

# 75 YEARS: A STORY OF INNOVATION & FAITHFULNESS

A SPECIAL PUBLICATION ON THE HISTORY OF ST. GEORGE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH | 1949-2024





*Worship in the original nave, 1950*

In our 75th year, we celebrate two intertwining stories that run through the history of this parish and point to God's abiding faithfulness: the stories of bold innovation and faithful commitment. Although there is a natural tension between these two narratives, together they weave a rich and beautiful tapestry, showcasing the incredible things that God has done and is doing among the people of St. George's.



The story of St. George's begins when, after approximately 20 years of prayer and patience, the Rt. Rev. James M. Maxon and lay leaders discerned the time was right for a new congregation to expand into the Belle Meade neighborhood of Nashville. The vestry of Christ Church agreed to accept a bid from W. F. Holt & Son in the amount of \$188,900 to construct a new chapel on Harding Road. Unexpected costs threatened the completion of the chapel, and to save money, men of the church painted the interior of the parish hall themselves. Named for St. George, the chapel opened for its first Sunday on September 11, 1949, with 808 people attending two dedication services. Our new bishop, the Rt. Rev. Edmund P. Dandridge, preached, saying "it was a triumph of man moved by the spirit of God to do his will and work." It had taken years of vision, patience, planning, delay, set-back, and unrelenting determination to reach the dedication services that day.



*Clergy at the dedication service, 1949: The Rev. Peyton R. Williams, Rector of Christ Church; the Rt. Rev. Edmund P. Dandridge, Bishop of the Diocese of Tennessee; the Rt. Rev. Theodore N. Barth, Bishop Coadjutor; and the Rev. Jonathan N. Mitchell, Vicar*

If you remember, the concrete floors were bare that morning. The collapsible metal chairs squeaked and scrunched. Tender knees learned the basic nature of Episcopal worship – kneeling on 2x4s on which men of the parish had worked hard and late the Saturday night before to finish. The walls and ceiling were still-wet plaster... But there was an altar, even if a temporary one, made by a carpenter for the occasion. Our custom-built chancel furniture had not been ordered – nor the pews. We couldn't pay for them.

*–The First Ten Years*



*Chapel cornerstone laying, 1948*

**1940s**

*The Rev. Jonathan Mitchell, Vicar (1947-1951)*



Just eight months after the first service, church members were organizing committees to further live into the mission of this new chapel in Belle Meade. With unanimous support from the sub-committee appointed to the task, St. George's took a "most progressive step" and began forming a kindergarten day school (Letter to the vestry of Christ Church, May 8, 1950). Opening on September 11, 1950, St. George's Kindergarten welcomed 36 students to its inaugural class, which would one day blossom into the largest Episcopal preschool in the country.



*Church exterior after Sunday school addition, 1954*

The future of St. George's was bright, and with the blessing of Christ Church, the chapel was granted parish status on January 24, 1952, allowing each congregation "a great opportunity to strengthen and expand its work, [putting] first the gospel of Christ risen ... each in its own community and in its own way" (Letter to Christ Church, March 1951).

The energy of St. George's Church exploded and so did the church's facilities. Families eagerly supported the growing needs of the congregation through a 15-classroom expansion and various other improvements. This evangelism continued outside the church walls as land was acquired and member families sent to a new congregation called St. Bartholomew's Church in 1954.



*Sunday morning worship with Organist Don Cowan, 1950s*



*St. George's Kindergarten students with Director Alice Kousser (left), 1951*

## 1950s

*The Rev. Robert Morgan Shaw, Rector (1951-1958)*



With 1,500 communicants, there was no end in sight to the growth experienced by this church in Belle Meade. New classrooms were built on top of the existing Dandridge Building to accommodate a Sunday School enrollment of 695 people. And for the second time, St. George's led the charge in planting a new congregation, this time in the West Meade area. St. David's Episcopal Church would become the new home for 101 members and one priest from St. George's.



*St. Gregory's Choir with Director Greg Colson, 1963*

At the national level, the 1960s were a trying period for The Episcopal Church due to challenging discussions at General Convention. And new liturgies were tested during worship on Sundays as a trial for what would later become the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. But the ministry of St. George's remained steadfast through growing Sunday School classes, youth mission trips, and an ongoing commitment to celebrating God's ultimate gift through the Holy Eucharist.



*Kindergarten class, 1960s*

## 1960s

*The Rev. Arthur William Fippinger, Jr., Rector (1958-1966)*

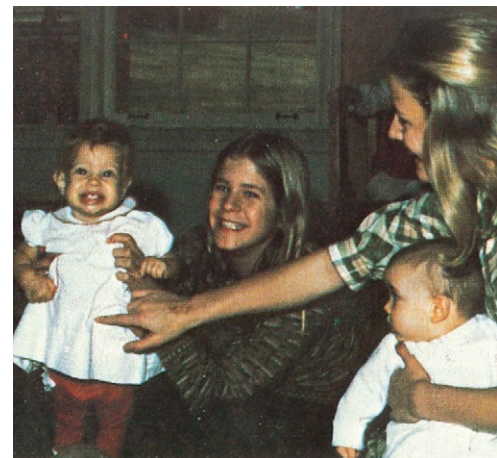
The arrival of St. George's 25th Anniversary in 1974 was cause for great celebration, with 750 families calling this church their spiritual home. The St. Francis Chapter of Daughters of the King was founded with 27 members, and the church opened its doors to community support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous – both ministries that continue to this day. But there were some lean budget years, and funds were tight. The Rev. James L. Johnson challenged the people of St. George's to avoid the temptation of complacency and move forward with a new sense of purpose.

We're abundantly blessed with new talent and people of energy and commitment, but a new sense of meaning must be found ... I believe God has called us to a new day and our responsibilities now lie not in celebrating the past, but in moving to the future with vision and the same kind of determination that brought this parish into being 25 years ago. This task of listening, understanding, and interpreting the hopes and aspirations of the people of St. George's Church is the task your rector has foremost in his mind as we enter the fall of 1974.

–The Rev. James L. Johnson,  
*A St. George's Scrapbook: The First 50 Years*



*Christmas service, 1970s*



*Nursery on Sunday morning, 1970s*



*Bell installation and steeple construction, 1987*

## 1970s

*The Rev. Thomas Adams Roberts, Rector (1967-1971)*



After six long years of construction and planning, 700 people gathered for the first Sunday in St. George's nave on September 7, 1986. The church had grown to such a size that the new nave could accommodate twice as many worshippers as the previous space, which is known today as Hampton Hall. And on October 17, 1988, 40 years to the day after the laying of the first cornerstone of St. George's Chapel, the cornerstone for the new nave was finally set in place.

Even in the midst of physical growth at St. George's and the financial commitments required for the addition of the nave, the vestry prioritized outward mission and an ongoing commitment to doing God's work in Nashville and throughout the Diocese of Tennessee. It was the vision of the vestry in the 1980s to find new and exciting ways to partner with smaller congregations and new missions, like Church of the Resurrection. It would be many years later that God would call St. George's to act on that vision.

The excitement of the church's physical expansion led to a convivial spirit. By 1989, St. George's would give thanks for 2,500 members and considerable growth in outreach ministries serving those in need.



*Dedication of the Bells with the Rt. Rev. George R. Reynolds, Jr., 1987*



*First worship service in the nave, 1986*

**1980s**

*The Rev. James Lawrence Johnson, Rector (1972-1989)*



The 1990s began as a transitional period at St. George's, marked by not one – but two – rector searches. The energy of prior years was waning, and by some individual accounts, the church seemed to be marking time with complacency threatening to take hold. Thanks to the energized baby boomers, the church rallied around a food drive for Second Harvest Food Bank, reminding St. George's of the Christian call to serve others. In this interim period, it "endued the congregation with a real sense of what they could do in the community around them that heretofore had been undiscovered" (A St. George's Scrapbook: The First 50 Years). In 1993, the call to serve was met when 28 people left for a mission trip to Our Little Roses in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in what would become St. George's longest-standing relational outreach ministry. Our ecumenical muscles stretched in 1994 when the church built a partnership with neighbors at Immanuel Baptist Church and The Temple to host the first annual Boulevard Bolt with 3,000 participants – the largest race in Nashville at that time.

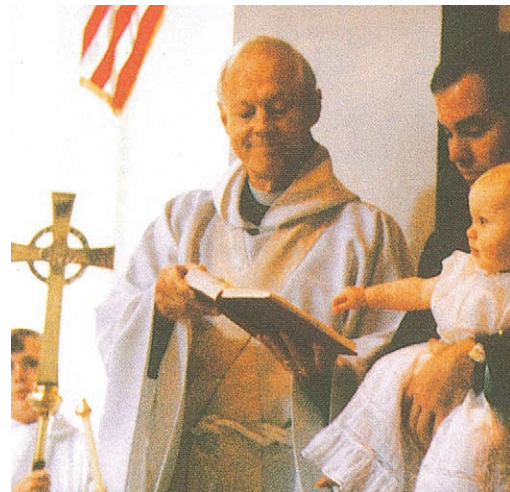
By 1995, the vestry charted a vision for St. George's around five core ministry areas – Christian Education, Evangelism, Outreach, Pastoral Care, and Liturgy – bolding launching the church into the future.



*First Boulevard Bolt, 1994*



*Our Little Roses Mission Trip in Honduras, 1994*



*The Rev. Tim Taylor assisting with baptism, 1994*

## 1990s

*The Rev. Edwin Cabaniss Coleman, Interim Rector (1990-1991 and 1993-1994)*





*Parish picnic, 1999*

I believe we need to reflect on what purpose God has for us. What is God calling us to be and do? How do we live our commitment faithfully and lovingly in this rapidly changing world? What good works are we being called to perform for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

—The Rev. Dr. W. Robert Abstein II in a letter to the parish dated June 16, 1999



*Groundbreaking for 'To Prepare a Place' campaign, 1999*

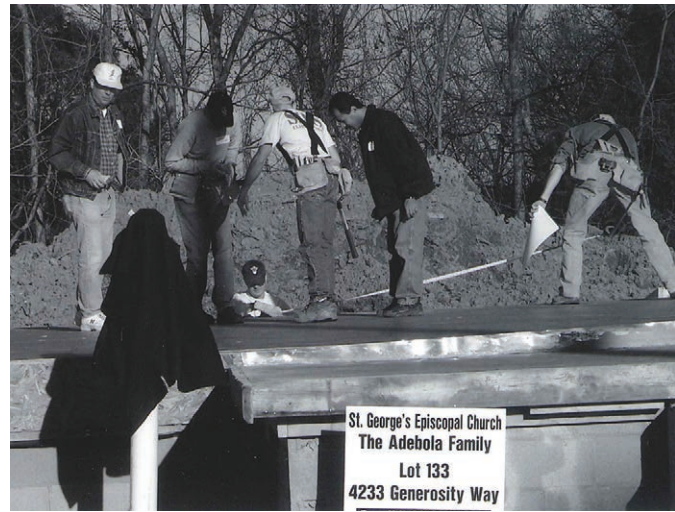


*Construction of the office and Mothers' Day Out entrance around the gingko tree, 1999*

*The Rev. Joel T. Keys, Rector (1991-1993)*



The completion of the Abstein Administration Suite in 2000 ushered in a new era of executive function and growth for St. George's. A new commission structure in the vestry empowered lay leaders throughout all church ministries, allowing the church to have greater impact in many areas at once. And by 2005, the vestry had re-engaged the church's mission to be "a Christ-centered church dedicated to inspired worship, deepened discipleship, and committed service" (Annual Report, 2005). Together, the parish embraced this calling toward worship, study, and outreach.



*Habitat for Humanity build, 2005*

A healing ministry was formed to harness the power of prayer in personal and specific ways during our Sunday morning worship services. Participation in Christian formation programs reached new heights in every age group, and St. George's Kindergarten faced the challenge of long wait-lists and limited classroom space. The church entered into what would become a multi-year partnership with St. Thomas Parish in Kagiso, South Africa. St. George's became a people on the move, with the Holy Spirit stirring up new life individually and throughout the parish.



*First mission trip to South Africa, 2006*

## 2000s

*The Rev. Dr. William Robert Abstein, Rector (1994-2004)*





*Strategic planning session, 2006*



*Youth mission trip to Appalachia, 2003*



*Adult Sunday school in Dandridge Hall, 2008*



*Habitat for Humanity build*



*Vacation Bible School, 2004*



Change came hard and fast when a catastrophic storm dropped more than 13 inches of rain on Nashville the weekend of May 1, 2010. Every inch of St. George's Church was submerged in water by Sunday afternoon, with water levels rising as high as 33 inches in the kindergarten area. That same day, stalwart church members Frankie and Bill Rutledge died when their car was swept away as they tried to come to church for the 8:45am service. The church was devastated by loss. But on May 9, the whole church gathered to remember those who were lost and to worship God together with Eucharist and prayer.

We remember that every negative event is paradoxically an opportunity to turn toward God in hope and gratitude. I am moved that in the last 48 hours many of you have shared your love for our beautiful facility and ache to see it damaged. And yet you have also recognized that we are called into being as the church not because of our buildings but because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ ... By God's grace, I am confident we will emerge from these days a stronger and even more tightly-knit community of faith.

—The Rev. Dr. R. Leigh Spruill in a letter to the parish dated May 4, 2010



*Post-flood construction, 2010*



*Flooding on May 2, 2010*



*"We are St. George's" sign made by children at Parish Picnic, May 9, 2010*





*Choir members crossing caution tape, May 9, 2010*



*The Rev. Sarah Puryear and the Rev. Malone Gilliam at The Table, 2011*



*Church of the Resurrection with a new influx of families from St. George's, 2015*

In the years that followed the flood, St. George's was spurred into loving action for our community. Through St. George's Enterprise Ministry (SGEM), the church took a faithful and bold step in generously funding into new and emerging social enterprises through this life-changing initiative. Generous support was given for the creation of a new Episcopal school in our city, and we entered into a multi-year partnership to pour new life into Church of the Resurrection in Franklin. On St. George's campus, new ministries were formed, including The Table – a new, modern setting for our beloved Episcopal liturgy. Leigh Spruill's words would ring true – St. George's emerged from the flood with a spirit of hope and an energy to transform the city around us.

In 2019, after six years of prayerful discernment, St. George's embarked on a campaign to grow our parish in order to better serve and minister to Nashville. Generous contributions to the Living Our Legacy campaign set in motion a significant addition to the campus, with the hopes of responding to growing pains in various ministries of the church, as well as much-needed parking for Sunday services.



*Portrait of Edwin Lockridge, artist with Daybreak Arts, one of SGEM's inaugural partners in 2016*



Perhaps no year was more surprising than 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged and stretched our ability to be the church together. St. George's was closed for in-person public worship for eight weeks in 2020, including Holy Week and Easter Sunday. But the creative energy of St. George's clergy and lay leaders allowed the congregation to embrace new idea after new idea, with seemingly no end in sight.

The Rev. Dr. R. Leigh Spruill spurred us into action during this turbulent period with a community-wide call to be brave, creative, and generous. Members of the parish engaged in a church-wide initiative to pray and read the Bible daily, to connect personally with every parishioner, and to serve their neighbors in new and creative ways. Our new online services, STG@Home and STG Kids Online, along with unique concert opportunities in the 'Play On!' series, provided ways to learn and grow together all year long. We worshipped outside and launched a small group Bible study called Essentials, which remains strong today.



*Summer Sunset Service, 2020*



*First service of The Table in Legacy Hall, 2021*



*Pentecost in the Parking Lot with construction of Legacy Hall underway in the background, 2020*



*Advent wreath kits to-go, 2020*

## 2020s

*The Rev. J. Malone Gilliam, Rector (2022-)*





*Artist reception for Ted Jones, first artist exhibited in the new Bradford Gallery, 2021*

Following Leigh Spruill’s departure in December 2020, the Rev. Colin Ambrose served as Priest-in-Charge, faithfully navigating the ever-changing landscape of the COVID pandemic. From week to week, there were changing guidelines on the recommended sizes of gatherings, as well as distancing and masking recommendations. Under his creative leadership, the Coming Home initiative encouraged the church to reengage through intentional fellowship gatherings, sparking growth in attendance and engagement across all ministry areas.

Meanwhile, construction continued on the Living Our Legacy campaign. In 2021, Legacy Hall opened for worship at The Table, our fastest-growing service. And the Bradford Gallery created space for an emerging art ministry, which seeks to engage the Christian imagination and celebrate the fullness of God’s kingdom. Further construction led to increased capacity for Sunday school classes, improved the acoustics in the nave, and provided the church’s new organ, Buzard Opus 48.



*Crawfish boil, part of the Coming Home Initiative, with almost 500 in attendance, 2022*

In July 2022, the Parish Search Committee completed their work and called the Rev. J. Malone Gilliam to serve as the next rector of St. George’s. Known for his deep faith and a relational, compassionate, and pastoral approach to ministry, Malone has invited the people of this parish to enter a new chapter driven by Christian friendship, fellowship, and deep care for one another. In this post-pandemic season, a time when so many churches were suffering, St. George’s has become a bustling place once again, filled with the spirit of love and gratitude. ✝



*Confirmation Sunday, 2024*



# THE NEXT 75 YEARS...

St. George's has flourished as a parish and has grown to a membership of 4,260 parishioners. No church history is free of controversy, and St. George's has experienced its share. But the church has weathered those seasons by God's grace through a steadfast commitment to the primary ministry with which it is entrusted: the message of reconciliation. God is not done with the people of St. George's, and we know the future is full of promise.

As we stand upon the foundation and shoulders of our predecessors from these past 75 years, we also stand upon the solid rock of Jesus Christ. As we keep our eyes on him, our joy comes from continuing the gospel witness at St. George's for future generations. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world, a city on a hill cannot be hidden." May we burn brightly for the goodness and freedom found in Christ for many years to come!

—The Rev. J. Malone Gilliam

Special thanks to the Archives & Memories Committee of St. George's for their ongoing work of preserving documents, photographs, and details of our collective history. To learn more about contributing to this important initiative – either by sharing your own memories with the church or by joining the committee – please contact church member Seawell Brandau or Robin Puryear, Director of Pastoral Care.

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