

Beyond The Red Door



ST. STEPHEN'S 'STAINED' ART HISTORY

By E. Ray Walker

Religion and art have been soulmates for 30,000 years, more or less, starting with prehistoric humans scratching images on cave walls. This marriage of art and religion has evolved greatly over the 30 millennia. Art history scholars might argue it reached its high point during the Renaissance period (1300s to 1600s) with Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli et al.

However, a century or so before these universally acclaimed Italians started mixing their paints, craftsmen in France were mastering the art of stained glass. For example, the windows of pre-Renaissance Chartres Cathedral (1194-1252) are considered to be one of the best preserved and most complete set of medieval stained glass, notably celebrated for its vivid colors. Chartres' 167 windows illustrate biblical scenes and the lives of the saints.



Definitely impressive.

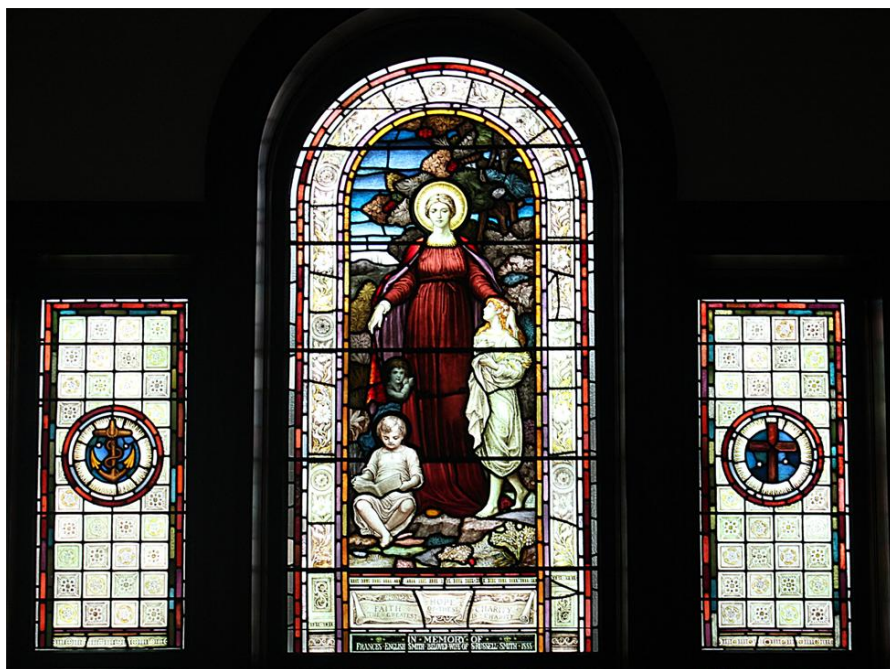
Little old St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in idyllic Culpeper can't match Chartres (this may be first time those two churches have ever been mentioned in the same sentence) or any other cathedral with global recognition, but its 14 stained-glass windows (three by Tiffany Studios in New York!) are worthy of public appreciation, without the expense of a trip to Europe.

(Pictured left: The Oddenino frescoes competed with Christmas greenery for parishioners' attention.)

Let's take our tour of St. Stephen's beautiful windows with the Rev. Michael Gray as our guide. He says to call him "Michael," not "Rev. Gray" or "Father Michael," but simply "Michael." So we will. Locals will recall that Michael was a rector of St. Stephen's until he retired in 2012. He is now the priest-in-charge at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Rapidan. Once a priest, always a priest

Important: In 2021, St. Stephen's published a booklet called "Behind the Red Door" celebrating the church's bicentennial. In that booklet, the history of the church and its stained-glass windows are detailed. This article has borrowed from that work.

Upon entering the St. Stephen's nave (the congregation's sitting area), look straight ahead. Michael starts the tour there.



"This is **Faith, Hope and Charity**, and the reason we know that is that it says so at the bottom. 'Faith Hope and Charity, and the greatest of these is Charity.'" (1 Corinthians 13:13, KJV)

The figure on the bottom left represents Faith, holding a Bible. Hope is the person on the right, looking up. The central figure is Charity, sheltering a poor child (symbolizing what charity is about). The smaller rectangular windows on the sides are an anchor cross and a Latin cross.

Installed in 1888, this is the oldest stained-glass window in St. Stephen's.

It was presented by S. Russell Smith as a memorial to his young wife, Frances English Smith.

The Road to Emmaus

(Luke 24:13-35), to the right of Faith, Hope and Charity. The bread and wine (chalice) are powerful symbols for Christ's body and blood. Not to be overlooked, however, is the bird at the top.

There are two interpretations:

Michael says the bird is a phoenix, symbolizing the Resurrection. According to ancient tradition, the mythical bird lives for centuries, self-immolates in a spectacular burst of flames, and is reborn from its own ashes. In other words, the symbol of renewal, resilience and life after death. "It is definitely the phoenix," Michael says.

The 2021 history says it is the Pelican in Her Piety. Legend says that in times of famine the pelican tears open her breast so that her young may feed on her blood to live. Thus, it was said, the pelican brought life to her young by her death. It represents Christ's sacrificial love on the cross, where Jesus nourishes humanity with His body and blood.



Whatever, the window appears to show flames at the bird's feet. Or is that a pod of hungry pelican chicks?

Each version makes a good story. So, phoenix or pelican? Pick your preferred version and stick with it. It's still a beautiful window.

Its window memorial: A "THANK OFFERING TO THE GLORY OF GOD by Philip Winfree Fore and Catherine Minor Fore.



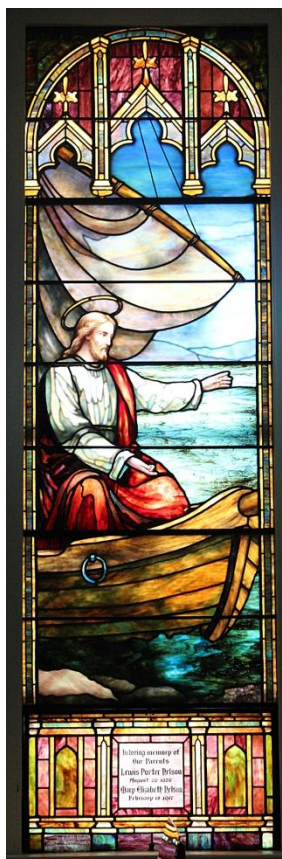
Christ in the Boat, to the left of Faith, Hope and Charity, Jesus preaching to the crowd from a boat.

Michael: "Jesus got in Peter's boat and then pushed off the shore because the crowd was so big that Jesus couldn't be heard. So they pushed him off a little bit, and he preached in parables. After that, there was the miraculous catch of fish,"

Michael adds, "Something that just occurred to me. That you have in the middle (of the three front windows) St. Paul preaching about 'faith, hope and charity, and the greatest of these is charity'; on the left you have the Word — Jesus preaching; and on the right the sacraments. That's why, I would guess, these three windows are tied together the way they are, in terms of presentation."

This window by the legendary Tiffany Studios (according to the 2021 history of St. Stephen's) spotlights the folds in Christ's red-and-white robes ("drapery glass"). On the Tiffany connection, Michael offers his opinion: "Possibly, it certainly looks that way. I just don't know if it's Tiffany or not, but it's possible. It's in that style."

Its window memorial: Dedicated "in loving memory of our parents Lewis Porter Nelson and Mary Elizabeth Nelson."



On the left side of the nave:

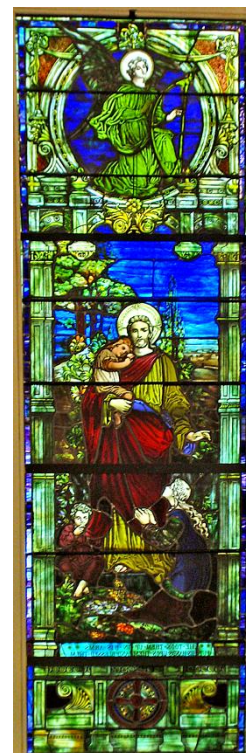
Christ and the Children. Michael: "This was a time when the apostles tried to shoo away children from Jesus because they wanted adults to hear what He had to say. But Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, don't hold them back.' (Matthew 19:14)

"It's a very tender picture."

At the bottom of the window is a verse from the Gospel of Mark, "He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them and blessed them."

The window's placement near the piano and organ may be related to an angel holding a harp in the top left corner, Michael speculates.

Erected in 1904, this window is "given to the glory of God and in loving memory of Claude and Kate Nelson Leake."





The Nativity. At the top we see an angel. “I would guess that’s Gabriel,” says Michael. “In some of the nativity plays I’ve written, Gabriel is the busiest person in the play.”

Michael points out a significant symbol in this window at the bottom: the lamb — the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, suggesting that the sacrifice of Christ starts at his birth. There are several possible meanings for the lamb.

—The symbol of Jesus Christ — “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

—The lamb also stands for John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ who prepared the way for the Lord’s coming,

—The lamb represents us, as lost sheep, needing the love and care of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Erected in 1905, this window is dedicated to the memory of Hay Taliaferro and his wife, Susan Fitzhugh Conway, and their children. It was sponsored by Peter Helm Mayo, grandson of Hay and Susan.

The Annunciation (*left*) Based on the Archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she would bear the Messiah.

“Her hands across her chest is a traditional, classical gesture of humility,” Michael says. “So my guess is that this is the point where Mary says, ‘Let it be according to your word.’” (Luke 1:28-38)

This window is in memory of Lucinda Margaret Rixey Lewis, placed by her son, James R. Lewis, and his sisters Fannie, Lula and Mattie Mars Lewis.

St. John the Divine (*right*) Another Tiffany! In Christian art, St. John is depicted with a book and a quill pen. An open (not closed) book symbolizes that God wants us to read His word and guides us in understanding its meaning.

The eagle on the right symbolizes the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the renewed life of the individual. John is frequently paired with an eagle ... “or a snake in a chalice, for some reason,” Michael notes. Honest.

This window showcases Tiffany’s handling of the way cloth folds across the human body.

This window is a memorial by the church to the Rev. James Gibbon Minnegrode, a former rector of St. Stephen’s.





On the right side of the nave:

All Saints Shall Praise Him (*left*). This is one of the original church windows. The designs combine circles (representing eternity) and quatrefoils (representing the four Gospel writers).

The inscription reads: "All His Saints Shall Praise Him: with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify thy glorious name."

Installed in 1900, this window is in memory of Thomas Seddon Alcocke and Josephine Mayo. his wife.

The Resurrection (*right*) This window represents an appearance of Jesus after the Resurrection. The red robe (symbolizing blood and sacrifice), the three crosses in the background on the left, and the rays resembling nails in his halo remind us of the recent crucifixion. Also note the nail prints in Jesus' hands.

In this window, Michael says Jesus is telling Mary Magdalene, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." (John 20-17)

Dedicated in 1905, this window is in memory of Josephine Mayo. wife of Thomas Seddon Alcocke. The window has this quote: "She being dead yet speaketh."

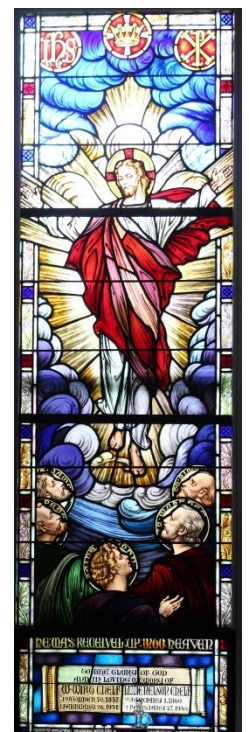
The Commission to the Disciples (*left*) Another Tiffany window!

Michael interprets this as Jesus instructing his disciples after the Resurrection, with one finger pointing heavenward and the other pointing to that other place. This suggests "that Jesus is the link between heaven and earth, the ultimate Pontifex Maximus."

The window memorial says, "Sacred to the memory of John W. Bell (1819-1896) and Maria Champe Storrow, his wife. Her life was a sacred canticle and his its antiphon. They lived with God."

The Glorified Christ (*right*) (Luke 24-51). This window shows Christ rising to heaven. He appears to be blessing his followers with uplifted hands.

Michael points out three symbols at the top, left to right:



— IHS, for the first three letters in Jesus' name in Greek.

— Greek cross and crown.

— Chi-Rho, the oldest monogram for Jesus Christ and is formed by putting the Greek letter X (chi) and P (rho) together. X and P are the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ.

Dedicated to the Glory of God and in loving memory of W. Wirt Chelf and Lizzie Nelson Chelf.



Honor All Men and Love the Brotherhood.

Two very similar windows on each side of the front door. Honor All Men has a glass lily (symbolizing the Resurrection) in its middle, and Love the Brotherhood has a glass rose of Sharon (symbolizing the birth of Jesus) in its middle.

These are two of the four original windows at St. Stephen's; the other two are in the Peterkin Parish Hall.

Stephen, Our Patron Saint. The first Christian martyr, meaning he was killed for his faith in Christ. He is a model of faith and forgiveness.

In Acts of the Apostles, he is called "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" and with the "face of an angel."

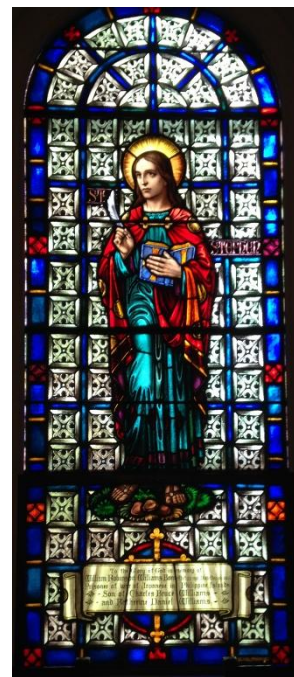
There is a similarity between Stephen's window and St. John's window. In each, the saint holds an open book and a quill pen.

Stephen's window, above the church's beloved front red door, is difficult to appreciate fully from the pews. The balcony flooring blocks views of the bottom of the stained glass. If able, climb the stairs for a fuller view. There, one can see stones at Stephen's feet, a reminder that he was stoned to death for his faith.

This window is a memorial to young Lt. William Williams, who lost his life in the Philippines while a prisoner of war of Japan during World War II. This window was given by his parents, Charles Bruce Williams and Katherine Daniel Williams.

That concludes our tour. Michael freely acknowledges not knowing everything about the history of the physical windows — when and where they were made, the names of the artists, how much they cost, etc. However, "I taught a class once in which I taught people how to read a picture, and I asked them what they thought about them. They really enjoyed it. What the window said to them as opposed to what I'm telling them."

What an enlightening tour. Thank you, Michael, for being a fantastic guide. St. Stephen's is blessed to have you nearby.



STAINED-GLASS ESSENTIALS

Everything you want to know about stained glass but were afraid to ask:

—Why do churches use stained-glass windows?

The quick answer: to beautify sacred spaces, to transform natural light into a symbol of the divine, and to serve as a visual Bible.

Historically, these windows illustrated scripture and the lives of the saints for largely illiterate congregations of the ancient past, acting as an instructional tool of the faith. Seeing is believing.

—While stained-glass windows are beautiful and relate meaningful events in Jesus' life, why not clear glass so parishioners can enjoy Mother Nature and appreciate the changing seasons? After all, nothing is more beautiful or inspiring than God's creation. Think of our sister church at Little Fork with its clear windows. Or Shrine Mont, the outdoor cathedral in Orkney Springs, Va. As Shrine Mont brags, its ceiling is heaven-high.

What works for pastoral Little Fork and rural Shrine Mont doesn't work as well in the heart of historic downtown Culpeper. For example, what would St. Stephen's parishioners see if the windows were clear glass? Answer: Weathered facades of old buildings, auto traffic on East Street, and, occasionally, a passing freight train. Hardly Mother Nature at her finest. We like our beautiful windows just as they are, thank you.

—Like everything, stained glass needs an occasional cleaning. But don't for one second think of Windex and paper towels. Heaven forbid!

Cleaning stained-glass windows requires extreme delicacy, as historic glass can scratch, and ammonia-based cleaners (Windex) will corrode metals used to hold the pieces of glass together. The safest method is to dry-dust first, spray a gentle, neutral-pH soap (Dawn dish soap) onto a microfiber cloth, wipe gently in straight lines, and buff dry immediately.

—After the 2011 earthquake, the windows were removed by experts to be refurbished and their leading replaced where it had been loosened.

—The word "Tiffany" is frequently used in descriptions of high-quality stained glass. The "Tiffany" is Louis Comfort Tiffany, an American glassmaking artist. Between 1899 and 1930, Tiffany and his team of artisans at Tiffany Studios in New York produced works of glass art admired worldwide.

St. Stephen's Tiffany windows showcase "Tiffany glass robes," a technique that makes angels and saints appear lifelike. Tiffany artisans manipulated molten opalescent glass into intricate, three-dimensional folds and ripples to mimic the weight and flow of real fabric.

HOBO PAINTER, FROM ITALY TO CULPEPER

The artist Joseph Dominick Phillip Oddenino was born in 1831 near Turin, Italy. He came to America in 1862, and eventually found his way to Culpeper County after the Civil War.

There, he became known — not always in a flattering way — as a "hobo painter" with a taste for wine.

Today, his work at Mitchells Presbyterian Church in Culpeper County is broadly acclaimed as a masterpiece of late-19th-century, folk-style *trompe l'oeil* ("deceive the eye") frescoes.



Less well known are the artist's frescoes at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Don't go looking; they are no longer there.

During the late 1880s through the early 1890s, the chancel wall (behind the altar) and the nave ceiling were adorned with three-dimensional *trompe-l'oeil* frescoes by Oddenino. During the 1920s, the wall and ceiling were covered with a new layer of smooth plaster, thus concealing the frescoes.

(pictured left: Joseph Dominick Phillip Oddenino, the hobo painter.)

After the devastating earthquake of 2011, the damaged plaster was removed, and part of the Oddenino fresco was revealed. Upon examination, it was determined that the fresco was in too poor of shape to simply expose it, and that it would be much too costly to restore. So it was removed.

Oddenino died in 1913 and is buried in the family cemetery in Aroda, Madison County.

But for one brief, shining period, we had a master artist in the house.



A section of the Oddenino mural on the chancel wall was visible after the 2011 earthquake. "Enter Into This Church With Praise" is inscribed above the window arch.