



BLACK HISTORY EDITION

## The sacred connection between black women and the earth

By Christian Brooks

In “Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage,” the Rev. Dr. Dianne Glave describes the relationship between African Americans and the environment as “the interconnectedness of the human, spiritual, and environmental realm ... harm toward or care for one necessarily affected the others.” Environmentalism is a personal issue for black people, especially black women. For centuries, black women have held a sacred and spiritual connection with the environment. The environment has served as a source of provision, a place of worship and a means of escape from bondage. Unity with the earth has always been an essential aspect of the black woman’s experience.

Often, when we think of environmentalism, the first image that comes to mind is not of a person of African descent. Yet, historically, African women were explorers and caretakers of the earth, and many still are today. They cultivated the earth to grow food and walked the land to gather water and fuel. They used their knowledge of environmental resources to make medicine for the sick and elderly and supply nutritional balance for children. Through these societal responsibilities, black women developed a deep relationship with the earth and a divine understanding of its role in protecting and sustaining life. This intimate bond with nature was passed down from generation to generation. It endured the middle passage and manifested

itself as a tool for survival for many enslaved Africans. Nature served as a covering for enslaved Africans, allowing them to engage in uninhibited worship. They gathered in hush

harbors to preach, pray, sing, shout and truly commune with God.

Nature also served as an avenue for escape. Harriet Tubman, like many black women before her, had an intimate ancestral connection with nature. God spoke to her through the earth. It was through this sacred bond with nature that she was able to survive the woods, navigate waterways, overcome treacherous landscapes and use the stars as a guide to freedom. Tubman made 19 trips to the South and escorted over 300 enslaved people to freedom.

In recent years, this sacred bond has been disrupted due to unequal access to natural resources and the current ecological state of many black communities in America. Low-income black neighborhoods are disproportionately burdened with air toxins as well as a host of other environmental injustices. Every day, black women stand on the front lines of the environmental justice movement fighting for the right to exist in unpolluted spaces.

These women recognize the importance of the quality of spaces around them and how it impacts daily life.

The Rev. Dr. Angela Cowser, a Presbyterian minister, sociologist and associate dean of black church studies at Louisville Seminary, has lived into this understanding.

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*Harriet Tubman, circa 1911  
Photographer unknown  
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## Sacred connection

Cowser has a holistic view of the environment, seeing societies as a construction of the human imagination for the earth. This construction has strategically placed some people in a position of safety and privilege with access to clean air, clean water and beautiful parks, while others, typically poor people and people of color, have been subjected to the dangers of living in poisoned spaces and spaces prone to natural disasters. Cowser urges the church

to work at the local, congregational and governmental levels to reimagine these landscapes to be equitable for all.

Through the black woman's experience, we see humanity's tie with the earth. The earth is essential in sustaining life for us all. As we continue to advocate to protect the earth, Cowser reminds the church of our collective call and responsibility to ensure that everyone has equitable access to the earth and human resources.

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in the image of God he created them." - Genesis 1:27**

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# Black immigrants in the U.S.

By Langley Hoyt and Rachel Ollivierre



March for Our Lives on 24 March 2018 in Washington, D.C. Photo by Lorie Shaull. License: [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en)

Much of the discourse surrounding immigration rarely discusses the unique challenges that black immigrants experience. Black immigrants face barriers that run parallel to the systemic racism that African Americans have always faced. Racist immigration policies and the double criminalization of being both black and an immigrant result in difficulties that are a part of the black immigrant experience in the U.S.

According to a Pew Research study, in 2016, 1 in 10 black people living in the U.S. were immigrants. However, despite the black immigrant population more than doubling from 2000 to 2016, the unique challenges they face often remain overlooked.

People of African descent migrate to the U.S. from all over the world, mostly from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. They come to the U.S. seeking a better life for themselves and their families. However, instead of finding America a sanctuary from poverty, violence and instability, black immigrants are met with anti-black policies that make it more difficult for them to arrive or stay in the U.S. For example, after the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, thousands of Haitian refugees came to the U.S. via humanitarian parole to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Despite the continued dangerous conditions in Haiti in 2018, President Donald Trump made defamatory comments about Haitian and African immigrants and subsequently announced that Haitian and Sudanese immigrants no longer qualified for TPS. Nearly 60,000 Haitians were deported as a result, and Sudan was added to the travel ban list.

Six of the 13 countries affected by President Trump's travel ban are African countries: Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Tanzania. Many of these countries are experiencing a refugee crisis due to economic instability and

political upheaval. Additionally, a 2017 study found that although deportations had decreased overall, the removal of African immigrants had increased. This is due in large part to the mass criminalization of blackness in America.

Black people are overrepresented in the criminal justice system due to over-policing, racial profiling and racist policies. Black immigrants face the same issues. James, an immigrant from Guyana, immigrated to the U.S. when he was 30 years old. During his first year living in the U.S., he boarded the New York subway, much like he did any other day, to go home.

It was late at night, so he dozed off. He was jolted awake by three plainclothes police officers yelling for him to show his ID. He had only been taught about the "American Dream" before entering the U.S., so James was unaware of the racial tension in the nation and the strained relationship between black Americans and law enforcement. So, he said no. Without hesitation, he was wrestled to the ground and handcuffed. James was arrested for failing to comply and resisting arrest.

James' story is not unique. Black immigrants are disproportionately followed, stopped and arrested by police. They are often misled by law enforcement into taking plea deals resulting in their own deportation. Although only 7% of non-citizens in the U.S. are black, more than 20% of non-citizens facing deportation on criminal grounds are black. Black immigrants are more likely to be detained, and thus deported, for criminal convictions.

Despite these barriers of systemic racism and xenophobia, many immigrants have been able to obtain citizenship and make essential contributions to our society. **Ilhan Omar** immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 10 after her family fled the Somali war. She is now the first woman of color to serve as a U.S. Representative in the state of Minnesota and one of the first Muslim women to serve in Congress. **Camille Wardrop Alleyne** immigrated to the U.S. from Trinidad at the age of 18 to pursue her love of planes and space. She is now one of the most-recognized women in aerospace engineering and one of the few women of color to serve in a senior technical management position at NASA. **Adriano Espaillat** immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic. He currently serves as the U.S. Representative for New York's 13th Congressional District. Espaillat is the first formerly undocumented immigrant to ever serve in Congress.

Although many black immigrants succeed and thrive in the U.S., immigration policies and the immigration enforcement system are not set up in a way that encourages them to do so. Changing current anti-black immigration policies will give black immigrants equal access to pursue a better life for themselves and their families in the U.S.



# African Americans have been prominent throughout Presbyterian history

By the Rev. Jimmie Hawkins

African Americans have featured prominently in Presbyterian history since the first presbytery was organized in 1706 in Philadelphia. In 1747, enslaved people were the first blacks introduced to Presbyterianism. **Dr. Gayraud Wilmore** (author of *Black and Presbyterian*) estimated that Presbyterians enslaved 70,000 men and women. At the first General Assembly in 1789, the topic of slavery was debated. The church resolved to place emphasis on the religious instruction of the enslaved individuals rather than their emancipation. Presbyterians attempted to be nuanced in their desire to avoid conflict and therein failed to take a stance. No church was more high-sounding and profound in its biblical and theological analysis of slavery and did less about it. In 1797, the church voted that slavery was indeed a moral evil. However, later the church voted that all people who held enslaved people were not guilty of a moral evil. In 1818, the Rev. George Bourne, of Lexington Presbytery, was defrocked for his anti-slavery pronouncements. Ironically, the denomination split in 1861 over the unresolved issue of slavery into the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. The latter renamed itself the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1865.

The driving force in the relationship between the denomination and blacks was one of congregational life and educational opportunities. While it was never considered an abolitionist denomination, Presbyterians provided a major contribution in the education of lay and clergy members who were prominent during the 18th and 19th centuries. The United Presbyterian Church trained a disproportionate number of activist-clergy who served as pastors, abolitionists, Underground Railroad conductors, newspaper publishers and editors, educators, authors, missionaries, orators and community leaders.

**Harriet Tubman** attended Second Presbyterian Church in Auburn, New York, and was married and funeralized in the sanctuary. **Frederick Douglass** and **Sojourner Truth** regularly spoke at Presbyterian churches. Truth held a fundraiser at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian in Washington, D.C. Many of the most conspicuous historical



*The Rev. Dr. William Henry Sheppard (See article on page 6.)*

African Americans in the earliest days of the republic had some association with the Presbyterian Church.

In 1807, First African Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia was founded, becoming the first black Presbyterian Church

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## African Americans prominent in Presbyterian history

in the U.S. It was founded by the **Rev. John Gloucester** (1776–1822) and was a hotbed of activity for social justice. In 1867, Catawba Presbytery was organized as the only southern United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., as well as the only African American presbytery. To have to travel to the North for a presbytery meeting was a hardship for black Presbyterians living in the South. The solution was the creation of all-black regional councils governed by black Presbyterians residing in the South.

In 1809, the **Rev. John Chavis** was licensed to preach in the Presbyterian Church, becoming the first African American to be ordained as Presbyterian clergy. In 1822, the **Rev. Samuel Cornish** founded First Colored Presbyterian Church of New York City. In 1827, he established *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the U.S. In 1828, the **Rev. Theodore S. Wright** became the first black person to graduate from a theological seminary, Princeton. The **Rev. James W.C. Pennington**, pastor of Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York's Third Presbytery, was an important voice of the abolitionist movement and utilized his church building as a station of the Underground Railroad. He served as the moderator of the Third Presbytery of New York and as the president of the National Negro Convention. In 1842, the **Rev. Henry Highland Garnet** was ordained. He lived as an ardent abolitionist and served as the pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian. He was the first black person to speak before both houses of Congress on the eve of the declaration of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. He was appointed as the ambassador to Liberia in 1881.

Another Presbyterian minister, the **Rev. Dr. William Henry Sheppard**, was commissioned as a missionary to the "Belgian Congo" in 1890, where he was instrumental in displacing Belgium's colonial rule.

Education was a dominant gift in the relationship between blacks and the denomination. Several African American colleges were started by the Presbyterian Church, such as Johnson C. Smith University, Stillman College and Barber-Scotia College. Barber-Scotia College trained emancipated black women for societal leadership. **Lucy Craft Laney**, who was formerly enslaved and whose father was a Southern Presbyterian minister after the Civil War, founded a pioneering black school, Haines Normal and Industrial Institute.



(Left) *The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson II is the first black Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (Right) The Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett is the first black President and CEO of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Photos by Rich Copley for Presbyterian News Service*

The denomination has had a series of African American leadership over the past decades. African American moderators include the **Rev. Edler G. Hawkins** in 1964, the **Rev. Dr. Lawrence W. Bottoms** in 1974, **Dr. Thelma Adair** in 1976, the **Rev. Joan Salmon Campbell** in 1989, Elder **Patricia Brown** in 1997 and the **Rev. Denise Anderson** in 2016. **Dr. Gayraud Wilmore** was prominent in the Civil Rights Movement and served as the director of the Commission on Religion and Race in 1963. He and the **Rev. Dr. James Cone** are noted as architects in the development of black theology. The **Rev. Dr. Katie G. Cannon** was the first African American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1974 and was a founder of womanist theology. In 2016, the **Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II** was elected the first African American Stated Clerk of the PC(USA). The **Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett** was called as the executive director and president of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in 2018.

Black Americans have played a role in the Presbyterian Church since it first began. Despite the denomination's history of owning slaves and its sluggishness to renounce slavery, black Presbyterian preachers and congregations organized within their churches to pursue justice. Following in this legacy, black Presbyterians have been missionaries, educators, activists and leaders who have been instrumental in shaping the Presbyterian Church into the denomination it is today.



# William Henry Sheppard *Advocate for justice in the Congo*

By Catherine Gordon



*The Rev. Dr. William Henry Sheppard, one of the first African Americans to serve as a Presbyterian missionary. (Public domain)*

The Presbyterian Church in the United States has a long history with the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1891, the church sent two young Presbyterian ministers — one African American from Virginia, the Rev. Dr. William Henry Sheppard, and the other white, the Rev. Samuel Lapsley. They formed what is known as the Presbyterian Church of the Congo, which currently exceeds 2 million Congolese members, more than the total membership of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Early in his mission work in the Congo, Sheppard discovered and exposed human rights abuses of the Congolese by King Leopold II of Belgium. The king privately colonized, owned and dominated the Congo Free State from 1885–1908. Leopold used his personal power to expropriate vast amounts of wealth from the country in the form of ivory and rubber. These trades were supported by slave labor. The local people were forced to work through torture, imprisonment, maiming and terror.

In his book “King Leopold’s Ghost,” Adam Hochschild describes the techniques of Leopold’s colonialist empire. Leopold created an “association” that claimed to fight against slavery and Arab slave traders. Local chiefs were paid one piece of cloth per month to relinquish their ownership of the land to the association. However, Leopold used the anti-slavery rhetoric of the association to rally public support for himself and cover his own use of slavery in the Congo.

Christian missionaries like Sheppard and a handful of human rights organizers publicized these atrocities to the world, and gradually, some nations began to oppose Leopold’s despotism. In January 1900, Sheppard’s investigation of a brutal massacre provided the basis for an article in the New York Times.

In 1908, Sheppard published an article in the American Presbyterian Congo Mission newsletter documenting colonial abuses. The Kasai Rubber Co., a Belgian rubber contractor in the Congo, sued him for libel. Sheppard was later acquitted. Later that year, after feeling diplomatic pressure to end his exploitative practices, Leopold relinquished personal control over the Congo Free State. Belgium then took over and further colonized the country, renaming it the “Belgian Congo.” There was not much change within the country until the ivory and rubber resources were depleted. Finally, in 1960, the country achieved independence and was renamed the Republic of Congo.

Sheppard left an important legacy in the Congo. His work contributed to the debate on colonialism and imperialism in Africa, put pressure against Leopold to relinquish his control over the Congo, and lifted up important issues of justice and exploitation to the church and the larger society.



*(Top) William and Lucy Sheppard*

*(Bottom) William H. and Lucy Gantt Sheppard with Maxamalinge, Mrs. Althea Brown Edmiston, and Rev. Joseph E Phipps*



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EAD 2020 will explore the intersection of climate change and economic injustice. This will galvanize our advocacy on behalf of policies and programs to chip away at the systems of oppression that keep people in poverty and push all life on earth to the brink of destruction.

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