

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

First Community Church



First Community Church began in 1932 as the First Independent African Methodist Community Church. Reverend Wayman Y. Horton led the new congregation of 182 members and held services in members' homes and in tents until a church building was constructed at 1732 Scovel. In 1936 Reverend James Crutcher, church trustees, and eight congregation members agreed to buy property at 1815 Knowles, where the church is today. According to church's written history, the Scovel building was moved on rollers to Knowles. Nashville city directories show the church building at 1815 Knowles in 1941. At that time the church was called the Crutcher Memorial, after the Reverend James Crutcher, who led the congregation until 1950.

First Community Church is a charter member of the International Council of Community Churches, an international, interracial, and intercultural association of churches. The church bylaws state that their objectives "...through a centralized and inclusive effort offers the fullest possible privileges and opportunities to the whole community for the religious, the social, the educational and recreational good of all." The result of this is shown in First Community's ecumenical community outreach activities.

First Community was always involved in ecumenical and community outreach activities. On January 19, 1941, Reverend Crutcher was mentioned in *The Nashville Tennessean* stating that a "community center has been organized for the general welfare of the less fortunate without regard to creed." The same article reported that he was the president of the "Independent Church of more than 55 congregations." In August Reverend Crutcher was in Birmingham attending the biennial conference of sixty independent nondenominational community churches. Crutcher spoke at the newly formed Southern Regional Council in 1944. Formed to promote racial equality, the council held a conference in Nashville that year. Two ecumenical organizations merged in 1950 to become the International Council of Community Churches, of which First Community became a charter member. The group is a voluntary association of self-governing, ecumenical churches.

Historically, First Community Church had a close association with the American Baptist Theological

Seminary (ABTS). Founded in 1924, the ABTS was a strong proponent of Christian education, racial equality, and leadership. Reverend Moses Williams, First Community pastor from 1950-1954, and Reverend Samuel Cameron, pastor serving after Reverend Williams, were ABTS graduates. In 1957 and until 1961, one of the leaders of the Nashville Civil Rights movement and pastor of First Community was ABTS's Cordy Tindell (C.T.) Vivian.

First Baptist and Clark Memorial are the churches most often cited for their roles in Nashville's Civil Rights Movement. However First Community and many other Nashville churches had ties to the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), the student movement, and supported the nonviolent protests. Churches helped raise bail money, helped get attorneys, and supported the economic boycott that occurred along with the sit-ins.

First Community Church was a part of Nashville's civil rights and community events through its pastors and members. Reverend Vivian was the second vice-president of the NAACP in 1959 and church trustee Johnetta Hayes was NAACP assistant secretary that year. Monthly meetings of the Nashville NAACP were held at the church. Attorney Z. Alexander Looby spoke to the Nashville branch of the NAACP at the church on the role of city government in 1961. Reverend J. Metz Rollins and Diane Nash were speakers at a NCLC sponsored mass meeting in May of 1961. Meetings at First Community included the efforts of the NAACP Political Action Committee to register voters. Reverend McCoy Ransom was the pastor at First Community in the 1960s and as a board member of the NCLC, he opened the church for a speaker from Vanderbilt on Race Relations Sunday in 1962. (Race Relations Sunday was an ecumenical observance for churches across the US.) In April 1962, Reverend James Lawson, then pastor at Scott Chapel Methodist Church in Shelbyville, returned to Nashville to speak at First Community about Operation Open City and "Economic Withdrawal and the Battle for Equality." Reverends Lawson, Metz, and Smith joined First Community's Reverend McCoy Ransom in 1962 for a mass meeting sponsored by the NCLC. A flyer for the meeting stated that the NCLC wanted "to make Nashville the beloved

community.” Reverend L.L. Dickerson, manager of Greenwood Cemetery, spoke on “The Church and Civil Rights” at First Community in 1964.

In addition to her work with the NAACP, where she became the first woman president in the late 1950s, Johnetta Hayes was active in Nashville Colored PTA and school desegregation. In a 2003 interview by Charles Wilson, Jr. in possession of the church, Hayes stated:

When I became local president of the NAACP in 1959, we were in the midst of marches and sit-ins lead by mostly college students. Old and young were involved. Our pastor at the time, Rev. C.T. Vivian was very actively involved in the movement. He was Vice President of the student Non-Violent Movement Committee. We sat in at churches, theaters, restaurants, and businesses. John Lewis and Diane Nash led the students in the movement. They held meetings at local churches. First Community was one of the churches.

As well as more prominent names from First Community, all members were encouraged to participate in Nashville’s civil rights movement. They often worked in the background, attended meetings and trainings. Examples include Johnetta Hayes’ daughter, Elaine Gross, and Dorothy Johnson who went to meetings at Highlander Folk School in Grundy County. Hayes also spoke at a Highlander workshop in 1961. First Community placed notices in the Nashville paper in October 1972 and April 1973 inviting all to come hear speakers. Ms. Gross was also one of the first African Americans hired by a clothing store in Nashville and church member Betty Parks was the youth president for the local NAACP. When Avco and Ford began hiring African Americans, church members Nathaniel Perry and Cecil and Alice McClure were hired. Helen Napier was the first African American to be employed by the Royal Insurance Company in Nashville.

Near the end of his ministry at First Community, Reverend Vivian began a campaign to construct a modern church. Completed circa 1960, congregation member Jesse Palmer Walker designed the building and member Fred Valentine directed the construction of the church building. Jesse Palmer Walker (1901-1992) was born in Tennessee and was a trustee of First Community and Church. He was noted as a carpenter in the 1930 census, a fireman in the 1940 census, and as a mechanical helper in the 1950 census. Frederick Valentine (1888-1988) was born in Mississippi near Natchez. After hearing Booker T. Washington talk, Valentine enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in 1906. After graduating he moved to Georgia and learned the bricklaying trade. He moved to Nashville in 1925,

bought a home, and rebuilt it himself after a fire. Funeral visitation services for both Walker and Valentine were held at First Community Church. Walker was interred at Hills of Calvary Cemetery and Palmer at Greenwood Cemetery.

First Community Church sponsored a concert by J. Robert Bradley, at the Tennessee War Memorial on November 6, 1959. The proceeds from the event were to go to the building program for the church. Memphis native Bradley was known world-wide for his rich baritone, especially as he sang arias and spirituals. Reverend Vivian wrote an editorial in the November 19, 1959, edition of *The Tennessean* stating that “We are presently building a church. We have had the unusual good fortune to have the men of the church do three-fourths of the building.” He also noted that all but two of the men were novices.

First Community’s Reverend Kendrick JanghDhari (pastor 1967-1982) served on the National Council for Community Churches Board of Trustees and his associate pastor Reverend Samuel Triplett was a National Youth Director for the International Council of Community churches. Reverend JangDhari, initiated a building fund to construct a dining room and program educational areas. Partial funding for the two-story classroom extension came through Reverend Vivian after he spoke on Oprah Winfrey’s tribute program to Martin Luther King, Jr. With the congregation’s building fund and monies collected as a result of Oprah Winfrey’s show, the extension was able to be completed in 1992 while under the pastorship of Reverend Harold Simmonds. Continuing First Community’s outreach programs, Rev Trajean Jadorette raised funds to purchase additional properties and renovate the church. Elder Glenn V. Clay was senior pastor from 2006-2019. He fought against injustices and oppressions and left a legacy of empowerment. Under current pastor Ella Clay, First Community started a new nonprofit outreach program in 2023 “Healing Minds and Souls” that focuses on healing from trauma.

Claudette Stager

Sources:

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