

Why Black History Month Matters

By Gwendolyn Walker

In August 2012, I was among a group of 54 people from Christ Community Chapel, with several of our staff, who made a journey to the South to learn about the history of the civil rights movement. On this bus trip, we traveled to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati then to the cities of Birmingham, Alabama and Memphis, Tennessee. Each of us was paired with a person of a different race to sit together, experience the planned events, and discuss the impact. It was an opportunity to encounter and experience the history of the civil rights movement with someone from another background. This four-day tour of memorials and landmarks was called "Sankofa" (a West African word that means looking backward to move forward). The purpose of the trip was to educate and motivate disciples of Christ toward a righteous response to racial division in society and in the Church. As believers, we are called to the ministry of reconciliation, which includes being reconciled to God and to one another.

Black History Month has a similar purpose of looking backward to move forward. It is a time set aside each year to focus on the history and experience of African Americans in our country. They have made many contributions to the United States of America that have intentionally been and continue to be left out of school textbooks and other history books. We remember, reflect on, and learn from this past history in order to forge toward a brighter present and future where we do not repeat or perpetuate the tragedies of the past. It is a time to build empathy for a race of people who have been treated unjustly due to the color of their skin. This historic indifference to their humanity needs to be recognized and not overlooked. It is an opportunity to learn and celebrate the triumphs and contributions of African Americans to the growth of America. There are white Americans who advocated and made sacrifices for the abolition of slavery, plus those who supported human and civil rights for Black people in America. They also have gone unrecognized. Black history is American history, our shared history. It is for all Americans.

Black History Month started as Negro History Week in February 1926 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who was an author, historian, journalist and the second African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. He wanted to raise awareness and acknowledge the accomplishments and influential experiences of Black men and women. He wanted this information to be taught in the public schools, at least to Black children. The history of Black people in this nation was not a part of American school curriculum. I was a senior in my segregated high school in the late '60s before we had an elective course on Black history. Our text was written by Dr. Woodson. At that time, my eyes were opened to the plight and achievements of African Americans beyond those well-known ones like Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and Harriet Tubman. Countless facts about the many Black achievers had never been taught. People like Richard Allen, William Seymour, and Thomas Dorsey who contributed to the shaping of Christianity in our country.

In February 1976, Negro History Week became officially recognized as Black History Month by President Gerald Ford who called for the public to “seize the opportunity to honor the too often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.” Each year there is a different national theme for BHM. This year it is “The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity.” The responsibility for selecting a theme was given to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). This organization, established in 1915, continues to provide information and resources for education about Black people in America.

There is so much I am continuing to learn each year, especially during Black History Month, that I never knew. This motivates me to search out more about the history of my culture to enhance my knowledge and continue to pass it along to my children, grandchildren, and others. How impactful it was to know that my history didn’t begin with slavery but goes back to the freedoms of African civilization where the people made great contributions to Christianity and to our world. This has caused many mixed feelings for me. One of the many times I have been brought to tears was when I saw the movie “Hidden Figures” a few years ago and learned about a Black woman, Katherine Johnson, a mathematician, who played a significant role in the success of our early NASA space missions. Why didn’t I know this as a master’s level educated woman? I am inspired and thankful to realize how far God has brought African Americans from the oppression of slavery and Jim Crow to the present-day liberties. This encourages me and fills me with hope that things can continue to change for justice and reconciliation in our country, starting in the Church by God’s power.

Remembering is such a central theme in the Bible. We are repeatedly admonished to remember and not forget significant history for our spiritual growth and repentance and thanksgiving. History can inspire hope, nurture identity, strengthen community, and ultimately creates a better existence for all. One way to combat the sin of racism and move toward racial reconciliation is by increasing our sensitivity to the history and feelings of African Americans. This must be continued beyond one month a year. Let Black History Month be a time for each of us to educate and equip ourselves to build racial reconciliation and unity in the Church.