

Black lesbian bishop Yvette Flunder is 'using my energy to find peace'

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) By her own count, Bishop Yvette Flunder has officiated at 149 funerals for victims of AIDS and HIV. Her office in Oakland, California, contains the ashes from some of those funerals after family members refused to claim them.

In recent weeks, she's been celebrated and castigated for being an African-American bishop who's legally married to another woman.

But when the time came for her to speak at a small Baptist college in this Bible Belt city, she chose to forgive the black clergymen who called her appearance a "travesty of the highest order."

"I'm not using my energy for useless fights," the third-generation preacher said at the end of a sermon on March 17. "I'm using my energy to find peace. Let there be peace on earth."

While strangers and critics see her only through the lens of her sexual orientation, Flunder has been hailed by those who know her as a leader with a "radically inclusive" agenda of compassion, aimed at getting everyone—gay, straight, black, white, immigrant and native—at the table.

Her calendar is full, from pastoring her predominantly black, mostly LGBT congregation in Oakland, California, to providing for orphans from Mexico to Zimbabwe, to keynoting a World AIDS Day event at the White House.

Randy Vaughn, a coordinator of the National Baptist Fellowship of Concerned Pastors, said his issue with Flunder was not her AIDS ministry, or even her luncheon speech at American Baptist College here. It was her preaching during a worship service of the college's annual lecture series as the legal wife of Shirley Miller, her partner of 30 years.

“The worship for us is the high point of our being with God, and how can we come before God with open, public sin?” asked Vaughn, whose fledgling group, organized specifically to protest Flunder, collected about 390 online signatures on its petition to try to halt her appearance.

The 5-foot-2-inch woman with the strong alto voice is a daughter of the Church of God in Christ, a predominantly black and Pentecostal denomination. Her opponents have difficulty accepting her, she said, because she challenges the traditional patriarchy of the black church.

“It’s one of the last bastions of power that a lot of my brothers feel like they have, and I represent everything that flies in the face of it,” Flunder, 59, said in an interview. “I am a woman. I am woman clergy and I’m a same-gender-loving woman.”

But she is also a defiant, self-described visionary, comparing herself to Martin Luther King Jr. in sometimes ominous language, with good reason, she said.

“I’ve had my back window of my car shot out; I’ve had my bedroom window shot out in my house,” said Flunder, who was guarded by six officers during her sermon. “People hate a change agent.”

Undeterred, Flunder continues her fight for justice after first attempting to do what the church expected of her: marrying a man. Though she knew she was a lesbian and her husband knew he was gay, she said, “We thought we’d kind of cancel each other out.” A daughter, now 38, was born from their union before they divorced and he contracted HIV. It was her ex-husband’s illness and death—along with that of other friends with the virus—that moved her to a new kind of ministry.

She and Miller opened the first faith-based house in the country for HIV-positive men in the mid-1980s. For some, she has represented either a second chance at life or at church.

“My life is what it is today because she taught me how to do self-care,” said Ken Hall, an African-American gay man who now works for Flunder as a medical case manager but who once was on the receiving end of her care, along with other HIV-positive men she taught how to track their white blood cell counts and fight infection.

James Pearman, a white gay man who traveled to Nashville with two dozen others to hear Flunder preach, said he was an agnostic for three decades and felt estranged in his Pentecostal church. Twelve years ago, he joined Flunder's City of Refuge United Church of Christ, which started in San Francisco in 1991 and now meets in Oakland, California.

"Bishop had her hands up, was singing," recalled the 63-year-old retired bank executive. "I just cried about six services and decided I had to join. My foundation was given back to me."

That church, with about 350 attending each Sunday, includes the Transcendence Gospel Choir, which sang at the 2003 national meeting of the United Church of Christ when the denomination officially welcomed the full participation of transgender people.

"By advancing issues of transgender inclusion through music, she was able to raise the profile of that issue within our church in ways that talking would not have accomplished," said J. Bennett Guess, executive minister of UCC local church ministries.

The congregation's outreach includes City of Refuge Tijuana Church in Mexico, led by Tony Manriquez, who was the first Hispanic elder of her San Francisco church and now oversees a congregation and ministries helping people with HIV, orphans and the elderly.

"Everything about theology, preaching, teaching, I learned at her feet," said Manriquez, who at 79 is 20 years older than his mentor.

Flunder was consecrated as a bishop of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, which began in 1999 and now has some 60 member churches and about 40 affiliates. Although most of the congregations are predominantly African-American and led by LGBT or LGBT-affirming clergy, the fellowship also includes whites and Hispanics. Its churches are also in Asia and Africa, and she will travel to Australia to start new work there this year.

"I'm shocked and surprised all the time at the way it grows," she said. "But I know something about freedom and positivity: It's much more alluring than all this hate talk. There are same-gender-loving people all over the world and cultures that resist them all over the world—religion being the principal culture."

Bishop Bonnie Radden, the West Coast leader of the fellowship, said the growth has added more hands and feet to the efforts Flunder began.

“For many years the work was just her and her church and then the work broadened,” she said. “I think her compassion for people—period—keeps her going whether she’s standing next to President Obama or next to an AIDS patient in Tijuana or Africa.”

Flunder’s supporters hope the latest protest—and counterprotest—may be the sign of a turning point in the church debate about same-sex marriage. More than 2,000 people signed an online petition of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists that championed her Nashville appearances.

Flunder used the controversy as a teachable moment about sticking with a vision.

“I wouldn’t have flown on an airplane if Orville and Wilbur Wright had listened to their haters,” she said. “It takes courage to be a visionary.”

*These stories are part of a series on the intersection of faith, ethnicity and sexuality, with support from the Arcus Foundation.*