

South Carolina church honors memory of enslaved members

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CHARLESTON, S.C. (BP)—A South Carolina congregation took an official step to honor the memory of past members of the church who were enslaved prior to 1865.

On Nov. 11, First Baptist Church of Charleston dedicated a marker that says: “In memory of the thousands of enslaved members of the First Baptist Church of Charleston whose names we do not know, but are written in the Lamb’s book of life. Revelation 7:9.”

The bronze tablet was approved unanimously by the congregation as a way of acknowledging the contributions of the many enslaved members who served in the church but largely had been ignored by history, Pastor Marshall Blalock said.

“We can’t change the past, but we can honor those who were unjustly forgotten and work to bring the hope of a world where every person is recognized as uniquely made in God’s image, worthy of respect, and pursued in friendship,” Blalock said.

“Only the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ makes that possible, and this memorial honors people who through the power of the gospel overcame the indignities and suffering of slavery and now rest in the peace of Christ himself.”

Those who ‘worshipped in the balcony

and in the back'

The church placed the plaque in a prominent location next to the exterior door of the historic sanctuary where, prior to 1865, slaves would enter to ascend the stairs for worship. The marker is among the first of its kind in one of the historic Charleston churches where slaves were members, Blalock said.

The marker was unveiled in a dedication service attended by leaders from throughout the city and state.

Donald Greene, president of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention of South Carolina, who delivered the invocation, said, "My ancestors prayed to God in the balcony of this sanctuary, and tonight their prayers have been answered."

Leonard Griffin, pastor of Morris Street Baptist Church in Charleston, joined Blalock in unveiling the plaque. Morris Street Baptist Church was formed in 1865 by freed slaves who had been members of First Baptist Church.

"As pastor of the mother church of Negro Baptists in downtown Charleston, I know that I am, and we are, beneficiaries of the slaves and ex-slaves who worshiped in the balcony and in the back of this church," Griffin said.

Five months after Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, 73 ex-slaves "courageously" organized Morris Street Baptist Church, Griffin said.

"I am humbled and honored by the invitation to participate in this magnanimous moment of memorializing those believers on whose shoulders we stand today," he said.

Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg spoke and led in worship, playing "Amazing Grace" on the piano.

The dedication was followed by a presentation by Walter Strickland, assistant professor of systematic and contextual theology and vice president for diversity at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Strickland brought to light the forgotten history of black Christians in American life for the past 400 years, much of it forged in the crucible of slavery.

“The prayers of the saints for generations ushered us into the moment we shared in unveiling the plaque,” Strickland said. “God’s story of redemption was animated by dignifying forgotten members of First Baptist Church of Charleston and the ever-reconciling relationship with Morris Street Baptist Church.”