

Women Church Convergence

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I should begin by setting out for you the context out of which I shall be speaking today. I am, as you can clearly see, a woman of African descent, an African American woman to be precise, who is a convert to the Roman Catholic Church. I grew up in a working class family in Buffalo, NY within the family of Zion, that is, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, one of the historically Black churches founded in the last century in the US. My conversion to Catholicism came about at the age of 31, long after I had stopped going to a church of any kind, and came as a complete shock to me and to my family. When asked, often to my surprise by other Catholics, why I, an allegedly sane, rational mature Black woman, would join this church, my response has remained the same. I joined in response to a call from God though I had little idea what that response would eventually lead to. 28 years later and knowing the church as I do now, there are times, I must admit, when I wonder if my response would still be "yes".

I came to the Church challenged by what was happening in it and in the world around it in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the US Civil Rights Movement. It was a time of challenge and change throughout the world. It was my intellect that was first aroused but my heart quickly followed. Having practiced law for a number of years, I found myself committed to a program of study that would take a minimum of 7 years, ending in the Doctor of Sacred Theology degree. I chose this program, not realizing the uproar my entering it, as a lay woman, would cause, because I felt I needed the strongest background possible and I certainly received it. Once in it, I fell in love with what I was studying while, at the same time, was increasingly challenged by the bloody history of the Catholic Church's interactions with women and persons of color and Christianity's pivotal role in the construction of race, gender, and class.

Although my journey to God had begun long before I became Catholic, it is within the Roman Catholic Church that I have become the person I am today, an articulate, passionate, compassionate Black Catholic theologian, a womanist theologian to be precise, not a feminist. I say this not to disparage or in any way denigrate the feminist movement but to simply acknowledge that, despite Alice Walker's initial definition,

there is a difference, a difference grounded in the reality of being a woman of African descent whose ancestors were all slaves (except the white ones, of course, many of whom were probably indentured servants) and whose life has been "colored" if you will by that experience. As a womanist colleague once noted, there is not enough cloth in the feminist dress to fit me. My experience is one that brings together numerous forms of oppression, including race, class, and gender. It is a both/and rather than an either/or experience. The challenge for me and other womanists therefore is to weave a dress that will fit us from the whole cloth of the Black woman's experience in these United States and throughout the African Diaspora.

My experience is also affected by being an adult convert so I came with a prior experience of church and with many questions. I was raised in a church with similar restrictions and limitations especially as regards the role of women but which also honored women as the Mothers of the Church and sought to groom young women to one day join their ranks. To be a Mother meant more than sitting in front of the Church yelling out "Amen" and "Preach, brother" to the pastor. It meant being recognized and affirmed as a source of wisdom and knowledge that went beyond personal experience that had to be consulted before

anything major was done. Many a young pastor discovered to his dismay that his grand plans of edifice building and/or program changes was dead in the water if he did not consult those elderly women who spoke gently but whose words carried a great deal of weight. They were ministers who mentored, counseled, advised, and served as role models for young women and men. Their ministry was to the entire church.

Entering the Catholic Church as I did, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (God knew better than to invite me into the old Church), laid the path that I would follow. It gave me a certain freedom as doors were being opened to new ideas and understandings that we have come to realize were not actually so new at all. Doors were opened to women that had long been closed and I, and many of you, stepped right in, embarking on the serious study of theology and breaking open the history and traditions that others had long obscured and/or ignored. It is this knowledge, of a church that was once open to the words and ministry of all its believers that I seek to restore today with the work that I do.

Ministry for me has never been a closed box, an "office" that only a few, all male, were allowed to enter. This is emphatically not the history of Christianity, a religion that appealed to the needs and concerns of the poor, women, the enslaved, and others too often relegated to the margins of accepted history, whether secular or sacred.

The recognition by Vatican II of the Church as consisting in the People of God, the ordinary people in the pew, was groundbreaking for many yet it dates back to the earliest beginnings of Christianity. It fit very well with my own experience and understanding of a participatory church, such as the one I grew up in Buffalo. Yet I was quickly to learn that this tradition and so many others had been tucked away, absent from memory, as Christianity grew and developed into a hierarchical edifice with strict rules and regulations about who could do what, when and where. The narrowing of the role of minister to that of ordained priest left the laity without a role to play, except to "pay, pray, and obey." Some fear, rightly, that efforts are being made to return us to that status today, but it must be recognized that you cannot truly return to the past but only its false memory. Ironically, as a result of their split from the Catholic Church, many Protestant churches were able to maintain that

earlier understanding of ministry, one that invited and engaged all called by God to participate in God's mission here on earth.

I believe this is one of the reasons there is such a vast diversity of leadership roles, especially within the historically Black Protestant churches. As the former slaves sought dignity and respect in their lives, they developed churches that provided roles for all of its members to have, whether you were a "Bud of Promise", as a child in Sunday school or Director of Music, head of the Sunday school, Superintendent of the Missionary Guild, or an usher, deacon or deaconess. There is room for everyone and a place for everyone to use their gifts and talents in service to God and God's people.

Consciously or unconsciously, it was recognized that St. Paul was correct:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to

another the utterance of knowledge, according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11)

All of these gifts are charisms of ministry, conveyed in and through our baptism in Christ. Nothing is said about race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or class. Rather, as Christians, as we are all baptized into Christ, we are all given charisms by the Holy Spirit. Thus, a renewed understanding of ministry is called for; one in keeping with the changes taking place not just within the Catholic Church or even within Christianity as a whole, but one that is in sync with the "signs of the times."

What are those signs? One of the most significant is the shifts taking place within our own church, a church increasingly of persons of color who, although Catholic for generations, have very different understandings and interpretations of the Church's teachings on worship and ministry. Speaking, if I may,

for African American Catholics, there is a greater sense of community participation, of working in solidarity at all levels, at calling upon the wisdom of the elders (which is African not Protestant) and of a participatory celebration of Jesus' victory over death. These shifts are also taking place globally as we find ourselves connected in ways once thought impossible to peoples and cultures throughout the world. Our world is shrinking rapidly. We can speak, orally or by text, to persons across continents and oceans at the push of a few buttons, and even see them while doing so. We can fly anywhere in the world within hours rather than days or weeks. No place is remote, sadly, as all people are being affected by the impact, both positive and negative, of globalization.

What, you may ask, is the significance of these changes to our understanding of ministry? I believe it demands that we return to the broader understanding of ministry as diakonia or service rather than the sense of privilege and elite status that is too often a part of it today. Seeing ministry as service to those in need, rather than to serve our own, across racial, color, language, gender, sexual orientation, or religious lines, requires of us a recognition of the vast diversity within humanity but also the shared creation of all of humanity in

God's own image and likeness. Christianity in its origins, which were not European for almost the first millennia, but Asian and African, rejoiced in this diversity and the challenge of learning new ways to preach and pray as new voices and faces were added in the thousands to the infant church.

I am speaking of service as a gift not as a duty. I am certainly not thinking of it in terms of the servitude that has, for too long, been seen as the responsibility of women and persons of color. My understanding of diakonia is as a gift offered to others from the deepest recesses of our spirits, freely given and freely received, not imposed. For too long, women and persons of color, especially women of color, have been the surrogate sufferers for the world, taught to see the burdens placed upon them by others as a grace. It is not a grace; it is oppressive, dehumanizing, crippling, and life-destroying. The service I am speaking of is that which frees rather than restricts, that brings life not death, that creates community rather than destroys it.

Today, as those of us who work ecumenically and across religious boundaries recognize, we are called to minister to all, to

recognize the humanity of all of God's people and the sacredness of all of creation. Thus, our ministry today must be one inclusive of all, done not to "steal sheep" as some may fear but to share God's blessings with all with whom we come into contact.

To speak in terms of my experience as an African American woman, I and my sisters bring gifts that are new yet at the same time old. We share with our Native American and Latina sisters a worldview which celebrates difference rather than denouncing or being afraid of it. We see it as something in which to rejoice, recognizing our links with peoples around the world, like and yet unlike us. Religion is not something to be set apart but to be lived as part of our daily lives; a sense of the holy encompasses the entire mystery of life and death. To live is to participate in an ever changing religious drama and to be totally immersed in a sacred cosmos. This perspective of life and the sacred is an ancient one passed down through generations but increasingly overwhelmed by a newer and narrower perspective that is dualistic and individualistic. Rather than seeing God or the Holy, however it is named, and self as part of a larger holistic community, a person's encounter with the Holy has been reduced to a one on one encounter without connection to anyone

or anything else. Is it any wonder that genocide is on the increase, that wars, murders and other forms of violence are flourishing? If there is no connection between one human being and another, there is no concern, no solicitude, and no compassion for one another. There is a disconnect that threatens the future of our planet and all that dwell on it. The understanding of ministry that flows from this holistic perspective is one that recognizes that we all respond to the Holy in very different ways so those who minister must be open to learning from those with whom they minister.

All religions, all persons, understand the command "to love God(or the holy) and thy neighbor as thyself" But how many of us attempt to live it in our lives? Ironically, as we become closer, the sense of neighbor seems to become more remote. That belief is the basic mandate for ministry as is the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Today, it seems foolish to many to live by either of these mandates, for they are seen as images of weakness rather than strength. Yet are they really? In a nation and world where the value of a person's life is based solely on the value of their work in or contribution to the marketplace, who has time to befriend another; to help them through crises, to guide them along rocky

paths; to walk with them in times of need. Ministry in its truest sense has no monetary value despite the efforts of many to give it a class and gender value out of proportion to any reality. Rather, to be in ministry today calls for a radical conversion of both head and heart. It requires a shaking up not only of our own reality but of the reality of those around us. This was my experience as I entered the Church and then embarked on the study of theology. Everything I knew and thought I understood about myself and others, about faith and belief, about people of my own race and those of other races, was shaken up. I realized that in order to truly serve others, I must first seek to know myself and then attempt to share myself as I am with all with whom I came into contact. Not in an egotistical way; not to turn everyone into myself; but to recognize and share my weaknesses as well as my strengths, my fears and my dreams, my doubts and my assurances with them.

The call to be in ministry is a call to serve others as you would like to be served. It involves both a loss and a gain. It requires you to walk closely with your God, however the Higher Power in your life is named, and to listen to the whisper of the Spirit deep within you or coming from the least likely person you have ever encountered. It means a loss of privacy but a gain

of intimacy. It means sharing yourself with strangers who hopefully in time become friends. It means being called out of yourself over and over and over again while for your own sanity also finding the time to withdraw, to let go and let God. The call comes at different times and takes many different forms but it is constant, an ever-present part of our lives. Saying yes once does not end it; you are called again and again to confirm that yes, something which at times seems harder and harder to do.

Ministry is not and cannot be confined to the definitions of institutional religion nor can it be confined to the ordained or any other allegedly privileged elect. It is an important part of religion, yes, but goes so far beyond it. It is a vision of solidarity and community that builds up rather than tears down; that uplifts rather than oppresses; that feels the pain of the world and seeks to ease it. To be in ministry is not a path to glory; it is simply a way of life that we are all called to follow, regardless of the type of work we do. It is not a path to holiness as such nor should it be a road to self-appointed martyrdom. For me, to be in ministry today means trying over and over and over again to walk with others on their life's journey and to seek to ease the way as best I can. It means working with

others who may have different beliefs than my own, different cultures, different ways of being in the world and learning from them as hopefully they learn from me.

Ministry today must be an instrument of solidarity, bringing people together across supposed divides and barriers of whatever kind into a community, a kin-dom if you will. This does not mean that you have to ignore your own faith and beliefs, only that you be open to the beliefs of others, including those with a complete lack of faith. Your actions are your billboard; they speak the truth or falsity of your faith as my ancestors discerned so many centuries ago. They affirmed their belief in this new god, Jesus, while at the same time denying the legitimacy of the faith of those other Christians who held them in life-long bondage, claiming it was God's will.

Ministry is a calling, as I have said before. It is a vocation that today is as challenging as it has ever been. How do we walk with other Christians, with Muslims, Jews, Hindu's, Rastafarians, Buddhists, Pagans and Neo-Pagans? How do we unite to bring about change in the world in which we live today, a world of famine, war, plague, ecological devastation and other

forms of violence? What kinds of programs, educational systems, charitable entities, NGO's can we develop that represent the world as it is today, a Two-Thirds world of Brown and Black people held hostage by a predominantly white Western World that makes up only one-third of human population yet devours resources vital to the well-being of all, not just the wealthy few.

To be in ministry requires that we leave our egos at home or risk their being severely bruised. We must open ourselves to the needs and concerns of others; see ourselves as others see us, be willing to listen but also hear and to allow those with and to whom we minister to speak from within their own contexts in words of their own choosing, setting their own agendas.

As a womanist theologian, I strongly believe that no one is free until all are free. All forms of oppression and/or marginalization are equally heinous, equally unjust, equally immoral. There can be no hierarchy of oppressions; it is immaterial whether sexism is older than racism or classism older than both. What is of critical importance is that all of these forms of oppression have not been eradicated and still persist

in the 21st century along with too many others. The perpetuation of these "isms" is a denial of our creation and our connection as brothers and sisters of one humanity, not many.

My ministry, as I have come to understand it, lies in teaching, preaching, and occasionally prophesying by speaking the truth to everyone I can, thereby hopefully challenging and critiquing the status quo, both secular and religious, seeking that which can be rather than that which presently is. I teach, as bell hooks affirms, to subvert, to challenge, to transgress the boundaries imposed artificially by church and state; to tear down structures that oppress and dehumanize, replacing them with that which gives life and love freely to all.

As a Roman Catholic womanist theologian, I do also teach my faith in Christ Jesus but as a gift while holding myself open to the gifts of others' faiths. This, I believe, is a critically vital part of ministry in today's world. What can you offer others if you have nothing within yourself that sustains and nurtures you? The harvest is indeed plentiful; there are many in need. The workers come from all ranks of life, all faiths, all people, seeking to serve not to be served. Our lives are a

testimony to our own faith and our ministry will be rejected or accepted accordingly.