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*How the power of faith and community has
helped Bethel A.M.E. overcome adversity*

Story by Kristina Gaddy | Photos by Caroline J. Phillips

On a quiet Sunday morning on Pine Street in Cambridge, parishioners trickle into a Gothic-revival brick church. Inside, the bright summer sun shines through the colorful stained glass onto the hardwood floors, illuminating the large sanctuary. The windows and floors, the pipe organ behind the choir, the pressed tin ceiling overhead, and the radiator system are all original to the 1903 building. For 171 years, the members of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church have gathered at this corner to worship, to build community and to spark change.

This Sunday, the Rev. Randolph Fitchett Jr. preaches about managing what you have.

“The task may be huge and your ability small,” his voice booms out to the congregation, but turn it over to God and you will manage it, he says. Shouts of “Yes!” and “That’s right” echo back from the sixty or so people sitting in the pews.

In the 1960s, the task for the African American community centered on Pine Street was huge: desegregate the town of Cambridge. Businesses refused to integrate, but more importantly, black citizens of Cambridge didn’t have equal access to healthcare, education, or work. And just like Fitchett preaches, the community brought the task back to Bethel. The civil rights era is what Bethel A.M.E. is most known for, but for more than 100 years before and more than 50 years after, this church, and this building, has been a community anchor for Cambridge.

In 1847, nine men bought the land to establish the Bethel A.M.E. church and congregation. At the corner of Pine and Cedar streets, Bethel was one pillar of the growing African American neighborhood, and the other was the Waugh Methodist Episcopal Church at the intersection of High and Pine, founded in 1826.

Like in many African American neighborhoods, churches were safe spaces



that grounded the community and even helped residents buy land and establish businesses. Major events necessitated the building of larger churches. The first was emancipation in 1865, and in 1870, the Bethel congregation expanded to a wooden church. But even that didn’t suffice because more and more people moved to Cambridge to work in the new packing plants and expanding industrial economy at the end of 1800s.

In 1903, Bethel replaced the wooden church with a brick Gothic Revival church

According to Dion Banks, lifelong member of Bethel A.M.E., the church is home to one of the country’s oldest working pipe organs.



with corner towers in contrasting heights. The congregation raised money to build an impressive church with a sanctuary that could seat as many as 350 people, large colorful stained-glass windows and a pipe organ.

The church would fill up on Sunday mornings, and as lifelong member Dion Banks said, “Bethel was known as the church for everybody.”

In the era of Jim Crow, Bethel

continued to be a safe space to congregate.

Written above the pulpit on the wall of Bethel is the African Methodist Episcopal motto: “God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother.” Just a year before the cornerstone was laid for the current building, in 1902, when a pastor was leaving the church, the *Afro-American* reported that City Councilman John Cooper addressed the crowd and said,

“The mission of the church was to make men and the community better and not simply to gather therein for social purpose.”

As African Americans across the United States and in Cambridge became more and more vocal about injustices in this country and lack of civil rights for people of color in the 20th century, Bethel became the place where people could come to instigate change.



“We must keep marching downtown until downtown gives us what we want,” Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Reginald Robinson told a crowd of over 200 people seated together in the sanctuary of Bethel on a night in June 1963.

They had returned to the church after marching two-by-two from the church to the Dorchester County Jail on High Street, to sing, pray, and protest the arrests of twenty demonstrators. The night before, they had been confronted by angry white counter-demonstrators and harassed with firecrackers.

“We must control our emotions. Retaliation is no good,” Gloria Richardson told the crowd.

For more than a year, Dorchester and Talbot counties had been home to freedom rides to desegregate public transportation and sit-ins at drugstores, snack bars, and restaurants. And although Cambridge’s

African American 2nd Ward had been able to elect a black city councilman since 1882, in 1963, only one out of 19 white-owned restaurants would serve black customers, and playgrounds and schools were segregated, as was the hospital.

The closing of packing plants and an economic downturn affected African Americans more disproportionately than whites, and job discrimination only added to the inequity. Throughout the 1960s, Bethel became the place where community leaders like Richardson could bring people together, have freedom riders give speeches to children, and plan sit-ins and rallies. The church was the center of the civil rights movement.

Bethel was taking on a huge risk by supporting the meetings. In September 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in



Nine men bought the land for Bethel A.M.E. in 1847. In 1865, emancipation required a larger church, which was built in 1870. The congregation soon outgrew the wooden church as people moved to Cambridge for work in the new packing plants. In 1903, the wooden church was replaced by the existing brick Gothic Revival church.

Birmingham, Ala., killing four girls — Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson, all who were 14, and Carol Denise McNair, who was 11.

In Cambridge, threats of bombs, fire and violence were real. Banks, co-founder of the Eastern Shore Network for Change, says that other churches, like Waugh, had more to lose.

“They were business owners and teachers,” (while Bethel was more working class) he says, and could have their livelihoods destroyed by supporting the movement so publicly. In addition to firecrackers and bullets shot into crowds of demonstrators, *The Baltimore Sun* reported a gasoline-soaked mop was thrown into the window of a

bakery, and of course, there was the fire in 1967.

The narrative that is most often remembered, and what the national media put out was that activist H. Rap Brown spoke and incited a riot that burned down a school, businesses and homes on Pine Street.

What really happened was much deeper and more nuanced than this narrative, and in 2012, forty-five years after the fire, Banks and his friend Kisha Petticolas realized that the real story hadn’t been told, and the fire was a wound that hadn’t yet healed.

“There were issues going on in the community that were not being addressed,” says Petticolas, issues that stemmed from the tensions of the 1960s.

Banks and Petticolas wanted to hold an event that would allow the community to come together and speak about this history publicly, and they knew Bethel was the place for this conversation. The church was still the safe space it had been 45 years earlier.

“Whenever we have a community conversation, we do it in Bethel,” says Petticolas.

After the first meeting, they knew they had more work to do. The sanctuary had filled with tension, anger and tears. They realized this was the first time the community had come together to speak about the past. They also wanted to illuminate the true history of what happened in 1967.

“These [false] perceptions are what hold us back,” says Banks.

Banks and Petticolas co-founded the Eastern Shore Network for Change to raise awareness about issues facing the community and foster change.

“We need to be able to tell a story of healing, faith, and community,” says Petticolas.

Last summer, they hosted “Reflections on Pine,” a series of events to commemorate fifty years after the Long Hot Summer of 1967 and what happened on Pine Street. While the fire and the aftermath are still painful for many community members, Bethel has continued to be a home for these conversations.

This fall, ESNC will kick off their “Year of Reading,” a community book club, through a discussion at Bethel about *Civil War on Race Street* by Peter Levy, and in the next five to seven years, they want to ensure that the physical Bethel A.M.E. church remains in good shape. While minor adjustments have been made to the building, including air conditioning, the main building and sanctuary have never been renovated.

“It would be a hole in the community if something happened to the building,” says Petticolas.



They want to make sure this building remains a community gathering space for generations to come. Even though the congregation is smaller than it once was, it remains a place where people know and care about one other and want to make the community stronger. Music and messages of faith and hope will continue to fill this old brick building. During the sunny summer service at Cambridge, the congregation sang “We Shall Overcome” backed up by a drum set and organ, reminiscent of the history of this church, and the role that it plays in the community’s future. 📍

“We Shall Overcome” is a gospel song with origins in the early 20th century. Later that century, it became an anthem of the civil rights movement.

