



Christian Education Department Black History Moment March 2026



A BLACK HISTORY MOMENT

Jarena Lee was born on February 11, 1783, into a free black family in New Jersey. She began to work as a live-in servant with a white family at the age of seven. Lee did not receive religious instruction as a child. She was not formally educated but taught herself to write. In 1804, Lee was first introduced to Christianity by a Presbyterian missionary. In 1804, she moved from New Jersey to Philadelphia, where she continued in domestic service.

While in Philadelphia, she was introduced to Christian teachings during religious revivals at Richard Allen's church and felt herself to be a "wretched sinner." Bishop Richard Allen's teachings inspired her to convert, but she continued to struggle in the male dominated church. She struggled with suicidal thoughts and fantasized about drowning herself on at least several occasions. Through prayer, she finally felt justified and was baptized. After three months of constant prayer, she felt that she had been fully sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In 1807, Lee began hearing voices telling her to "Go preach the Gospel! Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth." Lee then told Richard Allen that God had spoken to her and commanded her to preach, but Allen said that there was no provision for women preachers in the Methodist Church. Lee was actually relieved by this information as it removed the social burden from her of becoming a public figure in a time when women were demeaned for daring to step out of their so-called "proper" place. However, her call to ministry would come again.

Seven years after joining Philadelphia's Mother Bethel, Jarena married Joseph Lee in 1811. Joseph Lee was a pastor of the African American Society¹ at Snow Hill, six miles from Philadelphia. During their marriage her husband did not want her to preach, so she felt forced to put her spiritual needs on hold for her marriage. It is said that her not being fully committed to her spiritual needs resulted in Lee becoming ill and a sense of discontent. Joseph Lee died six years into their marriage.

After her husband's death, Lee renewed her advocacy in the ministry: "*If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also? Is he not a whole Savior, instead of half of one?*" In 1817, she again requested her ecclesial license to preach, but Allen refused again. Two years later, during a Sunday service at the Mother Bethel the preacher seemed to lose spirit. Lee stepped up and began to preach - the crowd was very intrigued to what she had to say. Following this, Bishop Allen was so impressed with Lee that he publicly endorsed her. A leader in the Wesleyan-Holiness movement, Lee preached the doctrine of entire sanctification as an itinerant pastor throughout the pulpits of the African Methodist Episcopal

denomination. Though Allen could not issue her a license to preach, he endorsed her as an official traveling exhorter. Lee went on to preach throughout the United States, including in the South, where she risked enslavement. Despite Richard Allen's blessing, Lee continued to face hostility to her ministry because she was black and a woman. She became a traveling minister, traveling thousands of miles on foot. In one year alone, she travelled 2,325 miles and preached 178 sermons.

Religious belief became a source of self-empowerment for Lee. In rebuttal to questions on a female ministry, she responded, "Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Savior?".^[4] The idea that African Americans and women could preach was an element of the Second Great Awakening, which reached its peak as Lee began her missionary work.

In 1836, Lee became the first Black woman to publish an autobiography, which she titled *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*. She published an extended version with a hired publisher in 1849, including 70 pages revealing names of those who had rejected the Spirit's movement within her preaching.

Lee's date of death is unclear. Archival research by Dr. Frederick Knight suggests that Jarena Lee died penniless in Philadelphia and was buried at Olive Cemetery. However, records of Mount Pisgah AME Church Cemetery indicate that she died in 1855 and was buried there. Other sources list her death in 1857.

Lee's story is a rare one. She is considered a woman who changed the world. She paved the way for female ministers. Even though initially she wasn't allowed to preach, Lee listened to and embodied the Spirit of God. In 1852, the African Methodist Episcopal Church officially ruled that women were not allowed to preach. Widespread licensing of women as local preachers was not approved until 1888. With ordination to local deacon following in 1948 and full itinerant ordination in 1960.

Our own Rev. Maude Burton was motivated by Lee when she founded Jarena AME-Saginaw in 1991. Burton remained the pastor until her retirement in 2007. This church only had female pastors during its history.

Just think how long it took for female bishops to become elected and consecrated in the AME Church. In 2000 Vashti Murphy McKenzie became the 117th Bishop (active from 2000-2021), She also served as the first female President of the Council of Bishops. Others to follow were Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry, #122 (active from 2004-2012); Bishop Sarah Frances Taylor Davis, #126 (active from 2004-2013); Bishop E. Anne Henning Blyfield, #135 (active 2016-2024); Bishop Francine Angelique Brookins, #141 (active from 2021-present) and Bishop Erika Derrise Crawford, #143 (active from 2024-present).

-- Reflections from the Christian Education Ministry