

Jehu Jones

Bp. Kurt Kusserow's Remarks for February 13, 2021: "Absalom Jones Day"

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this celebration of Absalom Jones and Jehu Jones. I am honored to have been asked.

Lutherans commemorate Jehu Jones in November, along with Justus Falckner and William Passavant, who are remembered together as "pastors in North America." But we gladly remember him again today, during Black History Month, to celebrate Absalom Jones day with you.

Jehu Jones was the first black pastor ordained by the Lutheran Church in this country. That took place in October of 1832, in New York.¹ But Jehu Jones was from Charleston, South Carolina. He grew up in a slave family that bought its freedom. The Jones family joined the faith family of St. John German Lutheran Church in Charleston when, in 1816, it opened its doors to people of African descent. Along with others in Charleston, Jehu Jones seriously considered emigrating to Liberia to serve as a teacher there or as a missionary. His pastor encouraged him to seek ordination in the New York Synod, which he did. Jehu Jones was ordained as a pastor and immediately sent as a missionary to Liberia.

But upon his return to Charleston to pack and depart for Liberia he was arrested. There was a law in South Carolina at the time prohibiting free blacks from entering the state. Technically, he was to have been given 15 days to exit the state, but he was told he could either spend the night in jail or leave Charleston immediately. He chose the latter.

It is worth noting that 189 years later, it is still the experience of black men in this country to be arrested for doing nothing more than showing up black. The cascading consequences of arrests like this are only too familiar to us all:

Because Pastor Jones was detained upon his return to Charleston and required to leave immediately, he could not travel to Liberia as he had planned. Because he could not travel to Liberia as planned he was considered to be someone who did not follow through on his promises. This reputation, it

¹ All of the historical detail of this account comes directly from the excellent article in the *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. X, No. 4, Winter, 1996, "Jehu Jones (1786-1852) First African American Lutheran Minister," by Karl E. Johnson, Jr., and Joseph A. Romeo.

would seem, adhered to Jehu Jones persistently, despite the ample concrete evidence to the contrary that his ministry provided.

Returning to New York as a pastor ordained in the Lutheran Church, Pr. Jones found that the eagerness with which that synod ordained him for work in Liberia did not necessarily translate into eagerness for him to provide pastoral ministry in that synod. He relocated to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia it was suggested to him that he could perhaps become Methodist or Presbyterian or Baptist, as those churches already had black clergy.

I name these unlovely details not only to provide an accurate historical account of the challenges that our first African American Lutheran Minister faced, but to remind Lutherans today that when our church confesses complicity in the systemic racism of this country it is not just a pious posture; we can document examples of that sin.

Pr. Jones persisted in his desire to remain in the Lutheran church and to serve it as a pastor. Finally, about nine months after his ordination, the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Pennsylvania resolved to send him into missionary work (and this is a quote) “to labor among the colored people in Philadelphia under the direction of our Ministers there.” In six months Pr. Jones had established the first African American Lutheran congregation: St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, on Quince Street.

A year later Pr. Jones reported back the synod that during a fund raising tour to provide a building for the congregation of St. Paul, he had established two more congregations, one in Gettysburg and another in Chambersburg. Two years later, in May of 1836 the congregation of St. Paul in Philadelphia dedicated its new building.

I would like to end the narrative here, with this uplifting account of Pr. Jones’ work ringing in our ears, and perhaps give it a celebratory flourish befitting today’s observation. But the story of Pr. Jehu Jones does not end here.

Because the members of St. Paul were not people of means, they needed the help of the rest of the synod to retire their mortgage. Help was asked for. Help was promised. But help was not provided, at least not to any substantive degree. With some measure of daring, a letter published in the August, 1838 edition of the *Lutheran Observer* contested: “He has asked for our assistance – and will we refuse that assistance which it is in our power to bestow? ... Let him state the case candidly before [us], and if that debt is not liquidated, I have greatly mistaken the character of the Lutheran Church.”

The debt was not liquidated. St. Paul's building was sold at a sheriff's sale. To our shame, dear people of God, I confess that this story remains familiar to many in our church today. Not a few of our church's new start congregations among people of color could simply substitute their names and locations for the congregation of St. Paul in Philadelphia and their pastor Jehu Jones, and find that their stories are one.

What perpetuates this reality within our church? Clearly the underlying systems of racism and economic inequity in our country are found in our churches as well. But to these I would add another failing, and confess to it as well. A lack of imagination.

The dream of the Beloved Community is as difficult for our people to imagine as it is to realize. Or, perhaps, to say the same thing in a more positive way, the realization of the Beloved Community may be no more difficult than our ability to imagine it.

Can we imagine thriving black congregations being integral parts of our synod and diocese? Can we imagine thriving congregations in which black and brown and white people belong equally to the family of faith in multicultural congregations that manifest multicultural patterns of worship and discipleship and witness? Pastors Jehu and Absalom Jones invite us to do so, even these many, many years after their labor in the Lord has been completed. It is our desire to do so. Can we do so? We pray God that we can!

Let us pray:

Eternal God, you have made us in your image – all of us – so that we cannot be who we are without belonging to you and to each other. Give us the holy imagination to be the people you created us to be.

Lord Jesus Christ, our hope and our salvation, you entered fully into our life and took on our skin to become one with us so that we might share your eternal life. Give us the holy imagination to see you in the face of all you call beloved.

Holy Spirit, fire and breath and wisdom, give us the holy imagination to embrace your movement within and around us as your gift of grace.

Holy Trinity, One God, lead us from death to life, now and always.
Amen.