

Celebrating Our Past – Shaping Our Future

“He has shown you, o man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

**“...I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
Philippines 3:14 (NKJV)**

At each meeting of the Pittsburgh Presbytery during 2007, we, African American Presbyterians spent a few moments talking about, celebrating and attempting to educate the Presbytery about our journey as African Americans in this denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). We talked about our founder, other leaders, our institutions...we talked about our congregations and the role that African American Presbyterians played in the struggle for freedom and justice.

We felt the need to do that for several reasons. First of all, any group that has been associated with any institution for 200 years needs to be celebrated. Any congregation that has survived 200 years needs to be celebrated. Also, we felt the need to let a lot of misinformed and uninformed people know that we are not late comers to this denomination. We have been around for a long, long time. Longer perhaps than many of those who ask us how long we have we been around. I recall some years ago when I was a staff person for our Synod, I preached in a church in another Presbytery and after worship as I stood at the back door shaking hands, a lady came up to me and asked, “How long have you been a Presbyterian?” I said to her, I do not remember when I was not a Presbyterian – for you see my parents and their parents before them and their parents before them were all Presbyterians. So you see my Presbyterian roots run very deep. She said, “You don’t sound like a Presbyterian.” Don’t ask me what a Presbyterian is supposed to sound like.

Our official sojourn in this denomination began in 1807. I say official because we were in the balcony and the back of the church long before 1807. But it was in 1807 that John Gloucester founded the first African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

Since 1807, many African Americans chose to be Presbyterians and those choices were made for several reasons;

- Some of us became Presbyterians because of the missionary spirit, the missionary zeal and the sense of justice portrayed by Presbyterians in the Northern Stream of the church. For you need to remember that the Presbyterian Church split over issues of slavery. The Northern Stream felt slavery was wrong. The Southern Stream felt that slavery was alright. Following slavery missionaries from the Northern Stream went south and established schools and churches for the freed persons throughout the south, for the education and religious training of African Americans. Literally hundreds of educational institutions from elementary schools through colleges, universities and seminaries were established to educate

African Americans. Had it not been for the Presbyterian Church, the Northern Stream, people who look like me would not have had a chance at an education. Where I came from the Presbyterian Church was the public educator for African Americans. Some of those missionaries were from Pittsburgh.

- Many of us are Presbyterians because during the days of sharecropping after slavery – when many Black sharecroppers lived in poverty and could not make ends meet, and the Northern Stream of the Presbyterian Church from which many people came, many justice loving people went South and brought Black children north to support them and give them good education.
- Some African Americans became Presbyterians because of the form of government that they witnessed and so they petitioned Presbyteries to organize churches to serve their needs. Churches like, Grace organized 140 years ago; Bidwell and Bethesda
- Some African Americans became Presbyterians because the Presbyterian Church, Northern Stream was not afraid nor ashamed to deal with tough issues; issues of slavery; issues of injustice; - sending people and money to aid Dr. King and his movement (however in many instances turning a blind eye to the racism and injustice at home in the urban areas of the north).
- Some of us are Presbyterians because the Pittsburgh Presbytery supported urban ministry in places like Homewood through the Bethesda Center and through Bidwell to create the Bidwell Cultural and Training Center and the Manchester Youth Development Center, The Kay Bays Club in the Hill where people saw the ministry and they signed on.

When we look back on our involvement in this denomination – not only can we call the roll with names such as John Gloucester – but Henry Highland Garnet and Matthew Anderson and Maria Faring and Lucy Craft Laney and Mary McCleod Bethune and Frances Grimke and Thomas Merton Thomas. In recent years we have had leaders like Elder Hawkins, Thelma Adair, Edgar Ward, Eugene Turner, Mary Jane Patterson, Gayuard Wilmore, Robert Pierre Johnson and Leroy Patrick, Harold Tolliver and more recently James Robinson and Samuel George and the beat goes on to the present where we see those of us in this Presbytery.

We see what the church has been and we as African Americans have been there and we love being there and have not left. When the majority church disrupted over Angela Davis we stayed. When the majority church left Homewood and the Hill and Manchester and Garfield and Hazelwood we stayed, often times “making bricks without straw” but always believing the “Lord will make a way somehow.”

So our past in the church has been good and steady. We had to struggle but we have remained good Presbyterians. Unfortunately, we find ourselves today in a church that seems willing to divide over any issue except the issue of justice for African Americans. While we will split – and some of our brothers and sisters are willing to leave over issues of homosexuality, same sex marriages and by what name do we call Christ and the Re-imagining Conference of years ago. The church is not demanding anyone speak out on the issue of Gun Violence, a disease that kills young people in our community daily. Because no one wants to deal with the disease of gun violence by passing gun legislation, African American legislators walked off the floor of the House a few nights ago.

Our church is not splitting over illegal drugs that are infesting our communities; or the fact that the Penguins were issued a welfare check for \$315 million dollars and refuse to give back to the community; or the miseducation of African American children in Pittsburgh; or legislators who make more than \$200,000 a year and do not want to pass a decent minimum wage bill.

We are spending as a country billions of dollars on an illegal and an immoral war in Iraq. A war that we cannot win and yet the President vetoes an Insurance Bill that would give insurance to the children of this country. There is no schism in the Presbyterian Church because of that.

We do not see our beloved denomination taking the stand for justice that it once took. So as we come today celebrating our 200 year journey; as we come celebrating our joy, our staying power and our struggle. We come saying with the songwriter “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.” We come saying, “had it not been for the Lord on our side....” We as African Americans have stayed in this denomination when our friends asked us why because we believed we could be Black and Christian and Presbyterian. We have stayed because we believe we are in this denomination for “such a time as this”; to call our Presbytery to a sense of justice.

So as we come celebrating our past and being concerned about our present, we ask you to help us shape our future; - help us create a Presbytery of Justice – a Presbytery where we will have justice as the byword in 2008.

For I heard God say the other day to Pittsburgh Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church USA “ I hate, I despise your religious feasts – I cannot stand your assemblies – even though you bring me burnt offering – and grain offering (Christmas Joy Offering and Peacemaking Offering and Hunger Offering) I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings I will have no regards for them; away with the noise of your songs – I will not listen to the music of your harp – but let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream.”

We invite you to stand with us creating the beloved community that the Prophet Isaiah talks about when he said – “Never again will there be in the city an infant who does not live but a few days or an old man who does not live out his years; He who dies at 100 will be considered a mere youth – A city where those who build houses will live in them,

a city where the wolf and lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox – but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain.”

We want a city when it is called most livable will be most livable for all of God’s people; Hill District and Squirrel Hill – Beltzhoover and Shadyside. As we march into the next 200 years we want to form a Justice Network where Pittsburgh Presbytery will speak truth to power and stand with those of us who are in the trenches of the inner city communities that others left and fight against racism and sexism and church closings and miseducation of children and abuse of the have nots by the haves. I am convinced that the church can still be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County is still powerful if we would only stand together and harness our power.

So we call for Justice Pastors as we call for Prayer Partners with the Black Church, so that when we need to go to City Hall, to the School Board, or to the streets if need be we can make a few phone calls, send out some emails and have Justice Pastors, Justice Elders and Justice Congregations standing with us. We are looking for some good people who will do the ministry of justice and take Micah seriously when he said “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

If we work for justice we can go out to our communities, places of work and worship – singing “I’m pressing on the upward way, new heights I’m gaining everyday....” Presbyterians of Pittsburgh if we speak with one voice we can change Pittsburgh and Allegheny County for we have the people to do it. We have organized people and as Presbyterians we have organized money that equals power. If we work together we will be able to go day by day saying, “Beams of heaven as I go through this wilderness below, guide my feet in peaceful ways, turn my midnight into day, I do not know how long it will be – nor what the future holds for me but this I know, If my God leads me – I shall get home some day.”