

The Success, Impact and Varied Roles of the Offices of Black  
Ministry in the Church Today

We Walk by faith and Not by Sight  
25<sup>th</sup> Commemoration of the U.S. Bishops Pastoral  
“Brothers and Sisters to Us”

Bishops’ Committee on African American Catholics  
USCCB Meeting  
November 14, 2004

Greta Stokes Tucker  
Department for Black Catholics, Ethnic & Cultural Communities  
Diocese of Pittsburgh

---

---

INTRODUCTION:

Many throughout the country eagerly anticipated the new millennium and the changes, insights, improvements, and opportunities for society that the new year would bring. While there was much to celebrate, the year 2000 ushered in old problems, new challenges, and unresolved issues. Unfortunately, the old problem of personal and institutional racism, not yet dismantled and more insidiously subtle, stepped into the new era. In addition, we were soon faced with 9-11 and its aftermath; new targets of prejudice and discrimination based on country of origin, ethnicity and religion; a changing economy; and the painful scandal within the Church.

In some way, we have all been affected by the challenges at the beginning of this new century and millennium. It may not be surprising, therefore that a few offices of ministry to African American Catholics, and other ethnic groups, have been closed. On the other hand, some dioceses have looked for new and different models to continue the invaluable ministry provided by Offices for African Catholic American Ministries. Before highlighting a few of these models, let me note the historic role and success of these offices.

## ROLE & SUCCESS OF OBM OFFICES:

The first offices of ministry to Black Catholics were established between the late 1960's and early 70's. They began at a time when African Americans were raising the questions of Black identity, acceptance, leadership, and equal status in the United States and in the Church. African American Catholics recognized that they, too, had authentic gifts and talents to share with the church and a right to be at the banquet table. They understood the importance of evangelization—the sharing of faith—within their own communities and the importance of leadership and having a voice within the Church.

The development of these concepts continued into the 80's and gave birth to the historic 6<sup>th</sup> National Black Catholic Congress in 1987, after which many more offices or structures for African American Catholic ministry were established in dioceses. As in the beginning, these offices were vehicles for evangelization among African American Catholics and within the larger African American community. While the number of African American Catholics has increased, we, like the United States Census Bureau, must find better ways to count African Americans, encourage participation in data collection, and change attitudes about participating in such surveys. In 1984, the Black bishops in the United States wrote, in What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization, “Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing; not only conversion but renewal; not only entry into the community but the building up of the community; not only hearing the Word but sharing it”

For African American Catholics, who were one of the invisible and marginalized members of the Church, the offices created one of the means by which Black Catholics could be on the inside of the Church. What was significant was not merely that the invisible had become visible, but that now there was African American presence and leadership within diocesan decision-making structures. Having indigenous African American leadership was important.

Outreach required leadership that understood the culture, language, and experience of the people. Their presence was not to be mere tokenism of long awaited acceptance, rather the active participation of African Americans into the full fabric of the Church both locally and nationally.

The Offices for African American Catholic Ministries have opened the door for Black Catholics to have a place and a voice at the table of decision-making and leadership in dioceses. Besides focusing on evangelization, they assist dioceses in addressing racism. These offices and their programs have been a leaven of hope by reaching out to the broader Catholic community as well as to the broader African American community. They have been a symbol of hope and recognition for African American Catholics of their presence at the Eucharistic table. In many dioceses, we have gone from no African American leadership presence in the chancery to at least one or two African Americans in leadership roles. While this is not sufficient or the place to remain, it is a conscientious and deliberate step forward.

The offices have helped to change the image of the Church in the larger Black community and among African American Catholics themselves. Their establishment has been viewed as a sign of recognition and welcome. As liaisons between the community and the Church, they bring a face to the problems, issues, and dreams in the African American communities and parishes. Ultimately, each Office for African American Catholic Ministries exists to serve its bishop, the church, and its people.

They have helped African American Catholics to enrich the universal church with their gifts of faith, spirituality, symbols, and culture. They have assisted in feeding their people through programs that build leadership and faith. According to the National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan, Here I Am, Send Me, “There is a vitality and an enthusiasm in the African American Catholic community that must be channeled and nurtured. No longer simply

recipients of the ministry of others, they are called to be full participants in the life and mission of the Church, on both the local and national levels.”

Directors of offices have a significant role as leaders within their diocesan structures, in the African American community and nationally. Just look at who serves on the various committees of the USCCB departments and other national Catholic organizations.

### MODELS:

Some dioceses, faced with issues of financial stewardship, have created different structures to carry forth ministry to African American Catholics. I will cite four multicultural models that are currently employed throughout the country by giving a brief description of each, plus positive considerations and challenges.

#### Model 1: The Melting Pot

- a. In this model, multiculturalism is generic, a melting pot without distinguishing the various cultures. All ethnic ministries are combined into one multicultural office with a single staff person, the director, who is responsible for working with all ethnic and cultural groups addressing racial, ethnic and cultural ministries, issues, programs, and worship.
- b. Positive: It helps to reduce the budget because there is only one staff person.
- c. Challenge: One person cannot do it all or carry out the full mission given the differences in histories, cultures, symbols, spiritualities, worship styles, and languages. Usually, one person is not equipped or trained to work with all ethnic groups. Also, the specific ethnic communities are not present at the leadership table, and therefore have no voice.

### Model #2: Focus On Only Two Ethnic Groups

- a. In this model, African American and Hispanic ministries are joined under one title or office.
- b. Positive: It, too, helps to reduce the budget because there is only one staff person.
- c. Challenge: The focus is only on two ethnic ministries. Other groups, their culture, symbols, spirituality, and needs are not recognized and are excluded. The staff person must have familiarity with both communities or it becomes a superficial ministry. The danger is that the focus of the office and ministry will be based on the culture of the dominant group or staff person, thus creating tensions and a sense of alienation for the other.

### Model #3: A Department for Multiculturalism or Diversity

- a. The structure for this model has a director of the department and a coordinator for each of the ethnic ministries. It is a communal model where there is a clear vision and understanding for the mission of the department. The coordinators for the respective ethnic ministries have a multicultural perspective so that each is able to articulate this perspective or vision on behalf of all within the department. There is no compromise on diversity and all, from the director to the coordinators, function from the perspective of the multicultural lens in solving conflicts, working with other diocesan departments and structures, and with their respective communities. In several cases, former directors of Offices for African American Catholic Ministries have been asked to serve as the directors of these departments, because of the experience and expertise already gained in African American ministry.

- b. Positive: It is communal. It is more visionary and easier to establish a clear vision and mission. One person is not the official spokesperson for all; rather there are appropriate persons in leadership for each ethnic ministry. It exemplifies the mission of the Church to evangelize. And, it is more alive, inviting all to bring their gifts.
- c. Challenges: It does not reduce the budget. It calls for a vision and commitment. In addition, sufficient time must be provided for all involved to build a level of trust, commitment, and ownership for the vision.

#### Model #4: Separate Ethnic Offices, But No Director

- a. Similar to the last model, this one has an office and/or coordinator for each ethnic ministry, however there is no department or executive director pulling all together in order to forge a common vision.
- b. Positive: Each ethnic ministry is represented.
- c. Challenge: Each ethnic ministry works independently of the other, and they do not necessarily have to work together or share a common vision or mission.

#### CONCLUSION:

These models are offered as a way to stimulate questions, engage in creative dialogue, and brainstorm even more innovative models. Consider the theme of a piece of music and the variations on that theme by different instruments and musicians. In the same way, there may be other creative structures—variations on this particular theme—that are grounded in justice, equity and the inclusion of those for whom it is meant to serve. Whatever the model or structure, there must be a clear vision, not just for today but also for the future. Moreover, it is vital that those who are impacted are at the table. We should not poster one ethnic group as the epitome of

all, for it ignores and subdues the interaction, the wealth of knowledge, and gifts the other has to offer the Church. And, regardless of the paradigm, it must include African American ministry. The history of African Americans in the United States, in the American Church, and the continued evidence of racism make this a necessity.

We must remember, when the faithful are fully alive in their faith, are committed, and have accepted the invitation to share their gifts with the larger Church, greater are their demands for full participation. The dead is silent and will ask nothing from the Church. On the other hand, our brothers and sisters who are alive will place upon the Church greater demands, needs and expectations in order to fully live and celebrate their faith.