

The Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin outside her home in Hackney, England. The first woman and the first person of color to serve as chaplain to the queen and in the House of Commons moves between those rarefied worlds and that of the poverty- and crime-ridden parish in East London that she continues to run.

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Parliament in London is an old-fashioned place. When members gather in the House of Commons, the sea of faces is generally wrinkled, white and male.

The chaplain who leads them each day in prayer is emphatically not.

The Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin is the first black woman to serve as chaplain to the speaker in the House of Commons. She broke the same barrier when she was appointed chaplain to Queen Elizabeth II. She was also the first woman, and the first person of color, to run her parish in Northeast London.

She currently juggles all three of those roles, shuttling back and forth between the poor, diverse communities of her churches and the magnificent, rarefied worlds of Westminster and Buckingham Palace. It has been a long journey for the girl who was raised in poverty by her aunt on the shores of Montego Bay, Jamaica.

"I didn't grow up feeling sorry for myself and thinking, 'Oh, gosh, I'm poor,' " Hudson-Wilkin, 53, said in an interview. "Because that was the life of everyone around you. When a dice has been thrown and that is your life, you learn to live with your life. You grow from it."

Now she tries to impart that message to her parishioners.

Preaching In A Poor Neighborhood

Her church in the neighborhood of Dalston is surrounded by housing projects. There is violence in this community, and there are gangs. There is also passionate worship. On a recent Sunday morning, the congregation sang out in call and response, a Peruvian melody for a traditional Christian prayer.

Gwen Gutzmore remembers interviewing "Reverend Rose," as she's known, for the job

in 1998. It was just a few years after the Church of England began to allow female priests.

"There were members within this same congregation who didn't want a woman priest," says Gutzmore. "It took some time, but they came around."

Eileen Skarrett, a church warden, arrived in Dalston in 2001.

"When I got invited to the church, it was a black minister," Skarrett says with a laugh. "I was much surprised." She has been a regular ever since.

Many of the voices in these pews have the lilting cadence of the Caribbean. The Rev. Hudson-Wilkin said a prayer in front of a very different-looking congregation last year, at the funeral for former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

At St. Paul's Cathedral, she led some of Britain's most powerful men and women in solemn prayer.



The Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin (center) walks in front of Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron and other lawmakers from the House of Commons through the central lobby toward the House of Lords for the state opening of Parliament, on May 8, 2013.

WPA Pool/Getty Images

"The days of man are but as grass, for he flourisheth as a flower of the field," she intoned. "For as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone."

Living In Different Worlds

Hudson-Wilkin first arrived in the United Kingdom for training as a lay evangelist. She returned to live in 1985, and has been a chaplain to the queen for 15 years. In 2010, she was appointed chaplain to the House of Commons. Almost no one else in the Church of England straddles these different worlds in such a high-profile way.

In each sphere, she tries to pull people out of their bubbles and help them see the larger world. She gives the queen and members of Parliament a glimpse of those who struggle to get by.



Hudson-Wilkin speaks at a celebration of the life of Nelson Mandela held at the House of Commons on Dec. 12, 2013.

Stuart C. Wilson/PA Photos /Landov

"As I meet with them, I reflect back to them the impact of policies on people in an area

like this," Hudson-Wilkin explained.

And in minority communities, she delivers messages that she doesn't hear from white clergy. Hudson-Wilkin remembers staring down mourners at a funeral for a young man who was stabbed to death.

You all riot when police kill a black man, she told them.

"And yet in the last 10 years, we have killed — we have killed in our community — over 300," she continued. "What are you saying about the value of life?"

Hudson-Wilkin celebrates her uniqueness. On a popular radio program called "Desert Island Discs," she said the songs she would like to be stranded with include Harry Belafonte's "Island in the Sun," and another old Caribbean classic, the Calypso song "Hot Hot Hot."

"I just absolutely love Calypso," she gushed on the BBC show, "and this one in particular, wherever I am, if I heard it, then I've just got to dance."

The Church of England's leadership has been slow to reflect its members' diversity.

"Only around 2 percent of clergy come from ethnic minorities," says Michael Ledger-Lomas, a lecturer at King's College in London who studies Christianity. "About 20 percent of all worshippers within London, for instance, belong to ethnic minorities. So I think there's no question that there's a demonstration effect."

But Hudson-Wilkin is not content to be a demonstration, or a figurehead. She is now actively pushing the Church of England to ordain female bishops. Some say it could happen this year.

When asked if she thinks it likely, Rose Hudson-Wilkin replies: "I believe in miracles."

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