

# St. George's Episcopal Church

Maplewood, NJ



## Our Community

St. George's is committed to both tradition and modernity.

Many parishioners draw comfort from the time-honored pageantry of the Eucharistic service. We have a hunger for deeper understanding of Episcopal history, liturgy and teaching.

At the same time, while there is room for a variety of opinions on economic and political matters, St. George's is firmly progressive on civil rights and social justice issues. For more than a decade, our website banner has proclaimed: "Our parish is over 100 years old. Our thinking is not."

Support for LGBT persons runs deep in the parish. Gay men and lesbians have served on the vestry continuously for more than two decades, and straight and gay parishioners advocated for marriage equality. One of the first openly gay priests in the country served as rector at St. George's in the early 1990s, and our recent rector also is a gay man. For years the church provided meeting space for Dignity, a gay Catholic group that was not welcome in the local Catholic

churches.

St. George's helped pioneer women's ordination by sponsoring one of the first female priests in the late 1970s. For years we have been committed to helping those who are less fortunate. We were a founding church in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, which provides temporary housing for homeless families in church buildings, on a rotating basis.

More recently, clergy and lay people from St. George's have actively supported First Friends of New Jersey & New York, a group that provides volunteer visitation, resettlement assistance, and advocacy for asylum seekers and other detainees at five detention centers in New Jersey. For many years the church has supported North Porch, an organization providing supplies for babies and toddlers in need. We provide space for four weekly meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, one of which has met at St. George's for more than 40 years.

We are proud of our diversity. While a majority of parishioners are white, people of color have held lay leadership positions in the church for many years. An active Absalom Jones Committee, named after the first black Episcopal priest, leads commemorations each year of Black History Month and Juneteenth. We welcome all of God's children, including non-traditional families of every kind. Mixed-race families, same-sex parents and children who have been adopted are so common as to be unremarkable.

We gratefully play a role in the broader church. Currently two St. Georgians work full-time on the 15-person staff of the Diocese of Newark, and a third is the uncompensated chancellor, or chief legal advisor to the bishop. St. George's has been continuously



represented on the diocesan staff for more than three decades. Other parishioners have worked for the Episcopal Church Foundation, the Church Pension Group, and at church headquarters in New York.



church offers an age-appropriate Good Friday service for children, built around the Stations of the Cross.

Communion is open to all who wish to receive. There is an opportunity for individual healing prayer with an

intercessor at the 8 and 10:30 services, and for several years there was a Wednesday evening healing service.

## Our Worship

St. George's holds two services most Sundays: an 8 a.m. Spoken Eucharist and a 10:30 a.m. Choral Eucharist with choir and organ. Music at the 10:30 service is led by a part-time organist and choirmaster, and the volunteer choir is supplemented by four paid section leaders from Westminster Choir College, which is located an hour away in Princeton.

We provide a special Family Eucharist. On the second Sunday of each month (except July and August), our 9:15 a.m. service is a boisterous opportunity for children and their parents to worship together. A volunteer band called the Joyful Noise provides music.

There is a strong sense of community within each of our services. The groups are unified at a single 10:30 service twice a year, in conjunction with the Annual Meeting and the Thanksgiving feast. We have been meeting our goal of having all three services represented on the Vestry.

On Sundays when there is no Family Eucharist, Sunday School meets during the first part of the 10:30 service (again, except for July and August), with kids joining their families at the Peace. The church has provided child-care during the 10:30 service in the past, and is beginning to do so again.

Services generally are conducted according to Rite II, and sometimes incorporate Rite I language during Advent and Lent. We use incense on major holy days. We have experimented with other worship and music formats, including Taizé services, liturgical dance, and Jazz Eucharists. Some services begin outside, and the

## Our Parish Life

Our congregation has a tradition of strong lay leadership, with an active 11-person vestry and productive committees overseeing finances, property maintenance, outreach, stewardship and other essential church functions. Our lay leaders held the church together during the rocky previous rector search, when pastoral leadership was provided by supply priests and interim rectors for more than three years. The Rev. Bernie Poppe then steered a steady course for a decade and a half, ending in mid-2018.

Maplewood is a bedroom suburb of New York City, and many parishioners commute into the city daily, primarily via the train station about a quarter mile from the church. This can inhibit participation in weeknight meetings and activities.



Our average Sunday attendance (ASA) has been fairly level for the past decade, in the range of 130 to 150. This makes us one of the larger and more stable parishes in the diocese, but leaves us short of the critical mass required for a "program church" that could provide a broader spectrum of activities to help parishioners connect with each other, with the community and with their faith.

## Our Property & Finances

The physical plant at 550 Ridgewood Road in Maplewood was constructed in three stages. The cornerstone for the current church was laid in 1925, and the worship space has a vaulted ceiling, spacious altar area and pews that will seat more than 300. The two-story parish hall and office building was constructed next, and a three-story educational wing was added in the 1950s. The three buildings are adjacent and share a slate roof. A fenced-in playground adjoins a parking lot that is too small for the church's needs, so that parking regularly spills over onto the streets of the residential neighborhood.

Our property generally is in good condition, but it is old enough to require a steady stream of small repairs, particularly to the slate roof. A sudden and complete failure of the boiler-fed heating system in 2011 led to a capital campaign and installation of a forced-air system that provides heating and, for the first time, air conditioning throughout the building.

The rectory is a spacious three-bedroom house with a detached garage on a quiet residential street seven blocks from the church. A renovation in 2015-16 provided air conditioning, an upgraded modern kitchen and a deck overlooking the small back yard.

In recent years, 90-plus pledging units have donated in



the neighborhood of \$325,000, and the building provides income of about \$70,000 from a pre-school and other groups. The church's endowment of about \$800,000, more than half of which is restricted for designated purposes, provides some financial security but little in the way of operating income. The church strives to operate with a balanced budget, and over the past several years modest surpluses and deficits have roughly offset each other.

## Our Path Forward

The discernment process for the current rector search rests on a foundation of town hall meetings and structured discussions with committees and other internal groups. We asked two simple questions: What aspects of St. George's would parishioners like to keep, and what would they like to change?



With guidance from a diocesan consultant, a demographically diverse Profile Committee of about a dozen parishioners solicited and compiled answers to those questions, and prayerfully discussed the process and results over a period of a few months. Rather than creating artificial precision through numerical responses to predetermined survey questions, the committee reviewed the feedback qualitatively, looking for trends and hot spots. The feedback has helped inform this narrative.

One clear insight is that Father Poppe established a high standard for thoughtful and engaging sermons. For the last decade or so he created more intimacy with the congregation by preaching from the crossing and center aisle, without notes. Different preachers will of course have different styles. The main point here is that parishioners don't want to be simply preached to, we want to understand the Word of God in the context of modern society and our lives.

We cherish our existing commitment to diversity of all forms, and believe any Child of God should be made to feel welcome at St. George's. Coffee hours are important, as are other fellowship opportunities focused on food. Parishioners want to explore opportunities for greater connection with the surrounding community, as well as more interaction within the congregation itself.

The 8 a.m. service has no music, but music is essential to the other two services. Some parishioners find comfort in the traditional Episcopal hymnal, while others yearn to mix in some newer, more modern and energetic music.

Many parishioners recognize that the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion have a unique



place in the spectrum of Christianity – a *via media* between Protestants and Roman Catholics. We welcome instruction on how this is reflected in our traditions and liturgies. We also seek other opportunities for adult education and formation.

We are blessed with our location in a family-friendly town, which provides a continuing stream of small children. We want to find ways to incorporate them more fully into the life of the church, and to support their faith formation as they grow into adolescence and young adulthood.

We are profoundly grateful for our ability to afford a full-time rector, at a time when many churches in the diocese cannot. We are not focused on growth for the sake of growth, but we recognize that increased membership would provide resources and critical mass to expand both programming and support staff.

St. George's is not a turnaround project. There is no sense of crisis in the parish, but rather a recognition that opportunities exist. We want St. George's to be the way it is ... only more so. We hope to find a rector who will celebrate who we are, while having the passion and talent to inspire continued growth. ✚

