



## STATE OF THE CHURCH ADDRESS

### *The Winds Which Blow Across Our Bethel*

By

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Senior Bishop**

Thank you so much, Bishop Bryant.

To the Chair of the General Board, to the Bishops of the Church, the General Officers of the Church, Connectional Officers, distinguished members of the General Board, and to all of the pastors and lay persons and lovers of African Methodism who come now at the first session of the General Board at the beginning of this Quadrennial. With joy and thanksgiving we greet the challenges and we greet the opportunities which face us.

I have chosen to title this, somehow hopeful “State of the Church” as “*The Winds Which Blow Across Our Bethel.*”

The wind, when it blows, you can always see the effects. Strong enough, it uproots. Gentle, it is a pleasure. Erratic, it can bend. How the tree or institution or building survives depends upon its foundations, its rootage. So, I would like to give you some of the winds that blow across our Bethel, as we face the new Quadrennial, with the understanding that every 24 to 30 years there is a turn in the “wheel” of African Methodism. There is a turn in the wheel in personnel, a turn in the wheel in thinking and in attitudes. And, we have just gone through one such turning of the wheel in 2004, which leads us to think and to understand and watch for the winds that blow across us.

The first (wind) that I think is of grave concern is denominationalism verses congregationalism. Will we be a denomination or will we be congregations? One of the dangers that is confronting us as a church is the rise of mega churches. I have no problem with mega churches, except sometimes they tend to lose their denominational affiliation. And, if we continue down his pathway of not associating the (mega) church with the denomination, we will have congregations in separate areas with no denominational ties whatsoever.

The process of teaching and instructing as to what we are, and the present state of our church is one that says we are moving down the path of rising congregationalism which gives grave danger to denominationalism.

Within the framework of that, we are faced also with neo-pentecostalism versus the traditional, not only in worship and praise but in preaching and in all of our liturgical styles.

Will we be neo-pentecostals or will we be traditional?

How do we walk the fine line ecclesiastically between the winds of change which are blowing us liturgically and the winds of change which are blowing us homiletically and the winds of change which are blowing us in terms of our worship? How will we walk the fine line?

Can there be a reconciliation?

Can there be a determination that will bring us to an understanding of what we must do to preserve the best and keep the best? Several questions arise out of this wind. How do we who are of the generation of those that came in the 40's, who contended with the Buppies which came in the "60's, 70's and 80's," now deal with the Hip Hop generation that came in the 90's and 2000's.

How will we deal with the new Hip Hop generation which is around us, which is in us, which is here whether we want to accept it or not? It is here!

How will the AMEC deal with worship, praise, preaching, liturgy?

How will we deal?

This is a wind which blows across our Bethel and the current state of our church as we find ourselves in that dilemma where there is the full and defined term of the one against the other.

There is the wind of fiscal stability.

We must find new streams of revenue. We can no longer build our Church through the plate offerings. We must find ways, we must find ways to under gird our programs, to under gird our advances. There must be new streams of income and revenue. We must be about the business of recapturing what our progenitors had in mind.

Richard Allen was a believer in self-help. He was a believer in producing revenue that could take care of the widows and orphans and those that are homeless. We must be about the business of providing streams of income outside the plate offering which will not suffice!

When I thought of this, there is a church in Alabama, when I was privileged to be the Bishop of that great District, in Northern Birmingham. I got a call one day, one Saturday evening saying, "Bishop, come. The walls of the church are crumbling. We have to tie them up in order to have church tomorrow."

I said, "Tie the walls of the Church up?"

I went there and found out that they had put four roofs on top of each other. And piling it on the top made the sides bulge out, and break. They kept piling it on the top.

We can no longer keep piling it on the top, and piling it on the top, and piling it on the top without having the sides breakout. And, we have no rope to tie us. We have no anchor to hold

us. We must find new streams of revenue to tie up bulging walls of fiscal instability to keep us from breaking.

There is a crisis in our change in personnel as a result of several things. The new law which we have states an itinerant elder cannot receive an appointment if the elder is seventy-five when the Annual Conference convenes.

For the first time now we are faced with a personnel crisis that comes, not only with the episcopacy, but which comes from every itinerant elder in our system. So, when you think in terms of changing total packages and changing talent, much of our middle management has been changed. When this happens, it can create some difficulties. We must recognize that this is something we will go through.

And, it can be a pleasant wind that blows. One of the pleasant winds that has blown across our Zion has been the emergence of equity of female clergy. That is a very pleasant wind that has blown. We no longer can say that there are two classes of clergy. Clergy is to be considered for excellence, not by gender. And clergy progress is to be considered by production and not by your sex. And, I think that is something that is now growing across our Bethel which is an astoundingly refreshing good wind that says we consider clergy persons based upon their ability and their performance and they will be placed in positions that will be commensurate with their skills and abilities and talents.

This is a very refreshing wind.

Indigenization!

Will (indigenization) answer the problem of growth (in districts 14-20)? This is something that we must take a good look at. The last General Conference caused many changes, when you look at all the changes that happened when the wheel turned in 2004. It turned with personnel. It turned with relinquishing of authority and responsibility in (Districts 14-20). It brought in a whole new stream of leadership. And so now we are confronting and we are asking ourselves, are we expecting indigenization to answer the problem in growth and development in (Districts 14-20), where we need to root and to grow and to become what God would have us be.

The final wind that is blowing across our Bethel is Redistricting, the work of our strategic planning. Will we downsize or will we expand? How will we take a look at restructuring and redistricting of our Church?

Will we expand or will we downsize?

Will we plant or will we pluck up?

Will we grow or will we shrivel up and die like a raisin in the sun?

How will we meet this wind?

These are the winds that are blowing across our Bethel.

I hope that we will be strong as the oaks and the redwoods and the other trees that will never be uprooted because no wind that comes will uproot African Methodism.

I pray that we will be shady enough so that we can give comfort and solace and aid to all who seek to find succor and who seek a place of salvation. We spread the branches of the tree and the winds blow. They will not destroy! But those who seek protection will come under our leaves and branches and under our fig tree and find comfort.

I pray that when the winds blow that we may bend but never break. They may push us but never break us.

So, my fellow Christians, the winds are blowing.

How we stand and face them will determine what happens, as the wheel has turned again.

In my short or long memory, it turned in 1948. In my memory, it turned in 1972.

In your memory it turned in 2004.

As a final thought, when it turned in '72 and it turned slightly in '76, those of us who were privileged to be a part of that turning thought that there was going to be a new day in African Methodism, but low and behold, but low and behold, and low and behold...

We are sometimes still where we were and have not adjusted to the times. I pray that with this new turn of the wheel we will adjust, and understand how to deal with Hip Hop. Understand and know that when spiritual vitality is real and when it is orchestrated. Understand and know what the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is. Because in finality, Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes it is like the wind. When the wind of the Holy Spirit blows across our Zion, all the other winds will take their places. For we will have the comfort and joy in knowing that there is a realness, a truthfulness, and real vitality that will not let (African Methodism) die.

We are the best vehicle for salvation that God has planned for this earth! Let us now take these winds and somehow funnel them, and in funneling, help cause them to blow away all of the dirt and all of the things that would destroy us. And help us to grow and become what God would have us be.

This is our challenge.

The winds blow but we are stronger than the winds!

The winds blow but they will not break us!

The winds blow but they will not uproot us!

For we have the Real Wind which has blown upon us, a real spirit of Holy Ghost Power will give us strength, comfort and joy.

May God Bless us and keep us, and may our Church ever continue to grow and be the Church where all of the people who seek salvation can find comfort and joy.

Note: The only material change to the original language is the replacing of “Districts 14-20” for the expressions “overseas” or “overseas areas.” Where parenthesis appear, words have been inserted or changed.