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Dear Friends,

My least favorite 30 hours of the year At the end of this month the Diocese of Newark will gather for its annual Diocesan Convention. We do many of the sorts of things you might expect—we elect people to fill leadership positions in a variety of areas, we hear reports, and we pass a Diocesan budget (St. Elizabeth’s pledges just under 24% of our parish income—over \$250,000 for 2015—to the shared ministry of the Diocese in that budget). We hear an address from the Bishop and often from a guest he has invited, we remember members of our Diocesan community who have died in the last year, and we often see a few short videos of lively ministries in congregations throughout the Diocese.

And we debate and vote on resolutions.

Historically, the resolutions are my least favorite part of the whole experience, primarily because they often seek to address complex issues about which few of us have detailed knowledge or experience, and they are often about areas where the world is not waiting to hear from the Diocese of Newark to decide how to go forward. And the extent to which the three lay deputies (an equal number from every congregation, regardless of size) and clergy members represent the many views of their congregations is also unclear. When the Church acts as though we were a government (with actual power to impose its will on its citizens), it seems to me that we misunderstand our identity and do not recognize the source and manner of our considerable, but very different, power.

I embrace radical change After fuming and grumbling about this (often to the retreating backs of colleagues heading off to the bar or to retire for the evening), for about twenty-five Conventions I have decided to break with my personal tradition and submit two resolutions of my own.

Telling the truth about bad news The first resolution addresses how we process the closing of congregations. The number of congregations in the Diocese has been steadily shrinking for some years. As attendance in a congregation dwindles, income shrinks, unmet deferred maintenance costs increase, the ability to retain full-time clergy disappears, congregations run through their endowments, look to support themselves by renting out space, and, when all else fails, simply close their doors or seek to merge or combine with a neighboring congregation. There are local variations on this sequence, but many of these elements are common to many of the stories.

The official closing of a congregation requires the vote of Convention, and, on these occasions, we often celebrate the history of the closed church, but we rarely receive any detailed analysis of the causes or circumstances leading up to its demise. In short, we do pretty good funerals, but if we do any autopsies, their results are never published.

If one grants the premise that closing parishes is a bad thing, then I think we might seek to learn from our mistakes. We are in a challenging environment for parish churches, but if we can salvage useful knowledge from our losses and defeats, we may be better equipped to avoid them in the future.

So I have submitted a resolution calling for a report, to be published to the Diocese, when a congregation closes, the investigation to be conducted by people who have not been involved in decisions or guidance which resulted in the closing of the congregation. For an organization which devotes a fair amount of time to issues of confession, repentance, and amendment of life for the purpose of making things better, I would think this would be fairly straightforward. I am told not to hold my breath.

The second resolution, another hot potato My second resolution seeks to address a kind of log-jam in which we have been stuck for a few years, and is a response to sin of a different sort.

In the past year or so the toxic effects of unresolved racial tensions—maybe we could just say “racism”—in America have been painfully and shockingly evident. The demographics of our prison population, shootings of people of color by police and citizens (including Black-on-Black gun violence), the statistics in areas of employment, education, and income inequality—to name only a few issues—continue to make clear the truth—and I think it a shameful one—that to be Black in America is a significantly different experience from being White.

Politics, have you met religion? In the Episcopal Church you cannot get baptized without affirming a commitment to respecting the dignity of every human being and seeking justice and peace for all persons. It seems to me there remains a significant gap between those principles and what we see on the streets, in the media, and throughout our culture with respect to race. That is by no means the only gap, but that is the one on which I focus in my second resolution.

Certainly some may disagree, but my sense is that American racism has its deep roots in slavery. The genesis of slavery was economic—using people to produce wealth in which they had no share and about which they had no choice. That wealth built up the economies of the Colonies and later the United States (north and south), the economy of England, and it strengthened institutions and endowments, public and private, on both sides of the Atlantic. Textile production, the sugar trade, excavation of raw materials, shipping, tobacco, and other agricultural products were some of the industries in which slave labor was a key element. Great fortunes in Britain and America were amassed by families who may never have seen a slave but received the proceeds of their unpaid labor. I found myself thinking that separation by time might not be so different from separation by distance. I have never seen a slave, but I think I may have benefitted from their labor.

Brown University has done extensive work in looking at how the benefits of slave-generated wealth have persisted through its endowment. The Rev. Ally Brundige, of this congregation, has done similar work about the continuing presence of slave-generated wealth at Yale and the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. I attended both a boarding school and a college whose endowments and benefactors had roots in the proceeds of the slave trade. I suspect many of us through education, business, or the arts have similarly been beneficiaries of the forced and uncompensated labor of

Africans and their descendants in this country for the nearly two and a half centuries in which slavery was legal here.

Don't accept this? Consider a second perspective... One may reject or deny any obligation imposed by such an indirect participation in the systematic denial of basic human rights and dignity. But even in that case one might still acknowledge that racial prejudices and resulting distortions of American life—for everyone—are a deeply destructive element in our national character. Without acknowledging any responsibility from debt, one might still take on responsibility as a commitment to making things better. When Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, his principal figure has no obligation to help the man in distress. But the Samaritan sees a need he can address and, at some cost and inconvenience, he does it. The punchline from Jesus, as you may recall, is “Go and do thou likewise.” (Luke 10:37) If Jesus is talking to you and to me, how do we respond?

Inaction—and action As a Diocese we have been unable to formulate an economic response to the racism in America. It is such a complex topic, and our membership and perspectives sufficiently diverse, that no proposal has come forward to be approved. The trap into which we have inadvertently fallen is the assumption that we cannot do anything as a Diocese until we have a majority vote for a specific proposal. True for a government, maybe less so for a Church.

And yet within the Diocese much is being done.

One way to break down the larger issue I have considered three specific consequences of racism—certainly not the only ones, but three that strike me—and they are: 1) Inequality in educational opportunities; 2) A persistent message from many directions of inferiority and inadequacy; and 3) An exclusion from many of the informal networks by which people advance in their careers, find social or other opportunities, and fully participate in the rich and varied resources of our culture—that is, “the Old Boy Network.”

To correct, oppose, and counteract those three elements would be one way—certainly not the only way, and maybe not even the best way—to address racism in America.

Three specific action options Over the years I have been impressed by how St. Philip's Academy—now **Philip's Academy**—has undertaken each of those three dimensions of the damage of racism. From what I have seen, its education is first rate, its students emerge with a strong and healthy sense of self whatever their race, and their graduates are routinely sought after by educational and other institutions deeply connected to those informal networks which are a real but not always acknowledged element in personal careers.

Our Cathedral in Newark, **Trinity + St. Philip's Cathedral**, from which St. Philip's Academy was founded, is another institution in our Diocese which addresses the broad spectrum of the consequences of racism. Through welcoming worship, lively preaching, and powerful music, it claims—and offers—some of the unmatched achievements of African American culture in the Church. My fellow-Canon at the Cathedral, Sandye Wilson, maintains that our Cathedral is the only Episcopal Cathedral in the United States that is African American in its identity, making it not only a focal point for our Diocese, but a witness to the entire Episcopal Church.

For many years we have been partners with **St. Paul's Church** in Paterson, and especially with their **Community Development Corporation** (CDC). The St. Paul's CDC provides shelter to homeless men (very much in the spirit of The Good Samaritan), offers preparation for employment, English as a second language, food for hungry families, after-school programs for children (a help to their working parents, as well), and a variety of other services to a broad-based population.

Back to the Resolution My resolution invites people who want to take action against the toxic, caustic effects of racism in our immediate area, to become on-going financial supporters—at whatever level seems right to them—of one of these institutions (or more than one) within our Diocesan life. That list of three is meant to suggest rather than limit—one might well find another institution doing comparable work which would be just as good a place to take one's stand.

I picked a school, a church, and a community development corporation to offer a spread—some may want to focus on one area, others on another. Philip's Academy, Trinity + St. Philip's Cathedral, and St. Paul's Community Development Corporation all need support and all put it to good use. As an investment portfolio in addressing the effects of racism, I think they make a strong package.

The point is to do something, and to choose for oneself—rather than be told what to give and to whom—so that one might become an active partner in the work. I do not think the Convention of the Diocese of Newark is smarter or holier than the members of our congregations. I think it is appropriate for the Convention on such a subject to invite, maybe less so to seek to impose.

If we wait until we find a way to address racism that makes sense to us all, we might wait a long time. My view of the Baptismal Covenant is that the duties and expectations it imposes apply to all of us, but how we carry out those promises is up to us. That we seek justice for and respect the dignity of *all* people is a non-negotiable core element of our identity. If you don't accept these principles, the Episcopal Church is not for you. But *how* we carry out those principles is left to individual choice and judgment. And on matters of implementation, there may well be a diversity of views. Let a hundred flowers blossom. Or at least three or four.

And maybe it is up to us not only so that we might have the freedom to choose, but also so that we will engage these issues more deeply ourselves, rather than just complying with some sort of external decree.

The thought behind my second resolution is that if we think slavery was wrong, we ought to do something now to show that. For people who were slaves, it was not just about words. Whatever we do will not balance or take away what was done to them. But perhaps an outward, visible, and even costly participation in redressing the effects of racism in America might be one way to begin to come closer to those for whom it was never a choice then, and is not a choice now.

That's it Those are my two resolutions—an independent report on why congregations close and an invitation to personal support to an institution of one's own choosing to address racism in America. The Convention is at the end of the month—I'll let you know what happens.

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Rector