

Father Vernon Huguley and Two Catholic Parishes
A Case Study Prepared by Sarah Shelton

a shepherd, of being a laborer, and of being a disciple. Speaking confessionally, Father Vernon told his flock, “When you have a call placed in your spirit, that is where you will

In the fourth grade, Father Vernon received his First Holy Communion. In addition, Father Vernon and brother Frank were enrolled in The Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic School. His mother paid the subsidized tuition of \$29 per month per child. Father Vernon qualified because he was a cradle Catholic. In addition, his mother gladly baked for school functions and fundraisers as the proud mother of her sons. Father Vernon also did his part. He was enlisted as an Altar Server to serve Mass on Sundays. During summers, he would come to the school and work with the sisters to prepare the classrooms for the beginning of school. This experience taught Father Vernon the value of work and the business of serving and helping others. It also began a discernment process in Father Vernon where he considered the possibility of a vocation; in other words, that he might become a priest.

The sisters taught a consistent theme: be proud of who you are. For the first time, Father Vernon began to understand that he was a person of value created by God. At his eighth grade graduation, the call of God on Father Vernon's life began to take shape as he sang the words: "Don't you know black is beauty? Certainly, Lord! Don't

God's call continued to nudge Father Vernon's soul. After discussions with a vocation director about the priesthood, he attended a weeklong conference in Beaumont, Texas. While he learned many things about the priesthood, the primary attribute of a priest that he took to heart was that a priest must be a person of prayer. He began, therefore, to increase his comfort level with spontaneous prayer and the ability to express his faith with words.

Following high school, Father Vernon attended The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. He graduated in Human Development and Family Life through the School of Home Economics. Father Vernon worked his way through undergraduate school. One of his favorite jobs, which continues to be a hobby and part of his ministry today, was being a baker in the cafeteria of The Ferguson Center (student center). He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1983. At the University of Alabama, Father Vernon began to bring together his heritage and faith. With the skills learned from his parents' kitchen, Father Vernon found a way to continue to prepare himself for the calling that tugged at his heart.

He joined the student chapel on campus and for the first time worshiped in a church whose members were not black. While the music and its presentation were different, Father Vernon found comfort in the liturgy and practice that were the same. While it felt "different" to Father Vernon to worship with the white students, no doubt it was a new experience for them to have a black Eucharistic Minister, Lector and Religious Education Instructor! These days were formative for Father Vernon. They continued to confirm his conviction that black congregations need black priests. It provided an early exposure to his minority presence within the larger church and gave a preview of the racial challenges that he would face as a priest. It increased his sensitivity to the issues between blacks and whites, so that he would take on the responsibility of speaking out for the black communities of faith. While Father Vernon admits that he has to be careful about when and how he speaks out, his educational experiences taught him not to deny who he is nor to those whom he feels called to serve. It began the struggle of knowing that he is called to preach a gospel of reconciliation, but finds reconciliation often a challenge within his own heart and soul.

Also during his college days, Father Vernon responded to a request made by the Consalata Sisters of Greene County, Alabama. They needed a teacher for children's religious education on Saturdays for Advent and Lent. Father Vernon was willing. For all four years that he attended the University of Alabama, plus one summer after graduation, Father Vernon traveled to Greene County to teach the children Bible stories and religious songs. He says that the Consalata Sisters provided the backbone of his vocation. In particular, Sister Elisa gave Father Vernon the good advice to "let your anger and frustration run off your back like water off a duck's back." This missionary group of nuns, recognizing Father Vernon's gifts and abilities, took it upon themselves to pray for Father Vernon in his formative years and continue to do so to this day.

In 1987, Father Vernon entered Saint Meinrad School of Theology, located in southern Indiana. He was drawn to this seminary because it was racially mixed (there were about a dozen blacks in the seminary; they were also the only blacks in the adjacent town.). An additional attraction was the presence of a black, church history professor, Father Cyprian Davis. Father Davis spent a lot of time mentoring and shaping Father Vernon. Father Davis also provided advice for Father Vernon's academic choices and spiritual direction.

While in seminary, Father Vernon found his voice. He was often outspoken in regard to black and white issues including a confrontation with one of his professors about the annual Martin Luther King Celebration that was to be held on campus. One of Father Vernon's class presentations included his singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" as an expression of how alone and far from home he felt. When he would talk with Father Davis, his beloved professor, Father Davis would advise: "Remember Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Peter, James and John were all there. They looked up and saw Jesus. That is what you need to do Vernon. You need to look up and see Jesus."

Father Vernon was sustained through his seminary days by some advice that he received from a spiritual director prior to entering the seminary: "Your vocation is not to the seminary. Your vocation is to the people of God. You are not meant to stay at the seminary."

In order to bring some balance to these predominantly white educational experiences, Father Vernon enrolled at Xavier University, the only black Catholic university in the United States, to pursue a Black

God's blessing. The congregation was so moved that tears swept through those gathered. Father Vernon has been the faithful leader, friend, pastor and priest for Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church and Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church since 1993. Both congregations are predominantly black. He has served as the Spiritual Moderator for the Cursillo Movement in Birmingham and has served on the Priest Council for the Diocese of Birmingham. He is an active member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus. He continues to bake for his congregation and friends, and claims as his favorite verse, Psalm 139, "I give You thanks, O God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

History of the Congregations

When Birmingham emerged as a city of the New South in 1871, the lessons of the Civil War were still fresh on the minds of the city's developers. They, therefore, placed their confidence in industrialization. Rich mineral deposits of iron ore were buried beneath the Red Mountain of Jones Valley. Coal and limestone lay nearby. These

The third white child to be born in Jefferson County was Joseph Riley Smith, who became one of Elyton's most prominent citizens. A well-educated doctor/physician who practiced all over the county, operated a drugstore and established two schools: one for the white children and one for the black children. Smith donated the land for the first hospital in Birmingham and upon his death in 1905, Smith was the largest taxpayer in the area. Smith had twelve children. He used their names for the naming of the thoroughfares for the community he developed: Smithfield. Once a cornfield, Smith developed Smithfield into one of Birmingham's earliest subdivisions. (Satterfield, p. 52) In the late nineteenth century, the 500 acres that made up Smithfield caught the attention of city boosters who were striving to improve Birmingham's status. Being west of the city limits, Smithfield provided alternative housing for those black and white residents of the city that were in cramped living conditions. With physical separation from the city came a feeling of control and influence. This resulted in an elevated self-esteem and sense of status. The black residents of Smithfield could move freely within their own neighborhood without the consequences and restrictions of segregation that existed within the city limits. (Feldman, p. 1) Middle-class blacks achieved a place of belonging in Smithfield.

This coincided with the strategies of African Americans on a national basis who were adopting a strategy of self-segregation. It emphasized self-reliance in that viable communities were being developed that supported their own businesses, clubs, and private institutions. It created a protective environment in which the residents could assert independence, nurture personal and business

courtesy of Mr. Virgil Harris, Mass was held each Sunday at the Davenport and Harris Funeral Home. As the congregation of Our Lady Queen of the Universe Catholic Church

In March of 1957, Archbishop Toolen visited the mission site for The Sacred Heart of Jesus. He promised an elderly, ill lady (a mother of one of the Catholic families involved in the mission) that there would be a Catholic church built in the community of Collegeville. In May of 1957, Archbishop Toolen named Father Foster to be the Director of the North Alabama Mission Band. This would be in addition to Father Foster's pastorate at Our Lady Queen of the Universe and two mission sites which were in Parker Heights and Collegeville. Father Foster had two associates: Father Michael Quealy and Father Robert Campbell. Another devoted helper was Brother Larry Johnson. Father Foster and his associates resided at St. Margaret's Parish. Father Foster's mother, Mrs. Alice Foster, promised to donate \$1,000 to purchase the land for Sacred Heart of Jesus, if the parishioners would match her gift. The money was raised, and Mrs. Foster sent her

the members of Our Lady Queen of the Universe, Mr. Fred Calhoun, spotted two green boxes containing 50 sticks of dynamite each on the curb close to the church house. It was set to go off during Mass or shortly thereafter. Father Foster quickly moved those who had assembled for Mass to the front of the rectory. The bomb, fortunately, did not explode. The Bethel Baptist Church in Collegeville was the site that received bomb threats and, ultimately, was bombed. Sacred Heart had no specific scares.

Following Father Foster has been a long list of priests and administrators. Sacred

have moved out in search of access to better homes, jobs and educational opportunities for their children. They continue, however, to return to the church of their roots.

Therefore, the church population is not totally representative of the population that surrounds it. In addition, those that return, do so with the attitude of the original Smithfield residents of being self-reliant, proud, informed, and elite. It is this writer's opinion that Our Lady Queen of the Universe, while it is not publicly spoken, believes that Sacred Heart of Jesus should not be a mission any longer. Instead it should be an

It is undeniable that Father Vernon has a colorful personality. From his gregarious smile to his thoughtful sermons, Father Vernon is uniquely his own person. As with all persons, however, there are some realities that balance the courageous and lighter sides of their lives. In the fall of 2005, separate meetings were scheduled for the lay leadership of Sacred Heart and Our Lady Queen of the Universe. They were held in the Parish Halls of each church and lasted for about two hours. Initially, general questions about leadership styles were asked, but gradually the discussion moved to how these lay leaders experienced Father Vernon's leadership.

Being the priest of one parish is demanding, but to be the priest of two parishes is twice as difficult. There is a constant question in the mind of the priest that if he is at one site, he feels he should be at the other site and vice versa. The questions of balance and of burnout are prevalent. In addition, Father Vernon quickly learned that both the Smithfield and Colledgeville Catholics were proud of their status within their churches. They asked questions, expressed opinions and assumed responsibilities for the routine activities of the parish. Too often this attitude caused problems for new leaders. Additionally, there is an element of cultural competition between the two communities that make up the parishes of Queen and Sacred Heart, Father Vernon is easily caught in the question of **partiality**. Consider these statements offered by members who were interviewed:

Voice 1: *When he's here, he's the happiest priest you've ever seen in your life because we all communicate well with him and he communicates well with us. ...when he leaves here, he's all frustrated because he knows he's got to jump in the lions' den over there.*

Voice 2: *"Father, you are married to the Queen, but you are shackin' with Sacred Heart!"*

In addition to partiality between congregations, the question of partiality also appears in personal relationships. Consider these statements:

Voice 1:

respect of key individuals; that he can be domineering and controlling; he has weakness in follow-through; fails to delegate; can worry unnecessarily; and can be indecisive when pressured. While Father Vernon's Usual Style is that he prefers to be organized and concentrative, when he is unduly stressed, he can be dominating, self-protective, easily distracted, disorganized and argumentative. He likes to know who is in charge and performs best when given personalized incentives. He is normally openly enthusiastic and a team player, as long as the rules are kept to a minimum and the tasks are varied. His preference is to schedule things, draw up the rules and procedures, and have a way to measure the results of his efforts. He is often direct, to the point, decisive and busy. The Birkman Inventory also supported areas of strength that the parishioners of Queen and Sacred Heart named about Father Vernon. In general these include that he is usually direct and straightforward; friendly and easy to kn

critical times. Father Vernon is so intentional about representing God's care that he is also willing to participate in non-Catholic funerals. For his own parishioners he often places symbols on the casket of the deceased in order to help family members have tangible, visible reminders of the life that they have gathered to celebrate. Other words that were used to describe his pastoral care were: compassionate, servant of the people, trustworthy, confidential, a presence, a bridge builder, and big-hearted.

In addition to these gifts of pastoral care, the parishioners expressed a great appreciation for Father Vernon's

Voice 2: *“Father Vernon knows us. He’s one of us and I don’t care how white you are, you are not black. You don’t have that experience.”*

members of both churches to dialogue. The idea was met with such strong resistance that the conversation was concluded. Father Vernon, rather than isolating or punishing his parishioners, continued to love them. His ability to respond redemptively endeared him to his congregants.

In the Diocese of Birmingham, priests are assigned to a parish for commitments of six year blocks of time. They may renew for an

In these last months of his tenure, one cannot help but wonder how Father Vernon will help his congregants to build a memorial to his legacy, just as Joshua had twelve stones erected as a memorial for the crossing of the Jordan by men who represented one of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Joshua 4) Perhaps Father Vernon has already erected this memorial, for through his leadership both congregations have remained fiercely independent, made great strides in being debt free, and have grown in their