

February 8, 2023

Dear Elected Officials and Public Agency Leaders of Montgomery County:

As leaders of the local religious community, we urge you to meet with the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition (BACC) and negotiate with them to create a museum and memorial as a lasting tribute to the Moses African Cemetery. Located in a triangular area bounded by River Road, Little Falls Parkway, and Westbard Avenue, the cemetery is the burial ground of enslaved African Americans and subsequent generations.

You are likely aware that a thriving African American community had lived in this part of Bethesda for generations. After the Civil War, this community consisted of laborers and small business owners that farmed the land and contributed to the railroad and construction industry, including the carving of marble for the Supreme Court and other venerable buildings. The community established churches and cemeteries.

In the first half of the twentieth century, KKK violence combined with governmental acts of discrimination to displace this resilient and hard-working community. In the process, the land was converted to commercial and large-scale multifamily developments that desecrated the Moses African Cemetery by building right on top of it.

The resounding verdict of Circuit Court Judge Karla Smith's injunction halting the sale by the county's Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) of Westwood Towers corroborates this tragic history and desecration of the Moses African Cemetery.¹ Subsequent to the Judge's verdict, the HOC appealed her decision in the fall of 2022. Meanwhile, the current construction in this corridor continues unabated, threatening the erasure of history and the complete desecration of the Moses African Cemetery. To stop the desecration, we call on the HOC to negotiate with the BACC with the aim of establishing a museum and a memorial on the land near Westwood Towers.

Desecration of cemeteries is one of the most heinous ways to erase a race, religious group, and culture. During the Holocaust, the Nazis destroyed Jewish cemeteries, often employing forced Jewish labor in the process of [destroying gravesites and re-using](#) the materials for roads and other infrastructure. Racism and hatred all across the globe have also contributed to the desecration of [Christian](#) and [Muslim](#) cemeteries.

You have an opportunity to exert real leadership and demonstrate a commitment to racial and restorative justice. If you meet with the BACC and negotiate a solution that includes a memorial

¹ The judge's decision can be accessed here <https://www.scribd.com/document/535079433/Smith-Preliminary-Injunction>



and museum, you will preserve history and provide invaluable educational opportunities for future generations. If history is preserved and memorialized, it is remembered. Future atrocities can only be avoided if we remember and teach. If construction proceeds and creates parking lots, storage facilities, and other commercial/residential development where sacred cemeteries are now located, the County has erased the experiences of yet another African American community.

The only way to ensure that future generations growing up and residing in Montgomery County understand and appreciate this history is to preserve it. Imagine all the field trips that future school classes could take to a memorial located at the Moses African Cemetery. Imagine the lectures that could be given by descendants of the original African American community. Imagine the richness this would provide.

If the public sector leadership of Montgomery County shirks this responsibility, it would be a most shameful action. The time is now to act. Any further delay risks permanent damage. Montgomery County has a reputation as a progressive and inclusive place. This status is endangered if our leadership allows desecration of cemeteries. We ask you to please uphold our best values and please act now.

Sincerely,

Rev. Segun Adebayo, Macedonia Baptist Church

Rabbi Debbie Cohen, Beth Chai - the Jewish Humanist Congregation of Greater Washington

Rabbi Eric L. Abbott, Bethesda, MD

Rev. HiRho Park, PhD., DMin., PCC, Lead Pastor, Bethesda United Methodist

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Reverend Dr. Laura Norvell, Faith United Methodist Church, Rockville

Reverend Kara Scroggins, Pastor of North Bethesda United Methodist Church

Rabbi Michael Safra, Rockville Maryland

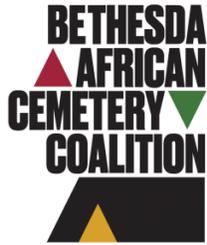
Rev. Martha Meredith, Rockville United Methodist Church

The Reverend Dr. Jay L. Moses, St. Mark Presbyterian Church

Rev. Shelby Etheridge, Associate Pastor, St. Mark Presbyterian Church

Reverend Ledlie Laughlin, St. Columba's Episcopal Church

Rev. Joey Heath-Mason, Associate Pastor, St. Paul's United Methodist Church



Rev. Dr. Patricia Allen, Senior Pastor, St. Paul's Kensington UMC

Timothy Tutt, Senior Minister, Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ,
Executive Director, Briggs Center for Faith & Action

Rabbi Josh Gischner