

Solange De Santis

Film Traces History of Black Churches

By Solange De Santis

The history of black people in Canada has sometimes been a sketchy thing to know, caught up and trampled in the rush of French, British, Irish and Scottish stories written in the early years of exploration and settlement. *Seeking Salvation: A History of the Black Church in Canada*, a new documentary film, illuminates an essential part of the black experience in this country: its relationship with Christianity.

Black migration to Canada is unlike any other. Like its American counterpart, it began with the forced migration of slavery. Both slavery and racial segregation have existed in Canada, but since neither was institutionalized, many Canadians are unaware of the fact. From the earliest days, black people in Canada met oppression with faith in Christ. As the scholars, clergy, lay people and historians in the film note, they also embraced the Old Testament story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, seeking freedom.

Seeking Salvation is full of fascinating, astonishing "did you know" stories, such as:

The first black resident of Canada was Olivier LeJeune, who arrived in 1632 as a slave of a privateer. Most of the Catholic religious orders that came to New France held slaves, according to the film's narration, and Mr. LeJeune was baptized into the church. He had a poignant view of his religious experience, saying that, "You say that by baptism I shall be like you. I am black and you are white. I must have my skin taken off in order to be like you."

Written by novelist Lawrence Hill and directed by Phillip Daniels of Toronto-based Travesty Productions, the 90-minute film explores how religion fed the African-Canadian soul. As one man says early in the film, "The church gave us dignity. No matter how much humiliation people faced, they could come back home and feel dignified."

Many Canadians probably know that black United Empire Loyalists emigrated to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution, but how many know that a large number found conditions so intolerable that they then fled to Africa? After a riot by white Nova Scotians against black settlers, an African-Canadian preacher named David George in 1792 led 1,200 black people to Sierra Leone.

When slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834, the illegal exodus of black American slaves to Canada accelerated. Slaves escaping via the Underground Railroad would hear coded messages within religious songs from such "conductors" as Harriet Tubman, who often used *Stealing Away to Jesus*. Another spiritual, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, directed escapees to look for the Big Dipper in the night sky and head north to freedom.

Seeking Salvation features a number of African-Canadian preachers, scholars and musicians, but the most affecting modern story is that of George Elliott Clarke, a poet and academic who came of age in the 1970s, when Malcolm X, not Jesus, was the man to follow.

Fine young radicals of the 1960s and 1970s made fun of what they saw as reactionary churchgoers – the men in suits, the ladies in their hats, he said. Then, he recalled a 1979 conference in Dartmouth, N.S., where the black attendees were rebuffed when they wanted to discuss racism. "We sang spirituals. It was a very intense moment, a very emotional moment," Mr. Clarke recalls, his eyes moistening. In subsequent years as he matured, he realized, he says, that "we were ignorant." Black churches offered leadership roles when the wider society wouldn't, advocated equality and social justice and supported an oppressed people. "The church sanctified us," he says, emotion rising again in his voice and eyes.

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