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The year was 1915. In Neenah-Menasha, the Episcopalians were up to something new. Since 1868, when Trinity Church in Neenah was formed and 1859, when St. Stephen's Church in Menasha was incorporated, the two parishes had ministered side-by-side but with fluctuating fortunes. As one would prosper, the other would languish. Gradually, it occurred to both parishes that their needs would best be met by one church.

A consolidation committee of lay representatives from Trinity and St. Stephen's began to meet in the fall of 1914. Prayerful deliberations and planning resulted in a smooth and orderly transition. Early in 1915, the committee acquired an ideal site, located at a juncture of the two communities. At the first annual meeting on Easter Day, the wardens and vestry were empowered to proceed with plans to build a new church and to adapt the existing residence for use as a parish hall and rectory. In quick succession followed the election of the first rector in July - Herbert A. Wilson of Danbury, Connecticut - the official incorporation and selection of the name St. Thomas in September and, on October 10, the laying of the cornerstone by the Right Reverend Reginald H. Weller, Third Bishop of the Diocese of Fond du Lac.

Grace and dignity were exemplified in the grey limestone exterior and the dark oak interior of the new church. Joyfully, the first service was held on January 16, 1916. less than four months later, on May 10, Bishop Weller officiated at a service of thanksgiving and dedication. Bishop Weller commented:

"During the (past) year I have had the unusual pleasure of laying the corner stone and consecrating the Church. This has been made possible by large contributions, in some cases, with real self-sacrifice, by a small but earnest band of faithful people."

The 1920's were a time of rapid growth for St. Thomas. Sunday school enrollment increased over 300% and the number of baptized parishioners more than doubled. This was a direct result of the programs initiated under the leadership of the third rector, Raymond A. Heron. Specifically, he founded a Girl Scout Troop, a Boy Scout Troop and a Junior Boys Club. The Boy Scout Troop, Troop #3, which still meets regularly at St. Thomas, received its charter in May of 1922. (This makes it the troop with the second longest continuous tenure in the Fox Valley District. An inscription on the 1922 charter indicates that Troop #3 had been Troop #11, a fact which, if substantiated, would make Troop #3 the oldest troop in the Bay Lakes Council.)

Naturally, the expanded youth activities required more room than what was available. Consequently, the parish house was enlarged to include a gymnasium and a meeting hall. In addition, ten acres of land near High Cliff State Park on the north-east shore of Lake Winnebago was donated to the church for scout and parish activities. Fr. Heron lost no time in organizing a committee to construct a cabin on the new property.

During the 1930's, a series of stained glass windows were installed as memorials in the church. The first designs, placed within the sanctuary, were made by the English firm William Powell & Sons, Ltd., known as the "White Friars". These three windows depict the First Confirmation in Samaria, the Institution of the Lord's Supper and the Ascension of our Lord. The remaining eight windows, designed in the medallion style of the 14th century and constructed by the James Powell Studios of London, illustrate seven scenes from the Gospels: the Nativity and Jesus' Youth; Jesus' Baptism and the Temptation in the Wilderness; A Selection of Jesus' Parables; A Selection of Jesus' Teachings; A Selection of Jesus' Miracles; The Crucifixion; and The Resurrection. The largest window in the series, set above the altar, portrays Christ with outstretched arms, extending His invitation, "Come Unto Me".

In 1940, St. Thomas celebrated its 25th anniversary with the realization that many individuals, through personal sacrifice, enthusiasm and devotion, had nourished the life and work of the parish in the community and the Diocese. Additionally, a sense of expectation developed, with the hope that St. Thomas would become a more effective instrument of God in a spiritually hungry world. The same is true today.

Two significant physical changes occurred in the mid-1950's and early 1960's. Expanding ministries within the congregation necessitated the replacement of the parish house-gymnasium-meeting hall complex with a larger, more flexible structure. The present Parish Hall was built in 1955. The second change, while unexpected and tragic, proved to be the stimulus for continued, meaningful growth.

During the afternoon of February 28, 1961 fire broke out in the basement of the church beneath the altar. Before it was over, the roof and supporting walls had suffered extensive structural damage, the altar, pews and interior walls were badly charred, and furnishings inside the church were water damaged. The dollar loss was great, but a heightened sense of community was gained. Even "like-warm"^{li} Episcopalians showed up to help with the clean-up and before long, plans were being made to rebuild. Just the summer before, St. Thomas had purchased the land directly to the south of the church for building expansion.

The new nave and sanctuary feature the designs of Harry Weese of Chicago, an architect whose specialty has proven to be the blending of the old with the new. In St. Thomas he found such a challenge. Describing his perceptions about the new church, he wrote, "the very nature of a church is that it is set apart from secular buildings...its basic value is symbolic and unworldly. It must... bring to bear on its congregation a sense of consecration to its higher purposes."¹¹ This was skillfully achieved with boldness and simplicity.

The new church now contains a chapel, which is the only remaining portion of the original building. The beautiful and delicate stained glass windows, miraculously saved from destruction in the fire, are displayed in the chapel and along the cloister, which runs the length of the nave. The solid concrete sanctuary wall towers 46 feet behind the open altar and a 12 foot cross hangs suspended above. At the rear of the church, the choir loft houses a custom-tailored 1800 voice organ, given in memory of vestryman Richard J. Aylward. Above all is an impressive sweeping curved slate roof. Outside, where the entrance to the old church had been, a bronze relief sculpture has been installed. The gift of a member of the community and a friend of the parish, the sculpture portrays the face of the Apostle Thomas as he responds to the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ - "My Lord and my God!"

The history of St. Thomas provides a heritage rich in courage, beauty and faithfulness. The life and work of the parish today reflects an interest in spiritual growth, in becoming what God would have us be. This is an individual as well as a corporate responsibility. Numerous opportunities for growth are available throughout the year in the areas of worship and prayer, Bible study, fellowship and service.

One example of an opportunity which encompasses each of these dimensions is the Healing Ministry. It meets weekly on Thursday mornings beginning at 10 o'clock with an hour of study, followed by an hour of sharing and informal prayer. At noon, the meeting concludes with a Healing Service in the chapel. In an atmosphere of mutual trust and caring, and in the expectant stillness of the Eucharist, many find added strength, hope and peace of mind, as well as specific direction for their lives. All are welcome to attend. Members of the Healing Ministry Team also reach out into the community by sponsoring special events such as a recent Christian Stress Management Workshop at the DeKoven Foundation in Racine.

Closely tied to the Healing Ministry is the concept of renewal. Renewal is always available through the Sacraments of the Church and by the invigorating influence of the Holy Spirit. On occasion, a lay-witness weekend such as Faith Alive, or a teaching mission like Fr. Chuck Murphy's visit last fall, stimulate the congregation to an increasing awareness of God and, hopefully, a more personal and pervading commitment to Him. During a teaching mission in 1982, the challenge was given to seek God's will for St. Thomas parish. The result was a Statement of Purpose from the Vestry: To Know Christ and To Make Him Known.

In keeping with the Statement of Purpose, the goal has become to fulfill Jesus' commandment: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) A disciple is a person dedicated to Jesus Christ who becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work by applying Scripture to his life on a daily basis because "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (II Timothy 3:16) Discipleship, then, is the process of helping Christians become more effective disciples and is, in fact, the very process Jesus authorized in the Great Commission. At St. Thomas, discipleship takes the form of Discovery classes, which explore the promises of Christ and the fundamental truths of Christianity, and Growth Groups, which provide the opportunity to grow in the areas of Bible study, prayer, fellowship and outreach.

Of course St. Thomas is more than buildings and programs. It is a group of people who enjoy being together - worshipping, praying, studying, fellowshiping, serving - and who enjoy sharing - joys and sorrows, victories and disappointments. It is a congregation of diverse talents and experiences who recognize God to be the source of their abilities and strength. It is people who maintain and exhibit a special kind of caring and nurturing, which foster faith and growth. For all of this and so much more - thanks be to God Who has established us and Who sustains us!