

## commentary:

by Reginald E. Lee

## Church Must Remember African Methodists' Contributions

There is a deep historical fog that rests over some Methodists' memories. Maybe the strength of the Central Jurisdiction (the church's segregated black jurisdiction that existed from 1939 to 1968) was greater than anyone anticipated. The contributions of black Methodists are so often forgotten. Yet, African Americans have a rich and long history in the movement started by the Rev. John Wesley.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we who know the contributions of Africans and African Americans to the Methodist saga owe it to ourselves, and to others of good will, to tell the story.

The African's romantic attraction to the doctrine of grace can be traced back to Wesley himself. Wesley's own journals indicate that the first African conversion occurred late on a November day in 1758. He writes: "I rode to Wandsworth [near London] and baptized two Negroes belonging to Mr. Gilbert, a gentleman lately from Antigua. One of these was deeply convinced of sin; the other is rejoicing in God her savior; and [they are] the first African Christians I have known."

Many church historians use 1738 as the beginning of the Methodist movement in England. This means that Methodism was just about 20 years old when Wesley baptized the two slaves from Antigua. These converted slaves went home and converted their slave master, Nathaniel Gilbert. The three of them returned to the West Indies and started the first Methodist chapel on the North American continent.



The Rev. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones are believed to have been at the historic Christmas Conference held in 1784 at Baltimore's Lovely Lane Chapel. Moreover, the presence of African Americans in American Methodism seems to date from the very beginning of the movement. There doesn't seem to be a period when Africans were not active in the life of the church.

From the very foundations of Methodism in America, the names of African slaves appear on the class rolls. The name of

Anne Sweitzer, a slave, appeared on the role of Robert Strawbridge's first Methodist society.

From slave plantations to stately stone cathedrals, blacks packed the house to hear the Good News of grace. It was a message of God's deep and abiding love for God's entire creation. This love was big enough to include the African. It was a message of pure liberation. In a world that systematically denied their human worth and dignity, the message that God cared resonated deeply in the black consciousness.

A Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor" undergirded this message of love. Wesley strips away the prestige of wealth and chooses to side with the poor. This was the outgrowth of his understanding of justifying and sanctifying grace.

If we are going to stem the decline in American Methodism, we must find the strength and grace to accomplish the noble task of the Uniting Conference of 1968. If the United Methodist Church is ever to regain its momentum amongst our nation's poor, we must revisit the unique contributions of black Methodists. We must not forget Richard Allen, who left the Methodist Episcopal church due to its harsh treatment of African Americans. His love for Wesleyan theology drove him to start the Free African Society, which evolved into the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen took the Wesleyan understanding to its logical conclusion: If God loves us all, then we all deserve to be free.

Allen left the Methodist Episcopal Church as a sociological protest. Yet, many decided to stay and fight. People like Bishops James S. Thomas, Leontine Kelly and Woodie W. White pressed the church to reconsider its stance on race. Their staying was a quiet but forceful protest against racism. In 2001 the church quietly made history as we elected three well-qualified African-American women to the episcopacy. The church continues to show that where God's spirit is active and available, all things are possible.

As we celebrate Black History Month, let us be reminded that the pages of American Methodism still have room for all of God's children!

The Rev. Reginald Lee is pastor of New Hope United Methodist Church in Anderson, Ind., and serves as adjunct professor of Methodist history at Anderson University School of Theology. This United Methodist News Service commentary was originally posted in February 2001. ■



## calendar:

### ■ 'Survivor wives' will retreat March 14-16

Holston Conference ministers' wives will gather for an annual retreat March 14-16 at Oak Tree Lodge in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. The theme is "Survivors By the Grace of God."

Guest speaker will be Joy Carr, director of ministry for the Southeastern Jurisdiction Administrative Council. Workshop topics include "Scrapbooking for Penny Pinchers" and "Survive and Stay Alive." Activities include water aerobics and singing.

Registration is \$75 for overnight guests or \$30 for commuters. Registration deadline is Feb. 1. For more information, contact Registrar Lori Sluder at (423) 753-2614 or [mglsluder@aol.com](mailto:mglsluder@aol.com).

### ■ Experience Celtic Christianity Feb. 15-17

Holston members are invited to a Celtic retreat at the Hinton Rural Life Center in Hayesville, N.C., on Feb. 15-17. "Experiencing Celtic Christian Spirituality" will be led by Fred and Jean Macon, who studied in Wales and Scotland for three months. Activities will include an "awareness walk," labyrinth, and stories of Celtic saints. Cost is \$125-145 per person, depending on accommodations. "This weekend retreat will be an experience steeped in nature, art, music, prayer, meditation, and worship," organizers said. Contact [hintoncenter@dnet.net](mailto:hintoncenter@dnet.net) or Laura Trent at (828) 389-8336. ■

## awards:

### ■ Denman Evangelism Award

The Denman Evangelism Award is presented to a lay member and to a clergy member in recognition for effective efforts in making disciples for Jesus Christ. The awards are presented by the conference Witness Team at Annual Conference 2002. Previous recipients include the Rev. Tom Robins, pastor at Bethel-Seymour UMC (Maryville District), and Sam and Charlotte Green, lay members at Appalachia UMC (Big Stone Gap District). Nomination forms are available at district offices. Completed forms should be mailed by Feb. 28 to the Rev. Sandra Johnson, 2484 North Briar Court, Chattanooga, TN 37406.

## Snapshot:



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FLOYD, Va. — When they received word that Holston churches were collecting shoes for Afghanistan during the Advent season, members at Floyd United Methodist Church gathered more than 60 pairs. They also tucked in new pairs of warm socks for the refugees. Loading up shoes for the Wytheville District church are (from left to right) Pauline Repass, Katherine Gardner, and Hilda Harmon. ☐