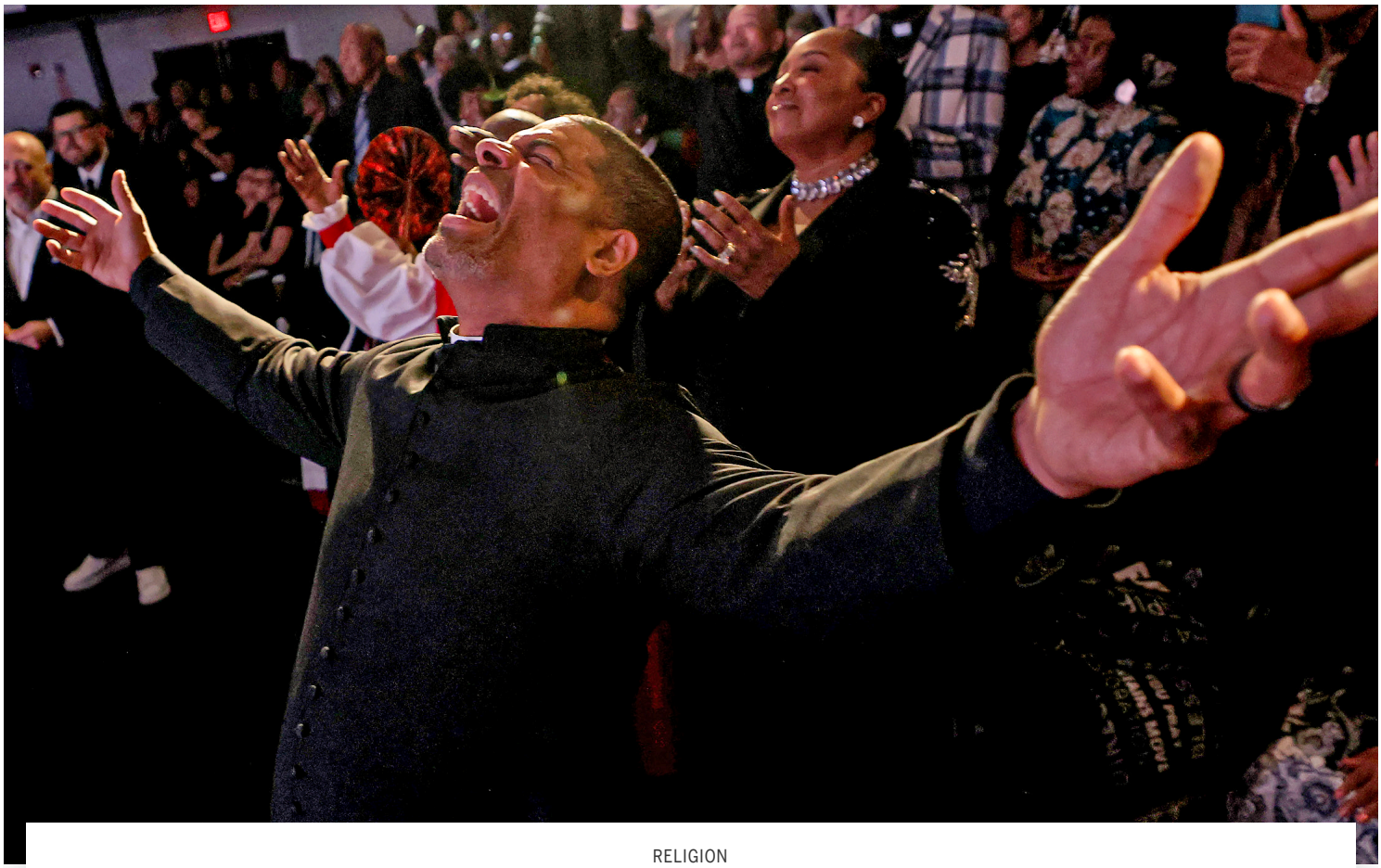


RELIGION

At Boston's Jubilee Christian Church, a pastor's elevation to bishop marks a full circle moment

A new generation of Black clergy is taking on leadership roles at Black churches around Boston

BY NIKI GRISWOLD
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Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson worships during a song infested prelude Friday night in Mattapan. Thompson was appointed to the office of Bishop in a sacred consecration ceremony. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

t was nearly 11 on a Friday night, and the sanctuary of Jubilee Christian Church in Mattapan was still packed with hundreds of parishioners. Nearly four hours into a service filled with rousing songs and sermons, the crowd

I hushed as it focused on the clergy — and the three generations of Thompson men at the center.

The church's lead pastor, Matthew K. Thompson Sr., bowed his head as his 26-year-old son anointed him with oil. Thompson's father stood above him, praying.

Then, in a moment that captivated the crowd, Thompson stood before his congregation bearing a gifted sword and shield, and, for the first time, a new title: bishop. The audience erupted into cheers.

In the nondenominational church, Thompson's consecration ceremony last week marked his elevation to a senior clergy position — a pastor who leads and counsels other pastors. He is part of a new generation of clergy ascending to leadership roles at Black churches around Boston — a trend that points to the institutions' efforts to evolve with the times.

The consecration also represented the next chapter in his family's role in the community, as Thompson was anointed with the same title as his father, Bishop Gideon Thompson, who founded Jubilee Christian Church more than 40 years ago.



Jubilee Christian Church Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson, his wife, Mona, and his parents Yvonne and Archbishop Gideon A. Thompson, left to right, celebrate during a sacred ceremony Friday night. Matthew Thompson was appointed to the office of Bishop during the ceremony at the Mattapan church. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Today, Jubilee has grown into one of the largest nondenominational Black churches in the Greater Boston region, with an estimated 7,000 members across its three locations in Mattapan, Stoughton, and Worcester. In many ways, the church's legacy is as much defined by its influence in the community as it is its founding family's lineage of ministry.

"God's just not a god of moments, he's a god of momentum," Matthew K. Thompson Sr. said. "But then he doesn't just stop with momentum. He's really concerned about movements, and the way movements are birthed is that it needs to be generational, multi-generational."

Though the succession of Jubilee's leadership may seem preordained, Matthew K. Thompson Sr. says for many years he was reluctant to follow in his father's footsteps. He struggled with a stutter as a child, so while he always wanted to serve his community, he didn't plan to preach.

Instead, after graduating from Morehouse College, he began working for his father as a personal assistant. He later oversaw the church's finances and expanded its business and real estate portfolios, which are substantial. Jubilee at one point sued the city of Boston in an effort to advance its plans to develop 200+ apartment units on a property it owns in Hyde Park.



Guests sing and worship during a ceremony celebrating Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson. Thompson was appointed to the office of Bishop in a sacred consecration ceremony Friday, in Mattapan. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson worships during a song infested prelude Friday night in Mattapan. Thompson was appointed to the office of Bishop in a sacred consecration ceremony. Standing at right is Thompson's wife, Mona.
MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Matthew K. Thompson Sr. was nearly 30 years old, helping his brother start a church in North Carolina, when he hit a turning point. He describes praying to God to give thanks for his toddler son, whom he and his wife had welcomed after years of struggling to conceive. He pledged to dedicate his son to God, and says he heard God's voice for the first time, summoning him to preach. He decided to heed the call.

Today, ministry at Jubilee is a family affair. All eight of Gideon Thompson's children with his wife, Yvonne, are pastors, in Massachusetts and elsewhere. Matthew K. Thompson Sr., 53, is their second son, and succeeded his father when he stepped down in 2014, assuming the role of head and senior pastor of Jubilee. Matthew K. Thompson Sr.'s wife, Mon,a serves as his co-senior pastor, and their son, Matthew K. Thompson Jr., is the church's youth and young adult pastor.

Initially, Matthew K. Thompson Sr. was reluctant to become a bishop and accept the responsibility of ministering to his fellow clergy. But about nine years ago, he said, other pastors began reaching out to him requesting his advice and guidance. Early this year, he said, he again heard God's voice, urging him forward.

“There are people that will receive a title just for the title, not necessarily for the work. And I think I’ve always been the type of person [who wants] to do the work,” he said. But, “this isn’t my church. This is the Lord’s. And when you know that God has called you to do something, then you have a different confidence.”



Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson worships on his knees during a sacred ceremony. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Guests sing and worship during a ceremony celebrating Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rev. Jeffrey Brown, a longtime pastor and youth violence prevention advocate at Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, said that Matthew K. Thompson Sr.'s ascension to ministerial leadership reflects the broader trend of transition in the ranks of many historical Black churches across Boston.

At churches such as the Twelfth Baptist, Peoples Baptist Church, and Bethel A.M.E. Church, pastors who served as pillars of the community through the Civil Rights era have retired or plan to soon, Brown said.

Morning Star Baptist Church this Sunday is celebrating Bishop John M. Border III's retirement at the end of this year after 45 years of service .

“There’s this wholesale changeover of the ministry of which Matt is a shining example,” Brown said. “I see this new generation of ministers really stepping up to the plate to take on the mantles of leadership from the ones that have came before them, and to take ministry to higher heights and deeper depths, and so I’m really excited.”



Guests sing and worship during a ceremony celebrating Jubilee Christian Church's Senior Pastor Matthew Thompson. MARK STOCKWELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The same is true at the historic Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Dorchester, where Boston City Councilor the Rev. Miniard Culpepper, whose grandfather founded the church more than 85 years ago, was the senior pastor. When he ran for office last year, his son stepped up to take on more of the services.

“It’s really a blessing to see these young ministers take over,” Culpepper said. “When you look at the legacy that’s being kept well and alive, it means that the Black community will continue to grow and develop.”

Culpepper emphasized that welcoming succession is critical for the survival and evolution of a church. Younger pastors are better equipped to lead their congregations in an era of new challenges, and keep younger generations interested and engaged in the church, he said.

Jubilee’s efforts to appeal to youth drew in Angel Lyte, 33, who has been attending service at Jubilee since she was a teenager.

When she saw Matthew K. Thompson Sr. preaching, “I remember feeling it in my heart, deep in my soul, ‘Angel, this is where you need to be, you need to root yourself here,’” Lyte said.

After Lyte’s father died, Matthew K. Thompson Sr. and his wife took her under their wing. She calls the bishop her godfather, and described him as a protector and pillar of the community, who cares for everyone he comes in contact with.

She remembers watching Matthew K. Thompson Sr. be ordained as a senior pastor. As the consecration ceremony got underway last week, tears ran down her face as she sang, worshipped, and celebrated.

This is a “full circle moment,” she said.



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