



Historic Saint Paul's is a welcoming Episcopal congregation committed to living and sharing the Good News of God in Jesus Christ through liturgy, music and outreach

What Brought Us Here

Almost one year ago, former Rector George Muir said that the Polk Memorial should be moved from the altar area. In a letter to the parish, he described the proposed action as removing “one of the seen and unseen stumbling blocks for people of color that sustain a narrative of inequality.”

In November, the Vestry voted to move the plaque to a “different position within the church buildings.”

This Vestry action proved contentious with parishioners expressing support for or displeasure with moving the memorial.

What Saint Paul's Said

Love the people, history, traditions, liturgy, music, and outreach. A welcoming church with parishioners whose families have multigenerational roots as well as people new to the parish. Exciting time to be downtown.

The Polk issue arose during a time of high anxiety when the nation was embroiled in a divisive election, socially challenging issues, and a pandemic. Parishioners were experiencing grief and insecurity due to social isolation and loss of jobs, security and loved ones. The congregation could not gather to fully explore the issues. The Polk issue compounded feelings of anxiety, anger, grief and isolation and became another distraction. Mistrust developed.

Some began to take sides, others signed a petition, and some withheld financial support. People on both sides of the issue were disparaged. As the conflict simmered, underlying issues arose, some of which have arisen in previous conflicts.

Underlying issues include: a few vocal lay leaders dominate leadership, “Finance Committee decides priorities and funding,” lack of transparency about committee composition and financial issues, lack of broad membership on committees, resistance to change, clergy is scapegoated, history of conflict that has been addressed only once, financial support was withdrawn in this and previous conflicts and concern this conflict will affect the search for new rector.

What We Heard

Genuine desire to begin gathering in person, transform this conflict, and move forward.

Develop a complete plan for the Polk memorial so that all sides feel heard and have an understanding of the issues

Continue to be “a church where all are welcome”

Develop shared leadership between older and younger leaders

Expand communication beyond email while parishioners commit to engaging with church communications

Transparency in all aspects of operations

Review of committee structure to include term limits

Use your history as a foundation for moving forward

Develop a vibrant children, youth and family program and senior program

Expand adult education offerings

Offer solace, comfort and prayer to hurting people, in the church and beyond

Conclusions

This is a high-level conflict which has resulted in the church being divided and polarized, a reduction in giving and participation, and early departure of clergy

Focus has turned inward to the conflict and away from your work in the world as disciples of Jesus Christ

Saint Paul's can be vibrant and healthy again if the conflict and underlying issues are addressed

Recommendations

Use your strong history as a foundation for moving the kingdom of God forward in downtown Augusta

Build on what you do best – worship, Tuesday Live Music, Wednesday Suppers, Ironman, hospitality

Value relationships above issues

Honor the deliberative process of the Vestry and acknowledge that Vestry decisions have been prayerfully considered and made through God's grace

Vestry appoints a representative task force to develop a complete plan to carry out the Vestry action to move the Polk memorial

The task force offers a variety of ways for parishioners to comment on the plan and fully informs the parish on all steps. All actions are transparent

Develop a policy addressing memorials in the church, including flags and windows

Conflict transformation skills training for the Vestry, committee chairs and any interested parishioners

Train the Vestry and lay leaders on best leadership and stewardship practices. Extend stewardship training to the parish.

Continue participation in Church Development Institute

Develop programming for children, youth and families and seniors and expand educational activities for adults

Develop policies and term limits around the committee structure

Complete and implement strategic planning

Filter all leadership decisions through the mission statement, not through the budget