Summary

The Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church building is significant because for more than six decades it has been the home of one of Hartford's leading African-American religious organizations, one that is a direct descendant of the city's first African-American church (Criterion A). First known as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, the congregation was formed in 1833 when the earliest known church, the African Religious Society, which had been formed in 1826, split in two. Located first on Elm Street, then for many years on Pearl Street, and since 1926 on Main Street, the church has been a focal point for many within the city's African-American community, not only as a place for religious worship but also for the social and humanitarian activities associated with it. The church's move to the present building, made necessary by the construction of the Hartford Fire Department headquarters, coincided with a period of rapid growth in the African-American population, as people moved to Hartford to take advantage of opportunities created by the city's industrial expansion and by the spread of tobacco production throughout the Capitol area.

The building also has architectural significance because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of the High Victorian Gothic style of architecture (Criterion C). Among these characteristics are the use of medieval elements, such as the arched windows, buttresses, and ceiling beams; a complexity of form created by the dissimilar towers, projecting gables, and dormers; and the use of polychromatic masonry effects.

Although buildings owned by religious organizations or used for religious purposes are not normally eligible for the National Register, the Metropolitan A. M. E. Zion Church qualifies because of its architectural qualities and because of the historical importance of churches in the community life of urban African Americans (Criteria Consideration A).

Historical Significance

As in most eastern American cities, the religious history of Hartford's African Americans followed a distinctive pattern: dissatisfaction with their treatment by white churches, formation of independent congregations, affiliation with national denominations, and growth during several episodes of migration that swelled the city's African-American population. As early as 1816 a group of people, discontented

with their segregation in the balconies of the city's predominantly white churches, began meeting together; in 1826 they formed the African Religious Society and acquired a building on Talcott Street. In 1833 the society divided in two, with those preferring the Congregationalist tradition forming the Colored Congregational Church.[1] The other members formed the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, purchasing land for a house of worship on Elm Street. By 1856, when the property was bought by the city in order to clear the way for Bushnell Park, the group had already affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a national organization headquartered in New York. The church then built a new building nearby on Pearl Street. Along with an associated school, it became a focus for many within Hartford's African-American community, which numbered 443 people, or 3% of the city's population, in 1850.

African Americans played a major role in the growth of American Methodism. In 1771, when John Wesley sent Francis Asbury to preach in America, there were only 5,000 Methodists in all the colonies. By 1816, when Asbury (by then the first Methodist bishop) died, there were 212,000. Asbury's fellow preacher in all his evangelical efforts was Harry Hosier, known as Black Harry, and in most northern cities African Americans made up a sizeable portion of those who responded to Methodism's call. Methodism's emphasis on the equality of sinners before God, belief in individual salvation, and general opposition to slavery undoubtedly contributed to its appeal, as did its enthusiastic forms of worship, which, according to many scholars, African-American Methodists fused with West African traditions to create a unique combination of singing and movement that endures to this day.

Despite Hosier's role in the founding of the movement, Methodist churches relegated African Americans to a secondary role. Often they were confined to certain pews, few served as officers, and the "classes," the subgroups within congregations, were usually organized along strictly separate racial lines. In 1796 a group of African Americans withdrew from New York's John Street Methodist Church to form (with Asbury's blessing) Mother Zion Church. In 1820 Mother Zion severed its connection with the white Methodist organization altogether and the following year created the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Soon independent African-American congregations in other cities began affiliating with the denomination, which elected James

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[1]Later known as the Talcott Street Congregational Church, it is still active today as the Faith Congregational Church.

Varick of New York its first bishop. Affiliation with such a national organization gave local churches a source for religious publications, supported the training and placement of preachers, and created a sense of belonging to a larger group of people that shared their experience. Among the prominent figures who were members of A. M. E. Zion congregations were Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth.

Hartford's A. M. E. Zion Church grew steadily as the city's African-American population increased. After the Civil War, the core of families that had lived in Connecticut since colonial times was joined by numerous migrants from the south. A new and larger church on Pearl Street was built in 1898, by which time the city's African-American population numbered almost 1,900 people. Industrial expansion during World War I and the spread of tobacco culture throughout the Hartford region attracted even greater numbers, so when the church relocated in 1926, it was fitting for it to move into this large and attractive structure.[2] By the end of the 1920s, there were more than 6,500 African Americans living in Hartford. In addition to holding services, the church sponsored a Christian Endeavor group and a Missionary Society, and several secular organizations such as Masonic groups were closely associated with the church. The church thus served as a social focal point for the community. During the 1960s, Hartford's African-American churches also took on an important political role: the city's African-American ministers formed a coalition that worked to expose discrimination and promote the passage of Civil Rights legislation.

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[2]The building had been built in 1873-1874 by a white congregation and was known as the North Methodist Episcopal Church. Although intended to hold 500 people, the society remained small and was nearly bankrupted by building the church, which remained incomplete for many years. By 1919, however, the group had grown enough to build a new church on Albany Avenue, putting this building up for sale. For a short time, a Jewish congregation owned it and was considering remodelling it for use as a synagogue.