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“Opened Doors and Rejection: Giving a Voice to Black  
Women’s Experience in the Itineracy”

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## **Abstract**

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Vast are the characteristics attributed to being an effective leader. In the context of itinerant ministry, the disciple who travels from one congregation to another is expected to lead well while displaying evidence of God’s call. God’s call is inclusive of males and females who encounter experiences that are different. In some instances, disciples are rejected solely based on gender. This research will consider how churches in the Sixth Episcopal District (S.E.D.) of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church can better understand the impact of gender on the itineracy and be more receptive to qualified leadership. Although wide doors of opportunity have been opened for black women in ministry, there is an accepted cultural norm of silent oppression that exists on the other side. The elimination of gender bias is believed to be attainable through dialogue among members of the denominational hierarchical structure that encourages relationships with instead of over one another.

This new relationship model will be introduced through a series of roundtable discussions with consideration given to power dynamics. By naming the characteristics of an effective pastor, the leader is identified according to the criteria of being qualified for a position, not the historical patterns of tradition or personal preference. The absence of such discussion presents a threat of returning to the oppressive and dehumanizing sins of the past that are of particular concern for women. The overarching objective of this study is to eliminate future experiences of sexism encountered by qualified clergy, by naming the existing opposition and giving a voice to the unique experiences of black women.

Opened Doors and Rejection: Giving a Voice to Black  
Women's Experience in the Itineracy

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the  
Candler School of Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Ministry  
2024

Prepared. Visionary. Servant-Hearted. Administrator. Faithful. Creative. Called. These identifiable traits are among those used to describe the disciple who serves as an effective leader in pastoral ministry. For many, these adjectives can catapult beyond the limitations of personal preferences. Instead of inclinations that are “driven and tossed by the wind” or that discriminatorily change over time, they function as the non-negotiable criteria for the pastoral leader.<sup>1</sup> These are essentially the shared virtues of leadership for individuals who say yes to God. God called, they answered, and the expectation is for fruit to remain for generations. God’s invitation for ministry service is inclusive and once accepted mirrors the 19th-century hymn proclaiming “Though none go with me, still I will follow.”<sup>2</sup>

A response in the affirmative to God’s call stands as an independent decision carried out alongside others. Within my faith tradition, Bishops and Presiding Elders, clergy and laity, male and female are those who encompass this “great cloud of witnesses.”<sup>3</sup> Each group understands God’s call either from the perspective of familiarity or a foreign topic only observable through the lens of an appointment made. However different the vantage point, being “called” is undeniably the most important of the characteristics affiliated with a particular ministry context.

Amid divine work are reminders of the origin, growth, and unexplored possibilities relating to the Creator’s plans for the ones created. It is the assurance of “the call” that makes each step along this unpredictable journey of both mountaintop and valley experiences achievable. Without clarity and confidence relating to “the call”, the ministry context itself can unintentionally become a battleground for which there appears to be no relief. An isolated

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:6 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>2</sup> The Faith We Sing, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus,” accessed December 19, 2023, <https://hymnary.org/hymn/FWS/2129>.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2 (King James Version)

journey that appears to offer more closed doors than opened ones. A controlled environment where spiritual progression is expected while the stories and experiences of the ones evolving through the context are universally ignored. Although challenging, it is the unwavering assurance of God's call as demonstrated by the recipient that provides the strength needed to maneuver through these unpredictable moments. Assurance of "the call" is sometimes the only voice of comfort in the variable environment where a disciple has been chosen to serve.

The particular context that I seek to expound upon in this paper relates to itinerant ministry in the Sixth Episcopal District (S.E.D.) of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. I am African American and female. I am also an ordained itinerant elder who currently provides pastoral leadership in the A.M.E. church.

For about a quarter of a century, I have been available for God's use in the itinerant ministry. During this time there have been inescapable moments of triumph and tragedy. As believers, we ecstatically welcome the first but also understand that the latter is assured to be commonplace. It is a revelation given to us in I Peter 5:9 "...for you know that your brothers and sisters in the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."<sup>4</sup> Suffering has a place in everyone's story. The shared experiences in the context of itinerant ministry are accompanied by stories about various levels of suffering that expose challenges unique to each participant.

This forthcoming testimony is only a fragment of my story. I am a single mother. Invited into this group after the conclusion of an engagement and marriage that covered about 3 ½ years combined. I am heterosexual. I am bi-vocational. Most importantly, God has called me to serve.

When I responded to God's call and began the itinerant journey, I had little preparation, guidance, and support. There have been challenges. However, being a vested participant in the

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<sup>4</sup> I Peter 5:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

itinerant process has now allowed reflection upon these encounters and the ability to hear wisdom speak. What has been revealed in these moments of personal deliberation is the suggestion that some of the most undesirable encounters were specific to the classification of my gender.

I assume that gender contributed significantly to the abundance of undesirable circumstances encountered, but cleverly wore the more acceptable mask of ministry opposition. I am convinced that gender was the driving force providing the stamp of approval for multiple lockouts while pastoring and in seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center. I imagine gender played a role in why I was boldly served during the 131<sup>st</sup> session of the Atlanta North Georgia Annual Conference with a request from the congregation not to return. I believe that gender was the central reason inspiring a member to attempt to change my name upon arrival to “honey”, “baby”, “sweetie” or “doll”, instead of settling on the appropriate title of pastor. My preference did not matter even after a formal introduction. And dare I forget to name other incidents that seem gender-specific such as the unacceptable occurrence of the female pastor’s baby crying in the church, staged walkouts led by the patriarch of an admired family, the refusal of a raise after years of faithful service, and the persistent presence of sexual harassment confirming that “there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>5</sup> These and other events transpired while in seminary, pastoring, preaching, teaching, working, married, pregnant, driven to a status of being suddenly single, but still called by God. These years seem to speak of what it means to be gifted, but unwanted. Able to lead, but not trusted to do so. Called, but blatantly rejected. And not able to make “full proof of your ministry” for reasons perceived to specifically relate to your gender as female.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>6</sup> II Timothy 4:5 (King James Version)

For this reason, I present the following research question: How can churches in the S.E.D. of the A.M.E. church better understand the impact of gender on itineracy and be more receptive to qualified leadership? Rejection from any source is an oppressive experience. But rejection in the location where God has called you to serve is akin to other historical patterns of injustice. While serving in an identical ministry context with equal expectations, findings reveal that the experiences of male and female itinerant preachers in the S.E.D. have several points of commonality, but also sharp contrasts. Shared circumstances of success and suffering will be easy to recognize, but the contrasting points are quite surprising. Despite advancement, opened doors, and advocacy, some matters exclusively impact the female gender. These evils include the persistence of traditional viewpoints, divided perspectives regarding women's leadership, lay women's opposition towards clergywomen, and the unyielding existence of a gender pay gap. Unfortunately, these contrasting areas are points where dialogue rarely occurs among members of the denomination as a whole or within our hierarchical structure.

My thesis is that the reduction or the complete elimination of gender bias within our denomination can only be achieved through open dialogue among members of the hierarchical structure. Reduction is possible, while its complete elimination would have to be appropriately categorized as a miracle! It is not the idea, but the actual practice of reaching across the aisles in this context that will encourage collective buy-in within a system that could be in danger of repeating the sins of the past. Despite undeniable progress, there could be a return to an oppressive existence that is of particular concern for women.

I contend that open dialogue with S.E.D. episcopal leadership, presiding elders, clergy, and laity can serve as "gatekeepers" regarding our collective understanding of the non-negotiable traits of an effective pastor. Instead of ambiguity, these conversations will provide both a clear

and consistent benchmark regarding fair expectations, thus exposing and eliminating the temptation for personal gender preferences that interfere with the acceptance of qualified leadership. Since the A.M.E. church has a clear hierarchy, the cumulative understanding of “qualified leadership” flows from the top down with the expectation of effective implementation within each local congregation. The A.M.E. church was not created to be a pseudo-connectional church, but one that cooperatively takes direction from the head.

The steps forward in this paper will include the origins of the A.M.E. church, a brief history of the itineracy, a discussion of the status and progress of women in the A.M.E. church, data analysis from interviews and surveys disseminated to clergy and laity, identification of existing problems exclusive to women, and a description of a proposed ministry innovation.

### **A.M.E. HISTORY**

Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal church with an uncompromising desire for freedom, acceptance, and equitable treatment. While societal norms constantly spoke to a status of “less than” or misguided labels of inescapable inferiority, Allen and others were looking for something a bit more inclusive in the house of God. This pioneer of freedom was a 27-year-old African who had been repetitively subjected to dehumanizing treatment by the overwhelming majority. However severe the challenges encountered; he and others were determined to show up for worship in a space that was inconsistent at best with being welcoming. Over time, this continual lack of hospitality evolved into an unavoidable occurrence of blatant racial discrimination.

In 1787, “officials at St. George’s Methodists Episcopal church pulled blacks off of their knees while praying.”<sup>7</sup> Male and female worshippers who experienced this injustice together

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<sup>7</sup> “Our History,” AME Church, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history>.

responded in a unified manner by walking out “as a protest against the inhuman treatment...”<sup>8</sup> A unified departure following a moment of public embarrassment led to the birth of a church organized by people of African descent and heritage. Formally organized in 1816, the A.M.E. church continues to spread Christ’s liberating gospel in response to innumerable incidents of social injustice within and without the context of official congregational settings.

From humble beginnings in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the A.M.E. church has now expanded its membership to “twenty (20) Episcopal Districts in thirty-nine (39) countries on five (5) continents.”<sup>9</sup> That is quite an amazing progression from origins in a blacksmith shop to the five continents of Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, and North America. Equally impressive is the denomination’s status of “2,785,000+ members worldwide” and 7,130+ individual congregations” which speaks to the prioritization of church growth.<sup>10</sup>

In North America, the state of Georgia which is also known as the S.E.D. consists of six (6) Conferences. Among the 159 counties within the state, the A.M.E. church has a ministry presence of “more than 500 churches and the greatest concentration is in Atlanta.”<sup>11</sup> The churches are organized by the following parameters: Old Georgia Conference, Atlanta North Georgia Conference, Macon Georgia Conference, Southwest Georgia Conference, South Georgia Conference, and Augusta Georgia Conference. Each of the six (6) Conferences function under the leadership of seventeen (17) Presiding Elder Districts of which only seven (7) women have had the opportunity to serve in this capacity since the year of our Lord 2000. With appreciation for their service and strength amid adversity, their names in order of appointment are Presiding Elder Ella Mae Samuels, Presiding Elder Jaqueline Smith (*retired*), Presiding Elder Catherine

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew White, *Know Your Church Manual* (Nashville, AMEC Publishing House, 1965), 6.

<sup>9</sup> “Leadership,” AME Church, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://www.ame-church.com/leadership/>

<sup>10</sup> AME Church, <https://www.ame-church.com>

<sup>11</sup> “About Us,” Sixth Episcopal District of the AME Church, <https://ame6.church/about-us/>

Mathis, Presiding Elder Millie (Rambeau) Shorter (*reappointed as a pastor*), Presiding Elder Yvonne Hudson Whitman (*deceased*), Presiding Elder Toni Belin Ingram, and Presiding Elder Kimberly McMichael. In the year 2024, there are currently 3 women out of the 17 leaders who are serving as Presiding Elders in the Old Georgia, Augusta, and Macon Conferences respectively. Of the remaining conferences, the Southwest Conference is the only other geographical area in Georgia that has ever had a female to serve as a Presiding Elder. The South Georgia Conference and the Atlanta North Georgia Conference have never broken this stained-glass ceiling in relationship to being under the supervision of qualified female leadership. The writer's association is with the Atlanta North Georgia Conference (ANGC) which consists of four (4) Presiding Elder Districts: Atlanta East, Atlanta West, Atlanta North, and Atlanta South.<sup>12</sup> Each of these Presiding Elder Districts has historically maintained male leadership.

### **ATLANTA NORTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE**

When the next session of the Atlanta North Georgia Annual Conference (ANGC) assembles in May of 2024, members of the denomination will have gathered for 150 years. During this meeting, the denomination will be 208 years old. The Annual Conference is “composed of all traveling elders and deacons (including chaplains) ...” and attendees will convene for the 150<sup>th</sup> time to call the roll, hear the Annual Sermon, conduct required business matters, and as a part of the itinerant process receive an identical or altered pastoral appointment with the stroke of the Bishop's pen.<sup>13</sup>

The latter captures what it means to be a part of the unpredictable nature of the itineracy. Serving in the itineracy is such a spontaneous ministry context that there is no such thing as an

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<sup>12</sup> *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, “Annual Conference”* (Nashville: The AME Sunday School Union, 2022), 293.

<sup>13</sup> *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church, “The Annual Conference Composition”*, 281.

inseparable relationship with the congregation the pastor preaches to the Sunday before answering the roll. The appointment of ministry service before the opening of the Annual Conference is not guaranteed to be the same congregation to which the pastor returns “following with a glad mind” and having submitted his/herself to the godly judgment of the chief minister—the Bishop.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, from a sea of capable itinerant preachers who make up the ANGC, one disciple is always carefully selected for the opportunity to preach the Annual Sermon. The Annual Sermon is a point of intersection where both clergy and laity are celebrated and steadfastly encouraged regarding divine work. From the established historical pattern, the body of Christ who gathers for opening worship sings with unity of voice a song which testifies to their collective determination to prevail.

*“And are we yet alive, And see each other’s face?  
Glory and praise to Jesus give, For His redeeming grace.*

*Preserved by power divine, To full salvation here,  
Again in Jesus’ praise we join, And in His sight appear.*

*What troubles have we seen, What conflicts have we passed  
Fightings without, and fears within, Since we assembled last.<sup>15</sup>*

As previously indicated, the assumption being made is that the “troubles seen...and conflicts passed” are shared, but also gender specific. On May 4, 2021, Rev. Dr. Susan H. Buckson was the first woman selected for the privilege of preaching The Annual Sermon at the Atlanta North Georgia Conference. It took 147 years for a woman to be allowed the opportunity to encourage her peers as well as congregational lay members. In her sermon entitled “Come Out From Among Them,” she masterfully used the biblical text of II Corinthians 6:14-18 to highlight the differences between various groups. In her opening argument, she claims that all

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<sup>14</sup> *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church*, “Public Worship and Rituals”, “The Ordination of Elders”, 694.

<sup>15</sup> *The African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal* (Nashville: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1988), #304.

who serve can find themselves “metaphorically swimming with the flow of the current because it requires less initiative, less opposition, less foresight, and less energy instead of swimming against the current that requires more.”<sup>16</sup>

This practice of having to “swim upstream” is common to the system of itinerant ministry. Both males and females who have answered God’s call to go are thrust into an environment that does not differentiate between them, unless or until experiences encountered prove this disparity to be true.

### **HERE AM I, SEND ME!**

At its core, the itineracy has a universal meaning for males and females. The basis not only includes hearing God’s call but also being available for God’s use. There is an invitation and the opportunity for a response revealed to us through the call of Isaiah.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,  
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”  
And I said, “Here am I; send me!”  
And he said, “Go and say to this people...”<sup>17</sup>*

Hearing the voice of the Lord “qualifies” the candidate for the ministry service opportunity, but the command to “go” is the beginning of the journey. For many, the highlight of the Annual Conference occurs during the Closing and Commissioning Service. With unified voices, both clergy and laity sing God’s command to “Go, Preach My Gospel.”<sup>18</sup> Both genders go. They go “as warriors of light amidst the wilderness darkness.”<sup>19</sup> They go and serve wherever

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<sup>16</sup> Rev. Dr. Susan H. Buckson, “Come Out From Among Them” (sermon presented at the 147<sup>th</sup> Session of the Atlanta North Georgia Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA, May 4, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 6:8—9a (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>18</sup> *The African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal* (Nashville: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1988), #220.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Feinman, “Itinerant Circuit -Riding Minister: Warrior of Light in a Wilderness of Chaos,” *Methodist History* 45, no 1 (October 2006):45.

the bishop sends them. They go equipped with gifts and graces given by God to supply the needs of the particular congregational appointment. That is the advantage of the itinerant system.

Traveling from place to place. Preaching the gospel. Making a positive impact and a notable difference in one church after another. Males and females “go” with the expectation to provide leadership, but the journey for women continues to be uphill due to the “triply oppressive realities of racism, sexism, and classism.”<sup>20</sup> The experiences of women in the itineracy in the A.M.E. church most accurately resemble the same “good fight of faith” that originated among predecessors of progress both known and unknown.

### **HISTORICAL STRUGGLES**

One woman who distinctly heard and answered God’s call upon her life in the context of the itineracy was Jarena Lee. In 1809, she was “the first black woman to request the right to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>21</sup> Convinced that God had called her, Lee visited Rev. Richard Allen to inform him of her desire to preach, to connect with the Methodists, and no doubt to use whatever gifts she possessed for the good of the church. However good her intentions, the adverse reply from Allen who was undoubtedly the top tier of leadership at that time was “that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it-that it did not call for women preachers.”<sup>22</sup> Can you imagine the discouragement and inner conflict of this encounter? Hearing an unobstructed voice saying “Go, preach the Gospel”, but being told that the voice you claim to have heard and the instructions given do not line up with the church’s polity. In this scenario, God’s call is outrightly denied. When Lee considered how this type of uncompromising stance

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<sup>20</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989)

<sup>21</sup> Marcia Y. Riggs, *Can I Get A Witness?: Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women An Anthology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) 6.

<sup>22</sup> Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Pantianos Classics, 1836) 15.

on the topic of women preaching could affect the church in the future, she warned of the need to be cautious. She forewarned that the church's goal of spreading the gospel message could be in danger of being compromised due to an overemphasis on what was or was not blatantly stated in the Discipline. Her uneasiness centered around the fact that "lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life."<sup>23</sup>

God called her to preach. God called her to "go." God provided a mandate to travel within the boundaries of the itinerant ministry. God called her knowing her gender as female before giving her an assignment of equal importance and responsibility. As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> - century, Lee's autobiographical account reveals that exclusive matters for women regarding equity of treatment and opportunity while serving alongside their male counterparts were not issues to remain silent about. Her argument can be found below:

*"If then, to preach the gospel by the gift of heaven, comes by inspiration solely, is God straitened: must he take the man exclusively? May he not, did he not, and can he not inspire a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and accompany it too with power to the sinners' heart. "<sup>24</sup>*

Jarena Lee's life and service in ministry proved that she embraced her role as a vessel for God's use. She was licensed to preach in 1819 but never ordained. 197 years after being licensed to preach she was posthumously ordained. She remained committed to God's call, despite the difficulty and hostility encountered in a male-dominated church. Throughout service in the itineracy in one year alone she "walked 2,700 miles preaching a mere 138 sermons."<sup>25</sup> Lee was called to preach, but in 1852 the African Methodist Episcopal Church ruled that women were not allowed to preach. 1852 was the same year that a petition similar to ones in preceding years to

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<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*: 16.

<sup>25</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) 48.

license women was rejected, and in 1864 the General Conference let a resolution to license women die.<sup>26</sup> It appears that after that decision little is documented of Jarena Lee's life as an itinerant preacher.

The position of the A.M.E. church regarding women in the itineracy was made known through various types of legislation introduced and adopted over the years. The oppressive views and actions of the times followed a top-down approach to inescapable injustice. On the matter of itinerancy, the "1952 edition of the Doctrine and Discipline that specifies the laws governing the church, stated in no case shall women be given itinerant relationship."<sup>27</sup> Eight years later, "it came about full ordination as itinerants was enacted making women eligible to receive pastoral appointments, to serve throughout the A.M.E. church, to run for the office of Bishop and to be appointed to the position of the Presiding Elder."<sup>28</sup> Such a reversal of opinion did not happen without a persistent and overwhelmingly united presence of women and some men. Both females and males accepted their role in the denomination to be change agents while sharing a burden of concern for the discouraging impact of experiences in the itineracy for future generations.

To this point, Jacquelyn Grant who was at the time a Ph.D. student at Union Theological Seminary "articulated in a position paper at the 1976 General Conference the urgency of integrating women into denominational leadership."<sup>29</sup> As evident today, church membership at that time identified women as the majority, but women's inclusion in the overall life and work of

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<sup>26</sup> "Jarena's Daughters-Webinar about AMEWIM," The AMEC Department of Research and Scholarship (presented by Rev. Sandra E.H. Smith Blair, Consultant, Connectional Women in Ministry,) accessed December 22, 2023, <https://amewim.org/our-herstory>.

<sup>27</sup>"Jarena's Daughters-Webinar about AMEWIM," The AMEC Department of Research and Scholarship (presented by Rev. Sandra E.H. Smith Blair, Consultant, Connectional Women in Ministry,) accessed December 22, 2023, <https://amewim.org/our-herstory>.

<sup>28</sup> "Jarena's Daughter-Webinar about AMEWIM", <https://amewim.org/our-herstory>.

<sup>29</sup> Dennis G. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (Cambridge: University Publishing House, 2020), 517.

the church at large seemed intentionally relegated to a minority status. Teresa Hoover indicates that “throughout all varieties of black religious activity, women represent from 75% to 90% of the participants, yet there is little documentation or analysis of their role in the development of this oldest and most autonomous aspect of black community life.”<sup>30</sup> The “status of women” in the context of the black church at large has often proven itself to be a sisterhood of which open doors, unfortunately, swing on the hinges of non-acceptance.

Women were not fully accepted in the A.M.E. church, although in 1960 a door had been opened for full connection through ordination as itinerants. The details of this status were further outlined in the above-mentioned position paper regarding oppressive tactics, dehumanizing treatment, and the outright rejection of women’s leadership. Grant challenged the A.M.E. church’s normalized conduct towards women “on the basis of the doctrine of creation and redemption.”<sup>31</sup> The two main points introduced relative to “the status of women” were:

1. The African Methodist Episcopal Church must affirm that men **and** women are equal under God; and
2. The African Methodist Episcopal Church must adopt a program to eliminate discriminations and injustices based on sex.<sup>32</sup>

The affirmation of being “equal under God” has significance to both men and women actively engaged in the system of itineracy. The “privilege” of equality becomes the hoped-for treatment in the church at large while acceptance of the gifts that one possesses has historically become the cry of women more often than men. This generation is fighting a battle harmonious to that of previous generations. So much so that Grant’s fifth recommendation voiced to the members of the 1976 General Conference powerfully echoes this writer’s research focus.

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<sup>30</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 45.

<sup>31</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *The Status of Women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, presented during the AME Church General Conference, Atlanta, GA, 1976.

<sup>32</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *The Status of Women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, presented during the AME Church General Conference, Atlanta, GA, 1976.

Nestled in between requests for humane treatment, proper representation, opportunities at all levels of the connectional church, encouragement towards the track of itinerant ministry, and the opportunity to serve as Presiding Elders and Bishops, was the core issue at hand—rejection based on sex. In plain terms, the demand was “that women be appointed to pastor churches on the basis of talent and abilities and not rejected on the basis of sex: and that they be given the support necessary for maintaining such pastorships.”<sup>33</sup> The qualifications of the pastor were emphasized as being of more importance than their gender. Of equal value was the need for corresponding support.

As the A.M.E. church is rapidly approaching 50 years since these problems were initially presented to her, time has revealed struggles to be fixed at one level, only to be encountered at another. One becomes exhausted trying to figure out how doors can be simultaneously opened and closed. These are now problems encountered at various levels of the hierarchical structure of the church and at the door of the congregations where pastors are appointed to serve. Instead of the pages of the *Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* these problems now stem from the places where itinerant female ministers are sent, but the God who is on the side of the oppressed remains the same. The God who has called both male and female disciples for service in the itinerant ministry has not changed, but the experiences encountered by each gender are different. One who continues to vividly bring our attention to this truth is James Cone. With the incorporation of inclusive language, Cone considered *God of the Oppressed* his “most developed theological position.”<sup>34</sup> Out from the gloomy past and post-civil rights

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<sup>33</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *The Status of Women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, presented during the AME Church General Conference, Atlanta, GA, 1976, 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), ix.

movement era, he makes a bold claim concerning the interlocking relationship of truth and experience for black people.

*There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people. This means that there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of “how we got over.” For theology to be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.*<sup>35</sup>

For that reason, the personal testimonies of male and female itinerant preachers in the S.E.D. must have a voice.

### **TELLING OUR OWN STORIES**

A total of 12 interviews were conducted among active itinerant preachers in the State of Georgia. One male and one female were selected from each of the six Conferences. Selection of interviewees was done by observing these itinerant preachers in leadership roles during state-wide denominational meetings and/or conferences, inquiring if they had taken the clergy survey yet to be discussed, and asking if they would like to be interviewed. For clarification, although the A.M.E. church is connectional, there is no personal relationship between the interviewer and those who were interviewed.

Each itinerant pastor interviewed has ten (10) or more years of consecutive active pastoral ministry service and has provided leadership to a minimum of three (3) congregations. Their ages range between 49 – 72 years old which coincides with the ages of highest responses

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<sup>35</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 16-17.

received to the survey questions solicited. Easily recognizable are the commonalities associated with the itineracy, but there are also points of departure appearing to be gender related that are worthy of further exploration.

In common among both male and female participants of itinerant ministry is the confirmation of God's call. Each pastor has traveled extensively serving congregations within their Annual Conference and/or throughout the state of Georgia. Contrary to popular narratives suggesting that women are sent to "girl churches", both genders speak of humble beginnings.<sup>36</sup> From personal testimony shared by both genders, it is not just females who are assigned to churches with five or six members, that needed extensive work to the physical structure, or that struggled to meet 100% of their required budgetary obligations. Males and females alike face unwanted and identifiable opposition. Surprisingly, three males of the six interviewed spoke of a lack of male advocacy, feeling overlooked, and being subjected to unfair treatment concerning opportunities for advancement. To be quite honest, until these responses were given a question that was never considered during this research was "What does rejection look like to an itinerant male pastor?"

Each woman interviewed spoke of the itineracy in the A.M.E. church as being equivalent to a rough journey. In addition to being overlooked, subjected to unfair treatment, or not considered for advancement, there were a myriad of additional factors revealed for women. These factors included being bound by traditional roles, pay disparities, congregational preference for the opposite gender, and women's opposition against women. All of which

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<sup>36</sup> The concept of "girl churches" as expressed by some women in the S.E.D. are congregations that no man would want to pastor or be sent to by denominational leadership. These are churches with only a few members, in need of renovations to the structure and that do not have an established pattern of meeting required budgetary obligations.

contribute to the oppressive posture of being qualified, but facing constant rejection. This is a black woman's inescapable reality in the itineracy.

According to Delores Williams, "African-American women need to devise their own terms, express their own ideas, garner their own support for describing black women's reality so that their oppression by black men, their oppression by white men and their oppression by white-male-white-female-dominated social systems can be seen clearly."<sup>37</sup> One term brilliantly coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw is that of intersectionality. Crenshaw explains that this is the name that represents "being impacted by multiple forces and then abandoned to fend for yourself?"<sup>38</sup> Black women in particular can find solace in her argument because what seems to distinguish experiences that are known in the itineracy from the unknown ones--is gender.

Of everything shared by the men during interviews, no one spoke of being rejected at the door of the church or blatantly told that they were unwanted before arriving on Sunday morning to preach their first sermon. No male mentioned being locked out of the church appointed to or informed that they would receive only part or none of their salary. I recall the negotiation of salary for a church where I served as pastor early in ministry service. The offer was to pay me all of what was raised on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday and half of what was raised on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday. Needless to say, the offer was declined being that the church only had seventeen members and the majority of them did not work, give, or attend worship regularly. I estimate that this was their behavior because they felt obligated to display their disapproval to God and the A.M.E. church for sending them a woman.

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<sup>37</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 164.

<sup>38</sup> Kimberle' Crenshaw, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," TED TALK, December 7, 2016, <https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=kimberly+crenshaw+&mid=F9E05F084A3860DAB4B1F9E05F084A3860DAB4B1&FORM=VIRE>.

These unknown and unspoken occurrences that have taken place on Georgia soil over the years give notice to both a bigger connectional church and ecumenical problem. On October 31, 2021, Pastor Ratona Stokes-Robinson finally preached from the pulpit after enduring a humiliating four-month lockout at the hands of members of St. James A.M.E. Church in Thorofare, New Jersey.<sup>39</sup> Although Stokes was officially appointed during her Annual Conference in June of that same year, it appears she was rejected from providing leadership to the congregation solely based on gender. Because she was convinced of God's call upon life, she found a way and made a way to consistently "go preach the gospel", even though her pulpit was relegated to being outside. As reported in *The Christian Recorder*, the official publication of the A.M.E. Church "Rev. Stokes Robinson did not receive the keys to the church from the congregation allegedly over concerns of her gender and preached on the lawn of the church accompanied by her husband Michael Robinson."<sup>40</sup> When injustices such as this happen, something must be said to show solidarity with the one being victimized to discourage the probability of a repeat offense. Accordingly, the Commission on Women in Ministry called for and received the adoption of a statement appropriately addressing the matter.<sup>41</sup>

On a larger ecumenical scale, there is a recollection of the expulsion of churches by the Southern Baptist Convention for having women connected to the ministry with the title of pastor. The convention's executive committee chairman released a statement concluding that Saddleback and five other churches were "not in friendly cooperation with the Convention due to

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<sup>39</sup> Adelle M. Banks, "After 4 Month Lockout, A.M.E. Pastor Preaches at Her Church," *The Christian Century*, 138, no 24, (December 2021): 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> Banks, "After 4 Month Lockout...", 15-16.

<sup>41</sup> The Commission on Women in Ministry's call for a statement by the General Board of the AME Church (2016) (<https://www.thechristianrecorder.com/statment-on-the-matter-of-rev-rotona-stokes-robinson/>)

the churches continuing to have a female functioning in the office of pastor.”<sup>42</sup> The other four churches that were expelled for having women serve as lead or senior pastors are: Calvary Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi; Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky; New Faith Mission Ministry in Griffin, Georgia, and St. Timothy’s Christian Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland.”<sup>43</sup> The state of Georgia continues to have an inclusive stance, both historical and contemporary to the adverse issues regarding women who have acknowledged God’s call.

These current events and others like them are measures that can assist with an understanding of where we are as a denomination. For the past not to be repeated, a denomination must also have its finger on the pulse of the people who make up the body in service, inclusive of both clergy and laity. The forthcoming data analysis represents the views of both clergy and laity within the S.E.D.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Of importance to this research were anonymous survey questions posed to clergy and laity centering around the topics of Annual Conference affiliation, sources of opposition, ministry challenges exclusive to gender, receptiveness to female-appointed pastoral leadership, and qualities desired in an effective leader. 274 clergy responded to the “S.E.D. A.M.E. clergy ministry participant survey” and 166 lay persons responded to the “S.E.D. A.M.E. lay participant survey.” Surveys were dispersed through a social media platform, email distribution, and during denominational conference meetings and gatherings. Although responses were received from

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<sup>42</sup> Ruth Graham, “Southern Baptists Expel Saddleback Church Over Female Pastor,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

each of the six (6) Conferences in the state of Georgia, the highest concentration of data obtained was from the ANGC.

The first surprising factor about the “S.E.D. A.M.E. clergy ministry participant survey” is that more men responded to the survey than women. Of the 274 who responded, 145 were male and 129 were female. A greater response rate from men at 52.92% corresponds statistically with more men than women being a part of *active* itinerant ministry throughout the state of Georgia and the ANGC. According to the 2023 ANGC roll, a total of 334 itinerant elders are a part of the conference with 41% being men (136) and 59% being women (198). Thus, proving that survey responses received are reflective of the dominant gender in active itinerant ministry with a belief of the same trend occurring throughout the state of Georgia.

Regarding overall survey responses specific to the Atlanta North Georgia Conference the highest number received is within the age range of 61-75. These 141 members of the clergy are closest to retirement age representing 51.65% of total responses. Survey participants with a Master’s degree represent the 118 members of the clergy who responded at 43.38%. The marital status of all participants revealed that 62.04% (170) are married, 18.25% (50) are single/divorced and 14.96% (41) are single and have never been married. The remaining thirteen are widowed at 3.28% (9) or separated at 1.46% (4). These statistics expose who now joins the conversation and the wisdom they bring to the table regarding the issues where their truth is being requested. Three findings that are being further examined relative to differences between male and female clergy are notable pay disparities, women as sources of perpetual opposition, and the unchanging authority of traditional ministry views.

To start, this survey reveals that women serving in itinerant ministry are experiencing the unfair reality of pay disparity within the church. A female between the ages of 51-60 serving in

the Augusta Georgia Conference noted the “opportunity for an appointment that pays a living wage” as a ministry challenge believed to be exclusively experienced by her gender. This was not an isolated concern. In each of the six (6) Conferences, a response was provided relating to females receiving “less salary”, “lack of equality in equal pay”, or “females not being given equal opportunities to pastor larger congregations that can provide full-time salaries.”<sup>44</sup> The gender pay gap is not a new occurrence, but its impact has a S.E.D., cross-denominational, and global impact.

The gender pay gap represents the systemic difference between the average wages or salaries of men and those of women, often for doing the same work. According to the *Pew Research Center* the gender pay gap “has barely closed in the United States for the past two decades.”<sup>45</sup> Supporting data reveals that “in 2022 American women typically earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men [and] this was about the same as in 2002 when they earned 80 cents to the dollar.”<sup>46</sup> Even with such an alarming reality, progress toward narrowing the pay gap has been non-existent.

The gender pay gap “between college-educated women and men is not any narrower than the one between women and men who do *not* have a college degree.”<sup>47</sup> This is true in the context of society, across denominations, and in the A.M. E. Church. The majority of women admitted to the Atlanta North Georgia Annual Conference possess an undergraduate degree upon arrival.<sup>48</sup> As an educational requirement, both male and female candidates for ordination as itinerant deacons “must be college graduates.” Additionally, a candidate for ordination as an

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<sup>44</sup> “A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Ministry Participant Survey,” 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Rakesh Kochhar, “The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap,” Pew Research Center, March 1, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rakesh Kochhar, “The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap,” Pew Research Center, March 1, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Atlanta North Georgia Conference Board of Examiners Reports, 2018 -2023.

itinerant elder “must be a graduate of a seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) or a similar accrediting agency.”<sup>49</sup>

Unlike the expectation in the secular workplace of the potential for a raise every year or every other year, higher educational pursuits or faithful years of service are not guarantees of higher pay or equal pay concerning local church practices. It appears that churches pay what they believe to be acceptable with consideration to budgetary requirements, overall ministry goals, and at times gender preferences. A female who responded to the “S.E.D. A.M.E. Ministry Participant Survey” said, “Although [she] was more educated than [her] male counterparts, [she] had fewer opportunities.”<sup>50</sup> This undoubtedly included being the recipient of less money in terms of her salary.

In addition to this topic of concern, is perhaps a greater source of contention in itinerant ministry that mirrors the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.”<sup>51</sup> This expression helps the reader understand how Jesus came to those who were his people, but they did not accept him. His people rejected him. When asked, “In your experience, which group has presented your greatest challenge or is the source of greatest opposition while carrying out ministry service for the local church?” The response immediately after “male clergy” as representative of the patriarchal structure was “female lay leadership.”<sup>52</sup> The unfortunate discovery here is that lay women were noted as either not helping or being a hindrance to the ministry of women clergy. Thus, creating an environment of “women against

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<sup>49</sup> *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, “Annual Conference”* (Nashville: The AME Sunday School Union, 2022), “Educational Requirements”, 130.

<sup>50</sup> “A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Ministry Participant Survey,” 2023.

<sup>51</sup> John 1:11 (King James Version)

<sup>52</sup> “A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Ministry Participant Survey,” 2023.

women” in church culture. Listed are a few of the challenges highlighted from the “A.M.E. S.E.D. clergy survey”:

*Being a female pastor and not being accepted by your own gender fully as being an affect in my ministry. For whatever their reasoning, we are not accepted as quickly as they accept male pastors. (Macon Conference)*

*As a woman, women tend to want to “try” you. There is jealousy and pettiness and childish antics. (Atlanta North Conference)*

*Females don't care for female clergy. They will give male clergy more money for travel, expenses, and gifts.” (Macon Conference)*

*Women experience the most unnecessary pushback from laity. Women sometimes resist following other women in leadership. (Atlanta North Conference)*

*Still a lot of women in the churches do not want a female pastor and find themselves competing with a woman pastor. The criticism of a woman pastor mostly consists of the person in dress, hair, makeup, etc. Because of the male, female characteristics, women are always thought to want some man in the church and get accused of stuff even though there is no truth to it. (Southwest Conference)*

*Women can be very brutal towards other women. I have found they prefer a man to lead them than a woman. (Atlanta North Conference)*

These attitudes are most closely aligned with what would be expressed by a patriarchal culture. According to Mercy Amba Oduyoyo what is needed to address patriarchy and this type of existing tension is the Spirit. She considers patriarchal views and similar expressions as barriers to unity and a threat to the community.

“We see the visible manifestation of patriarchal structures and hierarchies whether in the church or in African cultures, wherever we encounter the subordination of women’s services or refusal to listen to women’s voices. Where leadership and initiative are seen as contrary to the female spirit (or are viewed as characteristics only of rebellious women) and are not encouraged or supported, we can expect the Spirit of God is being ignored. The pyramids of power that exists in African culture have found companions in Christianity.”<sup>53</sup>

William J. Nottingham harmonizes with Oduyoyo stating “This situation calls for sisterhood in the struggle for human rights and justice.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, local church lay women and itinerant clergywomen appointed to serve congregations would be a more productive force

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<sup>53</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoyo, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 182.

<sup>54</sup> William J. Nottingham, review of “*Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy*,” *International Review of Mission*, 94, no 572 (January 2005): 165.

working together against oppression and sexism, instead of repeating a cycle of opposition that was birthed in power structures that neither group is responsible for creating. If the goal is for the church to be taken seriously, all instances where there is an absence of God’s love on display to those witnessing our interactions with one another have to cease. Oduyoyo argues that “a church that consistently ignores the implications of the gospel for the lives of women---and others of the underclass—cannot continue to be an authentic voice for salvation. Not until we can say that what hurts women also hurts the entire Body of Christ, will we in truth be able to speak of “one Body.”<sup>55</sup>

I contend that the motivating force behind the rejection of women called by God to itinerant ministry in the S.E.D. remains the stronghold of traditional views (i.e. Biblical authority). Teresa L. Fry Brown discusses biblical authority and creation order as arguments made either for or against the call to ministry.<sup>56</sup> She elaborates further that “women who enter ministry are purported to be trying to impinge on “male” territory and destroy the very foundations of created order.”<sup>57</sup> Great progress has been made in the A.M.E. church, but “traditional views” or a preference for “traditional roles” concerning women is a point of interminable conflict. It is a conflict unable to be resolved if the suggested remedy is a return to an openly oppressive existence. The evidence of such immovable mindsets is scattered throughout each of the 6 Conferences of the S.E.D., but concealed from view in our interactions with each other. The following voices support the existence of such traditional views:

*God does not call women to pastor. (Southwest Georgia Conference)*

*Women prefer men to lead them. (South Georgia Conference)*

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<sup>55</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoyo, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995) 182.

<sup>56</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Can a Sistah Get a Little Help: Encouragement for Black Women in Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), xvi.

<sup>57</sup> Fry Brown, *Can a Sistah Get a Little Help*, xvi.

*Women and men believe that a woman is not supposed to be the pastor. (Augusta Georgia Conference)*

*Currently, there are some congregations who do not want women preachers. I have not experienced that but do know some churches that have. (Old Georgia Conference)*

*The reliance on Biblical interpretation which is exclusively told from a patriarchal perspective. (Old Georgia Conference)*

*Although women have made great strides, it is still [an] educational process for lay female members and leaders to embrace female clergy. They oftentimes still operate under their imprisonment of their own thinking. For some continue to act out and demonstrate the myths nurtured and indoctrinated by male clergy and male leadership about the value of female clergy ministering beyond speaking at Women's Day. Often times the issues they vocalize about female clergy is accepted when exhibited by male clergy and male leadership." (Atlanta North Georgia Conference)*

The objectionable voices and disapproval of men coming through the voices of compliant women are the two distinct ways that opposition to female leadership enters the room. As in our denominational hierarchy, there are traditional beliefs that are passed down from one level of each power dynamic to the next. Bishop Vashti M. McKenzie, the first woman to be elected and consecrated bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal church refers to theological objections known as the "household codes." This practice involved the "rejection of female leadership then centers on women being categorically subordinate in the hierarchy that is supported by Christ, scripture, and the church."<sup>58</sup> In these instances, the traditional views embraced silence cooperative ministry goals and create a wall of separation between clergy and laity.

The results from the S.E.D. A.M.E. lay surveys are equally helpful in assessing what is occurring throughout the state of Georgia and potentially across the entire denomination. In addition to sources of opposition, the questions posed to laity considered more intently receptiveness to a woman being appointed as pastor of their local congregation, perceived challenges of women's leadership, and desired qualities of an effective pastor. Of the 166

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<sup>58</sup> Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), 46.

persons who responded to the “A.M.E. S.E.D. lay participant survey 71.15% (124) were female, 24.85% (41) were male, and 1 skipped the question.

The majority of participants in this survey (31.71%) have completed a Master’s degree. The highest level of response again came from the age group between 61-75 at 49.62%. 155 (93.94%) who responded acknowledged having a childhood pastor who was a male, while 10 (6.06%) had a childhood pastor who was female. Thus, supporting the overwhelming presence of traditional views of ministry. The findings to be discussed include whether or not respondents believe that the pastoral role should be exclusively assigned to men, receptivity of a woman being assigned as the pastor of their local congregation, and areas considered to be problematic about women’s leadership. An interesting commonality between laity and clergy is that the group identified as the source of greatest opposition while carrying out ministry service for the local church is “male clergy”.

Members of the laity were asked, “Do you believe that the pastoral role should exclusively be assigned to men?” 99.40% (165) responded no, but 1 person (respondent # 154) representing 0.60% of those surveyed said the religious leader should only be male. This particular way of thinking emerged from the Georgia Conference. The follow-up question was “Are you receptive to a woman being appointed to serve as the pastor of your local congregation?” Of course, the response was no. This response when explored further was given by a 60-year-old male whose highest educational level was High School/G.E.D. equivalent. The rationale for what he found problematic about women’s leadership was “That’s not what the Bible says.”<sup>59</sup> This supports the earlier claim made that biblical authority and/or traditional

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<sup>59</sup> Respondent #154, “A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Lay Participant Survey,” 2023

viewpoints can overshadow the leadership capabilities of women causing them to be rejected before having an opportunity to serve.

In a similar study, the *Association of Religion Data Archives* asked, “Can Women be Religious Leaders? In response, 56.4% (705) of those surveyed said “yes”, 40.9% (512) said “no”, and 2.7% (34) said, “I don’t know.”<sup>60</sup> When this data was sorted by religion, the response among black protestants was 57.8% (519) “yes”, 39.0% (350) “no”, and 3.2% (29) “I don’t know.” The question posed began with “If they are otherwise “qualified”, are women in your congregation permitted to be the head clergyperson or primary religious leaders of your congregation?”<sup>61</sup> Being “otherwise qualified” in this context brings our attention to the potential existence of discriminatory practices. If someone meets all other criteria to be effective in a position as a religious leader, then gender should certainly not be an oppressive factor.

The follow-up question for members of the laity within the S.E.D. was “Are you receptive to a woman being appointed to serve as the pastor of *your* local congregation?”<sup>62</sup> Laity who were receptive to the leader of their congregation being female were represented by 72.73% (120 members), while those who had “no preference” were represented by 21.82% (20 members). Of the 166 sampled for this survey, one skipped the question and the remaining 5.45% (9) indicated that there is either hesitation or a specific problem associated with women’s leadership. Although all religious leaders are expected to discern and follow God’s call, women who discern and follow God’s call are immensely problematic for some.

The majority of those who have issues with women’s leadership suggested overcoming the barrier of patriarchal ideology as a primary obstacle. The decision “not to believe in” the

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<sup>60</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives, “Can Women be Religious Leaders – Beliefs Statistics Topic,” National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset, (1998, 2006 – 2007, 2012, and 2018- 2019)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Lay Participant Survey,” 2023.

leadership offered by women pastors has dangerous consequences as it continues to be the most frequently explained justification for rejection. In addition to patriarchal ideology, survey respondents provided the following traits as being problematic about women's leadership in no specific order:

People pleasing, domineering, constantly trying to prove themselves, manipulative, unmarried, critical of [the opposite gender] in the congregation, won't confront issues, no life-ministry balance, too talkative, tendency to overthink, hypersensitive, alpha mentality, not likable, need for validation, no visible comradery among peers/colleagues, superiority complex, bossy, too fragile for the job, insecure, sensitive, lack of confidence, not accepted, evidence of no mentorship, lacking leadership skills, unable to work with members [of the opposite gender], lack of experience, unable to make difficult decisions, always wanting to be on top, overpowering others, clickish, inconsiderate of the masses, not willing to listen to members, and the old familiar tune reserved exclusively for women of it's not what the Bible says.<sup>63</sup>

I would like to point out the paradoxical nature of these assertions. These words have different meanings depending on the gender of the person being described. Every negative trait associated with women's leadership can also be attributed to men's leadership. Even though poor leadership qualities are exhibited in both genders, women are often subjected to greater scrutiny and criticism. The burden of negative leadership is disproportionately placed upon women and is impossible to escape. The burdens of being black women in the church "are indeed heavy and include the burdens of women's history, the burden of the Bible, and the burden of the church."<sup>64</sup> Jeffery L. Tribble makes the connection concerning differences for black women from observations made within the Christian Methodist Episcopal church.

He presents the following:

The effects of patriarchal systems and attitudes are experienced by women across the world from antiquity to the present. The burden of the Bible is that it is a male-dominated book that has been used in the past as well as in the present as an instrument to

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<sup>63</sup> "A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Lay Participant Survey," Thirty-four (34) responses to "What do you consider to be problematic about women's leadership?", 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Othal Hawthorne Lakey and Betty Beene Stephens, *God In My Mama's House: A Study of the Women's Movement in the C.M.E. Church* (Memphis: The C.M.E. Publishing House, 1994), 44.

legitimate the subordination and mistreatment of women. The burden of the church includes the fact that patriarchy has been accepted as the divine intention in the policies and polity in the white hierarchical patriarchal church as well as in the attitudes and practices of the black church.<sup>65</sup>

The intention of this writing and forthcoming ministry innovation is to discontinue the rejection of qualified leadership regardless of gender, particularly for those whose gender is female.

### **MINISTRY INNOVATION**

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a connectional organization. Each local church is a part of that connection and Bishops are the chief officers. Although the denomination is connectional in name, there is an expansive gulf regarding the ability to ‘look back while moving forward’ considering issues presented in this paper. J Alfred Smith Sr. argues that by “employing the mythic gaze of the Sankofa bird that flies forward while looking backward, we are reminded how our African American elders answered the call of God for effective leadership in evil times worse than any we have known.”<sup>66</sup> These are perilous times. The need for qualified leadership is evident. And the acceptance of an effective leader regardless of gender promotes the overall interest of the denomination.

The A.M.E. church appears to be especially challenged in its relational existence as ‘sisters and brothers in Christ’ within the hierarchical or “pyramid” structure of the church. Within this type of organizational structure, there is an obvious chain of command with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Due to the day-to-day requirements of overseeing the spiritual and temporal affairs of the church, this top-down approach within the chain of command does

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<sup>65</sup> Jeffery L. Tribble, Sr., *Transformative Pastoral Leadership in the Black Church* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Wisdom from the Sankofa Institute for African American Pastoral Leadership* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2018), 68.

not necessarily prioritize interactions of dialogue and/or healthy relationships among clergy and laity.

Instead of remaining confined to a pyramid design a series of “roundtable discussions” were introduced in November of 2023 to encourage dialogue among each power dynamic within the hierarchical structure of the ANGC. Roundtable discussions were held with the Bishop of the S.E.D., Presiding Elders of the ANGC (4 males), Pastors of the ANGC (8: 4 males, 4 females), Lay of the ANGC (8: 4 males, 4 females), Lay of the local church (8: 4 males, 4 females) and Clergy of the local church (4: 2 males, 2 females). The objective of each roundtable discussion was three-fold: (1) To create an environment where participants are considered equal and encouraged to contribute equally, (2) to implement the practice of attentive listening, and (3) to clearly define the characteristics of an effective and non-effective pastor as named by each group in the top-down relationship of the respective power dynamic. The subsequent discoveries were points of emphasis from each of the six roundtable discussions.

### **S.E.D. BISHOP’S ROUNDTABLE**

For the church to be more receptive to qualified leadership a roundtable discussion was needed with the top tier of leadership. In pursuit of positive change, the voice of Episcopal leadership and echoes of the prophetic voice of James Cone are mutually beneficial. At the time of writing Cone confirmed that there was “only one woman presiding elder, but no bishops, general officers, college presidents, or pastors or major churches in the A.M.E. Church.”<sup>67</sup> In the year 2024, progress has happened for a few women in each of these areas, but not without intentional and open support for those “qualified” to be recommended and approved for service

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<sup>67</sup> James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, Where Have we Been and Where are We Going?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 133.

in each capacity by the Bishop. Cone's word to black male ministers and theologians was an expression of responsibility. He affirmed to black men who had ears to hear:

*There are responsibilities that we have in the church that affect how women are received and what opportunities are made available to them for the fullest development of their potential for service to God in the church and in society. It is important for black men to realize that women's liberation is a viable issue. We must recognize it and help others in church to treat it seriously. It is not a joke. To get others to accept it as an issue that deserves serious consideration and discussion is the first step. As ministers in the church, how we treat the issue will affect the attitudes of others in our pastoral care."*<sup>68</sup>

That being so, during the Bishop's roundtable discussion the following were identified as traits of an effective pastor:

1. *Genuine and sincere*
2. *That you try to be your best and do your best*
3. *That you demonstrate what you proclaim*
4. *That you have a genuine interest in people. That you know how to be a good shepherd*
5. *That you really commit yourself – to prayer, study, and preparation.*<sup>69</sup>

Just as clear were the traits of a non-effective pastor which in many cases were the polar opposite of the traits previously described. These qualities include:

1. *Lack of integrity and authenticity*
2. *Either no interest or having poor relationships with people*
3. *No demonstration of what you proclaim or little demonstration of what you proclaim.*
4. *No prayer, study, or preparation*
5. *They don't try to be their best or do their best*<sup>70</sup>

Understandably, the qualities that positively or negatively identify the leadership acumen of itinerant ministers are not gender specific. Instead, they are a result-driven list of foundational expectations to be applied in the ministry context of a pastoral appointment that complements the gift that has already made room for the individual. Traci West deliberately draws our attention to

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<sup>68</sup> Cone, *For My People*, 137.

<sup>69</sup> S.E.D. Bishop's Roundtable Discussion, November 21, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> S.E.D. Bishop's Roundtable Discussion, November 21, 2023.

the weight of black women's gifts of preaching and leadership not being sacrificed to the myth of male seniority.<sup>71</sup>

In response to a direct inquiry as to whether there are any noticeable differences between male and female pastors in the state of Georgia, Episcopal leadership responded “To be frank with you, no.”<sup>72</sup> Leadership indicated that there are itinerant ministers who think they should get “promoted” or that they should “get a break” solely because they are male or female, but seemed to allude to the fact that advancement in the church is not something that independently depends upon gender. Being “qualified” in terms of having the traits of an effective pastor constitutes an environment of equal opportunity for those who have prepared themselves after answering God's call. However, one point of astonishment for denominational leadership is how “those who least want a woman—are usually women.”<sup>73</sup> This supports the earlier claim of women being in opposition to women. From a historical perspective denominational polity blocked access to inclusion and opportunities for advancement, but today those who are of the opposite and the same gender are the ones who are attempting to re-write the narrative for “the called” concerning God's call. Even with this reality, leadership feels encouraged that we are “moving to a point where this [rejection based upon gender] has become less and less a factor.”<sup>74</sup> When Episcopal leadership was asked about their view of “women in ministry” the reply was that he thinks that “Georgia has some wonderfully gifted and talented women of which the overwhelming majority of them have earned where they are.”<sup>75</sup> It was stated that some seem to feel a “sense of entitlement” just because they are women, but that is not the attitude of the majority. The

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<sup>71</sup> Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 133.

<sup>72</sup> S.E.D. Bishop's Roundtable Discussion, November 21, 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> S.E.D. Bishop's Roundtable Discussion on November 21, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

majority in Georgia do not feel that they should be given an advantage solely because of their gender. In search of a reason behind the appearance of “women’s liberation being a viable issue,” leadership was asked, “What has been the motivation behind giving so many opportunities to women in the S.E.D.?” Without hesitation, the response was “I think if they’ve earned it, if they are qualified for it, I am going to give them a chance.”<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, if the body follows the head, instead of personal preferences of “I don’t want a man” or “I don’t want a woman” to serve as the pastor of a local congregation, Presiding Elders, Clergy, and Laity can embrace the more excellent way of being receptive to a “qualified” leader.

### **ANGC PRESIDING ELDER’S ROUNDTABLE**

For gender bias to truly become less of a factor in the church, the sentiments of equality previously stated must flow from the top down. During the roundtable discussion, male Presiding Elders from the North, South, East, and West Districts of the ANGC were asked “Do you believe that the pastoral role should be exclusively assigned to men?” The response received 100% of the time was “no”.<sup>77</sup> Each Presiding Elder then shared the percentage of women currently serving in their Districts as follows:

North District:	5 women out of 22 churches (22.7%)
South District:	10 women out of 24 churches (41.6%)
East District:	7 women out of 24 churches (29.1%)
West District:	7 women out of 22 churches (31.8%)

From a statistical perspective, the South Atlanta District appears to be the most receptive towards women in the itinerant ministry. Verification or disagreement with this claim can only be provided by listening to the voices of these ten (10) women about their experiences in the itineracy.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> ANGC Presiding Elder’s Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

For Presiding Elders in the Atlanta North Georgia Conference, five (5) communal characteristics of an effective pastor include:

1. *Love for God (The importance of spirituality/faith)*
2. *Love for God's people*
3. *Effective leadership and administrative skills (business acumen)*
4. *A strong work ethic*
5. *Commitment to God's call*<sup>78</sup>

On the contrary, five (5) characteristics of a non-effective pastor were identified as:

1. *No commitment to God's call/Not God-centered*
2. *Laziness or "spiritual laziness"*
3. *Uncaring/no concern for God's people*
4. *Using the church as a "part-time job"*
5. *Displaying a "weak faith" or evidence of not studying*<sup>79</sup>

These traits whether positive or negative were not assigned to any particular gender, but were provided as a holistic assessment of observations made in each Presiding Elder District. When encouraged to share their observations of any differences between male and female pastors in their Districts, two (2) articulated that there were none. The remaining two (2) Presiding Elders noted that "females are a little more committed" and that there is a noticeable difference in "the way they [each gender] approaches difficulties and problems."<sup>80</sup> There was recognizable criticism conveyed for pastors (male or female) who "complain about the work" or display an "attitude of being better than the appointment."<sup>81</sup> One Presiding Elder noted that it has been their observation that "congregations receive males better than they do females" while his colleague indicated that the reception of the itinerant minister "really depends upon the age of the congregation and the geographic location where the pastor is sent."<sup>82</sup> Based on responses to the survey distributed to the laity in the state of Georgia, the geographical locations identified as

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> ANGC Presiding Elder's Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

not being as receptive to a woman being assigned to serve as the pastor of the local congregation are the Georgia Conference and Atlanta North Georgia Conference respectively.<sup>83</sup>

Each Presiding Elder of the Atlanta North Georgia Conference shared that they emphasize the fact that a pastor is coming to a congregation, not that a “female pastor” or a “male pastor” is coming to serve. More important than gender is the understanding of what the pastoral role itself entails and that “a woman is just as efficient as a man as a pastor.” It was shared that some churches throughout the S.E.D. blatantly say “We don’t want a woman pastor”, but according to District leadership they are told, “Don’t tell me who you don’t want, tell me the qualities of what you want.”<sup>84</sup> Aligning with Episcopal leadership, those who are “qualified” are being promoted to serve in various positions because of their work ethic and faithfulness concerning God’s call.

### **ANGC PASTOR’S ROUNDTABLE**

The next opportunity was to speak directly with those actively engaged in pastoral ministry. Eight pastors (4 male, and 4 female) gathered for a pastor’s roundtable discussion on November 30, 2023. Raphael Warnock argues that “the relationship between black theology and the black church---and concomitantly the state of their dialogue regarding the latter’s mission—has not improved since the issue was first raised in the mid-1970s.”<sup>85</sup> The black church's mission and response to the need for liberation from oppression inside and outside of the church cannot be properly addressed without hearing the voices of black pastors. Moreover, what is

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<sup>83</sup> A.M.E. Sixth Episcopal District Lay Participant Survey – Respondent #'s 9, 18, 34, 63, 108, 117, 124, 132 and 154 answered “no” in response to “Are you receptive to a woman being appointed to serve as the pastor of your local congregation?” Six (6) respondents identify as male and three (3) respondents identify as female. Five (5) providing their ages were male while four (4) skipped the question. The ages were Respondent 9 – 61 years old, Respondent 18 – 55 years old, Respondent 63 – 71 years old, Respondent 124 – 69 years old, Respondent 154 – 60 years old.

<sup>84</sup> ANGC Presiding Elder’s Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 173.

“most needed in the continuum of black religious resistance to oppression is the *flowering of a self-critical black liberationist community*.”<sup>86</sup> There needs to be an inseparable connection between black theologians and black pastors and the pastor’s roundtable discussion comprised of mostly DMin students or recent DMin graduates was an attempt at both.

If Black Academic theologians and black pastors are serious about black people’s survival and liberation, then they ought to risk the comfort and prestige of their respective enclaves of academic and ecclesial privilege and commence a new moment, an *integrative moment* that brings together the revolutionary insights of black intellectuals and the institutional strength of the black church.<sup>87</sup>

During the roundtable discussion, participants were asked if they “believed that the pastoral role should exclusively be assigned to men?” and if “women were currently serving on their Districts as pastors?” The responses were “no” and “yes” respectively.<sup>88</sup>

In either peer-to-peer or self-evaluation, the characteristics of an effective pastor were highlighted as being:

1. Called by God
2. The ability to hear and follow the Holy Spirit
3. Self-Awareness (*Knowing Identity*)
4. Competent (*Lifelong Learner*)
5. Good listener and effective communicator

The non-effective traits of a pastor were just as convincing indicating that these individuals are:

1. Not called by God
2. Selfish
3. Ineffective communicators and poor listeners
4. Ego-driven
5. Unethical

When colleagues were asked to identify differences observed between men and women pastors a female pastor responded with “pay, salary, benefits, and all of that.”<sup>89</sup> She explained

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<sup>86</sup> Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> ANGC Pastor’s Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> ANGC Pastor’s Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

that after pastoring for about a year ½ at her church a member said “pastor we would not even have these issues if you were a man—because we would just get it done.”<sup>90</sup> Her response to that member was “So what is stopping you from getting it done now?”

Similarly, another female at the roundtable shared that her congregation told her “she needed to choose between serving God and serving the devil” because of her bi-vocational status. She clarified that she was “not serving the devil but going to work to pay her bills.” She further stated that the church did not even pay her enough to cover her light bill, but that the itinerant male pastor who was appointed after her tenure immediately received a raise. When the men at the roundtable were asked if they believed there was a pay discrepancy between male and female pastors in the ANGC the response was simply “There probably is.”<sup>91</sup> No one ever addresses the alarming disparity in pay and as a result, the disparity continues.

Another topic presented as a shared desire was the need for individuals to serve as mentors to pastors. A male participant in the roundtable discussion expressed that “every pastor needs a pastor.”<sup>92</sup> In essence, every pastor needs someone who is “senior and who can walk us through moments where greater understanding is needed in addition to listening to God.”<sup>93</sup> This desire was similar to a comment made in the Presiding Elder’s Roundtable Discussion about pastors in their Districts not looking for guidance or understanding that they have walked similar roads concerning ministry obstacles. Presiding Elder involvement in the details of ministry matters was not met with approval by either male or female members of the roundtable. A detailed explanation for this was shared by a female roundtable participant:

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

*The structure is broken. Ideally, it is broken because I see a lot of distrust as it relates to the hierarchy...It often becomes punitive when you demonstrate inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Ineffectiveness does not mean that you are not quality---it means that you need people who can help you develop in those areas. Then it is up to you to take that information and demonstrate growth. If you remain ineffective and inefficient then that's different. But along the way, we are supposed to have people who help us get better because we don't go into churches knowing what to do.<sup>94</sup>*

The matter raised here is a lack of trust concerning leadership that is in a direct supervisory position for those engaged in itinerant ministry service. Pastors shared examples of colleagues in ministry who attempted to “trust” Presiding Elders with sensitive information about themselves or encounters experienced in the church only to find that “after they poured out their hearts...they were sent to Lodebar.”<sup>95</sup> This became the point of departure regarding reliance upon the hierarchical structure and understanding the benefit of an alternative model such as roundtable discussions. Male and female pastors who have experienced a “lack of trust” from their most immediate tier of leadership are still required to create an environment of trust with the members of congregations entrusted to their care. Worthy of consideration is whether there is a relationship between the rejection of qualified leadership by members of the laity in the local church and harmful experiences encountered by the laity with other tiers of leadership in the denomination’s hierarchical structure.

### **ANGC LAY ROUNDTABLE**

On Saturday, November 13, 2023 clergy and laity gathered for the ANGC Annual Prayer Breakfast. This was an ideal opportunity to connect with the laity across the connection of our Annual Conference for a roundtable discussion. Members of the ANGC lay were provided with a questionnaire that required short responses. Each participant was encouraged to take 10

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<sup>94</sup> ANGC Pastor’s Roundtable Discussion, November 30, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. (Lodebar translates to “the land of nothing.” II Samuel 9:4-5.)

minutes to answer questions and then take 10 minutes to discuss among themselves before the facilitator returned.

An issue revealed by way of recording was lifted by an 83-year-old female layperson. Her concern was the lack of inclusivity experienced during what was supposed to be a moment of collective prayer among clergy and laity. She said,

*I noticed that two (2) Presiding Elders included everyone in the prayer for the whole group and the other two (2) were standing on their own. What that said to me was that they were selfish. The direction given didn't say that the Presiding Elder was going to do the prayer [alone]. Only two (2) Presiding Elders included the whole group that was there with them. That is something for me to look at. It said for the District to say the prayer, not the preacher from the District. That is the issue with this church for me. I see preachers and elders having their own stuff and they recognize the people they want to recognize...they don't include the whole people. And it's political and I know that, but I think it's time that we address it. It said to read it together. For me if a minister doesn't understand that my membership is real important and you ought to take it that way. But my point is...if you are inclusive, you would have asked all of these people to stand and we would have read it together, but that is not where we are.<sup>96</sup>*

This practical observation calls into question where we are as clergy and laity and where we go from here. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the interrelatedness of life. He concluded that “we are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”<sup>97</sup> This is also true regarding prayer.

Once joining the lay roundtable discussion as a member of the clergy, the atmosphere remained receptive to continued open dialogue. Participants were asked to share their memories and/or characteristics of their first childhood pastor. A female lay member from the South Atlanta District shared that “pastors back then felt like a father figure...they were like a father to everybody in the church and everybody in the church felt like they were belonging to a family.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> ANGC Lay Roundtable Discussion, November 11, 2023. Comments made by 83-year-old, African American Female from the West Atlanta District in reference to a noticeable lack of inclusiveness immediately after the 2023 Atlanta North Georgia Conference Lay Organization Annual Prayer Breakfast.

<sup>97</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 191.

<sup>98</sup> ANGC Lay Roundtable Discussion, November 11, 2023. Comments made by (age unknown), African American Female from the South Atlanta District immediately after the 2023 Atlanta North Georgia Conference Lay Organization Annual Prayer Breakfast.

This view is problematic only if traditional views of leadership being male in the itinerant ministry remain inflexibly accepted as the norm. A male lay member from the East Atlanta District recalls interactions in the church where “they did not realize they were not really family and not related until they got older.”<sup>99</sup> This is an example of unity existing among brothers and sisters, male and female, pastors and parishioners that can be so authentic that everyone effortlessly works together as members of the body of Christ.

Taking this into account, the following characteristics of effective and non-effective pastors were introduced by male and female representatives from the ANGC lay. The effective characteristics referenced were inclusivity, leadership qualities, being a follower of Jesus (Christ-like), motivational/inspirational, and approachable. Opposite in direction were the non-effective traits of poor or non-existent leadership skills, selfishness, controlling, not being an effective communicator, and being non-inclusive. None of these are gender-specific traits, but characteristics recognized by laity that make a positive impact in the local church when accompanied by a thorough knowledge of the *Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*.

Effectiveness as a pastor is not determined by gender, but by being “qualified” and called by God. God’s call is to take part in an equivalent work, but undoubtedly there are instances where the treatment is different. A female member of the ANGC lay gave an example of male pastors being treated differently from female pastors. Her comments based on observation are reflected below:

*I do believe that the male pastors have this click. They are going to look out for each other. They are respectful of the female pastors, but I feel like female pastors are still fighting to this day to be acceptable...The male pastors have this click where they are going to look out for each other. They say we are going to put some ---throw some*

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Comments made by a 37-year-old, African American male from the East Atlanta District immediately after the 2023 Atlanta North Georgia Conference Lay Organization Annual Prayer Breakfast.

*females in there to make it spicy, but we are going to look out for each other. That is just what I notice for me observing AME, Baptist, whatever denomination is it.*<sup>100</sup>

After the ANGC lay roundtable discussion, the 83-year-old said “If we are going to keep an A.M.E. Church, we are going to have to do some different things in my opinion.”<sup>101</sup> For that reason, the ministry innovation of having roundtable discussions in an otherwise hierarchical structure is an example of doing things differently. Having open dialogue while there is a model of sameness at the table, helps promote equality for qualified male and female pastors alike, within the life of the church.

### **LOCAL CHURCH CLERGY AND LAY ROUNDTABLE**

Equal acceptance for the male or female pastor is most visible or undetectable in the local church. The final roundtable discussions were held among clergy and laity in the congregation where this writer currently serves as the pastor. Following a model similar to Michael Mather, clergy and laity “met each other where their lives intersected, and in those places of intersection, they found community and kinship. And a sense of identification and intimacy grew as people recognized each other as sisters and brothers in that gathering.”<sup>102</sup> In the local church, the desired traits of an effective pastor were expressed to be biblical knowledge, effective listening, inclusive, approachable/available, and connected to the community. The non-effective traits of a pastor from the perspective of the local congregation are those who are unapproachable, lack integrity, behave selfishly, have closed minds, and have poor listening skills.

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<sup>100</sup> ANGC Lay Roundtable Discussion, November 11, 2023. Comments made by a 45-year-old, African American female from the East Atlanta District immediately after the 2023 Atlanta North Georgia Conference Lay Organization Annual Prayer Breakfast.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Comments made by an 83-year-old, African American female from the West Atlanta District immediately after the 2023 Atlanta North Georgia Conference Lay Organization Annual Prayer Breakfast.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Mather, *Having Nothing Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 117.

The comments made by lay were clear indicators of the differences observed between male and female pastors. One member noted “Men are given more respect than women. Women seem to ease into their authority. People don’t adjust easily.”<sup>103</sup> Another member shared that it seemed “males are typically respected differently. Women have to earn it, but men are given it [respect] automatically.”<sup>104</sup> However different the treatment or the experiences encountered by male and female itinerant ministers, the most important aspect is that they have been called by God and possess qualifications that equip them to be effective for the role. The truth is that gender bias continues to be an unwanted reality that now shows up by other names and in other ways like same-gender oppression. It is through open dialogue among clergy and laity within the hierarchical structure of the church that liberation can remain the priority for all who are impacted by its negative grasp. Roundtable discussions among the power dynamics of an otherwise “pyramid” type structure is an “alternative model of power and leadership within the most authoritarian and least democratic of formal organizations –the episcopally governed church.”<sup>105</sup>

## **EVALUATION**

The objective of this research was to demonstrate that there are differences among males and females in the itineracy that are specific to gender. Although both genders encounter different experiences, God’s call remains the foundation for effective and efficient ministry service. God called, and both males and females answered to begin an unpredictable journey relating to ministry and mission. Through personal experiences and observation, the discovery has been that rejection also accompanies the road traveled while fulfilling God’s call.

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<sup>103</sup> Local Church Lay & Clergy Roundtable Discussion, November 5, 2023.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 45.

Rejection of “qualified” leadership whether male or female is a practice deserving of eradication. This can occur through clearly defining the characteristics of an effective pastor through the voices of Episcopal leadership, Presiding Elders, Pastors, Clergy, and Laity. Once defined, qualified leaders can walk through wide open doors of opportunity and be received well by those on the other side regardless of gender. The historical moments of rejection, especially for women in the A.M.E. church have been explored as a reminder of how far we have come. A calling of the roll of pioneers of historical change provides strength in current instances of oppression. The urgency of now is to keep doors open for women as a point of emphasis and to encourage churches to be more receptive to qualified leadership. In times like these, it is of value that the lay women in local churches extend to clergywomen “a warm welcome in an otherwise hostile environment.”<sup>106</sup>

Data analysis from interviews and surveys distributed to clergy and laity have revealed that although women in the A.M.E. church have come a long way, there is still a long way to go. Responses were received from each of the six (6) Conferences in the state of Georgia, but two results in particular caused both alarm and concern. The first surprising result was the existence of both male and female lay members who expressed their inability to receive a female as the next pastor to serve their local congregation. Because the size of the sample for this survey was so small, a larger survey done with the support of church leadership may reveal an even larger percentage of such explicit gender bias. This probability is an indication that there is more work to do in discovery and with consideration for solutions to this problem of non-acceptance. Secondly, it was not an anticipated outcome to be faced with the opposite gender’s claim of male oppression. Three of the six men in the itineracy who were interviewed spoke of feeling

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<sup>106</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, *For the Good of the Church: Unity, Theology, and Women* (London: SCM Press, 2021), 95.

overlooked, their need for advocacy, and being subjected to unfair treatment concerning opportunities for advancement. It was never a focal point of this research to consider if rejection existed or what rejection could look like for a black man in the itineracy. To be fair, one interviewee of the opposite gender spoke sincerely about the overall absence of male advocacy, while the other two males also made comments that they felt justified their claims. On the oppression of men:

1. “I believe that because congregations and Episcopal leadership are so trying to correct a narrative of injustice, that the oppressor is trying not to oppress a particular gender which is women in ministry, so they are oppressing men. So, what they are doing...what they are doing...they are now saying I’m not going to assign a young man or a middle-aged man here. I’m going to *GIVE* this to a woman. And some of the women have said, we would rather not be given it “just because” but we would rather be given it because we have earned it or because we really are the best candidate. And that is Episcopal leadership who is making the mistake. It’s almost like they are projecting some of the sins of the former onto those of us who haven’t done anything wrong. Who as a matter of fact are partners with females in ministry.”<sup>107</sup>
2. “Rejection among males is even more crucial in my opinion than males rejecting females. It’s kind of like blacks rejecting each other as opposed to expecting rejection from whites.”<sup>108</sup>

An astounding point of discovery occurred during the Pastor’s roundtable. The A.M.E. Church is a connectional organization with a hierarchical structure. Because of the power dynamics within the “pyramid” structure, healthy and transformational open dialogue that can impact change is not occurring across each level. Roundtable discussions encourage such dialogue. When clergy and laity feel free to express themselves in an environment that does not mirror a top-down approach but one of equal importance, equal value, and equal right to participate, positive change can occur.

Another point revealed during roundtable discussions was the fact that there are now two (2) women serving as “the first pastor” among the over 500 churches in Georgia. It is also

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with itinerant male minister in S.E.D., October 26, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with itinerant male minister in S.E.D. October 28, 2023. The interviewee was making the claim that the experience is not as painful when coming from the source that you already expect it from, but males rejecting males in itinerant ministry is something he justifies as being worse than the experience for women.

believed that this researcher is the only other woman serving in the state of Georgia at “a third church.” All three of these appointments occurred during the current leadership's tenure, which has entrusted women leaders for such a time as this. It is the hope that the support demonstrated by the top tier of leadership will be imitated and adopted across the S.E.D. and among all local churches. The local church needs qualified leaders regardless of gender, but it should also be receptive to a qualified leader when she is a woman.

### **CONCLUSION**

The matter of qualified leadership is not exclusive to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. There are known and unknown instances of those rejected from having opportunities to serve based on their gender across various ecumenical groups. As a model and in the spirit of how the A.M.E. church was birthed, perhaps male and female worshippers who experience injustice together, can work together to obtain liberation from historically oppressive denominational norms.

These norms are often manifested in the form of constant opposition, closed doors, opened doors with rejection on the other side, and limited seating. A wide door was opened by pioneers who desired change and equality for women, and that door must remain open for future generations. All leaders deserve the opportunity to live out God's call. The desire is for the A.M.E. church to continue playing an instrumental role by opening doors for all who are qualified to serve regardless of their gender. But the desire for “qualified” women in ministry is that doors remain open without the experience of brick walls on the other side of them.

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