

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: Feb. 16, 2025

Absalom Jones

by Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church as we celebrate morning prayer. February is celebrated as Black History month and in particular this week the church often recognizes Absalom Jones, who was born in 1746 and lived until 1818. This is from the Episcopal Church's Historical page.

Absalom Jones was America's first Black priest ordained in the Episcopal Church. Born into slavery in Delaware at a time when slavery was being debated as immoral and undemocratic. He taught himself to read, using old books, with the New Testament as one of his resources. At the age of 16, Jones' mother, sister, and five brothers were sold, but he was brought to Philadelphia by his master, where he attended a night school for African-Americans that was operated by Quakers.

Upon his release from slavery in 1784, he served as lay minister for the Black membership at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church with his friend, Richard Allen, and together they established the Free African Society to aid in the emancipation of slaves and to offer sustenance and spiritual support to widows, orphans, and the poor.

The active evangelism of Jones and Allen greatly increased Black membership at St. George's. Alarmed by the rise in black attendance, in 1791 the vestry decided to segregate African Americans into an upstairs

gallery without notice. When ushers attempted to remove the black congregants, the resentful group exited the church.

In 1792 Jones and Allen, with the assistance of local Quakers and Episcopalians, established the “First African Church” in Philadelphia.

Shortly after the establishment that same year, the African Church applied to join the Protestant Episcopal Church, laying before the diocese three requirements: the Church must be received as an already organized body; it must have control over its own affairs; and Jones must be licensed as lay-reader and if qualified, ordained as its minister.

Upon acceptance into the Diocese of Pennsylvania, the church was renamed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. The following year Jones became a deacon but was not ordained a priest until 1802, seven years later. At 56 years old, he became the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church.

He continued to be a leader in his community, founding a day school (as African-Americans were excluded from attending public school), the Female Benevolent Society, and an African Friendly Society. In 1800 he called upon Congress to abolish the slave trade and to provide for gradual emancipation of existing slaves.

Absalom Jones was an earnest preacher. He denounced slavery and warned the oppressors to “clean their hands of slaves.” Known as “the Black Bishop of the Episcopal Church,” he was an example of persistent faith in God and in the Church as God’s instrument. Jones died in 1818.

It is important to remember our history, the whole of our history as several years ago CTL read the book “Black and Episcopalian, the struggle for inclusion”. It was through this reading that we heard of the many struggles African-Americans have had becoming leaders in the Episcopal Church especially when it included full inclusion and voting rights.

As the saying goes, “when you know better, you do better”. Please take some time to learn about some of the church’s Black innovators and leaders this month. We are not able to move forward until we know our whole history, and that includes the good and the bad, the struggles, and the victories. Amen