

PLYMOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL EMBROIDERIES ACTION PLAN MAY 28, 2019

BACKGROUND

Plymouth Church has for decades taken enormous pride in the four embroideries created by the Plymouth Needlers between 1968 and 2012. We have honored their artistry and the skill of their creators. Many of us have brought visitors to Plymouth to see these amazing pieces of art.

Yet, over the past several months, Plymouth members have been called to pay attention—some for the first time—to images in the embroideries that are disturbing and hurtful to many people, particularly those outside of the white-dominated mainstream. The images of the first Thanksgiving in the fall “Churchmen in the New World” embroidery have dominated the conversations, while other aspects have remained largely unexamined: “Black Peter” (winter), the caricatured depiction of the escaped slave Eliza (fall), the slaves leaving *The Amistad* (fall), the dominance of slave-owning white men (summer), and the hanging of a black body, which is intended to be from the Salem witch trials, but can be easily misinterpreted as a lynching (summer).

Plymouth Church is a spiritual community rooted in Progressive Christianity. Our Purposes of the Church are: *“We, the people of Plymouth Congregational Church, humbly seek and serve God within, among, and beyond ourselves.”* As a historically white congregation, Plymouth still has much to learn about our church’s and our collective American history from the points of view of other seekers of God. Some images in the embroideries, while designed and created with exemplary artistry and loving intentions, celebrate interpretations of American history from the point of view of our white-dominated culture without a broader appreciation of and respect for the diverse cultures that comprise the American experience. Members and visitors have questioned how the embroideries reflect the current Purposes of the Church and our calling to humbly serve God through service to ourselves and others.

The Leadership Council, like the congregation, has been in a period of deep listening, learning and discerning. The Leadership Council, with the support of the Deacons, was entrusted per the governing policies to develop an action plan to address the various concerns and issues raised about the fall “Churchmen in the New World” embroidery specifically, the embroideries as a set more broadly and, ultimately, Plymouth’s commitment to racial justice as stated in the Purposes of the Church.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS OF THE ACTION PLAN

The Leadership Council, with the help of the Racial Justice Initiative, has sought to address and integrate the following key considerations:

- a recognition and respect for the design, intention and outstanding contributions of the Plymouth Needlers;

- a recognition that the embroideries are expressions of women members’ art traditions (in both design and execution), bringing their perspective and talents into a church that needed a stronger women’s presence;
- an acknowledgement that several images in the embroideries have unintentionally caused pain and a sense of being unwelcome to other people of faith—members of both our internal and external communities; and
- an acknowledgement that the context in which we view the embroideries has changed over time and made recognizable the negative impact of some of the images.

PRINCIPLES THAT HAVE GUIDED THE CREATION OF THE PLAN

The Leadership Council’s Embroideries Action Plan is the next step on our continuing journey as a spiritual community. The principles that guided the creation of the Action Plan were as follows, in the order listed:

1. With the deep understanding that we are a church, and in consideration of where God is leading us. We are the stewards of Plymouth Church, and we have its future in mind. We honor Plymouth as a house of God residing on Dakota land.
2. Honoring the Purposes of the Church.
3. Honoring our commitment to racial justice.
4. Honoring the people who have been and will be impacted by this decision, including those who find the embroideries hurtful and the Needlers, who created them.

ACTION PLAN

1. Starting in June 2019, the Leadership Council will form a committee (including Needlers, members of the Fine Arts board and members of the Racial Justice Initiative) to:
 - a. Manage the implementation of the Embroideries Action Plan.
 - b. Consult with art museum experts to understand best practices to ensure that all of the embroideries continue to be well cared for and safe-guarded for the future.
 - c. Develop a budget to raise funds to borrow or commission new artwork representing the voices of our larger community for Guild Hall, Jones Commons and other areas of the church.

A guiding example could be how the University of British Columbia commissioned a totem to honor the natives on whose land the University sits, just as Plymouth sits on Dakota land.

2. Starting this fall 2019, Plymouth will exhibit “Churchman in the New World” during the month of September or October, along with informational panels providing (i) context of the embroideries’ creation and intent, their distinguished artistic merit and reputation and the significant contributions of the Needlers over several decades; (ii) historical context for the images in the embroideries that have been cited as problematic; and (iii) words of repentance acknowledging our history and how we may work to repair this harm.

During the month that “Churchman in the New World” is displayed, we will offer programming that will:

- a. Continue our conversations about the relationship between art and spirituality, between justice and art, between justice and spirituality;
- b. Examine the embroideries from an artistic point of view—the skill required to complete the textiles; their symbolism; their “iconography,” their history; and
- c. Examine our changing awareness of stories we tell about the past, and the power of art in telling those stories.

At the end of the month, the embroidery will come down, following a worship service of repentance, for an indefinite resting period. There are no plans to display “Churchman in the New World” in the future, until and unless a reason to do so arises. We will pause to reflect on the temporary blank wall in Guild Hall.

2. On November 30, the First Sunday in Advent, the winter embroidery, “Christmas Radiance,” will go up, along with the signage about the Needlers and the embroideries (from September). In addition, we will provide historical context and describe the current controversy in the Netherlands about “Black Peter,” who is depicted in the embroidery.

A celebration of the Needlers will be planned during Advent to honor their art, dedication and fellowship. During this time, we will also display in areas of the church art that reflects diverse representations of the Holy Family. The winter embroidery and art will be on display until January 31.

3. On February 1, the summer embroidery, “Summer of the First Amendment,” will go up and be on display during Black History Month, along with the signage about the Needlers, the embroidery and the historical context. During the month of February, we will again offer programming, but with a focus on exploring African American history and the continuing historical legacy of slavery on American history, institutions and culture. Prior to any action plan, it is critical that the congregation go through a period of education and discernment to grapple with the imagery, intentions and impacts of the summer embroidery.

At the end of February, the embroidery will come down for Lent, while Leadership Council assesses the next steps around the summer embroidery, including whether we need further programming and whether the embroidery will be exhibited or rested. We will have a temporary blank wall of reflection in Guild Hall during Lent.

4. On Easter week, the spring “Renewal of Life” embroidery will go up and remain up until either an action plan is made regarding the summer embroidery or until Advent 2020, when the winter embroidery with accompanying signage and historical context will be hung again.

5. After “Churchmen in the New World” is indefinitely rested, we will install existing high quality renditions of the embroideries in an appropriate location in the church, along with the professionally designed placards that were displayed during the 2019–2020 church year with the embroideries.
6. Representatives from communities of color, including Native American leaders, will be involved in all actions, including the writing of informational panels for the embroideries, in services of repentance and reconciliation and in the creation of educational programming.
7. Leadership will support ongoing efforts to learn more about our complex history and to engage the congregation in concrete actions that promote racial justice and inclusion as a key component to Plymouth members’ spiritual growth.

INTENTIONS OF THE ACTION PLAN

We on the Leadership Council ask for your support of this action plan. We believe that the action plan:

- Admits that people bring their own experiences to their understanding of any piece of art and that the meaning of art is not solely determined by its creators.
- Acknowledges the significant contributions of those who created these embroideries.
- Enriches the experience of members and visitors with exposure to the art, history and culture of others who have been underrepresented at Plymouth.
- Provides a constructive path through a difficult issue that demonstrates congregational growth in our ability to handle internal conflict.
- Recognizes that we’re a spiritual community, not a museum or government building. We aspire to follow the example of Jesus in our love and respect for all.
- Recognizes that while we honor our history, we also honor the Purposes of the Church.
- Calls on us—as individuals and as a congregation—to grow spiritually through our examination of issues of justice.
- Honors and reflects the careful and thoughtful expressions of a variety of congregants’ judgments, beliefs, values and opinions about the embroideries.
- Acknowledges the gulf that can exist between good intentions and unintended consequences.
- Aims for a more comprehensive understanding of our complex American history.
- In the case of “Churchmen in the New World” embroidery, acknowledges the singularity of the particular scene of Thanksgiving harmony in the larger and much darker context of Native oppression.
- Provides tangible evidence that Plymouth members have spoken with many voices about the power of the embroideries and that we have listened to various voices outside of our congregation, many from communities of people we want to feel welcome at Plymouth Church.

ADDENDUM

Here are the options the Leadership Council considered but did not select:

1. Starting in the fall of 2020, the four embroideries will not be on exhibit and they will be rested for an indefinite period. Smaller renditions of the embroideries will be displayed in a prominent position in the church along with educational placards. New artwork will be commissioned or purchased for Guild Hall which represents voices of our broader community.
2. During the 2019–2020 church year, display all four embroideries on their regular cycle, possibly with shortened time periods for some, with explanatory placards. Provide programming for education, healing, reconciliation and repentance. In a ceremony in fall of 2020, all four embroideries will be rested for an indefinite period. Smaller renditions of the embroideries will be displayed in a prominent position in the church along with educational placards. New artwork will be commissioned or purchased for Guild Hall which represents voices of our broader community.
3. Continue to display all four embroideries on their regular cycle, possibly with shortened time periods for some, with extensive education regarding issues related to the embroideries. Provide ongoing programming for education, healing, reconciliation and repentance.