

ST. BARNABAS ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Church in the Marketplace

A BRIEF HISTORY

St. Barnabas Church sits at the heart of the bustling and colourful neighbourhood of Riverdale. Looking at the streams of traffic and pedestrians passing by its door, it is hard to believe that this was once a country parish. In fact, it is one of the oldest Anglican parishes in Toronto.

In 1857, the Anglican Church held discussions about building a place of worship for the residents of Chester village, which sat north of the city limits, where Riverdale is today. The area was then part of the Parish of St. John's, Norway. In 1858 under the Rev. James Beavan, services were first held in a blacksmith's shop near what is now Broadview. Later that year, the decision to go ahead with a new building was made when the Playter family offered a quarter acre of land on Ellerbeck Street 200 yards north of Danforth. The wooden church, built with timber on the land, was one of the first eight Anglican churches to be built in the Toronto area. The frame church on Ellerbeck was first known as St. John's, Playter Corner, and later as St. John's, Chester. Then in 1862 the name of the church was changed again to Church of the Epiphany.

In 1872, the name of the church was changed a last time to St. Barnabas, Chester. The church served a large district of five square miles, with a scattered population made up primarily of immigrants from England, Scotland and Ireland. For 45 years, the church existed in modest circumstances in a picturesque and rural location. Most of the residents of the area were wage-earners with limited incomes. As a result, the parish had little money. In 1869-1870, the total receipts for the year were \$192.00. In 1895, a Women's Auxiliary was formed. One of its earliest projects was to buy a sewing machine.

-2-

Each member contributed 1 cent a week. It took 4 years to collect enough money to buy the machine. The church also lacked a rectory and a building in which to hold Sunday School or meetings.

By the turn of the century, however, things were changing. Population in the area was increasing and St. Barnabas was less restricted financially. Between 1904 and 1906, the church was enlarged and a parish room added. It became clear that more land was needed for a Sunday School building but no land was available on Ellerbeck Street. In 1905, St. Barnabas became a separate parish with the Rev. Frank Vipond as rector. On St. Barnabas Day, June 11th in 1906, the parishioners built (in one day) the small wooden mission church of St. Andrew in the north end of the parish. MacDonald's restaurant at the north-east corner of Pape and Cosburn Avenues occupies the site of the mission church today and has a commemorative plaque. St. Andrew's became a separate parish in 1914.

However, St. Barnabas still needed a Sunday School and rectory. In 1907, the congregation bought the present site at the corner of Hampton Avenue and the Danforth and the wooden church was moved to its new location. It was a memorable event. Moving day was Monday, September 23rd, in the expectation that the church would be on the new site by Saturday and ready for worship the next day. Unfortunately, heavy rains set in and delayed work. On Saturday morning the church was still perched on beams and sitting in the middle of Danforth Avenue some distance from Hampton Avenue. Inside, it was a mess, with dust from falling plaster covering everything. However, a party of 20 men and women determined that the church would be ready for worship as usual the next day. They removed the debris from the interior and in less than three hours the women had made continued to grow quickly. On St. Barnabas Day in June 1908, some 700 people gathered for a garden party in the fields around the church for a Jubilee Festival. Two years

-3-

later, the western portion of the nave of the present brick church, up to the transept, was built. Thereafter, much of the building was overseen by the Rev. F. E. Powell who became Rector in 1912, a position he held until his death in 1943.

By 1918, with the completion of the Prince Edward Viaduct over the Don Valley, Riverdale was enjoying a building boom. In 1918 and 1919, much of the present parish hall was built. By 1921, the cornerstone for the transepts, chancel, sanctuary offices and chapel was in place. The interior of the church was quite different from the church of today. The chapel was located where the present sacristy sits, to the south of the sanctuary. The font was at the back of the nave. The transept pews faced the central aisle and there were pews at the back of the church under the west window.

The period from 1921 to the end of the Second World War was a time of great strength for the parish. Ninety-five per cent of the people living in the area were from the British Isles. The church seated 800 and was packed each Sunday. There were over 1,000 children registered in the Sunday School. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the stained glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Christ were put in place and the church was furnished with plaques and memorials. Of particular note are the brass eagle lectern, a memorial to those who died in the First World War, and the solid oak reredos. After 1945, a plaque was mounted on the northern exterior wall of the church to honour parishioners who died in the Second World War.

The first part of the 1950s continued to be a time of strength and stability for St. Barnabas. However, by the mid-1950s the parish began to experience a significant population shift as many people began to move out to the suburbs which were springing up around the city. This trend continued throughout the 1960s. The Danforth gradually began to be transformed from a working-class Anglo Saxon

neighbourhood into a multicultural avenue as newcomers from Italy, Greece, the West Indies, Guyana, and Asian countries moved into the area. In particular, people from the Caribbean, many of whom were Anglicans, added new strength to the congregation at this time.

By the late 1960s, once again a building boom seemed imminent in Riverdale, with plans for high-rise apartments, office buildings and stores around the Danforth and Broadview intersection. Some blocks were bought up and buildings erected, but by concerted effort homeowners were able to halt the planned extensive development. Today, much of the Riverdale section of the Danforth still retains small-town storefronts dating from the 1910 to 1920 era. Riverdale, though a "downtown" community, has kept much of the character of the original tree-lined residential streets. Its wide main street, the Danforth, has colourful restaurants, shops, businesses and services which are easily accessible by foot and public transit. The character and accessibility of the neighbourhood have made it popular with young English-speaking professional and business people who have been buying and renovating homes in Riverdale since the mid-1970s.

During the 1970s, many groups not connected to the church congregation began to use space in the parish hall and to contribute to the upkeep of the building. This trend continues today. Though the present congregation is much smaller than in the past, serving some 200 households, St. Barnabas is very much connected to the lively community surrounding it and shares its spacious facilities with the neighbourhood in a multitude of ways, seven days a week.

Since the late 1950s, the East Toronto Latvian Lutheran Congregation has worshipped here on Sunday afternoons. From 1994 to 2000, San Bernabe, a congregation of Spanish-speaking Anglicans, met here for worship and

fellowship on Sunday evenings. Riverdale Presbyterian Church held weekly services in the Upper Hall while their own building was being renovated recently.

There has been a nursery in the church since the 1950s. Today the Children's Circle Day Care provides care for about 130 children--an essential ministry in this neighbourhood. Two apartment units and three offices are located on the premises. Many community-based groups, serving all ages, use the facilities for meetings, classes and special events.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, St. Barnabas continues to face challenges, not the least of which is being a good steward of the inheritance which has been passed down to it. Simply stated, the congregation of St. Barnabas sees its mission today as: to love and worship God together through Christian fellowship and service to the community. As they have always done in the past, the people of St. Barnabas look to the Lord to show the way into the future.



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A BRIEF HISTORY OF

St. Barnabas Anglican Church

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Incumbent: The Rev. Deborah Koscec

Let us faithfully witness to the Risen Jesus giving generously of our lives and substance for the relief of the poor and the sharing of the Gospel, bringing encouragement to all.

(From the COLLECT FOR ST. BARNABAS)