

# PATHWAYS

*Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta*





*We challenge ourselves and the world to  
love like Jesus as we worship joyfully,  
serve compassionately, and grow spiritually.*

✝ *In memory of the Right Reverend Frank K. Allan, eighth Bishop of Atlanta, and Mr. John Andrews, both loyal servants of the Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta.*  
*We give thanksgiving for their time among us and their legacy of leadership.*



*A Letter from the Bishop*

## FINDING OPPORTUNITY FOR JOY

Beloved in God,

As you turn the pages of *Pathways* this year, you'll notice quickly that our theme is joy, specifically joy and its relationship to worship.

We explore here the actions, surroundings, sights, sounds, and circumstances of joyful worship that compel us to bow our heads in reverence, raise our hands in adoration, fall down to our knees in gratitude, and give ourselves away for God's righteous purposes.

This joy is more than happiness. Happiness flees at the sight of pain and suffering. Happy can't get her arms around them; happy's arms are too short! But joy's arms are long and hungry and embrace all of life's seasons. In fact, the precondition of joy is pain and suffering. We acknowledge this reality at the funerals of our loved ones. In the face of loss and grief and the grave, we proclaim defiantly, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."

Opportunities for joy abound as we worship God in our sanctuaries, in nature, in fellowship, and in service to neighbor, because embedded in each moment is the reality of God ever near us, present in scripture, silence, sacrament, song, and in the people gathered.

But above all, when we worship, joy is present. We recall together the centerpiece of joy: that God is trustworthy, as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We remember that we are the object of God's love and favor. Our joy is that we are not arbitrary leaves dancing on a breeze for a time; we have been ushered into now by a loving Creator to live, love, and serve.

This is our joy. This was authored by the God we worship and adore.

God bless you,

Bishop Robert C. Wright

## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MIDDLE AND NORTH GEORGIA

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Everyone—whoever you are and wherever you are on your spiritual journey—is welcome here.

We represent a vibrant, diverse, and expansive faith tradition focused on worshipping a living and loving God and working for a better world in the name of Jesus Christ.

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75 ½ counties. 117 worshipping communities. More than 50,000 men, women, children, teenagers, and seniors.

*We are one lord, one faith, one baptism.*

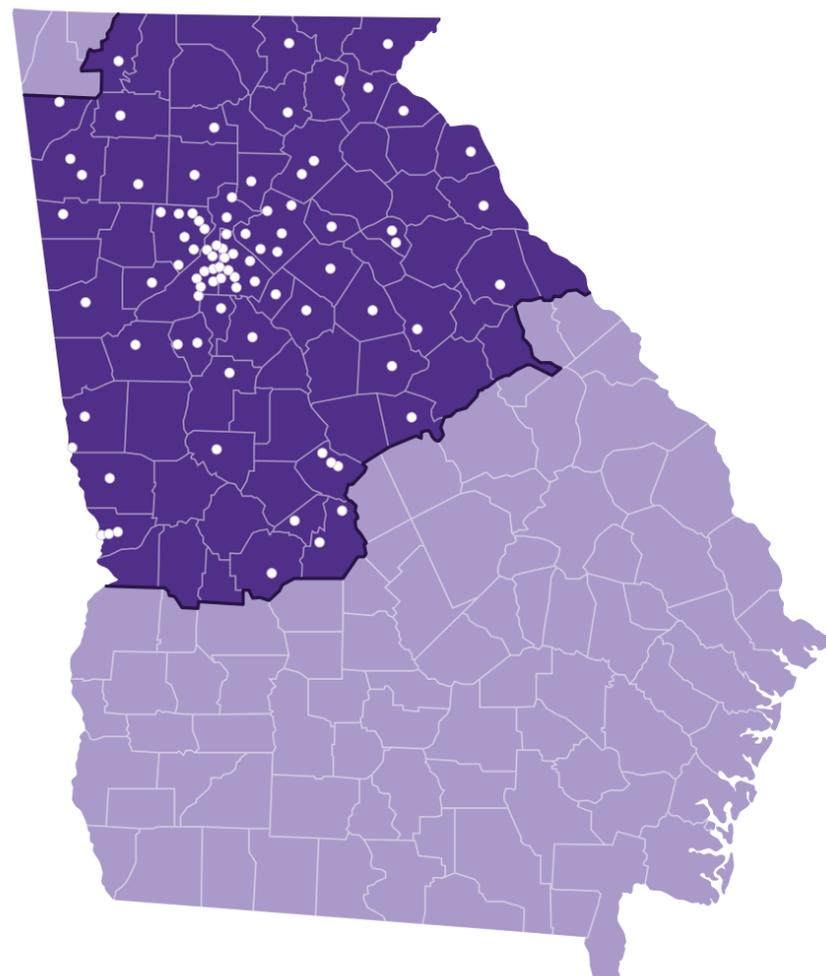
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**CHOOSING FOR THE LIGHT**

*The Joy of Worship*

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# WE KNOW JOY WHEN WE FEEL IT. IT'S THE SENSATION THAT OVERWHELMS US WITH LOVE WHEN WE GAZE AT OUR PEACEFULLY SLEEPING CHILDREN; WHEN TEARS WELL UP AT THE SOUND OF OUR FAVORITE SONGS; WHEN WE GASP AT THE BEAUTY OF DANCING LEAVES DAPPLIED WITH SUNLIGHT.

But those moments are as fleeting as a flickering fire. They warm us for a while, only to fade.

A scan through the offerings of any bookstore immediately reveals various paths to joy. There is, of course, *The Joy of Cooking*, a classic beginner's tool for any budding chef. But there is also a seemingly bottomless well of other works that begin with "Joy of..." There's the *Joy of True Meditation*; *Joy of Watercolor*; *Joy of Less* (about decluttering); *Joy of Mixology* (bartending); *Joy of Home Distilling* (making ingredients for the former); *Joy of X* (math); *Joy of Genius*; *Joy of Sex*. And that's just a sampling.

Much of humanity, it seems, as evidenced by this surplus of reading material on the subject, is searching for joy. Yet the feeling often proves elusive. Perhaps by seeking it so fervently, we sometimes fail to recognize it. Perhaps because we fail to look into ourselves.

"Everyone seeks happiness, joyfulness, but from outside," His Holiness the Dalai Lama said in *The Book of Joy*, a dialogue with South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. "From money, from power, from big car, from big house. Most people never pay much attention to the ultimate source of happy life, which is inside."

Since the way we worship is an extension and expression of how we live, it only stands to reason that if we want to worship God with joy, we must, therefore, live joyfully.

The Dalai Lama tells us how to access a kind of joy that is more profound and constant, by reaching beyond the external senses: "We can... experience happiness in the deeper level through our mind, such as through love, compassion, and generosity. What characterizes happiness at this deep level is the sense of fulfillment that you experience."

In the joint interview captured in *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu engage in an inspiring conversation about their personal journeys as spiritual leaders of nations in the midst of immense sociopolitical change, turmoil, and pain.

Yet, despite the hardship they've both endured during exile from Tibet and under apartheid in South Africa, respectively, both have maintained famously positive outlooks on humanity.

In *The Book of Joy*, these two sages describe eight pillars of joy:

**PERSPECTIVE:** "For every event in life, there are many different angles. When you look at the same event from a wider perspective, your sense of worry and anxiety reduces, and you have greater joy." — *the Dalai Lama*

**HUMILITY:** "Humility is the recognition that your gifts are from God. It does not mean you have to deny your own gifts or shrink from using them. God uses each of us in our own way,

PREVIOUS SPREAD All Saints' Episcopal Church in Atlanta celebrated Pentecost 2019 by showcasing different forms of joyful worship by congregants and international groups, including these Rwandan American dancers.

and even if you are not the best, you may be the one who is needed or the one who is there." — *Archbishop Tutu*

**HUMOR:** "People who are always laughing have a sense of abandon and ease. They are less likely to have a heart attack than those people who are really serious and who have difficulty connecting with other people." — *the Dalai Lama*

**ACCEPTANCE:** "We are meant to live in joy. This does not mean that life will be easy or painless. It means that we can turn our faces to the wind and accept that this is the storm we must pass through. We cannot succeed by denying what exists." — *Archbishop Tutu*

**FORGIVENESS:** "Sometimes people misunderstand and think forgiveness means you accept or approve of wrongdoing. No, this is not the case. We must make an important distinction. The actor and action, or the person and what he has done. Where the wrong action is concerned, it may be necessary to take appropriate counteraction to stop it. Toward the actor or the person, however, you can choose not to develop anger and hatred. This is where the power of forgiveness lies—not losing sight of the humanity of the person while responding to the wrong with clarity and firmness." — *the Dalai Lama*

**GRATITUDE:** "Where some people see a half-empty cup, you can see it as half-full." — *Archbishop Tutu*

**COMPASSION:** "If you want a happy life and fewer problems, you have to develop a serious concern for others. And if there is a possibility to help, then you can help. If there is no possibility to help, you can just pray or wish them well." — *the Dalai Lama*

**GENEROSITY:** "I've sometimes joked and said God doesn't know very much math, because when you give to others, it should be that you are subtracting from yourself. But in this incredible kind of way—I've certainly found that to be the case so many times—you give and then it seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you." — *Archbishop Tutu*

In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Roman Catholic priest, professor, and theologian Henri Nouwen describes joy as a discipline:

"It requires choosing for the light, even when there is much darkness to frighten me," he writes. "Once you choose to claim the joy hidden in the midst of all suffering, life becomes celebration. Joy never denies the sadness but transforms it into a fertile soil for more joy."

To worship joyfully, even in the hardest times, is to lose ourselves in the sacred and profound, remembering that we are not alone.

"Worship is the submission of all our nature to God," wrote William Temple, who served as archbishop of Canterbury in England during World War II. "It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of the imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart by His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable." ■



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## MOVING IN THE SPIRIT

*Worship in Motion*



THE FAMOUS AMERICAN DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER MARTHA GRAHAM SAID, "DANCE IS THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL." BUT WHEN IT IS PART OF WORSHIP, THE LANGUAGE IS NO LONGER HIDDEN. IT IS VISIBLE TO GOD AND SHARED WITH OTHERS.



THE IDEA OF WORSHIP THROUGH DANCE DATES BACK TO THE BOOK OF EXODUS, WHEN THE PROPHET MIRIAM AND "ALL THE WOMEN" DANCED TO CELEBRATE THE DEFEAT OF PHARAOH'S ARMY (EXODUS 15:20). HERE WE SEE FIRE DANCING CAPTURING THE JUBILANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, OFFERED BY MELISSA COFFEE DANCERS.



THE ATLANTA JUNKANOO GROUP OFFERS A DAZZLING CELEBRATION OF BAHAMIAN AMERICAN CULTURE WITH THEIR MAGNIFICENT CARNIVAL COSTUMES AND STREET PROCESSION MUSIC.



THE ANNUAL JUNKANOO FESTIVAL IS CELEBRATED OVER BOXING DAY AND NEW YEAR'S DAY.



RWANDAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO CAME TO ATLANTA AS REFUGEES PERFORM THEIR SACRED TRADITIONAL DANCES TO CAPTIVATING RHYTHMIC BEATS.



WHAT BETTER ANTHEM FOR THE CHOIR AT A CELEBRATION OF MOVEMENT THAN "LORD OF THE DANCE"? LYRICIST SYDNEY CARTER EXPLAINED HIS WORDS THIS WAY: "I SEE CHRIST AS THE INCARNATION OF THE PIPER WHO IS CALLING US. HE DANCES THAT SHAPE AND PATTERN WHICH IS AT THE HEART OF OUR REALITY."



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## MAKING A JOYFUL NOISE

*Sounds of Reverence*

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## EVERY LIFE HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE PLAYLIST: THE LULLABIES OF INFANCY, THE SILLY DITTIES OF CHILDHOOD, THE GRADUATION MARCH, THE FIRST WEDDING DANCE, AND ON INTO OLD AGE.

For Christians, much of that soundtrack includes music heard in church, from “Jesus Loves Me” in the nursery to the stirring anthem from last Sunday’s worship service.

Studies have famously shown how beneficial music is for the brain. People with advanced dementia or Alzheimer’s disease who no longer recognize their families can remember the lyrics and melodies of songs they knew in their youth. Scientists at the University of Utah, using MRIs, found that connections among regions of the brains of Alzheimer’s patients grew stronger when they heard music they found meaningful, according to their published findings in the 2018 edition of *The Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer’s Disease*.

### “MUSIC IS THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL MADE AUDIBLE.”

— Don Saliers

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Since 2006, neuroscientist Kiminobu Sugaya and violinist Ayako Yonetani, who happen to be husband and wife, have taught a course called Music and the Brain at the University of Central Florida. Music can reduce seizures, boost the immune system, help repair brain damage, and increase intelligence, they say.

Many claims about music and the mind are based on anecdotes, however. To acquire more

scientific evidence of the therapeutic effects of music, the National Institutes of Health is partnering with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and National Endowment for the Arts in an initiative called Sound Health. Its mission is to explore the impact of music on health, science, and education and to get a clearer idea of how the brain processes music.

One participant in Sound Health is Mickey Hart, best known as percussionist for the Grateful Dead. Motivated by his own grandmother’s Alzheimer’s disease, he works extensively with scientists to delve into the physiological impact of rhythm. Music “goes to the brain, the master clock,” he told the National Endowment for the Arts in 2018. “Now we’re able to read the master clock. We’re able to see what neurons are firing when certain rhythms are played.”

But music has emotional and spiritual impact far beyond what scientists can measure.

Music is “the language of the soul made audible,” wrote Don Saliers, professor emeritus of worship at Emory University. As it accompanies us in ubiquity, music “presents to us the tensions and releases, the intensities and rests, the dissonances and the harmonies of life.”

“Nearly all religions employ the human voice, instruments, and acoustical images in their indigenous worship and devotional practices,” Saliers wrote. Sound, pitch, and rhythm “are found in what we human beings do in our work, our festivals, our solemn occasions of grieving or rejoicing.”

Like the biblical psalms, our music expresses heartbreak, lamentation, praise, hope, faith, and, of course, joy.

“Joy is a concept that seems to me to be central to the church life,” said Stephen Ray Miller, a professor of music at Sewanee: The University of the South, in Tennessee. “It spans every culture and even goes beyond religion itself. Going back in the Christian tradition, I think the most joyful word we have is ‘hallelujah.’ You find it in David’s psalms, and St. Augustine praised the singing of hallelujah.”

Augustine spoke of “Allelujah” (the spelling varies) many times. One of his pithiest quotes is this: “A Christian should be an Allelujah from head to foot.”

The style of Christian music varies widely, from bombastic baroque organ pieces to emotional jazz numbers sung by swaying choirs to old favorite songs accompanied by off-key pianos in little clapboard churches.

In the Episcopal hymnal alone, the range of sources of songs is “phenomenal,” said Miller, an Episcopal layman. “In general, the style probably doesn’t matter as much as people’s participation with it,” he said, “and that varies from culture to culture and congregation to congregation. The music I find most rewarding is music where the people engaged in making it are filled with spirit or filled with obvious reverence.”

Here, we go “behind the music” with five very different types of worship through song: traditional “high church” music, bluegrass, gospel, Sacred Harp, and changing bells.

Each is a form of discipline and devotion for those who practice it. Each speaks to someone’s soul.

## CHANGE BELLS

*St. James, Marietta*

**EYES TURN UPWARD. LIPS MOVE IN SILENT CALCULATION.** Hands grasp, pull, let go, grasp again. Each member of the team at St. James in Marietta is fiercely concentrating on something most kindergartners do with ease: counting to eight.

From the floor above, invisible to the team, eight bells send a rolling wave of notes across Marietta.

This is the very British art of change ringing—part team sport, part mathematical exercise, and part musical performance. Done perfectly, it results in a seamless sequence of sounds, but every tug of a rope has the potential to throw off the entire group.

“It’s a great activity for mindfulness,” said English teacher Symphony Romaine, 33. “You don’t think about anything else when you’re playing. You can’t.”

Romaine and her husband, Joe Anderson, 31, an architect, are rookies on the ropes. They’re working on applying the right amount of tension at the right time. A bell rings almost a second after the rope is pulled. Accounting for the lag requires serious mental pacing.

“We haven’t thought about a pattern,” said Romaine. “We’re just working on the fundamentals.”

“I’m just getting a feel for the bells,” Anderson said. “You can’t see the bell, so you have to go by feel. It takes a lot of practice.” ▶

► The couple became interested in bell ringing during a visit to Romaine’s ancestral homeland, England, where they discovered that Romaine’s great-grandfather, Henry Johnson, a decorated veteran of World War I, was a ringer. Back at home, they decided to give ringing a try as a way to connect with that line of Romaine’s family.

Like any sport, change ringing has its own culture, jargon, rules, and means of keeping score. Each of the eight bells at St. James has its own saint’s name and its own tone. Dunstan, a C note, is the runt at 247 pounds; Scott, an octave lower, is the heavyweight at 593 pounds. In between are Bridget, Mary, Catherine, Margaret, Michael, and James, the church’s namesake. The practice of naming bells, usually for religious figures, dates back to medieval times, well before change ringing, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Change ringing is done in patterns, called “methods”—and these, like the bells, also have names, such as Bob, Plain Hunt, or Grandsire, certified by the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, a British organization established in 1891. The team, or band, that first rings a method usually gives it a moniker based on the leader, characteristic of the pattern, or place, but fanciful names are not unknown. Consider Percy’s Tea Strainer.

The simplest ring is the scale itself—do, re, mi... That could be followed, for instance, with

do, mi, re, then mi, do, re. With eight bells, multiplied to a factor of eight, the maximum number of patterns possible is 40,320. The St. James ringers have about a dozen patterns in their repertoire.

A “change” is the ringing of each bell once; a sequence of 5,000 or more changes constitutes a “peal.” To ring every possible exchange—a rare feat—is an “extent.” In keeping with the British sense of honor and propriety, no visual aids are allowed in change ringing. Writing cues on the back of one’s hand would be a grave offense.

As a highly collaborative art, change ringing often results in a closeness among ringers, said librarian Cathy Brown, 68, the current bell captain. That shared affinity among the team may also derive from the urgency of what this sound has meant historically. As Brown put it, “When bells are ringing, it tells the world something is happening at this church.”

Eighty-five-year-old Derek Wilsden, a St. James ringers mainstay, learned the bells at the tender age of 10, while growing up in Canterbury, England, during World War II. In 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered that the tower bells go silent, to be rung only as warning of Nazi invasion. As the Allies gained strength, the ban was eased, but by then many regular ringers were in uniform. Little Derek was recruited, and he has been ringing ever since.

Later, grown-up Wilsden, an aeronautical engineer, landed a job with Lockheed Corporation in Cobb County. Until St. James installed its tower bells in 1996, he continued his musical pursuits by playing handbells (he had his own set of 20) and making presentations until he had enticed three other ringers who would play with him in one another’s houses.

As a Brit, Wilsden was following a national tradition. Change ringing developed in England during the 17th century and came to the colonies with the British settlers. Paul Revere was a ringer at the Old North Church in Boston.

**“IT’S A GREAT ACTIVITY FOR MINDFULNESS. YOU DON’T THINK ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE WHEN YOU’RE PLAYING. YOU CAN’T.”**

— *Symphony Romaine*

Perhaps because of its association with the Redcoats, ringing lost some of its, ahem, a-peal during the American Revolutionary War.

The pastime continues to be popular in England, where thousands of new ringers signed up to help ring in the millennium. Bells rang along the route of the torch approaching the London Olympics in 2012, and a new set of eight bells in a floating belfry on the Thames marked Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee—60 years of reign—the same year.

Although ringing has rebounded somewhat in the former colonies, even today the United States claims only about 45 active towers, com-

pared to about 5,000 in England, according to the North American Guild of Change Ringers.

Interest on both sides of the Atlantic may have been helped along by Dorothy Sayers’ popular 1934 bells-themed murder mystery, *The Nine Tailors*. (Spoiler alert: The bells did it.)

The Sayers novel piqued the curiosity of Jay Williams, now 77, who joined the St. James team ten years ago as a novice. He has been blind since birth and rings through rhythm and sound.

Williams had wanted to learn change ringing since reading *The Nine Tailors* in his early 20s. Who knew that a move to Marietta from Washington state would afford him the chance, at last, to follow that pursuit?

Now, he’s hooked for life. “Until God stops me, there’s no way I’m quitting,” he said.

St. James’ bells are rung for regular worship services and for weddings and funerals. Traditionally, bells announced deaths to the community through different numbers of tolls for men, women, and children, but with more modern ways of communicating neighborhood news, that particular practice has been laid to rest.

Ringing at St. James is also a multigenerational undertaking—one that gets passed down through generations in the parish.

“I needed a couple of boxes to stand on when I started,” said 17-year-old Aiden Fortenberry, a seven-year veteran of the group, who considers ringing “a way to show my faith.”

His younger brother Jared, 14, followed him into the tower.

“We come together as a group, and we can spread the sound,” said Jared. “It’s what God would want.” ►

#### THE FAMILY OF CHANGE BELLS AT ST. JAMES

SCOTT	JAMES	MICHAEL	MARGARET	CATHERINE	MARY	BRIDGET	DUNSTAN
							
593 LBS.	445 LBS.	345 LBS.	326 LBS.	281 LBS.	282 LBS.	254 LBS.	247 LBS.

## SACRED HARP

*Holy Trinity, Decatur*

**TO THE UNINITIATED, SACRED HARP SINGING MIGHT** seem a bit unworldly—voices with no instrumental accompaniment verbalizing nonsensical-sounding syllables, often in a minor key. Emphatic hand gestures—repetitive slow chops—slice through the air to keep the rhythm.

The syllables will give way to lyrics that often tell of sorrow, death, and the hope of glory land. This kind of message was fitting for the American colonists, who, as they were carving out a life in this new and often harsh land, found enticement in songs that promised a brighter realm beyond their dreary labor.

Sacred Harp is also known as shape-note singing because each of the notes in the tune has its own shape: fa is a triangle, sol an oval, la a rectangle, and mi a diamond. That's it. Four notes easily distinguishable on a page to make sight reading easier for people with no musical training. Before vocalizing the words to a song, participants “sing the notes,” or the fa-sol-las, to become familiar with the tune.

Despite some somber messages, Sacred Harp singing brings an abundance of delight to practitioners, including a small, diverse group who gather regularly at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Decatur.

For Holy Trinity's associate rector, the Rev. Jenna Faith Strizak, Sacred Harp was an acquired taste. She attended her first singing, a big event with hundreds of singers, in 2002 while studying at Hampshire College in western Massachusetts, and found it at first overwhelming. “I was overcome by the sound of it. I didn't really like it,” she said.

A few months later, however, she went to a small gathering held to introduce people to the music genre, and, this time, she was captivated. “I talk about it being the first place I can point to explicitly knowing the movement of the Spirit,” she said.

The “rawness” of the sound combined with the words' often “clear-eyed” look at death, she said, felt radically spiritual.

“I think we're a culture that wants to deny death,” she said. “We think if we exercise and eat the right superfoods, we can stave it off. I love that Sacred Harp doesn't let us maintain that illusion. It tells us that each and every one of us is going to die, but death is not the end. It's death in the hope of resurrection in Christ.”

After moving to Atlanta for seminary at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, the Rev. Strizak connected with the group that now meets at Holy Trinity.

“It's a spiritual practice that's outside my parish work,” she said. “There's something powerful about singing with people, full-throated and looking them in the face.”

The eye contact comes from the typical configuration for Sacred Harp singing—chairs or pews in lines forming a square, all facing a “hollow” space in the middle. Singers of each of the four parts, treble, alto, tenor (or lead), and bass, sit together on one side of the square.

Jesse P. Karlsberg was sitting with the basses at a singing in New York when he locked eyes across the square with Lauren Bock, who was singing treble. They formed their own romantic duo, married, moved to Atlanta, and found the Holy Trinity singers.

Karlsberg doesn't just sing; he's an expert on Sacred Harp and edited the *Centennial Edition of the Original Sacred Harp* songbook. ▶

**OPPOSITE** Sacred Harp singers from various backgrounds meet monthly at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Decatur to share the tradition of shape-note music.



► His 2015 doctoral dissertation at Emory University’s Institute for the Liberal Arts focuses on what he refers to as the “whitewashing” of Sacred Harp’s roots. “Although The Sacred Harp tune book features music with racially diverse origins whose composers span a vast geography, scholars in the twentieth century came to associate the tune book with Anglo-Celtic whiteness,” he wrote. But in the raised consciousness of the post-civil rights movement, some singers are beginning to acknowledge and explore the deep roots of the persistent whiteness of the tradition’s revival.

Karlsberg, who is Jewish, acknowledges that at first it did feel strange to be so focused on overtly Christian music. “At times, early on, when I’d be singing a song, it would seem kind of jarring to me,” he said. “But when my grandfather died, I realized I was processing grief through the words of the songs. They became more meaningful to me.”

Some practitioners of Sacred Harp say they appreciate that there are no concerts, no rehearsals, and no professional directors. Singers take turns stepping into the center to choose and lead the songs. Volume is encouraged.

“This music is for singers, not listeners,” wrote Lisa Grayson in *A Beginner’s Guide to Shape-Note Singing*. “We don’t perform; we sing as an end in itself. And loud singing provides more catharsis, more instant gratification, more visceral pleasure than controlled singing.”

Four-note singing dates back centuries, as evidenced by the singing of “fa, sol, la, mi” by Edmund, a villain in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Grayson points out. The shapes came about a couple of hundred years later when singing-school teachers William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia introduced them as a sight reading aid.

The most widely used Sacred Harp songbook today is published in Carrollton, Georgia, where its publisher, Sacred Harp Publishing Company, also hosts a museum that contains photographs and recordings of singings, letters to and from singers, music manuscripts, and original copies of historic shape-note books.

## “THERE’S SOMETHING POWERFUL ABOUT SINGING WITH PEOPLE, FULL-THROATED AND LOOKING THEM IN THE FACE.”

— *Rev. Jenna Faith Strizak*

The Holy Trinity singers’ thick books are well worn. Some were packed in their owners’ bags for Camp Fasola, a weeklong immersion experience sponsored by the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association and held at Camp McDowell, an Episcopal center in Alabama. These musical tomes are frequently hauled to all-day singings, which can draw from a few dozen to several hundred singers to sing in the morning, break for a potluck lunch, and then dive back into singing until mid-to-late afternoon.

Lisa Bennett, 57, a faithful singer at Holy Trinity, has traveled to all kinds of events, including a singing in Japan. She was hesitant at first to attend rural gatherings. She’s a vegan with short, bright blue hair that had multicolored streaks seven years ago when she and her husband, David Smead, began singing Sacred Harp.

“I wasn’t sure how people were going to accept me,” she said. “But the community is so welcoming. We were just embraced. They didn’t care that I had blue hair. They didn’t care that I was vegan. They just cared that I loved the music.”

She describes herself as “sort of an agnostic person.”

“A lot of what I sing I don’t literally believe,” she said, but she appreciates that the theme of many songs—“we’re going to die, but our afterlife is going to be way better than this”—has sustained generations.

Sacred Harp has a tradition of the “memorial lesson.” Singers hear the names of those who are ill or shut-in, those who’ve died, and those who are mourning and sing a song in honor or remembrance.

Bennett leaned not on the message but on the music itself and her fellow singers through the loss of both parents and a nephew’s suicide. After each death, she said she drew strength from the knowledge that the tradition would be followed.

“I knew that people who cared about me were singing for my parents,” she said. “They were singing for me. They were singing songs that I loved for me.”

That, she said, was enough. “Sacred Harp is my church.”

## GOSPEL

*Gospel Music Workshop, Atlanta*

**EVEN WITHOUT THEIR HEAVY PURPLE ROBES, SOME OF** the 100 or so members of the Atlanta chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America Inc. are working up a sweat. They’ve practiced hard, standing and swaying for over an hour, sometimes repeating a single phrase over and over, until it’s just perfect.

“Make sure you have enough air in your diaphragm that you can get this,” coaches choir coordinator Reginal Jefferson. He turns from side to side, spreads his arms wide, and makes strong pulling motions as if to manually extract the sublime from these soaring voices.

“Oh/give/thanks/un/to/the/Lord,” the choir sings, chopping each syllable as cleanly as a cleaver.

The choir is preparing for their annual convention—the “workshop” of the Gospel Music Workshop—in Washington, D.C. The national organization now has chapters in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, all of which are represented at this one giant event every year.

The workshop was founded in Detroit in the late 1960s by the legendary Rev. Dr. James Edward Cleveland, pastor, pianist, singer, composer, arranger, and producer, who won three Grammy awards and recorded with the likes of Billy Preston, Aretha Franklin, Elton John, and Ray Charles among others; was the first gospel musician to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame; and was credited with writing and arranging more than 400 gospel songs. Upon his death in 1991, the *New York Times* obituary declared that ►



**OPPOSITE TOP** The Atlanta Chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA), shown mid-rehearsal, often performs songs composed by fellow choir members.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Brandon Gray, 14, is a songwriter and soloist who has been attending GMWA with relatives since he was a toddler. He says he has tapped into “a gift God has given me.”



► Rev. Cleveland was “regarded as the world’s foremost gospel musician.” He considered the workshop to be his greatest accomplishment, according to the *Times*.

This annual gathering is special for members of the Atlanta chapter, who plan to present songs from their soon-to-be-released first album at the event. Although they have backed up other artists, all the music on the upcoming CD was written and performed entirely by choir members.

The Atlanta chapter, like others, is made up of people from various churches and denominations with one thing in common: an enthusiasm for the genre of music that grew out of African American spirituals and went on to influence—and be influenced by—rhythm and blues, soul, rock ’n’ roll, and even country.

The music is hard to define, but people know it when they hear it. The Library of Congress puts it this way: “African American gospel music is a form of euphoric, rhythmic, spiritual music rooted in the solo and responsive church singing of the African American South.”

Emory University Professor James Abbingon, author of several books on music in the African American church, describes it as having “emotional and jubilant improvisation” and a “full-throated sound.”

“It has more of a beat to it” than traditional hymnody, says Atlanta chapter representative Evelyn White, 83, who grew up listening to the great Mahalia Jackson and has been singing herself since childhood. She approves of improvisation. “If I forget the words, I just ad lib,” she says. “I sing whatever the Lord gives me.”

Many people trace the birth of modern gospel to the 1930s and Thomas Dorsey, the Georgia-born son of a Baptist minister who was a successful jazz and blues musician when

he turned to sacred music. His best-known compositions are “Peace in the Valley” and “Precious Lord,” the latter of which was written after the death of his young wife and infant son.

Dorsey said he “wasn’t trying to change” church music, “but I was just struck with something... that God gave me.”

Like many innovations, gospel had its critics, mostly among black scholars, church musicians, and preachers who favored more sedate, traditional forms. One was the late Dr. Joseph R. Washington, a widely published professor of religious studies and director of the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. As the genre was coming into its heyday in the 1960s, he complained in his book *Black Religion* that gospel music “turned the freedom theme in Negro spirituals into licentiousness” and would “lead the masses down the road of religious frenzy and escapism.”

**“IF I FORGET THE WORDS,  
I JUST AD LIB. I SING WHATEVER  
THE LORD GIVES ME.”**

— Evelyn White

The emergence of gospel music had “important sociological consequences,” according to the seminal work *The Church in the African American Experience*, by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya. With it came the establishment of specialized ensembles and soloists.

Whereas congregational hymns “united worshipers through the collective activity of singing and declaring theological and doctrinal commonalities, the new style required the congregation to assume the role of ►



ABOVE The electric organ, developed as a smaller, less expensive alternative to the pipe organ, “laid the soundtrack” for gospel music, according to National Public Radio.

► audience,” Lincoln and Mamiya wrote. “In essence, worshipers became bystanders who witnessed the preaching and personal testimonies of singers.”

But, they wrote, gospel music is now widely accepted and has taken its place among other forms.

If Thomas Dorsey helped birth gospel by bringing his blues and jazz background to church music, gospel has in turn spawned some of secular music’s most famous artists. Before assuming the throne as the “Queen of Soul,” little Aretha Franklin belted out songs in her father’s church in Detroit. Before he became “the King,” young Elvis Presley grew up on the music of African American congregations in Tupelo, Mississippi. And before he was christened the “Godfather of Funk,” James Brown sang about salvation with the Starlighters.

A worldwide audience of more than 18 million was exposed to gospel-style music in 2018 when the Kingdom Choir sang “Stand by Me” at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. That particular song represents the cross-pollination of gospel and secular music.

Sam Cooke, whose long list of hits includes the civil rights anthem “A Change Is Gonna Come,” co-wrote a religious song called “Stand by Me,” addressed to God the Father and based on Psalm 46. Inspired by Cooke’s work, Ben E.

King and collaborators wrote the most widely known and secular version of “Stand by Me,” the iteration sung at the royal wedding. The lyrics “when the mountains crumble to the sea” retain imagery from the psalm.

Some members have literally grown up in the workshop.

Brandon Gray, 14, played with cars and trucks under the pews as a tot while his mother sang. Now, he’s both a soloist and a composer and performed solos before two breakout sessions of the 2019 annual gathering in Washington, D.C. “Music is my place where I get closer to God,” he said.

And Otis Byrd Jr., 23, came with Miss Evelyn, his aunt, as a little boy. His composition “Proclaim” was one of the biggest hits of the Atlanta chapter’s performance before the assembly of thousands of gospel singers at the national convention.

The music “is a way of life for us,” said associate chapter representative Ralph Davis. “It’s our connection with our experience of God.”

“We walk it, we talk it, we breathe it,” said Kenneth Love, 65, chapter worship director. “Gospel music proclaims and expresses the gospel of Jesus Christ. It will be the only Word some people will hear.”



## BLUEGRASS

*St. Anthony’s, Winder*

**THE SOUND FLOATING THROUGH THE AIR FROM THE fellowship hall of St. Anthony’s Episcopal Church in Winder, Georgia, pulls you in from the parking lot like a tractor beam: the twang of banjos, the lyrical whine of old-fashioned fiddles—not a “violin” in the bunch—the ringing melody of mandolins, the strum of autoharps, the deep plunk of big basses shoring up the tune. And 20 or so voices raised in joyful song.**

*“Come to this fountain so rich and sweet, cast thy poor soul at the Savior’s feet; plunge in today, and be made complete; glory to his name!”*

The crowd at this bluegrass “picking” varies month to month, attracting everyone from complete novices to members of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame. A doctor, a nurse, a trucker, and a mechanic. Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, none of the above, and nothing at all. Democrats and Republicans, perhaps, although the subject never comes up. In this circle of black folding chairs, all are equal and all are welcome.

“Nobody’s ever talked about politics or religion when I’m there,” said Ed Kellough, a professor

of public policy at the University of Georgia who plays guitar and mandolin. “We just play the music and have a good time.”

“Everybody parks their politics and profession at the door,” said Lizabeth Weber, who with her husband, Scott, organizes the gathering. “Here, we’re all on the same level.”

Lizabeth plays bass, Scott plays mandolin, and their only child, Zack, 25, plays banjo but can hold his own on anything with strings. Together, they are the Weber Family, specializing in bluegrass gospel. When they’re not picking, they run an electrical contracting business.

The trio started out about a dozen years ago after Zack developed a fascination with banjos that didn’t seem to fade the way childhood obsessions are prone to do. “We decided to get instruments and learn to play too,” said Lizabeth.

Asked why he plays bluegrass instead of another genre, Zack says simply, “It makes me smile.”

*“O come Angel Band, come and around me stand, O bear me away on your snow white wings to my immortal home...”*

Bluegrass enthusiasts began gathering at St. Anthony’s for the monthly pickings in 2007. Church members Tony Ianuario, a luthier who specialized in the craftsmanship of mandolins, ►

► and his wife, Ann, arranged use of the space. Both were killed in a car accident in 2009, but their memory lives on in an annual bluegrass festival held in their name every September.

St. Anthony's member Jerry Ash attends when he can, playing guitar or fiddle. He said he quite enjoys the contrast between Sunday mornings in the sanctuary (with the traditional Episcopal hymns) and the decidedly more casual and raucous Sunday afternoons with his bluegrass buddies in the fellowship hall.

Bluegrass is a potent elixir brewed up from cultural ingredients that have shaped the rural South over the last several centuries. Early white settlers brought English ballads and Celtic fiddle tunes to the new land. Enslaved Africans wanting to retain the cultures from which they were kidnapped and sold sang spirituals and early blues with their own distinctive rhythms and tones and built "banjars," the forerunners of the banjo, out of gourds and animal skins. Inevitably, the musical styles melded over time.

"Fiddle and banjo both seeped into the development of black spiritual music," wrote Stephanie P. Ledgin in *Homegrown Music: Discovering Bluegrass*. "Later, the dual sounds of fiddle and banjo would become entrenched in the white traditional playing known as 'old-time' music, a rough-edged, raw sound reflective of the simple country life."

Much of the subject matter of bluegrass, like that of many genres, is love lost and found, along with "a lot of cheatin' and drinkin' and dyin'," said Bill Long, an inductee into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame who plays a range of instruments, from guitar to washboard. But when the message is about sin and salvation, the music becomes bluegrass gospel.

The spirited sounds of bluegrass appeal to people who rarely darken a church door and

to those who are there the minute the doors open. When one of the non-church-going St. Anthony's pickers died a few years ago, his family and friends held a bluegrass and barbecue funeral with nary a Bible involved. Pickers turned out in force.

Mary Brown, a.k.a. "Lady Outlaw," and her fiancé, Mark Etheredge, are not churchgoers, but she shows respect for St. Anthony's by leaving her pistol in the car to attend the picking. "It doesn't seem right to bring it into a church," she said.

Brown is an Internal Revenue Service employee whose stage name came from a speeding ticket on I-85 that netted her eight hours of community service as punishment. Etheredge is a software developer who plays in Coldwater Bluegrass Band.

Despite their lack of religious affiliation, they enjoy singing bluegrass gospel and often perform at churches. As they prepare to leave for a gig at a Tucker pizza parlor, the group around the circle starts to sing.

*"Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"*

Many of the musicians acquired their taste for bluegrass in small Southern country churches and still hold fast to their faith.

Retired elementary school art teacher Zane Brock, who plays banjo and piano, was a Baptist preacher's kid who was "dragged to church three times a week" as a child, once on Wednesday and twice on Sunday. His daddy, the preacher, played old hymns on a guitar. Despite his resistance to hard church pews as a child, Brock still goes to church and loves playing hymns bluegrass style.

## ORGAN MUSIC

*Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta*

**FIVE MINUTES BEFORE CHURCH SERVICES BEGIN AT THE Cathedral of St. Philip, Patrick Scott sits down at the console of the Aeolian-Skinner organ like a jet pilot entering the cockpit and prepares to achieve the effect of an entire orchestra single-handedly—or rather, with two hands and two feet.**

He has all the symphonic instruments he'll need, right at his fingertips in four families of organ stops. With 32 pedals, 244 keys, and 5,140 pipes that range from pencil-sized to 32 feet long and as big around as the seat of a stacking chair, the varieties of sounds seem infinite.

For this performance of "Nimrod," a section of Edward Elgar's late 19th-century masterwork *Enigma Variations*, he calls up the strings, which start softly but with an underlying tension that builds through repetitive dissonance and resolution. Pulling and pushing stops, he mimics the wind instruments, adding depth and volume, then conjures up the timpani, rolling like thunder. When the energy seems at its peak, the sound sinks to a whisper of violins. A final note travels down the long nave until it dies out as quietly as the last beam of sunlight leaves a summer day.

"Nimrod" is the prelude at this Cathedral service, signaling the beginning of a worship experience filled with different varieties of music, from chants to hymns to anthems. Each piece is the product of careful thought and planning, selected to complement and enhance the other components of worship.

After a welcome from Dean Samuel G. Candler, Scott plays again as four dozen robed choir

members process in, two by two, with the clergy, acolytes, and other participants in worship.

Preparation for Sunday worship began on the Thursday night prior. At precisely 7 p.m., choral director Dale Adelman stepped onto a small platform in the rehearsal room and intoned, "The Lord be with you."

Chatter among choir members halted immediately, and four dozen voices—bass, baritone, tenor, alto, and soprano—replied in unison, "And also with you."

Every choir member has passed muster with Adelman. He has vetted them all on their ability to read music, stay on pitch, and follow directions.

Rehearsal starts with the chant that will be used for Sunday's psalm. Voices fill the room, rich and resonant, first singing only numerals to memorize the tune as Adelman guides them, his arms floating as gracefully as a ballet dancer. He will let them read the notes for the hymns and anthems, but he insists they know the tune to the psalm so that they can devote their full attention to bringing out the underlying meaning of the words as they sing on Sunday. Otherwise, they'll be too distracted "thinking about what note comes next," he said.

"Remember, we want to bring up what God is doing, what God has done, and the attributes of God," he instructed the choir.

Adelman holds a doctorate from the University of Cambridge and has served as canon for music at the cathedral for the last 10 years. Although he started out as an organist in a master's degree program at Yale, "somewhere along the way, I realized I like the choral aspect even more," he said. "I like the marriage of the text and the music, and the way music enables the text and brings it to life." ►



## A BASS SOUND LIKE THE RUMBLE OF A SMALL EARTHQUAKE SHAKES SOME OF THE OBJECTS SITTING NEARBY.

► He grew up immersed in ministry. Both of his grandfathers and his father were ministers in the Evangelical United Brethren, a denomination that merged with the Methodist Church in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church.

His first exposure to Anglican choral music occurred the summer after he graduated from high school, when he attended some concerts at the national convention of the American Guild of Organists. “I was completely blown away,” he said. When he moved to England as a student, that love grew deeper.

The music led him to the Episcopal Church. The baptismal covenant, he said, “really resonates with me.” Especially the promises to “seek and see Christ in all persons” and to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

At the cathedral, Adelmann likes to feature different types of music, from plainsong chant dating back more than a millennium to modern-day living composers.

“I think the Holy Spirit will never run out of ways to speak to us through music,” he said.

In the rehearsal room on Thursday night, the choir turned to the upcoming Sunday’s offertory anthem, singing vigorously, “Thou, O God, art praised in Sion,” the opening lines to the Malcolm Boyle composition performed at Queen Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee celebration. Scott accompanied them on a piano.

Adelmann stopped the music one line in to make a polite correction. “On ‘praised,’” he said, “can we make that a little less note-y

and a little more dynamic?” Then, he added: “Careful, please, on the top of page 6, ‘chooset’ and ‘receivest.’ There are wonderful acoustics upstairs, but they swallow up some consonants, such as the ‘st.’”

The choir went on, smoothing out “praised.” They refined the ends of “chooset” and “receivest” until the “st” sounds were as crisp as a pile of autumn leaves. After an hour and a half of practice with the piano, they drifted upstairs to rehearse with Scott at the organ.

Growing up Southern Baptist in Alabama and Mississippi, Scott acquired an affection for old hymns. He enjoys improvising on hymn tunes, but he also loves the music of Herbert Howells and Edward Elgar. “And what organist doesn’t love Bach?”

Like Adelmann, Scott fell in love with the Episcopal Church through the music and now is an avowed Episcopalian. As for the organ, he waxes as effusively about the potential of the largest pipes as a sports car enthusiast boasts about the horsepower of the latest line of Aston Martins. To demonstrate, he sets the stops and presses a key. A bass sound, like the rumble of a small earthquake, shakes some of the objects sitting nearby. “It’s all about the power,” he says with a smile. ■

OPPOSITE TOP An organist controls the sounds of an entire orchestra with stops.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM An additional keyboard is played by the organist’s feet.



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## SACRED SPACES

*The Power of Place*

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## SINCE ANCIENT TIMES, WE HAVE SOUGHT TO CREATE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE PLACES AND SPACES AROUND US, A PRACTICE THAT HAS CONTINUED ACROSS TIME, GEOGRAPHY, CULTURES, AND BELIEF SYSTEMS.

Archeologists exploring a cave in Spain made waves in 2016 when they found evidence of what may be the world's earliest known religious service: A series of hearths, blackened by fire, surrounded the remains of a Neanderthal toddler. Each hearth contained an antler. Nearby lay the skull of a rhinoceros.

As expedition leader Enrique Baquedano, director of the Regional Archaeological Museum of Madrid, explained to his colleagues at the time, these findings indicated that, some 40,000 years ago, humanity's ancestors designated a specific place to mourn and remember the dead through ritual.

Still today, we live amid places of worship for denominations and faiths, from Adventists to Zoroastrians. We travel to see the cathedrals of Europe, the Shinto shrines of Japan, the synagogues of Israel, and the great mosques of the Middle East. We ride past tiny clapboard churches on backcountry roads and pass big brick steeped edifices on city streets.

All seem to indicate that something in the human soul compels us to pay reverence to the Divine and to set aside a time and a place to do it.

Sacred spaces that enhance the experience of worship can range from "intimate" to "awe-inspiring," said church architect Eugene Barrington of Cumming, Ga. They foster the

feeling of connection to God, clergy, and fellow worshipers, making all "the difference between participating in worship and attending worship," he said.

The style of a church's building can reveal a congregation's perception of God as a mighty force above the world or a servant among the people, said Hank Houser, an Episcopal layman and Atlanta architect who specializes in churches.

"We sit in awe of a transcendent God in spaces that are generally very tall and where we feel small," he said. "The procession is considered a journey toward a destination."

"Churches that reflect God's imminence tend to be more horizontal... the seating is more circular. A worshiper might catch glimpses of God's presence in other people's lives. The emphasis is on coming together as a community to glorify God," he said.

While denominations may have general characteristics in common, each congregation is different, said architect Barrington. "Churches are as unique as people are."

Susan J. White, a professor at Brite Divinity School, in an essay called "Can We Talk About Sacred Space?" wrote that a church can be considered sacred when it "has been, is now, and (God willing) will continue to be used by

PREVIOUS SPREAD Participants prepare to process on Sunday morning at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross in Decatur.

faithful Christian people who are striving to live according to the gospel, who gather to hear the Word of God and to learn what it means to act upon it, who seek a ministry of reconciliation and who seek to draw the cathedral into that ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. It is a sacred space because it has aligned itself to the powerless by giving sanctuary to those in trouble. It is sacred space because all of these things together make it a valid sign, an authentic witness to the sacrificial self-giving love of God for the world."

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### THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY FAMILY

*Jasper*

The Rev. George Yandell can always tell when a hawk flies by during his homily. A hundred and fifty pairs of eyes suddenly shift in unison to the clear glass window that rises nearly three stories behind the altar, a synchronized sea of heads turning to follow the flight pattern.

Even without the wildlife, the view from the Church of the Holy Family, Rev. Yandell's church, is striking. On a clear day, Sharp Top Mountain is visible in the distance.

Nature's distractions "are just part of the game," said the rector. "I'm used to it."

The Church of the Holy Family in Jasper, at the Southern end of the Blue Ridge Mountains, feels as if it grew organically in a clearing amid a forest. In some ways it did.

Exposed wood and stone reflect the elements that surround the building, and the clear glass windows on three sides of the building bring the outdoors inside. Needlepoint kneeler pads depict the flora and fauna of the area—a

parishioner might take communion on a rabbit, an owl, or a duck—and the baptismal font looks like a tree trunk. Windows on one side look out on a field with a plaque commemorating the Cherokee who once played recreational games there.

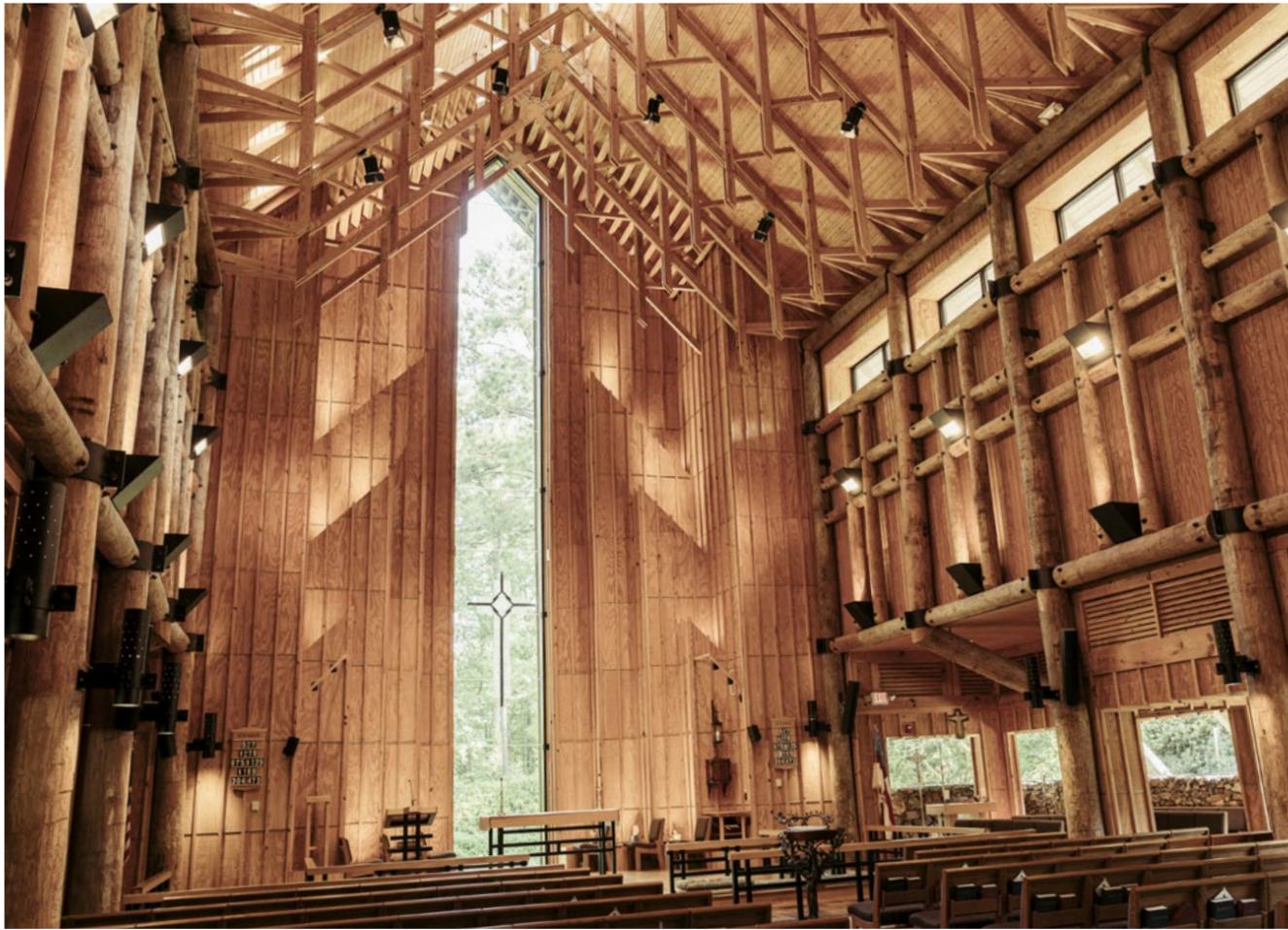
The church has purposefully left that patch of land undeveloped. "We try not to disturb it, to honor them," said Andy Edwards, a member of the church's grounds committee.

Cherokees were forcibly removed from the area in 1838 and relocated to what is now Oklahoma, in a 1000-mile journey on foot known as the Trail of Tears. A small remnant stayed behind or returned to the Southeast.

A desire to recognize the Native American heritage of the area also played a role in the design of the building itself. Although the sanctuary design is in the cruciform, or Latin cross, Gainesville, Georgia, architect M. Garland Reynolds Jr. incorporated elements of the longhouse—a large rectangular space shared by several families, though this is actually more typical of tribes in the northeastern part of the country. Round wooden columns down the sides of the sanctuary call to mind the poles that held up the bark roof of the longhouse.

"Some people think it looks like Noah's ark," said longtime member Carolyn Williams, 74.

For personal meditation for anyone who wants to come, the 40 acres of churchyard at Holy Family offer a labyrinth, a fountain garden, and 2.8 miles of hiking trails, one with rustic stations of the cross along the way. On a summer day, the towering pines and poplars offer respite from the beating sun, and birdsong fills the air. There's even a pond where people from ▶



► the community occasionally come to fish. Deer and wild turkeys share the land.

Holy Family draws members from several surrounding counties including residents of the resort communities of Bent Tree, Big Canoe, and The Preserve. It was founded in 1986 by a small group of Episcopalians who had no nearby place to worship. They met at various places around town, including a funeral home, before buying the current site, about 2½ miles from Jasper, a town of almost 4,000 in north Georgia.

“The funeral home was the best deal,” said church member Edwards. “The guy that owned that took care of us. He even furnished coffee.”

The congregation bought eleven acres of its property in about 1991. When adjacent property

became available, the church postponed plans for a sanctuary and education building to buy the additional land.

Besides the church building, which was dedicated in 2002, there’s a conference center that is used by the larger community for yoga classes, music practice, quilting parties, and day camps. Another building—“Pete’s Porch”—hosts Alcoholics Anonymous meetings almost daily and was the home of a food pantry that outgrew its space and now operates in downtown Jasper with the support of other churches. Holy Family also founded an emergency children’s shelter, a counseling center, and a medical clinic, which have become communitywide enterprises. Annual barbecues and low-country boils sponsored by the church as fundraisers for outreach projects have become popular features on the Pickens County calendar.

**ABOVE** The architecture of Holy Family Episcopal Church near Jasper, Georgia, combines clear glass windows with building materials from nature for a sense of worship as an integral part of God’s creation.

The church is there for worship and succor for Episcopalians in the area, for neighbors in need, and for anyone who just wants a walk in the woods.

“It’s a blessed place,” Edwards said. “It really is a Holy Family.”

## HOLBROOK CAMPGROUND

*Alpharetta*

For most of the year, Holbrook Campground lies deserted—rustic brown cabins scattered, silent, and empty around a field with a pavilion in the center. But in midsummer, it springs to life like the mystical village Brigadoon in the old Broadway musical.

Streams of worshipers, from grannies and grandpas to toddlers, set up in the cabins, known as “tents” (from the days when families actually camped), and make their way to the pavilion, called the “tabernacle.” They hug and back-slap, chatter and laugh with friends they may not have seen since the year before.

## “WHAT THIS PLACE MEANS IS COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION.”

— *Rev. Glenn Hannigan*

When the Rev. David Laycock, pastor of Macedonia United Methodist Church, located across the road from camp, is finally able to call his flock to order, their voices fill the night air with the rhythm of old hymns, chosen from the *Heavenly Highway* hymnal, published in 1956. Toes tap on the sawdust floors as the music accelerates with lively accompaniment

by piano and electric organ. “Revive us again,” the people sing, as if they mean it literally.

Cardboard fans, courtesy of two nearby funeral homes, are spaced out on the pews, but no one needs them on this opening service evening. The air is cooled by rain, which dampens the grass and pitter-pats on the tin roof, and by ceiling fans that spin quietly from the wooden beams above.

July is camp meeting season in Georgia, squeezed historically between planting and harvest, the only stretch of time that farmers could get away from their fields. The Holbrook camp in Cherokee County has been meeting since 1839, when, so the story goes, blacksmith Jesse Holbrook was paid for shoeing horses with 40 acres of land, and then turned around and sold it to local Methodists for \$20 an acre. A few counties away, Salem, in Newton County, is a few years older.

Camp meetings have been a part of the American landscape since the late 18th century, imported to the colonies by Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland, many of whom settled in the South. In Methodist circles, circuit-riding preachers would spread the word about services.

“There’s history here,” said the Rev. Glenn Hannigan, opening night preacher at Holbrook. “What this place means is community and connection.”

Drawing upon the Gospel of Mark’s account of a man who has been paralyzed, whose friends lower him through the roof of a house to be healed by Jesus, the Rev. Hannigan talks about the crucial importance of relationships. “The Lord intends for us to have a heart for others,” he said.

Inspirational and moving sermons like Hannigan’s are one reason Anne Pyle Atkins has never missed a Holbrook camp meeting in all her 61 years. ►

► Atkins' grandparents married at Holbrook during a camp meeting 100 years ago. As a child, little Anne chased lightning bugs, caught frogs, swung in tire swings, tossed water balloons, and rode bicycles around the campground—all idyllic activities she sees children still partaking in today. As a preteen, she committed herself to Christianity during an altar call at Holbrook.

Every year, Atkins reconnects with friends from those early days. Her family "tent" was rebuilt in 1997, raised from one story to two, the sawdust floor exchanged for cement. When her children, Austin, 26, and Hannah, 21, were teenagers, the one-bathroom cabin sometimes held as many as 18 of their friends. Sometimes hosting that many teenagers under one roof could be a chore, she confesses, but perhaps all the hassle was worth it, as today many of those teens still attend as adults.

Anne said she and her husband, Gary, keep coming back because "this is very much holy ground, and there's a sense of peace here. It's an opportunity to soak in and feel like you're sitting at the feet of Jesus for a week. You can't do that in everyday life. Or most of us don't."

## ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH

Milledgeville

On a hot summer's day, Mary and Dan O'Connor, touring the South from Dayton, Ohio, have found themselves in the nave of an old Episcopal church that they discovered through a AAA book. They were drawn to this place by the guidebook's dramatic tale about Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's troops.

The story goes that St. Stephen's Church, which was constructed in 1843, was co-opted for use as a barracks for the 107th New York Infantry during Sherman's March to the Sea, in November of 1864. Soldiers burned the

pews for warmth and vandalized the organ by pouring molasses on its workings. When the troops blew up a nearby arsenal, it obliterated the church's then-flat roof and its windows.

The O'Connors sat enrapt. "We love history," Dan said.

## "IT'S IMPORTANT FOR AN OLD CHURCH TO STILL BE ALIVE." — Carol Grant

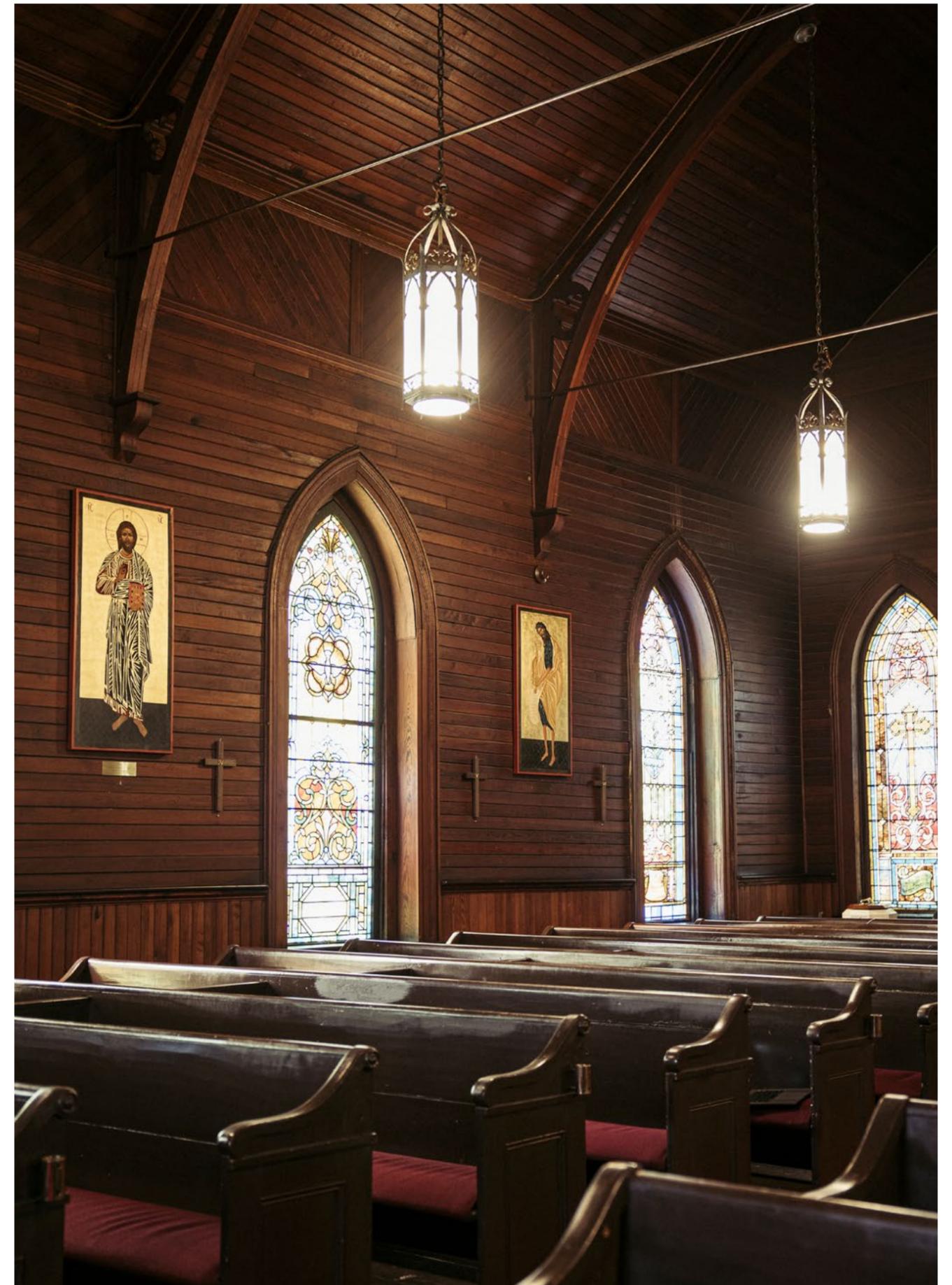
Today, the rebuilt St. Stephen's is an exquisite example of the style known as "carpenter Gothic," a North American variation with wood construction instead of stone but featuring pointed arches, steep gables, and towers.

Most of the chancel furniture was built from walnut lumber over a decade by communicant John Wilcox, beginning in 1874. Wilcox's great-great-grandson is a current parishioner.

As for the organ, the pipes were cleaned of molasses, but it is said that the quality of sound never recovered. In 1909, the 11-year-old daughter of the church organist, a girl named Nylic Bland, decided to take matters in hand. Nylic's name was an acronym of New York Life Insurance Company, her father's employer. She decided that if New Yorkers had damaged the organ, as they did in the fall of 1864, then New Yorkers should repair it. She wrote a letter to her father's boss, the head of the company, and he graciously responded with a telegram: "Buy an organ. Send me the bill."

Of course, the church today is much more than its past. "It's a vital church," said Carol Grant, whose children are fourth-generation members. She lists activities for children, college ►

OPPOSITE Dorothy Brown, a retired art professor at Georgia College and State University, created the icons hanging in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Milledgeville, where she is a parishioner.





**OPPOSITE TOP LEFT**

St. Stephen's was built in 1841 with a flat roof that was destroyed when a nearby arsenal was blown up during the Civil War. The pointed roof was added during subsequent repairs.

**OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT** Carol Grant is a lifetime member of St. Stephen's.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**

St. Stephen's is a regular stop on historic tours of Milledgeville, the capital of Georgia from 1804 until 1868.

► students, and older adults, as well as services for people in need. “It’s important for an old church to still be alive,” she said.

“I feel closer to God here,” said senior warden Mildred Brazley. “It’s security.”

Meanwhile, the church makes an interesting stop on the city tour. Out-of-towners like to be shown where the Civil War soldiers’ horses left their hoofprints in the floor.

## WHITWORTH PRISON

*Hartwell*

Chaplain Cynseria Jenkins’ congregation files into a concrete-block gymnasium, wearing identical khaki pants and shirts marked “Georgia Department of Corrections.” But as service begins, the drab surroundings at Whitworth Women’s Facility, a prison near the northeast corner of Georgia, slowly morph into a church filled with light and rejoicing.

Jenkins stands under a basketball goal, praise music blaring from a nearby boombox, and tells her parishioners to rise up, stand on their feet, and shake out the tension. They laugh, clap, and do as she says. Soon, they are enthusiastically singing along with the recording—“God my creator; God my leader...” Many carry notebooks and Bibles. Some fan themselves with papers.

Jenkins calls out the scripture and some stand for the reading from Psalm 103. The service is active and alive. “Bless the Lord, O my soul... who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit...” It is a message of hope, a promise that good can come, even to these 442 women doing time.

Jenkins moves on to the story from the book of Acts about a blind Saul/Paul, who had perse-

cuted Christians and was challenged by God. He had to go through the darkness before he could live in the light, she explains.

In the beginning, she reminds them, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and the darkness moved away.” God, she assures them, can do the same in their lives. She takes the name of the prison, Whitworth, and transforms it into Women of Worth.

Among her congregants is a mother of three, 31 years old, incarcerated for involuntary manslaughter because, she said, “I was hanging around with the wrong crowd.” She’s taking theology courses offered on the prison campus by New Orleans Baptist Seminary, because she says she feels called to counsel youth and women who have been abused once she gets out of prison.

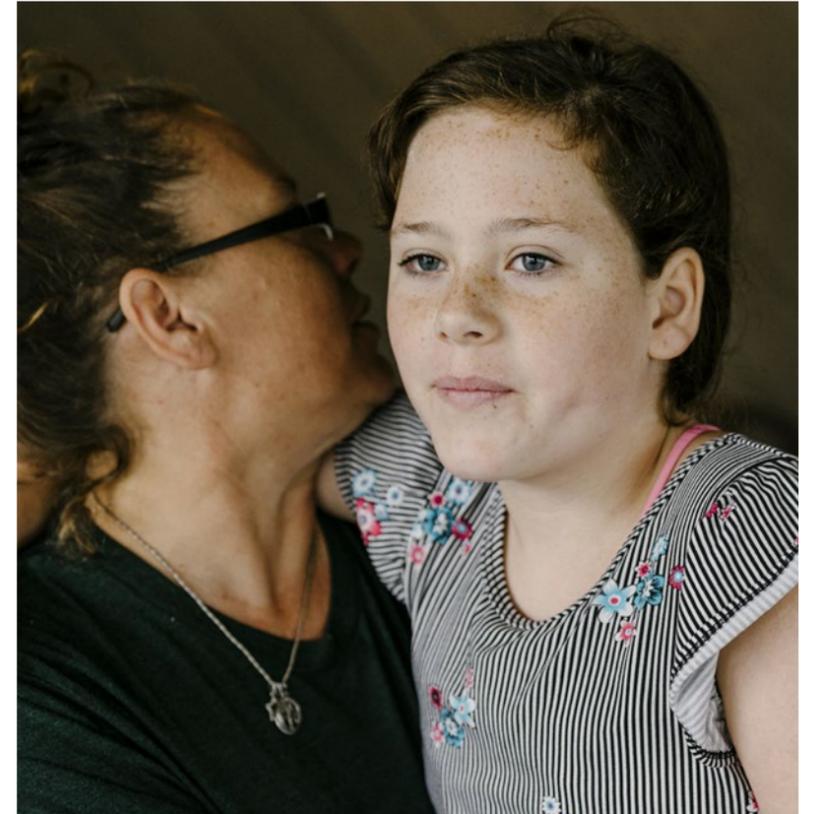
“The best thing about the service is that it gets me away from the things I focus on that keep me depressed,” she said. “I worry about what my kids are dealing with at home.” Concentrating on shaping a life outside these walls, she said, “keeps me closer to God.”

Another inmate, 42, is here at Whitworth for a second time after violating probation by using drugs. “I want to show my kids I can do better,” she said.

She clutches a letter she received a few days earlier from her 13-year-old daughter, who had been so angry with her for landing in prison again that the daughter hadn’t been in touch for two years. Tears stream down the woman’s face. “She told me she was sorry,” she said. She tucks the letter into the pages of her Bible for safekeeping.

Another woman, only 24, is also in prison for a second time, for assault. Although she said she found God in prison during her first stint, she said that “something was missing.” ►





► Incarceration is only the latest chapter in what has so far been a trouble-filled life. She was abandoned by alcoholic parents at 10 years old and gave birth to a daughter at age 13. She believes that this time, when she is released, she will stay free.

“Babe, I’ve done grew up on the inside,” she swears. “The sermon today, about light in the darkness, spoke to me.”

Chaplain Jenkins, “Chap” to the women, said she herself has known brokenness and hurt. Though she was never arrested and never struggled with addiction, that doesn’t mean that bad things haven’t occurred in her life. “Brokenness, hurt, some of the things they’ve been through, I’ve been through too.”

Jenkins finishes the service with a prayer. “Give them light, Lord,” she entreats. “Give them light that they can see, see what you would have them do, see your movement in their lives.” And the church resounds with “Amen.”

## BOAT CHURCH

*Lake Rabun*

You could call them Boaterians, or maybe just Boatists, these congregants who gather upon the glimmering waters of Lake Rabun each Sunday morning from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day. They skim their way to services in pontoon boats, ski boats, kayaks, canoes, even an occasional Jet Ski, to float with their neighbors in worship.

The mirror effect of the water’s surface multiplies the beauty of the surrounding hills and the houses tucked back in the trees. Ripples lap the shore in the wake of the watercraft.

Singles, couples, and whole families with dogs sit in their boats—about 40 of them speckling the surface—while about 70 landlubbers perch on backless benches in a boathouse and a scattering more sit on towels or folding chairs on

ABOVE LEFT During the summer months, many vacationers of various denominations attend Boat Church on Lake Rabun in north Georgia.

ABOVE CENTER Some people with homes on Lake Rabun and nearby Clayton worship on benches in a boathouse, overlooking their fellow congregants and worship leaders on the lake.

ABOVE RIGHT Boat church draws multiple generations of people and even a few pets.

**“THIS IS A SPECTACULAR WAY TO WORSHIP GOD; TO HEAR GOD’S WORD ECHOING ACROSS THIS MAGNIFICENT CREATION.”**

— Frank Lastra

the bank. The minister, musicians with guitars and a keyboard, and a youth choir conduct the service from a big boat in front of the boathouse.

“Some weeks the youth do better than others,” explains the Rev. Jerry Noffsinger, associate pastor of Clayton First United Methodist Church. “Today is good.” Participating youth are rewarded after the service with snacks and free swimming until noon.

In its earliest days, this church took its aquatic service directly to its congregants, with a preacher traveling from dock to dock in a boat.

Boat church in its present form evolved when the church acquired a barge made of four oil cans with boards strapped to the top, powered by a small motor. Sound was piped through a public address system rigged up to a car battery.

Betty and Guy Hall, a couple in the church, donated their boathouse for people who wanted to come in cars, and the first “land-and-sea” (or lake) service was held Memorial Day weekend in 1972.

A donated pontoon boat eventually replaced the old barge, and a series of more effective ►



OPPOSITE TOP Youth (and young at heart) from Clayton United Methodist Church who help lead worship services on Lake Rabun get to stay and enjoy the water after church.



► sound systems carried voices clearly into the boathouse and to the farthest boats. Brief printed bulletins tell the order of service, and stapled songbooks with a few old hymns are available for worshipers on land. Each segment of the service is announced so the boaters can follow along.

On this early summer morning, with temperatures headed to the 90s, Rev. Noffsinger is preaching from the book of 1 Thessalonians. “Finally, brothers and sisters,” he reads, “we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God... you should do so more and more.”

Being righteous isn’t always easy, he said, but it comes easier and more naturally with practice. Drawing an analogy from his experience on the lake, he said living as God would want is like learning to water-ski. “Most of us crash,” he said, “but eventually you get up... if you try enough.”

After the benediction, boats line up to drop offerings into baskets on long poles extended by the youth. Boaters who can reach far enough over the lapping waves shake Noffsinger’s hand. Laura Rhodes, a Presbyterian, has been coming with her husband in their ski boat since buying a vacation home in the area about 15 years ago. They now live on the lake full time.

“You don’t have to get dressed up, don’t have to put makeup on,” she said. “You see children still in pajamas. It’s a way to worship without having to go very far.”

But, she said, “it’s also very spiritual, being on this beautiful lake with the majestic mountains in the background.”

Clayton resident Frank Lastra, a Methodist, watches from the boathouse. He’s been coming to boat church for about 20 years. “This is a spectacular way to worship God,” he said, “to hear God’s word echoing across this magnificent creation.”

## CHRIST CHURCH

Norcross

The simple, elegant sanctuary of Christ Church, or Iglesia De Cristo, in Norcross, is the home of one congregational body that worships in two languages. Both English and Spanish services draw people from various countries of origin—some from Africa and the Caribbean worshipping in English, and others from about a dozen Latin American countries worshipping in Spanish.

Senior warden Daphne Gray, 69, grew up Anglican in Jamaica. When she moved to Gwinnett County almost 30 years ago, she felt “extremely welcome,” she said. At the time, only a handful of international transplants were members, but that has changed dramatically over the years.

Gray now lives in Cobb County and teaches school at another church, but drives across the metro area to Norcross every Sunday. “I love the energy in the church,” she said, “I love the music. I like how the service is done. It’s such a comfortable feeling.”

“Comfortable” is also the first word that springs to mind for Yamileth Silva, 17, who attends the Spanish language service.

Two years ago, the church hosted Silva’s quinceañera, a Latina tradition celebrating a girl’s 15th birthday and passage into maturity—similar in theme to bat mitzvahs in the Jewish tradition, for girls turning 13 years old. “It’s a huge moment that is a landmark of your life,” she said. “Doing it in a place where I felt welcome and comfortable made it even more special.”

Rector Cecilia “Ceci” Duke, Associate Rector Irma “Mimi” Guerra, and Deacon Letty Guevara strive to make the two congregations feel ►

► like one church. The Rev. Duke calls the team “the three amigas.”

“I think when I first came here, the Spanish service was viewed as more of a mission,” she said. Ten years later, she said, “It’s more one parish.”

Letty and Mimi participate in the 10:30 a.m. English service; Ceci, in turn, is part of the 1 p.m. Spanish service. The two services are similar except that an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a depiction of the Virgin Mary as Mother of the Americas, is placed beside the altar for 1 p.m. worship.

Just as many participants in both services have forged new lives in a new country, the church itself has built a new identity. The building that is now home to the parish used to be owned by a Baptist congregation. When the Baptists left, about 20 years ago, Christ Church relocated from a smaller building a short distance away.

To tailor their current home to the Episcopal liturgy and make the church more accessible from the parking lot, designers flipped the sanctuary, putting the altar where the entrance used to be and the narthex where the Baptists had their pulpit. There’s now a big arch on the wall behind the altar, and builder and parishioner Bo O’Kelley with his team built arches and routed Celtic crosses over the clear glass windows.

Another parishioner, a woodworker, built the lectern and crafted a big wooden mahogany cross that is now suspended behind the altar.

Outside, the Episcopalians added a rise in the roofline with a cross on top, some large metal framework in the shape of an arch, and memorial gardens, which were recently redone.

“It definitely gave it a more Episcopal feel,” O’Kelley said.

On a summer Sunday morning, the Rev. Duke stood in the very Episcopal-feeling sanctuary to address the congregation. She told of her childhood refuge, a hemlock tree in the yard of her family home. She urged her flock to “find your evergreen tree—your place of quiet refuge—your time and space to be in the Divine Presence.”

Yamileth Silva wasn’t in the pews for Rev. Duke’s sermon that particular day, but she had already found her place of refuge. It is the church itself. Sunday at Christ Church, she said, “is a break from a chaotic world.”

## HOLY CROSS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Decatur*

The architectural style may be “church in the round,” but the Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross is technically an octagon. The altar and lectern sit in the center, surrounded by pews. Posts and beams form four arches under the tall ceiling. Sunlight streams through a small skylight in the center of the sacred space, illuminating a cross suspended over the altar, and multihued panels of glass infuse the salmon brick walls with jewel tones.

Worshippers can enter from several points along a hallway that surrounds the sanctuary—a fitting metaphor for the different ways people have arrived at this Decatur church over the years.

In its earliest days, Holy Cross’ congregation was white; then integration and white flight shifted it to majority African American. In recent years, immigrants hailing from Africa and the Caribbean have joined the fellowship. Today, its membership includes black, white, brown, native-born, and newly arrived.

As they gather for worship, congregants share smiles, looking into one another’s faces across ►

OPPOSITE Holy Cross in Decatur was built as a “church in the round,” a controversial decision at the time but now a feature that is well loved by present-day parishioners.



► the space instead of at the backs of heads. That's the blessing of this configuration, said the Rev. Dennis Patterson, Jr., the priest in charge. And when he's preaching, walking around the space as he does, he can read the responses on his parishioners' countenances and feel a direct connection.

When he arrived at Holy Cross three years ago, he found himself rethinking how to do liturgy for such a nontraditional space. One of the first dilemmas he faced was how the processional would work, without a long center aisle leading to an altar. (Solution: The procession enters through the main doors and glides halfway around the room, then marches into the center space from the back of the altar.)

By now, Patterson said, he has adapted to the space, and preaching in the round feels completely normal.

Holy Cross was founded 65 years ago as a mission of Holy Trinity Church in Decatur. The first worship services were held at the old Southwest DeKalb High School. At the time, South DeKalb County was experiencing kudzu-like growth as a result of the post-World War II baby boom.

Rich's, the iconic Atlanta department store, opened its first suburban store at nearby Belvedere shopping center, and some schools would go into double sessions every day to accommodate the children while new buildings were under construction.

From the high school, the church moved to its current plot of land, worshipping in an old government surplus building nicknamed "the barracks." In 1961, the congregation built its first official home of its own. By 1966, it was self-sustaining and became a full parish with its own rector.

The next year, plans for the current building with the octagonal sanctuary were revealed. Response was immediate and mixed. Some members were vocal in their preference for a

more traditional space. As the church history booklet, prepared for its 65th anniversary in 2019, described this transition: "The plans for the current sanctuary were not initially well received by the congregation when the architects shared their vision."

Despite some parishioners' misgivings, plans proceeded, and in 1971, the *Atlanta Constitution* (pre-*Journal* merger) featured a sizable photograph of the sanctuary, filled with worshipers, and the caption "Services In-the-Round."

**"IT'S INCLUSIVE, IT'S COMMUNAL, AND YOU DON'T HAVE A SENSE OF HIERARCHY."** — *Roland Wallace*

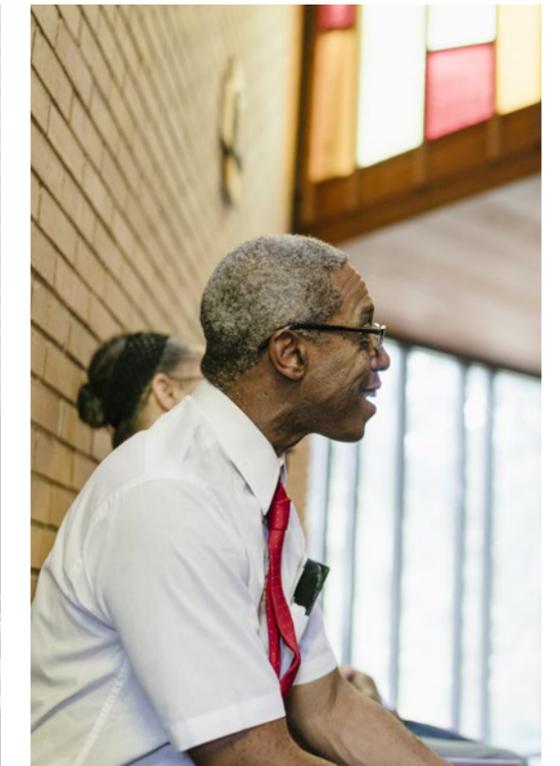
Both old-timers and newcomers now embrace and appreciate their worship space. Roland Wallace married into the church in 2011 and said the sanctuary was one of the first facets of Holy Cross that attracted him.

"It's inclusive, it's communal, and you don't have a sense of hierarchy," he said.

The setting seems especially fit for a congregation that proudly represents and welcomes such a diverse array of races, cultures, and nationalities.

Senior warden Karen Williams, who grew up Baptist and came to Holy Cross three decades ago, said she finds great meaning in facing other parishioners and experiencing the eucharist in the center of the sanctuary.

The ability to sit in different sections of the church and view the suspended cross from different perspectives makes Williams think about her faith in different ways. ►



OPPOSITE Worshipers at Holy Cross can enter from various portals around the sanctuary and sit at different angles from the altar.

► “Sometimes you see just a small rectangle, sometimes you see the whole thing,” she said. “I think about the people who saw the stations of the cross live. I think about Jesus carrying the cross, about his being crucified on it, about the soldiers bartering for his garments, and then the Roman soldier saying, ‘This is the Son of God.’”

Speaking and singing with different accents, sharing food and personal stories, the people of Holy Cross have formed a well-rounded community in this church-in-the-round.

“I think the different perspectives of the cross is a hidden sermon,” the senior warden said. So, too, with the different perspectives of Holy Cross.

## CHRIST CHURCH

*Macon*

The story of Christ Church in Macon is inextricably entwined with the complex history of Georgia and the South as a whole.

The “mother church” of the Diocese of Atlanta was located on land that had recently been taken from Muskogee (Creek) Native Americans; it accommodated separate worship spaces for enslaved African Americans and their white enslavers; when the Confederacy needed ammunition during the Civil War, it gave its bell to be melted into cannonballs; and, a century later, it hosted meetings to support the civil rights movement.

Today the Christ Church congregation is busy trying to live out its mission as a church that “gladly welcomes all people as we worship and serve our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.”

Episcopal missionary Lot Jones could never have imagined what the church would be like today. When he left the bustling port city of Savannah in 1825 for the new town of Macon on the Ocmulgee River in middle Georgia, Jones found a burgeoning community on territory that, until four years earlier, had been occupied by Creek Indians. The tribe, severely weakened in a war against Andrew Jackson’s troops, ceded and vacated its land in 1821.

Jones inspired local Episcopalians to establish the first church of any denomination in Macon, and within a few years they had raised \$400 to buy land at the corner of Walnut and Third Street. They constructed a building that opened in 1834 and called it Christ Church.

As Macon flourished, parishioners outgrew their first building, but remnants of it remain. When it was razed in 1851, bricks were saved for the new church, which is still in use.

The most prominent exterior feature of the current Gothic-style building is a large central tower “crowned with battlements and corner finials,” as described by John J. McKay, president of the Middle Georgia Historical Society, in a successful application for its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. McKay praised the stucco-over-masonry building for “unpretentious simplicity,” “judicious use of decoration,” and “unaffected dignity of its design.”

The sanctuary today is replete with mementos of the past. Parishioners walk under the same wooden arches and rest their feet on the same wide pine boards as those early members. Plaques bearing the names of Ayers, Ellis, and Cutter are reminiscent of the time when families had to rent their pews.

But there are also some shameful reminders of a bygone era. As in many Southern churches, enslaved African Americans were once confined to a gallery above the main worship space while their white enslavers worshipped below. And some of the church’s fine stained-glass windows were donated by parishioners who accumulated their wealth through the dehumanizing exploitation of slave labor.

Members acknowledge the church’s past, as the parish continues to move beyond it.

## “OUR CHALLENGE IS TO BALANCE OUR HISTORY WITH LOVING LIKE JESUS INTO THE FUTURE.”

— *Julie Groce*

Today the choir sits above the congregation in a section of what used to be the “slave gallery,” and people of different backgrounds worship joyfully side by side and work together in the church’s ministries.

“Our challenge is to balance our history with loving like Jesus into the future,” said church historian Julie Groce. “I think we represent the diversity of the Episcopal Church.”

One aspect of this movement toward an inclusive future has been the parish’s embrace of the LGBTQ+ community, and the heartfelt celebration of same-sex marriage. Hal Brickle

and Craig Bush recently tied the knot at Christ Church. Brickle said he had been hesitant to broach the question of a wedding because he and Bush would be the first gay couple to have a traditional ceremony in the sanctuary with all the usual accoutrements of organ, choir, and eucharist. But he and his husband received so much support from the entire congregation that he felt it “meant I was truly a member,” one who was fully accepted “as a whole person.”

The church has remained in its historic building downtown even as its membership has increasingly commuted in from different parts of the area. While generations of long-time families came because of tradition, they, and members who came later, are proud of the church’s willingness to address contemporary issues and needs.

“I find it enormously meaningful to worship here,” said Groce. “I’m so aware of the people who have come before us. But we really do embrace our role as a downtown church, with our service to the homeless and hungry. We have not chosen to move. We are still here.” ■

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## JOY IN THE SORROW

*Faith and Healing in Hard Times*



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# NOT ALL OF LIFE IS MARKED BY EASE, SUCCESS, OR JUBILANT CELEBRATION WITH THOSE WE LOVE. SOMETIMES A PROFOUND SENSE OF SORROW WASHES OVER THE SOUL AND LAYS IT BARE.

Sometimes a blaze of anger flares up as if to scorch God. Sometimes anxiety devours the days, or numbness dulls the senses, and life becomes a blur.

Every person reacts differently to grief and suffering, but rarely is the response to do as the psalmist instructed and “Lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing” (98:5) or “worship the Lord with gladness” (100).

When darkness obscures the light, when hearts break apart or families shatter, when disease looms or livelihoods vanish, it is psalms of lamentation that feel more authentic: “I have grown weary with my crying; my throat is inflamed; my eyes have failed from looking for my God” (69).

Or perhaps, when things get bad enough, the book of Job might feel closest to the truth: “And now my soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.”

Gail Davis, like Job, felt helpless and alone, even when surrounded by friends, after her son, George, killed himself in 2017. “When you lose somebody to suicide, there’s a time frame when you’re not sure you want to live anymore yourself,” she said.

Mary Lu Gunn “would rail at God” sometimes, after her husband, the Rev. Reginald Gunn, a retired Episcopal priest, was diagnosed with melanoma at Christmas in 2015. He had survived a kidney transplant several years earlier. “Here was a man of God, who’d known what

he wanted to do since childhood,” she said. “I was madder at God when he got sick than when he died. He was suffering.”

Steve Hadley “went into panic mode” when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2017. “Everything was going through my head,” he said. “My mortality was on the line.”

Gail, Mary Lu, and Steve all attended church services regularly throughout the worst of times. All found comfort in the familiarity of the liturgy and the fellowship of friends when life was in tumult.

“The steadfastness of weekly worship is a gift that God gives us in good times and in bad,” said the Rev. Katie Sundermeier, a Presbyterian pastor and executive director of the Samaritan Counseling Center of Atlanta, which provides spiritually integrated counseling, regardless of a client’s ability to pay.

“No matter how you feel when you go to church,” she said, “the Holy Spirit always meets you there.”

“Even at times when we feel dry spiritually, worship rituals remind us of other times we have experienced God, and of God’s faithfulness and love toward us,” said the Rev. Dr. Julia Gatta, Bishop Frank A. Juhan Professor of Pastoral Theology at the University of the South’s School of Theology.

“We come to God in our brokenness. This points us to the fact that we’re not self-sufficient. We need a savior. That’s what the gospel has been telling us all along.”

PREVIOUS SPREAD Steve Hadley found strength in worship and fellowship as he battled pancreatic cancer.

**ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER** || When Gail Davis and her husband, Orie, moved to be near their son, George, and his family, they transitioned from Christ Episcopal Church in Macon to Christ Episcopal Church in Norcross.

Life settled down in their new community—but not for long. Soon after they joined their new church, Orie was diagnosed with prostate cancer and began undergoing treatment. He died four years later.

In the meantime, Gail underwent major abdominal surgery for suspected cancer that turned out to be a false alarm, followed by rotator cuff surgery. “The church rallied around us, fed us, looked after us” during those crises, she said.

She was adjusting to widowhood, working her way through grief, and rebuilding her own health, when her daughter-in-law called late one evening.

George, Gail’s son, had disappeared. So had his gun. And he had left a note that suggested he might harm himself. Official word came from the police in the middle of the night. George was dead.

“That’s the worst thing I’ve ever been through,” Gail said. “You never know why somebody takes their own life. I think he was just taking care of everybody else and didn’t know how to ask for help.”

As word spread through the church, people came to bring food and offer comfort. Still, she said, “I felt lonesome, surrounded by a lovely congregation.”

She was angry with God and with George, whose daughter was about to graduate from high school and whose wife was weeks from completing her second year of seminary.

Christ Church Norcross’s rector, Cecilia “Ceci” Duke counseled her that “God gives us freedom, so it doesn’t make too much sense to be mad at God,” she said. But if you are, Rev. Duke added, “He’ll get over it.”

Through a support group for survivors of suicide at the Link Counseling Center, Gail said she came to understand that “when someone takes their life, they have gotten into such a bad place that they don’t think about what it will do to their family. They can’t see any other way out of the pain they’re in.”

She saw three possibilities for herself, she said: “Take my own life, pull the covers over my head, or put one foot in front of the other.” She chose the latter, and when people asked how she was doing, she answered simply, “I’m vertical.”

Through it all, she never missed a support group or a church service. “The ritual of our church is such stability for me,” she said. “It’s a reminder of what I believe every week. It’s like home base.”

Gail recently moved to Wichita, Kansas, to be near her stepchildren. One of her first tasks there was to find a church.

**STRUCTURING GRIEF THROUGH RITUAL** || Mary Lu Gunn held two memorial services for Reginald, her husband of 51 years. The first was at St. James Episcopal Church in Clayton, where they were attending just before he died. The second was in Americus, Georgia, where they lived before he retired.

Due to the blur that grief creates, Mary Lu can’t recall some details of the first service, except that “church people from all over showed up.” The wound was simply too fresh. “The second service was more celebratory, less funereal,” she said, thanks to some time and space that allowed her to process the loss. The services ▶

► were a major transition from abject loss to gratitude for time together.

Indeed, a funeral or memorial service brings people together, said Dr. Gatta, because “they give us a window into what really matters.”

“What worship does—particularly in the eucharist, but not only in the eucharist—is bring us in touch with the paschal mystery of Christ,” she said. “It gives us a way of experiencing suffering and grief as related to Christ’s own suffering.”

Familiar words from scripture and hymns are a reminder to those grieving that “other people have grieved before us and have gotten through this,” she said. “The liturgy itself creates a safe place for people to grieve. The structure of the liturgy, the fact that the community is there, allows people to express their grief and yet know it will not overwhelm them.”

The most effective memorial services recognize the heartache felt by those left behind, but offer the hope of eternity through an emphasis on resurrection, said the Rev. Sundermeier.

Mary Lu today said she’s determined now to continue celebrating her husband’s life. “I still enjoy things,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean there aren’t times when the waterworks come. The liturgy carries me through. The music carries me through. That’s my way of really being able to praise the Lord.”

She’s not angry with God anymore, she said, adding, “But there are times I tell the Lord I could still use Reg here.”

**STRENGTH IN NUMBERS** || Steve Hadley was prayed over formally and informally in 2017 while he was undergoing chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery for pancreatic cancer.

Friends visited him, laid hands on him, and prayed, and he attended some of the healing services held monthly at his church, St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church in Marietta.

Those services bore little resemblance to the stereotypical image left by televangelist programs where promises of unrealistic intervention abound. Instead, those were designed to give him the faith, comfort, and strength to face whatever awaited him.

“I didn’t ever get a bolt of lightning or anything like that,” Steve said. “But I did feel I was protected to have the love of the folks who were there.”

Steve and his wife, Susan, were eating breakfast with friends from church on a Sunday morning several months after his diagnosis when some good news arrived. His oncologist called to say that tests showed his tumor markers were down drastically. Another test revealed that they had dropped even more.

According to the American Cancer Society, the one-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer is only 20 percent.

Now, three years since those positive test results, Steve said he’s still living life on life’s terms, embracing the uncertainty. “We’ve developed a faith and don’t question why things happen,” he said. “We know that God’s with us at all times. This is the path we’re on. We do what we do.”

Part of what he and Susan do is to go to church, sharing in the community that has walked beside them through good times and bad.

**AND THERE WAS GOD** || Author and priest Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her book *An Altar in the World* that the world’s great Abrahamic religions arose from pain and suffering: Judaism from slavery and the Exodus; Christianity from Jesus’s ministry to the poor and oppressed, followed by his crucifixion and resurrection; Islam from Muhammad’s prayer for a solution to tribal warfare.

“Pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy,” she wrote. Even in happy times, sorrow lurks in the shadows.

“I can feel my heart filled with gratitude and joy, and at the same time recognize brokenness,” said the Rev. Sundermeier. “Joy and sorrow are inextricable.”

But if there’s sorrow in the joy, there may also be joy in the sorrow.

Librarian and author Mary Potter Kenyon, whose first book was about collecting and using discount coupons, turned to more somber matters after the deaths of her mother, her husband, and a grandson within the span of three years.

In *Refined by Fire*, Kenyon wrote: “In the midst of the darkness of loss, I found light... As I stumbled over the roots of hopelessness and despair, that light grew to illuminate my path... At some point in the journey I’d turned around, and there was God.”

The hope, the possibility, the firm conviction that God is there—that is reason enough to worship. ■

## ALIGHT WITH LOVE

*When faced with a devastating and sudden loss, Shelby and Georgia White found solace in the simplicity of practicing worship and the comfort of community.*

**SEPTEMBER 11 IN THE UNITED STATES IS A DAY OF NATIONAL GRIEF.** But for Shelby and Georgia White, the anniversary of that horrific day is also deeply personal: It’s the day Adam died.

Adam, their son, was 26, working for the financial firm Cantor Fitzgerald on the 101st floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center when the planes hit.

While many people in Atlanta and across the country remember the stunned horror of watching the attack and its aftermath on television, Shelby and Georgia had just one thought: get ahold of Adam. They frantically tried to reach him, or to reach someone who might know his whereabouts.

Shelby had begun dating Georgia when his son Adam was four, and Adam was seven when they married. Georgia loved Adam immediately and raised him as her own son. The two of them were proud of Adam’s adventurous spirit and professional achievements as he grew into adulthood. He went on climbing expeditions to Kilimanjaro and

Everest, bringing Buddhist prayer flags back from Nepal. And in his two and a half years on the job, he had developed computer innovations for his firm and had a patent pending in September 2001.

Then, everything shattered.

All efforts to reach Adam or find out whether he had escaped the tower were fruitless, but the Whites weren’t ready to surrender hope. They knew that cell phone service was overburdened with New Yorkers trying to call out and people around the world trying to get through to loved ones in the city, just as they were.

When they felt they had done all they could, Shelby and Georgia went to a prayer service at their church, the Cathedral of St. Philip. Both were active members there and hoped to find some comfort amid their panic and fear.

Dean Sam Candler stood near them in the crowded sanctuary and, after the service, embraced them. The dean was wearing white vestments,



Georgia recalled, so when he reached out his arms, he looked like a big white dove.

Days later, Dean Candler would travel to New York on behalf of Shelby and Georgia and bring back some gravel-sized particles from the World Trade Center site. Recovery and identity of remains was painstaking, slow, and uncertain, so many families settled for bits of rubble as a tangible representation of their loved one.

On September 29, still with no news about Adam and their hopes of finding him alive all but vanished, Georgia and Shelby held a funeral service for their son, which filled the majestic cathedral. They chose a reading from Isaiah (“They shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities”) and sang “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.”

“The service was uplifting,” Shelby said. “It was almost like a national day of patriotism.”

“It was meaningful to me how many people were there,” Georgia said. “Even the balcony was full.”

Later they scattered the gravel in some of Adam’s favorite places, one of which was Grayton Beach in northwest Florida. As she dispersed the rubble standing in for ashes of her son who wasn’t coming home ever again, Georgia, overcome with grief, couldn’t seem to stop screaming, “Why? Why? Why?”

Five years would elapse before they would get the official confirmation of what they already knew—that Adam had been killed. Some bone fragments were identified as Adam’s through DNA testing.

By then, their marriage of 22 years had ended. Georgia believed Adam’s death played a role. “When you are married and something tragic happens, you need comfort, security, loving arms around you,” she said at the time. “But when you both feel the same, the other person cannot give you that support.”

With the few ashes that were known to be part of Adam, they held another service, this time a private one.

Eighteen years later, in a seating area of the cathedral, they reflected on their faith, and on the friendship they have maintained, even after divorce. They said they never blamed God for Adam’s death, but they did—and do still—wonder why he had to die.

They attended services regularly throughout the doubt, the despair, and the sadness, and they still come here regularly for worship.

Georgia said she “melted into a puddle” every time she set foot in the cathedral. But nonetheless she returned again and again.

“I love the Episcopal Church,” she said. “I can go anywhere in the country and the services are going to be the same. That’s comforting.”

Shelby said that, while he doesn’t think he has personally changed much since the loss of Adam, he has ramped up his volunteering with the church, including serving on the funeral guild.

Both appreciated that fellow parishioners acknowledged their pain and expressed their sympathy, and even people they didn’t know went out of their way to offer condolences. A photography shop that copied a picture of Adam refused to take payment. So did the company that printed the hundreds of thank-you notes they ordered.

Shelby and Georgia say they appreciate that people call them and write them every September 11. “I don’t want people to forget,” Georgia said.

Every Sunday when she arrives to usher at the early service, she lights a candle for Adam—the one at the center of the back row. Adam was a leader and would like that one, she said.

“I get here early,” she said, “so I can pick the one I want.” ■

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