

Introduction

by Augustus H. Able III

The records of Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church comprise a considerable body of various matter: first, because the church is an old one; second, because the division of its corporate body into distinct, complementary halves, the secular and the spiritual, i.e., the trustees as the controllers and managers of the property over against the corporation and particularly within it, the stewards and leaders of the class system through which the religious dynamism of the church was promoted.

The class system that was adopted in America directly from Wesley's masterful plan for the promotion of his Societies in England succeeded here as well as it did abroad. It emphasized lay participation, bound members to each other by frequent meetings in small groups. Instructed them in the religious life, gave them fellowship, put them to common tasks and developed leadership. It fueled American Methodism for its great future, and for the African denomination when it emerged, it was a particularly apt instrument for the A.M.E.'s development.

In keeping, the Bethel records for stewards, leaders, and classes are more numerous than those for the trustees, and as a kind of appendix to them follow the records of a number of activities from benevolent societies to Sunday School. It must be remarked that the corporation whose records are listed in this article along with the records of the stewards and leaders embraced the entire membership of the church in good standing, i.e., those men who had paid their annual "dollar money." The classes were as a matrix within this enveloping body; for the same reason all other non-trustee records are put together in one group as illustrating the totality of the membership in action.

As has just been hinted, in view of the diversity of materials, it has seemed reasonable to present the items not upon a simple chronological thread but to classify related

items together under a few different heads, keeping chronology, however, within each group.

The general plan, as developed under this rationale, is as follows:

1. Books of general record
2. Minutes of the trustees
3. Cash books and ledgers (pertaining to the trustees)
4. Books relating to leaders and classes
Minutes of the corporation, of the Board of Stewards, of the Official Board, and of the Quarterly Conference
5. Special organizations:
Benevolent Societies
Trial Books
Sunday School
Ushers' Association
Christian Endeavor
6. Miscellany
Pictures and objects interesting for their associations
Visitors' books