

# *The Earnest Pastor's Heated Term: Robert J. Williams's Pastorate at "Mother" Bethel, 1916-1920*

**O**N WEDNESDAY EVENING, April 21, 1920, a thousand members of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation sat in their pews impatiently awaiting the arrival of their pastor. The Reverend Robert J. Williams was late on account of another meeting concerning the repayment of a financial loan. As the church members waited, they began to discuss several of Williams's shortcomings. Some claimed, according to a *Philadelphia Tribune* reporter present, that they had lent him money and had not been repaid; several women, whom Williams had allegedly tried to remove from the church, had something to say about his immorality; and another man asked how much the pastor had received for obtaining a liquor license in Chester. When Williams finally arrived, he opened the meeting with his usual prayer and song. After these, he started employing his "steamroller methods" – for which he was renowned – making various rulings against his opponents and denying all allegations made against him. But the pastor found that he had lost his support within the congregation. The consensus of the meeting, the reporter believed, was that Williams should attend a revival somewhere to be converted to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Thus ended a pastorate that had appeared four years earlier to be one of the brightest in the Philadelphia Episcopal district.

Williams's downfall resulted from turbulent conflict between the pastor and the longtime members of the congregation at "Mother" Bethel, in Philadelphia. This conflict occurred at a time when the

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Northeastern Seminar on Black Religion in February 1988. I wish to thank members of that group, especially Milton K. Sernett, Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, Peter J. Paris, and the Reverend Jeanne B. Williams, for their insightful comments. I also am grateful to Robert F. Engs, Emma Jones Lapsansky, Michael Zuckerman, and the many graduate students at Penn who read and commented on early drafts.

<sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 24, 1920 (hereafter *Tribune*).

church faced challenging conditions brought about by changing residential patterns, financial difficulties, the influx of black migrants to the city, and the changing role of the church in the black community. Besides the insight it gives into these developments, the conflict also brings Mother Bethel Church to life. It shows how one pastor with a forceful personality and clearly defined aims could reform both the structure of the church and its forms of worship, generating such positive and negative reactions among his communicants that his congregation would break apart. Most importantly, it reveals the intensity of feeling that could emerge among established black churchgoers towards the incoming southern black migrants.

Robert J. Williams had served at several churches in Pennsylvania before he was appointed by Bishop Evans Tyree to the pastorate at Bethel in June 1916. He had made a lasting impression in Chester, where, in five years of service at Murphy A.M.E. Church, he pulled together a divided congregation, attracted 203 new members, and substantially reduced the church debt.<sup>2</sup> Williams's leading position in the Pennsylvania Masons, along with his pastoral accomplishments, had earned him a great reputation among Pennsylvania African Methodists.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, Williams was appointed Presiding Elder of the West Philadelphia District in 1914, and during his two years in this position he helped to establish Tyree A.M.E. Church. In 1916, he was one of the leading members of the Pennsylvania delegation at the Centennial Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was held at Mother Bethel.<sup>4</sup>

When he arrived at Bethel, Williams found a church that was in poor financial and spiritual condition. The congregation had never managed to repay mortgages taken out in 1890 to build a new church edifice when Bethel was one of the leading churches in the African Methodist Episcopal Church Connection. In 1899, during the pastorate of Levi J. Coppin, church members expressed considerable concern about the financial situation:

<sup>2</sup> Richard R. Wright, Jr., *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1916), 249-50.

<sup>3</sup> This reputation was not seriously diminished, and indeed may have been enhanced, by his support of liquor licenses for various Chester taverns, even though drinking was still considered anathema by African Methodists: *Tribune*, April 24, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> *Centennial Encyclopaedia*, 249-50.



The Reverend Robert J. Williams. From Ruby Chappelle Boyd, *On This Rock* (1976).

We have taken a census of the membership of the church and we find we have only 924 actual members although it is often reported that we have 1500. . . . Something must be done if we expect to pay for our church and we the members should do it and depend entirely on ourselves and stop begging our friends and the public.<sup>5</sup>

The church debt had not decreased during the first decade of the twentieth century and a split in the congregation in 1910 along with dwindling membership had made it even less likely that the debt would be paid.<sup>6</sup> But, having already triumphed over many difficulties

<sup>5</sup> Mother Bethel, "Minutes of the Corporation," 1898, roll 7, microfilm (Historical Society of Pennsylvania). . Ibid., 1910, p.176; Caroline Stickney Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree: The Persistence of an Historic Afro-American Community" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College,

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at Murphy, Williams was considered the perfect choice of pastor to deal with this problem for Bethel.

Williams, a very charismatic pastor, approached church services with an evangelical fervor. Unlike most other African Methodist pastors, he had not been educated at a theological seminary. In fact, he did not convert to African Methodism until well into his twenties when he enrolled at the Institute for Colored Youth, where the prominent African Methodist, Fanny J. Coppin, was principal. In 1897, at the age of twenty-six, he was licensed by the Connection to preach.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps his lack of formal theological training explained his less restrained style in the pulpit—a style of preaching that was still foreign to most of Philadelphia's black churches at this time, whose pastors copied the practices of their white counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Williams often interspersed songs during his sermons and composed hymns for his congregation, which enhanced his popularity as a preacher.<sup>9</sup>

One way to deal with Bethel's financial problem, Williams realized, was to increase the pool of people from which money could be collected. His appointment came at a time when the preparation for

1981), 172. No newspaper reports on what has been called the "so-called split" of 1910 have been found and mention of it in the minutes of the Corporation is not specific. It is uncertain, therefore, how many broke away from the church and how much impact this split had on Bethel. It does show, however, that there were considerable tensions within the congregation and that members were not united behind the cause of clearing the church debt. In 1908, just before the split, the church reported 1,148 members: Richard R. Wright, Jr., *The Philadelphia 1908 Colored Directory* (Philadelphia, 1908), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia*, 249-50. Before coming to Philadelphia, Williams had received a rudimentary education during the winter months in a Maryland public school.

<sup>8</sup> William A. Creditt's article on evangelist Arthur Wilbanks, known as the "Black Billy Sunday," published in "In the Pulpit and the Pew," section of the *Tribune*, indicates that black preachers shared the traditional preaching styles of the white churches in their denominations. This style was taught in the theological seminaries that had been set up by whites after the Civil War to refine the Christianity of the freed men and women. As pastor of First African Baptist Church, Creditt was in a position to know what practices were usual in Philadelphia churches. *Tribune*, April 10, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 28, 1916. In many respects, Williams's style was similar to Charles Albert Tindley's, of East Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church. Both possessed an evangelical fervor and both composed and sang their own gospel hymns. Even their backgrounds were similar. While Tindley was about fifteen years Williams's senior, they both came to Philadelphia from Berlin, Maryland, and both were largely self-educated, lacking formal theological training. But, while Tindley went on to lead the largest congregation in Philadelphia and have a church named after him, Williams ended his life in relative obscurity.

war created an economic boom, thus increasing the demand for black labor in Philadelphia. As a result, southern black migrants began to enter the city in large numbers and these men, women, and children needed assistance to find housing and jobs. Williams believed that by helping these migrants, and by persuading more to leave the South, his church could provide a valuable service and at the same time attract many new members to the congregation. Soon after his appointment, he established an Information Bureau to print leaflets advertising Bethel which would be distributed at African Methodist churches in the South. These leaflets encouraged blacks to come North to join the "mother" church of the denomination.

Established church members also supported the induction of migrants into the church to ease their financial burden. Problems re-paying the large mortgage had been increased by population movements that had occurred during the first fifteen years of the century. Roughly 62 percent of Bethel's members were working class in 1897.<sup>10</sup> Half of these lived and worked as domestics in the houses of white upper-class residents of the Seventh Ward, in which the church was situated. As middle- and upper-class whites left the area, and were replaced by Jewish immigrants, working-class members of Bethel became unemployed, reducing substantially the amount of revenue that could be drawn from the congregation. Many blacks also had left the area by 1916, moving west of Broad Street and across the Schuylkill River into West Philadelphia—a movement that forced the church to seek support from new members. According to one older member of the church, the people from the South saved Mother Bethel from extinction as "we were barely able to hold on financially."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Reverend Williams's intentions initially complemented those of the congregation. The two were brought even closer together by the mutual desire for Bethel to once again become a leading church among Philadelphia's blacks. When migrants started to flood into Mother Bethel and it became necessary to establish an organization to help them, it was not surprising that Colonel Philip

<sup>10</sup> Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 96; W.E.B. Du Bois described Bethel as a black working-class church: Du Bois *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899, rpt. ed., New York, 1967), 203-4.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewed by Caroline Beck, and cited in Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 41.

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H. Edwards, president of the Bethel Corporation, accepted Williams's invitation to become the chairman of the church's reception committee.<sup>12</sup>

In order to attract new members to Bethel, Williams portrayed the church in such a light that it would appeal especially to migrants. This is evident in the leaflets he distributed in the South. On the top left-hand corner of each leaflet there was a picture of Williams giving a welcoming salute as if he were coming forward to greet a new arrival. Below this picture were various short prayers and poems written by Williams. Each of these was calculated to appeal to the migrant. The theme of the church as home resonated in each appeal, as in the short poem, "Let This Be Your Home":

Beloved, let this be your home  
 Even if your stay is short.  
 To all, I say, never roam.  
 Heaven loves a contrite heart.  
 Enter Bethel, enter now,  
 Let the spirit teach you how.

To the "City of Brotherly Love"  
 you are welcome;  
 At Mother Bethel you  
 will be at home.

Below this, Mother Bethel was described as "The home for the stranger; the pride of the Connection; the center of attraction; the house of God.,"<sup>13</sup>

On the reverse side of the leaflet Williams provided reasons for blacks to come North. The last passage on this side also was designed to appeal to the migrant:

*The Church the Haven*

Civilization is founded on Christianity. The Church is the organized agency of Christianity. When you go into a strange community, the

<sup>12</sup> *Tribune*, March 17, 1917.

<sup>13</sup> Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, *Information Bureau Leaflet* (n.p.). Copies of the leaflets are held at Mother Bethel.

first thing you should do is to find a church. To be satisfied, you should find the church of *your* choice, and when you find the church of *your* choice, join-connect yourself with the church.

The church is the haven of safety. The tents of wickedness are on every hand. Satan is busy. His forces are organized. To keep out of his clutches you must keep in the ranks of God's army.

Mother Bethel sends you these greetings, and if you come to Philadelphia we invite you to come within her fold. The members of the Mother Church of the African Methodist Episcopal Connection will do everything in their power to help you, and to make you welcome to their church and their homes.<sup>14</sup>

Words such as "haven," "home," "fold," and "safety," juxtaposed with "the tents of wickedness," and the fears of Satan's "clutches," gave Mother Bethel great appeal. These leaflets played upon the migrants' fears and their desires to join a group for protection while they adjusted to their new city environment.

Church services at Mother Bethel also were altered so that they might appeal to migrants. Williams departed from the more traditional forms of worship and employed aspects of the evangelist's trade. Perhaps he was responding to criticisms of church worship that had been common in Philadelphia's black newspapers and journals. In an article entitled "The Churches and the Moving Picture Shows," for example, a *Philadelphia Tribune* editor described his experiences at a Sunday service at a church similar to Bethel:

Recently we spent an *hour* in a big church, and listened to a long and rambling sermon on the rewards and punishments of the future life, when the things that worried us were the hard labor, small rewards and many aches and pains that bother us now in this present life. Half an *hour* more was spent listening to mournful music and earnest appeals for money to keep the Lord's work going. The whole business made us restless dull and heavy.<sup>15</sup>

After the service, the author "felt so down in the mouth from the solemnity of the church experience that [he was] in no humor to go home to bed, and possibly to ugly dreams." He therefore went into a moving picture show where he "spent another hour and a half

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Tribune*, May 8, 1915, p. 4.

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listening to good music, full of snap and go, and seeing people do things, sad and gay, that were natural to say and do." The editor left the theater with "the good impression of the show full upon us," and wondered why the churches could not "give us better music. . . and teach us more about the philosophy of living and less about the dogmatism of dying."<sup>16</sup> Williams seems to have been aware of this criticism of churches.

He endeavored to make his services more appealing by talking in his sermons about problems facing his communicants and by putting more "snap and go" in the church music. In one of his sermons, for instance, Williams began with an eloquent discourse on the scriptural selection of the service and closed with an acrostic on the word "home." "H" stood for hospitality, "O" for opportunity, "M" for militant, and "E" for elevation.<sup>17</sup> Chanting and "shouts," not new to Bethel, were employed by Williams more frequently and were given a special twist with a more personalized ritual. Services began with hymns that the pastor had composed, such as the "Bethel Battle Song," and a special salute, called the Ta-wawa, was used to welcome the pastor as he climbed onto the pulpit. After being greeted by this salute at one service, Williams proclaimed, "I'm happy, are you?" Whereupon a loud "Yes" resounded through the church.<sup>18</sup>

By personalizing both the services and the purpose of the church, Williams used his charisma to turn the focus of attention towards himself. This allowed him to equate the success of the church with his own success, helping him to pull the congregation closer together behind his leadership, and also to appeal to migrants. At first he was successful both at unifying the church and increasing membership. After he had received his hundredth new member into the congregation, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the city's leading black newspaper and later one of Williams's detractors, published an article, entitled "Earnest Pastor Works During Heated Term," in which it noted: "Bethel is going forward, peace prevails in every department.,"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., March 31, 1917.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Earnest Pastor Works During Heated Term: To Increase the Membership of His Church and is Eminently Successful. Over One Hundred Saved," *ibid.*, Oct. 28, 1916. It



The Information Bureau's leaflets and Williams's style of preaching drew large numbers of new members to Bethel. At almost every weekly service several men and women were converted or welcomed by letter into the church.<sup>20</sup> Most of these had recently settled in Philadelphia. Bethel attracted migrants mainly from Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, with the majority from Florida and Georgia. In fact, almost half of those bearing letters from the pastors of their previous churches came from just three towns or cities: Jacksonville, Florida; Savannah, Georgia; and Greenwood, South Carolina.<sup>21</sup> These must have been the places where Williams's propaganda was most effective, or where Williams concentrated his leaflet campaign among the pastors of particular African Methodist churches, since many of the newcomers to Bethel came from the same churches.

The large influx of migrants into Bethel, an influx reported extensively by the *Tribune*, increased Williams's reputation and added to his prestige among local churchmen.<sup>22</sup> He became a leading figure not only in the African Methodist Episcopal church, but in black Philadelphia generally. Soon after his appointment, he was invited to join many of the leading church organizations.<sup>23</sup> In 1918 he

is ironic that the *Tribune* should have used the word "Heated" here. This probably refers to Williams's style of preaching and the fervor it aroused in the congregation, and yet it also is appropriate as a description of the conflict that was to develop later.

<sup>20</sup> During Williams's early period at Bethel, the church usually recorded the number of new members joining the congregation in the church news section of the *Tribune*, entitled "In the Pulpit and the Pew."

<sup>21</sup> One hundred ten of the letters brought to the church during Williams's pastorate have survived in the possession of the Historical Commission of Mother Bethel. They reveal the origins of many of these migrants. Thirty-four of the letters (30 percent) were brought by migrants from churches in Florida, thirty of them (27 percent) were brought from Georgia, and twenty-one (19 percent) were brought from South Carolina. This distribution is surprising as Mother Bethel has been described as "a South Carolina Church," and it has a very strong South Carolina Club which was formed around the migrants, and their descendants, from this state. Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 218; Allen B. Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (New York, 1984), 177; and conversation with Mrs. Ruby C. Boyd, of the Mother Bethel Historical Association, February 1983. From the cities, 22 letters were brought from Jacksonville, Florida, 20 from Savannah, Georgia, and 8 from Greenwood, South Carolina. The last figure confirms Allen Ballard's suggestion that Bethel had ties with Greenwood.

<sup>22</sup> *Tribune*, Oct. 28, 1916. <sup>23</sup> One such organization was the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, which was created to "bring together the great mass of the race recently migrated from the South," and to "join hands with them for the mutual benefit and uplift of the race in the community." *Ibid.*, Jan. 20, 1917.

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organized the Richard Allen Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons<sup>24</sup> and was elected Vice-President of the Colored Protective Association, established in response to the Philadelphia race riot of that year. The list of the Colored Protective Association's leaders included black Philadelphia's most prominent ministers, and the fact that Williams was given such a prestigious position, and that no churchmen were placed above him, attests to his influence at this time.<sup>25</sup> This was definitely the high point in Williams's career.

Perhaps Williams was too successful. By bringing a large number of migrants to Bethel he made many of the established members of the church feel insecure about their own positions, and the low opinion that the latter held towards the newcomers only increased tensions. Recruiting new members was all very well, these people thought, as long as they came from recognized African Methodist Episcopal churches in the South, with a letter from their former pastors confirming their upstanding moral character. Once Williams began welcoming into the church people whom established members thought were of dubious character, who came without letters, and who were accepted only on a declaration of faith, then he had gone too far.<sup>26</sup>

The congregation soon became divided. Williams's supporters were mainly those members of Bethel who had recently arrived in

<sup>24</sup> Ruby Chappelle Boyd, *On This Rock* (Philadelphia, 1976), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Richard R. Wright, Jr., was president of the Association, but this was before he became a pastor in Philadelphia. Other ministers in the Colored Protective Association were: Abraham R. Robinson (Shiloh Baptist) and Charles A. Tindley (East Calvary Methodist Episcopal), vice-presidents; J. Campbell Beckett (Morris Brown A.M.E.), secretary; F.H. Butler (Zoar M.E.), assistant secretary; Wesley F. Graham (Holy Trinity Baptist), treasurer; Bishops Levi J. Coppin, J.A. Johnson, J.S. Caldwell, G.L. Blackwell, W.H. Heard, E. Tyree, P.A. Boulden, and B. Ramsey as advisors; John A. Whitted (Pinn Memorial Baptist), Wesley G. Parks (Union Baptist), E.W. Johnson (St. Paul Baptist), L.J. Jordan (Mount Carmel Baptist), S.C. Jackson (Salem Baptist), and Henry L. Phillips (formerly of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Crucifixion) on the advisory board; William A. Harrod (First African Baptist), I.H. Ringgold (Zion A.M.E.), William A. Creditt (formerly of First African Baptist), William H. Moses (Zion Baptist), and J.W.H. Eason (Varick Memorial A.M.E. Zion) as directors. Vincent P. Franklin, "The Philadelphia Race Riot," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 99 (1975), 344-45.

<sup>26</sup> Mother Bethel, "Minutes of the Corporation," Oct. 8, 1917. Traditionally, Methodists tested sincerity by subjecting newcomers to a six-month trial to determine whether they evidenced a desire for salvation: see C.M. Tanner, *A Manual of the A.M.E. Church, Being a Course of Twelve Lectures for Probationers and Members* (Philadelphia, 1900); and J.T. Jenifer, "Why I am an African Methodist," *A.M.E. Church Review* 7 (1890), 282.

Philadelphia; his opponents tended to be established Philadelphians who wished to maintain control of their church. It is clear, however, that this division was manipulated by the pastor in his attempt to seize control of the governing bodies of the church.<sup>27</sup> The Bethel Corporation was a key body in this division. Along with the Board of Trustees, this governing organization was independent of the A.M.E. episcopacy and the pastor was excluded from its meetings. It represented the interests of the established churchgoers who had elected its officials. While the church had been incorporated for the democratic purpose of securing power for the congregation against the threat of white Episcopalians and Methodists, by 1890 it had become a conservative body sustaining the power and prestige of a minority within the congregation and often opposing change.<sup>28</sup>

In particular, Williams threatened the power of Colonel Edwards and a small group of his supporters who were all entrenched in their positions on the Board of Trustees. Most of these men had been elected to the Board during the first decade of the century.<sup>29</sup> At the Corporation election of April 1912, they had rallied around Edwards to depose the previous president of Bethel, J.R. Powell, who had occupied this position for fifteen years. It is not clear whether or not this involved a conspiracy, but the manner in which Powell refused to accept the thanks of the congregation for his years of unstinting service suggests there may have been some underhanded dealings

<sup>27</sup> According to one member of the church, Williams "would tell his members the trustees didn't like them because they were from the South." Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 224.

<sup>28</sup> When Bethel was founded, in 1794, members of the congregation wished to establish their independence from the white Methodist denomination. They achieved this by incorporating the church, setting up the Corporation to control all church matters. Even after the African Methodist Episcopal church was founded in 1816, members of Bethel sought to retain this independence from the black episcopacy. Consequently, they made sure that the pastor of Bethel, who was appointed by the bishop of the Philadelphia Conference, was not allowed onto the Board of Trustees. This made Bethel an exception in the Connection, for at most other A.M.E. churches the pastor was allowed to preside over the Board. Many members feared that a bishop might try to use one of his appointed pastors to force the congregation to make changes that they were unwilling to accept. By keeping a clear division of power, and by keeping financial matters in the hands of the trustees, the congregation felt reasonably secure: Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 170.

<sup>29</sup> Mother Bethel, "Minutes of the Corporation."

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Trustee Board of Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church. Philip H. Edwards is seated second to the right. From Richard R. Wright, Jr., *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1916).

between the new president and his supporters.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, though, Edwards guarded his power jealously, and when Williams's efforts to increase church membership began to appear threatening to him and his coterie, he began to oppose the pastor, in spite of the fact that he had previously endorsed the latter's plans.

Soon after Williams's installment, Corporation officials began to

<sup>30</sup> The system of election prior to 1910 enabled Powell to maintain his position without fear of opposition. The ballot was prepared by a nominating committee rather than by nominating from the floor. This undemocratic procedure was overthrown when Isaac Moseley, one of Edwards's supporters, brought the issue to a head by resigning in protest. This enabled Edwards to get nominated Bd in 1912, suggesting that plans to depose Powell were longstanding. Mother Bethel, "Minutes of the Corporation," April 11, 1910, p. 169.

worry about his intentions. They believed that he wished to use the migrants' loyalty to him to make himself president of the Corporation and to bring the church under his complete control. This would have meant, among other things, that a number of established church members would have lost their prestigious positions to new members. Such positions included member of the Board of Trustees, steward, usher, class leader, and historical commissioner.<sup>31</sup> The positions were important to members, partly because there were few other social or political outlets for blacks to attain prestige in Philadelphia, and partly because financial benefits might accrue from holding such a post in a church. To obtain loans from black building and loan societies, for instance, one's position in a church would be taken into consideration, as would one's position in the Masons, the Knights of Pythias, or some other fraternal order. Further, an appointment to one of the church positions mentioned might lead to a promotion in rank in one of the orders.

Realizing, therefore, that Williams's motives might be inimical to their interests, these established members began to take measures to secure their positions. In October 1917, the Corporation amended its by-laws so that

no member shall be eligible to either of the said offices [treasurer and member of the Board of Trustees] who shall not have been a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Connection in the United States for at least three years and a member of this church for at least two years previous to his election.<sup>32</sup>

This resolution, adopted unanimously, aimed to limit the power of the migrants and to restrict control of the Corporation to established members, thus thwarting Williams. The resolution complemented other by-laws which restricted voting for Corporation officials to members who had joined the church "by letter" and who had been "publicly read into membership."<sup>33</sup>

By March 1920, Williams had developed a plan with William H.

<sup>31</sup> The *Centennial Encyclopaedia* includes group photographs of Bethel's trustees, stewards, and historical commissioners illustrating the prestige that could be gained from being on these bodies. Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia*, 346-47.

<sup>32</sup> Mother Bethel, "Minutes of the Corporation," Oct. 8, 1917. <sup>33</sup> Ibid., April 12, 1920.

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Thompson, his attorney and a fellow church member, to take over the Corporation. The implications of this would have been revolutionary for Mother Bethel: an end to church debt, a reorganization of the Corporation so that the pastor became chairman of all boards, voting rights for women, and a relocation of the church. The church and its real estate holdings were worth over \$150,000 and, since the church debt was still about \$30,000, it was estimated that the church could be sold, the mortgage paid, and a new church bought, leaving a profit of approximately \$85,000 for the congregation. Bethel was (and remains) located at 6th and Lombard Streets. Williams and Thompson reasoned that if the congregation moved further west, it could purchase a building inexpensively from a white congregation moving to the suburbs.

The reorganization of the Bethel Corporation was an important consideration for Williams. During the 1890s a number of local churches became incorporated while the African Methodist Episcopal church itself remained unincorporated. As the Reverend H. T. Kealing complained in an editorial in the A.M.E. *Church Review*, this meant that the local churches had a legal existence which the general church did not have. Consequently, any congregation's refusal to be governed by the Discipline of the Church would be upheld by the civil legal system. A number of churches, Bethel included, used the power incorporation gave them to deny the right of the pastor to preside over meetings of the Board of Trustees, even though this right was "explicitly set forth in the Discipline of the Connection." Moves were made to incorporate the Connection, but the only way for the general church to regain control of these recalcitrant churches was for them to surrender their charters and to agree to new ones dictated from the general body.<sup>34</sup> By reorganizing the Corporation and Board of Trustees at Mother Bethel, Williams would be bringing back into line perhaps the most important church in the A.M.E. Connection. Williams believed, therefore, that if he executed this takeover successfully, he would be elected bishop at the following African

<sup>34</sup> Editorial, "Connection Incorporation for the A.M.E. Church," A.M.E. *Church Review* 16 (1899), 269.

Methodist Episcopal church convention in June.<sup>35</sup> This would have made him one of the most powerful black churchmen in the country.

Williams was playing with fire. Many members of the congregation were bound to be upset by the amount of power that he wished to concentrate in his own hands. In addition, the idea of voting rights for women was still very difficult for male members of the congregation to accept. Williams might have supported votes for women from his own conviction of its justness, but it cannot have escaped his attention that he might strengthen his position within the church if he managed to achieve this democratic goal. Women had always constituted a majority of Bethel's membership, so if Williams gained control of the Corporation using the migrants' votes, he may have believed he could retain that control with the support of women.<sup>36</sup> Another important consideration for Williams was the fact that the A.M.E. episcopacy had declared that women should have the vote. The episcopal policy was: "Where possible, women should have voting power in all church corporations, as they support them largely, and 'taxation without representation is tyranny' both in Church and State.,"<sup>37</sup> Given that Williams had aspirations towards the bishopric, he would not have wished to contradict episcopal policy. But, while voting power for women was a good long-term policy for Williams, it could not help him in the short term. Men controlled the Corporation, and they would be less likely to support the pastor if they knew that this was one of his goals.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, Williams had neglected to take into consideration the great

<sup>35</sup> *Tribune*, April 24, 1920. Williams's claim to the bishopric would have been a strong one. He had been a presiding elder, a position "of power, strength and forcibleness in the Methodist Church" (A.S. Jackson, "The Presiding Elder System," A.M.E. *Church Reoview* 10 [1893], 301); he had the support of Bishop Tyree, after naming a church for him; and Mother Bethel Church had supplied numerous bishops in the past (of the nine pastors preceding Williams three had become bishops, C.T. Shaffer, Levi J. Coppin, and W.H. Heard). Although the reform of Bethel would have made him many enemies, many bishops would have been grateful to him. For information about the election of bishops, see Reverdy C. Ransom, *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom's Son* (Nashville, 1950), 261-74.

<sup>36</sup> Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 101. Of the letter bearers from the South, however, sixty-two were women and fifty-seven were men, not a large majority of women.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia*, 304. 38 It would not be until the constitution and the by-laws of the Corporation were changed, in 1953, that women would be included as members of the Corporation: Boyd, *On This Rock*, 69.

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attachment of members to the church edifice. Since it had been constructed at great expense to church members in 1890, the building had become a shrine for African Methodists, despite the fact that it was now located in an increasingly white residential area.<sup>39</sup> According to Montrose William Thornton, pastor of Bethel between 1907 and 1912, hundreds of tourists annually visited this landmark, often described as the "abbey of African Methodism.,,"<sup>40</sup> They came to see the stained-glass windows, which featured deceased African Methodist bishops, important events in the life of Jesus, and symbols from the Masonic Order and the Order of the Eastern Star.<sup>41</sup> Or they came to see the sarcophagus of Richard Allen, the founder of Bethel, which had been placed in a crypt in the basement of the building. Attending a church that was so revered bestowed upon its members prestige that they were unwilling to relinquish.<sup>42</sup>

The conflict came to a head when, in March 1920, Williams organized "a special men's conference" to discuss with his supporters their plans to gain control of the Corporation. The meeting did not go as planned. Members of the Board of Trustees had discovered that the meeting was to take place and had decided to confront Williams outside his lawyer's office, at 17th and South Streets, before the meeting.<sup>43</sup> As Williams approached the office, therefore, several

<sup>39</sup> In 1908, Richard R. Wright, Jr., described the area around 6th and Lombard Streets as a largely "Negro-Jewish district": Wright, *The Philadelphia 1908 Colored Directory*, 48. By 1920, according to the federal census, more blacks had left the area and more immigrants had settled there. For information about the construction of the church and its significance, see *Christian Recorder*, May 8, Oct. 30, and, in particular, Nov. 27, 1890; see also William H. Heard, *From Slavery to the Bishopric* (Philadelphia, 1924), 76-77.

<sup>40</sup> M. W. Thornton, "Richard Allen's Descendents," *A.M.E. Church Review* 24 (1907), 253; and H.T. Kealing, "Allen's Crypt," *ibid.*, 17 (1900), 392.

<sup>41</sup> Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 123; Levi J. Coppin, "Rev. C.T. Shaffer, D.D.," *A.M.E. Church Review* 7 (1890), 203.

<sup>42</sup> Rev. William M. Thornton, for example, wrote: "How well the church has respected and preserved these relics of its christening, how precious are they in their possession, and how carefully are they guarded! No price could purchase their removal; as long as African Methodism survives, these momentoes will ever hold their place of inestimable worth." Thornton, "Richard Allen's Descendents," 253.

<sup>43</sup> Williams had been indiscreet in the planning of this meeting. His agent, Thompson, had sent out a notice four days before, on March 25, to a number of the conspirators. It read: "You are requested to attend a special men's conference with the Pastor Rev. R.J. Williams of Bethel at my office, S. W. corner of 17th & South Streets, Monday evening



"spotters" came from the doorways toward him. As soon as he recognized them in the light from the street lamps, Williams turned on his heels and ran down Kater Street, a side-street running parallel to South. He managed to escape, but three hours later he returned and was met by the same men. Another chase ensued during which Williams boarded a trolley for center city. Unfortunately for the pastor, it moved too slowly and one pursuer caught the trolley. After the "spotter" had boarded the trolley and sat down next to Williams, the two fell into a heated argument during which Williams revealed his plans to wrest control of Bethel from his opposition.<sup>44</sup>

Two Sundays after the South Street chase, the congregation met at Bethel Church for the annual meeting to elect a president and other Corporation officials. Having learned of Williams's plan, Colonel Edwards was well prepared to thwart his pastor's strategy. When D.A. Hart, one of Williams's supporters, rose to speak, Edwards informed him that he could not be recognized at the meeting as he had not entered the church with a letter and had never been publicly read into the church. Next, Thompson tried to address the president, but he was informed that he could not be recognized for the same reason. Both were therefore asked to vacate the space reserved for members of the Corporation. Steadfast in their conviction, however, they remained where they were. Hart had been a member of the church for at least four years and had been chairman of the church's Information Bureau since its inception in 1917. Likewise, Thompson was a respected member of the church and he had been at many previous Corporation meetings without any complaints being made. After a few minutes of protest Hart withdrew peacefully, but Thompson remained until the sexton called some police officers to escort him to the vestibule.<sup>45</sup>

Williams could succeed only if his candidates, all of whom were

March 29th, 1920 at 7:30 p.m." The notice obviously fell into the wrong hands. It also is interesting to note, given that Williams sought support among female members of Bethel, that women were not included in the planning stages of the coup. *Tribune*, April 24, 1920.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "Minutes of the Corporation," April 12, 1920. The *Information Bureau Leaflet*, distributed around the South, reveals that Hart held this position. Thompson's name appears on numerous occasions in the Corporation minutes, prior to April 12, 1920. As an attorney, he was a prominent member of the church.

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newcomers to the church, were elected to the Corporation. But the likelihood of this dissipated once Edwards revealed the content of another Bethel by-law. This law decreed that "the names of all candidates for election must be placed in the church thirty days prior to election.,<sup>46</sup> Since the conspiracy itself was less than thirty days old, none of the names of Williams's candidates had been placed on a notice board in the church and so all were disqualified. Thus, Edwards's men were elected and he was returned to the presidency.

Discussion at the meeting then turned to the question of how to depose Williams. Edwards made an impassioned speech about the history of the church and all that it stood for. He was ashamed to say that the church was not fulfilling its historic purpose because

there are a few members who have lately come among us who have sectarian ideas about North and South. Had Richard Allen desired that Bethel be like other churches, he would not have had it incorporated, for he secured through this medium a guard against white, and possibly some black, devils.<sup>47</sup>

Williams's fate was sealed. A resolution was adopted and sent to the presiding bishop for the Philadelphia district declaring that "under no circumstances do we want Reverend Robert J. Williams returned to Bethel A.M.E. as pastor."<sup>48</sup>

The following Sunday, Williams sat in the congregation. After a visiting clergyman finished his sermon, the pastor rose to the pulpit and, in a last bid to pull the congregation onto his side, proclaimed:

I am going to dismiss the heads of various departments of the church. I have already taken the class books away from some class leaders, and I may take away the license of some of the local preachers who voted against my return to this pulpit.

After this threat, he continued:

I am ready to die and go to heaven or hell. I am going to preach the funeral of seven who were against my return. I am going to be returned to Bethel against all opposition.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Tribune*, April 24, 1920.

<sup>47</sup> "Minutes of the Corporation," April 12, 1920. .. Ibid.; *Tribune*, April 24, 1920. .. *Tribune*, April 24, 1920.

Believing that this had stirred up enough support for his cause, Williams called a meeting for the following Wednesday.

Williams had miscalculated, however. The members of the congregation who gathered for the Wednesday meeting came to dismiss Williams, not to support him. Consequently, he was not returned to Mother Bethel by the bishop for the district. He left the church with about a hundred supporters in June 1920, and founded a new church, Thrift A.M.E., one month later. The church members made a down-payment of \$3,000 on a building at the corner of Broad and Christian Streets, but the deal fell through and they lost their money.<sup>50</sup> The *Tribune* then accused Williams of stealing several hundred dollars taken in at the only service held in this building, but later admitted that he was falsely accused and the charges were retracted.<sup>51</sup> The pastor's difficulties ended finally when another building was bought with the help of one supporter who contributed his entire life savings to Mt. Zion, as the church was now called. Williams ended his career in relative obscurity pastoring this church. He died in 1923 at the age of fifty-two.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear that the pastor's personality had had a great impact on Mother Bethel. Once Williams had departed, Bethel's congregation managed to overcome its problems. Bishop William Henry Heard, the new bishop of the episcopal district, appointed Harry P. Anderson to Bethel, largely because he felt that Anderson would be able to communicate with both new and established members of the congregation.<sup>53</sup> This was a good appointment. Within a year most of the wounds had healed, and during Anderson's pastorate Bethel managed

<sup>50</sup> Frank C. Cummings, ed., *The First Episcopal District's Historical Review of 200 Years of African Methodism* (Philadelphia, 1987), 212. I am grateful to the Reverend Jeanne Williams for this source.

<sup>51</sup> *Tribune*, Oct. 2, and 9, 1920, and May 28, 1921. <sup>52</sup> Cummings, ed., *200 Years of African Methodism*, 212. <sup>53</sup> *Tribune*, Aug. 7, 1920. Anderson could appeal to established members of Bethel as he was a Pennsylvanian by birth and had been educated at Wilberforce University and Drew Theological Seminary. He also had been head of the Knights of Pythias in New Jersey and had been successful in several churches in that state. He also showed concern for the migrants, possibly because he had experienced adversity in his own life. He had supported his mother and sister on a small farm in Salisbury, Pennsylvania, while working at a brickyard, and had paid for his education at Wilberforce by doing dining-car service during vacations: Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia*, 24.

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to continue its work for the migrants without friction, mainly because Anderson was judicious enough not to challenge Edwards, who remained president long after Williams had departed.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage of newcomers to the city in the congregation increased as the established members continued to leave the church in large numbers.<sup>55</sup>

How should we interpret this conflict? Was it caused by Robert Williams's megalomania, as the *Tribune* and the established black Philadelphians in Bethel's congregation seemed to suggest? Or did the cause of the conflict lie in the prejudice of established members of the church towards the southern migrants? The answer probably lies somewhere in between. We should not forget the *Tribune's* description of Williams, early in his pastorate, as the "Earnest Pastor." He had considerable concern, no doubt, for the welfare of southern migrants. At some point during his pastorate, however, he acquired a taste for power, but whether it became the addiction implied in the *Tribune* and whether it was greater than Colonel Edwards's own desire for control is another matter. Had Williams been at a Baptist church, where the pastor had more authority in relation to the congregation, or had he been successful in his attempt to gain control of Bethel, his concern for power might have gone unnoticed, or would have been viewed in a more favorable light. Furthermore, the established members cannot escape the charge of being opportunistic in their own way, increasing membership for financial reasons, and of being prejudiced against the migrants. Perhaps this explains the intensity of their attacks on Williams. Feeling that their own attitudes towards the migrants were less than Christian, they may have avoided criticizing the migrants directly and instead accused Williams of misleading them.

The conditions found at Bethel—a conservative Corporation whose officials wished to maintain their prestige, a pastor seeking to increase

<sup>54</sup> According to the "Minutes of the Board of Trustees," roll 3, microfilm (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), only two members of the Board of Trustees lost their seats before 1924.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, Anderson opened the Richard Allen House, a home for southern migrants, in 1923: *Tribune*, Aug. 2, 1924. Older members of Mother Bethel described this exodus, cited in Beck, "Our Own Vine and Fig Tree," 100.

his power, and the influx of migrants-were present at other churches. Other congregations, therefore, also had to deal with internal conflict. Many did so successfully, like Tindley Temple United Methodist Episcopal Church, but when they failed a schism or breakaway resulted like those that occurred at Finn Memorial Baptist and Varick Temple A.M.E Zion Churches, where the Reverends C.C. Scott and J. W .H. Eason were deposed in a manner similar to Williams.<sup>56</sup>

Along with incidents at other churches, the conflict at Mother Bethel provides the historian with insight into the manner in which black congregations responded to the incoming migrants. Historians have argued that the unwillingness or inability of established black churches to play a positive role in the conversion of black peasants to urban dwellers was partially responsible for the subsequent failure of blacks to escape from the ghettos.<sup>57</sup> This view is too condemnatory of black churches, many of whose members persevered to ease the predicament of the newcomers. Besides, the conversion from rural to urban dwellers was facilitated not so much through the support of churches as through the provision of good incomes and decent living conditions, which were seldom available in the new urban ghettos.

As the case of Mother Bethel reveals, however, the good intentions of black churchgoers could be undermined by the political maneuverings of different groups of people within the congregations. Since blacks were cut off from many avenues for advancement, their churches became places in which individuals secured power and prestige for themselves. When the doors of the churches were opened to newcomers, this created instability. Conflict, or a mass exodus of long-time members, could only be averted if the newcomers did not threaten the positions of more established members. Once a pastor began to manipulate the situation to his own advantage, in the way that Williams endeavored to do, power struggles were the likely outcome. These struggles in turn detracted from a congregation's ability to aid the migrants.

<sup>56</sup> For incidents at Pinn Memorial, see *Tribune*, July 17, 24, 31, Aug. 14, Sept. 11, Oct. 16, 23, 1915. For those at Varick, see *ibid.*, Aug. 7, 1920, and Jan. 29, 1921.

<sup>57</sup> This view was first put forward by E. Franklin Frazier, in *The Negro Church* (reprint ed., New York, 1964), 47-67. It has since been restated by Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1982), 394-95.

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Nevertheless, as the example of Mother Bethel shows, black churches did less than they might have done for the new arrivals. While black churchgoers made many attempts to attract migrants into their congregations, they preferred to recruit the wealthier, more skilled migrants who had been affiliated with respectable churches in the South. As a result, those who most needed the support of the churches often remained outside them, turning instead to religious cults.<sup>58</sup> The qualified support given to the migrants by the churches therefore contributed to the consolidation of a class structure in the black community.

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<sup>58</sup> Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults in the Urban North* (Philadelphia, 1971). 1-11