

E. Anne Henning Byfield, former president of AME bishops' council, dies at 74

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Bishop E. Anne Henning Byfield, president of the AME Council of Bishops, speaks during the opening worship service at the general conference July 6, 2021, in Orlando, Florida. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Bishop E. Anne Henning Byfield, a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, has died two months into her retirement, the denomination announced on Thursday.

Byfield, 74, a former president of the AME Council of Bishops and a recent chair of social action for the church, died unexpectedly on Thursday in Indianapolis. The cause of her death was not announced.

“Bishop Anne Henning Byfield was a special type of bishop. One who always led with a spirit of humility and prayer,” AME Church Senior Bishop Wilfred J. Messiah said in a statement posted on his office’s Facebook page. “Her sage wisdom and humble heart will truly be missed.”

Byfield was most recently the leader of the historically Black denomination’s 13th Episcopal District, headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2023 she prayed with other AME clergy after the fatal shooting of six people at the city’s Covenant School and later joined William Barber II and other leaders in demonstrating for the end of gun violence.

She previously led districts with churches in Indiana and the Caribbean.

Byfield was known for her creativity, having written special services for church use as well as prayers and poems. According to the *Christian Recorder*, the official publication of the historically Black denomination, Byfield wrote the litany used at the 2005 funeral of civil rights activist Rosa Parks in Detroit.

She also was a leader at AME-affiliated schools in Ohio, serving as chancellor of Wilberforce University and on the board of Payne Theological Seminary.

Most recently she was involved in the AME’s response to a massive embezzlement case in which Jerome V. Harris, who had been the executive director of the department of retirement services for 21 years, was accused of stealing from the denomination’s retirement fund.

In 2022, when Byfield was president of the Council of Bishops, the church sued Harris and others, accusing them of embezzlement and fraud. “With the help of our legal team, the AMEC community is committed to holding those responsible accountable and recovering embezzled funds,” Byfield said at the time.

Harris died in May.

At the denomination’s quadrennial general conference held in August in Columbus, Ohio, the AME Church announced a settlement agreement in a class-action suit filed by AME church clergy. If approved by a judge, the settlement would provide \$20 million, though the litigation alleged a total loss of \$90 million.

In a sermon at the general conference, Byfield preached on dealing with trauma with God’s help.

“God can see what you can’t see,” she said. “The old ways don’t always work. Following traditions of power doesn’t always work. Blaming each other doesn’t always work. . . . This fight is different. God is fighting for the life and the soul of the church, not to destroy it. God is fighting to free us.”

The anthem sung by the choir preceding that sermon was written by Byfield.

Byfield read a portion of the litany at the event’s opening session for AME bishops, pastors, elders, and staffers grappling with the loss of substantial portions of their retirement savings.

“We confess that our fellowship has been fractured,” Byfield read. “Some feel betrayed and injured, a circumstance with the potential to tear us apart, fragmented and feeble. Was the Vision given to our venerable founder merely myopic?”

The gathering responded, saying, “A thousand afflictions to vex our souls, yet we are the church, we are called to hope.”

Byfield’s death comes just days after the death of another AME leader, Cecilia Williams Bryant, a bishop’s wife known for mentoring up-and-coming clergy and fostering prayer, who [died on September. 26](#).

“My soul is heavy as I process the reality that these two giants of the faith have joined the Church Triumphant,” said Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling, leader of the United Methodist Church’s Baltimore-Washington Conference and Peninsula-Delaware Conference, in a Thursday Facebook post. “They were fierce preachers, prayer warriors, visionaries and unabashed advocates for equality.”

Added Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, on X: “Another major death of a beloved and powerful female leader in the AME Church: Bishop Elizabeth Anne Henning Byfield. Lord, have mercy.”

John Thomas III, editor of the *Christian Recorder*, said Byfield had been expected to attend Bryant’s funeral, which is set for Saturday.

“People are in shock,” he said of Byfield. “She was beloved and was a mentor and spiritual mother to countless persons throughout the AME Church and beyond.”  
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