

The Black Experience in the Episcopal Church

by Lydia T. Wright, M.D.

Booker T. Washington is reported to have said that if a black person "is anything other than a Baptist or a Methodist, a white person has been fooling with his religion."¹ W.E.B. Dubois, in his *History of the Black Church*, observed "the Episcopal Church probably has done less for black people than any other aggregation of Christians." Blacks of other denominations have seriously accused black Episcopalians of being "middle-class social climbers" who deny their black religious heritage.²

Robert A. Bennett, a contemporary black Theologian has responded to these cliches with these answers: ³

Black Episcopalians, no less than blacks of other denominations, have viewed the black church as the most vital force within the black community.

Black Episcopalians have demonstrated the authenticity of their religious commitment by their persistent struggle to maintain their racial identity in a larger church body that has not readily, until recently, acknowledged their presence.⁴

Black Episcopalians, stand in the same relationship to whites in the Episcopal

Church as the total black community stands in relationship to white America at large.

Who are we black Episcopalians about whom these things have been said? Who are we in relationship to white Episcopalians? Who are we in relationship to blacks of other denominations? From whence did we derive and what is our mission as we approach the twenty-first century?

By all counts it would seem that black Americans should all have been Quakers. Quakers were the first religious group to work seriously toward developing a sense of dignity among blacks in America. Although some Quakers owned slaves, many from the beginning identified with black people, and they did so at the point of their suffering.⁵ Instead of focusing on the afterlife, Quakers believed in and labored for the kingdom of God on earth. They intended to reveal the Gospel by deeds rather than words. While other protestant communions were opposing the importation of slaves, Quakers were opposing the whole institution of slavery. In 1775 they organized the first society committed to freeing slaves.⁶ This provided a stimulus for all of the antislavery movements that followed.

In anticipation of the time when slaves might be free, Quakers not only trained blacks for making their own way socially and economically, but they also exposed them to the spirit of justice, freedom and equality. In contrast to other religious communions, Quakers early on faced and dismissed racial consciousness. But the Quakers were so few and so concentrated in the north, especially in

Philadelphia, that their numerical impact on blacks was not spectacular and most of their finest efforts died before fulfillment.

The vast majority of slaves who became Christians were concentrated on the plantations in the middle Atlantic states and the southeast where the Church of England was the established church. While the story of black Episcopalians is often said to begin with the arrival in 1701 of missionaries under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), it actually began in Virginia in 1619 when the first black slave was baptized in the Anglican community.

Through the SPG, Anglican missionaries worked not only among slaves, but also among the American Indians and those plantation owners who had broken ties with the church when they migrated to the colonies.⁷ While in some places in the south, slaves made up to half the communicants, Anglican missionaries were not as effective among slaves as they had hoped to be. First there was the matter of enslavement *per se*. Northern Anglicans never broke with their southern brothers over the issue of slavery. They both preferred to work within a political framework which permitted human enslavement. This fact alone contributed heavily to the defeat of Anglican missionary work among the slaves. Then there was the matter of the sheer numbers of slaves, far more than the SPG could reach. There were also difficulties for the whites in converting adult slaves and convincing plantation owners that conversion would not lead to giving enslaved persons their freedom.⁸

To solve these problems, the SPG developed a strategy. First, the SPG prepared an oath for potential black communicants to take prior to baptism:

I declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that I do not ask for Holy Baptism out of any design to free myself from the duty and obedience I owe to my master while I live, but merely for the good of my soul and to partake of the grace and the blessings promised to the members of the Church of Christ.⁹

After the introduction of this oath planters became more secure and began granting special privileges such as free time for religious instruction to their favorite household servants. Soon, in some households, slaves were worshiping with their Anglican masters who were still holding them in bondage.

Next, because of the large numbers of slaves and the difficulties with training adults, the SPG decided to concentrate on the children of household slaves. They thought that if the children were well trained, they would pass their teachings on to the next generation. But there were proportionally fewer children among the household slaves than among the field hands, so a relatively small and select group of blacks ended up as Anglican communicants. Bennett notes that they were baptized, confirmed, married and buried by the priests of the church, but the majority of them were forced to worship in slave galleries or in separate buildings or at special hours.¹⁰ This group of slaves may have been better educated than their counterparts in

the fields because, contrary to law, they learned to read and write in order to follow the prayer book service. It has been suggested that this is the group from whom was derived that marvelous Negro spiritual, "Let us Break Bread Together on Our Knees."

The special treatment given household slaves resulted in a class system. Household slaves were in closest contact with the white masters and from them there descended a comparatively few, usually light-skinned middle-class Episcopalians in evidence down to the present.¹¹ Having observed the best things in life in the kitchens and the parlors of wealthy plantation owners, these household slaves adopted the cultural superficialities of this life for themselves and passed it on to their children and their children's children.

Methodists and Baptists in the south concentrated their missionary efforts on the field hands. Their preachers lacked the education of the Anglican ministers but they appealed greatly to the outcast slaves. In the huge crowds that attended the revivals and camp meetings, there were slaves who found in the fiery messages of salvation a hope and prospect of escape from their earthly woes.¹² Moreover, the emphasis which evangelists placed upon feelings as a sign of conversion found a ready response in slaves who were repressed in every other way. Despite the vast gulf that separated master and slave, participation in the same emotional religious services drew blacks out of their isolation and a step closer to the white man's world.¹³

Abolition and the Underground Railroad sub-

stantially increased the number of blacks migrating to the north. Among them were some of those black Episcopalians who had been taught and indoctrinated by the Anglicans in the south. Most black Christians migrating to the north, however, were black Methodists and Baptists who had taken seriously the sermons of the white evangelists. In the north the better educated black migrants joined free blacks, some of whom had been educated by Quakers, to become the north's black middle class.¹⁴

A pivotal event for the black church occurred on Fourth Street in Philadelphia in 1786 at the predominantly white St. George's Methodist-Episcopal Church.¹⁵ Richard Allen, a former slave, had been invited to preach at St. George's because of his spell-binding oratory. He began attracting ever increasing numbers of blacks to St. George's and it soon seemed prudent to the elders to assign the former slaves segregated seating around the walls. Tradition says that one Sunday morning Allen, his friend Absolom Jones and several of their friends, arrived at St. George's, not to preach, but to worship. Because the blacks' seats were already taken they went boldly to the gallery which was reserved for whites. White men came up to the Allen group and wrenched them from their knees as they prayed. Allen, Jones and their group left St. George's and responded to the insult by setting up their own organization in a blacksmith shop. They called it The Free African Society.

The Free African Society was not a religious organization but a forum for expressing ideas about

freedom and protest, but it became the major vehicle for deciding where and how blacks should worship. Allen believed blacks should form a separate congregation based on race, but still related to the Methodist Church. Jones believed that the Methodist Church did not welcome blacks and so he organized St. Thomas African Protestant Episcopal Church which was received into the Episcopal communion on October 12, 1794. Absolom Jones was ordained as its first deacon in 1795 and its first priest in 1804. Before his death at 71, he participated in the consecration of his friend and comrade, Richard Allen, as bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Despite differences in the way they developed over the years, it is clear that the same independent spirit and desire to control their own affairs which impelled black Baptists and Methodists to separate from white congregations, also caused the organization of black Episcopal churches. However, black Episcopalians did not go as far as black Methodists and Baptists in breaking fellowship with their white brothers and sisters. Since blacks in the Episcopal Church were few, they had never precipitated a crisis over seating such as the one at St. George's. Also, the emphasis upon an educated ministry and a prayer book service dissuaded many blacks from membership in the Episcopal Church.

From the beginning black Episcopalians have been technically an organic part of the predominantly white Episcopal Church. Some black Episcopal churches have been less aggressively independent and less black-oriented than their counter-

parts among Baptists and Methodists. Many black Episcopal priests have depended to some extent on sources outside their churches for their lower than standard salaries. Such arrangements have not generally fostered self-determination or divergence from the institutional norm.¹⁶

From its beginnings the black church has enjoyed uninterrupted growth. Today an estimated 60 percent of black Christians are Baptists, 25 percent are Methodists and the rest are divided among the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational, Roman Catholic and other smaller churches. Black Methodists and Baptists have adapted Christianity to serve pressing earthly needs. Their churches through the years have fulfilled important community roles.¹⁷

They are sanctuaries and tactical headquarters for the poor and oppressed.

They are the primary means of communication between black leaders and the black masses.

They are the primary spawning ground for militant black leaders.

By paying the salaries of their black ministers, the black churches have made their ministers the freest men in the civil rights movement.

They are the most successful voter registration centers.

They are the primary means of attracting members to the NAACP. One fourth of all the presidents of NAACP chapters have been ministers.

They are the most successful organizers of boycotts of products, buses, schools and services.

Black churches are places where blacks run their own affairs and, most important, they have been the places where blacks have received the Gospel and made it their own in terms that have meaning within the black culture and experience.

Because of successes in these roles, black Methodists and Baptists are sometimes referred to as the "visible" black church and black Episcopalians as the "invisible" black church.

All discussions of questions about black Episcopalians must respond first to the question of black identity in the Episcopal Church. Sociologist Van S. Bird states that the "twoness" of being black and American is not overcome or transcended in the Christian community. "We are not Episcopalians," he says, "we are black Episcopalians."¹⁸ Most black theologians concur.

Washington's statement about a white person "fooling" with a black person's religion may be too narrow. Recent studies of black populations in the 18th and 19th centuries in Philadelphia reveal the influence of white Christians on all denominations of blacks.¹⁹ These studies also show that blacks chose denominations casually. For instance, most members of the Free African Society opted for the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because Presiding Bishop White's gracious offer of ordination was accepted by Absalom Jones.

Those who would rule black Episcopalians out

of the black experience because they are not a "black church," and seem not to witness to the black community, have never heard of that deep and abiding friendship between Absalom Jones and Richard Allen that bound black Episcopalians and Methodists together in a dynamic and life-long union. Despite the distinct differences in their theology and sociology regarding American Christianity, Jones and Allen remained intimate friends for life. Together, history says, they established community businesses including real estate interests and the first black insurance company. Their corps of nurses and their burial teams were among the most effective in the country during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Together they worked for the abolition of slavery and for the protection of the rights of free blacks. In the best sense, Allen and Jones were fathers of the black church as we know it today. Their lives should remind us that we black Christians have a duty toward our own community born of the peculiar institution of American enslavement that surmounts institutional and denominational loyalties.

DuBois stated that the Episcopal Church probably has done less for blacks than have other denominations. But the black community has learned that it is not wise to put its future in anyone else's hands, to have anyone else *do* for blacks what they can do for themselves.²⁰ What whites have done for blacks has often been done in an effort to control them, to make them over in white cultural and western patterns in the name of Christ. John Burgess, 12th bishop of Massachusetts and profes-

sor at Yale Divinity School, said, "The fact that Christianity is making spectacular strides in Africa today is the direct result of the actual withdrawal of western missionaries from positions of authority there and the preaching of the Word by blacks to blacks."²¹ He went on to say, "As Christians, blacks have been expected to demonstrate a patience, a love and a tolerance they rarely saw in their teachers and oppressors; but they have, nevertheless, made the Gospel their own. 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."

To those blacks who say that we black Episcopalians "are middle-class social climbers," R.E. Hood, black theologian, had this to say: "First we ought to admit to being middle class, accepting all the risks such admission carries with it. . . . At the same time black Episcopalians ought to be liberating themselves to use the talents associated with the middle class to serve and minister on behalf of all blacks who are poor. We should be showing our solidarity with our fellow blacks by literally washing the feet of the underclass and the poor who are black."²²

Nathan Wright, black educator and theologian, has said, "We blacks need to overcome the effects of our acculturation in a pro-white society and reclaim our own identity as a kingly race."²³

Whether we realize it or not, black Episcopalians are strategically located to articulate the alienation and suffering of the oppressed to those who oppress. They can be agents of social transformation within

the church.

In Charles Willie's book, *Oreo*, the author described marginal people as those "who live in, between, and beyond their race." Willie stated that these are the people who unite the clans and races in society and help us reconcile our differences. Moses and Martin Luther King were two of Willie's prime examples of marginal men in that they not only lived in, between, and beyond their race, but they also turned toward, rather than away from, their opposition and insisted on being recognized. They left a legacy of creative imagination.

But Willie asked this question: "If marginal is so creative, why do so few people aspire to be marginal men and women and why are race and clan relations so exalted?" His hypothesis was that many people are fearful of marginality because they fear loss of identity. They think they are maximizing their identity by relating primarily to like-minded and look-alike people when actually they are limiting the range of their identity. Willie went on to say, "A group never can be really certain of its social significance in the scheme of things if only the members of that group believe it is valuable. A group rejected, ignored, or unrecognized tends to be uncertain of itself."

"Identity," Willie said, "is a two-stage process of affirmation and confirmation and this process is necessary at all levels of society. The peoplehood status of whites, at present, tends to be confirmed by the society at large. But the way of life of blacks is mostly ignored by this same society. Confirmation for personhood status at the family, kinship,

or clan level cannot substitute for confirmation of peoplehood status by the society at large."²⁴

Nathan Wright said of marginality and the mission of the church:

Blacks and other third world people have been forced to the margins of national and global life from which they view the society from which they have been excluded. Those at the periphery (who know who they are and who do not pretend that they are elsewhere) may look at life at the center of the society which has excluded them with far more perspective, imagination, objectivity and creativeness than can those who dominate the center of things. For the Church we serve and for the world of which we are a part such persons may be no less than a type of 'saving remnant.'

One of the major differences between Black religious tradition at its characteristic best and the white American religious tradition at its best is that while the white tradition seeks infinitely hard to ameliorate wrong and to make life better in every possible way, the other, the Black tradition, seeks to set life right. Black churchmen do not want to work to make life good or better. At our characteristic best, we want life about us changed, altered, transformed.

When Jesus, early in his public ministry went into the synagogue at Nazareth, he read these words from the book of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me.

Because he anointed me to preach new life to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.

And recovering of sight to the blind.

To set at liberty them that are bruised.

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

When Jesus finished reading, he said, 'Today has this scripture been fulfilled in your ears.'

Those whose religion is related to power seem to seek to lessen the burdens of the poor, but the powerless seek a new reality reference, desiring only a full release from poverty. Those whose religion is related to a culture of power work to make our prisons as deeply humane as possible, but those victimized and imprisoned by a culture of power want the prisons opened. In other words, they seek the jobs, the education and the opportunities that would result in a full release from poverty and, therefore, a full release from prison.

Those whose religion is that of the status quo want to minister in the most kindly ways to the helpless; but those who come from a culture of debilitation want no less than healing, wholeness and self-sufficiency for every human life. And (in the style of the sixties) they want ALL! Here! Now! For Jesus Himself, has promised 'Today are these words fulfilled.'

Those possessed of marginal insight do not

represent a culture of power. They are potentially—for the Church and our World—a type of saving remnant.²⁵

Could black Episcopalians be the marginal men and women to whom God has given the opportunity to unite two different worlds because they live in, between and beyond their race? For that matter, could white Episcopalians? And more to the point, could you?

Notes

¹Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933) Chapter I.

²W.E.B. Dubois, *History of the Black Church*.

³Robert A. Bennett, *Black Episcopalians: A History from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: McGraw-Hill), page 1.

⁴See also Nathan Wright, "The Black Laity: Offering Us Their Life and Work," in *Laity Exchange* (London: Papers, Spring-Summer 1986), page 4.

⁵John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947), pp. 108-9, 199-201.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1966), Chapters I and II.

⁸Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956). This book is the best seminal treatment of the peculiarly degrading nature of the North American experience of human enslavement. Stampp speaks of this institution in America as being "peculiar" because in human demeaning it outdoes all other historic forms of enslavement. He employs the term "human enslavement" in preference to slavery.

⁹Bennett, R., *Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Wright, N. op. cit.

¹¹Franklin, J.H., *op. cit.*

¹²Burgess, John M. *Black Gospel, White Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981). See Introduction, pp. 1-XI.

¹³Franklin, J.H., *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 126, 127.

¹⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹⁵George F. Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: Church Advocate Press, 1922). See Introduction and Chapters I and II.

¹⁶Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921). See especially Chapters II and III.

¹⁷Van S. Bird, "Christian Witness and Social Transformation," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology*, Vol. 22, September 1979, p. 294.

¹⁸See especially W.E.B. DuBois' classic study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: B. Blom, 1967), Chapters 4, 5.

¹⁹Nathan Wright, *Black Power and Urban Unrest* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967). See especially Chapter V, "Self-Development and Self-Respect," pp. 58-69.

²⁰Burgess, J.M. *op. cit.*, p. XI.

²¹Robert E. Hood, "Christian Witness and Social Transformation," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology*, Vol. 22, September 1979, pp. 305-307.

²²Nathan Wright, "Four Keys to Black Church Action," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology*, Vol. 22, September 1979, p. 253.

²³Charles Willie, *Oreo* (Parameter Press, 1975) p. 24.

²⁴Nathan Wright, "Four Keys. . ." p. 254.

Lydia T. Wright has been a practicing pediatrician for 35 years. She grew up in Cincinnati and now lives in Buffalo. Dr. Wright has written several medical papers in her field, and a family history going back into the 1700s.

