

A Year in Review: 150 Years of the Episcopal Church in Valdosta, Georgia 1871-2021

Written by Michael M. Black, Ed.D., December 2, 2021

Since I was a teenager, my principal hobby has been genealogy. As a genealogist, I love history, all kinds of history, family history, local history, church history. I have learned over the years through my personal research that we (society) should make efforts to record, publicize, and protect our history, because memories will fade and records will be lost. In October 2020, I approached the vestry of Christ Church, Valdosta, with a request for their support to make 2021 the year to celebrate 150 years of the Episcopal Church in Valdosta. They were enthusiastic and supportive. In addition to Christ Church, Valdosta is home to St. Barnabas Episcopal Church (est. 1982) and the Episcopal Church of Christ the King (est. 1990), and the goal was for the three churches to celebrate this milestone together. Contacting their senior wardens resulted in more enthusiasm and interest in this project.

In the middle of a pandemic when weekly services had been live streamed or not conducted at all, I felt it was important to have a purpose to keep us together and engaged. With the assistance of Julia Ariail, we designed a logo which was immediately used to brand a theme for the year. Posters went up in windows and outside. The logo was added to the cover of the weekly service bulletin, weekly email bulletin, social media, and website.

One of the first efforts was to take stock of what history was already recorded. From 2009 to 2014, parishioner, Dr. Joseph A. Tomberlin, Professor Emeritus of History at Valdosta State University, wrote 65 articles on the history of Christ Church, Valdosta. I did not want to duplicate his work but build off his efforts. Our first task was to reorganize his articles chronologically onto one webpage: [Tomberlin's Church History Articles](#). Thank you to Julius Ariail for this work.

In January and February 2021, I researched and wrote two articles. The first titled, [Our 1871 Foundation: Securing Property for the First Episcopal Church](#), discussed the initial and subsequent land acquisitions in Valdosta. The Lowndes County Historical Society and Museum printed Our 1871 Foundation article in their [January-March 2021 Newsletter Yesterday & Today](#) and added new information, including a circa 1886 picture of the first Episcopal Church on Central Avenue in downtown Valdosta.

The second article was a narrative about the [Christ Church Kindergarten and Preschool](#) which started in 1954 and still operates today. I interviewed former kindergarten students and teachers who recalled vivid memories from their time there.

In April 2021, I prepared a [comprehensive list of the 62 past and present Episcopal clergy serving the Valdosta area](#) along with their years of service. For puzzle enthusiasts, a clergy word search accompanied that list. Over the summer, parishioners expanded (or refreshed) their knowledge of the Book of Common Prayer and particularly were asked to read about the role of the [Custodian of the Standard Book of Common Prayer](#).

We were on a roll but experienced some disruptions during the summer. The rector of Christ Church, the Rev. David A. Johnson, pursued a position in Florida. Upon his absence, Christ Church secured the services of an excellent supply priest, the Rev. James C. Pace, until an interim rector, the Rev. David W. Perkins, was appointed in September 2021. St. Barnabas Episcopal Church had been without assigned clergy since the pandemic started but secured the Rev. Dea. Susan Gage as deacon-in-charge in August 2021. At the Episcopal Church of Christ the

King, their founding rector, the Rev. Stanley J. White, passed away in December 2020. And in Spring 2021, their Vestry decided to sell its three-story historic downtown Valdosta property which it had occupied since 2002. They purchased another historic downtown property which was dedicated on June 20, 2021.

In August and September 2021, I was actively preserving history. Specifically, vestry minutes, parish registers, and all other historical items I could put my hands on were scanned and/or photographed for digital preservation. This effort consisted of making 1,080 photographs and scanning 4,205 pages. I now have comfort with the fact that our records can be accessed more easily by office staff and are backed up off-site. I always wondered what was inside the big, stand up, antique safe in the church office; now I know.

At the October 3, 2021 Stewardship Dinner, I had the opportunity to share some of our Valdosta Episcopal history. Having recently read nearly every historical document available over the past two months, I selected items that I hoped would entertain the audience. I talked about facilities growth, congregation growth, ministries of the church, the Every Member Canvas which attempted to secure “subscriptions,” the challenges of being landlocked in a downtown area, the regular events of parish life, and the work of junior wardens. Yet the two largest laughs came from a request by the bishop at the time (1949) who instructed the congregation to dig up the shrubbery from the Central Avenue church and move it to the new church location on Patterson Street. Also there was a mysterious sentence from a 1950s vestry minutes where they decided to “bury the matter and never speak of it again.” I never figured out what they were referring to.

In November 2021, all [517 names in the Christ Church Remembrance Book](#) were transcribed and placed online. Parishioners were asked to pray for the faithful departed members and friends for All Souls’ Day. St. Barnabas dedicated a columbarium in November as part of their All Saints’ Day service. Along the way, I learned that the Christ Church Altar Guild formed in 1946 and was in its 75th year of continuous service.

Our desire to host a large community celebration was delayed twice during 2021. This was understandably due to the resurgence of COVID-19 in the Valdosta-area and to adhere to diocesan guidelines. Finally, we made the decision to go forward with an outside event. On Saturday, November 13, 2021, over 120 guests enjoyed a celebratory cookout and received a [proclamation](#) from the City of Valdosta commemorating Episcopal Church Day. The Rt. Rev. Frank S. Logue, Eleventh Bishop of Georgia, delivered a [homily](#) to parishioners and guests. [Posters displaying historical items](#) were set out for visitors to view. Special thanks to the Men in Blue Grilling Team, the Hospitality Committee, Michael Black, Robin Coleman, Mike Tanner, Kim Dudley, Dave Clark, Pat Denmark, Sandra Fletcher, Stefani Carroll, Bobby and Nikki Yarbrough, Paul Stevenson, David Schert, Greg Moore (Senior Warden, Christ the King), Nancy Lutsko (Senior Warden, Christ Church), and Susan Borchert (Senior Warden, St. Barnabas) for their contributions for this signature event. As 2021 closed, I was pleased that despite the challenges caused by a pandemic, we were able to celebrate this milestone with our community and church families.