



Amazing Grace

Grace Church Parish House • Bruce R. Wardell, Architect

For more than 80 years, the humble parish house of Grace Church in Cismont sat in quiet deference to the main church, a Gothic stone edifice designed in 1845 by the prominent Philadelphia architect William Strickland. The relationship between the two buildings was set by parishioners who, in the 1920s, debated what kind of building would be fitting beside their revered old church.

“The controversy back then was whether to add to the church or build something beside it,” says architect Bruce Wardell, AIA. “This English-cottage style hall came out of that. It was so different from the original church, and that was the intent. That way the original maintained its integrity and stature.”

But growth of the congregation and an active children’s ministry eventually stretched the old parish hall to its limits. Church leaders began to plan an expansion of the building that would provide a larger meeting space, additional classrooms, a modern kitchen, and wheelchair accessibility. Wardell – whose Charlottesville firm, Bruce R. Wardell Architect, was commissioned



for the job – recognized that the new functional elements would more than double the size of the old parish house. Even so, it had to continue to bow to the original church. To keep from dividing the membership, Wardell’s office held “congregational town meetings” to seek reactions on design alternatives. Parishioners packed the existing hall and overflowed into the corridors, reinforcing the very need for the project.

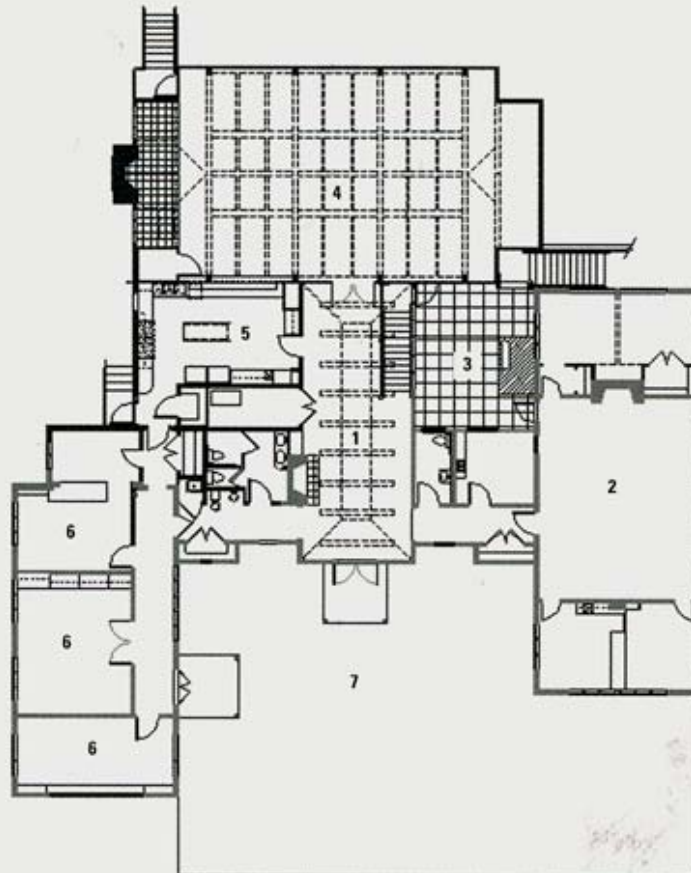
Inspiration for the new parish hall came from the trusswork in the historic church. Wardell framed the loft-like interior with pegged timber trusses. He configured one end of the room to serve as an auditorium. At the other end, a fireplace and casual arrangement of chairs create a good spot for small gatherings. The new commercial kitchen equips the room well for many kinds of events.

To shield the new addition from the old stone church, Wardell placed it behind the existing parish hall. In the process, he closed the old side doors and created a new main entrance on the ground floor that leads into a generous narthex – the former library. Three new classrooms also occupy the lower floor.

Great pains were taken to make the addition fit snugly with the existing parish hall. The cornices, windows, roof slate, and new chimney were all designed to echo the original building. And particular attention was paid to matching its troweled stucco finish and color. Why so much effort? Answers Wardell: “Our stated goal in the very first interview was that people not realize the building had ever been added to.”
 – *Vernon Mays*



Stairs to the upper courtyard make a natural transition between the two buildings.



- 1 Narthex
- 2 Chapel/Classroom
- 3 New Courtyard
- 4 Parish Hall
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Office
- 7 Front Terrace (Below)



Upper Floor Plan



The old parish house (at left in photo, left) and new addition form a picturesque ensemble. Inside, the main hall (above left) echoes the original church’s spirit.