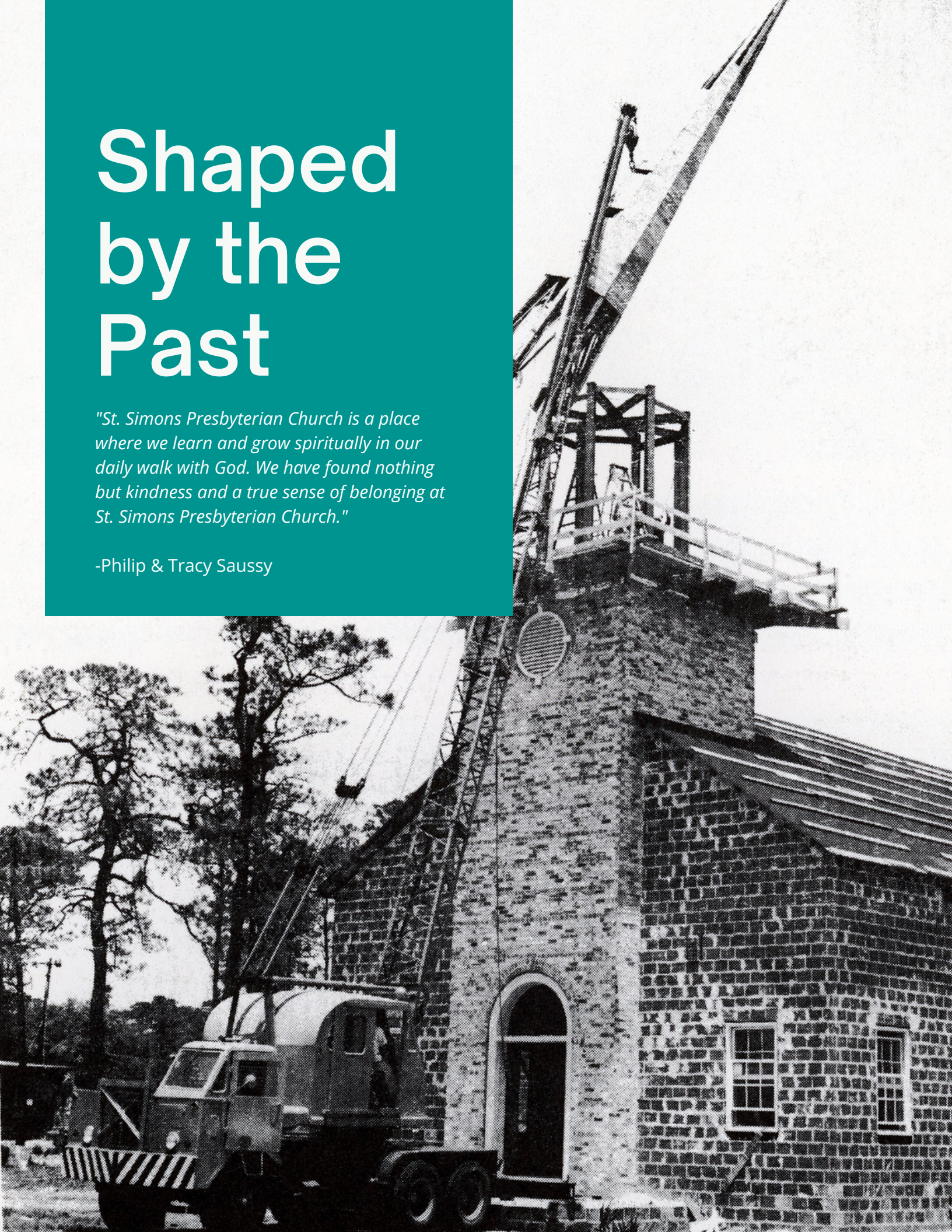


Shaped by the Past

"St. Simons Presbyterian Church is a place where we learn and grow spiritually in our daily walk with God. We have found nothing but kindness and a true sense of belonging at St. Simons Presbyterian Church."

-Philip & Tracy Saussy



History of Pastoral Leadership

The history of St. Simons Presbyterian Church is distinguished by stability in its leadership combined with a steady growth in its membership and ministry over the past 76 years. Five senior pastors have been primarily responsible for oversight of the church and its congregation since its Day of Organization on September 29, 1946. St. Simons Island, the community that this church calls home, is one of Georgia's 15 barrier islands and a popular resort area known for its sandy beaches, salt marshes, fishing, and beautiful sunsets. Since it was planted, the development and growth of St. Simons Presbyterian Church has mirrored that of the island itself, which grew from a population of less than 1,700 in 1946 to nearly 16,000 full-time residents today.

Rev. Thomas Lyttleton Harnsberger (1946-1947)

Rev. Thomas Harnsberger was instrumental in the establishment of St. Simons Presbyterian Church. After graduating from Union Theological Seminary, he found his calling as a missionary. From 1912-1939 he served in China and was then sent to Georgia, where he became the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Brunswick. It was during this time that Rev. Harnsberger began to explore forming a church on St. Simons Island. In December 1945 a small group of parishioners held regular prayer services in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Fendig to worship and pray for fulfillment of their vision of an island church. By the spring of 1946 Sunday services were being held at the Island Casino Theater. As interest grew, Sunday, September 29, 1946, was designated the Day of Organization. Forty-six members of the church attended the service along with the entire congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Brunswick. Rev. Harnsberger's sermon was titled "The Vision of a Church".



Rev. Thomas Harnsberger

*Pastor at First Presbyterian in Brunswick, GA
and Visionary of St Simons Presbyterian Church.*

**Sunday,
September 29,
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designated the Day
of Organization for
St. Simons
Presbyterian
Church.**

Rev. Dr. James Thornwell Gillespie (1947-1958)

Rev. Dr. James Gillespie was St. Simons Presbyterian Church's first called pastor. From his first sermon on January 5, 1947, until his retirement on June 1, 1958, Dr. Gillespie was a guiding force for the growth and development of the church. Key to the establishment of the church in its current location was a donation by Miss Maida McDonald, a member of Brunswick's First Presbyterian Church, of her mother's bequest. These funds were used as a down payment for the purchase of land for the church.

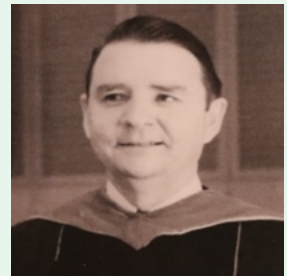


**Rev. Dr. James
Thornwell Gillespie**

By 1950 St. Simons Presbyterian Church was entirely self-sustaining, and the membership had more than tripled from the 46 charter members to 167 members. Plans were made to continue the vision of building a church with the establishment of a building fund in March of 1951. Ground was broken on March 1, 1954, and just 8 years after the Day of Organization, the first worship service and the Day of Dedication were held on September 25, 1954, in the church's new sanctuary. During Dr. Gillespie's ministry, the vision of having a Presbyterian church on St. Simons Island became a reality.

Rev. Dr. Benjamin Franklin Moore (1958-1980)

After being called to the church, Rev. Dr. Ben Moore preached his first sermon on December 1, 1958. During Rev. Moore's 22 years of care, the congregation of St. Simons Presbyterian Church grew and became grounded as progress brought new traditions. The first "Live Nativity" was held Christmas of 1963, and to this day, it is a beloved tradition in the church and island community. The Thanksgiving morning pancake breakfast was started in 1971. Another milestone was reached in 1971 when Frances Worst became the first woman in the church elected and ordained as a deacon. The following year Miriam Benefield was ordained as the first woman elder.



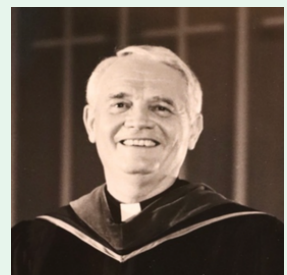
**Rev. Dr. Benjamin
Franklin Moore**

Under Rev. Moore's leadership, the congregation also began a long history of reaching out to help others. In 1961 the Jekyll Island Presbyterian Church was planted, and St. Simons Presbyterian Church made a financial pledge to support the development of the new church. Members also contributed to the fund for the building of the All Faiths Chapel at Milledgeville State Hospital. In 1962, for the first time, the church organized a Stewardship Committee to assist with budgeting. By the following year, St. Simons Presbyterian Church led the Savannah Presbytery in per capita giving to benevolences. Seventeen years later, as Rev. Moore's era was ending, the island was on the verge of entering a new era of dramatic population growth.

Rev. Dr. John Harden Law (1981-1996)

Rev. Dr. John Law preached his first sermon at St. Simons Presbyterian Church on April 5, 1981. Dr. Law grew up in the First Presbyterian Church in nearby Brunswick. As a child, his pastor was Rev. Harnsberger, who had the vision of an island church. Dr. Law had actually attended the "Day of Organization" held at the Island Casino Theater as a 12-year-old.

Dr. Law characterized the church as having strong leadership, which grew from the church's congregation. Whether it was the church treasurer, Sunday school superintendent, or building committee, everyone seemed to take a personal interest and ownership



**Rev. Dr. John
Harden Law**

of their responsibilities. The doubling of St. Simons' population between 1980 and 1990 from 6,566 to 12,805 residents was felt directly at St. Simons Presbyterian Church. During this time there were many visitors who filled out pew cards which led to pastoral contacts which led to potential new members. A review of the church's list of new members from 1987-1996 indicates an average of 68 people joined the church each year. Membership growth was steady and continuous.

The church campus grew to include the fellowship hall, kitchen, large recreational room and children's building. St. Simons Presbyterian Church became known as a family church with full Sunday school classes, a playground for the children, and the start of a preschool program which continues today. A new children's building was added in 1993, which continues to house this program. Throughout his tenure, Dr. Law was known for his humility and reaching out to others in Christian love.

Rev. Robert Montgomery Brearley (1998-2018)

After his call to St. Simons Presbyterian Church began in 1998, Rev. Brearley became known throughout the community for his kindness and grace when connecting with others in the congregation, general community, and other ministers. The church supported the planting of a second Presbyterian Church on the island in 1997 and relationships with other island pastors resulted in ecumenical services such as Holy Week worship, Easter sunrise service, and other shared worship services.



***Rev. Robert
Montgomery Brearley***

Under Rev. Brearley's guidance, the church became a mentoring church for several pastors just graduating from seminary. Associate pastors under Rev. Brearley's mentorship included Deanie Strength, Troy Hauser-Brydon, and Alan Dyer (who later became co-pastor then pastor/head of staff of St. Simons Presbyterian Church). Later, Rev. Annie Franklin Arvin would serve as associate pastor under Rev. Alan Dyer's leadership. The number of church staff during Rev. Brearley's tenure also grew to meet the needs of the congregation and the church's organization moved from oversight by the Presbyterian Women Council to leadership by congregation-led ministry teams.

Rev. Brearley led the congregation through The Great Recession of 2007-2009, which coincided with the completion of a new children and youth building with Sunday School and activity rooms, as well as a new administrative building containing staff offices and meeting spaces. He encouraged congregational support of the General Assembly's stance on homosexuality to ensure that all people were welcome to attend worship and become members of St. Simons Presbyterian Church regardless of sexual orientation. He formalized a strong history of benevolent giving by the church with the policy to tithe all undesignated donations. Additionally, Rev. Brearley began the tradition of celebrating our Presbyterian Scottish heritage with a Kirkin' o' the Tartan service, which has continued since its introduction in 1999.

Rev. Alan Folsom Dyer (2016-2022)

Rev. Alan Dyer arrived in the summer of 2013 as an associate pastor. He quickly became known for his sermons, both content and delivery. In 2016 the session met with Rev. Brearley and it was agreed to petition the Savannah Presbytery to have Rev. Brearley and Rev. Dyer serve the church as co-pastors. Rev. Brearley and Rev. Dyer shared duties of pastor, moderator, and head of staff for the next two years until Rev. Brearley's retirement on June 30, 2018.



***Rev. Alan
Folsom Dyer***

Rev. Dyer led the Heart & Soul capital building campaign to renovate the sanctuary and the Ashantilly wing of the church. On October 6, 2019, the congregation began worshiping in the social hall as renovations began. COVID-19 dictated changes: Rev. Dyer live-streamed worship, made continuous adaptations in ways of worship, encouraged the staff to creatively keep activities and ministries alive, and steadfastly kept the members united even though they were physically apart. During the COVID-19 crisis, financial giving by church members increased. Rev. Dyer suggested a Covid Relief Fund, which offered financial help by distributing \$207,327.05 to those critically impacted. After over a year's absence, the congregation returned to worship in the church's renovated sanctuary on March 28, 2021.

At the core of Rev. Dyer's deep religious ethic was "being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the community." America's turmoil over race relations arrived locally in spring of 2020 with the shooting murder of Ahmaud Arbery. Community leaders and pastors, including Rev. Dyer, bonded together to call for mercy, justice, and peace. Although racial unrest and demonstrations were happening in cities throughout the United States, it was nationally recognized that the involvement of the pastors was instrumental in maintaining peace in Glynn County. Rev. Dyer participated in the formation of racial equity meetings, which continue today.

In 2020, when church in-person attendance was limited due to COVID-19, 15 people joined St. Simons Presbyterian Church. The new member count rose to 20 in 2021 and, once the church reopened for worship, there were 57 new members in 2022. On January 30, 2022, Rev. Dyer announced he had been called to Spartanburg, SC. His final Sunday was February 27th. On that day, with Rev. Dyer moderating, the session met and welcomed 9 new members to our church family.

The Pastors

Through God's calling, its pastors have led St. Simons Presbyterian Church from a distant vision of a church to a strong body of worshipers grounded in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rev. Dr. James Gillespie helped turn the vision into reality with the construction of the church. Rev. Dr. Ben Moore developed and organized the congregation into the body of Christ. Rev. Dr. John Law helped grow the congregation and the church as the island population increased dramatically. Rev. Bob Brearley grew ecumenical relationships with the island pastors and led the church through crises in the denomination and in the world. Rev. Alan Dyer guided the church through a worldwide pandemic, a racial crisis in the community, and strengthened a philanthropic culture and membership growth.

Although our pastors have led the congregation, it is God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer who we worship and glorify. St. Simons Presbyterian Church has been blessed with imperfect human pastors, who were undoubtedly perfectly placed to listen and lead through times of plenty and times rife with confusion and challenges. The warm, sweet spirit of our congregation has nourished its pastors, and our pastors have prayerfully led us through this thing we call the Christian life. We rejoice in the assurance that God is leading us to the individual already prepared for us as the next pastor of St. Simons Presbyterian Church.