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# My Life's Journey

Reatha J. Stevens

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# My Life's Journey

Reatha J. Stevens



MY LIFE'S JOURNEY

REATHA J. STEVENS

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Somebody said to me that it couldn't be done.  
But he with a chuckle replied  
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one  
Who wouldn't say so 'til he'd tried.  
—Edgar A. Guest

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To Ms. Dorothy Owens of Dot Owens Realty for giving me the courage and belief in myself that I could write a book highlighting accomplishments of my adult and professional life, thanks.

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To Ronald Stevens, many thanks for typing the entire manuscript. For proofreading, thanks go to Elinda Gorman and Lavon Stevens.

To my extended family, thanks for your interest and best wishes.

Although my parents are deceased, I shall always be indebted to them for giving me the foundation to embark on such a project as writing a book. It was their teachings and examples that gave me the courage and ambition to undertake such a project as writing a book, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Finally, I am thankful to God for His guidance and direction, without which there would be no book. All glory, honor, and praise belong to God.

## INTRODUCTION

After much encouragement from family and friends, I am embarking on the awesome and challenging task of writing a book. I hope to give you, the reader, an overview of my life from early childhood through my adult years, and highlights of my professional career.

I am the tenth of eleven children born to Ila Lee McCall Jenkins and Joshua Jenkins, Sr. I am the seventh of seven sisters. I grew up a skinny little girl who always thirsted for learning. My second oldest brother, Joshua Jr., nicknamed me "Spirit" because of my size. My closest sister and best friend was Inez, who lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

As you read this book, I hope you will get a deeper understanding of how my countless and various experiences throughout my life played such a significant role in my overall growth and development. Also, I would be remiss if I did not include the role of my parents in my growth and development. They were both stellar teachers and role models for all of their children. Read more about them in the section on my growing years.

I hope you, the reader, will enjoy this account of my life's growth and development from childhood to my senior years. Extensive domestic and international travels had an indelible impression on my life. The many messages that I have given at various churches played a significant role in my spiritual growth and development.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE BEGINNING

I, Reatha Belle Jenkins, was born to Ila Lee McCall Jenkins and Joshua Jenkins, Sr., on June 21, 1931, in rural Brooks County, Georgia. The community where I was born and grew up was a small community called Red Hill because it is situated on a small hill with red clay. The County Seat is Quitman, Georgia. I was born the tenth of eleven children and the seventh of seven sisters. There were four brothers in our sibling group. Only one of the brothers was younger than me. Their names beginning with the oldest, are Robert Fulton, Joshua, Jr., Willie James (Bus), and Herbert Nathaniel (Hut). The sisters' names, beginning with the oldest, are Thelma Odessa, Lillie Beatrice, Eberneeze Rebecca, Cordie Edith, Dorothy Catherine, Inez Jacquelyn, and Reatha Belle. Only two (2) sisters are surviving from the sibling group of eleven at the time of this writing. They are Lillie Beatrice and Reatha Belle.

Our family was a farm family, as were several extended family members, who lived in this community. My grandparents, our dad's parents, were one of the prominent families in the community. Granddaddy, Reverend Robert (Bob) Jenkins, was perhaps the owner of the most farmland by formerly enslaved people in the Red Hill community. Granddaddy, an ordained minister in the Missionary Baptist Church, was the Moderator of the Thomasville Missionary Baptist Association at the time of his demise. He continued in those positions even

when he was in his eighties. Recently he was honored with the lane leading to his homestead named "Jenkins' Lane." Granddaddy was married to the former Sally Adams.

According to my information, Sally Adams was the mother of fifteen children, including one set of twin girls. However, one of the twins died in infancy. Our dad was the oldest of his sibling group. Grandma Sally was a great supporter of Granddaddy's ministry. Our dad, Joshua, recalled his parents sitting up late at night reading the Bible. Grandma Sally was a great housekeeper and cook. She had a great sense of humor, was witty, and was a stern disciplinarian.

Mother's family was also a farm family. She grew up approximately four (4) miles from where we lived. Her parents were Wesley McCall and Letitia Jackson McCall. My mother was raised by her grandmother, Georgia Ann Williams. Her parents passed away when she and her four (4) brothers were small children. Georgia Ann Williams was a former enslaved person who purchased and owned her farm. Being a strong, determined woman with savvy business skills, great-grandmother, Georgia Ann, sold a cow to finalize the purchase of the farm. But to her dismay, she was told she was short of the money needed to complete the purchase. Undeterred, she returned home to get another cow and sold it to complete the purchase. She was determined to get the deeds to the land that day. Georgia Ann lived to be 110 years old. Upon her death, she left the farm to her grandchildren: Herbert, Homer, Milton, Fulton, and Ila Lee. Herbert, Milton, Fulton, and Ila Lee deeded the farm to Homer.

MY LIFE'S JOURNEY



*Grandma Georgia Ann Williams*

Both of our parents' families were well-known in the community. They were well respected, good providers, and lived peacefully with their neighbors. They were Christians and leaders in their churches and their communities. Our daddy was a World War I veteran and served in France during the war. He was eulogized as a Bible scholar, Lay Preacher, and Thirty-Second Degree Mason. He taught many of his children in Sunday School, including me.



*Dad in uniform*

Mother was also a great teacher. She was also the mother of her church. She always seemed delighted to teach her children about life, how to carry ourselves, and how to keep ourselves clean. She was one of the world's best cooks, especially of biscuits made from scratch, a variety of cakes, fried chicken, delicious sundry pies, and vegetables fresh from the garden. After they were old enough to help, my dad and my brothers butchered the pigs for the pork. Maybe every two or three years, Daddy and Mama's brother, Milton, would get together and slaughter a calf. This gave us some of the best steak and beef roasts to be found anywhere.

My mother and father had certain chores for each of us. The boys did particular things with my dad, and the girls did special chores with Mama. Mama raised chickens, turkeys, and guineas. One breed of chickens she raised were known as white legends because they had all white feathers. The white legends gave us plenty of fresh eggs for cooking. These chickens also provided eggs to sell. She gave me the job of collecting and cleaning the eggs for sale. This chore was my first experience with marketing and determining how much money I should receive based on the number of eggs I had. The egg man would come by in a large truck each week and collect the eggs that I would have prepared for sale. This lesson taught me to take responsibility for things I was explicitly given to do.

In many ways, Mama taught us how to appreciate and wisely use everything we were blessed with, especially the farm's plentiful produce. She taught us how to can fruits and vegetables when they were in season. Some of the fruits and vegetables included tomatoes, butter beans (baby lima beans today), corn, peaches, pears, and figs. This lesson taught us how to select ripe fruits and vegetables, which later helped us purchase good quality fruit and vegetables for our families, as

adults. Today's thrifty homemakers accomplish this goal by blanching vegetables and fruit and placing them in the freezer.

Our reward for assisting in the preservation of the fruits and vegetables was one of Mama's special breakfasts. This meal could include smoked ham from the smokehouse, hot biscuits made from scratch and garnished with freshly churned butter, preserved figs from our canning project, piping hot grits, scrambled eggs right from the hen's nest, hot cup of freshly brewed coffee for the adults, and a fresh cup of milk for the children from our cows. *Umm, umm, umm*, what a way to start a day! These special breakfasts were delicious and nutritious—better than any other breakfast you would ever taste.

So, right here, just let me say this! I had a wonderful and happy childhood with a few games to play and delicious home-grown food; my parents created the recipe for a happy and carefree childhood.

## CHAPTER 2

### GROWING YEARS

And now let me share some experiences from my growing years. Each of them was a lesson learned.

One afternoon, as our mother and some of my sisters were preparing supper, Mama asked my sister, Inez, to get her some salt from the smokehouse. If you do not know why we were getting salt from the smokehouse, let me share a little story with you, of my life growing up on a farm.

During my childhood, the smokehouse was where farmers smoked pork meat and stored other things such as large bags of salt and homemade soap for laundering clothes. During that period, we did not buy salt in boxes as we do today. No lite salt, garlic salt, sea salt, or any other purchased salt existed.

A stone crock cup was placed in the kitchen, where salt was kept for cooking. This particular evening the crock cup was empty. So, Mama asked my sister, Inez, to go to the smokehouse and get some salt. I loved Inez and thought I had to go everywhere she went, whether or not I was asked to go. So, Inez got the crock cup from its place in the kitchen, and to the smokehouse, we went. The smokehouse was recessed, and steps took us down to where the salt was.

When Inez opened the door, we heard a loud noise. She screamed, turned around, and ran back up the steps, with me holding on to her dress, saying, "There's a man in there."

Mama replied, "Oh, Child, 'there's no man in there'."

Still pleading her case, Inez said, "Oh yes, there is, Mama; just as soon as I opened that door, he made a loud noise."

So, Mama went to investigate this loud noise which Inez said came from a man. Mama found the fallen makeshift shelf that had held her homemade laundry soap. We all had a big laugh about the man in the smokehouse. It seemed that with every event with Mama, there was a lesson to be learned. This event taught us that things are not always what they seem, and we should always make sure of what things really are before we declare that they are something they are not.

Another event of my childhood is the "White Potato and Gravy" story. Mama always grew white potatoes in her garden. When vegetables were scarce in the spring, she would prepare white potatoes with gravy as one of the sides for dinner. But I had told Mama that I was not too fond of white potatoes. So, she would always prepare something else for my dinner.

One spring afternoon, she was going to the field to work, leaving the three younger children in the house. She told Inez, the oldest of the three, that if we wanted anything to eat, she could give it to us. So, Herbert, the youngest of the three, asked Inez if he could have some white potatoes. Then I said, "I want some white potatoes, too."

Inez replied, "I thought you didn't like white potatoes."

My response was, "I like them when they get cold."

Inez couldn't wait for Mama to get home so she could tell her that I had eaten some white potatoes. Needless to say, I never got a special dish for dinner anymore when white potatoes and gravy were put on the dinner table. Lesson learned,

a good mother gives her children the best she has but does not spoil them.

Let me share one more memorable childhood lesson learned before I move on to other areas of my life. It seems that summer was the time of year that we would get into most shenanigan situations that have remained with us through the years. One summer evening, after supper, our parents went to the front porch to relax and enjoy the cool breeze. The children were still seated at the table. The older children sat in chairs, while the younger children sat on a bench on the side of the table next to the wall. There was a window right at the end of the table.

Our brother Willie James, "Bus," as he was affectionately called, sat at the end of the bench, closest to the window. I was seated next to him. He always seemed to enjoy picking at me. So, he started poking me in the side. I asked him several times to stop because it was annoying. In the meantime, our brother Josh was trying to convince Inez and Herbert, whom we called "Hut," to go and get his pipe, which he had left by the watering trough where we kept the mules. Even though it was a well-moonlit night, Inez refused to go because she said it was too dark and she was afraid.

Meanwhile, Bus continued to annoy me with his jabbing. I told him that if he poked me again, I would *"knock your head out of the window, and your body will still be sitting on the bench."* So, he did it one more time. That's when I picked up my plate and swung at his head. He ducked the plate, which landed on the wall and broke into hundreds of pieces. When the plate hit the wall and broke, Inez jumped up, grabbed Herbert's hand, and said, *"Come on, Hut, let's go get the pipe."* They were sure Mama would come, and somebody would get a whipping. I quickly cleaned up the broken plate and placed it in the

container where things that could not be burned or otherwise disposed of were kept. I swept the floor, and as far as I know, our mother never knew about the plate having been broken. This lesson reminds us that we can never know all the things our children might do.

As we move on with this account, I must repeat, I honestly had a happy and eventful childhood—being the tenth of eleven children played a large part in this fact. I would be remiss if I did not recognize the stable, comfortable, and safe environment in which my siblings and I grew up. I cannot recall a time when we were hungry, and did not have anything to eat. Our parents saw to that. They raised us by the teachings in the Good Book to “love each other and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” We were taught to live truthful lives, be honest, dependable, compassionate, and help those less fortunate. Our father and mother were both excellent role models for their children.



*Mom and Dad*

## CHAPTER 3

### EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER PATHS

I benefited from being the tenth of eleven children. By the time I entered school, I was already reading. This gave me a head start and instilled in me a love for learning. This head start enabled me to complete first and second grades in my first year of school. I graduated high school as the valedictorian of my class at the tender age of 16. However, my parents felt that I was too young to leave home after completing high school. As a result, I did not begin college until I was twenty-one.

Even though I remained out of school for four years, I never lost my thirst for learning. The years I spent at home gave me time to mature and prepared me for the person I was destined to become. Today, as I reflect on those years, I thank my parents and I'm grateful for their wisdom in insisting that I not begin college immediately after graduating high school.

My sister, Eberneeze, was then teaching in school and still attending college during the summer to obtain her bachelor's degree. Eberneeze asked our dad if he would approve of me beginning college in the fall of 1952. Dad gave his approval, and I began my pursuit of a college degree at Savannah State College (now Savannah State University) in September 1952.

When I arrived in Savannah, I did not live in the dormitory but boarded in a home secured by my sister, Eberneeze. She had boarded there that summer and felt that would be a good place for me. It was next to the college campus and easy

to reach without the need for transportation. Even though I was older than most college freshmen, I was able to keep pace with the other students and I passed all of my courses.

The second year, my sophomore year, was quite different but I still maintained passing grades in all of my subjects. My landlord's brother, Ernest Stevens, and I developed a friendship. We were married on March 20, 1954. The following year, on April 11, 1955, I gave birth to my first child, Elinda Marie. A year and 10 days later, on April 21, 1956, my second child, Ronald Levette was born. On June 10, 1958, I gave birth to my third child, Lavon Carter.

Although my pursuit of a college degree was interrupted after my sophomore year by marriage and starting a family, I did not give up. After becoming the mother of three children, one daughter and two sons, I left school to start work. However, I continued to take classes whenever possible.

Since I was not a native Savannahian, I had to begin at the bottom of the ladder and work my way up. My first job was at Charity Hospital, the only hospital for Blacks in Savannah. It was a steady climb from Charity Hospital to my final professional position as Executive Director of Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Incorporated. I worked at Charity Hospital for only a few months. Next, I accepted the position of assistant secretary at T. J. Hopkins Electric Company. After I had served in this position for only a few months, I was approached for a position as elementary school secretary at East Broad Street Elementary School. I accepted this position and served under the principalship of Mrs. Eunice Clay for one term. The next term, I was transferred to the same position at Robert W. Gadsden Elementary School. I served three years at this school. The years I served as secretary in the elementary

schools of the Savannah Chatham County Public School System were fertile ground for my professional growth and development. I served two school terms under the principalship of Dr. Frankie G. Ellis, and one school year under Mrs. Irma S. Fields.

Still determined to obtain my college degree, I resigned from my position as elementary school secretary to return to a full-time college student to complete the requirements for my college degree. I met all requirements except student teaching. So, once again, I had to return to work without the much sought-after degree.

This time, I obtained a position at the Family Counseling Center of Savannah as a social service visitor. This job was part of one of the neighborhood programs organized during the civil rights movement. I worked there from the summer of 1965 until the spring of 1968. Once again, I became a full-time student at Savannah State College (now University) to complete the student teaching task, my final requirement for the bachelor's degree. I met this requirement and received my college degree in June 1968. Although my pursuit of the college degree stretched over sixteen years, I was never discouraged and I do not regret the time it took.

Shortly after receiving my college degree, I returned to work as a social service visitor at the Family Counseling Center of Savannah. I remained in this position until the spring of 1969 when the federal funds for this program were discontinued. Again, I was faced with choosing another career path. I could either pursue another position in social work or begin a teaching career with the Savannah Chatham County Board of Education. Because my children were either teens or pre-teens, I pursued a career in social work where I felt I would have

more time to spend with them as they became more involved in extracurricular school activities. So, I took the state exam to qualify as a caseworker with the Chatham County Department of Family and Children Services.

After the position at the Family Counseling Center was phased out, I passed the state exam, which qualified me for the position of Caseworker I with the Department of Family and Children Services. Even though my job at the Family Counseling Center was phased out in May 1969, I did not begin working at the Department of Family and Children Services until July 1969.

My adjustment to this position went well. I was promoted to Case Worker II and in March 1970, I was elevated to the position of a supervisor. After this promotion, I continued progressing and was asked to serve on the Administrative Board of the Department of Family and Children Services. I remained in this position until September 1972 when I resigned to accept the position of Executive Director of Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Incorporated.

The former Bethlehem Center, located at 303 W. Gwinnett Street, and Inner-City Community Center at 552 E. Oglethorpe Avenue merged to form Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Incorporated. I was the first executive director hired after the two agencies merged. As director of this newly merged agency, I was in complete charge of the agency's operation; this included planning, assignments of personnel, and preparations for state and/or federal grants. Since both former agencies were mission agencies of the United Methodist Church and United Way Agencies, I worked with both of these entities as they were the primary funding sources.



*Me at my desk*

After the merger of these two agencies, the Board of Directors of Wesley Community Centers and the Savannah Housing Authority reached an agreement for Wesley Community Centers to utilize one of the housing units in Hitch Village, a low-income housing project near the former Inner-City Center, in exchange for an educational program for preschoolers, known as "Play School." An after-school program for school students up to age twelve was also housed in this unit. This location became known as the "Eastside of Wesley Community Centers."

However, our primary location was 303 W. Gwinnett Street. This site housed our full-day childcare program, after-school program, teen program, outreach services, and all

administrative offices. During my tenure as the executive director, the agency was compelled to secure another facility that met the new standards passed by the State of Georgia in 1975 for all agencies serving preschool-age children. Thus, Wesley Community Centers moved from two two-story colonial-style houses to a three-building brick complex at 1601 Drayton Street, the present location. The Agency purchased this facility and became property owners for the first time. This complex was paid for in the short period of four years during my tenure as the executive director. The administrative office building was renovated, and central heating and air conditioning were installed. A restroom facility was also added before my retirement.

It took the Agency three years to find a facility that met the State's specifications and that the Agency could raise adequate funds to purchase. During our search for a suitable facility, temporary space was secured in the West Broad Street YMCA building. However, we were not permitted to place the Agency's name on the outside of the building. Therefore, we survived by telephone, word-of-mouth, and our reputation for quality services. Working closely with the board of directors on this project afforded me valuable experience that still benefits me today.



*Newspaper pictures*

## CHAPTER 4

### DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVELS

Travel played an essential part in my intellectual and professional growth and development. Since Wesley Community Centers is a Mission Agency of the South Georgia Conference United Methodist Women, I received frequent invitations to participate in various United Methodist Women events. This association allowed me to travel to multiple cities throughout South Georgia and beyond. Some cities and sites I visited included the Little White House of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Columbus, Georgia; Epworth by the Sea in Saint Simons Island, Georgia; and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

In my hometown of Savannah, Georgia, I visited several United Methodist Churches, including Isle of Hope, Wilmington Island, Epworth United Methodist, Speedwell United Methodist, Asbury United Methodist, Palen United Methodist, Asbury Memorial, and Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church. As you can see, much of my work was at local United Methodist churches.

However, I did have the opportunity to visit other cities in our South Georgia Conference as well as churches outside the South Georgia Conference. I had meaningful and memorable experiences at each of these locations. Some cities included Nashville, Tennessee; Louisville, Kentucky; Madison, Wisconsin; New York City, New York; Houston, Texas;

Asheville, North Carolina; Seattle, Washington. I attended several administrative conferences in Nashville, Tennessee, where I learned many valuable lessons in administration. Epworth by the Sea was a constant source of inspiration and spiritual growth. I attended many other events of the South Georgia Conference United Methodist Women. In October 1996, I was the keynote speaker for the South Georgia United Methodist Women Annual Conference in Statesboro, GA. My attendance and participation in these events significantly affected my overall development.

Apart from my work-related travel, I enjoyed several recreational trips. One memorable trip was to the three islands of Hawaii (Oahu, Maui, Hawaii).

My international travel included South Africa, Germany, and France. I spent two weeks in South Africa with a group of early childhood educators from across the United States, South Korea, and the Bahamas. This childhood educators' trip was a part of the People-to-People Program initiated by Dwight D. Eisenhower during his presidency. After a fourteen-hour flight from New York to Johannesburg, South Africa, our experience and sightseeing began.

We visited the cities of Soweto, Pretoria, and Cape Town. Some sights we saw in Soweto included the former home of President Mandela before he was imprisoned. This trip took place in August 1996. The country was in a state of reorganization under the leadership of its new president, Nelson Mandela. While we did not go inside any of the offices of the president, we were told that he maintained an office in each of the three cities we visited: Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town.

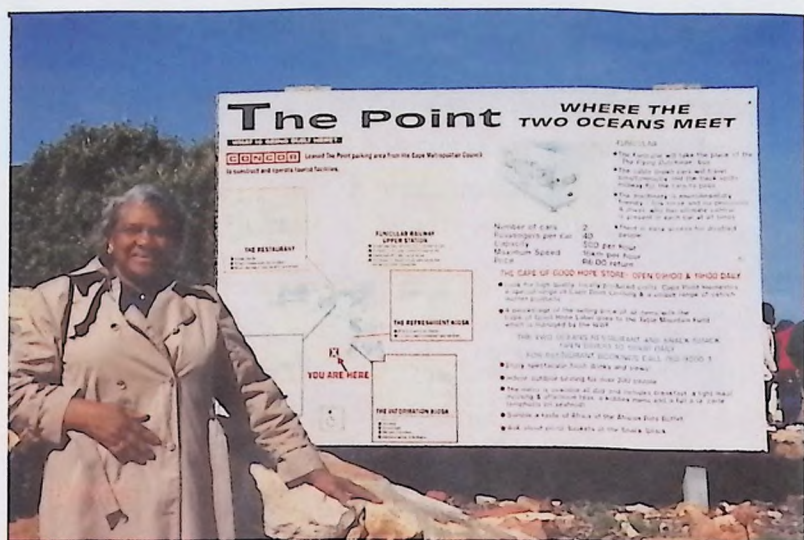
We visited several centers of preschool programs in Johannesburg and Soweto. The Early Childhood Programs

were housed in some residents' homes. It was apparent they were excited about the Early Childhood Program. The students were eager learners. It did not seem to bother them that they did not have a large modern school building. In some of the centers that we visited, the students were easily taught as many as three languages.

A trip to South Africa is not complete without a safari. So, on a safari, we went. It took about a day and a half, give or take a few minutes, to complete the safari. This excursion was an education in itself. It was unbelievable how calm and serene those wild animals appeared. We saw lions, elephants, buffaloes, and antelopes. I was most fascinated by the lions; they traveled as families. The male lion would go in the front, then the cubs, and the females followed the cubs. They seemed so peaceful. And I thought, this was a lesson we could learn from them.

When we visited Cape Town, I saw the imaginary place where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. I was in awe as I beheld these two vast bodies of water. The Indian Ocean does not have any waves, but the Atlantic Ocean does. This is one of the ways you can tell where the two oceans meet. Coming together so peacefully, the waves in the Atlantic Ocean just calmly ceased as they approached the Indian Ocean, as though someone had marked the place where they were to meet. I thought to myself, what a mighty God we serve. Standing there, watching the two oceans simultaneously coexisting, I realized no human could command these two vast bodies of water with such peace and harmony, as we observed the oceans coming together with such calm and grace. I could only bear witness to the power and majesty of our God. And again, I say, what a mighty God we serve! What an event this trip was, in

my life. From this trip to Africa, there are things I saw and experienced that I will remember for the rest of my life.



*Me at Ocean sign*

The coordinator asked me to summarize the beginning of the trip, which started at Kennedy Airport in New York City. I wish each of you, reading this report, could have been there to share this moment with me. It was one of the great joys of my life to have been asked to play such an important role in this trip. I was especially humbled because there were people from all across the United States, South Korea, and the Bahamas. All were people I had never met.

After returning home safely from South Africa and almost two years' rest, it was time to visit my daughter Elinda and her family in Landstuhl, Germany. Her husband, Lt. Col. Alfred C. Gorman was an active-duty military doctor in the US Army.

At that time, he was assigned to the hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. So, in the spring of 1998, I flew to Frankfurt, Germany, and spent two weeks with Elinda and her family. We toured that area of Germany, including a visit to the home of a native German woman they met there, and those of two American families living in Germany. They had heard about my fried chicken; so we spent one Sunday afternoon visiting, cooking, and eating fried chicken, Reatha style, at the home of one of the families.

There were so many sites to see in those two weeks that I spent in Germany. One of the highlights was an overnight trip to Paris, France. Paris was about a four-hour drive. It was a nice car ride and an opportunity for more sightseeing. While in Paris, I shopped in some Parisian shops and saw the world-famous Eiffel Tower and the Notre Dame Cathedral. What a magnificent road trip that was.

On our return trip, we traveled through Strasbourg, France, and toured the cathedral there. What a magnificent structure! All of my international travels were indeed very educational and memorable.

## CHAPTER 5

### INSPIRATIONAL MESSAGES

Interspersed throughout my travels were public speaking invitations at churches of various denominations, including Bethel AME; St. Thomas AME; Butler Presbyterian of Savannah, Georgia, and Central Union Missionary Baptist Church, Fort Valley, Georgia, to name a few. All were a great source of inspiration and spiritual growth.

Assisting in planning special events at my membership churches, which included Bethel AME and New Zion Independent Methodist Church, was an invaluable experience. The Conference United Methodist Women invited me to join them at their School of Christian Mission each year while I was serving as executive director of Wesley Community Centers. The spiritual growth I gained over these years helped mold and shape me into who I am today. I still remember some of my experiences as a participant there, each year.

I want to share four of the messages given at various churches. I hope that they will be a source of inspiration for you as they were for me.



*Me at podium*

## FOUNDER'S DAY

*Bethel A.M.E. Church, Savannah, GA*

I am indebted, first, to God for enabling me to be present today, to Dr. Jackson for inviting me to serve in this capacity, and to Pastor Butler for allowing me to stand here today in his stead. I accept this responsibility with deep humility, sincerely and completely depending on God to speak through me in order that we might receive some spiritual nourishment for our souls. Founder's Day. A day of celebration, a day of reflection. A day of honor, a day of recommitment.

For we pause today and each year at this time, to pay homage to The Rt. Rev. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. We pause to honor his life and work, embrace his ideals, and accept the challenge, as African Methodists, of continuing in the noble, steadfast, and courageous tradition in which he founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church for this accomplishment was not easy for Richard Allen, and it is likewise not easy for those of us who have chosen to follow in his tradition.

We could not properly celebrate the founding of the AME Church without referring to God's Word. It was Richard Allen's diligence in studying God's Word and his personal commitment to teaching his African sisters and brothers the Word of God that led him to the establishment of the AME Church.

For our scripture reference today, I have chosen Romans 12:1-2: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this*

*world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (KJV)*

This is a difficult Command for any age or era for man to follow for it is so easy for us to take the path of least resistance and join the crowd rather than take a stand for what we know to be right and the perfect will of God.

Josiah Holland, the poet, puts it this way in his poem entitled "God Give Us Men."

*God, give us men! A time like this demands strong minds,  
Great hearts, true faith and ready hands;  
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;  
Men who possess opinions and a will;  
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;  
Men who can stand before a demagogue  
And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!  
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog,  
In public duty and in private thinking;  
For while the rabble, with their thumb-worn creeds,  
Their large professions and their little deeds,  
Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,  
Wrong rules the land and waiting justice sleeps.*

Richard Allen was such a man, as described in this poem for he was a man of conviction who did not allow the offer to become a pastor of the African Church of England to deter him from achieving his goal of establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Rather, he continued his efforts to establish a church of the persuasion that he was converted to at the age of seventeen.

Yes, he too was faced with many obstacles and temptations. But he held to his convictions and his belief that people of African descent needed to be able to worship God in a setting where they felt free and not intimidated or constrained.

Even though he had been ordained a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church and was permitted to preach in the church on occasions, he never lost sight of the fact that his African sisters and brothers could not participate fully in the worship service and were not responsible for their own leadership that he yearned for so much.

So, that Sunday morning in St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, when the trustees pulled him and his African brothers from the altar as they knelt in prayer, The Right Reverend Richard Allen used this act as a stepping stone to establishing a church in the Methodist tradition for his African sisters and brothers. He had no crowd when he purchased the plot to establish his church in 1787. But what he did have was sheer determination, unyielding faith in God, and love for his fellow man.

This love for his fellow man, and especially his African sisters and brothers, did not end with establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He also wrote a letter stating his opposition to the scheme of sending all free Africans to Liberia to be colonized. Even though he was aged by that time, he was still a devoted Minister of the Gospel. He wrote the letter appended below stating his position on African colonization. His letter was published in the November 27, 1827, edition of the *Freedom's Journal*. The entire letter is included here.

*"Dear Sir,*

*I have been for several years trying to reconcile my mind to the Colonizing of Africans in Liberia, but there have always been, and*

*there still remain great and insurmountable objections against the scheme. We are an unlettered people, brought up in ignorance, not one in a hundred can read or write, not one in a thousand has a liberal education; is there any fitness for such to be sent into a far country, among heathens, to convert or civilize them, when they themselves are neither civilized or christianized? See the great bulk of the poor, ignorant Africans in this country, exposed to every temptation before them: all for the want of their morals being refined by education and proper attendance paid unto them by their owners, or those who had the charge of them. It is said by the Southern slave-holders, that the more ignorant they can bring up the Africans, the better slaves they make, 'go and come.' Is there any fitness for such people to be colonized in a far country, to be their own rulers? Can we not discern the project of sending the free people of colour away from their country? Is it not for the interest of the slave-holders to select the free people of colour out of the different states, and send them to Liberia? Will it not make their slaves uneasy to see free men of colour enjoying liberty? It is against the law, in some of the southern states, that a person of colour should receive an education, under a severe penalty.*

*Colonizationists speak of America being first colonized, but is there any comparison between the two? America was colonized by as wise, judicious and educated men as the world afforded. William Penn did not want for learning, wisdom, or intelligence. If all the people in Europe and America were as ignorant, and in the same situation as our brethren, what would become of the world? where would be the principle or piety that would govern the people? We were stolen from our mother country, and brought here. We have tilled the ground and made fortunes for thousands, and still they are not weary of our services. But they who stay to till the ground must be slaves. Is there not land enough in America, or 'corn enough in Egypt?'*<sup>21</sup>

*Why should they send us into a far country to die? See the thousands of foreigners emigrating to America every year: and if there be ground sufficient for them to cultivate, and bread for them to eat; why would they wish to send the first tillers of the land away? Africans have made fortunes for thousands, who are yet unwilling to part with their services; but the free must be sent away, and those who remain must be slaves. I have no doubt that there are many good men who do not see as I do, and who are for sending us to Liberia; but they have not duly considered the subject—they are not men of colour. This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free.”*

—**RICHARD ALLEN**

*Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States*

Richard Allen found joy and fulfillment in the knowledge that the power of God dwelt within him and that he was living according to the perfect will of God. Too often, we get caught up in believing that happiness consists of material things: OUR MERCEDES, OUR JAGUARS, OUR TOWN CARS, THE KIND OF HOUSE WE LIVE IN, WHERE WE BUY OUR CLOTHES, AND HOW WE PAY FOR THEM.

Don't misunderstand me, God wants us to have some of the finer things in this life—but these should not become the center of our lives. Jesus taught us that we should first seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto us. *For the Father knoweth that ye have need of them. (St. Matt. 6:32b)* Jesus also reminds us that *a man's life consisteth not in the things that he possesseth. (St. Luke 12:15b)* The hope of a secure, peaceful, and livable world lies with

disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.

The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom have always been nonconformists. Rosa Parks did not conform to the request made of her to sit in the back of the bus. Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *Self Reliance* wrote, "*Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.*" Likewise, Apostle Paul reminds us in our scripture reference, that whoso would be a Christian must also be a nonconformist. Any Christian who blindly accepts the opinion of the majority and, in fear and timidity, follows a path of expediency and social approval is a mental and spiritual slave. James Russell Lowell puts it this way:

*They are slaves who fear to speak for the fallen and  
the weak;*

*They are slaves who will not choose hatred, scoffing,  
and abuse*

*Rather than silence shrink from the truth they  
needs must think;*

*They are slaves who dare not be in the right with  
two or three,*

We would do well to review the heritage left by our founder, Richard Allen. History tells us that his heritage was one of high endeavor and uncompromising devotion to worthy causes. A great and noble legacy of the highest idealism has been left to the generations that followed. His spirit, his ideals, his character, and his church are parts of this inheritance. To know him, one must endeavor to come into contact with the spirit, the life motives, and the work of this outstanding churchman and race leader. What manner of man was Richard Allen that the work of his hands could go marching on, after his death? What was the secret of his power? The survey of his life shows

that he was preeminently a good man of plain mind and simple heart. He was not a braggart. However, on the contrary, his objectives were to settle convictions himself about which he dared not boast.

In spite of all the obstacles, he held to his course. He shared some of the qualities of the great religious reformers, yet, he was orthodox in his theological views. He was full of hope for the future. In the midst of dangers and difficulties, he expressed hope in God.

Of this hope, he stated, *"Whether I am comforted or left desolate; whether I enjoy peace or am afflicted with temptations; whether I am healthful or sickly, succored, or abandoned by the good things of this life, I will always hope in Thee, O my chiefest infinite good. Although the fig tree shall bloom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, although the labor of the olive shall fail and the fields yield no meat; although the flock be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."*

Although all would be against him, Richard Allen would feel confident that there was a greater power on his side. This confidence awakened in him the capacity for carrying on with his work alone and trusting in the few followers who first agreed to follow him. This independence of spirit was not of himself but rather of his belief in God. He had laid hold on the certainty that God would gather up the broken threads of life and weave them into unity and peace. Richard Allen did not hesitate to say that he believed in God as *"an eternal, incomprehensible spirit, infinite in all perfections, who didst make all things out of nothing and doth govern them all by thy wise providence."* He elaborated upon this belief further by saying that *"he believed in the unity of the Godhead, that there is*

*a Trinity of persons; perfectly one and perfectly three; one essence and three persons."*

He believed that Jesus was of one substance with the Father, the very and Eternal God, that He took upon himself our frail nature; that He suffered, was crucified, killed, and buried to reconcile us to the Father and be a sacrifice for our sin, and that by His own power He arose from the dead, ascended into heaven where He is adored by angels and is interceding for the sinners. He was confident that those who lived without God were miserable and blind. He looked forward to "*everlasting mansions of glory*" where there would be eternal happiness.

Richard Allen, characterized as an Apostle of Freedom and Founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church has left us a great and rich heritage. Among them is a thirst for knowledge, thrift, honesty, courage, racial pride, a love for all mankind, and a deep and abiding faith in the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He was an affectionate husband to his wife, Sarah, and a tender father to his children.

My Christian friends, the torch has been passed to us today. Are we prepared to accept the challenge of carrying on this great heritage? The future of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is dependent upon our answer.

## IT'S HARVEST TIME

*St. Thomas A.M.E. Church, Savannah, GA*

Today is the "Harvest Day" celebration, and the message I have chosen to share with you is titled "It's Harvest Time." The scripture reference is found in the Gospel of St. John 4:31-38 (KJV), which reads as follows:

*<sup>31</sup> In the mean while his disciples prayed him, saying, Master, eat.*

*<sup>32</sup> But he said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye know not of.*

*<sup>33</sup> Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought him ought to eat?*

*<sup>34</sup> Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.*

*<sup>35</sup> Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.*

*<sup>36</sup> And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.*

*<sup>37</sup> And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth.*

*<sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours.*

When we think of harvest in our daily lives, we think of the time of year when we gather our crops or the time when crops reach maturity and are ready to be harvested. We also know that harvest means a gathering in, or we may sometimes say, "It is reaping time." But it is also the reward of the efforts put forth, beginning with the planting or sowing of the seeds and cultivating or nurturing them until they have reached maturity and have produced, hopefully, a good yield.

We also note that some other things are synonymous with the harvest season. First, there is a change in the weather. We have cooler temperatures, and the leaves on some trees and shrubbery begin changing colors and start falling to the ground. This change signifies that winter is approaching when we cannot grow many crops because of the cooler temperatures.

However, we have the same physical needs for food supplies in order to sustain ourselves as in other seasons of the year. So how do we prepare for our needs during the winter season? Harvest season is the time when we gather the crops to carry us through winter. We all remember the story of the busy little ant, storing away his food for the winter during the harvest season. All these seasonal indicators are signs of the physical or earthly harvest, and we should understand that the earthly harvest is needful.

But what about the spiritual harvest? Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 9:37, which also applies to all followers today, *The harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few.* Now we know that Jesus did much of his teaching in parables, so what was he referring to when he made this statement? Surely, He was not referring to corn crops or sugar cane. But He was referring to God's people, the children of the household of Israel who had turned away from God and were worshipping

idol gods. For He said on one occasion, *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.* (Luke 19:10) Jesus also said, *My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.* (John 4:34) So, the harvest that Jesus was referring to was the souls of those who are lost in a world of sin, who are seeking a way out of the darkness.

In chapter 3, verse 13, of Joel, he also spoke of the wickedness of God's people by comparing them to a ripe harvest. *Come and trample the grapes, for the winepress is full, and the vats overflow so great is their wickedness.* The Prophet Joel is comparing God's people to the physical harvest, for the children of Israel were now ready to turn from their sinful lives and return to The God of their Father Abraham. They are ready to be gathered in and sheltered under the mighty wings of a loving, caring, forgiving, and powerful God. They were ready to acknowledge that the Lord is God.

And we see in today's society many of God's people who are called by His name but are living ungodly lives. As Paul stated, they have become *lovers of themselves* (2 Timothy 3:2) rather than lovers of God. Yes, the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Jesus said to his disciples, *Say not ye there are yet four months and then cometh harvest? Behold, I say unto you, lift your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest.* (John 4:35)

Again I say, lift your eyes and look at the fields. It's harvest time. Crime is running rampant in our city and throughout the country. Children disrespect themselves and others. We see parents killing their children. Just a few days ago, a woman was caught on a security camera in a mall parking lot beating her four-year-old daughter mercilessly, an example of the severity of the problem of child abuse. We see nations against nations

as we are teetering on the brink of nuclear war, and the known world is plagued with threats and acts of terrorism daily. Yes, the fields are white already for the harvest.

In our scripture reference (St. John 4:31–38), Jesus had a conversation with his disciples. This conversation took place after Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, a story I'm sure we are all familiar with. The disciples' concern was for Jesus. He had not eaten any physical food. They had been traveling all morning en route to Galilee. While the disciples went into town to buy food, Jesus tarried at the well. When they returned and offered food to Jesus, not knowing what had happened while they were in the city, He refused to eat. The disciples did not understand his refusal and began to talk among themselves, trying to come up with a reason for Jesus not eating. But Jesus, knowing what was going through their minds, said to them, *I have meat that you know not of. My meat is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work.* (John 4:34).

And as Christian followers of Christ today, my sisters and brothers, we are called to complete the work that Jesus began while he was on earth: to gather in those who are lost in a world of sin and darkness. As Christians, we must be ever mindful that we have a great responsibility to reap the harvest for Christ. For we are laborers with God, and our reward will depend on the kind of laborers we are. For we know that the Bible teaches us that if we reap the harvest, we gather fruit unto eternal life.

Our labor for Christ should be evident in how we live, treat our fellow man, and share our blessings with others. Yes, there is a job for each of us in God's vineyard if we would but lift our eyes and look on the fields, for the harvest is ripe. We can begin at home by teaching our children the commandments and

statutes of God and by being an example for them by obeying God's Word ourselves. If we do our job at home, it will carry over into every aspect of our society. We would have a judicial system that is fair and just, a government with integrity, and corporations that are honest and fair to their employees. Our streets would be safe to travel without fear of being robbed or killed; there would be peace among nations.

The list goes on and on, but there is a part for us to play, whether we have children or not. What about the opportunities to serve in various capacities in the church? Whether teaching a Sunday school class, singing in the choir, assisting with the mission, ministering to another member in need, working in the nursery, and numerous other ways, there are opportunities to serve. Then, there are the community organizations where you can volunteer to assist them in carrying out their mission in human service. Sometimes, our part is just sharing words of encouragement with someone experiencing difficulty at that time. So, you can see there are innumerable ways to help reap the harvest of the Lord.

And Jesus depends on those of us who profess to be His followers, namely the church, to win the world for Him. But our strength and our courage must come from the Lord himself in the form of answered prayers. Eugene M. Harrison wrote about that kind of prayer in his poem titled "*The Soul Winners Prayer*."

*Oh, give me Lord, thy love for souls,  
For lost and wand'ring sheep,  
That I may see the multitudes  
And weep as Thou didst weep.  
Help me to see the tragic plight  
Of souls far off in sin;*

*Help me to love, to pray, and go  
 To bring the wand'ring in.  
 From off the altar of thy heart  
 Take thou some flaming coals,  
 Then touch my life and give me, Lord,  
 A heart that's hot for souls.  
 Oh fire of love, Oh flame divine,  
 Make thy abode in me;  
 Burn in my heart, burn evermore,  
 Til I burn out for Thee.*

Jesus said in St. John 12:32, *And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.* Church, we need to lift Jesus up today. We need to take a stand for right and righteousness. Sometimes we may have to stand alone but stand anyhow. For, if we plant the seeds of righteousness in a willing heart, we will reap a crop of God's love. Remember that if we reap the harvest, we gather fruit unto eternal life.

But many times, we are like the disciples were, on the day that Jesus met the woman at the well. We are caught up in our personal needs, wants, and desires, and we fail to see the vast harvest that surrounds us daily. If harvest time is that season for gathering in, and we see the winning of souls for Christ as also being a "gathering in" and the outcome of getting to know Christ, we can see that harvest time in God's vineyard is not confined to any one season of the year; rather it is any time we have an opportunity to tell others about the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And we should rejoice for every opportunity that we have, to tell others the story of Jesus and His love.

I like the way the hymnologist puts in the third verse of this old familiar hymn of the church, "I love to tell the story;

tis pleasant to repeat what seems more wonderfully sweet each time I tell it. I love to tell the story for some have never heard the message of salvation from God's own Holy Word."

Even though we live in a country where we have religious freedom, hundreds of thousands still have not heard or do not believe in the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. My sisters and brothers, we are living in perilous times. Lift up your eyes and look unto the fields, it's harvest time. We live in a society where love and concern for our fellow man is almost a thing of the past. Seldom do we hear the Golden Rule mentioned, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" But the good news is that there is hope, and this is the message that we need to tell a sin-sick world.

We need laborers who are bold and courageous to tell the world about the message of salvation. We need to tell them how GOD wrapped himself in human flesh and came down through forty-two generations to a dark and sinful world as His own Son, to redeem man back to himself. We need to tell them how he gave His life freely on an old, rugged cross where he bore all of our sins. There, He was crucified, buried, and rose again on the third-day morning. Why? Because he loves us, each and every one of us, regardless of race, creed, color, or nationality. But how can we tell the world about Him if we don't know for ourselves? Do you know who Jesus is?

Let's check the record and see what is recorded there of who Jesus is:

- In Genesis, He is the Creator God.
- In Exodus, He is the Redeemer.
- In Leviticus, He is your sanctification.
- In Numbers, He is your guide.
- In Deuteronomy, He is your teacher.

- In Joshua, He is the mighty conqueror.
- In Judges, He gives victory over enemies.
- In Ruth, He is your kinsman, your lover, and your Redeemer.
- In I Samuel, He is the root of Jesse.
- In II Samuel, He is the son of David.
- In I and II Kings, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- In I and II Chronicles, He is your intercessor and high priest.
- In Ezra, He is your Temple, your house of worship.
- In Nehemiah, He is your mighty wall protecting you from your enemies.
- In Esther, He stands in the gap to deliver you from your enemies.
- In Job, He is the arbitrator who not only understands your struggles but also has the power to do something about them.
- In Psalms, He is your song—your reason to sing.
- In Jeremiah, He is your Balm in Gilead, the soothing salve for your sin-sick soul.
- In Ezekiel, He is your wheel in the middle of a wheel—the one who assures that dry, dead bones will come alive again.
- In Habakkuk, He is the Holy One.
- In Matthew, He is King of the Jews.
- In John, He is the Son of God.
- In Acts, He is the savior of the world.
- In Romans, He is the righteousness of God.
- In Ephesians, He is head of the church.
- In I John, He is your light.
- In Jude, He is the foundation of your faith.

- And in Revelation, He is your coming King.

From the beginning of the world to its end, there is no place where you can look and not see Jesus. He is everywhere! He is everything! He is before all things and in all things! Do you know Him? Do you know Him, Jesus Christ, God's Son? Has he ever done anything for you? Are you a witness that He is Lord? Are you willing to work in His vineyard? Will you help me lift Jesus so that He might draw all men unto Himself? The hymnologist pleads with us now as we prepare to close:

*Hark the voice of Jesus crying, who will go and  
work today?*

*Fields are white and harvest waiting who will  
bear the sheaves away?*

*Loud and strong the Master calleth; rich rewards  
He offers thee;*

*Who will answer gladly saying, "Here am I! Send  
me! Send me!"*

LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND LOOK AT THE FIELDS,  
IT'S HARVEST TIME!

## PROMISES OF HOPE

*Speedwell UMC, Savannah, GA*

The subject or title chosen for our message this morning is "Promises of Hope." The scripture references will include passages from several divisions of the Book of Psalms. These will be given as the message unfolds. If you have your Bible handy, I invite you to follow along as we explore these passages. As we read the newspapers and watch or hear the news on television or some other electronic device on a daily basis, we hear of so many acts of violence, including robbery, shootings, resulting in the murder of both children and adults, kidnapping, and police brutality. The list goes on, for we live in a time when we are no longer safe in our own homes. We have corrupt justice systems, which make you wonder if there is any hope of a better life and world. Well, let us take a look at what some scholars say about hope and what the Word of God teaches us about hope.

Scholar Charles Sawyer, says, *"Of all the forces that make for a better world, none is so indispensable, none so powerful, as hope. Without hope, men are only half alive. He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything."* Jer. 17: 7 says, *Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and has made the Lord his hope and confidence.* The Evangelist, Tony Abram said, *"As we journey through life, the thing we long for is hope. There is no greater source of hope than God's Word."* That being said, let us examine Psalm 1. This first message to us from the first Psalm is the pursuit of happiness.

Happiness! Isn't this what we are all seeking in this life? We also see here that the one who is blessed by God does not walk in the counsel of unbelievers, does not stand in the way of sinners, and does not sit in the company of scoffers. But we see the man or woman pursuing true happiness as a positive person. These are people who daily search the Word of God and find absolute delight as they take time to meditate on each precious word. The optimistic believer takes hold of God's promises and finds that their life becomes new and fertile, "*Like a tree planted by the rivers of water.*"

What a picture! Imagine a green tree bearing fruit, whose roots are deep down into God's rich soil! No dry, withered leaves or dead fruits on this tree! It flourishes, gives beauty to the eye, and shade for others to enjoy. This tree is a picture of a fulfilled, happy life, bearing the manifold fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, and temperance. Thus, we see a Christian character that is radiant, attractive and brings glory to God.

Psalms 89:1, says, *I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever: with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations.* As Christians, we should begin each day with a song just as the Psalmist says that he will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. If we expect to be among that great company of believers who love God and have tasted His goodness, we should begin now to get in practice to sing His mercies in eternity with the Heavenly Choir. This sinful and wicked world is in dire need of a good song and a faithful testimony to our wonderful God. The Psalmist also tells us in this Psalm about speaking to all generations. And surely, our children and youth of today need to hear about the reality, the guidance, and the power of the living Lord Jesus. And who can better tell them than those of us who have tasted His mercy and forgiveness

through our many life experiences? So let them hear your song of experiences and testimony, speak a word for Jesus today, and make known His faithfulness to all generations.

Then in Psalm 27:14, we are instructed to *Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say on the Lord.* When the pressures of this life seem to weigh you down, and there are mountains in your life that you can't seem to tunnel through, wait, I say on the Lord.

In this age of almost everything being instant like instant coffee, instant tea, instant grits, and instant communication, it is difficult for us to wait for anything. We no longer have to wait for the postal service to deliver our mail to receive a message—instead, we can receive messages in a matter of minutes or less by fax, e-mail, or text, which some I don't even know about. But the Psalmist tells us not only to wait but to *be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart.* David, the Psalmist here, refers to the Lord, for he was a warrior and had experienced wars, fears, and deadly terror, and God delivered him. And He will also deliver us if we learn to wait on him. One writer says we should not run ahead before the Lord reveals His peaceful plan for our lives.

Psalm 23 is the one that most Christians have committed to memory. It begins, *The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.* This is a powerful statement indeed; what an assurance we have because we trust in Him. He has restored our souls and led us into perfect peace. My sisters and brothers, can you speak with certainty of God's salvation today? Can you be sure that His goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life?

Is this even possible, you might ask? It is possible and available to all who come to Him through His dear Son, our Lord

and Savior, Jesus Christ. Then and only then do we have the assurance that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

From Psalm 23, let us now move to Psalm 138:1, which reads, *I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee.* This Psalm could be titled "Facing Trouble Increases Praise." David did not use the fact that he and those with him could not go into the temple for worship as a reason not to worship. Instead, he used this opportunity to teach his companions to sing, which increased their praise for Thanksgiving. This type of worship lets us know we are not to give up on our dreams because we face challenges. Instead, we should use challenges to enhance our goals and increase our praise with our whole hearts.

Psalm 13:1 reads, *How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?* From sighing to singing would be a good theme for this Psalm. Within just six verses, we share in a soul struggle that David experienced from deep agitation. In verse 1, he cries, *How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord?* Then on to the last verse when we find him singing because God has dealt bountifully with him.

Other passages in Psalms sing along with other biblical characters' praises of hope because of how God dealt with them when they were in trouble. Let's look at Daniel in the Lion's den, who was rescued without a scratch. The three Hebrew boys were put in the fiery furnace and they came out without a smell of smoke or a singe. Scripture tells us that not a hair on their head was singed. Christ was there in that den of lions, with the Hebrew boys in the furnace of fire, and was there when David cried out in his affliction. He has told all believers, *I will never leave you nor forsake you.*

My Christian friends, if you are in any affliction today, you can be set free. Rest assured that God has not forgotten you, for He has the whole world in His hands.

David continues to testify of the benefits of trusting in God as recorded in Psalm 40:2. *He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.* Picture the drama of this experience of David as a man in a horrible pit noise, struggling to get a foothold on an impossible substance, described as miry clay. This experience has also been likened to someone stuck in quicksand. You struggle with your feet and clutch at the air with your hands. And unless a friend is nearby to help you, you cannot get out of this dreadful place. So, this Psalm is a vivid picture of the powerful friend sinners have in Jesus. He takes hold of us when we don't have the strength to rescue ourselves. He is the only one who can save us from our pits. And because we have the assurance of this truth, we cry to God, and He sets our feet upon a rock. He establishes the believer in a new way of life and puts a new song in his mouth. This Psalm is a song of praise, promise, and hope. Remember this, hope speaks of a new song that only God can give. He puts the song in our cleansed hearts, and it becomes a praise. It is praise for his wonderful deliverance.

In Psalm 18:2 we see David speaking as a soldier on the day when God delivered him from all of his enemies. *I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, fortress, and deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.* This Psalm of praise expresses how David realizes God is mighty when we have hope. He is the one who buckles on David's armor.

What is the mighty God for you? Some may say that He is my lawyer, my doctor, my father, my mother, or my closest friend. He's my bread, my water, my shelter in the time of a storm, my bridge over troubled waters, and the list goes on and on. For me, He is my all and all.

Psalm 18:30b and 31(NIV) reads, *He is a shield for all who take refuge in Him. For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God?* The songwriter acknowledged that hope in Christ is a significant part of his song "*My Hope is Built on nothing less than Jesus' Blood and Righteousness.*" Then the chorus begins with, "*On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand...*" This lets us know that he is our Hope and our Rock of Salvation.

Throughout the scriptures, we can see Christ as the Solid Rock on which believers can stand, a place where we may shelter ourselves from the raging storms of life. Our message today reminds us that God is still our promise of hope in a lawless and sinful world.

## REMOVING BARRIERS TO WORLD PEACE

Today is "Human Relations" Sunday. A day when we pause to recognize our oneness as a human race, our oneness as children of God, and as members of the family of God. We are all a part of God's creation. I am honored to have been invited to come and share this worship experience with you today.

As I reflect on the world situation today, I feel that the thing we need most in the world is peace. There is hardly anyone we talk with today who is not concerned about world peace—peace in our homes, our communities, our states, our nation, and throughout the known world. As the world watches Russia change its form of government, one of the main concerns is what will happen to its huge stockpile of nuclear arsenals, who will control them, and how will this affect world peace?

Unfortunately, this concern for world peace is not a new phenomenon to mankind. For man has been in search of peace since Adam and Eve committed the first sin and were driven out of the Garden of Eden. But I believe that we have been following the wrong path or the wrong course to find peace. For there can be no peace without love and there can be no peace without God being the source. For peace is of God. As I envision a world at peace, I see many barriers in our society and in us as individuals that prevent us from having a world at peace. So, I would like to use it as a theme for our discussion today, "Removing Barriers to World Peace." Our scripture reference is found in the book of Ephesians 2:13–15 (KJV) *But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of*

*commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace.*

Here, Paul writing to the church at Ephesus from prison in Rome is reminding the Gentiles that, at one time they were not privileged to share in the inheritance of God's love through his son, Jesus Christ, as were the Jews. But now, after having had the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them, which is the good news and because of their belief and acceptance of this gospel and this Christ that it represents, Christ's love as expressed by His suffering, death, and resurrection has broken down the barrier that once existed between the Jews and the Gentiles, and out of these two, has made one man thereby making peace. Paul is assuring the church at Ephesus that they have equal rights to God's grace. The same applies to us today. Though on the basis of nationalities, race, or physical appearance we may look different, we are all one with God. This was indeed good news for the church at Ephesus and it is good news to all of us today who believe that God is the father of all creation and that all of mankind is interrelated. Because of the love of God, through His son Jesus Christ, we are brothers and sisters with equal rights to his grace and his mercies.

But not all of mankind share in this fellowship of brotherhood for there are still many barriers that divide mankind to this very day. There are nations against nations, struggling to gain more power, so as to dominate and control other peoples. There is the barrier of greed, corruption, and injustices in our own country and in our own communities. There is a barrier between the rich and the poor throughout the world. And we hear a lot about third world countries being poor, and I concur that this is true and there is much suffering in them. But I also know that we have the poor among us right here. If you have occasion to be in the downtown area any day of the week, you

can see the homeless. If you visit the health clinics, you can see the suffering of the poor and the elderly.

In Paul's day, circumcision was the great dividing barrier. But today we have illiteracy, unemployment, hunger, crime, injustices, alcohol and drug abuse, greed, corruption in our government, self-centeredness, disease, unfair tax laws, unfair trade laws, etc. All of these are barriers to world peace.

As Christians, we must find ways to spread the good news of love for our fellow man, not only to all nations but to all of the citizenry of our own community. We must begin in our Jerusalem and then go abroad. We must begin with the highest government officials to the persons of greatest needs on the street corner if we are to have world peace. We must break down the barriers of illiteracy by seeing to it that all of our children receive an education. We must break down the barrier of unemployment by providing adequate jobs for all of our citizenry. We must break down the barriers of injustice and inequality by standing for right and righteousness. We must break down the barriers between the rich and the poor by sharing out of our abundance with those who are less fortunate. We must break down the barrier of self-centeredness with love and compassion for others. For Jesus commanded us as Christians to love one another. John 13:34 and 35 says in part, *A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples.* In Matthew 22:39, he tells us that we are to "love our neighbor as ourselves." The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security."

One might ask as the lawyer did of Jesus, *And who is my neighbor?* Jesus' answer to this question is found in the story of the Good Samaritan. You know the story as told by Jesus of a certain man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Envision with me, if you will, a long, lonely uninhabited road with many dangerous curves, where one's vision is obscured. A perfect setting for robbers to hide and ambush passersby. Such was the case in this story. A priest and a Levite passing by observed a man who had been beaten and robbed, but offered him no assistance. A Samaritan came along. He too saw the wounded man who had been stripped and robbed and he had compassion for him. He bound up his wounds, placed him on his beast, and took him to an inn where he remained with him overnight. Upon leaving the next day, he paid the innkeeper to allow him to stay there until he was able to travel again. Jesus here in essence is saying, that anyone who is in need along the highways of life is your neighbor—he is neither Jew nor Gentile; neither American nor Russian; neither Black nor White—yet he is all of these and more, if they are in need. The Samaritan is called good because he showed love, concern, and compassion for others.

We must remove our barriers of complacency and self-centeredness in order to feel the needs and the hurts of others. Then and only then can we show love and compassion for those in need along life's roadside. Children who, through no fault of their own, are hungry, sick, and homeless and are waiting for their good Samaritan. Those individuals who are unemployed and are unable to provide for their families and themselves are waiting. The young man and young woman addicted to drugs and alcohol are waiting. The elderly man or woman who cannot afford to pay for medical care is waiting.

There is a world out there that is crying and dying, waiting for their good Samaritan to come along.

It may be you or it may be me that needs to respond to these cries. But surely, we must all do our share in removing these barriers that stand in the way of peace and brotherhood. While those who suffer need to be relieved of their physical suffering, they also need the assurance that there is hope for a better day and a better life. This comes with faith in God and belief in the power of God within themselves, to overcome whatever their barriers might be. But how can they have faith in someone or something that they know nothing about? Our world today is suffering from spiritual amnesia. There are too many in our society who know very little or nothing about the love of God.

I was both shocked and saddened as I talked with one of our four-year-old students last fall who continued to fight his teacher. While talking with him about his disruptive behavior, I asked him if he didn't know that God loves him and was not pleased with him fighting his teacher. He responded with a question, "Who is God?" and looked up as though he was looking to see this God of whom I had spoken. And so it is with many people today; they neither know this man called Jesus nor do they know of his matchless love for mankind. Even though they may not know it, they too are looking for this man called Jesus. When they resort to the use of alcohol and drugs, they are in search of something greater than themselves. They are attempting to fill a void in their lives and fail to recognize that the thing that's missing is the knowledge and faith in an almighty God. So, it is important for those of us who are Christians and know about the love of God, to teach those who do not. We must teach, not only by words but also by deeds. Jesus said, *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set*

*on a hill cannot be hidden.* We must hold our lights high so that those who walk in darkness may see the marvelous light. For Christ commanded his disciples of old to go and teach all nations. If we are to have a world at peace, we must be willing to go out and tell others of His love. We must accept all people as a part of the family of God. We must show compassion and love for everyone regardless of their station in life, their race, creed, or color. We must bear witness to the fact that there is one faith, one Lord, one baptism, thereby making peace. The hymnologist says it best in his hymn entitled "*In Christ There Is No East or West.*"

*In Christ there is no east or west,  
In Him no south or north,  
But one great fellowship of love  
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

## APPENDIX

### RECOGNITIONS AND AWARDS

The Executive Secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, Deaconess Joanne M. Reich, recognized Wesley Community Centers of Savannah's work under my leadership during the years I served as Executive Director. This recognition was dated February 3, 2000, and I am enclosing the entire document with the years that I served in this position.

### **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SERVICE OF REATHA J. STEVENS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WESLEY COMMUNITY CENTERS 1972 – 1996**

Reatha J. Stevens was employed as executive director of the newly formed Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Incorporated, September 16, 1972. She was given the awesome task of bringing together two former agencies, namely, Inner City Community and Bethlehem Center. This feat was accomplished and today the services of these former are administered under a single administration. She also hired the first secretary for the Agency, who is still employed by the Agency.

Programs initiated during the tenure of Reatha J. Stevens including the first Inner-Center Neighborhood Garden

Program in Savannah; an energy assistance program; a food pantry; clothes closet; and, a community outreach component of services. The enrollment in the full day child care program was increased from 49 to 75. The half day program's enrollment was increased to serve 22 preschool children. Programs that were continued under the administration of Reatha Stevens were an After School Enrichment Program for children ages 6 through 12; a Teen Program and a six-week Summer Camp Program. For a time, the Agency conducted a school dropout program for High School students and was closed due to lack of funds.

She led the Board of Directors in purchasing the present facility at 1601 Drayton Street. The property was paid for in four (4) years and was dedicated debt free in May 1986. Before retiring in 1996, the administrative wing was renovated and a reception area, client waiting area, a restroom was added and a central heating and cooling system was installed. Reatha Stevens initiated a major medical insurance program and a retirement program for all staff of the Agency during her tenure. Working with other directors in the community, she played a major role in establishing a credit union, whereby all staff might become members.

Reatha Stevens was an exceptional fiscal manager and worked with minimal financial compensation. However, this did not lessen her commitment to the work and mission of the Agency. In fact, her sacrificial service made it possible for the Agency to be recognized today as one of the leading child caring agencies in this community.

## Reatha Steven Receives Harley Memorial Scholarship

Reatha J. Stevens, Executive Director of Wesley Community Centers has been selected to receive the Helen Harley Memorial Scholarship Award presented by the Southern Early Childhood Association. As recipient of this award, she will attend the 45th Annual conference of the Southern Early Childhood Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, April 14-16, 1994, representing the State of Georgia. She will be given special recognition at one of the sessions on Friday, April 15. There are only two of these awards given per year to individuals attending the Conference for the first time. The other recipient for this year is Lowell D. Parker of Wheelwright, Kentucky.

According to Mrs. Stevens, there will be many choices of Early Childhood Educations Workshops as well as educational and fun tours. She expects her participation to greatly en-



Reatha J. Stevens

hance the quality of the Child Care and Development Program at Wesley Community Centers. We congratulate Mrs. Stevens on being selected for this award and wish for her continued success in all of her endeavors.

*Harley Scholarship*

THE CITY OF SAVANNAH  
GEORGIA  
Proclamation

- WHEREAS: Reatha J. Stevens has served as Executive Director of Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Incorporated for 23 Years and 9 months and has had a profound impact on the lives of hundreds of children, youth and adults; and
- WHEREAS: She successfully brought together two former Community Centers to form one Agency under one administration serving two distinct inner-city neighborhoods and the entire city of Savannah and Chatham County; and
- WHEREAS: She initiated several new programs at the Agency which included establishing the first inner-city neighborhood garden in the city, an Energy Assistance Program, Food Pantry and Clothes Closet; and
- WHEREAS: She increased the capacity of the Child Care Program from 49 to 75 and increased the number of child care staff from four to eight full time teachers and one part-time aide; and
- WHEREAS: She worked with the Board of Directors to purchase the present facility at 1601 Drayton Street, and in the completion of the renovation and addition to the administrative Wing, including the addition of a reception area, client waiting area, restroom and a central heating and cooling system; and
- WHEREAS: She played a major role in establishing a Credit Union for employees of all United Way member agencies; and
- WHEREAS: She initiated a major medical insurance program and retirement program for Agency employees; and
- WHEREAS: Governor Joe Frank Harris honored Ms. Stevens with a Proclamation for Exceptional Leadership in 1986; and
- WHEREAS: Ms. Stevens has received the Helen Harley Scholarship Award presented by the Southern Early Childhood Association, is a member of the Georgia Association on Young Children and the Southern Early Childhood Association; and
- WHEREAS: She is recognized as an outstanding Community Leader.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Floyd Adams, Jr., Mayor of the City of Savannah, do hereby proclaim Friday, July 12, 1996 as:

"REATHA J. STEVENS DAY"

in Savannah.



In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the City of Savannah, Georgia to be affixed. This 12th day of July, 1996

ATTEST  
Sydney G. Reese  
Clerk of Council

Floyd Adams, Jr.  
MAYOR

Proclamation



*Plaque 1*



*Plaque 2*

FAMILY PICTURES





MY LIFE'S JOURNEY









**The quality of a person's life  
is in direct proportion  
to their commitment to excellence,  
regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.**

**—Vince Lombardi**