Powerfully and painfully the dancer anguished the birth story of the Savior of the world. In laboring and birthing movements unimaginable except in the artist’s eye—in this case, the black artist—choreographing a black Mary leaping and lowering movement after movement in bringing forth the story called Black Nativity. More than the eye even, the imagination courses through the artist’s blood. This drama was gospel, both biblically and culturally.

Fifteen years later and that eight-, 10-, 12-minute dance is burnt into my memory of this famous Christmas drama written, produced, and staged by the black Christian community in Boston. And when I feel the ache resultant from another story of racial prejudice, so regularly subtle, and sometimes not at all subtle, my mind goes back to this scene.

For only a Black person, or a Latino person, or a Native American person, or someone who from the outside looks like “one of them,” could write a scene of struggle so poignant. The struggle of a people laboring for the coming of justice so long denied know from the inside out the pangs of birth. And unfortunately they also know from the inside out the work of justice that so often ends up miscarried or aborted.

The recent morass of voting irregularities in Florida sends the woman dancing in anguish again. The stories of racial profiling by the State Police in New Jersey screams out the reality that every Black person knows, namely that profiling is more the norm than the exception. Prejudice and discrimination abound, beginning with something as simple as color.

February is Black History Month. Such a remembrance occasions an opportunity for all of us to look at our attitudes, our experiences, and in the light of the truth that most of us in the NACC are of the so-called “dominant culture,” our sins, either of commission or omission. The truth is that we are terribly white, and the people that we serve are quite diverse.

We have known for years that the fastest growing minority group in this country is Latino, and at least historically, this group is predominantly Catholic. But how many Latinos are certified chaplains? Though the percentage of Black Catholics is relatively small in the wide expanse of the American experience, there are
Black Catholic Churches all over the country. And how many Black persons are certified chaplains?

In Milwaukee, for example, there is a Native American parish, Great Spirit, and so the question emerges, do we have any candidates who could carry on the ministry of healing from the Native American community who could serve their sisters and brothers as certified chaplains?

And especially on the West Coast, though not exclusively, how many Asian Americans are certified chaplains?

Several years ago we attempted at a national meeting to bring racial and ethnic minorities together to invite them to help us (the leadership) to understand how we might become a more diverse organization. About a dozen of us gathered for breakfast, and I remember initiating the discussion by asking the half who are minority persons to work with this question.

Within minutes the “dominant culture,” well, dominated! I struggled to get control by returning the question to the minority folk, but within minutes the same dynamic took hold. I was so frustrated. So I sat quietly until the end of the meeting, and then the CPE supervisor in me lifted the group dynamic for all to see.

What followed was fascinating! The White folk were astounded as evidenced in their puzzled looks and hanging jaws. The Black and Latino folk smiled. They knew the dynamic for they live it day in and day out. So many of us in the dominant culture do not realize that there are two cultures—at least—and that we seesaw on the upper end. And then if you mix gender, sexual orientation, disability—well, then we have “dominant” dominant cultures and “minority” minority cultures.

As the quickly ignited furor in Florida and New Jersey amply demonstrates, racism, prejudice, and discrimination are very much present in the American experience as we enter into this new millennium. And worse is the contention of some individuals that this is all a hoax; that in fact if you work hard enough and long enough every one has an equal chance. Not so.

I remember the rage I felt as a priest in the Black community in Boston when I tried to get a cable company to hook up the television of a severely disabled man. The man had an extremely high, squeaky voice and every time he called the cable company they hung up on him thinking he was a prankster. When I called I got the runaround and by the seventh or eighth person I was fuming. I was finally told
that they could not hook him up to cable because he was in a "low frequency" area. Roxbury (Black community) was low frequency; Jamaica Plain (across the street) was—I guess—"high frequency." The truth was that the cable company had redlined Roxbury and would not service the area because "they" lived there.

So our work, society, Church, and the NACC, lies before us in leveling the field of cultures.

We are at an exciting juncture in the NACC where I believe we will have some of the resources to lift out and empower a more culturally diverse association of professional chaplains and CPE supervisors. We have a new Board with some extraordinarily gifted people who bring skills that a board of chaplains and CPE supervisors just don’t possess. We will be employing two full-time staff focused on education and professional practice that can work with me and the board in trying to realize a long desired goal of not only the NACC, but the Church at large.

Some of the questions that occur to me are as follows. How do we identify just how diverse the NACC is at this present time? How do we go to the minority persons in our association and ask for their help and leadership in this regard? How do we recruit candidates from racial and cultural minority groups? How do we get the funding to assist in educating and training candidates who so often come from economically impoverished communities? How do we set realistic goals and measures if this in fact is a value that we hold dear?

ACPE is an example of an organization that has worked successfully in cultivating a more racially and ethnically diverse membership. Here lies a wonderful opportunity for collaboration with our sister organization in the give and take of learning from one another.

Black History Month is a time of remembrance. But remembrance is perhaps best understood in the context of the "source and summit" of our life together in the Church at Eucharist. Jesus’ understanding of remembrance—"do this in memory of me"—is not something that is in the nostalgic past, but rather in the real presence of the present.

The woman still dances the birthing of the Savior of the World, as only a Black woman can.