

## Centennial Moments in History

1931–1936

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### **The History of The Church of St. Michael & St. George (1928– ) Doing Church in a Tough Economy**

*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 parish had a number of generous parishioners of means, so the building expansion project was planned in 1928 with confidence that there would be no long-term building debt; the balance not fully subscribed would be paid off in several years with special gifts. But no one anticipated what would happen in October 1929. A stock market crash began on 24 October, culminating five days later on “Black Tuesday”. Market losses for the month totaled \$16 billion (multiply all dollar figures in this e-letter by 16 to get an approximate present value, based on the CPI). The Great Depression was but another significant change the newly merged parish had to manage, this one with significant financial ramifications.

In 1931 there was an unsubscribed building indebtedness of \$115,000, one-third of the expansion project’s cost. The vestry authorized a bond issue so that the building debts could be consolidated. One hundred and fifteen notes, payable in gold coin, each of \$1,000 denomination, were issued bearing interest at the rate of 5.5 percent per annum, to be paid semi-annually on the second day of February and August. The schedule called for five notes, or \$5,000 of the building debt, to be retired each year. By 2 August 1936, \$25,000 of the debt had been retired on schedule, leaving an outstanding balance of \$90,000. The debt had been further reduced to \$79,900 by February 1938, and the church had never failed to pay on time either the interest or the scheduled amortization. However, the church was unable to meet operating expenses for several consecutive years in the depths of the Great Depression.

In February 1932, a large deficit was predicted, and immediate steps were taken to deal with the situation. The Rev. Mr. Poindexter, the first assistant rector in the merged parish, had come on 15 October 1930, a year after “Black Tuesday”. His services were terminated on 1 June 1932. Bishop William Scarlett had also placed him in charge of Mt. Calvary Mission located on De Tonty Street near Grand Avenue. When Mr. Poindexter left, the church’s financial assistance to the mission was discontinued. (Mr. Poindexter would later serve at Christ Church Cathedral as Canon in Residence, 1948–1958, and as Canon Pastor, 1958–1962.)

During the years of the Great Depression, the word “retrenchment” appears repeatedly in the vestry minutes. This retrenchment took many forms. Miss Martha Bishop and Miss Lizzie Dyer each offered to take a month’s vacation without pay in order to reduce salary expenses. The weekly bulletin was discontinued during the summer months, and when it was resumed, it was reduced in size to cut costs.

Mr. Friess, organist and choirmaster, had brought the choir to routine excellence by the early 1930s. Cuts were made in the music program. The salaried quartet of the choir was furloughed during the summer months at a savings of \$3,209, and Mr. Friess voluntarily accepted a salary cut. In 1934, the choir purchased awning equipment that they rented for weddings and other occasions in order to raise money for the choir that by 1935 numbered 60 members.

Despite the severe economic times during the 1930s, church membership and parish programs grew during the decade. Dr. Block observed that “in spite of severe retrenchment in expenditures, the efficiency of the various activities of the church had not been impaired nor had morale been lowered.” Dr. Block conducted a number of Bible classes throughout the week, some attended by people outside the parish. Mr. Friess and his wife, Mary, also an organist and musician of considerable ability, organized a Vesper Choir made up of young parishioners.

Because of membership growth and the many and varied parish activities and programs by 1933, Dr. Block needed an assistant, but the salary for an assistant had been trimmed from the budget two years earlier when the merged parish’s first assistant rector had been let go. Mr. Clinton Whittemore, the senior warden, offered to pay \$100 per month of the \$1,800 annual salary needed for an assistant. With this commitment (and perhaps other undocumented commitments) in hand, Dr. Block was instructed to begin a search for an assistant. The search led to the Rev. John Elbridge Hines, a 1933 graduate of the Virginia Theological Seminary, and he assumed duties in September 1933. He served the parish for 18 months during which time he found a bride among the parishioners, Miss Helen Orwig, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Mercer (Mabel) Orwig. Mr. Hines left at the end of April 1935 to become rector of Trinity Church in Hannibal, MO. (This is not the last we shall hear about Mr. Hines.)

In 1934, the fiscal year was closed without deficit for the first time in four years. This feat was accomplished by the “Rector’s Special Fund” which Dr. Block undertook as a way to balance the year’s budget. The Fund raised \$3,480 in the depths of the Great Depression, an amount sufficient to balance the year’s budget. With Mr. Hines’s departure, Dr. Block again needed an assistant, but said that he would make no attempt to secure one until the financial support could be assured through the Every Member Canvass. He felt that it would be good to conduct the canvass with this goal as a major objective.

In the spring of 1936, it finally became possible for Dr. Block to call an assistant. The Rev. Frederick Kates, a new seminary graduate, began his work on 21 June 1936. That year, the parish reported 82 confirmations, 37 baptisms, and 484 students in the Sunday school.



The nation continues in a protracted economic recession, although the economy is showing modest signs of improvement as I write this. While the present time cannot objectively be compared to the Great Depression, it rightly has been called the Great Recession. The parish experienced annual budget deficits during the 1930s. We have experienced budget deficits in the past several years. What steps did the parish take in the 1930s to address the budget shortfalls? Which steps, if any, are applicable to our time? What principles can we learn from that experience 75 years ago that will help us today during the present economic downturn?

Can a church invest for future growth during a time of budgetary shortfalls? If so, how?

A stewardship speaker at a church where I once was a member made the following announcement from the pulpit during the annual stewardship appeal: “I have good news and bad news. The good

news is that we have all the money we need to fund our programs and ministries next year. The bad news is that it's still in our pockets." Do you think we parishioners collectively have all the money we need to fund our programs and ministries each year and invest for future growth? If so, how do we transfer that money from our pockets to the collection plates?

*Come, all Christians, be committed  
To the service of the Lord;  
Make your lives for him more fitted,  
Tune your hearts with one accord.  
Come into his courts with gladness,  
All your sacred vows renew,  
Turn away from sin and sadness,  
Be transformed with life anew.*

*Of your time and talents give ye,  
They are gifts from God above,  
To be used by Christians freely  
To proclaim his wondrous love.  
Come again to serve the Savior,  
Tithes and offerings with you bring;  
In your work, with him find favor,  
And with joy his praises sing.*

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