Perspectives on the History of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension Gaithersburg, Maryland With Focus on Connections to Slavery and Issues of Racial Justice

[Photo to be added]

A Report Submitted to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington Congregational History Committee

by the Ascension History Committee

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History matters. Your history, my history, our history: these stories make us what we are. To hold out a realistic and renewed hope for beloved community, to see the actual distance between that ideal and the current state of dis-ease in the United States, and in the dominant American Christian communities, we have to tell America's truth.

—The Reverend Stephanie Spellers, 2021: *The Church Cracked Open (p36)*

1. Introduction

As Christians who reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant at every initiation of a new member to the Body of Christ, we pledge to "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being." Knowing that we will fall short of God's intentions, we also commit ourselves to the rite of repentance, promising that we will "persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever [we] fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord." This practice keeps us honest with ourselves, with others, and with God. Through our regular worship, we join in and uphold our need for community confession and absolution to strive continually to partner with God in the healing of our broken world.

In 2021, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (EDOW) embarked on a journey of reckoning with the Church's historical complicity with the enslavement of Africans and African Americans in our country. As an initial step, EDOW commissioned a Congregational History Project to review the history of diocesan congregations and each parish's involvement with slavery. The purpose of this research, conducted as part of the EDOW Reparations Task Force, has been to investigate the financial legacy of chattel slavery in the Diocese and, in doing so, to reckon honestly with and ultimately attempt to make restitution for the value of reparations owed on that legacy. Our committee is focused primarily on the history of Church of the Ascension in Gaithersburg, though there are overlaps in our history with Christ Church Rockville from which we were born.

In beginning this work, we were fortunate to lean upon the carefully researched and written history of Church of the Ascension (*355 and Summit: A History of Ascension Parish*), completed in 2007 in honor of the 125th anniversary of the parish. That document has provided essential information about Clergy leadership, Vestry members, finances, capital efforts, buildings, and church events. We are indebted to the individuals who, through collective effort, provided this foundational and comprehensive overview of the history of our parish. Without it, we would not have been able to so readily understand the intricacies of our history, first as a mission chapel of Christ Church Rockville and later as a parish in our own right.

We also extend our gratitude to our Rector, the Reverend Javier Garcia Ocampo, and to Jesse Velazquez and Julie Brewer for their assistance in obtaining access to parish records. We are grateful to the secretaries of the Vestries across many decades, who faithfully recorded the thoughts, debates, actions, and discussions of our former church leaders. To read these notes is to step back into history and to become acquainted with the pressures, inspirations, and challenges of those who came before us, and to trace the lines that connect both our past and present. As one might imagine, however, stepping back into this history has also been painful at times. To explore our history fully means facing our own interconnectedness with slavery, even as Ascension was founded after the conclusion of the Civil War. Like all Americans, we cannot ignore this legacy. As people of faith, we are called to confront it honestly, openly, and with an eye towards repentance and restitution. We offer this report as our contribution to the

Congregational History Project of our Diocese, guided by the EDOW Reparations Task Force, trusting that peace and justice are only possible when we bring hard truths to light.

This initial work to understand more about the history of Ascension Gaithersburg has revealed direct connections to the institution of slavery through the land donated for the church facilities, the families of Vestry leaders appointed to explore building the chapel, and early Clergy leadership.

We organize the remainder of this paper as follows. After discussing Ascension's founding, we describe the land where Ascension Chapel was built and still stands. Next we discuss the Clergy leadership at Ascension from its founding, and early lay leadership. We then move to more recent history in the period when Ascension transitioned from a mission of the Diocese of Washington to an independent congregation. We highlight four events that illuminate viewpoints and actions taken by the Ascension congregations during the 1960s and 1970s related to the Civil Rights Movement. We close with reflections about next steps and questions that might help to guide our continuing journey as a community of faith.

> Maryland was a slave state but did not secede from the Union during the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved people in Confederate states, did not grant freedom to enslaved people in Maryland. Slavery was not abolished in Maryland until November 1, 1864, through a new state constitution.

2. From a Cradle of Privilege: Ascension Chapel, a Mission Church of Christ Church Rockville

The Reverend Stephanie Spellers notes in her book *The Church Cracked Open*: "No church in the United States of America compares to the Episcopal Church for longevity and depth of alliance with colonial, imperial power" (p53). The first known Episcopal worship in the land that would become Maryland dates to 1608 when Captain John Smith required his crew to read from the Book of Common Prayer each day as they explored the Chesapeake Bay (Smith). The Calvert family, whose charter established the colony of Maryland in 1634, was Roman Catholic, but most Governors and members of the Assembly were Anglican. In 1692, the Colonial Assembly in the State House in St. Mary's City, Maryland, enacted a law creating 30 parishes for the Province (Committee on the History of the Diocese p134). That same year, they deprived Roman Catholics of their public freedom, and every free adult male, regardless of his religion, was obliged to tithe 40 pounds of tobacco, or its equivalent, to the Anglican Church (Smith). On July 25, 1726, the Colonial Assembly of Maryland created Prince George's Parish. At the time, the Parish stretched 90 miles from what is now the District of Columbia to Allegany County, but it became smaller over the years with several boundary changes (Committee on History of the Diocese p137).

The first Vestry of Prince George's Parish was elected on December 3, 1726, and a few weeks later, they called their first Rector, the Reverend George Murdock, to officiate at Rock Creek, the first Parish Church. In 1728, Mr. Thomas Williams gave two acres of land for a Chapel of Ease, which was built in 1739. The Rockville Cemetery was also established there and remains there today (Wikipedia). The Rock Creek Chapel of Ease was rebuilt in 1808 and consecrated under

the name Christ Church by Bishop Thomas John Claggett, the first Bishop to be ordained in the Americas. Christ Church was rebuilt at its present site on South Washington Street (on land donated by Solomon Holland) and was consecrated by Bishop James Kemp in 1822. It became the Parish Church in 1830 (Committee on History of the Diocese p137).

In 1880, while Christ Church Rockville was still part of the Diocese of Maryland, the Vestry and Rector (the Reverend Richard Templeman Brown) appointed a committee of three Vestry members-—J. Sprigg Poole, George Fenton Snouffer, and David Griffith—to build a Chapel of Ease in Gaithersburg to serve the growing population. Ascension Chapel was completed in 1882, with its first service held in 1884. It was consecrated in 1885 by Bishop William Paret.

Ascension Chapel continued as a mission of Christ Church Rockville until becoming a mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington in 1955. As a mission of Christ Church, Ascension was financed and governed by Christ Church's Vestry, and Clergy from Christ Church presided at services. In 1965 the Diocese of Washington recognized Ascension as an independent congregation.

3. The Land

Summit Hall Farm

Our research into Ascension's history shows a direct connection to the institution of slavery through the land our church now occupies. In 1881 the owners of Summit Hall Farm, siblings Sarah Ann (1812–1885) and John T. (1810–1891) DeSellum, donated land for Ascension Chapel.[2] Summit Hall Farm had been part of a large tobacco plantation beginning in the 1750s. The area was called Logtown, and in the 1770s Baltus Fulks, a shoemaker, owned lots in Logtown. By 1828 his daughter and son-in-law, Catherine and James DeSellum, had purchased Fulks's lots and added 242 acres to the farm. Their children, Sarah Ann and John T. DeSellum, inherited Summit Hall Farm in 1847. Records about Summit Hall Farm indicate that John T. DeSellum (and his father James DeSellum[3]) held people in slavery.

John T. DeSellum was an example of the contrasting views of the time.[4] He was a staunch Unionist and yet held people in slavery on his farm. He believed in fighting for the preservation of the Union, and this position brought the wrath of the Confederate army when they passed through in 1863 and again in 1864. Food, supplies, and horses were taken from Summit Hall Farm as the Confederates traveled through. John T. DeSellum describes in his records how he aided Confederate deserters, and there is no record of him being compensated for his losses.

The Piscataway Indians were the first inhabitants of the land

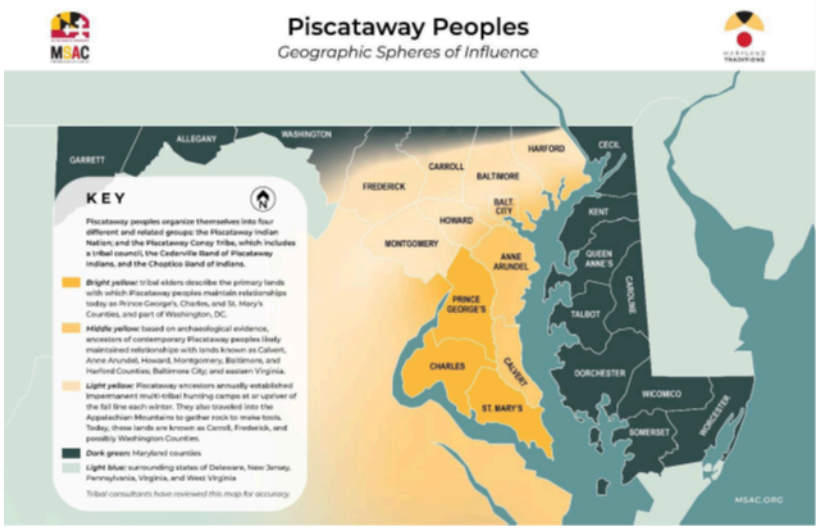
[2] file:///G:/History_Project/Summit%20Hall%20Farm%20Historical%20Marker.html

[3] See website, Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/. Also see "Life in a War Zone: A guide to the Civil War in Montgomery County, MD."

[4] See Robinson (2015), Faith and Tobacco (p35). Robinson notes the differing viewpoints in Maryland regarding secession. Two predominant political parties, Democrats and Whigs, supported secession. The Unionist party, formed in 1861, opposed secession but was protective of slavery. Robinson quotes Episcopal Bishop Whittington of Maryland as saying, "I am satisfied that no community can permanently thrive, that is, for a course of generations, in which slave-holding prevails." However, Franklin (citing Rightmeyer) also reports that the Bishop believed the church had no role in politics and that Maryland should determine its own course.

We recognize that the story of the land where Ascension sits did not begin with the DeSellum siblings donating a parcel of Summit Hall Farm. As documented at Native-Land.ca | Our home on native land, Ascension is located on the ancestral home of the Piscataway people (see Figure). The Piscataway lived and prospered in this area for thousands of years before European colonists arrived in Maryland. The Piscataway were among the first Indigenous groups that early European colonists encountered in what is now Maryland. The Piscataway land was stolen, and its people were decimated by disease and colonial warfare (Tayac 2004; Tayac 1999; Sennet, 2010; Native-Land.ca | Our home on native land. Not until 2012 did the state of Maryland recognize the Piscataway nation.

Maryland State Arts Council
Land Acknowledgement Project Overview and Resource Guide



Source: Maryland State Arts Council, p. 19 (msac.org) accessed July 2022.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding between the Europeans and native nations was their differing views regarding land. Europeans held land privately and used land as a commodity. Tribes believed land was held in common to meet the needs of tribal members. Today we read of land purchases and treaties with Indian tribes or outright land grabs. Europeans believed they were justified in taking Indian land using their legal systems, treaties, deceit, or force because Europeans were convinced they could make better use of the land and its resources. These divergent concepts regarding land yielded the greatest gain for Europeans and the downfall of individual tribes.

The work of Dr. Gabrielle Tayac and other scholars provides extensive resources for us to learn about the Piscataway nation. Dr. Tayac is a historian and professor at George Mason University. Prior to joining the faculty at GMU, she served for 18 years as historian and curator at the National Museum of the American Indian. Her 1999 work, *Spirits in the River*, provides a comprehensive history of the Piscataway. Dr. Tayac is the granddaughter of Turkey Tayac, the last known speaker of the Piscataway language. Through an Act of Congress, Turkey Tayac was buried in 1978 on ancestral sacred ground at Moyaone on the Potomac River.

Although the Piscataway were connected with the Catholic Church in Maryland beginning in1641, more work is needed to understand the role of the Episcopal Church and its connections to the Piscataway.

Increasingly, organizations, universities, and individuals are developing land acknowledgments to recognize that the land we occupy was taken from Indigenous people. We located examples of land acknowledgments used by the Montgomery County government in Maryland and the University of Maryland, College Park. These entities, like Ascension, are located on ancestral lands of the Piscataway. The University of Maryland's Office of Diversity collaborated with Piscataway elders to develop the following land acknowledgment, posted on its website:

> Every community owes its existence and strength to the generations before them, around the world, who contributed their hopes, dreams, and energy into making the history that led to this moment. Some were brought here against their will, some were drawn to migrate from their homes in hope of a better life, and some have lived on this land for more generations than can be counted. Truth and acknowledgment are critical in building mutual respect and connections across all barriers of heritage and difference.
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> At the Office of Diversity & Inclusion [University of Maryland, College Park], we believe it is important to create dialogue to honor those that have been historically and systemically disenfranchised. So, we acknowledge the truth that is often buried: We are on the ancestral lands of the Piscataway People, who were among the first in the Western Hemisphere. We are on indigenous land that was stolen from the Piscataway People by European colonists. We pay respects to Piscataway elders and ancestors. Please take a moment to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us together here today.
>
> Source : https://diversity.umd.edu/resources/land-acknowledgment. Note: The land acknowledgment we [UMD] use was organized by Ghonva Ghauri from MICA and approved by Piscataway elders. If you would like to use the land acknowledgement below for your own office/school/group, please feel free, but we ask that you not change any of the words aside from the office/unit's name, as this was the exact language that was approved by Piscataway Tribe elders.

The Ascension History Committee believes it is essential to acknowledge the ancestral home of the Piscataway people, stolen from them by European colonists. We also understand that land acknowledgment is simply a starting point. We urge our Ascension community to commit to learning about the Piscataway nation and to outlining concrete ways that we can support Indigenous communities into the future. Doing so will help us to avoid "optical allyship" that could occur if we make the statement without a commitment to learn and offer support. To facilitate this process, we have developed a list of resources to foster learning and to support Indigenous communities.

4. The Clergy

After Ascension was founded as a Chapel of Ease by Christ Church Rockville in the early 1880s, its earliest Clergy were Rectors of Christ Church who also served Ascension Chapel. The Rectors were men of education and pedigree, often descended from prominent politicians or theological leaders. As such, they are exemplars of Episcopal Church leadership. While the

timing of Ascension's founding precludes any of these Clergy holding people in slavery at that time, more than one of them held ties to the Confederacy or had family involved in the enslavement of African Americans in their homes.

The Reverend Richard Templeman Brown, Rector of Christ Church from 1875 to 1887, and the first Clergy member to serve Ascension Chapel, was a well-educated and well-known Episcopal priest, having graduated from Kenyon College in Ohio and Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. He served as Rector of multiple churches in the South, including during the Civil War, before joining Christ Church Rockville in Maryland. His mother, Eleanor Rutherford Brown, was the daughter of Robert Rutherford, an early immigrant from Scotland who became a
representative in Virginia's state legislature. Known as a man of "high character, of education, and of refined feelings" (*from Biography of Robert Rutherford, http://www.bedinger.org/biography-of-robert-rutherford-by-rudolf-loeser.html*), he was also a perpetrator of slavery. According to the Will and Probate Records in West Virginia, there were three Black men by the names of John, Harry, and George enslaved in his household. While Richard Templeman Brown himself may not have enslaved any individuals, he was certainly raised in a home that promoted this practice, and any resources that contributed to his education or future well-being cannot be separated from that fact.

The second priest to serve Ascension Chapel (from 1887 to 1897) was the Reverend Arthur Schaaff Johns, son of the prominent Right Reverend John Johns, who served as President and Professor of Theology at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. A student at Virginia Military Institute for six months, Schaaff Johns was listed as a Confederate soldier by the U.S. Confederate Cards Index. Interestingly, the Rector to serve as the third priest for Ascension Chapel, the Reverend Thomas J. Packard, was also the son of a priest (the Reverend Joseph Packard) who taught at Virginia Theological Seminary. The Reverend Thomas Packard served Christ Church and Ascension Chapel from 1897 to 1912. His mother, Rosina Jones, came from a family committed to the Union. His wife, Mattie Cunningham, came from a prominent family in North Carolina with deep ties to the Episcopal Church. The obituary of her father, Colonel John W. Cunningham, a member of the North Carolina Assembly, named that "he was a devoted member of the Episcopal Church and built and supported a chapel in the spacious grounds of his country home." Colonel Cunningham's father Alexander built Waverly Hall Plantation in 1835, a plantation documented to have held people in slavery in Person County, North Carolina (https://www.ncgenweb.us/ncstate/plantations/nc_plantations.html). Whatever resources Mattie contributed to the marriage were built upon the labor of those enslaved by her family.

5. Early Lay Leadership

In 1880, the Vestry of Christ Church Rockville appointed a committee to explore building Ascension Chapel. Those on the building committee included John Sprigg Poole, Judge David Griffith, G. Fenton Snouffer, and Henry Miller. In some cases, there were family connections to slavery, and in other cases, no connection could be found.

John Sprigg Poole was born in Poolesville, Maryland, on August 5, 1846. The back wall of the chancel in Ascension Chapel contains a beautiful stained-glass window that John Sprigg Poole

dedicated to his mother, Rebecca Dickerson Poole. He worked for 25 years for the Deposit Company of Maryland and listed Insurance as his occupation. He served on the Vestry of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in D.C. but attended Christ Church during the summer because his primary home was in D.C. and his summer home was in Rockville. In 1913, he applied to the D.C. Society of the Sons of the American Revolution and could trace his family back to Major Frederick Sprigg, who acted as captain and major in the Maryland militia during the Revolutionary War.

John Sprigg Poole's father, William Dennis Poole, was a farmer. In the 1860 U.S. Census-Slave Schedules, [5] we find a Wm. D. Poole in the Medley District (current-day Poolesville) holding 25 people in slavery. In the 1900 census, Wm. D. Poole lists two black servants, Marian and Margaret Plummer. John Sprigg Poole's grandfather, also named John Poole (1769–1829), did not have any enslaved people listed in the 1790 census.

Judge David Griffith, another building committee member, was born around 1826. He was a private in Company A of the 1st/2nd Maryland Cavalry, for the Union. He was also a Judge in the Orphans' Court of Montgomery County, Maryland. In the 1870 census, David is listed as a farmer. His father, Thomas D. Griffith, held six people in slavery according to the 1860 U.S. Census-Slave Schedules. His brother, Festus, served in the Virginia Cavalry, and at one point was a prisoner at Camp Lookout, a Union prisoner-of-war camp.

George Fenton Snouffer was born in February of 1838. He registered for the Civil War when he was 24 and listed himself as a farmer from Buckeystown, Maryland. He is listed on the Union records. There is a Fenton Snouffer (he went by G. Fenton Snouffer) listed in the 1860 U.S. Census-Slave Schedules, as holding several people in slavery, and the Ancestry.com website links these two names in the search for George Fenton Snouffer. In the 1870 census, several Black domestic servants are listed.

Henry Chew Miller, whose father was a merchant in the Baltimore area, bought Gaithersburg Milling and Manufacturing with Mr. I.T. Fulks. He was also instrumental in bringing the Episcopal Chapel (Ascension Chapel) to town. The church contracted with a local builder, Rufus Belt, to build the chapel.

6. Ascension in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s

In her book *The Church Cracked Open*, the Reverend Stephanie Spellers describes how, although the Episcopal Church is steeped in Anglican tradition and power, its commitment to the vernacular principle also "…maintains that worship and faith expressions should honor and rise from the people's language and culture" (Spellers p57). Ascension Chapel Council/Vestry notes from the 1960s and 1970s show three forces for positive change at Ascension: leadership from the Diocese of Washington, open meetings and parish gatherings that allowed for discussion and debate, and a strong program for children and youth. We thank the authors of *355 and Summit: A History of Ascension Parish* for giving us examples of Ascension's struggles and successes in living up to our Baptismal Covenant.

[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States*, *1860*. Washington, DC.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653,1438 rolls.

Let's look back at 1954 when Ascension was about to transition from a mission of Christ Church to a diocesan mission. Because financial support from the Diocese would decrease with each successive year, estimating potential growth in the congregation and pledge income was a priority. Vestry minutes and notes contain a letter submitted to the Plans Committee, reporting on the estimated growth in the county's population based on data from the school system, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and the Census Bureau. In describing estimated projections in population growth in Montgomery County, the letter refers explicitly and solely to projected growth in the "native white population." We think it is significant that the Plans Committee based its projections of potential congregational growth solely on the White native population in the Gaithersburg and surrounding areas, excluding other racial and ethnic groups. Although we do not know the sentiment that motivated this approach, it seems clear that the early vision for congregational growth did not include diversity in race and ethnicity.

A report from the Chapel Committee from September 9, 1964, shows that the congregation may still have been stuck in an "us versus them" mindset. The report revealed that the Eastern Montgomery Council of Churches had asked Ascension, along with other area churches, to donate $100 to help rebuild the Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Olney, Maryland. Oak Grove AME had been established as Zion Wesley AME Church in 1878 by a group of African Americans freed prior to the Emancipation Proclamation (see https://oakgrove-amez.org/), and in 1964 this original church building had been destroyed by fire. The Ascension Chapel Committee voted not to help, based on two reasons given by the Reverend Harry Dalzell, then the Vicar of Ascension Chapel: (1) Oak Grove was not under the authority of the principal Methodist Conference, and (2) the Oak Grove congregation was described as dying out, with only 10 congregants. The notes indicate no debate over this decision. The next item on the agenda was a decision to allocate $50 for a parish dinner. We learned from our research that Oak Grove African Methodist Zion Church was rebuilt over 10 years, through the contributions of church members and pastors who gave their time, resources, and efforts to the rebuilding. Oak Grove AME, also known as the Freedom Church, has continued to thrive as an active community of faith.

In contrast, four years later, the Ascension community demonstrated more awareness of and willingness to engage in issues of racial justice. But this engagement did not come easily. In January 1968, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, through its collaboration with the Executive Committee on the Council of Churches and the Interreligious Committee on Race Relations, called on Episcopal churches in the Diocese to support the Poor People's Campaign (also referred to as the Poor People's March on Washington). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized the campaign.[6] Ascension's Rector, the Reverend Harry Dalzell preached about this call to support the campaign in his sermons. On April 8, 1968, four days after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, the Vestry called an emergency meeting and resolved ***not*** to support the Poor People's March. The Vestry's

[6] After Dr. King's murder on April 4, 1968, Ralph Abernathy assumed leadership for the Poor People's Campaign, held in Washington D.C. from May 12 through June 24, 1968.

resolution cited concerns over the potential for violence, and a sentiment that demonstrating was not necessary, as legislative actions and voting rights were thought to be sufficient to promote justice. The Vestry's resolution led to some debate and divergent viewpoints among the congregation, and soon after, the Vestry decided to allow individual parishioners to donate. Through individual donations, the church raised more than enough to buy the napkins and plastic cutlery the march organizers requested, leaving $70 remaining to donate to the Bishop's fund for support to Biafra.

Another example shows forward thinking on the part of the Ascension Youth Group and openness of church leaders to move toward equity and justice. In1974 in Philadelphia, 3 retired Bishops took the controversial step of ordaining 11 female Deacons to the priesthood, before the Episcopal Church allowed the ordination of women. The next year, Ascension's Youth Group invited one of these Deacons, the Reverend Allison Cheek, to preach at a service at Ascension. This action seems to reflect support among the Ascension congregation for the ordination of women and a willingness to recognize their legitimacy to serve as Clergy. In 1976, the General Convention voted to ordain women to the priesthood.

7. Ascension Today: Where Do We Go from Here?

While sometimes painful, telling the truth about our past is vital. Yet, we look ahead with hope, knowing that our past need not define our future. We can acknowledge harm and our connections to it. At the same time, we can turn and commit to the work of community building as we strive to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to respect the dignity of every human being.

This report is but a first step on our journey to explore and grapple with our history. We have focused on a few events and milestones that ground Church of the Ascension Gaithersburg. We hope to offer a starting point for future research and truth telling, as we seek to understand more fully the lives, convictions, and actions of the Ascension congregations in the 137 years since the chapel was consecrated.

We also hope that this initial work might offer seeds for the ongoing work of building beloved community. In 2022 as we write this history perspective, we see our Ascension congregation as a diverse, creative, passionate, and loving community. Our congregation's current cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity reflects our surrounding Gaithersburg community. A look at the U.S. decennial census data for Gaithersburg shows increasing racial and ethnic diversity from 2000 to 2020 (see Table). For example, in the 2000 census, 20 percent of the Gaithersburg population identified as Hispanic/Latino, and by 2020 that proportion had grown to 29 percent. Proportions of people who identify as Black or Asian also increased in this time period. By contrast, the proportion of the Gaithersburg population that identified as White declined from 58 percent in the 2000 census to 35 percent in 2020.

Several blessings have converged to form our current diverse Ascension community. In the 1990s, members of the Liberian community and other immigrants from Africa began to join

Ascension, contributing vision for leadership and worship that has shaped Ascension's focus on outreach and community building. In 2004, as the Hispanic population increased in Gaithersburg, the Diocese selected the Reverend Simon Bautista Betances to lead the Latino ministry, working throughout the Diocese but with dedicated office space provided by Ascension. On Ash Wednesday 2004, the Reverend Bautista Betances officiated at the first Spanish service in the newly renovated Ascension Chapel. Since then, weekly Spanish services and regular bilingual worship have become a vital component of Ascension's life. The early 2000s saw a call for more diversity in worship styles and music, with a service designed for families with young children, a Sunday afternoon come-as-you-are service, and a 9:00 a.m. service that used the LEVAS and Wonder, Love, and Praise hymnals. In 2016, in those months with a fifth Sunday, we began holding One Ascension Sundays, featuring one trilingual service (Spanish, English, and American Sign Language) followed by a shared meal.

Since the 1970s, Ascension has supported opportunities for youth fellowship and service. Summer work camps have been a central focus, offering middle and high school students the opportunity to serve, building a lifetime of spiritual experiences through work and fellowship. Ascension's youths have contributed to rebuilding work in Louisiana and Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and to summer work camp projects closer to home. In 2011, Ascension's Youth Group began collaborating with St. James School in North Philadelphia. This relationship has flourished, with Ascension's youths returning each summer to assist with building and groundskeeping, and to serve as summer camp counselors and assistants. With leadership from Ascension's Youth Group, the Ascension congregation has supported the St. James community with holiday food drives and other efforts.

> St. James School is a faith-based Philadelphia middle school in the Episcopal tradition, committed to educating students from an under-resourced neighborhood within a nurturing environment. The school is a community that provides a challenging academic program and encourages the development of the moral, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and creative gifts in its students.
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> *Source: Mission Statement, St. James* Welcome - St. James. (stjamesphila.org)

In 2020 the Ascension Equity & Justice Committee was formed in response to the social unrest and ongoing systemic inequities in the U.S. The committee roots its work in Scripture and has been active in its mission of promoting justice and dismantling inequity and injustice. The committee has organized events and excursions to raise awareness and deepen knowledge about the history and culture of African Americans and Indigenous people, disability rights, criminal justice reform, gun violence prevention, efforts to reimagine public safety, Holocaust remembrance, and creation care. The committee has also held an event with the EDOW Missioner for Equity & Justice on how to do advocacy work and has led the Ascension congregation in conducting the *From Many, One: Conversations Across Difference* exercise.

While we appreciate the gift of our diverse congregation, we also recognize that building a more inclusive and beloved community is a process and that more work is needed. As we compiled this history perspective, a variety of questions occurred to us that might guide next steps in this

work. These are inspired by the concept of stewardship of privilege in the work of the Reverend Stephanie Spellers.

- What is an inclusive community? If it is a place where all are welcome, what does it mean to feel welcome and to belong? Do all people feel welcome now? Do all feel that they belong? If not, what barriers exist and how can they be dismantled?
- Do we celebrate the cultures, gifts, and lives of groups that have been historically excluded? How do we do this, and are there more concrete actions we can take?
- Do we acknowledge how privilege and power influence our community? How can we hold space for honest, and even uncomfortable conversations about equity and justice, particularly regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, and age?
- Do those in the White-majority dominant culture listen to the stories of people who do not share their privilege? Do they acknowledge harm? Are they willing to share access to privileged spaces and relationships?
- Are we able to embrace and celebrate our differences?
- What might we need to let go of, or to embrace, to achieve a more beloved, welcoming, inclusive community?
- How can we continue to build cultural competency? How can we engage one another in meaningful conversations about race, culture, and bias? How can we listen to each other more honestly and openly?
- How can we continue to expand our concept of church so that we might join in God's work underway in our community?

The good news is that we do not need to tackle these questions alone, and we can lean on a growing set of resources to guide the way. For example, we might look to the Episcopal Church's *The Way of Love: Seven Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life*—an intentional commitment to follow Jesus using these practices, as adapted in *The Church Cracked Open*:

1. TURN again and again to God.
2. LEARN Jesus' ways through scripture and holy reading.
3. PRAY and dwell intentionally with God every day.
4. WORSHIP God weekly through community praise, thanksgiving, and petition.
5. BLESS one another by giving our lives away in love.
6. GO across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness.
7. REST in God's grace, because the revolution is not ultimately up to us.

We might also continue structured conversations through exercises such as *From Many, One: Conversations Across Difference*. That structure can help forge relationships of trust, providing safe spaces and firm grounding for deeper engagement on difficult topics. We might consider meeting in groups or engaging with outside facilitators. One such resource is the *Dismantling Racism Training Class* offered by the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing. We can also build on other efforts underway to deepen connections to our community, such as *Tending*

Our Soil. We urge our community to keep moving forward and to hold each other accountable to centering equity and justice in all aspects of our congregational life.

The Ascension History Committee acknowledges and appreciates the foundational reparations work conducted in the Diocese of Maryland. We are grateful to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington for establishing the Reparations Task Force and taking on this important work. We appreciate the inspiration and support the Reparations Task Force has provided to our committee. We have found great meaning in these initial efforts to explore and investigate our congregational history. Because we have only just begun to explore and reckon with our history, we are enthusiastic and committed to building on these initial efforts. We look forward to learning more about the histories of other congregations that are conducting congregational history projects. Finally, we are hopeful about the next stage of the Reparations Task Force's work, including surveying institutional reparations initiatives to identify best practices and to meaningfully participate in making reparations.

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DeSellum Family Cemetery Historical Marker (hmdb.org)

DeSellum Family Cemetery – Gaithersburg – MD – US – Historical Marker Project

Appendix

Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Gaithersburg, Maryland: Census Data from 2000, 2010, and 2020

The current estimated population of Gaithersburg is 70,168 (1/2022).
City of Gaithersburg population based on 2020 Census was 69,657.

Race

CITY OF GAITHERSBURG	CENSUS 2000	CENSUS 2010	CENSUS 2020
White	30,625 58.2%	30,469 50.8%	24,271 34.8%
Black / African American	7,680 14.6%	9,752 16.3%	11,533 16.6%
American Indian / Alaska Native	188 0.4%	272 0.5%	644 0.9%
Asian	7,241 13.8%	10,145 16.9%	13,305 19.1%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	33 0.1%	34 0.1%	83 0.1%
Other Race	4,535 8.6%	6,404 10.7%	11,906 17.1%
Multiple Races	2,311 4.4%	2,857 4.8%	7,915 11.4%
Total Population	52,613	59,933	69,657

Ethnicity

CITY OF GAITHERSBURG	CENSUS 2000	CENSUS 2010	CENSUS 2020
Hispanic / Latino of any Race	10,398 19.8%	14,499 24.2%	19,834 28.5%
White, Not Hispanic / Latino	25,818 49.1%	23,961 40%	21,970 31.5%
Black / African American, Not Hispanic / Latino	7,457 14.2%	11,193 16.1%	11,193 16.1%
American Indian / Alaska Native, Not Hispanic / Latino	131 0.2%	108 0.2%	108 0.2%
Asian, Not Hispanic / Latino	7,205 13.7%	13,202 19.0%	13,202 19.0%

Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander, Not Hispanic / Latino	33 0.1%	62 0.1%	62 0.1%
Other Race, Not Hispanic / Latino	170 0.3%	623 0.9%	623 0.9%
Multiple Races, Not Hispanic / Latino	1,401 2.7%	2,665 3.8%	2,665 3.8%

Source: Decennial Census, taken from City of Gaithersburg website [Demographics | Gaithersburg, MD (gaithersburgmd.gov)](#) accessed July 25, 2022.