

History of the Parish

The history of St. Luke's parish in McLean, Virginia began with a letter to Monsignor J. Louis Flaherty, pastor of St. Elizabeth's Church in Richmond, Virginia. In this letter, Bishop John J. Russell, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, appointed Monsignor Flaherty, a former Army chaplain, the founding pastor of St. Luke's parish, effective Friday, May 19, 1961. St. Luke's parish was to cover a roughly three by ten mile region running along the Potomac River and stretching between Chain Bridge road and the Loudon County line. The parish was formed from the northeast sector of St. John's Church in McLean and covered the northwest corner of Fairfax county. This part of Fairfax County was made up of the small, but rapidly growing town of McLean and the still rural farming community of Great Falls. St. Luke's Parish was established to relieve the stress of travel upon the parishioners of St. John's, St. Joseph's, and our Lady of Good Council churches. Monsignor Flaherty was introduced to the people of St. John's on Tuesday, May 23, 1961, to announce the formation of the new St. Luke's.

The first mass of St. Luke's was celebrated by Monsignor Flaherty and four parishioners on May 27, 1961. Regular Sunday mass was first held on June 4, 1961, in the Franklin Sherman School cafeteria with 730 parishioners in attendance. The official residence of the Church was a small house at 712 Congress Lane (currently 1000 Congress Lane), located in Broyhill Langley Estates, adjacent to the church property. The house served as the rectory, the parish center, and as the location for weekday mass. It was decided by the parishioners that the first church building to construct would be a school. They felt that once a school was completed, a church would soon follow. Construction of the St. Luke's school commenced during April, 1962. With the completion of the school and gymnasium, masses would be transferred to the gym. At 1961's end, 450 families were registered in the Parish of St. Luke's. Sunday mass was moved from Franklin Sherman School to Churchhill Road School in the summer of 1962. In June, 1962, the newly ordained Reverend James McMurtrie joined Monsignor Flaherty as the first associate pastor of St. Luke's.

In August of 1962, the school and the gymnasium were completed despite the construction problems caused by the building's location on the clay fault line, and Sunday mass was then held in the gym. Mass would be celebrated in the school's gym/cafeteria for the next twenty years. On August 8, 1961, Mother Mary Virginette, C.S.S.F., Provincial Supervisor of the Felicia Sisters from Lodi, New Jersey, had agreed to staff St. Luke's School. To make room for the Sisters who were coming to teach at the school, Monsignor Flaherty and Fr. McMurtrie were moved into an apartment in the school in which they stayed for two years. The apartment was built into one classroom of the school and contained two bedrooms connected by a bath, and two offices connected by a very small kitchen/dining area. The parish office was also moved from the house on Congress Lane and

established in what would eventually become the school library. The house on Congress Lane was now St. Luke's convent, and Sister Mary Josephine, Principal, Sister Aldona, and Sister Victoria arrived on August 24, 1962. The school, composed of eight classrooms and a gym/cafeteria, opened on Tuesday, September 4, 1962 for grades 3, 4, 5, and 6 with fifty children in each grade level. Grades 1, 2, 7, and 8 were added to the school in the next few years. The Confraternity of the Christian Doctrine program (CCD), directed by Fr. McMurtrie and staffed by about 90 volunteers, was instituted at St. Luke's in 1962 and offered regular religious instruction for about 250 students.

In the early years of the parish, the people of St. Luke's were a small, closely knit community. The parishioners helped out in any way they could. The rectory on Congress Lane was totally bare when it was purchased. The parishioners quickly solved the problem by holding a sacristy shower on October 18, 1961, to which the people donated the furnishings, appliances, and other necessities for the rectory. Until a housekeeper could be hired, the domestic duties were provided by the men and women of St. Luke's. The women donated food, took turns cooking, and helped to keep the rectory and parish center clean. The men helped with many other odd jobs such as carpentry projects and yard work. Other volunteers staffed the parish office at the school, handling the duties called for in the running of a parish.

The next several years saw much change in the growing parish. The first Holy Communion class and the first Confirmation were held at St. Luke's in 1963. Monsignor Flaherty left to become the director of a seminary and was replaced by Fr. Joseph C. Wingler, former pastor of the Holy Comforter Church in Charlottesville. In 1963, Father Wingler purchased a house at 931 Dead Run Drive to serve as the new rectory and parish center. This move from the cramped quarters of St. Luke's school was a great relief to all parishioners and certainly the priests. A convent was built in the years 1965-66 near the school, allowing the sale of the house on Congress Lane. The priests of St. Luke's moved into that building several years later when the Felician Sisters left and converted it to a rectory and parish center. Fr. Wingler next sought to build a church building for St. Luke's but he was soon transferred in 1965, and Fr. Albert G. Pereira came to St. Luke's.

Starting in 1963, weekly Sunday mass was held in the gymnasium of St. Luke's school. In truth, such a set-up was in the original plans. A large dividing door was put in place after mass, allowing the altar and pews to remain undisturbed during the school week. The other half was allotted a basketball court sized area to be used for physical education. Come Sundays, the doors were opened and a multitude of metal folding chairs were set up to allow seating for all in attendance.

Through the years, the altar was enlarged and beautified. What started as carpeted steps and a cloth background ended up as the original steps, plus an elaborate wood backdrop almost twenty feet tall by fifty feet wide. Further enlargements to include a separate tabernacle and choir section were shelved with the realization of

matters concerning the parish. The other extreme claimed that the lay people should decide on issues and run the parish, leaving the priests to hold masses. Both sides were two extremes, and neither side was wholly justified.

After the first few years of working to start a church community, the people of St. Luke's Parish began to look at the larger community by helping their neighbors who needed assistance because of illness, a death in the family, fire, or for many other reasons. The Outreach programs, such as SHARE, continued in the McLean, Great Falls, and Vienna, but soon spread to the District. Fr. John J. Hughes became the pastor of St. Luke's Parish in 1973, and the community service programs increased under his leadership. St. Luke's held a clothing drive in November each year and provided food to organizations in the city of Washington. St. Luke's also contributed financially more than any other parish in the region to community service organizations. S.O.M.E (So Others May Eat) was begun just a few years ago in the District to provide hot meals to the needy. St. Luke's has contributed the third Saturday of each alternate month.

The Parish Pastoral Council of St. Luke's is a governing board that serves in an advisory capacity to the pastor. The Council consists of an elected member from each of the six areas of the parish, two members elected at large, and one member from each of the parish organizations. The pastor considers the recommendations made at the Council's monthly meetings when deciding important issues.

In the spring of 1978, the final decision was made by Fr. Hughes that a church would be constructed. The decision for building a church had been researched for the previous three years. A fund-raising drive was begun to raise the necessary money to construct the new building. More than 120 volunteers were recruited to secure pledges from their fellow parishioners. These pledges were payable over a three year period.

Also in 1978, a fund-raising campaign was held for the construction of a mission church in Great Falls. St. Catherine's of Sienna was intended to be a satellite of St. Luke's but the Bishop decided that St. Catherine's should be a separate parish. St. Catherine's of Sienna was opened in June, 1979, reducing the number of families in St. Luke's Parish from 1200 families to 900 families. The parish population has continued to grow and is now at 1,300 families.