



THE STORY OF ST. GREGORY'S

*How two GTS graduates combined talents
to create a unique parish ministry*

BY MELISSA M. SKELTON

The basic ideas underlying St. Gregory Nyssen Church in San Francisco began 25 years ago in conversations between Rick Fabian and Donald Schell as they rode the Seventh Avenue subway together to church. Fabian and Schell were students at General at the time and had both been assigned to the same field work parish, Saint Edward the Martyr in Spanish Harlem. It was, therefore, during their Sunday morning travel that they first began talking about the kind of congregational life that deeply stirred them and that someday they hoped to foster as ordained priests: congregational life that was founded in Jesus' ethic of unconditional welcome for all and grounded in ancient Jewish-Christian traditions emphasizing a liturgical practice that was highly participative. "Following Norman Perrin and

others," Fabian says, "we believe Jesus showed God's urgent and unconditional love in a radical liturgical reform: the sacred meal with unprepared sinners."

It is these fundamental ideas that the two priests have developed, refined, and enriched over the years during their work together, work that began with Schell serving as Fabian's assistant at the Episcopal Church at Yale in the mid-seventies. After both later left Yale to work in separate ministries, Fabian founded St. Gregory's in 1978. Later, in 1980 Schell and his wife joined Fabian, with the two priests sharing the role of vicar and now rector. Schell explains that what helps this kind of collaborative leadership work is that their working together over the years has been grounded in friendship, a friendship that keeps us patient and ready to explore when our vision and ideas diverge.

Friendship with God and one another is a recurrent theme at St. Gregory's. In the new church building, Fabian and

Schell had Gregory of Nyssa's saying, "The only thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend" painted in the clerestory above the altar table. St. Gregory's laity say that the highly participatory liturgy they share every Sunday leads them to discover friendship with God and one another.

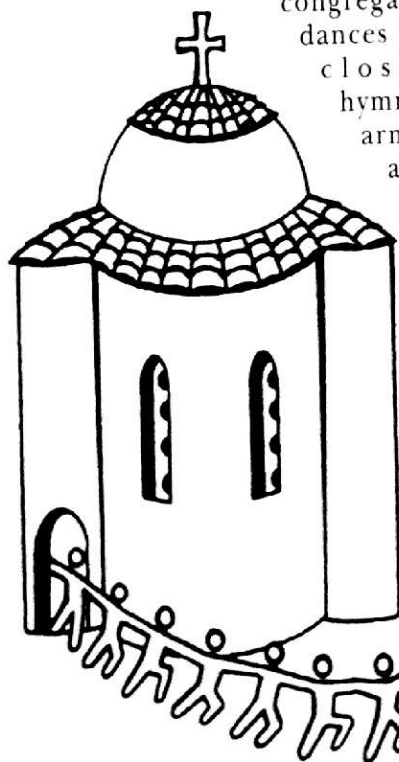
Congregational participation in the context of Sunday eucharistic worship at St. Gregory's takes on many forms.

Everyone joins singing four-part hymns and service music from a wide range of cultural and ethnic groups (and new music composed by members of the congregation). The liturgy of the Word includes deliberate, meditative silence initiated and closed by the use of bells. Added to this, after the sermon, lay people share their own experience in response to the readings and the preacher's words. Later lay people also offer prayers out loud during the prayers of the people which is done in a way that then elicits a spoken congregational response.

But what some have found truly remarkable about St. Gregory's is its use of dance. At the beginning of the liturgy of the table, the entire congregation sings a hymn while doing a stately line dance to the altar consisting of three steps forward and one step back. After communion, the congregation dances the closing hymn in arm-in-arm,

shoulder-to-shoulder circle dancing.

What makes much of this activity possible is the way the worship space is configured. After sixteen years of worship in rented space, in October of 1995, a new 6,600 square foot \$1.75 million church building was completed. Its design reflects St. Gregory's ethic of inclusivity and congregational participation as formative of Christian character. The building consists of two large adjacent rooms to accommodate the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Table. The great room for the Word is set up like an ancient synagogue with the president's chair at one end and the lectern at the other. Congregational seating is choir style — like the chapel at General Seminary. Adjoining is a large octagonal altar room with no furniture but the altar table at its center.



ST. GREGORY'S Episcopal Church

Each room, intentionally no more than 60 feet wide, is meant to create community in that, according to Schell, "60 feet is the maximum distance at which a human being can read the expression on another's face."

This is the true perfection: Not to avoid a wicked life because we fear punishment, like slaves. Not to do good because we expect repayment, as if cashing in on the virtuous life. On the contrary, disregarding all those good things which we do hope for and which God has promised us, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.

—St. Gregory of Nyssa, 395 A.D.

With the new building, St. Gregory's has received enthusiastic attention with articles in *The New York Times* and *Episcopal Life*. Both articles celebrate St. Gregory's distinctive character as a congregation that invites religious experience in liturgy by drawing on ancient traditions while appealing to an isolated urban dweller's need to gather and create something as part of a coherent community, the ordinary experience of people in villages in older times. In contrast to some megachurches that model their worship after TV shows and intend to offer easy, comfortable entertainment to a fairly passive audience, St. Gregory's welcomes the city dweller who is eager to create something new and timeless with strangers and friends.

St. Gregory's congregational life pours out from the liturgy to express friendship with God and one another in other activities and work. The members have drafted a "Members' Agreement," spelling out what membership (communicant status) at St. Gregory's means. An example of what is included in the agreement is that members will "Celebrate (their) friendship on Christ together at the Eucharist in Sundays, Holy Week, and Easter" as well as "take responsibility for bringing friends to share these celebrations," and will give time and money for the work of the church. In the parish's journal *God's Friends*, clergy, laity, and an extended circle of friends from around the country

GOD'S FRIENDS

engage in dialogue about Christian life, practice, and experience. An annual music festival and two writers' weekends support the congregation's commitment to creative artists, both in the congregation and beyond. Education for adults seeks to foster "learning for the whole self" including heart, imagination, spirit, mind, and body. A strong Sunday morning education program for children and a couples group that Schell and his wife founded support families' and children's participation in St.

Gregory's.

As the leadership of St. Gregory's looks at the future, goals related to growth are an important priority. The congregation has been able to support two full-time clergy thus far and build its new building through a solid congregational stewardship, backed by generous grants and loans from benefactors. The challenge will be to attract enough new members to sustain St. Gregory's program and staff over time. The average Sunday attendance has doubled (to 130)

since opening the new building. Over the next five years the congregation will work to triple that number. To do this, St. Gregory's will continue to design programs and advertise to specific segments of the city's population — single people and couples who enjoy children, artists, musicians, and lovers of music and arts, and people looking for challenge, support and encouragement in their work, their relationships, and their giving of themselves in service to others. ❖

Some reflections on St. Gregory's from Chelsea Square

"St. Gregory's liturgy ought not to be understood as experimental or 'cutting edge' but is, in fact, a very genuine attempt to live more deeply into the tradition, not to back away from it... Some things that are very ancient, precisely because ancient and well-worn, are as contemporary today as they ever were."

— Professor J. Neil Alexander,
*Professor of Liturgics and Preaching and
Director of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd*

"I find St. Gregory's to be a fascinating example of rich, faithful congregational life. The congregation's stance of unconditional welcome in the practice of open communion, however, raises the question of how we in the Episcopal Church understand the meaning of baptism and the Eucharist. How do we as a Church act as effective evangelists while continuing to uphold the importance of disciplined adult catechumenal preparation?"

— Prof. William A. Doubleday
Professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of Field Education

"From a congregational development perspective, St. Gregory's is doing several things very well:

- They have a solid self-definition (expressed in the theme of friendship with God and others) that gives their life an integrated character and projects a clear image externally. This appears across a variety of vehicles — liturgy, newsletter, education etc.
- They are working with their strength, liturgy. This focuses energy and shapes a specific style for evangelism, education and other efforts.
- They currently have an alignment between the elements of their life (finances, building, context, liturgy, character) which allows them to have energy for the growth they will need."

— The Rev. Robert A. Gallagher
Coordinator of the Parish Development Institute

"As I look at St. Gregory's I see a congregation in which the Eucharist is effectively being used as a means of evangelism, a position set forth in the broad church tradition of the 19th century. St. Gregory's is in many ways a logical extension of certain elements within the liturgical movement."

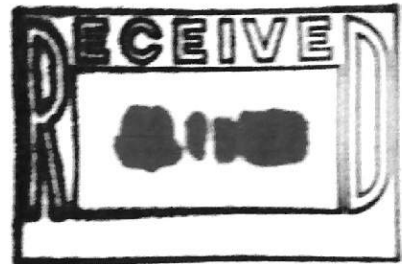
— Prof. R. William Franklin
Professor of History, World Mission and Anglican Studies

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Dear Melissa,
Here is my response to your piece. I got the FAX Sunday and have tried to make a very quick and I hope complete response. Mostly I just tinkered with what you wrote, but I did try to clarify a couple of things that we've learned over the years may need a little extra description (especially in dance and architectural arrangement). I also added in the piece about friendship (Gregory of Nyssa's saying, Rick and my working friendship, and friendship as spiritual practice in the congregation) because I think it picks up and clarifies what Bob Gallagher says so nicely and clearly in the "solid self-definition" phrase in his quotation. Your GTS faculty and program staff quotations are really wonderful! Because of the quotations, I added back into your article a more explicit statement and rationale of our communion practice so Bill Doubleday's remark would make sense. I also added in a couple of references to my wife to make it explicit that Rick and I are work partners rather than a couple, and to make it clear that the congregation welcomes gay and straight people. Thanks again for your great work on this, I hope my response is helpful and doesn't feel too intrusive in your process. We are really excited and grateful that you are doing this, and we hope to welcome you and Bob's visitors here at some point.

peace,
Donald



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