

The 1800's.....

Because its situation was so precarious, it became evident to everyone that Saint-Esprit would fare much better if it joined with a larger Protestant denomination.

After much discussion, in November of 1802 the members of the parish unanimously voted to join the Episcopal Church. This decision of a French Calvinist church characterized by simplicity of manner, plainness of ritual, and democratic structure to join with a church which, in the popular imagination, is felt to stress elaborate ceremony, aristocratic mannerisms, and a "Catholic" hierarchy has never ceased to puzzle people. An explanation is in order. At the time the decision made sense. The modern Episcopal Church is, in many aspects, the result of the Oxford Movement. Starting in England in 1833, 30 years after Saint-Esprit had joined the Episcopal fold, it brought Anglo-Catholic tradition, liturgy, and doctrine back into the life of a church which, for centuries previously, had been far more Protestant in character. From its beginnings in the Church of England, the movement spread rapidly in the American Episcopal Church throughout the 19th century. However, the Episcopal Church of 1802 was still much more Calvinist and Protestant in outward aspect than it was to become later and the elders and members of Saint-Esprit saw no insurmountable problems. Other Protestant denominations were rejected for reasons which would not be important today. The Dutch Reformed (Collegiate) Church was considered too Dutch, the Presbyterians too Scottish, and the Lutherans too German. The Congregational Church was not represented in New York City. Everything favored the Episcopal Church. Since the time of the first persecution of French Protestants, the English kings had always welcomed Huguenots in England and in the colonies. This tradition of warm relations with the Church of England was continued by the Episcopal Church after the Revolutionary War. Several of the pastors of Saint-Esprit had possessed Anglican ordination, and in the past, when the children of the Huguenot refugees joined American churches, they tended to go to the Church of England. The Episcopal Bishop of New York, Dr. Benjamin Moore, was impressed by Pierre Albert and enthusiastically encouraged Saint-Esprit to join the Diocese of New York. There was the added inducement of the Des Broses legacy. In 1773, Elias des Broses, a Huguenot who had become a vestryman of Trinity Church, Wall Street, made a will shortly before his death in which he left a thousand pounds, to be administered by Trinity Church, for the maintenance of a French clergyman who "shall perform Divine Service in the French Language according to the liturgy of the Church of England." This money was badly needed. However, the most compelling financial reason for joining the Episcopal Church was not the legacy. It was the fact that, in those days, churches were supported by the rents charged to those who bought pews, and since so many descendants of the former members of Saint-Esprit had become Episcopalians, it was hoped that these people would, out of loyalty, buy pews in Saint-Esprit now that it was part of the Episcopal Church.

So, on Whit-Monday, 1803, Bishop Moore consecrated the little church at Pine and Nassau Streets as an Episcopalian house of worship. The following day, he ordered Pierre Albert to the diaconate, and three weeks later, to the Priesthood. Almost all the pews were soon bought, membership grew, and Saint-Esprit was

well along on its path of recovery.

Unfortunately, Pierre Albert died in 1806. For the next 10 years, the vestry searched for a suitable replacement. Their search was made more difficult by the fact that Europe was embroiled in the Napoleonic wars. Finally in 1816, after many letters and disappointments, a clergyman from Neuchatel, Henry Penevyre, accepted a call to come to New York. He was ordained into Episcopal orders by Bishop Hobert and for 10 years had a successful ministry at Saint-Esprit. Under his leadership, the parish consolidated its gains in membership and, finally, was able to exist on a firm financial footing. Mr. Penevyre was well-respected in the community and was honored by a doctorate of divinity.

In 1826, Mr. Penevyre, growing older, resigned in order to return to Switzerland. Before his departure, he corresponded with various theological faculties in his native land to arrange for his successor. The most outstanding candidate was a young man named Antoine Francois Verren, aged 24. He had been an excellent student at the Theological Academy of Geneva and was currently ministering in Marseilles, his native town. The vestry issued a call; Mr. Verren accepted, and arrived in New York in August of 1827. He was to be the rector of Saint-Esprit for the next 48 years.

Antoine Verren had the distinction of having officiated in three different church buildings and of having erected two of them. His long ministry covered a period when the city of New York was experiencing tremendous growth. Among the multitudes of immigrants who poured into New York were many French and Swiss Protestants. They greatly strengthened the parish.

By the time of Dr. Verren's arrival, the neighborhood around the old church building at Pine and Nassau Streets had turned almost completely industrial. The residential neighborhoods were moving rapidly north. The building and property were sold in 1831 and a new church, designed in Greek revival style by the noted architects Town and Davis, was constructed at the corner of Church and Franklin Streets. It was simple yet elegant and it was greatly admired for the beauty of its design.



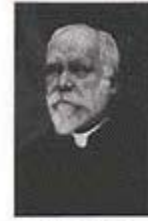
L'Eglise Francaise
du Saint Esprit,
West 22nd Street

However, the northward advance of the residential areas of Manhattan was so rapid that, fewer than 30 years later, the neighborhood around the church had become almost completely commercial. The French section had moved northward on the West side. So in 1862, the property was sold and a new church was constructed at 30 West 22nd Street. Unfortunately, in accordance with prevailing taste, the new church was designed in an undistinguished neo-gothic style. It was to serve the parish for less than 40 years.

After a long and distinguished ministry, Antoine Verren died in March of 1874. The vestry called as rector the Rev. Leon Pons, living in Troy, New York. He served for only five years. It seems that his personality was not as strong as Dr. Verren's and that he suffered the inevitable problems of a newcomer

arriving after a long tenure of his predecessor. After five years, Mr. Pons decided he would rather be a full-time professor of French and so he resigned to accept a teaching position.

Fortunately, a young Lutheran clergyman, born in Alsace but receiving much of his theological training in the United States, named Alfred Wittmeyer, was available to succeed Mr. Pons. Called as rector in 1879, he was ordained to Episcopal orders by Bishop Horatio Potter. He was to be rector for the next 46 years. Mr. Wittmeyer was an ideal choice for Saint-Esprit. He was equally at home in both French and American cultures. His ministry, almost as long as Dr. Verren's, paralleled it in many respects. Both came as young men to Saint-Esprit and stayed there for the rest of their lives. Both were of strong personality and gained wide respect in the community at large. Both were competent leaders and Saint-Esprit thrived at the height of their ministries. Both had to cope with declining membership toward the end of their tenures as rector.



Reverend
A. V. Wittmeyer,
Rector,
1879-1925



l'Eglise Francaise
du St. Esprit,
East 27th Street

Mr. Wittmeyer had a remarkable talent for business and put the parish on a sound financial basis. The church property on West 22nd Street had become quite valuable. He was able to sell it, purchase a new location at 45-57 East 27th Street, build there a new and larger church (unfortunately also designed in a mediocre neo-gothic style) and have a profit left over.

One of Mr. Wittmeyer's most enduring contributions was his leadership in the founding of the Huguenot Society of America in 1883. He was its secretary and guiding light for 15 years and he worked tirelessly to bring together Americans of Huguenot descent in order to foster in them an appreciation of their ancestors. Led by his example, the Huguenot Society became a source of strength for Saint-Esprit which continues to this day.