

SAINT STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

A PARISH PROFILE

5 August 1989

BACKGROUND

In the 1950's the Episcopal Church on the mainland had begun intensification of their program of creating congregations and parishes to meet the language requirements of ethnic groups in communities all over our Nation. This movement to reach out to all persons was in keeping with the Articles of Religion, XXIV - "Of Speaking in the Congregation in such a Tongue as the people understandeth".

The then Bishop of Puerto Rico, Edwin? Swift, having made great strides in converting an "elitist" Episcopal Church in Puerto Rico to reach out to all Puerto Rico, decided to do the same for the growing number of English-speaking Episcopalians on the Island.

Someone once said that a bilingual person's true language preference comes out when (1) dreaming, (2) counting his money and (3) praying. Religion is so personal that one usually feels more comfortable using his native or first tongue. While Spanish is the vernacular in Puerto Rico, there are various groups who use English. The English-speaking community can be classified into several principal groups. Generally, they are:

Federal civilian and military personnel assigned to Puerto Rico for limited periods of time

Mainlanders transferred to manage or work in branches of U.S. industries established in Puerto Rico

Down-Islanders and foreigners living here whose first tongue is English

Hybrid families (Puerto Rican/Mainland couples) who use English more than Spanish

Recently returned Puerto Ricans who feel more comfortable using English

Except for the English-speaking congregation at the Cathedral in Santurce, there was no on-going program for ministering to the non-Spanish speaking Episcopalians in Puerto Rico.

A UNIQUE PARISH IS CREATED

The Bishop's proposed parish was to differ from the typical parish in that language, not geography, would be the basis for defining the parish. After consulting with members of the Cathedral's English-speaking congregation living in the suburban areas of Metropolitan San Juan, the preparatory work for

establishing this English-language parish was undertaken. The embryo congregation, mainly young professionals with small children, met the challenge by organizing themselves, enlisting others and putting a "parish" together.

A search committee reached out to the mainland ministry in search of a priest to head this parish. Somehow, everything fell into place, Father Charles Cooper was recruited from the States as the Priest-In-Charge, the parish was named Saint Stephen's and the first service was held on Sunday, December 24, 1961 at the Iglesia de la Encarnación in Hato Rey.

The parish grew as Father Cooper devoted all of his time to ministering to this geographically large, but numerically small parish. The Church School Program became the "drawing card" for many families who wanted Christian education for their children. The expanding program was somewhat restricted by the space availability at Encarnación and the problem of the two parishes sharing facilities. A cooperative nursery was established to meet the needs of young mothers wishing to attend mass without worrying about their infants.

Saint Stephen's Parish continued to fit in their services and other activities at the Hato Rey facilities when not required by the Encarnación Parish. But, furniture required for the nursery and Church School could not be purchased due to lack of space. Obviously, Saint Stephen's was outgrowing the borrowed facilities and needed to find its own home.

FINDING A HOME FOR ST. STEPHEN'S

The Vestry, consulting with the other members of the Congregation, undertook the task of identifying possible sites for a permanent facility and finding a rectory for the priest.

As much as the temporary use of the Encarnación facilities were appreciated, the congregation of St. Stephen's was determined to establish their own church facilities. With the limited funds raised by the congregation along with financial assistance from both the Diocese and the National Church, Saint Stephen's was able to purchase a vacant lot in San Ramón Development and make the down payment on a house to be used as the rectory. Some, especially those from the more established parishes, thought it foolish for a young congregation to invest in a vacant property when the future of the parish was so precarious. Faith and determination prevailed and the purchases proved a sound investment. At least the monthly payments for a Vicarage were being invested in the purchase of the facility rather than being lost in rent payments.

The Parish continued using the Hato Rey Encarnación facility until 1965 when a 4-bedroom house became available next to Saint Stephen's Vicarage. With funds raised through pledges and from "fund raisers", the congregation was able to finance the payment for the house. The second floor living-dining-kitchen became the chapel, one bedroom became the parish of-

fice/sacristy, and the other three bedrooms were used as classrooms. The open lower level (originally designed as a double carport) was used as the "common room" for coffee hour and other activities.

The congregation continued to expand to a point where the upstairs "chapel" was no longer adequate. The front half of the lower level was enclosed and made into the Chapel, thus releasing the living-dining-kitchen area for more, much-needed, classroom space.

The parish was now able to offer its facilities for use by civic and community groups. Cub Scout, Girl Scout and Boy Scout groups used the facilities as well as other organizations.

STAGNATION, DECLINE AND RENOVATION

The parish suffered a great loss in 1967 when Father Cooper, the parish's first priest and the person most responsible for the growth and initial success of the parish, left for a position in California. After that loss, the parish had a noticeable decline as it tried to survive with various temporary and "on loan" clergy supplied by the Diocese. For a period of -- years Saint Stephen's survived with first one priest and then another. Even though the few remaining members of the congregation tried to hold the group together, families left and potential members were not attracted to the leaderless congregation. The former attraction, the Church School, was dead and could not be re-established with "Sunday preachers".

During this period, one of the acting clerics started a Spanish service to counteract the loss of English-speaking parishioners. The Spanish-speaking services survived for a time but died out when another change of priests was made. The lack of a permanent priest was an important factor in deterring potential members from joining the congregation.

In 1975 Father Wade Eaton, a Theological Professor, was assigned to assist in Sunday services. The congregation, composed of a small group of permanent residents and a transient group consisting of families and persons stationed or assigned to Puerto Rico for a 2 or 3 year tour of duty, began to show a pattern of growth.

It became necessary to enlarge the lower level to accommodate the growing congregation. The Vicarage, for several years unused and vandalized, was reconditioned for use as additional Church School space.

Even so, the two residences proved to be less than satisfactory as church facilities. Persons normally attracted to Saint Stephen's expect to see facilities which look like a church, not a "storefront" or makeshift residential conversion.

OUR OWN CHURCH BUILDING

Over the doubts of our Bishop and opposition from administrative personnel of the Diocese, the Vestry decided to sell the two houses to finance a Church building on the vacant lot previously purchased. With little more than determination, the congregation constructed a new building especially designed for the needs of the parish and its mission.

The dedication was held on Thanksgiving Day 1977.

New vitality, growth and interest in Saint Stephen's resulted. The addition of a Spanish service was again instituted through Father Eaton's interest in reaching out to the immediate community.

17 Sept
→ 1978

Fred Kidder, a retired university professor and a member of the congregation, having completed his seminary studies, was ordained as a priest in 19--. The parish was fortunate in having Father Kidder, as curate, to assist in some aspects of Saint Stephen's. Although his health would not permit him to take on the duties of a full-time vicar, he was able to conduct some services and assist Father Eaton in other ways.

In 1982, after -- years serving Saint Stephen's, seeing the parish through the construction of the new building and the new growth of the congregation, Wade Eaton was forced by his full-time employer, the Evangelical Seminary, to stop serving as parish priest to Saint Stephen's.

In 1982 the Bishop offered Saint Stephen's the use of Father Andre Trevathan on a part time basis. In addition to conducting two Sunday services (one English, one Spanish), he was to devote one half day during the week to building up the congregation and ministering to the community.

While there was some growth in the Spanish-speaking service, the English-speaking group remained stagnant. The traditional mainstay of Saint Stephen's, the Church School program for youngsters, failed to re-emerge under this priest.

Father Trevathan left for the States in May 1985 so the congregation again went into decline as the parish was forced to rely on temporary or loaned priests for a period of time. The Church School program, a vital element which attracted many families with children, died out completely. Many families with children drifted to other English-speaking congregations in the San Juan Metropolitan area.

The Bishop offered parish the use of Father Milano to conduct Sunday services starting in August 1985. With Father Kidder as curate and the part-time assistance of a former seminarian, Jesús Nieves, another attempt was made to keep the parish together without facing up to the need to reinstate Saint Stephen's to its former usefulness to the community. Father Milano left in March 1986 and Father Kidder died in August.

After Father Milano's departure the Sunday services were conducted by Father Kringle, headmaster of the Cathedral School. Jesús Nieves continued to offer assistance, especially in the Spanish service until the end of 1986.

NEW HOPE FOR THE PARISH

In January 1987 the Rev. Sherman H. Miller and his wife Pamela were sent to us to lead and help re-build this parish which had been languishing for a number of years for various reasons. It was a gift from heaven that a retired cleric who deserved the leisure normally associated with retirement. The Parish has witnessed a renewed vigor, inspired and carried out by the Millers with the will and determination of many of the parishioners.

The three-year commitment to assist Saint Stephen's had resulted in numerous improvements. It is hoped that, after the departure of the Millers, God will send us a replacement who can continue and build upon the good works of the past 3 years.

RECENT STATISTICS

We are a small, active parish. Contrary to the general belief, our congregation is not composed primarily of "transients" (those scheduled to stay in Puerto Rico three years or less). Our most recent Parish Directory (May 1989) lists 44 family groups for a total of 104 persons. The 104 persons show the following characteristics:

Total			100 %
18 years of age or older		71 %	
Under 18 years of age		29 %	
Total Communicants		86 %	100 %
18 years of age or older	65 %		
Under 18 years of age	21 %		
Non-Communicants		14 %	
18 years of age or older	5 %		
Under 18 years of age	9 %		
Total			100 %
Considered temporary		33 %	
Considered permanent		67 %	

PARISH CHARACTERISTICS

Our parish has its good points as well as its weak one. After 28 years, more than 10 priests, we decided to engage in some good old-fashioned soul-searching in order to take hold of our future as an Episcopal congregation.

Positive Traits

- Christian Education: Study groups, retreats, lay reader instruction, Church School in English
- Stewardship program
- Congregational unity and caring feelings between the English- and Spanish-speaking groups
- Adult volunteer program for Church Assistants and other duties
- Youth volunteer program for Acolytes, torchbearers, etc

Weak Traits

- Church School program in Spanish
- Sporadic attendance
- Lack of time to devote to Saint Stephen's