

## **The Rt. Rev. John Thomas Walker, 1925- 1989**

Bishop Walker was the second African American Diocesan Bishop in the Episcopal Church, USA. He served The Episcopal Diocese of Washington as a trail blazer in many aspects of ministry. Social justice, the church in Africa and interdenominational dialog were among the concerns that distinguished his career.

John Thomas Walker was born in Georgia into a religious extended family. A grandfather and a great grandfather were pastors in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The family moved to Chicago where Walker was raised. College brought him to Michigan to attend Wayne State University where he studied political science. At age 23 he joined the Episcopal Church and went to Virginia Theological Seminary as the first African American to attend the seminary. After graduation he was ordained Deacon in 1954 and to the Priesthood in 1955. He became rector of St. Mary's Church, Detroit. In 1957 he went to St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire where he joined the faculty. In the 1964-1965 academic year he had the opportunity to teach at the Bishop Tucker Theological College in Uganda where his interest in African ministries grew. In 1962 he married Maria Rosa Flores: in time they had 3 children. In 1966 he left St. Paul's School.

Bishop Walker's next position was as a Canon at Washington National Cathedral. Along with teaching and preaching he concentrated on urban ministry in the D.C. Metropolitan area. His next career move kept him on the National Cathedral Close, (campus) when he was elected to be Suffragan Bishop for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. The Bishop continued his social justice ministry including serving on boards of social service agencies serving Africa, the National Church, Interfaith ministry and other ministries. In 1976 the Diocesan Bishop announced his retirement and Bishop Walker was elected to be Bishop Coadjutor, (bishop-elect). In 1977 he was installed as the Diocesan Bishop. This action made him the second African American diocesan bishop in The Episcopal Church in the United States.

Bishop Walker held a special place in my life. During his ministry as Cathedral Canon and Suffragan Bishop he visited St Agustin's, D.C. as his second home. That was the same church I attended after my move to D.C. The first time I met Bishop Walker I was a 23-year-old wearing a purple dress and an amethyst ring. The bishop stunned me by genuflecting and kissing my ring while he told me that I looked more like a bishop than he did. There started a warm relationship that continued for the rest of his life. I was among a small group of people he ministered to as if we were members of his congregation. Among my fond memories of Bishop Walker was when he agreed to preside at my father's memorial service right here at St. Mark's, Grand Rapids just a few months before his own death.

Among Bishop Walker's roles while diocesan bishop was also to be the dean of Washington National Cathedral. The Cathedral was only partially finished at the time he was elected bishop and he wanted to see it completed before the unique craftsmen were no longer available to build Gothic cathedrals. He sought to raise the money to

complete the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, aka, Washington National Cathedral.  
As the final stone was being set on one of the towers, Bishop Walker died at a  
nearby hospital.

Judith Claytor