

Christ Church, Delaware City

When the first Chesapeake & Delaware Canal opened in 1829 and ran through Delaware City, ships could run directly from Philadelphia to Baltimore. Thinking Delaware City would flourish because of it, many people bought land, and Christ Episcopal Church was one of many new buildings. Formally organized as a parish in 1848, construction of Christ Church, began in the following year, and the first worship service was held in 1851. Parish tradition contends that the building's design was based on the Church of the Redeemer for Seamen, an ornate floating edifice in gothic revival style, which served the needs of Port of Philadelphia sailors and Delaware River seamen from 1849 to 1853.

In 1927 a new and broader canal opened and, unfortunately, the entrance to the canal was two miles south of Delaware City. Boats sailed straight past Delaware City, new building ceased, and many people left town. Christ Church lost wealthy parishioners and their money. How was the church to survive? The congregation did much of the needed work, the diocese paid for priests, and maintenance of the buildings was minimal. Today, it is still a hard-working congregation, paying for a part-time pastor, and maintaining its buildings with thanks to the Trustees' Advance & Development Funds for its loans.

Christ Church and three other community churches support a Community Food Closet, raise funds in a Spring Fling Fundraiser to send children to Camp Arrowhead, and offer ecumenical services together. Alcoholics Anonymous uses the parish hall twice a week for meetings and there are many outreach projects: caps and scarves knitted for the Seaman's Center, money raised for a water well through Episcopal Relief & Development, and support of the Sunday Breakfast Mission. Special Christmas outreach projects include collecting needed items for Victory Home, which houses 15 veterans, and paying utility bills to ensure people in need have heat, water, and electricity.

Over the years, Christ Church has had a priest and three outstanding members who did unprecedented good deeds. In 1990, the Rev. David B. Nickerson (Father Nick) became the first African American Priest serving in a predominantly white church. Dr. Hilda Davis was the first African American to hold a full-time University of Delaware contract and the first female senior warden in the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware. Dr. Davis passed away in 2001 at the age of 96. Parishioner Littleton Mitchell was president of the NAACP in Delaware from 1961 to 1991. He was the first black employee of the Governor Bacon Health Center, and when he started teaching swimming there he couldn't even get in the pool with the white children. He prodded, poked, and pushed the system and got things done, working tirelessly for equal rights. Mary Ash and her husband Charles G. Ash were very active members in the church. Charles died in 1889,

and Mary died in 1929. Mary left her estate to the diocese in the amount of \$180,000 in cash and other properties. A similar donation today would have an approximate value between 4 – 5 million dollars. This gift, which kept the diocese running during the 1929 – 1939 Great Depression, is held in the Diocesan Fund named Charles & Mary Ash Memorial Fund, and it is designated to “best promote the Gospel of Christ and extend the worship of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Delaware forever.”