Faith Calling for Action

The Advocacy Booklet of the Faith & Action Committee

-Educating, Equipping, and Empowering Our Community –

Racial Justice and Healing

FAITH & ACTION

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St. Paul's

Episcopal Church

Dear Friends in Christ,

FAITH & ACTION

As followers of Jesus, we are called to remember. Remembering is not simply looking back; it is an act of truth-telling. It allows us to face what has been hidden, to confess what has been denied, and to ground ourselves in God's call to repentance, reconciliation, and new life.

The history of slavery in this nation - and in the Church - is a painful one. The Episcopal Church, and St. Paul's in particular, did not stand apart from the systems of human bondage. Many of our pews were once filled by enslavers, while those they enslaved were relegated to the margins. Our stained glass and stones carry a silent witness to a time when the Gospel of liberation was silenced by oppression. This history is grave, but it is not the end of the story.

In Christ, we are called to confront this legacy honestly, to lament the ways the Church has fallen short of embodying God's love, and to recommit ourselves anew to the work of racial justice and reconciliation. Remembering our complicity is not meant to paralyze us in shame, but to free us for action so that together we may live more fully into the baptismal promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

This month, our Faith & Action Committee invites you into deeper engagement with this history. On October 19, we will gather for our Sunday Forum, *Walking with the Enslaved: The Church's Role in Slavery*. We will explore how truth-telling can become a pathway to healing, and how the Spirit is calling St. Paul's today to bear witness to God's justice and love in Richmond and beyond.

May we walk humbly together on this journey - remembering, lamenting, and acting in hope - trusting that the God who redeems also transforms.

Faithfully yours,

Deacon Florian+

Deep Complicity and Institutional Silence:
The Episcopal Church and Slavery

The story of the Episcopal Church in America is inextricably linked to the story of slavery. From its earliest days, the Church was deeply enmeshed in a society built on human bondage. Wealth derived from enslaved labor shaped the lives of many parishioners, funded the construction of church buildings, and underwrote endowments. Bishops and priests, vestry members and donors - many were directly involved in the institution of slavery, either as slaveholders or as beneficiaries of an economy dependent on enslaved labor.

What is striking about the Episcopal Church's history is not only this complicity but also the way the Church framed slavery as something *outside* its spiritual concern. Unlike Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, the Episcopal Church did not divide into northern and southern branches over the issue of slavery. This institutional unity is often remembered as a source of strength. But unity came at a cost. It was preserved by refusing to name slavery as a moral evil, treating it instead as a matter of politics, law, or "regional difference." The Episcopal Church chose peace among its members over prophetic witness.

The silence was not confined to the South. In the North, too, Episcopal parishes often avoided confronting slavery directly. Some churches hosted abolitionist speakers or supported African American clergy; yet, even in these cases, the welcome was limited. When the Rev. William Levington, an African American priest, preached in Boston, white congregations opened their doors but required Black worshippers to sit in designated galleries. At times, Black communicants were even removed from the altar rail if they attempted to kneel beside white parishioners. Northern Episcopalians, while less openly pro-slavery than their southern counterparts, often maintained segregated practices and resisted "politicizing" the pulpit by denouncing slavery.

This pattern of complicity combined with silence reveals much about how the Church understood itself. It prided itself on being a church of

order, moderation, and unity, a bridge between factions. But in the process, it failed to be a church of justice. By avoiding conflict within its own body, it allowed the greater conflict of slavery and racial oppression to continue unchallenged.

The legacy of this silence is long. Because the Episcopal Church never officially condemned slavery during its existence, it carried the weight of that moral failure into the post-emancipation era. The reluctance to confront hard truths lingered, shaping how the Church responded to segregation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination well into the twentieth century.

Why does this history matter today? Because silence in the face of injustice is never neutral. By refusing to speak, we choose the side of those who benefit from oppression. Our Church's history of complicity and silence is not simply a matter of shame to be acknowledged and forgotten. It serves as a reminder of the danger of prioritizing institutional comfort over gospel truth, of confusing peace with justice, and of valuing unity over righteousness.

For St. Paul's today, this history poses both a warning and a calling. The warning is clear: if we allow fear of conflict or desire for comfort to mute our witness, we risk repeating the sins of our forebears. The calling is equally clear: to be a community that chooses courage over silence, truth over convenience, and justice over false peace.

Our task is not to undo the past, but to learn from it. To tell the truth about our complicity. To confess where silence has prevailed. And to embrace the call of the prophets and of Christ himself: to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

Only when we reckon with our silence can we begin to find our true voice.

Enduring Exclusion and Marginalization of African Americans

The story of the Episcopal Church and African Americans is a story of faith persevering amid exclusion. Even after emancipation, when slavery itself was abolished, the Church did not immediately embrace African Americans as equals. Instead, patterns of segregation, second-class citizenship, and marginalization persisted for generations, leaving deep wounds in our common life.

From the earliest days, African Americans in Episcopal congregations were required to sit in galleries or special sections, separated from their white brothers and sisters in Christ. Even when Black Episcopalians were baptized, confirmed, or admitted to communion, they were regularly denied full participation in the governance and leadership of the Church. Diocesan conventions barred Black congregations from voting. Seminaries like Virginia Theological Seminary and the University of the South excluded Black students until the mid-20th century. The Episcopal Church's own structures reinforced the message that African Americans were welcome as worshippers, but not as equals.

And yet, amid this exclusion, faithful witnesses arose. One of the most significant was the Rev. Absalom Jones (1746–1818). Born into slavery in Delaware, Jones purchased freedom for himself and his wife. In Philadelphia, he became a lay leader at St. George's Methodist Church, where he and Richard Allen organized Black members into prayer and service societies. When St. George's imposed segregated seating, Jones and Allen led a walkout - a moment of holy resistance.

Jones went on to found the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in 1792, the first Black Episcopal parish in the United States. In 1804, he was ordained the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church. His ministry was one of resilience, dignity, and justice: preaching the Gospel, organizing mutual aid, caring for the sick during yellow fever epidemics, and advocating for abolition. Jones's legacy is a powerful

reminder that even when the Church excluded, African Americans carved out space for faithful witness.

Still, the broader Church was slow to follow his example. After the Civil War, many freedpeople turned away from the Episcopal Church, drawn instead to Baptist and Methodist congregations where they found leadership opportunities and a more welcoming spiritual home. In South Carolina alone, the Episcopal Church reported a 90% decline in African American membership after emancipation. The Episcopal Church's Freedmen's Commission, established in 1865 to evangelize and educate former slaves, was underfunded and disbanded within little more than a decade. By 1877, the Church had only 37 African American congregations and 15 Black clergy across the entire South.

Even where African American Episcopalians remained, they were often relegated to "colored convocations" or led by white clergy who held authority over their parishes. Where black priests were consecrated as suffragan bishops, they were denied a vote in the House of Bishops. Again and again, the message was clear: you may belong, but not fully.

Theologically, this is a profound contradiction. In baptism, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). In the Eucharist, we gather at one table, made equal by the grace of God. Yet for centuries, the Episcopal Church failed to live out this truth, placing barriers where Christ had broken them down.

To name this history is not to dwell in shame, but to tell the truth. Our African American forebears in the Church remind us that faith persists even when institutions falter. Their endurance, their witness, and their ministries - from Absalom Jones to many unsung heroes - call us today to repentance and renewal.

For St. Paul's, this history presses us to ask: Who is still excluded from full participation? Whose voice is not yet heard? Where do patterns of inequality remain, even subtly, in our life together? To follow Christ faithfully is to honor the dignity of every human being, not only in word but in practice.

Truth-Telling, Repentance, and Repair: Toward Beloved Community

The work of racial reconciliation cannot rest on memory alone. Memory must give way to truth-telling, repentance, and repair not as one-time gestures, but as ongoing, embodied practices. This is not optional for the Church; it is essential to the practice of discipleship.

Truth-Telling: Naming What Has Been Hidden

To speak the truth is to bring into light what has been buried or obscured. In the context of slavery and racism, truth-telling requires rigorous historical research, courageous conversations, and openness to seeing how injustice continues to ripple through our institutions and relationships.

At St. Paul's, this work has been underway through the History and Reconciliation Initiative (HRI), begun in 2015 in response to the Charleston church shootings and a broader reckoning in the Episcopal Church. That effort examined how St. Paul's identity as the "Cathedral of the Confederacy" was woven into its memorials, windows, plaques, liturgy, and congregational memory. The HRI's findings were published in *Faith, Race, and the Lost Cause: Confessions of a Southern Church*, which unpacks how the people of St. Paul's over time understood their religious, racial, and civic outlooks.

One of the most visible results of this truth-telling has been changes to the sanctuary: St. Paul's removed plaques, kneelers, and other memorial items bearing Confederate symbolism. In 2020, the church rededicated windows initially installed in honor of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, reclaiming their biblical narratives to new meanings of liberation, mercy, and justice. St. Paul's also developed the **Stations of St. Paul's** -silhouette banners marking significant moments in history, from 1619 through the twentieth century - to invite reflection during Lent.

Truth-telling also happens beyond walls. St. Paul's shares the church's racial history publicly, including online, in-person history tours, and speaking engagements.

Repentance: Lament, Confession, and Transformation

Truth-telling can be painful. Repentance means allowing ourselves to acknowledge that pain, lamenting what was done and left undone, confessing complicity, and opening ourselves to transformation.

In the Diocese of Virginia, the Reparations ministry works to confess "the sins of silence, white supremacy, and complicity in the systems that promoted chattel slavery and race-based oppression." One notable structure in the diocese is the Repairers of the Breach Task Force, which provides a framework for congregations and diocesan bodies to reckon with how slavery and racism shaped their institutions and to strategize paths toward repair.

St. Paul's has established pilgrimages, such as "Walking with the Enslaved," in which participants visit historical sites connected to enslavement and reflect on the Church's involvement.

Repentance must also include a willingness to shift power, to listen to voices historically marginalized, and to accept discomfort. It is not a ceremonial act but a posture of the heart and community.

Repair: Concrete Acts of Justice and Reconciliation

Repair is about more than words; it is the practice of justice. Repair demands that we look for ways to mitigate, heal, and transform.

In Virginia, the diocese has committed to allocating part of its resources toward justice and healing. It has been acknowledged that church buildings were often built with enslaved labor and that no institution in Virginia could fully disentangle itself from the legacy of slavery.

At St. Paul's, the ongoing Racial Justice & Healing ministry (under the umbrella of Community Engagement) carries forward the work of the HRI. The parish continues to offer educational and experiential programming, including "Walking with the Enslaved" pilgrimages (in partnership with St. Philip's Episcopal Church), as well as public conversations about Richmond's racial history.

Repair also implicates our use of space, memorials, liturgy, music, and funding. By rededicating windows, altering memorials, commissioning liturgical resources, and telling new stories, St. Paul's is making its sanctuary a site of transformation, not preservation of old hierarchies.

Toward a Beloved Community

Truth-telling, repentance, and repair are not linear steps but interlocking practices in a lifelong journey toward a beloved community.

For St. Paul's, this is not a sideline project or a seasonal observance - it is part of our identity as a community called not merely to worship, but to embody God's justice in Richmond. Our work is to lean into discomfort, continue naming what is hidden, offer genuine repentance, and act boldly in repair.

May we place before us not the mere memory of the past, but the promise of a future shaped by God's reconciliation. May our truth-telling humility, our repentance, and our repair be signs that God's reign is breaking in healing wounds, lifting burdens, and reconciling all things to Christ.

Walking with the Enslaved: A Pilgrimage toward Truth, Reconciliation, and Hope in Richmond

Saturday, November 22th, 8:30 AM until 2 PM (St. Paul's) and Sunday, November 23rd, 1 PM until 3 PM (St. Philip's)

Join members of St. Philip's and St. Paul's as we journey through four centuries of Richmond's racial history, traveling by bus and by foot to experience key historical sites in downtown Richmond along the James River. On this spiritual pilgrimage, we confront the ways that white Christian leaders justified and benefitted from colonization, race-based chattel slavery, the East Coast's largest domestic slave market, and destruction of Jackson Ward. We also share stories of African American resistance, hope, and liberation inspired by Christian faith. By uncovering the truth of this history, we seek to inspire racial healing and equip communities to enact Jesus-centered justice in the future. On Saturday, we tour the historical sites followed up on Sunday by a facilitated group reflection. Details and registration available through St. Paul's website.

Annual Reconciliation Weekend

Each third weekend of October, we host weekend of contemplative events dedicated to recommitting ourselves to the ongoing work of truth-telling, repair, and racial justice and healing to foster God's Beloved Community.

Racial Justice and Healing Team

A ministry team committed to telling the truth of St. Paul's racial history and to repairing the breach through education, exploration, and advocacy.

Deepen Understanding Through Learning and Advocacy

● Read *Faith, Race, and the Lost Cause: Confessions of a Southern Church*. https://www.upress.virginia.edu/title/5909/

● Read *Richmond's Unhealed History by The Rev. Ben Cambell.* https://www.brandylanepublishers.com/product/richmondsunhealedhistory/

● Explore the *Exploring Race & Repair in Faith Communities* toolkit, developed by St. Paul's Truth-Telling Team, at stpaulsrva.org/community/racial-justice and https://www.unumfund.org/toolkit-exploring-race-repair-in-faith-communities

● Pray with the Stations of St. Paul's: https://stpaulsrva.org/worship/stations

● Join Clergy and Citizens against Racism (https://clergyagainstracismrva.org/) whose mission is to build a coalition of diverse faith leaders in dialogue striving to dismantle systems of inequality and foster a more just, compassionate Richmond. This group meets on the last Thursday of the month at 11:30 AM via Zoom.

A Prayer for Racial Justice

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God of truth and mercy, you formed us in your image and called us to live together in love and justice. Yet we confess that our city, our commonwealth, and even your Church have been scarred by the sin of racism and the legacy of slavery.

We remember the hands that built our sanctuaries, our streets, and worked our fields; hands too often bound, unpaid, and unnamed. We remember those whose voices were silenced and those whose dignity was denied.

Give us courage, O Lord, to tell the truth about our past, to lament what has been done and left undone, and to trust that your grace is strong enough to redeem us still.

Bless St. Paul's, that this house of prayer may become a house of healing, a place where history is faced with honesty, where all find a welcome, and where your Spirit renews our hearts for the work of reconciliation.Bless the people of Richmond, a city once divided by chains and walls. Transform us into a community bound together by hope and compassion.

Open our eyes to systems that still oppress and give us the will to build equity in housing, education, and opportunity.Bless the Commonwealth of Virginia, that our leaders may seek justice with humility, our churches model repentance with courage, and our people walk together in the way of love.

Grant us, O God, the grace to repair what we have broken, the faith to believe that change is possible, and the steadfast love to labor for your Beloved Community until all your children are free, and your glory is revealed in every heart.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reconciles all things in heaven and on earth. Amen.