

Negro Spiritual Royalties Initiative

presented by Susan DeSelms, Minister of Music

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▶ ○ Black and Unknown Bards

Hello friends at Old South! I am SO GRATEFUL for this opportunity to share the Negro Spiritual Royalties initiative with you! We officially started this program at the United Parish in Brookline this past October 31, and have been overjoyed to find so many people just like us, looking for a way to do right by this beloved body of work, and by all Black Americans. We want to do what's right, but we don't know where to begin. We also know that many of our "good deeds" end up being unintended microaggressions. We fear that our attempts to help may be, in fact, ways to make ourselves feel better, while diminishing the people we seek to elevate. I know, I know, I know. So, I'll start at the beginning, and take you through my own philosophical journey with this subject, and how I decided to pursue the Negro Spiritual Royalties Initiative.

First off - for most white Americans, the word NEGRO is not at all comfortable to say. It reminds us of the word that was once so commonly used as a weapon, and as a term of extreme disrespect. So why refer to these songs as Negro Spirituals?

The term *Negro Spiritual* refers to the enormous body of folk songs created by enslaved Black people in America. As we've all heard many times, churches continue to be the most segregated places in America. In mostly Black churches, "Negro Spiritual" is the most commonly used term for these songs. In churches that are predominantly **NOT African American**, we feel more comfortable calling them *African American Spirituals*, or simply *Spirituals*. Other terms used for them are *Plantation Songs*, *Jubilee Songs* (named

after the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University) Afro-American Spirituals, and W. E. B. Du Bois poignantly named them *Sorrow Songs*. Words matter, and while using the word *Negro* gives me INCREDIBLE discomfort, I acknowledge that the discomfort comes from a place of incredible privilege.

What I am learning is that we cannot disconnect the songs, even in name, from the people. Those people were not American citizens - they were enslaved people without rights, or any other sort of protection under the U.S. Constitution. They were a people so far removed from their land of origin that they may not have viewed themselves as African either. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child... a long way from home" comes immediately to mind, and provides all the context we need.

[Odetta - Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child](#)

Today, I respectfully use the term *Negro Spiritual*, to distinguish these songs from other types of religious music, and to give credit where it is due.

Unlike other hymns and worship music, *it is nearly impossible to trace the origins of Negro Spirituals back to individuals, or group of people*. Yet, even before the abolition of slavery, Negro Spirituals had begun making their way into the collective memory of all Americans, and even into our hymn books, often labeled "Slave Songs." They have also become the source of **hundreds of thousands of** musical arrangements and compositions published, sold, and used by churches, schools, community choruses, orchestras, bands, and every musical organization imaginable.

Negro Spirituals are also the intellectual property of the enslaved Black people in America.

Few of us will ever have to experience the same kind of suffering that enslaved Black people endured in life, but we all understand grief, and joy, and rage and heartbreak, and hope.. The *Negro Spirituals* reflect the totality of the human experience fully and authentically.

In the words of Frederick Douglass:

“The slaves would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune...”

I have sometimes thought that the hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject.”

How is it that enslavers could appreciate the songs of the enslaved, and there is plenty of evidence that they did, while maintaining the conviction that these same people were subhuman?

What caused abusive enslavers to be filled with so much rage that they were driven to commit such extreme acts of violence and torture?

How did they not hear God’s voice in these songs, **imploing them to turn back?**

For the last decade, or more, I have struggled with how to appropriately, and respectfully use *Negro Spirituals* in worship at the United Parish in Brookline. They are some of the most powerful, beautiful, and expressive music that I know, and my own faith is rooted in them. But as America continues to wake up to the injustices faced by people of

non-European descent, I have had to think deeply about the role I may have played - knowingly or unknowingly - in perpetuating racism.

My own final wake up call happened when George Floyd was murdered on national television. As many other churches did, we felt compelled to respond to the event in online worship, and my inclination was to underscore our prayers with the plaintive sounds of "Stand Still Jordan." A violinist and cellist improvised on that melody with me in our previous Good Friday service, and the tone and sentiment of that recording seemed exactly right to me. That choice turned out to be quite controversial. Emotions were high, and we all felt powerless, angry, and scared. One person reflected back to me his frustration that, "A Black man is murdered, and we honor his life with what could easily be construed as cultural apopropriation?"

The challenge of how to appropriately use Negro Spirituals in worship was now in the front of my mind. First, why was it so controversial? We know that *Negro Spirituals* came from the hearts and souls of enslaved Black people, and are a living witness to the horrors experienced by them. We also know they are songs of survival and resilience, and a witness to a kind, merciful and just God.

Who are we to confine Negro Spirituals to the past? Remembering the enslaved people only by what was done TO them, and the power that was wielded OVER them, while diminishing the extraordinary beauty CREATED BY them doesn't seem right. Yes, singing them reminds us of a painful and traumatic time in American history. And... singing them brings us closer to the heart of God.

Then again, who are we to share in the whole-hearted joy, and emotional release imparted by them? Who are we to impose *our* stories and interpretations on them?

No matter what, Negro Spirituals are an inextricable part of American music and culture, and are found by the thousands in a vast array of hymnbooks.

How many of these do you know?

This Little Light of mine
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
I've Got Peace Like a River
We Shall Overcome
Lord, I want to be a Christian
I'm gonna lay down my burdens...
Go Tell it On the Mountain....
Ezekiel Saw the Wheel...
It's Me... it's ME oh Lord, Standing in the Need of Prayer
Let Us Break Bread Together
Nobody Knows ... the Trouble I've Seen
When Israel was in Egypt's Land... "let my people go"
He's Got the whole world in his hands
Do Lord, O Do Lord, O Do Remember Me
Wade in the Water...
We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder....
Gimme That Old Time Religion
Rock a My Soul
Mary Had a Baby
As I went Down in the River to Pray
Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burnin'
I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table -
In that great Gettin' Up Morning

My God is a Rock in a Weary Land
Ride On King Jesus
Soon and Very Soon,
Were You There when they...
Great Day! Great Day the Righteous Marching

Did you even realize that *all of these songs are Negro Spirituals?*

When I sang through this list at the United Parish, each prompt elicited a relatively accurate response from at least a few people in the congregation. Very few people realized that all of them were Negro Spirituals.

It's important to remember, I think, just how recent our "dark past" really is:

(Slide 3)

In 1619 - the first Africans were brought to America. This was the beginning of **244 years of legalized slavery on U. S. soil.**

In 1808 - the Transatlantic Slave Trade was **abolished while slavery continued to be lawful in the US for another 55 years.**

1857 - The *Dred Scott Ruling* determined that the **US Constitution** was not "intended" to **protect people of African descent.**

1860 - The Republican party declared slavery itself to be "a crime against humanity" as part of their presidential campaign. Though nothing came of it, it is the first example of this term being used.

1863 - The **Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves, but ONLY** in the states that had seceded from the Union.

(SLIDE 4)

1865 - The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the US after 264 years. EXCEPT as a form of **punishment for a crime**.

1867- Three northern abolitionists compiled and published *Slave Songs of the United States*. According to its authors, **the first 7 songs were already sung in both white and Black churches** by the time the collection was published,

1871 -(150 years ago) The Fisk Jubilee Singers, made up of *emancipated former slaves*, brought Spirituals to the concert hall, and were able to raise the equivalent of \$3.5 million in today's dollars, for Fisk University. The Jubilee repertoire quickly made its way into concerts, and Vaudeville, Minstrel Shows, and as always, church.

(SLIDE 5)

1929 Harry Thacker Burleigh, among the first acclaimed Black American composers, published *Jubilee Songs of the United States - Negro Spirituals* arranged in classical form.

1936 - Works Progress Administration, a part of the New Deal, started collecting testimony from former slaves. They collected over 2,000 first hand accounts from just 2% of the former slave population still living at the time. (If these statistics are correct, that means there were at least 100,000 former slaves still living in America in **1936**.)

Our history is the backdrop for our ongoing struggles with systemic racism.

Now consider that a LARGE percentage of the hymns we sing today are as old or older than Negro Spirituals. In most cases, we know who wrote them, and we even know something about them.

Negro Spirituals, however, are treated as though they are both everybody's, and nobody's property. In unarranged form, they are free for the taking.

We also know that formerly enslaved Black people weren't sent out into the world with a new life starter pack, complete with money, education, resume, and even proper clothing, and that time and again, Black Americans have had financial security kept, or stolen from them.

AND we know that Negro Spirituals have fueled, and continue to fuel, the music industry unlike any other folk music in the world.

It seems very clear that is time for us ALL to acknowledge the Negro Spirituals for what they are, and address the debt owed to the enslaved Black people who created them. I probably don't need to say to you that Black Americans have been last in line to receive recognition and financial compensation for the extraordinary contributions they've made to American music over and over again, because we all know it to be true. So, if we truly believe Black Lives Matter, and that we are the hands and feet of Christ, then it is our responsibility to start making things right.

At the United Parish in Brookline, after many conversations with people of various ethnicities in and outside of our church, and many more hours of thoughtful consideration and prayer, we have decided to turn our singing of Negro Spirituals into an act of restorative justice *by* collecting royalties for them, and using that money to support Hamilton Garrett Music and Arts on the border of Roxbury and Dorchester. (SLIDE 5)

We have committed to doing this every time we sing a Negro Spiritual in worship. Each time, we also print a congregational pledge in our bulletin that explains that the money we collect in the offering plate that day, through special contributions, and through matching funds from the Missions Giving team will go to support the development of Black musicians.

This is our congregation's pledge:

**The plate offering from today's service will go to
Hamilton-Garrett Music and Arts.**

**We at the United Parish in Brookline
acknowledge the history and significance of the Negro Spirituals
sung in today's worship service.**

**With great respect and deep gratitude
for the extraordinary musical contributions
made to American music by Black people,
we offer our thanks and praise to God
for the creators of the Negro Spirituals and their descendents.**

**We pledge that each time we sing the spiritual songs
of enslaved Black people in our worship together:**

**We will sing and hear them with *holy reverence, open hearts* and *great feeling*;
We will honor the unnamed musicians who created them;
And we will pay royalties to organizations
promoting the advancement of Black artists and musicians in America,
starting with Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts.**

**We understand that the debt owed to Black musicians and artists
can never be fully repaid.**

**Through our prayers, our gifts and our actions,
we will forever strive to do what we can
to end systemic racism in America.**

Sometimes we take in a lot, sometimes we take in a little, but we are committed to making this practice a part of the United Parish's normal routine. This practice has forced us to become far more intentional about when and how we sing Negro Spirituals. We no longer casually sing a verse of This Little Light of Mine, or Honey in the Rock, which is, I think, appropriate. We actively consider the real people who created this music, and we treasure it so much more. We try to remember that the road to justice and racial harmony is still

mostly in front of us, and will be paved with humility, gratitude, lots of patience, and our ongoing financial support.

And for the first time since I've been at the United Parish, singing Negro Spirituals does not feel fraught with morale complexity.

Imagine if EVERYBODY started to pay royalties to organizations that empower Black artists and musicians whenever one of the hundreds of thousands of arrangements of Negro Spirituals are programmed, performed, or enjoyed? What if music publishing companies devoted a standard percentage of their profits from the arrangements of Negro Spirituals to similar organizations? What if the act of singing and programming Negro Spirituals became *synonymous* with acts of restorative justice, healing, reparation, and love? Maybe, just maybe, churches would STOP being the most segregated places in America.

In the words of Langston Hughes,

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

With God's help, may we hold fast to our dreams, and become healers of the breach.

A few practical suggestions if you are thinking of starting this practice within your church, community chorus, school, or performing ensemble:

1. Talk with your community about it, and if there are people of color in your congregation, make sure that they are comfortable with the idea, and have as much say in the process as they want to have.
2. Be clear about why you want to sing Negro Spirituals. For me - it's because they speak to me in ways that other hymns don't. There's an honesty and an authenticity and a deep sense of hopefulness in them that my soul craves.
3. Be clear about your goals, and about why you think financial restitution is necessary.
4. Look for an organization that fosters the development of Black musicians that you can support that's close to your community. Talk to their leadership, and ask for permission to pay royalties to them, because in reality, this practice is about you, not them.
5. Remember that this is not an act of charity, and the recipients should not be made to feel like they should give you anything in return.
6. Honor your commitment, and know that our Black siblings may not immediately trust you to be reliable. It may take years for real trust to be formed. We have a long history of making empty promises to oppressed people in this country. A few well-publicized donations are not enough, and might even do more harm than good. Years of regular, dutiful practice WILL make a difference.
7. People often ask me how much is a good amount of money to pay as royalties for a song. There is no easy answer to that question. Money is only part of the solution here. It is a big part, but not the only part. Just as important is the regularity of the practice, and the willingness to keep doing it after all the excitement dissipates. We dedicate the plate offering, matched by Missions money, to the payment of royalties whenever we sing Spirituals. We may decide to build this into our budget at some point. Either way, I think it is pretty important to acknowledge the practice, and

the need for continued vigilance in the area of racial justice. Your partnering organization may have something to say about the language that you use.

8. If you haven't noticed, we now say "enslaved people" and "enslavers."
9. Many of our churches are not financially wealthy, even if our congregation members are. It may be tempting to consider all the ways that the royalties money could help our own music ministries - even ways that might benefit Black musicians on some level. BEWARE! We don't get to choose how royalties are used. That's up to the recipient. Period.
10. Think big, and know that generosity is something that always always comes back to you. Let go of what you think you might need someday, and trust that God will provide.

SLIDE #7 The Gift to Sing

[James Weldon Johnson](#) - 1871-1938

Sometimes the mist overhangs my path,

And blackening clouds about me cling;

But, oh, I have a magic way

To turn the gloom to cheerful day—

I softly sing.

And if the way grows darker still,

Shadowed by Sorrow's somber wing,

With glad defiance in my throat,

I pierce the darkness with a note,

And sing, and sing.

I brood not over the broken past,

Nor dread whatever time may bring;

No nights are dark, no days are long,

While in my heart there swells a song,

And I can sing.