

Kahler Hall Ecumenical

by Joseph G. Schaefer

In 1972 when I first arrived at St. John's, there already was an established practice to celebrate Sunday Mass at Kahler Hall in the Harpers Choice Village Center. At the same time, Christ Episcopal Church on Oakland Mills Road, affectionately known as 'Old Brick,' also held a Sunday service at Kahler Hall.

The Episcopal service was celebrated each Sunday by Rev. Rodger Kramer, the pastor at Old Brick. The Catholic service was celebrated by a rotating schedule of all the priests then serving at St. John Catholic: the pastor, Fr. George Cora; the associate pastor, Fr. Joseph Schaefer; and four Jesuit priests who took turns coming out for weekend Mass at the parish... Cooperation and a very friendly spirit existed between those who attended the services from the two congregations. There were frequent interfaith dialogues as was the spirit and custom in the interfaith setting of Columbia...

The idea arose of a shared regular Sunday service between the Episcopalians and the Catholics.... A particular positive focus was the high degree of similarity between the Catholic and Episcopal traditions on questions of faith, discipline, shared outlook and especially the similarity of the structure of the mass.

The suggestion was made that one Sunday each month the two congregations at Kahler Hall would worship jointly....I am aware that there was a review by officials of the Archdiocese of Baltimore; I am not aware of what steps, approvals, or procedures were needed to be worked through on the Episcopal side. ... Through various meetings and dialogues the suggestion was made that the two congregations share the Liturgy of the Word on the first Sunday of each month. The readings in the lectionary used by both congregations were identical as was the order of service, aside from slightly different versions of the prayers. One month we would use the Episcopal rite, led by the Catholic priest, usually myself, who would also preach. The following month we would use the Catholic rite, led by the Episcopal priest, who would preach.

The joint service would continue until after the creed, at which point we would exchange the greeting of peace. Then the smaller Episcopal congregation would go across the hall to the smaller room and hold their communion service, while the larger Catholic congregation continued in the larger hall. The point was made to the gathered congregations at this time that we shared what we had in common, the Word of God, but because there was not complete unity between the churches, we would part before celebrating the Eucharist, but continue working until the day when we could fully worship as one in unity of faith. It was also pointed out that the first thing each congregation did after we separated was take up the collection—and we jokingly referred to this aspect of parish life as being at least as important as faith issues.

This shared practice continued for several years. Two events led to its suspension. The first was the opening of the Oakland Mills Interfaith Center in 1975, which allowed the Catholics to have abundant space and more services. Secondly, a building renovation took place at Old Brick about the same time, giving the Episcopalians more space. The smaller event at Kahler Hall became a personnel burden for both congregations and the reluctant decision was made to terminate the services there.

Creative Tension, pp.108-111.