

THE BICENTENNIAL OF
THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
&
THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

1787 - 1987

Early AME Church

To many the story of Richard Allen as the founder of African Methodism is familiar. For many years Richard Allen and other Negroes had been worshipping in St. George's Church in Philadelphia, but as their numbers increased, they were more or less welcome. They were asked to sit only in certain seats, and finally assigned to the gallery. The climax was reached when one was pulled from his knees while at prayer, and ordered to take the seat assigned. They were then convinced that in order to have peaceful undisturbed worship they must have a separate church; so in the year 1787 Richard Allen and his friends left St. George's. Richard Allen and Absolon Jones were the leaders, and they debated about which form of service they should use. Absolon Jones favored the quiet dignified form of the Episcopal Church, while Richard Allen definitely felt the Methodist form would be better suited to the emotional nature of his people. After much thought and prayer he settled on Methodism. Their first church was in a blacksmith shop, but five years later, 1792, Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia was dedicated, and in 1800 Richard Allen was ordained the first Negro minister in this country.

In 1816, the first Convention of the A.M.E. Churches, which was really the first General Conference, was held in Philadelphia. At this session, Richard Allen was elected and consecrated Bishop - the first of the Negro race.

With regard to our 1787 United States Constitution, there was a compromise by counting Black Americans, then slaves, as three-fifths of a person. Women were denied the vote. There was no provision for the federal government to abide by a budget.

The "three-fifths rule" was amended out of existence by the 14th Amendment. Women were given full voting rights by the 19th Amendment. We are still trying to balance the federal budget.

Rev. Fred A. Lucas, pastor of the Bridge Street A.M.E. Church, Brooklyn, N.Y. said: "Black churches collectively own more land, housing, kitchens, parking lots, classroom space and public assembly halls than any other institution in the black community!!" "The church has the land, the money, and the people. The pastor speaks to more black people at 11 a.m. on Sunday than the leaders of any other institution in the black community."

The year of 1987 marks the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the A.M.E. (Church) denomination. The church's celebration of two centuries of "liberating & reconciling people" was formally kicked off February 8, A.M.E. Founders Day, in Philadelphia and will culminate in a closing ceremony to be held in Fort Worth, Texas in July 1988.

The oldest black institution in America, the denomination numbers over 8,000 churches in 29 countries with a total membership of about 2.5 million people. Although the majority of these churches are located in the U. S. A. there are over 2,000 AME churches in Africa, Canada, England and the Caribbean.

"Among America's black churches, the A. M. E. denomination has the greatest potential to improve the economic and social conditions of black people" asserts Rev. Richard F. Norris of Philadelphia's Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, the denomination's mother church.

The founding of the A.M.E. Church in 1787 is closely related to the establishment of the U. S. Constitution, which shares its birth year. The emergence of the denomination was more the result of social protest against the racism practiced by established white christian churches than the culmination of a theological movement. "The year the Constitution was being ratified, black men and women were marching out of Philadelphia's St. George Methodist Episcopal Church because the Constitution movement and document did not include them" says Lucas.

The black members of St. George's congregation, including their minister, Richard Allen, were forced to worship in the balcony of the church, and were prohibited from being ordained or receiving Holy Communion. After being blocked from praying at the front of the church on a Sunday in November 1787, Allen and another minister, Absolon Jones, broke with St. George and established the A.M.E. Church.

Since then the church has wielded considerable clout, not the least of which is economic. According to Dr. Joseph McKinney, national treasurer of the A.M.E. Church, the denomination employs 90 people and manages an initial budget of 5.8 million at its national headquarters in Washington, D. C.

Although a large portion of this budget is used to support the programs of the church's member institutions, these institutions are expected to at least match the funds thru local fund raising efforts. The national office of the A.M.E. Church manages the \$2.5 million budget of the Congress of National Black Churches (CNBC), an organization that counts institutions such as the United Church of Christ and the National Baptist Convention among its members.

A. M. E. Churches have a tremendous potential for pooling resources, much of which have been directed at problems of concern to the black community, including the need for affordable housing, and assistance for the poor and elderly.

The A. M. E. Church has placed a great emphasis on education, devoting 38% of its budget to its learning institutions. The church has established a dozen colleges, including Ohio's Wilberforce University and Atlanta's Morris Brown College. The quality of primary and secondary education has been targeted by churches such as the Allen A.M.E. in Queens, N.Y. which runs a school that includes kindergarten through the eighth grade. Last November Rev. Floyd H. Flake, pastor of that church, became the greatest symbol of the denomination's political influence when he made a successful bid for Congress. Flake and Lucas are counted among the new generation of influential religious leaders in New York.

In Philadelphia, A.M.E. churches are establishing a collective banking policy in order to consolidate scores of accounts into one or two banks to achieve a greater concentration of economic power. Much more can and must be done. The A.M.E. Church is highly respected in World Christendom. The black church still remains the most vital resource the black community has to find ways to achieve its potential.

Resource: Wayne J. Dawkins
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