

Memoirs of a Journey in Faith

An Informal History of
St. Francis Episcopal Church
(1948-2008)

To

THE REV. JOHN H. PARKE

*whose youthful enthusiasm, know-how, and
attention to detail helped the founders of St.
Francis Church to turn their dream into
reality, this booklet is gratefully dedicated.*

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By Alice Carr

Originally conceived by the late Roger Perry

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Preface

WHATEVER POST-MODERNISM MAY MEAN, it seems to mean at least a certain humility about any notion that there is such a thing as an “objective” history. We see things—each of us—from a perspective. The stories we tell and call history can be told from many different angles and told again and again in ways that are ever new and ever changing. The past is never really ever past.

This should neither scare, nor surprise, Christians. Our pre-modern forebears in the faith knew this quite well, and perhaps it was only in the midst of our Enlightenment hubris that we suffered from a kind of amnesia. We get Old Testament narratives offered by different narrators, with different theological perspectives. We get four gospels, not one. Above all, Jesus the rabbi told stories that held within them a range of interpretations and meanings.

Our own lives—our sacred stories—are the same way. In the telling of a story, we remember and find new meaning, and in the re-telling of that story we create new layers of meaning previously hidden from our understanding. So it is, as well, within the communion

of saints. There is no definitive history of St. Francis Church. What we have are the stories and memories of those who have gone before us, and the stories yet to be told by those who will come after us.

One illustration will, I hope, help to make this point. As rector of St. Francis I have heard various stories about how St. Francis got to the place where it settled on the name of this Umbrian saint. I believe all of them! It is impossible for me or anyone else to reconstruct a straight-line chronology of how that name came to be chosen from this vantage point. Would it matter even if we could? What we have is a coherence of stories that to this day remind us of our call to be instruments of God's peace in our own day.

It is therefore fitting that this history of St. Francis is the work of several authors. It began as a project undertaken by the late Roger Perry, an early member of the St. Francis community. He did much of the research and countless interviews and wrote drafts of the earliest chapters. He died, however, before the work could be finished. Graciously, Alice Carr, another person who has been here from the beginning, took over. Alice has poured herself into this work and we are indebted to her. As Alice reached the stage of needing a reader, Cynthia McIntyre offered her keen editorial eye.

Throughout this process there have been some threads that seem to run through the narratives. One is that St. Francis has not

only been blessed with good priests, but far more significantly with faithful lay leadership. The partnerships have been critical, I believe, to our successes. Just as importantly, there has been a willingness to not only serve faithfully, but also to let go when the time comes in order for a new generation of leaders to emerge. In my time as rector, I have witnessed senior and longtime members of this congregation gracefully allow new lay leaders to take their place. Such “church elders” have celebrated the change of a new chapter unfolding without the need to control or hold on, recognizing such change as affirmation that the parish continued to move in new directions. I think it has been ever so for us, at least in our finest hours. Life goes on and as rectors come and go, we are reminded that the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. That frees us to be open to the urgings of God’s Holy Spirit.

It is sad to say, but must be said; it is not so everywhere. Too often parishes hold on for dear life to what is past because it is what is known and familiar and may be of great comfort. It is the way things “have always been” and presumably “always will be.” But such clinging to the past displays a lack of faith in the God who is ever making things new. It suggests in ways louder than words that God’s people have no future. What is not changing is near death.

So for me, the great gift of what makes St. Francis what it is

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comes from the wisdom of those first families that gathered in the middle part of the twentieth century and dreamed of an Episcopal parish in Holden—and that is that they did not feel it was theirs to own, but to be shared. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and are ourselves now part of that cloud for those who will come after us. But the grace of this dream is that this story is not ours. Still it must be shared and passed along—a dream that continues to evolve and is passed along to our children and our children's children. It is in that spirit that we offer this story of St. Francis Church.

Faithfully,

Richard M. Simpson, Fifth Rector

St. Francis Day, October 4, 2008

Introduction

WHAT WOULD BECOME ST. FRANCIS EPISCOPAL CHURCH in Holden was at first just an idea and a wish in the mind of Paul L. Hinckley back in 1946. Hinckley was an attorney who practiced law in Worcester and Holden where he and his wife, Lucy, had settled prior to World War II. Paul and Lucy Hinckley were long-time members of All Saints Church in Worcester. They realized that among the new families moving into post-war Holden, there would be many who had grown up in the Episcopal Church. Could there be interest in creating a new Episcopal parish in Holden?

When the Hinckleys shared these thoughts with fellow Episcopalians Henry and Anne Pratley, their response was enthusiastic. Together, they began seeking out others living in Holden and surrounding towns to determine if there might be enough interest to develop this dream into reality.

The group met in the Hinckley living room at 29 Phillips Road to read Evening Prayer together. As word of the new venture spread, their numbers increased. By 1947, the group sought the as-

sistance of the Bishop of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, the Right Reverend W. Appleton Lawrence to discern if they were really being called by God to establish a new Episcopal church in Holden and if so, how they were to proceed.

Although delighted to see such enthusiasm on the part of a relative handful of laypersons, Bishop Lawrence seemed to take a cautious approach to advancing the project, sometimes to the frustration of those who felt they had already labored long enough to build the case for a new church in Holden. Bishop Lawrence asked the Research and Strategy Department of the Massachusetts Council of Churches for a survey of Holden, a normal and appropriate first step in the process. The survey was made and it did not recommend adding another church to Holden's religious community at that time.

The First Congregational Church and the First Baptist Church on the town Common were about as old as the town itself. St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Holden's Jefferson section was built in 1891. The Chaffins Congregational Church had been built in 1903. And if that were not enough churches for a town of about 5000 people in 1947, a new Lutheran church was under construction in the Chaffins area.

Although disappointed, the founding group accepted this

decision as merely a temporary setback. Home meetings continued with unabated fervor. In February 1950, the Rev. Richard Preston, rector of All Saints in Worcester, raised their spirits by officiating at a service of Evening Prayer at the Hinckley home.

Meanwhile, another key founder, the Rev. John H. Parke, rector of St. John's Church in Worcester, was about to enter the scene. "In the late 1940's, Bishop Lawrence ordered every parish in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts to consider the possibility of starting a mission," recalls Father Parke in retirement. "That caught my attention and I thought I should do something about it. I was then a young, energetic priest eager to take on a challenge. A number of my parishioners at St. John's lived in Holden. In conversation with them, I first learned of what was being done there under the leadership of Paul Hinckley and others. After a very cordial and fruitful meeting with them, I suggested forming a Parochial Mission in Holden, which would technically be an extension of the St. John's Sunday School. We decided to hold a service of Evening Prayer to which we would invite the entire list of known local Episcopalians."

"The Minister and people of the Holden First Congregational Church graciously made their sanctuary available to us for a Sunday evening service in December 1950. The turnout was beyond our expectation. I was definitely convinced that there were enough

interested people in Holden to create a successful mission,” says Father Parke. “With the wonderful support and encouragement of the Congregational Church, we continued those Sunday evening services for several weeks until Bishop Lawrence asked that we postpone further meetings until the Council of Churches’ initial report could be updated. By then Holden’s population had grown to 5600. The second survey report in February 1951 supported the efforts to establish a new Episcopal parish in Holden.”

Once the Bishop was satisfied that the project was viable, he encouraged Father Parke and the founding group to continue their efforts toward seeking mission status in the diocese. Permission was granted to resume Evening Prayer services in the Congregational Church. Since this sharing of facilities limited services to Evening Prayer with no Sunday School, the founders began to search for a new location.

In a letter dated September 10, 1951 (see Figure 1), Father Parke announced to his Holden constituency the good news that permission had been granted by the Holden Board of Selectmen for them to use the Town Hall for Sunday services. Worship there began on September 30, 1951. Permission was also granted for simultaneous use of other spaces in the Town Hall that made it possible for the first time to conduct Sunday School classes. During the summer

of 1951, parents were called with this news. This survey indicated an expected enrollment of 38 children in September. Henry Pratley took on responsibility for the Sunday School. He recruited several experienced teachers and ordered Sunday School materials to be on hand for the opening of classes.

Women with previous Altar Guild experience quickly took on the responsibilities with which they were familiar under the leadership of Directress Linda M. G. Smith. The music program with choir developed under Kenneth F. Connor, Jr., choirmaster with pianist Virginia Johnson at the well-used town piano. The first usher corps was established. "I brought over an altar cross I'd found in the basement of St. John's. This was placed on a temporary altar in the auditorium on the top floor of the Town Hall," recalls Father Parke.

Since other groups used this space during the week, it was also necessary for volunteers to set up and take down the chairs and the temporary altar and put everything away in the storage room until the following week.

Those early parishioners recalled one of the occasional inconveniences of holding services in the Town Hall. At that time, Holden summoned its volunteer firemen to action with a fire siren, which could be heard throughout most of the town. Unfortunately for the congregation, that siren was located in the Town Hall! After

the first deafening blast, it took several minutes for the siren to wind down enough to allow the service to continue. In the meantime, two or three call firemen would leap up from their seats and rush to their cars to report for duty.

“Those were happy times, though,” says Father Parke. “At St. John’s, we had Sunday services at 7:30 and later at 11 o’clock. That gave me time to dash out to Holden for a 9 o’clock service. Often-times, Frank Ordway, our St. John’s lay reader, would accompany me. Sometimes, he would conduct a Morning Prayer service when I had a conflict of dates.”

In each issue of the St. John’s monthly bulletin, Father Parke included information on the progress of the Holden group. In the October 1951 issue, he explained to his St. John’s congregation the role their church was playing in developing a new mission in the diocese (see Figure 2).

The November 1951 issue announced: “Things are looking bright for our Parochial Mission in Holden. At a potluck supper held in the Rice School on November 25, 125 adults and children attended with the following chosen as temporary officers: Warden, Paul Hinckley; Clerk, Charles E. Currier; and Treasurer, George Avery White, Jr.; Vestrymen, Donald Buxton, Kenneth Connor, Charles Dorsey, James Grainger, Ernest Handy, Francis Hart, Ever-

ett Haynes, Peter Moore, Henry Pratley, and John Spinney.”

At their December 10, 1951, meeting, St. John’s Vestry unanimously agreed that the Episcopal group in Holden would be carried on for an indefinite length of time as a Parochial Mission of St. John’s. They (the “Holden Group”) were to contribute one-fifth of Father Parke’s salary. They would be entitled to a Sunday morning service and one day a week of his time. St. John’s lay reader, Frank Ordway, would conduct Morning Prayer one Sunday a month to permit Father Parke to spend that morning with the St. John’s Church School.

By the end of 1951, the Holden Group mailing list had reached 80 families and 45 individuals, totaling about 280 people. Nearly half of them were already actively participating in the work of the group. The group had participated in the recent Holden Every Member Canvass program, raising \$4,700 in pledges for 1952.

After receipt of consent and approval from the Board of Missions at the Diocese, the mission group met to formally organize as a Parochial Mission at their first annual meeting on January 10, 1952. Agenda items included adopting bylaws, electing officers, and choosing a name for the mission. One of the temporary officers, Russell Franz, stepped down and was succeeded by Donald Buxton. All other vestrymen continued in office.

In the nearly six years that Paul Hinckley and his fellow planners had worked to create a new Episcopal parish in Holden, their eventual goal had remained nameless. “St. Francis of Assisi was always one of my favorite saints,” says Father Parke. “My father, the Rev. Hervey C. Parke, was a former rector of St. James Church in Amherst, where I was baptized, married, and later ordained a deacon. At his retirement in 1936, he went to Italy on vacation. He visited Assisi where he purchased a white linen chasuble with the head of Francis in the stitching. At my father’s death in 1951, this chasuble was passed on to me. I proudly wore it in his memory at some of those morning services in the Holden Town Hall and at St. John’s in Worcester. I’m sure that at that time, I told both congregations the story of how this chasuble had come to be mine and of my strong admiration for St. Francis.”

“At our first annual meeting, many names were suggested and discussed. At one point, I asked that we consider St. Francis as our name,” Father Parke recalls. The meeting ended when discussion reached an impasse, with two name choices tied in the voting. The people present decided they should postpone selecting a name until everyone had the opportunity to discuss and pray on this matter of such importance. According to early historical records of the parish, the impasse was broken at the second meeting when Mrs.

Everett Haynes proposed that the mission be named for St. Francis of Assisi. Her motion received unanimous approval with no further discussion.

In March 1952, Father Parke, now Vicar, announced an important organizational meeting to follow a Lenten covered dish supper meeting in the auditorium of Rice School on March 17, 1952. Enclosed with his letter announcing the meeting were three closely spaced typed pages listing committees together with those who had already volunteered to serve on them (see Figure 3).

Once the legal aspects of establishing the mission had been accomplished in January, Vicar and Vestry set about developing plans for the future. They envisioned carrying on the functions of parish life through six committees: Worship, Education, Property, Stewardship, Pastoral Relations, and Service and Social Relations. Father Parke's goal was to involve everyone in the work of the mission on one or more of these committees.

With no building of its own, meetings were held in the homes of committee members during the week. Choir practice, for example, was held in the home of Virginia Johnson. The real work of building St. Francis into a strong mission church thus began in small working meetings held in homes throughout the Wachusett region. Father Parke was pleased to see so many people actively and

effectively involved in this great planning effort. He had accepted the challenge of guiding this congregation of Christian people into becoming a Mission Church in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. It was time to move on to new challenges.

In the summer of 1952, Father Parke accepted a call to become the Rector of Grace Church in Norwood, Massachusetts. His last Sunday service as Rector of St. John's was on August 31, 1952. His successor as Rector at St. John's was the Rev. Edgar R. Walker, who was also appointed by Bishop Lawrence to serve simultaneously as Interim Priest-in-Charge of the St. Francis mission.

St. Francis Church was formally organized as a mission in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts on October 4, 1952, a memorable day for those who had labored so long.