Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bishop Barbara Harris

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator: Harris, Bishop Barbara
Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Barbara Harris,
Dates: February 12, 2007
Bulk Dates: 2007
Physical Description: 6 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:45:46).
Abstract: Bishop Bishop Barbara Harris (1930 - ) is now retired, but was the first woman to be ordained to the episcopate in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 12, 2007, in Foxboro, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification: A2007_062
Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Bishop Barbara Clementine Harris was born on June 12, 1930 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Harris grew up in Germantown, a neighborhood of Philadelphia. Her mother, Beatrice Price Harris, played the organ for St. Baranabas Church and her father, Walter Harris, was a steel worker. While attending Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she excelled in music, Harris wrote a weekly column called "High School Notes by Bobbi" for the Philadelphia edition of the "Pittsburgh Courier," an African American newspaper. After graduating from high school in 1948, she attended the Charles Morris Price School of Advertising and Journalism. She earned a certificate from Charles Morris Price in 1950. In later years, Harris would study at Villanova University and the Episcopal Divinity School.

As a member of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) since the late 1950s, Harris served on a number of diocesan committees. In the 1960s, she helped to form the Union of Black Clergy and Laity which was subsequently called the Union of Black Episcopalians (UBE). She was a member of the St. Dismas Fellowship and served on the board of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. During the summer of 1964, Harris volunteered with Delta Ministries in Greenville, Mississippi, educating and registering voters. In 1974, she advocated for the ordination of the “Philadelphia Eleven,” a group of women who had been ordained priests, but were labeled "irregular" by the Anglican Communion. By 1976, the church began to admit women priests and, in October 1980, Harris was ordained as a priest. After her ordination, she served as priest at St. Augustine of Hippo Church and as chaplain of Philadelphia County Prison.

In 1984, Harris was appointed executive director of the Episcopal Church Publishing Company, molding the social direction of the Episcopal Church. Known for her strong advocacy for social justice, Harris was elected in 1988 as the consecrated Suffragan Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, becoming the first female bishop in the Anglican Communion. She served as bishop until 2002 when she retired at the age of seventy-two.
Harris is the recipient of numerous honors including an honorary degree from Yale University's Divinity School and the 2007 Wisdom Award from the National Visionary Leadership Project. After suffering a stroke in 2010, Harris made a full recovery and still advocates for social change.

Bishop Barbara Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on February 12, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bishop Barbara Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 12, 2007, in Foxboro, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 Betacam SP videocassettes. Bishop Bishop Barbara Harris (1930 - ) is now retired, but was the first woman to be ordained to the episcopate in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Harris, Barbara C. (Barbara Clementine)
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harris, Barbara C. (Barbara Clementine)--Interviews
African American religious leaders--Interviews.

African American women bishops--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Episcopal Church.

HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Barbara Harris, February 12, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/8/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection
Bishop Barbara Harris slates the interview. She discusses her family background and her childhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she was born in Philadelphia on June 12, 1930, to Beatrice Price Harris and Walter Harris. Beatrice was from Philadelphia and studied music as a child. Later during Harris's childhood, she worked as an organist for churches. Walter moved to Philadelphia as a young man from Virginia and worked as a steel worker. Harris grew up in Germantown, a neighborhood of Philadelphia, and her earliest memory is spending time in Sunday school at church. From her childhood, Harris recalls the sights of the smiling faces of neighbors, the smells of hot biscuits and salt mackerel, and the sounds of Sunday morning radio programs such as "Wings Over Jordan" and "Southernaires."

African American families--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.
Gospel music.
Radio programs.

Bishop Barbara Harris discusses her childhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She attended St. Barnabas Church, which had a predominantly black congregation. Instead of using traditional black religious music art forms, the church used classical music such as Bach, Mendelssohn, Handel, and Mozart. Harris describes her musical studies as a child; she studied piano, vocal, and choral speaking. Harris attended Philadelphia High School for Girls and found it unwelcoming. Harris speaks about writing a column for the Philadelphia edition of the "Pittsburgh Courier," a black newspaper. Her columns pertained to the interests of teenagers and she had a press pass to attend all the musical venues and see acts like The Temptations.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.
African American newspapers--Pennsylvania.

Bishop Barbara Harris details her life after graduating high school. Harris's family could not afford to send to her college so she instead enrolled at the Charles Morris Price School of Advertising and Journalism to receive a certificate. Harris talks about how she had a lot of education but never earned a degree even though she now holds seventeen honorary degrees. After leaving the Charles Morris Price School of Advertising and Journalism, she went to work at Joseph Baker and Associates, a black-owned public relations firm. Harris would eventually become president of the firm. While working in public relations, Harris was still involved in church and civil rights activities. Harris describes how, in 1964, she travelled to the hostile environment of Greenville, Mississippi, to register voters with the Delta Ministry.
Civil rights movements--Mississippi--Greenville.
African American business enterprises--Public relations.
African American women--Education--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Barbara Harris, Section A2007_062_001_004, TRT: 0:29:45 2007/02/12

Bishop Barbara Harris describes her involvement with the Episcopal Church. Harris became involved with the Episcopalian Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) in the late 1950s, leading to her involvement with the Union of Black Episcopalians and the Women's Caucus. Harris talks about her role in planning the Irregular Ordination, a movement to ordain eleven female priests. Afterwards, she felt a greater pull to the ministry and began the process of ordination. While working full time as the director of community relations for the Sun Oil Company, Harris studied on the nights and the weekends to finish at the Episcopalian Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She became a deacon in September 1979 and, a little over a year later, Harris was ordained a priest.

Episcopacy.
Women in the Anglican Communion.
Anglican Communion.
African Americans--Religion.
Episcopal Church.
Sun Oil Company.
African American clergy.
Women clergy.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Barbara Harris, Section A2007_062_001_005, TRT: 0:29:50 2007/02/12

Bishop Barbara Harris discusses her nomination and ordination to bishop. When she was nominated, there were several African American bishops but not any female bishops. On September 25, 1988, the standing committees elected Harris bishop but she still required approval from the bishops with jurisdiction. During this period, she received death threats and was given police protection from the City of Boston, Massachusetts. She felt the resistance to her election was due to her gender, rather than her race. Harris describes the Bishop of Canterbury as being gracious, but not accepting. She then talks about the differences in Anglican churches in other countries, especially in Africa where there is more of an emphasis on Anglo traditions. The South African Anglican church, however, is more accepting of diversity than other African churches. This is evident in the more racially diverse congregations of churches in South Africa than in other countries, like Nigeria.

Women in the Anglican Communion.
Episcopal Church--Bishops--Massachusetts.
Episcopacy.
Women bishops--Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Barbara Harris, Section A2007_062_001_006, TRT: 0:17:13 2007/02/12

Bishop Barbara Harris shares her opinion about the African American community. She is disturbed that more African Americans are in prison than in college. She discussed the importance of a strong education for the African American community and states that from an education of quality comes
economic well-being. Harris then discusses her life's work. She wishes that she had been more discreet and less blunt in her comments. Harris states that her proudest achievement is becoming the first female Episcopal bishop. By not relenting, she opened the path for other women. Harris believes that the major religious movements need to recapture some of the spirit that was alive with Martin Luther King, Jr. Denominations need to advocate for housing and justice for all, regardless of race or sexual orientation. Harris ends the interview stating that religious polarization between Christians is detrimental. Christians should embrace the principles that unite them all, rather than ones that divide.

African Americans--Education.
Women in the Episcopal Church.
Episcopal Church--Bishops.
Social justice--Religious aspects.
Christianity.
Philosophical theology.