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The North Carolina DISCIPLE

THE BECOMING BELOVED
COMMUNITY PROJECT

HOLY
DISRUPTION

FROM THE
204TH ANNUAL
CONVENTION



 **The North Carolina
DISCIPLE**

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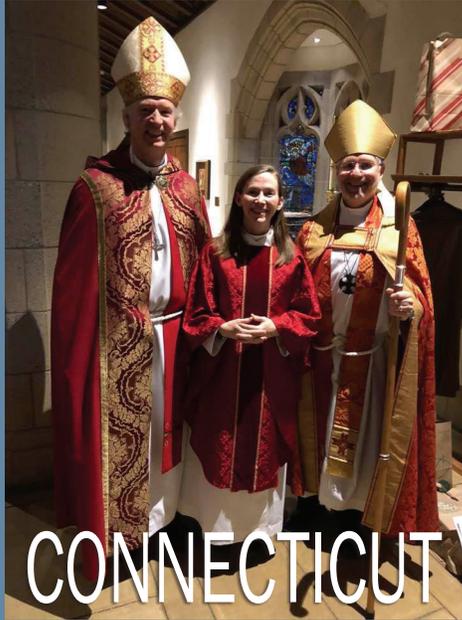
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COVER PHOTO
Dr. Catherine Meeks presents during the Becoming Beloved Community events hosted by St. Luke's, Salisbury. *Photo courtesy of St. Luke's*

THE DIOCESE



The Rt. Rev. Sam Rodman and the Rt. Rev. Ian Douglas (bishop, Diocese of Connecticut) ordained the Rev. Margie Baker to the Sacred Order of Priests on January 4 in Hartford, Connecticut. *Photo courtesy of Rodman*



Parishioners from Holy Innocents', Henderson, celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 15 with members of the Ballet Folklorico group performing traditional Mexican dances. *Photo by Marsha Nelson*



Dr. Catherine Meeks, director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Justice in Atlanta, was a featured speaker during the Becoming Beloved Community event hosted by St. Luke's, Salisbury, November 8-10. She's pictured here with the Rev. Robert Black, rector of St. Luke's. *Photo by Caroline Stephenson*



The Rev. Eric Grubb shares the story of St. Nicholas during the Annual St. Nicholas Festival at St. Margaret's, Waxhaw. *Photo by Joanie Cameron*

DISCOVERING HISTORY

One congregation explores history as a step to Becoming Beloved Community

Long before St. Luke's, Salisbury, applied for a Mission Endowment Grant in fall 2018, they entered a discernment process. They wanted a clearer sense of mission, and so they started asking questions about who their neighbors were, and to what did they, as a congregation, need to be paying attention.

Taking note St. Luke's is located within a square bordered by the county jail on one side, the county courthouse on another and lawyers' offices all around, it was quickly clear St. Luke's neighbors were members of the criminal justice system. They started exploring what that meant and how the congregation might develop relationships with those within the system. They were rebuffed outright.

"We ran into a lot of red tape and resistance to doing any sort of prison ministry," said the Rev. Robert Black, rector of St. Luke's. "So with the front door closed, we started searching for what other doors might be there." The congregation continued with their focus on the criminal justice system, reading the work of people like Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, and learning about the racism embedded in the system.

The more they learned, the more St. Luke's interest expanded to wonder about the history of racism in their own church and the surrounding Salisbury community. Conversations began, and before long, the idea for the grant proposal took shape.

THE BECOMING BELOVED COMMUNITY PROJECT

The grant was not a single idea, but rather an integrated series designed to reveal, understand and process the history of racism in Salisbury. The discernment process happened to be taking place at the time of the Most Rev. Michael Curry's call to begin the work of Becoming Beloved Community, and so it was an absolute the history would start with racism within and around St. Luke's itself.

"We have a wonderful history," said Black. "But several chapters of our history have been lost or left out, and we wanted to fill in those gaps." The first goal of the grant was to hire a historian to do just that.

The second facet of the grant was to look at racism from a systemic perspective to help understand how the microcosm of the local Salisbury community fit into the bigger picture. It was decided a series of presentations and discussions with speakers from across the nation was needed to help provide that perspective.

The third goal of the grant project was to give voice to those who lived during the Jim Crow era and experienced racism first hand. It was decided to do this through a series of interviews to be developed into a documentary film.

The grant proposal was completed and submitted in fall 2018, and the church was notified it had been awarded the Mission Endowment Grant in January 2019. The foundation for what would be the Becoming Beloved Community project was in place.

AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY

Salisbury, North Carolina, is known to many as the home of Cheerwine, the popular soft drink. At one time, though, it stood as the last outpost on the western frontier. It was one of the last stops on the railroad before braving the wilds of "the West," and though that fact is celebrated in many of the area's histories, its involvement with the slave trade is often not even acknowledged.

"The narrative Salisbury has told itself about the history of slavery and race is that it wasn't a problem here, we didn't do that," said Black. "But in his research, our historian found hard evidence that not only is that narrative untrue, but Salisbury was a kind of a pioneer in the slave trade, and not in a good way. There were some really ruthless practices around the leasing of slaves that happened here, and it'll be interesting to see the reaction to his findings."

It's understood that parishioners of St. Luke's played a part in that history. All of Salisbury's history "relates to the church," said the Rev. Bonnie Duckworth, deacon at St. Luke's. "There are roots we need to examine."

"There was a [long ago] vestry member here who was partially responsible for the Confederate statue here in town," said Black. "He was a deputy to General Convention, too, and in the records of General Convention and his correspondence, we know he argues vociferously against African American clergy. So the history of the town is part of the history of our church."

St. Luke's wanted to know whether the church itself, first built in 1828, had been built by slaves. The research indicates it was not, though evidence suggests the bricks used to build it were made by slaves, and there is no doubt the money used was money made with slave labor.

It's in the asking and answering of these kinds of questions that St. Luke's recognizes that pastoral care is an integral part of the project. "There's been some concern that the unknown is out there," said Duckworth.

“Committee members worried about something coming up about someone whose family still has connections to the church, or something that would be especially hard to hear. We reassured them that if that came to pass, it will be okay. We will deal with it.”

PREPARING FOR DISCOMFORT

While waiting to hear the result of their grant application, the church began to prepare for the work ahead. To get ready to receive the stories, the history and the conversations that were sure to be painful and uncomfortable, members of the church began to get comfortable with that discomfort. They started having dinner together or gathering in the afternoons to watch TED Talks about race. Then they would discuss what they saw.

“It’s a great resource,” said Black. “You can watch amazing speakers like Michelle Alexander and Bryan Stevenson [author of *Just Mercy*], all for free on the TED Talk website (ted.com).”

The conversations quickly grew beyond St. Luke’s. The church partnered with the local AME Zion congregation to expand the voices involved, and soon they invited members of the wider community, including the mayor, who did, in fact, take part.

“More and more people in the community have been attending these events,” said Duckworth. “It has been encouraging that we’re reaching beyond the church walls.”

The conversations proved to be good preparation for the interviews conducted for the film. Finding willing participants in itself provided an education on the long-term effects of racism, as several of those approached supported the project but simply did not feel as though they could participate.

“Either it was too painful, or there was fear of the effect on relationships with both black and white friends,” said Duckworth. “They didn’t want stories told that might affect current relationships. That was heart wrenching to hear.”

Of those who did agree to participate, some were members of St. Luke’s, one a member of the AME Zion church and one a retired Episcopal deacon, and they all lived in Salisbury during the Jim Crow era. The stories they shared were not all pleasant, and “some were hard to hear,” said Duckworth. “But it’s important they be told.”

“I grew up in a time well past the legal era of Jim Crow, about 20 years after the Civil Rights Act was passed,” said Black. “So many of the things that people talk about and experienced, I saw only in textbooks. I never saw a segregated water fountain or legalized discrimination. I think a lot of people have never seen those things. The temptation is to think racism is solved because I’ve never



Methodist Bishop Will Willimon lectured as part of a series of Becoming Beloved Community events hosted by St. Luke’s, Salisbury. Photos courtesy of St. Luke’s

seen those things,’ but we know that’s not true. This is hearing the stories of people who have lived [with racism]. It’s why it’s so important we capture these stories in the first person for all of history to maintain.”

THE POWER OF STORIES

That collection of stories, the “Becoming Beloved Community” video, premiered October 20, 2019, to a standing-room only crowd who participated in a post-screening panel discussion with several of the film’s participants. Following the screening, the film was made available to the public on YouTube (bit.ly/StLukesYouTube).

Over the weekend of November 8-10, 2019, Methodist Bishop Will Willimon and Dr. Catherine Meeks of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Justice presented to—again—packed crowds, giving lectures and taking part in a lunch with community leaders. The last event, the presentation of historical findings, took place January 19, 2020.

Across the board, the response has been overwhelmingly positive, and the effect of the project is visible far beyond the walls of St. Luke’s. The community leaders who took part in the lunch and conversation with Willimon and Meeks now meet every month to talk about local issues of race and poverty.

Black was named one of Rowan County’s “10 to Watch in 2020” because of the work happening at St. Luke’s, and he has been invited to speak to community groups and to give the benediction at this year’s breakfast honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The community was invited to be a part of the Becoming Beloved Community, and they not only accepted, they have remained engaged.

Part of the reason, according to Duckworth, is simply because of the power of the stories. These are “people we see all the time in this town,” she said. “It’s not something we’re reading in a magazine, it’s not something we’re seeing



It was a packed house for the premiere of the “Becoming Beloved Community” video created by St. Luke’s, Salisbury.

on television—this is someone I know and love, someone I see every week, and they have a painful story they need to tell. Offering them that opportunity is one of the biggest things we can do. Jim Crow is not over, it’s still going on. To a different degree, but there are still those things that are holding the black community back.”

The church’s involvement also played a part. “The Church can lead these conversations in a much healthier way than other institutions can,” said Black. “Church has embedded in our core a sense of sin and forgiveness, so we have a language to talk about these things in a way other institutions can’t.”

And they will keep talking. Other churches in town have already started to follow St. Luke’s lead and engage in similar conversations within their own spaces, and St. Luke’s is now working with several of them to bring training by the Racial Equity Institute to Rowan County. The first session is being offered by invitation only so that community leaders, including business people, law enforcement, medical teams, educators and more have the chance to take the training together. Subsequent training sessions will have seats more widely available.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Salisbury is a small, Southern town, and Black is often asked why he took the risk to develop this project. To him, the answer is clear. “I buy into the metaphor of the Body of Christ,” he said. “And like any body, if there is a part of that Body that is wounded or suffering from an old hurt, we have to take the bandage off, look at it and deal with what’s there so we can heal the entire Body. I really believe

we are only as healthy as the entire Body is, and if there’s suffering in any part of it for whatever reason, those are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we must respond in love to them.”

“Our hope is to encourage people to look into their situations in their own communities,” said Duckworth. “It’s about opening the doors so others can do this work. [In our case], some of this was bubbling up in the community. Conversations were going on about the past, and it just seemed like everywhere we looked, the doors were opening for us. It felt organic, and as the doors kept opening, we kept walking through them.”

Whether with grant funding or not, everyone has the capacity to do the work St. Luke’s has modeled. The TED Talk resources at the heart of their first conversations are available to all. The *Becoming Beloved Community* film and related materials are offered online to everyone who can use them. Diocesan resources to help start and guide conversations are numerous and ready to assist. And every congregation has the ability to walk outside their door and invite their community in to deepen relationships and engage in the work of truth telling and discovering history. Every congregation is filled with people with stories to tell, and those stories are powerful.

Even if the first door you approach is closed, keep looking. Another is open and waiting for you to walk through it.

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