

# THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A narrative by Kelly Norrell

The beautiful stained glass windows of the First Presbyterian Church of Knoxville reflect both the colorful history of the church and the diverse, rich styles of the artisans who created them. Toughness, vision, ingenuity and resilience were required of those who led this church forward from its beginnings in 1792. The church's selections of stained glass artisans, and the work they went on to do, resonate in a fascinating way with the church's story.

The windows at First Presbyterian reflect at least three different movements within the art of stained glass. Adjectives that have been used to describe our windows have included "simple," compared with the more Gothic or Victorian styles of other churches' windows; "elegant," "comforting," and "varied." The story of how they came to be is exciting and full of heroes. Best of all, it is still unfolding.

The church has 10 stained glass windows in its sanctuary and two in its narthex. There are two more at the north chancel entrance, and a window and door enclosing our Columbarium, making a total of 15. There is at least one more window covered up in its walls. The historic windows came from at least four studios: Tiffany Studios of New York, A.L. Brink Stained Glass Studio of New York, Willet-Hauser Art Glass Company of Philadelphia, and (attributed to) Flora MacDonald of the MacDonald Glass Works of Boston.

In 1897, the church began plans to build a new sanctuary. It would be the church's third. The first (for both our church and the City of Knoxville) was known as the Brick Meeting House and was built in 1812-1816; and the second took its place between 1852-1855. When longtime church member Sophia Churchwell died in 1897, she left a provision in her will that she would donate \$5,000 for a new sanctuary for First Presbyterian Church, provided that the church raise \$20,000 for the building fund outside of her bequest. She stipulated that \$1,000 of the money should be used to purchase a memorial window. The church raised the money.

On Sunday, Sept. 28, 1902, the new sanctuary, built for an estimated \$30,000, opened its doors and held services for the first time. It was a graceful, low-hipped roof building with a Grecian portico and Ionic columns, 26 feet shorter than today's sanctuary. The 1902 sanctuary would seat 625 people. A newspaper clipping from that day reported:

"The church will have four fine memorial windows. Chief of these is a window in memory of William Park, Mrs. Churchwell's father, which, it is said, costs about one thousand dollars. The other windows are in memory of members of the White family, deceased, the Rayls and Mr. S.B. Boyd, the latter being donated by Mrs. Isabella Boyd. The Churchwell window is at the front of the building and is a very handsome memorial."

Who made those windows and what did they look like? All of these windows – the Park memorial window, the White memorial window, the Rayl window, and the Boyd window – are still in the church, although one, the Rayl window, has been greatly altered. Besides those four, the new church apparently had nine other windows. Pictures show that there were five windows on each of the north and the south sides on the sanctuary and three at the State Street opening of the church.

A walk through the church today quickly brings all that history to life. Four of the earliest windows have been attributed to Flora and Ruby MacDonald, daughters of stained glass artisan Donald MacDonald of Boston. Even though the church has no record of who made those windows, Lance Kasparian of Salem, MA, historical architect and expert on Donald MacDonald, has said he believes they are the MacDonald sisters' work. He found a scrapbook with newspaper clips attesting to this. He even produced photographs of Flora and Donald MacDonald making the windows recognizable as those in our sanctuary today.

This is a wonderful piece of history that clearly belongs to this church. Donald MacDonald was an esteemed pioneer in the making of stained glass windows. His studio, MacDonald Glass Works of Boston, was in operation from 1888 until his death in 1916. His daughter, Flora, became a stained glass artist also, and her work first attracted public attention at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, when a window she had made received a gold medal. She went on to receive commissions to design windows for a number of churches. Lance Kasparian found a clipping dated around 1903 that said she was completed a series of beautiful stained glass windows for an old colonial church. A later clipping dated around 1916 quoted Flora McDonald herself. She said:

“Once when father heard of a church in Tennessee that was to install new windows, I told him I could bring the order back. I finally prevailed and started off. I found when I reached the church that certain New York artists had already submitted their plans and the committee was considering them. Well, smiled this canny Scotch American, I came back with the \$10,000 order.”

Lance told me that in 1993, Sarah B. McKeige, a MacDonald descendant, corresponded with Edith Watson and Brown McLendon Tate, historians of First Presbyterian Church. They provided photos from which she was able to determine that the window depicting the three Marys at Christ's tomb is similar to a documented MacDonald window at Salisbury, MD. He said, “I would say that all four windows are now well documented and recognizable to me as Flora's work.”

Flora reported getting a \$10,000 order from the church. That meant she probably made more than four memorial windows – possibly other ornamental windows among those in the sanctuary. The minister's yearly salary then, by comparison, was only \$1,800. MacDonald's work seems to have been part of an initial overall scheme, including permanent memorials and more simple decorative windows, which were later replaced with memorial work by other designers. But the New York studio, which Flora mentioned in her newspaper interview, was probably the studio of the famous stained glass artist Louis Comfort Tiffany, because our collection includes three Tiffany windows that date from the same time.

A bit of description helps put those windows in their place. The sanctuary windows are arranged in a balanced configuration down both the south and north walls. The four windows we attribute to the MacDonalds are the third, fourth and fifth windows from the pulpit on the south side, and the fourth window from the pulpit on the north side. The Park and White windows are large, three-part figured windows set directly opposite one another – the Park window on the south wall and the White window on the north wall. These windows portray the birth and resurrection of Jesus. The two windows on either side of the Park window are also figured windows. The Boyd window on the left portrays Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The unnamed window to the right of the Park window portrays Jesus with outstretched arms and hands and the inscription, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

All four of these windows are representative of a movement of American artists away from the translucent stained glass used in Europe to a more opaque glass, which transmits little light. Proponents of this style said it drew attention toward the glass as an art form and away from floods of colored light pouring through the translucent glass. These windows have darkened, possibly because of coal heating which deposited soot upon them. Such darkening was universal because so many churches were at one time heated with coal. Another characteristic of these four windows is the simple, geometric borders. Notice that the Park and the White windows appear to be companion pieces, and the Boyd and “Come Unto Me” windows are alike. All the figures in these windows have a sympathetic, earthy quality.

At about the same time that the 1902 church commissioned the MacDonalds, it also commissioned the Tiffany Studios. Kasparian said it was not uncommon for churches to assemble a collection of windows by different studios. This was partly due to the windows being funded by private sources over time. There are three existing windows attributable to Tiffany. One of these was the Rayl window, the most prominent

window in the early church. It was a large, double window situated at the State Street entrance and consisting of at least three sections – two rectangles and a circle. This window was a memorial to church member Jesse Addison Rayl, a ruling elder in the church for 40 years and the first president of the Knoxville School Board. He was married to Anne Elizabeth Strong, daughter of Dr. Joseph Churchill Strong, one of the founders of the church.

Today, that window is in the narthex, but it has had quite a journey. It began facing State Street. In about 1924, the window was moved to the chancel at the east end of the sanctuary. Then, in 1947, the church purchased a Christ mosaic to go in the chancel, and the Rayl window was moved back to the State Street entrance. The four pillars, which had previously been grouped in pairs on each side of the portico, were now equally spaced, and the center wall of the portico was moved outward to create a narthex. An artist unknown to us divided the window into two, each half now a freestanding window and located at staircases leading to the balcony.

Each of the windows now consists of one of the two original rectangles with, at its top, one half of the original circle. The two windows are rich in color and incorporate two signature components of Tiffany windows: Favrite Glass (colorful, iridescent glass) and jewels (faceted glass). The windows have no Biblical scene. Knoxville stained glass maker Laura Parham noted that creation of Biblical scenes in art is viewed by some as making a graven image, and that perhaps the benefactor took that view and chose alternate expression.

A second window mentioned in Tiffany's book, "A Partial List of Windows" (1910), the Barker Memorial window, was unknown to current members. We thought that the author of the book had either made a mistake or that somehow the Barker Memorial Window had been lost. But a Tiffany historian named Wayne Boucher of Cambridge, England, contacted us last summer. He said he believes the giant Rayl window IS the Barker Memorial window. He said:

"Jesse Rayl had a daughter, Jessie, who married a Barker. Tiffany, in his list, often gave the name of the donor rather than the name of the person whom the window was in memory of, presumably because it was the donor that the company dealt with. I would be willing to bet that is the situation here, that she with some of her siblings was the donor, which is why Tiffany called it the Barker Memorial Window."

The other Tiffany window is the third window from the pulpit on the north wall. This one, the Vanuxem Memorial window, also called "Angels of Praise," is one of two windows from First Presbyterian Church recorded in Louis Comfort Tiffany's book, "A Partial List of Windows" (1910).

"Angels of Praise" is said to demonstrate Tiffany's skill in achieving color and texture within the glass itself. Instead of applying paint to the stained glass to achieve shading and texture, Tiffany pioneered the use of opalescent glass, internally coloring it to achieve tonal gradations, lines, and textures. Notable in "Angels of Praise" are the details in the wings and robes of the angels, Tiffany's use of fabric glass which has rolls and ripples for texture, and his use of a technique called "plating", in which several layers of glass are used to obtain differing tones in color. This window was given in memory of Frederick William Vanuxem and his wife, Elizabeth Kennedy Vanuxem who were married on May 9, 1854. Mr. Vanuxem was in the book selling business with Jesse A. Rayl. The Vanuxems had several children, the two oldest being born in Knoxville. The Vanuxems moved to Philadelphia in about 1858. Frederick, who ended up selling life insurance, died in 1880, and Elizabeth died in 1901. Probably one or more of the children donated the window in 1902. Whoever did possibly decided that Knoxville more than Philadelphia was their spiritual home.

Incidentally, there is a window very like our “Angels of Praise” at First Presbyterian in Lockport, NY. That window, however, dates from the 1940s, whereas ours is much earlier. Stained glass experts have reported that there are other churches around the country with similar windows, but the double angel windows are not so common.

The next windows to be added are the four windows nearest to the pulpit – two on the south side, and two on the north. When the church renovated the sanctuary in 1947, it commissioned four beautiful windows from the A.L. Brink Studio (New York), replacing two simple, ornamental windows on either side (probably made by Flora MacDonald) and adding two more. These windows, which portray scenes from the life and ministry of Jesus, are remarkable for several reasons:

- They are highly translucent in a style similar to the treatment of stained glass found in European cathedrals, using brilliant blues and reds
- They reflect a very high level of skill, said Laura Parham: the balance of the design, the artistry and the use of difficult techniques such as one called silver stain, in which silk screen and painting are used together
- Every piece of glass is painted and fired to exquisite effect, with meticulously painted details on clothing and coloring on wings
- The figures have a manicured, Gothic look with oversized eyes, halos and well-groomed hair

The windows were given in memory of, respectively, Amanda Morgan White and her husband, Joseph T. McTeer (showing the Annunciation, the angels appearing to the shepherds, and the magi visiting the holy family); John and Anne Dempster (showing the flight into Egypt, Jesus in the temple, and Jesus in his parents’ carpentry shop); Elizabeth Groves Madden (showing Jesus being baptized, Jesus healing the sick, and Jesus with the children); and Mrs. Robert Mountcastle (showing Jesus leaving the tomb, ascending into heaven, and reigning in heaven).

The newest window in the sanctuary, fifth from the pulpit on the north side, depicts “Jesus Feeding the Multitude.” It is a translucent, hand-blown, leaded glass window done in a realistic style with decorative, medieval influences, said its creator, Crosby Willet of the Willet Hauser Architectural Glass Company. The window shows Jesus blessing the basket of fish and loaves presented by a young boy while the hungry crowds look on. His disciple, Andrew, speaks to him as he blesses the food. Lilies are a recurring motif throughout the window.

Lucie Polk, a member of the church committee overseeing the window's creation, explained the origin of the design. The window was given in honor of the late Elizabeth Heiskell Smith in 2000 by her grandchildren, Elizabeth Lindsay Wall, Katherine Lindsay Fails of Florida and Powell Smith Lindsay of Washington, D.C. In honoring the Smith family, best known as founders of the White Lily Flour Company, the window reflects an ancient tradition.

"We talked with a variety of artists and company representatives both locally and nationally, learning a bit more from each conversation and meeting," said Lucie.

"One of the artists made the point that in medieval times a guild often donated a window to a church. The symbol of that guild would be incorporated into the window. That led our train of thought to the Smiths and White Lily, then to bread, then to loaves and fishes. It was somewhat of an 'Aha!' moment."

The late Betsy Worden headed that committee. The Rev. Carswell Hughs, pastor at the time the window was installed, said the window echoes a longstanding priority of the church: “A vital part of our church’s ministry today is the outreach program, ministering to the poor and needy.”



Willet said that in fabricating the window, he and his team tried to achieve both fresh artistic and spiritual expression and maintain the existing look of the church. To do that, Willet salvaged elements from the first window, a simple, opalescent one probably made by Flora MacDonald, and incorporated them into the new one. These elements included the top, semi-circular piece of the window, with its recurring theme of lilies, the window's border, and some of the stylized lilies used in the base of the new window. The result is a traditional depiction of a Biblical scene, consistent with the others around it, but with a gentle, storybook feel. Jesus alone wears a halo.

The newest stained glass windows, located in a small parlor just outside the north entrance to the sanctuary, were created and installed by Laura and Ben Parham of State of the Art, Inc. Stained Glass Studio of Knoxville. Vance Burkey and Peggy Hagler commissioned the first, completed in the summer of 2010, as a memorial to their parents, Ralph Dalmont Burkey and Louise Vance Burkey. At First Presbyterian, Ralph Burkey was a deacon and elder. He taught Sunday school and was an active member of the James Park Sunday School Class and the Men of the Church.

The window portrays Jesus with the sisters Mary, who listens at his feet, and Martha, who is working in the kitchen. The Rev. William Pender, pastor of First Presbyterian, noted that the scene sets the stage for this main entrance to the sanctuary. "Both things represented in the picture are necessary – spiritual reflection on one side and getting things done on the other. We are very responsible as Presbyterians, but we never forget to reflect and worship." The scripture passage is from the Last Supper and has no connection to the picture.

A second, adjoining window was commissioned by the Rosa Scott Sunday School Class in honor of present and deceased class members. This window has a wonderful story. Jeanne Fox, who was treasurer of the Rosa Scott Class, wanted the class to make a lasting contribution to the church one day, she was standing and looking at the new Burkey window. "I noticed that there was a blank window next to it. I thought, "What we need is a stained glass window with a Bible in it, because we're the Rosa Scott class and we're a Bible study class." Jeanne presented her vision to the class, and the other members agreed. They selected State of the Art Stained Glass Windows to make the window. "We picked out the glass and the colors," said Jeanne. "We decided to use the same pattern around the border that the Burkey window has to tie the two windows together." The window was installed in August 2011.

**SCROLL DOWN TO VIEW STAINED GLASS WINDOWS**



**Angels of Praise Window**

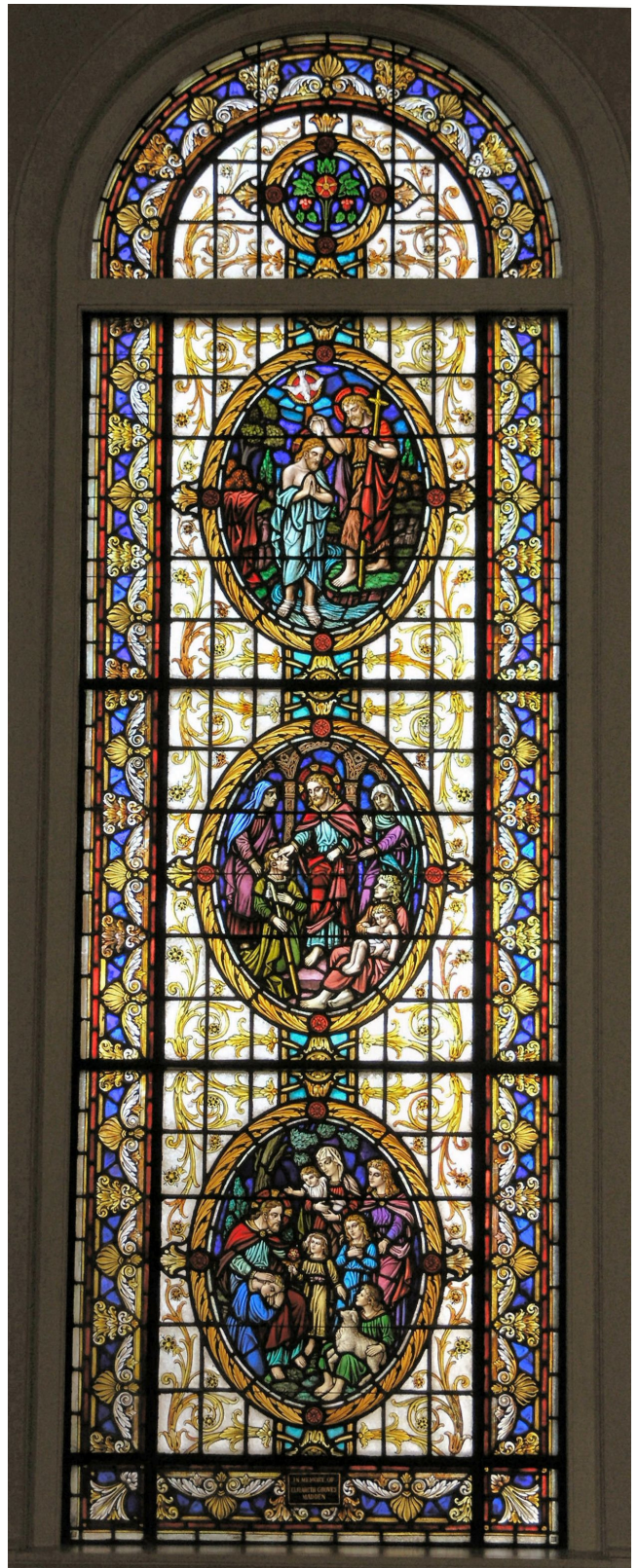


**Come Unto Me Window**



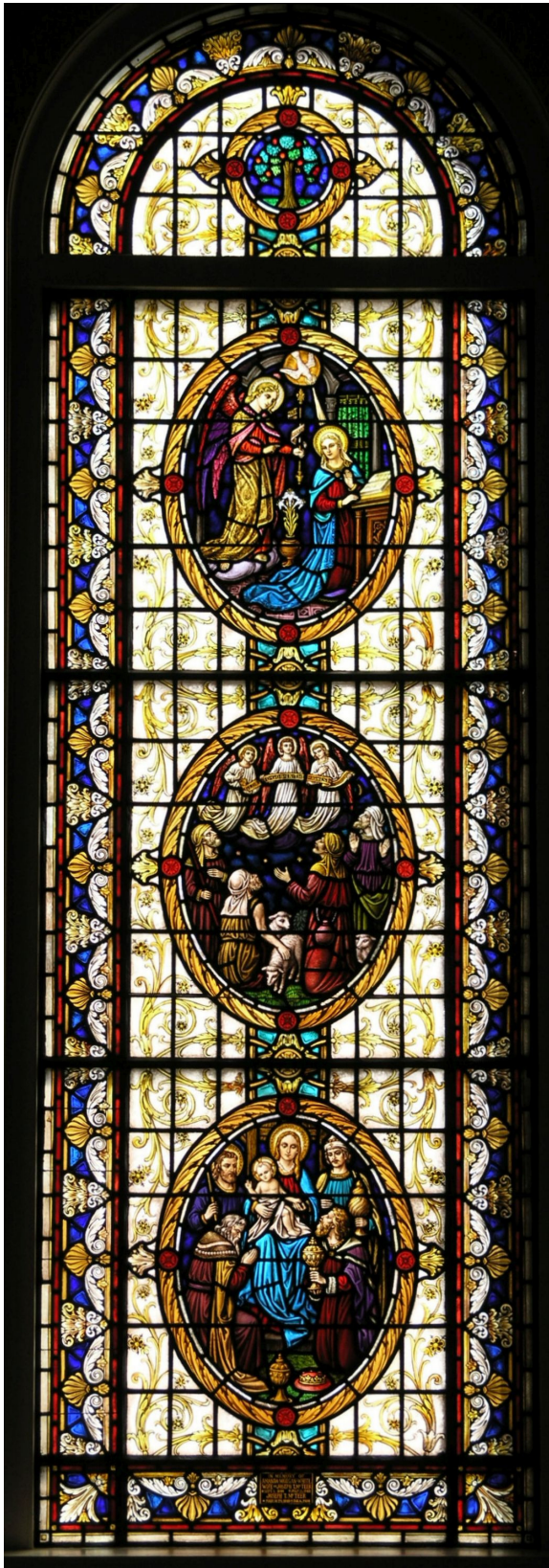


**Dempster Window**



**Madden Window**





McTeer Window

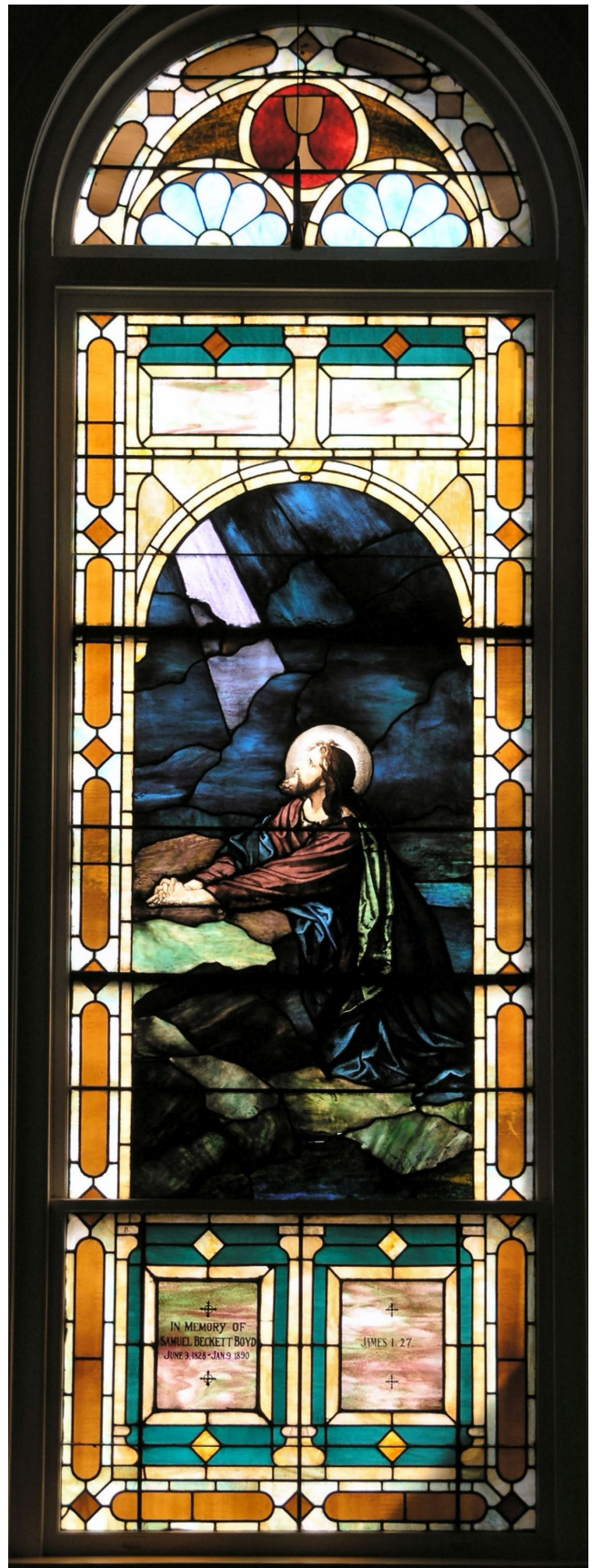


Mountcastle Window



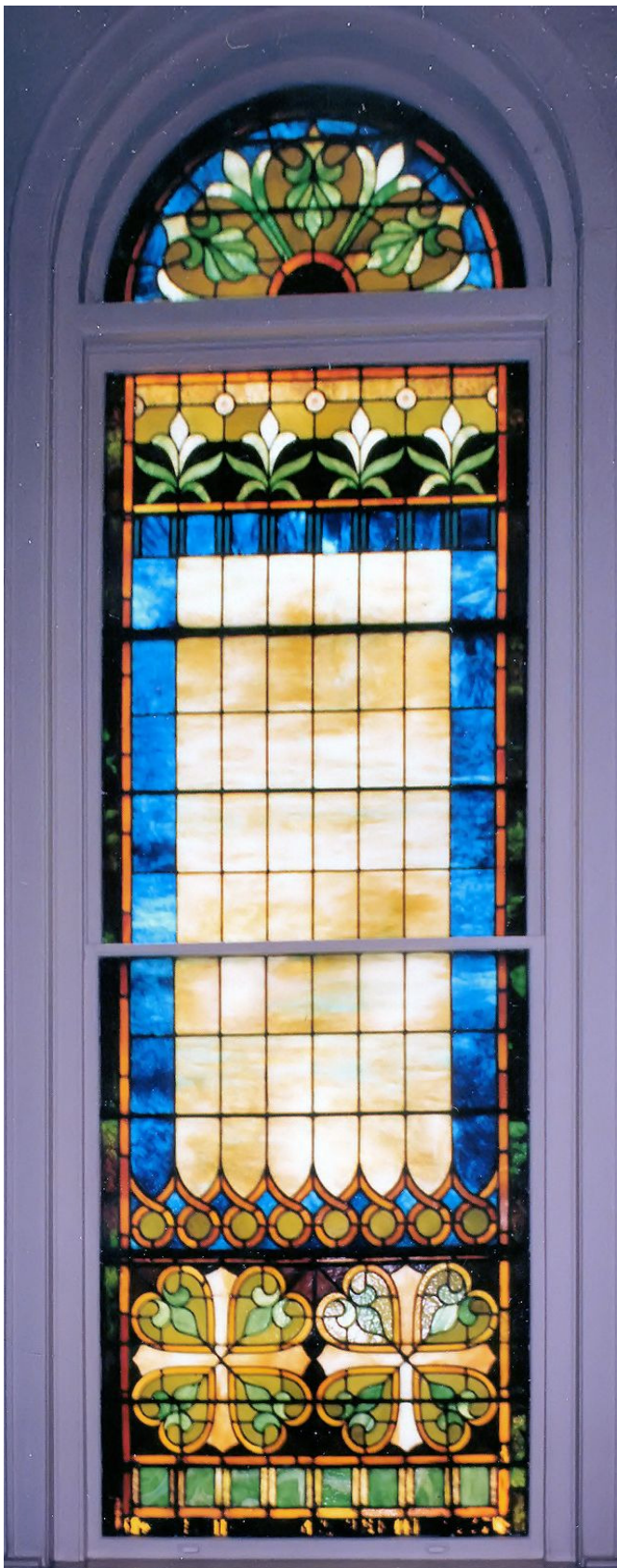


Smith Window

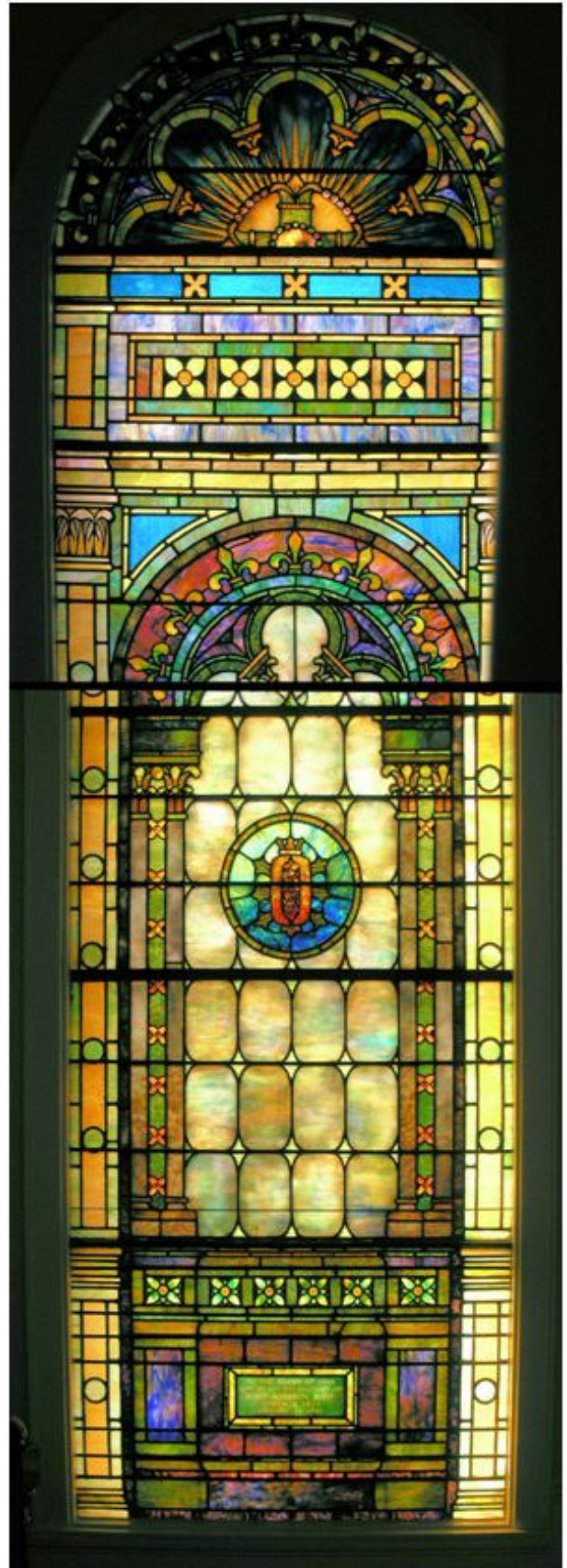


Samuel Beckett Boyd Window





**Hidden Window**



**Rayl Window**





White Memorial Window





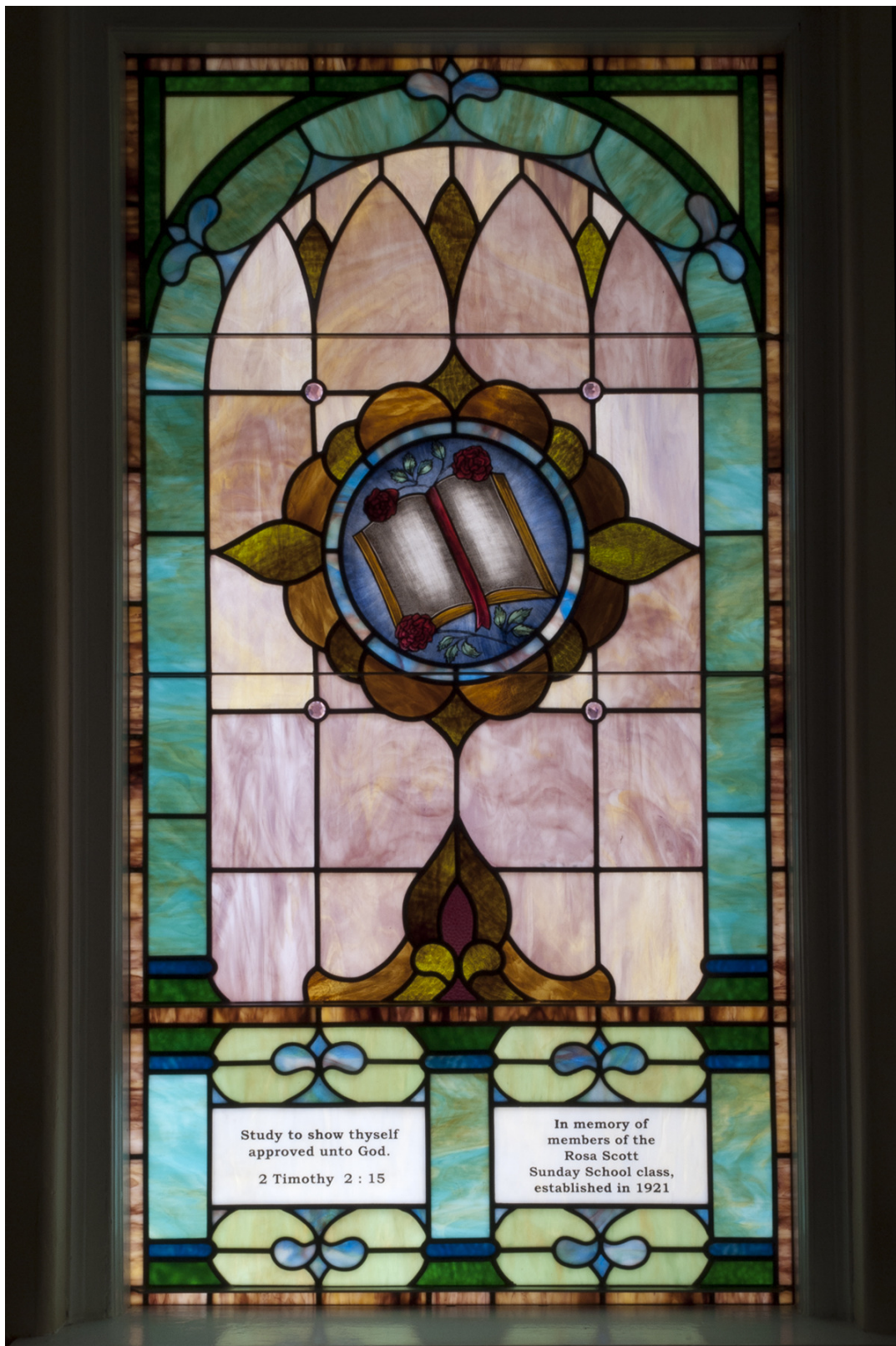
William Park Window





**Burkey Window**





**Rosa Scott Sunday School Class Window**