

## TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY

Saint Paul's Church in Bantam was first organized in 1797, when the United States was still a very young country. It was the year John Adams was elected our second president with Thomas Jefferson as vice president. That year Tennessee became the 16th state in the union, while abroad Napoleon was on the march.

In Bradleyville, as Bantam was called then, there were other troubles. The nearest Episcopal church was St. Michael's in Litchfield, and several dozen parishioners from Bradleyville were dissatisfied with the Rev. David Butler, the rector. There is no record of their complaints, but they must have been serious. On April 2, 1796, the Bradleyville residents signed a contract for a new church to be built on a hill across the street from what is now the Bantam Cemetery.

The new church, known as the West Church, was designed and built by Giles Kilborn, a local contractor.

"Some of the best specimens of church architecture of his day, in the counties of Litchfield and Berkshire, were of his workmanship; as are also some of the finest mansions still standing in the village of Litchfield," relates a Kilbourn family history.

West Church had a tower, a spire, and some 1,800 square feet of space furnished with "a high pulpit, reading desk, pews with doors but without cushions, deep galleries and a capacious sounding-board," according to historical records. West Church never was consecrated. In 1844, the current building was consecrated and officially named St. Paul's Church.

It is one of the quirks of history that West Church was completed and Giles Kilborn's funeral services conducted in it before the new congregation approached St. Michael's, also known as the First Episcopal Society of Litchfield, for permission to organize a new parish. On October 30, 1797, a group of 55 people petitioned to establish the Second Episcopal Society and to be exempted from paying taxes to the first group. The petition was granted, and the Second Episcopal Society was formally organized on Nov. 14, 1797.

While the petition's careful wording gives no hint of a personal-ity clash between Father Butler and Bantam residents, the evidence suggests otherwise. In February, 1799, St. Michael's records show, "it was voted to dismiss Mr. Butler from his charge at his request." He was replaced by the Rev. Truman Marsh.

A few months later, West Church parishioners asked to be reunited with St. Michael's Church, and on Sept. 10, 1799, articles of union were ratified. Under the new agreement, Father Marsh's services were divided three ways: two-fifths to St. Michael's, two-fifths

to West Church and one-fifth to Trinity Milton. He served as the first rector of the Bantam parish from 1799 to 1810. There was no resident pastor at West Church until the Rev. David G. Tomlinson arrived in 1831; the parish's first three rectors lived in Litchfield.

## Sacred Sundays

In the early 1800s, going to church was a much different experience than it is today. One person who wrote about that was the Rev. Hiram Stone, who was baptized in West Church in 1824 and served as St. Paul's rector from 1873 to 1903. During a centennial address at the church, Father Stone, then 73 years old, recalled Sundays in his youth when it was the custom to attend church all day, with a one-hour break for lunch.

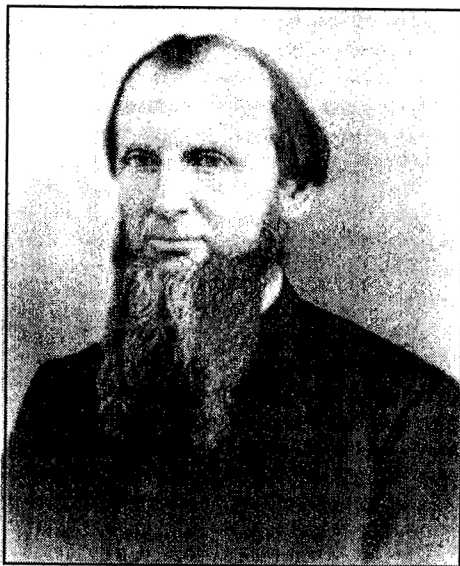
In those days, stoves were rare and not often found in churches, he said. During the winter, each family brought a foot stove to church. The fire pan was filled with live coals from the hearth before leaving for church, then placed in the pew to warm cold feet.

At noon, parishioners who traveled some distance visited houses near church to eat packed lunches and to refill the foot stoves for the afternoon service, Father Stone said.

"They were strict observers of the Lord's day," he recalled. "Twenty-four consecutive hours were kept as sacred time, and hence one night, either of Saturday or Sunday, had to be observed."

Then, as now, Christmas Eve services were very popular. When Father Stone was a boy, the occasion meant "elaborate dressing of the church with evergreen and a grand illumination, sometimes

with hundreds of candles arranged in tiers, giving to the whole interior a most imposing and gorgeous effect," he said.



*Hiram Stone served as rector of St. Paul's from 1873-1903, the longest tenure of any pastor.*



The first 25 years of the West Church's history coincided with the "Golden Age" in the Litchfield area. In 1810, Litchfield had the fourth largest population in the state. Jobs were plentiful in the four iron foundries and dozens of mills and manufacturing operations located in the town.

Many manufacturing concerns were established along the Bantam River. Here iron ore was smelted in furnaces; metal was forged, rolled into sheets and slit into rods for nails; wool was carded and rolled for spinning wheels; hand-woven cloth was prepared for market; fabrics were dyed, flax seed was pressed for oil, and paper was produced.

As a result, West Church, founded with 55 signatures, saw its membership increase for a generation. However, at least 16 Bantam families left the church in the early 1820s in protest against the Rev. Isaac Jones, rector for the three local Episcopal churches, and joined the Congregational Church, according to St. Michael's records.

In 1826, there was a practical separation of the three churches in the First Episcopal Society. West Church in Bantam and Trinity Church in Milton began to operate as independent parishes. In 1832, the first West Church vestry was elected.

After 1820, local manufacturing firms went into decline. Railroads opened elsewhere, and the Industrial Revolution rendered more primitive operations obsolete. This led to a population decline in Litchfield and Bantam, and West Church lost both church members and financial support. In 1843, the Diocesan Journal reported West Church had just 30 communicants; the number had not increased by 1876.

## **Building a New Church**

But the congregation had bigger problems than small membership. The church building had fallen into such disrepair the congregation voted July 21, 1843 to tear it down and erect a new building on the present site. The new clapboard church, built by Royal A. Ford of Litchfield, was smaller than West Church, but it was ready for worship services Christmas Eve, 1843. On Christmas Day, parishioners voted to name their new building after St. Paul. The building was consecrated Nov. 1, 1844 by Rt. Rev. T. C. Brownell, bishop of the diocese.

At least one item from West Church is used at St. Paul's today. The original church bell, cast in 1802 by Fenton and Cockran of New Haven, was transferred to the new belfry, and our ushers con-

tinue to ring the bell before Sunday services by pulling on a thick rope.

St. Paul's Church weathered many difficult years in the mid-1800s. Between 1836 and 1873, the parish was served by 14 different rectors, with nine of them serving two years or less. Things changed in 1873 when Father Stone became rector. He held the position for 30 years, except for a nine-month leave early in his tenure. His record of service is unlikely to be surpassed.

In 1897, Father Stone reflected upon returning to his childhood church as its leader.

"At the time when I took permanent charge here, this church had reached the lowest depth of depression known in its history," he said. "Nearly all of its old and stable supporters had passed away, while serious difficulties had arisen of which it is not necessary now to speak."

Fortunately, Father Stone's arrival marked a turning point for St. Paul's. During his stay, the number of communicants more than doubled; a rectory was willed to the parish; stained glass windows and an organ were installed in the church, and a parish house was built behind the church.

The church was willed a rectory in 1879 after the death of Mary Ann Wilmot, widow of Lucius Wilmot, who was a vestryman for many years. In 1873, the couple built a large house, located two doors beyond the former Bantam Firehouse, with the intention of donating it to the church. The gift was a windfall for the small parish, making it much more attractive to prospective rectors.

The rectory was home to a dozen priests and their families before it was sold in 1976. The building still survives, although it is vacant and in need of major repairs.

The eight-lamp chandelier and the bracket lamps in the nave were purchased in February, 1879. For a time, the old oil lamps were stored in the attic, but in 1940, the men of the parish wired them for electricity.

St. Paul's was closed for more than two months in late 1885 and early 1886 for extensive interior renovations including: installation of six stained glass windows along the side walls, new flooring and carpet, new pews and cushions, and in the chancel, installation of a new dossal, or ornamental fabric hanging behind the altar. (The Good Shepherd windows behind the main altar did not exist then.)

It is interesting to note our stained glass windows are not the real thing but a material called "glacier" affixed to clear glass windows, according to church records. Stained glass experts say glacier windows tend to be more vibrantly colored than traditional



*Church properties as they appeared in 1897. Note the church once had two front doors. The parish house was located behind the church. The former rectory still exists on Route 202, two doors past the old Bantam firehouse.*

Tiffany glass. Most likely, glacier windows were more affordable.

The windows along the side walls commemorate some of St. Paul's earliest and most active parishioners. In a 1901 tribute, Father Stone, who knew these people from his boyhood and his ministry, said, "All the persons and families thus memorialized were strong helpers of the church and assisted in the building of the present, second edifice."

Captain Stephen Russell (1778-1858), Daniel Keeler (1785-1854), Putnam Kilborn (1791-1863), Lucius Wilmot (1808-1875) and Abner Landon (1796-1863) were all long-term vestrymen. In addition to serving as church warden, Mr. Landon conducted lay services when the church was between clergymen, a frequent occurrence. John (1797-1875) and Linus Westover (1804-1874) were brothers who sang in the choir together over a period of 50 years, according to Father Stone.

In 1897, St. Paul's marked its 100th anniversary by building a parish house behind the church. The building was equipped with a kitchen and stoves for heat. A hand pump supplied water. The parish house also was used for a growing Sunday School; there were 45 students and 8 teachers at the time.

In 1903, the Rev. Stone resigned as rector; he was 79 years old. Over the next two decades, the church saw six ministers come and go. Rev. Stone died April 3, 1911 and was buried in Bantam Cemetery. After his death, parishioners decided to build a T-shaped addition to St. Paul's that would include a stained glass window of The Good Shepherd as a memorial to him. In 1912, the new wing was built, adding space at the east end of the building for a chancel, organ loft, sanctuary and choir room. The Good Shepherd window was installed above the altar in what was then an exterior wall.

## **Room to Grow**

The church's ministry troubles stabilized in 1923 when the Rev. James W. Diggles arrived for what would become a 14-year stay. But it was his successor, the Rev. H. Waldo Manley, who dreamed of a major capital building project that would give the church more room to grow. On Dec. 12, 1944, he proposed using the Christmas offering as the beginning of a church building fund. The collection raised money for \$150 in victory bonds, and the building fund was born.

At the January, 1946, annual meeting, Father Manley challenged the congregation to raise \$1,000 for the building fund by year's



***Excavation for the undercroft began in 1952. Before this, social events were held in the parish house.***

end. After hosting a turkey supper, a New Year's Eve party and other events, the goal was met.

Meanwhile, church membership continued to grow. In 1949, Father Manley reported St. Paul's rolls contained 154 families and 60 Sunday School pupils. In January, 1951, he asked for a show of hands to gauge interest in building an addition to the church. Many hands shot up.

Seven months later, Ralph Speerman Meyers, an architect, explained his plans for excavating under the church to create a large undercroft, kitchen, choir rooms and side rooms. Above ground, the east end of the church would be enlarged again to extend the chancel and sanctuary and add meeting rooms. When the construction was finished, the old parish house would be razed. Vestry minutes indicate it was never properly heated or large enough for the burgeoning Sunday School. Nearly 100 children were enrolled in January, 1952.

On April 27, 1952, ground was broken for the addition. The First Episcopal Society in Litchfield financed the bulk of the project, granting St. Paul's a loan of about \$45,000 at two percent interest. During

eight months of construction, the congregation attended morning services first at Trinity Church in Milton and later in the Bantam Theater. Sunday School met in the old Bantam Borough Hall.

The congregation returned to St. Paul's Church for Christmas Eve services in 1952, but the work was far from finished. The money ran out after the concrete slab for the upstairs rooms was poured; the project was put on hold. However, the undercroft and the original church area were completed by the June 28, 1953 dedication ceremony celebrated by the Rt. Rev. Robert M. Hatch, suffragan bishop of Connecticut.

In 1954, Father Manley resigned as rector, and the Rev. Joseph P. Matthews took his place.

James and Regina Kilbourn were married at St. Paul's in 1949. Mr. Kilbourn has been a member of the parish since he was baptized here some 70 years ago, and Mrs. Kilbourn joined the congregation in 1942.

"One of the most pleasant times in this church for us was in the '50s," Jim Kilbourn said.

From 1950 until 1957, the couple ran the Young People's Fellowship, a group of teenagers that met every Sunday night during the school year for prayer, civic projects and social activities. The group held dances with live bands at the Bantam Firehouse, sponsored pool parties at the Torrington YMCA and took a weekend trip each year to Boston or New York. When the church did not have adult sextons, the young people cleaned the church for \$15 per week, Mrs. Kilbourn said.

Forty years ago, the YPF was a very active organization.

"It was a social activity of the community," recalled the Rev. Thomas Kilbourn, our vicar, who was a YPF member as a teenager. "There weren't other distractions like there are today...It was remarkable."

In 1955 and again in 1956, St. Paul's YPF received the coveted Bishop's Cup award for its community projects, which included work on traffic safety programs and raising money for the St. Barnabas Brotherhood, which cared for chronically ill men and boys.

In June, 1956, Father Matthews convinced the vestry to buy a used school bus to bring Sunday School pupils to church and to transport YPF members to events. Clyde Tibbets was certified to drive the bus.

"We used to call it Belching Betty," Regina Kilbourn said with a chuckle. The bus was sold in 1958.

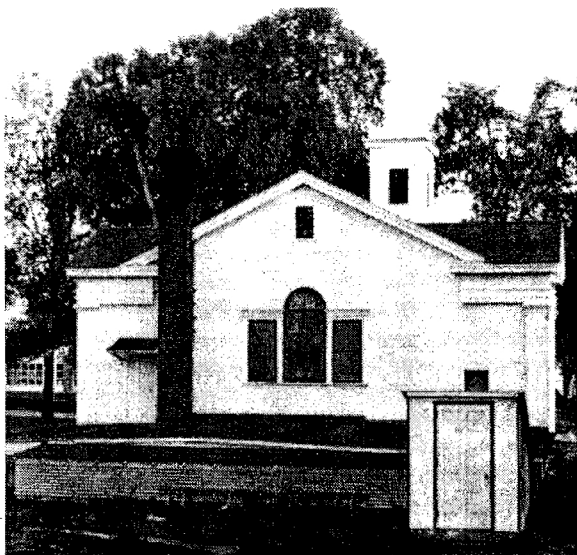
Father Matthews also was busy in the late 1950s trying to drum up support for completing the church addition. But he left St.

Paul's in 1959, and the matter was left to his successor, the Rev. Daniel R. Colley.

Before he tackled the building question, Father Colley broached another sensitive topic: Would the vestrymen consider electing women to the group? The answer can be found in the Jan. 9, 1962 minutes.

"Decided to leave the vestry membership as it is," the secretary recorded. In 1966, Sally Anderson and Mildred Griffin became the first women elected to the vestry.

By April, 1962, parishioners agreed the building project would be funded through a three-year pledge campaign. The vestry hired Kirby Smith Associates of West Medford, N.J. to canvass parish

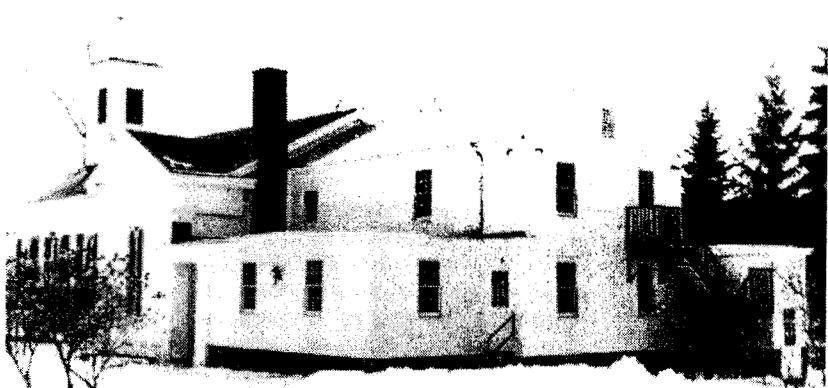


*After the undercroft was built, the rear of the church looked like this. The upper floors of the addition were not completed until 1963.*

families over a two-week period. Some \$26,000 was pledged.

The architect was John Ravenscroft, a church member. In August, 1963, Arthur D. Deacon and Son Inc. of Litchfield was awarded the building contract. During five months of construction, the congregation worshipped in the undercroft.

Nearly 400 people attended the Jan. 19, 1964 open house when the work was finished. At the ceremony, the stained glass window in the north transept was dedicated in memory of Carrington and Cassandra Arnold, and their son, Carrington Jr. The window was



*The rear of the church building as it appears today.*

donated by Andrew Duncan McIntosh and his wife Jennie, the Arnold's daughter.

Before 1963, the church ended near the present communion rail. The chancel, sacristy, pastor's den, parlor, church office and the two second-floor Sunday School rooms were all part of the addition.

## **Membership Declines**

The parish continued to grow and prosper until 1968, when Father Colley resigned. Shortly before he left, the church rolls listed 423 baptized members from 109 families and 34 single households.

Unfortunately, matters turned sour quickly under the new rector, the Rev. William G. Sorrells. It's hard to say whether the parishioners were finally pledged out or simply displeased with him, but the church ran into serious financial difficulties soon after Father Sorrells' arrival. Personality differences only compounded the trouble. The financial problems were due, at least in part, to the growing demands of maintaining a nearly 100-year-old rectory, a full-time priest and a larger church building.

At the 1970 annual meeting, there was a lengthy discussion about the church becoming a Mission "if all obligations are not met," according to vestry records. Parishioners were urged to pledge \$25 more for the year and to encourage new church membership. By late 1970, the vestry was considering reducing Father Sorrells' job to a part-time position.



In 1971, St. Paul's explored a team ministry or sharing church services with other rectors. The rector at St. Michael's and Father Sorrells split responsibilities for services at the three local Episcopal churches. But the team ministry did not last long, and Father Sorrells submitted a sharply worded letter of resignation in June, 1972.

"While we have often been disappointed in each other, and have sometimes been critical, I hope that is now a thing of the past," he wrote. "The most charitable thing that can be said now is simply that we were the wrong people for each other, in the wrong place, at the wrong time."

With his departure, St. Paul's faced serious decisions about its future. The wardens met informally with St. Michael's rector to discuss hiring a student priest, a part-time priest or a curate.

From 1972 to 1974, the parish was served by a series of Sunday supply priests. Vestry minutes indicate many families transferred to St. Michael's during this time. A membership task force found disturbing news; the number of St. Paul's families had dropped from 105 in 1968 to just 70 in 1972. Most seriously, total yearly attendance declined dramatically over a decade. While there were 9,976 church visits in 1963, the number plunged to 5,772 in 1968, the year Father Sorrells arrived, and fell further to 2,905 visits by 1972.

Only 17 parishioners attended the November, 1973, special meeting where a new course was charted; they voted unanimously to look for a "worker priest," a part-time clergyman with other income.

## **A Part-Time Vicar**

On Feb. 24, 1974, the vestry agreed to the bishop's appointment of St. Paul's first vicar, the Rev. Richard T. Nolan of Bristol. He was a full-time professor of philosophy at Mattatuck Community College in Waterbury and an ordained Episcopal priest. Although he had assisted at several parishes, St. Paul's was his first assignment as pastor.

Father Nolan and the vestry worked out an agreement for a part-time ministry: he would be available to St. Paul's 2.5 days each week and commute from Bristol.

In 1974, there were only about a dozen part-time vicars serving the 183 Episcopal parishes and two college congregations in Connecticut, according to the Rev. Nancy Charles, deployment officer for the diocese. Today, there are about 35 congregations served by part-time priests.

The arrangement flourished. The parish developed a strong lay ministry that complemented Father Nolan's pastoral work and improved its financial picture. Since the vicar did not live in the rectory, the vestry sold it. His part-time salary made it possible to hire a parish administrator to oversee day-to-day details.

In a recent conversation from his home in West Palm Beach, Florida, Father Nolan recalled his first meetings with Jim, Dick and David Kilbourn.

"I was just taken with the dedication that the folks had," he said. However, that didn't hide the reality. "The parish was in a survival mode," he said.

About 65 parishioners came to church the first Sunday Father Nolan celebrated mass at St. Paul's. The next Sunday, there were only 20.

"I had the feeling that my ministry might be to close the place," he said. The parish explored the idea of joining with St. Michael's or Trinity Church in Milton, but it never happened. "Things just sort of began to pick up," he said.

In 1979, J. Scott Kilbourn was named the first parish administrator. Later, the position would be held by Alec G. Waters and Laura Turner.

Father Nolan invited other part-time priests to join St. Paul's ministry. The Rev. Elbert B. Hamlin of Litchfield, a psychotherapist, began celebrating mass in 1980. He was later named a liturgical associate, which he delighted in describing as "dessert." The Rev. John R. Kenny, Jr., a deacon and a pharmacist, arrived in 1987. He coordinates pastoral care with Mrs. Turner and organizes all family activities for the parish.

Father Nolan championed the idea of televising St. Paul's Sunday services on Laurel Cablevision. The first show was broadcast on Dec. 14, 1981; it showed the Rt. Rev. Clarence Coleridge's visit to St. Paul's two weeks earlier. Beginning in 1982, Sunday services were taped once a month and broadcast on Monday evenings. In 1985 before services were televised every Sunday.

By all accounts, Father Nolan's tenure was marked by joy and renewal at St. Paul's. Although holding two jobs put a strain on him, the parish was dear to his heart. In a March, 1984, letter to parishioners following a visit by the Rt. Rev. Arthur E. Walmsley, Father Nolan revealed deep affection for the congregation.

"I'd not be able to maintain my composure, if I tried to tell you what you mean to me," he wrote. "Without the relationships that have developed at St. Paul's during the past decade, the quality of my life would be significantly diminished. I cannot imagine that elsewhere a priest would be encouraged to be himself — a human

being—and to live without pious masks and pretensions. I cannot imagine that elsewhere I would have been nurtured so gracefully with such love.”

With Father Nolan’s attention and improvements, the congregation virtually doubled in size between 1974 and 1984, when membership increased to 150 people.

After 14 years, he felt it was time to leave St. Paul’s. Father Nolan described the decision as “anguishing.” When he left in 1988, he was pleased that the church did not need an interim pastor. The legacy of his vicarship was that the lay people learned how to keep their church in order when the minister was absent.

Now a retired, assisting priest at the Episcopal Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea in Palm Beach, Father Nolan sent his best wishes to St. Paul’s for its 200th anniversary.

“I’m convinced St. Paul’s will endure, because of that spirit that is there,” he said. “It’s obviously been there since 1797.”

In the college classes he taught, Father Nolan said he was often asked for proof of God. His reply?

“St. Paul’s Church in Bantam. It’s still there despite all the odds.”

## **Native Son Returns**

St. Paul’s was without a vicar for nearly a year until Feb. 6, 1989, when Bishop Walmsley appointed the Rev. Thomas L. Kilbourn of Bethlehem. There is wonderful irony in the fact that Father Tom, as he is called, will celebrate St. Paul’s bicentennial anniversary with us.

When the church commemorated its first 100 years, it was led by Father Stone, a native son who returned to his boyhood church as rector in mid-life. In this 200th anniversary year, St. Paul’s is fortunate to face a similar situation.

Father Kilbourn was born and raised in Bantam as a member of St. Paul’s Church. In 1967, he graduated from the Berkeley Divinity School in New Haven. While serving as a curate at St. Paul’s Church in Fairfield, he decided to pursue a career in education. He earned a master’s degree in education while working at St. John’s in Bridgeport and teaching evening classes at the University of Bridgeport. Today, Father Kilbourn is a full-time English teacher at Joel Barlow High School in Redding. Before coming here, he spent many summers working at other Connecticut churches.

On March 2, 1989, Father Kilbourn was installed as vicar by his good friend the Rt. Rev. Clarence Coleridge. Recently, Father

Kilbourn remembered that day. The service was "quite a moment," he said, filled with "powerful images ..tangible and real... intangible and spiritual."

Although he initially worried whether those who had known him as a boy could accept him as a pastoral leader, that has not been a problem. Dividing his time between two demanding jobs has been more difficult.

"How to juggle the two was and is a terrible concern," he said.

Upon arrival, the new vicar found Father Nolan had established a clear sense of ownership.



***The Rev. Thomas L. Kilbourn was installed as vicar on March 2, 1989 by The Rt. Rev. Clarence Coleridge.***

"The parish was the people," Father Kilbourn said. "The degree of active participation was utterly amazing. My declaration to the calling committee and to the vestry from day one was more of the same."

Nevertheless, he soon found the parish structure needed some gentle fine-tuning.

"St. Paul's was mostly a Sunday parish when I started," he said. "Sensing a push to return to 'the rector says,' I realized there was a need to move in the direction of making the parish a weekly affair, not just a Sunday operation, and a need to affirm lay involvement.

"Hence the decision to change the title of parish administrator to administrative secretary to reduce the tone of hierarchy — not just a language change, but a change in function — and to institute regular office hours," he said. "With that decision, I started to af-

firm more consciously many of the characteristics of the parish that made it so feisty in the name of the Lord. That is, let the people lead. Frankly, I started to relax, recognizing that I did not have the energy nor the desire to construct a parish in my own image," he said.

Lynn Moncuse currently serves as administrative secretary for St. Paul's.

Father Kilbourn said he enjoys the way the church ministry is balanced between two priests and a deacon. He had warm praise for his counterparts, Father Hamlin and Father Kenny.

The vicar described Father Hamlin as "an altar-centered priest. His gentle chiding and his extraordinary liturgical presence has made the difference in my life at St. Paul's. He is at once my mentor and my companion.

"On John Kenny's shoulders rides the pastoral care of the parish and so much more," Father Kilbourn explained. "The pastoral calls, the youth work, the family centered activities, the folksy stuff of the parish. A deacon is to engage a servant ministry and John Kenny is an exemplar of such a ministry. He seems to be beyond the reach of fatigue."

The three are very different personalities, yet they obviously enjoy each other. "Our planning sessions, usually at Bert's house on a Saturday morning, are rich with teasing and discussion," Father Kilbourn said. "My theology professor was fond of saying that teasing is a sign of love."

## **Secrets of Endurance**

Why is it that St. Paul's has endured for two centuries through times of hardship and renewal? Father Kilbourn believes it has a lot to do with "selfless dedication to the place beyond being just a place.

"I recognize the implicit problems with the politics of a parish," he continued. "There is an old guard, and they do have strong feelings regarding this or that suggestion. I see it regularly at vestry meetings and at the coffee social. But, and it is a huge but, many of these individuals have been in the parish since before their births. In a highly mobile and transitory social order, these individuals are quite remarkable and, dare I say, irreplaceable. Their voices and their labors continue to be a model for younger members to emulate."

What will it take for our church to remain strong in its third century?

"As long as St. Paul's remains relevant to the needs of the day, she will endure," Father Kilbourn predicted. "And the essential need of the day is to be a people-centered parish in the name of the Lord."

Statistics show St. Paul's has experienced significant growth in recent years. The parish was comprised of 115 families and 293 members in August, 1997. Fifteen new families have joined St. Paul's in the past three years.

What is the major goal of the parish in its 200th year?

"Spread the good news of redemption," said Father Kilbourn. "In less theological terms, make known to those who do not have a spiritual home that St. Paul's may be a place for them."