

## Itinerant “HER”STORY

The AME church which in centuries past had been at the forefront of advocating for social and political justice on behalf of disenfranchised black people was slow in making steps toward addressing gender injustices within its own ranks.

Among the African Methodist denominations, 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 20th century.**

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

**JARENA LEE** experienced her conversion in 1804, at twenty-one years old, under the preach of then Reverend Richard Allen.

Years later, after marrying, having several children, and being widowed Lee announced her call to preach. But Bishop Allen, unwilling to ordain Lee, pacified this relentless woman who sought him out every chance **she got by giving her papers in 1817 (she was licensed)** which "authorized" her to preach, but **didn't ordain** her to preach.

Other women with the calling who emerged about this time were...

- 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.

**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 because of the opposition of many male ministers who claimed that the ordination of women was unbiblical.

**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 deacons in 1948 and local elder in 1956** but not until **1960 were women ordained to itinerant orders.**

*[Rev. Gertrude Bryant of Louisville in the 13th Episcopal District who was ordained in 1956 into her 80's carried around with her a 1952 Discipline 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 19th 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**.

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.

The revival of the Early Church order of deaconess created an additional arena of lay service for Protestant women.

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.

Women in Ministry (WIM) are engaged in a diversity of ministries – teaching, chaplaincy, counseling, membership on the General Board and major commissions.

**The first female Presiding Elder** in the AMEC, Reverend Dorothy Morris of the Guyana Conference (16th District) was appointed in **1973** by Bishop Frederick H. Talbot.

**The first female Presiding Elder in the U.S.**, Reverend Cornelia Wright of the West Virginia Annual Conference (3rd District) was appointed by Bishop Vinton R. Anderson **in 1983**.

The first female Presiding Elder on the African continent, Reverend Esther Ntinda of the Northeast Zambia Conference (17th District), was appointed by Bishop Richard A. Chappelle in **1990**.

To date, a total of some 30+ appointments have been made, and approximately 20 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 African Methodist Episcopal Church!