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# THE FIRST AME CHURCH LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas, Nevada | African Methodist Episcopal Church

BY *Shonda Gladden*

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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In addition to a national survey, researchers from The Confirmation Project visited congregations, using the research method of Portraiture to understand how confirmation and equivalent practices are practiced in congregations. Portraiture is a method of inquiry that shares some of the features of other qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative, but it is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. This Portrait is one from a gallery that can be found at [www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery](http://www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery).

### CO-DIRECTORS

Katherine M. Douglass | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Richard R. Osmer | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### PROJECT MANAGER

Kristie Finley | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### STEERING COMMITTEE

Reginald Blount | Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, AME  
Kenda Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Gordon Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Joy L. Arroyo | Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesleyan Church  
Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Shonda Gladden | Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, AME  
Kate Obermueller Unruh | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Kate Siberine | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Jacob Sorenson | Luther Seminary, ELCA, Camp Consultant

### SPECIALISTS

Michael Gewecke | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, [www.designbysarah.net](http://www.designbysarah.net)  
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

## ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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The Confirmation Project seeks to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth. These denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church. It seeks to provide Christian leaders with examples of good practice and with strategies that are effective in helping young Christians grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengthening discipleship includes nurturing faith in Jesus Christ and facilitating youth encounters with Christian traditions (Scripture, creeds, confessions, and practices) to support lifelong Christian vocation. This project is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary.

“The role of the church is to meet people where they are regardless of who they are.”<sup>1</sup>

## CONTEXT

North Las Vegas, Nevada is anything but the tourist destination for gambling and headliner performances that many expect from its southern counterpart Las Vegas, Nevada. Nestled in this valley oasis, “North Las Vegas is one of Nevada’s fastest growing cities.”<sup>2</sup> With a 2013 Census population of 226,877,<sup>3</sup> North Las Vegas is large enough to be considered a major suburban city. An impressive feature of this growing city, however, is the neighborly and nostalgic feel of a close knit town. Children playing outside, neighbors sharing times of catching up, both express a friendly air; even the unknown passerby is welcomed with a hearty wave of hand and smile. Well-appointed lawns juxtaposing red clay dirt lots amid political campaign candidates’ promotional signs echo the communal reality that this is a city marked by beauty, wonder, a certain pride and a vested interest in partnering towards a promising future. “Located in Clark County, the 98.44 square-mile City is surrounded by majestic mountains, desert valleys and an underlying current of dynamic growth.”<sup>4</sup>

## CONGREGATION

“The vision of the church is to be a community church. And so we are about trying to reach and touch the lives of every segment of our community regardless of the race, creed or color. We want to touch every age group. We want to touch our young people, the children, the youth, adolescents and also our adult and senior population. So we have multi ministries in our congregation that reach and touch the lives of these individuals.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, R. E. (2014). *Developing Your Spiritual Understanding*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com> Accessed June 6, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/32/3251800.html> Accessed June 6, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Ralph E. Williamson, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015.

“I don’t even live close to the church. I travel about twenty minutes to get here and no matter how far my friends are, I go pick them up early in the morning and try to make sure we all get here to worship together as a family. It’s always worth it.”<sup>6</sup>

“They bring everything around us. The pastor, the members, the choir, everybody, every service they make sure they acknowledge young people.”<sup>7</sup>

At first sight, the people of First AME Las Vegas appear to be beautiful, middle class to affluent in their economic makeup, and the buildings and grounds represent excellence in ministry. From the impeccably clean exterior of the main worship complex to the parking lot and property surrounding the Family Life Center, there is a certain level of pride that is evident to guests upon immediate entrance to the First AME Las Vegas campus. Every member, from the youngest to the eldest, was particularly well groomed and looked as if they should grace the pages of the latest fashion magazines. The air of the congregation was invigoratingly life giving and the word that captures the collective sentiment is pride.

At the time this data is being compiled, the landscape of what it means to identify with various cultures in the United States is rife with possibilities. How one is identified by others and how one self identifies is not always one in the same. The variances of identification markers are important for individuals, but they are also equally important for institutions. The First AME Las Vegas story is one in which her members are proud to claim their part.

Notwithstanding the historic richness of the African Methodist Episcopal Church start, the people of First AME Las Vegas trace their communal pride through a lineage of people who are diverse, confident in spirit and proud of both their history and the promise they see for their future. Every member seems to take a special interest in the lives of their congregation’s young people; however, they appeared proudest of the direction their church was taking specifically under the leadership of their pastor. Rev. Dr. Ralph Williamson. During the Sunday morning service, the leaders of the church were excited to make space to celebrate their pastor who was

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<sup>6</sup> “Rae”, 11<sup>th</sup> grade Confirmation Student, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> “Abe”, high school Confirmation student, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015.

preparing to make a trip to Washington, DC to lead prayer for an upcoming meeting of elected officials.

In November, 1787, the colored people belonging to the Methodist Society in Philadelphia convened together in order to take into consideration the evils under which they labored, arising from the unkind treatment by their white brethren, who considered them a nuisance in the house of worship, and even pulled them off their knees while in the act of prayer and ordered them back to their seats. It was this act of protest of disparate treatment at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that spurred the beginnings of The African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787.<sup>8</sup>

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has existed for more than two hundred years; however, the church did not begin in Nevada until the late 1960s. FAME Las Vegas was the first such church; therefore, making it a historically significant, yet relatively young congregation. Their website explains this history:

In early spring of 1966, a small group under the leadership of Hugh Key assembled to discuss the possibility of organizing an African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Southern Nevada. In April 1966, First A.M.E. Church was fully organized under Rev. Horace Gholston. Services were held in several churches throughout the community until such time as a new church for First A.M.E. could be built. Under the leadership of Rev. Charles Wyatt, dedication services were held for the new church on April 20, 1975. From 1975 through 1994, several ministers were at the helm of First A.M.E., including: Rev. Albert Dunn, Rev. Charles Foster, Rev. J. Parker, Rev. James Allen, Rev. Waldo White, Rev. T. James Baker, Sr., Rev. Samuel Eugene Winn, and Spencer Francis Barrett.<sup>9</sup>

The flux of ministers in the early years of congregational planting quelled when “in November 2003, Bishop John R. Bryant assigned Rev. Ralph E. Williamson to take First A.M.E. (a.k.a. FAME) to another level.”<sup>10</sup> Under Rev. Williamson's leadership, the congregation has indeed propelled itself to ‘another level.’

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<sup>8</sup> Shonda Gladden, “African Methodist Episcopal Church Christian Youth: Learning and Living the Faith,” (unpublished paper for The Confirmation Project research team, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, December 2014).

<sup>9</sup> <http://famechurchlasvegas.com/about.asp> Accessed June 6, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Remaining ever humble, Pastor Williamson credits the success of the congregation to “God given favor”<sup>11</sup> that he sees as the underlying explanation for not only the congregation’s ability to thrive in challenging economic times, specifically with regard to the bottoming out of the housing market and the mortgage foreclosure epidemic that devastated Las Vegas; but also the cause of the congregation’s continual growth over the years.

When Bishop Bryant called me in 2003, I was pastoring a church in Denver, CO, Christ Our Redeemer AME Church and he asked me if I would come to Las Vegas to build a church... Little did I know that the church would turn out to be what it is today. When I showed up at the church I was as excited as I am today about what the possibilities were. I saw God in the midst of all that has taken place over the years.

We started out next door in our smaller building, which is our Family Life Center, FAME Family Life Center, where we do all of our ministries... God gave me the vision [to build a church building], I had never built anything in my life, except a shoe box, but I trusted God. We put our faith to work, we put together people that had a vision and a mind to work and we rallied around, and God allowed us within my first five years, to build a church. I will tell you how good God was then, the moment we started building, the economy collapsed, but God gave us favor. We were able to build the church under budget, under schedule and to move into the church for one year without paying one mortgage. That’s nobody but God! And the church has grown immensely over the years because of the favor that God has upon us.<sup>12</sup>

It is this persistent reliance upon ‘God favor’ and the notion that the church is actively engaged in partnership with a Divine work that characterizes all that is being done at First AME Las Vegas. Youth and elders alike seem to be excited to partner with the legacy of this church.

We were intrigued by the legacy of this church as articulated by the pastor and invited him to dig deeper as it relates to how we live out the church motto... “Our motto for our church is ‘where the Word is taught, the Gospel is preached and souls are saved.’”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rev. Dr. Ralph E. Williamson, First AME Las Vegas Pastor, interview by Shonda Gladden, February 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Mark,” adult leader and parent at First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden

“Kay” is a high school student at First AME Las Vegas. She is also the daughter of one of the founders of the original FAME church. She shared her story of being connected through several generations of leaders at FAME. Her peers described her as a ‘leader’ and she took great pride in this identification. She is a graduate of the confirmation program, participates in the Young People’s Division of the Women’s Missionary Society at FAME, as well as the choir. She said,

...the perspective of young people at FAME is trying to build up the youth so that we have a bigger and greater church here... people think that church is boring and church isn’t fun, but you just have to make it fun. And it’s fun to learn about what people did back then, how people had to confirm their faith, how people founded the church. So I want to inspire other people to come and participate in what God is doing here.<sup>14</sup>

Third grader, “Kallie,” said “I like coming here. [The programs] teach me stuff that I don’t know about God...I want to come [to this church] because it lets me know that I’m apart of God’s Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

Being “a part of God’s Spirit” is not just a coy expression spoken by a precocious third grader for the benefit of a cameraperson. Rather it is demonstrated by the congregational expressions of outreach to neighbors in varying stations of identity and need.

We have a food pantry that is phenomenal. Then on Thursdays we have a bilingual service at 10 o’clock in our FAME Family Life Center, and we pack that house out on Thursday mornings. In my absence, our minister, Rev. Kenneth Arbuckle preaches for them. We have a Spanish interpreter. We don’t try to give them a Sunday morning service. We try to give them words of spiritual encouragement and then we invite them come to be a part of that. And so we are reaching out so our congregation is very diverse. My vision is for us to become a community church and not just a church that is focused on one specific ethnic group.<sup>16</sup>

This congregational story is rich and the cultural experience of entering into the flow of their community during this short site visit cannot completely tell their

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<sup>14</sup> “Kay,” high school student at First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>15</sup> “Kallie,” elementary student at First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>16</sup> Rev. Dr. Ralph Williamson, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

story. Nevertheless, it afforded us robust insights into how Confirmation looks at First AME Las Vegas.

## INSIGHTS INTO CONFIRMATION FROM THE GROUND UP -----

“I learned about the Trinity, which is God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost...I learned about confirming my faith of the church, being baptized, what baptizing means. I learned about how to get to know God better for myself and how to connect with Him by prayer.... It’s a lot that I learned, but it all taught me how to connect to the faith, to the church.”<sup>17</sup>

“Confirmation is like, basically, it teaches you about Jesus and God. It makes you understand more; and I needed that. In church it was a little struggle for me to understand. This [confirmation experience] helped me.”<sup>18</sup>

The Confirmation Program at FAME was birthed out of the heart of the current senior pastor, Rev. Dr. Ralph Williamson. Pastor Williamson envisioned the program, taught the first two sessions and is currently very influential in the facilitation of the confirmation program. He has written the curriculum, oversees the instruction team and has literally hand selected the instructors to ensure that his heart remains at the center of the program. Since beginning the program, they have graduated forty-five youth, ages 13-18 in the first three years of courses; at present, there are fifteen students engaged in the FAME confirmation program. As senior pastor and author of the curriculum, Dr. Williamson shared the following about his motivation concerning the writing and use of his book:

What I love about the “Developing Your Spiritual Understanding” is it takes you from the very simplicity of what a person needs to know and then it gives you all of those things that are pertinent to your faith- the tenets of your faith- so that you can articulate your faith in an intelligible manner, and I say this, so that you can be able to speak as the Jews, as the Muslims, as the Jehovah’s Witness and the Mormons. So when people ask you what it is that you believe you can tell them more than ‘I’m saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost.’ You can tell them exactly what it is that you believe and that is the whole purpose of what I was trying to accomplish. This takes you all the way through it and then to the point that when we celebrate, when you

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<sup>17</sup> “Kay” elementary student at First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>18</sup> “JayLa”, 11<sup>th</sup> grade student at First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015



graduate, we want you to invite your family members, your friends, so that they can see that you are now becoming a disciple of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Although Pastor Williamson has written the curriculum and personally taught the first two sessions of the youth confirmation, presently Evangelist Teri Key Wesley leads the confirmation classes; however, it is evident that youth confirmation is a very important part of the ministry work Pastor Williamson takes a specific interest in.

I love teaching [the youth confirmation classes], but I can't do everything. So I had to find someone that had the pastor's heart and had the children's concern. And that was this individual here. That's her ministry gift: to minister to our young people. So I chose her to be the teacher. Now we do have another Sunday School Department, in which others of our people teach youth that are visiting, youth that are not consistent. They go to that Sunday School; but when they go to the youth confirmation, they have to come through Evangelist Teri Key Wesley.<sup>20</sup>

Evangelist Teri Key Wesley is a quiet, but visibly effective administrator of the total church program for youth and the primary teacher for the youth confirmation classes. She was our site visit coordinator and without her assistance, this project would not likely have found the level of success it has. From the outset, Evangelist Key Wesley was leading the young people from the sanctuary of the main church to the Family Life Center. She could be seen delegating leadership to the students involved in the junior high Sunday school groups and ensuring a seamless transition of all youth to the various component rooms during our Sunday morning experience. The students we interviewed held her in high esteem and she was literally hand selected by Pastor Williamson to be his proxy as it relates to the facilitation of the confirmation program.



Evangelist Terri Key Wesley facilitates Spring 2015 Confirmation Session

An important insight gleaned from observing the FAME confirmation program is the shared importance of articulating the community narrative. Each person

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Dr. Ralph Williamson, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

interviewed, pastor, student, and staff alike, was able to communicate, in their own words, a version of the congregational narrative as it relates to the pastor's heart for young people. Whether it was a student beaming with pride about the way the pastor and congregation took interest in their lives outside the confirmation classroom, or the staff member who expressed both exasperation and excitement with the amount of work necessary to effectively minister the confirmation program; there was a unified expression of the merits of the confirmation program, beyond the actual classroom portion.

Also of significant importance to this congregation's process of confirmation are both the concept of legacy and the notion of youth agency. The church's history and legacy of excellence is important to the pastor and that import is communicated at every level of ministry service as a hallmark of what it means to be affiliated with FAME Las Vegas. Every youth is encouraged to take ownership of their faith formation and the confirmation program itself is implemented with the individual in mind. Evangelist Teri Key Wesley, the primary confirmation facilitator and staff person responsible for coordinating the youth programming at FAME shared:

I like to keep the kids engaged. That's why I ask them a lot of questions, it's not just about reading to them, but to make sure they're engaged and asking questions. Also, I have some kids that are far advanced, like "Sally" is more advanced than the other kids so making sure that it's not a competition, that if your brother or sister cannot find the scripture, [say] 'what page are you on?' They're all using the same bibles which are presented to them at the end of the confirmation process...the kids don't put their names on their bibles or their workbooks or their folders. We do numbers because we want to keep everything confidential. They take an assessment at the beginning of the confirmation and we give them the same assessment at the end. And they're looked at by numbers so that we don't know who they are so there's no judgmental [feelings] and they feel comfortable that they're not being put on blast. So that's very important that the information is confidential and that we're not sharing with anyone other than myself or pastor. [We're the only ones] seeing those questions that are given at the beginning and the end so that we can evaluate the process of what they knew from the beginning and they should know more towards the end of the project.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Terri Key Wesley, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

In addition to the approach of emphasizing youth agency, the articulation and adherence to a communal narrative that values young people, and structuring the program with the individual in mind, the confirmation program at FAME is one that is becoming a model in African Methodism for confirmation programs.

## OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

“I’m trying to find God. I’m trying to find my reason for being here.”<sup>22</sup>

The African Methodist Episcopal Church Book of Worship defines confirmation as



Spring 2015 Confirmation Class

...the rite by which a baptized person ratifies or seals the baptismal covenant and confirms the same in the presence of the community of believers as an act of personal commitment to Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the incorporation of the former in the Book of Worship, First AME Las Vegas is one of few churches within the continental United States that

currently has a formal Confirmation program. Many congregations have shifted from Confirmation programs to Confirmation Equivalent Practices (CEP). At First AME Las Vegas, “the purpose of the confirmation process is more than teaching [youth] about the bible and [their] Christian belief system. The purpose is three-fold: (1) increase [youth] confidence; (2) encourage [youth’s] active participation in the church school, community and the world; and (3) teach youth how to make sound Christian decisions.<sup>24</sup> This three-fold purpose is realized through grade designated courses held onsite at the local church in the Family Life Center.

<sup>22</sup> “AB”, high school student, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>23</sup> *The Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 2005. Print. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, R. E. (2014). *Developing Your Spiritual Understanding*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

Prior to our first site visit, our preliminary research suggested that First AME Church Las Vegas was the only AME church within the continental United States that had a curriculum based Confirmation program. During the site visit, we discovered that Dr. Ralph Williamson has been engaged in teaching the curriculum, “Developing Your Spiritual Understanding,” that he wrote as part of his doctoral work while a student at United Theological Seminary for at least the last three years.

This project literally revolved around my dissertation. I was working on getting my doctoral degree out of United Theological Seminary and I started doing workshops and teaching this confirmation project. Little did I know that it was going to become what it is. And my mentors kept saying, “When are you going to publish it, when are you going to publish it, when are you going to publish it?” And because of that the Lord has allowed me to travel the world. And I teach other individual pastors and youth leaders about this confirmation project. I’ve been to Africa, I’ve been to Europe, I’ve been to St. Croix, and teaching. I teach for the Department of Church Growth and Development every year and it has been a blessing.<sup>25</sup>

There is an expectation that, while it is the youth’s demonstrated commitment to the process that ultimately ensures their successful completion, “parents/guardians, the pastor and church membership... assist [youth] in attaining spiritual principles that influence making the right moral decisions”<sup>26</sup> as a result of attending to the confirmation process. The process is completed through a series of nine lessons and culminates with a special confirmation service. A summary of the lessons, taken from the Student Workbook, is shown here:

### **Lesson I- Understanding Confirmation**

The lesson will discuss the following topics:

- Defining confirmation
- Building community
- Confirmation Goal
- Your Decision on Becoming a Disciple of Christ

(This lesson will also include a questionnaire. The objective of the questionnaire is to provide the instructor with valuable insight of your knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior.)

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<sup>25</sup> Rev. Dr. Ralph Williamson, First AME Las Vegas, interviewed by Shonda Gladden, February 2015

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

**Lesson II- The Trinity**

The lesson is designed to give biblical references that will provide you with a better understanding of God in three persons.

- What is meant by the Trinity
- God the Father

**Lesson III- Jesus Christ is Lord**

The lesson will focus on the various aspects of Jesus.

- Jesus is the Son of God
- Jesus is the Christ
- Jesus is the Savior of the World

**Lesson IV- The Holy Spirit**

This lesson will highlight the third part of the Trinity.

- What is the Holy Spirit
- Life in the Spirit
- Fruit of the Spirit

**Lesson V- Salvation**

The lesson will focus on the importance of Salvation.

- What is Salvation

**Lesson VI- Worship**

The lesson was developed to help you understand how we worship in our daily lives, in church and community.

- Defining Worship
- Where We Worship
- The Way We Worship
- How We Worship
- Worship Terms and Definitions  
(A PowerPoint Presentation)

***Lessons VII-Lesson IX, PowerPoint Presentations*****Lesson VII**

- The Bible
- The Books of the Old Testament
- The Books of the New Testament
- The Apostles' Creed and
- The General Confession

**Lesson VIII**

- Our History
- Our Founder
- Our Name

- The Mission of the A.M.E. Church
- The A.M.E. Church Motto
- The Doctrine and Discipline of the A.M.E. Church
- The 25 Articles of Religion
- The A.M.E. Connection
- My Responsibility

### Lesson IX

- Overall Review
- Final Questionnaire
- Preparation for the Confirmation Service

The overall intended goal of the program is to,

**prepare** youth with confidence when using the bible to access scriptures for every aspect of their life; **empower** youth with the knowledge of the Word of God; and **transform** youth into becoming a disciple of Christ by demonstrating the importance supporting one another and working together in small groups.<sup>27</sup>

This summary of the formal Confirmation program at First AME Las Vegas shows that the program is detailed with regards to the scope of content students are expected to engage; however, the topical outline also demonstrates how the curriculum leaves significant room for interpretation as other congregations adapt the model to their various congregational contexts.

### WHAT CAN OTHERS LEARN-----

Confirmation at First AME Las Vegas is intricately woven into the very fiber of everything the church does, both among the youth and within the adult population. The lived experiences of the pastor, coupled with the dedication of the adult leadership, bring the confirmation program to life in ways that are innovative and adaptive. Others can learn that confirmation is more than simply a marker of faith development students navigate out of ritual, but confirmation can be an entryway into a lifelong process of discipleship. First AME Las Vegas may not be highly visible in the field of confirmation, but the ways that they have modeled their program,

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<sup>27</sup> Williamson (2014), ix.

engaged student and parent participation as well as highly structured programming makes for an important consideration that others should note.

Confirmation at First AME is lifestyle oriented. The data collected on Confirmation and Confirmation Equivalent Practices (CEP) within African Methodism suggests that this type of model- a model that is not curricula based, but rather is interwoven into the fabric of all youth programs- is commonplace. While the First AME model includes coursework within a prescribed timeline, Confirmation and CEP is engaged not merely as a program of study confined to a calendar, but rather it is the beginning of student involvement in the life of the First AME congregation. This model is one that rigorously teaches the foundations of faith and also indoctrinates students into a way of life.

The way of life illumined in Confirmation and CEP at First AME is grounded in congregational involvement. Congregational involvement is demonstrated through participation in the congregation's numerous ministries. Through participation in the helping ministries (ushers, hospitality/welcome desk workers, etc.), the liturgical supplemental ministries (choir, band, etc.), discipleship training (children's church for younger students, etc.) and other auxiliary ministries, youth are indoctrinated into a congregational way of life through active engagement with the church's ministries from a young age.

Student engagement is the gateway to congregational involvement. Students are encouraged to be active in the life of the church beginning as early as two years old through participation in the "Mother Sunbeams" within the Young People's Division of the Women's Missionary Society. In this entry level student engagement experience, children age two to six, are groomed through play and peer socialization to know what it means to be a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Mother Sunbeams are taught developmentally appropriate history of the church's founding. Mother Sunbeams actively participate in worship services.

The next level of student engagement is Allen Stars. The Allen Stars is also based within the Young People's Division of the Women's Missionary Society and it

encourages congregational involvement among students ages seven to twelve. Although it is the expectation that families will allow students to participate in the congregation from the entry level “Mother Sunbeams” and the socialization that takes place will continue to be nurtured into the subsequent levels, it is not a requirement that students have prior experience to participate. Students who may move into the congregation at the “Allen Stars” age are encouraged to join the group upon membership in the congregation.

The third level of student engagement is comprised of two components for students ages thirteen to nineteen. At this level, students have the option to continue in the denominational track of discipleship development housed in the Young People’s Division of the Women’s Missionary Society, migrate into the FAME specific youth group for this age group “Becoming a Responsible Teen” (B.A.R.T.), or both. Students who discern a call to international missions and carrying out the spirit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church are nurtured in the Y.P.D. Students are interested in being trained in personal development are nurtured through the (B.A.R.T.) component. Regardless the level of student engagement in the congregational involvement, Confirmation is central to the developing young adult life.

Confirmation student engagement as the gateway to congregational involvement is lived out of robust and fluid adult-student relationships. The adult Confirmation instructors are youth workers. Many of them are volunteers who commit to teaching the curriculum; however, their student engagement is not limited to the workbooks. The adult instructors regularly check in with youth throughout the week. Some attend student’s sporting and other extracurricular events as a supportive adult presence in their lives. This adult-student relationship building model is one that affords both the student and adult a type of learning environment that impacts congregational life. In addition to cultivating the adult-student relationship, adults who are engaged in their separate Confirmation program (taught by Pastor Williamson) are often afforded the opportunity to do informal comparative studies that deepen their own personal spiritual growth and development as a result of fielding youth questions on Confirmation. Accordingly, Confirmation at First AME



is seen as a way of life that influences congregational growth on many different levels. More than an appendage to or incorporation in the traditional ministries of African Methodism, Confirmation at First AME Las Vegas is the course of study by which the formal curriculum is engaged multiple times during the year.

## METAPHORS -----

Confirmation is a way of life. Confirmation is a foundation of faith.