



★ The Episcopal Diocese of Texas

For Immediate Release

Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Houston: A Church with Experiences that Wholly Reflect its Name God was, and remains, with Emmanuel.

[May 7, 2020] Houston, Texas – Emmanuel means God is with us. This is a story of faithfulness through challenges and disappointments, outweighed only by perseverance and cohesiveness. Nearly rivaling any tragedy, it concludes with a joyful outcome. The Rev. Canon Joann Saylor reflects, *“Rather than being destroyed by the loss of their church at the same time a number of members lost their homes, Emmanuel saw opportunity to discern what God was calling them to do in a new season. They developed partnerships, becoming stronger through relationships, and committed to staying together.”*

Emmanuel Episcopal Church flooded during the heavy rains brought on by Hurricane Harvey in August of 2017. The church flooded after the second round of flooding that came about after it became necessary to release the waters from a local reservoir. This, only 18 months after new Rector, the Rev. Andy Parker, came onboard to lead the parish.

For some, however, this was a nightmare, already experienced. You see, some members of Emmanuel had relocated to Houston from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina destroyed most of that city in 2005. Although 12 years later, for those, the sting of Hurricane Katrina returned with a vengeance—thanks to Harvey’s flooding.

As a result of this flood, and the devastation and destruction it brought upon the church’s structure, it became necessary for the congregation to seek out another place to worship. They landed at Temple Sinai, a Houston-area synagogue that was closer to their church’s neighborhood, allowed for a Sunday worship schedule, and a leader whose compassionate spirit allowed for flexibility. What began as a beautiful collaboration proved to serve as the foundation for a long lasting and meaningful relationship.

In January of 2018, Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop and Primate Michael B. Curry visited Houston and performed a prayer service on the property of Emmanuel. It had become an empty flooded structure. While still a church, it was not fit for worship, and would never be again— at least not for Emmanuel Episcopal Church.

Shortly after this hurricane named Harvey, the congregation worked on salvaging what they could and remediating their property. They also spent time with an architectural firm, considering renovations, before being approached by a developer to sell their property. But after much thought

and deliberation on behalf of the church, and guidance from the diocese, it was determined that they would no longer look backward, rather they would move forward in finding a new church home. Unfortunately, though, within a very short period of time, Parker would develop a brain tumor, fall ill, and pass away in December 2018. How much could one parish bear?

Making lemonade out of lemons, the congregation thought that the worst had come and gone. They felt fortunate to have landed at Temple Sinai, and quickly forged a great relationship, partnering in outreach work and serving together. In fact, many Emmanuel congregants attended Temple Sinai's service after the shooting at the Pittsburgh synagogue that left many elderly, devout servants and members of the Pittsburgh synagogue lifeless. So, while under totally different circumstances, both congregations grieved losses, and they were able to grieve together.

Through this stormy time of uncertainty, the Emmanuel family remained together as one, and continued their worship and outreach- as a church of hope and faith. Fortunately, the Rev. Brad Sullivan, carried on his duties as an associate throughout the losses, ensuring continuity and cohesiveness among the parishioners, along with members of the vestry.

Then, in March 2019, Ousley began his service as Priest-in-Charge at Emmanuel, upon his return to The Episcopal Diocese of Texas after a stint with the Diocese of Olympia in Washington (state). But even with this addition of stability through the appointment of Ousley, nothing could erase the long and intermittent periods of discernment that the church had experienced (or those that were yet to come). With so many losses and downward turns, certainly there were times when all they could rely on was the guidance of the Holy Spirit, pastoral care from Bishop C. Andrew Doyle, our regional bishops, and Canon Saylor, head of Mission Amplification at The Episcopal Diocese of Texas, and the deepening of their individual and collective faith. Little did they know, their future would not be without incident. Along with Ousley and other members of the diocesan Mission Amplification team, Emmanuel knew it would muddle through; besides, the church had the expertise of the past Senior Warden Phil Berrie, and past Junior Warden Alice Busch.

Eventually, relatively early in 2019, the church needed its own leased office space and, not long after, they also decided to place their flooded property in the real-estate market. They were excited, looking forward, not backward. And so, they relocated to an office space in April, that they could temporarily call their own.

Things were looking up for Emmanuel in 2019: They had a Priest-in-Charge, Sullivan; Ousley and dedicated parishioners remained steadfast in their service, clearly for the long haul; they had leased office space of their own; their flooded property was up for sale (Bishop Doyle had made it clear that the purchase of their new property would not be dependent on the sale of their flooded property); and most exciting, they had located a church to purchase: Covenant Lutheran.

What could possibly go wrong? 2019, it seemed, would be the year for Emmanuel Episcopal Church! They had been out of their church for over two and a half years. Or would it?

It would have but Tropical Storm Imelda formed and became a horrendous rainmaker in September of 2019, and some parishioners experienced their own flooding and destruction—yet again. With the determination and faith of the whole, they pushed through. Together, they leaned on their faith, and counted their blessings, which for all—had been tested time and time again.

Then, in the same month when Imelda hit, they received approval to purchase. This was something to celebrate, but they knew they were far from finished, as they still planned to sell their existing

church.

Emmanuel landed a local developer to purchase the flooded location. This was great news! Mission accomplished? Well, not quite.

After agreeing to purchase the property, and even placing it under contract for sale, the developer backed out of the deal, leaving confident selling parties more than disappointed. Prior to this letdown, everything had finally come into such perfect alignment.

Once again, the people of Emmanuel would see God's hand at work in the life of their parish and ministry as they approached their closing date to purchase their new church (formerly Covenant Lutheran).

Through creative financing methods, the empathetic spirit and understanding of both Bishop Doyle, and members of the various diocesan foundations, along with the acumen of the diocese's business team, Emmanuel Episcopal Church was able to proceed with its closing. Diocesan business staff kept everything on track, quickly working to put a plan together to help Emmanuel close on the Lutheran Church property.

Emmanuel was in a position to contribute proceeds from its Hurricane Harvey Support, funded by each of the five foundations of the diocese: Great Commission Foundation, Episcopal Health Foundation, Episcopal Foundation of Texas, Church Corporation, and the Quin Foundation. The best, however, was yet to come to fruition. The Great Commission Foundation Board approved providing Emmanuel, at a low interest rate, with a loan for the balance of the Lutheran Church purchase- that will be repaid once the Memorial Drive location sells. The Church Corporation is collaborating with the parties to help sell the old Memorial Drive property. In April, Emmanuel realized a reward of faithfulness and finalized the transaction to purchase their new church. They finally have a new place to call home. After a long faith walk, they have arrived at their destination. They call it their own.

As David Fisher, Director of Foundations for the diocese puts it, "This was truly an intra-foundation effort to allow Emmanuel to find a new home and to come up with a solution to make that happen. We are blessed to have the resources to help our congregations."

"Our new church is a wonderful blessing for us, and our predecessors were very thoughtful in its design for hospitality and mission with flexibility built into the nave and chancel. Liturgically we will be able to do some wonderfully dramatic staging in our new space," said Ousley.

While they plan to make only minor improvements to their new church home, they're not currently having virtual worship service from their new location; however, this parish is excited to establish roots and become part its new neighborhood.

"We want to be strategic about when we begin our online live services from our new church. We are in conversation now about when is best for that to happen. We want to balance the solidarity and personal touch that has been felt by broadcasting from home with the anticipatory introduction to the wonderful aspects of our new church in our new neighborhood," said Ousley.

They are working both internally, and alongside the diocese, to grow, as they gain a better sense of the needs of the community, the whole community. They look forward to establishing both long-

term relationships and partnerships within the areas they will serve.

Ousley shares he is extremely proud of Emmanuel, Houston members. Adding: “They are amazingly faithful, resilient, and caring people that have endured many challenges these past several years. My hope for them as we move into our new church and neighborhood is, they realize God’s faithfulness and their own through all of this in a way that strengthens them to embrace the blessings of the new possibilities and partnerships that God is placing before us.”

The deal is now done, and the church can finally turn the page into a new chapter. The Great Commission Foundation President Maria Boyce says, “The Great Commission Foundation is very excited to help this vibrant parish find its new home so that the wonderful people of Emmanuel can continue to spread the good words and works of our Lord. This parish will not be stopped by Hurricane Harvey, COVID 19, or anything else that will come along because its faith is so strong and enduring.”

For both the church and the diocese to be able to pivot in the midst of, not only a pandemic, but a scramble within a pandemic due to the loss of the potential buyer, speaks volumes to Emmanuel’s commitment, and that of Bishop Doyle and all of our foundations.

The story of Emmanuel, Houston, is in direct alignment with Hebrews 6:11 that says, *We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized.*

Emmanuel has been rewarded, yet the reward does not come without expectations from Bishop Doyle.

“I am very excited about the Emmanuel move,” proclaimed Bishop Doyle. “The site is perfect for our mission work in the area. We are eager to get to know our new neighbors and to see how we, as an Episcopal Church, can help join in the work- caring for and with our community,” he continued.

One thing is crystal clear, just as he is with us, God is, and remains with, Emmanuel.

During this season of an unexpected pandemic, the Episcopal Diocese of Texas is pleased to celebrate with Emmanuel. Let’s all share in this time of celebration with this parish. Thanks be to God for this good news!

Congratulations, Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Houston! Congratulations!

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