



BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Morganton, NC

Dear Lord,

As we begin to navigate our journey into a new and hopeful future, we humbly ask that you bless us with strength, courage, and wisdom. Bless us too with love for one another. Help us to treat all persons with dignity and respect.

Our new journey requires that we look outward and upward, knowing that we must also look inward.

We ask that you inspire us to explore beyond our comfort zone, our uncertainties, and shadows of doubt. Help us to see solutions where before we saw problems, and to live within the realm of your Divine possibilities. Let your light shine brightly on us!

You have been and will always be the source of our peace.

We offer these prayers for the sake of your only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Written by Jeanne Fleming

As is the story with many historical black parishes, St. Stephen's came to be not because of a larger force at hand, but because of a few dedicated people.

Long before the church building was constructed on Bouchelle Street, long before the transfer across the Catawba River and the blending with St. Mary's, St. Stephen's existed solely as a group of believers, worshiping above a black-owned hardware shop on West Union Street in downtown Morganton. Black-led and lay-led, the gathering became a solace for the black community in Morganton, not welcome at the nearby Grace Episcopal Church. The year was 1888.

The nine founding members of St. Stephen's had previously attended services at Grace. For years they had arrived religiously every Sunday and worshiped alongside the white parishioners until one day, quite unexpectedly, they were forced to the back of the pews, told they had to keep quiet when the congregation sang. Solely because of the color of their skin they were viewed as second class citizens, not worthy of worshiping in the same form as their white counterparts with whom they had shared Sunday mornings for years before.

Determined to create a space in which they could worship as they pleased, and concurrently as an act of protest, nine members left Grace and created a parish of their own. This is how St. Stephen's was born.

As we take a look at the history of many historically black parishes, St. Stephen's stands out in this intentional act of protest. While many black parishes were created by the white community, either as missionary outposts or small chapels for slaves to worship, the foundation of St. Stephen's was built directly upon the courage and bravery of a group of folks who decided they had enough dignity to leave and to worship as they pleased. In the room above the hardware store, the community had the space to worship freely. They sang, they cried, and they praised God regardless of all circumstances.

The group was small, but quickly growing. One of the 9 original members, Ms. Lillie Harbinson, knew of an African American priest who might be able to lead. The Rev. Henry Stephen McDuffy was a freed slave and the rector of Trinity Chapel in Asheville, a parish we now know as St. Matthias. Inspired by the passion and dedication of the members of St. Stephen's, he eagerly jumped at the opportunity to come and lead.

Rev. McDuffy was a respected leader with a fiery missionary zeal. Though he lived almost an hour up the mountain, he made the journey to Morganton every other Sunday on the afternoon train, joining with other believers above Lilly and Philo Harbinson's hardware shop. Under his leadership the community grew, and by 1891, Bishop Lyman was called in to baptize 10 additional members who had joined St. Stephen's since its creation. A year later, the community broke ground on the construction of their own parish, across the street from Grace Episcopal on McDowell Street, and on November 23, 1893, the St. Stephen's community worshiped for the first time in a space that they could truly call their own.

Before long, this new church building became much more than just a worshipping community. In 1894, the church opened what was the only school for black children in Morganton at the time, known as the Episcopal Academy. Among the teachers at the school was the aforementioned Lillie Harbinson, who worked at the academy from its creation to its completion, teaching up to 30 students at a time. On weekends, when school was out of session, the parish was a hub for sporting events, social gatherings, and the like for the black community in Morganton.

Another woman at the center of St. Stephen's was Ms. Annie Avery. In fact, the story of St. Stephen's would not be complete without her.

Ms. Annie, the longtime choir director at St. Stephen's, is what we might nowadays refer to as a hidden deacon, filling the pews each Sunday—from community members singing in the choir to schoolboys serving as acolytes. She was a headstrong, passionate woman, with a love for St. Stephen's that ran deep through the community.

In fact, it was Ms. Annie herself that donated the land now most recognizable as home to St. Stephen's. This plot, located in a historically black neighborhood off the main street of Morganton, was at the center of black life, and thus so was St. Stephen's. Officially consecrated in 1949, the worshipping community migrated from their former home on McDowell street to this new building at the center of their lives and community.

Allen Fullwood, who grew up only blocks from St. Stephen's, recalls the impact that St. Stephen's had on his life growing up. Though Allen grew up in the AME church, Gaston Chapel, he now attends St. Stephen's in his adulthood.

I have the recollection of Ms. Annie Avery, who lived next door and donated the land for St. Stephen's back in the 40s before they built the church. She was a single lady and she provided housing for many of the African American professionals who came here either as schoolteachers or in other positions, because there was no hotels there were few if any apartments for African Americans. So many of the teachers had to live "boarding" so to speak in the homes of citizens here in the community. But Ms. Avery provided room and board for many African American teachers who taught in the school system here for many, many, many years, right up until and even after segregation I believe.

I think on a daily basis at some point, either in the morning or late in the evening, and she lived next door to where St. Stephen's is, she would enter and play the organ. And it was such a refreshing and I don't know how to describe it, to hear that organ playing hymns, any time of the day, it wasn't just on Sunday. She was there rehearsing for a choir. So that's how a lot of individuals eventually became members of St. Stephen's because she would motion to you to come over and say, "we need you in the choir!" Maybe they had never attended but she would recruit them and that's the way many of them became Episcopalians.

In terms of the African American church, no matter what denomination, has been the centerpiece in terms of African American life in this country. It was the gathering place. When you talk about after Emancipation and beyond, what other properties did they own? It was the church, it was the school. They gathered at the school, that was the place, for PTA and sports events, teacher parent conversations and other events. It was the church where they gathered on Sunday. It was the place, "they dressed up for." Sunday was very important and the church was very important. It was a place where certainly, very sacred time. It was a time where they were relieved of that everyday pressure, that pressure of facing segregation, Jim Crow-ism. They didn't encounter the white-black water fountains. They didn't encounter, "you have to go to the back, you can't be served in this restaurant, you can't come in the front door." That's why I always said, when you look at the African American church, when you gather there's always food, it was a great time you know, and I'm speaking certainly of my experience in the AME church and other churches.

Ms. Bernadette Moore and Ms. Jeanne Fleming are cousins who have grown up attending St. Stephen's since childhood. Both women recall early memories at the church and how integrated their life at St. Stephen's was with the events happening in the world outside.

When I was about twelve years old my mother, my brother and I moved to Morganton, and we lived near Grace church. And in fact, in my mom's home place. And we walked down the hill and up the hill and there sat Grace Church. And as a twelve year old I didn't understand why we could not attend Grace Church and we had to walk all the way across town to St. Stephen's. And I was very, very unhappy during those years living here. We lived here about 4 years and then we eventually moved back to New York.

And so I retired in Morganton and I first went to Grace Church a few times, and one Sunday I decided to go to St. Stephen's, and I walked in and there sat half of my cousins on my father's side and of course they embraced me. I hadn't seen them in maybe over 50 years. So we started going to St. Stephen's, and the next thing I knew, I was Senior Warden! And then the next thing I knew, I was president of ECW!

And I went to a jazz concert one night and I met Joseph Hasty who attends Grace church and he was a jazz musician, and after I got to know him I approached him about doing a jazz mass. He agreed, we had a write-up in the local paper, and it was an afternoon service. St. Stephen's was standing room only, people had read about it in the paper and the church was packed and it was just beautiful. And to hear him playing, he walked in playing When the Saints Go Marching In.

My Auntie Elizabeth married an Episcopal priest, so it really got interesting! He was active around here, he was the first African American priest that I knew of and I'm sure Bernadette too, at that time, Father Eugene Avery, Uncle Gene to me! So I've always been pulled back to the Episcopal Church and when he passed away I would bring my aunt to church, Auntie Elizabeth, and she always still attended, and so after she passed away I still attended.

My parents never protected me from the struggle. I always knew something was wrong from just a small child. As I've always told that story-we used to go to New York every summer, I guess it was an escape. My father would go to summer school, and we would stay in New York for the summers.. That's how I met my cousin Bernadette at the time, I was a little bit older than her, she might have been two and I was maybe four or five, something like that! And I know on the trains of course you started out in the back car but once you passed the Mason Dixon line you could sit wherever you wanted to. Coming back from New York one night my mother refused to move because she had me asleep, you could push the seat back where you were facing, two seats were facing, she had me asleep and she would not move. And the conductor came back numerous times and said "Lady you got to move," and she said "I'm not moving!" And she said some things that I can almost remember even though I was really little! But I knew something was wrong and there was a black soldier that got into the argument too. This went on all night. He finally said "Well lady when we get to Hickory you're going to jail!" And so she stayed and stayed and stayed. Just before we got to hickory my dad who was sitting some other place came up and said, "Aye Zola, move," so she did move as the train was pulling into Hickory that time, that was one experience. But I've had lots and lots of experiences growing up in the South. But we never let it ruin our joy and our love for people, that sort of thing, you couldn't let it get you down.

St. Stephen's called Bouchelle Street home for many years. In the early 1960s, the Rev. Delmas Hare was called to be the rector of St. Stephen's along with two other nearby parishes, St. Mary's and St. Paul's. Despite their shared leadership, opportunities to connect the parishes were limited, as many members of the white church resisted efforts. In an era of Jim Crow, segregation, and daily stories of violence against people of color, members of St. Stephen's were understandably hesitant to connect with communities where they knew they were unwelcomed.

As the years continued, the relationship between the parishes evolved and eventually, under the leadership of the Rev. Francis King, St. Mary's and St. Stephen's began worshipping together in 2008. As larger cities like Asheville and Charlotte grew nearby, church attendance diminished, and both communities found themselves seeking support. Special care was paid to ensure that members of both congregations served together on the vestry, sang together in the choir, and participated together in as many aspects of life and worship as possible. In 2014, the two congregations officially blended into one by vote of the Diocesan Convention. Although the blended congregation ended up being located in the small stone church of St. Mary's, the names of both congregations were preserved in the new "St. Mary's St. Stephen's Episcopal Church".

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the people of St. Stephen's in this blending was the loss of their beloved church building in Bouchelle Street. Though the building was aging, with a leaky roof and expensive water damage, it was also the home they had built for themselves, a physical representation of the dignity and courage that is woven into the foundation of the congregation. To leave this building behind, in favor of a building historically home to a white congregation, continues to be a source of some lingering pain and grief for many lifelong St. Stephen's members.

These days, the church building continues to stand on its home on Bouchelle Street, a centerpiece of the black community in Morganton and a reminder of the determination and strength of the St. Stephen's community for over 125 years. Occupied or unoccupied, it bears witness to the generations of resilient members who joined together in the face of numerous challenges and obstacles to spread the Gospel, serve the needs of Morganton's Black community, and enrich the Diocese of Western North Carolina.

Looking at St. Stephen's, we are reminded that the church is not its buildings, but its people. The spirit of St. Stephen's lives on in the many people who called and continue to call it home, be it on McDowell, Bouchelle, or St. Mary's Church Road. These days, the blended parish of St. Mary's St. Stephen's is a pioneer in breaking down the racial barriers that have kept us separated in the past. The story of St. Stephen's challenges the rest of us to look to the future, to find new and creative ways to heal the racial wounds of our past, and to bear witness to the unity of Christ's one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

To learn more, please visit the [St. Mary's St. Stephen's website](#).