

G*d Sees, Hears, Knows & Loves

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Pictured here is a button I found yesterday in the Hyatt gift shop on-site at the General Conference. The card stock paper on which this black, rainbow-fleeced sheep was presented stated: “I’m the Rainbow Sheep of the Family.” Yes, I celebrate being Black. Yes, I celebrate being quare.* However, I did not purchase this “black rainbow sheep” for those reasons.

I purchased the “black rainbow sheep” because, when I saw it, I not only recognized myself signified, but also remembered I am not alone: “The Lord is my Shepherd!” (Psalm 23.1).

G*d, my Shepherd, sees me, G*d hears me, G*d knows me, and G*d loves me. As my Shepherd, G*d has covenanted with me, with us as African Methodists, and with others like me in the AME Church.

This covenant is that G*d does not seek our destruction (Genesis 9.8-17). Moreover, there is an assurance: all things work together for good for we who love G*d and are called according to G*d’s purpose (Romans 8.28).

I cannot describe the excitement I felt in 2000 when I heard chants in the halls of the General Conference: “It’s time, it’s time to make a change! McKenzie’s the one! She can do it!” The words of Esther echoed in the corridors affirming the imminent election of Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie: “for such a time as this” (Esther 4.14). I join the community of those who will lament the retirement of Bishop McKenzie. Yes, McKenzie was the first of only four women elected to the episcopacy of the AME Church thus far – joined by Bishops Carolyn Tyler Guidry (retired), Sarah Frances Davis (deceased), and Anne Henning Byfield. However, more remarkable than this accolade is McKenzie’s prophetic witness within and for the church.

Bishop McKenzie’s message at the Opening Worship of the General Conference, “Between What Is And What Could Be,” was further evidence of her prophetic witness. Three aspects of McKenzie’s sermon rest in my spirit as I write: 1. While many of us are focused on what is, Jesus is manifesting what could be. 2. The “could be” answer is not only among us but is also found in unlikely people – including the next generation. 3. We are invited to “co-create” with G*d – imagining a “could be” future.

For this co-creation – transforming a limited “what is” through “what could be” to a new and expanded “what is” – McKenzie invited us to reconfigure the Zulu call, “Sawubona” and response “Yebo, Sawubona.” McKenzie explained the meaning of this call as “I see you; I recognize you; I value you” and the call and response together meaning that we see one another and consider: “what can we do in this space together?”

McKenzie made powerful appeals: See the value of women! See and protect children! See and support physical and mental well-being! And we know there are others among us who we could see and hear and should see and hear but historically have not seen and heard well as a church.

But, to call that roll, we must begin with our missing, unseen, muted, Zoomed and/or distanced siblings now in Africa from whom we are yet learning the “Sawubona” call and response.

However, the roll cannot stop there. Can’t we also imagine the AME Church as space where LGBTQ people – disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, overflowing with “two fish, five loaves” gifts waiting to be multiplied – are also heard and seen among us? Can’t we receive what G*d is manifesting through the LGBTQ people in our midst? Can’t we see answers to our needs in those we have problematically excluded, ignored, and/or oppressed? Can’t we see that the future is ours to create together – those traditionally seen and unseen, heard and unheard?

Except insofar as I reflect the image of G*d, I would be okay without being seen or heard.

However, Bishop McKenzie invited us to declare, “I am here to be heard” and to respond, “I hear you,” to declare, “I am here to be seen,” and to respond, “I see you.” In this spirit, with the unction of G*d’s DNA in me: hear me, see me, create with me.

For such a time as this: I will be the one with the Black rainbow sheep pin on, inviting you to make your presence and support known as G*d calls you to, defending legislative and electoral choices that open our eyes, our ears, and our creativity to all the “black rainbow sheep” among us.

** Taking a cue from E. Patrick Johnson in “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” quare means “queer; also, opp. of straight; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer” and signals a womanist way of being “LGTBQ” – turning the “Q” from “queer” to “quare.”*

See Leath, “The Fire This Time: AME Sexual Politics,” The Christian Recorder, 14 June 2021 for a definition of “quare.”