The First Episcopal Holy Union

In 1976, St. Stephen’s parishioners John Fortunato and Wayne Schwandt announced their intention to have a holy union ceremony at St. Stephen’s Church. The Rt. Rev. John T. Walker, Bishop Coadjutor of Washington, objected, as the Episcopal Church had not yet approved such rites. When the Rev. William Wendt and the vestry decided to override Bishop Walker, he threatened to cut off diocesan financial aid of about $7,000 annually. The participants then decided to relocate the service to Washington First Congregational Church, with full participation by members of St. Stephen’s Church.

This was the first time the rector of a parish in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington was willing to lead a Holy Union ceremony.

Coming a few short months after the vote to allow women to be ordained, the Fortunato/Schwandt holy union service caused another earthquake in the Episcopal Church. The service was a major catalyst for wider conversations about gay rights throughout the Episcopal Church.