Culture



Nolan Williams Jr., left, speaks with choristers while filming the "Just Like Selma" project at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in Houston. (RNS/Courtesy of NEWorks Productions/Alma Hicks)

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January 19, 2026
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Composer Nolan Williams Jr. has long combined faith, culture and the arts in his productions on stage and screen, often centering on African American life. Now, he has created the "Just Like Selma" project to focus on the history of and continuing advocacy for voting rights.

The song he composed by the same name debuted via a video ahead of Martin Luther King Jr. Day (Jan. 19), and will be incorporated into the worship services at churches across the country during Black History Month in February.

"We are shifting from voter participation to civic engagement and really shining a spotlight on the Voting Rights Act and the history that led to the Voting Rights Act," Williams told Religion News Service in an interview, describing the law that has lost some of its key provisions since a 2013 Supreme Court decision. "We have seen the impact of that and the number of precincts that have been closed or the kinds of voter ID laws that have been enacted. … States that had a history of discrimination no longer have to answer to anyone before they make any changes in their voting procedures."

Williams, 56, is the founder of NEWorks Productions, a music and arts production company, and the chief music editor of the African American Heritage Hymnal. The song "Just Like Selma" is the next part of NEWorks' Freedom Advances campaign, whose "Rise Up & Fight" pro-voting animation music video earned him a Best Director award at the 2025 Cannes Film Awards.

The social justice hymn calls for the kinds of resistance and protest that King declared as the final voting rights march from Selma in 1965 concluded at the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, saying, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

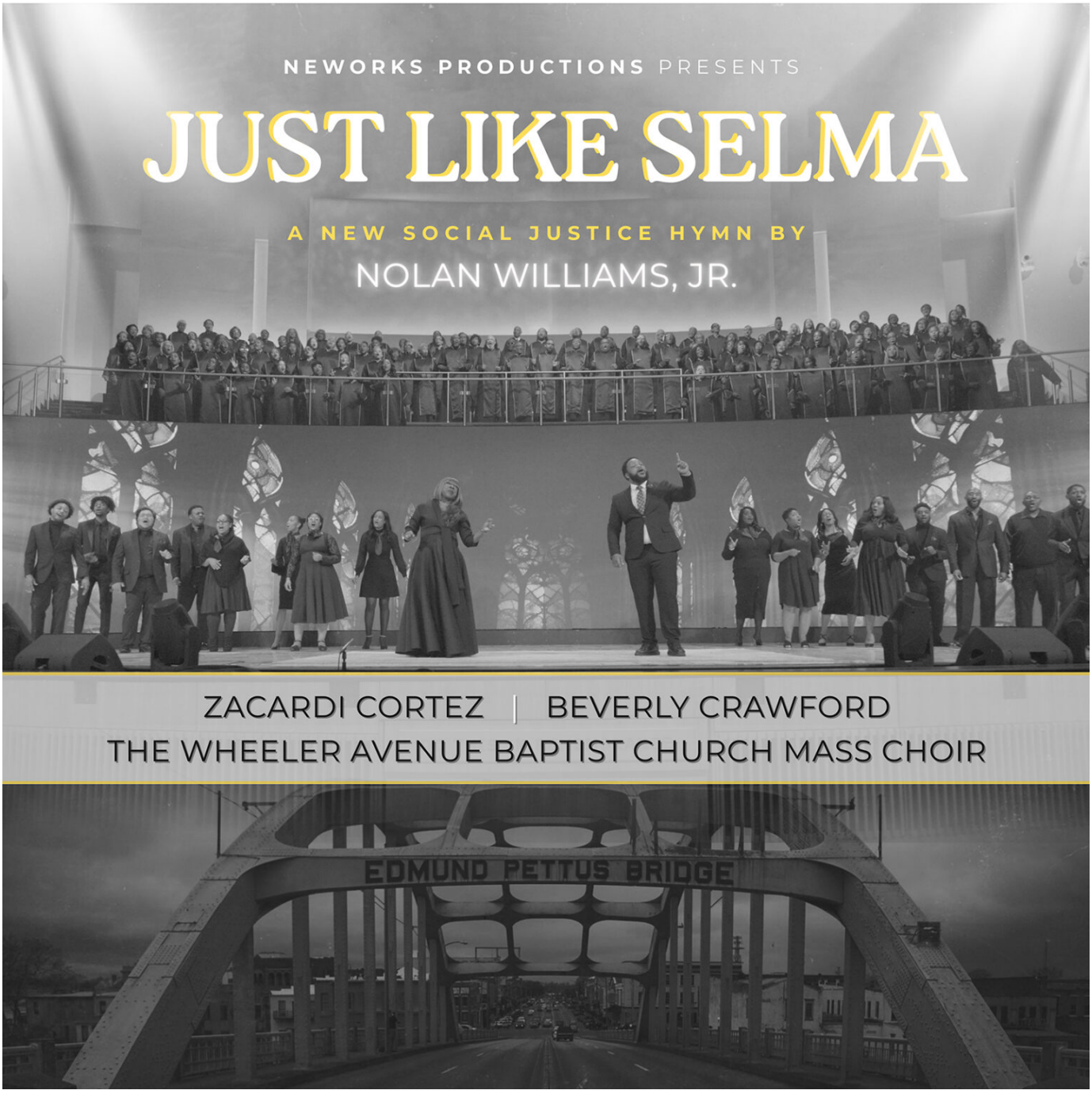
The music video blends archival footage of civil rights marchers — showing the historic signs they carried and headlines they prompted — with a recording of the

song by two soloists, Grammy Award-nominated artists Zacardi Cortez and Beverly Crawford, and the 130-voice Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church Mass Choir from Houston. The a cappella performance captures the sounds of hands and feet being used as instruments to undergird the song ' lyrics, reminiscent of the anthems of the 1960s. The refrain begins:

> "Oh, Oh, Oh, Selma has taught us how to persist, resist.
>
> Selma has taught us how to protest, endure.
>
> Selma has taught us how to fight hate, agitate,
>
> Until the arc bends our way …"

As the nation marks not only the King holiday but, in February, the 100th anniversary of Black History Month, which began in 1926 as Negro History Week, Williams thought the hymn could be a way to collectively hear from Black churches again. He noted that recent social and racial justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, began outside of church walls, a shift from the Civil Rights Movement's closer connections to churches.

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Promotional poster for the new hymn "Just Like Selma." (RNS/Courtesy of NEWorks Productions)

"That's where the roots are in terms of social protest, and it's important to make that connection," said Williams, who is the son of a Baptist pastor. "But this project is not exclusive."

The list of dozens of churches that have indicated they will perform the song during Black History Month includes Black churches of a range of sizes and locations, in addition to other churches, such as the Arlington Church of the Brethren in Virginia. Those that registered to incorporate the song on the NEWorks website receive resources, including sheet music, to help them prepare to sing the hymn.

The Rev. Jacqueline Thompson, senior pastor of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California, said her church's Unity Choir plans to open its Black history commemoration by singing "Just Like Selma" during its morning worship service on Feb. 1.

"There is a deep irony in celebrating 250 years of American democracy while simultaneously witnessing efforts to erase Black history, restrict voting access, and the narrowing of the story we tell about who belongs," Thompson, who also is the second-vice president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, a historically Black denomination, told RNS via email. "This project is a reminder that remembrance comes with responsibility."

The Rev. Matt Rittle, pastor of Arlington Church of the Brethren, considered a peace church, said he hopes his mostly white congregation that usually gathers 25 to 40 people on Sunday will sing "Just Like Selma," after congregants began an email thread discussing it after seeing it in a denominational newsletter.

The video will also be featured in bicoastal events on the King holiday before the song's release in February on streaming platforms.

The video will be included in the annual "Let Freedom Ring" Martin Luther King Day celebration and concert, which had long been a partnership between Georgetown University, Williams and the former John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. This year, the event will be held at the historic Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Since the recently renamed Trump Kennedy Center began being chaired by President Donald Trump last February, numerous artists have canceled appearances.

Asked about the recent ending of his 15 years on the Kennedy Center's Community Advisory Board, Williams declined to comment.

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A spokesperson for Georgetown said the new venue was "chosen in part to contribute to a set of proactive steps to protect the university's financial health amid ongoing challenges." In a December update, the university's president attributed "considerable financial uncertainty" at the school to causes including higher utility costs and federal research award disruptions.

The "Just Like Selma" video will also be featured in a Martin Luther King Day service during the midwinter board meeting of the Progressive National Baptist Convention in Los Angeles.

"Music is essential to movements," said the Rev. David Peoples, president of the denomination, in a statement. "As the denominational home of Dr. King, PNBC is honored to collaborate to promote this timely addition to sacred music."

Leon Lewis, the minister of music at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, said the message of resilience in the song is as relevant as it was in the past.

"I think that's why we were able to garner so much support from our choir members to participate in it, because we're still seeing the inequities in our states, in our world, in our cities," he said. "Clearly, the message still resonates even now in 2026."

On the Sunday before the MLK Day events, Williams plans to return to Wheeler Avenue Baptist to conduct the choir for a premiere performance during its two worship services. They are expected to draw some 12,000 people over two services in the church's sanctuary and overflow rooms.

Williams declined to make predictions about how his new composition might endure, but he said it's the right moment for the song to be sung.

"We need to be reflecting the times, and that's not something that should just be in the streets — that's something that should also be in the pulpit, in the choir loft, in the pews," he said. "We have amazing artists now that create praise and worship music and gospel songs and all of that, … but a social justice hymn is not a common kind of thing, and it's timely."