

# African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)

Principle Administrative Offices  
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Nashville, TN 37203

www.amecnet.org

## Statistics (1999)

Source: *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 2005*.

### In the United States:

2.5 million Members  
4174 Congregations  
77 Annual Conferences  
13 Episcopal Districts

### Worldwide:

113 Annual Conferences  
19 Episcopal Districts

### Ministry

14,428 Ministers (U.S.)

### Financial Data

Not available.

## Women in Ministry

In 2000, the AME elected its first female bishop, the Rev. Dr. Vashiti McKenzie. She became the bishop of the 18th Episcopal District which serves southern Africa. At present there are some 3000 ordained women.

## Brief History

The AME church is an offspring of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which by 1792 had a membership that was 40% black. However, racism was a difficult reality in most churches, with African Americans usually required to worship in the balcony, or otherwise segregated from white congregants for both worship and leadership. In Philadelphia, **The Free African Religious Society**, founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1787, recognized a need for people of African descent to have the opportunity to worship together. They continued to worship at St. George's Church until approximately five years later, when Absalom Jones and several other members were forced in the middle of prayer to leave the altar rail to move to the rear of the church. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones led their people out of the church and established the **African Church of Philadelphia**, soon after which Richard Allen purchased land and established the **Bethel African Church**. Several churches have since been erected on the site, and it is now fondly known as "Mother Bethel". In 1816, they united with several other African Methodist Churches around the country to form the **African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)**. The same year, Richard Allen was consecrated as its first Bishop by Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal Church. After the Civil War, the AME church expanded rapidly throughout the south.

## Organization

The AME is a **connectional church**. Its organization is similar to other Methodist denominations. The supreme unit of governance is the **General Conference**. It meets every four years, and is composed of the Bishops from the 19 **Episcopal Districts**, and an equal number of ordained and lay delegates who have been elected by each of the **Annual Conferences**. **Presiding Elders** lead each **Presiding Elder District**, which meets quarterly under the Presiding Elder's supervision.

There are two levels of ordained ministry: **Deacon**, and **Elder**. **Bishops** are Elders who have been elected and consecrated to preside over an Annual Conference. They are responsible for appointing pastors to churches, ordaining Deacons and Elders, organizing missions, and for administration and oversight. Itinerant Deacons and Elders are appointed for a period of one year to an individual congregation.

**1730s John and Charles Wesley** begin a reform movement of the Church of England that becomes known as **Methodism**. During the 1760s, several lay Methodist groups are formed in the American Colonies, which become **The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC)** in 1784.

**1787 Richard Allen, a former slave, and Absalom Jones form the Free African Religious Society in Philadelphia.**

**1792 Allen and Jones lead the African American members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia to walk out of the church after racist parishioners force several of them to stop praying at the altar rail.**

**1794 Richard Allen purchases land and moves an old blacksmith's shop which becomes the Bethel African Church, now called "Mother Bethel". His organization is called the African Church of Philadelphia.**

**1796 African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) forms in New York.**

**United Methodist Church (UMC)**

### Major Doctrines/Theology

The AME church broke away from what is now known as the United Methodist Church (UMC) because of discrimination based on race, rather than over doctrinal differences. Thus they retain a very similar theology and doctrine to other Methodist churches. The basis of that theology lies in the thought and practices of John and Charles Wesley. The two primary theological documents are the **Apostle's Creed** and the **Twenty-Five Articles of Religion**, based on the Church of England's 39 Articles of Religion, and sent by Wesley to the U.S. to guide the early Methodist Societies.

There is also a strong tradition and emphasis on education and self-help, which arose out of night classes originally taught by Richard Allen. In addition, publishing has been an important ministry: the **AME Book Concern** was the first publishing house owned by African Americans, and has had a major impact on the African American community.

### Worship and Sacrament

Worship is central to the life of the AME. Like the other Methodist churches, the AME church sets forth its worship practices in its *Doctrines and Disciplines*, and churches have a common hymnal. There are also special elements of the black worship experience such as that in the AME. According James Cone, an AME theologian,

*Black worship is essentially a spiritual experience of the truth of black life. The experience is spiritual because the people encounter the presence of the divine Spirit in their midst...*

*Call and response is an essential element of the black worship style. Black worship is a community happening wherein the people experience the truth of their lives as lived together by God's Spirit. There is no understanding of black worship apart from the presence of the Spirit...There is no understanding of black worship apart from the rhythm of the song and sermon, the passion of prayer and testimony, the ecstasy of the shout and conversion as the people project their humanity in the togetherness of the Spirit.*

**Preaching** and music are central to the worship experience, and congregants are expected to actively and vocally participate through **call and response**, **prayer**, **song**, **shout**, and **testimony**. **Conversion**, the accepting of the Holy Spirit and being born again, is another important element of the worship service. Two Sacraments are practiced—**Baptism** of infants and adults, and **Lord's Supper**.

### Ecumenical Involvement

The AME is a member of the **National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC)** and the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**.

They are members of the **Congress of National Black Churches**, an organization which seeks to promote unity between churches of eight African American denominations in the United States.

They are also active in the **World Methodist Council**, a body that seeks to bring together Methodist and Wesleyan churches around the world. In the U.S. they are engaged in ongoing dialogues with the **African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)**, the **Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME)**, and the **United Methodist Church (UMC)**.

### Important AME Resources

*Doctrines and Discipline of the A.M.E. Church*, (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2000).

*The Hymnal, African Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2000).

