

Vashti McKenzie, first woman bishop in AME church, to retire in July

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue



(Photo courtesy of The Christian Recorder)

Vashti Murphy McKenzie, the first woman to be elected as a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, will retire from active ministry at the AME general conference in July. She currently leads the AME's tenth district, which encompasses the entire state of Texas.

The AME denomination retires all bishops at the general conference closest to their 75th birthday. (The general conference takes place every four years.) McKenzie was scheduled to retire in 2020, but the general conference was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

McKenzie's election as a bishop in 2000 was a historic moment for the oldest Black denomination in the United States. Women had been preaching in AME churches since 1787, but they were not allowed to be ordained until 1960. Twenty years later,

women began running for episcopal office but without success.

McKenzie attributed her historic win to God's approbation. "Because of God's favor, the stained-glass ceiling has been pierced and broken," she said at the time.

McKenzie was ordained in 1984 after leaving a career in journalism. "I was . . . looking for my purpose in life," she said in a 2000 *Washington Post* interview. "God just made it clear that I was called to preach and pastor."

McKenzie is the author of six books. She served on former president Obama's inaugural President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.