

Vermont church welcomes back member expelled over slavery

By MARK BUSHNELL - Published: February 6, 2011 in the Rutland Herald

Jedediah Holcomb made up his mind: He was going to switch churches. Today, such a change might seem purely personal and hardly deserving of comment. The same was usually true in Holcomb's day, but in his case it wasn't so simple. By seeking to change churches, he ignited a controversy that resulted in his being excommunicated.

The controversy surrounding Holcomb was forgotten until recently, when a historian unearthed his story and local residents began working to right what they saw as a historic wrong.

The trouble can be traced at least as far back as Aug. 15, 1840, when Holcomb submitted a request to the Brandon Congregational Church for a letter of dismissal. Despite its ominous-sounding name, a letter of dismissal was akin to a letter of reference. It stated that a person was leaving the church on good terms. The letter would serve as a shortcut to gaining admission to another congregation. People moving out of town regularly requested and received such letters.

The problem in Holcomb's case was that he wasn't moving anywhere. He simply was no longer interested in remaining with the Congregational Church. In a letter to the church, Holcomb explained that he was unhappy with the pastor and that his strained relations with many church members were beyond mending. He also made clear that his discontent with the church was over the issue of slavery.

Holcomb regularly submitted resolutions to the Brandon Congregational Church calling for it to take a stance against slavery, but the membership voted not to consider his resolutions.

In 1840 slavery was already a divisive national issue. It was of vital importance to Holcomb. Described as a clerk and later as a blacksmith in census records, Holcomb was a passionate abolitionist who may have been inspired by another Brandon resident, the rabble-raising activist Orson Murray, who had helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833.

Not free to go

The church created a committee to hear Holcomb's reasons for wanting to leave and learn what church he wished to join. Holcomb told the committee he didn't have any definite plans: He just wanted out. Church officials ruled that they had no authority to dismiss a member who didn't plan to join another church.

Holcomb responded by notifying the church that he had "absolved his connexion" with it. Two deacons were appointed to try to talk Holcomb into returning. When he refused, the church sent him a letter of admonition on Dec. 5.

Holcomb responded with a letter of his own, outlining his work against slavery and what he saw

as the wrongs of the church and its pastor, the Rev. Harvey Curtis. Holcomb and Curtis did not seem to see eye to eye.

Around this time, word may have reached Holcomb that Curtis was leaving town, having accepted an appointment as a missionary. Perhaps Holcomb allowed himself to believe that things would be different under a new pastor. Perhaps the new pastor would urge the church to issue a letter of dismissal. Holcomb never got the chance to find out.

Curtis wasn't planning to leave this bit of business unresolved. He was set to leave town Dec. 15. Having already moved out of his home earlier that day, he attended one last church meeting as pastor. At that meeting, church members decided, with one dissenting vote, to excommunicate Holcomb.

Someone had to write the letter of excommunication. Curtis announced that since he had known that after the meeting he wouldn't have a home in which to write, he had taken the liberty of writing Holcomb a letter of excommunication, just in case one was needed. The letter was sent to Holcomb, sealing his fate with the church.

Times change

That's where the story would have ended, if not for the work 170 years later of Brandon resident Kevin Thornton, a history professor at the University of Vermont, who unearthed it while researching the anti-slavery movement in town.

Thornton mentioned his discovery to his friend Bill Moore, a deacon at the church. "I thought it would be great to see if we could get him reinstated," says Moore. "It was clear he was booted out for his beliefs."

Moore arranged for Thornton to present his research to a meeting of the church's deacons last spring. The church's pastor, the Rev. Dick White, wasn't sure of the procedure for reinstating a member. He contacted the conference minister in Randolph and was told the church could proceed however it saw fit. So White and the deacons decided to discuss reinstating Holcomb and vote on it.

The debate wasn't entirely in favor of Holcomb, White says. "There was some concern that we don't want to make it look like the folk back then didn't know what they were talking about," he says. The immorality of slavery is perhaps clearer today than it was then, he adds: "Time always has a way of enlightening folks about things."

So when the issue of reinstatement came to a vote, the deacons worded the question so it would "not disparage our predecessors but was based on current knowledge and history," White says.

The deacons voted unanimously to reinstate Holcomb.

In 1846, five years after excommunicating Holcomb, the Brandon Congregational Church took a

stance against slavery. But still Holcomb did not return to the fold.

Perhaps he was unimpressed with the sometimes tepid wording of the church's resolution. The church declared that slavery was "at war with the spirit and precepts of the gospel" and called it "a sin against God." But church leaders took pains not to offend Southerners. They called for communication with churches in slaveholding states so that church members might "learn how the subject is viewed by them."

Gone missing

So, what happened to Holcomb? Did he join another church? Thornton says he may have become a Baptist, since that church took the strongest anti-slavery stance in town. But the Baptists didn't keep regular membership records during that period. So far Thornton has not found Holcomb in the records of any Brandon church after he was excommunicated.

Whatever his religious practices, it is clear he remained a devout abolitionist. On Sept. 16, 1841, Holcomb wrote a letter to the National Anti-Slavery Standard, referring to an advertisement in the District of Columbia that offered a reward for a runaway slave.

"I am pretty confident I saw the woman, on her way to Canada," he wrote, "and her owner, as he calls himself, may as well give up the chase. ... There are several individuals here, who gladly give a helping to all such wayfarers; and we not unfrequently have it in our power to do so."

Now that the Brandon Congregational Church has decided to un-excommunicate Holcomb, one question remains: What would he think of it?

"I don't know if Holcomb would take it if he were alive," says Thornton. "These abolitionists were so principled that they would run away from anything that had the faintest whiff of a compromise to them."

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