

History of St. John's Church – 1960-2010

A Note about the research:

Three leather bound notebooks contain roughly thirty years of minutes for St. John's Episcopal Church (1955-1988), a large portion of the history of this period. They are handwritten by, primarily, four stalwart clerks: Leslie Guilford, Norman Pike, Mary Hall, and Harriet Pike. The men were referred to as Bro and the women as Sis, as in Bro Gray and Sis Craft. The process they honored seems unbelievably cumbersome today, in our high-tech world of laptops and voice-activated software. The clerk would take notes, write them up for the next meeting, when they were read aloud for additions or corrections. Once they were approved they were painstakingly transcribed into the minutes' book. Thinking about this process, admiring the beautiful handwriting, nearly upstaged the often riveting content of these pages. The subsequent minutes and the work of Frances Gray and Alan Dann have been essential to this report.

Upon the first service of St. John's Church in 1827, Jonathan Lilly, both the lead carpenter of the new church building and clerk of the parish, spoke in honor of "the few individuals which commenced so great an undertaking." It has been ever thus. In 1873, Rev. Lewis Green wrote, "We are but a handful and weak ... still this light on the hills must not go out." In 1851 Rev. Withington wrote that "Few of our churches would stand better than this one if compared with the whole population." In the late 20th century The Rev. William Crist, a visiting priest at the church, called St. John's the "gem of Christendom."

Then and now the heart of St. John's has been to seek an ever stronger, more meaningful liturgical worship experience. All that emanates from St. John's comes from this. Worship guides St. John's energies toward a mission that strives for hospitality and understanding within the community and encourages tolerance, diversity, service, and social justice wherever it can. These key elements have

endured and expanded – all in the face of financial strains and constant building issues, as well as the challenges inherent in human relationships. And its smallness.

Considering the arc of this time, a thread of growth emerges. Each vicar and each generation moves forward with new and fresh learning. Over time the practicalities of “running” a church would be streamlined to allow for an increase in St. John’s mission – which now is well over \$10,000. The physical space and service structure would become more open. The willingness to experiment and inspire pioneering initiatives, as only a small church can, would persist. Smallness was always a fact – and a reason.

The Dual Ministry Years (1945-1983)

During World War II The Rev. Charles Whiston, author of *Teach Us to Pray*, was the vicar of St. John’s. It is said that he was brought to Ashfield because it was the one place the Bishop of Western Massachusetts felt an unflinching pacifist, such as Rev. Whiston, might find an understanding parish. (Whiston, an adjunct professor of Middlebury College, lost his position there because of his pacifist views, causing him to resign his position at St. Stephen’s in Middlebury, although he was given a vote of confidence there.) Before he left Ashfield, in 1945, he worked with the diocese to create a model whereby one person might serve the two Protestant denominations in Ashfield, St. John’s and the Congregational Church. The moment was ripe, as there was a growing interest in the ecumenical movement along with the reality that there would be fewer clergy available in rural areas, following the world war. The Rev. Phillip Steinmetz became the iconic minister to serve in this capacity for the next 11 years. After his resignation, the churches voted to continue this model, and it endured, in one form or another until 1983. That year Beverly LaBelle spoke in moving and heartfelt words to both St. John’s

and the Congregational Church that each congregation had grown beyond this partnership and it was time to go their separate ways.

Those who experienced the magic of Rev. Steinmetz's unifying touch were entranced by what he was able to accomplish. (He returned from 1969-1973.) His personal charisma and ability to meet the needs of all members of his flock allowed him to become truly the minister of Ashfield – and the churches became the Ashfield Parish. This dual ministry became famous well beyond the Ashfield boundaries and was chronicled in several church publications,

During the period of the dual ministry St. John's was the genesis for several important contributions to the town. In 1969, Ruth Craft (a fountain of ideas and longtime head of St. John's Guild) and Marian Gray and others spearheaded the very first Fall Festival -- then called the Autumn Festival -- with the sale of 150 pies. In the November minutes the treasurer noted a profit of \$911.14. Their founding goal was to draw outsiders to the town, so neighbors would no longer just be buying from one another. The goal of providing scholarship money soon followed. In the 1970s the roots of the Ashfield News began in Rev. Steinmetz's basement where Mary Priscilla Howes edited and ran off the Ashfield Parish Paper on a mimeograph machine. When the paper moved to its office at the Congregational Church St. John's voted funds to furnish the office. In 1970 St. John's hosted the first candidate's night so that citizens could get to know their leadership. The first town-wide phone book was introduced by St. John's in 1980. While the inspiration for these initiatives began at St. John's they only succeeded because of the support of many townspeople.

Along with the benefits of the dual ministry there were significant challenges. The minutes during that period reflect the enormous attention that had to be paid to the complex governing bodies and care of the vicarage and the hassles of renting the space when it was not inhabited by a minister. (The final

straw seemed to be when a ten year old boy fell in the dry well of the property.) The home on Meadow Lane was purchased in 1940 and later sold in 1972 for \$32,500 to Raymond and Theresa Cassidy. There was an intricate financial arrangement between the two churches that evolved into a 40/60 split – St. John’s 40% and The Congregational Church 60%, though this split was often reviewed and revised. And Rev. Steinmetz’s “unifying touch” could not always be replicated.

The Rev. John Philbrick came in 1957 and resigned in 1962 because of “dissatisfaction with his ministry by some members of the Congregational Church.” He would recommend to Bishop Hatch that a congregational minister be called to take his place. That minister was The Rev. Richard Barnett (1963-1968), also in the pacifist tradition. Because he was not an ordained Episcopal minister, he was kept under close scrutiny by the Diocese, who did not give him permission to offer communion from the Book of Common Prayer. An Episcopal priest came in once a month to provide that service. Finally Rev. Barnett was allowed to celebrate communion by using The Book of Common Prayer from South India. Mary Snow remembers this about Rev. Barnett: “During the height of the Vietnam War we had a very lively youth group. ... During that year, all young men who turned 18 had to register for the draft. All registered as pacifists. The Congregational Church, fearing ‘loss of patriotism,’ voted no confidence in Dick. Our vestry resoundingly voted him confidence, and the church supported him. The war didn’t end. Dick resigned rather than end the ecumenical project, but this act has always made me love St. John’s and treasure its ministry.”

The Rev. Peter Hayn (1973-1977) and The Rev. Sandy Johnson (1977-1983), both of whom gave valiant effort in making the dual ministry work, also resigned in frustration over the partnership. Upon Sandy Johnson’s departure, The Rev. Leslie Fairfield was the interim minister, bridging the gap between the dual ministry and the new era.

The Rev. Susan Crampton (1884-1991)

The ministry of The Rev. Susan Crampton was a watershed period for St John's, as she guided the parish in realizing its own identity. She was the first woman priest to lead a church in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. A graduate of Smith, wife of a physics professor at Williams, and mother of three, she attended the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge in her late thirties. The logistics of her ministry, minimized to the outside eye by Rev. Crampton's grace and irrepressible good cheer, must have been daunting. Following what Susan lightheartedly called "The Great Divorce," there were no offices or vicarage. The office (with desk, chairs, and phone) were all at the Congregational Church. The vicarage had of course been sold. This was dumbfounding to the new vicar. Not even a phone! The vestry then met in the small vesting room in the church or in someone's home. At first Rev. Crampton stayed with Harriet Pike and then embarked on a nomadic journey involving three rented homes to serve as temporary vicarages. In addition, the church leased the tavern diagonally across the street from the church to serve as the parish house. (It was there that St. John's parishioner Ruth Julian began what is now the Hilltown Churches Food Pantry, with four clients.) The eventual purchase of the Corner House was a beautiful moment.

When the Corner House was purchased in 1989 the pantry was indeed housed in the small pantry off the kitchen area. The Corner House realized a dream, that one building, right across from the church, could house both an apartment and office for the vicar and space for Sunday School and parish gatherings. It could also be available for use by the community. Al ANON has met every Monday in the parlor of the Corner since its early days. Book groups, mothers groups, town committee meetings, receptions, have all gravitated to this space, the one community building in town that was originally a home. It was purchased from Ned Pearce for \$125,000 and paid for with the help of the money saved

from the sale of the vicarage on Meadow Lane and a loan from the diocese that was paid off in five years by the parishioners.

In 1988 Walter and Angela O'Donnell donated a piece of land that would offer space for a garden and for outdoor gatherings for the church. It is not only a place for parishioners, but truly for the entire town, especially the children, who like to play secretly in the plantings under the dogwood tree. Many of these plantings surrounding the church were designed and contributed by Ramon Sears. According to one of Mrs. O'Donnell's children, she would look out the window and see members of St. John's pressed up against the outside wall of the church and knew they needed the space that she could provide.

Rev. Crampton and the vestry gave much thought to the worship space, wanting to make the chancel more open to parishioners. (The floor of the chancel had been extended in 1966, and the altar moved forward.) Knowing that change is a tender process, she carefully planned a way for the parish to become used to her ideas – of moving the altar even closer to the people and the altar rail down to the step close to the front pews. She led a study group on the subject and arranged for a three-month trial period, moved the original rail back, as she promised to do, and then invited Rev. Leslie Fairfield to conduct a phone survey to see if people liked the change. The verdict was yes. Susan had in mind other changes, but this was the first significant step, paving the way for others in the future.

Understanding the isolation young mothers' feel, Rev. Crampton began weekday groups for mothers and children. She established the first St. John's Sunday School, while her husband Stuart began a Men's Breakfast Group that met on Saturday mornings. Both the church bathroom and vesting room were refurbished, and sturdy Plexiglas coverings were installed on the exterior of the sanctuary to protect the original glass windows and cherished stained-glass Tiffany window, The Good Shepherd, installed in 1921. She quietly welcomed gay members of the parish to serve on the vestry, something

the diocese at that time would not have approved. The first marriage blessing of a same-sex couple in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, following the directive of Bishop Fisher, would be held later at St. John's.

Over the years since she left St. John's Rev. Crampton has returned to Ashfield many times to preach and pray with the flock she treasured, particularly giving the sermon in 2008 for the installation of her friend, The Rev. Eliot Moss, our current vicar, whom she knew to be the right person for St. John's.

During the transitional period following Susan Crampton's ministry, while the search committee was completing its work, there was a sense that morale was flagging, so the parish decided to put on a play, a version of *Everyman* they entitled *Anyone*. It was carefully revised so that the pathway to heaven was not simply good deeds but Faith, Hope, and Love – played by three young parishioners. On the day of the performance to a packed house there were double rainbows over the church as the cast assembled for the opening "curtain." At key moments during the play – as when Death approaches Anyone while playing a haunting penny whistle – rumbles of thunder were heard.

The Rev. Beth Long (1992-1999)

The bumper sticker on The Rev. Beth Long's car read "If you want peace, work for justice." This was certainly a theme of her ministry at St. John's. In response to an accusation of anti-Semitism in town, Beth and others established a Human Relations Committee, providing discussions and programs to encourage a more tolerant society. Refugees and others in transition were offered living space in the Corner House apartment until they could become independent. (Peter Elenois, vital to St. John's for over three decades, also lived there.) The Remembrance Garden was built. Consciousness was raised around the newly-understood impact of Environmental Illness. A series of parish-wide workshops were held on human sexuality, organized by the Diocese and meant to pave the way for same-sex unions,

though gay and lesbian parishioners always had a home at St. John's. The Clothesline project came to St. John's, bringing focus to the issue of domestic violence. The sanctuary became the perfect space for poetry readings, and several impressive events occurred in the church in those years, organized by Paris Press and also K.C. Scott. The poets who read included Richard Wilbur, Ruth Stone, and Sharon Olds, beginning a tradition of readings that has continued to this day, with the addition of a youth poetry contest. In an approach, quite different from the altar rail process in Rev. Crampton's ministry, one day the vicar and a vestry person removed the pulpit and housed it first at New Hope and then in Marian Gray's barn. It was replaced by the lectern to symbolize that both the scripture readings and the sermon would emanate from the same place.

The church tower was restored through the deft fundraising efforts of John Ratté and oversight of Arnold Jones. Steve Smithers designed a beautiful plaque honoring all those who contributed to that effort. (Over the years Steve has created several works for St. John's.) Beth also began a gingerbread house decorating day after Christmas for the children of the community – something that is still offered.

From 1996 to 1998 St. John's developed a partnership with Mafi-Dove, a small village in Ghana, where Nell Todd was in the Peace Corps. The parish gave money for pumps for clean water and helped revive the kindergarten by providing used clothing for sale. In order to foster household sanitation in the village Nell asked St. John's friends to give \$100 donations to fund latrines for the families that needed one. The donation meant that each latrine would be named for its donor. ("The Herb" still exists.)

In the midst of these accomplishments there was a time of acute discord, a very sad and painful period for St. John's. Many meetings with several outside facilitators occurred to seek resolution of the issues, a rift between some parishioners and the vicar. One of the issues in question was the distribution of power between the vicar and laity – an issue that would have resonance in later years. A reconciliation

didn't occur, leading to several people leaving the parish. A period of peace, however, ended Rev. Long's ministry before she moved to a new parish in Lime Rock, Connecticut. She now has an active church in Athens, Georgia.

Before Rev. Long left the mission statement of St. John's was written:

Our mission at St. John's Church in Ashfield is to grow, through worship, in God's gospel of hospitality and wholeness, and to faithfully live that word in our fellowship, families, communities, and the world. May all who enter here be received as Christ.

The scars created then are now part of the deep memory of St. John's, as it is a terrible thing to lose people so beloved and vital to a church community.

One of the wardens during that time said that it was a "failure of love." Another parishioner called it a "trial of love." There were certainly lessons learned. The Diocese has established closer support systems for priests serving their first parish, structured sabbatical time, and guidelines for a mutual ministry to be a part of each calendar year. As a vestry St. John's has developed a covenant that asks the leadership to address areas of disagreement immediately with those involved so that issues do not take on a life of their own.

Rev. Gordon Dean (1999-2002)

The Rev. Gordon Dean, a long-time parishioner and neighbor from Buckland, became the Priest-in-Charge and then Vicar, following Beth's ministry. His knowledge of organizational principles, as well as his kind heart, led to the church's ability to realize that, as Peter Senge, the American systems scientist, writes, "Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do."

In his brief time as vicar Rev. Dean worked tirelessly for reconciliation. He also helped St. John's structure the business aspect of the parish, shaping the work to be done by organizing committees and asking them to articulate their mission. He hired Anne Yuryan as a parish secretary to help with communication and administrative work, something that had been long missing at St. John's. Jan Mahnken followed Anne. During his tenure the church interior was repainted, and the chancel renovated in memory of Frances Gray and Mary Priscilla Howes. The temporary wooden cross and dorsal curtain were removed and a wooden cross from Ghana¹ was installed. Under the architectural guidance of Ann Browning there was church foundational work that prevented the usual spring flooding. One especially memorable occasion (organized by Molly Robinson and Ann Browning) was the celebration of the arrival of the 21st century. A group of people met at 10 p.m. on 12/31/99 in the church sanctuary, each bringing a piece of literature to read – ranging from *Goodnight Moon* to *The Declaration of Independence*. At midnight everyone rang a bell and the church bells chimed.

Peace Corps volunteer Sarah Branch received support from St. John's for her work in Namibia at this time. Her village was very remote and AIDS was a huge concern as it was very shameful for someone to have the illness. Those infected were usually kept at home to keep them hidden. Sarah worked with a group of local nurses to develop "kits" to give to families, practical things like soap, bandages, liquids containing electrolytes (due to people having terrible diarrhea). The hope was that these kits and the time spent with the local nurses would help to prevent the virus spreading to other family members. Sarah felt most strongly about this project because the local people were very invested in it. The other project was around developing a way through a farmer's coop to sell

¹ While Nell Todd was in Ghana Peter Elenois said that St. John's should ask her to have a cross made for the wall of the chancel, behind the altar, knowing the superior reputation of Ghanaian woodcarvers. Herb Libby made a drawing of what was desired in perfect proportions for the space, reflecting the brass cross at the back of the church. This drawing was faxed to the now defunct American Club in Accra, to be delivered to the woodcarver named Christian. Nell carried the unfinished cross home on her lap on the plane. It was refinished by Anne Judson and hung by Arnold Jones.

any leftover crops. Often an individual farmer did not have enough crop to sell on his own, but together they would have. Both of the above projects were partly funded by the money St John's sent.

The Rev. Jane Dunning (2002-2006)

Another neighbor of St. John's, The Rev. Jane Dunning, of Shelburne Falls, had recently completed an interim post in Adams, having retired from a parish in Lenox, and was available for a part-time position at St. John's. She brought strong pastoral gifts, and the ability to draw people into the life of the church, inviting them to offer their energy to St. John's. When the second Iraqi War broke out in 2002 a group of parishioners met with Rev. Dunning to ponder together this difficult period. An extraordinary booklet called *Statements of Peace* was produced in January 2003 that compiled the thoughts of the participants. One of the most significant accomplishments was the work that the vicar and vestry did around developing a team ministry at St. John's. This was a pioneering effort, and it led to articulating this structure for our Letter of Agreement with our next vicar, under the approval of the Diocese.

Thoughtful writing has always been an important value at St. John's. There has been an increased number of lay preachers over the years, and The Rev. John Snow and then Mariel Kinsey, representing St. John's, have written illuminating columns for the Ashfield News. St. John's had had a way of welcoming many retired priests into its community.

Rev. Dunning holds particularly grateful memories of the wise and sensitive mentoring role that Rev. Snow played in her own ministry and in so many other lives. In the days when Rev. Snow could no longer

deliver his own sermons he entrusted both Rev. Dunning and Rev. Dean with the honor of delivering them for him. For each priest, it was a sacred moment. In reflecting on the character of St. John's, which she has always considered a very "special" place, she was amazed at the people who, over the years, see that specialness and openness, enter into the life of the parish, give of themselves, and leave their lasting mark. Rev. Dunning was among those.

The Rev. Eliot Moss (2008 --)

The Rev. Eliot Moss was called following a period without a vicar as the congregation examined and lived the principles of team ministry. (Our postulant, Jill Rierdan, was pivotal at this time.) Rev. Moss is a bi-vocational minister, serving as a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Massachusetts. In a highly unusual process, he did not attend a formal divinity school program, but followed a course of study proposed by Bishop Scruton. Rev. Moss has said that he would not have been able to come to St. John's had there not been a team ministry – whereby every person shares responsibility with the vicar.

In 2009 Mariel Kinsey initiated the ecumenical Centering Prayer group that meets once a week in the Corner House. In 2010 Eliot, Robert Harris, Thomas Kreek, and Nell Todd traveled to Mafi-Dove, Ghana, to install a computer laboratory at the local junior high.

Also in 2010 the organist Hedley Yost marked the 150th anniversary of the installation of its William A. Johnson, Opus 95, 1860, pipe organ with two concerts. These followed major repairs of this revered

instrument. (In 2004, the organ received a citation from the Organ Historical Society as a pipe organ of historical significance.) It has the distinction of remaining in its original site since its installation.) The Hedley Yost Fund now provides continued maintenance support for the organ.

For a one year period the parish participated in a Diocesan-sponsored program called Partnership for a Missional Church. The principles of that experience led the parish to discern ways to go where God is already working. This would lead toward a renovation of the Corner House to provide handicapped access and to make the building a self-sustaining and hospitable place. The space now provides a weekly support group for new mothers. One young mother involved in the newly-formed MotherWoman group said, upon attending a service at St. John's, "Now I understand where the work you do comes from."

The following letter, received during the writing of this piece, articulates this core experience, central to all that happens at St. John's. It is printed here with the realization that one never knows who or how or when someone will be touched by this small church. It came from former Secretary of State George P. Shultz:

"I remember my first visit to the church roughly seventy years ago. Having just returned from two and a half years as a US Marine in the Pacific during World War II, I immediately came to visit my parents, who lived in Cummington in the house we still enjoy. My mother's father and uncle had been Episcopal ministers and she faithfully attended church services throughout her life, so I had hardly arrived in Cummington before my parents and I visited Saint John's. While there had been religious services of one kind or another during my years of active duty, St. John's was the first church I had entered in quite some time. I remember how moved I was by the elegant simplicity of the sanctuary, by the music, and by the sacred atmosphere of the service."

