

ST PETER'S ON WILLS



REFLECTIONS ON ITS
STORY SINCE 1950

**E TE ATUA, KO KOE NEI RA
TE KAI-AWHINA MAI;
TE PA E ORA AI AHAU
I ENEI MATE NUI.**

**O GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST,
OUR HOPE FOR YEARS TO COME;
OUR SHELTER FROM THE STORMY
BLAST,
AND OUR ETERNAL HOME.**



THE PROJECT

**"SUFFICE TO SAY AT
PRESENT IT IS A
PECULIAR PARISH
MAKING BIG DEMANDS
ON PERSONAL MINISTRY,
COUNSELLING AND
GUIDANCE; PREACHING;
AND IMAGINATIVE
APPROACH TO BOTH
CITY ELEMENTS WHICH
HAVE LINKS WITH THE
PARISH AND TO THE
DOWN-TOWN ELEMENTS
WHO HAVE BEEN
ATTRACTED TO THE
'CATACOMBS'."**

**BISHOP HENRY BAINES
TO THE REV'D GODFREY
WILSON**

St Peter's on Willis is one of Wellington's oldest and enduring institutions. The site on which the church stands was purchased in the earliest years of colonial settlement, in 1844, while the parish's first church building was completed in 1848. Even the newer, present church dates back to 1879. In the intervening years, much has changed. The surrounding landscape and community have been altered beyond recognition, and social, economic, and religious changes have also profoundly influenced the shape and dynamics of church life - most notably during the second half of the twentieth century. Remarkably, even as some parishes and ventures that were established from it ceased, St Peter's has found ways to navigate change. It continues today as a key site of Anglican worship and ministry in central Wellington, based in one of the city's most recognisable and beloved heritage buildings.

Unusually, for an old church with such a significant history, no formal history of St Peter's has ever been written. The present booklet does not directly remedy that gap. It is presented as the fruit of a summer project that aimed to contribute towards such a goal, however. In 2021, St Peter's and Victoria University of Wellington joined forces to support a project: "An Oral History of St Peter's, 1950-2000". The project entailed 18 interviews with people who were connected with St Peter's, in varied capacities, during those years and in some cases also more recently. Further details of the project are included at the back of this booklet. The interviews aimed to record stories and reflections that capture something of the life and character of this historic church and its community during a dynamic period of change. The booklet highlights key themes from the interviews. It complements the interview transcripts and bibliography that were the project's key focus.

COMMUNITY



"AN INTERESTING BUNCH OF ODD PEOPLE."

BISHOP EDWARD NORMAN TO RICHARD RANDERSON

One of the central issues raised throughout the interviews concerned what makes St Peter's what it is. Does the church have a distinctive nature? Does that come from its longstanding traditions, geographical location, or historical building, or perhaps through the ways in which it has organised and mobilised itself? While such factors did arise, and were acknowledged as important characteristics, the near-universal answer from those who know the church best focused on the community. It has been the people, and their way of being together, which makes St Peter's what it is.

St Peter's was described by the interviewees as a church with a hospitable and diverse congregation. Situated at the heart of Te Aro, St Peter's outreach has evolved over time but has reflected its inner-city location. This location has always shaped the community, which has drawn from its neighbourhood, though also increasingly over time from further afield. The vibrancy and diversity of the city location drew many to attend, coming from a variety of places beyond the parish's immediate bounds. As longtime parishioner Sheila Williams put it: "You meet people at St Peter's you mightn't otherwise meet."

The perception of St Peter's as a hospitable place arose often. One of the most prominent symbols of that hospitality was the "open door", which the church sustained literally as well as figuratively, for many years. It was regarded as an important feature of the church, allowing anyone and everyone to enter the building – and be part of the church's life. The Rev'd Godfrey Wilson, who was Vicar from 1962–1978, once said: "You'll lose a few things to the odd thief or vandal, but you're making a statement with that open door, and I know something about who comes in, and why, and what it means to so many people." Interviewees spoke often about the variety of people who would wander into the church off the street, and sometimes sleep in the pews, adding to the diversity of the congregation.

"YOU MEET PEOPLE AT ST PETER'S YOU MIGHTN'T OTHERWISE MEET."

SHEILA WILLIAMS

That diversity straddled the social scale, however. It also included some celebrated New Zealanders who in various ways were inspired by St Peter's in their work.



One of St Peter's most high profile parishioners was former Archbishop and Governor-General Sir Paul Reeves. Sir Paul and his wife Beverley were frequent attenders during his term as Governor-General (1985–1990), with Beverley even teaching Sunday School. Jackie Randerson remembered the Christmas Eve service they attended. At the altar rail receiving communion, "it was Paul, and then it was Beverley, and then there was a dog, and then there was an unemployed guy ... and the dog got blessed". It is hard to think of many institutions where such a gathering might occur! Janet Brown had fond memories of the film evening where the whole parish was invited to Government House to watch a movie.

Community at St Peter's is remembered both in the singular and the plural. Various groups and networks have served as spaces of hospitality and formation. St Peter's has a strong musical tradition, for example, which has been exemplified in the church choir. Several interviewees recalled the choir community, and the sense of identity and belonging it created. Ian Jamieson spoke about "the happiness and joy and companionship which these choir members had."



A traditional highlight of the musical year at St Peter's was the Advent Festival, in which the church was lit with candles. Janet Brown recalled how one year, whilst singing in the Advent Festival, her hair caught on fire! From more recent times, the Alternative Music Group and the Jazz Service were also fondly remembered by many parishioners – for their music, but also as spaces of connection and ministry within the church, and extending out into the wider community.



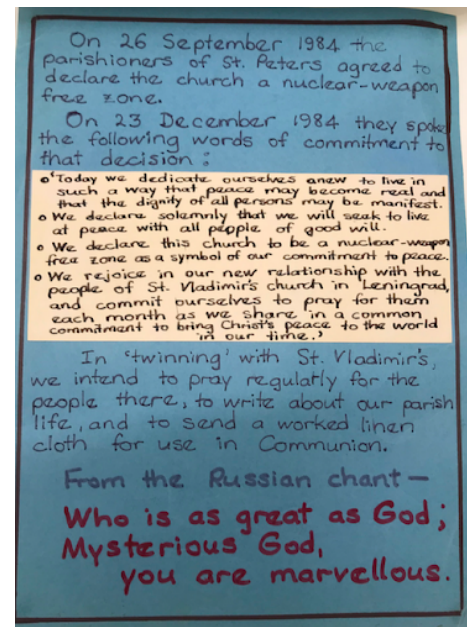
Women also commented on the church as an enabling space of community. Penny Jamieson, the first female Bishop in New Zealand, began her path to ordination while attending St Peter's. She recalled that the church inspired her, and "helped integrate a concern for society and social issues with the rudiments of faith".

SOCIAL JUSTICE

If there was one single theme that appeared more than any other during interviews, it was undoubtedly the value that St Peter's has always placed on social justice. Every person emphasised that this value has been a distinctive feature of St Peter's. A phrase, repeated in several interviews, and which captured this sense, was the "edge to the world" that interviewees considered intrinsic to St Peter's – a dimension that many said was aided by its inner-city location.

While social justice was identified as a feature of the church throughout its history, memories of the 1960s and 1970s loomed especially large. These decades were famously a period of social upheaval and rapid change – of burgeoning protest and political activism. St Peter's was at the heart of these dynamics in Wellington. The church is remembered as having been a hub for movements such as the anti-apartheid movement and the Nuclear Free New Zealand movement. Church members were actively involved in campaigns and campaign organising. But interviewees noted that justice issues were also commonly aired from the pulpit: they remembered sermons on town planning issues in Aro Valley, Hospital Board elections, naval frigates, the Dawn Raids, and more. In the words of Br Graham Wills: "The things that are happening in there now, they're reflecting what we were doing 50 years ago." Support for current programs and movements such as The Free Store and the Living Wage Movement maintain a longstanding St Peter's ethos.

The Women's Movement of the 1960s onwards also found a home at St Peter's. Stories abound of some of the debates and contestation this aroused. Some of these debates were wounding. Yet many reflected that the church uplifted women and supported their initiatives. Rachel Tipping commented that St Peter's has always been "a place where women could be strong". This includes women like Janet Brown, who founded St Peter's Pantry, which was the first food-bank established in Wellington.



St Peter's famously declared itself a "nuclear-weapons free zone" in 1984. The original declaration, pictured here, can be found in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

**"YOU KNEW YOU
MARCHED SHOULDER
TO SHOULDER WITH
THE PEOPLE YOU
WORSHIPPED WITH,
AND THAT IT WAS AN
EXTENSION OF YOUR
FAITH."**

JANET BROWN

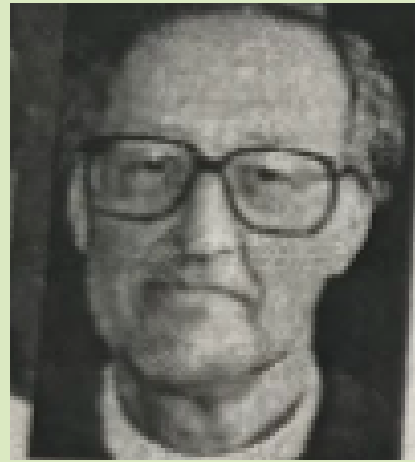
Social outreaches to the city, such as the St Peter's Pantry, are well remembered and have an honoured place in reflections on the church's social justice ethos. Many of those interviewed spoke about the Inner City Ministry (ICM), in which St Peter's played a strong formative role. In 1969, the ICM, which later became Downtown Community Ministry, then DCM, was founded by a group of Wellington churches as part of an ecumenical movement. This followed a six-month course that Godfrey Wilson undertook in the United States. ICM established many social justice and outreach programs.

Many interviewees pointed to the ICM as an example of the spirit of collaboration and community that characterises St Peter's – a spirit of collaboration that extends to religious neighbours such as St John's in the City, and a long relationship with the Jewish community at Temple Sinai.

**"A CHURCH THAT BELIEVED IN
TAKING BOTH THE BIBLE AND THE
WORLD SERIOUSLY."**

RICHARD RANDERSON

Another prominent feature of the story of St Peter's own outreach was the Catacombs, a drop-in evening coffee bar in the St Peter's hall. This sprang from a Young Anglicans coffee club founded in 1959 by the Rev'd Allan Pyatt, who was Vicar from 1958–1962. According to his successor, it became "one of the most significant things St Peter's has done in the last couple of decades". Rachel Underwood observed that the Catacombs provided many opportunities for hands-on ministry, including, as she recalls, driving people home late at night. Interviewees also remembered the Friday Forums, a series of talks given by influential people of the day such as James K. Baxter to the diverse audiences who gathered there.



**"ITS NOT A SIN TO BE LEFT-
HANDED, OR TO HAVE A DIFFERENT
COLOURED SKIN, SO WHY IS
HOMOSEXUALITY A SIN?"**

GODFREY WILSON

On 26 June 1967, Godfrey Wilson made history by broadcasting a sermon questioning the Christian Church's harsh condemnation of "homosexuality", and calling for "just laws concerning our sexual behaviour". Bob Scott, who was connected with St Peter's and led the ICM ministry from 1971–1977, wrote of the sermon: "I think it was possibly the first time such a topic had been aired on national radio ... and certainly not from a church!" Apparently the script delivered to National Radio prior to the broadcast was on a different theme, with the real script delivered just a few minutes before the broadcast aired out of concerns that the address might be cut off! In hindsight, the sermon can be seen as marking a decisive shift in St Peter's orientation towards a progressive social justice orientation. The legacy of inclusivity towards the LGBTQIA+ community continues, for example in the church's submission in 2021 in favour of the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Bill, and being recognised as one of just three Rainbow-affirming churches in Wellington.

THE BUILDING

**"WE ARE, WHEN WE
KNEEL IN THIS PLACE,
KNEELING WHERE PRAYER
HAS BEEN MEANINGFUL."**

GODFREY WILSON



The emphasis that interviewees placed on stories of community and social justice highlight that, for most, the church is much more than simply a building: at heart, St Peter's is about people. Nevertheless, those who have been part of St Peter's for many years also recognised the importance of the place. The aesthetic beauty and history of the building is attractive. Yet it is also loved for what it affords as a space for belonging and connection, as well as worship and spiritual experience. As Jackie Randerson noted, the building is evocative, and exudes a spirituality.

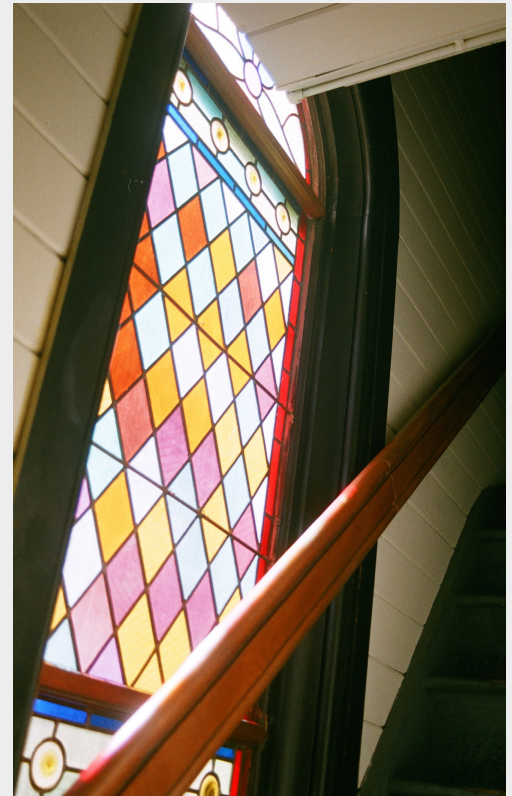
Many interviewees spoke to the ways in which St Peter's has changed, but the building itself has been a constant fixture in the evolving Te Aro landscape. The parish has adapted to changing needs and circumstances, but the building has remained a stalwart feature. Richard Norman observed that this stability could be powerfully meaningful for those within the parish as well as in the wider Wellington community.



**"IN A TIME OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC UPHEAVALS, PEOPLE ARE
LIKELY TO VALUE THIS EVER MORE HIGHLY AS A POINT OF STABILITY
IN THE MIDDLE OF CHANGE."**

RICHARD NORMAN

Stephen Jenkins spoke about many of the quirks in the church which reflect its long history. The floor between the pews has indentations in the wood back against the pew from when stilletoes were in fashion and at the front from when hobnailed boots were the in thing. When the sun comes up in summer and there is a reflection of light against the apartment windows, a beam of light comes through and it projects the image of the cross on the wall. There is also a clever ventilation system with a series of holes in the molding for inlets and at the top of the bridge for outlets. In his words, "You could shift St Peter's out of that building and put it somewhere else but it probably wouldn't be St Peter's."



"BECAUSE IT'S WOOD, IT'S SORT OF LIKE THE WOMB OF GOD."

JACKIE RANDERSON

"ST PETER'S HAS ALWAYS BEEN A HOUSE OF HOPE, I THINK THAT'S A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF ITS ETHOS, OF ITS SPIRITUALITY, OF ITS THEOLOGY, BUT I FIRMLY BELIEVE TOO IT'S A HOUSE OF LOVE."
BR GRAHAM WILLS

The bells are another distinctive feature. Nearly 150 years old, they are tuned to an old scale. Placing them in the tower without the aid of modern cranes was an extraordinary undertaking, with the biggest bell weighing fully 780 kilograms. Ringing the bells rocks the bell tower; it turns out the tower's rocking frequency is the same as that of the 2016 Kaikōura earthquake, which meant that the bells rang of their own accord during the quake.

Br Graham Wills recalls that when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, people in the surrounding area complained that the bells had gone silent. He commented that this demonstrates the place that St Peter's has in the hearts of its surrounding community. As the building approaches its sesquicentennial, ongoing challenges of maintenance and renovation lie ahead. Amidst those challenges there are palpable hopes that the building, and the people who make St Peter's a church, will remain deep and long in the community's heart.

ST PETER'S CHURCH ON WILLIS ST

**A CHURCH OF AND FOR TE ARO,
SUPPORTING THE CITY OF
WELLINGTON**



St Peter's Church has a long tradition as a church with a real sense of social justice and of being a church for the community in the heart of Wellington city. It is a church very aware of its history and the stories it can tell – and they are plenty! Stories of people and events, of forums and music, of gatherings that influence far beyond the heritage architecture and reach out into the minds and hearts of the city and its leaders and people.

In 2022 St Peters stands proudly on the corner of Willis and Ghuznee Streets and provides a haven and support for an amazing diversity of people who call our city 'home'. This year we are beginning a five year plan to develop St Peter's Church, to restore and care both for the actual building with its bells and organ and beautiful architecture and to also ensure that the amazing humanitarian contribution of this church community continues as part of the reality of living in Wellington now. The uncertainty of the past two years of the Covid pandemic have really heightened the incredible breadth of involvement this church has and how important it is to save, to treasure and to keep St Peter's open for the city.

This booklet is a snapshot of a period of St Peter's history. The stories gathered are precious and a new part of a living heritage that every pew, beam and person of St Peter's has contributed to. As we go forward to new times and with new communities making their homes here it is special to have stories told of our past and reminders of what makes St Peter's unique. Thank you to Caitlin, to all those who enabled this research to happen and to those whose lives are a part of these memories.

Deirdre Tarrant – Vicar's Warden

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Caitlin Walker, February 2022

INTERVIEWS:

Pat Booth | Hugh Bowron | Janet Brown | Dianne Halliday | Ian Jamieson | Penny Jamieson
Stephen Jenkins | Richard Norman | Jackie Randerson | Richard Randerson | Sarah Rutherford
Ross Tanner | David Tannock | Simon and Rachel Tipping | Rachel Underwood | Sheila Williams
Graham Wills

PHOTO CREDITS:

Unless otherwise stated, all photos are drawn from the St Peter's on Willis website |
<https://www.stpeteronwillis.org.nz/>
Interior photos: Samantha Glanfield
Advent festival: Rachel Underwood
St Peter's community, and Godfrey Wilson: Sarah Rutherford
Front cover: Wellington City Heritage webpage | <https://www.wellingtoncityheritage.org.nz/>
Sir Paul Reeves: Governor General webpage | <https://gg.govt.nz>
Penny Jamieson: Diocese of Dunedin webpage | <https://www.calledsouth.org.nz/bishops-of-dunedin/>
Church bells: Spectrum (RNZ), 1 June 2014, webpage |
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/spectrum/20140601>
Anti-nuclear declaration: Alexander Turnbull Library
Back cover: 1/2-003790-F, Alexander Turnbull Library

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THE FIRST ST PETER'S CHURCH, 1848-1878

ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY