

## Emerging Leaders: Rev. Yehiel Curry, Shekinah Chapel

**“As each has received a gift, employ it in serving one another, as good managers of the grace of God in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10**

Shekinah is interpreted as “the glory and presence of God” and Shekinah Chapel in Riverdale, IL is testament that the glory of God is at work with its newly ordained Pastor, Rev. Yehiel Curry. Curry was ordained April 26, 2009 after completing the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Theological Education for Emerging Ministers (TEEM) program. He is currently in the Master of Divinity program at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

From selecting his undergraduate major to his current position, Curry has always been drawn to the “helping” professions and committed to uplifting and mentoring young African-American males. He earned his undergraduate degree in Psychology at Lewis University and is also a certified mental health counselor. With an impressive resume that includes four years as a sixth grade teacher at Doolittle Elementary School on Chicago’s South Side and ten years in the financial service industry, Curry, who also has a financial consulting business as a regional Vice President with Primerica, could easily have been satisfied with his secular life. Why the call to ministry?

“In September of 2005 I had the opportunity to spend time with actor, singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte in Epps, Alabama,” said Curry. “We were talking about leadership and how it was time for the previous generation to pass the baton to the next generation. Sensing that I was struggling with something, he pointed at me and said ‘And *your* generation has to accept the baton.’”

These powerful words from the internationally renowned human rights advocate were the first in a series of catalysts urging the emerging leader to accept his calling. “As soon as my plane landed in Chicago, my phone rang ... and the call changed my life. It was apparent from the phone call that changes were needed to be made at Shekinah Chapel and that members of the congregation were depending on me for leadership. I reflected on Mr. Belafonte’s challenge to me and began to discern my call to ministry. “

“I ignored the call for a long time because I felt unprepared and unworthy,” he admitted. “I could not imagine that God was calling me. I had been working with the members of Shekinah Chapel for about nine years at this point, trying to build a church. I was afraid that the members would reject me.”

The Chapel originated in 1992 as a SIMBA (“Safe in Our Brother’s Arms”) camp for African-American males. After partnering with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to create an aftercare program, by 1995 the program evolved into Sekinah Chapel and celebrated its first worship service. Before its current location in Riverdale, IL the Chapel was housed at St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Chicago. In addition to the SIMBA program, there is also SIMSA (“Safe in My Sister’s Arms”) and LaShonda Curry the pastor’s wife of 14-years is one of the founders. They met while attending Lewis College and she was the first to join Shekinah Chapel. The couple is committed to engaging people aged 18-35 in worship.

“Almost without hesitation he stepped up and started his journey to the altar. We are forever thankful and grateful for him and his wonderful wife who is also very active in the ministry,” said Gaylord Thomas, Director for Africa Continental Desk/Program Director for East Africa Global Mission, ELCA, who has known Curry for 14 years and is one of his many mentors.

Another mentor, Rev. Lawrence Clark, Pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL has known Curry for over a decade. They developed their relationship when Clark was Assistant to Bishop Paul Landahl. “He is committed to young people as a volunteer, counselor and mentor. Pastor Yehiel is a prayerful and concerned leader under development and one of the up-and-coming pastors. He is a ‘Joshua’ and a well sought out speaker and workshop leader.”

The father of three daughters, Shemiah, Ashirah and Shekinah – who was named after the ministry – has acknowledged he recognized his younger self in the youth involved in the SIMBA program and that in saving disaffected youths he saved himself. “We provide monthly sessions for our youth that engages them in relationship building, self-esteem and self-image, African culture and spirituality,” said Curry. “These monthly sessions are an extension of the annual SIMBA and SIMSA camp experiences. We provide a safe space for our youth to express their real situations, good, bad and indifferent. We give them foundations that will help them in dealing with the things they face in a productive and positive way.”

Thomas believes Curry’s “natural spirit to serve and reach out to the young people trying to find their way was a perfect match for our SIMBA program.” Curry became very dedicated and

committed to the ministry and as a leader in SIMBA. “In many ways I consider Yehiel to be my successor; it gives me great relief and good favor to know we have built an organization that can recreate and sustain itself through time.”

The TEEM graduate acknowledges those who assisted in his journey. “I have been blessed to have been mentored by many within the church.” In addition to Rev. Lawrence Clark and Gaylord Thomas, his mentors include Rev. Booker Vance, Jerome Dabney, Venice Williams and the Rev. Dr. Wyvetta Bullock, Executive for Administration, Office of the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. “When I first began to discern my call to ministry I contacted Wyvetta who helped me develop a more personal relationship with her pastor Rev. Maxine Washington,” said Curry.

“Pastor Yahiel Curry is a gifted, committed young leader. He brings passion and compassion to ministry,” said Bullock. “I have observed him grow and develop over the years into solid pastoral leadership. I have had the privilege of working with his congregation in the areas of discipleship and leadership. Pastor Curry’s commitment to developing and equipping leaders is evident and is resulting in strong lay leaders at Shekinah. His work with the SIMBA Circle is sign of his compassion for youth and determination to make a difference in the lives of young people.”

Mentors outside of the ELCA include Shedrick Sanders, Dr. Lewis Dodley and Father Michael Pflieger. “Through my involvement with SIMBA I met Elders Shedrick Sanders, Dr. Dodley, and Venice Williams. I accompanied Gaylord to a dinner in 2006 with Mr. Harry Belafonte. Mr. Belafonte was interested in working with youth in Chicago and had reached out to SIMBA

and his old friend Father Michael Pflieger. Over the years my work and friendship with Father Pflieger has increased. “

The church incorporates African traditions into worship, for example libations for ancestors, manhood and womanhood ceremonies. There is also an emphasis on worship through creative expression. The Chapel reaches out to youth through its Poetry Ministry and Spiritual Expressions Dance Ministry. Curry recently co-wrote, *The Struggle Is Not Over*, a play that was performed at the Chapel, with proceeds supporting the SIMBA and SIMSA Ministries.

“Yehiel has great character and embraces a healthy set of values,” said Thomas “I know my life is better because of him, and I thank God everyday for his great works and witness.”

--- **By Kimberley Berry**