

189TH SESSION OF THE PHILADELPHIA & BALTIMORE ANNUAL CONFERENCE
REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE CHURCH
May 22 – 27, 2018

Presiding Prelate, W. Darin Moore, Missionary Supervisor Mrs. Devita Moore, Associate Prelate, Bishop Louis Hunter Sr, Associate Missionary Supervisor Mrs. Ingrid Flack Hunter, General Officers, Presiding Elders, Pastors, Clergy, Lay Delegates, Conference Officers, District Officers, members, family and guest to and of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Annual Conference, the State of the Church Committee submits the following report for your consideration.

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church has a rich and vibrant history in which we stand and celebrate on today. Our foremothers and fathers heard the voice of God, and set out to establish a church where they could both be instructed in the ways of God, and a church that would be the catalyst needed to force socio-economic change to the communities in which they serve. As Zionites, we are proud that our history, our banner as “The Freedom Church” has been at the forefront of change not only in our society, but also around the world. We remember Frederick Douglass, Harriett Tubman, Bishops James Varick, Clinton, Hood, Spottswood, Walls, Shaw and countless hosts of others who have championed freedom, equality and justice in their generation. While we celebrate our history – it is just that our history. It is the story of our struggle, the perseverance of our people and the tenacity of our convictions. The question we now face and must answer is how does our cherished past, translate to relative, transformative action today.

To begin to answer this question, we turn to the Holy Writ for some insight to the church. The prophet Isaiah refers to, and Jesus confirms that His house is called to be the house of prayer for all nations. Jesus when admonishing the money changers and others in the temple says that (paraphrasing) my house is called one thing – but you’re making it another. In other words, whatever the church is, or whatever the church is not, it is of our own making because the calling has not changed. What then is the church-particularly the AME Zion Church-making the church as the church? Are we making disciples of Christ, or are we making good church members? Are we still speaking truth to power, or are we complacent and ignoring the plight of others? Are we still the house of prayer to all nations, or are we so focused on our institutions and structures that we praise the institution more than the God who has given them to us? In response to these questions, the committee focused our attention on reviewing what it is that we do, identifying our strengths and weaknesses, and determining what it is we as the church need to do to remain relevant today, so that our story continues to the coming generations.

For some, this review of our practices is difficult. Again, we acknowledge the rich history upon which we stand. However, there are some hard facts that we as the church must acknowledge for our ministry to remain effective in our modern context. First, over the last ten years, the percentage of distrust in organizations and government has dramatically increased. Everyday institutions and tenets that once were considered norms are being removed and challenged. This distrust has found its home in the hearts of many of our congregants where distrust of the connectional structure, leadership and clergy is high. Second, technology has made it easy for some to challenge the basic structure of the church. Praise and worship can be accomplished by viewing your favorite psalmist on YouTube, and sermons on any topic are instantaneous from your favorite preacher or teacher. Additionally, technology has caused the constant bombardment of news leading to competing interests and shortened attention spans.

While we personally may not subscribe to Twitter and their 280 characters, we are serving in an age where messages are expected to be succinct, with updates as timely as possible. One must minister to real time needs and issues, respond to situations as they occur, and still sound a message of hope and good news even in the midst of chaos of confusion. Finally, for many of our urban churches, the communities in which we serve are changing. Historically black communities are now gentrified with many of our Caucasian brothers and sisters that see our churches as relics of the past, and not the future of their community. Instead of looking at the church as a meeting place, they view the church as either wasted real estate or as their source of frustration relating to parking and drawing “outsiders” to their new neighborhood.

The committee’s review consisted of the following and will be shared in this order. First, we examined what part of our practices we need to **retain** as we move forward to being effective to the current age. While the extemporaneous thought would be to start from scratch, there are some foundational principles our fore parents laid that are still true and relevant to today. Secondly, we examined what needs to be **recycled**. Some of our practices are out of date, and need to be updated for today. Finally, we examined our practices that need to be **replaced**. There are some things we do that serve no purpose, no one can explain why we do what we do, and they need to just be eliminated altogether.

Retain

As mentioned earlier, the church is called to be the house of prayer for all nations. To that end, we must continue to retain our distinct mark of being disciples of Christ. We must continue to proclaim good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, preach deliverance to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set liberty to them that are bruised and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. We must retain one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all and in all in a society and environment that strives to highlight differences instead of focusing on commonalities. We must retain our identity as “The Freedom Church” as speak truth to power, fight for socio-economic equality – regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation or gender identity. We must retain our spiritual authority on matters of God while demonstrating the love of God to those in our communities.

On the local level, we must retain our relevancy in the neighborhoods in which we reside. As Methodists, we quote John Wesley where he stated, “I look upon all the world as my parish”, but fail to leave the confines of our walls to talk and foster relationships within our communities. We must retain our commitment and commission to mission work. Our thinking of mission work has to change from just that of the homeless or substance abuser. Local missions as simple as providing a place for after school activities, helping older members with some light work, or even providing quarterly free babysitting can allow opportunities for increased member involvement and visibility within the community. Also, we must retain the class system in effective discipleship making. Only a true disciple of Christ can instruct another to become a disciple and the class system provides an opportunity and avenue for this to occur. While this is retained, we must however, ensure that the persons serving as class leaders are of spiritual maturity and possess the necessary skills to effectively serve. Quarterly training, at minimum, should occur for not only the class leaders, but also the ministers to serve in an ever-changing environment.

In summary, the committee’s recommendation is that the following items are to be retained:

- Discipleship making
- Maintain championing for freedom, equality and justice
- Maintain mission-minded activities relevant to the communities we serve
- Maintain the class leader system within the local churches

Recycle

Of the areas focused by the committee members, this notion of recycling was the most difficult to quantify. The difficulty rose because it is rooted in the fact that what we are currently doing is not effective, and it is hard to admit personal failures and shortcomings.

First, for the connection to remain effective, we must re-examine the role of the connectional church and the local church. Our model of governance is similar to that of federalism; however, we do not apply the financial operational structure consistent with that paradigm. In true federalism, resources flow up into the central government, and back down to local governments to cover those things agreed would be the responsibility of the government. In our connection, resources flow up to the general church; however, very seldom are resources provided back down at the conference or local level. As a result, many of our churches are being taxed beyond their means. There is a general sense that while financial information is provided, no one has audited the information to determine what is fiscally responsible or sustainable and subsequently make decisions about what is appropriate to ask regarding assessments and the general connection. Additionally, the lack of transparency and accountability when it pertains to the financial health and sustainability has led to increased scrutiny and cynicism regarding the church and the financial asking related to connectional claims. In this environment of distrust in institutions, the church must be willing to allow thorough, independent audits of the church accounts from the local junior usher board account to the financial accounts and holdings of the denomination. With the thorough accounting, uniformity in the assessment of claims needs to be established and disseminated based upon the current strength of the church – and not what the church carried some 20 – 30 years ago. The church must also be mindful that information on most things are available to most people with a simple Google search. The finances of the church cannot be shrouded in secrecy if we are to build and maintain trust in the institution.

Additionally, we must recycle our views of what it means to be a connectional church. While we fully understand the local and central church, we must begin pooling our resources in geographical areas and districts. While the local church may be unable to support or sustain a ministry, the combined strength of the geographic area and district could. If we are serious about church growth and discipleship, we must let go of our individualism, and truly become united. New societies and ministries should be undergirded and supported by all the churches in the district. Home missions needs to be recycled to become a Growth and Development committee, with the responsibility of completing S.W.A.T and market analyses on local churches to recommend which societies should merge, and where and when the next society should be established.

Third, we must recycle the ministries of the Women's Home and Oversees Missionary Societies and the Christian Education Departments. If the scripture is true that where our treasure lies, our hearts are there as well, we must recognize that as a connection we have not demonstrated a serious investment in equipping and building disciples of Christ. Our meeting times should be geared towards teaching and equipping leadership to effectively minister in their communities. Continuing Education or personal development hour requirements need to be established for all persons in leadership. Financial support for this continuing education should be given from both the local and connectional level to demand and encourage excellence in our ministry. Our mission arm should work to seek more than just the homeless and sick. The banner of the AME Zion mission arm must also be the voice of justice, equality and freedom. Within our church, the missionaries must demand equality and fair treatment and advocate for all disenfranchised persons (women, minorities, refugees, widows, orphans, persons who are LBTQI+, etc.), in our society and hold leadership within the church accountable for fostering healthy, diverse vibrant communities of faith.

Next, we must recycle our Order of Worship to maintain relevancy within our communities. It serves no purpose to say we have “high church” and lives are not changed, persons are not converted and we are more focused on the ritual of the service than on providing opportunities for persons to have an encounter with God. Our worship experiences must be planned and intentional from the moment worshipers enter the church prior to the Call to Worship to the point at which they leave following the Benediction. Redundant and monotonous activities that do not serve the local setting need to be examined for updating or removal. For instance, can the Responsive Reading incorporate the scripture for the preaching? Do the responses offer persons opportunities to engage in worship? Is there continuity within the service or is it disjointed? Do we practice radical hospitality and are we passionate about worship? Questions similar to these must be asked and answered at the local level and beyond. Moreover, the church has not fully embraced the use of technology in enhancing our worship experience. Many of our churches have created social media accounts; however, if the information is not relative and geared specifically towards an intended audience, it is missed. Many of our churches have taken advantage of the free Facebook Live feature in streaming our services. While this service is a great resource, discernment must be exercised, as some of what we are placing in the public sphere does not highlight “the best of us.” Since our society is more visual than print, have we adapted to this, or are we still relying on printed programs that are coloring pages for children during service, and not read by anyone under the age of 55 in our congregations?

In summary, the committee’s recommendation is that the following items be recycled:

- The role of the connectional church with the local church
- The role of Home Missions in church growth and evaluation
- Reorganization and increased intentionality around the WHOMS and Christian Education Departments to provide missions and training
- Thorough evaluation of our Order of Worship to foster encounters with God

Replace

First, it is important for us within the church to realize that while we are serving in response to a call we received, many within our leadership are volunteers sacrificing and working for kingdom advancement. With that in mind, we must be cognizant of the time and other resource demands the church places on our volunteer army. Technology must be utilized to eliminate the need for several of the in person meetings called at both the local and connectional levels. In person meetings should only be reserved for teaching and training that is better served in person instead of via videoconference or teleconference. Additionally, fiscal responsibility demands that we examine our meeting schedule to ensure we are investing our resources within kingdom activities instead of hotels and meeting spaces, and demands that the church seek other revenue streams.

Secondly, we must replace our antiquated notion of what is and what is not considered church and “Christian.” Persons are dying and souls are being lost daily and instead of trying to rescue the perishing, we are worried if the altar colors match the liturgical season of the church. Instead of focusing on if a person’s heart is right, we are busy evaluating if they meet our standard of holiness, which may or may not be supported by scripture. While we are not calling for a complete revolution of our rituals and norms, some must be replaced to better serve in our communities. Does the weekly worship experience have to occur on Sunday morning? Does church school have to occur at the church? Are persons free to come as they are to church? Are we truly open to all nations, or just of the same hue as our own? In doing this, we must also replace our belief in what is considered good preaching. Oftentimes, we are so focused on delivering three points, a whoop and a hymn that lives are not being changed.

One of the questions often raised during the admission process is “Has anyone been saved by your preaching?” For the church, this is paramount to all that we do, and therefore, this question should be asked of every minister – every year.

Next, we must replace the music of our churches. In this recommendation, we are not calling for the abandonment of one type or style for another. Instead, we are advocating that the music ministry of our churches must be elevated in importance to the overall worship experience. We must demand that our musicians are first saved and understand the church in which they are serving. We must demand excellence in our choirs – rehearsals are mandatory and bible study must be incorporated into each rehearsal because you cannot effectively minister that which you do not believe. While our hymns tell of our faith, the rhythmic style and singing must be replaced to maintain life and vibrancy within the worship experience.

Additionally, we must replace the several clubs and organizations we have within the church. Oftentimes, we have attached the word “ministry” to a club to justify its existence within the church. Many of the auxiliary organizations serve no ministry purpose other than fellowship, which can be accomplished at any time, and do not minister outside of their club/organization. Additionally, many were birthed out of discord among the larger group, and their existence only perpetuates the discord and division to the future generations. The organizations need to be replaced with true ministries in line with the vision of the connectional church and Pastor.

Finally, we must replace the ideology of misogyny that permeates the church within many of our places of worship and amongst various leaders. Over the past several years, there have been a growing number of women sharing their experiences of sexual misconduct, abuse, and mistreatment in national news (#metoo). The church has often been a part of or complicit in these experiences. As women fill the pews of our churches, the church cannot continue to perpetuate a rape culture that shames young girls and women without understanding and does not hold men accountable for their treatment of women. The church must be at the forefront of changing how we view, treat and respect women, especially those in ministry and within our walls.

In summary, the committee’s recommendation is that the following items be replaced:

- The amount and/or requirement of in-person meetings
- Antiquated notions of church and “Christian”
- The music ministries of our churches
- Disbandment of clubs and organizations within the local church that have done no ministry
- The ideology of misogyny and rape culture

In conclusion, while the list may seem daunting as we consider what we need to retain, replace or recycle, we the AME Zion church have a legacy on which we can stand, and a God in which we can trust to maintain our relevancy in our communities, and deliver a church to the coming generations that is rooted in scripture and celebrates our heritage as The Freedom Church.

Respectfully submitted,

The State of the Church Committee
Rev. Delmar D. Lytle, Chairperson

Rev. Dr. Darrell Gaskin, Rev. Samuel Whittaker, Rev. Sandra Reed, Rev. Patrick Barrett, Rev. Michael Stanley, Rev. Alanna Thomas, Rev. Lorenzo Lyons, Rev. Dr. Winston Gooden, Rev. Beverly Jones, Dallas Taylor, Megan Saxon, Tracey Jennings and Hunter Forte – Committee Members