

Being the Advocate

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Forty years ago, on 26 July 1974, The George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate, under the leadership of the Rev. Paul Washington, became the host church for the ordination to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church of a group of women who have come to be known as The Philadelphia 11. This movement of the spirit, as is true for most transformational moments, required individual acts of bravery that coalesced into a mighty and definitive roar. For the larger Episcopal Church¹ this roar proclaimed a desire to live more fully into a calling where, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, black nor white, male nor female; we are one in Christ.”² For the Advocate the roar affirmed its identity as a ministry of the Episcopal Church with sufficient outsider status to be transgressive and sufficient insider status to be the recipient of support, financial and otherwise, to nurture a radical ministry with extraordinary impact. The “irregular” ordinations were groundbreaking and so was the congregation whose arms opened in welcome.

The Philadelphia ordinations were an identity-shaping moment for women and for the Episcopal Church. With the ordinations in 1974, the Episcopal Church entered into a pivot that challenged its identity; forty years later the Advocate is being called to a similar challenge. This paper will consider the nature of the Advocate’s identity that gave rise to such powerful ministry.

¹ For clarity use of the word “church” signifies the larger Episcopal Church and not the Advocate congregation.

² These words, based upon Galatians 3:28, were the words inscribed on the frontal for the altar made by the women of the Advocate and used during the ordinations of the Philadelphia 11.

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The ordinations of the Philadelphia 11 were acts that demonstrated the considerable courage of the ordinands, their sponsors, Paul Washington, and the Advocate congregation. Each faced that decision to step beyond the lead of the General Convention aware that risks and opportunities always come with acts of faith. For the Advocate the risk was loss of diocesan funding that would jeopardize the work. In 1962 Washington had inherited a robust community-oriented ministry that included a day care center, a community center, a two-week Vacation Bible School, and a six-week summer day camp.

By 1974 the Advocate had taken on even larger community significance. In addition to offering programming that met physical needs (i.e. food and clothing), the Advocate had become the embodiment of hope as a leading participant in the struggle for human dignity. She became a shelter and gathering place for children, artists, and athletes. She was the meeting place for those in the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party, the Black Economic Development Conference, the MOVE Organization, and other groups that rose up to challenge racial and social injustice. She was the place where the community gathered. Paul Washington became the shepherd of a very diverse flock of men and women, people who struggled to change daily realities.³

Because he was compelled by the gospel and quickened by the prophetic call of the Spirit, Paul Washington saw the ordination of women as manifestation of the continual working out of God's purpose and plan for humanity. The added threat of sanctions this action might precipitate was insignificant compared to the greater privilege unfolding at 18th and Diamond.⁴ He and the others were faithful to the spirit of God and the ordination occurred and the church was forever changed. The identity shift that began in the church prior to the ordinations was affirmed by that singular event and was given, as a result, unprecedented momentum.

³ Paul M. Washington, "*Other Sheep I Have*": *The Autobiography of Father Paul Washington*, David Grace, ed. (Philadelphia, 1994), iv.

⁴ The Church of the Advocate is located at 1801 W. Diamond St (18th and Diamond) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19121.

Sometimes it takes a while to get to that place of being ready to become something different. This was certainly the case with the Advocate. The Advocate was built as a memorial to merchant and civic leader George W. South by his estate. North Philadelphia was rapidly developing during the post-Civil War boom as an industrial center in the city and was selected as a site in need of Christian missionary activity. A church without pew rents, the Advocate was intended to be a congregation of working and/or middle class families.⁵

In 1900 when the church charter was presented for reception into the Diocese of Pennsylvania it was approved by the Right Reverend Ozi W. Whitaker, but rejected by the Standing Committee. Of concern was a clause in the deed accompanying the charter that instituted the Advocate Trustees, instituting the Advocate as a church of working class individuals who would be denied the responsibility of electing their own rector. The deed stipulated that five trustees, rather than the vestry, were solely invested with the authority to elect and pay the salary of the rector. Their decisions were subject to the approval of the bishop, also a trustee, alongside three members of the South family and Richard Y. Cook, a family friend and financial advisor.⁶ The Pennsylvania diocesan convention of 1900 resolved the charter impasse by concurring with the bishop; being swayed by the argument that the common interest of the Advocate trustees and congregation would ensure that the trustees would act in the best intentions of the congregation.⁷ The South family's vision of the Advocate tells the

⁵ The Church of the Advocate is said to be the most lavish and architecturally sophisticated church in Philadelphia that was not built to serve a socially elite neighborhood. The architect was Charles Marquedant Burns.

⁶ The original trustees consisted of Mrs. South, Mrs. More (the South's daughter), Richard Cook, George W. South, nephew of Mr. South, and the bishop of the diocese. When Mrs. South died in 1888, Cook's son, Gustavus Wynne Cook, took her place.

⁷ Additionally the trustees were not chosen by the parish, but appointed their own successors. The Standing Committee's position was this authority deprived the vestry and congregation of any voice in the choice of their rector, and "enable[d] such board of Trustless, should they be so minded at any time, to force upon the Parish, and to keep in office, a Rector objectionable to the Vestry and to the Congregation." *Journal of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania*, 1900, 39.

all-too-familiar story of the social inequality that has given shape to the American church and American society. In 1886, through the gaze of class, the South family believed in the necessity of providing oversight to the congregation.

Upon his arrival at the Advocate in 1962, Paul Washington sensed that his ministry was going to be at odds with the congregation's history and identity. Designated a pilot parish for urban missions, the Advocate received an annual subsidy from the Diocese of Pennsylvania. To manage the expenditures of the subsidy for the Advocate, Bishop J. Gillespie Armstrong, who called Washington to the Advocate, appointed a bishop's committee of five white, suburban men.⁸ In 1886 it was the gaze through the lens of class that necessitated "oversight" of the affairs of the Advocate; in 1962 it was the gaze through the lens of race. The story of the Advocate reminds us, that unless we attend to our past the repetition of history may catch us unaware.

Interestingly, it was the grant from the Diocese of Pennsylvania that exposed the truth of Paul Washington's sentiments. The subsidy gave Washington a measure of freedom in making ministry decisions. He was able to live his ministry in a manner neither separate from, nor dependent upon, the sentiments of the congregation. Consequently, many of the actions for which he is best known put him at odds with the black middle-class sensibilities of many of his parishioners. This was true regarding his affiliations with black nationalists and Black Power organizations, with MOVE, and with the commissioning of fourteen African-American history murals that pointedly captured the African-American struggle for freedom and liberation that continue to fill the nave of the sanctuary.⁹

In challenging the status quo for black Episcopal Church involvement, Washington's actions created tension within the congregation. The tension was over issues of agency, issues of identity, and issues of control. For people of all classes, the church historically has been that place where men and women were afforded dignity, respect, and agency not otherwise accessible to them in

⁸ Washington, *"Other Sheep I Have,"* 54-55.

⁹ Artists Richard Watson and Walter Edmonds painted the murals from 1973-76.

larger society. Having achieved relative socio-economic privilege through education and employment, many in the congregation of the Advocate were a part of the burgeoning black middle-class. As such they would have expected to have agency in both their professional and religious lives. Not surprisingly, the congregation chafed at their lack of control over Washington's affiliations and to whom he granted use of their property. The congregation, according to Washington, was very class-conscious and not inclined toward involvement in controversy. "Over the years many would leave because they disagreed with the new course of ministry at the Advocate or simply because they were moving into neighborhoods . . . where black professionals had become able to purchase some of the fine old homes in neighborhoods some distance from North Philadelphia."¹⁰ The congregation decreased by 45% between 1960 and 1980, as it was caught between the pull of maintaining a traditional Episcopal identity and the push of radical identification with the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.¹¹

There was nothing traditional about Paul Washington's and, therefore, the Advocate's involvement in the African American demand for justice in the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s meant that African Americans were engaged in a struggle with a personal-socio-political understanding of black self-identity—an identity layered with complexity. W. E. B. DuBois described the "double-consciousness" of black identity in this way:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the

¹⁰ Washington, "*Other Sheep I Have*," 9.

¹¹ Other factors were at play that would have contributed to a changed in congregation size. These included natural attrition and neighborhood demographic change, especially following the 1964 North Philadelphia Rebellion against police brutality.

eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.¹²

Black self-identity according to DuBois is known through the lens of anti-black racism.¹³ Asking a congregation to simultaneously *struggle* through the complexity of African American identity, and *respond* to the pain inflicted because of it, would have been a significant undertaking for the racially turbulent years of the 1960s. Such a process would have, at minimum, delayed the revelation of good news when good news was needed most. Paul Washington knew that. He understood the risks and opportunities of this transformative faith action for the Advocate, the wider church and himself. The opportunity was for the church to model a radical embrace that unflinchingly held the existential pain of black North Philadelphia and the larger black community. Christianity is, in best practice, a radical embrace of humanity. Washington's actions demonstrated how the church might live out of and into the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The risks of Paul Washington's ministry, too, were significant; these included potential destabilization of the worshipping community and the possible loss of outside funding from the diocese and mainline Episcopal congregations and supporters. Of the two, congregational destabilization became the greatest threat to the congregation. The Advocate's vulnerability, caused by an exodus of human resources, was manifested at a time when many aspiring Episcopal congregations were experiencing growth and stabilization. The congregation's historical inability to maintain its own buildings and ministries, along with its inability to capitalize on the growth years of middle-class professionalism, virtually assured its future as being consistent with its past. The worshipping congregation, the heart of any church, was appreciably weakened because of its proximity to and identification with the Black Power movement and black nationalism. Although the heart of the congregation was weakened, the congregation was never without

¹² W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1990), 8.

¹³ See Bernard R. Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Totowa, 1984), 193; and Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (New York, 2000), 28.

heart as evidenced by the thriving social service ministry maintained by the dogged determination of a small band of worshippers and staff. During the 1960s, the congregation became significantly smaller, less affluent and increasingly dependent upon outside funding to finance operations and to manage social services programs.

The Advocate became increasingly dependent upon outside funding, a fate not unusual among urban congregations. Such dependence did not necessarily constitute a problem in itself, but grew increasingly problematic because it continued for so long in an uncritical and/or non-reflective manner. The impact of its founding history, the weight of the physical plant and the fall-out of the 1960s struggles left the congregation few options for survival. During the social and religious turbulence of the various civil rights movements the Advocate,

had become an important symbol for the whole church and for the community around it. . . . The diocesan committee expressed it well by saying that the Advocate had become an “outward visible sign” of the commitment of the diocese to “involvement in the struggle against race hatred and poverty in the slums of Philadelphia.”¹⁴

The needs of the Advocate and that of the wider church were aligned. The Advocate needed to maintain clergy leadership and continue community programming and the wider church sought a faithful response to the social and religious impact of the inequities in wealth acquisition and distribution facilitated by oppression and marginalization for which it was a direct beneficiary. The Advocate embraced an identity as a congregations that simultaneously challenged the status quo by giving voice to the underserved, and extended the credibility of the church by doing the work of redistributing resources of the haves to the have-nots. In this way the institutional identity and the self-identity of the congregation were consistent. One might be tempted to think that the Advocate had overcome the constraints of the “double-consciousness” of black identity and attained what DuBois referred to as its “truer

¹⁴ Washington, *“Other Sheep I Have,”* 60-61.

self,” or a merger of double consciousness into “self-conscious manhood.”¹⁵

Although David Gracie in his introduction to Paul Washington’s autobiography asserts that Washington “broke through the boundary of “twoness” himself and achieved the goal DuBois described, “one should maintain a healthy suspicion about this assertion in regard to Paul Washington, as well as for the Church of the Advocate.”¹⁶ Rather than nullifying the bifurcating impact of the anti-black racism upon African American identity, Washington and the Advocate became adept at working within the system for a desired beneficial outcome. The omnipresent death-dealing gaze of anti-black racism is represented powerfully in Walter Edmonds murals hanging in the nave of the Advocate’s sanctuary. In the murals, Edmonds represents various phases of the movement from enslavement to the realization of freedom and hope, while the eye of the oppressor is present on every canvass. The eye transforms as the freedom journey progresses but the eye, nonetheless, remains. Paul Washington and the Advocate may have played a role in bridging the gap between various institutions and the oppressed community, but even they were unable to step outside of the grip of the “double consciousness.” None will be free until all are free.

The 1974 ordinations of the Philadelphia 11 were both a rally and a respite for the congregation. After making a commitment of his time and for the use of church property in support of the ordinations, Washington made what was for him an unusual move.¹⁷ He sought congregational support for a ministry decision. After twelve years of controversial but highly effective ministry, he had never before taken this action. The risks for the church to be involved in the ordinations was greater than that in previous

¹⁵ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

¹⁶ Washington, “*Other Sheep I Have*,” xix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161-63.

controversies because this action would be in direct violation of the wishes of the diocesan bishop, the person chiefly responsible for funding the ministry.¹⁸

In spite of the risks the congregation responded unanimously and rallied around the decision to move forward with the ordinations. That candidate, the Rev. Suzanne Radley Hiatt, was a member of the congregation and might have had some influence upon the decision. Perhaps, the strongest stimulus for the congregations' decision to wholly embrace one movement for change and not the other was this: the ordinations of the Philadelphia 11 was an Episcopal struggle, while those concerning the oppression and marginalization of the black community, were not defined in the same terms. Paul Washington's decision to not seek the support of the congregation for his engagement with Black Power and black nationalism speaks to the prophetic nature of his ministry. To have sought congregational consensus would have immobilized him and the congregation thereby denying an active response when action was required.

It is important to note that the congregation's reluctance to enter the struggle in support of the poor and marginalized with Washington should not be understood as a general reluctance to participate in this type of social justice action. Eleven years following the controversy and exodus fueled by the installation of the murals, under the leadership of the Rev. Isaac Miller, the congregation galvanized support for two community-organizing groups, Philadelphia Interfaith Action (PIA) and Heeding God's Call. PIA, a local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, was concerned with the shortage of affordable housing units and employment opportunities for the city's underserved and under resourced community, the poor.¹⁹ Heeding God's Call was

¹⁸ That he felt participation in the ordination would constitute a greater threat to the financial stability of the congregation than the other involvements during this period is significant. One could argue from the wider church perspective that the congregational struggles around issues of identity and race was an in-house or "race" matters. Such controversies, potentially, could pose a greater threat to the life of the congregation than the ordination of women.

¹⁹ The Rev. Paul Washington served from 1962-1987. The Rev. Isaac Miller served from 1989-2009. The Rev. Dr. Renee McKenzie began serving in 2011.

a grassroots movement that responded to the proliferation of guns and gun violence in the city. The Advocate was not reticent in confronting the systems of oppression in these two instances. These two actions, along with women's ordination, held some things in common that the congregation found compelling. First, these events offered an achievable and visible opportunity for success within a reasonable period of time; and second, they were each a part of a larger Episcopal struggle in which the Advocate could act in concert with other Episcopal organizations.²⁰ In these three instances, the ordination of the Philadelphia 11, PIA, and Heeding God's Call, the Advocate pushed the limits, but remained within the bounds of what one might call a "traditional" Episcopal identity.

The Advocate has taken a place on the front line of the struggle for liberation and self-determination for a marginalized community, and has demonstrated that she is a trusted advocate and ally. Her lived reality, however, has not reflected an internal striving to inculcate these same values of liberation and self-determination. As a mission congregation, her clergy and lay leaders serve at the pleasure of the bishop, the Diocese of Pennsylvania, and other diocesan organizations and individuals fund a very significant portion of the operational expenses. As noted earlier, such reliance has been characteristic of the congregation since its founding. It could well be that the demands of survival have been too great or too immediate to have anything other than "keeping the lights on and programs running" constitute a primary concern. We have learned over the years to master the grind of surviving, something held in common with the economically challenged people fed in the Advocate Café (soup kitchen) daily for over thirty years.

The Advocate sits on a cusp between the Episcopal Church and the marginalized community that still struggles for change fifty years following the March on Washington. It seems problematic that the wider church and the congregation would find coherence

²⁰ In 1993 the Diocese of Pennsylvania was the first to offer a \$1 million loan to PIA to finance the construction of 160 homes in North Philadelphia. Numerous Episcopal clergy and congregations were active in PIA and Heeding God's Call.

in the Advocate's identity as a congregation who simultaneously challenged the status quo by giving voice to the underserved, and extended the credibility of the church. It seems that the answer to the existential "what" of the identity question "What am I?" from the Advocate's perspective must remain under-articulated.

In 2014 as the Advocate moves into the next phase of her life and ministry, it seems appropriate to explore the question about identity because the question "calls for the question of being's relation to itself."²¹ How does the Advocate understand her identity? What is the Church of the Advocate with respect to the people with whom she is called to minister? What is the Church of the Advocate with respect to the larger church? What is the value in raising the question of self-identification? And is the impact of this knowledge and how might it be used to shape the future? Raising these questions will help us give rise to a future that honors the work that has preceded us and allow us to respond faithfully to the needs of today.

During the leadership of Paul Washington and Isaac Miller the congregation received special dispensation to use the designation "parish" and "rector" rather than the formal titles given to aided congregations of "mission" and "vicar." The former titles more accurately reflected and acknowledged the extraordinary work of the rectors and the congregation, along with recognizing the local and national stature the ministry attained. But the latter titles correctly describe the Advocates' standing with respect to the diocese. Titles which honored the work were admirable and deserving, and their use probably made it easier for the ministry to be pursued in an environment that lacked the luxury of reflection and the resources to pursue any hope of becoming a parish. The congregation was seen as a beacon of hope because it participated in, nurtured and facilitated the dream of others, albeit as an

²¹ Lewis Gordon frames the question of identity as an answer to "What am I" as opposed to "Who am I" "What" is a question of existence while "who" is a question of essence. Identity is existentially shaped in the quality of being lived. Lewis Gordon, "Identity and Liberation : An Existential Phenomenological Approach," in *Phenomenology of the Political*, Fevin Thompson and Lester Embree, eds. (Boston, 2000), 191.

unrecognized fellow struggler. So the Advocate will continue to pursue its purpose in the way available to it by raising funds to facilitate ministry and to support the physical plant. Or as some of the seasoned saints would say, "With God's grace she will continue to make a way out of no way." It was this pursuit that shaped her past and has given her hope for her own unspoken dream of liberation and self-determination, now being named, so that she might model for her community the change they would like to see.

The Advocate community is broad and is collected from a wide swath of places. There is very little that she does alone; that is our strength. Her struggle has always been a shared struggle. The human struggle of living in a world where we strive to reflect the grace we have received.