

The Episcopal Church: The Black Perspective

As we approach the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, with the opportunity such a gathering affords to express and implement the corporate will of God for the people in His church, we discern a need to clearly present the concerns of part of this "Body of Christ" to the whole Church with the intention that what we say and do at Louisville will be in accord with the will of God and in support of the struggle for justice, equality and full humanity for all of the "People of God".

Black churchmen constitute the largest ethnic group in the Episcopal Church. We have established over 250 congregations in the Church and contribute a substantial amount annually to support the mission and ministry of our Church.

We have a long tradition of involvement in this church. Though some would say that "Richard Allen chose the wiser course", those of us who followed the tradition of Absalom Jones still desire to find a place of belonging, a Church home, within the Episcopal Church. We find this very hard to do. Our Church, in its national, provincial and diocesan structure, constantly programs around us rather than with us. Our people, like all those who profess and call themselves Christians, demand a place of respect and participation in the fellowship of God's Church. We are constantly denied full participation in the life, work and witness of our Church - in its evangelistic outreach, its educational materials, its mission thrust at home and overseas. We are hard put to justify this expression with our understanding of the Church.

In the Old Testament the Church is the "People of God". It is that people to whom he has chosen to disclose himself, with whom he has established a covenant. That covenant is one of demand and promise. "You shall be my people and I will be your God". His self disclosure is in his mighty acts of deliverance. "I have seen what the Egyptians have done to you and have come down to deliver you from oppression." In Yahweh's deliverance - his gracious activity in behalf of the children of Israel - he has demonstrated that oppression is contradictory to true humanity and an offense to the nature of the divine. Thus, to be the people of God - that is to experience true humanity - one must not involve himself in any acts of oppression nor must one allow himself to suffer oppression. In both cases there is a denial of God's creation and a forsaking of covenant.

The New Testament speaks of the Church as the Ekklesia and the Koinonia. Those who, under the influence of the Gospel, have been "called out (Ekklesia) and who have fellowship (Koinonia) with God and each other constitute the Church - "The New Israel of God". Those who hear the word of God and who see the vision of the Kingdom of God and who take responsibility for affirming the presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst begun in the person of Jesus Christ - they are the Church. It is, again, the recognition in the Gospel that oppression is contrary to human nature and an offense to divine nature:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because
 he anointed me to Preach good tidings to the poor;
 He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
 and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty
 them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year

of the Lord."

It is the Church's affirmation of the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth which allows it to proclaim that reconciliation is a present reality. That statement is an affirmation that the future is already being guaranteed in the present. This is the basis of our Christian hope and the cause for our continuing involvement in the institution whose potential to reflect this hope and understanding we desire to enhance. The Black religious experience affirms our desire and ability to participate as partners in the process of making the Church be The Church.

Historically, the primary issue in the Black religious experience has been liberation from the forces of oppression. While an overwhelming majority of white churchmen gave their tacit approval to slavery, if not their wholehearted support, Black preachers never grew weary of preaching against it as an evil before men and an offense to God. The Black slave songs (spirituals) at once affirm the impossibility of slavery and the hope for human liberation based upon a religious consciousness gained from an understanding of God's revelation in scripture and his activity in history.

From a cursory look at this history, there are evidences of at least three modes of protest each of which is based upon the religious consciousness of Black people. That religious consciousness caused them to know that they, instead of being slaves, were children of God and to be a slave and a child of God was an impossible contradiction. They knew, also, that God acted on their behalf. Moreover, they knew that the purposes of God could not be defeated. Thus, they were freed to act - for they acted not of themselves, but only through the power of God.

The three modes are independence, insurrection and interdependence. The Black Church, *i.e.* Black denominations represent the first organized movement of independence. This movement is clearly seen in the lives of Richard Allen, James Varick and Peter Williams, Sr. Out of the movement of these men came the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as alternatives to white Methodism and a situation which relegated Black people to the balconies and Black interest to the back door. Some men chose to fight and protest from within predominantly white organizations.

The conditions which caused the three modes of protest mentioned above, albeit the particularity of oppression has changed, the condition of oppression remains pervasive in the society as well as in the Church. The responses of Black people to these conditions may also be categorized as independence, insurrection and interdependence. Those of us who remain in the Episcopal Church do so because of the hope we have in making interdependence a present reality not a condition relegated to eschatology. Our presence here should not be construed to mean capitulation. Indeed we stand affirmatively in the tradition of Absalom Jones, Peter Williams and Alexander Crummell.

The continued existence of Black denominations and the presence of Black caucuses in the predominantly white denominations are indicators to us that the question of power for the powerless has not been adequately dealt with nor resolved. Indeed, they attest to the fact that no real progress has been made in the area of empowerment of the poor.

The realities of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements urged upon the Episcopal Church, at least, the recognition of the situation of powerlessness. This recognition prompted some movements, which on the fact of it, were calculated to ameliorate the situation by providing for some corrections. Yet the ensuing six years (1967 - present) have seen the ugly head of racism and the powerlessness of Blacks and the poor accentuated. The destructive nature of this cancerous sore on the face of this society cries out that anything less than a total commitment to its eradication is sinful and criminal. As a Church we live in the hope of affirming the fact of reconciliation. In our Church and within the society that affirmation is dependent upon empowerment.

The Episcopal Church under the purposeful, inspired and prophetic leadership of its Presiding Bishop, John E. Hines, ventured a move toward empowerment by the establishment of GCSP. GCSP in its years of operation has sought to move toward the goal of true empowerment. Yet it has been assailed and weakened by the efforts of those within the Church who see it as being outside of the Christian Faith or those who view it as being radical, or, again, those who seek to bring it under their control by the power of the veto. In all there is simply one question to be raised, are we about feeding the poor; liberating the oppressed; clothing the naked and ministering to those who are powerless in order that they may achieve true humanity?

Recently the Church under the guise of the rubric of "self determination" has asked these questions: 1) what needs in the

Church and society do you think the General Church Program should attempt to meet? 2) What are your program priorities? 3) What funding method shall we use? These questions are undoubtedly real and important. Albeit their importance one must ask such questions on the basis of what is the mission and ministry of the Church? In other words, how are your perceptions of the mission of the Church justified by the mandates of the Gospel? Or, how does the Gospel determine for you what the mission of the Church is to be? Thus, what started out under the rubric of self determination simply means white control. Thus the Gospel, as a point of departure, is ignored.

OUR CONCERNS AT GENERAL CONVENTION - LOUISVILLE

1. Elective Offices in the Episcopal Church constitute one of our major areas of concern. For too long, our Church's headquarters in New York has been a bastion of "white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism" - not always at its best. Persons considered for elective office should be representative of the full ethnic range of membership of the Church at large and not just a segment thereof. This is especially true with respect to staff positions in that office.

WE REQUIRE THAT MORE STAFF POSITIONS BE FILLED FROM
THE RANKS OF QUALIFIED BLACK PEOPLE IN THE EPISCOPAL
CHURCH.

2. As the Executive Council is the interim executive/legislative organ of this part of the "Body of Christ", exercising the strong hand of decision making, policy design and

implementation between Conventions, it is untenable that so few Black persons are included in that body.

WE REQUIRE THAT THIS GENERAL CONVENTION RE-COMMIT ITSELF TO THE PRINCIPLES OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT AND ASSURE THE CHURCH THAT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF BLACK PEOPLE BE ELECTED TO THIS VITAL ORGAN OF THE CHURCH.

3. Minority Empowerment - General Convention Special Program represents the only significant effort within our Church toward the twin goals of empowerment of the poor and the alleviation of oppression. Yet, as this young, virile "child of the Church" tries to make its steps toward mature and responsible adulthood, there are those who would "break its legs" and impede its progress. The Church needs a bridge between herself and the large number of poor and powerless people in our communities. General Convention Special Program has proven that it can be this bridge not only offering a brotherly hand of enabling justice, liberation and empowerment, but also strengthening the very weak hand of the Church as she tries to live out her understanding of the Gospel.

WE REQUIRE THAT THE GENERAL CONVENTION SPECIAL PROGRAM MUST BE MAINTAINED AS AN INTEGRAL, INTER-RELATED UNIT OF THE CHURCH. THE FUNDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT ITS WITNESS IN COMMUNITY MUST HAVE A ONE MILLION DOLLAR PER ANNUM FLOOR WITH ADDITIONAL RESOURCES PROVIDED AS NEED AND AVAILABILITY ALLOW. EPISCOPAL ADVISE AND COUNSEL MAY BE A PART OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS BUT MUST NOT BE DETERMINATIVE. VETO POWER OVER GRANTS

MUST NOT CONTINUE.

4. Many actions by Churchmen have been committed in the name of the Lord by people who felt themselves to be right in the midst of wrongness. The decision to kill Jesus was one of them. The decision to persecute the Christians was another. The decision to endorse slavery, to wage war, and countless others. It is now apparent that the decision has been made to co-opt the Black Colleges simply by not adequately funding them. Many well meaning persons in our Church are giving leadership to phasing out these colleges in the name of integration, which for most Blacks is offensive. The question is not integration vs. segregation. Such rationale is specious at best and immorally deceptive at worst. In an era where Black consciousness is an indispensable component to a healthy Black identity, and where education is becoming more and more Blacks are preparing themselves for the collegiate experience, it is unthinkable, and unacceptable that any cutback in support of Black colleges could be imagined. The Black colleges must survive as an alternative educational institution.

WE REQUIRE THAT OUR CHURCH GIVE HIGHEST PRIORITY TO SUPPORT OF ITS BLACK COLLEGES. SUCH PRIORITY CAN BEST BE REFLECTED IN THE PROVISION OF A SUPPORT BASE MINIMALLY SET AT ONE MILLION DOLLARS PER ANNUM AND INCREASED AT A RATE COMMENSURATE WITH ESCALATING EDUCATION COST IN THE YEARS AHEAD.

5. All of the concerns alluded to the above have a specific context as they relate to Black churchmen. The needs of the Church are many. The opportunities presently available to implement solutions to these needs are few. In consideration of methods by which these needs might effectively be addressed, prime consideration should be given to the establishment of a Black desk which will address the wide variety of work among and with Black communicants of the Episcopal Church. It is our desire that such an agency would address such concerns as Christian education from a Black perspective as it affects the whole fabric of the Church; the significant contributions potentially available to the Church in the use of music and liturgy evolved out of the Black experience; the necessity for the continuation of a Development scheme whereby clergy sufficient to the needs of the Church are provided through a scheme of recruitment and educational support is another valuable function needed by the Church as a whole and capable of implementation through a special agency.

WE REQUIRE THAT OUR CHURCH ESTABLISH A BLACK DESK WITH ADEQUATE STAFF AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ENABLE A PROCESS OF BLACK CHURCH DEVELOPMENT, INCLUSIVE OF OUR CONCERNS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION, MINISTRY, DEPLOYMENT OF LAITY AND CLERGY, MUSIC AND LITURGY, SO AS TO ENHANCE AND ENRICH THE TOTAL LIFE OF OUR CHURCH.

6. This Convention will elect the next spiritual and administrative leader of our Church. He will be spokesman, representative

pastor and servant to us all. There are, however, specific concerns which we must lay on the shoulders of our next leader. They are:

- a) For too long, the Episcopal Church has functionally ignored the Black Religious expression embodied in the Black denominations of our country. We affirm our desire to have our Church relate to the Black Denominations through its leadership and programming and where necessary, outside the traditional channels of ecumenical communications and contact.
- b) We are acutely aware of the significant role the traditional and independent churches in Africa are playing in the growth of Christianity. We affirm our need and desire to relate more effectively to other Black churches in Africa. This, of necessity, means the establishment of other channels of missionary outreach save those of our paternalistic post.
- c) While we honor and applaud the work and witness of Bishop John Hines, we would require that our new "chief pastor" build upon the solid base laid by his predecessor and devise programs to address the concerns of the 70's and 80's, i.e., racism, sexism and an end to the exploitative and imperialistic disposition our Church is often

perceived to take through its policy positions and its financial structure.

- d) He must give strong, prophetic, moral leadership to our Church and our nation.

CONCLUSION

As Black Churchmen within the Episcopal Church, we celebrate our heritage of protest with Allen, Varick, Crummell, Turner and Vessey; for their heroic steps have guided our actions of the past and shall continue to inform our movements of the future. We, therefore, are committed to achieving these goals. We call upon all Episcopalians, who see the church's mission with the disinherited, the despised and the rejected to join us. We affirm the Gospel mandate for reconciliation in a factionalized world. Yet we recognize that there are no legitimate grounds for reconciliation in the absence of power. We come not to beg nor to borrow, but with the prophetic voice seeking to point the church toward its responsibility.