Initial Report: Breathing Through a Difficult History

A Companion Guide to "Initial Report: The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina's History of Institutional Racism (Founding-1960s)" by The Rev. Rhonda M. Lee, Ph.D.

An Offering from the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina's Reparations and Restitution Committee

Introduction

Two friends travel along a road, recounting the last few days. In their grief, it's all they know to do---walk and talk. Somewhere in their journey a strange man appears and they share with him everything that has happened. They tell him about their friend who died, how they were sure he was the one to redeem their people, and how their hope died along with him on the wooden beams of Rome's cross. Companions along the way, navigating grief and a new reality, these two friends unknowingly shared conversation and a meal with the risen Christ. This stranger-Christ breaks a loaf of bread and vanishes, leaving the friends with open eyes and burning hearts that have been stirred with curiosity and a yearning for something unknown.

The spirit of the Emmaus experience inspires this guide.

As a diocesan-wide community, we have been walking the path of racial reckoning, justice, and healing for some time now. The welcoming of this new ministry for Reparations and Restitution follows the natural next step in our journey. As inheritors of this church, our society, and the culture we participate in, we can ask ourselves, "How are we holding ourselves accountable to the legacy of harms done?" To truly answer that question, we have to dig into the vaults and take a fuller, more comprehensive and honest look at our history. This is exactly what *Initial Report: The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina's History of Institutional Racism (Founding-1960s)* by the Rev. Dr. Rhonda M. Lee does. It takes the historical record and works in tandem with research our diocesan historiographer and archivist have compiled, allowing our eyes to be opened and remain open.

Initial Report: Breathing Through a Difficult History, a Companion Guide (the document you're reading now) aims to be a trusty partner along this eye-opening journey. Six vignettes have been taken from the original document, with each one followed by a collect and prompts for engagement and reflection. The title, bidding us to breathe through the truths elucidated, is an invitation to understanding this process as an embodied practice. As you read, notice what signals your body gives. Do you find yourself holding your breath? Clenching your jaw or fists? Are any body parts tapping or moving anxiously? Notice your bodily clues and remind yourself to breathe. Acknowledge your senses, take a deep breath, and keep going.

Also note that this is a companion guide. The word companion is used here because the guide pairs with the original document, but to also encourage that at least one or two companions are journeying with you. *Breathing Through a Difficult History* can be read with a partner, with a church group as part of adult formation (situated perfectly for the weeks of Epiphany or Lent and Holy Week), or experienced next to Scripture for Bible study. The path is up to you.

You are viewing this document for a reason. You are courageously choosing to say yes in playing your part in God's call to our church. The God who knows and loves you goes ahead of you, keeps watch behind you, and the risen Christ walks beside each step you take. May your heart burn with curiosity and a yearning to continue striving for God's kin-dom.

The Rev. Lindsey Ardrey
Canon Missioner for Reparations and Restitution Ministry

Vignette #1 **inhabited land.**

"The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina includes historically white, historically African-American, and, more recently, Latino congregations, but there is no Indigenous (Native American) mission or parish within its boundaries. The Episcopal Church, however, and this diocese specifically, has had an immeasurable impact on the Indigenous population of this land. In every phase of the establishment and perpetuation of what is now called North Carolina, from the initial English colonization in the sixteenth century on, Anglicans played key roles.

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Also in 2009, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church repudiated the doctrine of discovery: the fifteenth-century idea that God authorized Christians to take possession of any lands inhabited by non-Christians, and to hold those inhabitants in slavery. Today, through its contributions to the Episcopal Church, the diocese of North Carolina supports Indigenous ministries outside its boundaries. This diocese, however, has not taken stock of its particular role in colonization, nor considered what its debt might be to current-day Indigenous inhabitants of the land that falls within what we recognize as our diocesan boundaries.

The lands where contact first took place are now in the diocese of East Carolina; and the only fully federally-recognized tribe, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, lives in what is now the diocese of Western North Carolina. Within the current boundaries of the diocese of North Carolina fall Lake Norman, on flooded Catawba land; the homes of (state-recognized) Haliwa-Saponi, Occoneechi-Saponi, Sappony (Person County), and Catawba peoples; and the watersheds of rivers that run through the lands of other nations, including the Lumbee.

Areas for our diocese to discern include: how to acknowledge our part in the theft of land and usurpation of sovereignty; what might be an appropriate tangible offering in recognition of the harm our ancestors committed and in which we participate; and how the descendants of this land's original inhabitants might prefer us to behave as better neighbors and as allies in their flourishing."

Collect

Boundless God, you knew us before we were formed in the womb and instilled a spirit of curiosity and adventure within us. Burden our hearts with the desire to pursue You more fervently than our ancestors pursued inhabited lands. Trouble our souls to name, recognize, and acknowledge those who call this land native: the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, Haliwa-Saponi, Occoneechi-Saponi, Sappony, Catawba, Lumbee. We pray this in the Name of our Beloved Steward. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions

1. Do I know any Indigenous People anywhere in my community? Where might I go to find out more information that will be helpful to me in becoming a better neighbor or a better ally to the Original People of North Carolina?

2. The treatment of Indigenous People in the United States is the miserably failed attempt at a quick political solution. The real issue of genocide, isolation and racism is a spiritual problem in need of atonement and reconciliation. What is the difference between political action versus a deep, long-lasting spiritual resolve and restoration? How is God calling me to participate in spiritual resolve and restoration?

Vignette #2 **the first bishop.**

"At its annual convention in April 1823, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina elected its first bishop: John Stark Ravenscroft of Mecklenburg County, Virginia. In his letter accepting the call, The Rev. Mr. Ravenscroft warned that it would be several months before he could move to North Carolina. The reason? "In common with many others," Ravenscroft wrote, "I am encumbered with landed property and some slaves, which must be disposed of; as I wish, as far as possible, to be free from such cares and encumbrances."

For whatever reason, Ravenscroft maintained ownership of his land and at least 21 enslaved persons for a few years after taking up his new ministry.

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These persons' names, the names of the men who bought them, and the amounts Ravenscroft received appear on the bill of sale alongside items like 805 acres of land that went for $1610.00, a variety of farm implements, and cattle, horses, and pigs.

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Ravenscroft retained ownership of one man, called Johnson, who served him until the bishop's death. In his will, Ravenscroft bequeathed both Johnson and a favorite horse, "Pleasant," to his adopted sons, writing of man and beast in virtually identical terms: "I believe they will be kind to Johnson for my sake, keeping him from idleness and vice, but suiting his labor to his infirm condition; and that they will not suffer Pleasant to be exposed to any hardship or want in his old age, but will allow Johnson to attend to him as he has been accustomed to do."

Collect

Loving God, before whom no human is disposable: only you have the power to repair that which we have torn asunder. Look with compassion on the whole human family, especially in those moments when we have denied it wholeness. When the powerful set a price on your children, help us look beyond their exacting ledgers so that we may see our own families, siblings and children. This we ask in the name of your Son, our Lord and Redeemer. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions

1. What do I need to "let go of" to be closer to God's actions regarding this story of Bishop Ravenscroft and other more recent expressions of racism and white supremacy?
2. As I consider our Diocese's intimate and compelling history of complacency with chattel enslavement, from the very beginning with our first Bishop, I am now experiencing thoughts and feelings of _____.

Vignette #3 **bill of sale.**

"Bill of sale for enslaved persons owned by Bishop John Stark Ravenscroft, March 1828

Negro boy, John, to John F. Finch $207.50
Nelly and child James, W.W. Young $261
Boy Abrum, John F. Finch $153
Michael, R. Allen $161
Old Abrum, Aggy and William, J.F. Finch $301.50
Providence do do [ditto ditto] $353
Eliza and child Thomas, James Bowers $341
John do do $100
Robert do do $120
Emorilla do do $150
Molly and child do do $334
Absolum, Thomas Bragg $200
Daniel, Eb. Hepburn $500
Armstead, William Steel $0.50
Old Fanny do do $5
Elizabeth, R[rest of name unclear] Allen $149"

Collect

O God who calls us by our full names, your love penetrates our inner being to an unfathomable depth. Living as one of us, you broke into the world, showing us ourselves. Amidst a culture of forgetfulness, we remember that we are descendants of a slaveholding society. Confront us, O God, with this truth that disturbs us. Use this disturbance to shake us out of our complacency and finally release the shackles of bondage, no matter our ancestry. This we pray in the Name of our Great Liberator. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions

1. Now that I have been given the names of the enslaved people, people created by God, sold for the benefit of a white Bishop to feel less encumbered, I ask myself, "Why didn't I know about this before now?" What am I feeling right now?

2. Who, in my circle of confidence or trust, can I turn to with my reaction or response to reading this list of people and what happened to them?

Vignette #4 **the buildings.**

"In reviewing diocesan newsletters, reports, and correspondence to understand how churches were physically built and ministries were funded, clear patterns of racism emerge. Three phenomena are particularly obvious.

- Whether grand in scale or more modest, white church buildings were frequently paid for over a short period of time, funded by gifts from wealthy members or, in the case of working-class churches, patrons. These members and patrons almost always had roots in the slaveholding class. A number of these churches were physically built by enslaved laborers, such as Christ Church, Cleveland and St. Andrew's, Woodleaf (the oldest intact frame antebellum Episcopal church building in North Carolina).
- Black church buildings were paid for over longer periods, due to white Episcopalians not sharing resources in their control, and also to a relative lack of capital among Black churches' members…. Black Episcopal churches were often supported by networks of African Americans beyond North Carolina, and sometimes by white organizations in the north. Black clergy and laypersons often built, repaired, or renovated their buildings with their own hands.
- The white majority of the diocese put Black churches and clergy in the position of having to beg for support from their diocesan colleagues and siblings in Christ, often to no avail…
    - In 1910, Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire (1850-1932; bishop 1893- 1932) asked white churches of the diocese to contribute $200 (in total, not each) to work among Black churches, a request the chair of the Committee on the State of the Church called "modest enough in all conscience." White Episcopalians offered less than $100 in response."

Collect

God of our ancestors, your people gave their talent and treasure to build the first tabernacle in the wilderness. We give you thanks for the witness of those who made much with little, establishing a legacy of dignity and resilience in the face of trial and tribulation. Give us wisdom as we discern the difference between one's frugality and another's abundance. This we ask, in the power of your Spirit. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions:

1. Has my home congregation conducted a thorough examination and/or a racial audit to uncover our possible involvement with such (or similar) actions that I have just read? What is preventing me from being the person who seeks and leads such truth-telling?
2. Where do I see the remnants of white supremacy, power, and control alive and active (like in this vignette) in the community I reside in now?

Vignette #5 **church dispositions.**

"As previously noted, and as acknowledged in diocesan sources, financial support for Black churches typically came from Black Episcopalians in and beyond this diocese, and to some extent from white northerners. Despite this fact, it was typically the case that when a Black church was closed, its assets were transferred to the general diocesan fund, to an institution that was closed to Black people, or to the white church in the same town, which members of the Black church sometimes joined. Decisions about how to dispose of the churches' property were made by diocesan authorities (such as its trustees and other bodies) that have historically been majority-white (and were exclusively so until fairly recently).

There are at least two cases of Black members of the diocese retaining control of a church's assets after it closed. Both occurred in the late 1960s.

- When St. Simeon's, Satterwhite (Granville County), closed in 1969, its property was granted (without any funds changing hands) to its one remaining member family in exchange for their commitment to keep up the cemetery. The members joined historically Black St. Cyprian's, Oxford.
- St. James, Pittsboro was closed in 1967 and sold for $5,000. In early 1968, diocesan council "appropriated [the proceeds] as a gift to St. Titus Church, Durham, for capital improvements."*****

In contrast stand the following cases:

- The Church of the Resurrection, Henderson, was closed in 1965 and its property sold to a Church of Christ for $7,000.
    - The sale proceeds went into the diocesan "Church Extension" fund over the objections of The Rev. Othello Stanley, priest-in-charge of (Black) St. Cyprian's, Oxford and formerly of Resurrection. Stanley wrote Bishop Thomas Fraser (coadjutor 1960-65; diocesan bishop 1965-83): "Since I was once in charge of the Resurrection, Henderson, and was responsible for raising all of the money for the uncompleted building I feel that we [St. Cyprian's, Oxford] should have first claim on the proceeds from the sale of the building, if possible."
- Holy Cross, Statesville, closed in September 1968. Its members joined Trinity Episcopal Church in town, and its property was conveyed to Trinity…
    - The Rev. James Parker Dees, rector of Holy Trinity and an outspoken white supremacist, had been priest-in-charge of Holy Cross from 1955 to 1956. He was a founder of the North Carolina Defenders of States' Rights in 1958, and left the Episcopal Church to form the segregated "Anglican Orthodox Church" in 1963.
- Holy Trinity, Monroe, closed in 1970 and was sold for use as a private home. The almost $1,300 sale price was merged with other funds and disposed of by Convention.
- St. Philip's, Salisbury sold in 1971 and the proceeds went to neighboring (white) St. Luke's, which former St. Philip's parishioners had joined."

*****_Though the proceeds from the sale of St. James, Pittsboro's property were gifted to St. Titus, Durham, the church was "deconsecrated and sold to the Methodist Church for use as a parking lot. In 1968 it was burned during a Pittsboro Fire Department training exercise." Taken from "Short Sketches of Historically Black Episcopal Churches in North Carolina" by Lynn Hoke, Diocesan Archivist._

Collect

Itinerant God, we know that no walls can contain you, and no amount of money is equal to the worthiness of standing on your holy ground. Open our eyes to the ways we misuse, misappropriate, and deal with our resources inequitably, directing us to deal more justly toward one another. And when we need a place to call home, plant our wandering feet in the sureness of your presence. In the Name of the One who calls us worthy, we pray. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions

1. Where do I see people of color, specifically African Americans, being constantly short-changed in my workplace, my school system, my worship space, my community at large, my Diocese of North Carolina? (Please be specific as possible in your responses.)
2. If you identify as white or attend a historically white church, how comfortable are you with the income gaps between yourself and communities of color? If you identify as a person of color, how does this history resonate for you?

Vignette #6 **the summer camps.**

"As early as 1923, the diocese ran a camp near Little Switzerland in Mitchell County, directed by the Brotherhood of St. Andrew and advertised as "a real vacation" for 50 "boys" aged 15 to 21. The camp chaplain was Bishop Coadjutor Edwin Penick (coadjutor 1922-1932; diocesan bishop 1932-1959), while a Pullman (railroad) chef whom the campers called "Black Bill" cooked for the group. The man who developed Little Switzerland as a summer mountain resort, and who donated the land on which the Episcopal camp stood, was Robert Heriot Clarkson, an Episcopalian and a Democratic legislator from Charlotte.

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Within a couple of years, the diocese had established a camp for girls called Camp Penick, while the boys' camp was renamed in honor of Bishop Cheshire. In his address to diocesan convention in 1924, Bishop Penick spoke of the ways in which summer camps could draw young people into the church and develop their leadership skills: "Our boys and girls are just as intelligent, just as capable of zealous devotion to the Church, just as responsive and responsible as young people anywhere. What they need is attention, sympathetic interest, encouragement in initiative, more freedom in religious expression." What went unsaid and, by most if not all white people of the diocese, unnoticed, was that "our boys and girls" were, by definition, white. Black Episcopalians were not welcome at these camps. Bishop Penick's support for the camps extended to

disbursing $63.10 from his discretionary fund in 1927, equivalent just over half the amount he gave to the entire diocesan "colored convocation" ($125.00).

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In the early 1930s, the diocese took over a disused hotel in Stokes County and created its own camp and conference center, Vade Mecum, which it maintained for decades. Like previous facilities the diocese had used for summer camps, Vade Mecum offered amenities such as "baseball, basketball, hikes and swimming in the big 100-foot swimming pool." Vade Mecum remained segregated into the 1960s with two exceptions: clergy conference, and the presence of Black women at the Women's Auxiliary Conference for a year or two in the mid-1950s. They were housed separately from white participants.

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[In the same time period] African-American members of the diocese requested that camps be provided for Black youth too. A committee was established to study the matter; no camp materialized. In 1940, the Black branch of the diocesan Laymen's League sponsored the first such camp at a site near Raleigh. Five years later, with financial assistance from the Women's Auxiliary, the Black Laymen's League, and "some prominent Negro laymen," the diocese purchased an 80-acre site, 13 miles from the capital, for a permanent camp and conference center. Not only did Camp Delany (named for the late suffragan bishop and frequently misspelled Delaney in diocesan documents) possess none of the amenities of Vade Mecum, such as a swimming pool; the camp was frequently cited by the North Carolina Department of Health for not meeting basic standards.

Identified problems included:

- in 1948: no running water, showers, or toilets (in contrast to the bathrooms with hot and cold running water and showers provided for each cabin at Vade Mecum);
- in 1950: a lack of a refrigerator, electricity in the chapel, a shower house, and leaders' quarters; broken windows and rotting sills;
- in 1954: still no adequate water supply.

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Some members of the diocese made known to the bishop their objections to a segregated camp of whatever quality. One was R.N. (Rencher Nicholas) Harris of St. Titus, Durham. In the 1950s, Harris would become the first Black member elected to the Durham City Council and the first to sit on the city Board of Education. In 1945, a day [after] Bishop Penick's visit with the (Black) Laymen's League at St. Titus, Harris wrote to ask, "Is the Episcopal Church doing the best thing when it sponsors a segregated camp for our youth? The thought occurs to me [that] even if we cannot go to Vade Mecum, it would be better than the establishment of the proposed camp…. The truth of the matter is that I hate to think that my Church sponsors an institution which I am

compelled to accept against my will in my everyday life." It is unclear whether Bishop Penick responded."

Collect

God of play, God of rest: you call every child into the joy of your kingdom. Give us the grace to be like children, humble and curious, as we grapple with the ways that we have hindered them. Grant us wisdom so that our young may see visions once more; so that the old among us may dream dreams, long-deferred. Draw us near, heavenly Father, help us bear witness to your glory. ***Amen****.*

Engagement and Reflection Questions:

1. Where am I feeling shame, guilt, anger, resistance, or rebellion to my acceptance of this history right here on my doorstep in the Diocese of North Carolina?
2. What I want to say to the leadership of my Church (local, diocesan, national) right now is _____.
3. Do I believe that a monetary offering alone will fix any of the spiritual damage done to people of color in the Diocese of North Carolina? What else must be done?

Concluding Prayer for Reparations

God, creator of a diverse world and peoples who thirst for justice, freedom and peace. We are here because we want to continue the ongoing work of dismantling racism in this diocese—that sinful combination of prejudice and social power. We turn to you. Help us to be honest about our diocese's experiences, honest about our own feelings and fears, and honest about facing the daunting task before us to begin to make things right. Help us undertake the work of reparations and restitution—repenting of our sins, repairing the wrong done to others, and seeking peace and reconciliation among us all. That we might truly be persons demanding truth and doing justice. We pray this in the name of Jesus. ***Amen****.*