

Rev. Uklyn Hendricks' Prepared Testimony for the 36th Legislature

To the Committee's chair, senators, staff, and fellow testifiers, I am Rev. Uklyn Hendricks, the Presiding Elder of the Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands Annual Conference African Methodist Episcopal AME Church and Pastor of Bethel AME Church, Christiansted, St. Croix. Thank you for inviting me to testify in support of Bill No. 36-035, a resolution honoring and commending the AME Church for 106 years of continued service to the Virgin Islands community. I speak on behalf of Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath, Presiding Bishop of the 16th Episcopal District, Supervisor Susan Leath, MD, and the pastors, officers, and members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) in the Virgin Islands emerged over 106 years ago from an unceremonious exit from the Holy Cross Anglican Church and has impacted many facets of Virgin Islands life. Its proverbial tentacles have spawned politics, religion, education, medicine, human service, science, the labor movement, music, culinary arts, and every aspect of the Virgin Islands culture. Over the years, we have been blessed with some of the most talented, committed, dynamic, and trailblazing leaders and members. They have left us a rich legacy of caring for the community's spiritual, physical, emotional, and social needs.

Like the circumstances that led to its founding in America, the AME Church in the Virgin Islands came into being as people of color sought a place to worship God freely. People founded our denomination in St. Croix about three years after the United States acquired the Islands from Denmark in 1917. Earlier attempts to establish it in St. Thomas in the 19th century failed.

Adversities are often hidden blessings. In 1918, the bishop of the Anglican Church (Episcopal Church in the USA) sent a colored priest to serve as pastor at Holy Cross Anglican Church in St. Croix. His name was Rev. Reginald Grant Barrow. Faithful to his calling and the Gospel mandate, Rev. Barrow immediately began working to improve workers' conditions. He also helped print a newspaper that allowed people to express themselves for the first time. Working with Mr. David Hamilton Jackson, President of the St. Croix Labor Union, Rev. Barrow was an influential community advocate and clergyman. He gave focused, full support to the St. Croix labor union movement and demanded higher wages and respect for the rights of people experiencing poverty. The church is unashamedly Christian and unapologetically pro-Black. It believes improving people's conditions is not an addition to an overcrowded agenda; it is the gospel.

Rev. Barrow's political activities, especially in the labor movement, put him at odds with the Anglican (Episcopal Church) hierarchy, which dismissed him from his parish, Holy Cross Anglican Church. White planters and high-ranking government officials complained to his bishop about Rev. Barrow's activities, who, in turn, warned him to stop his secular work and focus only on his people's spiritual needs. Rev. Barrow did not heed his bishop's warning; instead, he chose to follow Jesus by working to relieve people's suffering as he enacted the Gospel of Christ. In 1920, his bishop advised him to stop preaching in the church. He brought his case to his parishioners, and about 800 joined him in worship under a large, shady tamarind tree at Estate Grove Place.

The Labor Union gave Rev. Reginald Grant Barrow and his people permission to use the Great House to hold meetings. Mr. David Hamilton Jackson, a lawyer and friend of Bishop Monroe Davis of the AME Church, advised Rev. Barrow and the people to seek affiliation with the AME Church in the USA. After the 1920 AME General Conference, Bishop Fountain and others came to St. Croix and received Pastor Barrow and members into the AME Church connection. The Labor Union gave the new church nearly three acres of choice land to build a church and school. With this gift, the denomination built St. Luke AME Church, which was the first AME church sanctuary in St. Croix, USVI.

Reverend Barrow and Rev. August Bough founded Bethel AME Church in Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands, in June 1920. People from St. Croix's rural districts left their communities' plantations for Christiansted to seek employment because planters were unwilling to pay sixty cents per day for laborers and one dollar per day for tradespeople. Revs. Bough and Barrow, seeking a ministry opportunity, tried to buy suitable property in Christiansted to accommodate people who were always moving into the town. Mr. and Mrs. Brow sold the property on which Bethel AME Church in Christiansted is located to the AME Church Missionary Department.

For over fifty years, the AME Church in St. Croix was the home for many Methodists who came from the Islands as members of the British Methodist Church. It was their "home away from home" until they built their first chapel on St. Croix approximately fifty years ago. As Methodists, we aspire to "scriptural holiness" where the Bible is read, performed, embodied, and enacted.

As a result, many lives have been touched. Many stories show how the church has impacted citizens' lives. For example, after Hurricane Hugo, the late Rev. Gordon (the first native Virgin Islander to serve as pastor of St. Luke/Bethel) and church members provided refreshments to the community for days and weeks after the disaster. Members also recall that before portable water was available to a large segment of the VI population, the community went to Bethel on Saturdays to get rainwater, which was preferable to well water.

The church's practice of not denying service to anyone in need has drawn many to its doors. Community members who seek blessings for their child find our church; when a loved one passes and the family wants to ensure a dignified home-going celebration, they come to our churches. We believe no one should be denied the church's blessings, and that it exists to serve God through the community. Consistent with that belief, Rev. Gordon led Bethel and, later, the VI annual conference in assuming responsibility for the Caribbean Community School to ensure everyone, even undocumented immigrants, had access to education. Under Rev. P.N. Stephens' leadership, the church established a nursery school to shape young minds and provide quality early childhood education. We continue to serve the community by providing food to those in need, supporting education, and providing grief counseling.

About nine years ago, the AME Church in the VI resumed efforts to establish a station on St. Thomas, leading to the founding of Family of Faith on St. Thomas, led by Rev. Charles from Maryland, USA.

To summarize, the church is relatively small, but its impact is large. It has touched countless lives and contributed immensely to the Virgin Islands' development. The church has helped children develop their public speaking abilities and musical talents; it has given students

scholarships to attend college on the US mainland and in Puerto Rico; and it has changed many lives through the clear, concise preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord has enabled Bethel to purchase and maintain properties, erect buildings and sanctuaries, and outfit its musical ministry with organs, strings, and instruments. The church has shaped and impacted many lives, greatly improving the quality of life for the territory's residents. Our records show that AME members have served as senators, educators, scientists, musicians, Commissioners, cultural bearers, and even a governor. For example, Governor Kenneth E. Mapp; Commissioners Sis Ferryneisa and Cecil Benjamin; outstanding Public Servant Sis Gloria Joseph; Educators, Rev. Vincent Gordon and his family, Sis Amabel Compton; and Bro Ronald Hewitt. We praise God for what He has enabled the AME Church to accomplish, and we look forward to many more years of impactful service. It is indeed an honor to be considered for this recognition. We thank the committee chair, resolution sponsor, Senator Hubert L. Frederik, and the senators who supported this resolution.