

AME Zion marks centennial

By Lou Ann Seelig
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DANBURY — In the late 1880s, when blacks were forced to sit in the back of many churches, the Rev. Moses Monzingo offered black Christians here the chance to sit in the front row.

He had been sent to the city by the New England Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to help organize a church specifically for blacks.

Details of the church's early days are sketchy, since the records of the church have been lost.

"One of the first members had the whole thing, but she died before I could get it," the Rev. William Hooker, pastor of the church, said.

From the bits of information that have survived, often in the form of oral history, members believe that the first worship service took place in 1889 in a house on Cherry Street, a gathering of simple folk of simple means, mainly factory or domestic workers.

The first members, tradition says, continued to meet in private homes until they had enough money to rent a building on Liberty Street. Eventually they purchased the property as their first "church."

Danbury directories more or less dovetail with the history handed down with word of mouth, indicating the presence of a Rev. Moses Monzingo in the city in 1886-87. It

appears that missionary activity may have preceded the founding of a church by a few years, for Mr. Monzingo apparently joined and then succeeded the Rev. J.A.

Evans, who had been resident for about a year.

The directories suggest that the New England conference could not afford to pay Mr. Monzingo much,

if anything, for he is listed as a day laborer as well as a pastor.

Thus was born Mount Pleasant AME Zion Church.

See MARKS, Page A-10



The News-Times/Carol Kaliff

The Rev. W. J. Hooker in the sanctuary of the Mount Pleasant AME Zion Church, Danbury.

trampled as the through burst onto the field. as they scrambled over the spiked fence.

Soccer fans in Sheffield, England, were pushed forward. More than 90 were killed when the fence collapsed, and several hundred were injured.

Marks

Continued from Page A-1

This year, members of church, now a modern structure located at 69 Rowan St., are giving thanks for their first 100 years.

An enthusiastic and dedicated congregation of about 375 has planned a centennial celebration, "We've Come This Far By Faith," which begins today at 11 a.m. with a special address by the presiding bishop of the denomination, Bishop Alfred G. Dunston, of Philadelphia. An anniversary banquet is today at 3 p.m. in the Chatham Oaks, and centennial events continue through April 23.

For each of the last few springs, the congregation has celebrated the church anniversary with elaborate programs of preaching, music and banquets. This year, however, is special, members say, and committees have been planning the festivities since last July.

"It's sort of exciting just to be a part of something that's been around for 100 years," said John Bracey, 51, a 23-year member who moved to Danbury from South Carolina in 1957.

For a century, Mount Pleasant has served not only as a spiritual center but a social center for hundreds of blacks. Today it is one of three black churches in the city and it is continuing to grow.

The church rolls count between 375 and 400 members, according to Mr. Hooker, who commutes from New Britain. He expects that number will increase once the rolls are updated later this year.

"It's really a gathering place, as it always has been, for the minority community," said Ella Rountree, an elementary school teacher in Bethel who has been a member since 1963 and has been active as, among other things, a Sunday school teacher. "I think it's the unity, people getting together and sharing the spirit."

Members find no shortage of activities to keep them busy.

Mount Pleasant supports five different choirs — the senior choir, the community gospel chorus, the men's chorus, the Hooker ensemble and the youth chorus. Each group sings on a different Sunday during the month.

The church also has clubs for men, women and children and several standing committees to plan activities and new programs.

Milton Brown first came to Mount Pleasant as a teen-ager after his family moved here from North Carolina.

"They kept us very, very busy," he said, recalling the church basketball team he played on in the 1960s.

As an adult, Brown decided to put his heart into Mount Pleasant.

"When I joined I decided to be active. After I joined, the reverend put me on the steward board." Now Brown, 48, is treasurer of the governing body of the church.

One of the things he likes best about the church is the way people treat each other, he said.



The News-Times/Carol Koliff

Members of the anniversary committee, from left to right around the table: Milton Brown Sr., Elneda McCarley, Marilla Crowder, Ron Grover, the Rev. W. J. Hooker, Mabel Daren, Elizabeth Washington, Stella Aytch, John Bracey.

"Everyone treats each one with respect," he said.

"Like the name of it says, it's a pleasant place to be," Bracey said.

In the surviving histories, it appears the congregation's enthusiasm waxed and waned over its early years. After several notations in the late 1880s, mention of the A.M.E. Zion Church disappears from city directories in the 1890s.

The church's anniversary booklet says the Liberty Street property the congregation purchased "was lost because of lack of support and general interest. Worship services were held after that in the loft of Barnum Grain Store on Main Street." But by 1908 the church's fortunes had improved, and the congregation was able to build a church on Rowan Street.

The A.M.E. Zion Church began in New York City as a movement within the Methodist Church in 1796, when blacks — both free and slave — were forced to wait in the back of the church while white parishioners received communion.

Originally attracted by the teachings of John Wesley, an Anglican priest who began the Methodist movement, these blacks felt betrayed. The second wave of Methodists seemed to have forgotten that Wesley had said American slavery was "the vilest that ever saw the sun," according to a history of the denomination written by Bishop William J. Wells.

In 1820, the A.M.E. Zion movement became an independent denomination.

From its inception, the church was at the head of the emancipation movement and the Underground Railroad. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth were all members of the A.M.E. Zion church.

Missionaries from the A.M.E. Zion Church attracted strong followings in the South after the Civil War. Ministers from the New England Conference are credited with starting the North Carolina Conference, which is now the national headquarters of the denomination of 1.2 million members.

For many of its early years in the North, the denomination's churches were concentrated in New England's biggest cities. As late as 1889, a rural town like Danbury was considered missionary territory.

As a black church in a Yankee town, Mount Pleasant struggled in its early years. Even in a state that freed its slaves six decades before federal law required, blacks were not treated as equals with whites.

Custom, rather than law, kept the races apart. As they did in some white churches, blacks were required to sit in the balcony of the Taylor Opera House, and the Library Place roller-skating rink set aside one night a week for the use of blacks.

Before the first church was constructed on the present Rowan Street site, the congregation purchased property on South Street, one of Danbury's oldest neighborhoods, to build a church.

While the events are not detailed, the anniversary booklet says that the congregation "met with resistance."

"During this period, (a) transaction was made with a Real Estate firm in Brookfield for the site on Rowan Street in exchange for the South Street property," the history says.

The first Rowan Street church was a small, wood-frame building with a wood or coal stove for heat.

John Bracey's sister, the Rev. Burnell McCarley, an associate pastor of Mount Pleasant who is certified to start a mission

church in New Milford, arrived in Danbury from South Carolina in 1948 with her husband, Jackson and their first child.

"I remember sitting in there and you could look through the walls," Mrs. McCarley said.

The wood stove was in such ill repair, "by the time you'd build a fire, you'd smoke yourself out," she said.

"It held maybe somewhere about 75," said Hazel Cromwell, 86, the oldest member of the church and president of the Missionary Board for about 30 years. "It was a small place."

By the early 1960s, the congregation was outgrowing its building.

The Rev. Leslie Lawson, the pastor in those days, is a man whose name has outlived his tenure at the church. Now living in York, Pa., he led his congregation through the financially painful years of saving for and building a new church.

"Like anything else, there were people grumbling," Mrs. McCarley said. "He asked us to make a sacrifice and give a week's pay."

"To them it seemed very hard. Some people didn't believe it could be done. Those who wanted really worked at it, but after it was all done, everybody said 'Come down and see our church.'"

The present building seats about 300 people.

As corporate headquarters replaced hat factories, the income levels of church members increased, and the mortgage was paid off within 15 years.

Bracey remembers the exact date of the mortgage burning: "October 13, 1979," he said. "It was a big relief."

Mr. Hooker, the current pastor, was as-

signed to the congregation in 1978.

Since he arrived, the congregation has installed air conditioning, remodeled the interior and renovated a two-family house next door that was donated by a parishioner.

The church originally wanted to convert the house into a youth center or a senior center, but building codes prohibited that, and the congregation now rents it out for income.

Such projects have cost thousands of dollars, but the people at Mount Pleasant are willing to give, Mr. Hooker said.

"One thing about people in the churches," he said, "if they see something being done, they don't mind giving."

The future of the church is centered on continued giving in both time and money, according to Ron Grover, 35, anniversary committee chairman.

"Our latest effort is to start an outreach program," he said. The church has established a food pantry and works with the Community Action Committee of Danbury to distribute food to needy families. It has also started a program to offer transportation to and from Sunday services to church members who do not have cars.

But perhaps the most innovative program the congregation has begun is a health services program. Two volunteer nurses do free health screening on the second and fourth Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon in the community room of the Laurel Gardens housing project on Main Street.

As with most of its multitude of programs, the congregation is fully in support of all of its new programs, Grover said.

"It's a lot of work," he said, "but we're excited about that."

Centennial church events

DANBURY — The following events are planned for the 100th anniversary celebration at Mount Pleasant A.M.E. Zion Church, 69 Rowan St. (Unless otherwise noted, all events will take place at the church).

Today — Service, 11 a.m., with keynote speaker, Presiding Bishop Alfred G. Dunston from Philadelphia; 3 p.m. banquet at Chatham Oaks, 131 West St.

Tomorrow — Fellowship service, 7 p.m., with the Rev. Burnell McCarley, pastor of the New Milford Mission and associate minister of Mount Pleasant, as guest speaker.

Tuesday — Fellowship service, 7 p.m., with Elder Harrison D. Bonner, pastor of Mount Olive A.M.E. Zion Church in Waterbury as guest speaker.

Wednesday — Fellowship service, 7 p.m., with the Rev. Norvel Goff, pastor of St. James A.M.E. Church, Danbury, as guest speaker.

Thursday — Fellowship service, 7 p.m., with the Rev. Aaron Samuels, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church, Danbury, as guest speaker.

Friday — Youth Talent Night, 7 p.m., with guest master of ceremonies Elijah Young of television station WSFB in Hartford.

Saturday — Musical extravaganza honoring Marion Anderson, 7 p.m. Performers will be Denice Grant of Danbury; Jennifer Anderson of Endicott, N.Y.; and Teddy Grover and Reggie Watkins of Kansas City, Mo. Tickets are \$8 for adults, \$4 for children.

April 23 — Service, 3 p.m., with guest speaker, the Rev. Leslie S. Lawson, pastor of Small Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in York, Pa., and former minister at Mount Pleasant.

Raid

Soviets said to plan casualties