

Epiphany Mission



By Dan Hardison

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The Mission of Incomparable Opportunity



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A mission of sorrows, a mission to the poor, to the sick and them that have cause for bitter tears, to them of faint hope and fainter courage and faintest ambition – yet a mission glorying in the privilege to serve. A mission of poverty, without endowment or certain income and sometime without so much as one dime, but daily affording healing for the sick, food for the hungry, sweet anodynes for them that mourn... A mission with God and God's altars and God's sacraments and His love and His mercy. Epiphany Mission, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing all things.

— The Rev. George W. Jones, 1946



Epiphany Mission as it looked in 1938.

Nestled in a scenic valley of the southern Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee in the small community of Sherwood sits Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church. Twelve miles north is Sewanee, home to the University of the South. Six miles south is the Alabama border. In between is a half-mile wide valley with the Cumberland Mountains rising to the east and west. It is here you will find Epiphany Mission.

In the late 1800's, two Episcopal missionary women came to Sherwood to provide schooling for the children. They asked the Rev. William S. Claiborne, later Archdeacon of Tennessee, to hold a service for the community. On Christmas Day, 1898, a service was held in the public school building and Epiphany Mission was born.

A wood frame church was built in 1902 and later replaced by a sandstone structure in 1928. In the early days of the Mission, services were conducted by priests from the surrounding area and by students at the University of the South Seminary in Sewanee.

In 1929, a teacher at St. Andrew's School in Sewanee took an interest in Epiphany Mission and began to serve at the mission. After being ordained, he asked the Diocese of Tennessee to allow him to serve at Epiphany Mission as a full-time priest. But the Diocese, in the early days of the Great Depression, could not supply money for the mission. The priest was allowed to go to Sherwood, unaided by the diocese, provided he could find support elsewhere. In 1932, Epiphany Mission received its first priest-in-charge, the Rev. George W. Jones.



The Epiphany Mission
Chapel and its altar, 1938.

To support the Mission and its work, Father Jones enlisted the aid of what he affectionately called “The Greater Congregation”. Composed of individuals that lived beyond the valley all across the country, The Greater Congregation were friends and benefactors to the Mission providing money and “boxes” (boxes of cloths, shoes, books, and other items that could be used by the needy as well as the church).

Also in 1932, Father Jones began publishing *The Booklet*, a report of the Mission activities and the needs of the people that it served. It was issued quarterly at Easter, mid-summer, autumn, and Christmas. *The Booklet* would also include a spiritual message and “little true stories of the Mission people and their lives.”



ABOVE: Acolytes at Epiphany Mission, 1941.

LEFT: The Roofed Crucifix in the churchyard at Epiphany Mission, c 1940s.

Life in the valley was never easy and many of those living there lived in extreme poverty. A rugged area with only a small amount of land suitable for farming, most of the families depended on income from employment at the local limestone quarry or with the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railroad that made its way through the valley.

From its humble beginning, Epiphany Mission would grow to be much more than just a place of worship. The Mission taught the religion of the Church, helped feed and clothe the needy, tended the sick, and provided useful services for the whole community.

The little stone church was known as the “Church House” by its members – an old custom in the valley that could not be broken. The children would call the church proper “The Big Church” to distinguish it from “The Little Church”, which was the Lady Chapel.

Located across the street from the Church was “The Priest's House,” a small frame house where the priest resided; and the Mission House, a building that was converted for parochial purposes and used for Sunday School classes.

St. David's Gym was a gymnasium built in 1947 to serve as a Community House for activities by all the people of Sherwood. It was popular for youth activities such as basketball and skating and was also used for the showing of movies at night. It was constructed with bricks made by Mission boys.

Flossie's was the distribution center where clothes, shoes, and household items donated to the Mission were sorted and made available to the community. Originally located in a small shop up the street from the Mission, a new building was built in 1948 and located next door to St. David's Gym. Flossie's was managed by Miss Flossie and also housed the Mission Library.

OPPOSITE PAGE: View of the garden at Epiphany Mission, c. 1940s.

RIGHT: One of several pools in the Mission Garden, c. 1940s.

BELOW LEFT: The tower in the Mission Garden, c. 1940s.

BELOW RIGHT: "Our Lady of the Hills" Chapel in the Mission Garden, c. 1940s.





LEFT: "Altar of Repose" at Epiphany Mission, 1952.

BELOW: The sanctuary at Epiphany Mission today. Suspended above the altar is an Italian carved Christus Rex donated to the church in the 1960's.





The Study for the Epiphany Mission Triptych, 1953/54, by Philip Perkins.

The study is a half-size rendering of the triptych that was installed at Epiphany Mission in 1954. The center panel depicts the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Above Christ is the image of a dove representing the Holy Spirit and the hand of God is seen reaching out to Christ. Also, John the Baptist is holding a staff made of two branches that form a cross. The Baptism of Christ was chosen because it is one of the three events that is commemorated on Epiphany.

In the final full size triptych, the right panel showed the figure of St. John the Evangelist, the apostle of love. The left panel showed the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of gardening and wild life.

In the half-size study, the figure of St. John the Evangelist, although depicted with the same image as in the final version, is shown in the left panel in place of St. Francis. St. Francis was apparently a later addition because of the Epiphany Mission Garden. The right panel appears to be a different image of St. John the Evangelist that was not used in the final version.