

I live in the District of Columbia, Ward 6. I am a member of the St. Thomas' Parish and a member of the church's Building Committee.

The Cornerstone of the original St. Thomas' church building was laid in 1899, and that new church building included a gilded cross that could be seen over the Dupont Circle skyline. On June 26, 1899, *The Washington Post* reported that the congregation of St. Thomas, after five years of planning and construction effort, had held its first worship service in their newly completed church building. The article stated that the new St. Thomas' Church occupied "...a splendid site at the corner of Eighteenth and Madison streets northwest, just east of Dupont Circle...", and that the building, "...stands not only as one of the most beautiful church edifices in the city, but as a monument to the untiring efforts and the devoted zeal of those who have so long labored toward securing it." I would suggest that these qualities still define our congregation.

On August 25, 1970, the *Washington Post* ran a very different type of story, entitled, "Fire Destroys St. Thomas, Arson Blamed." That story began as follows:

"Historic St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, where President Franklin Delano Roosevelt prayed, was destroyed early yesterday in a three-alarm fire that officials believe was caused by arson.

"The blaze, first reported at 3:26 a.m. in the imposing 71-year gothic edifice on 18th St NW near Dupont Circle, was almost certainly of incendiary origin, said fire Marshall Joseph H. Mattare.

"Not controlled until about 5:30 a.m., the fire melted the church's stained glass windows, eroded its sandstone interior columns and consumed the pews, including number 32, where President Roosevelt sat.

"The gray granite walls, the spire that rose **more than 100 feet** and part of the roof of the **850-seat church** stood precariously yesterday morning when John P. Stoddard, D.C. building inspector, declared the structure unsafe and ordered it demolished."

The article also noted that, "Mr. Roosevelt and his family attended the church from 1913 to 1920, when he was assistant navy secretary, and from 1933 to 1945, when he was President. He had served as vestryman and was an honorary warden."

The *Post* article also contained a few comments by long-time members of the parish, who were shocked and saddened by the fire, and they looked back fondly on the history of St. Thomas' during its heyday, when it had been "a fashionable church where ushers wore tails."

While the 1970 fire destroyed our original church building, in a matter of hours, it left behind much more than a pile of ruins and a sense of loss.

That fire also forged among our membership a new resolve, a new resilience, and a renewed sense of mission and commitment to the Dupont Circle community and to the city. St. Thomas' Parish did not withdraw and retreat. It continued to worship in its surviving parish house. Nor did it go out of existence, as many people assume when they stand on 18th Street and see the ruins of the original building. Instead, after the fire our members increased their level of engagement with the community, during the 1970s, the 1980s, and beyond.

In the aftermath of the D.C. riots of 1968 and the ensuing white flight to the suburbs, St. Thomas' once again became a true church of the neighborhood, engaged with the daily life and struggles of people living and working in the city. And while the parish did not initially have the means to put its resources into brick-and-mortar construction during the 1970s (nor was it fashionable in the 1970s to do that), from the beginning St. Thomas' had a program called "Phoenix Rising" whose clear intent was to rebuild on its historic site.

During the 1970s, St. Thomas' was one of the few churches that would allow Integrity, the organization of gay Episcopalians who did not feel welcome in their own parishes, to celebrate Holy Eucharist in its worship space. St. Thomas' also distinguished itself early on, during the AIDS crisis, as one of the few places that allowed funerals for people who died from AIDS, whether or not the deceased had been a member of the parish.

St. Thomas' is a community where **people who feel like the church has left them encounter the God who has never left them.** We are committed to being a beacon of light in the community and our city, and our parish outreach extends to international projects in locations such as Honduras. St. Thomas' is diverse its membership and is a shining example of human unity in a divided world. **All** are welcomed through its doors -- persons of any social class, persons of all races and backgrounds, young, old, gay, straight, and transgender. The church's vision and mission have continuously been focused on human rights and the needs of marginalized groups.

For the past 45 years, St. Thomas' Parish has lived with "make do" facilities that are aging and inadequate. Our sanctuary is crowded and hard to locate. We have gone from having the **most prominent** church edifice in D.C. to having the **most hard to find** sanctuary in D.C. Our space is heavily used during the week by a wide range of community groups. Our meeting space is more than maxed out, and we continuously experience

scheduling conflicts regarding its use. The lack of ADA accessibility is a major limitation of the current structure. We are also currently experiencing a baby boom among our membership, and we lack space to accommodate the needs of small children. Our current space was never designed as a permanent worship home, and is inadequate for both current and future needs.

The size of our planned church will be modest in comparison to its original building and in comparison with other existing churches in the Dupont Circle community.

Our congregation has made a very intentional choice to stay in Dupont Circle, at our historic and visible location at the corner of 18th and Church Streets. We weathered the tumultuous 70s and 80s, including the AIDS crisis, with inadequate facilities, and we have no intention of going through a multi-year process of planning and construction simply to end up with a facility that does not support our basic needs for ministry and mission.

St. Thomas' Parish has been on Church Street and been part of the Dupont Circle and Washington, D.C. community since 1894. We remain proud of our legacy and are excited about our future. Thank you for your consideration of this variance.

Submitted on 12/16/2015 by:

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