

Teaching people to clap again

When Rev. MacArthur “Mac” Pendleton preaches, the cross suspended from his neck swings back and forth, his robe sways as if breezes are wafting through the sanctuary, and his arms are always in motion. Always.

He’s not the first preacher at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, not by a long shot. In 1876, Bethel AME, or “BAME,” purchased for \$150 Lots 54 and 55 on Henry Clay Street. The first church on the site was built in 1868, with the present Gothic-influenced building reconstructed in 1916 reusing bricks from the first church. In 1984, the church was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Seven years ago – not long ago at all in Bethel’s esteemed history — Rev. Pendleton joined Bethel. Still, that’s more than 350 sermons, not to mention years of preaching at eight previous churches. All that time in the pulpit — although Pendleton rarely stands still — and Pendleton’s voice has not quieted, his energy has not faded.

“I can’t hear y’all, c’mon – Lord!” he said on a recent Sunday morning as the congregation sang Hymn No. 216, “There Shall Be Showers of Blessing.”

*“Showers of blessing
Showers of blessing we need
Mercy drops round us are falling
But for the showers we plead.”*

A short time after the hymn of praise, a scripture lesson and announcements, the congregation — members and visitors — welcomed each other in a welcome of grand proportions. They hugged, they conversed about their weekend, and hugged some more. Members in the back row walked to the front row and vice versa. All the while music played. And played. A welcome of grand proportions.

One of the visitors welcomed by literally dozens of embraces was Debra Gonzalez and her 9-year-old granddaughter, who recently began living with her. Gonzalez,

who is unemployed and looking for factory work or a cleaning job, was living on the street two years ago but now has an apartment, and renewed faith. She said she has been visiting several churches, and was looking for a church home.

Editor’s note: Four days prior to this service at Bethel, we met Debra Gonzalez during a visit to God’s Kitchen. You can read about her experience there on page 8.

As he does every Sunday, Rev. Pendleton asked three men in the congregation to come to the altar and pray. As the men kneeled and prayed aloud, shouts of “Wooo!” “Yes, Lord!” and “Amen” rang through the sanctuary. Marcus Johnson prayed, “Thank you for the good things, thank you for the bad things.” A member of the musical group lightly tapped a drum, another gently shook a tambourine.

When longtime member Rose Allen led the nine-member choir in singing the old Southern gospel song, “The Old Account Settled Long Ago,” people clapped, and a young girl began dancing in a side aisle. “We need to teach people to clap again!” Pendleton said.

During the “youth moment,” Rev. Pendleton’s arms, elbows bent, swung to the music as boys and girls walked up to the front of the church. His message was simple, and he made them repeat it several times: “One: Drug-free. Two: Baby-free. Three: One degree. By 23.”

“None of that means anything if you don’t love each other.”

– Rev. Mac Pendleton

“And if you forget all of that,” he added, “don’t forget to pray.”

Then, they recited the Lord’s Prayer. And Pendleton concluded the youth time with one final thought: “None of that means anything if you don’t love each other.” And one final request: he asked the oldest child to hug – yes, more hugs – all of the other children in the group.

When he asked if anyone else wanted to come to the front and pray, at least half of the congregation rose to their feet, walked as one large group, and kneeled down. “A family that prays together stays together,”





Rev. MacArthur "Mac" Pendleton of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.



"Give me something to say to help somebody."

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Pendleton said.

During the next musical selection – sung by a 19-year-old man whose voice resonated throughout the sanctuary – Marcus Johnson walked around with a box of tissue. Several people reached out for one to wipe their eyes.

One of those people was Debra Gonzalez.

Then, she listened to Pendleton’s sermon: “God’s Greatest Miracle.”

“Give me something to say to help somebody,” he prayed before beginning.

A boisterous Pendleton walked up and down the center aisle. He said each and every sentence with resoluteness and a sense of purpose, looking each person in the eye.

“Don’t let your circumstances hold you up. That ain’t the box you came in. You came in a divine box!”

“I want you to get this.”

“There’s nothing you can’t have, there’s nowhere you can’t go, there’s nothing you can’t do!”

“If you face it knowing the kingdom of God is in you. If you face it, you can fix it!”

Something clicked for Debra Gonzalez. At the end of his sermon, when invited to Christian discipleship, she rose from her pew, walked to the front, and joined hands with her new reverend.

Gonzales, pictured above left, had found her church home.



Three men are asked to pray at the front of the sanctuary during the Sunday morning service at Bethel.



Rose Allen leads the Bethel choir in singing "the old Southern gospel song, "The Old Account Settled Long Ago."