

History of the African American Catholic Community of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Founded in 1992

Compiled by Brenda Dabney, AACC Coordinator

We are an African American Catholic Community in the desert of the Southwest where the Black population is about 3% and the Black Catholic population is less than that. Yes, we are small but the Holy Spirit is with us. In 1992, Steven Woodbury, liturgist and musician and Brenda Dabney, wife, mother and teacher set out to lay the ground work for the formation of the community. They wanted to fulfill a long time dream to have an African American Catholic mass on a regular basis, where we could worship with elements of our culture.

Unbeknown to us, there had been a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. mass in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the state capital and seat of the Archdiocese, at St. Francis of Assisi Cathedral. Steven found out that it was going to be discontinued. He contacted Brenda and they requested that it be held in Albuquerque, where a larger number of Blacks live. The Archbishop at the time, Most Rev. Robert Sanchez, agreed and Steven and Brenda arranged to hold the first Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. mass in Albuquerque at the Catholic Center chapel. They were very surprised and very encouraged to see so many Black Catholics as well as others attend. There was standing room only. Archbishop Sanchez presided and Rev Albert McCain, a local Baptist minister delivered the MLK reflection talk. It felt good, so Steven and Brenda, along with the encouragement and help from Mrs. Joan Leahigh, then director of the Social Justice Ministry, decided to try it again.

The following April a second mass was held. Father Rollins Lambert, an African American priest, who at the time had recently retired in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe from Chicago, Illinois, was the celebrant. He came out of retirement to assist us in organizing and supporting the community by becoming our spiritual director and resident priest. He remained with us for ten years and retired for the second time, then his health weakened and he relocated back to Chicago, IL and passed on in January 2009. It was a blessing to have him actively with us for all these years. In honor of his 50 Jubilee as a priest, the Community established the Father Rollins Lambert Family Day picnic held each June after Mass.

After the Mass in April 1992, a meeting was held to plan our next steps. As a result, the Steering Committee, which is the Community's governing body, was formed. Dr. Clarence Kirby was named the first director and Brenda Dabney the assistant director. Dr. Kirby, Father Lambert, Steven Woodbury along with the Holy Spirit developed our founding mission statement, which was updated in 2011, is as follows:

In the context of our multicultural church, we support and reinforce the African American Catholic family and individuals. We invite, challenge and develop an appreciation of our African American culture through liturgical, social, spiritual, and educational programs. We pray that our culture will enhance the universality of the Church and the cause of evangelization.

The choir was formed under Steven's direction. Dr. John Watson, choir and music director at St. Teresa of Avila Church in Washington, DC, sent music to get us started. Brenda's brother, Mr. Patrick Ballou a member of that choir told Dr. Watson about us. The Holy Spirit was working to inspire others to help and support us during those early years. The choir is a key part of our Community. Many choir members have been with us since the early years and are with us today.

So many talented people came forth to serve. Many people have remained with us from the

beginning to the present. They serve on the Steering Committee, sing in the choir, prepare and set-up for mass each time we have our Sunday liturgy. We moved out of the Catholic Center chapel into the larger Sandia room. For a couple of years, we held our masses at Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Church, where then Pastor Fr. Joel Garner welcomed us. We usually had our Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. mass in a regular parish church since it is our biggest event.

For many years we held our masses on the fourth Sunday of each month. We have since gone to having mass quarterly. While the Archbishop at the time, Most Rev. Michael J. Sheehan was supportive of our Community, when our priest retired he could not replace him. Archbishop Sheehan suggested we contact priests on a rotating basis to say mass for us. We did this and it seemed to be working. However, Fr. Frank Prieto along with Ernest Chavez and other members of the newly built church, St. Joseph on the Rio Grande, approached us with an invitation to hold our 2005 MLK mass in their new church. We did and had the largest attended MLK mass in our history. It was a blessing. St. Joseph on the Rio Grande Church has invited us to have all our masses there. We have accepted and the present pastor, Msgr. Lambert Luna welcomes us. This was a big step for us, but it was a chance for growth.

At that time, God also blessed us with another retired African American priest, Fr. J. Stephen Hickman, who served as our spiritual director. He is a retired Navy chaplain and comes to us from Virginia.

Anne Avellone, the present director of the Social Justice and Respect Life office is our Archdiocese of Santa Fe liaison person. She continues, as Joan Leahigh did, to encourage us, guidance us, and help us in any way she can.

Our leadership had changed Brenda Dabney is now called Coordinator of the AACC and 18 other people serve on the Steering Committee. As the hymn says, "we've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord". We have been blessed with outstanding and talented people. Our small but strong choir is now under the direction of Louise Davis. We have a drumming unit under the direction of Camilla Dodson. We also have Eucharist Ministers, servers, ushers and proclaimers. Larry Stevenson is the editor of our newsletter.

Our latest venture is the development of our Elementary Catholic School Scholarship program, named the Fr. Rollins Lambert Scholarship. In 2014-2015, the AACC steering committee revised their by-laws and approved them in November of 2015. Archbishop John C. Wester signed their Constitution on January 30, 2016.

During their 25 plus years in the Archdiocese, the AACC has given back to the community by through different service projects including raising money for Catholic Relief Services projects in Africa. The AACC steering committee had long hoped to provide some scholarship assistance to African American children who were already attending Catholic schools in the Archdiocese. When Fr. Rollins Lambert, a priest who served as the first spiritual director of the AACC, passed away, he left a small amount of money to the AACC to help establish a scholarship fund as a start. The coordinator of the AACC, Brenda Dabney, assembled a scholarship committee, which consists of members of the AACC and the Director of the Office of Social Justice and Respect Life, Anne Avellone. In close consultation with Susan Murphy, Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese, the AACC scholarship committee met over a series of months and developed guidelines for the scholarship application and distribution process. We gathered information on how many African American students were enrolled in Catholic grade schools, financial needs, etc. The scholarships are open to any African American student enrolled in a Catholic elementary school, K-8 that has a verified level

of need. The first scholarships were awarded for the 2010-11 school year, and since then, 54 scholarships have been awarded through the 2017-18 school year, for a total of \$77,840.

The AACC raises money and contributes to this fund. They have also received money from the Black and Indian Mission Office to assist with funds for African American children. The funds from this grant are set up through a grant account under the Office of Social Justice and Respect Life, and are only used for giving scholarships, along with a small amount dedicated to expenses like certificates, mailings, a luncheon honoring the students and small ads placed in the African American magazine, *The Perspective 2*.

Scholarship awardees are recognized at one of the AACC monthly masses and their families are encouraged to get involved in service and leadership through AACC events throughout the year.

Since evangelization and service is embedded in the mission of the AACC, in 2014, the Scholarship Committee began to collect school supplies each Fall, so that all Catholic schools have the supplemental supplies they need for all children. Teachers are thrilled to have access to needed supplies like crayons, loose leaf paper, notebooks, pens and pencils and markers provided by the drive.