

The Reverend Deacon Theorplis Marzetta Borden, affectionately called “Top”, was born on January 27, 1934. She was delivered by her grandmother at the family home in Bessemer, Alabama to two young and ambitious parents, Fanella M. Smith (nee Miliken) and Israel A. Smith. She was the first of two daughters. Her sister Robbie A. Johnson was born two years later.

The young Smith family followed The Great Migration North for better opportunity and more freedom. They settled in Lincoln Heights, Ohio in 1940. Top’s early childhood education was at the tutelage of her mother who taught her in kindergarten and first grade in a one-room schoolhouse in Bessemer, Alabama. In Lincoln Heights she attended St. Simon’s School, a ministry of the Sisters of the Transfiguration, and South Woodlawn School (currently Lincoln Heights Elementary School). She worshiped with her family at St. Simon of Cyrene Episcopal Church, one of the diocese’s historically Black congregations. She was formed spiritually by her parents, grandparents, godparents, and the Sisters of the Transfiguration at St. Simon’s School.

Top graduated from Wyoming High School in Wyoming, Ohio in 1951 and went on to undergraduate study. She first enrolled at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio then transferred to Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, where she studied Business Education and Speech Pathology, respectively. At Indiana University, she met her late husband Nathaniel Borden (d. 1992), who became a professional football player, beginning his NFL career playing for the Green Bay Packers. Top, and in later years her three children, Stephen, Cheryl and Robert, enthusiastically cheered for the Green Bay Packers her whole life.

Deacon Top’s extensive career includes eucharistic minister, organist and choir director at St. Simon’s for over 25 years. Top also had a robust secular career working at various organizations including Ohio Mental Health Services, Princeton City Schools, West End Health Center, Applause Magazine, Xerox Corporation, Lincoln Heights Health Center, and the Union of Black Episcopalians. Top touched many lives in her professional career, and many more in her spiritual calling.

She was encouraged by her former priest, The Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry, to seek ordination. Deacon Top earned her theological degree from Kentucky’s Episcopal Theological Seminary and was ordained on May 4, 1991, becoming the first Black woman to be ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio. She volunteered as a team member for Diocesan Cursillo retreats, served on the Diocese of Southern Ohio Budget, Evangelism and Personnel Committees, the National and World Mission Commissions, the Board of Examining Chaplains and the Committee for the Diaconate. She was appointed chaplain to the Southern Ohio Lay Leadership Institute (SOLL) and subsequently to the retired clergy of the diocese.

Michael B. Curry, the 27th Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church, invited her to serve as Deacon of the Table at his consecration in 2015 at the National Cathedral. Top’s missionary work took her throughout the world honoring God through service and learning in Nigeria, a remote village in Alaska, El Salvador, and community projects in Appalachia. One of Top’s favorite projects was her prison ministry. She cherished spreading the knowledge and love of God through home baked cookies, prayers and companionship with the women incarcerated at the Ohio Reformatory for Women.

Truly a servant leader, Top responded to the injustices of the world with an open heart. She encouraged her parishioners to contribute to solutions to community suffering. This included writing letters to encourage the Ohio Legislature to close gaps in Medicaid coverage for uninsured children, and volunteering to read to children in the waiting room at the Lincoln Heights Health Center to nurture their love of books. Top helped launch the parish's prayer shawl ministry and faithfully ministered to the sick and shut in. Top also found connection in the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross and the Transfiguration Spirituality Center.

Top served as deacon with three parishes - Trinity Episcopal Church in Hamilton, Ohio for three years, Ascension and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Wyoming, Ohio for fifteen years, and St. Simon of Cyrene Episcopal Church in Lincoln Heights, Ohio, where she celebrated her retirement from active ministry in February 2025. Top was known for her powerful, sonorous proclamation of God's word through His holy Gospel. Top was a woman of the Word, and lived out her call in public and private ways.

Top deeply loved her family. She invited all she knew- for a moment, or a lifetime- to "join in her joy." She derived great joy from knitting, playing the organ and piano, tending her garden, travelling throughout the world (Italy, Paris, London, the Holy Land, India, South Africa, China- the list goes on). She loved spending hours over a hot stove preparing a meal full of love for her family as well as any friend who happened along. She also loved watching football and would cheer on her beloved Green Bay Packers with gusto! She watched Jeopardy daily and enjoyed Family Feud, reading, sitting outside in the peace of her beautiful yard, and had immense fondness for Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the rest of the PEANUTS gang. She greeted those she knew and loved with open arms, a gentle listening ear, a yummy plate of food, and a graceful word of wisdom.

In recognition of her 33 years of service to the Diocese of Southern Ohio, The Deacon Theorplis M. Borden Scholarship Fund was established in her honor in 2024. The fund supports minority students pursuing higher education; seminary students, students pursuing higher education in music and funding for student Christian missionary trips.

It was her prayer that her life and teaching would show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself. "You, LORD, are all I have, and you give me all I need; my future is in your hands." These words from Psalm 16 Verse 5 have been the guiding force in Top's spiritual journey and they carry her home to rest in God's eternal love.

She is survived by her sister, Dr. Robbie A. Johnson (Henry Johnson), three children, Stephen Keith Borden, Cheryl Anne Borden-Thomas, and Robert Aldon Borden, four grandchildren, Jonathan Keith Borden, Martina Patrice Beckum, Dawn Janeen Padilla (Meshach Padilla) and Dana LeAnne Thomas, and one great-grandchild, Xander James Borden Graham. Theorplis was blessed with numerous other nieces, nephews, great nieces, godchildren, revered associates, cherished friends, communities and church families who she held dear in her heart until the very end.

*"GO IN PEACE TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD."*