

A Brief History of the Assumption Parish

IN THE BEGINNING...

The Assumption Parish was officially proclaimed by Bishop Denis Hurley on **9 March 1947**. Up to that time, the Catholic community in the Umbilo and Glenwood areas were part of the Emmanuel Cathedral parish but attended Mass at Christ the King Mission in Congella.

This mission church was established as an outstation of the Cathedral Parish to serve the needs of the large Black population then living in what is now the area around King Edward Hospital.

The mission church in Pioneer Road, Congella was a converted wood-and-iron house and for the first three years after the official founding of the parish, was shared with the local Zulu-speaking community. Priests travelled from the Cathedral, often by bicycle or horse cart and the round trip was an all-day affair. Founder parishioners recall having the priests to Sunday lunch in their homes and remember with fondness the close bonds this built up between priest and people.

The need for a new parish had been seen for some time before 1947 and a building fund had been established as early as 1943. The first meeting was attended by a veritable group of founder parishioners, including Fr. McGrath, Mrs Foster, Mrs Young, Mrs Rachman, Mrs Currie, Miss Maher, Mr Paull, Mr Moran, Mr Leferbre and Mr Poilly. Later, Mr Ryan, Mr Tuohy and Mrs Dixon joined. Although fund-raising was difficult in the war and immediate post-war years, the committee made remarkable progress and by 1949 could justify beginning the building of the present day hall in Nicolson Road.



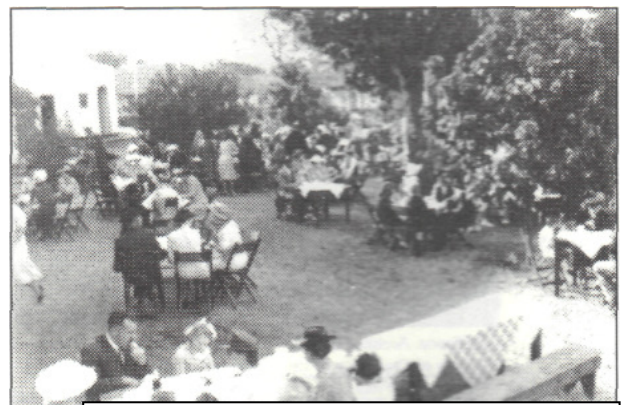
Site of the church of Our Lady of the Assumption Durban April 1948

This was a bold and innovative decision in those pre-Vatican years and it took some persuading to get all the authorities to agree that a dual purpose hall and church should first be built. The reasoning of the committee was that fund-raising to build the church would be considerably easier with a hall in which to hold functions.

Fr. Burke was appointed as the first parish priest when the parish was proclaimed and it was through his efforts that the present site in Nicolson Road was obtained. Legend has it that he had quite a job outbidding the Dutch Reformed Church, who wanted to build a hostel in the area.



PARISH YOUTH GROUP 1947



ASSUMPTION PARISH 1st Birthday Party 1948

IN THE HALL 1962...

The present hall was completed within a year and the **first Mass celebrated in it was Christmas midnight Mass in 1950**. Those who had so vigorously campaigned for the building of the hall were soon vindicated as the community set about fund-raising with a vengeance.



Dances, fetes and bingo were regular features in the ten years after the hall was completed.

The community first had to raise the balance of the debt on the hall, which had cost £14000. This was done in record time and immediately work began on raising funds for the Church.



FETE FOR CHURCH FUNDS

THE youngest members of the family are being especially well catered for by the organisers of the Grand Fete in aid of the Assumption Parish Building Fund to be held in the Parish Hall, Durban, on Saturday. For them will be toys, dolls and lucky dips, while prizes are set aside for the best costumes worn at the Fancy Dress Parade to be held in the afternoon. In the photograph (above) Marianne Simpson and Gillian Verheul model two junior-sized dresses which will be on sale, while Mrs. I. Jenman, convener of the Fete, and Father T. Slattery, the parish priest, look on.

["Mercury" photograph]

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New church for Durban

("Southern Cross" Correspondent)

DURBAN.—The first sod of the new Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, Nicolson Road, Durban, was turned on Lady Day (March 25), by Fr. T. Slattery, O.M.I., the parish priest.

The church, which will stand on a commanding site overlooking the southern area of the city, has been designed on conservatively contemporary lines. It will hold 500, and it is hoped that it will be available in time for midnight Mass at Christmas this year. The estimated cost is R70,000.

Last year this parish, which numbers more than 1,500 people adopted the "single-fund" plan under which it was proposed to raise R48,000 in three years. The scheme was carried through with such enthusiasm that pledges amounting to R60,000 were received. So far the pledges have been faithfully honoured.



FR. TOM SLATTERY, parish priest of the Assumption Church in Durban, performs the ceremony of "turning the first sod" for his future church which, together with a presbytery, will cost about R70,000. The church is expected to be in use by Christmas. In the background is the church hall which is at present used for services. The pledge system has been introduced in the parish to raise the necessary funds.

This also proceeded with speed and the first sod for the new Church was turned in April 1961
By that stage, Fr. Tom Slattery had been appointed parish priest



revolution brought on by the council began, Assumption parishioners were long accustomed to the idea that everyone in the church, not just priests and sisters, have a responsibility for building it.

Pioneer parishioners recall with fondness those years of energetic activity. There was a common goal and parishioners worked with dedication to achieve it. **The use of the hall as a church imposed additional burdens - after Saturday night functions, everything had to be cleared up and furniture rearranged for Sunday Mass. This seldom finished before 2.00am!** But the hard work had another, probably more important, outcome - from the earliest days, Assumption parishioners introduced a tradition of community involvement and lay participation. This was before Vatican II, when such talk became official policy. By the time the new Church was built and the fundamental

'Innovation' was the name of the game in those early days. The first baptism was held in the hall on the day of its opening - 16th December 1950. But no-one had got round to organising the necessary vessels yet. Instead, Castle beer mug and dinner plates were used! And when no suitable vehicle could be found to move the statue of Mary from Pioneer Road, Maisie Barth came to the rescue with an early Medwood Removal van - the statue making the journey up the hill held firmly in place on the back of the truck by a band of willing parishioners. ***Was this one of the earliest Marian processions?***

INTO A NEW CHURCH: 1962 TO 1980...

The new Church building, opened in March 1962, marked a new era both in Assumption Parish and the Catholic Church throughout the world. The Second Vatican Council was getting underway and was to fundamentally alter much of the Church's ethos and practice. The changes were to affect Assumption Parish as much as every other part of the Church, but the parish seemed oddly prepared for the change. Not only was there already a great level of involvement by parishioners, but the design of the new building admirably suited many of the changes : the new English liturgy, the priest facing the people and the greater involvement of lay ministers. Did the designers, who planned and built the Church before the first changes were announced, have some insight into what was to come?



PARISH SILVER JUBILEE: 1972

Assumption parish embraced the changes of the 60's and 70's with enthusiasm. Lay involvement expanded from fund-raising to lay responsibility and ministry and the first Parish council was established in 1967. The choir, established as one of the first parish societies in 1947, became a focal point for liturgical renewal and the parish's folk Mass was the first of this type in the diocese. Ministers of Communion were introduced in 1974 and this signalled the start of lay involvement in the core work of celebrating and spreading the Gospel. The parish became known in this period as one leading the way in liturgical

renewal and lay apostolate and was the first in a string of innovations later adopted by neighbouring Catholic communities.

Soon after seeing the new Church completed, Fr. I Slattery was transferred and Fr. Tom Hannon became parish priest. He was succeeded in 1969 by Fr. Jim McDade and in 1972, Fr. Albert Danker, formally chaplain to the Young Christian Workers, took over the reins. He was succeeded in 1977 by Fr. George Purves, but continued to live on the premises as the Oblate Provincial superior until 1983.

Parish wards were first introduced in 1973 as a means of building more personal involvement in the Church. These wards were later to manifest themselves as **Small Christian Communities** and are today a fundamental part of the life of the Church throughout the diocese. The Church had come to realise that it is in small groups, reflecting on the Gospel and praying together, that the essence of Christianity will be re-created in our world.

The church building was paid for by 1973 and work began on building the community room and the surrounding meeting venues. These were used for catechism classes and for the host of new groups springing up in the parish. In 1980, the Church was consecrated. This ceremony dedicates the building as a permanent place of worship and can only be done once all bonds on the building have been released. The parish council of the time built around this event a Year of Consecration, using it as an opportunity to deepen dedication and commitment in the parish. Many formation events were held, culminating in a mission and consecration ceremony. On the same day, the parish was permanently entrusted by the Archbishop to the Oblate fathers and the new Lady Chapel inaugurated as a memorial of this event.

THE CHURCH OF THE 90's: 1981 TO 1997...

Increasing social involvement characterised the 1980's and 1990's. The deepening of the national crisis and increasing political violence during the 1980's challenged the Church to face its responsibility of applying the Gospel to social, political and economic realities. The parish's own Justice and Reconciliation Group was active in this period and the parish's facilities were used by many ecumenical and civic groups for meetings and training.

The parish also combined with other Christian denominations in the area to protest against abuses of human rights and to promote a spirit of tolerance and openness.

Today, this co-operation continues in a united stand against crime.

Fr. Joe Money served as parish priest for nine years from 1983 to 1992 and was succeeded by Fr. Derrick Butt, who still holds office today. The complement of clergy was enlarged in January 1996 when the parish's first permanent deacon, Peter Kelly, was ordained. In May 1994, Sr. Helen joined the full-time staff as pastoral assistant.

Along with the Archdiocese, the parish participated in the great 'Renew' programme between 1989 and 1991. As part of a pastoral plan to revitalise the Catholic Church in the whole of Southern Africa, Renew aimed to transform the parish into a Community of communities serving humanity. The outcome of Renew has been the permanent establishment of Small Christian Communities. These are small groups of Catholics which meet regularly and attempt to build themselves into the smallest unit of the Church - a place where Catholics can experience more fully the support of a caring community.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was introduced to the parish in 1993. This is the Church's programme of instruction and liturgy for introducing new adult members to the Church. Baptism of adults and Receptions into full communion have since become a standard feature of the Easter Vigil, restoring the ancient tradition when this annual service was also the main service of Baptism for the year.

The vast changes in South African politics since 1991 have also made themselves felt in the parish.

Although the parish was always a multiracial and multi-cultural community, the repeal of Group Areas have made the parish even more pronouncedly a microcosm of the new South Africa. In unison with the wider society, the parish must play its part in achieving true reconciliation and in becoming sensitive to the new issues facing our community and society.

History is written daily. Today's community is doing the things that will be written about as parish history when the parish celebrates its centenary in 2047. Let us hope that we will be as fondly remembered as the pioneers who built our parish over the last fifty years in such a varied and inspiring fashion.

To be continued