

Connectional Lay Organization  
34<sup>th</sup> Biennial Session  
North Charleston, SC  
August 2 – 6, 2015

Plenary Session Notes

**Plenary I – A Healthy Church - Bishop Reginald Jackson, Presenter**

Bishop Reginald Jackson received a splendid introduction by Bro. Gibson Mengwe, President of the 20<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District Lay Organization.

Bishop Jackson began by stating that surveys indicate that black Christian numbers are in decline. Congregations are no longer relevant in the communities they serve. He then listed several characteristics of a healthy church, some of which are making disciples, spiritual compassion, loving relationships and exercising good stewardship and generosity.

Most lay people have not been taught a role in the life of the church. Too many folk are concerned about titles. Pastors fail to understand they need to teach and train. Some AME pastors actually say and think the members are dumb and don't know anything. Pastors have 52 weeks a year to preach, teach and train.

Most churches are not healthy. They need to commit to being spiritually healthy. Pastors cannot and must not be the only leader in the church. The Lay determines if the church is healthy (Act 2: 42-47). The AME church has not taken in additional members in 50 years. Church growth should be, but is not, the number one priority.

Our priority is to maintain the church. We are caretakers of the church. "Caretakers soon become undertakers." The Lay has a responsibility to grow the church. Over 80% of Lay people have never brought anyone to Christ or persuaded them to join the church.

Christian Education is important. Workshops on marriage, health, finances, etc. ought to be a part of ministry. This helps grow the church. We learn to move from membership to discipleship.

1. Every church should have a mission and a vision statement. They should have long range and strategic plans that help them carry out the mission and vision statements.
2. The church needs to make a commitment to grow. An absolute decision should be made on this. The greatest assessment of church growth is spiritual, not numerical.
3. The church needs to be inclusive. 80% of Lay people do not bring people to Christ. The church has become exclusive instead of inclusive. When you fish with a rod, you catch a certain kind of fish. But when you fish with a net, you catch ALL kinds of fish.
4. Children, youth and young adults are not in the church. Most of our congregations are senior citizens.

Bishop Jackson stated that most of our churches stay closed, except for a few hours on Sunday and maybe Wednesday. They may be open 7 hours a week. If that's the case, it may be cheaper to rent a place. The church must be the HUB of the community. After school programs, adopt-a-school, social action time (attend school board meetings), food pantries, clothing closets, the Rights of Passage are all examples of how the church can impact the lives of the people in the community. Churches need to meet the needs of the people. Churches need to change the way people think. It changes the way people act and how they live.

Bishop Jackson told a story that captured and captivated the entire convention. He was a young preacher and he received an appointment to a church. The church had 7 children. The average age of the congregation was 67 years old. When he got to the church, a woman walked up to him and said, "Young man. I don't mean any disrespect, but I'm old enough to be your grandmother. There's nothing you can tell me." The then young preacher knew where to focus his attention. He turned to the children and asked each one to meet him at the church on Friday evening. Each was to bring a friend. And they did. He had no idea what he was going to do with them. When the children arrived (14 strong), he took them to a movie. They met him again next Friday. This time they had pizza and bible study.

One day, the young preacher received what he called the best phone call he ever received as a pastor. It was from a lady who cursed him out. Bishop Jackson said the lady was calling and cursing about her son not being at home. She said the son is never home. And when he does get there it's late. She said the son didn't spend any time at home anymore. The lady ended by informing him that she didn't know what was going on out at that church, but whatever it is her son loves it.

## **Plenary II – Low Country Worship – Rev. Dr. Allen Parrot (and others), Presenter**

Presiding Elder Parrot opened by giving a descriptive definition of worship. Worship is defined as declaring the worth and protection of God. It can be private or public. Worship is rejoicing and praising God. Rev. Randolph Miller informed the attendees on how worship is conducted and carried out in the low country. We traversed through the order of service. The convention was given a lesson on clapping “low country” style. The songs used to demonstrate the low country clap were We Praise Thee O God, My Hope Is Built and O Thou in Whose Presence.

Ebenezer AME Church Choir, from downtown Charleston, SC, favored us with two selections; “When Peace Like A River and Love Lifted Me”. The songs were sung “low country” style.

Rev. William Swinton, pastor of Ebenezer AME Church explained that worship gives us motivation to overcome oppression in our cities and in the world. The foundation for change is found in black churches. It was born out of the need to commune with god. We couldn’t go many places, but we could always go to church. Folk will forgive you for a lot, but they won’t forgive the preacher for not preaching.

Richard Allen turned to the excitement and proclamation of the word. The Pentecostal influence is a part of our worship. The release of the Holy Spirit brings the order of service to worship.

The Altar Call is the once common thread that runs through churches in the south. Richard Allen was pulled from his knees while praying. Hence, the Altar Call is of significant importance. This is the time in our worship where we pray people through their troubling times. Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal. Low country worship, according to Rev. Swinton, doesn’t take us out of our struggle, but it allows God to come in.

**Plenary III – The Role of the Relevant Church – Rev. Dr. Jamaal Bryant,  
Presenter**

Rev. Bryant opened by talking about the various generations and their experiences. He focused on the millennial generation. This generation knows Global Warming and 9/11. They are the poach generation of the crack babies. This generation saw Trayvon Martin killed and Zimmerman go free. They saw Michael Brown in Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore. What can the Lay Organization do to shift our churches from emptying, Dr. Bryant asked? He then began to give some ideas.

1. Embrace Change – driving away millennials means you want to hold on to the steering wheel of tradition. A mega church is not needed to be influential. When you make a difference in your community, you become a threat. J. Edgar Hoover said the Black Panthers were a threat. It wasn't because they were large in numbers. There were merely 300 of them. They were a threat because they were active in the community. They fed the hungry and clothe the naked. One thing you must remember, your church can't be everything to everybody. Don't try to do it all. You must have a vision to move young people forward.
2. Enlarge the Vision – a church with no vision is a church where the millennials perish. You must get out of tradition. Figure out what the vision is. A vision is what I see that does not exist. Give young folk something to do. Dr. Bryant's church had a closed building they were about to sell. After they saw a community need, they opened the closed building to help the community in trying times. Everybody in the church should be moving up and doing better, not just the first family. If they're the only ones doing better, something is wrong. We must teach the youth and young adults what we know. We can't continue to stay in these positions forever. If bishops, pastors and clergy have to retire, then Lay folk should have to retire.
3. Envelope Expectation – some churches go a whole year and no one gets saved. No one is delivered. No one is helped. Lay folk should be thinking about how they can trouble the water. The Lay must do something that will push the envelope. The Lay must have the nerve to do what clergy cannot do. Something has to be done. What are we doing to bring young people in?
4. Engage the Community – 85% of Jesus's ministry was done outside the sanctuary. After the preacher finishes the sermon, we open the doors of the

church and we wait for someone to walk in. But the world is waiting for us to walk out. We need to walk out of the church and go into the world and bring lost souls to Christ. Society changes every 4 years. Churches change every 20 years. We need to think in a new way. Are the members able to give electronically? None of Jesus' disciples came from seminary. They were Lay people. Give young people the opportunity to serve. Children these days are wearing the stains and the pains of their parents. We must not only pray for them, but we must help them. If you're a church, it's sad when the community doesn't know who you are.

In Mark, Chapter 2, Jesus is 30 years old. His ministry was outside. But when he went inside the people followed Him and there was no room left. Outside, Jesus is teaching principles. Inside, Jesus is preaching the word. Each one of us has a calling. If you don't like people, you shouldn't be an usher. If you have problems with money, get out of the finance room. Your church must make room for millennials. It must make room for new ideas. If you want your church to be filled, make room for the youth and young adults.

You won't have an effective ministry until you break off some stuff. Break off the clicks, the back biters, the traditions, etc. If you want to be blessed, go find some drug dealers, prostitutes, young and confused folk and bring them to Jesus. We all should give God the glory right now for the millennials who are getting ready to come to church.

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