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## COGIC's Bishop Thuston Opens Up: 'Black Lives Matter Even in Church Conference During Coronavirus'

By Bonita Gooch, The Community Voice

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•With Kansas Health officials identifying 44 COVID-19 infections as “associated” with a Church of God In Christ jurisdictional conference held March 16-21 at Miracle Temple in Kansas City, KS, Bishop L.F. Thuston opens up about the conference, the church, his jurisdiction and the impact of COVID-19 on the African-American community.

Coronavirus, COVID-19, N95 masks, social distancing, and asymptomatic carriers are a regular part of our daily conversations. So much so, that it’s hard to wrap our head around the idea that just 90 days ago, these were all rather unfamiliar terms.

In mid-March, the virus that we were then calling Coronavirus was concentrated on the East and West Coast, and those of us in the Midwest were willing to believe it was something that could, and would, stay far out of our reach. Few of us could even begin to visualize the impact the disease would have on our lives.



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That was the state of the Midwest, Kansas, and Kansas City from March 18-24 when nearly 200 ministers and leaders of the Kansas East Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of the Church of God and Christ denomination gathered in Kansas City for their Ministers and Workers Conference. The conference, which the jurisdiction has held annually for more than 100 years, includes twice-daily worship service, but a major goal of the conference is information sharing, with various sectors of the church giving reports on their work during daily workshops.

The conference is typically held in March, and as mumbblings about the rapid expansion of COVID-19 reached the jurisdiction leadership, they considered postponing the conference. However, with limited information available on the virus, the church administrators decided to proceed with the

conference but to stay in strict compliance with the orders released by the Kansas City, Kansas Mayor David Alvey and the Wyandotte County Health Department.

“We knew we couldn’t depend on the mainstream to channel information to our ministries,” said Bishop Thuston. “So the church decided to use the conference as a way to get information on the virus out to representatives from the approximately 65 churches in attendance.”

With the limited amount of information available to them at the time, the jurisdiction focused the whole conference on getting information out to their congregations, and ultimately to the communities they represented. The conference keynote address was turned into an information session, with COVID-19 informational handouts distributed.

In compliance with suggestions from the WyCo Health Department, conference attendees practiced social distancing and there was no handshaking or hugging, a major divergence for typically sociable Black churches. Church of God in Christ churches practice anointing of oils in their liturgy, but no physical oil anointing was allowed. In addition, communal meals weren’t offered, another standard expectation for a Black church convention.

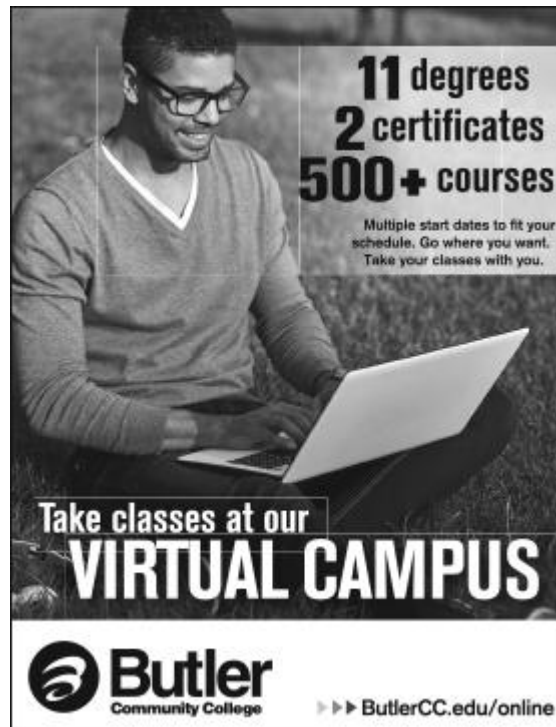
While the church followed the rules as requested by the health department, even the health department’s knowledge – and ultimately the church leader’s knowledge – was limited. Information

“There was just so much information that was inconsistent and contradictory at the time. If we had that accurate information earlier, we would have adjusted, as would have the city and county and state government,” said Bishop Thuston.

Some of the information that wasn’t widely recognized at that time, that we now clearly understand is: that the disease spreads in the air, that ventilation and circulation are important, and that fresh air outside is encouraged.

As the conference was coming to a close, on March 21, armed with additional knowledge, Mayor Alvey joined with other mayors across the Kansas City metropolitan area, and issued an executive order putting Kansas City area on lockdown.

COVID-19 cases



Just a little over a week later, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment went public with an announcement associating at least seven COVID-19 cases to the Ministers and Workers Conference.

Bishop Thuston and the jurisdiction took action. They notified attendees about the positive cases and encouraged individuals who were in attendance to get tested. Still, by April 8, the number of infections “connected” to the church had climbed to 15.

By April 17, the number of positive cases KDHE “associated” with the conference had risen to 44, with five deaths. Sixteen of the cases involved Wyandotte County residents, while the other cases were spread across the jurisdiction’s area of eastern Kansas and western Missouri. The state health department said 19 of the cases involved hospitalizations.

While Bishop Thuston cooperated with the health department he remains reluctant to identify the conference as the source of the COVID-19 outbreak.

“There has been no verifiable evidence that anyone was affected as the result of attending the conference,” said Bishop Thuston. “It’s very difficult and probably impossible to actually identify where everyone was affected. I’m not saying there is no way it did occur, but I do know there were more safety precautions there than there was at the meat market, than they had at grocery stores, than they had at Walmart, than they had at liquors stores.”

With the conference attracting people from across the state, who then returned to their homes, Bishop Thuston says many of them may have contracted COVID-19 in their hometown before or after the conference.

“There were people who attended who were infected but many of them can trace their activity to other locations other than their conference,” Bishop Thuston stressed.

### Impact on COGIC

Bishop Thuston says certainly he, members of his jurisdiction and members of the Church of God in Christ are saddened by the COVID deaths and illnesses. Not only have members of his jurisdiction been impacted, the Church of God in Christ has been hit hard by COVID. So far, six bishops with the denomination have died from the virus.

While Bishop Thuston notes the virus' impact on the COGIC denomination, he questions whether they're being unfairly highlighted. Surely, he says, the virus has impacted other denominations.

“I would not be so naïve to believe that only one particular sector of the faith community was infected by it, particularly when we know that African Americans in some cities were over half to 60% of people that were infected and of the fatalities,” said Bishop Thuston.

“However, if the attention that has come to the Church of God in Christ during this pandemic has brought attention to the devastating disparity of health care of African Americans, if that has brought attention to the fact that available resources to the White sector have not been made available to us, and that we are more vulnerable when there are epidemics of this sort; if that has been the cost of this attention on the Church of God in Christ nationwide, then we willingly accept that as a role that we play in trying to make our communities safer and turn the focus on them being cared for,” Bishop Thuston concluded.