

Spotlight on Mother African Zoar United Methodist Church

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According to current pastor Rev. Ralph Blanks, the word "zoar" means good will in Hebrew. "Our foreparents chose the name African Zoar because they were descendents of Africa [and] they did not want to forget the ongoing plight of Africa or African Americans," said Rev. Blanks. Zoar's Biblical roots come from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. "When Sodom and Gomorrah were being destroyed, Lot and his family were found to be the only righteous ones," Rev. Blanks explained. "God said, 'I can't destroy this place until you leave.' And Lot said, 'Well, let us go over to Zoar.' Zoar is a place of refuge, a place of shelter, a place of good will."

African Zoar's first place of worship was an abandoned butcher shop at 4th and Brown streets, dedicated by Bishop Francis Asbury in August 1796. It was the first assembly of African American Methodists to meet for religious services. In 1883, Zoar purchased a red brick structure at 12th and Melon streets, a site that it still occupies. The 1880s sanctuary has undergone many changes, but it is still home to the congregation and the church's many community programs.

The Zoar Community Building and Loan Association, the first Church Community Center, the first "Baby Well Clinic" and the Zoar Federal Credit Union are only a few of the programs organized by Zoar in its long history of community service. Public outreach of this magnitude is a challenge for Zoar that is met by lay committees that are able to take on community projects and manage the internal business of the church. As Rev. Blanks explained, "We have, if you will, a team ministry." The committees add support to the business functions of the church, freeing Rev. Blanks to oversee church activities and raise funds while maintaining contact with the surrounding community.

Zoar Church has always had a strong presence in its North Philadelphia neighborhood, in large part due to its long history of community outreach. "People say, 'Go to Zoar Church and sign up to get one of those houses'," Rev. Blanks explained, referring to the Zoar Community Building and Loan, which served African American homebuyers when housing loans were unavailable from white lenders. "'Go to Zoar Church to see about getting the turkey basket,' or 'Go to the Christmas Shop.' [It] has allowed us in more ways to expand our ministry."

"People identify with 'that church at 12th and Melon'," added Rev. Blanks. The church has also seen its regional status grow. Its congregation is now drawn from many different neighborhoods, as members have become more prosperous. Nevertheless, their allegiance to Zoar U.M.E. is strong. As Rev. Blanks noted, "At one point, the bulk of the membership came from North Philadelphia ... but down through the years, as economics and upward mobility have played a part, ... [only] 40 or 50 percent of our congregation still comes from North Philadelphia. The rest come from West Philly, South Philly, and even surrounding suburbs and South Jersey."

Part of Zoar's identity is in no doubt due to its distinctive building. A short, muscular, granite structure, Zoar features a central hipped-roof tower set upon a rectangular-shaped, gable-roofed sanctuary. The interior of the sanctuary features a gently arched ceiling and a series of stained glass windows that incorporate portraits of major figures from the church's long history. The Romanesque building is attributed to architect Thomas Lonsdale, although it is unclear whether he designed the building or merely remodeled it. Lonsdale designed a number of buildings for the Methodist Church, although his best known building is the Baptist Temple at Temple University.

The Zoar congregation, along with the fine church building itself, has weathered a number of building programs in the recent past. In 1985, the Licorish Educational Building was completed, expanding the available space for the congregation and its community programs. More recently, the church completed major structural repairs to the community room below the sanctuary. It was discovered during renovations that the basement walls were dangerously weak due to years of seeping water and inadequate structural bracing. In 1994, the Historic Religious Properties Program helped to fund an initial study by a structural engineer to recommend a course of action, followed by a grant to assist in completing the repairs. Rev. Blanks is candid about the fund raising process: "We started out with pennies at first, dollars at first, and we have raised over \$250,000. It's not to be taken lightly."

Its structural problems solved for the time being, Zoar continues as a North Philadelphia anchor, providing shelter to its congregation and outreach to its community. Rev. Blanks is philosophical about the church's mission. "I think perhaps the parable of the sower best summarizes where I think we have been," he said. "The sower goes out to sow seeds and he's not mindful of where the seeds fall. His primary task is to sow seeds and I think that's what we've sought to do, to be helpful, caring, concerned, and reach out. We're sowing seeds in an unconditional fashion and the return has been far greater than what we could have imagined."