

A Brief History of the Church of the Servant Episcopal Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Church of the Servant functions under the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church and recognizes the authority of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. The parish embraces the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the Revised Common Lectionary, and other authorized liturgies approved by General Convention. The parish is part of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina, formed in 1883.¹ The Rt. Rev. Clifton Daniel, 3rd, D.D., was elected and consecrated in 1996. In June of 1997 he became the 7th bishop of East Carolina.

The Church of the Servant is located at 4925 Oriole Drive, on the northern edge of the College Acres residential subdivision of Wilmington, North Carolina. The city of Wilmington was incorporated in 1739. The church grounds are bordered by tall long leaf pine trees and have three decades growth of ornamental flowering trees, manicured azalea shrubbery and clean grassy sandy lawns for community events, such as the annual June *Lobster Sale*, and an enclosed children's playground. A memorial garden borders the frontage on Oriole Drive.

The parish was the result of a study by the Division of Research and Field Study of the National Church which was requested by the Rt. Rev. Thomas H. Wright in 1967. His successor, the Rt. Rev. Hunley A. Elebash acquired property for the new church in the autumn of 1970. He set up an advisory committee consisting of people seeking an Episcopal church different from the other churches in Wilmington to organize this new parish in 1972. Bishop Elebash appointed the Rev. Clement H. Jordan II to be the first Priest-in-Charge effective 1 September 1972.² The advisory committee and Clement Jordan advertised and invited people to an organizational meeting at College Park Elementary School in October 1972, which is adjacent to the eventual site of its church building. They developed a Covenant of Purpose and Direction based on the question - "If you could design the ideal church, what would you do?" The Covenant provided a meaningful religious experience for all individuals, an open church, and a means for facing all issues that arise in life.³

The congregation chose to name the Church of the Servant based on their desire to have it reflect the duality of servanthood.⁴ They reasoned that the cross has both a vertical and horizontal dimension symbolizing a relationship to God and a relationship to humanity, respectively: that is to serve both God and humanity. The new congregation set priorities and organized task forces to accomplish each assignment. An important element of the organization was the concept of shared leadership which has endured throughout the life of the parish. The congregation held its first service 5 November 1972 in College Park School. The members principally met there until the spring of 1974, then relocated to the YMCA building on Market Street.⁵ The church was recognized as a mission at the Diocesan Convention in February 1973, the first step to becoming a parish. The church identified the creativity in its charter members,⁶ who very quickly reached out to the "unchurched," those who declared themselves to be no longer members of any church. Through its emphasis on religious education, the church began to grow. Clement Jordan served as rector until December 1981.

In September 1982, the Rev. Joseph W. Cooper was called as rector. The congregation became a self-supporting parish in 1989 and continued its strong education program, enriched liturgical life and outreach ministries, such as, the charity thrift store Bargain Box of Wilmington.⁷ Joseph Cooper retired in February 2006 and the vestry called the Rev. M. Blair Both to serve as Interim Rector on Ash Wednesday, 1 March 2006.

The Church of the Servant facility is a cluster of three buildings connected by a narrow hallway and was built in four phases. During the first years, the congregation developed plans for building on the property site on Oriole Drive. The original general-purpose building is a cement-block structure with vertical wood siding and contained a large common room, a kitchen and three small classrooms. The big room's most visible interior feature is the large roof trusses, made of heavy timbers bolted together. The initial worship service in the building was 24 August 1975. The room was also used for, adult education, dining, dancing (recreational and worship), parties and special events such as magic shows and workshops.⁸ The members made use of metal folding chairs, which were constantly rearranged for various uses. There was no intention of ever having pews. The 1978 addition added two offices and a nursery. The shortage of space forced the members to make inventive use of the building's rooms.⁹

The need for expanding the facilities was apparent, given the growing membership, and a master plan was developed. The Wilmington metropolitan area was still recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Fran (5-6 September 1996) when the congregation dedicated a new church building on 14 September 1996. The space based conceptually on a tent, is used for worship, fellowship and education. The multi-purpose bright sanctuary has excellent acoustics. A steel cross was eased onto its mount high atop the new church building in November 1996.¹⁰ A labyrinth etched in the sanctuary floor is a replica of the one in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Chartres, France. Scheduled labyrinth walks take place monthly. Thanks to movable sectional platforms and chair seating, the church has a functional, flexible airy worship space. Every fixture in the church can be moved to symbolize a religious season. During Lent, the seats on either side of the room may face each other, which is "to remind us that Lent is the time for facing up to our sins." At Christmas, the chairs might be arranged in a circle around the altar to symbolize Christ being in the world.¹¹

The 1975 original section was remodeled in 2000 into a rector's study, parish administrator's office, volunteer/vestry office, library and a parish hall.¹² In spring 2005, a wing was added onto the original buildings to house pre-teen classrooms and junior to young adult (J2A) programs. The Rev. Cooper said at the December 2004 ground breaking of this building, that the parish places a high priority on religious education and that helping children "prepare for the way of the Lord, is a responsibility."¹³

30 May 2007

Revised 4 June 2007

Revised 7 June 2007

¹ The Diocese of North Carolina was formed in 1817, and permission to create a separate diocese in Eastern North Carolina was given by the General Convention meeting in Philadelphia on 9 October 1883. The primary convention was held on 12 and 13 of December 1883 in New Bern, North Carolina. At this convention, the new diocese was named "East Carolina," and the delegates unanimously elected the Rev. Dr. Alfred A. Watson as the first bishop. He was consecrated at St. James Church in Wilmington on 17 April 1884.

² Correspondence from the Rt. Rev. Hunley Agee Elebash, Bishop Coadjutor to the Rev. Clement H. Jordan, 27 March 1972. Church of the Servant Archives.

³ A Covenant of Purpose and Direction for the Church of the Servant, 20 December 1972. Church of the Servant Archives.

⁴ A parish name designation comes from the bishop or with his approval. Conversations with the Rev. M. Blair Both (June 2007).

⁵ Conversations with Church of the Servant parishioner Anne Knopf (January 2007).

⁶ Newspaper article featuring Church of the Servant parishioner Ronald Knopf. "Can Religion play part in LCF Juvenile Center?" *Sunday Star-news*, 3 September 1972, page 11B.

⁷ Cece von Kolnitz, "Charity thrift store opens." *Wilmington Morning Star*/ Monday 19 June 2000, page 1B.

⁸ Conversations with Church of the Servant parishioner Marylee Hawse (February 2007).

⁹ *Church of the Servant History*, 1987. Conversations with Anne Knopf (June 2007).

¹⁰ The cross was built by Wilmington Ornamental Fabricating and lifted into place by Merritt Crane. "Solid symbol of faith." *Wilmington Morning Star*/ Friday 22 November 1996, page 2B.

¹¹ Conversations with the Rev. Joseph W. Cooper (May 2002).

¹² Conversations with Church of the Servant parishioner Carl Salisbury (June 2007).

¹³ The Rev. Joseph W. Cooper, *Preparing the Way*, Sunday Sermon, 5 December 2004.