Community, Service, and Faith:
Meade Church in the mid-20th Century

by David Taft Terry

World War I's impact was undeniable – immigration to Washington DC and Alexandria from the rural countryside increased, the growth of social and social welfare organizations was substantial, and in black communities a resolve to build up their organizations and institutions to meet their needs, where racism and discrimination fell short, was near universal.

At Meade Memorial Church, the 11-year tenure of Rector Joseph Mitchell came to an end when the fighting stopped, in the year of the Armistice, 1918. Mitchell's replacement was in many ways indicative of the times, as he was an immigrant to the United States. His name was Lorenzo A. King. He, a West Indian, would lead Meade for six years. Rev. King helped to carry forward what had become a tradition at the small chapel of community-orientation and service. Born in Barbados, Rev. King immigrated to the U.S. in 1897. King graduated from Bishop Payne Divinity School (BPDS) in 1917 and received further theological training at Howard University's School of Religion while at Meade. He appears to have been in step with the evolving ideas of the "social gospel" theories that saw many Christian clergy seek to pull from traditional texts new interpretations that met their modern congregations where they were, with practical means for their everyday lives, speaking to their material conditions as much as their spiritual needs. Newspaper notices, for example, invited the community to Meade to hear Rev. King deliver such sermons as "Some Race Prejudices of the Bible," likely not to debunk or put down the Good Book, but rather to strip away any legitimacy given to the man-made misuses of the word of God. He sought to empower the people.

As churches long had been in rural communities, by the 1920s, they were centers of black life in cities and towns – and not just spiritually, but socially, politically, and economic as well. The small, but growing community in Alexandria was no different. One of the chief strategies pursued by Meade to meet the growing need was its building, the structure itself. Until that time, Meade had only known wood-framed structures – first on Columbus Street at Montgomery, then on Columbus at Princess Street. In the mid-1910s, Meade had moved to its third location, a newly constructed brick chapel, at the corner of North Alfred and Princess. This new building was completed without a rectory, parish hall, or many modern features – too little money at the time, though the lot was purchased. Indeed, it would be a few years before the congregation could raise the funds to even get an organ in the new structure. What the new structure lacked was in many ways unimportant, however. The point was made – in brick and mortar – Meade was here in the community to stay, and to serve.

As Meade grew into its new facility, fundraising and outreach activities came to involve many in the church family. To pay for necessities like the organ, for example, members of the Ladies Guild often opened their homes for gatherings and receptions, like the annual fall "Chitterling Dinner," which not only helped to raise funds, but spread the good name of Meade Chapel.

The Meade Garden Club

Similarly, in the springtime, the Meade Men's Club sponsored lawn parties on the grassy lot adjacent to the chapel. Meade members also staged vaudeville-style productions occasionally to raise funds. On at least one occasion, the need to raise funds required them to meet the social expectations of segregated Alexandria, performing a production with other area churches, and billed "for white only" audiences in the newspaper advertisements.

The Rev. King was succeeded by the Rev. Junius L. Taylor (BPDS 1905) in 1924, and Taylor by the Rev. Isaac I. McDonald (BPDS 1926) two years later. Rev. McDonald served on the Alexandria Citizens Association, lending spiritual direction as that body's chaplain. McDonald left Meade in 1930, and the duties of priest-in-charge fell to Frederick DeLisle Pike (BPDS 1930.) In Summer 1932, one particularly significant development in the history of Meade occurred when St. Cyprian, a nearby mission parish house in a dilapidated school house serving the needs of rural African Americans near modern-day Fort Ward Park, was placed in Pike's care while he still led Meade. Appalled by the dilapidated conditions of St. Cyprian, Pike saw many of its members, particularly adolescents and young adults, transferred to Meade. Several of those St. Cyprian alumni would become integral members of Meade's congregation, providing lay leaderships into the late-20th and early-21st centuries.

With the coming of World War II, Meade, like the rest of the nation, sacrificed. Many of its men went off to fight in the armed forces. Many of its women worked in the war industry, which for some, was a first opportunity in their racially segregated homeland to work outside of domestic and menial labor. Some, for example, took positions at the Alexandria Torpedo Factory, which operated round the clock during the war. Also like the rest of the nation, Meade and its congregants emerged from the war with a sense of accomplishment and a renewed determination.

After short stints under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas Brown (BPDS 1920) (1936 – 1940), and the Rev. James West (BPDS 1939) (1940 – 1943), Meade brought an activist pastor to its pulpit in 1943, when the Rev. Arthur Myron Cochran[1] succeeded Fr. McDonald. Fr. Cochran had recently pastored in North Carolina, where he also led a local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Whatever the material deficiencies that characterized the 1930s and the Depression, a balance of sorts was struck as the era also marked tremendous social progress, especially regarding the broadening of a cultural voice for African

[1] Fr. Cochran was the first Meade pastor not trained at Bishop Payne Divinity School.

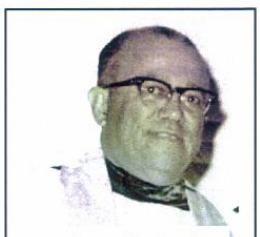
Americans. Inflections of these can be seen at Meade. Cochran was an accomplished musician and composer, and reflected the cultural bent of the day, arranging communion music based largely on African American spirituals.

Although the need for a parish hall had been identified as early as the 1920s, not until Rev. Cochran's tenure was Meade able to finance the construction. With the fundraising undertaken during the early 1950s, the new parish hall was completed in 1956 during the pastorate of the Rev. Isaiah G. Bell. The following year, the church refurbished its sanctuary. Its original mahogany tones were replaced by pine-colored paneling and pews. The grassy yard area once used to sponsor fundraising lawn parties gave way to a new purpose as a playground. Eventually, the expanded church facility would boast of a foyer, with rest rooms and a water fountain, connecting the sanctuary to a parish hall, and a second story of offices and classrooms.

Taken together, the 1940s and the 1950s represented in a sense the highpoint of the institutional development in the segregated African American community. Not just churches, but businesses, schools, art and cultural centers; news and media outlets in the larger cities had become sophisticated and comprehensive. Blacks were even beginning to take footholds in electoral politics for the first time since the late-19th century. To be sure, discrimination and racism still affected all blacks, and the masses were still systematically stifled by Jim Crow as they attempted to pursue the American Dream. Yet undeniable progress had been made, and the complex sophistication of the mid-twentieth century black community was testament to it. It was not enough, however. Blacks (with their churches) continued to organize. A change was coming.

A brief glimpse of the change was afforded to Meade Church as it was privileged to witness and influence the early career of Rev. John T. Walker. Walker, who went on to become the first African American ordained as Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (1977), served for a time at Meade during his time at the Virginia Theological Seminary. A few years earlier, he became the first African American to graduate from VTS.

As social change in mid-twentieth century grew from the strength and the work of grassroots organizations, especially churches, it is not inconsequential that so much of the leadership of this movement was provided by black preachers. In this respect, for his ability to nurture Meade spiritually, as well as his talent for also helping his flock rise to meet the tide of progressive social forces cresting at the very church doors, perhaps the most impactful pastor of the 20th century at Meade was the Rev. John Davis.


Father John Davis

During his pastoral leadership (1959 – 1971), The Right Reverend Canon John C. Davis (BPDS 1936) led Meade further down the path of community orientation and service than any one before or since. Whereas Meade had had earlier pastors with membership to the NAACP, for example, Davis encouraged and pressed congregants not simply to tolerate his own activism, but to get involved themselves during the height of the national Civil Rights

Movement. Davis had an impact most profoundly, perhaps on the Meade's teenagers in the 1960s, which he encouraged to support the NAACP, to support the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and to be active, conscious, and committed as an appropriate expression of their Christian Faith. Though the national movement was led by Rev. Martin King, the crusade at Meade was unquestionably led by Father Davis.

Though John Davis left a lasting impression on the congregation at Meade Church, especially the young people, it is not difficult to imagine, however, that several of his immediate predecessors – Father Bell, Father Walker, Father Cochran, Father Pike, Father McDonald, Father King, at least – had equally moved the young people of their day. And like those he followed into Meade's pulpit, Father Davis responded to his times, and the desires of the congregation he served. In that way, he reflected the values of Meade, values developed and nurtured across the generations. For its congregation, then, Meade Church served as a fountain of strength from the God which nurtured their faith. Community service was their most consistent expressions of that faith.