

St Paul's Episcopal Church

Wilkesboro, North Carolina

Story by Dan Hardison

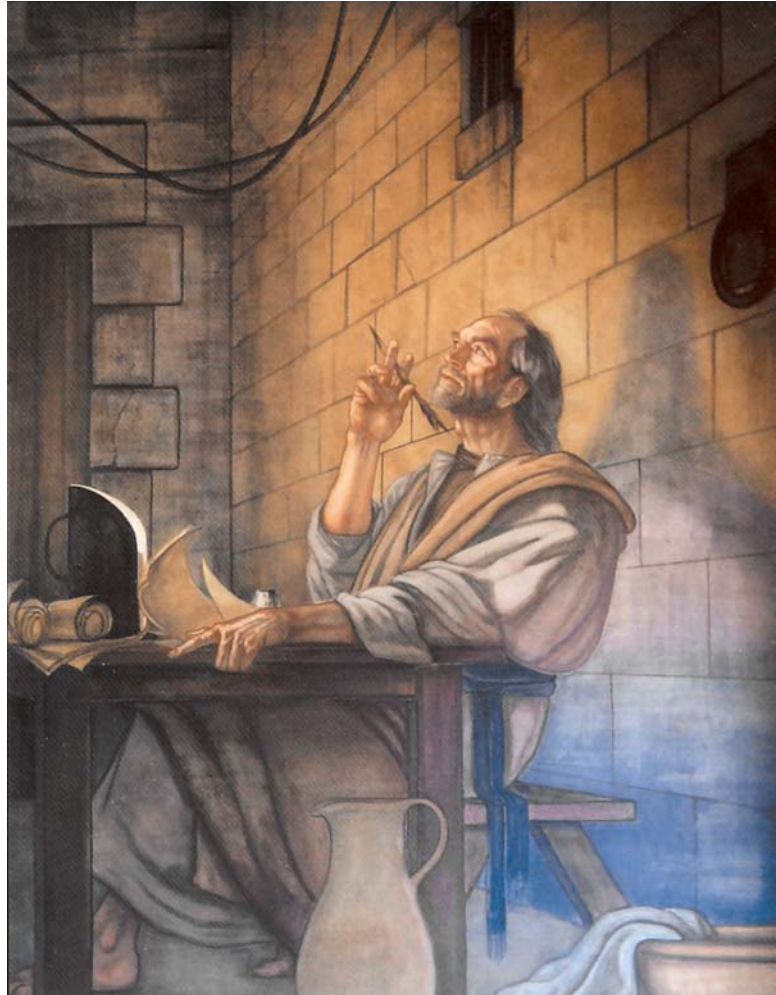
For more than one hundred and fifty years, St. Paul's Episcopal Church has found a home atop a steep hill in downtown Wilkesboro, North Carolina. Changes have come to this historic mountain church through the years, but in 2002 it embarked on a new journey that includes the visual arts when internationally known artist Ben Long painted two frescos depicting the story of St. Paul at the church.

St. Paul's Church traces its beginnings to 1836. A brick Gothic style church was constructed in 1848 and consecrated the following year. When the ceremony was held for the new church, faculty and students from the Valle Crucis Seminary walked the fifty-four miles through the Blue Ridge Mountains for the occasion. In 1928, the north wall of the church collapsed during a windstorm. The small congregation was able to repair the damage, but except for the construction of the Parish House across from the old church in 1958, little else changed until the 1990's.

A new chapel to accommodate the growing congregation was built behind the old church in 1990 and the two buildings connected with a common area. Services are still held in the old chapel for an early Sunday morning worship.

St. Paul's has followed the ancient tradition of burying the dead within the confines of the church grounds and is surrounded by a cemetery. An outdoor chapel and labyrinth has been constructed just outside the graves in the churchyard.

The Coventry Chapel at St. Paul's Church



Paul in Prison, By Ben Long, Fresco
(Photo courtesy of St Paul's Church)

was inspired the design of St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry, England. The cathedral was destroyed during World War II when a German raid devastated the city. After the war, a decision was made not to rebuild the cathedral but instead to build a new building beside the ruins. The ruins of the old cathedral are used as an entry to the new cathedral. It is in this spirit that a partial stonewall was constructed behind the altar of Coventry Chapel with three Gothic style window frames (from the construction of the new chapel at St. Paul's). The 'ruins' of the



Coventry Chapel and Labyrinth

The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle
By Ben Long, Fresco
(Photo courtesy of St Paul's Church)

Coventry Chapel serves as a reminder that “out of human sin and brokenness, God always brings hope, new life, and a new start”.

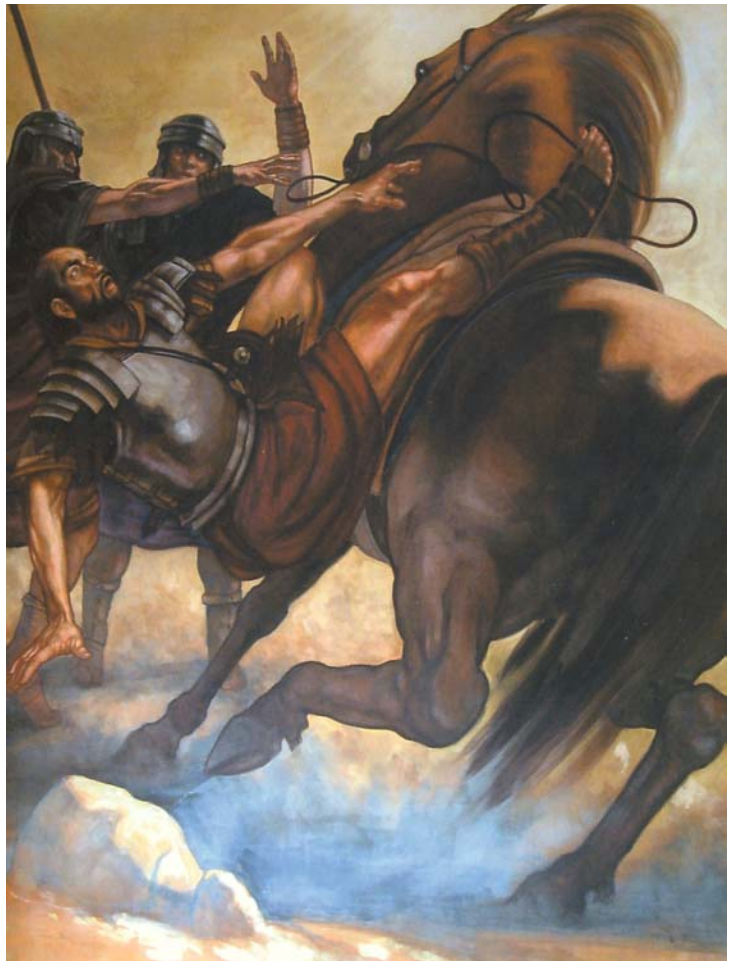
The floor of Coventry Chapel is a labyrinth constructed of intricately laid brick patterned after the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in France. The surrounding low wall offers a columbarium as a place of beauty and simplicity for cremated remains. A labyrinth is an ancient symbol used for walking meditation. The labyrinth at St. Paul’s Coventry Chapel is open to the community as a place to “quit the mind, soothe the soul, and mend the heart”.

A unique opportunity came to St. Paul’s in 2002 when the parish and the Cultural Arts Council for Wilkes County joined together to have Ben Long paint two frescos in the Commons area at the church. Ben

Long, a native of North Carolina, is internationally known for his work in the ancient art of fresco. Long works in the traditional technique used by the great Renaissance painters. The fresco is a long tedious process of applying three layers to the wall. The first layer is a base coat of plaster. Next is a finer coat of plaster to which a red outline transferred from a drawing is applied. The final layer of plaster is applied in small sections so that water-based pigments can be applied before the plaster dries. By using this process, the painting becomes part of the wall.

Long was assisted by artist Roger Nelson and ECVA artist James Daniel. The frescos were created on each side of the entrance to the old chapel from the Commons area. On the left is *The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle* based on Acts 22:6-11. On the right is *Paul in Prison* based on Philippians 1:3-8.

The Ben Long frescos may be the most conspicuous visual arts at St. Paul’s Church, but this parish has continued to embrace the visual arts. Former parishioner, fiber artist Mary Anne





White Frontal, By Mary Anne Caplinger
Appliqued and quilted silk, linen, and wool

Caplinger, created a series of altar frontals, paraments, and vestments used to celebrate the seasons of the church year. Artist and parishioner Ken Nelson created the large painting *Ascension* that hangs in the Parish House along with other works of art.

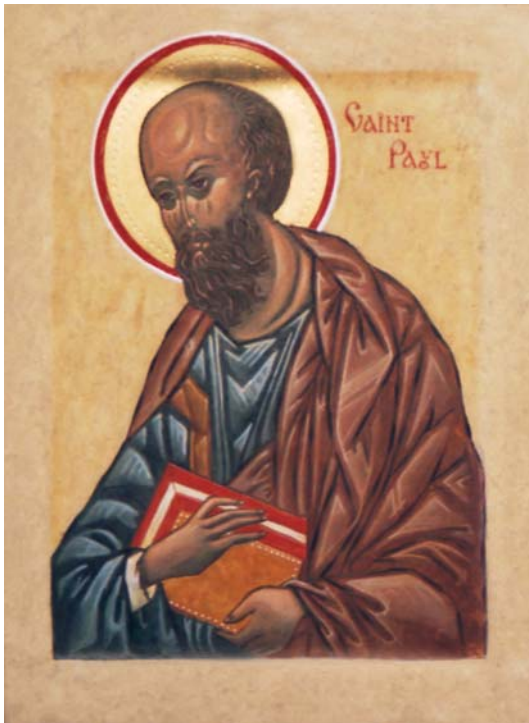
There is also the enduring *Icon of St. Paul* that hangs in the Commons area opposite the frescos. In 2003, clay artist Veryl Lynn Cox created an icon of St. Paul while taking a class in icon writing at Kanuga Conferences in Western

North Carolina. She had chosen to create a copy of a 15th Century icon written by Russian monk and saint Rublev. Completing the icon following the ancient technique of icon writing that involves meditation and prayer, Cox was so moved by the experience that she felt it should be “out in the world doing its holy work instead of resting on a shelf”. After hearing about St. Paul’s Church and its frescos, she knew a proper home for the icon had been found and offered it to St. Paul’s. When Cox visited the church for the

The Vision Within, By Tom Thielemann

Ascension, By Ken Nelson, Oil on canvas





Icon of St. Paul
By Veryl Lynn Cox, Mixed media

installation and blessing of the icon, it was discovered that the clay Eucharist vessels used during Lent at St. Paul's were also created by Cox. The vessels had not been bought directly from the artist and the connection was not made until her arrival.

Since its consecration when faculty and students made the long hard walk across the mountains to Wilkesboro, St. Paul's Episcopal Church has been on a spiritual journey to bring "God's healing and liberating powers to all whom we interact with in our daily living". St. Paul's has found that the visual arts provide yet another way to reach out to those who are drawn to Christ. ✝

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(All photos by Dan Hardison except where noted.)



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