The Right Reverend Bennett J. Sims, ’49

Bishop Sims, who was living in Hendersonville, North Carolina, at the time of his death, was born August 9, 1920 in Greenfield, Massachusetts, to Lewis Raymond Sims and Sarah Cosette. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1943 from Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, and an L.H.D. in 1985. He earned his Masters in Divinity degree from VTS in 1949, and was later awarded the D.D. in 1966. He was a Harvard Fellow from 1964-1965 and studied systematic theology at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. from 1969-1971.

He was ordained a deacon on June 3, 1949 by Maryland Bishop Noble C. Powell. Powell ordained Sims to the priesthood on April 15, 1950.

Sims married Beatrice Wimberly on September 24, 1943, and they had three children: Laura Scott, Grayson Bennett, and David Lewis. He married Mary Page Welborn on August 25, 1988.

Bennett began a curacy at the Church of the Redeemer, Baltimore, Maryland, in 1949 and two years later became its rector, serving for eleven years. In 1962 and 1969, he served as priest-in-charge of St. Alban’s Church, Tokyo, Japan. For two years, he was rector of Christ Church, Corning, New York. From 1966-1972, he was director of the continuing education department at VTS. In 1972, he was elected bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta, a post he held until his retirement in 1984. While in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1980-1988, Sims held a visiting professorship at Candler Seminary, Emory University, Atlanta.

During his episcopate, Sims struggled with the theological implications of the rising divorce rate - both among the laity and the clergy. He spoke of his own preference for the life-long integrity of the marriage vows. In 1979, he again re-affirmed his feelings in a cover article for the April issue of the diocesan newspaper. "So strong is the Church’s commitment to lifelong marriage and so deep our belief in the empowering grace of God that our marriage canons require all of us, clergy and laity alike, to seek the reconciling ministry of the Church when marriage is seriously imperiled," he wrote. "No one may justly seek permission to remarry in the Church who has not done the utmost in reliance upon the Church’s mystery of reconciliation."

His struggle would eventually find him entering a second marriage nine years later, and as he expressed in an open letter to the diocesan clergy, an experience of forgiveness, healing, and grace than any he had ever known before.

Sims also changed his mind about same-gender unions, writing in 1999 that "We will [eventually] favour same-sex unions that protect the same Christian sexual ethics that apply to conventional marriage."

He founded the Institute for Servant Leadership, based in Hendersonville, after his retirement. In 2004 Sims told Episcopal Life that his goal in establishing the institute was to seek an alternative to the top-down, authoritarian style of leadership that he saw governing the workplace, civic institutions and the church. Sims envisioned an alternative model, a
collaborative model that would hold up the leader as servant, the model provided by Jesus Christ.

"We have lived for 5,000 or 6,000 years under the aegis of power as dominance," Sims said. "Power is better understood as partnership or servanthood. It’s when you feel powerless that you lie and cheat."

Sims said that during his time on the boards of two corporations he has seen changes "where leadership moves from fear to care and affiliation, from power over to power with. It takes time, but when it happens it's a wonderful thing to behold."

Sims wrote a number of books, including "Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millennium" and his most recent in 2004, "Why Bush Must Go: A Bishop's Faith-Based Challenge."

Three services are planned for Sims, beginning with one on July 22 at 2:00 p.m. at St. James Episcopal Church in Hendersonville. Interment of ashes will follow at St. Francis Chapel at Kanuga. The Diocese of Atlanta will remember Sims on July 29 at 2:00 p.m. at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, Georgia. A service is also planned for August 5 at 2:00 p.m. at Church of the Redeemer, Baltimore, Maryland.

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