

# AME Elects Female Bishop

## Baltimore Pastor Is First Woman to Join Church's Top Rank

By HANNA ROSIN  
Washington Post Staff Writer

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the nation's oldest black denomination, yesterday elected the first female bishop in its 213-year history, elevating a Baltimore pastor to the top ranks of a church whose membership is overwhelmingly female.

The vote by delegates at their quadrennial conference in Cincinnati makes the Rev. Vashiti Murphy McKenzie, pastor of Payne Memorial AME Church in Baltimore, the highest-ranking woman in any U.S. black denomination.

A second female candidate, Los

Angeles pastor Carolyn Tyler Guidry, was still competing for another open bishop's spot in voting that continued last night. The Rev. Richard Norris of Philadelphia was also elected bishop in the second round of voting.

"Because of God's favor, the stained glass ceiling has been pierced and broken," McKenzie said to cheers and hallicujahs from the crowd in a rousing acceptance speech. "I stand on the shoulders of women who could not be here, but nevertheless fought."

McKenzie and Guidry have said their selection would bring the church into the 21st century by giving female religious leaders equal op-

portunities. They also hoped the choice would pressure other black denominations to open top leadership spots to women.

Forty-one candidates were competing for four vacancies created by bishops' retirements or health problems. Nineteen bishops lead the 2.3 million member denomination, heading districts in the United States, Africa and the Caribbean.

In the midst of a spirited lobbying effort by the candidates, McKenzie and Guidry ran under the slogan: "It's time." McKenzie has written a book called "Not Without a Struggle" that traces the history of female religious leaders and offers tips dubbed the "Ten Leadership Com-

mandments for Women."

Membership in most African American churches has tipped increasingly female over the years; by most estimates, parishioners in AME pews are 70 percent female, and women are even more heavily represented in other black churches. But the churches have resisted elevating women to key positions.

Most bishops were once ministers of large urban churches, a post that very few women attain. Guidry has said that some male ministers refused to work with her, and some congregants dropped out of her church when she took over.

"Black churches have had a long and difficult time promoting women pastors," said Lawrence Maniya, an expert in African American religions who teaches at Vassar College. "For black Christians, being a pastor at a large church is one of the few power positions in the community, and men have hung on to it as one of the only paths to power."

For the last 20 years or so, women in the AME church have been fight-

ing that lock on power. "We're just asking for our slice of the pie," said Jayme Coleman Williams, the first woman elected as one of the church's 13 general officers, who serve in administrative positions. "We feel that we women are the backbone of the church."

McKenzie, whose district includes Maryland, Virginia and the District, has been a minister for more than 25 years. She is known as a charismatic preacher who tripled her Baltimore church's membership to more than 1,400 in six years. Her church competed with other nonprofit agencies to win a \$1.5 million grant to provide job training and computer classes for young people.

The program, which replaced the church's traditional food pantry and clothes closet, reflects McKenzie's activist style. It has placed more than 550 people in jobs.

"In the end, people want to know: will you visit the sick, will you preach my eulogy, will you respect me, will you stick with me when I'm in trouble... and will you love me,"

McKenzie told the convenor before the convention. She said she didn't care whether you're a woman, black, white, pink, green, or blue.

McKenzie graduated from the University of Maryland, Howard University Divinity School and United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. She is the mother of three and is married to Stan McKenzie, a former professional basketball player.

Guidry has been a trailblazer for female leadership in the church during a 25-year career. She ran for bishop at the last general conference and garnered 200 votes. In 1977, she was the first woman ordained as a church elder.

She served as minister in several California churches, leaving behind larger congregations and expanded community service programs such as day-care centers at each one.

The church traces its history to a 1787 protest, when black worshippers walked out of a Philadelphia church after mistreatment by white parishioners and formed their own denomination.

# Appeals Court Rules FBI Can Keep Gun Records

## Judges Allow 6 Months' Grace for Audits

By BILL MILLER  
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mation for unauthorized purposes.

A federal appeals court ruled yesterday that the FBI can hold on to gun purchase records for six months to ensure that a federal computer system that conducts millions of instant criminal background checks is working properly.

The 2 to 1 ruling was a defeat for the National Rifle Association, which argued that the practice amounted to an "illegal national registration of gun owners." The NRA contended that the law requires the FBI to destroy records of approved purchases immediately.

The instant background checks of potential gun purchasers began in November 1998, fulfilling requirements under the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act and putting an end to checks conducted under a five-day federal waiting period.

Gun dealers are required to submit information about prospective buyers to the computer system in an effort to prevent sales to convicted felons, fugitives and other disqualified buyers.

The information includes the customer's name, sex, race, date of birth and state of residence. The computer is supposed to immediately generate a response for gun dealers that approves, rejects or postpones the sale for further investigation.

Since the system was put into place, roughly 14 million checks have been performed, Justice Department officials said. About 280,000 purchases have been rejected.

The NRA filed suit to challenge a Justice Department regulation that allows the FBI to keep all purchase records for six months for auditing purposes only.

The Justice Department contended that it needs the time to spot-check results for quality control, ensure that gun buyers and dealers are not using false identities or other means to thwart the system and determine that the huge database is not being used by anyone to gain confidential infor-

While the NRA did not object to preserving—indefinitely—the records of buyers who are rejected, it argued that the FBI was required to immediately destroy personal data about those who were approved. The NRA's lawyers pointed to language in the Brady law that called for officials to "destroy" records of approved transactions. The law also warned against using the checks "to establish any system for the registration of firearms."

U.S. District Judge James Robertson dismissed the NRA's lawsuit last year, concluding that the Justice Department acted reasonably in establishing auditing standards. The NRA asked the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals to overturn Robertson's ruling.

Appellate Judges David S. Tatel and Merrick B. Garland, both Clinton appointees, rejected the NRA's argument. David B. Sentelle, a Reagan appointee, dissented.

Tatel wrote that the "audit log" is not a firearms registry. The Brady law contained no timetable for purging records, he said, adding that common sense indicates that Congress wanted to ensure that the system functions properly.

Sentelle wrote that the law's instruction to destroy records meant exactly that, prohibiting even temporary preservation.

The NRA was among the strongest supporters of instant background checks. James Baker, the NRA's chief lobbyist, said the organization may seek further appellate review.

"When you have words in the law like 'destroy,' 'don't record' and 'no system of registration,' it seems fairly obvious to us," Baker said.

Attorney General Janet Reno called the ruling "a win for the safety of all Americans," saying it "will allow us to continue to conduct audits that protect individual privacy, ensure system accuracy and deter fraud by corrupt gun dealers."

Guns - NICS

# ABA Welcomes Its 2nd Female President

By DALE RUSSAKOFF  
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NEW YORK, July 11—There were no female lawyers at Holland & Knight, Florida's biggest and most influential law firm, when Martha W. Barnett applied in 1973, fresh out of the University of Florida College of Law. Years later, as a partner, she came across her application and résumé, bearing this scrawled comment from someone on the hiring committee: "If we have to hire a woman, let's get this one."

"This one" today became president of the American Bar Association, only the second woman to lead the 400,000-member organization. Ceremonially accepting the gavel, she vowed to champion the ABA's drive for a national moratorium on executions, calling on attorneys in every state to carry the issue to their lawmakers and governors.

"The issue is not the death penalty," said Barnett, 53, who describes herself as a "reluctant supporter" of capital punishment. "The issue is how do we as lawyers ensure that those charged in death cases have those things that we hold dear—competent counsel, a fair forum and an equal opportunity to present their case?"

Barnett was interrupted by loud applause as she laid out her strategy for navigating the politics of the issue. "There is not universal agreement on the death penalty," she said. "But I do believe there is almost universal agreement that we have zero tolerance for executing people who are innocent."

The woman who will lead this battle has long experience navigating troubled waters. In her days as a lone woman at Holland & Knight, she said she succeeded as a pioneer in part because she didn't seem like one. "I came out of the same kind of family, the same cultural background as those men. I could've been one of their daughters. I wasn't a threat," she said in an interview.

If that was true in 1973, it is not so today. "She'll cut your heart out in the courtroom," said Bill Townsend, formerly general counsel to the state Revenue Commission, who regularly encountered Barnett on corporate tax cases. The two now are law partners and friends. Barnett represents primarily businesses in areas of public policy and government. She has lobbied the legislature for Microsoft, IBM and PepsiCo, among others, according to the Tallahassee Democrat newspaper.

But still, it is Barnett's style to seem very much one of the boys, or at least the boys' kind of woman. Slim and fashionably dressed in a black and red woven suit, she spoke with a lilting Southern accent and folksy sense of humor.

At the beginning of her inaugural speech, when hundreds of lawyers rose to applaud—and a few women could be heard whistling and whooping—she became visibly emotional, placed her hand over her heart and said: "You're going to make me cry."

Barnett then said she didn't feel a need to unveil new initiatives as president. Rather, she said, she will champion a few of the many issues already on the ABA's agenda. With that, she outlined her initiative to advance the ABA's 1997 call for a moratorium on executions.

She said she would also champion diversity in the law, protecting children at risk and preserving the ethical values of the law.

Barnett seemed so much a part of the business establishment in Florida that state Sen. Daryl Jones, vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Children and Family Services, said he was surprised to learn about her death penalty initiative and her focus on the underprivileged.

"On social issues, I identify with what is called the liberal agenda," said Barnett, a Democrat. "I think of it as the human agenda."

Barnett said one of her most profound awakenings came when she and partner Stephen Hanlon represented, pro bono, the survivors of a 1923 attack by white vigilantes on the tiny black community of Rosewood, Fla. The town was burned to the ground and at least eight black residents were killed as retribution for what is now believed to have been a false report that a black man had assaulted a white homemaker and was hiding in Rosewood.

With Hanlon leading the legal offensive and Barnett heading up the

lobbying, the state legislature in 1994 passed a bill that awarded more than \$2 million in compensation to nine survivors of the massacre and descendants of the victims. Hanlon said it was the first time a state compensated citizens for failing to defend them.

For Barnett, the story was much more personal. After the burning of Rosewood, the black survivors moved to nearby towns, including tiny Lacoochee, where Barnett was born and lived until age 9. She never had heard of Rosewood as a child, she said, and never knew the painful family histories of her black neighbors.

Her father, William Walters, was the local doctor—"Doc Willie" to his patients—and she used to make house calls with him, visiting white and black families, playing with children of both races. As it turned out, those children became the lead plaintiffs in the case. So did the woman who taught her to swim in a Lacoochee creek. So did another woman who used to plait her long braids every Saturday.

"Rosewood helped me understand who I was," she said. "Things I'd forgotten about from my youth suddenly came forward—the whole picture. The way I used to ask my father, 'Why are their houses so much smaller than ours? Why are they so much poorer than we are?' My whole, very deep feeling for civil rights, suddenly I understood it."

Barnett became involved in the ABA early in her career, at the encouragement of one of her firm's most prominent partners, Chesterfield Smith, who was president of the ABA when she joined Holland & Knight. It was Smith, as ABA president, who spoke out against then-President Richard M. Nixon's refusal to cooperate with Watergate prosecutors, saying no president is "above the law."

Smith, 82, who came to New York to see Barnett become president, said he did not imagine nearly three decades ago that she would one day hold the post. "But before too long, it became evident to me that she was going to get there," he said.