January 2026

THE MESSENGER

Parish News From
St. Michael's Church
Upper West Side
New York City

Ashes to Ashes

Every year, St. Michael's Cemetery, which serves many different communities in Queens and beyond, hosts a staff Christmas party, with carol-singing, feasting and gift-giving.

Before the celebration I wandered the beautiful grounds and stopped by the office. Colorful painted cylinders were on display there.

"Those are for scattering ashes," a staffer explained. "They're often chosen by Hindus. Their tradition is to scatter the ashes of loved ones.

"We're a Christian-owned cemetery, but we're open to and respect the practices of all."

Many churches observed the just-past Week of Prayer for Unity, a practice begun in 1908. A Bible text is offered for study and reflection: this year, Ephesians 4:4, "There is One Body and One Spirit."

In my meditation on this text I recalled my cemetery visit and the hospitality there. In a time of grief, the staff knows what is needed for whatever "Body and Spirit" arrives. I felt a deep connection across the lines of religion and faith that so often divide us.

As we move toward Ash Wednesday on Feb. 18, I'm reminded that ashes are a universal symbol of our mortality — and for Christians, of the promise that we return to the dust of the earth and to the One who created us.

— *Mother Margaret*

Who Will God Call to St. Michael's?

The searchers: Tom Phillips, Gail Naruo (committee chair), Roberta Holder-Mosley, Carole Everett, Olga Hartwell, Austin Smith, Brian Hoff, Gregory Morris, Ieda Fuller and James Blue. Away: Jennevieve Culver.

The search for a new rector of St. Michael's is underway. A diverse, multigeneration committee of six women and five men, chaired by Gail Naruo, held its first meeting on Saturday, Jan 10.

We were given an overview of the search process by Alissa Newton, Canon to the Ordinary for Matthew Heyd, the bishop of New York. Mother Margaret hosted the meeting at the rectory and will serve as a resource for the committee.

A key element is the Parish Profile, based on the responses of 115 parishioners plus St. Michael's staffers. The profile paints a portrait of a dynamic parish with a wide portfolio of spiritual and temporal responsibilities, from our neighborhood to the St. Michael's Cemetery in Queens and beyond.

> *"Now we're looking for our next rector who can build on the church's many strengths and lead us into deeper relationships with each other and the wider community.*
>
> — from the Parish Profile

"Any parishioner will soon be able to direct a potential applicant to the St. Michael's website, where the Parish Profile will be posted, or to the website for the Episcopal Diocese of New York," Gail says.

"In both places there will be information about how to apply. Applicants and their advocates shouldn't contact the search committee directly, as part of our anti-bias process is to ensure that all applicants are treated the same."

The diocese winnows the applications and sends a selected list of candidates to the committee. In turn the committee reviews the applications, refines a shorter list for interviews on Zoom and then selects candidates for a subcommittee to visit and observe in their current parishes.

Finally the committee will invite two or three candidates to visit St. Michael's. Under the watchful eyes of the bishop and the canon, guided by the church profile and led by the Holy Spirit, the committee will then make its choice, subject to the candidate's agreement.

The committee sends the name to the vestry. With vestry approval, the name is then forwarded to the bishop for a final signoff.

Can this process wrap up by this summer? Canon Alissa thinks so, and she should know. Meanwhile, she says, general anxiety is normal.

For obvious reasons, the whole process is confidential. The congregation will get regular updates on where we are in the search, but no details of who or where we're searching. Pray for us! — *Tom Phillips*

AT A GLANCE

Average Sunday Attendance
150-175

Median Age
56

Female
56%

Households with Children
35%

The Messenger, monthly during the church year, is channeled by Rick Hamlin, Patrick Littel, Tom Phillips, John Stickney and Malcolm Sturchio, who welcome story ideas and contributions of articles, art or photos.

Pulpit Power

Have you ever imagined how intimidating it must be to ascend the stairs of St. Michael's lofty marble pulpit and, garbed in priestly vestments, deliver a sermon beneath the gilded sounding board?

Pulpits, a focal point now, weren't part of early Christian practice. During the faith's first centuries, services were held in private dwellings — as we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

Rather, pulpits belong to the great age of ecclesiastical architecture that begins in the 4th century, after Emperor Constantine the Great legalized the practice of Christianity in the empire in 313.

It's then — when services no longer needed to be clandestine — that the pulpit (or ambon, as it was called in Greek) made its commanding appearance. Precedents were the bema, or elevated platforms, of ancient Greek temples and Jewish synagogues.

The St. Michael's pulpit dates from 1907, and like so much in this grand church, it was designed by Tiffany Studios. Inspiration for its large, octagonal podium supported on marble columns and enhanced by glass mosaics can be found in the basilicas of Italy and Byzantium.

The mosaic panel depicting a cross surmounting an orb — the Globus Cruciger, signifying Christ's reign over the world — originates in the 5th century.

The other two mosaic panels show vases with vines bearing three-petal flowers (a sign of the Trinity). And the elaborate metal insets of the railing include what is known as a patonce cross, the ends of which again form three points, symbolizing faith, wisdom and chivalry.

These decorative features reflect the careful consideration given to the liturgical furnishings at St. Michael's. They incorporate the symbolic language that made its first appearance in the crudely incised Christian graffiti on the walls of the catacombs of ancient Rome.

— Keith Christiansen

Mother Margaret dares the heights in a pulpit grounded in faith practices that date back to the earliest days of Christianity — and beyond.

St. Michael's and the American Revolution

As the Ken Burns documentary "The American Revolution" makes clear, support for independence was far from universal 250 years ago among residents of New York and the other colonies.

When a group of New Yorkers gathered 24 years after war's end to found St. Michael's, former Tories were if anything better represented than former Patriots.

Two of St. Michael's founding members, Frederick de Peyster and Jacob Schieffelin, were officers in the British Army during the Revolution. De Peyster reputedly was wounded in battle. Schieffelin not only did time as a prisoner of war in Virginia but escaped to British-occupied New York City, where he met his wife, Hannah.

One of the original St. Michael's wardens, Robert Kemble, served in the British Army's commissary department during the war and was brother-in-law of Thomas Gage, the commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, who was recalled to England in 1775 after the bloody Battle of Bunker Hill.

On the other side, Edward Dunscomb was a captain in the Continental Army who was captured in the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776 and later released in a prisoner exchange. Pew owner Eliza Schuyler Hamilton was the widow of a famous officer and Founding Father, Alexander Hamilton.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, New York was among the states most hostile to former Loyalists, and De Peyster, Schieffelin and at least one non-combatant St. Michael's Tory, Valentine Nutter, fled to Canada. Kemble, son of a prominent New Jersey Loyalist, simply moved to the west side of the Hudson for a few years.

All had returned to New York City by the mid-1790s. Schieffelin in particular prospered, buying into his in-laws' pharmaceutical business and acquiring large tracts of land where he founded the village of Manhattanville. He also persuaded his friends the Hamiltons to buy a plot from him and build a house.

— Justin Fox

Credit: The New York Public Library

Edward Dunscomb, a founder and original vestry member of St. Michael's, had been a captain in the Continental Army. In 1776 he fought in the Battle of Brooklyn, was captured and released in a prisoner swap.