



PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL BLACK CATHOLIC CONGRESS

Sisters take part in a gathering of the National Black Catholic Congress.

# Inviting African Americans to join our communities

**F**OR RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS that are predominantly European-American to extend a sincere invitation to people of color to join in furthering the mission of their communities, it will be necessary to engage in a process of designing an intentional plan to address inherent weaknesses in the current approaches to the ministry of invitation to new members.

—Sister Gwynette Proctor, S.N.D.deN.

In preparing this article, I found the above comment by Sister Gwynette Proctor, S.N.D.deN. a natural place to begin. Our efforts as vocation ministers to invite and welcome all racial and ethnic groups requires a conscious effort. It is unlikely to just happen because we are people of goodwill. The cultural patterns and habits that exist in the United States have emerged from a long legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and discrimination. It is hard to escape the racism, both subtle and blatant, that is part of our larger culture and church; however we can choose to become more aware. We can choose to open our communities up to the whole church; we can choose to make the extra effort it may take to seek out, invite and welcome our African-American brothers and sisters. Our communities and our church will be the richer for it if we do.

Many religious communities are comfortable with serving African Americans, but to authentically follow Christ, we must invite that same population to become part of us, to minister alongside us. This was one of

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several messages Father Bryan Massingale, a renowned social ethicist, shared in a presentation at the 2010 convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference. He told his listeners: “Our faith calls us and empowers us to be the compassion of the Risen Christ.” He added: “If candidates for religious life are unwilling or unable to relate to people of color and socially stigmatized groups as

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equals and not just paternalistic benefactors—this is an indisputable sign that they do not have a vocation to serve the church as it exists today.”

To prepare this article I found myself re-reading and thinking of workshops and articles by various African-American presenters. I found their recommendations and tips in concert with my own views about what it will take to bring about greater diversity in congregations where

the majority of members, leaders, and vocation and formation personnel are, in fact, of European heritage. I had the opportunity to converse with Sister Gwynette Proctor, S.N.D.deN. about her booklet, “Toward Cultural Competence and Incorporation of People of Color into Predominately European-American Religious Communities,” (2000, published by the National Religious Vocation Conference). She stressed that the need for conscious efforts continues to exist today, as it did some 20 years ago when the booklet was published. Congregations must reverence diversity and recognize, as well, the Afro-centric approach, she told me. They must explore and accept that there is an African-American culture with its own practices and its own values.

Where to begin a conscious effort to build greater diversity? We can all agree that the call to religious life comes from God. Religious congregations must be intentionally conscious that the call for African-American candidates emerges out of their particular experience within the black community. This call emerges in spite of the many obstacles that still exist. Sister Proctor listed some of those obstacles: the withdrawal of the Catholic Church from black urban areas; the reluctance of white brothers, priests, and sisters to invite African-American people to Catholicism and to religious life; and the growing deterioration of education in the urban public and parochial schools.

These are significant hurdles, but the call to religious life continues to go out to African Americans, and vo-

cation ministers can do a great deal to help the call be heard and to support those who respond. The following tips are drawn, with permission, from Sister Proctor’s booklet on cultural competence. She graciously gave her permission for her work to be adapted here.

## Tips for vocation and formation personnel

- Attend courses and workshops at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies [xula.edu/ibcs](http://xula.edu/ibcs).
- Worship in predominantly African-American parishes.
- Enroll in courses or workshops led by African-Americans.
- Acquire knowledge and experience in the African-American community.
- Contact the National Black Sisters Conference, The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, or the National Black Catholic Congress (see page 7) to assist your congregation in inviting and, more importantly, in nurturing African-American candidates in ways suggested here.

## Tips for vocation promotion

- Publish print and online materials using graphics that include African Americans depicted as equals, not just as people being served.
- Publicize congregational activities in outlets that reach African Americans: in social media used by diverse young adults, African-American newspapers, in the bulletins of African-American parishes.
- Sponsor vocation awareness days in historically black colleges and universities.
- Take out ads in promotional booklets for events within the African-American community.
- Contact the diocesan Office of Black Catholics—meet the staff; enlist help from the staff in spreading the word.

## Nurturing discerners and new members

African Americans who are considering or who have joined a religious order that is mostly of European heritage can use support in dealing with the cultural and racial concerns they’ll encounter. Here are ways to help provide that support.

## INITIATES, CANDIDATES, DISCERNERS

For persons formally contemplating entrance and in structured contact with the congregation:

- Arrange for a sister, brother, or priest mentor who is black.
- Arrange for the candidate's assessment to be done by an African-American professional.
- Arrange periodic interactions with black religious (correspondence, visits, personal conversations, retreat/prayer experiences).
- Arrange participation in ministry experiences with African-American religious.

For affiliates and postulants (those persons who have formally entered at the pre-novitiate level):

- Provide regular interaction with black religious, even if they are from different congregations. The emphasis here should be on reflection and discussion, but you may want to arrange opportunities for shared ministry or prayer, such as working in places where black religious are employed or attending retreat or prayer experiences within the African-American Catholic community.

## NOVICES

The canonical year is still accepted as a year apart, yet it should not be a year of isolation. The canonical year should set a model for living, not stand as an antithesis to it.

- Involve African Americans directly in the formation program throughout this period. Their presence allows the novice to stay connected to his or her own culture while adapting to religious life.

## WHAT HAS WORKED WELL WITH CANDIDATES

Pre-entrance experiences with the community can be helpful, such as:

- living in a community for a short time,
- attending community gatherings,
- having assigned contact persons from a local house or community, and
- spending time with other religious congregations that are comfortable interacting with African Americans.

Once a candidate has entered, support systems can be helpful. These might include steps such as encouraging

the candidate to maintain ties to the black community, utilizing national black Catholic organizations as resources, or living in parishes with other black Catholics. Other support systems might be found by:

- ministering among African Americans;
- sharing his or her culture with the religious community, such as helping to develop within the religious community an attitude of openness to learn about other cultures and welcoming in the religious community different styles of cooking, relaxing, celebrating;
- incorporating into the religious community faith experiences rooted in African-American culture, including liturgies, retreats, spirituality, prayer groups;
- visiting with the candidates' family as appropriate;
- being sensitive to the family and extended family and friends; and
- initiating honest dialogue about community members' attitudes, biases, prejudices and fears.

## Taking individual action

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

- 1) What are my prejudices, biases, values, criterion for women and men of color? What do I need to change within to truly welcome a person of color?
- 2) What attitudes and behaviors must I change to deal with my unconscious racism? To become more aware of this persistent reality, it may help to read books such as *Silent Racism: How Well-meaning White People Perpetuate the Racial Divide*, by Barbara Trepagnier or *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*, by Frances E. Kendall.
- 3) Do middle class white values impede me in welcoming a person of color?
- 4) Can I name any racist attitudes and language that are present in me?
- 5) How do I appreciate, encourage, affirm, and support the cultural gifts that the Asian, Native American, Latino, African-American woman or man brings to our community? How do I allow and enable Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans to continue to live their culture?
- 6) How am I open to others' cultural or ethnic forms of prayer, ritual, and liturgy?

- 7) What expectations do I have that the African-American candidate will “fit-in” and adapt to the dominant culture of our community?
- 8) How would I consider adapting my lifestyle to meet the cultural expression needs of an African-American man or woman?
- 9) How do I see the charism of the institute/religious community lived out in a culture other than my own? How would I envision that charism being lived out by an African-American woman or man?
- 10) Do the province policies, formation plan, and structures include people of color?

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Read works by African-American authors.
- Pray daily for vocations among women and men of color.
- Take a course in intercultural awareness, or study one or two specific ethnic groups.
- Learn about your own culture and its unique gifts.
- Become aware of racist language and expressions, and erase them from your speech.

### Taking collective action

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- 1) What does it mean to be an intercultural community? To be pluralistic?
- 2) What would our congregation look like if we were intercultural? (Prayer styles, food, recreation, dress, theology, liturgy, spirituality)
- 3) What kinds of reading and visual artifacts exist in our residences that are not from a Eurocentric perspective?
- 4) What opportunities are available for the African-American man or woman to share his or her story and culture with the community?
- 5) How is our congregation involved in ministry in the African-American community?
- 6) In what type of ethnic neighborhood is our community located? What is our witness to people of other cultures by living here?
- 7) In what ways will our community welcome the family of our African-American community members?
- 8) What needs to change in our religious community

to make it more welcoming to an African-American woman or man?

- 9) What do we, as a congregation, think about our province’s formation policies and programs regarding women or men of color? Do they support the unique gifts of people of color, or do they attempt to “bleach” them to be more like the dominant culture?
- 10) Are we as a congregation willing to allow the African-American members to have the necessary support systems to grow and flourish, even if that means going outside of the community?
- 11) How and to what extent are we willing to prepare ourselves to accept African American women or men to form community, to serve, to proclaim the Gospel?
- 12) How does our congregation encourage and support African-American members to develop their own spirituality in the light of the charism of the congregation and their charism as a person of color?
- 13) Do we really want African Americans among us as community members?

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- Invite African Americans to celebrations and to be resource people.
- Experience the African-American woman or man’s way of praying, relaxing, cooking, conducting meetings.
- Contact local African-American religious men and women for guidance in learning how to become a welcoming community for an African-American candidate.
- Provide opportunities for cross-cultural spiritual and educational celebrations and experiences.
- Examine the values of the dominant culture and the African-American culture. Based on the values of the Gospel, discuss which values are negotiable and which are not.
- Celebrate major holidays of one or more ethnic groups.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVINCES OR REGIONS

- The province formation plans can state clearly a value for diverse approaches to the formation plan that would serve to meet the specific cultural and ethnic needs of the candidate.
- Formation and vocation personnel can engage in a process of training for cross-cultural min-

## RESOURCES

istry such as coursework or workshops at Xavier University's Institute for Black Catholics or seminars conducted by African Americans.

- African-American women and men can be actively engaged as planners, facilitators, resource persons and consultants at province level assemblies and projects.
- Provinces can implement a policy to establish business relationships with and purchase goods and services from African-American entrepreneurs.

**National Black Catholic Congress**  
nbccongress.org

**National Black Catholic Sisters Conference**  
nbsc68.com

**National Black Clergy Caucus**  
tnbcc.com

**Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University**  
xula.edu/ibcs

**NRVC African American Religious Committee**  
nrvc.net (Select "About" tab. Select "NRVC Member areas and committees.")

**U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, Subcommittee on African American Affairs**  
usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/index

- Province formation and vocation personnel can devise a national plan to utilize support networks such as those found on the "Resources" list on this page.

In general religious congregations need to begin serious reflection on the ways that unconscious racism causes barriers that result in the absence of earnest invitations and a lack of earnest responses from men and women who are African American.

In his 2010 address to the National Religious Vocation

Conference Father Bryan Massingale spoke on the implications of transformative love and passion for justice for vocation ministers. He said:

I believe that women and men religious are called to be agents of social reconciliation, healing a divided church and world. To do that, religious need a cultivated stance of unease... a transformative love that Christian tradition calls "compassion" and that Catholic social teaching calls "solidarity."

If this vision is true, he said, the implications include relating equally to and with people of color, tackling the issue of unconscious racism personally and corporately, and realizing that this change must begin with compassion and solidarity.

In the quickening Spirit of our Good God, we as vocation ministers must be about recognizing, reverencing and nurturing God's call of African-American women and men to religious life as brother, sister, and priest. As Father Bryan Massingale told us, "Our task as vocation ministers is to seek and call forth women and men who radiate the hope of a world made new." ■

*A version of this article appeared in HORIZON, Summer 2012.*

### Related reading

"Transformative love, passion for justice belong in vocation ministry," by Father Bryan Massingale, HORIZON, Winter 2011.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS

- 1) What is the definition of "intercultural" in our congregation as it currently exists in the U.S.?
- 2) Is there a genuine interest and commitment to engage in cross-cultural sharing and discussion in our religious congregation?
- 3) How can a discussion be advanced about how our congregation can include members from diverse cultural and ethnic groups?
- 4) It has been said that understanding your own culture helps you invite other cultures. How can we foster a process for this to begin?
- 5) How does our religious community witness the faith among African-American people?

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS

- Formation and vocation personnel can engage in a process of training for cross-cultural ministry. This could involve taking courses or workshops at Xavier University's Institute for Black Catholics, taking advantage of webinars, or engaging in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' intercultural training (see usccb.org).
- African-American women and men in religious communities can be encouraged to gather and create networks to support one another for life in mission. Further, it is recommended that on-going financial, emotional, and psychological support be directed toward this effort.