

# 400th commemoration remembering the enslavement of African-Americans in North America

July 22, 2019

*Nearly 400 years ago, the first African slaves arrived in what is now the United States. Today, many African Americans still struggle with the oppressive legacy. Three United Methodist agencies have assembled a collection of events and written material to help people study and commemorate the 400th anniversary of the first slaves brought to what is now the U.S. in 1619. [Read story](#)*

*Denise Rooks, chair of the Conference's Advocacy Team, has written the following to help us remember, reflect, and act.*

**By Denise Rooks, chair of the Conference's Advocacy Team**

Some milestones in history are meant to celebrate while others are meant to contemplate. One such milestone is the 400th year since the first African-Americans were enslaved and brought to North America.

400 years ago, in 1619, America began the atrocious journey into, as John Wesley put it in his letter to William Wilberforce, "that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature" called slavery.

Slavery, the intentional process in which humans are downgraded from men and women to become the property of others with no rights: they became what Jesus referred to as "the least of these." Like the children of Israel who were in bondage under Pharaoh, humans were made to forcibly do the bidding of the ones who were their masters. Unlike the Israelites who were invited to Egypt, Africans did not come to America of their own free will. There was never a time of mutual respect and friendship as there was in Egypt when Joseph was placed in a high position lower only to Pharaoh.

It is with this spirit of contemplation that we must be reminded of the past and the evils that were done to a people simply because it was convenient to do so. Was the convenience simply a matter of subjugating others simply because of the color of their skin? When Wesley wrote to William Wilberforce, he noted a tract he had read that morning that was written by "a poor African." Wesley wrote he "was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress" because of the laws at that time. Wesley went on to denounce those actions as "villainy."

As we contemplate the past during this milestone of the 400th year since the first African-Americans were enslaved, we must take a moment to look at this issue and we must reaffirm our commitment to making sure these atrocities never happen again to any individual or group.

This issue of slavery caused a nation to become divided, and we must remember this dark era from our past in order to proclaim, "Never again." This is our moment to reflect on how we got here as a nation and as a people and to decide where we go from here. Are we the people of God who now understand that we are our brother's keeper willing to speak out against all injustices, or do we silently look on in agreement like Saul did at the stoning of Stephen? No organization can regulate the heart, but through our Christian faith we can get a change of heart, and from this point on, denounce the wrong that did happen.

Through John Wesley's teaching, which was spirit led, we can see why the Methodist church took a stance against slavery at a time when it was not popular to make such a stand. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Jesus condensed the Ten Commandments into two simple things: he said we are to love the Lord

with all of our heart and all of our soul, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Simply put, we are called to love. It was at a time of great testing for the Methodist people against slavery. Today, we have the power, not to change the past, but to move forward as brothers and sisters in Christ serving one God not just with words, but with our actions.

Is contemplation enough, or are we called to act? Within the United Methodist organization, we are addressing enslavement issues. Our “Book of Discipline” denounces slavery, and through Social Principles, works diligently to stand up against slavery in any form. This is an honorable stance, but are there other ways to move forward? Are we still holding on to the past without resolving conflicts that have risen from those past conflicts? These are questions that we each need to be mindful of as we deal with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are challenged to be children of the light; we are called to love as stated in the second and third chapters of 1 John: *And this is his command to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Anyone who loves their brother or sister lives in the light and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going because the darkness has blinded them.*

Walking in the light means acknowledging the wrongs done in the past, as our “Book of Discipline” has done, and going forth together united as brothers and sisters in Christ where there is deference for all people, regardless of their physical attributes.