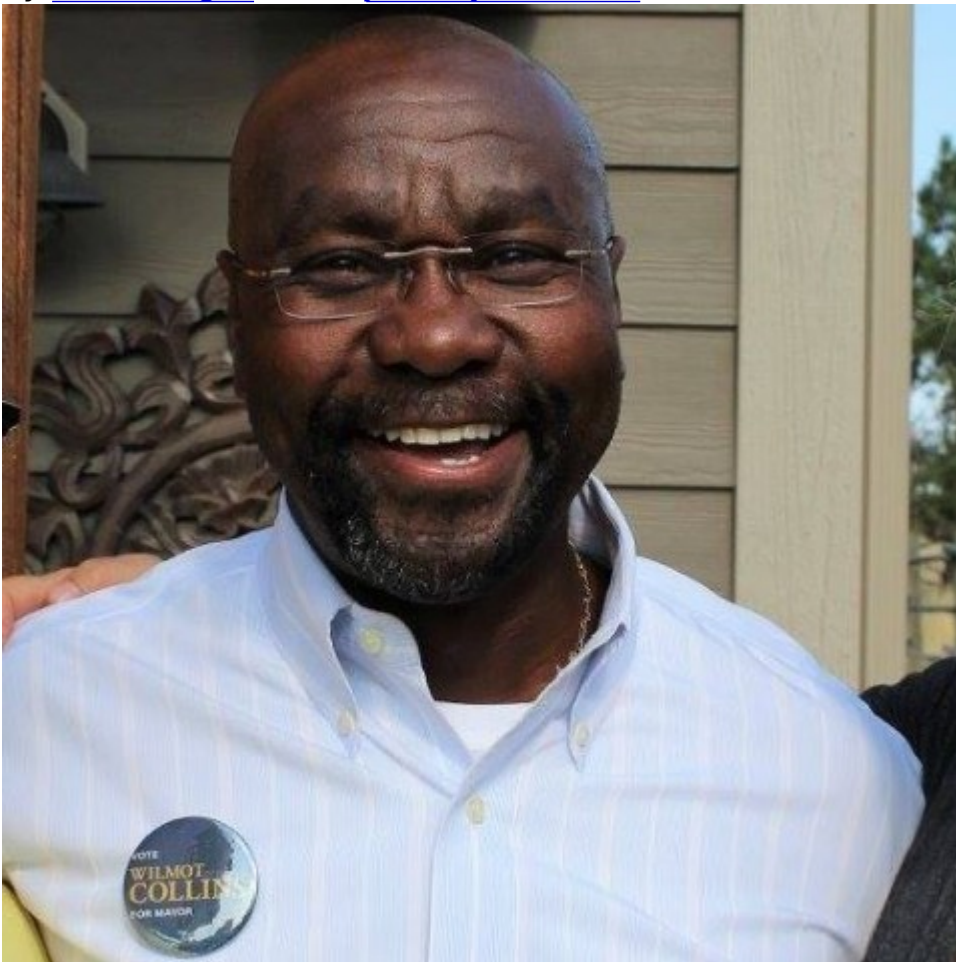


Wilmot Collins, who came to U.S. as a refugee, begins work as mayor of Helena, Montana

“He feels he can make a difference, and I think he can,” said a fellow member of Covenant United Methodist Church.

by [Sam Hodges](#) in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue



Wilmot Collins. Photo from Collins's Facebook page.

The Sunday after Helena, Montana, elected Wilmot Collins to be its mayor, a congregation in the capital city, Covenant United Methodist Church, broke out with applause.

“Wilmot is a beloved member of the Covenant UMC family,” said Patti Agnew, pastor.

Collins, 54, arrived in Helena as a refugee from Liberia 23 years ago and joined Covenant UMC. Since then, he has served on various committees, and he sings in the choir.

“The warmth in that church is unmeasurable,” he said.

Collins, who was sworn into office on January 2, respects church-state separation but doesn’t downplay that he is a Christian, he said.

“I never shy away from my faith,” he said. “I shout it from the mountaintop.”

Collins came to the United States fleeing a civil war that claimed the lives of his two younger brothers. His wife, Maddie Collins, had been an exchange student in Helena, and the family she had lived with helped her resettle there. The couple became U.S. citizens in 2002.

Helena has a population 31,000 and is located in a state that is almost 90 percent white and where black people make up less than 1 percent.

Soon after Collins landed in Helena and established a home with his family, it was vandalized by the painted words “KKK” and “go back to Africa.”

“I don’t dwell on that,” Collins said. “What I dwell on is the reaction to what happened. My neighbors got together and washed my walls down.”

In the United States, Collins has balanced military service (he’s soon to retire from the U.S. Navy Reserve) with work in the Montana office of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and Montana’s Department of Health and Human Services.

Collins is also an advocate for refugees and other immigrants, serving on the board of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. After Donald Trump promised to restrict immigration as part of his presidential campaign, Collins gave a TEDx lecture, shared online, explaining the extensive vetting the United States does for those seeking refugee status.

In Helena’s nonpartisan mayoral election, Collins stressed better resources for police and fire operations and more attention to affordable housing and teen

homelessness. On November 7 he defeated four-term incumbent Jim Smith.

“When I was knocking on doors, the people of Helena did not see a refugee,” Collins said. “The people of Helena did not see a person of color. The people of Helena saw the better of two candidates.”

Ron Guse, Covenant United Methodist’s council chair, who has known the Collins family for 20 years, enthusiastically supported Collins for mayor.

“He feels he can make a difference, and I think he can,” Guse said. “He’s smart, he’s willing to listen, and you can reason with him.” —United Methodist News Service

A version of this article appears in the January 17 print edition under the title “People: Wilmot Collins.”