

State of the Church
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“Help Wanted”

Jamye Coleman Williams



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Bishop Chappelle, Bishop Cousin, Bishop Williams, Other Bishops of the Church, General Officers, Connectional Officers, Episcopal Supervisors, Distinguished Members of the General Board, Loyal AME Followers (We who follow all the meetings and serve on the Lobby Committee), My Sisters and Brothers in the bond of Jesus the Christ.

Let me first thank Bishop Chappelle for the honor and opportunity to be a part of this historic occasion which celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the General Board. I am always surprised when I'm asked to do something out of the ordinary for my connectional church.

Nevertheless, I feel blessed that I have been-- for lo! these 66 years-- a part of the connectional scene.

But I know some of you are wondering what in the world is Jamye doing up there! Or some of you who have heard me from time to time speak on some pressing issue or had to listen to my unsolicited advice about what was expected of you or what I wanted you to do—you may be like the late Peter

Marshall, Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, who after his wife Catherine had served the family roast turkey for Thanksgiving, leftovers the next day, turkey hash the following morning, then turkey soup, Peter Marshall said that someone else would have to thank God for the meal because the Lord knew he was not thankful for any more turkey. The analogy, in this instance, I think is clear.

I was truly surprised recently when I got a call from Bishop Chappelle asking me to talk about “The State of the Church” on this occasion. I reminded him that the first such address had been delivered by our Senior Bishop—Bishop Cousin, son of my college schoolmate Sylvester, whose name I invoke when I want Bishop Cousin to do something. And last year Bishop Chappelle, President of the General Board and my former General Officer colleague, brought the message. When I asked him if he were sure he wanted me to do this, he told me he had been talking to the Lord. I said to myself “Lord, help me.”

On a more serious note let me say that here in the autumn of my sojourn in African Methodism I do feel blessed and humbled by Bishop Chappelle’s confidence in me. Thirty years ago—in 1976—the youth of our country had as a slogan “Never trust anyone over 30.” In that year when I was certainly over 30 I received an invitation to speak at the Orientation Session for the youth delegates to the 1976 General Conference. Many of the youth most of whom were first-time delegates are now names you recognize as servants and leaders in the church—Bishop McKinley Young, Dr. William Watley, Dr. Rosa McCloud Baxter, Mr. Jesse Burns, Rev. James Arnel, Rev. Henry

Green, Mr. Reginald McGill, Rev. Taylor Thompson, and others. So I have truly come full circle in terms of youth and age.

The world in which we live today is a world beset by many problems. It is a divided world and a hurting world. It is a world divided between the haves and the have-nots; between the Third World and the First World; between the rich and the poor; between the whites and non-whites; Democrats and Republicans; conservatives and liberals; Moslems and Christians, divided among Catholics, Protestants and Jews. It is a world hurting because of the alienation between parents and children, between management and labor, between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is a world hurting because of the homeless, the hungry, the mentally ill, the sick, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the destitute. It is a world beset by problems of all kinds despite the technological and scientific advances that have created great cities, made great strides in medical research, sent men and women routinely into outer space, even landing them on the moon.

Likewise, the church is confronted with many grave problems. A litany of problems facing the AME Church on which we take little action was addressed both by Bishop Cousin in his classic address on “The Winds Which Blow Across Our Bethel” and Bishop Chappelle in his creative approach with a focus on the “Trees of Our Zion.” Today’s problems are the same as they were last year, the year before, the year before the year before, ad infinitum. Today I simply want to reiterate the importance of our addressing the needs of the Church of Richard and Sarah Allen and more importantly the church of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Lest you think that these are only my personal issues, let me simply say that

I am a reporter for the Lobby Committee, the silent majority, the vocal minority, the concerned clergy and laity who do not raise their voices, and the members of the NTLG—the Nothing to Lose Group

Matthew tells us that Jesus told his disciples that the harvest truly is plenteous but the laborers are few. He also reminded them that many are called, but few are chosen. In each instance Jesus was calling for help. And so it is today that He continues to call Christians to help.

I daresay if Jesus were living in the 21st Century and wanted to call some persons to work in His employ, one method He might use would be the classified section of the daily paper. His ad in the *Charleston Post Courier* of June 26 could read: “Wanted—Men who are willing to forsake everything and follow a dream that will save the world.” Or realizing that the 21st Century and the Church have moved in a small way from a completely male-dominated society, His ad could read: “Wanted—Men and women who are willing to give it all up and run with a message to do the right thing.” In this context I want to use as a subject this morning, “Help Wanted!”

All of us are familiar with the way in which the corporate world does a needs assessment before making any major decision. I want to lift up for your consideration and action some of our needs as African Methodists. I submit that help is wanted

1. To recognize the needs of our church
2. To make changes in its outmoded system

When we think of our needs and articulate them, they are the those of so many of our bishops, general officers, connectional officers, ministers and laypersons. You, I am sure, will recognize many of your own personal concerns.

We need a spokesperson for the AME Church. At present no person or office is in charge of this great international church. There is no one who has the authority to speak out on national issues on which other denominations and organizations issue immediate responses. There is no one to follow up on actions we take or monitor our activities. We need a CEO. We need to muster the courage, forget our divisions, and name one of the bishops, active or retired, as the CEO. We do not need silence from the Church. Our legacy and history dictate otherwise. We do, indeed, need to be on the cutting edge of change.

We need to change the way we campaign for and elect persons to the highest, most sacred office in our church. We are operating today almost as we did over 50 years ago. We need campaign reform. It is the opinion of some that our antiquated method of electing bishops often financially and sometimes morally bankrupts our worthy candidates. The activities that are a part of our system are more appropriate for a Democratic or Republican National Convention than for the election of persons to be elevated to the highest office of our Church.

We need to be intentional about the actions of the General Conference. We meet every four years, spend thousands of dollars, waste countless hours, pass laws, print them in our *Book of Discipline* and promptly forget or

ignore them or try to change them. We need to consider carefully all proposed legislation in order to make into law only that which is sound and warranted. Laws can be changed at the subsequent General Conference and undo what may have been done in haste or simply what in retrospect some think was not a good idea. A special session is an alternative only if an issue is so grave and critical that an immediate solution is required. But we need to respect our laws—obey them or change them.

We need to preserve our history, traditions, and identity, while at the same time we embrace change. We must understand the needs of the baby boomers, Generation X—especially those between 18 and 25. But just as one of our youths suggested that a Joshua generation cannot be led by Moses, I suggest that a Moses generation cannot be led by Joshua. There must be compromise. There must be balance in all that we do to meet the spiritual needs of all whom we serve. We do, however, need to avoid “spiritual arrogance,” a term I use to describe the notion that every Christian responds to the moving of the Holy Spirit in the same way. Not all of us can praise on cue or react to orchestrated worship. Let us respect one another and understand that each person is responsible only to God. The question is now being asked, “Is there a recognizable AME Sunday worship? The question is also being asked, “Should I not know that I am in an AME Church whether I am worshipping in New York; Wichita; Chicago; Waco; Monrovia, Liberia; Cape Town, South Africa; Port au Prince, Haiti; Samfya, Zambia; Maseru, Lesotho; Johannesburg, South Africa; Harare, Zimbabwe.

We need to redistrict our Church in order to make it more equitable in size of membership. There is a decline in memberships, in resources, in denominational loyalty—due to demographics, disillusion with our denomination, absence of men. It was suggested to me recently by one of our Episcopal leaders that salvation is beyond the walls—beyond skin color. We need to reach out to the many immigrants in our midst.

We have spent a great deal of time and money to develop a Strategic Plan, which was authorized by the Church. We need to take seriously the recommendations coming from it and not set it aside as we did a previous one by the Lilly Foundation some years ago. Leith Anderson in his recent book, *A Church for the 21st Century*, suggests that there is a decline in denominational loyalty. We facetiously refer to the fastest growing denomination as “I Used to Be an AME.” Our children and grandchildren will not settle for mediocrity in the church while they demand excellence in other areas of their lives. We must address this problem of declining membership.

We need greater fiscal accountability. There should be transparency in all of our financial operations—uniformity in accounting from the District to the Connection. Again, according to Leith Anderson, members are more inclined to tithe when they can see the results of their offerings. We need to think of creative ways to approach our giving. Churches urge their members to be tithers--to return 10% of their income to the work of the church. But should not these churches also tithe? A new paradigm could transform our church's financial structure, enabling us to meet the many ever-present needs. This problem of fiscal accountability has special implications for the

younger generations—the Baby Boomers and Generation X’ers –generations that not only can read but also do read. Generations of working adults who know about budgets and spread sheets and shortfalls and capital gains----and accountability.

We need to review our position on higher education. We need to ask ourselves if we are able to adequately support all of the AME connected institutions. For years the idea has been tossed around to combine some of them for more effective delivery of educational services. At the 1948 General Conference in Kansas City, Attorney Sadie Tanner Alexander introduced a resolution, which passed, to connectionalize all the properties of our schools and colleges. Others have recommended connectionalizing all of the institutions themselves.

A final need from the perspective of many is that we need to revisit our mission statement and re-commit ourselves to implementing it in places where we are not doing so. We applaud our many churches which are extending their ministries beyond the sanctuary and responding to human need. But we might remind ourselves that in many local churches the burden of the budget keeps them from going beyond their walls. As one of the Episcopal fathers said to me on the way in: “We need to return to our first love—love of God and our Church.

In addition to recognizing the needs of our Church, we must make changes in its outmoded system in which position, power, and possessions can be seductive. We are seduced by position because we enjoy the prestige of being the Chair, the President, the CEO, the Pastor, the General Officer, the

Bishop. We are seduced by power. We enjoy being like E.F. Hutton—when we talk, people listen. We must avoid this seduction, or we will make true the adage by Lord Acton, a 19th Century British historian, who suggested that “power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” We are seduced by our desire for possessions. We need to answer the question, “When is enough enough?”

Finally, help is needed to carry out the mission of the church to minister to the needs of the hopeless, the helpless, the forgotten, the underserved. Help is needed to tackle the thorny issues which beset us. Help is needed to produce floor leaders to keep us honest. Where are the strong voices of the past, ministers and laypersons, unafraid to ask the tough questions and demand clear answers? To provide help for our Zion we need men and women of courage who are willing to challenge the status quo and to change a system which impacts us in many negative ways. It makes us look the other way in the face of wrong. It has us, according to some of our younger members, concerned only with internal policies and politics and makes little effort to use our talents and abilities to impact the national scene.

I challenge all of us to have the courage to do the right thing and always be on the right side of history. May future generations not be able to say that we allowed our personal agendas, our status among our peers to isolate us from doing the right thing. May it not be said that we preferred to retreat into the middle ground of neutrality or the shadow of detachment. May it be said that when the ad went out “Help Wanted,” we had the vision and courage to stand up and be counted.

I want to close with one of my favorite prayers which emphasizes our mission to meet the needs of a hurting world.

“Tie me to something eternal, O God!
I tie myself to things—houses, land, money—
And some twist of fate robs me of them.
I tie myself to love—husband, wife, children, parents—
But one microbe takes my loved one out of my life forever
I tie myself to a friend—a long-time friend,
A confidant—who ceases to understand me
Tie thou me to truth, God, ageless like thyself
Tie thou me to a purpose, endless like thyself
Tie thou me to human need, for thereby thou hast redeemed many

Help Wanted!

When the Help Wanted ad appears, only those persons need to apply who are willing to give it all up and run with a message to do the right thing and be on the right side of history.

May God bless African Methodism and each of you.

