



THE UNION OF BLACK EPISCOPALIANS

THE CHALLENGE OF THE UNION OF BLACK EPISCOPALIANS

by

The Right Reverend John M. Burgess

The Union of Black Episcopalians speaks to the conscience of white Americans, and specifically to the members of the Episcopal Church. It must also speak to black members, if it is to be saved from a spirit of self-righteousness and complacency. We must acknowledge our own shortcomings, as well as stand in judgment of others. There are certain problems that only we can deal with, if we are to have a full and meaningful life within the Church.

First of all, there is confusion in the black congregation as to its nature and purpose. Without going into details about the ways of worship, the traditions and doctrines and the life style that the Episcopal Church would share with those who would enter its fellowship, we must admit that generally it has attracted folk who would be classified as the "black bourgeoisie". This has been true of other predominately white churches that have a minority black membership. In too many instances, these churches have been too small to support themselves and have for generations depended upon the funds from church headquarters for financial undergirding. Some of these "missions" have received help for a hundred years, and, in spite of their locations in burgeoning urban situations, have kept about the same membership year after year. In many instances the members live comfortably, have stable incomes and yet seem quite satisfied with their small chapels, underpaid clergy and the non-existence of viable programs of outreach. In the Episcopal Church some fault can be laid

at the door of diocesan authorities that are satisfied with this pattern of paternalism. The congregations are also at fault by regarding their churches as little clubs of "better people", but not being able or willing to pay for the privilege of their exclusiveness. The challenge that faces such congregations is presently acute, for church executives, facing limited financial resources, are unwilling to use what money is available for missions projects that are not "mission-minded". There is the added problem of clergy to supply these places. Not only are there not enough black vocations to meet the growing demand for clergy, but we are stymied in our efforts to recruit sufficient seminarians who are willing to commit their lives to stagnant, self-centered, class-conscious churches.

A second problem facing many black congregations is their apparent inability to make up their minds as to whether they are essentially black or white. This is not a problem in the white church, for it shows in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that it is quite aware of the color of black congregations! Many of our people are even alienated by the name of the Union of Black Episcopalians, saying that it is too racist, that it is separatist and demeaning. If there are those who are still troubled by the word "black", then they have a problem and there is very little that the Church can do about it. America has spent a long time teaching its people to regard anything dark as inferior and second class. The Union, however, joins with other Americans of color who have redeemed their racial heritage and appreciate the potential of all of God's people, whatever the color of their skin. To say, "Black is beautiful," is neither boastful nor derogatory to others. It reflects our assurance that all of God's creatures reflect His image. As the Church's Baptismal Covenant declares we "seek and serve Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every human being".

In the present state of American society it is important that black citizens use every means at their disposal for the development of black leadership. The black Church has traditionally been the center of that training and experience. Integration has too often meant the submerging of black power and influence, and the suppression of any attempt to give black people opportunities to express their inherent gifts. In the Church it has meant that gaining the 'privilege' of worshipping with whites has resulted in having no black clergy in charge, no black professional staff, no wardens, no vestry, heads of organizations or delegates to synods or conventions. There are, of course, exceptions, but usually we are merely 'present', worshipping under the influence that "race doesn't matter".

Along with this situation is the black congregation served by white clergy. I realize that in certain places that this is a moot question, for there is a shortage of black clergy and a surplus of white ones - and the white ones want jobs - no matter! But we must also keep in mind that there are few, if any, instances where such a congregation has developed a strong, growing membership or taken a place in leadership in the larger black community. Devout church people may say, "We don't care about color. All we want is a good priest." And often a white person fulfills their wish. I know of several churches that have been well served by such faithful, hard working priests who have done all they could to make a go of it. But in these days, their best is not enough. The black community expects and needs its ministers to serve more than a particular constituency. The black community exists within a dominant white community that has deliberately and systematically torn up its roots, obliterated its history and refused to acknowledge black worth or dignity. The black Church has valiantly taken on the task of presenting to its people black leaders who have aspired to

higher things; role models who have 'made it'; and clergy and lay leaders who have involved themselves in every movement for betterment and progress. There is little or no place for white representation in this process. The white pastor becomes chaplain to his 'select' group, but not a participant in the development of the black community. I have heard of white clergy working in black parishes, unsettled by this growing black awareness and resenting their own ostracism. They destroy any literature that comes from black activist organizations and discourage their people from participating in the UBE or similar movements towards black solidarity. It is easy to recall examples from the past that contradict this view. However, we must remember that urban life has changed radically in these days and that black America has discovered that progress in racial fulfillment depends largely on its own efforts.

This is not only an American phenomenon. It is a significant fact that every diocese in the province of the West Indies today has a black bishop, and that there are few white bishops left in the rapidly growing dioceses of Africa. I am confident that the Episcopal Church will be an effective agent in the Christian formation of the black community only when it understands the role of black leadership and the contributions it can make on every level of the Church's life. It is a lesson that must be learned and acted upon by the black congregation as plans for growth and development are envisioned.

Finally, we must deal with the challenge of responsible stewardship. We have already mentioned the character of some of the mission churches that have limped along, generation after generation, depending upon diocesan funding for their existence. The problem, however, is larger than the raising of sufficient money to become 'independent parishes'. Too often this goal is reached only by paying the clergy the lowest possible salary, and contributing as little as

possible toward the 'quota' assessed by the diocese for its support and that of the National Church. Surely a responsibility falls on a Christian congregation to give beyond its own needs! Some take out a life membership in the NAACP. Some raise money for scholarship aid to worthy students. Some send donations to the black Episcopal colleges. Yet, all in all, few give over and above their assigned quotas. Very little is given for mission work in our great urban centers, or for desperately needed help in the West Indies or Africa. Appeals for the national program of the UBE are dropped into too many clergy waste baskets and our people are deprived of the opportunity to participate in the Union's concerns. Lack of money is not the problem. Our people are generally able to maintain a good standard of living. They attend the 'right' functions in society and community events and travel widely, visiting the great resort areas of the world. That the Church and its mission to the world occupies a third-rate place in our interests is a reflection, not of our incomes, but of our sense of stewardship and our sense of social responsibility.

To recognize our failures and weaknesses is the first step toward gaining our strength. We can speak to the church with confidence and conviction when we know that we, as black church people, are united in our witness and our obedience to the Gospel of our Lord Who calls us to discipleship. The Union of Black Episcopalians insists that we demonstrate our obedience, not by anger and resentment, not by withdrawal or schism, but by striving to help the Church reflect in its total life the declaration of our official Catechism - that "the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ", and that this mission will be accomplished as we "pray and worship, proclaim the Gospel and promote justice and love".