The Episcopal Church and Slavery: A Historical Narrative

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The Episcopal Church, as a body, did not question the institution of slavery. We might ask whether we can judge or question the actions of those in the past. But historical context is important. For instance:

– There were many, many people who did question and oppose slavery. Abolition of slavery was a contested issue in the formation of the U.S. Constitution. While slavery continued to be permitted, restrictions on slavery were incorporated into the Constitution (the banning of the importation of slaves in 1807 was written into the Constitution). The passage of the Northwest Ordinance, which provided the first organizational framework for much of what is now the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin, outlawed slavery in the region. By the Civil War, all northern states had put in place legal processes to end slavery.

– Many other Christian denominations opposed slavery with formal actions and decisions. The Congregational Church, the Unitarian Church, and Quaker societies took strong anti-slavery stances. We see a different dynamic in denominations which had a strong presence in both North and South: nearly all of these denominations splintered into northern and southern branches over opposition to slavery. The Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, and Baptist churches all split into northern and southern branches.

The Episcopal Church is the only major denomination with a strong presence in both North and South that did not split over slavery. Why?

– Episcopalians largely framed slavery as a legal and political issue, not moral or ethical. We see this plainly in a statement from the 1856 General Convention. At the time, an intense national debate raged over whether to admit Kansas as a free or slave state, with pro- and anti-slavery militias engaging in violence and massacres. When it met that year, the General Convention refused to comment on the violence in Kansas, stating that the church should have "nothing to do

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[with] party politics, with sectional disputes, with earthly distinctions, with the wealth, the splendor, and the ambition of the world." In 1861, as the nation was moving toward Civil War, Presiding Bishop John Henry Hopkins, who was bishop of Vermont (one of the first states to put in place provisions to end slavery), published an extended defense of slavery. While one might be morally opposed to it, Hopkins argued, slavery was nonetheless present in Scripture and was legal.

– Many Episcopalians actively supported slavery. After the Civil War broke out, the southern dioceses formed the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States. The Confederate bishops issued a pastoral letter to the church as a whole. In that letter, they wrote that Southerners had previously "been hindered by the pressure of Abolitionism; now we have thrown off from us that hateful and infidel pestilence." Freed from the "hateful and infidel pestilence" of people wanting to abolish slavery, the southern bishops then committed themselves to the God-given institution of slavery. Slaves were declared "a sacred trust committed to us, as a people...While under this tutelage He [God] freely gives to us their labor, but expects us to give back to them religious and moral instruction." Two southern bishops – Leonidas Polk (who also served as a general in the Confederate Army) and Stephen Elliott (Presiding Bishop of the Confederate Episcopal Church) – were large slaveholders.

Episcopal Church and Civil Rights

The issue of race and systemic racism was not solely confined to debates over slavery. The Rev. Absalom Jones was ordained in 1804, the first African American ordained in a predominantly white denomination. However, the condition of his ordination and the formation of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia was that neither Jones nor the congregation would have vote in diocesan convention. Prior to 1861, this was the pattern that developed in the North: most large northern cities established African American Episcopal congregations, but these congregations were not given vote or representation in diocesan conventions; they were second-class citizens.

After the Civil War, the Episcopal Church also did not challenge or question the establishment of legalized segregation and discrimination against African Americans, and, further, often failed to support African American Episcopalians. After the Civil War, a number of freed African Americans formed Episcopal congregations and asked to have clergy ordained for them: several southern dioceses refused. While some congregations eventually were formed, there was a mass exodus of African American Episcopalians to other denominations in southern dioceses.

Most southern dioceses created what were called "Colored Convocations" into which African American congregations were placed, creating a separate structure. While not setting up these kinds of convocations, northern dioceses were segregated and it would have been unthinkable to have an African American family join a white congregation, let alone have an African American priest minister to a white congregation. Eventually, two African Americans were elected and

consecrated as suffragan (assisting) bishops to minister to African American Episcopalians in southern "Colored Convocations." A condition attached to the creation of the office of suffragan bishop was that all suffragan bishops would not have vote in the House of Bishops, a concession largely to keep Black bishops from having equal status with white bishops. Many seminaries did not admit African American students. Virginia Seminary did not do so until the 1952, and the School of Theology of the University of the South did not do so until 1965.

Thus the Episcopal Church not only did not question slavery, unlike most other American denominations, it also acquiesced to establishment of legalized segregation after the Civil War, and continued to treat African American Episcopalians as second-class Christians.

So what does it all mean?

As noted at the outset, in our current reality, no one alive was involved with slavery nor the establishment of legalized segregation in the 1800s and 1900s. Yet there are important aspects from this history which are relevant to us in our own context:

- While a particular congregation might not have owned slaves, or maybe no one in the congregation might have, the economic system of slavery was broad and encompassing. There were banks that provided loans and mortgages on enslaved persons; insurance companies which offered insurance policies; and ships and shipping companies that engaged in the transatlantic slave trade. There were also secondary economic impacts. The textiles that fueled the industrial rise in northern states was produced by the slave system. Molasses was central to 19th century living, essential in everything from distilling rum to acting as a sweetener in baking when raw sugar was rare and serving a role in curing meat. Molasses was made almost entirely from sugar cane grown in the West Indies and produced by the plantation systems there. The economics of the slave system were embedded deeply in the economic life of the nation.
- This systemic racism that shaped the Episcopal Church also shaped American society, particularly in the ways society denied African Americans economic opportunities that were provided to whites. Two veterans returning from World War II who identically served their country would experience very different economic opportunities. A white veteran might receive a federally backed home loan, be able to attend any college or university which would admit them, and have a range of employment opportunities. African American veterans often were denied federally backed mortgages because of the neighborhood they lived in; could only attend certain colleges or universities; and, when they graduated, would not be hired by many employers. And all because such discrimination was perfectly legal at the time.
- The Episcopal Church was complicit with established structures of systemic racism. While no one currently living may be individually responsible, nonetheless we live in a world shaped by these aspects of systemic racism. One reason the Episcopal Church is overwhelmingly Caucasian – approximately 86% of the Episcopal Church is Caucasian, in a country that is approximately 62%

Caucasian – is because of the historical marginalization of African Americans. Segregation was embedded in the Episcopal Church.

The transatlantic slave trade and the institution of chattel, race-based slavery in the United States is one of the greatest crimes against humanity in human history, and must be named for what it was. The reality of the systemic racism, segregation, and denial of economic opportunities in the post-Civil War period is not dependent on whether anyone currently alive was responsible. The whole nature of "systemic" injustices is that they are not dependent on individuals: systems produce what systems are designed to produce. We live in a nation, a world, and a church profoundly shaped by systemic racism.

While focusing on the question of slavery, we should also be careful not to compartmentalize or think of these systemic injustices as solely a black-white matter. The Episcopal Church, and American society, has also systemically marginalized women, Asian/Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Hispanic/Latino/Latinx persons, as well as Native Americans. We can see a number of the same dynamics around systemic marginalization here as well; to give just one example, the Episcopal Church was actively involved in missionary work to Native Americans in the post-Civil War period. In fact, when it ended funding for its Freedmen's Commission and its work among freed African Americans in the South in the 1870s, it shifted that funding to Native American missionary work. Yet this missionary work also involved a cultural genocide of Native practices: converts were required to cut their hair, had to adopt "Christian" names at baptism, and were not permitted to speak their Native languages.

The purpose of this overview is to provide a general historical background; these issues are complex and multifaceted, and this summary is not meant to be comprehensive.

This background is also intended to be the beginning of a broader conversation. While we acknowledge we live in a world shaped by systemic racism and injustice, what can we do?

In Christian theology, there have traditionally been three aspects and elements of repentance.

– First, you acknowledge the wrong. The historical background in this document is an aspect of this first step.

– Second, you are sorry and express remorse. The Episcopal Church, on the churchwide level, has issued formal apologies for slavery; the United States government offered a formal apology for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

– Third, you take steps to right the wrong. This is an essential and integral component to repentance. This is why the sacrament of confession often contains a penance: not as a punishment, but as an outward sign and an action towards restorative justice. Restorative justice is a legal, ethical, and theological concept where we do not just acknowledge a wrong, but take tangible, active steps towards righting that wrong.

Questions for Discussion:

– Where have you seen evidence of systemic racism, as opposed to personal or individual racism?

– What are some ways you think your local community was shaped by the issues, injustices, and disparities summarized in this document?

– What are some things we could do, as a [congregation/diocese/seminary], to take steps towards expressing our remorse?

– What outward signs or actions could we consider as steps towards restorative justice?