

What St. Francis-in-the-Wood Means to Me

Don Millerd

My relationship with St. Francis-in-the-Wood is a long one. It is increasingly rare for a person to be born and raised to live their whole life in this community. But my family was operating the salmon cannery nearby, and some of the family were attending St. Francis in the 1940s. I was baptized at St. Francis, in 1948, and attended Sunday school here. Old photos will show me proudly displaying my Sunday school attendance pins. I was an altar boy and even sang in the choir. The picture below from the 1959 local paper confirms this unlikely fact.

In those days, long ago, Caulfield and Cypress Park were much smaller neighbourhoods. The church frequently filled the role of community Centre. I went to kindergarten in the old church hall, long since demolished. I went to Cubs, and Sea Scouts there as well, before the current Caulfield Cove hall was built.

Much of my recreational life, and that of Cypress Park and Caulfeild centred around this place.



St. Francis' Choir in 1959. Don Millerd is on the extreme left.

I have been attending this church for 70 years. It is a very familiar place to me. When Mary and I finished our studies and were back in this neighbourhood some 40 years ago to start a family, we came back to the church. Five of our children have been baptized here, and one buried. It was only when, as a young adult, I came back to the church and got involved in worship and activities, and the administration of the parish, that I realized that the church that I had always taken for granted was here because previous generations had made sure that this Church survived. Then, it really sunk in that is the contribution of the people sitting in the pews that ensures the continued existence of this wonderful place. I understood that I benefit from this wonderful church because generations before me have made sure it survives.

And because others before us had met this responsibility. Mary and I decided then that it was our responsibility to make an annual pledge to ensure that St. Francis was here to meet the needs of our children and grandchildren, and other people's children and grandchildren. Even though it was not always easy for a young family to make charitable donations, our practice of annual pledging began, and has continued.

St. Francis has been important to me in so many ways. Our attendance has sometimes been sporadic, as children's activities, travel, farming, and other responsibilities intervened. But while we may come and go, St. Francis has always been here for us. We may walk away for a time, but when we make our way back, the building will be as warm, familiar, and welcoming as it always has been. The liturgy will be recognizable, the congregation open, and the coffee is always on.

When I walk through these doors I am instantly at home and comfortable. I enter another world. I can sit or kneel in deeply the spiritual ambience of this church that takes me to spiritual places I don't otherwise go. I feel comforted by the familiar liturgy, supported by the community, and know that I am in the presence of the Spirit. Sometimes, being here takes me right back to my youngest days. Last week, the recessional hymn was "All things bright and beautiful". In the first few bars, I was transported back to my childhood, a little boy, standing next to my mother in the pew. I was emotional.

As I said earlier, the church has also, from time to time in the past, been the centre of our community social lives. Now with the creation of Caulfield Cove Hall, the Montessori School, Messy Church, concerts and dances, and so many other things, this church is again fulfilling the role of community centre of this area.

St Francis-in-the-Wood has not always enjoyed this success. It has not always been busy and lively. I can remember times when the pews outnumbered the parishioners. There were times when there was no choir, and no interest. Times when attendance was dwindling, and the church committee was not at all sure that it could meet current obligations.

Today, in comparison, St. Francis is doing well. We are a vibrant community. Church is well attended. And often there are children scrabbling around. Our buildings are well cared for, and we are free of debt, and able to meet outreach needs beyond our own. It is our responsibility to keep it so, and to build on this foundation. We can not take this for granted.

But to put this in the context of our current stewardship campaign, none of this success is possible if we, the people in the pews, are not giving as generously as we can to the operation of this place. Ironically, as we have seen here, it is often easier to give at times of crisis or immediate need than it is to maintain and grow a thriving organization. But it is at times like this that we can secure our future.

So that is some of what St. Francis means to me.

It is a constant and enduring touchstone in my life.

It is a place of Spiritual refuge.

It is a place of my community.

It is place where I belong.

We Anglicans are lousy talking about money. But once a year at stewardship time, we must squirm in our seats, and look inside ourselves, as our leadership asks us to pledge for the future. An Anglican priest friend of mine once told me the story of an elderly parishioner. It was not his parish, but it was a story of an elderly woman who had attended a certain small Anglican church her whole life. She was nearing the end of her life when the local newspaper reported that she had given the bulk of her estate to a local charity. The priest, who was close to her, and had ministered to her much of her life, was perplexed, and asked her why she had not given to the church. "But father" she said, "you never asked".

Today we are asking.

I hope you will join with Mary and me and many others and pledge as generously as you can to this wonderful church. It is our responsibility, and our gift, to ensure that our work, and this community, and this spirit may be shared by parishioners as yet unborn.

I am here because my parents and grandparents took their Stewardship responsibilities seriously.

Now it is my turn.

Now it is our turn.