New film prompts calls for racial reconciliation

by Adelle M. Banks in the Nov 13, 2013 issue

The new movie *12 Years a Slave* may depict a bygone era in American history, but religious leaders hope it might spark increased attention about present-day race relations.

“It is the elephant in the room,” said Barbara Williams-Skinner, a facilitator of the National African American Clergy Network, speaking at a panel discussion after a recent screening.

“If you even raise race today, you are ‘race baiting.’ You’re playing ‘the race card,’” said Williams-Skinner, who is also the CEO of the Skinner Leadership Institute.

The movie gives an unflinching account of the true story of Solomon Northup, a free man living in Saratoga Springs, New York, who was kidnapped and spent a dozen years as a slave in the South, wrongly accused of being a Georgia runaway.

Clergy and activists hoped the movie, which opened October 18—with its depiction of whippings and other degradation—will be a catalyst for churches to recall slavery and address the current state of the nation’s race relations. They point to controversies from the killing of Florida teen Trayvon Martin to the Supreme Court striking down a major provision of the Voting Rights Act.

Sojourners, the Washington-based antipoverty group, will be circulating “The One Church One Body Pledge” in hopes of starting a new conversation to improve race relations.

“Many white Christians and churches have no connection to what is being felt and said in black churches nationwide— both about fear for their children and fear of losing their voting rights,” the pledge reads.

It urges supporters to seek racial reconciliation and help the church become “a multiracial community.” It calls on them to “repair our criminal justice system” and

urge Congress to “restore the integrity of the Voting Rights Act.”

Sojourners’ founder, Jim Wallis, tied the stories of families separated in *12 Years a Slave* to often-forgotten African-American children who attend inadequate schools or live on streets where hundreds are shot each year. “It’s still going on every damn day,” he said.

Michael McBride, a minister and advocate on the issue of incarceration with PICO National Network, said he hopes the movie will encourage people to view the punitive aspects of U.S. society as excessive and not “grounded in scripture.”

The film sometimes addresses questions of faith, including a slave master quoting from the Bible at an outdoor worship service, legitimizing his authority to control and whip the slaves gathered before him.

“The faith that they had in the film was really capitalism in drag,” said Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, speaking of the slave owners depicted in the movie.

Galen Carey, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, said there’s no “one step” that will move the church on race relations. But “authentic encounters” in local churches can help.

A small group at his Columbia, Maryland, church discovered a sharp racial disparity among its members over whether they’d listed themselves as organ donors on their driver’s licenses. Black members recalled notorious medical experiments on unsuspecting black men in the mid-1900s.

“Every single African American in our group said, ‘No way would I do that ’cause we can’t trust those people,’” Carey said. “And every white person said, ‘What do you mean?’” —RNS

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