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Bennett professor in elite group

Monica Coleman is listed among a journal's "New Generation of Leading Clergy."

BY NANCY H. McLAUGHLIN
Staff Writer

GREENSBORO — At first she told no one. She attended her classes at divinity school and dutifully stood in the pews at church.

But all the while, she asked God: Why hadn't he stopped the rape?

She didn't speak to God until the night, months after the attack, when

she stood on a rock at Percy Warren Park in Nashville.

"I remember getting up on this rock and just screaming at God," said Monica Coleman, now the director of the Womanist Religion Program at Bennett College. "That's how I broke the silence. I thought I had been in a safe place. I thought, 'If you are in the will of God, he's going to keep you safe.'"

The violent act eventually helped shape a ministry that's now earning Coleman national applause.

Coleman, a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church

and in her first year as an assistant religion professor at the Greensboro women's college, has been named one of "20 to Watch" in an upcoming edition of a clergy publication.

She entered Harvard at 17, graduating magna cum laude. She left for divinity school at Vanderbilt at 20, graduating with honors, followed by a Ph.D. in religion from Claremont Graduate University. At 29, she was hired to shepherd the Bennett religion program through its infancy.

"All this before 30!" said Marjo-



Monica Coleman has been chosen as one of the top preachers under age 40.

See Coleman, Page A4

Coleman

Continued from Page A1

rie Hewitt Suchocki, Coleman's doctoral adviser.

"You have to say my goodness, this sister here has some stuff down deep within her that's unusual," said Martha Simmons, publisher of The African American Pulpit, whose list is published every four years. Coleman is listed in the nondenominational preaching and ministry journal's "The New Generation of Leading Clergy: Preachers under 40." Her picture, bio and sermon are featured in the Summer 2005 issue, available this week.

"She gives me hope the African American church is on the right course," Simmons said of Coleman, who grew up in Ann Arbor, Mich. "She says 'in spite of,' 'no matter what.' Like the Sojourner Truths... she says, 'Yes, there's some nasty stuff out there, but I can keep going.'"

A true scholar

Coleman can talk a mile a minute, using terms like "new thought religion" and "liberation theology." Personable with an infectious laugh, she is a self-described nerd — she reads the footnotes in books and catches up on scholarly journals before catching up with old friends on Christmas break.

It's easy to imagine her as a barely-out-of-diapers, high-energy youngster who sometimes put her clothes on backward — reveling in her independence.

"I said, 'She's being willful, she's being disobedient,'" recalled her mother, Pauline Bigby, an educational consultant and retired educator who is divorced from Coleman's fa-

MONICA ANITA COLEMAN

Professional training: Licensed minister, African Methodist Episcopal Church

Current employment: Director, Womanist Religious Studies and Assistant Professor of Religion, Bennett College

Education: A.B. Magna Cum Laude with Honors in Afro-American Studies, Harvard University, 1995; Master's of Divinity, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn., 1998; Doctorate in Religion, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, Calif., 2004

Selected awards and honors: "Harvard's Intellectual Elite, Class of 1995"; Dean's List, Harvard-Radcliffe College, 1991-1995; Wilbur F. Tiletts Prize (for student work in theology), 1998; Community Service Award, Nashville Baha'i Community, 2000; and The African American Pulpit's "Top 20 to Watch," The New Generation of Leading Clergy: Preachers Under 40

Publications: "The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Address Sexual Violence," Pilgrim Press, 2004

Selected articles: "The World At Its Best: A Process Construction of a Wesleyan Understanding of Entire Sanctification," Wesleyan Theological Journal (Fall 2004); "Clergy Sexual Misconduct in the AME Church: An Open Letter to My Brothers and Sisters in the Clergy," the AME Church Review (Oct.-Dec. 1998)

Selected presentations and lectures: "Young Faith Leaders: Our Role in Solving Contemporary Social Justice Issues," NAACP Leadership 500 Conference, 2005; "Bling Bling and Prosperity Doctrine: Hip Hop, the Black Church and Capitalism," Spelman College, 2002; "Keeping Alive the Legacy of Fighting Against Injustice," National Religious Leadership Summit, 2004.

HEAR HER SPEAK

Go to http://www.news-record.com/news/local/churchaudio_052905.html for highlights of a sermon delivered by the Rev. Monica Coleman. Go to <http://www.theafricanamericanpulpit.com/summerad.html> to learn more about the entire group of "Leading Clergy Under 40."

ther, a retired General Motors executive.

"Her grandmother would say, 'No, she's being who she is. Let her be.'"

Always curious, young Monica was "Mikey" among her friends — "Mikey will try it; he'll try anything," went the popular television commercial that Coleman's mother uses to describe the precocious child.

"She'll think about it, then she's like, 'How hard can it be?'"

Graduating high school at 16, the girl nurtured in the church was off to Harvard — having just gotten her driver's license.

"I partied all Saturday night, stayed awake and went to church the next morning,"

said Coleman, a lithe, wide-eyed young woman with long dreadlocks.

At 18, she traveled with Nelson Mandela and upperclassmen signing up voters for the election that would give South Africa its first black president. "She came back a different human being," Bigby said.

Not long after, Coleman was alone at the lodge while on a College Fellowship ski trip when she heard the voice of God in the room. Only she wasn't happy. She thought he was calling her into the ministry.

"When I grew up I had never seen preachers under 50, not a female preacher until I went to college," Coleman said.

She dismissed the voice, but soon found herself writing sermons in her head.

At 19, she accepted the calling. Coleman, who had been named by her peers as one of Harvard's "25 intellectual elites," enrolled in Vanderbilt's divinity school after graduation.

Her first year, she was raped during a visit by an old boyfriend.

While reconciling with God, she launched The Dinah Project, a plan that assists churches in responding to the rising incidents of rape, sexual assault, molestation and incest. The project became a book, "The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence" (Pilgrim 2004).

The project gets its name from Genesis 34, which chronicles the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter.

"People are more likely to go to the pastor than they are to go to a therapist," Coleman said. "As clergy, we need to know our limitations but we also need to make our churches safe places to be — our responsibility is more than just giving them a piece of paper with a referral on it."

Coleman also began talking about her experience in the pulpit, before strangers across the country, but also before the people who remembered her as "Little Monica."

She had come to the conclusion that God was there all along. "For every tear I cried, God cried two..." Coleman said. "God didn't go anywhere."

Her words began helping others.

"One thing that I admire about her as a human being is ... she will do what she is called to do and she recognizes what she's called to do may not be

what she wants to do," Bigby said.

Coleman admits her ministry is not what people in the pews might be used to. She speaks out with honesty about the sensitive and controversial things people are thinking about.

"After 9/11, when nothing was said, Monica was the first to speak out from our pulpit, to talk about why the persons who committed these egregious deeds — what might have been their motivations," her mother said. "She also said a number of people died that horrible day, let's contrast that with the number of people who have died of AIDS."

Her topics, such as the silence around mental illness, might not be the ones addressed in the average Sunday sermon. "She will say, 'Now I know you want a 'do-good' message, but that's not why I'm here,'" her mother said.

Big plans

Coleman got to Bennett by way of a cruise, where she was officiating a girlfriend's wedding. Bennett's president, Johnnetta Cole, was attending a conference on the same ship.

Coleman begged a friend to make the introduction during dinner.

"Before I got up, she was talking about what we could do at Bennett," Coleman said.

Cole was honest about the school's strengths and challenges, but she also had concepts for a "Womanist Religion" program at the college. The program, which combines rigorous academic study of religion with being "intentionally attentive" to the religious and spiritual experiences of women of African descent, is usually found on a graduate level.

The program's outline could have been written with Cole-

man in mind.

"Dr. Monica Coleman is among a group of young clergy who think, write and act positively outside of many of the traditional ways of the thought and practice of organized religion," Cole said.

In its first year, the program has spawned four new courses in religion and two lecture series, which included such topics as African American biblical interpretations, but also the love-hate relationship between Christianity and hip-hop culture.

"I have stretched that budget to unbelievable lengths," Coleman said with a laugh.

In the "Women in Ministry and Justice" lecture series, Tanya M. Barnett, a specialist in biology and agro-forestation and sustainable agriculture, encouraged local congregations to be environmentally responsible in their practice and theology.

"One reason we chose this particular speaker was to draw connections where people may not usually see them," Coleman said. "With Bennett's strong program in biology and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University just across the street, we have a population of students who are interested in agriculture and the sciences. But who would think that those interests could be combined with ministry?"

The work ahead at Bennett includes developing major and minor courses of study in Womanist Religious Studies.

"The fun part is we get to design and shape it," Coleman said — sounding a lot like that Mikey commercial.

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