

Final Report
Conflict Transformation Process at RE Lee Memorial Episcopal Church
“Discovery and Discernment”
April 6, 2017

C. Identity

Identity is a significant, and often overlooked, aspect of many conflicts. A particular church’s unique identity derives from its style of worship, its work in the community, its building and location, its articulation of doctrine, its members’ political or socio-economic affiliations, and many other variables. The more a characteristic is seen as distinctive and unique, the more prominently it contributes to people’s understanding of that church’s identity.

When members of R. E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church were questioned about the identity of the church, many of the above aspects of identity were referenced. From people’s comments, the church’s identity includes the building, how welcoming the church is or isn’t, its outreach and care for people in need in the wider community, characteristics of the people who are there, its music and liturgy, and the activities of the church. But perhaps the church’s most unique identifier is its name.

The name is unique among Episcopal churches, which are not typically named for people who are not considered saints by the wider church. This “uniqueness” is mitigated by all of the ways Robert E. Lee is memorialized in the Lexington community, including the university neighboring the church that also bears his name.

Yet, the context continues to shift even in Lexington as people across the country increasingly question the appropriateness of the prominence of memorials to Confederate heroes and their symbols. This shift raises, and will continue to raise, the prominence of the unique name of the church in terms of its effect on the overall identity of the church. For some people in the congregation and Lexington community, the name as part of the identity

of the church is a source of pride. For others in the congregation and community, it is an embarrassment. And for some others, it remains a less significant aspect of the church's identity.

Some advocate for trying to elevate other aspects of the identity of the church to minimize the importance of, and therefore the level of conflict over, the name. Yet, if society and the country continue to move in the direction that they appear to have been moving, the name will likely increasingly be seen as a unique attribute of the congregation and will increasingly influence and define the congregation moving forward.

The current conflict over the name involved parishioners who found themselves somewhere on a spectrum between wanting the name to change and wanting the name to remain the same. Underlying these two mutually-exclusive stated positions were many unstated, deeply-held valid needs and interests. Some people even held different needs and interests that made them uncertain which side to choose. Because they were presented with a binary option (keep the name or change it), each parishioner was pressured to determine which choice best suited his or her needs and interests, and the congregation divided between the binary choices. Even some families within the congregation have found that this conflict divides them.

When the Vestry voted between the two stated positions, it affirmed the needs and interests associated with the choice to keep the name without validating or addressing the also-valid needs and interests that people held that had been associated with the choice of changing the name. The needs and interests that led some people to suggest changing the name have not disappeared because of the vestry vote.

The Committee discerned from its work in discovery that a significant number of parishioners remain quite uneasy with the name of the church. Many of those people feel marginalized within their own worshiping community because their needs and issues have not been validated or addressed. The Committee and consultants have discerned that if those people's needs and interests are not adequately addressed, they will either continue

to seek to change the name or withdraw from the congregation. The Committee has further discerned that it would be likely that, since a future vote of the vestry could change the name, the conflict in the parish will continue to escalate until either people holding one position abandon the church or a solution that addresses the needs and interests on both sides is found. The vestry of the church could foreseeably be undermined by people campaigning on, and seeking election primarily because of, their stated position regarding the name of the church.

Some in the congregation, on both sides of the issue, do not understand or empathize with the underlying needs and interests that the other side holds deeply. This is to be expected with escalated conflicts. Yet the Committee discerns within the congregation a significant concern and compassion for one another. The Vestry comprised the Discovery and Discernment Committee with people representing the spectrum of interests and needs relating to the name of the church. As the Committee members worked together, and gained admiration and respect for one another, they desired a solution that honored not only their own needs and interests, but also the needs and interests of those who had a different stated position on the name.

The consultants supported the Committee members who were wondering if there might be another way forward as a congregation that would address the needs and interests of members of the congregation before the conflict resumed its escalation. To begin this brainstorming, the consultants led the Committee through an exercise of naming the needs and interests of people who found themselves on either side of the name debate. The following were identified:

For those who desire to retain the name of R. E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church:

- ☛ That Lee continue to be respected and honored by this congregation
- ☛ That the church's historical heritage be honored
- ☛ That a knee-jerk reaction to the present cultural environment be avoided

☛ That Lee be known as a reconciler

☛ That last year's Vestry decision be honored

☛ That they not be judged or shamed for desiring to keep the name

For those who desire that the name of the church be changed:

☛ That the name of the church reflects its identity in Christ and its spiritual mission and reflects a theological congruency as a church.

☛ That the historical heritage of the church be separate from its mission

☛ That the name be welcoming to all and that it not limit its ability to grow

☛ That Lee's name has become divisive in the church and in the larger society, and has become a liability to the church's reputation

☛ That they not be judged or shamed for desiring to change the name

Based on these identified needs and interests, the Committee was then asked to explore potential positions (beyond the binary choice the congregation was locked into before) that would best honor the needs and interests of people holding the different positions related to the name. The following recommendations arose from that work. Even though the Committee originally represented both of the two binary positions, five of the six members of the Committee supported this compromise position without reservation. One person does not support the recommendation, but does not block it from moving forward.

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

1) With deep respect and appreciation for this congregation's pride in General Lee, along with deep respect for his leadership on behalf of this parish and his role as a reconciler following the war, the Committee recommends that a sub-Committee of the vestry seek ways to honor Lee and the history of this parish in meaningful and significant ways. The Discovery and Discernment Committee envisions a historical marker as a possibility, and/or renaming a newly renovated significant space of the church in memory of R. E. Lee,

such as the parish hall, the undercroft, or the labyrinth. This plan should be completed by December of 2017.

2) The Committee further recommends that the name of the church be officially restored to its former name of Grace Episcopal Church, to be completed no later than the last meeting of the current vestry.