



BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church - Murphy, NC

Gracious God, we remember with joy and thanksgiving your people who claimed the name and lived the example of your apostle St. Barnabas. Help us always to hold them and their ministry in blessed memory. By the Spirit's power, strengthen us to be just such servants of the Gospel with their faith and courage, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

-Written by the Rev. Maggie Rourk

These days, thousands of cars drive past where St. Barnabas Episcopal Church once stood without so much as a second glance. Whether rushing west to Chattanooga, east to Asheville, or turning into the mountain-side town of Murphy, North Carolina, no one pays much mind to the small stormwater retention pool nestled by the side of Highway 74. And yet, where the water now collects once stood a vibrant, bustling parish, full of life, stories, and people.

Our story really begins in a time before highways and power lines, with a man by the name of Rufus Morgan. Rev. Morgan is sometimes referred to as “the Moses of the Mountains,” an active church-planter who created and served dozens of parishes in Western North Carolina in his 98 years of life. In 1948, Rev. Morgan proposed the idea of a black mission parish in Murphy, which soon developed into a small worshiping community in a nearby parishioner’s home. It was not until 1952 that the community would have a church building to call their own.

The church building was completed in 1952 and promptly named St. Barnabas. The small, cinder block building was constructed upon a vacant, half-acre lot on Jackson Street, on the south side of the town of Murphy. As compared to many other historically black churches, the building of St. Barnabas was not built in the historically black neighborhood of Murphy, but rather was constructed only a couple hundred yards from the nearby Episcopal Church of the Messiah, the pre-existing white-only parish in town.

Murphy’s black neighborhood is known as Texana. Named for Texana McClelland, a former slave who founded the community in the 1850s, the Texana community is located high on the mountaintop, about a mile north of downtown Murphy. Due to its location, many parishioners at St. Barnabas would walk upwards of 2 miles one way every Sunday evening for worship services, passing right by the white church on their route. After Sunday evening worship at St. Barnabas, parishioners would make the 2 mile journey back to Texana, usually after dark.

Services at St. Barnabas were a respite from life in a small, segregated mountain town. The church membership was small, but many parishioners were siblings, cousins, or chosen

family. The church was active in the community, hosting Vacation Bible School during the summer months and welcoming in children from all across the neighborhood.

Though black parishioners were not welcome at The Episcopal Church of the Messiah, Messiah oversaw much of the financial side of St. Barnabas. Messiah's vestry minutes from the time paint a picture of the level of control they had over the operations at the nearby parish. In 1962, a black woman from St. Barnabas was hired to mind the Messiah rectory for \$1 a week, which adjusted for inflation totals approximately \$10 US dollars. In 1968, the average weekly offering at St. Barnabas was calculated to be \$6.58. And later that year, the building was condemned by eminent domain, the financial compensation of the loss of the parish suggested and accepted to fund a new furnace for Church of the Messiah.

In 1968 the North Carolina Department of Transportation came through town, with big plans to expand Highway 74 from a two-lane country highway into a four-lane interstate. Unfortunately, St. Barnabas' building rested right in the middle of their expansion plans. Their next step was one not uncommon with many properties owned or occupied by black communities—the building was claimed by eminent domain.

Eminent domain, sometimes referred to as land acquisition, is defined by the "Takings Clause" of the Fifth Amendment, granting the government power to take private property for public use in exchange for compensation. It is a story seen time and time again in black history—buildings claimed, neighborhoods uprooted, and communities torn apart by eminent domain, which disproportionately affects minority communities. This is not a story unique to St. Barnabas, but a part of their history that has deeply affected the community.

The land where St. Barnabas once stood was appraised by United Farm Realty for \$15,000. However, the North Carolina Department of Transportation followed up with a lowball offer of \$12,600, a difference of close to \$25,000 when adjusted for inflation. The vestry of Messiah wanted the diocese to accept the offer, but Bishop Henry refused, ultimately accepting a higher offer of \$15,500, some of the funds of which went to construct a new parish hall for Messiah.

Prior to the eminent domain claim, discussions had begun between Messiah, St. Barnabas, and the diocese about merging the two Murphy parishes. *Brown vs. Board of Education* had passed 14 years prior, and The Civil Rights Act 4 years prior, and it was time for Messiah to integrate. After many long meetings, it was ultimately decided that the two parishes would merge, with former members of St. Barnabas being invited to worship up the street at Messiah. Though St. Barnabas members expressed sadness over missing their church, they unanimously agreed that the merger was the right thing to do. Perhaps they felt the decision was one last bit of autonomy over their parish community.

Only a few members of St. Barnabas made the transition to Messiah, and even fewer stayed for long, often opting to attend churches closer to their neighborhoods. Ms. Ella Jackson was only 14 when her family transitioned from St. Barnabas to Messiah, and today is the last remaining member of St. Barnabas still in attendance.

"My name is Ella Louise Jackson, and I guess I am still a member of St. Barnabas church. I had an aunt that lived in a house right down below it. My mother never was with us much. I have an older brother and a younger brother and I was mean, I was a mean child and stayed in trouble all the time at school, and my aunt found out about it and she made me come and stay with her. So that's how I started going to church because she belonged to the church over there.

I mean we would have to walk from Texana where I live now, we'd have to talk all the way through town to walk over there to come. A bunch of us would leave and we'd come up here in the evenings and we'd walk and we'd walk back home because a lot of people didn't have cars you know."

Ms. Ella shared that the transition to Messiah was not an easy one, and members of St. Barnabas were met with resistance from the white community. However, she shared that for her, the quiet service is what kept her coming back.

"Nobody liked it. A lot of people were upset about it. I was but then you know, wasn't nothing you could do about it, you had to accept it. My kids knew a lot of the kids, my son and daughter and a lot of the people in school, and then like I said I was always different and I just liked the quiet service so I would come you know.

And there was a couple, they would come, my husband got a job with the US Forest Service and they was some people moved, that transferred him here, the Nicholsons. Smith Nicholson and his wife. They knew that my kids were coming and we didn't have a car then and he would come and bring us to church every Sunday and take us back home.

I could tell a lot of the white people didn't like it. You could tell when people don't want you around but I showed them I'll be there. I've always been like that."

For a brief period, the integration of Messiah meant that members of the black community, not solely former parishioners at St. Barnabas, began to visit the parish. For many, visits were based on curiosity—the opportunity to finally take a look inside a place they had previously not been welcomed. However, the traditions and format of the Episcopal Church were unfamiliar to many coming from the Methodist or Baptist traditions, and many slowly transitioned back to their home churches. Many former members of St. Barnabas opted to go with them—the opportunity to worship with their own community.

Ressie Hughes was only 14 when she began attending Messiah, making her one of the longest attending members of the parish. Having lived with Laura Warner, the sister of the Rev. Rufus Morgan during her first years in Murphy, she recalls the transition period taking place between Messiah and St. Barnabas.

"I was 14 when I came here and I lived with a family, an elderly couple, and she was very active in the church, Laura Warner, and she very active in St. Barnabas.

In the summertime we taught bible school up there, sometimes, because we would have church first and then they would have church in the afternoon. Sometimes I would go with Mrs. Warner up there because she was very active and I lived with her so you know, it was a good time! It was a good time but it was a changing time with desegregation.

It was a challenging time for a lot of people in church. They didn't want to accept the blacks in their church, you know, this was their church and you know. There was a few of those. The thing that happened that caused the friction was, it was the people that didn't go to St. Barnabas that started coming to Messiah because they could come to the white church. It was more of a challenge to them to do that rather than people just come from one Episcopal Church to another Episcopal Church. I think a lot of people came out of curiosity, cause we can all go there now! But they came and realized they didn't know the service and they weren't happy and they weren't comfortable. Because people from St. Barnabas would have been comfortable because that's what they were accustomed to. But a lot of people came who weren't Episcopalians. So they didn't know the service anyway, so after a while when some of the blacks were leaving they left too because they were just here because they could be here, not because it was their religion but because they could do it. We just kind of accepted that they were here and then they were gone."

Here and then gone. For many in Murphy, this may be what appeared to have become of the small, stone parish on the side of the highway. But for members of St. Barnabas and Messiah alike, the stories of the people live on. One only has to visit the corner of the Messiah parish hall, where stands the carved wooden altar that once stood at the nave of St. Barnabas, to remember the people who called the parish home, people whose home was taken from them.

For St. Barnabas, the remaining stories are reminders of the work we must do as the people of God to acknowledge and extend love to all the people of God. May all those who pass its location remember and celebrate those who once called it home.

*Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.*