News
Guest Voices



The R.E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church in Lexington, Va., in August 2017, before the name change to Grace Episcopal Church. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons)

Doug Cumming

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Confederate symbols in churches, especially Episcopal churches in Virginia and the National Cathedral in Washington, have followed a pattern of controversy parallel to, but distinct from, the civic battles over their removal from public spaces.

In Episcopal churches directly associated with Robert E. Lee, the controversy has been a deeply emotional, semiprivate clash of sensibilities, one side claiming to respect the sacredness of history and the other, the history of sacredness.

It has been, under the surface, a re-litigating of Lee's terms of surrender at Appomattox.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Richmond is the church Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis attended during the Civil War. Five months after the mass shooting in a black church in Charleston, S.C., by a neo-Confederate in June 2015, St. Paul's began removing images of the Confederate flag from kneelers, bookplates and plaques.

"This decision is completely asinine," one reader commented online in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. "These are monuments to the dead and have a deep and direct connection to the history of this building. Burning books and removing historical markers will not help you resolve your juvenile white guilt, self-hatred, or racism."

The rector of St. Paul's, the Rev. Wallace Adams-Riley, resigned on Sept. 15 amid speculation that the church's embrace of Presiding Bishop Michael C. Curry's call for racial reconciliation — wholeheartedly endorsed by Adams-Riley — had played a part. St. Paul's own commitment to the national project is called the History and Reconciliation Initiative, which some felt was somehow behind Adams-Riley's resignation. A statement from the vestry rebutted these rumors.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," the vestry said. "HRI is the most vibrant and energized project St. Paul's has undertaken in many years. This work is a mandate of the Presiding Bishop and was Wallace's gift to the church, and we intend to live it forward fully, without reservation."

Meanwhile, at Christ Church, in Alexandria, a 1773 Episcopal parish that claims George Washington and the Lee family as former worshippers, a relatively new rector was pushing for the removal of heavy memorial plaques to Lee and Washington on either side of the altar, both donated by parishioners after Lee's death in 1870.

The Rev. Noelle York-Simmons, suggesting the church needed to be "radically welcoming," had run into resistance.

"The discussion about the appropriateness of the plaques in our worship space caused friction in our parish family," read an Oct. 26 letter signed by York-Simmons and the vestry. "We understand that the discernment process has felt confusing and exclusive. We hope all parishioners will be more fully involved as we move forward."

In Lexington, Va., the friction began for R.E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church in 2015 after the Charleston shooting. A parishioner who teaches Shakespeare at Washington and Lee University next door wrote a letter to the rector, the Rev. Tom Crittenden, and the senior and junior wardens calling for a "frank, Christ-centered discussion about the name."

Father Crittenden believed that compromise was possible, with enough love and forbearance. It turned out to be a far more difficult and costly belief than anyone imagined. But in the end, he was right.

I was on the vestry of the parish for all three years of the controversy. On Sept. 18, 2017, my final year, I voted with a bare majority 7-5 to change the name to Grace Episcopal Church.

To me, it felt like a miracle, considering how unbending the resistance had been since 2015 among some lay leaders and how empty the church's youth program had become because of the alienation of younger families. The defense of Lee's memorial name, which would have mortified Lee the traditional churchman, had become a gothic battlement against the shifting cultural winds.

"Grace" seems the right word, a return to what it was called in the 19th century when Lee was senior warden after he joined the church in 1865. ("Memorial" was added after he died in 1870; it became R.E. Lee Memorial in 1903).

In 2015, Father Crittenden did not try to stop the issue at the church door. But neither did he push toward a foregone conclusion. He summoned a special vestry meeting. He helped organize house meetings and parish meetings for well-run discussions. Instead of a vote, there was a survey. Nearly a third of the congregation felt there was something wrong with the name, from a Christian perspective.

Despite all of this effort at dialogue – or maybe because of it – most members were unhappy with the process. Although the vestry had imposed a super-majority requirement on itself for such an upending change (falling one vote short, 9-6, in November that year), neither side felt that the vote settled anything. The church ended the year in a dark funk.

In the face of a fractured church that one vestry member compared to our national political discourse, the rector sought outside help that turned out to be based on radical peace-building techniques from the pacifist Mennonite branch of Christianity.

Cooperative by Design, LLC, is a consortium of "peacebuilding practitioners," most of whom have connections with Eastern Mennonite University, an hour northeast of Lexington in Harrisonburg. Father Crittenden researched the group and, with the vestry's approval, invited two of its consultants (one an Episcopal priest) to the vestry retreat in January 2016. Two things were memorable about their visit to that retreat: A technique of giving an individual the power to speak while others listened and secondly, the idea that conflict was not something to be "resolved" but was a kind of energy that could be used for "transformation."

Such conflict-transformation was to come from recommendations by a group of six parishioners who would experience that transformation themselves. It would be expensive: The original contract was for up to $12,000, but the work took more time and effort than the consultants had planned on. In the end, Cooperative by Design submitted bills totaling more than $16,000.

It was hard, wrenching work for the six on the committee. They all said as much, although they were reluctant to speak as individuals about the experience. After nine months of two-hour meetings every two weeks, plus leading about a dozen focus groups with more than 100 parishioners, this "Discovery and Discernment

Committee" formed a bond of confidentiality: No grandstanding. When the committee members submitted their final 15-page report in April, they seemed to me like castaways rescued from an island after a powerful common experience.

Father Crittenden was seeking healing and reconciliation, so he did not put a limit on where God might lead the committee. But even he did not expect the committee to come back with a recommendation to change the name, or that it would cost him his job. When they first came, the consultants had insisted that the name change was only a symptom, a "presenting" issue of conflict underneath. What the underlying issue or issues might be was anybody's guess.

Robert E. Lee as symbol, a symbol generations of white Southerners invested with almost Christ-like qualities (as historian Emory M. Thomas has noted), has been hard on the rectors of Lee's churches. The reason Father Crittenden resigned after it was all over is complicated, and in some ways, inexplicable. A steady, patient, gifted man, Father Crittenden announced his resignation after 10 years at R.E. Lee Memorial, and three and a half weeks after the name change.

In one of his last sermons, he called the D&D report our "John the Baptist moment."

To many parishioners, it seems he was chewed up unfairly by the name-change controversy. He was faithful to a middle way, a way that worked beautifully for him in his previous parish in Tallahassee, Fla. There, his church flourished and weathered liberal-conservative battles over doctrine that had caused six other Episcopal churches to split or close down.

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In the fullness of time, it was his middle way that changed the name from R.E. Lee to Grace. The Discovery and Discernment Committee had found "identity" as an underlying issue. The answer to that identity could not be a stark binary choice, dividing "winners" and "losers." It had to be compromise. The committee's recommendation was to restore the historical name of Grace, but also create a subcommittee "to honor Lee and the history of this parish in meaningful and significant ways."

It took the vestry five months to accept that compromise, and even then, it was with a close, bitter vote. But the D&D committee's recommendation became the map. No

more argument was needed. Now a sign hangs out front for "Grace Episcopal Church, 1840," and a history committee I chair, dominated by church members who opposed the name change, is discussing an interpretive sign for the front of the Parish Hall with brief sketches of famous people who worshipped in the church.

That would include Lee, of course, but also could include Jonathan Daniels, a former cadet at Virginia Military Institute who was martyred in Alabama in 1965 while helping register blacks to vote.

Father Crittenden's farewell sermon was on All Saints Sunday. He said that he prays we will continue to implement the Discovery and Discernment Committee's recommendations — "all of them," he added. "Last April, the vestry 'tabled' some of the recommendations. People of God, we don't, we can't table the work of the Holy Spirit!"