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A Black Priest and Her Church Marries a Lesbian Mayor Inclusion

**By The Reverend Irene Monroe
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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Since the liberal arm of the U.S. Episcopal Church passed a resolution in July to bless same-sex unions, particularly in states like Massachusetts that legalize such marriages, so too has, at least, one black congregation within the Massachusetts diocese. On August 30, St. Bartholomew Episcopal Church in Cambridge hosted the marriage and blessed the union of its mayor, E. Denise Simmons, and her lifetime partner, Mattie Hayes.

The historic event happened because of the fierce determination of a straight ally to Cambridge's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community — the church's new Priest-in-Charge, The Reverend Leslie K. Sterling, who is also the first African-American female priest at St. Bart's. Having just arrived at St. Bart's in February, Sterling brings a new vision to a church that has served both the African-American and African-Caribbean community for over 100 years.

When I went to meet Sterling to discuss our roles as officiates in the mayor's nuptials, I asked her if she were ready to jump into in this conflagration that has the Episcopal Church at the brink of schism.

"Some will leave, I know, but those who oppose and stay, at least, we can talk about it in a spirited conversation," Sterling said.

Cambridge, like many of its residents, revels in its image as a bastion of liberalism. It's also a city of many firsts, like both E. Denise Simmons and Kenneth Reeves being the first African American openly queer mayors of a major U.S. city.

But underneath Cambridge's liberal facade is a rampant racism that came to light globally in the racial profiling of Harvard professor Henry "Skip" Louis Gates during his arrest by a white cop this past July. Evident, too, is a toxic homophobia in black congregations of both liberal white denominations and historical black ones, which put several communities under both spiritual and sexual siege. For example, Reeves, who was once a longtime worshipper at the historic African-American St. Paul's A.M.E in Cambridge, left that church after May 2004, when Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage, because the church made it clear it would neither bless same-sex unions nor marry its queer parishioners.

Mayor Simmons, a native Cantabridgian — who presides over a diverse demographic consisting of people from various racial, cultural, economic, and sexual orientations — had only one church she could go to with the hopes of not being turned down.

"I am cognizant of the deeper societal implications of this marriage...[St. Bartholomew] might be the very first mainstream African American church to hold a same-gender wedding," Simmons told the Cambridge Chronicle.

In preparing her parishioners for their leap of faith, Sterling wrote in a letter to them stating the following:

"I am aware of all the Bible verses conservatives cite in opposition to homosexuality, and I am also aware that there is more than one way to look at each one of those verses. If we believe that the Spirit continues to guide the church in the interpretation of scripture, as was done with respect to slavery and the status of women, then we have to consider the possibility that the Spirit is speaking today, as the hearts and minds of so many people at so many levels of Bible scholarship no longer read those verses as a blanket condemnation of same-sex relationships, or as a reason to deny committed, faithful couples a blessing on their marriage."

To be in full compliance with the canons of the Episcopal Church, which would avoid Sterling confronting ecclesiastical probation or being defrocked, the wedding liturgy was divided among three officiates: The Rev. Sterling; Jada D. Simmons, the mayor's oldest daughter and Justice of the Peace; and me.

I was elated to be a part of this liturgical assembly line helping to make a historic event happen within the church's ecclesial strictures. Sterling did the invocation, declaration of consent to marry, and blessing of the marriage; Simmons pronounced the marriage; and I did the homily, blessing of rings, and vows.

As the wedding service ended, with Simmons and Hayes walking down the aisle as a married couple, the church clapping, and the choir singing the gospel tune "Oh Happy Day," I turned to Sterling and asked what she thought about the service. "I'm feeling the history of the moment and what it must have been when black folks were able to marry."

Historically, as African Americans, we have always focused on spiritual content of family and not its physical composition.

Hayes spoke to me about the spiritual content of her family when she said, "Of course, to have my marriage and my wedding to be in an historic event is phenomenal. But the bottom line is as wonderful as all that is, I have married the woman I love, Denise Simmons."

These multiple family structures, which we have had to devise as models of resistance and liberation, have always shown the rest of society what really constitutes family. A grandmother raising her grandchild or a lesbian couple raising their children as in the Simmons-Hayes household that is now legal according to the state and blessed by the church—families both.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not-So-Everyday Moments](#). As an African American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.



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