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RELIGION

Why 200 years later, Vine Street Christian Church's progressivism is still an 'ongoing process'

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Reflecting on its 200-year-long legacy, Vine Street Christian Church is proud that it gained the reputation of being a relatively progressive church.

But to retain that title as it moves into the future, leaders and lay members acknowledge there is a lot of work to still do.

"What I find most progressive about us as a community is our attitudes toward wrestling with big questions," said Thomas Kleinert, Vine Street's senior minister. "We don't fall back on doctrine. We never do. We always engage with people. We always engage the questions and we engage with honesty and vulnerability."

Congregants of the Disciples of Christ church, some younger and others older, echoed Kleinert at a bicentennial festival on Wednesday. Members hopped on a trolley to visit a site where the church was once located, at Church Street and 7th Avenue, and then back to its current location, along Harding Pike, where the church unveiled two historical markers for the first time.

Those who attended were joyful marking the church's history but it didn't hold back from talking about difficult topics.

"Going forward, I hope that we can work more on interracial relationships," said Ed Cole, who joined the church after moving to Nashville in 1972.

Eva Evans, who joined the church in 1974, said the same thing. She said she only knows one Black person who attends the church.

On other issues, the church distinguished itself for embracing certain positions at the time it did. In the 1960s, the senior minister at the time preached against the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, leadership opened up to the ordination of women, though women wouldn't hold leadership positions there until later.

In 1994, the church began to wrestle with LGBTQ rights after a congregant asked to marry her female partner. It led to the launch of a survey that allowed lay members to share their perspective, Kleinert said. In those conversations, a female elder came out as a lesbian. Shortly after, the church embraced an open and affirming position, though it did cause many members to leave, Evans recalled.

Today, some children in the church have come out as gender nonbinary and two women serve in leadership roles on the church staff.

Tackling race slower for church

But race is the issue that the church has made slower progress on, members acknowledged. As a 200-year-old church in the South, that has always been true. Kleinert said that enslaved people attended the church in its early years.

Ideologically, the church is progressive on certain racial justice issues, such as reparations and affirmative action. Its membership diversity is the problem.

Teresa Smallwood, associate director of the public theology and racial justice collaborative at Vanderbilt Divinity School, whose work involves engaging local faith communities, said she sees Vine Street trying.

"It's not that people don't care and it's most definitely not that they are not committed," Smallwood said. "it's difficult for folks who really are welcoming whose hearts are really in the right place to take a stand in a place like Nashville, even in a place like Tennessee."

Vine Street has close ties to Vanderbilt Divinity, whose students will intern at Vine Street for ministerial training.

Smallwood said the intentions of Vine Street to address issues of race in its community are genuine, but "that doesn't mean you're effective."

Kleinert doesn't disagree. "Our worship traditions are steeped in western European traditions," he said. "It's very, very difficult to imagine that suddenly, just because we welcome it, African Americans are going to walk in and feel welcome and feel at home. Because I know they wouldn't."

It's a myriad of factors why a church that wants to be diverse is not, said Lisa Thompson, a Vanderbilt Divinity professor and author of the forthcoming book "Preaching the Headlines."

"Location matters, and even the ways in which people do worship, do community, find community," Thompson said. Ninety percent of people who live in the same Census tract as Vine Street are white, according to 2020 Census data.

That said, Vine Street is involved in various community outreach projects, such as Room in the Inn and Something to Eat, in which members are engaging Nashville residents from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

Also, Thompson said, "If you want a more diverse congregation or community, does your leadership reflect the type of diversity you want?"

The considerations that Smallwood and Thompson mention are what some Vine Street members hope for the future, on the same day they were reflecting on their past.

Cole said, "I think that's an important part of our heritage here is to ask those questions, to deal with those issues."

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