

The 116-Year Historical Journey of *Greater Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church*

The Reverend Conitras M. Houston Moore, Senior Pastor

"...and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."
-Matthew 16:18

One hundred and sixteen years ago, in the year of 1897, Ward Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church had its beginning under a bush at the corner of Thirteenth Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street. In 1897, the Reverend R. W. Miller, a local preacher from Saint John A.M.E. Church, came as pastor of Ward Chapel and served two years. Rev. Swindow followed Rev. Miller and pastored one year. Rev. W.J. Ferguson then became pastor, moved the church to Twenty-sixth Street and helped to rebuild it. Sister Henrietta Flemming raised the first twenty dollars to make a monthly payment on the new church. In 1913, the church was rebuilt a second time on Twenty-sixth Street. Fifty dollars was donated from a trust fund established in honor of the late Bishop Thomas M.D. Ward. The funds were left to build new churches. Each church receiving money from the fund was to be named in honor of Bishop Ward.

In 1937, the Reverend R.D. Griffin was appointed pastor of Ward Chapel at the Twenty-sixth Street location. In 1939, the church was forced to move from Twenty-sixth Street by the Government Housing Authority. The church was moved to Pou Street and rebuilt in 1940 for the third time during the pastorate of the Reverend R. D. Griffin. The cost of the church was \$6,500.00. Faith and prayer built this particular edifice with some members paying fifty cents to a dollar for dues. The Reverend T.L. Butler, Presiding Elder of the Savannah District, held the dedication on April 16, 1944.

The first parsonage in the history of the church was built on Pou Street. The five room wooden structure was located directly behind the church. The church remains as a community historical landmark, but the parsonage, long demolished, is a memory of progress. When asked to describe the church on Pou Street, a pleasant picture takes form:

With the smell from the cleaners in its backyard and the field of sour grass at its front, the foundation of a community stood for all to enter. The old structure made sure there was no long line to enter one door because it had two doors, one to the left of the front steps and one to the right. Many children perched on the cement slabs, which held up the steps, and many skinned knees were the result of running down the steps too fast. Inside, three sets of pews lined the church, at the front, was the pulpit, and around it was a wooden altar which heard many prayers, stood as a backdrop to many weddings, and acted as a stopping point for even more caskets. The choir stand was anchored behind the pulpit and was reached from the rear of the church. Wooden, straight-back chairs were the singers' only resting post, and sometimes tiny straws rose to prick the limbs and tear the stockings of those who sang in praise. It was not a large church, all meetings and classes were held in one room—the sanctuary; however, it was a comfortable one, where many gathered and where, when asked how to get there, were told to look for the church in the middle of a field of grass, next to Buck Ice and Coal Company and in front of the cleaners on Pou Street.

From the very beginning, the pastors and members of Ward Chapel involved themselves in efforts to improve the quality of life for all people in the community. People from all walks of life joined the church. Those of modest means and those with means worked diligently together. They left us a legacy of labor and love to be proud of this day. They were humble, spirit-filled members who were anxious to do all they could as servants of God.

Then, like the grass after the rain, a new change in December 1949, when the Reverend C.K. Knight became the next pastor. During his tenure, Rev. Knight improved the church by aiding the members in purchasing many needed items and other desired ones: pulpit furniture, communion table, collection trays, and carpet. He even gave the down payment for the organ. Both the gospel and sunbeam choirs were organized under his ever-watchful eyes. Perhaps his biggest contribution came when he decided that every child who wanted to go to college could go to Morris Brown College, if he had anything to say about it, and many went who otherwise would not have had the opportunity had it not been for his caring and dedication to the children of the "little church in the grass". With the demise of the Reverend M.C. Davis, Rev. Knight was given another job to do and was named Presiding Elder of the East Columbus District in January 1955. Although he left, Rev. Knight never forgot Ward Chapel. It was as if he handpicked the next pastor who would replace him because he wanted someone who would really care about "his children".

In January 1955, the Reverend S.F. Jackson came to Ward Chapel, and the church was blessed with another amazing pastor. Rev. Jackson came with his family, and that was an added inspiration to the young people in the church. He strived to make Ward Chapel the best church in the East Columbus District. While serving as the pastor, Rev. Jackson and some other members renovated the parsonage and the inside of the church. The organ was paid off, and new pews were purchased for the sanctuary. An additional choir was organized, The Cathedral Choir. Later, it was renamed in honor of him—the S.F. Jackson Choir. Rev. Jackson stayed with us until he was reassigned to Americus, GA in 1961.

The Reverend M.L. Hood passed our way for a brief duration as pastor in 1961. He was followed by the Reverend M.B. McClendon who soon had a vision of a new church because we had outgrown the old site on Pou Street. With the help of God and the support of the trustees, stewards, and members, the vision became a reality. In November 1964, the Official Board agreed to purchase property for a new site at a cost of \$20,000 with interest added. The new site was purchased from Mr. Edwin Jordan. It was recommended by Sister Lilla Hardaway. In May 1966, a church incorporated plan was written by the law firm, Stubbs, Hatcher, and Rothschild, and was accepted by the Official Board and signed by the pastor and trustees. To help finance the building program, Mr. Ben Pryon of Griffin, Georgia introduced a bond plan in August 1967. Bonds were sold and donations given. Members worked hard toward building the new church.

A groundbreaking ceremony was planned for November 6, 1967. Bishop E.L. Hickman, Presiding Bishop of the Sixth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Pastor M.B. McClendon, and Brother C.H. Johnson, Trustee, turned over the first spade of earth. The best bid to build the church came from Mr. Isaac E. Lutten, Jr. of Savannah, Georgia for \$100,000. A building deposit was made on September 15, 1969. The community, Presiding Elder and Mrs. Knight, and Bishop E.L. Hickman made generous contributions. Rev. Knight donated the pews for the new church.

The York Rite Masons of Georgia laid the cornerstone at the new church on March 29, 1970. Officiating were Mr. Clim Davenport of Atlanta, Georgia, the Grand W.M. of Georgia, Mr. Edmond L. Jones, past District Deputy, and other masons of Columbus, Georgia. The Official Opening and Dedication were held June 28, 1970. The theme for this ceremony was "The Lord Hath Done Great Things For Us Whereof We Are Glad" and based on Psalm 126:3. Members and auxiliaries donated needed gifts to the new church that included memorabilia, Bibles, hymnals, and furniture that revealed the names of the contributors. It was during this time that Saint James A.M.E. Church of Savannah, GA donated a marker to dedicate the new C.K. Knight Chapel and Fellowship Hall at Ward Chapel. Memories of the transition linger:

Not to be destroyed, the members left the old church hoping it would be used for the same satisfaction it had brought to so many. However, because it was needed, because it was deserved, from the hard work and diligent support rose the new Ward Chapel on Talbotton Road. It would be large, and there would be many classrooms, a dining area, a kitchen, and even several office spaces, all of this and a sanctuary too. The new structure would have two sets of pews leading to the front and three aisles instead of two. High ceiling lights would grace the sanctuary and even a

cooling system would be installed instead of the many hand fans found in the old structure. A sound system also became a new addition so no one had to strain to hear, and the pews were promised the best of cushions. In time, this new structure has become the new Ward Chapel Church, but the people who are inside, still remember the field of grass from which rose this monument to progress.

A church parsonage located in the luscious Merrywood Subdivision was purchased in 1984 at a cost of \$60,000. The Reverend R.B. Bass, who was appointed pastor in 1984, and his family were the first occupants. Rev. Bass, along with the support of the trustees, stewards, and members, continued the vision. There were so many blessings to thank God for during the pastorate of Rev. Bass from April 1984 to May 1997. The mortgage on both the church and the parsonage were burned, new carpet was installed, and the pews were cushioned. A gift of Mrs. Precious Calloway installed a communion glass rail to the altar. These are but a few of the many accomplishments attained under Rev. Bass. In addition, we have also been blessed with an increase in membership. It was and remains the prayer of the members that Ward Chapel will be blessed with the five hundred members for which the church was originally built.

At the inception of a second one hundred years of service, the Reverend Otis L. Duncan and his family were sent to Ward Chapel. Rev. Duncan served faithfully until his retirement in February of 2012. During his tenure as pastor, Rev. Duncan accomplished a great deal: painted much of the interior of the church, installed a chandelier in the vestibule and sanctuary, installed carpet in the classrooms and other areas, purchased and installed a new church sign which towers above a flower bed, purchased a drum set for the music ministry, purchased a van and established the transportation ministry, built a handicap bathroom, purchased a new clavinova piano, and much more. Perhaps the most visible change that Rev. Duncan provided was to the name. It is during the process of incorporating the church that Rev. Duncan, and the members of Ward Chapel, transitioned the identity of the church to *Greater Ward Chapel*. Although his work was extensive, Rev. Duncan still aided the church in maintaining a debt-free ministry prior to his departure.

On May 10, 2012, Bishop William P. DeVeaux appointed the Reverend Conitras M. Houston Moore as the new pastor of the Greater Ward Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In just three months of service, Pastor "C," as she is affectionately called, had already made history. She is the youngest pastor to ever serve Greater Ward Chapel, as she comes to us just shy of 30 years of age. She is also the first female pastor to be appointed to this congregation. Her soul-stirring first sermon, "Greater Ward—let's go to the other side," has inspired the members to rededicate themselves to the work of the Lord in a *greater way as we strive for "greater worship of Christ, greater works with Christ, and greater witness for Christ"*. At the start of this journey to the other side, Pastor "C" has led the construction of a brand new sound booth and instituted the Thelmore Pitts Media Ministry, rewired the church in order to foster closed circuit television abilities enabling the C.K. Knight Chapel to serve as a true overflow space during worship services, installed pews in the choir stand and created a "musicians corner" to increase the level of excellence in worship, transformed our ushers into the Welcome Ministry now including ushers, greeters, and even a parking ministry, painted the entire interior of the church rekindling the pride of the members, installed a security system at the church, and reestablished the Mime and Dance Ministry as she took her shoes off and taught the children and youth of Greater Ward Chapel herself. Pastor "C" believes in the Word of God and knows that God is going to surpass our desires and vision here at Greater Ward. For this reason, Bible Study is at an all-time height of attendance as it has been transformed to "Wednesdays With Family" Bible Study followed by dinner and fellowship.

Like the early church, the Greater Ward Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church has come this far by faith leaning and depending on the Lord. The Lord has been so good to us and continues to do so—from the founding shepherds to our current, each of our leaders have been strong in faith and courage. We trust the Word of the Lord as it is declared in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "...No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him". We are expecting even *greater* from the Lord as we continue our journey to the other side!