

A PAGE FROM THE LONG AND
AMAZING HISTORY OF ST. STEPHEN
AND THE INCARNATION EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. William A. Wendt

In 1960, Bill Wendt accepted the call to be Rector of St. Stephen and the Incarnation. For the next 18 years he and St. Stephen's rode at the **forefront of waves of massive change** in society and in the church.

Bill Wendt was a World War II fighter pilot. He became a priest "so that I would never be involved in anything like that again."

At General Seminary in New York, Wendt became active in the Urban Priest Group, a score of seminar students and graduates who were committed to taking the message of the Episcopal Church to everyone and working with poor people. Two of the group became Bishops—Paul Moore (Suffragan Bishop of Washington and then Bishop of New York) and C. Kilmer Myers (Bishop of California).

Wendt and others prayed with peace fasters in Lafayette Park, for Vietnam in the Pentagon concourse, and on the steps of the Justice Department for slain Black Panthers.

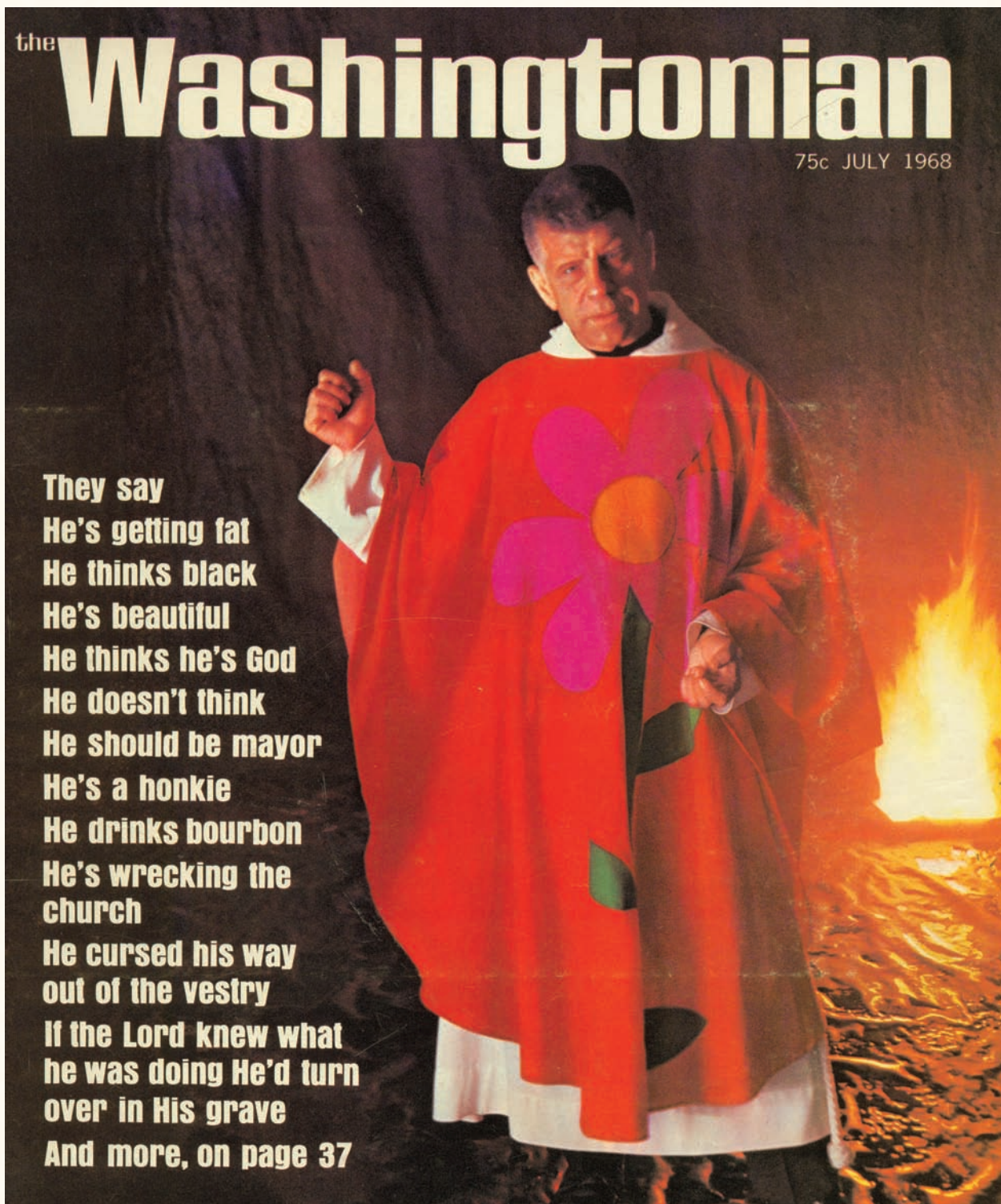


In 1969, Wendt organized the first public reading of the names of the Vietnam war dead—during an emergency national convention of the Episcopal Church.

Wendt was a freedom rider, defying segregated Trailways buses in Mississippi in 1961 and marching with Martin Luther King Jr., in Selma in 1965.

Wendt convinced The Reverend James Reeb, former assistant minister at All Souls Unitarian Church, to join in civil rights protests. In Alabama in March 1965, Reeb was severely beaten by whites while he participated in a civil rights march; he died two days later.

Wendt was deeply pastoral and was available at any hour to people who were troubled or dying. **He thought of the priesthood as a state of life, not as a profession.**



How To Be a Good-Guy Honkie Priest on 14th Street

Father Wendt does it right

By Judith Viorst

It's noon in the afternoon and William Wendt, rector of St. Stephen's and the Incarnation, is doing what he says is the most valuable thing he can do. He is taking a walk. He leaves St. Stephen's at Sixteenth and Newton and heads toward Fourteenth, a short, compact grey-haired man of forty-eight with coarse features, a good smile, and a slightly pigeon-toed lunge.

A pigeon-toed kid pops out of a doorway and gently pokes his belly. "You getting fat, Father," she tells him impudently. He sighs and pats his gut. A tired-looking woman is sweeping her steps. "I saw your old man in church last Sunday," says Wendt. "I didn't see you." She tells him she's been sick, he nods sympathetically and walks on. The rain has held off and everyone is hanging around. Hi, Father, hi, Father, they say. How you doing there, How's things, What about summer jobs?

"The only basic program we have at St. Stephen's," Wendt explains, "is walking the streets and meeting people on their stoops and finding out who's here and letting people know that we're here too."

Fourteenth Street is still a ruin of burned-out buildings, heaped-up rubble, and taped windows. The slightest breeze still carries the smell of smoke. Wendt stops at the store-front office of Build Black to say hello. Build Black is against mom and pop stores, slumlords, honkie unions, welfare gestapo, slave wages, high rents, spoiled food, credit crucifixion, and four-legged and two-legged rats. Father Wendt digs Build Black. The feeling is mutual.

"I love him," says George Storey, president of the new organization. "He's beautiful, a beautiful man." With black pride on the rise, isn't white Wendt heading for obsolescence, he is asked. "Black is a state of mind," is Storey's answer. "Father Wendt thinks black. He'll never be obsolete."



In September 1961, William Wendt was arrested and jailed for breaching the peace when, as part of a biracial group of ministers, he tried to use a white waiting room at a bus station in Jackson, Mississippi.

In March 1965, Wendt headed a delegation of forty Washington clergymen who joined Martin Luther King's ministers' march in Alabama.

In August 1966, Wendt helped organize an "invasion" of Bolling Field to urge that it be used for low- and middle-income housing.

In 1967, in the middle of last year's long hot summer, Wendt permitted a black power rally to be held at St. Stephen's, with H. Rap Brown as the featured speaker.

All hell broke loose.

Wendt doesn't always get away with everything he tries to do. He almost didn't get away with Rap Brown, whose loon-shoot speech scandalized many members of St. Stephen's. But after the initial shock, it was decided that Wendt, by providing an outlet for the frustrations of those in the ghetto, had probably saved Washington from violence in the streets—at least for the moment. Even his vestry finally gave him a vote of confidence.

The vestry, which is the governing body of the church, has not always agreed with Father Wendt. That printing press which printed those dirty words is printing them elsewhere, and St. Stephen's is no longer headquarters for Washington Mobilization for Peace, although it is still open to the group for meetings.

But Wendt must be winning most of the fights. Since his arrival at St. Stephen's, five senior wardens out of eight have left the church. "That's quite a record," he says, with something like pride.



WIDENING THE CIRCLE THE CAMPAIGN FOR ST. STEPHEN'S