

# African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)

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## Statistics 2003

Source: *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 2005*

### In the United States:

1,432,795 Members  
3236 Congregations

### Worldwide:

141 Annual Conferences  
12 Episcopal Districts

### Ministry

3827 Clergy  
3285 Serving Parishes

### Financial Data

Not Available

## Brief History

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) church emerged out of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC, which later became the United Methodist Church) as a response by African Americans to racism endemic in the church. In 1796 James Varick and about 30 other black members of the John Street Methodist Church in New York City petitioned Bishop Francis Asbury to hold separate meetings at the church. They did so until 1801, when they built their first church. They continued to be led by the white minister of the John Street Church until 1820, when they officially voted to leave the MEC and published their own *Book of Discipline*. At that time they chose not to join with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which had arisen in Philadelphia under similar circumstances, because of differences in organizational structure. In 1822, James Varick was elected as the first superintendent.

The church became known as the "freedom church" for its strong stands against slavery. Members include Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Katherine Harris, and Frederick Douglass.

## Organization

The AMEZ has an Episcopal structure similar to the other Methodist denominations. The primary organizational unit of the AMEZ is the Episcopal District, which is headed by a Presiding Bishop and governed by the Annual Conference, which meets yearly. There are 12 Episcopal Districts in the US. District Conferences are headed by an elder and meet quarterly. The denomination as a whole is governed by the General Conference, which meets every four years. Its decisions are published as the *Book of Discipline*.

The ordained ministry of the AMEZ consists of Deacons and Elders. Elders are required to itinerate, or go wherever they are sent by the Bishop to minister to a particular congregation. Bishops are Elders who have been elected 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.

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.

1796 James Varick and other members of the John Street Methodist Church in New York City withdraw due to racism and form their own congregation.

1787 Richard Allen and other members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia leave due to racism.

1801 The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) is chartered and "Mother Zion" church is built.

1820 Members officially vote to leave the MEC and operate under their own *Book of Discipline*.

African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)

United Methodist Church (UMC)

## Major Doctrines/Theology

Like the AME church, the AMEZ 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**, which is based on the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England, and which Wesley sent to the U.S. as a guide for the newly forming Methodist Societies.

Some important doctrines that are shared with other Methodist churches include:

- **Sanctification**—a doctrine of Christian perfection, believing that it is possible to order one's conduct such that one's spiritual nature dominates and one becomes sanctified, or entirely consecrated to the service of God.
- **Witness of the Spirit**—a belief that the Holy Spirit bears witness to those who have been born again in Christ.
- **Life of joy and obedience**—which follows repentance.
- **Christian experience**—the belief that one's religious life and expressions of joy should not be limited by secular customs.
- **Means of grace**—through regular participation in public worship, prayer, reading or hearing the Word, Lord's Supper, and following all other ordinances of the Lord.
- **Conversion**—considered an essential experience through which those who truly repent and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and become born again.

## Worship and Sacrament

Worship practices of the AMEZ church are authorized by the General Conference and set forth in the *AMEZ Doctrines and Disciplines*. In addition, AMEZ churches use the same hymnal. Ritual, dress, and decoration of the inside of the church is to be kept simple. Preaching is also to be kept simple. Rules for preaching were first adopted in the 1820 *Doctrines and Disciplines*:

*The best general method of preaching, is 1) to offer Christ; 2) to invite; 3) to build up; 4) to convince; and to do this, in some measure, in every sermon....There are some smaller advices...such as: be sure not to disappoint a congregation; begin at the time appointed;...choose the plainest text...take care not to ramble, but keep to the text...*

These types of rules are still followed today.

Music is extremely important in worship. **Spirituals**, songs born of the slave experience which were originally sung without instrumental accompaniment, have often been incorporated into worship. **Gospel choirs** are common elements of worship in AMEZ churches today.

The AMEZ church practices two Sacraments—**Baptism** of infants or adults, and Holy Communion or **Lord's Supper**. Only elders may administer these Sacraments. The AMEZ church also celebrates with simple ritual the important milestones of family and life. Children are welcomed as church members as early as the age of 5 or 6, and participate fully in the worship and sacramental life of the church.

## Ecumenical Involvement

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

In addition, the AMEZ is active in the **Congress of National Black Churches**, an organization which seeks to promote unity between churches of eight historically African American denominations.

They are also part of 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 Church (AME)**, the **Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME)**, and the **United Methodist Church (UMC)**.

Since 1986 the AMEZ has been involved in ongoing dialog with the CME. In July 2000, the AMEZ General Conference adopted a working

## Important AMEZ Resources

*The A.M.E. Zion Book of Doctrines and Discipline* (Charlotte, NC: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, —).

*The A.M.E. Zion Hymnal*, (Charlotte, NC: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, —).