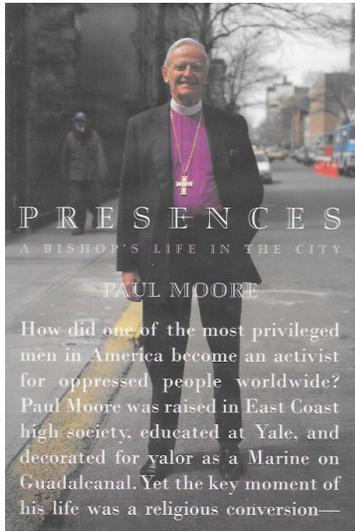


Using the Church to Reform Society

Presences: A Bishop's Life in the City, by Paul Moore (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).



Soon after the forced integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, leaders of Christ Church Cathedral in Indianapolis averted a crisis over race and religion. I learned about this congregational case study from a sermon preached in January, 2017, by Stephen Carlsen, the current dean and rector, and read the full detail in the memoir of Paul Moore who had been the Cathedral's dean and rector at that time. Although it happened sixty years ago, this episode in church politics continues to be instructive for people interested in the relationship of race and religion in America.

Moore was born into a wealthy New York family in 1919, reared in luxury, and educated at prestigious St. Paul's School. This school, Moore writes, "instilled faith in a god who looked favorably on gentlemen and demanded no shift in social values from the status quo. . . This religion had a touch of Calvinism to it, a tendency to believe that worldly success and position were blessings given to those who deserved them." People so blessed "were obliged, in return, to give service and leadership to your community and be a steward of the wealth you had inherited or earned because of your advantages." They were taught to give generously to their communities and the institutions that helped the poor. "Social change to eliminate poverty, however, was thought to be dangerously liberal." You could give money to a settlement house for black people but efforts to break the color barrier in your neighborhood would probably lead to your being criticized or ostracized (27).

After graduation from Yale and heroic service in the Marines during World War II, Moore experienced a deepening of his faith and enrolled in General Theological Seminary in New York City to prepare for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. While in seminary, he and some of his classmates ministered among poor people, many of them people of color, in neighborhoods close to the campus. Following graduation, he and three of four others were appointed to a long-established but declining Episcopal church in Jersey City located in a neighborhood with many poor people who were struggling to survive. Some of them were drawn to the church which found new strength.

In 1958 Moore moved to Indianapolis to serve as dean and rector of Christ Church Cathedral on Monument Circle, succeeding John Craine who had been elected bishop coadjutor of the diocese. The Moore family, including seven children (two more were born later) moved into the house provided by the church, "a large, pretentious neo-Tudor mansion, set back from the still-fashionable Washington Boulevard by a well-tended lawn and shade trees." The children attended public schools, including Shortridge High School where my children were students more than a decade later. Moore describes Indianapolis as patriotic and its people as "polite, but not

overly friendly." Heeding Bishop Craine's advice, he decided "to take it easy with the congregation. I realized most of them were conservative—socially, liturgically, and politically. In Jersey City, the more radical your views and actions, the better the people liked it. The opposite was true in Indianapolis" (141–3).

Christ Church had about seven hundred members, but only two were black, the principal of the segregated black high school and his wife. One of the cathedral clergy befriended three black children who attended its Sunday School and the 9:00 o'clock service with "the younger, more liberal families" (151). They asked to be baptized; in keeping with the church's established practice, the baptisms took place at the 11:00 o'clock service. At least twenty black adults were gathered around the font. About a month later, the vestry, the congregation's governing body, set up a retreat with their pastor. He soon discovered that the purpose was to register their discontent that "these nigras" had been there and to insist that this practice should not continue.

Two days later, the senior warden, who had not been at the retreat, came to see Moore. "Sorry to bother you, . . . but I want you to know that as long as I am senior warden there will never be a Little Rock on Monument Circle, and if you want to paint the church green with pink polka dots I will back you all the way" (152). The man making this pledge of support was Eli Lilly who headed the pharmaceutical firm that his grandfather had founded and probably the most influential person in Indianapolis. Under the surface, however, the conflict continued. Gradually the membership of the vestry was changed and the tension eased.

"The issue," Moore wrote many years later, "had to do with power in the church." The vestry when he came represented the city's leadership core and had been recruited during Craine's ministry that had led to a resurgence of the congregation. "They understood his aims and approved the building up of the institution. They did not understand my aim, shared now by Bishop Craine, of using the institution to reform society. And underneath it all, of course, was a racism so deep-seated as to be unconscious. The Negro community of Indianapolis was conscious of it, of course" (153).

Close to sixty years have passed since this episode at Christ Church, and much has changed for the better in Indianapolis. Yet, as recent studies of race and religion in Indianapolis and other American cities makes place, far too much remains the same.