

LANE CHAPEL C. M. E. CHURCH

LEWISVILLE, TEXAS

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A HISTORY OF LANE CHAPEL C.M.E.

The years right after the Civil War found both white and black Christians confused about the future relationship between white and black church members. This confusion included Methodists as well as other church members. The Methodist Church had divided over slavery in the 1840s. White Methodists belonged to either the American Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which was the church of the North, or they belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which became the proslavery southern church. African Americans in the South and in Texas, both free and slave, belonged mostly to the white southern church, black slaves because slave masters insisted, and free blacks because they had little other alternative. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, officially created in 1816 at Philadelphia was not allowed to operate in Texas in the years before the Civil War.¹

In the days after the Civil War ended many southern black Methodists began establishing separate independent congregations. White southerners were somewhat undecided for a while about how to respond to the postwar exodus from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, but gradually came to oppose it. White opposition seemed motivated mostly by fear of loss of members of their

¹Katherine L. Dvorak, An African-American Exodus The Segregation of the Southern Churches (Brooklyn, 1991), 103ff; The New Handbook of Texas (Austin, 1996), I, 55.

churches and by quarrels that developed between white and black Methodists over who got the church property if a split occurred. African American freed people were generally adamant, however, about separating from white churches, which ordinarily entailed leaving the MEC, South for either the aforementioned African Methodist Episcopal Church, the northern Methodist Episcopal Church, or the smaller African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, all of which had missionaries in the South and in Texas after the war ended.²

Between 1865 and 1870 in Texas and in the South there were many different black Methodist churches, some of them exercising complete congregational independence, others maintaining some regional or local association with other black Methodist churches while some were affiliated with the northern churches. Some of them had white pastors and some had black pastors. It was a rather chaotic situation. The black church exodus caused black membership in the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South to dwindle from 78,742 in 1866 to 19,686 in 1869.³

Since so many blacks were determined to separate, white Methodist leaders decided it might be best to provide some leadership and direction to the seceding blacks. Consequently, with the blessing of, and some leadership from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the majority of southern black

²Dvorak, An African-American Exodus, 101-02; New Handbook of Texas, I, 44. Othal H. Lakey, The History of the CME Church, (Memphis, Tenn., 1985), 165ff.

³Dvorak, African-American Exodus, 121.

Methodists organized the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) in 1870. As a result of this association, activist or more radical African American leaders, often referred to the CME as the "Slavery Church," the "Rebel Church," or most often, the "Old Kitchen Church." Northern Methodists sometimes referred to it as the "Democratic Church."⁴

Twelve years after the formation of the CME, or in 1882, Anthony Hembry led in organizing the Lewisville Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in the town of Lewisville. Original members included Hembry's wife, Ida, Dick and Ellen McKenzie, John and Mattie Bush, and Jack Sanders. Some of the early families who belonged to the church included the Lusks, Elberts, Rainwaters', and Williams families. The Hembrys and all of the older members had formerly been slaves. The Lewisville Community had the largest concentration of African American slaves before the war and consequently afterward, at least for a while, the largest number of African American people in Denton County. Almost half of the 251 slaves in Denton County listed in the 1860 manuscript census, were around Lewisville and several of the last names above were taken from white slaveholders who showed up in the 1860 manuscript census.⁵

⁴Ibid., 163-65. History of the CME Church, 165ff.

⁵Lewisville News May 9, 1993; See also Directory, Lane Chapel Christian Methodist Church 1998-2000 Membership and Officer Directory, published in 1998. The current church Minister, Johnie K. Dollarhide collected much of the history of Lane Chapel, much of which exists only as an oral tradition handed down by word-of-mouth from previous generations. Historical comments are scattered throughout the directory; This

Like many other early churches in rural and small town Texas, both black and white, the Lewisville black Methodists had a church and congregation at first but no building of their own. They met in members' homes, in other churches, and for a while in a brush arbor. But they had erected a simple building by the 1890s and during the late 1890s and early 1900s the Lewisville Colored Methodist church was one of the few black congregations of any denomination between Dallas and Denton that had a church building in which to worship. Members believe Lane Chapel, at 118 years old is the oldest black church in Lewisville, and other black congregations in the city, including Macedonia Baptist Church, and Bethel A.M.E. Church were offshoots of it. "Lane Chapel was the spiritual hub around which the black community of that period revolved."⁶

In 1908 the church congregation received title to the land on which the church building sat. The building was located on land owned by two different families; Anthony and Ida Hembry and Dick and Ellen McKenzie deeded the land to the church. The building sets on Hembry Street in the heart of a black area of Lewisville, that became known to blacks as "Scrougeout," and is a short distance from downtown, or what Lewisville today calls "Old Town." In 1908 the church was still known as the Lewisville Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America, but at some time

source will be cited hereinafter as Lane Chapel Directory. The names of Hembry and Sanders show up in First Annual Report of the Agricultural Bureau of the Department of Agriculture, Insurance, Statistics, and History, 1887-8 (Austin, 1889), H-516, S-536.

⁶Lewisville News May 9, 1993; Lane Chapel Directory, the quote is on page 4.

afterward the name was changed to Lane Chapel C.M.E. Church in honor of Bishop Isaac Lane, who was a leader in establishing the C.M.E. Church and was chosen as Bishop in 1873. In 1954 the General Conference of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church changed its name to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, enabling the church to continue using the same C.M.E. initials.⁷

In 1917, Reverend J. W. Keller, pastor at that time, virtually rebuilt the church building. K. O. Lodge and Reverend J. W. Reynolds laid the foundation. Other families joined the church and became leaders as the founders and early member families began to pass on. Included were the John Hembry family and Gladys Brotherton (Shelby), who joined the church at the age of sixteen in the 1920s. Among the early pastors of Lane Chapel were Reverends J. B. Bullock, W. A. Bell, J. A. Hill, and J. W. Keller, noted above.⁸

The shift of rural and small town America to the big city that began to accelerate in the 1920s, and speeded up even more during World War II in the 1940s, caused membership in Lane Chapel to decline along with the black population of Lewisville. Although Lewisville's total population grew slightly between 1920 and 1940, the surrounding rural area and small towns lost population significantly and both rural and small town blacks tended to leave in greater numbers than the white population. Although Lewisville's total population almost doubled between

⁷Lane Chapel Directory, 4; Denton County Deed Records, Vol. 115, p. 170; Dvorak, African American Exodus, 167.

⁸Lane Chapel Directory, 4, 6.

1940 and 1950, increasing from 873 to 1,509, the black community experienced little growth. Lane Chapel failed to grow significantly during those years, but the church continued to be a vital part of the community and a very significant social center as membership continued to be in the vicinity of a hundred. Church pastors of those years, P. F. Prince, J. A. Hawkins, J. A. Morton, and T. G. Kirkpatrick continued to minister to a viable church congregation.⁹

During the 1950s and 1960s the population of Lewisville began to grow even more rapidly, but the growth was not in Lewisville's Old Town nor was it in the black population. It was suburban and white. If anything, the number of black residents in downtown Lewisville declined. Lane Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church began to rapidly lose membership. By 1967 when the Reverend Jack Castle was appointed pastor of the church, the members were very few in numbers and the church building badly in need of repair and renovation. Castle said the church at the time was like a big long box full of holes. "It was so open you could spit in one end, and if you could spit that far, it would go out t'other. It was a mess."¹⁰

Castle's experience was typical of that of most of the ministers of Lane Chapel, at least in the last half of the

⁹E. Dale Odom, An Illustrated History of Denton County, Texas From Peters Colony to Metroplex (Denton, 1996), 78-79. Lewisville News May 9, 1993 in an interview with Mrs Gladys Shelby, the church's oldest member.

¹⁰Interview with Jack Castle, by Cynthia Odom, October 10, 1999. Lewisville's total population almost doubled again between 1960 and 1970, increasing from 5,489 to 10,049. Odom, Illustrated History of Denton County, 102.

twentieth century. He was not paid a salary and thus had to work at another job. If the minister did not live in Lewisville, which was almost always the case, he would have to pay his own transportation costs. All of this, in the case of Castle, as he said, to minister to "Mrs Shelby, Mrs. Fitzpatrick (Mrs. Shelby's daughter) and a few kids," at Mrs. Shelby's house while the church was being rebuilt. If improvements were made to the church, the minister usually had to take the lead and often furnish his own labor and maybe some of the costs of materials. The same would be true of the few members of the church; they had to work at their jobs and then work on the church. It took herculean effort and strong desire and devotion to keep persisting, let alone make improvements, in the face of such obstacles.¹¹

Assisted by Presiding Elder, Rev. C. B. Johnson, Castle tore down the existing church, which was long and narrow, had very high ceilings, a high steeple with a church bell, very narrow windows, and a single front door reached by high steps. As they rebuilt, a house was moved in at the back by Larry Hembry that divided the church, which had before had no partitions, in order to make a fellowship hall, a kitchen, bathrooms, a pastor's study, and an office. They were not financially able to replace the steeple that had been on the earlier building. The church kept the steeple bell, which was old and ornate, but cracked, for quite some time after the renovation. It finally disappeared and church leaders do not know what happened to it. The church today

¹¹Jack Castle interview, Oct. 10, 1999.

looks very much the same as it has since 1967 with the exception of ramps for handicapped and enclosing the foyer, accomplished by Reverend Dollarhide in 1998.¹²

After 1970 the city of Lewisville began to experience explosive growth; population increased from 10,049 to 21,664 in the five years from 1970 to 1975 and reached 37,329 by 1990. But the growth continued to be in suburban white Lewisville, and Lane Chapel C.M.E. continued to languish. During the 1980s membership got down to four, and the church was in danger of closing its doors after more than a hundred years in existence. From the early 1980s to the early 1990s "Tiny offerings, donations and contributions from businesses and other churches [kept] the doors open and the bills paid." A few times only the social security check received by oldest member Gladys Shelby allowed her to pay "the difference in the pastor's weekly \$50 service fee, the church utility bills, and the annual funds sent to the church's state body. Lane Chapel owed its survival not only to Shelby but to the Mount Pilgrim C.M.E. in Denton, a much larger and financially better off church, which paid the utility bills for the church for many months during the hard times."¹³

Survival of the church was hindered by the fact that from the 1960s onward, church ministers usually stayed only a year or two and the consequent lack of continuity did not serve the church well. Between 1964 and 1999 only Reverends John P. Brown,

¹²Ibid.; Lane Chapel Directory, 4.

¹³Odom, Illustrated History of Denton County, 102, 106; Lewisville News, March 1, 1998; May 9, 1993.

1968-71, John Barnett, 1979-82, Frank Young, 1982-85, Woodlon Holman, 1987-90, Karen Gaines, 1990-92 and Johnie K. Dollarhide, 1993-?, stayed longer than a year or two. Small membership and low finances caused repair and renovation of the church building to be put off many times, although beginning in 1988 Pastor Holman began repair and revovation of the church, using mostly his own labor. Instead of rebuilding the church as before, most of his work was inside revovation.¹⁴

In 1990 Pastor Karen Gaines, first woman to pastor a church in Lewisville, began to bring the church back into the mainstream of the C.M.E. Church's Ft. Worth district and Annual Conference. Then in 1992, the church under Reverend Johnny Ray Alexander began to reorganize its boards and reinstated its woman's program, even though Alexander was quite ill much of the time and only served for one year.

After 1993, when Reverend Johnie K. McDowell Dollarhide, first ordained woman pastor in full connection in Lewisville, took over as leader, Lane Chapel experienced considerable revival in membership and activity. Lane Chapel was Her first assignment as an ordained minister and in her first year there she completed reorganization of the boards and auxilliaries, organized a Sunday School and various choirs. Auxilliaries included a board of trustees, a Women's Missionary Society, a Steward and Stewardess Board, an Usher Board, a Board of Christian Education, a Men's Fellowship, and a Lay Department, in short most of the activities of a modern institutional church. Also in that first year, Lane

¹⁴Lane Chapel Directory, 6.

Chapel "began regular fellowships with other area churches, started an active spiritual program, including Thursday night prayer meetings and Bible Study." They also started charitable work in the Lewisville community by adopting families at Thanksgiving and Christmas and donating food and funds to families in need.¹⁵

By 1996-97 the church membership grew to about 25 members who came from about 10 families. All of the growth happened with very little growth in the African American population in Lewisville.

In 1995 church member Hurl Scruggs, Lane Chapel's Lay Leader, was elected District Lay Leader for the Ft. Worth District. He was elected by the lay leaders of the district churches and reelected every February for the past four terms. It has been a great honor for the church to have him chosen to fill this esteemed position in the C.M.E. Church.¹⁶

In 1997 the church took out a note to purchase new church furniture and paid off the twelve-month note in four months. In April 1997 the church held a note-burning ceremony.

In 1998 and 1999 the church continued to grow, reaching about 40 members by the latter part of 1999. In those years they undertook and completed some major projects. They built a ramp on the front of the church, enclosed the foyer, and purchased new choir robes. In 1999 they added central heat, air conditioning, a new sound system, repaired the sag in the roof, repaired and

¹⁵Lewisville News March 1, 1998.

¹⁶Interview with Hurl Scruggs, October 8, 1999.

repainted the outside of the church, and started a building fund. The church also added a new auxilliary, the only one added since 1993. It was the Pastors Church Aid Association, and it is one of only a few in the entire Dallas and Ft. Worth C.M.E. districts. This auxilliary's projects include having the church declared a historic site, building a working church and pastor's libraries, restoring a steeple bell tower to the church, and building a brick sign for the historic marker.

In the C.M.E. Church the pastor is reassigned on a yearly basis in May. It is the hope of Rev. Dollarhide to have the church membership grow to fifty people by May of 2,000. According to the C.M.E. Church Discipline, to be an official "church" a congregation must have at least fifty members. Any group with fewer than fifty members is considered only a "mission," not an actual "church." Lane Chapel has not been a "church" for a very long time. It is Lane Chapel's hope to be recognized as an official church once again soon.

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Mr. Jack Castle

Mrs. Johnie K. Dollarhide

Mrs. Tommie Jean Fitzpatrick