

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Clark Memorial Methodist Church

The Clark Memorial United Methodist Church congregation (Clark) began in Nashville in 1865 as Clark Chapel. The Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South purchased the former Andrew's Chapel building on Franklin Street. Bishop Davis Clark, president of the Freedman's Aid Society, organized an African American ministry and the chapel was named for him. Rev. John Seay was appointed pastor of the church in 1866, which included a school for African American children. In 1899, a new building was erected on Franklin Street and Clark Chapel became Clark Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church. As Nashville's African American community moved, so did the church.

The next move was in 1936 under Rev. Julius C. Johnson, when the congregation worshipped in a Seventh Day Adventist building on Meharry Boulevard. Soon after, a fundraising drive for their new building began. In addition to holding fundraising concerts, the Clark Ladies' Guild was an important source of financial assistance. However, the Depression made fundraising difficult.

Philadelphia architectural firm Sundt & Wenner designed the imposing Gothic Revival church, which was constructed from 1941-1945. Sundt & Wenner designed churches for the Methodist Episcopal Church's Bureau of Architecture in Philadelphia. Upon completion of the present building on Phillips Street, Rev. Dubro M. Grisham served as the pastor and Rev. Johnson was the superintendent. When the congregation moved into the new church, it became known as Clark Memorial Methodist Church.

Under the pastorage of Rev. Leonard L. Haynes (appointed in 1953), the congregation grew and prospered and a two-story educational wing was added in 1956. In 1957, a parsonage was

constructed adjacent to the church along Phillips Street. The education wing was extended in 1980-81 under Rev. W.C. Dobbins' leadership; it was designed by Clair Maurice Jones, an African American architect from Memphis. The last major expansion for Clark Memorial was in 2000, when they purchased the former home of Dr. C. J Walker, located next to the parsonage.

Nashville's African American churches, Clark included, have historically played an important role in serving both their congregations as well as the larger community. Clark continued hosting meetings for the church and community in the new location. One of the first meetings held here was in 1945 for the Southern Regional Conference of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). In December 1953, soon after he was appointed pastor of Clark, Rev. Haynes participated in an NAACP workshop and rally held at the church. Rev. Robert William Kelly began his pastorage in 1957. He was the chaplain for the Nashville NAACP, hosted school desegregation meetings at Clark, and accompanied parents and children desegregating Glenn Elementary.

Under Rev. Kelly, Clark became one of the most important sites in Nashville's civil rights history and the Nashville Student Movement. Rev. Kelly invited Vanderbilt Divinity School student James M. Lawson to hold workshops on nonviolent demonstrations in the education wing. While many African American churches in Nashville were involved in the civil rights movement, Clark, along with First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, is uniquely important as the place where Lawson conducted much of his nonviolent training. It is the building most closely associated with him in Nashville as he began his ascent as a nationally renowned civil rights activist.

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During his college years in Ohio, Lawson joined two groups promoting pacifism, equality, and Christianity: FOR and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). He was drafted into the military in 1951, followed the principles he learned, refused to report to the military, and was jailed. When released, Lawson finished his degree, then served as a minister in India, where he learned the philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi. Upon his return to Ohio in 1956, Lawson met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who encouraged him to go to Nashville. Around the same time, FOR representative Rev. Glenn Smiley offered Lawson a job in Nashville. As the home of four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), numerous African American churches and congregations, and Fisk University's Race Relations Institute, Nashville was a city ready for new civil rights actions. In early 1958, Lawson was in Nashville working with First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill's Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., at the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC).

It was through his associations with FOR and NCLC that Lawson began his nonviolent workshops. Rev. Smiley and Lawson held the first workshop at Bethel A.M.E. Church in the Edgehill neighborhood in March 1958, although most of the workshops in Nashville occurred at Clark and First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill. Initial workshops were small and geared towards adults; however, the churches' proximity to HBCUs allowed students easy access. After much training, students and leaders decided that downtown lunch counters should be the target of protests. The first Nashville sit-in protests were held on February 13, 1960; these efforts eventually resulted in the desegregation of several downtown lunch counters.

Clark's involvement with civil rights continued after the initial protest. Rev. Kelly was replaced by Rev. Alexander M. Anderson, Jr., in 1959. Rev. Anderson served as secretary of the NCLC and participated in the Montgomery Freedom Ride. After Nashville attorney Z. A. Looby's house was bombed in April 1960, students met with Lawson and Rev. C.T. Vivian (First Community Church) at Clark to strategize about their next action, which resulted in a silent mass march to the courthouse. Other key events at

Clark included Nashville NAACP meetings, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference held in 1961, and NCLC meetings held there until 1964.

Rev. John G. Corry served as Clark's pastor from 1965 to 1968, when the congregation became Clark Memorial United Methodist Church after the Methodists merged with the United Brethren Church. Clark continued to be involved with the surrounding community during Corry's pastorage. It was during Rev. W. C. Dobbins' term at Clark (1968-1983) that the congregation decided to expand the church building rather than move. The new facility was called the Grady Sherrill-Matthew Walker Memorial Wing, named after two of Clark's respected members.

Dr. Charles J. Walker lived in a house adjacent to Clark's parsonage, and now part of the Clark property, from 1942 until his death in 1997. Like other members of Clark, Dr. Walker was involved in Nashville's civil rights efforts, often behind the scenes. He was active in community affairs and served on the NCLC executive committee as treasurer. After attorney Looby's house was bombed, Walker had his home under protective surveillance.

Clark United Methodist Church's congregation has an impressive past record in Nashville's civil rights history and continues to be involved with the community. With the loss of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill's historic building, Clark is the building most closely associated with Nashville's nonviolent civil rights training.

*Claudette Stager*

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