

THE
DREAM
OF GOD

A Call to Return

Verna J. Dozier



Seabury Books
NEW YORK

TO MY SISTER LOIS
“a ministering angel”

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FOREWORD

As a writer of faith, I usually disclose at my speaking engagements that I am not a theologian and I am not ordained—it is, I believe, my business to be a layperson. I make that disclosure for two reasons. The first is that I know I tend to speak with a tone of authority, and I don't want to mislead in an arena where ordination and, sometimes, a divinity school degree are markers of credibility. I want people to know that what I'm sharing is not the result of formal theological study: I am merely sharing my experiences of God showing up in my everyday life, and of what I've learned in my ongoing seeking that is the spiritual journey.

The second reason is that, and I believe Verna Dozier would agree with me on this point, there is no “merely” about it. What I'm sharing is an important aspect of our faith, inherently credible, and I want laypeople to recognize that they have equally valid experiences and can connect with God and delve into that connection on the same level—no ordination required.

In fact, all the writings and teachings of Verna, as she preferred to be called, validate the layperson to the point where I see I may be a theologian after all. “I think we are all theologians,” she once said. “Any time you make any

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statement about God, you are a theologian. Some of us don't claim that status because we reserve it for people who have great tomes in libraries. This is a great mistake, I think."¹ The ongoing validation was her genius, and she even made it the focus of her ministry.

Verna wrote *The Dream of God* using her texts from a series of lectures delivered during Advent for her home parish, St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. Though originally published thirty years ago, the book still offers an empowering and relevant vision to revive the church even as she points out its weaknesses. It is a gift that this book remains in print for these days, when we seem splintered by our individual searching. Too easily we have learned to forsake the messiness of in-person engagement for the warm and comforting glow of spirituality on our screens. The COVID-19 pandemic, closing thousands of churches to in-person worship, only hardened the issue.

But Verna's message is clear: there's not just a place for laypeople and their leadership in church—they *are* the church, a living, breathing, questioning entity seeking to live into the dream of God she so aptly describes. "The very essence of God's gift is community," she writes.² And it is this realization that can save us from ourselves. We are not alone. We have only to reach out and see how we all share in the dream God holds for us.

Though I never met Verna, I feel close to her. We were both born into Baptist families and became Episcopalians as adults. In her small stature but big and gentle heart, Verna reminds me of my late mother, who was the daughter of a Baptist minister. When it comes to faith, I've always likened my mother to basketball wizards like Earvin "Magic" Johnson—phenomenal talent on the court but subpar as a coach, because what she knew came to her so naturally.

Verna, on the other hand, was a phenomenal teacher. Her thirty-four years in the Washington, DC, public

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schools informed her instruction of Christian formation and empowering laypeople. From her days of teaching Shakespeare, a favorite, she knew students had to understand and interpret Shakespeare on their own. The teacher doesn't give them the words, nor does she do it for them.

Likewise, Verna did not want laypeople to depend on clergy for their understanding of scripture or the development of their faith. They had become too willing to defer to clergy, too comfortable in abdicating ministry to the institution that the church has become. She urged laypeople to take hold of their authority, the authority of their baptism, and seek out their own active ministries as a form of evangelism modeling God's grace in the world.

And Verna would be the first to let you know that there will always be homework. She noted that laypeople have to take responsibility for their own studies by reading multiple Bible translations, perusing critical resources, and having fearless, searching conversations whenever and wherever they could.³ They have to let go of thinking they might get something wrong and embrace ambiguity. After all, there really are no right thoughts or right interpretations. But there are plenty of questions—and that's okay.

Any reader of *The Dream of God* may feel the heat of a nearby fire. The prophet's voice is at work in its pages along with a touch of impatience. It's as though Verna, her many years upon her, sensed she had spent too long teaching while too few understood what she was talking about—*Don't you see how amazing you are?* Like the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Verna wanted to illumine how people are walking around, shining like the sun.

"God has paid us the high compliment of calling us to be coworkers with our Creator," she writes, "a compliment so awesome that we have fled from it and taken refuge in the church. God does not need such an institution. 'Destroy this temple,' Jesus said, 'and I will rebuild it in three

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days.’ The institution is replaceable. The living body of God’s people is not.”⁴

The theology in this book is a freedom theology. Here is Verna setting God’s people free to answer a call of ministry that is more open, more daring, more compassionate, and, already, so very much our own. Will we be brave enough, faithful enough, to live such freedom? Can we shine the light that God has dreamed into us? That is the life of the layperson. That is, as Verna says, “being about God’s business.”⁵

—Sophronia Scott
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MFA in Creative Writing and author of
*The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday
Conversations with Thomas Merton*
April 2021



1. Jay Cormier, “Verna Dozier and ‘The Dream of God,’” Episcopal News Service, May 13, 1992. https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=92117.
2. Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 45.
3. Fredrica Harris Thompsett, “Christian Educators of the 20th Century: Verna Josephine Dozier,” Biola University, online resource. <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/verna-josephine-dozier#bio>.
4. Dozier, *The Dream of God*, 111.
5. *Ibid.*, 109.