

Connectional Lay History

The Lay Organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the newest in our church relative to our total years of existence. The Organization, like many in our church, at any early age, did not keep official records that would serve as reference material.

Research started with a brief history as given by former president, Attorney Herbert L. Dudley of Detroit. He used as his first pamphlet – History and Official Guide of the Lay Movement – by Professor R.J. Gardner of Cleveland, Ohio. In this pamphlet, Professor Gardner states that the “Organized Lay Movement” started at the General Conference in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1912, with Professor Charles H. Johnson of Wilberforce as the first president. It was known as the “Laymen’s Missionary Movement.” Professor Johnson traveled extensively through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, etc. He wrote pamphlets, Men at Work and Laymen’s Missionary Movement.

This organization was short lived and at the 1916 General Conference, not being satisfied with the progress of the Laymen’s Missionary Movement, the Connectional Lay College was organized with Professor Carl V. Roman, a noted Greek Scholar at Fisk University, as president. This organization met only once in four years at the seat of the General Conference and only delegates to that Conference were members. With this ever changing membership and not funds, etc., the Organization did not reach the local lay members that it needed to do so very much. Since Dr. Roman was not elected to the General Conference in 1920, the Lay College proceeded to elect a new president, Mr. Malone, the Poro College (aimed at educating the Black community of St. Louis, the college trained women as agents for Poro products and by 1926 claimed to have graduated some 75,000 agents located throughout the world, including the Caribbean. Mr. Malone was the husband of the famous Annie Turnbo Malone, the first black female millionaire.) millionaire of St. Louis, Mo., who served until 1924, when Dr. R.R. Williams of Tampa, Florida, was elected. Dr. Williams served as president until the General Conference in 1936, when Attorney Herbert L. Dudley was elected. Attorney Dudley remained president until he retired in 1959 and Mr. J.D. Williams of Kansas City, Missouri was elected. Because the eight- year term law had not been instated, Mr. J.D. Williams served until the 19th Biennial Session in 1985 which was held in Nashville, Tennessee. Subsequently, at that time, Dr. Katheryn Brown became the first female president of the Connectional Lay Organization.

In 1993, at the 23rd Biennial Session in Columbus, Ohio, Mr. James L. Williams became the eighth president of the Connectional Lay Organization. At the 27th Biennial Session, Mr. Arthur D. Brown of Columbus, Ohio was elected and in 2003 at the 28th Biennial Session Mr. Jesse L. Burns, Jr., of Gainesville, Florida was appointed President due to the untimely death of President Brown. In 2005 at the 29th Biennial Session in Houston, Texas, Jesse L. Burns, Jr., Gainesville, Florida, was elevated as the 10th elected President and in 2009 at the 31st Biennial Session in Little, Rock Arkansas, Dr. Willie C. Glover,

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Columbus, Ohio, was elected as the 11th President of the Connectional Lay Organization.

Some of the outstanding laymen who did much to pave the way for the present organization were: Dr. C.V. Roman; Ira T. Bryant, Publisher of Church Literature; William H. Shackelfort; Professor Henry Davidson; The Honorable George W. Malone; Professor Monroe Works; John Merritt; John R. Hawkins, and many others.

It was discovered early in the history of the Lay College that an organization that met only every four years, and composed of a constantly changing membership or personnel, could not do a good job of mobilizing the laity for effective service in the church, and so the laymen in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1946, abolished the old Lay College which met every four years at the seat of the General Conference with a constantly changing membership, and organized the Connectional Lay Organization on Episcopal District levels down through the Conferences to the local units and churches.

It meets biennially and has a permanent membership that reaches down to the grass root level of the laity. It has held biennial meetings in 1949 in Chicago; 1951 in St. Louis; 1953 in Tulsa; 1955 in Philadelphia; 1957 in Oakland California(UPDATE) There are those who think that the organized lay movement just recently came into existence when the General Conference of 1948 passed a law giving laymen the right to organize in the local church and make the lay organization a part of the organic law of African Methodism.

This, you will see, is merely the culmination of a long and gigantic struggle which had been waged by a large number of courageous laymen over the years. It is noteworthy to observe that some of the most significant, progressive and constructive legislation enacted by the various General Conferences of our church has taken place since the laymen have acquired equal representation. This has not been just by accident or mere coincidence. It has been true because the influence, prestige and voting strength of the laity have been thrown behind very constructive and worthwhile movements in the church.

In 1928, legislation giving laymen equal representation in the General Conference was enacted by the General Conference which met at Chicago, Illinois. Up to that time, lay representation was confined to three (3) laymen from each Annual Conference. In 1932, at the General Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio, laymen were granted the right to serve on the Episcopal Committee. However, Bishop Flipper ruled at the succeeding General Conference in 1936 in New York City that the right to serve on the Episcopal Committee by the laity was an act passed by the General Conference of 1932 and applied only to that General Conference, so that in 1936 we had to renew the fight previously made in Cleveland to establish the right of laymen to serve permanently in equal numbers on the Episcopal Committee. The General Conference of 1936 definitely and permanently

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established the right of laymen to serve in equal numbers on the Episcopal Committee. In 1940, in Detroit, Michigan, legislation gave the laymen equal representation in the Annual Conference. In 1944, the laymen sought equal representation on all Departmental Boards. The most significant achievement at the 1944 General Conference was the weight and influence thrown by the Lay Organization behind the legislation which created a Pension Department in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

We find Episcopal District Lay Organizations organized in every Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Continental United States from the first Episcopal District down through and including the Thirteenth Episcopal District.

Our organized lay movement has, therefore, had three (3) significant stages of growth and development. First, the early formative years under the Laymen's Missionary League organized in 1912 by Professor Charles H. Johnson, Wilberforce University; second, Connectional Lay College, organized in 1916 under the leadership of Dr. Carl V. Roman of Fisk University; and finally in 1946 in Connectional Laymen's Organization organized by the delegates from the Lay College who were meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1946. Today, the organized lay movement in the African Methodist Episcopal Church operates as a vital force for good because it is free, independent and unmotivated by any desire, motive or purpose other than the general welfare of African Methodism.