

HISTORY OF FIRST AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SEATTLE

In 1886, Seaborn J. Collins organized a small Sunday School band held in various homes of persons of African Methodist Episcopal persuasion. One hundred years later, after much work and prayer, this organization is now known as First African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest and one of the most prestigious black institutions in Seattle.

First Church has a history of bold leadership that has laid an enduring foundation through the grace of God. Mr. Collins was one such leader. In 1890, Mr. Collins, along with laity members I.I. Walker, John T. Gayton, Mr. and Mrs. Milton Roy, Fred Lawrence and C.H. Harvey, transformed the Sunday School Band into a church. The first minister assigned to the congregation was Reverend L.S. Blakeney. On August 13, 1891, the church was incorporated. Signatures on the corporate charter are those of Pastor Blakeney, Secretary Milton Roy, Treasurer George H. Grose and lay-persons S.J. Collins, Alfred P. Freeman, R.R. Brown and J.C. Blocker.

On a sizable lot in the Central Area, S.J. Collins converted a large dwelling into a place of worship. The property was purchased on September 2, 1890, for \$2,000.00 at 10% interest; an unusually high rate in those days, indicative of barriers erected against most black ventures. This house was the parsonage, as well as the parishioners' primary place of worship. Numerous structural improvements were made, and the building served adequately for several years. It was called Jones Street Church, taking its name from what is now 14th Avenue.

The congregation continued to grow through the turn of the century. The original sanctuary was replaced by the present edifice in 1912, and a separate parsonage was provided for succeeding pastors. The principal mortgage on the building was the large sum of \$10,000.00, but this small group possessed courage, plus a desire to worship in freedom and dignity. Thus they ventured forth, with faith and determination.

In June 1921, during the pastorate of Reverend J. Logan Craw, this same mortgage was burned; a major milestone in First Church history. In 1923, with an eye toward expansion, two lots located north of the original site were purchased. By December 1938, the mortgage for this property was also burned, under the pastorate of Rev. Fred A. Hughes.

World War II and the years after swelled Seattle's black population with laborers from the Bremerton Shipyards and the Boeing Company. Many were enamored with life in the Pacific Northwest and stayed. This migration increased the congregation and rendered the existing church inadequate. In 1950, a new building program began under the leadership of Reverend C.D. Toliver. By August 1955, \$100,000.00 worth of major additions had been made. They included: enlargement of the sanctuary, a new wing for religious education, a kitchen, nursery and choir facilities. In 1959, property to the east and south of the building was purchased and eventually became parking areas.

The 60's, along with social upheaval and racial unrest, brought new challenges to the congregation at First Church, some being: 1) Christianity's role in a changing moral atmosphere, 2) maintaining its effectiveness and relevancy in a modern society, and 3) providing guidance in the continuing fight against racism and discrimination in the black community. Into this caldron stepped Reverend Dr. John H. Adams and in the tradition of bold leadership, he took First Church to the struggle's forefront.

The times dictate the man, and Reverend Adams was a man for the time. In addition to being pastor, he was also a community-wide leader, influential in decisions that affected the entire city and its future course. He was co-founder of the Central Area Motivation Program (C.A.M.P.) and the Central Area Citizens Committee (C.A.C.C.) in 1964, plus vice-chairman of Seattle Opportunities Industrializations Center (S.O.I.C.). Reverend Adams believed that advancement of black goals must be intertwined with broader city-wide objectives. In his words: "I am a citizen of the community, as well as a citizen of the ghetto. I will work in the overall community of which the ghetto is a part. They must move to achieve 'community'".

The early 70's brought much economic growth to First A.M.E. Guided by Reverend Solomon Hill (1969-1971) and Reverend Cecil Murray (1971-1977), the church purchased the Imperial Apartments at 1427 E. Pike, the Texada Apartments at 1128 - 13th and entered into negotiation for the then newly built Bryant Manor complex at 18th and Yesler Way. These purchases broke new ground in First Church involvement with housing for Senior Citizens and low-income families.