

4 things to keep in mind when deciding what to do with offensive symbols

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South Carolina did it. It removed a “permanently” raised Confederate flag from the statehouse grounds. Now the leaders of the National Cathedral have a decision to make: Will the Jackson-Lee windows—windows extolling the Christian faith and virtue of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and featuring images of the Confederate flag—stay or go?

According to Kevin Eckstrom, the cathedral’s communications director, it could be more than a year before a decision is made. And it’s not the cathedral dean’s decision to make. We know where he stands: [take them out](#).

I suspect the National Cathedral is not alone. Many places of worship discover that symbols in their sacred space, however well intentioned when they were installed, now cause pain, confusion, and exclusion. How do you decide which ones stay and which ones should make a speedy exit?

Here are four things church leaders should consider as they deliberate about whether to keep a symbol in the church—whether it's the stars and bars or a picture of a beloved former pastor.

1. Understanding the past doesn’t justify the present. In other words, an explanation is not a justification. You can explain the original meaning of a symbol, tell the story of the people who paid for it, and paint a picture of the context at the time it was installed. But this does not justify its current existence, even if it’s a good story. (In the case of the Jackson-Lee windows, [I don’t think it is a good story](#).)

Knowing the history might help with public relations, or with designing a ceremony when we finally take the symbols out in order to honor the original story—if it’s honorable—but it doesn’t justify keeping them in now. Historical background is useful information, not a trump card.

2. The meanings of symbols are not in our control. Again and again, arguments *for* the Confederate flag claim that what the flag originally meant to

those who designed it and still appreciate it is what the symbol actually *means*. But a symbol's meaning is fluid—and public. If someone feels oppressed, excluded, or diminished by a symbol, then that's what the symbol means.

A good symbol's meaning widens over time, allowing more people to find themselves in its semantic landscape. Do the Jackson-Lee windows allow for that?

3. Sacred symbols should tell God's story, not ours. When we enter a sanctuary, we are entering liminal space, a space that evokes God's holiness and otherness. Symbols play a key role in helping us enter this space; they open to us the story of God's relationship with the world and help us find our place in it. When they tell *our* stories, they should tell them in relationship to God's story.

The National Cathedral has a window that symbolizes the reconciliation between the North and the South, picturing a hand from each side grasping an olive branch. This image gestures toward finding our story within God's story. I can imagine a Confederate flag in a different kind of window that does this, but the Jackson-Lee windows don't.

4. Foresight is better than hindsight. With images of the Confederate flag, or other symbols placed in our sanctuaries decades or centuries ago, it's too late—we have to decide whether they stay or go. So maybe we should save our successors some trouble by keeping these things in mind *now*.

We can't predict what our symbols might mean in 50 or 60 years (though anyone should have known what the Confederate flag has always meant to African Americans). But we can use our imaginations; we can try.

When we're installing windows, hanging pictures, or choosing church logos, we can ask ourselves: will this symbol help more people over the years find themselves in the story of God's redeeming love, within the story of God's wide mercy? Or will it leave people out?

Our answer to that question should guide the decisions we make.