Stories of Transformation:
Worship, Witness and Work
in the Black Community
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Introduction

Over the past 18 months, several groups of youth and young adults of color were gathered to talk about their experiences as Christians and as Episcopalians. Their responses were the catalyst for convening a three-day visioning meeting toward the development of a Faith Formation Resource that will supplement the rich landscape of materials already available. During the gathering that was held in 2010 the young people shared their feelings, perspectives and hearts’ desires for formation in a way that deeply resonated with them from their cultural backgrounds.

They came from various dioceses not knowing one another but quickly bonded through fellowship, prayer and Bible study. Conversations and discussions came naturally and it is within this context that ideas, passions, opinions, celebrations, disappointments, challenges, opportunities and expectations were shared.

At the conclusion of the gathering, the group identified 16 topics listed relevant to their formation as young people of color in the church and the world:

1. Sexuality
2. Episcopal identity
3. Evangelism
4. Cultural tensions
5. Lay leadership
6. Clergy leadership
7. Racism
8. Generational leadership
9. Challenges and opportunities
10. The Baptismal Covenant in action
11. Faith in the home
12. Family
13. Liturgy as formation – the work of the people, opportunities for introduction of and continuing formation
14. Stewardship
15. Communications
16. Morals and ethics

While these headings may look similar to the offerings in existing materials, the details addressed in each of these areas specifically relates to the experience in and of the Black community.

The youth and young adults in the initial meetings were clear about two things.

1) They did not know (were not taught) how to talk about their faith and

2) The Christian Formation resources currently available did not sufficiently capture or treat some of the subject matters that related to their own experiences.
To that end, this resource is being prepared in two phases, the first of which you will read in the following pages: *Stories of Transformation: Worship, Witness, and Work in the Black Community*. This offering is a series of stories shared from personal experience of the writers and is a direct response to the conversation among the young people about the place and role of storytelling in the family. The Baptismal Liturgy was used as the font within which clergy and laypersons share their stories.

In the second phase, the resource will provide teaching points on the topics listed above and will invite users to involve their families in storytelling, sharing Christian values and information for their continued growth and Christian Formation. This is to be accomplished in partnership with the on-going ministry of, and interaction with Church groups.

It is our hope that you will embrace, explore and use this resource as a catalyst, for further conversation and spiritual growth.

We extend our sincere thanks to all who contributed to this effort.

The Rev. Canon Angela Ifill  
Missioner, Officer of Black Ministries  

Ruth-Ann Collins  
Lifelong Christian Formation Office

Listen [here](#) (shorten message)

Listen [here](#) (full message)
We Thank You Almighty God, for the Gift of Water

By Adrienne R. Hymes

Adrienne R. Hymes, from the Diocese of Los Angeles, is in the M.Div. program at Virginia Theological Seminary and is called to a global ministry of congregational vitality and renewal. She regularly supports the Office of Black Ministries as the newsletter editor and contributes, as a writer, to the ongoing development of life-long Christian faith formation resources. Adrienne intends to build the kingdom of God through leveraging her expertise in broadcast journalism, public relations and marketing, supported by her theological studies.

Contributor

The Rev. Canon Angela Ifill has been the Episcopal Church’s Missioner for Black Ministries since 2004. She’s a graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1995. In 1994 she served in East Africa as a missionary of the Episcopal Church while also studying African Christianity and traveled to Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia as she followed and documented the 1936 Revival of the Church in East Africa. The overarching program of the Office of Black Ministries is the New Visions Initiative for Congregational Renewal and Vitality that partners communities of faith as they work together to become centers for mission. Included in this venture is training and development for clergy (Clergy Leadership Institute); youth and young adults (Spiritual Opportunity to Unite and Learn (SOUL) Conference) and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Training, which involves the ministry with Sudanese leaders under the Sudanese Leadership Institute for Learning and Advancement. These major activities are implemented through strategic planning meetings and conferences, with groups meeting on a regular basis for ongoing planning, discernment and evaluation of all ministries.
WE THANK YOU, ALMIGHTY GOD, FOR THE GIFT OF WATER

Anyone, who has ever participated as a young child in a group such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, quickly learns that the basic necessities for survival in the wilderness are food, water, shelter and clothes. One may live several days without food, or shelter or even the proper clothing for protection from the environment. After about three to five days without water intake, however, the human body can no longer sustain itself; it cannot live.

It may seem odd for some that we, as baptized members of the body of Christ, give thanks for something that seems so simple, yet it is a necessity to sustain human life. As Christians, we are called to be in relationship with God and in our communities of faith, not to simply survive as humans, but to thrive as persons of faith through Jesus Christ. The symbol of water connects us with the life, death and rebirth of Christ. Water is a symbol of change and movement. In the beginning of creation, the Holy Spirit moved over the water. Just as water becomes a part of us as it moves in us and through us to sustain the human body, our bodies in Christ must be nourished by the Holy Spirit, as it continuously cleanses and renews us on our journeys of faith. It is a symbol of the body’s ability to transcend the human experience as we constantly ebb and flow through our process of becoming, and growing into deep awareness of the life that awaits us after death here on earth.

Thanksgiving over the water reminds us of our roles as church leaders, and that all who are baptized are to share in the priesthood of Christ. We need to be reminded of this. While serving in the role as coordinator for youth formation, it has become more apparent to me that there is a disconnect in what we are called to do, what we are capable of doing, and what we are empowered to do. It is the job of church leadership to uplift the gifts of the congregation and to affirm new ministry opportunities. Instead of hearing “clergy and lay leaders,” people seem to respond in ways that indicate that they hear, “clergy leaders and lay followers.”

Ten years ago, I experienced a pivotal shift in my thinking, initiated by one statement, and a smile from my priest. At coffee hour, a woman, who appeared to be homeless, and afflicted by some type of mental illness, approached me. Out of all of the people at coffee hour, she came to me to ask for help. Perhaps she felt a connection to me as a black woman. At the time, I had the mindset, like so many, that I couldn’t help her or pray for her or even make a difference in her life. She was very fidgety, so I begged her to wait while I went to get a priest to help her. I found one of the priests, and explained the situation to him. I said, “I’m not a minister or anything, so I hope you can help her.” He simply looked at me, smiled, grabbed my hand and said, “Adrienne, we are all ministers.” That was the first time I really got it. He continued to hold my hand as we walked over to the woman together to pray for her, and to offer additional assistance. I didn’t realize it then, but today I consider it a major milestone in my faith formation and my understanding of my responsibility to act. My priest empowered me to step into my rightful place as a minister in the church. I have been an Episcopalian my entire life, and it took me nearly 30 years to have this revelation. Our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer not only states who the ministers are (lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons) and what we are
called to do (BCP, page 855), but reminds us of our duty as Christians.

One Sunday, an elderly black woman showed up at our parish asking for prayer before the worship service. Although the woman specifically requested a priest, one of my fellow parishioners, who knew that I was studying at the seminary, brought me to the woman to assist her. After speaking with her, it appeared that she had been referred to two people before she was connected with me. I placed her in the chapel and stepped out to request one of our priests to pray for her. I found one of the priests vesting, and explained the situation to him. He looked at me, chuckled, shook his head, and said, “You can handle that.” He was right. I could handle that, and I did. It was yet another opportunity for clergy to empower the laity. The blessing of that moment was that I was conscious of that wonderful partnership that was being nurtured.

Most recently, I had a similar experience that took place right after one of my meetings with my parish discernment committee. It had been a particularly emotional meeting, and I needed to gather myself before church. I was in the ladies room when I noticed an unfamiliar face. I simply said hello to the young, black woman. She looked puzzled and said, “Why are you speaking to me? You don’t even know me.” Of course, that was not the response I expected. I knew that this was a time for ministry—even in the restroom. I asked the Holy Spirit to speak through me in such a way that she would feel welcomed and safe. I responded, “I don’t have to know you to acknowledge that you are my sister.” Since I was serving on the altar that day, I invited her to worship with us and to stay after so that we could pray together, although I didn’t really expect her to stay. As we processed down the aisle, I noticed her sitting in the last pew and waiting to catch my eye to let me know that she had indeed stayed. We prayed after church in the chapel, and the young woman continued to come to church several Sundays thereafter. I don’t think she really understood how much she blessed me by allowing me to pray with her on that Sunday.

When there is so much opportunity to use one’s gifts in the church, and on behalf of the church, I often scratch my head, and wonder why there seems to be a hesitance to serve within our communities of faith—our parishes, in particular. I believe the reason for some of this slow response to a call to serve is fear. There is fear in responsibility. Leadership involves responsibility, ownership, and accountability for word, and deed. For some, the words “leadership” and “discipleship” may paralyze, rendering them unable to serve. Too often we are paralyzed by the words themselves, and not mobilized by the Spirit behind the words. When I reflect on the words, leadership and discipleship, in the context of water as a vehicle, the word “ship,” not leader and not disciple, is glaring. As members of this faith community of Christ, we are ships—vessels that have been purposed to sometimes be leaders and guides; and at other times, we are called to be active participants of the larger collection of ships. As ships, we must allow our sails to be propelled by the wind of the Holy Spirit.
What a beautifully broad image to illustrate our connection as black people to this discussion about thanksgiving over water. I’m reminded of Noah’s ark of salvation, which he built based on his faith in God. Over many years, his patience was tested, yet his faith grew. He and his family were saved, from the flood, as a reward for his obedience. We, too, have a saving ark in Christ Jesus. Let’s expand on this analogy of the ship, and make mention of the church nave, where the congregation gathers. Nave is the Latin word for ship. My home parish in Los Angeles is considered to be one of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in Southern California, and when I look to the ceiling from the pews, it looks like the inside of a ship. Finally, as black people, many of us are connected with the painful history of our African ancestors through their inhumane, often deadly, voyages on slave ships toward their lives of bondage in foreign lands.

Black Episcopalians are uniquely equipped with shared experiences, such as slavery and discrimination, which can strengthen our work in the church. We also bring experiences of our individual identities, such as interracial relationships within our individual families, which broaden our cultural perspectives and worldviews even more. We are a community that, in our creativity, has had to adapt to imposed circumstances to suit our needs. We have an innate sense of compassion for those in distress, and a sense of urgency for peace and justice. We have been given the gift of being able to build the kingdom in partnership with one another, and recognizing that all gifts of the Spirit are not only nice things to have, but very necessary. The gifts of the Spirit, whether it is discernment, wisdom, knowledge, teaching, prophesying, encouraging, serving or governing, are many. We have the responsibility to identify, magnify and utilize them to glorify God.

The question then becomes, “Am I called to lead or to follow?” The answer is yes. Clergy and laity leading and following in partnership; the answer is yes. Having a sense of ownership and accountability in the church begins with our Baptismal Covenant. In it, we are given the authority to be good stewards of God’s creation, and through it, we are given the responsibility, to equip and be equipped for the work we are called to do. This may manifest itself in the form of proactive and reactive seeking, such as obtaining formal theological education, participating in workshops and retreats, involving one’s self in existing or emerging ministries and going deeper into one’s prayer life. In all of these, there is a conscious effort to say, “Yes,” to God. As black Episcopalians, when God asks “Whom shall I send?” we must respond as the prophet Isaiah did with, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8).

As clergy and laity work in partnership, it would be unrealistic to ignore that there are responsibilities that uniquely belong to each group. A healthy partnership would be one where the laity acknowledges, and respects the sacramental, and pastoral responsibilities of the clergy, and the associated level of authority, and visibility within the community. In that same vein, clergy must be willing to relinquish authority in areas that may be best developed through the
work of lay ministers. This is the gift of discernment in action through invitation to ministry, and 
clergy support of lay ministry, in the church. Although there are separate responsibilities for 
clergy and laity, there are many that are shared. Both equip the saints for ministry; are stewards 
of God’s gifts; represent and advocate for the voiceless in our population; participate in telling 
the congregational story inside, and outside the walls of the church; and advocate specifically on 
behalf of the black community.

It is important that laity feel empowered to make decisions, with the understanding that the 
clergy knows them well enough, as individuals, to have faith in their decisions. Trust will grow 
when both groups are aware of the parameters of the other’s roles, and how the goals of each can 
be enhanced to spread the Kingdom of God.

When an infant or child is presented for Holy Baptism, the parents and Godparents take vows on 
behalf of the child. After all have been presented, the Celebrant asks the congregation, “Will 
you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” 
And, the people say, “We will.” Let’s jump ahead several years to confirmation, when the child 
is about 12 or 13 years old. Again, the candidates are presented, and the vows are now taken by 
the candidates themselves. After all have been presented, the Bishop turns to the congregation, 
and asks exactly the same question. “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to 
support these persons in their life in Christ?” And, the people enthusiastically say, “We will.” 
REALLY? When I examine that question, the word that jumps out at me is “do.” Saying that we 
will do everything in our power to support these persons in their life in Christ is very easy. The 
question asks if we WILL DO everything in our power, and then it whispers to us (even if it feels 
like hard work?). The act of doing something means that you are deliberately and actively going 
deeper into the life of your brother or sister in Christ. For black Episcopalians, it is especially 
critical that we not wait for others to tell us what, when, why, how and for whom we should be 
doing God’s work.

I suppose it’s possible that we gloss over the baptismal vows we take because that part of the 
vow that says, “all in your power” sounds a bit intimidating. Doing “all in your power,” means 
just that—what are you able to do to help another person in their journey of faith? Most of us are 
capable of learning someone’s name. That seems pretty simple, and not very intimidating. What 
about acknowledging the gifts and talents (I prefer to call them treasures) with which people 
have been blessed? We can’t mine for treasure, if we don’t know where the treasure lies.

The one person, who has had the most influence in my life as a Christian and as an Episcopalian, 
is my beloved grandfather, Dr. Cromwell Douglas. My grandfather has been a member of Grace 
Episcopal Church in Norfolk, Virginia, his entire life. He baptized his children, and 
grandchildren there. And, after serving in that church, in various leadership roles, he remains a 
trustee at the age of 87. When I was a child, I spent all of my summers with my grandparents, 
and attended church with my granddad. When I was, about 9 or 10 years old, I had the privilege
of accompanying him to the diocesan convention. I don’t remember the resolutions that were being discussed, but I do remember realizing that my grandfather was not just a part of the community of church leaders; he was an active lay leader in a community of bishops, priests, and deacons. Of all the hats my grandfather wore in the church, his most important ministry was helping to nurture my spiritual well being. When we went to convention, he didn’t leave me in childcare or have me sit in the corridor; he included me in his community of faith—our community of faith. Quite simply, my grandfather was, with God’s help, helping the child to grow into the full stature of Christ. That phrase may sound familiar to you, because it is in the Book of Common Prayer as part of the Presentation and Examination of Candidates for Holy Baptism (BCP, page 302). My grandfather was, and continues to be, a faithful steward of God’s creation.

At a very young age, I began to associate the word “stewardship” with money and pledging. As I matured in the church, I realized that my very limited understanding of stewardship kept me from experiencing the fullness of my spiritual journey. Stewardship extends far beyond money; it is indeed our responsibility to care for everything that God has given us, including our own gifts and talents—our treasures.

As ministers of the church, we are called to be faithful stewards of our lives and our children’s lives in Christ, which includes shaping their views about their God-given treasures that can be used to build the kingdom of God. I am involved in youth ministry, and am particularly interested in the adult’s role of responsible stewardship of our youth’s gifts and talents. We must be careful not to dictate the ways in which they can serve. Rather, we should engage them as they serve in traditional roles in the church, and offer guidance, and support as they blaze new trails for service in the church, and in the world. When we invite, inspire, and assist in the transformation of our youth, we enliven our own spiritual journeys.

Our children and youth are not the future of the Episcopal Church; they ARE the church. When I discuss stewardship with the youth, I encourage them to offer their time, talent and treasure to serve the Lord, and invite them to step into their rightful places as leaders in there church. That message, by the way, translates well for adults, too. We are called to be examples of faithful stewardship in its many forms. We are stewards of our communities, choices, gifts, talents, body, mind, spirit, spiritual life, creation and yes, money.

We cannot ignore the fact that the giving of our financial resources to the church is very important. Some parishes talk about money a lot and others talk about it too little. In all of those discussions, money should not be an uncomfortable topic. When we offer our monetary gifts, it is a symbol of our thanksgiving to God. The reality is that the church must have money to do the work in the community, and to ensure that it will be around for future generations. Beyond the ability for money to support the work of existing ministries, it allows concepts for emerging
ministries to become reality.
The next time you find yourself thinking exclusively about money when you hear the word “stewardship,” think of the many facets of stewardship, and then think of yourself. Take a look around at your brothers, and sisters in Christ to admire the treasures of your faith community. We are God’s treasures. He loves us, polishes us, protects us, and asks that we give Him the glory by sharing our gifts, and our talents with each other. We belong to God, and are merely the stewards of His treasures (each other) as we journey together in this life.

Have you ever heard the statement that showing up is half the battle? Having worked many years in the corporate world, I know that showing up is pretty much the standard, and not much more may be expected of you. Our Baptismal Covenant is a very clear call-to-action to do more than show up. My grandfather’s legacy reminds me that, as a minister of this Church (big “C”), I am called to do more than just show up. We serve a mighty God who calls us to a higher standard of service in building His kingdom. The challenges our church faces in the 21st century will require us to do much more than show up. We must be present, and we must participate. Brothers and sisters, showing up is just the beginning.

If we are conscious believers, our faith must necessarily evolve and deepen amidst the distractions of this world that surrounds us. Our faith constantly shapes our being; not who we think we are; but the person who God knows we are becoming. As we become more like Christ, we are more easily able to “go with the flow,” welcoming the changes that take place in the world around us; believing that nothing is stagnant; and understanding that our journeys of faith can only be enriched by change. The gift of water is indeed more than a symbol. Water is a spiritual vehicle that enables us to be present in the natural ebb, and flow of our own life experiences.

Nearly five years after Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans continues to heal from the devastation of the resulting floods. The Ninth Ward was the poorest, and hardest hit community during this tragic event. The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, based in New Orleans, initiated life-sustaining help and supplies to the residents, and continued to do so long after other organizations left. Witnessing Christianity in action, the residents asked to start the first Episcopal congregation there, which met in an abandoned Walgreens store. The church started in 2006, and was dedicated by the Most Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. Today, All Souls Episcopal Church and Community Center continues to grow as it actively serves its community. There is now life where, at one time, there had been death of mind, body and spirit. In 2010, Tulane University architecture students designed, and installed a reredos (the wall area behind the altar) that covers the entire width of All Souls. It was constructed from huge beams from buildings that had been destroyed during Hurricane Katrina. Since the beams came from the great flood of New Orleans, the architecture students named it Noah’s Ark, symbolizing new birth from a great tragedy.
With God’s grace, we can be the rain that drenches an individual with God’s blessings; or the flood of spiritual gifts that completely indwells a community of people with the Holy Spirit.

My understanding of the absolute necessity of the use of water in Holy Baptism was forever changed when the Episcopal Church’s Officer for Black Ministries, the Rev. Canon Angela S. Ifill, shared with me one of her past experiences as chair of the Diocese of New Jersey’s Foreign Mission Initiative. In that role, Ifill worked to develop a companion relationship with the Bishop of Mozambique, the Rt. Rev. Sengulane. Sengulane’s primary mission was to shed light on the scarcity of water in Mozambique, and to seek a solution for sourcing the life-sustaining element. While preaching at the Cathedral he talked about the multiple miles women and children walked to seek clean water, and of the dry water pumps scattered throughout the country that were unable to reach deep enough into the earth to reach water. During his sermon, Sengulane quietly reminded the congregation that without water there could be no baptisms. The statement was simple, yet profound. It was unimaginable to Ifill that the people of Mozambique had been denied the sacred sacrament of Holy Baptism because there was no water.

Over the next several years, groups from the Diocese of New Jersey mobilized to visit Mozambique and to assist in the installation of solar water pumps which had the capacity to provide water for daily use, and continue to remain active today.

As a result of this solar technology, altar guilds can now prepare water vessels to bring to the sanctuary for the service. At the point of baptism, the priest will take the pitcher of water and will slowly pour it into the baptismal font while praying the prayer of blessing over the water. The priest then approaches the baptismal font where the baptism of the child or adult will take place. With the precious water, the baptismal candidate is marked as Christ’s own forever in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.
The Liturgy

By Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle

The Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle is founder of the PeaceBattle Institute and served as rector of Church of Our Saviour in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. A well-known writer, speaker and retreat leader, his ministry covers the globe and focuses on Christian non-violence, human spirituality, and African Church studies.

Battle was ordained a priest in South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and lived in residence with him from 1993 to 1994. Battle has written out of his studies and friendship with Tutu, including such books as:

There is one Body and one Spirit; One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism

May the wind of the Holy Spirit propel us as we commit to grow together in the body of Christ. We bring our prayers, hopes and love for Jesus to the baptismal font to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves; lend our voices for those who have no voice and who struggle to be heard; and offer our hands and our feet for those who are immobile. Indeed, our Baptismal Covenant reminds us that just as Jesus Christ loves and keeps us in his care, we too, are called to be our sisters’ and brothers’ keeper.

Concerning this Theological Reflection

In western culture, we obsess about our health, especially about how much we weigh, and what we look like. Many guides assist, and distract in this obsession. Weight Watchers and many other resources assist us to know our health. Quick fix infomercials distract, especially if you plan to lose 30 lbs in a couple of days. But how do we measure our spiritual health; especially how do we know we are growing (in the correct way) in our spiritual lives?

Our assumption is that Christian Faith Formation is lifelong. To measure such formation should occur regularly informed by Scripture, Tradition and Reason. To this end we have chosen a sacramental rite of passage that helps us measure how we are doing as sojourning Christians.

This rite of passage is Baptism. We use the structure of the liturgy to organize the ongoing concerns and questions that arise in the Christian life with the hope that we continue to “renew our baptismal vows”. Baptism sheds light on how we are being born as God’s children resulting in God’s reign on earth. Baptism, however, reminds us that we are just beginning—that there is a lifetime ahead.

It is important to pay attention to beginnings, especially for religious people in general, and for Black Episcopalians in particular. One of the challenges with religious people is that we often get confused between self, and God. As Ludwig Feuerbach stated, God often ends up being “an expression of the idealized human essence”. But what happens when the old certainties of God have gone? Oftentimes, the result is identity crisis. If God is not God, our particular individual identities, (African, African American, Caribbean, Gay, Lesbian, Conservative, Liberal, etc) often have no organizing principle by which to find unity. With no God over us (and in us), we end up in defensive postures no longer understanding the message of the gospel. Religion ceases to be faith. It becomes war.

This theological reflection invites the reader into the humility that “God is God and we are not”. This implies that we need humility and resources from which to grow. To know that “God is God and we are not” requires continuous growth in the spiritual life. Such growth and genuine humility in faith, prevents religious folks from killing each other. When God is God, we no longer need to defend our particular identities. In fact, God known in Jesus invites everyone to
love other particular identities as if we love our own particular identity. An African desert saying helps me explain:

At one time some came to Abba Antony, and Abba Joseph was with them.

Abba Antony, wishing to test them, brought up a controversial issue in the Holy Scriptures. And he began to question them, beginning with the younger, what this or that word might mean. And each gave an answer as best they could. But Abba Antony said to them, "You have not found it yet."

After they left, Abba Antony said to Abba Joseph, "What do you say this word might mean?" Abba Joseph answered, "I do not know."
And Abba Antony praised his brother out loud, "Truly, those who say they do not know, alone have found the right road."

It is in our humility that God is most apparent. Our humility stimulates our particular identities to imagine the impossible—that God can be mutual with us. With such stimulation from above and within, we are then called to become mutual with one another. But this doesn’t happen overnight. Growth is required (for the rest of our life!) Despite what we may think, such growth is occurring in the church.

It is fairly easy to feel cynical about the church. Some even feel justified in trying to destroy the church. In particular, the Anglican Church’s reputation is not only celebrated, it is also criticized. Illustrating this reputation of the institutional Anglican Church even further, Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to a “remarkable American lady, married to an Englishman” that he met at a dinner table.

She said that so far as she had been able to experience, and so far as she could tell, very few indeed of the ministers of the established church in the United Kingdom had been wont to frequent the air-raid shelters during the Blitz to share in the misery of its occupants, and to try to help them bear their burden. Only the Salvation Army had been conspicuous in this regard. So the young had never seen any of the church pastors identifying with them at a low point in their lives.

To compensate for the oppressive history of a colonial church, Tutu’s Anglicanism embraces all the more the relevant meaning of the Episcopal Church, which embodies relentless advocacy for those who cannot defend themselves. And the beauty of our Episcopal Church is that oppressors, and those oppressed can learn to break the chains that bind by our owning up to the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. We have learned this, particularly as black Episcopalians.

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1 Anglican and Episcopal are used interchangeably wherever possible.
2 Tutu, Address “On Being the Church in the World.” In South African history there were notable white Anglicans, namely John Colenso, Geoffrey Clayton, Trevor Huddleston, Ambrose Reeves, Joost de Blank and Dennis Hurley. These Anglican protest figures created a milieu in which the eventuality of a Tutu could occur. See Geoffrey Clayton’s letter of outrage against government interference of racial integration in churches, in John S. Peart-Binns, Archbishop Joost de Blank: Scourge of Apartheid, (London: Muller, Blond, and White) 1987, pp. 86-87; and T.R.H. Davenport, South Africa: A Modern History (Johannesburg: MacMillan), 1977.
The black experience in the Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion, a worldwide family of churches. Currently, there are more than 70 million Anglican Christians, in 29 autonomous churches spread across 160 countries in every continent.\(^3\) These autonomous churches in the Anglican Communion are unified through their “history, their theology and their relationship to the Archbishop of Canterbury.”\(^4\) As black Episcopalians, our Anglican unity is made known in the Rites or Ceremonies of our Book of Common Prayer. In particular, this theological reflection emphasizes our unity and growth in the rite of baptism, which is the central rite of passage not only for Episcopalians but also for Christians. In this one unified rite, many things take place that actually change our lives and require our growth:

- Opening acclamation
- Collect of the day
- Scripture
- Sermon
- Presentation and examination of candidates,
- Baptismal Covenant
- Prayers for candidates
- Thanksgiving over water
- Actual baptism
- Welcome
- Eucharist
- Sending forth

Our Episcopal identity constitutes a wide spectrum of human identities, i.e., from murderers to healers, and from scoundrels to saints. That which is unique about the church is the constant creation of a new identity. Tutu helps me conclude when he wonders about why the church exists,

‘Is it a cozy club for like-minded persons who can be persuaded once a week to disturb their normal routine to have their Christian prejudices confirmed whilst they are insulated against the harsh realities of life out there . . .? Or does it exist to be a kind of mystical ivory tower . . .? Or does it exist to become involved in a mad rush of good works agitating its members into a frazzle as they rush from one good work to another . . .? No, the Church exists primarily . . . for God . . . The Church is the fellowship whence adoration, worship and praise ascend to the heavenly throne and in company with the angels and archangels and with the whole host of heaven we sing as did the cherubic choir in Isaiah’s vision . . . ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory’.\(^5\)

This is the miracle of the church, namely where rich, poor, free, slave, Hispanic, Jew, Gentile, male, female, gay, straight, white or black, can find one identity in Christ. They can be


\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Tutu, “Enthronement Charge.” On his enthronement as Bishop of Johannesburg.
organized into one, interdependent entity, which would carry on diverse functions for the good of the one body.
Opening Acclamation

By Rev. Canon Petero A. N. Sabune

The Rev. Canon Petero A. N. Sabune is the Africa Partnership Officer for the Episcopal Church. Most recently, Sabune, an Episcopal priest, was the pastor and Protestant chaplain at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in Ossining, New York.

In 1972, Sabune fled his native-born Uganda and the ruthless dictator Idi Amin. Sabune’s brother was killed by Idi Amin in 1976 and his sister was killed by one of Amin's men in 1977. Another brother died in Nairobi, Kenya after a narrow escape from Amin's men.

As a parish priest, Sabune served in churches throughout the greater New York/New Jersey area, including as Dean of a cathedral.

Internationally, he is a trustee of the Episcopal Seminary in Haiti, was a founding board member of the Business and Technology Institute of Haiti, and was chair of the Forgiveness and Reconciliation Project. Among his awards and honors, he received the Minorities in Criminal Justice Leadership Award, the NAACP Community Service Award, and the Caribbean American Families Inc Community Service Award.
Let us go forth in the name of Christ

As baptized Christians, we are equipped with everything we need to proclaim the Good news in Christ Jesus in word and deed. It is especially critical for us to be conscious of our everyday behaviors towards God’s people in the world. Hold the door for someone who is overloaded with grocery bags. Allow another driver to safely merge into your lane. Put an extra quarter in someone else’s parking meter. These are all acts of kindness and compassion, and reflect the ministry of Christ in our world today. We do this through our individual actions, but more importantly as a community of believers who live with a mission mentality. Let the renewal of the Baptismal Covenant remind us that we are never alone; that we are fully equipped, empowered and nourished as we set out to do the work that God has called each and every one of us to do. Thanks be to God.

The Acclamation:

There is one Body and one Spirit
There is one hope in God’s Call to us

One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism
One God and Father of all

The Lord be with you;
And also with you.
Let us pray.

The Chapel of the Redeemer at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York has stained glass windows where the Good Friday window, with its deep red color, casts shadows over the entire chapel. Underneath the window, stands the altar that becomes a baptismal pool on Easter. The cover is removed, and a water hose is connected to the base, which fills the tub overnight. I taught the inmates about Easter, and what to expect with their baptism.

“Wayne, you will graduate on Easter day! The day of the Resurrection,” I said.
Theologically, what I meant was that they will die to sin, and Be Born Again (BBA.)

The “graduation” was held up a bit by the security staff that was concerned that the water hose and the extra towels could be used as weapons but I was determined to proceed. Eventually, with permission from the superintendent and the deputy for security, we were allowed to prepare for the baptism of the 23 men who had agreed to die to sin, and be born to eternal life. So in 2005, on that cold Easter Sunday morning, 23 men came to the chapel, ready to receive a new life in Christ. That day, everything changed for me, and for them. We were about to be united with Christ in his death, and in his resurrection.

- Alleluia, Christ is Risen?
- The Lord is Risen indeed…Alleluia!

From January to April, I would gather the men in the chapel every week to journey together to Easter. During those sessions, we would go over the stages of incarceration from the arrest, arraignment, trial, and conviction ending with the sentencing. We would share the readings from the Gospel where Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. I would remind them that on the cross with Jesus were two men. One asked Jesus to remember him, and Jesus responded that he would welcome him to paradise. Whatever we do, on the cross, all is forgiven and we can come home. I would ask the men to read to each other the words Jesus spoke to the criminal, and reminded them that Jesus was also condemned as a common criminal. Even on the cross, he forgave saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”

I would ask the men to remember the first time they were arrested. What day of the week was it, and who else was there? I was not so much interested in the crime as much as the possibility of restoration, renewal and forgiveness.

- How old were you?
- Where were your dad and mom?
- Who else was there?
- What did they say?
- Were you afraid?
- Did you cry?
Only three of the men knew their fathers. The other 20 had no idea of where their father was or had given up looking. I would then read from Luke: 15 the story of the Prodigal Son who was given his inheritance and left home. But upon wasting it all, he returned to his father. I would ask all to repeat the words — I am not worthy to be your son; I have sinned against heaven and before you. I then asked them:

- Who has been hurt by what you did? (In the victim’s family as well as your own.)

The stats on the prison population of Sing Sing are disconcerting. Half of the men come from just seven zip codes in New York City, and many know each other from Rikers Island, an in-take prison located near LaGuardia Airport. Rikers is the first stop for most of the men arrested in the five boroughs. In New York State, 35 percent of the population is Black and Hispanic. Sadly, they make up 85 percent of the prison population. When they come to Sing Sing, a maximum-security prison, they can be TI (Transitional Inmates), which means they will be there for a lengthy time.

As our preparation continued, I told them that in the story, the father never stopped waiting for the son to come home and when he saw him, he ran and pulled him up and asked to have the fatted calf killed to celebrate “for this son of mine was dead and is alive.”

Our session would be followed with the words and the history of the hymn Amazing Grace and the life of its writer John Newton, who started out as a slave trader and ended up a minister of the Gospel. He became friends with William Wilberforce who became a member of the British Parliament and was instrumental in abolishing the Atlantic Slave Trade.

On Maundy Thursday, we held a foot washing service with Christ Church in Rye, New York. As I held their feet, I looked up at them and told them that GC no longer stood for General Confinement but for God’s Child and that on Easter Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, they would become GC and BBA. I explained that when they are dunked in the water of baptism, they are sealed as God’s own forever receiving GPS (God’s Purpose for your Soul.) They would die to sin and be born to a new life of grace, from their little finger to their big toe, from the top of their head, to the bottom of their feet. Every breath taken, every word spoken would contain
God’s DNA. It was always there, but they just needed to remember, how good God is. Like the loving father, he will wait until you come home and he shall welcome and forgive you.

I distributed copies of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* asking them to read a chapter each week as part of the preparation for baptism, paying particular attention to the evolution of the young man who came to prison, and the mature man who left with a new name, and identity. I would remind them that Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison before he became president. We would read the story of Fannie Lou Hammer, who was imprisoned before speaking to the Democratic National Convention in 1964, and proclaimed that she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” We would meditate on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and study his and Rosa Park’s prison numbers. I would remind them of countless others who were imprisoned and even put to death, for their faith. Lastly, we’d look through the Good Friday window and I’d ask them to think about the death house by the Hudson and remember Jesus died as a criminal on the cross.

The two questions asked at the baptismal font are:
- What is your name?
- Do you want to be baptized?

*Wade in the water, wade in the water children…God’s going to trouble the water* the band would play repeatedly as the 23 men, ages 17 to 59, get ready to die to sin and be born again. Thirteen of them were former gang members.

After BBA, they changed their clothes and stood at the altar to share testimony. They were not simply convicted criminals anymore; they were now part of the Body of Christ, past, present and future.

When we gather together we touch and are touched by the divine. We become one with God and with one another. We cry out to God as we enter the Sacred Circle of Life calling on God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sanctifier. In a moment in time we are united with those who have gone before and those yet unborn. As we approach the sacred mystery with Water, Candles, and Bodies…we touch eternity.
Also, when we gather, we are not alone. We are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses who have gone before us. The late actor and activist Ossie Davis used to love coming to Sing Sing and speak to the men about his father who was in the chain gang in the south. With tears in his eyes, he would remind them how their presence “has made an old man cry.” Harry Belafonte, who comes to Sing Sing on a regular basis, would tell the guys to remember, “It is not where you are, but who you are and whose you are.” At the 2010 commencement exercises at Mercy College, Warren Buffett quoted an ancient saying:

“Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.”

The Sacrament of Baptism is one of the two primary sacraments of the church, the other being the Holy Eucharist.

- How do we approach the Holy?
- How do we come to the Water of Life?
- Can we be made new?
- Can we be born again?

The celebrant says: Blessed be…
We respond: Blessed be…
Now and forever…

The slow walk to death has come to a head, death has been vanquished, and we are ready to be born again, to die to sin, and be born to newness of life. The new life in Christ is now and forever.

We cry out ALLELUIA….Christ is Risen
In you, in me, in today, tomorrow and for ever
The Lord is risen in DEED, in WORD, in SONG …ALLELUIA

The men who are baptized come to proclaim and claim Jesus as their own. When we leave on Easter we sing, “I am not forgotten, I am not forgotten, I am not forgotten, Jesus knows my name.” They are forever changed, never to be the same. They are BBA, having become GC. All can become GC, no matter, who they are or where they come from. We all can die to sin and BBA. No matter what we have done, we can come home again. We once were lost but now we are found, we were dead and now we are alive again. Come home God, come and wade in the water.

God is going to trouble the water.
Our acclamation is our affirmation that Christ has Died, Christ is Risen; Christ will come again. Today, tomorrow and forever.
Do you believe this?
Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ!
Come, come to the Baptismal Font and die with me.
Our ancestors bled and died so, we can live this new life of grace and power and joy.
We acclaim you Oh Lord, by your holy cross; you have redeemed them in the World. I am born again; I have a new lease on life. I am GC, I have GPS, and I will forever BBA! When you fall into sin, you will repent and return to the way, the truth and the life.
I will with God’s help……………………………………………..I will with God’s help!

At the Acclamation we put on a new garment, a foundational garment of baptism. Let us now die with Christ, so we can be raised with Him. The old has passed away, behold the new has been born. We have become new creatures in Christ. Amen.
Collect of the Day

By Rev. Karen B. Montagno

The Rev. Karen B Montagno is Director of Congregational Resources and Training (CRT) for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. CRT equips and supports congregations, lay and ordained ministers in mission, formation and creating vital and viable congregations and communities of faith.

Montagno, Second Vice President of the Union of Black Episcopalians, also serves as priest at St. Cyprian's Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. She is Co-editor of Injustice and the Care of Souls, which addresses issues of injustice in pastoral care with marginalized groups and individuals.

As a Colleague of the Bethany House of Prayer she joins the Sisters of St. Ann Bethany in their ministry of prayer and hospitality. This ministry involves retreat work, refreshment days and sharing in sacred conversations.
Let Us Pray

I pray. You pray. We pray. We pray one unified prayer, the collect, as we join our hearts, minds and our voices. This one prayer with many voices is like an ocean wave that builds energy from the wind. The multitude of voices, powered by the Holy Spirit, mimics the swelling of the wave until the prayer, like the wave, crests and finally breaks. With its energy released, the prayer rises to God. Imagine the remains of a foamy whitecap when the wave crest breaks and reaches the shoreline of the beach. A wave no more, the calm, foamy water quickly rolls back into the source from whence it came, retreating into itself, yet present. Let us release our prayer for all baptized Christians to God, and may the foamy “whitecap” calm us and remain present with us as we conclude the collect with, “Amen.”

The Collect is a short but powerful prayer because it “collects” the community and God into common spiritual ground. Collective prayer, the simple act of praying together, seems like an ordinary experience for many of us today. Community prayer however, is a privilege that did not always exist for Black people.

During slavery in the U.S, enslaved blacks did not have the freedom to gather together in worship. They could not be full members or pray freely as a community in some churches. In many places, it was against the law for enslaved people to be taught to read and write.

They could not own a bible, let alone read it. The inhumane treatment they received at the hands of their enslavers, and the dehumanizing experiences were, in direct contradiction to the Gospel. The word that was preached was twisted to promote the interest of the enslavers.

In spite of this, the Gospel was heard. Black people interpreted the scripture, and prayers they heard for themselves. Scripture became a prophetic and liberating force in lives of hardship and oppression. They took for their own, the story of the Exodus and the Israelites’ escape from bondage.

Daniel in the lion’s den was their story of God protecting the faithful. It was a story of deliverance. Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers was a familiar story. Many had experienced being sold into slavery by black brothers and sisters.

Jesus embraced the outcasts and broke bread with them. Jesus shared in their suffering when he suffered on the cross. Jesus became their friend, sharing their stripes, humiliations and troubles. Black people would “steal away” to be with their friend Jesus. They would gather in secret at appointed times and places to pray, preach, sing, lament, celebrate, strengthen, and encourage each other.
They would slip away to remote places at night where they could not been seen, or heard. These times would supply the hope, and endurance they needed to actively resist the enslavement of their spirits as well as their bodies. The singing of the hymn “Steal Away to Jesus” was the signal for the gathering.

An important part of setting the stage for their prayers was what has become known as a Prayer Kettle and kettle prayers. The prayer kettle was a big cauldron or pot that would be placed upside on the ground.

Rocks might be placed under the rim so they could speak into the kettle. Kettle Prayers were the prayers people offered into the pot so they could not be heard in the night. Like the Prayer Book collect, the prayer kettle became a container for all their hopes, and dreams collected there, and lifted to God.

Many descendants of enslaved people pass the Prayer Kettle from generation to generation as a touchstone or a cherished and sacred connection to their ancestors. It is a reminder of their suffering, and the comfort, healing, and release they found in prayer together.

It is cherished because it connects them with the past, in a tangible and poignant way. The Prayer Kettle is sacred because it is filled with their prayers and conversations with God. As we gather to say our collect, and other prayers, we stand in that tradition. Now, the house of worship is our Prayer Kettle, its walls are steeped in our prayers.

Today, the prayers we share come from the pages of a book as well as our hearts. In those pages, we read the prayers of many people. We can even write our own. Let us remember the privilege we have to gather in the house of God, and pray together.

Collects are short prayers found throughout the Book of Common Prayer. It is a prayer purposefully constructed to gather our hearts, hopes, and intentions—our collected prayers—into a few words. The shape of the prayer is simple with three ideas.

It begins with something about the nature of God, and describes some way that God is present in the world. For example, “O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature:” (For Stewardship of Creation, BCP 259). The next words form a request. Collects usually end with the name of God or Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The prayer leader begins with these words, “The Lord be with you.” These words are a pronouncement (a statement) and a hope. We respond, “And also with you.” With these words we acknowledge, and welcome the marvelous reality that God is present among us. We invite God into our collective prayer.
“Let us pray,” is an invitation that many of us miss. It is not simply an introduction to the next words that the celebrant will say. It is a pregnant moment. There is excitement in gathering. Now is the moment to sit, and breathe in the spirit.

In those moments, after “Let us pray”, comes a settling of the Spirit among us. As we arrive in the sacred space, we carry a variety of concerns, and joys on our hearts, and minds. For example, looking at members of our church, we might observe Toni. She sighs and her children are restless from all their rushing to get there. Maybe now they will settle down.

Marie arranges her sweater, relaxing herself. She too, barely made it on time. She thinks of her mother no longer able to get to church. Yvonne can barely sit still anticipating going off with friends at the end of service to celebrate her engagement, and new job. John is grateful. His ride came, and he is able to be here.

At the back, Bernice paces, looking forward to coffee hour, her meal for the day. She wonders, will there be leftovers this time. Johnnie is in his usual place in his crisp suit. He smiles, and nods but understands little of what is said to him.

There is excitement in church today because there is going to be a baptism. God is at work among the people. The collects used at baptism, stand in a long line of prayers from the past, today’s prayer, and prayers for the future.

The invitation to the Collect of the Day offers an opportunity for each one to ponder their unique cares and concerns. It is a dialogue where we can also offer that which is yet unspoken to God. A collect is also used to designate special occasions, like baptism or seasons of the Church.

When we gather for worship, we come together from many places and experiences. In Holy Baptism we are drawn together to celebrate our initiation and adoption, our sister and brotherhood as Christ’s own in a physical and spiritual body.

We begin this service of Christian initiation in a dialogue framed by the words of the opening acclamation and the dismissal. These words begin a liturgical conversation in sacred moments of prayer, scripture, sacrament and singing. These are all ways we proclaim the blessedness of God and our unity as a people in that blessedness through God.
The marvelous thing about baptism is we are witnesses to a miracle of transformation. We gather as many in Christ, we are united in one Body, one Spirit and one hope. Each time we come together we celebrate Christ.

This bond grows deeper and wider with each baptism, each time we bow our heads in collective prayer and each time we recommit ourselves to aspire to Holy Living, renouncing evil, and sin and turning with our whole heart to Jesus.

We dedicate ourselves to God and each other to be a community that preaches the Gospel and upholds others in their life in Christ. We vow to uphold the dignity of every human and strive—move with our whole being —towards justice and peace. These are strong words but we trust in God’s will to help.

As we gather as community, there is often much excitement in greeting one another, greeting God, anticipating what is to come. But soon it is time to settle down into prayer, to acknowledge God with us.

With the praying of the collect, the mood changes into one of collective reverence. In that silence, we can appreciate having the freedom to gather and pray. In that moment, we connect with all those who have experienced any kind of bondage.

We acknowledge our call to be instruments of peace. We lift our prayers to God.
Liturgy of the Word

By Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis

The Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis is rector of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., and Professor of Theology at Howard University School of Divinity. Born in the West Indies on the island of Antigua, he is a graduate of Codrington College in Barbados.

He was ordained a deacon in 1965 and a priest in 1966 in his home diocese, the Diocese of Antigua (now called the Diocese of the North Eastern Caribbean and Aruba). He has served as Rector of several parishes in the Caribbean and was, for some time on the faculty of his alma mater. He also served as an Executive Member of the Caribbean Conference of Churches.

He was one of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s representatives on the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II). In addition to having been a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, he has also served as Consultant to several other ecclesiastical bodies and academic institutions.

He is the author of several books and articles. His publications include Emancipation Still Comin’, African Creative Expressions of the Divine, Can God Save the Church? and Serving With Power.

He is married to Joan Thompson Davis, and they have two daughters, a son, and five grandchildren.
The next time you are in a public space, look around you. Chances are good that the person next to you, and those surrounding you, are hopelessly connected to a piece of technology that allows words to be communicated in the form of a text message. Some might consider texting as the butchering of language into meaningless symbols, creating collateral damage in the loss of message meaning and intent. Even as scripture has been interpreted and translated through the ages, the Gospel message cannot be truncated or lose its intended meaning. It embodies Christ’s mission and ministry in the world, and speaks to all baptized Christians, in our many languages saying, “Prepare your mind for action.”

When I was a young acolyte growing up in St. John’s Cathedral, Antigua, I used to enjoy the fun that we boys had in finding jokes, and sometimes making jokes, around the use of words in the sacred spaces of our times together. That great harvest hymn “Come Ye Thankful People Come” actually came in for some disrespect when we could swear that we heard some old man singing, “Come ye tangle-foot people come”! Or again, we would speak about the thief who was running away from the police and came to hide in the church while a service was in progress. When the congregation began to sing: “Holy, Holy, Holy…” the man thought that they were really singing “Hol’ he! Hol’ he! Hol’ he!” Of course he was smart enough to answer back: “Anyone of you that touch me will be sorry!” He took flight from the church as well, just to be on the safer side. Just joking! It was only a joke surrounding the Sanctus!

Yes, boys will be boys, and words will be words! We secretly laughed at the Sunday school teacher who insisted on calling God “All-ni-potent” rather than “Omnipotent”. But he was a good teacher and a powerful role model as well! Of course the jokes about words and phrases outside of the sacred spaces took on a much different tone, and that made it necessary for us to set a very sharp distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, even if we were not actually familiar with such terms, nor even bothered to know that such terms existed! All we knew was that some words and terms were suitable for church, and some were not! This common sense of church propriety covered more than just the words and phrases – it also touched on conduct, levity, interactions, and attire. There were things that were just not done, and just not said.

In church, it was the supremacy of the Word that mattered – praying, preaching, praising, singing, reading, reflecting, connecting, dissecting, reciting, learning, listening, interpreting, translating, embracing, rejecting, negotiating, selecting, comparing, aiming, dodging, accepting – all part of its supernatural immanence. We small boys knew somehow that the pungency of our words, and jokes could in no way come close to the efficacy of the words conveyed by the Word. We also knew that the time would come when we would put away childish things, and childish words, anyway, but we would never be able to put away words altogether. We would always
live with them, hoping very fervently that very few of them would ever come back to haunt us! Such was, and is, the power of words.

Words are actually tools of communication between us, and they have lives of their own. Some would say that words have souls – they possess that deep, and almost unreachable treasure of unending power, and appeal that cannot be easily disturbed or overthrown. They convey meaning in enormously multiple directions, quite often beyond our capacity to fathom or control. They are carriers of our motives and intentions, sometimes even far in excess of anything we could have dreamt of or contemplated. They deliver our mandates and messages as innocuously as they can, even if their reception is not infrequently fraught with controversy, and deception. They provide us with innumerable measurements for life and its circumstances, while maintaining their almost sponge-like capacity for absorption and resourcefulness. In so many ways, our words are us. We use them to address and relate to each other. We use them to ascribe attributes, and feelings both to the human, and the divine. More particularly, we use them to express our understanding of ourselves in the context of who we believe GOD to be, and what we believe GOD to will, and want from us. That is what the Bible is all about.

The Bible is the Word of God. This is the affirmation of the Church. It gives full assent to the authority, the inspiration, the moral guidance, and the testimony of God’s revelation to ordinary men and women. The Bible is essentially a sacred library of words – ordinary words that are used in an extra-ordinary (some would say ‘super-ordinary’) way. There the words are used in an assumed context of a faith relationship between believers, and God, to such an extent that, through them, we make bold to claim that God speaks to us, and we speak to, and about God. It is on that basis that we are able to ensure that we speak to each other in God’s name, in the power of the message of the Gospel, and in the context of the tradition of Christians that has been handed down through the ages.

Through a continuous legacy of wrestling with words, and through all the emotions and motives described above, the supremacy of the Word of God (within the Bible and beyond) holds firm our traditions of worship, work, and witness, while we seek to engage in the continuing conversation between God’s Church and God’s World. Nowhere is that conversation more powerfully active than in the liturgical combination of Word and Sacrament. The former is that outward and audible grace of God’s inward and invisible sign, while the latter is that outward and visible sign of God’s inward and spiritual grace. The combination of Word and Sacrament in the Eucharist and Baptism is thus the corporate celebration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and also the extension of the Ministry of Jesus Christ, as Son of God, and as Lord of the Church, and Savior of the World.

As the Church strives to remain faithful to embodying, and engaging in, the extension of the Ministry of Jesus Christ, it seeks to carry forward the threefold function that is so movingly described in Matthew 9:35: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every
sickness.” While it is otherwise fashionable to speak of the threefold office of Jesus – as prophet, priest, and king – this threefold function just mentioned is deeply ingrained in the heart of the Gospel tradition, and grounds the ongoing ministry of the Church in a dynamic relationship with the original ministry of the Nazarene Prophet, the Messianic Carpenter, and the Marginal Jew.

The Prophet announced the in-breaking Kingdom of God. The Carpenter invited his followers to fit themselves with his “easy” yoke. The Jew initiated the Age of Fulfillment of the Law and the Prophetic tradition. It is the contemporary explication and exposition of the message and ministry of the Gospel of this triple-functioning Messianic Pioneer – teaching, preaching, and healing – to which the Church, in this and every generation, must be unswervingly committed.

This is further enjoined by the mandate contained in what has become known to us as the Great Commission, which we find in Matthew 28: 18 – 20: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We must notice that the critical link between the earlier passage from the Gospel of Matthew and the later one is the injunction to teach. But the latter also involves a sense of mission (Go therefore) that is coupled with an obligation to make disciples through the ministry of baptism.

Now, while there is no evidence that Jesus himself ever baptized anyone, the mandate to baptize in the context of mission is inextricably linked with the duty to deliver the message in the course of the church’s ministry. Thus we see that mission, message, and ministry are all involved in the faithful embrace of the Word of God, and in the loyal obedience to the will of God. Word and Sacrament are thus inescapable functions of the Church of God, and the reading and exposition of Scripture – whether within the context of worship, or in the private conclaves of spiritual exploration, reflection, and enrichment. In the context of worship, however, the Sermon becomes the moment when the power of God’s Word is not only acknowledged and affirmed, but also explored, explained, expounded, and expressed.

The sermon is delivered less as a demonstration of intellectual or individual prowess, or of partisan or ideological predilection. It is delivered much more as a witness to the authority of God’s sovereign love in the re-creation, redemption, and reconciliation of the world, and to the authenticity of the faith of the people of the God who still speaks to us through the Holy Spirit.

The sermon is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God, conveying to God’s people, and in God’s name, that which is able to enrich the relationship of faith, hope, and love between God’s people. The sermon is the explanation of the faith of the church held in trust from the Apostolic Age. The sermon is the means by which the church’s exhortation to responsive witness and obedient service is delivered, thereby assuring the faithful that in the service of Christ and the Gospel, true and lasting freedom can indeed be found. The sermon is one of the church’s
principal means of engaging the world in conversation with the Word in a relentless effort to bring about an ongoing process of repentance, conversion, and renewal.

In the service of Baptism therefore, Word and sacrament come together in a most enlivening and empowering way – for not only is the ministry of Jesus being re-enacted, but the Commission of Jesus is also being appropriated. Ordinary words are used, not merely in the offering of the prayers, but more powerfully in the reading of the scripture, in the proclamation, exploration and explanation of the Word, and in the enactment of the divine imperative to bring into Christ’s fellowship those who are baptized in the name of the blessed Trinity. The power of God’s Word thus becomes present, and meaningful in the service of Baptism. For in this mysteriously inspiring sacramental moment, the Word of God, the work of God, and the world of God converge in the mystical experience of bearing witness to the regeneration of humanity – the affirmation of new life in Christ. Through the power of God’s word, the church engages in celebration, comprehension, commitment, consecration, and communication. These five spiritual activities, with their germinating power in the liturgical spheres of our lives, can also become for us powerful surges of moral courage, spiritual fervor, and contagious witness, as we strive to make a difference in the world that Jesus came to save.
Presentation & Examination of the Candidates

By Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle

The Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle is founder of the Peace Battle Institute and served as Rector of Church of Our Saviour in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. A well-known writer, speaker and retreat leader, his ministry covers the globe and focuses on Christian non-violence, human spirituality, and African Church studies.

Michael lived in residence with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa for two years, 1993-1994 and was ordained a priest in South Africa by Desmond Tutu in 1993. Michael has written of his studies and friendship with Desmond Tutu, in such books as:

The Candidates for Holy Baptism will now be presented

In the movie, “The Lion King,” there is a profound image of Mufasa, king of the Pride lands, positioned on the most visible location in the land, proudly raising his male cub to the lion pride to be officially, once and for all, welcomed and celebrated as the newest addition to the community. With this action, Mufasa was blessing the heir to his throne so that all would know his child’s rightful, royal, place in his kingdom. In the presentation and examination of the candidates for Holy Baptism, we, too proudly raise up our brothers and sisters and affirm that they are rightful heirs to God’s kingdom, through baptism in the body of his son, Jesus Christ. By our prayers and witness, we vow to help the individual grow into the full stature of Christ…with God’s help.

How are candidates for baptism presented? The answer is pretty simple.

The Celebrant says, “The Candidate(s) for Holy Baptism will now be presented.” If they are adults and older children, they are invited to answer for themselves individually or by their sponsors. For example, when Archbishop Desmond Tutu baptized our children, my wife and I said, “I present Sage, Bliss and Zion to receive the sacrament of Baptism.” When the candidates are older, as in one case when I was rector at St. Ambrose Episcopal Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, Mr. Jones, a black man, sharply dressed in a white business suit, stood before me beaming eagerly to respond to my questions.

The Celebrant then asks each candidate when presented, “Do you desire to be baptized?” Mr. Jones responds, “I do.”

What if, however, candidates for baptism are not old enough to respond for themselves? When the candidates are infants and younger children, as in the case of Sage, Bliss and Zion, they are presented individually by their parents and godparents. As proud parents, Raquel and I spoke loudly and in concert, “I present Sage, Bliss, and Zion to receive the Sacrament of Baptism.” All of us were crowded around the baptismal font in the narthex (entrance) of St. Ambrose—Raquel and I holding a squirming infant boy and two young daughters, three godparents, acolytes, members of the Church, and of course Archbishop Tutu, who most were more interested in seeing.
When all of our children were presented as candidates for baptism, Archbishop Tutu asked Raquel and me, “Will you be responsible for seeing that Sage, Bliss and Zion are brought up in the Christian faith and life?”

We responded, “I will, with God’s help.”

Archbishop Tutu then asked our godparents, “Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?”

They responded, “I will, with God’s help.”

Then Archbishop Tutu asked me, Raquel and the godparents who could speak on behalf our young children:

Question:  Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer:  I renounce them.

Question:  Do you renounce the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Answer:  I renounce them.
Question: Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?
Answer: I renounce them.

Question: Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept him as your Savior?
Answer: I do.

Question: Do you put your whole trust in his grace, and love?
Answer: I do.

Question: Do you promise to follow, and obey him as your Lord?
Answer: I do.

When there are others to be presented, the Bishop says, “The other Candidate(s) will now be presented. The presenters in these circumstances say, “I present these persons for Confirmation” or “I present these persons to be received into this Communion” or “I present these persons who desire to reaffirm their baptismal vows.”

The Bishop asks the candidates, “Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil?”
The Candidate states, “I do.”

Bishop asks, “Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?”
The Candidate replies, “I do, and with God’s grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord.”

After all have been presented, the Celebrant addresses the congregation, saying, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?”

The congregation says in unison, “We will.”

The Celebrant then says these or similar words, “Let us join with those who are committing themselves to Christ and renew our own Baptismal Covenant.”

Historian Joseph Okiziobo from Burkina Faso, West Africa told the story about two Egyptian deities in rivalry, Osiris and Set. The original form of the story states that Osiris was killed by a wooden coffin secretly made by Set, who was jealous of Osiris’s position as king, and so plotted to kill him and take his place. A party had been held where the coffin was offered to whoever could fit inside. A few people tried to fit in, but to no avail. Osiris was encouraged to try, but as

6 From Roy Cayteno interview and Dr. Sheila Walker, anthropologist from the University of Texas at Austin.
soon as he lay back, the lid slammed on him and was locked. It was then sealed with lead and thrown into the Nile River. Upon hearing that Osiris was gone, Isis set out to look for him. She was afraid without proper ceremonies and rites of passage Osiris would not be able to travel successfully to the afterlife. She later learned that the coffin had floated down the Nile River up to the coast of Byblos (now in modern day Lebanon) and got embedded in the trunk of a cedar tree.

When traveling back, along the Nile River, she left the coffin in an area of marshland. Set, while hunting, finds Osiris’ coffin and dismembered him into many parts, scattering them across the world. The story has a happy ending, however. Osiris was resurrected (his fragmented body came back together). He could then have proper ceremonies, and burial.

What does such a story of tragedy and resurrection have to do with baptism and in particular the presentation of the candidates for baptism? According to African scholars, Africa is like Osiris, chopped up into millions of pieces with her remnant now spread around the world. As Christians of African descent, it is vital to have the gravity for all of these pieces to make sense of the whole. Such gravity is known in baptism, a rite of passage that reminds us all of our primary identity as more than the sum of our millions of pieces. For example, in the African ritual of naming a baby, one holds up the child to God presenting the infant as a new candidate for ancestor hood. In baptism, we too present both infants and adults to God, as new candidates for primary identity in God. We do this so that no one piece will be lost. Perhaps, a new theology of African baptism is that it re-gathers all of the pieces of Africa that are scattered like a puzzle.

When we present candidates for baptism, we seek the relationship among all of the pieces of humanity, and creation and not their isolation or fragmentation. What are some examples of fragmentation?

**Family Fragmentation**

From Argentina to Canada, in all of the Americas, with the exception of Chile there is at least one population of African origin. Most countries have several African origins. One can see perhaps, African unity reflected in dress, body rhythms, food, etc. Such ubiquity among African presence is not fully realized. For example, when many think of Argentina, most don’t think of Afro-South Americans, and yet in the back of our minds reside Tango, music of central African origin, Samba in Brazil, Rumba in Cuba, Marimba in Guatemala (national instrument), all of African origin. Where did this fragmentation occur between what we consciously fail to realize about African ubiquity and what we subconsciously know and celebrate about African presence?

Unfortunately, there is not enough research out there to answer the preceding question of fragmentation. What we know for sure is that the ravages of the North Atlantic Slave trade wreaked havoc on African family systems. This means that all that is related to how one imprints upon a parent as a child, and how one acquires identity was deeply damaged. How one maintained identity in the African Diaspora was a herculean effort. Some scholars even argue that the slave trade stripped, from those of African descent, any pure African identity. Garifuna
are the best example of maintaining an African indigenous population in the Americas. They have maintained perhaps the purest indigenous culture (e.g., language, spirituality, food, family structures, etc.) The Garifuna are those of African descent in Central America sojourning in the Americas from St. Vincent to Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and United States.

Instead of family fragmentation, the Garifuna worldview of family is based on harmony. Garifuna harmony is necessary for relationships because without such harmony, one’s differences could not be understood, and celebrated. The father worked in harmony with the mother. Children in turn worked in harmony with their parents. Without such congruence, survival was doubtful. It also must be noted that a harmonious environment included the spiritual, social, and physical. In other words, this harmonious environment went beyond the borders of this life and extended into the society and even the afterlife. Such harmony comes by meeting family obligations that are extended into societal life.

We are now obligated to so many people; and in order to meet such obligations, there are mechanisms to ensure that we do not forget. If we do forget, we must atone for such lapses to reestablish the harmony.

Similarly, as Christians, we seek such harmony when we present ourselves, and our children for examination for baptism. Christians of African descent know that the spirit world contains both that which we see and the world in which God and the ancestors reside. Presentation and examination of the candidates for baptism allows for communication between these two worlds.

In our baptismal liturgy, we guard against failing to meet our family obligations when we respond to the question, “Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?” We have rituals and practices like family dinners and cutting off the TV during the week because we are trying to meet our family obligations. We have, in our Christian and African rituals, how to come together as a family. For example, part of the healing process required by African ancestors is to cooperate in difficult circumstances by learning to release resentments and violence and allow the reestablishment of harmony and connectedness where family matters have fragmented.

In African rituals, there is constant movement—dance that travels round, and round in a circle (good for forgiveness), drums that locate the ancestors among us, and if you look closely you see both a circle and a cross, symbolizing harmony. If there is harmony, then there is no sickness. To restore family relationships, one needs to move toward harmony. To have relatives, is to contribute to them financially, to exchange information and songs, to struggle toward a common goal, to offer and present ourselves to God and the communion of saints among us.

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7 Roy Cayetona, Sabestian and Isabel Cayetono, History Language and Culture of the Garifuna of Belize.
Family Reunion

When families are restored, and continually presented to God, often there is joyous movement akin to dance. I know that when my family holds a family reunion, we usually have some kind of dance for the whole extended family. Inevitably, my wife, children, sisters, mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins, are on the dance floor of some hotel moving in joyous movement. (Usually, the elders wait for a tune that also moves in sync with the Electric Slide!)

When Christians present candidates for baptism, we participate in that dance of harmony. It is a dance that we must practice because none of us have perfected its choreography. It is not a static dance because it evolves. Baptism is similar to a healthy process of cultural assimilation because, as one culture encounters another, hybridization occurs. Our cultures have become us and we the culture.

This ritual of baptism, lived faithfully, is an embodied practice of interconnection that involves the mind, soul, community and body, and demonstrates the relationship between human and divine environments. The African ritual practice of baptism can enhance Western Christianity in so far as trying to teach mutuality and integration of mind, soul and body. Black people know that in baptism, more than an individual is reborn. We know that families can be as well.

Yet, we must stay vigilant in the midst of sociological hurdles that challenge black families. Christian baptism can help us in these challenges in so far as individual family members (e.g., black male, single mothers, etc.,) are now connected to the restoration of larger systems gone awry (e.g., North Atlantic Slave trade). In short, the black experience of being a family is like Osiris, chopped up into millions of pieces with his remnant now spread around the world. The wind that blows them back together into one body, I believe, is the Holy Spirit. Our ultimate family reunion occurs when African and African Diaspora ethnicity experiences the healing offered to the whole world (Revelation 22:2). Christians promise to believe, and act on this faith. In other words, the presentation of the baptismal candidates must now take into account family systems not only based upon biological families, but God’s ultimate family. In baptism we are given God’s aerial view of how we are related and empowered—in this ritual space a collected memory is created in that our very survival as a planet depends upon our hormonal relatedness.
Baptismal Covenant

By Rev. Canon Howard Kently Williams

The Rev. Canon Dr. Howard Kently Williams is the Rector of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. A native of Jamaica, West Indies, he is the former Archdeacon of Brooklyn in the Diocese of Long Island. Williams holds a Certificate in Ministerial Studies, a Licentiate in Theology, a Master of Arts in Christian Education and a Doctorate in Ministry from the United Theological College of the West Indies, the University of the West Indies, Princeton Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Foundation respectively. His Doctorate is in Management and Spirituality.

After serving as Youth Coordinator for the Caribbean Conference of Churches, he served as rector in the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands, Chaplain of Voorhees College, SC, and then rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Columbia, SC. Williams founded, managed and produced TREASURE Magazine for children. He created and led teams of working groups in the visioning, design, development and marketing of pro-active children’s Initiatives. One such initiative, “Children Should Be Seen and Not Hurt,” is a peace making movement led by children. He launched a six-year pilot program entitled, “TREASURE Kids!” from which came the Children’s Charter for the Episcopal Church. Williams has a son and a daughter and three grandchildren.

Contributor

The Rev. Canon Dr. Sandye A. Wilson

The Rev. Canon Dr. Sandye A. Wilson is the rector of St. Andrew and Holy Communion in South Orange, NJ. Her church work includes experience in urban, suburban and rural settings, from small towns to major cities. Rev Wilson was the first black woman to serve as rector of a church in the United States and worldwide. She has a long list of accomplishments and leadership affiliations at the local, diocesan and national levels. These include serving for 15 years on the National Executive Council of the Episcopal Church and national president of the Union of Black Episcopalians.
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Through Holy Baptism, lay, and ordained church leaders, are called to share in the priesthood of Christ. That means that we are not only to believe the concepts embodied in the Baptismal Covenant, but we are to become what we believe. Each time we, as a community, renew our Baptismal Covenant, pieces of our self begin to atrophy and die, so that we may become more Christ-like in our interactions with God’s people. Respecting the dignity of every human being is not an easy thing to do for many people. With God's help, however, respecting the dignity of another person becomes the only thing we can do because we are incapable of seeing anything other than Jesus Christ in the faces of humanity.

The Baptismal Covenant is the solemn promise, or sacred agreement, in which God, the principal actor, adopts human persons as his children, and makes them members of Christ's Body, the Church and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. As black Episcopalians, what is even more heart-warming is that God will never revoke this action, and nothing anyone does can change what God has done.

This is indeed good news, because many of us share in a heritage which, at one time, was violated by slavery, and today years after its abolition, still worship in churches and live in communities where we are expected to contribute financially and otherwise, do not always feel welcomed. It is even more good news for those of us who are elderly, young, gay or homeless, since we are many times treated as persons to be pitied, forgiven or ostracized.

I serve in a large, vibrant and thriving, Caribbean congregation with a few members from Africa and the USA. This congregation is not the norm in the Black Episcopal Church, which is made up of about 80 percent of congregations with a membership of 150 or less. St. Augustine's, Brooklyn has an average Sunday attendance of 600 and an Easter attendance of 1,700. It is a congregation that seeks to focus on its mission "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ," and is committed to the Baptismal Covenant in which all persons are welcomed and accepted as God's own children.

We are so excited and thankful to God, that in loving trust, we confess belief in One God whom we see in three different ways. We see God as the Father who creates, the son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies.

We promise, in loving obedience, and in response to God's generosity, and steadfast love to us:

1. To live lives that are grounded in a sacramental worship; which is true to who we are as black Episcopalians. For example, we ensure that this happens, in our Bible studies, sermons, liturgies, vestments, and the language(s) used in worship, and music. Our Anglican Choir, Gospel Choir, and three Children's/Youth Choirs lead us in music from the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and the USA. As we lift our voices in praise, instruments
such as the organ, piano, drums, a 40-piece steel band, and at times, trumpets and a bass
guitar may be heard raising their strain in satisfying accompaniment.

2. To honor our humanity, acknowledge our sinful nature, and always return to God for
forgiveness.

3. To share the Good News with others, of what God has done and continues to do in our
lives. Members share freely, formally and informally the many Blessings they receive.
For example, a liver transplant, the wonderful report cards from school, the birth of a
granddaughter, or a deep spiritual moment or experience.

4. To seek to see Christ in all persons and to serve all persons as we would serve Christ
himself.

5. To work for just and peaceful communities in which all persons are treated with dignity
and respect. One example may be seen in our relationship with the New York Police
Department (NYPD). In New York and in many parts of this country, black people and
the police do not trust each other. In recent years there have been several charges of
abuse on the part of the NYPD especially towards our young Black men. St. Augustine's
decided to help in finding a solution to this problem. We started a Police/Fire Fighters
Sunday, in which police officers and fire fighters come and worship, eat and speak with
us. This has led a few parishioners and me to take a 14-week course at the police
academy to better understand the police from their perspective. Also, when new police
officers come into the community, they meet with me for an orientation in order to gain
insight into the community, and the community's expectation of them.

With the advent of airplanes, and more recently the Internet, the world has shrunk to what some
have called the global village. That means that we are able to communicate with each other
much more readily, and move around the earth, no longer in 80 days, but in a matter of hours.
No longer do we live with the fear of falling off the face of the earth if we venture too far.
People travel physically, and virtually. So, literally and figuratively, we are in each other's
"face," producing a closeness which is a challenge to many.

When people from so many different backgrounds and cultures come together in such close
communities, oftentimes they react in ways that deny the Christ in all of us, and grieve a loving
God. Black Episcopalians know firsthand atrocities such as racism, classism, and discrimination
against the aged, homosexual people, and recent immigrants. We have seen the effects of
oppression resulting in several expressions of poverty such as homelessness, addiction, substance
abuse, domestic violence, human trafficking, and elder and child abuse. These evils are not
always as a consequence of poverty, alone, but poverty provides a fertile environment for greed,
hate and other forms of bigotry to take root and flourish. But these are antithetical to what our
Christian actions should be as we promised in the Baptismal Covenant. How then are we able to
be true to our Baptismal Covenant? The church must constantly and consistently facilitate
authentic, sacramental worship, teaching and training. Who is responsible for this?

The onus must be placed squarely on the shoulders of church leaders - both clergy and lay
together. I am convinced that the most effective form of congregational leadership happens
when clergy and elected, appointed or informal lay leaders work as a team. There have been too
many stories of negativity between clergy and lay leaders, because each views congregational leadership as theirs.

Such is not the case at St. Augustine's. Clergy and elected lay leaders realize that the life and work of the church is for "all." The work is too much for any one person or entity. Also, God reveals God's truth, and will to ALL God's covenanted people, not only to the ordained.

We organized our life and work into three areas, which are owned by the entire congregation:

1. **Spirituality and Formation** - the **food** for all Christians. This includes the ritual worship and other pastoral rites of the church, bible studies, retreats, and other formational opportunities. This is coordinated by the rector.

2. **Mission and Ministry** - the **work** of all Christians. More than 20 groups in the church have organized themselves to engage the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals, along with all the other community commitments. This is coordinated by a warden.

3. **Management and Finance** - the **infrastructure,** which provides the support needed for Christians' **food and work,** includes my 7Ps: Property, Personnel, Policy, Procedures, Polity, Planning, and Program. Finance is the Big Four: Budget, Endowments, Investments, and Fund Raising. This is also coordinated by a warden.

The Baptismal Covenant then requires an awareness, and acceptance of who we are as black Episcopalians, our religious traditions and the social, political and economical concerns in our communities. Living into the Covenant requires an inward journey into us and willingness, and readiness, in a developmentally appropriate way, to confess publicly, through word and deed, that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives.

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**Easter Vigil Sermon, March 23, 2011**
**The Rev. Canon Dr. Sandye A. Wilson**
**Given at the Episcopal Church of St. Andrew & Holy Communion, South Orange, New Jersey**

Let us pray. “Do you not know that those who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death?” In the name of the living God, Amen.

Ever find yourself on the corner of 53th Street and Lexington Avenue, New York City? Years ago I stopped in to see the modern edifice and to hear Jazz at St. Peter's Lutheran Church and was amazed by what I saw! The baptismal font is off to the left right by the main entrance. That in and of itself is appropriate! For baptism is the entry into the Christian life. We are brought into the church when we are baptized. So the people of St. Peter’s put the font right by the front door. But this baptismal font is unlike anything we normally see here in the East: it actually looks like
one I have seen at various places in Colorado. For it is a large deep pool. It is elevated about chest high, as I remember. A visitor might confuse it for a hot tub, large enough for three or four people. Now the Episcopal parish in Vail has a baptistery that is a hot tub! But there are no spa checks in this baptismal font at St. Peter’s and the water as I touched it was quite chilly. So I overhear someone ask the pastor of the church at St. Peter’s, “How do baptisms get done?”

“Just like anywhere else,” he said.
“Well, do people get dunked in the Lutheran Church?”
“Some do” he said. Others stand outside the font and water is sprinkled on their heads. But the thing is, however we baptize people, we have to use enough water to kill people.”

Sprinkling or dunking. We have to use enough water to kill people. Well, like a lot of priests, over the years I been accused of using a lot of water to baptize people. In the dark of the church, you might have been able to see the big, heavy ewer that I was using. And I’d like to hold it up real high (sometime when I’m not feeling weak from Holy Week!) and let the water fall out and let it splash into the font and on the people around, usually kids. In my old church, when we reassembled for pictures after the baptism, the sexton would be standing by with the mop. In fact, in my first church after seminary I tried to be very generous with water. I once dumped a whole pitcher of water on the head of an unsuspecting child. The mother was shocked and thought I was trying to drown her son. Well, guess what? Theologically speaking, I was.

For Paul says, that we die when we are baptized. Whether you remember your baptism or not friends, you died at the baptismal font. And that is one of the keys of what it means to be a Christian. Most of the time in this church we baptize little children. Tonight we were blessed to have a teensy one, one a little bigger, and two “tw eens”. It is nice to have them! When we baptize a little child the baby could start screaming; or the baby could coo and smile. Either way the cuteness factor is pretty high. We also have the tradition of walking the infant down the aisle and introducing him or her to the household of God. Nobody ever frowns when that happens. Most of us are melting in a moment of “proxy-parenthood.”

But Paul reminds us tonight, in his letter to the Romans that something deeper is happening. At the moment of baptism we are so deeply united with Christ that we are buried with him. Our entire life up to this point has been finished off. And now something new begins. Christian baptism is not intended to be a ceremony on anybody’s social calendar. If it is, and that is only why you are here, please consider going home. It is not a predicable little ritual at a certain time in a person’s life. At its deepest meaning, baptism is the event at which we are as clearly marked as a Jewish child being circumcised. Life is going to be different from this day forward.

In one of her short stories, Flannery O’Connor tells about a four-year-old boy named Harry Ashfield. He lives in an apartment with parents who neglect him. Their lives are more concerned with drinking, partying and recovering from hangovers. So one day a cleaning lady take Harry to hear a preacher down by the river. Harry has never heard anything like that preacher. As the preacher stands hip deep in the water he talks about Jesus and a kingdom of God where every child is safe. Little Harry starts to pay attention. “Hey preacher” cries out Mrs. Cronin, the cleaning lady, “I’m keeping a boy from town today, and I don’t think he has ever been baptized.”
The preacher says, “Well bring him to me.” Then turning to Harry he asks, “Have you ever been baptized?” And Harry asks what that means. The preacher says, “If I baptize you, you will be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You will be washed in the river of suffering, son. And you will go deep by the River of Life. Do you want that?” It sounded pretty good to Harry. He wouldn’t have to return to the neglect of his parents’ apartment, he thought. The preacher said “You won’t be the same again, son. You will count.” And he takes the boy and swings him upside down and plunges him into the water. The child comes up gasping for air. Then the preacher says, “Son you count now. You count now.” At the end of the day, Mrs. Cronin takes the boy home. Everything is different for Harry, now. He wants no part of his parents’ parties. He is no longer comfortable being cooped up in their apartment while they ignore him. All he wants is to go back down to the river where he can jump in and go looking for the kingdom of Christ.

Paul says the old life dies when we are baptized. All our sins are killed off through Christ’s death. All our destructiveness is destroyed. Everything that kept us from the freedom of the Gospel is now loose, and we are free to live in the love of Jesus Christ: provided, of course, that we let the old life die. In the book Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership, Garry Wills writes about Harriet Tubman, the amazing African slave woman who led African slaves to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad. That invisible railroad came through parts of the eastern states, with whistle stops in many now familiar places. But here is a remarkable detail about her that you may not know. When Harriet Tubman was a teenager, as she tried to stop the beating of a fellow worker, her master hit her on the head with a steel pipe and the blow broke her skull. Harriet lay near death for weeks and she suffered for the rest of her life from catatonic spells due to the injury. But the injury also set her free. As Wills notes, the blow that cracked Tubman’s skull cut off her psychic chains. She had already died once. She had nothing else in life to lose.

Have you ever noticed, people can sometimes have an experience where they were as good as dead and when they emerge everything is fresh and new? They are not bound and held captive as they once were. In a very real sense, life begins after something has died. Paul says this experience lies at the very heart of the Christian life. For a couple chapters he has been arguing on behalf of grace. As he continues to remind us, God saves us through the death and resurrection of Christ. We are made righteous not through our deeds, friends, but through the righteous work of Christ’s sacrificial love. In the cross of Jesus God has forgiven us even before we knew we needed to be forgiven. The grace of God surrounds us. We can’t earn it; we can only trust it and welcome its power in our lives.

Not a bad deal, says the critic. We sin and God forgives. If that’s true, we can keep sinning and God will keep forgiving. In fact, we can do something really, really bad, and God can let us off the hook. Right? But Paul says, no, baptized people must not keep sinning because they have passed out of a life of sin. Look at what happened. The Old you was drowned in the baptismal font. Now you are a new creation raised to a new life. All the powers that hurt and destroy now do not have dominion over you. Sure we get into a little trouble now and then; everybody does.
Most of the time, we merely recalibrate the carburetor, without ever getting a whole new engine. We don’t allow any interruption to affect our schedule, our pocketbook, or what we do after dark. But then again, some people are lifted right out of the dust, because they are willing to let go of the wreckage they once suffered. From time to time, we lose jobs. We give up routines. We watch our children grow up and move away. We change addresses. We lose marriages. We mourn loved ones. All of these losses are real, and hurtful—and all of them are also reminders that we cannot completely become who we were meant to be as Christians until we say “Goodbye” to the old ways.

And as we say goodbye to the old ways, the Baptismal Covenant becomes a way of life, as we strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being, bringing hope to the world as a new creation. Paul says, "Don’t you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen—the Lord is risen indeed! And so are we. And so are we!

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Prayers for the Candidates

By Rev. Kathleen Hawkins Berkowe

The Rev. Kathleen Hawkins Berkowe is Assistant to the Rector at St. John’s Episcopal Church, Stamford, CT, where she is responsible for Adult Spiritual Formation. She has organized and led spiritual retreats, Scripture studies and adult confirmation and baptism classes in a variety of settings. She is particularly attentive to the ongoing spiritual journey that each of us is called to experience. She experienced her call to the priesthood after 20 years of practice in the field of corporate and real estate law, both in corporations and in private practice. She holds an M. Div. from The General Theological Seminary, New York, a JD from Boston University School of Law and A.B., cum laude, from Harvard University. Berkowe has two adult daughters, two sons-in-law, and two granddaughters.
Let us now pray for these persons

The people pray, with a level of hope that the baptismal candidate may not fully understand. The congregation prays for the candidate knowing that Jesus’ way is not an easy road, and that integral to strengthening the person in their newly committed life in Christ, is the practice of prayer. The prayer is an opportunity to model our worship practices for the newest additions to our faith community, and also knits the hopes of a community with the vision God has placed in the individual’s heart. We pray that once the candidate is baptized, they find the strength to turn away from sin; open their hearts to what the Spirit is saying; remain faithful in their service to the Church; and serve as witnesses to God’s love for humankind. As we pray, we vocally express that when our brothers and sisters commit themselves to Christ, we also commit to standing in the gap to pray on their behalf, when necessary.

The excitement has started to build way before the Service this Pentecost Sunday, at St John’s in Stamford, Connecticut. The immense white stone baptismal font stands gleaming, uncovered, on the chancel steps to the right of the lectern. Candles, baptismal towels and a gleaming silver water pitcher rest on a nearby table. The front pews bustle with extra visitors, generations of relatives, and friends of the soon-to-be-baptized babies.

The adults in the congregation look on with knowing smiles. Children, their eyes shining, see the preparations, the babies in white, and other visiting children, and know that this service will be special. I am especially excited to be Celebrant. It is my first Baptism as a newly ordained priest, and my own granddaughter is one of the infant candidates. Six months later I will baptize my second granddaughter. These reflections are a composite of these, and the many baptisms that I have witnessed.

The congregation’s excitement is understandable; they are active participants in this festive sacrament of Baptism. The congregation, representing the Church, the body of Christ, welcome the newly baptized into the Body of Christ, and commit to help the newly baptized to live their new life in Christ. This is a change, instituted in the 1979 Prayer book, making baptism a congregational event to take place during regular Sunday Eucharist.

In the prayers of the people, the whole congregation will pray for God’s help, and blessing for the Candidates as they live into the covenants of new life in Christ. We cannot do it alone. We need God’s help. In a mystery that we do not understand, it is in the context of community, in the church that our growth to new life of the Spirit is nurtured through the power of the Holy Spirit.
After the readings and the sermon, I rise and speak the introductory words, “The candidates for baptism will now be presented.” The crucifer leads the clergy and acolytes from their seats down the altar steps, and across the transept to the Baptismal font. I invite children of the congregation to be seated in the front pews while the parents and godparents gather in front of the font, and extending across the altar rail, holding the babies, and facing outward towards the congregation.

I stand before the Candidates and the families, my back to the congregation as they state,

“We present Madeleine Helge Faye to receive the sacrament of Baptism.”

I ask, “Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?”

They answer the question solemnly, “We do!”

And so on through the remaining questions, promises and vows to support the Candidates, and the renewal of the Baptismal Covenant in the form of the ancient creed.

“Do you believe in God the Father?” I ask.

The people answer,” I believe in God the Father Almighty…”

I ask again, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?”

The people respond “I believe…” and so it continues. ¹

In the Prayers for the Candidates, we ask for God’s protection, guidance and help for the Candidates in keeping their baptismal vows. The prayers follow the path of spiritual life; they highlight the direction of spiritual growth and warn of the pitfalls that beset us. The prayers tell us a lot about who God is, who we are, and who we are becoming in the body of Christ, and in the image of God.

As I lead the prayers, I think back to the preparation for Baptism, when the Candidates (or godparents in this case) considered what the prayers tell us about God, ourselves and the Body of Christ.

“Deliver them from the way of sin and death.” We ask God’s help to resist our human tendency to commit sins. We ask for help in overcoming sin and evil in ourselves. “For I do not
do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Romans 7:19) A question that comes up often in discussions is: If God made us as we are, imperfect, with the ability and tendency to sin, then why must we continue to confess how sinful we are? Why not (as effective parents and teachers do) reassure and encourage followers of Christ who try in good faith but cannot overcome their human nature? This is an important question that we will explore in greater detail in the following sections. But first, the fundamentals.

The prayer for deliverance demonstrates a crucial understanding about God’s nature. God’s nature is fundamentally different from ours. God is all powerful, and at the same time, all-loving. God’s ultimate demonstration of power is not by strength or force but by kenosis, self-emptying love. (Phil. 2:5-11) God “became flesh and dwelt among us,” in Jesus, fully human and fully God. God puts into effect ultimate love, and reconciliation between God, and humankind in Jesus’ life, suffering, death and resurrection.

Knowing of God’s love, and desire to be reconciled to us, and make us a new creation in Him, we are free to return God’s love in our imperfect way, secure in the knowledge that Jesus, having taken our nature into the Trinity, bridges the gap between God, and ourselves.

Part of our human condition is the reluctance to accept that we are not God. To accept this is to develop humility. Scripture tells us that God has “greater things in mind for us than we can ask or imagine.” Often God’s plans for us do not involve what we think is best for us, particularly in terms of tangible goods, and ease of living. God does not follow us, nor does God adhere to the plans and schemes that we devise. Faithful following of God means having a child-like trust even when things do not go the way we wish, and even more when we cannot see a favorable outcome.

Humility may mean following God through changes when we would rather those things stayed the same. In the church, liturgy and practices may change. In our families or jobs or even in the church we may be called to share decision-making, and to allow people who previously had little to say (including young people) more input.

Following God may put us at odds with other competing goals or authorities. We may have to challenge family, parish members, neighbors, friends, the government, or even the institutional church.

Being humble before God, and recognizing our flawed human nature are part of what we are called to do as followers of Christ. However, the fact that our human nature is flawed should never be used to deny our dignity as human beings. Feminists and women theologians have challenged the sin, and spiritual harm that has resulted when the universal fact of humanity’s sinful nature is used (wittingly or unwittingly) to judge and demean women, and specifically black women. (See, for example, the writings of Kelly Brown Douglas.ii)
Open their hearts to your grace and truth.

Though it is through our biological parents that we are given life, earthly families that nurture and sustain us may come in many forms: traditional, non-traditional, extended families of relatives and friends, adopted families. It is through the church family, the body of Christ, which is an adopted family, that we are nurtured spiritually, knitted together into relationship with Him, and formed into a New Creation.

As a child, family and the stories of family created my identity. I carried with me the stories of family and the prayers of my grandmothers, and great-grandmother wherever we were. Family, and the visits with family in summers are what connected me to people who loved me. Family is where I learned that people can love me just because of who I am, “Little Connie’s daughter” and “Bobby’s daughter,” “Old Mort’s granddaughter, and “Biggy’s great-granddaughter.” My mother had grown up in Detroit (in the neighborhood that spawned “Motown”), attended integrated schools, and then the historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C. Having served in World War II and graduated from the historically black Lincoln University, my father had returned home to attend the Jesuit Catholic University’s School of social work. Early in his career, my father became an officer in the U.S. Army, and our family moved every few years to different postings at Army Medical Centers in the US and in Germany. When I was growing up we saw our relatives infrequently, sometimes years would pass. Yet when we visited my mothers’ relatives in Detroit, they regaled us with stories of her as a child, with family lessons, with the newest news about other cousins living far away. And they would talk about Georgia, where my great-grandmother and great-grandfather had grown up and raised my grandmother, and her siblings.

How people were related was not as important as the fact that they were related. Whether married into the family or born into it, relatives were—and are—embraced as part of the family. And this bond is forever, lasting beyond divorce or death. My now-elderly cousin lives in a relatively isolated spot, off the Cape of Massachusetts, yet she communicates regularly by letter and phone with successive generations of our relatives on my father’s side. She is family by marriage, and adoption, and she knits the family together. This broad sense of family, and the importance of family is a shared African inheritance; I found similar attitudes on a pilgrimage to Malawi, in southern Africa two years ago!

In baptism, we become “Christ’s own” members of Christ’s family by new birth, and by adoption. We reaffirm our membership as a part of the body of Christ when we are confirmed, and every time we renew our Baptismal vows.

This is a time to consider how we as a congregation welcome, and include members of the body of Christ. Do we accept everyone as a “true” church family member? Are some more or less favored because they have been in the parish longer, or have converted, or have given more money? Do we welcome all families including non-traditional and extended families?
Fill them with your Holy and life-giving spirit.

God always gives life. Jesus says, “I come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) Baptism is the beginning of new Life in Christ. And this new life, centered on Christ, displaces the old life that is centered elsewhere, on us or other people or money or any number of created things. As baptized Christians, we look forward to the kingdom of God here on earth, a society where all people coexist and live together. I had glimpses of such a society growing up on Military bases; our parents were from many countries, regions and ethnicities, and backgrounds, all living together.

Keep them in the faith and communion of your Holy Church

My paternal grandmother’s family traces its beginnings to 1681, when Mary, a free white woman, and Robin, a “negro” man, both servants, were married by a priest in the local church. This was before the institution and idea of slavery had been developed in the United States. What hopes they must have had! Their marriage later served as a “get out of slavery” card for their descendants, who, 100 years later, went to court to prove their legitimate descent from “a free white person.” In a court decision, the judge ruled, “judgment for freedom” that declared that my ancestors were free from slavery which had been imposed on all of African descent by retroactive law.

Our family has continued to find strength, courage, meaning, and life in the church. From the wedding in 1681 to my recent ordination, and the current baptisms, my family continues to find identity in Christ in the church. Increasingly the experience is multi-faith. Through their father’s family my children celebrate Jewish heritage; a great grandfather who came over through Ellis Island as a 14 year-old and owned a tailor shop in New York’s garment district, and a great-grandmother, the daughter of a merchant, who grew up in New York City with appreciation of opera and fine art. Their French catholic grandmother traces the family ancestry back to the 12th Century, when they received their title for recovering, and selling war munitions! My two new granddaughters have this rich heritage, and the heritages of their respective fathers, whose stories are equally varied, and deep.

Teach them to love others in the power of the spirit

I look out over the assembled congregation. In the front pews are families and friends of the Candidates. My granddaughter, soon to be baptized, is supported by grandparents, a great-grandmother, great-aunts and uncles, aunts and uncles, and cousins on both sides. The colors of family members include black and white and many shades of brown in between. They are children of Africa and Europe and the Americas. The congregation of St. John’s is also of many colors and backgrounds. The extraordinary diversity of its members was one of the attractions that initially drew me. The congregation is from every continent (with the exception of Antarctica!) They are recent immigrants, and descendents of immigrants as far back as the 17th Century. They are from every economic and social stratum, and many different ethnic and
cultural backgrounds. They include both highly and minimally educated. They are also people with physical, mental and intellectual challenges. There are people who are outwardly gifted in various ways. There are people with great wealth, inherited and newly minted, middle class, and many who are quite poor. They represent a wide spectrum of political views and have very different opinions on issues of polity and structure of the church (raised by, for example, the proposed Anglican Covenant.)

Send them into the world to witness to your love

As we pray for candidates and renew our own vows, we think about our faith and how we live it in our homes. While personal prayer is important, it is also important to pray as a family. In our family growing up, we prayed together at meals. This was a time to bless the food, and to bring before God concerns, problems of the day, triumphs, and to ask blessings of all present at the meal. Another regular prayer ritual was at bedtime. My mother or father would “tuck us in,” pull fast the sheets and covers, and then listen to our prayers. This ritual of evening prayers was a time for taking with God about the day, for giving thanks for blessings, for asking for help for challenges and problems, and for remembering all those absent family members.

Outside of our own family, and friends we are called to bear witness to God’s love. As Christians in a post-slavery society, it is our responsibility to identify, and challenge vestiges of flawed theology that would deny the humanity of any person for any reason. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and break bread together. We are called to share our stories of God’s grace in our own lives with others.

Bring them to the fullness of your peace and glory

What does this tell us about our human nature? We do not need to be ashamed of what we are. We are as God made us, imperfect human beings. We are beloved, in our imperfection. Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, brings our humanity into the Trinity. Through Jesus’ death, and resurrection God reconciles us to Himself. We are called to continue our spiritual journey. We are called to continue to read Scripture and break bread together, to continue with all the promises of our Baptism. In this way, we will be inheritors of the promise. In Christ, we become a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17)

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1 “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons is St. John’s motto. An excellent resource illustrating another sentence of the Baptismal Covenant is found in an exhibition of The Episcopal Visual Arts Project, “Word and Example,” at http://ecva.org/exhibition/WordAndExample/WE-Thumbnails.htm

Thanksgiving over the Water
By Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis

The Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis is rector of Holy Comforter
Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., and Professor of Theology
at Howard University School of Divinity. Born in the West Indies
on the island of Antigua, he is a graduate of Codrington College in
Barbados.

He was ordained a deacon in 1965 and a priest in 1966 in his home
diocese, the Diocese of Antigua (now called the Diocese of the
North Eastern Caribbean and Aruba). He has served as Rector of
several parishes in the Caribbean and was, for some time on the
faculty of his alma mater. He also served as an Executive Member
of the Caribbean Conference of Churches.

He was one of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s representatives on the Anglican/Roman Catholic
International Commission (ARCIC II). In addition to having been a member of the Faith and
Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, he has also served as Consultant to
several other ecclesiastical bodies and academic institutions.

He is the author of several books and articles. His publications include Emancipation Still
Comin’, African Creative Expressions of the Divine, Can God Save the Church? and Serving
With Power.

He is married to the Joan Thompson Davis, and they have two daughters, a son, and five
grandchildren.
Now sanctify this water we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit

Water in its three forms is a powerful, destructive and creative force. As a gas, we may witness the destruction caused by the sheer force of the wind in the form of a tornado. Frozen water has the power to carve through rock in the form of a glacier. As a liquid, a steady flow of water becomes a skilled sculptor, wearing down landscapes while providing life-giving nutrients for the surrounding plants and animals. During baptism, the individual dies to self and is reborn into the body of Christ—the epitome of change. Just as water is the source of life on earth, the water used in Holy Baptism is a poignant representation of the individual’s acceptance of a new life as a Christian. The use of water during Holy Baptism reminds us all of our burial with Christ in his death, our shared resurrection with Christ and our new life in the Holy Spirit. As water destroys what is, it simultaneously moves to create what is always becoming.

There is a story told of a mayor in a small European village who was very proud of the well-appointed streets, and gardens with which the village was adorned. All of the villagers were obsessively mindful of the beauty of their environment, and did all that they could, or were asked to do, to maintain its beauty, and attractiveness. When the time came for the celebration of an annual festival in the village, the mayor called on all the villagers to celebrate the occasion by pouring wine into the water-fountain in the Village Square for a special display of communal pride and elegance. The villagers agreed. All of the water was drained from the fountain’s reservoir, and the signal was given throughout the village for everyone to bring a bottle of wine and pour it into the reservoir’s tank. One by one they brought their bottles, and quietly poured the contents into the tank. One old man decided that he could not afford a bottle of wine, but wanted to make a contribution anyway. So he came late in the night before the grand day and simply poured in his bottle of water.

The next day, all the villagers were assembled around the Village Square; and after the traditional speeches and salutations the time came for the great fountain to gush forth with its special contents. After some formal words of celebration, the mayor proudly turned on the tap to release the fountain’s contents into the air. Out came a tremendous gush of water!! The Village fountain showed no difference from what the villagers had been accustomed to seeing on any previous occasion. Where was the wine? Everyone was stunned, especially the mayor! Each villager had individually decided that their bottle of water would not greatly dilute all the wine that was presumably being poured in by all the others. They had all done exactly what the old man had done with his bottle of water. Water had become for that Village an instrument of deceit, and a mode of deception.

Throughout many cultures water has often been used as a means of deception and destruction. I grew up hearing of merchants who mixed their liquor for sale with water in order to secure a bigger profit from their inventory. This was particularly widespread with the sale of rum. Similar devious commercial practices were known with the mixing of cow’s milk and fruit juices. The scheme was called “Stretching”. Yet Nature also wreaks havoc on human habitations
by the torrential surges of water – rivers overflowing their banks, levees breaking away, dams
overflowing, interminable rainfalls washing away human, and animal lives, and livelihood. We
speak of these as the ravages of nature. Who can forget the disastrous spectacle of the Katrina
tragedy in Louisiana and Mississippi? Who can forget the great deluge of recent times in the
Mid-West, or New Jersey, or Pennsylvania, with thousands of homes and lives being washed
away by the ravaging and unrelenting surges of water? Nor should we forget the oppressive uses
of water by armies of police with their hoses, and dogs, and bullets, despotically seeking to quell
the just demands of those who marched during the Civil Rights crusades for justice, freedom,
and equality. In spite of all these unsavory aspects of the uses of water that we have just
described, however, let it never be forgotten that 90% of all life on this planet Earth is under
water.

We dare not overlook the centrality of water in every aspect of our common life. The rains and
rivers afford us so much of what we need to survive and thrive – food, fuel, fertility, freight, and
fun. Waterfalls create a unique and irreplaceable mystique of their own that not only fascinates
the human senses, but also soothes the restlessness of the mind’s negotiation with Nature itself.
Lakes, and ponds, and fountains, whether artificial or natural, draw the human spirit into a
symbiotic relationship with themselves that virtually betray the fact that the human body itself is
essentially made up of more water than any other element in the anatomy. Swimming pools and
beaches lend comfort to the human habitat in ways that no other form of the natural environment
can provide. Gardens bloom through water’s power. Households are sustained by access to
water’s flowing streams. Daily life begins, pauses, and ends with the uses of water in
innumerable modes and causes.

There is water, water, everywhere. Most of the Earth is made up of water. It is the staff of life,
and is often the cause of death. As it is said of the Lord, so can it also be said of water: “Water
giveth, and Water taketh away”. It fills, it feeds, it fuels, and it forms. It cleans, it creates, it
cultivates, and it cools. For all of these reasons and many more, water is the basis of human
culture, as well a carrier of culture itself. No wonder then that water is a deeply religious symbol
in every culture. It occupies a dominant place in the practice of religious ritual, and in the
mediation of meaning between the human and the divine, between the sacred and the secular,
and between the past, the present, and the future. All religions give pride of place to the
significance and function of water. A few examples from ancient and contemporary religious
rituals can be illustrative at this point.

Archeological findings in France (Ancient Gaul) and Britain have indicated that Celtic and
Roman traditions were very similar in the dedication of their weapons and military armor in the
waters of streams and rivers. The suggestion is that the Romans and Celts believed in the
presence of water deities, so much so that the veneration of such deities was regarded as essential
for victories in battle, fertility in life, and relief from diseases. It is believed that following the
Roman conquests of Britain and France (Gaul) the Celts were further influenced by intensifying
their veneration of water to the point of identifying certain rivers with water deities. Thus we
learn that Verbia was the goddess of the Wharfe River, Sequana was the goddess of the Seine,
and Souconna was the goddess of the Saone. Springs also had their divine appellations. Sulis
was the goddess of the springs at Bath in Britain, while Coventina was the goddess of a spring at
Carrawburgh. Generally speaking, the Celts practiced water veneration by throwing objects of
varying value and functions into the water as a religious ritual. The propitiation of these deities was deemed to be essential for their well being, and good fortune.

The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) begin with the mention of water as being primordial—that is to say—waters were in existence from the very beginning of creation, according to the first chapter of Genesis. The Genesis Story is linked by myth to the ancient beliefs of the Earth being held between two sets of water—“water from above” and “water from below”. The former brings divine blessing in the form of rain, while the latter (the Great Deep) is full of terror, and great beasts (like Leviathan). The Creator God has set bounds for the waters that they should not cover the Earth. The beautiful passage in Psalm 104: 5-26 about the God who creates and provides speaks wonderfully about the water-and-God connection. Showers of blessing are often in conflict with raging and death-making floods. Thus, water becomes a means of life and purification, but also an instrument of punishment (as in the Flood). It is a means of liberation and escape by Divine intervention (as in the Exodus at the Red Sea). It is also a means of ritual judgment as in the “water of bitterness” in testing a suspected adulteress (Numbers 5: 11-31) occasioned by a husband’s jealousy. The River Jordan is a sacred site for its many uses and traditions. Modern Judaism still uses the mikveh as a ritual bath for purification, for cleansing of sacred vessels, and for preparation for entry into a holy place. In any case, water from heaven is a sign of divine favor in Judaism, as in other religions and cultures.

Other religious traditions and cultures such as Zoroastrianism and Hinduism also place a preeminent significance on the use and sanctity of water. In the former case, strict prohibitions are enjoined against the pollution of water and water sources, because such pollution is evil and pure water is sacred. In the latter case the supreme Hindu duty of bathing in the Ganges River is as paramount as the Muslim’s duty of pilgrimage to Mecca. African religious and cultural practices also place a very high premium on the divine significance of water. For example, water is often used as a means of linking those who are alive with the ancestors. The value of rain in drought-prone areas can never be under-estimated. The uses of water for purification, fertility, and survival are deeply entrenched in the cultural and social modes of existence throughout African societies as a whole. Thus whether it is the African traditional religion, or the rites of Islam, or the varieties of Christian expressions, water is intensely symbolic and centrally functional in conveying meaning and sustaining sacred truth. No wonder then that in the Christian Rite of Baptism the thanksgiving for water takes center-stage in the sacramental act of pouring, immersing, or sprinkling—all towards the meaning of purification, regeneration, and renewal.

The Christian Scriptures (New Testament) make extensive use of the place of water in the Jesus Story. Jesus submits to John’s baptism, not only as an act of affirmation and authentication of John’s prophetic ministry, but also as an acknowledgement (ordination?) of his own sense of divine mission and mandate. He himself does not baptize anyone. He recruits his disciples from the Sea of Galilee, and thereafter they become fishers of people, rather than of fish—even if they are tempted to return to the sea immediately after his demise. One Gospel story describes his walking on water, suggesting not only a defiance of the “laws of gravity” but much more particularly the sovereignty of God over the norms of Nature. By extension, this signifies the conquest of the fear of the Great Deep—for the “many waters” can neither quench the power of God, nor the power of Love. John’s Gospel relates three special incidents connected with water.
The first is the Wedding at Cana where the water-pots that are traditionally used for rituals of purification are transformed into vessels of provision; so that in some unexplained way they are filled with water, but they are emptied of wine. The Gospel shows this as a “sign” of the New Age. The second is the story of the miraculous healing at the Pool of Bethzatha (or Bethesda, or Bethsaida) in Jerusalem. The stirring of the Pool (by an angel?) brings immediate healing potency, and whoever dips first afterwards gains the healing. The paralytic who has been waiting for 38 years for healing gets his wish granted by a word of command on the Sabbath from Jesus. Two spheres of authority are superseded – the healing power of the water in the Pool, and the restrictive power of the Sabbath rule.

The third incident is even more striking because it is narrated within the context of the spiritual, and saving significance of water. The Samaritan woman at the Well of Sychar engages in a conversation about water after Jesus initiates the encounter with a pick-up line (in a messianic sense only!) – “Give me a drink”. The conversation quickly moves from “well-water” to “living water”, and from “living water” to “water gushing up to eternal life”. Here is a case in which the material quality of water for human thirst, and other necessity is transposed into the spiritual quality of the meaning of life itself (“living water”), and then into the sacramental quality of divine salvation (“eternal life”). No wonder then that the Book of Revelation (the last book in the New Testament) in the very last Chapter (22: 1, 2) refers to the “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.” The vision is of rich fertility in the city for the “tree of life” is full of a variety of fruit, and the leaves thereon are laden with the healing potency for nations of the earth.

These are the aspects of the sacramental significance of water which provide not only liturgical meaning for the Prayer of Thanksgiving over the water in the Service of Baptism, but also the universal significance of the virtue, value, and vitality of water as a primary dictum of the providential presence of a loving and life-giving God. Water is the staff of human life – so is God. Water is humanity’s best friend – so is God. Water purifies, and washes away that which would distort, and disturb human health and well being – so does God. Water soothes, and refreshes humanity’s anxieties with life’s uncertainties, and complexities – so does God. Water reproduces life within the human body, and in the natural order – so does God. Water flows through all the avenues, and sectors of human livelihood, linking humanity with humanity, and re-ordering the artificial barriers that would give life to the wiles of inhumanity – so does God. The water for livelihood is often transformed into the wine of loveliness, thereby making humanity’s heart glad – so does God. To be sure, if a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of God’s inward and spiritual grace, nothing in all creation rises to a higher level of sacramentality than water itself. All of this then makes the prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water such a pivotal and transforming point in the baptismal liturgy, where the illuminative power of God’s word gives way to the regenerative power of God’s Water. Word and Water virtually converge in the Prayer itself.

What kind of meaning then do we bring to these words as they are offered up to God by the Celebrant on our behalf? How do we appropriate, and make meaningful our own concept, context, and culture of water, for which we give thanks in the Liturgy of Baptism? Is our ecological conscience stirred by the words to which we give sacred meaning? Is our awareness of the vast areas of drought and aridity in the world, coupled with the hunger, and diseases
caused by such natural conditions, heightened in any way? Is our fascination stirred by the beautiful waterfalls around the world, Kaeiteur in Guyana, Kilimanjaro in Africa, Niagara in North America, or by the beauties of the Amazon in South America? When we consider how our architectural and engineering skills have produced such monuments as the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington DC, with it uses of water as a structural aid for interpreting King’s message, and reliving the memory of his struggle, does the gratitude for water come to bear on the essential meaning of our Prayer? When we call to mind the extensive range of dirt, disease, and despair that envelopes so much of our moral climate, our social discourse, and our spiritual malaise, do we invoke the symbolic senses of water to remove, refresh, and renew? All of these questions and more can bring fresh meanings to the significance of the Prayer, especially as it follows on the renewal of our own Baptismal Covenant, and precedes our welcoming of the newly baptized into the fold of God’s Christian Family.

The Prayer itself is divided into three main parts, prefaced by a set of versicles and responses, and culminating in a doxology to the Holy Trinity – with the unusual attribution to the Son (Jesus) coming before God the Father, to whom the whole Prayer is addressed in the first place. The opening versicles and responses are reminiscent of the Great Thanksgiving in the Eucharist, but the Sursum Corda (“lift up your hearts”) is omitted. There is presumably some theological justification for doing so, since that is the signature liturgical invitation at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer. However, the invitation to lift up our hearts (as the center of our lives) to God in the sacred rite of Baptism is also of great significance, since it represents an appeal to the faithful to invoke the presence of God every time, everywhere, with the totality of their beings. Be that as it may, the appeal is made to give thanks to God with the response that such is the bounden right, and duty of those who acknowledge God’s presence in their lives.

The first main section of the Prayer seeks to recount the biblical narratives of God’s creative, liberating, and sustaining immanence in creation, through the efficacy of the “gift of water”. This is a crucial factor in recognizing the essential quality of water itself. It is not produced, manufactured, nor generated – there is no human agency that can be praised for the emergence of water in our midst, or in our lives. WATER IS A GIFT. This carries with it all kinds of implications and imperatives, the considerations of which would take us too far afield in these reflections. Suffice it to say that as long as we remain focused on this essential character of water itself, then our sense of dependence, coupled with a spirit of gratitude, and a stewardship of material responsibility, will serve always to make us accountable for the blessings of water in all its interminable, flows and dimensions. This section of the Prayer is beautifully crafted by its use of three different prepositions – making for a sort of mellifluous cadence, and musicality when read aloud. The prepositions each begin a sentence that advances the biblical narrative from Creation to Consummation. “Over” water the Holy Spirit moves in creation. “Through” water the Exodus from Egypt is accomplished. “In” water Jesus is baptized and thenceforth proceeds with his messianic mission and ministry, thus making possible for us the divine gift and grace of salvation from sin, and eternal death. The Jesus Story of God’s re-creation is linked with the Spirit Story of God’s creation in the first place, and water becomes the divine instrumentality for life, new life, and eternal life.

The second main section makes an advance on the specific aspect of water to which our minds are to be directed in this Prayer – it is gratitude not just for the gift of water, but also for the
capacity to use water as the material means of a sacramental act. We are thus giving special 
thanks for the water of Baptism. It does not change its composition – it is still made up of two 
parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen. (In some parts of the world there used to be the 
practice of collecting water that fell from the skies on Good Friday as having a special character 
of divine gift, and thus was most exclusively reserved for baptismal purposes only.) There are 
specially designated spots in millions of churches where receptacles are filled with “holy water”, 
and presumably understood to have special powers contained in them. No such mystical ideas 
are attached to the “water of Baptism” in this Prayer. It is purely the water of signification. Here 
again, three prepositions begin a sentence each. The thread that joins the sentences is not the 
biblical narrative as such, but the appropriation of the earlier narrative to the life of incorporation 
and regeneration through baptism into the death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are buried 
“in it” with Christ and his death. We share “by it” in his resurrection. We receive new life (born 
again!) “through it” by the Holy Spirit – present and active in creation, and also present and 
active in re-creation. As we affirm the means of appropriation of the life of Jesus Christ through 
the significance of the water of Baptism, we further affirm our filial obedience to God the Father, 
and our fraternal obedience to God the Son, by extending that fellowship of the Community of 
Christ to all who will have come to believe, and accept what we have already believed and 
accepted – namely faith in God the Holy Trinity. This is the formula, the form, and the 
framework, that enables us to enter into a sacramental relationship with God, with the whole 
Community of Faith, and with those who are about to be baptized.

Section three combines the first part of the manual sacramental act, with the special invocation in 
the Prayer. As the Celebrant touches the water, the Prayer is that God will sanctify the water, 
making it holy by the power of the same Holy Spirit (as in Creation, and Re-creation, and now in 
Regeneration). The act of touching the water is reminiscent of the Song from which the title of 
this entire reflection is taken (Wade in the Water). The Song carries the refrain “God’s gonna 
trouble the water.” The act of touching the water with prayer carries with it the plea for making 
it also the water of purification, so that there might be a cleansing from sin, and a subsequent re-
birth into the risen life of Jesus Christ. Does God ‘trouble’ the water when the Celebrant touches 
it? We never know! Here we come finally into the realm of repentance; for all of this is as a 
consequence of the renunciation of Satan, and the promises to follow Christ, that were made 
much earlier in the Liturgy of Baptism. The Prayer of Thanksgiving ends up being a Prayer of 
Sanctification, and in making such a nexus between both aspects of the meaning of baptism into 
Christ, renunciation of the old life of sin, and admission into the new life of grace, wells up 
inexorably into a doxological acclamation.

In conclusion, when we assemble for this special Liturgy of Baptism, whether for the re-birth of 
babies or the re-birth of adults, there should always come before our notice and into our very 
consciousness the fact that Baptism is an ongoing reality for all of us who have already been 
baptized. We may not need to be dipped or sprinkled again, but we may always have the need to 
allow the sacred meaning of water – in bottles, baths, fountains, oceans, or fonts – to so convict 
our lives and livelihood, so stir our consciences, and so stimulate our sense of gratitude and 
appreciation for its giftedness from God, that we come to see ourselves as carriers of that gift to 
each other. The Service of Baptism should do that for us, but the ripple effects should extend 
beyond the final words and acts of the Liturgy itself into the ways and water-courses of our 
world, where God’s gift of water is incessantly being troubled, and disturbed by the gross
imperfections of humanity at its worst. The Gift of Water must become the Gift of the water of Baptism, offered to us by God for the renewal of creation, and the regeneration of life in all of its fullness. This inevitably brings us into the realm of the words of Jesus himself when he said: “I am come that all may have life, and have it in all of its fullness.” (John 10:10). Fullness of life is indeed possible if we continue to do what the Song says: “Wade in the water children; Wade in the Water; God’s gonna trouble the water.” Whenever God brings chaos out of human order, the water is troubled not for the worse, but for the better, and life becomes whole again. Wade in the Water!!
Baptism
By Rev. Jemonde Taylor

The Rev. Jemonde Taylor is missioner for Saint Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas. His ministerial responsibilities cross two communities: southeast Dallas and Saint Michael. He serves as chaplain in the Jubilee Park neighborhood of southeast Dallas and at Saint Philip’s School, where he assists in leading worship and teaching theological education. Along with his work in southeast Dallas, Taylor serves the Saint Michael community by teaching, preaching, and providing pastoral care as part of the clergy team.

Originally from Louisburg, NC, Taylor received his M. Div. from General Theological Seminary in New York City. He graduated from North Carolina State with an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering, and he received a graduate degree from Stanford in 2002. While in seminary, Taylor studied the history, worship, and spirituality of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Taylor has recently begun participating in a weekly broadcast on KKDA AM on Sunday Mornings. His portion, called “The Pastor’s Word,” is a part of Cheryl Smith’s Show. He uses topics that emerge from the Sunday Lectionary. Follow the show at http://www.blogtalkradio.com/kkda-am. On occasion, he writes for Smith’s newspaper, The Dallas Weekly.
I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Have you ever met someone with the last name Christian? It’s highly probable that you have. In fact, everyone who is baptized in your faith community, and beyond has the same last name. Incidentally, Christian would also be your last name if you have been baptized. Remembering that we are children of God, let us reach out to one another saying, “My name is (your first name) Christian. How may I serve you?”

The Book of Common Prayer defines baptism as the full and complete initiation by water and the Holy Spirit in the Christian community of faith. It is the rite of passage for Christians. God forms a bond with the baptized that is never broken. In baptism, the outward sign of water points to the inward spiritual grace of salvation and new life in Jesus Christ. We die and are reborn, having sin washed away. We receive incorporation into Christ’s body, fusion with Christ’s character, and empowerment to be Christ’s reconciling presence in the world. Baptism is a public act done in the context of the Holy Eucharist.

We receive at least three gifts through baptism: new nature, new gifts, and a new name. We are buried with Jesus Christ, and resurrected to new life. This first requires death. Jesus Christ demonstrates his abounding love for God through the cross. In obedience to God, the Creator of all, Jesus’ life and actions point to the complete alignment between his will, and God’s divine will. Archbishop William Temple writes, “Suffering is not the last word. The Cross leads to the Resurrection. This is not merely a victory that cancels the former defeat; it is a reversal, which makes defeat itself into the very stuff of victory. Evil brought Christ to the Cross; by the Cross Christ abolishes evil.”

Sin, defined as missing the mark, is the misalignment of our will, and God’s will. Baptism is the first act that leads to the alignment of our will, and God’s. To do this, we must die to self in order to live for Jesus Christ.

Death can be difficult to discuss. Whenever someone dies, especially unexpectedly, we take a close look at our own humanity. When we receive baptism or witness someone being baptized, it reminds us of our humanity and finiteness. A grain of wheat must fall to the ground in order for new wheat to grow. Likewise, we must die to ourselves before entering new life. We cannot bring pride, envy, nursed anger, laziness, excess, lust, and excessive greed into new life. We renounce these in order to take on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is new life, new freedom.

Resurrection is new life. Christian icons are a way of praying with images. One popular icon is the Resurrection. It shows Jesus breaking the gates of Hades. Jesus grasps Adam’s and Eve’s hands raising them to new life. The powerful symbol shows that Jesus raises all of humanity,

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8 BCP p, 298.
9 William Temple, Christus Veritas, Ch. 14.
10 Galatians 5:22
symbolized by Adam and Eve, to new life through his resurrection. As Jesus is resurrected, so are we all.

We receive gifts in baptism. One gift is grace, which is the love and favor God shows to us, unearned and undeserved. We also receive a new name. All baptized persons take on a new last name—Christian. In the service, the celebrant speaks the candidate’s given names, leaving off the last name. This reminds us we belong to the family of God, having the last name Christian. The Episcopal Church baptizes infants, showing that all, no matter age or response capacity, can share citizenship in God’s covenant. Infant baptism is a reminder that God’s grace comes prior to our response. We grow into the gift of faith. Parents, guardians, and godparents are the sponsors at baptism who make promises in the name of the child, and take vows on their behalf. The sponsors take responsibility and promise to accompany, and guide the child’s spiritual journey.

Baptism itself happens around water, in the context of the Holy Eucharist. Using blessed, life-giving water, the celebrant either immerses or pours water on the candidate. We hear these words after the candidate’s name: “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Then the celebrant prays for the newly baptized by giving thanks to God that sin is washed away. God raises the person to a new life of grace. The celebrant also asks God to sustain the person, giving a discerning heart, courage to persevere, the spirit to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in God’s works. The congregation sees a new creation.

The Gullah people of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands coastal region historically have a moving expression of baptism. The Gullah people still keep the language and many customs of their African ancestors. Before a child enters the world, the mother and family made preparations for baptism by placing blessed objects in the expectant mothers room. When the person reaches time for baptism, the community gathers at “living water”—the ocean, river, or lake. The community assembles near the water while the baptism candidates assemble in a separate location, unseen by the congregation. The candidates emerge dressed in what one outside observer called “miserable clothes.” Immediately after baptism, a group shuffles the newly baptized out of the congregation’s sight. They return wearing shiny white robes. The same outside observer wrote, “There was a great difference in their looks when they came into the church the second time. They were full members in society.”

Chrismation follows baptism. The celebrant takes holy oil from the chrism, making the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized. The holy oil is a mixture of olive oil and myrrh, a reminder of our humanity and death in Christ. When making the sign of the cross on the forehead, the celebrant pronounces these words after saying the person’s name, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever. Amen.” These words remind us we always belong to God since God will not be separate from us.

The word “marked” carries heavy baggage for persons of African descent in the Western Hemisphere. During slavery, slave owners marked or branded enslaved Africans, showing ownership. Some American religious leaders in the 19th Century pointed that Africans bore the “Curse or Mark of Ham”. This mark was the “dark skin and wide nose,” making the African without soul for salvation. Those espousing that doctrine used Genesis as the basis for their

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belief. In Genesis 9, after Noah and his family leave the ark, a drunken Noah curses his son Ham, the biblical father of African people, when “Ham sees his father’s nakedness.” Noah says Ham’s son, Canaan, will be the lowest of slaves to Ham’s brothers, Shem and Japheth. Some Westerners used this story to justify racism, and the enslavement of Africans. In the modern day, black men in the American context are marked subjects, being the victims of racial profiling and self inflicted gun violence. In the black person’s psyche, marked is literally a loaded term. Racial profiling is a problem in the United States. Police reports show that officers stop black people more often than other ethnicities. In an attempt to justify this, a police officer, in a major city, explained that since blacks commit more crimes and the crime rate is higher in the black community, it makes sense that blacks should be stopped, profiled, or searched more often. This type of internalized and systemic racism continues to mark those of African descent. Yet in the context of baptism and chrismation, death and destruction are brought into new life. The word marked which in prior and current times meant slavery, cursed, without soul, and death in the context of baptism becomes the promise that God marks us as God’s own. We are Christ’s own forever. Not even death separates the baptized from God.

After the baptism and chrismation, the celebrant and congregation welcome the newly baptized by receiving them into God’s household. The people encourage the recently baptized to confessed the Christian faith, share the story of Jesus’ resurrection and God’s work in their lives, and to share in Jesus’ eternal priesthood.

In baptism, we see salvation, and touch new life. We notice this most clearly in the person being baptized. This event also reminds those witnessing, of their own baptism. We renew our promise to God, and remember God’s redeeming act.

“Remembering.” This is such an important part of the African experience. Wherever Africans have lived, and landed around the world, Africans bring the rich tradition of remembering through stories. These are the stories of our ancestors who through great struggle fought for freedom and equality. This is true whether in the West, and East African slave trade, struggle to throw off colonialism, or the struggle for human rights. The people of African descent continue to tell stories. And not all the stories are those of strife. The African remembers stories of families, and times of laughter.

Storytelling brings people in the stories to life. Stories passed on from generation to generation mean the people still live. The ancient Egyptians believed that as long as a dead person is talked about among the people, that dead person continues to have life.

My ancestor Dodderick Thomas was born in 1833 in Franklin County, North Carolina near the capital city, Raleigh. “Grandpa Dodd” is how his descendants still refer to him was born an enslaved person on the plantation of John Thomas. When Grandpa Dodd received his freedom from slavery at the end of the Civil War in 1865, he had the audacity and courage to approach his enslaver, demanding some sign or payment from his years of forced labor. His former master, John Thomas, gave him 15 acres of land. On this property he constructed a small cabin and

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12 Genesis 9:20-27
13 Diane Ream Radio Show, NPR. Fall 2010.
started farming for himself. He continued to purchase land, and grow his property until his death in 1920 at age 87.

Every family member who tells a story about Grandpa Dodd begins with, “Grandpa Dodd was a renegade!” Dodd is a part of my story. The slave cabin Dodd lived in stood until it collapsed in the year 2000. As a child I recall going to the cabin, hearing my father tell me stories. “As a child, I wondered how Grandpa Dodd lived in this little one room cabin with his family,” my father said while looking around. Each time I visit home, I visit the cabin site and family cemetery, only a quarter mile from my parents’ house. The cemetery sits on the property’s highest elevation, under a huge oak tree that Dodd himself planted. I understand the connection Native Americans have to the land. I, too, share that connection since geographically my father’s people have lived on the same land for 200 years. In the mind of the Egyptians, Grandpa Dodd continues to live.

In many current contexts, including the African or black experience in the Episcopal Church, stories of our ancestors or stories of the Christian experience are not being told. We are not remembering. We are forgetting. The biblical notion of remembering is not simply to recall. It is not recalling where a person placed a lost item. We remember in such a way that a story becomes part of our current story. We remember so that we see how our current situation fits into a larger story context.

Therefore, baptismal remembrance and renewal is importance. As Scripture states and Episcopalians believe, there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We receive the sacrament of baptism in the name of the Trinity once in life. Yet we renew our baptism whenever we witness another person’s baptism.

This idea of remembering and renewing the promise made to God at baptism is perhaps best shown with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Christianity has officially been in Ethiopia since the 300s, with the conversion of King Ezana. In fact, Ethiopia was the first country in the world to begin minting the cross on its coined currency. In Ethiopia, we have Christianity that reached Africans not through the bonds of slavery or the oppression of colonialism. Ethiopians proudly state they have never been colonized.

The Ethiopian Church is sacramental, and part of the Oriental (Eastern) Orthodox Communion along with Egypt, Syria, India, and Armenia. Although there are differences when compared to the Episcopal Church, we share commonality. The Episcopal Church embraces and respects these differences. The Episcopal Church currently shares full Communion with one of these Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India.

One of the largest celebrations in Ethiopia is Epiphany. This celebration is called Timkat, which means baptism. It consists of a three-day celebration, culminating on January 19 each year. Throughout the country, millions gather to remember their baptism, and promise made to God at their baptism. In the capital city alone, more than 100,000 people, wearing white garments gather

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14 Ephesians 4
to celebrate. Thousands assemble around small ponds or pools for the Orthodox clergy to consecrate the water, making the water of baptism. Ethiopians sacramentally believe that through their prayers and God’s grace, the water of baptism becomes the water that flowed from Jesus’ pierced side as he hung on the cross. This water not only renews humanity, but all of the created order. At Timkat, the clergy douse or spray the consecrated water on the people, blessing them. The crowds leave completely drenched; a sign of God’s abundant grace. Many across the world take pilgrimages to Ethiopia for this celebration. Each January, the faithful who come remember and renew their connection with God through baptism. They celebrate forgiveness of sin and embrace the abundance of God’s gifts.

I first understood the importance of baptismal remembrance during my first pilgrimage to Ethiopia for Timkat. I knew I was baptized. I had witnessed others’ baptisms. Yet I did not understand the importance of ritually remembering baptism. In Timkat, I saw how ritual, remembrance, and renewal strengthened my connection with God. This impacts my current ministry. While preparing sponsors for baptism, I invite them to imagine themselves as the child being baptized, fully embodying the experience.

I also learned about abundant physical signs of God’s grace. Ethiopians do nothing small. When asking Ethiopian priests to bless people with water at holy sites, the priest takes three hands full of water and hurls it at the person’s face with such force, it throws the person back, wet. My clothes were so wet after the Ethiopian bishop blessed me at Timkat, it looked like I had been submerged. Before going to Ethiopia, I conceptually knew God gave grace abundantly. However, I had never seen a large physical sign, only water sprinkled or a thumbprint of holy oil on the forehead. In dousing people with water, the Ethiopians physically remind people of God’s abundant grace. Also, it was a blessing to travel to Africa, not as a Westerner taking supplies or material to Africans in need, but to sit and learn at the feet of Africans with one of the oldest expressions of Christianity.

The African Ethiopians continue to show the way. Their witness and example demonstrate how baptism and baptismal remembrance continue to transform. They see their personal story, and struggle in the larger context of God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ. They remember they are baptized into the baptism of Jesus Christ. Africans throughout the world can learn from this. The Episcopal liturgy of baptism provides for remembrance to be powerful and transformative.

The sacrament of baptism is the ancient Christian rite of passage. Black Episcopalians and Anglicans are blessed to have this rite as a part of our worship context. Rising from sin and death to life through the waters of baptism, brings us into the community of Christians spanning time and geography. Receiving the Holy Spirit and being marked as God’s own forever brings the redemptive mark that resurrects the negative and historic marks. Remembering our baptism each time we witness another’s baptism, brings our story of transformation into God’s story.
Welcome & Eucharist
By Rev. Vincent Powell Harris

The Rev. Vincent Powell Harris has served as rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church, Washington, DC since 1991. A fourth generation Episcopalian, Harris received his B.A. in History in 1975 from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1979 he earned a M. Div. from the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia and was ordained deacon and then priest that same year.

He has served churches in Gainesville, and Tallahassee, Florida and was a college chaplain at the Atlanta University Center and Howard University.

He is married to Joyce Brown Harris and they have three grown children, and two grandchildren.
The Gifts of God for the People of God

Corporate America has an affinity for the Brown Bag Lunch professional development programs, also known as Lunch & Learns. The intent is to feed the mind and the body simultaneously. However, there are two main issues associated with these program formats: the trainings are not available to all who wish to participate, and the employee is usually asked to bring their own food to the table. And while the person has consumed a meal, they may be starving for nourishment in the form of spiritual food. The Holy Eucharist provides a great blueprint for organizations to use if the intent is to feed the whole person. When we are invited to Communion, we remember that Christ died for us, and that feeding on Jesus’ body and blood in our hearts, “by faith, with thanksgiving,” is our source for everlasting life—the ultimate nourishment. “Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself in your journey of faith you are welcome at God’s holy table,” is one of the most inviting statements spoken by the celebrant. The message is clear. Come to the table; the feast is provided for you. Live fully!

“I’m a-Going to Eat at the Welcome Table”: “Holy Welcome and Holy Eucharist

One of my fondest childhood memories is of family dinners. As I will reiterate later, these family meals remind me of how a community should welcome everyone—both the living, and the dead.

As a member of a large extended African-American family (my father was one of nine children) I always looked forward to attending these gatherings. This was especially true during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. These were intergenerational gatherings with at least three, and sometimes four, generations present. We were all gathered together for food, drink, conversation, fellowship and fun. These gatherings often provided the first opportunity for new spouses, and children to be introduced, welcomed and affirmed as members of the family.

There were always multiple dining tables at these events because there were so many of us. The adults had their table, the younger adults had their table, the teenagers had their table, and the younger children had their table. As you got older, you looked forward to the day when you would change tables. I watched my sister, who was four years older than me, move progressively from one table to the next. I always looked forward to the day when I would do the same.

My father, an Episcopal priest, would almost always say grace at these large family gatherings. After he said grace, we would then disperse to our various tables to eat all of the delicious food that had been so lovingly prepared by family members.

As I reflect back on this experience with my family, I realize the wonderful gift of affirmation, and belonging that I was given as an individual member of a larger family that had pre-dated me. This reminds me of a quote from George Omaku Ehusani in his book, “An Afro-Christian Vision: Toward A More Humanized World”
“Absent from the mind of the traditional African is the ‘social dualism’ between the individual and the community which (along with an over-emphasis on the material) has sustained much of the political and economic ideologies of the West. The community cannot constitute a threat for the individual; for it is precisely in community that individual existence is affirmed, as the saying goes: “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am.” (Page 220)

It is clear that our Christian life begins when we are fully initiated by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s body the church. In the baptismal liturgy we are initiated, welcomed and introduced into a family of faith that has existed for thousands of years. It is in the context of this extended family that we meet Jesus, come to know him, and discover our true identity as a child of God within an extended family that exists throughout the world.

We are welcomed into a community that includes both the living and the dead and have received the sacrament of new birth. We know ourselves to be spiritually and physically surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses who assist us in our Christian walk.

Immediately after our baptism, we are invited to share ourselves, and our stuff, in the service of Jesus through the proclamation of the Good News both in word and deed. There is no probation period, or age requirement, when it comes to working, praying and giving for the increase of God’s kingdom. You are a part of the family now. The gifts that you have been given by God will be discerned, nurtured, tested, honed and celebrated as you encounter Jesus, and engage with, your brothers and sisters in Christ. This encounter and engagement will take place not only in your local church community, but beyond it as well.

It is in the environment of this community that we live out this new identity as followers of Jesus. It is in the center of this welcoming community that we find “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow” as we seek to serve Jesus by ministering to a broken, and hurting world. We must always remember that just as we have been healed, we are also to heal others. In the community of the baptized, we continually receive the resources needed to: “Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection and share with others in his eternal priesthood.”

The central act of worship, and our main resource for the nourishment and strength needed to carry out our ministry of reconciliation in the world, is the Holy Eucharist. Notice that the first question asked by the celebrant of the congregation in the Baptismal Covenant after the recitation of the Apostle’s Creed is this: “Will you continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

In the Holy Eucharist, we gather, as it were, in the household’s living room to hear, share and expound the stories that the elders of the faith have to tell us as well as hear the Good News that Jesus has to share with us. The Good News is so good we are compelled to say once again what we believe. We then pray for the extended Christian family. We pray for those who make decisions that govern our lives in this neighborhood of the world; we pray for the well being of the extended human family throughout the world; we pray for the concerns of our local community and we pray for each other. We also acknowledge our responsibility for not living up to Jesus’ standards because, for example, we might have remained silent while others around us
were being abused, oppressed and exploited. Maybe we have been so self absorbed that we haven’t done all we could do to alleviate poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Or maybe we were too fearful to fight against the ugliness of discrimination and prejudice wherever it raised its ugly head. The healing, and growth comes, when we see ourselves as God sees us, with our assets and liabilities, and experience in the depths of our souls that love and acceptance that the forgiveness of God offers us. Because we have been forgiven we can now share the peace of God with others.

Then, as members of the family of Jesus and at his invitation, we gather around the dinner table that he has prepared for us through his death and resurrection. There is plenty of room at the table for everybody. The ordained priest set apart, but not above the other members of the community, has received authority through the power of the Holy Spirit to offer, and bless the bread and wine provided by the community and these elements become the Body and Blood of Christ shared with the members of the family.

We do not have to worry about paying for the meal because the cost has already been paid. At Jesus’ table, age (there is no kid’s table at the Eucharist baptized children regardless of age are welcomed to the table) socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, country of origin, sexuality, or any other category that society might use to exclude “the other” does not matter. The Eucharist is indeed the gift of God for the people of God. It is our food and nourishment for the journey of faith that we have under taken as a result of our baptism. It is this food that has sustained black Episcopalians through the contingencies and vicissitudes of life such as the horrors of slavery and the indignities of Jim Crow segregation. It is this food that was brought to this place for which our fathers and mothers sighed; the matriarchs and patriarchs, who have gone before us, and are still present with us, just as Jesus is, in the breaking of the bread.

Though the big gatherings became infrequent as the older members of the family became infirm or died, including my father, and younger members moved away, I did eventually move from the kid’s table to the adult table. And just as my father did before me I, as an Episcopal priest, said the grace.
The Rev. Allen F. Robinson became Rector of St. James Episcopal Church, Lafayette Square, Baltimore Maryland, in July 2002. He served as Associate Rector of Calvary Church in Memphis, Tennessee from December 1999 until June 2002. Prior to his arrival at Calvary, Robinson served two years as Assistant Rector of St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. Robinson was also vicar of Resurrection Church and Assistant Rector of St. James’ Church, both in Houston.

Robinson was ordained in 1996 after study at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. In May 2006, he received his Doctor of Ministry in Church Growth from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.
Let us go forth in the name of Christ

As baptized Christians, we are equipped with everything we need to proclaim the Good news in Christ Jesus in word and deed. It is especially critical for us to be conscious of our everyday behaviors towards God’s people in the world. Hold the door for someone who is overloaded with grocery bags. Allow another driver to safely merge into your lane. Put an extra quarter in someone else’s parking meter. These are all acts of kindness and compassion, and reflect the ministry of Christ in our world today. We do this through our individual actions, but more importantly as a community of believers who live with a mission mentality. Let the renewal of the Baptismal Covenant remind us that we are never alone; that we are fully equipped, empowered and nourished as we set out to do the work that God has called each and every one of us to do. Thanks be to God.

The Evangelistic purpose of the church

When the church thinks of baptism, she must also think about evangelism. Why? To be blunt: Jesus did (Matt. 28:19-20a). I say this because Jesus thought of both baptism and evangelism at the same time. Several years ago, a tattered, disheveled, disoriented young African-American woman appeared in the narthex of the church as service was nearing completion. As I prepared to lead the congregation in the Post-Communion prayer, one of the greeters impressed upon me to halt the service to come, and tend to the young woman. My first thought was that she was either in need of money or food and if that was the case, I could see her after service. However, as I arrived to speak with her, she quickly told me how she had lost her two sons in a fire that was bombed by a molly-cocktail firebomb by drug dealers who had labeled her a police snitch and informant. I knew the woman was telling the truth since I had seen her story on the news two nights earlier. I asked her to come in and be seated and that I would meet with her shortly after the conclusion of worship. She did as I had instructed and she sat patiently.

After about a two-hour pastoral response, one that was flooded with tears and prayers, she decided it was time for her to leave. She thanked me for the time and left. Several weeks had passed before I saw her again. When she appeared in the church this time, she came to worship and to seek a community of Faith who could help her keep her faith in a God whom she had once felt abandoned her. Various parishioners rallied around this young woman. They made sure that whatever needs she had, if possible, were met. She was loved by a community of strangers who became her extended family at a time when she was alone and in great pain. She felt loved and accept by a community of saints who were willing to embrace her in the midst of her suffering. This is evangelism. How could we fear such work!

I am not sure if members of my congregation realized it, but they were engaged in evangelism. Yes, the dreaded “E” word that so many Christians fear. Yet, it is what we, as the People of God, are called to exercise as part of Christian discipleship. It occurs to me that one reason many Black Episcopalians, particularly throughout North America and the Caribbean; fear the word evangelism is because it is too closely associated with the word “evangelicalism”. Therefore, the
connotation often ascribed to evangelistic efforts of the local church resonates with preachers in soft white; crush velvet suits, televangelists, and the far right conservative wing of the Church. This article wishes to clarify that although evangelism and evangelicalism may share the same Greek root word, *evangel*, which is Good News. The chief difference between the two is that when one is engaged in the true work of evangelism, she or he is not espousing a political viewpoint but simply is interested in communication the Good News of the Gospel. On the other hand, evangelicalism does seek to espouse a Theo-political perspective that many would find off-putting. Jesus does call us to be evangelists but does not command that we taint the purity of the Gospel’s claims with our own, unique spin. Every church is called to spread the Good News of God in Christ Jesus. This is indeed the mission of the Church.

When contemplating the prominent role of evangelism and its place in the overall sphere of God’s unfolding drama, the Church, a quote by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944, comes to mind. He is quoted as having once declared, “The Church is the only organization that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.” Archbishop Temple’s remarks strikes at the heart of the Christian witness. A primary mission of the Church is to seek to reach those who have yet to be in relationship with Christ Jesus through the fellowship of the Church. As the “sent” People of God, the task is ours to proclaim the Good News of God as it has been made known in, and through the works of Christ Jesus. To that end, it should be kept in mind that we, the active Body of Christ, never cease to evangelize or be evangelists. Have you ever wondered why at the end of a regular Sunday worship service, the priest or deacon says, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord”? We should understand the words “love” and “serve” in this context to be action verbs in the sense that as evangelists who are sent out into the world to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel, we want to be empowered to bring others into the active life of the Church. We should not merely see these two words as simple commandments that we must follow in our own personal relationship with Christ, but see them as necessary expressions of an evangelistic zeal to welcome others into the community of Faith.

As you deepen your understanding of the purpose and role of evangelism in the life of the Church, I would like to share three key elements which must be understood by a Faith Community if any evangelistic effort is to take root, develop, and prosper.

Firstly, the People of God must have a clear sense of Christian identity. Who are you? Why does your particular Community of Faith exist and for what purpose? What were the circumstances that brought your congregation into being in the first place? Secondly, a local congregation must have a clear sense of Christian witness. Who are those members in your congregation with a story to tell? How passionate are you with communicating that story with those outside of your usual context? What expectations do you/or would you have of the listener? Lastly, the people of God must have a clear sense of Christian vocation. As an evangelist, one whose task is to share
the Good News, how do you understand the role God is calling you to serve in? How does your life as an evangelist shape your understanding of the world at large and your place in it? How do you tangibly connect the life of the Church with listeners (since you are a vessel that is being used by God)? To honestly and earnestly wrestle with these questions is to truly live out the Great Commission as defined by the Great Evangelist Himself, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you…” (Matt. 28:19-20a).
Epilogue
By Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle

The Rev. Dr. Michael Jesse Battle is founder of the Peace Battle Institute and served as Rector of Church of Our Saviour in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. A well-known writer, speaker and retreat leader, his ministry covers the globe and focuses on Christian non-violence, human spirituality, and African Church studies.

Michael lived in residence with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa for two years, 1993-1994 and was ordained a priest in South Africa by Desmond Tutu in 1993. Michael has written of his studies and friendship with Desmond Tutu, in such books as:

The Charter for our course through this theological foundation for faith formation among our black community has been the baptismal liturgy of the Anglican/Episcopal Church. As we look back upon our journey, from opening acclamation to sending forth, we may find ourselves still full of questions, and even anxieties. The good news here is that such questions, and anxieties remind us that we are indeed on a journey—one that leads ultimately to God. As we end, in many ways we are still beginning as our Charter concludes:

Lifelong Christian Faith Formation in the Episcopal Church is lifelong growth in the knowledge, service and love of God as followers of Christ and is informed by Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

Our baptismal journey invites us all into the paradox that as we move toward the end of the liturgy, we also enter into a prayerful life of worship, continuous learning, intentional outreach, advocacy and service. The paradox is really the unfathomable grace in which God invites us all to become mutual with God—a thought that was once considered blasphemy by early philosophers and theologians; after all, how can the Creator ever become friends with the created? As we are baptized into Christ, however, clarity emerges as Jesus says to us, “I have called you friends...” (John 15:14-16). Such clarity comes only through the journey that still requires many questions and even anxieties. Our journey thus must become lifelong. Here are eleven ways in which we are specifically aided in our lifelong journey:

1. To hear the Word of God through scripture, to honor church teachings, and continually to embrace the joy of Baptism and Eucharist, spreading the Good News of the risen Christ and ministering to all.

2. To respond to the needs of our constantly changing communities, as Jesus calls us, in ways that reflect our diversity and cultures as we seek, wonder and discover together.

3. To hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people, placing ourselves in the stories of our faith, thereby empowering us to proclaim the Gospel message.

4. To experience Anglican liturgy, which draws us closer to God, helps us discern God’s will and encourages us to share our faith journeys.

5. To study Scripture, mindful of the context of our societies and cultures, calling us to seek truth anew while remaining fully present in the community of faith.

6. To develop new learning experiences, equipping disciples for life in a world of secular challenges, and carefully listening for the words of modern sages who embody the teachings of Christ.

7. To prepare for a sustainable future by calling the community to become guardians of God’s creation.

8. By doing the work Jesus Christ calls us to do, living into the reality that we are all created in the image of God, and carrying out God’s work of reconciliation, love, forgiveness, healing, justice and peace.

9. By striving to be a loving and witnessing community, which faithfully confronts the tensions in the church and the world as we struggle to live God’s will.

10. By seeking out diverse and expansive ways to empower prophetic action, evangelism, advocacy and collaboration in our contemporary global context.
11. By holding all accountable to lift every voice in order to reconcile oppressed and oppressor to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.\textsuperscript{17}

On our journey to God, we have all become “seekers,” because we know that God is our ultimate end. This journey wakes us up to our responsibility of being formed for the journey. The quality of theological reflection that accompanies our journey must always be continuously improved. Some parishes have adopted models of continuing education, and formation after considerable discussion and analysis. I encourage you to do so as well. Any formational model like the Charter mentioned above, challenges us to be more open, and hospitable toward the other as we too mature in mind, body and spirit. Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of heaven invites us all to think deeply about Martin Luther King, Jr’s words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” No longer can we afford to separate spiritual formation from ethical formation—and communal formation from individual formation. We must find balance, and confluence.

I think this is why Jesus wanted us baptized. Baptism reminds us that we are in need of deep identity formation that does not separate spirituality from justice, or community from the individual. Jesus marks our consciousness with practices. Again, look above at the eleven specific ways to practice this journey given to us by our formational Charter.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus has established God’s kingdom already in our midst. Our responsibility and need of formation is to see such a kingdom. Even more, our task is to learn to behave in the grace of this kingdom of heaven. Simply put, baptism is the ritual commitment to behave like the kingdom of heaven. At its best, the church inspires, and models the paradoxes of mutuality between creator and creature, spirituality and justice and finally community and individual. The baptismal liturgy enacts and nurtures the deep instincts of Jesus to get us all to see that we already have access to what (whom) can only ultimately satisfy. Christian faith that arises from our experience of God should heal the universe, not make matters worse.

The good news is that despite the adventure (including the anxieties) of our journey, we should take heart that Jesus has blazed the path for all of us. We do not take this formational journey alone. Particularly as Christians from Africa and the African Diaspora, we should take heart that our faith is not as superficial as to think that God somehow waives a magic wand to get us to the end of the journey. No, God, known in Jesus, slogs along with us through the good, and bad times. The second prayer of the supplemental liturgies of Enriching Our Worship provides these encouraging words: “Living among us Jesus loved us. He broke bread with outcasts and sinners, healed the sick, and proclaimed good news to the poor.”\textsuperscript{18} In this light, we can end knowing that we are just beginning our journey. If God is for us, who can be against us? Our baptismal liturgy reminds us of this good news. It reminds us of our Anglican incarnation theology in

\textsuperscript{17} Download your own copy (English and Spanish) of the official Charter: http://www.churchpublishing.org/media/custom/IN-Formation/Charter4ChristianFormation.pdf

\textsuperscript{18} Enriching Our Worship (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1998), 61.
which God doesn’t waive wands, but lives among us. Our baptismal liturgy is our prominent corporate celebration intended to see us through to the end.