

Luminaries of the Virgin Islands African Methodist Episcopal Church Testimony

by Ms. Amabel EP Hewitt-Compton

Good Afternoon Senators of the 36th Legislature. As we say in church, Protocol having been established, allow me to express my thanks for the invitation to present testimony today on Bill 36-0350- A resolution honoring and commending the Virgin Islands Conference of the 16th Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) on its 106th anniversary.

I am Amabel Hewitt-Compton. A retired educator of forty plus years. With a double major in Education and Psychology, I started my career as a Child Welfare caseworker, and then became the Principal-Teacher at the Anna's Hope Training School. I then worked as a Public school teacher for the rest of my career, retiring from the Alfredo Andrews School where I taught for almost twenty-four years.

I am a born and bred AME. My family exemplifies the tenants that created the AME church. When the Moravian Church in Christiansted refused to baptize my eldest uncle on the same day as the white children, my grandmother moved the entire family to Bethel AME church that had opened its doors just two years prior in 1920. The family has been AME ever since.

The motto of the AMEC, "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit Our Comforter, Humankind Our Family resonates strongly within Bethel AME Church. It has long been our tradition that if you have a child Bethel will baptize them and if you die and you need to a Pastor to preside over your burial, Bethel will bury you even if you were not an AME because you are a Child of God.

I have been tasked with the awesome responsibility of conveying the heart of Bethel AME Church. I get to discuss the members of Bethel AME Church. A church is not just four walls and a roof. The people who dwell in fellowship together portray the Spirit that dwells within. The people of Bethel AME Church illuminate their community and have done so for 106 years. How do I tell you about 106 years of dedication and service to the Virgin Islands community in five minutes? An impossible task!!! Let me try to illustrate by naming a few of the Luminaries, past and present of Bethel AMEC.

Luminaries are persons who inspire or influence others especially those prominent in a particular sphere. But there are sooo many persons in the 106 years that the AME church has been in these Virgin Islands. How can I choose?

Should I begin with Rev. Reginald Grant Barrow who was instrumental, along with David Hamilton Jackson, to give voice to the plight of the "colored" labors? This is after all the beginning of the VI AMEs and we cannot talk about Bethel without talking about

the start of St. Luke. His participation in this agitation was NOT appreciated by the government OR Holy Cross Anglican church of which he was a minister. But did that stop him No. Rev. Barrow and 800 members walked out of Holy Cross Anglican Church and started “worshipin undah deh tammon tree” in 1920. This is the legacy of the first AME church in Grove Place. Activism and service to the community. A legacy that carried on in the second church built on Queen Street in Christiansted later that same year, Bethel AMEC and the mission started in St. Thomas around 1924.

Should I talk about Rev. David S. Williams? Rev Williams knowing how proud Crucians could be, had to be innovative in finding ways to give food supplies to church and community members during particularly hard times. He came up with the THUNDER races. Why thunder you ask? Because that was the sound made by the 200+ pound women racing down Queen Street to the finish line. Dem women coulda move!! And Rev Williams was able to give EVERY participant 3 to 6 months’ worth of food supplies. But if I talk about him, I have to mention his wife Mrs. Altaha Williams -with her amazing energy, piano teacher, choir director, and instructor of Math, social studies and civics. She taught so many young people to play the piano and instilled a love of music into our church that carries on to this day. Her “famous” four tenors, Nathaniel Hewitt Jr., Vincent Benjamin, David Williams Jr, and Maurice Thomas who rivaled the international singers on TV who sang in every church program (will you nil you). Sis. Anna and Jacqueline Gordon who have taught so many young people to play various instruments and the piano. For free. And the children got to keep their instrument!! Entire Generations of Virgin Islands children who still play to this day not all of whom were members of the church. Shining luminaries in the world of music include Rev. Wayne Rhymer, Minister of Music, and Dr. Rev. Jeremy Francis both got their start on the piano in Bethel, and they now share the love of music throughout the States and Caribbean. So many of St. Croix’s children learned a love of music from music teacher, principal, Deputy Superintendent and Band Director extraordinaire Vaughn Hewitt. Drums, flute, clarinet, saxophone, organ even the violin. All were available to learn at Bethel.

Do really expect me to do this in only 5 minutes???

Maybe I will elaborate on the miracle of Rev. Vincent H Adams Gordon- Extraordinary English teacher (my teacher) and the only Native born pastor of Bethel AMEC. Do you know of his many accomplishments? From teacher to assistant principal or the lives changed by the lecture on “Morality, Good Behavior and Good Grades”? Or His deep devotion to his church that still has some referring to Bethel AME Church as “Pastah” Gordon’s Church? He along with his wife, Mrs. Veneta Hines-Gordon were founding members of Caribbean Community School. Many children went to Morris Brown University and Pensacola College through the efforts of the Gordons.

On the other hand, maybe I should talk about Rev. and Mrs. Stephens who started the Bethel AMEC Pre-school and Kindergarten at in the 1970's. Their students did them proud. Of the students that "graduated" from Bethel Pre-school there are three Medical Doctors, numerous nurses, teachers, senators, police officers, head of companies, college professors, ministers, authors and poets. Should I speak of the foster mothers of the church like Ms. Eliza Williams or Ms. Ella Gordon? Mothers to over 30 children. All giving back to this community.

I should talk about our World War II Veteran who served on the only naval ship to return from the bombing at Pearl Harbor and who at 99 years old was still driving himself and his wife to church; Mr. Abraham Hewitt Sr. He had a distinguished military career of 30 plus years only to return home to St. Croix to become a truant officer with the department of Education. His elder brother, my father, Nathaniel Hewitt Sr. who was a truant officer for 40 years. From the days of riding a horse to the beach to bring the children, back to the classroom to the days of fighting in the courtroom to allow all children an education. Mr. Nathaniel Hewitt was a stanch advocate for education and for politics but that is a different story. Perhaps I should talk about their two brothers who went to war at the same time, Mr. Albert Hewitt Sr. 36 years- Military Command Sargent Major and Special Education teacher and Mr. Sebiert Hewitt Sr. retired from the navy to become a Culture bearer. How many children did Sebiert teach to Quadrille? So many lives are changed by our Culture bearers like Patsy Williams who also carried the torch teaching the children of Juanita Gardine Elementary School how to do our cultural dances. I have to mention the warriors of the next generation who have served in the Korean War, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Desert Shield, Operation Enduring Freedom and many others. Our men and women who served their country all over the world carrying the teaching of Bethel AME everywhere they went. I will only name one. Keith Compton Jr. who was the first Virgin Islander to graduate from the Air Force Academy. He retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force and has since become an acclaimed certified Financial Planner working for Edward Jones. He made sure to get his license to practice not only in Virginia but also for the Virgin Islands so that his home could continue to benefit from his knowledge. He has presented many financial workshops to both churches on St. Croix.

I cannot forget to mention the warriors fighting in the trenches against the diseases plaguing our world, Mrs. Theolinda Hewitt the first married Midwife and her daughter Elizabeth Hewitt-Sloane, RN, MS, Professor of Nursing at University of the Virgin Islands before her death. Nurses Denise Chaplin, Michelle Smith and Lorna Davis and Dr. Yancey Sloane Jr. They are indeed luminaries of this generation.

The Teachers and Assistant Principals serving and retired- Ms. Anna Gordon, Dr. Vincent Gordon Jr. Ms. Jacqueline Gordon, Ms. Oran Roebuck, Rev. Erla Alleyne, Mr.

Ronald Hewitt, Mrs. Gertrude Jones, and even my daughter Krystel Compton. So many of us teaching and serving the children of the Virgin Islands. But Mrs. Violet Connor deserves a special mention. 40 plus years of teaching was not enough for her. Retired, she gave back by going into two elementary schools every year for two weeks displaying and teaching about the culture and history of St. Croix. She made sure a new generation knows the wonderful taste of tittie bread and box cheese!!!

So many, many luminaries. Former Asst. Commissioner of Human Services Mrs. Ferryneisa Benjamin, Professors-Eugene Francis, PhD University of Puerto Rico, Dr. Nathaniel Hewitt Jr. PhD Biochemical geneticist, participant in the human genome DNA research project and Who's Who American Scientists.

Poet extraordinaire- Larry Saurer- raised in the church by "Aunty" Ella Gordon- Most known for his poem "I Am a Virgin Island Child"

I can't forget our cooks. Who is more of a luminaire than the ones who keep the taste of the Virgin Islands in our minds and hearts? I must mention the adept master of the kitchen, Sis. Gloria Joseph. Why is she the master you may ask? Well, her food is so good when former Gov. John deJongh was passing by the church on Queen Street and he heard Sis. Gloria was cooking her famous Red peas soup; he promptly instructed his driver to park and along with his security, purchased six serving right away. Being a wonderful cook is not enough for Sis. Gloria she is also an activist, culture bearer, and most avid supporter of the seniors in our community, and retired administrator of Personnel services now known as Human Resources for the Department of Finances.

Oh, Politicians. We have politician!! My favorite politician, my "little brother", former senator, former Lt. Governor, born and bred African Methodist Episcopal Church luminaire was unanimously selected to receive the prestigious Bishops' Quadrennial Service Award at the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church General Conference in 2016. The former Governor of these Virgin Islands. Mr. Kenneth E P Mapp.

Now I know my 5 minutes has been over a long time but there are still so many people I have yet to mention who have devoted their lives to the service of our community but due to the time constraints I will not be able to name. They are no less important for not being named and live in our hearts and minds. It has been 106 years after all and our legacy is not over. It is still living and growing in the young people of the church who are sent out to serve for YPD. the young peoples division- stressed to be the best- get good grades, go to college (or not) but make us proud as they live lives that measure up to the activists, teachers, military personnel, poets, artists, musicians and politicians who have come before them and made Bethel AME Church a place of service above self in these Virgin Islands.