“Building Community Across Walls: A History of an Integrated Church Amid a Gentrifying Neighborhood in Charleston, South Carolina”

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University
2019
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“Building Community Across Walls: A History of an Integrated Church Amid a Gentrifying Neighborhood in Charleston, South Carolina” is a study focused upon the integrated history of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, the congregation I serve in downtown Charleston. The church, which was an African American congregation for much of the twentieth century, integrated in the late 1980’s following the gentrification of our Ansonborough neighborhood. This ethnographic study, centered upon formal interviews with both black and white members of my church who experienced this integration together, in addition to clergy and community leaders, is an attempt to both accurately share this history and to critically examine it to mine how it might inform St. Stephen’s present and future. This study makes the argument that St. Stephen’s history of integration must be understood amid the backdrop of urban gentrification and the ways in which this social phenomenon is impacting downtown congregation’s like my own.

This project will therefore be critically examining the intersection of race and gentrification and the ways in which these forces impact any church trying to build community across the “walls” of various social boundaries in urban areas. The argument of this thesis is that no such community can be sustained without awareness of these forces and an ongoing and intentional commitment to diversity, to combating racism and the ongoing reality of white supremacy in our country.

This thesis will have four parts. The first part will aim to offer critical background meant to put St. Stephen’s story into proper context. Chapter one will detail a short overview of the issue of gentrification and focus specifically on its impact upon African Americans. Chapter two will offer a brief reflection on the significance of the black church to African American identity, culture, and collective memory. This chapter intends to impress upon the reader what is
at stake and what is potentially lost when an all-black church wrestles with whether to integrate. These chapters will enable a better understanding and more accurate interpretation of St. Stephen’s story of integration.

The St. Stephen’s story will be explored through a series of ethnographic interviews I’ve conducted with nearly twenty-five black and white members of the church – lay and ordained – who lived through that history together. Archival material will also be utilized and woven into a reflection on the interview responses to deepen learnings and glean insights. Prior to parts two, three, and four pertaining to St. Stephen’s, a brief author’s note will appear. This note will include a fuller description of my interview sample and size along with an acknowledgement of potential biases and the fallibility inherent in a project based upon memory.

The second part will outline and detail St. Stephen’s history leading up to integration. It will include a third chapter that consists of a short early history of my parish and a fourth chapter laying out St. Stephen’s eventful African American history from the early decades of the twentieth century to the late 1980’s. Chapter five will include a description of the gentrification of the church’s Ansonborough neighborhood through historic preservation efforts, spearheaded by the Historic Charleston Foundation, that led to the integration of the parish.

Part three will focus on the parish’s intentional integration. Chapters six through thirteen will constitute the heart of this thesis: an accounting of St. Stephen’s late 1980’s to early 1990’s collective experience and a critical reflection upon its successes, points of tension, and missed opportunities.

Part four will consist of a detailed accounting of St. Stephen’s story since its integrative period in chapter fourteen and fifteen. Chapters sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen will include reflections upon the what the lessons of our past offer us today. I will then highlight a few
significant questions for further study and reflection in chapters nineteen and twenty followed by a conclusion.
This thesis is dedicated to the people of God called to be St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and especially to the clergy and lay leaders of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. This thesis is also dedicated to Courtney, Malcolm, Aubrey, and Hannah in thanksgiving for their love, support, and patience with me during this D.Min. program.
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St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, the congregation I have served as rector for over two years, finds its statement of purpose in the prophetic words of Isaiah 56:7: “My house shall be called the house of prayer for all people.” The parish was founded in 1822 “as part of an effort by wealthy church women to evangelize people who were unable to pay pew rents at other Episcopal churches in Charleston. As such it was one of the first ‘free’ Episcopal churches in this country.”

When the original church was built in 1824, Isaiah’s visionary words were placed above the door frame. The current church, consecrated in 1836, has the same words engraved above the doors. It is a passage of Scripture that still resonates deeply with our congregation today.

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St. Stephen’s has strived to live into these words in bold ways throughout its nearly two hundred-year history but no more so than in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s when the parish transitioned from being an all-black congregation to one that actively sought to integrate by intentionally building a congregation that was both black and white. This transition, in large part necessitated by the gentrification of St. Stephen’s Ansonborough neighborhood and the surrounding vicinity, was entered into in an effort to keep the church from having to close its doors. The years that followed reinvigorated the mission and did indeed save the institution. It was a pivotal moment in our history that I have heard a lot about from St. Stephen’s members – both black and white – since arriving as rector. I have yearned to know more about the dynamics involved and the realities of the community’s life amid this integration.

The origins of this thesis began to take shape as I learned more of our history of integration, in a city like Charleston, South Carolina, still marked by the legacy of slavery and “Jim Crow,” in light of Isaiah 56:7. I was curious to delve more deeply into our own parish story to see what insights it might offer for the present and future. This history is important to preserve at St. Stephen’s as we seek to “re-member” our past for the sake of living more fully into our calling to strive to be “a house of prayer for all people” in twenty-first century Charleston. I also believe our parish history offers insights for what it means to create Christian community for other urban churches in neighborhoods that continue to gentrify across the country as America still wrestles with racial division deeply impacted by the legacy of slavery and history of white supremacy in the United States.

This thesis, in critically examining St. Stephen’s integration amid the backdrop of the gentrification of our neighborhood, will therefore reflect upon both gentrification and race (specifically African American and Caucasian) and how these two realities are intertwined in the
life of an urban church like my own. Each of these realities impacts the other and I would argue that the ability of urban churches to both survive and thrive requires an appreciation of that. It will be necessary for churches to not only appreciate this intersection but also to commit themselves to intentional practices around diversity, inclusion, and congregational life and to continually resist the ways in which racism and white supremacy inform the world in which we live.

This kind of appreciation, intentionality, and commitment to anti-racism work is what I would argue is required to be the “beloved community” we are called to be as a part of the “body of Christ.” By “beloved community,” I mean here a diverse community of people united and liberated by finding its identity as “God’s beloved ones … [a community] liberated to embrace love as an active force that requires [responsibility and] conscientious religious practice.” This kind of community requires deep vulnerability, humility, and a commitment to truth telling in service of drawing people closer together as a part of one human family. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who popularized this concept in the 20th century, lays out some of the key responsibilities and conscientious practice associated with “beloved community” in arguing for a community in which

“racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice are replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood … [a community] not devoid of interpersonal … conflict … but … where conflicts can be resolved peacefully and adversaries can be reconciled through a mutual, determined commitment to nonviolence

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… [because] all conflicts in beloved community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating together in a spirit of friendship and goodwill."

The enormous challenge of creating such community in urban churches like my own is only possible through an on-going appreciation of and sensitivity to the impact of the neighborhood change brought on by gentrification and a commitment to understanding the truth about race in our country.

Gentrification is a much-debated social phenomenon that is remaking many of America’s urban areas. It is a process that some argue makes neighborhoods cleaner, safer, and more livable. And yet, it often has led to troubling and inequitable displacement. While definitions abound, gentrification tends to be marked by polarizing changes that can be seen, felt, and experienced by city dwellers over time: “displacement … loss of culture … [and] the influx of wealth and whiteness into … neighborhoods.”

Across the country, this influx has often pushed out lower or middle-income residents and specifically African Americans and other people of color from urban areas they have long called home.

This demographic shift has therefore also become associated with a loss of community and collective identity, particularly in communities of color. As Dr. Ade Ofunniyin, founder of the Gullah Society, a Charleston, South Carolina based non-profit, recently observed, “Black people are generally treated as though they are invisible, and the things that were visible have become invisible through gentrification and other means.”

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impact has often meant the loss not only of culture and way of life but of black, brown, and poorer communities’ memories, historical artifacts, and sense of self. Gentrification has subsequently contributed to many African American communities feeling erased from places they have called home for generations. This, in turn, has contributed to a collective sense of what some sociologists refer to as “root shock;” that is, “the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem.”

All of this presents very real challenges for the churches that sit in these impacted urban areas. As things such as “urban renewal” projects, historic preservation efforts, and rising inequality remake the demographics of our cities (largely from black, brown and poor to white and wealthy), many urban congregations cannot help but be impacted in profound ways. In the case of those congregations long associated with serving one demographic or one constituency (specifically for this study, African American), the impact will raise questions of survival and long-term institutional viability.

The challenge of gentrification therefore presents a stark “adaptive” leadership challenge to urban congregational leadership as that kind of challenge is defined by leadership experts, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. That is, a challenge in which there exists a gap between pre-existing modes of being and the present reality; work that “requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior … for mobilizing people to learn new ways.” In many cases, the challenge boils down to an existential one. Meaning, many urban churches are faced with the prospect of

adapting to a changing neighborhood, moving along with their displaced congregants, or closing their doors.

This leadership challenge is complicated by the power dynamics at play. When one considers the ugly, sin filled history that shapes perceptions of the racial changes wrought by gentrification, America’s checkered history around race cannot be avoided. As the columnist David Brooks observes, “We don’t talk about sin much in the public square any more. But I don’t think one can grasp the full amplitude of racial injustice [today] without invoking the darkest impulses of human nature.” In that same vein, I would argue that gentrification’s impact cannot be examined without an acknowledgement of the sin of slavery, racism, and white supremacy that is a part of our collective story in the United States. In my own city of Charleston, South Carolina, for example, the history of slavery and the long battle over the memory of the Civil War, casts a long shadow. The legacy of “Jim Crow” laws, segregation, and a long litany of discriminatory housing policies that have denied African Americans equal access under the law have to be factored into this discussion.

Gentrification has often been seen as responsible for pushing African Americans out. It has been seen as causing the destruction of black institutions that were important to communal identity and the preservation of collective memory. As such, this social phenomenon can be perceived as an act of violence – an invasion of sorts – against the poor, the marginalized, and the darker skinned in society that is linked to the colonial history of slavery and institutional racism that continues to impact us all. The challenge, then, of a shrinking African American congregation in an increasingly white and affluent neighborhood is not just about pastoral care,

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institutional survival, or adaptive leadership but also about social justice, human dignity, and important matters of communal identity.

How then can urban churches adapt to gentrifying neighborhoods in a way that sustains the institutional viability of the congregation but that also does not push out one population for another? Or is that shift inevitable? How might a church in a gentrifying neighborhood be used as a space for reconciliation – to build “beloved community” – in the divided world in which we live? Is integration in such a case always desirable or truly possible? Congregational leadership of urban churches in gentrifying areas must wrestle with and faithfully consider their call when deciding how to proceed. If churches choose to stay and integrate in order to survive, there needs to be a great deal of thought and ongoing intentionality invested in creating a community that not only adapts to a changing context but that is truly inclusive and takes seriously the demands of the gospel.

These leadership challenges will be explored through a critical examination of the recent history of the congregation I serve. As previously mentioned, St. Stephen’s is a congregation with a history of reaching out to marginalized populations at every stage of its nearly two hundred-year history. Originally started by three wealthy, white lay women in the early 1800’s as a house of worship for the poor and underserved, the congregation became an exclusively African American church by the early twentieth century. In the late 1980’s, with its neighborhood changing, the parish went through an intentional period of integration that grabbed newspaper headlines and our city’s attention while securing the future of the church. And yet, this pivotal period shifted the demographics in ways that continue to impact and define our ministry today. For nearly two decades, following that late 1980’s integration, our congregation maintained a significant level of racial diversity while also beginning to incorporate diversity of
sexual orientation. But our racial diversity has waned as the city of Charleston has continued to gentrify and we are at present between 10-12% African American, near or close to our black population when the church was founded in the early 19th century.

Our history of integration is largely remembered fondly by my congregants, both black and white, but it is my desire to delve more deeply into the leadership decisions made at the time and to consider the shape of the integrated community that was formed then. What made it work? Where were the tensions? What errors were made or opportunities missed? How can one maintain diversity of any kind in a congregation over the long term and respond faithfully in light of the inequality and divisions that continue to plague our world? We continue to strive to be a diverse and inclusive church that remains true to our roots and it feels like a critical examination of our past will support those aims.

A study focused upon the telling of stories and mining of memories seems like an important approach not only for the parish I serve and for my ministry there but also given St. Stephen’s context. It has been said that Charleston, the cradle of the confederacy, is a place of remembrance. “The entire city is a living history museum. No place in America has spent as much time and energy selling memories - most whitewashed, others unvarnished – of its past.” And yet, Charleston (along with the rest of the country) does not agree on the same collective memory. This division often falls along racial lines and makes reconciliation harder to achieve for, as the Rev. Dr. Gary Mason once said, “amnesia is the enemy of reconciliation.”

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10 Gary Mason, “The Role of Reconciliation, Memory and Theology in Shaping the Public Stage,” (lecture, Lakeside Chautauqua, Lakeside, Ohio, August 4, 2018).
It seems helpful therefore to consider the impact of issues such as gentrification and race on our collective congregational history through the lens of memory. Just as the biblical prophets call us not so much to look ahead but to remember, I would argue that there is a prophetic role to a project like this one focused upon remembering the past. I believe a faithful and honest reflection on these memories and the piecing together of the past will help to clarify, integrate, and reconstitute the “body of Christ” we are called to be as God’s people at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston in our own time and place. How will the stories from African American and white parishioners who lived through the integration of our parish converge? How will they differ? How might holding up these memories, and critically examining our collective history, not only help to preserve the past but inform our present and future as we strive to live more fully into the prophetic words etched into the front of our church: “My house shall be called the house of prayer for all people?” It is my sincere hope that this exploration faithfully accomplishes both these tasks for the sake of my congregation, my ministry as rector, and our mutual ministry in the “holy city” of Charleston, South Carolina.
**Part One: Gentrification and its Impact on the African American Community**

**Chapter One: Gentrification**

The term “gentrification” was coined in 1964 by the British sociologist Ruth Glass that is meant to evoke the land owning, privileged upper class gentry of old-world England. Glass applied this new term to changes she observed in the neighborhoods she saw in her own city of London. In her book, *London: Aspects of Change* she wrote,

“One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages – two rooms up and two down – have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. Larger Victorian houses, downgraded in earlier or recent periods – which were used as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation – have been upgraded once again. Nowadays, many of these houses are being sub-divided into costly flats or ‘houselets’ (in terms of the new real estate snob jargon). The current social status and value of such dwellings are frequently in inverse relation to their size, and in any case enormously inflated by comparison with previous levels in their neighborhoods. Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.”

While Glass’ early use of the term gentrification focused on the individual choices of residential home owners and those wanting to fix up existing properties, the term eventually began to be used to speak of urban policy and larger, systemic forces effecting change on an urban area.

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Gentrification can ultimately occur in a number of ways but is ultimately a part of the same process of urban change that all get referred to by this same term today. In 1979, MIT urban studies professor, Phillip Clay laid out three distinct phases of gentrification. “First, a few ‘pioneering’ gentrifiers move into a neighborhood, followed by a rush of more gentrifiers. Then corporations such as real estate companies [non-profits or other outside entities] … become the main actors in a neighborhood … finally … the process becomes completely top-down, wherein the only entities powerful enough to change … an already gentrified landscape are corporations [the wealthy] and political allies.”12 It is important to note, however, that, in the United States, much of what gets recognized today as gentrification cannot be separated from the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the subsequent realities of “Jim Crow” and “the great migration” of the early 20th century that followed when millions of African Americans fled rural slave-holding areas for greater opportunity in city centers.13

The links between gentrification and slavery revolve around what the scholar Michelle Alexander terms the racial caste system in America. “The language of caste may well seem a foreign or unfamiliar one to some,” she writes.

“Public discussions about racial caste in America are rare. We avoid talking about caste in our society because we are ashamed of our racial history … [but] what is completely missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up [in our society] at all. It is not just that they lack of opportunity, attend poor schools, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so … Like Jim Crow (and slavery), … a tightly networked system of

12 Moskowitz, p. 6.
laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively … ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.”

This networked system begun during slavery, evolved in the years after the Civil War when “the withdrawal of federal troops and the South’s revoking of black’s civil rights … left the mass of blacks economically beholden to whites, without civil rights and at the mercy of terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.” The segregated system of “Jim Crow” laws soon developed. “Between 1890-1910, Jim Crow laws created an elaborately divided world, such that the domain of resources and power was inhabited by whites, and the domain of deprivation and powerlessness was inhabited by blacks. The weight of this system fell with greatest force on those in rural areas … [thus] the black movement to the city began.” This black migration to the city and the subsequent reality of neglected urban neighborhoods, as will be shown, leads directly to the beginnings of what we now know as gentrification.

It is important to appreciate the historical links between slavery and the more modern phenomenon of gentrification because of the ways in which the narrative of racial difference, racial hierarchy, and white supremacy, upon which slavery was built, has subsequently been built into American jurisprudence, public policy, and racial animus. All this has eventually led to a variety of expressions of what we now recognize as gentrification in America. In many respects, therefore, one can argue, as the legal activist Bryan Stevenson once did, that “slavery never ended, it just evolved.” It just evolved because, even after emancipation and the passage of the 13th amendment, many white Americans in power moved to disenfranchise black Americans.

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15 Freeman, p. 32.
16 Fullilove, p. 22-23.
legally, violently, and through discriminatory practices that includes housing policy. This legacy led to the creation of thousands of neglected urban ghettos that ultimately gives rise to the gentrifying movement in America led by prosperous and enterprising whites.

During the first half of the twentieth century African Americans began to move en masse into many of America’s cities. The increase of all black or nearly all black urban areas began through a process of informal means of discriminatory practices and lack of the kind of opportunity African Americans fleeing rural slave holding areas were seeking. Sociologists that study the movements of immigrants into a community posited that, typically, “white people, when they first arrived, would live in the poor neighborhoods in the center of the city, which we may call ‘newcomer neighborhoods.’ When they got a little money, they moved on to more peripheral neighborhoods … those … neighborhoods provided the doorway into the American dream. For blacks, the newcomer neighborhoods were the beginning of the end of their options.”17 As more effectively segregated black ghettos sprang up during these early decades of the twentieth century, the more these boundaries began to be enforced in political, legal, and, in many cases, even violent ways.

The practice of “redlining” which began during these years further relegated African American urban dwellers into deteriorating, low-cost, low-opportunity neighborhoods. The origins of this term developed during the depression when Franklin Roosevelt created the Home Owners Loan Corporation (or HOLC). “The HOLC and the FHA (the Federal Housing Association) determined whether areas were deemed unfit for investment by banks, insurance companies, savings and loan associations, and other financial service companies. The areas were physically demarcated with red shading on a map … often these decisions were … based on the

17 Fullilove, p. 24.
area’s racial composition rather than income levels.”\textsuperscript{18} Subsequently, a decades long racially discriminatory practice began that was not legally ended until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968. This practice left ever larger swaths of America’s city centers neglected, impoverished, crime-ridden, and, in many cases, heavily populated by African Americans. This reality was further solidified after World War II through a process referred to as “white flight” when many white American GIs, seeking to capitalize on opportunities afforded them (but not blacks), fled the cities, with their families, for new developments in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{19}

As the twentieth century moved on, much of black life began to be identified by a life rooted in these urban ghettos. This reality “had two consequences for African Americans. The first is that the ghettos became centers of black life; the second is that the walls of the ghetto, like other symbols of segregation, became objects of hatred. In this ambivalent, love/hate relationship, it was impossible to choose to dwell. Yet, people did choose to make a life as vibrant and happy as they possibly could.”\textsuperscript{20} Many residents not only managed to survive but thrive.

Many city centers in the early to mid-twentieth century became celebrated areas of African American culture and civic life. The “Harlem Renaissance” of 1920’s and 1930’s New York, the vibrancy of the famed Hill District in Pittsburgh during the 1940’s, the South Side of Chicago or the “Borough” of Charleston at the same time all reflect urban life shaped by African American contributions in music, art, dance, and public life. The cultural life that emerged in these urban areas contributed to the collective identity of those who lived there. Black

\textsuperscript{20} Fullilove, p. 27.
institutions sprang up during this time that, along with the foundational influence of the church (that will be reflected upon in the next chapter), further added to African American life and sense of self that grounded generations of people. The late artist Paul Robeson recounts his memories of growing up in a ghetto of Princeton, New Jersey in recalling, “Here in this little hemmed-in world where home must be theatre and concert hall and social center, there was a warmth of song. Songs of love and longing, songs of trials and triumphs, deep-flowing rivers and rollicking brooks, hymn-song and ragtime ballad, gospels and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the illimitable sorrow of the spirituals.” \(^{21}\) The cultural influences of the city helped not only to inspire but to give voice to the joys and challenges of the city life of African Americans who filled up the ghettos of the early to mid-twenty-century in various urban areas. The culture of the city, along with the church, also helped to convey identity and generational memory to younger generations.

African Americans helped one another as best they could. Amid segregation, racism, and inequality, African American businesses, churches, schools, and the aforementioned cultural influencers helped to anchor everyday life. This became a way of life that is vital to keep in mind to better understand the impact of what eventually gets referred to as “gentrification,” a phenomenon that begins to take root in the years after World War II when city planners begin to discern how to “renew” and “rehabilitate” urban “blight” and signs of decay.

The recognizable process of gentrification referred to in the beginning of this chapter by Ruth Glass begins to take shape in the United States with the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 (that actually introduced the term “urban renewal” into law). “Those acts were designed to provide the money for retooling the city, preparing for the postwar era, and switching from the

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\(^{21}\) Ibid, p. 28.
war machine to a new means of productivity. In 1950’s America, urban renewal was a synonym for ‘progress.’”

Thus, the way began to be paved for a reinvestment in the city that would threaten the way of life for hundreds of thousands if not millions of African Americans who, by this point, had become firmly rooted in urban areas now deemed something that had to be fixed or even “saved” largely for the sake of the white population by white urban planners, white dominated city governments, and white run non-profits.

The term “blight” begins to emerge at this time for very strategic reasons. The term “blight” was codified into law … as really anything that the white powers that be deemed something that needed to be torn down, rehabilitated or fixed up. This then enabled white dominated city governments, through eminent domain and other means, to begin a strategic process of “rehabilitating” many urban areas which began to lead to the dislocation of poorer black and brown people who had called these city centers home for decades. The African American community was on the move again.

The remainder of the twentieth century, from the 1950’s forward, began a process of widespread urban renewal projects in cities across the country. These projects often appropriated religious language couched in calls to “save” downtown areas from “blight,” poverty and crime. In southern cities like Charleston, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, this language was easily intertwined with redemptive southern myths like “the lost cause” narrative that emerged after Reconstruction that sought to reassert white supremacy and black subservience after the Civil War. Oftentimes, these calls were explicitly sold to the public as a process of “negro removal.” As wealthy whites have continued to pour into urban areas of the country that, like my

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22 Ibid, p. 57.
23 Ibid., p. 20.
own city of Charleston, used to have a sizable African American population, poorer black residents have been gradually pushed out to the periphery. Some black homeowners willingly sold their homes but others felt forced out or in some cases duped by city government to move out. And this has led to deepening distrust between the black community and civic leaders.

Gentrification, it must be understood, is not just about neighborhood change, it is about place and belonging. It is also, as some of my African American colleagues have noted, about colonialism and the continued ways that powerful whites exert control and influence over poor black and brown people. It is about the systematic ways in which minority communities have lost access to places that they have long considered to be their home.

Gentrification has also led to a sense of loss not only of African American’s presence in city centers but also of the rich, vibrant cultural life that was forged over several decades. At stake here in the change in our urban landscape is a loss of collective identity and sense of self as black institutions have increasingly been forced to change, move, or close. This loss is no more significant than in the increasing loss of historically black urban churches that have long served as the heart of community life for many longtime city dwellers. It is to this significance that we now must turn our attention.

**Chapter Two: The Significance of the Black Church**

On a hot June evening in 2015, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist walked into the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest AME church in the south, and murdered nine people who had welcomed him into their Bible Study. Those murdered included the church’s pastor, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, associate clergy, the Reverend Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and the Reverend Daniel Simmons, as well as lay leaders Cynthia
Hurd, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor, and Myra Thompson. After the murderer was apprehended in the days following this massacre that traumatized a whole community and the nation, “investigators found [in his car] travel brochures and several sheets of paper on which this young white supremacist had scrawled the names of black churches [in Charleston], Emanuel A.M.E. among them.”24 The fact that black churches were specifically targeted in perpetrating a massacre intended to start a race war – a massacre that has indelibly marked the city of Charleston and our nation – speaks to the significance of the black church as the very center of African American life.

Black churches of many denominational identities and traditions have been attacked by white supremacists numerous times in history because black churches and the black religious tradition, as evidenced in the history of a church like Emanuel A.M.E. in Charleston, have been an ongoing locus of strength, perseverance, and resistance for African Americans living in a world marked by racism and white supremacy. As the black liberation theologian James Cone once pointedly wrote,

“black power … came into being when black clergy realized that killing slave masters was doing the work of God. It began when the black clergy refused to accept the racist white church as consistent with the gospel of God. The organizing of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Church, the Baptists churches, and many other black churches is a visible manifestation of … the black liberation struggle from the eighteenth century [onward].”25

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24 Kytle and Roberts, p. 2.
Hence, black churches have long been a haven for African Americans living amid a world dominated by whiteness. They have given “its members and its community languages to imagine themselves apart from the dehumanizing practices of white supremacy.”

It is noteworthy for this study that, following Emancipation, African Americans who had been worshipping in southern Episcopal churches (a primary denomination of their white slave masters) abandoned the Episcopal Church in droves for newly emerging all black denominations. As the author Gardiner Shattuck, an Episcopal priest who once worshipped at St. Stephen’s, wrote,

“thousands of African Americans abandoned their membership in the Episcopal Church and other white-controlled denominations, while … black … churches experienced astounding growth. Although white Episcopalians seemed genuinely amazed at what Joseph Wilmer, the bishop of Louisiana, called ‘the strange defection of this people from our fold,’ they should not have been surprised, for African Americans simply recognized the implications of the gospel that white clergy had preached to them … African Americans saw the creation of independent [black] … churches … [as] their best opportunity to achieve freedom from the values of their former masters.”

Thus, black churches served also as an escape from, at best, paternalistic white churches that had used the church as a means of upholding the white supremacist system of slavery in order to keep African Americans in subservient roles.

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The black church tradition, in all its richness and diversity, has served not only as a haven and source of strength for African Americans but also a locus of collective identity and community life. “Black churches constituted the primary agency for the development of social cohesion and social organization in the Black community during the post-slavery era, they nurtured, trained, and launched virtually every credible Black leader in religion, politics, business, music, education, and civil rights.”28 It has, therefore played an important cultural role for many African Americans.

In the black church avenues of opportunity were open to African Americans that had been denied them in white society. “In this church everybody could be ‘somebody.’ Those of humble occupation could claim dignity and positions of leadership … In the black church a barber or a redcap could become an elder; a seamstress might lead the Women’s Missionary Union … [and this] … democratic spirit [often] extends to the congregation’s worship and polity.”29

Freedom is the central feature of the black religious tradition – a tradition of “the disinherited” as Howard Thurman once put it – and that is reflective of the lived experience of African Americans and their “struggle for freedom: freedom from slavery, freedom from political and economic bondage, freedom of self-determination, and freedom to participate fully in American life.”30 Nowhere is this theme more evident than in “what Du Bois called ‘the Frenzy’ that descends upon black worship … the divine presence [that takes] the form of a

dialogic pattern of call and response between preacher and congregation”31 and the religious experience engraved in the spirituals. It is noteworthy here that, while the worship habits and style of the Anglo-Saxon influenced Episcopal Church, whatever the demographic make-up of the congregation, differ in large part from much of what has been described, it will be shown that most of the black members of St. Stephen’s do recall a qualitative difference in feeling, tone, tenor, and spontaneity of worship from what they have experienced at St. Stephen’s since the church started welcoming white members.

This emphasis on freedom in the black church tradition has been lived out in black churches and in the witness of black religious leaders who have been at the forefront of the Civil Rights movement and other efforts to confront racism and oppression in the political realm and in the public square. In the black church, “spiritual freedom has primacy, but must hold this-worldly and other-worldly concerns in equilibrium.”32 Put another way, the primacy of God “acts as a critique of every human law and institution. The enduring reality of God gives hope to those who chafe under the inauthentic ‘laws’ of the pharaohs of America.”33 This awareness and hopefulness have been formational and, as Dr. James Cone remarks “a source of empowerment in the struggle for freedom [from oppression].”34 This, as Cone himself observes, seems in stark contrast to white church traditions that often use religion “to cover up oppression or as an escape from the harsh realities of life.”35 In my own ministry with predominantly white churches, this inclination is often manifested in congregants’ intolerance of any intersection between what they see as the spiritual/religious and the political realm.

31 Lischer, p. 21.
32 Morrison-Reed, p. 16.
33 Lischer, p. 17.
34 Cone, p. 23.
It is also important to note the way in which black churches have been a depository of collective memory for the community, another feature of identity and empowerment. This function has been especially important in the South, in the years after the Civil War, when cities like Charleston began to glorify the cause of the Confederacy and “white-wash” the violent truth about slavery. The black church became a place where a counter-memory could be preserved; a place where black children could be schooled and taught in an era when they were being completely disenfranchised by the white majority.

The aforementioned significance of the black religious tradition and all black congregations are important to keep in mind as the St. Stephen’s story is shared because of the ways in which they differ from the traditions of white dominated Christian denominations like the Episcopal Church. It is important to appreciate the difference in purpose, worship style, and orientation between black and white modes of being church to better appreciate what was at stake for the black members of St. Stephen’s in integrating. It is also helpful to appreciate these differences in order to better understand the challenges faced by our parish’s leadership, during the late 1980’s, in its aim to achieve an integrated church community.

Desegregation, which most black religious leaders advocated for during the Civil Rights movement, must be differentiated from the challenge of integration. For an iconic leader like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the former has to do with “the just laws of the state” while the latter has to do with the end goal of “kinship.”36 Thus, integration points to reconciliation. It points to the kind of “beloved community” described in the introduction of this thesis; a community shaped and defined by self-sacrificial love. True integration requires a willingness to live into the tension of building community not only with an openness to people who are very

36 Paris, p. 126.
different than we are but with honesty about the inequitable realities and power imbalances of our fallen world.

As an Episcopalian, I believe the theological basis for such an integrated community is rooted in the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is key here because “baptism sets aside all prior identities and offers unity and freedom in Christ. Baptism … [builds the body of Christ from diverse peoples, races, and nations.” Our identity as baptized people calls us to see the presence of Christ in “the other” and to enter into community humbly acknowledging our need of those different from us to grow ever more into our calling as God’s beloved. The point is not to negate diversity but to find unity amid the wondrous diversity God bestows upon us. The point is also to allow the love of God to inform and shape all that we say and do.

The question, then, is how feasible it is to create such an integrative community – made up of black and white Americans – given the history of racism and white supremacy in the United States? What are the gifts and challenges that go along with attempts to bring about such a community in our fallen and inequitable world? The subsequent story of St. Stephen’s offers an interesting case study.

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37 Thompsett, p. 17.

Author’s Note on Ethnographic Methodology and Biases

The following material centered on St. Stephen’s is heavily reliant on archival material and qualitative data collected from formal interviews that I conducted with both black and white individuals – lay and ordained – who were a part of the congregation during its period of integration. I also conducted interviews with key influencers from outside the congregation. After approval from Duke’s Institutional Review Board, I began to reach out and set up as many one-to-one interviews as possible. Over the course of several months (from January – September 2019), I was able to conduct nineteen interviews involving a sample of twenty-one people who were a part of or had detailed knowledge of St. Stephen’s integration during the late 1980’s to early 1990’s. A couple of the interviews involved a husband and wife who came to the interview together. Some of the individuals interviewed are related to one another as St. Stephen’s, prior to integration, was made up of a group of large extended black families. In addition to this, I conducted interviews with longtime Charleston Mayor, Joe Riley and Historic Charleston Foundation President and CEO, Mr. Winslow Hastie.

At the beginning of each interview, I stated that I was conducting this research as a doctoral student examining the history of St. Stephen’s. I followed the same interview guide (which is included as an appendix at the end of this study) for each interview but asked additional questions when appropriate. Most of the interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes.

It is important to acknowledge that I serve as the priest and pastor to most of the people I interviewed. This relationship likely aided me in finding research participants many of whom are
appreciative of a project aimed at detailing a pivotal moment in our congregation’s history.

While I began each interview emphasizing my hope to hear honest and forthright answers to my questions, some participants might have held back or could have felt compelled to give certain answers because of my position. Responses might have been impacted by those who felt a truly honest answer would negatively affect the way I viewed them or the parish.

I also acknowledge that some of the subjects I interviewed were key leaders or important stakeholders at the time of the period in question and so have a lot personally invested in the way St. Stephen’s history is remembered. Those with such investment may have also altered or withheld information in order to shape the narrative of this part of our collective story. Most seemed to enjoy the opportunity to share their story and I believe that this in and of itself was a benefit to our ongoing ministry at St. Stephen’s.

I have chosen to change the names of all the living participants who were within my congregation as parishioners at the time period in question to preserve their anonymity as much as possible despite the fact that every participant assented to their information being made public. All those interviewed understood my desire not only to use the information gathered in the interviews for my research but also to share with the congregation and wider community as appropriate. Given the size of my congregation, there will likely be details shared in this thesis that will identify interview participants because of previously known information.

I was given permission to record every interview conducted except for one and collected over twenty-one hours of data. I transcribed each recorded interview and then coded them for themes and grouped the content so that I could share this thesis in narrative form.

I want to acknowledge the implicit bias and difficulty in conducting research based upon the memory of events that transpired thirty years ago with interview subjects that, for the most
part, are now in their seventies and eighties. Some of the interviews I conducted contradicted one
another on dates and certain pieces of the St. Stephen’s story. Some of the archival materials I
have used are incomplete or represent best guesses about the sequencing of our church’s
narrative. The parish materials I do have I owe in large part to the efforts of three parishioners
who whose identities I will disclose in gratitude for their work as our informal parish historians
over the years: Judy Sawyer, Thelma Shine, and Iris Carson. The subsequent pages represent my
own attempt to thoughtfully mine through the resources at my disposable to present my best
understanding and analysis of our parish’s story and history of integration.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my own bias in studying a congregation I presently serve
as priest. I have tried to distance myself enough from the subject matter to look at our history
objectively and critically. I believe my position as a still relative newcomer to St. Stephen’s aids
me in achieving these aims.

**Chapter Three: An Overview of St. Stephen’s Early History from 1822-1922**

St. Stephen’s recognizes three prominent, wealthy, white nineteenth century lay women
as the founders of the congregation. The three women, Sarah Russell, Sarah Rutledge, and Sarah
Dehon, who are all memorialized with large stone monuments inside St. Stephen’s present
worship space, were leaders of the Charleston Protestant Episcopal Female Domestic Missionary
Society. The Missionary Society, came into being about 1819 when “a group of devout Christian
churchwomen in connection with visiting the sick as members of the Ladies Benevolent
Association became convinced of the need of some place of worship for Church people who
could not afford to rent seats in existing churches.”

Thus, our church opened as a mission to the poor beginning in a rented room before property could be secured for a more suitable place of worship.

St. Stephen’s Chapel opened its doors in 1822 on Guignard Street a few blocks from its present location. The Reverend Edward Phillips, a newly ordained priest, began his ministry there under the patronage of the Missionary Society. Parish records show that the new mission was racially mixed to some degree (with approximately 10% African American membership) and open to all who desired to worship. In an effort to signal the mission’s purpose, the words from Isaiah 56:7 were affixed above the door: “My house shall be called the house of prayer for all people.”

It is noteworthy that the women of the Missionary Society, in addition to opening the church up to all regardless of socio-economic status or race, also sought to ensure St. Stephen’s would be a place for stigmatized classes of women. Sarah Russell included what would have been a surprising provision at the time of the mission’s founding “that pregnant women [married or not] were to be allowed to attend services. [This was surprising because] even as late as the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, a service for the ‘Churching of Women’ was included to welcome women back into the Church after pregnancy and childbirth.”

Thus, St. Stephen’s would become known not only as the first “free” Episcopal Church in the United States but also, throughout the nineteenth century, as a haven where especially pregnant single women could worship without being shunned.

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Following an auspicious beginning, under the leadership of a few different clergy, the chapel on Guignard street was destroyed on June 6, 1835 in a fire that damaged much of downtown Charleston. The Female Domestic Missionary Society again stepped in and helped to find an alternate location at the site of St. Stephen’s cemetery on Anson Street, the site where our church still stands today. The new church, located at 67 Anson Street, in the heart of a neighborhood known as Ansonborough was consecrated on November 24th, 1836 by the Rt. Rev. Nathaniel Bowen, who had also consecrated the original building. The building, modest in size and simple in its rectangular form, has the same words from Isaiah 56:7 used by the original church etched into edifice of the building above the front doors.

St. Stephen’s ministry would continue with modest racial diversity, with African Americans numbering 10% - 12% of the congregation for much of the nineteenth century. It would have been customary at the time for blacks and whites to sit separately in church and so it is likely that this was also the case at St. Stephen’s during this period. Prior to the Civil War in South Carolina, “there were almost as many black communicants [in the Episcopal Church] as white ones … [but while] white clergy [during these years] taught that all people were equal in God’s sight, they also stressed the need for slaves to remain obedient to their masters.”40 It is thought that some blacks who worshipped at St. Stephen’s in these years were free but it doubtful that all were.

Under the leadership of several more clergy and deacons, the church continued its commitment to social ministries. It opened a parochial school on January 1, 1845 and, under the leadership of the Reverend T. C. Dupont, opened a home for orphans and a home for women. It is noteworthy that both of these ministries continue today in what has become the Episcopal

Home for Children, now located in York, South Carolina and the Bishop Gadsden Retirement Community on James Island.

The latter half of the nineteenth century began a more tumultuous period of time when St. Stephen’s had to close its doors on several occasions. On January 17th, 1864, during the Civil War, the parish closed as a result of heavy Union bombardment of Charleston. It reopened shortly afterward in 1866 but then closed again in 1880 when the rector at the time, the Rev. Edward R. Miles, resigned and most of the congregation followed him to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church (now New Tabernacle Fourth Baptist Church on the corner of Charlotte and Elizabeth Streets). The church was again reopened from 1892-1893 under the Rev. George Frederick Degen, City Missionary. In 1894, with the church vacant, the Missionary Society conveyed the property of St. Stephen’s to the trustees of the diocese. The property was used to open another parochial school, from 1911-1923 but the church remained vacant or, at best, housed a very small worshipping community.

Chapter Four: St. Stephen’s History as an African American Church 1923 - 1987

Records show that St. Stephen’s history as an African American church began in 1923 (though some evidence exists that point to a slightly earlier date) when the congregation of Mount Moriah Union Methodist Church, located on the corner of East Bay and Calhoun Streets, and its minister, the Reverend William M. Morgan, applied to then Bishop William Alexander Guerry to be admitted into union with the Episcopal Church and petitioned to use St. Stephen’s as its place of worship. The congregation was granted permission to do so and either merged

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41 This chapter makes use of miscellaneous parish records and materials compiled by St. Stephen’s parishioner, Judy Sawyer.
with the small congregation already in the space or occupied the vacant building. The
congregation’s leadership received training and was confirmed with Reverend Morgan serving as
Deacon-in-Charge until his death on November 9, 1930. Following the death of Reverend
Morgan, the parish closed its doors and ceased to offer worship services for several months.

Three women (this time, three black women) again stepped in at a pivotal moment for St.
Stephen’s, over a hundred years after the “three Sarahs” founded the parish, when matriarchs
Sarah Reed, Sarah McCray, and Emma Bailey went to see the bishop about finding a new leader
so the parish could remain open for worship. With the church closed, much work had to be done
both inside and outside to clean up the campus. The Bishop agreed to send another priest and to
pay his salary to cover Sunday services if the laity would be responsible for church maintenance.
It was at this point that the Reverend Osmond Jonathan McLeod arrived and was placed in
charge on March 1, 1931. He served until 1939.

The arrival of the Reverend St. Julian A. Simpkins would bring a period of lengthy
stability and congregational vitality to the parish. During Father Simpkins’ tenure the parish is
remembered as having been the center of community life for what was then a bustling and
largely black neighborhood. Ansonborough was filled with grocery stores, small businesses
(some owned by parishioners) and homes, notably where the nearby Gaillard Auditorium (a
block from St. Stephen’s) now stands. Most members lived within walking distance of the
church and a large, free-standing brick building behind it served as both a parsonage and a
vibrant kindergarten that Mrs. Simpkins ran. It is remembered that, at the time, St. Stephen’s
operated one of the only kindergartens where black students were welcome in the city of
Charleston. It is said that Father Simpkins served as a kind of bus driver picking children up
around the neighborhood for those who needed assistance to get to school. He is remembered as a warm soul with a heart for the church and neighborhood.

Father Simpkins and his wife were also a team in leading worship. Father Simpkins preached and presided and Mrs. Simpkins served as organist and choir master. At that time, female parishioners sat on the left and men sat on the right. The only source of heat was a pot-bellied stove which had to be turned on early in the morning in the winter. Services of worship and a church school for children were held at 4:00pm because, like Father McLeod before him, Father Simpkins served other black congregations as well. Children were also active in the choir.

While the congregation had few resources, many remember these years as a time of abundance. Money was raised through rummage sales to support the kindergarten and no child was ever turned away. Clothing was available for any who needed it and church suppers and seasonal events were open to the whole neighborhood. Parishioner Sarah McCray notes that “the church had a warm, caring feeling. Everyone was encouraged to be a part of maintaining it [because] when you care for your church, you are able to feel like it’s yours and you really belong.”

The congregation continued as a mission of the diocese with priest fees covered. Father Simpkins’ salary was paid for and the parishioners were expected to maintain the campus. Eventually, the parsonage and school house in the back burned down and the fire department condemned the building. The church did not have the funds to replace it. Father Simpkins died in 1959 concluding a nearly twenty-year ministry as priest of St. Stephen’s.

Following the death of Father Simpkins, the congregation began to face challenges. The congregation floundered and numbers began to dwindle as many felt a sense of personal loss with Father Simpkins and his wife gone. It was also at this point that the neighborhood began to
gentrify from a largely black neighborhood to a mostly white one. The small businesses closed and homes were sold. Some members began to move beyond the church neighborhood. Chapter five will offer more insight into Ansonborough’s process of gentrification.

In 1960, the Reverend Henry Grant arrived at the request of Bishop Gray Temple. Father Grant was asked to oversee both St. Stephen’s and the St. John’s Center, a relatively new mission to a largely poor, African American section of the city known as “the East Side.” Father Grant was told that the bishop planned to eventually close St. Stephen’s. Instead, St. Stephen’s experienced a new period of growth and vitality under Father Grant’s lengthy stay as vicar of the church.

Father Grant is remembered as being a fierce advocate for the black community, race relations, and as a social justice-oriented activist during the height of the civil rights movement. During his tenure in Charleston, he challenged the Episcopal Church to “broaden … [its] ministry to involve the economy, health, and well-being of citizens in addition to their spiritual life.” At the East Side mission, his ministry became the center of life for a 12-block area of 1,800 low-income families with 3,300 children. He organized social clubs, day cares, kindergartens, adult education classes, Scout troops, employment programs, and many other community programs of social uplift. At a time of great racial tension, the Charleston News and Courier termed him “a bridge of communication between the races” and stated that he commands attention on both sides of whatever racial gap exists.” Many African American clergy, business, and political leaders of today grew up impacted by Father Grant’s work at the mission center.

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43 Ibid.
“The Rock,” as St. Stephen’s congregants lovingly referred to Father Grant, also steadily grew the church mission on Anson Street. During this time, families from the East Side, who had gotten to know Father Grant through the St. John’s Mission, joined St. Stephen’s. Father Grant also encouraged the community at St. Stephen’s to involve themselves and support the work of the East Side mission. Women’s groups were established during this time such as a chapter of the Episcopal Church Women and St. Mary’s Guild. There was an active youth group and the youth were participants at Camp Baskerville, an Episcopal camp located on Pawley’s Island for African American children and youth that Father Grant also helped to oversee.

As in previous decades, the all black congregation, which had few resources, did not have to pay its clergy as the diocese took care of that in exchange for the members caring for the church and grounds. Once there, these new families brought in by Father Grant joined the rest of the parish in maintenance and upkeep of the church campus. One family active during the time recalls finding sheet rock and other building supplies in dumpsters to attend to needed repairs at the church. Father Grant did not encourage pledging but there was small but steady giving on Sunday mornings. The congregation raised funds, as in past years, with dinners and parish events. They would also take up a collection to pay for utilities and to provide a $100.00 stipend for Father Grant’s efforts on Sundays.

The spirit of the church, despite the increasing neighborhood changes, was close knit and familial. One member recalls that members would refer to one another as “brother” or “sister.” The congregation sang African American spirituals and Mrs. Grant served as the organist. Several prominent families constituted the core of the St. Stephen’s community.

As time went on, Ansonborough’s gentrification continued to make an impact on the life of the community. By the seventies and early eighties, the neighborhood changes increasingly
threatened the viability of St. Stephen’s as a black church. As Father Grant’s life and ministry circumstances began to make his availability less reliable, the lay leadership was again faced with the threat of closure and with a pivotal moment of how to proceed. Prior to exploring that moment and the decision-making process that followed, it is important, for context, to first share the story of what led to the demographic change taking place in Ansonborough.

**Chapter Five: The Gentrification of Ansonborough**

“We have today learned that Mrs. Dingle’s property at 57 Anson Street was sold a few days ago for $4,000. The name of the buyer cannot be ascertained at this time, but we are informed that the property was sold to White persons who have no plans to make use of the property in any way for Negroes.” ~ Frances R. Edmunds, Director: Historic Charleston Foundation, September 22, 1961

The gentrification of the Charleston neighborhood of Ansonborough was brought about by a concerted historic preservation effort that launched the now well-established Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF). Ansonborough, a neighborhood with a history that stretches back to the 1740’s, had, during the Great Depression, begun to decline.

“In 1941, the Charleston Shipbuilders and Dry Dock Company opened a facility to build war ships … the docks employed African Americans … who needed nearby housing. Ansonborough homeowners began subdividing their houses for rent and moving away. When the war ended, dock jobs began to disappear and many of the renters found themselves out of work. By the 1950’s, many of the residences … were in slum condition. The decline was a pattern across the country as [mainly white] residents left

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44 Frances R. Edmunds Papers, Personal Letter, Historic Charleston Foundation Archives, Box 16.
historic inner-city neighborhoods and moved to new suburban communities after World War II.”

The still relatively new Historic Charleston Foundation, under the direction of the pioneering Frances Edmunds, designated almost the entire neighborhood of Ansonborough as its target area for a new revolving fund and rehabilitation program. “A pool of money would be used to acquire historic Ansonborough properties and complete partial renovation to allow for resale, with restrictive covenants attached to the deed.” In other words, once renovated, only individuals with the financial resources to maintain the properties to Historic Charleston’s standards were able to purchase the homes. The Ansonborough “Rehabilitation” Project was born.

From a historic preservation standpoint, Historic Charleston’s efforts in Ansonborough were a smashing success. The revolving fund idea transformed the neighborhood from what was deemed “slum like conditions” to an area of the city full of beautifully preserved antebellum houses, all slapped with Historic Charleston Foundation plaques, that have made Ansonborough a jewel of the downtown area. The revolving fund has become a model replicated in historic urban areas across the nation and Historic Charleston has gone on to other efforts throughout the city. And yet, many, including Historic Charleston’s own accounting of the project, acknowledge that Ansonborough’s “rehabilitation” intentionally forced many poor African American residents out of the neighborhood.

Historic Charleston Foundation President and CEO, Winslow Hastie seems to agree that, as in the case of many other examples of urban gentrification, racism and white supremacy were present throughout this historic preservation process. Reflecting on the Ansonborough project,

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45 Christina R. Butler, Ansonborough: From Birth to Rebirth (Charleston: Historic Charleston Foundation, 2019)
46 Ibid.
Hastie notes this is “not something we would be supportive of today … going in and pushing out a whole community of people, particularly African American people … [The decision making then] was very aggressive and very top down.” This kind of social change was alluded to in mid-1960’s brochures to market the Ansonborough neighborhood to potential new residents. One brochure characterized the project as “the most extensive, concentrated, permanent slum clearance or urban rehabilitation in Charleston by any organization, government or private, since World War II.”

The use, throughout the project, of such words like “reclamation,” “rehabilitation,” “bridgehead of stability,” “preserving the best of the past,” all subtly seem to harken back to a darker chapter of Charleston’s history while romanticizing the famed “Lost Cause” narrative that emerged amid the violent response in the South to Reconstruction. There are also records that point to the racial undertones of the project. Historic Charleston kept records of the races of inhabitants of various homes throughout the neighborhood, many times noting that the remaining homes with African-American tenants were not yet restored, in effect painting a bullseye on the back of the poor minority holdouts through the 1960’s.

During this Ansonborough Rehabilitation effort it is also noteworthy that the first iteration of the Gaillard Auditorium, what is now a prominent performing arts venue in the city, was built in the late 1960’s on the edge of the Ansonborough neighborhood about a block from St. Stephen’s. An African American neighborhood consisting of approximately seven hundred people was condemned by the city and those people displaced to make way for the auditorium’s construction that was ultimately completed in 1968. While construction of the municipal

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48 Frances R. Edmunds Papers, Report to Board of Trustees, October 29, 1963, Historic Charleston Foundation Archives, Box 16.
49 Weyeneth, p. 65.
auditorium was controversial, the project was publicly defended as a buffer between the
gentrifying Ansonborough and the black residents of the East Side neighborhood to the north,
where Father Grant’s ministry was housed. One white alderman subsequently observed that the
proposed location would inoculate Ansonborough from ‘invasion by slums.’”  

Hence, one black neighborhood was destroyed to “save” another increasingly populated by whites.

The neighborhood changes in Ansonborough, which indelibly changed St. Stephen’s,
replaced poor blacks with wealthy whites just as in the case of many other gentrifying projects
across the country. “Ansonborough’s ‘undesirables,’ many of whom had worked so hard
contributing to the war effort in the 1940’s, had been nearly all displaced … The lower-class
African Americans had, by the 1970’s, either largely moved from Charleston altogether or been
forced into public housing farther up the Peninsula and into North Charleston, places that were
designated for ‘undesirables.’”  

Frances Edmunds declared the project complete in the late 1970’s.

While not a part of Historic Charleston Foundation’s Ansonborough project, it is also
noteworthy that the Ansonborough Homes (or “the Borough” as local residents called it), another
nearby area of black low-income housing built at Calhoun and East Bay streets in the 1940’s,
that residents nevertheless remember fondly as a place of vibrant community life, also began to
be torn town as Historic Charleston was concluding its work. By the 1980’s much of what
constituted black housing in the area was gone. By 1992, in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, the
remainder of the “the Borough” was eliminated. While the city government, led by Mayor Joe
Riley, argued for the elimination of the “Borough” because they believed the ground to be

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50 Ibid, 65.
51 Ibid, p. 58.
contaminated, the black residents of that neighborhood remember that municipal process as deceptive. True or not, many African Americans in the city continue to believe that the ultimate purpose of this neighborhood change was to make way for condos, commercial space, and public facilities that would largely cater to wealthy whites. Former Charleston County School Board member Elizabeth Alston remembers the removal of African American Ansonborough residents as follows: “many people grew up on that side [of town] and people were very angry because they’d been displaced. A good word to describe what was done to the city is gentrification. A lot of people who’ve been displaced have not been able to move back into the city limits.”

One cannot overemphasize the importance of these neighborhood changes to the community life that would emerge at St. Stephen’s following the end of Father Grant’s ministry in the 1980’s. Many faithful members of the church had felt forced out of the neighborhood, knew friends who were forced out, or had seen cherished local businesses close. The neighborhood had been “saved” but many African Americans felt like the collateral damage. The church was left leaderless at a time when it was again a dwindling black congregation but this time in an increasingly affluent all-white neighborhood. It is also noteworthy that some of the early whites who had “taken a chance” on Ansonborough and moved into the neighborhood when the Historic Charleston Foundation began its rehabilitation project were gays and lesbians. As early as the 1960’s, it is reported that Ansonborough was quickly becoming a neighborhood with a notable gay population (at least for Charleston at the time). These changes were jarring for the black parishioners still in the pews and left them with some stark choices about how to proceed.

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52 Frances McCormack, “Art, Film to Help Recapture Memories of Ansonborough” Post and Courier, April 4, 2002.
Part Three: A Critical Examination of the Story of St. Stephen’s Integration: Insights and Missed Opportunities

Chapter Six: The Integration of the Parish as the “Key to Survival”

The early to mid 1980’s was a challenging period of time for St. Stephen’s. The all black congregation was surrounded by a now all white neighborhood and its Vicar, the Reverend Henry Grant was no longer able to reliably serve on Sundays. The diocese continued to send supply priests to cover services but the congregation began to dwindle as some members tired of worshipping at a church absent steady priestly leadership. One member, Joe Brown Jr., notes that by this point “it was a small congregation; a family church that consisted of about seven or eight [extended] families.” On some Sundays, with no priest present, lay leaders led Morning Prayer and offered some “inspirational words” in place of a sermon or homily. When they were without a musician, the members recall singing the Doxology acapella.

Robert Oaks, a key leader at the time, recalled these challenging years at the church by noting how marginal St. Stephen’s had become. “Two years … before [integration] St. Stephen’s was about on the way out,” he said. “The diocese was providing everything for us. And there were some tough times. Trying times.” Around this period, Mr. Oaks began to get the impression that the diocese, which was beginning to divest in a number of dwindling black ministries, had plans to close St. Stephen’s as well. “One day, the diocese called me to talk to someone about doing an assessment for St. Stephen’s and that told me what was going on. And before that, when Father Oliveros came in and preached [doing supply] one Sunday, he kind of started crying from the pulpit. That gave me an indication too [that things did not look good for us].” The families left at the church that constituted the remaining congregation were in despair.
Mr. Oaks, desperate to save the church, reached out to the bishop of the diocese, the Rt. Reverend FitzSimons Allison. “I made several attempts to keep this thing going,” he said. Eventually Bishop Allison told Mr. Oaks he wanted him to speak with a retired priest about a possible way to keep the church doors open.

Over a meal at a nearby diner, Mr. Oaks met the Reverend Alanson (Alan) Bigelow Houghton who first proposed the idea of integrating St. Stephen’s to him. Houghton, was recently retired as rector of the large, well-endowed Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City. He came from a wealthy, influential family, had a brother who was a sitting member of Congress, and was already known around Charleston as something of a socialite living near the bishop in a home nestled in the prestigious South of Broad area of the city. Mr. Oaks remembers Father Houghton as saying, “I think that we would like to see something different in Charleston. We would like to see an integrated church downtown. Preferably the Episcopal Church downtown.” He asked Mr. Oaks, who was senior warden of the vestry at the time, what he thought about that. He said, “I know I’m a senior board member. I’ve been a senior board member for quite a while … [but] don’t let me make that decision [myself] … Why don’t I try to arrange a meeting with the vestry and some of the congregants and see whether or not [they like your idea of integrating].” And so, out of this table conversation, a pivotal meeting of the church leadership and key leaders was arranged that would shape the congregation for years to come.

On a hot Tuesday evening in June of 1987, approximately twenty people gathered at St. Stephen’s to discuss the idea of integrating the congregation. The participants included members of the St. Stephen’s vestry, some influential members, Father Houghton and a white lawyer friend, Mr. Conrad Coles. The idea of integration was presented to the leadership. Mr. Oaks advised them, “I think that this is the key to our survival.” He recalls the black members
whispering to one another unsure of what to think of this proposal. Mr. Oaks’ wife, Shirley, said that some of the black members worried aloud that the white folks would come and push the black members into the background. They worried that the whites would, in effect, take the church away from them. Mr. Oaks stood up and said, “They can’t take the church. But we can surely give it to them. If we quit coming, we give it to them.” The black members “apprehension about the proposed changes was understandable since the St. Stephen’s situation was analogous to the historic pattern of race relations in the Episcopal Church – a white bishop choosing the white priest whom he wanted to lead a black parish.”

Many remember that the black leaders present planned to take a vote as to whether or not they would support integrating the parish. Then, Mrs. Louise Washington spoke up.

It is reported that Louise Washington, a matriarch of the parish who had raised eight children at St. Stephen’s changed the tone, tenor, and direction of that June 1987 meeting. Prior to the leadership taking a vote, Mrs. Washington got up and said, “I think we can do it. I don’t fear anything. I was brought up with white folks so I feel close to them. I don’t have a problem with white people. If they love God, they should be welcome.” A vote was never taken out of respect for Mrs. Washington and the congregation agreed to the proposed plan to integrate. Later, it is said that Mrs. Washington confidently observed, “I would never leave our church. If you love something you stay. And I stayed in my church because I knew that God would send somebody.”

The agreed upon plan to integrate St. Stephen’s was that Father Houghton would serve as part-time Vicar-in-charge of St. Stephen’s. His only payment was health benefits for himself and his wife, Billie. The model of ministry described at the time was a “worker-priest” model with

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the priest at the church but also out in the community doing other things and the congregation, as in past years, responsible for upkeep of the grounds. The small mission’s intended focus was on social justice, reconciliation, and outreach. The Bishop and diocese were clear, at the time, that the parish had to integrate and remain integrated in order to remain open. Bishop Allison is reported to have said, “We don’t need another all white church in downtown Charleston.” It is significant to acknowledge that Mr. Oaks commented that “as far as Alan was concerned, integration was the thing. But as far as we (the black members) were concerned, it was staying open.”

Despite the pressure from the diocese, the willingness of the African American members to embrace integration was still a remarkable and courageous choice. The racial climate of 1980’s Charleston had plenty of points of tension from the already described neighborhood changes and poverty of black communities to effective segregation in many of the city’s schools to the continuing battle over the memory of Charleston’s ugly history around race. In the face of these tensions, a black community intentionally welcoming whites to worship with them was a brave move.

On July 5, 1987, a new era began at St. Stephen’s with three white people in the congregation and a new mission of being an integrated parish amid a still very racially divided Charleston, South Carolina. The new lengthy stated mission of the parish was,

“To serve God as an Episcopal Church committed to congregational and community ministry; A fully integrated congregation which gathers in fellowship with one another to worship, learn, talk and act; A community which is centered in Christ, cares about each other and is concerned about the world at-large; A mission-oriented congregation determined to carry the Word of God out into the community; A community of lay and
clergy persons who give freely of their time and expertise; A congregation whose individual members make a serious commitment to pray, study, worship, serve and give.”  

Mr. Oaks recalls that more whites started showing up at St. Stephen’s almost immediately after Father Houghton arrived. Some of these early white parishioners were wealthy friends or acquaintances of Father Houghton’s who had previously worshipped at prominent all white congregations downtown like St. Michael’s or St. Philip’s. One early white member, Mrs. Julie Davis, mentioned that she and her husband knew Father Houghton in New York before they, like him, had moved down to Charleston. She reports that Father Houghton invited them to come to church and to commit to coming for at least two years to give him time to integrate the mission. Some of the earliest whites to come into the church at this time were gay and lesbian.

It is noteworthy that, as whites began to fill the pews of St. Stephen’s, the church, once largely neglected by the diocese, began to get more of the bishop’s attention. Two of the first white members to join the church, Gary and Marsha Little, who recall first visiting with Father Houghton before the church formally integrated, note that Bishop Allison had not really been all that involved with St. Stephen’s in recent years. The bishop “actually discouraged us from coming,” they recall. “He told us he did not think it was appropriate that we attend the church … And in the early years, he would not even come to St. Stephen’s for confirmations so our son was never confirmed.” It was only after the church was successfully integrated, that the diocese became more involved they recall.

The mission began to grow again under Father Houghton’s leadership with the active support of some of the black lay leaders who had agreed to the integration. Within a relatively

short period time (one to two years), the racial make-up of the church began to shift first to two-thirds black and one-third white and then to an approximately an even split of black and white attendees. Eventually, whites would outnumber the blacks. The Reverend Dr. Jennie Clarkson Olbrych, a priest who succeeded Father Houghton as Interim Vicar, remarked that

“the whites drawn [to St. Stephen’s at the time] came for a variety of reasons, some because they did not really feel welcome elsewhere as the tone of the diocese shifted from broad church to more of a charismatic renewal evangelical emphasis … [others came because of] a genuine welcome for gays and lesbians, persons on their third or fourth marriages, business people who had some kind of public failure or humiliation and others who were drawn to its somewhat counter cultural appeal.”

In a new way, St. Stephen’s once again opened its doors to those drawn in by its reputation as being a “house of prayer for all people,” a mantra that remains the only mission statement the church members really seem to embrace.

In time, other changes came. A small staff was eventually hired including an organist, administrator, and lay outreach worker. Neglected areas of the campus were fixed up with the help of funds from Father Houghton and some of the wealthy whites who joined the parish during that time. Also, a new parish house was built, just behind the church, with the help of a loan, in 1989. A hallmark of the mission during this period, that will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter, was that the parish gave away 50% of its income to outreach. A series of community forums on controversial topics (such as HIV/AIDS, gun control, and race), that will also be commented on later, were held, on occasion, in the church during the week, sometimes to standing room only crowds.
Chapter Seven: Underlying Tensions

On many levels, the integration of the congregation went very well. A Charleston Post and Courier article written shortly after the parish integrated included a quote from Mr. Oaks proudly reporting, “It’s wonderful. The old members don’t feel pushed out and I think the new members feel welcome. We’re even finding that some of the old members we lost before Alan Houghton came are returning.” Many of the whites arriving in those early years were attracted to the idea of worshipping in an integrated church. One couple mentioned how much they loved the “experimental feel” of St. Stephen’s in those years that gave them a sense that they were a part of a community that, in the Charleston of this time period, was looked upon as very avant-garde. But this period of integration was not entirely smooth or without tension.

It is important to point out here how much change this small congregation had undergone in a relatively short period of time. In the span of just three or four years, the congregation went from being a church made up of blue-collar African Americans to an integrated church, with a white Vicar, that included wealthy whites and blue-collar blacks and that actively welcomed gays and lesbians. On the face of it, St. Stephen’s had perhaps never before lived more fully into its original calling to be a “house of prayer for all people” but the changes brought down a lot of social barriers common in late 1980’s Charleston all at once. And it can’t be forgotten here that while the black leadership of the church assented to the proposal to integrate they did it because they had to. Even Mr. Oaks, who today lauds this period in our parish’s history, acknowledges that if the black congregation could have been able to continue as a black congregation, they would have done that. “We would have,” he concedes … [but] we were so dependent on the diocese. That was the key. We were so dependent on the diocese.” Amid such circumstances and

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55 Elsa F. McDowell, “Church seeking desegregation.” The Post and Courier. Date unknown.
the backdrop of a changing downtown, in 1980’s Charleston, and at the time when black ministries in the diocese were not being supported, there were bound to be tensions.

A number of the African Americans worshipping at St. Stephen’s remember times of tension, hurt feelings, and even anger during this intentional period of integration. One member, Joe Brown III noted that, with the whites coming into St. Stephen’s being so wealthy, the socio-economic divide added another power dynamic that was hard for some of the blacks to accept. He recalled that “[white] people didn’t have a problem putting their name [on something]; attaching their name to a project or attaching their name to a building [they had paid for], which annoyed some of the blacks because… you know, what happened to all the sweat and tears that the blacks [put in] before them? They don’t have their name on it. That annoyed a lot of people.” He added that this resentment lingered for a long time. “Especially with the females,” he said. “The African American females. They were bitter because, as it turns out, most of the folks who were driving things; who were very vocal about the funds they were putting in the church, they were white females … They were saying [to the other blacks] “what about when we did so and so? What about when we did this? There were some underlying tensions that just continued to seep through.”

Another black member at the time, Henry Wright, who no longer attends St. Stephen’s, remembers anger expressed from some of the blacks at a loss of control after the church integrated. Mr. Wright recalled that the black members had lost a lot in the changing demographics of the congregation. “This was a little family church with some strong families in here,” he noted.

“And then you brought in a white priest, two white core administrators, white parishioners. You could sense the contentiousness within a congregational meeting. And
it was pretty contentious there. Many, many times it was … I think the blacks felt like they were getting a very strong budget [but] they were losing their identity. They were losing their self-control. And maybe even their style of worship to some degree. And I guess you have the history of race in this country.”

Mr. Wright pointed not just to feelings he felt in public but also, and perhaps more importantly, to things that he remembers said in the parking lot and in the ways people expressed themselves in small groups.

Even a few whites interviewed remember tensions in the congregation as more whites entered St. Stephen’s and started filling up the pews. One white member, Samuel Moore, when asked if he felt welcomed by the blacks responded, “You know I did but [in hindsight] I’ve come to realize that there was a lot of questioning. I don’t want to say resentment or hesitation, but questioning … by the blacks about what’s going on here? Are we going to be welcomed continually? Are we being exploited? Are they trying to use us to do a documentary or something like that?” Julie Davis recalls that, “when we [the whites] go there [to St. Stephen’s], we lost … [some blacks] immediately because they thought we were going to take over the church. It became visible to me that we were the conduit for people leaving. It was, for me, heartbreaking.” Another white parishioner, Bruce Thomas, while mentioning he felt welcomed upon his arrival, did feel some tension. “There were times they (the blacks) seemed to act as though … we (the whites) were taking over the church.”

Lastly, some interviewed for this project noted tensions around the early inclusion of gays and lesbians as many of the African American members struggled with that issue on theological and cultural grounds. Some African Americans noted that there was a group of black members who started to leave when St. Stephen’s became more well known in the city as a
church that embraced gays and lesbians. Some interviewed, who no longer belong to St. Stephen’s, remember a lot of emotions between black members and LGBTQ members. But Mr. Oaks noted that, in sensing this tension, he specifically would try to address the issue with the black members. Acknowledging that fact that homosexuality is a taboo topic in the black church, Mr. Oaks said, “I was aware of that [tension]. And every chance I got to talk about it, among the African Americans, I did. But I talked positively about it … my thing to say them was, ‘Now you know you’ve been discriminated against. How’d you feel about that? I know how I feel about that.’ I’d say, ‘How do you think you would feel?’ It’s no different. Discrimination is discrimination, I don’t care what form you put it in.”

The aforementioned tensions do not diminish the successes of this integrative period but are rather intended to highlight the complexity of the effort. Achieving integrated community in a church, in the fallen world in which we live, will always be challenging to build and maintain. There will always be tension and conflict. The issue is how a community strives to approach that tension.

The St. Stephen’s integration, in the time and place in which it occurred, in the wake of the gentrification of Ansonborough and with the power dynamics at play, was never going to be an easy endeavor for the priest and people to navigate. This pivotal period did indeed save the church from closing its doors, diversified the congregation, and reinvigorated the mission but the effort did require a great deal of adaptive leadership and African American participation gradually decreased as time went on.

The chapters that follow will seek to highlight and reflect upon the leadership decisions and aspects of congregational life that helped make the adaption work. Space will also be allotted
to consider the missed opportunities that might have aided the integration of the parish and even prevented some of the loss of African Americans in the decades that followed. These insights will lead into the last part of this project: an examination of the St. Stephen’s story since the integrative period and a reflection on how we might better live into our continued call to be “a house of prayer for all people” today.

Leadership Decisions that Aided Integration

Chapter Eight: Welcome and Hospitality

Nearly every member – black or white – who was interviewed for this project seemed to agree that, however imperfect the integration of the parish might have been, one of things that made the community feel special at the time were the ongoing attempts by leadership (lay and ordained) at hospitality and, at least to some degree, of what today might be termed “radical welcome.” In commenting on the theme of “radical welcome,” the Reverend Altagracia Perez of Holy Faith Episcopal Church in Inglewood, California noted, “[I]t is “not just [about] how do we get more people, but how do we share power, how do we create a culture that is flexible and fluid enough to be open, constantly evaluating and reorganizing based on the reality around you?”56 The early years of St. Stephen’s integration were marked by a fluidity that, at its best, allowed the church to the space, amid a divided and inequitable world, where people of very different backgrounds could come and dip their toes in the water of what a truly integrated Christian community might feel like. The community that was formed in those years was made

possible by leadership doing what they could, in an ongoing way, to welcome people into all levels of the church’s life as a way of living into the church’s call to be “a house of prayer for all.”

That welcome and hospitality, for most respondents, was grounded on the example and leadership of the priest, Father Alan Houghton. People remember him as a warm and caring soul who fostered a spirit of vulnerability and playfulness that helped to bring the community together. While wealthy and patrician, he was quite progressive and embodied a generous and inclusive spirit. The Reverend Morey Lent, a white priest who was in the church at the time, and later served with Father Houghton recalled that,

“Alan was a generous person … memorable to me was the gift of his expression … [he had a] contagious smile [that made] you glad you had come even before he said a word. I used to enjoy … his announcement time because, invariably, he would say something always with a touch of self-deprecating humor which would let us see his humanity; his brokenness. And as we laughed, we would silently and readily forgive him because his presence [and] disarming honesty … would let us know we were also forgiven and loved … Alan was a melder…he led us in a way that we became one. That is why we came.”

He was also a leader that is remembered as approachable and a consensus builder. One who met people where they were, could communicate to anyone, shared power in some ways and fostered a culture not only of experimentation but permissiveness. His emphasis on representation will be taken up in the next chapter but even in small ways, he signaled that participation trumped perfectionism. Joe Brown III observed that Father Houghton “didn’t want to tell [parishioners] ‘no,’ especially black parishioners.” He wanted lay involvement whenever possible. While there

57 Morey Lent, Sermon, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, SC, January 18, 2015.
are admittedly dangers in not wanting to tell parishioners “no,” in this context and in this moment, it seemed to be important and emblematic of the welcoming and hospitable spirit he was trying to model. It is said that “hospitality is at the heart of Christian life, drawing from God’s grace and reflecting God’s graciousness. In hospitality, we respond to the welcome that God has offered and replicate that welcome in the world.”

For most of the parish, Father Houghton demonstrated that truth and reflected the gracious and inclusive love of God in the way he embraced anyone who walked through St. Stephen’s doors.

The lay leaders, especially the core African American leadership who had agreed to the integration, also put in a tremendous amount of effort to make new members feel at home and welcome them into the life of the community. Many of the black members appreciated the history of the parish and its founding mission to be “a house of prayer for all” and this collective identity helped them to embrace integration, as much as they were able, as a natural extension of the church’s mission. Joe Brown III remembers hearing his father excitedly tell him the church had white people coming. Mr. Brown, who had been out of the country in the military when integration started, was surprised to hear his father’s enthusiasm on the phone. “He (my dad) called me … he called and said, ‘We have white people that come to church now.’ I remember that call very vividly. He was surprised and happy at the same time. I guess he took a historical perspective on it because you look back on the history [of the church] it seemed in keeping with St. Stephen’s call.” The Reverend Stephanie Spellers writes that one of the hallmarks of radical welcome is that it is grounded in “a clear call to live out the dream of God as [a community] has discerned it in light of Scripture, tradition, reason, and context.”

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59 Spellers, p. 3.
member’s sense of St Stephen’s own identity and call, grounded in Scripture and their faith filled experiences at the church, were emblematic of this kind of welcome.

In the early days, the black leadership waited on the front steps of the church to proactively welcome in the whites at they arrived to check St. Stephen’s out. Robert Oaks noted that “I think [welcome and hospitality] were some of our finer points. The church was so welcoming. We (the black leaders) stood out there … waiting to greet [the white members]. We were all making a special effort.” Some white members fondly recalled that, in the early days, St. Stephen’s still felt like a black church with the whites welcomed as their guests.

Lastly, for the time and place in which St. Stephen’s integration occurred, it is worth highlighting the extent to which black lay leaders worked to welcome the gays and lesbians who began to walk through the doors of the church. While, as previously mentioned, some black members were not comfortable with an embrace of homosexuality, and this tension lingered, key leaders like Mr. Oaks tried to be intentional about discussing the issue to help people along the way. “Radical welcome means the community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups – especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced, and closeted – in order to help shape the congregation’s life and mission.”

Amid the unique circumstances of St. Stephen’s integration, as Mr. Oaks notes, the black leaders were able to tap into their own sense of being discriminated against and marginalized in order to help communicate the importance of embracing another marginalized population. This surely enabled some measure of integration amid that dynamic that, while imperfect, would not have been possible otherwise.

60 Spellers, p. 6.
Chapter Nine: Representation Matters

One of the most intentional and strategic moves made by leadership to aid St. Stephen’s integration was the acknowledgement that in order to maintain a diverse and integrated worshipping community, racial representation would be important to pay attention to. From the beginning, it was clear that Father Houghton’s aim was to make sure that, as the church welcomed in more and more whites, the leadership and worship leaders visible to the congregation would remain as racially balanced as possible. Robert Oaks recalls a planning meeting with Father Houghton and Conrad Coles, prior to the start of the integration. Thinking back on that meeting, he said, “Alan … [made clear his sense that] to make this thing work we have got to be sure that we have balance in the leadership because we know the church is going to grow. And he didn’t say it, but I knew it … [that] a lot of white folks would follow Alan.” This strategic decision does not only point to the degree to which Father Houghton understood the power dynamics of attempting to bring whites and blacks together but also the value of making explicit his fidelity to the black community who had agreed to the integration in the first place. “During times of transition in a community, it is important to find opportunities to make implicit promises more explicit”\(^{61}\) and the emphasis on a visual representation of the integration was indicative of that.

The plan on representation was that there would be as close to equal representation as possible in every aspect of the church’s common life; from worship to committee and vestry meetings to outreach endeavors. A rota would be established to make sure that leadership and participation was truly shared. At some points, Father Houghton’s dogged commitment to this principle led to humorous conversations. Conrad Coles, the white lawyer friend of Father

\(^{61}\) Pohl, p. 85.
Houghton’s who was with him the day the church integrated, remembers a time Alan called him and said, “All right, Conrad, you need to be the treasurer of the parish.” Mr. Coles replied, “Alan look, I’ve never been treasurer of anything in my life. I don’t know anything about being treasurer. And so, why do I have to be treasurer?” Alan responded, “You have to be treasurer because you are white. I’ve divided up the offices to have white and black people serving in leadership and it just happened to be that in the rotation. So being treasurer fell on you because you’re white. So, you’ve got to do it.” Mr. Coles added, “integrated representation was something that Alan tried to institute early on. 100%. Alan was completely open in terms of racial equality.”

This emphasis on representation eventually led to important staffing decisions that both black and white members mentioned as being very important to the overall feeling and well-being of the community. While some of the first hires Father Houghton made were white members who quickly signed on to serve as a part time administrator and lay outreach worker, he soon also added an African American organist, named Don White, who would serve the parish for the next twenty-five years. The white outreach worker, Sue Bird, accompanied Father Houghton on pastoral visits and coordinated much of the pastoral care and comfort that went on during those years. She recalls that she and Alan would visit everyone in their homes during those days. This gave many of the black members a close and intimate connection with a white member and lay leader that they grew fond of and came to trust deeply. Mrs. Bird’s special bond with the black community at St. Stephen’s endures to this day. Mr. White was a talented musician but also is remembered for being rather cantankerous and, at times, challenging to work with. Joe Brown III is sure Father Houghton’s commitment to racial diversity is one of the reasons he “tolerated” Don White.
An enduring example at St. Stephen’s of the value of representation in leadership and diversity of perspectives in worship was a fabled group of priests that Father Houghton eventually formed to assist him. The “clergy committee” as they are affectionately remembered included Father Houghton, three other white clergy and the Reverend John Richards, a retired priest from the Caribbean who Alan apparently sought out in order to have a black clergy person serving alongside him. Sue Bird remembers the day Father Richards first came to St. Stephen’s. “I remember him walking down the street and Alan saying with a smile, ‘he is exactly what we’ve been waiting for.’” Most of the clergy committee were retired priests who had gravitated to St. Stephen’s because of an attraction to the mission. They would eventually rotate leadership of worship and preaching on Sundays and share in pastoral duties as needed. Many in the congregation grew to love the variety of the leadership this committee provided and most agreed that the diversity of voices and perspectives they represented complemented one another well.

While he was revered by the entire congregation, Father Richards clearly made an enormous difference to the African American members of the church. Joe Brown III commented, “John was the first black scholar I’d ever known in my life. The guy was incredibly smart and so was his wife.” Henry Wright noted, “You just can’t underestimate the importance of Father Richards in this entire scenario. He became a kind of go-to person for many of these African Americans who might have had a difficult time with [the integration] … John was more accessible to the African American community.” Some remember Father Richard’s tenure as being the high point of African American membership in the church noting not only his accessibility but his preaching and pastoral presence.

This diverse clergy committee would continue at St. Stephen’s even after Father Houghton stepped down. In fact, Alan apparently pulled them in so he could begin to step back a
bit. Their ministry would provide a helpful bridge between this pivotal period of integration and the life and ministry that followed as St. Stephen’s continued to grow and change.

**Chapter Ten: A Focus on Mission and Social Justice**

While St. Stephen’s was a small parish in the late 1980’s, under Father Houghton’s leadership and influence, it was able to maintain an impactful focus on mission, outreach, and social justice that, in small ways, signaled continuity with Father Grant’s focus. St. Stephen’s frequently received newspaper coverage in the late 1980’s not only for its unique story of integration but also because of its mission to give half of every dollar it collected away to charitable causes. Admittedly, this generosity would not have been possible absent Father Houghton’s considerable personal wealth and the subsequent fact that the church did not have to pay him a salary. Still, the mission orientation, something the leadership felt strongly about, gave the whole community a sense of pride and engagement in the wider community that would, at times, lead to active participation. Mr. Wright noted, “Allan had a motto, so to speak, to give 50% of every dollar that we receive outside. So St. Stephen’s was a great ministry, a great resource for many … and some of these [ministries were] not just [about] giving money but participating.”

An outreach many remembered that helped forge relationships between the congregants through an emphasis on mission was serving meals and volunteering in other ways, in shifts, at the local shelter. Sue Bird remembers an important part of her job was scheduling integrated teams from the parish to go volunteer together at the shelter. “I would make an announcement [to the church],” she recalls. “We always knew when it was coming up … So, we would shop and … we would get all we need to [provide food] … What we were doing was we would come to
the shelter, have dinner [and] then sleep all night and then have breakfast [ready for the shelter guests] in the morning. So, that was a big thing and really busy.” This outreach effort helped form bonds between the members. “These things helped to solidify the relationship [amongst the members] and move us from the point of doubt to brotherhood” said Mr. Wright.

St. Stephen’s also strived during this period to open the church up as a space where critical issues of the day could be discussed and engaged. Father Houghton was once quoted in a local newspaper article as stating that, in his mind, “one of the main purposes of a mission-oriented church is to serve as an arena where people can discuss and debate significant issues.”

These public forums engaged a number of controversial topics that drew large crowds during the church. “Boy did we have some forums,” Shirley Oaks remembers. “They got pretty hot at times.” “Gun control,” she added. “There really was some serious conversation … I’ll never forget, we had up front by the altar; we had this big table and had all these guns.” Henry Wright recalls an open forum at the church focused on race. “St. Stephen’s was standing room only, okay. And had a couple of Native Americans, a couple of African Americans, Hispanic, a couple of whites, Jewish, traditional Jewish men, people from various ethnic backgrounds who were represented in pairs [at this forum],” he said. “The dialogue was really unbelievable … You know race is something that is very difficult to talk about.” In this way, the parish made space for dialogue that not only brought diverse people together but signaled a willingness to welcome the kind of hard conversations required of an integrated parish in an inequitable world.

Another mission endeavor remembered at the time as a community outreach was focused on signaling the parish’s embrace of the LGBT community amid an era and place where gays

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and lesbians did not have many options for church. St. Stephen’s in these years became the only church in the city that housed an exclusively gay AA group on its campus. It also held forums on the HIV/Aids crisis, and, amid an increasingly evangelical/socially conservative Episcopal Church, developed a reputation for its embrace of the gay community.

This social outreach and emphasis on justice issues complemented the positive impact of leadership’s welcome and hospitality as well as the emphasis on diverse and representative voices at all levels of leadership. These efforts were positive influencers in helping St. Stephen’s navigate the complexity of integration and maintain an integrated congregation for some time. The following chapters will highlight missed opportunities and tensions that, in hindsight, went unaddressed to the detriment of the church and its overall aims.

**Missed Opportunities and Unaddressed Tensions**

**Chapter Eleven: White Blind Spots: History, Power, and Privilege**

In critically examining St. Stephen’s history, there appears to have been missed opportunities to enable the wealthy whites entering the parish to better appreciate what was at stake for the African Americans in the integration of the church. These missed opportunities pertaining to the church’s history, the potential feelings of loss, and the inherent racial, historical, and socio-economic power dynamics at play allowed privileged whites to make choices or carry on attitudes that are remembered as having perpetuated damaging systems that angered or alienated some in the black community. Working with whites on the aforementioned issues and naming some of “the elephants in the room” regarding race and power would seem to have been
important for an intentional effort at integration given the history of race in America, and more specifically in Charleston, and given the near-term history of St. Stephen’s in the gentrified neighborhood of Ansonborough.

It is noteworthy that no whites interviewed for this project seemed to know much of anything about St. Stephen’s seventy-year African American history during those early years of integration. Most arriving knew something of the church’s aims to be integrated and that it had been a black church but never really learned to appreciate much of anything about the history of that black church. Bruce Thomas and his wife, Mary, who were a young couple when they arrived at St. Stephen’s in the late 1980’s, admit that this story, of life before Father Houghton and the whites arrived, was never really shared. “That story was never flushed out or told,” Mary said. The couple related that even by the mid 90’s, when the parish celebrated its 160th anniversary and some history of the parish was shared, the African American history was glossed over. The historical focus then was on our 19th century beginnings under the auspices of the “the [white] three Sarahs” who helped found the parish. This lack of context for the new white members walking in the door at the time of integration seems like a missed opportunity to help a new community, made up of long-time black members and new white members, creatively and collectively find a way forward.

St. Stephen’s integration was a self-described “experiment” striving for an innovative model of ministry but that innovation could have been made easier through a practice known today as “traditioned innovation.” “Traditioned innovation is a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in creative tension … it is an important mindset to have in any circumstance … [but] even more crucial in times of instability … [and] in contexts where we
often feel overwhelmed by all the new things that surround us already.’” Helping to lift up and honor the best of the decades long ministry of the church’s African American past, in addition to the church’s 19th century origins, as guide posts for how to move forward into an integrated future could have not only been a good strategic move but also a way for the newcomers to better appreciate the community they were entering. This could have helped both blacks and whites more fully embrace the changes that integration brought with less of a sense that what had gone before was being erased or forgotten as is so often the case when whites encroach on black spaces.

It also seems that the integration of the parish could have been aided by helping the white newcomers better appreciate the sense of loss that the integration would bring for the black members. One African American member, Doris Goodwin, remembers that, after the church started to integrate, many of the blacks, who used to worship with their whole body, began to self-censor themselves in worship. She recalled, “I think the African-Americans kind of said, ‘Well, our light-skinned church members, they’re not clapping or tapping their feet or singing loudly, so we might need to tone this down a little bit. We don’t want to scare them.’” She also recalled the familial feel of the church, prior to integration, when members referred to one another as “brother” or “sister.” This too went away with integration.

While integration is reflective of the Christian ideal captured by Isaiah’s prophetic words envisioning a “house of prayer for all people,” in the fallen world in which we live, there can be downsides to for historically marginalized and oppressed minorities. It is important “to remember that when you ask people to do adaptive work, you are asking a lot. You may be

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asking them to choose between two values, both of which are important to the way they understand themselves … you may be asking people to choose between their espoused values and their actual [hopes].”64 There is little evidence that leadership acknowledged what was at stake in integrating St. Stephen’s for the black community or what would be lost for them through integration. There is also no evidence that leadership helped the whites appreciate this loss. Awareness of this dynamic and some sensitivity to it might have avoided some of the unhelpful decisions by some of the white members to flaunt their wealth by putting plaques around campus or, in one case, a significant monument that still sits on campus. These decisions mimic old narratives tinged with white supremacy that gave rise to a sense, among some, that the black history, identity, and memory of the parish were being erased or, at least, forgotten.

Lastly, it would have been helpful for the whites to better appreciate and understand the inherent racial, historical, and socio-economic power dynamics at play in the kind of demographic change integration brought to St. Stephen’s in the late 1980’s. Joe Brown III said that it was obvious the whites coming in the doors in those early years were wealthy. Many were prominent figures in the city and captains of industry. And, as Mr. Brown pointed out, some of those new white members had been part of the gentrification of Ansonborough. Some were living in beautifully restored antebellum homes that had been previously lived in by black members or even been sites where there had once been black owned shops and businesses. While it is admittedly a lot to expect that this kind of reflection on race, white privilege, and power, that is just now getting more “air time,” could have been entertained by whites in 1980’s Charleston, some awareness and sensitivity around it would have been helpful. “It would have been helpful, I

guess, if someone had coached them a bit,” concedes Mr. Brown. In the absence of racial
dynamics and history being named and acknowledged, these “principalities and powers,” as the
scholar Walter Wink might name them, will take control. Absent intentional, ongoing effort,
privileged whites will fall into old habits and seek to dominate and subjugate African Americans
in small, subtle ways that might not seem like much in the moment but that over time can have a
lasting and damaging effect.

Chapter Twelve: Lack of Trust

While St. Stephen’s has been described to me as a warm place during its integrative
years, many interviewed for this project regretted that there were not more opportunities for
relationship building between black and white members outside of Sunday morning. It was
admittedly a small mission in the late 1980’s, with few resources, where much was done “on the
fly” but the integrated community was the stated mission – the church’s purpose for being at the
time – and this mission needed to be attended to in every way possible. The outreach to the
shelter helped build interpersonal relationships for those that participated. Some mentioned
impactful pastoral moments between black and white members or enduring friendships for those
who served on vestry together. And all mentioned a good spirit of camaraderie in the church
during worship on Sunday mornings. But there does seem to have been a yearning for more and
missed opportunities to help the black and white members go deeper with one another.

When asked if the black and white members were able to really talk about difficult issues
around race or inequality, Joe Brown III quickly responded, “no, no, not really because I really
think the relationships weren’t that strong where people could have had an open dialogue with
one another … I think for the most part the congregation talked about … [these things] in
private, or one-on-one with Alan. [I suspect] the white folks did … [but] Alan never had a conversation with me about integration.” While Father Houghton certainly talked about race and the congregation’s call to be an integrated parish from the pulpit or out in public, it seems as though more work could have happened to help facilitate interracial dialogue amongst those in the pews about what an integrative community really meant and felt like. More relationship building could have happened to allow members to really listen to one another’s stories.

Simply the fact that the majority of the whites interviewed for this project do not recall much tension at all during these integrative years and the majority of the blacks interviewed do remember clear feelings of anger, hurt, loss, and alienation, implies that much of these underlying tensions were not addressed interpersonally across racial lines. Henry Wright remembers hearing black members air grievances about the integration in small groups at basketball games or in people’s homes. He acknowledged that these groups can, over time, become exclusionary. “You know, there’s always a group. Like I said, the parking lot meeting, it can happen anywhere, in restaurants, and other places.” While these groups can form in any congregation, it would seem important to try to guard against this kind of fragmentation in a church, holding the kind of diversity St. Stephen’s was striving to hold at the time, whose mission was to be and remain integrated.

The internal dynamics inherent in holding a congregation with racial and socio-economic difference, in a gentrified southern neighborhood that was also welcoming of gays and lesbians, must strive to be as truthful about the differences as possible. “Communities can be very unwelcoming of truth, especially if [the] truth is unpleasant or embarrassing. People often prefer silence and secrecy over redemptive but difficult interventions … [and so] careful discernment and disclosing as much truth as possible [interpersonally] seems important for the well-being of
the community.” It seems as though leadership and certainly the members were, at times, reticent to discuss with one another the hard, real-world realities of what true integration entailed. There was an unwillingness, outside of the pulpit, to help people sort through these things out of a fear of not wanting to hurt feelings or get the members too riled up. As one member put it, leadership tried to “put a lid on those sorts of things.” In the long run, this was probably detrimental to the overall health of the system and may have hastened the exodus of some of the African Americans who left the church as time wore on.

Chapter Thirteen: Change Management and Long-term Intentionality

The last critical missed opportunity relates to two interrelated issues: change management and long-term, on-going intentionality around the project of racial integration. It is breath-taking to consider the kind of change St. Stephen’s undertook in 1987. This degree of change in such a short period of time cannot be named or considered enough when examining our history. Over the span of Father Houghton’s tenure as priest – approximately six years – the church went from being a blue collar African American Church to a church that had an even split of black and whites, if not a larger share of whites, with many of those whites being wealthy and some who were gay and lesbian. It was, in many respects, a laudable community that attracted many looking for a more tolerant and inclusive church than they had previously been able to find in 1980’s Charleston, South Carolina. But for the original black members, this was a great deal of change all at once. They accepted integration as a means to survival and, by all accounts, embraced that change once it began but the pace of change clearly led to a great deal of stress and anxiety in the overall system.

65 Pohl, p. 136-137
In discussing what is required to bring an organization through adaptive change, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky argue for the building of what they term “a holding environment.” A “holding environment” is “a space … within which people can tackle tough, sometimes, divisive questions without flying apart … it may be characterized by a clear set of rules [or boundaries] … that give minority voices the confidence that they will be heard without having to disrupt the proceedings to gain attention.” The reason for a “holding environment” is the prevent stress from boiling over and to provide people some sense of security in a changing environment.

It does not appear that there was much energy devoted to helping the black community at St. Stephen’s manage the pace of change that was taking place during the time of integration. Many respondents said as much in remembering that the changes taking place “just happened organically” without a sense of much pre-planning or forethought. While many whites commented how intoxicating it was to be a part of such an experimental and “cutting edge” church, for at least some of the African American community, this change was disruptive and too much to absorb all at once. It also does not appear that there would have been much of an avenue for someone upset by the pace of change to really feel heard without coming off as a malcontent or someone simply intolerant of diversity in general. Father Houghton shared power to some extent but even he admitted in a written reflection on his tenure at St. Stephen’s that “my besetting sin [was] being intolerant of the intolerant.” In other words, it does not necessarily feel as though an African American, for example, who was struggling with an embrace of gays and lesbians would have genuinely felt as though this was an issue the church could bring up for

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66 Heifetz and Linsky, p. 102-103
67 Alan B. Houghton, unpublished manuscript, Charleston, SC. Date unknown.
discussion or reflection in any kind of thoughtful and deliberate way. The mission at integration went on in earnest. With wealthy privileged whites moving in, at least some blue-collar blacks did not feel they had the agency anymore in the system to vocalize their anxieties. The church was certainly not going to close its doors to anyone, and is justifiably proud of its inclusivity of the LGBTQIA community today, but it appears that more effort could have been invested in acknowledging the pace of change and providing channels for thoughtful conversation.

As the integrative years went on, it seems as though a related issue to the change management question was that, over time, the congregation began to be less intentional about the integration itself. A few years after Father Houghton began his ministry, the Reverend Scott A. Benhase came to St. Stephen’s, at the behest of the Episcopal bishop of Virginia, to learn about the mission in order to better assist a parish trying to go through integration in Charlottesville. In his report back to Bishop Lee, Reverend Benhase wrote of St. Stephens’,

“The growth trend … [in the church] is in the white community and their parish is in a [white] neighborhood so a real effort at evangelization in the black community will be necessary in the long run if the parish is to sustain its racial balance … St. Stephen’s seems to be finding that the integration process is still working easily. In fact, they made a decision at this year’s annual meeting, as one lay leader put it, ‘to stop talking about being an integrated parish.’ On the surface that comment appears healthy. But race is still a very deep and dividing element in our culture (and our church). In an integrated parish that conversation needs to be ongoing. While it doesn’t need to dominate every congregational gathering, it does need to be addressed intentionally and deliberately and on a regular basis within the context of parish life.”

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68 Scott A. Benhase. Date and location unknown.
This astute observation seems to point to a moment in time when St. Stephen’s began to step away from overtly emphasizing race to the detriment of its project of racial integration. This is not to say the desire for black members ever waned (on the contrary, there are memories of discussions on vestry of how the church could get back more black members out of a genuine desire to maintain the diverse and racially integrated character and identity of the parish that had felt like a blessing to many members) but the intentional effort it takes to keep racial diversity in front of a congregation began to wane as more and more whites populated the church. This lack intentionality not only diminishes the mission of integration but could have been be another way in which the African Americans left in the pews might have felt marginalized.

The aforementioned issues of white blind spots, a lack of trust, managing the pace of change, and an increasing lack of intentionality around race eventually led some at St. Stephens, by the 1990’s, to question whether they were really an integrated church at all or just black and white people sitting next to one another in the pews. As the church continued to shift and change from where it it was in 1987, it experienced increasing challenges around racially diverse participation even as the number of gays and lesbians continued to grow. The last part of this project will provide a description of some of these ongoing shifts and challenges as well as a reflection upon how the insights of the past might inform our present and future as we continue to strive, in 21st century Charleston and in the now all-white and prosperous neighborhood of Ansonborough, to be a “house of prayer for all people.” I will conclude with lingering questions for further reflection and study.

Part Four: St. Stephen’s Today: Insights from the Past and Questions for the Future

Chapter Fourteen: Demographic Shifts at St. Stephen’s

Father Houghton’s retirement from St. Stephen’s, in 1993, began a period of transition at St. Stephen’s that ultimately led to more demographic change. The beloved clergy committee, that Alan had formed late in his tenure, continued on covering services and providing pastoral care in the absence of a vicar. In many respects, this model worked for the people in the pews. As St. Stephen’s, now more financially prosperous after several years of welcoming in wealthy white members, contemplated potentially calling a full-time priest in place of the clergy committee, some members protested. “I recommend we affirm what is already working well,” one white member once commented. “By continuing to have a clergy committee that supports the effort of a “worker priest’ [like Alan Houghton] … the diversity of clergy voices from our committee has a wide appeal to our varied membership. I think it would be a tremendous loss to eliminate such a group.” Still, this group of retired clergy did not feel they could adequately provide sufficient leadership of the parish. Subsequently, an interim priest, the Reverend Jennie Clarkson Olbrych, arrived and would serve from March 1, 1996 through December 31, 1997.

The bishop charged Reverend Olbrych with helping the congregation to discern its direction. The two possible paths seemed to be to continue with what some members had once described as “the Sunday-go-to-meetin-model,” more in the “experimental” and bare bones mode of being church as when Father Houghton was priest or to transition into a fuller and more normative expression of congregational life. Interestingly, Reverend Olbrych points to a distinct division in the congregation at this time around next steps that fell along racial lines.

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70 “Vicar Search Profile,” Appendix D, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, December 1995.
Reverend Olbyrch pointedly recalled that the white wealthy parishioners who had arrived during Father Houghton’s tenure mainly seemed to want to keep St. Stephen’s feeling “experimental” and “avant-garde.” The black members, on the other hand, wanted to build on the momentum and stability won during Father Houghton’s ministry, and grow the church in more traditional ways. Reverend Olbyrch commented regarding the white members at the time, “while some had been [churchgoers] … quite a few were not and were seekers of all stripes … in contrast to the long time [black] members, the faithful and mature Christians who have taken their stewardship of St. Stephen’s very seriously.” One black patriarch once told her, “First we prayed that God would send more folks like us. Then finally we prayed, ‘Lord just let the church survive.’” While the black membership “was genuinely heartened at the new life [at St. Stephen’s],” Olbyrch noted, “they are much more interested in Christian education, youth ministry, and fellowship, Acts 2 stuff, than the [white] Alan group. The [white] Alan group I would characterize as much more ‘seek ye first the kingdom types.’” So, she concluded, it became apparent that these two visions for ministry were really in gridlock with regard to direction. She now regrets that she did not name that tension for the congregation at the time.

Many of the whites who arrived during Alan’s tenure liked both the idea of integrated worship and the experimental model of ministry that they did not want to see give way to something more traditional. They did not want St. Stephen’s to become “just another parish” in the Diocese of South Carolina. These tensions came to a head not only in the decision of whether or not to hire a full time Vicar both also in whether or not to purchase a piece of property that opened up in an adjoining lot to the church and parish hall. The property, which now doubles as the church’s rectory, provides classrooms for Christian education, and a hall for fellowship after
worship, was ultimately purchased but some of the whites who had followed Father Houghton left because of it.

Nearly a decade after the beginning of the integration of the parish, Reverend Olbyrch noted that black and white members had still not built strong relationships with one another. In a written document she put together describing the church at the time, she wrote, “One great challenge is trying to help these two groups [black and white] get to know each other … there really has been almost no connection outside of worship and while they have been worshipping together for ten years, many, many folks, unless they have served on vestry, don’t know each other’s names.” \(^7\) She believed the black and white members had things to learn from one another but these vital connections were still not being tended to.

It is also noteworthy that during the 1990’s, while still maintaining significant levels of racial diversity for an Episcopal Church, with reports of 30% or even 40% black membership, the numbers of African Americans at the church continued to wane. The newcomers walking through the door were white. White gays and lesbians continued to see the church as a place of welcome in an increasingly unfriendly environment for the LGBT community amid the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina. But blacks were starting to leave either because they had moved too far away, gone off to school, or lost a sense of connection or belonging to St. Stephen’s, shedding their Episcopal identity for various all black church traditions.

Evidence exists that the white members at the time, left to their own devices, were desirous of no longer having to talk about racial issues. One white member, who arrived during Father Houghton’s tenure, but was on his way out because of dissatisfaction with the changes he was seeing at the church, wrote a letter to the vestry and clergy in which this desire gets noted. “I

\(^7\) Jennie Clarkson Olbyrch, Letter, Charleston, SC, April 23, 1997.
believe that if we were honestly to examine the question at St. Stephen’s, we would conclude that racism is not an issue here,” the white parishioner wrote. “I have observed no plan of action or motivation by any one group to maintain a power disparity at the expense of others … if we could set this issue aside and move on …, we would be a lot better off.”72 With twenty-first century eyes, this statement seems like a naïve perspective, from a privileged and wealthy individual, that disregards the subtle and implicit ways in which racism operates in all of us. Comments like “we are color-blind” or “God does not see color,” while well intentioned, gives license to the perpetuation of a kind of oppression that is damaging to the “body of Christ.”

The parish achieved independence from the diocese by 1998 and with it its first full time Rector in the Reverend Jim Bills. The clergy committee, as it had previously been constituted, ceased to exist. The staffing changed but Don White, the African American organist remained. While key African American members remained, albeit in smaller numbers, the church’s reputation as a spiritual haven for the gay community grew and grew.

By the turn of the century, in 2000, the Reverend Gardiner Shattuck, an Episcopal priest worshipping at St. Stephen’s at the time summed up the parish’s demographics in an article he wrote for the Sewanee Theological Review. “In recent years, the percentage of African Americans at St. Stephen’s has declined … and the racial makeup of the parish is now approximately two-to-one, white to black,” he wrote. “On the other hand, its gay/lesbian population has grown markedly. Despite the disapproval from some older parishioners, St. Stephen’s is now one of the rare parishes in Charleston where gay and lesbian church members feel welcome …”73 The uncomfortable question that seemed to emerge as the parish transitioned

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into the 21st century was, “would gay and lesbians supplant African Americans as St. Stephen’s majority minority group?” Could these two groups co-exist with one another? And, if so, what could leadership do to facilitate that kind of integration? A new challenge of what it meant to strive to be a “house of prayer for all people” was beginning to become more apparent.

Most black respondents interviewed for this thesis recall critical errors in leadership regarding the maintenance of the racial balance of the congregation under the leadership of St. Stephen’s next rector, the Reverend David Williams who began his tenure in 2004. African Americans spoken to for this project, including those still in the parish and those who’ve left, all agree that there was an exodus of black membership during Father Williams’ tenure. The reasons cited for this loss of membership revolve around three interrelated issues: a blatant disrespect for the black history of the parish, a disregard for any intentionality around cultivating black membership, and a perception that Father Williams was prioritizing wealthy whites and gays and lesbians over and above African Americans.

Many African American respondents painfully remember the way in which Father Williams showed little regard for the history of the black congregation. If that history had not been adequately shared in years past, under his leadership, black members at the time recall unthoughtful and disrespectful ways in which Father Williams almost went out of his way to proactively erase tangible evidence of the black history of the parish. One example of this mentioned frequently in interviews was Father Williams’ decision to take away the small, old organ that had been used for decades at the church and that had been played by the wives of Father Simpkins and Father Grant. “Now I will tell you one thing I’m sorry that happened,” Robert Oaks said. “We should have kept some of the things from the old church when it was a black church … like the organ, that organ; those people worked so hard to buy that… that upset
me so … He (David) just took it away. I said [to him] ‘you shouldn’t give away church property.’ He said, ‘Well, I had a meeting with people’ but [I said] ‘who you had a meeting with? You had a meeting with people who don’t know anything about the organ.’ We could have put it in the corner somewhere and said, this is part of our history. Oh that hurt me so.”

There was also a sense among the African American members that Father Williams treated the black membership with little regard during his tenure. Members remember him saying plainly “this is a white church now” and even, at times, making the black members feel inferior to the wealthier white members. During this time, Father Williams resisted honoring black members, out of a stated desire to not honor any one individual, and even disregarded the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday telling some that “this was not a real holiday.” Hence, not only did St. Stephen’s seem to lose much consciousness around race during this twelve-year period in our history but the black members that remained were left feeling unappreciated and undervalued. In many respects, this treatment of black members replays, within the church, old white supremacist laden patterns of privileged and powerful whites effectively colonizing black space. In subtle or not so subtle ways, this behavior, which cannot be separated from the history that precedes it, constitutes one more kind of invasion of sorts that pushes black members out and signals to them that they are no longer welcome in their own home.

Lastly, this time span is remembered by some black respondents as a time when evangelism to the LGBTQ community was prioritized over and above the African American community. “I don’t know if the results would have been different,” Joe Brown III commented. “But there certainly could have been a different level of outreach to the African American community … David was pretty intentional about reaching out to the LGBTQ community. I think if we had the same level of, you can call it marketing, to the African American community
[it could have made a difference].” Recalling the dwindling numbers of African Americans in the pews, he added that there were still many, at the time, on the rolls that could have been proactively cultivated. “We still have these folks’ mailing addresses,” he said. “Colleges and organizations have alumni events. [Why not the church?]. Look at the Emma Watson event (an annual barbecue that honors a black matriarch of the parish that serves as a kind of homecoming at St. Stephen’s). See how many blacks turn out? So where are those folks on Sunday?” The lack of any concerted effort to reach out, appreciate, or intentionally consider the church’s racial minority in any way led to a lot of blacks leaving the church at this time. The black members of the altar guild quit during this period and many others drifted away or stayed home.

Chapter Fifteen: St. Stephen’s Composition and Points of Tension Today

Today, St. Stephen’s racial demographics have returned to close to the same profile as it was at the time of its founding in 1822. African American membership in the parish is back to approximately 10%-12% of the overall congregation. Interestingly, in recent years, some of the new African Americans that have arrived have been a part of bi-racial couples that have seen in our parish’s story an embrace that they do not feel in other congregations. Most of the membership today consists of fairly wealthy, well-educated individuals given the prosperous, population that resides in Ansonborough and on much of the Charleston Peninsula after decades of gentrification that have pushed poorer people further north. Some of our white membership are quite active in the preservation movement and involved in Historic Charleston Foundation’s continued efforts to maintain “the holy city’s” historic “charm” and antebellum character.

St. Stephen’s has come to be known, by some, as “the gay Episcopal church” in Charleston. With the LGBTQIA population of the church somewhere around 35% of the overall
congregation, it is still known as one of the most LGBTQIA friendly churches in downtown Charleston. Proud of this inclusivity, church members march, each year, down King Street in the annual Charleston Pride parade. Our black organist of twenty-five years has died and been replaced by a dynamic and popular gay organist. In this way and in many others, our parish come to be described by some as a “boutique parish,” that even in a changed landscape of the Episcopal Church in Charleston, still finds its niche in welcoming gays and lesbians who have not felt as wide of an embrace in other churches on the Peninsula. In new ways, in a new era, St. Stephen’s continues to tout its call to be “a house of prayer for all people.” We are growing and financially prosperous. And yet, unspoken tensions remain. Questions linger.

There still seems to be at least some unresolved tension or resentment between the historic black membership and the LGBTQIA membership. There is little to no black participation in LGBTQIA events at the parish and not much forethought until recently to honoring/remembering/lifting up African American contributions or spirituality except for two notable exceptions: our organist does creatively incorporate black spirituals into our hymnody and even plan blues and jazz themed services of worship. And, we continue the annual Emma Watson barbecue to honor a black matriarch of the parish. I have begun a couple of other efforts that I will discuss in the next chapter.

The parish does still like to see itself as an integrated congregation and, sadly, by Episcopal standards, we do still have more African American membership than other churches of our largely white denomination. Our black membership, specifically the members who were here prior to integration, our still proud to be with us and proud of their role in saving St. Stephen’s at the time when the church almost had to close its doors. And many African Americans who are no
longer regularly with us on Sunday mornings continue to nevertheless consider us their home
curch stopping by occasionally when they need to return to their touchstone.

Questions remain for our present and future as I continue to transition into my role as the
still relatively new rector of St. Stephen’s. If we are to live as fully as possible into our call to be
a “house of prayer for all people,” then it stands to reason that more of a concerted effort, besides
simply lamenting that we wish we should have more black members, needs to be made to
cultivate the black membership that has always, in some way, been a part of who we are as a
congregation. As Robert Oaks noted, “we got to be intentional. Inclusivity is good. But I still
think … [a church can be] inclusive but not integrated. That’s the way I look at it. You can be
inclusive, but it doesn’t look like its integrated. Because you really can’t see inclusivity. You feel
it but, you know, if I walk into the church and I see two black folks and 80 white folks, tha’st not
integration.” It also seems as though there need to be ways to cultivate and hold together the
different strands of diversity that have marked our parish in recent years. How might we
integrate ourselves in that way in order to more fully live into our present and future as the “body
of Christ” called to be St. Stephen’s in our own time and place?

The insights and lessons from our recent history of integration, and the years that have
followed, seem to offer ways forward for us today. How might these insights enable us to
practice “traditioned innovation” over the coming years? How might we mine and cultivate the
best of who we’ve been as a parish in order to creatively move ahead to be as broad and
generous a church community as possible amid a time of great division and continuing
polarization in the Episcopal Church in South Carolina and the wider world?
The chapters that follow will attempt to pull out a few key insights from our past experience with racial integration to tangibly apply to our present reality. The insights most important to our present life and ministry are 1.) honoring and actively remembering the past, 2.) intentionality around integration and black outreach, and 3.) ongoing congregational work around the pernicious effects of the racism and white supremacy. These interrelated lessons will lead into a few key unresolved questions for further reflection and study.

**Insights**

**Chapter Sixteen: Honoring and “Re-Memebering” the Past**

When I arrived at St. Stephen’s in 2017, it quickly became apparent to me that one of the most important early aims would be to signal to our black membership that we, at St. Stephen’s, would not forget our origins. After many years of there being little public regard for the black history of the parish, it is pastorally important to honor our history and remember our origins not only for the black membership but also for many white members who do not know much of anything about that period of our history. To forget this past history perpetuates the erasure of black memory that gentrification has often done and deprives us of a more holistic understanding of our collective identity as a parish. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once rightly acknowledged, “leaders help us to adapt to the new without breaking faith with the old.”74 As we seek to adapt to new times, it is imperative that we do not break faith with our past and those who so faithfully enabled our church doors to remain open to “all people.”

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Over the last two years, we have begun to try to do this in intentional and ongoing ways that help to publicly signal a desire to honor our black origins. We have begun a tradition, during Black History Month, of making use of our archives to highlight two black saints of our parish each Sunday by way of bulletin inserts. When possible, we reach out to surviving family members to get their input and let them know their loved one will be honored. We have also made use of social media to broadcast these saints so that they can be seen and shared widely. This has drawn some black families back to church and given me a sense of what a wide “cloud of witnesses” we are surrounded by that might continue to inspire and uplift our ministry today.

Some black members interviewed for this project reported that this effort was seen by relatives in other parts of the country thanks to the reach of social media platforms like Facebook. This initial effort is also inspiring ways in which we can lift up our black history, throughout the year, alongside other periods of our history, through public lectures and panel discussions, and other means.

We have also begun to try to fold our parish history into our Sunday morning Christian formation programming and through sermons in the pulpit. In recent months, for example, we have led a Sunday series on our black history enabling key African American leadership to speak and give voice to the history that saved our institution. Opportunities to tell these stories publicly have helped us to better weave together threads that had not been pulled together much before.

In addition to this, we have begun to try to support and invest ourselves in the ongoing project of the creation of a new International African American Museum in Charleston. The new museum, set to open its doors in the coming years, will be erected just a few blocks from St. Stephen’s along Gadsden’s Wharf, the site where 40% of all slaves entered the United States during the transatlantic slave trade. We took up a collection last year, as a way of honoring our
African American history, to become a charter member of the museum and brought the museum president to the church to speak about its plans. In time, this museum should also present opportunities for us to go together to better appreciate the larger story of which St. Stephen’s black history is a part.

This thesis itself is another attempt at honoring and “re-membering” the origin story of our congregation, honestly and accurately, to help us to reconstitute ourselves in generative and revitalized ways. In a city like Charleston, with the racial history that we have, there are, happily, more attempts today at an honest and full accounting of our common story, good, bad, and ugly. It is incumbent upon us, at St. Stephen’s, to do the same for, as I once heard it said, “truth told in love creates freedom.”

It is my intention to find creative ways to use the fruits of this project around memory to help us at St. Stephen’s preserve and honor our ancestors in the faith. In the coming year, I will lead lectures, and hopefully create some parishioner led panels, on our history and hope, out of those presentations, that new directions for the future might emerge. With the permission of those whose interviews have been recorded, I will also preserve the transcripts and tapes from this project at the church so that they can be accessed by future generations.

Chapter Seventeen: Intentionality around Integration and Black Outreach

Reflecting on our history and the project of leading any kind of any integrated church, in a city like Charleston, reminds me that there must be ongoing intentional effort put into such an endeavor for it succeed. The early years of our integration, led by Father Houghton, had intentionality to it but that effort started to wane as the years wore on to the detriment of our
racial balance. Absent intentionality, I believe most congregations will move back towards the natural inclination to remain homogenous and segregated.

This is especially true for Episcopal churches like ours that sit in city neighborhoods that have gentrified long ago whose membership is majority white. Our immediate neighborhood is white. Black members, for the most part, no longer live downtown and are forced to travel in, sometimes driving 30-45 minutes by car, to get to us on Sunday morning. If we want to remain at all an integrated congregation for much longer, we will have to proactively consider how our evangelistic efforts and congregational life can forward those aims.

This is what I believe it must mean for us to practice “radical welcome” in our own time and place. Just as Father Houghton intentionally tried to share power and offer opportunities for representative voices to play a role in all levels of our common life, we must strive to do the same in the St. Stephen’s of today. While our African American membership is a smaller portion of the congregation than it was then, I believe we could still do a better job of including our African American membership in all levels of our parish life.

Radical welcome in regards to our intentionality around race should also necessarily translate into challenging discernment about how this should impact our worship life and our congregational justice commitments. “If welcome is the drama of embrace, then radical welcome is the embrace that his hardest of all, requiring the broadest extension and opening of self, even as it draws us back to our core values.”75 The “broadest extension of ourselves” at St. Stephen’s has to include a reflection on the ways we can be as inclusive as possible in our liturgy, the foundation of our common life, and in our engagement beyond our doors.

75 Spellers, 2.
Our music ministry, as previously stated, does try to offer a variety of expressions to be intentional about our inclusivity of African American membership. This includes use of African American spirituals and incorporation of blues and jazz. But, at present, there are no African American voices in the congregation helping to provide input. Allowing for more representation, not only on the altar, but in discernment around our worship life, would be one way we could move ahead with greater intentionality. It will always require effort for a majority white community, used to taking the lead, to step back enough and be quiet to allow nonwhite voices the ability to emerge and contribute to our common life. This requires that we white people admit ongoing biases and racism that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Community engagement also seems like another important way we could be incorporating intentional practices around race. We have, in recent years, had a diminished level of community involvement, certainly since our integrative years. Partnering not only with other black churches but aligning ourselves with city-wide efforts, like the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, a community organizing group of several local churches that takes aim at the root of racial injustice and socio-economic inequality also seem important for a church striving to be a place of welcome for all. It must be acknowledged here that such efforts would likely be stretching for wealthy white members who have joined since integration who, in some cases, would be challenged by the thought of our church aligning ourselves with efforts that challenge white power structures.

Lastly, there must be more intentionality in regards to outreach to black members. Creating a true “homecoming Sunday,” beyond our annual Emma Watson barbeque, as outreach to longtime members could be one tangible effort. But a greater canvassing of our black membership could identify those who have drifted away but might be coaxed back. In these
efforts, there must also be forethought into how we would intentionally incorporate increased African American membership into a majority white congregation. We have had some uptick in black membership in recent years but more certainly seems within our reach if we are willing to allow these new members the agency to help us change and grow. While we won’t ever get back to the racial balance we once had, given our context, surpassing 20% minority membership, the recognized threshold to allow a minority group to truly have agency and enough of a voice to avoid slipping into congregational “tokenism,”76 is possible.

**Chapter Eighteen: Telling the Truth about Racism and White Supremacy**

The insights of our own struggles around racial integration reveal that no real integrative ministry is possible, amid the broken world in which we live, if churches are not willing to tell the truth about the pernicious effects of racism and white supremacy. As Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s work in post-apartheid South Africa teaches, without truth, there can be no reconciliation. These systemic forces, like the demons Jesus exorcises in the gospels, have to be named, confronted, and addressed openly and honestly for any real progress to be made. And, much to the chagrin of white Christians, confronting these forces is a process that, like a conversion process, has got to be taken up over the long haul. This is clearly work St. Stephen’s clergy in the past avoided for good reasons but seems essential to our mutual ministry on Anson Street today. Thankfully, the wider Episcopal Church has begun to embrace this reality and encouraged congregations to do the same.

In recent years, the Episcopal Church, in signaling its commitment to the work of racial reconciliation, released a strategic plan titled, “Becoming Beloved Community: The Episcopal Church’s Long-term Commitment to Racial Healing, Reconciliation and Justice.” The plan, built upon the foundation of our Baptismal Covenant, calls for a four-fold process: 1.) Telling the Truth about the Church and Race, 2.) Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community, 3.) Practicing the Way of Love, and 4.) Repairing the Breach in Society and Institutions. The wider church has committed themselves to specific actions, under each of these steps, at a national and international level to help confront inequitable and unjust systems in the church, to raise awareness and build racial bridges across the church, and to invest in programs that repair broken institutions amid the church and the world. At a diocesan and congregational level, we in the Episcopal Church are being encouraged to live into this plan by moving beyond day-long mandatory anti-racism workshops to more ongoing conversations around race.

At the congregational level, this leads me to believe that we must begin with education, raising awareness of the impact of systemic racism, and the promotion of ongoing dialogue around race and social inequality. Several months ago, I represented the Diocese of South Carolina in a pilot program of the Episcopal Church focused on racial healing. The first part of the program involved a week-long pilgrimage that involved clergy representatives from every Episcopal Diocese in the southeastern United States. The goal of the program is for each of us to carry the work of this pilgrimage back to our congregations and dioceses.

Conversation with black and white lay leadership has helped to discern a path to enabling St. Stephen’s to begin to more honestly learn about and reflect upon systemic racism and the

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legacy of white supremacy. We have decided to make use of a lengthy congregational curriculum on race, lifted up by one of our black lay leaders, to form racially mixed small groups at the church to engage the material together. We also have begun to build on efforts to offer ongoing opportunities for learning and reflection for the congregation and community through lectures and evening presentations. Last year, we held forums examining the history behind the slaves who built the neighborhoods of downtown Charleston and in the coming months, we will reflect on the legacy of a large Charleston plantation with connections to both black and white members of our parish.

The 2015 massacre of nine African American men and women at nearby Mother Emanuel Church was a moment of reckoning for Charleston that has led to a renewed willingness for church communities to deal with the ongoing impact of race in America. And yet, Charleston still struggles with the legacy of the slave trade, “Jim Crow,” and the socio-economic inequality that years of segregation and the subsequent neglect have wrought. Confederate monuments glorifying pro-Slavery icons like John C. Calhoun (referred to by some local African Americans as “Killhoun”), tower over our city and Mother Emanuel. Any church with the history of St. Stephen’s that prides itself on being a “house of prayer for all people,” however progressive we see ourselves, must be willing to do the internal work necessary – on an ongoing basis – not only for our own well-being but to be a change agent in the city and a partner in the work of reconciliation that God calls us to do in the world.

Ongoing work on race is likely the most pressing adaptive challenge today as St. Stephen’s is presently constituted. For we are no longer an all-black church trying to adapt to integration but a majority white church, full of wealth and privilege, that needs to get increasingly accustomed to confronting race and racism, a call that I believe our legacy asks of
us whether we improve our racial balance or not. Managing the anxiety, the inevitable confrontations, and the losses such work will entail will be a critical leadership challenge in the coming years.

This project lifts up three lingering questions that I believe warrant their own investigations and study. Questions related to the efficacy of integration for minorities, the viability of the Episcopal Church with African Americans, and the malleability of the Episcopal Church to broaden itself enough to welcome and appeal to diverse groups of people will be briefly considered. Such matters warrant their own consideration for the sake of Episcopal churches, like St. Stephen’s, who are attempting to integrate themselves not only racially but linguistically and cross-culturally.

**Lingering Questions**

**Chapter Nineteen: Is Integration always Efficacious for Minorities?**

Throughout this study, a lingering question that remains pertains to the efficacy of an integrated church for racial and ethnic minorities. As much as we bemoan the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous observation that, “Sunday morning at 11:00am is the most segregated hour in the America,” is integration always preferable in 21st century America? While integrated church and visions of the “Beloved Community” capture the Christian ideal, in the fallen world in which we live, there may be may reasons why minorities would want their church experience to remain a segregated experience.
This reality was lifted up in my research and conversations with others about the significance of the black church and in some of the interviews conducted with St. Stephen’s community members. Reverend Olbyrch related a poignant story in this regard when she recounted an African American member who grew up at St. Stephen’s but married a man who worshipped in a black Baptist church who pulled her away from the Episcopal Church. Several months later, Reverend Olbyrch ran into this couple and expressed her hope that they might someday come back to St. Stephen’s. The man looked back at her thoughtfully and said, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings.” She replied with a smile, “Try me.” The man then volunteered, “Look, we have to be with you [white] people all week long. Can’t we have one day with our own kind.” While one could hear that exchange and misperceive it as “reverse racism” expressed by that African American man, for me, it highlights the ways in which the church has served as an important haven for those who have been consistently made to feel less than, oppressed, or marginalized by the dominant white culture.

One can see the longing for some blacks to be in a segregated community in feelings not only about the church but about historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that, like black urban churches, have begun to have to close their doors. As HBCUs have faltered especially Episcopal HBCUs (where the numbers have shrunk from eleven institutions down to two), many African Americans decry the losses of these schools that sprang up out of necessity at a time when they offered the only educational opportunity for blacks wanting to pursue higher education. Whites can look at that loss, akin to the debates around gentrification, and lift up the positives and celebrate the fact that these segregated communities are no longer necessary now.

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78 It is important to note here that racism is best understood as prejudice plus power. It also includes the belief that own’s own race is superior to others which the husband’s comment does not imply.
that blacks are free to be educated alongside whites. But many African Americans view this loss differently because all-black spaces, in the church or the university, have been places that offer formation that can help repair the damage done by racist ideologies by helping African Americans imagine themselves apart from white supremacy. In commenting on the loss of black space, in colleges and universities or in the church, one young woman was recently quoted in the New York Times as saying “African-American community culture has already been whitewashed, so to not have anything that’s not yours, I don’t want to think about it. It’s like a part of your heritage is taken away, like during slavery.”

Hence, there is a way in which integration, particularly if forced upon a community of color or done without care, can feel like nothing more than another invasion of black space by privileged white people however well-intentioned they may be.

Integration, while a wonderful ideal to strive for, entails losses that may be too high a price to be pay for some. As detailed in some of the interview exchanges included in this study, there is a change of culture, community, collective identity, and way of being when an all-black church, for example, begins to welcome in whites. Some of the African Americans interviewed for this study discussed the surprise of black friends and co-workers, who heard about St. Stephen’s integration, that blacks would want to stay in a church with whites. This attitude demonstrates not only a racial animus and distrust that is likely rooted in years of real-world experience with a white majority but also to a resistance to the ways white worshippers change the experience of church for African Americans. Some of my black respondents dismissed such

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comments as “nothing more than a fear of change” but I believe this is an issue worthy of
forethought and consideration before a church pushes ahead with the project of integration.

The case of St. Stephen’s integration demonstrates the sensitivity of this issue as black
members agreed that only the prospect of death led the lay leaders at the time to push ahead with
the plan that ultimately led the mission to live, a witness that our congregation should take time
to consider as we contemplate what to do with this heritage and example from our elders. Far
from romanticizing the moment that is remembered as such a pivotal time, these admissions
point to the fact that many minority churches might resist the idea of integration to the end or see
it as its own kind of death.

This has seemingly been the case for the two other historically black Episcopal churches
in Charleston, St. Mark’s and Calvary Church. These churches, like St Stephen’s, also sit in
gentrified neighbors. But unlike St. Stephen’s, they have long resisted calls to intentionally
integrate their pews to their detriment. Both are fledgling ministries today and both are still
actively considering the implications of what integration would look and feel like for them.

When faced with a gentrifying neighborhood and dwindling numbers, as St. Stephen’s
once was, black churches will wrestle with how to proceed. Integration will not always be the
option seen as viable or preferable because the collective identity and ethos for many such
churches will be to serve and be about the work of supporting black people. On the Charleston
Peninsula, black churches, which have long served as “anchors” of the urban neighborhoods in
which they have been located are closing because of a wholesale change to the demographics of
the city. “Between 1980 and 2010, the peninsula’s black population dropped by more than half
from 30,000 to around 15,000. Simultaneously, its white population rose from 15,000 to just
above 20,000 …”\textsuperscript{80} and this in turn has led to many black churches to close its doors or move. “(The churches) are very sacramental for the African-American community,”\textsuperscript{81} says Charleston City Councilman Robert Mitchell. With the black community selling their downtown homes to real estate developers or getting forced out due to the cost of living, many black churches are choosing to move with them.

White Christians should be mindful of these realities and not immediately expect the idea of integration to be immediately or enthusiastically embraced by African Americans. Such an awareness will be important even if a minority community accepts integration. While whites may find the prospect of integration a fun “experiment,” the prospect must be understood as a risk and, in many respects, a great leap of faith for the minority partner in such a move. This question is worthy of its own lengthy study that must also be grounded in the contextual and incarnational realities of each individual church community.

\textbf{Chapter Twenty: How Viable is the Episcopal Church for African Americans or other Communities of Color?}

A disconcerting but real question for me at the end of this study pertains to the viability of the Episcopal Church with African Americans in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. St. Stephen’s, while still 10\%-12\% African American has a greying black population. Many of the younger generations of these families worship today in all-black churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal


\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
Church or black Baptist churches. And many of the African American members I do have express skepticism that young church going African Americans, their children’s or grandchildren’s age, will feel comfortable or find a home in a church tradition that traces its cultural roots to the Anglo-Saxon ethos of England.

There is a proud tradition of black Episcopal churches dating back to the earliest days of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The first black Episcopal Church, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, was founded as early as 1794 by Absalom Jones who went on to be the first African American priest of our denomination in 1802. This tradition has produced many trail blazing Episcopalians and today the denomination is led by the Episcopal Church’s first African American bishop, the Most Reverend Michael Bruce Curry, who I served under in North Carolina. Still, Presiding Bishop Curry is an exceptional example and not the norm. The question remains, given our history, what room the Episcopal Church really provides for faithful black Episcopalians to thrive? As noted in this study, black Episcopalians were, for much of our history, treated as second class citizens by the white majority in the church.

For well into the twentieth century, in South Carolina, for example, black Episcopal churches lived out their existence in segregated black convocations. These communities were, for much of the twentieth century, ill supported and treated with little regarded by white leadership who viewed them paternalistically. These churches had to fight for everything they received. They maintained their membership in the denomination often despite the actions of the white hierarchy not because of it. This was hardly a full throttled effort at evangelism from the Episcopal Church.

The greatest obstacle, however, often seems to be cultural. As Henry Wright noted, “[there is a degree in which] African American Episcopalians sitting there in the quietness of the
[Episcopal] service are not being true to themselves. That there is something about the worship experience within their culture that they are being muted about.” He added, “I think a lot of [black] people who are Episcopalians have got some link to a Baptist association or [another black tradition]. Because you know, one thing about being an African American Episcopalian [is that] you are isolated from the rest of the African American religious community. It’s nothing like the worship at Morris Street Baptist Church [in Charleston].” Another black member of the church concurred with this sentiment in mentioning that when he tries to bring black friends to church, the worship is often just “too quiet for them.” The Episcopal Church, as it is often manifested on the ground in congregations, has too often demonstrated an inability, as has been shown at St. Stephen’s in recent decades, to really connect or speak to the African American experience and spirit.

I recently attended a seminar for Episcopalians on African American spirituality that argued there was much Episcopalians could do, in our prayer book liturgy, to incorporate more enculturated elements of worship. Use of such things such as percussion, a Gospel choir (yes, in an Episcopal Church!), and incorporation of Christian symbolism indigenous to the African continent were all lifted up as examples of what is being utilized in some congregational settings.

It also must be acknowledged that there is also an Afro-Caribbean element to the Episcopal Church in the United States that prizes what would be considered “high” Anglo-Catholic worship practices. In these parishes, much of our Anglican/Episcopal liturgical practices would be a comfortable fit. There is, in every community in the United States, a great deal of variety and worship preferences. Still, for your average neighborhood Episcopal Church, typically led by a white priest, since black clergy are so scarce in our denomination, the question of viability must remain. It is certainly incumbent upon Episcopal priests and liturgists to
consider how to better contextualize the tradition so as to appeal to a demographic that continues
to shrink across the Episcopal Church.

**Chapter Twenty-One: The Episcopal Church’s Challenge with Enculturation**

The challenge for the Episcopal Church to connect with African Americans points to the
overarching question of how the Episcopal Church can continue to remain malleable enough to
speak to any non-white/Anglo demographic as the white percentage of the population continues
to decline. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church has long struggled with
matters of enculturation and how to relay the faith in cultures and contexts different from our
tradition’s English origins.

When I was a missionary in Rio de Janeiro, serving the Anglican Church there, I
witnessed first-hand the struggles of enculturating our Anglo-Saxon liturgical tradition into a
non-Anglo-Saxon context. There, our tradition was led largely by indigenous Brazilian deacons,
priests, and bishops, but the Brazilian prayer book was nothing more than a straight Portuguese
translation of our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer in the United States (reflective of the fact
that the Brazilian church was founded in the 19th century by Episcopal missionaries from
Virginia). The Brazilian prayer book was in the language of the people but its liturgy did not
reflect the culture, rhythms, way of life, and experience of the Brazilian people that the church
was there to serve.

The Episcopal Church of the twenty-first century is working hard at better enculturating
itself for service in and amongst non-white and/or non-English people. New liturgies and
worshipping communities are springing up and attempting to develop Episcopal churches that
make sense in radically different communities than the Episcopal Church has long identified itself. The long-term success of these efforts remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The integration of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, in late 1980’s Charleston, was an “experimental” effort, borne in faith, hope, and love, that did yield a variety of “good fruit.” The institution was saved. The old church doors on Anson Street, with the laudable vision of being “a house of prayer for all people” etched above them, have remained open not only because of the ministry and leadership of the Reverend Alanson Bigelow Houghton, as many of our white members would say, but also because of the good faith and efforts of the African American leadership at the time who, while “under the gun,” made the decision to do all they could to embrace the vision of integration.

When asked where he saw the face of God in those integrative years, Joe Brown III remembers the faithfulness of the African American women. “I’ll go back to those women,” he said.

“Those women were very spiritual … In the church, I would [sometimes] get annoyed at them because … you know, God’s not going to pay bills … which was the wrong thing to say … to that group because they led with God all the time. And they led with God with a hammer all the time. And they would not move. God does not want this. God does not want that. God got us here. God sent us Alan.”

Our church survived and integration succeeded, to the extent that it did, because of the clergy leadership and because of the faithful witness of the black membership embodied by those
women; matriarchs like Louise Washington whose assent to the proposition of integration made it possible for the black community to say “yes.”

While imperfect and messy, these integrative years also provided a space where all sorts of social barriers were dropped and very different people, from very different walks of life, could “experiment” with what an integrated church community – what “the beloved community” might really feel like. Nearly every respondent for this project – black or white – described the integrated community and worship they experienced then as being where they most experienced God in those years. There were missteps and hurt feelings; tensions and unaddressed power dynamics but for the time in which this happened – for a while – there was a space created where black and white, gay and heterosexual, rich and poor, came together and tried to walk in love, as Christ loves us, as a part of Christ’s “body” in the world.

Father Houghton’s leadership did reflect some degree of awareness of racial difference and this awareness helped steer him to his most positively impactful strategic moves. Working to intentionally build in racial balance and representative voices into every level of parish life, while also bringing on African American staff, absolutely supported his effort to bring the church through this challenging time of adaptation and change. Black and white leadership modeled a good measure of welcome, hospitality, and inclusivity and the fluidity of the community’s life allowed for new voices to have roles. I also believe the church’s focus on mission and social justice, to the extent possible given the small size of the congregation, supported the integration inside the walls of the church. In the end, the 1980’s model of ministry was never going to be sustainable given the size of the community, its paltry resources, and, principally, because of the fact that Father Houghton had the personal wealth to serve our church without need of a salary. This, in the long run, did not serve the church well as it created unrealistic expectations, that, in
many ways, continued to enable the membership in old patterns of dependency that has taken years to undo.

The errors and missteps speak to the challenges faced by any church attempting to integrate in a city beset by the legacy of slavery, inequity, and the power imbalances that go along with the complex issue of neighborhood gentrification. Leadership, amid such a ministerial context, has got to find ways to continually acknowledge the ways in which racism and white supremacy continue to impact communities. Interpersonal relationships need to be intentionally fostered outside of Sunday morning worship, and racial difference needs to be continually kept in front a parish hoping to remain integrated over the long term.

The St. Stephen’s of today, while no longer the racially diverse church we once were, can absolutely benefit from the insights of our past, first and foremost by taking the time to look back in an honest and discerning way. As the Reverend Morey Lent, a member of our beloved clergy committee, put it in a sermon preached at St. Stephen’s a few years ago, “Some people say that looking back carries the danger of nostalgia. I disagree, because most of the time, nostalgia is not dangerous. True, it begins with a longing for the past, but those longings will usually lead us to a deeper and holier place.”[^82] This project in “re-membering” our integrative years will, I hope, provide good fodder for introspection, conversation, and dialogue that will also help us in the continued ministry Christ calls us to do. As Greg Jones would argue, sustainable innovation is that which makes use of the best traditions of our past in service of the present and future.

This study is also a reminder for us today of the leadership challenges of striving to be a “house of prayer for all people.” Given our context and history, to be a church “for all” means to be a community of the resurrection willing to lean in to some hard conversations around race and

[^82]: Morey Lent, sermon, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, S.C., January 18, 2015.
racial inequality; white privilege and the socio-economic realities of a city like Charleston. It means being intentional not just about black outreach but about how we as a church might need to change and adapt to be a church that is inclusive enough to hold racial difference in thoughtful ways. It also means a willingness to name not just racial prejudice but prejudice that still remains around sexual orientation and other forms of discrimination. A willingness to model this work in the pulpit, programmatically, in our Christian formation, and in our ongoing missional and justice commitments all seem important to facilitate such adaption amid the congregation.

This project focused on memory and oral tradition centered on a church located in a city replete with memories, has felt like an important effort for my early ministry at St. Stephen’s. Sharing these memories and preserving them for the future is one way to honor those who have gone before us. May their lives and faithful witness enable us to strengthen our ability, today and in the future, to lean into the continued call that has animated us since our founding: to be “a house of prayer for all people.”
Appendix A: Interview Questions for Internal and External Interview Subjects

This study aimed to interview 15-20 individuals (African American and Caucasian) for approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours who were active members and/or clergy at St. Stephen’s during or near the time of the congregation’s integration. Some of the contextual questions will be amended slightly for the white members who arrived after integration had begun. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The interview questions generally followed those below.

Interview Questions for Internal Subjects

Context/Background

1. How would you describe St. Stephen’s just prior to integration?
2. How would you describe the neighborhood around St. Stephen’s just prior to integration?
3. How did the church decide to integrate?

Leadership

4. Describe Alan Houghton’s style of leadership?
5. How were other clergy invited to work with Alan?
6. Describe how the clergy team that developed after Alan can work together? How did they work with the congregation?
7. How were lay leaders involved while the church was integrating?
8. How did the clergy and laity work together? Can you tell me a story about that?

Congregational Life

9. How were people welcomed during integration?
10. Can you share a story that describes the congregation in the early years after integration?

Mission

11. How was St. Stephen’s involved in its neighborhood and the city during this time?
12. What was the Church’s mission and outreach? Who was involved?
Theological Reflection

13. Where was God at work in the period of St. Stephen’s integration?

14. How did the congregation respond to God’s movement in the midst of the community? Can you tell me a story about that?

15. Many times, in reflecting back, people discern a gap (hindsight is 20/20). Based upon your own perspective and experiences, are there areas that you would have liked to see St. Stephen’s respond differently to the changing neighborhood that fits more with your understanding of God’s movement in our midst?

Proposed Questions for External Subjects

This study aimed to interview 2-4 key subjects (for approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours) who were not active members of St. Stephen’s during the period of integration but who can provide insights into the context and circumstances surrounding this period in Charleston. These interview subjects may include former public officials and staff members of institutions such as the Historic Charleston Foundation. While fewer in number, the questions asked of these external subjects will attempt to mirror the questions asked of the internal subjects. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed for later coding and analysis. The interviews will include questions like:

1. Why did the Historic Charleston Foundation designate Ansonborough for its initial historic preservation effort in Charleston?

2. What was the city's role in this effort?

3. How would you describe the process of gentrification in Ansonborough and its surrounding neighborhoods?

4. How were clergy and congregations involved in these neighborhood changes?

5. Many times, in reflecting back, people discern a gap (hindsight is 20/20). Based upon your own perspective and experiences, are there things about the preservation effort in Ansonborough and the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood you wished were done differently?
Appendix B: Consent Form to Participate in Research for “Building Community Across Walls: A History of an Integrated Church Amid a Gentrifying Neighborhood in Charleston, South Carolina”

This research study was conducted by the Rev. Adam Shoemaker as part of his doctoral thesis at Duke Divinity School.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to examine the history of St. Stephen’s integration in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s to glean how it was carried out and what made it successful. The study is meant to provide insights helpful for other churches in similar contexts and to strengthen the ministry of St. Stephen’s in the future.

What will I be asked to do?

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked a series of questions related to your personal experience or knowledge of St. Stephen’s during the time period in question or the surrounding neighborhood. This interview will be audio taped with your permission.

How long will I be in the study?

We expect your participation in the study to last 1 ½ to 2 hours.

What are the risks and inconveniences and benefits of this study?

There are no expected risks or benefits to you for participating in this research study.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be kept confidential if you choose not to sign the “Permission to Use” document presented to you by Adam Shoemaker.

Voluntary nature of participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate at any point. If you agree to be in the study you may withdraw at any time for any reason.

Whom do I call if I have questions or problems?

For questions about the study, contact Dr. Will Willimon at 919-660-3470 during regular business hours. For questions about your rights as a participant in this research study, contact the Duke University IRB at 919-684-3030 or campusirb@duke.edu.

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign and date below.
Subject’s Printed Name and Signature
Appendix C: Permission to Use Form

Date: ______________________________

Permission to Use (Photograph, Film)

Subject: Interviews for “Building Community Across Walls” Doctoral Thesis Project

Location: ___________________

I grant permission to Adam Shoemaker the right to take audio recordings of me in connection with the questions he will ask me for his thesis project. I authorize Adam Shoemaker to copyright, use and publish the audio recordings in print and/or electronically.

I agree that the above identified person may use such audio recordings of me with or without my name and for any lawful purpose including teaching, further research, or to be stored as a new oral history for St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Charleston.

I have read and understand the above:

Signature _______________________________

Printed name ______________________________

Organization Name (if applicable) __________________________

Address ________________________

Signature, parent or guardian _____________
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Biography

A native of New York City, Adam James Shoemaker received his Bachelor of Science in Communication from Boston University in 2001 and his Master of Divinity from Harvard University. He also holds a Diploma in Anglican Studies from the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church and a Certificate in Leadership from Duke University.

Adam served a missionary to the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil in the Diocese of Rio de Janeiro from 2005-2006 and was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 2007. He has served churches in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and South Carolina and presently serves as Rector of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. Prior to arriving in Charleston, he began the Doctor of Ministry Program at Duke.

Outside of his parish ministry, Adam has served in numerous diocesan and wider church committees and presently serves as Dean to the Charleston Deanery of the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina and also serves on that diocese’s Diocesan Council. He is also a member of the Episcopal Church’s bilateral commission for the Episcopal Church’s partnership with the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil.

Adam is married to an Episcopal priest, the Rev. Courtney Davis-Shoemaker, and is the father to Malcolm (7), Aubrey (4), and Hannah (2).