

Interview and Site Visit with Pastor Elaine Flake

Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of NY

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UR 510: Urban Theology

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Introduction to Site Review

The Site visit occurred on two Sundays, February 5th and 12, 2023 at the Greater Allen AME Cathedral of New York (GAC). The church is located at 110-31 Floyd H. Flake Boulevard formerly Merrick Blvd. within South Jamaica, Queens. The estimated congregation population of GAC is 23,000 members. Within the United States, it is noted as one of the nation's largest and progressive churches. In addition to their in-person worship services on Sundays, they also minister to

individuals via their own website as well as Facebook live and YouTube. The Senior Pastor is Rev. Dr. Elaine M. Flake and the pastor emeritus is Rev. Dr. Floyd H. Flake. The interview with Rev. Dr. Elaine M. Flake was conducted on Monday, February 13, 2023 between the hours of 3:00 PM and 4:30 PM. She transparently shared about her personal as well as the church's views in regards to reaching out to people and impacting lives. The church's philosophy is "We're expanding the Kingdom of God by Transforming Lives, so Worship with us" ([Who We Are | Allen Cathedral, n.d.](#)).

Setting

The church is situated between both the residential and commercial sectors of the South Jamaica community in Queens. The surrounding population is predominantly Black or African American. However, there have been some recent percentage changes which encompass a growing population of Middle Easterners in the community. The average age of individuals in the area are between late 20's to early 40's. The family size and composition vary throughout the 11433-zip code area.

Ministry Culture: GAC's Vision and Mission for the target urban culture

The Mission Statement of the church is as follows: "It is the mission of The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York to effectively minister the Word of God to the people of God through biblical teaching, preaching, and outreach. We believe that we are called to address the needs of the total person, as our Savior did. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will expand the Kingdom of God by lifting the name of Jesus in our community and in an ever-changing world through our commitment to study, worship, stewardship, evangelism, social justice, and economic development" (*Welcome to The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York, n.d.*). The vision for the church is "to continue demonstrating a strong commitment to God and to God's people through obedience to God's vision inclusive of economic empowerment as well as political and social action" (*Welcome to The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York, n.d.*). GAC is identified as one of the largest private sector employers within the Queens borough.

Social Analysis: with regards to GAC's target urban culture

As shared by Pastor Elaine Flake and in line with what was expressed by AME's founder Richard Allen, there are different factors which are vitally important for being a vibrant and engaged leader. The GAC community is a supporting church of God's people, who whole-heartedly endeavor to address the needs of those around them by "Expressing the glory of God's presence indeed." The continued outlook of Pastor Elaine Flake echoes the sentiment of Rev. Floyd Flake that "the success of the church is vitally connected to what is transpiring within the community it serves."

GAC is to provide compassion, care, and concern to those who are lost and hurting that need salvation and assistance in discovering their purpose. To address the varying needs within the internal as well as external church community, a number of organizations and outreach efforts were formulated over time and are still in existence today. The ministries of GAC are expected to do more than just minimal efforts to provide assistance to others. A church in the urban ministry context such as GAC, is to view itself as ministering to the community or people around where it is located and also to go into all the world and minister there as well. Churches might have different written mission statements but they are all to connect to the universal mission of the church as directed by God.

The universal mission of God includes but is not limited to a local level of providing affordable housing and educational advancement opportunities, confronting domestic violence, addressing food and other aspects of scarcity, championing causes or efforts which provide access to physical and information resources as well as important Biblical and spiritual growth enrichment. On a national level, that includes addressing such topics as gun violence, drug situations, sex and drug trafficking, as well as dealing with other difficult situations within our nation. On a global level, that includes both awareness of and commitment to being integral to responding to the needs of others and involvement in or partnering with foreign missions.

GAC's Theological reflection and formation

Rev. Elaine Flake shared that GAC's ministering efforts are led and prompted by the Holy Spirit to minister in such a time as this. The applicable scripture for this is Luke 4: 18 -19, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." This scripture indicates that the church is not only to be involved in proclaiming the truth of God's Word, but also to be attentive to the other needs of the members of their community. By this scripture, those of GAC are called to God's mission work and to be directed by the Holy Spirit as they minister in and to their surrounding community. There are varying needs which are expressed in this passage of scripture and are still required to be addressed by GAC even at this current time.

GAC's theological consideration is also rooted in what is stated in Hebrews 13:2, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." Because one is unfamiliar with whom they are interacting with or ministering to, should not prevent one's efforts to conduct equitable outreach to all. Being hospitable is not an option if the end goal is to be Christ-like in serving others, but hospitality needs to be evident even when one is unfamiliar with whom they are ministering to. The term "stranger" does not always have to mean a foreigner but can have various relevance in different contexts.

Another appropriate scripture is Isaiah 25: 4, "For You have been a strength to the poor, A strength to the needy in his distress, A refuge from the storm, A shade from the heat." This scripture speaks of being a resource of empowerment and stability in the midst of situations or circumstances of uncertainty and challenging scenarios. GAC also focuses on those scriptures which pertain to addressing the needs of the oppressed, widows, or less fortunate in our societies. This is discussed in Luke 14: 12-14 'Then He also said to him who invited Him, 'When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. 'But when you give a feast invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

GAC seeks out those in their community who need help and assistance. As stated in Matthew 25: 37-40 states, "Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? "When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? "Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." This scripture identifies various needs or concerns of community members which churches cannot ignore.

GAC also explores and applies scriptures which communicate making sacrifices for others as well as being the voice for those who are unable to speak up for themselves. An applicable scripture is Isaiah 10: 1 & 2 - "Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune which they have prescribed 'to rob the needy of justice, and to take what is right from the poor of My people. That widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless." These scriptures highlight the importance to addressing injustices in one's community.

GAC's Theological implementation approach and practice

The Allen Christian School was founded by Pastor Flake and her husband and still exists as part of GAC today. Its purpose is to make a difference in providing educational opportunities and advancement of elementary students. Another endeavor is The Allen Women's Resource Center which was established to address the needs of women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Similarly, the Allen Community Senior Citizen centers operate to address the needs of affordable housing for seniors. The centers also provide opportunities to respectfully respond to the needs of older members of society. The Allen Food Pantry operates to address the food scarcity needs throughout the year in the community. This ministry distributes various food items on two different week days. Around Thanksgiving time, the church also provides special meal packages to thousands of families.

To help with providing school preparation supplies for children of the church community, backpacks with school supplies as well as sneakers are annually distributed. There were approximately 900 backpacks and sneakers which were given out in 2022. The church is also concerned about children receiving gifts at Christmas time. To address this concern, Christmas on Merrick Blvd. was formulated by the church. There were more than 800 unwrapped gifts shared out in the week before Christmas in 2022.

GAC is also concerned about addressing the holistic needs of individuals. They provide Biblical enrichment via Sunday school as well as Bible study sessions for young adults, women, and men. They also conduct corporate – mid-week Bible study sessions, new members and discipleship classes. The Healing Love Ministry exists to respond to as well as provide a source of healing after one experiences loss of a loved one or family members. GAC also endeavors to bring awareness to health-related topics such as the following: ongoing Covid testing, informative sessions on HIV, AIDS, prostate and breast cancer, Alzheimer and dementia. To respond to the need for financial-health, they also provide unemployment assistance as well as financial awareness and enrichment sessions.

My personal reflection on GAC's urban theology

Potential strengths in the church structure

In spite of reduction in volunteer participation, they still conduct very successful events in various distribution efforts to members of the community. It was clearly evident from what was discussed by Pastor Elaine Flake, that tremendous amount of time is spent on organizing, registering the recipients, distributing items and completing the clean-up afterwards. Another strength of the church's structure is that on-site volunteers are willing to do whatever is needed to ensure the seamless process goes forward. Another strength is their partnerships with various agencies, companies or programs to ensure adequate supply of items.

Potential weaknesses in the church's structure

One potential weakness or area that the church will have to work on is how it will address the changing dynamics of an increase in the Hindu population around the church. There is also increased gentrification which has recently been occurring. These two factors will have to be explored and strategies will have to be put in place. One additional weakness in the church's current structure of multiple outreach ministries is that they are conducted outside. This opens them up to the possibility of adverse impact due to inclement weather. From what was shared with me, this was not the way distributions were conducted prior to the Covid pandemic.

Insights which I gained from the site visits and interview with the senior Pastor

One insight which I gained is that there are those in our society who are depending on the church as a source to provide help in a tangible way. Another insight which I gained is that each one of us can do our part to exponentially impact lives in our communities. The implication of leading in urban context and ministering via a holistic approach requires prayerful evaluation of one's current state, and honestly determining present strengths and weaknesses. The church must be committed and have the conviction to provide an impactful incarnational nature and environment in their different communities. This elevates the presence of the church from just being a building in the community to a notable presence of building up in the community.

My prayer is for God to show me what He wants me to do in order to join the process of making a difference in the lives of those around me. As a result of the interview and what I observed of GAC's continued involvement in their surrounding community, I have increasingly recognized the need for my involvement in reaching out to others. Engaging in the efforts for social analysis and then theological reflection and formation is excellent, but implementation is needed. I will conclude by stating that Matthew 25: 40 states, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me" is more than just a scripture for Pastor Elaine Flake and the Greater Allen AME Cathedral of NY (GAC) to memorize, but a committed directive from God which they are earnestly striving to fulfill, and so am I.

Works Cited

The Greater Allen AME Cathedral of New York. <https://allencathedral.org/>

(Access February 01, 2023)

Who We Are | Allen Cathedral. <https://www.allencathedral.org/about>

(Access February 01, 2023)