# A History in Song

*Prepared and written by Alydia Smith*

*This hymn festival celebrating Black History Month could be used in the place of a sermon. Or consider adding other elements* (*such as children’s time, reflection, and offering*) *for a Sunday morning service. Sung responses can be sung as congregational hymns, or some could be sung by a choir or soloist. Consider adding liturgical dance!*

**Call to Worship**

God, you taught our ancestors to sing with their souls while in a foreign land.

**Through music, you taught Black peoples to persevere and trust in you,**

**even as their hearts and bodies were broken.**

Your power God, moved through our ancestors,

as the rhythm and cadence of music moves through our bodies.

**There would be no Underground Railroad or Civil Rights Movement without a song,**

**and there would be no song without you.**

**Let everything that has breath, praise you!** (Psalm 150:6)

**Opening Hymn:** “Come All You People” (*More Voices* 2)

**A history in song**

**The 1600s**

Slavery existed in Canada, as it existed in colonies throughout the world. The first documented slave in Canada was named by their master Olivier Le Jeune in 1628. (However, there are reports of slave ships arriving in the early 1600s.)[[1]](#footnote-1) Many of the documented slaves in Canada were “owned” by clergy. It was not until the late 1700s that talks of abolishing slavery started in Upper Canada. While auction blocks where being built to sell people, the church sang…

**Sung Response:** “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*Voices United* 262)

**The 1700s**

During the late 1700s promises of freedom and land in exchange for British loyalty brought many freed Blacks to Nova Scotia. Although no longer slaves, the Black community was oppressed and denied basic civil and human rights. As a result, there was a mini exodus in the late 1700s when Black Loyalist and Black Refugees (the Maroons) took the offer to resettle in Sierra Leone. Although the church often attempted to preach a “thin” Bible to Black peoples, focusing on servitude and honouring your master, the power of the gospel shined through the hymns of Isaac Watts and the Wesleyans, offering hope and empowerment to an enslaved people.

**Sung Response:** “ Love Divine” (*Voices United* 333)

**Scripture:** James 2:1–10, 14–17

(*a reflection or children’s time could be added here*)

The irony of singing “come almighty to deliver; let us all they grace receive” and reading such passages as James 2 with both oppressor and oppressed was not lost, which is why the Black church responded with …

**Sung Response:** “Lord I Want to Be a Christian” (*African American Hymnal* 463[[2]](#footnote-2))

**The 1800s**

In the early 1800s, Canada and the northern part of the United States gained a reputation for being a safe haven for the enslaved. Seeking freedom, many enslaved peoples travelled secretly to Canada through a concealed network known as the Underground Railroad. Many churches and Quaker meeting houses became “stations” on the route to freedom. There is much mythology on how people communicated with each other between these “stations.” Since music and spirituals were often used in Black communities to counter the theologies being preached, music seemed like the perfect way to convey messages of freedom, as music was (and remains) a primary form of communication.

**Sung Response:** “Go Down, Moses” (African American Hymnal 543)

or “My Lord, What a Morning” (*Voices United* 708)

(*silent reflection*)

**1900s**

Long after slavery was abolished (in 1833 in the British Empire and in 1865 in the United States), life remained difficult for Black people across North America. In the 1950s and 1960s, the fight for civil rights intensified. Several iconic moments included: Viola Desmond refusing to sit in the Black only section of the movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia; Rosa Parks refusing to sit at the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama; the three civil rights marches from Selma to Montgomery; and the demolition of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that resulted in the forced relocation of the historic Black community. Many churches joined in the movement, while many others went about their daily business warning activists to slow down and to temper their voices. When society actively put restriction on the rights of Black peoples, “You cannot sit here” and “You cannot march there,” the church sang:

**Sung Response:** “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (*Voices United* 575)

(*The offering could be received at this point, reprising* Voices United *575 as the offertory hymn.*)

**2000s**

Over 50 years later, the recent deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and many others have tragically reminded us that the fight for equal rights is far from over. Racial profiling continues to affect every aspect of society. From child care to educational and employment opportunities, it is clear that the fight for racial equality continues.[[3]](#footnote-3) What will our church’s response be to the current reality of Black and other marginalized peoples in our society?

**Sung Response:** “Hush! Hush!” (*More Voices* 167)

**Prayers of the People**

Let us praise God together in prayer.

**Sung Response:** “Hush! Hush!”(*More Voices* 167)

How good it is to sing praises of your goodness, God;

for you have called us each here,

and have marked us with a desire to learn about the gospel.

We come with many names:

terms of endearment that we cherish

and labels that we seek to one day destroy.

But you call us by one name, beloved.

We remember your healing acts of salvation.

We remember how you gathered the dislocated

and dispersed Black peoples in Nova Scotia

to build communities

and relearn cultures that were torn away.

We remember the Maroons,

who with their hands built a mighty fortress on a hill.

We remember Viola Desmond, Harriet Tubman,

Frederick Douglass, Lincoln Alexander, Michaëlle Jean,

Wilbert Howard,

and other heroes and she-roes of the faith that we name to you now…

(*pause*)

**Sung Response**

We remember how your everlasting love

healed the self-esteem and rebuilt the self-worth of Black peoples

who were stripped of their human rights and dignity.

We remember that you continue to heal

the brokenhearted, and bind up their wounds.

In the silence of our hearts

we bring to you those in need of your healing…

(*silent reflection*)

How good it is, O God, to remember your steadfast presence.

With hands in the air we offer you all of the things

that we can no longer carry on our own:

our burdens, our worries, and our concerns…

We offer to you all of the situations

that we feel ill-equipped for…

(*name/list prayers for the world and local community*)

(*silent reflection*)

When we feel downtrodden by our burdens

and weary to the point of collapse,

when we find ourselves in exile,

help us to hear the words of the prophet:

“Those who wait for the Lord shall…mount up

with wings like eagles, they shall run

and not be weary,

they shall walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

Hush, our weary souls, God,

and remind us once more of your everlasting love.

**Sung Response**

Amen.

**Closing Hymn:** “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (African American Hymnal 540 [Black National Anthem]) or “My Life Flows On” (*Voices United* 716)

1. See <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/black/index.asp> for more information on Black History in Canada [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. African American Hymnal (this spiritual can also be found at [www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Consider including examples of racial inequality from your community. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)