

## **St. Columba** **A Historical Overview – by Peter Sehlinger**

For almost six decades St. Columba has been serving the faithful and the community in the Middle Keys. In July 1954, the rector of St. Paul's Church in Key West began holding Evening Prayer services on alternate Fridays in Marathon, and in October of the following year the diocese sent the Rev. A. Whitney Church to establish a mission. After meeting for a year in eleven business venues, the church found a temporary home for four years on the west side of the Vaca Cut in a round concrete building that had served as the souvenir shop for the Underseas Circus Company. The mission chose as its patron St. Columba, a sixth-century Irish missionary to Scotland and founder of an important monastery on the isle of Iona. When Fr. Church left Marathon in 1957, the congregation counted 82 baptized members. From 1957 until 1976, five vicars oversaw the mission. Eucharists were celebrated on Sundays and once during the week, and a Woman's Guild, church school classes, and adult education programs were organized. St. Columba was also one of the founders of the Marathon ministerial association, a group that includes clergy from several denominations.

Plans were soon made for a permanent church home. In June 1956 the church took possession of five lots in the Crane Hammock Subdivision. Two of them were purchased and the other three were given by the founders of the subdivision, Francis V. and Mary Crane. Christmas bazaars, bake sales in front of the post office, rummage sales, dinner dances, and fish fries were some of the activities that raised funds for the new building, but money was also found to contribute to local charities helping the homeless and providing day care for children.

On Christmas Eve 1960 the first service was held in the congregation's current home. The new building consisted of the church and sacristy, as well as the parish hall, a kitchen, and rest rooms. Donations funded the new church furnishings. The parish hall was used for social hours after the Sunday services and potluck suppers, adult education forums, the church school, and meetings of the Episcopal Church Women (ECW), as well as a number of community groups. The mission then included approximately 100 baptized members, and services during the winter season attracted a number of tourists and seasonal residents. In March 1964 former President Harry S. Truman and wife Bess were among the worshipers. By 1976 increased pledges from the members and continuing fund-raising efforts, particularly by the ECW, allowed the congregation to pay off its building debt and become independent of diocesan support. Throughout these years, the members continued to help local charities care for the homeless and the children of working mothers, as well as contributing to the work of the Church in Haiti.

Free of debt, the church building was consecrated in November 1976, and the self-supporting congregation became a parish. The Rev. Blount H. Grant was installed as the first rector that month and served for 17 years. His rectorship saw the expansion of the congregation's commitment to the community and the completion of several major building projects. Iona Hall was dedicated in December 1978 and includes an office for the pastor, a large multipurpose room for work, classes and meetings, and a restroom. The building stands on a lot purchased in 1969

by two parishioners. Between 1977 and 1982, nineteen windows were installed in the church and parish hall, and they immediately became one of the outstanding architectural highlights of the Florida Keys. These windows use faceted or cut pieces of colored glass that emit stunning light effects. In 1989 the rectory was constructed behind the parish hall.

In addition to new buildings and the impressive windows, Fr. Grant's years saw the parish expand its outreach to the community, in addition to serving the needs of the congregation. The parish contributed to local efforts to assist the retarded, alcoholics, and abused women and supported To Relieve Urgent Emergencies (TRUE), a diocesan fund. In 1985 Fr. Grant brought local churches, businessmen, and parents together to establish the Grace Jones Community Center to care for the children of working parents. Since then, the parish and diocese have donated tens of thousands of dollars to Grace Jones. With the proceeds from the sale of their home, two parishioners in 1986 established a \$97,000 trust that Fr. Grant administered for nine years to help the needy. Monies also were raised to send to church projects abroad, in El Salvador, Haiti, and Liberia. A variety of local groups—Alcoholics Anonymous, the Girl and Boy Scouts, the Marathon Theater, and the Fisherman's Hospital Woman's Auxiliary, among others—met in the parish hall. Worship services included Sunday and once-weekly Eucharists, special services during Lent, and on occasion a Thanksgiving or World Day of Prayer service with other local churches. St. Columba started an Episcopal mission in 1981 on Big Pine Key, St. Francis-in-the-Keys. St. Columba's rectors also served as vicars there, until 2000 when this mission was able to hire its own priest. Christian education for adults and children, annual parish meetings, the yearly Shrove Tuesday pancake supper, rummage sales and other fund raisers, potluck dinners, and meetings of the ECW and the men's club were among the many events that brought parishioners together at St. Columba.

Since Fr. Grant's departure in 1993 to serve at Trinity Cathedral in Miami, St. Columba has had three rectors. Each has reaffirmed the parish's strong commitment to ministering to the members of the congregation and to expanding the outreach of the parish. Sunday and once-weekly Eucharists, Christian education forums, special Lenten programs, and occasional ecumenical services with other congregations, as well as social hours after Sunday services, potluck suppers, a variety of fund-raising events, and meetings of the ECW and the men's club, have been some of the many activities enjoyed by the parishioners and their guests. Through generous donations to the Grace Jones Community Center, the Keys Area Interdenominational Relief (KAIR), TRUE, and the Domestic Abuse Center, among other local charities and scheduling meetings of community organizations such as the Friends of the Library, the Boy Scouts, and Habitat for Humanity in the parish hall, St. Columba has continued to make valuable contributions to the community.

Under the current rector, the Rev. Debra Andrew Maconaughey, St. Columba's ministry to its members and the wider world has deepened. Myriad activities, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for parishioners and guests, meals for the homeless, an annual Bluegrass concert and barbecue, spaghetti dinners to raise funds for charities, ECW fund raisers, and a parish trip to the Diocese of Malakal in Sudan, have helped to bring parishioners together as a family. In 2009 when the Marathon soup kitchen for the homeless was dissolved for lack of funding, Debra organized church members and community leaders to create and raise funds for Independence Cay, a new organization dedicated to helping the homeless in the Middle Keys.

St. Columba has been faithful in its service to the Lord for almost six decades, as its ministry to its parishioners and the wider world demonstrates. This is a history to be proud of.

For a more complete history of the parish, see Peter J. Sehlinger, "*Serve the Lord with Gladness*": *A History of St. Columba Episcopal Church* (2010). Copies available at St. Columba Episcopal Church.

## The Windows at St. Columba

The nineteen windows at St. Columba are among the most outstanding architectural creations in the Florida Keys. They display the characteristics found in the best of modern stained glass: bold colors, symbolism, and an impressionistic treatment of their subject matter, biblical lessons and church motifs. Much more than a passageway for light, these windows invite the observer to contemplate the meanings behind the stories and symbols presented, and through their resplendent radiance they permit the faithful to transcend momentarily the here-and-now and to sense the divine.

When the broken round window above the church entrance needed to be replaced in 1976, the rector, the Rev. Blount H. Grant, proposed new windows throughout the nave to “enhance the beauty of the church.” His suggestion met with enthusiastic support. In February of the next year, Hauser Studios of Stained Glass in Winona, Minnesota, was commissioned to prepare drawings for the window over the door and seven windows on the right side of the nave. A Celtic cross was the design selected for the round window and the Seven Days of Creation was chosen as the theme for the seven windows on the right side of the church. But a ninth window is of particular interest, and perhaps one of the most unique in all Christendom: “The Legend of St. Columba and the Loch Ness Monster.” This small rectangular window above the north door in the nave recounts the story of the parish’s patron, St. Columba, saving a swimmer crossing Loch Ness from a water monster. Donors stepped forward to pay for these windows, and they were constructed and installed by May 1978.

The Fourth Day of Creation window was deemed “really less than satisfactory,” for the lower center portion contained a large area of epoxy with little colored glass. A replacement window was crafted and installed in April 1978. The larger, upper portion of the rejected window was placed in the sacristy, and the rectangular bottom portion, a rainbow, found a home above the main entrance door to the parish hall.

In 1981 St. Columba accepted an offer by Piercy Studios in Orlando to design, create, and install the last seven windows in the nave. The theme for the remaining window on the right side of the church is the Burning Bush and the Torah. On the left side, the window at the rear of the nave depicts the Prophecy of Isaiah, while the remaining five windows illustrate lessons from the New Testament. Once again, parishioners provided funding, and the eight windows were put in place in 1982.

The largest window is a circular one on the east wall of the parish hall that depicts St. Columba at his desk working on a manuscript. It was designed and created by Hauser Studios and installed for Easter in 1981. It was given by William Bradley, Sr., a founder of St. Columba, in honor of his wife, Helen Brothers Bradley. This beautiful window displays the name Columba above the saint, symbols found in Celtic illuminated manuscripts, and a dove, whose Latin name means Columba.

The windows were made following a stained glass technique developed in France in the 1930s called *dalle de verre* or faceted glass. To construct these windows, cut pieces of colored glass are bound together with a cement-like epoxy mixture. The pieces of colored glass in the

windows at St. Columba hail from West Virginia, Indiana, Germany, Italy, and France. The resulting mosaic-like windows offer bold treatments and display brilliant colors. Certainly Fr. Grant did not exaggerate when he concluded that “the quality of color, light, texture and originality in these windows” represents the “finest craftsmanship” and offers viewers a “reminder in symbol and visual aid to the events of God’s work in the world.”

For a more complete account of these windows, see Peter J. Sehlinger, *Resplendent Radiance: The Windows of St. Columba Episcopal Church*, (2009). Copies available at the church.