

The Church Historian

Dr. Connie Lee is an historian at a major northeastern university and also a member of an historic Episcopal church. The rector has asked Dr. Lee to prepare a history of their parish for the celebration of their bicentennial. He indicates that several of the families in the parish since its inception have donated many ancestral papers about the church's founding and early years. He is particularly interested in the proud history of the church, including as a way station on the Underground Railroad and incubator for several mission congregations in neighboring communities that are now important parishes. Prior histories of the church have highlighted these facts, but without authenticating professional research.

Dr. Lee goes to work, but an alarming story unfolds. Records suggest that much of the money that helped found the church and its endowment came from two prominent families involved in the slave trade. Equally alarming, succeeding generations of those families became involved in the manufacturing of arms. Moreover, and that the principal motivation for founding the mission churches was to provide chapels for working-class families employed in those factories who, the founders stated, "wanted to worship with their own kind."

Dr. Lee comes to the rector and relates the story behind the story, noting that one of the families felt some guilt regarding their progenitors' activities in the slave trade and became abolitionists, in the process encouraging use the utilization of the church for the Underground Railroad. The other family became founders of the colonization society that sought to buy the freedom of slaves to transport them back to Africa. The records indicate that this caused a deep division in the congregation and also helped motivate creation of the missions. None of this information has come to light in the past century of recording church history. Now, the congregation is racially diverse, but still with the economic divisions that spawned the missions in the various guilds and clubs of the church. As a professional historian, Dr. Lee feels compelled to tell the story truthfully and to invite the congregation into a racial-awareness dialogue to confront their past. She is adamant on this point, because the records show that many shares in slave ships were donated to the church by other founding members who were less affluent but saw the slave trade as a good investment.

Displeased with these revelations, the rector asks Dr. Lee to do a less honest historical review. In the meantime, however, she has shared some of her findings with some members of the vestry and other church leaders. They are evenly split between her position and that of the rector.

One final complication has developed, bringing the issue to a head. A younger member of the congregation, descended from both founding families, has begun a documentary film telling the history back to Africa, and has invited members of the congregation to enter into dialogue on its moral responsibility in the 21st century. An interesting sidelight: the current diocesan bishop and two of his predecessors are descendants of these founding families.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you advise the church to address this situation?
2. What would you advise Dr. Lee to do?
3. What could the rector do to address the fact that this information is already known?
4. What are the implications for the mission churches that had planned to share in the celebration?

