



BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Tryon, NC

Dear Lord, you provided your one and only son to guide and protect us. May your Church of the Good Shepherd be wrapped in your holy spirit to support your flock as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not be fearful because you are with us. Help us to fulfill our Mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

-Written by members of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church

The creation of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Tryon involved many communities, many buildings, and many acts of faith.

One could argue the church was formed with the start of Ms. Plaisted's Sunday School for black children. Others could say the church took root with the creation of the Tryon Industrial School. And yet others could say the church existed before, with the construction of St. Andrew's Chapel on the Green River Plantation and the enslaved people that worshiped within it.

Each of these arguments is based in truth. Perhaps what we can say, with complete certainty, is that Good Shepherd is a community formed by many, the lasting impact of a dedicated group of believers and a resilient group of people.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was only one Episcopal Church in which to worship in Tryon—the majority culture, segregated Holy Cross Episcopal Church on Melrose Avenue. One of the members of this church was Ms. Mabel True Plaisted, second wife of the former governor of Maine, Mr. Harris Plaisted. Supported by Holy Cross, Ms. Plaisted began a Sunday School for black children near the church building, which soon became a gathering place for children and adults alike in the black community. Here, the black community felt free to share resources, to worship together, and to share in fellowship that they were not offered within many white-only church spaces. This community called themselves Good Shepherd.

As the community grew, so did resentment from some influential voices within the town of Tryon. As stated in the manuscript of Scotland E. Harris, “Ms. Plaisted of Maine, seeing that the colored children had never had a school for themselves, opened a Sunday school for local colored children.” This venture soon met with fierce opposition, with many townspeople calling for her to abandon the school. Many white townspeople voiced fear in allowing black children to walk up Main Street in town and come in contact with white children. This feeling soon became so intense that Ms. Plaisted was threatened with physical violence, and in 1907 she was forced to close down the school. The closing of the school was a complete setback to

the black community, for which it served as a central hub of worship and fellowship. The community was thus forced to seek a new space in which to call home.

A year later, many of the former community members of the Sunday School began worshipping in the newly established Tryon Industrial School on Markham Road. The school was intended to educate the black community, but also included a nearby chapel. Much of the land for the school had been donated by a man by the name of Edmund Embury, a Holy Cross member and a philanthropist dedicated to creating educational opportunities for the black community. Embury brought in a man by the name of Scotland Harris to serve as principal, and by 1911 the school had just over 100 pupils.

Scotland Harris was known for his spirit. With a passion for education and faith, he was vocal about injustice and an advocate for equal opportunity. He lived in a large house overlooking the school, a home that, as stated in reports of the time, was "likely to arouse and create an ambition among Negroes for a place and station in life which the Negro was not yet prepared to fill." In fact, Bishop Horner himself stated that, quote, "Building homes equal to the white people will disturb the peaceful relation of the races and raise Negro aspirations to false and elusive hopes of becoming the equal of white people." As such, his boldness had earned him a reputation in the Tryon community, admired by some, resented by others.

In 1908, Rev. Joyner invited Scotland Harris to join him for a Sunday service at Holy Cross and to sit his pew and share in communion. The two families sat beside one another in a pew, participating in the service as equals. The outrage that followed the service was tremendous, and in 1914, Bishop Horner fired Harris under immense pressure from the Tryon community. The Good Shepherd community was yet again deeply impacted by a change outside of their control.

Despite the setbacks, the black Episcopal community in Tryon continued to grow. Much of this can be attributed to a growing alliance of black churches in the Western Diocese, in which Good Shepherd was a part. As the alliance continued to meet, attendance continued to grow, filling up the schoolhouse with worshippers every Sunday. By the 1950's, Good Shepherd contained all of the elements of a church—bulletins, programs, people—and yet they still did not have a church building to call their own.

To tell this story properly, we must once again go back in time to the turn of the century. Down the mountain from Tryon, on the banks of the Green River Plantation in Rutherfordton, a small chapel was constructed by the Coxe family, owners of the nearby Green River Plantation. This chapel, known as St. Andrew's, was home to the black community, many of whom had been previously enslaved on that very land. There it served as a gathering place, a center of community, and a place of refuge for the generational memory the land contained.

By the 1950s, the chapel had gone long unused and had fallen into disrepair. At the negotiation of Bishop Henry, the chapel was relocated, in four pieces, to the site of Tryon Industrial School on Markham Road. In 1955 the chapel was reconsecrated in its new home and renamed Good Shepherd. For the first time in over 50 years, the Good Shepherd community had a building to call their own.

With their own building, the community of Good Shepherd continued to expand. Gordon Hamilton, a current resident of Tryon, recalls visiting his Aunt Elsie in Tryon as a child and the many ways in which the history and community of Good Shepherd impacted the entire community.

"My Aunt Elsie was fully versed on the story of Scotland Harris' firing and of the larger issues and implications of racism. However she did not speak directly of any of those topics. Our elders teach how to navigate interactions with white people and they coach us on avoiding the pitfalls and dangers, which you may not even know exist. Aunt Elsie interacted with extraordinarily skill because she was a housekeeper. She knew white people very well and she knew what could trigger them to feel threatened by the presence of a black person. She skillfully steered me away from going to a library, a park, or any place where my presence would signal "trouble". That included white churches.

Sitting with my aunt at her dining room table was a very special time and I have very fond memories of that. But she would tell me about what to expect at church, the people we were gonna meet. And I'd get up on Sunday morning and she'd be gone because she was one of the few people who would arrive early to turn on the heat, clean the church, get the altar ready and she'd give me clear directions on how to find it, how to get there, this was the first time after the first time I knew, and I'd arrive and Rev. Bonnacher would be there and the church would be packed. Forty people, thirty people, thirty-five people. It was a big gathering and we didn't have an elaborate service, it was a very simple, very modest church but in many ways it was much more meaningful.

My aunt was there for many years. She passed away in '93. Then my dad attended and he became senior warden there with Rev. Jankhe and they built up the church and did quite a lot of things for the youth in the area and again the church was packed! We had forty people there almost every day and there was a choir there was music, it was, we were part of an alliance of 5 black churches and we did things together. They were all, you know, very very happy in those days and then when Jankhe passed away the church had grown to such a point that we were ready, the church was ready to have its own rector, so we were getting out of the realm of a missionary church or a priest-in-charge to having a full-time rector. And so they did a search and Father Walter Bryan was hired. I do remember being here when he arrived and we had a grand dinner at Beryl's house and Rev. Bryan was there and the next day he had Sunday services and everybody in town was there, people who had never been from the black community who had never been to Good Shepherd were there, and it was a nice celebration, a very warm welcoming."

Father Walter Bryan's time at Good Shepherd was notable indeed. Having grown up in Good Shepherd, and his wife at St. Andrew's Chapel, Bryan was previously retired, but returned to serve at Good Shepherd upon hearing the call of two places close to his heart. However, there was no denying that the world was changing, and as the demographic of Tryon shifted many churches in the area struggled to keep their pews filled. Nevertheless, Bryan was there every Sunday, leading a community who had historically continued to worship together despite the challenges they faced.

Ben Ellington, the current Senior Warden of Good Shepherd, came to the church during this era. He recalls that it was Father Bryan's love for the Good Shepherd community that drew him in, and before long he was active in a multitude of ministries.

"I would be considered a fallen Episcopalian. I was born in the church and I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, went to St. Michael of All Angels, the single black Episcopal church in Charlotte for several years. Moved to DC. I guess I've been here about sixteen years. I moved up here with my wife when she got a job here. I asked about Good Shepherd when I first moved here, my wife made a presentation over here she couldn't tell me how she got to it. And she told me that she met Father Bryan who was the priest at the time. I tried to find the church and couldn't so I gave up on it! I think she had to make another presentation and I came with her, and Father Bryan got ahold of me and ok, tumbleweed! On the vestry and then Senior Warden! Delegate to the Convention, how did this happen?"

He's a personality! He blends I believe the pomp and circumstance of the Episcopal church along with a little bit of AME-zionism in there too which is kind of neat. I always wondered, you know, when he would make the decision to chant, you know, it seems like it would come over him pretty much like a black Baptist preacher who all of a sudden gets the feeling, going off in a whole new direction you know! But he kept us together. He was a part-time priest, he was not full time, but he was more full time than part time. And he got me back—I'll never forgive him for that!

I'm 78 years old and I have done a lot of stuff in my life, a lot of stuff I'll never tell you about too! But Good Shepherd got me into a Meals on Wheels program. And that's probably one of, if not the best experience I've had in my entire adulthood. You know, just knowing on average these 20 houses that you visit are generally people who have no way to get out, that you might be the only person they see the entire day and that may be the only meal they get. You know it kind of hits you as you're walking to the door and walking away from it. And regardless of what comes next, I will always be blessed for having that experience at Good Shepherd."

These days, Good Shepherd has become a geographically diverse parish, and an integrated church, reflecting the demographics of the Tryon community. And yet, Good Shepherd still carries with it the memory of many years of injustice and discrimination towards the community that occupied it. The mountains surrounding the hilltop parish in many ways mirror the resilience of the community—one that continues through setbacks, through hardships, and through changes and is stronger for it. Truly, as we reflect on the many ways in which Good Shepherd has overcome challenges in its years, we are reminded of how we are capable of facing any challenge with faith in the name of the one who creates us all. May Good Shepherd continue to remain a reminder to fight for justice, love one another, and carry a steady faith with us.

To learn more about Good Shepherd, please visit the www.goodshepherdtryon.org