

Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church

Sherwood, Tennessee

Story by Dan Hardison



Study for the Epiphany Mission Triptych by Philip Perkins, c1953. (photo by Dan Hardison)

Nestled in a scenic valley of the southern Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee in the small community of Sherwood is Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church. People from across the country would visit the little stone church and its walled garden with pools, bricked walkways, multitude of flowers, and open-air chapel. One of those visitors in 1953 was an accomplished abstract artist named Philip Perkins. He was so taken with Epiphany Mission and its work that he wanted to paint a new altarpiece for the chapel – a gift.

A native of Tennessee, Perkins was an abstract painter well known for his geometric, cubist influenced work of the forties. Although he was an abstract painter, for the new altarpiece he painted a triptych in a style reminiscent of El

Greco's work. "I determined to paint an altarpiece with the color which I felt the church needed – a piece of religious art which was not rapidly sentimental. I not only had a desire to help the Mission, but I felt that here was a chance to experiment toward the development of a 20th Century religious art form which would have the same human communicability which had been characteristic of all religious art of the past."

The center panel depicts the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Above Christ is the image of a dove representing the Holy Spirit, and the hand of God is seen reaching out to Christ. John the Baptist is holding a staff made of two branches that form a cross. On the right panel is the figure of St. John the Evangelist, the apostle of love. On the left panel

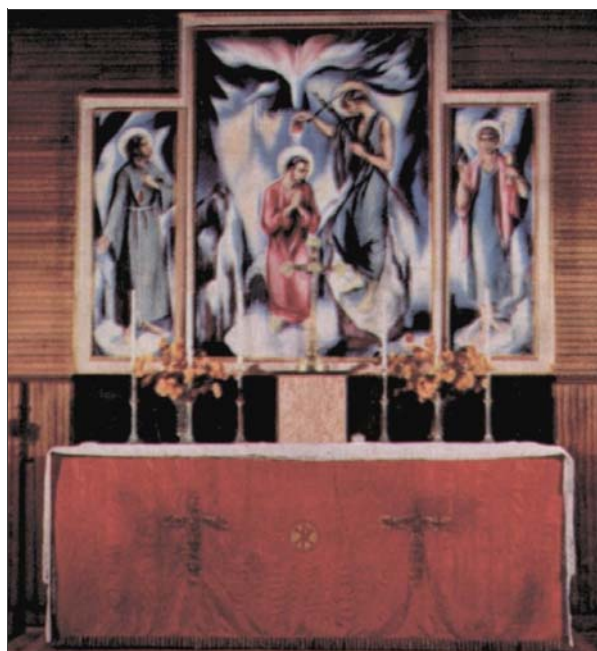
is the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of gardening and wildlife. On Easter, 1954, the completed triptych was presented to Epiphany Mission.

When Philip Perkins visited Epiphany Mission, Father Joseph S. Huske was the new priest-in-charge. The Mission had been the life's work of Father George W. Jones from 1932 until his death in 1952. The Mission provided a place of worship, taught the religion of the Church, helped feed and clothe the poor, and tended the sick. But in 1932, during the early days of the depression, the Episcopal Diocese of Tennessee could not supply money for the Mission. To support the Mission and its work, Father Jones enlisted the aid of what he affectionately called "The Greater Congregation". Composed of individuals that lived beyond the valley from across the country, they were friends and benefactors to the Mission providing money and "boxes" (boxes of cloths, shoes, books, and other items that could be used by the needy as well as the church). Also in 1932, Father Jones began publishing *The Booklet*, a report of the Mission activities and the needs of the people that it served.

The Mission Garden was started in 1938 by Father Jones to bring color, beauty, and inspiration to the people of Sherwood. Built by the young boys of the Mission over a number of years, the garden was also a way to occupy idle time and to provide needed income (although the pay was small). A field across the street from the church was cleared of cinders and fertile soil hauled in by wheelbarrow. Walls and walkways were built with blocks and brick that were cast by the boys on the spot. The boys constructed the garden and then the youths became the gardeners who tended the garden day to day. In the words of Father Jones, "A garden belongs to the Mission ... the shepherd of souls is the chief gardener, but the Mission youths are the gardeners who toil."

It would become a walled garden covering an area of 16,000 square feet in a Spanish mission style. The centerpiece of the garden was the open-air chapel where Mass was sometimes held during the summer months. The chapel had an altar and a large statue of Mary holding the infant Lord. It would become known as "Our Lady of the Hills" chapel.

Life in Sherwood was never easy and many of those living in the valley lived in extreme



ABOVE: **The Epiphany Mission Triptych** by Philip Perkins. Pictured is the original triptych as it appeared in the chapel. (Photo is from *The Booklet*, 1958, courtesy of John Lynch.)

BELOW: **Study for the Epiphany Mission Triptych** by Philip Perkins. Pictured is the study in the "Chapel of the Resurrection" at Epiphany Mission today. (photo by Dan Hardison)

The study is a half-size rendering of the triptych pictured above. The center panel in the two paintings shows the same depiction of the Baptism of Christ. St. John the Evangelist, although depicted with the same image, is shown in the left panel of the study in place of St. Francis. The right panel in the study appears to be a different image of St. John the Evangelist that was not used in the final version above.





TOP LEFT: Epiphany Mission. The stone church was built in 1928. (Photo from *The Booklet*, 1956, courtesy of Bryan Wells)

BOTTOM LEFT: One of several pools in the Mission Garden. (Photo from *The Booklet*, 1947, courtesy of John Lynch.)

ABOVE: "Our Lady of the Hills Chapel" in the Mission Garden, c1940s. (Photo courtesy of Clyde Garner.)

poverty. Sherwood would endure the Depression years and then the Second World War only to fall victim to a lack of employment that would cause an exodus of most of the people in search of work. But Epiphany Mission faced its greatest challenge in 1960. On the Wednesday after Easter, an early morning fire destroyed the church. Everything was lost including the Perkins triptych.

Of the fire Father Huske would later recall, "Twenty minutes and all was over. Twenty minutes that seemed hours. All lost ... every Vestment, every piece of linen, every Chalice, every piece of brass, of silver, of wrought iron, every chair, rug, prayer book, hymnal gone – not

one thing left – all a heap of smoking, charred debris, twisted metal, and stark crumbling walls." Using the Phoenix as its symbol for resurrection, Epiphany Mission would be rebuilt by 1964. But it would be 2001 before a sense of completion would come to Epiphany Mission.

From a peak of some 1200 residents, there are perhaps 200 people living in Sherwood today. As the population of Sherwood dwindled, so did the membership at Epiphany Mission. With few members left, the Mission Garden could not be maintained and much of it has been lost. But Epiphany Mission is still active today and like the Phoenix, the Mission has begun anew and is growing.



ABOVE: Epiphany Mission in flames. Moments before this picture was taken St. Gabriel, the church bell, crashed from the bell-tower to the floor of the chapel and can be seen just inside the doorway. (Photo from *The Booklet*, 1960, courtesy of John Lynch.)



ABOVE: Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church. Shown is the Mission Garden and church as it is today. "Our Lady of the Hills" chapel is to the left.

BELOW: "Our Lady of the Hills" chapel with a remaining pool and fountain. (Photos by Dan Hardison)

In 1953/54 while working on the triptych for Epiphany Mission, Philip Perkins had painted a half-size study. Now, through friends of Philip Perkins, the study has come home to Epiphany Mission – a replacement for the painting that was lost in the fire of 1960.

On Easter, 2001, forty-seven years after the original was presented to the church, the *Study for the Epiphany Mission Triptych* was presented to Epiphany Mission in Philip Perkins' memory. Along with the triptych, Epiphany Mission also received the Perkins painting *The Three Marys*, depicting the morning of Christ's resurrection.

A member of the church who remembers the old stone church and the original triptych has said, "In the fire we lost everything, our church, the mementos, the memories. It's as if a part of our past is coming back to us." †



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The Three Marys by Philip Perkins, 1958.
 (Photo by Dan Hardison)