

Gossip, Friendship, and Lawsuits: The Effects of Relationships on Eighteenth Century Christ Church in Shrewsbury

Christin Vivona

Christ Church Shrewsbury

Professor Robert Kelly

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The history of Christ Episcopal Church in Shrewsbury, New Jersey is quite impressive and includes many important names and dates that mark the eventful trajectory of its past. However, there is much more to the story of Christ Church than what is obvious in the history books. The friendships and feuds that colored the parish effectively changed its history, and that of the surrounding towns, creating a separate account of personal narratives that had a surprisingly fundamental effect on Christ Church. The friendships forged allowed the church to grow and flourish with the support of the Society for the Propagation for the Gospel in Foreign Parts. These friendships, however, also led to the spread of several rumors that collapsed many of the parish goals for fundraising. In contrast, many feuds arose between the people of the parish, including the reverend himself, which directed the loyalties and decisions of the parishioners, especially during the American Revolution.

The following investigation illustrates these emotional undertones of the parish through the examination of five vignettes: Christopher Robert Reynolds' appointment as schoolmaster, John Miln's dismissal from Freehold and Shrewsbury, Josiah Holmes's revolutionary tendencies and the parishioners' ties to the Anglican Church during the Revolution, the parishioners' rapport with one another, and the reverends' friendships with and relationship to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Christopher Robert Reynolds' close friendships and therefore sparkling recommendations led the Society to employ him as schoolmaster, which brought education to Shrewsbury for the first time. John Miln was a reverend that caused controversy in Freehold over his alcoholic tendencies. His scandalous actions inspired many complaints from the Freehold congregation, which angered the Shrewsbury parish as they vehemently defended Miln. This widened the rift that was already forming between the Freehold and Shrewsbury parish communities. Josiah Holmes's long-time feud with Reverend Samuel Cooke sparked

animosity within the parish, which only increased when the Revolution began and the two men aligned with opposite sides of the struggle. The Anglican parishioners certainly varied in their responses to the Revolution, and their ties to the Anglican Church proved to be a deciding factor politically for many of them. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was the organization responsible for choosing and sending Anglican missionaries to British colonies. When a prominent member of a community would request a rector or assistance from the Society, its leaders would assess the need and react accordingly.¹ The Society's strong support, both financially and professionally, for their missionaries proved to have lasting effects on the success of the Anglican, and later Episcopalian, Church in the United States. Finally, the parishioners' close relationships to one another ignited many fights and rumors, including those about George Spencer, which devastated the church's fundraising efforts and shook the parishioners' trust in their church.

These vignettes appear in the many documents at Christ Episcopal Church's archives. It is the letters that the missionaries sent to and received from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London that reveal the depth of the personal, emotional concerns that took part in the history of Christ Church and Shrewsbury. The vestry minutes, also found in the archives of the church, provide the details of the vestry meetings, but do not disclose the personal side to the events described. These minutes are useful in comparison with the more evocative letters in that they allow for a more neutral description of events, although bias can still be identified. These documents, in conjunction with those outside sources that speak to each vignette, illustrate Christ

¹Clyde McCulloch, Samuel

1945 *The Foundation and Early Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*. *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 8(3): 241-258.

Church in a different light, by presenting emotional undertones as the primary cause for the growths and failures of the Anglican Church in Shrewsbury, New Jersey.

Vignette I: Christopher Robert Reynolds

Although they may seem frivolous and unimportant in the wide scope of history, friendships played a major role in the story of Christ Church. The best example of the power of friendship is that of Christopher Robert Reynolds, the man who brought education to Shrewsbury. The vestry minutes, both the transcriptions and the microfilm, present Reynolds as an important member of the vestry and an influential man in town. He signed the meeting minutes as a vestryman on August 5, 1747, and again on October 27.² In fact, he is listed as a vestryman in the minutes until April 8, 1760.³ This means that he had at least a working relationship with the most prominent men in the church, and in some cases the colony. The vestry minutes do not include any further detail as to Reynolds' character, or his dealings with members of the vestry, however the flood of recommendations that inundated the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel suggesting that Reynolds be hired as schoolmaster for Shrewsbury certainly hints at a strong friendships between the men.

This positive relationship is clear first with the members of Christ Church in their recommendations of Christopher Reynolds as schoolmaster. In their letter to the Society, they plead, "take our poor Children into consideration, and also, provide for them, that they may be brought up in the true Principles of Christianity according to the Worship and Doctrine of our

²Vestry Minutes Microfilm
1747-1783 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. 1747.

³Vestry Minutes Microfilm
1747-1783 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. 1760.

most holy Church.”⁴ Although it is obvious that they wanted their children to be educated in the ways of the Anglican Church, they did not want just any appointee to take the position. Instead, “we would to the Society’s Favour recommend Christ Robt Reynolds, an old England man well qualified for a Schoolmaster and firmly attach’d to the Interest of the Church.”⁵ Aside from the many members of the church who displayed their loyalty to Reynolds through this dazzling recommendation, more prominent men within the community also lent their voice in favor of this man. As Reverend Vaughan described it, “he is recommended by Persons of the highest Character, I means his Excy the Governor of this Province & his son the Chief Justice of it.”⁶ Many reverends, under the employ of the Society, also made their esteem for this vestryman more than clear to the Society. William Skinner, the missionary at Amboy, wrote that he had “perfect knowledge of his Capacity, Zeal, and labours in promoting the interest of the Church.”⁷ The friendships that this man had forged with the people of his town and religious group were so apparent that the Society secretary commented “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts have appointed you their Schoolmaster at Shrewsbury upon the Petition of the Inhabitants thereof.”⁸ These recommendations and subsequent employment were a great asset to

⁴Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 10, 1743.

⁵Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 10, 1743.

⁶Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. June 9, 1744.

⁷Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 10, 1743.

⁸Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. March 25, 1745.

the community of Shrewsbury, as it sparked a tradition of education in the area, changing the face of the town.

Even those who studied the entire history of Christ Church noted the overwhelmingly positive recommendations that Reynolds received from his friends. Author Nelson Burr observed, “If ever a teacher came well recommended, Reynolds did.”⁹ Charles H. Kaufman, in his book, includes the recommendation that Governor Lewis Morris wrote on Reynolds’s behalf, claiming “Christopher Robert Reynolds is a person welknown to me, and has taken much pains in introducing children in that county [Monmouth] to read and in teaching both children and adult persons of the church in that county to sing Psalms.”¹⁰ He apparently maintained this glowing reputation even after his appointment to the position of schoolmaster. When he was first installed, “The parish hailed the news with joy, and never had any cause to regret it during the seventeen years he served.”¹¹ During his years in education, he served the Anglican Church in more ways than simply educating the children. In fact, “He brought a considerable number of people to baptism, and even won converts from the Quakers.”¹² Even after his death, the reverend at the time, Samuel Cooke, raved about Reynolds’s success as an educator within the parish. The people, after their wonderful experience with Reynolds, still seemed “very willing & desirous to give their children some education.”¹³ Christopher Robert Reynolds’s connections to

⁹Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 268.

¹⁰Kaufman, Charles H.

1981 *Music in New Jersey, 1655-1860: A Study of Musical Activity and Musicians in New Jersey from Its First Settlement to the Civil War*. East Brunswick: Associated University Press, Inc. Pg. 93.

¹¹Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 269.

¹²Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 270.

and friendships with his fellow parishioners changed not only his life, but also the history of Christ Church and Shrewsbury. He instilled a tradition of education in the community and led many outsiders to convert to the Anglican faith. His efforts greatly improved Shrewsbury for the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, and certainly shaped the history and the characteristics of Shrewsbury and Christ Church.

Vignette II: John Miln

In contrast with Reynolds, the Reverend John Miln experienced a very different type of relationship with his parishioners. According to historic documents, “Although he was a man of deep piety and probably more than ordinary ability, he was too fond of the convivial cup. The Society grew tired of paying him without getting any reports, and finally dismissed him.”¹⁴ The mission itself, “declined somewhat in the early 1740’s through the misconduct and neglect of John Miln,”¹⁵ which caused the Society great anguish over the actions of its missionary. Even after he was dismissed from his post, Reverend Miln refused to leave the Middletown glebe that belonged to Christ Church. His refusal “greatly distressed his successor, Thomas Thompson, and provoked a sordid wrangle, in which Freehold supported Thompson, while Shrewsbury and Middletown favored Miln.”¹⁶ This division between the two parishes had been ongoing for quite some time, but the Miln incident greatly exacerbated the issue. Many parishioners took sides in

¹³Samuel Cooke Letters

1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. November 5, 1760.

¹⁴Burr, Nelson R.

1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 108.

¹⁵Burr, Nelson R.

1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 108.

¹⁶Burr, Nelson R.

1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 499.

the debate for and against Miln, all of who expressed extreme opinions for their side. In the end, it would seem that “Many people disliked him, because he had no Scottish or Quaker background, and because he displayed the unpolished ways of the frontier, acquired among the Mohawks and in the garrison at Fort Hunter.”¹⁷ He simply was not the right man for the post, however he stirred up enough controversy while living in Shrewsbury, and in doing so left a noticeable example of the rivalries of the church and their influence on historic events.

Reverend John Miln began his career as a chaplain at Fort Hunter with the Mohawk Indian Mission. He was then assigned to the mission in Freehold, although it was no secret that he much preferred to be placed in Boston. He remained in Freehold from 1737 until 1745, when his parishioners began to complain to the Society about his conduct.¹⁸ The letters that passed from Freehold to the Society rebuking John Miln, and the subsequent action by the Society against this reverend proves an interesting study in personal relationships in history. The letter written from Freehold parishioners to the Society includes four main arguments against the purity of Miln’s character: “1st That he is an open and notorious Drunkard. 2dly That when he reads the Prayers & Delivers his Sermon, ‘tis is as much hurry & with as little Zeal & Devotion as Persons usually read a newspaper. 3dly That he neglects the great Duties of Catechising the Young and Ignorant, of comforting & advising the Doubtful and scrupulous, and visiting & exhorting the sick & Dying tho’ importuned thereunto. 4thly That by his careless and irreverent performance of some and neglect of other Duties, great offence has & daily is given to the Congregation, which by the circumspect behavior & pious Endeavors of his Predecessor began to flourish & was greatly

¹⁷Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 502.

¹⁸Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 623-625.

Enlarged but is now more Diminished.”¹⁹ This list is wrought with the dislike and distrust that the Freehold parishioners personally felt toward their reverend. It was their feud that eventually led to his dismissal and the argument over the glebe. After his discharge, Miln maintained a firm grasp on the glebe, or income property, in Middletown, because he had “laid out several hundreds of pounds, in the improvement thereof.”²⁰ Instead of compensating their former Shrewsbury reverend for his time and money invested in the glebe, the Society instructed the new Reverend Thompson “to proceed in a legal way to obtain Mr. Leeds Donation.”²¹ These letters display the unstable, and sometimes downright contentious, relationship that existed between Miln and many members of the community. This conflict eventually led to his dismissal from the parish, and therefore, the change in the historic trajectory of the church.

The situation with Reverend Miln played right into an already growing dissention between Shrewsbury and Freehold. The two parishes were formed on two different charters, meaning that they were originally intended to be separate parish communities.²² Therefore, sharing a rector would have been difficult and frustrating. While the parishioners in Freehold wrote their strong condemnations of Reverend Miln, the majority of the Shrewsbury parish defended him and regarded him as a success. In a letter to Reverend Vesey, the parishioners from Shrewsbury asserted that when they made their accusations, the Freehold residents, “knew that Mr. Miln had

¹⁹Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 18, 1741.

²⁰Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 6, 1745.

²¹Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. November 11, 1746.

²²Steen, James
1903 History of Christ Church Shrewsbury, New Jersey. Pg. 21-24.

for some time before, totally refrained all manner of Strong Liquor, and hath so done to the Best of our Knowledge and Belief ever since.”²³ Even the new reverend, Mr. Thomas Thompson, noted the difference in reception he received in Freehold and Shrewsbury. He reported to the Society “one part declar’d themselves satisfied therewith & moved for the immediate Admission of me to that Church, which the other part objected to, alleging that Mr. Miln had been abused & misrepresented.”²⁴ The split between the two factions, Freehold and Shrewsbury, eventually resulted in the physical separation that Miln discussed in one of his letters. He claimed that he was considering leaving the Society’s employment, until “the importunities of the people of Shrewsbury & Middletown, and upon their hopes of the Societys being prevailed on, upon better information, to continue me in a Mission for them, separate from Freehold.”²⁵ This did occur some years later, when Freehold was joined with the Spotswood mission, and this argument over Reverend Miln’s personal character and effectiveness as pastor certainly aggravated and intensified the division between the two parishes.

Vignette III: Josiah Holmes

Josiah Holmes is perhaps the most impressive story of how personal feelings and relationships can completely transform the face of history. He was raised as a Quaker, but later converted to become Episcopalian. After his conversion he joined Christ Church in Shrewsbury,

²³Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. March 1, 1742.

²⁴Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. November 11, 1745.

²⁵Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Letters
1743-1784 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. December 6, 1745.

where he became an instrumental parishioner. In fact, “In 1738, he helped establish Christ Church in Shrewsbury where he served periodically as vestryman and church warden.”²⁶ He was involved in many church committees and events, even serving “as manager of a lottery held on Biles Island in the Delaware River which raised funds for the construction of a new church building.”²⁷ Holmes’s integral position with the church is even demonstrated in the Vestry Minutes Collection, as his name is mentioned numerous times for holding different positions in the vestry. On July 22, 1751 he is listed as a vestryman²⁸, and on March 28, 1758 his name is recorded again, this time as churchwarden.²⁹ The name Josiah Holmes appears frequently in the microfilm vestry minutes as well, as part of important, trusted committees.³⁰ This constant connection with the church, and incredibly powerful role in its vestry, sets the stage for Josiah Holmes’s tense feud with the Reverend Samuel Cooke. The underlying reason for this rivalry is unknown, however it is clear that Cooke and Holmes vied for power within the church and the community, especially when the American Revolution began and the two men were positioned on either side of the conflict.

²⁶Huber Trust, Marion
 “Library & Archives Manuscript Collections.” The Monmouth County Historical Association: Revolutionary History-Landmark Collections.
<http://www.monmouthhistory.org/Sections-read-25.html>. (accessed March 19, 2013).

²⁷Huber Trust, Marion
 “Library & Archives Manuscript Collections.” The Monmouth County Historical Association: Revolutionary History-Landmark Collections.
<http://www.monmouthhistory.org/Sections-read-25.html>. (accessed March 19, 2013).

²⁸Vestry Minutes
 1751-1967 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. July 22, 1751.

²⁹Vestry Minutes
 1751-1967 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. March 28, 1758.

³⁰Vestry Minutes Microfilm
 1747-1783 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. July 22, 1751.

This grudge between Josiah Holmes and Reverend Samuel Cooke began quite early on, long before the Revolution tore them further apart. It was even apparent through Cooke's choice of bride. When he married Graham Kearney, "Mr. Cooke succeeded in allying himself with the strongest family in the county, and his wife's relatives in the Vestry were a source of strength to him, as it gave him control when the breach first came between himself and Josiah Holmes."³¹ This divide between Holmes and Cooke was further rooted in the public argument over the building of Christ Church in Shrewsbury. After beginning work on the church, Holmes decided he "did not like the building committee, of which he was not a member, and disapproved the arrangements for work. He resigned in a huff, and his name was crossed out in the minutes, not to appear again until 1777."³² He displayed his discontent so fervently that his fellow members recorded it in the vestry minutes. "Josiah Holmes, not approving of the Method concluded for the building of the Church, and for divers other Reasons, desires to be excused from serving or acting as One of the Committee for carrying on the Work,"³³ he was replaced as churchwarden, in an unanimous vote, by James Boggs. This episode cemented the contention between Holmes and the parish reverend. However it was the outbreak of the American Revolution that really widened the divide between the two men. Of course, as part of the Anglican clergy, Samuel Cooke supported the Loyalists and the crown. Josiah Holmes on the other hand, forged his own, distinct path to become a leader in the "rebel" movement of Monmouth County.

³¹Steen, James

1903 History of Christ Church Shrewsbury, New Jersey. Pg. 51.

³²Burr, Nelson R.

1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 505.

³³Vestry Minutes

1751-1967 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. Easter Tuesday, 1769.

Shrewsbury, according to Samuel Cooke, remained overall a Loyalist stronghold. Cooke, in his letters to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, does admit, “that one Family only of my Congregation at Shrewsbury can properly be deemed Rebels,”³⁴ the Holmes family. More than simply supporting the “rebels,” Holmes “early gave his adherence to the cause of liberty.”³⁵ He even served on a committee meant to represent Monmouth County at the Congress in Philadelphia. The author Edwin Salter recalls that Holmes’s name was prevalent on a list of those patriots “who in behalf of this Colony may steadily attend to said general Congress and faithfully serve the laboring cause of freedom,” making Holmes a leader in the patriot movement in Monmouth County.³⁶ Although Holmes’s conflict with Cooke was probably not wholly responsible for his alignment with the patriots during the Revolution, it certainly exacerbated the hatred and intensity he felt against the crown in the colonies. His leadership in this movement caused Holmes to lose some standing in the church, and to become persona non grata in the eyes of Cooke and the Society. Cooke told the Society, in one of his letters, that Holmes had allowed several rebel “disturbances” during his time as Justice of the Peace. In retaliation the governor did not renew Holmes in the position. Cooke claims that “This much chagrined him, and his subsequent conduct became so violent that the Vestry and myself thought it proper to reject him as Church Warden.”³⁷ This statement is a clear representation of the hatred Cooke felt for

³⁴Samuel Cooke Letters
1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. May 20, 1780.

³⁵Steen, James
1903 History of Christ Church Shrewsbury, New Jersey. Pg. 62.

³⁶Salter, Edwin
1890 A History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties. Bayonne: F. Gardner & Sons, Publishers. Pg. 50.

³⁷Samuel Cooke Letters
1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. May 20, 1780.

Holmes, and how this changed the leadership of Christ Church, as it caused the parish to lose its warden.

Josiah Holmes's power in the parish and the community in general in no way overtook that of Reverend Cooke. This is proven by that fact that "Another Loyalist stronghold was Monmouth County, where the Rev. Samuel Cooke and his connections had a powerful influence."³⁸ Samuel Cooke even mentioned in his letters that his parishioners in Shrewsbury "are unanimous in their ardent wishes & prayers for peace, & a restoration to British government and those Blessings they formerly enjoyed."³⁹ Even though it appeared that Samuel Cooke would maintain the majority of control in Shrewsbury, he remained wary of the Revolution to come. He noticed Holmes's ties to the growing rebel movement, and "At least in part due to this conflict, Samuel Cooke returned to England in 1775 and gave a farewell sermon to the parishioners in May of that year."⁴⁰ He never did have the opportunity to return to Shrewsbury, the home of the family and the parishioners that he loved. His discord with Josiah Holmes, especially where the Revolution was concerned, at least partly caused his flight back to England. This changed the face of Christ Church, as it was left without an Anglican reverend to be the leader during the frightening years of Revolution. Moreover, this conflict changed the course of Cooke's life, as he was relocated, by necessity, and lost the position he had enjoyed in Shrewsbury.

The frequent arguments between Josiah Holmes and Reverend Samuel Cooke caused quite a stir in the trajectory of Christ Church's history. The early stages of the conflict included

³⁸Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 383.

³⁹Samuel Cooke Letter

1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. May 20, 1780.

⁴⁰ Kelly, Robert

Reverend Samuel Cooke Script. Shrewsbury: Christ Episcopal Church.

the differences of opinion over the method of building the new church. Cooke ignored Holmes's wishes and continued on a different path. Holmes was so hurt by Cooke's snub that he walked out of the meeting and resigned from his prominent position on the vestry. This rift grew immensely during the Revolution when Holmes decided to stray from the majority of the Anglican parishioners and join the patriot movement. It is unclear if Holmes's alliance with the "rebels" was due to his conflict with the Anglican reverend, but it certainly amplified his dislike of the power of the crown in Shrewsbury. It is clear, however, that this rivalry with his parishioner was a factor that led to Cooke's flight from Christ Church back to England during the Revolution. This move left the church without a reverend, and therefore without a prominent leader during this time of crisis. This negative relationship between Holmes and Cooke brought about several negative consequences that transformed the history of the church in unique ways.

Vignette IV: George Spencer

The relationships between parishioners can often grow beyond the friendships or feuds of two or three men. They can become a network of acquaintances that also have the power to change the history of the entire parish. Rumors are the key tools of support or destruction that influence the decisions of the church. A prime example of this circumstance would be the failure of the subscription to raise funds for Christ Church. This was a direct consequence of the rumor that George Spencer, a notorious New Yorker, would be undertaking the position of reverend at the local parish. This rumor spread like wild fire, spurring real concern in the parish, and ultimately causing church and Society leaders to wrestle to regain control.

George Spencer was originally living in New York where he made quite a few enemies. He accused fellow wine merchants of illegal activities, and ended up dragging himself into the

trouble.⁴¹ Aside from his involvement with less than reputable characters, “Spencer presented himself as both well educated and well connected, but by the outbreak of the war he was better known for his financial embarrassments and for having squandered his wife’s fortune.”⁴²

Unfortunately for Spencer, his questionable reputation only grew in the colonies, even while he became a member of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in England. “Ever the opportunist, George Spencer returned to North American in 1767 as a clergyman. Though ‘publicly carted through New York and...otherwise of very bad character to our prodigious astonishment we hear [he] is also ordained,’ wrote an Anglican official in Philadelphia, adding, ‘no church on this continent will receive him.’”⁴³ Spencer could not escape his past mistakes, his reprehensible reputation among New York’s respectable society traveled even to Monmouth County, where he was sharply rejected even to the point of costing the church donations. This unfortunate state of affairs for Spencer however, demonstrates the power of rumors in the history of Christ Church.

The news of Spencer’s ordination traveled quickly and by word of mouth. Reverend Samuel Cooke detected this detrimental rumor while trying to collect donations for the church. He reported to the Society that he was disappointed with the amount he had collected. He claimed, “I would have exceeded that Sum, had it not been for a very unlucky circumstance of a report from New York circulating among them, of one George Spencer late of that City, a man

⁴¹Truxes, Thomas M.
2008 *Defying an Empire: Trading with the Enemy in Colonial New York*. Yale University. Pg. 13-18.

⁴²Truxes, Thomas M.
2008 *Defying an Empire: Trading with the Enemy in Colonial New York*. Yale University. Pg. 11.

⁴³Truxes, Thomas M.
2008 *Defying an Empire: Trading with the Enemy in Colonial New York*. Yale University. Pg. 205.

too notorious in these parts, his having by some means or other, obtained Holy Orders, and was appointed by the Society Missionary to the churches of St. Peters Freehold & St. Peters Spotswood. It was so confidently affirmed & so generally believed as to prevent many from subscribing who really had the affair very much at heart.”⁴⁴ This idea was spread as rumors typically are, through friends in the church, and gained enough power to halt the receipt of donations to the church for a time. Reverend Cooke attempted to soothe his anxious parishioners by ensuring that the Society only appointed men of solid character to serve. Unfortunately for the parish, “rumors that he had a shady past so alarmed the people that they stopped subscribing to buy a glebe” costing the church quite a sum of money and time.⁴⁵ The strong influence of this rumor illustrates the trust that parishioners had in one another, and the closeness of their bonds. In fact, they believed one another over their well-respected reverend and ruling Society. Members of Christ Church “protested hotly to the Society and published a newspaper notice, denying that the clergy had any part in his obtaining orders, stating that he was accused of ‘many atrocious Crimes,’ and flatly refusing to recognize him.”⁴⁶ This fear had grow to such unruly proportions and caused so much trauma for church relationships and finances, that the Society decided to dismiss George Spencer indefinitely.⁴⁷

George Spencer’s ill-fated attempt to join the clergy of Monmouth County exemplifies the importance of inter-parish friendships. Much like the modern world, rumors spread rapidly in

⁴⁴Samuel Cooke Letters
1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury NJ. April 23, 1767.

⁴⁵Burr, Nelson R.
1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 642.

⁴⁶Burr, Nelson R.
1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 293.

⁴⁷Burr, Nelson R.
1954 The Anglican Church in New Jersey. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 642.

a small, exclusive community like a church. The fears presented by the parishioners in the eighteenth century also caused quite a commotion and chaos for the Society. Due to this incident, Reverend Cooke was unable to collect the promised amount to buy the church glebe, or income property. The Society, too, lost their command over the Shrewsbury parishioners, as they simply decided to stop contributing to the church and to protest the appointment instead. This is the first instance, at least that appears in the vestry minutes or letters, when the parishioners took control of their own fate and used their bonds as friends to disseminate information and to create change. The friendships in this case altered the history of the church enough to call the attention of historians and authors. The Society was forced to change its plans and reevaluate its appointments as the parishioners began to dictate the trajectory of their own parish.

Vignette V: Advocacy of the Society

Usually, of course, the Society held great power over its parishioners, and especially over the reverends in its service. Dr. Thomas Bray thought up the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel when churchmen in England began to feel “an urgent desire to stem the rising tide of atheism and Quakerism and the current abysmal ignorance concerning the Church.”⁴⁸ It became apparent during this time that there were not sufficient missionaries to handle the growing need in the American colonies. Therefore Bray founded the Society with the intention of spreading the Anglican faith overseas. In regard to its missionaries, the Society was “painstaking in the instructions which it prepared for the conduct and work of its missionary agents.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸Clyde McCulloch, Samuel

1945 *The Foundation and Early Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*. *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 8(3): 241-258. Pg. 242.

During its years of operation in the colonies, the Society kept a firm grip on its missionaries, expecting them to be men of superior character and endless loyalty to the British crown. This complete power over its employees led to some friendships and bonds between the reverends and the Society, especially its secretary, who was in constant correspondence with the missionaries. These friendships, again, influenced the history of the church and the experience of its parishioners.

The Society demanded that its reverends remain in constant communication with its secretary in order to better monitor the success of the missions in the colonies. In fact, according to historian Nelson Burr, “They keep in constant touch with the Society through the secretary and make parochial reports every six months, so that the Society could review their progress and help them in difficulties.”⁵⁰ This requirement is physically proven through the ample letters between the Society and Samuel Cooke, John Miln, vestry members, and other missionaries. The recommendations of Christopher Robert Reynolds, discussed earlier, were sent as part of these constant correspondences. Likewise, the complaints against John Miln and George Spencer were also clear examples of the communication between the colonies and the Society. The missionaries’ consistent connection with the Society, particularly with the secretary, led to a relationship of advocacy and even personal friendship.

Once more, the friendships forged through the faith played an important role in the history of Shrewsbury and in the success of Christ Church. “The colonial Churchmen for some

⁴⁹Clyde McCulloch, Samuel

1945 *The Foundation and Early Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*. Huntington Library Quarterly, 8(3): 241-258. Pg. 252.

⁵⁰Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 31.

years had a powerful ally in the Society,”⁵¹ as it advocated for their financial, professional, and personal stability. Aside from their contracted salary, the missionaries could request any supplies from England, and “the Society tried to comply with all the requests, as soon as its means would permit.”⁵² This meant that the colonies, including Shrewsbury, had a wealth of resources at its disposal through the advocacy of the Society, which entirely supported its missions. Once a missionary became part of the Society, he was never abandoned. If a reverend “died leaving a widow and children unprovided, the Society saw that they did not suffer, and several such instances occurred in New Jersey.”⁵³ Also, if changes occurred to the structure of the mission, it was the Society that ensured that its reverends still received their salaries. When Freehold separated from Shrewsbury, the secretary wrote to the vestry members that “the Society will expect that the Rev. Cooke is no Sufferer by this Alteration, but that you will be willing to make up the Sum of £30 Sterl. Annum towards his Support.”⁵⁴ The Society ensured that its missionaries and its churches would not only thrive, but also that they would continue to do so as long as it was in power. Its financial advocacy and patronage was a major reason for the success of Christ Church and the strength of its missionaries.

One of the many letters in Reverend Samuel Cooke’s collection addresses the new secretary of the Society who was recently installed after the death of his predecessor, Dr. Bearcroft. Cooke writes, “As I was in a particular manner favor’d with the Friendship of your

⁵¹Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 341.

⁵²Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 33.

⁵³Burr, Nelson R.

1954 *The Anglican Church in New Jersey*. Planfield: Twin City Press. Pg. 32.

⁵⁴Vestry Minutes

1751-1967 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. April 9, 1765.

late Worthy Predecessor, so both Gratitude and Interest are Reasons which must cause me to Lament his Death.”⁵⁵ Reverend Cooke’s words illustrate the friendship that was constructed between many of the missionaries and the Society secretary because of their constant letters back and forth. Although they were living on different continents, the secretary was informed about the everyday lives of the reverends, and was charged with ensuring that their needs were met. This personal friendship, too, maintained the strength of the Society in Shrewsbury. The loyalty of its parishioners during the war, as mentioned above, the strength of its parish to last for centuries, and the power of its missionaries all stem from this personal relationship of advocacy and trust between the Society and its colonial missionaries.

Conclusion

The five vignettes recalled above relate to a different aspect of the church’s history, and demonstrate the way that personal relationships, positive or negative, can manipulate the course of a parish. Christopher Robert Reynolds forged many friendships as a vestryman and a prominent member of Christ Church. His fine character never faltered, and his dedication to the Anglican faith and to education gave his friends in the parish reason to support his application for the new position of Shrewsbury schoolmaster. These friends, including those of high status like the governor, inundated the Society with recommendations for Reynolds that sang his praises and begged the Society for his appointment. These positive relationships eventually resulted in the Reynolds’s placement as the first schoolmaster in Shrewsbury. This introduced education to the town, and boosted the power of the Anglican Church against the other religions

⁵⁵Samuel Cooke Letters

1751-1782 Christ Episcopal Church Collection. Christ Episcopal Church, Shrewsbury, NJ. November 4, 1762.

in the colonies. Unfortunately, the relationships that Reverend John Miln constructed in Monmouth County were of a different sort. While his Shrewsbury parishioners liked his style of preaching, the vestry in Freehold criticized him for being a lazy drunk. They were so adamant that he was unfit to be a reverend, that even Shrewsbury's defense of his character could not sway the Society. He was dismissed from his position in Monmouth County, but he refused to leave the church's glebe. This debacle caused a legal battle between the new Reverend Thompson and Reverend Miln. It also diminished the trust between Shrewsbury, Freehold, and the Society, as no parish seemed to be pleased with the turn of events. Finally, it deepened the divide between Shrewsbury and Freehold that would ultimately end in a separation of the parishes. These seemingly unimportant personal feuds clearly shaped and colored the church's experience and the recorded history of the parish.

Josiah Holmes's feud with Samuel Cooke was another example of the power of interpersonal feuds within Christ Church. This rivalry first became apparent in the documents because of a fight over the building of the new Christ Church. Holmes disagreed with the plans that Cooke had formed and carried out, so he decided to walk out of the vestry meeting and resign as churchwarden. The tension grew to exponential proportions during the Revolutionary War, when Holmes became a "rebel" fighting against the British crown and the Anglican Church. It is unclear if his dislike for Reverend Cooke fueled his anger toward the church, but the fight certainly inspired Cooke to flee to England never to return to Shrewsbury. The majority of Shrewsbury remained loyal to England and its church, however this toxic relationship between Holmes and Cooke sparked tension within the parish and certainly influenced the personal decisions that many made during the Revolution.

Rumors spread by friends at Christ Church also manipulated and changed the course of history for the parish. The fear that George Spencer, a well known, New York criminal, was appointed to the position of reverend in Monmouth County immediately halted the collection of money for a glebe to support the church. In his letters to the Society, Samuel Cooke relayed the reality that the Society would lose many parishioners if it did not take immediate action to calm the group. Thankfully for the mission, the Society did dismiss George Spencer and regain control over Shrewsbury. However, this incident remains in Shrewsbury's memory as a moment when the friendships and bonds of parishioners changed the plans of a powerful organization. Aside from this one episode, the Society tended to be an advocate for its missions and its reverends. Financially, the Society took care of all the needs that the missionaries brought forth. Personally, the Society supported the families of its reverends and ensured their success as missionaries. The strength of the parish at Christ Church can be attributed mostly to this friendship with the Society, and its secretary. The opulence and power that Christ Church enjoyed was due to the generous gifts of the Society, and its commitment to a strong, Anglican Church in the colonies.

As in modern society, the past was also influenced by seemingly minute factors, such as personal relationships. Both lasting friendships and tense feuds sparked change in Christ Church. Anger, trust, and fear are strong emotions that cause people to act in extreme ways. This action, although in response to a singular event, creates a chain reaction that proceeds through the history of the church. As seen in these five vignettes, personal stories of rivalries and compassion can be just as influential as an order imposed by a prominent leader. In these cases, relationships led to the growth of education in Shrewsbury, to the legal action between reverends, to the separation of parishes, to the loss of a Shrewsbury leader during revolution, to the failure of a collection to fund the church, and to the support of the powerful Society for Christ Church.

These consequences changed the face of Christ Church and led it down its path to construct the dense history that remains today. Although the personal relationships between everyday people are often forgotten in history, these vignettes demonstrate that they can be integral to the course of the society as a whole.

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