

Grace Episcopal Church Welcomes Members

In 1898, a small group of Episcopalians, living in the Ponca City area, began meeting together for worship in the traditional manner of their church, using The Book of Common Prayer. This "unorganized congregation" chose "St. Andrew's Episcopal Church."

The Rt. Rev. Francis Key Brooke (a descendant of Francis Scott Key, composer of "The Star Spangled Banner") was Oklahoma's first resident Episcopal bishop. On June 15, 1900, he made the first "bishop's visitation" to the Ponca City congregation. The Episcopalians had assembled at the Presbyterian Church for the visitation, and Bishop Brooke celebrated Holy Communion for them there. It was the first time that sacrament had been provided for the Episcopalians in Ponca City.

In 1902, St. Andrew's Church numbered seven families and all worship services were held in the Masonic Hall, located in the City Hall building at the southeast corner of Grand Avenue and Fifth Street.

During this time the Episcopal congregation, served by lay readers from the Episcopal congregation in Newkirk and other nearby communities, was formally recognized as a "mission church" of the Episcopal Missionary District of Oklahoma.

Episcopalians had plans to construct their own church building, and in 1914 a clapboard structure - referred to as the "Guildhall" - was erected on lots south of the City Hall at a cost of \$3000, with E. W. Marland serving the congregation as Senior Warden.

In 1923, the City Commission

of Ponca City request that all who owned property in the block bounded by Grand and Central Avenues and Fifth and Sixth Streets sell their property to the city so that a new municipal center, to occupy the entire block, could be erected. The church's lots were deeded to the city on March 7, 1923.

The Episcopalians then purchased two lots on Central Avenue and South Seventh Street and moved their Guildhall to that location. When moved, the building was turned so that its altar could be placed in the east end. Sometime during this transition, the name of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church was changed to Grace Episcopal Church.

In 1929, Grace Church Sunday services began to be broadcast over radio station WBBZ. Since the congregation lacked dedicated space for fellowship gatherings during this time, Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Marland entertained fellow church members several times in their lovely home.

With the congregation now growing, parishioners began to plan expansion of their facilities. An architect was engaged to design a new Parish House and begin plans for enlarging and remodeling the Guildhall into a proper church building. The Guildhall was elongated twenty-seven feet and a narthex (vestibule) was added facing Seventh Street.

The Parish House, a 36'X72' structure facing Central Avenue, was erected east of (and connected to) the enlarged church. Because many parishioners were active in organizing Ponca City's Little Theater group, he Parish House



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was designed with a stage for rehearsals and shows. The Parish House was first used February 10, 1931. In 1935, the Rev. Gordon V. Smith became the first rector of Grace Church, and later became the Episcopal Bishop of Iowa. Ponca City Episcopalians held worship, education, and fellowship activities at the corner of Central and Seventh until 1952.

On February 1, 1944, the Rev. Thomas O. Moehle became rector of Grace Church and continued in that position for 30 years. During his tenure, the church flourished and expanded, and plans for a new church building were envisioned. Lots were purchased, and architect J. Duncan Forsyth was engaged to design the new edifice.

The old church building, at Central Avenue and Seventh Street, was sold to the Bethel Temple congregation in 1951. Groundbreaking for the new church facilities, to be located at Grand Avenue and Thirteenth Street, was on April 15, 1951. In August of that year, the Parish House was moved to the new site and used for worship services while the new church was under construction.

To facilitate the moving process, the structure was split in the center and slowly moved along Ponca City's brick streets. Later, the Parish House was connected to the new church building, with administrative offices and other spaces for Sunday school classes added in 1954.

Grace Church continued to grow under Father Moehle's leadership. To accommodate the increasing attendance for Sunday school, the residence just north of the Parish Hall was purchased for classroom

space, and was named "Grace House" - and soon land directly across Thirteenth Street from the Parish Hall was acquired for use as a parking lot.

In 1954, the Episcopal Church Women (ECW), sponsored the first ballroom dance classes in the Parish Hall for Ponca City youth. Each year until the early 1990's, young people from the Ponca City community learned dance and social etiquette there.

A Moeller pipe organ, anticipated and planned for in the present church's original design, was installed in 1967. In the late 1970's, the "Stations of the Cross" were designed and sculpted in bronze by local artist Jo Saylor, and have been added in the church's nave. A wooden rare-dos, functioning as an organ screen, has been constructed separating the sanctuary's altar area from the organ pipe chamber in the apse.

Following Father Moehle's retirement in 1974, the Rev. B. Franklin Williams became Rector of Grace Church, serving until the summer of 1978. The Rev. Lawrence Boyd was called to Grace Church in 1978 from the Diocese of Fond du Lac (Wisconsin). He returned to Wisconsin to become Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in the Diocese of Eau Claire (Wisconsin). The Rev. Isaac Mason served Grace Church during the interim before the arrival of the Rev. John Loving, who arrived from Virginia to begin his ministry as rector in late 1983. Father Loving accepted a call in San Angelo, Texas in April 1990. Serving during the interim before the arrival of the new rector was the Rev. Richard Allen. Having just completed his 20th year as Grace Church's rector,

The Rev. Kenneth Armstrong came from St. Luke's Church, Ada, Oklahoma, on May 15, 1991.

Changes made during the 1980's include the construction of the columbarium Chapel of the Resurrection on the east side of the nave, dedicated in memory of Father Tom Moehle in 1988. Designed by parishioner Richard Winterrowd of Lewis Associates Architects, the Christian Education Center, with an additional small fellowship area, gift shop, library, and connecting cloister were added in 1997-98 for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the congregation. As was envisioned in the original plans, statues of the four gospel evangelists have been sculpted in Italy and installed

in the pulpit niches. The landscaped courtyard formed by the completion of the physical facilities has recently become the home of our newest sculpture - a large, welcoming, bronze statue of St. Francis of Assisi, which will soon have an accompanying outdoor altar.

From a fledgling congregation of only a few dedicated Episcopalians in 1898 to the vibrant and active community it is now, Grace Church has come a long way in the last 114 years. As the apostle Andrew said to his brother, Peter, "Come and see." What you will find is a friendly, dynamic, caring congregation which really takes to heart and puts into practice their motto, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You."

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