

## **Report on the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church**

The following members of the Mission Working group were selected to research the information presented to us regarding unresolved hurt between the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery of New Brunswick: The Revs. James Reese, Greg Albert, & Amy Lincoln.

We completed this task in the following ways:

- Read the compiled research to understand the situation at hand more clearly;
- Met with WSPC Session on July 20;
- Met with WSPC Pastor, the Rev. Muriel Burrows; Treasurer, Gerald Delk; and elder Ben Coleman from the Robeson House Board on August 3;
- Met with WSPC congregation in a Town Hall Meeting to hear concerns on August 17<sup>th</sup> at 7pm;
- Met with elder and historian, Shirley Satterfield, at her home on August 24<sup>th</sup> to go over historical documents and gather information;
- Read minutes of the Presbytery of New Brunswick for the years 1898-1901 at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia on August 26.

### **1. Historical background**

Contrary to what one might expect from a town as well-regarded as Princeton, the truth is that, while there is great diversity in those who live and work there, this is a slow-to-change town where historically white privilege rules almost without question. In the early-1800s, in a totally segregated town where “good Negroes didn’t make waves,” there was a fire at First Presbyterian Church on Nassau Street which destroyed much of the sanctuary and the balcony in which the slaves sat to worship. Those slaves and servants, employees of the white folks in town, began to meet regularly on Sundays together and in 1840 the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church officially began as they first celebrated communion together. The WSPC received financial support through the years from its own members, Nassau Presbyterian Church (who took care of “the little black church down the street”), the Freedmen’s Aid Society, and the Home Mission Board of the General Assembly. Until recently, it was always a poor church.

On October 7, 1879 the Rev. William Robeson was received into New Brunswick Presbytery and installed on Oct 19, 1879 as the pastor of WSPC. He served as a beloved pastor for 21 years and fought for the rights of black people all along the way, preaching the gospel and racial equality. It appears that the white folks in town felt threatened enough by his relationships with black leaders outside the area and the strides he was making towards racial equality that they orchestrated his removal from WSPC. An Administrative Commission was formed by New Brunswick Presbytery and, in their report, recommended the dissolution of the pastoral relationship. As a face saving measure, before the commission voted on the report, the Rev Robeson resigned under extreme duress.

This was a blow to the Robeson family. There is no record of anyone giving Pastor Robeson anything. Without employment as a pastor, Rev. Robeson was forced to take any kind of employment: drayman, picking up students at the train station, and removing ashes and garbage. No one came forward to speak against the injustice or to speak in support of him. No one suggested an economic solution to aid this unemployed minister. Left behind was a memory of injustice, no assistance in employment, and indifference to 21 years of ministry service. To compound these losses, within 18 months, the Rev. Robeson's wife tragically died by catching fire in their home.

The severing of the pastoral relationship was also a blow to the momentum of WSPC ministry into its future. The image of the congregation was greatly damaged within the black community. Finally, the Rev. William Robeson left the Presbyterian denomination which ordained and installed him and eventually became a pastor in the AME denomination.

Despite this discriminatory act, the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church has continued to thrive in service to the community and envisions a concerted effort of outreach empowering those on the edges of the mainstream in Princeton and beyond. We can only imagine how a continuum of support from the presbytery through these years could have created a more prosperous and secure scenario for the congregation.

## **2. Ecclesiastical Lynching**

As we began our investigation, we wondered how an installed Presbyterian pastor could be summarily removed from his church by his Presbytery. We thought that, perhaps, there had been an ethical or moral misdeed committed by him. We also thought that, perhaps, the congregation was at least sympathetic with the need for his removal. Much to our dismay, we discovered that neither of these thoughts was true.

As to an ethical/moral indiscretion, none such was mentioned in the four reasons given in the report recommending the Rev. Robeson's dismissal by the Presbytery. For the record, the reasons were:

1. That while the Baptists and Methodist Colored churches are making progress as shown by their church and Sunday School Membership – Our Church (WSPC) – by the same evidence seems to be on the decline.
2. A marked indifference towards, and disrelish for the services of our church as at present conducted.
3. A general unrest and dissatisfaction on the part of others -meaning Residents of Princeton- who have been the Church's friends and helpers.
4. That the existing lack of sympathy with, and appreciation of William D. Robeson's methods and services is so manifest, that it is convincingly evident he will never be able to overcome it.

It seemed obvious to us from this list that the Rev. Robeson, a former slave, was perceived as a trouble-maker and was an embarrassment to the rich and powerful of Princeton and to the Presbytery. His words and actions for racial justice had to be silenced and the best way to do that was to take away his moral authority as a pastor and as an installed member of presbytery.

As to the congregation's collusion in this debacle, we found none. Indeed, a petition of 76 signatures of church members opposed the Presbytery's recommendation for dismissal was presented . . . and ignored. At the Presbytery meeting where the matter was discussed, both church members

and the Rev. Robeson spoke in opposition of the dismissal plan. Clearly, this was a scheme carried out solely by Presbyters against one of their own.

What, then, shall we call this heart-wrenching event that occurred in 1900? An injustice common to the times? An abuse of power by a governing body? Another unfortunate dismissal of a well-intentioned and well-liked pastor? All of these are applicable but we (the Synod investigators) believe that what happened to the Rev. Robeson is best described in these stark terms: he was “hung” by his Church. In short, it was an ecclesiastical lynching.

### **3. The Paul Robeson House**

In the letter which launched our investigation, the Session of WSPC asked if it would be possible to incorporate forgiveness of the Synod loan on the Robeson House with the overall reconciliation process. This was problematic for two reasons: first, the Synod of the Northeast does not hold the loan but, rather, only has guaranteed the loan at a commercial bank. Thus, such loan forgiveness is not possible. Second, the injury done to WSPC was inflicted by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, not the Synod, which means that the latter is not directly involved.

The reader may be wondering why the Paul Robeson House is even part of this discussion. The answer is that it was the manse at the time of the Rev. Robeson’s dismissal. Also, it was the home of his son, Paul, and the rest of the family. It was purchased by the church during the Rev. Robeson’s tenure for \$1,000 but was sold afterwards because of financial constraints.

It could be and is argued that the church’s financial distress was caused or at least exacerbated by the fallout from the Rev. Robeson’s dismissal. By all accounts, he was in the prime of his life and ministry when the debacle occurred. After 21 years there, he had become deeply loved by this congregation and respected in the community. It is not hard to imagine how turned off many WSPC supporters were, which would have had financial implications.

Although the causes and effects are elusive, one thing was obvious to us - the congregation has never ceased to view the building at 110 Witherspoon Street as the original manse and now as the ideal place to celebrate the life of Paul Robeson, an advocate and supporter of international human rights. Indeed, the church's goal is to make the House a center for the study and advancement of human rights.

For the record, the property was repurchased in 2005 for \$435,000. There are two mortgages still outstanding: one with the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program for \$60,658 and another with HSBC Bank for \$112,692. The latter is the one guaranteed by the Synod. Amazingly, all of the mortgage payments and other costs associated with the House are covered by fundraising efforts apart from WSPC's annual budget.

Attached to this report is the manuscript of a speech given by one of the attendees at the town meeting held on August 17, 2015 at the church (see Addendum A). It provides an excellent overview of the vision for the Paul Robeson House. Suffice it to say, that vision is entirely congruent with the New Way Forward and, for that reason, warrants serious consideration by the Synod for partnership funding, especially in this 175th year of Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church's history. Please see "Recommendations" below for details.

#### **4. New Brunswick Presbytery action**

As we were preparing this report, the Presbytery of New Brunswick had a stated meeting (September 8, 2015) at which a commissioners' resolution was presented regarding the Rev. William Robeson affair. The presenting commissioners were the Rev. Dave Davis, pastor of Nassau Presbyterian Church and the Rev. John White, a former pastor of WSPS. The meeting was well-attended and included at least 10 observers from WSPS.

After about thirty minutes of explanation, the body was deeply moved and readily passed the resolution. Immediately, the body rose to recite aloud one paragraph of the document (highlighted here in bold), followed by a prayer by the presbytery moderator. The content of the resolution is "just what the

doctor ordered” as far an apology goes and we are satisfied that one of the recommendations we intended to make herein has been fulfilled. Thus it is omitted from this report. Please see Addendum B for the complete resolution which passed unanimously.

## **5. Recommendations**

- We recommend that the Synod of the Northeast send a letter of affirmation to the Presbytery of New Brunswick for hearing WSPC’s pain, for making amends for the injustice committed by the Presbytery in 1900, and for passing the recent resolution appertaining thereto.

It is clear that we are called to respond when a brother in Christ and those after him have been harmed by the actions of the church body. We are to seek reconciliation by listening and learning what this has been like for those affected.

It is also clear that acknowledgement of wrongdoing in the past which has caused lingering hurt is needed from the larger church. The Rev. William Robeson was actively voicing what the gospel calls us to give voice to – the truth of the hurt caused by white privilege. In proclaiming the truth of the gospel, he was deemed “ineffective” because his words threatened the entrenched power structure of white upper-class Princeton. Holding onto the new addition of the Belhar Confession to the PCUSA Book of Confessions, with its emphasis on unity and reconciliation in Christ, we now believe that forced separation of brothers and sisters in Christ is wrong. We need each other or we are only a partial reflection of God’s creation and intention for humankind.

- We recommend that the remainder of the Robeson’s House mortgage be abolished by a grant from the Synod of the Northeast.

This is an opportunity to act and help reduce the debt of the congregation by the very group that injured it long ago. Making a grant in the amount of \$173,351 is a tangible way to demonstrate the care of the larger church. The recent apology and grant cannot erase the past, but it can be a symbol of good faith measure of commitment toward the working out a future of hope and unity together.

- We recommend holding a worship service of reconciliation with communion at WSPC to enact the unity that we seek and proclaim through the grace and love of Christ Jesus our Lord.

This worship service would include representatives from the Synod of the Northeast, the Presbytery of New Brunswick, the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Congregation, the Board of the Robeson House, and the greater Princeton community providing leadership – using the Belhar Confession as a basis for its liturgy.

It is clear that we are at a time in history when this could not be more important. God has given us an opportunity to show that “separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.” Let us work together to ensure that we have sought forgiveness and made a good-faith effort to reconcile so that we may all move ahead into the mission and ministry to which God calls us together remembering these words born out of the racial injustice in South Africa:

“The unity in Christ is both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ... which must be earnestly pursued and sought; one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain; that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;” (The Belhar Confession)

## Addendum A

### **PRESERVATION OF THE PAUL ROBESON HOUSE—RESPECT FOR THE PAST AND COMMITMENT TO THE PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Eleanor V. Horne<sup>1</sup>  
Comments before the PCUSA Synod Committee  
August 17, 2015

Good evening. I am Eleanor Horne. I consider myself a full-time community servant. I do not live in Princeton. I am not a member of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, although I have great respect for the congregation and its leadership. I agreed to serve on the Paul Robeson House Advisory Committee because I believe deeply in its mission and vision. I come before you today not as a member of the Advisory Committee, but as a member of the broader community that stands to benefit from the restoration of the Paul Robeson House and its role as a community resource.

Your consideration of our request is consistent with the social justice beliefs that I have come to associate with several admirable Presbyterian Churches in the area, such as the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, Nassau Presbyterian, and the Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church. In this community the leadership of Presbyterian churches is greatly admired and appreciated. Your support of the Robeson House and what it stands for is consistent with the social justice leadership provided by this denomination.

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Most of this evening has been spent discussing the deplorable treatment of the Reverend William Robeson who was separated from Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church because of his activist positions in the quest for fair and equitable treatment of the Black people who lived in the Princeton area. The record clearly shows that the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Church was complicit in this egregious action. I applaud you for considering the request of the Reverend David Prince that the Synod of the Northeast of the Presbyterian Church of the USA right the wrong committed over a hundred years ago by helping the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church honor Reverend Robeson and his son Paul Robeson by providing a grant to retire the mortgage on the Paul Robeson House. With all due respect to the past and without any desire to minimize it, I want to focus on the present and the future. I want you to consider what the Paul Robeson House means to this community. By community I do not just mean just the congregation of the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church or the Witherspoon Jackson area of Princeton, or even all of Princeton. When I say community, I am referring to all of central New Jersey. Our community is hungry for a symbol of the integration of ethnic groups—Black, White, Latino, Asian at a time when we are divided by small-mindedness, economics, housing segregation, and fear of each other. When you study the beliefs of Paul Robeson, you will find that he was a man, like his father, who fought for equality and inclusion. The Paul Robeson House can serve as a beacon for equality and inclusion in the Mercer County area. It will be a focal point for people who want to work together to improve race relations and enhance opportunities for all people. Paul Robeson House is important to the well-being of this community at this time of growing racial hostilities and unrest here and around the country.

Please do not minimize the importance of the Paul Robeson House as a symbol. The Presbyterian Church—indeed all churches—are filled with symbols such as the cross, the altar, the robes worn by the clergy, the chalices used for communion, even communion itself.

Preserving and restoring the Robeson house is important to us because it is a symbol that ties us physically to Paul Robeson and his heritage. What is more important than the house itself is the work that is and will be done there. Providing a grant that will enable us to retire the mortgages will enable us to move forward much more quickly in preserving and restoring the House and creating programming that will bring together people to work for the good of the community and all who live in it.

I respectfully ask that you think of making the grant as an investment in the future of this community. We need to make a strong stand now! Our community is changing and changing fast. The demographics are changing because housing is no longer affordable and greedy developers want every inch of land they can get to enrich themselves to the detriment of the people who live here. We want to secure the future of Paul Robeson House so that no matter how much the neighborhood changes, the symbol of what it has been and what it has meant to the Black community will remain. If you make the grant, we will be able to devote more resources to creating a presence that will endure regardless of how the neighborhood changes. We need to restore the House so that we can expand its role and reputation as a true community resource—a place where people come together to discuss and resolve issues of importance and celebrate accomplishments; a place where people of all ages can learn about the past and how it impacts the present and the future. Robeson House will partner with other organizations to address social justice issues to the benefit of all. We will strive to unite the community and make progress by using a variety of vehicles such as the arts, religious values and tolerance to demonstrate that the forces that unite us are far more significant than those that seek to divide us. Is this not what a church at its best is supposed to do?

So I thank our friend and colleague in this work, the Reverend David Prince for making the case for the grant as a means of acknowledging the wrongs of the past committed by the Presbyterian Church. I thank you, Reverend Greg Albert, Reverend Amy Lincoln, and Reverend James Reese for considering our request. The Presbyterian Church Northeast Synod has an opportunity to right the injustice that it inflicted on this Church and our community and to make concrete its adherence to Christian values.

## Addendum B

### **The Resolution<sup>i</sup>**

Whereas the Rev. William D. Robeson faithfully served the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church as their pastor for 21 years beginning in 1878 in a ministry that was lauded by members of the congregation, the wider community, and the Presbytery of New Brunswick,

and whereas his accomplishments included faithful gospel proclamation and pastoral care, seeking the financial support of the Presbytery of New Brunswick to insure the congregation's existence, improving the church's property, serving the larger church and building historic relationships between African American Presbyterian churches and leaving a legacy that defines him as "ever the defender of justice—standing firm for the rights of all persons" and describes him as one who "was unwilling to compromise on moral principles"<sup>ii</sup>

and whereas the minutes indicate that a commission of the Presbytery of New Brunswick voted to dismiss the Rev. Robeson on September 24, 1900 over the objections of a vast majority of the congregation and their pastor and one of the

four reasons listed was “a general unrest and dissatisfaction on the part of others – meaning Residents of Princeton- who have been the Church’s friends and helpers”<sup>iii</sup> which is a clear reference to the white community in Princeton

and whereas church historians who work with ecclesiastical records affirm that what is not said is often more revealing than what is said and that official minutes are intentionally vague and often avoid embarrassing information and that therefore a reasonable, informed interpretation of the commission’s actions lead to the conclusion that the Rev. Robeson was dismissed for working for the rights of African Americans and preaching a message of social justice that threatened and offended the white majority in Princeton while the history records that the African American community filled the Witherspoon Street Church to overflowing to listen to and thank the Rev. Robeson on his last Sunday in the pulpit

and whereas the Presbytery of New Brunswick dismissal of the Rev. Robeson led to a financial hardship for him and for his family that has been documented in the records of the town of Princeton, the Witherspoon St. Presbyterian Church, and the Presbytery of New Brunswick

**Therefore, be it resolved that the Presbytery of New Brunswick on this night of September 8, 2015 expresses its regret over the dismissal of the Rev William D. Robeson from the Witherspoon St Presbyterian Church and hereby apologies to the Pastor and Session of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and its members and the family of the Rev. Robeson for the hurt and hardship caused by the action.** <sup>iv</sup>

Furthermore, the members of the Presbytery of New Brunswick seek permission from the Witherspoon St Presbyterian Church to have this resolution read at the congregation's 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in November and sincerely request that the Presbyterian institutions in Princeton and Presbytery of New Brunswick commit to an ongoing process of racial reconciliation in response to present circumstances in our nation and in light of the complex history of Princeton when it comes to race.

Lastly, the Presbytery of New Brunswick offers this resolution in gratitude for all who have worked to preserve and correct and proclaim the history of the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church to the glory of God through the years and in honor of the memory of the Rev. William D. Robeson for his faithful service and the Rev. David Prince who made this resolution a priority and a goal of his in the last year of his life.

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<sup>i</sup> Moved, seconded and passed (unanimously) at the Presbytery of New Brunswick stated meeting on September 8, 2015

<sup>ii</sup> Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, Alfred A. Knopf, NY, 1988

<sup>iii</sup> Minutes of the Presbytery of New Brunswick, June 20, 1900-April 10, 1901

<sup>iv</sup> After the vote, the body stood and recited this passage aloud, followed by a moving prayer from the presbytery moderator