Nathan D. Baxter Oral History, Interview One: Transcript

African American Episcopal Historical Collection

Virginia Theological Seminary Archives

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Narrator: The Rt. Rev. Nathan D. Baxter

Interviewer: Dr. Joseph Downing Thompson, Jr., Assistant Archivist for the African American Episcopal Historical Collection

Location: Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia

Date: February 26, 2014

Length of Recorded Interview: 1 hour 7 minutes

Abstract:
The Rt. Rev. Nathan D. Baxter, Bishop of Central Pennsylvania at the time of the interview, discusses his childhood in Pennsylvania, where he was raised in the Church of God in Christ tradition, his sense of call to the ministry, his seminary years, his entry into the Episcopal Church, and his relationship with his parents, especially concerning his denominational affiliation and ministry.

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Key:
[ ] = Note or addition of transcriber, narrator, or interviewer

Time stamps are noted in red and bold for ease of identification and citation.

Processing and Content Notes:
After the interview, the recording was sent to a professional transcriptionist who transcribed the conversation using a "light edit" method. This entails the omission of most verbal pauses and false starts. The interviewer then edited the initial transcript for the sake of clarity. This transcript is thus an acceptable rendition of the recorded interview. However, the audio is also available to researchers.

Finding Aid: The finding aid for the Nathan D. Baxter Oral History, RG A60, may be found on this page: http://www.vts.edu/podium/default.aspx?t=131182

Access Points:
Baxter, Nathan D., 1948-
African American Episcopalians
Black Episcopalians
Blacks -- History
Blacks -- Religion
Episcopal Church
Episcopal Church. Diocese of Washington
Episcopal Church. Diocese of Central Pennsylvania
Episcopalians -- Biography
Church of God in Christ
Pentacostalism
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
Coatesville, Pennsylvania
Thompson, Joseph Downing

TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00]

Joseph Thompson: **Today is February 26, 2014. This is Joseph Thompson, Assistant Archivist for the African American Episcopal Historical Collection. Here with me is the Right Reverend Nathan Dwight Baxter who has graciously agreed to sit for an**

oral history interview with the AAEHC and to discuss his very accomplished life, particularly his dedicated service to the Episcopal Church.

Our interview is taking place in the Bishop Payne Library of the Virginia Theological Seminary, the home of the collection. Thank you so much for being here, Bishop Baxter.

Bishop Baxter: It is an honor and a delight, and thank you for the ministry that you have to capture the history and experience of African Americans and **[00:01:00]** others of African descent. Thank you.

Thompson: It is our pleasure. This interview is the first in what we hope will be a series of interviews with you, allowing us to focus on different phases of your life and career. In today's interview, we will begin with early years and background, moving forward as far as we can in an hour or so. Not only are you the current Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, you are also a son of Central Pennsylvania.

Baxter: Yes.

Thompson: Which must be a very interesting experience to be back in the place that is really your home. You were born in Coatesville, raised in Harrisburg. Would you tell us a little bit about some of your most vivid memories of growing up in that region in the 1950s and the 1960s?

Baxter: First of all, **[00:02:00]** my father was one of seventeen children born to Charles Wesley Baxter, my grandfather, and Annie Bonaparte Baxter, my grandmother. As his name suggests, Charles Wesley Baxter, he was a Methodist lay preacher. A few years ago, someone from the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] archives sent me a document where he was paying his registration dues for convention. My father was the first of his siblings. They had out-migrated from South Carolina, where my grandfather was also a sharecropper, and moved to Coatesville to work in the steel mills. My father was the **[00:03:00]** first one to leave, and we moved to Harrisburg. It was at a time when lots of things were changing in the small, gritty, urban areas of Harrisburg. My father was a Church of God in Christ pastor, but he also worked as a laborer. He worked in the mills, did landscaping while developing a church in the eastern part of the city and, in the center part of the city, an outreach center that provided direct services. My mother worked very closely with him. She was a domestic, and so in Harrisburg, she would go to the more affluent communities to clean house, care for their children. **[00:04:00]** The church, then, was both our social circle, but it was also the place where my parents could actualize. I lived really in two worlds, one that was very, very segregated. I was one of the first persons to attend the white elementary school in my part of Harrisburg coming right after the 1954 Brown decision. There were not many of us, and many of the teachers were not pleased that they had to receive these children. But having said that, **[00:05:00]** the church was the place where we felt like someone, the independent power of the pastor, the community which was really in many ways an enclave of southern culture, many people who had out-migrated to Harrisburg from the deep South—Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, places of that sort. It was there that I really had the expanded sense of family, that truly brothers and sisters, which was a

reference to members, but there were also aunts and uncles to us. In one sense, whatever lack of affirmation or challenges to dignity we may have experienced in those **[00:06:00]** early years of growing up were countered by that sense of being part of those congregations.

I really enjoyed much of the playtime with friends, and increasingly, the opportunities to make music. I played drums when I went on to junior high school and played in the symphony orchestra as a percussionist in the marching band and in the concert band and, for a little bit, in senior high. In the meantime, I worked very closely with our gospel choir in my local congregation, and my brother—I have three brothers-- the middle brother **[00:07:00]** became quite an organist. We eventually expanded it to a regional choir with about seventy young people who were early teen years. We traveled quite a bit in the mid-Atlantic area, doing concerts and so on. It kept many kids out of the street, drew others into church life, and we enjoyed that very much.

My father had a strong ecumenical bent, and as time went on, he was also a poet, a published poet. He has poems in the Hyde Park Library, the Kennedy Library, the King Center, and in the Carter Library. In fact, President Carter invited him to the White House to honor one **[00:08:00]** of the poems he had written. His poetry drew him closer to relationships with some of the pastors of Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches. It was in that experience that they would invite him to preach or to do poetry recitals, and he would bring his youth choir. I got to experience mainline churches, which were essentially all white churches in our community. But it was during that time that I got exposed to the Episcopal Church, and there was something about it that was very attractive. I did not have a sense that I was going to become an Episcopalian but of the places that I visited because of his ecumenical relationships. I got to make some relationships with pastors **[00:09:00]** in these churches, which afforded me an opportunity to talk with them about ordained ministry and seminary as options. It eventually led to my working in the city with some of the church's summer programs, which I really enjoyed because these were pastors who also related to my father in collaborating around some of the issues of riots and so on in the city to include in Harrisburg and in York. There were literally tanks and troops in the cities in the middle 1960s and into the late 1960s.

My wife remembers going to school and the police having the dogs walk them home, not **[00:10:00]** to protect them but to keep them supposedly from bursting into riots, but with the white children of the same school, who also lived in a certain direction, they were not attended to in that way. There were always those tensions within those communities, not of the magnitude that you see in the larger urban areas, but significant for our small what we call "third class" cities in a sociological sense.

Thompson: **May I ask—you spoke a bit about your family and the migration from South Carolina, and there were other aunts and uncles of yours who also came up to Pennsylvania?**

Baxter: Actually, my grandfather came north **[00:11:00]** to look for work when my father was very young, about seven years old. When he found work, he then sent for his wife, and they had at the time seven children. She brought them up to Coatesville,

Pennsylvania to the Lukens Steel Mill, to the company housing they had provided. My father came with that group as a child who was about seven years of age and his six siblings, later to become fourteen. It was seventeen, but fourteen lived to adulthood.

Thompson: **Wow.**

Baxter: Our family was always close. One of the most exciting things was to return home to Coatesville, and eventually, some moved to Reading, Pennsylvania, some to the Philadelphia area, **[00:12:00]** but everyone came home to the homestead for Thanksgiving. Often in the spring at spring break, we would all go back. Even today, we still have every year a reunion of that part of the family, and then, every other year, we have a reunion of both sides of the family from around the country converge. We usually have about two hundred and fifty who come for that. We've had as high as three hundred.

Thompson: **Wow.**

Baxter: Cousins, aunts, and we always discover new people, and it has extended because I have discovered some of my cousins in the UBE [Union of Black Episcopalians].

Thompson: **Wow.**

Baxter: Yes and so…

Thompson: **How about that.**

Baxter: Yes, that has been simply wonderful, including one who is a priest, **[00:13:00]** Valerie Bailey Fisher, who is a cousin but also several lay persons who are cousins. It has been rather rich on both sides of my mother's family. She had eight siblings.

Thompson: **Wow**.

Baxter: She made the ninth of the children. They out-migrated from western North Carolina to Philadelphia but a very similar story. For us, that sense of both the richness of church life, but also given my parents' approach to life and ministry, had some nascent exposure to the broader world and a little less defensiveness. I would say that all **[00:14:00]** of my family at that time, and pretty much today, are either Church of God in Christ, Baptist, or AME. In those early years, they were pretty much of that ilk, and even those who were Baptist came out of the more rural Baptist experience, which would be much closer to the Pentecostal and Holiness experiences.

Thompson: **Now, your mother, was she also raised in the Church of God in Christ?**

Baxter: She was.

Thompson: **Okay.**

Baxter: She was Baptist in her very, very early years, and when they out-migrated from the South and moved to Philadelphia, there was a conversion on the part of a couple of sisters **[00:15:00]**. So then, they received the gift of tongues and Baptism in the Spirit. That eventually drew the rest of her siblings, or not the rest of them, well, actually yes, because though the brothers were a little late coming, they are now members of that church. On my mother's side of the family, with the exception of one cousin, they are all Church of God in Christ, including one who is a bishop and three or four who are pastors. On my father's side, I probably have about ten cousins who are Church of God in Christ pastors and some of them superintendents.

Thompson: **Wow. [00:16:00]**

Baxter: That's my background and my wife's background. Very steeped. My father became sort of what in Anglicanism we would call the archdeacon. He was the district superintendent of the lower half of central Pennsylvania. My wife's father was the head deacon of the largest church in that jurisdiction. That is her family's faith, and we knew each other in our youth groups that they use to fellowship back and forth and the region or district that we were in.

So we knew each other. We did not fall in love romantically until we were in our late teens, but I had my eye on her for a long time. I just did not have the courage. A little sensitive to rejection. **[00:17:00]**

Thompson: **That is a great story. You said your paternal grandfather was an AME pastor. How did your father come to Church of God in Christ a little bit more specifically?**

Baxter: During the early part of the twentieth century, there was an experience called Azusa Street experience. Parham and some others. There was a real movement on the heels of the Second Great Awakening. There was this great movement of Pentecostal revival, and it spread across the country. Churches which emerged would be churches like the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, Fire Baptized Holiness, **[00:18:00]** United Holy Church of America, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. All of those bodies were growing out of that Azusa Street experience. In many small communities, revivalists of the Pentecostal ilk would come through and would have revival services. Many persons who were very devout in their Methodist and Baptist congregations would come to these experiences and experience the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was out of that context that my father, when he returned from the war, had such an experience. So he left his AME church that he had grown up in, both in the South and **[00:19:00]** then when they moved to Coatesville, and became a member of the Church of God in Christ.

My mother, as I mentioned, because of a couple of her sisters who had similar experiences, she eventually was drawn to that church and became a member of the Church of God in Christ. So the two of them were Church of God in Christ once they came together. Now, it is amazing that they were able as a family, however, because some of his brothers and sisters remained AME. But they kept their relationships together, and he always talked fondly of his AME pastors in the years past. My mother always talked about being baptized at Long Branch Baptist Church

and so on. So there was an ecumenical— **[00:20:00]** I think of it as being rather unusual—that my parents had. While they were very clear that they thought the fullness of the Christian faith was found in the Pentecostal experience, but they had a graciousness with regard to those of other traditions. I grew up with that, and that, looking back, had a very significant influence on me.

The issues of social justice were very important. My father was very active, and my mother, in both the Civil Rights efforts in the community but also even much more passionate about direct action. How do you provide, in Matthew 25? Besides his congregation, which was in East Harrisburg, he started an outreach center in **[00:21:00]** we call it uptown Harrisburg, which was the heart of the urban community. It was there that that center received a number of awards from governments and social agencies and the governor for its outreach in clothing, literacy programs. They also had a program, it was not really a program, but it was a service that was quietly offered to find runaways because, during that time, you had drugs also rising, and a lot of kids were coming from the white communities and would go and hang out in these dens and drugs and that sort of thing. My father had the kind of reputation in the community that he could go and talk to a drug dealer or talk to a guy on the street or a pimp or whatever and say, "I am looking for Sally Smith. Do you know where she **[00:22:00]** is?" They understood that if they did, he would not force them to come home, but what he would do is set up a meeting between them and their parents at the center to talk about what was going on. If that person freely decided they wanted to go back home. If they did not, then they would let them know where they could go to get some real housing, some counseling, or whatever until things were better, particularly those who were of age, eighteen or older.

It really helped me and my brothers to grow up with a real passion not only for political action but for direct services. I think it is reflected. Of course, I chose ordained ministry. My brother, who is the musician, had choirs. **[00:23:00]** He played for the Edwin Hawkins Singers, for the James Cleveland Workshop. He used to run workshops for mainline denominations in gospel music. He is now pastoring. He succeeded my father in pastoring my father's church in East Harrisburg, but he still does work with the school district in working with children and developing concert gospel choirs. Now, there is a special program that he and a couple of college faculty members are doing on math through music.

Thompson: **Wow.**

Baxter: My youngest brother is the Chief of the Bureau of Aging for the State of Florida. That whole sense of direct care and action, I think, was very much a part of the nurture of our parents.

Thompson: **Now, I think [00:24:00] in your CV, I saw that you were a neighborhood organizer at one point, maybe in the late 1960s. Was that with your father's organization?**

Baxter: No. I did help him. I went into the service in 1968 and did not return home until 1971.

Thompson: **Okay, which branch**?

Baxter: Army. I was drafted. I was a combat medic, and I applied for conscientious objector status and was denied, partly because my denomination was not a pacifist denomination. So I served but without a weapon, but I was a combat medic in Vietnam and received the Gallantry Badge with Palm **[00:25:00]** and the Combat Medics Badge while there. I went to work for the United Methodist Neighborhood Center in 1971, and about eight years ago, they celebrated their hundredth anniversary, but I was the community worker. My task was to oversee outreach programs in the community but also to build bridges to get churches in the suburban areas, as well as in the urban areas, to be partners with the center. One of the things we did was established an exchange program where we would take young people from our program and they would go and spend time in suburban communities and churches. Then, **[00:26:00]** we would bring kids from those churches into the center, and our children would plan for them experiences that they could get a sense of what life was like and the positive things and what they enjoyed and so on. It built some bridges, brought in some good financial support and we got volunteers to engage so they could work with the community outreach staff in doing various things.

The center was ostensibly focused on children and families, including afterschool programs, lots of afterschool programs, including everything from homemaking, woodwork, and crafts to athletic programs and activities. And it still goes on. They built a new center up further in Harrisburg, merged with my fathers. My father eventually **[00:27:00]** moved his program to that and worked with them and retired from that. But at the time, my father had his own center, and I was working as the community worker. We also worked with efforts that were going on in the city and other agencies collaborating to address problems in the city. So I got to work with my father because he was one of the agencies that would work with others, to include a part of what was done was the establishment of a health clinic in that part of the city. Which has now grown and expanded and is now spread around the city.

Thompson: **At what point did you begin to start seriously considering ordained ministry? I can imagine that perhaps you never really thought much about it. It just kind of happened, [00:28:00] given the background, but maybe there was a conscious moment? Or maybe not?**

Baxter: I always wanted to serve in the Church, but I thought that I would serve as a lay leader. I loved organizing things. I always had the knack for being able to bring people together to create collaborative situations. So I thought I would always be a volunteer lay worker in the Church. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I started feeling this tug towards ministry, but I was reluctant because I did not want in that sense to be a carbon of my father. And I had also seen enough that I knew how difficult it could be. **[00:29:00]** And then, I just felt that I did not want to make the commitment that was related to the expectations when one said one was a minister. Preaching was very, very important, and in that tradition, I did not really have the skills and gifts of the styles of preaching. That was the other thing was that I really felt I am not qualified, and as I said, I have many cousins and very dear friends who are pastors, and they really had that traditional ability to do those great things. Black

preaching is—you have heard Bishop Curry, for example. He is a wonderful example of that, **[00:30:00]** and there are others, including Walter Dennis and people like that, and that just was not my gift. But eventually, it became clear to me that I had a real passion not just to offer direct services but to be a spiritual leader and that I had a gift for relating to and communicating with people, though it was not as illustrious as I would have wanted it to be. But I also realized there was something even there in COGIC.

Eventually, I realized that I had a lot of theological questions, and I was always the kind of child that was very inquisitive, very curious. My wife teases me because she says your mother used to always say when you were little, "Nathan, don't think" because she would give me a task, and I would think that task and come **[00:31:00]** back and say, "Mom, I thought if I moved it over here." "No, all I need you to do is take the dishes off the counter and put them in the closet. No, I do not want you to go rearrange the whole closet." I was always that child with an imagination of how things could be and why they were not this way or that way. I discovered, particularly while I was in the service, that I had a lot of questions that were not being answered. And I thought after I came back and I worked for the neighborhood center, and in college, the courses that I loved the most were in philosophy and comparative religion, and that got me stirred up. So I eventually decided that I wanted to go to seminary. I had already acquiesced to being a licensed minister. I went through the internships that are **[00:32:00]** required and the mentoring study, which I did principally with my dad. I had a couple of other mentors. But the ordination process did not require formal education but that you had the experience of the faith and that you were able to articulate doctrine and that you showed the character that was necessary. So I went through that and was eventually licensed, which would be maybe akin to being a deacon. Some people remained there for many, many years.

So I had that role but was continuing to be trained and on track to be an elder. Eventually, while I was in the service, I got involved with a church in Hawaii. My wife and I lived in Hawaii for two years. **[00:33:00]** I was sent from Vietnam to Hawaii to be on standby to return to Vietnam, but we never had to go back, thank God. My wife came over and joined me in Hawaii, and then after I completed my last nine months, then we remained for another year and a half. We got involved with some Church of God in Christ congregations there.

So the bishop there ordained me as an elder, and I started a church. It is still going on there in Hawaii, and it was great fun. We had Filipino, Japanese, Korean, African-American, Hawaiians, Samoans. It was quite mix, but it was a congregation that, with the exception of one or two persons, everyone was under forty and lot of military **[00:34:00]** people but also people who actually were from the Island of Oahu. We really enjoyed it, but I found myself getting sucked deeper and deeper into this role of being a pastor and ordained minister, but I still felt I was not settled on so many theological questions. I had this hunger for a real theological education.

Thompson: Could you give an example if you care too?

Baxter: I think some of it grew out of understanding, what is the historic story of the Christian church? We are Pentecostal here and Methodist over here and Congregational over here--how does all of this fit together? That sort of ecumenical piece was a piece **[00:35:00]** that I kept trying to understand. Why do we have different—I know what my doctrinal understanding is, but how is it that this person has a different doctrinal understanding and does not seem to be worried about his soul as such? So there were those kinds of things. I also did not feel sufficiently able to articulate Scripture and interpret Scripture beyond the kind of storytelling. One of the strong points was to be able to creatively retell the story. I am grateful for that, but I hungered for what really was going on. All of those things would bother me, and I would sometimes, because of my own ecumenical involvement, I would sit with other pastors from other denominations, even those who were Evangelical that had been to Bible college, and they had a knowledge that I **[00:36:00]** was lacking. I did not agree with them necessarily, but I was impressed with the depth upon which they had made their choices, not only doctrinally, but in terms of how they approached social issues and how they went about pastoral ministry.

So I was very hungry, and I decided that I wanted to go to seminary. So I started visiting seminaries. Some of my father's friends took me down to Lutheran in Gettysburg and Lutheran in Philadelphia, Eastern Baptist, the Evangelical Congregational, ITC, Howard—just started visiting seminaries. Finally, I went to Lancaster Seminary, and there was something about that community that just overwhelmed me. They had twenty-one different denominations in the student body, including Roman Catholic, **[00:37:00]** and then in the faculty, they had about twelve full-time faculty at the time. And the fellow who taught Patristics and Liberation Theology and a few other things was a Jesuit. Later, the spirituality person was a Jesuit. I thought, "This is the place" so we moved, and we went to Lancaster, and I thought this would also be an opportunity for me to discern where God was calling me because I had finally gotten to the place where it was not just about information and education. It was I genuinely thought God was calling me someplace else, but I had no clue where that was.

So we moved—my wife and we had **[00:38:00]** two children. And she was a social worker with the Welfare Department so she traveled by train to Harrisburg, which is about a forty minute train ride. She commuted back and forth. I did a lot of the caretaking and that sort of thing with the kids, sometimes taking them to class with me until it was time for school and then take them to the school stop. Anyway, while I was there, it was really rich at the coffee pot, talking with students from different backgrounds, listening to the various views in classrooms as people would share but also talking with the professors who, as I mentioned, came from probably four or five different denominations, primarily from Reformed traditions. But there **[00:39:00]** was a Mennonite who was one of the clinical psychology faculty pastoral theology, but most of them Presbyterian, German Reformed, that sort of background. The students you could see during the time I was there. We had two or three who became Roman Catholic, one was Methodist, one was E&R or UCC, Church of the Brethren, and I forgot what he was and myself, we became Episcopalians. In fact, one of the persons who became a Roman Catholic, a woman, she is now the Chancellor of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg. First woman to receive a degree from the Pontifical Institute in Rome. She has **[00:40:00]** a Doctorate in

Canon Law and one in New Testament. I t was, as Jerry Lee Lewis used to say, it was a whole lot of shakin' going on.

I visited lots of churches. I had become a fairly well known preacher in that region as a seminarian, and the president used to send me out to churches to build good will and so on. We got a chance to experience a lot of different churches, and then on other Sundays, I would go and visit. My family got a little tired of this different church every Sunday, and so they went back to the Church of God in Christ to attend church, and my wife is, "If you find a place that you feel called, let me know, and I will see what I think." Well, I was exhausted, and I got to the point where I said, "You know what, I am just not going to church because I am tired of going and feeling frustrated, **[00:41:00]** and I do not know where else to go." And one Christmas Eve, I was putting my daughter's carriage together, a dolly carriage, and something said to me, "You should be in church tonight." You have to understand not only protestants, thirty or forty years ago, did not have Christmas Eve services, but certainly my denomination did not. You went to church the Sunday closest to Christmas, and in the evening, you would have the Christmas pageant and poems and all that sort of thing. So I am thinking, "Church tonight? It is Christmas Eve!" And I thought, "Well, where would I go?" And I saw this church that I had passed often but never had gone into. I do not know why or how because I used to pass it taking my son to the nursery school. Interestingly, **[00:42:00]** there were two adjunct faculty persons—one was the director of the case method project, and the other was one of the seminary chaplains—who were both Episcopalians.

Unbeknownst to me, the one who headed the case method project was the rector of this church I was passing. I had been to the other one's church, and it was basically a Morning Prayer church, big, but I will come back to that because it ended up playing an important role in my discernment. I got up and put my coat on. I had an old raggedy faux sheepskin jacket and put my ski cap on, and my wife: "Where are you going?" And I said, **[00:43:00]** "Honey, I feel like I should go to church tonight." She said, "What?" And I said, "You know that church that is near where the nursery is?" "Yes," she said. I get in the car, and I drive, and when I get there, I had no idea Christmas Eve was such a big deal. There were cars everywhere, parking lots were filled, the streets were filled, but right in front of the church was a parking space. I just thought somebody pulled out. I did not think of this as God's hand, and I really do believe that God transcends often in manipulative ways, regardless of what the professors of theology would say. So I parked it, and I walked in, and, Joseph, when I walked in there was like it was when I experienced Lancaster Seminary. It was this is where you belong. The incense was going, and they were singing. It was the '28 Prayer Book. I had no **[00:44:00]** clue what was going on, but the ushers were so hospitable, and they found a chair and squeezed it in by the Baptismal font, very significant, but it was the only place they could squeeze a chair. I went in. They gave me a bulletin, and a lady in front of me, with two or three kids who wanted to be any place but in church on Christmas Eve, she would open her Prayer Book to wherever we were, pass it back to me, and take my Prayer Book. Then, when the hymns came, she opened it to the hymn, pass her hymnal, and take mine. All through the services, and I never saw that woman again. I eventually joined that church, but I never saw her again. She never made herself known to me or whatever. I have told the story. In fact, the story is on our diocesan website in the archives. It is a video of

my being in that church and telling the story and showing. **[00:45:00]** Some say she was an angel. She was regardless. She was a messenger, but I always say to people, the graciousness of the ushers and this woman making this special effort was as significant as that epiphanic experience of walking in and saying this is where I belong.

It was at that point that we began our pilgrimage, and it was a long hard one. We wrestled. I would argue with the rector about infant baptism, believer's baptism, and all of those things. But I knew this is where God was calling me.

Thompson: **So did you begin to attend? That was St. John's?**

Baxter: St. John's Church in Lancaster.

Thompson: **Did you begin to attend there?**

Baxter: We began to attend, and my wife came. She did not particularly like the liturgy, but the rector was a really good preacher and a good biblically oriented preacher so she loved his **[00:46:00]** preaching. She eventually joined the choir. She is a musician by training. She did her undergraduate in Music Education, strings, at Hampton Institute, then did her graduate degree in Educational Administration at Harvard, then did certification in choral directing and hand bells at Westminster Choir College. She has always had an interest in music, and both of us were late going to school. She was working in social work, but then when we moved to Virginia, she finished her education at Hampton in music. She now plays in the West Shore Symphony. So the music and the choir began to draw her, and the preaching held her **[00:47:00]** until she really fell in love with the church, and she was confirmed before I was. I was still arguing and whatever.

So that is how I became an Episcopalian. After I had worked through all of my issues, I got to a place where the question was—because these churches were all white, and I thought to myself, "How can I be—a black man—how can I be a priest in this Church? This is all good, but how do I leave my black momma that needs me and has nurtured me and then go to this white adopted mother? Even though I feel called of God, but there is something that is not right here." And I struggled with that. One day, I saw in the newspaper that the rector of the church—St. John's is a good size, about five hundred, but St. James is twelve hundred. **[00:48:00]** I thought I did not have the best experience there, but I looked, and the rector had invited Henry Mitchell who used to teach here, adjunct. He taught Black Studies, and I think Homiletics, but Black Studies here. He had invited him—they were dear friends—to come and preach on Absalom Jones Day. Well, I did not even know who Absalom Jones was. Anyway, I saw in the paper this black face with this collar on is going to be speaking, and I thought, "You know what, if I go, maybe I can get a few minutes to talk to him." Because I had not seen many black clergy, maybe one or two or something like that. I went to the church, hoping that after the service, I could corner him and talk to him. Well, he got up to preach, and he said, "My topic is…" and he talked about his daughter, who was one of the sixties **[00:49:00]** and seventies black radical intellectuals who were always challenging religion. She is now teaching, I think, at Brooklyn College, and he said, "She was asking me

questions," and she was a college student, and she said, "Daddy, with all this racism that is going on, how can you, a black man, be a priest in this Church?" And then he went on to talk about racism and the Church but what he felt called to do and the way he saw his ministry and that a part of his calling was the healing of the Church, was to bridge the divides and challenge. Every question I had he answered in that sermon. At the end of the service, he was standing at the door greeting people, and I walked past and shook his hand, and he was very polite, but there **[00:50:00]** was a press. Everybody wanted to talk to him, and I went on. So it was at that point that the last obstacle was moved, and I fully invested in preparing for priesthood.

Thompson: **Now, were you still in seminary at that time?**

Baxter: I was.

Thompson: **So kind of finishing up and deciding to enter the priesthood process.**

Baxter: I started the process in the second half of my Middler year.

Thompson: **Okay.**

Baxter: Then, in our diocese at the time, we took canonical exams rather than GOEs, and I thought I was hot stuff. I had graduated with honors in Christology and honors in Homiletics. And so I took the exams. I always say to my seminarians when they are doing the GOEs. I say, "Do not be anxious." I said, "I enjoyed my canonicals so much I took them twice." **[00:51:00]** So there were areas where I failed in the canonical exams. So the bishop said, "You have a choice. Your problem is that you are really not anchored enough in the ethos **[00:51:18]** of the Episcopal Church." Originally, they were going to have me go to Philadelphia Divinity School, but that was the year that they closed and merged. So he said, "You can go then to Virginia, or you can do a two year internship at a parish of my choosing and do canonical readings with faculty of my choosing." We decided on the latter because Mary Ellen had her job there with full insurance, and it would be difficult for her to commute if we were in Virginia. We decided that we would **[00:52:00]** take the latter. So I served for two years as a lay curate in a church in Carlisle, and he had several tutors from the School of Christian Studies. One who was a Professor of Classics and Patristics at Dickinson College, and a Ph.D. from Cambridge. He taught at the School of Christian Studies so he tutored me in Anglican Church History, going through its Patristic roots through the Reformation. Another professor, who was a professor here. He commuted here. His name was John Whitney, and then a person who was the Diocesan Canon Lawyer on Canon Law. Those three areas I read **[00:53:00]** and had sessions and tutorials with those persons and then retook the exams a year later. Then six months later, I was ordained a deacon, and then six more months, I was ordained a priest.

Thompson: **Wonderful story. You mentioned that you had these misgivings about being a black man in a predominantly white denomination and the relationship to family. I wonder what your mother and father had to say. Based on the things that you already said, they had a very ecumenical outlook, but how did they actually react when you--?**

Baxter: That is a very, **[00:54:00]** very important question for two reasons. One is it is one thing when you are generally sharing relationships with others, but when it is your child that is leaving home, as my father said to me, "We need you. They do not. I never expect you to succeed me, to take my church," which was often one of the ways in which succession was, if you were a son and, in later years, if you were a daughter or the oldest one in the ministry, you would succeed your father. He said, "But I thought you would be a leader in our Church." That was very difficult for him. So it was difficult in the sense of the needs of the Church, **[00:55:00]** and COGIC was doing a lot of changing at that time. There was more and more of a desire and more and more persons who were going off getting a theological education, and I think his vision was that his son would be one of those who would be leading the new era within the Church of God in Christ and Pentecostalism at large. Jimmy Forbes and his father were friends. They are in the United Holiness Church, another Pentecostal denomination. There were a number of others who were theologically educated. I think that was the one piece. The second piece was cultural, and it was—you were abandoning the richness of who we are as black people, **[00:56:00]** and how we can nurture and advance that, to adopt a white culture, which he and my mother appreciated in their friends, but that was you go visit, not you go live there kind of thing. Theologically, there were some significant issues that—especially the Episcopal Church. They might have swallowed some other churches a bit differently. But the Catholic nature of the Episcopal Church and the sacramental and the ceremony, as opposed to liturgy, and all of that. They were concerned that I may be seduced by the charm of those things and not really thinking about whether it could nurture me spiritually, much less being misled by certain theological doctrines. I mention infant baptism as an example. **[00:57:00]** I mean, Pentecostal churches often come out of Holiness traditions so the idea of using wine in any form, including for religious purposes, represents a no-no in those traditions. The people smoke, dance, do all those things the Pentecostal Holiness folks do not do. They call out of that so you are going back. I have been quoted, "If I build again the thing I once destroyed, I make myself a transgressor." Paul's words.

So that, but then, there was another much more significant one that I missed until later on, and that was the socio-economic. In the larger black community, there is always a sense that people who become Episcopalians are class climbing. In general, if you, as the old saying use to be "if **[00:58:00]** you are not Methodist, Baptist, or Pentecostal, somebody been messing with your religion." If you become Presbyterian Church in America or Congregationalist, American Baptist or whatever, black folks don't do that kind of thing. In the Episcopal Church, there was the class issue, but even more so, it was the fact that holiness churches were at the bottom of the socio-economic scale of the black church community. So the National Baptists, the Progressive Baptists, the AME, the AMEZs, CNEs, all looked down on the Pentecostals and the Southern rural shaped Baptist churches because they were untutored, and they were somewhat of an embarrassment. They were not of the refined nature, **[00:59:00]** were not educated theologically. They were always looked down upon, and the fact that your child that you think of as bright and having a chance to help the Church grow and develop in ways that it might be respected, when you leave is that a statement? Which it was. I did not realize my parents were going through that, that some of these persons were saying, "Yeah, we knew that boy

was not going to stay down with all this foolishness, and he is too bright to stay where you all are and all that." I did not know about that part, and I did not think about it, first of all, because I was not becoming an Episcopalian for status reasons. That is what was more apparent than anything else, but I did not know how they were being put down by some others. I often say God used my naiveté because if I had thought of those things, **[01:00:00]** I would never have left. I would not hurt my family in that way, and I still feel that way. But I am glad God used my naiveté because this is where I belong. But our family was very close. I loved the Church of God in Christ, and they invite me back to lecture and to preach from time to time.

My parents, it was very hard for them, and it was not until—they did not come to my ordination as a deacon, they did not come to my ordination as a priest. My daughter who, at the time, was probably about six or seven years old, maybe even eight, she said to me, after she was an adult, "You know, Daddy, you used to think that I was laying on the sofa asleep when we would go visit Grandmom and Pop-pop." She said, "I remember you and Pop-pop arguing, and sometimes **[01:01:00]** Grandmom crying," and I had forgotten about it. We had some heated discussions, and we would go back to Hampton where was the church that I was first Rector at St. Cyprian's in Hampton. It brought back the memory of how we would fight and argue. About three or four years into that, I invited my father to come and preach at the church. I just really thought I needed to reach out. He was an incredible preacher. He knew how to preach in different contexts. So he came to this church and preached, and I will never forget two things. We never talked about it. The one was at communion, my mother and father both knelt to receive communion in both kinds. They have never received since. **[01:02:00]** They never said anything about it. And my mother—I was walking down the hall, and she came out of the nave part of the church, and she looked up, and she said, "Father Baxter," and I turned and looked at her, and she laughed. That was it. Now, we never talked about it. I know that they still hurt, but they had made the decision. My father later said to me, "I do not understand this, but I also recognize that God does not tell me everything."

So that reconciliation began during my years in Hampton, and I do not think it was until I became Dean of the National Cathedral that it made theological and spiritual sense to them. Now, they recognize that their son was chosen to speak to the nation, not only across denominations but across religious communities **[01:03:00]** and across sectors—private, social, public. I think for them, in many ways, it said, "Okay, I see how all the pieces of his life are coming together, and we are at peace with this." But the reconciliation happened much earlier.

Thompson: **That is just a fascinating and moving recollection of your story. I thank you so much for sharing all of that so candidly. Do you have any closing thoughts or anything that we have not touched on? As we said, we would like to continue and do more interviews, and I hope that is okay with you. I'm going to get you on tape.**

Baxter: Yes. I would like that. I think, in closing, I would say I wrote **[01:04:00]** a medication for the Union of Black Episcopalians around Thanksgiving of 2013 called *For This I Give Thanks*. It is was on their web and circulated, but I wrote it as called *The Musings of an Adopted Son of the Episcopal Church*, and it was basically

to say that I am so grateful for the opportunities that I have had to serve in but also more importantly through the Episcopal Church, that it has afforded me ways of discovering myself. I mentioned about my discomfort in experiencing myself as a Church of God in Christ minister. **[01:05:00]** But when I experience and have lived into the Episcopal Church, I often think of the story of the *Ugly Duckling*—that I discovered that really truly at heart, I am a swan. I am not a duck. I have an appreciation for ducks. Ducks nurtured me, but my soul is really shaped in ways that only the Episcopal Church could nurture me, could shape me in ways for God to use me as God would wish me to. And if I could go back now and choose any profession or vocation, there is nothing—whether I became a bishop or Dean of the National Cathedral, that is immaterial—there is nothing I would want to be more than an Episcopal Priest. I love parish ministry. I love being a parish priest, the teaching, the preaching, the pastoral care, the community involvement. And so, I look back on my journey, and I have no regrets about the decision to yield **[01:06:00]** to the calling. There are a lot of mistakes I have made that I regret. You know, I wish I could take back arguments with the vestry and things of that sort. But that aside, I am very grateful to the Episcopal Church, and I am very grateful to the black Episcopalians that I got to know, and we can talk about that at another time, who also were very helpful to me. But also, to many of the white priests who, early on, were really mentors and pastors to me, and I am just so grateful to be in a Church where, with all of its challenges and all of its shortcomings, it is still the most rich and beautiful Church that Nathan Baxter could have become a part of.

Thompson: **To that I can only say amen. It has been an honor and a privilege to interview you, Bishop Baxter, and I look forward to future interviews.**

Baxter: Thank you, Joseph. **[01:07:00]** God bless you.