

LaVerne McCain Gill
Ministry of Empowerment/Ministerio de
capacitación

1. Getting to Know LaVerne/Aprendiendo a conocer a LaVerne

Name/Nombre: LaVerne McCain Gill

A. Brown Recipient/A. B. honor: 2003

Color of my hair/Color de pelo: Black/Negro

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos: Brown/Café

Brothers and sisters/Hermanos o hermanas:
Three brothers/Tres hermanos

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento: Third child/Tercera

Favorite school subject/Clase favorita: English/Inglés

Hobbies/Pasa tiempo: Reading/Leer

I looked up to/Admiro a: My mother/Mi madre

What was important to you?/¿Qué fue importante para tí?
Getting an education and staying in school/Obtener una educación y mantenerme en la escuela



Getting an education meant a passage out of poverty. I was curious about religion, although I did not have a lot of solid information. At the age of 15, I went away one summer to a conservative “religious” “camp” entitled Moral Re-armorment in Mackinac Island, Michigan. It was a very intense almost brainwashing experience and my mother had to “de-program me once I left there.

My dream was to have options in my life. I had them and that was important to me. I had many careers before going into the ministry. I grew up wanting to be a social worker, but in college I received a degree in business.



2. Wondering

*I ain't goin' to let nobody turn me around,
Turn me around, turn me around.
Whatever the situation might be,
Nobody is going to turn me around.
No matter what the problem,
Whatever is standing in your way,
I ain't goin' to let nobody turn me around.¹*

LaVerne McCain Gill sings these words into her May 7, 2006, sermon. Her congregation claps in rhythm. LaVerne is African American. She is the first African American pastor of [Daniel] Webster United Church of Christ. She is its first pastor who is a woman. This is her first pastorate. It works.

In 1999, the historic church called LaVerne, then 51. The former abolitionist and temperance church continues to lead the rural suburban community in progressive thinking. About seven per cent of its 200 members are people of color. From the farming community to the professional persons who commute to nearby Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan, it works.

3. Doing the Do-ing

In contrast to that setting, LaVerne had spent seminary training preparing to become a leader of "my people." She had been a university teacher, corporate trainer, Senate legislative aid, real estate broker, Federal Reserve budget analyst, weekly alternative newspaper editor/publisher, television and radio producer, author and news commentator. She wrote in "From the Driver's Seat to the Passenger's Seat"² that she thrived on all of it.

Several production titles from the nine years of radio and television hosting reveal the span of her passions:

"He Never Sent Women: The Ordination of a Female Priest"
"Straight-Talk: Sex, Teens and the 90's"
"The Talented Ten: African American Women in the 103rd Congress"
"Winnie Mandela in Washington"

¹ Gospel hymn as taped in Dexter, Michigan, by Brauninger.

² In Cleophus LaRue, Editor, *This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 121ff

"African American Women in Jazz"
"African and African-American Dialogue"
"African American and Korean-American Dialogue"
"Creating Peace."

"Creating Peace" was the first of the Bailey Youth Forums that she initiated soon after arriving in Dexter. She wanted Webster to expand its outreach to a more diverse community. The inter-racial, inter-denominational and inter-faith gathering drew more than three hundred of the county's youth.

"He Never Sent Women: The Ordination of an Episcopalian Priest" became a significant part of her faith journey. At the time, she said, she felt the public television documentary had fulfilled her actual calling. It did not occur to her then that she would begin seminary in five years. She did not expect that after her own ordination, she, too, would encounter discrimination.

4. Beginning the Be-ing

LaVerne's journey of seeking was long. She had experienced the call almost a decade before entering seminary. It was "a feeling of restlessness and a search for purposeful and faithful living," she said. She was going on forty, married with two sons, but "something was missing" (LaRue, 121).

In the flush of superlative productions, she collapsed physically and required surgery. "Women who were as active as I was, trying to burn the candle at both ends in the middle of being a mother-wife-professional and a hopelessly addicted work-aholic are pretty much guaranteed such wakeup calls," she said. "I stopped everything . . . and returned to a period of discernment. . . . God had taken me out of the driver's seat and gently placed me in the passenger seat. I was not in charge of the journey any more," she said (122).

She continued to wonder her way into a career:

What is God telling me to do?
What am I doing wrong?
Why did God put the brakes on this roller coaster?

When she entered the hospital in October, 1992, she brought along Machiavelli's *The Prince*; the Bible and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secrets of Joy*. "One of these books would be the key to the rest of my life," she said (122).

Would I return to the media business and be a "ruthless business woman"?

Would I be caught up in doing idealistic and noble "missions of justice"?

Would I "work for transformation through the gospel model of discipleship"?

"I knew that my life was about to change," she said, "even though I was trying to keep from surrendering."

The night that she developed an infection with a high fever, LaVerne wrestled with God. That night she decided which book would govern her life.

Yet, she still was not ready. She returned to radio production. With a generous grant from public radio, she produced and narrated the program on African American women in the 103rd Congress. It aired over 100 stations.

"It was a time," she said, "when everything I put my hand to seemed to work, as if to create doubt in my mind as to whether or not this 'calling' of mine was authentic" (125).

She was still restless, still seeking. Even though she had achieved this level of success, her passion for her work was not as keen. In early 1994, she went to Princeton for a weekend exploratory seminary. She was ready to say "yes" to God.

5. Book: *African Women in Congress*

At the age of 46, she entered the fall class. Also that September, she signed the book contract that would close her pre-call life and expand her ministry of empowerment to include the written word.

What does *African Women in Congress: Forming and Transforming History* reveal about LaVerne McCain Gill? Not only did she honor their journeys, her insatiable pondering and her curiosity held firm:

How did oppressed African women transform themselves into today's African American woman?

What was the process that they used to re-envision their lives as women of God and not slaves of men?

How did they move from the mantle of oppression to the altar of praise; from the bottom of the slave ship to the halls of Congress?

How had they and did they still meet hopelessness with hope?

She wrote about the pioneering first Black women in Congress. She considered their personal struggles and the confrontations they met around gender, class and race that were internal to Congress.

She stood tall with these empowered women whose soul energy strengthened their determination to trail blaze justice. "They were the heirs apparent," she said, "to the centuries of struggle within the struggle" (*Congress*, 1).

6. Seminary

Seminary was a time to prepare for her new life. She earned two more graduate degrees, Master of Divinity and Master of Theology, and began work on a second book proposal. "While I had acknowledged the call," she said, "I was still not ready to embrace it" (LaRue, 125).

She did not envision herself in pastoral ministry. Her seminary internships were in other settings – chaplain at a correction facility and chaplain assistant for Princeton University. She also did not cocoon herself within a cloth of reading and pondering. Beyond chaplaincy assignments, her preaching and other ministerial "to do list" for the next decade would include several delegate travels, among them to Cuba and Zimbabwe.

Returning for a summer to her hometown of Reston, Virginia, she founded an ecumenical local missions project. "Works Sunday" (<http://www.workssunday.org>) encouraged people to enter the community for a Sunday and engage in some form of social justice or faith-based activity.

What began from three Protestant churches in 1996, gathered interfaith support from Jewish, Muslim and Roman Catholic communities. By 2003, a dozen participating religious groups reached out with projects that involved all ages.

In Reston, however, she met a wall of mean-spirited church leaders who made her ordination difficult. While she was experienced in politics, she said she was unschooled in those of the church. It cooled her interest in serving a church. However, the call came.

7. Into the Midst

Still completing the manuscripts for her next two books, LaVerne began her ministry at Webster on May 1, 1999. "I moved right into parish ministry without my usual analytical deliberations," she said after a number of emergencies arose among parishioners her first week (LaRue, 129).

She learned soon that intercultural ministry was as challenging as it was enriching – fodder for her next pondering:

How could I minister and maintain my integrity as an African American with a different church cultural experience and still provide ministry open to and welcoming of all? (129)

She held to the truth that Webster folk come from a variety of denominational and worship style backgrounds:

Freedom to worship belonged to anyone who walked through the door. If some people wanted and felt the spirit move through them to clap, they should clap. If it moved them to say "Amen," they should say "Amen." If they just wanted to sit and be quiet, they could just sit and be quiet. The only thing that was not allowed was for anyone to look askance at the person next to them because the spirit moved differently for them (130).

Mirroring her warmth, on the Sunday of May 7, 2006, "Amen's" sang throughout the responsive and empathic congregation that celebrates God and each other and whose people are for each other.

8. Book: *Daughters of Dignity*

In February, 2000, Pilgrim Press published LaVerne's second book. Three years earlier, she had taught a seminar at Princeton Theological Seminary. "African American Women in the Ministry: The Church's Role in Reclaiming the Virtues of Womanhood" shaped the starting point of *Daughters of Dignity: African Biblical Women and the Virtues of Womanhood*.

To this book, she carried four goals, aims that she still implements in her congregation:

- To draw readers to new insights into the Christian virtues that are the basis of character formation;
- To create ministries designed to reclaim Christian virtues;

- To explore new approaches to personal spiritual growth; and
- To use new strategies for reading the Bible (*Dignity*, 108).

In *Daughters of Dignity*, LaVerne continued to ponder:

What was the process that [today's African American women] used to re-envision their lives as women of God and not slaves of men?

What is their link to the stories of African women in the Bible?

What can oppressed women around the world learn from the faith journeys of African American women?

African American women, she wrote, redefined and reclaimed their womanhood in the aftermath of slavery. They "forged an ethic of black womanhood that defined the manner in which they would survive in an alien and strange land – America" (xv).

For each Christian virtue of justice, love, faith, wisdom, and perseverance, she told the stories of African biblical women and of African American women of faith who have made significant historical contributions to the ethics of black womanhood. Each played a part in God's plan for all of humanity.

After relating the traditional interpretation, she retold their stories through the viewpoint of the oppressed person. She sowed a holistic way of viewing biblical stories, a "justice reading strategy." She unwrapped each story, revealing God's purpose for placing a woman in the story, rather than being preoccupied with male leaders, heroes or heroines.

Whether the distancing that our society shows is toward persons with disabilities, persons of color, economic differences, gender-preference, sexism or any of the other –isms that separate people from each other, anyone who suffers some form of oppression does not walk through that mess alone.

What separates God from the other gods, she said, is that God cares about giving justice to the orphan, the widowed and the oppressed. From Psalm 82 and other biblical passages, she said, the biblical meaning of justice emerges. "Justice . . . was and remains one of the most significant attributes of God" (3).

9. Deepening Individual Spiritual Formation

Whatever her storytelling form of expression -- writing, media production, orating, or preaching, LaVerne McCain Gill's lifework is an invitation to explore. She brings together women of all times with stories of empowerment to share how oppressed persons "meet hopelessness with hope" (14). She invites all to reflect upon how God uses the unique be-ing of each to help improve another's situation.

LaVerne has carried that spirit of justice empowerment into her pastoral ministry. In her May 7th sermon, she reflected on the after Easter/Pentecost story:

How did the Disciples hiding in a room, afraid of the Jews, get from that point where they were crouched down and fearful to being willing to confront the Jews, to give up their lives to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ? That story speaks of spiritual boldness and spiritual authority.

.....
We need to claim that [spiritual] authority for ourselves. Many of us live off of inherited spirituality. Whatever our parents gave us, what little bit we can still hold onto, we hold onto; but we do not go for it for ourselves.

10. Book: *My Mother Prayed for Me*

When we begin to listen for God's plan, she said, we discover that God means to use us in some way to help improve the situation for others. This understanding can transform the humiliation of oppressive experience into our becoming instruments of justice.

In November, 2000, Pilgrim Press published *My Mother Prayed for Me: Faith Journaling for African American Women*. LaVerne McCain Gill's emerging dream has become an invitation to African women and to other oppressed persons:

It is difficult to be an African American woman and not know that your faith journey was paved with the prayers of a community that knew what it would take to bring women who have been violated on the slave ships of the Atlantic to the point where their ancestors would be speaking on the floors of Congress (*Faith Journaling*, 10).

This was her dream:

I hope that this journal will start a long-overdue process, the documenting of God's work in the lives of ordinary people who endured generations of oppression – women who survived and triumphed over adversity because of the wonders of God's grace and the magnitude of God's goodness (ix).

The mother she reveres had stirred its writing. LaVerne held within her soul her mother's spoken stories. Yet she yearned for something she could hold and read as a guide during trying times. This personal book reveals the heart of LaVerne Gill:

Even during hard times, [my mother] always seemed anchored in her faith, not wavering as I sometimes do. . . . As an African American woman, I have always thought about how I too might gain the kind of spiritual fortitude and strength that under girded my mother. ³

LaVerne reflected about women in today's world who "find themselves without this kind of reservoir of peace from which to draw. Many of us worry as we go, but refuse to let go of those worries and give them up to God. We take . . . little time to nurture our spirit and our faith. We spend time telling our stories to friends, but little time writing our stories for new generations" (*My Soul Looks Back*, Introduction).

She draws us to self-reflection and the telling of our own stories through a five-step process that begins with prayer and meditation and ends with writing from the heart.

God, who is a God of all people, intends to bring salvation to all people, the whole world. Thinking in this way, she said, African women are placed in the salvation story. They, like all women considered the spoils of war, "were left to make sense out of who they are after the devastation and dehumanization" (*Faith Journaling*, xxvii-xxviii). They, as Africans who were brought to America as slaves, have a unique story to tell about deliverance (10).

³ From the introduction to *My Soul Looks Back and Wonders*, Kim Sadler, Editor, UCC Mosaic Series (Pilgrim Press, 2000)

11. Book: *Vashti's Victory*

In 1996, while LaVerne was at a predominantly white seminary, she had met the racist threat of a professor. Laverne refused to back down. "If I had not known that God and not humans charted my path, I would have caved in," she said. "It was then that I found in the story of Vashti a story that could provide the sustenance that would guide me through moments like these" [*Vashti*, xii].

LaVerne titled her course paper, "The Vashti Paradigm: Systemic Violence against Women of Color Who Rebel against Patriarchal Authority." It prompted the writing of *Vashti's Victory: Biblical Women Resisting Injustice*. Published in 2003, it continued to hone LaVerne's empowering invitation to resist injustice.

Using the justice reading strategy, she retold the stories of six biblical women whose courage helped them to rebel against that oppression. They rebelled *for* God in order to have God's work made obvious in the world. The message: Women everywhere can overcome being swallowed by a choice of victim hood. Women are not "footnotes in the biblical narrative. . . . God not only seeks justice for them, but also uses them in the process of fighting injustice" [*Vashti*, xvii].

12. The Ghana Ministry

Since 2001, delegates from the Webster United Church of Christ have made an annual spiritual pilgrimage to Ghana, West Africa. There the Webster church has a well-established denominational relationship in the communities of Ho and Accra. Among other supportive activities, LaVerne also designed a cottage industry in the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp at Sekondi. It provides work and a source of income for the ninety women there.

At this writing, the delegation is completing preparations for the February, 2007, pilgrimage. LaVerne McCain Gill's multi-faceted ministry of empowerment at Webster UCC continues to house as many enriching options as her enthusiasm and passion can summon.

13. So What About You?

The questions in this section are among those in *My Mother Prayed for Me* that Laverne Gill suggests we ask ourselves as we consider our life journey.

- Read Habakkuk 2:1-3. The prophet Habakkuk enfolded the journey of finding voice – from the African women of the Bible and the African American women of Congress to Laverne Gill and other women of today.

How will God answer us?

How is God answering you?

Sometimes, she says, "it's a gesture or an event; sometimes God is silent. . . . The uniqueness of every person provides that each has a calling from God."

- Read Ephesians 6:18-19.

Who prayed for you?

When were you first aware of God in your life?

What were you taught about God as a child and who taught you?

- Read Psalm 82.

What is a path that you took that led in the wrong direction? How did God deliver you?

How do the significant relationships in your life tie in to your spirituality? (Faith Journaling, pp.1-2)

- Read Psalm 8.

Why do you suppose LaVerne says this is her favorite Psalm?

What does this Psalm say about your own life?

14. Church Family Project

Invite several mothers and daughters of all ages in your church to a time to talk together about spiritual role models.

What to do:

- ✓ Invite mother (or other caregiver) and daughter pairs to sit together and listen to you read Psalm 46:10.
- ✓ Meditate silently on the Scripture, inviting God's presence.
- ✓ Talk in pairs to each other about who your spiritual role models are, who it is who gives you courage for your spiritual journey, who prays for you, for whom you pray. These may be women of the Bible, women in history, your neighbor, your own caregiver.
- ✓ Tell how God has used you to help another person in some way.
- ✓ Come together as a whole group to share a few stories.
- ✓ Invite those who wish to do so to offer a prayer of thanksgiving or to pray for the one told about.

15. Still Curious?

Books written by LaVerne McCain Gill:

African American Women in Congress: Forming and Transforming History (Rutgers University Press, 1997)

Daughters of Dignity: African Biblical Women and the Virtues of Womanhood (Pilgrim Press, 2000)

My Mother Prayed for Me: Faith Journaling for African American Women (United Church Press, 2000)

Vashti's Victory: Biblical Women Resisting Injustice (Pilgrim Press, 2003)

Contributing Writer in:

LaRue, Cleophus, Editor. *This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

My Soul Looks Back and Wonders, Kim Sadler, Editor, UCC Mosaic Series (Pilgrim Press, 2000)

Books by Other Writers:

Burnside, Madeleine. *Spirit of the Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Rosemarie Robotham (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997)

- Dove, Rita. *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (New York: Norton, 1999)
- Felder, Cain Hope, Ed. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991)
- McCarty, Osceola. *Simple Wisdom for Rich Living* (Marietta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1996)
- Mitchem, Stephanie Y. *African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness*. Order through UCC Resources at 800-537-3394.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. (New York: Random House, 1987)
- Painter, Nell Irvine. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1996)
- Parker, Evelyn L. *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents*. Order through UCC Resources.
- Patterson, Sharon C. *Put on Your Crown: The Black Woman's Guide to Living Single – and Christian*. Order through UCC Resources.
- Wright, Jeremiah A., Jr. *Africans Who Shaped Our Faith* (Chicago: Urban Ministries, 1995)
- Tinsley, Sonya, Ed. *Black Excellence: African-Americans on Striving and Excelling* (Peter Pauper Press, 1998). Read more about Osceola McCarty.
- Wimberly, Anne E. Streaty. *Nurturing Faith and Hope: Black Worship as a Model for Christian Education*. Order through UCC Resources.

Video:

"Amistad Rising." Order through UCC Resources.

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, June 2007