A Brief Chronology of St. Columba’s Episcopal Church

By The Rev. Margaret Guenther

Rectors Serving the Parish:

- William Welton Shearer 1915-1930
- Emmanuel A. Lemoine 1931-1941
- C. Randolph Mengers 1942-1969
- William McDonald Tully 1980-1994
- James M. Donald 1995-2005
- Stephen Huber (transition) 2004-2006
- Janet Vincent 2007-2013
- Joe G. Burnett (interim) 2014-2015
- Ledlie I. Laughlin 2015-

1874 First services held in “Tenallytown” (named after John Tenally who in 1790 built a tavern at the intersection of River Road and Wisconsin Avenue). Services were held by the Rev. John Chew (rector of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church), initially in a Baptist Church, then a hotel, then under the oak tree on current property.

1875 A rough mission chapel is built for services.

1900 A parish house is added and becomes a social center for the neighborhood.

1904 Chapel is named St. Columba, following a tradition of missionary chapels of St. Alban’s.

1906 Neilson Barry becomes first vicar.

1907 William Bushby begins service as the first priest in residence, the first of five to serve.

1911 Chapel is enlarged, doubling seating capacity. Bell tower is added.

1915 William Shearer appointed vicar/rector and serves until 1932. The neighborhood experiences a population boom during the 1920s and the congregation fills the building.

1924 St. Columba’s becomes an independent parish.
1926  Current worship space built; first services in April 1927.

1932  Emmanuel Lemoine becomes rector and serves until 1942. During the 1930s, the area surrounding church develops as a blue-collar residential neighborhood.

1942  Randy Mengers becomes rector, serving until 1969. Lemoine’s tenure produced a dwindling congregation, a huge debt and a dilapidated physical plant. Mengers accepted the position on a meager salary. Under his leadership the parish turned around and flourished. His additional legacy was his strong pastoral relationships in the parish and surrounding community. He died less than a year after retiring in 1969.

1954  Reid Isaac begins to serve as first curate.

1959  Albemarle parish hall wing built; nursery school established. Parishioners mortgage homes to pay for building. The new building becomes a neighborhood gathering space.


1970  Friendship Terrace, an Episcopal retirement home across the street, opens.

1972  First woman seminarian serves at St. Columba’s. Judy Dodge Breneman becomes director of the Boy Choir, marking beginning of current music program. Music and drama groups form in the parish, and the program flourishes.

1974  St. C’s Concert Series begins.

1975  Alison Palmer is first female deacon to join staff. Three octaves of handbells are purchased. The Opera, Amahl and the Night Visitors is performed by the Boy and Girl Choirs and St. Columba Singers.

1977-8  Noreen Suriner, a deacon on staff, is ordained priest, becoming St. Columba’s first female priest. Helen Eisenhart becomes first woman to serve as Senior Warden.

1980  The Boy and Girl Choirs sing in Bach's St. Matthew Passion with the Choral Arts Society at the Kennedy Center

1980  Bill Tully is called as rector, serving until 1994. Parish grows exponentially. Outreach Steering Committee is formed to develop and oversee new mission groups and social justice programs.


1982  The Boy and Girl Choirs perform Noye’s Fludde at the Washington National Cathedral in cooperation with Queen Anne’s School. A musical based on the “Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” is performed by the parish, the music and book by
parishioners Mary Hardman, Will Billow and Thaddeus Cauvoti. Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus of the Netherlands attend a special service at St. Columba’s honoring the new Dutch pipe organ.

1983  "The Sounds of St. Columba’s" cassette tape is produced with anthems by the Boy and Girl Choirs, songs from The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, and virtuoso handbell ringing by The St. Columba Handbell Ringers. Judy Dodge Breneman resigns as director of music.

1984  Stephen Anderson becomes new director of music.

1985  Trevor Ambrister spearheads “Christmas in April” program at St C’s. First paid director of children’s ministries is hired. Terry Peel and John Pickard write and direct the first of a series of biblical musicals called the Peel-Pickard productions.

1989  Butterworth wing, Great Hall and Common are added, and the Church Nave seating is expanded.

1990  St. Columba’s orchestra continues to build under violinist, Peter Clamp.

1992  The "Candlelight Concert" cassette tape is produced by the Boy and Girl Choirs, performed at Bruton Parish, Williamsburg, Virginia.

1993  Judy Dodge Breneman returns to St. C’s as director of music/organist.

1994  St. Columba’s forms a partnership with Truesdell Elementary School and its three kindergarten classes, calling it STEP (St. Columba’s-Truesdell Elementary School Partnership), beginning what would become the largest mission effort ever undertaken by the parish. Bill Tully accepts call as rector of St. Bartholomew’s, New York. John Hurd is hired as associate music director.

1995  Jim Donald is called as rector, serving until 2005. First director of youth ministries is hired.

1996  Diane Heath joins music staff as music assistant.

1997  Pattie Ames comes to St. C’s as director of children’s ministries.

1998  Former parishioner Margaret Guenther returns to St. C’s to serve as associate rector.

1999  A second Great Hall Eucharist and 5 pm Eucharist are added on Sundays. Campaign for St. Columba’s helps retire 1989 building debt, fund deferred maintenance and create the Columba Fund. The music program grows to 280 participants. A Dowd harpsichord is added to the instrument collection in the Church Nave.

2000  The Haven (formerly Winter Haven) moves into Fletcher House to be run as a year-round transitional shelter through a partnership between St. Columba’s and Community Council for the Homeless at Friendship Place. Christmas in April USA becomes Rebuilding Together.
2002  The St. Columba Singers present a German Requiem by Johannes Brahms to commemorate the first anniversary of 911.

2003  The Opera, Amahl and the Night Visitors is performed by the Boy and Girl Choirs and St. Columba Singers.

2004  Jim Donald suffers and survives a brain aneurysm, which in spite of successful surgeries and miraculous recovery, leads to his retirement in 2005.

2004-06  Steve Huber, associate rector, transitions to priest-in-charge/transition rector. When he leaves to become vicar of Washington National Cathedral, associate rector Margaret Guenther serves briefly as priest-in-charge until a new rector is called.

2006  Julia Berry begins as director of the St. Columba’s Nursery School, which now boasts an enrollment of 125 children.

2007  Janet Vincent is called to serve as the seventh and first female rector, serving until 2013. Noye’s Fludde is performed again with great costumes and pageantry, in cooperation with Revels.

2009  Judy Dodge Breneman retires after 20+ years. John Hurd becomes director of music having served in the music department since 1994 along with Diane Heath.

2010  St. Columba’s embarks on the redesign of the church logo and website based on a new mission statement.

2011  The first Live@5 contemporary Eucharist is conducted.


2014  The Right Rev. Joe G. Burnett is called to serve as interim rector in January, and the search for a new rector is launched. Judy Dodge is named director of music emerita of St. Columba’s. Noye’s Fludde, performed again with great costumes and pageantry, is directed by Giselle Becker.

2015  The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin is called to serve as the eighth rector of St. Columba’s. Margaret Lefever is honored on Columba Day for 25 years of serving the St. Columba’s parish community. A major renovation project is undertaken during the summer months financed by the 2013 Foundation for the Future Capital Campaign.

2016  St. Columba’s mourns the passing of the Rev. Margaret Guenther, associate rector.

2017  “New To You,” annual yard sale/community building event, returns for its sixth year after a one-year hiatus. Music director John Hurd retires in June, and a special Columba Day celebration is planned in his honor. Anne Timpane comes on board as the new director of music ministries.

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