

The Reverend Ron Rawls

Pastor, Civil-Rights Advocate, Faith Leader, and Community Activist

The Reverend Ron Rawls is an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) pastor, civil-rights advocate, faith leader, and community activist whose ministry has combined Christian faith, racial justice, civic engagement, and community development.

Born **October 15, 1966**, Rev. Rawls was born and raised in Gainesville, Florida. He earned a **Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion from the University of Florida** and is also a licensed real-estate agent, although he is identified as non-practicing in that field.[1]

Rawls' ministry began in **October 1994**. He was ordained as an itinerant deacon in **1997** and an itinerant elder in **1999**. He received his first pastoral appointment in 1999 and has served congregations in **Chiefland, Trenton, Jasper, St. Augustine, and Gainesville, Florida**. [1][2]

His ministry has been strongly influenced by the historic civil-rights tradition of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Rawls identifies the late **Dr. Robert B. Hayling**, a central figure in St. Augustine's civil-rights movement, as a mentor. His stated approach to ministry and community activism is organized around three concepts: **Confronting, Educating, and Building**. [2]

Pastoral Ministry and AME Leadership

Rawls' pastoral ministry extends from his first appointment in **1999 to the present**. His current pastoral assignment is **Greater Bethel AME Church in Gainesville**, where he has served since **October 30, 2020**. [1]

His responsibilities extend beyond his local congregation. Within the AME Church's East Conference, his listed responsibilities include serving as **Statistician, Second Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees, member of the Finance Committee, member of the Conference Adjustments Committee, and General Conference Delegate**. [1]

These responsibilities demonstrate that Rawls's work includes not only pastoral leadership but also administrative, financial, institutional, and denominational responsibilities within the AME Church.

St. Augustine and the Civil-Rights Movement

Rawls served for many years as pastor of historic **St. Paul AME Church in St. Augustine**. The church has an important place in the city's civil-rights history and hosted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the movement of the 1960s.[3]

While serving in St. Augustine, Rawls became an increasingly prominent advocate on issues involving racial justice, historical memory, policing, government representation, and Confederate monuments.

His biography describes him as an activist in **Jasper, St. Augustine, St. Johns County, Gainesville, Alachua County, and throughout Florida**, and characterizes his activism as an expression of the AME tradition of placing the church at the forefront of the pursuit of justice.[2]

In 2017, Rawls organized public discussion at St. Paul AME concerning the removal of Confederate memorials from public spaces and urged the St. Augustine City Commission to remove the monuments.[4]

The campaign became one of the most visible civil-rights controversies in St. Augustine. Rawls opposed efforts merely to contextualize the Confederate memorial with historical plaques, arguing that the monument's location and symbolism remained problematic.[5] Contemporary reporting described him as a leader of the effort to remove the Confederate memorial from the city's Plaza de la Constitución.[6]

Rawls' activism also included demonstrations during major public events. His approach was to use peaceful direct action and public protest to bring racial-justice issues before city government and the broader community.

Florida Poor People's Campaign — 2018

In 2018, Rawls became involved in the Florida chapter of the **Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival**, the national movement inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s unfinished Poor People's Campaign.

The Florida campaign launched at the Florida Capitol in Tallahassee on **February 5, 2018**. Contemporary news coverage documented the beginning of the campaign's statewide activities.[7]

Rawls participated prominently in the campaign's 2018 actions. On **May 21, 2018**, *Florida Politics* reported on a Poor People's Campaign rally at the Florida Capitol and identified Rawls as a participant who delivered the closing remarks. His remarks addressed voting

rights, mass incarceration, and racial disparities and included support for restoring voting rights to Floridians with felony convictions.[8]

Independent television coverage provides particularly important evidence concerning Rawls' formal role. WTXL's contemporaneous report on the beginning of the campaign's 40 days of nonviolent protests identifies him specifically as **“Faith Leader Ron Rawls.”** The report shows Rawls speaking at the Florida Capitol about poverty, wages, housing costs, and homelessness.[9]

Additional primary-source documentation from **July 19, 2018**, provides direct evidence of his organizational title. In correspondence with Amy J. Miller, whose signature identified her as Fundraising & Finance for the **Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival**, Rawls followed up regarding reimbursement for his April 2018 Nashville training. His contemporaneous email signature identified him as:

“Florida Poor People's Campaign, Faith Leader.”[10]

Together, the contemporaneous news report and the 2018 campaign correspondence establish that Rawls served as a **Faith Leader of the Florida Poor People's Campaign in 2018.**

Confederate Monument Campaign and 2020 Outcome

Rawls continued his St. Augustine campaign against Confederate monuments into 2018–2020. In July 2018, contemporary reporting documented his opposition to the city's proposal to retain the Confederate memorial while adding contextualizing plaques.[5]

In June 2020, amid the nationwide racial-justice demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd, Rawls remained an active participant in St. Augustine demonstrations. A University of Chicago publication described a St. Augustine demonstration called **“Standing in Strength”** as being led by Rawls of St. Paul AME Church.[11]

That same month, the St. Augustine City Commission voted to remove the Confederate monument from the Plaza de la Constitución. Contemporary reporting noted that Rawls had been vocal about removing the monuments since 2017.[12] The monument was subsequently relocated.

The removal was the culmination of a broader community and governmental process involving Rawls and other activists, city officials, historians, residents, and other stakeholders. It should therefore be understood as a collective civic outcome rather than an action attributable to Rawls alone.

Greater Bethel AME Church — Gainesville

On **October 30, 2020**, at the 145th Session of the AME Church's East Annual Conference, Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson appointed Rev. Ron Rawls pastor of **Greater Bethel AME Church in Gainesville**, the city where Rawls was born and raised.[13]

The attached ministry biography identifies Greater Bethel as Rawls's current pastoral assignment and records his service there from October 30, 2020, to the present.[1]

At Greater Bethel, Rawls has continued a ministry that combines worship and pastoral care with community engagement, civic participation, social action, education, and programs addressing community needs.

His approach has consequently expanded from direct-action protest into community-based institutional work, including health, education, youth development, civic engagement, and economic opportunity.

Community and Civic Leadership in Alachua County

Rawls's community involvement in Alachua County extends beyond his pastoral role.

The 2026 ministry biography identifies him as a member and **Social Action Committee Chair of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.**, a member and **Social Action Chair of the Alachua County NPHC**, and a member and **Second Vice-President of the Alachua County NAACP**. [1]

The biography also identifies leadership roles in local education, including:

- **Chair, Eastside High School School Advisory Council**
- **Member, Alachua County Public Schools District Advisory Council**. [1]

These positions add an important dimension to Rawls's community work. His activism has not been limited to demonstrations or public statements; it has also included participation in civic organizations, educational institutions, fraternity-based social action, and local advocacy organizations.

Alachua County Equity Advisory Board

Rawls subsequently became involved with the **Alachua County Equity Advisory Board (EAB)** and served as its chair.

The Equity Advisory Board was established to assist Alachua County with its Equity Action Plan; review policies, programs, and services for racial and gender bias; recommend ways of eliminating such bias; and engage residents and organizations in the policy process.[14]

In January 2025, Alachua County announced a community listening session chaired by Rawls at Greater Bethel AME Church. The purpose was to hear residents' experiences and concerns regarding equity in county programs, services, and policies.[15]

In February 2025, Rawls presented the Equity Advisory Board's work to the Alachua County Commission. Among the board's reported accomplishments was development of an **Equity Audit Tool**, which the board used to examine the housing element of the county's Comprehensive Plan. The board also conducted a community listening session to gather residents' perspectives on equity-related issues.[16]

This phase of Rawls's work represents a transition from primarily direct-action civil-rights advocacy toward participation in a formal governmental advisory process intended to examine and address institutional inequities.

A Ministry Rooted in Generational Vision

The attached 2026 biography provides an important additional explanation of Rawls's philosophy of ministry. It describes his vision as being rooted not only in confronting present injustice but also in preparing future generations to inherit stronger institutions and opportunities.[2]

Rawls frames this philosophy through the biblical language of being “**the head and not the tail**” and “**above and not beneath,**” coupled with the discipline of leaving an inheritance for one's children and a legacy for descendants.[2]

His three-legged framework—**Confronting, Educating, and Building**—therefore provides a useful lens through which to understand his pastoral and civic work:

Confront injustice and inequity rather than ignore them.

Educate individuals and communities about the forces affecting their lives.

Build institutions, relationships, opportunities, and legacies capable of benefiting future generations.

This philosophy connects Rawls's work in the civil-rights movement, the Poor People's Campaign, church ministry, civic organizations, education, and Alachua County equity work.

A Continuing Ministry of Faith and Justice

Across his pastoral and civic career, Rev. Ron Rawls's work has consistently connected religious faith with public responsibility.

His documented and biographical record includes:

- Pastoral ministry beginning in 1994 and continuing to the present;
- Ordination as an AME itinerant deacon in 1997 and itinerant elder in 1999;
- Pastoral service in Chiefland, Trenton, Jasper, St. Augustine, and Gainesville;
- Civil-rights and racial-justice advocacy in St. Augustine and throughout North Central Florida;
- Leadership in the **Florida Poor People's Campaign as a Faith Leader in 2018**;
- Advocacy surrounding Confederate monuments and their eventual removal from St. Augustine's historic plaza;
- Participation in racial-justice demonstrations during 2020;
- Pastoral leadership at Greater Bethel AME Church beginning October 30, 2020;
- Leadership and participation in community, educational, fraternity, NAACP, and civic organizations;
- Service in the **Alachua County Equity Advisory Board**;
- AME East Conference leadership responsibilities; and
- Continuing efforts to connect faith, justice, civic participation, and generational community development.

His career can therefore be understood through several interconnected stages:

Pastoral ministry → historical preservation → direct-action civil-rights advocacy → statewide faith-based organizing → civic and educational leadership → institutional equity and community development.

Rather than separating the pulpit from community life, Rawls has treated the church as a platform for addressing issues affecting the social, economic, political, educational, and spiritual well-being of the community.

His stated framework—**Confront, Educate, Build**—summarizes this approach: confront injustice, educate people about the issues affecting their communities, and build institutions and opportunities capable of producing lasting change.[2]

Today, Rev. Ron Rawls serves as pastor of Greater Bethel AME Church in Gainesville and remains engaged in community and civic affairs in Alachua County. His public record and ministry biography reflect a career extending beyond traditional pastoral responsibilities into sustained participation in Florida's civil-rights, faith-based organizing, educational, civic, and community-development movements.

Footnotes / Sources

1. Primary biographical source: *Ministry Bio 2026*, Greater Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, updated September 23, 2026. The document provides Rawls's birth date, education, ministry dates, ordinations, pastoral assignments, current appointment, AME Conference responsibilities, and local organizational roles.

2. Primary biographical source: *Ministry Bio 2026*, “Biography.” The document describes Rawls as a pastor, community activist, and prophetic voice; identifies his Gainesville roots, pastoral history, civil-rights activism, mentorship by Dr. Robert B. Hayling, and the “Confronting, Educating and Building” framework.

3. Diocese of St. Augustine, “Ceremonies Remember the Hardships and Contributions of our Ancestors,” February 9, 2015.

4. News4JAX, “St. Augustine city leaders prepare for Confederate memorial debate,” October 19, 2017.

5. News4JAX, “Task force: Context needed for St. Augustine's Confederate memorial,” July 10, 2018.

6. Florida Phoenix, “Update: St Augustine votes for Confederate monument with ‘context’.”

7. *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 5, 2018, “Activists revive Poor People's Campaign half-century after King assassination,” and accompanying video, “Watch: Poor People's Campaign in Tallahassee.”

8. *Florida Politics*, May 21, 2018, “Felon rights restoration on horizon for Poor People's Campaign.” [Florida Politics — “Felon rights restoration on horizon for Poor People's Campaign”](#)

9. WTXL, “Poor People's Campaign begins 40 days of nonviolent protests.” The report explicitly identifies Rawls as “**Faith Leader Ron Rawls.**” [WTXL — “Poor People's Campaign begins 40 days of nonviolent protests”](#)

10. **Primary source:** July 19, 2018 email correspondence between Rev. Ron Rawls and Amy J. Miller of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Rawls's contemporaneous signature identifies him as “**Florida Poor People's Campaign, Faith Leader.**” The correspondence concerns reimbursement for the April 2018 Nashville training.

11. University of Chicago Magazine, “A New Era,” documenting the 2020 St. Augustine “Standing in Strength” demonstration led by Rev. Ron Rawls.

12. News4JAX, “Controversy swirls over Confederate monuments in St. Augustine,” June 11, 2020.

13. Greater Bethel AME Church, “Our Story” and “Meet Our Pastor,” documenting Rawls's appointment as pastor on October 30, 2020.

14. Alachua County Equity Advisory Board, Annual Workplan 2024–2025.

15. Alachua County, “Alachua County Equity Advisory Board Invites Community to Listening Session,” January 9, 2025.

16. *Alachua Chronicle*, February 25, 2025, reporting on Rawls's presentation of the Equity Advisory Board's 2024 accomplishments to the County Commission, including the Equity Audit Tool and community listening session.