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London artist explores Charleston's oldest Black Episcopal congregation on 'voyage of discovery'

BY KENNA COE KCOE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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The Rev. Ricardo Bailey sings a hymn during the start of a service at Calvary Episcopal Church Sunday morning, Sept. 21, 2024, in Charleston.

ANDREW WHITAKER/STAFF

When Antoinette Bennett-Bluford thinks about growing up at Calvary Episcopal Church, a host of memories come back to her. At 75 years old, she is one of five generations in her family who have attended the [historic Black church in downtown Charleston.](#)

She describes the church as a “second family.”

As a child, she remembers the Rev. Stephen Mackey, the rector who served until 1972, visiting the Calvary kindergarten every Friday to share Bible stories. One of her favorite stories was Joseph's coat of many colors.

A quote from Mackey that she carries with her today is, "If you listen, you will learn; and if you learn, you will be smart."

Calvary Episcopal Church is documenting stories and experiences from church members, like Bennett-Bluford, that encapsulate the church's more than 175-year history.

These stories, along with gathering old documentation, will help shape the ideas around two permanently installed pieces of art that will be displayed inside the sanctuary. London-based artist Graeme Mortimer Evelyn, who is known for creating church icons in England, was commissioned for the Calvary Icons Project.

A 175-year-old history

Calvary Episcopal Church is the **oldest Black Episcopal congregation** in Charleston, according to the Preservation Society of Charleston. The congregation formed in 1847 as a place for **free and enslaved African Americans to worship**, according to the church's history. Since laws prohibited enslaved people from learning to read, all of the teachings and Sunday School instruction were oral.



Parishioners pray during a service at Calvary Episcopal Church Sunday morning, Sept. 21, 2024, in Charleston.

ANDREW WHITAKER/STAFF

The congregation first met in the basement at St. Philip's Episcopal Church, then moved to a building on the corner of Beaufain and Wilson streets in 1849, according to the church's historic marker.

By the 1940s, the demographics of the neighborhood shifted to a predominantly White population, which meant many of the church's congregants moved away, according to the Preservation Society. The church ultimately sold the property and built the church on the corner of Line and Percy streets, where the church remains today.

The church's impact goes beyond the Sunday services and church gatherings. Calvary Day School, started by Father E. L. Baskerville in the 1930s, was the only preschool and kindergarten for Black children on the peninsula at the time, according to the church's history. Many children, even outside of the Calvary congregation and across many generations, attended the school until it closed in 2012.

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BY ALI ROCKETT AROCKETT@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

For Bennett-Bluford, the Line Street church building is the only Calvary she has known. Even when she moved away for a period of her life, she did not miss a Christmas Eve service because, to her, coming home meant going to Calvary.

The church has always been embedded in the community, she said. Many parishioners and Sunday School teachers lived in the neighborhood in walking distance to Calvary's front steps, including Bennett-Bluford's childhood home. Her sister, Marionette Bennett, the current deacon at Calvary, still lives in that home.

Bennett-Bluford said the family would walk to church every Sunday. When her mother died, the family and church community gathered to walk from the home to the church, honoring the many walks her mother completed to and from the house of worship.



The Rev. Ricardo Bailey wishes Yulanda Thompson a happy birthday during a service at Calvary Episcopal Church Sunday morning, Sept. 21, 2024, in Charleston.

ANDREW WHITAKER/STAFF

The Rev. Ricardo Bailey, who has served as rector for a year and a half, said the longstanding faith of the people at the church stands out to him.

He, too, calls the church family.

"Church is not just a place where you go, but church is something that you are," Bailey said.

Sharing Calvary's story through art

The Calvary Icons Project is a way to enshrine the church's history and values for the generations to come. When approaching a project like this, Evelyn said he thinks 200 years ahead to the story Calvary will tell in the future.

"I believe that history must remain intact within the church," Evelyn said.

The idea for the project came out of the Diocese of South Carolina's convention in 2023. Each year, delegates elected by their parishes attend the convention that includes church updates, worship, discussions and workshops. Grace Wingfield, the delegate from Calvary, felt inspired by conversations at the conventions about preserving church history.



NEWS

A historic Black community now has a \$6k rental. How can neighborhood leaders curb gentrification?

BY KENNA COE KCOE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Later at the convention, Wingfield attended a breakout session where Evelyn was the guest speaker. **At the time, Evelyn was the artist-in-residence for the Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts where he engaged with faith communities in Charleston for his work.**

Wingfield, who has attended Calvary since 2021, started thinking about ways Calvary's history could be preserved and shared.

When the diocese's annual budget was presented at the convention, Wingfield noticed a line for Racial Justice and Reconciliation with a sum of money allocated towards it but no details about where the money was going. Wingfield decided she would inquire about using some of the funds to start this project and see if Evelyn would take it on.

Wingfield said she received full support from the Right Rev. Ruth Woodliff-Stanley, bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina, to start the project.

Capturing the church's history

Evelyn has worked with churches to create defining art pieces, such as an [altarpiece for the 13th-century](#) St. Stephen's Church in Bristol. For a project like this, Evelyn said he has to spend time becoming embedded in the community to be able to create art that represents the church's past and points to the future.

"It's a long process of making this work," said Evelyn. "What makes art sacred is it's a lot of relationship building and trust building with communities."

One significant component of the Calvary Icons Project is gathering oral history from church members who have the tangible experience within the church. Bailey said the church's historical data is within its church members.



Marica Bailey takes a photo of her son Ricari Bailey, 9, just after a service at Calvary Episcopal Church Sunday morning, Sept. 21, 2024, in Charleston.

ANDREW WHITAKER/STAFF

"Their memories are very sharp. They are also full of information, as well as their own particular points of view about how things have gone," Bailey said.

Evelyn, who has had conversations with people at Calvary during his visits to the Holy City, said the church's history, much like Charleston, is like peeling onions, where new layers are constantly exposed.

"It's still a voyage of discovery for me," Evelyn said.



NEWS

'Big Nose Baddies' by North Charleston's newest artist in residence represents Black experiences

BY KENNA COE KCOE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

The project is still in the information-gathering stage. Evelyn will be back in Charleston for a few weeks in October to conduct more interviews and continue researching the church and community.

After Evelyn gathers the information, which he expects will be by the end of this year, he will start drawing sketches of the art pieces. Then he'll receive feedback from the church. By March 2025 he will start carving the final pieces into wood.

The church plans to enshrine the icons in November 2025.

KENNA COE

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Kenna Coe covers North Charleston and Faith and Values for The Post and Courier. She graduated from the University of South Carolina. She previously worked for The Moultrie News as the editor and general assignment reporter.