

## Chapter 6

# “Trailblazers and Truth-Tellers”

IN SERMONS, MICHAEL IS FOND OF ASSERTING, “God is not finished with us yet.” Barbara’s oft-repeated phrase, “Hallelujah anyhow,” encourages her listeners onward. Whatever the challenges, the crucial work of pursuing justice and sharing God’s love lies ahead, lies in the future. In conversation these two leaders are clear that everyday Christians, including Episcopalians, are not always living up to our full potential. Verna Dozier, whom both Barbara and Michael acclaim as a truth-telling theologian, often spoke of the church, the collective people of God, as a sleeping giant that needs to be awakened. Michael tells a similar story featuring Billy Sunday, the influential American evangelist:

Billy Sunday did say, “Heaven help the rest of Protestantism if the Episcopal Church ever wakes up.” He meant it as a compliment. He meant, like the Episcopal Church is sleeping, but oh boy, look out, if it ever really wakes up! He apparently said this after seeing the prayer book for the first time. And this would have been the 1892 or the 1928 version.

A friend of Michael’s, a Pentecostal leader who taught at Duke, used to claim that

Episcopalians don’t know what we’ve got in that prayer book, the present one. He said, “Y’all sitting on dynamite!” He said a Pentecostal would know what to do with this, and he used it in his church all the time.

In addition to making better use of our liturgical texts, what are areas of unfulfilled promise for Episcopalians and those of other faiths?

Where is there work for the faithful that demands attention? Michael recently pointed out that “there is still much work to be done to bring about true race equality. Some attitudes have to be worked at, and relationships need to be rebuilt, and wrongs need to be righted as well.”

These two leaders are well aware that Christians today are living in new mission contexts with diverse and emerging populations. While they respect the bishops’ promise in the prayer book to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church,”<sup>1</sup> they also agree that it is important for leaders to imagine innovative futures for the church. As Barbara once noted, “A leader does not seek consensus; he or she makes it.”<sup>2</sup> Envisioning the church’s future is the focus at this point in the conversation. In addition to exploring signs and patterns of growth, these two friends reflect on how they themselves might be named by future generations.

With the greater part of his new ministry as presiding bishop ahead of him, Michael is decidedly optimistic about the challenges facing the Episcopal Church:

It’s a good time, it’s an important time to change our direction because I do think in many respects the Christian faith has been kind of hijacked into meanings that really don’t look anything like Jesus of Nazareth. I think of all those studies where they interview millennials who have no church affiliation and ask them what they think about Christianity, and half of what comes out of their mouths is negative. The Jesus movement really needs to reclaim the gospel, to reclaim the way of Jesus that you see in the New Testament and try to live like that. This isn’t just good news, it’s actually *new* news to a whole bunch of folk.

He tells a story about a group of young adults in North Carolina who were leading a “Vote Against” campaign for an amendment restricting the understanding of marriage. Michael’s daughters said he ought to get involved. So he and one of the canons on the diocesan staff attended a rally held one Sunday afternoon at Fullsteam Brewery (owned by an Episcopalian) in downtown Durham.

We walked in the door and some two hundred people were drinking beer and taking pictures. And the place goes dead silent. The whole place: dead silent. And I say to Mike, “What the heck just happened?” And I realized we were in collars, so we’re clearly clergy. They were kind of doing a double-take, trying to figure out why *they* are here. Anyway we went in and took pictures with them. And the people were so grateful. I mean, they treated us like we were royalty. And when we were standing in line for the barbecue truck, the guy ahead of us said to the person serving, “I’ll pay for theirs.” I said, “No, you don’t have to do that.” And he said, “Oh, you didn’t have to be here, because the only thing we hear from Christians is how much they hate us.”

Sarah, one of Michael’s daughters, told him later that her friends didn’t know that there was even a church that welcomes and values diversity. “They don’t know we’re *here*.”

Barbara believes that the future will be shaped by expanding new avenues of entrance and involvement. She points to two experiences in the Diocese of Massachusetts. The first is an internship program called “Together Now” where young people commit to living together and being involved in service to the community. The other is a Thursday evening congregation of young people called “The Crossing” who meet in the cathedral while sitting on cushions around the chancel. Their primary focus is “very much where the church meets the community.” Barbara reports:

I visited them for a worship service one time, and I’ll tell you what really impressed me. At the end of the Eucharist, people came over to the side altar for private prayer with me. And in most instances

when I said, “What they would like to pray about?” it was for somebody else, not themselves. I mean, it was so moving, particularly one young woman who wanted to pray for success for her boyfriend. But in so many instances, they were not asking something for themselves. They wanted to pray for somebody else. I encourage young adults to find sources that speak to their spiritual needs and areas through which they can express themselves. Those that get fed spiritually and then move into the community to serve give me real hope for the future.

Both Michael and Barbara agreed on the value of creating alternative ministry sites, although Barbara also points to traditional services of confirmation in the Massachusetts diocese where having “130 to confirm at one regional service is not unusual.”

As their discussion of the future continues, Michael often highlights the advantages and opportunities of re-visioning the church as the Jesus movement. He reflects on the church as having more of the characteristics of a movement than an institution, a movement that resembles early Christian origins:

The Jesus movement has remarkable flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances. There are a variety of ways in which people meet God and Christ in community, and it’s not always neat. A lot of New Testament scholars refer to early Christian origins as the Jesus movement. You see that kind of variety in both the New Testament and the post–New Testament church, where if you try to find a consistent polity, you won’t find it. I mean, they’re all over the map. There are some basic things that are there, but then beyond that, there is a multitude of ways that people enter into and are part of a Christian community. I think that’s more where our future is going to lie.

He is not sanguine about the ease, neatness, and swiftness of such a movement:

It’s going to take a while to figure out what this means. This is more Acts of the Apostles than the high Middle Ages. We’re going

to have to follow where the Spirit is going, and we're going to mess up. It's going to be sometimes some one thing is going to catch fire and move, and sometimes it is not. But I think the church that has a future, that's willing to risk following where we think the Spirit is leading us, is a church that's going to have a future. It's not going to be pretty and compact and controlled. The reality is, I think, that small communities of faith, in a profound variety of forms and configurations, are probably going to be the wave of the future, not as a negative but actually as a potentially powerful, positive thing because intimate community is important. This is a locus where people come into relationship with God and with each other and therefore serve the world.

Barbara adds that, if she understands Michael correctly, he believes many of these relationally intimate characteristics already exist and may be further reflected in small communities. "I think what I'm saying is that church growth doesn't necessarily mean large congregations." Michael agrees: "Big kinds of things will continue, but the growth is going to be elsewhere." In sum, the future just might not be about conformity. Such a church might travel more lightly because a movement "doesn't require all the things an institution does." Michael concludes, "We're not making up something new. We're going back to deep Christian roots."

In a recent PBS interview Michael described the Episcopal Church as basically a "moderate voice."<sup>3</sup> We challenged him, wondering whether the church was a bit more liberal or even progressive. When asked what the word "moderate" meant for him, he thought this out in two ways. First in reference to his experience in the Diocese of North Carolina:

They'd be fairly down the center, which means they could go left or right but not too far right. But they don't tend to go to extremes almost by nature. It just seems to be the culture. We've been doing blessings (of same-sex couples) since 2004. But it was still moderate. I also had to claim it and articulate it in ways that someone who lives and dwells in the center could resonate with.

Michael then framed moderation in another way with reference to today’s culture:

I’m not sure how much to do with this, except I am very aware that, just in our current political context, *moderation is actually revolutionary*. By moderation, I don’t mean it’s mushy, that you don’t stand for anything, but where you at least can stand at a place and have some convictions. Your convictions don’t cancel out other people or demonize other people, and it doesn’t mean that you can’t listen to them, and learn from them, and possibly moderate your position a little bit. And that’s what I really mean by moderation. That’s almost the *via media* in its best sense. And I do think our church tends toward that at its best. And that may be a great gift in our culture, even in this very moment.

There is a freshness and timeliness in his portrayal of “moderation as revolutionary” in a world that is becoming extremely divisive in its public religious life. He points to the Episcopal Church’s capacity to live with differences and “embrace people of all stripes and types.”

Michael portrays the future theologically as the pursuit of reconciliation with God and one another. In this regard, he mirrors a central passion of Martin Luther King Jr., who insisted that “when God’s grace is understood as the basis of communities of reconciliation, there is no Biblical or theological basis for segregation or racism.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Michael points to racial reconciliation, which, along with evangelism, was an explicit emphasis of the 2015 General Convention.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and giving us the issue of reconciliation . . . I really do believe that what we’re essentially here to do is to help folk and each other to be reconciled in a relationship with God . . . I think that’s life and death. That’s Martin King’s thing: we shall either learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools. I think it’s that clear. It is not just a nice spiritual thought. I think human survival and the survival of the planet depends on that. And for

the church to have reconciliation at the core of who we are, that's central for me.

Both Michael and Barbara express deep faithfulness in the future. For Michael, "the Spirit is leading us as a church that is going to have a promising future." Barbara speaks with "absolute belief and faith in the promise" of God's dream of justice and peace. She notes, "It may be a long time coming, but believing that it is the will of God, it inevitably has to happen, maybe not in our lifetime, but ultimately." The depth and strength of their hopefulness in God's dream is palpable. Their words underscore a saying that Michael remembers from his grandmother's church: "I may not know what the future will hold, but I know who holds the future."<sup>5</sup>

Together we also wondered how these two friends might be named by future generations. What words or phrases would they accept or even embrace? A lively conversation ensued about the word "trailblazer." Michael welcomed this term for Barbara who "went where no one had gone before." Barbara said she does not "think of myself as somebody who set out to blaze a trail. I think the trailblazing fell on me!" The image of the prow of a boat pushing through the waters is one Michael tries out for Barbara:

The boat pushes the waters aside and it takes on the resistance of the water and moves forward. And especially your episcopacy really was the front of the boat that had to go through the resistance of the water. Now people who are skiing behind you can ride along and can follow you though.

Barbara likes the image of cutting, not parting, through the waters. Michael laughs and images Barbara like Miriam, dancing with "a tambourine out front"!

They then try on portrayal of themselves as "truth-tellers." Michael points to Barbara, who affirms this trait in herself:

I hope that's what I am. That is, I hope I speak the truth in love but speak it anyhow, even when it hurts. Like it or not, I got to say

it. Most of the time I’ve said it. And it has not always been well received!

Michael tries to back away from describing himself as a truth-teller, saying he is more of a diplomat, “I think through how do I get this truth out so folk can hear it?” We noted that although his approach may be more mediated, and not as direct as Barbara’s, still he hits the core of truth right away when he’s preaching. He concurs: “There may be a buildup, but when the hammer comes down powerfully, the nail’s going in. That’s clear.” Michael pauses to add that, in addition to prayer, one of the gifts he needs in his office as presiding bishop is a person whom he can count on to tell him the truth. He notes that “it is easy in any position of leadership to actually live in a bubble, to be clueless.” Barbara agrees to “speak the truth in love.”

Similarly they agree that, although their styles are different, at various times they have each been advocates for change. When asked if they have been “prophetic” at various times, they consent to this depiction with hesitation and humility. First from Barbara:

Being called prophetic is very complimentary, and it’s nice to be complimented. I would like to hope that I’ve been prophetic. I’d be the last one to say that I am, but if some people feel that I have been, then I am highly complimented.

We point to the connection between hope and prophecy for both of them, underscoring the strength of their hope that bends toward justice and the future of God’s dream. Michael identifies with being prophetic when we suggest that the depth and strength and power of his hope is where his prophecy lies. When asked what word or phrase they would like their ministry to be associated with, the response comes quickly. They would each like to be known by the active phrase “faithful witness.”

These prophetic witnesses stress that this vision of hope and real relationships where people actually get to know one another extends beyond the Episcopal Church. At this time of civil uncertainty,



Barbara reminded us to reach out and struggle for the inclusion of all God's people. In Michael's words:

I actually have a belief that God is not finished with this world, and God is not finished with the human family yet, and that applies as much to the Anglican communion or the family of nations as to the human community. I refuse to believe that we cannot learn to live together. I believe that that's what Jesus came to teach us and to show us how to do.<sup>6</sup>

As a concluding question, I asked what the experience of these few days of conversations had evoked. I wondered whether there was anything else they wanted to say to one another. Here is their exchange as they concluded this face-to-face opportunity for discussion.

**Bishop Harris:** Well, this has been a privilege and a rare opportunity, which I don't necessarily expect to have again given what's before you, but I have thoroughly enjoyed sharing with you and hearing you share. And this *has* been a rare opportunity for me. I'd love to share more again, but it may not happen. Thank you for agreeing to share with me. And I would say, press on, be faithful, and stand up and fight for what you believe as you go forward in this new role and ministry. And know that as long as I'm around, I've got your back.

**Bishop Curry:** I do hear that. Thank you, and that's a witness that I need, and I have a feeling others do too.

**Bishop Harris:** But get to it because I may not have too much longer because come this Sunday, I'm going to be eighty-six years old!<sup>7</sup>

**Bishop Curry:** You're saying, don't be slow! This conversation has been wonderful. Thank you for this. I never thought I'd be able to sit down with you and have this conversation. I mean, all these years, I would have loved to have sat down with you, but I wouldn't have asked. You know, it wouldn't have occurred to me that it was even possible. And being able to sit down and listen to you and

hear about your great-grandmother and Ulysses S. Grant, and to hear some parts of your story that I wouldn’t know, it was almost like getting a little glimpse into where you came from. You are, you really, really are, Barbara, somebody who embodies moral courage!

**Bishop Harris:** Thank you!

**Bishop Curry:** This was an *incredible* gift.

As Barbara said, “sustained conversations” between these two friends “may not happen again.” Yet if they do, I am sure these two high-spirited friends will have more to say, more wisdom to share. Barbara and Michael have indeed shared incredible gifts and graces with us and we will without a doubt look for more to come. Along the way, one of the many lessons these trailblazers, truth-tellers, and faithful witnesses have underscored for me is the importance of taking time for in-depth conversations with friends, near and far. Thank you, Michael and Barbara, for blazing this conversational trail.