

## THE HISTORY OF ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Luke's was founded in 1900, not as a parish in its own right, but as a satellite church within the then very large parish of St. Bernard's, Bernardsville. It was not until 1904 that the foundation stone was laid for an actual building in Gladstone where services could be held. Known as St. Luke's Hall, it was described by its founding father as "practically a Parish House with a chapel in it." That founder was Thomas Anderson Conover, a thirty-year-old priest who had become rector of St. Bernard's just a month before the twentieth century began. It was his vision that mapped the future for St. Luke's – a future that could only have been imagined and planned by a man of extraordinary faith, because the largest congregation recorded in those early years consisted of twelve adults and ten children. Yet Conover persuaded his vestry at St. Bernard's, together with the principal congregants in Gladstone, to purchase what must have seemed a great deal of land for so small an enterprise. They bought the site on which the church now stands, and a few years later a parishioner donated a further hundred feet of frontage on an adjacent site. By 1912 yet more land had been donated so that a rectory could be built behind the church on what is now the parking lot (in 1956, when the parish house was built as an extension to the church, the rectory was spectacularly trundled across the street to its current location). Father Conover clearly expected, and intended, that great things should burgeon from small beginnings.

And the beginnings *were* small. The space in which the twelve communicants and ten children worshiped was the space that is today the choir and the sanctuary. The rest of the building, separated by a wooden partition, was the church hall. "My idea," Conover wrote, "is to make it a center for the people of the community in general and a number of them may be led, I hope, through the hall into the chapel."

Conover's vision, so confident and so steadfast, was shared by the man he called to be his Senior Curate in charge of St. Luke's. John Mitchell Harper arrived at Gladstone in 1905 and he remained there almost forty years. For the last twenty-three of them he was, in his

own right, rector of an independent parish, which is what St. Luke's became in 1921. "It was a long hard pull," Harper later wrote; "a slow growth, considerable opposition. It required much patience, a constant care of souls with whole-hearted love of Almighty God."

Like the parish, the church itself developed slowly over many years. There were important landmarks along the way – the removal of the partition in 1923 so that the church, with a proper nave and pews (and a newly built narthex), became virtually the space we know today; the installation of the principal stained glass windows in the 1920s; the purchase of an organ in 1928; the addition of the Norman tower in 1932; and eventually, in 1938, the consecration of the church (delayed so long because bishops in those days were prohibited by canon law from consecrating buildings that still carried outstanding loans on any part of them). By that time, St. Luke's was far from being the uninspiring but functional little box of 1906. It had become what it is today – a stone church of marvelous serenity and beauty, a place where God is always present.