

Multimedia ministry: AME Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie

by [Joan R. Harrell](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue



PHOTO BY Walter Jones

*When Vashti Murphy McKenzie was elected a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2000, she became the first woman to serve in that capacity. As bishop, McKenzie has emphasized social networking and digital media as well as social justice. Last year, Bishop McKenzie used social media to create a "prayer-cation," reaching 12,000 people worldwide with a monthlong set of spiritual disciplines. Her most recent book is *Swapping Housewives: Rachel and Jacob and Leah*.*

**Can you describe your call to ministry?**

I was an on-air personality for a Christian radio station in Baltimore as well as program director and general manager of that station. I wanted to own my own radio station to show people how you really do it!

My show was on the air during early morning drive time, and every day I offered people a "daily spiritual vitamin." I gave a little scripture and a little message. People were calling in because they needed help. I would ask, did you talk to your

pastor? Did you go to your church? I saw that people were falling through the spiritual community safety net, and I wondered if we could sew it up. I began to pray: What did God want me to do?

In reading Acts 6 the Lord showed me to look for persons wise and full of the Holy Spirit. We pulled together a community service organization in the Washington, D.C., area, and out of that experience people eventually acknowledged that I—and other women—had a call to preach.

### **Have you experienced discrimination against you as a woman in your role as bishop?**

When I was writing my book *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry*, I had the opportunity to interview Bishop Leontine T. Kelly, the first black woman elected bishop in the United Methodist Church. She said if you spend your time justifying your call, that will become all you do. I decided long ago that I was not going to spend my ministry trying to justify my call and that I was going to help other women do the same.

Do I experience discrimination? Yes. I think that women who are in nontraditional jobs—whether you are a preacher, a doctor, a lawyer, a cardiovascular surgeon—experience it. You handle that the same way you handle every other objection to your presence. When you are a leader, there are those who will object to being led.

God did not call me as a woman preacher. I am not consecrated as a woman bishop. I was not ordained as a woman itinerant elder. If God had a problem with me being a woman, God would have fixed it before I was born. When I walk in the door, I walk in as a preacher, as a teacher, as a bishop.

I've been the first woman pastor at every congregation where I have served. When you visit a family who is devastated by a crisis, they really don't care if you are a woman. They want to know if you will come and pray with them. They ask: Are you going to be able to say a word to us that will keep us from falling apart? Will you visit my child in jail? Will you come before I have surgery and pray with me? Will you stand with me at the graveside of my mother or my father? They are not questioning your gender. They want you to be God's mouthpiece, God's representative.

### **You are recognized as a powerful preacher. How do you prepare a sermon?**

Preaching is something that you do every day. It is ongoing. I don't say, "It's noon and I am going to go into the office and prepare my sermon." The best sermons will grow out of devotional time with the Lord. God will place a scripture on your heart, a thought on your heart, and then you pursue the research, getting into your commentaries, making sure you have thoroughly researched the text, seeing if there are other texts that speak to this issue. And then you lay it before the Lord and say, "God, what do you want me to say?"

Preaching has to be a part of your prayer life. You cannot just go to the word of God to get a sermon for that week.

### **What role do you think social media and digital technology should play in faith communities?**

Jesus tells us, "Go ye therefore to teach and baptize and make disciples, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." The Lord tells us to go, but he does not exactly tell us how to go. He does not say, "Go ye therefore and write a book," or "Go ye therefore and build cathedrals in my name with stained glass windows." With all of these new technologies, we have new tools. It is the same message, the same Jesus, the same 66 books for our reference materials, but the delivery method has changed dramatically.

With my online ministries I minister to people I may never see, people who may never walk inside a church door, but I am beginning a conversation with them about Jesus Christ that I hope will lead them into a local congregation, lead them to a place where they can hear the preached word and be taught physically face to face.

Let's face it, the majority of teens, 20-somethings and 30-somethings are having conversations every day in the digital world. If we do not engage them in conversation, we will not have a chance to lead them.

### **What is an effective social justice ministry?**

Too often the church acts like an ambulance at the bottom of the hill, waiting for people to be pushed off it. We pick up the pieces, mend them and help them on their way rather than participate in building a fence to keep the people from being thrown off in the first place.

We must think about taking our ministry concerns to the next level. For example, soup kitchens and food pantries are good, but we also need to figure out what can we do to make sure that soup kitchens and food pantries become obsolete. Are we

going to look at what public policy is forcing people into needing soup kitchens?