

CELEBRATING 175 YEARS

A History of Saint Peter's Episcopal Church Cambridge, Massachusetts



1842-2017

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"We, the subscribers, being desirous to establish an Episcopal Church in Cambridgeport, do hereby associate ourselves as Parishioners for that purpose."

Saint Peter's Episcopal Church was organized by a group of people who felt the need for an Episcopal Church in the Cambridgeport (Central Square) area of Cambridge. Saint Peter's first Parish meeting was held on Thursday, October 27, 1842 in the Douglass Building on the corner of Essex Street and Massachusetts Avenue. At that time the nearest Episcopal congregation was Christ Church, a mile and half away over dirt roads in Old Cambridge (Harvard Square). The Parish was formally organized at this meeting, voting to take the name of "Saint Peter's Church." The Rev. Darius Richmond Brewer was the officiant at Saint Peter's first liturgy, held on December 4, 1832, the Second Sunday in Advent.

Saint Peter's first building, was on 112-114 Prospect Street. This building was an innovative early example of intentional design for adaptive re-use. This meant that after its time of use as a public space for worship, it might later be converted into a "double dwelling" house. Saint Peter's congregation numbered between 100 and 150 at that time. The Rt. Rev. Manton Eastburn, Bishop of Massachusetts, consecrated this first church building on January 31, 1844.

Cambridge's population nearly doubled in the 1840s, and Saint Peter's congregation soon outgrew its first church. In 1864, the Parish bought land for a new church building on the corner of Main Street (now Massachusetts Avenue) and Vernon Street (now Sellers Street). While waiting for the new church to be completed, the congregation worshipped at the City Hall that existed at that time. The first worship service in the Undercroft of the new (and current) building was held on September 1, 1866, and the second floor, the current Sanctuary, was finished in 1867.

On December 29, 1867, the Rev. Edwin P. Chase and the Rt. Rev. Manton Eastburn officiated at the opening liturgy. A contemporary article in the "Cambridge Chronicle" described the Sanctuary as follows: "The roof is open to the rafters. The pillars and beams are colored cinnamon, the walls a neutral tint, the ceiling ultramarine blue, the nave spangled with stars, the aisles drawn in panels and the chancel ceiling ornamented with emblematic designs within the panels." The debt on the new building was subsequently paid, and the church was finally consecrated on October 2, 1873.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Saint Peter's was ahead of its time regarding the role of women in the church as the Vestry recommended a change in the Parish Bylaws giving women the vote on church matters at Parish Meetings. At the Parish Meeting of January 8, 1906, the word "male" was stricken from Article Three of the Parish Constitution. Women were first elected to serve on Saint Peter's Vestry at the Parish Meeting of January 13, 1919, and have served on it ever since.

The first of Saint Peter's magnificent stained glass windows was added in 1917 by the famous stained glass window firm, Wilbur Herbert Burnham of Boston. In the mid-1930s, two windows from the Connick Stained Glass Window firm of Boston were added. The very large three paneled window above the High Altar and the lovely and delicate window of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, located in the enclosed Saint Elizabeth Chapel were added to the Sanctuary. These are magnificent examples of Connick stained glass and the Parish is blessed in having such stunning stained glass windows, all of which were beautifully executed and installed, and remain in very good condition.

The Rev. Frederic C. Lawrence, Saint Peter's Rector from 1927 to 1941, oversaw significant physical renovations and liturgical innovations. During the 1920s, Saint Peter's Vestry, noting the need for more space for Parish ministries, purchased the land behind the Church to build a Parish House. The cornerstone of the building was laid in May 1931, and the building was dedicated on October 29, 1931. Upstairs in the Parish House was Lawrence Hall, an auditorium with a stage and gallery that was named in honor of Bishop William Lawrence (father of the Rev. Frederic C. Lawrence). Downstairs was a large kitchen, several offices, and Hannum Hall (also known as "the Supper Room") named in gratitude to Miss Esther Hannum who was instrumental in establishing the fund for a Parish House.

Saint Peter's new home for Parish activities had no sooner opened than the Parish was offered funding for a major renovation of the church itself from the Susan M. Loring Fund. During 1932, Saint Peter's church building was remodeled and reconstructed. A congregation of 800 attended the Service of Dedication on November 20, 1932. Saint Peter's ministries grew and expanded during the Great Depression. By 1940, Saint Peter's Church School had become the third largest in the diocese, with nearly 500 pupils, supervised by Deaconess Mabel Pennock.

After the Rev. Frederic C. Lawrence left St. Peter's Church, the Rev. W. Harold Deacon became Rector through the rest of World War II – until 1949 when the Rev. Ernest D. Thompson became Rector. The years following World War II brought many changes to Cambridge and to Central Square, such as declining population, suburbanization, changes in shopping patterns, and immigration from developing countries. At Saint Peter's the post-war period was notable for the twenty-nine year (1949-1978) ministry of the Rev. Ernest D. Thompson, affectionately known as "Father Thompson" or "Father T". The Rev. Thompson had served in the US Army during World War II and was awarded the Purple Heart and the Croix de Guerre. After the war, Rev. Thompson graduated from the Episcopal Theological School. In 1949, at the age of 38, he was ordained. In that same year, Vernon Street was renamed in honor of Lt. John Richard Sellers, a Parishioner who had been killed in action during the war. The Rev. Thompson's lengthy ministry saw significant changes in the number of parishioners. If the post-war years were a time of change and concern for Saint Peter's it was also a concern for our home city of Cambridge. The proposed construction of a multi-lane elevated highway (the "Inner Belt") would have gone through the middle of Central Square and Cambridgeport probably irreversibly destroying those neighborhoods. Fortunately, the Inner Belt was never built.

In 1954, a new side altar was installed in memory of Margery Emily MacFarlane. A major redecorating project was carried out in 1958 when the entire interior of the church was painted. The formerly white walls of the chancel were transformed into a pale pink with gold crosses and crowns and the symbol of Saint Peter – crossed keys. In 2012 the Sanctuary and chancel were painted white again.

Many of Saint Peter's traditional ministries were discontinued in the 1960s reflecting the exodus of many Cambridge residents to the suburbs. In 1960 the population was 107,716 and in 1970 100,361 – a striking nearly 10% loss in a small city. The number of Church School pupils dropped by half, and membership declined from about 1,774 in 1960 to 686 in 1969. Saint Peter's could no longer sustain these ministries.

On Sunday, October 22, 1967, Saint Peter's celebrated the Parish's 125th anniversary with a Service of Thanksgiving. The principal celebrant was former Rector, the Rt. Rev. Frederic C. Lawrence, Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts from 1956-1968.

In the 1960s, Cambridge became a center of political and social activism. During the 1970s, Saint Peter's Parish House became home to several social, political, and artistic groups. Many groups, including activist ones, such as the Greater Boston Peace Action Coalition, would meet at the Parish House. Activism was consistent with Rev. Thompson's personal theology. He was a supporter of Civil Rights and spoke from the pulpit against racism and communism. Each week during the Vietnam War, the congregation sang hymn 436 (578 in the 1982 hymnal) whose first two lines were "O God of love, O King of Peace, Make wars throughout the world to cease". Saint Peter's provided these groups with work, performance, and rehearsal space, and these groups provided the Parish with financial support. This was critical at a time when the Parish membership had declined from 662 in 1970 to 278 in 1978. This financial support helped Saint Peter's survive the effect of galloping inflation and the "Oil Shock" of the 1970s. In 1979, half the Parish deficit was due to the oil bill.

In 1973, the Rev. Thompson went on a sabbatical year fellowship and the Rev. Elsa Walberg, a Deacon at that time, conducted services at Saint Peter's. Saint Peter's long support of women in the life of the Parish and the Episcopal Church was demonstrated by Rev. Walberg whose weekly services were conducted during the maelstrom of the national debate of ordaining women into the priesthood. Her position also gave the Parishioners the experience of a woman minister.

When the national church published a proposed new Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in 1976, Saint Peter's introduced this liturgy by using it alternately with the 1928 BCP. Despite smaller numbers, Parishioners continued to actively support and maintain their church. A dedicated group of women organized a Thrift Shop in October 1970. The Thrift shop, opened weekly during the school year, contributed \$2,000 to the 1978 Parish Budget. Parishioners such as Herbert Candow and other members of the Care and Repair Committee demonstrated their devotion to Saint Peter's by physically

building partitions and painting ceilings in the Sanctuary and Undercroft. In 1979 the Rev. Thompson retired after 29 years.

The Rev. Robert B. Dunbar was Rector from 1980 – 1989. During his tenure, the Parish continued its efforts to retain viability even as its membership declined. In 1982, Saint Peter's Wardens signed leases with four groups holding classes in the Parish House. The Mandala Folk Dance Ensemble, which had made its home at Saint Peter's since 1969, held a performance on November 18, 1984, to benefit Saint Peter's Boiler Fund. The rent from these Parish House tenants and the proceeds from the Thrift Shop provided financial support for the church during a decade which ended with only 147 Parishioners on its rolls. When the Rev. Dunbar resigned in 1989, the Parish called the Rev. Elizabeth P. Wiesner, affectionately known as "Mother Wiesner", to be its Interim Priest.

In April of 1991, Senior Warden Henry Soones reported that the Vestry had unanimously decided to call the Rev. Titus Presler and the Rev. Jane Butterfield Presler as Saint Peter's new "Co-Rectors." On June 9, 1991, the Parish welcomed them and their four children to Saint Peter's. The Rev. Titus Presler and the Rev. Jane Butterfield Presler both had a very strong missionary background having served for three years (1983-1986) in Zimbabwe, where the Rev. Titus Presler had been Rector of Saint David's Mission in Manicaland. Together, they led a pilgrimage of Saint Peter's Parishioners to the Bernard Mizeki Festival in Zimbabwe in 1996.

The 1990s were a time of renewal for both Central Square and Saint Peter's. In 1992, the Vestry initiated a series of meetings to develop a Parish Mission Statement. The Preslers' continuing involvement in diocesan and provincial ministries for evangelism, mission and stewardship served Saint Peter's especially well as it sought to reach out further in mission to Cambridge and the wider world. On Palm Sunday 1992, the congregation processed, as a group, out from the Sanctuary and into Central Square, reenacting Jesus' procession into Jerusalem. (One year they even had a donkey!) This procession continues to be part of Saint Peter's Palm Sunday liturgy.

An expansion in Parish ministries coincided with a contraction in the space available to host them. The Vestry decided to rent the entire Parish House on a long-term lease for use as commercial offices. With less space Saint Peter's the rooms in the Undercroft came into frequent use throughout the week. On October 24-25, 1992, the Parish celebrated its 150th Anniversary with a Saturday night banquet, followed by a Festival Eucharist and reception on Sunday.

In 1992, the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts provided financial assistance to set up a Family Literacy Program "Wordworks" at Saint Peter's for the many new immigrants moving to Cambridgeport and Central Square. Wordworks, founded by parishioner Caroline Banks, offered weekly English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes to newcomers to Cambridge and the United States. Wordworks participants later helped Saint Peter's identify and start another important ministry, the need for a safe and secure after-school program for Cambridge low-income families. The Rev. Jane Butterfield Presler along with Caroline Banks and Vyonna de Mel started "Afterworks" in 1993. This initiative soon grew to be a state-licensed, multicultural afterschool program for children five to twelve years of age. In 2017, eighteen children are enrolled. Afterworks provides an enriching place for children as well as a place for their families to develop their parenting skills and become a supportive community for each other.

"CommonCare," a ministry of hospitality was founded in 2000, and is led to this day by parishioner Frank Smith. CommonCare offers an opportunity to experience God's love among friends and strangers alike as Saint Peter's parishioners work side-by-side with people from the community preparing and sharing a common meal together on Saturday afternoons. Annually, CommonCare serves over 1,800 meals. Like other Saint Peter's ministries, this exemplifies a long-standing tradition of mission to the local neighborhood.

In October 2002, Saint Peter's celebrated 160 years of ministry with the Rev. Gareth Evans as Interim Priest. From 2004 – 2010, the Rev. François Trottier served as Rector. Under Rev. Trottier's leadership several things occurred: The kitchen was renovated with a more appropriate stove and dish sanitizer; the Rector's office was moved to its current location and the former Rector's office (now the conference room) was converted into the Church School; a handicapped accessible elevator was installed in the church, and dedicated to Gloria Jackson. This elevator is now used every Sunday. In addition, Rev. Trottier conducted a bicycle ministry, and was an active participant and strong supporter of our CommonCare ministry. In 2010, the Rev. Trottier returned to his native Canada. The Rev. Kim Hardy served as Interim Priest following his departure.

After an extensive search process, the Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato was elected as the Parish's twentieth Rector. The Rev. Brocato began his ministry on September 1, 2011 and his official installation took place on October 21, 2011 with the Rt. Rev. Thomas Shaw, Bishop of Massachusetts, presiding.

Under Rev. Brocato's leadership (with the collaboration and much work by outstanding leaders and volunteers in the Parish), many changes occurred at Saint Peter's Church and the Parish House. Among the changes, an altar was placed among the people at the crossing (below the chancel stairs and in the front of the pews). All services are now celebrated from this altar. The pews were re-configured so the congregation faces toward the altar. A few pews were removed to create handicapped seating and a baby grand piano was placed in the Sanctuary to use for services and performances. The pews in the Sanctuary were refinished, the hymn racks and kneelers were repaired and the flooring was replaced.

The Connick Window (above the high altar), had its stained glass and frames removed, cleaned, repaired, and replaced, taking several months. In addition, the stained glass windows in the Sanctuary were repaired (in place). Organ repairs were also started.

The Church and the Parish House physical plants also underwent changes. Over the years, there have been almost constant concerns about the condition of the Church and the Parish House boilers. In 2013, the Vestry authorized converting the oil fired boilers to gas, alleviating many concerns about heating. The roofs of both the Church and the Parish House were also repaired.

In the 2000s, the price of housing in Cambridge skyrocketed. In 2011, Saint Peter's sold the Rectory, a large house on nearby Clinton Street in need of expensive repairs. These repairs could have been detrimental to the financial health of Saint Peter's. In 2013, After much thought and many discussions with the Vestry and Parishioners, Saint Peter's bought a smaller, more appropriately sized condominium on Cpl. McTernan Saint in Cambridgeport for the new Rectory. The Rev. Brocato resided in this Rectory.

Saint Peter's continues its mission and outreach. While Wordworks no longer exists, Common Care still meets twice a month between September and June. Afterworks, an after school program continues to meet and serves a number of children during the school year. Each January, Saint Peter's hosts Cambridge's annual Martin Luther King Celebration and lunch, and the Helping Hands project that follows the lunch.

In continued outreach and mission to the community, Saint Peter's collaborates with the People's Theater in Central Square. It has a relationship with the Mosque of the Islamic Society of Boston on Prospect Street in Cambridge and supports the Wet Shelter on Albany Street. At Christmas, Saint Peter's "Giving Tree" supports the East End Shelter and Casa Myrna Vasquez.

In February, 2017, the Rev. Brocato resigned. The Rev. Bill Albinger was appointed Bridge Priest, and a few months later, the Rev. Sarah A. Conner was appointed Interim Priest. At the time of the 175th Anniversary Celebration, a Search Committee is being formed to call Saint Peter's 21st Rector.

Over the past five years, exciting changes have taken place. The Parish has experienced liturgical renewal, continued property renewal in the Parish House and a renewed emphasis on mission and outreach. The "welcoming and affirming" statement continues to firmly demonstrate the Parish's strength and commitment to diversity.

By the grace of God, Saint Peter's has continued to be a source of faith, hope, strength and guidance to its people, to the people of Cambridge, surrounding communities, and even abroad.

We joyfully celebrate our 175th Anniversary on October 29, 2017 and continue to look forward to more years of serving God and God's people through our ministry together at Saint Peter's.

Rectors & Interim Priests

Saint Peter's Episcopal Church

Central Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Darius Richmond Brewer, 1842-1844
Edmund Farwell Slafter, 1844-1846
Moses P. Stickney, 1847-1851
William Putnam Page, 1852-1863
Charles Seymour, 1863-1866
Edwin Bailey Chase, 1866-1874
Edward Manning Gushee, 1875-1888
Henry Harrison Hayes, 1888-1890
Charles Hall Perry, 1890-1906
Edward Lyman Eustis, 1906-1910
Ransom Moore Church, 1910-1914
Samuel H. Jobe, 1914-1927
Frederic Cunningham Lawrence, 1927-1941
William Harold Deacon, 1941-1949
Ernest Darwin Thompson, 1949-1978
Thomas G. Cleveland, *Interim*, 1978-1980
Robert B. Dunbar, 1980-1989
Elizabeth P. Wiesner, *Interim*, 1978-1980
Jane Butterfield Presler, *Co-Rector*, 1991-1995
Titus Leonard Presler, *Co-Rector*, 1991-1995; *Rector*, 1995-2002
Gareth Clive Evans, *Priest Associate*, 2000-2002; *Interim*, 2002-2004
François E. Trottier, 2004-2010
Kim Hardy, *Interim*, 2010-2011
Christian Francis Brocato, 2011-2017
Sarah A. Conner, *Interim*, 2017-

THANKS BE TO GOD