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Chaplains Ministries

The Story of Rear Admiral Byron Black, Chief of U.S. Navy Chaplains

Admiral serves God and country

Pastor: A Baltimore native has traveled a long spiritual path to be appointed chief of the Navy's chaplain corps.

**By John Rivera
Baltimore Sun Staff**

As a young pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist church in Durham, NC, Barry C. Black regularly saw five African-American sailors in the congregation who, he learned, were stationed in Norfolk, VA, and drove five hours to attend worship services.

Incredulous, he approached them and said, "'This is ridiculous -- 10 hours roundtrip to come and hear me preach -- why not go to the chapel and listen to the messages there?' And they said, 'Well, we've never seen a black chaplain.'" "That was what motivated me to enter the Navy," he said. "At least they'd see one."

Nearly a quarter-century after he traded his robes for a uniform, the Baltimore native is now a rear admiral and was installed this month as chief of the Navy's chaplain corps. Black, 51, supervises the 1,350 chaplains who serve the 800,000 active and reserve men and women in the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

As it turns out, he wasn't the first black Navy chaplain -- there were about a half-dozen serving when he joined up in 1976. But he is the first African-American to lead the Navy's chaplain corps.

Black comes from a tradition, Seventh-day Adventist, that is not in the Christian mainstream. It shares attributes with Judaism, such as celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday and following the dietary laws of the Hebrew Scriptures. Most of his predecessors have been from the liturgical churches -- Roman Catholic or mainline Protestant. Black is only the second clergyman to lead the chaplain corps who is from an evangelical, non-liturgical tradition. This has been an issue in the past few years among evangelical Navy chaplains, who have complained of bias by their liturgical, High-Church colleagues.

"For an individual coming from a religious tradition as idiosyncratic as my own, to become a two-star admiral at the top of the heap, that is a tribute to the opportunities available in the military for people of all religious traditions," Black said in his office at the Navy Annex, next to the Pentagon. It has been a long journey to that office for someone who was born in West Baltimore and saw his family's move to a public housing project in Cherry Hill in southern Baltimore as a step up. "Moving to Cherry Hill was like moving upscale," he said. "It was grass and trees, which we were not familiar with."

Black was the fourth of eight children, raised, for all intents and purposes, by a single mother. "Mother was a domestic," he said. "And it was kind of a challenge, because when we were on welfare, she was not supposed to work. The rules at that time, you weren't supposed to have a male adult in the home. "I remember the social worker coming by and looking in the closet to see if there was any adult male clothing. So my father just was not around very often, and when he did come around, he had to dart in and dart out."

Black and his siblings had a second family: the Berea Temple Seventh-day Adventist Church. And they went to school at the church-sponsored Baltimore Junior Academy at Cold Spring Lane and Wabash Avenue. Church and school, he said, "provided a kind of cocoon that protected me from the more corrosive elements of my beloved Cherry Hill."

As a youngster, he showed signs of a precociousness that would take him places. He was a standout at school and a champion orator. He preached his first sermon at age 11.

"As the oldest boy, he had a lot of responsibility," said Black's younger sister, Iris Odinma, who teaches language arts to eighth-graders at Baltimore Junior Academy. "He was always a serious, very peace-loving person. He had outstanding speaking abilities, even as a child. He was always in plays, things like that."

Black attended a Seventh-day Adventist boarding school in Pennsylvania and then enrolled at church-run

Oakwood College in Huntsville, Ala. He recalls being mentored by a psychology professor, Earl Gooding, who later inspired Black to earn a doctorate in the discipline. He also holds a doctorate in ministry.

"I would put him among the three or four most outstanding young students that I came across while I was at Oakwood," said Gooding, now a professor at Alabama A&M University. "I recommended books to him, the great books of Western philosophy. I gave him a whole list of these books, and he just went down the list and read them one after the other."

Even while excelling at secular academics, the idea of ministry beckoned. One of his favorite classes was homiletics, the art of preaching. "He evinced, even at an early age, an ability to articulate ideas and to express himself persuasively," said Mervyn Warren, his homiletics professor. "Even at that time, we expected him to make a contribution to the church, to the nation and to the world."

It was at Oakwood that Black decided that he would take the pulpit permanently.

"When I was in college, I was pre-med, I was pre-law, anything but preaching," he said. "But it finally caught up with me. Around my junior year I finally said, 'OK, I give up.' "I've never wanted to do anything else. It's never had a rival in my affections," Black said. "I ran from it because I knew preachers didn't make much money."

After seminary and ordination, he served as pastor of seven churches, five in South Carolina and two in North Carolina. Eighteen months later, he was made pastor of three churches in North Carolina, including the one in Durham where he encountered the sailors.

Interestingly, the Navy's top chaplain had never intended to make the Navy a career.

"It was the fact that there were people who looked like me and were from my religious tradition whose worship needs were not being met that motivated me to come into the Navy," Black said. Plus, "I wanted to see the world. My wife had just gotten a Ph.D. fellowship to American University, and so I said, 'Look, you do your thing and let me have a little fun.' "I had intended on staying three years and then getting out," he said. "But I discovered that it was like a honeymoon, this is just too good to be true. And it has been a protracted honeymoon for 24 years."

And the Navy, which he calls "a model of pluralism," has caused him to stretch as a minister and as a person.

"Growing up in the inner city, I did not meet a white person face to face, shake hands, until I was 16 years old," Black said. "I never officiated at the wedding of anyone who was not African-American. I never pastored anyone who was not African-American. ..."

"So to enter a setting where I raise my hand and I take an oath to protect the constitutional religious free exercise rights of people, and to facilitate for those who are not from my tradition ... to me it's just a wonderful example of how people from disparate religious traditions and backgrounds can cooperate with one another."

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