

Learning Our Own History

As we look toward Black History Month this February, it is my hope that we will spend intentional time learning about some of the history and stories of our Black siblings in Christ. As people of faith we believe that we have been knit together as one body by Christ, all crafted in God's own image. This means that when we take the time to learn one another's stories we learn about God's own self. God, who was born among us, died among us, and has been raised for us, calls us to seek out one another in all of our multitude with a sense of curiosity, respect, and dignity, trusting that when we encounter diversity we encounter God's own face.

Too often we of the ELCA have failed to treat the stories of Black History Month as our own history. While it is true that the German and Scandinavian heritage of our Lutheran tradition is a bold and powerful one, it is *not* the only story of Lutheran witness and heritage that exists. As Lutherans alive in the 21st century we stand on the shoulders of a variety of Black Lutheran saints whose testimony and faithful service to God and their Church inform our life together today.

One of those saints is Jehu Jones Jr. (1786-1852). Jones (whose saint day we recognize on November 24th) holds the title of the American Lutheran church's first Black ordained minister. Born enslaved in Charleston, South Carolina, Jones gained freedom when his father rose through the ranks of Charleston's elite and bought his family's freedom in 1798. A tailor by occupation, Jehu Jones Jr. brought his children to St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church for baptism in 1813 and 1815. As soon as the Lutheran Church of German Protestants (now called St. John's Lutheran Church) opened its doors to the Black community in 1816, however, Jones and his wife Elizabeth made the transition to this congregation. They became an active and committed part of life in that Lutheran congregation.

In 1824, at the age of 46, Jones presented himself before the ministers of the New York Synod as a candidate to become a Lutheran missionary in Liberia. The Synod was impressed by Jones' witness to the Lutheran faith, and supported his ordination on October 24, 1832 in St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in New York City. Upon his return to Charleston, however, Jones was arrested and jailed under a state law prohibiting free Black individuals from entering the state. Jones was told by the judge to either continue to be jailed or to leave Charleston immediately, so he fled the city he called home and was forced to separate from his family.

Many events transpired after this, leading to Jones' reunion with his family and their eventual settlement in Philadelphia. There Jones established the first independent African American Lutheran congregation in the country, St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, in 1834. Support for this important mission was not consistent from the Pennsylvania Synod, however, and as financial challenge arose the congregation was forced to close in 1839. This very clear experience of discrimination and rejection by his own church didn't thwart Jones' commitment to the Lutheran witness, however, as his continued preaching and missionary activities in the city and suburbs of Philadelphia show.

Jones demonstrated a deep value of Lutheran theology and witness, even when it was difficult. When told by friends and colleagues that he might join a different church that had more diversity in it, Jones proclaimed that he ‘was a Lutheran and could be nothing else.’ Our church today benefits from the commitment, tenacity, grace, and love that Jones exhibited for the gospel in our country.

Peace, Pastor Marissa Becklin

