



Brother Don Dubay and Deacon Candidate Luigi Mandile assist in removing the memorial plaque dedicated to Bishop Polk, July 6, 2020.

Blog Post: Removing the Past *(Reconsidering the images of our faith)*

Over the past several weeks I, like many others, have struggled a bit, reflecting on our national conversation around systemic racism, personal culpability, and collective responsibility. I have engaged in conversation around the removal of monuments and place names. Here at St. Anna's, we as part of The Episcopal Church, are wrestling with our own past role in oppressive systems. Our shared experience of these past months have given many pause to think deeply.

The following words from the Baptismal Covenant of The Episcopal Church should be the guiding standard for deconstruction of the myth of white supremacy and construction of radical inclusion:

Celebrant: Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
People: I will with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People: I will with God's help.

These words should hold deep power for each of us. They demand that we enter into the discomfort of giving up social power and restoring an equality and equity that never were part of the American story. But we can learn. If this is our claim in a sacrament that is so very much a part of being human, then it must also be true in all that we do. We must be a community that blesses in the presence of God. We must no longer support even a glimmer of the Jim Crow South. At Saint Anna's, the Jim Crow South took shape in the form of a marble memorial to Leonidas Polk, slaveholder and Bishop of the Diocese of Louisiana from 1841-1864.

How can this be in our present time? The symbols of white supremacy must be removed. Here at St. Anna's Church, we have removed the Polk memorial from the church wall. Although the plaque is down, the history surrounding the relationship of Leonidas Polk to many southern churches and institutions cannot be removed. It can be found in several sources. But we need not honor him with monuments in this parish church. Now only a red brick outline of the memorial remains. Perhaps it awaits a memorial more representative of our community; perhaps for the Blessed Francis Gaudet or perhaps to Stewart Butler (Gay Rights activist). Perhaps it should remain a red spot, as a reminder of this process; or perhaps it simply awaits a fresh coat of paint to match the current wall. Our church will continue this discussion to find the best solution.

Leonidas Polk's link to the Diocese of Louisiana and St. Anna's Church

St. Anna's started life as a seaman's mission church close to the Mississippi River. It was originally called St. Peter's Bethel Mission. The little mission was initiated by Christ Church Cathedral in 1846. There is not a great deal of history about its early days, but we do know its first Vicar was a Mr. Charles Whithall. The Bishop of the Diocese of Louisiana at that time was The Rt. Rev. Leonidas Polk.

Polk was born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1806. He was a part of the privileged class of slaveholders called "gentlemen planters." He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the West Point Military academy. In his class were notables including Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee. Polk left the military in 1827 to attend the Virginia Theological Seminary. In 1830 he married Frances Devereaux, the daughter of a fellow enslaver.

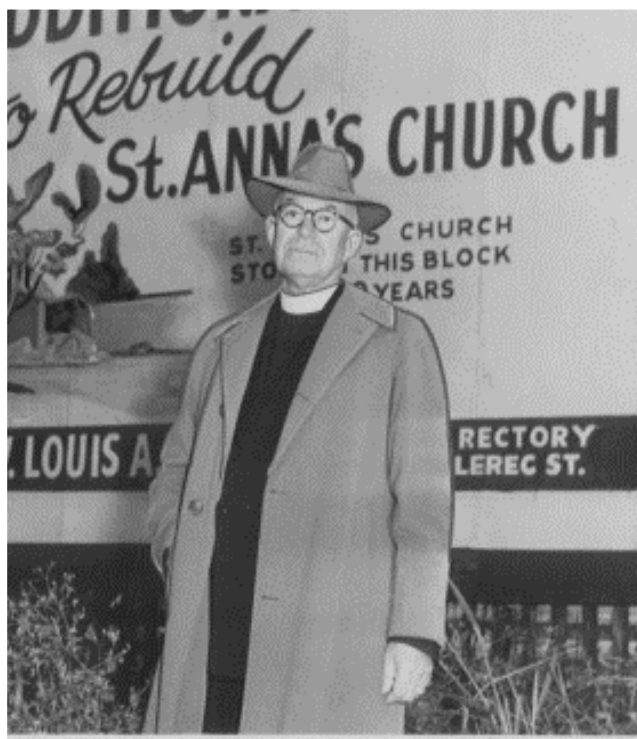
In 1832, Polk moved his family to Tennessee and established "Ashwood Hall" plantation, including 111 enslaved people. While in Tennessee, Polk eventually owned between 200-400 enslaved humans.

In 1838 the national Convention of the Episcopal Church appointed Polk as a Missionary Bishop over the vast territories of the "southwest" including Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi and some of the "Indian Territories." During this time, Polk traveled almost 5,000 miles by horseback within this vast territory. By 1841 he was elected Bishop of the newly formed Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana. He located his family to Leighton Plantation near Thibodeaux, where he owned over 220 slaves. One historian notes that he was a "progressive" in that he hired a priest to preach to his slaves, and that he would bring them "to the big house when they were married."

Polk went on to become a founder of the University of the South, home of The School of Theology at the University of the South. Here is what From the Page: The Polk Family Papers say, "*Polk wrote a letter to the bishops of the southern Episcopal dioceses urging support for a great southern university to serve the purposes of a slave society. Due to Polk's fundraising and organizational efforts, the southern university garnered unparalleled support and laid its cornerstone on Oct. 10, 1860. Polk joined the Confederacy as a major general, but still served as his diocese's bishop. This arrangement drew criticism from northerners—a man of the cloth should not engage in political and military conflict—but elevated Polk in the minds of many southerners. The bishop-general sanctioned their struggle. In 1864, Polk was killed in battle.*"



The construction of a new brick St. Anna's church was completed in 1880. Three marble memorials were created to commemorate the first three Bishops of Louisiana, including Polk. It was at about this time that the reimagining of the Great Rebellion was taking place in what became known as "The Lost Cause." Wikipedia provides a short but worthy explanation of "The Lost Cause" and notes that publication by Jefferson Davis of his defense of the Confederacy went a long way into creating the myth of the "Noble South" vs. "Northern aggression." *Echoes of this myth can be seen in the final words of the Polk memorial: "A soldier of the Lord."*



Notably, the Polk memorial was not the first plaque to be taken down. Several years ago, two of our prominent members, Mrs. Mary King Dodwell and The Rev. Daniel Hanna, commissioned fourteen unique Stations of the Cross as a memorial for The Rev. Bob Dodwell (Mary's husband and long time Rector of St. Anna's) and The Rt. Rev. James Winchester Montgomery. The new Stations of the Cross replaced a memorial plaque for The Rev. Louis A. Parker. Why remove Fr. Parker's Memorial? The Rev. Parker, rector at St. Anna's, had been responsible for the construction of the current church building, which opened in 1951. However, Fr. Parker, it is alleged, was a member of the New Orleans White Citizens Council. Unlike other hate groups operating in secrecy, it was a visible council that recruited members of the community who were generally "well connected and financially powerful," according to Wikipedia. St. Anna's Church

records show that some of the Parker era fundraisers included "Black Face Minstrel" productions. Regardless of the time, regardless of the claim that "it was another era," such institutional behavior was inconsistent with our Baptismal covenant. We cannot celebrate what was positive in Parker's work alongside what was sinful in Parker's work.

We must face, name, and disclose the deeply racist past of St. Anna's and many other churches, and continue the work to fulfill our Baptismal Covenant. Since Fr. Parker's time, St. Anna's has begun the long and difficult process of righting past wrongs and taking our position alongside the marginalized. We have worked alongside our Latino brothers and sisters as a Sanctuary Church. We have offered ESL classes to our migrant friends, established the Medical Mission to provide medical access to underserved communities. We have invested our time, talents, and treasure in building alliances with the LGBTQ+ community. Our joy is in providing a safe space no longer tied to past bias and fear. We invite all to share in this ongoing work because we are writing a new history. That history, by the Grace of God, will be a history of inclusion, a history of alliances with people of color, migrants, LGBTQ+ persons, and any who are on the margins.

We invite you to join us in believing the unbelievable; that a small church can change this world.

This essay was written collaboratively with:

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