

# The Peace

A Publication from the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee | Summer 2025 | Issue 9



## Clergy Transitions

**The Reverend Paul McLain** has been named Lead Chaplain and Director of Spiritual Care Services of Trezevant Manor, a retirement community with Episcopal roots in Memphis. He previously served as Associate Rector for Pastoral Care of Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis.

**The Reverend Jesse Perkins** has been called as Rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Jackson. His new call began July 1, 2025.

**Mr. Wesley Rowell** joined the ministry team at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis on June 29, 2025, as Minister for Congregational Care. He is a recent graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary and holds an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is preparing for ordination to the transitional diaconate in Fall 2025.

**The Reverend Christina Selzer** will join the clergy team at Church of the Holy Communion in Memphis as Curate beginning July 14, 2025. She is currently a transitional deacon and will be ordained to the priesthood in fall 2025.

## Upcoming

### Happening #75

August 22-24, 2025 at Calvary Episcopal Church (Memphis)

### The Feast of St. Columba

Saturday, October 25

### Barth House Theological Society Fall Lecture

Thursday, November 6 at 7 p.m.  
*More information on back cover.*

### Diocesan Convention

November 14-15, 2025 at Calvary Episcopal Church  
*More information on page 9.*

## On the Cover

*At the table we are one. Bishop Phoebe Roaf and Bishop Kevin Strickland preside together at the Eucharist during the Gathered As One worship service on Saturday, April 26, at the Barth House—a joyful celebration of the full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which have been in full communion since 1999.*



## The Peace is the official publication of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee.

We encourage the submission of articles and images. We reserve the right to edit materials offered for publication. Please submit content to Emily Austin: [eaustin@episwtn.org](mailto:eaustin@episwtn.org).

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A MESSAGE FROM  
*Bishop Phoebe*



Dear friends,

In April, I returned from a four-month sabbatical refreshed and renewed for our work together. I want to thank members of diocesan staff as well as our committees and commissions for enabling me to fully withdraw from my work responsibilities. We are blessed to have committed individuals who serve the diocese.

Much of this issue of *The Peace* is dedicated to our small churches. That's not surprising, as the majority of congregations in West Tennessee are small in membership but mighty in impact. What's happening in our context mirrors The Episcopal Church demographics throughout the country. I was inspired by the energy and enthusiasm at the first small church conference in April, and by the willingness of five faith communities to worship together during Holy Week and Easter. Creativity is the name of the game today, given all of the challenges facing congregations. However, in the midst of challenges, there are manifold opportunities to identify new ways of partnering with others.

The article about an old cemetery on the grounds of St. Paul's Mason serves as a reminder that there is still work to be done in the area of racial reconciliation. If you are interested in engaging in our diocesan racial reconciliation efforts, the members of the Becoming Beloved Community Commission would like to hear from you. You can learn more about this work at [EDWTN.org/bbcwtn](http://EDWTN.org/bbcwtn).

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church ended 66 years of worship on Kimball Avenue at the end of June. Beginning in July, they will worship on Sunday mornings at Barth House on the campus of the University of Memphis as they discern their next steps. It is bittersweet to leave a place where so many sacred memories are held, but the faithful and resilient members of Holy Trinity serve as a reminder that the Church is comprised of the people, not the buildings. I am grateful for the Rev. Hester Mathes' leadership during this time of transition.

As we continue to experience deep divisions in our communal life, the meditation by Connie Cruthirds and the St. Columba article remind us of the restorative power of God's creation. One of the highlights of my sabbatical was the five and a half weeks I spent exploring Australia and New Zealand during their summer season. In addition to walking, my modes of transportation included trains, planes, automobiles, boats and even a helicopter. My spirit is always uplifted when I am surrounded by nature. May you find time to exhale this summer in your yard, in a local park or near the water.

Peace,

*Bishop Phoebe*

Bishop Phoebe A. Roaf



**(ROW 1)** Episcopalians from across West Tennessee gathered for Diocesan Day with the Memphis Grizzlies on Sunday, April 13. Pictured are members of St. Thomas (Somerville), St. John's (Memphis), Holy Communion and other congregations who joined in the fun, fellowship, and basketball at FedEx Forum.

**(ROW 2)** Neither wind nor rain nor tornado warning could stop St. James, Bolivar, from flipping pancakes and kicking off Lent in true Shrove Tuesday spirit! PHOTO SUBMITTED BY SHELLY RICE. **(ROW 3)** On May 4, 2025, St. Paul Episcopal Church in Mason joyfully welcomed Kason Josiah Hill into the Christian faith through baptism by the Rev. Samson Gitau. Surrounded by his parents, Mary Hayes and Roy Hill, godmother Bianca Claybon Reid Stephenson, and clergy including the Rev. Peter Kuria, Kason's baptism was followed by a festive, school bus-themed birthday reception—complete with cake, candy, and joyful chaos on the lawn. PHOTO SUBMITTED BY ESTHER COCHRAN.





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*Youth from across West Tennessee—and a few joyful guests from Mississippi—came together at St. Columba for Episcoplympics, capping off our Spring 2025 Younited semester with laughter, games, and a whole lot of holy fun.*



# Small Church, Big Potential

BY PATTY EASLEY

# The first Small Church Conference of the Diocese of West Tennessee was held on April 4 – 5, 2025 at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Jackson, Tennessee. There were 16 churches represented, with 45 parishioners and clergy in attendance.

As I reflect on our time together, I am taken back to the beginning when conversations about our small churches took place at a Diocesan Leadership Retreat held at the Barth House on April 13, 2024. We had the survey data from the Diocesan Vitality Initiative and we knew that our small churches were hurting, some facing significant challenges.

It was at this retreat that the concept of having a Small Church Conference formed.

Shortly after the retreat, a team was put in place to do the work of planning the conference. It was during this work I discovered that though we (small churches) were all so different (demographically, geographically, infrastructure), we all faced the same issues.

Being new to diocesan-level church work – I was elected to Bishop and Council in November of 2023 – I knew very little about the churches that make up the Diocese of West Tennessee. The survey results helped me see that we, Grace Episcopal Church in Paris, Tennessee, my home parish, were not an anomaly.

Our struggles were the norm.

I found comfort in this and was excited when I was asked to serve on the planning team for the conference. I found the other members of the team have this same passion for their churches as did I for Grace.

By the end of October, the team had solidified a theme – “With God’s Help, We Will!” – and a graphic. The theme emerged from my own experience with recent confirmations in the church. At confirmation, the people repeat our baptismal covenant, proclaiming to continue in the apostles’ teachings, resist evil, proclaim the Good News of God in Christ by word and example, seek and serve Christ in all persons, love our neighbor as ourselves, and strive for justice and peace among all people. But remember how we say we will do

all these things ... “I will, with God’s help”. And so, it was in the very beginning stages of the planning, the team sought the Holy Spirit for guidance and wisdom. This baptismal promise helped shape the rest of our work.

After the theme was in place, Bishop Phoebe set off on her sabbatical and charged the team with the task of planning the conference. With the help Stacey Williams-Duncan, CEO and Founder of Learning Forte, the conference agenda began to unfold. I vividly remember Stacey asking us to share with the group our churches’ “kryptonite” as well as their “super power.” This is when I learned that we all truly had similar strengths and weaknesses; though we may not all be in the same boat, we were all in the same storm. We were also asked what we wanted each conference attendee to walk away having gained from the conference. First, the team agreed that this was not a “one-and-done” conference, but rather the beginning of a movement within the churches. We came to the consensus that we wanted all participants to walk away having been “Enlightened, Encouraged and Empowered.”

The day of the conference came quickly, and it began with the viewing of a TED Talk featuring Derek Sivers’ “How to Start a Movement.” Sivers tells his viewers that a leader needs to have the guts to stand out and be ridiculous. He goes on to stress that it is not the actions of the first person that actually start the movement but rather those of his first follower. You see, once the first follower joins it is no longer about the actions of “one” but of “them” making it easier for others to join and, thus, quickly a movement begins.

According to Tod Bolsinger in *How Not to Waste a Crisis, Quit Trying Harder* (2024), “we need to lead by not trying to be the superhero who saves the day with our old solutions, but the leader who teaches people to explore the unknown with new questions”. This concept is what started day two of the conference.

The three objectives for the conference were...

## To enlighten

Participants recognize the strengths and resilience of their congregation within the broader diocesan context;

## To encourage

Discover and affirm their spiritual gifts for leadership and mission; and

## To empower

Begin envisioning how their congregation can actively shape its future through ministry.

Workshop One was centered around what’s good in our diocese with participants charged with telling their churches’ stories of resilience from the past. It was during this activity I began to see a shift of mindset. In *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change*, Bolsinger writes, “A teachable learning mindset leads to a greater capacity for staying in a difficult position, taking on a particularly difficult task or standing up to resistance, because there is an inherent assurance that if all else fails this trial will – if nothing else – lead to further growth.”

I first learned about the concept of a growth mindset from the work of psychologist Carol Dweck. People with a growth mindset embrace challenges, viewing them as opportunities to learn and improve. They’re more likely to persist in the face of obstacles rather than giving up. During Workshop One, participants began to shift their mindset toward the possibility of change and growth by sharing stories of resilience and highlighting the good work happening across our diocese—such as the initiatives supported by the Do Good and Share Grants.

With Workshop Two came the task of delving into what is hard in the story of our diocese. This involved group activities led by Canon Rob Courtney and the Rev. Noah Campbell. Each group was given one of the eight emerging themes from the Small



**(LEFT)** Ashley Smith, a parishioner at St. Mary's Cathedral, shares insights during a group report-out at the Diocese of West Tennessee's first-ever Small Church Conference. Held April 4–5, 2025, the conference aimed to enlighten, encourage, and empower small church leaders across the diocese. "We didn't leave with a bold vision or concrete plan," Easley wrote, "but we did leave with a changed mindset as participants of a movement." **(RIGHT)** Emmanuel Memphis parishioner Nedra Bailey contributes to a small group discussion during Workshop Two at the Small Church Conference. Each group explored one of eight emerging challenges—including vitality, outreach, and reputation—and brainstormed how to turn those challenges into opportunities for growth. "Though we may not all be in the same boat, we are all in the same storm," wrote planning team member Patty Easley.

Church Consultation Project: Relationships, Demographics, Vitality, Outreach, Formation, Durability, Reputation and Information Technology. They were tasked with seeking possible solutions.

I was amazed with how many creative ways these diverse groups discovered to turn challenges into opportunities. You see, we did not intend for the participants to walk away with concrete strategic plans or goals, but rather questions and experiments.

Bolsinger writes that "a truly visionary leader brings the whole people together to look not to a wishful future, but to look to God who makes us fit for the challenge". He goes on to say that there is no clear way ahead, but we must be curious questioners and find our way together. That is exactly what was happening during Workshop Two.

After a tornado warning and sheltering in place for approximately 45 minutes of Spirit filled singing led by Bishop Phoebe, who reminded us that "to sing is to pray twice," we were forced to condense the third workshop. The Rev. Sarah Cowan gave the group an overview of The Cure of Souls in Parish Ministry and asked the questions:

1. What do we think we know?
2. How do we identify what we don't know?
3. How do we connect strengths to needs?

Due to the inclement weather, we weren't

able to answer these questions together, but the attendees were assigned the task of working towards these answers within their churches. The participants likely left the conference with more questions than answers, which is not a bad thing. We didn't leave with a bold vision or concrete plan, but we did leave with a changed mindset as participants of a movement. We left with a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. We left with new friendships and prayer partners. We all left feeling enlightened, knowing that we are all in the same storm, encouraged that we don't have to weather it alone, and empowered to continue to ask questions and seek solutions even if they are a little different than what we've done in the past.

I look forward to the continued workshops via Zoom in the coming months that will let us do a deep dive into Tod Bolsingers' concepts on Leadership in a Disrupted World. I feel if we, as a diocese, listen to the voice of our inner Creator, the still small voice that says "With God's Help, We Will", our churches will not only survive, but thrive! By listening to the Creator voice, we can nurture a growth mindset: one that allows us take ownership, roll up our sleeves, and go to work in order to elicit change.

I hope that you, too, are now Enlightened, Encouraged and Empowered to be the change you wish to see in our diocese.

**PATTY EASLEY** is a member of Grace Episcopal Church in Paris, Tennessee, where she is active in Grace's Loaves & Fishes outreach ministry. She is a member of Bishop & Council.



### Looking Ahead

**2026 Small Church Conference**  
**April 24–25, 2026**  
**St. Luke's Episcopal Church**  
**(Jackson)**

Register this fall

The 44th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee will be held November 14–15, 2025, at Calvary Episcopal Church in Downtown Memphis. This year’s theme—One Church—draws from Ephesians 4:5: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

It’s a call to remember what binds us—the shared waters of baptism that mark us as Christ’s own forever. Though we come from many places and carry many perspectives, we are drawn into one current, flowing together in purpose and promise. As we gather this fall, we do so as members of one body, discerning and serving as One Church.

**Convention Schedule**

**Friday, November 14**

Convention will open with a Diocesan Eucharist at 6:00 p.m., followed by a festive reception. All are welcome and warmly encouraged to attend the Eucharist, whether or not you plan to attend Saturday’s business proceedings. Nursery will be provided. No registration is required for Friday night.

**Saturday, November 15**

Convention business will be conducted throughout the day. Registration is required for anyone attending on Saturday. Nursery and childcare will be available.

**Keynote Speaker**

We are pleased to welcome the Rev. Dr. Tod Bolsinger as our keynote speaker. A practical theologian and executive coach, Dr. Bolsinger serves as Executive Director of the Church Leadership Institute and Associate Professor of Leadership Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary. He has more than three decades of experience in ministry and leadership development and is the author of

several influential works, including *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* and *How Not to Waste a Crisis*, which was the focus of our 2025 diocesan Lenten book study. He also led this year’s clergy retreat, and we look forward to welcoming him back to West Tennessee.



THE REV. DR. TOD BOLSINGER

**Registration Timeline**

We’re introducing early bird pricing this year to encourage timely registration:

**EARLY BIRD REGISTRATION:**

**JULY 25 – AUGUST 29**

\$105 for clergy and lay delegates  
\$70 for guests and alternates

**STANDARD REGISTRATION:**

**AUGUST 30 – OCTOBER 3**

\$125 for clergy and lay delegates  
\$90 for guests and alternates

Parishes received a letter in early June confirming the number of lay delegates they may send, based on the 2024 Parochial Report. We encourage churches to elect and register delegates as early as possible.

The deadline to register for Convention is Friday, October 3 at 5 p.m. CST.

**Important Dates & Deadlines**

July 24	Registration opens
	Nominations open
	Resolutions open
Oct. 1	Resolutions close <i>Resolutions received after this date must receive 2/3 vote at Convention to be considered.</i>
Oct. 3	Registration closes
Oct. 13	Deadline for diocesan committees to submit written reports
Oct. 17 at 12 p.m.	Budget Hearing (Zoom)
Oct. 21 at 12 p.m.	Constitution, Canons & Resolutions Hearing (Zoom) <i>This hearing will include both new resolutions and follow-up on 2024 legislation.</i>
Nov. 3	Deadline to submit nominations to appear in Convention book and website
Nov. 14 at 12 p.m.	Nominations close

**Looking Ahead**

Full convention schedules, hotel block details, and volunteer opportunities will be announced later this summer. For updates, visit [edwtn.org/dioconvention](http://edwtn.org/dioconvention) or contact the diocesan office with questions.

Together, may we continue walking as One Church, grounded in One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.



# One Church

## One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

*The 44th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee*

## “Another Way to Do Church”

### Memphis Churches Collaborate for Lent and Easter

By Emily Austin

**T**his past Lent and Easter, five small Episcopal communities in Memphis—Barth House Episcopal Center, Holy Trinity, All Saints’, Emmanuel, and Church of the Good Shepherd—came together in a bold act of faith and fellowship. In pooling their people, worship spaces, and liturgical responsibilities, they created something larger than the sum of their parts: a Holy Season that felt fuller, richer, and more deeply connected to the heart of the Gospel.

This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. “It actually started in 2023 with just Good Shepherd and Holy Trinity,” said the Rev. Hester Mathes, priest-in-charge at Holy Trinity. “Noah [Campbell], who at the time was vicar of Good Shepherd, and I were both trying to figure out how to survive Holy Week as solo clergy—but also how to make these midweek services feel alive. When you’ve got seven people from each congregation, suddenly a service of 14 feels like a real, vital gathering.”

That spark of vitality soon grew. “Emmanuel invited us to their Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper,” Rev. Hester recalled. “And from there, we invited them to join us for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.” In 2024, All Saints’ Episcopal Church joined the mix, and this year, Barth House officially came on board. “Although we had technically hosted Ash Wednesday in 2024, this was the first year we were fully part of the rotation,” said Maggie Schaumleffel, Director of Ministries at the Barth House. “And it felt good to be on the schedule—not just hosting, but really participating.”

That full participation led to moments of grace that were both tender and transformative. Maggie brought several college students with her to services throughout the season, many of whom do not identify as Episcopalian—and some who are actively deconstructing their past religious experiences.

“The idea of walking into a worship space—any church space—is hard for a lot of our students,” Maggie shared. “But I could say to them: ‘I believe we are safe in this space. I trust these people with you.’ And when they were met with love? Whew. I was just so proud. It was like, ‘These are my babies—and this is a church I trust to love them well.’”

The emotional resonance of the season wasn’t limited to college students. “On Easter, I met Anne Marie Motley, the senior warden at Holy Trinity,” said Beverly Holmgren of All Saints’. “We just had the nicest chat. She was so warm and animated, and it reminded me why we do this—to connect. That’s what being the Body of Christ is about.”

Other cross-congregational relationships blossomed. “At the Small Church Conference, I met Joyce from Good Shepherd,” said Nedra Bailey of Emmanuel. “During the conference, we decided to be prayer partners, but we didn’t exchange our contact info at the time. Then we saw each other again on Easter and said, ‘Let’s actually do this.’ So now we talk every Thursday.”

The beauty of the services themselves left a lasting impact. From choirs combining at Holy Trinity, to the Stations of the Cross beginning with chant at All Saints’, each liturgy was enriched by the unique traditions and talents of its host. “I’ll never forget when John Vargas from Good Shepherd chanted the Gospel one Good Friday,” said Rev. Hester. “It was stunning. People from Holy Trinity had never experienced it done that way, and it was so moving. That’s the gift of doing this together—we share what makes each of us special.”

Even practical details—often the behind-the-scenes stress points of Holy Week—became occasions for collaboration and joy. Bulletins, for example, were produced by combining the forces (and printers) of Holy Trinity and All Saints’. “We printed the covers at one church and the inside pages at the other,” Rev. Hester explained. “Then we sat around and stapled them together. I’ve never had so much fun collating bulletins!”

There was, of course, a lentil soup contest.

(Because Episcopalians never miss a chance for a potluck with bragging rights.) “What Good Shepherd did so well was make their Maundy Thursday hosting into a community-building event,” said Maggie. “Instead of dreading having to make soup, they turned it into a joyful competition—and made it a signature moment in the week.”

But what happens when congregations share an Easter service—and with it, the Easter offering? “We just asked everyone to either give online to their home churches, or write checks and drop them in envelopes marked for their own parish,” Rev. Hester said. “Then a representative from each church came forward and distributed them after the service. It worked beautifully. The cash offerings helped cover shared costs, like security and the reception.”

That kind of coordination extended to attendance numbers too—something that’s still reported to the diocese each year. “We decided that each church would simply count their own people, and report those numbers. That way, everyone still gets to count Easter in their average Sunday attendance, which can be a really important data point for small churches.”

Beyond numbers and logistics, though, the experience offered something more profound: an ecclesiology rooted in relationship.

“Year after year, it starts to feel like a family reunion,” Rev. Hester said. “Instead of learning names, you’re reconnecting with people you’ve come to know and love.”

And it’s not just fellowship for its own sake. “When our Barth House students went to Emmanuel, we talked on the way home about the history of that church—its legacy as a historically Black congregation,” Maggie said. “They didn’t grow up with

that context. To be invited in and included in that story—it mattered.”

For Nedra, whose church is navigating the challenges of generational change, the collaboration is both a blessing and a stretch. “Some folks don’t want to change,” she said honestly. “They want things the way they’ve always been. But this ‘shuffling around,’ as I call it, is our new normal. And honestly? I love it. It connects us. It wakes us up.”

Each church brought its own flavor—sometimes literally. Barth House brought students, Emmanuel brought hospitality, All Saints brought music, and Holy Trinity brought the table. And yes, Good Shepherd brought the lentil soup—three kinds, in fact.

“They kind of had a lentil soup contest,” Maggie explained. “They made it into something joyful and communal, not just a task on the calendar. It helped fuel fellowship activities leading up to Maundy Thursday.” What started as a simple meal had become a tradition. “That lentil soup Maggie made the first year?” Rev. Hester added. “It’s now part of the signature of our Holy Week walk.”

Banner day for lentils, indeed.

“What stood out most to me,” Beverly said, “was having a full church, with people praying together. At All Saints, we love each other—but we’re tiny. It’s so nice to feel like we’re part of something bigger.”

That sense of “bigger” was felt in every borrowed pew and lentil spoon. “This is how church began,” said Maggie. “People were brought in, cared for generously, and loved authentically.”

As for what’s next? Christmas Eve collaborations are already on the table. “The first year Emmanuel and Holy Trinity worshiped together for Christmas, it was amazing,” said Nedra. “It turned out great. We’re just getting started.”

And with each season, this grassroots partnership grows deeper, stronger, and more joyful.

“We didn’t sit in a meeting and decide to do this,” said Rev. Hester. “It happened organically, because the Holy Spirit is moving through our churches. This is what it looks like to be the Church together.”



**Feasting in Fellowship.** Members of several Memphis-area Episcopal congregations gathered for a joyful Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper hosted by Emmanuel Episcopal Church. Festive beads, full plates, and heartfelt laughter marked the evening, which helped launch a season of shared worship among the small congregations. PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLY TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

## A Closer Look: EMBODYING UNITY

At its heart, Lent is a season of return—returning to God, to one another, and to the shared life of the Church. For the congregations of Barth House, Holy Trinity, All Saints, Emmanuel, and Good Shepherd, returning didn’t mean turning inward. It meant stepping across parish boundaries in trust and in love. In doing so, they bore witness to something deeply sacramental: that the Church is not defined by buildings or bulletins, but by belonging.

That belonging took many forms—some of them unexpectedly joyful. The logistics of preparing bulletins for a combined Easter service could have been a headache. Instead, it became a highlight. “Our printer is lovely,” Rev. Hester said with a wry smile, “but she likes to take pauses between each page. It would’ve taken us three weeks to print everything.”

So, they teamed up. “We printed the color cover pages at Holy Trinity and the inside pages at All Saints. Then Beverly, Kathy, and I sat down and stapled them all together. I’ve never had so much fun collating bulletins.”

That simple act—hands from different churches folding paper and lining up staples—became its own kind of liturgy. A shared task, done in community, in preparation for the feast. It was a Eucharistic moment long before the altar was set.

When St. Paul writes to the Corinthians that “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread,” he’s describing exactly this kind of embodied unity. Each congregation brought what they had to offer: a choir, a soup, a printer, a college student, a prayer partner. The resulting whole was richer, more beautiful, and—perhaps most theologically significant—more truthful to the Gospel than any one parish could have accomplished alone.

“We’re all one body of Christ,” Rev. Hester reflected. “And so often we get into little silos—especially in small congregations. You can feel very alone in the struggles.” But when those silos come down, something holy happens. “To be able to celebrate the radical hospitality of Emmanuel, the glorious voices from All Saints and Good Shepherd, and the Barth House young adults—that was a powerful reminder.”

That reminder carried through every station of the cross, every harmonized hymn, every ladled bowl of lentil soup. It was, as Maggie said, “a chance to show our students that there is another way to do church. Another way to be with the Spirit.”

In an era when small congregations often face questions of sustainability and isolation, this collaboration pointed to a more hopeful theological truth: resurrection begins in community. “We now have a new normal,” Nedra said. “And the new normal is sharing, giving, and connecting. Just like God told us to.”

## In This Place

### Remembering the Sacred Legacy of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mason

By Emily Austin

**O**n the edge of a quiet field in rural Mason, Tennessee lies a patch of overgrown land—thick with underbrush, dotted with trees, and steeped in a sacred history long remembered by those who have carried its legacy in their hearts. This is the Old St. Paul Cemetery, the original burial ground of St. Paul's Episcopal Church; founded in 1847, St. Paul's is one of the oldest historically Black Episcopal congregations in Tennessee. Though time and the elements have claimed many of its markers, the site bears witness to more than a century of Black faith, education, resistance, and resilience.

“This project has been in the making for years,” says Lavonnie Perry Claybon, a longtime member of St. Paul's. “It's been quietly growing in our hearts and minds. Now, we're finally in a place to bring it into the light.”

Along with Lavonnie, St. Paul's parishioners Faye Taylor Knight, Barbara Williams, and Swazoo Claybon are part of a grassroots effort to restore and commemorate the site through a new initiative tentatively called “In This Place.” The goals are both practical and spiritual: clear the land, document known and unknown burials, install a memorial marker, and offer the community of Mason, Tennessee a sacred space for reflection and reconnection.

“There are probably 100 to 150 graves here,” Faye explains. “Some stones are still intact, but others have deteriorated or been overtaken by trees and brush. I know my great-grandfather is buried here. So are many members of the Taylor family—my family. The Clevelands, the Harris', the Hemps, the Claybons, the Burchettes, the Maclins, and other community ancestors are buried in this sacred place. So many people in this sacred place still have descendants in the surrounding area.”

Many of the people buried here lived during or shortly after enslavement, and the land itself was gifted by a landowning white family in Mason as a burial site for enslaved people and their descendants. Some oral histories even suggest that two biracial children were the first two burials in Old St. Paul Cemetery.

“The project is a way of honoring those

individuals who were once excluded even in death,” Faye says. “But that history has been hidden—until now.”

Though the site has fallen into disrepair over the years, efforts to preserve it and the history it represents have persisted. Several years ago, Barbara Williams and Swazoo Claybon visited the cemetery with Bishop Phoebe Roaf. More recently, Lavonnie and Faye returned to find one of the remaining tombstones had slid into a ditch—possibly dislodged by utility work tied to the nearby BlueOval megasite. “That's what pushed us to act,” said Lavonnie. “We realized if we don't do something now, we'll lose this history.”

The significance of this place extends beyond the cemetery itself. Adjacent to the cemetery once stood the original St. Paul's Episcopal Church of Mason, before it was relocated to its current location on the historic grounds of the Gailor Industrial School, a thriving educational institution for African American youth during the height of the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras.

Known now as Hoffman-Saint Mary's, the School of St. Mary the Virgin for Colored Girls was founded in Nashville in 1901 as part of Fisk University. In 1911, the school moved to Mason. Gailor Industrial School, expanded to serve both boys and girls, was supported by the American Church Institute for Negroes (ACIN), and offered a curriculum of academics and trades - from math and music to sewing, farming, cooking, housekeeping mattress-making, carpentry, reading, writing, and religious education.

“This wasn't just a school—it was a pipeline for leadership,” Lavonnie explains. Among its leaders was Edward Thomas Demby, the first Black bishop consecrated in the Episcopal Church. Before his consecration, Bishop Demby was ordained a deacon at St. Paul's and served as principal of the Gailor School. Other teachers included medical professionals, educational teachers, and seminary-trained educators who built up not only skills but a sense of dignity and community. The enrollment of 350 students included boarding and day students from 24 states being represented. In 1936, the school included ten buildings.

“The vision was so forward-thinking,” Lavonnie adds. “There's even a document showing a proposed plan to turn Gailor into a junior college. Parishioners were asked to contribute toward it—one thousand dollars apiece. Can you imagine the faith that took?”

That vision was never fully realized. Racism, segregation, and economic injustice eventually led to the school's closure. Oral histories speak of arson, threats, and fear. “The gymnasium was burned down multiple times,” Lavonnie recounts. “People were threatened. And yet they still built. They still taught. They still believed.”

This legacy of spiritual and educational uplift forms the heart of the “In This Place” initiative. The name itself is a refrain—spoken with reverence—echoing the sacredness of the land and the lives it cradles. “In this place, people resisted,” says Lavonnie. “They created a world of opportunity in a society trying to deny them everything. That deserves to be remembered.”

The congregation is seeking donations and volunteers to help clear the land this fall and eventually install signage listing the names of those known to be buried there. There is also hope for a future memorial garden, inspired by a similar project in the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland that honored unmarked graves.

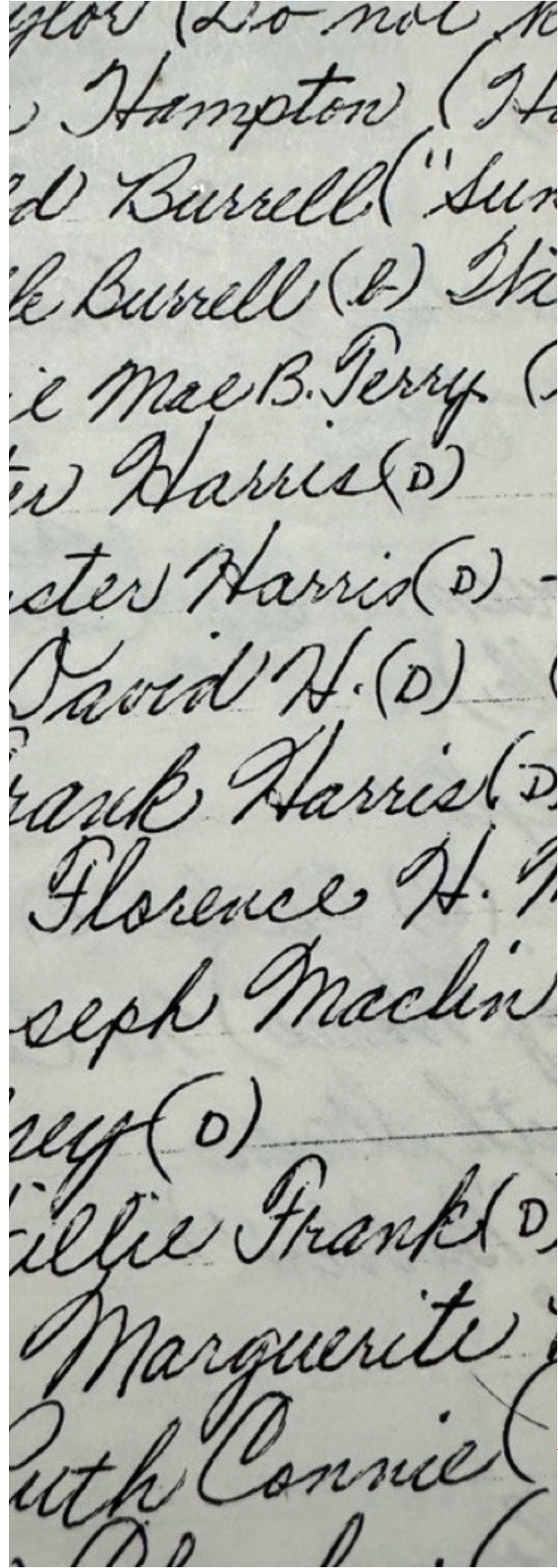
“This isn’t just about restoration—it’s about reconnection,” says Faye. “There are people in this community who don’t even know they have roots in the Episcopal Church. This project is a way to bring them home.”

In a time when so many stories have been paved over—literally and figuratively—“In This Place” stands as a holy refusal to forget.

To support this project or learn more, go to [saintpaulmason.org](http://saintpaulmason.org).



An overturned gravestone lies in a ditch at the Old St. Paul Cemetery in Mason, Tennessee, where over 100 people—many of them formerly enslaved—are buried. The site, once part of the original campus of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and the Gaylor Industrial School, is the focus of a new restoration effort led by church members. “BlueOval had already begun to put piping and widen the ditch... that tombstone was on the edge. It just eventually slid in,” said Lavonnie Perry Claybon, a leader at St. Paul’s. PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. PAUL’S MASON.



**A** mighty white oak spreads its shade across the lawn behind the former St. Elisabeth's Episcopal Church on Old Brownsville Road. Roughly a century old, it is home to more than a hundred species, from agile Grey squirrels to worker ants tracing yards of Virginia creeper. This tree sustains life.

It once had a sister tree, cleared for construction in 2012. The Reverend Bill Murray was Rector when the parish built a new church near the northeast corner of St. Columba land. Hord Architects designed the building to sit right where the sister tree stood.

When the great oak was felled, Reverend Bill's father Seldon Murray commissioned the wood to be made into an altar table according to plans of the original concrete altar at the church on Yale Road, an homage to tradition. A local arborist cut the lumber, and it dried for weeks in a kiln.

"The wood was so hard, it dulled the sawblades. A number of us in the congregation tried to work it, backyard setups and such, but it was just too hard," says Seldon Murray. He contacted Jim Cole of The Woodwork Shop in Bartlett, who with owner Joe Harriman, planed the raw lumber.

"The arches were cut and inlay was all done by a CNC computer-controlled machine, according to their plans. We glued it all up, did the router work and stained it," says Harriman. "It was a really fun project."

Cole was astounded by the finished product. "Everything you make is out of square, off by just a little," he says. "You take a tape measure from one corner diagonal to the opposite corner, then measure the other side, corner to opposite corner. If it's exact, then it's square. And it was perfect. God did that."

When Reverend Murray placed the altar table in the sanctuary, he was stunned. It stood in the exact spot where the tree had once grown. Over the years, hundreds of parishioners knelt near the altar for communion.

After St. Elisabeth's closed in 2019, the property sold twice over. Two years ago, St. Columba staff visited the new owners who were clearing things out and found the altar table abandoned in the nave, warped and cracked.

"They said if we could move it, we could have it," says Matthew Arehart, Associate Executive Director of St. Columba, "so we loaded it up, along with the lectern and some prayer books, and brought it all back here."

Cole and Harriman repaired the damage and restored the finish to its original brilliance. Now the altar overlooks the forest through the massive bay window in the chapel of Scheibler lodge. Hundreds continue to gather before it in times of prayer.

Like its sister growing tall just across the woods, this tree too, sustains life.

# Sister Trees: Story of an Altar

BY CANDACE BAXTER



# Finding Community Among the Birds

by *Connie Cruthirds*

**A**t the last St. Clare silent retreat before this summer's hiatus, Reverend Mimsy Jones invited us to remember the resurrection stories in our lives. The one that came to mind continues to enrich my life in ways I never imagined.

Last summer, I left Memphis to help my daughter and her husband with their first baby – also my first grandchild. Oh, the joy of being with this precious little boy every day!

I planned to stay with them at their home in Florida for three months, but ended up there for seven.

During my time in Florida, I longed for an extended community of friends to share this journey with me as my grandson grew. But my daughter's family was new to the area, too. How could I possibly be lonely or feel isolated with this baby?

The seasons kept moving along around us, and I found myself at the threshold of Lent. Just before Ash Wednesday, I heard something beyond me say, "Would you be willing to step outside for one minute a day for 40 days to listen?"

I said yes.

During Lent, I kept a journal of what I heard each day. Thanks to the "Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab" app, I also listed the birds singing around me and my grandson.

Each day, the sadness I'd felt without community was replaced by joy, anticipation, and marvel at the majesty of all that surrounds us. Bird songs resurrected me as I sat outside with a baby before his own sounds had gone much further than coos or squeals. Throughout those 40 days, the wilderness welcomed us home everyday.

## Day 12

Cacophony of bird song this morning. 12 sing at once.  
Tufted titmouse to American Goldfinch.  
Eastern Phoebe responds with very few notes.  
Rooster cockadoodles nearby.  
I am of this.  
Trees look grey brown from here.  
Up close?  
Spring springs.  
It's been a long winter in this isolated town.  
My Grand and I both grow up more each day.  
So do the trees.  
How could we not grow amidst the symphony of birdsong?  
We listen.

## Day 20

Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee  
Call the wild back and forth between trees.  
The Uncommon Red-Wing Blackbird adds song between the wind's blowing breath.  
This lonely place, his time of isolation from the community I know,  
Is now filled with song and feathers.  
I begin to see the beauty of this time away.  
This chrysalis has forced new wings.  
I pray this listening inspires new flight.

## Day 27

All the regulars check in...  
Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse,  
Eastern Phoebe.  
Yellow-Rumped and Pine Warbler arrive

soon after.

American Robin, White-Throated Sparrow, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Cardinal and Mockingbird, Carolina Chickadee, Chipping Sparrow, and my poetic friend the Dark-Eyed Junco.

A revival for my soul.

This most beautiful time came with a side of loneliness and disappointment.

27 days ago as Lent began and home had been far away for 6 months, the wilderness invited me to step into it to listen for one minute a day for 40 days.

Downy Woodpecker and Great Blue Heron have arrived.

I might have missed them if I wasn't listening.  
Sound without sight brought us closer.  
My ears are more keen now.  
I know how often Phoebe and Titmouse call and respond.  
I know that when Hawk soars,  
His call drowns out all others'.  
They've taught me to sing as the sun rises and sets.  
To know that when storms are coming, like today,  
I'm to sing louder  
and sense my shelter.  
I don't know.  
I'm just listening.

A song revival for all of me.  
Amen.



**CONNIE CRUTHIRDS** - storyteller, photo-journeyist, and a weaver of words in the style of Mary Oliver and David Whyte - writes to discover the intriguing life within us all. She is married, with two adult children, and is a creative coach helping people find their way through life. She is a parishioner at Church of the Holy Communion in Memphis.



Fall Lecture:  
**SACRED, SECULAR,  
 SYNCOPATED:**  
**Theology & the Music  
 of Kendrick Lamar**

Thursday, Nov. 6 at 7 p.m.  
 Memphis, location info to come

**WHAT DOES HOLINESS LOOK LIKE IN A WORLD ADDICTED TO VIOLENCE, POWER, AND PROFIT?**

**CAN HIP-HOP BE SACRED?**

**CAN A COMPTON-BORN PROPHET POINT THE WAY TO SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION?**

Join us for the 2025 Barth House Theological Society Fall Lecture featuring Femi Olutade—writer, podcaster, and theologian—who will explore the sacred themes pulsing through the music of Kendrick Lamar.

A Christian thinker, hip-hop head, and lead writer for the acclaimed Dissect podcast's deep-dive into Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN.*, Olutade will guide attendees through a theological exploration of Lamar's discography, drawing connections between holiness, justice, personal transformation, and prophetic critique.

Femi Olutade is the lead writer behind Dissect's acclaimed season on *DAMN.* and a passionate teacher of scripture and culture. His lecture will resonate with seekers, skeptics, artists, and activists alike.

**Reserve seats starting Aug. 1, 2025.**



Femi Athanasios Olutade is a Christian, husband, father, Bible nerd, hip-hop head, Nigerian-American Millennial, and a follower of Jesus in the Eastern Orthodox tradition who enjoys exploring ideas related to spirituality, history, and culture. Femi has taken a particular interest in exploring hip-hop music as a lens to understand the specific struggles of Black people in America and the universal human struggle for personal and societal transformation. Femi's analysis of spirituality, history, culture, and hip-hop lyrics has been featured on numerous podcasts, blogs, and social media outlets. Most notably, Femi served as the lead writer for the Dissect podcast's Season Five, which presented a 20-episode line-by-line analysis of Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize-winning album, *DAMN.* Femi equally enjoys teaching a Bible study course for high school students at St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine, California. Femi graduated from Stanford University with degrees in electrical engineering. Outside of raising children and other domestic responsibilities, Femi works as a software engineer in the tech industry.

**CONGRATS,  
 CLASS OF 2025  
 GRADUATES!**



**Calvary Episcopal Church**

Angelee Akin-Houston High  
 Henry Bush-Crosstown High  
 John Bush-Crosstown High  
 Kate Connell-Hutchison School  
 Virginia McLean-St. Mary's Episcopal School  
 Morgan Thompson-Northpoint Christian School

**Holy Trinity Episcopal Church**

Neeley Mathes-Texas Christian University  
 Seth Motley-Avon Lenox School  
 Carrington Sulcer-UT Knoxville

**St. Andrews Collierville**

J.P. Senyoni-University of Memphis

**St. Paul's Mason**

Brianna Cochran-University of Memphis

**St. George's Episcopal Church**

Penny Hamm-Houston High  
 Sutton Jenkins-Westminster Academy  
 Helena Lange-Houston High  
 Bruce Freeman-Houston High  
 Billy Freeman-Houston High  
 Jack Boccher-Houston High  
 Sophie Crider-Houston High

*God of journeys, endings, and new beginnings, through the highs and lows, the twists and turns this class has faced along the way, we have faith that your love has guided them from the moment they began up to graduation day. We give you thanks and praise for the goodness that shines in the relationships formed, knowledge learned, and memories made through this school. Bless the body, mind, and soul of every graduate, that they may celebrate your glory in themselves and all creation, and use their education to build your kingdom of peace.*



ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL SCHOOL



ST. GEORGE'S FIFTH GRADE



ST. GEORGE'S MIDDLE



GRACE-ST. LUKE'S



ST. GEORGE'S HIGH