

GRACE CHURCH, PONCA CITY A BRIEF HISTORY

A group of Episcopalians began gathering for fellowship and worship using *The Book of Common Prayer* in the bustling frontier town of Ponca City sometime during 1898. When clergy could be had for the little Episcopal group, then known as St. Andrew's congregation, they came from the then larger towns of Newkirk, Pawhuska, and Pawnee.

On a rainy May 15, 1900, the Right Reverend Francis Key Brooke, first resident Episcopal bishop in Oklahoma, came to Ponca City for the first time to visit the few Episcopalians in the Ponca City vicinity. However, since it rained all day and travel was so difficult, Bishop Brooke could not meet with them that day. Bishop Brooke returned a month later and met with the Episcopal congregation and conducted Evening Prayer, followed by a celebration of Holy Communion the next morning. The Presbyterian Church in Ponca City had been made available to the Episcopalians for both services.

In 1905, the congregation, which was holding worship services in an upstairs area of the City Hall, began making plans to construct a church/guildhall immediately south of the City Hall building. Sometime between 1912 and 1914, the congregation's name was changed from St. Andrew's Church to Grace Church. In 1914, a clapboard building, referred to as the guildhall, was erected on the South Fifth Street lots (117 South Fifth Street) which had been purchased earlier.

The congregation increased slightly each year and by 1917 the vestry included the well-known Ponca City oil man and philanthropist (and later Governor of Oklahoma and United States Congressman), E. W. Marland, as the Senior Warden. The little Episcopal church included a women's guild of fifteen members and a Sunday church school with eight children. There were twenty-nine persons listed as "confirmed members and communicants" with worship services held twice a month.

From its beginning, and for much of its first twenty years, the fledgling congregation was served by lay readers and priests of then established churches in Newkirk, Pawnee, Pawhuska, and Guthrie.

In 1923, the church's South Fifth Street property was sold to the city to provide room for the expansion of the Civic Center. The Episcopal congregation then purchased lots at the corner of Seventh Street and Central Avenue where a new Grace Church building was constructed. It was here that Grace Church acquired its first official Parish Register when the Reverend Dederic S. Sandford, first Episcopal clergyman to reside in Ponca City, became Priest in Charge of Grace Church on April 20, 1924.

Father Sandford resigned in April, 1928, and was followed by the Reverend Harry Lee Virden, during whose tenure a Parish House was completed at a cost of \$8500. The Parish House included a small stage, due to the persistence and strong support of those members of the congregation who were also members of the local little theater group.

In the grip of the Great Depression in the 1930's, the vestry determined that the congregation was no longer financially able to support a resident priest, so the Reverend Harry Malcolm Kellam, Vicar of St. Thomas Church, Pawhuska, traveled to Ponca City twice monthly to provide services for Grace Church until he resigned in November, 1934.

It was at this time that, as a vestry member was later quoted as saying, "the vestry resolved to make this congregation go or close it out." The Reverend Gordon V. Smith, Vicar of St. James Church, Albion, Michigan, was called to Grace Church to begin his tenure on February 1, 1935. Under Father Smith's leadership, the church grew and gained strength. The mortgage loan incurred for the construction of the Parish House, which had fallen into arrears during the Depression, was paid off and when the Annual Convocation of the Missionary District of Oklahoma met in Ponca City in January, 1937, parish status was granted to Grace Church. At the Episcopal Church's General Convention in 1937, the Missionary District of Oklahoma was granted diocesan status as the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma.

World War II began in Europe in 1939, and Father Smith became the chaplain to the British men who were receiving pilot training at Ponca City's Darr School of Aviation. Father Smith continued to serve as Rector of Grace Church as well until he accepted a call to a parish in Des Moines, Iowa, in September, 1943.

The Reverend Thomas O. Moehle, Rector of Ascension Church, Stillwater, Minnesota, became Rector of Grace Church on February 1, 1944. Father Moehle found a church that, at its annual congregational meeting, had voted to authorize a committee to begin plans to build a new church. Lots were purchased at Thirteenth Street and Grand Avenue and architect J. Duncan Forsyth was engaged to design the new church.

Father Moehle worked very closely with Forsyth as well as with all the artisans whose stained glass, wood carvings, ironwork, and masonry were designed and crafted for Grace Church. Father Moehle always kept members of the Architecture Committee and vestry aware of his vision of a church building as “a building erected to the Glory of God, not for the convenience of man.” The long cherished dream of a new church structure in Ponca City was realized when, on Whitsunday (Pentecost Sunday), June 1, 1952, the Right Reverend Thomas Casady, Bishop of Oklahoma, dedicated the present Grace Church building.

Grace Church flourished during the thirty-year leadership of Father Moehle. An addition was made to the Parish House when it was moved from its original site behind the old church at Seventh and Central to its new location adjacent to the new church at Thirteenth and Grand. To provide more room for Christian education, a residence located north of the Parish Hall was purchased and designated Grace House for use as Sunday church school classrooms. A Moeller pipe organ was installed in 1967, and the Parish Hall was remodeled during the 1970's.

Following Father Moehle's retirement in 1974, the Reverend B. Franklin Williams IV became Rector of Grace Church, and served the parish until the summer of 1978. The Reverend Lawrence Boyd was called to Grace Church in 1978 from the Diocese of Fond du Lac (Wisconsin), remaining at Grace Church until he became Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in the Diocese of Eau Claire (Wisconsin). During Father Boyd's tenure, another house adjacent to church property was purchased for use by the expanding Sunday church school program and was designated St. Nicholas House. Grace Church's bronze Stations of the Cross were designed and created by nationally recognized local sculptor, Jo Saylor.

The Reverend Isaac Mason served as Interim Rector following Father Boyd's resignation until the arrival of the Reverend John H. Loving from Farmville, Virginia in October, 1983. During Father Loving's tenure as Rector of Grace Church, the Chapel of the Resurrection, a columbarium, was constructed and dedicated to the memory of Father Moehle, who had died in 1977. Father Loving resigned to accept a call to become Rector of Emmanuel Church, San Angelo, Texas in April 1990.

The Reverend Richard C. Allen served as Interim Rector until the Reverend Kenneth L. Armstrong arrived from St. Luke's Church, Ada, Oklahoma to become Rector of Grace Church on May 15, 1991. In June, 1996, Steven Mallory (a Grace Church parishioner) was ordained as a vocational deacon at Trinity Church, Tulsa, and assigned as a pastoral assistant at Grace Church.

In the spring of 1992, Father Armstrong appointed a Long Range Planning Committee charged with gathering information and formulating plans to provide for a physical plant to meet the congregation's needs as it approached a second century of service and worship in Ponca City. It was soon determined that the major need was for a Christian Education Center to house infant and toddler nurseries and Sunday church school classrooms for all ages. With hard work and many sacrificial gifts to fund it, the long needed Christian Education Center, designed by Richard Winterrowd and Troy Lewis, was dedicated on April 6, 1997 by the Right Reverend Robert M. Moody, Bishop of Oklahoma.

By the end of summer, 1997, the new parking lot had been paved and landscaping was in place for the expanded facilities. Appropriate furnishings and installation of stained glass windows in this newest expansion project provided ample and beautiful classroom space for Christian education at Grace Church.

In the spring of 2006, a major restoration and renovation of the Parish Hall was undertaken to provide expanded space adequate for fellowship events and music ministries. With the completion of the new office entrance area and sacristy in 2008, the facilities for worship, fellowship, and education at Grace Church are, like the people who make up the congregation at Grace Church, ready for whatever ministry God has in store for them in a Second Century with Grace.