

President's Address
Delivered February 12, 2020 at the 82nd Session of the International Ministers and Lay
Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
Meeting held in Birmingham, Alabama
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Our Commitment to Accountability – We Have Been Chosen For Such A Time As This

On the heels of the recent heinous and angry response coming from the highest office in the United States of America, we have seen and felt, firsthand, the impact of pathological behavior in leadership: one that is plagued with perpetual adult tantrums, an unwillingness to acknowledge wrongdoing, constant rejection of accountability, and a flagrant disregard for Christian values. Sadly, evidence suggests that as a religious nation, we are farther off the beaten path than ever imagined. When we see the cover stories of major news outlets, such as social media, the Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, Mr. Trump is hailed as a victoriously acquitted person, and in each instance, we are reminded that history is often skewed to evade the truth about how things really are. From the Senate's abject failure to set aright a deeply divided country, what will go down in history, retrospectively, is the obvious splintering of our nation descending to a place of further depravity and chaos. Let us be well-assured that although our country has seen worse, under this administration the worst is yet to come, as it is clear that conservative politics will not exercise its power to hold leadership accountable to the letter of the law, even when proof of wrongdoing is readily available.

Unfortunately, the days seem long passed when the religious community influenced government in such a way that government felt ashamed to air out its dirty laundry on the world stage. Today religion has taken a back seat to shenanigans of political theater. Religion from a top-down worldview becomes entangled with status quo versions of selective biblical quotes

utilized only to satisfy the temporary self-aggrandizements of getting points across, maligned with little to no genuine desire to utilize the heart of religion to help set captives free. It must be made clear: no matter what our party affiliation may be, there are systemic problems that exist wherein the Christian Ethic is being abated to some degree. As a Ministers and Lay Association; as a people; as children of the most-high God, it must be made clear that, just in times past, “Christianity is still on trial.” Unfortunately, the act of Christianity is not always witnessed in a top-down manner as was intended from America’s inception, and at times this is the case for us as a denomination. Our response to issues appears to be sporadic, at best. Yet, we cannot forget what we have been called to do, as well as the role we play for the overall fruitful good of our church. Simply stated: we have been chosen for such a time as this.

As we revisit the bylaws of our association and its purpose, we are reminded that one of the reasons we exist is to **“provide a forum for Ministers and Laity”** in our church **“to address problems and issues which are relevant to the Church’s ministry to the nation and the world.”**¹ We cannot run from issues and problems that exist within our church for fear of making waves. We cannot run from issues and problems that exist within our church for fear of alienation. We address issues and problems head-on in the fear of God. This does not, in any way, disregard, overlook or disrespect our stance on highly controversial issues. In fact, the denomination is often quite clear, at least in word, about where we stand as a religious body. Still we cannot become complacent, ignoring that which is evident, that which affects us, and that which must engage us. Such is the case as recent decisions and occurrences have pushed the Methodist Church in particular, to review her practices very closely, as we know that whenever

¹ The Bylaws of the International Ministers and Lay Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Article II – Purpose, number 1

serious review takes place, we are often forced to observe and challenged to respond to things that cause us to confront the realities around us. As an association, we too are not immune to this reality, for we are the vanguard for many as to how ministers and lay are expected to speak truthfully to these issues, hoping to assist our people back home with serious, introspective, careful, spirit-led ways of reassuring our people of the solvency of our denomination. Please allow me to highlight a few of these areas that affect us denominationally and nationally, either directly or indirectly, and can no longer be swept under the rug:

1. The challenge of convincing the masses that church still matters. Over the years, our general neglect of establishing an effective methodology for engaging the church intergenerationally has led to a great falling away from consistent church attendance. As a result, we are being prompted to make necessary shifts, not only in Zion, but within mainline Protestantism throughout the nation. While our church makes necessary shifts to maintain viability, we are forced with a gentle reminder: we are not shifting, per se', because we desire to, but we have been brought to a fork in the road where we must be honest; where we must shift. Although fads, overnight sensations, and fly-by-night inventions often render themselves powerless; still, the desire for power and control is often the order of the day. Yet and still, we cannot ignore the necessity for us to make various shifts throughout our church. Such shifts are not limited to the churches we regularly frequent, but even in our association. We must bring our association holistically and unapologetically completely into the twenty-first century for relevance, viability, and sustainability. Our bylaws state that part of our purpose is **“to keep before the church, proposals, to improve, maintain and/or expand the influence and effectiveness of the**

Church's life, work and mission."² Coming into the twenty-first century does not ignore why we exist, nor the pain staking sacrifices of those upon whose shoulders we stand. Rather, such a shift acknowledges and appreciates their labors, their beliefs that our association speaks truth to power and will always possess a voice that helps to makes liberation a reality. Such a shift acknowledges and appreciates that we are an association whose voice helps to set the captives free. For church to still matter in an age where the relevance of church is in question, we are challenged to develop a feasible and realistic plan to reach the masses beyond just physical church attendance, but through the plethora of mediums that did not exist at the inception of our association. We experienced the power of worldwide ministry during our recent Legislative Summit in Louisville, KY where persons throughout our denomination attended both physically and through social media on the Ministers and Lay Facebook page and the M&L Website (which we are committed to utilizing even more in the future). We experienced the power of streamlining our annual programs as evidenced by using technology during our banquet. We will be experiencing the power of innovation in the hard work of the association's Bylaws Committee to enhance the way we do association business to serve this present age. Such shifts are provided by our Executive Team which stands upon the shoulders of previous Executive Teams to continue to bring a superior quality product, in every aspect, to the association and denomination as a whole that makes each of us proud to be in such a family. Just as attendance in our local churches is vital, so is attendance during our meetings and various sessions. The shifts before us requires us to be **all** age inclusive, discovering the abundance of talent among us just waiting in the gallows for

² Ibid, number 2.

opportunities to reveal what God has planted within them. This week we will hear from both ends of the spectrum with honest renderings of where we are, with suggestions of how we can bridge gaps effectively; this also includes, but is not limited to a legislative process that will keep us attuned to, as our bylaws state, **“monitoring the Church’s compliance with the law and mandated by the General Conference.”**³

2. We cannot ignore the great divide among our United Methodist brothers and sisters, namely discerning the way forward around decisions that highlight gender roles and preferences. While as Children of Varick, we are firm concerning where we stand on the issue of same sex relationships, we cannot take for granted the connections that exist within the Wesleyan family throughout the world. As Methodists, even in our doctrinal stance, we must not ignore our own homophobia that often prevents us from deeply expressing the power of love; a love that transcends our own hang-ups that perpetuate hatred towards others. The late Bishop Clinton Hoggard once stated during an Annual Conference in South Africa, **“I do not fault people for being who they are, I fault Christians for failing to assist people with becoming who they can really become in Christ Jesus, who alone has the power to change all of us, from who we have been to who He desires for us to become.”**⁴ Only the love of God can change the hearts, souls and minds of people on a continuous basis—a love that is exemplified through the lives of God’s people. While it is easy to point fingers at the actions taken by the United Methodist Church, we must not be blinded by what also exists within our own ranks, and in the Christian church as a collective body. These issues and concerns are not new to our

³ Ibid, number 3

⁴ Quote made by Bishop Clinton Hoggard while attending South Africa Annual Conference, 2001.

church but are becoming increasingly necessary to address. Our association must assist in leading others to uphold, without fear, that which our church believes and also assist others, regardless of background, in contending for our faith and ability to worship God in spirit and in truth. Our association must assist in addressing that which is feared in order to foster healing from neglect, denial, resistance, and refusal to speak up and out in such a way where God is front and center. As an association, we must seek to understand what is prevalent, and that which can no longer be swept under the rug, even though we may express our doctrinal beliefs. Just because we fail to speak about an issue does not mean the issue does not need speaking to. Just because we resist issues does not mean issues disappear—they only subside for a moment. Some issues are not as point blank as receiving pastoral or lay appointments. Some issues challenge us to observe matters on the horizon toward which we are headed. It has been said, **“The truth we omit doesn’t go away. The rug gets pulled back and prophets show up. The lost get found. The unofficial story gets told. The unnamed and previously ignored get a seat at the table.”**⁵ As an association, we are in a position to help people with learning to be completely honest about their faith on a daily basis.

3. The Importance of the 51st Session of The General Conference will be an important time. In just a few months, our denomination will again make history in several ways. Cutting edge legislation will be presented, some of which requires us to examine our actions from top to bottom, calling for the church to be more accountable. Methodism holds us to

⁵ Statement made by Rev. Dr. Judy Fentress Williams, Professor of Old Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary. 2018 Gardner C. Taylor Lecture Series-Ministry and #MeToo: Confronting Sexual Violence from Black Church Resources

accountability. In every respect this will be our quadrennial check-up meeting. We will be faced with a host of proposals that will either be collectively embraced, put on the back burner, or reveal our ambivalence. Yet, while we cannot and should not evade the needs that exist in the U.S., we are being called out, even challenged, if you will, to think seriously about the connectivity between here and abroad. Having personally travelled our church abroad, and witnessing first-hand the enormous growth taking place, a great deal of our statistical success is due, in part, to our existence and influence in other parts of the world. In the most recent addition of the Missionary Seer, Bishop Michael Angelo Frencher, Sr. expressed the need for the church (Zion) to think seriously about missions in a broad sense. As he reflected over a low point in ministry as a bishop in the mission fields, he states that he realized that many **“cannot or will not embrace the total mission of the A.M.E. Zion Church.”**⁶ He further states, should missions be truly fruitful, it must **“go beyond our present environment into other environments”** even visualizing the possibility of **“one day placing”** even **“Caribbean work under one Bishop, rather than continue to keep them with Stateside Conferences.”** Lastly he states that he **“envisions the A.M.E. Zion Church supporting and bringing into the denomination work being proposed in Southern Central and East Africa.”**⁷ While it is clear there must be careful strategy for this to become a reality, especially where funds are involved, this is a hot topic to be discussed, even within the ranks of Ministers and Lay. This week we will take a brief moment to hear from two of our Episcopal Fathers who are instrumental in helping to advance not only overseas missions, but in many

⁶ “Framing Missions at Home and Overseas;” The Missionary Seer, Vol. 11, Issue 014, January-March 2020, pg. 11

⁷ Ibid, pg. 14

respects church growth and development. I'm quite sure there are various opinions regarding the same, but we cannot avoid the subject, especially since we will have to pay for it, should the General Conference approve.

The General Conference will also be presented with a host of candidates who are presently campaigning for various offices throughout our church. We will have an opportunity tomorrow to briefly hear from them, so as to assist us in making wise, intelligent, and prayerful decisions as we prepare to cast our votes in a few months.

Let us not take for granted, however, that the General Conference reminds each of us that there is also a call for the once again empowered ministers and laity of the world to embrace the power of “the courageous voice”, working in concert to bring this to fruition. Lay presence beyond the physical but through word and deed is probably more vital now than ever before. Just as the voice from the pulpit is important, so too are the voices from pews. This can be nurtured in tandem and collectively when Ministers and Lay provide equal voice and mutual respect. Ministers and Lay must once again nurture the relevance as a collaborative whole, while seeking God’s direction—a direction that from our inception, made us the “Freedom Church.” Who else, but our association, has the power to do this in practice without political strings? Hence, we must not be more afraid of the **terror by night; nor of the arrow that flieth by day;**⁸ but we must continue to speak truth to power. This is most significant, for there will be quite a few first-time and younger delegates, both clergy and lay, at this General Conference, each who are passionate about being allowed to cast votes physically and in word, for they have something to say. As an association, we take the lead in this collaborative effort. Today and tomorrow we observe lay and clergy who will share their perspectives of our church—perspectives to be shared by both our

⁸ P s a l m s 9 1 : 5

General Secretary Treasurer of Christian Education and also a millennial pastor. Delta Airlines CEO, Ed Bastian speaks to this necessity to depend upon the other stating, **“We cannot grow if we’re not able to demonstrate that we can grow in a responsible way, in terms of not only what we’re utilizing, but what we’re replenishing.”⁹ We collectively replenish among both ranks so that the legacy bequeathed to us is solid enough to be passed down even further through our hands.**

4. Lastly, The upcoming statewide elections. While we focus our efforts on the election of the offices in our church, we must never cease to remind those ministers and lay with whom we are in constant contact of the necessity to vote in the upcoming elections in the places we reside; especially here in America. The House of Representatives impeached the sitting president, we must see to it through the power of the vote that he is permanently impeached, replaced, and retired for good through the power of the vote. We have witnessed with Donald Trump at the helm of our country that very little respect is given to the area of Christian Ethics—he just doesn’t care. One writer contends that “self-grants us permission to be the worst versions of ourselves.” Mr. Trump is truly the worst version of himself. As an association, let us continue to go on record helping to lead the charge to remind our people that change begins with us. We will take a moment to hear a few strategies for helping our people at home with get out the vote campaigns from a representative before we adjourn this week as well.

⁹ Ed Bastian, President and CEO of Delta Airlines, “Redefining Travel,” pg. 61, found in Sky Delta, February 2020 Edition

In closing, the Executive Team takes very seriously, with integrity and commitment, what you, as an association, has elected us to do. Our Executive Team promised to provide the association with transparency, hard work, building upon our social media ministry, working towards building our membership, and making sure we continued to build upon the legacy that has been passed down to us. To date, we have done our level best to follow through on our commitments.

- We promised to continue to provide information in a first-class manner from first class presenters. We continue to do our level best to do so.
- As with previous administrations, we promised to provide a legislative process that keeps members of our association informed. Our association has hosted three Legislative Summits in Rock Hill, S.C., Orlando, Fla., Greensboro, N.C. and Louisville, KY. During our time here in Birmingham, we will host a Legislative Summit, with the last summit to take place in Salisbury, N.C. April 18, 2020 so that our association as a whole is kept abreast of things taking place in our church.
- We promised to be more innovative in as many areas as possible. We have been able to do this to the best of our abilities through Facebook, Website, Zoom, etc.
- We promised to work toward increasing young adult participation, a task we continue to explore, led by one of our team members. Yet, we have added to our ranks a Millennial whose work was evidenced at our banquet last night.
- We promised to update our Bylaws so that members of the association would be kept abreast of our purpose. The Bylaws Committee will continue to work toward providing us with a robust update.

- We promised to work diligently toward increasing our association's membership. We have established an online membership registration option (imlaamezion.org), which can assist Regional Vice Presidents with promoting memberships in their respective areas, and for persons to obtain and renew memberships. As usual, persons may also obtain and/or renew their memberships this week during our annual meeting. Although we have not reached our total goal, we continue our endeavor to do so.
- We have had designed our own association lapel pin. It is our hope that Regional Vice Presidents will encourage our members to purchase a pin for \$10.00 to help spread the proud word that we are still viable to the denomination. Pins may be purchased this week on-site, by contacting our Assistant Secretary, or through the association website at imlaamezion.org.
- We have established online capabilities for persons to purchase their banquet tickets online (imlaamezion.org).
- We promised to honor the veterans of our church and association both past and present with a plaque that will be displayed at the AME Zion Headquarters. We are working to secure a spot to do so. We will plan a special ceremony for the Spring of 2021.

Allow me personally to thank this extraordinary Executive Team voted by you to serve this quadrennium. Allow me also personally thank the Regional Vice Presidents for their unwavering support in helping to both recruit and keep members abreast of things taking place throughout our denomination, nation and the world that affect us both directly and indirectly. Each person brings a tremendous amount of talent, perspective, experience, but most importantly passion for making our association proud.

In our collective efforts to move Zion forward, I am reminded of the words of hymnist Mary Ann Thomson:

**“O Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell all the world that God is light;
That He who made all nations is not willing
One soul should perish, lost in shades of night.**

**Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace;
Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.”¹⁰**

I am also reminded of the words that can be found under the heading of **Encourage My Soul - Joyful Voices of Inspiration:**

**“Encourage my soul and let us journey on.
Though the night is dark, and I am far from home.
Thanks be to God; the morning light appears.**

**The storm is passing over, The storm is passing over,
The storm is passing over, Hallelu!**

**Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah
The storm is passing over, The storm is passing over,
The storm is passing over, Hallelu!¹¹**

¹⁰ O Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling **By Mary Ann Thomson (1868) Tune: TIDINGS**

Published in 422 hymnals

¹¹ **Encourage My Soul - Joyful Voices of Inspiration** [www.joyfulvoices.org/Lyrics/Project/PDFs/Current Songs/Encourage My Soul.pdf](http://www.joyfulvoices.org/Lyrics/Project/PDFs/Current/Songs/Encourage%20My%20Soul.pdf)