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OBITUARY: Verna J. Dozier**Goodbye beloved teacher, theologian, friend**

By Lucy Chumbley

Verna Dozier, a well-loved lay theologian, author, mentor and Christian educator in the Episcopal Church, died Sept. 1 at Collington Episcopal Life Care Community in Mitchellville, Md. She was 88.

Her funeral was held Sept. 30, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill, her parish home for more than 45 years. Bishop Michael Curry of North Carolina was among the eulogists.

"She was without a doubt one of the most creative thinkers in the 20th century church," said the Right Rev. John Bryson Chane. "She made us all very proud to be from this diocese and to have known her."

Dozier, a forceful preacher, was St. Mark's first black parishioner, and she became something of a legend there. In 1999, around 500 people attended the dedication of a stained glass window created in her honor, lining up to shake her hand and tell her what she meant to them.

In her window, Dozier is pic-

tured with her younger sister, Lois - who died the year before the window was dedicated - and the prophet Amos, a champion of social justice.

"She's an icon at St. Mark's, no question about it," said Jan Hoffman, one of Dozier's closest friends.

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A third generation Washingtonian, Dozier started life as a Baptist, attending the 19th Street

Baptist Church with Lois and her mother, Lucie, who were lifelong members of that congregation.

Her family was poor: Her father, Lonnie, had never graduated from high school and had to work two jobs to make ends meet. Yet each night, the two girls would read aloud from the Bible and from Shakespeare - the only books they owned.

Building on this solid foundation, Dozier attended Howard University, where she earned a master's degree in English literature and went on to become a school teacher.

As a young woman, Dozier was drawn to the Episcopal Church by the beauty of its liturgy, and was invited to join the all-white



congregation of St. Mark's by its young rector, the Rev. Bill Baxter.

"He said, 'Verna, this church is ready for a black,'" Hoffman said.

"He told her a lie, really, that

St. Mark's was ready to be integrated," said Dee Hahn Rollins, another friend. "But she dealt with that in a wonderful way."

Not everyone was ready for integration, Hoffman said, recalling that she and her room-

mate were evicted from their Arlington apartment in 1955 for having Dozier to visit.

In 1975, after more than 30 years of teaching Shakespeare to inner city students, Dozier retired from the school system. But always the teacher, her Bible study began in earnest.

Rollins, who was in charge of women's activities in the Diocese of Indianapolis at the time, heard about Dozier's method of Bible study, in which scripture is examined in significant sections using different translations of the Bible.

She invited her to lead a conference at the diocese.

"I went to the airport and picked her up, and it changed my life," Rollins said. "It changed her life, too."

It was Dozier's first real job teaching the Bible and the start of her second career.

She went on to give workshops all over the country - even traveling to Kenya on several occasions - and quickly became a sought-after speaker for retreats and conventions.

"She was tremendous with the Bible," Hoffman said. "She

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More Episcopal churches encouraged to 'WIN'**Parishes join forces to rally voters, hold local politicians accountable**

By Paul Donnelly

"Would it be fair to call us religious troublemakers?"

That was the puckish question the Rev. Luis León, rector of St. Johns', Lafayette Square, asked his audience at a dinner at Washington National Cathedral on the eve of the Sept. 12 primary election.

León was explaining to clergy and vestry members from across the diocese what membership in the Washington Interfaith Network has meant for his parish. The dinner meeting, organized by WIN volunteer Clem Dinsmore and the Rev. William Barnwell, the cathedral's canon missionary, was attended by more than 50 people from 22 parishes.

"When I first came to Washington, I didn't know what WIN was," said Bishop John Bryson Chane. "Now I

think there are four..."

"Five," said Barnwell from a back table.

"...five parishes that are connected, that participate actively in the effort," Chane said.

At a front table, the Rev. Randolph Charles, rector of Epiphany, D.C., said: "I'd say we were connected, but we haven't been that active lately. That's why we're here."

Chane responded with a quotation from Scripture. "In the valley of the dry bones, there were many bones, and they were all connected but they were very dry. And he said to me: Son of Man, can these bones live? And I answered: Lord God, thou knowest. 'So we're going to put meat on those bones, and we're going to make them active.'"

An affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, like its sister organization Action In Montgomery [County], WIN

comprises 48 congregations, community-based and union organizations. It is non-partisan: WIN does not endorse candidates. But it is very political: WIN has an agenda determined by its membership. It asks candidates for support, and it holds them accountable.

"We show up," is how John Moore, the WIN activist who also chairs the diocesan Standing Committee, explains it. By the hundreds, he might have added. Wearing T-shirts quoting Jeremiah: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you."

While WIN has enjoyed some legislative successes, its willingness to engage in political give-and-take makes some parishes uncomfortable.

Martin Trimble, WIN's professional organizer, and a member of Ascension, Silver Spring, deals with that concern on a regular basis. "Many congregations are sometimes nervous at first about WIN, because WIN is about power," he said. "What

is power? It is the capacity to act, and it comes in two forms: organized people, and organized money."

The WIN agenda for 2006 (www.winc-iaf.org) includes specific goals: 14,000 units of affordable housing for D.C., the implementation of the \$450 million Baseball Community Benefits Fund, WIN's signature achievement so far, and following through on the commitment agreed to by all candidates for \$500 million in new revenue from development on the Anacostia waterfront.

Tish Gardner of St. Columba's, D.C., said that membership in WIN was "a hard sell" in her parish. "Some in the vestry were concerned about words like 'self-interest,'" she said. WIN teaches that understanding politicians' self-interest is essential in effecting the legislative process.

The key issue turned out to be sidewalks. The affluent neighborhood around the church was getting new ones, which they

didn't need, while less well off congregations in other parts of the city needed new ones, and weren't getting them. "WIN asks the right question: Who is the city for?" Gardner said.

And it asks that question not just of the city, but of the church. "There are a lot of benefits to the congregation from the training that we provide" Trimble noted. "The principles of organization that we apply to developing new leadership for social justice also apply within the congregation. The discipline of organizing is about identifying, raising up and training new leaders, which every congregation needs."

"There will be local training for new members of WIN starting the 18th of January, probably near BWI, for new leaders in IAF organizations in Baltimore, Howard and Montgomery counties, and D.C. and Northern Virginia," he added.

Gardner gives a hearty endorsement: "So join up. You'll never regret it."

APPRECIATION: Verna J. Dozier

Farewell to a great and prophetic dreamer

By Michael Curry

On Sept. 1, Verna Josephine Dozier, baptized child of God, faithful disciple of Jesus, teacher of the faith and prophet in our time, died. Verna was for so many in our church one who awakened anew the lively oracles of God found in the Holy Scriptures; the vital reality of living discipleship in the world; and the incredible possibilities of a God whose love has no limits, whose justice is the constant companion for compassion, and whose kingdom—working through our freedom—will truly come.

From a personal perspective, Verna Dozier has been a mentor and a teacher who has challenged me and encouraged me to dare deeper dimensions of a discipleship formed by faith, grounded in the Gospel and lived in daily life in the world. I used to jokingly refer to her as "Moses." When she visited St. James', Baltimore, when I was preaching, I used to tell her it was like preaching with Moses in the congregation. And in truth, it really was. Like Moses, Verna was and is a friend of God whose relationship with God was earthy, real and contagious. Like Moses, she brought to us the deeper truths of God's way, not in petrified legal codes or in frozen stone tablets, but in the living and joyful words: "Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one, you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself." Like Moses, Verna bore in her very soul the wisdom of the ages, and though a fallible mortal human being like the rest of us, became the bearer of a transcending word from on high. Like Moses, she called forth the ministry of the whole people of God, lay and ordained. You may recall the story in the Book of Numbers where two people unexpectedly begin to prophesy among the Israelites. Some of the officials ask Moses to stop them from prophesying and Moses responds, "Are you jealous for

my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:30)

If I may borrow from Marcus Borg, who has spoken of Verna as an influence on his thought, she taught us to hear again for the first time the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac, Esau, Rachel and Rebecca, Moses and Miriam, Bathsheba,



Dozier Chantry Window
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Washington, D.C.

David and Solomon. She taught us to hear again for the first time the thunderous voices of the prophets Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the voice crying in the wilderness, the baptizer at the Jordan. Above all, she taught us to hear again the voice of Jesus.

Hers was and is a voice that must be heard. Here are some of her words:

"Jesus came to serve the world, to restore it to the oneness of God to which

it had fallen. That restoration-reconciliation is the word St. Paul used—is always the mission of the people of God. Any talk about ministry that does not talk about reconciliation has already missed the mark. Ministry is serving the world God loves."

"Faith is a straight forward decision for the kingdom of God. To believe in God is to believe that goodness is more powerful than evil and truth is stronger than falsehood. To believe in God is to believe that in the end goodness and truth will triumph over evil and falsehood."

"Jesus annunciated and lived out the values of the kingdom of God instead of the values of the kingdoms of the world in the realms of money, prestige, human solidarity, power, time- and the choice for the kingdom of God. He asked for a total and generous sharing of all possessions. The kingdom of God will be a society in which there will be no prestige and no status, no division of people into inferior and superior. Everyone will be loved and respected, not because of educational wealth or ancestry or authority, or rank or virtue, or achievement, but because each human being is created by God and loved by God. Jesus understood love as solidarity. Love your enemies, and call them enemies no more."

"It is comforting for the church to declare the Bible the word of God instead of taking seriously what the Bible says—that Jesus himself is the word of God. It is troubling to consider that God did not become incarnate in the book, but as a person."

"The Bible is about very real and human people who resist God's call."

One of Verna Dozier's significant contributions was to give voice to God's vision, to God's world, by using the phrase "the Dream of God." She gave voice to that language as the heir to a long tradition that goes back to God's original intention for creation. It goes

back to the thunderous prophesy of Amos that justice might roll down like a mighty stream. It goes back to Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kingdom that is established when God truly rules. It goes back to Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom in which the poor are blessed together with the peacemakers and those who hunger and thirst for what is loving and good and compassionate and right.

In more recent time, the metaphor of dream was found in the poetry of Langston Hughes. In the earlier part of the 20th Century, Hughes gave voice to the longings of people once enslaved and then segregated by brutal American systems of apartheid. Those longings, rooted in a deep trust in God, were spoken of as a dream. "What happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? I dream of a world where none are scorned." That dream born of biblical prophesy, spoken in 20th century poetry, was given greater voice before the statue of Abraham Lincoln on a hot summer day when another mortal stood up and declared, "I have a dream."

Verna took that language and gave it new voice as the language of God's vision for God's world. And it was that language of God's dream, spoken through the lips of Verna Dozier, that was shared by another in a land far away; who like her, spoke of a God who has a dream for all of the people of South Africa. That contribution may be a cornerstone of the enduring legacy of Verna Dozier. For in that she, like Moses pointing to the Promised Land, showed us the way beyond the nightmare that often is our world, to the dream of God that is God's intention and purpose for the world. Well done, good and faithful servant.

The Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, bishop of North Carolina, was among the eulogists at Verna Dozier's funeral.

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knew so much, and she was such a vital person... She certainly was an excellent teacher. She used to preach a lot, too - she preached all over."

Her sermons were always rooted in scripture, Hoffman said. And although social justice was often a theme, her actions spoke louder than her words, her friends said.

"She didn't have an edge with her preaching," Rollins said. "She never pushed an agenda, so to speak. When you listened to Verna, who she was spoke louder."

"She was an activist with words," Hoffman said. "But she had a feeling that there was a way that you dealt with things

that did not make the gap wider, with things like racism."

A powerful presence in the pulpit, Dozier was clear about her role as a lay preacher, and never felt the need to wear vestments, said Bishop Jane Holmes Dixon.

"She really saw the ministry of the laity as critical for the life and fulfillment of the church," Dixon said. "She was never in awe of clergy - not with bishops or anyone else. She just saw them as people with another role to fulfill."

For the 30 years she knew her, Dozier was her friend, mentor and advocate, Dixon said.

"When I first met Verna, she was really just taking off - her life with the church," she said.

"I saw, watched and learned from this extraordinary woman at the height of her ability."

Dozier's ability to ask wonderful questions and to really pay attention to the answers impressed her. "She never put anyone down - she never patronized, no matter what you did," Dixon said.

But she also wasn't afraid to tell it straight.

"Besides her love and friendship, Verna always called you to be your best," Hoffman said. "She was affirming, but she was always so real."

"That was her gift to me," Dixon said. "That she loved me

enough to tell me the truth."

While her book *Equipping the Saints* sets out her style of Bible study, those close to her say her book, *The Dream of God: A Call*



Dozier

to Return best describes her beliefs.

"That really tells you who Verna is more than anything else," Hoffman said. "What she believed."

The book claims that as an institution, the church has fallen short of the dream of God. It

reminds Christians that they are not called to worship Jesus, but to follow him.

In June, Seabury Books published a collection of Dozier's

writings *Confronted by God: The Essential Verna Dozier*.

Strong in her faith, Dozier was also emphatic that there was no way to truly be certain.

"Verna used to say that faith in God is that there are no guarantees," Dixon said. "It is a faith enterprise. It is a risk. She was clear that that certainty that people so yearned for in a religious faith was not given to human beings."

But she was willing to risk her life for the promise of the Gospel.

"She always used to say, 'I might be wrong,'" Dixon said, breaking into a smile. "But I believe it."