

AME Church continues 200-year journey toward racial justice

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PHILADELPHIA (RNS) Standing outside of the historic Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Yvonne Studevan was full of pride as she saw her great-great-great-great-grandfather being honored with a new, six-foot bronze statue.

“We’re a denomination that a man had a vision for that was so strong because he had the right vision of serving God: love God, serve God, love God’s people,” Studevan said of Richard Allen, who started the nation’s first independent black denomination.

Just as their religious ancestors did exactly two centuries ago, members of the AME Church made a pilgrimage to Philadelphia on Wednesday (July 6) for the opening of the denomination’s General Conference.

They gathered not only to remember their history, but to continue to forge a path toward racial justice.

Allen started Bethel AME Church in 1791 after watching white officials of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church pull up his friend, clergyman Absalom Jones, who was praying on his knees.

“We’ve been talking about Black Lives Matter since the AME Church started, not just now,” said Gregory Ingram, host bishop for the quadrennial General Conference and leader of the AME Church’s First Episcopal District.

At a bicentennial banquet Tuesday that kicked off the conference, Mark Tyler, the pastor of Bethel AME, told 3,000 attendees at the Pennsylvania Convention Center that they have much to celebrate.

“We gather tonight to give God praise — praise for keeping, protecting, and expanding the freedom church birthed in a blacksmith shop, having come out of segregated pews but now standing on five continents,” he said.

As the festivities for the General Conference began with AME members decked in tuxes and sequined gowns, speakers recalled their humbler beginnings, when delegates arrived on horseback from Delaware, New York and Maryland.

AME Church historiographer Teresa Fry Brown said the anniversary highlights a significant legal achievement by a religious organization of African-Americans.

“We had to fight all the way to high court,” she said of the battle that was resolved by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. “The Methodist Episcopal Church resisted an independent black denomination.”

An exhibit at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts showcased other successful efforts to counter discrimination and segregation over the years, including a photo of bishops praying in front of the Supreme Court for a favorable ruling in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that ended legal segregation in U.S. schools.

But the joy and pride that the AME members spoke of as they reunited was tempered with a reminder that the denomination’s work for racial justice continues.

“We stand tonight, looking back at an extraordinary history, but we also remember that we had some pain along the way, even in our recent history,” said Leslie Tyler, another clergyperson at Bethel AME, before listing the names of nine members of Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina, gunned down during a Bible study a year ago.

A section of the courtyard surrounding the Allen statue includes plaques paying tribute to the nine victims: “May the untimely deaths of these three men and six women be an eternal reminder of the power of love and forgiveness, and that God’s grace is sufficient, no matter what.”

Reginald Jackson, chair of the church’s Social Action Commission, said the expressions of forgiveness by some of the victims’ relatives lifted the nation but the tragedy highlighted the need to do more to address racism.

“Racism to this day still remains a major problem in the United States,” he said. “It’s one the country wants to live in denial about, but the reality is that liberty and

justice for all is still not a reality.”

Even as the AMEs focused on their 200-year history, one bishop suggested its members go back even further.

Theodore Larry Kirkland, a bishop, urged more teaching about the Bible from the denomination’s pulpits to increase biblical literacy and reduce “lethargic pulpits” and “a lack of spiritual growth in our pews.”

“I am convinced that we need to go back to the basics,” he preached, drawing applause from the 11,000 people listening. “We need to go back to what lasted for 2,000 years. We need to go back to being spiritual. We’ve become too political rather than spiritual.”

The 2.5 million-member denomination has grown from 16 delegates at its first meeting to 1,506 today. Translation booths—for Spanish, French, and Portuguese—were positioned in the back of the convention hall, reflecting the international membership that includes churches in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

As the meeting began, attendees made their way to Mother Bethel, where they could see both the new statue and the old tomb of Allen, who died in 1831.

Studevan, the founder’s great-great-great-great-granddaughter, said the statue gives stature to a man many in the AME consider a black founding father.

“It just dignifies us as a race, as a people because some people today—Donald Trump—Did I say his name? ... sometimes they still devalue black people,” the 72-year-old woman from Athens, Georgia, said. “Some of the issues that Richard Allen faced, we’re still facing today.”

The retired school administrator hoped the fresh look at the denomination’s history may help pass the story along to the younger generation of AME members. Within minutes of her expressing that hope, a tour guide recounted to a group of teenagers how the walkout from one church led to the creation of their denomination.

“It just makes me realize how far we’ve come and how far we could go,” said Daja Williams, 17, a member of an AME church in Nashville, Tennessee, who stopped at the statue and took in the tour. “And just made me appreciate our ancestors and how much they’ve done for us.”