

MAKING HISTORY TODAY

TODAY'S COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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In Hebrews 11 we find what has been called the roll-call of the saints. From Abel, Abraham, and Moses through Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel, we are reminded of all those men and women who testified to and suffered for their faith in the good news of God's love and faithfulness.

In light of recent events in this country it is worth our time to recall many in the Presbyterian Church in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas who by their lives testified to a gospel of love and grace in times of racial tensions and violence, often at great cost to themselves.

*On May 31, 1921 there was a massacre of African Americans in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma. First Presbyterian Church, Tulsa and its pastor, William Kerr, provided shelter and a safe haven for many of those African Americans.

*In 1946 in Ada, Oklahoma the Rev. Mitchell Epperson, pastor of the Presbyterian church there, was forced to resign because he and his family defended the rights of an African American teenager to check out books from the local public library. It took Epperson two years to find another call.

*Little Rock, Arkansas became a hotbed of racial tension when in September 1957 nine African American students sought to enter Central High School. Rev. Dunbar Ogden, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, was the only white clergyperson to accompany the students to school. They faced a torrent of angry white persons shouting abusive epithets, some even spitting on the students. Presbyterian pastors Marion Boggs and Don Campbell were among those who preached sermons on racial justice at the time. In the meantime, Ogden was asked to leave his church, finally receiving a call to Huntington, West Virginia. One of his sons committed suicide as a result of his family's support of the integration of Central High School.

*From 1964-1968 the Rev. Granville Sydnor served as pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Ferriday, Louisiana, home town of Jerry Lee Lewis, Mickey Gilley, Jimmy Swaggart, and Howard K. Smith, among others. Sydnor stood up to the KKK and often received phone calls threatening him and his

family. Sydnor remained firm in his convictions, resisting segregation in all its forms. In 1968 he and his family moved to Minden, Louisiana.

*In April 1925 the Rev. James H. M. Boyce became the organizing pastor of the Gregg Street Presbyterian Church in the Fifth Ward of Houston. In 1950 the congregation moved to a new building across from Wheatley High School and adopted a new name – Pinecrest Presbyterian Church. In 1955 Boyce was elected the first black moderator of Brazos Presbytery. After more than 35 years of ministry there, Boyce died on December 31, 1959. He was succeeded by Rev. David Shipley in 1960 and then by Rev. Ed Triem in February 1968. Triem remained there until his retirement in 1998. Among the strong lay leadership from that congregation over the years have been Nellye Joyce Punch, Rebecca Howard, and Sharon Darden.

* “And time would fail me to tell” of Floyd and Selma Tate, Rev. John and Lib Minter, and Carrie Walker at University Presbyterian in Houston (an intentionally integrated church), Rev. Bob Walkup (Starkville, MS and McAllen, TX), Rev. Louise Row (Presbyterian pastor in Jasper, TX at the time of James Byrd, Jr.’s death), among many, many others.

As we make history today, may we do so knowing that others who have gone before us have given faithful and often costly testimony to Jesus Christ and the gospel of love, justice and truth.

(Some of the stories cited above can be found in ***Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, and Walking Humbly***, edited by James S. Currie, copyright 2014).