

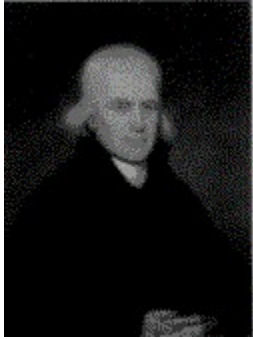
History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church



The AMEC grew out of the Free African Society (FAS) which **Richard Allen**, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. When officials at St. George's MEC pulled blacks off their knees while praying, FAS members discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans. Hence, these members of St. George's made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation. Although most wanted to affiliate with the Protestant Episcopal Church, Allen led a small group who resolved to remain Methodists. In 1794 Bethel AME was dedicated with Allen as pastor. To establish Bethel's independence from interfering white Methodists, Allen, a former Delaware slave, successfully sued in the Pennsylvania courts in 1807 and 1815 for the right of his congregation to exist as an independent institution. Because black Methodists in other middle Atlantic communities encountered racism and desired religious autonomy, Allen called them to meet in Philadelphia to form a new Wesleyan denomination, the AME.

The geographical spread of the AMEC prior to the Civil War was mainly restricted to the Northeast and Midwest. Major congregations were established in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Washington DC, Cincinnati, Chicago, Detroit, and other large cities. Numerous northern communities also gained a substantial AME presence. Remarkably, the slave states of Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, Louisiana, and, for a few years, South Carolina, became additional locations for AME congregations. The denomination reached the Pacific Coast in the early 1850's with churches in Stockton, Sacramento, San Francisco, and other places in California. Moreover, Bishop Morris Brown established the Canada Annual Conference.

The most significant era of denominational development occurred during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Oftentimes, with the permission of Union army officials AME clergy moved into the states



of the collapsing Confederacy to pull newly freed slaves into their denomination. "I Seek My Brethren," the title of an often repeated sermon that Theophilus G. Steward preached in South Carolina, became a clarion call to evangelize fellow blacks in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Texas, and many other parts of the south. Hence, in 1880 AME membership reached 400,000 because of its rapid spread below the Mason-Dixon line. When Bishop **Henry M. Turner** pushed African Methodism across the Atlantic into Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1891 and into South Africa in 1896, the AME now laid claim to adherents on two continents.



Preliminary Beginnings. As early as 1784, black Methodists had already begun to hold exclusive meetings. Whites allowed this practice to go on, but with the provision that "proper white persons" be chosen to oversee the meetings (Baldwin, 1983:26). They had the intention of minimizing discontent and curbing any possible ideas of insurrection, but the unfortunate result was that blacks felt they were being restrained religiously (Baldwin:26). So began a dissatisfaction in the hearts of many blacks with regards to the Methodist church (which was itself in a gestational period in 1784).



In February of 1786, Richard Allen, an African-American Methodist preacher, went to Philadelphia and began evangelizing to blacks there. He was accompanied in this endeavor by Absalom Jones and some other black members of Philadelphia's St. George's Methodist Church. The white congregation there was directly opposed to black assemblies; and accordingly, as before, they restricted the gatherings and also segregated worship service. At this time, Allen began to entertain the idea of forming a separate congregation for blacks, but his intentions met with considerable resistance -- in equal amounts from both blacks and whites.



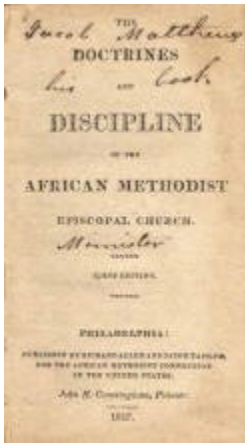
White Discontent. A majority of white Methodists wanted to see blacks obtain social freedom and equality, but for some reason did not feel this freedom should carry over into the ecclesiastical realm (Baldwin:26). Many saw black forms of worship as questionable at best, and perhaps feared that giving blacks leadership in church would have deleterious effects on their religion. Whites felt nervous and in some cases even threatened by many black members' unique approach to serving God. For instance, African-Americans often integrated several "unorthodox" behaviors into service such as call-





and-response, rhythmic movement and jumping, dance, weeping, groaning, and shouting (Baldwin:22-23).

Allen's Persistence. Allen moved forward with his idea of forming a separate group for blacks. (Still not a separate *church* at this point). On April 12, 1787, he decided to organize the "Free African Society" with the help of Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Ginnings. This was the first- ever independent black group in America, and it dedicated itself to abolishing slavery and providing help one to another between members -- helping blacks to help themselves (Murphy, et al, 1993:404).



The Last Straw. November 1787. It was becoming an accepted practice to not let blacks partake of communion until after white members of the congregation had done so first (Melton, 1996:330). While this insulted blacks, they were not roused enough to take action until a Sunday morning service at St. George's Methodist Church. Allen and some black companions were led to an upstairs section -- a new "special seating arrangement" designed to segregate the congregation. Some sat in the front rows, not having been told of the rule that blacks couldn't sit in the front -- even in their own upstairs section. During prayer, a sexton interrupted and told them they were in the wrong area of the gallery. At this point, the group left, and collectively decided that they would build their own church, specifically for black worship. The pastor of St. George's was against their idea, but they did manage to win the support of a few prominent people (Benjamin Rush, the physician, is one example). The dissidents began a fundraising effort, with the ultimate goal of constructing a church building of their own. This occurred even in the face of flagrant opposition from St. George's, and threats of excommunication from the church (Murphy, et al:7).



Affiliation. When the time came for the group to decide on a religious affiliation, they cast a vote. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones backed Methodism, but the rest (due to an understandable disillusionment with that denomination) preferred Episcopalianism. Allen and Jones both felt the need to have amicable ties with the larger Methodist Church -- despite the already existing hostility -- because, in Allen's own words, "No religious



sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodists; for the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people" (Murphy, et al:7).

Baldwin (1983:19) has identified several reasons to explain why Allen and many blacks in general were so attracted to Methodism during its early years. First, preachers of this denomination seemed genuinely concerned for the spiritual lives of blacks. Second, the preaching style was appealing to Africans, in that it included simple, easy-to-grasp concepts that were Bible-based, and presented them in an emotional way. Third, blacks were often impressed by the Methodist policy that allowed them to participate in ministry. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the Methodist church took an early, clear-cut stance in opposition to slavery.

Birth of AME/Struggle For Legitimacy and Autonomy.

In 1794, Allen personally purchased a blacksmith shop and converted it into a church. Bishop Frances Ashbury dedicated it as the Bethel Church. Allen was the informal leader of the congregation that met there, and in 1799 was ordained a deacon by Asbury, thereby becoming the first ordained black in the Methodist Church. Up until this point, the church had been forced to accept various visiting preachers. Officially, though, the congregation was served by whites (namely the elder of Philadelphia), and was denied any political voice in the denomination until 1863. Moreover, he couldn't perform the Eucharist, baptisms, or weddings (Murphy, et al:34). Another setback came when Bishop Asbury, who had once been a valued supporter of the movement, had a reversal in values. Asbury revoked his support, and after 1809, he decided not to ordain any more blacks as elders of Methodist churches. Further, he approved of revised versions of the *Discipline*, from which words against slavery were deleted (Murphy, et al:). Nevertheless, in the face of impediments, membership grew to 427 by 1795, and by this time the church had become a cornerstone of the black community (Murphy, et al:34). The sect grew at a steady rate in the North and Midwest up through 1865. Still to come, the time of greatest expansion -- after the Civil War, following which Southern blacks were allowed to identify themselves with religions of choice

(Melton:330).

While the AMEC is doctrinally Methodist, clergy, scholars, and lay persons have written important works which demonstrate the distinctive theology and praxis which have defined this Wesleyan body. Bishop Benjamin W. Arnett, in an address to the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, reminded the audience of the presence of blacks in the formation of Christianity. Bishop Benjamin T. Tanner wrote in 1895 in *The Color of Solomon – What?* that biblical scholars wrongly portrayed the son of David as a white man. In the post civil rights era theologians **James H. Cone**, Cecil W. Cone, and Jacqueline Grant who came out of the AME tradition critiqued Euro-centric Christianity and African American churches for their shortcomings in fully impacting the plight of those oppressed by racism, sexism, and economic disadvantage.

In the 1990s, the AME included over 2,000,000 members, 8000 ministers, and 7000 congregations in more than 30 nations in North and South America , Africa , and Europe . Twenty bishops and 12 general officers comprised the leadership of the denomination.