

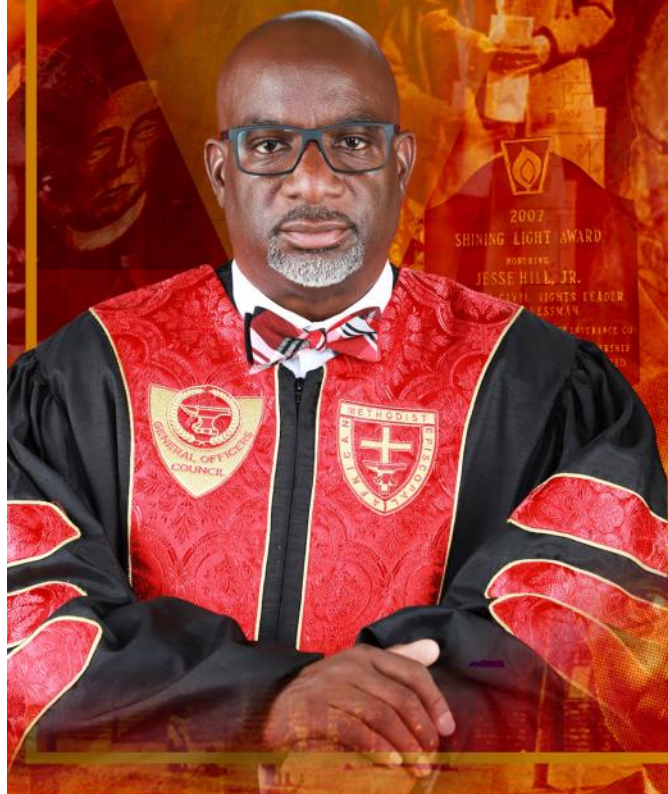
**Sunday
Oct
19**

Church Anniversary

**Rooted in Faith, Rising for Justice
178 Years of Witness and Action**

Micah 6:8

“Justice Flows from Faith.”



**Rev. Dr. Mark
Kelly Tyler**

**Historiographer, AME Church
(former senior pastor of Mother Bethel)**

Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Right Reverend Michael L. Mitchell, Presiding Prelate, 6th Episcopal District

Mrs. Cordelia Mitchell, Episcopal Supervisor, 6th Episcopal District

The Reverend Kimberly McMichael, Presiding Elder, North Atlanta District

The Reverend Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor



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Atlanta's First Black Church

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Worship Times:

10:00 am Traditional

2:00 pm Contemporary



**Pastor Jay and
Leading Lady Michelle Burks Augustine**

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19th Annual National Children's Sabbath Interfaith Service



Sunday, October 26, 2025 @10:00 am

2025 Theme:

Building Beloved Community

Ephesians 2:10



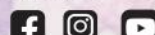
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Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor
Michelle Augustine, Leading Lady

Big Bethel AME Church: A Brief History of Atlanta's Oldest Congregation, 1847 to 2025

Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church traces its roots back to 1847, with a group of enslaved persons who were part of "Union Church," the very first congregation formed in Atlanta. Although Union Church, which eventually disbanded, was established for whites, the original enslaved group that was allowed to worship there remained intact. Whites eventually granted a petition for those enslaved to have their own church and set aside \$700 for that purpose. In 1855, "Bethel Tabernacle" was completed. Indeed, while Big Bethel is often referred to as Atlanta's first *Black* congregation, it is more accurately recognized as Atlanta's *oldest* congregation, Black or white.

After the Civil War ended slavery, the Bethel congregation joined the connection of the AME Church, in 1865, thereby embracing a philosophy of self-help and a theology which highlights the intervention of God into the African American experience.

Notwithstanding the racist beliefs and obstacles facing Black worshipers, Bethel Tabernacle stood as a great testament to the faith and strength of our stalwart forebearers. From the Union Church, on Peachtree Street; to Bethel Tabernacle, on Jenkins Street; to Old Bethel, on Wheat Street (now Auburn Avenue); to its present site, on the corner of Auburn Avenue and Jesse Hill Drive, Big Bethel AME Church stands as a historic landmark and cornerstone of that heritage.

By the end of the Civil War, in 1865, African Methodism had reached Georgia and other southern states. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne sent Reverend James Lynch to present a formalized structure, during the period of Reconstruction. Payne organized the AME Church in the South, and then in Atlanta, with **Brother Joseph Wood**, as a lay preacher at "Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Tabernacle." Brother Wood worked diligently, and often sacrificially, to build a strong church family. His efforts, after two years of faithful service in building Bethel Tabernacle, were applauded.

Succeeding Brother Wood to the pastorate of Bethel Tabernacle was **Reverend Wesley John Gaines**, an ex-slave who was a blood relative of Confederate General Robert Toombs. Gaines, who arrived in 1866, was the first ordained Black minister, as well as the first minister assigned by the AME Church to lead Bethel flock. Despite limited formal training, Gaines acquired the style and manners of the slave-holding gentry. He was a fine orator and an eloquent writer of several books. **Reverend Gaines would later become the sixteenth bishop of the AME Church.**

Reconstruction, a New Church Home on "Old Wheat Street," Prince Hall Freemasonry in Georgia, and the Founding of Morris Brown College

Many converts united with Bethel because of Reverend Gaines' inspirational preaching, and the membership became too large for the building. The growing congregation built a new edifice on Atlanta's "Old Wheat Street" (presently Auburn Avenue). Under Reverend Gaines' dynamic leadership, one of the largest black-owned buildings in the country was erected in 1868. When the church was completed, the proud members marched from the Jenkins Street church to the first church built by members of Big Bethel. This brick structure was considered an outstanding achievement because it was owned and controlled by Blacks.

As was customary under the AME Church's itineracy, Reverend Gaines was moved to another pastorate and **Reverend F. Jesse Peck**, from Boston, Massachusetts, followed him. People flocked to the church to hear the eloquent preacher from New England, because of his learned talks. Church attendance increased so rapidly that a gallery was built to accommodate the worshippers.

Reverend Peck, who had become a member of the Masonic Order while in Boston, was instrumental in the establishment of **Prince Hall Free and Accepted Masons** in Georgia. A petition to the Grand Lodge was presented in 1870 and approval was granted to establish the **Saint James Lodge Number 4 of the Prince Hall Free and Accepted Masons**, in Atlanta. The lodge was established on March 5, 1871. Reverend Peck served as Worshipful Master and Brother Joseph Wood, Bethel Tabernacle's first pastor, as Senior Warden.

Between 1873 and 1880, several pastors lead Bethel, two of whom had the distinction of serving twice as pastor of this historic church. **Reverends Charles L. Bradwell, William D. Johnson and S. H. Robertson** followed Reverend Peck's tenure, each serving one year. Reverend Peck returned in 1875 for a second term as pastor and rendered dedicated service for the next two years. In 1877, **Reverend R. A. Hall** was sent to lead the flock and was succeeded, in 1880, by Reverend Wesley J. Gaines, who began his second appointment.

The following year, 1881, Bethel Church hosted the North Georgia Annual Conference where a resolution was presented to establish an institution of learning for the Christian education of Negroes. The school, which grew out of the desire of Black people to help themselves, was named in honor of **AME Bishop Morris Brown. The first classes of Morris Brown College were held at Bethel Church.** Reverend Gaines was succeeded by **Reverend Richard Graham** who pastored the church one year.

The Impossible Dream: The Great Cathedral, Big Bethel AME Church

In 1885, the powerful **Reverend Joseph Simeon Flipper** was appointed to serve as Bethel's pastor. Reverend Flipper inspired the congregation to pay its honest debts, develop habits of punctuality, and to be reverent in the Lord's House. He even tried to get the officers and members to purchase the corner lot on Auburn Avenue and Butler Street, next door to the church. His vision was so far ahead of the congregation that the proposal was not accepted. **Reverend Flipper later became president of Morris Brown College before his election as a bishop in the AME Church.**

The great builder, **Reverend Larry Thomas**, succeeded Reverend Flipper. During Reverend Thomas' tenure, the congregation observed the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of its affiliation with the AME Church. With a now-mature faith and dreams, under the direction of Reverend Thomas, the membership readily accepted the proposal to purchase the property next door (had the property been purchased earlier, when suggested by Reverend Flipper, the cost would have been one-fourth less. **Eventually a two-story church structure was erected on the corner of Auburn Avenue and Butler Street.**

Reverend Thomas was followed by **Reverend R. M. Cheeks**, who labored in the vineyard for two years. By this time, the old church building was becoming known as "Old Bethel" and the new building, "**Big Bethel.**"

Reverend W. G. Alexander became pastor in 1895. In 1898 the church was condemned for the second time and then rebuilt. The ceiling was lowered, and the walls were made secure by erecting two long arches overhead across the church's interior. Church historians surmised that this was the period when the church's architectural identity was changed from the original Victorian design to the Romanesque Revival school. During the building and decorating campaign, significant events took place which would influence the church's history for future generations, including the 1898 formation of the "Big on Big Bethel" Choir, under the direction of **Millie McCree**.

The Early 1900s

The goal of completing overall construction on the mammoth church dominated the administrations of Big Bethel's pastors during the early 1900's. The entire project, which was begun in 1891, would span thirty years, finally reaching completion in 1921.

During the conference year 1899-1900, the **Reverend E. W. Lee**, who later became the fourth president of Morris Brown College, arrived as the fifteenth pastor of Bethel Church since Joseph Wood. During the period between 1900 and 1905, **Reverends C. W. Newton** and **C. C. Cargile** served as pastors. **Dr. Issac N. Ross, who would be elected the forty-first AME bishop in 1916, was assigned as pastor in 1905.** It was during his administration that the first unit or lecture room of the church was completed in 1906.

These were not easy times. In 1906, the most sensational race riot in the South brought Atlanta to a state of siege, as much of the rage flared right in the vicinity of Bethel Church, near Auburn Avenue and Courtland Streets. In 1909, **Dr. Cal M. Tanner**, brother of renowned artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner and son of AME Bishop Benjamin Tanner, accepted the church's pastorate. Reverend Doctor Tanner was one of the first black PhDs and a prudent financier. He spearheaded the then-largest rally held at Big Bethel, raising \$2,800, used for the ongoing overall construction project. Largely due to Reverend Tanner's efforts, another major construction phase was completed in 1913. It was in that same year that the **Always Faithful (A.F.) Bible Class** was organized. It remains a vital part of the Sunday School.

In 1914, Dr. Tanner was succeeded, for a very short time, by the **Reverend F.R. Sims**. His departure made way for the **Reverend R. H. Singleton**. During Reverend Singleton's administration, the congregation reached its seventy-fifth year and celebrated fifty years of affiliation with the AME Church.

Tragedy and Triumph: The Early 1900s to The Great Depression

Great leaders spoke from Bethel's pulpit during the early 1900's, including **Booker T. Washington**, **United States President William Howard Taft**, and **Marcus Garvey**. When Atlanta's great fire of 1917 leveled many of the buildings in the city's old Fourth Ward, Big Bethel was spared.

It became a large auditorium where Blacks could still gather. In 1919, the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** seated its national convention there, with **James Weldon Johnson** and **W.E.B. Dubois** in attendance. Later, in 1929, the **Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.** seated its national (general) convention there, with its seven founders in attendance.

Although Big Bethel was spared from the Fourth Ward fire in 1917, tragedy struck in 1923 when a fire emerged from the church's offices that destroyed the interior and roof, leaving nothing standing but the outside walls. During the time the church was being rebuilt, Pastor Singleton died, in 1923, and **Reverend J. T. Hall** finished Dr. Singleton's term.

Efforts to rebuild culminated during **Dr. Butler's** administration, during the latter part of 1924, when a lighted cross, bearing the message "**JESUS SAVES**," was placed on the church steeple. **This symbolic cross remains a historic shrine on Auburn Avenue.** During the same period, a \$8,500 three-manual Moller pipe organ was installed and marked by appropriate ceremony.

From 1924 through 1932, the church's doors were kept open by the diligent work of the following pastors: **Reverends J. L. Butler, C. J. Wiley, and B. G. Dawson.** Under the pastorate of Reverend Dawson, who came to Big Bethel in 1930, the religious drama, ***Heaven Bound***, was written and produced by two ladies from Choir Number One, Lula Byrd Jones and Nellie Lindley Davis. Originally conceived as a fundraising project, *Heaven Bound* was reviewed and applauded by major magazines such as *Theater Guild* and *Time*, after its February 17, 1930, premiere. Now, in its 95-year and with millions of tickets previously sold, the annual showing of *Heaven Bound* is a stable in Atlanta's culture.

The Great Depression

At the dawn of the Great Depression, Big Bethel, the flagship AME Church in Georgia, continued to be a beacon on Auburn Avenue. The great educator, **Mary McLeod Bethune**, spoke from the pulpit of Big Bethel, in 1937. The good preaching, the fine music rendered by the choirs, and the impact of influential members, all contributed to a full and colorful congregation. Among the prominent members and officers were **Professor C. L. Harper**, the first principal of **Atlanta's Booker T. Washington High School**; **Professor J. L. Wheeler**, an executive at North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company; and **Bro. Cornelius King**, Atlanta's first black realtor.

Reverend Dewitt Talmadge Babcock, came to Big Bethel in 1934. Facing the financial strain of the mortgage taken out in 1924 to rebuild the church, and the harshness of the Great Depression, Babcock adopted as his slogan "It Can Be Done." His administration (1934-1948), the longest in Big Bethel's history, was one of expansion and growth. It was then that a group from Choir Number One appeared at the **Little White House, in Warm Springs, Georgia**, for **President Franklin Roosevelt**. Continued demand for *Heaven Bound* resulted in its presentation under the auspices of the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)**, at the Atlanta Federal Theater in 1937, as capacity crowds held the play over for an entire week. Further, on **December 15, 1939**, Choir Number Two performed at the world premiere of the movie ***Gone with the Wind***, based on Margaret Mitchell's book.

Dr. Dwight V. Kyle, who succeeded Reverend Babcock, was transferred from the 13th Episcopal District (Tennessee) by **Bishop Richard Wright**. Among the accomplishments of his three-year tenure were the remodeling and refurbishing of the Auburn Avenue parsonage, reorganization of the Missionary Department, revitalization of the Young People's Department (YPD), and organization of the first Cherub choir under the leadership of Julia Brown. **Reverend Kyle also set in motion plans to purchase the Butler Street property where now stands the residential housing structure called Bethel Towers.**

The 1950s and 60s

In the midst of accelerated social and community change came **Reverend Harold Irvin Bearden** to the pastorate of Big Bethel in 1951. He joined other local clergy in providing leadership during the Civil Rights Movement and often took part in protest marches and "sit-ins" at segregated lunch counters. His provocative sermons captured a wide radio following through the weekly broadcast on the Black-owned Radio Station, WERD. His interest in institutionalizing *Heaven Bound* also attracted a feature writer from *Life* magazine to cover the 1953 annual production.

In the 1950s and 60s, Auburn Avenue retained its magic as a national Black Mecca where fervent Black churches, bustling Black commerce, and Black social life combined to form a unique and most picturesque subculture. **Big Bethel, the oldest institution on the thoroughfare, was looked at as everybody's church.** Indeed, **Bishop William Alfred Fountain** was funeralized at a packed Big Bethel, in 1955, as was **John Wesley Dobbs (the Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons, co-founder of the powerful Atlanta Civic and Political League, and a member of neighboring First Congregational Church),** in 1961.

The Young People's Department (YPD), under the leadership of Sister Julia Brown, remained a vital organization during Reverend Bearden's administration. The Junior Church was reorganized, and the H.D. Massey Junior Missionary Society was formed in 1953. The Youth Guild, a phase of the YPD, was organized to provide opportunities for youth who were not members of other youth groups. **Brother Jesse Hill, Jr., of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company,** and one of the few Black actuaries in the country, at that time, was appointed Sunday School superintendent by Reverend Bearden. Because of the Korean Conflict, however, his tenure was cut short when he was called into the armed services.

In 1955, during the Bearden administration, Big Bethel's parsonage, located on Auburn Avenue near Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final resting place, was sold to the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Ebenezer needed more land for expansion. The funds received from this transaction were used to purchase another parsonage for Big Bethel on nearby Wabash Avenue. The Bearden administration was also responsible for redecorating the church and for installing pews to replace the theater-type seats used for many years. Much help for the renovation came from Atlanta's wealthy white families. **The Rich family, of Rich's Department Store,** gave carpet for the sanctuary.

The Clanders, former owners of the Coca-Cola Company, gave the hardwood flooring. Furniture was also purchased for the office, kitchen and lounge. Over 575 members united with the church.

In May 1964, Reverend Bearden was elected as the eighty-third Bishop of the AME Church. Three former Big Bethel pastors had become bishops: Wesley J. Gaines, Joseph Simeon Flipper, and I. N. Ross. Bishop Bearden, however, was the first pastor elevated to the bishopric directly from the pastorate of Big Bethel.

Succeeding Reverend Bearden was Reverend Reuben T. Bussey, who was appointed to serve Big Bethel in 1964, by Bishop Ernest L. Hickman. Early in his administration Reverend Bussey, the Sunday School—under the leadership of Brothers Jesse Hill and Charles W. Moore—initiated plans for self-evaluation and revitalization. One innovation was the appointment of quarterly superintendents, which provided an opportunity for young adults with leadership potential to render greater service. Among those serving as quarterly superintendents were Lowery Wright, Nellie W. Adams, Lucile Neely, Wesley Jackson, Sr., JoAnn Vickers, Fisher Kimble, Oliver Powell, and Azira Hill.

In 1967, the congregation's official name, "Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Tabernacle," was changed to "Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church." Further, in 1970, Governor Jimmy Carter (later U.S. president) addressed the congregation. During these times, integration brought about changes in the city's political and business landscapes. John H. Calhoun, a Big Bethel trustee, became the second Black to sit on the Atlanta City Council and Jesse Hill, former superintendent of Big Bethel's Sunday School, became the first Black president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

The 1970s

In 1968, Reverend Bussey negotiated with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.) to erect Bethel Towers for low-income tenants. Reverend Bussey utilized the services of Bethel member and well-known architect, Joseph W. Robinson, Sr., for the project.

Before the end of Reverend Bussey's tenure, efforts were made not only to strengthen fellowship and beautify the church, but to engage in an outreach program to help senior citizens. Big Bethel became one of the sponsors for, as well as the site of, the Senior Citizens Nutrition Program of Metro Atlanta. In 1976, Big Bethel was also added to the coveted National Register of Historic Places.

Bringing closure to the decade of the 70's, two dedicated, experienced pastors were appointed to serve Big Bethel. In 1977, Reverend L. J. Jones succeeded Reverend Bussey. During his two year tenure (1977-1979), the Mass Choir was organized, and the placing of fresh flowers on the altar began. The Reverend Dr. D.C. Grant, who succeeded Reverend Jones in 1979, had a short tenure of one year. He implemented plans for replacing the roof of the church at a cost of \$88,000. He also revived the Sunday evening worship service.

The 1980s and Bishop McKinley Young

Reverend Dr. McKinley Young, a native son of the church, became Big Bethel's new pastor in 1980, after Bishop Frederick Talbot's appointment. As Reverend Young replenished the membership with young parishioners, he also envisioned a sweeping redefinition of the church's

mission and realignment of its projects and organizations. To assist, Reverend Young appointed **Reverend Mary Bellinger** as Big Bethel's first female associate minister.

At the outset, **Reverend Young's** ministry was focused on social issues. His participation in ecumenical and community programs kept Big Bethel in the forefront of social action during his administration. He **served as president of the Concerned Black Clergy, Inc. and the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta**. His membership on the **Mayor's Civilian Review Board** and his involvement with the **Congress of National Black Churches** kept the spotlight on Big Bethel. He also established the **Richard Allen Outreach Center** and the following programs: the **Food Pantry and Clothing Bank**, for the needy; **The Welcome Table**, to serve meals to the hungry and homeless; the **Drug Information and Referral Service Hotline**; and **Cooperative Pastoral Counseling Services**, a cooperative effort with Ebenezer Baptist Church. An **Alcoholics Anonymous** unit was based at Big Bethel and the Young Administration also sponsored a prison ministry, beginning with the **Women's Prison Project**, and later, the **Men's Prison Ministry**.

During Reverend Young's tenure, one of the most profound changes at Big Bethel came through the music ministries. In 1983, Choir Number One and Choir Number Two merged, renaming them "**The Cathedral Choir**." The old Babcock Gospel Chorus was merged into the newly organized **D.T. Babcock Voices of Inspiration**. The Community Choir was organized to serve at the early morning (8:00 a.m.) worship services. It was composed of members of the congregation, the community, and students from Morris Brown College. **Subsequently, reorganized and renamed the McKinley Young Community Choir, this group became known simply as the McKinley Young Choir.**

A major project of renovation and restoration was also undertaken in 1983. The interior walls, floors, pews, and pulpit furnishings were restored. The neon cross and "Jesus Saves" sign on the steeple were repaired and relighted. The crowning glory of the renovation was the complete restoration of the three-manual Moller Pipe Organ, at a cost of \$101,000, in 1987.

In 1985, the *New York Times*, lauded *Heaven Bound* in a five-column article, as "one of Atlanta's most enduring traditions." **Sister Joann Bearden Vickers** and **Gregory Coleman, Esq.**, succeeded **Henry J. Furlow** as directors of the play. **Dr. Wendall Phillip Whalum**, of Morehouse College, came for several years as guest chorister, and **Dr. Gloria Tinubu**, of Spelman College, served as guest director.

In 1987, **Project Spirit**, a tutorial and enrichment program sponsored by the Congress of National Black Churches to help the youth in the community, became another innovation at Big Bethel. Big Bethel also participated in the **Grady Homes Cluster of Churches and Organizations** which served low-income areas by sponsoring safe summer programs for children and supporting and developing community improvement programs. **The H.I. Bearden Youth Choir** was revived and, in 1989, the Children's Choir was renamed the **Emma Scott Children's Choir**. **Alicia Oden** became the new Sunday School superintendent, following the retirement of **Earlie A. Smith**. **Amos McCrary** was named co-superintendent.

The 1990s to 2004: Tradition, Black Pride, and Social Progress

By 1990 Reverend Young had given a decade service to Big Bethel. He continued to expand the church's ministries by organizing the **Singles Ministry** in 1991, under the leadership of **Sister Monica Jones**, and reinstating **Junior Church** in 1992. His outreach and travels had won for him identity and recognition by world leaders. It was no small wonder that **Nelson Mandela** of South Africa, **spoke from Big Bethel's pulpit on his visit to Atlanta on June 2, 1990, followed by presidential candidate Bill Clinton (later U.S. president), in 1992. On July 14, 1992, Reverend Young was elected the AME Church's 109th bishop.**

Reverend Dr. James L. Davis was appointed as Big Bethel's pastor, by **Bishop Donald George Kenneth Ming**, in 1992. He led the congregation in the establishment of new and innovative ministries that were a catalyst for revitalizing "Sweet Auburn" and other communities. Some positive outgrowths include: the **Trinity-Bethel Partnership, Big Bethel Senior Village**, acquiring the **parking lot and Renaissance Walk**. His leadership initiated the changing of the landscape of Auburn Avenue through church renovations (\$1.3 million dollars), property acquisition and development, with support of the **Boards of Trustees and Stewards** (led by **Brothers Floyd Baxter and Stanley Pritchett**, respectively), the **Commission on Stewardship and Finance**, and church conferences). Projects were initiated for the interior and exterior renovation of the church, including installation of an elevator and upgrades to the kitchen, and the purchase of surrounding and auxiliary property. Some accomplishments included the **development of new administrative offices**, establishment of the **Big Bethel Federal Credit Union and an endowment fund**, property purchases for the development of **Renaissance Walk, the Big Bethel Senior Village, computer room at Bethel Towers, parking lot, Youth Retreat Station**, and community **amphitheater** on Auburn Avenue.

The Davis Administration also initiated several special services that included **"Come On Home For Christmas"** (**Dr. Jackie Michael**), the **Palm Sunday Parade and Palm Sunday Concert**, **Richard Allen Outreach Recitals** (events for financial support), **Philippians, Signing Ministry** (**Dr. Monica Jones**), **Kwanza Sol Dance Ministry, Signs of Praise Mime Ministry**, revitalization of the **Bell Choir, Johnson-Schofield Male Chorus**, and the **Men of Big Bethel (MOBB) Annual Golf Tournament** to raise money for scholarships (**Michael Brown and Dr. Price Michael**).

Reverend Davis was elected and consecrated as the 123rd bishop of the AME Church, in 2004, the second consecutive pastor elected to the bishopric directly from the Big Bethel's pulpit.

The Early 2000s to 2013

Reverend Mark Thompson was appointed to Big Bethel's pastorate, in 2004, by **Bishop William Philips DeVaux**. Several highlights of his administration were establishment of the **Big Bethel Saturday Academy, Seed and Proceed**, the **History and Heritage Ministry, Computer Lab restoration**, establishment of the **Babcock-Young Voices of Unity choir**, the **Bearden-Scott Youth Choir** (**Reverend Maurice Wright**) and the **Katrina Relief project**.

Reverend Dr. Gregory V. Eason (later elected as the AME Church's 148th bishop, while serving at Flipper Temple AME Church) was appointed to lead Big Bethel, in December 2005, by **Bishop William Philips DeVaux**. During the Eason Administration, while adopting the mantra of "Radical Hospitality," several successes occurred. **FOCUS** (Faithfully Obeying Christ with Unwavering Stewardship) was launched to raise funds for the church to retire the debt incurred from the parking lot repurchase. **Renaissance Walk** was completed, and the original mortgage burning ceremony for Bethel Towers occurred. Additionally, Big Bethel's steward pro temp, **Dr. Stanley J. Pritchett**, served as president of Morris Brown College from 2006-2018. The MOBB also established "A Taste of Big Bethel."

The Reverend Dr. John Foster: 2013-2025

In May 2013, **Reverend John Foster, Ph.D.**, was appointed to serve Big Bethel, by **Bishop Preston Warren Williams II**. The Big Bethel 2020 Vision was adopted as the masterplan for church ministries. It grew into the **Vision for Big Bethel 2027**, to be the preeminent religious presence in the Auburn/Edgewood Corridor of Atlanta.

Several significant events occurred during Dr. Foster's twelve-year tenure. They include: ownership of Bethel Towers being officially transferred to the Bethel Towers Board; the mortgage for this \$3.5 million dollar building being burned, along with the 1st Phase completion of Bethel Towers total \$32 million dollars renovation—the largest single project in Big Bethel's history—a venture that allowed Big Bethel to burn the mortgage on its sanctuary, fellowship hall and parking lot. The original church mortgage of \$4.8 million, in 2013, was reduced to \$1.1 million, in 2019. Big Bethel members instrumental to the project include **Brothers Charles Moore, Tim Crim, and Bill Sisk**.

Under Dr. Foster's leadership, and in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Big Bethel became a community center for vaccinations and testing. In partnership with local medical agencies, Big Bethel provided monthly vaccinations (**Brother Stanley Pritchett** and **Reverend Charmain Purvis**) for the entire 4th Ward Community. Over 2,000 vaccines and tests were administered.

During Pastor Foster's tenure, Big Bethel's Young Adult Ministry evolved to become the **THRIVE Ministry**, with a 4-prong outreach: (1) weekly millennial worship services, at 2pm; (2) weekly Bible studies; (3) a monthly service Sunday, where members leave service and go out into the community; and (4) a monthly social activity, to attract and retain college attendees. Other innovative ministries, during the Foster Administration, included the **Social Action Ministry**, the **Monday-Saturday 6:00 AM Prayer Line**, the **Women's Emphasis Month** and **Women's Bible Study Ministry**, as well as the modernization of various giving platforms, the **Big Bethel Chorale**, and the revitalization of **Emily's Haven**. Dr. Foster was a candidate for bishop in 2021. He retired from Big Bethel's pulpit in May 2025.



A New Era: The Reverend Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine

In May 2025, after Dr. Foster's retirement, **Bishop Michael Leon Mitchell** appointed **Reverend Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine** ("Pastor Jay"), vice president of the AME Church's Judicial Council, as Big Bethel's servant leader. Pastor Jay is leading a church revitalization, where weekly attendance has dramatically increased, children's church was reinstituted, along with Youth Sundays, new ministries have been birthed, and Big Bethel has a renewed focus on social justice.

Under Pastor Jay's leadership, Big Bethel is once again garnering local and national news headlines as a church that is committed to fighting injustices and being a place of welcome for all, as the **"City Hall of Sweet Auburn."**

In Big Bethel's 178-year history, thirty-seven ministers have served as pastor and sainted spiritual leaders. **Three pastors, the Reverends Harold I. Bearden (1964), McKinley Young (1992), and James L. Davis (2004) were elected from Big Bethel's pulpit and consecrated as bishops in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.** Additionally, four other pastors were elected and consecrated as AME Church bishops, but not while serving at Big Bethel: the Reverends Wesley J. Gaines, Joseph S. Flipper, Isaac N. Ross, and Gregory V. Eason.





The Reverend Dr. Mark Kelly Tyler

The Reverend Mark Kelly Tyler, Ph.D., is a native of Oakland, CA. Following a rough and dangerous period following graduation from Bishop O'Dowd High School, he eventually found the right path before it was too late and began preaching the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ in 1987. He is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. He is a graduate of Clark Atlanta University (B.A., Religion), Payne Theological Seminary (Master of Divinity), and the University of Dayton (Ph.D., Educational Leadership). Since 1994, Dr. Tyler has been in full-time ministry in the AME Church. As an itinerant pastor in the AME Church, he served congregations in Missouri, California, Ohio, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. For 16 years, Dr. Tyler had the esteemed honor of serving as the 52nd pastor of Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, the congregation founded by Bishop Richard Allen.

In August 2024, delegates of the 52nd session of the General Conference elected Dr. Tyler the Historiographer of the AME Church. In this role, he also serves as the Executive Director of Research and Scholarship for the denomination on five continents and thirty-nine nations. The Historiographer serves as the authoritative source for AME history, directs the AME Church Research Program, maintains the repository of AME Church artifacts and documents, and directs production of the scholarly magazine the ***AME Church Review***. Dr. Tyler also consults with clergy and members about preservation projects related to preserving the AME story.

Dr. Tyler, a former radio personality, has now merged his love of Black History with his passion for motorcycles. His YouTube channel, **Black History On Twos** (@blackhistoryontwos), brings historically significant locations and stories to a new audience. His work in this area was recognized by his inclusion as a Fellow of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. His project as a Fellow focuses on telling the story of the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

Dr. Tyler is a documentary film maker. He has worked on and produced multiple projects, including ***Bishop Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom (The Documentary)***; ***The Anvil: Echoes from the General Conference***; ***The Anvil: The Spirit of African Methodism***; and, ***The Anvil: Preaching on the Frontline***. He has been consulted as an on-air expert on numerous other documentaries, including Dr. Henry Louis "Skip" Gates' PBS documentary, ***The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross***; various episodes of Sam Katz' ***Philadelphia: The Great Experiment***.

Dr. Tyler has also been active in the world of theological education, currently serving as a Fully Affiliated Faculty Member at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio. He has been a member of the Adjunct Faculty at Payne Theological Seminary, Northeastern Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Missio Seminary, and United Lutheran Seminary. Additionally, Dr. Tyler is the past Director of Church Relations and Alumni Affairs at Payne Seminary and the past Director of Church Vocations at New Brunswick Seminary. He has served on numerous boards and committees for various seminaries.

Dr. Tyler has also served his community in additional ways. He created and led an effort to increase voter turnout in the Black community through Black Faith Votes, which united Black Christian and Muslim congregations in mobilizing their congregations. He served as the Co-Director of the Philadelphia affiliate of Live Free USA, a national social justice movement aimed at reducing gun violence, mass incarceration, and bringing about greater criminal justice reform. His work with Live Free helped to bring about the historic Citizen's Police Oversight Commission in Philadelphia.

He is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity (Alpha Boulé). He and his wife, Leslie, are proud parents and grandparents and live in the greater Philadelphia area.



Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Reverend Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor

178th Anniversary Worship Service

Sunday, October 19, 2025, 10:00 AM

Rooted in Faith, Rising for Justice—178 Years of Witness and Action—(Micah 6:8)

Brother Cornelius Pettway, Worship Leader

The Order of Liturgy

Worship in Music The Big Bethel Mass Choir
Sister Monique Griffiths, Director

The Doxology All Worshipers (standing)

The Call to Worship.....Brother Cornelius Pettway

Leader: I was glad when they said unto to me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord!” Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!

People: For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere I would rather be a door keeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.

Leader: For the sake of the house of the Lord Our God; I will seek your good.

People: They are planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in courts of our God.

Leader: O Lord, I love the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells.

People: For the Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.

Leader: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer

People: O sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things! I will sing of loyalty and of Justice. to you, O Lord, I will sing.

The Hymn of Praise*Lift Every Voice and Sing” AME Hymn #571*.....Brother Marvin Fleming

The Prayer of InvocationThe Reverend Gwen Senatle
(Prayer Chant)

The Scripture Reading(Micah 6:8)Sister Michelle Jackson

Worship in Music The Mass Choir

The Preface to the Decalogue.....In the Tune of #258 Just As I Am.....Brother Pettway
From all that dwell below the skies, let the Creator’s praise arise;
let the Redeemer’s name be sung, through every land by every tongue

The Order of Liturgy (Continued)

The Summary of the Decalogue.....Brother Miles Jones

And Jesus said to him. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second it like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

The Gloria Patri.....AME Hymn #627

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, Amen.

The Litany.....Sister Andrea Young Jones

Written by Sis. Martinique Mix and Brother Sam Stephens

Leader: For 178 years, O Lord, You have rooted this church in faith.

People: And from that faith, You have called us to rise for justice.

Leader: You have shown us what is good and required: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You.

People: Justice flows from our faith; mercy flows from our love; humility flows from our walk with God.

Leader: Through trials and triumphs, you have strengthened this congregation.

People: We are witnesses of Your power, and we are workers in Your vineyard.

Leader: As those before us stood for truth, we too stand as a living testimony.

People: Rooted in faith, rising for justice—this is our witness and our call.

Leader: Let us press forward with courage, worshipping God and serving God's people.

All: We are the church of Jesus Christ—Rooted in Faith, Rising for Justice, for 178 Years of Witness and Action!

Welcome to Big BethelThe Philippian Ministry
(Everybody, Hug Somebody)

The Worship Through Creative Expression.....The Signs of Praise Mime Ministry

The AnnouncementsThe Reverend Dr. Lairalaine M. White

The Pastor's Perspective.....The Reverend Jonathan C. Augustine
Senior Pastor, Big Bethel AME Church

The Order of Liturgy (Continued)

Worship in Giving.....Brother Alvin Francis



The Presentation of the Guest PreacherPastor Jay Augustine

Worship in Music The Mass Choir

The Proclaimed WordThe Reverend Dr. Mark K. Tyler,
Executive Director,
Department of Research and Scholarship/
Historiographer, AME Church

The Invitation and Prayer.....Pastor Jay

The DoxologyAll Worshipers (standing)

The BenedictionThe Reverend Dr. Tyler



Visitors, please register your attendance on the Big Bethel Guest Registration Form by scanning the QR code to the right. Thank you for worshipping with us. You are always welcome!!!!



WRITTEN & PRODUCED BY
TOWONDA KILPATRICK-RAFFETY

"EIGHT VOICES. ONE DIVINE AWAKENING."



RAHAB



RUTH



HAGAR



**SAMARITAN
WOMAN**



TAMAR



ESTHER



**WOMAN ISSUE
BLOOD**



**MARY
MAGDELENE**

She Spoke and HEAVEN MOVED

A NEW SPOKEN WORD MUSICAL

**OPENING NIGHT HISTORIC BIG BETHEL
AME CHURCH, ATLANTA, GA 30303**

(220 AUBURN AVE NE, ATLANTA, GA 30303)

RED CARPET AFFAIR OCTOBER 25, 2025

RED CARPET AT 5:00PM AND SHOW 6:00 PM

\$45.00 GENERAL ADMISSION

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BIG BETHEL A.M.E CHURCH
PLEASE JOIN US FOR A

FALL FESTIVAL



FOOD | GAMES | FELLOWSHIP

NOVEMBER 1, 2025 AT 1 PM

FREE ENTRY

Located in the Big Bethel Amphitheater
220 Auburn Ave NE, Atlanta, GA 30303
Dr. Jay Augustine, Senior Pastor



Do Everyday ACTIONS
Determine YOUR
Hereafter?

You don't
want to miss

Heaven Bound

Traditional
version

FRIDAY

November 7th
7:00 PM

Contemporary
version

SATURDAY

November 8th
7:00 PM

Experiencing it might help you decide.

TICKET PRICING

General Admission \$20.00 ★ Group of 10 (or more) \$15.00

Tickets available online

www.bigbethelame.org/special events

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Or Call the Church Office - **404-827-9707 ext. 109**
204 Auburn Avenue NE ~ Atlanta, GA 30303



HB2025 TICKETS

Calling all Volunteers!



Big Bethel AME Church



Linked in Friendship, Connected in Service
Magnolia (GA) Chapter

**Will be hosting a monthly food giveaway
beginning in November. We need YOU to help make
these events a success. Our first food giveaway is**

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2025

from 1:00 pm-4:00 pm.

Please use this QR code to sign up to volunteer

Volunteer training will be held on

Saturday, November 8, 2025, at 10:00 in Fellowship Hall.

**For additional information please contact
Rev. Lairalaine White or Lisa Johnson Whigham - 404-542-9793**

**Big Bethel AME Church
220 Auburn Avenue, NE
Atlanta, GA 30303
www.bigbethelame.org**

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SCAN ME



**Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine Senior Pastor
Michelle Augustine Leading Lady**



BIG BETHEL AMEC
SENIORS MINISTRY

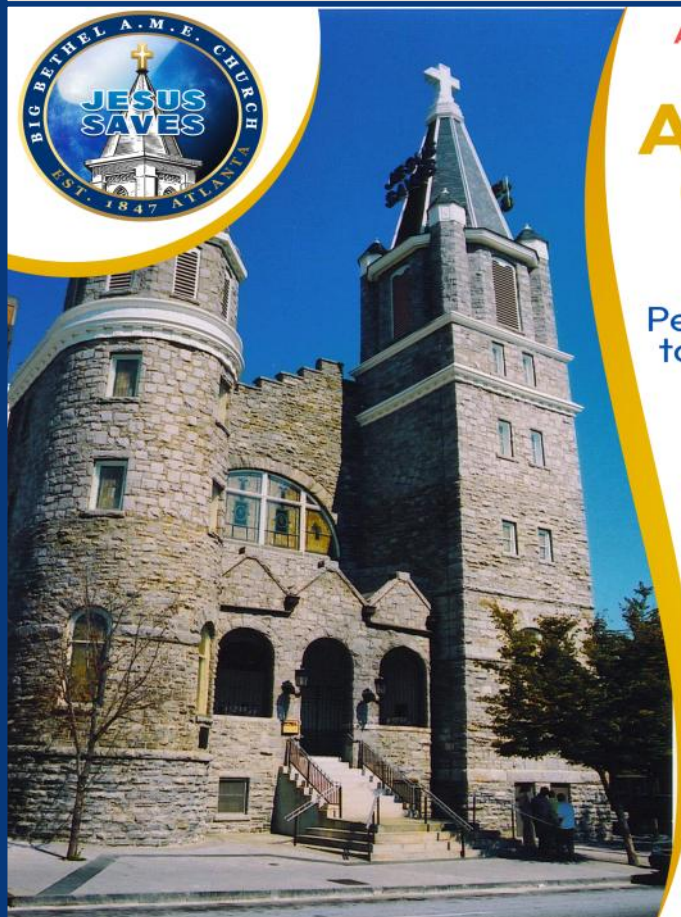
Senior Day Trip to MERCIER ORCHARDS in Blue Ridge GA

Oct 23, 2025

Cost: \$40

Join the Senior Ministry in a scenic trip to the Georgia Mountains, Thursday, October 23rd. The bus will leave from the church at 9 AM. We're planning to visit the apple orchard in Blue Ridge. The cost of the trip is \$40 and will be due by October 1st. Please reserve your seat by calling Martha Thomas 404-783-2290 or Cornelia Jordan 770-289-6451 no later than October 1st.

Reserve your seat early - don't let the trip sellout!



ATTENTION

Big Bethel Members

Are you missing out on church news & event info?

Perhaps your contact information needs to be updated! Scan the code below or go to the website.



SCAN ME



www.bigbethelame.org/resources/member-services

Be in the know!!

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Daily Morning Prayer Call (1-605-472-5512 Access Code:772576#).....Monday - Saturday, 6:00 - 6:30 am
 Church School.....8:45 am
 Traditional Worship Service10:00 am
 Contemporary Worship Service (THRIVE Next Shift)2:00 pm
 Big Bethel Village Worship By Phone 202-962-1123 673604#.....3:00pm Sundays
 Wednesday Virtual Bible Study (ID: 847 251 8679 Password: adultclass).....12:00 noon & 6:00 pm
 Love Feast.....8:00 am Saturday before First Sunday
 Holy Communion.....First Sundays
 Discipleship New Members Class.....8:45 am 1st, 2nd, & 3rd Sundays
 Baptism..... As Announced

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE HOURS

Monday.....10:00 am—2:00 pm
 Tuesday—Friday.....10:00 am—4:30 pm

CHOIR REHEARSALS

Big Bethel Mass ChoirWednesday @ 7:00pm and Saturday @ 10:00am before First Sunday
 Johnson-Schofield Men's Choir..... 2 Saturdays before Second Sunday
 Babcock-Young Voices of Unity/Big Bethel Chorale.....Wednesday @ 7:00pm and Saturday @ 10:00am before Third Sunday
 Bearden-Scott Youth Choir.....2 Saturdays before Fourth Sunday
 Big Bethel Praise Ensemble.....2Thursdays @7:00 pm and Saturday before Fourth Sunday

STAY CONNECTED



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www.bigbethelame.org



404 . 827 . 9707



jesus.saves@bigbethelame.org

Big Bethel AME Church

220 Auburn Ave NE | Atlanta, Ga 30303



Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Right Reverend Michael L. Mitchell, Presiding Prelate, 6th Episcopal District

Mrs. Cordelia Mitchell, Episcopal Supervisor, 6th Episcopal District

The Reverend Kimberly McMichael, Presiding Elder, North Atlanta District

The Reverend Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor

220 Auburn Avenue, NE, Atlanta, GA 30303

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