fourteenth through Twentieth Episcopal Districts.
10. To compile a complete and accurate record of all women in ministry in the A.M.E. Church.

Subsequently, efforts were focused on strengthening the organization of AME/WIM in the Episcopal Districts, gathering data on women across the Connection for the updated publication of a directory of women in ministry, and sponsoring two conferences in Atlanta in January 1991 and January 1994. In addition, several publications were prepared for sale, including a reprint of the journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, the first preaching women of the AME Church, as well as a documentary herstory of AME/WIM from 1976-1992. Publication of a newsletter, *Bricks Without Straw*, began, and work was initiated on documenting the stories of pioneer women in ministry in a video production.

On June 30, 1996 in Louisville, Kentucky at the seat of the 45th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference, Rev. Sandra Smith Blair of the Fifth Episcopal District was elected to give leadership to the organization until the 46th Quadrennial Session in the year 2000. Bishop C. Garnett Henning, Sr., Presiding Prelate of the Nineteenth Episcopal District, was assigned as Chairperson of the Commission on Women in Ministry for the 1996-2000 Quadrennium.

On July 9, 2000 in Cincinnati, Ohio at the seat of the 46<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Session of the General Conference, Rev. Blair was reelected to serve until 2004. At that herstoric General Conference, Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie was elected the first female Bishop of the A.M.E. Church and assigned as Chairperson of the Commission on Women In Ministry for the 2000-2004 Quadrennium.

During Rev. Blair's term of office a number of initiatives were taken to strengthen and expand the organization. The bylaws were revised; the offices of Herstoriographer and Overseas Coordination for Southern Africa were established; the establishment of seminary campus chapters was approved; a new dues system was established for the global districts; activities and reporting were structured programmatically and by committees; reporting forms were restructured; legislation was approved to include the Connectional President in the *Book of Doctrine and Discipline* as a voting member of the General Conference; the Jacquelyn Grant Sister to Sister Fund was established to assist women in ministry from the global districts; the Jarena Lee Appreciation Award Breakfast was launched to pay tribute to individuals for their support of AME/WIM; the service of installation of connectional officers elected for the

quadrennium was scheduled at the site of the annual meeting of the General Board/Bishops' Council; in each quadrennium a connectional conference was held with a closing Ecumenical Heritage Breakfast to honor trailblazing women in ministry in the AME Church and other denominations; a commemorative service was held at Mt. Pisgah AME Church in Lawnside, NJ, the burial place of Jarena Lee, and a framed sketch of her was presented to the church as a permanent memorial; an official AME/WIM hymn was commissioned; an AME/WIM kente stole was created; and membership was established with the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA/Women In Ministry. In addition, AME/WIM took leadership in developing legislation revising the AME Church Clergy Misconduct Policy and including it in the *Book of Doctrine and Discipline*.

On July 4, 2004 in Indianapolis, Indiana at the seat of the 47<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Session of the General Conference, Rev. Dr. Lois A. Poag-Ray of the Second Episcopal District was elected Connectional President of AME/WIM. This General Conference was also an herstoric Conference that elected not one but two women to the Bench of Bishops – Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry and Bishop Sarah Frances Davis. Bishop Davis was assigned as Chairperson of the Commission on Women in Ministry for the 2004-2008 Quadrennium.

The other officers elected to the Executive Board were: First Vice-President, Rev. Delphine L. Vasser (10<sup>th</sup> District); Second Vice-President, Rev. Kimberly L. Dethrage (1<sup>st</sup> District); Third Vice-President, Rev. Diane Burl (12<sup>th</sup> District); General Secretary, Rev. Aleta Pearson (12<sup>th</sup> District); Corresponding Secretary, Rev. Carolyn Davis (7<sup>th</sup> District); Financial Secretary, Rev. Pamela Mason (5<sup>th</sup> District); Treasurer, Rev. Deloris Prioleau (2<sup>nd</sup> District); Worship Director, Rev. Faith Maycock (11<sup>th</sup> District); and Herstoriographer, Rev. Barbara J. Barbour (2<sup>nd</sup> District).

In addition to the elected officers, Rev. Pretty Masuku Harrison (19<sup>th</sup> District) serves as Coordinator for Central and Southern Africa, providing liaison with the five Episcopal District Presidents in the region. Three consultants to the Executive Board also assist with the work of AME/WIM. Rev. Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Callaway Professor of Systematic Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia; Rev. Dr. Teresa L. Fry Brown, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Emory University, Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia; and Rev. Sandra Smith Blair, Immediate Past President.