Introduction

Why an African American Hymnal?

The ways in which a people expresses itself musically and liturgically provide us, perhaps, with the most significant insights into its culture. Believing this, and in an attempt to share some of the gifts that black people bring to the whole church, the Episcopal Commission for Black Ministries, under the aegis of the Church Hymnal Corporation, published *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Collection of Afro-American Spirituals and Other Songs (LEVAS I)* in 1981. Today, a little more than a decade later, in collaboration with the Standing Commission on Church Music, and again under the aegis of the Church Hymnal Corporation, the Episcopal Commission for Black Ministries now offers *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal (LEVAS II).*

While it is not within the scope of this introduction to give a comprehensive overview of church music among black Episcopalians, a few observations might enable us to better understand the place of *LEVAS II* in that historical evolution. There is an old French proverb: "*Plus ça change, plus la même chose.*" ("The more things change, the more they remain the same.") This adage seems applicable to the development of church music among black Episcopalians. In an article entitled "Music Among Blacks in the Episcopal Church: Some Preliminary Considerations" which appeared in the *Historical Magazine of the Episcopal Church,* Dr. Irene Jackson-Brown, general editor of *LEVAS I,* writes that in the late eighteenth century, "blacks were . . . beginning to experience musical syncretism within the colonial Church of England. That is, blacks were fusing certain African and African American musical practices with Anglo-American musical practices." She also

notes that these "musical practices included the singing of religious folk songs," later to be called spirituals.

The Reverend Professor Robert Bennett of the Episcopal Divinity School, in an article entitled "Black Episcopalians: A History from the Colonial Period to the Present Day," also in the *Historical Magazine,* suggests that at least one spiritual actually originated among black Episcopalians:

> In the south, where the majority of black Episcopalians were to be found and where prior to the Civil War the Bishop of South Carolina claimed more black communicants than white and where black churchmen worshipped in separate galleries or chapels, it was this body which described their plantation Holy Communion services in the spiritual, 'Let us break bread together on our knees.'

After the introduction of the organ, many black congregations enjoyed reputations for excellence in church music. From the choir stalls of such places as St. Thomas', Philadelphia (founded by Absalom Jones); St. Philip's, New York City; St. James', Baltimore; and Calvary Church, Charleston, emanated the sacred strains of psalter and hymnal. It was not uncommon for such congregations, in addition to liturgical music, to offer afternoon and evening concerts featuring anthems and other choral works of great composers. But the works chosen were almost always European in origin. A Swedish visitor who attended a service in a black congregation in 1850, included the following comments in a letter home (and I would add parenthetically that the same observations could have been made in 1950):

> I had in the forenoon visited a negro . . . church belonging to the Episcopal creed. There were but few present, and they were of the negro aristocracy of the city. The mode of conducting the divine service was quiet, very proper, and a little tedious. The hymns were beautifully and exquisitely sung.

We must keep in mind that prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the last generation, "black" was often considered not beautiful at all. Celebrating black heritage was not always understood as the way to success

in a society in which the dominant culture established the standards to be equalled or excelled. If this was true in society in general, it was no less operative in the church, and in the Episcopal Church in particular. Thus, Bishop Turner, in his Introduction to *LEVAS I,* could write:

> Unfortunately, Afro-Americans, particularly those in predominantly white churches, have not felt comfortable using their own music in formal church services, but instead relegated this music to use at civil and social gatherings. Although Black Episcopalians could not or would not use spirituals in their formal worship, they constantly hummed and sang these songs in private.

The Civil Rights Movement, it can be argued, gave black Episcopalians the license to reclaim the outward and visible signs of their black heritage; and once again, like their forbears of the colonial era, they began to syncretise the clipped cadences of English church music and the syncopations, improvisations and coloratura of the black musical medium. The Venerable Hartshorn Murphy, Archdeacon of Los Angeles, in his keynote address entitled "Expanding our Horizons through Evangelism", delivered at the national conference of the Union of Black Episcopalians in 1989, put it this way:

> As a result of the civil rights and black consciousness movements, something remarkable happened . . . We as a people, re-discovered the validity of "emotionalism" as a religious expression. Where previously, [black] church ladies in the Episcopal Church would go home on Sunday, remove their veils and gloves and sing and listen to spirituals and gospel music, today, they want to do that in church, at least occasionally.

To be sure, this conversion experience was not a universal phenomenon among black Episcopalians. Black Episcopal congregations, like the church at large, number among their members several converts, who often associated the hymns contained in *LEVAS* with music in their former denominational affiliations. But more and more, spirituals, gospel music and mass settings reflective of the black religious experience

are enjoying increased prominence, even in those parishes which in a former age, would have limited its mass settings to Willan and Oldroyd, and whose concerts would have featured Vivaldi's "Gloria" or Stainer's "Crucifixion." More correctly, what is happening now is that these parishes are discovering that they can have their liturgical cake and eat it; they can skillfully blend these various elements into a tasteful and artistic whole; like blacks in the colonial era, they have learned to "syncretise." *"Plus ça change, plus la même chose."*

But clearly, *LEVAS II* is not being published solely to enable previously stuffy black Episcopalians to become "sanctified" ones. It is intended to be a resource for the whole church. For as Archdeacon Murphy observes:

> White people, too, want to rejoice and sing "Blessed Assurance" with abandon. This is especially true of young white children who can't get with the program on Sunday mornings after rocking out to Michael Jackson or Whitney Houston all week.

Faithful to the Episcopal Church's new appreciation of multiculturalism, *The Hymnal 1982,* for which *LEVAS II* will serve as a supplement, is a far more inclusive and representative resource than its predecessor. African, Caribbean, Native American, Hispanic, African-American and other sources have been used, to remind worshippers of the rich diversity of all the people of God. We are pleased that the church's official hymnal includes music, both old and new, reflective of the African American experience, and it is in the spirit of providing additional resources from the black musical experience that *LEVAS II* is offered to the Episcopal church at large as well as to our brothers and sisters in the broader ecumenical community. In so doing, we echo the wish of Bishop Burgess, in the Preface to *LEVAS I:*

> It is the hope of the editors and the Commission for Black Ministries that there will be acceptance far beyond those parishes composed largely of Black people. This music will serve the whole church well, if, in making it its own, it will come to understand something more of the mission of all people in today's world.

The history and theology of the black church are embodied in its music. The music of the black church, then, is the expression of the struggle, the pilgrimage and the joy of a people. In an age in which all members of the church are searching for a renewed sense of spirituality, it seems altogether fitting and proper to look to the music of a people whose religious folk songs are for good reason called spirituals. I commend to you the riches of the black musical experience, and express the hope that together we may LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING!

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