

From the Editor



In Memory

**Dr. Gene R. Alston
(1937-2005)**

The First African American Graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary

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This special issue of *The Asbury Journal* is dedicated in honor of all of the African American students, staff, and faculty who have been part of the Asbury Theological Seminary community, past, present, and future. It is also dedicated to the special memory of Gene Alston (1937- Feb. 14, 2005), the first African American graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary. Gene was the middle of five children born to Ottawa and Lucinda Alston. He was born in Washington D.C., where his father was a laborer for a construction company. As a child, he attended the Shelhamer Mission, an outreach of the Free Methodist Church to urban Washington, D.C. led by Julia Shelhamer, and under the oversight of the Department of Interracial Evangelism of the Free Methodist Church, led by Gilbert James (see the *From the Archives* in this issue for more information). At nine-years of age, Gene accepted Christ in that mission and with the encouragement of Julia Shelhamer, he stayed in school, graduated from high school, and with a scholarship from the Department of Interracial Evangelism he attended Greenville College. As a young person he often travelled and spoke with Julia Shelhamer about God's work among African American Free Methodists.

After he graduated from Greenville College, Gene Alston became one of the first two African American students, along with Douglass Fitch (also coming from Greenville College) to attend Asbury Theological Seminary in 1958 (see Thomas Hampton's article in this issue for more information on this). Their first week at the Seminary included local people shooting at the administration building and making national news in opposition to the integration of the Seminary. After graduating (Fitch transferred and finished elsewhere), Gene Alston wanted to serve in the pastorate in the Free Methodist Church, but there were few openings for a black pastor. He ended up going to Shreveport, Louisiana to work with the Free Methodist church and school there (see the *From the Archives* for more information on the work in Shreveport). While in Louisiana, Alston went back to school to earn a teaching degree so he could do work in educational administration. Ultimately, he earned a Ph.D. at St. Louis University.

Gene Alston moved to St. Louis and became a school administrator in the Alton school system, where he worked for 28 years until he retired. During all of this time he remained in a largely white Free Methodist Church. He noted in one article, "Over time my congregation accepted me so well that they lost sight of the fact that I was still an African American, with a culture distinct from theirs...they largely were unaware that their perspective was formed by a conservative, evangelical, middle class,

white perspective- unaware of there even being another point of view.”¹ Gene Alston was involved with the African American Task Force of the Free Methodist Church, constantly trying to build bridges between white congregations and the African American community. He was only 68 when he died in February of 2005. Since he represents the first African American graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary, it is important to recognize his trailblazing work, which opened the doors for other African American students, and so this issue of *The Asbury Journal* is dedicated to his memory, and in honor of those who have followed him: students, staff, and faculty who have formed a crucial part of the Seminary community.

The first article in this special issue is by William Pannell and is republished as the first article published by an African American in *The Asbury Seminarian*, the precursor to *The Asbury Journal*. It was originally published in 1969, but reads as if it could have been written in 2022. Dr. Pannell has been a major voice in the evangelical world, urging the Church to deal with the issue of race. I remember as a student in the 1990s at Asbury sitting in the cafeteria with Dr. Pannell and reading his works. He would occasionally teach as an adjunct at the Seminary. When I called him to talk about Gilbert James, who is highlighted in the *From the Archives* in this issue, we spoke briefly about how little has changed since he first began his work. Even in his 90s he still issues the call for places like Asbury Theological Seminary to do more to bring about racial reconciliation and true equality within the Church.

This article is followed by four articles written by African American students (three current and one graduate) who have all been connected to the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism. Cynthia A. Talley, a Ph.D. student, starts with a penetrating article covering the “Black Experience” in the United States, but she uses this framework not just for historical perspective, but to suggest that this history actually provides the African American Church with an assortment of gifts which can propel the African American Church into an important future in global missions. This article is followed by Gabriel B. Tait, who was the first African American Ph.D. graduate from Asbury Theological Seminary. His article builds off of his doctoral research and his background in photography, which allowed him to develop a method (called Sight Beyond My Sight- SBMS) for empowering the subjects of mission to become their own ethnographers through photography. This removes the usual lens of colonialism and provides a suitable foundation for missionaries to learn more about a culture from the

viewpoint of the people themselves. He uses examples from his research in Liberia. Mercy Langat follows this with an article rooted in Public Theology, considering the issue of the African American women's Natural Hair Movement. Mercy is also a Ph.D. student at Asbury Theological Seminary and brings a different perspective as someone born in Africa, but raised in the United States. Her voice carries the cultural background of Africa, but with insight gained from living within the African American community in the United States. Finally, Stephanie Rountree provides another African American woman's voice as a MA student at Asbury. Her article engages the historic development of Spanish language missions by the early Church of the Nazarene, but especially it focuses on how a white woman, Maye McReynolds fought against her own marginalization as a woman in the early 20th century, and used her position and voice to empower Santos Elizondo, a Mexican immigrant, into mission despite the gender and cultural barriers she also faced.

After these insights from African American scholars we turn to two white scholars, who are reflecting on vastly different aspects of the African American experience. Thomas Hampton, another Ph.D. student at Asbury Theological Seminary explores the often-shrouded history of integration at the Seminary. In particular, his interview with Rev. Douglass Fitch (Gene Alston's classmate in 1958 who later transferred to another school) opens up a first-hand voice on those events in the Seminary's history. This is followed by an article by Philip F. Hardt, a New York Methodist historian, who explores how Phoebe Palmer, one of the founders of the Holiness Movement used poetry to support her religious views behind the colonization effort to create a state for freed African Americans and freed slaves in Liberia (the same site of Gabriel Tait's work with his SBMS methodology). Walter Palmer, Phoebe's husband was actively involved in colonization work as well. While the Palmers have frequently been criticized for a lack of involvement in the abolition movements of their time, they do show an active concern for African Americans in the early 19th century and paired it with a missional concern for the evangelization of Africa.

Finally, the *From the Archives* essay examines the fascinating life and work of Gilbert James, the first sociologist on the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary. But more than that, Gilbert and his wife, Esther, were actively involved in ministry across racial boundaries even before the Civil Rights Movement. Tying their holiness theology with a love of missions and a

concern for racial justice, they set up a Free Methodist church and school in Shreveport, Louisiana (where Gene Alston would work for a time). From this work, Gilbert James helped found the Department of Interracial Evangelism for the Free Methodist Church and led it for a number of years. At this same time, Esther's mother, Julia Shelhamer, would lead a young Gene Alston to Christ, the Free Methodists would educate him in Greenville College, and Gilbert James would see that the Department of Interracial Evangelism provided the scholarships that allowed Gene Alston to ultimately attend Asbury Theological Seminary in 1958. But Gilbert James did much more, and through his pedagogy inspired a group of students who would go on to work against the "white flight" of churches from ethnic enclaves in urban areas to the suburbs, which would encourage racial diversity and urban ministry, and which would produce church leaders and scholars from the Wesleyan tradition that would help change many people's views on social justice and the evangelical branch of the Church.

In a way, all of these stories are tied together. I remember my own experience at Asbury Theological Seminary in the late 1990s. I became active in a group at the time called Bridge Ministries, which was concerned with issues of racial reconciliation. The focus was really on intentionally building relationships with people of other races and trying to bring change. For me as a young white man who grew up in a North Florida Methodist Church (which was known locally for one member who was a former grand dragon of the KKK), this was an eye-opening ministry. While my parents had opposed racism as much as they could (my father was placed as pastor of the aforementioned church even with his New England roots), it was the relationship I built with a fellow student, Patricia Jenkins, or "Sister Pat" as we called her, that would establish a permanent foundation for racial justice in my life. As a former missionary to Sierra Leone, and a lifelong member of the Church of God in Christ, we ate together at almost every meal in the cafeteria as she taught me about the Black Experience. We skipped classes together to attend Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Day events in the area, since at this time the Seminary did not recognize the holiday. I watched as she confronted faculty and leaders in the administration (including President Maxie Dunnam) with questions about the lack of African American professors and the lack of textbooks by African American authors. She would even do the research ahead of time and have a handy list of suggestions to meet the inevitable reply, "Well, there just aren't many African American writers in my field." She was the

one who would pull Dr. Bill Pannell to our table at lunch when he was on campus, and she gathered to our table anyone who she saw eating alone. When an older single African American student became ill, she took me with her as I cleaned his apartment and she cooked a month's worth of diabetic meals for his freezer. Sister Pat instilled in me a lifelong respect for African Americans and their history. She also taught me that as Christians we are all responsible for the well-being of others no matter what their race. In my own little way, putting together this issue of the *Journal* is born from my desire to honor people like Sister Pat, as well as Gene Alston, Douglass Fitch, Gabriel Tait, Cynthia Talley, Mercy Langat, and Stephanie Rountree and all of the other African Americans who have overcome the obstacles of coming to rural Kentucky and isolated Wilmore to work, study, and live here as such a valuable part of our community.

I hope we will all take more seriously the implications of Paul, who wrote in Ephesians 2:14-16, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." As Paul worked to bridge the barrier between Jew and Gentile, let us work together to tear down any racial barriers which keep us from moving forward together as the reconciled people of God.

Robert Danielson Ph.D.

End Notes

¹ "The Persistence of Gene Alston," *FMConnection*, January-February 1998: 3-4. See also: "Gene Alston, Julia Shelhamer: Honored in Spencerville Memorial," *Free Methodist Historical Society Newsletter* 7(2) (Winter 2007): 2-3.

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