

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church Stories about Race from our History

In February 2023, members of BPC engaged in a racial equity habit-building challenge, hoping to carry out as individuals at least 21 actions of listening, reading, watching, engaging, or reflecting, during the 28 days of February. To enhance those practices and our knowledge of BPC's history around racial equity, we highlighted in worship a few of the stories on that topic from BPC's past.

Each of the 4 weeks in February, someone shared a story, beginning in the early days of the church and moving toward the present. In this document are the stories as they were presented.

Chapter 1, compiled and shared by Sarah Windes

The first mention I could find in our book of BPC's history by our own Charles Taylor is a reference to the first elders of the church, elected in 1832 – one who came from an intensely religious family who had worked to tame the wilderness with the help of two slaves, and a second elder who came from a prosperous family who owned “20 cattle, 8 horses, and 1 slave.” Both of these families moved away within a few years, but the third elder, Col. William Jenkins Thomas, was the first clerk of Session, the first elder to be commissioned to the General Assembly, and served until 1863. He owned several slaves, who attended Sunday service regularly. To quote the history book, “The conflict between slavery and Christianity had not occurred to the early settlers.”

In the late 1840s, the second building used by the Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg was constructed on Main Street, and that building still stands. We know it today as the home of Cabo Fish Taco. Col. Thomas, the clerk of Session, took the leadership in this project and his slaves helped with the work. Jake Deyerle, an enslaved mason rumored to be the best in the area, fired and laid the brickwork for a large part of the building, making the bricks by hand up on Brush Mountain and bringing them down. The walls of the building are 18 inches thick, which is an astonishing amount of bricks! Mr. Deyerle's work is now honored by a historical plaque on the wall of Cabo Fish Taco. Both Caucasians and African Americans worshiped in this building, and a couple were even members of the church, but they were segregated, with the enslaved people using the galleries, or balconies.

Rev. William Hickman, the second installed pastor, serving from 1853-1861, owned one slave whose name was Jesse, and joined the Confederate brigade in 1864, where he was mortally wounded.

In 1869, in response to questions posed by the Presbytery regarding whether classes were conducted for both “white and colored” children, the Session stated that there was a Sabbath school for white children led by the pastor and a Sunday School and Bible Class for a “different part of the congregation” led by an elder. Later that same year, the answer to the question was that “the colored people have their own pastor and Sabbath school.”

Rev. Samuel Preston, pastor from 1879-1882, preached once a month for a while for African Americans. Attendance was good at first, but fell off, apparently “on account of the colored preacher thinking that we were infringing upon their rights.” Services were suspended. Before and after the ending of slavery, a few Black people were members of the congregation, and several marriages of Black couples were conducted in the 1870s and 1880s. As Professor Dan Thorp, from whom we will hear next week in a program after worship, reports

from his research, in most of the 19th century a quarter of the population of Montgomery County was African- American, mostly, but not all, enslaved, so it is no surprise that Black Americans show up in the history of BPC as well.

Chapter 2, compiled and shared by Sarah Wiles

As part of our racial-equity habit building challenge, we are taking time each week to learn some of BPC's history of confronting issues of racial justice. It's a mixed history and we don't want to shy away from the complexity of that. Last week we heard about the first pastors and elders of the church who owned slaves and Jake Deyerle an enslaved mason who built our first building.

This week we fast-forward to the 1950s. In the wake of the Brown vs Board of Education decision Virginia Senator Harry Byrd called for "Massive Resistance" by closing public schools rather than integrating them. Ellison Smyth was our pastor at the time.

Ellison and his wife Mary Linda both spoke passionately at multiple Blacksburg School PTA meetings during this time. Rev. Smyth remembers that all the ministers of the churches in our community were united in the effort to maintain our public education system. At one point Rev. Smyth concluded a Ministers' Association presentation with a severe indictment of Massive Resistance and the group put forward a motion that the PTA petition the Governor and Legislature to nullify Massive Resistance laws. The motion did not pass. Mary Linda was ultimately instrumental in the fight to keep Montgomery County schools open. They were both severely criticized for expressing such views by the community at large and by some church members who claimed that Rev. Smyth was splitting the church through his activism.

During the same time period, Rev. Jerry Boney, the Minister to Students, held meetings with students, including Irving L. Peddrew, III, who was the first Black student to be admitted to Virginia Tech. Those meetings eventually led to the creation of an integrated Blacksburg Council on Human Relations. One of the charter members later told Rev. Smyth that Lize Otey Hoge Newman, the wife of Virginia Tech's president, warned her not to have anything to do with Rev. Smyth because he was a "Communist."

Once the Council on Human Relations was formed, it began searching for places to hold its meetings. The Episcopal and African American churches agreed. However, Rev. Smyth was deeply disappointed when the BPC session refused to let the integrated group meet in our buildings. The president of Virginia Tech at the time, Walter Stephenson Newman, was, in Smyth's words, "dead set against letting any group including Blacks come into the church facilities." By legal requirement, the first Black students were enrolled and graduated under President Newman's tenure. President Newman, however, set policies that kept Black students from living on campus, or eating on campus, and closed all buildings on campus to any group with a Black member.

Though he wasn't able to host an integrated group at BPC, Rev. Smyth and the newly hired Minister to Students, Woody Leach, worked with others through this time on integrating public eating places in Blacksburg.

Over time, opinion began to slowly shift at BPC. In 1957 the session agreed to host the Ministerial Association's Thanksgiving service that was integrated. In 1959 the session approved holding a lecture by Dr. Marion Wright, a Black scholar and activist, in our building, but it was a divided vote. Similarly, when the American Association of University Women was banned from meeting on campus because they had invited a person of color to join, Mary Linda Smyth urged

the church to allow them to meet at BPC. It was again approved by a divided vote with several abstentions.

We'll hear more about this on-going shift in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3, compiled and shared by Tom Tillar

Each Sunday, we hear Pastor Sarah say proudly that ours is a church that is open to everyone. Yet, over 60 years ago, Pastor Ellison Smyth may have liked to do that during a period of public school and college integration. But Dr. Smyth was indeed a pioneer in the community for openness and equality affecting the races.

We have heard on earlier Sundays from Sarah Windes and Pastor Sarah how this church was attended by members and their enslaved servants and workers, who were seated in the upper gallery or outside the 1800s building on Main St. We also heard in remarks last week during Professor Dan Thorp's after-church presentation how, after the war ended in 1865, churches became segregated. Former enslaved members of the community preferred congregations of their own churches. Thus there was very little, if any, integration regarding worship in the South into the 1950s.

Ellison Smyth gives a personal account here of how he addressed the question in 1960. The church was in this building by the late 50s.

"I was asked what ushers should do if Blacks should come to the door on Sunday morning. I said, 'Welcome them and seat them.' Then I went to the session and said it was time for the session to act officially and do what was right - that this building was dedicated to God and persons of any color who came to the house of God had as much right as anyone else. They asked me to nominate a committee to study the matter, and I recommended a chair who had come from Mississippi, and had served as a missionary in China for 25 years.

"I told the chair to make it a study group and not to come in with recommendations until he had a unanimous consensus. About four months later, the report was given which opened the door of the church to all. When the report was presented, I asked each elder what was his honest, Christian opinion on the matter. It so happened that the last elder in the circle to speak was VPI President Walter Newman. Each elder agreed to an open-door policy, but Newman said he could not agree, and he got up and left." Many of the elders who held their ground were on his faculty.

As was mentioned by Pastor Sarah last week, living arrangements and socialization of the few Black students at the college in the 1950s was quite different and restricted. However, Newman had presided over admission of these early Black students, and the first was admitted in 1953. Tech was integrated ahead of many other public and private colleges in the state, but the then president apparently held different views around integration into the community.

This 1960 vote led to the integration of the church's Scout troop and the appointment of a Black assistant scoutmaster. The Church Day school with 130 pupils received Black children. Dr. Smyth said that, while a few members left the church at the time, many more were added because of this open stand.

Chapter 4, compiled and shared by Anne Campbell

This month we have heard each Sunday about our church's history around racial equity. Last week, Tom Tillar told us about the 1961 Session meeting, when Pastor Ellison Smyth asked each elder to speak his mind and vote on whether to welcome ALL people regardless of race into our sanctuary. The last person to speak and vote was the president of VPI, Dr. Walter Newman. He cast the only negative vote. Although the Session was full of faculty members (including my father who was head of the horticulture department at the time), the session quietly stood up to University President Newman.

Today is the last in our series, and I will speak about two events in our church's history. Here is the first story, retold to me on ZOOM this week by Jim Vandeberg.

In the summer of 1962, Jim had completed two years of seminary in New Jersey and came to Blacksburg for a year on a Danforth Seminary scholarship to see if campus ministry might be his calling. Jim had been in town about two weeks when the pastor of BPC, Dr. Ellison Smyth, invited him to attend a Human Relations Council meeting. The Council was a town group addressing better racial relations. Ellison was the chair of the group of about 20 community members including several Black people. He suggested it was time to start talking to restaurant owners about the importance of opening their businesses to our entire community and not just white people. The group agreed to go in pairs to restaurants around town.

At the time, the few Black VPI students were not allowed to live or eat on campus and at that time both Black students and Black community members could not eat in local restaurants and could only wait at the restaurants' back doors to pick up the food they ordered. Ellison Smyth invited Jim to be his partner on the restaurant visits and soon thereafter, they visited with the owner of a restaurant on North Main Street who had placed a large sign in his front window that read: We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.

As Jim said: I was just a 24-year-old kid from the Midwest and had no idea what I was getting into. Jim said "The owner did not receive us well. He was angry and did not want to hear what Ellison Smyth had to say. But Ellison was steadfast and said to the owner 'my friend, we have to make change and people like you have to help us.' As the owner's anger was increasing, and he was inviting us to leave, Ellison said 'ok, we'll leave, but if you are not going to work with us, we'll have to figure out how you can continue to do business in our community,' whereupon the man said, 'Get the hell out of here.'"

A few weeks later, after the Human Relations Council had posted signs in supportive business windows and on telephone poles around the town pointing out the position of this uncooperative restaurant owner, the owner apparently saw his business suffer and reconsidered his position. He called Ellison and said he wanted to meet and was ready to work with him. Jim said that on the return visit, Ellison put his arm around the owner's shoulder and said, "Friend, this is going to make a difference for all of us. I will never forget you." And soon thereafter, Ellison and Mary Linda went to have dinner at his restaurant and encouraged others to do the same. Stating the obvious, Jim said "Ellison wasn't one to hold grudges."

Story 2:

In the milestone 1954 decision known as Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court ruled that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional. Prince

Edward County Virginia, which included Farmville, was one of five defendants in the Brown case, and the white folks in the county decided to close their public schools rather than allow Black children to integrate.

White officials in Prince Edward created private schools to educate the county's white children, but no provision was made for educating the county's Black children. Some Black children received schooling with relatives in nearby communities or in makeshift schools in church basements of Black congregations. Others traveled north to attend school, but many pupils missed part or all of their education for five years.

Against this backdrop in the spring of 1965, Woody Leach, BPC campus minister, asked the Session's permission to take VPI students to Prince Edward County to participate in a summer literacy project for African American school children called Operation Catch Up. BPC Session granted permission on a 9 to 4 vote for Leach's participation in the project but only after silent prayer. Two weeks later, the Session was asked to reconsider their vote. The Session agreed to reconsider.

The fateful follow-up meeting took place a week later with the members of the Session and others in attendance. The discussion was long. Letters of opposition and resolutions from white churches in Farmville to disallow permission were read. The purpose of the project and its chances for good and harm were argued. The final Session motion (in abbreviated form) read:

"Be it resolved by the Session of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church in regard to the request that Minister to Students, the Reverend Hugh Underwood Leach, be granted two month's leave with pay during the summer of 1965 to act as leader of the group of Presbyterian students to undertake a project in bi-racial Christian education in Prince Edward County, VA, that in spite of serious reservations concerning the wisdom of the proposed project, in spite of misgivings concerning the probably resultant costs and in spite of considerable apprehension concerning its likely results, all of which leading the majority of this Session to advise against the undertaking; but realizing the frailty of human judgment, even that of the majority, in matters of Christian conscience and venturing through faith to facilitate rather than to impede the call of God to His servant, Mr. Leach; and risking the costs likely to ensue, we do hereby sustain the action of the Session on March 21, 1965, approving this request and we do earnestly pray for the evident presence of the Holy Spirit in Prince Edward County this summer."

Woody and his students taught classes at the elementary level and stayed in African American homes, finding everyone to be very hospitable. Woody was a powerful witness for justice. He knew something was wrong in society and the church if this situation had been allowed to go uncorrected.

As we face the challenges of injustices that surround us now, may we be inspired and emboldened by the courage and determination of these Blacksburg Presbyterian forebears.

Presented in February 2023

Sources: RetroSpect, by Ellison Smyth, 1993 by Pocahontas Press; What Mean These Stones, by Charles Lewis Taylor, 2013, by BPC; Memories, 175th Anniversary BPC, 2008; http://www.collegiatetimes.com/lifestyle/cabo-fishtaco-houses-a-slice-of-local-history/article_7a2d5366-a401-11e3-b930-0017a43b2370.html; Zoom conversation with Jim Vandenberg, 2023