

MAKING HISTORY TODAY
**“THE WONDERFUL, POWERFUL,
MAGNIFICENT SPIRIT OF HISTORY”**

James S. Currie, Executive Secretary
Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest

In the Acknowledgements to his memoir *Walking with the Wind* John R. Lewis closes with these words: “Finally, I am forever indebted to the wonderful, powerful, magnificent Spirit of History. I was touched by that spirit long ago, and I have followed it ever since. I only hope and pray that my journey will continue to be blessed.”

In that phrase “the wonderful, powerful, magnificent Spirit of History” Lewis captures the dynamism of being part of history. This man who spoke at the March on Washington in August 1963, who was beaten within an inch of his life in Selma, Alabama in 1965, and who was imprisoned many times understood that he was involved in something important. Perhaps one can even say that he felt called to be part of a movement for the cause of justice that had national significance. Of course, he went on to serve that cause in the Congress of the United States for 34 years.

Might there be a sense in which the Spirit of History, in retrospect, could be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit? We rarely see the work of the Spirit at any particular time as such, but surely, with hindsight, that work can be discerned. The first disciples only began to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words and deeds through the retrospective prism of the resurrection.

History gets bad press when we think of it only in terms of names, dates, and events in the past. If that’s all it is, then of course it would be boring. Our appreciation for the the cause of civil rights over the past 60 years can only be enhanced when we begin to examine not only the plight of persons of color over the previous 300 years in this country, but also how our own attitudes have been shaped by those events.

In his account of the massacre of African Americans in East St. Louis, Illinois in July 1917 Harper Barnes reviews the previous 150 years of unrest and racial bias in this country (see Barnes’ book *Never Been a Time*). In May 1921 a similar massacre took

place in Tulsa, Oklahoma. No doubt, there were people of faith who over the years fought on the side of the angels in seeking justice and reconciliation (the PHSSW's 2021 annual meeting will be held in Tulsa and will be devoted to the issues of that event; see also the book ***Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, and Walking Humbly: The Witness of Some Southern Presbyterian Pastors for the Cause of Racial Harmony in the 1950s and 1960s***).

Henry Ford is credited with saying, "history is more or less bunk." That only illustrates the disconnect between present and past that John Lewis resisted. In the May 26, 1910 issue of *The Christian Century* Robert Speer, that great Presbyterian authority on missions, wrote: "The worst disloyalty to the past is to mistake it for the future. Very great and glorious that past has been, but that past will have failed to teach its lesson for us, that past will have failed to fulfill its mission in the will of God, if it binds [people] forever in the chains of its institutional forms, if it has not made them ready for larger and completer things, and led them on to such a unity as Christ himself, we must believe, longed for while he was here and waits for now where he is gone." At the head of those remarks are the words: "*For freer minds, rooted in but not enslaved by the past.*" Our goal is not to re-create the past, let alone live there, but rather to learn from it as we move into the present and the future.

In his novel/play ***Requiem for a Nun*** William Faulkner has one of his characters say, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." We study Scripture and church history and theology precisely because we are part of that "wonderful, powerful, magnificent Spirit of History." We are part of that story, and that story has not only shaped us, but it informs our understanding of the issues we face today – issues of race relations, immigration, economic justice, among others. We are not called to return to days gone by. Rather, we are called to move into God's future understanding that we cannot do so responsibly without having a profound awareness of "the wonderful, powerful, magnificent Spirit of History." May our lives also be blessed as we move into God's future.