

Why We Need A Black History Month

By Forrest C. Stith, Bishop retired

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Retired

Following the Emancipation of enslaved people, there were many attempts to tell the story of persons of African descent in the United States of America, some negative and some positive. It was an African American history teacher, Carter G. Woodson, who perceived that the only books written, and the only courses taught about American history distorted the story of African Americans. In 1915, he created an organization called the National Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The outgrowth of this organization was the first Negro History Week on February 7, 1926, which evolved into a Black History month, recognized by the governments of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and others. The purposes have always been to learn, share and celebrate the unique story of African Americans. But that was then, and this is now. Why, then, do we continue to need a month almost one hundred years later? I suggest there are at least three reasons.

SEEKING AN IDENTITY FOR A MINORITY IN A MAJORITY WORLD

*“ Fear not: for I have redeemed you, I have called you
by your name; you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1*

First, African Americans need to have their identity strengthened. The prophet, Isaiah, about six hundred years before Jesus Christ, was struggling for a word to a once proud people who had just experienced exile from their beloved Jerusalem and were searching for identity. His words are to assure the people that, regardless of the sophisticated culture, and progressive society of which they had experienced, their ultimate identity was that God had chosen them. That was their comfort and assurance.

In a similar vein, African descendants in America were exiled from their sophisticated culture, family, religion and way of life. They searched for a

new identity in a strange land. However, unlike the Hebrews, there were several dilemmas that made identity difficult. The enslavers in America forbade any symbols or practices of their former life. Forbidden was their language, their DRUM, Traditional Religion, family, and tribal traditions. The Black poet of a hundred years ago, Langston Hughes put it this way: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore - and then run?” The dream is comparable to identity and identity is tied inextricably in the STORY, or history. Black History month affords an opportunity to tell the story.

My first nine and a half years of school occurred in segregated schools in Kansas, Virginia and Maryland, a result of a father who was an itinerant Methodist pastor, and then an Army Chaplain. My memory is a combination of the oppression and anxiety of segregation on one hand and the undergirding and sense of identity on the other. By the third grade I had learned what we called the Negro National Anthem, written by James Weldon Johnson (Lift Every Voice And Sing), which followed the American National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance. The principal and my teacher drilled into each of us that we were persons of worth and if we worked hard, integration would one day occur. I still remember my third, fourth and fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Campbell, challenging me by saying, “Chris, the Negro race is depending on you.” Wow! What a burden!!! I then proceeded to attend a high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, the University of Nebraska, Drew Theological Seminary, all of which were 90 per cent White, and then served a Black Church in the all-White Baltimore Conference as the only ordained Black clergy for seven years. Amidst the joys and sorrows, ups and downs, I prevailed as a result of knowing who I was and whose I was. I never lost the underpinnings of family, community and church. “My soul was and is anchored in the Lord.”

Woodson was right. We need a positive “story” amidst an intentional false history promulgated over a hundred years ago and still present today. Black History month provides an opportunity for an oppressed people to “set the record straight” on American history, for Black people to gain a sense of identity and self-worth, and for the rest of America to know the truth, “so that the truth can set us all free.” Without making comparisons, all oppressed groups have had to find ways to retell their story, like the Jewish people who after the Nazi propaganda machine rolled out a false negative Jewish image throughout Europe to justify murder and persecution, the Jewish remnant has focused on correcting the story of Adolph Hitler and Nazi atrocities. African Americans need to

remember “how we got over” amidst the pain and suffering, past and present, by telling the stories of perseverance and triumph.

This is one of the reasons some of us have worked so hard over the last 20 years to create and sustain the African American Methodist Heritage Center, whose purpose has been to promote, restore, collect, and retell the stories and personalities of African Americans in Methodism. We further believe that strengthening and developing congregations require leadership who possess a sense of identity and believe in the possibilities of the Christian faith, as well as Methodism.

The irony is, that Black Methodism was the strongest and most vital when segregation, discrimination and limited resources were available. During the era of the Central Jurisdiction, most Black churches were situated in all black neighborhoods, with segregated schools, limited resources and opportunities. Clergy tended to come out of parsonages and Sunday schools and youth groups were committed to the local church and Methodism. The segregated neighborhoods featured a strong sense of unity, undergirded in schools and organizations, with the church as the center, and God as the ultimate source of identity. The struggle today is how to find identity and a common purpose amidst so called integration and/or incomplete inclusion. Any confusion around identity hampers growth. Further, the vestiges of the horrendous experience in slavery, continues to adversely affect Black people after a hundred years of segregation, discrimination, lynchings, and intentional inequality. In such a negative setting, the key to survival was developing a positive sense of identity primarily through learning their history and leaning upon the God who “called them by name.”

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE STORY

There is an African proverb that states *“Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”*

The second reason we need a Black History month is to make sure the story is accurate. Indeed, the insidious racism and much of the current strife in our country and world makes no sense unless one knows history. The assumptions of some Black scholars, that all the ills of America society can be traced back to 1619 and the arrival of the first slave to America, may be difficult to prove, but we can trace back attitudes and assumptions held by much of white America to slavery.

From the very beginning of slavery, the proponents of slavery struggled with ways and means to justify the immoral institution of enslavement of another human being. The propaganda effort existed in both the north and south. The two major underpinnings or justification were theological and scientific. Although debunked a hundred years ago, these foundation points still permeate the minds and hearts of many in America.

Some preachers and so-called theologians utilized Biblical proof-texting to find passages that might indicate persons of African descent were inferior, and not included as God's chosen people. The Genesis story of the Curse of Ham, exiled south towards Africa, was an indication of God's supposed rejection of people of color. (Gen 9:22-29). Paul's statement that slaves need to be obedient to their masters (Ephesians 6:5) was seized upon, forgetting that Paul also said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28). Further, the book of Acts is replete with stories proclaiming that Jesus Christ and salvation is for every nation, every gender, and every race. *"God so loved the (whole) world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes shall be saved"* (John 3:16).

The good news is that there were some white missionaries and people of faith who knew and shared the true Bible story. Thus, the enslaved persons understood that they were chosen by God, as they sang such spirituals as "Go Down Moses, way down in Egypt, and tell old Pharoah, to let my people go" or "Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart."

The other justification of enslavement came from pseudo scientists or so called medical experts who through cursory examinations of the physiology of the enslaved, assumed that any differences had to indicate inferiority or superiority. It is unfortunate those scientists did not live long enough to see the fruits of modern-day science. Archaeologists and Anthropologists have uncovered physical evidence that homo sapiens actually began in northeast Africa over a million years ago, and what we now call human beings, migrated from the same clime to Europe and Asia, and over centuries, what we now call racial differences evolved to adapt to other environments. Or that genetic research has revealed that most of the DNA material in human beings is uniquely the same for all human beings, and that the only DNA differences account for height, unique skills in arts, music, sports intelligence, pigmentation, hair color and texture, etc. But behold, we all share over 90 percent of the same DNA. So,

whether it is in God's great plan, or Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, minor differences evolved for survival. Therefore, Black History month and a valid American history must affirm our common heritage.

Abraham Lincoln argued for emancipation using Euclid, the ancient Greek mathematician's theory that "if two objects are equal to a third object, then they are equal to each other." Therefore, all of human beings are equal. Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, under the plan of Abraham Lincoln, the goal was not just to free enslaved people but to give them full equality, which was legalized by the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Yet, after Lincoln's death, his successor, Andrew Johnson was supportive of White southerners by restoring property (except for slaves) and granting pardons to all Confederate crimes. His leniency opened the door to many cruel practices by whites, including Jim Crow, the formation of the Ku Klux Klan, the squashing of voting rights for former enslaved people, Sundown laws, and constant intimidation.

It was during this post reconstruction interval that the southern states began to rewrite history, depicting the defeat of the Confederacy as the "Lost Cause" (that needed to be restored); slavery as a benevolent and necessary institution, and African Americans as children who benefited from oversight and limitations. The Daughters of the Confederacy and other post war organizations became key entities that raised funds, hired historians to rewrite history and architects to build monuments and statues, name roads and buildings after Confederate leaders across the south, celebrating those who fought for "states' rights" (without admitting that the primary rights of states was the maintenance of slavery). This re-write of history also undergirded physical oppression including lynching as a common practice of intimidation. James Cone, in his book, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," suggests "the image of the cross standing beside the lynching tree are two symbols arising out of the same horror, vented both on God and other people. The cross and lynching tree shed light upon each other. Both proclaim that cruelty and death will never have the final word."

The "Big Lie" of inferiority of those of African descent was said over and over again, through every communication method, (films, dramas, shows, newspapers, fraternal meetings, etc.) until it was accepted or at least stayed in the subconscious of most Americans. If you read an American History text book written before 1960, it probably says very little about the accomplishments of

Black inventors, scientists, writers, legislators, professionals, preachers, etc. and very little of the cruelty of slavery and later denigration through segregation and discrimination. Another example that perpetuates the Big Lie of southern culture and history is the film “Gone with the Wind.”

This false history justified horrendous actions such as angry White mobs who destroyed Black businesses and chased Black residents out of the towns of Wilmington, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and other places to “keep the Negro in their place.” There were also a number of race riots in cities across the country in the early 1900’s resulting in the death of thousands of Black people. The same attitude empowered the first March on Washington in 1925; a parade of hooded Ku Klux Klansmen, boldly marching down Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, 90,000 plus strong. The “Big Lie” of inferiority of non-whites continues to this day, but in more subtle and systemic ways which we call Systemic Racism. Statistics of 2020 reveal that Black Americans are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as White Americans. Black children are three times as likely to live in poverty and have inferior education. The median wealth of Black families (\$17,000)— which is less than one-tenth that of White families (\$171,000), and in total assets, the median white household had \$111,146 in wealth holdings compared to \$7,113 for the median black household. Such holdings may not include investments, heir property, insurances, etc., which the average Black family has less or none. Further, wealth is a prerequisite for housing, schools and employment, all necessary to move up the so-called ladder of success.

Anecdotal achievements of a few Blacks, (like Oprah Winfrey or Barak Obama) who accomplished much by a combination of unique genes, good fortune, positive undergirding and opportunities, do not represent the norm. Further, they are reminded every day that they are Black. The majority of African Americans continue to languish far behind the rest of America. Michelle Alexander, in her book, the New Jim Crow, reminded us that “The success of the few does not excuse the caste-like system that exists for many. In fact, black exceptionalism - the high-profile, highly visible examples of the black success - actually serves to justify and rationalize mass incarceration.”

REACTIONS

The enigma of Black History is how such an oppressed people survived and even thrived. Of course, there were those from the beginning who chose a violent death over a suppressed life. There were those on slave ships who jumped into the ocean rather than submit. Amidst enslavement there were those like Nat Turner and the Methodist preacher, Gabriel Prosser, who led rebellions, which ended up in torture and death. There were others like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, (both Methodists) who risked their lives and freedom on behalf of freeing others through the Underground Railroad. And after Emancipation, there were those like Marcus Garvey who, influenced by the Black Renaissance movement of Harlem, embraced Black Nationalism to the ultimate, perceiving the only hope for oppressed Black people was a return to Africa. But most impacting of all was the Black Church, which became the bastion of civil rights activism, and proclaimed ultimate freedom “over there.” Great Black Preachers emerged in both the north and south after Reconstruction. These “God’s Trombones” sounded the clarion call every Sunday that “You are Somebody.”

Indeed, through all these years Black History is a rhapsody of amazing stories and Celebration.

- The only original music in America is based on Spirituals, Blues or Jazz, which came out of the African American experience.
- Musicians like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson proved African Americans were equally able to perform European classics.
- Writers like Phyllis Wheatley, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelo have taught and inspired millions.
- Politicians like Shirley Chisolm and John Lewis supported legislation for equality.
- Scientist like George Washington Carver and Charles Drew developed breakthrough techniques.
- Entrepreneurs like Madame Walker and John Johnson were trailblazers.
- Athletes like Joe Louis, Mohammed Ali, Jackie Robinson, Jessie Owens (who angered Hitler by winning three gold medals at the 1936 Olympics), Simone Halep, Serena Williams and others established the gold standard for Athleticism.

Indeed, in every aspect of life, African Americans have excelled in spite of a host of incumbrances. Black History month is a time to celebrate.

Two years ago, the New York Times published an exhaustive study called the 1619 project. It was developed by Nikole Hannah-Jones, along with other writers, whose purpose was to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative. It was linked to The Critical Race Theory. Neither is taught in any K to 12 year public schools. Yet, the very thought of teaching the true story of race in American schools sets fear in many White politicians and parents. Perhaps the reason is that they fear the truth may have consequences for racial equality. During the recent elections in Virginia, the key issue seemed to be schools; when and if to return to in person learning; how to deal with Transgender students; and of course, whether to teach Black History.

The Washington Post published a story of a mother's complaint that her son was taught the horrors of slavery and the story of African Americans, and that it made him so guilty he could not sleep. While we should all grieve with every impact of life, this mother and those who write angry letters, miss a teaching moment and an opportunity to help students come to grips with our true history. What about the sensitivity of the young children who face oppression every day?

HISTORY CAN ENABLE BETER RELATIONS

"We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and I pray that all unity may one day be restored, and they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Finally, we need Black History month so that as the complete story of America is told, it should be a warning against world-wide racism, colonialism, ethnic cleansing and/or apartheid. We are ever conscious and fearful of the white supremacy movement and far-right hate groups in our country that have grown rapidly in recent decades, especially since the election of President Barak Obama. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that membership in such groups has risen almost 100 per cent in the last four years. Its members blatantly preach the inferiority of all non-whites, and sanction violence towards them. When such groups hear a political leader saying, "Take your country back," they translate it to mean, take it back from Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, Immigrants from South America, LGBTQ, and from those perceived as sharing

resources and power. The only antidote to such extremism is education and exposure. Such a designated month reminds us of what was and what can be.

Dr. Martin Luther King's dream at the March on Washington in 1963, should be our dream. Much progress in racial relations has occurred since Dr. King's death, but racism is still present in many places. The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 started an informal movement, Black Lives Matter, to protest the killing of several Black men and women by police. Like a kettle of water that finally could be contained no more, all the ills of injustice and inequity seemed to be released. Protests, composed of multi-racial, every gender, age and religion have been held all around the world on behalf of justice. Ninety per cent of these demonstrations were non-violent and peaceful. Unfortunately, the movement caused a backlash by many whites and the issue of justice was often lost in the few incidents of riotous behavior, justifying rejection of the issues of justice and equality. It is illustrative of how far we are from King's journey.

RECONCILIATION AND THE CHURCH

Should reconciliation not begin with the Church of Jesus Christ? The contemporary historian, Jon Meacham wrote a book recently called "The Soul of America, the Battle of our Better Angels" in which he suggests that the strife and chasm in our society can be traced back to the Civil War and that we are battling for the soul of America. Will we be a nation listening to our better angels, welcoming to America a diverse group of people, or shall we be a nation controlled by the old white only America? And I would add can we be that nation that reflects the Shalom community preached by Jesus Christ?

The advantage of a Methodist connectional system is also our liability. On the one hand we are probably the most diverse denomination anywhere in terms of race, language, gender, globality, culture and a diverse leadership; and yet it is our curse also, because the nature of our Connectionalism, we are forced to relate to diverse persons at workshops and conferences. As the boxer Joe Louis once said about a fast opponent, "he can run but he cannot hide." So, we cannot run from our diversity, which sometimes is stressful. Indeed, in spite of recent statistical losses, our denomination is probably in the most advantageous of all denominations postured to address a future world that will cherish diversity and reject judgmental verbiage. Yet, on Sunday morning, we return to our silos. We,

like all Christendom, echo Dr. King's statement that Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. is the most segregated hour in America.

As United Methodists, the journey of inclusiveness has been painful at times, but always rich. For more than two hundred years,

- we have moved inclusively from an all clergy decision maker to include laity;
- we moved from a white only male clergy to an interracial clergy;
- we moved from an all-male clergy to a clergy of men and women; and
- we have moved from a national denomination with global missions to a partnership and global denomination.

Resultant is occasional confusion and grief. Yet, in the journey we are better people and more in touch with our better angels when we prioritize inclusiveness.

METHODISM

In the early days of Methodism, even before the Christmas Conference, there were enslaved people amongst the Methodist meeting houses. At the organizing conference in 1784, attendance included at least two African Americans, Richard Allen and Harry Hosier. Hosier was a great preacher and a partner of Francis Asbury. When Richard Allen left Old St. George Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in favor of establishing a new denomination (AME), there was another group in the same church who said, the sin of racism is present here, but the spirit of Methodism is beyond these walls. So Zoar Methodist Church also in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, became the first Methodist Church that consisted primarily of Black people. From Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore, Maryland came Sharp Street Church in Baltimore (others followed all across the north). That model became the model of all churches in America, wherein the congregation retained loyalty to the denomination, but freedom of relationship and expression was likewise found.

For over a hundred years, Black preachers were effective evangelists and pastors, but seldom credentialed or ordained. Due to their effectiveness, congregations grew, and leaders came forth. Symbolic of such leadership was Charles Albert Tinley, a former enslaved man who was self-taught in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He learned Hebrew and Greek and became the pastor of the church where he was once a custodian. He preached to thousands of people, including those who had migrated from the South after Reconstruction. Like Isaac Watts and John

Wesley, Tinley wrote his own hymns which became the bridge between Spirituals and Gospel songs. Such songs as “Beams of Heaven as I Go,” and “We’ll Understand it Better By and By” and dozens of other songs were included in his repertoire.

Other Black evangelists and pastors helped grow Methodism. It was not until near the turn of the century that many qualified pastors were ordained and able to serve Holy Communion. Likewise, District Superintendents were seldom men of color, and it was not until 1920 that two Black Bishops were elected as resident Bishops of North America. Heretofore, the only Black people designated as Bishops were only selected to preside in Africa. For decades, caucuses of Black preachers and laity confronted the General Conference with this dilemma. No election occurred until the General Conference changed the assignment of Bishops and created Residential Bishops, rather than any Bishop arbitrarily overseeing any annual conference. Apparently, there was fear from some Whites that a Black Bishop would superintend them.

We need a Black History month, not just to read about a minority group, but to intentionally discern ways of growing together in New Testament inclusiveness.

Today, the Council of Bishops represents the most diverse group of leaders in Christendom. The average Bishop, when elected, comes from a community and congregation which looks like, talks like, and thinks like him or her. Yet, they are assigned to a diverse constituency and expected to make decisions in a diverse setting. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, they do it well. This is a precious moment, and the Holy spirit of Pentecost may once again help us to tell the world about the Savior of the world.

Hopefully all of the above demonstrates that we not only need a Black Church History month but a commitment towards living together in the Shalom community of Jesus Christ. So,

“Walk together children, don’t you get weary,
walk together children, don’t you get weary,
walk together children, don’t you get weary,
there’s a great camp meeting in the promised land.” AMEN.

Forrest C. Stith, Bishop retired

A TMLINE AND KEY DATES FROM AFRICAN AMERICANS PERSPECTIVE

1600'S-1865	Slavery is legal in the United States.
1773	John Wesley prints a pamphlet denouncing slavery and calls for slave traders and owners to repent and free their slaves.
1787	Original US Constitution calling enslaved and debtors 3/5 of a person.
1800's	Several slave rebellions documented, abolitionist movement, and underground railroad devise ways to escape slavery.
1840	Methodist church divides, north and south over slavery.
1850	The Fugitive Slave Act allowed the capture and return of fugitive slaves to their owners within the territories of the United States. Part of the Compromise of 1850.
1857	Supreme Court Dred Scott decision assuring Negroes have no rights.
1861-1865	Civil War - Southern states secede from Union.
1863	Lincoln signs Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in seceding states.
1865	13 th and 15 th Amendments making slavery illegal and giving full rights to Negroes, including the right to vote.
1866	The Methodist Church organized the Freedman's Aid Society to combat illiteracy, resulting into several institutions of learning.
1870-1920	Post Reconstruction Era - Jim Crow, lynching, segregation, legalized discrimination
1896	Plessy vs Ferguson Supreme Court decision upholds the constitutionality of racial segregation under "separate but equal doctrine."
1925	Ku Klux Klan march on Washington -- 90,000 people present.
1939	Methodist Church creates segregated Central Jurisdiction.
1954	Supreme Court decision Brown vs Board of Education declaring there can be no separate but equal, thereby making segregation illegal under constitution.
1963	March on Washington led by Martin Luther King Jr.
1964	Civil Rights Acts making discrimination and segregation illegal.
1965	Selma to Montgomery March led by Martin Luther King Jr.
1965	Voting Rights Bill passed by Congress, later decimated by Supreme Court.
1968	United Methodist Church ends segregation, moves toward inclusiveness.
1968	Organization of Black Methodists for Church Renewal in The United Methodist Church.
2008-2016	Barak Obama first African American President.
2020	George Floyd's death facilitated Black Lives Matter for justice and equity.