

## **Educating Predominately White Congregations on Black History month beyond February**

There is a plethora of information associated with Black History month which can compel some to engage in learning more about the history of Black people in Canada and in North-American. In Canada specifically, each province and territory offer Black History events during the month of February. However, the majority of people only utilize this month as a snapshot in viewing and learning about the vast landscape and world's topography that has been shaped by the countless contributions throughout history by the lives of Black people in their area, Canada and around the world. It provides an opportunity to share and learn about the experiences, contributions and achievements of peoples of African ancestry.

“Black History Month was initiated in Canada by the Ontario Black History Society and introduced to Parliament in December 1995 by Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected as a Member of Parliament. Black History Month was officially observed across Canada for the first time in February 1996.”<sup>[1]</sup> This year Black History month is being celebrated from Monday, February 1<sup>st</sup> through Monday, March 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>[2]</sup>

Canadians celebrate the many achievements and contributions of Black Canadians who, throughout history, have done so much to make Canada the culturally diverse, compassionate and prosperous nation it is today.” Celebrations consist of concerts, educational resources, symposiums, films and various events.”<sup>[3][4]</sup>

An area that I personally have tried to influence, has been in educating the next generation by volunteering my time at several elementary and middle schools in Canada and the United States. From early in 2011 until March of 2020, with the cooperation of several dynamic educators, I introduced 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students to the meaning of Kwanzaa, through books and videos. The schools were in Sahuarita, AZ, Lunenburg, NS and New Ross, NS. I also read books to them about Black history. One of my favourite projects was helping the children identify their heritage. When I asked the question, “Where did your grandparents or parents come from”, most of the children identified themselves as Canadians or Americans. I wanted them to get a sense of who they were and to be proud of their heritage. I introduced them to a book titled, “The Quilt of Belonging: Stitching Together the Stores of a Nation by Janice Weaver”<sup>[5]</sup> and I showed them videos about people from different cultures.

Using the cognitive pedagogy and analogy of the, “Quilt of Belonging” I emphasized how as a Canadian, American, and ultimately world society, our global society is made of the fabric of us all. Not that one strand or thread is more important than another, but that we are all intertwined together and symbiotically significant. All must be quantifiably acknowledged and respected. If you pull on one thread, try to disrupt, marginalize,

erode, or destroy one thread; you will ultimately cause possible irreparable damage and destroy the whole quilt and our global society as a whole. I used this to help the classes identify their own family history, heritage and roots. As an example, I used my own personal family heritage, which traces back to Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Kenya. I spent time helping them go back and identify their roots. Again, I further emphasized the importance of the individual threads being symbolically important in making up the whole quilt because, it took me a long time to be proud of who I am as a Black woman. I wanted to instill a sense of pride in the school children so they would grow up being proud of themselves and their heritage. Their homework was to interview their grandparents and parents about where they came from before immigrating to Canada or America. We then put together a flag of nations with each child represented as part of their classroom heritage.

One of the significant contributions to the legacy of Black History that has given me the most joy, has been the wonderful opportunities I have had to be a guest soloist at different concerts and churches during Black History month celebrations both here in Nova Scotia and in Arizona. Music is universal and has the ability to touch the core of who we are and the unequivocal necessity for us to experience a relationship with GOD and with one another.

The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus' as saying, "Thou shalt **love** the Lord **thy** God with all **thy** heart, and with all **thy** soul, and with all **thy** mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt **love thy neighbour** as thyself" (King James version - Matthew 22:37-39) <sup>[6]</sup>

I consider this Bible quote to mean that my neighbour is all of humankind, animals and the environment here on this planet and beyond. If I am to love my neighbour as myself, then it is really important for me to start by looking inside myself and see what is holding me back from doing exactly this. What are the prejudices and hurts that I believe are embedded in my DNA that have come down through the ages and still impact my thinking and actions? This is the starting point for each and every one of us in order to move beyond injustice and hate and heal the wounds that have been part of our lives for ions.

Taking Black History month beyond February would mean for the United Church of Canada to implement a curriculum for churches to follow throughout the year. This is a way to celebrate the legacies of Black Canadian's who have made an impact on our country's history. For example:

- January – An introduction to Black History in Nova Scotia (each Province or territory would focus on their own region)
- February – December – 365 Black Canadian Curriculum <sup>[7]</sup>

This is a school curriculum that can be adapted to your church. There are many ways to continue educating your congregation about Black History in Canada. It takes a desire to want to engage in learning more about Black Canadians. These are some ways to go about doing this:

- Identify local people in your own community to highlight and celebrate.

- Develop a sub-committee to brainstorm and implement different activities that celebrate Black Canadians throughout the year.

I think it would be great for our churches to learn more about the different cultures that make up Canada (i.e., First Nations, Islamic, Asian, etc.). This is something to consider as we practice being an all-inclusive congregation. As we say in worship at Bedford United Church, “All are welcome, all the time.” This reflects a spiritual community that embraces everyone. Let’s really put this into practice as we learn and grow together as a loving Christian family.

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## References

[1] <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-history-month-in-canada>

[2] [https://www.google.com/search?q=black+history+month+canada+2021&rlz=1C1WPZC\\_enCA847CA847&oq=black+&aqs=chrome.2.69i57joi67j35i39l2joi67i395i457joi67i395l2joi2oi263i395.7863j1j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=black+history+month+canada+2021&rlz=1C1WPZC_enCA847CA847&oq=black+&aqs=chrome.2.69i57joi67j35i39l2joi67i395i457joi67i395l2joi2oi263i395.7863j1j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

[3] <https://antiracism.utoronto.ca/black-history-month-2021/>

[4] <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/collection/black-history-in-canada>

[5] The Quilt of Belonging: Stitching Together the Stores of a Nation – Weaver, Janice - March 1, 2006 - ISBN: 189706649X - ISBN13: 9781897066492

[6] <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2022%3A36-40&version=KJV>

[7] <https://www.etfo.ca/SupportingMembers/Resources/Pages/365.aspx>