

## Theology, Ministry, and Praxis: A Forty-year Retrospective

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It is hard to believe that four decades have elapsed since I knelt before the bishop of Long Island in his cathedral church and was made a deacon. Reflecting on that distant past in an ordination sermon preached five years ago in St. John's Cathedral, Denver, I described myself as a Neanderthal—a priest so old that his ordination predates the revision of the Prayer Book, the ordination of women, and, blessedly, the creation of both the commission on ministry and the GOEs! A child of the sixties who was present at the March on Washington to hear Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, I became a member of a generation of clergy who believed that a minister of the gospel is an agent of social change—and that with a collar around our necks and a little help from the Almighty, we could indeed change the world! And change was sorely needed. Civil rights legislation had not yet changed people's hearts. Racism was still alive and well, and the Episcopal Church, in the words of historiographer John Booty, "jolted out of its complacency," was waking up to that fact. Presiding Bishop John Hines had dropped a bombshell at the Seattle General Convention in 1967, challenging a church known as "God's frozen chosen" to reach out to the least, the lost, and the last of society. At the special South Bend Convention two years later, angry and long disenfranchised protesters seized microphones and demanded reparations! In those heady days in the history of the Episcopal Church, black clergy were deployed strictly along racial lines; most women were still relegated to something called an "auxiliary," and gays and lesbians were in the deepest recesses of the closet.

How has theology shaped the practice of my ministry? I would like to posit four theological themes that have loomed large as I have sought to serve our Lord and his church: justice, mission, scholarship, and worship. I offer them, however, with the caveat that they are not

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to be understood as discrete categories, but overlapping ones which have influenced and cross-fertilized each other.

### *Justice*

One of my first lessons in social justice took place when I was a teenager. Although a faithful altar boy at St. Philip's Church, I frequently "defected" to hear the illustrious Gardner Taylor hold forth from his pulpit at Cornerstone Baptist Church, a few blocks away in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Not on Sunday mornings, as a rule, but on those weekday evenings when civil rights rallies took place. Although trained to respond "And with thy spirit" when the priest intoned "The Lord be with you," I quickly learned to shout "Freedom!" when asked "What do we want?" and "Now!" when the question was "When do we want it?"

It was with the said Gardner Taylor and other clerics that on a sweltering day in August 1963 I found myself behind bars. The churches had organized a sit-in at the Downstate Medical Center construction site, protesting the fact that Negroes were barred from the unions which would have accorded them access to jobs in the construction industry. We protesters blocked the progress of cement trucks by boldly sitting in front of them, with arms linked, lustily singing "We shall not be moved." Then we were nevertheless hauled off into paddy wagons. In jail, we sang the sixties theme song, "We shall overcome," in four-part harmony.

Justice (in Hebrew *mispāt*), as I point out in *Christian Social Witness*,<sup>1</sup> is a concept inextricably woven into the rich tapestry of Holy Scripture. *Mispāt* suggests doing what is right, just, and pleasing in God's sight. But it also conveys, as the prophets remind us, a sense of advocacy—of taking up the cause of groups who have been abused and mistreated by those in power. Believing that such an understanding of justice is central to ministry, I have tried to be a champion of the oppressed. Such a commitment to advocacy helped shape my work in the missionary diocese of Honduras and as a priest at St. Monica's Church in Washington, D.C., where I responded to the challenge of bringing to financial autonomy a congregation that had been founded as a "colored mission" in 1899. Advocacy was, understandably, pivotal

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<sup>1</sup> Harold T. Lewis, *Christian Social Witness*, vol. 10 of the New Church's Teaching Series (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2001).

in my work on the Presiding Bishop's staff, where as director of the Office of Black Ministries (a post formerly known as "Deputy for Colored Work") it fell to me to create programs to help ensure the full inclusion of African Americans in the life of the church.

One of the great surprises of my ministry, however, has been that such an understanding of justice, together with my experience as a civil rights activist, has stood me in good stead in my role as rector of Calvary Church, Pittsburgh. Calvary, whose base of operations is a massive neo-Gothic edifice erected by Ralph Adams Cram, and which for more than a century and a half has numbered among its faithful Pittsburgh's "landed gentry," bears no outward and visible signs of oppression. But in a diocese that prided itself on its so-called orthodoxy and that embraced a narrow biblical, theological, and social conservatism, the members of Calvary and other progressive parishes that espoused a theology of inclusion were very much considered *personae non gratae*.

When Gene Robinson's election was approved at the 2003 General Convention, matters came to a head. A special convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh passed resolutions that made it very clear that the bishop and standing committee had every intention of seceding from the Episcopal Church (it was called "realignment" with the Province of the Southern Cone, but I learned long ago that if you call a horse a noble steed, it's still a horse!). What is more, the wording of the resolutions left no doubt that the diocesan leadership believed that in their secession, they were entitled to the financial assets of the diocese into the bargain.

Protests against this nefarious plot, whose planners held up as a model the formation of the Episcopal Church in the Confederacy, took two forms. First, following the example of George Freeman Bragg (1863–1940), rector of St. James', Baltimore and founder of the Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People, who decried the unjust practices of the church through his publication *The Church Advocate*, I chronicled the events leading up to the schism in Calvary's fortnightly newsletter, *Agape*. Like Bragg, I was inspired by the words of the Prophet: "For Zion's sake I shall not be silent" (Isa. 62:1).

The second strategy was a lawsuit filed in the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County by Calvary Church, its rector and senior warden, and a neighboring parish, St. Stephen's, Wilksburg, against Bishop Robert W. Duncan *et al.* Citing the Dennis canon, the suit contended that in the event of "realignment," the real and personal

property of the Diocese of Pittsburgh would remain in the *bona fide* Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh of the United States of America. The court ruled in our favor, and the Superior Court of the Commonwealth has, upon appeal, twice upheld that decision. Our legal actions have also had the effect of setting precedent for other “reorganizing dioceses,” and, we believe, served to discourage other dioceses from considering secession as a solution to theological differences. Moreover, we maintain that through our efforts we struck a blow for justice for those loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church. It was a risky move on many levels, not the least of which was fiscal. But Calvary’s parish leaders were inspired by the maxim *Fiat justitia, ruat caelum* (Let justice be done, though the heavens fall).

### *Mission*

In a recent Holy Week address, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori opined that the church should be more concerned with mission than with outreach. The problem with outreach, she said, was that it is often predicated on the idea of reaching out to but not necessarily becoming a part of the community to whom we attempt to minister. (Indeed, in its worst manifestation, as one wag has observed, outreach is defined as “keeping others out of our reach.”) Mission, according to Bishop Katharine, means being sent into the midst of those with and among whom we minister. Throughout my ministry, I have tried to subscribe to this theology of mission, and have been guided by Isaiah’s declaration of willingness: “Here I am, send me” (6:8). Perhaps that willingness was spurred in part by the fact that when I was asked, at the age of fourteen, by one of the parish curates if I would consider becoming a priest (which elicited a response of incredulity and raucous laughter on my part), I had already “decided” on a career in the foreign service!

My wife Claudette and I embarked on our first “missionary journey” in the fall of 1971, our vessel of choice a banana boat bound for Tela, Honduras. At the invitation of Bill Frey, the bishop of Guatemala, whom we had met the previous summer on a mission trip for seminarians, we served two congregations (in La Ceiba and Tela) and a parish day school. Our communities were made up of people whose roots were in the British West Indies and who had come to work for the fruit companies, native Spanish-speaking Hondurans,

and a smattering of American expatriates. Shortly after our arrival, Bishop Frey, who had spoken out against the government, was expelled from Guatemala, and found himself in exile in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Luckily, he had no quarrel with the Hondurans, and came to La Ceiba to ordain me to the priesthood!

There have been many other journeys: to parishes in the mountains of Rwanda, mission stations on a river in Belize, a cathedral overlooking the sea in Antigua, a church in a township outside of Johannesburg, an Anglo-Catholic parish just a few blocks from King's College, Cambridge, a seminary chapel in Haiti. I believe that it is still true that the Anglican Communion is held together by the Prayer Book. Despite current theological differences that have put a strain on our "bonds of affection," we eighty million Anglicans are united, as a favorite Evensong hymn reminds us, by common prayer:

*As o'er each continent and island  
the dawn leads on another day,  
The voice of prayer is never silent,  
nor dies the strain of praise away.<sup>2</sup>*

This truth manifested itself in a poignant way about twenty-five years ago. I found myself in Banjul, Gambia, on a Sunday morning, after having unsuccessfully attempted to reach the bishop, the dean, and other clerics the day before. I presented myself at the sacristy door of St. Mary's Cathedral and asked if there was anything I could do. "What about celebrate and preach?" responded the warden. I was hastily vested, escorted to the altar, and handed a thurible. The MC pointed the Missal and the Eucharist was offered, the only adjustment for me being that I was bidden to pray "for Elizabeth, our most gracious Queen and Governor."

But such experiences are not merely sentimental sources of Anglican pride. What I have consistently learned is that mission, with all due respects to Reginald Heber, is not about taking the gospel to "heathen" who in their blindness "bow down to wood and stone."<sup>3</sup> We

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<sup>2</sup> "The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended," words by John Ellerton, in *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), hymn 24.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Heber (1783–1826), bishop of Calcutta, is the author of several missionary hymns, among them "From Greenland's icy mountains," which contains these lines and those quoted below. The verse containing these words, however, was omitted from *The Hymnal 1940* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1940), hymn 254.

Anglicans in the West no longer think of ourselves—thank God!—as those “whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high,” whose job it is to bring the gospel “to men benighted.” What is remarkable is that the missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century worked! The cross followed the Union Jack into the nethermost parts of the empire, with the result that today the Anglican churches in so-called developing nations are burgeoning compared to the anemic Anglican communities in the “sending” nations of England, the United States, and Canada. We have been at a point for some time when we recognize that it is we who need to be missionized! Maybe it is our lands that need to be delivered, again in Heber’s words, “from error’s chain.”

### *Scholarship*

I like to think that in my approach to scholarship, justice and mission converge. I count it a great privilege to have been able to teach at seminaries in the Congo, South Africa, Mozambique, and Barbados. Being in such different cultural contexts is itself an education, and affords the visiting professor the opportunity to learn as much (if not more) than he teaches. My most recent book, *The Church for the Future: South Africa as a Crucible for Anglicanism in a New Century*,<sup>4</sup> for example, grew out of my experiences at the College of the Transfiguration in Grahamstown, South Africa in 2004, when the Anglican world was reacting to the consecration of Gene Robinson and preparing for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, originally slated to take place in Cape Town. Through local research, I discovered that the first Lambeth Conference in 1867 took place because of a controversy in South Africa!

In my doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham, I sought to answer the question of why blacks have remained in the Episcopal Church. I had been confronted with such questions by classmates at Yale Divinity School who were members of black denominations and who found it incongruous that I belonged to a “white church.” It was a plausible question. If it is true, as James Cone has observed, that “the black church in America was founded on the belief that God condemned slavery and that Christian freedom meant political

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<sup>4</sup> Harold T. Lewis, *The Church for the Future: South Africa as a Crucible for Anglicanism in a New Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

emancipation,”<sup>5</sup> it is axiomatic that blacks, given a choice, would be less inclined to affiliate with the church of their oppressors. But what my classmates did not understand is that I grew up in an Episcopal parish with two thousand black people and three black priests, and that my grandparents had immigrated to New York from Barbados, where the only white Anglicans they ever saw were the reverend clergy! Nor could my classmates have known of another question with which I was grappling, posed by a professor who interviewed me as I was applying to Berkeley Divinity School: “Mr. Lewis, did it ever occur to you that the Episcopal Church doesn’t particularly like you?”

The professor of mission in the Faculty of Theology at Birmingham was interested in my work because he could see stark similarities between how the Church of England ministered to people of color in various missionary outposts and the way the Episcopal Church ministered to people of color in its own backyard. It is for this reason that my dissertation was entitled “No Alien Race, No Foreign Shore,”<sup>6</sup> an expression of the church’s belief as expressed in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28, RSV).

Some of my most rewarding experiences in the area of scholarship have not been in the academy, but in the parish. In the baptismal service we pray over the candidates: “Give them an inquiring and discerning heart.” Owing to what I have dubbed “the recent unpleasantness” in the Anglican Communion, hearts and minds have been more discerning than usual. We Episcopalians have suddenly found ourselves intimately involved with entities previously at the peripheries of our consciousness, such as the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. We have also developed a keener interest in the Episcopal Church’s Constitution and Canons and ecclesiastical courts, and are intrigued by something called an Anglican Covenant. And while popularity for courses on Prayer Book

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<sup>5</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Lippincott, 1970), 130.

<sup>6</sup> The title phrase is from the words to a hymn by Henry Hallam Tweedy, “Eternal God, whose power upholds,” in *The Hymnal 1940*, hymn 265. The dissertation was later published as a book, *Yet With a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996).

and Scripture has not waned, it is heartening to know that as we sort through the morass of church polity in adult forums and in confirmation classes, the people of God become both more knowledgeable and more appreciative of their Anglican heritage.

### *Worship*

It is at the altar that all these strands are woven together. It is there that week by week we bring our selves, our souls and bodies, to be nourished by word and sacrament, thereby strengthened to do justice. It is at the altar, where we pray that the church “in faithful witness may preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth,” that we are strengthened to do mission. And it is at the altar, where we are reminded to love the Lord, the source of all wisdom, with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, that we are equipped to proclaim him, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

But the seed for such an understanding of ministry was planted long before I was a priest. Every year of my childhood, busloads of Sunday school children in the Diocese of Long Island converged on the grounds of the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City for Cathedral Day. As I recount in *Elijah's Mantle*,<sup>7</sup> we spread our blankets on the acres of lawn that surrounded the cathedral and partook of our picnic lunches. At the appointed hour, James Pernette DeWolfe, fourth bishop of Long Island, appeared, gloriously arrayed, at the south portico of the cathedral, from which vantage point he could cast an episcopal eye over the hundreds of children who had come for the festival. His perpetual deacon (as we called them in those days) stood at the bishop's side, clasping a jewel-encrusted crosier.

Then our father-in-God would examine us in the faith by reading questions from the Office of Instruction: “What is your name?” A cacophonous babble ensued, as each answered with the name given in baptism. A barrage of other questions followed, but the one I remember most is, “What is your bounden duty and service as a member of the Church?” to which the answer was, “My bounden duty and service is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his church, and to work, pray, and give for the spread of his Kingdom.” When Bishop DeWolfe was satisfied that we were grounded in the faith, he

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<sup>7</sup> Harold T. Lewis, *Elijah's Mantle: Pilgrimage, Politics, and Proclamation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001).

rose from his throne (our signal to hit the deck!) and pronounced the pontifical blessing. Then he led us in a rousing chorus of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” As we sang “Onward, then, ye people, join our happy throng,” we marched, happily indeed, to the tables where our Sunday school teachers rewarded us with great scoops of ice cream! Cathedral Day taught me that with faith came responsibility. It taught me, too, that I was part of a great army of Christians, in the church militant and the church triumphant. It also taught me that church was fun!

