I write this as Elaine and I are leaving St. Simon’s By-The-Sea, the Episcopal Chapel in Sandbridge, Virginia. We have been associated with St. Simon’s since 1985, the year we bought our oceanfront home. After 7 years as absentee owners we retired to Sandbridge and St. Simon’s became an important part of our lives. For the last ten years, St. Simon’s has been led by two strong people – the Rev. Jack Chamblin and Senior Warden, Sam Ames. When Jack moved to Delaware in 1997, the Rev. John Jordan became the Vicar and Marty Benson took over as Sr. Warden, with Sam continuing to add his wisdom and support as Sr. Warden *Emeritus*.

Those two teams were able to bring a character of simplicity and informality to a chapel that is unique in the Episcopal Church. From the rough driftwood cross and uncarpeted cement floor, to the casual dress and lack of structured organization, they carved out an environment of reverent worship of God and contagiously friendly fellowship.

Ned McIntosh, June 2001

**In the Beginning**

Sandbridge began as a small, mostly summer vacation cottage community. On the front porch of one of those cottages, owned by Adelaide and Charles Snyder, St. Simon’s was born when a few neighbors felt the need for a summer Sunday School for their children. This was around 1960, and it was just a summer program. In the infamous Ash Wednesday storm of 1962, the Snyder cottage was destroyed and the Sunday meetings moved to the porch of another summer cottage, owned by the Rev. Bill Englehoff, an Episcopal Priest from Richmond, Va. His cottage, one of the first built on pilings, had survived the storm and he volunteered to hold services whenever he was at the cottage. A notice was posted at the market when he would be in residence and the vacation congregation sometimes reached 40 people.

In 1966, the Rev. John D. Chamblin, Assoc. Rector of Church of the Good Shepherd, Norfolk, suggested to parishioners Barron Black and Harvey Lindsay, Sr. that it might be a good missionary project for the Diocese to establish a mission church in Sandbridge. Lindsay’s son-in-law, James (Cue) Kabler, was developing Sandbridge as a summer community and was persuaded to give the Diocese a three-acre plot - the present site of the chapel and cottage – if it would agree to build an open-air chapel for summer services.

The Diocese agreed and suggested adding a two-bedroom apartment for the use of visiting clergy. The Rev. Joseph Pinder, Vicar of All Saint’s Mission in Virginia Beach, was given the additional responsibility for the new Sandbridge mission, and named it for St. Simon-the-less. Rev. Pinder and Peter Meredith, Sr., designed and built the chapel and apartment and the first Eucharist was celebrated at St. Simon’s on Sunday, July 2, 1967, with the Rev. Charles Taylor as Celebrant. The Diocese began scheduling visiting clergy from Memorial Day through Labor Day to conduct the Sunday service of Holy Eucharist and to use the cottage for their family vacation.

The first worshippers felt what we have all felt at St. Simon’s – with the sights and sounds of the ocean just a block away and a slightly salty breeze blowing across our faces: surely the presence of God is in this place.

**The Old Rugged Cross**

The simplicity of St. Simon’s creates its charm. Built of wood timbers, weather-worn and faded gray from years of salt spray and northwest winds off the nearby ocean. The original open-air chapel boasted a beautiful cross, built of fine wood. One morning Adelaide Snyder’s father, George Curtis, arrived to find the large cross had been stolen. He found some driftwood on the nearby beach and constructed a simple wooden cross to replace it, starting a tradition of driftwood crosses that continues to this day.

Curtis’s cross served the church until 1989 when it was also stolen! Eddie Johnson, a fireman stationed across from the chapel, offered to build a new one, which he fashioned with wood from broken fence rail around the church. It was the first of many gestures the neighboring firemen have contributed. The mystery of the stolen crosses was never solved. The present driftwood cross was discovered and donated by parishioner and artist Renee Seiler Southern who saw that the simple elegance of the crossbeam seemed to have been designed to nestle in the strong upright piece. In 1992, when Becky Benson’s mother died, a large shell baptismal font was purchased with the memorial donations. It is held by a stand of native roots, fashioned by Becky and Marty Benson, and added to our simple, beach décor.

Over the years well-meaning parishioners have offered to donate the kind of traditional memorial trappings found in many Episcopal Churches, but they have been diplomatically discouraged because they would conflict with the reverent simplicity of the rustic chapel. One exception is the bell tower, given in 1997 in honor of George Curtis who had designed the first driftwood cross. The bell was rung at the dedication service by George Curtis, IV, and it is now a tradition to have our children ring the bell before the Sunday service begins.

**An Ecumenical Chapel**

St Simon’s was offered to Sandbridge Roman Catholic worshipers to use on a staggered schedule basis during summer and on May 22, 1980, a historic ecumenical service took place at St. Simon’s conducted jointly by the Episcopal Bishop of So. Virginia, the Rt. Rev. C. Charles Vache and Bishop Walter F. Sullivan of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Richmond. A covenant was signed for the joint use of the chapel and the outdoor space was enlarged to accommodate 300. In 1988-89 the exterior was landscaped with funds and labor from both congregations, and a new sign was erected. About the same time St. John’s Roman Catholic church built its new edifice on Sandbridge Road, St. Simon’s went year-round.

**St. Simon’s Becomes a Year-round Chapel**

In September, 1990, the first winter congregation was formed, with six people attending the service held in the living room of the cottage. The Rev. Jack Chamblin, now retired to Sandbridge, became the first Vicar, his wife Anne the first Church School teacher. In 1991, the screened porch was enclosed and the space would now hold 25 people. In March of ’91 we were designated a Mission Station by Bishop Vache, with 15 members. Sam Ames (wife, Lovie) was appointed Warden and Marty Benson (wife, Becky) and Myron Sheik Kindley (wife, Becky) as Co-Treasurers. Some of the other original members included Dr. George and Patricia Rector, Adelaide and Charles Snyder, Rolf and Sunny Williams and Peter and Susan Meredith .

The year-round congregation soon outgrew the cottage and chapel space was enclosed with removable walls, designed by Frank Holton, AIA, and constructed by Steve Haberdash. The walls go up in October and the heaters are hung; the walls are removed in May. Vicar Chamblin led the first service held in the enclosed chapel on Feb. 9, 1992. The first Confirmation class, with 1 adult and 3 children, was presented to Bishop Vache in April, 1993.

In 1995, under the direction of Becky Benson, there was a major renovation of the cottage, which now boasted three bedrooms. New ceramic floors, kitchen cabinets and remodeled bathrooms, in addition to improved air conditioning made it a most desirable retreat for the summer clergy and their families. [Portions of the cottage have been remodeled twice since then, most recently under the supervision of long-time Sandbridge resident and former Jr. Warden, Laurie Evans.]

**No Debt – Large Outreach**

Newcomers to St. Simon’s, used to a more traditional parish, find its informality refreshing. There is no “every-member-canvass”, no debt, but a budget showing generous income, most of which is given to the outreach needs in the community and the Diocese. For example, the Center for Love and Caring for homeless mothers and their kids receives over $10,000 per year in financial support, plus the time and talent of many members of the congregation.

**Leadership Transition**

In the early 1990’s both the clergy and lay leadership changed. Marty Benson, formerly the co-Treasurer, became the Sr. Warden – a position he held until 2015. Carl Isbrandsten was appointed Jr. Warden. Jack Chamblin retired for the second time in 1994 and the Rev. Betty Long became Vicar for one year. She was followed by the Rev. John Jordan who had retired as a distinguished Rector at the large Galilee Episcopal Church in Virginia Beach. He was coaxed out of retirement by Jack Chamblin and Sam Ames and became the Vicar from each October through May, with summer Sundays continuing to be served by visiting clergy as before. The Rev. Bill Starkey was the next Vicar, serving for three years. In 2007, the Rev. Marni Schneider took over as Vicar and served until her full retirement in 2018, at which time the church called the Rev. Dale Hirst. He led St. Simon’s to full parish status, celebrated by the Diocese of So. Virginia at the annual Diocesan Council gathering in 2020. And the little St. Simon’s chapel in Sandbridge went from a summer cottage porch gathering to mission status, to the year-round parish of St. Simon’s by-the-Sea.

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