

A Church Transformed

Central United Methodist Church

By Cathy Bonneville Hix and Jen Tucci

On Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024, Central United Methodist Church members gathered to celebrate the grand opening of their new church, the realization of a dream to serve God in the Ballston community. In addition to a new sanctuary and church offices, a commercial kitchen was installed to feed the hungry and a new space carved out for Kinhaven, a community day care center. The crowning achievement of this project is the inclusion of one hundred and forty-four affordable housing units, in partnership with the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing. With the completion of this project, Central can return once again to being the little church on the corner, a spot it has held for over one hundred years. While this space is new, the rich history of the church and its spiritual role in the community still resonates. That history which began in 1909 propelled the vision realized in 2024.

In 1909, Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Croson and J. P. Divine, recognizing the need to build a church, met to discuss the path forward. Fortunately, around the same time, an heir of Robert Ball, Sr., who had died in 1865, deeded land at the corner of Fairfax Drive and North Stafford Street (formerly Clements Avenue) for a Southern Methodist Church. At the time, this land was in Alexandria County which by 1920 would be renamed Arlington County.

The first church was built in 1911 during the tenure of Revered O. C. Beall, Central's first minister. At this time, Arlington was a small county with a population of 10,000 people. The building was first a mission of Calvary Methodist Church in DC and later the Georgetown Methodist Church. Congregants named the house of worship Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Eventually it became Central United Methodist Church. The church building was a partly-circular-shaped yellow brick structure with plans drawn by Frank Follansbee (Fig. 1).

The bricks were donated, and volunteers built the church.

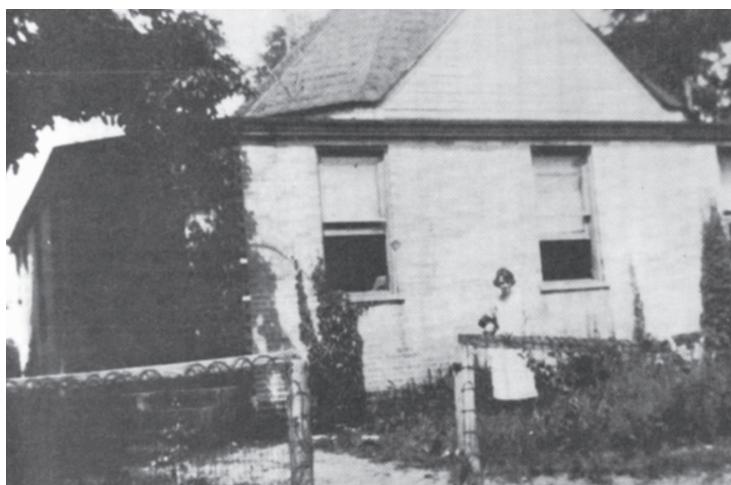
Central was not the first church in Arlington. The book *Arlington Heritage* indicates Hunter's Chapel was established in 1859 and was one of the earliest Methodist churches built. As Arlington grew, so did the number of churches. By 1924, there were thirty-eight churches in Arlington, and eleven were Methodist.

Even with all the churches in the county, Central had a recognized need to expand. The population of Arlington increased in the 1920s to 18,000 people, and new residents needed places to worship. In 1923, the Rev. Charles York became the first full-time minister of Central, and members decided to fund a new building. With a congregation of one hundred, funds were raised by sacrificial giving and hard work with the minister encouraging all to give even if only five cents. This "can-do" attitude has prevailed throughout the church's history. When work began on the new building, church members as well as the minister were doing the digging.

The architect of the new building was E. E. Speer who lived nearby on Stafford Street. The cornerstone on the new building was laid on November 18, 1923, and formed the base of the sanctuary. Mr. Speer's plans for the new church and its location were described aptly below in the program of the cornerstone dedication:

Fig. 1: Grace Shipman stands in front of the first church, circa 1911.

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.



The modern and ample Methodist Episcopal Church, South, now well under construction at Ballston [...] plans for which are now on exhibition and which will soon weld all the more closely this Virginia suburb with the great heart of the great nation...

By 1924, services were held in the incomplete church with members climbing through windows to attend. The official opening of the new sanctuary occurred on Thanksgiving Day in 1925, after a campaign was spearheaded to buy furniture for seating (Fig. 2).

By 1927, it became apparent that a parsonage was needed to house the full-time ministers who served Central. The first parsonage was built on Vermont Street during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Despite financial hardship, Central members managed to continue reducing the debt on the parsonage as well as the debt incurred by the new church building finished in 1925. The parsonage remained at Vermont Street until 1953, when a new building was purchased on North Evergreen Street. It sits there today.

By 1937, with the country's economic situation improving, congregants of the little church on the corner decided it needed to expand and

Fig. 2: An ad for the new church in 1926. Not visible are the trolley tracks that ran in front of the church. Street names had not been changed yet to Stafford and Fairfax Drive.

THE HOMELIKE CHURCH

Sunday

- 9:45, Sunday school.
- 11:00, Preaching.
- 3:00, Junior League.
- 6:00, Intermediate League.
- 7:00, Senior League.
- 8:00, Preaching.

Thursday

- 8:00, Prayer meeting.

REV. PAUL L. WARNER, Pastor
CENTRAL M. E. CHURCH, SOUTH
Corner Clements and Railroad Aves.

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.

upgrade to meet Arlington's growing population. Using a legacy from Mrs. Hyatt, a Ball family descendant, the church was painted, nursery and kindergarten classrooms were added, and restroom and kitchen equipment were installed.

In 1942, the Rev. J. H. Carroll became the minister. With all the improvements that had been done over the past two decades, a decision was made to erase the church debt of \$5,000. Church member Lyman Kelley launched an "All Out in '42" campaign, and by Christmas a ceremony was held to burn the notes of debt. Without this debt, the church could continue to expand.

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, the church purchased an organ; constructed education and youth buildings, a library, and a new chapel; and added beautiful stained-glass windows to the sanctuary. The little church on the corner now had a sanctuary, a fellowship hall, a youth facility, and twenty-two classrooms (Fig. 3). These new accommodations enabled the church to provide two services weekly.

The expansion of the church in the 1950s addressed the rapid growth of the post-war baby boom. During this time, there were two

Fig. 3: Central continues to expand in the 1950s with the addition of a Youth Building and education classrooms.

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.



hundred children enrolled in the Central Sunday School program, and a Methodist Youth Fellowship program was organized to support the children as they became teenagers. The music program grew as well. Under the leadership of Dale Harphan, a Sanctuary Choir, an Angelus Choir, and a Wesley Brass Choir were introduced. Also active were the United Methodist Men and the United Methodist Women who organized church dinners, bazaars, prayer meetings, and service projects.

Over the next two decades, membership would remain steady, and improvements to the existing building would continue. In 1962, the sanctuary was remodeled, and a steeple was added to the building, gracing the Ballston skyline until the 2020s. During this time, most members lived in Arlington which despite a booming population of 163,000 was still a sleepy suburb.

As with other Methodist Churches, the ministers were transferred regularly to different churches throughout Virginia. Figure 4 lists the ministers throughout Central's history.

In 1969, the Arlington Historical Society placed a historical marker at Central defining the Ballston community and honoring the church. This marker reads:

Fig. 4: Central ministers from the beginning of the church through the present day.

Central Ministers 1911–present

O. C. Beall	1911-1914	C. F. Mosley	1954-1956
G. W. Gaither	1914-1917	Robert E. Forrest	1956-1962
E. C. Berry	1917-1922	Woodrow W. Hayzlett	1962-1966
C. I. Flory	1922	C. Fred Williams	1966-1970
John Knox	1922	Robert H. Garner	1970-1977
J. B. Henry	1922-1923	J. Leroy Young	1977-1983
C. A. York	1923-1925	Albert A. Honaker, Jr.	1983-1986
Paul Warner	1925-1927	Manning B. Harrell	1986-1988
E. S. Sheppe	1927-1929	Hugh C. Paschall	1988-1991
A. Van Devander	1929-1932	Ruben H. Woodfin	1991-1998
P. C. Helmintoller	1932-1937	Richard E. Cobb	1998-2014
Harry W. Craver	1937-1942	Sarah Harrison-McQueen	
J. H. Carroll	1942-1946		2014-present
J. L. Kibler	1946-1954		

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.

By 1900 a well-defined village called Central Ballston had developed in the area bounded by the present Wilson Boulevard, Taylor Street, Washington Boulevard, and Pollard Street. More diffuse settlement extended westward to Lubber Run and southward along Glebe Road to Henderson Road. The track, Washington, Arlington, and Falls Church Electric Railroad ran along what is now Fairfax Drive, Ballston Station was at Ballston Avenue, now Stuart Street. Here Clements Avenue, now Stafford Street, divided to pass on either side of an old Ball family graveyard.

The 1970s were marked by a large membership with many activities for children and youth. Central became the location of a Mother's Day Out program for preschoolers which evolved into the Kinhaven School for preschoolers, an integral part of the church community.

The elderly were also a focus of Central in the 1970s. A chair lift was added to the church and later an elevator. A Meals on Wheels program where church members worked weekly to deliver meals to residents in the community became a focus of outreach into the county.

The face of Arlington began to change in the 1980s as residential areas were replaced by skyscrapers and other signs of urban growth. With the arrival of the Ballston Metro in December of 1979 and the completion of Interstate 66, the Ballston area exploded. The arrival

of the Metro was also followed by the local strip mall becoming Ballston Commons Mall and high rises and condominiums appearing overnight (Fig. 5). While much of the church membership still lived in Arlington, many started moving to the outer suburbs and commuting to church.

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.



Fig. 5: The area surrounding the church becomes more urban with the arrival of the Metro.

The membership of Central began to change from young families with children to a more diverse population. This diversity is still seen today.

Central members entered the new millennium with a renewed vigor for the church. Despite increased urbanization around the church, Central members became even more determined to be the community church on the corner. Minister Richard Cobb arrived in 1998 and ushered Central into the new century. The age of technology arrived as the church added computers and other media devices.

As the Ballston area changed, church membership began to decline. Many single-family homes in the area disappeared. Central members who had moved out of Arlington began to attend services in churches near their homes. This was coupled with the challenges of maintaining an aging building. Maintenance issues required the use of a sizable portion of the budget which was reduced due to membership decline. There was a continuous need for repairs to heating and air conditioning units, and in 2002, termite damage led to the collapse of a portion of the sanctuary, requiring major repair which closed the sanctuary for five months.

Despite these financial challenges, Central members began to look for new ways to expand the ministry. The 2000s marked a period of tremendous outreach to the community. Programs such as the prayer shawl ministry—which helped those fighting illness—and the prison ministry reflected this outreach. Two areas of mission work became inseparable from Central’s vision: support for homeless resources and advocacy for affordable housing.

A pivotal moment in the church’s history occurred when several members participated in a prayer walk through Central’s Ballston neighborhood to learn how the church could better serve the immediate neighborhood. During the walk, congregants saw previously unnoticed numbers of homeless individuals and vowed to serve these unhoused neighbors as they struggled to live just a stone’s throw from Central’s front door.

The church arranged meetings to learn what local resources were available for the homeless and how Central could help. Leonard Chari from A-SPAN (Arlington Street People’s Alliance Network) met with Central staff and identified the need for space where the homeless could receive services. Central became that meeting spot and opened

its doors to the homeless. A-SPAN began offering donuts, coffee, juice, and sack lunches on Friday mornings. It soon became apparent that more was needed, and the program expanded to a full hot breakfast program with bag lunches provided. This ministry became more than that. It became a place where the homeless could rest and church volunteers could hear their stories and better understand their challenges (Fig. 6).

It is important to note that the ministry to the homeless continued even through the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Friday morning breakfast was replaced by the Back Porch Bodega, where food, clothing, coats, gloves, warm hats, and sack lunches were handed out. Most food came from the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) but meat was brought by a neighborhood angel, Andrew, by members of the congregation, and by other friends of the Friday morning breakfast. Heidelberg Bakery donated baked goods that were distributed. In addition to the homeless, there were individuals and families who were hit especially hard with the loss of jobs and income when COVID shut everything down. Between 50–100 people came to the Bodega each week. The commitment to feed the needy in the community was unwavering.

Fig. 6: Central partners with A-SPAN to support a homeless ministry.

Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.



During this time, A-SPAN operated a seasonal shelter for the homeless but wanted to open a year-round shelter with centrally-located services. Central backed their efforts. They also bolstered Rep. Jim Moran in efforts to obtain housing vouchers for the veterans that were on the street. He visited Central on Friday mornings to demonstrate support and get a sense of the issues and needs of veterans.

Soon after the launch of Central's homeless ministry, a developer approached Central's minister, Reverend Cobb, proposing to build a high-rise where the church stood. The ground floor would remain a church, and preschool and the upper levels would become condominiums. The developer's offer captured the congregation's attention, and in July 2007, a building committee was formed to explore the idea. The initial discussions about rebuilding the church occurred at the same time as the Friday morning breakfasts with A-SPAN. These events also coincided with discussions taking place in Arlington about the growing need for affordable housing.

These key moments and evolving conversations marked the convergence of the church's call to serve the local homeless and the desire to answer the demand for affordable housing. Central members could use the two resources available, a convenient central location and space to help those in need. The offer to build presented an opportunity, sparking a dream that would take the congregation through two decades of work and expanding vision.

In 2014, Rev. Sarah Harrison-McQueen was appointed to serve at Central with the specific task of leading the congregation through the development and construction process. Like all complex projects,

Fig. 7: Central is torn down and replaced by a building that includes the church and 144 affordable housing units.



Courtesy of Central United Methodist Church.



Fig. 8: Central's sanctuary in the new building. Note the stained glass windows that were moved from the old building.

the journey had challenges: developing a design to incorporate many needs in a single acre site, securing financing, planning to build immediately adjacent to a Metro tunnel, and honoring the rich history of the property while embracing the congregation's vision.

In November 2018, Amazon announced plans to bring their second corporate headquarters to Arlington and create 25,000 new jobs in the county. Amazon gave \$20 million to Arlington in housing funds, plus another \$40 million in land to build more affordable units. Arlington County used the Arlington Housing Investment Fund (AHIF) to hold these contributions. In addition to Amazon, developers in Arlington were required to put a percentage of their investments in the county into the fund. The county would determine how to use it for affordable housing. The timing was perfect for Central. Its leaders were in the process of reaching out to Arlington County with a plan for one hundred and forty-four affordable housing units. Because 100 percent of the building's units were affordable units, the project was eligible to secure low-cost loans. Project financing was confirmed in 2021, and the groundbreaking soon followed.

As Central Church members celebrated their new building in 2024, echoes of those members who came before were evident. The little church on the corner had become the church of the community, transformed and poised to live out the church's mission to Worship God, Serve Others, and Embrace All.

About the Authors

Cathy Bonneville Hix was born and raised in Arlington and spent her career as an educator in the Arlington Public Schools. She is a former president of the Arlington Historical Society (AHS) and currently serves on the AHS Board. In addition, Cathy has been a life-long member of Central United Methodist Church.

Jen Tucci joined Central United Methodist Church in 2004. Jen's main service areas included helping with the Friday morning breakfast program, finance positions, and service on the Leadership Board before and during the church's building project. The Leadership Board felt it was important to record the journey of the building project. Together they recorded how a small community can make their Dreams a Reality.

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