

THIRD STREET BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1856

Third Street Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richmond's first historically black church, opened its doors in 1856 with the support of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and as a direct result of the way both free and enslaved blacks had been treated at Trinity and at churches across the nation.

John Wesley, whose religious practices were the foundation of Methodism, was clearly opposed to slavery. The "General Rules of Methodism," which he produced in 1739, stated that those who desired salvation could neither buy nor sell slaves.¹ A year later, Francis Asbury encouraged passage of a statement that "declared preachers should preach to slaves but at the same time exert pressure on the masters to set them free."² Asbury's statement reflected both the legalities and injustices associated with slaveholding in America at that time.

Itinerant preachers, who comprised the majority between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, spoke to crowds in the open air and welcomed all races. When Richmond's Methodist converts, who had first worshipped in public spaces, became a pastoral charge in 1799, they erected their first building. "First Church," the charge that would through time become Trinity United Methodist Church, had a membership of 256 whites and 47 "coloreds."³

In 1828, the congregation completed construction of a larger facility on the South side of Franklin Street between 14th Street and 15th Street and took on the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church name. After this building was destroyed by fire in 1835, Trinity rebuilt at the same location in 1836. This third building was described by the Dailey Dispatch as "an ornament to the city." Notwithstanding this description, in this sanctuary free blacks entered through a west side door that led to a basement vestibule, and from there they reached the western gallery for seating, fully segregating them from white parishioners.

Conference records reflect the conflict between Methodist Discipline and civil law that affected not just Trinity, but congregants throughout the new nation. Despite Wesley's aversion to slavery and the General Principles of Methodism that remain in place today, the Disciplines in the 1800s required only that slaves be freed in states where freedom was permitted. By 1816, the Conference's commission on slavery wrote that "'under the present, existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish the practice so contrary to the principal of moral justice.'"⁴ In 1844, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church told Bishop

¹ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>

² THE BULLETIN OF THE KING & QUEEN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VIRGINIA; "HEZEKIAH MCLELLAND: METHODIST ITINERANT OF KING AND QUEEN;" July 1977.

³ 140th Anniversary, Celebrating Family and Friendship; The Third Street Bethel Legacy; "A Historic Sketch of Third St. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church," Richmond, VA, Prepared by Tsepho Williams, Church Historian, Third Street African Methodist Episcopal Church, November 24, 1996.

⁴ THE BULLETIN OF THE KING & QUEEN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VIRGINIA; JULY 1977.

James O. Andrew of Georgia to desist from his duties until he freed slaves inherited from his wife. Although Andrew was willing, Georgia law prohibited such a sale. In 1845, the church divided along a geographic line, creating the Methodist Episcopal Church, South with headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky. Richmond's Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church was part of this newly named conference and added the nomenclature "South" to its name. The Civil War would abolish slavery in the South, though still leave jarring issues of segregation throughout the nation.

Racial injustice was not limited to the South. As early as 1787, segregation and poor treatment drew Richard Allen, an ex-slave who had become an assistant pastor in the Methodist church, to lead black congregants out of St. Georges Methodist Church in Philadelphia. He was followed two years later by blacks at John Street Church in New York. Walkouts occurred in other communities as well. Although qualified as a Methodist minister at the 1784 founding conference of the Methodist Church in North America, it was another 15 years before Francis Asbury ordained Allen as the first black ordained minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Nevertheless, Allen and his congregants still remained under the domain of a predominantly white conference. And so, in 1816, Allen united black congregations in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland to create the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The A.M.E. church was the first fully independent black denomination in the United States. Its doctrine and order of worship remain denominationally Methodist.

In Richmond, the freed blacks who attended worship at Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South began in 1850 to express interest in a location to worship on their own. A Dr. Parker, a trustee of Trinity, moved in February 1852 that the church appoint a seven-person committee to obtain funding for such a location. His motion carried. Rev. Francis S. Mitchell was assigned to Trinity to serve this population of freed black congregants from 1854 to 1855 and secure the funds and land for a separate church. He succeeded, but perhaps at the cost of his life. Illness had plagued him for some time, and he died in 1856, the year after his service at Trinity.

The charter members of the new church were Thomas Hewlette, the leader; Samuel Smith; Diane Smith; Peggy Tyree; Randolph Rully; Rebecca Strange; William Williamson; Elizabeth Young; Dekia Pierce; Maria Jackson and Sarah Norrell. Artisan slaves and free black laborers built the church's main portion, completed in 1856. At that time, the new church affiliated with the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The conference named it Third Street Methodist Church and assigned one of the conference's white ministers, Rev. George Washington Nolley, as pastor. Nolley had served Trinity from 1831 to 1832 but returned to Richmond and served the black congregation of Third Street Methodist from 1856 until 1867, a period that included the Civil War.

It is worth noting the differing perspectives on the establishment of Third Street Methodist. In 1936, an article in the Richmond Christian Advocate stated:

In 1855 the African Mission was established by the Methodists in Richmond, and the Rev. G. W. Nolley was appointed to minister to the colored people in the city. This mission was continued in the list of Methodist appointments until the year 1864, at the close of the War Between the States. We have been unable to get any definite information about the work done, but it is interesting to know that in those dark days our people were not overlooking the spiritual welfare of the colored people.⁵

In contrast, an undated article by Wesley Arnett Turner Sr. on the history of the church's first 25 years stated:

...a little band of flourishing colored worshippers – who were never burdened under the yoke of slavery – organized into a congregation....Thereafter, the presence and growth of this body under the guidance of exhorter Hewlette apparently annoyed the white Methodists, so plans were made to remedy the situation... About two years after “west gallery aggregate” took form in Trinity, evidence of what the white Methodist had in mind blossomed forth. Thus, on July 1, 1852, ...trustees of the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South... negotiated the transfer of a parcel of land...for future use by trustees as they so desired....At last the year 1856 arrived...the principal portion of the church edifice was completed and occupied by the colored congregation...The name “Third Street Methodist Church” was given, indicating that it was an off-spring and not an affiliate of the white church. The building of this church was indeed an act of benevolence, but it also solved a problem that had existed in Trinity Church.⁶

By the end of Nolley's appointment and after the Civil War, Third Street Methodist wanted to merge with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, becoming part of the nation's first black connectional congregation. The Virginia Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in May 1867, and the first Virginia annual conference of the denomination convened at what was now Third Street Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Rev. J.D.S. Hall of that denomination was appointed to serve the church for one year. In 1874, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South transferred ownership of the church property to the African Methodist Episcopal Church for one dollar.

In 1975, Third Street Bethel A.M.E. was listed on the Virginia Historical Landmark Register and the National Register of Historic Places – the first black Richmond church placed on either list.

⁵ Richmond Christian Advocate, October 8, 1936, page 48

⁶ Historical Third Street Bethel A.M.E. Church and The First Twenty-Five Years, by Wesley Arnett Turner, Sr., Historiographer

Today, Third Street Bethel A.M.E.'s vision is to become the church that reaches beyond its walls to impact the world. It remains a Methodist church by doctrine and order of worship. It speaks out on social injustice but also acts with social ministries for members and the community. One of its best known programs, "New Shoes for Back to School" was introduced in 2006. That year, it collected and gave 712 pairs of shoes to students in need. The program is now run in conjunction with The Metro Richmond Partnership of Churches/ Synagogues, and Trinity United Methodist Church is one of more than a dozen churches participate in this highly successful annual event.

Other Sources

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A Historical Sketch Of Third St. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia;
Prepared by Tsepho Williams, Church Historian

Historic Third Street Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church; by Wesley A. Turner, Historian
(undated)

The Members Guide, Third Street Bethel A.M.E. Church, 614 North Third Street, Richmond,
Virginia 23219

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