# Worship Liturgy for Black History Month 2022: Stories of Black Experiences in Canadian Churches

## Welcome

Today's worship will focus on Black experiences in Canadian churches, including The United Church of Canada. It will tell stories of two historical beginnings of Black churches in Nova Scotia and southern Ontario. The stories are part of the findings based on research by six Black young people affiliated with the United Church. Today’s worship will also include several creative interpretations from the lens of two millennials and four Gen Zs. We are thankful to God for the contributions from these people.

## Land Acknowledgement

(Use community of faith’s usual acknowledgement.)

## Opening Prayer

Come!  
Come into the place where God listens!  
Where God waits  
Come as you are  
Broken, whole  
Sick, well  
Satisfied or with deep longings  
Come to sing  
Come to cry  
Come to hear  
Come to see  
Come and be ready or  
Come to be made ready  
We are here  
As God is here too.

## Hymn

As abolitionist Harriet Tubman guided Black people to freedom along the Underground Railroad, she sang certain spirituals to signal it was time for escape. Among Tubman’s favorites was [reportedly](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/harriet-tubmans-hymnal-evokes-life-devoted-liberation-53824293/) “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The [melody was a signal](https://medium.com/dose/music-was-the-secret-language-of-the-underground-railroad-e91b3981d21a) that the time to escape had arrived. The “sweet chariot” represented the Underground Railroad, swinging low—to the South—to carry people to the North. The song, which is still commonly sung in Black churches, was performed at Tubman’s funeral in 1913.

With this in mind, let’s join in singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” (*Or* *choose a hymn or music you prefer.*)

## Stories of Black Experiences in Canadian Churches

### A Historical Beginning in Nova Scotia: Africville, Nova Scotia

by Amelia Brohman

(*Have someone from your community of faith read the following:*)

An important Black experience and history has had a strong impact on our Black members located on the east coast of Canada in Halifax. Africville was and is a community just north of Halifax. The village was founded in the mid-19th century by roughly 400 people of African descent, many of whom may have been formerly enslaved Americans and Jamaicans.

From the beginning of its identity as a Black neighbourhood, the structures around Africville were markedly racist. For instance, although the City of Halifax taxed the inhabitants of Africville, the people in the neighbourhood did not receive basic services such as paved roads, running water, or sewers. Furthermore, in what can certainly be considered environmental racism, a railway was built through the centre of the village, a dump was created at the edge of the neighbourhood, and a prison was also located on the boundaries of Africville. By the first half of the 20th century, Africville had toxic water supplies and no community policing, recreation facilities, or garbage collection.

In the 1960s, the City of Halifax began a more overt campaign to destroy Africville. Without consent or consideration, Africville residents were threatened, evicted, and removed as their homes and stores were razed to the ground. Seaview African United Baptist Church was built in 1894 and was a community hub. It held weddings, funerals, events, and baptisms and was considered the beating heart of Africville. Seaview United Baptist Church was destroyed in the middle of the night in the spring of 1967. The Black Haligonians found themselves displaced and disconnected. Although they were promised $500 and a new home if they left Africville, no one received a dime.

Now, looking back on the oppression and systemic racism visited on this community, we can recognize anti-Black racism at its worst. The church, however, has been rebuilt and is a museum, a chance to learn what we can do when we marginalize those who are different from us. All the events are part of a larger history of Eurocentric colonialism and its racist agenda.

### A Historical Beginning in Southwestern Ontario: Buxton, Essex County, ON

by Noah Brown

*Play* [*A podcast presentation on Black church history in Buxton, Ontario*](https://youtu.be/aWkxY7K54q0)*.*

### A History of Black Experiences in Canadian Churches via contemporary dance video

by Brianna Lane

*Play* [*The Black Journey*](https://youtu.be/3xLBWBRo8e4) *video.*

## Bible Reading: Lamentations 3:17‒18 (NIV)

I have been deprived of peace;  
I have forgotten what prosperity is.

So I say, “My splendor is gone  
and all that I had hoped from the Lord.”

### A Reflection: “Confusing Pain”

*By Amelia Brohman*

(*Have someone from your community of faith read the text below.* *Please* show only the [image of a Black woman in tears with a White hand with red-painted nails covering the woman’s mouth](https://medium.com/@solidaritycville/now-hear-this-final-word-on-listen-first-f0d16bf3800c).)

I will be correlating the image on the screen to the thoughts and feelings I have heard from youth and young adults that I have interviewed.

This image speaks volumes. The image is of a young Black woman who has the hand of a White woman softly covering her cheeks and mouth with her hand. The Black woman is staring directly into the camera and has tears streaming down her face.

This picture is evocative of recurring themes that came up in my discussions with people of African descent. The image of the White woman’s hand is refined because of the red nail polish; it is not aggressively placed on her face and yet it probably does not realize how threatening it seems. This is the soft-handed touch of a White person silencing the voices of Black people. Not aggressively, though, but almost soft and polite like. As one may say, polite racism.

From the people I spoke to within The United Church of Canada, there was no overt racism but there were some questions and assumptions by White folks, or not having Black people be included in things, or being asked as an afterthought, or even White people checking boxes off instead to say that something was done rather than asking Black people.

The face of the Black woman is silenced and frozen. There is pain but it is a confusing pain.

Based on my conversations with Black members of the church, there is nothing overtly unpleasant that they faced. They felt, though, that they were expected to give up certain things and be grateful that they were welcome in a Eurocentric environment. For example, for people who moved here from another country who were of African descent, it was assumed they should fit into the norm of a European White culture, and it was assumed they should have a voice only when dictated by White people and that what was being done to make them feel welcome was enough. There were no conversations being had on why they felt left out, why they felt uncomfortable, and what was missing.

It’s a confusing kind of sadness because it is not as always easy to identify, but it almost feels like a loss or grief to Black people.

### Spoken Word: “So I Wait”

By Jonisha Lewinson

*Play* [*A Spoken Word: So I Wait*](https://youtu.be/MRcM_05e-OY) *video.*

## Hymn

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was originally written as a poem by educator James Weldon Johnson, with accompanying music created by his brother, John Rosamond Johnson. The lyrics were recited by 500 schoolchildren on February 12, 1900, in Jacksonville, Florida, to celebrate [President Abraham Lincoln](https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/abraham-lincoln)’s birthday. While composing, James Johnson struggled to write lyrics that spoke to the traumatic yet triumphant lives of his ancestors. “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” became popularly known as the “Black National Anthem” and is still sung at significant Black functions to this day.

Let’s join in singing “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” (*Or* *choose a hymn or music you prefer.*)

## Responses to Reflection

### What Now 1

By Brianna Lane

As Christians, we must recognize how cruel we can be in the effort to maintain a norm, culture, ideology, or theology that is comfortable and familiar to those associated with the dominant power of our churches and society. We are capable of cruelty. This background information is important to understand and be made aware of because Canada has a longstanding issue with racism, slavery, and the mistreatment of its people. Before anyone can understand anything further with the stories told today, we first must understand that Canada is racist.

### What Now 2

By Sifa Zahinda and Brianna Lane

Many of the people with whom I spoke had simple, concrete suggestions about how our church can be less racist (and yes, let’s use the word “racist”) even if these behaviours and norms are not intentional. The starting place is simply to recognize what our culture looks like now, and although our traditions can be beautiful and meaningful, they are most predominantly European. This means that they exclude other traditions. After we have worked on recognizing this, we need to talk with people of colour; we need to create a safe space for them to be heard. We must recognize their realities, and this does not necessarily mean asking people of African descent to take on leadership roles for which they might not have time or interest. But being available as consultants for literally everything that happens in the church. Change happens when everyone feels heard, when everyone feels respected, and when we share our stories in an accepting environment.

## Prayer in Poetry for Black People in Canada

By Andrew Johnson

Here I am in a mosaic of cultures, not a melting pot,  
Yet, my Blackness is not seen or given too much thought,

While it is true I have other identifiers that can have me talking for days,  
Now is not the time or place as peoples continue their racist ways,

The course of time continues to play back echoes from long ago,  
Gaps, secrets, lies, coverups, and parts of our history we’ll never know,

An ongoing narrative of trauma, ongoing stress, prejudice, and discrimination,  
But, folks who never have to think about it won’t fully understand my fatigue and agitation,

In the Northern Hemisphere of the Americas, we call Canada our home and native land,  
Black history and experience is shoved under the rug with some of it left untold, unspoken, and banned,

People say you can look it up on the Internet in an age of information,  
We should be advanced now and know so much more,  
But, that is only the tip of the iceberg and leaves us standing at the door,

When you open the door to lived realities you will see there are higher truths, and find the capacity to feel for other living, breathing people,  
It shakes the status quo including those who pray underneath the churches’ steeple,

Empower us! Allow us to feel Joy! Let us share our lives and wholehearted “isness”!  
Hold that thought for the swarms of devil’s advocates, and personal identifiers being part of everyone else’s business,

We’re caught in learning cycles, and aware of the world’s problems without good policy or sensible action,  
There is no vocal power here for persons with Blackness, since the good cause doesn’t have enough bells, whistles, or dignified media traction,

Say my name, say my name! But, you don’t know me well,  
We’ve only just begun to name real lived experiences after recognizing how humanity has been so mentally unwell,

Why did the man uproot, enslave, dominate, violate my ancestors, and turn around to make a mockery and think it’s funny?  
It seems to boil down to a massive transfer of wealth, power, resources, and money,

The trauma of this atrocity is left stored in my DNA memory,   
I await for issues of apologies and statements written carefully and cleverly,

It would be wise if we could learn from our past in all its horror, twists, grit, and grime,

To your average citizen, the events of these racialized heightened days are like an impossible puzzle or mountain we cannot climb,

As though there isn’t any thread to follow for each sickening act of violence, hatred, and crime,

If you know your history well, there are no surprises under the sun here in our place in space and time,

I regret to think that maybe, if I play “the game” well, I can possibly see the day of reconciliation and reparations,

But then, I am but a person with Blackness in Canada with a hope for seemingly healthy, feel-good race relations.

## Prayer of Blessing

O Living, Disturbing God,  
Let us go in peace with you,  
to disrupt those who are comfortable,  
comfort those who mourn,  
and walk alongside those who suffer various forms of racial discrimination.  
Now receive the blessing of God all-loving;  
our Mother-God who holds us in our pain,  
our Brother-God, Jesus the Christ, who gives us courage to resist,  
and Spirit-God who binds us together  
in all that is free and liberated.  
Amen.

## Hymn of Benediction

“Amen,” *Voices United* 967