Mothering Souls: A Vocation of Intercession

Donyelle Charlotte McCray*

Intercession can constitute the heart of one’s prayer life and even become a defining mark of one’s vocation. Such is the case for the “church mother,” a distinct role held by esteemed elderly laywomen in African American congregations. This article consists of an introduction to the church mother’s vocation. The piece begins with an examination of the roots of the role in American slavery and follows with an exploration of the ways race, gender, and advancing age shape the church mother’s unique form of spiritual authority. I examine two key qualifications for the role: divine call and longevity in the parish. Then, I delve into the church mother’s robust understanding of prayer and explain how theodicy and hope fuel her intercessions. The article closes with a brief profile of a beloved Episcopal church mother from the twentieth century, Mattie Hopkins.

“Do you want to meet our fearless leader?” It was my second or third visit to St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., and a parishioner was introducing me to people in the parish hall. I answered affirmatively, thinking my host would lead me to the rector or vicar. Instead, she led me to St. Mary’s ninety-three-year-old “church mother.” The church mother is a venerable laywoman who appears in African American congregations across denominational lines. She anchors her faith community with her intercessions and exhortations. She rarely takes on a formal leadership role because she does not need one. By virtue of her long history of service in the parish, she embodies spiritual depth. Parishioners seek her out for advice and

* Donyelle Charlotte McCray is Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Director of Multicultural Ministries at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Her dissertation, “The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher,” focuses on the relationship between preaching and censorship. Her research foci include homiletics, Christian spirituality, and mysticism.
entrust her with their prayers. Few roles, whether lay or ordained, carry as much moral authority or esteem.

The church mother plays a foundational role in shaping spirituality in the Black Church and yet she is what historians might call an “ordinary Christian.”¹ In the tapestry of Western spirituality, her story occupies the “underside of history” relegated to those who do not count as spiritual elites.² In light of this limited scholarly attention, this article will consist of a portrait of the church mother’s vocation. After describing some of the historical foundations and qualifications, I will outline her distinctive approach to intercession. I then conclude with a profile of a beloved church mother in the Episcopal Church, Mattie Hopkins.

What is a Church Mother?

At the risk of romanticizing, it may help to think of the church mother as one who lives behind an invisible prie-dieu. Her interactions with parishioners are coded by an assumption that she is continually seeking God on their behalf. This symbolism results in a form of spiritual authority that is as profound as it is unique. Sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains the power associated with this role:

The Mother, while not the pastoral head, is the protocol leader for the congregation. . . . She may or may not be a voting member of the church board, but in either case her opinion is always consulted, and usually heeded. . . . The Church Mother also is the epitome of spirituality, providing a model for the women of the church. Whether she is scripturally knowledgeable, a prayer warrior, or a spiritual advisor, she has a “word from the Lord” that is never to be taken lightly. She may speak in little sermonettes to the congregation. She is never ignored.³

In some settings the church mother’s role is considered as essential as that of a preacher. Her peculiar way of straddling both the center and the margins of the church enables her to shape the “ordinary religious lives and dreams” of parishioners.

The church mother’s ministry is enhanced by its own perceived marginality. Ministry takes place in ways that seem almost clandestine—in a song hummed while a certain person “happens” to walk by, in a prayer whispered during a long hug, in little epigrams about the ways of God. These gestures all grow out of a core vocation of intercession in which praying for others becomes a personal charge. In most cases the role seems to emerge quietly and without a formal rite of investiture. Why does the simple decision to intercede on behalf of others carry so much weight? How did this role develop?

**Historical Foundations**

Details are murky, but the role of church mother has been a fixture in the Black Church since the nineteenth century and may have evolved directly out of matriarchal family structures or spiritual mother roles in indigenous African faith traditions. It seems more likely that the role sprang from fictive kinship relationships among enslaved Africans. When enslaved people lost spouses or biological family members as a result of lease, sale, separation, or death, they were sometimes able to cultivate surrogate families out of their friendship networks. The bond between “play mother” and “play daughter” might be especially strong given the history of loss and the need for emotional support. This relational aspect of the church mother’s vocation seems consistent with this pattern of fictive kinship, leading to the suggestion that there is no parallel in white churches.

If one seeks ecclesial antecedents, one might place church mothers in the line of nineteenth-century itinerants like Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, and Zilpha Elaw, who publicly affirmed black women’s

---

spiritual authority. Similarities also exist between church mothers and antebellum slave preachers who had to offer prayer and words of encouragement outside of formal liturgical settings, when candid speech was possible. This privileging of extra-liturgical spheres was critical for enslaved Christians. Their religion was “both institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted.” The fluidity in slave religion made space for women’s ministry for a time despite the fact that female leadership became a source of shame. As Clarence Hardy explains:

Shortly after Emancipation, black Baptist observers in the North believed that the power some black women exercised within rural religious communities in the South was an unfortunate heritage from the days of bondage and undoubtedly among the “vices and irregularities inseparably attendant upon the state of slavery.” Though these “church mothers” or “gospel mothers” were, according to black missionary Charles Satchel in the late 1860s, “outside of the New Testament arrangement,” these women nevertheless claimed “to be under the special influence of the Spirit” and began to “exercise an authority, greater in many cases, than that of ministers.”

This shame around church mothers probably contributed to the limited historical resources on their ministries. More to the point, Satchel’s comment suggests the church mother role served as a route for black women’s spiritual authority and a mode of Christian leadership that did not mimic white power-wielding. By resting on the Holy Spirit’s anointing rather than rank, education, personal charisma, or talent, the church mother announced the liberative possibilities within Christianity. As one who identified as both a crone and a beloved child

---

11 Hardy, “Fauset’s (Missing) Pentecostals,” 19.
12 Anthea Butler notes the paucity of historical research on church mothers in her *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 44.
of God, she offered an alternative vision of being human that resonated with her community.

This vision has proven vital to the Black Church. As a result, histories of individual church mothers appear in multiple theological traditions, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Baptist churches, the Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal churches, and the Episcopal Church. Church mothers have served in Protestant denominations that support women’s ordination as well as in denominations that do not. The role has even had manifestations in Roman Catholicism and Neo-African traditions. Further, the role spans geographical boundaries as well as theological ones, with church mothers appearing as far south as the Caribbean. On one level this broad influence suggests that the role results from syncretism, but it also underscores the role’s importance over time.

The Church Mother’s Call

Like their ordained counterparts, church mothers respond to a call to ministry. This call authorizes the ministry and also informs its character. Mother Lizzie Robinson, who later became an iconic church mother in the Church of God in Christ, reflects on being called to ministry as a youth living in rural Arkansas:

One day, while we were playing, I heard someone call me Liz. . . . They called me three times, Liz, Liz, Liz. I did not know who it was that called me. My mother was in the field and when she came home I told her someone had called me. She said, don’t answer when someone calls you like that or you will die, so don’t answer. She did not know about Eli calling Samuel.14

The prophetic overtones of this call came to fruition as Robinson assumed leadership roles among women in the church and developed a reputation as an intercessor and truth-teller much like the prophet Samuel.15 In her case, discerning the call to ministry involved a

14 Butler, Women in the Church of God in Christ, 13.
delicate negotiation of the gender norms of the Church of God in Christ, which made room for women’s pastoral ministry so long as its expression had a maternal flavor. The point I wish to make here is simply that church mothering is dignified by a call narrative. In Robinson’s context, call amplifies the importance of a given ministry and points to God as its authorizer.

The church mother’s call to ministry might manifest more subtly as a call to make a spiritual home in a given parish. Settling in the parish is vital for at least two reasons. First, a long tenure in a specific faith community fosters the necessary intimacy with members of the congregation. Church mothers often have the opportunity to pray for multiple generations of the families in the parish. Second, a long history in the parish allows the church mother to steward individual and congregational stories. She can then narrate the Holy Spirit’s action in the community over a significant block of time. The call to settle or become planted entails intentionally building relationships with parishioners that deepen over time.

Making a spiritual home in a parish also requires regularity. Sporadic appearances over long periods of time will not foster the kind of intimacy the church mother seeks. Her ministry demands a continual presence that rivals that of the medieval anchoress who steadied the church with her abiding presence and constant prayer. The church mother’s physical presence on site announces her continuing availability to fellow parishioners. Howard Thurman, a mystic whose spirituality was shaped by church mothers, gets to the heart of what continuing availability means when he talks about “leisure”: “There must be a sense of leisure out of which we relate to others,” he explains. “We cannot be in a hurry in matters of the heart. The human spirit has to be explored gently and with unhurried tenderness.”

One might ask whether a church mother’s call can be compared to that of a spiritual director. Some parity exists between the two insofar as both the spiritual director and the church mother seek to foster the spiritual growth of others rather than elevate themselves. Both focus on how God speaks to a given individual or group and both seek to enhance sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Yet, the church mother has license to be much more directive than the contemporary

---

16 Hardy, “Fauset’s (Missing) Pentecostals,” 20; Butler, Women in the Church of God in Christ, 2.
spiritual director. She holds the authority to correct rather than merely suggest and will determine protocol as quickly as she follows it. The church mother will “chastise the pastor” for misinterpreting scripture or leading ineffectively. “[Talking back] or voicing dissent serves as a vehicle for full participation in the faith community and models something critical for oppressed or exploited people who seek healing and subjectivity.”

Here, it is worth noting that the church mother is not a sweet little old lady in the parish. Her long tenure in the parish yields license to speak freely. Usually this means the church mother hears requests for intercession but also challenges her petitioners so that they develop more expansive understandings of divine action, build patience and tolerance for risk, and otherwise develop the grit that is critical for rigorous discernment. In one man’s words, the church mother “made you get your shit together.” So being a church mother is not tantamount to coddling infants but more like companioning adult children who need to develop sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leadings. Mothering souls boils down to nurturing spiritual vitality and keeping the heart supple.

Praying Like a Church Mother

How does one learn to pray like a church mother? What is it about her approach that prompts such endearment? Each church mother offers a unique answer to these questions based on her personality and gifts. Yet as a general rule, the church mother’s theology of prayer reflects a high view of intercession, unusual sensitivity to suffering, and abiding hope. These three form the mirepoix from which each church mother’s ministry evolves.

Stressing Intercession

While adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and petition surely have a place in the church mother’s prayers, the emphasis falls on intercession. The sorrows, fears, and dreams of her fellow parishioners

---

take on a driving importance and give her prayers a surprising vigor. The Rev. Dr. Lloyd A. Lewis learned this lesson while serving as a young curate in Brooklyn. His rector insisted that he make a communion visit to a Mrs. Mortley:

I walked over to Mrs. Mortley’s door and rang the doorbell. All of a sudden, I heard this singing coming out of the house. I stopped for a second and said, “Okay.” So her husband came down and said, “She’s upstairs.” I went upstairs, and there was Mrs. Mortley. Mrs. Mortley had just about everything you could imagine medically that could go wrong with her. She was sitting in a wheelchair. But she was singing her heart out. I was amazed when I looked at her. She said, “Come on in. Jesus is here.” I said, “Alright.” I went in, and Mrs. Mortley began at that point to preach at me. She said, “You know Jesus is good.” I said, “Yes, ma’am. I know that Jesus is good.” “You know that Jesus never leaves you.” I said, “Yes, ma’am. I know that, too.” “They said that I would not be alive right now, but doctor Jesus had a different idea.” I said, “Oh well, that’s true, too.” We just sort of talked like that, and then, I said, “Mrs. Mortley, it’s time for me to give you communion now.” She said, “Oh fine.” So I was giving her communion, reading out of my little Prayer Book, having a wonderful time being a liturgical officer, and when I got to the end of the service and closed the Prayer Book because of the fact that I was finished, she took her hand and put it on my hand, and she said, “We’re not finished yet.” She said, “Because now I’m going to pray for you.” I was a deacon at that point. . . . Mrs. Mortley took her hands and put them on my head, and I can’t remember what she said, but something happened. She prayed for me, and the tears started flowing.

I got up after the service, after we had finished, and walked back around to the church. Henry [the rector] was sitting inside of the church office smoking his pipe. He looked at me and said, “You saw her, didn’t you?” I said, “I did.” He said, “She prayed for you, didn’t she?” I said, “She did.” He said, “You need to go around and see her lots of times,” and I did. Not necessarily to take Mrs. Mortley communion, but so that she could pray for me.21

Mrs. Mortley’s reputation as an intercessor seemed well-founded. She even encouraged Dr. Lewis to rely on the prayers of parishioners. He

---

21 Lloyd A. Lewis Oral History, RG A62, Interview One Transcript (in process), 6 November 2014, Minute 19:00, African American Episcopal Historical Collection, Virginia Theological Seminary Archives.
goes on to explain, “When parishioners say they pray for me, I believe them. I know how much I need those prayers to do anything that I’m going to do with any authenticity as a priest.”

Mrs. Mortley probably could not spark such a fire if her intercessions simply consisted of mouthing names. Her method seems to mirror that of Howard Thurman, who soaked up much of this theology from church mother figures. Thurman sees prayer as bringing a person with a need clearly to mind and then tenderly exposing the person to God’s scrutiny and love. One prays for the beloved first out of pure necessity rather than in pursuit of some desired result. Intercession, then, in Thurman’s view, comes down to “finding an opening or openings through which my love can flow into the life of the other,” and locating openings “through which his love can flow into me.” In other words, intercession is unitive. Praying for another person means exposing the other person’s need to one’s “total life and resources, making it possible for new insights of helpfulness and creativity to emerge.”

While Thurman does not say so explicitly, he is narrating the unitive movement of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shapes the church mother’s perception and illumines the human situation. Thurman remembers one such encounter with a church mother figure named Ma Walker:

In the corner down at the end of our street, my mother noticed that a large group of people had gathered and others were coming. She sent me down there to see what was going on. As I got to the corner I saw that the center of attraction was the strange behavior of Kenchion Butler, who ran a barbershop. He was describing a large circle around an oak tree. Each time he completed the circle he would strike the tree with a huge cross-tie ax he had in his hands, and call someone’s name. He was clearly out of his mind. The sheriff had come to take him away to jail as a preliminary to sending him to the mental hospital—or, as we said at the time, the asylum. The sheriff could not get to him because of the ax in his hand. It was a game of waiting it out.

Then someone thought of Ma Walker, and I was sent for her. She was a most unusual woman in our community, distinguished

22 Lloyd A. Lewis Oral History, Minute 23:00.
23 Thurman, Strange Freedom, 182.
24 Thurman, Strange Freedom, 94.
Two things stand out about this incident. On one level, the encounter is sheer miracle in that “the wildness is gentled out of a personality at war with itself.”26 The second thing that stands out is the active nature of Ma Walker’s intercession. By going to the scene of Butler’s crisis, calling his name, and walking him home, Ma Walker stands “in loco Dei in the life of another,” thus demonstrating “the willingness to be to another human being what is needed at the time the need is most urgent and most acutely felt.”27 This willingness brings new dimension to the notion of intercession.

Ma Walker is not alone in pairing her intercessions with action. Often, a church mother’s prayer will take the form of community or civic engagement. Activists, politicians, and clergy regularly rely on the symbolic influence of church mothers. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes recounts a case when a group of protesters held a sit-in in a public building. When threatened with arrest, the protesters arranged for a taxi to bring Mother Williams to the scene. This tactic proved effective because once Mother Williams joined the sit-in, the police were ordered not to make arrests.28 Here again, praying for others involves solidarity, making one’s intercessions visible in the public square.

26 Thurman, Strange Freedom, 167.
27 Thurman, Strange Freedom, 183.
Sensing Suffering

The urgency demonstrated by Ma Walker and Mother Williams is not surprising when one remembers that church mothering grew out of the context of slavery. For the enslaved church mother, prayer served as a form of resisting evil and way of claiming a fully human identity. Prayer often functioned as the only buffer against the brutalities of daily life. Naturally, then, the church mother prays with a robust theodicy or doctrine of evil. In her case a strong theodicy demands more than sitting with existential questions about why people suffer; theodicy involves testing the limits of evil and searching out the possibilities for creative agency in the face of tragedy.29 The church mother’s prayers reflect a partiality for those who stand “with their backs against the wall,” or rather, “those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity.”30 Yet, this partiality for suffering people is driven by an underlying belief in their resourcefulness and skill.

The reality of black suffering has epistemological implications. To varying degrees, the church mother must rely on what Toni Morrison calls “discredited knowledge,” the wisdom that grows directly out of African American culture and its attendant values, beliefs, and experiences.31 In other words, the church mother must pray with those who have a sense of inherited exile. In this context, intercession requires discerning “what it means to be religious when safety is theologically and sociologically in question,” and attempts at self-actualization trigger danger.32 This task does not lend itself to tidy solutions or episodic support. Instead, this mission involves making a longer-term commitment to pray with socially dispossessed people who are continually negotiating the terms of their own survival.33

33 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 20.
Along this line, a church mother develops a “nose for trouble” that helps her anticipate difficulty in advance. Part of her ministry is to sense suffering as it hovers beneath the surface. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reflects on such an instance with a woman affectionately called Mother Pollard. After a speech given around the time of the Montgomery bus boycott, Mother Pollard noticed King’s anxious and depressed affect:

At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, “Come here son.” I immediately walked over and gave her a big hug. Then she said, “something is wrong with you. You didn’t talk strong tonight.” Seeking to keep my fears to myself I retorted, “Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.” “Now you can’t fool me,” she said; “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? or is it that the white folks is bothering you?” Before I could answer she looked directly into my eyes and said, “I don told you we is with you all the way.” And then with a countenance beaming with quiet certainty she concluded, “but even if we aint with you, God’s gonna take care of you.” Everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when she uttered these consoling words. . . . As the years have unfolded the majestic words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace to the hinterlands of my troubled soul. “God’s gonna take care of you.”

Mother Pollard unmasks King’s feigned strength and hones in on the reality of his suffering. In doing so, she acknowledges human finitude, the idea that human beings are intrinsically limited. Despite the common façade of invincibility, humans have “limited emotional capacity, limited abilities to understand and predict, limited powers to cure, limited control over what is most precious.” Church mothers like Mother Pollard refuse to deny these limits. Instead, the church

---

mother’s role is to gesture toward a new, more humane world order where human fragility is respected. And because she negotiates the intersecting dynamics of race, class, gender, age, and ability on a daily basis, the church mother is an essential partner in enacting a more humane vision.

Abiding in Hope

Hope fuels the church mother’s vocation. Because she is willing to both scrutinize the human condition and energize parishioners, her ministry has a prophetic bent. As Walter Brueggemann explains, prophetic ministry is not limited to preaching but includes a range of tasks that involve critiquing the powers and principalities on the one hand, and stirring hope within the Christian community on the other.37 The church mother demonstrates prophetic consciousness by being a voice of hope and unveiling practices that inspire faith. While she spent much of her life on the fringe of the church, Ida B. Wells took the posture of a church mother when she met with a dozen African American men confined in an Arkansas jail. They related their stories in detail, weaving in songs and prayers for a better life in heaven. Wells remembers her response:

Finally I got up and walked close to the bars and said to them in a low tone, “I have been listening to you for nearly two hours. You have talked and sung and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure that you are going to be received in the New Jerusalem because your God knows that you are innocent of the offense for which you expect to be electrocuted. But why don’t you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened their prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that he will open your prison doors too.

“If you do believe that, let all of your songs and prayers hereafter be songs of faith and hope that God will set you free; that the judges who have to pass on your cases will be given the wisdom and courage to decide in your behalf. That is all I’ve got to say. Quit talking about dying; if you believe your God is all powerful, believe he is powerful enough to open these prison doors, and say

---

Miraculously, all twelve men were released. In a similar way, the church mother nudges parishioners toward life. In cultural contexts burdened by the forces of death, such assertions amount to a radical act and make the church mother a beacon of hope.

Quite apart from her words, the church mother can become a physical embodiment of hope. Toni Morrison depicts this phenomenon with a fictional though not ahistorical character named “Baby Suggs, holy” in her novel *Beloved*. Baby Suggs, holy is an elderly former slave woman living in nineteenth-century Cincinnati. A life of inordinate labor leaves her body “busted” but her physical frailty does not hinder her from functioning as a spiritual mother to a group of former slaves in Cincinnati. Even with ailing “legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,” Baby Suggs, holy urges her listeners to weep, laugh, dance, and claim their full humanity. Further, Baby Suggs, holy’s spiritual wholeness despite sixty years of enslavement testifies to the possibility of human thriving in the face of grave suffering. Her broken body becomes the site of the community’s experience of resilience and hope.

The church mother’s body carries a similar magnetism. In contrast to preachers who are ordinarily greeted with a handshake at the close of the worship service, the church mother elicits hugs and kisses. These affectionate gestures may grow out of a general coding of elderly black female bodies as safe and nurturing, but more likely suggest the church mother is the embodied “repository of belief and culture,” and thus, a living symbol of hope.

Being a symbol of hope carries risks, and here it is worth noting that even if the church mother is dearly loved, she is not infallible. A range of competing interests and values shade her perspective and influence the exercise of her ministry. She might fall short by allowing social respectability to win out over the demands of the gospel, by confusing guidance with manipulation or control, by giving into despair about the congregation’s future, or by any number of other


personal failings. Yet when she is buoyed by hope, she provides an invaluable model of discipleship and demonstrates the liberating possibilities within the Christian tradition.

A Profile of Mattie Hopkins

The Episcopal Church had a mother of hope in the late Mattie Hopkins (1918–1988). Mattie mothered in “quiet, unspectacular ways,” and her influence reached well beyond her parish, Trinity Episcopal Church, Chicago. Mattie embodied the church mother role so well that Canon Frederick Williams dubbed her “Elephant Mother.” Her ministry had both formal and informal dimensions. In an official capacity, her labors included service as a vestry member and as a representative to the Council of Women’s Ministries from the Episcopal Commission for Black Ministries. Shortly before her death she was elected vice president of the Union of Black Episcopalians, having nurtured the organization through its birth from the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU). She spent much of her energy advocating behind the scenes for various social causes. Henri Stines, her former rector, described her as “always—every day—involved in some kind of cause.” For instance, in an effort to end apartheid in South Africa, she played a key role in the Episcopal Church’s 1988 endorsement of the Royal Dutch/Shell boycott. Her leadership in this initiative followed decades of work in the background of the civil rights movement. Mattie’s faith-based witness earned her the Vida Scudder Award and made her a pillar in both sacred and secular movements for justice.

Mattie spent almost forty years as an educator. As a member of the Chicago school board and an ally to the Chicago Teacher’s Union, she became a thorn in the side of the city’s political machine. She protected low-income children as if they were her newborn cubs and openly clashed with school board members who sought to direct funds away from poor black and Latina/o youth. Mattie also helped to propel organizations such as TransAfrica and Operation PUSH forward and to equip Harold Washington for his term as Chicago’s mayor. The car accident that ended Mattie’s life took place while she was making

42 Harris, “In Celebration of Mattie,” 22.
the long drive from Illinois to Atlanta for the Democratic National Convention.

People who knew Mattie well understood that her advocacy grew out of her intercessions, and within the church she seems to have garnered as much respect for her spirituality as for her activism. Mattie’s counsel drew people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and she offered them wisdom with a strong dose of candor. By refusing to bite her tongue, Mattie antagonized some people, including some women who found her frankness off-putting, some white clergy who wanted her to cater to ecclesiastical hierarchy, and some older African American clergy who sought to avoid conflict at all costs. These differences tired her but rarely did they prevent her from remaining in dialogue or quash her resolve. The great ideals of equality, liberation, and truth repeatedly trumped petty personal differences.

Mattie’s expression of the church mother vocation differs from the norm in one important respect: she attended a racially integrated church. Most church mothers attend African American parishes, where their ministries are cherished and readily understood. Mattie prayed on behalf of a diverse flock and in doing so taught a lesson about being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. She nurtured a similar openness in others and encouraged people to see the spiritual life as one spent “touching the surface and the depth of things, instinctively responsive unto both.”°° Mattie saw this capacity in both lay and ordained Christians and enlightened members of the Union of Black Episcopalians in this regard. She is credited with opening its leadership to men and women, whether lay or ordained. Much of the work behind this sea change was unsung and prompted by her prayers and exhortations, though posthumously she won the endearing title “Mother of the U.B.E.”

Church mothers like Mattie Hopkins offer much to the Anglican tradition and to contemporary Christian spirituality. Given the unofficial nature of the church mother’s role, it is unclear how the increased number of ordained women and demographic shifts within parishes will shape the vocation. The call to steward congregational stories, foster relationships, labor in prayer, and embody hope to parishioners has clear pastoral dimensions and some women may opt

for some form of ordained ministry instead. Longevity in the parish, so key to the church mother’s vocation, may also prove unattainable given the mobility in urban parishes. Despite these daunting challenges, it is helpful to remember that the church mothers are not the fruit of intentional recruitment; they are sheer gift. The church’s task is to honor their vocation and tell their stories. The Spirit’s task is to replenish their ranks.