

Praying for Peace, Praying for Presidents

By Bonnie Dwyer

It was raining in Washington on Memorial Day weekend when Chaplain Barry Black walked to the podium to offer prayer at the dedication of the new memorial for World War II veterans. His words were brief but eloquent.

Eternal Spirit, your faithfulness endures to all generations.

We thank you for the sixteen million Americans who served during World War II and the memorial to their courage.

Remind us that true peace is not the absence of war, but the experience of being in your presence.

Forgive us the selfish desires of our human family that war against the spirit and lead us to violence.

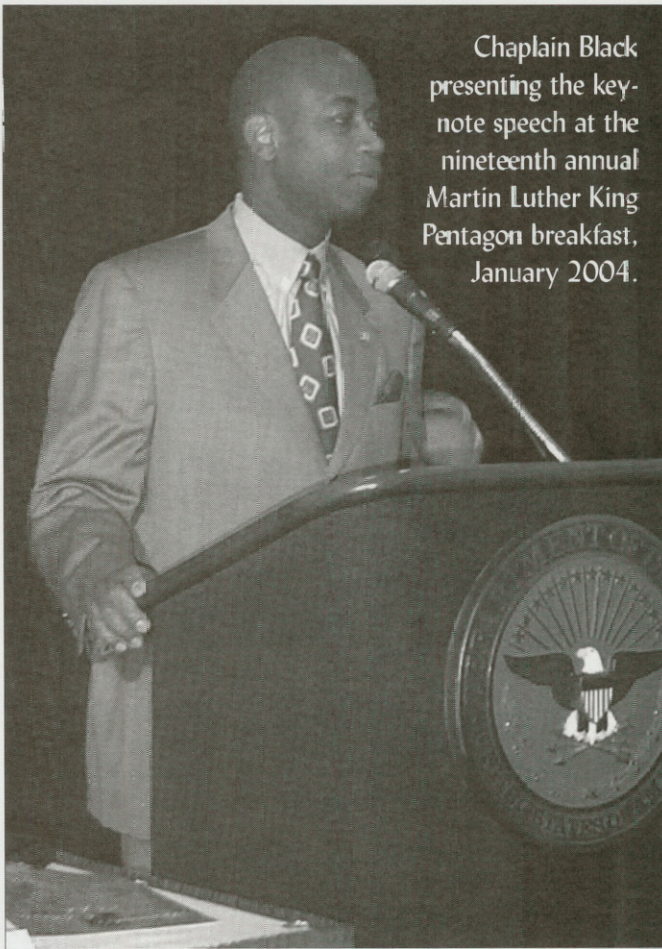
As we live on this fragile planet, empower us to plant seeds of peace that we will bring a harvest of justice.

Make us pure, kind, sensible, and sincere.

And hasten the day when we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks and study war no more.

Now the God of peace be with us all. Amen.





Chaplain Black presenting the keynote speech at the nineteenth annual Martin Luther King Pentagon breakfast, January 2004.

He speaks of peace often in his prayers that open the meetings of the United States Senate, where he became the sixty-second chaplain on June 27, 2003. He also addresses God on behalf of presidents. He offered the closing prayer at the service for former President Ronald Reagan when his body lay in state in the rotunda of the Capitol.

"Public prayer is an act of communion with God, Black says. "It is an effort to bring the people listening into an environment of worship."

When preparing to give such a prayer, he tries to visit with the people he will be representing. "A public prayer should be an expression of collective longings, not just what one person is praying. When I get a sense of the pulse of the people who I am giving the prayer for, then during my devotional period, I will begin to write the prayer. It really is an overflow of my devotional life."

He recalls the story in Scripture of Elijah being called to pray and prophesy. Elijah asked for the minstrels. When the musicians came, the muse arrived. "It is in the warm glow of worshipping God in private

devotion that I permit the overflow to produce the prayers that I pray publicly. Very often, much of the prayer is a paraphrase of the Scripture or music that I have been listening to."

The prayer for Reagan included words from the song "Day by Day." "That just came out of nowhere," he says, "To see you more clearly, to love you more dearly, day by day."

But even his casual conversation is sprinkled with poetry, lines from Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," the Psalms. He says he has always loved poetry and the music of speech. As a child he was exposed to Longfellow, Guest, Wordsworth, Shakespeare. "That has influenced the way that I write my prayers. A prayer should sing. Music and Scripture season prayer."

What other things should a public prayer include? Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, praise, supplication, and intercession are elements that he notes. "Often we major in petitions, and forget the importance of adoration and thanksgiving," he says.

The devotional life that nourishes his prayers is also at the heart of his current position. "I am chaplain of the Senate because I am and continue to be in pursuit of God, even as David was called from the meadow because of his interior life. God is seeking true worshipers. It would be easier for me to stop breathing than to stop worshipping. Devotion does not just involve a ten or fifteen minute segment of my day that I calendar.

"On his law doth he meditate both day and night.' It is a way of life. In my car, I listen to tapes of Scripture. I try to get through the word four or five times a year. That's the way I've been living for the last thirty years."

Black grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. He attended Pine Forge Academy and Oakwood College before entering the ministry. Early in his pastoral career he met some sailors who had driven miles to attend his North Carolina church. They told him there were no black chaplains at their naval base. Their comments launched a revised ministerial career for Black.

Commissioned as a Navy chaplain in 1976, his first duty station was the Fleet Religious Support Activity in Norfolk, Virginia. Subsequent assignments took him to the U.S. Naval Academy; the First Marine Aircraft Wing, Okinawa, Japan; the Naval Chaplains' School Advanced Course in Newport, Rhode Island; the Marine Aircraft Group Thirty-One, Beaufort, South Carolina;

and then the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, Norfolk, Virginia, where he served as Fleet Chaplain. He ended his distinguished career as the Chief of Navy Chaplains.

Along the way he added graduate education to his professional life. A graduate of Oakwood College, he is also an alumnus of Andrews University, North Carolina Central University, Eastern Baptist Seminary, Salve Regina University, and United States International University. He holds master of arts degrees in divinity, counseling, and management. He has received a doctorate in ministry and a doctor of philosophy in psychology.

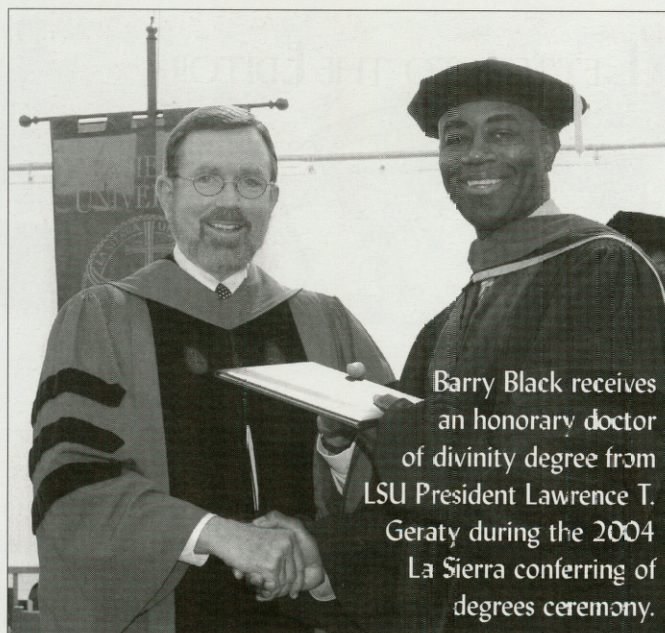
The transition from the Chief of Naval Chaplains to the Senate was seamless, he says. The chaplaincy positions are similar. The task is to advise significant national leaders. It is like Nathan—speaking the truth to power. Both places call for an inclusive ministry in a pluralistic setting where one needs to be sensitive about what is said and intentional in providing ministry to non-Christians.

“I conducted Bible studies there and here,” he notes. At the Senate, he gives five Bible studies a week, plus hosting a regular prayer breakfast. There is a plenary session for everyone who works in the Senate—from janitors and door guards to the vice president. About two hundred people attend that weekly session. There are a couple of sessions just for senators.

“There is a hunger to learn more biblical truths,” he says. But he also notes that there is a much more sophisticated understanding of the Scripture than he expected and there are far more people of faith among senators than he expected. One senator wanted a study on how to pray effectively. In addition to that study and other special requests he offers what he calls a core curriculum of foundational truths: How important it is to appreciate the power in God’s word, how to harness that power. Recently he did an eschatology series examining last day events.

The office of Senate chaplain was created in 1789 at the first Senate meeting in New York City. The Right Rev. Samuel Provost, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, was the first to hold the post. Three days later the Senate voted the Establishment Clause of the Constitution creating the separation of church and state. Reverend Provost opened that session with prayer, Chaplain Black notes. Our forefathers did not intend to eliminate prayer. They voted to separate church and state, not God and state.

Black is often invited to talk to state legislatures



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LA SIERRA UNIVERSITY

Barry Black receives an honorary doctor of divinity degree from LSU President Lawrence T. Geraty during the 2004 La Sierra conferring of degrees ceremony.

about prayer. He gladly obliges. “I’ve been in institutional ministry for twenty-nine years making the case for federal chaplaincy and the constitutionality of chaplaincy.”

But that is the only issue that he addresses. The radical prayer of a prophet is not the calling of a chaplain. He says the nonpartisan nature of the position must be honored.

“Most issues are sufficiently complex that it would be a bit presumptuous of me to try to make the case for stem cell research in a prayer, for instance. The venue of the opening invocation is not the place to do that. It would hurt my effectiveness. By taking a position I would automatically go against the grain of a fairly significant number of people who are listening.

“The primary intent of prayer—having communion with God—would be harmed. Public prayer is speaking to God and hopefully listening.”

His advice for those offering public prayer is to listen to the people you are going to be praying with and for. Make sure that the adoration and thanksgiving reflect the corporate utterances and not just your own. Draw those who are listening into communion with God. Acknowledge where there is a diversity of religious traditions, and praise inclusively so all those who listen can say a fervent amen.

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

