

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ELEVENTH EPISCOPAL DISTRICT LAY ORGANIZATION

Presented by

Phillis Filer

East Conference Director of Lay Activities

A. M. E. Church

- ▣ The African Methodist Episcopal Church has a unique and glorious history. It was unique in that it is the first major religious denomination in the Western World that had its origin over sociological and theological beliefs and differences.
- ▣ It rejected the negative theological interpretations which rendered persons of African descent second class citizens. There was a theological declaration that God is God all the time and for every body.
- ▣ The church was born in protest against slavery – against dehumanization of African people, brought to the American continent as labor.
- ▣ The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed.
- ▣ At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy.

History of the Lay Organization

The Lay Organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the newest components in our church relative to our total years of existence. The Lay Organization, like many in our church, at any early age, did not keep official records that would serve as reference material.

Stages of the Lay Organization

- ▣ In 1912, the "Organized Lay Movement" also known as the "Laymen's Missionary Movement" started at the General Conference in Kansas City, Missouri with **Professor Charles H. Johnson** of Wilberforce as the **President**.
- ▣ This organization was short lived and at the 1916 General Conference, not being satisfied with the progress of the Laymen's Missionary Movement, the Connectional Lay College was organized with **Professor Carl V. Roman**, a noted Greek Scholar at Fisk University, as **President**.

Drawbacks

- ▣ This organization met only once in four years at the seat of the General Conference.
- ▣ Only delegates to that Conference were members.
- ▣ Organization was composed of a constantly changing membership or personnel, and therefore could not do a good job of mobilizing the laity for effective service in the church
- ▣ Due to changes in membership and no funds, the Organization did not reach the local lay members that needed the information.

Connectional Lay Organization

- ▣ Since Dr. Roman was not elected to the General Conference in **1920**, the Lay College proceeded to elect a new **president**, **Mr. Malone** of the Poro College which was aimed at educating the Black community of St. Louis. He served until 1924.
- ▣ In 1924, **Dr. R.R. Williams** of Tampa, Florida, was elected. Dr. Williams served as **president** until the General Conference in 1936.

Connectional Lay Organization

- ▣ In 1936, **Attorney Herbert L. Dudley** was elected. Attorney Dudley remained president until he retired in 1959
- ▣ In 1959, **Mr. J.D. Williams** of Kansas City, Missouri was elected. Because the eight-year term law had not been instated, Mr. J.D. Williams served until the 19th Biennial Session in 1985 which was held in Nashville, Tennessee.

Connectional Lay Organization

- ▣ In 1985, **Dr. Katheryn Brown** became the first female president of the Connectional Lay Organization.
- ▣ In 1993, at the 23rd Biennial Session in Columbus, Ohio, **Mr. James L. Williams** of Jacksonville, Florida became the eighth president of the Connectional Lay Organization.
- ▣ At the 27th Biennial Session, **Mr. Arthur D. Brown** of Columbus, Ohio was elected president.

Connectional Lay Organization

- ▣ In 2003 at the 28th Biennial Session **Mr. Jesse L. Burns, Jr.**, of Gainesville, Florida was appointed President due to the untimely death of President Brown.
- ▣ In 2005 at the 29th Biennial Session in Houston, Texas, **Mr. Jesse L. Burns, Jr.**, Gainesville, Florida, was elevated as the 10th elected President.

Connectional Lay Organization

- ▣ In 2009, at the 31st Biennial Session in Little, Rock Arkansas, **Dr. Willie C. Glover**, Columbus, Ohio, was elected as the 11th President of the Connectional Lay Organization.
- ▣ In 2013, at the 32nd Biennial Session in Washington, D. C., **Dr. Willie C. Glover** was re-elected as President of the Connectional Lay Organization.

- ▣ It was discovered early in the history of the Lay College that due to the structure that the Organization could not provide laity for effective service in the church, and so the laymen in Little Rock, Arkansas, in **1946, abolished the old Lay College** which met every four years at the seat of the General Conference with a constantly changing membership, and **organized the Connectional Lay Organization** on Episcopal District levels down through the Conferences to the local units and churches.

Ongoing Struggle

- ▣ The Connectional Lay meets biennially and has a permanent membership that reaches down to the grass root level of the laity. It has held biennial meetings since 1949 when it was held in Chicago. There are those who think that the organized lay movement just recently came into existence when the General Conference of 1948 passed a law giving laymen the right to organize in the local church and make the lay organization a part of the organic law of African Methodism.

Ongoing Struggle

- ▣ This is the culmination of a long and gigantic struggle which had been waged by a large number of courageous laymen over the years. It is noteworthy to observe that some of the most significant, progressive and constructive legislation enacted by the various General Conferences of our church has taken place since the laymen have acquired equal representation.

Legislative Changes

- ❑ In 1928, legislation giving laymen equal representation in the General Conference was enacted by the General Conference which met at Chicago, Illinois. Up to that time, lay representation was confined to three (3) laymen from each Annual Conference.
- ❑ In 1932, at the General Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio, laymen were granted the right to serve on the Episcopal Committee. However, Bishop Flipper ruled at the succeeding General Conference in 1936 in New York City that the right to serve on the Episcopal Committee by the laity was an act passed by the General Conference of 1932 and applied only to that General Conference.
- ❑ So in 1936 we had to renew the fight previously made in Cleveland to establish the right of laymen to serve permanently in equal numbers on the Episcopal Committee. The General Conference of 1936 definitely and permanently established the right of laymen to serve in equal numbers on the Episcopal Committee.

Legislative Changes

- ❑ In 1940, in Detroit, Michigan, legislation gave the laymen equal representation in the Annual Conference.
- ❑ In 1944, the laymen sought equal representation on all Departmental Boards. The most significant achievement at the 1944 General Conference was the weight and influence thrown by the Lay Organization behind the legislation which created a Pension Department in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.
- ❑ There are Episcopal District Lay Organizations organized in every Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Continental United States starting with the first Episcopal District.

The Organized Lay Today

- ▣ Today, the organized lay movement in the African Methodist Episcopal Church operates as a vital force for good because it is free, independent and unmotivated by any desire, motive or purpose other than the general welfare of African Methodism.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ From its inception in the A.M.E. Church in 1912, the Lay Organization has had to forge its way through the seas of resistance and discouragement. Buffered by sheer determination it was nearly seventy years ago, in 1945, at the seat of the South Florida Annual Conference, that the Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Organization had its beginning.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ During the 1944 General Conference convened in Philadelphia, Delegate E. M. Blocker, a steward of Greater Bethel A. M. E. Church in Miami, Florida attended the Laymen's Connectional meeting. It was this meeting that infused him with ideas and principles regarding the laity, and he was inspired to organize the Lay League in the Eleventh Episcopal District.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ Under Brother Blocker's leadership, the Laymen met and organized the Miami District Laymen League at Greater Bethel A. M. E. Church. Other laymen were encouraged to participate, and the Lay movement began to gain momentum as Brother Blocker was invited to hold organizational meetings throughout the South Florida area.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ News of the organizational meetings led by Brother Blocker and laymen of the North Miami and the West Palm Beach districts reached Bishop H. Y. Tookes, the Presiding Bishop of the Eleventh Episcopal District. Bishop Tookes directed Reverend H. W. Fayson and Reverend S. A. Cousin not to allow Laymen to hold meetings in churches.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ The Laymen movement continued to grow, and finally, the message was received in other parts of the state. In the East Florida Conference, Brother J. L. Williams, Sr. of St. Paul A. M. E. Church, Jacksonville called together Laymen who organized the Laymen Alliance Incorporation of the A. M. E. Church.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ In 1945, during the South Florida Annual Conference in Cocoa, Florida, Bishop Tookes deciding it was better to have laymen meet and organize properly appointed Dr. A. J. White of St. Paul A. M. E. Church in Tampa, State Lay President and Brother E. M. Blocker president of the South Florida Conference.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ Laymen were not satisfied with the appointed organizational structure and expressed to the Bishop the desire to have an elected president as dictated by law. The Bishop denied them this privilege, and amid much unrest, they proceeded to contact the General Church. In 1948, newly assigned Bishop John Andrew Gregg called his first district meeting at Edward Waters College, and the first item on his agenda was to call a special meeting to elect a president of the laity.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ On November 2, 1948, the Laymen's League met at St. Mark A. M. E. Church in Orlando. At this meeting, Professor E. M. Blocker became the first elected Lay president of the Laymen League of the Eleventh Episcopal District and remained as such until 1953 when he received the Divine Call to the ministry.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ Felix White of Atlantic Beach was elected as the second Episcopal President in 1953; Selmo Bradley of Quincy, FL was elected as the third president and served from 1971 to 1984. The fourth Episcopal Lay President James L. Williams, Jr. from Jacksonville, FL served from 1984 until 1992. Jesse L. Burns of Bradenton, FL succeeded Williams as president from 1992 to 2000.

Eleventh Episcopal District Lay Origin

- ▣ In 2000, the dawn of a new century and new millennium, the laity elected Marian Bacon White of West Palm Beach, the first and to date the only woman to lead the Episcopal Lay Organization. She presided from 2000 to 2008, when current president, number seven, Charlie Nichols was elected.

Restructure

In November 2004 at the Bishop's Planning Meeting the Eleventh Episcopal District underwent its first Restructure with the Conference lines being drawn which would affect all of the Conferences:

- ▣ Florida Conference (18 Counties-4 Districts)
 - Pensacola District
 - Marianna District
 - Quincy District
 - Tallahassee District

Restructure

- ▣ East Conference (17 Counties- 4 Districts)
 - Alachua-Suwannee District
 - North Jacksonville District
 - Central Jacksonville District
 - South Jacksonville District
- ▣ Central Conference (11 Counties – 3 Districts)
 - Daytona District
 - North Orlando District
 - Orlando District

Restructure

- ▣ West Coast Conference (8 Counties – 3 Districts)
 - St. Petersburg District
 - Tampa District
 - Lakeland District
- ▣ South Conference (13 Counties-3 Districts)
 - North District
 - Central District
 - South District

Restructure

- ▣ Bahamas Conference(2 Districts)
 - Nassau
 - Eleuthera

Organizational Meetings and elections were held as follows:

Central Conference – 1pm Dec. 11, 2004- Mt. Olive, Orlando

West Coast Conference – 4pm, Dec. 12, 2004, St. Luke, Tampa

LAY ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS

Organizational Meetings and elections were held as follows:

- ▣ Central Conference – 1pm Dec. 11, 2004- Mt. Olive, Orlando
- ▣ West Coast Conference – 4pm, Dec. 12, 2004, St. Luke, Tampa
- ▣ South Conference – 10am, Dec. 18, 2004, West Palm Beach
- ▣ Florida Conference – 10am, Jan. 8, 2005, St. James, Marianna
- ▣ East Conference – 10am, Jan. 22, 2005, Mt. Pisgah, Lake City

Second Restructuring

One year later the Eleventh Episcopal District under went more changes bringing the Conferences that had 4 Districts to 3 Districts:

- ▣ East Conference
 - Alachua-Central District
 - South District
 - Suwannee-North District

Second Restructuring

- ▣ Florida Conference
 - Pensacola District
 - Marianna/Quincy District
 - Tallahassee District

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for Laity and Clergy,
generation after generation of intentional
ministry holding on, shouting on, fighting on,
working on, praying on, fulfilling our great
commission in the A. M. E. Church.

AMEN.