

When a Church Community Changed To Meet Changes in Society

BY CYNTHIA L. CLARK

A century ago a small group of Episcopalians in the Ballston area of what is now Arlington County began to worship on the front porch of a small bungalow located at Wilson Boulevard and North Taylor Street. At the request of the Rev. William Callender, Rector of The Falls Church, they had been designated as a mission by the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. Unlike the parishioners of the Falls Church, they were not largely descendants of 18th century Virginians, but farmers and small business people and a few professionals. Many had come to Virginia from England and found employment at the British Ambassador's residence in Washington, DC. They chose St. George's as their church's name, after England's patron saint. They immediately formed a choir, then a vestry, a Sunday School, and a women's group, and shortly outgrew the space on the front porch. With generous donations from members and much hands-on work, such as the building of the altar by the men after purchase of the marble from money raised by a group of girls, they succeeded in 1911 in building a church. It was located at North Nelson and 9th Streets on land donated by Dr. and Mrs. W.C. Welburn, and had been a truck garden. It is now the only original church building in Arlington still in use for worship (though a grander and more beautiful St. George's was built in 1952).

In those early days Ballston, Clarendon, and Rosslyn were small villages surrounded by farmland, with trolley lines connecting them to each other and to Washington. Rosslyn, once a farm, had at one time been an iniquitous den of gambling houses and bars, cleaned up in 1902 by community effort. Roads were mostly mud, and automobiles were rare. The efforts required for daily living required large portions of people's time. Their attitudes and values were basically those of their forefathers, religious customs were taken for granted, and strangers were unusual.

None of these things continued to be true of this society. Perhaps the years from World War I to the present have changed the world and people's lives more than any other period in history. U.S. involvement in wars somewhere in the world, the Depression, the Bomb, the Cold War, space travel, the Baby Boom, medical advances, TV, computers, and instant worldwide communication have made previous centuries seem far away and ancient. In the mid-20th century a revolution in attitudes, customs, and moral values began, and became prominent in the 1960s and 70s. Stable assumptions about such matters as governmental

and parental authority, race relations, the status of women, proper dress and behavior, and the liturgy of the church were challenged. St. George's had its share of controversy over these. Two well-loved and long-serving priests, the Rev. Hedley J. Williams and the Rev. Robert C. Hall, calmed some violent expressions of opinion. Their skills at mediating, together with the solidarity that had characterized St. George's parishioners from the beginning, rescued the church from actually splitting up. Some changes that hit St. George's were:

—Results of The Baby Boom that followed WWII. In the 1950s Arlington's population soared, schools were expanded, and church membership increased hugely. At St. George's the Sunday School grew to such a size that classes were tucked into all available spaces. Postwar prosperity and a burgeoning congregation allowed construction of a new sanctuary and a new office building. Although traditional church activities continued, a now diverse congregation with an outlook toward increased interaction with local and world communities and societies made for tension.

—Youth Groups. In the 1960s young people were discovering freedom in new kinds of music, new ways to dress, and new attitudes toward authority. These were exciting and admirable in many ways but unfortunately were sometimes accompanied by more likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse, especially dangerous for teenagers. Arlington did not boast many attractions for this age. So in 1965 St. George's youth leaders cooperated with their counterparts at St. Andrew's and, at the request of Arlington County officials, organized inexpensive monthly dances for teenagers, held alternatively at the two churches. Chaperones were commandeered from among the parents.

The dances were hugely successful, attended by large numbers from the churches and also by local kids of any or no church affiliation. Tickets were issued—anyone trying to climb in at a window was firmly repulsed. Any sign of alcohol, or any starting of a fight got you thrown out. But there was very little trouble. The parish hall at St. George's really rocked with music from local bands playing from the stage. Later the hall required strengthening of the floor and foundations by steel beams, largely paid for by the Youth Group.

—Adult Education. By the 1970s the spirit of freedom from tradition that was in the air brought change to the customary Christian study groups at St. George's. In 1972 a “free” program was inaugurated, in which parishioners were encouraged to give courses on any subject that interested them—play reading, book reviews, Bible translations, and current affairs. It was successful for several years.

—Communications. The church newsletter was reorganized in 1970. In 1977 a TV ministry was begun, producing programs on church affairs and conducting weekend programs on an Arlington TV station.

—An Hispanic Ministry. In 1974 there was no Spanish language program in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. In that year Deacon Robert Prichard organized a Spanish worship service, held in the original St. George's, now referred to as the chapel. This grew swiftly; permanent clergy were acquired; and the San Jose group became a separate organization with a contractual relation to St. George's, together with expanded social relations between the two congregations.

The above changes developed at St. George's with congregational approval or minor dissent. In the 1960s and 70s, though, several major issues caused enormous controversy in church affairs:

—Racial issues. National turmoil over civil rights for black people in the 1960s also caused turmoil among St. Georgians. This was a basically conservative congregation, still in some respects with the outlook of small, homogeneous Arlington toward the full acceptance of blacks (the State of Virginia, it will be remembered, was violently opposed to integration, instituting the program of Massive Resistance.) A more enlightened attitude and no little courage had been shown in 1959 by parishioner Claude Richmond, principal of Stratford Junior High School in Arlington, who supervised the entrance of the first black students in Virginia to be integrated into a white school. They were attended by a crowd of onlookers and many police cars. But there were no incidents: the *Washington Post* headline was "The Day Nothing Happened."

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was acknowledged at St. George's to be a step forward, but with some reservation. Such events as riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles and in Birmingham following the brutal deaths of three little black girls; the violent treatment of the Freedom Riders; and subsequent demonstrations and violence in Selma, Alabama then reinforced among some St. Georgians very old ideas that blacks were lower class and possibly dangerous. Some people wanted none of them and no connection with them. A black couple did attend St. George's for a while at this time, but stopped coming. When Rector Hedley Williams called on them to see why, they said they were afraid to come back because the white people would be so angry with them about civil rights, seeing them as protesters. The congregation voted "No" on the church becoming socially active. However, Hedley Williams calmed things down, speaking with effect to people on the fence in this matter, leading without preaching.

Then in April 1968 the vestry meeting was interrupted several times by phone calls telling of the assassination of Martin Luther King. In the following days St. Georgians, like all Americans, were stunned by watching Washington, DC on fire and rioters destroying even long-established black neighborhoods. When the Poor People's Campaign March on Washington took place in June 1968, even though it was organized to address economic inequalities by

nonviolent action only, many were opposed to the suggestion that some of the marchers be allowed to sleep in St. George's parish hall during the march. Serious arguments arose, but in the end Associate Rector Moody Burt's leadership won the day and the parish hall was opened. Some parishioners volunteered to help out the marchers who were camped on the mall in "Resurrection City" when rainstorms flooded the camp area. But the marchers left without accomplishing much: the Poor People's Campaign for Economic Justice had petered out with the death of Martin Luther King.

—Status of Women. Feminism

became especially important in the 1960s as women strove for equality in the business world and in the home. At St. George's, Hedley Williams had urged more participation in church affairs by women for several years. In 1968 Cynthia Clark became the first woman on the vestry; first as nonvoting member in her capacity as President of the Church Women, and later elected to full membership following the Diocesan Canon of 1970 allowing women on vestries. In short order the church had its first woman Senior Warden, its first woman priest, and first woman chaliceist (In the Episcopal Church the wine at communion is brought in a special cup, or chalice, to each communicant in turn by a licensed lay person); other women began to serve as vestry members, chaliceists, ushers, and lay readers. Then-Deacon Bob Prichard refused to be ordained as priest until women could be priests, officially allowed in 1976. Gradually women became active in all church functions, no longer confined to their work in the circles and on the Altar Guild and to teaching—no longer simply parish homemakers and supporters of decisions made largely by men. At the same time men began to be involved or began leading activities previously confined to women: fund-raising projects, garage sales, and the bazaar. The church gained the benefit of all the talents of all its members.

—Prayer Book Revision. Beginning in the late 1950s with the publication of the series of "Prayer Book Studies," the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church as a whole had begun to look at the 1928 Book of Common Prayer in the U.S. and the 1662 Book in England and other Communions as being in some

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ways not suited to the contemporary world. In 1967 it was decided to move to trial use of a new Prayer Book. Though Cranmer's 1549 Common Prayer was compiled for the purpose of being clearly understood by its users, its beautiful language, much of which had remained in the 1928 Prayer Book, was now difficult for many. In addition, modern worshippers were now different: A society that had been for centuries mostly rural, illiterate, obedient to authority, with few choices in life, and class stable, was now urban, educated, and socially mobile, with bewildering numbers of choices and distractions and not automatically accepting traditional choices. People needed a new language of worship. Furthermore, the Prayer Book has in fact undergone many changes over the years.

All the same, the issuance of the Services for Trial Use in 1971 caused an uproar not only in most of the churches in the Anglican Communion but also in other churches and individuals for whom Common Prayer was bedrock religion and literature. St. George's was fortunate in that Rector Hedley Williams spent a great deal of time preparing its congregation for change, and Rector Bob Hall arranged careful scheduling of the new Rites, surveys that encouraged expression of all opinions, and study groups for each of three succeeding versions. In 1975 an 11-week trial of the Proposed Prayer Book (Authorized Version of 1973) in worship was held. It began with an Instructed Eucharist, then alternated Morning Prayer and Rites 1 and 2. A survey afterwards showed that most people still preferred BCP 1928, but a minority of responses disagreed, liking the new services, especially the less penitential note in them. All agreed that more alternative prayers are needed, and were glad to have been asked to participate in the proposed revision.

In 1975 a vestry letter to the Standing Liturgical Committee of the Diocese said: "It is the consensus of the [Liturgical Planning Committee of St. George's] that the majority of St. George's sees no need for, and rejects, Prayer Book Revision. A vocal minority welcomes revision. Good luck on your interpretation of this contrast."

Adoption of the new book in February 1977 was generally untroubled, however. On the 428th anniversary of the Prayer Book, under Bob Hall's guidance, a special service was held at St. George's. It began in 1928 form; then the old books were collected from the pews, blessed, and given to parishioners; then the new books were rolled out; blessed, and used for the rest of the service.

Most St. Georgians gradually became accustomed to the new language, albeit with some regret for the lost stateliness and beauty of particularly well-loved passages in the 1928 version.

These changes seemed radical and upsetting to this church community in mid-20th century, yet hard work in discussion and toleration of opposing views resulted in new actions that carried on in the solid tradition of the found-

ing church. More shocks to complacency were to arrive, but St. George's is dealing with its feelings about new wars, AIDS, terrorism, threat of schism on the subject of homosexuality, and the bewildering effects of the computer age by accepting diverse ideas and opinions while developing important new programs together.

Cynthia Clark has been a resident of Arlington since 1943 and a parishioner of St. George's Church since 1953. She has been active in the church as a Sunday School teacher, newsletter editor/writer, and church historian and archivist. She retired as a federal government writer/editor and has free-lanced in that capacity. She is grateful to her son Charlie Clark for his constant help and advice, and for putting her in touch with the Arlington Historical Society with the suggestion for this article.

Sources

This article was adapted from Clark, Cynthia L.: *One Hundred Years of St. George's Episcopal Church: Growth of a Church Community in the Turbulent 20th Century* (St. George's, 2008). The sources on which the article is based include taped interviews with past and present parishioners and clergy of St. George's, and the St. George's archives, containing vestry minutes, annual reports, unfinished previous histories of St. George's, background papers for vestry decisions, and letters written on the occasion of St. George's 75th anniversary.