It Can Be Done

The Autobiography of a Black Priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church who started under the bottom and moved up to the top

BY
ODELL GREENLEAF HARRIS

edited by
Robert W. Prichard

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Dedicated

To my dear late wife, Lizzie Elnora, whose patience, encouragement, and moral and spiritual support helped me to see daybreak during the darkest hours, and to rise with the golden sun.
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Editor's Preface

I would like to thank Mrs. Marion H. Perry and the other members of Odell Harris's family for making this manuscript available, Sara Barnes and Susan Buttrick for their typing of the manuscript, Tony Lewis for his advice and counsel, Henry Mitchell for his help in selecting photographs, and the Dean and Board of Trustees of the Virginia Seminary for making publication possible.

Robert W. Prichard

Alexandria, Virginia
August 1985
Author's Preface

The Author feels that he has lived a rich and full life and would like to share his experience with others, especially those who want to MAKE IT, and have to struggle to do so.

Social, economic, and political conditions during the author's youth were quite different from what they are today. Segregation of the races was almost universal and generally accepted by both races. By and large, black persons could never expect the whites to accept them as equal in any phase of life. They were considered to be inferior to whites and were expected to accept that status. Practically everything that whites did for them was designed to instill that belief in inferiority. Blacks with self-respect and race pride had to always fight against the system of segregation and all of its attendant evils. The author was one of these. He learned very early in life the power, goodness and mercy of God, and always looked to Him for guidance and strength and was always rewarded. He always set goals to reach, and fortunately, reached them. There was never a time in his life that he did not have friends, both black and white, to encourage and stand by him. His family, parents, and grandparents were a great source of strength to him. He would like to share with you the story of his efforts and successes in the following pages with the expectation that they may, in some measure, inspire you with hope and confidence that whatever may be your great ambition in life, you can and will achieve it.

Odell Greenleaf Harris

May 1983
CHAPTER I
BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

When President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, freeing the slaves in the United States, he gave William Paschall Russell, his wife Isabella and their son, Plummer, their first taste of freedom.

They were born in Warren County, North Carolina, and were the slaves of John T. Russell, who had purchased William from a former slave-owner named Paschall.

William was intelligent and well-read for a man of his status and time. He had been taught to read and write by his master’s son and by others, and was punished several times for studying and learning. He was finally sold, because of his persistent effort to gain an education. This education, although meager, served him well both before and after emancipation.

His wife, Isabella, could neither read nor write. She was, however, an excellent cook and a good midwife—occupations she followed before and after emancipation. She was the only midwife in her community at a time in which few doctors were available. She delivered practically all of the babies born in that community, both white and black, as long as she was physically able. She would later deliver a number of her own grandchildren, including me and four of my brothers and sisters.

For the first thirteen years after their freedom, the couple and their son, Plummer, lived and worked on John T. Russell’s plantation. Then, in 1875, William purchased fifty-five acres of land from him. By this time, the family had increased to eight children: Plummer, James, John, Norvel, Doctor, Isabella, Lizzie, and my mother Susannah. After reaching maturity, all of the sons and daughters, except Isabella and Susannah, left home. Plummer went to Norfolk, Virginia, ran a bar, married, and reared a daughter and three sons. One son became a pharmacist, a second became a dentist, and a third died early in life. The daughter, Alice, was deaf and dumb. She attended a school for deaf and dumb students in Raleigh, North Carolina. James, John, and Doctor went to New York City; Lizzie to Atlantic City, New Jersey; and Norvel to Norfolk, Virginia. Isabella was burned to death when a lamp fell and exploded at her wedding.

Susannah attended a school operated by “some white ladies from the North,” and finally taught for several years in Warren County. She used some of the first money she saved to help her father, William, build a house on the fifty-five acre tract with the understanding that the ground floors would be for her parents and the upstairs for her. A separate kitchen and dining room building was erected nearby for the use of all. It can be done.
The Building of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church

During the year 1886, the Protestant Episcopal Freedmen’s Commission, which General Convention had created in 1865, began active work among black people in North Carolina. One of the first sections of the state the Commission visited was Warren County. The first persons members of the commission contacted about starting a church among blacks were the following: William P. Russell, Robert Edwards, Andrew Reid, Macklin Russell, John Russell, and John H. Russell. Together with some of the diocesan officials, these men laid the groundwork for a black Episcopal Church in Warren County, which was named St. Luke’s Episcopal Church.

Macklin Russell, brother-in-law to William P. Russell, provided one acre of land. William P. Russell gave the framing, Robert Edwards gave the weatherboarding, and others contributed either materials or money. They put up the building themselves. On October 3, 1887 the property was deeded to the Diocese of North Carolina. B. Lyman, W. E. Anderson, and A. H. Battle were trustees. The deed was recorded in Warrenton, North Carolina in book 53 on page 26.

After the building was completed, William P. Russell, Robert Edwards, Andrew Reid, John H. Russell, John T. Russell, Winnie Russell, Millie McCarge, and Amy Pitchford were baptized and confirmed. It is interesting to note that these ex-slaves gave and built the church before they were baptized and confirmed. Usually, it is the other way around. Later, Susannah, Isabella and Ida Russell were also baptized and confirmed there.

In 1899, Susannah and Robert L. Harris married. They lived in the second story of the house she had help build for her parents. To this couple thirteen children were born. Two were twins who died shortly after birth. The remaining eleven were: Berlena, James, Odell, William, John, Elberta, Robert, Anna, Frank, George, and Eunice. I was the third child.

My father, Robert, was a member of a Christian Church when he married, but soon thereafter he was confirmed in St. Luke’s Church and became a good worker, serving on the Bishop’s Committee and as lay reader, as well as in other areas. Five of the eleven children in the Harris Family were baptized in St. Luke’s Church. I was baptized there at the age of nine months.

Now, to get back to Grandpa William. From all I ever saw of him, he was a fine Christian gentleman in every respect. He gave his church time, talent, and financial support from the time it was built until his death in 1915. He was highly respected and loved in his community. He always called himself a Republican out of respect for Abraham Lincoln who freed him and his family, and he voted the Republican ticket practically all of his
free life. During the nine years I lived in the house with him, he subscribed to two newspapers: The Warren Record and a New York paper—I think it was called the New York Age. These he usually read every night after retiring. He provided his family with a home, food, clothing, and above all, love, devotion, and a fine Christian example. It can be done.

A New Name

When I was baptized my sponsors gave me the name Odell. Three years later, my cousin, Frank Greenleaf Russell of Norfolk, Virginia, visited us. He asked about our names. My oldest sister answered, "My name is Berlena Ella Harris;" my brother answered, "My name is James Eldred Harris," and I answered, "My name is Odell Harris." Frank look at me and said, "Boy, don't you have a middle name?" My answer was, "no." He then said, "You ought to have a middle name; so I'm going to give you mine—Greenleaf. From now on your name is Odell Greenleaf Harris." And sure enough, that has been my full name ever since.

Activities of St. Luke's Episcopal Church

From the time that St. Luke's Church was organized in 1886 until its closing in the 1940s, Sunday School was held every Sunday from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. A priest led Morning Prayer, Holy Communion or the Litany every fourth Sunday at 11:00 a.m. The first priests to serve there were white. Around 1896, black priests began to serve both St. Luke's and All Saints' Church, another black congregation about eight miles away in Warrenton, North Carolina. William P. Russell and Robert L. Harris served as lay readers at St. Luke's on these Sundays of the month when the priest was not present. Later, Frank Harris also served as lay reader there.

The members of St. Luke's Church always kept the building in good repair, paid their share of the priest's salary, and paid in full their quota for diocesan assessment and church program. St. Luke's Church was never an aided mission; it never received money from the Diocese or from any white church. The biggest problem the members faced was the getting and keeping of a priest. Generally, the priests moved on to bigger and more lucrative fields.
The successive black priests who served at St. Luke's Church were as follows: The Reverend Messrs. Henry B. Delaney, William Morris, George Williams, J. H. M. Pollard, James K. Satterwhite, Robert J. Johnson, Joseph Hudson, Bravid W. Harris, and Herbert Banks, the Reverend Mr. Hill, the Rev. Dr. Robert B. Sutton; and the Author.¹

I am happy to have been born in the house where Grandpa William and Grandma Isabella lived, and to have been baptized in St. Luke's Church. For nine years, I saw my grandparents practically every day, talked with them and listened to them, and observed them; and as far back as I can remember, my whole family, including Grandpa and Grandma, attended not only the services at St. Luke's Church, but also the Sunday School. Grandpa William was the Sunday School Superintendent for many years, and always closed the Sunday School with the hymn, "Blest be the Tie that Binds."

My Paternal Grandparents

My father's parents were Henry and Celia Harris, who also lived in Warren County. Both were members of the Christian Church. Grandpa Henry was never a slave, as one of his parents had Indian background and the other was a free black person. Grandma Celia, on the other hand, was a slave, but her father was white. Both Grandpa Henry and Grandma Celia were later confirmed in St. Luke's Episcopal Church and remained members until their deaths many years later.

They had seven children: Willie, Robert, Rosa, Bettie, Lula, Mary, and Albert, all of whom lived in the community. Willie, Rosa, and Lula died in their early thirties. Albert later went to Virginia, where he spent the rest of his life. Bettie moved to New York, and Mary to New Jersey.

Robert and Susannah's Purchase of Land

In 1905 the owner of twenty-three acres of land on the opposite side of the road from Grandpa's fifty-five acre tract put his land up for sale. Papa and Mama bought it, and built a house on it. Soon thereafter, Grandpa

¹The author's list of clergy-in-charge of St. Luke's differs somewhat from the Living Church Annual listings:
William Walker (a white Archdeacon for Colored Work) 1893-96; J.H.M. Pollard (Archdeacon for Colored Work) 1898-1908; Henry B. Delaney (Archdeacon for Colored Work) 1909-1913; J.H. Hudson 1914-1921; Bravid W. Harris 1922-24; Herbert Banks 1925-27; Jacob R. Jones 1929-33; Odell Harris 1933-37, and Robert J. Johnson 1941-43. James Satterwaite served in Raleigh from 1913-18, and Dr. Sutton served as principal of St. Augustine's School in the same city in the 1880's. Both must have visited St. Luke's [editor's note].
Henry had a stroke and lost the use of both legs. So, Papa moved him and Grandma into the new house where they lived for nearly twenty years, until their deaths. During these years, Papa and Mama not only provided for them, but also took care of them, paying practically all of their bills. They also paid burial costs when they died. During the whole period, three brothers and I alternated in staying with Grandpa and Grandma.

A Christian Family

My parents and grandparents were devout Christians. As far back as I can remember, they not only attended Church services and Sunday School regularly, but also gave much of their time, talent, and money. Both morning and night, they had family prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. I can never remember a time when they did not give the tenth of all they earned to the church and other charitable causes. They did no work on Sundays and did not permit us to do any. Most of the food for Sundays was cooked on Saturdays. On Ash Wednesdays and Good Fridays, the whole family fasted all day. My parents and grandparents not only taught us what they thought was right, but lived good Christian lives before us.

During the Christmas and Easter Seasons, there were programs for the boys and girls at the church and everyone had a part in them. Mama was always one of the leaders in planning and carrying out these programs.

They loved people. Many of the ministers of the neighboring churches came home with them to eat after their services. When the Episcopal priest came for services on the fourth Sunday of the month, he stayed at our house and ate with us. Papa and Mama always seemed to enjoy having the priest come. We children did not always share that joy, however, for the custom at that time was to have the grownups eat first.

Many people in the community, both white and black, came to Papa with their problems. He helped them all.

Grandpa William’s Birthdays

Grandpa William’s birthdays were always big days. Not only did relatives come, but neighbors also attended. There was always plenty of food and drink, especially wine. On each birthday, Grandpa William got a keg of wine, and everybody enjoyed the occasion. The only one ever to over imbibe was Uncle Norvel. It was reported that on one occasion he went home from the birthday celebration and whipped his wife. I never knew the full story, but I do know that she came home crying and talked to Grandma Isabella, who in turn went next door to Norvel’s house and put
him to bed. I remember hearing that she gave him sweet milk to quiet him down. It may have quieted him for a while, but it never cured him.

A Community with No Black School

Schools for black children were scarce in that neck of the woods. In fact, there were no black school buildings; the only teaching was done in some church buildings. Different teachers had come and taught at St. Luke’s Church from time to time. My sister Berlena and brother James attended school there, but teachers were hard to get and even harder to keep. Papa and Mama decided to move to Littleton, North Carolina, where a parochial school was operating. In August 1912 we moved there.
CHAPTER II
LITTLETON, NORTH CAROLINA

Papa and Mama moved because they had learned that St. Anna's Episcopal Church in Littleton had a good parochial school. Virgil N. Bond was the principal of the school. He was one of my first teachers. The successive teachers who taught me there were as follows: Messrs. Virgil N. Bond, Spragg, Ellis Harris, and Misses Garnes, Welden, Beatrice Harris, and Helena Harris.

St. Anna's Parochial School was the first school I attended. Fortunately, I passed each of the school's grades, and finished in 1919. Sister Berlena had completed her studies earlier and because there was no high school in or near Littleton had gone to St. Augustine's High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. My parents wanted me and my brother James to go there also, but we decided to quit school. None of the boys in my class went away to school. There was no high school in or near Littleton. Papa and Mama were greatly disturbed and disappointed by our decision. From time to time, they brought up the subject of our returning to school. For us, however, that seemed to be the end of our schooling. We were happy about it.

Getting a Job

Papa operated a small farm and did some carpentry. James and I settled down to help him with both. We also got odd jobs at times in order to earn some money. One of these jobs took James and me to Henderson, North Carolina, where we worked for a few months with a black contractor. There was a slot machine in the cafe where we ate our meals in Henderson. I stood and watched several men operate it, and some were quite successful in making a few nickels. After they had gone, I decided to try my hand, and for a while, I was very successful. I made one dollar from one nickel. I continued with the machine until I had lost the entire dollar. I decided then and there that that machine was not for me. From then on, I have had to earn my living the hard way—with my hands and my head; and I am glad.

St. Anna's Parochial School

St. Anna's School and Church were on the same grounds. The school building was located behind the church. The spacious grounds included a large lawn and a baseball diamond. We lived adjacent to the school. Nearly every morning when the weather permitted, we and the boys in the com-
community gathered and played ball until school opened; we also played some afternoons.

Just to the right of the church and schools was a one mile circular race track. On each Fourth of July, and other special occasions, the race track was used, sometimes for horse racing, and at other times for foot racing. A tall pole had been erected on the grounds and frequently, especially on holidays, the American Flag was flown from it. Large groups of people gathered there on these occasions and ate barbecue and brunswick stew.

The most spectacular event held there was a military parade and drill of a large number of World War I Veterans, under the command of Lt. Bravid W. Harris of Warrenton, North Carolina.

Baptism and Confirmation at St. Anna’s Church

The three oldest children in the Harris family had been baptized at St. Luke’s Church. Five of the eleven children, however, were baptized at St. Anna’s Church, Warren County. The eight of us who had been baptized were also confirmed at St. Anna’s Church. Bishop Cheshire confirmed me when I was thirteen years of age. Before being confirmed, I had to learn verbatim the whole Office of Instruction in the Book of Common Prayer. The bishop was serious about preparation for confirmation. Once he examined a young lady who was about eighteen years old and found she had not learned well the Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and Ten Commandments. The bishop did not confirm her; she had to wait until his return a year later.

Mother’s Visit to Her Sick Parents

While we were in Littleton, Mama learned that both of her parents were ill; they wanted her to come home immediately. She went and cared for them until Grandpa William died. Grandma Isabella was too ill to attend his funeral. Mama remained with her until she was able to get around and then brought her back to Littleton to live with us.

After about one year, Grandma began to get restless and wanted to return home to Warren County. Mama and Papa discouraged her going; they felt that it was better for her to remain with them than to live alone. However, one Sunday morning, after Papa and Mama had gone to church service, Grandma put a few things in a small bag, walked a mile to the train station, and went home. One of the children ran to the church and told Papa and Mama that she had gone. Papa caught the next train and found that she had reached home safely; a friend had taken her home from the train station.
Papa stayed there a few days and arranged for someone to look after her. Shortly thereafter, however, Grandma’s son Norvel and his family left Norfolk, Virginia, where they had lived for many years. They moved in with Grandma.

Mama and Papa also felt that they should be nearer to Grandma who was weak and approaching the age of eighty. They moved back to Warren County in 1919. Fortunately, the school situation had greatly improved there. When the family returned to Warren County, Brother James and I stayed behind. Both of us had jobs. About a year later, however, we too went back to Warren County.

My Decision to Enter the Ministry

One thing that always disturbed me during my boyhood days was the lack of a minister to visit the sick and bereaved, to help people with their problems, and to officiate at the burials of my grandparents and others. Papa was constantly called upon when such needs arose. No black minister lived in our community; those who served churches there lived elsewhere and commuted. Each of the black churches in the community had a service once a month and Sunday School each week. The lack of black clergymen in times of need and crises caused me to actually hate the ministry and ministers. I never knew the arrangements church officers and congregations made with their minister; I simply took it for granted that when sickness, grave problems, or death came, the minister should be there. I thought of ministers at that time as those primarily concerned with completing services, receiving money, eating and getting away as quickly as possible—a most unfavorable impression. Deep down in my heart I had no respect for them.

The fact that Papa, Mama and Grandpa enjoyed working for the church, even without financial return, made me feel deep down that there was another side to the ministry. Gradually, the thought came to me, "Why don’t you try to prepare yourself for this kind of work.” That thought lingered with me about two years before I took any concrete action. However, I did a lot of thinking and praying about it. Finally my mind was fully made up to try to prepare for the priesthood.

I had no priest to whom to talk, and I chose not to talk with my parents or anyone else about the matter. I knew, however, that I would have to go back to school and spend many years in preparation. The big question was, "Where will I get the money to finance my education?" I wanted to do it myself, unaided by my parents or anyone else. I knew no trade and had no skills to fall back on in getting a job. So, what was I to do? I prayed many
times that I would see a way open to get back to school to finance my education.

I thought of many kinds of jobs I might try to make enough money to see my way through, but none seemed acceptable. Finally, the idea of learning to barber came to me. Were I to learn the trade, I could work each evening until closing time and all day on Saturdays, and thus be able to make enough money to attend school. This idea came to me as a challenge and I accepted it wholeheartedly.

I decided to make known my plans to return to school. I told my brother James that I was going back to school as soon as I finished learning to barber and explained to him just how I planned to learn. He was so carried away with what I had to say that he too decided to learn the trade.

Both of us ordered a set of barber tools from Sears-Roebuck. Soon they arrived, and we began notifying the boys in the community that we were giving free haircuts to all who wanted them. They came in good numbers.

I began learning by cutting off all the hair and giving what I called a "skinny." Gradually I learned to shape the hair, leaving more on the head. From time to time I went to the barber shop to observe how the good barbers, especially Marion Madden, my Church School Superintendent, cut hair. I did this many times and returned to copy what I had observed. I followed this procedure for six or eight months. When I felt that I had made sufficient progress in the profession, I started charging fifteen cents for a hair cut. Not only did the boys in the neighborhood continue to come, but boys from other parts of the town came as well.

Finally, when I felt that I had mastered the trade and was reasonably sure of myself, I went downtown one Friday and applied for a job barbering. The barber looked at me and asked if I could barber. I replied, "Yes, I can." He then said, "Come back tomorrow morning and bring your tools. I can give you a job each Saturday, paying you sixty cents on each dollar you make."

I went down early the next morning and the barber explained the rules of the shop and assigned me a chair. When we closed that night, I had cleared $13.00. Few times in my life had I ever been happier, for I had never had as much as $13.00 in my hands before that I could call my own. I went back several Saturdays and made more and more money. Finally, I began to feel that I could barber as well as anyone in the world. I knew then that I was ready to return to school.
I went to my parents and told them I was ready to go back to school, and that I was prepared to work and would not need money from them. I wanted permission to leave home and get out on my own. Both were very happy; they granted me my freedom and wished me well. I never mentioned my plan to study and eventually enter the priesthood. The time was July 1923 and I was nineteen years of age. I prayed and asked God to help me both to get a job and to finish my education.
CHAPTER III
HENDERSON INSTITUTE,
HENDERSON, NORTH CAROLINA

I went to Henderson, North Carolina, the next day and got a job barbering at Cook’s Barbershop on Garnett Street. After working there for a little more than a month, I found the largest and best barber shop in Henderson. It was run by Thomas Rogers, who gave me a job there; for the next ten years I worked with him. I was determined to give each customer a good job, and that determination paid big dividends, for I soon had all the work I could do. My customers included both men and women, for at that time there were no beauty parlors for women. They came later.

Three months after arriving I enrolled at the Henderson Institute, a Presbyterian High School and eighth grade located about a mile from the barbershop. Since I had only finished the seventh grade, I entered the eighth grade. Mrs. Helena Harris had sent my transcript from Littleton, so I had no difficulty in entering. This was another happy day for me.

So now I was on my own to sink or swim. I had my job barbering and was now enrolled in school for the first time in three or four years. I prayed and asked God to help me to keep well, to keep up my barbering successfully and to make good in my school work. I was determined to succeed, if doing my part would bring success.

I did not know whether I would be permitted to work on my job in the city and live in the dormitory on campus. I went to Dr. Cotton, the principal, and told him about my situation—that I wanted to stay on the campus and be permitted to work evenings and Saturdays in order to pay my way through school. He was most gracious in giving me permission to work whenever and for as long as I cared, provided I did my school work well. He also complimented me for wanting to work my way through school. Also, Miss Warren, the matron of the men’s dormitory, readily gave me a key so that I could come and go as I wished. Now the way was opened for me to really get down to work. Nothing could have made me happier.

Henderson Institute was one of the best schools I have ever attended; the educational standard was the best in the state for blacks. The principal and teachers were well prepared to do their work, and all seemed tremendously interested in the welfare of the students.

There was a Y.M.C.A. on the campus, which I joined. From time to time, outstanding educators and speakers were brought to the campus to speak to the students and faculty. Their speeches were always inspiring.
and thought-provoking. We had the best football team in the state, the best debating team, and a fair basketball team. Students were expected to attend the Presbyterian Church there each Sunday morning and some evenings, although students of other denominations were permitted to attend their own churches.

**Daily Routine**

For the first two years, I lived in the men’s dormitory; for the last three years I lived in the city. On the campus we started the day with breakfast, followed by chapel and classes. We had to drill from chapel to classes and from class to class, with Mr. Adams calling the time: “Right, Left, Right, Left, etc.”

During one of the morning drills, just as my class came to the stairs, Jessie Somerville, a young man several steps ahead of me in line, reached down and stuck a long hat pin in my head, causing me to bleed. When I reached the classroom to which we were going, I found him sitting down. I went directly to him and gave him several blows on his face with my fists. Mrs. Gates, our English teacher, who was looking on, spoke up, “Odell, go straight to Dr. Cotton’s office and report to him what you have done.” I arose and immediately went, half afraid and fully angry. After entering his office and explaining just what took place, I expected to be sent home. He, however, looked at me and said, “Now, now, now, we don’t permit this kind of action here. You should have reported him to one of your teachers. Let’s not do that again. Go back to your class.” As I left, Dr. Cotton rose in my estimation, because he understood. He knew that Jessie, who was a member of his church, was the kind of nut that always picked on people. Best of all, Dr. Cotton was willing to give me a second chance. I shall always be grateful.

While I am on the subject of breaking rules, I may as well finish, for there were other occasions when I was caught red-handed. Once during a Friday Literary Program at which a student was singing, William Baxter took a sling shot and struck me on the side of my face. The blow was so sudden and so hard that I was almost stunned. I couldn’t say anything for fear of disturbing the program; I could only sit there in pain, getting angrier and angrier. As soon as the program was over and we had gone out on the grounds, I jumped on William and gave him a good beating with my fists. Mr. Adams, one of my teachers, was upstairs looking out of the window. He heard the fellow holler and called me to his room. He asked what had happened, and I told him that William Baxter had, from time to time, thrown rocks at me and other students on the way from school and that he had just hit my face with the sling shot. I was simply trying to stop him
from interfering with me. Mr. Adams looked at me and said, "I know Bill Baxter. He lives just in front of me. Should anything like that happen again, just report it. There is always someone here to handle cases like that." I thanked him and went home.

The third and last time I violated school rules didn't affect anyone but me. Early one morning one of my customers asked me if I would cut his hair before going to school. I agreed to do so and went to the shop where I did the job. Afterwards I knew I would have to rush to get to school on time. I ran practically all the way—about a mile distant. Our custom at the school was that every student had to be either in the building or on the porch when the last bell stopped ringing. Mr. Gregory always rang the bell, and Mr. Adams observed. In my case the bell stopped just as I got about two feet from the porch. When I entered the building, Mr. Adams met me and said, "Go home, sir." I tried to explain why I was late, but all I got from him was, "Go home, sir."

I was just about as angry and tired as I had ever been, but I went back to the barber shop and worked all day. The next day I got to school one hour before classes began. As I entered the building, Mr. Adams, who had also just entered the building, said to me, "Young man, I hated to send you home yesterday, but that is the rule, and we can't make any difference in the students. I see you made it this morning. Just keep it up. Being on time is part of your training." Really, all the hate I had for him left me and he rose in my estimation. I got the impression that though he was simply doing his duty in sending me home the day before, he really cared. I was never late again nor have I ever been late in my church services during my entire ministry.

Extracurricular Activities

During my first year at Henderson Institute, I started with the baseball team and also with the football team. I soon found that they took too much time from my barbering and quit both teams in order to settle down to barbering and attending classes. The fact that my teachers were capable and understanding made my work comparatively easy and enjoyable. I did attend practically all of the games held on the campus, the social functions, the Y.M.C.A. meetings, and the extra services.

One of the most memorable experiences I had in connection with the Y.M.C.A. was at an Annual Conference held at King's Mountain, North Carolina, at which delegates from all branches of the Y.M.C.A. in North Carolina met. This was most interesting—the first meeting of this kind that I had ever attended. There was a three or four day program with outstanding speakers and a variety of activities. A young white girl from Atlanta,
Georgia, listened to an address by Howard Thurman, a noted black speaker and educator and said to me, "This is my first visit to a conference like this. I have never heard a Negro speaker before. I didn’t know there were any. He is good." All of us thought so too. Such speakers came to our campus from time to time; they always brought good and inspiring messages.

My Future Wife

While home to see my parents one weekend, I attended a rural church. The church had no well, only a spring. When my brother-in-law and I went for a drink, we saw three young ladies standing and waiting for their turn with the dipper. One of them I had never seen before, but there was something about her that made her stand high in my estimation. I asked my brother-in-law, "Who is that young lady?" He didn’t know either. I decided to find out. I walked up to them and, looking at her, said, "Ladies, I am going to see that you get some water right away." I spoke to the fellow with the dipper, "Say friend, give these ladies some water," and he did. When we all had drunk and started back to the church, I walked with the young lady. I learned that her name was Lizzie Elnora Henderson and that she was also visiting her parents that weekend. They lived in Manson, North Carolina. She was a graduate of Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina, and was teaching in the public school in Henderson. From then on we became friends, and after a year we became engaged. I’ll say more about this later.

The Debating Team

During the fall of my senior year, I joined the debating team. There were about a dozen boys and girls interested at the beginning, but in the end there were only four of us—three young ladies and I. Jake Gaither, the football coach, was our coach. I had never tried to debate before, and I was somewhat skeptical about joining, but Coach Gaither encouraged me to come on in. He not only thoroughly trained us, but also provided the inspiration and enthusiasm to make us really enjoy it.

There were twenty-three black debating teams in the state of North Carolina that year. When all teams were ready, they met at A. and T. College in Greensboro, North Carolina, for the annual debate. The occasion was the greatest that I had experienced up to that time. Fortunately, our team won that night, giving Henderson Institute the James Dudley Cup for the first time in its history. Unfortunately, it was to be the last time. The debaters were Gladys Simmons and Venesse Reid (Negative); and Lora Zolicoffer and Odell G. Harris (Affirmative). We debated whether Congress should enact the McNary-Haugen Farm Relief Bill.
After the debate was over, the judges named the best debater of the evening. Of the ninety-two debaters present, the winner was Odell Greenleaf Harris. That was really the most inspiring moment in my life. It can be done.

Valedictorian Class of 1928

A few weeks after the debate and about a month and one-half before commencement, the Principal, Dr. Cotton, called me to his office. He told me that I had been chosen to be the valedictorian, because I had made the highest average in the senior class. He told me to begin preparing a speech for the occasion. I complied with his instructions and delivered the speech at the proper time.

I had really never thought of my grades, but, after receiving so many congratulations, I went to the Registrar’s Office for a transcript. They looked good, for I had made three Bs, six B-pluses and twenty-four As. I also received a scholarship to Knoxville College, Knoxville, Tennessee. That commencement was a happy day for me.

When I graduated, I had $1,000.00 in the bank which I had saved from barbering. I put many prayers and much hard work in my job, but it really paid off. It can be done.

After graduation, I began making plans to enter college. I made up my mind to enter St. Augustine’s College, Raleigh, North Carolina. I applied and was soon notified that my application had been accepted. They expected me to report in September, 1928.

Marriage

Miss Henderson and I decided to marry before I entered St. Augustine’s. We were married in Holy Innocents Episcopal Church in Henderson on August 5 by the Rev. Issac Wayne Hughes. It was a quiet wedding; only six witnesses—three from her family and three from mine—were present. We had agreed to continue as we were; she taught and lived at the place in which she had been rooming for some time; I continued my education at St. Augustine’s College, and then planned to enter Seminary. Each of us would support ourselves, but we would always be ready to help one another if needed. I arranged with Tom Rogers to keep my job of barbering open on Saturdays and planned to return to Henderson each weekend. Fortunately, I never spent one penny of my wife’s money on myself or my education.
CHAPTER IV
ST. AUGUSTINE’S COLLEGE,
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

When I arrived on the campus of St. Augustine’s College, I was surprised to see Frank Lewis, a former classmate at Henderson Institute. Neither of us knew that the other would be there. However, since we knew each other and both were strangers on the campus, we decided to room together. Soon we both were enrolled and assigned our room.

When I was settled, I went to Dean Boyer for permission to return to Henderson for work on Friday evenings after class. I promised that should my grades fall below B, I would voluntarily stop going. Before I could finish, he bluntly said, ‘‘No, you can’t go.’’ I then tried to explain to him that I could only stay in school if I worked my way through, that I could do it barbering, and that I had done so in high school. Again, he was very emphatic, ‘‘No, you can’t go.’’ I went to him first because he was black like I was, and because as dean he had the authority to grant me permission to go. I felt that he would better understand my economic condition. Since he didn’t, however, I went to the president, Dr. Edgar Goold, who was white.

As soon as I explained my situation to him—I did not tell him that I had gone to Dean Boyer—he gave me permission to go and work on weekends. I was very happy to have his permission, because I could not only work on Saturdays, but could also spend weekends with my wife.

I took a revolving chair with me to college and did some barbering in my room in the afternoons and nights. Soon I got another job taking clothes to the cleaners for teachers and students; I received twenty-five cents on every dollar’s worth of clothes taken and returned. With these three jobs, I felt certain that I could meet my financial obligations.

Soon, I began the daily routine of classes, chapel and other events, all of which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was quite exciting to have a racially mixed faculty. This was a new experience for me. President Goold was white, and so were Misses Snodgrass, Guernsey, Frost, and Bertha Richards, who headed the Bishop Tuttle School. These fine people and all of my black teachers—except Dean Boyer—were very nice and often went out of their way to help the students any way they could.

The campus was spacious and well-kept with several buildings sprawled over the campus. To the right was Taylor Hall, a building used for programs, recreation, and commencement exercises. To the left was St. Agnes Hospital, and a little farther down, the Bishop Tuttle School for the training of women church workers. Still farther down to the right was the library. To the far right was the beautiful stone chapel, and just in front of
the library was the Lyman Building, a large dormitory for male students. Behind the Lyman Building on the east was the dining room and kitchen. To the right of this was the girl's dormitory. To the south of the Lyman Building was the science building.

Chapel services were held daily before classes and on Sunday mornings. I attended the weekday services and on-campus football games, but missed all weekend activities, because I spent weekends in Henderson.

I was determined to make a good record both scholastically and otherwise. At that time, the college observed only one day for Christmas. My first Christmas came on a Tuesday. Before I left to go to Henderson the Friday evening before Christmas, I asked permission from Dean Boyer to be excused from school the following Monday—Christmas Eve—and told him that I would return to school on Wednesday. His answer was "No." So, I went to Henderson that Friday evening, and as usual, returned to school Sunday night. I left again for Henderson that Monday evening to spend Christmas with my wife.

**Another Job**

Mr. Hayes, who was the Superintendent of Grounds and Buildings, gave me a job helping with repairs. After working about two months without pay, I went to Mr. Hayes. He said the college was to pay me and the check would have to come through Dean Boyer's hand. I went to Dean Boyer and asked why I had not received my pay. His answer was, "I need someone to help me in my classroom, and I would like for you to take this job." I readily agreed to take it and notified Mr. Hayes that I would no longer be working for him. I thought Dean Boyer's job was a sort of promotion.

The dean explained that I was to keep a record of student attendance and absentees, and a few other things. I wondered why he offered me that job and wondered whether his attitude toward me was improving. At any rate, I hoped so. Soon I found just the opposite. After two more months I still had not been paid. I went to him for my money. His answer was, "You won't get any pay for the first year; pay begins with your second year." I couldn't believe it. However, I was afraid to stop for fear that he would take it out on me in my grades or otherwise. I found myself stuck with him, at least for the rest of the school year. I decided to go through with it. But I was really boiling inside.
A Real Clash with Dean Boyer

In my second year, Christmas came on Wednesday. In making my plans for the holiday, I thought of taking a whole week off. The college allowed students a number of days absence each semester, and I had not taken a day off, despite going back weekends to work. It seemed useless to travel to school Sunday night, to Henderson Tuesday evening, and back to school on Thursday. I decided to take the whole week off, whatever the consequences.

My big problem was getting permission from Dean Boyer to miss chapel services and classes. His permission was required of all students who planned to be absent. I knew he would not grant it, if he followed the usual pattern. I had to find a way. He had a rule that a student who missed chapel services and classes without his permission had to make seven copies of one of his favorite essays for each day’s absence. He usually kept the book with the essays in his desk. Since I had access to his room and desk, I got the book and made copies to cover the period of time I would be away. I returned the book with the completed essays to his desk and left.

When I returned after the week’s absence, he was furious. Calling me to his room, he asked about my absence and my failure to secure permission to leave. I told him that I thought it would be useless, as he had never granted any request I had made, and that I was willing to take the consequences for my action. Without any further words, he reached in his desk drawer, pulled out his book, and said to me, ‘‘For every day you were absent, make seven copies of this essay.’’ He indicated which one. Taking the book, I asked him, ‘‘Will this be all I have to do?’’ His answer was, ‘‘Yes.’’ I then said to him, ‘‘I have already made the copies, and they are in your desk drawer.’’ He reached in and pulled them out. He gave me a pretty nasty look, but said nothing. I left the room knowing that from then on I had my head in the lion’s mouth. I felt he would eventually get even with me, if he could. I was determined not to let it happen. I thought the only way to avoid clashing with him again would be for me to leave school at the end of my sophomore year. Keeping this in mind, I decided to do my best while there in my studies and otherwise.

Dean Boyer’s Chickens

It came to my attention that a group of students had a cookout each Friday evening in a cave at a rock quarry a distance from the college. Each Friday they took a hen from Dean Boyer’s yard for the meal. After the cookout, they left the feathers and bones of the hen on Dean Boyer’s porch. This continued for several months, until the last hen was taken from Dean Boyer’s yard.
Two of my best friends were members of the group; and they invited me to join them on one of the cookouts. I tried to find a way to refuse, telling them that I usually went to Henderson each Friday evening. They then said, "Don't worry about that. We'll set the cookouts for Thursday nights." Realizing that I would be able to do unto Dean Boyer before he did unto me, I agreed to go and help devour one of his hens. I went three times, knowing all the time that I was doing wrong, but it did me good to know that Dean Boyer's hens were involved. After the last hen was taken I stopped, feeling that I was soon leaving school on account of Dean Boyer.

Rand

Three students who had had too much to drink came to the first football game during the fall of my sophomore year. Two of the boys were upperclassmen and one, Rand, was a freshman who had been at St. Augustine's less than three months. It was against the rules for students to drink on campus, but it was no secret among the students that alcohol could be purchased from an upperclassman. I feel certain that the Dean of Men, who lived in the dormitory, also knew it.

School officials, for some reason best known to themselves, let the two upperclassmen off the hook and decided to make an example of Rand. They sent him home.

When I saw Rand getting ready to leave, I went to two of the school officials and told them that I didn't think it was fair to send him home, while letting the other fellows off. Rand was only following the older students. To my happy surprise, the officials changed their minds. Instead of sending Rand home, they decided to campus him for two weeks. I was glad they did not send him home, for he was a fine young man, but young and inexperienced.

A Tombstone and Flowers

The following Spring, three or four male students went to a nearby cemetery and took some fresh flowers that had recently been placed on graves. They also moved a tombstone and hid it in the woods. Some neighbors saw the students in the act and reported them to President Goold. Shortly thereafter, he called together the student body and questioned us about the flowers and the tombstone. No one seemed to know anything, so he dismissed us.

Several of us knew who did it, but no one divulged the information. After the meeting, however, I went to the three fellows who had taken the
flowers and moved the tombstone and told them to put them back. After I talked with them a few minutes, all three agreed. Neither the President nor the faculty ever knew who did it. I have always known that young people get a kick out of doing crazy things, but I have never been able to see any sense in taking flowers from a grave or moving a tombstone.

The College Club

After the incidents involving Rand and the three students who moved the tombstone, it occurred to me that the students, if united for the good of the college, could be of great help in solving problems. Therefore, I contacted some of the finest members of each of the classes to talk over the possibility of starting a student organization on the campus. We planned an organization consisting of two or more students elected by each class. Its purpose would be both to work with the faculty—three students would serve on a special committee with some faculty members—in solving student problems and to make suggestions for improving conditions on campus. I sold the administration on the idea.

I explained the idea to each class, and soon the students elected me to form "The College Club." As far as I know, this was the first student organization on the campus of St. Augustine's College. Shortly thereafter, we designated the three students from the College Club to join with some faculty members in the committee to deal with student problems. It was the school's first faculty and student organization. I do not know how long either the club or committee lasted, since I left St. Augustine's College after my sophomore year.

I did quite well in all of my work during my two years there. I had the respect of the students and of the faculty members, except for Dean Boyer, and my grades were good. Even Dean Boyer gave me a B+.

After commencement, I left St. Augustine's College for good and decided to finish my work in Petersburg, Virginia, at Bishop Payne Divinity School and Virginia State College.

Return to Henderson

I returned to Henderson and continued my barbering to earn money for my education in the fall. It was good to be home with my wife. I knew that soon I would be leaving again, not to St. Augustine's College, but for Petersburg, Virginia. I applied to Bishop Payne Divinity School and was
accepted. I decided to make the most of the summer by earning as much money as I could.

I did, however, decide to spend some money. I took $500.00 of the $1,000.00 saved while in high school and purchased a lot on Orange Street in Henderson with the hope of building there later on. This was the summer of 1930. In September, I left for Bishop Payne Divinity School in Petersburg, Virginia.
CHAPTER V
BISHOP PAYNE DIVINITY SCHOOL,
PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

I arrived at Bishop Payne Divinity School in September 1930. It was a small Episcopal theological seminary for black students. All faculty members were white, except the warden who was black. All were scholars, dedicated to their work. The Seminary had a three-year course for juniors, middlers, and seniors. The classes were small; there were only five juniors in the year I entered. Most of the classes were held in the morning—never later than 1:00 p.m.

We read Morning Prayer Service each day in the chapel before classes, except on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays. The warden either presided at the services himself or appointed a senior or middler for whom these services were a part of practice work. Each Wednesday morning there was a service of Holy Communion, and on Thursday evenings at 4:00 p.m. a senior student had a special service and preached. Sunday mornings were free for the students to attend St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in the city. On Sunday afternoon, the students conducted a Sunday School on the campus of the Seminary. Usually, fifty to eighty-five boys and girls attended. The students also did some missionary work in visiting and leading worship at the jails, and the city home. I participated in and thoroughly enjoyed all these activities.

Soon after I was settled at the Seminary, I made arrangements with the dean to return to Henderson on weekends to continue my barbering in order to be able to meet my expenses. This was my first experience attending an institution operated primarily by whites for blacks. I soon became aware of an old practice that had been in operation during and since "Antebellum Days." It was this: students constantly reported to the dean whatever went on among fellow students. These student reporters we nicknamed "Stool Pigeons." We observed that they always received special favors from the dean. I mention this because I faced the same kind of thing after my ordination to the priesthood. In each of the churches or institutions I served, I found one who reported to the bishop. It never lasted long, however, because once the culprit was discovered and dealt with, he was as effective as a snowball in a fiery furnace. I had no more trouble with stool pigeons. This reporting was the only thing that really bothered me during my stay at Bishop Payne. I could live with other things even though I would have liked to have seen some things done differently.

I thoroughly enjoyed all of my subjects and my professors. I was determined to excel in all of my work. Each day after lunch, I went directly to
my room or to the library, where I thoroughly prepared my work for the next day. I also arranged to take college courses at Virginia State College in Petersburg and to have my credits transferred to St. Augustine’s College. Therefore, in the afternoons I took courses at Virginia State College. I found myself with quite a heavy load.

My three years at Bishop Payne were busy years, but I enjoyed all of my work. I went to Henderson on weekends to barber and to spend some time at home with my wife. I also learned that I could get a scholarship from the Evangelical Education Society, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They sent me $50.00 a month for my three years in the Seminary. I paid all of it back after I started to work, and I still send them a contribution each year. Their help meant so much to me in meeting my financial obligations.

When I finished my middle year in May 1932, I took a taxi to the train station, hoping to catch a train home. To my disappointment, the train left just as the taxi drove up to the station. I had to wait until the next day for a train. I caught it, and within a few hours I was home. As I approached the house I noticed that it was all lit up and that three or four cars were parked in front. When I went in, I found the doctor and nurse there. My wife was delivering her first baby, Odell Greenleaf Harris, Jr. I was very happy to see my dear wife and to see our son for the first time. This was May 30, 1932.

During my middle year at Payne I went through the proper procedures and the Rt. Rev. Edwin A. Penick, D.D., Bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, made me a Candidate for Holy Orders. During the month of April in my senior year, I was instructed by the Board of Examining Chaplains of the Diocese of North Carolina to report to Greensboro, North Carolina, for examinations for both the diaconate and the priesthood. I reported at the proper time and passed both examinations successfully. There were two other candidates—both white—from other seminaries. When the examinations were over, the Chairman of the Board said to me, ‘‘You have passed both examinations very satisfactorily.’’ That was the happiest day for me since entering the Seminary. I returned to Bishop Payne and reported my success to the faculty and students; they, too, rejoiced with me.

I also completed my college work at Virginia State College with all As and Bs. My credits were sent to St. Augustine’s College which awarded me my A.B. degree.

About a month before commencement in my senior year at the Seminary, Dean Ribble notified me that my average grade for the three years at Bishop Payne was 95%. He said that was the highest average on record in the Seminary and that I had been chosen by the faculty to be the Valedictorian of my class. Again, this was good news. I began preparing my speech, using the subject: ‘‘The Challenge of the Hour.’’ I delivered it
during the commencement exercises. After commencement exercises, I went home for good. I think I was the happiest person in the whole world and the most fortunate, for I had been able by the help of God to successfully finish my training for the priesthood. I really thanked God for seeing me through. It can be done.
CHAPTER VI
ORDINATION TO THE DIACONATE

A few days after arriving home I received a letter from my bishop saying that he would ordain me to the diaconate in All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Warrenton, North Carolina, on June 11, 1933 at 11:00 a.m. I then began making preparation. Before I could realize it, the day had arrived. Friends from many places came, as did my parents and relatives. The Rev. F. H. U. Edwards of Oxford, North Carolina, preached the sermon, and Bishop Penick ordained me. This was a great day for me, for I had now taken the first real step toward the priesthood—that of a deacon. Again, I had to thank God for bringing me to that point. It can be done.

First Assignment of Work

At the ordination service, the bishop assigned me to a cure of three churches: All Saints’, Warrenton, St. Anna’s Church, Littleton; and St. Luke’s Church, Warren County. Both All Saints’ and St. Anna’s Church were in dire need of repair. I lived in Henderson for the first three months after ordination because repairs were needed on the rectory in Warrenton. I went by bus each Sunday and many weekdays to my churches.

I agreed with the officials and the bishop on a salary of $1,000.00 a year with meals after each service. All went well at my first Sunday at All Saints’ Church. It was my first service, and it was well attended. After service, I had my first meal with Mrs. Berta Plummer, and then returned on the bus.

End of Barbering Career

The week that I began at All Saints’ I went back to the barbershop where I had been working for the past ten years. I thanked Thomas Rogers for permitting me to work with him. I told him I was giving up barbering because I had accomplished what I set out to do. I had used the trade to prepare myself for my life’s work—the priesthood.

I gave him some of my barber tools, but most I took with me. From then on the only barbering that I did was for my son, my father, and a few other special friends.

Learning to barber and following the trade for thirteen years had proved to be a great blessing to me personally, for without it I don’t think I could have ever finished my education. The blessing extended far beyond me, for it also proved to be a blessing to three of my brothers. Two of them
followed the trade until they retired and the other used it as I did to prepare himself for his life's work.

The next Sunday I returned to All Saints' Church for my second service. The attendance was good, and so was the service; but no plans had been made for my meal. While packing my vestments, I overheard the ladies discussing whose turn it was to serve me the meal. I got the impression that it was too much of a burden for them to both provide the meal and attend the service. I just knocked on the door, went into the room, and said that I had overheard them discussing about the meal. I told them to forget it in the future; I would get my own meal when I got home. After a few visits, I returned home.

My First Car

The next Monday I went to a friend, who was also a member of All Saints' Church. His name was Parker Fitts, and he was one of the best mechanics in the city. I told him that I wanted to buy a used car, and that I would like for him to look out for a good one for sale. The man with whom he worked sold cars. At noon on the following Saturday Parker came to me and said that he had just what I wanted. As soon as I saw it, I really liked it. I bought the car, but I didn't know how to drive. Parker drove me out of the city limits. He stopped the car and explained just how it operated—how to handle the clutch, the brakes, etc.—and told me to drive it back to town. He got out of the car and I drove the car home to finish my day's work. The car was a Ford with a rumble seat.

The next day I drove it to St. Luke's Church. This was my first service there. It was well-attended, and I thought the service was good. When it was all over, I decided to drive to my wife's parents' home, which was about fifteen miles distance. She had gone to visit them for the weekend. She was utterly surprised to see me with the car. We had discussed my getting one, but neither of us knew it would be so soon. She liked it as well as I did. From then on I drove to my churches and to visit some parishioners each Sunday.

Repairing and Painting Church Buildings

The Vestry of All Saints' Church took so long to get the rectory ready for occupancy that I asked them to get paint, materials, and nails, and did the repairs and painting myself. I didn't want to do it, but it had to be done. Finally, the job was finished, and I moved in.

Both All Saints' and St. Anna's churches also were in poor repair. They needed new roofs and good paint jobs inside and out. We began with St.
Anna's. After my second service there, I asked the vestry to authorize the needed work. The congregation and vestry members made the usual excuses about small membership, lack of money, and other expenses. I asked them to find out how many shingles and nails would be needed for the roof and how much paint would be needed for two coats. I asked that they have the figures ready for the next Sunday. All agreed.

The next Sunday the vestry brought the figures and presented them to the congregation after the service. We asked everyone present to give money to cover the cost of the materials. Soon all of the money was collected. The vestry purchased the shingles, nails, and paint. The men in the congregation planned to meet the following Wednesday morning at 8:00 a.m. to put the roof on the church building. I asked that those who attended that Sunday contact the male members who were not present to try to get them to come also. All of us were to bring saws, hammers, etc.

At 8:00 a.m. that Wednesday morning I was utterly surprised to see not only members, but also friends. All the materials were there. We climbed up and soon ripped off all the old shingles. When noon came, there was another surprise in store for us. The ladies of the church served dinner to all the workers. After the meal we patched the roof boards and added the new shingles. The job was finished by 5:00 p.m. Our only cost was for the materials. When the job was finished, I thanked all and went home.

All of the men agreed to meet the following Wednesday at the church at 8:00 a.m. to paint the building. There was great enthusiasm and interest in the project. Since not more than two or three had had any experience in painting, we hoped to learn something about painting while adding the first coat. After thoroughly scraping off the old paint, we began painting the rear of the building and the sides. When we had finished, we knew it was a bad-looking job. We all laughed at it, but decided to make the next coat better. Again, the women served dinner. By six or six-thirty that evening the paint job was finished. It really looked much better. All of us were happy. I thanked them for a job well done, and left for home.

On the next Sunday the members and friends who helped us came out in good numbers to celebrate the improvements.

The next job was All Saints' Church. When we had raised enough money to repair the roof of the church building, we hired a contractor to do the job. After that, we raised money for paint for the interior and the exterior of the building. A white friend had offered to donate the needed paint, but I thanked him and told him that I was trying to get the members to do the job themselves. I said that if we ran short of paint later I would let him know. Fortunately, we were able to finish the work ourselves. We also added some concrete steps for the church building and rectory, and sidewalks.
Confirmations and Baptisms

Soon after moving to Warrenton, I began preparing a class for confirmation. The first class which consisted of seven adults met in September, 1933. My darling wife, whom I had for a long time wanted to come into the church with me, was a member of the class. She was a Baptist when we married and was one of the finest Christians I have ever known. I was foolish enough, however, to want her to come in the Episcopal Church with me. I did not think she would be a better Christian, but I thought it looked bad to others for me to be an Episcopal priest with a Baptist wife. I also thought of my going to one church and her to another each Sunday morning. It just didn't add up. Yet, I had decided never to try to persuade her to change churches. I would not even mention the subject, unless she brought it up. She always went with me to church and was most cooperative. Then suddenly one day she said to me, "Odell, I believe I'll come in the church with you. I like the services, and I like the people." Those were the most beautiful words I had heard since she promised to marry me. I told her so.

The class met eighteen or twenty times for instruction. Bishop Edwin A. Penick of the Diocese of North Carolina came for the confirmation service on February 25, 1934.

During our four years in that cure, I baptized thirty-three persons and presented thirty-three candidates for confirmation—an average of eight persons baptized and eight persons confirmed each year. Among the thirty-three persons were twenty-four adults. One-half of them were men. I will say a word about four of these and about one of the women. I shall call them J.F., S.S., J.J., B.P. and S. or Sis.

J.F. was a retired Navy man, who had spent thirty years in the service. He was tall, handsome, and about fifty-seven years of age. He had travelled extensively and was very intelligent, but was considered to be an avowed atheist. He had an unusually big vocabulary of curse words and was a past master at sprinkling a few of them in conversation. He had a fine Christian wife and two teenage boys, but he had never professed to be a Christian. He was not baptized or confirmed and did not attend any church.

From time to time, I saw him on the streets and struck up conversations with him. I had him tell me about his experiences in the Navy and about his travels over the world. He mentioned that though he visited many churches and cathedrals in his travels as an adult he never saw a church that he cared to join. He did say, however, that he had attended Sunday School at All Saints' during his boyhood days, and recalled those days as some of the happiest days of his life. I invited him to come to worship with
us at All Saints’ Church, and finally he came. After several visits and many conversations, he said that he wanted to be baptized and confirmed. I instructed him about the meaning of the Christian life, and the need for repentance, forgiveness, etc., and I baptized him. I later presented him for confirmation. He became one of the most faithful members of All Saints’ Church. He made and paid his financial pledge, and attended services regularly as long as I was there.

One day he and his wife paid us a visit. His wife told me that from the day J.F. was baptized and confirmed, he was a changed man. During their whole married life up to that point she had never seen him pray or ask a blessing at meal time. After he became a member of the church, however, he had now done those things. Their home was much happier. I was indeed glad to have had a hand in helping him to make the change. So much then for J.F.

Now about S.S. He was a one-armed taxi driver about fifty-five years of age. One Sunday he brought a carload of people to church and remained through the service. When I greeted him at the door after church, he said to me, ‘‘This is my first time in this church. I have never seen a service like this before. I like it and would like to join.’’ I expressed how pleased I was to hear that and told him to come back so that we could talk about membership.

Soon afterwards I had several talks with him about the church, the Christian life, baptism, etc. He came to church regularly and said he wanted to be baptized. After we finished baptismal instruction, I baptized him. He joined the next confirmation class and was confirmed. He, too, became a faithful member.

Now for M.J. He was thirty-seven years of age. He had lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, more than twenty years, but returned to Warrenton to visit his parents who lived next door to the rectory. His father was a Baptist, and his mother and sisters were Methodist, but M.J. was not a member of any church. He was a carpenter and, while visiting, was making repairs on the family house.

His mother came to me one day and said that she was greatly disturbed that her son was a sinner who had never been converted and baptized. She asked me to talk with him. I found him to be a very likeable person. He was tall and handsome, but liked to drink. He neither drank, however, at his parents’ home nor appeared there while under the influence.

I did find opportunity to talk with him several times. We talked about the Christian life, and how it began and grew. We spoke about the things that impeded its progress.

After a few weeks, he told me that he liked the church. He had attended an Episcopal Church in Philadelphia from time to time and now
wanted to become a Christian and be baptized. He started coming to All Saints' Church and joined the class of those preparing for baptism. He was baptized and later confirmed. He became a faithful member of All Saints' Church and remained so as long as he was in Warrenton. He eventually returned to Philadelphia. I never heard from him again.

Now for B.P. He was about fifty-five years of age and married. He and his wife had two grown daughters. He had been a Methodist, but had slacked off several years before I met him. His big problem was drinking. One day, out of the clear blue sky, he asked me to help him. He took a bottle of whiskey from his pocket, held it up, and began to tell me how alcohol was ruining him and his family relationships. It also had led him to do other things that were hurting himself as well as others. As he talked, it became more and more evident that he had been drinking.

After listening to him, I asked the following question: "Do you think it is possible for you to cut down on the number of drinks you take each day until you are able to control your drinking?" He said he didn't know, but would try. I then said to him, "Let me help you cut down; give me the bottle. I can keep it for you until you really have to have a drink. Just promise me that you will not take a drink elsewhere until I see you again. Will you do it?" His answer was, "Yes, I will try." I then told him to pray seriously to God for help in stopping his drinking. He promised and left my study.

About a week and a half later he came back, saying that he just had to have a drink. I gave him his bottle and he took a good swallow. I asked if he had had a drink since I saw him last, and he answered, "No." After we talked a while, he left.

About two weeks later he returned for another drink. He took another good swallow and left. It was approximately a month before he returned again. He drank all that was left. He said that he did not intend to buy any more and that he would like to join the Episcopal Church.

I told him about the confirmation class that was starting soon. He joined the class and began attending services at All Saints' Church. When the bishop came, he was confirmed with the others. He remained faithful during the last two and one-half years I was there. During this time, I neither heard of nor saw him under the influence of alcohol. Like J.F., S.S. and M.J., B.P. became one of the best members of All Saints' Church. The four also brought some of their friends to church.

I would also like to mention one of the women at All Saints'. S. or Sis was another person who changed for the better after I spent a little patient time with her. Sis lived just three doors from the rectory. She was a member of my church, but had not been for a long time. People in the community believed she was both selling liquor and operating a house of ill repute. Soon after I moved to Warrenton, I myself noticed men from all
walks of life entering her house—even some of my members and vestrymen.

I found Sis’s real name on All Saints’ membership list. I knew I had a job to do, but didn’t know how to do it or even how to begin. One of the older members of the church called me aside one Sunday and said, “Father Harris, there is a house down the street that has a bad name. Sis, who runs it, is a member of this church, but is not active. Don’t you be caught there. No decent person would want to be caught there.”

My reply to her was, “Thank you very much for trying to keep me from contamination, but I am quite sure I can take care of myself and still do my work. I have a responsibility to all of my members, and I intend to do my job. In the final analysis, I shall have to decide where to go and where not to go. Just leave that to me. You have brothers who go there. Other men of this church, as well as men from other churches in Warren-ton, go there. If you want to do something about this problem, work on them.”

I decided to make a round in visiting all of my members, including Sis. When I arrived at her house, Sis greeted me at the door as courteously as any other member and invited me into the living room. As I sat down someone called her name. She excused herself and went out. I assumed it had something to do with her “business.” Soon she returned and apologized for having to leave. Then she said, “Rev. Harris, you ain’t no fool; I know you understand.” I replied, “No, I don’t understand, and I didn’t come here to understand. In looking over the list of members, I saw your name. I am trying to get around to see all of my members. So, I am here. I have been here three weeks and haven’t seen you at church. This is the first time I’ve seen you. I want you to promise me three things: First, that you will come to church next Sunday, and will do your best to come back each Sunday thereafter; second that you will make a financial pledge to your church and pay it; and third, that you will work in the church along with the other women.” She answered, “Let me think about it.” My reply was, “Think about it as much as you want to, but I shall be looking to see you Sunday. Please bring your pledge.” That Sunday she came and brought her pledge. The amount was larger than that of any other woman. She came regularly after that and paid her pledge during the four years I was there. I baptized five or six persons formerly connected with “Sis’s” business.

Less than a year after Sis had started back to church, Mrs. Jenkins, a neighbor whose house was between the rectory and Sis’s, came to me and said, “I have good news for you. Sis had just told me how much you have helped her and how nice you have been to her in bringing her back into the church. She says your sermons have been helpful to her. Her conscience
has been bothering her so much that she closed up her business for good.’” Later, I found this to be true. It made me very happy. This same Mrs. Jenkins said to me on another occasion, “Rev. Harris, if you don’t ever do any more work in Warrenton, you have already done more than any other minister who has served here. You made Sis close up her place, and got J.F., S.S., and M.J. in the church. They were all old rusty men, and no other preacher could get them to change.” I thanked her, for it made me feel very good. I was thankful to have had a hand in helping these people whose lives changed for the better. It can be done.

First Diocesan Council

I attended my first Diocesan Council in 1934 in Christ Church, Raleigh, North Carolina. I was just a deacon, fresh out of seminary. I had been thoroughly drilled at Bishop Payne in the fact that the Episcopal Church was the one HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH. I swallowed it whole and really believed it. To my dismay and utter surprise, however, the ushers at Christ Church directed all blacks to the balcony. At the opening service, all blacks were in the balcony and all whites in the nave of the church.

At the closing of the council I went to Bishop Penick and said, “I was really shocked and surprised that you would permit the Negro priests to be sent to the balcony while the white priests and laymen occupied seats in the nave of the church. This is contrary to all that we were taught at seminary about the ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH.” He looked at me with as pious an expression as that bishop could muster and said, “Well, no one else has raised any objection.” (I am sure he was right on that point, for the black priests were of the “old school”—whatever that may have meant.) I said to him, “If this is the way it will be in the future, I don’t ever intend to come to another council.” He looked at me as if I were crazy. I meant, however, what I said. I did attend three more Diocesan Councils in the Diocese of North Carolina, but I never again went to the balcony. At my first council meeting, I decided never to accept segregation in any church affairs. I have lived up to that decision up until now.

Some White Friends in Warrenton

One night about 3:00 p.m. my wife, Lizzie, became quite ill. She had never been physically strong, but up to that time, we had not needed a physician. I tried to get the only black physician in Warrenton on the phone, but could not. Finally, I gave up, and called Dr. Pete. He was an
elderly white physician. He answered the phone and said, "I will be right over." In a few minutes he was there. He gave my wife some medicine, which cleared up whatever was wrong with her. After he had finished, I asked what he charged. His answer was, "You don't owe me anything. If you or your wife ever need me again, just give me a ring." I shall always be grateful to him.

Stephen Burrough was a white man who ran a large grocery store in Warrenton. He was a member of the white Episcopal Church there. I purchased my groceries at this store. He and his clerks were friendly. After he learned that I was priest-in-charge of All Saints' Church, he began asking questions about the work.

On my first Christmas Eve there, a delivery man brought a small truckload of groceries of all kinds, including a turkey, ham and many other nice things. He said, "A friend sent them." I asked who it was, but he simply repeated, "It was a friend of yours." After the man had brought the groceries into the kitchen, I went to Stephen Burrough's store and asked whether he sent them. He smiled and said, "Yes, I sent them. I just wanted to do a little something to help you and your family. Have a good Christmas." I thanked him and left. Deep down in my heart, I was most grateful to him.

Each of the following Christmas Eves, that same truck came filled with groceries, but each time it was a different white friend who purchased the groceries from Stephen Burrough's store and sent them to me without any name. When I went to the store to find out who sent them, Stephen Burrough simply said, "A friend who has a lot of respect for you." Later, I learned one of them was an elderly white lady. I went and thanked her.

Our Daughter Marion's Birth

My wife Lizzie awoke at about 2:30 a.m. on April 30, 1936, with severe pains—labor pains. I immediately called Dr. Haywood, who was at that time a member of my church. He rushed over, and, after examining her, said that she was about to give birth to a baby. He took both of us to Jubilee Hospital in Henderson, which was around fifteen miles away. About 5:00 a.m. that morning Lizzie gave birth to our second child, Marion Elizabeth. As soon as the nurse notified me, I went to see Lizzie; I saw a smiling wife and a bald-headed little baby girl. We were very happy to have two children, Odell and Marion, for Lizzie had been told by her physician years before we married that she would not be able to bear children. Each time she became pregnant, she became quite ill. After Marion's birth she had to give up her teaching position in Henderson. She was never able to return to it. From that time until her death on June 22, 1973, she was under the
doctor's care. She was never fully well, but she had many good days.

Before Marion's birth Odell, Jr. had been staying on weekdays with my parents in Warren County. Lizzie was teaching in Henderson and only coming home on weekends. When Lizzie gave up her teaching position, however, we decided to bring Odell, Jr. home for good. For the first time since our marriage, we decided to settle down as a family. We were very happy.

**Black Community Center and Library**

When we first moved to Warrenton, the city public library was for whites only. No blacks could go in the comparatively small frame building. The Rev. Gillis Cheek, who was a black Baptist minister, met with other black people from Warrenton and Warren County and decided to build a nice community center with ample space for a good library. We purchased a nice large lot on Franklin Street one block from All Saints' Church. We secured the service of an expert brickmaker. He sampled the soil in many places in the county and located some property that had all the soil he needed. It belonged to an elderly black lady who was very much interested in the project. She gave her permission to use as much of the soil as was needed—free of charge. We assembled as many men as possible to dig the soil and make the bricks. We had no problem in getting enough men to help. The only person who received pay was the expert brickmaker.

We secured an architect to draw plans for the center. From his sketches we knew about how many bricks we would need. In a short time we had made and hauled them to the lot for the building. We hired a contractor to do the building. The black churches in Warrenton and the county raised the money needed to do the job. In a comparatively short time he had completed the building. Black people, with some help from a few well-wishing white friends, paid him in full. The completed building had space for a library, rooms for group meetings, toilets, office space, a large room for community gatherings, and two rooms available for rent to some kind of business. There was no place in Warrenton for whites comparable to it. We got books for the library and furnished the rooms.

It was just at this time that I received a call from Bishop Payne Divinity School, Petersburg, Virginia, to become warden and professor of New Testament Greek. As far as I know, the Rev. Mr. Cheek and all other interested parties were quite successful in bringing the center and library to full fruition. I was very happy to have had a part in the digging of the soil for the bricks. It can be done.

During my stay at All Saints' Church, I had intended both to serve well as rector and to share in the leadership of the black community wherever
and whenever it was needed. I left with the satisfaction of knowing I had done so.

I talked with my wife about the call to Bishop Payne Divinity School. Then I made a trip to Petersburg to learn more about the work there. After doing this, I felt that I should accept the call. I notified the Bishop of my intention to leave at the end of six months. After clearing the matter with him, I notified both of my congregations. Together, we took steps to bring our work to a close, to pay all bills, to baptize all candidates for baptism, and to prepare and present candidates for confirmation to the bishop by the middle of August 1937. The only bill that remained unpaid was $75.00 of my salary. The treasurer promised to send it but never did. This was the only unpaid bill of any church I have ever served. After getting matters cleared up, we moved to Petersburg to begin our new work.
CHAPTER VII
WARDEN OF BISHOP PAYNE DIVINITY SCHOOL

In the last week of August 1937, we moved to Petersburg, Virginia, where I was to serve as warden and professor of Old Testament of Bishop Payne Divinity School. Bishop Payne was the only Episcopal seminary for black men preparing for the ministry. In the spring of 1878 a young black man, James S. Russell of Mecklinburg County, Virginia, had contacted the Rt. Rev. Frances M. Whittle, Bishop of the Diocese of Virginia. Russell had told the bishop of his desire to enter the Episcopal ministry. The Virginia Theological Seminary did not accept black students at the time but the trustees of the school agreed to establish a branch of the Seminary for black students in connection with St. Stephen’s Normal and Industrial School in Petersburg. It started with one professor, Dr. Spencer, and one student, James S. Russell. The school grew to become the Bishop Payne Divinity School. For many years the trustees of Virginia Theological Seminary contributed to the new branch of the Seminary. It was here at Bishop Payne that a vast majority of the black Episcopal priests were trained.

At the time of our arrival, the campus was located in the 400 block of South West Street. It occupied eight lots—four on the south side and four on the north side of the street. On the south side was Whittle Hall, a large brick building with library, classrooms, auditorium, student rooms, and a large hall. On the north side of the street there were three buildings: Emmanuel Chapel; the warden’s house, which was a frame building with eight rooms; and Russell Hall, named for the first student, James S. Russell. There were several student rooms in the second story of Russell Hall. The kitchen, dining room, and another large room were also located in the building.

My job there was that of warden and professor. As warden, I was responsible for arranging all religious services, supervising the students, purchasing supplies for the Seminary, and superintending student clinical training. As professor, I taught three classes a day of New Testament Greek and Pastoral Care.

The General Program

The day began with worship each morning at Bishop Payne. There was a service of Morning Prayer Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, and we celebrated Holy Communion on Wednesday and Friday. We also had Evening Prayer and sermon on Thursdays at 4:30 p.m. Prior to my arrival, it had been customary for the warden to preside at all morning services.
with the assistance of students who were in their senior year. I made a few changes, however. I asked the other professors to take turns in having services also. This worked beautifully.

Chapel services not only provided an opportunity for faculty members and students to worship together, but it gave the students an opportunity to practice reading and preaching. Senior students preached to the student and faculty congregation. Their only outside practice preaching at that time was at the city home and the jails, where they led religious services under the supervision of the warden. In order to expand the number and variety of experiences in preaching and lay reading open to the students, I arranged for one additional field site. Central State Hospital had no chaplain or religious services for patients. I asked the Superintendent, Dr. D. Brent, to permit us to lead worship there once a week. He graciously agreed and provided a spacious room with ample seats. He also arranged for a lady to play a piano for our services.

On Friday evenings, I took the seniors and middler students to service with the patients at Central State. At first I conducted the services: later, I had the students share with me. Finally, all services except the Communion service at which I presided were turned over to the seniors. I arranged a schedule for the whole school year, assigning one student for each service. From time to time, I met with these students and discussed their work there. This plan continued for the first six or seven years I was at Bishop Payne Divinity School.

I also arranged for some student parochial work. Archdeacon Bravid W. Harris assigned students to some of the vacant churches in the diocese. I supervised students who worked in two or three such congregations. There was a small financial stipend for the students who served in these parishes. This arrangement proved helpful both to the students and to the congregations.

**Graduate Work at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary**

From the very beginning of my work at Bishop Payne I planned to continue my own education by taking every opportunity that presented itself. I spent three or four summers and one semester during the regular academic year studying at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In time I earned the M.A. degree with thirty-eight additional hours of credit. It can be done.
Financial Aid for Students

Some students came to the Seminary with little or no financial aid. In several cases, the school gave them jobs. They fired the furnace, kept the grounds and buildings, or worked in the city. Some also qualified for scholarships from one of three societies that provided them for worthy theological students. No worthy student was ever turned away from school because of financial reasons. City students and those of other denominations were permitted to take courses free of charge. Most of these were special students who took only what courses they felt they needed. After finishing their studies special students received certificates instead of diplomas and degrees. Several ministers in the Petersburg area took advantage of the offer to improve their education. There were only three of these students who took the full course and received diplomas.

Practically all of our students did exceptionally well in their examinations with the Boards of Examining Chaplains in their dioceses. I never heard of a student’s failing any of these examinations. They measured favorably with the white students who attended the so-called best seminaries in the church.

A Comparison of the Duties and Salary of the Warden and the White Professors

The warden was the only faculty member who resided on the campus. The others commuted each day for classes. This had been the procedure since the Seminary moved to South West Street in 1889. The salary of the warden had also been less than that of the white professors, even though the warden had three or four times as much work to do. Their work usually consisted of two or three hours’ teaching daily, while the warden not only taught, but was also responsible for the oversight and discipline of the students, the chapel services, the purchasing for the seminary, the arranging for practical work for the students, and even the fund-raising for the seminary.

The Passing of Dean Ribble

Just before commencement of my second or third year at Payne, Dean Frederick J. R. Ribble, D.D., died. The board of trustees met and elected a faculty member, the Rev. Pearson Sloan, to serve as dean. He held this position until 1942. At its meeting in 1942, the board elected the Rev. Robert A. Goodwin to succeed Sloan as dean. Goodwin was the first dean in the long history of the Seminary with Christian attitudes and actions on the race question. All the other white professors and the members of the
board of trustees seemed fully convinced that the black man was inferior to the white. They did a great deal for blacks, but expected them to stay in their place. This was the prevailing view held by the whites from the time that America began. Dean Robert A. Goodwin, in contrast, saw the black man as a brother and he worked with him as a brother.

The dean was the faculty member who met with the board of trustees. He—never the warden—made reports for the Seminary, and submitted financial requests. The only way the warden or any alumnus could make requests to the board was through the dean.

As warden I took advantage of this. I took figures on the differential in salaries between the warden and the white professors, and their respective job descriptions, to the dean. I requested that he ask the trustees to give the warden the same salary as the other professors and extra pay for his additional duties. He gladly agreed. Fortunately for me, the desirable changes were made. This was the first time in the history of Bishop Payne Divinity School that the salaries of faculty members were equalized.

Black Members of the Board of Trustees

My next goal was to get some blacks on the board of trustees. I talked with Dean Goodwin about the need for blacks on the board of trustees. He went to the board and sold the idea to them. Soon we had three blacks on the board of trustees. They, in turn, helped to get other blacks on the board. The number of black trustees eventually reached seven.

More Black Professors

I also felt we needed more black professors on the faculty. The black trustees, the warden, and the alumni all stressed the need of more black professors. Soon we had three other black faculty members: Dr. Joseph Nicholson, Dr. Edgar C. Young, and the Rev. John C. Davis.

At about the same time, we made changes in the curriculum so as to add a Department of Christian Education for the training of young women as church workers.

Two of our Biggest Problems

One of our biggest problems at Payne was the recruiting of a sufficient number of students. The normal entrance requirement—college graduation and diocesan postulancy—limited the number of potential students. Non-college graduates were admitted only if they could pass an entrance examination. Prior to my joining the faculty, many of these non-college gradu-
ates had been admitted. A majority of the students at Bishop Payne were alumni of either St. Augustine's College, Raleigh, North Carolina, or St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville, Virginia, and neither awarded degrees before 1930. St. Augustine's College awarded its first degree in 1931. St. Paul's awarded its first somewhat later.

There were other reasons for the difficulty in recruiting students for Payne. Some of the white seminaries, especially in the North, had begun to take a few black students. Some of the best qualified students went to those seminaries. Also, blacks were not going into the Episcopal Church in large numbers. Bishop Payne found difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of the best qualified students.

Our second greatest problem was economic. Practically all educational institutions for blacks found it difficult to get sufficient financial support; Bishop Payne was no different. At that time, all of the members of the Board of Trustees were white southerners, who were very conservative in their views toward blacks and did little to encourage white churches in the South to contribute toward the support of Bishop Payne. Hence, adequate funds for support were hard to come by.

The trustees considered moving the Seminary to the campus of St. Augustine's College, Raleigh, North Carolina, in order to merge the two institutions. They thought that it would be more economical to operate the Seminary in connection with the college. They also felt that the proximity of the Seminary to the college would possibly encourage more college students to enter. Practically all of the trustees bitterly opposed the black postulants going to northern seminaries; the farther south the seminary was, the less the black graduates would be inclined to go north to work. These Southern Bishops did not want their black boys to breathe any northern air, lest they become dissatisfied with the GOOD OLD SOUTH where they were happy and content. This was in keeping with the thinking of that day. The idea of moving the Seminary was most pleasing to all of them. A vast majority of the Alumni of Bishop Payne, however, bitterly opposed the idea of moving the Seminary farther south.

I vividly remember a commencement exercise at Bishop Payne during which one participant prayed fervently that God would direct the hearts and minds of all concerned to move the Seminary to Raleigh. The priest who took the final prayers, however, prayed even more fervently that God would keep the Seminary on "those sacred grounds" in Petersburg—a great task for God!

After two or three years of negotiating between the two institutions, the plan to move was finally abandoned, but not until—if rumors at the time were correct—the trustees of the Seminary had lost approximately $20,000.00 to some slick lawyers in the negotiations. The trustees finally
agreed that Bishop Payne would remain in Petersburg, on "those sacred grounds"—and it did.

The only sources from which the Seminary received funds were the following:

1. Contributions from the friends of the Seminary;
2. Funds raised by the trustees, which were usually small;
3. Annual appropriations from the Virginia Theological Seminary;
4. The Evangelical Education Society scholarships for students;
5. The King Hall Fund;
6. Payments by the students themselves;
7. Annual appropriations from the National Council;
8. A special building and expansion fund raised by a National Council Fund drive. This drive resulted in the raising of $192,000.00 for the Seminary.

Work in the Community

The only hospital in Petersburg at that time was a completely segregated institution in an old run-down building. Black physicians and nurses were not permitted to work there; and black girls could not get nurse-training. Blacks could never enter by the front door, but only by a side door.

The hospital authorities took steps to build a new hospital; they purchased a new site and secured an expert to make a study and prepare plans for the new hospital. After the study was completed, hospital authorities learned that some matching funds were available from the federal government through the Hill-Burton Plan. They accepted the study and plans and set up the machinery to raise the necessary local funds. They established separate committees to seek contributions from blacks and whites.

A Mr. Titmus, president of a Petersburg optical firm, accepted the chairmanship of the white division. The hospital authorities successively asked Dr. Foster, the President of Virginia State College, and two other blacks to head the black division; but the blacks of Petersburg who had agreed to serve on the committee refused to accept any of them as their chairman or to work with them.

Two of the hospital officials came to me and explained their failure to find a suitable head for the black division. The officials had asked black committee members, "Is there anyone in the city that you would accept as your chairman and heartily support?" Their answer was "Yes, the Rev. Odell G. Harris." The officials explained to me, "This is why we are here: to find out whether you will accept the chairmanship of the Negro Division."
Before making any commitment, I asked to see the plans for the new hospital, which they had with them. They readily complied. This was in the late 1940s, years before segregation was outlawed. The plan called for a five-story building with a 150-bed capacity, plus 23 bassinets. Blacks were to occupy the first floor and to enter by the side door. I asked whether black physicians and nurses would be permitted to serve on an equal basis with the white physicians and nurses and whether young black ladies would be trained for nursing without being segregated. Their answer was, “I think we can work that in.” My reply to them was as follows: “Under no circumstances would I accept the chairmanship, unless I am guaranteed five things: First, that the plans will be changed to permit the black people to enter through the front or any other door they please; second, that black doctors and nurses will be permitted to serve on an equal basis with white doctors and nurses; third, that young black ladies will be permitted to train for nursing at the hospital just as white girls do; fourth, that, though black people would occupy the first floor and whites the second floor, the maternity ward, the intensive care ward, and other special wards will be unsegregated; and fifth, if the first floor were ever full that blacks would be given the unsegregated space elsewhere in the building.” Their answer was, “We will take this up with the hospital authorities and get in touch with you shortly.” They did, agreeing to comply with all the requests.

My next step was to tell them I would accept the chairmanship, provided they call together the black group that nominated me as chairman and explain the changes they had made in the plans for the hospital. This they graciously did. We met, and the members of the hospital authority fully explained the matter and presented me as chairman of the division. I expressed appreciation to the black committee members for the confidence in me that they showed in asking for me as chairman, and I promised to see that our goal was reached. I asked for their full cooperation. They promised it most enthusiastically. I thanked the committee members and the members of the hospital authority. We closed the meeting after planning a mass meeting to present the whole matter to blacks in the community.
The Mass Meeting

The Mass Meeting was held at the Harding Street Recreation Center with an overflowing crowd. The following was my message to them:

My Dear Fellow Citizens:

I take this opportunity to bring to your attention a matter which should be paramount to every citizen of Petersburg and of the surrounding counties, but especially to the colored citizens. The matter to which I refer is the new hospital that is to be built in Petersburg.

There is at present a crying need for a first-class hospital. This need is based on three factors: First, the present hospital is woefully inadequate in space and facilities to meet the needs of patients and prospective patients in this area of Virginia; second, the present hospital has already been condemned as a fire hazard; and third, colored physicians have never been permitted to practice there with their own patients. The NEED is for a hospital where these factors are corrected.

The new hospital is designed to meet these needs. It will be a five-story hospital with a 150-bed capacity plus 23 bassinets. In fact, the plan calls for twice the number of beds and bassinets that are in the present hospital. In addition, it will be fire-proof and up-to-date in every detail. The entire first floor will be used by colored patients, who will receive the same service as patients on the other floors. Colored physicians and nurses will practice in the hospital. It will be a hospital available for service to people of Petersburg and surrounding counties, regardless of creed, race or color.

The new hospital will cost $2,500,000.00. Of this amount, there is approximately $75,000.00 on hand. The site has been purchased at the cost of $20,000.00. Some aid from the Commonwealth of Virginia is expected and the United States Government will contribute approximately $1,000,000.00. This will leave approximately $800,000.00 to be raised in this campaign. Of this amount, the colored citizens will be asked to raise approximately $80,000.00 or one-tenth of the total amount to be raised. This amount is to be raised within a period of three years. I have every reason to believe that we can and will raise it.

There are two reasons why we should raise this amount. First, the need demands that we raise it. Only by raising the full amount asked can we get the new hospital as planned. Second, in the face of such a need, I don’t see how we can maintain our self-respect without assuming our full share of the cost of the new hospital. We don’t want anyone else to bear our share of the cost when the share is fair and equitable. I don’t believe that the colored people have ever failed to assume their share of responsibility in any matter when they are convinced that they will share equally with the others who share the responsibility. This we can expect in the new hospital.

The goal of $80,000.00 presents to the colored citizens of Petersburg and surrounding counties the greatest challenge in their history. This challenge can and will be met by having every citizen assume his own share of responsibility—however small or great.

Therefore, my friends, let us one and all rise up and meet this challenge with a united front so as to make possible a hospital of which, not only
this generation, but the generations to come, will be justly proud. It will be a living monument dedicated to the ministry of healing and will be available to all citizens alike. I thank you for your cooperation.

We organized a campaign committee with special sub-committees to seek contributions from professionals, commercial establishments, churches, fraternal and social organizations, civic clubs, and students and faculty at the Virginia State College. In addition, we formed educational and publicity sub-committees, and a speakers bureau. We divided the surrounding counties into geographical units and assigned a person to canvass each street in Petersburg.

It took two weeks to get the organization ready for action and one final week to do the solicitation and collecting of cash and pledges. The drive ended on Friday of the third week. Reports were made at mass meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday nights.

When the report was made on the final Friday night, the total collected in cash and pledges amounted to $162,000.00, eight times more than any group of blacks in Petersburg had ever raised. (I was told that a group had once raised $20,000.00.) We had, therefore, more than doubled the amount requested of us. The white division also exceeded its goal. The Hospital Authority expanded its original plans for the Hospital. When the Cornerstone Exercises were held June 5, 1951 at the New Hospital, I gave the closing benediction.

I know of nothing that ever happened in Petersburg that gave the blacks more joy, unity, and confidence in themselves and their ability to do a good job than the hospital experience.

After the campaign ended, I went down to the old hospital and went in through the front door. This, to my knowledge, was the first time that a black person other than the janitor had entered there. I took care of the business for which I went and left through the front door. After that the hospital both permitted black physicians to see their patients there and permitted blacks to enter and leave through the front door.

That year, 1949-50, the Delta Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity honored me with a testimonial of merit for outstanding achievement. It was quite an honor for me, an Alpha, to get such honor from the Omegas. It can be done.

Other Work in the Community

Another project that I was happy to have a hand in was the playground for blacks in Petersburg. When I came to Petersburg, there were no playgrounds, swimming pools, parks, tennis courts or any form of
organized recreation for black youths, except a building on Harding Street, owned by the city, in which occasional activities were held. Therefore, the main recreation of the black youths consisted of gathering in groups on street corners, playing in the streets, breaking in houses, schools, etc., and roaming in the streets in gangs. These groups were found all over the city. One of these gangs included boys from both good families and bad families in our community. The gang's regular hangout place was on the corner of West and Stainback Streets, just a few yards from my house. During the summer months, one could hardly rest after 12:00 at night because of noise.

One summer after commencement at Bishop Payne, some members of the gang broke into one of our dormitories and took clothes, radios, and other items that had been left by the students. The boys had used an ax to break open the window through which they entered. Luckily, I saw them as they were coming out of the building with the articles and I knew them. Those who emerged from the dorm window made no attempt to run. They stood there with the things in their hands, while the other members of the gang joined them.

My first thought was to call their parents. My second thought was to report them to the cops. A third thought was to call the boys together, sit down, and talk with them. This was what I did. I asked why they broke into the building and took the things. One replied, "We just did it for fun." Another said, "We were just wondering what was in there; and we decided to go in and see; and we saw these things and took them." I then asked, "Did you need them?" Their answer was, "No." I asked why they cut up on the streets and did such bad things that disturbed people in the neighborhood. Their answer was, "We just meet out here to have some fun. We don't have any other place to go; we are just having some fun." I then said to them, "If you had a nice playground with swimming pool and provision for other activities where you could play, would you get off the streets and play there?" The answer was, "Yes." I asked them to go and find a good place in or near this community that they would like to see made into a playground. I would try to help them get it. After looking around for some time, they finally returned, saying they had found a good place. All of us went to see it. Luckily, it belonged to the city. It was large enough for baseball, football, slides, sand boxes, swimming pool, etc.

I visited every home in the community and explained to the parents the need for a decent playground for their children. They agreed to cooperate in every way possible. I called weekly meetings in our chapel to discuss ways that we could help. These meetings were lively and well attended. Those who attended the first meeting organized a committee of which I was elected president. In a comparatively short time, we had
raised approximately $500.00 for the playground project, which was to be used primarily for the youths in that section of the city.

In 1948 the local parents' committees conceived the idea of a large playground in which all the blacks of Petersburg could participate in baseball, fastball, tennis, volleyball, swimming, etc. We looked around for a suitable place. Finally, we came across what we thought could prove an ideal location. It consisted of a fraction less than two acres. A part of it was being used for a city dumping ground, but it was the best location to be found within the city limits. We went to work trying to get black citizens of Petersburg interested in the project. We contacted people in all walks of life. Soon we organized with the name, the Petersburg Recreation Association. I was unanimously elected president.

Mrs. Ophelia Johnson was elected secretary, and Mr. P. M. Vaughan was elected treasurer. Unlike our parents' committees, which represented specific sections of the city, the Association consisted of a cross-section of black citizens of all of Petersburg.

The Association met and chose a delegation to visit the city council and to make known our desires for a playground. The delegation consisted of seven members; I was chairman. Two weeks before the regular meeting of the council, we wrote letters to the mayor and to each member of the council explaining our needs and the action we desired the city council to take.

The night of the meeting was rainy and cold. We knew that the mayor was always rude and disrespectful to blacks who made requests of any kind. In spite of the weather and the mayor, I went to the meeting. None of the other six members of the committee showed up.

When my turn came to speak to the council, Mayor Hodges Mann asked me to state our requests. I gave the mayor and council members a written statement and explained why a larger playground was needed. I stated that the smaller ones could be used by the younger children but the large one was to be for the youths and adults. We requested the location that we had found and asked that it be graded and leveled; that provision be made for baseball, tennis, volleyball, swimming pool, and bleachers; and that it be lighted. When I finished, the mayor very abruptly replied, "Rev. Harris, before we give you anything on this list, I will close up all recreational facilities for whites in the city. You are not going to get anything." Then he went on to talk about black people and the fact that they didn't need a playground, etc. This he did for about twenty minutes.

When he finished talking, I then said to him, "Mr. Mayor, you are the first drunk mayor I have ever seen presiding at a meeting like this; you are a disgrace to the City of Petersburg and to the council, and to all who elected you. I am sure the people who elected you don't know how you look and are acting tonight. As a citizen and a voter, I don't like what I see
The original building at the Henderson Institute, a Presbyterian high school in Henderson, N.C. The school had the highest educational standard for blacks in the state.

Odell Greenleaf Harris, Jr., Marion Elizabeth Harris, and their mother, Lizzie Henderson Harris.
The Rev. Odell Harris and Mrs. Harris (the former Lizzie Elnora Henderson of Manson, N.C.). They were married August 5, 1928, at Holy Innocents Episcopal Church in Henderson, N.C.

The home of the warden at Bishop Payne Divinity School. The warden was the only black member of the faculty in 1930, and weekly Morning Prayer services were held under his direction.
The planning group for the first Diocesan Black Youth Conference, meeting at Emmanuel Chapel at Bishop Payne Divinity School in 1947. Among those pictured are Charles Carion, George Harper, Odell Harris, Agnes Jones, Andrew Scott, Jr., and Robert Gordon.

Some of the students and faculty at Bishop Payne Divinity School in 1949. Seated, left to right: Dean Robert A. Goodwin, Dr. Joseph W. Nicholson, Dr. Edwin R. Carter. Standing, left to right: Warden Odell G. Harris, James H. Murray, Lennie Frisby, Dorothy V. Jackson, Lelia Brown, Hermon Blackman, Mrs. Lillian Brown, Mrs. Joseph Nicholson, and Dr. Edgar C. Young.
During the ten-year period from 1951 until 1961, Fr. Harris baptized 97 persons at Fort Valley College Center. One hundred thirty-five were confirmed during the same period in the chapel which later became known as St. Luke's.
Camp John Hope, Fort Valley, Georgia, the only diocesan camp black youths could attend, was opened in June 1952. The camp was closed in 1961 after blacks were admitted to Camp Mikell, the Diocesan camp.

A confirmation class at St. Peter's Church, Richmond, Virginia. During Fr. Harris' service at St. Peter's, a new parish house was built, with adequate room for church school classrooms and offices, new furnishings were provided, and much-needed sidewalks were added.
St. Matthew’s Church, Macon, Georgia, which was completely built, furnished, and paid for in two years by donations of time, materials, labor, and money by its parishioners and friends.

The choir at Fort Valley College Center, Fort Valley, Georgia, where Odell Harris was Director-Chaplain and Archdeacon of Negro Work in the Diocese of Atlanta.
and hear.' He answered, 'You are not the only one who doesn't like me. Another person just said to me, 'Hodges Mann, I don't like you; I don't like anything about you, not even the way you park your car.' So you see, you are not the only one who doesn't like me.' I replied, 'Mr. Mayor, I have heard several people say that you had been rude and disrespectful to them when they came to council to make requests. Now that I know it is true I am going to see that you will not be re-elected to council, for we are going to get enough votes to put you out of office.' His answer was, 'You won't have that chance, because I am resigning at the end of this term.' And he did.

Jack Long, one of the councilmen, said, 'Rev. Harris, I have a lot of respect for you and for the way you handled this matter. I, for one, will vote that you get all that you came for.' Then the other three councilmen in turn said they would also vote affirmatively. The Mayor then said, 'In order to make it unanimous, you have my vote too.' So we were assured that we would get the playground and equipment.

They then began discussing the requests and how they would go about executing them. In a few months everything we requested became a reality. There were eight tennis courts, a swimming pool, a baseball diamond, a football field, bleachers, a race track, and a building for equipment. Wire was put around the field and lights put up for night games.

The Petersburg Recreation Association worked out a program for the black youths and adults of Petersburg. Since there had been so many juvenile problems in the city—especially on Saturday nights—we began by arranging for a variety of activities for the youth. We secured a building and scheduled games, dancing, refreshments, and even some talent shows. The various clubs, fraternities and sororities, and other groups and individuals in the city paid for the band that provided music for dancing. We had parents and relatives chaperone the activities. Parents were told of our plans for the youth through the newspaper, the radio and public meeting. We asked for their cooperation.

The first night of activities brought a full house. We outlined the plans to the young people. The program would begin at 7:00 p.m. and last until 10:00 p.m. at which time they would go straight home. We asked them to help us to bring in any whom they knew to be troublemakers. They assured us they would.

We worked out a schedule of activities for a year in advance. Initially various organizations took turns providing the refreshments. Later, we printed membership cards for the Petersburg Recreation Association and asked all parents and friends to pay a membership fee. A large number did so. A part of the money received from the fees was used for refreshments.
We had the Chief of Police come to the meetings, and we explained that our program was designed to solve some of the juvenile problems in Petersburg. He welcomed the idea and promised to organize policemen to assist us with our program. Shortly thereafter they began collecting bicycles, tricycles, and skates to be presented at Christmas to the boys and girls who proved most helpful in the program. They did this each Christmas. A small committee recommended those who would receive the prizes. This proved a great incentive for the boys and girls. They really gave their best.

The Association also began making plans to use the new playground, which was completed in the late Fall. Our first activity there was skating; the eight tennis court areas were turned into a skating rink. That Christmas it was filled to capacity with skaters from many parts of the city. In the spring, the tennis courts were opened. There were no tennis courts for blacks in Petersburg. Many adults, as well as youths, took advantage of the courts. The city paid two workers for the park. We planned for baseball games. We formed several city teams, and we invited several teams from out of the city. Baseball games, tennis and other outdoor activities were held each weeknight from the day school closed until Labor Day. These activities included all age levels, and they drew large crowds each night, not only from Petersburg, but from other places as well, especially from places from which visiting teams came.

I was re-elected as president of the Association each year until I left Petersburg for Georgia in 1951. In July of 1951 the Petersburg Recreation Association and the police organization had a nice program to honor me for my service in that area of work. The two speakers for the occasion were the Chief of Police and Sgt. Allen, who represented the Petersburg Recreation Association. They presented me with a beautiful two-pen desk set with the following engraving on a bronze plate: "Presented by Petersburg Recreation Association to Reverend Odell G. Harris in Grateful Appreciation for Service to the Community of Petersburg, Virginia, August 1, 1951." It can be done.

After this I called a meeting of the Association to elect a new president. At the meeting the treasurer reported a balance of approximately $500.00 on hand. The activities of the Association continued in full force for eight or ten years, until Peabody High School needed a larger and better athletic field. The school officials and city council arranged to turn the playground over to Peabody for an athletic field.
A Bitter Pill that Turned Sweet

An interesting incident occurred to me one day when I went to pay my taxes. When I approached the window, the treasurer (a white man) asked, "What is it for you, old man?" I replied, "My name is Odell G. Harris, and I would appreciate it, if you will use my name instead of calling me old man." He answered, "I call others like you old man, and I will call you old man whenever I care to." I quickly retorted, "No, you'll never call me old man again. I have never called you old man, even though you are an old man, and I am not." He turned red and changed the subject. He asked, "What did you come here for?" I replied, "To pay my tax." He said, "Did you bring your notice with you?" I said, "No, I didn't think it was necessary, as you have the figures in your office." He then said, "Go home and get it." I went and soon returned with the notice. After I paid the bill, he looked at me and said, "I am sorry I called you out of your name; my wife and I had some words before I left home this morning, and I've been a little off all day. I promise you I'll never do that again." I thanked him and went out. I have seen him many times since then, but each time he was most courteous and as nice as anyone could be.

The Student's Mental Breakdown

One of our students from Panama, Frederick Clarke, had a mental breakdown. The physician who came to see him advised that Frederick be taken to Central State Hospital. Because of the Seminary's service to the hospital, Central State admitted him, even though it was against their policy to admit one who was not an American citizen. Dr. Brent, the superintendent, promised to see that he got the best possible treatment. I took Frederick in my car and visited him at least three times a week. A few days after Frederick entered the hospital some of our faculty members discussed his condition and his probable future. One of them diagnosed his condition as incurable; the others expressed small hope of his recovery. None of them, however, had visited him. I felt that visits from us would be helpful, and I told them so. I continued to visit him at least three times a week and noticed his steady improvement. At the end of four months he was well enough to be discharged.

The Seminary was closed for the summer, in any case, and Frederick did not plan to return to Bishop Payne to finish his work. I called his father in Panama and asked him to come for his son. I met Mr. Clarke at the airport and brought him home for a meal and rest. The next day I took him to the hospital to get his son. That afternoon I drove them both to the airport for the return trip. Mr. Clarke called the next day to say that they had
arrived home safely. Later, I heard that Frederick had returned to the U.S.A. and earned his Master's degree. I was very glad to have had a hand in helping to save a brother. I have thought many, many times of how utterly wrong my colleagues were in their diagnosis of Frederick's case and in their failure to visit him. It can be done.

St. Stephen's Church

During my stay in Petersburg, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church became vacant many times for one reason or another. During their vacancies, I served occasionally as supply priest. I baptized more than twenty persons at St. Stephen's, prepared and presented more than thirty candidates for confirmation, performed more than fifteen marriages, and had more than ten funerals. In addition to leading worship services, I also visited in homes and at the hospital.

At my last service there, members of the church presented me with a beautiful bronze plaque with the wording:

PRESENTED TO
FATHER ODELL G. HARRIS FOR OUTSTANDING DEVOTION,
DEDICATION AND SERVICE TO ST. STEPHEN'S
CHURCH. YOU WILL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED
IN THE HEARTS OF THE PARISHIONERS
AND IN OUR PRAYERS

I will always cherish this expression of kindness.

Final Years at Bishop Payne Divinity School

In 1949 Bishop Payne Seminary was preparing for capital improvements. The Seminary had $192,000 and had purchased four or five additional lots. Yet some of us on the faculty wondered about the wisdom of expanding the facilities. Our operating funds were limited, and we continued to have difficulty in recruiting applicants. In trying to clear the problem, I wrote to the other theological seminaries of the Episcopal Church, asking whether they would take black applicants on par with the whites. I knew that if they would, there would be less chance of our getting the best qualified black students. Two seminaries said they would accept blacks on an equal basis with whites and the others were vague in their answers and stated that Bishop Payne was the logical place for Negro students to attend.

I went to Dean Goodwin and suggested to him that the faculty recommend the board of trustees close Bishop Payne for a period of three years.
During the interim all black postulants would apply to the white seminary of their choice, and we would wait to see what happened. If during this period all applicants were accepted and the students were treated on an equal basis with whites, then we would close Bishop Payne permanently. We should give the $192,000.00 and the property of Bishop Payne to those seminaries that took the blacks. If, however, none of the schools took the blacks on an equal basis with the whites, we should go ahead with our building program and go all out to raise money and recruit students.

Dean Goodwin agreed with the suggestion, but asked that the other black professors and I draw up the letter of recommendation to the board of trustees, since Bishop Payne was an institution primarily for black students. The other black faculty members asked me to draft the letter, since I had been at Bishop Payne longer than they. All the faculty members signed the letter, and we sent it to the board of trustees. The trustees accepted the recommendations. Bishop Payne Divinity School was closed in May, 1949 after commencement exercises—and was to remain closed until 1952.

During this interim, the board of trustees of Bishop Payne Divinity School met with that of Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia, several times to discuss the future of Bishop Payne. They finally concluded that a merger of the two institutions was the best thing to do. This was done at the end of the three-year period in 1952. This merger gave the alumni of Bishop Payne another Alma Mater. They realized that Bishop Payne was not dead, but would continue in the life and spirit of Virginia Theological Seminary. The $192,000.00 and all the property of Bishop Payne were turned over to Virginia Seminary for scholarships for black students. It can be done.

Thus my work at Bishop Payne terminated May 1949. At their final meeting before the closing, the trustees made plans for the faculty members to receive salaries until they had gotten other work with comparable income. The fact that I had already worked in the Diocese of Southern Virginia made it relatively easy for me to get work. Bishop Brown made arrangements for me to begin working as Archdeacon in June, 1949. This work continued until 1951. The other faculty members finally got other positions.
CHAPTER VIII
ARCHDEACON OF NEGRO WORK OF THE
DIOCESE OF SOUTHERN VIRGINIA

The Ven. Bravid W. Harris served as Archdeacon of Negro Work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia for about five or six years. He left in 1943 to become Secretary of Negro Work at the National Council in New York. Canon XV was still in effect in Southern Virginia when he left. According to this canon, the Negro Convocation elected two laymen to represent all the black congregations in the Diocese at diocesan council. When this canon was first enacted in 1890, two clergy were also permitted to attend council. By constant effort on the part of the four black delegates in council, however, all black clergy finally gained the right to attend council with seat and vote. This was still the state of affairs in 1943. Also, the salaries of black clergy were lower than those of the whites. No black priest received the car allowance or travel expense that many white priests received. Three black clergy did not even have rectories, but had to provide housing out of their own meager salaries. Black priests had no utility allowances and no vacations.

One of the expenses made by the Bishops to keep blacks from having full representation in council was the smaller percentage paid on diocesan assessments by blacks. The 1940 canons specified that "Churches and congregations of which current expenses amounted to more than $100.00 were to pay five percent on current expenses and forty cents per communicant. The assessment on other churches and congregations of which the current expenses amounted to $100.00 or less and on all the Colored Convocation was five percent on current expenses and twenty-five cents per communicant."

The only organizations in the black congregations were the vestries, Sunday schools, choirs, and women's auxiliaries. There was no contact between the white and black organizations of the diocese. There were parochial and diocesan youth organizations and camps for whites, but blacks were not permitted to participate. Also, the black clergy attending diocesan councils were expected to be segregated at meal time at special tables provided for them. For some time they were required to sit either in the balcony or in some other separate location. In 1943, two of the twenty-eight congregations of black communicants in the diocese—St. Stephen's Church, Petersburg, and Grace Church, Norfolk—were self supporting, yet neither of them had been permitted to send a lay delegate to council. This was the state of affairs of the black work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia in 1943.
Steps Taken to Strengthen the Black Work

After Archdeacon Bravid W. Harris left the Diocese in 1943, the Rev. Odell G. Harris was unanimously elected dean of the Colored Convocation. He was re-elected to that position each succeeding year through 1947. As dean, he carried out the duties and responsibilities formerly performed by the archdeacon. He headed the convocation and attempted to strengthen and to develop the black work in the diocese.

He attended the 52nd Annual Council of the Diocese at St. Paul’s Church, Newport News, on May 9-10, 1944, with seven black clergy and the two representatives of the Colored Convocation. This council amended Canon XV to increase the number of black lay delegates from two to six. At the 53rd Council Meeting at Good Shepherd Church, Richmond, on May 8-9, 1945, however, only four lay delegates were present. Six lay delegates were present at the 54th Council at Bruton Parish, Williamsburg, on May 14-15, 1946.

In my 1946 Annual Report, as Archdeacon of Negro Work, I stated, "During the past year, no priest has received less than $1,800.00; and at the last meeting of the Executive Committee of the Colored Convocation, there was a raise in some salaries, so that, at present, no priest is receiving less than $1,900.00."

In his address to council, Bishop Brown stated, "The opportunities for work among Negroes in this Diocese seem to be notably increasing. The attaining of self-support is the goal of several of our Negro congregations. Already we have six that do not receive aid and it is hoped that within a short time there will be more."

Also, at this council I petitioned the council to admit lay delegates from black congregations on the same basis with white congregations. This would increase the number and strength of black delegates. The petition was adopted by the council with the understanding that changes would apply only to self-supporting congregations and organized missions.

At that time, there were fifteen black congregations in the diocese that could qualify to send delegates. Steps were immediately taken to remedy the situation in the thirteen unrepresented congregations. As a result, those that met the qualifications became organized missions, and thus qualified to send delegates to council. Those that could not qualify were eventually merged with other congregations or closed. There had been a need for such action.

Up to this time, there had always been a difference in the salaries and fringe benefits of black and white mission clergy. The salaries and other benefits of white clergy were always larger than those of the blacks. Everyone knew this was not fair nor right. I drove to the diocesan office in Norfolk and brought the matter to Bishops Brown and Gunn to see
whether the salaries and benefits could be equalized. Both suggested that the time was not right to make the change because, they claimed, there was not enough money.

At any rate, I was elected to the Executive Board of the Diocese of Southern Virginia, which set the salary scale for the white clergy. When the board met, Bishop Gunn made a plea for increasing the salaries of the white mission clergy, praising them for their work and explaining how underpaid they were for their service. He moved that the minimum salary be increased. I immediately seconded the motion. It was adopted.

At the close of the meeting, Bishop Brown asked me to draw up a salary scale for the black clergy to present to him within two weeks for his and Bishop Gunn’s approval. I drew up a scale with the same figures and benefits as those for the whites. At the required time, I presented it to both bishops. When they saw it, their response was, “It can’t be done; we don’t have the money.” I asked that the executive committee that had set the salary scale for the white clergy consider the salaries for the blacks. They agreed.

The board met, and I explained the whole matter, reminding them that at their last meeting, three weeks prior, Bishop Gunn had moved that they raise the minimum salary for whites. I had seconded it, and it had been adopted. I then said that I was proposing the same salary scale for the black clergy, and I would like for them to concur so that it would apply to blacks as well as whites. The board unanimously agreed, and this matter was settled. From then on, the blacks received whatever the whites received in the way of salary, car allowance, utility, etc. This action of the board brought great joy to me. I was very happy, but both bishops turned redder than usual. This, then, became the first time in the long history of the church in America that the black and white clergy were receiving the same salaries and other fringe benefits. Bishop Gunn became quite angry and apparently remained so during the remainder of my stay in the diocese. Yes, it can be done.

On his next visits to black congregations, he told the congregations that he had equalized the salaries of the black and white clergy, because he thought it was the right thing to do. All the blacks believed his lie. Neither I nor anyone else told them different. They went on thinking that they had the best white bishop in the whole wide world.
End of Segregated Meals at St. John’s Church, Hampton

When the 55th Council met at St. John’s Church, Hampton, on May 13-14, 1947, the black clergy and fourteen lay delegates were present. The fourteen were: C.A. Palmer, W.L. Brown, W.T. Mason, W.F. Clarke, W.E. Waters, Martin W. Calthrop, W.E. Reid, Robert Hester, John Fulcher, Thomas Marks, Jr., Jimmie Mayo, James E. Harris, H.L. Shurman, and Arthur Abenathy. The changes in lay representatives made at the previous council accounted for the increase in the number of black delegates.

Up to this time, the black delegates had always been segregated at meal time at councils. This meeting was no different. However, after all delegates had been assigned tables for lunch, I suggested to the black delegates that the time was ripe for us to desist from eating at segregated tables and that we should go to a black restaurant for our meals. All agreed; we left quietly and went to a black restaurant.

At this council meeting, I was elected alternate to General Convention. I believe that I was the first black alternate and that, up to that time, no black had ever been elected deputy to General Convention. When the Colored Convocation met in September of that year, I was re-elected dean of the Convocation. Immediately after that, Bishop Brown appointed me Archdeacon of the Negro work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

I visited all of the black congregations in the diocese and urged them to accept the financial responsibility that fell on them when Diocesan Assessments and Church’s Program Quotas were equalized. This they readily did.

During the Spring of 1957 I drew up a handbook of objectives, methods, and plans for Negro Work, 1947-1957. This handbook consisted of the following:

1. A brief summary of the past and present status of the Diocese of Southern Virginia.
2. A statement of the needs of the work among Negroes;
3. A list of objectives;
4. A series of methods recommended to increase and strengthen membership;

Blacks did not begin to regularly appear in the House of Deputies until the 1940s. Some blacks had, however, participated in General Convention prior to that time. A black lay deputy from South Florida attended in 1889, and a clerical deputy who attended in 1892 may have been black. Bishop Samuel David Ferguson was a member of the House of Bishops from 1885 to 1913. See J. Carleton Hayden, “The Black Ministry of the Episcopal Church: An Historical Overview” in Black Clergy in the Episcopal Church: Recruitment, Training and Deployment ed. Franklin D. Turner and Adair L. Lummis (U.S.A.: Seabury Professional Services for the Office of Black Ministries of the Episcopal Church, 1981), pp. 17-18. [editor's footnote]
Organization of Diocesan Black Youth Work

During the Spring of 1947, I conferred with Bishops Brown and Gunn about black participation in the diocesan youth conference and camps. They said it would not be wise to do so at this time. When they were pressed for a "Yes" or "No" answer, they said emphatically, "No, it can't be done now." I then asked permission to start a diocesan conference for black youths. They gave permission.

I contacted all the black clergy and their congregations to explain the need of such a conference and the steps that were being taken to start one. All black clergy and youth leaders, and at least two youths from each congregation were invited to attend an organizing meeting.

On the day set, all met at Emmanuel Chapel at Bishop Payne Divinity School in Petersburg, Virginia. We discussed the whole matter. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Diocesan Black Youth Conference of which the Rev. Richard B. Martin became director. At a second meeting that Fall, we planned the Diocesan Youth Conference which would be held at St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville, Virginia, the following year.

This conference was held in the Summer of 1948 and was a great success. It lasted about five days. Since that time, the black youths have held annual conferences, which have proved helpful in many ways. The conference finally merged with the white Diocesan Youth Conference. Black youths were eventually permitted to attend the Diocesan Youth Camp. This milestone of providing a diocesan conference and camp program for the black youths was finally attained. It can be done.

Death and Burial of Canon XV

The 56th Annual Council of the Diocese of Southern Virginia met at Epiphany Church, Danville, on May 11-12, 1948. All the black clergy of the diocese and the following fourteen black lay delegates were present: Willie Valentine, Jimmie Mayo, D.L. Bradley, Thomas Jordan, Mrs. Pearl Bassette, Robert L. Walker, M.O. Poole, Floyd Miller, C.A. Palmer, Wilfred Brown, Luther Foster, W.E. Reid, R.H. Hester, and Charles C. Graves.
In his report to the Department of Christian Education, J.F.W. Fields stated, ‘The Colored Youths have been organized and plans are made for a Division of Youth Conference to be held at St. Paul’s, Lawrenceville, with the Rev. Richard B. Martin, Director.’

At this Council meeting, I was given the floor to speak on behalf of the black work of the diocese. I then presented a resolution requesting that Canon XV be deleted and that the Jamestown Churchman, our diocesan paper, stop segregating the listing of diocesan churches. I also asked that all other canons and practices that in any way promoted or encouraged segregation of the races be either eliminated or changed to conform with Christian practice.

I asked Bishop Brown, who was presiding at Council, to register his approval of the recommended changes by standing with his right hand raised. This, he did. Further, I asked the bishop to request all delegates present who favored the change to do likewise. When the final count was made, a vast majority had voted for the complete change. The Committee on Constitutions and Canons then recommended the deletion of Canon XV and the renumbering of the succeeding canons. On the motion of Dr. Jones, the resolution was adopted. This, then, killed Canon XV and all allied supports for segregation in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. This canon had been in effect since 1890. It can be done.

In his address to Council, Bishop Brown stated, ‘Our church has materially grown in this diocese. In 1938 we had 13,980 communicants of whom 1,816 were members of the Colored Churches. For the past year the report shows 16,497 communicants of whom 2,311 are Colored.’

Great Increase in Black Lay Delegates


The change in canons that permitted black congregations to send lay delegates to council just as whites had always been doing accounted for this increased number of delegates. This was the last council in which black lay delegates were listed by race, and it was the first year that Canon XV did not appear in the Constitutions and Canons. In future years, black delegates were listed with the churches they represented. This had been the custom in listing white lay delegates.
When the 58th Council met at Trinity Church, Portsmouth, in May 9-10, 1950, the number of black lay delegates had increased to the following twenty:

St. James' Church, Warfield
  Thomas Marks
  Nathan Burwell
St. Paul's Church, Lawrenceville
  Herbert Taylor
  Henry Shurman
St. Cyprian's Church, Hampton
  Oscar Pindle
  Mrs. C. E. Green
St. Stephen's Church, Petersburg
  Albert O. Avent
  W. F. Clarke
St. James' Church, Emporia
  C. E. Green
  Mrs. T. O. Mason
St. Mark's Church, Bracey
  Sollie Valentine
  H. C. Young
Grace Church, Norfolk
  W. L. Brown
  W. E. Reid
St. James' Church, Portsmouth
  Martin
  Robert Hester
St. Augustine's Church, Newport News
  Dr. E. Stanley
  David Burwell

The 59th Council was held at Christ Church, Norfolk, on May 8-9, 1951, with a good delegation of black clergy and lay delegates. There were, however, no notable changes in the black work as far as the council was concerned. This was the last council I attended, for the following year I accepted a call to go to Fort Valley, Georgia, to become Director-Chaplain of Fort Valley College Center and Archdeacon of black work in the Diocese of Atlanta. It can be done.

The Real Reason for Leaving the Diocese of Southern Virginia

It seems fair and right that I should give the reason why I left the Diocese of Southern Virginia. I was resolutely determined to do all in my
power to make the black work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia as strong and as active as was possible. The real reason for my leaving then was that George P. Gunn, Bishop Coadjutor from 1948 to 1950 and Diocesan Bishop from 1950 to 1971, and I could no longer work together. He was bitterly opposed to the equalization of salaries of black and white priests. He was also opposed to the deletion of Canon XV. This canon had prohibited black congregations from sending lay delegates to the council, for it specified that only two lay delegates could attend council with seat and vote. It had initially specified that only two black priests would have seat and vote, but black delegates had succeeded in changing that provision. My position was just opposite that of Bishop Gunn. I was for all of the things he opposed. It was inevitable that we would eventually clash and finally end our relationship. I think the change was best for both of us.

The Diocese of Southern Virginia had a policy of contributing one-half of the cost of mission church buildings, provided the members raised the other half of the amount needed. Many white churches were built that way. The black congregation of St. Paul’s, Union Level, needed a new building in a new location. I met with the vestry of St. Paul’s Church, and together we found a desirable location for a new building. We then found a buyer for the old church building and land with the understanding that the congregation would be permitted to continue to worship in the old building until the new one was ready for occupancy. With that understanding in writing, we sold the old building and land, and we purchased the new location. The vestry got an estimate of the cost of the new building. I told them that as soon as they raised one-half of the amount needed, I would get the other half from the diocese. Shortly thereafter, they had raised that amount.

At the next meeting of the committee that handled mission building funds, I requested the diocesan half of the amount needed. Bishop Gunn, who was chairman of the committee, announced that no money was available for the new building. A Mr. Flournoy, who was a member of the committee, challenged the Bishop, saying, “Just recently, a white congregation applied here for funds to build, and we granted it without a dissenting vote. This has happened several times within the past year or so.” He demanded the Bishop give an accounting to the committee of all funds available for building mission churches. After some unpleasant words, the Bishop complied, but said that the funds were intended for white mission churches. However, the committee gave St. Paul’s the amount requested for the new building. It was sent to the parish treasurer, and the building was finally erected and fully paid for.

Most of the other black clergy were also having trouble with Bishop Gunn. As a result, three black clergy left the Diocese within a period of two
years, leaving a total of eight vacant congregations. As Archdeacon, I was responsible for all of these and also for five others I was already serving—a total of thirteen churches.

One of these churches was St. Mark’s, Bracey. Bishop Brown asked me to go to St. Mark’s to preside at a vestry election. I saw that the proper notices of the election were made. I went on the appointed day, read the canon dealing “with the election of the vestry,” and then called for nominations and voting. After all the ballots were in, I asked if any one had any objections to the way the election had gone so far. All the parishioners indicated that they were satisfied. The tellers then announced those who were elected.

At this point, one man asked if he could see the ballots. The congregation consented and he was permitted to see them. He checked them and left the church without saying anything more. When the election was over, I recorded the list of the newly-elected members of the vestry and went home.

The next day I wrote Bishop Brown, telling him of what I had done and listing the names of the newly-elected members. Two weeks later, I received a letter from the Bishop enclosing a petition that had been drawn up by the man who had asked to see the ballots. He, several who were not present, and a few others who had attended the recent election signed it. Bishop Brown asked what it all meant.

I, myself, was at a loss to explain what it was all about. Later I learned that the man who wanted to see the ballots and one other former vestryman had not been re-elected. They were, therefore, dissatisfied with the election and were responsible for the petition. I explained this to the bishop, and asked his permission to return to St. Mark’s to clear up the matter. This, he granted.

I made the proper notices to the congregation and returned to Bracey on a Sunday, but I found Bishop Gunn there. I explained to him that Bishop Brown had given me permission to clear up the matter, and asked that he not interfere. He replied that he would handle it himself. At the time of the announcements, the bishop said that he would like to meet with the congregation after the service. At the conclusion of the service he said, “I understand that Archdeacon Harris came here last month and broke the canons in electing a vestry. As Bishop, I declare that the election was uncanonical, and that the old vestry is still the vestry of St. Mark’s Church. I am, therefore, asking Archdeacon Harris to come back here next month for the election of a new vestry.”

One man spoke up, “Bishop Gunn, I was here at the election last month and Archdeacon Harris did not break any of the canons. Everyone
indicated that he or she was satisfied with the election, and it is so recorded. Whoever said that he broke the canons is absolutely wrong.”

I then asked permission to speak and said, “Bishop Gunn, whoever said that I broke the canon told a lie, and your action here today in declaring the new vestry invalid is based on a lie. Therefore, you are just as wrong as the party who told the lie. As for my returning next month for another election, I will not come back then nor any time in the future. If there is to be another election, you will preside yourself or get someone else to do it.” He turned red and brought the meeting to a close.

I got in my car and drove off. Before I had gone very far Bishop Gunn’s car overtook me. He blew his horn, and we both stopped. He said, “Archdeacon Harris, I didn’t expect it to turn out like this.” My reply was, “You are responsible for what happened, for I asked you to permit me to clear up the matter myself. I started it, and Bishop Brown had given me permission to resolve it.” We then drove off.

The next day I wrote my resignation from the work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. I sent it to Bishop Brown with a copy to Bishop Gunn. When Bishop Brown received it, he called me on the phone and asked that I come down to his office in Norfolk. When I arrived, I found Bishop Gunn was already there. Bishop Brown got at the heart of the matter by saying, “Archdeacon Harris, I received your letter of resignation, but I want you to stay in this diocese. You have done good work here, and I will not accept your resignation: I believe we can work things out.” I explained just what took place at St. Mark’s Church. Bishop Brown said to Bishop Gunn, “George, you owe Archdeacon Harris an apology.” Bishop Gunn then apologized for his action. I said to him, “I will accept your apology and remain in the diocese, if you will go back to St. Mark’s Church and apologize to me in the presence of the congregation there. You left them under the impression that I was wrong and that you and those who lied were right. Unless you do so, I as Archdeacon will not be able to work effectively with them in the future.” The Bishop said he could not go back and apologize there.

Bishop Brown then insisted that I remain with my work. My reply was, “I will stay on one condition—that I will not go back to St. Mark’s Church any more.” Both Bishops accepted the terms; so I remained.

The Rev. Vernon Jones, a newly-ordained priest, was assigned to Christ Church, Halifax, and two other mission churches—one in Danville and the other in Chatham. There was no church building in Danville, and there were no parish houses or facilities for any kind of activities at either of the two other places. Under such conditions it was most difficult for him to build up any youth or other kind of work. Yet after Mr. Jones had been there a little more than a year, Bishop Gunn asked me to tell him that he
would be removed from that cure, because he had not made the progress expected of him. My reply to Bishop Gunn was: "Bishop Gunn, you haven’t given the man a chance. He is one of the best men we have in the diocese, but he has nothing to work with. Neither you, I, nor anyone else could go there and do a better job under the circumstances. If it meets your approval, I will assign him to St. James’ Church, Emporia, where I am now serving. He will have a parish house and a larger congregation to work with, and I am sure he will be able to do a good work there. I will take over the work he now has.” The bishop gave his approval of the change; and it was soon made. Mr. Jones did an exceptionally fine work in Emporia. Later, he accepted a call to St. Stephen’s Church, Petersburg, where he served acceptably for many years.

The Rev. George Harper was priest-in-charge of St. Cyprian’s Church, Hampton. His salary was small and he found it difficult, if not impossible, to care adequately for his family. So, he got a part-time job to enable him to buy a frigidaire and other needed items for his home. When Bishop Gunn learned that he was working part-time, he called me on the phone, asking that I go to Hampton to tell him that he was being dropped from his cure. I said to him, "Bishop Gunn, it is not a part of my job to tell a priest that he is fired. If it has to be done, it is your responsibility. Under no circumstances will I do so. Neither should you, at least until you have talked with him to find out why he is working outside of the church." Bishop Gunn agreed to do just that, and when he had gotten all of the facts, he reported them to me. I replied, "Bishop Gunn, all of us know it is against the policy of the diocese for a priest to do any work outside of his church work, but this man and his family need these things. If his salary is too small to permit him to get these and other necessities, I don’t blame him for doing extra work in order to be able to buy them. If you expect him to give up the job, you should find the money to pay off his bills and see that his salary is raised." This was done, and Mr. Harper remained in his cure.

Once, when St. Matthew’s Church, South Hill, was vacant, and the vestry was trying to get a priest, the senior warden, who could easily pass for white, spoke to Bishop Gunn. He said a light-skinned priest would be more acceptable than a black one, and urged Bishop Gunn to try to find one. Soon thereafter, I was in the bishop’s office, discussing the vacant cures in the diocese, and Bishop Gunn mentioned the request of this senior warden for a light-skinned priest to Bishop Brown and to me. He suggested that we transfer one of the light-skinned priests in the diocese to St. Matthew’s Church. Bishop Brown said he had no objection. When it came my time to speak, I said, "Bishop Brown and Bishop Gunn, a vast majority of the members of St. Matthew’s Church are dark-skinned black, if you please—and I don’t think we should give in to such a request. What I think
we should do is find a good man, preferably a black-skinned man, as soon as possible, for giving in to such a request could help to perpetuate color prejudice. We already have enough of that.' We finally got a black priest and assigned him there. He was well accepted, and he did a good job at St. Matthew's Church. After he had been there a little over a year, I asked Bishop Gunn how he liked the priest, and his answer was, 'I don't think we could have gotten a better man.'

In 1950 Bishop Brown retired, and Bishop Gunn became diocesan bishop. My difficulty in working with Bishop Gunn increased. Our final clash was in June 1951. He called me on the phone to say he was to be at St. Stephen's Church, Petersburg, for a confirmation. He wanted me to meet him there after the service. I went, and after service, he said to me, 'Dr. McClenny and I would like for you to become the new chaplain at St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville.' I asked, 'What is involved in the chaplaincy? Just what is the chaplain expected to do?' He answered, 'You will be responsible for the services in the chapel, for some counseling, for some visitations, and for twelve hours teaching.' My next question was, 'What then will become of my present work and the thirteen churches I have?' He answered, 'You will keep them.' I then said, 'Under no circumstances can I accept the chaplaincy of St. Paul's College.' He quickly retorted, 'I am your bishop, and you will take it, or I will cut your salary.' I began to boil inside, but no words came to my mind that would convey the full import of my feeling and thinking. So, I simply said, 'I am not going to accept it, and there is nothing you or anyone else can do to make me change my mind. Furthermore, I am going home now to write a resignation from all of your work in this diocese.' I did just that, sending Bishop Brown the original and Bishop Gunn a copy.

Though he was no longer the diocesan bishop, Bishop Brown tried to convince me to stay. He called me and Bishop Gunn to his office. Bishop Brown said, 'I have your letter of resignation, but I still want you to remain in this diocese.' I replied by thanking him for his big-heartedness, but explained about the chaplaincy of St. Paul's College. I told him that I was fed up, and that he would have to accept my resignation, as I did not intend to work any longer with Bishop Gunn. I would stay only three more months to bring to a close all of my work. After much talk, the three of us finally concluded that I would terminate my work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia at the end of August 1951.

I began to bring my work to a close. I completed the six confirmation classes that I had in progress. I made a special effort to meet all my fundamental obligations. All other matters were brought up-to-date in the thirteen churches. During July and August, Bishop Gunn came with me each Sunday for confirmation at one or the other of my churches. By the end of August all work was brought up to date, and all bills were paid.
CHAPTER IX
FORT VALLEY COLLEGE CENTER,
FORT VALLEY, GEORGIA

I received a call to become Director-Chaplain of Fort Valley College Center, Fort Valley, Georgia, and Archdeacon of Negro Work in the Diocese of Atlanta. Fort Valley College had begun in 1895. Henry L. Hunt became its first principal in 1903 and attracted large donations from Northern philanthropists. The school affiliated with the Episcopal Church in 1938. The State of Georgia later accepted responsibility for the college, but the Episcopal Church retained property on the opposite side of the street from the college campus, where it built the Fort Valley College Center.

I agreed to come beginning on September 1, 1951. My wife and I left Petersburg on the last Saturday in August of 1951. We arrived at Fort Valley that night about 10:30 p.m. Fort Valley College Center consisted of a chapel, rectory, recreation room, kitchen, secretary’s office, chaplain’s office, library, five guest rooms, and choir rooms. They were located opposite the college with spacious lawn and ample ground for gardening, etc. When the Episcopal Church turned over the college to the State of Georgia, the state and church came to the mutual understanding that the Episcopal Church would provide needed moral and spiritual help to the students and faculty members. The director-chaplain was to work out a program of student-related services and activities and to see that they were executed harmoniously with the program of the college. The College Center’s board of directors was elected by the congregation that worshipped in the chapel. When I arrived there, however, I soon learned that a very cool relationship had developed between the college and the College Center, because of the previous director-chaplain’s reputation for fooling around with women. The college officials, not knowing who the next director-chaplain would be, passed a regulation prohibiting female students from attending services or other activities at College Center. I learned this after arriving.

One of the first things I did was to ask Fort Valley College President, Dr. Troup, for a meeting with him and his administrative staff in order to plan for effective work with the students. I learned that the college had given the Baptist students on the campus permission to organize as a body. I asked permission to organize the Episcopal students on the campus in a Canterbury Club, so that I would have a starting point for work with them and other students. The president and his staff refused to give permission. I then asked them to give those students who desired it permission to attend services and other student activities. They complied with these requests.
In the meantime, the senior Warden, Mr. Alva Tabor, died suddenly. He was the Chairman of the Board of Directors. He had worked for many years in the field of agriculture, holding a top state position. His funeral, therefore, drew both white and black people from all over the state. At that time, segregation was still the order of the day; neither the president of the college nor any other black person could take a white person in his home to eat or sleep. This kind of thing was adhered to strictly in all public places and in all modes of travel. The College Center treasurer told me that in the past, white people who came to worship were given seats in the chancel of the church. He suggested that we follow that pattern at the funeral service.

I replied to him, "Reserve enough seats for the family; and then see that the ushers lead the people to seats, beginning at the front, until all the pews are filled—taking the people as they come, whether white or black..." He almost hit the ceiling, saying that the white people wouldn't stand for it. I then said to him, "Don't worry about it, I will take care of it." I instructed the ushers to follow the plan, and they did.

The congregation at the funeral filled all the pews and all standing room in the church. At least one fourth of the people were white. Whites were sprinkled all over the church. It was a beautiful and most democratic sight. When the service was over, everyone present seemed pleased. I was. It occurred to me to capitalize on the fact that Mr. Tabor was so well liked all over the state to enhance the work of Fort Valley College Center. To be specific, I decided to purchase the best set of chimes I could find in the State of Georgia as a memorial to him and my predecessor. I talked this over with my wife, and the secretary, Mrs. Hunt, but with no one else. After the whole thing had crystalized in my mind, I drafted a letter stating that the chapel was getting these chimes as a memorial. I mentioned the cost and stated that the chimes would be purchased, installed, and dedicated in time to be played for the first time that coming Easter morning at 6:00 a.m.

I got the names and addresses of more than a thousand persons from all over the state and sent them letters with self-addressed stamped envelopes. In less than a week donations began to pour in. For the next several weeks, donations came each day. After about three-fourths of the needed amount was contributed, some persons in the agricultural field stole my idea and decided to build a building at Camp John Hope in memory of Mr. Tabor. They sent letters to many people; I even got one. This effort on their part caused the number of donations for our cause to drop considerably. I decided, therefore, to announce the plans for the chimes to our congregation. I stated that we would get them and suggested they would probably like to make a contribution to the cause. Many did. I even went to a few individuals, who were reported to have money. They
contributed far more than I expected. Soon, the chapel had the total amount needed.

We had found the chimes we wanted. They were purchased, installed, and attached to the organ at a cost of approximately $8,000.00. Mrs. Hunt, our organist, rehearsed until she was ready for the occasion. Promptly at 6:00 a.m. that Easter morning, she played Easter music, using both chimes and organ. I had never heard anything like that before nor after, nor had anyone else there. This music could be heard at a distance of three miles or more. The organist worked out appropriate music and began to play regularly from 3:00 to 3:30 each Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday afternoon.

I know of no one thing that I or anyone else has ever done that did more to change the atmosphere of College Center than that chime and organ music. For the first two years after the chimes were installed, people—white and black—drove out to see where the music was coming from, and to sit and to listen. When the weather permitted, the campus was filled with students and faculty members, sitting and drinking it in. This music schedule was followed during the remaining nine years I was there. It can be done.

Since the president and staff of the college would not permit me to start a Canterbury Club, but permitted the Baptist students to organize with Baptist faculty members, I decided to win over the entire Baptist Club to our church. I suppose it was a devilish thing to do. At first we went to their meetings. Soon I was invited to speak to the group on some Sunday evenings. I found this to be a most interesting group of young people. Some of them began coming to some of our morning services. One Sunday morning, I preached on a part of the Apostles’ Creed. A young lady from the Baptist Club, who attended the Episcopal service that day, heard it. She asked if I would speak to their club on the Apostles’ Creed. I gladly agreed to do so. At the conclusion of the club meeting three persons said they would like to become Episcopalians. They were in our next confirmation class.

Soon we learned several of these young people, including the president of the club, were singing in the college choral group. I was able to convince him and three other of their best singers to join our choir. These four were later confirmed, making them full members of the Episcopal Church. With these and other Episcopal students on the campus, I was able to get many with the best voices to sing in our choir. All later became Episcopalians.

I then got together fifty to seventy-five students for a Bible Class, which was held every Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. I taught this class for about one year. Later I came across a faculty member who had his doctorate in psychology. He was a Methodist, whose father was a Methodist
minister. For years he had been his father's organist and right-hand helper. For some reason, however, he had stopped going to church. I had several conferences with him and invited him to our services. He came regularly. Later I invited him to a confirmation class composed of students, faculty members, and others in the city, saying to him that he was under no obligation to be confirmed. During the tenth meeting, right in the midst of our discussion, he raised his hand and said, "Father Harris, my mind is made up: I want to be confirmed." I told him I was glad and looked forward to the event. After he and other members of the class were confirmed, I told him that I had a job for him—teaching my Bible class. He gladly agreed. He was a most competent person, very likable and respected by the students. The class increased in numbers. He taught it as long as he remained at the college. His class continued as long as I was in Fort Valley. It can be done.

Information about New Students

In order to obtain information from new students, I drew up a questionnaire, asking for birth date, place of birth, parents' names, any church affiliation, special interests, address, telephone number, etc., and got permission to include these with the college registration papers. The completed forms were turned over to us. From these I was able to get a list of all students who were not members of a church. I personally visited each of these students and invited them to our services, Bible class, and other activities. Also, I soon got to know all faculty members who were not church members; they, too, were invited to our services.

College Students' Social Hour

I asked many of the students, especially those in the Bible class, if they would like to have a special social activities night at the center once a week. All said that they would. The Bible class members elected a committee to draw up a program of activities for the center and to choose the night best suited for them. They were enthusiastic and soon submitted the program. It included cards, dancing, ping pong, checkers, dominoes, etc., and refreshments. I provided the refreshments and games, but they made all preparation and cleaned up after each activity. There were always at least four or five adults present. These activities continued as long as I was there, and there was never an unfavorable incident. The student body greatly appreciated the program.
Counseling

The students soon got to know me and my interest in them. Again and again, they came to me with their problems. So did the faculty members. At the end of three years I had won the complete confidence and cooperation of both faculty members and students of Fort Valley State College. When problems among faculty members or students could not be solved, I was called in again and again. For example, one of the professors at the college, who was also the Baptist minister at the leading Baptist Church in Fort Valley, had marital problems. He and his wife came to me for counseling. It took about eight or ten sessions to clear up the problem, but it was finally cleared up.

On another occasion two of the teachers, a husband and wife, came to me at their noon-day break. She had caught him in a motel with another woman. She said that she was going to leave him and divorce him. He begged her not to go through with it. After I talked with them about one-half hour, she agreed to forgive him and decided to start over. They went back to their respective schools, and for the next six or seven years we were there I never heard of another problem between them. Each time I saw them after that they seemed happy.

The Problem of the Male Secretary

One day, when I was directing a camp for boys and girls about eight miles from the college, the head of the Department of Education came to me with a problem. Her secretary, who was a man, was given to drinking, and for the past days he had been on a drinking spree. She didn't want to report him to the dean or president for fear that he might be fired. He was efficient in his work when he was not drinking. I agreed to talk with him at the close of the camp activities. I called him, and we met that night at his house. He was just about sober. Fortunately, he began talking freely about his problem, which was most complicated. He told me of his childhood days. He was the only child of an unwed mother, who was also an alcoholic. He never knew his father. He was born in the building in which his mother ran a cafe, sold liquor, and operated a house of ill repute. When he was born, his mother placed him in a garbage can. He was found by someone who discovered who his mother was and returned him to her for rearing. As he grew, he began to understand the environment that was part of his daily life. By the time he reached the age of puberty, he had become fully involved in all that went on.

On one occasion, his mother and a man became involved in an argument. She shot and killed the man. Since the son was the only witness, he
was asked to testify at the trial. His mother told him that unless he said on the witness stand that she shot the man in self-defense, she would go to jail. The son followed her instructions, and she was freed. A year later, she shot and killed another man under similar circumstances. She insisted that he tell the same lie. He did, and no one ever knew better.

He struggled with school and finally finished college with a business degree. For a while he taught school, but later applied for a position as secretary at Fort Valley State College. He got the position and gave acceptable service for a long time.

He helped his mother buy and furnish a house. Each month he sent the bulk of his check to her to help her meet her loan payments. After about a year and a half, he received a letter from his mother saying that the furniture man repossessed the furniture and that she was about to lose the house. She wanted him to come home immediately. When he went, he found that she had been using much of the money he sent her for liquor, etc. He became disgusted and frustrated and began drinking heavily. I had two or three conferences with him, which proved helpful. He told me that he tried to commit suicide on two or three occasions. I found it to be true.

One morning he called me on the phone to say he had slashed his wrist with a razor blade. I went over immediately. I quickly did some first-aid work. We then sat down, and I asked him if he really wanted to die. He answered, "Yes."

I decided to call his bluff and said to him, "Probably the best way you can do it would be to drown yourself. There is a deep pond a little better than a mile from here. I will drive you there. I have some rope in the trunk of my car. You can tie one end securely around a large stone and the other tightly around your neck. When you roll the stone in, you too will slide in, and the weight of the stone will finish the job." He agreed. So, we got in the car. I drove quite fast. Neither of us spoke until we were very near the pond. Then he spoke up, saying, "I am not sure whether I should go through with this." I then said, "If you have anything to do, the best thing I know is to get it over as quickly as possible." (I was hoping all the time that he wouldn't take his life.) Then, all of a sudden, he said, "Stop the car." I stopped. He then said, "You know this is the craziest thing in the world for me to do." I asked what he meant. Then he began giving me good reasons why he shouldn't commit suicide. I then joined in with all the reasons I could think of why he should stay alive. He then decided to go back home.

I had no intention of letting him drown himself. I simply wanted him to have time to think about dying. I wanted him to make up his mind once and for all whether he really wanted to die or live. Fortunately, it worked out just as I thought and hoped it would.
After that, I had several talks with him about the advantage of being a Christian, thinking Christian thoughts, and doing Christian deeds. He finally decided that he wanted to become a Christian. He came to our class for candidates who desired to be baptized, and was baptized and later confirmed. He became a better man and did better work. I never heard again of his getting drunk or attempting to commit suicide.

**Parochial Work at College Center**

The primary work of Fort Valley College Center was to provide spiritual help and guidance for the students and faculty of Fort Valley State College. This work was about ten years old when I arrived there, and it had grown into an active congregation of about eighty-five or ninety members, composed largely of teachers, students, and a few families and individuals from the city. I soon saw the possibility of developing it into a parish church. I set out to do this.

I prepared a list of all the members with their addresses and telephone numbers and visited each one. Thereafter I visited each member at least once a year. I visited all who were sick or in special need of chaplain services as frequently as necessary.

Services were held on Sunday at 11:00 a.m. and on most holy days and special occasions. I aimed to have the best choir and the best possible services. Fortunately, I had a good organist and some good voices. No other church in the city seemed to have tapped the music talent at the college, so, I decided to do so. Our organist, Mrs. Hunt, had lived in the city for many years and had once been employed at the college. She had a first-hand knowledge of many of the faculty members and students at the college.

The two of us drew up a list of all faculty members we thought had both good voices and were suitable for our choir. I invited them to join our choir, providing they could make two rehearsals a week and the Sunday service. Everyone contacted accepted. Soon we had the best choir in town. Later, each of these choir members was confirmed and became an active communicant.

Practically every year, however, we lost members from the choir, either by graduation or transfer to other places to work. I invited additional students or faculty members to fill the vacancies. I kept a good choir as long as I was there.

At the beginning of each year, I set a minimum number of candidates for baptism and for confirmation to aim at for the year. The goal was never to get less than the eight per annum in each category. Also, I set out to increase our members' financial contributions each year and above all to increase their interest in the work and in the use of their talents.
Up to the time of my arrival in Fort Valley, the congregation at the center was not organized as a mission church with a vestry. Rather, it had a board of directors composed of members of the congregation. The work was financed by the National Council, the Dioceses of Atlanta and Georgia, and by the members' contributions. The total receipts from the congregation during the year of 1950 was less than $800.00. Little effort had been made to encourage the members to increase their contributions or build up the numbers. In fact Bishop Barnwell of the Diocese of Georgia said to me at a trustee meeting, "Don't try to get these people to be confirmed. Just minister to them, and preach, and teach, and baptize those who want baptism." Of course, at that time a person was not considered a full member of the church unless he or she had been both baptized and confirmed. Only confirmed persons were eligible for seat and vote in business matters. So, I just told him that I would do my job there as director-chaplain; and I did it.

During the ten-year period from 1951 to 1961, I baptized 97 persons—approximately ten per year—and presented 135 persons for confirmation—an average of 13 persons per year. Of those confirmed, 43 were teachers and 29 were students. Of the 105 faculty members at the college, I presented 36 for confirmation.

Each year the budget increased more than $4,300.00 over the previous year. Also, donors gave an additional $600.00 in special gifts and contributed the sum of $30,000.00 for Fort Valley College Center in the Building for Christ Campaign sponsored by the National Council. In 1956 I recommended to the trustees that the Chapel of Fort Valley College be renamed St. Luke's Episcopal Church. They officially made the change. So this is how we got the St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. It can be done.

**Bishops Walker and Walthour**

Bishop Walker of the Diocese of Atlanta was Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Fort Valley College Center when I was elected director-chaplain. It was he who notified me of my election and extended the call in June, 1951. He died the following August. When I arrived in Fort Valley, September 1, 1951, I did not have a bishop.

At a special council meeting that October, Dean John B. Walthour was elected bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta. His episcopacy was short-lived, for he died a year after his election. Few people, however, accomplished more than he did in so short a time. In his address after his election, he stated that he had been elected the bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta and intended to serve as bishop of all of the people of the diocese. He emphasized that mission work, especially the black work in the diocese, had been greatly neglected. He intended to do something about it, and he did.
At his first and only council meeting, he proposed that he and the clergy of the diocese visit all the mission churches in order to get a firsthand look at them. Also, he put in motion a three-year campaign to raise thousands of dollars for mission work.

During the Spring of 1952, he called the clergy of the diocese to begin visiting the missions. The campaign that he started to raise funds for mission work eventually reached its goal. The funds were used to repair many buildings and to erect many new church buildings and parish houses.

When Bishop Walthour made his first trip to Fort Valley College Center as president of the board of trustees, he spent the night with my wife and me. That was the first time in my life that a bishop had ever come into my house, or, as far as I know, into any other black man’s house.

After the board meeting, he told me he had been elected to the board of trustees of the Divinity School in Sewanee, Tennessee. He was on his way to that board meeting. He said the Sewanee board had to deal with a touchy question—admission of blacks to the Seminary. His position on the subject, he said, was to admit blacks. He felt, however, that he could not vote that way, because he had heard that some of the biggest donors to the Seminary would cut off their gifts, if blacks were admitted. Therefore, at present, he said he would vote against admitting blacks with the hope that sentiment on the subject would soon change.

My reply to him was this, “Bishop Walthour, I know you are a bishop of the Episcopal Church, that the Seminary’s primary purpose is to train clergy for the Church, and that whatever action the board takes should be Christian. Should the board take that step and those donors cut off their contributions, I am quite sure that God will open a way for the Seminary to get enough money to operate in the future. As it is, it is not operating on a Christian basis.” He replied, “You are right.” At any rate, he went to the meeting and the board voted not to admit black students. After the report of the board meeting got out, a large number of students and faculty members left the Seminary for good.¹

Later, Bishop Walthour came back to Fort Valley and told of the board meeting and its results, saying, “We were wrong; and you were right. We

¹In June of 1952 the Board of Trustees of the University of the South voted 45 to 12 that though there was “nothing in the ordinances of the University to prevent the admission of Negroes, or men of any other race, to the School of Theology...[they were] of the opinion that the encouragement of the enrollment of such students...[was then] inadvisable.” Six full-time and two part-time faculty members submitted resignations effective June 1953 in protest, and thirty-five of the fifty-six students who would have returned in the Fall of 1954 transferred to other schools. The Board of Trustees reversed its position, and in September 1954 Merrick William Collier became the first black member of an entering class. See Donald Smith Armentrout, Quest for the Informed Priesthood: A History of the School of Theology (Sewanee: The School of Theology of The University of the South, 1979), pp. 281-312. [Editor’s note.]
will now have to go back to another trustee meeting." At this meeting, the trustees reversed their previous action and opened the doors to blacks; and since then, I know of no Seminary that has received more money from donors. Before the Bishop left, he said, "Odell, the church wastes a lot of talent by not using more qualified Negroes. We don't have a man in the diocese as prepared and as capable as you are to teach Greek. I am therefore appointing you to serve on the Board of Examining Chaplains in our diocese. Will you accept?" My reply was, "Certainly. I will be glad to serve." I did so for five years, until a change of schedule caused the meeting of the chaplains to conflict with the Conference for Church Workers of which I was dean. This was the first time in the South that a black man was appointed to serve in that position.

Bishop Walthour died suddenly of a heart attack on October 29, 1952.

**Bishop Claiborne**

A subsequent council elected the Rt. Rev. Randolph Claiborne, D.D., Suffragan Bishop of Alabama as Bishop of Atlanta. Bishop Claiborne made his first visit to Fort Valley College Center to preside at the meeting of the board of trustees. At the proper time, he called for a report on College Center and on Camp John Hope, of which I was director. I gave my report on College Center first. I then distributed a written report on Camp John Hope to each member of the board and showed them a picture of the staff and campers. After Bishop Caliborne looked at the picture, he asked sarcastically, "Is this a picture of the group at Camp John Hope or a picture you have taken of some other group?" My reply was: "What do you think it is?" He then paused and began to get red. I continued, "That is a hell of a picture of your staff and campers. I would have taken your word for it, and you've got to take mine this time." We then went on with the report. He turned redder and redder, but said nothing. (I knew I was wrong to speak to my bishop like that, but I had heard of his attitude and action toward his black clergy in Alabama and felt that he deserved it. Later, I knew he deserved it. For on numerous occasions in the future, he showed just how prejudiced he was toward blacks.)

**Coming to the Aid of a Brother Priest**

There was an elderly retired priest, the Rev. F. H. U. Edwards, who had served as priest-in-charge of St. Elizabeth's Church, LaGrange, Georgia, for several years. His pension was small, and he had not qualified for Social Security. It was impossible for him and his wife to live on his pension and to pay off some debts they had incurred. He had talked with
the bishop, but apparently there was nothing the Diocese of Atlanta could do about it.

Father Edwards called me to ask if I could help him. I quickly drove to the Social Security Office in LaGrange and presented his case to the officials there. They told me that, if he worked long enough to earn as much as $400.00, he would be eligible to receive Social Security. I conveyed these facts to Bishop Claiborne and got his permission to schedule Father Edwards for services in the diocese, until he had earned the $400.00. I understood that after the work was completed, the bishop would give me the $400.00 to take to Father Edwards. It was my intention to surprise Father Edwards by giving him the check for his work and telling him he had qualified for Social Security payments.

However, after Father Edwards finished the assignment, Bishop Claiborne sent him the check by a white priest, thus depriving me of the joy of presenting the check and breaking the good news about Social Security. This act of the bishop infuriated me, for he had lied to me. I had worked hard in planning and made many trips to clear up the matter for Father Edwards. I told Bishop Claiborne in no uncertain way just how I felt toward him and his action.

**Building a New Church Building in Macon, Georgia**

There was a small group of black Episcopalians about twenty miles from Fort Valley in Macon, Georgia. They had no church building of their own, but worshipped each Sunday afternoon at a special service at Christ Church (a white church). They were not permitted at Christ Church’s 11:00 o’clock service.

The black priest who had been holding services for this small congregation went into the army, leaving the little flock without a shepherd. Since I was Archdeacon of the Black Work in the Diocese, the bishop asked me to arrange services for them. This I agreed to do.

Only eight members attended my first service at Christ Church. After service, I met with them to discuss plans for future services. I asked whether they intended to continue to have services at Christ Church or whether they had other plans. Several persons raised their hands at the same time, and each one expressed a desire to get a church of their own. They wanted neither to continue services at Christ Church nor to integrate, since the white churches did not want them. They wanted their own church building, parish house and rectory.

My next question was, "Just how do you expect to get all of these?" Their reply was, "We are willing to do whatever we can, if the diocese will help us." They also said they would be willing to raise whatever amount of
money the diocese requested of them. Seven of the eight present agreed on this; the other one said the diocese should provide all the money. Neither I nor the other members agreed with him. I ended the meeting by thanking them and saying I would get in touch with the bishop to see what could be done.

I knew that thousands of dollars had been raised in the campaign for mission churches. I also knew that none of it had been spent on a black church, but that much had been spent on white churches, rectories, etc. My intention was to tap this source. I wrote Bishop Claiborne and explained the whole matter to him, and requested that some of the money be used to help these people with new church buildings. I also asked that he would specify the amount he would like for that small congregation to raise.

Shortly, his reply came, specifying the amount the congregation was to raise and assuring me that he was in full accord with our plans for the buildings. He even went so far as to ask that a representative group from the congregation and I find a suitable location for the church.

The committee and I soon located a large, desirable lot in Macon with a seven-room house in very good condition. We learned the price of it. A white friend who was an architect in Macon, Miss Ellamae Ellis League, heard of our efforts and offered to draw the plans for the new church building free of charge. We accepted, and she designed a church with a seating capacity of approximately 175. It had classrooms for adults and older children, a nursery, a kindergarten room, a secretary’s office, a priest’s study, a church parlor, a furnace room, a kitchen, a storeroom, a sacristy, a choir room, and toilets.

Before the building was built, we used the house on the lot for the congregation. The living room and dining room became a temporary church room in which we set up an altar, lectern, and pulpit. We used folding chairs borrowed from an undertaker. Someone gave us a piano. We used the other rooms as classrooms. We ordered suitable chairs, tables, etc., for each class, and soon began our services and church school. Fortunately, there was no other church nearby. We soon got a large number of boys and girls in the church school, and many adults and children came to our services. These services were held each Sunday at 9:00 a.m. with church school from 10:30 to 12:00.

In the meantime, a Mr. Burns from Milledgeville, Georgia, who was on the board of trustees of Fort Valley College Center, said to me, “Archdeacon Harris, I understand you are trying to get a church building in Macon.” I said, “Yes, that is right. We have purchased a large lot with a house on it, and we are now using it for a church and Sunday school. Also, we have plans drawn for the whole plant.” He asked to see the plans, and,
after looking at them, said, "I will give the bricks for the building and will send them over to Macon. Just let me know how many you need." I thanked him, hardly believing what I had just heard. After finding out the number of bricks needed, I notified him, and he sent them over free of charge. Another white friend, formerly from Macon, but then living in New York City, heard of our plans for the new church building and sent a check for the sum of $20,000.00.

From the very beginning of our efforts to get the church building, I urged members not to do any soliciting for the church and not to ask anyone for anything. I said that I would do likewise. I told them, however, that it would be all right to tell others that St. Matthew's congregation (for that was the name of the small group) was getting a new building. I did this constantly; and somehow it aroused interest in those who heard about it. In this way, we got much needed help. Every member, even the youngest child, pledged to give something toward the building program. The total cost was a little less than $75,000.00. The eight members raised $5,000.00. The white friend from New York gave $20,000.00. Mr. Burns gave the bricks, and Miss League drew the plans free of charge. The balance of the money came from the Mission Fund of the Diocese of Atlanta.

In less than two years the plant was completed and paid for. At first, however, there was only the altar, pulpit and lectern in the building. We had to get the pews, the baptismal font, the American flag, the church chairs, the organ, and the Communion set. We also had to have the grounds landscaped. We asked the Bishop if it would be possible to get more money from the mission fund or from other funds in the diocese. His answer was, "No. I've done all I can do for St. Matthew's Church." Then he said, "There is a church in Macon, St. Luke's Church, I believe, that has been saving some pews in the basement for a Negro Church, should one be built. You may inquire about them." I thanked him, but told him that we didn't want any old pews put in new St. Matthew's Church. His reply was, "Go ahead and get them." I called together the members and we got the exact prices of everything needed to equip the church building, including the janitor's supplies from a church furniture catalogue. After summing it all up, I asked them, "Now what are we going to do about getting these things? Where do we go from here?" One member spoke up and said, "We can get them." I answered, "Yes, we can get them and we will get them." The next question was, "How?" All of them agreed that every adult member would purchase a pew with kneelers, and every young child would give something. We also agreed to get bronze plates for the pews, font, etc., indicating the donor and names of persons memorialized. When
the meeting ended, every member had promised to get a pew or something, even if it were only a bronze plate.

In the meantime, eight or ten new persons showed up at services saying they were Episcopalians. I explained to them what we had done and were doing to get our church furnished, and asked whether they would like to join us in the endeavor. They all agreed to do so. In time, other newcomers came in with us and assumed a share of the responsibility.

The news of what we were doing spread far and wide. Many who heard it not only expressed a willingness to help, but contributed substantially to furnishing the building. Dr. Bowden from Atlanta, a member of the board of trustees of Fort Valley College Center, and Mr. Pitts, also from Atlanta, paid me a visit one day to say they wanted to help. Dr. Bowden gave two pews and the baptismal font, and Mr. Pitts gave one pew and an American flag. Later, St. Luke’s Church, Atlanta, gave one pew. Some other congregations did the same. Soon we had everything needed to furnish the building, including two complete beautiful Communion sets. We had everything needed except an organ.

We set a day to dedicate the building and for the occasion borrowed the best organ we could find in Macon. It was a beautiful Baldwin organ costing around $5,000.00. The salesman graciously loaned it to us for the occasion, moving it to the church free of charge. The Bishop came for the dedication service and found the church filled to capacity. As he approached the pulpit to preach the sermon, he asked whether everything was paid for. I answered, “Everything except the organ.” He then said, “Well Archdeacon Harris, you and the members of St. Matthew’s Church can consider the organ paid for. The friend who gave the $20,000.00 toward the building wrote me saying he was so impressed with you and what you have done at St. Matthew’s that if anything was unpaid at the time of the dedication, he would pay it. Just send him the bill.” I gave the friend the bill, and the organ was ours.

The dedication service brought to full realization the dream, hopes and goal I had for St. Matthew’s congregation. One of the members, who taught landscaping, had already landscaped the grounds and set out the shrubbery. All the members and visiting friends were happy indeed. It can be done.

I then set out to build up the congregation. Shortly I had baptized twelve persons and presented a class of five adults for confirmation. Our membership then had grown from the original eight to fourteen adults. Other Episcopalians scattered throughout the city joined us. The five newly-confirmed members made a total of thirty-three confirmed members. There were approximately thirty children. After the new church was completed, many visitors came out to services. This work presented an
unlimited opportunity for the black people of Macon. I soon received a call to St. Peter’s Church, Richmond, Virginia, however, and had to leave St. Matthew’s congregation. The call to St. Peter’s Church came in June, 1961.

In addition to the work at Fort Valley and St. Matthew’s Church, Macon, as Archdeacon of the Black Work in the Diocese of Atlanta I visited five other congregations in Griffin, LaGrange, Atlanta, and Columbus from time to time, particularly when problems or special needs arose. There was very little time for me to improve the plants, increase the number of communicants at these churches, or put forth special efforts to raise more funds. These congregations usually had a priest-in-charge who could more easily concentrate on such matters.

**Camp John Hope**

As director-chaplain of Fort Valley College Center, I wanted to not only do a good job with the students and faculty at the center, but also to reach out into the community to help as many people, especially young people, as possible. There was no camp for blacks at the time I came to Fort Valley in the whole state of Georgia. Young black Episcopalians could not even attend the Episcopal diocesan camp. Therefore, I decided to direct a camp for all youths who desired to participate. I made plans to open in June, 1952, the second year I was in Georgia.

I notified as many youths and parents as possible in Fort Valley. I also contacted Episcopal ministers in other cities and towns in Georgia, urging them to send their children to our camp. Then, I convinced a goodly number of teachers and other adults to volunteer to help with the camp for five days a year. I appointed a committee to plan for the operation of the camp. It outlined the jobs to be done, designated the cabins the boys and girls would stay in, organized adult supervision, arranged for meals, and prepared a curriculum of classes and activities for the campers. Each boy and girl was expected to pay a modest fee, and the Dioceses of Atlanta and Diocese of Georgia promised $300.00 annually toward the work.

The camp opened the first week in June each year and lasted for five days. The first year about 75 campers from Fort Valley, Macon, and other places in the Dioceses of Atlanta and Georgia attended. A few campers came from Alabama, especially Tuskegee and Birmingham. The Fort Valley College farm in Fort Valley provided an abundance of watermelon, canteloupes, and peaches for the campers. There were movies and other forms of entertainment. Parents and relatives were permitted to visit the campers on Sundays. All in all, the first year’s camp was quite a success.
Each succeeding year, the campers increased in numbers, and quality of service and kinds of activities improved. One of the most gratifying things about the camp was the interest of many adults. All staff members were volunteers. Even the insurance man provided a policy for campers and staff free of charge. He said that he was proud of the work we were doing and that he wanted to have a share in it. He did this for the ten years I directed the camp. He was white, but many white people cooperated.

I opened Camp John Hope because Camp Mikell, the diocesan camp, would not permit blacks to attend. Though John Hope was quite successful, I wanted the diocesan policy to change. In February, 1961, my opportunity came. Two black boys from Atlanta applied to Camp Mikell. The director of the camp gave their applications to the Bishop of Atlanta, who in turn refused to admit them. He wrote me, letting me know what he had done and explaining that he advised the boys to apply to Camp John Hope. I picked up the telephone and told him that if he were afraid to admit the boys to the diocesan camp, the Standing Committee, whose membership included a black man, could make the decision. The Standing Committee voted unanimously to admit the boys to the diocesan camp.

When the Standing Committee notified the bishop of their decision, the bishop, afraid of possible reaction to the decision, called the clergy of the diocese to his office in Atlanta. The director of Camp Mikell resigned when he heard that the black boys had been admitted. Fortunately, another white priest gladly agreed to serve in his place. So, that was solved.

After the bishop and clergy discussed all of the possible pros and cons of taking blacks into the diocesan youth camp, we decided to integrate the camp. One of the reasons why some did not want blacks to attend the camp was that some Ku Klux Klan members had children attending the camp. They feared that the kluxers might raise trouble when they learned that blacks were attending the camp. Fortunately, however, the first year passed without any ugly incidents. From then on black youths have been admitted to Camp Mikell. I decided that Camp John Hope was no longer needed, since the black parents sent their boys and girls to Camp Mikell. It can be done.

The Opening of the Doors of All Episcopal Churches in the State of Georgia to Blacks

One of my communicants, who was leaving Fort Valley and going back home to work, told me how much he would miss attending and participating in the church. I asked if there was a black Episcopal Church in his home town. His answer was, "No." He went on to say, "There is a white
Episcopal Church there." I asked if he would like to attend, and become affiliated with the work there. His answer was, "'Yes.'"

I told him that I would ask the rector of that church to invite him to join the parish. This met with his approval. I wrote the white priest, explaining the situation and asking that he contact my parishioner. I gave the priest my parishioner's name, address and telephone number. The white priest got in touch with him and the young man attended the next Sunday service. After service, however, the white members registered so much disapproval that the priest advised the young man to go in the future to a Methodist Church that he pointed out to him. The priest wrote me, explaining what he had done. I wrote to thank him for trying, even though he failed. Down in my heart, I could appreciate the attempt of my white brother to solve the problem. I realized that it was a universal problem, but one that could be solved, if the right steps could be taken.

I decided to contact my bishop to see what could be done from the diocesan level. I suggested that he and Bishop Stewart of the Diocese of Georgia assemble their clergy to try to come to grips with the vexing problem. He agreed. He and Bishop Stewart set a day for the clergy to meet in Atlanta. We spent a whole day discussing ways to solve the problem. Luckily, we finally came up with a solution. We established a diocesan policy that all clergy serving in communities where there was no black Episcopal Church would encourage black Episcopalians to attend their services and to join their congregations. Not only did they agree to do this, but they began doing it right away. I say this because I know of instances when blacks visited white churches and were accorded the same hospitality as other members. They were encouraged to come and serve whenever they desired to do so. I know of nothing that gives me greater joy than to have had a hand in helping the Episcopal Church in the State of Georgia open its doors to blacks. It can be done, and it was done.
CHAPTER X
ST. PETER’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

After I received and accepted the call to St. Peter’s Church, Richmond, Virginia, I began bringing my work in Fort Valley to a close. I directed Camp John Hope for the last time that summer. I finished the confirmation classes at St. Luke’s Church, Fort Valley and St. Matthew’s Church, Macon, and presented the candidates for confirmation. I baptized four candidates at St. Luke’s and saw that all financial obligations at both churches were paid in full. In the last week in September, 1961, my wife and I left for St. Peter’s Church, Richmond.

St. Peter’s Church

When we arrived in Richmond, my wife and I found a beautiful church building seating 175 to 200. The congregation had between 60 and 80 members, one-half of whom were children. Most of the adults had not finished nor even attended high school. There was one teacher, but the others were common laborers and domestics. Most of the educated and large-salaried people who were interested in the Episcopal Church went to St. Philip’s.

There was a church school with an attendance of 35 to 40 and five teachers ranging in age from 9 to 16. There was a vestry or bishop’s committee that had been in office for seven years. There was no men’s organization, and the women’s organization kept no records of its past activities. There was no rectory or parish house. The church building needed painting, the venetian blinds were in need of repairs, and the sidewalks were not paved.

When I accepted the call to St. Peter’s Church, I also agreed to take one service a month for the small congregation at Osgood Memorial Church. Soon after my arrival in Richmond, I met with Osgood vestry and congregation and arranged for an 8 o’clock a.m. service that would not conflict with St. Peter’s Church’s 11:00 o’clock hour of worship. I started with that hour and continued for about a year.

The senior warden at Osgood Church was a little fellow who had the reputation of “running things.” He was unusually nice to me, but he was always pointing out the flaws of the previous priest. One Sunday, when I went over for the 8:00 o’clock service, I found an announcement on the bulletin board that Holy Communion was to be at 11:00 a.m. I remained at
Osgood for about a half hour, and since no one came, I left. I did this for the next three or four months.

No one had said anything to me about changing the time of the service, and I did not ask about it. However, the checks from the diocese for the monthly services at Osgood stopped coming. I went to the diocesan office to find out just what had happened. The bishop told me the little, pint-sized senior warden at Osgood had made the change. I said to the bishop, "If he didn't have sense enough to notify me of the change, it does seem that you could have done so. You had to give your permission for the change. Now, since my original salary included the work at Osgood, I expect you to restore it." He did.

Accomplishments During Seven Years and Two Months at St. Peter’s

The parish built a nice eight-room brick rectory, located mid-way between two large lots. It built a brick parish house with furnished lounge, kitchen, rector’s study, secretary’s office and church school rooms. The parish painted the church building twice, both inside and out, and installed a new lighting system in the church school rooms and the rector’s study. The parish also purchased the following items: choir vestments, typewriter, mimeograph machine, chancel flags, processional cross, water fountain, and over 200 prayer books and hymnals. It had sidewalks laid and the ground beautified.

I baptized 110 persons and prepared 113 persons for confirmation, an average of more than 15 baptisms and 16 confirmations a year. Thirty-two persons transferred to St. Peter’s Church. It can be done.

The first year I was there, I recruited 10 city teachers to serve as church school teachers and officers. I spent a whole year preparing them for their respective jobs. They took over the church school work, and very soon thereafter the school took on new life. The attendance rose to between 60 and 85. The women’s auxiliary grew stronger, and a men’s club organized. In addition, I strengthened the altar guild, acolyte guild, and the youth and adult choirs.

On the diocesan level, I served on the Christian Social Relations Committee of which I was chairman for one year, and served on the Board of Examining Chaplains.

Three Unforgettable Incidents

During my stay at St. Peter’s Church, three unforgettable incidents occurred. The first happened during my initial year in Richmond. I was bothered by the fact that I found no adults working in the church school,
and few capable ones in the church. The training program I planned for the
ten teachers I had recruited for the church school included visits to observe
three of the best church schools in Richmond. I asked the chairman of the
Department of Christian Education for the names and locations of the best
church schools in Richmond. I went to the rector of the church that the
chairman had rated best and told him that I was trying to get St. Peter's
church school going. I had recruited new teachers and would like his per-
mission for them to observe his church school in operation one morning. I
gave him a month to answer. At the end of the month he told me that the
superintendent and others would not agree to a visit. No further explana-
tion was given. This hurt me more than words can explain. This was the
first time in my life that I had requested a favor from a white person. The
fact that he was a priest made it seem even worse. It was a tremendous blow
to me. Yet, he was a fine Christian gentleman and I liked him very much.

The second incident occurred during my second year there. The clericus
(the gathering of all Episcopal clergy) in the city of Richmond provided
celebrants for the weekly services at a diocesan home for elderly ladies.
Once each year priests signed up for the week and month in which they
would serve. In 1961 the only black priest who attended clericus indicated
the day he would serve. The following day, the chairman of the Depart-
ment of Christian Education of the Diocese advised the black priest not to
take the service, because the ladies probably would be offended by having
a black priest come to the home. This did not sit well with the black
brother. He took up the matter with his white colleagues at the next
clericus meeting. When he learned it was their consensus that he should
not take a service, he withdrew his name, but was greatly disturbed by
their attitude.

I joined the clericus after my arrival in Richmond. When the day came
to sign up for services at the church home for the following year, I signed
up for a service, not knowing what had happened the previous year to my
black brother. He, too, signed up again, and then asked why the church
was not Christian enough to permit a black priest to take services in a
diocesan home for senior ladies. The subject was discussed pro and con.
One white priest stated that he and several others had come up with a
happy solution—to have a chaplain (white, of course) serve the home.

I then asked that we go ahead with the original plan by letting each
priest sign up for the services he desired to lead. One of the brothers stated
that it would not be practicable, for if some of the ladies saw a Negro priest
come in, they might drop dead. I was foolish enough to say, 'If this should
happen, there could not be a better place to die than in the church taking
Holy Communion.' The bishop was present, and I was glad. So, I said to
him, 'Bishop Gibson, it is deeply regrettable that the Diocese of Virginia
has waited so long to solve this problem. Getting a white chaplain will not solve the problem; accept it, and solve it, by having each priest, black or white, take his turn for a service without notifying the ladies in advance that black clergy are involved. Then let us see just what will happen.” All agreed that we should follow that procedure.

I must admit that when my turn came to serve, I was quite apprehensive about my reception. To my utter surprise, however, I have never been more graciously received and courteously treated. I saw nothing but a fine group of elderly ladies. All who were able to come to the service came. After the service, I went to the rooms of the four or five ladies who were too weak to attend the service; and I talked with them and prayed with them. I learned from the other black priest that his experience there was the same as mine. During the next six years of my stay in Richmond, I always took my turn in visiting the diocesan home. Even after I retired and moved to Petersburg, I received an annual invitation from the ladies to take the usual service. I accepted until my wife became too ill for me to leave her.

The month after I first visited the home, I told of my experience at the meeting of the clericus. I said that the real problem of racial prejudice in this case was with the priests and the bishop, and not so much with those ladies at the home. It was we who were afraid to do what we knew we should do. We used the argument that the women would not be able to face the black priests as an excuse. During all the fifty years of my ministry, I have believed that the church should set the example of practicing brotherhood, but, unfortunately, it has not always done so. At any rate, the problem of the clericus and the diocesan home was solved. It was the last of the problems of that kind in the diocese to be solved. It can be done.

The third and last of these incidents occurred the fourth year of my ministry at St. Peter’s. The parish had just built a nice spacious brick rectory and a parish house. One of the big problems that we faced, however, was the fact that our church building, parish house, and rectory were in a new community away from a vast majority of our members. Two years prior to my arrival the diocese purchased the church building in a community that was formerly white. As usual, as blacks moved in, the whites moved out. When the parish house was completed, there was only one white family living near the church.

I decided to make friends with the people of the community. The first thing I did was to get a church sign for the parish house, which read as follows, “St. Peter’s Community Center.” Most of my members objected to the wording, for they wanted it to read, “St. Peter’s Parish House.” However, I eventually won them over.
The second step was to form a sense of community in the new neighborhood. I visited every house in a section nine or ten blocks square, telling heads of the families that I was interested in making that community one of the best in Richmond and in the world. I wanted every home in the community involved. I was providing a meeting place at St. Peter's Community Center. I was able to interest the members of every home.

I set a night for the first meeting. I was elated to have 75 or 80 persons present. I opened with prayer, thanked them for their presence, and stated the purpose of the meeting—to make our community one of the best in Richmond and in the world. I asked a good writer to go to the blackboard, and then asked those present to state what they thought were the things that marred our community, the things that kept it from being the best. People began to make statements faster than they could be recorded. Soon the board was filled with the things that needed to be improved in our community. The following were some of the things on the board:

1. Front and back yards that needed cleaning, new flowers, and shrubbery;
2. Streets and alleys without lights;
3. Unpaved sidewalks;
4. Unsightly streets and trash cans;
5. Juvenile delinquency (breaking in houses, stealing, vandalism, etc.);
6. Low voter registration and turnout;
7. Lack of stated times and places when members of the community could learn about registering and voting;
8. Little involvement in city government.

I then asked the question, "Just how can we go about improving these things?" The first answer was, "Let us get organized." Since the one hour we had agreed to meet was up, we all agreed to meet the next week at 8:00 p.m. at the same place. The first item on the agenda would be the organizing of the group.

At the next meeting, those who attended elected a president, secretary, treasurer, and certain other officers. We drew up a statement of purpose, laws and by-laws for the organization. We agreed upon requirements for membership and voted to order membership cards. We chose a committee to contact every adult in the community, asking them to pay the annual fee and become a member.

I was unanimously elected president of the organization, which we named the Community Civic League. We met once a week for about three months, during which time we were able to make plans to meet the needs of concerned members of the community. Then we began meeting once a month. During my last three years there, there was very good attendance.
and lively discussions at these monthly meetings. We made many improvements in a variety of areas of needs. Each succeeding year that I was there I was re-elected president. It has been fifteen years since I retired, but the Community Civic League is still going strong, and it has done much to make for a beautiful and stable community. Many of the members of the League came into St. Peter’s Church and became strong supporters of its program.

My primary purpose in getting the community organized was not to get the people to become Episcopalians—although I hoped many would want to become members—but to have St. Peter’s Church take the lead in improving the community. The results far exceeded my expectation. It can be done.

Preparing to Retire

I became 65 years of age on September 3, 1967. I intended to retire when I reached that age, but my bishop was in England at that time, and I could not notify him of my plans to retire until he returned a couple of months later. I began, however, to take steps to bring my work to a close. I baptized a few more candidates and finished the instruction of my last confirmation class so as to have it ready for the bishop when he came. I saw that all financial obligations were met for the year, and even finished the Annual Diocesan Report that would not be due until January 15.

When the bishop returned, he came to St. Peter’s to confirm the members of the class. I told him of my plans to retire. He was very much surprised. Then the two of us discussed the possibility of getting a priest to take my work on the first of January 1969. After discussing several possibilities, we both decided to try to get “Pope,” a very fine white priest in Richmond.1 During my years in Richmond, I had observed him closely and was always amazed at the very great interest he always took in black work of the diocese. With the Bishop’s consent, I called him on the phone and told him I was getting ready to retire. I asked if he would be interested in taking over my work. He said he would be interested and would like to come over the next day to look the work over. He came and said he would like to take it. I arranged with the vestry to meet with him, so that they could talk things over. They met and he accepted the work and stayed there ten years. I was so thankful to God to have had a hand in developing the work to that point and to have seen it continue in the hands of a dedicated priest and leader. It can be done.

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1The Rev. Edward M. (“Pope”) Gregory served as Vicar of Saint Peter’s from 1969 to 1979. [Editor’s note]
So, after serving from the time of my ordination in 1933 until December, 1968—a period of 35 1/2 years—I retired and moved to Petersburg, where I had a home. After my retirement, I have served as a part-time priest at St. Stephen’s Church, Petersburg, for nearly six years. I also served two other years at St. James’ Church, Emporia, and have participated in special services at other churches.

During my retirement, I wrote and published a history of the Bishop Payne Divinity School.² I have also written up the life of my grandfather, William P. Russell. He spent many years in slavery, but after his freedom bought a home and helped found St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, where I was baptized. I have also written a history of the Black Episcopal Church in Virginia, and this biography of my own life. I hope to publish these last three shortly. Also, I was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia, in 1974.

In April, 1974, my darling wife died of cancer. Some years later, I married again—this time to Gladys L. Ward of Henderson, North Carolina. So I still have a fine wife, two children (Odell G. Harris, Jr., who is teaching in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and Marion Elizabeth Perry, who is married to Col. Mervin E. Perry, who has spent more than 26 years in service) and four grandchildren (Dr. Charles O. Harris, who is practicing at Duke Hospital, Durham, North Carolina; Carol Perry, who is a physical therapy nurse working in a hospital in Fayetteville, North Carolina; Susan Perry, who is a sophomore at the University of Texas; and Robin Perry, who will begin graduate school with a scholarship of $5,000.00 in September, 1983.)

I lost both of my kidneys last year, but am active and feeling fine and hope to reach my 80th birthday on September 3, 1983.³

²Odell Greenleaf Harris, The Bishop Payne Divinity School, Petersburg, Virginia: A History of the Seminary to Prepare Black Men for the Ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church (Alexandria: Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary, 1980) [Editor’s Note]

³Odell Harris lived to see his eightieth birthday. He died on November 7, 1983. [Editor’s note]