

What Every AMEer Needs to Know About the 116th Congress

(Washington, DC) It's a New Day..... In the US House of Representatives and US Senate. Today, we assume that you may not remember or be aware of how the actions of the elected representatives in US government will impact your lives from 2019 - 2021. For every member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, we want to highlight ways that we have historically and can, in the future, minister to the whole people of God and serve humanity. So, we start with a brief historical perspective.

Forty-eight years ago (1971) when 13 members of African descent serving in the US House of Representatives established the Congressional Black Caucus¹ (CBC) no AMEs were in the group. Over the years our presence² has been noted by those who served admirably.

At 8:00 am on January 3, 2019 the 1,847 seat Warner Theater in Washington, DC was filled to capacity for the *Ceremonial Swearing-In* of CBC members to the 116th ³session of the US Congress. We were about to “see with our own eyes” 55⁴ fellow Americans elected to serve as legislators for 2019 – 2021⁵. 56 persons of African descent (Representing every region of the country, over 78 million people in 28 states and US territories) now make policy including 9 new members in the class of 2019.

¹ Its purpose was “to advance human and civil rights for all people, especially African-Americans toward justice, full civic inclusion, and economic empowerment”¹. The CBC has accomplished much, and it should be noted that a 125 page prescriptive document presented to the 45th President, entitled “We Have A Lot To Lose” summarized thoughtful recommendations of the 115th session and the President of the United States of America.

² Congress members Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, Floyd Flake who followed those from Reconstruction (Congress member/Bishops Richard Harvey Cain, Hiram Rhodes Revels)

³ All 435 seats in House of Representatives open for election every two years.

⁴ Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina is African American but not a member of the CBC. In 2018, during the 115th session of Congress, he did co-sponsor legislation to end lynching along with Senators Cory Booker and Kamala Harris

⁵ Key addition is role of CBC members as Chairpersonships of 5 Full House Committees (The Big 5):

- **Committee on Oversight and Government Reform** – Rep Elijah E. Cummings (MD - 96)
The Committee's government-wide oversight jurisdiction and expanded [legislative](#) authority make it one of the most influential and powerful committees in the House. The Committee serves as Congress' chief investigative and oversight committee, and is granted broad jurisdiction. The chairman of the committee is one of only three committee chairmen in the House with the authority to issue [subpoenas](#) without a committee vote or consultation with the ranking member.
- **Science, Space and Technology Committee** – Rep Eddie Bernice Johnson (TX - 93)
It has jurisdiction over non-defense federal scientific [research](#) and development. Specifically, the committee has partial or complete jurisdiction over the following federal agencies: [NASA](#), the [Department of Energy](#), [EPA](#), [ATSDR](#), [NSF](#), [FAA](#), [NOAA](#), [NIST](#), [FEMA](#), the [U.S. Fire Administration](#), and [USGS](#).
- **Committee on Education and the Workforce** – Rep Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (VA - 93)
The Committee on Education and Labor oversees federal programs and initiatives dealing with education at all levels—from preschool through high school to higher education and continuing education. The *purpose is to ensure that Americans' needs are addressed so that students and workers may move forward in a changing school system and a competitive global economy. while insuring access to good public education & equitable distribution of resources*
- **Committee on Homeland Security** – Rep Bennie G. Thompson (MS - 93)
Homeland Security is the largest agency in federal government to reveal who is benefitting from contracts. It conducts oversight and handles legislation (and resolutions) related to the security of the United States. The committee may [amend](#), approve, or [table](#) homeland security related bills. It also has the power to hold hearings, conduct investigations, and [subpoena](#) witnesses. Additionally, the committee has authorization and policy oversight responsibilities over the [Department of Homeland Security](#).
- **Committee on Financial Services** – Rep Maxine Waters (CA – 91)
Empowered to subpoena tax returns and financial records of the US President, the **Committee on Financial Services**, also referred to as the **House Banking Committee** and formerly known as the **Committee on Banking and Currency**, is the [committee](#) of the [United States House of Representatives](#) that oversees the entire [financial services](#) industry, including the securities, insurance, banking and housing industries. The Financial Services Committee also oversees the work of the [Federal Reserve](#), the [United States Department of the Treasury](#), the [U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission](#) and other financial services regulators.

Their collective caucus signals a new day in public policy for all people, but especially those whose voices are unheard, whose needs continue to be unmet, and their rights are suppressed/ignored. Finally their legacy of working to insure equal access and equity for all people continues.

Notable among the newly elected CBC members is the AME presence. Five (5) acknowledge membership in the AME Church: Five are members of the AME Church: Representatives James Clyburn (SC – 93), Alcee Hastings (FL – 93), Gregory Meeks (NY – 98), Terri Sewell (AL – 10), Valdez Demings (FL – 17)

The leadership of the House of Representatives rests with the Democrats (aka the “majority” party) so AMEs in House Leadership are leading the House. Notable are:

House Majority Whip – Rep James E Clyburn (SC – 93). He is the highest ranking African American lawmaker in Congress & #3 in House leadership.

Chief Deputy Whip – Rep Terri Sewell (AL – 10).

AMEs are among the CBC chairs of the 28 sub-committees and details will be forthcoming.

Finally, a key role as Interim Director of CBC is filled by AME’s Dr. Elsie Scott. She returns to insure the viability of this organization after having previously served for 6 years and taking the CBC to new levels of engagement.

Their collective voices will be heard as visionaries and their individual cries as prophetic leaders signaling their Calling for such a time as this. We urge you to make the special effort to reach out, congratulate them, and affirm the partnership that the AME Church has in key issues⁶. Tell them “we gotcha back”! Find specific ways we can be supportive. “Stay woke”. Don’t wait for them to come to you - let them hear from you.

The Congressional Black Caucus elected as its chairperson for the 116th session (2019 – 2021) Rep Karen E. Bass (CA-10). Eight AME Churches are in her Congressional District⁷ giving the AME Church direct access to Congresswoman Bass in her tenure as CBC chair. Having served as the first Black female Speaker of the California State Assembly, she is prepared to negotiate on behalf of the CBC and the people whose voices have been muted to date. In her acceptance speech, she emphasized the partnership in the year of the 400 year anniversary of our ancestors’ arrival on these soils. She noted the amazing resilience of our people, “finding a way out of no way” and suffering while others take credit for our work. To mention a few efforts led by CBC “hidden figures”, she listed the creation of thousands of Black owned businesses, end of Apartheid, Affordable Care Act focus on health disparities, financial aid for students attending HBCUs, and finally the fact that a former CBC member was elected President of the USA. The goal is to move the needle forward with governance, resistance, and end hateful leadership. Chairwoman Bass pledged to provide hope by keeping the public informed of the work of the CBC as it makes a course correction.

Let us affirm again. That the AME Church must fully identify with the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for human dignity. That this participation in human development is not optional, nor is it an addendum to an already crowded agenda. It must be the very heart of the life and work of our church⁸.

Stay tuned for Action Alerts and Issues Briefings from your Social Action Commission. Be poised for ACTION. You must continue to be and/or become the community education gurus, informing our community stakeholders. You must consider public service (as elected officials, commissioners and key administrators). #WeAreAMEs

⁶ See AME Social Action mandate from 2016 General Conference including Voting Rights, 2020 Census, Climate Change, Economic Justice, Civic Engagement, Affordable Healthcare, Mass Incarceration, and Public Education

⁷ First – LA, Ward – LA, Brookins/Kirkland Community - LA, Bethel – LA, Price Chapel – LA, Second – LA, Bryant Temple – LA, St. James – LA

⁸ From the Episcopal Salutation of the AME Book of Discipline from 1976 – 2008.