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Greetings, North Carolina United Methodists! In First Peter, chapter 2, we hear these words, “Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you’ll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God.”

The 2025 Black History Month theme is “African Americans and Labor,” focusing on the various and profound ways that work and working of all kinds – free and unfree, skilled, and unskilled, vocational and voluntary – intersect with the collective experiences of Black people. Work is at the very center of much of Black history and culture. Whether the traditional agricultural labor of enslaved Africans, debates among Black educators on the importance of vocational training, self-help strategies and entrepreneurship in Black communities, or organized labor’s role in fighting for both economic and social injustice, Black people’s work has been transformational throughout the United States.

Here in Eastern NC, we celebrate the extraordinary labor of Julian F. Abele, an African American architect who designed Duke University’s Chapel, as well as many other English Gothic buildings at Duke University between 1924 and 1950.

Remembering and celebrating “African Americans and Labor” includes an expansive understanding of labor like the community building of social justice activists, voluntary workers serving others, and institution building in churches, community groups, and social clubs and organizations. In each of these instances, the work of Black people has been instrumental in shaping the lives, cultures, and histories of Black people and the societies in which they live. We honor the legacy of Black clergy and church leaders who have shaped the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church and beyond. Their faith, courage, and dedication have been a light in times of struggle and a beacon of hope for generations.

We also celebrate the vital work of the Strengthening the Black Church Committee here in our conference. Through their leadership here in the North Carolina Conference, they have nurtured partnerships and empowered the next generation of church leaders. Their efforts include fostering connections with students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities like North Carolina Central University, mentoring aspiring clergy, and creating spaces for Black pastors to connect, to rest, and to reset.

In 2024, leaders in the Strengthening the Black Church movement made an incredible impact—by hosting Wesley Campus Ministry luncheons to supporting students entering Divinity School, engaging in General Conference activities, and attending the Southeastern Jurisdiction Black Methodists for Church Renewal Conference to build community with Black clergy around the country. We celebrate these contributions as we present ourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which we will serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God.