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Black History Month Offers Opportunity to Examine Christian Heritage

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Office of University Communications

February 19, 2014

Gardner-Webb Professor Dr. Eddie Stepp Examines the Early Church in Africa

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Black History Month offers an opportunity to reflect upon the significance of religion and the early church in Africa, which some historians believe goes back to the early days of Biblical history. Dr. Eddie Stepp, chair and associate professor of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Gardner-Webb University, says the roots of Christianity are much more African than European.

“Although we don’t have many references to Africa in the New Testament, we do see the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts chapter eight,” said Stepp. “We are told he was a member of the queen’s court in Ethiopia and came to understand the message of the gospel through Philip’s preaching. By the second century, there was a strong tradition that this convert became a leading evangelist throughout Northeast Africa (including parts of modern Egypt, Kenya, and Sudan).” This event took place well before the Apostle Paul shared the gospel in Europe.

Some early Christian writers give credit to the gospel writer Mark for bringing Christianity to northern Africa in the first century. Stepp recalls, “One traditional teaching is that Mark was actually from North Africa and after his conversion, he planted the message of the gospel in Alexandria, Egypt.”

During the second, third, and fourth centuries, as Christianity grew during the time of a hostile Roman empire; Stepp says Christianity had some of its greatest success in North Africa. “The African churches have a rich tradition of faithfulness to the gospel even when Roman persecution was at its worst and some Christians were put to death. It was the African church leader Tertullian who famously noted that ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,’” Stepp explained.

While many western Christians might be surprised about those early Christian roots in Africa, Stepp believes the events of today might be just as surprising. “Africa is where Christianity has experienced its most rapid growth in the last 100 years,” he offered. “By comparison, Christian growth in America has been steady yet slow. In Europe, it is more proper to speak of Christianity in decline. Looking back, 200 years ago it was the European Christians who carried the gospel into Africa. Now we are seeing Africans carrying the gospel into Europe.”

African Christians, including black congregants in churches throughout the United States, have clearly experienced a long and significant history that continues today.

To learn more about the GWU Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, call 704-406-3269.

Dr. Eddie Stepp discusses the early African church in this WGWG.org interview:

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.