



St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba's History

By The Rev. Margaret Guenther

If you had come to St. Columba's in 1884, you would have worshiped in a little white frame chapel, standing approximately where our fieldstone church stands today. No problem parking on 42nd Street—it didn't exist. Instead, the cemetery shared with our Methodist brothers and sisters at Eldbrooke constituted the churchyard. According to legend, in fine weather the congregation gathered under the Columba oak, which is still with us, gnarled and showing its age but a powerful symbol of the life and growth of our community.

There was no full-time priest. St. Columba's was then a mission of St. Alban's parish. At first the rector of that parish presided at the relatively infrequent services—no Wednesday evening classes in those days and certainly no marathon services on Sunday. It was twenty years before St. Columba's received its name, and twenty more before it became an independent parish.

A well-to-do neighbor and pillar of society gave us our land, a half-acre fronting on Albemarle Street, then unpaved and not yet cut through to Wisconsin Avenue. Mr. Murdock owned a mill on the stream that still empties into the Potomac at Little Falls, the closest mill to Tenley Town and a lively operation until 1889. His name lives on in our neighborhood, just down the hill from St. Columba's on a twisted little street that runs for two blocks between Albemarle and Butterworth. Another branch of that little street made it up the hill where it merged with River Road. Still called Murdock Mill Road, it is now the shabby or at least inglorious alley between Cityline condos and the Iona senior citizen center.

In 1900 a modest parish hall was built. One day a week there was an after-school program teaching girls how to sew and crochet—there is no evidence that comparable programs for boys were offered, and no evidence at all of offerings in adult education. Then as now the choir, however, flourished.

As a newcomer in 1884 you would have found yourself in Tenley Town or Tenallytown, so named after John Tenally who in 1790 built a tavern at the intersection of River Road and Wisconsin Avenue. That was it! That was our neighborhood. It is safe to assume that you could eat (and drink) heartily at Mr. Tenally's establishment, that your horse would be cared for, and that there would be a bed of some sort for the night. No Starbucks, no Whole Foods, no Metro stop—just modest lodging at the intersection of two major roads.

The scene changed drastically in the mid-1920's. The old Georgetown-Rockville Road (now Wisconsin Avenue) was a busy thoroughfare. There was a building boom. The neighborhood suddenly looked solid and relatively prosperous as Janney School, the Masonic Hall on Wisconsin Avenue, our neighboring Eldbrooke Methodist Church (now The City) and our own St. Columba's were built in the span of a few years. Check out the cornerstone on 42nd Street; it names us "a child of St. Alban's." With our solid stone building, our beautiful windows and a full-time rector we had grown up.

That's when 42nd Street came into being. Much of the old graveyard disappeared. The unclaimed bodies were removed and dumped to make way for the new street, while the rest became part of the cemetery shared with the Methodists. The little cemetery, dating back to the 1860's, is open to visitors. A stroll among the old gravestones reminds us that ours is an old neighborhood, at least by North American standards.

Those were the olden days. We need to remember those tenacious, faithful people—men, women, the little girls learning to sew and crochet, and the little boys who seem quite neglected—who are our spiritual ancestors and to ponder what they would think today of our beautiful neighborhood.

St. Columba's in the 1950's was still a small parish: everyone knew everyone by name. The rector, C. Randolph Mengers—known to all as "Randy"—lived with his family in the rectory, now Fletcher House. The neighborhood had changed after World War II as American University Park expanded. Many of the brick colonials around St. C's were part of a massive building effort by W.C. and A.N. Miller Realtors. As streets were cut through, woods and empty lots turned into well-manicured suburbia, highly attractive to young families with children. Finances in the parish were tight, but the call to new growth was powerful. Giving for the "new" parish hall fronting on Albemarle Street was generous and sacrificial. There are stories—like the legend of the Columba oak surely true—that parishioners sold their table silver to raise the money for the new building. Then it housed the receptionist's office, the rector's office, a smaller office for the curate (when the parish could afford one), the library (which doubled as a meeting room for the vestry) and Sunday school classrooms. There was no need for more staff offices as there was no more staff: all other work was done by volunteers. Roy Hayes, who had his own pastorate on Sundays, was custodian for the church and parish hall. "Mr. Roy" was a gentle, cheerful presence, especially loved by the nursery school children: anyone too short to reaching the drinking fountain could count on a boost from Mr. Roy. With the completion of the parish hall in 1959, the nursery school was founded, with space for thirty children and four teachers. Playground equipment was modest, but there was always the challenge of rolling wildly down the hill or trying to climb one of the locust trees—now long gone. Within a year or so Sylvia Buell, a legendary Columban, became the director. Wise, loving, an indefatigable worker and a true visionary, she created an extraordinary place of learning. Parishioners received priority for admission, then siblings, then neighborhood children. Very soon, the school was so much in demand that eager parents joined the parish to assure their children's acceptance in the school.

Sylvia was a pioneer in our special needs ministry, long before the term "special needs" existed. In the early 1970's she accepted a child with a severe birth defect, well aware that this would bring extra work and responsibility to her dedicated staff. She made it clear, however, that she would do her share in the hands-on care of this child with so many needs. Since then the nursery school has been a welcoming place to all children.

In 1968 Mr. Mengers announced his plans to retire. He had served the parish since 1942 and had baptized, married and buried several generations of Columbans. More than that, he was recognized and loved in the Tenleytown community, an American version of the beloved village vicar in English novels. His retirement coincided with diocesan plans to formalize a process for calling a new rector. So St. Columba's became the guinea pig. With the help of diocesan consultants, a small group of parishioners met regularly for a year to assess our strengths and weaknesses and our vision for the future. Since Randy had been omni-competent, the hopes for the new rector were high: he (and of course in those days, it must be he) should be a fine preacher, a loving pastor and know how to deal with the temperamental heating system and anything else that might go wrong in the building.

The search committee worked hard. They were not flooded with applications as recent similar committees have been; after all, St. Columba's was a struggling parish with serious financial problems. Nevertheless a number of good priests were eager to join us. Even the committee was a bit surprised by their choice: William E. Swing, then serving a small parish in Weirton, West Virginia. He was younger than the profile called for and his experience as rector was limited, but he was clearly the right person to lead the parish into a new era.

With his arrival in 1969 St. Columba's took off! Bill savored the stories. He learned the history of the Fletcher clan, how the Fletcher matriarch had traveled by sled pulled by her sons to the parish Thanksgiving dinner, holding a roasted turkey in her lap. (Rumor has it that the turkey rolled off the sled at one point but resumed the journey, good as new, once the snow was dusted off.) Bill knew and loved the matriarchs, some of them quite fierce. They were powerful money-raisers; proceeds from the annual bazaar often made the difference between (modest) feast and famine. Father of two children himself, Bill built on Randy's tradition of inclusion and hospitality as he welcomed children as full participants in worship.

Until then, the chief service was at 11 am. It was devout, formal, indeed a little stiff. The current prayer book was a far-off dream, so there was a lot of kneeling and “thees” and “thous” with a generous sprinkling of “vouchsafests.” The volunteer choir, under the direction of Dr. Ralph Gibson, set a high standard. It was usually easier to listen than to join in the singing.

With the growing number of young children in the congregation, Bill saw the need for another service so the 9 am liturgy came into being. Soon the tail was wagging the dog: The more formal service continued steadily, but new people flocked to the earlier service. On many Sundays the Gospel reading turned into an impromptu drama, basically reverent but sailing very close to the wind. Congregational participation in the music became important in the new service: after a period of trial and error, a young woman living just down the street on Brandywine became the organist and music director at the 9 am service. Then Judy Breneman (now Judy Dodge), she came among us with the conviction that everyone can sing and should enjoy it. She began the children’s choir, then only a small group recruited from the Sunday School, but the ancestor of our present rich array of musical offerings for the young. The adult choir grew and a small orchestra of parishioners was formed. The rest is history.

The 70's were a time of growth and ferment in the Episcopal Church. St. Columba’s moved with the times: we conscientiously used the trial liturgies (some of them pretty bad), and then welcomed the “new” Prayer Book. We were—for the most part—open, even enthusiastic about the ordination of women, and sponsored Alison Palmer for the diaconate and later Noreen Suriner for the priesthood. When, for the first time, lay people were commissioned as readers and chalice bearers, St. Columbans were eager to embrace this new ministry.

When Bill Swing was chosen as Bishop in California, Columbans grieved his departure but moved steadily forward. Under the leadership of Craig Eder and Louise Lusignan we weathered the transition until Bill Tully joined us as the fifth rector. The Tully years were rich and lively. The parish continued to grow until the quiet little church at the corner of 42nd and Albemarle became the largest parish in the diocese. We outgrew our space so the expanded parish hall was added in 1989. The old rectory that had housed the Iona Senior Ministries became the Haven, as Iona moved next door into spacious new quarters on the site of the old police station. Showers and laundry facilities had been included in the new parish hall, so the Water Ministry took off and continues to thrive. It is a gift to our homeless or nearly homeless neighbors and a gift to the parish for it reminds us that the wounded body of Christ can be found at our very doorstep

RECENT HISTORY

With Jim Donald as our rector we have continued to grow and thrive. Our children and youth ministry—guided by Pattie Ames, Emily Gowdy Canady and Kelly Moughty—is breathtaking. The legacy of that first little girl, unable to walk or run or even to talk very well but welcomed into the nursery school by Sylvia Buell, lives on in our special needs ministry, “AIM—Accessibility-Impairment Ministry,” guided by Kelly Moughty, We move steadily on in our call to inclusion of all God’s beautiful children—and adults.

This is a sketchy history. Our story merits its own calendar of saints, those folk who have loved this sacred space for the past 124 years. We know some of the names—they are tastefully included in the stained glass windows as donors. The old timers can tell us more. Just ask them: who were Keith and Virginia Johnson? The Eisenharts? Miss Esther Barr? Ask them when Ramer Simpson first appeared. Ask then how the Shortbread Ministry got started—they will tell you stories of Charles and Mary Baggott. Ask how we navigated tough times—you’ll hear about Bob Tetlow and John Womack.

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses! For which we say only, humbly and gratefully: “Thanks be to God!”