

A wide-angle photograph of the interior of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church during a service. The view is from the back of the sanctuary, looking down the central aisle towards the altar. The church has a high, vaulted wooden ceiling and dark wood paneling on the walls. The floor is made of large, irregular stone tiles. On the left, there are tall, narrow windows with blue stained glass. On the right, there are white banners hanging from the ceiling. The altar is at the far end, featuring a large red backdrop with a golden cross. Two people in white robes are standing at the altar. A group of people in blue robes are standing in the middle of the sanctuary, facing the altar. The congregation is seated in wooden pews, many holding white papers. A banner with the word "alleluia" and a colorful butterfly design is visible on the right side of the altar.

st. stephen's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH + SCHOOL

parish profile



PART 1: WHO WE ARE

St. Stephen's, Houston, is a progressive, inclusive, nurturing, and healing community that seeks and invites all to practice the transformational and empowering work of Jesus Christ among us and in the world. We practice radical hospitality and believe deeply that ALL ARE WELCOME !

Housed in a Norman-style stone sanctuary in Houston's Montrose area, our urban church has a quirky sense of humor that is readily apparent. Yet St. Stephen's has a clear-eyed Easter faith that willingly engages the questions of modern existence.

Our Worship

We have a simple, lightly musical Eucharist at 8:30 on Sunday morning, and a more elaborate service at 10:30. We use the current Book of Common Prayer and other resources approved by the Diocese, sometimes the New Zealand Prayer Book, or prayers from the treasure trove of ecumenical resources from Anglican, Lutheran or Catholic sources. It's vitally important to us that the Eucharist is God's table and not an Episcopal table, not a table for only some of God's children, but for all.





It's vitally important to us that the Eucharist is God's table and not an Episcopal table, not a table for only some of God's children, but for all.

Good preaching is important to us—preaching that comes from both the heart and the head, that uncovers the depths of Scripture and conveys the Gospel.

And we sing: St. Stephen's has a full choir with a paid, professional singer in each section; a bell choir for special occasions; and sometimes an informal family choir. The congregation loves to sing. We thrive on familiar hymns, but we'll try ones that aren't so familiar, or world devotional music in other languages. And we take pride in our Walker organ, which is one of the finest organs of its size in Houston.

Including Everyone

We are trailblazers: St. Stephen's has a long history of promoting women's leadership in the church and supporting full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ members. We were the first Episcopal Church in Houston to hold a gay marriage, officiated by Rev. Lisa Hunt, with a nave full of overjoyed parishioners and friends. Always we have been faithful and loyal mavericks in the Diocese, obedient to the rules of the Church, and on occasion having spirited discussions with the Bishop.

"S/he has spoken through the prophets"

We called the first female Rector in the Diocese of Texas. We still strive for gender inclusion at St. Stephen's, and that manifests itself in many ways. We hear the names of our Old Testament Mothers invoked by the priest along with the Fathers. It's also common to hear the pronoun she, both in the congregation and from the priests, as we speak of the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed.



For many years we have been a force for ministry and grace in Montrose, sometimes serving as “The Living Room of Montrose.”



Our Congregation

Our parish community is diverse in many ways, from age to professional background to neurodiversity, and includes people experiencing great personal transformation and stress, including the unhoused. We are students and educators (teachers, professors, administrators), as well as librarians, doctors, judges, psychologists and counselors, architects, developers, lawyers, engineers, musicians and authors, producers and actors, Eagle Scouts, and radio hosts. We still have a long way to go in terms of increasing our ethnic diversity, and we want to increase our cadre of families with young children.

With numerous members who are LGBTQIA+, St. Stephen's is church home to the first LGBTQ Appellate Judge in Texas, as well as the first openly transgender judge in America.

Our Location

St. Stephen's is located in Houston's Montrose neighborhood, the historical center of Houston's gay community in America's 4th largest city. We are not far from Midtown and Downtown, and very close to the Museum District as well as the University of St. Thomas and Rice University. Only a few miles away is the Texas Medical Center—the biggest medical center in the world.

For many years we have been a force for ministry and grace in Montrose, sometimes serving as “The Living Room of Montrose.” Some of our watchwords, distilled from years of experience as Church and School, are: Joyful, Queer, Affirming, Welcoming, Curious, Connected.





People come
here because
here they can
be who and
how they
truly are.

A Destination Church

Fewer than a third of our congregation lives in the Montrose. Most of our parishioners commute to St. Stephen's from other parts of the city. Some drive 45 minutes (and right past other Episcopal churches) to reach our doors. For some, this is how far they have to drive to reach a church where they feel welcome at all. For others it's more like finding a church where they can say what they really think about God, the Church, or the world — or ask hard questions about those topics. People come here because here they can be who and how they truly are.

Our School

At St. Stephen's Episcopal School, we provide a progressive, cohesive, and globally focused education for students 15 months – 8th grade. Using the methods of Montessori and the International Middle Years Curriculum (IMYC), we encourage our students to become lifelong learners and effective global citizens.

St. Stephen's Episcopal School is rooted in the values of the Episcopal faith — welcoming all people, compassion, integrity, and community service. We believe in making the world kinder and smarter by nurturing not only the academic growth of our students but also their moral and spiritual development.





DID YOU KNOW ST. STEPHEN'S HISTORY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE?

First private school in Houston to admit all students regardless of race

First Houston church to embrace and care for people with AIDS

First Episcopal church in Texas Diocese with a female Rector

First Houston church to bless same-sex couples



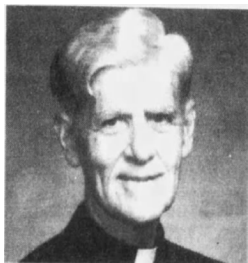
Our History

Since our founding in 1927 on dirt roads on the margins of Houston, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church has evolved with Houston and yet stayed vibrant, open, friendly — and deliberately marginal! Inspired, faithful and visionary Vicars and Rectors have led us all the whole way.

Past Rectors of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

- Charles A. Sumners (Vicar) 1928-32
- Tom Sumners 1933-39
- E. Percy Bartlam 1940-45
- John R. Bentley 1946-50
- Claxton Monroe 1950-81
- Helen Havens 1981-2004
- Lisa Hunt 2006-2024
- *The future ... whom God calls, may they respond!*





Seven Decades of Stable, Yet Provocative, Leadership

St. Stephen's has had only three rectors in the past 71 years.

Claxton Monroe, Rector for 31 years. The Reverend Claxton Monroe, a graduate of Philips Academy and MIT, moved from New York to become Rector of St. Stephen's in 1950. Under his leadership, the parish grew rapidly and started a day school in 1958. Working with his wife, Vicki Monroe, "Clax" pioneered "The Coffeehouse," a Sunday evening program attended by all kinds and conditions of people, including learned professors and university students, recovering drug users and alcoholics, hippies and sex workers. Clax was a cutting-edge speaker and leader in a troubled era. St. Stephen's expanded physically and spiritually in his 31-year tenure.

Since our founding in 1927 on dirt roads on the margins of Houston, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church has evolved with Houston and yet stayed vibrant, open, friendly — and deliberately marginal!





Helen Havens, Rector for 22 years. The Reverend Helen Havens was instrumental in opening the Episcopal Church to the ordination of women. In 1977, Helen became the first ordained woman priest in the Diocese of Texas. Four years later, she was called to serve St. Stephen's as the first woman Rector of an Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Texas. Outreach ministries during her tenure included one of the first AIDS Respite Care Teams in Houston: a daring, difficult, and vitally necessary ministry, given St. Stephen's location in Houston's gay neighborhood. Helen also created innovative worship services to wrestle with existential questions and appeal to a wider community, including skeptics and disaffected Christians who might never come to church on Sunday morning.



Lisa Hunt, Rector for 18 years. The Reverend Lisa Hunt came to us from Nashville, Tennessee, where she was Rector of a parish and also served on the school board. One of Lisa's greatest gifts to our parish was helping to grow the relationship between church and school. Her community activism made her a strong voice not just for the Episcopal Church but for the least of these in every community she was a part of: she steadfastly advocated for their inclusion in city and state politics, challenging other Texans to love their neighbor.

Lisa also guided us to great gains in capital campaigns. With her leadership, we created the first unified Master Plan for our campus. Acknowledging how we pour out many of our gifts into the community, she also encouraged us to invest in ourselves and God's work in what we have been given. We are still in the process of becoming that which she did so much to nurture.





PART 2: OUR STRENGTHS AND INITIATIVES

Ministers and Ministry Leaders

Fr. Ray Wilson is our Interim Rector.



Rev. Ashley Dellagiacoma has been Associate Rector to St. Stephen's since 2022, which includes serving as Chaplain to the School. She is rostered and ordained by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and her presence celebrates and strengthens the full communion partnership between the Episcopal Church and the ELCA. Her first call was to Mission Development as Restart Pastor for what would become +KINDRED, a dinner church and community hub in the historic gayborhood of Montrose. Now her passion for community wholeness energizes the gifts of St. Stephen's. Her ministry includes fostering a culture of curiosity and meaningful care, preaching with thoughtfulness and humor, engaging principles of community organizing, growing diverse lay leadership, and nurturing the spirituality of the young and indeed all of us.



Grace Sung serves as our Director of Music and Organist. With exceptional professional qualifications and remarkable talent, she directs the Choir, Bell Choir, and Percussion Ensemble, working with both amateur and professional musicians. In our worship services, Grace brings the Walker organ to vibrant life, enriching our actively singing community. She skillfully navigates the vast treasury of hymnody and sacred music from throughout history and around the globe. Dr. Sung holds degrees from Westminster Choir College, Yale University, and the University of Houston, along with two artistic diplomas (Konzertreife and Solistenklasse) from Germany.

The ministers of St. Stephen's are all members of the Parish. We are gifted, enthusiastic, committed in many directions, and sometimes as hard to lead as herding cats. Collectively, we are comfortable in being countercultural, bold, and unafraid in our faith.

St. Stephen's has been at the forefront of outreach to our neighbors in the Montrose and Houston communities for decades.



Formation

St. Stephen's has multifaceted, vibrant Christian education and spiritual formation.

- **Confirmation** is held on a regular basis.
- **Adult Formation on Sunday morning** is led by St. Stephen's clergy, laypeople, and invited experts. The wide-ranging topics have recently included a series on neurodiversity and a series titled *Preparing for Death, in Light of Resurrection*. Those sessions were led by Rev. Lisa Hunt, a parishioner who is highly placed in the staff of a Medical Center hospital, another parishioner who is an estate attorney, and the well-respected director of the funeral home down the street. In Lent of 2022, a series called *Race and Land: An Examination of Montrose* began with learning how the land under St. Stephen's has an original deed and covenants that were racially exclusionary.
- Over the past decade, the congregation has led several "courses" of **Our Whole Lives**—a comprehensive secular sexuality education curriculum for all ages, created by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. These materials promote health, safety, communication, consent, and bodily autonomy. Several lay leaders and staff are trained in the various age levels of the curriculum, which has been offered to congregants and wider community members.
- **Faith Lab** is a child-centered and family-oriented gathering over a meal, prayer, and play. Each gathering explores a story or theme through interactive stations including service and tools to continue exploring/practicing faith at home. This is a time where the spirit and church can be curious, messy, loud, and silly.
- In addition to midweek **Bible study**, there are **book studies** that include difficult topics such as racism..
- The **Women's Spirituality Group** had an afternoon retreat last Advent with the topic of spiritual formation. This Spring, they visited the Labyrinth at the University of St. Thomas, followed by meditation in the St. Stephen's nave.
- The **Men's Spirituality Group** shares life experiences, poetry, holy writing and story from many sources in an invitation to model and mirror to and for each other the male pilgrimage towards emotional and spiritual maturity.
- A surprising number of parishioners have undertaken **Education for Ministry - EFM**. This college level, four-year spiritual formation program



We provide a progressive, cohesive, and globally focused education for students 15 months through 8th grade.

for adults was developed in the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. The curriculum covers biblical studies, church history, and theology, in addition to the spiritual autobiography of each participant. EfM graduates are a rich resource for lay ministry at St. Stephen's. An EfM graduate leads Children's Chapel during part of the 10:30 service with a focus on the Lectionary and the Liturgy for that Sunday.

- Several parishioners are **Spiritual Directors**. One of them helped found FindD, the spiritual direction training center in the Diocese of Texas.
- We're proud that a surprising number of parishioners have gone to seminary and entered ministry in the Episcopal Church.

St. Stephen's School

In the words of the current Head of School:

Established in 1971, we are located in the diverse neighborhood of Montrose in Houston, Texas. We provide a progressive, cohesive, and globally focused education for students 15 months through 8th grade. Using Montessori principles, we encourage our students to become lifelong learners and influential global citizens. We aim to nurture each child's academic, creative, and spiritual potential. This mission is supported by a set of core values that foster individuality, service, curiosity, relationships, belief and a commitment to the future.

The work of the school community is guided by our Four Keys for Delivering the St. Stephen's Experience. These keys (in order) are:

- The safety and security of our students and staff
- Modelling "The Bulldog Way" (see below)
- Professionalism
- Efficiency

Our school mascot being the Bulldog, "The Bulldog Way" is a set of guiding principles that our community has identified as most important in helping the world grow kinder and smarter. These principles are Integrity, Grace, Respect, Optimism, and Wisdom—or as we call them IGROW.

St. Stephen's is accredited by the American Montessori Society and the Southwestern Association of Episcopal Schools.

The Rector is the President and a voting member of the School Board. The Rector is also responsible for the spiritual formation of the School community.



Outreach, Cooperation and Partners in Ministry

The Havens Center, in its own spacious building, is a multi-use space for parish activities, after-school programs, and other services to the neighborhood.. For decades St. Stephen's has been at the forefront of outreach to our neighbors in Montrose. A variety of partnerships have provided service and advocacy opportunities for St. Stephen's parishioners as well as those we serve. Our community partnerships involve diverse grassroots organizations, including both long-established and emerging groups. Many St. Stephen's parishioners on their own engage with social justice minded initiatives and communities within the Houston area.

St. Stephen's has a rich history of ecumenical and interfaith collaboration within the varied religious tapestry that is Houston. Some of these collaborations involve service, some involve worship, and some involve both.

Our educational efforts are extensive: having our Montessori school, doing public education about reproductive rights and LGBTQIA+ rights, hosting cultural festivals, and organizing restaurant outings supporting POC (people of color) owned businesses. St. Stephen's also produces a podcast, *Faith from the Margins*, which amplifies diverse voices and perspectives and reaches listeners internationally.

<https://ststephenshouston.org/faith-from-the-margins-podcast/>

Within a vibrant welter of outreach, collaboration, and education, there are official ministry partnerships with organizations in our neighborhood and Houston. We are accountable to them, as they are accountable to us. Our ministry partners include:

- **Amazing Place**, which provides fellowship, memory care and wellness for adults with mild to moderate memory loss and support to their families and the community.
- **Christian Community Service Center**, serving the poor, hungry, disabled, and otherwise needy while respecting their religious, ethnic or cultural differences.
- **Epiphany Community Health Outreach Services (ECHOS)**, which connects people in need with health, social and educational resources that can improve their lives.
- **Lord of the Streets**, a ministry to those in Houston experiencing homelessness. LOTS seeks to relieve suffering, restore dignity, and rebuild lives through ministry and relationships.
- **Montrose Grace Place**, which offers a safe, welcoming environment for vulnerable youth of all sexualities and genders who are experiencing homelessness.



Parishioners
continuously
connect with
social justice
minded
congregations
and
communities
within the
Houston area.

Parish Life

A lot of what happens at St. Stephen's doesn't occur inside the hallowed walls of our nave. Our life together overflows into activities like these:

- One Sunday morning a month, the Parish Hall is full of intergenerational activity packaging rice and beans for distribution to those in need.
- For several years, the service of Maundy Thursday has been held at St. James, Houston, with the combined choirs of these churches. St James is a dynamic and historic Black congregation that is also civically engaged and welcomes us to the table.
- We exuberantly participate in the Houston Gay Pride Parade every June.
- Around the start of school, we host a start-of-school block party and invite the entire neighborhood to join in the celebration.
- The late-autumn all-parish weekend retreat at Camp Allen resumed in 2024, after a hiatus during the Covid years.
- Last Christmas we participated in a holiday gingerbread house contest supporting LGBTQIA+ youth services in Houston.
- The Feast Day of St. Stephen is marked by the Chili-Bingo party, a lively potluck featuring chili because by December 26, everyone has had enough turkey and ham. The potluck is followed by bingo with prizes consisting of unwanted Christmas gifts, attractively wrapped. Anyone who gets BINGO! can either select a fresh gift or take one that someone else has opened (up to a limit of two steals per gift). Most years, most every participant ends up with something they actually want, though a few notorious items in questionable theological taste turn up again every year.





Like many close-in neighborhoods, Montrose has experienced significant gentrification over the past decades.

Mission Real Estate

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and School occupies approximately 86% of a city block in a prime location in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. Like many close-in neighborhoods, Montrose has experienced significant gentrification over the past decades, which presents new opportunities and challenges as St. Stephen's thinks about its buildings and grounds.

We've been on a long journey to build a new, two-story building to serve both church and school. This effort started with a Master Plan in 2016, which imagined a phased approach to transforming our campus. COVID, Inflation, and the rapid rise of interest rates slowed progress on our Phase 1 building, as the cost of construction nearly doubled between 2020-2023.

The land we steward has great value. The 2016 Master Plan considered a potential ground lease of a portion of our block to a private real estate developer. The intention was to create a mixture of market-rate and affordable housing, generating additional income for St. Stephen's while adding affordable units to the neighborhood. Toward that end, St. Stephen's began working with Trinity Wall Street's Gift of Place program. Trinity Wall Street has awarded St. Stephen's two six-figure grants to help explore potential missional real estate development on our block.

As of Spring of '24, market conditions were such that there was not a viable deal that provided enough value to St. Stephen's. Our Mission Real Estate efforts are taking a "holy pause" as we wait for new opportunities. The planning for our two-story Phase 1 building continues, and we look towards an additional capital campaign to close the monetary gap remaining for us to break ground on it.





PART 3: OUTLOOK AND NEW RECTOR PROFILE

Insights from Congregational Assessment

On the cusp of dramatic change as we begin the search for a new Rector, we undertook an assessment with the survey called Congregational Assessment Tool, or CAT. The results have much to say about who we are, and where we want to go.

We have high energy, high satisfaction, and a high degree of willingness of parishioners to stay through this transition and do more than before.

We align with a “Transformational” congregation profile. We have a strong mission and external focus that values building healthy relationships in our congregation and community. We have high energy, high satisfaction, and a high degree of willingness of parishioners to stay through this transition and do more than before.

We are a “Magi culture” seeking brighter stars than our own, with God’s help, as we journey together. A high percentage of the congregation has a graduate degree. Collectively, we have intellectual curiosity, rationality, and progressive theology.

The CAT scored us on the low end of “Spiritual vitality” at 28%. The CAT questions may presuppose an evangelical, charismatic, or at any rate traditionalist understanding of spirituality. We don’t have a chapter of Daughters of the King. We do have many parishioners for whom spirituality is autonomous, experimental, and vital.

Other CAT findings round out the picture of our congregation.

- St. Stephen’s is a commuter church, with 50% of parishioners driving a good distance to get here.
- St. Stephen’s is culturally capable of growth.
- St. Stephen’s comes close to the “modern tithe” of 5%.
- The shadow side of who we are is the temptation to try to be everything to everyone.
- Another shadow side is the danger of undervaluing emotion.

All in all, we have challenges and opportunities that call for a high level of priestly and prophetic leadership.



In a city experiencing both population growth and devastating storms, we must focus on intentional growth, which may require thoughtful pruning along the way.

An Aging Campus Complex

In addition to the sanctuary building with its nave and offices, we have a school housed in several buildings, a community center, and a large fellowship hall which also serves as gym for the school. This collection of buildings varies in age and degrees of deferred maintenance. One ongoing issue is poor climate control in the organ loft which threatens the preservation of the organ. More immediately, when Hurricane Beryl hit Houston in the summer of 2024, two large oak trees fell over, damaging the second-floor roof over the choir practice room.

Fortunately we have already raised funds to begin preparing our physical plant for the next half-century. But this is not a paint-by-numbers project.

Unevenness in Our Educational Program

We do well with deeper modes of Christian formation, including EfM. Yet we are weak in more ordinary modes of Christian education. Our Adult Forum on Sunday morning, in the hour between early and late services, can end before a topic is carefully explored. We don't have a Sunday school for children. Sunday school, in its nonthreatening ordinariness, can be an on-ramp to the parish and the church. The absence of it may mean missed opportunity for growth, especially in the area of young families.

Having Strong Yet Sustainable Growth

With the faithful, inspired leadership of Lisa Hunt and the other staff and members of St. Stephen's, we came through the Covid pandemic without a detrimental drop in membership and funding. In fact, we grew by 13%. Going forward, just maintaining what we've got is not what we intend. In a neighborhood that includes long-time residents, professionals, bohemians, academics, artists, LGBTIA+ folks, and immigrants, and in a city experiencing both population growth and devastating storms, we must focus on intentional growth, which may require thoughtful pruning along the way.

One definite avenue of growth is implicit in St. Stephen's being a commuter church with so many congregants driving long distances to get here. We could intentionally reach across those distances to countless people who yearn for a progressive, hospitable, transformational church that doesn't shy away from hard questions.



The Practice of Radical Hospitality

St. Stephen's is a progressive Christian community. We are a vibrant, open, friendly, and diverse congregation. Intentionally, we are a place of acceptance and celebration as we practice radical hospitality, welcoming people of all races, gender identities, abilities, immigration statuses, ages, and sexualities. Living into that much diversity is never easy and has occasioned some stumbles and uncertainties.

We keep trying, learning, and accepting conversion into better inclusion. We mean it when we say, *All are truly welcome here*. But we need good, expert, and Godly guidance in this.

What We Seek in a New Rector

We need a Rector for whom the mission of radical hospitality resonates and who can challenge us to live up to it. We need a leader walking with us as a parish to:

- Welcome individuals and families in every form, and provide a haven where all people are accepted and embraced.
- Care for our parish family through worship, healing, pastoral care, and fellowship.
- Manifest Anglican identity in liturgy, prayer, music, and freedom of thought.
- Be courageously committed to justice in the conviction that all people are God's children.
- Value learning and education—in school, in church, in Christian theology, and in the ideas and experiences encountered in the modern world.
- Cherish traditional, classical, and liturgical music along with enthusiastic congregational singing.
- Grow—individually and as a community—in aptitude for service and at the same time mature individually and together in spirituality and grace.
- Build for the future, developing modern structures that will be in lively use 50 years from now.

We practice radical hospitality, welcoming people of all races, gender identities, abilities, immigration statuses, ages, and sexualities.



We mean it when we say, *All are truly welcome here.*

In faith, we believe that our new Rector is already prepared for ministry here.

Recognizing God’s sense of humor, we anticipate interesting surprises on both sides. We are earnestly praying for a good preacher and creative but correct liturgist, one who has a good ear for classical sacred music or recognizes others who do.

Given all that goes on here—Church, School, community center, Mission Real Estate initiative, and more—our new Rector must be a skilled administrator and consensus-builder. At the same time, our next Rector needs to have a strong sense of strategy with regard to our position in Montrose, Houston, and Diocese of Texas.

We invite any prospective Rector to say “Amen” to our heartfelt collect for the search process:

Wise Creator, steadfast, gracious, and all-knowing, accompany us and reveal Your vision as we walk in harmony into our future, overflowing with patience and care for one another. Guide us to call a Rector who strengthens and shepherds our community in joy, service, and witness to Christ’s grace, abounding in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

