

Bethel African Methodist (AME) Church

Individual Landmark
60 West 132nd Street



Bethel African Methodist Church. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

The First African Methodist Episcopal Church: Bethel (Bethel AME) is located at 60 West 132nd Street in the Borough of Manhattan in the City of New York. Bethel AME is in central Harlem, approximately half a mile west of the Harlem River and one mile north of Central Park. The church complex is situated on the south side of West 132nd Street, between Malcolm X Boulevard and Fifth Avenue. Moving from west to east along the block, the church complex includes the church, its former rectory, and the Bethel Manor apartment building.

The church, rectory, and apartment building each occupy nearly their entire lot. A contemporary metal fence runs in front of the entrances of the church and is matched by fencing and the railing on the concrete steps in front of the rectory. Two raised planters with

shrubbery and concrete steps and a ramp running parallel to the street are in front of the apartment building.

Two-story, one-bay by six-bay, Neo-Gothic church resting on a random ashlar granite foundation. The church's north elevation has a cast stone and terra-cotta facade and features a central gable flanked by two vertical piers. The building's east, west, and south elevations are covered in stucco and punctured by six-pointed arch stained-glass windows. The building is rectangular in plan, with a small annex attached to the building's southwest corner. The church's original design remains intact, and the building's interior and exterior retain much of their original decoration.

The facade is dominated by an ornate central section with an entrance pavilion, large window, and gable. Three granite steps fronted by an attached non-historic wrought-iron gate on the sidewalk lead to a slightly projecting pavilion. The pavilion features three multi-paneled doors and transoms, each of which is set within a recessed pointed arch. While the wood paneling is undecorated, each door boasts a bronze handle with Gothic tracery. The spaces between the doorways are decorated by four decorative cast stone flowers, set within a rectangle, and topped by blind lancet arches. A course of cast stone label molding highlights the entryway.

The façade is dominated by a pointed arch stained-glass window that rises above the entrance pavilion. The window's-stained glass is arranged in an ornate geometric pattern. Surrounding the window is a terra cotta frame with ornamentation of blind pointed arches and quatrefoils. Above this, there is a cast stone pediment with a terra cotta belt course of blind arches pierced by a curved empty niche. The facade is topped by a pointed, ornamental crown with Gothic detailing that serves as a false front for the building's flat roof.

Two comparatively unadorned piers flank the front gable. Each pier is capped by vertical terra cotta elements which stretch upward from the second story to terminate in three blind lancet arches, topped by a crown of trefoil tracery and foliated pinnacles. A metal cross reading "AME CHURCH: BETHEL" protrudes outward from the eastern pier, and a pair of signboards sit on either side of the doorway.

On both the east and west elevations, the rough cast-stone cladding of the front extends around the corner to frame the first of six bays. The remainder of these side elevations are faced in stucco with a beige cementitious coating. These more austere elevations are punctured by six pairs of stained-glass windows: each bay consists of a small, square window at the level of the first floor topped by a tall pointed arch window stretching up to the roofline. These stained-glass windows feature a similar ornamental tracery to that found in the large window on the front facade. Five buttresses separate the windows, providing structural support to the building.

The church rectory is a two and one-half story over a raised basement, three-bay by six-bay frame residential structure. The building is covered in asbestos siding and has an asphalt-covered mansard roof; the foundation is covered by siding but appears to be brick. A flight of non-historic concrete steps rising from east to west, provides access from the sidewalk to the front door. The rectory's raised basement has two small windows partially sunken below

street level. On the first floor, the doorway is in the westernmost bay. It is flanked by two one-over-one double hung wood windows that stretch the full height of the door. The second-floor features three smaller one-over-one double hung wood windows. This is topped by a mansard roof on the façade; the building is primarily covered by a shed roof. A pair of front-gabled dormers, each containing a twin set of one-over-one windows, projects from the roofline. The east and west elevations lack fenestration. The north elevation has a door and a non-historic safety glass window on the first floor, and two two-over-two double hung sash windows on each of the second and third floors.

The manor apartment building is a six-story, thirteen-bay by six-bay, flat-roofed brick building built in a simple modern style. The symmetrical building is roughly rectangular but is given some rhythm by projecting bays on each end and slightly projecting balcony bays four bays from each end. This setback of the other bays provides space for a ramp and two raised gardens, all of which are constructed of the same brick as the facade. On the first floor, the entrance is set slightly off center. A set of stairs leading up to a patio rises to the entrance, which has a pair of glass doors set within a recessed entry. The one-story entry porch is made up of a concrete slab cantilevered off a vertical concrete element set against the west side of the stair form. The building has regular fenestration; all of the bays, excepting the balconies, feature paired one-over-one windows with a built-in air conditioner underneath. On the second through sixth stories, the fourth bay inward from both ends of the building contains a set of balconies. These slightly projecting balconies are enclosed by brick walls on either side and divided in half by another wall that separates the outdoor space between the adjacent apartment units. The west elevation abuts the adjacent building, and the east elevation has a single window in each of the two central bays.