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By CHRIS BOURNEA

Staff Writer

On Feb. 4, the Church of Christ of the Apostolic Faith in Columbus hosted Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson. Wilkerson is the author of the best-selling nonfiction book “The Warmth of Other Suns,” which chronicles the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North in the 20th century.

It was fitting that Wilkerson appeared during Black History Month at a church, since she has the captivating oratory style of a preacher. As she described the journey taken by many of the audience members’ grandparents and great-grandparents, she captivated, educated and entertained.

Wilkerson said it took her 15 years to write and research

“The Warmth of Other Suns.” In the process, she interviewed 1,200 people before narrowing the book down to three main people who represent the three migration streams from the South to the east coast, Midwest and the west.

“How ironic that the people were leaving the warmest part of the country for literally the coldest part of the country for the warmth of other suns,” Wilkerson said. “That says it all right there.”

Wilkerson described the Jim Crow conditions that propelled many African Americans to abandon the warm climate and familiarity of the South and set out on the long trip North.

“This was the only time in American history where people were forced to leave,” she said, “to defect just to be recognized as the citizens they were born as.”

During segregation, it was illegal, for example, for Black motorists to pass White motorists on the highway, no matter how slow the White motorist was going. There were even laws that segregated activities as seemingly harmless as playing checkers.

“That meant somebody saw a White person and a Black person playing checkers,” Wilkerson

said. “Maybe they were having too much fun.”

In Alabama, there were separate Bibles for White and Black citizens to swear on when they appeared on court.

“I said, ‘Oh my goodness. You mean the word of God is segregated?’ The answer is yes. They found a way,” Wilkerson said.

The segregation, combined with horrendous working conditions when picking cotton and performing other back-breaking labor, is what led many African Americans to take their chances and move North.

“Six million African Americans left the South from the 1920s through the 1970s, and that is how the majority of African Americans got to where we are,” Wilkerson said. “That is why Cleveland, Columbus, New York, Detroit look the way they do.”

Leaving the South was not only challenging economically, forcing those who wanted to make the journey to save for months or even years, but was illegal in many Southern states.

“They would actually arrest people on the rails if they had a northbound ticket,” Wilkerson said. “They would arrest the (employment) recruiters who came down from the North. There were so many barriers to people just trying to get out that it’s a wonder that they actually did.”

Once African Americans made it to the North, they didn’t always find it as welcoming as they’d hoped. Even though they were often forced to live in segregated housing and toil in low-paying jobs, many African Americans who relocated to the North were eventually able to forge a better life for themselves.

The mass exodus of so many Black residents forced Southern states to treat the African Americans who stayed behind with more respect, Wilkerson said.

“You had people who tilled the soil and planted the seeds for the equal rights movement to happen. They freed themselves, and that is astounding,” she said. “These people changed the very region from which they had been forced to leave.”

Many famous and accomplished African Americans come from families that took part in the Great Migration. Author Toni Morrison’s parents were from Alabama, where it was illegal for Blacks to check out library books. Her parents migrated to Lorain, Ohio.

“She became a novelist and a Nobel laureate,” Wilkerson said. “If you’re going to become a Nobel laureate, it’s good to get a book every now and then (from the library). What would have happened if her parents hadn’t left?”

Jazz greats such as Miles Davis and John Coltrane also came from families who originated in the South and moved North.

“Jazz would not have existed if it hadn’t been for the Great Migration,” Wilkerson said.

Many of the musicians who invented contemporary pop, R&B and hip hop are products of the Great Migration, Wilkerson added. She noted that Motown founder Berry Gordy’s parents were originally from Alabama and relocated to Detroit.

“Motown simply would not have existed if not for the Great Migration,” she said. “We would not know Michael Jackson’s name or the Jacksons at all if it had not been for the Great Migration.”

Wilkerson said there is now a “return migration,” with scores of African Americans moving South to cities such as Atlanta that have become beacons of prosperity for Blacks. While legal segregation has been abolished for decades in the South, there is still much progress to be made, Wilkerson said.

“The laws have been changed, but have the hearts truly changed?” she said. “What will it take for the hearts to change?”