

FOR ALL THE SAINTS
The First Hundred Years of
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Francisco
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INTRODUCTION

One Hundred Years in The Haight-Ashbury

Just off the sidewalk, tucked between taller structures in a narrow but much-trafficked residential block, the building was – until a recent renovation – quite easy to miss, a fact which led one rector to install a distinctly un-Anglican neon sign announcing its presence. Yet, since the early years of the last century, All Saints' Episcopal Church has been a place of worship and service in the heart of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district.

Not surprisingly, the life of All Saints' over the past one hundred years has reflected the sometimes dramatic cultural changes affecting the Haight during that period. From its founding in 1903 through the 1950s, All Saints' was a fairly typical Episcopalian congregation of the time: middle class, Caucasian, with a clear, if more often than not unspoken, sense of its roots in historic British Christianity. Then, in the 1950s, as neighborhood demographics began to shift, the parish slowly became more diverse. Indeed, a number of the African-Americans who joined All Saints' at that time remain to this day, and were among the few members to stand by the parish through the difficult decade of the 1970s, when the church came perilously close to being closed for lack of congregants, funding and perceived viability.

The decline of the 1970s was triggered in the late 1960s, when the corner of Haight and Ashbury, only a block and a half from the church door, became a destination for thousands of young Americans "turning on and tuning out" in the media-hyped Summer of Love. All Saints', under the enthusiastic if sometimes incautious direction of Rector Leon Harris, opened its facilities to the flower children. With Harris' blessing, the Diggers, an anarchic counter-cultural collective, made All Saints' undercroft and kitchen the headquarters for its free food and clothing distribution activities, as well as various ad hoc programs of political activism. Some parishioners protested the presence of the hippies, but Father Harris was adamant. "[A] congregation of members of Christ's Holy Church is not a private club which exists to make its members comfortable" was only one of numerous sound bites that gained the always quotable priest media imprimatur as "the patron saint of the Haight-Ashbury."

As the Summer of Love crashed and burned in the drug-riddled horrors that blighted the Haight in the late '60s and early '70s, All Saints' reeled into precipitous decline. Nonetheless, its people continued to attempt to minister to the needs of their neighbors in the Haight. Their efforts included at various times a shelter for homeless

men, a senior center, and a free nursery for neighborhood children (in response to this last endeavor, one local broadsheet of the period warned young hippie – and presumably vegetarian – mothers to “keep in mind” that the well-meaning Episcopalian ladies “will feed the babies meat”). Despite such outreach, however, the congregation continued to shrink until only a handful of stalwarts remained. Led by a circle of spiritually powerful matriarchs, these faithful few continued to gather for worship in the now visibly aging Arts and Crafts redwood gem, its beauty only somewhat marred by a clumsy stucco façade put in place in 1949 (faux-Tudor embellishments were added later) and an eccentric collection of ecclesiastical kitsch lovingly gathered by Father Harris over the years of his incumbency.

Following Harris’ retirement in 1971, the parish suffered a demoralizing series of relatively brief priestly assignments. By 1979, Bishop of California C. Kilmer Myers was seriously weighing the option of closing All Saints’ and selling the property. It was at this point that Neil B. Little, an Episcopal layman and member of Christ Church, Sausalito, became convinced that, by looking beyond strictly geographic parochial boundaries, a new and diverse community of spiritual seekers could be attracted to the parish. Supported by Bishop Myers, but fueled initially by little more than his own unflagging personal enthusiasm, Little began to draw in new members, many of them lesbian and gay Christians seeking a welcoming home within the Anglican communion. Slowly, what had appeared to be a dying community began to show encouraging signs of life. A major step in this process of revitalization was the calling of the Rev. Lloyd Prator as Priest-in-Charge (later rector) in 1979. Father Prator’s richly-grounded mix of practical and pastoral skills was a perfect match for the parish’s increasingly diverse community.

But in the midst of this renewal, All Saints’ found itself confronted by a new and devastating crisis: the onset of AIDS and HIV disease. A number of beloved members, as well as numerous friends of the parish, were lost to the epidemic. Indeed, for All Saints’, the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-’90s became an extended season of mourning. When, in 1988, Father Prator accepted a call to St. John’s Church in New York City’s Greenwich Village, his successor, the Rev. Kenneth Schmidt, came to a community harrowed by grief and loss. As a result, a primary focus of Father Schmidt’s ministry in its early years was leading the congregation in ministering to the sick and the dying, and sustaining those who survived through a spirituality of lament and holy, healing grief. This particular focus was given concrete expression in 1995 by the installation of Louise Lieber’s shrine to St. Michael, Defender of the Defenseless. Set at the back of the parish garden, this sculptural fountain stands as a memorial to all those who have died of AIDS.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, with new medical protocols and greater awareness of prevention strategies, the immediacy of the practical and spiritual crisis created by AIDS began to lessen for the parish, although All Saints’ continues to remember AIDS fatalities each year in a special memorial service on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. At the same time, a subtle but significant shift in parochial demographics and focus began to evolve. Whereas the All Saints’ community had, in

the 1980s and early '90s, been made up primarily (though by no means exclusively) of single people or individuals whose partners did not participate in parish life, many of them living at some distance outside the parochial boundaries, the new millennium saw an increase in neighborhood couples – gay and straight – and, with them, for the first time in decades, young children.

One of San Francisco's "Historic Anglo-Catholic Parishes"

Although current parish literature refers to All Saints' as one of the City's "historic Anglo-Catholic parishes," such a description is somewhat misleading. To be sure, at one hundred years of age, the parish is – at least by California standards – historic. But All Saints' began its life as a staunchly Protestant expression of Episcopalian piety. It was not until the late 1940s that Father Harris introduced Anglo-Catholic worship and spirituality into the parish – and did so, according to parish legend at any rate, in the space of a single week.

At its centenary, All Saints' continues to grow and evolve as a community of faith. While maintaining certain of its Anglo-Catholic traditions, it has modified or discarded others. While continuing the traditional Anglo-Catholic emphasis on social service (as well as Father Harris' commitment to the street people of the Haight) through the Saturday brunch program of its Haight-Ashbury Community Services program, which feeds several hundred people each weekend, it finds the volunteer staff for that program now hailing from several area churches, as well as from the ranks of its own parishioners. While remaining constant in its affirmation of the church as a community of faith, not just a collection of individual worshipers, it remains sensitive to the needs of those who might be discomfited by the more robust forms of welcome afforded visitors to many Episcopal churches today. As has been noted in more than one sermon in recent years, newcomers to All Saints' are free to find their own unique place in the congregation (and to do so in their own time) without the pressure of community expectation.

The history of All Saints' is, finally, the history of individual believers in a particular place, a particular neighborhood, determined to build and maintain a community of worship and service, a local expression of that transhistorical mystery we call the Church, the Body of Christ. They are clergy and laity, women and men, adults and children. Of some we know a great deal. Of others we can only cobble together fragments from parish and public records. But each of these individuals is a vital part of the composite history of this congregation, this parish now over a century old, this particular breaking forth of the Kingdom of God that is always in our midst.