

# in the Ministry of the Episcopal Church

## *the Call, the Challenge, the Context, the Cost.*



*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*

—Jeremiah 1:5

*I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger?" I answered, "Here I am. Send me."*

—Isaiah 6:8

### **I. The Call**

What does it mean to be called? To be called, to have a vocation, means that God in His wisdom has chosen you to perform a particular task which will help build up His Body, the Church.

God calls men and women to serve in many capacities—as teachers, nurses, electricians, doctors, and secretaries, to name a few. He also calls some men and women to serve Him and His Church as ordained ministers.

Are you one of those? Is it possible that God is calling you to the ministry—and you are not even aware of it? Or perhaps you suspect that you are being called to the ministry—but have dismissed the idea, thinking yourself unworthy, or not "cut out" for such a profession.

If you have responded in such a way, you are in good company. Even the prophets balked when God called them. Isaiah claimed he was a man of unclean lips; so God cleansed them with a live coal (Is. 6:5-7). Jeremiah begged off,

saying he was too young; but the Lord gave him the confidence he needed (Jer. 1:5-7). Ezekiel was afraid because he wouldn't know what to say, so God literally put words in his mouth (Ez. 2:6-3:4). Esther, a Jewish orphan girl who became queen against all odds, risked her position and her very life to save her fellow Jews from extermination, believing it was part of the divine plan that she had been put on the throne "for such a time as this." (Esther 4:14). Mary, at first startled and frightened by the angel's words, found strength in them, and consented to be the bearer of the Christ Child, the Incarnate Word, declaring, "Be it unto me according to thy word" (Lk. 1:38).

Throughout history, then, God has not always chosen the worthy; He has made worthy those whom He chooses.

#### **How will you know when you are called?**

Some people miss the call because they are expecting a vision, or a lightning bolt, or a voice from

a cloud. God does not necessarily go the dramatic route. He works through His people—for example, through a minister or priest or college chaplain who encourages you to think along these lines, or through fellow churchmembers. You may hear God calling you through the worship of the church; or through the reading of scripture, or at a vocations conference. He can call you "at any time and in any place"; and you can perceive the call when it comes, as long as you are open to the Spirit.

#### **What should you do to respond to a call?**

Pray about it; then speak to your priest or college chaplain, or any minister whom you know, and he or she will discuss with you the process through which the church will test and hopefully affirm the call you have received from God. If you are not an Episcopalian, and would like to join the Episcopal Church, you should seek out the minister in the Episcopal church nearest you.



## II. The Challenge

What does it mean to be a priest, and especially a black priest, in times like these?

The exercise of the ordained ministry, especially in and for the black community, is an exciting challenge. If you are serious about liberation, there is probably no better way to be of service than as a minister.

The church has always been the most important institution in the black community. It has nurtured and sustained black people through slavery, poverty, discrimination, and injustice. As a leader of a religious community, you will be in a position to make a difference, through involvement in your own parish and in your community. Moreover, in a computerized age, when everyone is reduced to a number, you will be able to relate one-on-one with the people you serve—because the church believes that every person is a child of God, and precious in His sight.

As a black priest or minister, you will be a prophet—one who perceives and understands the events of the day, and who can interpret them for his people. As a black priest or minister, you will be a preacher; and you will learn that the pulpit in the black church is not a place to mouth platitudes, but a source of strength for the faithful, and a powerful political base. As a black priest, you will be a pastor, privileged to minister closely to those committed to your charge, especially during times of crisis, and to those in "high-risk situations" on the fringes of society. As a black minister, you will be a priest, whose honor it is to be a dispenser of the sacraments, and whose responsibility it is to make worship reflective of the black experience.

Most important, in the exercise of all these roles, you will be an evangelist, charged with the task of sharing the "good news" of the saving and liberating gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel which has at its core a love and concern for

the poor, the weak, the oppressed and downtrodden.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Bennett, a black priest in the Episcopal Church, who is Professor of Old Testament at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, succinctly describes the challenge and opportunities which blacks have in the priesthood of the Episcopal Church, in this way:

*Blacks and other "ethnics" form a minority within a privileged white majority church—white not only in numbers but in basic attitudes, presuppositions, and in its view of the world and the gospel from the stance of the privileged and majority culture. For blacks especially, their base of power of leverage within the church is within their natural, namely black, constituency, and their identity—like it or not—is with the wider, non-Episcopal poor and oppressed community.*

Dr. Bennett concludes that we must not accept, therefore, the dominant view that blacks are inferior, or unable to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," but acknowledge and seek out the power and the potential of black humanity.



Rev. Dr. Robert Bennett

There are few tasks more noble or more necessary than these. And the challenge is to give serious and prayerful consideration to the ordained ministry. The need is great. The need is for more black priests—not only to serve in parishes, but as members of national, diocesan, and cathedral staffs, as

seminary professors, as chaplains, as missionaries, and in other capacities. For, while the church-at-large complains of a "glut" or "oversupply" of priests, the black church suffers from an acute shortage. If current trends continue, as black clergy are lost through retirement, resignation, and death, our members will decrease significantly. Never has it been more true in the black community that "the harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few." We must indeed "pray the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest."

It may well be that you are one of the laborers whom the Lord wants to send forth.



## III. The Context

What will you be getting into? In what arena will the exercise of your ministry take place? What problems, barriers, or pitfalls might you encounter?

You will be a priest in a church in which you must uphold its doctrine, discipline, and worship, and be guided in the exercise of your ministry by the Constitution and Canons of the church, and by the "godly admonitions of the bishop."

Many people cite being part of a "white church" as a deterrent to being ordained in the Episcopal Church. But in the Episcopal Church, you are more than a priest in a so-called white denomination. You are a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion, most of whose 40,000,000 members are non-white.

What is more, you will be in most instances about the business of ministering to and among blacks, and will follow in a long line of distinguished black clergy—such as Absalom Jones, a man born into slavery but who became the first black priest in the Episcopal Church; Alexander Crummell, the founder of St. Luke's Church in Washington and one

of the great intellectuals of the nineteenth century; George Freeman Bragg, rector of St. James', Baltimore, one of the first to write about blacks in the Episcopal Church, and a man decades ahead of his time in his understanding of black pride and awareness; and Peter Williams, Jr., founder and rector of St. Phillip's Church (Harlem) in New York, one of the largest Episcopal churches in the world.

We are not claiming that the Episcopal Church is perfect—far from it. But we are confident that it is changing for the better; and, while all the vestiges of past policies have by no means been erased, we believe the church is making a conscientious effort, on many levels, to improve the situation. For example, through the establishment of the Episcopal Commission for Black Ministries, the church has reaffirmed its commitment to its black members; and, more recently, with its Venture-in-Mission funds, it has set aside a considerable sum to help recruit, train, and deploy blacks for the sacred ministry. Should you decide to enter seminary, some of these funds may be available to you to help with your theological education.

All of this may be interesting from an historical point of view; but perhaps you are most concerned about the type of work in which you will be engaged. There are many exciting viable congregations which stand as beacons in the communities they serve. These parishes do far more than open their doors for worship on Sunday. Rather, from the altar, which is the center of parish life, radiates a host of activities which underscore those parishes' commitment to their respective communities.

- St. Phillip's, Harlem—whose rector, Dr. M. Moran Weston, has served that parish for nearly three decades—operates a counseling center, a recreation facility, and the parish has sponsored several housing developments for the elderly and for low- and moderate-income residents.

- The Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia—which has flourished under the sensitive leadership of the Rev. Dr. Paul Washington

—advertises on its church bulletin board: "This church lives by the gospel." It prides itself on opening its doors to those who, for a variety of reasons, feel disenfranchised from society at large.

- St. Timothy's Parish in Washington, D.C.—pastored by the Rev. Richard L. Tolliver—has just erected a new facility to help house its many outreach programs, including an elderly program, a nursery school, a dance school, and a scout troop.

- The Church of Christ the Good Shepherd in Los Angeles—whose rector is the Rev. Kenneth D. Higginbotham—operates a senior citizens high-rise, a facility for the handicapped called the Center for Independent Living, and has recently begun a hospice for the terminally ill, one of the first parishes in the country to sponsor such a center.

These are but a random sampling of black congregations that "make a difference" in their communities. And while most clergy are engaged in parish ministry, there are other exciting ministries in which black Episcopal clergy are engaged. You will read about them in the next section.



## IV. The Cost

Any profession worthy of the name has a cost to those who wish to join its ranks. Since, as a famous prayer reminds us, bishops should "lay hands suddenly on no one," it should go without saying that a high level of motivation and commitment, a great deal of dedication, some humility, the ability to work within a system, and the willingness to make sacrifices must be part of the make-up of the aspirant for Holy Orders.

Additionally, you must be in good physical and mental health, and, normally, have been graduated from a college or university, then be prepared to spend three years in one of the church's seminaries. For those who, because of

age, marital status, and/or other factors, cannot feasibly enter into such a program, alternate routes of preparation for the ordained ministry are available. There are lots of "hoops" to go through between your initial conversation with your parish minister and the day of your ordination—such as physical and mental examinations, seminary examinations, national General Ordination Examinations, and certification by parish, vestry, standing committee, commission on ministry, and maybe a screening committee or two. There are so many hurdles that the ordination is likely to be discouraged and think that the ordination process is a test for the survival of the fittest. In a way, it is; for the church, through these methods, seeks to ensure that it will ordain to the ministry not only those who feel they are called, but those who demonstrate that they have the requisite spiritual, intellectual, moral, and psychological qualifications to live out that call—in light of the personal and institutional pressures inherent in the exercise of the ordained ministry.

A recent survey revealed that, despite certain ever-present problems, "the majority of black Episcopal clergy have a high commitment to the ordained ministry, and consider it the most challenging, exciting, and fulfilling type of occupation in which they could be engaged."

The testimonies of black Episcopal clergy, who exercise their ministry in a variety of settings, seem to substantiate this finding:

- The Rev. Michael Curry, Rector of St. Stephen's Church, Winston-Salem, N.C., enjoys the parish ministry because he finds in it "the potential for constant challenge," and because he enjoys a "freedom to be creative" to meet those challenges. Too, he finds it exciting to be able to minister to the diverse groups within a parish, as well as to the many people in the community who look to him for spiritual leadership.

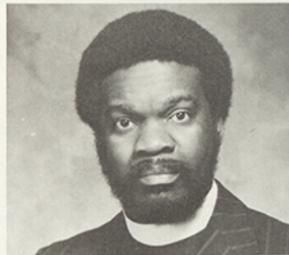
- The Rev. Norma Blackwell, a recent graduate of the Virginia Theological Seminary, is assistant chaplain at the National Cathedral School for Girls at Washington Cathedral. A former Peace Corps



Rev. Norma Blackwell

volunteer, she left a successful career in government because she felt that there was "an ingredient missing" in her life. She feels her desire to be of service is fulfilled in her current position—where she teaches religion, plans and leads worship services, and is responsible for developing an outreach program designed to make her students more aware of the community around them.

• The Rev. Enrique Brown is Hispanic Missioner for the Diocese of Connecticut. He believes that blacks within the Episcopal Church should "lift up blackness without apology." He feels that the black community should do much more, and that "credible urban ministry must be done by blacks." One of the greatest challenges facing the church, according to Father Brown, is a ministry to the growing number of Hispanics, as well as to Haitian refugees.



Rev. Enrique Brown

• The Rev. Barbara Harris is Vicar of St. Augustine's Church, Norristown, Pennsylvania. She was an executive for many years with the Sun Oil Company. She feels that black clergy are especially called to minister to a broad spectrum of needs which frequently are ignored by the larger church. She believes that we can ill afford the luxury of ministering only to "our nice parishioners," but must extend the parish to include the larger community, especially those in prison. Mrs. Harris feels that one of the greatest challenges to women in the ordained ministry is "to bring a heightened sensitivity to the need for strengthening the black family."

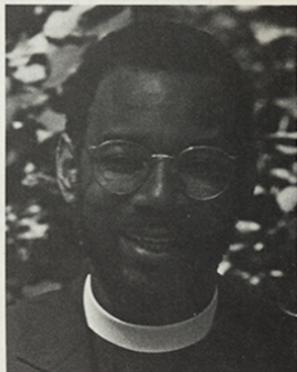


Rev. Barbara Harris

• The Rev. Preston B. Hannibal is Master in Religion and Ethics at St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire. He asserts that the infusion of the gospel into a high-powered academic setting is crucial to the well-roundedness of his students. He believes that his presence, too, serves as a positive role model for the minority student in a predominantly white and privileged community.

• The Rev. E. Nathaniel Porter is Episcopal Chaplain at Howard University. Fr. Porter feels that his presence on the college campus helps challenge students to think about their traditional views, not only about religion, but about the image of the clergy. He believes

that it is essential that spiritual values be sharpened during the crucial college years, to help equip young black men and women to assume leadership roles in the black community and in society at large.



Rev. Preston B. Hannibal

• The Rev. Dr. Robert E. Hood is Professor of Church and Society at the General Theological Seminary in New York. His position was established at the urging of black students and clergy who felt strongly that there should be a black presence on the seminary's faculty. Dr. Hood states that he should not only teach courses which reflect the black experience, but encourage his colleagues, e.g., those in theology, liturgy, and church history, to include references to the black experience in their courses. He believes that he represents to black students at the seminary someone with whom they can identify—based on a common black experience. In addition to teaching and counseling, Dr. Hood functions as a liaison between the seminary community and the church in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as a faculty member who raises critical questions about the seminary's admissions policies, and its stance and credibility within the black community.



Rev. E. Nathaniel Porter

• The Rt. Rev. Walter D. Dennis, Suffragan Bishop of New York, served as a parish priest, a chaplain at a black college, and as a cathedral canon before being elevated to the episcopacy. Convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ has relevance to every human situation, he has distinguished himself as a forthright spokesman on a variety of controversial issues. He has continued in this prophetic

role since becoming bishop. From that office, Bishop Dennis believes that he may speak to the church as a member of a minority group within it, and that he can speak for the church as one entrusted with guarding its faith, unity, and discipline. Bishop Dennis also sees as an important part of his ministry the encouragement and support of young blacks seeking to be ordained; he is always happy to discuss the ministry with those considering it as a vocation.



Rt. Rev. Walter D. Dennis

We sincerely hope that you will give serious and prayerful thought to offering yourself for the ordained ministry of the church, and that, like Isaiah, will say: "Here I am. Send me." We stand ready to be of assistance to you at every step in your journey.

For further information, please contact:

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