

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service

### Session 3 – Some History

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**The worship environment.** We noted last week the importance of what liturgists call “the worship environment” – the space in which we gather each week to celebrate Eucharist. We noted that the church building we have inherited at St. Andrew's is an historic and beautiful one, and that while the exterior has remained mostly the same (with the addition in the 1920s of a graceful gothic steeple to what had been a simple square tower), the interior has undergone more extensive alterations. To understand these we need to look at history.

**Changes in Anglican piety.** When our building was built, in 1826, Anglicanism was just beginning to transition from its roots in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Worship spaces were simple, stripped of the adornments that their medieval Catholic past had accumulated. The emphasis was on hearing and preaching the Word – the Morning Prayer service, with Communion perhaps quarterly – no more than once a month. Hence our rows of fixed pews and the relatively small space in what is called the chancel area at the front of the church. Pews had been introduced to churches after the Reformation and were rented annually by households in colonial America as the means to support the Church after State support ceased. Most likely there was only a simple table form of Altar, a larger pulpit, and certainly no organ. There might have been a simple cross and two candles at the Altar, but these would have been regarded at the time as rather dangerous innovations. Windows were clear glass; the one by the Font being the only remaining example. Images, stained glass or otherwise, were avoided as idolatrous.

**Anglo-Catholicism makes its mark.** Gradually in the nineteenth century all this Reformation simplicity changed with the Anglo-Catholic movement. Beginning in England at Oxford University in the 1830s, this movement sought to reappropriate Anglicanism's pre-Reformation Catholic heritage. We see its influence in our stained glass windows, in the bas relief reredos depiction of the Resurrection, and in our larger and more elaborate Altar. An ambry or tabernacle for the reservation of the Sacrament was installed behind the Altar and an ornate Sanctus Lamp hung to signify its presence. It was only after the passage of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, with its emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist as the principal service on Sundays, that St. Andrew's Altar was moved out slightly from the wall and the priest presided facing the congregation. So there have been many changes to bring us to where we are now.

**A bit more about our “box pews.”** Of all that remains of our original interior, probably the “box” or “sheep pen” pews are what strike a visitor most notably. They have numbers – what does that mean? Doors – can I get them open? History again tells a fascinating story. In medieval churches (and you can see this in European cathedrals today) there was no seating except some stone benches built into the interior walls for the aged or infirm. The congregation stood or knelt. They also walked around, both

in liturgical processions and to visit quietly with neighbors while the priest intoned the liturgy in incomprehensible Latin at the Altar. The Reformation brought a new emphasis on preaching, and a service that was now in English. Sermons were designed to be instructional, which usually meant long. Seating became desirable. The first seats were installed by the gentry (surprise), and walled off to keep others from intruding. These enclosures could be quite elaborate, not like our little box pews. The local lord or squire would will his enclosure to his heirs. Now transfer this tradition to the American colonies. No longer in America was the Anglican Church a State Church supported by the Crown. There was no such thing as pledging to support the Church. So pews were rented to households each year. We have a chart from those days framed on the wall of the sacristy, noting the renters names and the amount of the rent (up front was more expensive). Hence the numbers on the pew doors. There was another reason for box pews: the church was unheated. So people brought footwarmers filled with hot coals which they place under their seats. The “box” with its doors helped keep the heat in!

**Environment and adornment in the wake of the 1979 Prayer Book.** Next week we will take a look at thinking about worship environment in light of the theological reforms embodied in the “new” (now pretty old!) Prayer Book. How does our space favor these? How is it at odds with them?