

# African-American Deaconess Anna Butler Alexander honored at Georgia Revival

By Archdeacon Carole Maddux

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Yesterday I was in the Diocese of my baptism and birth, The Diocese of Georgia, to represent The Diocese of Atlanta at the celebration of the life and legacy of Deaconess Anna Alexander---the first African-American deacon. It was a great honor to be there (thank you Robert C Wright!) and to meet some of her family and students and to learn about her work. It is truly amazing and humbling to think about her determination to do God's work and mission with love in the midst of so much hate and discouragement. Despite the failures of her church, her country, and the state of Georgia to right the wrongs of racism and slavery, she pressed on to serve her community with faith, love, and dedication educating so many children and leaving us a legacy to learn from. THIS is what being a deacon is all about. Leading where others won't go. Loving like Jesus. Working toward justice.

A "proud Gullah-Geechee" man told me after the service that he thinks the Episcopal Church is the ONLY church that can pull this country together and heal our divisions. He stated, "I can tell the truth because I'm a Baptist!" If that is true, it may be in part due to the unique role deacons play in our church. Trained to work across factions and listen to all. Taught to recognize who is NOT at the table and seek them out. Set apart to be prophetic voice within and outside the church. And to do it all with the love of Jesus and His Gospel as our only authority.

We don't always do it as well as we wish but as there are more and more of us and more holy examples like Deaconess Alexander, we CAN be catalysts for real change. Maybe even the change that man was voicing hope for. I thought about all these things as I whispered my thanks to Presiding Bishop Michael Curry for his words honoring Anna. They were brilliant and inspiring but you knew they would be. What is rarer is the recognition of the need for this work and these deacons. In fact, there were no deacons at all in the altar party. There were very few in attendance. I hope I was not the only one there. As deacons, we need to honor our own. I know that we are all very busy doing the very work that I described above. But we must take time to take rest and inspiration from the shining saints on whose shoulders we stand upon.

As you can see from the pictures, this holy pilgrimage site is in great need of repair and protection. I believe it is our obligation to preserve this for all the deacons to come---the deacons that we will rely on to do the hard work ahead of us. We need to know our history. I am calling upon the Episcopalians of the state of Georgia (both Dioceses!) and deacons everywhere to come together to help the Nobles family raise the money and get the historic designation needed to preserve this holy site. And then we need to celebrate Deaconess Alexander and ALL deacons with regularity and joy!

