

UMC pastor honors Black church with Simon of Cyrene musical

by [Sam Hodges](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



Henry Masters (right) confers with cast members Faith Griffin (center) and Brianna Williams during an April 4 rehearsal at Hamilton Park United Methodist Church in Dallas. (Photo by Sam Hodges, United Methodist News)

Henry Masters has a thing for Simon of Cyrene.

Nearly two decades ago, Masters wrote and published a book about the African man summoned from the crowd to carry Jesus' cross to Calvary. Now, at age 76 and retired as a United Methodist pastor, Masters is producing his own full-length musical about Simon.

Others might write Simon off as a bit-part biblical character. Masters finds him fascinating—and highly relevant in a 21st-century America still struggling with race and racism.

“Black men, in particular, get caught in circumstances they didn’t create but have to deal with,” Masters said. “That’s Simon.” With *Simon of Cyrene: The Musical*, Masters is making his debut as a theatrical director. But he has long studied the history of the Black church.

A community organizer early in his ministry, Masters soon became a local church pastor, mentored and inspired by Black UMC legends such as Ira B. Loud, Zan Wesley Holmes Jr., and Negail Riley, founding coordinator of Black Methodists for Church Renewal.

Over more than four decades, Masters would lead three historic, predominantly Black UM congregations in Dallas: St. Paul, Hamilton Park, and St. Luke Community. He had a long stretch as well at Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, and he served as a district superintendent in the North Texas Conference.

Masters’s pursuit of a doctor of ministry degree at Perkins School of Theology, which he earned in 1990, found him going deeper into African spirituality. It was in this period that Masters began to focus on Simon the crossbearer. Though the Gospel passages that mention Simon don’t specify his ethnicity, he is described as being from Cyrene—a city in present-day Libya. And Masters, with many others, believes he must have been dark-skinned.

“I think the color of his skin made a difference,” Masters said. “He’s there [in Jerusalem], and he’s the only African there we know of, in a crowd of Jews and Romans. You can’t stand out any more clearly in a crowd, being a Black person. And he’s the one who gets picked.”

On retiring from full-time ministry in 2014, Masters focused on *By Faith* magazine, which he still publishes bimonthly. But he kept thinking about Simon and about the possibility of a full-length musical. (A smaller-scale musical based on Masters’s book was performed at St. Paul UMC in Dallas years ago.)

The desire to connect Simon to today’s challenges—especially the persistence of police killings of unarmed Black males—gave added impetus.

Masters wrote a goal for his project: “To use the music created around the biblical story of Simon of Cyrene (a Black African) to demonstrate to other Black boys and men how God works miracles to turn circumstances and situations into God-honoring destinies.”

In Masters's musical, Simon is a family man and spice trader who makes a business trip to Jerusalem, leading to a life-changing encounter with Jesus. Masters stresses that Simon bears Jesus' cross unwillingly but is transformed by the experience.

Masters intersperses the story with spirituals, original songs, and original settings of familiar texts, including the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. The musical draws from a Countee Cullen poem written from the perspective of Simon of Cyrene. It includes African dance and a range of readings from the Bible and other sources.

Masters said a musical is a fitting way to honor both Simon and the Black church.

"Music is such an integral part of our history," he said. "It's a cultural underpinning of our struggles and our joys." —United Methodist News Service