

Houses of Worship Tour

“National” Houses of Worship on Massachusetts Avenue and upper Sixteenth Street

American Society of Church History
Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.

2 p.m., January 3, 2013

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Itinerary

2:00 p.m. Depart Washington Hilton (“F” on map)

B. 2:10 p.m. Arrive **Church of the Pilgrims (Presbyterian)**, depart 2:35

C. 2:50 p.m. Arrive **National Presbyterian Church**, depart 3:25 pm.

D. 3:45 p.m. Arrive **Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Church**, depart 4:10

E. 4:30 p.m. Arrive **Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St. John the Baptist**, depart 5:00 pm. travel down 16th St. to Columbia Road or Florida Avenue and back to Washington Hilton

Introduction

Almost since 1800 when the federal government moved to Washington, American religious groups have competed in claiming what Thomas Tweed has called “civic space” in the capital through the erection of prominent, and even monumental, houses of worship. Through these churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras Americans sought to erect architectural monuments to their groups’ places in American life, and also to minister to government leaders and the many short-term residents of the capital. Often these were erected through nation-wide capital campaigns. Sometimes they were accompanied by formal declarations by denominational officials that these houses of worship would be the

“national” church of their denomination. Other times, these were more local efforts, whose “national” status was merely self-asserted. The best known of these churches are Washington National Cathedral and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The later is the subject of Thomas Tweed’s excellent study *America’s Church: the National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation’s Capital* (2011).

This tour focuses on national houses of worship erected on or near two of the city’s most prominent avenues, Massachusetts Avenue (often known today as Embassy Row) and 16th Street, which in the early twentieth century was also promoted as Embassy Row, or the “Avenue of the Presidents.” The four churches which we will tour represent some of the variety of the national church movement. Two are Presbyterian, but erected by different Presbyterian denominations. The other two, one Russian Orthodox and one Maronite, are the sole representatives of their particular group in the capital. They occupy less prominent sites and were not explicitly promoted as the “national” church of their group in America. Yet as representatives of Russian and Lebanese identity they make perhaps even stronger claims on civic space.

The first church we tour was built in the 1920s and lies on the border of the original boundaries of the City of Washington. Further from the city center the buildings are newer. Thus as we journey up Massachusetts Avenue we’ll see more recent structures, while the return trip down 16th Street will bring us back to the 1920s. Older national houses of worship, such as Metropolitan Memorial A.M.E., are closer to the city center.



**Stop 1: Church of the Pilgrims
(Presbyterian)**

2201 P St NW.

Architect: Benjamin Courtland
Flournoy, 1926-1930

stained glass by Henry Lee Willett of
Philadelphia, 1948

This congregation was initially part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), the southern

denomination. The 1983 denominational merger brought it into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The early twentieth century saw the rapid expansion of Washington’s population and symbolic significance. In 1901 the Senate Park Commission re-envisioned the National Mall providing the plan that guided it toward its now familiar form. Union Station (completed 1907) provided a new model of capital grandeur, and Episcopalians’ plans for the Washington National Cathedral (foundation stone 1907) aspired to give Christianity a prominent place in it. Meanwhile the growth of Washington’s population, particularly in World War I and afterward, suggested that prominent new churches were needed by all denominations in this strategic center.

Church of the Pilgrims finds its origin at this time, as Andrew R. Bird, the energetic minister of Second Presbyterian Church (founded 1903), suggested that Southern Presbyterians should have a church dedicated to providing a home for transplants or “pilgrims” from the South. Supported by resolutions of the General Assembly of the PCUS in 1920, 1921, and 1922, he raised money throughout the South for a new home for Second Presbyterian, renamed “Church of the Pilgrims.” Newspaper advertisements regularly called it “the Southland’s Gift to the National Capital.”

The Gothic revival church originally centered on a commanding central pulpit presiding over an altar-like communion table. It was located picturesquely over the Rock Creek Parkway in a fashionable and prominent area of the city. Its architect, Benjamin Flournoy, was the son of the pastor of Bethesda Presbyterian and the grandson of a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Pew dedications and its detailed, mosaic stained-glass windows reflect contributions from throughout the South. The windows feature both biblical scenes and more recent saints and heroes including, in the Music Window, J.S. Bach, in the Discipleship window, Martin Luther, John Knox, John Huss, Peter Waldo, and D.L. Moody, and in the Missionary window, David Brainerd, David Livingstone, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and

lesser known missionaries Robert Morrison (China), John Leighton Stuart (China), Samuel P. Fulton (Japan), and Motte Martin (Congo).

In the 1960s under Minister Herbert Meza, the church began to establish a progressive identity. The church's historic "representative church" status in the PCUS and its commitment to urban ministry, helped scuttle the prospect of PCUS support for a new National Presbyterian Church when that congregation sought to relocate from nearby Connecticut and N to its more suburban site. Since 1973, the church has hosted "The Pilgrimage" a hostel-like program for visiting groups serving in social ministries. The church is a More Light congregation and has long been supportive of the GLBQT community.

Sites on or near route

Statue of Saraswati, goddess of education, Indonesian Embassy, erected 2013
2020 Massachusetts Ave NW

Statue of Mohandas K. Gandhi
21st St and Massachusetts Ave NW (near Indian Embassy).

Islamic Center of Washington, proposed 1945, completed 1957.
2551 Massachusetts Ave NW

Kahil Gibran Memorial
3101 Massachusetts Ave NW

Apostolic Delegation (Vatican Embassy)
3339 Massachusetts Ave NW

Washington D.C. Buddhist Cultural Center
(Soka Gakkai International-U.S.A.), completed 2008
3417 Massachusetts Ave NW

St. Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral (originally St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church / National War Memorial), proposed 1948, completed 1963
3500 Massachusetts Ave NW

Washington Branch, Community of Christ (originally Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), 1953
3516 Massachusetts Ave NW

St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral, 1951-55
36th St and Massachusetts Ave NW

Washington National Cathedral (Episcopal), proposed 1890, completed 1990
Massachusetts Ave and Wisconsin Ave NW

Sikh Gurdwara, DC (originally National Gurdwara)
3801 Massachusetts Ave NW, proposed 1964, completed 2006 (closed in 2011 and reopened under new name in 2013).

Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church ("The National Church"), proposed 1852, opened at original downtown site 1869, first phase of current building 1930-35
One block to the left as we turn on Nebraska Ave, 3401 Nebraska Ave., NW



Stop 2: National Presbyterian Church
4101 Nebraska Ave NW
Architect: Harold Wagoner, 1967-1969,
stained glass by Willett Studios
This national church project began as that of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA), which before this site was secured had become the United

Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1958. Since the 1983 merger the denomination is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

While this church is one of the capital's newest "national" churches, it houses one of its oldest congregations. In early Washington, D.C., Presbyterians claimed prominent civic space through several churches including F Street Church (later New York Avenue Presbyterian) near the White House and First Presbyterian near Judiciary Square. The Romanesque revival Church of the Covenant at Connecticut and N Street

(1887-1889) continued this tradition. A proposal, however, by Supreme Court Justice John M. Harlan in 1903 that the General Assembly of the PCUSA support the erection of a "Presbyterian Cathedral" started the effort for a "National Presbyterian Church." National support was not forthcoming in Harlan's days, nor when the effort was revived in the 1920s. This was in large part due to the rivalry between the city's Presbyterian congregations and the rather un-Presbyterian character of a "cathedral." These were overcome in the 1930s, however, in part by the merger of Covenant and First. This congregation, housed in the 1889 Connecticut Avenue building, became the National Presbyterian Church in 1947.

This congregation and its minister, Edward L.R. Elson, received significant attention when President Eisenhower was baptized and joined the church shortly after becoming president. With Eisenhower attending regularly and the general expansion of church activities the church was pressed for space. The time seemed ripe to many for the erection of a landmark national church approaching the scale of the Washington National Cathedral and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Retired ambassador William S. Culbertson led this effort, attempting to secure at one point the site where the Washington Hilton was later built. In 1960, designs by Edward Durrell Stone for a site on Massachusetts Avenue between Wisconsin and Nebraska Avenues were unveiled before President Eisenhower. This rugged site, however, proved too costly to develop even with the financial support of Henry R. Luce of *Time* magazine. Thus it was sold and the current site, formerly occupied by a children's home, was purchased and the cornerstone laid by Eisenhower in 1967. Initially the complex housed both the National Presbyterian Church, a congregation, and the National Presbyterian Center, an agency of the denomination. While arrangement helped secure more denominational support for construction, denominational budget cuts in the 1970s soon led to the defunding of the center.

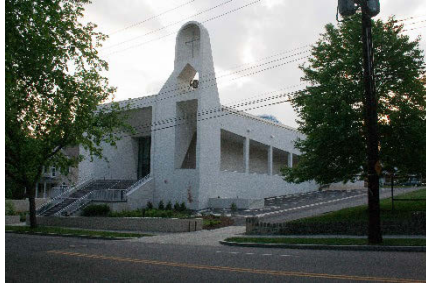
The complex incorporates both stone structures from the former children's home and Harold Wagoner's Modern Gothic design. An elaborate symbolic program seeks to integrate Biblical, Presbyterian, and American themes, in

three spaces, the narthex, the sanctuary, and the Chapel of the Presidents. Its complex windows are detailed in *Facets of Faith: Seeing the Light through the Windows of the National Presbyterian Church* (2011).

The narthex includes stained glass windows from the former church by Tiffany and Booth studios. The chandelier from the old church is here as well with flags of countries with Reformed churches.

The windows in the sanctuary and the Chapel of the Presidents are by Willett Studios in the modern and somewhat abstract style of faceted glass. Biblical figures appear in the small windows along the nave, the large window in the right hand transept depicts "The Church in the World Today" and features many modern heroes in the central lighter section, which is a map of the world. These include John Witherspoon, Mohandas Gandhi, Billy Graham, Paul Tillich, John Mott, and Martin Luther King. A unique feature of the window is representation of negative forces in the lower darker section, including Lenin, Marx, denominational schism, and the K.K.K.. The left-hand transept window depicts the church triumphant, including the verse "Behold I make all Things New" in the center and the four horsemen of the apocalypse across the bottom. The lancet windows at the corner of nave and transept depict various Early Christian and Reformed confessions.

The Chapel of the Presidents is designed as a memorial to President Eisenhower and includes the kneeler upon which he was baptized in the Connecticut Avenue building. Windows along the wall of the chapel depict how faith influenced the work of six Presidents, Washington, Lincoln, T. Roosevelt, Wilson, F. Roosevelt, and Eisenhower. The large window over the baptistery depicts "One Nation Under God." It is anchored by depictions of the First Prayer in the Continental Congress on one corner and the adoption of the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom on the other, suggesting on the one hand the religious foundation of the nation on the one hand and freedom and disestablishment on the other. Various religious groups are depicted above these, including Mormons, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Asian religions.



Stop 3: Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Church

7142 Alaska Ave NW
 Architect: Alexis Moukarzel, 2001-2006

The Syriac Maronite Church of Antioch is an eastern Catholic church which has affirmed its communion with the Church of

Rome since 1182. It takes its name and traces its origin to Maron, a fourth-century monk. It follows a unique West Syrian liturgy and is closely associated with Lebanese identity. The Patriarch of the Maronite Church resides in Jounieh, outside Beirut, Lebanon.

In 1961 Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Seminary was founded in Washington to be part of the complex of Catholic institutions gathered around Catholic University. A small community of Maronites soon began worshipping at the seminary and gradually grew to erect their own simple building and achieve parish status in 1976. The church was regularly visited by dignitaries from Lebanon, but the structure did not seem suitable to this purpose. Dominic Ashkar became pastor of the parish in late 1987 with a charge to build a suitable building. While it may have been easier to build a church elsewhere in the metropolitan area, the determination was made to remain in the District and adjacent to the seminary. After years of fundraising, Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Peter Sfeir presided at the groundbreaking in 2001. Designed by Lebanese architect, Alexis Moukarzel, the church was dedicated in 2006.

The modern sculptural form of the church establishes a distinctive presence in the city while alluding to the simplicity of Christian antiquity and to the bright Mediterranean sun of Lebanon. The church is designed to lead worshipers through darkness to light. A colonnaded processional gallery runs along the right-hand side of the church from the parking lot at the rear of the building to the bell tower and entrance to the church. Its roof steadily increases as the worshiper approaches the church entrance. The entrance narthex funnels worshipers into the nave. The nave then

ascends toward the altar which is bathed in light from a glass dome. Near the entrance, the baptismal font sits in an egg-shaped baptistery that suggests rebirth. The simple furnishings of the church and the easy accessibility of the altar from the nave reflect the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council on the action of the liturgy and the participation of the people in it.

Sites on or near route

Cross streets are in reverse alphabetical order when driving south
 Most are immediately north of listed cross street.

There are many houses of worship on this portion of 16th St. Not all are listed.

Chùa Giác Hoàng (Vietnamese, Buddhist)
 5401 16th St NW

Washington Buddhist Vihara (“first Theravada monastic community in United States”), 1965
 5017 16th St NW

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, third ward, meetinghouse, circa 2011
 Emerson and 16th St (4901 16th St NW)

Church of Christ
 Decatur and 16th St (4801 16th St NW)

19th Street Baptist Church (organized 1836, one of the city’s first independent African American Churches; this building originally built for a synagogue)
 4606 16th St NW

Mosaic Church of the Nazarene (originally “First,” then “National” before circa 2007 re-launch), present building 1953
 Webster and 16th Street (4401 16th Street NW)

Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church
 4335 16th St NW

Grace Lutheran Church (ELCA, originally Joint Synod of Ohio)
Varnum and 16th St (4300 16th NW)

Northwest Community Church (original National Memorial Church of God
(the Anderson, Ind., denomination), proposed 1936, opened 1942,
relaunched under current name *circa* 2005)
Taylor and 16th St (4100 16th Street NW)



**Stop 4: Saint John the Baptist Russian
Orthodox Cathedral**
4001 17th St NW

This church is part of the Russian
Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. The
division of Russian Orthodox in the
United States stems from Soviet rule. In
1946, a council of Russian Orthodox in

the United States decided to affirm the patriarch of Moscow as its spiritual
head, even though he was under Soviet rule. The dissenting minority is
represented by Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia (ROCOR), while
the majority is now known as the Orthodox Church in America (whose St.
Nicholas Cathedral is on Massachusetts Ave.) In 2007, communion was
restored between the ROCOR and the patriarch of Moscow.

This parish was organized in 1949 under St. John Maximovich who later
became bishop of San Francisco. For its first nine years, the congregation
worshipped in the Chapel of the Resurrection of the Washington National
Cathedral. The present site was secured in 1956 and the congregation
moved into the building in 1958. The church is built in the seventeenth-
century Muscovite-Yaroslav-style. Scenes from the life of John the Baptist
appear above the exterior doors. The interior is ordered into the three
traditional spaces of narthex, nave, and, behind the iconostasis, the
sanctuary. As is in many traditional Orthodox churches, there are no pews
in the nave. Worshipers stand for the liturgy. The church is richly
ornamented with icons throughout, including those on a four-tiered
iconostasis. Weekly liturgies include those in both English and Church
Slavonic.

Sites on or near route

In Mount Pleasant / Columbia Heights many cross streets do not conform
to the alphabetical pattern.

Trinity A.M.E. Zion Church, building originally Church of Christ, Scientist
3505 16th St NW

St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church, 1928-29
16th St and Newton St, NW

Shrine of the Sacred Heart, 1922
Statue of Cardinal James Gibbons, 1928-32
3211 Sacred Heart Way (faces 16th across park)

Next Step Public Charter School (originally Central Presbyterian Church
(PCUS), cornerstone laid by church member, President Woodrow Wilson,
1913-1914)
16th St and Irving St (3047 15th St NW)

Equestrian Statue of Francis Asbury, 1924
In park on west side of 16th Street at Mt. Pleasant



Three churches near 16th St and
Columbia Road NW

National Baptist Memorial Church, built
through the joint effort of the Northern
and Southern Baptist Conventions,
proposed 1917, completed 1924
Columbia Road and 16th St NW
(eastside),

All Souls Church Unitarian, 1913-1924
Harvard St and 16th St NW (2835 16th St., NW)

Unification Church (originally Washington Chapel, Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints, 1932)
Columbia Road and 16th St NW (westside)

guide prepared by David Bains