

News & Notes



WINTER 2025

“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.”

—Victor Hugo

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— Colleen McSpirit-Brush, Editor

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Spotlight on Rev. LaThelma Yenn-Batah

Executive Director
American Baptist Women's Ministries



The Journey of Rev. LaThelma Yenn-Batah, a Trailblazing Ministry

Rev. LaThelma Yenn-Batah credits an elementary school student named Jada with her mission trajectory. In 2015 when visiting her friend's classroom, the young girl asked Rev. Yenn-Batah what was her career focus. When she told Jada she was in school preparing to be a pastor, Jada responded, "Women can't be pastors, only first ladies."

"Little girls not seeing women as leaders in church affected me," said LaThelma.

LaThelma has a strong church background. She was raised by her grandparents, James and Thelma Armstrong, in Chicago. They attended a small church on the Southside of Chicago where LaThelma was a junior usher. Her grandfather was a trustee, and she often sat in on meetings. It was in the choir where she found her voice. As a youth, LaThelma loved church and singing in church was how she shared her gifts and talent. At the age of 14, she was awarded a scholarship to a boarding school in Indiana, where she participated in the gospel choir. She soon realized she could pursue a Master of Divinity degree. That reality sank in further when she realized the Rev. Dr. Janel Dixon, pastor of Cedar Park Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, was showing her who she wanted to be.

As a post-graduate Parish Pulpit Fellow through Princeton Theological Seminary, she received her first call and participated in extensive cross-cultural and urban ministry in Costa Rica. During her fellowship, she was inspired by women who used their educational, biblical, and theological experiences to take leadership roles in their churches' communities.

Pastor LaThelma first served American Baptist Women's Ministries (ABWM) as the Associate Executive Director from 2019-2021. In April 2021, she was called as the first African American pastor of Flemington Baptist Church in Flemington, NJ.

She served there until September 2023. "It was challenging," said Rev. Yenn-Batah. "But if God calls you, it will be okay. It doesn't mean it will be easy, but if we stay faithful, He will stay with us."

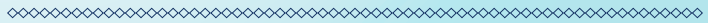
She returned to ABWM in March 2024 as the Interim Executive Director. She was named Executive Director on July 11, 2024. "I feel my best self when in service," Rev. Yenn-Batah stated. "I am given the divine spark."

She explains the difference for her between being interim, and now being the executive director. "Now I know I have the full support of the board and that the ability to lead into the future is cemented. All in all, it feels really good." Rev. Yenn-Batah shared further, "I want to be an agent of change and tap into the needs of women and girls beyond ABCUSA. To be a voice of justice and equality and to equip women with resources to be innovators."

She was instrumental in the founding of ABWM's Rudd Empowerment Center, which is dedicated to advancing leadership, education and advocacy for women and girls. Named after ABWM's first Executive Director Violet E. Rudd, the center will be a cross-denominational and interfaith collaboration to extend ABWM's influence beyond its traditional community.



"It is time for us to focus not only on supporting women in ministry but on expanding our reach to impact the broader global community of women leaders."



Rev. Yenn-Batah will work directly with the hub's director, the Rev. Dr. Christine Smith. "The Center is built on what we have currently and training for where we are going next," explained Rev. Yenn-Batah.

“It is time for us to focus not only on supporting women in ministry but on expanding our reach to impact the broader global community of women leaders,” she observed. “The Rudd Empowerment Center is a transformative initiative that will elevate the voice of women who have long shaped our faith and communities. It’s exciting for us to have a global voice.” Planning is underway for the Center to work in partnership with academic institutions to offer training and certification programs to give women needed skills to excel.

LaThelma still worships through music. Together with her husband, they own a music and consulting company called SoulJourn. “Singing is like breathing. It’s my first love. I would be sad if I couldn’t sing. It brings healing, peace, connection, and hope,” she voiced. “I am always aware with how I show up, but in music I’m free to let go and have a beautiful relationship with God. Music brings people together. It impacts us as individuals and as a collective by telling stories in a way that relates as a universal language.”

Rev. Yenn-Batah participated in MMBB’s Strategic Pastoral Excellence Program (SPEP), which provides pastors and their spouses with tools and strategies for financial wellness, both personally and for their ministries. “I learned so much that helped to create

financial wellness in my family,” shared LaThelma. “The program gave me general confidence in financial matters as well as helping to support and educate my church. I am most grateful for MMBB providing a retirement supplement when ABWM could not initially take on the full cost. Our future success can be attributed to MMBB. They are a special partner.”

Rev. Yenn-Batah received a Master of Divinity and a Master’s of Christian Education from Princeton Theological Seminary along with certificates in Theology, Women and Gender and Black Church Studies. She graduated cum laude from Scripps College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and Africana Studies. She has received numerous awards including the Graduate Study Fellowship for Parish and Pulpit Ministry at Princeton, The David Allen Weldon Award in Sacred Music, and The Aaron E. Gast Award in Urban Ministry. She was also selected as Ronald E. McNair Scholar and a Daniel Murphy Scholar. Ordained in 2018, LaThelma has served in Costa Rica, South Korea, Nicaragua, and the United States.

In Memoriam

The Rev. William “Bill” Alexander Lawson, Jr., 95, went home to be with the Lord on May 14, 2024. He was born June 28, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri to Clarisse Riggs and William Alexander Lawson, Sr.

He was later adopted by his mother’s second husband, Walter Cade. Rev. Lawson grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. He earned a bachelor’s degree in Sociology from Tennessee State University in Nashville, a Bachelor of Divinity specializing in New Testament interpretation and a Master of Theology from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kansas. While in seminary, he married Audrey Ann Hoffman on January 30, 1954. They moved to Houston, Texas in 1955. From 1955 to 1965, he was chaplain of the Baptist Student Union, a religious studies professor and then director of Upward Bound at Texas Southern University.

In 1962, Rev. Lawson founded the now megachurch Wheeler Baptist Church in Houston with just 13 members. He was also a Civil Rights activist and leader through his association with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The church was located near Texas Southern University and soon became an information hub for students and nonviolent civil rights protests. Known as the Three Amigos, Rev. Lawson, the late Rabbi Samuel Karff and the late Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza worked together to tackle some of the city’s pressing issues including homelessness, racism and inequality. In 1969, The University of Houston asked Rev. Lawson to initiate their first African American studies program.

In 1996, he founded a non-profit advocacy agency, the William A. Lawson Institute for Peace and Prosperity, (WALIPP) which includes a prep school for boys. The mission of WALIPP is to strengthen Houston’s Third Ward Community through educational success for all students and provide safe and secure housing for senior citizens.



Often called, "Houston's Pastor," Rev. Lawson led Wheeler Baptist Church for 42 years, retiring in 2004. Upon his retirement, the congregation named him Founding Pastor Emeritus, a title he held until his death. He was the recipient of numerous awards, and the Woodson Research Center at Rice University has archived Rev. Lawson's family and church photos, papers, videos, and teaching materials. He is the author of *Lawson's Leaves of Love*, a book with 366 daily meditations.

Rev. Lawson was predeceased by his wife, Audrey, his son Eric Hoffman Lawson, and his siblings, Walter Cade, Jr. and Catherine Cade Cruitt. He is survived by his daughters, Melanie Cerise Lawson and her partner John Foley Guess, Jr., Cheryl Grace Lawson and her husband, Thomas Robert Carter, and Roxanne Lawson; his granddaughters Robyn Nicole Troup and her husband, Alexander David Perry Koby, and Raven Justine Troup and her partner Nathan Lee Wilson; two great-grandsons, Amadeus Lawson Koby and Ronin Wolf Koby as well as a large extended family. A Community Service Celebration and a Congregational Service of Celebration was held at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.



The Rev. Dr. Julius Richard Scruggs passed into the arms of the Lord on May 8, 2024. Rev. Scruggs was born in Elkton, Tennessee, to Rev. and Mrs. Earl Scruggs.

He grew up in Toney, Alabama. Dr. Scruggs earned a Bachelor of Arts degree

from American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee, and a Master of Divinity and a Doctor of Ministry from Vanderbilt University School of Divinity. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters in 2011 from Alabama A&M University.

At the age of 18, Rev. Scruggs began his pastoral career at Pine Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Harvest, Alabama, where he served from 1960-65. He pastored at Mt. Ararat Baptist Church in Nashville from 1965-72, followed by the Antioch Baptist Church in East Chicago, Indiana before settling in at First Missionary Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama where he served from 1977 until his retirement in 2018.

During his 40 plus years of ministry as the pastor, First Missionary Baptist Church grew by over 5,200 members. Pastor Scruggs initiated various ministries, including evangelism teams, jail ministry teams, scholarship

funds and health fitness programs. He expanded the church's Christian Education programs with weekly Bible studies for all ages. He formed a child development center and academy for children aged 2 through fifth grade. The church expanded its property to 12-acres and constructed the Sanctuary, Educational Complex, the Family Life Center and Administration/Educational Wing. Under Dr. Scrugg's guidance the church gave significant contributions to Home and Foreign Missions, Selma University and American Baptist College and built and paid for 23 Habitat for Humanity homes.

Active in various religious and civic organizations, Dr. Scruggs served on the Board of Trustees of American Baptist College, a member of the National Board of Directors of the NAACP, former board member of Selma University, and former President of the Alabama State Missionary Baptist Convention (President Emeritus). Locally, he was a member of the Mayor's North Huntsville Leadership Advisory Council, and former president of the Greater Huntsville Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship. He also participated in the Huntsville Human Relations Commission, 100 Black Men of America, Inc. Greater Huntsville Chapter, Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Inc. and Epsilon Kappa Boule.

In the 1960s, he was active in the civil rights movement and almost lost his left eye during the Nashville sit-ins. In 2012, he delivered the main speech at the 50th Anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

In 1999, Rev. Scruggs was elected Vice President-at-Large of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBCUSA) and was elected the 17th President of NBCUSA in 2009.

Dr. Scruggs published four books: *Meditations on the Church*, *Baptist Preachers with Social Consciousness: A Comparative Study of Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Fosdick*, *God is Faithful* and *How to Study and Teach the Bible*.

In 1998, he was the recipient of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Award presented by the Greater Huntsville Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship.

Dr. Scruggs is survived by his wife, Josephine Stewart Tipton; a daughter, Jennifer Juliette Scruggs; a son, Morris Erol Tipton, II and three grandchildren, Morris E. Tipton III, Morgan Taylor Tipton and Elizabeth Francina Scruggs.



Rev. John Edwin Grummon, 80, passed away November 21, 2023, at his home in Great Bend, Kansas. A Celebration of Life was held at Central Baptist Church in Great Bend, Kansas. John was born April 2, 1943, in Omaha, Nebraska to Daniel and Elda (Goff) Grummon. His family

moved to Walters, Oklahoma, where his parents served as American Baptist Home Missionaries to Native American churches. He graduated from Ottawa University, Ottawa, Kansas, in 1965, and married Dee Anne Baldwin. He graduated from Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Kansas. In 1969, he graduated from Central Baptist Theological Seminary and served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Marysville, Kansas for five years, and the Beloit-Simpson Baptist Parish for 22 years.

Pastoral care was always a natural gift in John's ministry. He loved people and learning their stories. In 1996, he took a one-year CPE Residency at Research Medical Center in Kansas City, MO, to pursue a career as a chaplain. John and Dee Anne moved to Great Bend, where he served as chaplain for Central Kansas Medlander, St. Joseph Hospital in Larned, and Golden Belt Home Health & Hospice (GBHH) until retirement in 2014. John continued to volunteer for GBHH until his health issues prevailed. He was an active layman of Central Baptist Church, Great Bend, serving on boards, committees, and choir as his health allowed. A board-certified Chaplain, John was endorsed by ABCUSA, belonged to the Association of Professional Chaplains, and was a long-time treasurer of the Kansas Association of Chaplains.

John is survived by his wife of 58 years, Dee Anne, and two sons, Daniel Grummon (Ivan), Toronto, Canada, David Grummon (Miranda), Shawnee, KS, grandsons, Joshua and Isaiah Grummon, and one sister, Donna Pena (Ramon), Mesa, AZ. He was preceded in death by his parents, and his brother, George Grummon.

Calling MMBB Centenarians

Do you know a current MMBB member who is celebrating a 100th birthday this year or has celebrated the century mark? We'd like to feature them in *News and Notes*. Send an email to communications@mmbb.org including their name, age, birthday and a highlight of their career or vocation.

Celebrations

Dr. Jerry Cain Serves as Editor for *The History of the Karen People of Burma*

Jerry B. Cain, former president of Judson University in Illinois, is the editor of *The History of the Karen People of Burma*, written by Angelene Naw. Dr. Cain's interest in missionary history resulted in the collaboration with Dr. Naw.

The book details the Karen ethnic minority's centuries long struggle with the Burmese majority in Burma/Myanmar. It is told from a Christian Karen perspective and shares the history of missionary work. Because the studies of ethnic minorities is illegal in Burma, this book has the unique perspective of someone who both studied the culture and lived in Burma.

Dr. Cain and his wife, Linda, live in suburban Kansas City where he is involved with the Grace Karen Baptist Church.

Book Review

Remove the Pews: Spiritual Possibilities for Sacred Spaces Paperback by **Donna Schaper**. Published by Pilgrim Press October 2021.

"A church is a building and people, bricks and mortals," writes the Rev. Donna Schaper. "We believe the steeple and the people are one and that each needs the other." In this book, Rev. Schaper proposes this is a dying concept and to revitalize churches we need to take a different approach.

Removing the Pews is a physical act and a metaphor. She claims removing pews is necessary to both raise funds for the building's upkeep and to maintain a church's position as a community center along with letting go of the fixed ways of practicing our faith.

Rev. Schaper proposes, "God is not in trouble, but religious





institutions are. One of the reasons to remove the pews is they were built for the old house.” It is time for creative evolution. She suggests that religion today is part of a different cultural economy from when most churches were built.

If there are no pews, other groups can use the church to hold dance performances, concerts and other artistic endeavors, 12 step groups can easily use the space and the church can even be rented out to other faiths for their place of worship. These activities could bring in revenue needed to maintain the church. But removing

the pews is about much more than money. The first five chapters discuss why spiritually and theologically pews need to go from sacred sites. According to Rev. Schaper, “Pews are an unwanted authority. They force people to behave in a certain way. Today people want to interact with preaching. Pews are one-sided preaching,” writes Rev. Schaper.

She assures the reader that she is not recommending preaching be done away with, but that it needs to change. “Slowly and spirit led,” she states. “To renew the spirit in the building.”

Lifestyle



Unlocking the Secrets to a Good Night’s Sleep

Older adults need 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night, like any other adult. However, for those over 55 years of age this amount of sleep may feel like an impossible dream.

The initial step is to eliminate practices that promote poor sleep. First, do not consume caffeine late at night. This includes not only coffee and black or green tea, but also chocolate, most colas, candies, energy drinks, some snack foods, and even gum. Pain relievers and cold medicines often contain caffeine. The key is to read labels and learn what products contain caffeine. Caffeine has a half-life of 4-6 hours, which means that after six hours half the caffeine you consumed is still in your body. As a rule, you should stop drinking caffeine around 2-3 p.m. but understand that caffeine tolerance varies from person to person. Some are more sensitive than others.

Alcohol is another potential cause of poor sleep. While that glass of wine with dinner may make you feel relaxed and tired, alcohol is a sleep disruptor as it breaks up sleep cycles and doesn’t allow for enough REM/deep

sleep. Alcohol can affect breathing while sleeping and may even interfere with circadian rhythms.

Having an inconsistent sleep/wake schedule also can harm a good night’s sleep. It is important to go to bed and wake up around the same time every day.

Good sleep habits can help improve longer sleeping times. Some things to do to achieve a good night’s rest are:

- Avoid heavy meals close to bedtime.
- Keep napping during the day to a minimum.
- Get regular exercise, such as walking, during the day and go outside.
- Make sure the mattress and bedding are comfortable.
- Eliminate screens right before bed, this includes not only cell phones and computers but also television.
- Reduce exposure to LED lights.
- Cut back on liquids late in the day as a full bladder can wake you up at night.
- Keep the room cool. It is recommended we sleep in 60 to 67 degrees.
- Minimize both noise and light in the bedroom.

Create a bedtime ritual for yourself. Take a bath, journal, read, listen to music, do gentle yoga, or meditation and prayer are some activities that can be part of winding down from the day. The purpose of the ritual is to signal to the brain it is now time to sleep.

If you’re still lying in bed awake after twenty minutes, it is suggested you get up and go into a different room. Try to relax by reading, listening to music, or meditation and praying. Be patient with yourself and keep working towards good sleep hygiene.

