

Moment for Mission: Disciples of Christ Historical Society and National Convocation

Preston Taylor: Resurrection faith makes a difference in the world

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In the 1880s, Taylor, an African-American Disciples minister born in 1849 as an enslaved person in Louisiana, started a funeral business and bought land for a cemetery on the top of a hill in Nashville, Tennessee, the current site of the historic Greenwood Cemetery. It was a humane and revolutionary act because African Americans had severely limited access to proper funeral care and burial in Nashville at that time. In fact, all but one cemetery there had “covenants” explicitly forbidding the burial of people of African descent. White supremacy, in the racist fantasies that held sway in those days, continued in death and in resurrected life beyond death. White bodies, it was thought, should not be “contaminated” by lying in graves alongside black bodies.

Taylor, led by his Disciples faith in God’s love for all people, offered professional, loving care for black bodies and thus dignity to them and to those who mourned their passing, and he sent a defiant message of hope that in God’s New Creation, white supremacy would be exposed for the blatant, evil lie that it was.

Taylor also created an amusement park on the property he bought that allowed African-American children to have access to recreation otherwise available in Nashville to “whites only.” Taylor organized the first black bank in the city and took the lead in creating the Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial Normal School for Negroes (later, Tennessee A&I State College), which is now Tennessee State University, an historically black state land grant university that today serves a diverse population of students from Middle Tennessee and around the world.



In 1917, Taylor was instrumental in forming the National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC), an auxiliary organization to the International Convention of Christian Churches (ICCC), to serve needs of African-American Disciples being inadequately addressed, he and others thought, in the agencies and structures of the ICCC. Taylor served as president of NCMC from its founding until his death in 1931. NCMC was the precursor to the National Convocation, a vital part of the general ministry of our church.

Preston Taylor is a giant of our church’s history. His story is an enduring witness to the power of love over hate, the ultimate triumph of life over death. His life was a testament to the liberating power of the gospel to change the world.

Your gift to the Easter Offering, not only helps support the ministry and witness of National Convocation, it also helps ensure that Disciples of Christ Historical Society is able to preserve and proclaim the amazing, inspiring stories of the people of our church, everyday stories of courage, determination, and faith that make a difference.

