

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.32 No.39

The Nineth Sunday after Trinity

08/12/01

## Back to the Future

The playful variations on the theme of time in recent movies and books suggest to me a not so playful, but still engaging -reflection on something else.

We are embarking on a "capital fund campaign", one major part of which is designated "preservation". The word carries several suggestive meanings, not all of them pleasant. One can think of mason jars of preservative fluids, within which we can contemplate various donated or decrepit body parts; or of preserves of fruits (especially raspberries!); or the protection of our waterways and forests; or of our own dear Savannah's historic district.

All this looks toward the past from the present, with intention for the future. In fact the "present" is no more than an infinitesimal (unmeasurable) moment in which past and future coincide. We can sense the present, but can not fix it, except as a fiction of our imagination. The classic formulation of this comes in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets: Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past.*

Especially in Christianity, the future involves us constantly in the past. The Church is constituted by an act of recollection, by our continuum of participation in an event done once long ago, but repeated over and over again as her determinative sign of life. When Jesus told us to "do this in memory of me" he defined the principal mode of his living communion with those who believe in him. And the act is a meal, a taking of food and drink, both material and spiritual, to sustain body and soul. It is all very simple, and yet mysterious and profound. So we go to the past to sustain the future. The venerable Socratic and Platonic paradox, "knowledge is recollection", is not merely validated; it is made the very principle of our life in Christ.

Now all this theological preamble is offered as a way to guide our understanding about "preservation". We are not interested in maintaining a beautiful historic property as an end in itself. Leave that kind of thing to professional preservationists. Our preservation is more nearly like that of preserving the great forests, which give life and refreshment to so many creatures of every kind.

Our beloved St. John's, an incomparable bequest to us from our "past", is also our home. When we preserve it we gather up our past into our future. We are not "maintaining structures". We are acting in

faith that our small and home, and making this knowledge of him explicit and accessible in our particular society.

So, "back to the future". When we receive a lovely gift, such as that bequeathed to us by Josephine Kennedy Osborne, we are made aware in a personal way of the value of our Church to its people, and of their hope and expectation for its life and ministries. Mrs. Osborne's gift of over one million dollars will fund an endowment (or trust) designated in her name, in memory of her son, First Lieutenant John Woodward Sognier, Jr.

Such testamentary bequests are of tremendous importance to us. It was Dr. Kirk Train who taught me how to think about "trusts" when he stoutly

resisted an attempt to "invade" the existing trust fund of the Church for what seemed at the moment the pragmatic necessity of a debt. The long-term usefulness of an endowment must not be pandered in the cause of some immediate difficulty. The Church at present has incurred a debt due to various imperative renovations. It is perfectly able both to sustain this debt and to retire it without damaging (or betraying) our trusts and endowments.

Mrs. Osborne's gift means that the Church now has trust funds of about two-million five-hundred thousand dollars. For a parish as old and venerable as ours, this is very little, grateful as we are for it. Some years ago the Vestry excluded the trust income from the ordinary operating budget for each year. Income from the trust is used for our future. It is something I hoped for during all my time as rector that we would finally have sufficient resources to "preserve" our superb inheritance in property and secure it for time to come. Mrs. Osborne's gift takes us a second major step toward that.

Sam Varnedoe was the one who used to stress to the Vestry, in season and out, the remembering of the Church in our wills. Some of you have done this over the years, and I hope it remains a real priority with many others of you. My own pledge to the capital fund drive is intended for the Preservation Fund.

We are most fortunate that Mr. James Hungerpiller has consented to co-chair the campaign with Mr. Ross. Mr. Hungerpiller's years of exemplary service and' dedication to the parish would have given him every justification in refusing. But he did not refuse, and we should all be grateful.

Please let your mind play with this idea. Our Church is not a museum, however important its place in civic and Southern history may be. It is a living thing, dedicated to one central purpose: to remember Jesus the Christ. It is our joy and delight to care for it as well as we can, as part of our own prospects and of the future life of faith, to which by its fineness and beauty it bears continuous and eloquent testimony.

**The Rev. Dr. William H. Ralston**

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

Report Errors | Comments

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.