

From Repentance to Hope in Virginia

Service commemorates Emancipation Proclamation

By Emily Cherry

Over 500 people gathered at St. George's Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg, Va. on Saturday, February 16 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation with a special service of remembrance, celebration and witness. The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop, reminded attendees that "emancipation is another word for the ongoing resurrection we know in Jesus Christ, who continues to set us free." But, she added, "to discover the depth and reality of that freedom, we must re-encounter it, every day of our lives."

The entire congregation joined in a litany of offense and apology, in which the Rt. Rev. Shannon S. Johnston, bishop of Virginia, offered apologies for the Church's complicity in the slave trade – and a promise to strive to create a community of justice. "The Diocese of Virginia gathers to apologize for its complicity in the institution of slavery and to repent of the injuries done in its aftermath," said Johnston in the litany. He added, "With God's grace we will amend our lives, committing ourselves to opposing the sin of racism in personal and public life."

Hosted by St. George's and planned by the diocesan Committee on Race & Reconciliation, the service was designed to mark a true journey from repentance to hope. Three priests of the Diocese of Virginia offered their personal reflections on the subject. "Racism will not go away ... until we name it," said the Rev. Kim Coleman, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Arlington, Va. "Emancipation is ... God's ongoing work of transfiguration through us."

The presiding bishop spoke of that same transfiguring power in her sermon. "God's spirit continues to set the people free," said Jefferts Schori. "Today's act of repentance is another freshening breeze." She added, "That breath of God, the spirit of God, will blow away the cloud, that gale of freedom will propel us forward toward the reign of God, if and only if we are willing to let go of anchoring chains that bind us to our own self-centeredness."

Following the litany of repentance came a litany in celebration of hope, led by Jefferts Schori. The service included joyful music from St. George's choir and the choirs of Shiloh (New Site) Baptist Church in Fredericksburg.

The celebration concluded with a walk through historic downtown Fredericksburg, which passed the site of the former slave auction block and ended at the memorial dedication of a sculpture by artist Ayokunle Odeleye." The sculpture, depicting a set of raised hands releasing a dove into the air, is appropriately called "Jubilation."