

Unapologetic Apologetics: The Essence of Black Anglican Preaching

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In his 1892 sermon preached at the centennial celebration of St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia, the Rt. Rev. Henry Codman Potter, bishop of New York, declared, "I do not think it would have been very strange if the colored race, after it had been freed, should have refused to follow the white people's God. It shows a higher order of intelligence and an acute discernment in the African race to have distinguished the good from the evil, in a religion that taught all men were brothers, and practiced the opposite." In this brief homiletical observation, Bishop Potter captured the perennial challenge of the Afro-Anglican preacher, who, despite experience to the contrary, must demonstrate that the catholic and incarnational truths of the gospel are no less demonstrable in the lives of people of color. This article maintains that this is accomplished both apologetically, in the classical sense of its being argued on the basis of biblical and theological truths, yet unapologetically, in the colloquial sense of being straightforward and without apology, as in the homiletic offerings of such preachers as Demond Tutu, Walter Dennis, and Kelly Brown Douglas.

To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable

In giving thought to the topic of the essence of black Anglican preaching, I was reminded of a book written in 1982 by Bishop John Melville Burgess, entitled *Black Gospel, White Church*. It is a compilation of sermons preached by black Episcopal clergy over a period of 170 years, beginning with Absalom Jones, first black priest in the

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Episcopal Church and founder of St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia; and James Theodore Holly, founder of the church in Haiti and first black bishop in the Episcopal Church; and culminating with homiletic offerings by several distinguished clergy of the mid- to late twentieth century, among them Junius Carter, rector of the Church of the Holy Cross, Pittsburgh, and Walter Dennis, canon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York and later bishop suffragan of the diocese.

Burgess, in his introduction, allows for the fact that many devout church members, believing that religion is “color-blind,” maintain that there can be no such thing as a black gospel. But the author is quick to remonstrate that as Christians,

blacks have been expected to demonstrate a patience, a love, and a tolerance they rarely saw in their leaders and oppressors, but they have, nevertheless, made this Gospel their own. Steeped in the despondency of powerlessness, cursed by the ever-present insufficiency of the means of livelihood, relegated to racist institutions, condemned by injustice, and propagandized by notions of white supremacy and black dependency, blacks have taken the Gospel given to them by those who would use it as an instrument of their pacification and have transformed it into a means of liberation.¹

Moreover, Burgess observes that black Anglican preachers have been consistently concerned with both church and community, and in their sermons and other pronouncements are never far, philosophically, from W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of “twoness.”² Indeed, Burgess’s pithy title encapsulates that “double consciousness” challenging black Anglican preachers to preach a gospel authentic to the struggle, challenges, and experiences of blacks who live, move, breathe, and have

¹ John Burgess, *Black Gospel, White Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), xi. See also Harold T. Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996), esp. part 3: “Contenders for the Gospel,” and part 4: “Interpreters of the Gospel.”

² In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994; originally published 1903) the great African American philosopher, W. E. B. DuBois, describes “twoness” in this way: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

their being in the African American community, while accomplishing that formidable task in a church whose predominant membership is not only white but elitist. Such a position, as Bishop Nathan Baxter observes, can be precarious:

It is the stand that often puts us on the brink of self-alienation from our rich heritage as black people . . . that sometimes makes us the subject of scornful suspicion by other black Christians. And we are often the victims of the subtle but relentless racism within our own church.³

It is indeed the task of the black Anglican preacher to sing anew the Lord's song in a strange land. It has been the black preacher's role, as Burgess observes, to "fight for change, aspire and to hope," and while of necessity such preachers may often be critical of the church's action and inaction, they have never been iconoclasts.⁴ Indeed, in his or her ministry as a preacher, the black priest must both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Canon Frederick Boyd Williams put it this way:

This dual heritage of ours did not occur in a vacuum. It reflects in many ways the divergence that erupted at the Reformation (with its unfortunate separation of table and pulpit) as well as the differences between the "writing" bias of Europe at the "aura/oral" bias of Africa. Now the problem for us today is to balance our ministry, to creatively utilize all strands of our heritage and forge a new mode of operation that will truly make us, in the power of Almighty God, "prophets and priests," preaching for a new day.⁵

Moreover, Williams believed that black preaching, unlike Jack Webb's "just the facts, ma'am" approach, tells its story "with majors and

³ Nathan Baxter, "The Feast of Absalom Jones," 1979, in Burgess, *Black Gospel, White Church*, 71.

⁴ Burgess, *Black Gospel, White Church*, xiii.

⁵ Frederick Boyd Williams, "The Black Priest as Preacher," lecture delivered at a meeting of the Organization of Black Episcopal Seminarians, Virginia Theological Seminary, April 15, 1983. *Linkage*, Office of Black Ministries, Episcopal Church Center, New York, June, 1988. Dr. Williams was from 1971 until his death in 2006 rector of the Church of the Intercession in New York City.

minors, sharps and flats, with retarded full notes and accentuated eighth notes. . . . *There is always a bias, a point of view, an ideology.*"⁶

As an acolyte growing up in St. Philip's, Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s and 1960s, I sat at the feet of such preachers. St Philip's second rector, John Milton Coleman, who taught me the faith in his last confirmation class, was a renowned social activist who was the first Negro to serve on New York City's Board of Education. When I preached the funeral sermon of St. Philip's third rector, Richard Beamon Martin, in 2012, I referred to him as "a master of the homiletic art, indeed the John Chrysostom of black preachers,"⁷ and a great builder of communities, who above all emphasized the importance of being a faithful pastor to the people committed to one's charge. I remember being impressed by Bishop Martin's preaching—and that of several of Bishop Burgess's "exemplars" who not infrequently graced the pulpit of St. Philip's, a flourishing parish of some two thousand Afro-Anglicans from the United States and the Caribbean—because of the orthodoxy of that preaching, its grounding in scripture, and the preacher's ability to retell scripture in such a way that it became, indeed, "a lantern unto our feet and a light unto our path." (Richard Martin believed that good preaching was good storytelling; he was able to weave four or five stories within a single sermon, without dropping a stitch or losing the attention of the congregation!)

But I was particularly mindful of the preachers' straightforwardness, their unabashed and unswerving attention to the message of the gospel, and a commitment to its being not merely recounted, but proclaimed. It was preaching with a purpose, in which the issue addressed in the sermon took on life and meaning precisely because it was never detached from the message and thrust of the gospel. Finally, there was a self-confidence in delivery, making it abundantly clear to the listener that the proclaimer was convinced about what the proclaimer was saying. The utterances that emanated from the pulpit were unapologetic. No matter the text, the preacher was always guided and influenced by the "subtext" of Ezekiel 2:5: "Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that a prophet has been among them." And to Ezekiel, the prophet is not a foreteller of the future,

⁶ Williams, "The Black Priest as Preacher," italics mine.

⁷ Archbishop of Constantinople, ca. 349–407. Early church father known for his oratory. He was nicknamed "Chrysostom," which means golden-mouthed.

but one who interprets the signs of the times for the people, and who equips them with a GPS for redemption.

Arnold Hamilton Maloney, a Trinidadian-born 1910 graduate of the General Theological Seminary, expands on the idea of differing job descriptions between black and white preachers. He bases his belief on what he understands to be a basic difference between the white church and the black church. The white church, as he explains it, is but a chaplaincy to the status quo, while the black church as an institution, is an advocate for the oppressed:

The “white church” and the “colored church” are not the same thing. They represent two different psychological phenomena. In the former, the people congregate to render “service.” . . . They make God their debtor. They pay God a call to offer their help in the difficult problem of guiding the course of the world. To the latter, the church is a meeting place. It is here that the talent for racial leadership is developed. It is here that the problems of home and of the community are threshed out. It is from this social meeting place that the souls of Negroes soar up to meet their God in the skies.⁸

Carleton Hayden makes a further distinction regarding different approaches to preaching in white and black congregations in the Episcopal Church. He observes that the contrasts are not in style but in content. “The sermons of black Episcopal preachers frequently draw on racial themes. They aimed at making Christian teaching and practices relevant to African Americans.”⁹ While referencing nineteenth-century preachers, Hayden’s comments are no less valid today.

But of all the stories that speak to this perennial phenomenon, in which issues of race, politics and religion, and the authority of scripture coincide and collide, one, in my opinion, emerges as the most poignant and illustrative, and that is the 1988 feud that emerged between Pieter Willem Botha, president of the Republic of South Africa and Desmond Mpilo Tutu, archbishop of Cape Town and primate of

⁸ Arnold H. Maloney, “Whites Strive to Keep the Colored Race Divided,” *Negro World* (July 1922).

⁹ J. Carleton Hayden, “Black Episcopal Preaching in the Nineteenth Century: Intellect and Will,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 19 (1982): 12.

the Anglican Province of Southern Africa. The president challenged the archbishop's right to rail against the evils of apartheid, and, adding insult to injury, formally warned the archbishop that he had distorted the true meaning of Christ by bringing the church's spiritual power into the "secular" struggle against apartheid!¹⁰

In response to Botha's attack, Archbishop Tutu penned a 3,200-word letter (for all intents and purposes a sermon) which cited more than thirty passages from Genesis, the Prophets, the Pauline epistles, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, to make it abundantly clear that the Bible indubitably proclaims that people were created for fellowship and togetherness, not for alienation, apartness, enmity, and division. Thanking the South African government (tongue in cheek) for "providing a platform we wouldn't have otherwise had for preaching the Gospel," the primate and Nobel Peace Prize laureate makes two related statements central to the church's belief: First: "The God whom we worship is the Lord of all life, and if you are to say his writ does not run in the political realm, you have to tell us whose writ does?" Second: "The church does not recognize the dichotomies which are much loved by the privileged and the powerful."

It is essential to understand that Archbishop Tutu, in his challenge to Botha's specious and presumptuous foray into theology, is making a statement about the incarnation. In incarnational theology, the gospel is not only preached, it is lived. Inherent in the incarnation is a belief that because the Word became flesh, there is nothing outside the interest and concern of him who is that Word, Jesus Christ. There is ultimately, therefore, as Temple would assert, no secular realm (as opposed to the sacred), precisely because "Jesus' perfect union and communion with God [means that] in him God has a real experience of human life, suffering and death."¹¹ Any evil thoughts or actions that would deny the dignity of every human being (and every good thing that upholds and blesses it) comes under the purview of the gospel.

It can be seen as axiomatic, therefore, that what characterizes the essence of black Anglican preaching is a grounding in incarnational

¹⁰ Peter Steinfels, "Tutu and Botha Joust over Theology," *New York Times*, May 3, 1988. Quotations are taken from this article.

¹¹ Archbishop William Temple, "The Incarnation," in William J. Wolf, John E. Booty, Owen C. Thomas, eds., *The Spirit of Anglicanism* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing), 1979, 112.

theology. It has been with no less a mandate that the black Anglican preacher has felt emboldened.

The “Good News” Is Bad News for Somebody!

Apologetics is the religious discipline of defending religious doctrines through systematic argumentation and discourse. It is in this classical sense that black preachers are apologetic. As much black preaching concerns itself with social justice, it follows that the Bible—the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, as well as the books of the New Testament—is understood as the foundation and source of the church’s understanding of justice. Moreover, the clear assumption throughout scripture that the beneficiaries of justice are such groups as strangers, the poor, aliens, outcasts, and widows, is upsetting, even offensive to the wealthy; the landed gentry; all the “firsts” relegated to be last; those of privileged religious groups, and, lest we forget, those hapless individuals who unexpectedly find themselves unwitting denizens of that neighborhood known as “outer darkness.” Verses, therefore, such as “He will put down the mighty from their seat and will exalt the humble and meek” (Luke 1:52) are not simply lovely words to be set to music in a canticle, but are understood to preachers of social justice to be words of truth describing the very nature of the divine dispensation, the fulfillment of what theologians call the “distributive gospel.” These words of truth, then, are used by the apologist as premises not only for theological arguments but for the social witness they should engender.

Peter Gomes, minister to Harvard University, in his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good about the Good News?*² writes, “Our good news is always bad news for someone.” The title of one of the chapters of his book is made up of two words not normally paired: “Offending Gospel.” In it, he makes some unflattering remarks about one of the most offensive preachers in scripture, John the Baptist, whom he describes as “not the most diplomatic of evangelists.” His offense was not only verbal—he called his elitist congregation “a brood of vipers”—but sartorial and epicureal, vested as he was in wild animal skins and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey. Gomes then goes on to describe Jesus’ first sermon at Nazareth, in which he offends the congregation not only because he presumed to suggest that the passage from Isaiah was about himself, but, as Gomes insightfully observes, because Jesus’ exegesis challenged the entitled sense of identity his hearers had of themselves.

It behooves us to consider critically all comments, in Jesus' day and in ours, that are quick to label sermons as offensive. What is often meant by such comments is not that the preacher's words are heretical, or in poor taste, or that they were not in keeping with the Commandments or the Beatitudes. Rather, such comments are more likely to mean that the message made the listeners uncomfortable because it did not conform with the prevailing mores or political opinion of those in the pew. Or, as Gomes succinctly put it, "People don't want to hear what they don't want to hear."

I would like to share a personal "offensive sermon" story, of particular significance as its setting was one of the Episcopal Church's seminaries, a place where seeds are sown in the minds of those who will be responsible for preaching the gospel to future generations of the church's faithful. It was 2017, and I had the privilege of being the Dean's Scholar at Virginia Theological Seminary. I delivered a lecture entitled "Genuflection as Protest." It addressed the fact that members of the NFL had adopted the practice of "taking the knee" during the singing of the national anthem to protest the fact that an inordinate number of African American men and boys had been killed by law enforcement officers. The players believed, therefore, that singing the anthem, hand on heart, constituted an act of disrespect for the slain young men who did not believe when alive that they inhabited "the land of the free and the home of the brave." One of the points that I made in my talk was that President Trump refused to accept the football players' rationale for their action, insisting instead that it was staged as a sign of contempt for the anthem and the flag, as well as for the men and women who had made the supreme sacrifice for the country that flag represents.

In the question and answer period after the lecture, a member of the faculty asked me if I thought it would be appropriate in a sermon to make such a comment about the president, since in most congregations there would be worshipers on both sides of the political divide. I replied that I did not make a comment about the president; rather I was reporting a statement Mr. Trump had made and reiterated several times. If indeed a preacher were to frame his or her remarks so as not to run afoul of either side of a given argument, the preacher would succeed only in fomenting confusion. It is not the role of the preacher to aim for some theoretical middle ground where all might find sweet refuge, but rather, as Saint Paul admonishes, "to sound a clear trumpet" (1 Cor. 14:8). In this way, the proclaimer of the gospel

can hope, in Maloney's words, to enable the church to thresh out the problems of home and community, and truly become an advocate for the oppressed.

Challenging the Church to Be the Church

In the case of the heated debate over taking the knee, players were instructed not to exercise their First Amendment right openly, but to confine their demonstrations to their locker rooms. Opining that locker room banishment was insufficient punishment, President Trump added, "Maybe they should leave the country." His statement echoed the wishes and subsequent actions of church and society two hundred years ago, when the stated desire of many Episcopalians was that free Negroes be sent "back" to Africa—a view that met with the vociferous objection of black Anglican preachers. As we consider their sermons of this period, we notice a pattern. Almost every preacher makes a petition for inclusion—for recognition as bona fide members of the Episcopal Church itself (and indeed as citizens of the United States).

Peter Williams, founder of St. Philip's Church and the first black priest in the Diocese of New York, in a sermon preached at a Fourth of July observance in 1818, raised serious questions about the African missionary societies, which, it would appear, were willing to export freed Negroes to Africa, ostensibly so that they could bring the gospel to their cousins in bonds, while accomplishing their true aim, namely to rid the United States of her free black population.

James Theodore Holly's story was very different. Accompanied by his wife and children, and several members of St. Luke's, New Haven, where he had been rector, he migrated to Haiti of his own volition. He was convinced, along with other black Americans, that true freedom was obtainable only through mass migration to Haiti, where they would have the benefit of black leadership and not be subject to white rule. Holly founded a church there, and was eventually invited by the Episcopal Church to affiliate with it. Holly was consecrated in Grace Church, New York City in 1874, and became Haiti's first bishop. The Episcopal Diocese of Haiti is today the largest (in communicant strength) in the Episcopal Church, although the nation itself is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, a situation compounded by its having been adversely affected by a series of natural disasters and rampant political corruption.

Holly spoke of Haiti in only the most laudatory terms, and sought for the rest of the world to appreciate its superiority: "Present us with the strongest evidence and the most irrefragable proof of the negro race that can be found anywhere. . . . Among the nations of the world, Haiti stands as . . . the solitary prodigy of history. [Once] chattelized and almost dehumanized, [it now possesses] a manly status of independent, self-respecting freemen."¹² It is clear that Holly could boast of something his fellow black clerics in the United States could not: a black pride that stemmed from the confidence of living and working among other blacks responsible for their own destiny.

Alexander Crummell believed that civilization "never springs up spontaneously, in any new land; it must be planted."¹³ To him, the "new land" was Liberia, where, in some ways, he attempted to accomplish what Holly had managed to achieve in Haiti. He believed, moreover, that Liberia was especially suited for the Episcopal Church and vice versa: "There is a place for the Episcopal Church in Liberia. . . . There is a peculiar work for souls in this country, for which the Episcopal ritual and regimen are specially fitted."¹⁴ But the road to Liberia was a tortuous one. Crummell was refused admission into the ordination process in the Diocese of New York and was rejected by General Theological Seminary. Although ordained by the bishop of Massachusetts and allowed to serve parishes in the Northeast, he resigned from a congregation in Pennsylvania when he was barred from participating in the diocesan convention. He relocated to England, served a curacy there and graduated from Queens' College, Cambridge. He finally arrived in Liberia, but there met opposition to his ministry in the person of a white missionary who had jurisdiction over his work, Bishop John Payne, and in the form of an ongoing feud with the ruling elite class of mulatto Americo-Liberians.

¹² James Theodore Holly, "Thoughts on Hayti," 1859, in Burgess, *Black Gospel, White Church*, 15ff.

¹³ Alex Crummell, *Africa and America* (Springfield, Mass.: Willey and Co, 1891) from a citation by W. L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 11, cited in Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 119.

¹⁴ Alex Crummell, "The Episcopal Church in Liberia: On Laying the Cornerstone at St. Andrews," in *Africa and America*, 463, cited in Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 119.

Shortly after his return to the United States, Crummell founded St. Luke's Church in Washington, D.C. During this period, he wrote extensively, but unlike most of the black clergy who appealed to the church hierarchy or secular authorities for amelioration of their plight, Crummell, who believed African Americans in general, and black Episcopalians in particular, to be in possession of high morals and intellectual superiority, appealed directly to his own people to improve their lot. In one of these publications, "The Race Problem in America," Crummell's hope is evident for people of color. It is based on his own confidence in the intrinsic good of black people, as well as the nation of which they are a part:

We have a blatant provincialism in our own country, whose only solution to the race problem is the eternal subjugation of the Negro. . . . Such men forget that the democratic spirit rejects the factious barriers of caste, and stimulates the lowest of the kind to the very noblest ambitions of life. They forget that nations are no longer governed by races but by ideas.

But arguably, Alexander Crummell's most stellar accomplishment vis-a-vis the strengthening of the role of African Americans in the Episcopal Church was his successful thwarting of the so-called Sewanee Canon. In 1883, a group of Southern church leaders met at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Its purpose was to draft a canon (church law) for consideration at the upcoming General Convention: "in any Diocese containing a large number of persons of colour, it shall be lawful for the Bishop and Missionary Convention of the same to constitute such population into a special Missionary Organization under the charge of the Bishop." This would result in the absolute disenfranchisement of blacks, preventing them from participation in diocesan conventions.

It was because of the Sewanee Canon that the Conference of Church Workers among Colored People was ushered into being by Alexander Crummell. As senior black priest in the Episcopal Church, he convened a meeting in New York to take place after the Sewanee meeting and before the General Convention. As there were no black voting members in either house of the General Convention, it was necessary that Crummell and his friends recruit sufficient numbers of sympathetic whites to carry the day. They were successful. The vote

passed in the House of Bishops, but failed in the House of Deputies, and the proposed canon was never enacted.

Another aspect of black preaching in Episcopal churches is that sermons are timely. While sermons should never be a rehash of the seven o'clock news, they should, nevertheless, reflect on the significance of that news for the people of God. On Easter Day, 1945, Kenneth de Poullain Hughes, rector of St Bartholomew's, Cambridge, Massachusetts, preached a sermon entitled "Our Debt to the Four Striking WACs." In it, he recounted the story of four African American women who were arrested for striking because their superior officer, who believed black WACs (Women's Army Corps) should only perform menial tasks, objected to their taking the temperatures of patients at a military hospital. The women staged a strike and were subsequently court-martialed for disobeying a superior officer in time of war. They were sentenced to jail and dishonorably discharged. Father Hughes had this to say about the relationship of this instance to the Queen of Feasts:

If Easter means anything, it is this: no sacrifice made on behalf of a righteous cause can fail to bring forth good. It is in the very nature of the God we worship to make Easter follow inevitably upon each Good Friday, no matter who is crucified. Both secular and religious history are back of these striking women.¹⁵

For the past two decades or so, the Episcopal Church has been embroiled in theological controversies around such matters as scriptural authority and human sexuality. The debates, which came to a head in 1993 around the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, to the episcopate, became so entrenched that the parties involved arrived at the conclusion that they could not in all conscience live with those on the other side of the theological divide, and decided that some kind of separation would be in order. That inability (or unwillingness) to pray together meant that the matter of who held title

¹⁵ Kenneth dePoullain Hughes, "Our Debt to the Four Striking WACs," in Burgess, *Black Gospel, White Church*, 37.

to church buildings became a real question, one, as it turned out, that would be settled in civil court.¹⁶

As bishops, chancellors, vestries, and standing committees began to prepare their briefs and rebuttals, they discovered that the church had long ago (the 1979 General Convention) weighed in on the matter. Its ruling on the matter, that “all real and personal property held by or for the benefit of any Parish, Mission or Congregation is held in trust for this Church [that is, the Episcopal Church in the United States of America] and the Diocese thereof in which such Parish, Mission or Congregation is situated,” became known as the Dennis Canon, named for its principal author, Walter Decoster Dennis, then chair of the Standing Committee on Constitution and Canons, a position he held in order that he might help preserve the catholicity of the Episcopal Church. He had been better remembered as the bishop suffragan of New York, whose sermons on such subjects as racism, abortion, homosexuality, and drug use made him, arguably, one of the most controversial preachers in the Episcopal Church. A review of these sermons will reveal that they are all about justice, or perhaps more precisely, injustice. Moreover, in light of several recent Supreme Court decisions, many would agree that Dennis proved to be prescient.

But Bishop Dennis’s most memorable sermon was most likely the one he preached on October 6, 1998, from the pulpit of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine at a service of solemn evensong in thanksgiving for his ministry. His text was Isaiah 61:1, which was the text that Jesus used for his first sermon in Nazareth. Citing Jesus’ words that he had come to bring good news to the poor and bind up the brokenhearted, Bishop Dennis emphasized that those words continue to describe the changelessness of the gospel imperative. He recalled a time early in his ministry when the church was passionate about racial integration and economic justice. He referred to this period as that of “Alphabet Soup and Acronyms.” There was, among others, MRI (Mutual Responsibility in Investment); ESCRU (Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity); and SWEEP (Service,

¹⁶ The matter is fully discussed in Harold T. Lewis, *The Recent Unpleasantness: Calvary Church’s Role in the Preservation of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

Worship, Evangelism, Education, and Pastoral Care). Today, he lamented, the church has become preoccupied with such matters as the authority and jurisdiction of bishops, Prayer Book revision and human sexuality, issues that have tended to sap the church of the energy she would otherwise have used to usher in the kingdom.

He concluded his sermon by recalling his text, and by emphasizing that it is the duty of every layperson, deacon, priest, and bishop to enlarge the office to which he or she is called. This will be the gospel, proclaimed Bishop Dennis, when every pundit has weighed in on every issue, when every consultant has filed his report, when all the church's fads and fancies had run their course.

*Black Women Preachers in the Episcopal Church:
A Strong Womanist Cohort*

There are several definitions of womanism. To refer to it merely as "black feminism" is to give it short shrift. A fuller and more descriptive definition is "a form of feminism that emphasizes women's natural contribution to society, used by some in distinction to the term 'feminism' and its association with white women."¹⁷ Many black women theologians have embraced womanism because it takes into account at least two aspects of interpersonal relations either ignored or downplayed in feminism, namely racism and misandry, the latter being an ingrained dislike of or contempt for the male sex. The black womanist might say, therefore, "So many groups already beat up on our black men; there is no reason for us to add to the abuse." Womanist theology, moreover, because of its connection to being womanish, is often considered to be audacious, courageous, and willful. It is theology outside the box. Alice Walker, the poet and activist and author of *The Color Purple*, coined the phrase, and is also credited with another description of the phenomenon: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

It is my observation that the black female clergy in the Episcopal Church, especially as relates to their ministry of preaching, constitute a strong cohort of womanist theologians. In addition to the characteristics of black preaching we have cited—its straightforwardness, its incarnational emphasis, and its bias toward building up the body of

¹⁷ "Womanism," *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/womanism>.

Christ in the black community—womanism provides a lens through which the black woman preacher can interpret scripture and understand experiences.

On the Feast of SS. Mary and Martha of Bethany, July 29, 1974, eleven women were ordained, “irregularly,” to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. It was irregular, and therefore illegal by strict interpretation of sacramental theology and canon law, because the 1973 General Convention had defeated the resolution that would have allowed women to be advanced to the priesthood. The crucifer at that service, who led the procession into the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, was Barbara Clementine Harris, an active laywoman in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, who had been nurtured in the faith in St. Barnabas’, a strict Anglo-Catholic parish, where thorough knowledge of the catechism and the Articles of Religion was required for confirmation! Many, looking back at the ordination service at the Advocate, saw it a sign that Barbara was destined to become a leader of women. They were prophetic. After undergoing theological studies, she was ordained deacon in 1979 and priest the following year. In September of 1988 she was elected bishop suffragan of Pennsylvania, and five months later, despite objections at home and abroad, became the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion.

As a person active in civil rights and women’s issues, she “qualified” as a womanist long before ordination; once ordained, Barbara Harris gained renown as a forceful and dynamic preacher. In a sermon in Washington Cathedral, Bishop Harris challenged the congregation: “Who are the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed? . . . It would be easy to forget the confused, chaotic. . . . We, too, are called to identify with the cause of the needy and to share in [Christ’s] mission of love and mercy.”¹⁸

When Nan Arrington Peete preached to those in attendance at the Second International Conference on Afro-Anglicanism held in Cape Town in 1995, it was “not her first rodeo.” Seven years earlier, in Canterbury, in response to an invitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury, she became the first ordained woman to address the Lambeth Conference, the decennial gathering of all the world’s Anglican bishops. Her words on that occasion, it is believed, had a

¹⁸ Sermon preached by Barbara C. Harris, January 28, 2007. The text may be found on the website of Washington National Cathedral, <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-27/>.

positive influence on many there for whom a female cleric was a novel experience. She brought to Cape Town a rich background as a parish priest, a member of diocesan staffs, and a distinguished ministry as an associate for pastoral care and outreach at Trinity Parish, Wall Street.

Her sermon at Cape Town exhibited a thorough understanding of the nature of Anglican polity, eucharistic theology, and social witness:

As Anglicans, we are people of the word and the table. The word is broken in the sermon, the sacrament is broken in the bread and poured out in the wine, to empower, feed and quench the thirst of the suffering, the poor. . . . We do this not because the poor are good, but because God is good. As people of the table, we welcome all to the table.¹⁹

But in a sermon whose title was “Who Do We Say That We Are?,” Nan did not forget to challenge her hearers and warn them of self-complacency, smugness, or selective charity. Dr Peete reminded us that “we need to claim our identity as Christians [because] too many of us have become closet Christians, closet Anglicans, and even at times closet Africans. We have let Christianity be defined by a small group of people who have a narrow view of Christianity.”

Closetedness is also a theme in a sermon preached at an Absalom Jones celebration by Debra Q. Bennett (Mo Deb).²⁰ Esther, although she knew that she was living under a death sentence if she revealed herself to be a Jew, decides to reveal herself nonetheless, saying, “If I perish, I perish.” She did this even though aware that her zip code (the king’s palace) would not protect her from execution. She and Mordecai become, preaches Mo Deb, “disrupters of the status quo” who decide they must have some skin in the game! In the “divisive, elitist climate in which we find ourselves, in which people of color are being portrayed as the reason the American dream has eluded those in the majority culture; a climate steadily growing in ethnic and religious intolerance; a climate in which gun violence, human trafficking and the drug culture is claiming the lives of our young people; a climate that is bent on rolling back advances in civil rights”—it is at

¹⁹ Nan Arrington Peete, “Who Do We Say That We Are?,” *Anglican Theological Review* 77, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 469.

²⁰ Debra Q. Bennett, “For Such a Time as This,” Absalom Jones sermon preached in St. Andrew’s Church, Cleveland, Ohio, February 11, 2018.

such a time as this that we must reclaim our identity, and go into the king's presence, however that may be defined in our particular situation, and take the risk of full disclosure, precisely because the stakes are so high.

In Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, where she had been installed as bishop a few months earlier, Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows addressed attendees at the Missional Voices gathering, and told how as a newly minted priest she participated in a hiking trip in Utah (in which one of the greatest lessons was learning how to fall down and get up again, with grace)! She told how casual, polite conversations deepened into life-changing dialogues. She described an encounter with a woman who was incredulous that Jennifer's church was one struggling with issues of inclusion and recognition, a church that recognized that the world had not experienced perfection since the first week of creation. Jennifer's new friend, whose efforts to enrich the ministry of her community were rejected partly because of her gender, had not darkened the church door for nearly twenty years. She was encouraged by Jennifer, whose efforts were not thwarted by her childhood memory of a white man spitting on her and calling her the n-word. The woman confided to Jennifer that she had never really learned in church the lesson of redemption. "I didn't know church could be like that! I love Jesus, but I hate the church. Tell me more about your church!" Jennifer did. And thus began an evangelistic opportunity for both of them. In such a way did Bishop Baskerville-Burrows, gentle womanist, the soaring red stone Utah mountains substituting for the Gothic arches of her cathedral church, share the good news.

Most of the women clergy we have mentioned in this article never knew Pauli Murray as a colleague, but they are nevertheless in her debt. In 1977, at the age of sixty-seven, Pauli became the first African American woman to be ordained to the priesthood; she died only eight years later. At the 2018 General Convention, she was recognized as a permanent saint of the Episcopal Church. A daughter of historic St James', Baltimore, where scores of priestly vocations had been nurtured under the tutelage of George Freeman Bragg and his successors, Pauli was a womanist long before Alice Walker invented the concept. She was certainly recognized in her day as a feminist. She was an attorney, a civil rights activist, a poet and author, a friend, confidante, and advisor to Eleanor Roosevelt and Thurgood Marshall, and a cofounder of the National Organization for Women (NOW). She was arrested in Virginia for riding in the front of a public bus

more than a decade before Rosa Parks's action metamorphosed into the Montgomery bus boycott.

It is in a sermon on love that we see the intersection of her politics and her spirituality. In each, we see a foundation of self-giving and sacrifice as the font of love and community: "To be a Christian, to follow Jesus Christ, means to be self-giving, pouring out love upon others even when they are unlovely and unlovable. And this is the hardest part of our faith."²¹

Kelly Brown Douglas, recently named dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union, in New York City, is the first black woman dean of an Episcopal seminary. (She also holds the position of canon theologian of Washington National Cathedral.) Although most if not all of her black women colleagues can be considered womanists, Dr. Douglas's chosen field of academic and theological concentration is womanist theology in the black church, and as such, it can be argued, she owes the greatest debt to Pauli Murray. When asked if her dual vocation as priest and professor was complicated, Kelly responded that to the contrary, "it has not been a complicated balance to me, maybe because I am in the Episcopal Church."²² What she meant by that comment is that given the polity and the theological climate of TEC, as well as its understanding of Holy Scripture, it would be more likely open to womanist theology than other more traditional denominational structures might be.

Kelly wrote *Sexuality in the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* because she (and many of her colleagues) perceived that it needed to be written. Because of deep-seated homophobia and heterosexism in the black church community, there had been for a long time a radio silence on such issues, punctured only by blasts of intolerance. And Canon Douglas is a firm believer that because troublesome issues emerge from the church community, it is there that they must be subject to the wrestling that will result in deeper comprehension. This is what Douglas describes as "calling the church back to its radical center." That center is the incarnate Jesus, in whom the sacred and secular intersect.

²¹ Pauli Murray, *Selected Sermons and Writings* (Marykoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 1970.

²² Kate Gill, "Off the Cuff: Kelly Brown Douglas; Priest and Womanist Scholar," *The Oberlin Review*, October 11, 2013.

It may well be that the more complicated the subject matter of a sermon, the simpler the message. In the Washington Cathedral in 2017, Kelly Douglas preached a sermon based on an elementary school lesson she remembered on how to write a “friendly letter.” In the carrying out of our Christian witness, as in the body of a letter, we make decisions and choices, we affirm our relationships, we tell each other what is going on in our lives; we affirm our proximity and our bonds of solidarity to one another, as we empathize with each other, share our pain and celebrate our joys. We are a better people when we are together than when we are apart. Together we hold on to one another’s dignity even through the confusion and uncertain realities of our uncertain times. It is in this way that we move toward God’s sacred vision for us.

It is clear that the womanist is also a pastor.

Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs

It will have been observed that one of the dominant themes of black Anglican preaching has been its emphasis on catholicity, and for good reason. To appeal to a catholic church means to place one’s confidence in a preracism institution. To believe in a universal church means to aspire to belong to a church in which no barriers to membership are erected. Neither of these visions fits the agenda of those who wish to exert control.

The Conference of Church Workers among Colored People (CCWACP), for example, having met with success with its stand against the Sewanee Canon at the 1883 General Convention, continued to speak out against periodic pronouncements promulgated by the national church—or, just as frequently, sent “memorials” to General Convention, in which it lodged complaints or made observations about issues facing black Episcopalians. The CCWACP, which in 1968 became the Union of Black Episcopalians, differed from official church bodies in that the former was concerned with the plight of blacks both within and without the church, whereas the church’s official bodies thought their duties to be discharged if they were satisfied that the Negroes in Episcopal congregations and institutions.

When the Conference ventured into the arena of making requests that would improve their lot in society, the Episcopal Church officialdom was no more helpful. Even a request for intervention that

would “restrain the disorderly classes of both races, and to moderate their lawless passions” (that is, to seek an end to lynching), was met with silence, the church believing such matters were outside of its scope of responsibility. Consider, for example, a platitudinous General Convention statement in 1919:

As touching the matter of Social Justice for colored people and the securing of Christian treatment for them as full citizens of the Republic, your committee, as a step towards a better understanding between the races, *recommends the formation in every city of Local committees of representative citizens of both races who shall constitute a Committee or Conference with a view to obtaining the sympathetic and intelligent cooperation of men and women of both races in the settlement of racial problems.*²³

Most of the CCWACP publications flowed from the pen of George Freeman Bragg, rector of St. James, Baltimore, historiographer and secretary of the CCWACP. His magazine, *The Advocate*, whose motto was “For Zion’s sake I will not keep my peace,” was published widely among black and white Episcopalians. His witness was strengthened in the early 1940s when a secretary for Negro Work was added to the national church staff. With the appointment of Bravid Harris (later bishop of Liberia), there was a “black voice” at headquarters. Previously, Negro work, such as it was, was coordinated by the American Church Institute for Negroes, made up of twelve white men.

John Booty, late historiographer of the Episcopal Church, said that through the civil rights movement, “the Episcopal Church was forced by the course of events to recognize the existence of a deep-rooted prejudice in its midst.” The incongruity between such practices and the principles for which the Church claimed that it stood became painfully obvious. The Episcopal Church, therefore, began, in word and action, to acknowledge what black Episcopalians had been preaching for nearly two centuries—that there has long been a disparity between the Church’s catholic claims and the unjust treatment of some of its members. Once in crisis mode, the rebuttal sermons came in rapid fire.

²³ *Journal of the General Convention* 1943, 551, italics mine.

Presiding Bishop Arthur Lichtenberger called discrimination within the church “an intolerable scandal,” and urged every parish to examine its own life and to renew efforts to insure inclusiveness. The House of Bishops urged passage of effective civil rights legislation. The Diocese of Southern Ohio urged to seek by various means further understanding between Negro and white.

Then, predictably, the homiletic caveats: Presiding Bishop John Hines, upon taking office, warned that the structure of the church does not afford rapid change. Bishop Jones of Louisiana pointed out that pressure at this time might damage progress and harden attitudes. Bishop Burrill of Chicago commented that change must come slowly as the Episcopal Church is congregational in nature, and the bishops have no power other than to invoke change.

The “most unkindest cut of all” concerning the internal squabbles in the Episcopal Church at the time of the civil rights movement is that when the time came to make grants to inner city projects from the General Convention Special Program, black parishes and institutions in the Episcopal Church were overlooked in favor of secular institutions, many of which were openly hostile to religious organizations.

The Reverend Junius Carter of Pittsburgh declared, “I’m sick. I’m sick of you. You don’t trust black priests!”²⁴

To Comfort the Afflicted and to Afflict the Comfortable

Most of the sermons we have considered in this article have been delivered from the pulpit of a church by preachers in holy orders. So important and normative were such means of shaping the morals of the American public that the *New York Times* dispatched its religion editor to report on the dean’s weekly homilies delivered from the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. Nowadays, opinions on racial minorities, immigrants, and global conflicts real or imagined are more likely shaped by a 280-character tweet from the Oval Office. It is through this modern means of communication that immigrants learn that they are no longer entitled to Emma Lazarus’s warm embrace or that white supremacists enjoy moral parity with those who are willing to lay down their lives for the cause of racial justice.

²⁴ Comments made by church bodies and individuals as the Episcopal Church became aware of the impact of the civil rights movement on its life. See Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, chap. 10.

If black Anglican preaching is to carry out its mission, it must continue to provide an antidote to such vituperation posing as the truth, and be committed to comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, accomplishing both with a loving heart. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was speaking to all of us when he preached at the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex: “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way.”