

Jackie Robinson's Methodist faith

by [Jim Patterson](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue



(Collage by Crystal Caviness, United Methodist Communications)

Besieged by death threats, racial abuse, and physical danger, somehow Jackie Robinson never publicly lost his composure during the 1947 Major League Baseball season, when he integrated the league.

It was an amazing achievement, given Robinson's reputation in the Negro leagues as having a "temper like a rattlesnake," said Michael G. Long, co-author with Chris Lamb of *Jackie Robinson: A Spiritual Biography*.

Robinson had a little-known ally helping him stay stoic and perform well through the ordeal: faith.

Robinson grew up attending Scott United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California. But his Methodism has been downplayed or ignored in many stories and biographies.

Robinson attended Scott United Methodist Church as a boy at the insistence of his mother, Mallie Robinson. The arrival of pastor Karl Everette Downs in 1938 to the church was a game-changer for Robinson, who was already a local sports hero as a youth.

“What he did was to inject some of the Black Social Gospel into Scott Methodist Church,” Long said. “And he began to envision the church as having an important role in the community, and Robinson was really attracted to that.”

Mallie Robinson had already instilled racial pride in her son. She had an interpretation of the Adam and Eve story that Jackie took to heart.

“Mallie taught Jackie that Adam and Eve were originally Black,” Long recounted. “And then they were scared White when God caught them eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

The moral of the lesson was that Jackie’s black skin was a gift from God in which to take pride. His mother also taught him that it was God’s will to fight for freedom in the present, rather than await a better world in the afterlife. Robinson continued that fight after his baseball career as an associate of Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

He died in 1972, of complications from heart disease and diabetes, at 53. —United Methodist News Service