

Milestones

Program for blacks fosters lay ministers

By Jay Copp
Catholic News Service

CHICAGO — A scholarship program begun in 1990 is helping ease a shortage of African-American lay ministers in Chicago.

The Augustus Tolton Pastoral Ministry Program pays for tuition and books for African-Americans pursuing graduate degrees at the Catholic Theological Union. In exchange, graduates agree to serve in a pastoral role in the Chicago archdiocese for three years.

A joint venture of the theological school and the archdiocese, the Tolton program is believed to be the first of its kind. It is named for Father Augustus Tolton, the first U.S.-born African-American priest and founder of the first black Catholic church in Chicago.

"I think it's definitely made an impact," said Dominican Sister Jamie Phelps, an African-American theologian who initiated the program.

Barbara Anderson, a 51-year-old Tolton student from Chicago, said her courses have made her more knowledgeable and better prepared to face challenges as a youth volunteer at St. Helena of the Cross Parish.

"I think young people need to be aware of God's presence in their lives," said Anderson.

"I think the church should evangelize as hard as the gangs do," she told the archdiocesan newspaper, *The New World*.

According to Sheila Adams of the archdiocesan Office for Ethnic Ministries, the archdiocese has 19 priests, 38 permanent deacons and 54,000 Catholics who are African-American, but only one credentialed director of religious education and only one or two certified pastoral associates who are African-American.

"Blacks are not seen as equals in the church," said Sister Phelps, and the low number of African-American ministers is a result of the lack of a welcoming attitude in the church. "It's a failure to see black Catholics as full brothers and sisters in the church."

Other factors also have contributed to this shortage, said Adams, citing the inability of parishes to pay for ministry training, stiff educational requirements for ministry and low wages paid to ministers.

Tolton program funds have come from fund-raising events and donations from religious orders and foundations. Sister Phelps said the program has inspired a similar effort in Baltimore and that the theological school is planning another program to aid Hispanic lay ministers.

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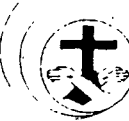
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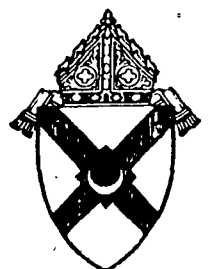
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