

Centennial Moments in History 1986–1990

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The History of the Church of St. Michael & St. George (1928–) Transition on the Horizon

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

— Hebrews 12:1–2a

The year 1987 began with the Rev. Salmon identifying inactive parishioners and calling on them with the goal of returning them to active worship, study, and service. This effort is most often taken when a church is in decline. It usually is not a priority when staff and lay leaders are stretched thin receiving and integrating a growing number of new members into the church. But there was concern for the spiritual health of parishioners who had become inactive.

The year 1988 was the rector's 10th anniversary with the church. Baptized membership had grown from 1,560 to 2,532 over the ten years. Pledges had grown from \$253,000 to \$939,000 (multiply all dollar figures in this e-letter by 1.8 to get an approximate present value, based on the CPI). Average weekly attendance was now 1,241. There were 360 students in the church school (nursery through eighth grade), and 600 adults were participating weekly in adult classes on Sundays and weekdays. The number of single persons in the parish had increased from 49 to 406. And the pattern in recent years of having more adults than children confirmed continued. In 1989, 79 adults and 34 children were confirmed; the church was attracting adults from protestant denominations. Attendance on Easter Sunday of 1990 was 2,300, the highest number ever.

There were changes in the clergy and lay staff during the period. The Rev. Baker retired, and his position was taken by the Rev. William K. Christian III, a curate at St. Michael and All Angels Church in Denver, CO. He had been a Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod pastor before his 1986 ordination as a priest in The Episcopal Church. Mr. Armstrong left in May 1987 to become rector of a church in Colorado, and his position was assumed a year later by the Rev. Steven Lawler, chaplain of Holland Hall High School in Tulsa, OK. Mr. Lawler would oversee the youth program along with other duties. The Rev. Virginia Bennett, a parishioner who recently had been ordained, was called in the spring of 1990 as the fourth associate with primary duties for adult Christian education. Other full-time and part-time additions were made in the clergy and lay leadership ranks, and areas of responsibility shifted among the staff to fit current needs.

Along with growth in numbers came growth in ministries. Adult Christian education continued on Sunday and throughout the week at a robust pace with classes like those described in previous e-letters. The church school continued to run at capacity. The outreach ministries attracted more lay people to give of their time, talent, and treasure. The parish roll was reviewed again to identify all shut-in parishioners in 1987. A lay shepherding ministry was begun to assist the clergy in making visits to shut-ins, and all shut-ins were visited within the year. On 19 October 1987, the stock market crashed, and the day is still known as "Black Monday". Stock indexes fell 23 percent by the end of the month. People lost their jobs in the fallout that generated plant closings and

mergers as companies looked for less expensive ways to run their businesses in a recession. Concerned lay people formed a "Job Squad" to assist parishioners in networking within and without the congregation so that they could find employment. St. Michael's Houses, initially planned and managed under the outstanding leadership of Mrs. Elsie Valier and now under the equally outstanding leadership of Mrs. Elizabeth Hyers, continued to blossom. Mrs. Hyers noted in a February 1988 ministry report that "this is not a program about bricks and mortar. It is a program about significantly touching the lives of the least of these, and during this process our own lives become transformed" (the underlines are Mrs. Hyers's). A Sixty-Plus ministry was begun in 1987 and soon had active programs of service to others and interesting educational and fellowship activities.

Mrs. Jo Werner, who headed the lay ministry board, gave a ministry report at the December 1988 vestry meeting that provides an insightful peek into the 19 organized lay ministries of the time. Mrs. Werner reported that "the opportunity for ministry is given to all Christians. The Hospitality Guild has 27 members and can use some new members. The Rector's Guild has 13 members who answer the phone in the absence of the regular staff. There are 29 trainees in the Stephen Ministry. The Guild of the Christ Child called on 45 families with new babies. Helping Hands sends out two to five casseroles each month to families in transition. The Parish Callers, whose main ministry is to listen, call on shut-ins or people in the hospital. Job Squad, which grew from a common need, now has job opportunities posted in the Gallery Walk. There are 10 to 12 Casserole Clubs of which four are newly organized. Sixty-Plus is a dynamic group, and nearly 300 people have attended its various programs. Parish Access is a group that hosts patio parties. Coffee Servers and Greeters serve weekly at Sunday morning services."

The capital campaign, initially reported in last week's e-letter, had been undertaken to provide space for the continuing growth in membership and ministries. The construction contract was approved in February 1987, and by April 1987, \$1.6 million of the \$1.8 million goal had been pledged. As with all construction, unforeseen problems were encountered, some in the existing building, and the project ultimately overran the contract cost by \$400,000. As summer 1988 came to an end, the building renovation and expansion work was mostly complete, and St. George's Chapel was consecrated on 23 October 1988.

Several interesting liturgical matters arose in this period. In 1987, a parishioner asked the vestry to move the High Altar from its place on the east wall to a free-standing location so the "minister" could face the people. The rector spoke to the matter by observing that the stone altar was very heavy and that the cost to move it would be quite high. After some discussion, it was decided to leave the High Altar where it was (and is). First Communion for children apparently was at the fourth-grade age, for there were *Dragon Tales* notices telling parents that they and their fourth-grade children must attend a communion preparatory session before their children could take communion. The 9:15 a.m. service for years had been much better attended than the 11:15 a.m. service, the reason most often posited being that those arriving for the 11:15 a.m. service had to park a long distance from the church since many parishioners stayed after the 9:15 a.m. service for Christian education classes. Yet the choir had always sung only at the 11:15 a.m. service. The vestry determined in May 1989 that they also wanted the choir to sing at the 9:15 a.m. service beginning in September, and increased the expense budget accordingly.

The growth and change continued to present operating budget challenges. The fall 1986 Every Member Canvass generated \$860,000 in pledges, \$100,000 short of the goal. A rigorous line item review of the budget was established in an attempt to produce a balanced 1987 operating budget, and a small budget surplus of \$9,600 was achieved. The 1988 budget was set at \$1.05 million. Pledges of \$939,000 were received, and Mr. Salmon again told the vestry that "the parish does

not have a surplus of funds, has not been able to meet the operating costs of the church out of the giving of the parish, and has always had gifts to help balance the budget,” a situation he had reported in 1983 to be “a most dangerous position.”

Through careful management, the 1988 budget was balanced. By July 1989, the church had a \$900,000 indebtedness — \$361,000 for accumulated operating budget deficits, and \$539,000 for the building project deficit. The year 1989 concluded with a budget deficit of \$74,500. A fall 1989 pledge goal was set at \$1.48 million, a 40 percent increase over the prior year, and the rector wanted to add a fourth associate by January 1990. But as plans were being firmed up for 1990, Mr. Salmon announced to the parish on 18 September 1989 that he had been elected as the bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina.

Mr. Salmon continued to be fully engaged in the leadership of the parish and asked the vestry to focus on three things during the interim period: “(1) find fine gospel leadership; (2) address the financial issues of the church in order to support ministry; and (3) maintain the parish until new leadership arrives to provide vision.” Mr. Barbee assumed the position of priest-in-charge. Mr. Salmon vacated his position as rector on 24 February 1990, the date of his consecration as a bishop. Attendance and giving remained strong throughout 1990, a good sign for the parish that would be helpful in seeking a new rector.

A search committee had begun their work within a month of Mr. Salmon’s announcement of his leaving, and the rector told the committee that none of the current associates were interested in the position. In the search committee’s 18 October 1989 letter to the parish, they outlined the attributes they would seek in a new rector:

- Mature understanding of and deep commitment to traditional biblical Christianity;
- Commitment to and ability to provide pastoral care;
- Love of and ability to teach scripture both in the classroom and from the pulpit, and commitment to maintain a wide variety of meaningful educational experiences for people of all ages;
- Ability to work and communicate effectively with, and to assimilate into parish life, diverse groups within the church;
- Proven experience as a rector leading a church which has shown a continued growth and is staffed by several priests of varying backgrounds, and which has lay persons on staff in significant roles. Effective management skills;
- Knowledge of and commitment to strong traditional liturgy;
- Profound intellect;
- A demonstrated commitment to Christian witness, both in life and in doctrine;
- A vision of the Church of St. Michael & St. George as a parish deeply caring for its own people, with a call to be a leader in the national church. Commitment to Christian discipleship and ministry beyond the parish bounds.

Armed with this vision, the search committee launched their search for a rector who was faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

← *BACK TO THE FUTURE* →

We read above and in the two previous e-letters about the church's robust lay ministries and its outreach ministries to the community. What do you think enabled and created this level of ministry? How might we strengthen and expand our lay ministries and outreach ministries today?

One might think that the membership growth in the period 1978–1990 would generate pledges sufficient to prevent budget deficits, yet the church wrestled with budget deficits almost every year and had a significant indebtedness in 1990. We were recently reminded in the 2012 Annual Parish Meeting that pledges have continued to be insufficient to produce balanced budgets. What can we parishioners do to reverse this long-standing trend? What can the rector and vestry do?

What are the key things a parish must do to maintain effective ministry during an interim period? How does a parish's effectiveness and behavior during an interim period affect a search committee's ability to secure the best possible candidates for the position of rector?

In his 14 October 1978 introductory letter to the parish, Mr. Salmon said that "the central core of all ministry is to focus on the person of Jesus Christ and his saving power". And with those words to ponder, we conclude this e-letter with a complimentary hymn text.

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation
By water and the word:
From heaven he came and sought her
To be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her,
And for her life he died.*

*Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.*



— John R. Tyler