

## Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring

### A Racial History

*Please note: While this timeline is accurate to the best of its creators' knowledge, it is a living document and will continue to be added to and revised.*

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*The racial history of Grace Church is inexorably tied to the racial history of Montgomery County and the surrounding area. For that reason, this history includes specific examples of the racial climate at various points in the history of the church. It is impossible to understand the racial history of the church without understanding the racial and cultural circumstances which influenced the actions, make-up, and activities of Grace Church. Some of the events cited, while perhaps not directly tied to issues of race, were indicators of change in other parts of society which ultimately helped to effect change in racial areas as well. In essence, throughout its 162 year history, Grace Episcopal Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, has been impacted by and reflected the existing legal and de-facto discrimination regarding African Americans.*

#### **1855 – 1875: EARLY HISTORY**

- **1855** – Grace Church is established by a group of prominent white individuals from the Silver Spring area, including Mrs. Samuel Philips Lee, sister of Montgomery Blair, a holder of enslaved people. Originally called “Labyrinth Parish” ground was broken for the first church building in 1857.
- **1861** - The still incomplete church building included a slave gallery, where the enslaved people of white parishioners would sit separated from their owners during worship.

Historical Background: *Maryland moved rather slowly to give up slavery during and after the Civil War. Just a few miles away from Silver Spring, Congress freed enslaved people in the District of Columbia in 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved people in all states that had seceded, went into effect on January 1, 1863. The state of Maryland did not act until 1864, when it held a referendum in which the vote in favor of abolition was only passed after counting the absentee ballots of soldiers fighting for the North. The final tally was 30,174 in favor of freeing all enslaved people to 29,799 against. On November 1, 1864, Maryland’s enslaved people were declared free, only a few months before Congress would approve the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. Many blacks in Maryland had taken matters into their own hands by that time, either escaping to the District or enlisting in the Union army, where they served as free men.*

#### **1874 - 1896: CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS MONUMENT**

- **1862** - Confederate General, Jubal Early, invaded Maryland by marching down Georgia Avenue. He and his troops were stopped by Union forces at Fort Stevens, 3.5 miles south of Labyrinth Parish. Several Confederate soldiers who died in the battle were buried nearby.

- **1874** - The Rector of Labyrinth Parish, a former Confederate Chaplain, had the bodies of 17 buried Confederate soldiers moved to the church cemetery to be buried in a common grave. Many of the soldiers were unidentified.
- **1896** - An obelisk monument was erected at the corner of Grace Church Road. and Georgia Avenue. to mark the site of the fallen Confederate soldiers buried there in 1874. That monument remains today.

### **LATE 1800'S – 1945: ERA OF JIM CROW**

During this time period, the congregation and make-up of Grace Church, no doubt, continued to reflect the on-going racial discrimination of the times. In the early 1900's, the local area was rural and largely agricultural, with little change until the early 1940's when the population of the area began to experience greater growth.

- **1875** - Labyrinth Parish changed its name to Grace Church
- **1877** - Parishioners constructed a new building with rooms for Sunday School and community functions.

Historical Background: *During this same time of growth and stability for Grace Church, African Americans in the surrounding area were experiencing some of the worst aspects of the Jim Crow Era. Masked mobs of local white men carried out two separate lynchings of African-American men in Montgomery County on Rockville's courthouse lawn. John Diggs was violently lynched in 1880 and Sydney Randolph similarly murdered in 1896. Neither man was found guilty in a court of law. Nor was anyone punished for the lynchings. Until July, 2015, on that same lawn, the Maryland Historical Society maintained a monument to the Confederate army as "heroes of the thin grey line", because Montgomery County, like the rest of Maryland, was divided over the issue of secession. No memorial exists for victims of Montgomery County's lynchings.*

*The segregated community of Lyttonsville began in 1853, within walking distance of Grace Church. Named for Samuel Lytton, a freed slave who established the community when he bought property there, it was among the first predominantly black neighborhoods in Montgomery County. The neighborhood changed very little in the first half of the 20th century and did not get running water and paved streets until a county redevelopment effort in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after years of residents' lobbying.*

### **Late 1940'S – 1965: A TIME OF GROWTH**

When World War II ended, Silver Spring and Grace Church begin to experience another period of growth. In 1948, Georgia Avenue was widened, providing additional lanes for traffic traveling to new suburban developments such as Silver Spring, Woodside Park, and points north.

A post-war real estate boom brought significant numbers of white families into the area. As a result, Grace Church found itself with a rapidly growing congregation. However, while white families flocked to the suburbs, the area and housing market continued to be segregated by race.

- **1956** – Current church building is consecrated at the Christmas Eve services. Like many other mainline Protestant denominations, Grace Church experienced a period of significant growth in the 1950s. The congregation remained white, reflecting the racial segregation of Montgomery County.
- **1960** - Grace Episcopal Day School was founded. For parts of the Grace Church congregation, the day school was seen as a potential “white flight” school, reflecting concerns about both the population growth in Montgomery County, and the more open questioning of segregation in all forms. Interestingly, by the 1990’s the student population of GEDS had become increasingly more diverse - a trend that continues to this day.

Historical Background: *Montgomery County remained a legally segregated community well into the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Although segregation in public schools became illegal in 1954, Montgomery County was slow to adhere to the law, and in the 1957-58 school year, two years after integration, 68 percent of the county’s 3,035 black students remained in segregated schools. Schools were considered fully integrated in 1961, even though scores of schools remained that had only white students because no blacks lived in the district. Montgomery County neighborhoods remained segregated for years after school integration. Those schools were integrated by moving one black teacher from another school.*

*Another example of local segregation was the Glen Echo Amusement Park, which from its beginnings, enforced a strict segregation policy, allowing only whites to enter and enjoy the park grounds. In the summer of 1960, this unfair treatment was challenged by a group of students from Howard University united by the common goal of equality and justice for all people, regardless of their color or creed. Due to their efforts and continued protests outside the park, in March, 1961 Glen Echo announced that it would open its doors to any patron, regardless of skin color.*

- **1964** - The “Te Deum – All Saints” window, depicting numerous saints as well as individuals from the history of the parish, was installed in the balcony of Grace Church. The window depicted a Union soldier bearing the American flag and a Confederate soldier bearing the Confederate battle flag. The window’s installation coincided with the nation’s celebration of the Civil War centennial.

## **1965 – 1995: SIGNS OF CHANGE**

Following the cultural changes of the late 1960s, including the end of the Vietnam War, and the passage of significant Civil Rights Legislation, Montgomery County and Grace Church began to slowly reflect a more diverse population. African Americans and other people of color began to attend Grace Church in the 1970s and their numbers gradually grew throughout the next two decades. Although Grace Church remained a

predominantly white parish, during this time period, and for the first time, African Americans were elected to the vestry and began to actively serve in many of the church's ministries.

- **1966** – The Parish Relations Committee, a sub-committee of the Grace Church Vestry, wrote a letter to the Montgomery County Human Relations Commission, expressing their strong support of a fair housing ordinance applicable to the sale and rental of houses and apartments in Montgomery County.

This period of time also included other significant changes within Grace Church as well as the national Episcopal Church:

- **1976** - Ordination of women to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. In the 1980's Grace Church called its first female Assistant Rectors, Reverend Meg Custer and Reverend Sherry Foote.
- **1982** - Adoption of a new Book of Common Prayer. There were some parishioners in Grace Church who steadfastly refused to use the new prayer book, necessitating a visit from Bishop John Walker. Upon being instructed to hand over their 1928 Book of Common Prayer to the Bishop, some parishioners walked out and left Grace Church that morning.
- **1995** - Reverend William Wooten retired as Rector of Grace Church. Rev. Wooten had served at Grace Church for over 30 years, as a seminarian, Assistant Rector, and Rector. Grace Church began forming the first official search committee in its history.

#### **1995 - 2008: THE REVEREND JANICE ROBINSON**

- **1995** - A Search Committee was formed, and Grace Church engaged in a two year long interim process.
- **1997** - In the summer of 1997, the Search Committee forwarded to the Vestry four candidates for the position of Rector. The Reverend Janice Robinson, an openly gay, African American woman was called to be the next Rector by the Vestry. This was the first time in the history of Grace Church that the Rector was not a white, heterosexual male.

Rev. Robinson's arrival brought with it many changes. Some members of the parish elected to leave when she arrived. Concern was expressed about the call as being untimely and ultimately leading to declines in the congregation and in enrollment at GEDS. One member of the Vestry resigned the evening that the decision was made to issue a call to Janice to become the Rector of Grace Church.

Within two years of Reverend Robinson's arrival, Grace Church began to experience a significant increase in attendance and in pledge revenue. Additionally, African Americans not only participated in the full range of the church's ministries, but also held leadership positions. During Janice's tenure as Rector, several new initiatives and benchmarks were achieved, including:

- **2001** - Pledge revenue exceeded \$500,000, for the first time in the church's history.
  - "A Call to Authentic Discipleship" a special Lenten Evensong service, created at Grace Church, and based upon the writings of Bishop Desmond Tutu, was performed on April 1, 2001.
  - On the Feast of Pentecost, June 1, 2001, "Lift Every Voice and Sing", the African American hymnal was added to the musical repertoire, in honor and support of the ministry the Rector.
- **2003** - The annual Absalom Jones Day Celebration, hosted by the Union of Black Episcopalians was held at Grace Church on Sunday, February 9, 2003. This marked the first time this celebration had been hosted by a predominantly white parish.
- **2004** - First African American elected Junior Warden
- **2005** – First African American elected Senior Warden

Other initiatives during the tenure of Reverend Robinson:

- **Pentecost Project** – This program was developed and implemented by the Diocese of Washington. It provided financial grants and other support for churches to engage in the work of creating and supporting multi-cultural parishes. Grace Church received two grants from the Pentecost Project which were used to support the addition of LEVAS, the development of the Bishop Tutu Lenten Evensong , a New Year's Eve Multi-cultural Celebration and Nightwatch Service, as well as an on-going recognition of the many different cultures that were represented in the congregation of Grace Church.
- **Magi Consortium** – This program was also developed and implemented by the Diocese of Washington. It was originally designed to include both clergy and lay members and focused on sharing ways to deepen and broaden diversity in their parishes. Today, the group continues on as MAGI (Multicultural Awareness of Gifts, Inc) and involves diocesan clergy.

#### **2009 – 2017: NEW LEADERSHIP AND CONTINUED FOCUS ON DIVERSITY**

Following the retirement of Reverend Robinson, Grace Church went through another interim period and the formation of a Search Committee. The church's commitment to diversity was evident throughout the Parish Profile, which described the congregation as, ". . . *young, old, black, white, male, female, native born Americans, and immigrants. We are comfortable economically and struggling; we are married, widowed, single, divorced, gay and straight. We are cradle Episcopalians, recent converts, long time members, newcomers, able, disabled, traditional and progressive. Some members of Grace come simply to be "fed" spiritually while others take a more active role in our ministries.*"

The Parish Profile also included the church's Core Values, which were defined as the *"essential and eternal principles particular to Grace Church, needing no external validation, and having intrinsic value to the members of Grace."* The first listed value was *"We cherish diversity."*

- **2009** - Reverend Janice Robinson retires as Rector of Grace Church
  - Reverend Bruce McPherson is called as Interim Rector and shares his strong commitment to the diversity of Grace Church, including the need to be "intentional" about its support.
  - Reverend Michele Hagans is called as an Associate Rector, the first African American to serve in that capacity.
  
- **2011** – Reverend Andrew Walter called as Rector of Grace Church, in full support of and embodying the final statement of the Parish Profile, *"Most importantly, we are looking for a Rector who raises us spiritually; supports our diversity of race, gender, age and ability; who can keep the momentum of positive change and who will continue to help us discover all our capabilities."*
  
- **2016** – Wade in the Water begins its work as a Racial Justice Ministry of the church.
  
- **2017** – In October the panels containing two Confederate images depicted in the "Te Deum" window were removed and deconsecrated. The Vestry voted unanimously to remove the confederate symbols from the stained glass window, believing those images contradicted the church's Vision for the Future to that "city on the hill" where people of all races and cultures can come to build their relationships with God and with one another.