

Two Women Two Cultures One God

How AME India Was Founded

by Carole Copeland Thomas, MBA, CDMP

The adventure of traveling to India as an exchange student would have been enough excitement for most seminary students. However, for (now) Rev. Karla Cooper it became a door-opener to a much larger launch into AME history. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (www.ame-church.com) founded in 1787 by freed slaves, has always been a global outreach denomination. With churches in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Central/South America, Europe and Africa its membership of 2.5 million represents one of the oldest historically Black denominations in the United States.

Asia, however, was always a distant outpost with few opportunities to save souls in that region of the world until 2003 when the door opened even wider for this mainstream church organization. That was the year seminary exchange student **Rev. Karla Cooper** met and formed a friendship with another student at **Gurukul Theological Seminary** in Chennai: Indian born **Rev. Minnie Sarah** (Peddiny). Rev. Cooper shared church history with Rev. Sarah and told of the visionary leadership of the church's co-founder, ex-slave and first elected and consecrated bishop Richard Allen. It was a match made in Heaven.

At that time Rev. Sarah and her husband, Rev. Abraham Peddiny, were shepherding a dozen or more independent "family churches" in India, especially Southern India. Many of the members were Dalits, one of the lowest categories in India's long history of the caste system. Many were also dark skinned Indians, making it difficult to advance the socio-economic ladder in an ancient and complex social system. When the Richard Allen story was shared with Rev. Sarah, her husband and others, the similarities were too remarkable to ignore. Slaves purchasing their freedom to become entrepreneurs, business leaders, abolitionists and church leaders in an independent Christian denomination. Marginalized dark skinned Indians looking for respect and dignity in a nation that systematically overlooked their humanity.

From 2003-2007 the idea was floated to invite the Indian churches into the fold of the AME Church. By 2008 when the AME General Conference was held, the church voted to accept the 20 Indian churches into the AME Church. Originally a part of the Fifth Episcopal District "AME India" was shifted to the Fourth Episcopal District at the 2012 General Conference under the guidance of their original executive sponsors and advocates Bishop John and Rev. Cecilia Bryant. Rev Sarah and her husband were to become the AME Church's first Presiding Elder couple.

In less than seven years AME-India has grown from 20 to 105 churches located across India. Their commitment to Christ is unwavering and their devotion to their brothers and sisters throughout the denomination is unquestionable. AME India is one of the fastest growing regions in the entire denomination. The combined cultures, traditions and vision form one of the most unique collaborations in modern church history.

Gratitude is paid to two classmates from different parts of the world who were nurtured and supported by a Bishop and his wife who valued and respected the global outreach of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In May 2014 a group of 40 AMEs from US, Canada and South Africa attended the Fifth Anniversary of AME India. The week long trip included the Annual Conference attended by more than 200 members of AME India from around the country, a visit to one of the AME India churches and a mission visit to an orphanage in Chennai, Tamilnadu. This all took place during the conclusion of the India national election, the largest democratically held election in world history.

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