



Installation of Officers

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. So give recognition to such persons. —1 Corinthians 16:15-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

The apostle Paul speaks the above words to the fledgling church in Corinth, a people who were seeking what it meant to live together in community as people of faith. Their quest contained no small measure of difficulty, as Corinth was the seat of government, culture, and wealth for Achaia or Southern Greece. It was a cosmopolitan city (similar to New York City where I serve in ministry), and that setting provided challenges to the believers trying to live together as witnesses of the risen Christ. In several passages in the letter, the apostle Paul calls for a censure of the quarrels and divisions among the people. Yet to this church Paul offers some of his most poignant writings concerning the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1 and 2), the gifts of the spirit (1 Corinthians 12), and the excellent way of love (1 Corinthians 13).

As Paul nears the end of the letter from his location in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8), he commends in the above passage the household of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, converts whom he baptized (1 Corinthians 1:16), for visiting him and being sources of refreshment for his

spirit. Without their presence, Paul may not have had the spiritual fortitude to compose the letter which ministered to the church then and ministers to the church now. Therefore he asks in this Scripture passage for the church to recognize these leaders for the importance of their contribution both to him and to the church. This contribution is refreshment, translated from the Greek work ἀναπαύω, meaning to cause or permit one to cease from any movement or labor in order to recover and collect one's strength.¹ The installation of officers is a time to both recognize the service of those in leadership in our congregations and to consecrate the importance of their work as those who provide, in their own way and by virtue of their gifts, refreshment to our souls.

II. A History of Communal Leadership

No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you. — Althea Gibson²

The above quotation by tennis great Althea Gibson is a succinct description of the biblical importance of community in the fulfillment of divine calling throughout Scripture. Moses had Aaron and Hur who lifted his hands to give him support and to help lead the Israelites to victory over the Amalekites (Exodus 17:11-13). David had Jonathan, who interceded on David's behalf with his father, Saul (1 Samuel 19:1-7). Jesus performed his earthly ministry with his team of twelve disciples as well as Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene, who was given the divine appointment of reporting his resurrection to disciples. On the day of Pentecost, the church grew from a handful of believers to three thousand in one day (Acts 2:41). This kind of exponential growth needed to be both led and (reverently stated here) managed. For the church to grow in numbers and in witness, more participants were needed than the apostles. Leaders were needed. And interestingly enough, leaders were called because of a need for refreshment—physical refreshment. Acts 6 chronicles the need for food to be distributed to widows, those with the lowest socio-economic status in the society of their time. To fulfill this ministerial need, the twelve asked the community to select seven men who would serve in this function so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and to “serving the word” to the people (Acts 6:4). One could effectively argue that the first installation of church officers was the prayer and the laying on of hands on Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, who would serve the church as its first deacons, translated from the Greek as “waiting man” or “servant.”³ Importantly, these men were called as ministers to physically and spiritually refresh the souls of those who were most in need during their time.

Although much is spoken of the leadership of the apostles during this time, examples too numerous to mention abound in Scripture and historical documents of the contributions of believers, men and women, to the prolific growth of Christianity despite over two hundred years of persecution by the Roman Empire. This remained through the post-Apostolic church as well, with deacons serving in their role as servants, tending to needs of the poor and the sick while elders and bishops (apostolic fathers) tended to the spiritual needs of the church. As the church grew, the need for leaders (officers) for various ministries grew as well, all with the intent of adding believers to Christ and to sustain by means of Christian community individual and communal spiritual well-being.

The historical black church has had a rich history of clergy and lay leadership. As early as the 1770s African Americans experienced the “Awakenings,” a time of religious revival. Slaves in the South were converted in large numbers and were encouraged to attend Methodist and Baptist churches in the North and the South, in the latter region under the watchful eyes of their slave owners. Slaves were prohibited from meeting independently for fear of their plotting rebellion against slave owners. Slaves were thus exposed to the organization and leadership styles of the white congregations they attended. But they also defied their slave owners by gathering in what were called “hush harbor” meetings, singing spirituals embedded with codes of religious salvation and freedom from bondage, and speaking of a Jesus who was simultaneously savior and liberator.⁴

It was in meetings such as these that Nat Turner, a self-styled Baptist preacher, organized the most significant armed insurrection of his era, where Harriett Tubman found passengers for the Underground Railroad, and where Denmark Vesey, as a class leader in the AME Church (discussed below), used this platform to encourage slaves to revolt against their owners in Charleston S.C. Vesey used these meetings to organize this rebellion with Lieutenant Gullah Jones in 1821, inspired by the Exodus account of the Israelites’ deliverance from bondage in Egypt and their forty year journey to the Promised Land. The following excerpt from the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861 provided an account of Vesey’s theological basis for community organizing in the pursuit of freedom:

For several years before he disclosed his intentions to any one, he appears to have been constantly and assiduously engaged in endeavoring to embitter the minds of the colored population against the white. He rendered himself perfectly familiar with all those parts of the Scriptures which he thought he could pervert to his purpose; and would readily quote them, to prove that slavery was contrary to the laws of God, — that slaves were bound to attempt their emancipation, however shocking and bloody might be the consequences, — and that such efforts would not only be pleasing to the Almighty, but were absolutely enjoined and their success predicted in the Scriptures. His favorite texts, when he addressed those of his own color, were Zechariah xiv. 1-3, and Joshua, vi. 21; and in all his conversations he identified their situation with that of the Israelites.⁵

The class system that enabled Vesey to organize his officers was a product of his denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) church. This church came to being because free African American worshippers attending white churches in the North were denied full participation and opportunities for leadership. Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church was dedicated in 1794 when African American members were pulled off their knees seven years earlier while praying in St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia. Led by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, Mother Bethel was under the auspices of St. George’s Methodist Church until 1816, when the A.M.E Church, the first denomination formed by African Americans, was formed. Mother Bethel A.M.E Church grew from a membership of 121 in 1795 to a membership of 457, prompting the trustees to purchase two lots for new building to accommodate the growing congregation. Mother Bethel continued to grow in membership and witness, providing a spiritual anchor and home for its denomination, serving as a stop on the

Underground Railroad, and serving the needs of the downtrodden in its community. Mother Bethel has accomplished this ministry from its inception because of its structure, which recognized the role of Trustees and controllers and managers of the property, and the class system of lay participation described below from the guide to the archives of the church published in 1993:

The class system was adopted in America directly from John Wesley's plan for the promotion of his Methodist societies in England. It emphasized lay participation, bound members to each other by frequent meetings in small groups, instructed them in the religious life, gave them fellowship, put them to common tasks and developed leadership. At Mother Bethel, members are assigned to small units, called, "classes", with leaders who keep up with their individual welfare and report to the pastor when his services are needed. Class meetings are held weekly, with prayer and praise services. Once a month, at the class meeting preceding Communion Sunday, a "love feast" is held to affirm love and fellowship with one another, and to reaffirm the Christian way of life.⁶

After slavery was abolished in 1863, ex-slaves were free to organize churches based on the theology and community building experienced as slaves. As a result, African American churches emphasized leaders at both clergy and lay levels. This model of leadership enabled our congregations to be centers of communities, sponsors, and sites for historically black colleges (such as Morehouse College, whose first location was at Springfield Baptist Church in Atlanta), providing for the needs of poor and serving as centers for social action. The best example of this in recent times is the Civil Rights Movement. Although much of the vision is rightly credited to Martin Luther King, Jr. and other clergy leaders, this movement would not have occurred without the contributions of lay leaders such as Rosa Parks, who was a deaconess at Saint Matthews A.M.E. church in Detroit; Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, an active member at Saint Augustine's, the oldest African American Roman Catholic Church in Washington D.C.; and Bayard Rustin, whose vision of equality was undoubtedly affected by his membership in the Fifteenth Street Friends Meeting (Quaker) in New York.

III. Church Leadership in Our Times

Mother Bethel's AME Church was among the earliest demonstrations of the importance of leaders in the life of the church not only from the pulpit, but also from the pews. Mother Bethel continues in its tradition of lay leadership by the existence of two Boards—Stewards and Trustees. The Steward Board oversees the financial and spiritual governance of Mother Bethel, overseeing Commissions ranging from Christian Education to Christian Social Action, while the Board of Trustees manages the church's property and oversees the historical Commission, which includes its archives and museum. These two boards are the administrative arm of the church. In addition, Mother Bethel fulfills its ministry through a number of organizations and auxiliaries, ranging from the music and arts ministries of choirs and Praise Dancers to the Stewardesses (pictured below), who are appointed by the Pastor to prepare the elements for communion. Class leaders, part of the church's history, are also part of its present, as class leaders meet with members on a weekly basis for spiritual guidance and instruction on church discipline and doctrines, and they recommend congregants for full membership after a probationary period of 90 days.⁶



There is no question of the past and present role of officers both in fulfilling the long and prolific ministry of Mother Bethel, and this has been the case not only in this historic church but in African American congregations since we began worshipping together in community. The importance of church officers is marked in African American congregations ranging from “mainline” denominations such as Methodist churches to Pentecostal denominations as the Church of God in Christ. It is these officers who make our congregations places of refreshment for our spiritual sustenance, places of refuge from the institutional evils of racism still encountered outside of the sanctuary, places of compassion and help for our communities in need, and still, as evidenced by voter registration drives that helped in the election of President Barack Obama, places of political, social, and economic empowerment.

IV. The Importance of Church Officers: A Personal Reflection

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work 'mid springing flowers;
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man's work is done.

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the sunny noon;
Fill brightest hours with labor,
Rest comes sure and soon.
Give every flying minute,
Something to keep in store;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man works no more.

Work, for the night is coming,
Under the sunset skies;
While their bright tints are glowing,
Work, for daylight flies.
Work till the last beam fadeth,
Fadeth to shine no more.⁷

The above hymn by Anna Coghill was a favorite of Sister Edelle Johnson, who was a devoted lay leader and officer at my childhood church of St. Stephen's Baptist Church in Washington D.C. (now in Temple Hills, MD). It was not uncommon in our congregation of roughly 250 members of our church to "wear different hats" as church officers and lay leaders. A member who loved to sing would hold offices in two or more choirs. Members who wanted to exercise a diverse portfolio of gifts would serve as Trustees and be part of auxiliaries like the Pastor's Aid Club, which served the pastoral needs of Rev. James G. Ford, or the Helping Hand Club, which ministered to those in need in our congregation. Sister Edelle Johnson was just one of them, singing in the Senior Choir with my mother in the soprano section on Second and Fourth Sundays while serving as its Secretary, chauffeuring our musician, and attending Thursday night rehearsals of the Junior Choir in which I sang as the Choir's advisor, and serving on First Sundays as the President of Usher Board #2. Sister Johnson often quoted the apostle Paul from Philippians 2:12 saying that she was "working out her soul salvation" by the contributions she made to the life of our congregation. I can say with no equivocation that persons such as Edelle Johnson not only were major contributors to my spiritual refreshment as a child and teen at St. Stephen's Baptist Church, but also to my spiritual education, support, and formation. I am deeply indebted to her generation and many saints who served faithfully and well during my childhood and teen years.

On Sunday, January 30, St. Stephen Baptist Church will have its Installation of Officers. My parents, Deacon Freeman F. Palmer and Emma L. Palmer, will be there God willing. My father, Vice-Chair of the Deacon's Ministry, has served for over four decades, and my mother, who serves coincidentally as Vice-President of the Deaconess Ministry, has been a major force in the development of church leaders as convener of the New Disciples (members) ministry. They have served as pillars of the congregation, providing spiritual strength and support and refreshment not only to lay members, but to Pastors James G. Ford, Rev. John E. Crump, Rev. Thomas Lee Rogers, Rev. Dr. Allen R. Horton, and the church's present Senior Pastor, Elder Lanier G. Twyman. Now senior members of the congregation, they are still going strong, serving as sources of spiritual refreshment to the congregation, and still serving as sources of inspiration to me.

In discussing this unit with my parents, I was kindly provided by my mother with a copy of the St. Stephen's Baptist Church's Bylaws and Constitution. According to this document, the following officers will be installed on January 30th (with a one-sentence description of their responsibilities taken from the constitution):

- Deacons – They shall serve as the overseers of the spiritual welfare of the church.
- Moderator – The moderator shall be the pastor for all church-related meetings (I note here in some denominations such as the United Church of Christ, the moderator is a lay member who presides at all church meetings).

- Trustees – The trustees shall be entrusted for all the church property belonging to Saint Stephen’s Baptist Church and shall take all necessary measures for its protection and management permitted by the law.
- Church Clerk – The clerk of the church shall keep in a suitable book a record of all the actions of the church.
- Treasurer – It shall be the treasurer’s responsibilities to receive, preserve, and pay out, upon receipt of vouchers by and signed by the financial secretary, all money, or things of value paid or given to the church, keeping at all times an itemized account of all receipts and disbursements.
- Assistant Treasurer – The assistant treasurer shall work closely with the treasurer and assist in any duties he or she deems necessary.
- Financial Secretary – He or she shall have the responsibility of recording and distributing the weekly income/expense report.
- Assistant Financial Secretary – The assistant financial secretary shall work closely with the financial secretary and assist in any duties he or she deems necessary.
- Auditing Committee – They shall audit all financial books by the end of February (this assumes a calendar year budget).
- Minister of Music/Music Administrator – He or she shall be charged with responsibility to provide worshipful music for all church services and shall have general oversight and direction of the music under the direction of the pastor.⁸

Other elected officers at the church (e.g. Sunday School Superintendent, Ushers, and choir president) are also considered officers at the church and will be installed on January 30. The installation may or may not consist of a litany such as the one found in the *African American Heritage Hymnal*, but will undoubtedly contain a prayer of dedication by Elder Twyman. While the above officers will be installed at St. Stephen’s Baptist Church in 2011, a pictorial gallery featuring the 2010 installation of officers with similar responsibilities at Wayman AME Church in St Louis, Missouri, can be found by accessing the link:

http://www.waymanemetl.org/bgm/mod/gallery/view-gallery.php%Fgallery_id=119

V. The Significance of Church Officers

I’m Available to You

You gave me my hands to reach out to man
 To show him Your love and Your perfect plan
 You gave me my ears, I can hear Your voice so clear
 I can hear the cries of sinners
 but can I wipe away their tears?

You gave me my voice to speak Your Word
 To sing all Your praises to those who never heard

But with my eyes I can see a need for more availability
 I’ve seen the hearts that have been broken
 So many people to be free.

Lord, I'm available to You
My will I give to You
I'll do what You say do
Use me Lord to show someone the way and enable me to say...
My storage is empty and I am available to You

Now I'm giving back to You all the tools You gave to me
My hands, my ears, my voice, my eyes
so You can use me as You please
I have emptied out my cup so that You can fill it up
Now I'm free, I just want to be more available to You

Lord, I'm available to You
My will I give to You
I'll do what You say do
Use me Lord to show someone the way and enable me to say...
My storage is empty and I am available to You

My storage is empty (repeat)
My storage is-My, my, my storage is empty (modulate)
My storage is empty

Use me Lord to show someone the way and enable me to say...
My storage is empty and I am available to You ⁹

The above lyrics comprise one of many songs I have cherished from the ministry of Rev. Milton Brunson and the Thompson Community Singers. "*I'm Available to You*" is sung mostly in unison (I believe) to emphasize the importance of living in community and dedication, the giving up of self for the good of the whole. This embodies musically for me the significance of the ministry of Church Officers in the lives of our congregations. I understand in my ministry the importance of my calling to the spiritual care and well-being of those to whom I minister.

Those called to leadership as church officers are those to whom the spiritual care of the congregation are entrusted as well. They are today's equivalents of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaius in Ephesus, providing spiritual refreshment to both our pastors and our congregations, enabling us to "keep on keeping on" in the divine calling and our particular witness as African American people of faith.

As I prepared this unit, I could see that our churches are in great need of leaders who are both and dedicated to their calling. Their responsibilities cannot be taken lightly in light of double-digit unemployment in our communities, foreclosures from the recent economic and housing crisis affecting our neighborhoods at disproportionate levels, and high rates of violence and crime among our youth. Our history as African Americans shows that our church leaders did not take their responsibilities lightly. They made our churches places where people could gather spiritual strength, but they were also places of social, economic, and political empowerment as well. What was needed then is needed now: the willingness to serve and the willingness to lead.

One of my favorite sermons from Martin Luther King Jr. is *The Drum Major Instinct*, delivered on February 4, 1968, two months to the day of his assassination. This sermon, based on James and John's desire to sit at Jesus' right and left in glory as recorded in Matthew 10, speaks eloquently to the importance of being both a leader and a servant. Thanks to technology, ten minutes of this sermon may be heard on YouTube (by accessing this link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY1raOAVC>), and perhaps, as part of the service, the following passage may be read as a reminder to those installed as officers this year of the model of leadership we are called to follow.

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.

And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

May all who are installed as church officers this year, and all of us called to any and all types of ministry, be those servants as well. Amen.

VI. Suggestions for Further Reading/Study

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Notes

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