

New rector of St. George's Church drawn to history of region

Native of England finds much to like in Schenectady and his new parish

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

The Rev. Paul Frederick Blanch loves history, so when he first saw St. George's Episcopal Church in the Stockade neighborhood of Schenectady, he was duly impressed.

Not awed, mind you, but impressed.

"I've always been keen on church architecture and historic buildings, so I really do appreciate what's here at St. George's, and you can't help but be impressed by the specific local history here as well as the entire Mohawk Valley," said Blanch, who became rector at St. George's in December.

"But I've been at parishes on the very beautiful west coast of

Focus on Faith

England, where one of the church buildings was 1,000 years old. At Ufford, the church had one of the most famous font covers in the world. Thousands of tourists came to see it each year."

Blanch, 56, was born in the village of Durham in northeast England and quickly realized he would be devoting his life to religion.

"Every Tuesday, the rector would come to school and celebrate Mass and we'd have music, the vestments, incense," he said. "It was a very elaborate affair and it touched me greatly, apart from what I saw in church on Sunday morning. Even at about 7 or 8, I felt and knew that I wanted to be a priest."

His father, grandfather and great-grandfather all served as church wardens and sang in the choir in the small community where they grew up, and Blanch would take his family's spiritual devotion a step further. But, it wasn't easy.

"My father had the family business and I was the only son, so there was a lot of pressure on me to take over," he said. "We were butchers. I did it for a while, but I hated it. Fortunately the church won. I got the opportunity to work at a church, got some further training, and then I went to seminary. I never wavered, but it did take me a while to get ordained."

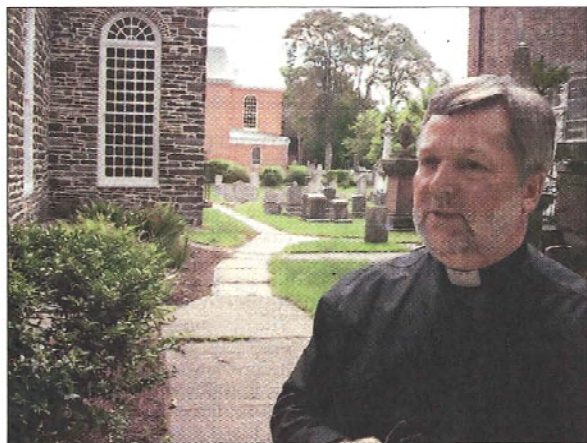
By the time he was done with his seminary work at Chichester Theological College in West Sussex, England, Blanch was 30. He

also went to Durham University and earned a degree in theology, and then went to work as an assistant rector at St. Philip's Church in Derby, in the English Midlands. He landed his first senior position at a church in Edinburgh, Scotland, and went on to serve parishes in Ufford and Melton in Suffolk County, England, before landing in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, England.

"It was a very busy and large congregation," he said. "It was the kind of place where you had 200 baptisms a year and five or six funerals a week. I was there for four and a half years before I felt the call to come to St. George's."

Although it meant leaving his home, family and friends, Blanch

See FAITH, page E3



BILL BUELL/GAZETTE REPORTER

Paul Blanch, the new rector at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, stands outside the church building in the Stockade section of the city.

Faith: New rector willing to discuss divisive issues

Continued from page E1

and his wife, Maggie, came to the U.S. and plopped themselves down in Schenectady.

"The Episcopal Church has a clergy deployment office, what I call a heavenly dating agency, and you put your name into a computer and tell them what you'd like, and then parishes put in what they're looking for," he said.

"My name had been in the system for a while, and then one Sunday evening I looked it up and saw this place, 'Schenectady.' I couldn't pronounce it, and I had only seen it once or twice because I would look at maps while we flew from Canada to New York and I could see our path went right over Schenectady."

The Rev. William Andrews was the first rector at St. George's back in 1771, just a few years after William Johnson, a hero of the French and Indian War, put up a large sum of money to help build the church. Blanch is the 18th rector in St. George's long history, filling a void created back in 2007 when the Rev. William David McSwain left.

FAMILY HISTORIES

"We had done some exchanges with parishes in the U.S., so we had come here a few times and had some friends here," said Blanch.

"It was quite a move, but in the six or seven months we've been here we've felt great about it. The congregation is wonderful, and I think they're happy with me. The fact I'm English is a plus. There are some members here who can trace their family history back to England, and to those the history of this church is very important. I think they like to hear my British accent."

The Episcopal Church in America severed its ties with Great Britain and the Church of England during the American Revolution, but it remains a constituent of the Anglican Worldwide Community. While there are issues driving a wedge between some members of the Episcopal community, such as homosexuality, Blanch feels that church members will just have to agree to disagree.

"As a Christian, there are always going to be tough issues to face, and I'm not the kind of person that runs away from them," he said. "I think my 25 years in the ministry, some of that as a prison chaplain, has taught me to be pragmatic. I am very open to where God is leading us, and at the same time I try to be faithful to the scriptures and the tradition of the church."

AREAS OF CONFLICT

"But, it's also been my understanding that God is still revealing himself to us and his truth, and therefore I have to be open to where that might lead me. Sometimes that takes me into areas of conflict with Diocesan policy in Albany, but I want to err on the side of caution, on the side of love and respect, rather than be too judgmental about matters."

Blanch was sympathetic to the story of Gene Robinson, who in 1993 became the first openly gay priest in the Episcopal Church.

"The [Diocese] tends to be against homosexual practice, and certainly against anyone in the clergy being a practicing homosexual," said Blanch. "When I first got here, I had to thrash this out with my bishop. He had his views and I had mine and we had to agree to differ. But there are other issues, too, and sometimes when you're facing ethical issues and moral dilemmas, it's very easy to give black and white answers. Some Christians like those black and white answers, those non-negotiable views, but I would feel very uncomfortable doing that."

Blanch and his wife are both in their second marriages and have four adult children between them. They are very much enjoying living in the Stockade — St. George's rectory is on Front Street — and when Blanch isn't busy at work, he and his wife enjoy traveling.

"We've been all over the world, but we've also done a lot of driving around this area," he said. "We've been to Cooperstown, to Lake George and several other places. It's been great fun getting to know the area."

Reach Gazette reporter Bill Buell at 395-3190 or bbuell@dailygazette.com.