

GOLDEN LIGHT:

The Nave Windows at Luther Place Memorial Church
1226 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20005

Washington has a rich variety of beautiful churches. Not all, however, preserve a legacy from a significant past. Luther Place is so gifted. As recipients of bounty, it is part of our task to prize it, to try to understand it, and to provide for its use so that it may delight those who come after us.

Clearly, our old windows, casting their golden light, are an invaluable gift to us from the past. They are eloquent documents from a time markedly different from our own, but which still speak. These ten sets of double windows witness on three levels: biblical, evangelical, and domestic. The complexity of these images can seem, at first, to be somewhat confusing, but their basic patterns not hard to decipher.

- I. Their primary message is biblical. Six pairs of scriptural texts are cited and illustrated by traditional liturgical symbols rendered in a charming Victorian style.

East wall (south to north)

- 1.1 “He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove.” Matt. 3:16. Symbol: A dove (Baptism of Our Lord, Epiphany I).
- 1.2 “Upon this rock I will build my church,” Matt. 16:18. Symbol: Cross enthroned upon a rock (Confession of Peter, January 18).
- 1.3 “Take, eat, this is my body,” I Cor. 11:21. Symbol: Sheaf of wheat with a second text, “I am the bread of life,” John 6:35 (Eucharist)
- 1.4 “Praise the Lord with the harp,” Ps. 33:2. Symbol: A lyre (sacred music).
- 1.5 “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path,” Ps 119:105. Symbol: The scriptures with a sword. (Cf. Heb. 4:12).
- 1.6 “This is my body which is given for you,” Luke 22:19. Symbol: Sheaf of wheat with a rake; the latter is very unusual. (Eucharist and harvest of souls, Cf. John 4:35f).

West wall (south to north)

- 1.1 “Behold the Lamb of God,” John 1:36. Symbol: Lamb with the apocalyptic book of seven seals. Rev. 5:6f. (The Last Judgement).
- 1.2 “Behold, a sower went forth to sow,” Matt. 13:3. Symbol: an American farm boy. (Evangelism).
- 1.3 “I am the beginning and the ending.” Rev. 1:8. Symbol: The Scriptures with an alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. (The eternal Word).
- 1.4 “So teach us to number our days,” Ps 90:12. Symbol: Winged hourglass. (Transitory time).
- 1.5 “There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness,” 2 Tim. 4:8. Symbol: Cross and Crown (death and resurrection). Also in north wall.

- 1.6 “I am the light of the world,” John 8:12. Symbol: A flaming menorah (Jewish sacred candelabrum).

These twelve symbols illustrate the fundamental importance of biblical witness for the spiritual life of our community. Interesting is their emphasis on the Eucharist (two windows with three texts) and baptism since the church historians usually argue, incorrectly it would seem, that nineteenth century English-speaking Lutherans neglected the sacraments.

- II. The secondary message of the windows is more surprising. The church’s founders chose to commemorate the evangelical movement with four pairs of ecumenical leaders.

East wall (south to north)

1. John Wicklif, 1328-1385. British Roman Catholic priest. Pioneer translator of the Bible into English.
2. Philip Melancthon (Melanthon), 1497-1560. German Lutheran layman. Professor at Wittenberg, theological colleague of Martin Luther.
3. Gustavus Adolphus, 1594-1632. Swedish Lutheran king. Defender of Protestantism in Germany.
4. John Huss (Jan Hus), 1373-1415. Czech/Bohemian Roman Catholic priest. Disciple of Wicklif, martyr.

West wall (south to north)

1. John Knox, 1505-1572. Calvinist reformer of Scotland.
2. John Calvin, 1509-1564. French (Swiss) layman, lawyer. Founder of Reformed theology and churches.
3. Ulrich Zwingli (Huldreich, Huldrych), 1484-1531. Founder of Swiss Protestantism.
4. John Wesley, 1703-1791. British Anglican priest. Founder of Methodism.

The inclusiveness of confession (two Catholics, two Lutherans, three Reformed, one Anglican-Methodist) is astonishing and clearly testifies to the remarkable breadth of the founder’s understanding of the evangelical movements. Similarly, the witnesses from seven countries covering five centuries challenge sectarian, provincial, and chauvinist readings of our evangelical heritage. Today as we seek even greater inclusiveness, the catholicity of the founders’ vision provides us with a firm basis.

- III. The tertiary message is least clear although closest to us in time. Who are these donors and the persons and concerns they sought to honor? Eight pastors are memorialized: George Lechman, Daniel Garver, George A. Lintner, Philip Wieting, William D. Roedel, George B. Miller, E. W. Hutter, and Theophilis Storck, but only two laity: David Pearson and Major David Emmett. What would Pearson’s widow, Martha, tell us of his death at the age of twenty-two? Who recalls the Hartwick and Franckean Synods of western New York? The spirit of these pioneer synods lives on at Luther

Place even though subsequent mergers have long since absorbed them. Hartwick was founded in 1830 by pastors of Ministerium of New York so they could be in a synod in union with the General Synod; the country's only intersynodical body. Hartwick soon became engaged in an intense debate as to the church's political responsibility. Should the new synod witness to the abolition of slavery? Or is that none of the church's business? In 1837 several Hartwick pastors withdrew to form yet another body, the Franckean Synod, which would be unequivocally and publicly opposed to the enslavement of African Americans. In 1842 the Franckean Synod appealed to all U.S. synods to join it in its uncompromising rejection of slavery. Incredibly, none was willing to do so. Subsequently, the synod ordained an African American graduate of Gettysburg Seminary, Daniel A. Payne, who later became an African Methodist Episcopal bishop and President of Wilberforce University.

These windows' record of American church life is startling but confirming. They have become historical documents themselves. For over a century churches far beyond our parish have sought to have a share in our ministry in the nation's capital. Advocacy for and ministry with the dispossessed, the enslaved, the outcast, are the political and evangelical mandates we have been given. Golden light indeed!

(This is the first in a series of articles written to encourage reflection on the message expressed by our historic church building as the congregation plans for its restoration and renovation.)

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