

Regretfully yours

Old Dutch Church issues apology to African-American community for past injustices

by Carrie Jones Ross

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The Rev. Kenneth Walsh. Photo by Lauren Thomas.

The two most difficult words to say: “I’m sorry.”

The Mount Zion African-American Burial Grounds have finally begun to get some long-overdue acknowledgement and respect, thanks to combined efforts of the Kingston Land Trust and the Old Dutch Church — the latter from which the entire African-American community will receive a big mea culpa on Sunday, June 5 at the cemetery’s rededication.

Several volunteers from the Kingston Veterans Association began to pay respect by caring for the grounds of U.S. Colored Infantry 20th Regiment soldiers’ graves at the Mount Zion Cemetery several years ago. Last year, the Kingston Land Trust, under the executive directorship of Rebecca Martin, recognized the need to do even more, and initiated an awareness and revitalization of the circa 1848 Mount Zion cemetery, the sister site of American Methodist Episcopal Zion church cemetery and the built-upon and overgrown burial grounds on Pine Street as well. Today, those sites are in review for historic landmark status on a state level.

At one point, several sets of remains of African-Americans were exhumed from the Pine Street location and delivered to the Old Dutch Church where they were reportedly placed in a mass grave containing a single marker and a modest flag.

But Kingston’s history will turn a new corner on Sunday when the Rev. Kenneth Walsh, dominie of the Old Dutch Church, will read aloud a letter of reconciliation he drafted with church elders apologizing for “our history of dehumanizing racism that allowed for the enslavement and subsequent segregation of our sisters and brothers of African descent.” The simple, two paragraph letter underscores the power of confession as healing. “Through wrong interpretation of Scripture and theological reflection, we, with the whole Reformed Church of America, proclaim that our contribution to racism and bigotry has been sinful and contrary to God’s eternal will of grace.”

“The Reformed Church as a whole has been working on this,” explained Walsh. “Two years ago we adopted documents from South Africa which deals with racism, equality and justice. It’s the first doctrinal standard that has been added in almost 300 years.”

Walsh, a direct descendent of the Mayflower settlers whose family had owned slaves along the way, described this process as cleansing and healing. He said that he didn’t realize the need for such an apology until after it was written. And now that it has been, said Walsh, so far the positive response and the swiftness in the “mileage it’s made” has been unmistakable.

“I was not prepared for the emotional response which was tears and absolute silence. People couldn’t speak. They were absolutely moved by it. [I read it at a committee meeting] They loved it. They thought it was the best thing that they have heard. I didn’t realize how much burden the African-American community carries here from those early days and from the segregation of the churches.”

Most congregants are very supportive of the apology, said Walsh, though a few congregants questioned its need, stating that they personally had nothing to do with slavery. Old Dutch Church Elder Rob Sweeney responded that it’s about the Christian grace of forgiveness. “A wrong has been done and has never been admitted. When we do this collectively as a church, it’s very powerful. We as individuals have to admit wrongdoing, and sometimes we as a

collective need to admit sin too.” Sweeney continued, “The existence of a separate cemetery for African-Americans in the first place was due to our dehumanizing practices toward that community. As the church admits wrongdoing, we should collectively seek forgiveness. We are not just reconciling with the community, but also reconciling with God. We share collective guilt. You joined the congregation and you get to share in all the good things this congregation has done historically and so you must share in all of our inequities as well. It is hoped that this apology will be healing, and eases the pain of others.”

Pastors appreciative

But will it? “Some members and friends of this church were deeply touched by the hearing and reading of this statement of reconciliation; and, they were visibly emotionally overcome by the sensitivity and tone,” said the Rev. Gloria Askew of First Presbyterian Church of Kingston. “And, I am thankful for this heartfelt acknowledgement. While some may say it’s a little bit too late, I am filled with hope, as this step moves us towards reconciliation, and the olive branch offered removes decades, if not centuries, of dehumanization and suffering to [people of] African ancestry. It gives me renewed strength to press on for more justice and equality to all people of the human race.”

The Rev. James Childs of Pointe of Praise Family Life Center, who has worked and advocated extensively in Kingston’s African-American community, concurred. “For the long, long time throughout the United States there has been this tendency of people to see African-Americans as less than human,” said Childs. “This has resulted in this whole thing of separation. Here you have a regular cemetery and the African-Americans had to be in a separate one — this was miscarriage of righteousness and justice. To have a congregation stand up and say this was wrong, and that this was biblical misinterpretation was very powerful. It is great for them to say that happened. Now let’s treat each other as brothers and sisters and let’s go forward to make this great nation the best that it can be.”

Childs said that he doesn’t really expect many people will look on this as a hollow gesture. “I think most people will realize that for him to write this at all, well, he didn’t have to write it. I think it was a well-thought-out, deeply felt statement. There may be people who say that they are going through the motions, but I think that most people will see it as what it is, which is an effort to make the record straight.”

Rebecca Martin of the Kingston Land Trust said that a committee on the city’s African-American cemeteries was formed eight months ago after an informative tour through the three burial grounds guided by Kingston City Historian Ed Ford. It was through the trust’s mass e-mailing that they connected with the Old Dutch Church, who immediately asked how they could help. Martin has invited over 40 Kingston-based churches to Sunday’s ceremony at the grounds on South Wall Street, which will open with a 21-gun salute and African drumming. Speakers from the Veterans Association, participating pastors, County Executive Mike Hein and Ed Ford will deliver remarks; then Walsh will read the apology letter aloud. Guests are asked to bring an iris to be placed graveside. There will be a casual reception at the AME Zion Church on Franklin Street following the ceremony.

“We as Old Dutch Church commit to the goal of [as quoted in the letter] ‘We pray with all our sisters and brothers of faith that we may strive for this one goal: to be the one family of God that celebrates our diversity while serving each other and the whole world,’” said Walsh.

For more information, visit the website of the Kingston Land Trust kingstonlandtrust.org or call 877-LAND.

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