

Centennial Moments in History 1925–1928

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The History of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels (1912–1928) Living with Prosperity

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

After the Rev. McFetridge's departure, the Rev. D. S. Putney, whom the parish had grown to love during his first term as interim rector, again agreed to take charge of the parish. The search for a new rector was begun; it would take more than year. The Rev. Dr. Karl Morgan Block of Roanoke, VA accepted the call to become the third rector of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels.

Dr. Block, who was 38 years old upon his arrival, had an interesting and varied background. He graduated from George Washington University in 1906 with a B.A. degree and studied toward a degree in law for one year. He then considered a career in acting and auditioned to be in a stage show on a cruise ship. He worked as an extra with an opera company in Washington, D.C., in one production carrying "the great Caruso" on his shoulders. It has been said that he was one of the first to own a Model T Ford — popularly known as the "Tin Lizzie" or the "flivver" — that was introduced in 1908. He eventually felt a call to ministry and entered Virginia Theological Seminary in 1910 where he and a fellow student wrote school songs that were "noted for their bad quality." He and Nancy Shackelford were married on 1 October 1913 in St. Thomas Church, Orange, VA. He had served three previous rectorates: Grace Church in Haddonfield, NJ (1913–18); All Saints Church in Norristown, PA (1918–20); and St. John's Church in Roanoke, VA (1920–25).



The Rev. Dr. Karl Morgan and Mrs. Nancy Block

During the evolution controversy highlighted by the Scopes trial in 1925, Dr. Block took a moderate view, saying that he always looked upon the earth as an "organism" and no real challenge to Christianity. He received his honorary D.D. degree in 1924 from Virginia Theological Seminary, one year before coming to St. Louis.

Dr. Block said one of the attractions our church held for him was its nearness to Washington University and the opportunity it would give him to work with young people. At the end of the first year of his rectorate, he reported that since the previous fall, with the exception of two Sundays, there had been an attendance of more than 300 people at each of the regular worship services. What makes this figure so astonishing is that the church's seating capacity at the time

was 260! Today's church growth specialists say that once attendance reaches 75–80 percent of seating capacity, further growth is not possible. This was not the case for our church in 1925, another sign of the strength of the parish and its clergy and lay leadership. Chairs and benches were purchased to accommodate the weekly overflowing attendance.

Dr. Block proposed that a decision be made either to enlarge the existing facility or move to another location and rebuild. This was only 12 years after the church cornerstone and five years after the parish house cornerstone had been laid! Dr. Block appointed two committees: one committee was to investigate and recommend property sites suitable for building a larger church complex; the second committee was to investigate the advisability of enlarging the present church and parish house and also to report on the possibility of selling the present property in its entirety, using the proceeds from the sale as partial payment on new property and construction. It was determined after investigation that it would not be possible to sell the current property, and it was recommended that the present buildings be enlarged. At the March 1928 vestry meeting, a Building Committee was appointed with Mr. Clinton L. Whittemore as chairman.

In the fall of 1928, while planning was still underway for the enlargement of the church and parish house, it became known that the fourth oldest parish in the city was in great financial difficulty and would soon be forced to dissolve or to merge with another parish. In the next Centennial Moments in History e-letter, we will turn our attention to the history of that parish, for that history will soon become part of our past, our present, and our future.



Dr. Block saw Washington University as a mission field. Is the university a mission field for us today and in the future? If so, how might we engage it?

There were over 300 people in attendance each Sunday worship service in a church that would seat only 260. Chairs and benches were purchased to accommodate the weekly overflowing attendance. Would you welcome that condition today or view it as a disturbing inconvenience? What should we be willing to do, willing to accept, and willing to give to bring more people in contact with the gospel at our church?

G. K. Chesterson said, "The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living." After reading the history of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels these past few weeks, has there been any change in your view of our church in which we worship? Any change in your view of the age in which we are living?

Gracious God who changest not: Give us thy guidance as we address the constant changes in our fast-moving world, and the ability and willingness to make decisions that reflect thy will for the future of this thy church, so that when our earthly course is over, we may be welcomed as good and faithful servants. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— John R. Tyler
Historical information from *Trilogy* by Harriet Davidson