

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## The Miracle of the Broken Window

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Churches age, just like people. Their bodies start falling apart. They begin to sag. Gravity and (in the case of my parish) Gulf-coast humidity take a toll on them.

Trinity Episcopal Church, in Galveston, Texas, was built before the Civil War. It had weathered many storms. And, time after distressing time, it was repaired, restored, brought back to its original grace. However, even though we have been faithful stewards of the old building, it is literally crumbling into bits. A restoration architect was hired; a building committee was created; and a study was made of all the problems that need addressing if our building is to survive.

The results were overwhelming. The tower was unsafe. The building was structurally unsound. Even the enormous Tiffany window above the altar needed to be removed and restored, as its glass was too heavy for its metal framework, and it was in danger of collapsing.

The estimated restoration costs were enormous. With a shrinking congregation, who was going to pay for them? Fundraising began, but the pledges were painfully shy of the goal.

And then . . . on September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike blew in. Ike flooded ninety percent of Galveston structures, including old Trinity Church. But, even more of a shock, a section of the Tiffany window had been blown out, weakened no doubt by the necessary removal of a protective covering in preparation for shipping the window off to the Hauser Stained Glass studio for restoration. Without that covering, a large section of the window was broken, scattering shards of glass over the altar, the floor, and into the choir stalls.

Restoration work was halted, remediation was begun, soaked kneelers were removed, the broken window was temporarily covered. For two winters with no heat and one summer with no air conditioning, the congregation worshiped in the soggy shell of our sad sanctuary.

Gradually work began again, not only on the original restoration, but now on the additional flood damage and the awful breaking of Trinity's icon of identification — our Tiffany window.

The huge window was taken out section by section, and piece by piece, by the Hauser Studio workmen, and transported, along with the broken shards, to Minnesota. Because we did not want it returned until after we had been through another hurricane season, the studio kept it for over a year. During all that time, the congregation was presided over by a huge plywood plug where the beautiful colored glass had been. Not inspiring!

Finally, the workmen brought the window home and reinstalled it. One of the men was the very man who had done all the restoration work. He spoke one Sunday about the experience of being able to work on it completely by himself, something that was rare because churches usually want their windows returned quickly, requiring many to work on them.

He spoke about the thrill of learning exactly what made Tiffany windows special, how the company had layered the glass (sometimes as many as seven layers). He thanked the congregation for giving him the opportunity to “make a Tiffany window.” He ended his talk by telling us that he had used as much of the broken glass as he could, but that in some instances, he had decided it would be better to make new pieces instead. And, so, he had brought back three small crates of broken shards.

A young man who had recently moved to Galveston was leaving church that morning and happened to turn to the woman who was walking down the aisle beside him and say, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could make jewelry using that broken glass?” I was that woman. And I was immediately enchanted with his idea as a fundraising possibility for our parish. Because my husband and I spend three months a year in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, I proposed to him that we take a few pieces with us on our next trip to see if one of the many silversmiths there could work with us.

I designed nine simple pieces and had them crafted by Francisco Perez (Paco) in sterling silver. We started showing the results after church on Sunday mornings and started taking orders. From that simple beginning, more designs were created, and, again, orders were taken. Robert Clepper, the man with the brilliant idea, became our master designer. A jewelry committee was established, a name given to our enterprise: “The Phoenix Project.”

Twice a year, in the spring and the fall, I take more glass and new designs down to Mexico. This summer 500 pieces of jewelry were completed, so that we now have a large inventory stock. Over the last three years more than 1,000 pieces have been completed.

The project has been inspiring and life-giving. Four families in Mexico, working with the amazing Paco, are being supported by crafting this jewelry. Every single person who has ever bought a piece of the jewelry has been delighted to own a piece of that Tiffany window, many of whom were married beneath it, or had a baby christened under it. Total strangers are moved by the story and want to own a piece of it.

Because our committee needed to keep investing our proceeds into the making of more jewelry, it took a long while to make a “profit.” Miracle of miracles, we eventually handed over \$25,000 to our vestry at their November, 2012, meeting. They, in turn, voted unanimously to send \$10,000 of that amount to the Episcopal Relief and Development Fund to help the victims of Hurricane Sandy.

The jewelry has become a symbol for our parish. Out of death comes new life. Our congregation is worshiping in a beautifully restored sanctuary, with a sparkling Tiffany window. We have a new rector, The Rev. Susan Kennard, and she is fabulous! The congregation is experiencing growth. We are people of faith. Faith in God. Faith in a bright future. And we are gloriously arrayed in sterling silver “Tiffany” jewelry.



Joal Donovan lives in Galveston, Texas, with her husband, John, rector emeritus of Trinity Church.