

Responses

Jeff Coppage

History can be a powerful vehicle for transformation and reconciliation. I read Paul Peucker's article thinking of a living witness to his thesis. One example of how the Moravian "culture of remembrance" is intertwined with our contemporary "history of lived faith" is the remarkable partnership between a secular history museum (Old Salem Museums and Gardens), denominational leaders, and a contemporary congregation: St. Philips Moravian Church. As part-time interim pastor for St. Philips since October, I have marveled at the degree to which the museum's "critical, scholarly approach," used to tell the story of race relations among early Moravians in Salem, has been "usable and productive" to the faith of current St. Philips members.

One of the "blemishes" within Moravian history in North Carolina is certainly the use and owning of slaves by the Salem congregation right up to forced emancipation in 1865. The church record-keepers of the time were indeed "protective." Some history was even erased.¹ Surviving records include paternalistic and highly spiritualized religious justifications for slavery and racial injustice. This was consistent with the prevailing theology of class and racial hierarchy held by Count Zinzendorf and most other Christian leaders.²

The slaveholding period has been

documented extensively in recent decades by historians such as Jon Sensbach and C. Daniel Crews.³ The historical record now reveals many Moravians in early Salem to have been good-hearted, caring people who had theological and cultural blind spots when their economic interests conflicted with their more Christ-centered egalitarian world view. Their story of selective self-deception certainly evokes "questions to which no definite answers exist."

Sometimes it helps to see, hear, touch, and feel the wrongs of the past in order to make things right. It is to the Moravian Church's great benefit, then, that many details of the slaveholding era are now on public display within Old Salem Museums and Gardens' historic St. Philips Moravian Church complex. The rebuilt 1823 log church and the restored 1861 brick church first served Moravian slaves and African freedmen, then African-American Moravians until 1952. The congregation's sponsor was Salem Congregation, primarily the women, and the Moravian mission organizations that earnestly supported the church's activities. The St. Philips congregation baptized children, built vibrant Sunday schools, had weddings and funerals, and held poignant lovefeasts (complete with the requisite beeswax candles and lovefeast buns). The historical project has preserved and enhanced what is clearly a sacred "site of memory."

Old Salem employees Mo and Martha Hartley (archeologist and planner respectively) now lead the Historic St. Philips project. Very aware of the transcendent nature of the project, they note, “It seems to us that repentance is central to spiritual health, and that repentance cannot take place without some kind of conscious awareness that transgression has occurred. History, honestly and rigorously viewed, can provide a kind of meditation on spiritual health from the individual level to the level of a society.”⁴ Rev. Cedric Rodney, retired St. Philips pastor, once described the St. Philips project this way: “A building consecrated to the worship of God in 1861 becomes an instrument for learning, growth, and reconciliation.”⁵

Church members have contributed richly to the vitality of the project. From the visionary leadership of Rev. Rodney, who shepherded much of the project, to the current members who give tours to the public, there is a blossoming “history of lived faith.” Old Salem employees have been empowered to assist the congregation when museum and congregational missions overlap, arranging periodic worship services and training church members as docents. The Hartleys sense that “there is, across the board, a re-emerging recognition that St. Philips is in fact a Moravian Church and not simply a museum stop in a tour of Old Salem Museums and Gardens.”⁶

I recently asked St. Philips members for their thoughts about the influence of Old Salem’s project on their personal faith, their Moravian identity, and the life of the congregation. Their responses align well with Peucker’s article.

Brother Conrad Mitchell writes that the project “has strengthened my faith.... It exposes the strength of the church today in its willingness to publicly explain the past action of the Salem organization.” Brother Alphonza L. Gaydon Sr. adds, “It has given us the opportunity to visualize our past and will help us shape our future.”

Sister Lethia Coleman observes, “We step out in faith with every commitment to Historic St. Philips. The 5th Sunday service is a welcome chance to meet new people and to tell them that history is still being made by African Moravians.... [Through the docent tours] children by the hundreds will know about our beginning and hopefully some of them will want to be part of its continuation.... We are now part of a living past, a living present, and a living future.... I think that the Moravian identity has always been the Unity of the Brethren. The St. Philips complex now identifies the African American Brethren as part of the Unity.”

The hard work of all involved has achieved the goal of “appreciative inquiry” as Paul Peucker describes it, allowing people “to use the best and most valuable narratives to construct a hopeful image of the future.” For me, particularly poignant are the rediscovered gravesites and headstones now visible through an opening in the 1861 brick church’s flooring. Recovered only after long-term archeological work, they exist now in stark contrast to the centuries of carefully manicured veneration given to God’s Acre a few blocks north. In what might be considered a Moravian heresy, the graves of early black

Moravians were nearly lost to history through systemic neglect and spotty record keeping.⁷ The recent willingness to “integrate the histories of ‘missionized’ people” is an important step forward for the Kingdom of God.

A powerful testimony to the redemptive power of those gravestones appeared in a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* article quoting jazz musician and scholar David Chevan: “One of the most important Afro-Semitic Experience concerts we have ever given was at a Saturday night concert at St. Philips Moravian Church in Old Salem, N.C. This was a former slave church and many of its worshipers were buried beneath the floor of the church.... It was a standing-room-only audience that was on its feet almost the entire night as we played for the ancestors beneath our feet.”⁸

Moravians have not attracted great numbers of nonwhite members in North Carolina. Embracing our history with integrity is sowing seeds for a more hopeful future. Living into authentic unity can be discomfoting, but the St. Philips project shows that employing “a critical approach to history” can also warm our Moravian hearts.

Endnotes

¹ Leland Furguson, “The Historical Archaeology of Early African Americans in the Moravian Town of Salem, North Carolina,” <http://www.cas.sc.edu/anth/faculty/LGFergus/Ferguson.html>

² Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 30–34.

³ C. Daniel Crews, *Neither Slave nor Free: Moravians, Slavery, and a Church That Endures* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Moravian Archives, 1998).

⁴ Personal correspondence.

⁵ Michael O. Hartley and Martha B. Hartley, “St. Philips: African-American Moravian Church,” *Old Salem Museums and Gardens: A Biannual Magazine for Friends and Supporters* (Fall/Winter 2009), 10.

⁶ Personal correspondence.

⁷ Furguson, “The Historical Archaeology”: “In 1890 an addition to the front of the church was built over the earliest part of the cemetery (the Stranger’s Graveyard), and in the second decade of the 20th century the entire churchyard, including the post–1816 part of the cemetery, was landscaped: grave depressions were filled, walkways and retaining walls were built and the gravestones were removed and hidden. The cemetery was essentially erased.”

⁸ Nat Hentoff, “Jews and Blacks Join in This ‘Yizkor,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2008, D9.

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