

Parish History

By Demetri Makres

To dream something is one thing -- to watch it take shape and form is the foundation of a lifetime. For those seeking to begin a third Greek Orthodox Church in Baltimore, that dream has become a reality; a life-long pilgrimage to erect God's house for all those to follow and to the eternal Glory of His name.

The history of the Saint Demetrios Parish began when the need for a third Greek Orthodox Church in the suburbs of Baltimore permeated the thoughts of many people for many years. During a pastoral visit to Baltimore, His Eminence, Archbishop Iakovos, spoke with Christopher Makres of the church's need to move out where the people are and recommended that the young people of Baltimore should meet in the suburbs and set the foundation for a new church. What followed, and in a short amount of time, is testimony of the will of man seeking to do works pleasing unto the Lord.

For the next several weeks, dedicated and enthusiastic young stewards including Christopher Makres, Constantine Alexion, Dan Stamathis, Michael Karas, Gabriel Pantelides and John Sitaras tapped on the shoulders of other strong faithful of Baltimore to see if there was sufficient interest in following the directive of Archbishop Iakovos. By word of mouth, interest grew among the young people who were called and guided by the Holy Spirit to an incredible challenge; one that would be a cornerstone of their lives.

Several preliminary meetings were held leading up to the celebrated first general meeting of November 29, 1969 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Pantelides. It was agreed that a church should be founded to serve the spiritual needs of the Greek Orthodox faithful in order to preserve and perpetuate their religious and cultural heritage.



With task at hand and much apprehension, the members of the Steering Committee established at this meeting set out to lay the foundation of what was to come. Much of our humble beginnings is due in large part to the vision and dedication of these early stewards of the church.

Following the first meeting in New York with His Eminence, Archbishop Iakovos on February 3, 1970, a pledge drive was initiated. This began an impressive first year. In order to meet the requirements of the Archdiocese, signatures representing 102 families and pledges totaling over \$100,000 were gathered within 30 days. At the charter meeting held April 5, 1970 at Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, an interim Parish Council was elected to begin the necessary deliberations that would lead themselves down a daring path of becoming the third Greek Orthodox parish in Baltimore. On May 15, 1970, all the hard work up to this point was recognized when the Archdiocese granted our Ecclesiastical Charter giving us life and a concrete foothold from which the growth evolved.

Our Greek Language School commenced on October 12, 1970 with Mr. Sotirios Mitilineos as teacher. The first priest assigned to the parish on November 15, 1970 was Reverend Father Sam Kalamaras. All the hard work up to this point climaxed on November 29, 1970 when our first Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the Cromwell Valley Elementary School. Imagine the excitement and joy felt by all those in attendance unsure of what would happen next. In exactly one year, we were able to acquire a priest and hold our first service complete with choir and cantors! Our first cantors were Mr. Phillip Arnas and Mr. John Livanion. Our first Choir was organized on November 23, 1970 under the leadership of director Jennie Roesch and organist Barbara Karvounis.

The Church School began January 3, 1971 with Thomas Heath (now Father Thomas Heath) as superintendent. During these our humble beginnings, home was Parkville Senior High School. It was during this time that the true meaning of stewardship and the giving of time and talent was prevalent. Men and women, both young and old, worked endlessly to succeed. All the necessities for a church had to be packed and unpacked each and every week -- the utensils, cloths, icons, candles, sandboxes, provisions for wine and prosforon. Duties were rotated for setting up and tearing down an altar for services. When Parkville Senior High School was not available, the grace of God provided other facilities for our use. Many area churches -- Catholic, Protestant and Episcopal -- offered use of their facilities. We were welcomed by these churches for meetings and services especially during Lent and Holy Week. Imagine the task of getting a 1,400 seat auditorium cozy for church services! Needless to say, no one wanted to stand pat. We wanted our own facilities, "Our Land".

While all of this activity was going on, "The Spirit" was inaugurated. Published primarily by Mr. John L. Sitaras, "The Spirit" became an invaluable source of documented history and chronologically covered historical moments. Every step of our fledgling Suburban Greek Orthodox Community was recorded. Also, the "Hospitality Teas" were inaugurated primarily by Mrs. Katherine Strakes in concert with the graciousness of many women who opened their homes for a social with the intent of "spreading the word" as it were of what the suburban community was all about.

Several of the early dedicated members searched for land on which we could build our house of worship. It was Jack and Helen Foudos who found the ad in the newspaper for what would become our permanent home. At the General Assembly meeting of October 17, 1971, the thirty acre property on Cub Hill Road was approved at a cost of \$90,000. A \$40,000 down-payment was made in cash and a mortgage of \$50,000 was secured at settlement on December 9. Our dream now had form. The beauty of this secluded sanctuary was to become the location of the Sanctuary of God in the eyes of all.



When Father Sam Kalamaras departed in August 1971, the parish was left in a quandary for thirteen months. Many wondered who would serve our community until the Archdiocese was able to recommend to us the Reverend Doctor Demetrios Constantelos. A professor at Stockton University, Doctor Constantelos found the time to come

and serve our parish almost every Sunday for the thirteen months for which our community is eternally grateful. He helped keep us together during a difficult period of time.

Progress was rapid and outstanding and due only to the devotion of people committed to a purpose. Much excitement and anticipation ran through the thoughts and hopes of all. In the summer of 1972, the Reverend Doctor Sophocles served as celebrant priest at the first liturgy on our property in open air. Doctor Sophocles was known to our parish since he filled in when Doctor Constantelos was unavailable. This service was followed by a picnic during which parishioners enjoyed the beautiful surroundings of their new home.

Reverend Father Ernest Arambiges was assigned to the parish on September 15, 1972 and he led this community with vigor and passion, nurturing it from its early childhood into the mature and respected parish of today. His arrival also ushered in a new period in the life of the parish. The coming years would give the Suburban Greek Orthodox Church an identity and foothold within the Baltimore metropolitan area, as well as in the New Jersey Diocese.

The Permanent Building Committee, chaired by Dr. Andrew Vendelis, was formed on October 1, 1972 to give direction and to formulate plans for the complex to be built on Cub Hill Road. Many meetings were held to discuss the available options for our future and what could be built "for the glory of God." The arduous task of selecting an architect to give form to the vision of the early leaders of the church rested with members of this committee. After much deliberation and fact-gathering, the Building Committee selected and recommended Leonard S. Friedman as architect for the entire church complex. So thorough was the research in the selection process that members of the committee took road trips to view other Greek Orthodox churches designed by Mr. Friedman in order to solidify their decision.



As plans progressed, the life of the parish continued to grow. On May 13, 1973 Archbishop Iakovos visited our parish at Parkville Senior High School. Imagine the excitement at hosting His Eminence for the first time in our parish life and in a high school auditorium. This showed the love and support of the Archdiocese and gave everyone the encouragement necessary to carry out their dreams. The first of our Grecian Festivals was held in October 1973 at Cromwell Valley Elementary School. This weekend of celebration, although tiresome, has proven to be and continues to be an unending expression of ethnic pride and community development, not to mention a great source of revenue for all that has been accomplished.

A unique and identifiable program to our community culminated on the weekend of February 15-16, 1974 as the Suburban Players first production of "Fiddler on the Roof" took place at Parkville Senior High School. Now in its twenty-ninth year, this group has typified the Christian ethic of love and used its God given talents promoting fellowship

amongst man. We all have been the beneficiaries of all the hard work involved in the efforts of Orthodox and non-Orthodox people who have graced our lives even if only for a brief moment during these productions.

Life is made up of milestones. These are significant moments or events that tend to define exactly who we are. One of these times occurred on May 11, 1974 when the Suburban Greek Orthodox Church received its Christian identity, that of Saint Demetrios. The banquet at the Hunt Valley Inn brought such tears of happiness and joy because now we had an official name. On the following day, ground-breaking took place in the rain. Ah, the rain! It should be noted that the runner up in the naming of our parish was Saint Andrew. It seems that at almost every major event in the history of the parish, since then, it has rained.



At a pastoral visit on October 26-27, 1974, Bishop Silas presented the community with the Ecclesiastical Charter formally acknowledging our existence in the Archdiocese. Again momentum was building in the community. Picnics and open air services were held on our property, although home base was still Parkville Senior High School.

Membership was growing, having more than doubled from 74 families in 1970 to 168 families in 1974. The passing of time saw the uninterrupted establishment of worship services, a complete parochial program to witness the life of the Church and the needs of her Parishioners and the finalization of architectural plans that concretely set the "dream" on firm foundations.

With the first mortgage on the land paid off the same month, settlement for the \$350,000 Phase I construction loan took place on February 6, 1975 and the erection of the first building on "our land" began February 10, 1975 with Thomas A. Lloyd as general contractor. All the fervor had been building for many years and so much had been accomplished in a short period of time. To that end, and with all the activities booming, this first fifteen year mortgage was liquidated in April 1982 after having been refinanced in January 1978 within an amazing six years and four months. This action was spurred on by a generous gift of \$100,000 from the Paterakis and Tsakalos families which was matched by the community in a two year drive between 1981 and 1982.



Before we get too far ahead of 1975, a flurry of activity took place during the next ten months of construction. Our community did not sit still and rest upon its laurels. On March 29, 1975 a "Gala Concert" with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra was held at the Lyric Opera House as a fund-raiser and to promote public awareness of our existence. It also accentuated the cultural growth within Baltimore. We witnessed the burning of the old farm house on our property on September 4, of that year. This served not only to prepare the property for our arrival, but also as practice for the Baltimore County Fire Department. On the nameday of our Patron Saint a banquet was held in honor of the

charter members. A charter scroll was signed by these pioneers as a symbol of remembrance for all the dedication which helped us get to this particular point in our history. Imagine the anticipation of celebrating the first Easter in our very own building after all the years of moving from one place to another. Although much love and joy went into being mobile, nothing could compare to being home. We did it by working together as a team.



The magnitude of the moment reached its climax on January 4, 1976 when the final Divine Liturgy was celebrated at Parkville Senior High School and Opening Day services were held at the Saint Demetrios Educational Wing Chapel. What a glorious day! Peter Alatzas and Angelo Toutsis, representing the younger and older elements of our parish, received the honor of opening the doors allowing all the faithful to enter this new House of the Lord. Smiles filled the room and everyone was there to partake of a wondrous feeling. The sense of pride filled the chapel and angelic voices sang praises to His name. After all the picnics and open air services on the property, all the hard work and meetings that became a part of everyday lives, Saint Demetrios now had a place to call home.

Later that year, the first Saint Demetrios Church Award was presented to Mr. John L. Sitaras "with deep appreciation for outstanding dedication and stewardship as an Orthodox Christian." In November of 1976 Mr. Petros Kakkaris became cantor replacing Mr. George Rossis. The entrance wall to our property was completed on October 24, 1977 and November 20 marked the debut of "Spotlight On Youth." This became an annual event in which members of GOYA assume the duties of the Parish Council for the day and deliver the sermon as an accentuation of the important role the young person plays in the life of the parish.



As time went on so did the many activities that make up the community life. Many programs prospered and grew. Our community has always provided for the Orthodox faithful and continues numerous services and caring ministries: the Benevolent Fund, GOYA sponsored Career Day, prayers during the Persian Gulf War, Blood Drives, CPR classes, sponsoring a mission priest are but a few of the projects that were ministered.

Father Ernest celebrated the 25th anniversary of his ordination on February 10, 1979. The final group of iconostasion icons were installed in May of that same year. These beautiful icons were the work of iconographer Christina Dochwat whose vibrant use of colors capture the eyes of those who behold them.

Cultural celebration has always been exhibited in our community through participation in the Inner Harbor Ethnic Festivals and in our own Grecian Festivals. Much like the

"Zorba" dancers entertained and brought joy to the hearts of all at the first Grecian Festival, the "Demetrakia" dancers made their first appearance at the festival on September 22, 1981. This, too, continues to play a part in our lifelong history.

With the first chapter in the history of our Saint Demetrios parish complete, a new one in which the hope and faith of our people to perpetuate the legacy of our forefathers and meet the needs of the future began. Dedication, determination and love had brought us to this point. That same spirit that guided us through the early years presented another new challenge. This challenge was the erection of a new house of worship for the glory of God.

Under the leadership of Mr. Christopher Makres, the Building Committee studied, prepared and presented for approval architectural plans to the General Assembly for the main church and administrative buildings. Now that the plans were in hand, the challenge was to raise the necessary funds to achieve our goals. Funds were in place to take the project up to this point, but more would be required. As they had done throughout the years, the parishioners responded resoundingly on April 9, 1983. The "Meeting the Challenge" banquet held at the Pikesville Hilton proved the resolve of the community. An astounding \$275,000 was pledged and subsequently raised. It was a glorious evening.



Everything moved swiftly. Ground breaking for the main church was held the next day, April 10, 1983. Construction began with Altan Kemahli as general contractor. The community was able to follow the progress on a daily basis, building anticipation for the future. After Sunday services, many would stroll in awe through the shell of what was to become a House of the Lord. One could not help but feel that they were

participating in the making of history as this was a first-time experience for most. The parish was in its prime. Excited with the anticipation of the coming of our church, the entire community was united in a common goal. During this time, the life of the parish developed through the growth of its organizations. The infant parish had grown and matured. It nurtured its people at the same time as it developed into the loving parish we see today. A briskness was filling the air with a ray of hope and a feeling of accomplishment.

On March 11, 1984 the cornerstone of our church was laid. In it lies a Holy Bible, an Icon of Saint Demetrios, a vial of holy water, and numerous historically significant lists, booklets, publications and photographs depicting the life of the parish. These and other items will remain a permanent testament to the will and determination of many people, both young and old. With all this said, the church doors were swung open like opened arms embracing all the faithful to enter and partake. Mrs. Ritsa Economakis led the parish into its new house of worship on August 28, 1984 during opening day services. A lifelong journey for many had achieved its goal of bringing together a people to glorify His name.

Progress continued to be rapid. Our Saint Demetrios Cemetery was dedicated on June 2, 1985. The baptistry window was dedicated November 26, 1986. A walkway around the church was completed to accommodate our religious processions. And finally, on July 9, 1989, the Saint Kyriaki Chapel was dedicated in honor and memory of Mrs. Kyriaki Paterakis. All of the icons in the chapel and the major icons in the main Church (except for those found on the Iconostasion) were executed by the renowned iconographer, Mr. Demetrios Dukas.



Life continued. However, a rest period was in order to take a breath and to examine where we were and what was happening. The church grew in outreach and the breath of new life into the church building was felt. The church ministries grew. Stewardship took hold and proved a tremendous success due to the leadership of Mrs. Sophia Vendelis. This time in the history of the parish proved to be a change in direction. After the hectic and challenging pace set to this point, much reflection was necessary.

Soon after, plans began to celebrate the 20th Anniversary and Consecration of our parish. However, the untimely illness of Archbishop Iakovos put the Consecration on hold for five years, but that did not stop us. A tremendous out-pouring of love and dedication was bestowed upon our parish by many families wishing to gift the community with the major appointments of the church. These gifts were rapid and significant, signifying the strength of the community as a whole.

The permanent Altar Table and Table of Oblation were dedicated on November 19, 1989. The Baptismal Font was dedicated August 5, 1990 followed by the Platytera Icon on October 21, 1990. The Pangari dedication followed on March 24, 1991. The icons of the Inner Narthex were dedicated on May 31, 1992. In the following year, the Proskynitaria and Pulpit (September 19) and the Pantokrator Icon and Dome (October 24) were dedicated. The Bishop's Throne was dedicated on November 20, 1994 and the Sanctuary Icons on May 14, 1995. Finally, the Cantor Stand (September 10) and Iconostasion (October 1) were dedicated in 1995. These represent the last major appointments for our beloved parish. Our community has always been blessed by the generosity of its people since its inception; however, this segment of our history was beyond belief.

The Silver Anniversary of our Saint Demetrios parish was observed in many significant ways. Some of the highlights during the year-long celebration include the Altar Boy reunion on January 9, 1994 where the solea of the sanctuary was replete with the young boys (now mature adult men) who served their Lord -- a moving and overwhelming experience. This was followed by the equally memorable celebration of Baptisms on June 5 and Weddings on September 25 when all the respective participants of the past twenty-five years of these two sacraments were honored and acknowledged. Finally, the twenty-

fifth year celebrations were capped with a beautiful concert in the sanctuary offered by our choir on November 6 and a Hierarchical Liturgy on November 27 with His Excellency, Metropolitan Silas officiating. A Grand Banquet closed this milestone year in our life.

In our thirty-three years of existence we have not only grown by numbers and bricks and mortar, but spiritually as well. The ministries of the church expanded or changed. The church reached out to its own people and beyond and the strong roots allowed this spiritual family to grow. Saint Demetrios Church offers many varied programs for all that wish to partake.

So you see, the call to build God's house was answered by those young, energetic people who sought to erect a Church "for the glory of God." This Church now stands high on a hill where it cannot be hid. It will stand there as a beacon and, hopefully, it will give light "to all in the house." It has become a religious community where the faithful Orthodox worship the Lord and work with steadfastness and live with joyful anticipation in His vineyard. Set on this hill, the light of this Church is a magnet lifting up and enlarging the vision of all people, guiding them to the knowledge of the Lord in this age and for ages to come. Many have worked a lifetime to lead us to this point. We must now strive to perpetuate what has been done and fortify the foundation for generations to come.

We stand here now having consecrated the House of the Lord in awe of our accomplishments. This House is now sanctified, reborn and full of the light of life provided by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

