

The Fairview Disciple



The Mission of the Fairview United Methodist Church is to enhance the spiritual growth of its members and the community by providing sound and meaningful experiences through worship, education, outreach, personal involvement in the ministry of the church, and the general nurturing of the congregation in keeping with the example and teaching of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

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James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) was both scholar and showman, at home in the political and academic realms as well as in the world of popular entertainment. At various times in his life Johnson was a teacher, attorney, novelist, poet, editor, professor at Fisk University, U.S. Consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua, and a lyricist for hit Broadway musicals! One of the founders of the NAACP, he became its first executive secretary in 1915. The editors of a survey of African-American literature wrote: "Johnson was as close to a Renaissance man as the conditions of American society would permit a Negro to be." He was also a lifelong Methodist.

Asked to speak at a program celebrating Lincoln's birthday February 12, 1900, Johnson decided also to write a song for the occasion, his brother Rosamund composing the music. "We planned," wrote Johnson in his autobiography, "to have it sung by schoolchildren—a chorus of five hundred voices." The first few lines came by "grinding" effort, he said, but "when there came to me the lines:

THE PASTOR'S POUND

*"An ounce of
common sense is
worth a pound
of clergy."*

— John Adams

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
the spirit of the poem had taken hold of me. In composing the two other stanzas I did not use pen and paper. While my brother worked at his musical setting, I paced back and forth on the front porch repeating the lines over and over to myself, going through all

of the agony and ecstasy of creating. As I worked through the last stanza, I could not keep back the tears." The result was "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (# 519 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*).

Although the song has no specific scriptural reference, its tone is strongly reminiscent of the exultant song in Exodus 15 of Moses and his sister Miriam, in which they rejoiced in God's faithful deliverance of his people from bondage into new life and freedom.

The Johnsons' noble song "was taught to the children and sung very effectively at the celebration; and my brother and I went on with other work. After we had permanently moved away from Jacksonville [Florida], both the song and the occasion passed out of our minds. But the schoolchildren of Jacksonville kept singing the song; some of them went off to other schools and kept singing it; some of them became schoolteachers and taught it to their pupils. Within twenty years the song was being sung in schools and churches and on special occasions throughout the South and in some other parts of the country.

"Nothing that I have done," Johnson concluded, "has paid me back so fully in satisfaction as being the part creator of this song. My brother and I, in talking, have often marveled at the results that have followed what we considered an incidental effort, an effort made under stress and with no intention other than to meet the needs of a particular moment. The only comment we can make is that we wrote better than we knew."