

Advance praise for *This Band of Sisterhood*

“There are so many nuggets of wisdom to be found in the conversations between these remarkable Black women bishops that when you have finished the book you will need to read it again for a second, third, and fourth time! The reflections, experiences, and profound humanity that my sisters share in these pages are indeed priceless.”

—THE MOST REV. MICHAEL B. CURRY
Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

“*This Band of Sisterhood* is personal, spiritual, theological, and political. With each conversation, it becomes clear that these five Black women bishops are not content with being ‘first’ and that they refuse to be essentialized as symbols of diversity. Instead, they are determined to carry forth the legacy of the Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris, Pauli Murray, and the other Black women who dared the church to live into its call to be a witness to God’s just future in an unjust present. *This Band of Sisterhood* is a sign of hope that our church is indeed on the path to becoming Church.”

—THE VERY REV. KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS, PHD
Dean, Episcopal Divinity School
at Union Theological Seminary

“We are changed by the sacred stories of one another, especially if the stories are of persons to which the world does not always listen. *This Band of Sisterhood* is a precious offering, a divinely crafted mosaic of devoted and tenacious faithfulness, a challenge

to the reader to pursue with greater clarity and vigor the Spirit's liberating work of justice in both church and world, and just good food for the soul!"

—THE RT. REV. MARY GRAY-REEVES
Managing Director, College for Bishops,
The Episcopal Church

"I am so excited to commend this book to you. These are our sisters, those elevated and now celebrated, as women paving the paths that were blazed for them. Did I say blaze? These bishops are on fire—a must-read."

—THE REV. DR. SUZAN JOHNSON COOK
Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom,
the Obama administration

THIS BAND OF
SISTERHOOD

Black Women Bishops

ON RACE, FAITH, AND THE CHURCH

Edited by

WESTINA MATTHEWS



Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

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Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016
Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.

Cover photo by Phillip MacVean. *From left to right*: The Rt. Rev. Kimberly (Kym) Lucas, the Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, the Rt. Rev. Phoebe A. Roaf, the Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Shannon MacVean-Brown

Cover design by Marc Whitaker, MTWdesign

Interior design and typesetting by Beth Oberholtzer Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Matthews, Westina, 1948– editor.

Title: This band of sisterhood : Black women bishops on race, faith, and the church / edited by Westina Matthews.

Description: New York, NY : Church Publishing, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021005789 (print) | LCCN 2021005790 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640653511 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640653528 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: African American women clergy. | Episcopal Church—Bishops.

Classification: LCC BX5967 .T45 2021 (print) | LCC BX5967 (ebook) | DDC 283.092/520973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021005789>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021005790>

To the Rt. Rev. Barbara Clementine Harris
(June 12, 1930–March 13, 2020)
of blessed memory

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this book began with a happenstance conversation with the Rt. Rev. Phoebe A. Roaf on a Sunday in August 2019 at the airport in Colorado Springs, Colorado, as we awaited ground transportation to carry us to a Gathering of Leaders¹ meeting. Bishop Phoebe was exploring the possibility of joining the board and I was there as a facilitator for one of the organization's quarterly gatherings. As we stood outside, searching for the van, the bishop shared with me how the Black women clergy in the Episcopal Church had voiced a need to come together with the five Black women serving as diocesan bishops. The Black women clergy believed that their needs, experiences, and concerns were very different from Black male clergy and would welcome an opportunity to meet with the five bishops for an open, candid conversation.

With the #MeToo movement top of mind for many of us and in light of the increasing division in our country, I knew that these five Black women bishops could provide a compass for how to navigate these new, uncharted pathways. This was an historical moment for the Episcopal Church and their story needed to be told and it needed to be heard. While I could not facilitate a meeting of the Black women clergy, perhaps I could edit a book based on conversations with the bishops.

There was only one problem. I did not feel that I was your “typical” Episcopalian. I was raised in the AME Church, coming from a long line of ministers—including my father, my uncle, and my grandfather. Further, I have only been an Episcopalian for about fifteen years, unlike some of my “cradle” Episcopalian friends. I jokingly tell everyone that I kept the “E” in the AME in my family. And yes, while I have been an adjunct professor at General Theological Seminary for ten years, I teach contemplative spiritual direction in the Center for Christian Spirituality. My doctorate and postdoctorate fellowships were in education, not theology. Still, my commitment to the development and advancement of women and people of color—especially in leadership positions—spans over forty years as an educational researcher, a grantmaker, a public servant, and an author.

I had never even met the four other Black women bishops; and only Bishop Phoebe for about fifteen minutes standing in front of an airport. In spite of my own reservations, I felt Spirit-led to pursue this idea for a book, and things began to move quickly. With her enthusiastic support, Bishop Phoebe was my initial liaison with the other bishops to determine if there was interest. Holding my prayer breath, I awaited their answer. They all agreed to participate. This was an answered prayer.

The legacy of Black women bishops begins with the Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris, who on September 24, 1988, was elected suffragan bishop (that is, a bishop who assists another bishop but does not have rights to succession) of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. She was consecrated on February 11, 1989, becoming the first woman to be ordained and consecrated a bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion. It was only fifteen years prior that the Episcopal Church had first ordained women as priests. Upon retiring from her position in 2003,

Bishop Harris was succeeded as bishop suffragan by another Black woman, the Rt. Rev. Gayle Elizabeth Harris. This was the first time in the Episcopal Church in the United States that a woman was succeeded as bishop by another woman.

It was not until thirteen years later when, on October 28, 2016, the Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows was elected the 11th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis (consecrated on April 29, 2017) that a Black woman was elected a diocesan bishop in the denomination's 185-year history. Succeeding the Rt. Rev. Catherine Elizabeth Maples Waynick, Bishop Jennifer was also the first woman to succeed another woman as diocesan bishop.²

In three very short years, following Bishop Baskerville-Burrows's election, there were now a total of *five* Black women serving as diocesan bishops:

The Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes was consecrated on September 22, 2018, as the 11th bishop of Newark, becoming the first woman and first Black elected bishop in Newark in its 145-year history.

The Rt. Rev. Phoebe A. Roaf was consecrated as the fourth bishop of the Diocese of West Tennessee on May 4, 2019, becoming both the first woman and the first Black bishop in the diocese's 36-year history.

The Rt. Rev. Kimberly (Kym) Lucas was consecrated on May 18, 2019, as the 11th bishop of the Diocese of Colorado, becoming the first woman bishop as well as the first Black bishop in the diocese's 132-year history.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Shannon MacVean-Brown was consecrated as the 11th bishop of the Diocese of Vermont on September 28, 2019, becoming the first Black and the first Black woman bishop in the diocese's 229-year history. Bishop Shannon also is one of

only three Black women (following Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris and the Rt. Rev. Gayle Harris) to hold the title of bishop in any of the seven dioceses that make up the Episcopal Church in New England, also known as Province I of the Episcopal Church.

At the time this book was conceived, women numbered only twenty-seven, or 20.6 percent, of the total 131 active bishops (diocesan, suffragan, assistant, or assisting), including all those elected but yet to be ordained.³ Therefore, these five Black women bishops represented only 4 percent of the 131 active diocesan bishops. With such an important role in the Episcopal Church, I believed that these amazing women had much to offer ecclesiastically, spiritually, and practically.

In November 2019, when I first proposed this book to Church Publishing Incorporated, I could never imagine what 2020 would hold: a pandemic, racial unrest, and a highly charged presidential election. Our original plan was to begin our conversations just before the Episcopal Church House of Bishops meeting began in March 2020 at Camp Allen in Texas, with three video conference meetings to follow. With COVID-19 quickly becoming a reality, the House of Bishops meeting would now be held virtually, and our meeting was cancelled.

The timeline for this book became questionable. Our shared grief and disbelief of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery—a twenty-five-year old Black man who was murdered on February 23, 2020, by armed white men as he was jogging in Glynn County, Georgia—took our breaths away. With all of the unanticipated delays, COVID-19, and the racial unrest, I began to wonder if this book could become a reality.

Nevertheless, the project moved forward. I invited Catherine Meeks, PhD, executive director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, to write a foreword. I continued to hold

each of the bishops in prayer, following them on social media, and receiving encouragement and strength through their Harriett Tubman–like efforts to free others from fear, anxiety, loneliness, and grief.

Our first virtual meeting was scheduled for March 17, and the month was filled with unexpected events. On March 4, Bishop Phoebe spoke at a Lenten Lecture program at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and nine days later the Rev. Brad Whittaker, the rector of that parish, was diagnosed with COVID-19. Tennessee had declared a “state of emergency” on March 12, and Bishop Roaf was in self-quarantine.

Bishop Barbara Harris died on March 13, 2020, at the age of eighty-nine. She was a mentor to and source of inspiration for these five Black women bishops, and their grief was palpable. The agenda for this brief meeting was to see if the book was even a viable option and, if so, to identify potential topics. I immediately became aware how glad they were to see one another on the computer screen, as they shared their own grappling with circumstances and responsibilities. Yes, they still wanted to go forward with the book. However, they asked if we could wait awhile before beginning the conversations.

We did not meet again until June 3. Over the next five months, we met five times, and it became clear that this book was even more important than I originally had envisioned. These prayer warrior women had much to share, against the backdrop of the pandemic, the racial unrest and protests, and the presidential election. Indeed, I thought I had all the material that I needed after our virtual meeting in October, but the aftermath of the presidential election persuaded me that another meeting was needed. Blessedly, the five bishops all agreed without hesitation.

The following chapters are presented in the sequence of our virtual meetings. However, to facilitate the reader's accessibility to the conversations, there are a few times that I have reserved particular discussions to other chapters. I learned early on that while I could pose questions for each of the sessions, their responses rarely would directly answer the questions but rather serve as a springboard to begin a conversation among themselves. To provide a context for what was happening in the country at the time of the virtual meeting, I have begun each chapter by setting the contextual scene.

Each of the six meetings was recorded and transcribed. I have tried to remain true to their voices with only a light editing of their words, using brackets sparingly for clarification. To ease understanding of who was speaking, the bishops gracefully gave me permission to refer to them as "Bishop" with their first name.

As we journeyed together over the months, I witnessed a band of sisterhood being formed. Having promised to honor their occasional requests to "don't put this in the book," I am humbled by the privilege to be able to listen in on their conversations.

At the end of each of our conversations, I would invite one of the bishops to offer a prayer. Heartfelt and spontaneous, I knew that each of the chapters would conclude with one of their prayers.

Just as I was finishing up the manuscript for the book, the Rev. Canon Paula E. Clark, canon to the ordinary and chief of staff, Diocese of Washington, was elected on December 12, 2020, to be the 13th bishop of the Diocese of Chicago, becoming the first Black person and first woman to hold this position in the diocese; she was scheduled to be consecrated on April 24, 2021. Bishop Paula graciously agreed to contribute an afterword for this book.

The title for the book is inspired by the prayer offered by Bishop Carlye. Yes, this band of sisterhood—which began thirty-one years ago with Bishop Barbara Harris and continues today with these now six Black women bishops—is a mighty bond shared among women who “completely get it.”

Dear Heavenly Father, we come before you, completely trusting in your goodness and mercy. I appeal to your loving spirit to watch over these women gathered for this book. I praise you for their lives and their souls and I am filled with deep gratitude. Look upon my sisters with your tenderness and grace. Bless these women. Let them be healthy, free, and protected in the strength of your loving arms. In these things I pray, Amen.

WESTINA MATTHEWS
Week of Advent IV, 2020