

An appreciation for the life and ministry of the Ven. Odell Greenleaf Harris
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Let me be clear from the outset of these remarks: the life and ministry of Odell Greenleaf Harris deserves to be better known and more widely appreciated.

Why? Because his story encapsulates two neglected aspects of our history.

First, his story helps us to gain an appreciation for the black Episcopal families, congregations, and schools that existed here in Warren and Halifax Counties in the early decades of the 20th century: to appreciate the network of reciprocal support that tied these families, schools, and congregations to the larger church, and to appreciate the excellence of the academic and spiritual preparation that Odell Greenleaf Harris and others received.

Second, his story is one of consistently combatting the system of Jim Crow segregation in church and society. Again, we need to appreciate the extent of what he was able to achieve, especially during his ministry in North Carolina and Virginia. He left a legacy of substantial progress toward racial upbuilding, equity, and inclusion. He was a pioneer, working to dismantle racist structures in the decades before the Civil Rights Movement caught fire; before the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*; before Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King rose to national prominence. His is a record that needs to be remembered and celebrated.

Let us begin this appreciation with Harris's family background among the small band of Episcopalians in the Russell Union community of Warren County.

Following emancipation, when those who were formerly enslaved gained the freedom to make their own choices regarding religious affiliation, a charismatic black preacher named James R. Howell made his way from New York to Boydton, VA and organized a new church body under the name of the Zion Union Apostolic (ZUA) Church. Howell was previously an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the new body adopted many of the characteristic features of American Methodism. Howell's evangelism spread from Southside Virginia into northern Warren County, and until 2015 there remained an active

congregation in the Reformed ZUA denomination in the Russell Union community.¹

Now, what's important to understand is that between 1874 and 1880, there were ongoing talks between the ZUAs and Virginia Episcopalians about possible merger between the two bodies. Ultimately, that merger did not transpire, which is why the ZUAs regrouped in 1882 as the Reformed ZUA Church. But the conversations between the two bodies did lead some among the ZUA Church to embrace the Episcopal Church. One of those was James Solomon Russell, who would become the first student at Bishop Payne Divinity School in Petersburg in 1878, and then go on to found St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, VA. Another was William Paschall Russell, Odell Greenleaf Harris's grandfather, who lived in the Russell Union Community. Yet another was a ZUA minister named George Williams, who would enter St. Augustine's in 1887 to prepare for ministry in the Episcopal Church.²

Precisely when William Paschall Russell became an Episcopalian is not known. And precisely when a small group of Episcopalians in the Russell Union Community began to coalesce as a worshipping community is not known. What we do know is this: in 1887, Norvel Russell, one of William Paschall Russell's sons, deeded an acre of land to the trustees of this diocese for a church called St. Luke's; and George Williams, the former ZUA minister and now a student at St. Augustine's, began a 6-year ministry as the lay-reader for St. Luke's, spending one Sunday a month in Warren County. We also know that two or three times a year, the Principal of St. Augustine's, the Rev. Robert B. Sutton, would come with George Williams to administer the sacraments.³

Now this is the Christian community that nurtured Odell Greenleaf Harris from infancy to age ten. It was a congregation principally built and sustained by his

¹ For an overview of the history and practices of the Zion Union Apostolic Church, see Arthur C. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of The United States and Canada. Volume II: Protestant Denominations* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978) 609, 610. "On August 20, 2015, a letter was signed by 17 members of Russell Union Reformed Zion Union Apostolic (RZUA) Churches of America, proclaiming their immediate withdrawal from the Union. Since then, the Church has been called Russell Union Church." Virginia Broach to Brooks Graebner: email dated March 30, 2022.

² Worth E. Norman, Jr. *James Solomon Russell: Former Slave, Pioneering Educator and Episcopal Evangelist* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012) 75-85.

³ *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of North Carolina* (1888): 25. Hereinafter abbreviated *NCDJ*. *NCDJ 73rd* (1889): 124, 126. *NCDJ 74th* (1890): 129.

grandfather, who supervised the weekly Sunday School.⁴ It was a small congregation, consisting of five or six families, but it was characterized by its loyalty and devotion to the Episcopal Church.⁵ In his autobiography, Odell Greenleaf Harris describes how his family life centered around daily morning and evening prayer, and how the entire family fasted on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.⁶

After the diocesan position of Archdeacon for Ministry among Colored People was created in 1891, St. Luke's would become one of several congregations served by the Archdeacon, an arrangement that lasted until 1914.⁷ But at best, the Archdeacon could minister only occasionally to the congregation. More regular ministrations would therefore be the responsibility of the lay-reader. George Williams filled that role until 1893; from 1896 onward, the lay-reader at St. Luke's was Virgil Bond.⁸

That's significant because Bond was also the chief organizer of the black congregation and school in Littleton. A graduate of both the teacher-training and theology departments of St. Augustine's, Bond moved to Littleton in 1892 with the family of black Congressman Henry Plummer Cheatham and started a school for black children with another St. Augustine's graduate, Clara Leary. Bond, who was a skilled carpenter, a trade he honed at St. Augustine's, actually built the church building for St. Anna's, as well as serving as lay-reader.⁹

⁴ Archdeacon Henry B. Delany noted the death of William Paschall Russell in his 1915 parochial report for St. Luke's: "We regret to mention the death of our late Superintendent, and one of the founders of this Mission, William P. Russell. He died the first week in March, and was faithful unto the end." *NCDJ* 99th (1915): 120.

⁵ *NCDJ* 79th (1895) 129; Henry B. Delany, "St. Luke's Mission, Near Ridgeway, N.C., in Warren County," *The Carolina Churchman* February, 1912, 19.

⁶ Odell Greenleaf Harris, *It Can Be Done: The Autobiography of a Black Priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church who started under the bottom and moved up to the top*. Edited by Robert W. Prichard (Alexandria: The Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1985) 5. Hereinafter cited as Harris, *It Can Be Done*. Note the similarity of Harris's account of Prayer Book piety to the description of James Solomon Russell's use of the Book of Common Prayer. Norman, *James Solomon Russell* 22.

⁷ Starting in 1914, Archdeacon Henry Beard Delany arranged for the yoking of All Saints', St. Luke's, and St. Anna's under the care of one clergyman: the Rev. Joseph Hudson. In 1914, Hudson served as a deacon under Delany's guidance. Once Hudson became a priest in 1915, he took over the pastoral oversight of the three congregations, a deployment pattern which would continue into the 1930s.

⁸ *NCDJ* 80th (1896): 112.

⁹ See *Annual Catalogues for St. Augustine Normal School and Collegiate Institute, Raleigh, N.C.* From 1890 to 1893, Virgil N. Bond is listed as both a postulant in the Theology Department and as a student in the Normal Department. In 1890-1891, he is also named as a "Pupil-instructor" in the Carpentry Shop. For the founding and development of St. Anna's, see Virgil N. Bond, "St. Anna's Mission, Littleton, N.C." *The Carolina Churchman* (July, 1912) 10.

Bond's success in building a thriving black parochial school in Littleton impelled the diocesan Archdeacon, the Ven. John H.M. Pollard, to actually move to Littleton himself in 1901 and to help arrange the purchase of a 31-acre farm. The hope was to expand the school into an industrial-training center, much on the model of what James Solomon Russell was building at St. Paul's in Lawrenceville, VA. Pollard was quite familiar with Russell, having served alongside him in the Diocese of Virginia in the late 1870s and 1880s.¹⁰

Now all this is important because of what happened next. In 1913, Robert L. Harris decided to relocate his family to Littleton, since there wasn't a day school for black children in the Russell Union Community at the time. Moreover, Robert Harris was given oversight of the 31-acre farm at St. Anna's.¹¹

So, beginning in 1913 and continuing until 1919, Odell Greenleaf Harris was enrolled at St. Anna's School in Littleton, where he would progress through the 7th grade. Among his teachers at St. Anna's, in addition to Virgil Bond, were G. Ellis Harris and his daughter, Helena Harris, themselves both St. Augustine's graduates.¹² G. Ellis Harris is best remembered as the author of the *North Carolina Constitutional Reader*, a 1903 publication of St. Augustine's designed to help illiterate blacks pass the new literacy requirements for voting in NC. His daughter, Helena, would later become a teacher in the Halifax public school system, and the Gymnasium at MacIver High School would be named in her honor.

So, we can see that the story of St. Luke's and St. Anna's are thoroughly interwoven, and that Odell Greenleaf Harris's family exemplifies that connection. Moreover, we can see at work the vital role which St. Augustine's College played in the life of these congregations. St. Augustine's supplied the lay-readers and teachers for St. Luke's and St. Anna's. St. Anna's, in turn, supplied a cadre of outstanding students who would attend St. Augustine's and then return as teachers, lay readers, and clergy to continue and extend the mission and ministry of the black Episcopal Church.¹³ And as we shall see, Odell Greenleaf Harris is part of that larger pattern as well.

¹⁰ On Pollard and Russell, see Norman, *James Solomon Russell* 67. For an account of the training school and farm at St. Anna's, see Pollard's report in *NCDJ* 85th (1901): 122.

¹¹ Archdeacon Henry B. Delany reported for St. Anna's, "The coming of Mr. Robert L. Harris from St. Luke's Mission, with his family of eight, to take charge of our school farm, is and will be of great help in our work." *NCDJ* 97th (1913): 98.

¹² Harris, *It Can Be Done*, 7.

¹³ Delany's 1912 parochial report for St. Anna's notes seven St. Anna's students currently attending St. Augustine's. *NCDJ* 96th (1912) 90.

After completing 7th grade, which was the highest grade level offered at St. Anna's, Odell Harris could have gone straight to the high school, or preparatory department, at St. Augustine's. Instead, he took time off from school. And when he resumed his education in 1923, he did so at the Henderson Institute, a Presbyterian-affiliated High School, enrolling in the 8th grade and living in a dormitory on campus. To make ends meet, Harris worked nights and Saturdays as a barber in town.¹⁴

Odell Harris describes the Henderson Institute as one of the best schools he ever attended, with the highest educational standards in the state. As a senior, he joined the school debating team and was named the best debater in the state among black high school students. He also graduated in 1928 as the Valedictorian of the senior class.¹⁵

This prepared him to enter St. Augustine's College that fall. Harris did not, however, intend to give up his trade. He insisted on returning to Henderson every weekend to work as a barber and to see his new bride.¹⁶ Although Harris continued to do well in his academics, his weekend absences from campus were a cause of friction with the academic dean, Charles Boyer. As a result, Harris left St. Augustine's after two years and applied for admission to the Bishop Payne Divinity School in Petersburg, Virginia to continue his preparation for the priesthood there. Bishop Payne, a satellite seminary of the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, was founded in 1878 for the training of black men for ministry in the Episcopal Church.¹⁷

The schedule Harris kept while attending Bishop Payne was staggering. He took his theological subjects at Bishop Payne in the morning, and in the afternoon, he attended Virginia State College to earn credits towards his undergraduate degree. He also continued to go home to Henderson on weekends to work and see his wife. After three years, Harris was again named Valedictorian of his senior class and was awarded degrees from both Bishop Payne and St. Augustine's. He also passed his canonical examinations for both the diaconate and the priesthood.¹⁸

¹⁴ Harris, *It Can Be Done*, 11-13.

¹⁵ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 15-16.

¹⁶ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 15-16.

¹⁷ See Odell Greenleaf Harris, *The Bishop Payne Divinity School, Petersburg, Virginia 1878-1949: A History of the Seminary to Prepare Black Men for the Ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church* (Alexandria: Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary, 1980) 1-3.

¹⁸ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 17-25.

Once ordained deacon in June of 1933, Odell Greenleaf Harris was assigned by Bishop Penick to serve three congregations: All Saints', Warrenton; St. Luke's—his home congregation, and St. Anna's—where he had gone to grade school. His first task at All Saints' and St. Anna's was to see to much-needed building repairs. In both instances, he got directly involved in making the repairs himself and then challenged the congregation members to join him in the effort. He also engaged in a vigorous schedule of pastoral visitations, claiming and reclaiming members for the Episcopal Church. And he was active in local projects, helping to build the community center (which still stands one block north of All Saints').¹⁹

One incident which occurred early in Odell Harris's ministerial career merits close attention. In 1934, Harris attended his first diocesan convention. Here's how he describes what happened:

I attended my first Diocesan Council [Convention] in 1934 in Christ Church, Raleigh, North Carolina. I was just a deacon, fresh out of seminary. I had been thoroughly drilled at Bishop Payne in the fact that the Episcopal Church was the one HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH. I swallowed it whole and really believed it. To my dismay and utter surprise, however, the ushers at Christ Church directed all blacks to the balcony. At the opening service, all blacks were in the balcony and all whites in the nave of the church.

At the close of the council I went to Bishop Penick and said, "I was really shocked and surprised that you would permit the Negro priests to be sent to the balcony while the white priests and laymen occupied seats in the nave of the church. This is contrary to all that we were taught at seminary about the ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH." He looked at me with as pious an expression as that bishop could muster and said, "Well, no one else has raised any objection." (I am sure he was right on that point, for the black priests were of the "old school"—whatever that may have meant.) I said to him, "If this is the way it will be in the future, I don't ever intend to come to another council." He looked at me as if I were crazy. I meant, however, what I said. I did attend three more Diocesan Councils in the Diocese of North Carolina, but I never again went to the balcony. At my

¹⁹ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 26-36

first council meeting, I decided never to accept segregation in any church affairs. I have lived up to that decision up until now.²⁰

This passage is worth noting for many reasons, not the least because of what it says about prevailing practices in our diocese and about Bishop Penick. But I want to call our attention to another aspect, the connection Harris is making between his ecclesiology, his core convictions about the nature of the church, and his rejection of Jim Crow segregation in church affairs. Harris insists that when we proclaim the Church to be One Holy Catholic and Apostolic, we cannot then allow ourselves to accept segregated practices when both black and white members of the Church are present. For Harris, this was an inviolable rule, from which he refused to countenance any deviation.

So, how did Harris subsequently put that core conviction about the unity and catholicity of the Church into practice as he continued in ordained ministry? Harris received a call in 1937 to return to Bishop Payne Divinity School as Warden and Professor of Old Testament. As warden, Harris was responsible for arranging daily religious services and supervising the students; as professor, he taught New Testament Greek and Pastoral Care. To broaden the student's experience, he arranged for students to conduct weekly services at Central State Hospital and to do parochial work in nearby congregations with clergy vacancies.²¹

When he arrived in 1937, Harris was the only black faculty member, and the prevailing attitude of the white faculty and trustees was paternalistic. This changed for the better in 1942, when the Rev. Robert A. Goodwin became seminary Dean. With Goodwin's backing, Harris placed before the trustees the job descriptions and duties of all the faculty, and requested equal pay with the white professors. Once the salaries were equalized, Harris lobbied for blacks to serve on the board of trustees and for the hiring of more black professors. In both cases, his petitions were successful.²²

In 1949, Bishop Payne faced a choice: whether to proceed with a major fundraising and building campaign or close its doors. Harris went to Dean Goodwin with a proposal: that Bishop Payne temporarily suspend operations for three years to determine whether black postulants would be accepted at other seminaries of the Episcopal Church on an equal basis with whites. If all black applicants were

²⁰ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 33; the capitalization is in the original. Note: Harris uses the Virginia nomenclature for annual diocesan gatherings. In North Carolina, they are called Conventions; in Virginia, Councils.

²¹ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 37,38.

²² Harris, *It Can be Done*, 39,40.

accepted, and black students treated on an equal basis, then Bishop Payne would be closed permanently and the \$192,000 already raised for renovations would be given to those seminaries that took in black students. In 1952, at the end of the three-year trial period, Bishop Payne closed its doors and merged with Virginia Theological Seminary.²³

Harris was equally successful in making meaningful change in the larger community. When Petersburg decided to build a new hospital in the late 1940s, Harris was asked to head up the fundraising effort among local blacks. He refused to accept the position unless the following conditions were met: 1. That black people be allowed to enter through the front door; 2. That black doctors and nurses be permitted to serve on an equal basis with whites; 3. That black women be offered nurses' training on an equal basis with whites; 4. That the maternity ward and the intensive care ward be unsegregated; 5. That if the floor designated for black patients became full, that blacks would be given unsegregated space elsewhere in the building. Remarkably, the hospital authorities agreed to all of Harris's conditions. Harris then convened a public meeting to present the plans for the new hospital to the black community and enlist their financial support. Harris's appeal garnered double the amount anticipated.²⁴

Also in the late 1940s, Harris spearheaded a local initiative to build a large playground in the black community. When he took the request to the mayor and the city council, the mayor was openly contemptuous of Harris and the request, to which Harris responded by noting that the mayor was under the influence of alcohol, unfit to be in public office, and that Harris would henceforth be working actively to see to the mayor's defeat in the next election. Following Harris's confrontation of the mayor, first one and then the three other council members declared their support for the park project and authorized the necessary funding. At that point, even the mayor voted to approve the project.²⁵

But Harris's greatest contribution to racial equity came in his work for the Diocese of Southern Virginia. In 1943, when Bravid Harris (another distinguished Warrenton native; later Bishop of Liberia) left the position of Archdeacon for Negro Work to become Secretary of Negro Work for the National Council, the Diocese still had in effect Canon XV, which restricted black clergy and congregations to token representation in the diocesan annual council and which

²³ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 57,58.

²⁴ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 42-45.

²⁵ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 45-47; 54,55.

countenanced paying black clergy less than their white counterparts. Odell Greenleaf Harris was unanimously elected Dean of the Colored Convocation and assumed the duties formerly performed by the archdeacon. At his instigation, the diocesan convention proceeded to dismantle the existing canon and admit lay delegates from black and white congregations on an equal basis. Harris was subsequently elected to the diocese's Executive Committee, where he successfully moved the Committee to equalize the pay and benefits of black and white clergy. Harris did so, however, over the protests of both bishops, who claimed there wasn't enough money to pay blacks and whites equally. In 1947, Harris organized a walkout at diocesan convention, in protest of segregated dining tables. And in 1951, he resigned his position as Archdeacon in Southern Virginia rather than accept additional duties demanded by the new diocesan bishop.²⁶

Odell Greenleaf Harris accepted a comparable position in the Diocese of Atlanta, where he served until 1961. During his 10 years in Atlanta, he witnessed the establishment of a diocesan policy that black Episcopalians would be welcome in any church. Harris declared in his autobiography: "I know of nothing that gives me greater joy than to have had a hand in helping the Episcopal Church in the State of Georgia open its doors to blacks. It can be done, and it was done."²⁷

Harris concluded his full-time ministry by returning to Virginia in 1961, now serving in the Diocese of Virginia at St. Peter's in Richmond. I want to highlight one achievement during this final tenure, namely, that Harris was made Chair of the diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains.²⁸ This appointment speaks to Harris's status as a scholar and teacher. Although the product of a segregated school system, and although compelled to teach in a segregated seminary, Harris was a man of considerable intellectual and academic ability, fully the equal of white clergy. During his time as warden of Bishop Payne, Harris spent his summers enrolling in courses at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York, ultimately earning an M.A. from Columbia.²⁹ The Bishop of Atlanta was the first to acknowledge that Harris knew Greek better than any of his white clergy, naming him to the diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains.³⁰ The Bishop of Virginia followed suit, and made Harris the board chair.

²⁶ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 59-70.

²⁷ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 87.

²⁸ "The Rev Odell Greenleaf Harris, September 3, 1903-November 7, 1983" *Annual Journal of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia*, (January, 1984): 55.

²⁹ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 38.

³⁰ Harris, *It Can be Done*, 80.

More could be said, but I hope this serves as a sufficient introduction to the remarkable life and ministry of the Ven. Odell Greenleaf Harris, who devoted himself to making our congregations and communities fulfill the true meaning of a Church which proclaims itself to be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.