Prophets who walked among us: Hawley Lynn and I. DeQuincey Newman

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Hawley Lynn was a short man with a giant’s courage to bear the Word of God.

It fell his lot to be pastor of Grace Methodist Church in Pickens when Willie Earle was taken from his jail cell and lynched Feb. 17, 1947. It became his calling to speak out, this product of Textile Industrial Institute – now Spartanburg Methodist College – who was the first to take his work/study transcript from there to the University of South Carolina.

The Rev. Mr. Lynn, most of us would think, should have been more careful; he was a widower with an infant daughter, just two years into his first assignment as a S.C. Methodist pastor and with a new church building to fund. But Lynn stood for his Creator. In less than three days, he called a meeting at Pickens High School and invited leaders of other denominations to help lead a repudiation of the bold murder 50 feet from the sheriff’s office. The sympathy for the man Earle allegedly had killed, the sense of white supremacy and other area history created a failed meeting, but Lynn was not deterred. The coroner’s jury protected the names of Earle’s white killers. Lynn preached a sermon March 2 titled, “Who Lynched Willie Earle?” proffering that the race-hating attitudes of those not physically involved in the murder made them equally guilty.

To take the issue beyond Pickens County, Lynn composed a pastoral prayer that appeared on the cover of the Southern Christian Advocate March 6. It next ran in the Pickens Sentinel. Within three years, his sermon ran in The Pulpit, a publication of The Christian Century Foundation.

Although 21 men signed confessions, the 31 accused were exonerated by an all-male jury. Perhaps Lynn took some comfort in a student protest, led by the Rev. Charles Crenshaw in Spartanburg, of the jury’s foul work.

Grace Methodist Church’s building was completed and paid for in 1949 and Lynn soon became director of Adult Work for the conference and, later, was the Hartsville District’s superintendent. He died in 1989.

His sermon asked, did 31 men do it on their own? “Would they have dared come unmasked and undisguised if they had known that the whole weight of our moral disapproval would have fallen on them? … Too many have already answered, ‘I’d turn them loose.’ And in those words they became an accessory to murder. …”

Lynn’s contention was that Willie Earle was killed by men without the love of Christ.

“I heard one answer a few nights ago under this roof,” Lynn told his congregation, “‘We have got to put our foot on them and keep them down!’ That has been tried, (is) still being tried in some sections of our world. … It is not by pride or arrogance that we shall again behold his glory, whether it be black arrogance or white pride. “I slept, I dreamed, I seemed/To climb a hard ascending track; And just behind me labored one/Whose skin was black/I pitied him, but hour by hour/He gained upon my path/He stood beside me/ stood upright!/And then I turned in wrath./‘Go back,’ I cried, ‘what right/Have you to stand beside me here?/I paused struck dumb with fear;/For lo, the black man was not there/But Christ stood in his place./And oh! The pain, the pain, the pain/That look from that dear face.’…” *

Beyond his love of God, it was his difficult background that gave Lynn the courage to step beyond the usual person’s ambitions and concerns for his personal future, the Rev. Fred Reese believes. The Textile Industrial Institute “was a beacon of light for almost anyone trapped in the textile mill community,” Reese said. Lynn and Textile Industrial Institute founder David English Camak became really close friends, Hawley Lynn’s son, George, said. Although Lynn was offered a scholarship to Wofford College, Camak wanted him to go to USC to prove students at TII could make it at a four-year college, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and went on to earn a bachelor of divinity at Yale University.

During integration, whites were overturning school buses in protest in Lamar, and Lynn, then Hartsville District superintendent, spoke out and wrote letters to the editor to protest the kind of things that were going on, said George Lynn, a member of Grace UMC in Rock Hill. “That was a difficult time as well. He was always involved in social justice issues and people issues.

Living near Jefferson in Chesterfield County, Lynn’s father farmed and operated a grocery store and restaurant until the Depression took hold. On the farm, Lynn had an opportunity to know black people and he came to identify with their plight.

Harley Lynn, Reese said, “was part of a reading group that met at Lake Murray as a respite center for liberal souls who needed a place for communicating. Eben (Taylor), Porter (Anderson), and John Murray were a part of that. Hawley was a mentor for many of us who would come to his office at the Methodist Center and ventilate.”

“Persons such as Hawley and Claude Evans provided a prophetic presence.” In addition to having some prophetic insights, Lynn was a gentle spirit, Reese said.

* By Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a verse from “Christ Crucifie,” 1917; also published in Poems of Experience

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Like Hawley Lynn, it was a lynching that created the call to prophecy for Isaiah DeQuincey Newman.

Born in 1911 in Darlington County, the “little boy experienced a lynching. He heard it going on,” his nephew, Marion Newman recalled the story. His father, the Rev. Meloncy Newman, told him to go back to sleep, “but it seared his consciousness. It was a seminal moment,” his nephew said in his Columbia home.

After graduation from Claflin College, Clark College and then Gammon Theological Seminary, the Rev. Mr. Newman was first ordained an elder in the Atlanta conference and transferred to the S.C. conference in 1937, serving churches across South Carolina and the Sumter District as superintendent.

Civil rights timelines crossed Newman’s lifeline as often as his pastoral services.

Newman helped John McCray form the Progressive Democratic Party when a Supreme Court decision made all-white primaries illegal and Gov. Olin Johnston called the legislature into session to make the state’s Democratic Party a private club that omitted blacks. The PDP fought against lynching and poll tax and, by 1950, the 50,000-member party provided the margin that allowed Johnston to beat Strom Thurmond in the Senate race.

In May 1954, the Supreme Court declared no more segregation in schools, but by 1958, only seven Southern states – including South Carolina – had public school segregation. S.C. colleges and universities integrated with a lower profile the other states, beginning with Clemson in 1963. The Orangeburg Massacre was in 1968. The two racially divided Methodist conferences merged in 1972.

Newman was “front and center” in all these turbulent years, advocating nonviolent protests to win equal rights.

He played a major role in helping South Carolina achieve a more peaceful transition from a racially segregated to an integrated society. He founded the Orangeburg branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1943, served in the statewide NAACP and, from 1960-1969, served as its field director.

Newman worked in clandestine ways, hand-in-hand, with governors and SLED to facilitate non-violent protests in the state. They trusted him to do the right thing. “He was close to McNair,” Newman’s nephew said. The same was true of Governor West and Senator Hollings. “He didn’t want South Carolina to go through what other states went through.” And it didn’t.

Newman’s life was not without pain, however. He was run out of Myrtle Beach by a mob, jailed and suffered the verbal abuses of blacks, as well as whites, for not “going along to get along.”

Newman held important state positions and was considered for an ambassadorship, but a major public claim was that of the first African-American elected to the S.C. Senate since Reconstruction.

His work on behalf of the rural poor and his ministry perhaps says even more about Newman.

Newman wore his heart on his sleeve, Marion Newman said. He often remembers what his uncle said about church, likening it to a football game. “Do not let what we say here sink within the walls. We’re in the huddle here but, once you leave, you’re executing the play.” His frequent prayer was “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The son, grandson and brother of a family of pastors, Newman’s courage came from his family. “He was a man of God,” Marion Newman said.

He was also described as a “people person, very caring; he knew how to make everyone feel important. He had a magnetism and he was genuine,” his nephew said.

Having founded Francis Burns United Methodist Church, Newman was in the hospital during his 1980s Senate tenure, taking radiation treatment, when he had a visit of light. The next thing he knew he was flying over Meadowlake neighborhood on the north side of Columbia.

It wasn’t his neighborhood; despite his achievements, he stayed in his modest home on Chappelle Street.

“Why are you taking me here?” he asked his guide. “Where’s the church?”
“There is none,” he responded. The answer came: “Why not?”

Here he was in a hospital bed, likely not going to live, with an instruction to start another church, Marion Newman recalled the story. The Rev. Mr. Newman didn’t think that was possible, but the next morning, the doctor came in and told him his cancer had receded.

Newman enlisted the support of his nephew and several others, including a Caucasian family because he wanted the church to be multi-racial. He visited the bishop and Middleton Rosemond UMC was born.

The story around the Conference Center is that the bishop and a few others didn’t think it was a good place to plant a church, but concluded, “If God told ‘Deke’ Newman to put a church there, we’d better put a church there.”

The church began in the Carpenter’s Millright Union Hall across Wilson Boulevard, someone donated land and a building they hope will be a fellowship hall beside a new sanctuary someday was built. Newman preached until he turned it over to the Rev. Luonne Rouse. His cancer returned to conclude his life in 1985 and the church became I. DeQuincey Newman UMC.

People often mention Newman’s close relationship to God. Vernon Jordan, a protégé who became a national civil rights leader, said he always listened carefully whenever Newman prayed, because he “always felt that when I. D. Newman was praying, God was listening. He seemed to have a direct line.” Newman himself noted that every aspect of his career was simply an “extension of ministry.”