



# BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

## St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church, Rutherfordton, NC

*Most Merciful God, the creator of the universe;  
Support us in acknowledging the humanity of others;  
Thus, making us more like You as we grow in love;  
With the blessing of the Holy Spirit and your beloved son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*-Written by the Rev. Toni Belhu*

The story of St. Gabriel's actually begins with St. John's Church, the oldest parish in Rutherford County. Located just off of Main Street in downtown Rutherfordton, St. John's was built brick by brick on the backs of slaves in the late 1840s. Despite the hands that built it, from the moment of its consecration in 1851, only white worshippers were recorded as members of the parish. The black community worshiped on Saturday evenings in the basement, not welcome at Sunday morning services.

By the turn of the century, white parishioners had outgrown the space at St. John's and began construction on a new church further down Main Street, a parish we now know by the name of St. Francis. This new parish was not open to the black community, and ultimately, with the consecration of St. Francis in 1900 and the deconsecration of St. John's, the black community was left with no place to worship at all.

Thus began a story we have heard time and time again when looking at the history of black churches in the United States—the black community began worshiping in their own homes, gathering together in houses around Rutherfordton's New Hope neighborhood. Their main gathering place became a large wooden house on North Ridgecrest Avenue, a house that now sits across from the chapel of St. Gabriel's. The St. Gabriel's community met in this household for 15 years.

By 1913, construction finally began on a building for the community and by 1915 the building was completed and consecrated. Known as "St. Gabriel's Mission for the Colored, under St. Francis Parish," the church was still tied to the white community, even further by the implementation of a white priest, the Rev. Hibbert H. P. Roche. In fact, the community would not have a black priest until 20 years later, when Father Eugene Lenoir Avery became priest-in-charge in 1935.

Father Avery was born and raised in nearby Morganton, North Carolina, and grew up attending St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, another historically black parish in the diocese. Following his ordination by Bishop Gribbon in 1935, he went on to serve the community of St. Gabriel's for 7 years, while also serving as an assistant to Archdeacon James T. Kennedy, the

rector at St. Stephen's and St. Matthias Episcopal Churches at the same time. His time serving St. Gabriel's marked the first time in almost 100 years that the congregation had a priest who looked like them, and was influential in setting a precedent for the St. Gabriel's community. Under his leadership, the parish became a hub of community, hosting potluck dinners, school dances, and other social gatherings. The basketball court outside the parish hall became a popular gathering spot for youth in the neighborhood—even Michael Jordan once played on the small concrete court adjacent to St. Gabriel's.

In the 1940's, St. Gabriel's was led by the Rev. Quintin E. Primo Jr., the second black priest at St. Gabriel's who would continue on to be the first black bishop of the Dioceses of Chicago and Delaware. During Rev. Primo's tenure, Bishop Gribbon suggested linking St. Gabriel's with St. Andrew's Chapel, another long-standing building in Rutherford County, built on the property of the Green River Plantation. Ordered for construction by Maude Coxe, the wife of Green River Plantation owner Franklin Coxe, the chapel had been consecrated in 1908 as a place of worship for slaves and servants of the plantation. By the 1940s, it served as its own worshiping community and was home to many descendents of former slaves.

The bishop's suggestion to yoke St. Gabriel's and St. Andrew's was met with opposition from Ms. Daisy Coxe Wright, the sister of Maude Coxe. In J. Derek Harbin's book, *No Mountain Too Steep*, he notes that Mrs. Wright seemed to be quite upset that the new priest for St. Andrew's and St. Gabriel's was a black man. Her later correspondence about the matter painted a biased picture of her desires about the diocese's intent. She suggested a trust, which had been set up for the maintenance of St. Andrew's, be taken over by the vestry of St. Francis rather than by the bishop, who quote "brought the colored priest to St. Gabriel's, which he had no right to do." She claimed that she did not want to take her opposition to law, but felt that it was "her duty to carry out Maude's wishes."

In 1955, the building of St. Andrew's Chapel was transferred to Tryon, North Carolina to serve as the new worship space for Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. In the meantime, the membership of St. Gabriel's grew, and by the 1960s, the parish was selected to be a part of a creative missionary strategy, raising up local talent from within the congregation. As a part of this strategy, two men, Bobby Lynch and Robert Stroud, were selected from the congregation to be raised up as deacons. Upon their ordination as deacons in 1975, Lynch and Stroud went down in history as the first two vocational deacons of color in the Diocese of Western North Carolina. The Rev. Bobby Lynch has served St. Gabriel's ever since that day, making him the longest standing deacon in diocesan history.

In addition to the ordinations of deacons Lynch and Stroud, Philip Mock, another longtime member of St. Gabriel's, was ordained to the priesthood in 1988 as part of that same creative mission strategy. Mock had been a member of St. Gabriel's for years, and was well-known within the diocese as a prominent lay leader. Following his ordination by Bishop Weinhauer in October of 1988, Father. Mock went on to serve as the priest-in-charge of St. Gabriel's for over 10 years, leading the congregation from 1988 to 1999. When illness caused him to retire, The Rev. Bobby Lynch, who had continued to serve the congregation as deacon, took over the role of leading the church, which he did faithfully for many years.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
And with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,  
For with blessing in his hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
Our full homage to demand.*

Sandra Miller Camp is a lifelong member of St. Gabriel's and currently serves as the parish organist. She recalls growing up in the church as being a formative experience not only for her, but her entire family, and has memories of many priests who have passed through the doors. However, she also notes that even in periods of transition, it was the people of St. Gabriel's who continued to keep it alive.

*"I wish my mother were here, she could tell you a lot. She was head of Women's Auxiliary for several years. She along with the other ladies would do the cleaning, the cooking when we'd have meals. She was the seamstress of the church so she did a lot of the sewing, she would make curtains for the hall. In fact, one of my memories of her doing that was that one day we had come over, she had made some curtains for the hall, and I guess I was about seven or so, and we had come over. At that time my family only had one car and my father was working, my mother wasn't working at the time so he had the car, so we'd do a lot of walking. So we walked from my house over to the church which I guess was about, I don't know, maybe a mile, two miles, and I had walked over her with her to bring the curtains over and start putting them up. And then we walked back home I remember stopping at the post office and doing something and then we went on back to the home and when we got to the house that was the day Dr. King was killed 'cause we always looked at the 6 o'clock news and turning the news on and seeing that. And that has always been tied in my brain with that day, being, coming over here and doing those curtains and then going back home and hearing that and seeing my mother, you know, crying, and I don't know why that connects with me. But I remember that time and how sad of a time that was for our community and for our church. But my mother she loved this church, even though like I said she grew up a Baptist. She loved being here.*

*We had a lot of ladies that served the church. We had a lady here who was actually my godmother her name was Mattie Carpenter. She was like the senior warden even though we didn't have a senior warden at the time we only had a junior warden, but she was the person who kept things going and kept in contact with the diocese and made sure we had this and we had that. But she was here for a long time and she loved this church.*

*I just remember growing up, it seems like the women did a lot, we had what was called the Women's Auxiliary, and to my mind they were running things and they were the ones that got things done and the men kinda went along with them.*

*But my earliest memories are just getting up in the morning, getting dressed, and coming—my mother and my father. I was always given like a quarter or something to put in church every Sunday before we got here and just the people here in the church, the older members that are now gone."*

Like many small parishes, St. Gabriel's has struggled financially in recent years, especially as many members of the community move to larger nearby cities like Charlotte and Asheville. And yet, the parish continues to open its doors every Wednesday, inviting people in for a meal and welcoming them to come on Sunday morning. One could say it is the dedication of the people that have kept the parish alive for all of these years and has continued to make it a center of community for the New Hope neighborhood.

For Bobby and his wife Helen, serving the community at St. Gabriel's means serving the entire New Hope neighborhood. This is why they began the Jericho Road Soup Kitchen in 2003, a ministry born out of their own pockets aiming to bring people to St. Gabriel's and send St. Gabriel's out into the community.

*"Me and Bobby was the backbone of this church for a long time, a long time, we really was. And it was not easy, it wasn't easy, but we did it! We did it. We went. And then we retired and so he said to me he said, 'lets...' We just had retired, you guys! He said to me, 'Helen, they starting a clinic so why don't you and myself start a soup kitchen.' I said, 'We just retired, we haven't been nowhere, you know, the kids is grown,' you know, I fell for it again just being a wife! So we started a soup kitchen just like he probably told you, they started the clinic. The clinic started off and then we said, 'ok.' We talked to the priest and he said, 'Ok go ahead and y'all can do it,' but he said, 'we don't have no fundings you know because we're trying to get the clinic off the ground,' and we said, 'ok can we do it on our own.' And I opened my budget with my retirement you know but, so that's how we got started. We did it. And honest, you know I said, 'Bobby how we gonna do this,' and he said, 'the Lord will make a way Helen, 'and he said, 'he'll make a way so let's not worry about it.' You know so I said, 'what we gonna do what we gonna get?' He said 'Let's go to the grocery store and get some green beans, let's get some spam, and let's get a five pound bag of potatoes,' and guys, the church they did not have no money to help us start a soup kitchen and we didn't know nothing about the diocese, no kind of grant back then, we didn't know nothing about grants so that's what we did! And we did it with that little bit. And then the next, we fed about 5-10 people on that. And the next week we had to buy two gallons of beans and we had to buy more spam, we bought a little box of spam. And I tell you guys, God is a good God! He did that to us, he let, he managed that we did it, we really did it.*

*And we've been doing it for, well this year it'll be 19 years! 19 years we've done this soup kitchen. And if it hadn't been for us having this soup kitchen this little church would have been gone. 'Cause they had to close the clinic because of financial-wise and everything. But me and Bobby kept going. We kept going.*

*Every church, especially small church, they need a deacon!"*

In 2021, the Rev. Toni Belhu was called to serve not only St. Gabriel's, but also the congregation of St. Francis Episcopal Church across town. One might recall that St. Gabriel's in many ways came to be because the black community was not welcomed at St. Francis, so for the two parishes to be united by one rector signifies a conscious step towards

reconciliation. There continues to be much work to be done, but the two parishes now see themselves as sisters, and join together for outreach, worship, and fellowship.

St. Gabriel's continues to be a light in the New Hope neighborhood, meeting the changing needs of the community. It is a parish built of stories—those of Father Mock, Father Avery, Helen and Bobby Lynch, and many more. For as long as it stands as the heart of New Hope it will continue to collect stories of those in search of food, those in search of community, those in search of belonging, and welcome them with open arms to be filled with warmth, love, and hospitality. May it serve as a reminder to us all to continue to serve one another, despite all circumstances.

*God has smiled on me,  
He's been good to me!  
God has smiled on me,  
He's been good to me!*

To learn more about St. Gabriel's, please visit [www.stgabrielepiscopal.com](http://www.stgabrielepiscopal.com)