

# *Parish Profile*



*Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Norristown, Pennsylvania*



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## Who We Are



**S**aint John's Church, Norristown is a medium-sized parish located in the Philadelphia suburbs. The congregation is made up of some 131 communicants, with a total of 374 baptized members.<sup>1</sup> We are an older group, with an average age of just over fifty years, although we range from toddlers to nonagenarians. As a parish, we are seeking to uphold our Anglo-Catholic beliefs and worship in a changing and challenging world, to serve as witnesses to the gospel and works of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are seeking an opportunity to grow as a congregation while continuing our present traditions of worship, liturgy and outreach. Our convictions are our strength – we have a devoted congregation, a beautiful worship space, sublime liturgy and unmatched social ministry. If we can increase our visibility within the deanery, the diocese and the wider community, we feel we can easily meet our goals for growth.

## What We Believe:

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

*St. John's Episcopal Church is a fellowship of dedicated Christians who proclaim the risen Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Redeemer, and seek to live our faith by worshiping in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, by helping people of all ages to grow in their knowledge and love of God, by reaching out to those in need, both within our parish and in the community at large.*

A sign located outside of our parish office building states: "Saint John's Church. A Traditional Anglo-Catholic Parish." This claim was strongly reinforced in the results of the parish survey conducted to aid in the preparation of this Profile. Our Anglo-Catholic beliefs extend far beyond a preference for Rite I liturgy and incense. We stand in full witness to the traditional beliefs of the Anglican Church, including the 1801 Articles of Faith of the Episcopal Church and the 1886 Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, and are looking for a priest who shares these time-honored beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> From the Annual Report 2003, p. 13: "From the Parish Service Record Book." 153 copies of the Parish Survey were mailed out, 100 were returned - a rate of return of 65%. Sixty-five of the respondents turned out for the subsequent meeting to discuss the results of the questionnaire.

We hold the following to be central tenets of our Anglo-Catholic Faith:

1. The authority of scripture, whose central theme is salvation through Christ.
2. The Nicene Creed as a full and living statement of our beliefs.
3. The central role of the sacraments in our life and worship.
4. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.
5. The historical episcopate and the apostolic succession.
5. A high regard for the Incarnation and the Atonement.
6. Respect for and continuance of the traditions of Anglican liturgy and worship.
7. The responsibility of all to follow the example of Christ in works, ministry and outreach.

This being said, we also have an abiding love for traditional liturgy and worship, including traditional language, incense and bells. At our later service, these are augmented with organ, choir and sung liturgy. Weekday masses are less elaborate. Our soup kitchen and social outreach programs are clear examples of our works in the community.

### *Who We Are Looking For:*

The parish survey shows that the congregation strongly wishes to maintain its traditions, history, and liturgy, and sees its members as its most valuable asset (Please see sidebar). The survey results show a strong desire for a rector who will concentrate on the pastoral needs of the congregation. At the same time, the parish seeks to grow in membership, especially with regard to young people and families with children, whose numbers are currently low. An emphasis on Christian Education would probably do much to further this end. We are looking for a rector who will embrace the traditions, history and liturgy that make Saint John's special, and use our uniqueness to attract new members. We are looking for a priest who shares our deep-seated and profound Anglo-Catholic beliefs. We are looking for an individual with vision and energy, who can rise to the challenges of budget constraints caused by a stalled economy, of an aging physical plant and an aging congregation, of urban outreach in a suburban parish.

### **Results of the Parish Survey:**

The Parish Survey identified the following as the five main strengths of the Parish:

1. Anglo-Catholic Tradition.
2. The history of the Parish.
3. The beauty of the liturgy used.
4. The dedication of the members of the congregation.
5. The beauty of the church building.

The main weaknesses were identified as:

1. Small/dwindling size of membership.
2. Location of church facilities in downtown Norristown.
3. Limited participation by parishioners in church/parish activities and committees.
4. Lack of young people/young families with children.

The parish sees its history and traditions as the core of its identity, and would be unwilling to compromise them. At the same time, we need to increase our numbers. We feel that this can be accomplished by increasing our visibility within the community and the Diocese, and through the expansion of parish activities.

## *History:*



Saint John's Episcopal Church was organized on December 17th, 1812, with charter granted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on January 4th, 1813. Ground was broken for the church later that year, and the building was completed in 1814. The church was consecrated on April 6th, 1815 by the Rt. Rev'd. William White, first Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania. Saint John's is the oldest church in Norristown (having been organized nine months after the incorporation of the Borough of Norristown) and the first organized in Montgomery County after the American Revolution.

The east and west walls still retain 80% of their original fabric. The nave was lengthened 20 feet in 1856 –1857, and the north tower was dismantled and replaced with the current south tower. A fire in February of 1898 severely damaged the interior. Reconstruction resulted in a new and enlarged chancel, new organ, and the removal of the rear gallery.

The church in its present form is largely the result of the generosity of the Rev'd. James M. Niblo, rector from 1925 to 1957. Under Fr. Niblo's guidance, the chancel was doubled in size, the baptistery, the mortuary chapel and the Lady Chapel were added, and the parish hall was constructed. The interior of the church was greatly enhanced and adorned in the Gothic style, with initial planning by Edward T. Boggs, a Philadelphia churchman and architect; final design and construction were undertaken by Calvert,



Herrick and Riedinger of New York. Highlights of this project are the high altar and mosaic chancel and sacristy floors of Italian marble, the Altarpiece with the figure of Christ the King flanked by the four Evangelists and the Calvary scene on the Rood Beam, both of carved oak from Oberammergau, the carved trusses and paneling of the false ceiling in the chancel and nave, with gilded and painted decoration following a fifteenth-century motif, and the Welsh tiles of the floor of the nave and the crossing.

The stained glass dates from two major periods. The older, Tiffany-style windows were donated at the turn of the twentieth century; the windows in the sanctuary were dismantled and reinstalled when the older, apsidal space was enlarged into its present form. The Epiphany Window was added at this time (1928), to match in style the earlier Nativity Window (1903). The grisaille-style windows date from 1928 – 1929, as do the medieval-style windows in the baptistery, another component of the adornment of the interior of the church under Father Niblo.

More recent additions to the interior of the church include the etched glass doors located in the Narthex and at the entrance to the Lady Chapel, the antiphonal division and Trompette-en-Chamade for the organ at the rear of the nave, and the free-standing altar. The parish is proud of its building and its intricate beauty – the interior of the nave was recently re-stuccoed and repainted, as was the parish hall, and a new roof and trusses were installed in 1998.

Part of the reason why the parishioners of Saint John's have such a deep-rooted sense of history and tradition is the fact that we tend to have long-tenured clergy. Since 1925, we have had only four rectors: Fr. Niblo, Fr. Lanigan, Fr. Austin and Fr. Watson. We are accustomed to the feeling of security and stability that such long tenures can bring, but this also makes us less comfortable with the idea of change.



## *What We Do:*

Saint John's parishioners are active both within the congregation and in the community at large. While our programs do not differ greatly from those found at other churches, it is worthwhile to present them here in summary form:



### *Social Ministries:*

Saint John's has a very active and very successful Soup Kitchen. With the aid of 10 area churches, a cadre of fifty volunteers serves over 500 meals per week. To quote the Social Ministries Financial Report from the 2002 Annual Report:

The Social Ministries Committee is not supported [financially] by the Church and is not included as a budget item. The Committee receives all of its financial support from charitable organizations, service organizations, outreach programs of other churches, and individuals both within and outside of St. John's parish.

It is the hope and goal of the Social Ministries Committee to establish a permanent, self-sustaining endowment for the maintenance of the Soup Kitchen. It is expected that, as this dedicated endowment grows (to a minimum goal of \$100,000), the ability of the Soup Kitchen to become self-sustaining will also grow. The parish is understandably quite proud of our Soup Kitchen.

### *C.O.N.I.*

In 2001, Saint John's Outreach Committee was spun off and incorporated into Cooperative Outreach of Norristown, Inc., a non-for-profit ecumenical outreach group. Under the terms of C.O.N.I.'s charter, the majority of board members will come from Saint John's Church, which will therefore maintain nominal control. However, C.O.N.I. is a completely separate and self-sustained entity. C.O.N.I. came about as the result of a vision by the Outreach Committee.

In 2000, Saint John's took out a line of credit and purchased a building at 530 Church Street, just around the block from the Church. The building was renovated and space provided for Norristown Ministries, Inc. (a local, ecumenical counseling and advocacy service) and Mercy Suburban Hospital Clinic, with whom we had already been involved in outreach activities. The building provides a one-stop counseling and clinic facility for the local community, while offering discounted rent rates for the two tenants. The rent collected is used to pay down the line of credit used to purchase the building; once the line of credit has been repaid, the tenants will no longer be charged rent, allowing them to allocate more of their resources the people who need their services.



C.O.N.I. is actively fundraising, with the aim of repeating its success with the 530 Church Street building. While no longer technically a committee of Saint John's

Church, C.O.N.I. stands as an important part of our outreach and service to the community. We have been remarkably successful at ensuring that our outreach programs are self-supporting.

### *Saint John's 2000:*

In 1993, Saint John's initiated a capital campaign called "Saint John's 2000" to raise funds for capital maintenance and improvement projects, as well as to augment special programs such as music. The campaign was quite successful, raising almost \$750,000. The majority of the funds raised are deferred gifts in the form of insurance policies and annuities, which makes little of the proceeds available for current projects.

## *Christian Education:*

Our Christian Education program is small but dedicated. We do not have a staff position for this purpose, but rather rely on volunteers from the parish. Our programs include intergenerational and adult Christian education between the two services on Sundays, Bible study groups meeting after Wednesday evening and Thursday morning masses, and an Enquirer's class for individuals interested in confirmation or reception in the Episcopal Church. The Sunday school group has recently added the Godly Play program for youngsters, with good results. Youth Fellowship events are also organized under the aegis of the Christian Education.



## *Music:*

Music has always been important to the worship and life of our parish. The organ replaced after the fire in 1898 was the church's third; the current organ, an Austin, was installed in 1928, and rebuilt and expanded in 1963 and again in 1981. The organ is a variant on the French style, with main divisions in the chancel and an antiphonal division with trumpets in the rear of the nave. The current choir is a small but able group, with two paid singers and four volunteers from the congregation, under the capable leadership of our choirmaster and organist. Current budget constraints prevent us from seeking additional paid singers.



The choir performs a wide range of music, from medieval plainsong to modern compositions and spirituals, although most of their repertory falls within the classical Anglican canon. In addition to singing at the later mass on Sundays, the choir also regularly performs choral Evensongs, Lessons and Carols and other special concerts.

## *Missions:*

Saint John's missions philosophy is to concentrate on local needs and organizations within the immediate community, the Deanery or the Diocese. At present, our Missions budget through 2004 has been earmarked for C.O.N.I.: in 2002, the Vestry voted a three-year grant to C.O.N.I. to help them get their program going.

### *Parish Life:*

As with most activities at Saint John's, the Parish Life Committee is run by a small but devoted group of parishioners. The Parish Life Committee is in charge of activities geared towards fostering fellowship among the members of the congregation. This most often takes the form of receptions after special services and events, but has included parish outings as well, such as the annual Pig Roast.

### *Stewardship:*

As an Anglo-Catholic parish, we take a high view of the duty of all parishioners to give freely of their time and talent. As a result of a successful stewardship program over the last several years, pledge income has increased even as our numbers have reduced slightly. Under this program, the living are finally contributing more to the church's treasury than the dead.



### *Saint Agnes Altar Guild:*

The Altar Guild plays an important part in enhancing the beauty and solemnity of our services. Masses are held every day of the week except Mondays, and must be prepared for. Saint John's has a fine collection of vessels, linens and vestments which require tender and loving care.

### *Daughters of the King:*

Saint John's is host to the Saint Mary's chapter of the Daughters of the King, a service Order for woman communicants on the Episcopal Church who undertake a Rule of Life incorporating a Rule of Prayer and a Rule of Services. Saint Mary's Chapter members coordinate the Parish Intercession List and the Prayer Chain, and maintain the Parish Library.



### *Financials:*

Saint John's is fortunate to have both the financial support of its parishioners and an endowment, which allows us to have programs usually found in larger congregations. For 2003, our income was \$211,411 and our budgeted expenses were \$220,553, a net difference of (\$9,142). Of the income, \$102,832 was from plate offerings and pledges, \$63,915 was from investment income; the remainder comes from the rental of office and parking space. As with most endowments, the recent fluctuations

in the stock market have had an effect on our investment income. On the expense side, our largest outlays in 2003 were for payroll and payroll benefits: \$143,367, utilities: \$21,662, office expenses: \$10,838 and property expenses: \$14,163.

## *Region:*

### *The Diocese of Pennsylvania:*

With 160 congregations spread over five counties in the Philadelphia area, the Diocese of Pennsylvania is the fifth largest diocese in the Episcopal Church and one of the oldest. The Missionary Diocese: it's what we call ourselves today. It's what we called ourselves 300 years ago when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) helped bring the Church of England to the Colonies.

It was in the late 1700s when the Rev. Evan Evans, an English missionary priest from the SPG, helped bring the liturgy in Welsh to widely scattered Welsh settlers in the Philadelphia area. Helping Evans to revitalize the Church of England were other SPG missionaries, and their efforts firmly established more congregations. By the end of that century, 17 congregations were flourishing – and the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America had united its congregations here under the leadership of William White, the first bishop of Pennsylvania. At that time, our diocese became not only the birthplace of the American Episcopal Church, but also the birthplace of the Anglican Communion, the second largest Christian body in the world with 70 million members in over 160 countries.



The present bishop, the Rt. Rev'd. Charles E. Bennisson, introduced a program of diocesan renewal and growth in 1998 called "Our Holy Experiment," which is now in full swing. The mission statement of Our Holy Experiment states:

*We believe Jesus Christ is calling us to become a missionary diocese, working as one body to carry out the Great Commission: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you... (Matthew 28:19-20a) We believe our mission is: ...to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all members. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 855)*

*Living Into Our Baptismal Covenant "Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ." We will act as one body with each congregation becoming a missionary community. We are not separate entities – the diocese, the congregations, the institutions and the committees – but one body whose purpose is to make disciples of all people.*

The Diocese of Pennsylvania is an attractive place to work, with a generous salary scale and excellent clergy benefits.

## *Montgomery County:*

Montgomery County is one of the most rapidly developing regions in the Northeast, and Norristown is the county seat. Nearby King of Prussia is not only home to the King of Prussia Mall (the country's largest in terms of retail space), but is also home to numerous corporate headquarters in the insurance, financial, technology and manufacturing centers. The greater Norristown area is also the center of the American pharmaceutical industry, represented by Wyeth, Smith/Klein Beecham and Merck.

Norristown is also a half-hour drive from Philadelphia, and is well connected by commuter rail and bus, via the Norristown Transportation Center. New York City is a two-hour train ride or drive away, and Washington DC can be reached in three hours by car. Local attractions include the King of Prussia Mall, the boutique towns of Lahaska, New Hope, Manayunk and the Main Line, each with distinctive shops and dining. Historic attractions include Valley Forge National Historic Park, Hopewell Furnace, the Brandywine Battlefield, Independence Mall and the Mint in Philadelphia, and numerous restored colonial homes and estates. Numbered among nearby cultural attractions are Longwood Gardens, the Morris Arboretum, the Barnes Foundation, the Mercer Museum, Michener Museum and Moravian Tile Works in Doylestown, the Brandywine Museum in Chadds Ford, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Rodin Museum, the Academy of Fine Arts, the Franklin Institute and numerous other museums in Philadelphia. The recently-opened Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts is one of the premier concert spaces in the country, and there are many other theaters and concert halls in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs.

The Norristown School District - covering greater Norristown including East Norriton and West Norriton - is well regarded (several of our parishioners teach in the school system). During a visit, President Clinton proclaimed the school district a model for the whole nation. The region also has abundant opportunities for higher education. Colleges within a half-hour drive include Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Swarthmore, the University of Pennsylvania, Temple, Villanova, Drexel, Le Salle, St. Josephs, Philadelphia University, Widener, Ursinus, Cabrini, Eastern University, Rosemont College, West Chester University, and Montgomery Community College.



### *The Borough of Norristown:*



Norristown was incorporated as a borough on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1812. At the time, it was a bustling mill town and transportation nexus, located at the junction of road and canal networks leading into Philadelphia, then the largest city in America. Saint John's was founded later that year. Norristown continued to be an important commercial center until the middle of the twentieth century. It then suffered the same decline as other Northeastern mill towns, as manufacturing jobs moved either south or overseas. The construction of the King of Prussia Mall and the general decline in downtown America in the second half of the twentieth century also took their toll on the Borough, which as present is making a comeback with the construction of the regional headquarters of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection downtown and the proposed revitalization of the waterfront along the Schuylkill River.

Nevertheless, the community offer the challenges of urban ministry in a generally suburban setting. The closure of parts of the State Hospital located on the north end of town has also added to the character of the community, and helps explain the success of our feeding and outreach programs. About ten years ago, on a motion to relocate the parish to one of the surrounding suburban communities, the vestry voted to remain in Norristown and minister to the needs of the local community. Saint John's Church is committed to Norristown, its people, and to improving the quality of life in the Borough. While few members of the parish live right downtown, most come from the immediate area and surrounding towns.

Make no mistake – greater Norristown is a fantastic area to live in, with excellent opportunities for employment, education, history, culture and recreation. Saint John's Church is an architectural treasure with small but devoted congregation dedicated to doing Christ's work and proclaiming the Gospel in a traditional, Anglo-Catholic manner.