

CHAPTERS IN TRINITY'S HISTORY

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CHAPTER XII - THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CONGREGATIONAL AFFAIRS: 1812-1890

There was no official role for women in Trinity during the nineteenth century. They could not vote in congregational meetings (even if they were pew-holders), serve on congregational committees, or serve on the vestry. However it is quite clear from vestry minutes, diocesan reports, correspondence, and newspaper files that the women of the congregation had a major impact on the life of the parish.

In the 1830s there was a Ladies Working Society which functioned somewhat as an earlier version of the Daughters of the Holy Cross. At the request of the rector, they provided the funding for a parochial library. The group also paid for the painting of the little wooden church inside and out and decorated the interior with red velvet. In addition, the rector reported that the women had "contributed liberally towards the extinguishment of the balance of a debt due by the church." With the ladies' assistance, Trinity paid off all its debts in 1835 and notified the diocese that it would no longer ask for financial support.

In 1839 the women of the parish raised the necessary funds to erect a Sunday School building near the church, and then they managed the financial affairs of the school. The rector did teach some classes in the school, but was somewhat peeved that he was not in charge. "The Parochial School is in successful operation," he reported to the diocesan convention, "but the collection and disbursement of the funds are attended to by the ladies and are not under my regulation or control."

When the congregation erected its new sanctuary in the 1840s, Mary Cantey Hampton commissioned the noted sculptor Hiram Powers to carve a marble baptismal font. The first one he executed was unsatisfactory to Mrs. Hampton and eventually was shipped upstate to the Church of the Nativity in Union, South Carolina. A second marble font (the one still in use) with its Gothic panels matching those of the new marble altar, was installed as Mrs. Hampton's gift to the congregation.

In the 1880s, Mrs. Mary Marlow and the women of the Church Guild supported local mission and outreach efforts through their own funds or such community projects as the "Trinity Church Christmas Tree" for the poor of Columbia. Given the funds expended on missions, the women must have been continuing their long-standing tradition of maintaining a separate account under their (not the vestry's or rector's) control.

Since its inception, the primary source of funding parish operations had been pew rentals. Any unexpected major expenses were normally funded by special Easter offerings. By the 1880s, the church was in such disrepair that the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Peter Shand's ministry had to be postponed.

The vestry had voted to build new Sunday School facilities for the congregation's burgeoning mission and outreach efforts. However, since the vestry was unable to raise the necessary funds to keep the church in decent repair, it could not support a new Sunday School. The women of the church petitioned the vestry to be permitted to undertake the Sunday School project. The vestry agreed but appointed a committee to "act with the ladies." On All Saints Day 1886, the women of Trinity presented to the vestry a brand new, completely furnished, Sunday School.

Neither pew rentals (which were increasingly in arrears) nor Easter offerings provided the funds the congregation needed to maintain its sanctuary or build any new facilities. In fact, Trinity often had to make overdrafts on its account with the Central National Bank in order to meet existing obligations. Based upon the success of the 1881-1886 Sunday School campaign, the vestry turned to the women of the parish for help. In 1887, the vestry appointed a committee of eight women to visit parishioners prior to Easter to encourage them to make "more liberal contributions."

In 1888, at a special congregational meeting, a committee of ten parishioners was appointed to decide upon a "fitting memorial" for Peter Shand. Five members were men and five were women. The appointment of women to an official congregational committee was highly unusual, but given Trinity's recent history they had proved to be more effective fund-raisers than the men of the church. The funds were raised and five chancel windows were installed within less than eighteen months.

Despite their lack of any official status in the congregation, it is clear from the record - whether in the flush days of the antebellum years or the straitened circumstances of the post-Civil War era - that the women of Trinity Church played an absolutely crucial role in the life, health, and development of the congregation.