

Who Are We When It Comes To Race? A Fresh Look At Our Church's History

Summary

For much of its history, Highland Presbyterian Church and its members were shaped, battered and blessed by the same forces that forged other churches across the segregated American South. In that, this church is very ordinary. Occasionally over those years, however, our church rose above those forces to take stands or do the right things involving issues of race. In those moments, Highland and its members were extraordinary.

For most of its first 70 years, Highland Presbyterian Church followed the Southern Presbyterian dictum that pastors should preach “the word” -- that Christians should seek salvation through the risen Lord – and forgo topical sermons on politics, ethics, or the day’s evils. That meant ignoring rampant injustice and unimaginable violence against black people in the South. “There wasn’t a crying need that we saw or searched for,” an assistant minister explained as he looked back.

Beginning in the 1950s, Protestant churches were coming to believe that the Bible calls the church to move into the world. Highland was led by a series of courageous, visionary ministers who used The Bible, especially the Old Testament, to proclaim a social gospel demanding justice. Race was not the only “ism” they took on in a time fraught with fears and resistance to change; women’s rights and public reaction to the threat of Communism demanded attention, too. Highland members, acting as private individuals or public officials, also played critical roles in responding to the civil rights movement.

In the 1970s, the church’s emphasis shifted to a more personal approach to race as pastor James O. Chatham preached that members should answer God’s call to become involved with people who are struggling – in Louisville and around the world. Over the next 50 years, church members found a variety of ways to reach out. Then, toward the end of the 20th Century, their approach underwent a change that reflected a recognition that working together for change is better than simply making donations without consulting the recipients. Church members began working *with* Black Christians and others to understand and attack economic injustice and racism, while continuing to stock food pantries and clothes closets with their donations.

Never in its history were Highland members unanimous in their views on anything, much less race. Change came slowly, in fits and starts. That has not changed.

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Our mission and method

In December 2020, Highland Presbyterian Church's Race Equity Task Force asked Bill and Linda Raymond Ellison to do a brief history of how the church has dealt with issues of race through its history. We were recruited because we authored a 2008 history of the church, *Like Jacob's Well, the Very Human History of Highland Presbyterian Church*. The Session published the book as part of Highland's 125th birthday celebration.

We told the task force leaders that we would do a summary of what we found concerning race while researching the book -- with important caveats:

- Because of time limitations and the Covid-19 pandemic, we cannot do additional research. We can't return to our sources to check or clarify information; records have been returned to their homes (the Presbyterian Historical Society, other churches, individuals and the church safe, among them) and many of the older members we interviewed have died.
- We can't parse the most important element behind racism through the years: attitudes and assumptions. We have hints about what our forbearers thought – but only based on things our church members **did** and the times in which they lived. We are also unable to dig into the attitudes of most Black people about our church, the other part of the equation. We found no diaries. Minutes and other documentary records tend to record actions, not feelings. Racism is often reflected in sins of omission. We have few records on steps our church fathers didn't take or on issues they didn't discuss.
- We can't dig into the finances of our founding members or those who followed. Was our church built with money tainted by racial exploitation? That's beyond our ability to determine.
- Our research and book ended with 2008. In the years since, Highland has continued to struggle with racial justice in a time and community where racial segregation, economic inequities and injustice thrive. When we consider the last 12 years, our only resource is our memory. That is an uncertain tool for any historian.
- We will work to avoid drawing conclusions or judging our forefathers by the standards of our time.
- Because our thesis is that Highland Presbyterian Church was both an ordinary church shaped by its time and an extraordinary church whose members stood up at key moments to shape events, this summary must include some context. Providing context for 148 years of history is a formidable job, best left to historians writing weighty books. We can provide no more than brief summaries that fail to reflect the complexity of those years and issues -- but may suggest more cause for reading.

We began by combing our book for passages that refer to race and found more than 60 mentions of people who were Black and issues involving race. The result we offer here is a modest story about very human Christians who wanted to do the right thing and sometimes did.

Our beginnings – A new church in a time of divisions

In 1873, Harriet Larrabee, wife of a former Union Army doctor, canvased her emerging Highland's neighborhood for children to attend the new Sunday school that would become Highland Presbyterian Church. It was a happy project in a tough time for the nation and the Presbyterian church.

A Union Civil War General, Ulysses S. Grant, was President of a country sliding into an economic depression and nursing still-raw tensions from the Civil War that had ended only eight years earlier. As the war ended, slavery, states' rights and long festering issues of governance had split the national Presbyterian Church and divided Presbyterians in Louisville, where church members had ties to both the North and South. Because Louisville was in a border state, its Presbyterian churches each chose between the northern Presbyterian Church (USA) and southern Presbyterian Church (US), often with considerable acrimony and sometimes by splitting their church. When the decision making was done, Louisville had Presbyterian churches on both sides of the divide. That would be important to the new Highland Presbyterian Church.

Throughout the South, Black people were suffering unimaginable violence, lynching, beatings, torture, terrorism, and murder. If the white people forming the new Presbyterian Church at the corner of Highland Ave. and East Broadway (now Cherokee Road) knew or cared about that violence, they didn't record their concerns. Americans were struggling with how the newly freed Black people would fit into society. Outside the former Confederate states and legislative chambers, the easiest way to deal with that question was to ignore the trouble when possible. In that, the new members of Highland appear to have been a very ordinary reflection of their time.

What made Highland extraordinary was its congregation's willingness and ability to bridge differences left by the Civil War and church division. Highland was founded May 15, 1882, formally constituted according to the Southern church's Book of Church Order, making it part of the Southern Presbyterian Church (US). However, the church's first elected officer, a deacon, was a Connecticut Yankee, W. C. Nones, who had fought for the Union at Shiloh. The new church drew its first members from Presbyterian churches associated with both the Northern and Southern branches. And it called its first pastor from the South. Tennessean Alexander McClure arrived in Louisville with his wife, a Mississippi woman whose father and brother had been killed by Union soldiers like those her husband would face in his pulpit.

Highland's ability to bring people together across differences at its beginning established a precedent that served throughout its history. The church's members have always reflected a range of views. We can make few assumptions in this report, but we will assume that at any given time, some members disagreed on issues of the day, sometimes vehemently, even as they served the church together. That would have been as true concerning race as it was for all the other issues that divided.

In 1888, Highland dedicated its first real sanctuary and installed a new minister, Robert Ernest Caldwell, who was called from a pugnaciously southern church in Frankfort, Ky. His

installation charge was to preach “the word,” salvation through the risen Lord – not political sermons on issues like the KKK, which was active in Kentucky. That charge was entirely consistent with the Southern Presbyterian church’s approach to religion; it focused on the eternal, not the unpleasant present.

Calling on Southern preachers to preach “the word” seemed to give them permission for proof texting, the practice of examining Bible passages, verses or even phrases, out of context. Ministers across the South found Bible verses that seemed to endorse slavery and racial prejudice and pounded home the message that Black people should keep their “place.”

The most important passage used to endorse racism may have been Genesis 9:18-27, a sequel to the story about Noah’s Ark and the flood. In the story, Noah got drunk and fell asleep naked. One of his sons, Ham, looked on his father’s nakedness, a violation of the law, and told his brothers. They covered Noah without looking. Ham’s son, Canaan, and his progeny were cursed with being slaves forever. Canaan was sent south to Africa. In the King James version used in the early Southern church, the passage is a nearly unreadable account of genealogy, politics and land distribution, but its impact has been enormous, especially when it had been embellished by centuries of rabbinic teachings and religious traditions suggesting that Ham was black. The “Curse of Ham” has been the subject of rich debate among scholars for centuries, but no one denies its impact on Christianity in the American South; The story gave church-going Southerners permission for slavery. “Slavery was necessary in the white Southern mind to control the ungovernable black,” religious scholar Stephen R. Haynes told the *New York Times* in 2003. “Slavery is the response to Ham’s rebellious behavior.”

We don’t know exactly what Highland’s ministers preached, but our early pastors were apparently content to stick to preaching “the word” well into the 20th Century. While we don’t know if our Highland forefathers focused on the Curse of Ham, there is considerable evidence that they absorbed the ethic that Blacks are inferior to whites.

All of Highland’s original members were white, but by 1890, the church directory listed two Black women as members. Ann Cass and Tina Scott were employees of white church members and probably attended church with their employers – a Southern custom. The directory lists them without the honorific titles Mrs. or Miss used with all other women members, and their names are followed by the notation, “(col.)” Highland’s register would not list other Black members for a very long time.

Black people were welcomed to Highland’s sanctuary to speak for mission projects like the John Little Mission (later the Presbyterian Community Center in Smoketown) or for special programs. However, church members were apparently content to live and worship in a world that was white – except for their Black employees. The Kentucky legislature eased the way by refusing to endorse the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution (the ones that ended slavery and guaranteed former slaves the rights of full citizens) until 1976 and by passing legislation over the years to mandate segregation. We found no record that Highland Presbyterian Church ever objected.

Highland's relationships with the church's Black employees seems to have been marked by paternalism, low pay, and often real affection. The deacons' minutes record many frustrations with custodians who didn't stay long. However, over its history, Highland also employed a series of Black custodians -- Thomas McAvaney, Luther Long, Dolly Brown and Nardie Jackson among them -- who gave long and sometimes sacrificial service. They often worked during Sunday worship services, but didn't attend them. They were honored at the end of their service to the church, and Long and Mrs. Brown joined Highland after they retired. Stories about their time at Highland abound. When stories were told, the custodians were always referred to by their first names, never as Mr. Long, Mrs. Brown, Mr. McAvaney or Mr. Jackson, even during periods when the titles were standard for white adults. The deacons and later finance committees did a never-ending dance trying to balance custodians' pleas for more help and higher pay against church finances that were never enough to cover everything. During hard times, when the church cut pay and laid off other employees, custodians' paychecks were cut, too. The church was sometimes slow to restore those cuts.

The tragic story of Thomas McAvaney illustrates the complex combination of dedication, affection and racial separation that characterized Highland's relationship with Black employees.

McAvaney began working for Highland in spring 1930 for \$1,143.75. (Nationally, the average wage in 1930 was \$1,368; the average entrance rate for common labor 45 cents an hour. Those were Depression years. The unemployment rate for the Black population in Louisville rose to 37 percent by 1933.) As the Depression deepened, the church's finances were severely stressed and its heating system in serious need of replacement. As part of the austerity effort, McAvaney's annual pay was cut to \$900.

In mid-January 1937, rain, frozen ground and a rising Ohio River triggered a disaster still respectfully remembered in Louisville as The 1937 Flood. Huge sections of the city -- 70 percent by some estimates -- were covered with water laced with industrial waste, sewerage, and dead animals. Higher islands, like the Highlands, provided the only refuge for 75,000 refugees. Highland Presbyterian Church became a refugee center that provided shelter for 75 to 125 people a day. About 30 of those sheltered in the church were Black, remarkable in a day when Louisville was resolutely segregated.

Church women worked long shifts to provide food and shelter. McAvaney worked around the clock for 13 intense days to provide for the refugees and keep the boiler operating. It was too much. McAvaney, 55, died of a heart attack Feb. 15. The day of his funeral, McAvaney's body lay "in state" for two hours at Highland before moving to his own church, Lampton Baptist. Highland minister Peter Pleune joined Lampton's Rev. J. M. Williams in conducting the service. A "goodly number" of Highland members reportedly attended.

Throughout its history, much of Highland's relationship to people of color -- in Louisville and beyond -- centered on charity. In the church's early days, most money used for benevolences was raised and allocated by Highland's women, who knew a good deal about discrimination by white men. Those women raised money through fund-raising bazaars and dinners and allocated it to a dizzying array of causes, including John Little's Mission for Negroes, later Presbyterian

Community Center in Smoketown. The women's donations were too small to have a significant impact, but they reflected concern at a time of real need. So did the women's support for missionaries to China and Korea. The women put considerable energy into informing themselves about missions. They formed a study group to read books such as *In Four Continents*, and to invite a missionary to speak every month. In 1910, one of those speakers had just returned from a mission in Luebo (then in the Belgian Congo). According to minutes of the meeting, the missionary reported that "the Africans wore nothing but a loin cloth and that they clutched with one hand all day long." The minutes seem to suggest that concern for their clothing prevented Africans from using two hands for work.

Highland Presbyterian Church after World War II

The end of World War II in 1945 changed the nation, its people and its churches, including Highland Presbyterian Church. However, the changes were different for returning soldiers who were white and those who were Black.

The horrors of war and the Atomic Era that ended it, turned many Americans to seek God through organized religion. Returning soldiers fathered record numbers of children. Their growing families caused church attendance to boom. Southern Presbyterian church membership grew by 50 percent, and Highland followed the pattern. Veterans missed the comradery of the war years and the brotherhood that developed when men faced danger together. Their white congregations focused on the linked threats of Communism and the Cold War. Highland's all-white men's group flourished through fear and friendship. Couples' activities and the Sunday school exploded in size and vigor. Crowds packed the sanctuary on Sundays.

Black soldiers who had served their country well returned from war with a fresh appreciation of their own abilities and rights. They wanted to exercise the rights they'd defended and to use the skills they'd developed during the war. They didn't intend to return to the pre-war racial order of discrimination, segregation and limited opportunity. They sought profound change at a time when whites wanted safety and stability. Black churches and colleges served as command centers for a crescendo of civil rights marches, sit ins and law suits challenging the status quo.

At this point in human affairs, Highland called the first of a series of pastors with courage and vision who took on issues of race and justice. Over the next 70 years, Highland's pastors led Highland's congregation -- and our broader Louisville community -- to face issues of race. Each pastor's approach was very different, and so was the congregation's response. During that post-war period, Highland Presbyterian Church made a profoundly important statement on race, perhaps without fully realizing what it had done. And, the church began to haltingly consider its responsibilities in a country divided by racial injustice. Even small steps toward racial change took courage. The pastors and some members of the congregation displayed that courage.

The first of the post-war preachers was William Benfield, a professor at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, which had ties to both the northern and southern branches of the church. Benfield really didn't want to leave a job he loved for Highland's pulpit and a minister's responsibilities. He arrived at Highland in 1949 with a prophetic fire, a yellow convertible, a zeal for fun and personal inner demons (probably including alcoholism) that would cause him woe.

Benfield knew how to “rattle the rocks” with sermons that packed new members into Highland’s sanctuary, which was fast becoming too small. His sermons were amplified by Highland’s weekly radio broadcast of its services.

Benfield’s message was different in tone and emphasis from what Highland had heard for more than half a century. The post-war religion boom meant preachers no longer had to urge their flocks to come to God. With the pews suddenly full, preachers needed to tell their congregations what to do with their faith. Benfield did. He urged Highland’s members to take their religion into their schools and workplaces. He challenged parents to talk to their children about morality as much as they did about manners and education. Then, on Dec. 12, 1954, in the middle of advent, Benfield broke all the rules. He preached that the church had a duty to end racial segregation.

The sermon drew national attention at a time when the South was struggling with how to respond to the U. S. Supreme Court’s May 1954 decision on *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*. The court had ruled that maintaining separate educational facilities for white and black students – state-mandated segregation -- was inherently unequal and unconstitutional. Benfield agreed and picked Christmas as the right time to take a stand: “What is Christmas?” he thundered. “Didn’t it all begin when God came down to earth so the Son of his Love could be known to all men? And could there be any better way to observe his birthday than in this hour of destiny to resolve to follow our Lord and . . . testify not only by word but by witness of life that every man who believes in Jesus Christ is one with every other believer. . .?”

Back in the Spring, the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian church had issued a long statement proclaiming that “every person is of infinite value and is endowed with infinite possibilities because we are all made in the image of God.” However, many Southern pastors disagreed vehemently with their leaders’ conclusion that Presbyterian churches, colleges and school should be integrated. One Mississippi church leader proclaimed segregation “one of nature’s universal laws.” The nation took notice when Benfield differed. *Time* magazine cited him as an exception to the “muted Trumpets” in Southern churches on racial issues.

Highland members may have been stunned, but many accepted Benfield’s preaching. “He sort of . . . blended his . . . social gospel convictions with what I would call warm Presbyterian orthodoxy,” said a later Louisville Presbyterian Seminary President Dean Thompson. “He was so well loved that even those who disagreed with him on these hot button topics probably tolerated that because they cared so much about him.”

That wasn’t true for some Highland members, especially older ones. They were angry. The church was divided between those who wanted change and those who wanted to keep things as they had always been. Working to integrate Highland and moving into the world to advocate an end to segregation in society represented a profound and unwelcome change. When it came to attacking racial injustice in the past, “there wasn’t any crying need that we saw or searched for,” said Conrad Crow, Benfield’s assistant minister.

Racial segregation was only one of the issues troubling the church. Although the church was full every Sunday, some of those who crowded in were visitors. Many members stayed home.

When members did attend, they didn't recognize some of their fellow worshipers. "Who are those strange looking people?" a Highland member asked when guests from China, Japan and India visited.

The fact that Benfield urged integration at Highland didn't mean it happened. Opposition, some of it at least, came from an unexpected place: Highland's much loved Black custodian Luther Long quietly postponed integration of Highland's Bible school. One of the Bible school teachers had seen a Black child watching Highland's annual Vacation Bible School parade around the block. Everyone seemed to agree that the little girl should be invited to attend, and the child came for two days then disappeared. A teacher visited her home to see if she was sick. The child was fine, but her parents said, "Mr. Luther told us this is a white people's school, and she's not to come." No one was ready to cross Long to get her back. Long never explained what he'd done.

Arguably the most important stand Highland took on race during the Benfield years involved something the church didn't do. The church did not move to the suburbs.

There were powerful reasons for Highland to move, and some elders believed that's what Benfield wanted to do. The church was overcrowded and crumbling, even dangerous, according to safety inspectors. Committees looking for ways to expand at the corner of Highland and Cherokee found no space. More committees looked for possible building sites in or near the prosperous eastern Highlands and gave up in despair. Highland's Cherokee Triangle neighborhood was losing its shine as big old houses became seedy apartments and affluent residents – including many church members -- moved to the suburbs. Burglars and vandals damaged church property. Parking posed a pressing problem. The logical solution was to follow affluent white members to the suburbs' open spaces.

The same choice faced main-line Protestant churches nationally as other cities became donuts with prosperous suburbs surrounding impoverished inner cores populated by Black people. For some scholars, church migration raised a theological question: where did the church belong, in the city with all its problems and Black people or in the clean, shiny, affluent suburbs where congregations could remain resolutely white?

Remarkably, Highland's Session minutes don't record a clearly labeled vote or discussion on whether our church should move, although old timers remembered one. What records do show is the Session's 1957 decision to buy land across an alley from the church to build a new education building. The decision didn't guarantee that Highland Presbyterian Church would engage the gritty, linked realities of poverty, race and injustice that lay just to the west in the Smoketown neighborhood or to the north in Phoenix Hill. Staying on our Highlands corner did make the problems harder to ignore.

In the end, Benfield's inner demons apparently shortened his tenure at Highland. His departure in 1958 was quietly arranged without recorded details. Highland's congregation publicly celebrated his tenure with praise and thanks. Benfield left to go into the tiger's mouth, the deep South where he continued his fight to reform Presbyterians' insistence on racial separation.

With Benfield's departure, the temperature and emphasis at Highland changed. The church needed a pastoral preacher for difficult times. In Henry Mobley, it got a healer who masked his courage with humor, and brought people together at a time when society was rent by the bitterly divisive issues of racial justice, women's rights and the country's response to Communism.

Soft-spoken Henry Mobley could hardly have been more different from Benfield. He was a seasoned pastor who had grown up in a staunchly Presbyterian home on the Mississippi Delta. Mobley was known there as a fun-loving party boy who "danced all over the Delta" -- until he had a life changing experience. As a student in a government job, he worked next to a smart Black youngster about his age. "I realized then that the world was open to me, and I could be anything I wanted to be," Mobley said later. "And this boy could be a railroad conductor -- about as high as he could get."

Mobley decided to wash his hands of Mississippi and resolved to "divorce himself" from prejudice and to work toward alleviating racial tensions. His 23 years at Highland provided rich opportunities for that work and for relieving the other, conflicting tensions that rent the nation during that fraught period.

While U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy had been discredited and died in 1957, conservatives had founded a new organization, the John Birch Society, where they could defend the Constitution and their cherished American values. The John Birch Society, named for a Baptist missionary killed by Chinese communists, defined itself as an activist organization of "men and women of good character, humane conscience, and religious ideals who have worked together to safeguard the Constitution."

In Louisville, the organization included plenty of Presbyterians, including some at Highland Presbyterian Church, who kept their eyes open for threats. At Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, with its ties to both the northern and southern churches, they saw plenty to worry about. As Seminary professors and students marched and took public stands supporting civil rights for African Americans and opposing the Vietnam War, conservatives began to believe that the seminary faculty was leaning toward Communism and might not be Christian at all. Highland Presbyterian Church elder Richard Oldham Sr. was an outspoken advocate of Birch ideals. He embraced the old ethic that a church's mission was to save souls, not to meddle in politics, at a time when Protestant religion nationally had gone through an "epochal change." Now many Christians believed they were called to stand in the world in the name of Christ.

The question was what they should stand for. The question produced heated Session meetings at Highland and meant trouble in two venues for Henry Mobley and another Highland elder, John Fulton. In addition to being Highland's pastor, Mobley was head of the seminary's board for 10 years, and Fulton was a member of the board. They saw their duty as defending the seminary and its professors against Oldham and Birch Society members at other Presbyterian churches who were working to put financial pressure on the seminary to adopt more conservative views. The campaign became ugly, personal and threatening. Tension grew as clashes moved into meetings of the Louisville Presbytery.

In most meetings involving the seminary, Mobley had an ability to defuse the seminary's detractors with humor as he defended the seminary and academic freedom. However, at one especially acrimonious Presbytery meeting, Mobley surprised everyone by unleashing his righteous anger against those who were hurling venom. That took courage and a considerable toll on Henry Mobley. As tensions rose in the church, seminary, and community, Henry Mobley had a heart attack.

The heart attack may have slowed Mobley's capacity for conflict, but he continued to preach, drawing on the Bible to address the day's struggles. "The time has come for Christian people to look beyond their own prejudices and bias to the light of truth held out by our Christ," he said.

Highland's congregation included mayors, judges and community leaders who embraced Mobley and Benfield's messages on the Old Testament's demand for justice. They used their positions to work for racial justice and understanding. For example, Highland member Henry Triplett was juvenile court judge in 1961 when Black leaders used young people to press for access at segregated lunch counters. When they were arrested, Judge Triplett found that the children were not delinquents and shouldn't be charged with crimes that would prevent them from going to college. Highland member Mayor William Cowger put into effect Louisville's open accommodations bill, barring discrimination in public places like restaurants and stores. And, later as an alderman, Triplett helped pass open housing legislation forbidding discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. Those steps were not accomplished without violence, and they didn't finish the job of removing racial barriers in Louisville.

The issue that touched Highland members the most closely, the issue they couldn't ignore, was busing for school desegregation. Highland Presbyterian Church and many of its families were in the Louisville City School district, which also served most of Jefferson County's Black families. Predominately white schools – mostly in Eastern Louisville – offered a good education. Black schools in central and Western Louisville were often in poor condition with fewer supplies, textbooks and opportunities – although they had some very strong Black teachers. Black student test scores sagged despite attempts at innovative teaching. Faced with sagging tax revenue as affluent families moved to the suburbs, the city school board decided to go out of business. That meant the urban city district, with all its problems and vigorous Black culture, merged with the largely white suburban and rural county school system, which had a very different culture. The merger occurred as a federal court ordered the county schools to desegregate. The resulting busing plan touched everyone. Most white students were bused to formerly Black schools for two years. Black students faced up to 10 years of busing to formerly white schools that often seemed unwelcoming or hostile. As the first day of school approached, everyone was tense and fearful.

One Sunday, Mobley cancelled his sermon for a "Dialogue about the Busing Issue." That evening in the fellowship hall, a committee of Highland Presbyterian parents drafted a statement calling on Highland members "to assume responsibility as Christians" during a challenging time. The statement urged a number of steps to prevent disruption of the educational process and to ease hardships caused by busing. The Session endorsed the statement at a special meeting with a 10-3 vote.

Many Highland members were teachers. Henry Triplett represented the city school board, which included Highland member Dr. John Bell as a member. John Fulton represented the Jefferson County Board of Education. Everything they did took courage as the county erupted with protests and rioting. Education happened in 1974, but it was a hard year for everyone.

Integration at Highland lacked the rancor other churches experienced, but it hasn't come easily. As best we can tell, Highland never actively resisted adding Black members or seating Black worshipers as some Southern churches did. During the Civil Rights era, Black activists were sometimes sent to test congregations' willingness to admit Black people. When a Black couple came to worship at Highland, an usher seated them with a bulletin, and elder Robert Moseley slipped into the pew beside them and offered to share a hymn book.

Attracting Black members proved to be much more difficult and complicated. Since the early days of slavery, Black churches had been more than Sunday morning worship centers. The churches provided a safe place for Black people to be themselves and to follow worship practices they enjoyed. The churches were repositories of Black culture, and, increasingly, centers for political action. The Black church would embrace a Black man who felt demeaned all week for his work as a janitor. At his church, he would be judged and valued for his character and personality – not his job title. He could be a leader. Given the white church's record for racism, Black churchgoers did not leave the Black church for white congregations lightly. Among other things, social pressure from other Blacks could be intense.

Mobley said he'd invited Blacks to join. "They didn't want to join," he said. They would explain, "'My wife would no longer speak to me' or 'I would lose all my customers or my clients.'"

However, Highland's mailing list included many names in the predominately black West End as a result of our church's radio broadcast. John Fulton recounted a conversation with a Black doctor who told him Highland Presbyterian was his church. Every Sunday at 10, his family gathered around the radio to worship with Highland.

Music also offered a bridge over racial divides. In 1904, Caroline Bourgard, an accomplished musician and teacher, became Highland's organist and choir director. Miss Bourgard was considered a "musical missionary" who spent her life working to bring good music and singing to Kentuckians divided by race and geography. She began a music school for Black young people in Louisville. Her will, which was administered by Highland, included money to educate a Black man for the ministry and to support the education of Black children in Kentucky's mountains, and an endowment to continue the music school she'd founded in Louisville. In later years, Highland's worship was integrated by gifted Black musicians in the choir, who sang either as church members or as part of the paid quartet.

Highland's first Black member in a very long time was a surprise to everyone. Luther Long, the Black custodian who served Highland for 35 years, retired in 1973 with a party and gifts: a Ford, a life annuity and a warm resolution of thanks from the Session. Long went to Tennessee to enjoy life and take care of his elderly father, but he came to worship at Highland when he was in town. In May, 1977, after the 9:30 service, Long found Mobley and asked to be baptized. A

special Session meeting was hurriedly organized. Mobley baptized Long and the Session accepted him as a member. “There wasn’t a dry eye,” one elder said afterward.

When Bill and I were researching Highland’s history, we came across a hand-written note “a footnote for any future historians who may happen across these minutes,” written by Mobley. “For many years, Highland has sought black members with no success,” Mobley wrote. “. . . It is fitting that Luther Long broke the barrier for the Church, which will observe its centennial only five years hence.”

Before that centennial, Highland would face other divisive issues including the Vietnam War and Mobley’s successful effort to put women on the Session. Mobley didn’t shy from those issues either.

“He has what we call a prophetic message,” Highland member John Fulton told a newspaper reporter. “It compels him to speak out on public issues. He’s not an activist, but he’s fearless in the biblical message.”

More than 20 years of speaking for justice at Highland wore Mobley down. He had mellowed considerably when the church called James O. Chatham as an associate minister. Chatham was inclined to be an activist, although Chatham’s first duty at Highland was to revise the Sunday School curriculum and attract young families to a church that was fast getting gray.

When Mobley retired in 1981, Highland’s divided and doubtful congregation called Chatham, who even nominating committee members felt, “veered to the left a little.”

A son of North Carolina, Chatham, like Mobley, had gotten a tutorial on racism in Mississippi. Chatham graduated from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. at the height of the Civil Rights movement. He charged straight into the fray. Chatham accepted a joint call from two churches in Fayette, Mississippi, population 1,600, where 80 percent of the population was Black. None of those Black people went to Chatham’s churches.

The white people who did go to his churches included a bootlegger and a car dealer. The car dealer won Chatham’s lasting admiration when he stood for justice even after the KKK stoned and burned his business. As civil rights workers moved toward Fayette, the Session met to consider – with harsh, racist language – how they would respond to Black agitators who tried to attend church. Chatham stated his position without any of the balm Benefield and Mobley brought to similar discussions elsewhere. “If anyone ever gets turned away from worship at this church, then there’s not going to be worship . . . because what we would do would not be worship,” Chatham told the Session. Soon he moved to another job back in North Carolina – in a tiny house church that experimented with bringing affluent and poor people together to find ways to fight poverty.

Chatham came to Highland with an understanding that racial prejudice and poverty were linked. When he met Dr. C. Mackey Daniels, a fellow Southerner and soul mate who led a middle-class Black congregation, he saw opportunity. West Chestnut Street Baptist Church was heavy with teachers, firemen, social workers, and other educated public servants who shared Highland members’ values. Perhaps, Chatham and Daniels decided, the congregations could forge

relationships that crossed racial lines if they didn't have the one-up-one-down obstacle of economic difference. In the years that followed, Highland and West Chestnut members joined forces for fun and service. The churches had joint parties, a talent show and a long-running program to volunteer as readers at Atkinson Elementary School, the school with some of Louisville's lowest reading scores.

Highland member Judge Ann Shake arranged a joint court watch project for members of both churches. The three-day program offered a powerful example of how differently Black and white Christians see justice in action. Highland members peered through the bars at the jail and saw the sad debris of poverty and crime, young Black men in orange jump suits in over-crowded cells, looking sullen, defiant, hopeless. Highland members didn't want to meet those men, not then and certainly not on the street. Highland members wanted out. West Chestnut Street members saw former students, neighbors, nephews, the children of friends they knew and cared about.

Sitting in courtrooms together, Highland members measured the judges' rulings by their adherence to the law and approved when a judge told a young defendant he could avoid jail time by repaying what he'd stolen. A West Chestnut member knew the young man had no job and couldn't repay anything without committing another crime. The same actions looked very different from opposite sides of the racial divide.

"When both eyes are focused on [a problem], not just one eye," Mackey Daniels said, "it's a different thing. It's not my problem. It's our problem." Judge Shake said the annual programs gave members of both churches a chance to discuss their very different views of justice with people who really liked and respected each other.

Most joint activities involved people who wanted to participate. However, the annual pulpit exchange exposed everyone who went to church to different worship styles. On that one Sunday a year, Jim Chatham preached at West Chestnut and took Highland's choir and some of Highland's members with him. Dr. Daniels, his choir and some West Chestnut members went to Highland.

At West Chestnut Street, Highland members discovered that the service stretched on for hours, powered by vigorous hymns, handshaking and loud "amens." Back at Highland, the service was crisp and sedate, and the congregation was unresponsive, even when Daniels preached with passion about suffering. "Don't tell me you don't know what I mean," Daniels said to the silent congregation. Finally, he interrupted his sermon. "Are you too proud to say, 'Amen?'"

Highland sedately responded, "Amen."

Finally, Daniels and Chatham decided that they needed to do something more dramatic to make a point. On World Communion Sunday, Highland members formed a line at Second and Broadway. West Chestnut members gathered at Broadway and Sixth. A horn, the Biblical shofar, sounded and the two congregations marched to Fourth Street where they joined forces for a joint service – led by the pastors and choirs from both churches -- at the Palace Theatre.

For some Highland members that was a powerful morning and a treasured memory. For others, it was another sign that the church they joined and loved had changed.

The event marked a dividing point, Chatham said later. Some Highland members were asking “Do we really want to cozy up to all these Black people?” Some people thought that morning was “one of the best things we ever did,” he said. “Others didn’t show up and weren’t about to show up.”

Chatham continued to act on his beliefs in other ways. One Sunday, Chatham and associate minister Paul Frelick stood before the congregation to report that racists had burned a cross in front of a Jefferson County home. They had organized a prayer vigil and planned to “go out and stand with the family.” Louisville Presbyterian Seminary professor Eugene March thought, “that’s right. That’s what ought to happen” and joined them. Others in the congregation were troubled.

Although Chatham was valued at Highland as a teacher, his sermons caused upset. He abandoned the lectionary – the schedule of Bible passages most preachers use to plan their sermons and services – and preached from the Old Testament on current affairs. Some members thought the sermons “too political” and left mad, feeling they had lost the church they loved. Some left Highland all together, often shifting to Second Presbyterian Church where Henry Mobley had accepted a call as interim pastor and offered the preaching they knew and savored.

As affluent older members left or died, Highland’s demographic mix changed. The congregation got younger as families with young children joined, drawn by Chatham’s sense of urgent mission. They were ready to accept new ways. A few of the new members were Black.

One new member was well known at Highland. Dolly Brown had come to work with custodian Luther Long when she was a very young mother. Highland members “helped me raise my children and myself,” she said. Highland women were generous, but some weren’t ready to accept a Black employee as an equal. Mrs. Brown attended her Black Baptist church all the years she worked at Highland. When she retired in 1999, Dolly Brown became a Highland member. With Jim Chatham as pastor, attitudes had relaxed a bit, she said. “The feeling is good. I don’t feel out of place.” While some members still stood back from Dolly Brown after her retirement, others wrapped her in love and care as her joints froze with arthritis and her health deteriorated.

In the late 1980s, Black membership at Highland got a boost from the union of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches and the merged church’s decision to locate its headquarters in Louisville. Some of those who moved from the former denominational headquarters in New York and Atlanta brought new points of view on race. And, some were Black. They gave Highland its first Black elder, Yenwith Whitney.

A Tuskegee airman, teacher and aeronautical engineer, Whitney and his wife Lori were drawn to Highland by Chatham’s preaching and teaching. “Really his Bible classes were just delicious,” Whitney said. The Whitneys were among a group of talented African American members who joined Highland while Chatham was minister. The group included Rob King, a gifted young

Courier-Journal artist; William McAnulty, who would become Kentucky's first African American on the Supreme Court; baritone Edward Caruthers; Dr. Brenda Kee, a member of University of Louisville's music faculty; and her husband Wayne Brown, a nationally known music administrator. Key and McAnulty served on the Session, but the group never grew to more than a dozen. In time, many of them moved out of town. Highland's music program continued to recruit fine Black musicians such as Annie Bolden and Louis Washington. Edward Caruthers remains a member and continues to sing in the choir as bass vocalist and section leader.

As the new century dawned, Highland refocused some of its ministry on a growing number of refugees from all the places the world hurt. The Session voted to buy the old Parr's Rest nursing home across Highland Avenue from the church – without really knowing how it would be used. Chatham challenged Highland to use the building to establish a high school guidance counseling center to steer “downtown young people” to go to college and to success once they got there.

Instead, a large part of the building became home to Kentucky Refugee Ministries, a product of Chatham's years at Highland, that welcomed and helped settle thousands of refugees from around the world. It was a new pivot point for Highland. Jim Chatham retired in August 2002. It took a committee two years to find a new pastor -- who was entirely different.

Like Highland pastors before her, Dr. Fairfax Fair grew up in the South, a small town in southern Arkansas. She began her first sermon at Highland by confessing her cultural ties to the “hogs” of the University of Arkansas Razorbacks. Fair attended Tulane University in New Orleans but transferred to Southern Methodist University to be near – and marry – Bart Fair. Bart died of cancer just a few years later. When she was only 26, Fair became a widow with a small son. Instead of going to business school as she'd intended, she entered Chatham's alma mater, Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. Her first church was in Franklin, Tenn., where Mobley had preached. When Highland called her, Fair was an experienced pastor at Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church in Houston. Her passions – and priorities – she said many times over were people and preaching, but her first major undertaking involved property.

When Fair preached, she focused on the New Testament and the resurrection. Highland members who remembered Chatham, Mobley and Benfield's Old Testament prophetic teaching objected that Fair talked too much about Jesus. Fair didn't apologize or stop. “Jesus the Christ is waiting – waiting for you” she said over and over.

Fair was an admitted workaholic who dedicated herself to a pastoral ministry some Highland members felt Chatham had neglected in his zeal for racial justice. She dropped the partnership with West Chestnut Street, feeling that it was grounded on the personal relationship between Daniels and Chatham. During the Fair years, Highland's relationship with people who are Black focused on Fair's history with New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. After Class 5 Hurricane Katrina walloped the Gulf Coast and its most vulnerable residents, officials announced that some hurricane victims would be evacuated to Louisville. Fair saw opportunity and rallied the Session and an inter-denominational group of volunteers to quickly clean up the well-worn Parr's Rest building as housing for the Katrina refugees. It was a proud time for Fair and for Highland. “It

was . . .one of the most amazing weekends I will ever remember in this church,” said Session clerk Mike Kirk.

The refugees were Black people with complicated needs that Highland rallied to meet with transportation to doctors, mental health services, food, clothing and resources. When the guests moved to their own apartments, Highland dispatched them with furniture to get them started.

When the old building was empty again, Fair found herself focused on a \$4.5 million capital campaign to renovate the building, later christened Pleune-Mobley, and to repair infrastructure in other buildings. Night after night Fair and members of a campaign committee met with potential contributors to the “Blueprint for the Future” campaign and repeated its mantra; the campaign would enable Highland to “Honor our Heritage, Expand our Mission and Serve God’s People.”

Highland adults and youth continued to serve God’s people on the Gulf Coast with trips to clean up and rebuilt from the hurricane.

Like Jacob’s Well, our church history, ended with Highland Presbyterian Church’s 125th birthday celebration – and so did our research. However, perhaps we should add that the church has continued to follow the pattern it established over that history. Its attention to racial justice has been uneven.

The problems that fed Louisville’s racial tension continued to fester. The Jefferson County school system failed to heal the test score gap between Black and white students. Instead, it graduated thousands of students (Black and white) whom it had labeled as unprepared for work or college. Gang violence, the drug trade, and tension between Black neighborhoods and police grew. Many neighborhoods remained segregated. Good, safe housing remained out of reach for many. Hunger stalked thousands of children.

The Church in the World Committee continued to support organizations like Cabbage Patch and the Presbyterian Community Center that served Black families, but Highland did not focus much energy on problems of race as a church. Fair did not address them from the pulpit. Highland’s trumpets were muted again.

However, church members continued to combat community problems together as individuals and as committees. When Portland Avenue Presbyterian Church and its food and clothing distribution center burned down, an energetic group of Highland members stepped in to meet immediate needs and establish a trust to sustain long-term relief work. Grover Potts struggled to keep the Presbyterian Community Center going through changing demographics and inadequate finances. Bill Grubbs led a campaign to expand the Cabbage Patch Settlement building – and its work. Mike Kirk worked to feed children and their families. David Jones Jr. became chairman of the Jefferson County Board of Education just after Fair left and agitated for profound, systemic change. The list of individual Highland members who took their faith to the community’s problems is long.

Members of the Race Equity Task Force who commissioned this study know well the work Dr. Cynthia Campbell, Fair’s successor, did in her nearly nine years at Highland. Campbell

continued the tradition of prophetic preaching and involvement with the Black community, but in new ways.

As Highland makes another transition to another new pastor, the community's need for Highland to sound its trumpet remains great.

Note: This report is drawn from *Like Jacob's Well, the very human history of Highland Presbyterian Church*. Our sources are listed and given credit there.

