

PREFACE

When a people have a vision, it must be shared.

When a people have a story, it must be told.

This particular story told at this particular time is filled with passion, holy boldness, gifts of the Spirit, affirmations, and a rejoicing that fills us up. We hope that *God Delivers Me: A Model from Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century* also fills you up.

There are so many ways that we can share God's word and God's love. This book is full of how one group of people who believe that there is a different way to make disciples for Jesus Christ in their time and space are living out their calls.

It was in early 2006 when Fred Allen of The United Methodist Publishing House invited me to be the senior editor of this fully funded writing project that the editorial team of the national Strengthening The Black Church for the 21st Century committee wanted published. I was both intrigued and challenged by this invitation. We started immediately to plan how and who could make this a reality. I had heard of the SBC21 committee in my own Baltimore-Washington Conference, but I knew very little about the SBC21 ministries across the country.

The year 2007 was filled with administrative duties, committee meetings, conferences, research, and information gathering that led to the selection of the writers for this book. The Contributors section introduces these writers, who are skilled and gifted United Methodist church leaders. Our story is told through their voices. It is my hope that you know at least one of us and that you will want to talk to us about how you can reshape your ministry into a distinctive and culturally relevant experience that follows the model we introduce in this book.

The purpose of this book is to introduce the ministry and mission of the SBC21 that reaches across many jurisdictions, to teach laity to find religious guidance and strength for daily living, and to present a model of ministry in which Christ is our center for hope, healing, and wholeness.

Preface

The powerful DVD is a companion to this book that explains, celebrates, and offers an updated version of the SBC21 project. We are grateful to Pamela Crosby and Cheryl A. Stevenson for their work on the DVD. The comprehensive appendix further strengthens the power of this book.

We have put ourselves out on the front lines of mission and ministry, and this is only the beginning of what we hope will influence you to use the SBC21 model to build vital congregations. I believe that we are living in an era when our church must open itself to change. These are troubling times for many of our churches because we are struggling to figure out what we need to do to keep our United Methodist Churches strong and vital. This book addresses these issues, and it makes me feel hopeful for the future.

SBC21 has been a builder of self-esteem, healthy relating among Christians, and has helped a people who have frequently asked the question, “Where do I stand?” SBC21 teaches churches to maintain integrity and to stand strong. I am blessed to be the editor of this critical assessment that gives a holistic view of the Action Plans approved by the 1996, 2000, and 2004 General Conferences of The United Methodist Church.

Jonathan D. Keaton, resident Bishop of the Michigan Episcopal Area and chair of the SBC21 Coordinating Committee, provides the Introduction to this work. Chapter 1, by Youtha Hardman-Cromwell, gives a four-century review of Blacks in Methodism prior to the initiation of the SBC21 project in 1996. Chapter 2, by Dorothy Watson Tatem and Cheryl A. Stevenson, chronicles the spiritual and community formation of several congregations using anecdotal reflections. Dorothy Watson Tatem describes in detail what we mean by the description “vital congregation” in chapter 3. Chapter 4, by Cynthia Hopson, tells why the Congregational Resource Centers and the Partner Churches are critical to the initiative and what differences they make. In chapter 5, F. Douglas Powe, Jr. outlines how leadership, planning, worship, faith formation, and outreach when viewed evangelistically can create a vital church. Fred Smith, Jr. begins chapter 6 by reframing the discussion as we move forward from vital congregations to unity of the beloved community as a gift to the Church. Then he assesses the SBC21 training events providing insights and learnings. In the final chapter bishops Jonathan D. Keaton, Peter D. Weaver, and James R. King further warm our soul by their positive affirmations for the future.

There really is no better way to strengthen our churches than to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey the commands of Jesus Christ,” assured that God delivers us.

Sincerely,
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Lecturer, Religious Education
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This text is the realization of the visionary leadership of Bishop Jonathan D. Keaton, Michigan Area, and chair of the Coordinating Committee of Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century. He believed that the program needed to be placed in text form in order that all local congregations of The United Methodist Church and beyond would have ready access to strategies that would enable them to become vital congregations now and well into this century. The bishop has contributed to the writing in *God Delivers Me* and is a member of the editorial team.

Much gratitude is extended to the original members of the study panel: Bishop Woodie W. White, chairperson; Douglas Fitch; Gilbert Caldwell; Karen Collier; Tyrone Gordon; Carolyn Johnson; Delores Queen; Ernest Swigggett; Bishop Peter Weaver; Trudie Kibble Reed. We are also grateful for the team responsible for crafting the original innovative plan for SBC21: David White, team leader; Walter Kimbrough; Ruth M. Lawson; Delano McIntosh; Nelda Barrett Murraine.

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Cheryl A. Stevenson, SBC21 National Coordinator, contributed to the

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writing and along with administrative assistant, Pamela Holman, facilitated research and other critical resources for this text.

The voices of innumerable women and men can be heard in these pages. These are the persons in the local churches; we thank them for their labors in the transformation of their local congregations. They have participated in SBC21 as Congregational Resource Centers and as Partner Churches. Much thanks is given to them for their efforts in local church revitalization in order that the Kingdom of God might be manifested here on earth. A very special word of gratitude must be expressed to the senior editor the Reverend Jacquelyn Thorpe of Howard University Divinity School. Her expertise, experience, patience, and comprehension of SBC21 were invaluable in moving this book from outline to manuscript. We are indebted to the academics that gave of their time and skill as researchers and writers to the text. These persons are: Karen F. Williams, copy editor; Dr. Youtha Hardman-Cromwell, Wesley Theological Seminary; Dr. Cynthia Bond Hopson, Assistant General Secretary of the Black College Fund and Ethnic Concerns, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry; Dr. Fred Douglas Smith, Jr., Wesley Theological Seminary; and Dr. Douglas F. Powe, Jr., Saint Paul School of Theology. The enthusiasm and commitment of these persons to excellence remains inspiring.

We thank Pamela Crosby for her vibrant creativity in producing the DVD that accompanies this book.

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Above all, we thank God for the blessings of this work.

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She adds to her published work of various articles and book chapters, retreats and workshop presentations for churches and other organizations. Also, she organized Youtha & Friends, a drama group that performs “God’s Trombones with Negro Spirituals.”

She and her husband Oliver Cromwell, a retired government public affairs officer, have one grandchild, Tiffany, and four adult children: Darnell, Dwayne, Debra Whitten, and Michael Cromwell. Debra is also an elder in the United Methodist Church, Greater New Jersey Conference.

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JONATHAN D. KEATON, S.T.D., was named resident bishop of the Michigan Area of The United Methodist Church effective September 1, 2004. He currently chairs the Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century. He was elected to the episcopacy in 1996 and served eight years as resident bishop of the Ohio East Area. Prior to his election to the episcopacy in 1996, he served on the conference staff responsible for monitoring the church's stand on social issues providing support and encouragement for ethnic local churches and promoting spiritual formation.

He attended Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, where he earned a Master of Divinity, and Doctorate of Sacred Theology. He and his wife Beverly have three children and one grandchild.



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DOROTHY WATSON TATEM, D. Min., presently serves as the Director of the Office of Urban and Global Ministries of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church. She is a member of various boards and agencies including Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century and the General Commission on Religion and Race; she is also a trustee at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. Dr. Tatem has formerly pastored both suburban and urban churches that experienced growth in community partnerships, ministries, real estate acquisitions and membership/worship attendance. She perceives preaching as a dynamic vehicle to proclaim the reality of God.



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A native of Louisville, Kentucky, she and her husband Marvin, a retired army officer, live in Bethesda, Maryland and they have four adult children.



FRED SMTH, JR., Ph.D., an Elder in the Baltimore-Washington Conference is associate professor of Urban Ministry and associate director of the Practice of Ministry and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC. He was educated at Harvard College and earned his B.A., at Perkins School of Theology of Southern Methodist University with his Master of Divinity (cum laude), and received his Ph.D. at Emory in 1997. He had directed a number of national initiatives and he is widely published and has authored and coauthored many books, articles, reports, and curriculums. He is coauthor of *Black Religious Experience: Conversation on Double-Consciousness and the Works of Grant Shockley*.



CHERYL A. STEVENSON, a native of Wichita, Kansas is the national coordinator for Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century. In 2001 she left a fourteen-year career as a personnel and customer service representative with the Internal Revenue Service to give her knowledge, skills, and abilities in areas that would contribute to the ministries of The United Methodist Church. She is married to Louis and they have one beautiful daughter.



PETER D. WEAVER, who served as president of the Council of Bishops from 2004–2006 is quoted as saying, “I’ve yearned simply to be a disciple of Jesus which I believe is simply the highest honor that can be given to anyone.” He is currently located in the Lawrence, Massachusetts Area. He holds many honors, is widely published, and well traveled. He received his Doctor of Theology from Boston University. He and his wife, Linda, have eight daughters and four grandchildren. He enjoys time with his family, water sports, playing the trombone, and wood-working.

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan D. Keaton

No statement from the life and lips of folk in the Black Church is more real than the witness or testimony “God delivers me.” Though racism and its antecedents still flourish, new ideas and movements emerge in every age “to make the wounded whole.” One story from General Conference 2000 in Cleveland, Ohio demonstrates the value and validity of liberating moments.

General Conference 2000 planned a service of repentance and reconciliation. We wanted to repent and reconcile with Black folk who left, namely the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Black folk who stayed rejoiced. At the turn of the century our denomination stepped forward to right historic wrongs. Trouble arose when “those who stayed” desired the same recognition in this denominational apology. Their efforts were largely rebuffed. As a result, lines were drawn. If a just compromise could not be found, the service seemed headed for disruption via the absence of Black folk, presence without participation, signage of some kind, and so forth. To a small degree, most of these responses occurred. Before the service began, planners of the service offered “those who stayed” an olive branch by allowing the Rev. McAllister Hollins, Senior Pastor of Ben Hill United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia to offer a statement of protest on behalf of Black folk who stayed. Some Black folk wept. Others refused to attend. Still others participated with a heavy heart. Nevertheless, they were buoyed by a word spoken to the whole Church on behalf of those who stayed. One might conclude that the whole offered its African American constituency another olive branch in General Conference 2000. It adopted legislation to strengthen the Black Church for the twenty-first century for another Quadrennium.

Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century (SBC21) represents the latest stance taken by The United Methodist Church (UMC) and its predecessor bodies on behalf of Black folk. It will not be the last.

Depending on the mind of the General Conference, movements in our country and world, successful advocacy for initiatives, programs, and emphases required to nurture the Black Church rise and fall like “hope deferred.” Following are stories of deliverance and liberation; one necessitates the other.

When the famous 1784 Christmas Conference convened in Baltimore to create the Methodist Church in America, significant decisions were made. Inspired by John Wesley’s description of slavery as “that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion” and American slavery, “as the vilest that ever saw the sun,” our founding fathers and mothers opposed slavery wholeheartedly. In part, they stated,

We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the Laws and the Prophets and the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the revolution to hold in the deepest abasement in a more abject slavery than is perhaps to be found in any part of the world except America . . . we therefore think it is our bounded duty to take immediately some effectual method to extirpate this abomination among us.¹

As a result, Blacks joined the Methodist Church in droves. Here was a church that preached Jesus and him crucified. The church stood up for the liberation of members kissed by the sun and consigned to a so-called life sentence of hard labor as chattel. Opposing forces, primarily southern, protested. Immediately, they rolled back, mitigated, discounted and/or dismantled the denominational commitment to extirpate slavery. Six months later, the commitment to abolish slavery was quashed. William B. McClain noted in his book *Black People in the Methodist Church*, “The rules established at the Christmas Conference were to be applied only as far as they were consistent with the laws of the states in which the members resided.”² The welcome mat for receiving Black folk into the Methodist Church during the eighteenth century turned out to be a slippery slope. No advocacy has interrupted that pattern for long. With Black folk in Methodism, the church has constantly taken a mighty step forward countermanded by two steps trudging “magnificently backward into the future.”

When the Methodist Church retreated from its opposition to slavery, Black folk left and started their own, among them the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Zion Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Most of “those who stayed” lived on whatever came their way. Their status as half-slave and half-free remained.

What the gospel did or did not say about the enslavement of Black folk tore at the fabric of Methodism until it ripped apart during the 1844 General Conference. By marriage, Bishop James O. Andrew became a slave owner. His refusal to give them up or free them led to his suspension. Incensed over his suspension, the church split over the slavery question. Two denominations, one South and one North, remained divided for almost a century. In the meantime, African Americans who stayed in both communions continued to attend White churches. Eventually, they were encouraged to “do church as they saw fit” within the connection but under the aegis of White bishops until May 19, 1920. Bishop Robert Elijah Jones was elected as the first Black general superintendent in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Despite this reality, Black folk who stayed organized themselves into annual conferences and accomplished the work of ministry under circumstances some would label “separate but equal.”

On May 10, 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; the Methodist Protestant Church; and the Methodist Episcopal Church united as the Methodist Church. Black folk belonging to nineteen separate conferences were placed in the Central Jurisdiction alongside five other jurisdictions. Separate but equal was codified. Under protest, the segregated jurisdiction continued until the merger of 1968. When the Central Jurisdiction died in 1968, Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) was created for the purpose of renewing the church as well as looking after the interests of the Black Church within the United Methodist denomination.

The lobbying efforts of National BMCR on behalf of the Black Church have been nothing short of amazing and a God-thing. God has used BMCR to help create the General Commission on Religion and Race, the Black Staff Forum, the Black College Fund, Ethnic Minority Local Church (EMLC) and its continuance in general agencies, Black Community Developers, and SBC21. In every instance, aspects of the church have realized the liberating effects of their particular ministry. General agencies and annual conferences have been challenged to “do the right thing” with regard to racial and ethnic minorities in hiring and firing practices as well as support. General agencies have made Ethnic Local Church (ELC) grants to churches and annual conferences as a way to empower and improve their ministry. Persons like me have benefited from the Black College Fund. Small colleges like my alma mater, Philander Smith College, have kept their doors open because of the Black College Fund. As a child of the Black Church, I know “God delivers me” is not a mantra. I have experienced it as a reality.

African Americans within The United Methodist Church have continued to dream, to hope, to envision a body of Christ unfettered by racism but truly comprised of all God's children. An excerpt of the vision statement writ large in the pages of a petition to the 1996 General Conference bears repeating word for word:

Black people carry particular responsibilities for revitalizing and strengthening Black local churches within The United Methodist Church and offering our gifts to the wider church. Our prayer, which resounds through the decades and centuries past, is that as we take seriously our responsibility before God and in this United Methodist Church we will be joined by others. The denomination must also take seriously the need to support the endeavor, and in some places relinquish cultural and political control so that the work of renewal can be effective. The greater the contribution of the general church, the greater will be the renewal of the entire church's mission and ministry.³

Because of SBC21, local churches in the African American tradition are being strengthened all over the connection.

The Congregation Resource Center (CRC) and Partner Congregation (PC) model is at the heart of this renewal. When a local church demonstrates its desire and commitment to be strengthened, the SBC21 Coordinating Committee assigns it to a training event sponsored by one of the twenty CRCs. A team of five persons usually attends the event. In the best of all worlds, something cognitive, catalytic, and spiritual happens. And the team returns ready, willing, and able to help the church move to the next level. A rural congregation in South Carolina is one fitting example of the possibilities found in SBC21.

At the 2006 National BMCR meeting held in Dallas, Texas, the SBC21 Coordinating Committee asked that Rev. Marvin Taylor of Huger, South Carolina to share his story. He shared this scenario. The St. Thomas Charge—comprised of New Hope, Seward Chapel, and Zion United Methodist Churches—grew “from 567 to 1200 members in seven years.” Taylor cited two training events sponsored by SBC21 as the reason. First, The New Life CRC in Jacksonville, Florida helped the St. Thomas Charge grasp the importance of stimulating church growth and being themselves in the worship context. Taylor commented further: “We were able to bring representatives from each of the churches. They came back and were able to help me share my vision concerning the importance of creating ministry for children, youth, young adults, and older adults. From the training the

parishioners also understood the importance of being themselves in the worship experience.” Second, on November 2005 Taylor and his team attended a training event sponsored by another CRC, St. Luke Community Church in Dallas, Texas. Because New Hope had grown from 267 members to 700 members, Zion from 190 to 240 members, Seward Chapel to 240 members, the St. Thomas Charge had to find some answers to its growth problems. Again, Rev. Taylor stated “this training helped us to create a model of leadership . . . to manage our growth . . . the St. Thomas Charge is one of SBC21’s success stories.” Without knowing it Rev. Taylor described the heart of the SBC21 enterprise. It is cognitive and catalytic, spiritual and spirit-driven. SBC21 is committed to and led by its overarching mantra: “Christ, Our Center for Hope, Healing and Wholeness.” Last but not least, Pastor Taylor omitted another aspect of their success. The St. Thomas Charge has changed its status from a PC to a CRC. Now, SBC21 has begun sending churches to them for training.

The SBC21 model resident in the St. Thomas Charge and other Partner/CRC congregations is not just a model for the Black Church; it is for the whole church. Consequently, readers will find within these pages a panoramic view of SBC21 in terms of its history, its successes, its failures, and its future vision. Most of all, the book shows African American congregations taking greater responsibility for strengthening themselves and other congregations. That is the heart of the SBC21 story. Cooperation and support replace competition and fear. Hence, local churches, including their lay and clergy leadership, renew their strength for God’s sake, not their own.

Whoever reads through the chapters of this book will not find simple solutions to complex problems vexing the Black Church or our denomination. Buried in the fiber of our mantra are the essentials to strengthen the life of any congregation. Look for them in our trials and errors, history, prayer, meditation, social activism, and personal witness—a witness in thought, word, and deed, communicating the power of a God who delivers and liberates the captive. And remember “Black folk who stayed” in the Methodist Church dare to stand up, “one more time,” because God is not through with us yet; nor is God through with the whole church. Knowing that God has delivered us in the past, Black Methodists just can’t shake the thought that “Our Time Under God Is Now.”

NOTES

1. William B. McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1984), 57.

2. *Ibid.*, 58.

3. Report on Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century," Report No. 3, (Petition Number: 21677-GJ-NonDis-OS; GCOM, 1996), 1996 General Conference (1997-2000), 583.