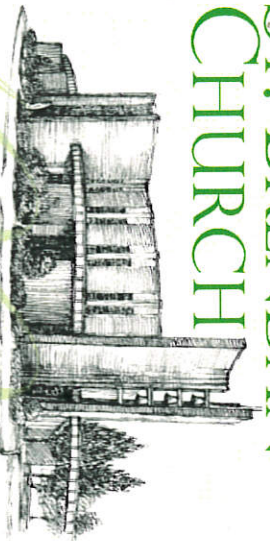


# ST. BRENDAN CHURCH

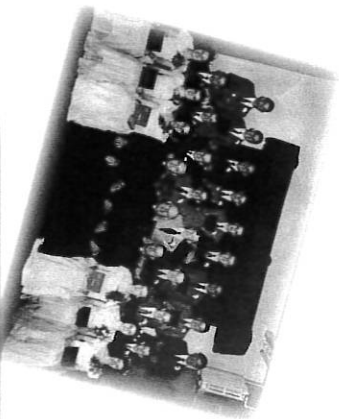


A COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND SERVICE  
FOR 100 YEARS



## St. Brendan Parish History

1909 - 2009



When we look at the great expanse of the Catholic Church's 2000 year history, 100 years seems hardly significant. However, when that century has seen more technological and scientific advances than any other century and when it witnesses two horrific world wars, and is laden with more historical events than the previous 500 years combined, it is a century to remember.

Faith. As a Parish they have tried to keep the Lord Jesus at the center of their lives and they have laid the foundation for the many parishioners who are yet to come. And so it is to the people of St. Brendan Parish, past – present – and future that we dedicate our Centennial Celebration this year.

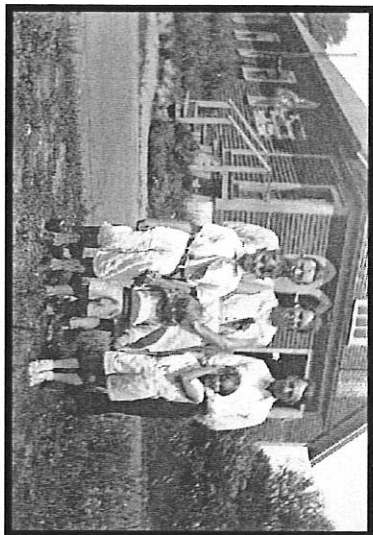
The Catholics of Riverside in the past one hundred years have seen the first airplane take off at Kitty Hawk and the first man land on the moon. We have seen the map of the world change several times and watched tyrants try to rule the world only to be defeated by patriotic and brave lovers of freedom. Those who lived in the early days of the parish without modern knowledge of radios, televisions, satellite, or e-mail did not have the opportunity to watch the news on the internet and text message their friends any where in the world to tell them about it. What has never changed is the dedication of the people of St. Brendan's to their parish and to their Catholic

In compiling this history, I have relied heavily on histories previously written for other historic occasions. Rev. Joseph McCabe, an assistant at St. Brendan's, wrote a history during the pastorate of Fr. Toohey in 1936, two years after the parish's 25th Anniversary. I also rely on the history prepared for the occasion of the parish's 75th Anniversary in 1984. Gratitude and prayers go to those who prepared it in 1984 including: Eleanor Casey, Ellen Garvin, Ruth Hall, Anna Higginbotham, Sr. Mary Clare McCarthy, RSM, Sr. Mary Charlotte Winn, RSM, Leona Phillips and Alice McCusker. I am especially grateful to Rev. Robert W. Hayman, our diocesan historian, for his invaluable help.

## THE EARLY YEARS

In the 1860's, Catholics who lived in the Riverside section of East Providence had a choice of where to attend Sunday Mass. Those in the northern section, near Bay View went to St. Joseph's Church in Fox Point and those in the southern end and in

Mass was celebrated in Riverside during the summer months starting in 1889 when "Winchester Hall" on Bullocks Point Avenue, was rented for that purpose. In the summer of 1891 the Turner Avenue School was used instead.



Barrington went to St. Mary's in Warren. At times, especially in the summer months, a priest from the Cathedral would celebrate Mass at what was then called St. Mary's Seminary, Bay View or at the old Watchemoket Hall in East Providence. With the establishment of Sacred Heart parish on Taunton Avenue, in 1876 priests from that parish looked after the needs of the Catholics of Riverside. Those who lived in Barrington, however, continued to go to Warren for Mass.

This arrangement continued until 1893 when Fr. John Harty, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, asked Bishop Harkins for permission to purchase land on Sprague Avenue, for a chapel in Riverside. This mission chapel was soon built for a cost of \$3,000 and was named under the patronage of St. Brendan the Navigator. It was also in 1893 that the first cars of the suburban line of the Union Railroads started regular service that made Silver Spring, Riverside, Camp White and Bullocks Point popular resorts

and brought an increase in the number of Catholics in those districts during the summer. In addition to the summer colonies there were several hotels, all popular during the warm weather, but after the close of the vacation season very few Catholics wintered in the area.

St. Brendan's mission chapel served until 1905, when the need was felt for a larger edifice and a new chapel was built on Turner Avenue, by Fr. John Haney, who had succeeded Fr. Harty as pastor of Sacred Heart Church. The new church was dedicated on Sunday August 27, 1905 by Very Rev. Thomas Doran, the Vicar General of the diocese. This church was constructed of the best hardwood on a solid brick and stone foundation and cost \$10,000 to complete. According to coverage which appeared the following week in The Providence Visitor, "The interior was finished in hard pine with natural wood finish. The walls were painted a dark cream color with a light green base, giving the interior a rich but not gaudy appearance. The exterior was finished with green-stained shingles extending on ether side from the foundation to the tip of the roof."

By the time the church was dedicated, the number of Catholics living in and around Riverside had increased considerably and Mass was celebrated on Sundays all year round. The mission continued to grow until 1909 when the size of the congregation warranted its being established as a parish.

At the request of Fr. Haney, Bishop Matthew Harkins established St. Brendan Mission as a parish on April 29, 1909 and on the same day named Fr. Joseph E. Hughes, then the assistant pastor of the Assumption Church in Providence, to be its first pastor. During his first year as pastor, Fr. Hughes established the East Providence Council Knights of Columbus (located on Pawtucket Avenue.) and, for this reason we share our Parish Centennial with them. The first corporation meeting was held on May 5 of that year naming Tobias Burke and John Meehan as the first trustees. Mr. Burke remained a trustee well into the 1930's. At first there was no rectory and so Fr. Hughes lived with friends until he was able to build a rectory in 1910 on Turner Avenue. In 1913 he purchased more land adjoining the church and in 1920 sold the old chapel on Sprague Avenue,



which remains standing today as a child day-care center.

During his pastorate of nearly 21 years, Fr. Hughes saw the parish develop from what in the beginning was not much more than a summer mission with only about 125 families. For many years he had to rely on the generosity of the summer residents for financial support. Then, beginning in 1915, some farmers began selling off lots of land and the area began to develop. By the time of his sudden death on December 14, 1929, Fr. Hughes had seen the membership increase to over 500 families.

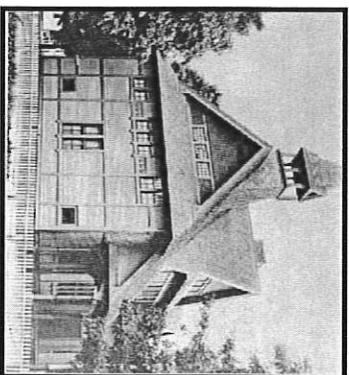
## FROM THE DEPRESSION TO WORLD WAR II

For some time Fr. Hughes had planned to enlarge the church to accommodate the growing parish, but was unable to see the plan accomplished. In 1930 this task fell to his successor, Fr. John A. Toohey, who served as an Army Chaplain during WW I and later as pastor of St. Michael Parish in Smithfield. Fr. Toohey immediately set about to enlarge the church. The work was done by William Noonan of East Providence and it extended the upper part of the church to double its seating

capacity and made possible the construction in the basement of a large assembly room seating 250, and two smaller rooms used for Sunday School classes. The remodeled church was rededicated on Sunday, May 17, 1931, by Bishop William A. Hickey, the 3rd Bishop of Providence. The dedication homily was given by Rev. Msgr. Peter Foley and at that occasion he said: "In the annals of St. Brendan's parish this day's ceremonies will be recorded in gold."

In 1932 Fr. Toohey purchased a lot adjacent to the parish property with a cottage on it which was renovated to become a Social Hall, later known as "The Red House" for St. Brendan's Men's Club, The St. Brendan's Catholic Woman's Society, the Catholic Girls Club and the Boy Scouts. In this hall the parish celebrated its social events. It was both a meeting hall and a temporary convent when the first school opened in 1943. It also served as a depository for Boy Scout paper drives, the Daughters of Isabella ran their canteen dances there and, during the War Years, 1941 - 1945, parishioners met there to roll bandages and store blankets for the war effort.

During the war years from 1941 through 1945 many families mourned the loss of their young sons and husbands who died in the War both in Europe and in the South Pacific. On Monday evenings during those years the church was filled to overflowing with parishioners who gathered to pray a Novena to the Sacred Heart asking the Lord to watch over their loved ones away at the war. The sacrifices made by the parishioners of St. Brendan Parish, those who went away to war and those who stayed home and supported the war effort, will always be remembered and appreciated. They have left us a great example of a time when the parish came together in prayer and solidarity.



## EARLY CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Beginning in 1870 the bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States feared that the young Catholic Christians attending public schools would lose their faith. They encouraged the establishment of a parish school as part of every parish unit. St. Brendan Parish had considered building a parish school from its foundation in 1909, but it was delayed because of World War I and the Great Depression. It was, however, always a priority in the minds of the parishioners.

From the beginning of his term as pastor, Fr. Toohey envisioned a parish school for the education of a growing number of children in the parish. In 1936, after negotiations with St. Mary Academy, Bay View (then known as St. Mary's Seminary) a new program was developed at the school to accept children from St. Brendan parish in grades 1 through 9. For the first time, the school would accept boys at the elementary level, but no changes were made in the high school. In September of 1936 Bay View opened its doors to 200 children from St. Brendan parish and the parish saw the

early beginnings of what would become its own parish school. It was the beginning of a long relationship with the Sisters of Mercy whose dedication and generosity made this possible.

In that same year construction began on a new mission for St. Brendan parish located in Barrington. Ground was broken for the new chapel by Fr. Toohey on October 7, 1936, just a few days before the patronal feast of the new mission which was to be named after St. Luke. This new chapel would accommodate 325 people and would serve St. Brendan parishioners who lived in Bay Spring and West Barrington. This new chapel was finally dedicated on August 15, 1937, by Bishop Francis Keough, then Bishop of Providence, and the first Mass was celebrated by Fr. Toohey with Rev. Charles Carroll, OP, the homilist. In 1946, St. Luke Parish was established and St. Brendan Parish was to see its parish divided to accommodate the growing number of people moving to the area. It was a sign of growth and promise for the future.

Fr. Toohey ended his eventful pastorate at St. Brendan parish when he was named to be the new pastor of Sacred Heart

Church in Pawtucket in February of 1942. He was replaced by Rev. John X. Murphy who had previously been pastor of St. Agnes Church in Providence.

Fr. Murphy immediately began the work of fulfilling Fr. Toohey's long dream of opening a parish school. In 1943 the parish purchased three lots and buildings on Turner Avenue and was able to also lease the old Turner Avenue School from the town of East Providence to serve as the first St. Brendan School. One of the buildings acquired was also to serve as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy who at first resided at St. Mary's Academy on Pawtucket Avenue. The school could accommodate students (boys and girls) from grades 1 through 6. Those who completed their studies at St. Brendan School then went on to complete their Junior High studies at St. Mary's Academy, Bay View. One of the noted graduates of this school was Bishop Kenneth A. Angell, DD, the long time Auxiliary Bishop of Providence and now the retired Bishop of Burlington Vermont. Financial records and payroll books from these years have survived and it is noted that in 1953 a young seminary student named Kenneth Angell

was paid \$40.00 per week to be the school janitor during the summer months.

Fr. Murphy remained at St. Brendan for only two years before being named pastor of St. Matthew Parish in Cranston. He was succeeded by Rev. Francis J. McCabe who had been pastor of St. Rita Parish in Warwick. Fr. McCabe, who served as pastor until 1952, continued to prepare the parish to build its school and was able to acquire more land on Turner Avenue for that purpose. Unfortunately, records of his years as pastor have not survived, but it is known that the school and the parish continued to grow in great numbers.

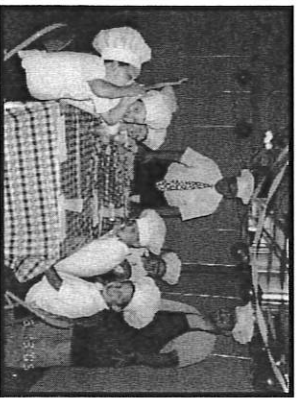
Fr. McCabe was replaced by Rev. William Tierney who immediately took up the challenge of raising funds for a new school. In May of 1955, Fr. Tierney broke ground for the new 16-classroom school and construction began the next day. The design and construction was supervised by the diocese because Bishop Russell J. McVinney, the Bishop of the diocese at the time, wanted to build a "state of the art school" that would become a model for all parish schools and a reminder to those in the public sector of how far Catholics had

come in providing the very best in education, both secular and religious. This explains why it was built with so many "bells and whistles" like a full sized gymnasium, shower rooms and three cafeterias. The new school opened its doors in September, 1956. That same year St. Brendan Parish was divided once more to form a new parish. St. Martha Parish was established in the Kent Heights section of town and many families living in the northern part of the parish would now attend Mass there.

## FIRE DESTROYS THE CHURCH

July of the following year was disastrous for the parish. Fire would destroy the roof of the church and the following day any of the non-damaged furnishings, altars and statues were transferred to the school gymnasium which was to become the parish church for the next 11 years. The fire broke out just after midnight on July 10, 1957. Fr. Frederick Rogers, the Assistant Pastor smelled smoke. Quickly, he realized that the church was on fire. He called in the alarm and then rushed into the burning church to remove the Blessed Sacrament.

Unfortunately, that was all he could do to save what was left of the church. Firefighters from the East Providence Fire Department battled the fire for two long hours, but their efforts were unsuccessful. In fighting the fire, one firefighter tripped and broke his ankle and another, Lt. Robert McPherson, who lived just down the street from the church, went into the church basement to see if there were any people trapped there and became trapped himself. At the age of 51, Lt. McPherson lost his life trying to save St. Brendan Church. On July 10, 2007, the 50th Anniversary of that tragic day, a memorial was placed in the present church to honor his service to our parish.

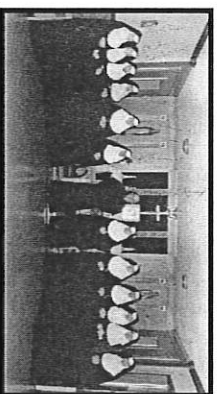


At the time of the 50th Anniversary of the parish in 1959 the parish was celebrating Mass in the School, using both the gymnasium and the large assembly room below the

gym. On the 3rd of March, 1959, Fr. Tierney was replaced as pastor by Rev. Msgr. John J. Kenney. His time as pastor could be characterized as a time of growth, re-building and new construction. At the time the parish embarked on an ambitious building campaign while at the same time, new homes were being constructed in the parish by the hundreds. First a new convent was built, then in 1965 plans were announced to build a new rectory and church which would be large enough to seat over 900 people while the new rectory was completed in 1968. The Church was opened in 1969 and dedicated in December of that year by Bishop McVinney.

Built at a cost of \$630,000, the new Church was built in the shape of a sea shell, according to the architect, Edward P. Denning. At the time off his death in 2006, his children confided that Mr. Denning had always wanted to design and build a cathedral. Never given that opportunity, he considered St. Brendan Church to be his "cathedral". The sanctuary wall behind the main altar consists of 10 limestone piers supporting the steel beams of the roof and 12 lancets of Dalles glass, imported from Belgium

and France represent the 12 disciples. The design depicts Christ the Savior in whites and grays, with five wounds shown as red spots. There is a halo of blues and greens, representing the fullness of God, according to the artist who designed them. The window at the entrance of the church, also of Dalles glass shows St. Mary, Star of the Sea.



## RECENT TIMES

In 1972 Msgr. Kenney retired from administration and was replaced by Rev. James J. Cassidy, who had been a religion teacher at LaSalle Academy for many years. The expenses incurred by 10 years of construction made for a large parish debt. The Diocese of Providence came to the aid of the parish and loaned the parish \$425,000 so that interest payments to the bank would be lowered. Fr. Cassidy's years at St. Brendan were very challenging indeed. Not only

did he have to deal with an enormous debt, but changes were also coming to Catholic Education.

St. Brendan School hired its first lay teacher back in the 1950's, Mrs. Emma Haskins, who remained on the faculty for 15 years and never drew a salary. Her daughter was to become a Sister of Mercy now known as Sr. Josepha Haskins, and she is one of the many religious vocations nurtured by the parish.

The 1970's, however, saw a large decrease in the number of Religious in our schools and so the parish began to replace them with a growing number of lay teachers. Because of rising costs for salaries and benefits, the parish had to begin charging tuition for students while continuing to support the school operation with a large subsidy. Fr. Cassidy labored for many years to balance the needs of the parish with the growing expense of the school, while also trying to pay off a large debt. To his credit, Fr. Cassidy, with wise council from parish trustees and parishioners was able to make a significant reduction to the debt, leaving the parish in good financial condition before having to face many future challenges.



The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's brought many changes to the way a parish celebrates liturgy and a new emphasis was placed on the importance of Religious Education. The parish was able to face up to the challenge of building a new church which was well designed for the liturgical changes in the way Mass was to be celebrated, but the changes brought about in Catholic Education were no less daunting. A decline in the number of children attending Catholic Schools and fewer religious sisters to teach religion brought about a new Religious Education Program in the parish run largely by lay people. Although in the 1970's the sisters continued to lead the program it was eventually taken over completely by the laity. By the 1980's it meant that in addition to a lay principal in the school, there would also be a lay director of Religious Education. For the first time the parish had a salaried position for a person to direct the instruction of a growing number of children from public schools who by that time outnumbered Catholic School children.

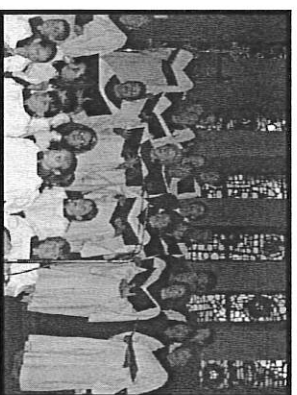
At this time more and more parishioners were called upon to become involved in new

ways. Many chose to serve the parish as Lectors and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist at weekly Mass. However, nowhere was this increase in lay involvement more evident than in the parish choir. In the mid 1970's a young parishioner named Ron Procopio created a Parish Choir out of volunteers. The number of choir members continued to grow until his departure in the early 1990's at which time there were more than 40 choir members and a Junior Choir as well. In 1981 the senior choir was chosen as the Outstanding Church Choir in New England by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. This legacy of good music has continued to the present day.

Fr. Cassidy retired from administration and became Pastor Emeritus of St. Brendan and Rev. Roger M. Fortin was named to be the new pastor in 1990. Fr. Fortin continued the work of reducing the parish debt. He found it necessary to sell the former Convent on Turner Avenue in order to pay for badly needed repairs to the church and the school. He helped strengthen the Religious Education Program which had expanded to accommodate over 600 children. The Parish

CYO and Athletic Basketball programs there thriving thanks in large part to a number of dedicated coaches and a great friend to all the kids of the parish whose name was Al Santie.

In January of 1996 Fr. Fortin, who had experienced difficulties with his health, asked Bishop Gelineau to give him a new and less stressful assignment. The bishop then named the pastor of St. Mary Church in Pawtucket, Rev. John E. Unsworth, to replace him. Fr. Unsworth who was the first native of East Providence to become pastor, came to the parish at a time of transition and change.



In the year 2000 the parish embarked on a campaign to raise \$800,000 for needed repairs. Because of the success of this campaign the parish was able to purchase two houses on

Dorr Avenue and provide for the parish a new parking lot, to allow for badly needed parking. The heating system of the church was also replaced and, for the first time since it was built, the church now would have air conditioning. During these years many remember the social events. The Parish Bingo on Thursday nights, the Fish & Chip Dinners on Fridays in Lent and the School Reunion, Bazaars and Parish Auctions.

The school had experienced many problems with enrolment in the 1990's and many changes had to be made in order to prepare the school for academic accreditation. It was now required that all Catholic Schools receive full accreditation with the New England Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges (NEASC). After successfully completing the accreditation requirements the school began to grow and reached it's peak enrolment of 235 in 2005. Then the financial crisis which began in 2006 began to erode the enrolment. More families were leaving the school or choosing other schools. For 11 years the school was led by principal Joseph Renzulli, who guided the school with great care and ability. However, the declining

enrolment, new state fire code requirements and rising costs forced the school to close its doors for the last time in June of 2009.

## CONCLUSION

No history of St. Brendan Parish can ever be complete. Each member of the parish has his or her own memories and cherishes the significant moments when the parish had a great impact on their lives. There are many stories and people whose names are not mentioned in this brief history, but they are just as much a part of the history of the parish as the facts and figures presented here. Most of all, our long Parish History has also be a Journey of faithful service to the Lord. We exist as a parish to be God's family in this particular place and at this particular time. We are called to live the Gospel message, to celebrate the Sacraments with faith and love so that together we can grow in holiness and grace. We are called to serve God and one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, who has always been the center of our Parish life.

Today as we celebrate our 100 years as a parish, we should be looking forward as much as we

reflect on the past. Our Parish is entering a period of great change. For most of our history the parish school had been at the center of our activity. Now with its closing we will have to find new and exciting ways to continue the tradition of Catholic Education in our parish. The end of the life of the school is also the beginning of new ministries for the parish which are yet to be discovered and developed. Today we are blessed with a number of dedicated parishioners, staff and clergy. We face the future with great hope and confidence because it is God's work we do here. May those who come after us find the history we leave behind an inspiration so that they will continue the great work of our parish. When all is said and done we will always be a *Community of Faith and Service*.

### Parish Staff:

Very Rev. John E. Unsworth, *Pastor*  
Rev. Przemyslaw Lepak, *Associate*  
Ms. Marie Lamb, *Office manager*  
Mrs. Tamara Primmer, *Pastoral Assistant for Religious Education*  
Mr. Thadious Platt, *Director of Pastoral Music*

Parish Trustees: Hon. Joseph R. Weisberger  
Mr. Warren Lewis

### PRIESTS WHO HAVE SERVED THE PARISH:

#### Pastors -

Rev. Joseph Hughes  
Rev. John A. Toohey  
Rev. John X. Murphy  
Rev. Francis J. McCabe  
Rev. William Tierney  
Rev. Msgr. John J. Kenny  
Rev. James J. Cassidy  
Rev. Roger M. Fortin  
Rev. John E. Unsworth

#### Parochial Vicars (Associates) -

Rev. Leo McVay	Rev. Timothy L. Gillen
Rev. Daniel J. O'Connell	Rev. William M. Gallagher
Rev. Peter Croghan	Rev. William F. Harrington
Rev. Joseph Degnan	Rev. William R. Macera
Rev. John J. Feeney	Rev. John A. Daley
Rev. Thomas Monahan	Rev. Alfred E. Irving
Rev. John G. Murphy	Rev. Lawrence E. Toole
Rev. John C. Canole	Rev. John W. Hunt
Rev. Leo P. McKenna	Rev. James V. Farley
Rev. Richard Prime	Rev. Sean Maher
Rev. John J. Callahan	Rev. John E. Abreu
Rev. John T. Carty	Rev. Msgr. John J. Darcy
Rev. Charles F. Dolan	Rev. Daniel F. Moriarty
Rev. William O'Connell	Rev. Joseph A. Pescatello
Rev. Oscar Ferland	Rev. Roland L. Simoneau
Rev. Frederick J. Rogers	Rev. Marcel L. Tailon
Rev. Austin J. Smith	Rev. Robert L. Bailey
Rev. Vincent Ferri	Rev. Michael A. Kelley
Rev. John J. Farrell	Rev. Jared J. Costanza
Rev. Przemyslaw Lepak	Rev. Timothy D. Reilly





Book donated in memory of  
Rev. Msgr. John J. Kenny  
&  
Rev. James J. Cassidy