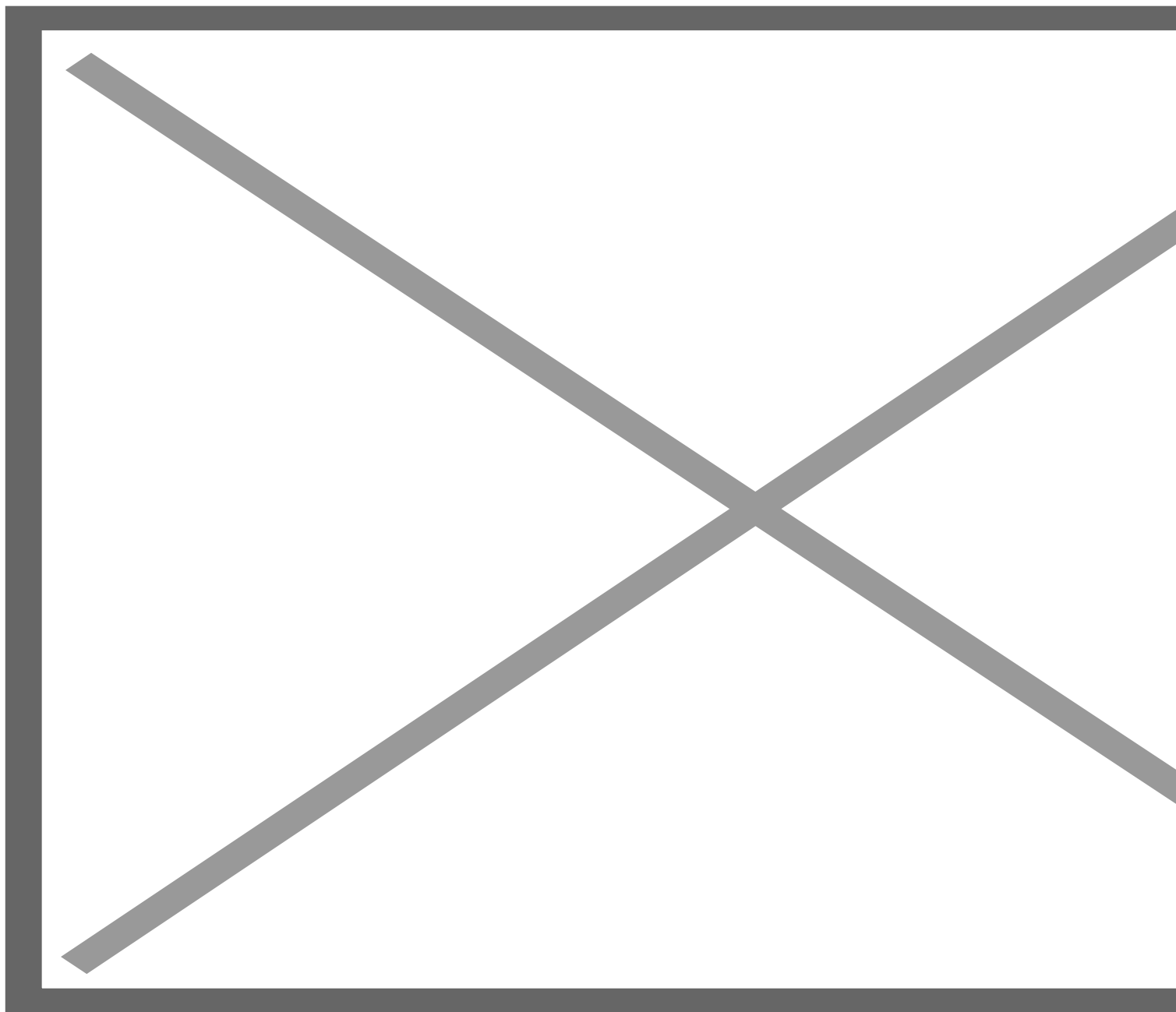


Church sculpture near NASA honors Black Americans, women tied to space race

by [David Paulsen](#)

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The *EarthRise* sculpture outside St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas (Photo courtesy of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas)

An Episcopal church located near NASA's [Johnson Space Center](#) in Houston, Texas, is paying tribute to Black Americans, women, and people from underrepresented groups who were pioneers in the US space exploration

program.

EarthRise, a new public art display outside [St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church](#), takes its name from the [famous 1968 photo of Earth](#) captured by the Apollo 8 crew as they orbited the moon. The sculpture's parabolic canopy is intended to resemble the edge of a wing, with about 50 people of color depicted in the structure's stained-glass mosaic. Below, eight plaques form the sides of a miniature space capsule and feature photos and text honoring the real-life accomplishments of individuals "whose courage, innovation and perseverance helped expand humanity's reach into space."

The sculpture, funded largely through a Diocese of Texas fund for racial reconciliation projects, was [dedicated in a ceremony](#) August 16 attended by an estimated 400 people, including former [NASA Administrator Charles Bolden Jr.](#), a longtime member of St. Thomas.

"I hope every young person who visits *EarthRise* will be inspired," said Bolden, whose short biography is one of the eight incorporated into the sculpture. "You can do whatever you want to do. Don't ever let other people define you, tell you who you are," Bolden said [in a diocesan article about the dedication](#). "Particularly, for women and people of color, you can do whatever you want to do, but you've got to study. You've got to work hard."

The stories of all eight *EarthRise* honorees also can be found on the [sculpture page on the church's website](#).

Texas Bishop Andy Doyle also spoke at the dedication. "*EarthRise* reminds us that history is strongest when every story is told," Doyle said.

The idea for the *EarthRise* sculpture was inspired by the Houston-based diocese's interest in creating historical markers as part of a major racial reconciliation effort it launched in 2020. That year, its diocesan council approved \$13 million for the newly created [Missionary Vision for Racial Justice Initiative](#), which established several funds, endowments and scholarships, including the Joseph and John Talbot Fund for Racial Reconciliation.

One goal of the Talbot Fund has been to install physical markers and memorials sharing the untold stories of historical violence and other episodes of injustice toward communities of color. At St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church, parish leaders considered how they might participate. Mike Stone, St. Thomas's rector, said in an interview that the congregation envisioned a historical marker focused on positive achievements.

"What if we did something celebratory?" Stone said. Parish leaders suggested highlighting Black contributions to the space race, and diocesan leaders gave the green light.

In 2022, with a Talbot Fund grant of \$116,000 and an additional \$15,000 raised by the congregation, they chose a design by the [Genesis Art Collaborative](#) out of three finalists. Over several years of engineering work, permitting approvals and construction, *EarthRise* took shape.

Alongside the Genesis Art Collaborative's work on the sculpture, the congregation recorded video footage of the project and interviews with some of the NASA pioneers that will be turned into a documentary overseen by a member of the congregation.

The sculpture is illuminated at night and open for viewing by the public anytime. People from all walks of life can take inspiration from the words displayed across the top of the sculpture's model space capsule: "We can do more together." —Episcopal News Service