



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Trinitarian Life – *E Pluribus Unum***

**By The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen**

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When a congregation is formed, one of the things that they do is to decide what to call themselves. Names are important. They say something about how the congregation wants to be known. For instance, if a church is named after St. Paul, that congregation might have chosen that because they want to be a part of spreading the idea of God's love and welcome in the world. They might be a church that lifts up Paul's vision of radical equality.

A church that treasures scripture and literacy might name themselves St. Columba's, after the great Celtic saint of the 6th century. A church called Nativity would know itself as a congregation of humility and good tidings. St. Stephen's, named for the first martyr, would be a place of unshakable faith and self-sacrifice. And how does a congregation live up to being called Christ's Church; that one comes with a lot of pressure.

And then there are the congregations named Trinity. I have scoured the History of our Trinity to glean some understanding of why the name was chosen. Alas, all we know is that in 1818, the name Trinity first appears in the church records after the congregation was officially sanctioned and consecrated under the Bishop of the United States, Samuel Seabury. We can only wonder at the conversations that led to the decision to call this place Trinity.

We have no idea what it was about the Trinity that appealed to the early Episcopalians in Branford. Perhaps it was the idea of representing an elegant mystery, but I doubt it. Perhaps it was an appreciation for higher math, in which three equal one? Interestingly, the age of Reason, the Enlightenment that birthed our nation was not friendly to the idea and doctrine of the Trinity. There was a strong thread of Deism that wove through the minds and experience of the founders. Even the Episcopalians were influenced by this idea. Deism, as defined by that venerable reference tool, Wikipedia – is a religious philosophy which holds that reason and observation of the natural world, without the need for organized religion, can determine that the universe is the product of an intelligent creator. But this is the “clock maker God”, who makes the clock and then has nothing more to do with it. The Deist's God never intervenes in human affairs. They typically rejected supernatural events such as prophecy and miracles. Deists refuted or simply ignored the Trinity as an inherited theological oddity. God was not expected to be interested in us personally, but was merely a mechanistic force keeping planets in their courses. The mystery of God was overshadowed by the fascination of how things work.

So, apparently, the Episcopalians in Branford in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were counter-cultural, rebels bucking the prevailing winds of rationalism. For some reason, they stood up for the mystery of the Trinity and said this is how we want to be known.

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As a doctrine, the Trinity has been consigned to the sidelines for quite a while. But as the western world has begun to emerge from the restrictions of pure rationalism, the mystery has been allowed to re-enter the hearts and minds of people. We are less concerned with specific, verifiable truths and more interested in truth with a capital T, which is often expressed in story, myth and mystery. The Trinity is making a comeback.

In 1998, David Cunningham published a book entitled *These Three Are One; The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*. It's only a catchy title if you are a theology geek, so of course, I bought it immediately. It was described as the best thing to be written on the Trinity in a very long time. The premise is stated in the introduction, "Doctrines are not formulated as an end in themselves; they draw their meaning from, and are ultimately intended to have some effect on, the practices of the believing community." In other words, if we believe in the Trinity, it should show somehow in what we say and how we live. He also says, "The way we understand God affects the way we understand our relation to God and our relations to one another; thus, the ... doctrine of the Trinity has concrete ethical implications...(it is) a challenge to the modern cult of the individual; it teaches us think in terms of webs of mutuality and participation."

Cunningham's academic sounding descriptions are now being echoed in many places that call for an understanding of the Trinity as something to be practiced, not merely pondered. The communal aspect of the Triune God is a model for us to replicate. It is "the perfect model of loving community - becoming vulnerable, entering into partnership, sharing the divine life..." (C Leonard Allen, *Trinitarian Theology and Spiritual Life*, [www.wineskins.org](http://www.wineskins.org))

We as a congregation named Trinity have inherited the work of embodying divine relationships in the world. Our work is to heal where we can the places of brokenness and imbalance. Because all things happen within God, these places of inequality and lost equilibrium must feel like some sort of great ache or pain to God. I know that I don't want to be responsible for such a thing.

I came across an extraordinary example of what it looks like when people live like the Trinity. Malcolm Gladwell, author of the *The Tipping Point*, has a newer book called *Outliers; The Story of Success*. He opens with the story of a small town in Pennsylvania named Roseto, after the town in Italy from which everyone emigrated in the late 19th century. The town became a self-sufficient somewhat isolated completely Italian village, in the slate-mining region of Pennsylvania. What made this town notable was that in the 1950 while American's were regularly dropping dead of heart disease, there was none in Roseto. Teams of researchers descended upon the town and tested everything they could test. They interviewed everyone. They looked at the diet, but instead of the healthy olive oil based practices of their forebears, these Italian Americans were cooking with lard, lots of it. They smoked heavily and were not into fitness. They should not have been any healthier than other Americans but they were. The death rates for all diseases were 35% below national averages. When people died, it was usually of old age. So what made the difference?

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It turned out that it was the way they lived together. They lived in multi-generation homes in which grandparents commanded great respect. They stopped and chatted with each other on the street, they cooked for each other. In a town of 2000 people there were 22 civic organizations. They worshipped together. The bonds of their relationships insulated them from disease and depression, from poverty and loneliness. In short, the relationships in the town of Roseto were Trinitarian, forged out of love, respect and an atmosphere care. There was no need for them to raise funds for Basic Needs, no need for a Roseto Cares campaign.

Now think about American culture and ask yourself whether or not we are harming ourselves by the insulated, individualism of our time and place. And now ask yourself whether or not there is anything that we can do about it? I think there is. All we need to do is to own our name. We are Trinity, let us be an example to our town of the benefits of higher math, *e pluribus unum* – out of many, one. Holy, holy, holy.

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