

**AFRICAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS  
Philadelphia, PA**

**THE 2025 STATE OF THE PARISH  
“The AECST Express Journey Continues - Celebrating 233 Years of Amazing  
Ministry”  
(1792 – 2025)**

**A MESSAGE FROM THE RECTOR  
The Very Rev. Canon Martini Shaw - Rector**

Greetings, as we celebrate our parish’s 234th year of active ministry and the 250<sup>th</sup> year of the founding of our nation.

We are grateful to be able to continue our faithful ministry with renewed dedication and fervor. During 2025, our many ministries, guilds and organizations were actively serving with renewed energy and vision.

Following a few years of lower attendance for in-person worship—due to the COVID pandemic—our in-person worship numbers continued to increase. Our mission was to regain in-person worship to pre-pandemic levels and continue to increase our virtual footprint; fortunately, in-person and virtual worship grew in 2025. Our livestream ministry for those who could not physically attend witnessed additional viewers. Our stellar videography ministry added a new component of communication for our parish. The photography ministry, website ministry, social media ministry continued to capture and promote our many weekly ministry activities.

We give thanks to God that the AECST Express continued to journey to many exciting destinations and added some new ones.

+ In January, we celebrated the Baptism of Jesus with the Laying on of hands as part of the liturgy; we celebrated the addition of new parishioners who joined our church family during the previous year (2024); observed and celebrated the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr, and welcomed the Rev. William Gipson from the University of PA as our guest speaker; and celebrated the ministry of our Girls Friendly Society chapter.

+ In February, we kicked off our celebration of Black History Month with Arthur Sudler, our parish historian, serving as homilist; we observed and celebrated the Feast of Blessed Absalom Jones by welcoming the Most Rev. Sean Rowe, new Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church, as the homilist; we celebrated “Love Sunday,” Mardi Gras Sunday, Scouts Sunday and HBCU Sunday.

+ In March, the Season of Lent began with the Ash Wednesday observance. Our Lenten theme - "Post 2024 National Election: The Role of the Church" - which was facilitated by the rector, associate to the rector, the Rev. Joe Watkins, Julio Rodriguez, Ernestine Johnson, Arthur Sudler, Lisa Sharon Harper, Wendella Fox and Elaine Gillison.

+ In April, we observed Holy Week (Maundy Thursday and Good Friday), beginning with the Palm Sunday street procession led by a donkey, once again, welcoming students, staff, and parents from St. James School; and finally, celebrated a festive and glorious Easter Sunday; finally, at the end of the month, we enjoyed our Annual Men Are Cooking event.

+ In May, we celebrated Mother's Day; celebrated Heroes' Sunday and welcomed Philadelphia Fire Commissioner Jeffrey Thompson as guest Homilist;

+ In June, we celebrated Women's Day with the highly acclaimed actress – Sheryl Lee Ralph as our guest speaker; we celebrated Father's Day; Pentecost Sunday; Graduate Sunday; Church School and Youth Annual Sunday; and the Caribbean Festival.

+ In July, while this month, historically, begins our reduced schedule of parish activities, we celebrated Independence Day with our scouts joining us.

+ In August, as usual, I personally used the time for holiday rest, relaxation and recharging; our ministers of music offered weekly Sunday homilies; and in light of her departure, we celebrated the ministry of Kathryn Brossa, who had served as our amazing seminarian for a few years.

+ In September, as our church school classes reconvened, we began with a Back to School/Education Sunday celebration, with Dr. Brenda Allen, President of Lincoln University, serving as our homilist; and a festive Homecoming Sunday was celebrated.

+ In October, we kicked off our Stewardship Campaign; celebrated O.V. Catto Sunday with State Representative Morgan Cephas serving as the homilist; and observed Breast Cancer Awareness Sunday.

+ In November, we celebrated the Feast of All Saints/All Souls, Veterans Day; Health Ministry Sunday, and Judicial Sunday with the Honorable Kai Scott serving as the homilist.

+ Finally, in December, we observed the Advent Season; celebrated our Annual Men's Day with Senator Vincent Hughes as our homilist; enjoyed the wonderful Christmas pageant by our Church School; and, a festive Christmas Eve Service attended by many parishioners and visitors.

During 2025, there were both joyous and somber moments. The more joyous times were the celebration of baptisms, marriages, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. We welcomed thirty-five individuals into our church family. In addition, as reported by our Accounting Warden and Treasurer, St. Thomas, unlike many years of ending the year with a sizeable budget surplus, we ended the year with a small budget deficit, however there was a marked increase in our investment portfolio. We remain very humbling grateful to almighty God for our strength, vibrancy, relevance and membership growth. Our spirituality continues to develop and grow in faith as we proudly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in novel and re-imagined ways and opportunities. Sadly, once again, we mourned the death of a number of faithful parishioners and family members who entered the joy of the heavenly Jerusalem.

In conclusion, I wish to thank each one of you, individually, and all of our guilds, ministries and organizations for sharing time, talents and treasures during 2025. I am enormously grateful, honored and blessed to have served with such esteemed partners in ministry: Fr. Daren Evans; Fr. Gerald Collins; Seminarian Kathryn Brossa; dedicated wardens-Richard Jones and Deborah Camp-Frye; a supportive Vestry and Auxiliary Vestry; a dedicated and hard-working staff – Gladyce DuBrey, Jeannette Jeffrey, Dr. Jay Fluellen, Waltier Blocker, Dr. Rollo Dilworth, Robert Davenport, LaDon Elliott, David McGilberry, Gail Harris and the many volunteers who shared countless hours of serving. My continued vision and prayers for 2026 is that the AECST Express continues its path of touching and serving others through our proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

To God be the glory for the things God has done, is doing and has yet to do at the AECST. Amen.