

RACISM

Alive and Well In the Episcopal Church

by Louie Crew

- *"Bishop Walker is spooking the choir at the National Cathedral, so I worship elsewhere now."* (Senior aide in the U.S. Senate, in private conversation).
- *"Don't tell me about the challenge of our new black students. I call them 'gravel in the rough.'"* (An Episcopalian professor).
- *"Isn't it disappointing how middle class the blacks are!"* (A guest Anglican Marxist driving his new Volvo out of the parking lot of a black parish, with no evidence that the communicants there are any more fashion-conscious than the people leaving the nearby all-white parish who escape his notice as he drives past).

No amount of such real evidence of residual personal racism in the Episcopal Church in 1978 is likely to dispel the conviction of typical white communicants that racism is "something we solved back in the 1960s, except for a few unrepentant stragglers." Basically such folk feel that

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"we treat our Negroes well, certainly better than the Baptists, Methodists, or Presbyterians do."

Most of our members would be shocked to know that in reality ours is a black church which tolerates such arrogance in "its whites" much too passively. This year at Lambeth, for the first time bishops of color outnumbered their white brothers, even as lay membership in the Anglican Communion has been for several years predominately non-white. The fastest growing parts of our church are in Africa. Yet in most of the Episcopal Church, we means "whites." The church maintains that complexion most conspicuously when confronting our sisters and brothers in the greater Anglican Communion in that we have only two black members on the Executive Council's Standing Committee on National and World Mission.

"In our church, racism is still more important than people," charges the Rev. Frank Turner, chief staff person for the Episcopal Commission for Black Ministries. "Racism pervades the whole church, as in continued widespread segregation, in the deployment of clergy, in church investments and legislation. . . ."

The Rt. Rev. Quintin E. Primo, Jr., the black Suffragan Bishop of Chicago,

agrees, especially on the bleakness of clergy deployment: "I haven't seen any changes in the last 15 years. Bishops still want a traditional church and will not reorder priorities, preferring to drag their feet on the social gospel. We must simply insist that all search committees consider candidates without regard to race. Black priests don't want to be circumscribed in black parishes."

Very tellingly, we don't even have a concept of "laity deployment." As Turner has observed: "Most whites seem to find it impossible to worship in black settings with black leadership, even when, as is often the case, we blacks are better trained and more professional in our services. I now say, 'To hell with it, why should I make all the adjustments to someone else's culture?' Besides, while facing this sick mess, my people have a real need for a separate parish in which we can create a healthy climate where all are accepted as human beings."

The Rev. Joseph Green, black rector of Grace Church, Norfolk, and member of the Executive Council, shares Turner's pessimism: "You can bat your head only so many times before sensibly you conclude, 'Why bother?' More and more I see my job as the reclamation of our own black young people, so many of whom have turned away from the church. Of course racism is a big

problem, but whites have got to change it!"

Facing such witness, our church is foolish to believe that all is really okay now that a white Mississippian (Most Rev. John Allin, the Presiding Bishop) and a black New Yorker (Dr. Charles Lawrence, President of the House of Deputies) share our titular leadership, rather like an ecclesiastical version of the Jimmy Carter-Andrew Young team in secular leadership. Certainly all is not yet reconciled, as Young demonstrated by inflaming White House liberals by his seemingly obvious comment that racism is still at the heart of American life.

"In our system, the church merely reflects the system that is its setting," says Ms. Ida Miller, a black communicant in the Diocese of Atlanta: "The church has not been as responsive as some other institutions. Certainly there have been some surface changes, as in blacks' greater access to the market place; but those changes seem to serve our exploitation as much as our enfranchisement. Church racism is a subtle thing, deeply and complexly interwoven with potentially good things, as in Charles Lawrence's presidency, despite the obvious tokenism."

Many observers have stressed that to understand the subtlety of racism, one must distinguish between the racial discrimination perpetrated by individuals and that perpetrated by institutions. Though more accessible for easy judgment, the white hooligan who shouts "Nigger!" is often much less villainous, because much less powerful, than the church commissioner who votes not to invest diocesan funds with minority businesses. "The resistance to such investment can so readily be justified as a 'purely business decision' that the racist consequences are often overlooked by the commissioner, who feels that the decision has protected the church's best interests," observes the Rev. Henry Mitchell, Assistant for Urban Affairs in the Diocese of Michigan.

Dr. Joseph A. Pelham's important report presented recently to the Urban Bishops' Coalition documents many patterns of discrimination preserved by

our church nationally. The Report and Recommendation of the Institutional Racism Project of the Diocese of Southern Ohio (April, 1974) is an excellent model of such a study at the diocesan level. Hopefully an increasing number of such studies will minimize the present problem of what the Rev. Richard Kerr, white rector of a predominately black parish in Denver, calls "the simple lack of persons informed about issues at the core of the church's life, as well as the widespread preoccupation with issues of fundamentalism to the ignoring of other issues."

Nevertheless, an easy dichotomy between institutional and personal racism runs a risk of obscuring rather than clarifying some of the issues. Once one can feel personally uninvolved — "Oh, it's just the way things are" — a member of the white majority too easily feels exculpated while still protecting and enjoying all of the spoils of the racist system. Ultimately Christians can't really pass the buck to the church, because individual Christians *are* the church and hence are accomplices in any discriminatory practices perpetrated by the church's policies.

The Rev. Sanford D. Smith, Canon for Metropolitan Affairs in the Diocese of Chicago, urges that we "find the clue to (racism's) identity on the spiritual level of individuals — their consciousness level if you will — (rather) than looking for it in accusations of various institutions as being its parent." He amplifies: "After all, what is institutionalized on one level begins in a person's understanding, his attitudes at a single level. Racism is a malignancy that grows and takes on a life of its own, by default more than by design."

Certainly many of the urgent facts about racial inequity have long been documented: The problem is to get those who share in white privilege to feel a long-term responsibility to reverse those inequities. Guilt is not needed so much as amendment of life.

Dr. David Snider, a longtime documenter of discrimination, has reported: "Poverty and hunger do not

fall equally upon all groups. For example, by the 1974 government standard 56% of all poor persons were white, but only 8.1% of all whites were poor. In contrast, 31.4% of all blacks were poor, 24.1% of all Americans of Spanish origin were poor... Over 45% of all native Americans were poor, and 90% of all native Americans on reservations were poor" (*Life & Work*, vol. 16, no. 3, December 1977).

Our courts would have us believe we cannot prove discrimination from such results, but only from the intentions of those in charge of society; and very conveniently a country's collective intentions are inaccessible to all but God. By contrast, the New Testament response to such inequity is much clearer: "Bear one another's burdens"; "Go sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me"; "For as much as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me"...

For many people the church is important precisely because it offers a retreat from the world, a refuge from secular concerns. To them, the Gospel injunction to demonstrate our faith in our lives in the full community is a threat, unless it is watered down to mean that we should deliver baskets at Thanksgiving and Christmas and should dump some now unfashionable items on the Goodwill people occasionally.

On the other hand, Christians who make a secular commitment often seem much more in touch with the world's greater need, as revealed in this excerpt from a personal letter to me by the Rev. Austin Ford, who runs Emmaus House in Atlanta's ghetto: "We are facing problems: for example, four of the Dawson Five, who were visiting in the apartment of their lawyer in a white neighborhood, were recently picked up in their lawyer's absence for no other reason than that they were the wrong color and their presence was unaccounted for. Also, the conduct of the police during a recent pro-marijuana demonstration in Atlanta was exceptional. They disguised themselves and apparently deliberately provoked incidents..."

Compare Ford's pungent grasp of reality with that of the narrative in *The Episcopalian* for November 1977 about the Cathedral of St. Philip, the world's largest Episcopal parish, which is less than two miles from Emmaus House: "Last May (1977), for example, a group of black and white women arrived. The ushers were apprehensive and ran to tell (The Rev. Judson) Child (then the canon, now Suffragan Bishop of Atlanta). But, Child says, some older people, who "five years ago would have called the police, . . . helped them find places in the Prayer Book and Hymnal and chatted with them afterward. Part of it is the new South. It also reflects the nature of the community here."

One can't resist imagining the response at St. Philip's if four of the Dawson Five had showed up! When I explained to Canon John Porter, then also at the Cathedral, why this "progress" report was heinously offensive, he counseled that I needed to be more patient and to see that, limited as it might be, welcoming a few blacks at the Cathedral does represent progress. "We don't all live in a black community as you do, Louie," he said.

But we do! Not only is the Anglican Communion predominately black, so too, is the city of Atlanta. It is dangerous to use the church to narrow rather than to enlarge the "community" in which we live; thereby we risk the blasphemy of

suggesting that Christ's Great Commission is in reality a charter for a private club.

A big issue obfuscated by the white we in the Episcopal Church is our defaulting in the mission to black Americans. Increasing numbers of black people are disillusioned with the fundamentalism of their youth and will likely turn away from organized religion altogether if we do not reach out to them with our particular understanding of Christ's love. Historically ECUSA has had a very definite mission with many other persons to preserve for Christ's service the lives and talents of those who are no longer nourished by their different traditions. I speak not of sneaky proselytizing that denigrates other traditions, but of efforts to enlist persons for whom those other traditions are no longer effective. If the Episcopal Church really cared about the souls of black folks, black folks would know it and would be here with us in much greater numbers.

The black leaders with whom I have talked assure me that if change is to come, it must come at the local levels. Bishop Primo reminded me that of the \$800 million annually given in ECUSA parishes, only 3% ever reaches the Executive Council, so "the leadership for change will not come from 815; the leadership must be at the diocesan

level." Dr. Charles Lawrence warned me that even diocesan leadership is often vitiated: "Although our church is 'Episcopal,' bishops have very little real authority over parishes, in clergy employment or otherwise." Yet most parishes I know about are still rejoicing that the bigots are no longer likely to call the police if a few blacks show up next Sunday; and almost everyone wishes the subject of racism would remain politely buried. ■

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renewal, or ecumenism. The ancient writer said: Tell your child about the God of the oppressed, and what that God has done.

Second, Christians are specifically called to make no peace with oppression. In an Anglican communion in which people of color now constitute a majority, we must oppose all actions which place artificial, arbitrary, power-motivated limitations on the freedom of the human being. It does not matter whether these limitations pass under the guise of "conscience" statements issued by the House of Bishops, or the less harmful but hardly less offensive singing of the 51st psalm, which limns the asinine desire to be washed whiter than snow.

My people because of their peculiar circumstances have not been — generally speaking — and I thank God for it — a theologically sophisticated people. They knew the bible; not Barth and not Tillich. They prayed and preached and sang and shouted inside and outside of the church in this wilderness called America. And sometime, somewhere along the way one of their number — surely a genius — left for posterity all the reason I've needed to remain a part of this church and seek ordination in it. They sang out of their suffering and pain. They sang out of their knowledge that racism has no place in the kingdom of God because in Jesus Christ God finally set captivity itself captive. They sang: "God may not come when you want Him, but He's right on time." ■

