



In September 2002, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference dedicated a specially commissioned monument over the previously unmarked grave of Charles A. Tindley at the historic Eden Cemetery, outside Philadelphia.

Charles Albert Tindley, Faithful Servant of Christ

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Editor's note: Rev. Amy Smith is a clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference and long-time member of the Commission on Archives and History. She served on the special task force that created the monument to Charles Tindley which was erected over his gravesite in 2002. She currently serves as Associate Pastor of the Lehman Memorial United Methodist Church in Hatboro, Pennsylvania.

I have found at last the Savior,
 Of whom I've often heard,
And I have the precious favor,
 He has promised in His word:
Oh, the joy that comes to me,
 And the power that sets me free,
My soul is filled with praises,
 'Tis the year of jubilee.

These are the words of a song by Charles Albert Tindley, prolific hymn writer, powerful preacher, street evangelist, church growth expert, outreach coordinator. Charles Tindley was born in Berlin, Maryland, on July 7 in the year 1851, according to his son, or 1856, by his own accounting. His mother died when he was about two years old, and his father, being very poor, hired him out to work for people who were often cruel to him and refused to allow him to receive an education or to attend church. But Tindley was determined to learn to read, and he would pick up scraps of newspaper from the roadside and "put them in my bosom (for I had no pockets), in order to study the ABC's from them." At night he would study the scraps of paper until at last he had taught himself to read the Bible.

One Sunday, young Charles felt compelled to attend church, despite having no coat or shoes to wear. He made himself as presentable as he could and found a seat in as inconspicuous a place as possible. This is what he says about what happened next:

I was content until the speaker, who was a sort of missionary, called for all the boys and girls who could read the Bible to take the front seat. One big lump after another arose in my throat as I thought of what I should do. I was one who could read the Bible. No one in the [white]

church knew that but myself. I rolled up a big resolution and started. The people hissed and cleared their throats and did many things to get my attention, but with eyes on the speaker I made right for the front seat... When the lesson was read I rose and went back to my hiding place in the gallery, but not to be hid, for all the people were watching and whispering about the boy with bare feet.¹

This episode fueled Tindley's desire to become educated; later on he made a rule to learn one new thing each day, and he kept that rule for the rest of his life.

Tindley was working as the janitor at Bainbridge ME Church in Philadelphia when he took his examination for admission to the Delaware Conference in 1885. On the day of the examination he was ridiculed by the other candidates, all of whom had the formal education Tindley lacked. One of them asked him how he expected to pass. "The other candidates and I have diplomas," the rude young man pressed. "What do you hold?" To which Tindley modestly responded, "Nothing but a broom." But Tindley was soon vindicated; when the tests were marked, his was the second highest score.²

In his book *The Prince of Colored Preachers*, Tindley's son Rev. E. T. Tindley records many anecdotes from his father's life that illustrate his great faith, including the story of his arrival at his first appointment in Cape May, New Jersey. The area was experiencing a heavy snowstorm, and Tindley and his family were isolated in their new parsonage. They had no food except a stale piece of bread, and had decided to dip that in some water (they had no milk), to soften it up a bit, then break it into pieces to give to the children, Mary and Fredrick. As for themselves, there would be nothing to eat. In the front room was another baby daughter who had passed away the night before.

Charles Tindley asked his wife to set the table as though she had the food to put in the dishes. She was understandably reluctant to do so at first, but finally agreed. After the table had been set, he said, "Now let us get on our knees and have our morning prayer." Then he proceeded to thank God for being alive, for their health and strength, for the sunshine and the snowstorm that was raging outside. Not once did he complain about the shortage of provisions, but thanked God for what they had. Then, getting up from their knees and seating themselves at the table, they prepared to say grace over the food that was not there. At that moment, they heard someone commanding his team of horses to stop outside their door. Tindley opened the door to find standing there a man who had come to deliver food and firewood to the "new parson."³ It was out of this experience that Tindley wrote the hymn "God Will Provide for Me."

¹Charles Albert Tindley, *A Book of Sermons* (Philadelphia), iii, 1

²*Maranatha Manna* (newspaper), February 1992, 3.

³E. T. Tindley, *The Prince of Colored Preachers* (Muskegon, MI: Patterson Press, 1942), 11-12.

Here I may be weak and poor,
With afflictions to endure;
All about me not a ray of light to see,
Just as He has often done,
For His helpless trusting ones,
God has promised to provide for me...

All creation is His own,
All my needs to Him are known.
He has promised to provide for me.

In 1902 Tindley was appointed pastor of Bainbridge Street ME Church, where he had once served as janitor. Under his leadership the congregation grew rapidly, and soon they were in need of a larger building. In 1906, they purchased a church building on South Broad Street from a

Charles Tindley

Presbyterian congregation in a move that broke a significant racial barrier. Prior to that time, realtors had refused to sell property on Broad Street or other center city streets to African Americans. But Tindley surmounted this prejudicial treatment by his popularity and his acquaintance with such men as John Wanamaker and Dr. Russell Conwell, founder of what was then called Temple College.⁴ The church name was changed to Calvary ME Church in 1907, and to East Calvary in 1914 when a church in West Philadelphia took prior claim on the Calvary name. Soon even the 1500-seat sanctuary of the new building became inadequate and construction began on a new building to include a sanctuary capable of seating 3200. At midnight on the eve of the dedication of the new building, Mrs. Tindley died, and it was a grief-stricken Charles who carried on his ministry. Soon the congregation numbered 7,000, and the sanctuary was filled to capacity three times each Sunday.⁵ (At the time of his death, Tindley's congregation numbered over 12,500).⁶ Some records mention people lining up hours ahead of time to assure themselves of seats; they say that those who had attended in the morning were instructed not to return for the evening service in order to give others the opportunity to worship.

But Charles Tindley did more than preach. He also started a soup kitchen (referred to in his day as a breadline) which often fed 500 men and women. In addition, if people needed clothing, the pastor provided it, and he helped to find jobs for the unemployed.⁷

⁴The Daily Times Salisbury, MD, February 23, 1992, B7.

⁵Maranatha Manna.

⁶E. T. Tindley, 34.

⁷William F. McDermott, "Tindley Temple United Methodist Church" (reprint excerpts from Coronet magazine, June 1946), 9.



One morning, according to his son, Tindley was busily engaged in his study when he was told that a man wished to see him. After the man had been admitted, he was asked to state his mission. He told of his heavy burdens which were becoming more than he could bear, and so he had come seeking counsel and advice. Pastor Tindley, having many times been confronted with this same situation, advised him, "Go home and secure a large sack, then get all of your troubles together and name each one as you drop them in, to be sure that none is forgotten. Get it up on your shoulder and go upstairs away from everyone. When this is done, sling that burden down at the feet of Jesus, and leave it there. As you go about your daily work, thank Him for answering your prayer, and before you realize it, your prayer will be answered." After the man had left, Charles Tindley, thinking of his own experience as much as his advice to the young man, composed the song entitled: "Take Your Burden to the Lord and Leave It There."⁸

If the world from you withhold of its silver and its gold,
and you have to get along with meager fare,
Just remember in his Word how he feeds the little bird,
take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.
Leave it there, leave it there,
take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.
If you trust and never doubt,
he will surely bring you out;
take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

Charles Albert Tindley was a well-known and much-loved figure in the city of Philadelphia, easily recognized, in part because of his imposing 6 foot, 2 inch, 230-pound frame, as he walked South Broad Street in search of souls to minister to. He was often called "the people's pastor," and was known for living the life that he preached about and preaching about the life that his parishioners experienced. He was also a leader in the Delaware Conference, which he represented at seven General Conferences from 1908 to 1932, and an advocate for inclusion: people of many different nationalities and races not only attended his services but served as officers of the congregation,⁹ and he advocated for women to be given orders as local preachers.

When one of his sons was once asked how his father had obtained his success, he answered quickly, "On his knees." Like a good follower of John Wesley, Tindley rose at 4 AM each morning to spend time in his study singing and praying.

Charles Albert Tindley died on July 2, 1933, survived by his second wife and six of his twelve children. On his deathbed, he pointed out the window and

⁸E. T. Tindley, 25.

⁹McDermott, 9.

said, "I can see my mansion now. It is as large as the state of Pennsylvania."¹⁰ He left behind instructions that there be no sadness at his funeral, but that it be a farewell reception where all of his hymns would be sung. He also insisted that it include an altar call, for, as he said, "I would like to present my Savior a bouquet of human lives at my farewell reception."¹¹ Tindley had gone to be with his Savior; he was free from the burdens of this life.

Beams of heaven as I go,
through this wilderness below,
Guide my feet in peaceful ways,
turn my midnights into days.
When in the darkness I would grope,
faith always sees a star of hope,
And soon from all life's grief and danger
I shall be free someday.
I do not know how long 'twill be,
nor what the future holds for me,
But this I know: if Jesus leads me,
I shall get home someday.

These words, from one of Tindley's most famous hymns, were inscribed on the granite monument that was placed on his grave in Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, Pennsylvania. The monument was dedicated, and the life of Charles Albert Tindley celebrated, on September 14, 2002, beginning with a service at Tindley Temple United Methodist Church at 11:00 AM, and continuing with a procession to the cemetery. Church leaders from across the denomination gathered that day for a joyous commemoration of Tindley's life and legacy and the music that still moves our hearts.

¹⁰E. T. Tindley, 31.

¹¹Ibid.