

The Movable Eucharist: The Episcopal Church on Vashon-Maury Island

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

The Episcopal church has a long history on Vashon — the church celebrates its 100th year on the Island this year. It's a history marked by change and by moves around the island.

The first Episcopal service on Vashon was held in September 1912 in E.E. Van Olinda's Hall above the Portage Store. Sunday school had been organized earlier that year, and when a mission on Vashon was sponsored by Trinity Church in Seattle, Vincent Gowen, son of the rector at Trinity and a lay-reader, led the first service on Vashon.



Christ Church, Portage 1921 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum
Portage Marsh behind Church and a gathering of Masons in front.

When the Coe family of Portage donated land just west of what was then the Portage Store and \$100 in materials, Christ Church — Vashon's first Episcopal church — was built. It was dedicated July 4, 1913 and began serving 15 local and summer families. The simple one-room, board-and-batten building, designed to hold 35 people, had two windows on each side and a vestibule attached. The building served as the Episcopal church until August 1933, when the newspaper record of church services ends. The building sat empty until it was sold to Cliff Lavender, who had purchased the Portage Store from Van Olinda.

There was no Episcopal church on Vashon-Maury again until March 1944, when a group of Episcopal women met to form a guild and develop a plan to revive the Episcopal church on the Island. The group found that the Lutheran church on Bank Road (now the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum), where services here held in Norwegian, was not being used often because many of the younger Lutherans preferred going to services at the Colvos Lutheran Church, where services were held in English. The Episcopalians rented the Lutheran church on Bank Road for \$1 per service, more if heat and lights were used, and on May 28, 1944, the first service of the revived Episcopal Church was held.

Many in the new congregation wanted to name the new church Christ Church after the original mission at Portage, but the Bishop preferred a different name, since the original Christ Church Mission was considered a “finished project.” “This is a completely different mission, and it would be confusing to carry on the records of two different churches with the same name for the same community.” The name Church of the Holy Spirit was chosen, since that first service — on May 28, 1944 — had been held on the Feast of Pentecost, or Whitsunday, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and gave them the gift of tongues.

In 1947, a lot to the west of the Lutheran church was purchased with plans to build a new church. When the Lutheran church was no longer available in 1948, services were held in the Odd Fellows Hall (now Vashon Allied Arts' Blue Heron Arts Center) until a new church could be built. Cliff Lavender sold the original Christ Church building at Portage to the group for \$75, and in February 1949 the original church was moved to the new location on Bank Road and was called “The Little Brown Church.” It was dedicated on Oct. 30, 1949, after the building was refurbished and a kitchen and narthex were added. Several more additions were built over the next decade. Then, in 1962, a fire destroyed part of the building and a decision to build a new church was made. Land had been purchased on Vashon Highway north of town in 1957, and in 1963 the new Church of the Holy Spirit was built and dedicated.



Church of the Holy Spirit 1963 - Courtesy of the Church of the Holy Spirit

The old church was sold back to Cliff Lavender, making him once again the owner of an abandoned Episcopal church. The 1963 photograph of the interior of the new church, shows the north wall covered by a hanging of the Jerusalem Cross above the altar, the lectern to the right, the baptism font and hanging candle to the left and center facing pews for the choir. The 2012 photograph shows the same interior with some significant changes. The north wall was replaced in 1968 by a large memorial window donated by the Holke family in remembrance of their son Don Holke who was killed in the Vietnam War in 1967. The lectern to the right and the hanging candle to the left are all that remain from the 1963 photograph. A new altar donated in 1981 and a matching altar rail added in 1983 have helped transform the interior into the open and inviting space it is today.



Church of the Holy Spirit 2012 – Terry Donnelly

For 100 years — save for that 11-year hiatus — the Episcopal church has been a presence on Vashon Island, from its humble beginnings at Portage in 1912 to its current incarnation on Vashon Highway.