

**THE HISTORY OF
ST. LUKE'S CHURCH: 1912 TO 1986**

Jonathan P. Sullivan

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This is the single most extensive written history ever compiled about St. Luke's Church and its congregation. In the past brief overviews of the history and details of particular events have been recorded, but they have never been brought together to form a whole picture of all that has gone before. Now, on the eve of the celebration of seventy-five years as a congregation and twenty-five years as a parish of the Diocese of New Jersey, the need to assimilate all the events in relation to one another is obvious.

In compiling this archive, I have tried to use as many primary sources as possible. This is important because the history of St. Luke's is about people. It is a group of devoted people who have worked together to make St. Luke's what it is today. The events that are recounted here hold little that would be of great significance to outsiders. Hopefully for the church members it will give more meaning and appreciation to that which their ancestors have provided for them.

The original founders of St. Luke's were potters who emigrated from Stoke-on-Trent in England in February of 1904. They settled outside of Trenton in a country area called Prospect Heights in Ewing Township. There was no gas, no sewer, and no electricity, just they and their simple dwellings. The potters worked at the Mercer Pottery on Olden Avenue in Trenton. The only form of public transportation was the Johnson trolley, which ran from the Perry Street terminal to Princeton, along Fifth Street. As a result, the people who lived in the area did a lot of walking. They walked to work, walked to the city to shop (a distance of two or three miles), and they walked to church.

The potters and their families attended Grace Episcopal Church on North Clinton Avenue in Trenton.² A Few of the communicants of Grace Church, having moved out to the Prospect Heights section, found it difficult to attend the services at St. Andrew's, which was the nearest church. They decided to investigate conditions and see if they warranted a church in the neighborhood. There was nothing whatsoever within the radius of a mile.³

Samuel W. Kirkham and Laurence Hamnett circulated around the area, visiting every home. They found that the parents would welcome a Sunday School for their children. Some of the people, however, thought that a union school would be better than one of any particular denomination. The Inter-Church Foundation was notified of their intent. The president of that body, Dr. McCauley, met with a committee from Prospect Heights at St. Andrew's Church and arrangements were made for the establishment of a union school. The freeholders gave them permission to use the public school building (now known as the Alfred Reed School) and the Sunday School started.⁴ Mr. Kirkham and other members of Grace Church acted as teachers, but the leadership was in the hands of others.⁵ After several months, attendance and interest lagged and the school was finally closed.⁶

After some time had elapsed the Rev. Milton A. Craft, rector of Grace Church, and Samuel W. Kirkham again visited the houses in the neighborhood and found that the people would welcome a school such as proposed under the care of the Episcopal

Church. The school, which was followed each Sunday by a service at four o'clock, was then begun. The first session was held on Trinity Sunday, June 2, 1912, at 2:30 p.m. in the school building.⁷ This event marks the very beginning of St. Luke's.

Mr. Craft came out from Grace Church to do the service each Sunday. He is described by those who knew him as "a beautiful person" who was very special to them.⁸ He is still remembered as a saintly man, of gentle disposition who used his own financial resources to perform many kind and generous works of charity.

The need to have their own place of worship was clear and the present site on Prospect Street was purchased in 1913.⁹ The next five years required much hard work on the part of the members of the congregation to get the mission off the ground. In erecting the building, much credit is due to a young architect, Albert E. Micklewright, who later would design Antheil School, Lore School, Fisher Junior High School, Ewing High School, and the Frederick C. Ryan Administration Building for the Ewing Township Board of Education.¹⁰

He submitted plan after plan at different stages of progress toward a church home. Although it was a time of war, Mr. Micklewright was able to design the building and bring it within the very modest sum which the projectors felt they could afford -- some \$ 3,500 for land and all.¹¹

The building committee was composed of Mr. Craft, Samuel W. Kirkham, Daniel Henderson, Frank S. Bennett A. E. Parkinson, and Albert Micklewright; they spent many hours in consultations and doing work toward the erection of the building. The construction began early in 1917. The foundation was dug by a number of boys and men of the church.¹² The design of the church was modified gothic architecture; a red brick structure with plain glass windows.¹³

The bricks were obtained from a local brick factory. They were the burned ones from the bottom of the kiln which were free for the carting away. In those days the stressed brick facade was considered second rate. Ironically enough, stressed bricks are the most expensive ones today because of the weathered look they provide.¹⁴

The building was constructed by contractors who showed much more than a perfunctory interest in their work. They were as follows: Samuel W. Kearta, brick work; Samuel Wiley, carpenter; and E.W. Swan, painting. Now that electricity was available, lighting and electrical work were installed. This tedious and difficult task was undertaken by Frank S. Bennett, Daniel Henderson, and Robert Chamberlain in the late afternoons and evenings after a hard day's work.¹⁵

The church would never have become a reality if it had not been for the help of many people. The Rt. Rev. John Scarborough, Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey, not only gave his official consent for the mission but also contributed liberally toward securing the land. Grace Church willingly gave the services of its rector in starting and conducting the work. Contributions of money for the financing of the enterprise and the purchasing of the land were given by the following: Dr. Phillips gave half the price of the

land, the Rev. Milton A. Craft, F. Hendrickson, Samuel W. Kirkham, Daniel Henderson, A. Woodruff, Clarence E. Rihl, Thomas Micklewright, John Foxall, A.E. Parkinson, Mr. Fowler, Laurence Hamnett, Samuel Kirkham (son of Samuel W.: Kirkham, sometimes referred to as Samuel Kirkham, Jr. in early church records), Herbert Crisp,

T. Shenard, G. Slack, Mr. Stetsen, Mr. Feierabend, Mr. Read, Reuben Parkinson, Mr. Page, Mr. Skolsky, Miss Retta Slack, Mr. Russell, Harry Rue and J. Rue.¹⁶

On June 30, 1917, the cornerstone of the new church was laid by Miss Anna E. DeCou, who was a contributor and also a leader in the Ladies' Aid Society.¹⁷ This was the beginning of a long and steady period of growth during which Mr. Craft and his assistants from Grace Church provided nurturing pastoral care.

It was at about this time that Mr. Kirkham and some of the men from the church went down to Trinity Church in Woodbridge to buy an old organ.¹⁸ The organ was an 1865 William Davis tracker organ, and they purchased it from the church for \$ 400!¹⁹

Today this organ still faithfully serves the church at age 121; it is the oldest tracker organ in the Diocese of New Jersey, one of the oldest organs still in use in the State of New Jersey, and is registered with the Organ Historical Society. The organ sat in one corner of the church and was played by Helen Crisp Micklewright, wife of Albert E. Micklewright, while two young men pumped it.²¹ No one is sure just exactly when the organ was installed but it was working for the first wedding at St. Luke's. In January of 1919, Edna Rebecca Parkinson married George Beeman in the first of many weddings to come.²²

St. Luke's was one of the focal points of the community; the Prospect Heights School and the Prospect Heights Volunteer Fire Company were the other two. This was the beginning of a long relationship between the fire company and the church; they both have their roots with the same people. The rector of St. Luke's has long served as chaplain to the fire company.²³ Active organizations in the church at the time included not only the Sunday School but the Ladies' Aid Society, the Ever Ready Society, and the Ivy Tea Club as well.²⁴

From 1924 to 1928 Mr. Craft hired the Rev. Gordon L. Kidd to run St. Luke's and St. Andrew's. It is interesting to note that this man later went on to become rector of St. James' Church in Hyde Park, New York, where he was pastor to and a confidant of the Roosevelts. Father Kidd presided at Eleanor Roosevelt's funeral.²⁵

Mr. Craft died in 1935 much to the bereavement of the congregation.²⁶ Indications are that he might have left active participation a year earlier. According to an article in *The Trenton Times* on May 27, 1934, the "Rev. John N. Warren is present rector of the church."²⁷ In 1934, Mr. Warren was the vicar of St. Andrew's in Trenton and may have been doing services at St. Luke's as well.²⁸

At this time Mr. W. Donald Phillips, a member of Grace Church, came over to be Lay Reader-in-Charge of St. Luke's. Mr. Phillips took the trolley over from his residence on Greenwood Avenue in Trenton to conduct Morning Prayer. One Sunday a month he

would have a clergyman from a surrounding parish come in to celebrate the Holy Communion.²⁹ For the next twenty-five years that was much how things remained. Mr. Phillips provided pastoral care, Sunday services, stability, and continuity.

The widening of Prospect Street in 1937 necessitated the only structural changes that were made in the church during that period. The front entrance was moved to the side and a chancel was added at the east end, with a basement Sunday School room. The organ was installed in a special chamber on the gospel side of the chancel.³⁰

After World War. II, Ewing Township developed rapidly and St. Luke's grew with it. The Rev. Gerald R. Minchin, rector of St. James', Trenton, and his assistant, the Rev. Ware G. King, who worked at St. Matthew's, Pennington, and St. Paul's in Trenton, came to help Don Phillips carry out the ministerial duties. Clergy from surrounding parishes also came often to conduct services during the busy seasons like Lent.³¹

By 1954, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the growth of the parish necessitated a full-time vicar. In a letter to the Board of Trustees of St. Luke's, dated May 8, 1954, W. Donald Phillips submitted his "resignation as Bishop's Man and Lay Reader."³² He cited the need of the church to grow under the guidance of a priest into an independent parish:

I feel that this action is necessary in order that the functions of the Associated Parish Plan, under the leadership of priests, may more properly administer to the growth and enrichment of the parish and congregation.

It has been increasingly clear during the past months that this action on my part is now a necessary condition to the next and important step of providing a more mature growth in the spiritual growth and development in the history of St. Luke's Church.³³

Reading between the lines, it is evident that the parting was a painful one on both sides. Mr. Phillips took with him the gratitude of many for his years of friendship and faithful service.

The Rt. Rev. Alfred L. Banyard, bishop of the diocese, recognized the need for new leadership and agreed to provide financial help from the diocese to support a full-time vicar. In November 1954 he assigned Elmer L. Sullivan, a student at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, to field work at St. Luke's. He would come down on the train each weekend to help Father Minchin and Father King with the services. By June 1, 1955, he had graduated from seminary and been ordained a deacon, and Bishop Banyard appointed him to full-time work at St. Luke's. In November 1955 he was ordained a priest and St. Luke's had their own clergyman for the first time.³⁴

At the same time other changes were being made. The old church mortgage from 1917 had been paid off in 1950. Now they were free to build a much needed parish hall beside the main church building. This addition was designed by Albert Micklewright and

his sons William and Robert, and was built by two contractors who were parish members, John S. Rigby and John Micklewright. It was dedicated in 1951.³⁵

Over the course of the next few years, Father Sullivan worked with the church members to develop a large church school. He also started a neighborhood oriented youth program which provided many activities for teen-agers, including dances. He remembers taking ten to twenty people to the biannual Medford youth conferences. There was a baseball team, a basketball team, a touch football team, and an occasional ice hockey team. Father Sullivan was young and single and was able to devote most of his time to the parish.³⁶

St. Luke's attracted many young families who were moving into Ewing and it reached its peak during the post-war baby boom period of the 50's and 60's. By 1958, the mortgage on the parish hall was paid off and a rectory was built at 1628 Prospect Street near the church. Up until this time St. Luke's had been a mission, receiving financial aid from the Diocese of New Jersey. In 1962, the church became financially independent of the diocese; it was now a parish in its own right.³⁷

During this period St. Luke's was on the forefront in breaking down minority barriers. When the all negro church of St. Monica's in Trenton closed down in the late fifties, about 40% of the congregation came to St. Luke's.³⁸ The negro families who came to the church were welcomed by the Mission Committee and the vicar. Most of the congregation were in favor of the change, although a few white members disagreed and left the church. There were no serious conflicts, but it took time for all to make the adjustment.³⁹

After a couple of years the situation between races became comfortable and relaxed. Blacks transferred into St. Luke's from churches of other denominations in the area as its reputation grew. By 1960, there were two Black men on the Mission Committee, Roy Gregg and Oscar Barker.⁴⁰ Over the course of nine years the integration of negroes into St. Luke's became complete and has remained as such ever since.

The integration struggles which the United States experienced in the 1960's did not have a great impact on a majority of the people at the church. They remained for the most part conservative and low-key. Father Sullivan and a few members of the congregation did become involved, however in a national organization of the Episcopal Church called the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU). Father Sullivan, Gloria Nevius, Oscar and Hyacinth Barker, and Alice Hamnett joined the local branch of this organization whose goal was to influence the national Episcopal Church and the local diocese to play a more vigorous role in the struggle for racial equality.⁴¹

Members of St. Luke's again pioneered with the War on Poverty. In 1965 every town was supposed to create a head start program for disadvantaged preschool children. The Ewing Township Committee, however, claimed there was no need for such a program here. Father Sullivan and Dr. Peter Buerman, a psychologist for the board of education, went out and rounded up twenty kids and started a program in the parish hall of the church staffed by church members and local volunteers. After one year, people

realized that there was indeed a problem of poor in Ewing. Local government took over the head start program and created a community center on Ingham Avenue to provide other services. Later it was named the Father Elmer L. Sullivan Neighborhood Center.⁴²

In 1967 Father Sullivan got married and moved to a different church. He was replaced by the Rev. Paul Meglathery. Father Meglathery was also interested in bringing in the youth off the street and he continued the youth program. He and some of the other parishioners were interested in opening up the parish hall to provide a night of food and shelter for a group of people traveling to Washington, D.C., for the Poor People's March. They were met with opposition from the vestry, however, and their plan wasn't realized. This incident brought to a head tension that had been growing between Father Meglathery and the vestry and congregation.⁴³ Finally in 1969, upon the advice of the senior warden, Father Meglathery resigned and was replaced by the Rev. Samuel L. Koons.

Father Koons was very "high church" and got lots of white people to enter the parish. He had many weekly evening services, but became frustrated at the low attendance. In 1974, he resigned to take a position at a larger parish.⁴⁴ Father Sullivan returned to assume the rectorship when Father Koons left.

In the 1970's, St. Luke's, like many churches, suffered from changing social attitudes toward church attendance, the declining birth rate, and economic recession. In the 1980's, the parish managed to achieve some modest growth, with an encouraging influx of young married couples with children.⁴⁵

The late 70's and early 80's also brought the involvement of female priests at St. Luke's. Susan Carney, a member of the parish, was trained at St. Luke's and was ordained in 1980. She served as priest associate of the parish for a time following her ordination.

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In 1983, Father Sullivan was appointed as the Administrative Assistant to the Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey and was no longer able to devote his full attention to St. Luke's. The vestry elected the Rev. Virginia M. Sheay as his replacement. She was the first female priest to have full charge of an independent parish in the diocese.

In compiling this historical essay I have found that there is much more to write than the scope of this paper will allow. The history of St. Luke's is people and it would be a mistake not to devote some time to the accomplishments of those to whom the church is indebted. These pages have been intended to provide a chronological view of the main events in the history of St. Luke's church. Seeing that a more complete interpretation of the church's history is necessary, I have decided to further pursue the goal of providing a more complete historical sketch which would give more attention to the lay members of the church and the role they have played.

ENDNOTES

¹Reuben Parkinson, interviewed by Jonathan Sullivan (Estates Blvd., Trenton, N.J.), 11:30 A.M., March 29, 1986.

²*Ibid.*

³A.L. Mars, "What Has Gone Before," *The Guiding Light: St. Luke's News* (Spring, 1954), p. 3.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶"Resident Shares Experiences," *The Trenton Times* (May 27, 1934), p. A10.

⁷Mars, *The Guiding Light*, p. 3.

⁸Parkinson, *Interview*.

⁹*Inventory of the Church Archives of New Jersey* (Newark, N.J., The Historical Records Survey, 1940), p. 115.

¹⁰Rev. E.L. Sullivan, interviewed by Jonathan Sullivan (13 Llanfair Lane, Trenton, N.J.), 7:30 P.M., April 3, 1986.

¹¹A.L. Mars, "Past History," *The Guiding Light* (Summer, 1954), p. 2.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Inventory*, p. 115.

¹⁴Sullivan, *Interview*.

¹⁵A.L. Mars, "Past History," *The Guiding Light* (Summer, 1954), p. 2.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Sullivan, *Interview*.

¹⁹Parkinson, *Interview*.

²⁰Sullivan, *Interview*.

²¹A.E. Parkinson, interviewed by Jonathan Sullivan (1755 6th St., Trenton, N.J.), 12:30 P.M., April 5, 1986.

²²Reuben Parkinson, interviewed by Jonathan Sullivan (Estates Blvd., Trenton, N.J.), 11:30 A.M., March 29, 1986.

²³Sullivan, *Interview*.

²⁴*Inventory*, p. 115.

²⁵Sullivan, *Interview*.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*The Trenton Times*, p. A10.

²⁸Rev. David R. King, *The Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey 1785-1985* (Trenton, N.J., The Diocesan Bicentennial Committee, 1985), p. 161.

²⁹Sullivan, *Interview*.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Personal letter from W. Donald Phillips to Charles A. Inman, May 8, 1954.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Sullivan, *Interview*.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Hyacinth Barker, interviewed by Jonathan Sullivan (3 Grafton Ave., Trenton, N.J.), 7:30 P.M., April 4, 1986.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Sullivan, *Interview*.

⁴³Barker, *Interview*.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Sullivan, *Interview*.

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