

Michael Bradley

Michael Bradley, Rector of St. George's Church in Durham, is taking a new position with St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Gross Point Woods, Michigan. His last day at St. George's is this Sunday, November 24.

Michael, his wife Becky, and their son Carter have lived in Durham for 22 years. Michael has been very active in town, including chairing Main Street Durham many years ago, and most recently leading the Historic District Commission.

He grew up in Portland, Maine and recalls a run-down city with its wharves, cobblestones and railroad tracks running down the middle of Commercial Street. Observing Portland's impressive evolution, starting in the 1970s, stimulated his interest in architecture and historic preservation.

Michael and Becky met in high school. She studied elementary education at Leslie University in Cambridge and taught first grade at Moharimet Elementary School. Their son Carter attended the Oyster River schools. He works at Pep Boys and will start work soon as a driver-operator at Pease Development Authority.

Michael studied church music and organ at the University of Southern Maine and later attended Harvard Divinity School. After a stint as chaplain at Mass General Hospital he and Becky spent four years in northwest Newfoundland where he served five small Anglican congregations.

Residents were deeply engaged in the life of the church and of the community, as was he, serving on the school board, counseling parishioners and helping them with their taxes, along with presiding over baptisms, marriages, and funerals. The novel and movie The Shipping News was set in this remote region. Michael said, "There was a beauty in the bleakness. It makes for hardy people and they were very grateful for everything that you did."

Reverend Bradley started at St. George's in 1997. He was only the second permanent rector after Reverend Albert Snow who served for 36 years. The soaring space in the sanctuary with its fine wood beams and magnificent stained glass window struck him upon his initial visit. The building, dedicated in 1954, was featured in Life Magazine and won a competition sponsored by the Church Architect's Guild. Asked to name his favorite buildings, Michael said St. John the Divine in New York City, the Boston Public Library, the Maine State Capitol by Charles Bulfinch, and, of course, St. George's which he called a "real gem."

The organ at St. George's needed to be replaced when he arrived. The church acquired an 1890 mechanical action organ from the Organ Clearing House in Enfield, NH, that had been salvaged from a catholic church in Hingham, Ma. St. George's has about 1,200 pipes, the smallest the size of a pencil and the largest about eight feet long. Michael says the system

“has a rich, 19th century sound. There is a lot of heft and a strong bass. The acoustics at St. George’s are phenomenal.”

Reverend Bradley is a highly accomplished musician (attested to by those who have heard him play St. George’s organ). His favorite pieces are Bach’s chilling Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, a popular Halloween treat, and Debussy’s Sunken Cathedral, about a church rising out of the ocean and then submerging amid the sound of bells and crashing waves.

Michael shared some amusing stories of mistaken identity. He had agreed to officiate a burial at the Durham Town Cemetery. At the appointed hour he went to the historic cemetery on Schoolhouse Lane (which is actually privately owned). It was pretty quiet and he grew concerned. He inquired in Town Hall and, after a hearty laugh, Town Clerk Linda Eckdahl pointed him to the correct venue (located past Route 4). He made it in time.

One Saturday in July at about ten minutes to ten, he was in the building dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. A gentleman came in and said, “Father, I am here for the funeral at 10:00.” After some discussion, the fellow said, “Oh, this isn’t St. Thomas? That’s good, because for a priest with a funeral you look pretty relaxed.” (Wrong church, wrong pew.)

One Saturday night, the Bradleys received a knock at their house. A young man “reeking of alcohol and cologne” said, “You must be Suzie’s dad.” Father Bradley redirected the wayward fellow to the student apartments nearby.

Reverend Bradley will deliver his first sermon at St. Michael’s on December 1. The church reaches out to help the residents in Detroit. Like Portland many years ago, that city is finally undergoing a renaissance after years of devastating disinvestment and abandonment. The historic downtown is rebounding and the goal is for this resurgence to expand to the troubled neighborhoods. Michael expects this gig to be his last full-time ministry.

Retired Episcopal Minister Reverend Celeste Hemingson will serve as interim pastor at St. George’s Church. They hope to hire a permanent replacement within a year.

Michael Bradley said that serving St. George’s has been a wonderful ministry and that Durham has been a great town to live in. He and Becky will miss it very much. We thank the Bradleys for their countless contributions to our community and wish them much success in their new adventure.