

**REFLECTIONS\***  
**FROM THE FIRST (1956) GENERAL BOARD**  
**By**  
**Bishop Frederick Calhoun James**



Bishop Frederick Calhoun James

Thank you Senior Bishop.

To Senior Bishop, Phillip R. Cousin; Bishop Richard Allen Chappelle Sr., President of the General Board; Bishop Preston Warren Williams II, President of the Council of Bishops; Fellow and Sister Bishops of this Church of ours; General Officers, Members of the General Board; and those interested AME's who appreciate what we are trying to do here to the extent that they are here with us at the closing of this session.

You asked me to bring reflections, to share some reflections on the first General Board, and I am very pleased to do that. You have heard a tremendous presentation as to what the significance of the first General Board was from our first speaker (Mrs. Valerie Gary Bell), and you have heard the oratory from our second speaker (Bishop John Hurst Adams), so all I need to do is just to give a few reflections and be seated. That's what I really want to do. But I want to, first, just express my appreciation and the appreciation of so many folks, to the leadership of the Council, and to the leadership of the Board for programming this moment of remembrance and reflection. This is a time when the backward look may inform us, not only in the present as to what we are doing and how we are doing it, but possibly as to what we should be doing in the future, in our best interest.

\*A Reconstruction By FCJ

It really was a challenging time. It was a time of revolution, challenge, and daring aspirations. The times were changing in this country of ours. It was just less than two years, or just about two years from the Supreme Court decision of 1954 to desegregate our country with all deliberate speed; and, we know what that turned out to be. And it was just a year from the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and many other activities of less acute media note taking place across our country, suggesting the time for basic change. It was no accident, then, that in the life of our church—as well run as we were, for we were very well run—that there were those of us in the church who felt, at that time, that this was the time and an important time for change. That group was personified by a group known as the Brotherhood.

Now there were many persons who were sisters who were supportive and they encouraged us to use the word, “Brotherhood.” But let the record show that we had strong support from the sisters. We had a sisterhood and a brotherhood working together to bring about some change to the church.

We came into the 1956 General Conference in May at the Dinner Key Auditorium in Miami, Florida, and we achieved a few things that we hadn’t done before. One of them was to elect an African bishop. Sentiment was strong that the time had come, in the middle of the century, for us to elect a bishop from Africa—a real African Bishop. All of us came from Africa to some extent, but we are talking about one who had just left there and still lived there most of the time. And his name was Dr. Francis Herman Gow. The politics had been set up for the General Conference to elect four bishops. Then the Episcopal Committee told us that we could and should elect five. The General Conference decision was to get the African Bishop elected first and do what we had planned to do to elect the other four. And that’s what we did. Bishop

Gow was the first one elected, the other four followed (Bishops Hickman, Huggins, Ball and Sherman).

The second new thing was the use of an opaque projector for the election process. We always had that “other system” of election. Now when I say the “other system,” a lot of the older ministers and laymen in here know what I am talking about. But Rembert Stokes, who was either President of Wilberforce, or was Dean of Payne Seminary, was the leading spirit in bringing that opaque projector. It was something that gave everybody at the General Conference a look to see what was going on with those ballots, and although there were those who found a way, to find a way, to find a way, to find another way, we saw more than we had ever seen before at the General Conference at election time in 1956.

The third new thing, and there were other things, but perhaps the great thing was the creation of the General Board. Now, you know we were replacing the “dollar money” the almighty dollar money system. The dollar money system was the system in which the Finance Department got 48 percent; Pension Department got 31½ percent; Conference Contingent got 5 percent; Education Department got 4 percent, the Christian Education Department got the remaining 1½ percent of a dollar. To do everything that the AME Church was doing on all continents, everywhere we operated, it was a heading under a general title. All money matters in our church were headed under a general title called “Temporal Economy.” When some of us came into the Ministry in the 40’s and 50’s, and before then, we had to learn what was meant by “Temporal Economy.” That meant that you were dealing with paying everybody—Bishops, General Officers, schools, missions, whatever required money, it was under “Temporal Economy.” The accountability was, really, at the discretion of the Bishops of the Church and those who the Bishops had around them. Some of the earlier speakers spoke eloquently of the

“unaccountability” of that system, and how difficult it was for anybody to question, or get an understanding as to why, or wherefore, or get a total of what really went down as related to money.

It was in 1952, at the General Conference in Chicago, that a small group of us got together. We had been talking about a Brotherhood, a group of foot soldiers, of persons who were willing to lay their political lives on the line, who were willing to take the chances to become outcasts, to lose whatever churches we had to somebody who would be very quiet and not rock any boat. I remember Rev. Archibald Carey, and Rev. Roy Miller, at that time as being real good Chicago hosts for those late night meetings and for a group of us, led on by some persons I want to name in a minute or so, who constituted the core of that “Brotherhood” from the various Districts.

Now there were many persons who participated, some to a greater extent than others, but to be identified, to go to a meeting was a dangerous thing: Not good for your church life and your future: Not real good for the health of your career. But we pressed forward, and during the four years remained excited by the anticipation of revolutionary action to come up with a system with more transparency; a system that would give greater clarity; a system that would “connectionalize” and be accountable; a system, certainly, that we had not heard of before, but one which would allow a Board to go about its duties in the very efficient way that we have operated since 1956. This was another A.M.E. world, the General Board of 1956. And, so, we began to work on this new program. The Brotherhood did the spade work to create a system for the betterment of the church at whatever cost. That is what really powered and produced this present General Board.

Reflections of the first General Board were almost sentimental and nostalgic because so many of us felt that we were survivors, and indeed we were survivors. We knew the General Board--we knew the system better than anybody did, because we built the system. Most of the bishops weren't worried about it and they said, "It will not succeed." My Bishop said, to a few of us who went from our District, "The Budget (General Board) Law is not going to pass, but I want my men to be regular. They are talking about installing something, very radical." He said, "yes, to go on to the meeting." I said, "thank you Bishop." And to each other we said, "at least we won't lose our church at Annual Conference since Bishop did tell us we could go." Dr. Frank Veal asked Bishop Frank Madison Reid Sr., the question, "why do you say, Bishop, that it can't pass?" He said, "because a bishop will be presiding every minute of the General Conference and no bishop will let it pass." But that's where he had made his mistake. There were two Bishops who were friendly to the General Board, and to the idea of some change. Many of the Bishops were doing a great job, as is always the case, with the old system. To assume that every bishop was doing the wrong thing is a false assumption, as it is now, and as it always is. Like bishop, like people, like people, like bishop, we are all in this thing together.

And so, it was that in 1953 we started going from one part of the country to another. We assigned work of various areas of this General Board, and what we came up with was a larger umbrella for a centralized accountable system of AME funding. We came up with a stipulated level of support and an orderly system of support for all areas of the AME Church. We did not have that before! We came up with a more representative connectional board, district and clergywise, with guaranteed laypersons and guaranteed clergy persons from the various districts.

I was fortunate enough to be elected, at the age of thirty-four (34), as a member of the first General Board and served as Secretary of the Commission on Finance and Statistics.

Bishop William Reid Wilkes Sr. was Chairman of that Commission at that time. But the members of the Brotherhood bridged the success of the General Board, because the members of the Brotherhood had put it together and knew most about it, and what they did was obviously successful because it has certainly worked for 50 years.

Now I want to close my remarks by just naming some of the persons who were active in the work of the Brotherhood and in the formation of the first General Board rationale. I have left out some names, so understand that some of these may be here right now, but I am talking about listing some core members with others who were also very, very active. It's always dangerous when you start calling names, but on reflections like this, at a time like this, I think it is important to do so. When we say, "The Brotherhood," we all think of H. Ralph Jackson. I am going to start with the First District and name some persons who come to mind. You will speak to each other and talk to other persons who will name names that I did not call, and they were truly part of the core. So I am telling you to start with, don't expect me to remember all of them. When you pass your eightieth birthday you don't remember all you did before you did.

From that **First District**: I think of Rev. M. E. Jackson, and I think of Rev. R. R. Stokes.

From the **Second District**: I think of Rev. Sam Guiles and Rev. A. R. Powell. They hardly missed a meeting.

From the **Third District**: I think of Revs. U. A. Hughey, Rembert Stokes, G. T. Sims, and R. C. Eberhart. These were some of the stalwarts.

From the **Fourth District**: I think of Rev. Archibald Carey. Bishop Gomez was so much against this; he was passionate against the change and against the movement at this time. He was one of our great bishops, and perhaps his system was just as good as this one, but many

Fourth District strong men and women did not join us, but Arch Carey, Dudley, and others made up for a whole lot of them.

The **Fifth District**: Revs. Woody Hall and James Oxley. These guys would stand on the floor and argue with St. Peter and argue long enough to make St. Peter laugh. Rev. F. Lemoyne Whitlock, was not only a great speaker, but also a great writer, a great organizer, and had an analytical mind. There was Rev. Frank Madison Reid Jr., an effective leader--who became very committed, and very active in the Brotherhood. Rev. McCoy Ransom brought brains, research, articulation and dependability.

The **Sixth District**: Rev. H. I. Bearden. Always, we could depend on Bearden.

The **Seventh District**: Rev. Fred James, Rev. Frank R. Veal, Rev. H. B. Butler, Rev. B. J. Glover, and others.

The **Eighth District**: the Rev. G. H. J. Thibodeaux and Rev. Haughton come to mind.

The **Ninth District**: the Rev. Sam Davis, Rev. C. E. Thomas, and Rev. R. W. Hilson. These were “Guerilla Fighters,” and also Rev. Swanson from Mobile.

The **Tenth District**: Rev. John Walker, the philosopher, and Ed Gibson from Waco.

The **Eleventh District**: Rev. R. E. Lamb and Rev. E. J. Blacknell.

The **Twelfth District**: the Rev. Ezra Johnson—great architect and a great part of the brains of “The Brotherhood,” Rev. Jim Hunter and Rev. J. M. Granberry from Oklahoma.

The **Thirteenth District**: there is where the Rev. H. Ralph Jackson, who was the undisputed ramrod, the leader of “The Brotherhood,” and Dr. Jamye Coleman’s brother (Frederick Douglas “Buster” Coleman Jr., M.D.), were located. From that District also came Rev. Elmer Martin, the saintly, godly minister who was sincere, through and through.

I am leaving out a great number of the great laymen, and I told you to start with I was going to leave some out, but they were a great part of it as well.

Leading lay supporters of The Brotherhood included Dr. R. W. Mance, Attorney H. L. Dudley, Dr. R. A. Billings, Mr. John Wheeler, Mrs. Dollie Alexander, Mrs. Virginia Guy, Mr. L. N. Smith and more.

Thank God for what was done, thank God for the General Board, thank God for its leadership down through the years. Upon this platform where you see these Bishops, where you see these General Officers, you see a whole lot of what has grown, what has been the result of that great leadership through all of these years. Seated out there where you are, some of you were very active and very much in the leadership of doing this for our church. Our Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, has from the day of its inception, been a church of The Average Woman and The Average Man. The General Board became the Fiscal Embodiment of The Church of The Average Man, and in closing, I share this favorite poem with you.

#### “THE AVERAGE MAN”

The average man is the man of the mill,  
the man of the valley, the man of the hill,  
the man at the throttle, the man at the plow,  
the man with sweat of his toil on his brow;  
who brings into being the dreams of the few,  
who works for himself for me and for you.  
There's not a purpose, a project, or plan  
that does not depend on the strength of the average man.

The growth of a city, the might of a land,  
depend on the fruit and the work of his hand.  
The road or the wall or the mill or the mart  
call daily to him that he furnish his part.  
The pride of the great and the hope of the low,  
the ebb of the tide as it toils to and fro,  
the reach of the rails and the countries they span

have shown us the worth of the average man.

So here's to the average man, to the one  
who has labored on the tasks he has done,  
who has met as they came all the problems of life,  
who has helped us to win in the stress and the strife.  
In the forefront of progress since progress began  
He is worthy of our tribute—and we salute the average man!

And now, after fifty (50) years of General Board Connectional oversight and Fiscal  
Accountability, in the words of Bishop Levi J. Coppin,

“Oh! the church is moving on, the church is moving on,  
From lowland and from valley, from mountain top they rally,  
The battle bow is strong, the banner is out-flung,  
And giant wrong no more is strong, for the church is moving on.”