

As We See Ourselves:
**Transforming the Inward Focused Congregation Through Differentiated Leadership and
Focused Teaching Strategies Toward Works of Service To The Community**

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Introduction

The Pastor appointed by the sitting bishop to serve a congregation is challenged to lead, grow, and develop an unfamiliar group of people with many implied common goals. This task is often entered without full knowledge of the personality, behavior, and history of the congregation. Yet, regardless of the condition one finds the church in, the partnership between pastor and congregation is expected to net a well- rounded, productive, socially aware body of believers who model Christ in witness with service to the surrounding community being the standard practice.

Every standard has an exception. The exception is the congregation that does not function with an outward perspective but keeps their gaze inward. In this instance, the internally beneficial focus puts the congregation in a position that can be identified as inward focused. An “Inward Focused Church” is one that due to their traditions, limitations, and mindsets, intentionally focuses internally toward self-preservation as opposed to embracing and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships outside the walls of the church. The terminology is used for this work as the behavior of my church, and denomination, demonstrated behavior centered on intentional disregard for healthy community involvement to promote church growth. It opted instead to preserve control of the inner workings of the local congregation, impairing the formation of productive outreach opportunities and community relationships.

Statement of the Problem

I was appointed to Mt. Zion in 2009. I became immediately aware of systemic issues plaguing the congregation two years into my tenure and set out to investigate the

root causes. The congregation is tremendously talented with members having expertise in education, business, hospitality, construction as well as a wealth of creativity that could potentially empower the community. Yet the focus was always toward in-house issues of power, finance, and survival. The church concentrated their concern toward projects that were beneficial to them and every effort to move outside what was customary was met with disapproval or done in mediocrity. Works of ministry were non-existent and outreach was minimal. The result was a church that was in the community but not providing any service that fostered relationship with it or ministry building for the Opelika community benefit.

To be fair and looking more broadly at the denomination, the local church had simply replicated what it saw, making the problem more complicated. Coming to this realization, our denomination sought to uncover the causes on the district and local levels. Success in this effort would provide information to transform the denomination into a more welcoming, vibrant, and productive parent body. Sharing the results with the local church would invite the same behavior to be spread across the footprint of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Alabama and possible throughout the world.

Since 2012, the Ninth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church has become increasingly aware of the decline in membership. This decline was not only evident within the span of the State of Alabama, where the Ninth District is headquartered, but also across the denomination. As a means of pinpointing the overall causes of this issue statewide, a Self-Assessment/Mirroring Tool¹ was created by a Steering Committee approved by our Servant Bishop for the local church to complete in 2013. This

¹ For full survey results, See Appendix 1.

study was distributed to Pastors, who then assigned a committee made up of members of their congregation, to look specifically at the following areas: Geographic, historical, and financial ministry patterns as it pertained to church growth, ministry offerings and community involvement. The rationale was to allow each congregation to look at themselves, engaging in dialogue and gathering data per the given criteria, with the hope being that each local church would determine the strengths/shortcomings unique to them. Moving forward the overall goal was to create a strategy to address the local churches areas of concern.

In 2014, the Self-Assessment Mirroring Study was completed and was revelatory to the Ninth District of the AME Church. The results exposed areas of opportunity for evangelism, outreach, congregational merging and new church planting. Based upon the responses of each local church regarding the demographics, social and community needs, geographic growth statistics, along with specific data addressing congregational growth, finances, and ministry offerings, each congregation was provided with a unique assessment based upon the above for their review.

The study brought to the forefront on the local level Mt. Zion's personality as a congregation that was successful administratively and financially but had difficulty with social interaction and communication with the surrounding community. The study also exposed the church as a congregation that was not meeting the needs of the community as outlined by local social service agencies. According to the study, we were a church that was visible yet not inviting.

When the results of the Mirroring Study were disseminated then shared across the State and Presiding Elder district, I obtained the clarity that our congregation was not isolated in having negative results. Armed with this information, I began searching for equivalent issues outside the geographic area and denomination regarding the root causes of church decline. I also searched for congregational causes for the issues the Opelika community felt we had been unresponsive. By comparative analysis, it was discovered that other denominational churches shared the same issues, yet non-denominational ones were not experiencing those issues. Speaking with area pastors, both AME and otherwise, in group conversations and one-on-one, assisted me in gaining a clearer perspective of our challenges in hopes of formulating a strategic plan to address them.

The goal was to transform the congregation from their current myopic state to the thriving congregation they thought they were. Using the results of the Self-Assessment Mirroring Study for reference, we began the challenge of revisiting the perception of our church from both the internal and external viewpoints. We understood the key areas of perceived weakness were intentional internal focus on matters of finance and power, the lack of relationship with the surrounding community, and resistance to innovative ideas outside of our normal practices. These key areas substantiated the inward focused characteristics. Yet, the congregation had difficulty viewing themselves as such. Mt. Zion saw themselves as a successful congregation because they met their financial obligations, were self-sustaining, had a new sanctuary and had worship on a regular weekly basis unlike many in the surrounding semi-rural area; the Opelika community, when asked in casual conversation, saw them as a pretty church building with little going on that they felt

welcomed to become a part of. Aside from occasional programs, the community saw no consistent effort by Mt. Zion to actively engage with them.

The fact that the congregation was one who also desired passive growth without the necessary implementation of evangelism plans or committed giving, made the work of transformation a priority for their longevity. Being aware that it would be necessary for us to be in full partnership to recognize the limitations of the current state, refocus our time, talent, and treasure toward achieving balance with the community and re-structuring our ministry practices to facilitate growth was critical. Success in walking through this process together could prove to be both revelatory and productive spiritually, numerically and financially. Otherwise, our congregation was destined to simply fade away without having fulfilled the mission of the church according to Luke 4:18 per the Doctrine and Discipline of The AME Church. It would also be considered a personal and professional failure pastorally (and to the denomination) to allow this historic church to fail at the work of Kingdom building. With neither result being acceptable and after much prayer we journeyed toward producing a more excellent product for God by opening ourselves up to change our spiritual practices and self-perceptions. By transforming these key areas, we would enable ourselves to see how others saw us externally as well as how we saw ourselves internally. This change in scope would clear the way for growth, individually and collectively, while empowering us to maturely acknowledge ways to impact the surrounding community in the process.

Methodology

According to the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study², congregational membership has declined from 70% in 1992 and 63% in 2009 to 59% currently. The same surveys results state that historically black Protestant traditions, of which the African Methodist Episcopal church is a part, have been relatively flat showing little or no growth from 2007-2014. It is also important to note that the number of religiously unaffiliated has climbed from 36.6% in 2007 to 55.8% in 2014. The survey also notes that historically black mainline denominations have lost more members than they gained with a large percentage now affiliating themselves as non-denominational. Clearly the lack of growth was in line with the trend the Country was experiencing.

Understanding that both denominational and non-denominational congregations had been successful in overcoming the challenges of growth and change, I turned to some respected voices in Church Growth, Congregational Revitalization, and Church Culture Analysis to understand the root of the problems. The works of Pastors James D. Anderson (Project Test Pattern), James MacDonald (Harvest Bible Church, Chicago), C. John Miller (New Life Presbyterian, Jenkintown, PA) and respected researcher Dr. Thom S. Rainer, confirmed my perspective. These leaders work showed evidence of their successes and failures in situations like the ones Mt. Zion was experiencing. The diversity of their congregations allowed realistic comparisons of their best practices, combined with

² “2014 Religious Landscape Study”: At Pew Research Center, www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious, (November 3, 2015)

observations unique to Mt. Zion, to create a strategy to shift the inward focus while meeting the needs of the community as well.

A combination of interviews and small group workshops were employed over the three-year period. These methods revealed deeply seeded ideologies, perceptions of Mt. Zion's identity as a church, their role as a community partner, and challenges that they saw as hindrances. Armed with this information, my comprehension of the root causes of the issues became clearer.

Additionally, the understanding that my style of leadership had to evolve toward a differentiated style to meet the demands that change, and the resistance to it, would bring played a major factor in forming an effective strategy.

Congregational Context

“Everything that happens in a congregation educates. The learning it is able to transmit is the result of the total experience of life in that congregation. The rituals of worship, the words of prayer and scripture, the architecture, the web of human relationships, the norms and roles and patterns of interaction, these and countless other factors form the curriculum of Christian education in the church context. These are formative experiences influencing the communication of Truth.”³

As far back as anyone can remember the area was rural with Mt. Zion beginning in a brush arbor on the same plot of property where both the Historic and New Sanctuaries stand. Written history notes the congregation's progress from the bush arbor to a gin house to one of several buildings erected on the original property. The worship spaces were rebuilt with modern necessities to reflect the congregations needs without consideration to the change (or lack of it) of the community around it.

³ James D. Anderson, *To Come Alive! New Proposal for Revitalizing the Local Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 111.

Though Highway 29 is paved and very easy to travel, the community does not have many of the accoutrements that would mark it as a modernized area. The absence of sidewalks makes it common to see people walking along the side of the road or darting across it between the quickly moving cars. The now paved and well-traveled short cut between Auburn and LaGrange has obvious dangers for pedestrians. This poses a difficulty about evangelizing the area, a necessity to grow in a manner that would sustain the larger building and new ministries. It is not however insurmountable by any means.

Typically, the congregation meets for one weekly Sunday morning service at 11:00. Prior to Morning Worship, Sunday school is held beginning at 9:30 a.m. Worship services at the 11:00 hour is a wide range of experiences liturgically. It always begins with about 10-15 minutes of Praise & Worship. This is a time where congregational songs are sung to get everyone involved and in the attitude of worship. It is a very freeing time that helps bring us into “the presence of God to release our anxieties and stresses to our God who is awaiting praise and wants to address those very issues in our lives”⁴ as Rev. Carnegie S. Calian so eloquently puts it.

The Gradual Building Worship Experience is used at Mt. Zion. It works this way: First Sunday is Traditional with the standard AME Call to Worship (“I was glad when they said unto me...”), hymns and Communion. Each Sunday thereafter becomes slightly more contemporary with the Call to Worship either personally or taken from elsewhere, music and scripture coordinated with my preaching theme. This practice has made room for

⁴Carnegie Samuel Calian, *Survival or Revival: Ten Keys to Church Vitality* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998), 16.

“creativity, experimentation and the Spirit to move freely”⁵ as well without dishonoring the traditional pattern of worship. Using this gradually building approach to worship has allowed me to embrace and introduce new genres of worship while honoring the traditions of the denomination as well. The concept has pushed the congregation outside of their almost robotic presence into much livelier, vibrant worshippers.

Fourth Sunday, the young people oversee the service and are assigned to perform all the duties from beginning to end. The presence of young people in worship validates their importance to the congregation and allows them to find their voice as pivotal parts of the future of the church. Fifth Sundays are a day of worship and sharing as no sermon is preached but the congregation is given the opportunity to share their testimonies and special prayer requests.

Our services are around 90 minutes in length with the typical sermon preached between 20-25 minutes of that time. The NASB is used most frequently but depending on the subject the NKJV, NLT and even The Message might be used for emphasis. A four-week series preached quarterly and monthly themes (i.e. Stewardship, Evangelism, etc.) are the basis of the preaching experiences. Periodically, current events, both local and National, that are too prevalent to ignore are incorporated.

At the beginning of my tenure in 2009, Mt. Zion was financially comfortable. They have the reputation of being a congregation that never struggled to pay their Conference Assessments or any other financial obligation. Their debt in 2009 was \$410,000.00 with all of that being mortgage debt on their then two-year old edifice. From 2010-2016, their

⁵ Ibid, 19.

debt was reduced from \$410,000.00 to \$249,000.00. This was a great accomplishment though it shifted the sole focus of the congregation to paying the debt. Though this is admirable it is not conducive to fulfilling the entirety of Gods intent for the Church. When the church cares more for its own needs than those of the community or the world it was founded to care for, it shows an often-deadly pattern of self-focus is at work. Sadly, this pattern of “keeping the machinery of the church moving rather than funding The Great Commission and the Great Commandment”⁶ shows the attention toward self-preservation to be more important than ministry development and community service. Though financially sound, the congregation had suffered some numeric losses. During the year prior to my appointment, the church endured a “silent split” due to a rift with the Pastoral Leadership. Many left prior to my arrival and found other church homes. Others left after I arrived because they felt uncomfortable with my gender. Efforts were made to reach each person that left with only minimal success. This split effected not just the church roll but the finances as well.

Numerically, from 2009-2014 the church grew steadily increasing membership from 118 to 186 over that same period. 2015 saw no numeric growth due to a combination of congregational powers struggles and apathy. It was the first time in my tenure that no growth had occurred. In 2016, there were however some losses due to death and relocations that made our growth static. Currently, we remain at a steady 160 on the active roll with between 80-100 coming to worship regularly.

⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Your Alive* (Nashville: B&H, 2014) 35.

Community Context

According to the City-Data⁷, the income per capita in Opelika is 4.3% greater than the Alabama average and 15.3% less than the National average. The median household income in Opelika is 10.4% less than the Alabama average and 30.4% less than the National average. The median household income in Opelika for owner occupied housing is 159.8% greater than the median household income for renter occupied housing in Opelika. The poverty level in Opelika is 3.9% greater than the Alabama average and 44.8% greater than the National average.

The Encyclopedia of Alabama⁸ notes the following history of the city:

Opelika was first settled in by the whites in the late 1830s. They named the community "Lebanon". The Native Americans, the original inhabitants of the region, were forcibly removed from the area in 1836-1837. The city's present name was derived from a Muskogee term meaning "large swamp". The first railroad entered the area in the 1840s and helped the area to become a commercial center. Opelika was incorporated on February 9, 1854.

The City of Opelika, known once as the Trading Center of East Alabama, is the county seat of Lee County. Opelika is situated at the juncture of the Piedmont Upland and East Gulf Coastal Plain physiographic sections. Evolving from a small railroad town, Opelika is part of the sixth fastest-growing small metropolitan area in the nation. Opelika is governed by a mayor-council government, with a mayor and a five-member city council.

The major industries that funded Opelika's economy were linen, magnetic tape, auto tires, sheet-metal and iron-fabricating plants, bottling East Alabama Medical Center Companies, bakeries, and publishing, textile, and hospital facilities. Over the past several years, Opelika's economy has shifted away from a traditional basis in textile manufacturing. Since 2004, the city has experienced revitalization in many segments of the economy, including commercial, residential and industrial activity. Since January 2005, the City of Opelika has announced new industry investments and existing industry expansions and created more than 2,265 jobs. Projects include Daewon and Mando America Corp. (automotive parts suppliers), Gambro Renal Products (a Swedish manufacturer of dialyzers for kidney dialysis), and the newest addition to the Northeast Opelika Industrial Park is Pharmavite, a global leader and manufacturer of dietary supplements.

The religious landscape consists of 21.46 % Evangelical Protestant, 10.87 % Mainline Protestant and 59.36 % identifying themselves as Nondenominational. Many of the most respected and thriving ministries in the Opelika area are Nondenominational.

⁷ City Data, "Opelika Alabama", www.city-data.com/city/Opelika-Alabama.html, (May 2014).

⁸ Lauren Wiygul, "Opelika," <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org>, (June 2014).

Traveling fourteen miles down U.S. Hwy. 29 off I-85, among the beautiful green space sprinkled with homes set on large parcels of acreage it is easy to be taken in by the quiet natural beauty of the area. On many plots of property, there are cows grazing or an occasional riding lawn mower or tractor sitting somewhere that indicates the owner's intentions to complete the work of manicuring their land. Further on the highway, there are smaller plots cluttered with cars surrounding trailers that have been bricked around to provide a stable foundation and even small trailer parks hidden behind banks of trees with only a well-worn dirt road to mark their presence. There are no marked subdivisions or sidewalks. As far as one can see on the winding road is the evidence of a content country life in the immediate area of Opelika near Mt. Zion.

The presence of this structurally suburban styled church sitting within a landscape that is clearly rural is a telling statement as to the importance of geographic and social identity of the congregation. Mt. Zion is a congregation that is determined to maintain their location amid the challenges of demographic and economic changes in the community. Though the area has experienced obvious changes, shifting from a completely rural farming community to slightly more single home, working class community, the congregation has shown a commitment to remaining there though little has been done to adjust to its surroundings. This skewed vision, coupled with the lack of interest in serving the changing community, has further validated Mt. Zion's perception of itself as insular with the expectation of passive growth occurring to sustain it.

Analysis of the Situation

It would seem instinctive that a congregation that has a historic relationship denominationally with being resilient during times of struggle would carry out that same platform today. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was born out of a desire to worship God with the equality and forward movement that we as African Americans had been denied. This came to pass by our ancestors using a focused agenda, setting aside individual desires for the greater good, and speaking in a collective voice to bring about change. Though the current congregation sees themselves as productive and progressive examples of the same, the reality is slightly different.

The history of the church bears witness that in its early years, Mt. Zion did indeed strive to remain in keeping with the examples of our forefathers. However, in the last 60 years a pattern of complacency, power struggles and silence became apparent. Borrowing from the observations of Leadership guru Dr. Edwin H. Friedman, “The presence of the past can be seen both in their ability to survive crisis and in their inability to change.”⁹ These themes have repeatedly stifled the progress that the early church envisioned.

Researching the history of Mt. Zion, opposing themes came to the forefront which could easily be missed if one were not doing this work. This congregation, though thriving from outward appearances, shows a pattern of behaviors that shape their identity pinpointing the challenges that loomed large in the present context. None of the three are irreversible yet they are deep seeded enough to be inescapable. It was discovered that 1) Changes in leadership caused dramatic loss of focus 2) Strong family allegiances caused

⁹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, Seabury, 2007), 249.

rifts within the congregation and 3) Silence at pivotal times hindered forward progress. These three themes occurred as many times in the last twenty years and at least that many during the previous 60 years. This congregation's ability to conceal their issues is admirable on one hand, yet very detrimental on the other.

In Methodism, a pastor is traditionally appointed on a yearly basis with the possibility of being moved at any time at the discretion of the Bishop. The pastor is always considered the most expendable part of the congregation and this has always been standard practice. This congregation has been fortunate enough to have leaders who have stayed on an average of seven years. Yet, each change in leadership brought about dramatic losses in focus, membership and finance.

The focus of this congregation was set around the desire to grow spiritually, numerically and financially in accordance to the quotas set by the Bishop. This was also important so that Mt. Zion could distinguish itself from others in the area who considered it a "rural" church because of its location. Great strides were made to dispel the "rural" image, which many equated with being "country and uncouth" according to church officers. The progress could have continued if they had been more open to new means of obtaining growth instead of insisting on doing "what we have always done." The former methods brought some success yet would have benefitted from the infusion of contemporary ideas to address the current needs. The core of the membership did not change much nor did the base families represented of the team of Officers over the past few years. A shift was apparent however when core members reduced or stopped giving due to opposition with any new ministry vision.

In another incident, a sub-culture was created that functioned as the primary decision making body. This sub-culture managed the day-to-day administrative, financial and spiritual business of Mt. Zion due to the prior appointed Pastor's refusal to do so. From outward appearances, all seemed to go smoothly yet a new internal dynamic came into play keeping the "look" of the congregation the same while this new decision making sub-culture stepped in to adapt to the crisis. Though differences in leadership style and focus are common occurrences, this congregation does not seem to adhere to change well or quickly. Rather than adjust many left with the result being two churches, Burrell Chapel and St. Peter being birthed out of Mt. Zion. In every case, historically, the option that was taken caused decline when it could have been the impetus to push the Mt. Zion into a more productive direction.

Further, changes in Episcopal and Presiding Elder district leadership also weighed heavily on how this congregation functioned. In a seven-year period, three different Presiding Elders each with their own distinct personality and administrative acumen were assigned to the area. With each having a differing interpretation of the vision of the Bishop for the area, it was often difficult to get the congregation to "buy in" to the paradigm shifts that occurred.

These areas of inward orientation formed an unspoken, systemic barrier that not only prohibited the growth of the congregation but also nurtured a defiance against productive pastoral leadership. New pastors were inevitable; new pastors with ideas challenging Mt. Zion's feeling of safety were not fully embraced leading to a tension that hindered the congregation's growth and progress.

Interviews with five pastors (three of which immediately preceded me and two who served as Asst. Pastors) provided contributing factors to the congregation's inward focus were revealed. These personality and leadership styles greatly affected the behavior of the congregation:

- The pastor with the longest tenure (seventeen years) found it difficult to continue to try initiating change in the congregation to only be met with their complacency. To meet the expectations of the Bishop and Presiding Elder, he began performing the tasks necessary while allowing the congregation's complacent behavior to go unchecked. This behavior allowed the congregation to become "enfeebled and permitted to remain herds of sheep in which have cheerfully turned to their own way."¹⁰ By his admission it was easier to let them have their way than to be in constant turmoil with them. This Pastor was considered the "Beloved Superstar Pastor" as he led them to complete the building process for the new sanctuary. He retired in 2007 after 45 years of Pastoral service.
- The next pastor (two-year tenure) felt that the issue in his tenure that correlated to the congregation's inward behavior was one of misplaced leadership roles. The congregation had the expectation that this leader would allow them to continue in their previous ways. They became unhappy when he showed enthusiasm and zeal that disturbed their comfortable routine. The congregation wanted someone who would "act within the boundaries of an unexpressed but nonetheless clearly defined social contract."¹¹ This "contract" implied that the church would pay him if he

¹⁰ C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1986), 19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 35.

made them look good without causing them to do the work of study, prayer and giving. When this Pastor stepped outside of this contract, the church requested new leadership from the then newly appointed Bishop unbeknownst to this pastor.

- The pastor that preceded me immediately (one year tenure) shared that he had absolutely no interest in being the Pastor of Mt. Zion. When interviewed, he told me that he accepted the appointment because he had to but never tried to lead the church due to his desire for appointment to another church. He did the minimum of preaching and teaching, never encouraged youth participation or initiated any type of evangelism efforts. He did make sure the financial obligations to the District and Episcopacy were paid in accordance with the regulation of the Doctrine and Discipline of The AME Church during his tenure. This pastor and the congregation mutually agreed that new leadership was needful. I was then appointed to lead this congregation.
- Both Assistant Pastors interviewed served the church prior to being assigned to their own congregations. Though they are members of one of the two leading families, they admit that the congregation can aptly be described as having tunnel vision. Rev. C. John Miller defines tunnel vision as having characteristics “that limits potential ministries of the church to those that can only be accomplished by the visible, human sources at hand.”¹² Having grown up in this congregation they admit that because the congregation had always been self-sustaining due to the

¹² Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, 29.

predominant membership of their families, so it seemed easy for them to fall into the school of thought that they did not need anyone else to survive.

Each pastor interviewed also shared the feeling of being compelled to allow things to continue the way they found them due to the pressure from the core leadership group to keep the church intact. Both the pastors and core leadership understood the need for change but feared pressing the church to do so would bring about another split in the congregation. Nearly all of them expressed the pressure of the officer's resistance to change many times bordered on Pastoral Abuse because their demands were nearly always in opposition with the pastoral vision of the church. To this end, threats to withhold pay and/or benefits or the silence of lack of support came into play as a means of controlling the authority of the assigned pastor. Additionally, the demands of the Episcopacy brought its own set of discomforts that walked the fine line toward abuse of authority leaving the pastors feeling powerless. Because of Mt. Zion's consistency in meeting their obligations to the Ninth District much of their internal issues were overlooked and the pattern of inward behavior ignored on both the local and Episcopal level.

Further, the existence of differences between two strong founding families has often caused rifts within the congregation. One family is predominantly made up of educators and small business owners. From my research, they have always been extremely astute in matters of investments, land acquisition and the like. Those who worked in the mill, Opelika's largest employer up until ten years ago, were mostly in supervisory or management positions. Most members of this family were/are college educated and many left the area to expand their horizons; The other key family is mostly blue collar. They are

known for being hard, loyal workers who usually stay on one job until they retired. They are not very adventurous and most of them are not college educated. This family is known more for saving than investing and are likely to be found behind the scenes than out front. Both families grew up in the Opelika area and have a great love for Mt. Zion. Even up to the current date, they serve, share their talents and give equally to the congregation at large. These two families make up about 80% of the congregation and span four generations.

Though these families are different in demeanor and habits, they have historically been represented equally in the major areas of Church leadership. These families are the “Power Players” of Mt. Zion. When they work together, they are a force to be reckoned with as they can band in a united front to ensure the success of any project or initiative; when they are in opposition with each other, the result is the negatively in that their opposition can cause a stalemate or shutdown that is equally as daunting. “In “settled times” the presence of these families and their work/worship ethic provide a positive framework so everyone knows how to move forward in the everyday workings of the church. Yet in the “unsettled” times they respond in a mixture of “survival of the fittest” and “survival of the similar”, neither of which is inclusive of those in the minority or is a healthy way to adapt to changes in the congregational environment.”¹³ Those outside of these families are often overruled, leaving them feeling powerless and/or voiceless, which brings the third recurring theme to the forefront.

The tendency to be silent at pivotal times has come into play several times. While the “Power Players” voiced their displeasure or approval of decisions ranging from

¹³ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, “Introductions,” in *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), x.

purchasing property to ousting pastors and everything in between, some members of the congregation were notably silent. These issues were vital to the state of the church and ultimately caused another period of decline which hurt the church further. Research discovered that the silence was a means of avoiding confrontation and bringing peace. This “go along to get along” attitude may have gotten them past some issues temporarily while in the long run it caused some serious underlying wounding. The wounding was verbalized by some as an act of “suffering so the greater good would come forth”; for others, it was simply a means to end the present argument. In both cases the issues that were subjects of contention were still vividly remembered along with the hurt that resulted. Additionally, pastors took a silent approach. They reported that to squelch differences, because they were mentally exhausted or afraid to cause another split, they allowed concerns that should have been addressed to go undiscussed.

The power to speak, in this instance, has not been evenly or equitably distributed leaving some families feeling that what they must say has no place and/or value.¹⁴ The repeated silencing, whether intentional or unintentional, in each situation made those on the outside remain on the fringes of decision making. They do however contribute, serve and share their talents regardless.

The silence in some areas still manifests itself in the current congregation. It is evident not just in the absence of words but also in the body language that accompanies some discussions. Some are so used to the two families being in the majority that they have given up on trying to be heard. Even worse, the fringe group is satisfied to allow “the

¹⁴Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 150.

way we have always done things” to be the way things remain. Being comfortably uncomfortable has become the way of life and has hindered the church in many cases from moving forward because they would rather stay safe than to risk speaking up and bringing about change. Unless those silent exercise the power to speak, the power to change will never come into play the way the two, power and change, are intended. The regret for not speaking in the past weighs heavily on those I spoke with who long for change yet are not willing to risk being accepted to bring it to pass. Regret coupled with unhealed wounding has been a nearly lethal combination for Mt. Zion.

Just as pressing as attending to the internal woundedness of the church was the community’s need for Mt. Zion to serve them with outreach ministry. The community is a close-knit one with many residents having social ties to one or more of the families within the congregation. Having grown up together or attended the same schools birthed a degree of comfort between the two. For occasional Mt. Zion activities, such as yard sales, bar-b-ques or the monthly Food Bank distribution, the community comes out in droves. Yet the congregation lacked the desire to commit to long-term activities such as hosting Summer Camps, After-School care, GED Training needful in the area though they had the skills and facility to successfully house them. This behavior gave the community the view that Mt. Zion as what Dr. Thom Rainer describes as a fortress. “People in the community did not feel welcomed in the church. Those in the church were more concerned about protecting the way they did church than reaching residents of the community. These churches are really fortresses. The very thought of making significant changes to reach and impact the

community is frightening.”¹⁵ This fortress perception of Mt. Zion made it easy for those in the surrounding area to align themselves with congregations who offered these services. This further stunted the potential growth of the church, as well as diminished the possibility of building the necessary community relationship.

While doing this research a sentence from Homiletics professor, Dr. Lenora Tisdale’s *Exegeting the Congregation* repeatedly came to mind. “And if we are going to engage our people in the ritual acts that enable them to become better dancers of the faith, both within worship and without, then we must first know where their steps are faltering and where they are most in need of dress rehearsal for the new age to come.”¹⁶ This sentence echoed in my mind as I considered the three previously noted themes. Seeing how the “dance” they memorized over many years was passed onto several generations, dances that have taken them off the path of growth, ones that have allowed family ties to rule over mutual respect and even silent dances have allowed a roller coaster effect to take the place of a steady climb is sobering.

The fact that this congregation has strong family roots with four generations of two major families still in membership gives a sign of hope. The younger set, according to group conversations and private visits to my office, are ripe for facilitating change and seem willing to rise to the challenge. The seasoned members have expressed their weariness in providing leadership but hold fast to their positions as officers so the power balance nor their identity within the congregation would shift. This tension is one that puts

¹⁵Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 27-28.

¹⁶ Tisdale, Lenora Tubbs, “Exegeting the Congregation.,” in *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997), 57.

the two generations at odds and many times sets the church off balance. Pastorally, it was clear that the only way to change the way a dance is performed was to revise the steps, integrating new ones alongside the old, so that the dance becomes a seamless mix of past and present to bring the necessary stability into view.

Looking broadly over the conversations during fellowships, official board meeting minutes and the views shared during group discussions gave me insight on the mindset of the congregation as it related to change. The verbal and non-verbal reactions to new ideas in addition to the silent protests at activities or in ministry event planning gave me a new lens to view the depth of the fear of change. By observation and inquiry, I discovered members of this congregation desired change when we talked in private though their allegiance to their families caused them to oppose it in public congregational meetings and forums. Analyzing the information more deeply brought to the surface that much of the fear of change was a learned behavior that would likely be changed by teaching there was an alternative that would liberate them personally and collectively.

The introduction of a more structured teaching model, far different from the random one they were accustomed to, would make focused learning available generationally and community-wide to meet the needs of both groups and unify them. To arrive at a place of balance that would bring Mt. Zion out of their comfort zone while allowing the Opelika community in required a two-fold strategic plan of transformation. The strategy would employ consistent, focused education partnered with differentiated leadership to bring the congregation to a healthy balance. Refocusing would lead to the improvement of ministry functions by addressing the deep seeded issues that hindered growth to transform the

congregation into a new, productive mindset that functioned well in the transformation of the community and denomination; the evolution from self-directed to a differentiated leadership style would provide the proactive, non-anxious, decisive leadership that would propel the pastor/congregation partnership to new heights.

Pastoral Analysis

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is not a congregational church. It is a pastor led church where each person appointed to that office has been charged to “take thou authority” and march in step with God as the Chief Executive Officer, under the advisement of the connectional church. It is a heavy responsibility that takes a special kind of leader. This pastor is one called by God, who has been trained in such manner that they can successfully lead any congregation they are assigned. The training comes in the trenches by experiences that cannot be taught solely in classrooms but are lived out as one serves. This combination of theory and practice becomes the foundation of the lens pastors view their style of leadership as it impacts each congregation they are appointed to. Analyzing myself as a leader allowed me to understand my ability to lead and adjust my perception of what successful pastoral leadership entailed.

As a pastor serving my first charge, Edward Friedman’s *A Failure of Nerve* was a wake-up call and much needed push in the way of systems theory. His discussion regarding the “sabotage of leaders”¹⁷ put a name to the uneasiness that is often felt denominationally on Conference, District and most especially on the local church level. By osmosis it was learned that a “good pastor” was one who sought to make sure everyone was pleased even

¹⁷ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 2.

at the risk of little or no progress being made within the congregation. Most times the “good pastor” was often overly stressed trying to achieve this herculean feat. Sadly, due to the lack of training to the contrary I found myself in the same situation.

Adding insult to injury, the feeling of being abused by those who wanted to do things “the same way we’ve been doing them”, while also discouraging others to buy into new ideas because they were afraid to come outside of their comfort zone often came into play. Hearing someone say, this “resistance came with the territory of leading”¹⁸ provided the enlightenment I needed to understand the negative reactions of the congregation to innovative ideas was not personal but rather is systemic. It was the way they were taught to wield power as a means of holding the pastor hostage, which was a feeling I often felt but could not intelligently articulate. Nor did I have anyone to share it with who was not experiencing the same.

Understanding the process of leadership that I had observed and practiced was the very thing that characterized me as a leader who was self-directed sent a light bulb off in my head. I had heard pastors and leaders that I admire speak of being delivered *from* their congregations while leading them was the only way to move the congregation forward. Deliverance happened after the pastor stopped being a “peace monger who was concerned more with good feelings than progress”¹⁹ and began being a differentiated leader. Wishing to become a successful change agent, required I learn to be a differentiated leader. The work of Family Therapist and Leadership Consultant Dr. Edwin H. Friedman, assisted me

¹⁸Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 11.

¹⁹ Ibid, 13.

in understanding how important the skills of the leader are in crafting change in a group who are resistant to change. Friedman defines a differentiated leader as one who has “clear goals and vision for an organization yet is not anxious when challenged to speak, act or make decisions that go against the underlying power culture of the congregation. This is a leader who can be separate, yet connected and maintain a modifying, non-anxious and challenging presence.”²⁰ A differentiated leader can manage their own capacity to react emotionally to take the risks that may be displeasing yet necessary for the group.

This leadership style allows me to think less about displeasing one or two and more about the progress of the whole. Realizing that what was needed to move forward shifted my focus toward continually working on my own differentiation to “optimize my objectivity and decision making capacity.”²¹ The focus became the greater good, an unpopular mindset in an inward focused congregation, but one needful to bring about consistent, upward progress.

Looking at the practices of former pastors, uncovered a pattern of situation based preaching and teaching that helped nurture the ingrown behavior the congregation exhibited. This teaching capitalized on preaching in reaction to current issues within the congregation as opposed to a well-planned, proactive strategic preaching model that was encouraging and instructional. To be fair, this style may have come about as a means of avoiding resistance and conflict within the congregation. The Self-Assessment Mirroring Survey, coupled with my comparative analytical research, prompted me to retrain myself

²⁰Ibid, 14.

²¹ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 26.

to facilitate change in the congregation after discovering I had fallen into the reactive pattern as well.

As the research revealed the unique tensions Mt. Zion lived in, it became clear that I needed to view this context under a new lens. This lens allowed me to see Mt. Zion through the eyes of a pastor who by stepping outside the established pattern of teaching could journey with them to introduce new twists to the basic tenets of the church in a manner that transformed all of us in the process. Knowing that the ability to diminish my emotional reaction to the self-centered behavior assisted me in becoming more able to respond confidently and consistently without the concern of making everyone happy with my decisions. Coming to grips with the knowledge that the way the leader functions directly effects how the church functions, made the issues clearer to see. As I continued evolving, the congregation began to follow suit gradually transforming into a church that understood its obligation to be not just visible but vital in the lives of those they touched.

The evolution from being self-directed to differentiated, required that I tap into not only the advice of Dr. Friedman but also the wisdom of my now retired ordaining Bishop, Rt. Rev. William P. DeVeaux, Sr. In a course on AME Polity Bishop offered the following as traits an effective Pastor should possess. “A pastor should develop a tough skin, have a heart surrendered to God, a teachable spirit and a confidence that borders on arrogance but is balance by humility. Lastly, every pastor must have the willingness to serve without the need to be served.”²² These qualities are ones that are now constantly growing and have made a tremendous difference in how I continue the work of ministry in the office of pastor.

²² DeVeaux, William P. Sr. “Qualities of an Effective Pastor.” Lecture, AME Polity from Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA, September 2008.

Using more structured practices to meet the needs of this congregational context, and overcome their obvious resistance to change, revolutionized my pastoral relationship with them.

Congregational and Pastoral Strategy

Transformation begins with being able to visualize the positive aspects of a situation and modeling them making collaboration more appealing. The process spoke to our situation with the community and in this instance, it required some refocusing to enjoy a positive result.

As a vehicle to educate the congregation and encourage transformation, the employment of practices, though seemingly simplistic, that would allow spiritual growth to come forth through the basic tenets of teaching, preaching, study and prayer with the added caveat of intentional focus also positioned the congregation to become accepted by the community as a trusted source of help, hope and encouragement. Working from the understanding that change requires instruction, we employed a collaborative book study with other AME Churches, tandem Bible study and Preaching Series within Mt. Zion and instituted focused small group prayer to strengthen Mt. Zion's instructional foundation.

Collaborative Book Study

In discussions with neighboring AME pastors about their mirroring survey results, we discovered that regardless of size, congregational talent or length of leadership we all had similar plights in our congregations. All of us had issues with change, complacency and being welcoming to those outside of our congregations. The Collaborative Book Study brought together the Officers (Stewards and Trustees) and Auxiliary Leaders (Lay,

Christian Education, YPD, etc.) to rightly define the current state of the three AME congregations in the geographic area.

Using Church Growth Strategist, Rev. Thom Rainer's *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* collaboratively assisted the leaders in each church in identifying the behaviors noted and how they applied to their specific congregations. Because this exercise was a group effort with two other churches, the presentation of the information did not seem accusatory to any one congregation while being revelatory to everyone. We discussed each chapter over an 8-week period with others sharing how their church identified with the signs of sickness, I saw recognition in my leaders. This opened later conversations and led to the desire to restructure the way we thought about how our church functioned. Using this form of study and training, the group of pastors saw change in their congregation's leaders as well. Further, this level of teaching/training served to diminish the comparison of Evangelism practices in our respective churches by parishioners from the same families that served in our congregations.

Tandem Bible Study and Preaching

Implementing a method of tandem Bible study and preaching to strengthen the concepts we discussed in the collaborative study was the next step. One of my colleagues calls this process, "My Wednesdays make my Sundays make sense!" This simply means that a weekly Bible study is formulated to work in concert with each Sunday's message. The subject and text are introduced on Wednesday allowing for questions and conversation. Each study was crafted to include the history, context and biographical information on the

key persons in the text to lay a foundation. As the information unfolded and questions arose it became a time where the back stories of the text came alive and took root.

For example, the Book of Nehemiah was chosen to highlight the strategic ways leadership play into the rebuilding of a community. During the process, we touched on Nehemiah's prayer life, his dependence on God for guidance, the way he became victorious when opposed and his demand for fairness. Over several weeks, we compared those character traits focusing on how vital they are in the rebuilding of a congregation and its surrounding community. Using those biblical examples as an aid, I could cast light on the church's need to do the same without the harsh negativity that would otherwise come forth.

Those same texts were preached in a six-week series called "I Want M.O.R.E!" M.O.R.E. was an acronym M-Making God My Priority (prayer), O-Operating with The Spirit (godly guidance), R-Rejecting opposition (negativity) and E-Expecting victory (positive results). In this instance, M.O.R.E becomes a means for not only desiring more as an individual but also as a congregation who desired to do more, be more and share more. In this way, the lesson is applicable (and was taught to be) not just inward but outward as well. The excitement in hearing the word taught in depth then fully preached expanded the congregations understanding of the text in both teaching and celebration. Using this method, reinforced the biblical concepts and they took root in a more effective way. Pastor Larry Osborne of North Coast Church and author of *Sticky Church*, uses the term "lecture-lab combo to identify this method because it exposes people to a passage multiple times and increases their familiarity and gives them an increase working

knowledge of the Word and biblical principles”.²³ This method was viable with every text that it was used with. The more exposure to the Word and the teaching points, the easier it was to see attitudes and mindsets change. Prior to the implementation of this tandem teaching/preaching model, the text taught/preached had no pattern for the congregants to follow nor life application with which to measure their personal spiritual growth. As they each week saw the lessons build from the week prior, it gave new insight on how the text worked together to enhance their learning as well as their living. The atmosphere on the campus became more positive and less tense. I began to hear and see the learning concepts put into practice in other areas of the church because the application came to life transforming them without their notice. There was a new excitement centered around attending Bible study and there was a new confidence in asking questions to gain clarity each week. In the Opelika community, I was often contacted via email or stopped as I did business in the area by those who were attending bible study and visiting our services. They shared how engaging and life-changing the tandem teaching/preaching had been. Some of my colleagues have begun to employ this system as well with impressive results.

An added benefit to me as a pastor was the insight this process provided me to the areas in the text that were misunderstood or had never been taught. Having the opportunity to hear and address their questions, reframe their study habits, and correct misinformation was vital in our growth together as it gave me a more in depth view of how some of their mindsets had been created. Within the teaching setting, people became more open to how

²³ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 65.

the Word of God gave instruction, correction, and guidance that could be used in their daily lives because they had the opportunity to question, wrestle, and consider it more broadly.

Many shared their notes²⁴ with neighbors and coworkers and we began to experience an increase in Bible study attendance from those in the community. It also increased the number who visited to hear how the Word went forth in worship. Using the same text opened eyes to the importance of the celebration of the Word making it more than just a preaching moment. It was the culmination of our collective work in study and the elevation of what we discovered together shared within the worship service. Our congregation became more attentive, further personal study was cultivated, excitement grew and it made preaching easy for me because I could feel their anticipation. As a church where the tradition of Call and Response is the indicator of both excitement and understanding, it became obvious that there was new comprehension. They became part of the preaching experience because they already understood the back story of each text and we could move toward digging deeper. Worshippers came expecting new revelation welcoming it gladly.

Focused Small Group Prayer

Historically the AME Church used the Class Leader System as a tool. Contemporary congregations call this the Small Group or Cell Groups. It is a method that had not been employed in this congregation for many years. In its former state, it was used mainly to collect class dues (offerings) from those who were sick and shut in and to offer fellowship to them in the process. It also served as a way of giving officers and leaders the opportunity to touch the pulse of the congregation and share information on the condition of their group

²⁴ For Bible study notes example, See Appendix 2.

with the pastor. Over the years, the practice fell to the wayside as many did not want the responsibility of contacting the members on their class or abused the authority of class leadership by acting in a manner unbecoming an officer in some manner.

Refashioning the practice using the contemporary model, which groups people by geography, age group and/or interest, we began to use this system for focused prayer. Each group was given a calendar with their prayer focus. For example, one group could have “courage to forgive” while another had “love of neighbor” as their focus. The calendar was distributed to those in the community surrounding the church as well making them feel welcomed to join in. With each group meeting on a different day and time, it allowed for those who could not participate during normal worship, Bible study or prayer services to do so.

Small Groups assisted in allowing leaders to become more empowered to use their gifts while giving the community a glimpse of the kind of teaching that was going forth inside Mt. Zion. Pastor Larry Osborne, author of *Sticky Church*, states, “A strong small group ministry can also help a church become more authentic in its relationships are far more disciplined in its spiritual disciplines.”²⁵ The intimacy of Small Groups made it easier for focused prayer to become a spiritual discipline. The more disciplined one’s prayer life, the easier it is to grasp other spiritual principles. As these groups began to pray about subjects like commitment, tithing, maturity, growth, and sharing the Gospel, a change in how they fellowshiped with one another and with visitors became apparent. These groups became a vital part of the transforming process as those who participated not only had the

²⁵ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 53.

opportunity to observe the process but became an integral part of it by their participation. The Opelika community felt welcome to participate and the congregation embraced them in such a seamless way that they became one unified body without even realizing it.

By calling the congregation back to the methods the church was founded upon, teaching, preaching, study and prayer, we retrained our thinking away from self-centered, inward behavior to a mindset that embraced God centered thinking. The implementation of intentional focus was the transforming factor for this congregation. Much different from the prior teaching methods that used a more random teaching/preaching style, the structure of this method provided a strategic methodology that had been absent in this context. These practices gave the congregation a new confidence in how impactful the Word of God could be in their lives. It also helped them understand their responsibility to share it with others to build the Kingdom. Because they began to attend Bible study and church focused on God as opposed to out of ritual, their true engagement in worship allowed God to become so real to them that sharing the experience with others became more natural. Experiencing the actual building of the intimate relationship with God allowed them to tear down the walls in their hearts and minds making it more appealing to share their experience with others.

Summary

Uncovering the systemic causes of congregations being inward focused helped shed light on how vital it is that leaders understand the history and culture of their congregations, as well as how the skill set and style of leadership the pastor possesses drives the work of achieving transformation.

No church chooses to be inward focused but rather adapts to the behavior to protect themselves from further disappointment, defeat, being overlooked or unrecognized, criticism or any combination of other soul hurts. In many cases, inward focused churches simply do not know how to begin to refocus and fear the failure of not accomplishing it will cause additional issues. Consequently, they remain stuck in behaviors that are comfortable, safe and continue seeking self-validation. This kind of tunnel vision impedes growth and sets an unhealthy model in place for stagnation to continue. It is cultural more than it is behavioral. Church Leadership Consultant Dr. Samuel Chand defines culture this way, “Culture, not vision or strategy, is the most powerful factor in any organization. It determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas, unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or deep discouragement about working or being involved there. Ultimately, the culture of an organization-- particularly in churches shapes individual morale, teamwork, effectiveness and outcomes.”²⁶ Coming to understand the culture of the congregation helped me make the adjustments I needed to as a leader. This revelation guided me to refocus myself away from pressure of performance to please higher leadership and toward loving the people in a manner that made them want to love others as well.

The possibilities for transforming the congregation appeared daunting yet through a change in my leadership style and understanding of the congregation’s culture, a difference in their mindset became apparent. Our conversations became more open with both parties listening for ways to work together for the strengthening of the congregation

²⁶ Samuel R. Chand, *Cracking Your Church’s Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision & Inspiration* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 2

and the Opelika community. It has been refreshing for us as a collective to become more aligned with the mandate to “love neighbor as self” that we so proudly ascribe to as part of our AME liturgy each week.

As the process of turning the focus from inside toward outside continues to progress, we have been able to visualize the restoration of this congregation to a productive place in the Opelika community and denomination.

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Appendix 1- Mirroring Survey

<u>Mirroring Results-Mt. Zion, Opelika</u>	
1	<p><u>Composition of Presiding Elder District:</u> Mt. Zion AME Church is on the Phenix City District of the Northeast Alabama Conference, 9th Episcopal District. It is one of the 21 circuits and stations of the Phenix City District.</p>
2	<p><u>Geographic location of the P.E. District by county lines, by areas:</u> The geographical location of the presiding Elder’s district includes Russell County, bordered by Lee County to the North, Muscogee County and Stewart County Ga. To the east, Barbour County to the South and Bullock and Macon Counties to the East. Lee County which is bordered by Chambers County to the North, Muscogee County, GA. To the East, Russell County to the South Macon and Tallapoosa Counties to the west. 17 AME Churches are in Russell County and 4 are in Lee County.</p>
3	<p><u>General population of those counties and/or areas:</u> Lee County :Population 150,933 (2013) □ <u>Cities</u> included: <u>Auburn</u>, <u>Opelika</u>, <u>Phenix City</u>, <u>Smiths Station</u>, <u>Loachapoka</u>, <u>Waverly</u>, <u>Notasulga</u>, <u>Woodland</u> Opelika population: 26,477</p>
4	<p><u>Growth Trend:</u> Since 2000, it has had a population <i>growth</i> of 22.35 percent. The City of Opelika has a growth trend of 21.9%</p>
5	<p><u>Economics of the County and/area:</u> <u>Lee County:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Lee, AL poverty rate of 19.3% is higher than the national average. • The median household income in Lee, AL is \$54,034. • At the time of the last census, the Lee, AL unemployment rate was 8.4%. <p><u>Opelika:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the time of the last census, the Opelika, AL unemployment rate was 8.2%. • The Opelika, AL poverty rate of 18.9% is higher than the national average. • In Opelika, AL, the median worker income is \$23,680. This is lower than the national average of \$29,701.

6. Church History:

Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church is on the Phenix City District of the Northeast Alabama Conference of the Ninth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first major religious institution for African Americans. The church was founded by **Bishop Richard Allen** in 1787 in Philadelphia. The church began as a protest against racial injustice to worshipers of African descent at St. George's Methodist Church. The first organization was known as the Free African Society. In 1816, the church held its first General Conference and elected Richard Allen the first Bishop. Today, the church has millions of members and numerous Episcopal Districts throughout the world.

The Ninth Episcopal District consists of the State of Alabama and the Presiding Bishop is the **Right Reverend James Levert Davis**. The Ninth District was originally the Seventh Episcopal District. It was officially formed at the General Conference of the AME Church in 1868. Bishop John W. Brown was assigned the first Bishop. Between 1868 and 1920 the district was geographically reorganized several times with Alabama being attached with Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. In 1920, Alabama became the Ninth District. The District has 5 conferences.

Bishop Henry McNeil Turner organized the North Alabama Conference, beginning with Greater St. Paul A.M.E. Church in Florence, AL, in 1878. Portions of the North and East Alabama Conferences were combined and the Presiding Elder Districts realigned under the leadership of **Bishop James L. Davis**. The current Presiding Elder is **Reverend Samuel Smith**.

Mt. Zion AME Church of Opelika was organized in 1840. Many families were responsible for gathering the congregation together. Names such as Carter, Roberson, Bryant, Jackson, Neloms, Rudd, Avery, Brooks, Robinson, Ingram, Dowdell, Wallace, Flake, Thomas, Madden and Kay are listed throughout what written history was recorded. According to the few handwritten documents that were passed on, the first church services were held in a bush arbor. In 1846, services were moved to a log gin house belonging to a Mr. Blaine Bozeman. In 1876, Rev. Glenn Hunter was appointed to Mt. Zion and arrived finding a congregation of 39 persons but no church property in their ownership. Rev. Hunter negotiated with Mr. Bozeman to purchase 2 1/2 acres of land where the congregation had been worshipping. Later, Mr. Bozeman stepped off the land for a cemetery and presented Rev. Hunter with the clear deed. At the end of Hunter's 4 year tenure, the church had grown to 200 members. Mt. Zion is the Mother of two other churches-**Burrell Chapel** and **St. Peter**.

Though it is unclear exactly when the Historic Church was built it is now a focal point on the Mt. Zion campus. As years passed, the original wooden structure was rebuilt and modernized. In 1986 the Fellowship Hall, along with classroom space on the second level, was added to the structure. In 1990, 5 additional acres of land was purchased for future growth and development. Desiring to have a still better place to worship, construction of the current sanctuary was begun in 2005. On September 2, 2007, the current sanctuary was dedicated. This nearly State of the Art facility stands as a towering testimony to the strength of the founding families, many of whom have decedents still attending Mt. Zion.

Ministers serving Mt. Zion include Reverends G.W. Sharp, Steal, Chatman, G. Hunter, J.W. Jackson, J.M. Jackson, S.G. Lee, J.A. Miller, Ford, Williams, A. Barkley, T.W. Wright, R.T. Baker, W.M. Boddie, Jr, J.L. Parker, L.F. Smith, B.C. Carter, S.G. Green, I.R. McIntosh, E.D. Phillips, L. Williams, J. Grooms, J. Walton and our present Pastor, Reverend Carmen Avery Walker. Reverend Walker is Mt. Zion's first female Pastor.

7. Membership of the Congregation:

There are approximately 93 members on roll after purging it in February 2015. There are approximately 30 families in the Church.

8. Income of the church:

\$ 125, 327- Conference year 2011

\$ 136, 290-Conference year 2012

\$ 113,568- Conference year 2013

\$ 134, 250-Conference year 2014

9. Attendance of congregation (How many visitors per month?)

Month	Members	Visitors	Total
January	158	10	168
February	93	10	103
March	93	4	97
April			
May			

10. Pastor Compensation:

HOUSING	\$0
MEDICAL INSURANCE	\$0
TRAVEL	Reimbursed as necessary
ALLOWANCE	\$0
VISION	\$0
LIFE INSURANCE	\$2,200 (including Annuity. No outside life insurance policy is paid for)
SALARY	\$27,300
TOTAL COMPENSATION	\$29,500

Categories listed according to Doctrine and Discipline of AME Church

11. Operating budget needs of the Congregation: \$120,585.21.

12. Growth patterns of the congregation:

2011- 14 new members

2012- 5 new members

2013- 18 new members

2014- 8 new members

13. Historic significance of the church in the community:

During its years of existence Mt. Zion AME Church has produced six (6) pastors; Three of those ministers are now pastoring and leading churches in Alabama.

Mt. Zion is the mother of two other AME churches: Burrell Chapel and St. Peter.

Our membership is composed of school teachers who serve the school systems of Opelika City Schools, Lee County Schools, Chambers County Schools, and Troup County Schools.

Among our members are prominent members of the business community who are entrepreneurs as well as bank assistant vice-presidents, and supervisors.

Members of our congregation serve on the police force of Opelika City. Several members of our congregation have served our nation in the military.

We strongly emphasize education; therefore, a large number of our members have received college degrees.

A member of our congregation has run for the Mayor of Opelika.

14. Issue surrounding title and deed or usage of the land:

There are no issues surrounding the title or deeds to the property.

15. Distance of other churches to the location of our church:

Church	Distance in miles
Shady Grove Christian	0.8
Pine Grove UMC	2.2
Wallace Chapel Baptist	2.4
Bethel Baptist	2.7
Gethsemane Baptist	3.1
Church of The Highlands (Meeting currently at Opelika Sportsplex)	5.4

16. Distance of AME Churches to Mt. Zion:

St. Mark- 5.7 miles

17. Are there any special social programs being operated out of the church site at present:

Yes, the Food Bank. During the summer of 2013 we hosted The ACTS of Thunder Super Summer Camp, and we hope to host another summer program in the future.

18. What is the estimated dollar value of the church property?

Land: \$50,900

Building:\$940,000

Total:\$990,900

Church furnishings: \$35,216.00

Church equipment: \$14,014.66

Expendable items:

19. Why would it possibly profit two congregations to consider at this time to merge? (Be specific)

As Christians we should follow in the footsteps of Paul, Timothy, Peter, Silas, and other disciples whose assignment was to grow the church and make disciples. The church must grow and continue to spread the good news that Jesus redeemed us from our sins. If merging two congregations leads to a stronger, more powerful outreach to the community, then it must be done. One building, one pastor's salary, a larger congregation all lead to better operation of one church if there were two churches in close proximity of each other that would be willing to merge.

At Mt. Zion we have built a new building. We are sustaining ourselves. We believe that churches considering building a new church could save on expenses if they considered merging with us.

20. What is the final recommendation of the committee?

We recommend that Mt. Zion not consider merging with another church at this time. However, if there is a church in the area that is having difficulty because of a declining membership, we welcome them to consider worshipping with us at Mt. Zion. There may be a church in the area that can't afford their budgets or to pay their pastor or is considering taking on a huge mortgage by building a new facility. Our facility is only 7 years old and has the capacity to seat 300 people. Those churches could maintain their property, but worship at Mt. Zion and not be burdened with the expenses of trying to pay a pastor or a budget or take on a new mortgage. With God's help we will have our mortgage paid off within the next 7 years. Then we can focus on the real purpose for which we were called – making disciples for Christ.

Appendix 2- Bible Study Note Sample

A little bit about Nehemiah...

The Book of Nehemiah is the last *historical book* of the Old Testament and records the history of the third return of Jerusalem after their captivity. It tells of how they rebuilt the walls and how the faith of the people was renewed. This book helps us as a Church understand:

- The importance of seeking God FIRST in prayer
- The characteristics of LEADERSHIP
- How vital STRATEGY and ORGANIZATION are in all areas of our lives

From Nehemiah the person we learn:

- To be PERSISTENT and PRAYERFUL
- CALMNESS is necessary when faced with OPPOSITION
- The importance of TALKING (prayer) and WALKING (submitting and obeying) with God

Nehemiah's name means "*Jehovah consoles*" or "*God comforts*"

Tonight, we will learn about EFFECTIVE PRAYER-

The SITUATION:

- Nehemiah receives a report from his brother that their homeland is in shambles
 - There is a remnant still there who did not escape.
 - **Remnant- a scrap or portion of the whole. Part of the part that was left behind. That part still possesses the core values of the whole but they are far smaller in number.**
 - The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* describes it as "What is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe".
 - The remnant has survived so there is hope! They are there for a reason. Why are we STILL here? Our purpose is to carry on and keep building!
- Nehemiah mourns
 - Weep for the condition for a season
 - Natural sadness to think of how it "used to be" vs present condition
 - Ok to look at what was lost but then remember you survived for a reason!
- Nehemiah PRAYS
 - Begins to PRAISE God
 - Who God is- Great, awesome of heaven
 - What God has done-Preserved covenant
 - Gives THANKS to God

- Shows lovingkindness those who keep commandments
- Then REPENTS
 - I understand we have not always acted wisely
 - Disobedient
 - Got what we deserved
- Makes REQUEST
 - Reminds God of His promise.....If we returned to You, we would be restored
 - Attach His promise to your prayers!
- Makes a COMMITMENT
 - We are ready to serve You!
 - We recognize that You are a
 - Redeemer, Strong and Powerful
- Asks for something PERSONAL and SPECIFIC
 - Give me FAVOR with those I need help from

Effective prayer uses:

- Praise
- Thanksgiving
- Repentance
- Requests by recalling God's promise
- Commitment to obey God's direction
- Specific to your needs

Are you praying effectively?