

# Obama's election poses challenge to black clergy

By **SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN**  
New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — As he walked into his office in Brooklyn nearly every day this fall, the Rev. David K. Brawley noticed a photograph on his assistant's desk. It showed Sen. Barack Obama, head bowed, as a circle of black ministers gathered around him, touching their hands to his shoulders and uttering prayers.

Without even knowing the precise circumstances of the picture — it had been taken in July during the quadrennial conference of the African Methodist Episcopal de-

nomination — Brawley understood the broader context. The hands and the prayers offered to Obama were an act, in the lexicon of black Christianity, of impartation.

What was being imparted at the most obvious level was a blessing on a black candidate's pursuit of the presidency. Now, with Obama's election, the image has taken on a double meaning. The presence in the White House of an African-American, and specifically one from the post-civil-rights, multicultural era, will almost certainly impart influence on his contemporaries in the black ministry.

"It's ushered in a new generation of leadership," said Brawley, 40, incoming pastor of Saint Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn. "It symbolizes the Moses generation passing the baton to the Joshua generation. So the Obama presidency presents us with both an opportunity and a challenge."

The shift is more than simply chronological. The generational dividing line during the Democratic primaries found many of the established leaders of black Christianity — Calvin O. Butts III, Floyd H. Flake, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Suzan Johnson Cook — either supporting Sen. Hillary Rodham Clin-

ton or staying conspicuously neutral. Obama's director of religious affairs, meanwhile, was a 25-year-old minister; Joshua Dubois.

By their life experiences alone, the younger echelon of black clergy sees the United States different from the elders whom it learned from and indeed reveres.

Obama's speech on race last March in Philadelphia made this exact point, as he tried to distinguish his moderate stance from the sharp, prophetic rhetoric of his longtime pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Obama explained some of Wright's most controversial sermons as the expressions of a man deeply marked by the rampant segregation and racism of his formative years. Putting aside what a lightning rod Wright ultimately became — and how distorted the caricature of him as a militant crackpot is from the eloquent, erudite man himself — the broader point held.

During the years when Obama and his peers came of age, the black middle class grew markedly, elite colleges actively recruited black students, and the rigid definition of race began to erode.

"This new generation of black ministers has grown up in a less overtly hostile white environment," said Professor James Cone of Union Theological Semi-

nary in New York, who has been the leading scholar of black theology since the late 1960s.

"It will open them up for more dialogue with white churches," Cone said, "and it will open up white churches for more dialogue with them. You will have a generation of black ministers who want to embrace the reconciliation embodied by Obama. They haven't been hurt so badly by racial segregation that they can't reach out with a little more openness and a little less fear than I might have."

Jonathan Walton, a professor of religion at the University of California at Riverside, is in his 30s, and has both studied and enacted the changing focus of black Christianity for the post-civil-rights generation.

"What happens when the language of the civil rights movement becomes tyrannical?" Walton said in a telephone interview. "The language of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks was in a segregated world. We're now almost two generations removed from segregation. Does that language speak to the mortgage crisis, poor public schools, the prison-industrial complex? And in all those areas, many of the faces our people encounter on a daily basis look like us. When we're talking about race now, we have to talk about it in a very complicated way." ★

## Answering God's call to sisterhood

By **SISTER MARY KERNER**

FOR SO LONG, God's call to me went unanswered. I was being called to a life of service as a Roman Catholic Sister, but it took time to decipher. After all, I wondered, do women still even become nuns?

I've learned the answer to that question is a resounding yes. Today, I answer the call as I make perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and become a fully professed Sister of the Holy Child Jesus.

For much of my life, the thought of what becoming a Sister would mean made me run in the other direction. I knew it would involve living in community with other sisters. I had lived alone for years. Could I live with others? I knew it would involve transferring ownership of my property to the Society. Could I do this?

Reflecting on all this now, I realize that I spent too many years avoiding the call for the wrong reasons. Did I have possessions, or did my possessions have me?

God's call to me wasn't a bolt from the blue, but rather a gradual realization that answering "Yes" would help continue to bring Jesus to the world. Through spiritual direction, prayer and reflection,

I discovered that being a Sister means holding things with an open hand and knowing that you're both giving and receiving. By answering God's call, I gain more than I could ever lose.

Having been an operating-room nurse with the University of Pennsylvania for 26 years and then a visiting nurse at Wissahickon Hospice, I have always found great purpose in the care I provide to my patients. But, nursing, like other professions, is a career: the work only goes so far. Nursing alone isn't sufficient to fulfill my desire to help others. Being a Sister of the Holy Child Jesus integrates every aspect of my life and is more than a job.

As a Sister, I grow deeper in my relationship with God and others. The motivation for my work has changed. I see myself carrying out God's work, and I see God in those I serve.

I was drawn to the Society of the Holy Child because of how connected the Sisters are to those they serve and the world. The Society, based on the vision our foundress Cornelia Connelly had, believes that each Sister should use her own gifts and talents in service of God.

Together, our mission is the same — to help others to believe

that God lives and acts in them — but we carry this out in many ways. Like me, some of us are nurses, but other Sisters of the Holy Child are teachers, spiritual directors, social workers, parish ministers, paralegals and more.

I am humbled to follow in Cornelia's path, particularly on the eve of her 200th birthday and amidst the Society's yearlong celebration commemorating her legacy ([www.holychild200.org](http://www.holychild200.org)).

A Philadelphia wife and mother, Cornelia founded the Society in 1846 after her husband, Pierce, answered a call to the Catholic priesthood and Pope Gregory XVI granted the couple a deed of separation.

Today, my life is defined by the call I answered in service of God, a call I know many hear. It's a call I hope many have the courage to answer. There are so many myths about religious life — the idea of a life lived in seclusion, for example — but I've found all of those stereotypes to be just that: stereotypes. In answering God's call, I'm both freed and grounded. ★

Each Saturday the Daily News offers men and women of faith the opportunity to share their words of life and comfort with our readers. If you are a minister, a priest, a rabbi, or the head of another religious organization and would like to submit a faith-based column, contact Lorenzo Biggs at 215-854-5816, or by e-mail at [biggs1@phillynews.com](mailto:biggs1@phillynews.com).



Sister Mary Kerner belongs to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

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