

50th Celebration of the General Board

by Valerie Gary Bell

**I WILL BLESS THE LORD, AT ALL TIMES; HIS PRAISE SHALL CONTINUE TO BE
IN MY MOUTH.....**



Valerie Gary Bell

To the Senior Bishop of the Church, Bishop Philip R. Cousin, To Bishop Richard Allen Chappelle, President of the General Board, To Bishop Preston Warren Williams, President of the Council of Bishops, To the Bishops of the Church, and their Spouses, to the General and Connectional Officers, and their Spouses, To the Members of the General Board, To the Presiding Elders, Pastor, Missionaries and Laity, my brothers and sisters in Christ. I bring you Greetings from the Committee, whose honor it is to Commemorate and Celebrate the 50 Year Anniversary of the General Board of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

I would like to thank my Chairman, Bishop Philip R. Cousin, Sr. for this particular assignment, and I am always grateful for the opportunity to serve. I bring you greetings from the Sensational, Second Episcopal District, where I have been wonderfully blessed to live and serve, under the leadership of Bishop and Mrs. Adam J. Richardson, and finally from First A.M.E. Church, in Manassas Virginia, where the Rev. Ronald Boykin is

my beloved Pastor.

My task is to present a brief Historical Perspective, Recognizing the Birth, Mission and Purpose of the General Board, or “What the First General Board was Created to do?” Now this is a monumental challenge, in itself, however, not being a member of the Clergy or a Theologian, however, being elected in 1992, having been a member of the General Board, for the past 12 years, I would, ask, prayerfully, that you would indulge me a few moments of personal reflection.

Come with me, the date is May 1956, the place is Miami, Florida, the setting is the 35th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This General Conference is, regarded by some, as the most important General Conference in African Methodism since 1816. The General Conference of 1816 brought together 16 independent Congregations to form our denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Between 1816 and 1956, the A.M.E. Church is now 150 years old, handling millions of dollars, but still operated without a budget. Each Episcopal District functioned as a separate autonomous entity. There was no consistency or continuity in the governance of these Episcopal Districts, and without a Connectional Budget, each Episcopal District functioned independently both financially and programmatically. Any discussion about the birth of the General Board or the development of the Connectional Budget must include the pivotal role played by “The Brotherhood Movement”. The Brotherhood Movement, was a group of ministers who demanded reform in the Church, persons such as Rev.’s Sam Davis, A.

A. Davis, Ezra Johnson and A. Louis Williams, but led by its charismatic, and shrewd President, Rev. H. Ralph Jackson, forged ahead, across the Church, calling for the adoption of a Connectional budget. Their slogan "Reconstruction Under God", was an attractive one to most members of A.M.E. Church, because of the many and numerous assessments.

In order that we get a clear picture of the work put into the Brotherhood movement, it is necessary to cite the letter dated January 29, 1956, sent to every General Conference delegate, containing the entire proposed legislation, and asking for their support in Miami..

So in that auditorium in Miami, the proposed legislation was hotly debated, but ultimately enacted, passing, almost unanimously, calling for the following:

1. The establishment of a **central fund known as the General Budget** Fund. Each Church was assessed **\$4.00 per member** to support the Connectional General Budget. Sometimes referred to as "**Four and No More.**"
2. This Connectional Budget would **fund** the various agencies and Departments of the Church.
3. The creation of the "Board of Education
4. And finally, the formation of an administrative Body, whose sole responsibility was supervising the financial program of all agencies and persons receiving monies from the General Budget Fund. This body was charged with the oversight of the A.M.E. Church, in the interim of the General Conference. And in

particular, both the collection and disbursement of the Connectional Budget.

This administrative body would be called the **General Board**. Its composition would consist of the:

Active Bishops, The Treasurer of the Church, The Secretary of the Church, The Secretary/Treasurers of the agencies receiving funds from the General Budget Elected representatives both Clergy and Lay, in equal numbers, from each Episcopal District. For the first time in the history of the Church, Lay people were given equal partnership to determine the destiny of the Church.

And in 1972, one (1) youth member was mandated from each Episcopal District, as a member of the Board.

The General Board would meet annually, and its members sit on the various Standing Commissions would hear the reports of their respective agencies, reviewing and evaluating the account of their stewardship for the past year, as well as a projection of what they plan to do in the next year. What I have just shared is a summary of the birth of the General Board. But for the mission and purpose, I would direct your attention to the Discipline, in the sub-section entitled the Duties of the General Board, It states the following:

“During the Quadrennium, the General Board shall have full authority to correlate the work of the various agencies, in the interest of co-operation, economy and effectiveness, as these relate to the financial interest of the Church”

That’s our mission, to Correlate, co-ordinate the work of the departments, doing what is best for the Church, in the interest of **co-operation, economy and effectiveness.**

We were not created to simply hear and rubber stamp reports, we were created as an organism and commanded to act with Authority, as a careful and intelligent evaluator.

That’s what the General Board was created to do, in 1956.

But the question we must ask ourselves is what are we doing today, in 2006?

Is the General Board functioning effectively, for the purpose that we were designed?

Indeed, we have an awesome task. Our commissions meet only once a year, with members sitting on 3, 4 and 5, commissions, which meet at the same time.

Factor in the ever changing composition of Board members, like this quadrennium, when over 50% of the Board members are spanking, brand new, having never served on the General Board. .

Yes, our Work has increased, but at the same time, our business work day has grown shorter and shorter, consumed by non-General Board Activities, which have grown longer and longer.

Coupled with the ever increasing requests for additional funding, in the various departments continues to increase, while our financial resources decrease.

The resulting frustration from what seems to be an “Impossible Mission” can be overwhelming, and if we are not careful, one can fall prey to the prevailing litany of apathy, cynicism and negativity.

We are fast, approaching a crisis time like 1787, like 1816, and like 1956. If we are not careful, the dream of what 1956 was to accomplish will become the Nightmare of 2006.

While this is not an attempt to vilify the Administrative Arm of the Church, But it is an attempt to sound the alarm that we are creeping dangerously close to losing sight of why the

General Board came into being, and what it was designed to do.

The General Board Meets once a year to and as I stated earlier, “**with the**

authority to correlate the work of the various agencies, in the interest of co-operation, economy and effectiveness,...”but the General Board Meeting has evolved into the time for everybody else in the Church to meet, and our workday becomes compressed to the point of total ineffectiveness.

In the morning, we must wait for the various District, School, and Organizational breakfasts to dismiss, before we can begin the General Board deliberations of the day.

That is not the way to conduct the business of this great Church.

The General Board Commissions meet to hear departmental reports to assess and evaluate their Stewardship, but at any given time 3 to 4, up to 7 Commissions are meeting at the same time.

That is not the way to conduct the business of this great Church.

To my fellow Board Members, if a careful analysis of the Roll is taken, there are some District representatives who sporadically attended the meeting, I mean actually, “in the meeting”, not the “Hobby in the Lobby.”

That is not the way to conduct the business of this Great Church.

Because of God’s Goodness and the contributions of so many committed

servants who have unselfishly served the Church, from 1956 to the present. Through God's Grace, and their dedication we have been able to:

- Submit Connectional Budgets
- Manage and coordinate the work of the various departments
- Respond to the Church's financial crisis
- Establish a Pension or Annuity Fund, which has grown from -0- to over 58 million, in only 50 years.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY_____

But we can't stop there; there is so much work to be done. Yes the future lies ahead, but what role will the General Board play in making that future a brighter day for our Zion. We **can**, through the work of the General Board, **do God's will**.

And So, as we **Celebrate**, our 50 year Anniversary, now is a good time to **revisit** the story of 1956. Celebrating the gift, that the General Board was created to be.

We should **Commemorate** our 50 year Anniversary. **Retelling** the story of 1956, for some have never heard. Never heard of Rev. Ralph Jackson, never heard of the Brotherhood, and the dramatic and pivotal role they played on the Stage of African Methodism.

To my fellow General Board Members, Now is a good time to **Reflect** on our 50

year past, and reflect on our successes and our failures. Now is a good time to **Refocus** our energies on the mission and purpose for which this great body was created.

I believe that each one of you have been uniquely gifted, to serve the Church for this moment in time. The best and the brightest minds in all of African Methodism have been summoned together, not by luck, chance or coincidence, but by Divine Providential Design, for 21st Century

Kingdom Building”

We can seize the moment, to do more effective planning and preparation for Ministry in the 21st Century, **But the Question is, Do we have the Will?**

The financial enterprise of the A.M.E. Church, rivals that of many fortune 500 Companies, both in assets and cash flow, so as a Guide, or a business Plan, I would suggest the second Chapter of Acts.

Here the Apostle Luke records, what happens to another group of Church folks, who 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, were instructed to gather themselves together.

Luke recounts how the leadership followed the instructions to **stay** in Jerusalem, **with** a spirit of expectation, for empowerment. And God as the Holy Ghost ignited the

flames to further the spread of the Gospel, signifying the birth of the Church.

Verses 43-44 records how the church leaders were able to successfully pool and manage their meager resources together, for the collective good of the Church. They were successful in meeting the needs, not because they pooled what they had. They were successful, in meeting the Church's needs, because, back in verses 1-2 they came together on one accord. Because they were **in the same place, at the same time, with the same mind.**

This sounds very much like our Church Today. We meet regularly to review, assess, evaluate, but we continue to find that the needs out weigh the resources.

But that's a situation, tailor made for the Holy Ghost.

What would happen if we come together in the same place, at the same time with the same mind and expecting the Holy Ghost to show up and show out? Doing for us, supernaturally, what we cannot do in the natural.

I believe that we have gathered in this day in Charleston, looking for a more excellent way.

Members of the General Board, my brothers and Sisters, we have been given a tremendous gift, in The General Board. Many unsung heroes, of the Church, suffered

and sacrificed, living and dying with crushed dreams, and broken hearts, to bring it into being.

We have been given an opportunity to work together, brothers and sisters, young and not o young, Clergy and Lay...all together, **with a spirit of “Excellence”**

Let us use this great gift, the General Board, to serve this Great Church...

God has put the ball in our hands, and He’s depending on us, not to drop the ball....