

History of the Western North Carolina Conference Branch Women's Missionary Society

In 1896, in Wilmington, North Carolina at St. Stephens A.M.E. Church, the A.M.E. General Conference convened. The Connectional Missionary Convention met simultaneously at the same location. At this historic time, the name of the missionary organization was changed to the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society. Another significant event was the organization of the Western North Carolina Conference Branch, and the Charter members of record were: Sister E.M. King, Sister M.S. Pearson, Sister S.B. Dudley, Sister G.T. Thurman and Sister R.H.W. Leak. Mrs. G.T. Thurman was elected as the very first Conference Branch President and served for several years under Bishop J.A. Handy. Mrs. E.M. King, the second Conference Branch President, succeeded Mrs. Thurman and served for three years, until 1900. In September 1900, at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, Mrs. Minnie S. Pearson, wife of Mr. W. G. Pearson, and a member of St. Joseph's A.M.E. Church in Durham, North Carolina, was elected as the third Conference Branch President. She was a leader in the educational, civic and religious arenas. Some of her accomplishments were as follows: Teacher in the Durham County and City systems; President of the N.C. Women's Federation Club, and 1st Vice-President of the Connectional body of the Women's Home & Foreign Missionary Society. Pearson Memorial A.M.E. Church in High Point, North Carolina, was erected in her honor. Mrs. Minnie S. Pearson departed her life on September 5, 1940.

Mrs. Vera L. Holt, a graduate nurse from St. Agnes Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina, and wife of Presiding Elder K. C. Holt, was elected as the fourth Conference Branch President. She was an efficient leader. Mrs. Holt was recognized for her dynamic leadership ability. Her missionary involvement also included serving as Vice-President of the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the Western North Carolina Conference. She resigned the office due to failing health. Sister Vera L. Holt departed her life in May 1964.

Mrs. Mary Holbrook Shepard, born in Spray, North Carolina, and a member of St. Joseph's A.M.E. Church in Durham, North Carolina, was elected as the fifth Conference Branch President. She taught in the Danville, Virginia, and Durham City School systems for several years. Her active participation included the position of Treasurer in the Women's Home & Foreign Missionary Society of the Western North Carolina Conference. Sister Mary Holbrook Shepard's active participation discontinued due to ill health.

The torch was passed to a native of Jacksonville, Florida, Mrs. Hortense Duhart, who was the sixth president of the Western North Carolina Conference. She was the wife of Dr. T. P. Duhart, A prominent AME preacher in the Georgia, Florida, and Arkansas Conferences. They transferred to the Second District, WNCC in 1945 where he pastored at St. Paul- Raleigh (1945-1953)) and later at St. Paul Chapel Hill (1954-1969).

Mrs. Duhart's passion was working with the youth and the Women's Missionary Society. She was musically inclined, played the piano and sung with the choirs. During her tenure she served as President of her local society and as Conference Branch President. Through the cooperative spirits of ministers, officers and members, progress was made in missions and the rewards were fruitful; she was truly a productive leader. Mrs. Duhart sought out and mentored young women while striving to increase the area programs. She traveled to all major missionary meetings, helped set policy, and contributed to the overall work in missions. She became known for her resourcefulness and received numerous awards and plaques of commendation, both locally and worldwide.

Mrs. Duhart served WNC Conference for over 20 years before retiring in 1967. She was especially proud of being a Life Member of the WMS. She departed this life in June 1983.

Mrs. Verdelle Johnston, a native of South Carolina, wife of Reverend D. A. Johnston and a member of St. Joseph's A.M.E. Church in Durham, North Carolina, was elected as the seventh Conference Branch President in 1967. The growth and development of the young people at Kittrell College was a focal point of her administration. She taught Special Education in the Durham City school system until her retirement. In 1972, she became the Connectional Historiographer and author of One Hundred Years of Victorious Service, a history of the Women's Missionary Society.

Mrs. Johnston also served as 2nd Episcopal District W.M.S. President under Bishop John Hurst Adams and Dr. Dolly D. Adams. Later, under Bishop Hartford Brookins' administration, Mrs. Johnston became Episcopal Supervisor and served four years. Mrs. Verdelle Johnston's leadership was a noble and enriched one, emphasizing active participation on all levels of W.M.S. endeavors.

On November 14, 1972, Mrs. Lessie Jane Morrow succeeded Mrs. Verdelle Johnston, as the eighth Conference Branch President. Mrs. Morrow was a dedicated Christian woman with a warm and winning smile for all. She served as an Area Chairperson of the Durham District for fourteen years. She became a conference worker in 1944; commitment to the call of missions was her trademark. Her two daughters were noteworthy in assisting their mother in carrying out the duties of a conference branch president.

In July 1980, the General Conference sent a new Episcopal team to the Second Episcopal District. Bishop John Hurst Adams and Dr. Dolly D. Adams, a knowledgeable and productive couple, arrived with a trademark of excellence and organization for the Second Episcopal District. Shortly after their arrival, Dr. Dolly D. Adams conducted the election of the ninth Conference Branch President for the Western North Carolina Conference, who was Sister Willia R. George, wife of Dr. Charles R. George, a university professor. Mrs. Willia R. George, from St. Joseph's A.M.E. Church in Durham who, at that time, came in as Vice Area Leader, was a Media Specialist with the Durham City School System. She immediately set forth the Conference's operational slogan: "*An Action Agenda: Inspired, Informed and Involved.*" Her emphasis was placed on the total development of all women in the Conference and the development of positive awareness of each Church in the Conference. She served as 1980 Quadrennial workshop leader in New Orleans, and was co-author of Voices of the Eighties, an A.M.E. Women's Missionary Society slide presentation. In 1987, after a productive tenure as Conference Branch President, Mrs. Willia R. George was appointed Connectional Chair of the Hughes Smith Life Membership Committee, where she served until 1995.

Mrs. Shirley James Sheares served as the tenth Western North Carolina Conference Branch President. Mrs. Sheares is a native of Darlington, South Carolina. After High School she attended and graduated from Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. She met and married her husband, the late Reverend James N. Sheares, while at Allen University. They became the parents of two daughters and two sons. Mrs. Sheares earned a Master's degree at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. As an educator, she taught at Kittrell College, in Kittrell, North Carolina, and at Johnston County Community College. Presently, Mrs. Sheares is an instructor at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Mrs. Sheares has served in the A.M.E. Women's Missionary Society as local President, Conference Christian Social Relations Chairperson, Western North Carolina Conference Branch President, and is our immediate past 2nd Episcopal District President. One of the highlights of her service during her tenure as Western North Carolina Conference President, is the Homeless Shelter in Raleigh, NC which was purchased under Mrs. Sheares' leadership.

Mrs. Everlena Diggs served as the eleventh W.M.S. Conference Branch President of the Western North Carolina Conference. Mrs. Diggs' educational journey began in Person County, where she was born. She holds a B.A. Degree from Fayetteville State University, a Master's Degree from NC A&T State University, with further studies at Appalachian State University, University of NC at Greensboro, and UNC-Chapel Hill. Mrs. Everlena Diggs has served in local societies as YPD Director, Vice-President, Secretary, and has chaired numerous committees. In 1983, Mrs. Diggs served as Conference Director of Promotion & Missionary Education.

She holds the distinction of serving as an Area Leader in both the Ethyl Anderson and the Minnie Pearson Areas. Of her many accomplishments as Area Leader she is well remembered for incorporating an end of the year celebration, which is now known as the Area annual banquets. During her tenure as Vice-President of the Conference, she established the Presidents' Retreat. Under Mrs. Diggs Presidential administration, the Western NC Conference W.M.S. coined the phrase, "*the West is the Best*".

Some of the highlights of her tenure as Conference Branch President include: Increased yearbook sales which yielded a Connectional award; enlisted the largest number of magazine subscriptions at the Connectional level; during one year – the W.N.C.C. held the distinction of wearing the crown in every category in the District Dorcas Queen Contest. The Western N.C. Conference W.M.S. raised the highest amount of Dorcas monies in the District during the last three consecutive years of her tenure. Mrs. Diggs gives God all of the credit for her accomplishments. Mrs. Everlena Diggs is married to Reverend William E. Diggs, Pastor of Turners Chapel A.M.E. Church in High Point, North Carolina, and they are the parents of three children.

On June 9, 2004, the Western North Carolina Conference Women's Missionary Society elected Dr. Gertrude R. Foust as their twelfth WNCC W.M.S. Conference Branch President. Dr. Foust was born in Mebane, North Carolina, and has worked in missions for over 40 years.

Immediately prior to becoming the new Conference Branch President, Dr. Foust served as the Western North Carolina Conference's Chairperson on Christian Social Relations. She is known for her excellent work in missions, including the production of a special W.M.S. videotape, which is shown at the Annual Conference each year. This videotape is complete with narration, still photo shots, and live video clips, highlighting the Conference level year in missions through its four WMS areas.

Dr. Foust holds a degree in Science Education from Towson State University in Towson, Maryland. She continued the technical aspects of her work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Due to Dr. Gertrude Foust's lifelong humanitarian efforts, leadership in shaping the work of missions in the A.M.E. Church, service to mankind at-large, and the positive impact she has made in helping people change their lives in many communities of various cities and towns, the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters was conferred upon her by New Hope Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland, in June 1996.

Mrs. Foust's W.M.S. vision is to evangelize – which will result in strengthening witnesses and do'ers of the work in missions, and to work with community organizations, schools, colleges, and universities in order to improve the conditions of those in need of our services in missions. Under her new leadership, Dr. Foust emphasis will be placed on (1) designing programs to support the work of the Connectional District, the Conference, Area, and local women missionary societies, (2) to encourage young women to join the Women's Missionary Society, (3) to save our youth from dangers that confront them, with special emphasis on saving our young men, (4) to provide information and support to all ages on health and wellness issues in order to make a difference where we live, and (5) to teach the missionaries at the Conference, Area and Local levels on the newly revised transformation of the A.M.E. Women's Missionary Society structure.

She was married to the late Rev. Benjamin S. Foust, Presiding Elder of the Western District of the Western North Carolina Conference, and the proud parent of four adult sons and a daughter.

Mrs. Frances H. Hope, a native of Hillsborough, NC, the wife of the late Leroy Hope and member of Flat Rock AME Church in Hillsborough, NC. Mrs. Hope was elected the thirteenth WNC Conference Branch President in 2012. She served the works of missions in various elected positions on the Local, Area, Conference levels. She also served as WNCC Strategic Initiative Coordinator for 2012 Prison Fellowship Angel Tree. Mrs. Hope was elected as Delegate to the 16th and 17th Quadrennial Conventions and served on the Credentials and Registration Committees.

Mrs. Hope served on the Conference level as 1st Vice President for seven years, prior to election as President. She kicked off her tenure with a themed retreat “Seat at the Table.” Early in Mrs. Hope’s term it was determined the revised term limits provision in the 2012—2016 Constitution and Bylaws, limited her service as President to only one year. But God is good— she continued to inspired the works and service of the WNCC WMS with dedication and excitement. Under her leadership, Mission Outreach extended support to the Prison Fellowship Initiative; the AME Incentive Shelter; Second Harvest Food Bank; Soup Kitchens, feeding and clothing the homeless and Domestic Violence Shelters. Mrs. Hope was named Life Member in 2013.

Mrs. Nikki Walker Lyons is a native of Raleigh, NC, wife of Rev. Dr. Steven L. Lyons and a lifelong member of St. Paul AME Church in Raleigh, NC. Mrs. Lyons was elected the fourteenth WNC Conference Branch President in 2013. She served the WNCC WMS as an officer on the Local, Area and Conference levels. She was elected a Delegate to the 17th WMS Quadrennial Convention held in 2011 in Orlando, FL.

Under her leadership, the WNCC WMS experienced spiritual growth and increased mission outreach; outreach mission projects have expanded to serve the vulnerable, the poor and those in need. The outreach mission projects include support given to the AME Men’s Empowerment Center located in Raleigh. Many Local Societies established food pantries, supported domestic violence prevention and abuse organizations, provided Summer Food Service Feeding sites, initiated adopt a school projects, given support to children in Foster Care and partnered with Alamance County Habitat for Humanity. The WNCC WMS has been recognized throughout the Second Episcopal District for most funds raised for the Dollars for Missions project and for the Dorcas Extravaganza. Additionally, under her leadership a new electronic registration process was implemented.

The Lyons are the proud parents of one adult son, Joshua. She and her husband are entrepreneurs and in following her husband’s dream, opened the Steven L. Lyons Funeral Home in Raleigh in 2012.

Mrs. Diane Tawwab started her journey serving God at Saint John AME Church in Harlem, NY and is a serving member of Saint Paul AME Church, Raleigh, NC. She has served as Local President and Third Vice of the Addie G. Stroud WMS; Third Vice WNC Conference WMS and Area Chair for the Martha McCauley Area. She was elected Delegate to the 18th WMS Quadrennial Convention. Mrs. Tawwab was elected the fifteenth WNC Conference Branch President April 29th 2021.

Mrs. Tawwab’s vision for the Conference is in three folds: ***Engage, Embrace and Empower*** every missionary to complete divine assignment. ***Teach to Engage...Embrace grant writing*** to make a difference; further impacting the communities we are serving and beyond; ***Empower through shared timely and relevant information.***

She is married to Mikel Tawwab and together have a blended family of four daughters, one son and eleven grandchildren. She is a humble servant leader motivated by love.

