

A Partial Narrative: African Americans In the Covenant Church

What follows is a very partial, quickly assembled highlight of the pilgrimage of African Americans into the Covenant Church, primarily through the AAMA. Many voices, gifts and leaders are not captured but can't be discounted or forgotten. It has been the faithfulness of so many pioneers who have opened the doors for those of us who've followed. Some of those who've paved the way were positional leaders and others were influential leaders. This is a very narrow snapshot of some of their contributions.

Persons of Note

Rev. Dr. Willie B. Jemison – began co-pastoring Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago with Craig Anderson. In 1970 he became the pastor. He served on the Board of Ordered Ministry and Executive Board as well as other positions. He was honored with the Irving Lambert Award for notable service in urban and ethnic ministry in 1986 and received an honorary doctorate from North Park Theological Seminary.

Rev. Dr. Jerry Mosby – completed studies at New York Theological Seminary and was called to pastor Immanuel Covenant Church, now known as Fellowship Covenant Church. He received a Master of Divinity degree from New York Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry in Urban Studies. Dr. Mosby served as the first president of the African American Ministers Association.

Rev. Dr. Don Davenport – In 2001, Davenport was recruited to be a special consultant to the ECC to train pastors and church leaders, help start and revitalize churches, and mediate congregational conflicts. He developed a peer-mentoring model specifically for urban contexts. Davenport served as a ministry consultant until 2012. He received the 2015 Irving C. Lambert Award. Don served as the second president of the African American Minister's Association.

Rev. Adam Edgerly – In 1996, Edgerly served as the first African American Associate Director of Global Evangelism with World Mission. He worked with Lon Allison and Dallas Anderson. Adam was the Director of Church Planting from August 1999 through May 2003 for Pacific Southwest Conference. He left to be campus pastor of NewSong LA. In January 2000, his role broadened to include compassion and justice. Adam was key to initiating multiethnic church plants in PSWC.

Rev. Jerome Nelson – served as director of Church and Society Ministries for the Central Conference. Jerome served as associate pastor of the Gary Covenant Church from 1987 until 1999 when he accepted a position on the Central Conference staff. In 2004 became the first African American Superintendent of the Evangelical Covenant Church. "It doesn't matter that I'm the first; what matters is that I'm not the last."

Rev. Dr. Robert Owens – served as pastor of Grace Covenant Church in Compton, California from 1984 to 1991. Owens was the first pastor in the Covenant to plant an African American church, New Life Covenant Church in Atlanta, Georgia from 1992 to 2001, when he left to become the associate superintendent and then on to be Southeast Conference superintendent until 2018. He was the first recipient of the North Park Theological Seminary Distinguished Alumni Award which honors excellence in urban ministry.

Rev. Dr. Henry Greenidge – served on the Book of Worship Commission and the executive board of the North Pacific Conference. In June of 2008 he was presented with the Irving C. Lambert Award, which honors excellence in urban ministry. He was pastor of Irvington Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon

and guided the founding of Irvington Village, a retirement community. Henry served as the third president of AAMA.

Rev. Rose Cornelious – first African American woman on staff in World Mission and served as Coordinator of Covenant Church Relations East. She led two teams of African American pastors and leaders to Congo, and many other church teams on ministry trips to Haiti, Jamaica and Burkina Faso. Rose carried an important responsibility of encouraging mission training, exposure and leading experiences among African American Evangelical Covenant churches.

Rev. Bennie Simms – worked with Youth for Christ for 17 years and was the organization's first black executive director, a position he held for seven years. His work included serving in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Hong Kong, and the Billy Graham Center in Amsterdam. While working with YFC, he helped plant and pastor Church of Gary Covenant. He died on October 24, 2017.

Rev. Harold Spooner – served as president of Covenant Initiatives for Care. Harold was instrumental in starting and developing Sankofa with Jim Lundeen. He was one of the architects of the Five-fold test. He worked with others who started health-care clinics and enabling residences for adults with developmental disabilities. He has held numerous positions in the Covenant, including vice-president of community impact for Covenant Retirement Communities, and staff member-at-large for Love Mercy Do Justice.

Rev. Dr. Debbie Blue – served as the first African American Executive Minister of the Covenant for Compassion, Mercy & Justice. She received an honorary doctorate from North Park Theological Seminary. Blue, also served on the board of Bread for the World. She started out as associate director of consulting and training and later she became director of adult ministries for the Covenant.

Rev. Dr. Catherine Gilliard – serves as the first African American woman to serve as superintendent. She also served as the first African American president of ACCW, the first female and fourth president of the AAMA, the first African American female church planter in the Covenant, the first African American woman to serve as president of the Covenant Ministerium, the first African American to chair the Covenant Executive Board, and the first African American woman to serve on the Ethnic Commission. She holds an MDiv and DMin from NPTS.

Rev. Cecilia Williams – served as the second person to hold the office of Executive Minister of LMDJ. During her tenure, she was one of the advisors to the Ethnic Commission. Previously, she served at Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis.

Rev. Dr. Robert Johnson – serves as a chaplain in Turlock, CA and was the fifth president of the AAMA.

Rev. Efrem Smith – currently serves as co-pastor of Bayside and was the first African American superintendent of the Pacific Southwest Conference. He was the church planting pastor of Sanctuary Covenant in Minnesota.

- Rev. Harvey Drake** – pastor of Emerald City Bible Fellowship in Seattle, Washington was awarded the Irving C. Lambert Award in 2016.
- Rev. Debbie Griffith Samuels** – was the sixth president of the AAMA and serves as Associate Superintendent of the Central Conference.
- Rev. Bryan Murphy** – serves as pastor of South Bay Community Church and is the current and seventh president of the AAMA.
- Rev. Karen Brewer** – serves as pastor of Atonement Covenant Church in Chicago was awarded the Irving C. Lambert award in 2018.
- Rev. Shaun Marshall** – served as the first African American Director of Congregational Vitality
- Rev. Willie Peterson** – former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and pastor of Bethel Bible Fellowship Church, Asst to Midsouth

Moving toward Multi-Ethnicity

Once the denomination decided it was going to intentionally move to become multi-ethnic it had to develop a way by which to measure progress. It also had to have a way to move from tokenism toward real integration of potential populations coming into the denomination.

The '97 and '98 Midwinter conferences were themed "Celebrating Ethnic Diversity". It was the first time there had been a two-year theme emphasis, which made it clear that tokenism would be unacceptable. The two-year diversity Midwinter theme happened during Paul Larson's presidency. Rev. Dr. Don Davenport was president of AAMA and advocated for the two-year theme. Out of this work President Larson mandated that each board would need to have two non-white members.

Six-fold Test (prev. Five-Fold Test)

The development of the five-fold test happened in 2004 during Glenn Palmberg's presidency. After the two-year Midwinter emphasis on diversity, the discussion centered on, what's next. During the 2001-2 Ethnic Commission meetings, members worked to create the framework for a tool to measure progress. Gary Walter primarily worked on the initial test and Harold Spooner worked with him to solidify it. Data on board and commission compositions were presented by CG&E.

The test could not launch on the denomination level without approval from the Ethnic commission. Once the members reviewed the proposed test, they recommended a retreat/consultation with key leaders representing all the ethnic groups from the denomination for the purpose of buy in and accountability. The executive board approved spending the money.

Gary and Harold chose the facilitator and with him planned the consultation. We emerged with buy-in and with five specific measurement goals for each of the initial five areas of the test.

1. **Population:** Is the Covenant reaching increasing numbers of people among increasing numbers of populations?
2. **Participation:** Are we finding ways to engage life together through denominational, conference, and local events, service and fellowship?
3. **Power:** Are the positions and structures of influence (boards, committees, and positions at both the conference

and denominational level) influenced by the perspective and gifts of diverse populations?

4. **Pace-setting:** With additional perspectives, burdens, and gifts in our midst, what new ministry opportunities is the ECC now better positioned to strengthen and initiate?
5. **Purposeful Narrative:** How do the stories of new backgrounds become incorporated into our overarching history? How do all of these streams flow together into one story moving forward?
6. **Practicing Solidarity (added 2019):** In what ways are we standing with and advocating for the Multiethnic Mosaic? How are we sharing in the suffering of others on both an individual and communal level?

Out of the consultation, Glenn required the COA to participate in a Sankofa Journey. The COS agreed to join them on a Sankofa Journey which they took together. Also emerging from this test was the creation of the Department of Compassion, Mercy and Justice (later LMDJ), with Debbie Blue called as its first Executive Minister.

In 2014 a smaller group convened to update goals, as many of the original ones had been met. In 2019 a sixth area was added to the test. Another large meeting is being planned for 2020 to 'reboot' the test 16 years after the first consultation.

There are many other people who should be a part of the list of people whose journeys have shaped different areas of the Covenant serving more recently on Organizing for Mission and other mission priority areas.

Partial Current Picture (2020)

- Rev. Lance Davis** – first African American male Executive Minister of Develop Leaders
- Rev. Josef Rasheed** – first African American Serve Globally Regional Coordinator
- Rev. Paul Robinson** – Executive Minister of LMDJ
- Rev. Michelle Sanchez** – Executive Minister of MDD
- Rev. Dominique Gilliard** – Director of Racial Righteousness and Reconciliation

Ministerium Participation

In 2018, we had eighteen (18) African American church planters; (17 men and 1 female)

There are one hundred ten (110) credential African American clergy (73 men, 37 female) who are in good standing in the ministerium.

Closing Thoughts

We are indebted to the faithfulness of the African American pioneers who took courageous steps to move the mosaic of the Covenant forward. There were African American scholars who served at the seminary and university whose work was also critical to recruiting, training and equipping African American leaders for service in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

The consultation on the five-fold test was composed of many of these trailblazers who served in various capacities of leadership within the Covenant Church.