

## **St George Free Serbian Orthodox Church**

The St George Free Serbian Orthodox Church is an imposing red brick building with a square bell tower, and the words 'St George' appear in large white letters of Cyrillic script on the western wall. This church is classed as a cathedral and is well-known as the largest congregation of Free Serbian Orthodox in Australia and New Zealand.

The church itself was established in 1958 after a working committee of 18 Serbian-Australians met and each donated one pound to begin the treasury. Construction was made possible by voluntary labour and donations. The present building was consecrated in January 1967 and became the seat of the diocese.

Like so many Fairfield communities, the congregation began with temporary premises. The first building was erected in 1961, and served as both a chapel, a hall and a meeting room. Prior to the erection of this building, services and meetings were held in borrowed premises such as the Cabramatta Council Chambers.

### **Architecture and symbolism**

The ornamental front gateway on the corner of Cabramatta Road and Bowden Street features the words 'Free Serbian Orthodox Church' in both Cyrillic and Roman scripts. At the centre of the arch you'll notice a plaque depicting St George on horseback slaying a dragon. This main gateway is only used for weddings, funerals and other special occasions.

Before entering the gate, Free Serbs cross themselves, as the entire grounds are considered a part of the Church and hence a sacred area with specific protocols. All doorways are decorated with a large crucifix.

The building is a fine example of post-war Byzantine architecture. Like all eastern churches the altar faces the East. The building consists of an altar and a nave, with an area for the choir on an upper level of the rear wall. The bell tower contains three bells, and these ring three times before services. For funerals, only one bell tolls.

Women are not permitted in the altar area. During services women stand on the left of the congregation, men on the right. There are no pews, as the congregation stands throughout the service. There are, however, several wall seats for elderly parishioners to lean on.

The church is well known for successful fundraising, and the church grounds continue to expand and develop. The interior of the cathedral is also beautifully decorated. Elaborate chandeliers hang from the ceilings, and the church has a collection of goldplated articles and robes. Near the altar area are two woodcarved thrones, one for the Bishop and one for the King.

The altar includes many icons showing scenes of Serbian Saints and Christ's life and death. Icons are devotional paintings depicting holy figures, usually on wood, and are typical of the Eastern Church. Parishioners believe that when the altar doors are open, Christ is with the congregation in the Cathedral.

### **Culture and community**

The *Free Serbian* title is central to the identity of this community. 'Free Serbian' churches were founded by loyalists, remaining loyal to the King and monarchy after the communist takeover in Yugoslavia. Similar organisations developed in Canada and the United States, and all remain staunchly anti-communist.

Christmas is celebrated on the 7 January, as the Free Serbian church has made a very deliberate decision to keep the old Julian calendar. The celebration begins

with a church service on Christmas Eve, and there is a strong emphasis on children throughout the festivities.

Parishioners fast for six weeks leading up to Christmas, and for seven weeks before Easter. There are other fasts throughout the year, and couples fast before their wedding. Cheese and dairy products, poultry and meat are forbidden during fasting, although fish can be eaten. Fasts are observed to demonstrate suffering, just as Christ suffered. During fasts parishioners may also go before the Priest to confess their sins.

Saints Days are celebrated throughout the year. Each family has a patron saint or protector, usually chosen to reflect the time when the family first converted to Orthodoxy. Families honour their patron Saint by attending Church in the morning. The family brings bread to be blessed during the service and then eaten during the day. On major Saints Days such as the celebrations of St George or of Saint Sava (Saint Sava played a central role in converting Serbian people from Christianity to Orthodoxy), guests from as far away as Wollongong and Canberra come to St George. In fact, the church has been air conditioned for the comfort of the large congregation.

Other important dates include Easter, which commemorates Christ's death with a strict fast and a midnight service on Good Friday followed by a traditional Easter meal on the Saturday. Heroes of the Serbian monarchy are also remembered throughout the year. Vidovdan is a major celebration, which commemorates the Battle of Kosovo in 1380, in which the Serbs were defeated by the Ottoman Turks. Members of the Church like to compare this battle to Australia's Anzac Day. Like Anzac Day, Vidovdan commemorates a military defeat, but also demonstrates resilience. The Serbs were beaten but not defeated.

Candles play a significant role in remembrance activities. Traditionally families will burn a very long taper on their Saint's Day. The candle should burn all day

and all night - and superstition holds that if the candle goes out, it will bring bad luck.

On entering the church members of the congregation cross themselves, approach the icons and light candles. Candles are lit on two levels inside the church - the lower level is for the dead, the higher level is for the living or for special prayers. It is customary to kiss the icons and to leave a donation.

Many people believe that for 40 days after a funeral, the spirit of the deceased is still present, visiting the family and relatives. After 40 days a service is held at the gravesite, and the dead are remembered every year on the anniversary of their deaths.

### **History and development**

The first Serbian immigrants arrived in Australia in the years after the end of the Second World War. The vast majority came from resettlement camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. Most began their lives in Australia in migrant camps. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw another period of Serbian migration, and in the late 1990s many refugees arrived fleeing wars in the Balkans. Many of these newcomers are not familiar with the Church, having grown up in communist Yugoslavia. Many Serbian refugees have been christened as adults in the St George Church.

### **Activities**

The Free Serbian Church is deeply committed to maintaining Serbian language and traditions. The Church is the centre for a wide range of activities, which teach and celebrate Serbian history and culture. A children's orchestra was founded and a drama group operates on its premises. The choir was formed in 1963 and remains active. In 1972 the Saturday School was established, and the first Sydney Serbian School building was consecrated here in 1983. The

services and all social activities are conducted in Serbian as part of a deliberate effort to make community members aware of and proud of their heritage.

On the church grounds is the Serbian School 'Vuk Karadzic'. The façade features a clock with Cyrillic numerals, and the school is named after the great Serbian Linguistic reformer of the nineteenth century, who standardised the Serbian Cyrillic script. The Sunday School teaches the Serbian language, history and culture, as well as Bible studies. Many of the students go on to study Serbian language for the Higher School Certificate.

The hall is also a meeting place for the Ladies Auxilliary and the children's folkloric group, which performs traditional dances at community functions.

The Church arranges many picnics and social outings. Strong links are maintained with the Monastery Hall outside Canberra. There is an annual kids camp which attracts children from Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Adelaide and throughout Australia. The St Sava celebration often coincides with the Australia Day long weekend, making it a major celebration.

### **Visiting and protocols**

For lay visitors, the main protocols are respect and decorum. Please refrain from being rowdy, and observe the usual protocols for visiting any Christian Church.

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