

Bicentennial General Conference Posthumous Conferral of *Honoris Causa* Ministerial Title for Jarena Lee

The Bicentennial theme “An Extraordinary Past and an Incredible Future” lends itself to a celebration of the historical milestones and foundational personalities of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It also encapsulates limitless possibilities for the legacy of the Church of Allen to stand as a spiritual light of ministry, worship, evangelism, education, scholarship, activism and inclusivity of all of God’s children. One of the ways we, as the sons and daughters-daughters and sons of Allen honor our legacy is through breaking down social barriers, rectifying discriminatory rules, and publically honoring God’s call to ministry on the lives of our sisters and brothers. Our communal acknowledgment of God’s private call is signified by the ministerial orders of Licentiate, Deacon, Elder, Bishop and by honoring one with the title of “Reverend” when one has completed an intense study process, an examination by elders of the church, demonstration of ministerial gifts and graces and a personal pledge to serve the church and its leadership.

Born February 11, 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey Sis. Jarena Lee affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Society in 1804 in Philadelphia at Bethel Church under the pastorate of then Rev. Richard Allen and immediately sensed the “...power to exhort sinners and to tell of the wonders and goodness of Him who had clothed me with His salvation.” She journals of experiencing the call to preach four or five years after her sanctification and hearing God in the “impressive silence” say to her, “Preach the Gospel, I will put words in your mouth and will turn your enemies to become your friends.” Two days later telling Rev. Allen of her “duty to preach”, she was informed women were exhorters but there was no doctrinal precedence for women preachers.

Jarena Lee continued to hold prayer meetings, exhorted, married, had two children, became a widow, lost one child as she wrestled with being faithful to God’s call on her life and human’s deferral of that same call. Her first congregation was five persons. Eight years later she was anointed during a worship service and rose to preach “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9) as a personal testimony and God convicted then Bishop Allen that she was indeed called to preach. She was officially licensed in 1819 at age 36 to exhort, hold prayer meetings, and travel at times with Bishop Allen including preaching assignments at Bethel Church. Lee preached in private homes, schools, public meeting houses, in open fields and churches across denominations, races and ethnicities. Over the course of four years she self-reported travelling 1600 miles and walking 211 miles because she was “willing to suffer as well as love”. She preached 138 sermons one year, raised money for the connection and planted churches across the East Coast and Canada. She died in God’s service but without all the rights and privileges of an AME minister.

Jarena Lee, first known preaching woman of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is recognized across Black Christendom as the mother of Black and White preaching women. Her extraordinary devotion, obedience dedication and ministerial work for the cause of Christ, the Church of Allen, and the world laid the foundation for countless women and men in ministry.

Following the work of Bishop Allen in allowing Lee to live out her call, women and men sought to persuade the church to recognize the call of women to the preaching ministry. An 1844

petition to the General Conference to license women was rejected. In 1848 the Daughters of Zion Women's Society petitioned the General Conference and faced opposition led by Bishop Daniel Payne. In 1852 Bishop Paul Quinn tried unsuccessfully to get a resolution approved to license women. In 1884 Bishop Henry McNeal Turner ordained Sarah A. Hughes a deacon in the North Carolina Conference only to have the action overturned in 1888 as the General Conference approved the licensing of women evangelists. As Jarena Lee intoned, God's call is never limited by law or society.

Lee's legacy includes nineteenth century preaching women Sophie Murray and Elizabeth Cole of Bethel, Baltimore; Rachel Evans of New Jersey; and Harriet Felson Taylor of Union Bethel in Washington. Lee's determination reaches to the twentieth century as the AME Church began ordaining women as local deacon in 1948, local elder in 1956 and finally itinerant deacons and elders in 1960. Following Lee's obedient model, Rev. Carrie T. Hooper in 1964 was the first woman to run for bishop. The first female Presiding Elders, Rev. Dorothy Morris of the Guyana Conference (16th District, Bishop Frederick H. Talbot, 1973); Rev. Cornelia Wright of the West Virginia Annual Conference (3rd District, Bishop Vinton R. Anderson, 1983) and Rev. Esther Ntinda of the Northeast Zambia Conference (17th District, Bishop Richard A. Chappelle, 1990) took their place in leadership of the church.

It is because of God's grace, the sacrificial service and example of Jarena Lee, the work of the Council of Bishops and the General Board, the Ad Hoc Commission on Women in Ministry (1977), the Connectional Women in Ministry (1988), the Women's Missionary Society, the Lay Organization, Dr. Jayme Coleman Williams and women and men in ministry over the course of our extraordinary history that opened the way in the twenty-first century for the election and consecration of the 117th Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie (2000), the 122nd Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry (2004) and the 126th Bishop Sarah Francis Davis (2004). As we enter the next century anticipating an incredible future the Church of Allen includes some 4000 ordained itinerants, locals, licensed evangelists, and exhorters, licentiates and superannuated women in ministry.

Today, July 13, 2016, two hundred twelve years after this phenomenal woman answered God's call to "Go Preach my gospel", we, the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church having reviewed the life and legacy of Jarena Lee, examined her unquestionable devotion to God, read of her adherence to the duties and responsibilities of a minister in this Zion, and have seen and understood the evidence of her deep legacy now posthumously affirm the life and ministry by conferring the ministerial title Itinerant Elder to Reverend Jarena Lee (*Honoris Causa*).

Ecclesial Affirmation by Senior Bishop McKinley Young and the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church at the Bicentennial General Conference held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Statement Composed and Read by Dr. Teresa Fry Brown, Fourteenth Historiographer, Executive Director of Research and Scholarship, Editor of the *AME Review*, Connectional Consultant, AME Women in Ministry©tlfb2016

