

The Reverend Joe Goodwin Burnett

Describe three contemporary saints who have influenced your ministry.

My contemporary saints are not on the calendar of *Lesser Feasts*, but they have profoundly influenced my pastoral and personal life. First is my father, **Marshall Emmett Burnett, Sr.**, a United Methodist minister who died in 1997 at the age of 91. A consummate pastor and lover of persons, his quiet witness thundered against the prevailing Mississippi culture. I vividly remember a time in 1964 when a contingent of irate racist members tried to hijack a board meeting and force our congregation to leave the "liberal" Methodist Church. My father listened to their tirades, then calmly but firmly replied: No, he was *not* going to leave the Methodist Church, and furthermore, *neither was the congregation*. An interminable silence followed. Then one by one, other board members rose to voice their support for their pastor. The church remained. As we face schism and division today in the Anglican communion, my father's determination gives me courage and hope.

Duncan M. Gray, Jr., was my Bishop in Mississippi from 1974-1993. The account of his brave resistance during the violent riots of 1962, as federal marshals sought to enroll the first African-American student at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, appears in Will Campbell's book, *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma*. However, a deeper dimension of Gray's witness became clear to me years later when I watched him tell his unassuming story to Episcopal seminarians. He shared from sermons he had preached during that period at St. Peter's, messages of deep integrity, drenched with the gospel's promise and demand. I realized then that the essence of his prophetic spirit was a pastoral commitment to friend and foe alike, persons in and out of his parish, who knew and respected him even when they disagreed with him.

Leslie Neal Casaday (1940-1995) was Principal Parish Musician of St. Philip's Church in Jackson, Mississippi, and founding director of the Mississippi Conference on Church Music and Liturgy. This annual event has left an indelible mark on the liturgical life of the Episcopal Church, and has shaped the vocations of countless church musicians. Casaday's legacy is remarkable given the fact that he was an openly gay man in an era when the church resisted affirming homosexual persons. Until his death from AIDS in 1995, he was outspoken in his conviction that such affirmation was a matter of simple human dignity. His passion for music ministry led me to re-appropriate my musical heritage as an essential dimension of my priesthood, and, moreover, his integrity has inspired me to embrace the full social implications of my baptismal covenant.

What risks have you taken for the Gospel?

As I reflected on this question, several social and political situations came to mind in which I felt I "went out on a limb" to promote what I believed to be a faithful response. However, in the light of the witness of the persons I just described, it would be pretentious for me to claim that I have ever taken any real risk for the gospel. In one sense, this is a blessing, for it suggests that I have been fortunate to spend my ministry in congregations where tolerance and respect for diversity have been prized, and where circumstances have not converged to put me in a position of serious vulnerability. I do believe that I must always be ready to bear witness in an appropriate and courageous way. Yet I am also mindful that prophetic ministry so often takes place in the midst of the day to day life of people and parishioners who are beset with the hurts and hopes, joys and sorrows, of daily living. I cannot minister with full integrity in one arena of the human drama without a deep concern for what happens in other arenas, for in an ultimate way all these arenas are one mission field. I am inspired by the fact that the ordained leaders who have had the most significant impact on issues of social justice have almost always been pastors of congregations. Nevertheless, I feel sure that in all the places I have served, more could have been accomplished if I had been more forthright in my proclamation and Christian witness.

How have you been called as a leader and a Christian to respond to the events of September 11th? How have you led your faith community to be a witness in the post-September 11th world?

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, how are we to preach and pastor and bear witness to the gospel in a new world, in an era of "new war," facing a dangerous and uncertain future? As a pastoral leader who teaches pastoral leaders, this is what I have said we should do.

First, we must reconsider our church's current fascination with corporate design and management technique. I fear that our eagerness to expand our memberships has brought us to the point where, as Eugene Peterson puts it, we tend to treat congregations as "loot," as raw material for manufacturing this program or that, and in the process we have forgotten our people. The tragedies that befell our nation on September 11 have reminded us that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels," meaning the *gospel* and the community of Christ. Let this be to us a clarion call to reclaim this church's soul. And in reclaiming its soul, let us also reclaim the power of the gospel of God's scandalous generosity and searching love.

Second, we need to learn appropriate ways to affirm the universality of this gospel in the context of a pluralistic religious world. I believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ contains the criteria for its own sharing, and calls us to a posture of mutual respect, tolerance, and forbearance in the face of what others intend for evil. Let those who pray for peace work together in peace.

Third, this era is reminiscent of others in the church's life that have been torn by persecution, terrorism, and violence. Yet the pastoral task is the same now as it has always been in perilous times: interpreting the Christian life and gospel with clarity and contemporary relevance; building sacramental communities that are immersed in the life of the world; articulating a clear Christian witness against state sponsored tyranny and terror of any sort; honing a Christian ethic for people in global crisis; and always rooting our words and actions in a context of mutual love and care.

Identify three top issues or trends in the life of the Episcopal Church today and how you envision us as a diocese under your leadership relative to these issues and trends.

The first issue has to do with our church's current fixation on numerical growth. I support ministries of evangelism and church growth, but I am concerned that some expressions of this enthusiasm run the risk of diluting our distinctive Anglican character and personality. I am in the Episcopal Church because it offers persons a life-affirming, intellectually open, liturgically vibrant expression of the Christian faith. I believe such an environment fosters diversity. I also believe it is that very diversity that generates spiritual strength and maturity for responsible Christian living in a complex world. I want to work with you to enhance our opportunities for witness and service *and* growth, but I want to do it by forging a clear Episcopal identity for each and every congregation, and embracing it with no apologies.

The second issue has to do with the way in which our ritual life forms our baptismal life. It has often been said that *praying shapes believing*. A corollary to this is that praying, or worship, shapes our mission and evangelism, our social outreach, our pastoral care, and, indeed, all of our diverse ministries. This being the case, I would invite each and every congregation of the diocese of New Hampshire to share in further enriching our liturgical life in a way that deepens and broadens our sense of God's call, as well as gives voice to God's action and our response in more inclusive language and imagery. When the church prays, the way in which we name one another, as well as the way in which we invoke the nature

and being and action of God, has a profound effect on the way in which we think about issues of gender, community, and justice. Continuing prayer book revision is an integral part of our liturgical heritage. I believe we can honor the traditions that sustain that heritage, and at the same time move forward in expanding our language and liturgy to express the fullness and richness of God's creation, redemption, and mission.

Third, I am hopeful that our church is moving in new directions in dealing with human sexuality, and I will gladly join with the members of your diocese in supporting what I believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit. I affirm and welcome, as do so many of you, the lay and ordained ministries of gay and lesbian persons, and I further believe it is time to offer ritual and pastoral resources for honoring their faithful and committed partnerships. I believe that if we act with courage and love, these steps will contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ. I also care deeply about those faithful church members who sincerely disagree, and I will continue to reach out to them in love. Charity and patience will be needed by all concerned to see this journey through. But see it through we must, now and in the days to come.