

MEETING WITH REVEREND ALLEN N. PINCKNEY  
Main Pastor of Salem United Methodist Church

additions by Linda Lin are indented and in green

The meeting was arranged by John Nelson who was main pastor there from 1996 to 2000. It had first been arranged for Wednesday at 1. I could not make it. Nelson rescheduled for today at 11.

126P

I met Nelson at 10:45 on the corner in front of the church (129<sup>th</sup> and Powell). He told me the name of the pastor, Reverend Doctor Allen Pinckney and briefly explained that he has held the position for less than a year that he had been a superintendent in the North District of the UM church.

We talked briefly about how pastors come and go in the UM. The pastors are appointed but they are also reviewed formally at least once a year by the “pastor/parish relations committee” and the district superintendent during his annual visits. [all this got explained again at great length by Pinckney]

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Nelson pointed out a new building across the street from Salem. It looks like one of the recent condos that have sprouted around the neighborhood. He told me that he had been instrumental as pastor of Salem in getting the City’s help to get it built. During lunch, later, he told us that it had involved being nice to an aide to Giuliani whom he invited to attend a service because she had never heard of the church, who came with her whole family, had lunch after the service, and then got the approval from the City. All of that took place more or less during one of the campaigns for mayor.

Pinckney parked his apparently new Cadillac Escalade SUV in front of the church very close to 11. We introduced ourselves and said that we would wait for Linda before coming in. Linda arrived soon after and we climbed the front steps into a narrow corridor with stairs going up. Pinckney asked us to moved into his office, a rather small and dark, paneled room with a nondescript desk with a computer monitor. Pinckney hung some of our coats and invited us to sit in mismatched chair.

{this room, like all the rest of the plant, except for the sanctuary, looked worn, in need of paint and other maintenance. This is not a rich church, or one that is trying to display itself as rich}

Pinckney is wearing a black suit with a black shirt and a silver and black tie. He wears a tie clip at the collar. He wears a gold ring on his left ring finger and highly polished black shoes. He is slightly shorter than John Nelson and has a trim build. He looks to me to be in his forties, and carries himself in a very distinguished manner. He has warm mahogany skin, short hair, and long fingers. I seem to remember that he had a trim moustache/goatee. Later I see that he also wears a silver colored watch on his left hand under his jacket. He sits in a stuffed green armchair and we sit in leather chairs. Only mine, in the middle, has armrests.

Pinckney sat himself on his armchair. I gave the brief version of the introduction to the project is, with little prodding, he started what turned out, in the first half of the interview, to be a kind of autobiography. I summarize it below from my note in chronological order. This is very close to how he told it.

He was born in Flushing Queens and stayed there until he was 11. Both his parents were members of the UM church. They were both from North Carolina. The father was born there and had an MA in microbiology. His mother was born in Queens (?) and had a degree in nursing. They then moved to [Laurelton \(Queens?\)](#).

Pinckney went to Brooklyn Tech High School in Brooklyn. He made a point of saying that this is one of the three competitive high schools in NYC. He was already interested in the ministry but thought that it would be best to start with a BA in social work which he received from the University of South Carolina—event though he was not interested to become a counselor.

“One of the three institutions that require a test.” Also, “It was transitioning into both a boys and girls’ school.” Regarding his undergraduate work in social work: “It was always my intention to go into the ministry.” He “wanted counseling skills,” to work with families, and “never intended on being a social worker.”

Later he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York where he got his MA in 1987. At time he was a student minister at Salem and this started his relationship with the church. Eventually he got a doctorate in ministry from Drew University (1999)

He called it “Union Seminary” and later “Union.” Varenne clarified, “Union Theological Seminary.” Then he was a student minister here [at Salem] about 20 years ago. Varenne asked, 1987? Pinckney confirmed. “I served one year here” as part of the requirements to fulfill the degree.

His first church as pastor was in South Floral in Long Island. It was a UM church with a mostly Caucasian congregation {"Caucasian" is his word; I am quite sure that this is the word he used consistently when talking about the racial composition of the various churches}

He served in South Floral "only one year." When Varenne asked to clarify if this was a United Methodist Church, he seemed affronted, but of course politely so. He declared, "I was born and raised in the United Methodist Church. My history is United Methodism. The church I was raised in was an African American church." Then he continued with describing the "largely Caucasian denomination." He then said that South Floral Park "did not have the resources to have me stay full-time."

He then had a church in the Bronx, in the Wakefield, at the edge of the boundary between the city and Mount Vernon. The congregation was largely Carribean. He stayed there 8 years. He was the "asked to serve" in [Elmont \(Nassau county\)](#). It was a "sort of promotion." The congregation was very diverse racially. He was there 4 years.

I wrote down that he served in the North Bronx for 8 years [and 4 years in Elmont]. After saying it was "a largely Caribbean congregation," he stated, "I am African American. My mother was from New York. My father migrated to New York." His father was a professor at Brooklyn Technical College. His mother has a nursing degree. She taught courses and also practiced nursing "per diem" at the Long Island Jewish Hospital.

[I can't remember the context of "East Indian, African American, Caribbean, Anglo," but it's written with my Elmont information, which suggests that he's talking about the neighborhood.]

While in Elmont he got married (in 1999) . His first child was born in 2000 and the next one soon after. His wife finished a degree in nursing from Mount St. Michael college.

At this point he was appointed superintendent for the Long Island East district which at that time included 51 churches (now 75) mostly in Nassau and Suffolk. At the time there were 8 districts (now 6). The increase in the number of "charges" per district was driven by financial reasons. The conference with its 6 districts includes 468 churches under one bishop advised by a "cabinet" made up of the superintendents. These are essentially administrative positions involved in record keeping, financial supervision, conflict management between pastors and their congregation. In the fall of each year, the superintendent meets with the pastor and what is now called the "pastor/staff/parish committee" to discuss how things are going in the church. By the end of his 6 year term (the maximum being ten year consecutive to insure that superintendents return to pastoring) he had been named Dean of the Cabinet, which made him second to the bishop.

When he began, the Long Island East District served 1/3 of Nassau County and all of Suffolk County. Condensing the conference from 8 to 6 districts was "largely driven by financial" concerns. During his tenure he received 25 extra churches that it went from 51 to 75. He served as district superintendent for 6 years, and the usual tenure is 5 years. A district superintendent can serve up to 8 years consecutively, according to "our rules and policy books," and up to 12 years total.

"At the time of my tenure I had 75 churches," he told us, "all of Suffolk County, all of Nassau County." "I just completed that responsibility as of July." He described the issues HV listed above, and also told us, "I had to meet with each of the churches once per year." HV made noises of being impressed and said something like, one church per week. Pinckney told us he had to visit all of the churches between September and December.

He was then appointed to Salem on an emergency basis as the preceding pastor had a stroke and retired. He emphasized that pastors are not chosen by a congregation but are appointed by a bishop in consultation with this cabinet and what they know of the congregation. But the bishop has the final say.

Just before talking about the illness of the former pastor at Salem, he declared, "I could have served 8 years" as district superintendent." The previous pastor retired to Antigua. I can't remember in response to what, he said, "I'm the poster child for the New York Conference. I grew up in the church. I emerged out of the life."

Varenne said, "If I may ask, are you married?" Two years after he got married he became the district superintendent, in 2001. When he described having his children amidst these changes, Varenne made sympathetic noises about him being busy and asked how old they were. He replied, "one is five going to be six" and the other two going to be three.

I asked about how he managed to stay on for 6 years when the usual tenure was 5 years. He talked about the dean of the cabinet as being the "highest role," and said that he was the superior of the other superintendents, when the Bishop wasn't around. He explained that the cabinet was comprised of the Bishop, superintendents, and program officers such as the treasurer and secretary. Varenne ventured that these were not only African American churches, and he told us there were Korean and Anglo churches.

Varenne asked, "Now when you move into a church like this what is there to learn?" He answered, "First of all I had a history with the organization," referring to "having served here 20 years ago."

The process of appointing a new pastor starts with the superintendent collecting information, starting with statistical, demographic matters and talking with the Staff/Parish committee (the

ex-Pastor/Parish committee now expanded to include other staff besides the pastor) about mission, profile, compensation, and the concerns of the local community. On the basis of all this the bishop assigns the new pastor and the superintendent introduces him to the parish. This is NOT an interview, Pinckney emphasized; it is a matter of informing.

“The bishop says, ‘I want to make X the leader and the superintendent has to make it happen.’ Also on the non-interview with the congregation: “We don’t want to send mixed messages that they have the power to change the decision.” He meets with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, which is the liaison between the congregation and “all the staff.” It was formerly called the Pastor-Parish Relations, but changed to include all the staff other than the pastor. He admitted, “My appointment was difficult, being in the Cabinet.” He told us that “an interim was placed here,” a retired bishop who was still highly influential, one of the senior bishops. “I had little options,” he said. [I seem to remember that he had the full support of the bishop and this retired bishop—is he speaking of difficulty among the congregation?] Varenne asked if the district superintendent who was his liaison was one of his colleagues. [I believe that he responded that the superintendent was his inferior once he was the dean.] Varenne then asked about the issues facing Salem.

Pinckney then proceeded to outline the main issues facing Salem. {He was very well organized and did not get distracted from his outline. I think he must be very well practiced at making this presentation}

The preceding, interim, pastor was a retired senior bishop who had been very influential.

Salem has a long history. It has been a community oriented church with a gym, a community service center, various programs, a day-care and pre-school and some after school programs and a program of home visiting. There also used to be a senior citizen program.

“First of all, this congregation has a historic impact on this community.”

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However, as the congregation has aged, many of those who had “passion” for community programs became less active. The interest has dwindled. There are much less financial and human resources.

Finances are a major concern given the size of the facility and its physical operations (heat, insurance, roofs, etc.). This is made more complex by the peculiar way the title to the property

is held by a subsidiary of UM, the UM City Society. It used to be very helpful financially, but it's own resources have been dwindling and it can only help now with the insurance.

[John Nelson gave me some figures on the heating bill.] Pinckney talked about the size of the building as "a block, an entire block." Varenne says that relationships with potential donors has been one of the things we are interested in, and how do you [do what they want] without compromising your work. Pinckney responded well to this, saying, "Absolutely." After talking about the UM City Society paying the insurance bill, he said that if the congregation had to pay it "we are looking at a lower insurance package."

Pinckney talked briefly about the building across the avenue. He described it as a partnership with Phipps Housing but did not seem to know much about it when I pressed him for more details.

He made a general comment about a pastor needing many skills. He then moved back to listing the current issues facing Salem. 613

Diversity: youth and children, Anglo, Hispanic, highly educated, highly stable.  
[Desirable members of congregation? Vs. Salvation army, later.]

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There are few children and adolescents members, even though the area is full of them. The area is now extremely diverse in terms of age, race, financial resources {I am quite sure he mentioned Caucasians there but it is not in my notes) 612

He has to fight against the "culture of the church" {repeated at least twice}. They have to transition out a tradition of worship that is very Euro-centric with organ and hymns and to develop a more blended for of worship that is more likely to attract a wider range of people. But a lot of the current member have been there 50 years and they are not eager to change. He does have increased credibility because of his past administrative positions and the support of the bishop. {I got the feeling at this point that he is aiming for the position of bishop himself...}

The problem is the culture of the church." Also, that this particular site is "transitioning out of" being predominantly African American and traditional. HV aska "traditional African American, or--?" Pinckney replies, "Traditional traditional," and talks about the hymns and Eurocentricity. "I don't want to say high church," he says, then makes a joke about the Catholic Church. "Western Eurocentric focus." By blended he refers to more than gospel: contemporary, gospel, and spirituals, into a "wide blend of worshipping." He says, they've "historically been doing things in this way for the past

40 or 50 years," and that those members who have been there for many years "want the status quo."

Now he talks about "credibility not just as a pastor." He says, "I had that background," and the "backing of the bishop we see here." He wants "to make those shifts as gradually as possible." Varenne asked about recruiting members, and he said, "I haven't done that in an overt way of going out and knocking on doors." Instead he is changing the services, "in worship, the way I preach."

He shifted briefly to a more religious vocabulary and talked about the need to move from the ministry of the ordained, which is what the older members are used to, to a ministry of all believers: "what is your passion? What gift or grace did you receive from our Lord Jesus Christ? For me it is an expectation that people use their gifts."

He talks about the need for the congregation to take ownership. Varenne says, "I assume you can't do all of it" [I think making changes]. After talking about the ministry of all believers, he says that the "baby boomers grew up with the minister doing the preaching" and visitations. "This generation is much different in terms of experiential involvement." He says that it's about "finding what is the core that each believe has for ministry," then the talk about gifts and what Jesus Christ is calling you to do. Varenne says that the Catholic Church is going through something similar.

I asked him a question about getting educated into the church. He responded with the variety of ways of teaching and shifted to a historical discussion of the "class system" that is part of the Wesleyan tradition. When Wesley started, at the onset of the industrial revolution, there were many needs and the early Methodists, who were all lay people, developed these "classes" to deal with the various needs. This was moved to the United States but, over the years, the classes have become more of a social matter. He wants to transform them back into something more spiritual. So he has been working with the class leaders.

Pinckney said of the class system, "it's become somewhat stagnant." John Nelson sighs. In addition to the class leaders, he has been working with administrative leaders and Bible Studies. Varenne said something about him being there for six months, and he replied, "Not even that. I started in September." He told us, "I took a couple of months because of the intensity of the superintendency."

There will be a retreat of these on the second Sunday in March and he invited us.



The final issue are the children. There are about 800 people on their list, and about 300 attend every Sunday. But there are only 6 children in Sunday School. "Where are the children?"

Varenne says, "That is a very striking representation of aging." Pinckney continues, "Where are the young people with families? What is not occurring in the life of the church? If the congregation is to be vital it must have a [inaudible] Sunday School. That's the final issue we need to address." He talked about the aging congregation, and restructuring, "re-identifying our mission and ministry in the context of this community." Varenne asks if the congregation are local residents. He says, "I would say immediate [but in] the Harlem area," meaning up to 150th Street down to 116th, Adam Clayton Powell to the west. "Again this church hasn't done a good job with the immediate community."

{I must have asked a question about competition with other churches}

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[It may be that Pinckney raises the question of competition] Pinckney says there are "historic congregations right in this vicinity that are competing." HV then asks which churches would be their competition, and mentions Abyssinian, and the brownstones. Pinckney repeats Abyssinian and says that many of the local churches are Baptist. He then lists the 3 UM churches nearby: Mt. Cavalry, St. Marks, and Metropolitan Community United Methodist, and of course Salem. He says, "Then further away you have Grace" at 104th Street, and one on Madison Avenue, which has as Hispanic congregation. In my notes: "all aging congregations, all dwindling [illegible], all struggling financially, all maintenance, all transitioning with pastoral leadership, relationship to community." He lists the Abyssinian Church and Convent Baptist. Then, there are the African Methodist Episcopal Churches, Metropolitan at 135th, AM Episcopal Zionist, Bethel, and CME Williams Institution, which used to stand for Colored Methodist Episcopal, and now Christian Methodist Episcopal. [I wrote this before continuing to read what HV wrote below, then decided to keep it instead of deleting]

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[30](#)

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Also a Wesleyan church in the Caribbean that is not connected to any of the four.

We talked about the area that is Harlem. There are 3 other UM churches besides Salem: Mt Calvary, St Marks and Metropolitan. All have similar issues. "And then there are the Baptists." He mentioned Convent.

This triggered a brief history of the way the "racism" that did not allow black people fully to join the main UM split the UM into various denominations that have all major presence in Harlem:



the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal (started in Philadelphia)  
the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (started in New York)  
C. (Christian?) Methodist Episcopal

Then United Methodist. Varenne asked if they all have bishops, and he confirmed this. He says that AME is the strongest out of those three besides the UME. "We joined the Evangelical Brethren to form the United Methodist Church." [evangelical?] Varenne asks about "what I call the brownstone churches," and Pinckney says they are "largely independent." He mentions that the evangelical churches rely very much on charismatic leadership.

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Shiloh Baptist used to be very strong. It was very closely associated with the Wainright family over several generations and a charismatic leadership.

In response to a question from Varenne probably about Abyssinian, Pinckney says, "Well, their pastor had a lot of connections," and mentions Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Sam Proctor [sp?] who taught at Rutgers, and Calvin Butts.

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{I had the feeling that he did not know the Harlem churches very well, perhaps because he is new here. He did not pick up either on my mentioning what I call the "brownstone" churches which I should probably call in these interviews "storefront churches." }

[we will have to start finding ways to guess the social/class/elite position of the various churches: social class, individualism, education about all this]

Somehow Varenne got an opening to ask, "What keeps good ideas from happening?" Pinckney responds that the pastor has autonomy, answers to the congregational leadership, which frees them to do innovative things [perhaps talking about other denominations?]. "Not that we are not able to do it. We are signed and supervised by a bishop and a district superintendent." He says that he has several advantages, including having been a student at Salem, having been a pastor, having been educated in public schools, and being a native New Yorker. [This raises questions about the history of other pastors at this and other churches.]

In response to my question about racism and the UM church, he says "all of the African American churches were segregated into a central jurisdiction," meaning all of the AfAm churches in the US. "I don't know what caused us to stay," he said, rather testily, "I guess it was the love of the unique church. Despite the racism. [illegible]"

He then offered to give us a tour of the facilities, starting with the sanctuary. It is in quite good shape. He mention the number of tourists that come and visit on Sunday and how this is a gook thing. I mentioned that we had heard people complained when the visitors left after the music and before the sermon. He agreed that this can be a little disruptive.

Pinckney banter that John knows the church much better than him. John counters that he is the ex-pastor. In the sanctuary he points out the flags and explains that each class has one. He also points out the 2 lecterns.

[we will have to pay attention to the flag/cross/pulpit displays and arrangements, as well as the musical instruments; I am sure they have the same indexical value as they had in Paw Paw]

He then took us to a room next to sanctuary (seedy as everything but the sanctuary) with pictures of all the pastors (about a dozen). Then we went to the (unheated) gym and the social hall beneath the sanctuary. We then went up to the fourth floor to make a brief visit to the pre-school: three rooms where the children were taking their nap break. Linda got the director's card and an invitation to visit. The director told us she had been a public school teacher but was happy to be here. There was some joking with Nelson when he mentioned that he had been pastor. He said he remembered her. She said she did not remember him.

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Pinckney takes us to Cullen Hall, downstairs, a sort of social hall with tables and chairs. He tells us that Narcotics Anonymous meets there. There is a kitchen. A maintenance worker greets John as reverend. A man asks us for change for a dollar. I tell him I may have it. Pinckney seems annoyed. The man thanks me profusely. As we head out of the gym, where a few people are hanging out, the man comes in with a soda and thanks me again.

[this school would be worth spending a day at; it could give us access to families: a task where we could introduce Torry to fieldwork?]

We went back to the pastor's office and took our leave. As we did there was a discussion about the location of [Londel's](#) as a good place to go to lunch to. Neither Nelson nor Pinckney quite knew where it was in relation to Salem.