

After four-month lockdown, AME pastor preaches at her church

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Pastor Ratona Stokes-Robinson, center, celebrates her first service inside St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Thorofare, New Jersey. (Video screengrab)

A pastor who had been locked out of the church she was appointed to lead in June preached for the first time from its pulpit on October 31. The lockdown was allegedly due to her gender.

“God is still worthy to be praised,” preached Ratona Stokes-Robinson, pastor of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Thorofare, New Jersey, just south of Philadelphia. “And for the rest of my life I promise, no matter what I go through, I come to serve the Lord.”

Stokes-Robinson's cause had been taken up by AME Women in Ministry, which issued a statement in late October after learning of her situation.

"As we celebrate a woman as President of the Bishops' Council, a woman as President of the General Officers Council, a woman as President of the Presiding Elders' Council, and an all-woman Executive Board of the National Council of Churches (USA), we are greatly distressed to hear of women in ministry concurrently being oppressed by systematic strongholds and discriminatory behavior," the group wrote.

The Christian Recorder, the official publication of the AME Church, reported that after the pastor was appointed in late June, "Rev. Stokes-Robinson did not receive the keys to the church from the congregation allegedly due to concerns over her gender and preached on the lawn of the church from July accompanied by her husband Michael Robinson."

The Christian Recorder reported that a Women in Ministry delegation from the AME Church's First District, in which the congregation is located, arrived at its building on October 24, expecting to hear Stokes-Robinson preach, only to learn that "the congregation refused to open the church for the pastor."

In late October, Julius H. McAllister Sr., bishop of the First District, reconfirmed Stokes-Robinson's appointment and told the congregation to give her keys and pay the salary she was due since her original appointment.

In its statement, Women in Ministry noted that in 2016 it successfully requested that the denomination's general board adopt a statement on eliminating gender-role stereotyping and upholding parity.

John Thomas III, editor of the Christian Recorder, said this was not the first time there has been a lockout in his denomination.

"Church lockouts have happened before," he said in response to an emailed question. "I do not know of an instance when the issue was over a pastor's gender, but that is not to say that it hasn't occurred. Of the lockouts I'm familiar with, almost all of them have resulted in the pastor eventually exercising their pastoral appointment and taking leadership of the congregation."

Jeffrey Leath, the AME Church's ecumenical officer, said in an interview that the treatment of Stokes-Robinson was "one negative" in the midst of what he considered many recent positive developments in his denomination.

"I think that the current situation in New Jersey is unfortunate in view of the tremendous accomplishments that women have made in ministry in the church, taking charge of leading pulpits in the denomination," he said.

He cited as an example the May appointment of Elaine Flake as senior pastor of Greater Allen AME Cathedral in New York City. She succeeded her husband, Floyd Flake, who retired from leading the congregation of more than 23,000 members after four decades as pastor.

Stokes-Robinson, who has declined interview requests, expressed her gratitude for support on the day she preached inside her church, citing Ecclesiastes 3:11, which she said during the service is her favorite Bible verse.

"He has made everything beautiful in his time . . . so that no man can find out the work that God does from beginning to the end. I am extremely grateful to God for the outpouring of love!" reads a post on her Facebook page. —Religion News Service