

Committed to Community



Rev. Dr. Valerie Oliver-Durrah is Called to Serve

By Glenda Cadogan



In an October 2014 article in this magazine, Rev. Dr. Valerie Oliver-Durrah, president and chief executive officer of the Neighborhood Technical Assistance Clinic (NTAC), talked about being “called to serve.” At that time, she had no idea how much that declaration would change her life.

“Since the article I have seen a shift in my work toward more engagement with faith communities focusing on results rather than activities,” she revealed in a recent conversation.

Through NTAC, Dr. Durrah has been involved with helping community-based non-profit organizations for the past 30 years. “The article made me realize the importance of helping clergy women create community change,” she continued. “So I now have more of a heart for serving, working with, and empowering women who are senior pastors in their churches.”

NTAC, founded by Durrah, serves the needs of philanthropic individuals and organizations in its efforts to develop, support, and maintain effective community-based and faith-based programs. The Brooklyn-based organization also serves non-profits wishing to improve programs and organizational capacity for addressing the needs of low-income and service-starved neighborhoods.

As a result of NTAC’s refocused direction, Durrah recently published *Lead Me: Guide Me: Capacity Building Resource Guide*, a self-help manual designed to assist clergy women who are interested in engaging in nonprofit work. The guidebook provides important information on everything from nonprofit incorporation guidelines for New York State, tax exemption instruction, board development tips, 20 biggest fundraising mistakes, and scriptural evidence confirming the need for community service, volunteer work, and women helping in the community.

Also instructive toward her new direction was earning her doctoral degree from New York Theological Seminary. Her dissertation, which focused on women and girls empowerment, was the first spark. “In my research, I found out there were not too many churches that had serious in-depth programs for girls,” Dr. Durrah explained. “I had the notion that there needed to be more women as senior pastors, which would allow for the creation of lots more programs for women and girls. I also discovered that whether a church had a nonprofit or not, very few had a 501c3 status. The fact is that it is very difficult to create community change if you do not have an affiliate nonprofit organization.”

Durrah says after 30 years of community-based work, she is now more enthused with transforming lives rather than providing a service. “One service provided by a nonprofit is not enough,” she explained. “So instead of focusing on filling a room with people for a workshop—many of whom I may never see again—I would rather work with those who are serious about impacting the lives of the people they serve. There seems to be a serious lack of services in black churches, so we are competing with the plate when we ask the church to do new programming in the community. By creating non-profit organizations, churches can then have the capacity to do fundraising to fund these new programs.”

Since its first soft publication, praises have rolled in from across the country for Dr. Durrah’s resource guide book. Rev. Dr. Kanyere Eaton, senior pastor at Fellowship Covenant Church, had this to say: “What a valuable resource! When I was new to my church’s community, this easy-to-use guide to the institutions, services, and officials in my neighborhood helped me. Every church needs a resource book like this.”

Adding to the chorus of voices was Rev. Marva D. Usher-Kerr, senior pastor at Tremont United Methodist Church: “The self-help book was extremely useful because it challenged you to become more familiar with your own neighborhood. There is even a neighborhood checklist in the guide that encourages you to know the key resources and leaders in your local community. This reminder is helpful because it brings attention to what we often take for granted, but usually do not know.”

It is said the reward for a job well done is more work. If so, then not only has Dr. Durrah’s past 30 years of work been exceptionally done; she is just getting started. ■