

African Methodist Episcopal Church Christian Youth: Learning and Living the Faith

*A Preliminary Report compiled by Rev. Shonda Nicole Gladden, under the supervision of Rev. Dr. Reginald Blount,
submitted for inclusion in the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Funded Research Project
spearheaded by Katherine M. Douglass and Richard R. Osmer*

Statement of Purpose

The process of introducing, instilling and ensuring the perpetuity of faith relationship in the lives of children, youth and adolescents in the African Methodist Episcopal Church has evolved throughout the course of history. Various vehicles, from the Young People's Division to the Allen Christian Endeavor League, have been utilized to minister to the religious needs of this demographic. The purpose of this paper is to provide an abbreviated scope of the historic practices employed in the strengthening of youth discipleship. While care has been taken to be thorough in the presentation of these findings, given the scope of the project and the timeline for completion of these preliminary findings, it should be noted that this report is only a preliminary survey of research on the subject and may not include an exhaustive report of the historic means through which youth discipleship has been engaged within the denomination.

The method of investigation will be threefold and includes a summation of the following: 1) a brief history of the establishment and organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; 2) the role of children, youth and adolescents in the life of the Connectional AME Church to include a sampling of historic practices of cultivating, teaching, nurturing and maintaining youth development in the AME Church; and 3) confirmation equivalent practices and related publications in African Methodism.

A Brief History and the Organizational Structure of the A.M.E. Church

“In November, 1787, the colored people belonging to the Methodist Society in Philadelphia convened together in order to take into consideration the evils under which they labored, arising from the unkind treatment by their white brethren, who considered them a nuisance in the house of worship, and even pulled them off their knees while in the act of

prayer and ordered them back to their seats.”¹ It was this act of protest of disparate treatment at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that spurred the beginnings of The African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, having been relegated to prayer in a segregated section at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church, and desiring to establish a society for mutual aid for colored persons in Philadelphia, convened a group of colored men and women known as the Free African Society. This group was the beginning of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. With its beginnings firmly established as a result of divergent civil and ethical views, specifically racially exclusive worship practices, rather than theological differences, the African Methodist Episcopal Church historically bears much structural resemblance to the Methodist church out of which it was borne; particularly with regards to the polity and doctrinal organization of the church itself.

“The AME Church is a member of the family of Methodist Churches. Its founder and first active bishop, Richard Allen, felt that no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of his people as well as did Methodism with its emphasis upon the plain and simple gospel which the unlearned could understand, and its orderly system of rules and regulations which the underdeveloped needed.”²

Since the founders remained convinced of the doctrinal structure of Methodism, much of the organization of the denomination, adherence to the basic tenets of Christian faith, the catechetical processes, the organization of the local church, the means by which ministerial orders were assigned, etc., were all standardized into the newly organized denomination that would become known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Most significant to this project is the order for receiving new members, especially adolescents, youth and children.

¹ *The Book of Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 2012. Print. 3

² White, Andrew Nathaniel. *Know Your Church Manual: An Introductory Study of the Local Church for Officers and Members*. Nashville, TN: Division of Christian Education, African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1965. Print. 6.

The Historic Role of Children, Adolescents and Youth in the AME Church

“Children have as much of a place in the fellowship of the church as do adults. They should be brought to the church as infants, baptized, instructed in the Christian way, and, in due time, led into full membership as soon as it is practicable and they are able to understand the meaning of church membership.”³

Children, adolescents, and youth have always been important to the life of the Connectional AME Church. “The children in the Sunday School and in the homes are of infinite value in the sight of God. Each is a creature of destiny and in the breast of each there is a longing for the highest and the holiest, which desire can be satisfied only at the altars of the church.”⁴

Initial research suggests that during the 18th and 19th centuries, youth discipleship and development was relegated primarily to the Sunday School and ACE League. Through these structured entities, the AME Church formally trained youth for service to the denomination and the world. While the teachings of the Christian faith appear important during this era, it appears that there was an emphasis on preparing youth to be socially conscious, articulate and scholarly.

“Children born into Christian families have a valuable heritage which the church must help preserve. The church helps the family preserve this valuable heritage by encouraging parents to present their babies for baptism as soon after birth as it is convenient to do so...all baptized babies are preparatory members and should be recorded as such. They should be organized into nursery, primary, and junior groups for proper instruction and fellowship. These children if properly cared for, will, at the proper time be read into full membership.”⁵

Baptism is not only the first sacrament that is lifted as important relative to the formation of children in the AME Church, it is listed as the first rule for admission of all adult members into the church, per the Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church. The AME Hymnal and Book of Worship of the AME Church both have prescribed liturgy for the means of preparing and administering the sacrament to babies, youth and young adults.

³ White, 30.

⁴ Ibid, 32.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

“In order to meet the needs at every level of the Connection and in every local church, the AME Church shall implement strategies to train all members in: (1) Christian discipleship, (2) Christian leadership, (3) current teaching methods and materials, (4) the history and significance of the AME Church, (5) God’s biblical principles, and (6) social development to which all should be applied to daily living.”⁶ “In addition to spiritual guidance, the church provided opportunities for formal education. In the 18th and 19th centuries, churches often served as classroom and later contributed to the development of black colleges.”⁷

“In 1882, the Sunday School Department [of the AME Church] was organized. By it, all of the literature of the A.M.E. Sunday schools is published.”⁸ “Christian Education in the form of youth fellowship was organized by Rev. B. W. Arnett in 1900 as the Christian Endeavor Society. In 1904 the name became the Allen Christian Endeavor League led by Rev. Gregg.”⁹ According to the Centennial Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, published in 1906, at that time, the entity responsible for youth formation was called the Juvenile Department and at that time, the primary concern of youth development was preparing students to be scholars. The bulk of the Christian youth formation was through the establishment of schools for colored students who, as part of the youth formation practices, were groomed to matriculate through institutions of higher learning, many of which were also affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It is unclear as to the timing; it is however clear from current documentation that at some point the name Allen Christian Endeavor League was changed to the Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship and again to the Allen Christian Fellowship. The latter is the current terminology utilized in the most recently published denominational references, namely The 2012 Doctrine and Discipline of the AME

⁶ BOD, 13.

⁷ "Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church : Containing Principally the Biographies of the Men and Women, Both Ministers and Laymen, Whose Labors during a Hundred Years, Helped Make the A.M.E. Church What It Is : Also Short Historical Sketches ... and General Information about African Methodism and the Christian Church in General ..." *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church : Containing Principally the Biographies of the Men and Women, Both Ministers and Laymen, Whose Labors during a Hundred Years, Helped Make the A.M.E. Church What It Is : Also Short Historical Sketches ... and General Information about African Methodism and the Christian Church in General ...* N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2013.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.ameced.com/department.shtml>

Church and the 1965 (most recent) Know Your Church Manual. Since 1920, the iterations of youth formation, discipleship and fellowship have varied and some of the referent terminology has been employed differently at different points in published literature. Additional research is needed to determine the rationale in employing the varying terminology as well as to what degree the agency's functioning was altered as the terminology was modified. For the sake of clarity in this report, the referent terminology utilized will be that which is found in the 2012 edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church*.

In the 2012 edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, it is noted that the Department of Christian Education is responsible for developing “a comprehensive and unified program of Christian Education... lead[ing] to the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, the Christian Religion, and the Christian Church, and an implementation of these values in daily living.”¹⁰ Furthermore, “in cooperation with the Department of Publications, the [Department of Christian Education has] general oversight of the Church Schools of the AME Church” and is therefore responsible for “supervis[ing] the Young People’s Society of the AME Church known as the Allen Christian Fellowship.”¹¹ It is this entity that is charged with the responsibility of the furtherance of youth development in the denomination. The means by which said furtherance occurs varies from congregation to congregation, however, there are four specific teaching and training agencies that are part of the prescribed manners instituted by the denomination for facilitating youth discipleship and development: 1) The Sunday Church School, 2) The Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship, 3) The Young People’s Department of the Women’s Missionary Society (Y.P.D.), and 4) The Richard Allen Youth Council. It is The Sunday Church School that is responsible for teaching youth Christian faith and beliefs. The Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship, The Y.P.D. and

¹⁰ *BOD*, 167

¹¹ *BOD*, Page 167

The Richard Allen Youth Council are responsible for training young people by affording them the opportunity to put into practice the tenets taught during the Sunday Church School. In recent years, in addition to the aforementioned, many local churches have also implemented a formal youth ministry that may or may not incorporate the historic agencies previously mentioned. Although a further study of congregations for whom these trends is normative is a worthwhile and recommended addition to this project, this report will be limited to an examination of the four aforementioned teaching and training agencies.

The Sunday Church School

The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church provides recommendations for the local church organization of these activities. “The local church is responsible for helping youth to understand the nature and purpose of the church. It can do this best by freely involving youth in the worship, study, fellowship, and service activities which are regularly conducted.”¹² The local church Sunday Church School has historically served as the primary entry into personal growth and development of the total membership of the AME Church. The local church Sunday Church School program, utilizing curriculum produced through the denominational publishing house, provides the basic instructions for formation and development in the tenets of Christian faith.

Through the Sunday Church School, youth are instructed in the catechism of the church. The most frequently used catechism is a revised version of Turner’s Catechism. Prefaced dated 1884, this catechism¹³ is a question and short answer format, divided into two parts, Part I- Doctrines and Part II-Historical. It also includes an appendix detailing significant liturgical and denominational information including the full text of the General Confession,

¹² White, 34.

¹³ *The Catechism of the A.M.E. Church [electronic Resource]: (formerly "The Turner Catechism") Revised and Improved : Containing Brief Compendium of the History, Doctrines and Usages of the African Methodist Episcopal Church : Including a Series of Historical Questions on the Old and New Testaments, the Whole Being Designed for the Instruction of the Young : African Methodist Episcopal Church : Free Download & Streaming : Internet Archive.* N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2013.

The Apostle's Creed, The Beatitudes and The Lord's Prayer. Historically, in practice, the catechism is taught over the course of two to three months, wherein youth are instructed through rote memorization to recall the answers to each question. At the conclusion of the period of preparation, youth are presented to the congregation for public recitation of the answers. In addition to the catechism, youth are instructed through weekly curriculum that typically centers on readings in the revised common lectionary. Preliminary conversations with congregants yielded frequent references to two additional catechisms that may have been actively employed at one time or another: Champion's catechism and Edith Bryant's catechism. Preliminary research did not avail tangible copies of either reference. As future research opportunities arise, it is recommended that additional inquiry into these historic documents be pursued.

Per the Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, "there shall be a Church School in every local church."¹⁴ Accordingly, although the structure of the local Church Sunday School may vary by geographic region and/or local church capacity, most congregants would be familiar with this component of the local church organization.

The Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship

"The Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship offers young people of [the] church a great variety of fine opportunities to be trained for Christian leadership. As one phase of the church's Christian education program, the Fellowship is committed to a teaching and training program, but its main emphasis is based upon TRAINING."¹⁵ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the ACE Fellowship, also known as the ACE League, was a mainstay of local youth formation practices. Rev. Anita Marshall, Clergy and Christian Educator based in Gary, IN who has been professionally engaged in Christian Education for twenty years, noted that her

¹⁴ BOD, 69

¹⁵ White, 33.

“parents met through the ACE League; it was the organization of the local church where young people could come and establish lifetime friendships and put into practice the Christian upbringing taught [through the Sunday Church School program.]”¹⁶ Further evidence of the historic significance of this training agency is found in the 1916 publication, the Centennial Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church:

Our Sunday schools are more largely attended, have better trained instructors and efficient superintendents, better graded system of lesson studies and superior class of music... Akin to this in purpose and work is the Allen Christian Endeavor, with its literature and organ, *The Endeavorer*, under its efficient manager, Rev. Julian C. Caldwell, D. D., *by which we are enabled to husband the youthful energy, ambition and tact in service for Christ and the church.*¹⁷

During the 1936 General Conference, the Sunday Church School agency and the Allen Christian Endeavor were merged to form the Connectional Christian Education Department¹⁸, although the current edition of the Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church continues to refer to them as separate entities in the local church organizational structure. The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church lists the Allen Christian Fellowship (ACF) as fourth in the listing of organizations in the local church. In theory, per Discipline, “the A.C.F. is usually composed of three (3) or more persons formed for the purposes of: promoting intelligent and practical Christian living among young people; training them in proper methods of Christian work and helpfulness, both for the support of the church and relief of the needy; strengthening and purifying the social life of our young people, making them an uplifting force in the world.”¹⁹ In practice, the preliminary research produced little to no evidence of the presence of this agency in local church organization in the United States after the late 1970s. Contrastingly,

¹⁶ Marshall, Anita. "Informal Interview of Clergy and Educators." Personal interview. 1 Nov. 2013..

¹⁷ See Note 13.

¹⁸ "Welcome to The African Methodist Episcopal Church." *Welcome to The African Methodist Episcopal Church*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

¹⁹ *BOD*, Page 71.

preliminary research suggests that the ACE League is particularly vibrant and well integrated into local church organization in the overseas districts of African Methodism.²⁰

The Young People's Department of the Women's Missionary Society (Y.P.D.)

The Young People's and Children's Division of the Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (hereafter referred to simply as Y.P.D.) is another important means of ministry, instruction and outreach to children and youth. This agency is presently the most active in its engagement with this demographic and is the agency with which most local congregations will have the greatest familiarity as it relates to youth discipleship development. According to the 2013 Y.P.D. Handbook, this agency had its beginnings in 1912 during an executive board meeting of the Women's Parent Mite Society held at Wilberforce University.²¹ The original organization of The Young People's Department divided youth into three groups- The Young Women's Auxiliary; Allen Stars; and Mother Pearls; however the current divisions are as follows:

1. The Sunbeams, age level pre-school to primary (2-6).
2. The Allen Stars, age level primary to sixth grade (7-12).
3. The Young People's Auxiliary, age level (13-17)
4. The Young Adult Division, age level (18-26). Young adults shall be encouraged to affiliate with the Young Women's Initiative and later transfer to the Senior Organizations of the church (Senior Society, Lay, or Sons of Allen) upon reaching the age of 26 or before.²²

A.C.E. League Palm Sunday Program. Pittsburgh, PA: Bethel AME Church, 1979. Print. Also, "Allen Christian Evangelical League (A.C.E League)." *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

²¹ Young People's and Children's Division of the Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Handbook of the Young People's and Children's Division of the Women's Missionary Society African Methodist Episcopal Church*. AMEC Sunday School Publishing House, (Nashville, TN) 2013, 13.

²² *Ibid*, 45.

A detailed historical statement of the Y.P.D., inclusive of officers past and present, key initiatives and historic meetings is provided in the opening pages of the handbook, however, this agency was established to:

“a. provide meaningful resources, training and guidance in all areas of church life which encourage full participation in the mission programs and activities of the entire church and [the women’s Missionary Society of the AME Church]; b. provide specific training in Evangelism, Christian Social Relations, and Education programs designed to increase knowledge of the African Methodist Episcopal Church History and the Scriptures; c. facilitate and support opportunities for leadership experiences in the church and society; d. enable growth in stewardship of the church; e. advocate for the integrity of childhood and the dignity of all children and youth in our religious, civic and political structures; e. create linkages, establish work synergies and devise schedules to effectively implement and administer meaningful programs and activities for all levels and units of the organization; and g. foster a community, in which children, youth and young adults know each other by name, minister to each other and partner in servicing and witnessing for Jesus Christ.”

In theory, per Discipline, this agency is “usually composed of three (3) or more persons formed for the purpose of implementing a missionary program on the local church level. This program included Bible Study, The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and WMS/YPD Constitutions; service projects in community; workshops in Christian social relations and family life, dealing with such topics as drug and alcohol abuse, personal development, teenage sexuality, communication, morals, etc.”²³ In practice, this agency is established to provide a training ground and entry into the life of church organization and governance for youth ages two (2) to twenty six (26). The means of training includes adherence to a detailed constitution and bylaws specific to this agency as well as the publication and strict adherence to a handbook. The handbook is organized as a primer to the Book of Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and employs terminology suitable for communicating to children the parameters for ministry service. This agency is responsible for the bulk of youth formation and discipleship development in the AME Church

²³ BOD, 72

and is likely to be the entity most congregants recognize as the vehicle through which youth formation and discipleship is engaged at the local church level.

The Richard Allen Youth Council

The Richard Allen Youth Council was organized in June, 1937 at Memphis, Tennessee during the Sesqui-Centennial Jubilee or the 150th birthday celebration of the A.M.E. Church... It was part and parcel of the overall Youth Recovery crystallizing program launched by the Department of Christian Education under the direction of the late Dr. S.S. Morris, Sr. It was not intended to replace or supersede any existing youth organization of the A.M.E. Church, nor was it intended to be just another youth organization. It seeks to make the work of our existing organizations more widespread. It is a helpmate to our existing character building organizations in the effort to coordinate, conserve, and intensify the loyalties which our young people owe to Christ and His Church... The RAYC, as a recruiting and integrating agency, is devoted to spreading the message of Christianity through the young people of the A.M.E. Church by urging them to take a definite and active part in church work in general, and in the Sunday School, A.C.E. Fellowship, Young People's Missionary Society and other youth clubs in particular.²⁴

During the convening of the 45th Quadrennial Session of the AME Church (1996), the Richard Allen Youth Council (RAYC) was reorganized into the Richard Allen Young Adult Council. As a result of this change, "The RAYAC no longer serves as an overseeing body of other youth organizations; it is now a group for young adults between the ages of 26-39. The goal of the RAYAC is to retain young adults to the Lord, the church, and to lead young adults to use their gifts and talents in the service of the Lord."²⁵ In theory and practice, this agency continues the legacy of youth formation and development established through the work of the Christian Education Department and the Young People's Department of the Women's Missionary Society of the AME Church.

Confirmation Equivalent Practices and Related Publications in African Methodism

The African Methodist Episcopal Church Book of Worship defines confirmation as "the rite by which a baptized person ratifies or seals the baptismal covenant and confirms the same in the presence of the community of believers as an act of personal commitment to Jesus

²⁴ White, 36.

²⁵ See Note 18.

Christ.”²⁶ According to the preliminary research, although it is not presently a prevalent component of youth discipleship formation in a majority of local congregations, it is however maintained in several churches in the Philadelphia area as well as in overseas congregations, a historic component of youth formation has been the observance of Confirmation Sunday, sometimes called Decision Day. There is a liturgical order prescribed in the African Methodist Church Book of Worship for “An Affirmation of the Baptismal Covenant” that has been “adopted from the A.M.E. Participation in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU).”²⁷ Typically held the second Sunday of the month of June, this Sunday has been devoted to receiving young people who have successfully matriculated through a course of study as prescribed by the Sunday School Union.

The confirmation service is designed to take the place of the “Decision Day Service” where children baptized as infants and nurtured within the congregation are read into full membership as a time near their twelfth (12th) birthday and before their eighteenth (18th) birthday.

Preliminary conversations during an informal research session with members of the Fourth Episcopal District of the AME Church, during the 2013 Mid Year Conference in Toronto, Canada, yielded a preponderance of evidence that previous generations of AMEs, as recent as perhaps the baby boomer generation, participated in Decision Day and/or Confirmation Day services in their local church context.²⁸ Additional research is recommended to determine the rationale concerning the decline in observance of this practice.

Summary

In summary, the modes of discipleship and confirmation equivalent practices for youth in the African Methodist Episcopal Church are historically varied. Present day modes are even

²⁶ *The Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 2005. Print. 230.

²⁷ BOW, 52.

²⁸ For a detailed account of a Confirmation Sunday experience see: http://www.practicalmattersjournal.org/sites/practicalmattersjournal.org/files/pdf/issue1/PM_Imagination_Rogers.pdf

more varied and tend to reflect local or regional preferences. The sacrament of Baptism is the initial entry into the life of the church for children, adolescents and youth. Following baptism, there have been four main teaching and training agencies through which the formal processes of catechism, confirmation, and denomination specific training were administered: The Sunday Church School, The Allen Christian Endeavor, The Young People's Department (Y.P.D.) and The Richard Allen Youth Council. The current agencies through which spiritual growth and development methods are primarily employed are the Sunday Church School and the Young People's Division of the Women's Missionary Society of the AME Church. In some instances, youth who successfully complete the prescribed curriculum for confirmation are afforded an opportunity to participate in a communal observance of the rite of passage through Decision Day or Confirmation Day. Continual formation opportunities are provided for young adults ages eighteen through thirty-nine through the Richard Allen Young Adult Council (RAYAC). Lastly, there is a rise in current congregations transitioning to a youth ministry model that incorporates aspects of the training and teaching agencies but emphasizes more personal growth and development than doctrinal awareness and ministry service preparation. This goal of this report has been to present preliminary research findings into the scope of the historic practices employed in the strengthening of youth discipleship. While care has been taken to be thorough in the presentation of these findings, given the scope of the project and the timeline for completion of these preliminary findings, it should again be noted that this report is only a preliminary survey of research on the subject and is not intended to convey an exhaustive report of the historic means through which youth discipleship has been engaged within the denomination. It is recommended that the study provide opportunities for additional research into the historic practices of confirmation equivalent practices, particularly with regard to the decline and/or departure from certain practices, such as "Decision Day" and the emphasis on youth training through the Allen Christian Endeavor Fellowship.