

# The Church of the Ascension



In order to better understand the Church of the Ascension today, it is important to know the history of the parish. There exists a book by late parishioner George C. Giles: *History of the Church of the Ascension Chicago, Illinois 1857-1982*. The online full text of the book is hosted by Project Canterbury, an extensive repository of important documents regarding Anglican and Episcopal churches. This History begins with the story of the parish from its founding as a mission of St. James to the decisive and influential rectorate of the Rev. Canon Charles Palmer Dorset. At the time Fr. Dorset arrived at Church of the Ascension in 1869 the worship services at Ascension were characterized in the local newspaper as follows: “the type of churchmanship was of a breezy and inconsequential order, distinctly low.” By the time Fr. Dorset left the parish a little more than five years later in 1875, Ascension was said to be the most advanced Anglo-Catholic parish in the diocese of Illinois. The principles of the Oxford Movement and the belief that the Church of England was Catholic, and not Protestant, drove worship practices into a “High Church” mode. The liturgy at Church of the Ascension, even then, followed “Ritualist” practices including the use of candles, crosses, incense, hymnody, processions, lay servers, vested choirs and

fasting communions. These ritualistic practices were very controversial and condemned by many in the Episcopal Church hierarchy at that time. The front (west) side of the church seen from La Salle Boulevard. Liturgical music has been a major part of the worship service at Church of the Ascension from the very beginning of the parish in the mid-nineteenth century. Ascension had gained a reputation for fine music as early as 1866 after purchase of a new organ by Fr. Hiram W. Beers. The one-manual, nine-rank organ was built in Chicago in 1864 by Pilcher Bros. opus 58. (This instrument burned to the ground with the church in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871). Fr. Canon Dorset also placed a very high priority on music as well and by 1870 he had organized a boys choir that was performing regularly. The choir of twelve sang Evening Prayer each night in Gregorian chant and became Chicago's first vested parish choir. The Church of the Ascension first began meeting in a rental building on Oak St. between Wells and LaSalle. In November 1864, the church's rental lot was sold by its owners necessitating a move to the northwest corner of LaSalle Avenue and Maple Street. In September 1865, the vestry authorized purchase of the property on the northeast corner of LaSalle Avenue and Elm Street, where the church now stands, for \$8,640. A place of worship was built which the congregation first occupied in the summer of 1867. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 affected Church of the Ascension very dramatically. Ascension suffered the worst fire damage of any Episcopal parish in the city. The wooden church was completely consumed by flames in a few minutes and, apart from the font and communion vessels, nothing was saved. The homes of all parishioners and most of their businesses were also destroyed. In November 1871, the "Church of the Ascension" consisted of a parcel of land on LaSalle Avenue, a font, a chalice, a paten, and a group of faithful parishioners with very little money. The parish suffered in the recovery from the fire because of a lack of financial support from the Episcopal Church, which directed its efforts to Chicago churches that did not adhere to Catholic beliefs and practices. The crucifix on the front of the church, with inscription "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?" The rectorate of The Reverend Arthur Ritchie began in 1875. Fr. Ritchie came to Church of the Ascension from Church of the Advent, Boston. He led the Church through a time of continuing struggle against the Bishop because of the Bishop's disapproval of Catholic religious practices. Fr. Ritchie, like Fr. Dorset before him, supported controversial Catholic liturgical practices (like the use of flaming candles on the altar during the worship service) and expanded them, first in defiance of the Bishop and then later with his unofficial acquiescence. A midnight Mass celebrated on Christmas, 1875 was described in a local

newspaper as "quite an unusual service in the Episcopal Church." Silk vestments had replaced the plain linen ones which had previously been worn; and the Athanasian Creed was printed on cards for use by the congregation. During Lent of 1877, Fr. Ritchie introduced violet vestments and thereafter continued to use vestments of proper liturgical color. A daily Mass was celebrated. On Maundy Thursday the rector attracted negative attention from the local press by preaching on the subject of "the Real Objective Presence." He also had to embark on building program to accommodate an expanding parish. The present church building was constructed between 1881 and 1887 in the French Gothic style, to the designs of Albert Wilcox and John Tilton. Fr. Larrabee's Book - Prayers at Mass Rev. Edward Larrabee followed Fr. Ritchie in the leadership position at Church of the Ascension. During the beginning of Fr. Larrabee's rectorate in 1884, Ascension began to attract a number of socially prominent people as parishioners. A fund-raising entertainment conducted by ladies of the parish was described in the society pages of newspapers. Fr. Larrabee did not change the ritualistic worship practices instituted by Fr.s Dorset and Ritchie and as a result, got into some nasty public debates. It was during Fr. Larrabee's time that the church gathered for worship services at LeGrand Roller Rink at Clark and Elm Streets due to a fire at the main church building on LaSalle. It was also a time when Alice Lord Wheeler supported the church financially and donated funds for many important physical improvements. Music accompanying worship at the Church of the Ascension at this time was widely known for its beauty and general excellence. Newspaper accounts of liturgies contain frequent references to vocal and instrumental music. At each Solemn High Mass the choir sang Mass settings in Greek and Latin, including complete presentations of the Kyrie Eleison, Gloria in Excelsis, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei. The use of an orchestra to accompany worship services as well as organ was common. Click the drawing to the right to see a copy of Fr. Larrabee's devotional guide, Prayers at Mass, published in 1899. Fr. Stoskopf towers over two children of the parish. The Rev. William Brewster Stoskopf was Rector of Church of the Ascension for a period spanning 42 years from 1909-1951. Like the most influential parish leaders before him, Fr. Stoskopf was strong in his conviction that the Anglican Church was the one faith that held and adhered to the whole catholic faith as accepted by the East (The Eastern Orthodox Church) and the West (The Roman Catholic Church). He denied being "Protestant" and railed against the official name of the American branch of the Anglican Communion, which was the "Protestant Episcopal Church." He urged it be changed to The American Catholic Church.

He led the Parish through two world wars and the Great Depression. It is his generous bequest and that of his sister, which sustains the Church of the Ascension financially to this day. The Order of St Anne's was founded during Stoskopf's tenure. Following the purchase by the parish of property immediately south of the church in 1927, the sisters were moved to the convent at 1125 N. LaSalle Avenue, which they currently occupy. From December of 1941 until 1959 Mr. Willard Groom served as organist and choir director. He continued the parish's long tradition of musical excellence. (His brother, Lester Groom, had held the same position before him for 30 years.) After Father Stoskopf's death in 1951, Church of the Ascension had to navigate through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. The church was forced to evolve and deal with a changing neighborhood and a more diverse parish while continuing the liturgical practices that had been its hallmark for 100 years. Bishop Albert Hillestad, Bishop of Springfield following his Church of the Ascension rectorate. On October 29, 1951, The Rev. Albert W. Hillestad was instituted as twelfth rector of the Church of the Ascension. He pledged his allegiance to the legacy of Church of the Ascension's liturgy and urged the parish to be more tolerant and inclusive of others. In a letter to parishioners, the rector alluded to the priests who preceded him "and distinguished themselves and the parish by the glorious traditions which have been built, and the witness you all have maintained for the Catholic Faith. The reputation of the parish is known from coast to coast." Following the rector's wedding in June 1954, he and Mrs. Hillestad resided in the rectory with other members of their family (two children born before Fr. Hillestad's resignation in 1957). The Hillestads were warmly received by parishioners and cordially welcomed to the parish family. A few, however, were concerned that the rector's marriage was inconsistent with what they viewed as a long-standing parish tradition: clerical celibacy after ordination. What, in fact, was the status of this tradition? Canon Charles Dorset, first of the succession of seven Anglo-Catholic rectors to serve the Ascension, was married throughout his rectorate (1869-1875); Fr. Hillestad's three immediate predecessors, Arthur Ritchie (1875-1884), Edward Larrabee (1884-1909), and William Stoskopf (1909-1951), had not married. Following his resignation as rector of Church of the Ascension, Fr. Hillestad was consecrated bishop coadjutor of the diocese of Springfield, Illinois and was enthroned as bishop of the diocese on September 24, 1972. The music program at Church of the Ascension (which had always been excellent) flourished in these years and added a gloss to the high church reputation of the parish. Between September, 1959, and his resignation in 1971, Mr. Benjamin Hadley,

Groom's successor, augmented and enhanced the music program and instituted many improvements in the quality of the form of musical accompaniment of the Solemn High Mass many of which are still in place today. In 1964, the Schlicker Organ Company of Buffalo, New York, installed the three-manual, sixty-four rank organ. A unique feature of the organ is a small keyboard attached to the conductor's podium, allowing the conductor to give pitches to the choir from selected stops in the Swell division, without walking to the organ console. The Berghaus Organ Company of Bellwood, Illinois, subsequently carried out some judicious tonal alterations to the organ and installed a new console, in phases in 1984 and 2001. The Rev. Edwin A. Norris, Jr. was Rector of Church of the Ascension in the years from 1969-1993. Father Norris, a Benedictine Monk, focused on the worship service and continued Solemn High Mass, as had been the tradition at Church of the Ascension despite the changes being brought about in the Roman Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Latin mass settings continued to be used at Church of the Ascension and the "High Church" reputation was sustained. The congregation began participating in the singing of hymns and of the Gloria and Credo each Sunday morning. The issue of women in the priesthood became a hotly debated issue during Father Norris's time and Norris was very active in arguing unsuccessfully against the change in Episcopal Church doctrine. The parish also gained parishioners during this time who were members of Chicago's gay and lesbian community. Fr. Gary P. Fertig at Low Mass in Lent

The Rev. Gary P. Fertig was the next permanent Rector at Ascension, with a term lasting from 1995 to 2012. Throughout his tenure he maintained the distinctive liturgical practices consistent with history at Church of the Ascension and concentrated on the physical and spiritual needs of the people in and around the parish. Fr. Fertig was known for the intellectual and insightful quality of his preaching of the Gospel. He expanded financial support of the music program allowing the choirmaster, Thomas Wikman, to hire very high quality professional singers augmenting the quality of the liturgical music. He established St. Anthony's Soup Kitchen, which feeds more than 100 poor and needy people monthly, and he installed air conditioning in the church in one of his first (of many) major improvements to church facilities. In addition, Fr. Fertig continued the arrangement with Valet Parking to rent the church parking lot; this rental arrangement of church property just south of the Rectory continues to provide significant income to support church activities.