

A home for St. Paul *in Wesley Chapel*



When St. Paul's Episcopal Church Senior Warden Dr. Jeanette Rollins drove by a small sign advertising a "Wesley Chapel Episcopal Church" start-up on Route 301 in rapidly-developing Pasco County, she was sure that she needed to do something.

"I had a calling and a desire in my heart to reach out, and say yes; this is something my body needs to do," said Rollins. What Rollins didn't realize was that three years later, she would ultimately be saying yes to a position as senior warden of the newly elected bishop's committee of an Episcopal Church start up. Not only would it be a part of only a handful of new church starts across the Episcopal Church, but it was groundbreaking in that the last new church in the Diocese of Southwest Florida was in 1999, with the founding of Iona-Hope in Ft. Myers.

"I don't consider myself a procrastinator," said Rollins, who is by day, a nurse practitioner. In the past, she admits, had not always been able to respond so completely. She had attended other Episcopal churches in the area, but because of her life, she had not always had the time, or energy to lead. In the past, she said she was always willing to go, but instead preferred just to do like so many and "go in and get my spiritual food, and leave."

Over the months, and through a move, expansion, and coronavirus, she has taken on more responsibility, along with the dozens of other members that now call St. Paul's their church home. "Our body tells us everything we need, whether spiritual, physical or psychological," said Rollins, who grew up attending Grace Episcopal Church in Jamaica, N.Y., until she left New York City. At Grace, she had been involved through her childhood, as an acolyte, and youth.

"The Episcopal Church is what I know," said Rollins. "It's a part of who I am."

The sandstone steeple of her childhood church on Long Island is among the oldest on Long Island, founded in 1702. Although there was no long history, old building, or historic organ in the service she first encountered in the Wesley Chapel Savannah office park, there was a familiar liturgy and hymns, and a traditional way of worship that spoke to Rollins in the present.

The church is located in a fairly new suburban office court; their next-door neighbor, until they leased the space, was a noisy dance studio. As the church has grown, they have added gothic wooden decor to the interior, and have used altar, candles and liturgical items gifted from local parishes.

Currently, during coronavirus, they are averaging about 30 attendees each Sunday. They returned to in-person worship in summer. Before coronavirus, they were at 60 each Sunday, which is better attendance than many older churches. The church recently expanded into the remaining space of the building (see sidebar), which will be used for a parish hall for fellowship and teaching.

WEATHERING COVID-19

"In the midst of a pandemic St. Paul's is an outward and visible sign in the Wesley Chapel community that God is present and can always be glorified," said the Rev. Adrienne Hymes, the original church planter and now their vicar, the title for mission congregations of the diocese.

"We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to boldly risk walking by faith and jumping into God's mission already at work which are definitely not for the faint of heart or the weak in stomach."

The St. Paul start up is one of only a handful in the Diocese of Southwest Florida in recent decades, the most recent launches being St. Margaret of Scotland in 1986 in Sarasota, Grace Episcopal in 1992 in Tampa Palms, St. Mary Magdalene in Lakewood Ranch in 1996, and Iona-Hope in Ft. Myers in 1999. That there was a 20-year period in between new congregations meant that many of the skills for launching a congregation had been out of use, or lost.

In the 1950s and 60s, there were some years that the diocese launched multiple churches, and because of that,



Facing page, outdoor building dedication. Top, ribbon cutting with the Rev. Canon Richard H. Norman, the Rev. Adrienne Hymes, the Rt. Rev. Dabney Smith and the Hon. Mike Moore. Bottom, Dr. Jeanette Rollins, The Rev. Hymes, Bishop Smith. 31



Clockwise from top left; ribbon cutting; the new parish hall, in an old dance studio; the sanctuary; the Rev. John Reese of St. Andrew's, Tampa, with the Rev. Hymes; Mary Wallis Smith and the Rev. Canon Norman. Center, a group gathered after worship.

there was an overall process for launches. In the case of Wesley Chapel, the Diocese of Southwest Florida began with an idea to plant a church by Bishop Smith, with seed money from the Episcopal Church. To help, the diocese worked with the now Bishop of Georgia, then the Rev. Frank Logue, who had launched churches in Georgia before he was elected bishop. Logue, along with Bishop Smith and the Rev. Hymes, found possible locations, and made the strategic decision that Wesley Chapel was the most promising area to start a parish. (See *Southern Cross*, *Planting the Seed*, Pentecost 2019.)

It has been the right location. The Wesley Chapel area is growing with every demographic, including young families and recent retirees. As part of its new members, the church is attracting a wide age group, but has not watered down its worship or liturgy to try to “attract” a segment. Instead, it has found a wide variety of demographics, and sought members from all faith traditions, as it carefully presents a traditional liturgy. “I don’t know what we would do differently,” said Rollins.

SECOND START

Le Grand Jones and his wife Dianne are some of the pioneers of the Wesley Chapel start. They were among the earliest residents of Tampa Palms, and attended Grace Episcopal, where the Joneses worshipped at an elementary school before they were able to buy land to build. While there, he helped put together the business plan for the purchase of the Grace Episcopal campus.

Early on Jones had heard of the possibility of a launch in Wesley Chapel, where they wanted to move to downsize. He called the diocese, where he talked with the Rev. Canon

Michael Durning, then Canon to the Ordinary. When the Rev. Adrienne Hymes was hired, he met with her for a two-hour lunch at Bonefish Grill, talking over ideas. He also met with the Grace Episcopal rector, the Rev. Benjamin Twinamaani, who encouraged a few of the congregation to help with the launch, which was about ten miles away. Currently, Dianne serves on the vestry, and Le Grand is on the hunt for a permanent location.

Junior Warden Christine O’Donnell had lived in the Wesley Chapel area in 1998, with her husband. She grew up Catholic, but had married her late husband at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Newport, Rhode Island, before they came south. She had attended St. Clement’s, but jumped in when she found that there would be a neighborhood church. Since then, she has found much more, and none of the stress that might seem to have been associated with building a new church.

“I found a group of people with whom I could share things and be safe with,” said O’Donnell.

O’Donnell is one of four nurses in the parish, and came to the Tampa Bay area to work with the Veterans Administration. Her specialty, for which she teaches, is infectious disease. It was a coincidence, but it has been helpful in 2020 as the new church attempted to cope with coronavirus. Their challenge was different than other parishes, as they had a full room on Sunday, but not a lot of extra space because the church was in an office park. As the church opened up, they have gained a few new regular attendees that “appreciate that the congregation “makes sure everything is done in a proper way.”

Currently, as junior warden, her work has been practical, and not at all connected with teaching. She leads the Altar Guild, and she is also volunteering with setting up book-keeping, trying to set up the office operations so that they go

easily. They are also preparing for growth again, as people come back to worship. "We are picking up," said O'Donnell. "Since the new year, before we were under 20, and now we are close to 30."

As a new launch, there is plenty to do with the congregation for a junior warden, but there are enough who have come, and expressed interest, that the task is not overwhelming. "We give God our thanks and praise for His holy leading of faithful servants," said the Rev. Hymes, "for leading us to our church home; and for hearts on fire for Jesus."

The parish, off to a solid start during a rocky pandemic, will inevitably grow. As it grows, Rollins believes that it can remain open and welcoming, and stay away from negative attitudes. That it feels apolitical, and provides a warm welcome for all is critical. And as a congregation, they need to be willing to listen.

"We are small, and we are new," said Rollins. "We have this comfy, cozy new family."



Dedication & Ribbon Cutting

The new Episcopal Church congregation of St. Paul's held its ribbon cutting and dedication on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021.

"There is a new place, dedicated to God's service that is set apart for worship," said Bishop Dabney Smith, in his remarks to the gathered. The church plant is the first in the diocese since 1999, when Iona-Hope was established in Ft. Myers. The congregation is led by the Rev. Adrienne Hymes, the vicar-in-charge.

In its short time residing in rented space at Renaissance Professional Park, St. Paul's has already expanded from one office unit into a second rental, a former dance studio, which has been transformed into a fellowship hall and Sunday School.

Located off of Bruce B. Downs Boulevard in Pasco County in the Seven Oaks area, it is situated amidst one of the fastest growing areas of Southwest Florida. Past events have included a socially-distanced indoor dedication service and an outdoor ribbon cutting. Pasco County Commissioner Mike Moore attended the dedication: a nearby resident, he heralded the "tremendous occasion" of the opening. "The Lord is looking upon us to have this beautiful day," said Moore.

Launch Sequence

AUGUST 2016 | The Rev. Adrienne Hymes named Missioner for Church Extension, working on both a new church plant, and the revitalization of the St. Anselm's USF Chapel Center.

OCTOBER 2016 | The Episcopal Church approves \$100,000 grant for Southwest Florida Church Plant start in Diocese of Southwest Florida. It is one of 68 applications, 34 approved and 34 declined.

SEPTEMBER 2017 | Bible studies begin in Wesley Chapel area at Mercedes-Benz of Wesley Chapel

FEB. 1, 2018 | Church leases office park worship space at 3758 Maryweather Lane, Seven Oaks, Wesley Chapel.

MAY 8, 2018 | The Rev. Adrienne Hymes ordained as priest.

MAY 9, 2018 | First Holy Eucharist with gathered group.

APRIL 30, 2019 | Church leases new office space at 3836 Flatiron Loop, its current location.

JUNE 1, 2019 | First visit by Bishop Dabney Smith.

JULY 28, 2019 | Baptismal font dedicated by the Rt. Rev. Michael Garrison, Assisting Bishop.

SEPTEMBER 1, 2020 | Church begins renovations on new fellowship hall in former dance studio.

OCTOBER 12, 2019 | Church becomes Associated Worshipping Community at 51st Convention.

OCTOBER 17, 2020 | 52nd Annual Convention affirms mission status.

JANUARY 28, 2021 | Ribbon cutting and dedication of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.



Top, Commissioner Mike Moore; inset guests at the dedication.