

**Ten-Minute History of the Cathedral Church of the Advent  
Birmingham, Alabama  
For the Celebration of the Advent's Founding in 1872**

By Alice Bowsher

The Cathedral Church of the Advent's story begins in 1871—six years after the Civil War ended—when a small group of Southern planters, investors, and railroad men organized the Elyton Land Company. Their purpose? To buy 4,150 acres of raw land in north central Alabama. Their intention? To create an industrial center and reap the rewards. The very next year, Bishop Richard Hooker Wilmer sent deacon Philip Fitts to establish an Episcopal mission in the new town. The thirty-two-year-old, a Tuscaloosa lawyer and Confederate soldier before he entered the ministry, arrived to serve 16 communicants in Birmingham along with small congregations in Elyton and Irondale.

In February 1872, for the sum of \$5, the Elyton Land Company gave the Episcopal Church the deed to one quarter of a choice downtown block. The company's largest stockholder, Josiah Morris, was a prominent member of St. John's Episcopal Church in Montgomery, which contributed \$400 to help build the Advent's first house of worship. By 1873, a frame church building that seated 200 stood facing 6th Avenue North (behind where the present nave stands).

Growing a new church in a new city was more challenging than the “magic” that Birmingham's “Magic City” nickname suggests. Just as the congregation prepared to celebrate admission to the diocese, as well as Mr. Fitts's ordination to the priesthood, a financial panic that was sweeping the nation arrived in Birmingham, along with a devastating cholera epidemic. Then an economic depression that would last 6 years hit the struggling city. So despite the promise that nearby mineral deposits for making iron would bring great fortunes, the pioneering settlers faced lean times.

In that first decade, the Church of the Advent had 6 different rectors (3 of whom served a year or less). The turnover in these early years undoubtedly gave rise to a strong tradition of committed laity carrying on the life and leadership of the church. The first long-term stability came with the Rev. Thomas Jefferson Beard, who arrived in 1882 for 14 years. In 1886, the anticipated Birmingham boom finally came, with robust pig-iron production and real estate development. Both

the city and the Advent flourished, and the congregation began planning for a new church building to house its growth in the coming century.

But the long-awaited prosperity was short-lived. In 1887, as foundations for the new nave were laid, the city's economy began to slow again. It limped along, eventually becoming part of the nationwide depression of 1893, the effects of which lingered for years. Under Mr. Beard and a committed vestry, however, members of the Advent summoned both confidence and perseverance to face the challenging times. After laying stone foundations, the congregation weathered halts in construction every time funds were depleted. Finally, in 1893, the church in which we worship today was completed—except for the bell tower, which was finished a few years later, and the stained-glass windows and furnishings in the nave, which were added over many decades.

From the beginning, the Advent's heritage has been one of new beginnings, deep faith, continuity, and adaptation to change. Is this an exalted view of the past, or does it embody a core truth that we carry on today? What telling traits have prevailed over the 150 years since the Advent's founding?

Certainly, the Advent has been blessed with leadership and vision, both ordained and lay. After repeated turnover in that first decade, the church has called rectors who, sustained by strong lay support, have served long tenures, marked by growth and the ability to respond to a changing world. In 1903, as the Rev. John G. Murray—later the first-elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church—prepared to leave the Advent, the vestry told him, “You leave us the largest, strongest and most united parish in the whole Diocese of Alabama.” This combination of continuity, coupled with commitment both to tradition and to clergy leadership, has allowed new ideas to be examined over time and contributed to the church's ongoing vitality, from starting a day school in the 1950s to adapting to liturgical changes and to new roles for women in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

Another essential part of the Advent's heritage is pastoral care, symbolized by the statue of the compassionate Christ overlooking downtown Birmingham from the church's 20th Street façade, expressing Christ's invitation to “come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” Installed in 1965, the statue was the inspiration of the Rev. John C. Turner, whose loving heart and faithful visitation embodied pastoral care for hundreds of Adventers during his 27 years as rector. Today, Advent clergy, staff, and volunteers carry on this heritage.

From the Advent's earliest days, women of the church have played a central role, contributing energy, dedicated service, and significant funds. Time and again women's groups provided financial support to expand and furnish the church, and to carry on its work. Two of the church's earliest stained-glass windows, installed on either side of the altar in 1898, were given by the Ladies' Aid Society and the St. Agnes Guild. Four years later, the Ladies' Aid Society gave the altar and reredos, imported from Munich, Germany. This strong tradition of leadership and service has continued over the decades, through horse shows and garden pilgrimages and now in the annual Lenten Lunches that bring hundreds of Birminghamians to the church throughout Lent and raise thousands of dollars for outreach.

The Advent's role in the life and development of the city of Birmingham, its sense of commitment to the city center and the needs of all citizens, is a motif running through decades of church life. For example—when Charles Clingman was less than halfway through his 12 years as rector, and before the real onslaught of the Great Depression—the 1929 parish handbook mentions the Advent's director of social work, whose salary was paid by the Woman's Auxiliary Guild, and the “free kindergarten,” founded under his predecessor, Middleton Barnwell, to serve needy children living downtown. Today, the Advent supports close to a dozen ministries to the Birmingham community, as well as more than a dozen with a broader reach beyond Birmingham, including some 8 global missions.

Strong preaching and teaching also mark our heritage—exemplified by Advent rectors from Thomas J. Beard to Larry Gipson and Paul Zahl, as well as a host of distinguished guests who have brought insights and inspiration over the course of many years. John Turner laid a firm foundation for noonday Lenten services and preaching missions when he brought in church leaders and renowned speakers to give the parish the benefit of great thinking and preaching. This tradition continues to enrich us, shaped by each dean's interests and a committed congregation.

Long before it became a cathedral, the Advent had close ties to the Diocese of Alabama. Early in the 20th century, it was proposed to locate the diocesan office at the Advent. Then in 1922, Bishop Coadjutor William McDowell became the first bishop consecrated at the Advent. His office was above the rector's, in the space later called Mount Ararat by Bishop Charles C.J. Carpenter, who spent two years as Advent rector before beginning his long tenure as bishop. In 1982, under rector

and dean Brinkley Morton, the Advent became the cathedral of the diocese in a service conducted by Presiding Bishop John M. Allin.

The Advent's heritage continues to evolve, reaffirmed and reshaped as we carry on the life of the church. As we hold in our minds' eyes the physical stonework of the Advent, may we remember that our God is himself a mighty fortress, a bulwark never failing; that Christ is our Rock of Ages, cleft for each of us, so that in him we may safely rest. And may we remember the words from the first Epistle of St. Peter, reminding us that we ourselves are like living stones, being built up as a spiritual house. As we come to him, the foundation of our faith, we hear the good news spoken to each of us: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people; but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit remain with each of us, and with our church, now and always. Amen.*