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April 2006

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The Black Regiment

"Cursed is the sneaking coward who neglects the sinking state, when called to its defense—O then flee this dire curse—let America's valorous sons put on the harness..."

--Rev. William Stearns (1775)

Dear Friends:

April 19 is just another day—except in Lexington, Massachusetts. Townsfolk and tourists will gather on the “green” before sunup to experience the annual reenactment of “The shot heard round the world.”

Some seventy Minutemen responded to the peeling of the church bell on that mid-Spring morning in 1775. Reverend Jonas Parker took his place in line alongside others who were hurriedly wadding the powder charges in their long-barreled muskets. Almost before he could fill his hat with musket balls and flint, someone cried, “Here they come!”

Rounding the bend in the road near the east end of the green was a long column of British regulars—perhaps numbering several hundred. What happened next is unclear. First, some yelling, the sound of a pistol, and then scattered rifle fire. It was over in 15 minutes, leaving some of the Lexington’s leading citizens dead or mortally wounded, including Rev. Parker. Seriously wounded, he was on the ground, struggling to reload his musket. A young Redcoat finished him off with a bayonet.

Whatever compelled Pastor Parker to place his ministry, his church, and his life in harm’s way also compelled other ministers throughout the colonies. “In fact,” says historian David Barton, “so prominent were the clergy in the struggle that the [Tories] called them the ‘Black Regiment’ due to the black clerical robes they wore.”

Many were the exploits of ministers such as Rev. William Graham, who rallied his own neighbors to dispute the passage of Rockfish Gap with Tarleton and his Britain dragoons, or Chelsea’s Rev. Philips Payson who single-handedly captured two British supply wagons during the battles of Lexington and Concord. Rev. John Craighead was noted for fighting and preaching alternately. He raised a company of militia from his parish and led them off to join General Washington in New Jersey.

Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green served as an orderly sergeant and Rev. James Hall commanded a company that armed against Cornwallis. Rev. John Blair Smith, president of Hampden-Sidney College and Rev. Dr. Cooper were also captains of military companies. John Adams later wrote that Rev. Cooper and Rev. Dr. Mayhew were two of the “characters... most conspicuous, the most ardent, and influential” in “an awakening and a revival of American principles and feelings...in 1775.”¹

Perhaps best known among the soldier-clergy was Rev. (John) Peter Muhlenberg of Virginia. At the conclusion of a sermon from Ecclesiastes 3, he declared, “...There is a time to preach and a time to fight.” He paused, and then threw off his pulpit robe to reveal the uniform of a colonel in the Continental Army. Muhlenberg marched that afternoon at the head of a column of three hundred men and was to distinguish himself in a number of battles, rising to the rank of brigadier general.²

The Rev. Frederick Muhlenberg of New York, Peter's brother, was deeply troubled by Peter's involvement in the war. He told him: You would have acted for the best if you had kept out of this business from the beginning...I think you are wrong in trying to be both soldier and preacher together." Peter responded:

I am a clergyman it is true, but I am a member of society as well as the poorest layman, and my liberty is as dear to me as to any man, shall I then sit still...? Heaven forbid it...I am called by my country in its defen[s]e—the cause is just and noble...and so far I am from thinking that I act wrong, I am convinced it is my duty so to do and duty I owe to God and my Country."³

Some historians say that Peter's arguments had an effect upon Frederick; others say that Frederick became involved after the British ransacked and burned his church to the ground. Whatever the motivation, Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg—an ordained minister and pastor—became the original Speaker of the House of Representatives. David Barton notes that his is one of only two signatures at the bottom of the *Bill of Rights*.

Pastoral involvement in the public sphere is much more controversial today. Joe Wright, senior pastor at the 2,500 member Central Christian Church in Wichita knows this well. He ignited a firestorm of controversy in 1996 with his politically-incorrect prayer before the Kansas State House, later aired by commentator Paul Harvey. Wright returned to the public fore in 2004 when state lawmakers denied Kansas residents an opportunity to consider a ban on same-sex marriage.

Enlisting the support of fellow preacher Terry Fox, senior pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church, the pair took a two-hour trip to Topeka to meet with legislators. Many legislators refused to meet with them. Others ridiculed them from the Senate floor calling them "the two ayatollahs of Wichita" as they sat in the gallery above. One member told them, "You need to shut up and go back and take care of your churches and let us take care of the state."⁴

Motivated by the experience, the two returned home to develop a strategy. They began by leading their congregants on prayer walks around the state capitol. Next, they visited churches in the districts of lawmakers who opposed a marriage amendment, challenging local clergy to get involved. They were received more warmly on a subsequent visit to Topeka. They brought 400 other pastors with them. Eventually, a number of church members were persuaded to file for office resulting in a gain in conservative seats and legislative approval for a public vote on marriage. The following year, a ban on same-sex marriage won a stunning 70 percent voter approval.

The situation in Washington State is similar to that of Kansas in 2004. Our legislature has refused to consider a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. It has also enacted a law that forces public accommodation of sexual deviancy. The question is: Will the Church respond?

Referendum 65 is a collaborative effort of Christian and conservative groups to repeal this repugnant law. We have until June 7 to gather the required signatures to qualify R-65 for the November ballot. So far, grassroots efforts are proceeding at a phenomenal pace, but key "spiritual leaders" have not reported for duty.

We are at war and all hands are needed. "Let America's valorous sons put on the harness."

Sincerely,



Rick Forcier
Executive Director

¹ Barton, David, Original Intent, 1996, WallBuilder Press, Aledo, TX, pg. 104

² Marshall, Peter, The Light and the Glory, 1977, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, New Jersey, pg. 291

³ Barton, David, Keys to Good Government, 2000, WallBuilder Press, Aledo, TX, pgs. 27, 28

⁴ Cushman, Candi, Fearless faith, Citizen [Magazine], April 2006, pg. 16