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Special Fund Helps St. James Pine Bluff Reclaim Church Property

Methodist Foundation Grant Awarded to Repurpose Existing Space into Kitchen, Dining Area

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PINE BLUFF, ARK. (June 18, 2020) – During the business session of the 2020 Arkansas Annual Conference, the voting members of the Conference approved a legislative proposal to use \$550,000 in special funds to purchase the property of St. James UMC Pine Bluff from the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas and deed it back to the congregation at St. James.

The Arkansas Annual Conference, which took place on June 13 on the online video conferencing platform Zoom, voted 577 – 69 to use money from a special fund called the Connected in Christ Endowment Fund to help the St. James congregation reclaim its church property after it was voluntarily deeded it to the Methodist Foundation due to a financial crisis at the church.

“During this time of lament, to be able to share something of great joy is a blessing. To release the strain of debt and receive an additional grant for expansion is an expression of love for the community of Pine Bluff. We are grateful for the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas and Rev. Michael Roberts who made the motion,” shared Bishop Gary Mueller. “St. James United Methodist Church is going to be a vital hub of a worshiping community, with missional outreach and leadership development.”

The legislation states, “there is a need for educational and leadership development opportunities for laity and clergy in the Delta, with a special emphasis on African-American leadership, that facilitate connections for faithful and fruitful ministry by connecting pastors together in peer learning and conversation, and connecting clergy and lay leadership together to discern God’s calling upon the church.”

It goes on to say, “the Arkansas Conference is at a critical juncture for addressing racism and strengthening Black United Methodist congregations and their leaders.”

The Rev. Natasha Murray, who will begin her new appointment as senior pastor at St. James in July, sees this as an opportunity to continue the vital work of the congregation in the community.

“I’m looking forward to helping continue the ministry at St. James in new and creative ways, especially in the face of COVID-19. This is more than a building, it provides hope for the future. It’s a mission post for the community, and I hope that it continues to be in ministry with college students, boys and girls clubs, and other important social justice issues that are so needed during this day and time.”

Additionally, the Methodist Foundation has committed \$100,000 in grant funding to help the congregation transform an existing space into a new kitchen and dining area to better serve the community in Pine Bluff.

The Rev. Maxine Allen, the current senior pastor of St. James who will be leaving to take an appointment at St. Paul UMC in Maumelle, said she is thrilled that the Arkansas Conference has entrusted the congregation with this gift.

“The elimination of the debt from the congregation will allow it to achieve its goals of reaching men, women, boys, and girls for Jesus Christ to the glory of God.”

St. James UMC is a historically black United Methodist Church with a more than 150-year history in Arkansas. The Rev. Natasha Murray, current UAPB Wesley Director, will lead the church as senior pastor beginning July 1, 2020.