

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY NATIVITY
1964-2014
FIFTY YEARS ON THIS OUR ISLAND HOME



INTRODUCTION

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...

Hebrews 12:1 NRSV

On Christmas Eve, 1964, the people of the Church of the Holy Nativity, an Episcopal mission in the Village area of St. Simons Island, Georgia, celebrated their first Eucharist. The timing of this event influenced the name they chose for their church, and its timing also means that Christmas Eve, 2014 marks the congregation's fiftieth anniversary.

Most of those who participated in that 1964 service have joined that "great cloud of witnesses." But their legacy lives on in the faith and perseverance that enabled them and those that came afterwards to serve the Lord in a place that He chose for them and in ways that honor Him.

This brief account is their story. At its heart is the idea that the Lord works through people, thus its focus is on people. Although it contains chronology, it does more than chronicle events. Although it includes information on changes in facilities and in projects, its purpose is to highlight the people who, in relationship with the Lord, made and continue to make the buildings and programs possible.

In sum, this people-centered history aims to remember the past and to allow it to serve as inspiration for the present and the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, it must be stated that the amazing archive of Edith Withington Wrangofski (1923-2013) made the writing of this history possible. Her collection of documents extends from the original petition to Bishop Stuart to late in the year 2010. Her daughter, Melinda Johanson, spent a great deal of time helping organize and interpret the documents. Ed Cheshire offered useful information on the church's early history. Freddie Norris

explained the role of Daughters of the King. Ann Russell willingly made official records available, and Anne Delea went above the call of duty by inserting photos and serving as an outstanding proofreader.

Listing names for acknowledgment is risky, because some very helpful people get left out. I apologize for any omissions, and I claim full responsibility for any errors in the narrative.

Becky Matthews
December, 2014



FROM EDITH'S ARCHIVE: HOLY NATIVITY IN THE SNOW, 1989

BEGINNINGS

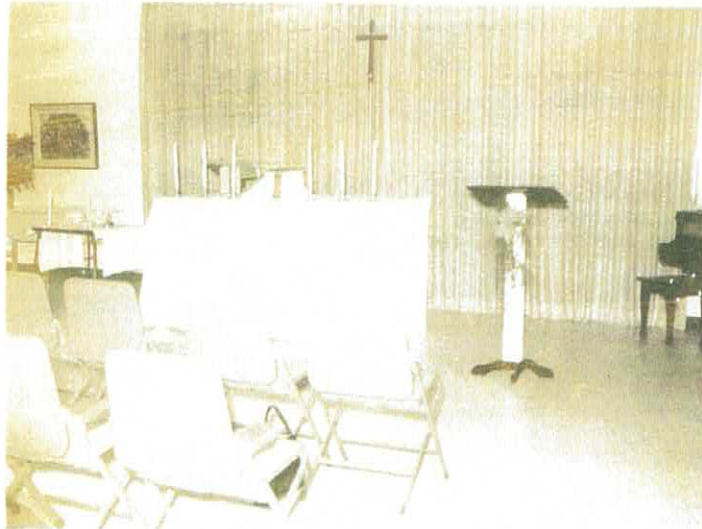
The Church of the Holy Nativity began as an answer to prayer, and it remains so today. For five decades, its people have served the Lord with resourcefulness, resilience, perseverance, and a strong commitment to know Christ and make Him known. These traits have served them well, as across time, they have encountered numerous challenges, both minor and major. Always, however, faith, buttressed by prayer, has prevailed.

In 1964, twelve individuals prayed Holy Nativity into existence. The twelve ((Fred Davis, Jean Davis, Ralph and Dana Harvey, Betty and Dave McConnell, Martha Keiffer, Carolyn Mattingly, Ella and Dabney Loving, and John and Edith Withington), all communicants at Christ Church near the north end of St. Simons, hoped to establish an altar farther south in the area known as the Village. Accordingly, they discussed their idea with Diocese of Georgia Bishop Albert Stuart, who promptly replied that he had been praying for such a mission for eleven years.

The original plan called for Christ Church to have responsibility for the mission; but after more prayer and several meetings, on 1 November 1964, the twelve, "prayerfully submitted" a petition asking for direct diocesan authority over the new congregation. With the granting of this appeal, two important goals (Bishop's approval and diocesan acceptance) had been achieved; but there was much more work ahead.¹

A priest, a place, and all the accoutrements required for Eucharist became high priorities for the group. During the months of November and December, they met in various homes for prayers, planning, and sermons read by Dabney Loving who had received diocesan approval to offer them. As they met, they became exceptionally attuned to the influence of the Holy Spirit and to the blessings God would provide. A specific gift came their way in late November when Edith Withington met Father Archer Torrey, a missionary on leave from Korea. Ever one to see and seize an opportunity to serve the Lord, Edith asked Father Torrey if he would ask for permission to celebrate Eucharist with the emerging congregation. As soon as the Bishop approved this request, plans for a Christmas Eve service began to take shape.

The venue for that service was the Oglethorpe Room (familiarily known as the party room) of First Federal Savings and Loan on Ocean Boulevard. Under the direction of the recently formed altar guild (Edith Withington and Ella Loving) that space, so often used for secular events, became, for one holy night, a chapel. Folding chairs provided seating: the altar was a metal picnic table. Vestments, altar appointments, prayer books, hymnals, and the processional cross were borrowed from the diocese conference center at Honey Creek. When all was in readiness, the altar guild suddenly realized they had forgotten to provide flowers. So, quickly, they "borrowed" pyracantha berries from the side yard of the First Federal building and created decorations that were highly appropriate to the season. Pianist for the occasion was Carolyn Mattingly, one of the twelve. A total of twenty-nine Episcopalians attended the service, with twenty-six receiving communion.



FIRST EUCHARIST, FIRST FEDERAL SAVINGS & LOAN

Shortly after the first service, Father Torrey suggested that the group hold a week-end retreat to "seek the will of God for the young church." Those who attended that gathering "decided that we did not need a large beautiful church with stained glass windows, a pipe organ, etc., but to worship where we could be a beacon light to

the Island, reaching out to the lost and hurting in the community as well as those looking for a church home."

The group also framed this statement of purpose:

1. To have the Holy Eucharist as the central service of worship.
2. To proclaim and offer all seven Sacraments to our communicants.
3. To encourage all people to worship with us regardless of race.
4. To have the church open for prayer and meditation at all times.²

These goals, created as they were in 1964, deserve some analysis. Clearly, *The Book of Common Prayer* inspired the first two statements, but the third one seems to have been influenced by contemporary events. The year 1964 marked a milestone in the civil rights movement. National attention focused on the state of Mississippi where northern college students and local black activists led a project known as Freedom Summer. Their focus was voter registration, increased opportunity for black political participation, and the improvement of literacy in black communities that for decades had suffered the inequities of segregated schools. Although workers in the project advocated a non-violent approach, Ku Klux Klan members murdered three of them in early June.

In less than a month on 2 July, President Lyndon Johnson signed the first comprehensive Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction. Across the nation, racial tension remained strong: across the South, white resistance to black rights remained powerful. And yet, and yet, in a sleepy resort town, in a Deep South state, twelve Episcopalians declared unequivocally that their hearts and church would be open to all.

Another kind of openness appears in the fourth statement. With it the people of Holy Nativity promised that once they had acquired a building its doors would remain perpetually unlocked. This pledge held firm for quite some time until vandalism forced a change.

The acquisition of a building occurred in stages. In early 1965, the members of the Golden Isles Masonic Lodge allowed the people of Holy Nativity to use their Hall for Sunday services. The Hall itself has an interesting

history. Built in the 1930s as a center for ecumenical worship, it became the island's first community church, and from it, local Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations emerged. In time, the Masons took over the building, but by 1965, they had decided to construct a new one nearby. Before that was accomplished, each Saturday, members of the Holy Nativity family, worked diligently and with precision to prepare for Sunday worship. Each Sunday, after services, they had to return the building to its previous state.



GOLDEN ISLES MASONIC LODGE HALL,
CORNER OF NEPTUNE AND MAGNOLIA

Ed Chesire has vivid memories of those days. As a young architect he, Judy his wife, and their infant daughter Anna had moved to Saint Simons in the fall of 1964. They lived in the Village area but out of necessity began to worship at Christ Church. Early in January of 1965, Bishop Stuart visited that parish, announced the formation of Holy Nativity and asked if anyone would be willing to join the new congregation. Ed says he immediately volunteered. Subsequently, Judy, who grew up Methodist, also became a parishioner. Their son, Rob, who

was born 14 June 1965 was the first baby to be baptized at Holy Nativity.

At that time, as Chesire recalls, men came to the Masonic Hall on Saturday, moved church pews from the sides of the room to its center, set up the altar, covered it with monk's cloth and placed a gilded cross behind it. At first the altar was a folding table set on concrete blocks so it would be the correct height, but in a short time, the mission obtained an altar and credence tables that had been used at a Bishop's Conference which had been held on Jekyll Island in early February, 1965. This altar, which was designed by Ed Chesire and Lamar Webb, was built of railroad ties placed on concrete blocks. It served Holy Nativity for many years and now stands in the church's parish hall. The gilded cross also came from the Bishop's Conference. Chesire and Webb created it from a stair railing. Total cost to the mission for these furnishings--the price of the concrete blocks. And, as Edith Wrangofski [Withington] stated in her 1989 history of the parish, "the altar coverings and linens were thrown in for good measure."³



EASTER, 1965, MASONIC LODGE, FR. DASHER AT ALTAR

For good measure and for good order, Holy Nativity leaders created a check list of tasks needed to prepare the hall for Sunday worship. The list which is quite detailed indicates that rotating committees were responsible for everything from making sure the Hall was unlocked to passing the Hall key as well as "books, robes, candles, everything to "next week's person." Of particular concern was the need to clear away all traces of Masonic symbols. In the vestibule, the head of Christ was to replace the Masonic sword. In the sanctuary, a five pointed star, Masonic flags and pictures as well as a G on the ceiling had to be removed.⁴

The check list also outlines responsibilities for a Thursday evening service (coffee, cups, song books, Eucharistic vessels, etc.). Communicants had begun a long-lasting tradition known as House Church. This weekly meeting, as described in the history written in 1989 consisted of a covered dish supper, Eucharist, and music. It was considered a "missionary effort to the community," because "we invited friends . . . introducing them to the Episcopal Church in a very non-threatening way."⁵ Thus, the church began to grow, with Sunday attendance ranging from twenty-five to thirty. Included in that number were Anna and Rob Cheshire, happily ensconced in a play pen set up by their parents.

In early January 1965, Fr. Torrey returned to his missionary work in Korea. For several weeks, a number of different individuals led worship; then in late February, Father Arthur Dasher began a time of service as interim vicar. Fr. Dasher had come to Glynn County to serve as vicar for a new church, Saint David's in Brunswick, but since that mission was not yet up and running, he agreed to work with the Holy Nativity family. He continued to do so, (even after the completion of St. David's) until June, 1966.⁶

Fr. Dasher instituted the practice of writing weekly newsletters that noted church events, recognized the work of members, encouraged a habit of intercessory prayer, and presented his views on challenging spiritual themes. For example, on 9 May 1965, he explained that the tune used for the Sanctus that Sunday derived from a folk mass in which an Anglican monk combined folk and jazz genres to "express

the Church's life and worship." Moreover, according to Fr. Dasher:

This is as it should be. The Church is constantly called to redeem society; to use the best, to better the mediocre, and to denounce the worst, but always to work for the perfection of man and his society. THIS MEANS OUR LIVES AS WELL AS OUR MUSIC.⁷

Fr. Dasher brought a special kind of energy to Holy Nativity. A trained musician, he introduced such innovations as a jazz mass and experimental liturgies, which were encouraged by Bishop Stuart who apparently was in step with the mood of the mid-sixties. Melinda Withington Johanson who was in her late teens at the time recalls that Fr. Dasher, a pianist, could "really play that boogie-woogie. The kids just loved him." In 1989, Melinda's mother, Edith, wrote of Fr. Dasher's influence, "we learned to sing with much enthusiasm."⁸

It was during Fr. Dasher's tenure that the church came to own the Masonic Hall. When the Masons completed their new building, they offered the old one to Holy Nativity in exchange for six hundred dollars, the amount they owed on their heating system. This arrangement developed because the original deed to the building stipulated that it could be donated but not sold.

Once the building had been acquired, the next step was finding a suitable location for it. Originally the congregation chose land on King's Way, but when residents of that area learned that a small church would soon be their neighbor, they circulated a petition against its presence. Subsequently, for reasons that are obscure, they took their objections to The Sea Island Company, which arranged a property transfer that gave Holy Nativity its current home on Mallery Street (a lot that is larger than the one on King's Way.) The building was moved on 18 November 1965. Shortly afterwards, Fr. Dasher wrote, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. At times I thought we were pretty close to those gates, but we can see daylight now."⁹

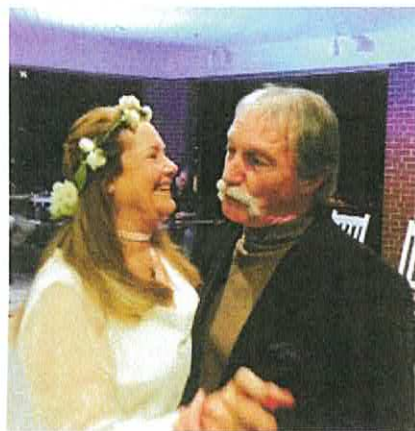
Before the "big move," another momentous event occurred. On Saturday, 2 October 1965 at 4 P.M., the Masonic Lodge Hall became the scene of Holy Nativity's first wedding. The bride was Anne Butler, daughter of Gene

and Agnew Butler who were among the church's early members. Mike Blount, a young Marine scheduled for service in Viet Nam, was the groom. Mike had grown up at St. Mark's.

The bride had some concerns about holding the ceremony in the Lodge Hall because it needed painting and, more importantly, it had not been consecrated. But Agnew, Anne's mother, insisted on Holy Nativity. She, her husband Gene, and their children (Anne has two brothers Pinckney and Edward) had transferred membership from Christ Church earlier in 1965; thus, Agnew's decision served as a demonstration of strong loyalty to and support for the infant mission.

Anne recalls that the wedding was small, maybe forty or fifty people. Her one attendant was Emily Withrow Reeve. Guests sat on aluminum folding chairs. The altar was a folding table and the podium was a sheet music stand. Edith Withington, a long-time friend of the Butlers, contributed the flowers. Fr. Dasher participated in portions of the ceremony, but because the Bishop had not yet consecrated the building, he could not preside over the vows. This was done by Dr. James Griffith, pastor of First Baptist, St. Simons.

In time, Anne and Mike had two sons, Michael and Christian, both of whom were baptized at Holy Nativity. The Blounts were married for forty-five years until Mike's passing in the year 2010. This first wedding was an auspicious occasion not only for Anne and Mike, but also for Holy Nativity. A total of 74 weddings have been registered in church records since that memorable first. The most recent celebration is the wedding of Becky Pate and Konrad Spethmann on 22 November, 2014.



ABOVE: BECKY & KONRAD
LEFT: ANNE & MIKE

As members of the Holy Nativity family approached the end of their first year together, they understood and appreciated the many providential gifts that the Lord had made available to them. With His guidance they had used those blessing to His glory. They had created a vibrant faith community in the Village; they had acquired property and a permanent house of worship; they had benefitted from the leadership of Fr. Torrey and Fr. Dasher, and, despite numerous obstacles, their faithfulness continued to grow. We do not know the discussions, negotiations, debates, or compromises that occurred during that first year (or afterwards), but we can see results.



NOVEMBER 1965, AT HOME ON MALLERY STREET

GROWING TOGETHER

The transition to a permanent home generated new challenges as well as new growth. It is safe to assume that there was not always constant agreement among Holy Nativity members, but their cohesiveness, commitment, and creativity is obvious. They had to work together to accomplish their goals, and as will be seen, that work required a great deal of energy and creative thinking.

accomplish their goals, and as will be seen, that work required a great deal of energy and creative thinking.

After their building was set in place, the congregation's immediate task was to make it suitable for worship services. Accordingly, the altar guild (Edith Withington and Ella Loving) coordinated a flurry of cleaning activity so that the "old building sparkled."¹⁰ Seating consisted of borrowed folding chairs; folded blankets became kneelers. The altar with its burlap covering and the gilded cross no longer needed to be put up and taken down each week, but for quite some time the church continued to rely on borrowed altar appointments.

At one point (no-one knows the exact date but it was rather early the life of the church) the cross created a minor disaster by falling from its place on the wall behind the altar. As the story goes, Edith Withington and others decided that before it was re-installed they would have to carry it around the building seven times, singing and praying as they went. Suffice to say, the cross never fell again.

For many months, the church had no running water or restrooms. Coffee hour was held "under the oaks," with a pot plugged into an outlet in the back interior wall so that "during the service the aroma of fresh coffee permeated the church." The mission did have a piano (donated by Pat Frazier), and Martha Keiffer (a founder) served as pianist. The chorus consisted of Ed Chesire and Robert Lyons with occasional assistance from Melinda Withington [Johanson].¹¹

At this juncture in our narrative, a small but significant digression might prove instructive. One of the great joys of investigating history is the ability to develop our historical imaginations. Thus, reflections on the early days of Holy Nativity allow us to journey back in time, to see ourselves in that setting, to smell that coffee, to kneel on those blankets and to join those pioneer voices in praising our Lord. Thoughts such as these enrich our understanding of the past and enlarge our empathy for those who lived it. And it is for these reasons that this writer encourages readers to pause occasionally for a bit of "time travel."

Another kind of travel occurred in July of 1966 as Father Robert Wright accepted a call to serve as Holy Nativity's "very own priest."¹² Fr. Wright, his wife Maude,

and their three children Katherine, Scott, and Robert came to St. Simons from Albany, Georgia where his civil rights activism had triggered threats to his family. It was for their safety that he left that strife-torn city.

He did not, however, abandon his commitment to human rights. In 1966 he helped establish the Glynn County Human Relations Council, and for eight years he served the Diocese of Georgia as coordinator of its Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity. In 1982, the NAACP honored him for his "courageous and outstanding devotion to human rights for all Georgians."¹³

When Fr. Wright came to Holy Nativity, mission membership numbered fifty-one. Members knew they needed more space, and therein lies another tale of persistence and creativity. According to "The History of the Church:"

One Saturday in 1966 John Withington was reading the *Florida Times Union* and saw an article where the Naval Air Station was giving away obsolete buildings to any organization that would move them. John got in touch with Dabney Loving, Ed Cheshire, and Fr. Wright and it wasn't long before plans were being made with the N.A.S. to have one of their buildings sent to St. Simons via barge on the St. Johns River and the Inland Waterway between Jacksonville and St. Simons. When the building did not arrive when we expected, a call was made to the proper authorities and we found our building had been accidently torn down. We were assured we would receive another shortly. When this building did not arrive, we again called and found out that this building had actually been placed on the trucks to move to the barge when it burned to the ground. Another try was made and a promise [that] an even nicer building would be ours. The plans were made and approved. The building was placed on the barge and was on its way to the destination point at Epworth on St. Simons [Gascoigne Bluff]. During the voyage, the tugboat captain anchored the barge through necessity because of a hurricane. After all winds were past, the barge was retrieved and came on up the Inland Waterway to the waterfront at Epworth. We called it our "Gospel Barge."¹⁴

Upon leaving the Gospel Barge, the building experienced another calamity. As explained in *The Brunswick News*, of 11 June 1968, it was hauled up Gascoigne Bluff, loaded on to a flatbed truck, then promptly fell to the ground.¹⁵

When it was finally put in place, the structure was in such bad shape (remember the hurricane) nearby neighbors, expressed great "distress," about its appearance. Holy Nativity leaders assured them it would be completely renovated, and that is what happened. Inside, they constructed a kitchen, a sacristy, an office for Fr. Wright, a parish hall with space for Sunday school classes, and a restroom with running water (a first). Many generous communicants made the transformation possible. Dr. Frank Mulling donated funds for the siding of the building and the kitchen remodel. Mrs. "T" McCoy gave floor covering, and Daisy Grambling financed the landscaping in memory of her husband William and their son, Bill. She also gave the church bell, as a memorial to her grandson, Bill Davis.¹⁶

In time, the church's interior also changed. Assisted by member Dick Snyder who worked for Sears Roebuck, the congregation purchased ninety discounted turquoise folding chairs from that company. These chairs were used until Sally Corrano donated pews from the Glynn Haven Pentecostal Church, which had recently closed. Maude Wright and Louise Stamps then added an antique turquoise stain to the repurposed pews so that they would match the wall behind the altar and the aisle runner that had been another addition.



EASTERTIDE

NOTE TURQUOIS-TINTED WALL
AND PEWS

The arrival of the pews meant that kneelers and cushions were needed. Melinda and Joe Johanson donated these in memory of his parents, Dr. and Mrs. H. R. F. Johanson. To enhance the altar, Dave McConnell made wrought iron floor candle stands shaped like a lotus flower at the top. These now flank the original altar in the parish hall.

Other donations brought new altar vessels. Sam and Ed Cofer gave a silver chalice, paten, and two silver cruets in memory of Ruby Cofer. Interestingly, the Cofers were not Holy Nativity communicants, but Pat Frazier, Ed Cofer's secretary at Sea Pak was. When she mentioned the church's needs, the gift was made. Patty Sebring gave the silver breadbox and two pewter altar vases. Judy and Ed Cheshire donated the lavabo (a small Revere bowl).

As the decade of the sixties came to an end, Holy Nativity was poised for a time of significant growth. In 1970, membership stood at eighty-eight. By 1981, it had grown to 178, thus the stage was set for the mission to become a parish. This was accomplished in 1983. The Canons of the Church require that in order to make such a change a mission must have a desire to become a parish, must be self-supporting for at least two years, must be able to give financial support to the Diocese and the National Church, and must undergo a two-year evaluation. Further, the mission must have a minimum of seventy-five members. Once approval is obtained, the new parish must adopt formalized Articles of Association and elect a vestry which will then select a rector (priest). This is different from mission situations in which the Diocesan Bishop appoints the priest (vicar).¹⁷

As soon as Holy Nativity became a parish, Fr. Wright was chosen as rector. Additionally, the 1964 statement of purpose was modified with the addition of these words:

To worship God the Father through His son Jesus Christ as a Eucharist Fellowship of baptized Christians, and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to offer ourselves in creative evangelism, renewal and service to others.

And finally, a new set of by-laws completed the transition from mission to parish.¹⁸

TRADITIONS

As change occurred, the people of Holy Nativity persisted in work that fostered both spiritual growth and a strong sense of community.

The tradition of weekly house church meetings (sometimes in the form Bible studies and/or prayer groups) continued for many years, as did regular home visits by Fr. Wright. Current members Melinda and Joe Johanson recall that at least once a month, the energetic priest would arrive in a yellow Volkswagen for an unannounced "house call." For the young Johansons this caused a great deal of scrambling about to get into appropriate clothes. Also, it was absolutely necessary to quickly put the kettle on. Fr. Wright always expected a cup of tea.

From the outset, church school was an important feature of congregational life. For quite some time, it had two forms. One occurred on Thursdays when Edith Withington would pick up children after school and drive them to her home for lessons and snacks. Later, space in the parish hall was used for Sunday classes. Still later, in the winter of 1983 a classroom wing was added. Costing \$42,300 this annex contained a vestry meeting room that is now a library, space for a nursery, and four classrooms.



SUNDAY SCHOOL - GEORGIA
PERKINS [BARRS] AND FRIEND

As the size of facilities increased so did land ownership. In the late sixties, the church acquired a lot that extended from its original boundaries to Martin Street. A columbarium was installed on this property, with the first burial, that of Eric Westbrook Meyer (1951-1971), taking place in 1971. During that same year, plans and

fund-raising for a meditation garden began. Four years later, it became a reality.

The focal point of the garden was a statue of Christ crucified, arms stretched out on the cross, head lowered in anguish. Carved in Austria and eighteen months in the making, the icon was "slightly larger than half-life size, meticulously detailed, and colored for a strikingly realistic effect." Given by Priscilla Gregory and her family in memory of her mother, the statue created quite a stir when it was placed in the garden in December of 1975. Passersby wondered why the church had put up such an unusual Christmas decoration.

According to Fr. Wright who is quoted in a newspaper article dated 18 December 1975, the garden was created specifically for the statue and was intended to serve as a "wayside shrine similar to those that are common in Europe." Ed Cheshire designed the space which included seventy-five azaleas, lights (the icon was lighted from dusk to dawn daily), and a sprinkler system. It was dedicated to the memory of former church organist Aspasia Powers. Because it is open to all, the garden remains a place of peaceful contemplation for the Village community.

Early in his ministry, Fr. Wright introduced the Cursillo experience to Holy Nativity members. Cursillo, in Spanish "short course," began as a movement in Spain in 1947. Rather quickly, it spread to other parts of the world, arriving in the United States in 1957 and in the Diocese of Georgia ten years later. According to the National Episcopal Church:

The Cursillo week-end is not a retreat but an opportunity to meet clergy and laity seeking to strengthen our faith. It provides an environment to experience the reality of the gift of God's love through shared prayer, individual meditation, worship, study, fellowship, laughter, tears, and unconditional love.

The week-end lasts three days, but participants are encouraged to continue to support each other by becoming part of an on-going Fourth Day community that will empower them to greater spiritual growth.¹⁹

Fr. Wright attended Cursillo #1 in the Diocese of Georgia and then went on to serve numerous times as

spiritual director for Cursillo. Across time, he inspired many Holy Nativity communicants to participate in this enriching experience thereby beginning a tradition that continues today.

Across time, the people of Holy Nativity developed significant traditions of service. Some of the mission's founders had been involved with Episcopal Church Women (ECW) before they left Christ Church, so they were eager to start a chapter in their new congregation. Begun in the 1870s as a women's auxiliary, ECW, has become a national organization that invites all Episcopalian women to unite in their love of God and their desire to serve Him. We do not have records for the first decades of ECW at Holy Nativity, but we do know that from 1987 through 1989 Edith Withington Wrangofski served as ECW president for the Diocese of Georgia.



EDITH WITHINGTON WRANGOFSKI, "MISS EDITH"

An annual report for the year 1989 reveals the extraordinary commitment and energy of ECW members at Holy Nativity. A sampling of activities includes a prayer workshop, sponsorship of a video series on evangelism,

weekly adult Bible studies, hosting a community-wide quiet day, maintaining a caring ministry for the congregation, spearheading plans for the church's 25TH anniversary celebration, and providing strong support for Mary House Ministries, which housed a day care center and assisted elderly and needy island residents in multiple ways.²⁰

It must be noted that for a time in the past decade, ECW became somewhat dormant at Holy Nativity, but it is now in a revitalization process. In the last year, members have hosted a Lenten quiet day, held yard sales, served hot meals at Brunswick's Manna House, assumed responsibility for coordinating covered dish luncheons, and created a cookbook to commemorate the church's fiftieth anniversary.



ECW BLANKET DRIVE FOR
ST. ATHANASIUS

DALE ANDERSON
BECKY MATTHEWS
ANN RUSSELL

Another women's organization that has made a lasting impact at Holy Nativity is Daughters of the King (DOK). Also national in scope, Daughters of the King is described as a semi-religious order. Hence, local groups are referred to as chapters. Members see themselves as part of a "spiritual sisterhood dedicated to a life of prayer."²¹

According to the "Rector's Annual Report, 1990," a DOK chapter was organized at Holy Nativity in that year. Charter members included Mary Anne Ford, Margaret Harper, Daphne Tresher, Helen Hall, Snookie Collins, and Edith Wrangofski. According to current member Freddie Norris, the group's "main mission is to pray daily for our Church, our priest, and anyone who requests prayers for the needs of others."²² Prayer request cards and a box in which to deposit them are available in the church's narthex, and each Sunday the box is brought to the altar for a blessing from the priest. From this box, members generate a prayer list that they use each day.

"Daughters" also emphasizes service. In recent years at Christmas they have packed gift bags to be distributed at the International Seafarers' Center in Brunswick. Because the Center serves men and women from around the world, these gifts represent a truly global outreach. Other acts of generosity have included collecting towels, sheets, and blankets for tornado victims, singing Christmas carols at nursing homes, and providing Christmas gifts for the elderly and for children.²³ Recently, the chapter sponsored what might become a new tradition. Members collected coats for the "Feed My Sheep" food bank and clothes closet at St. Athanasius in Brunswick; and faithful to their primary commitment, they placed a prayer in the pocket of each jacket or coat.



"DAUGHTERS" AND DITTY BAGS

MELINDA JOHANSON
DOT O'QUINN
LEE LEE KING
MARY ANNE FORD
DALE ANDERSON

Traditions of service often arise from feelings of connectedness within a church. Rather early in their history, the people of Holy Nativity realized that sharing food and friendship can generate a spirit of community. For example, for fifteen years, the Cheshires hosted an Easter brunch at their home. Everyone was invited, and as depicted in the "History," it must have been a grand affair. The setting was elegant, with the Chesires supplying their best linens, silver, and china. The menu was extensive, baked ham, cheese grits, eggs, homemade biscuits, hot cross buns, and assorted jams and jellies. While the adults prepared the feast, children enjoyed an Easter egg hunt. This is a custom that continues until today, although now it takes place in the parish hall.

Epiphany was commemorated at the Withington's ocean front home each year. Christmas trees were dragged onto the beach and burned, and after this children performed a

pageant that told the story of the three kings. The Withingtons also hosted a Pentecost party with cake and homemade ice-cream for refreshments. Recent years have seen the renewal of both of these traditions; now each takes place in the parish hall. And instead of full-sized trees ablaze on the beach, snips of greenery are burned in an outdoor fire pit.

The home of Fr. Wright and Maude became the scene of an annual New Year's Eve celebration. At midnight, those gathered observed the first communion of the New Year. Then they enjoyed glasses of champagne and finally "an old fashioned country breakfast."



FR. WRIGHT AND MAUDE AT HOME

A pancake supper marked (and marks) Shrove Tuesday. A note in the church's newsletter of 1 February 1970 tells us something about the continuity of this tradition and also the effects of inflation. Almost apologetically, it states; "Since we lost money last year, we are forced to raise the price to \$1.00 for everyone except pre-school children who will pay 25 cents...Come one, come all, and bring along your friends." By Shrove Tuesday of 2014, the cost had increased to \$5.00 per person. But members were still encouraged to bring friends.

Another tradition that encourages the bringing of friends is the Blessing of the Animals, which takes place on or near the feast day of St. Francis in October. It is not too much of a stretch to say that in this context the word friends has a double meaning—referencing the animals we love and the people who love them. Exactly when this practice began at Holy Nativity is not known, but it remains popular not only with the church family but also

with pet lovers in the neighborhood. This year, 2014, dogs received, in addition to a blessing, a St. Francis medal for their collars. No cats were present. One speckled hen showed up, but since she was not wearing a collar, she had to take her medal home and hang it on the door of her hen house. In this way, she was able to share the blessing with her coop mates.



Finally, to return to the earliest years of the church on Mallery Street, the tradition of coffee hour under the oaks continues today, although only in good weather. Now there are electrical outlets on a paved patio so coffee pots do not have to be plugged into the back wall of the church, now there is running water, and a well-equipped kitchen, but one thing has not changed, and that is Holy Nativity's enjoyment of community.



REFRESHMENTS ON THE PATIO

MARY ANNE FORD, DEAN
JOHNS, WANDA BULLARD

RON & LILLIAN BINNER
CELEBRATE THEIR
FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
"UNDER THE OAKS"



DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

Fr. Wright retired in 1987, but it must be noted that he retained his commitment to the Lord, primarily by becoming a member of the Franciscan Order of the Divine Compassion in which he took the name Brother David. Also, for two years, he served as interim priest at St. Athanasius, the traditionally African-American parish in Brunswick. In 2001 he and Maude gave that church a beautiful stained glass window that memorializes the forty-one people known to have been slain in the civil rights movement.²⁴

Upon his retirement, Holy Nativity arranged to acquire the house that Fr. Wright and Maude had purchased on Bartow Street, directly behind the church. This ideally situated rectory soon became the home of Father Grant LeRoux, his wife Claire and their five children who arrived in mid-September of 1987 from Little Rock, Arkansas where he had served as the dean's assistant at Trinity Cathedral.

It was Fr. LeRoux who guided plans for the celebration of Holy Nativity's silver anniversary in 1989, which actually became a series of three events. As highlighted in a brochure published for the occasion, on the last day

of December at 5 p.m. there was a "Champagne Reception" at the home of Margaret and John Harper. A catered dinner in the parish hall followed. After that there were "Reflections and Evensong." Fr. Wright and Maude attended as did Fr. Dasher. Melinda Johanson, remembers her mother Edith, one of the twelve founders, standing beside the anniversary cake and remarking, "It is hard to believe that our little church has come this far."²⁵ Even as members reflected on their past, they also looked to the future. The third occasion in the series was a "Convivial Luncheon" on New Year's Day. Hosted by the Paul Bodamers, this traditional meal of ham, black-eyed peas, greens, and cornbread was intended, in Fr. LeRoux's words, "to help us begin our next twenty-five years."

Preparing for and celebrating the anniversary required a tremendous amount of effort by dozens of parishioners. Committees were formed for various functions, sponsors were recruited, a pictorial directory was created, and the first twenty-five years of church history was written. Taken as a whole, these activities provide clear evidence of a robust parish at work.



TWENTIFIFTH
ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATION

EDITH
WITHINGTON,
FR. DASHER,
ELLA LOVING,
FR. WRIGHT

EDITH AND
ELLA WERE TWO
OF THE TWELVE
FOUNDERS.

During the initial years of Fr. LeRoux's ministry, the people of Holy Nativity continued to establish traditions and build community. Examples from the annual report for 1990 include the formation of three new Bible study groups, a vibrant music ministry, the institution of Daughters of the King, the establishment of a Men's Wednesday Bible Study Group, continued support for Mary House Ministries, and the wide-ranging service projects of ECW. Additionally new fellowship opportunities, such as the first-ever Seder meal and the first annual congregational picnic were introduced.

Still, according to Fr. LeRoux's comments to the congregation, the church was facing a challenging time of change: He wrote:

I remind you of two images which I have used for our Church family in the past, the birthing process and the transition from Collie to Garden.... First, the Holy Spirit has used these past three years to give birth to an exciting new style of worship at our 10:15 Sunday Eucharist.. Second, it is obvious to me when I review the proliferation of ministries in our Church and how effectively many of them are operating that we have been making the transition from a Church family, loosely organized around relationships and warm feelings (the Collie) to a more complex organism made up of different fellowships and ministries. This may be one of the most difficult transitions a Church family has to make because it involves a complete change in character. All future transitions involve appropriate accommodations for increasing size. I think we are doing well and that this is opening us up for an exciting future.²⁶

As the decade of the nineties progressed, the transitions Fr. LeRoux discussed had both positive and negative effects. The number and type of ministries did increase for a time. In 1992, a lay pastoral care ministry formed as did "Hearts and Hands," a group that cooked and delivered meals to people who were homebound. The music

ministry changed its identity to "Praise and Worship," participants in the men's Bible study decided to attend a retreat organized by the Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International, and Fr. LeRoux began a "prophetic ministry."²⁷

Although many Holy Nativity members remained faithful and optimistic, the anticipated growth failed to occur. Instead, membership began to decline. By 1992 it had dropped from its 1983 peak of 183 to 134 then to seventy-seven in 1993. It would plummet even more in the decade ahead. A key reason for this change is that Fr. LeRoux and an influential cohort of communicants sought to lead the church in a very different direction. Increasingly, they turned to the beliefs and practices of a charismatic movement that had begun in 1960 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California. From there it spread to Episcopalian parishes across the nation and to other mainline denominations.

At the center of this charismatic movement (from charisma, the Greek word for gifts of grace) is the idea that through baptism or anointing by the Holy Spirit, individuals receive an array of spiritual gifts that will bring them closer to God. The acquisition of these gifts leads to the ability to speak in tongues and to various physical manifestations such as dancing, falling to the floor in a trance-like state ("slain in the Spirit") and "holy laughter." When these practices emerged at Holy Nativity services, members who preferred more traditional forms of worship left for other churches.

Then in 2003, what has been called a "mass exodus" occurred. A majority of the charismatics left to form their own church which was to be affiliated with The Episcopal Charismatic Fellowship. Fr. LeRoux resigned in late summer, and by year's end, membership had fallen to fifty-seven. The struggling congregation soon had to revert to mission status.²⁸

Although Appendix B in this essay charts membership trends at Holy Nativity, it is important to understand that while numbers do reveal certain aspects about church life, other features such as congregational commitment and the ability to overcome adversity are often more significant. Certainly this proved to be true at Holy Nativity.

Discord within communities of believers is far from new. For evidence we need only to look at Gospel accounts

of disciples arguing over who would be greatest, the divisiveness recorded in the book of Acts, and St. Paul's epistles, segments of which call for unity to replace the dissension that had developed in a number of early congregations.

Throughout history, some churches have found ways to heal internal differences, while for others reconciliation has been impossible. When facing schisms, some churches have managed to survive; others have collapsed completely. Survival is what happened at Holy Nativity. A faithful few, a remnant, stayed, and they prayed. And the grace of God empowered them to move forward.

MOVING FORWARD

On 6 September, 2003, shortly after Fr. LeRoux submitted his resignation, Senior Warden Ann Delea sent an email message to the congregation "to let everyone know what's happening with the church." Various priests from the diocese were going to lead services during the month of September, candidates for an interim position were being interviewed, help and prayers were being sought from the St. Mark parish in Brunswick and perhaps most importantly she asked the people of Holy Nativity to:

Pray for the church and the vestry—that we will listen to the Holy Spirit and follow His direction in all of this. I am sure that this is the only way for us to proceed.²⁹

Proceed they did. By 25 October, the Senior Warden was able to write:

If you look around and think about it, every member of the parish is really working hard during this transition time. Thanks to everybody!! I guess that's one of the reasons the vestry is so hopeful about the future of Holy Nativity. We are all pulling together, we're open to whatever the Lord wants to do, Sr. Elena is a "go-getter." We really do want to spread the gospel and serve our community.³⁰

The aforementioned Sr. Elena was Sister Elena

Thompson who was scheduled to become Holy Nativity's interim priest in early November. An Anglican Dominican and a professed member of the Anglican Order of Preachers, she brought enthusiasm and hope to the struggling church. Her 2003 Advent message, written three weeks after her arrival expressed appreciation for the hospitality she had enjoyed, for work done to get the vicarage cleaned and painted, and for the congregation's on-going service projects. She hoped that these would continue and even expand. Then she reminded members of their heritage with these compelling words, "We are Holy Nativity; we are a Christmas church."



PREPARING FOR BUDDY WALK FOR DOWNS SYNDROME CHILDREN, SISTER ELENA SUPERVISING

Looking to the future, she proposed "a series of surveys and discussions to elicit a vision of what the parish might be if we were completely dedicated to the divine purpose of God." To work toward this vision, she planned a retreat week based on the theme "Seeing Ourselves as God Sees Us." Following this, small self-study groups would form in order to "examine every visible aspect of our common life." This would lead to the creation of a parish development plan and "From there on, our task will be to glorify God through the plan we have made together."³¹