

# Remembering Bill MacKaye

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Compiled by Jane Lincoln

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*As we come to know the seriousness of the situation—the war, the racism, the poverty in our world—we come to realize that things will not be changed simply by words or demonstrations. Rather, it's a question of living one's life in a drastically different way.*

—Dorothy Day

**B**ill MacKaye was a member of St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church for more than sixty years. He lived in the *drastically different way* that Dorothy Day advised in order to inspire change by loving mercy, doing justice, and walking humbly. He lived this way with joy, dry wit, generosity, an astonishing grace with words, and an unabashed commitment to God's work in the world.

As people who knew him have shared their remembrances, words pop out that begin to describe his impact.

He was a catechist, a teacher of the principles of Christian faith. He was an intuitive, graceful liturgist. His sometimes gruff demeanor belied his warm, welcoming spirit and loving hugs.

There was a "true north" quality to him: If he thought it was a good idea, a solid nomination, a path forward paved with integrity, it was a wise choice.

One member of the **Misa Alegria** called him a *faro* (Spanish for lighthouse) and prayed that "Bill's light may guide our ship in the storm and darkness."

Several fellow parishioners echoed the perspective of **Laura Moye**: The passing of Bill MacKaye is the end of an era, a milestone. Bill was an institution, a pillar. Laura declared that Bill was part of the generation that didn't think in terms of hiring staff to make all things happen, but the generation that just jumped in with both feet to build the church.

For **Kim Klein**, Bill was a faithful friend for twenty-two years of Friday lunches at Dos Gringos in Mount Pleasant. "When I had doubts about myself as a writer, a museum docent, or a solo traveler in my mid-80s, he was my encourager-in-chief." She shared some of his *bons mots*: on procrastination or inability to decide what to do next, he'd say, "Just do the next right thing — don't stew; do." And this memorable quote: "Much is accomplished sitting alone on a back porch, gazing at the trees as they sway back and forth. Like the Holy Spirit, we don't know where the breeze comes from and where it

goes next.” Bill was also Kim’s Lyft and Uber coach: “Once we had both given up our cars, he taught me how to compare rates but also to select the cheaper rate if you opted to wait, because they usually came earlier, anyway.” Practical, earthy wisdom, shared freely.

He was an excellent friend. **Tom Bell** described how he didn’t know Bill until he turned 80, and then Bill called him out of the blue:

Imagine my surprise when, after my own eightieth birthday, facing new challenges in my personal life, Bill reached out to me. We had a couple of remarkable meetings in California, where I realized what a wise and generous, and (surprise) modest person he was. The personal revelations we shared took a bit of time, but we moved quickly on to our shared interest in the well-being of St. Stephen and the Incarnation Church. Bill’s history with the parish easily eclipsed my own. However, as a couple of 80+ old guys, we shared a deep experience of the history of the place. I can’t define Bill’s view of St. Stephen’s, but my own is that it’s a parish filled with people who are deeply serious about exploring and examining, criticizing and celebrating our individual and societal spiritual experience and values.

He was a wise advisor to **Jane Lincoln** when she and her husband were divorcing, giving words about being family no matter what – which he lived out with each of the five amazing adults whom he and his late wife Ginger reared together. Jane also viewed him as an example of how to be an anti-racist White person and how to be a deep friend to women, seeing how he collaborated fully, consistently, and over many years, for example, with Laura Mol on *Hearing the Word: An Inclusive Language Lectionary* and with Elizabeth Finley on the work of the Washington Free Clinic.

**Brian Best** shared this bit of wisdom from Bill: “Fences don't make good neighbors.” Bill was referring to the fence that Urban Village installed behind the dining room to deter visitors to Loaves and Fishes from hanging out on Urban Village’s stoops. Brian, who now that lives in Tucson, Arizona, says he is reminded of this lack of neighborliness every time he sees a stretch of the U.S. border wall, and “Bill was all about breaking down the barriers that separate us from each other and from God.”

It is important to acknowledge with gratitude Bill’s institutional role as keeper of former rector Bill Wendt’s vision of an integrated, justice-seeking congregation. As **Fern Hunt** summarizes:

Bill MacKaye, progressive, iconoclastic, stubbornly anti-hierarchical, was a close friend and supporter of Bill Wendt – the founder of the “modern” St. Stephen and the Incarnation. Under Wendt’s leadership, St. Stephen’s became a racially integrated parish, the first in the Diocese of Washington, deeply connected to the

then-predominantly African American neighborhood. Under Wendt, St. Stephen's also became a center for the movement to ordain and regularize women and LGBTQ people in The Episcopal Church. When Wendt retired, it was Bill MacKaye who continued [these commitments] through his direct leadership and recruitment of energetic and talented parish leaders over several generations.

During the Wendt period, there was a cadre of associated clergy who greatly enriched the worship and our spiritual life. Bill MacKaye's influence helped to maintain this incredibly important association over many decades. His endless activity was buttressed by a deep faith and knowledge of historical Christian practice, particularly of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, parts of which are quite visible in St. Stephen's liturgy today.

In the late 60s and early 70s, when Bill Wendt was rector, **Phillip Periman** was a lay reader and on the vestry at St. Stephen and the Incarnation. Phillip recalls that Bill was a constant presence and anchor of the congregation.

We left D.C. for Texas in 1976 and only infrequently returned but would always attend St. Stephen's if we were in town on Sunday. Bill always recognized us and often insisted that I help with the elements during communion. I don't think he knew my lay reader's license had been taken from me in Texas for being "too liberal." Bill was always my connection to St. Stephen's. I grieve knowing that he will no longer be there.

**Isabella Bates** was a parishioner in those same tumultuous years. She wrote:

When I think of Bill, I hear him saying, "If I have to hear *The Velveteen Rabbit* read in church one more time I am going to scream." He was clear, often outspoken, and a loyal St. Stephen's member. He was much more conservative about church matters in those Bill Wendt years of great experimentation, and I always appreciated his voice as a balance to the wild, creative energy of those times."

Bill had a profound gift for liturgy. **Susan Kyle** reminds us how special Holy Week was when Bill essentially served in the liturgical role of the deacon. She helped him with Tenebrae this past Holy Week, which was the last time she saw him.

Choir member **John Linn** describes how All Saint's Day is identifiable by the litany Bill wrote:

[It was] a chanted rite that the parish has practiced for many years. His encyclopedic knowledge of the saints, his poetic clarity in describing them,

followed by the powerful acclamation, “Stand here beside us,” were a powerful annual ritual. Along with all the artists, martyrs, healers, writers, politicians, saints, and disciples of history that Bill celebrated in that litany, may he also ever stand with us and watch over our community – one he so dearly loved, and one that loved him in return.

Bill will be remembered by the many guests and volunteers of the Loaves and Fishes free meal ministry. **Claudia Pabo**, a longtime volunteer, first learned of Loaves and Fishes from an article by Bill published in her church’s [St. Columba’s] newsletter. At the time, her daughter needed to earn community service hours in order to qualify for a D.C. high school diploma, so Claudia called Bill to ask about volunteering. She wrote:

My daughter earned the community service hours she needed, and I worked with her as her “job” coach, since she is disabled. Over thirteen years later, I’m still working in the kitchen almost every weekend. Bill understood what Loaves and Fishes meant to the people who came to eat with us – a hearty meal and a quiet, safe place to sit down and relax in a chaotic world. But Bill also placed an equal, if not greater, emphasis on the spiritual benefits for those who volunteered. In particular, he saw this work as fostering a profound recognition of all humanity’s shared and equal status as children of God – a God who doesn’t judge us based on the earthly trappings of success that most people hold so dear... Christ admonished that insofar as we have fed, clothed or cared for one of those the least his brother, we have done so for Christ himself. The world looks very different when everyone, including those in need, is a potential stand-in for Christ.

**Paola Scommegna** shared one of Bill’s lessons in this vein:

In the early 1980s, I was one of his assistants at second-Sunday Loaves and Fishes, cooking piles of chicken in an always steamy kitchen. One week a documentary filmmaker interviewed us. I, a strident, 20-something, mused during my interview that we weren’t doing anything to change lives – just feeding people. Bill countered with an eloquent description about how the meal was an extension of the Eucharist upstairs and did indeed change him.

**Ed Grandi** remembers exactly when he met Bill: Comfort Dorn and Ed were attending a service with their daughter Rachel, who was brand new (and now is almost 40 years old). Bill was working in the kitchen, as was his custom on third Sundays. He came up to the sanctuary to find someone who would help by lifting some boxes, as Bill’s back would not let him. Ed joined him to help with those boxes and, from that Sunday to

now, he has helped Loaves and Fishes provide meals to those who are hungry and who live near the church.

**Denize Stanton-Williams**, who for some ten years has been on Loaves and Fishes staff as the program's manager, described how:

Right away, Bill "got me" (and not many people do). We spoke to one another with this dry humor.... We would always greet one another with a smile and start talking business – what we wanted to see for the future of Loaves and Fishes, and any fundraisers on tap? Bill had a work drive that made me want to kick up my game!

**Isaiah Poole** knew Bill from worship, but also from Urban Village work. He shared a [video of Bill](#) walking around Newton, Center and Meridian Streets by the church, talking about affordable housing in the gentrifying area of Columbia Heights. The video's description affirms both the church and Bill:

Saint Stephen and the Incarnation Church longtime member William MacKaye leads a walking tour of affordable housing in a section of Columbia Heights in Washington as part of the 2009 Fannie Mae Help the Homeless Walk. St. Stephen has been active in the fight for affordable housing in the Columbia Heights community for more than 40 years. Urban Village, a housing complex for working-class families, was built on land donated by St. Stephen, and church members hold several seats on the Urban Village board. Housing is one of several social justice ministries at St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, a multiracial, multicultural and affirming congregation.

Parishioner and current co-senior warden **Atiba Pertilla** first came to St. Stephen's on Easter Sunday 2000; a newcomer to D.C., he was seeking the Episcopal church closest to his apartment. Eventually he signed up for the "Welcome to St. Stephen's" series of classes. In the session taught by Bill, he heard some of the incredible stories of the church's history and how the parish had evolved over the years. As he got drawn more into the life of St. Stephen's, Atiba wrote that he had "the great fortune of serving with Bill" on a number of parish committees – notably, the search committee that recommended the calling of Frank Dunn as priest; many years together on the finance committee; and serving with Bill on the vestry this past year.

I will always carry with me the sound of Bill's beautiful, rich voice as he offered prayer, advice, deeper perspective, or a shot of good humor. Bill's love for St. Stephen's and his certitude that the faith of the community of believers can bring the parish through any storm were a tremendous gift to all of us.

**Laura Mol** says she spent decades working/playing/struggling over words with Bill MacKaye, and now she wants to add to these remembrances the word *patriarch*:

I believe he became, over the many years, a patriarch of the parish – not *patriarchal*, as the word is mostly used today, for he certainly was no fan of patriarchy. Nor was he a patriarch simply because he was the last person standing (though that’s true), the last link of “living memory” to the people and events of St. Stephen’s in the 1960s. Bill was a patriarch within and to this community – a flawed human who knew himself called of God and responded whole-heartedly, who yearned to be a friend of God, who sought and offered companionship with others on the Way.

But, personally, what I remember most is laughter – a twist of his mouth, a lift of his shoulder, a wry word – and we’d laugh. Even on the phone, even or especially in some discouraging turn of events, he got us laughing.

Former parishioner **Pan Conrad** wrote that it was late spring when she last saw Bill:

We periodically got together to have lunch and talk about faith and science and their entangled ways of knowing. We had not seen one another in person for three years because of the pandemic, and this final lunch was at Bill’s home where, three hours later, we still had not run out of things to say. Bill was a beloved friend, and he was deeply significant in my formation as a Christian. We are all lucky to have crossed paths with Bill on this side of the veil. *Rest well, dear brother.*

**Mary Alcuin Kelly** shared this remembrance:

When I think of Bill MacKaye, I think of a man who has found the pearl of great price. Bill’s gift was his welcoming presence and, despite his hearing difficulties, he was a ready and good listener. You could approach Bill with any concern or need, and he was there for you one-hundred percent. His counsel was always considered and wise.

The pearl of great price was, I believe, Bill’s care and love for his friends, his family and anyone in need or trouble. Bill was a person you could count on in any situation. Bill was also an institutionalist. I learned from Bill the importance of being a part of an institution – St. Stephen and the Incarnation or the diocese – as institutions were there to do good and to respond to those who were members. Institutions existed for the purposes of the people, not the other way around! For Bill, the church, as institution, existed to implement the ideas and actions of members who wanted to live the Gospel in concrete and practical ways. And Bill always had an idea or plan that was in search of implementation!

I would be remiss if I did not comment on Bill's go-to dress of loafers, khaki pants, blue blazer, and buttoned-down shirt. It was a classic look for a classy guy!

May all the angels and those he loved who have gone before him welcome him into paradise. We will miss his presence and wise counsel this side of heaven.

Several people recalled Bill's curmudgeonly persona, his gruff way of speaking up on principle without care for what other people thought (or what else was on the agenda).

**John Payne** noted that he appreciated Bill's...

...years of experience, intelligence, and passion, but it could be hard to disagree with him at times or to try to move a meeting along while Bill wanted to continue discussing a particular point. We definitely had more than a few of those moments over the years. But even when we butted heads, it was clear he wasn't disagreeing out of spite or obstinance but instead he was coming from a deep love—a love for all people, particularly the oppressed, and for St. Stephen's and for God. And it was that love that made it possible for us to keep working together week after week. Since his passing I've found, remarkably, that I've missed those occasionally trying moments in our meetings together, but I know that part of Bill will always remain with St. Stephen's, and I'm sure is with us in every meeting and Zoom call. And we could ask for no better advocate on the other side.

**Fern Hunt** recalled an example of his skill at problem-solving during an important moment in the life of the parish:

Bill was always involved either in the vestry or in some committee having to do with power and governance of the parish. Bill was often a very wise and skilled church politician.

Here is an example from work in the parish: In 2015, I served on the parish search committee along with Bill. We were tasked with finding candidates for a senior priest to succeed retiring Frank Dunn. The parish had changed dramatically and rapidly in the previous decade. The influx of young professionals, Black and White, in the Columbia Heights and Park Road neighborhoods, had been replacing the middle- and working-class African American parishioners of earlier years. There was now also a Latino congregation, Misa Alegria, as a part of the parish.

To accommodate a bilingual search committee, we had two translators and a bilingual facilitator from the diocese. After two or three meetings, it was clear to many that it was a mess. Even finding a day and time when there was a

critical mass of committee members from English and Spanish services was difficult because of the widely differing work schedules. One evening we finally discussed these difficulties at length but were unable to come to a conclusion.

Then Bill offered a way out. We would have to give up the idea of having a single bilingual meeting every single time. Parishioners from the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking services would meet separately and come up with decisions on the candidates; then periodically we would meet as a single group in order to share thoughts and compare notes. Bill advised that the two groups would also interview candidates separately, in their respective languages, and so decisions could be based on the needs of the respective groups.

Amazingly this approach not only worked, but it also built trust. As a non-Spanish speaker, I came to understand the priorities of Misa parishioners, including those who spoke no English. In joint meetings, I believe they came to know my priorities as well. We were able to operate as a single unit and come to consensus.

**Tom Bell** spoke of this same commitment Bill had to justice and to St. Stephen's. Tom shared this:

As a veteran now of three parishes, I often recall the old thought that the work of the church is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Bill came to St. Stephen's at a time only the oldest of us can recall: the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. He kept his moral compass on true north then and through the subsequent afflictions of the comfortable: women's ordination, respect for gay clergy, for gay people seeking marriage, for strong lay leadership. Oh, and he was a holdout for high church delights. I'll always remember him in a procession, happily swinging the Coptic thurible, jingling and sending holy smoke in all directions, as if it were just how we were always destined to approach the divine.

**Sandra Moore** knew Bill from their work together on the Loaves and Fishes Management Board and on the Healing Committee.

When I wrote my first appeal letter as a 26-year-old new member of the Management Board, Bill offered to edit it. I was terrified to share it with such a talented writer and a former *Post* reporter, but still remember the feeling of immense pride when it came back with only minor edits.

I admired Bill's commitment to doing what he believed was right, regardless of whether it was easy, practical, or popular. Whenever a group was



barreling toward easy answers, he would break in with a suggestion that was inevitably more difficult, but also more just.

I appreciated Bill most when we disagreed, as we did many times. He was a passionate defender of his beliefs, but even when we were on opposite sides of an issue that he felt deeply, he never made it personal or allowed it to damage the relationship. When he was outvoted, he stepped back with grace. Even my toughest conversations with him had moments of levity and ended with a warm goodbye. In a church that has endured painful conflicts, Bill was a model of how to disagree with love and integrity.

I also had the pleasure of giving Bill rides home from church from time to time. I always offered, even though he lived 20 minutes in the opposite direction, because it was a chance to hear stories of St. Stephen's past told in delightful Bill fashion and to get his insightful analysis of church issues of the day. The 20 minutes always flew by.

I will miss him and feel blessed to have known him.

Long-ago parishioner **Robin Seiler** offered the following:

When I joined St. Stephen's, John Mathis, Louisa Brown, and Bill were gathering at 7 a.m. on Tuesdays to say morning prayer in the sanctuary. Brother John invited me to join them. A clear memory from those gatherings and others is of Bill's prayerfulness. (I also noticed, when the four of us ate breakfast at the Little Giant on Mount Pleasant Street, that Bill invariably ordered scrapple with his eggs.)

When I asked him about his spiritual journey, Bill said he had not been raised as a Christian but had had a mystical experience as an undergraduate at Harvard. That gift and his response, I gradually realized, grounded his prayer life, his devotion to family, church, and world, and his deep compassion for the poor and powerless.

Volunteering with Loaves and Fishes, I noticed twin sisters who each week ate and took home as much food as they could. When I mentioned them to Bill, without much compassion, he said with great feeling, "They're frightened." Bill was generous with other young people as well. ... He also read the first draft of the beginning of a college buddy's novel and told him over lunch, not unkindly, that it wasn't any good. For me, Bill will always be a living reminder of deep prayerfulness, devotion, compassion, and generosity.

**Elizabeth Finley** shares these thoughts:

At least twice a week when something comes up related to liturgy or stewardship or buildings and grounds or a question related to vestry or bylaws or St. Stephen's history or if there is an interpersonal or spiritual question, I'm wrestling with, my brain immediately goes to, "talk to MacKaye," and then I'm hit with the sickening reality that I can't.

For going on 45 years, MacKaye has occupied a singular place in my life as a friend, a mentor, a surrogate annoying-but-beloved older brother, a trusted co-worker in God's vineyards, a sounding board, an unindicted co-conspirator, and someone with whom I could share the joys and sorrows of life. In one of our last conversations, he said a thing he valued most about our relationship is that he could tell me anything, and I felt the same way about him.

Sure, he could be a curmudgeon, and sometimes (often) he had very strongly held opinions, but the beauty of MacKaye was that invariably he was able to discuss those opinions openly, honestly and respectfully and was willing to carefully consider alternative viewpoints. He was a gifted listener and often had the willingness and grace to change his mind.

His eyesight and hearing were failing him, but despite that, he had a brilliant and inquisitive mind and deep spiritual roots, and he was a great storyteller. Even after 45 years of knowing him, he continued to share stories about his life and about life at St. Stephen's that I had never heard before. I miss him beyond measure and trust that we have a strong advocate among the saints in light who continues to "stand here beside us."

**Mary Alcuin Kelly** shared a prayer written by George MacLeod, the Scottish churchman who rebuilt Iona Abbey in the 1930s. He requested that it be read at the time of his death:

*Be thou, triune God, in the midst of us as we give thanks for those who have gone from the sight of earthly eyes. They, in thy nearer presence, still worship with us in the mystery of the one family in heaven and on earth. If it be thy holy will, tell them how much we love them, and how much we miss them, and how we long for the day when we shall meet with them again. Strengthen us to go on in loving service of all thy children. Thus shall we have communion with thee and, in thee, with our beloved ones. Thus shall we come to know within ourselves that there is no death and that only a veil divides, thin as gossamer.*

Other voices in remembrance:

Thank you, Bill, for all the ways you shared your faith.

Thank you, Bill, for your beautiful and transformative vision of the world.

May all the angels and those you loved who have gone before welcome you into paradise.

A hole has been torn in Earth's fabric, as Heaven rejoices.

Amen and amen.

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***Contributors to these remembrances and prayers:***

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