

General Convention of The Episcopal Church 2022 Archives' Research Report

Resolution No.: 2022-C019
Title: Petition to the 80th General Convention to add John R. Lewis to the Episcopal Church Calendar
Proposer: Northern California
Topic: Church Calendar

Directly Related: (Attached)

2018-A066 Commemorate Thurgood Marshall, Pauli Murray, and Florence Li Timi-Oi in the Church Calendar

Indirectly Related: (Available in the [Acts of Convention](#) database, searchable by resolution number)

None

In preparing this report, the Archives researched the resolutions in the Acts of Convention database for the period 1973 through 2018, selecting “direct” resolutions that have a substantive bearing on the proposed legislation. The “direct” resolutions are attached and “indirect” resolutions are available in the Acts of Convention database. Committee members who require other research assistance should contact the Archives through the [Research Request Form](#) or call 800-525-9329.

C019 - Petition to the 80th General Convention to add John R. Lewis to the Episcopal Church calendar

Final Status: Not Yet Finalized

Proposed by: Northern California

Requests New Interim Body: No

Amends C&C or Rules of Order: No

Has Budget Implications: No

Cost:

HiA: HB

Legislative Committee Currently Assigned: 12 - Prayer Book, Liturgy & Music

Completion Status: Incomplete

Latest House Action: N/A

Supporting Documents: No

Resolution Text

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring,

That the 80th General Convention designate July 17 in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, or the supplement *A Great Cloud of Witnesses: A Calendar of Commemorations* as the annual celebration of the life and work of John R. Lewis, pastor, civil rights leader and public servant.

Explanation

This resolution petitions General Convention to add John Lewis to the calendar of commemorations on the date of his death (July 17) in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* or its supplement, *A Great Cloud of Witnesses: A Calendar of Commemorations* with appropriate readings and collects.

John Robert Lewis (Feb. 21, 1940 – July 17, 2020) was born near Troy Alabama, the son of sharecroppers. He was mentored by Martin Luther King, Jr., and was ordained a Baptist pastor. He later earned a degree from Fisk University. As a student he organized lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville. He was one of the “Freedom Riders” in 1961, challenging Southern policies that imposed racial segregation on buses. He was assaulted and beaten by angry mobs in South Carolina and arrested.

In 1963 Lewis became chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was one of the “Big Six” who organized the March on Washington where Dr. King delivered his “I have a dream speech.” Lewis was a leader of the 1965 march in Selma, Ala., and was severely beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, suffering a skull fracture. At the time, Lewis believed he would die on the bridge. In 1970 he became the director of the Voter Education Project, registering nearly 4 million minority voters nationwide. In 1986, Lewis was elected to a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia, serving in Congress until his death in 2020.

Lewis was arrested more than 40 times in non-violent protests against racial injustice and remained committed to non-violence throughout his life. “Our struggle was not about politics,” he said a few years before his death. “It was about seeing a philosophy made manifest in our society that recognized the inextricable connection we have to each other.”

Author Jon Meacham, who is an Episcopalian and Canon Historian at the Washington National Cathedral, wrote a recent biography of Lewis, making the case that Lewis meets the definition of a Christian saint.

“To John Lewis, the truth he had lived out on that bridge in 1965 was of a piece with the demands of the gospel to which he had dedicated his life since he was a child. He was moved by love, not by hate,” Meacham wrote. “To put complicated matters simply: John Robert Lewis embodied the traits of a saint in the classical Christian sense of the term.”

Another recent historian, Douglas Brinkley, wrote of Lewis: “He is our apostle of quiet strength. His eyebrow raised or finger wagged carries more weight than a hundred bombastic speeches or clever pontifications.”

It should be noted that this resolution was passed overwhelmingly by the Convention of the Diocese of Northern California on a vote of 275-7, indicating broad and enthusiastic local support. While there have been no formal local liturgical celebrations on his death date that we know of, Lewis was mentioned in sermons and prayers for All Saints Sunday here in our diocese, and in a powerful sermon on All Saints Sunday at the Washington National Cathedral by Jon Meacham. Lewis (and Howard Thurman) have been studied in our “Pathways” pilgrimage program for teens.

While we expect concerns that this request is relatively soon after Lewis’ death, we note that the length of time for consideration for calendar commemoration of a “saint” has been shortened for those who are martyrs, for example Martin Luther King, Jr. and Oscar Romero. Lewis came close many times to dying as a martyr, and as author Meacham notes in his biography: “One test of a saint, closely tied to the test of a martyr, is the willingness to suffer and die for others. Which Lewis was willing to do—again and again and again.”

The Episcopal calendar includes more than 300 individuals, but only ten are African American, and only a handful are from the twentieth century (King, Pauli Murray, W.E.B. Du Bois and Thurgood Marshall), and none from this century. Truthfully, our Episcopal calendar dimly reflects the rich contributions of African American theologians, educators and religious leaders who played an enormous role in shaping the civil rights movement and, more

broadly, how we engage with the difficult issues of race and justice in our world today. John Lewis is certainly among them.

The introduction to *A Great Cloud of Witnesses* describes the purpose of our Episcopal calendar: “This resource recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to our understanding of our calling as the Body of Christ within the complexities of the twenty-first-century world without making a statement one way or another on their sanctity. It serves as a family history, identifying those people inside and outside the Episcopal/Anglican tradition who help us proclaim the Gospel in word, deed, and truth.”

John R. Lewis meets this description and should be included on our calendar.

1 John Lewis, *Across That Bridge*, by John Lewis, Hyperion Books, 2012, p. 7.

2 Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On: Jon Lewis and the Power of Hope*, Random House, 2020, p. 4.

3 Douglas Brinkley, Foreward, *Across That Bridge*, p. ix.

4 Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On: Jon Lewis and the Power of Hope*, Random House, 2020, p. 4.



Resolution Number: 2018-A066

Title: Commemorate Thurgood Marshall, Pauli Murray, and Florence Li Timi-Oi in the Church Calendar

Legislative Action Taken: Concurred

Final Text:

Resolved, That the 79th General Convention include Thurgood Marshall, Pauli Murray, and Florence Li Tim-Oi in Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018.

Citation: General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Austin, 2018* (New York: General Convention, 2018), p. 1166.