

GoodNews

Artist At Work

From The Black Panther Party to Pastor

By Barbara Fluhrer

The Rev. Gayle Dickson, once known as Asali, wrote for the Black Panther Party Newspaper, "Intercommunal News" in the '70s, while teaching preschool. She attended seminary at San Francisco Theological School in San Anselmo and in 1998 she became the pastor of South Berkeley Community Church, United Church of Christ.

She also ministers through her art as illustrated in an 8'x 4' painting, "Love Lifted Me," which graces the sanctuary in which she preaches every Sunday at 11 a.m. Rev. Dickson also presently works at the Sister Thea Bowman Senior Residence - "My day job," she said with a smile.

In the early '70s she used her art "as a political tool to encourage people to recognize our social conditions and support programs against poverty." Her drawings appeared in the Black Panther Party newspaper for six years after which she felt her "creative expression was waning and my soul was dying." She believed that many of the programs she'd been involved with were only treating the symptoms of poverty while political conditions were deteriorating.

At that juncture of her life she was involved in a serious automobile accident, and was saved only by "the jaws of life." She said she "crashed literally and figuratively." Confused and weary, indifferent to the church and God, she struggled to recover her life



The Rev. Gayle Dixon, pastor of South Berkeley Community Church, also ministers through art. Here she displays one of her paintings.

Photo by Barbara Fluhrer

and realize, "God was making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert of my soul." Though baptized at 14, she said, it wasn't until her second "Baptism" in 1976, that she could say she believed in God. "I rediscovered church and the sacraments; and learned there were church denominations other than Baptist and Methodist."

After three years of conva-

she began to search. She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree. She said that while in school, "My need to rediscover the traditions of my religious heritage came clear." "Because my Mother had always questioned and critiqued the stories, myths, ethics and values of these traditions, they were not part of my social and spiritual life."

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Church as a child and I heard Leontyne Price sing. When I was 7-11, a little girl up the street took me to church nearly every Sunday." These influences caused her to become "hooked" on the sacraments and gospel singing. Later she heard the Rev. Ben Chavis preach and was deeply impressed, continuing to search, attending different churches.

Finally she remembers her calling. "I heard someone call 'Rev. Gayle.' In my mind's eye I saw a pair of legs in trousers standing next to my bed. When I opened my eyes and turned over there was no one there. I immediately thought one of my children was playing with me. Then finally I was on a ski trip in my hotel reading...and it was quiet. Suddenly I heard a voice, 'Can you hear me now?' I answered, this time."

Rev. Dickson has used her paintings and drawings as well as her preaching to tell others of God as revealed in the Bible. "All people have a story to tell and all people have a voice. Sometimes when our voices have been suppressed for so long, we forget what it sounds like when our mouth opens. The Bible helps us find our voice."

As she shepherds her flock at The South Berkeley Community Church the members lead one to realize that indeed the Rev. Gayle Dickson "found a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert," and is now helping others to find their way.