

VANISHING CHURCHES  
a local history  
by David Allen White

This past summer saw the closing of Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Bellaire on San Antonio's South Side. Most of the remaining members of Holy Cross were transferred to St. Stephen's in Highland Park. If the Diocese had chosen to merge the two congregations, the Highland Park church would now have the name "St. Stephen's and the Holy Cross." This is why in some cities you find churches with names like "Ascension and St. Agnes," "Grace and St. Peter's," and "St. Stephen and the Incarnation." But this is not what happened. Holy Cross just closed its doors and the building is being sold.

Holy Cross was opened in 1955 as a mission of St. Stephen's, and the present building was dedicated in 1964. I attended there briefly in 1972 when Father Paul Cochran was vicar. He was trying to make it an Anglo-Catholic congregation, but without much success.

It's a sad thing when a church has to close and its people have to go elsewhere. There are currently members of St. Paul's who lived through this experience with the closing of Trinity Church in Jefferson Terrace. Trinity opened in 1946, but closed in 2007. This must have been especially painful for the people at Trinity at the time. One wonders if it could have been saved. But Bishop Lillibridge has pointed out that it is not always the best use of resources to try to keep a struggling church alive for a very small number of people, when those resources could be better used in a new area where people are settling. Urban populations shift and change, and we have new congregations in suburban areas where nobody lived 50 years ago.

There is, I suppose, a temptation to think that every neighborhood of a large city needs an Episcopal church like it needs a fire station or a branch library. But this is not borne out by demographics. We are called to bring everyone to Christ, but we are not called to bring everyone to the Episcopal Church. Our brand of Christianity uses a formal liturgy printed in a book. This is who we are, but it's not who everyone is. Some people prefer a more spontaneous form of worship. Are we to say that there is only one way to worship God? Does God only hear the prayers that are approved by the Standing Liturgical Commission? I think we know the answer to that.

Holy Cross and Trinity are not the only San Antonio Episcopal churches that have closed. There was a St. Luke's, located at the corner of Houston and Chupaderas in Prospect Hill. This church was opened in 1878 and closed in 1926. This pretty little church, now being used by a Spanish-speaking Baptist congregation called El Calvario, looks very much like it once could have been Episcopal. No, St. Luke's did not close the church in Prospect Hill and move to Alamo Heights. The Alamo Heights church was founded in 1943, and at that time the name "St. Luke's" was unused, so it was adopted for the new church. The present building dates from 1954. There is no connection between the two congregations.

The other one, much closer to home, was called St. John's. It was located at the corner of Hackberry and Burnet in the Dignowity Hill neighborhood. It was established in 1878, the same year as the first St. Luke's, and five years earlier than St. Paul's. It closed in 1939, leaving the

title of St. John unused until the chapel at the Bishop Jones Center was dedicated. That chapel has become the de facto cathedral for the diocese. The church at Hackberry and Burnet later became Calvary Baptist Church (the same name as the former St. Luke's, but in English). Calvary Baptist later outgrew that space and moved to larger quarters on Burluson Street, a little farther east. It later became New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church, but the building was boarded up, and several years ago it burned down, leaving only a vacant lot.

What about our cathedral? Did we ever have one? Yes, it was St. Mark's, the oldest Episcopal church in San Antonio. It was founded in 1858 but the church building was not completed until 1875. The first Bishop of West Texas, the Right Reverend Robert W. B. Elliott, designated St. Mark's as the cathedral for the Diocese, but his successor, the Right Reverend William Steptoe Johnston, claimed that the agreement between the Diocese and the people of St. Mark's was for the episcopate of Bishop Elliott only, and he chose not to continue cathedral status for St. Mark's. Since then we have not had a real cathedral. Some of us feel this as a loss, while others don't think it makes much difference.

Since being appointed to the Diocesan Historical Commission by Bishop Lillibridge a couple of years ago, I have been able to learn a few things about the history of churches in San Antonio and the Diocese. History is one of my interests, so I enjoy sharing these stories.



**Former St. Luke's Episcopal Church, now Iglesia Bautista El Calvario.**



**Former St. John's Episcopal Church, later New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church.**