

New National Cathedral windows focus on racial justice

by [Melodie Woerman](#)

September 26, 2023



The new windows, dedicated on September 23, replace window honoring two Confederate generals that were removed in 2017. (Photo courtesy of the Washington National Cathedral)

[Washington National Cathedral](#) on September 23 unveiled and dedicated a new set of stained-glass windows with a racial justice theme, called the [Now and Forever Windows](#), that feature people engaged in a march bearing signs calling for “Fairness” and “No Foul Play.”

The windows [replace](#) the cathedral’s former windows honoring Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, which were [removed](#) in 2017.

During the dedication service, available on [video](#), Randy Hollerith, the cathedral's dean, said the Confederate windows "were offensive, and they were a barrier to the ministry of this cathedral. And they were antithetical to our call to be a house of prayer for all people."

The new windows were designed by artist [Kerry James Marshall](#). A 1997 recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant, he is known for his [distinctive style](#) that depicts Black people in various settings with faces that are dark black, his attempt, he said in a commemorative booklet distributed at the dedication, "to make up for the absence of Black figures in Western art for centuries."

Marshall was the first choice of a special cathedral committee charged with finding the artist to create windows that had lofty goals—to depict the resilience and courage of African Americans, a sense of forward motion from slavery to freedom, and the inherent tensions in that struggle.

In the booklet, Marshall said his design features a procession of figures who are oriented "toward a process, toward an activity that is always ongoing." He said he picked the words "fairness" and "no foul play" for the signs the figures are carrying because of their simplicity.

"Most people, when you say, 'foul play' they know what that means," he said. "Most children know what foul play means. I was trying to find something that spoke to the idea at an elementary level, but that also had a sense of force and precision."

Marshall's paintings, some of which grace museum walls, can sell in the millions of dollars. But his fee for creating the cathedral windows was far less—\$18.65, symbolizing the year the Civil War ended and the last of the enslaved people in the United States were freed. He chose that number, he [told the *Washington Post*](#), because it represents him being free and able to make decisions "about myself and the things I do and who I do it for."

Marshall had never before created a work of stained glass, but when he proposed a design to the special committee and Hollerith, it was accepted without change. Then the work of translating that vision into stained glass began.

He met with Andrew Goldkuhle, a fifth-generation church artisan who took over the creation and care of the cathedral's stained-glass windows from his father, Dieter, in 2010, and together they picked out colors of glass that would honor his design but

also let in just the right amount of filtered light.

The details on the colored glass are made by applying various layers of paint, but Marshall wanted to do something different than just use a brush—he created more than 80 hand-cut blocks of craft foam that would act as stamps. In Goldkuhle’s studio outside Richmond, Virginia, Marshall coated his stamps with black paint and pressed them against the glass to create the design of faces, shoes and letters on the signs. In the end he found that the paint was slow to dry and required a second coat—this time applied by hand—to make the details visible.

According to the commemorative booklet, the four panels contain between 800 and 1,000 individual pieces of glass, some large and many not much bigger than a quarter.

The cathedral nave was filled for the dedication service, which included three readings, two from the Bible and one from Martin Luther King Jr.’s [Letter from Birmingham](#) Jail.

California State Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove who is Marshall’s step-daughter; and Henry Louis Gates Jr., author, historian, and professor at Harvard University read the scripture passages. Reading the excerpt from King’s letter was US Supreme Court Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

In remarks during the service, Marshall said he doesn’t hold any delusions about the “transformative power of artworks” but hopes that the themes of the windows he created “continue to be a catalyst for the kind of transformation the cathedral stands for, that the nation stands for, and what I hope we all as members of this culture and society will embody and stand for and bring forward ourselves.”

At the service, [Elizabeth Alexander](#), president of the [Mellon Foundation](#), the nation’s largest funder in the arts, culture and humanities read her poem *American Song* publicly for the first time. The poem is currently printed on two panels below the windows, occupying a spot where information about the old Lee and Jackson windows was displayed. Over the next nine months, Alexander’s poem will be carved in stone and permanently affixed below Marshall’s windows.

Hollerith spoke briefly during the service, and he noted the role his predecessor, Gary Hall, had played in the effort to remove the Lee and Jackson windows, which currently are stored in the cathedral’s archives. That decision was prompted by two

seminal events in recent US history—the murder of nine members of Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015, and the violent clashes between hate groups and anti-racism counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2020 that prompted a debate about Confederate symbols in public places.

He also said the windows are not the end of the cathedral’s efforts at racial reconciliation but do offer an opportunity “for us to recommit ourselves and to recommit this cathedral to joining that march toward fairness for all Americans, especially African Americans.”

Hollerith added, “There is a lot of work yet to be done to confront systemic racism, to foster racial reconciliation and to be repairers of the breach, both in our past and in our present and in the future. We’re committed to this work at the cathedral, to being a house of prayer for all people, and for doing what we can to build the beloved community.”

Financial support for the windows replacement project and related public programming on racial justice and reconciliation was provided by the [Ford Foundation](#) and the Mellon Foundation through its [Monuments Project](#). The [Hearthland Foundation](#), founded by Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg, is funding the poetry-inscribed stone tablets.

A new [section of the cathedral website](#) is devoted to the windows and features a photo gallery, a documentary film about the windows’ creation and other information. —Episcopal News Service