

# Martha Simmons

## on the African American Lectionary

*By Tracy Schier*

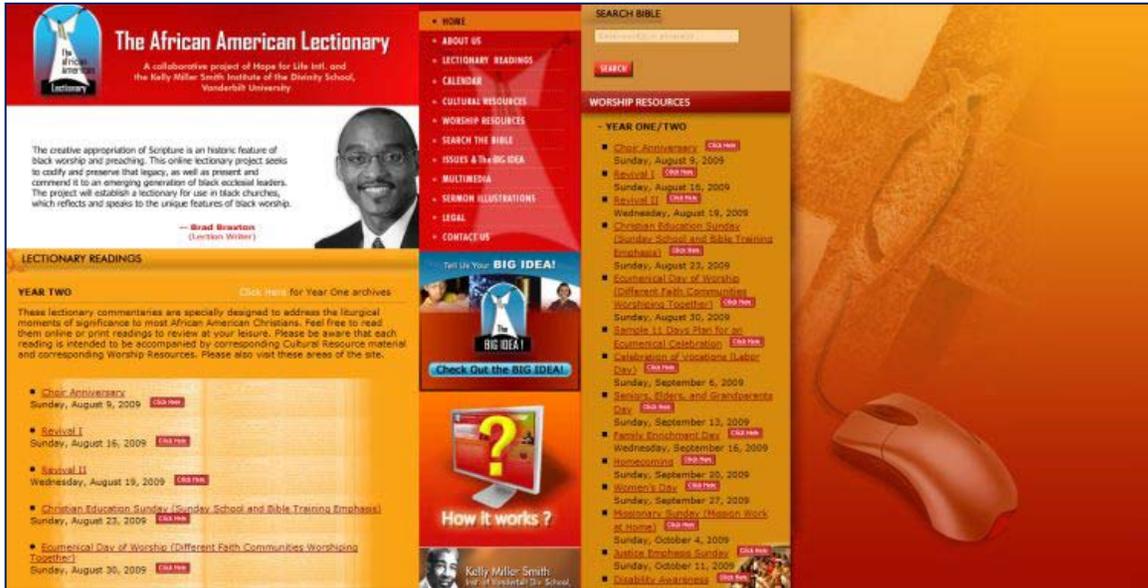


Rev. Martha Simmons saw a need and, with a grant from Lilly Endowment, was able to fill it. As a Black minister (named in 1997 by *Ebony* on its Honor Roll of Outstanding African American Women Preachers in America) she saw that there was need for a resource that would specifically highlight African American ecclesial traditions and liturgical celebrations, something missing from the Revised Common Lectionary and other sources that assist liturgists and ministers in the preparation of worship services. With a Lilly grant she was able to assemble leading Black religious leaders and prepare what is today a web-based resource known as the African American Online Lectionary which, since its inception in December 2007, has received more than a half million hits.

Simmons is the president and publisher of *The African American Pulpit*, one of the nation's most respected homiletics journals. She holds her M.Div. from Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and a J.D. from New College of California, School of Law. She also completed four years of doctoral work at Boston University and was ordained Baptist but has been a U.C.C. minister for the past fifteen years. She is one of two general editors for *Preaching with Sacred Fire: African American Sermons 1750 to the Present* (W.W. Norton, Spring 2010). She is co-editor of *9.11.01: African American Leaders Respond to an American Tragedy*; editor of *Preaching on the Brink*; and co-author of *A Study Guide to Accompany Celebration and Experience in Preaching*.

Members of the African American Online Lectionary team are: Dr. Brad R. Braxton, Dr. Luke Powery, Sr., Dr. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Dr. Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Dr. Anthony B. Pinn, Rev. Nolan Williams Jr.,

Michelle Riley Jones and Patrick W. Alston, Sr. The Lectionary can be accessed at [www.TheAfricanAmericanLectionary.org](http://www.TheAfricanAmericanLectionary.org)



This conversation is edited.

**Q. What prompted you to start the process of developing the African American Lectionary?**

**A.** I was doing doctoral work at Boston University and one of my professors had a photo of the group that worked on the last Revised Common Lectionary. I saw that there were no Blacks in the picture and I asked about that. His response was something to the effect that if African Americans wanted a Lectionary they should develop one. After I got over being angry with that response for about five minutes I decided that he had a point. So I spent about two years studying all existing lectionaries and trying to decide what would work online. I wrote to Jean Smith at Lilly Endowment proposing the idea and then surveyed ten thousand African American clergy—essentially asking, “If we do this will you use it?” All but one of the respondents gave overwhelming approval to the idea. And, what was hilarious—people thought that if we did put a lectionary together that it would cost them money. Even though we had said it would be free. I then received a planning grant in 2005 from Lilly and brought together a team of six people to assist in planning the structure of the lectionary.

**Q. Can you describe how the lectionary works?**

**A.** First of all, because it is online it is multidimensional in both approach and design. We offer a cycle of biblical readings for 62 liturgical moments that are the Annual Days most celebrated by African American Protestant churches. The Lectionary has four primary components:

- 1) The Commentaries which are sermon primers using Scriptures to address issues of relevance to African Americans. Unlike the Revised Common Lectionary, The African American Lectionary offers Scriptures to illumine the Annual Days that are unique to African Americans, while also celebrating liturgical moments celebrated by all Christians, such as Easter and Christmas. Commentaries are overseen by Lectionary team members and are also prepared by clergy and academicians from a variety of denominations;
- 2) The Cultural Resources are information units that supplement each commentary. They too are overseen by Lectionary team members and include materials prepared by historians, academicians, civil rights activists, and others;
- 3) The Worship section is led by three Lectionary liturgists and also contains worship units from at least 20 other liturgists who are composers, ministers of music, worship leaders, and academicians. Each year these three sections also include material developed by graduate students; and,
- 4) Lectionary Symposia are offered at least twice each year and are hosted by Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School, under the leadership of Dr. Forrest Harris, director of its Kelly Miller Smith Institute. Vanderbilt Divinity School is a collaborative partner for the project along with Hope for Life (the entity that owns *The African American Pulpit*). Vanderbilt is also the fiscal administrator of the project. The symposia challenge preachers to thoughtfully address issues that are critical to their constituency and are led by homileticians and scholars from various disciplines. The symposia will continue through Winter 2010.

Other unique features of the Lectionary include sermon illustrations, a Big Idea section and beginning in Winter 2009, a Liturgical Colors Corner and a Sermon Development Corner. The vast technological capacity of the internet allows our offerings to be lively and even multi-sensory. We provide music and art work and even poetry related to specific liturgical moments. And another thing, all that is on the Lectionary site is archived so that if a preacher didn’t use something in

one year, he or she can go into the archives later on. People can use the Lectionary readings, or the cultural resources, and the worship resources as they see fit, since this is meant to be a guide. As we say in our recent brochure, “Feel free to do a lot of cutting and pasting.” We will continue to put new material on the website until October 2010 and the site will be accessible through 2015 or perhaps longer.

***Q. Were there any nay-sayers along the line? If so, what might they have been objecting to or wanting to see done differently?***

**A.** Some people said it would not work because it does not use four scriptures which is what lectionaries have historically done. Others said Black people don't use lectionaries that much. And some said the project was too big and that we would not get enough people to write for it, that there are not enough Black Biblical scholars who will have the time to provide material. There was some ambivalence about an on-line resource, and some survey responders indicated they prefer such information in book form. But I had a feeling that once they would see the advantages of this online resource it was inevitable they would go along with the technology.

***Q. How is it being used and what do you hear from users? Also, are there any denominations using it more than others?***

**A.** It is being used as we intended, as a sermon primer and as a cultural and historical resource and to help people plan worship services. It is being used by pastors and lay people, professors, students and worship planners. Because it still is under two years old, we don't have a lot of data on who exactly is using it, but my hunch, backed by the e-mails that we get and the calls that come to our 800 number, is that Baptists and United Methodists are the biggest users, so far.

***Q. For our non-African-American readers, tell me some of the ecclesial traditions that have deep meaning for Blacks and are included in the Lectionary.***

**A.** A big one is Watch Night. Historically this refers to the time when slaves waited for slavery to end and word of the abolition came at different times to different states. Within the African American tradition, Watch Night services evolved around the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham

Lincoln in 1862, when Black people gathered on December 31, 1862, to wait for the new day and the new freedom that was promised for January 1863. Now it is commemorated on the last night of the year. People give thanks for making it through another year and celebrate the possibilities of the year ahead.

Another important tradition is Women’s Day which is celebrated at differing times of year, but typically between April and October in Black churches. On this day we remember Nannie Helen Burrough’s, who worked tirelessly for education for black girls as well as for women. Burrough’s idea for a National Woman’s Day was for each Black Protestant church, on the same Sunday, to have a program devoted to the women of the congregation. This observance was to be an organizing tool to have local congregations come to terms with the role and support, or “raising up,” of the women within their membership, as well as to raise funds for foreign mission work. Burroughs advocated sending a portion of funds raised to the Women’s Convention Auxiliary for foreign mission support, especially in Africa. She led the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., for more than 60 years and was considered an organizational genius—a religious leader, educator, political organizer, and civil rights activist.

In congregations, on Women’s Day, it is typical for women to lead the liturgical celebrations—and that is true even in denominations that still don’t allow female preachers. Many Black churches also celebrate Men’s Day, Young Adult Sunday, Ushers Day, among others. Homecoming is another important marker in the Black church, and some churches call it Family and Friends Day. This celebration gained significance after the great migration, when many Blacks moved from the South to Northern cities. Homecoming referred to their annual return to their home churches and families in the South. And today, when many Black people no longer have relatives in southern states, they will return to the churches where they might have worshipped as children or young adults and combine this with family reunions.

***Q. What are some of the special celebratory ways that days on the liturgical calendar celebrated by all Christians, such as Christmas or Easter, might be celebrated differently in a Black church?***

**A.** Let’s take Christmas season to start with. Many African American faith communities do not place emphasis on Advent in the way that many non-Black faith communities do. Our Lectionary does list the four Sundays of Advent. We did this for those churches that do celebrate Advent and because we believe that it can be a teaching moment for those who wish to begin celebrating Advent. As far as Christmas is concerned, there has long been a lot of pomp and

circumstance in the white churches but not black churches during Christmas. In the last 25 years, we have begun to see more elaborate celebration in black churches. Some churches will even have Christmas pageants with actors and animals.

The way that Easter is commemorated in the average Black Protestant church has shifted over the years. In the early 1900s, Easter was celebrated in conjunction with the marking the planting season. It was about new life and newness, hence the wearing of new clothes! But historically, Black Protestants didn't observe Lent in moderate numbers until about 50 or 60 years ago. And some churches still don't place much emphasis on the Lenten season. The same goes for observations of Holy Thursday—it has been given more attention in the last 50 or 60 years but in some churches still does not receive much emphasis. We do have Lent and Holy Thursday on our Lectionary Calendar however. But Good Friday as part of the Easter season is a day that African Americans have long paid special attention to. Good Friday services are big, often with multiple preachers.

***Q. One would hope that the richness and creativity of the American Black church would spill over to traditionally white congregations. Is this happening yet and can you give me some examples that model this?***

**A.** Because we are still less than two years young, we don't know a lot about this yet. But we do get e-mails from white clergy who self-identify and who voice their appreciation for the Lectionary. I think in four or five years it will happen more, simply because there is such richness in the offerings. We had a letter from a white pastor who was working on Kwanza and was able to get many things from our site that he could not get from Google or Wikipedia and he said that he knew he could trust our information.

***Q. Have seminaries taken notice of your project and perhaps introduced some of your materials into their curricula?***

**A.** We do hear periodically from professors. We are young and it takes time! I recently sent out a brochure to fifteen thousand people outlining the content of the Lectionary, and we have handed out more than twenty thousand brochures at conferences this year—so we are moving along those lines as well. In the brochure we indicate that it is not intended to function in the same way as the Revised Common Lectionary, but that it can be used in conjunction with it.

***Q. Describe your Big Ideas program and talk about its significance for those involved. What are some of the Big Ideas?***

**A.** This area of the Lectionary is for churches with 750 members or less who share information about successful and innovative programs in which they have engaged. In the survey that we did at the planning phase of the project, we asked pastors what they believed were the top ten or so issues facing Black people today. We compiled this list and then sought small churches who had created programs or initiatives to address the issues. We did this in an effort to inspire other small churches. This was important to us since the average church only has about 125 members and needs to know that small churches can do big things too. The areas that we have highlighted so far include: economic empowerment, health awareness, education, violence prevention, and homelessness. The Big Ideas program only began in January, 2009. We know that small churches have always been the backbone of their communities and we are giving them an opportunity to share their experiences and learning with other churches around the country. Some examples of these Big Ideas include one church that started a credit union for its members, another church is helping the homeless, another one is working with people who have disabilities and mainly ministers to those who are deaf. Yet another one is working on youth literacy. Sharing resources is a big part of the Big Idea project and it includes information that may help churches avoid landmines that might occur in the development of programs.

***Q. What lessons have you learned throughout the development of the African American Lectionary that you could share with other groups who might want to follow your example, for example, Hispanic Americans or Asian Americans?***

**A.** One of the first things that we realized was this: limit your universe and know what you want to do and stick to your plan. A second lesson is for anyone who wants to do a project online and tie it to a larger community. That lesson is that most people do not write well and you can spend an inordinate amount of time editing—or you might have to hire editors, or the project leaders end up doing that work.

A third lesson is that you have to expect that some people will promise to work in the project but will then drop out. Others might not be able to meet your deadlines so you need to have backup writers. Some people will back out if they see that your project contains high quality material; they will fear they cannot measure up to the standard.

**Q. *What are you learning as you go along about the greatest needs of African American congregations today?***

**A.** They really need Christian educators. The seminaries don't seem to train people to do practical Christian education anymore, and there is a limited number of trained staff in the churches who lead Christian Education efforts. So people often get their Christian education from TV or therapeutic Christian teaching books that only aid people in surface ways. We are promoting our materials to Christian educators with the hope that they will use them and get ideas on how to reshape and re-fashion the way they understand and do Christian Education.

Another big need is for people with training in church administration—this training also seems to be lacking in the seminaries. Far too many pastors struggle with problems they are clueless to solve because they have not had basic Church Administration training. Also, pastors really need help in implementing practical programs or linking their churches to programs that will help their members with everyday problems such as unemployment, bad health, illiteracy, poor parenting and financial illiteracy.

**Q. *Do congregations pastored by women have different needs or different ways of celebrating, etc?***

**A.** The Lectionary has not tracked this. I did learn a small amount from the survey we did. However, most information I have about the needs of women pastors and how they function in ministry comes from my work with *The African American Pulpit* journal over the past decade and thirty years of working in the church. What I know for sure concerning the needs of women pastors is as follows:

First, there are few African American women pastors who are paid well compared to their male counterparts. This is tied, in large measure, to the fact that women still get called to or are placed by denominations in small, economically poorer churches than men.

Second, there are few African American women pastors who have stable jobs with good benefits. This is tied, in large part, to the first issue I mentioned.

A third issue is that most African American women pastors do not have knowledgeable mentors who can assist them in areas such as gaining a long-

**term pastorate that pays well, learning how to be good church administrators, becoming better preachers, and making ministry decisions that give them options and power.**

**And of course, a fourth big issue is that women pastors struggle with balancing family and church just as all professional women do who have time-consuming, non-traditional jobs and families.**

**I would say, also, that women pastors need more support from women congregants.**

**In terms of how women celebrate the Annual Days celebrated by most African American churches, I have not seen much evidence of differences that are tied to gender with the exception of women placing more emphasis on Youth Day and on their re-fashioning annual days to reflect issues of concern to women, for instance, using Women’s Day activities to raise the issue of domestic violence.**