

President's Address
Delivered February 20, 2021 at the 83rd Session of the International Ministers and Lay
Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
Virtual Meeting hosted by the Piedmont Episcopal District
Dr. Anthony Witherspoon

**Moving Forward Together: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Our Continued Commitment
to Accountability**

To the Sons and Daughters of James Varick, especially the members of the International Ministers' and Lay Association:

A retrospective trip to an American Literature Class at Livingstone College where the late Mrs. Mattie Lakin was the professor is in order. Each of her students were required to memorize a poem. She assigned the poem "Heritage" to half of the class. Some of you tuning in today remember Mrs. Lakin. She demanded "No notes in hand, only the use of the brain when reciting the poem." She had asked the question prior to making the assignment, "What is Africa to you?" Yet, she substituted the name of the country "Africa" and posed the question another way; "what is your faith to you?" as well as asked, "what is your belief in God to you?" She did this, ironically, having in the back of her mind the words found in the first line of the poem "Heritage" which asks the question, "What is Africa to me?"¹

Today, I would like to challenge us as an association by asking a similar question, What is the International Ministers and Lay Association to us? Even when we will find ourselves existing beyond a post-covid, an initial post-vaccinational existence, each of us must personally ask this question, what will the association mean to us? Perhaps our response to issues appears to be sporadic at times, at best. Yet, we cannot forget what we have been called to do. We cannot forget the role we play for the overall fruitful good of our church. As in times past, I have stated and continue to contend, "our association is still being chosen for such a time as this."

The bylaws of our association remind us that one of the reasons we exist is to **"provide a forum for Ministers and Laity"** in our church **"to address problems and issues which are relevant to the Church's ministry to the nation and the world."**² We cannot evade issues and problems that exist within our church for fear of making waves. We cannot run from issues and problems that exist within our church for fear of alienation. Nor can we evade issues and problems within our church for fear we may be ostracized, especially when our convictions fall in line with doctrine and practice.

An even greater accountability prompts us to continue to address issues and problems head-on in the fear of God. This does not, in any way, disregard, overlook or disrespect our stance on highly controversial issues. In fact, the denomination is often quite clear, at least in word, about where we stand as a religious body. Still, we cannot become complacent, ignoring that which is

¹ "Heritage" found in Anthology of American Literature Volume II: Realism to the Present, Fourth Edition, pg. 1312, by George McMichael, J.C. Levenson, Leo Marx, et. al. Macmillan Publishing Company, New York; 1974.

² The Bylaws of the International Ministers and Lay Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Article II – Purpose, number 1

evident, that which affects us, and that which must engage us. We are not immune to world-wide occurrences, for that which exists externally often directly and/or indirectly affects us too. However, now, more than anytime, we are challenged all the more to examine, reexamine and help give direction to those who look to us for direction. Please allow me to address just a few of the areas our association can continue to provide such direction:

1. During our Annual Meeting in 2020, I highlighted the challenge that centers around convincing the masses that church still matters. If this last year has revealed anything to us, it has revealed the number of people who do not find solace in church gatherings, but rather a spiritualist understanding of the creation. Over the years, our general neglect of establishing an effective methodology for engaging the church intergenerationally has led to a great falling away from consistent church attendance. As a result, we are being prompted to continue to make necessary shifts, not only in Zion, but within mainline Protestantism. While our church makes necessary shifts to maintain viability, we are faced with a gentle reminder: we are not shifting, per se', because we desire to, but we have been brought to a fork in the road where we have to. Perhaps we never knew to what extent Free Conference.com, Zoom and Facebook Live would become three of our greatest friends. Our association holistically and unapologetically continues to forge into twenty-first century relevancy, viability, and sustainability.

Our bylaws state that part of our purpose is **“to keep before the church, proposals, to improve, maintain and/or expand the influence and effectiveness of the Church’s life, work and mission.”**³ Coming into the twenty-first century does not ignore why we exist, nor the pain staking sacrifices of those upon whose shoulders we stand. Rather, such a shift acknowledges and appreciates their labors, their beliefs that our association “speaks truth to power” and will always possess a voice that helps to make liberation a reality. We will continue, as is stated in our bylaws, to **monitor “the Church’s compliance with the law as is mandated by the General Conference.”**⁴

2. The Importance of the 51st Session of The General Conference. In just a few months, our denomination will again make history in several ways. Cutting edged legislation will be presented, some of which requires us to examine our actions from top to bottom and vice versa, which calls for the church to be more accountable. True Methodism holds all members to accountability. In every respect this will be our quadrennial check-up meeting. We will be faced with a host of proposals that will either be collectively embraced, put on the back burner, or reveal our ambivalence. Yet, while we cannot and should not evade the needs that exist in the U.S., we are being called out, even challenged, if you will, to think seriously about the connectivity between both our domestic work and work abroad.

Once again, the words of Bishop Michael Angelo Frencher, Sr. in previous addition of the Missionary Seer expressed the need for the church (Zion) to think seriously about missions in a broader sense. As he reflected over a low point in ministry as a bishop in the mission fields, he states that he realized that many **“cannot or will not embrace the**

³ Ibid, number 2.

⁴ Ibid, number 3

total mission of the A.M.E. Zion Church.”⁵ He further states, should missions be truly fruitful, it must **“go beyond our present environment into other environments”** even visualizing the possibility of **“one day placing”** even **“Caribbean work under one Bishop, rather than continue to keep them with Stateside Conferences.”** Lastly he states that he **“envisions the A.M.E. Zion Church supporting and bringing into the denomination work being proposed in Southern Central and East Africa.”⁶**

In past meetings, we have had presentations rendered by Bishops Crenshaw and Powell to learn more about the possibility of expansion throughout the world. But we have also played a role in this by providing an international inclusion since our association’s inception that respects diversity and equity, which can be observed during our annual awards banquet.

The General Conference will also be presented with a host of candidates who are presently campaigning for various offices throughout our church. Today we will have the opportunity to briefly hear from them at the end of our business session by way of video to assist us in making wise, intelligent, and prayerful decisions about the future leadership of our church.

Let us not take for granted, however, that the General Conference reminds each of us that there is also a call for the once again empowered ministers and laity of the world to embrace the power of “the courageous voice.” As previously stated, “This requires us to continue to work in concert with our leaders to help bring this to fruition. Yet, Lay presence beyond the physical but through word and deed is probably more vital now than ever before.” Just as the voice from the pulpit is important, so too are the voices from the pews. This can be nurtured in tandem and collectively when Ministers and Lay provide equal voice and mutual respect. Ministers and Lay must once again nurture the relevance of a collaborative whole, while seeking God’s direction—a direction that from our inception, made us the “Freedom Church,” as we have moved forward together.

3. The power of our vote during midterm elections is still relevant. While we rejoice over witnessing the first woman of color; the first woman in the history of our nation; the first African American woman to graduate for an Historically Black University rise to the office of Vice President; let us not remain vigilant, awake, and attentive to the work of the enemy. It is already time to begin to once again push our people to vote. I am grateful that our association over the years has encouraged this. It is still our bounden duty as a people of faith.
4. Lastly, Healthcare is not only a worldwide issue, but affects members of our association as well. As an association, let us support the efforts to educate our people on the Corona Virus, vaccinations, precautions, etc. Let us join forces to assist the members of the association, our families and loved ones with encouraging them against becoming complacent, idle, or comfortable simply because people are being vaccinated throughout the nation. The clarion call still reverberates reminding us the battle is not over. Our goal is not to politicize, mind you, but to help provide knowledge and encourage our people to “stay woke.”

⁵ “Framing Missions at Home and Overseas;” The Missionary Seer, Vol. 11, Issue 014, January-March 2020, pg. 11

⁶ Ibid, pg. 14

5. The Executive Team takes very seriously, with integrity and commitment, what you, as an association, elected us to do. Our Executive Team promised to provide the association with transparency, hard work and the determination to keep our association as a viable entity within our Zion. We intentionally continue to utilize our various means to keep the association informed and work towards building and maintaining our membership, while continuing to build upon the legacy that has been passed down to us. To date, we have done our level best to follow through on our commitments. A quick recapitulation over the past four years:

- We promised to continue to provide information in a first-class manner from first class presenters. Prayerfully, you will agree we have accomplished this.
- As with previous administrations, we promised to provide a legislative process that keeps members of our association informed. Our association has hosted Legislative Summits in Rock Hill, S.C., Orlando, Fla., Greensboro, N.C., Louisville, KY., and Birmingham, Ala. Today the association will be given a recap from Dr. Yvonne Tracey and Reverend Erich Shumake regarding legislative contributions made collaboratively that have become resolutions. Personal thanks are in order to both of them for their tireless efforts. We would also like to thank Reverend Lakesha Womack for assisting us with utilizing technology and social media so persons throughout our Zion from across the world could participate and provide vital input to bring the final masterpiece to fruition.
- We promised to be more innovative in as many areas as possible. We have been able to do this to the best of our abilities through the association's Facebook page, our Website, Zoom, etc. A special thanks to Mrs. Denise Niles, Reverend Lakesha Womack and Reverend Austin Young for helping to make this a reality. You will also find recently updated and enhanced means to pay for memberships, organizational pins and future banquet tickets utilizing the association website. We will continue to work even harder to update and utilize the website in the future. We solicit your patience in this regard.
- We promised to work towards increasing young adult participation, a task we continue to explore, led by one of our team members, Dr. Maurice Harden. We will continue to keep the association updated on this process.
- We promised to provide much needed updates to our Bylaws. Thanks to Dr. Curtis Walker's leadership, a draft of the has been prepared, to be further reviewed by the Bylaws Committee. Upon final review of the committee, the committee will make its presentation to the Executive Team for any corrections, additions, and suggestion, who in turn will present the final product to the association for review and for approval.
- We promised to work diligently toward increasing our association's membership. We have established an online membership registration option (imlaamezion.org), which can assist Regional Vice Presidents with both promoting memberships in their respective areas, and for persons wishing to obtain and/or renew the same. As usual, persons may also obtain and/or renew their memberships today and in the future via the website. Persons should also feel free to mail their memberships throughout the year to Dr. Myrtle Bowen, 2nd Vice President. Although we have not reached our total goal for membership, we continue to endeavor to do so.

- We have designed our own association lapel pin. It is our hope that every member will purchase a pin for \$10.00 to help spread the proud word that we are still viable to the denomination. Pins may be purchased via the association website. Ms. Carlous Tyrance, assistant secretary will see to it that persons receive the same.
- We promised to honor the veterans of our church and association both past and present with a plaque that will be displayed at the AME Zion Headquarters. Our plan was to have a special ceremony this Spring. Due to Covid-19, we will plan for this to become a reality upon being able to meet in person, post-covid.

In conclusion, I thank the almighty God for the grace bestowed me, and you for the opportunity to serve these past four years. Allow me personally to thank again this extraordinary Executive Team elected by you to serve this past quadrennium. We have worked tremendously hard to continue the legacy of times past, while striving to innovate, educate and cultivate. Thanks to the Regional Vice Presidents who helped to promote our association tirelessly, and for their unwavering support in helping to both recruit and keep members abreast of association particulars. Thanks to Dr. Mary Matthews, International President of the Connectional Lay Council for your teamwork and council; Miss Rhandi Stith, the Connectional Lay Council and Dr. Addie Lisby for their support, use of various mediums for advertisements, as well as any others of you who have shared our information.

Thanks to everyone from across Zion who played a vital role during our various summits by serving on committees as well as providing extraordinary input. The manifestation of your labor has not been in vain. Thanks to the Board of Bishops for continuing to support and recognize us as a viable entity within our church. Last, but definitely not least, we would like to thank the ministers and lay as a whole who consistently purchase new and renewed memberships, who represent us throughout our Zion. Without you the association would not continue to exist.

Thinking back to the question posed to our American Literature class by Mrs. Mattie Lakin, “What is Africa to you?,” I came to understand the deep respect she had for the motherland. I also realized her query was not limited to a continent but had an even deeper meaning. Abel Meeropol wrote the lyrics to the poem “*The House I live In; That’s America to Me*” that later became a song, sung by Frank Sinatra. At the end of each stanza, the statement is made, “That’s America to me?”⁷ It is easy for me to assume Mrs. Lakin was aware of the song’s lyrics as she posed the question from the first place. She matriculated during the era the song was written, produced, and sung. Perhaps she also thought seriously about Frank Sinatra’s adamant and blatant omission of a line in the poem/song which served as a slap in the face to people of color, as the words written by Meeropol expressed his profound belief that a real American community could include diversity, equitability, and inclusivity. It is possible this reality may have moved Mrs. Lakin psychologically, as it may move so many. The line that was omitted by Sinatra was omitted on purpose. Mrs. Lakin challenged the students back then, as we are challenged today not to allow a rich history that is ours to be omitted, become ineffective, docile, unimpactful, or unimportant. With all that people try to erase from our Heritage already, we must never allow our organizations to become non-existent.

⁷ “*The House I Live In: That’s America to Me*”, by Abel Meeropol, 1951

Family, what does the International Ministers' and Lay Association mean to us? What does our voice mean to us and so many? What does our right to exist today mean to the future of our existence for years to come within the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church? Mrs. Lakin continues to answer this question; "Our people exist because our fore-parents existed." Brothers and sisters, our association continues to exist because others before us saw to its very perpetual existence. We too must continue to see to it.; no omissions!

Thomas Ken can perhaps assist with expressing how we feel as a unit:

"Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."⁸

⁸ *Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Bicentennial*

Hymnal, pg. 15, October 1996, A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, Charlotte, N.C.