

February is Black History month in Canada and in The United Church of Canada. It was important to me, to not take time to offer my own voice to this newsletter this week, but to share the voice of other and to learn together with you about Black History in Canada and also in this United Church of ours. The following work was Prepared and written by Alydia Smith as a component to a worship service. Given the presence and importance of music in all of our lives, it felt to me a great place to begin.

Sincerely

Rev. Adam Hall

A HISTORY IN SONG

The 1600s

Slavery existed in Canada, as it existed in colonies throughout the world. The first documented slave in Canada was named by their master Olivier Le Jeune in 1628. (However, there are reports of slave ships arriving in the early 1600s.)¹ Many of the documented slaves in Canada were “owned” by clergy. It was not until the late 1700s that talks of abolishing slavery started in Upper Canada. While auction blocks were being built to sell people, the church sang...

Sung Response: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*Voices United* 262)

The 1700s

During the late 1700s promises of freedom and land in exchange for British loyalty brought many freed Blacks to Nova Scotia. Although no longer slaves, the Black community was oppressed and denied basic civil and human rights. As a result, there was a mini exodus in the late 1700s when Black Loyalist and Black Refugees (the Maroons) took the offer to resettle in Sierra Leone. Although the church often attempted to preach a “thin” Bible to Black peoples, focusing on servitude and honouring your master, the power of the gospel shined through the hymns of Isaac Watts and the Wesleyans, offering hope and empowerment to an enslaved people.

Sung Response: “Love Divine” (*Voices United* 333)

The 1800s

In the early 1800s, Canada and the northern part of the United States gained a reputation for being a safe haven for the enslaved. Seeking freedom, many enslaved peoples travelled secretly to Canada through a concealed network known as the Underground Railroad. Many churches and Quaker meeting houses became “stations” on the route to freedom. There is much mythology on how people communicated with each other between these “stations.” Since music and spirituals were often used in Black communities to counter the theologies being

¹ See <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/black/index.asp> for more information on Black History in Canada

preached, music seemed like the perfect way to convey messages of freedom, as music was (and remains) a primary form of communication.

Sung Response: “Go Down, Moses” (African American Hymnal 543)
or “My Lord, What a Morning” (*Voices United* 708)

1900s

Long after slavery was abolished (in 1833 in the British Empire and in 1865 in the United States), life remained difficult for Black people across North America. In the 1950s and 1960s, the fight for civil rights intensified. Several iconic moments included: Viola Desmond refusing to sit in the Black only section of the movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia; Rosa Parks refusing to sit at the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama; the three civil rights marches from Selma to Montgomery; and the demolition of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that resulted in the forced relocation of the historic Black community. Many churches joined in the movement, while many others went about their daily business warning activists to slow down and to temper their voices. When society actively put restriction on the rights of Black peoples, “You cannot sit here” and “You cannot march there,” the church sang:

Sung Response: “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (*Voices United* 575)

2000s

Over 50 years later, the recent deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and many others have tragically reminded us that the fight for equal rights is far from over. Racial profiling continues to affect every aspect of society. From child care to educational and employment opportunities, it is clear that the fight for racial equality continues.² What will our church’s response be to the current reality of Black and other marginalized peoples in our society?

Sung Response: “Hush! Hush!” (*More Voices* 167)
