

## *One Hundred Years in Service to God*

### **The History of the Church of the Ascension 1904 to 2004**

One hundred years ago on April 10, 1904 the Church of the Ascension was founded in the home of Mrs. Thomas Ward. Mr. and Mrs. Ward lived at 441 Corona Street (the house has since been demolished). It began as a Sunday school for 11 neighborhood children.

The following Sunday, the Reverend Edward Eustis of the Emmanuel Church took charge of the school. He soon established a mission church in a tent 20 feet by 40 feet on the east side of Corona Street between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenues where the Safeway is now. This fledgling church was named Arlington Mission due to the fact that it was located in the part of Denver called Arlington Addition. The first morning church service was in November, 1904 in the tent.

In 1906, the present site at 6<sup>th</sup> and Gilpin was purchased and a temporary \$350 chapel was built. The Reverend C.I. Mills was made priest-in-charge.

In 1909, a small brick church with a seating capacity of 100 was built. The mission was then named Arlington Memorial.

Reverend Mills resigned in 1912 and the Reverend Henry S. Foster became the new priest. Father Foster had served as the assistant rector of St. Mark's Church in Denver (now it is a nightclub known as "The Church"). As our first rector, he began 28 years of service at what was to become the Church of the Ascension.

At the beginning of his tenure, the congregation numbered 49, the Sunday school had 35 enrollees, and the church had a large debt of \$10,000. Church property was advertised for sale for delinquent taxes. Under his leadership the mission became

financially stable, was elevated to parish status in the Diocese of Colorado, and was named the Church of the Ascension on May 1, 1913. During that year, the church was enlarged according to plans drawn by architect and church member, Arthur Fisher. The number of parishioners increased greatly and many beautiful gifts and memorials were given as thank offerings or memorials. A Carrara marble font was given by Mrs. R.L. Bogy and is still used today.

A terrible disaster occurred on Sunday, December 16, 1917. At three o'clock in the morning, a fire caused by defective electric wiring completely destroyed the interior and the roof of the church. Everything was burned except the Communion vessels, the vestments, the ornaments of the altar, and the marble font.

Plans were made for reconstruction. The congregation used Trinity Memorial Church (now St. Andrew's) for their Sunday services. The weekday services were held across the street in a vacant store

The new building, church and parish house were completed at the cost of approximately \$28,000. The first service was held in May, 1918. The congregation grew. Many baptisms and confirmations were performed. A boys' choir and a girls' choir were established. The girls' choir director was Mrs. Link and the organist was Mrs. Benjamin Stapleton, wife of the Mayor of Denver. The Sunday school thrived. Church suppers and "fiestas" provided plenty of opportunities for fun and a feeling of community. Father Foster's programs were widely supported, and the congregation continued to grow.

During Father Foster's tenure, the church's outreach programs grew, too. Camp Ascension was one of these. Mrs. Arthur Fisher, whose husband, the architect Arthur Fisher, drew the plans for the rebuilt church, donated land in Turkey Creek Canyon. The camp served Ascension youth for two weeks every year, but was used primarily to provide underprivileged

children with a summer mountain experience. The camp was supported by donations from many generous people in the church. In 1933, the camp was deeded to the Episcopal Order of St. Anne. To this day, the original log cabin camp continues under the name of St. Anne's in the Hills. Located in the Indian Hills area, it is owned and operated by St. Anne's Episcopal School in Denver as a day camp for their students and occasionally leased to outside groups that provide camping experiences for underprivileged children.

The first organization of Boy Scouts in Denver took place in Father Foster's study while he was at St. Mark's parish. Recent research revealed that Father Foster officiated at the burial service for the three year old son of Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower in 1921. The boy's name was Doud Dwight Eisenhower. It is not known why the service was held at Ascension because Mamie's family, the Douds, were members of Corona Presbyterian Church on 8<sup>th</sup> and Downing Street. However, the Douds were close friends of Ascension members, William and Elvira Bird.

Among the many beautiful memorials given to the church is the altarpiece reredos. It was designed by Denver sculptor Arnold Ronnebeck. The piece was given in memory of Mr. and Mrs. R.C.Campbell by their son, Thomas Patterson Campbell, and daughter, Mrs. Stuart S. Smith, in 1932.

Other lovely memorials include the large stained glass window at the back of the church given by Holly Hughes in memory of her father, Lafayette Hughes. The beautiful stained glass windows along each side of the sanctuary were given as memorials by many parishioners. Through the years, many generous church members, including Jane O'Donnell, gave wonderful gifts.

Father Foster, who for years suffered from asthma, retired from the church after 28 years of faithful and loving service. He died at the age of 90 in 1962.

He was succeeded by The Reverend James L. McLane. During Father McLane's time at the church, a daily Eucharist was celebrated and a series of lecture courses designed to advance the spiritual and intellectual growth of the parish began. These lectures were popular in the community and widely attended by churchmen of other parishes and non-Episcopalians. The music program at the church was expanded. The church and parish house to the north were redecorated. The nave was painted soft pink and the chancel was painted blue. The side altar, the Stations of the Cross, and a plaque placed at the baptismal font were installed. The church debt was paid. Father McLane resigned in 1945 to become Rector of St. Matthias Church in Los Angeles.

The Reverend Frederick H. Avery was called from California as rector. He held his first service on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1945. His special interest and expertise was in Christian education for the Colorado Diocese. A five-year course of educational study was developed during his tenure. The materials that he organized were used in Sunday schools for each grade level. He also started the Lay Reader's Training Program for the Diocese.

During Father Avery's stay at Ascension the chapel was moved from the second floor to the first floor of the parish house and the rector's study was moved to the second floor. Father Avery resigned in 1949 to go to a church in Vancouver, Washington.

The Reverend Edwin Burton Thayer was called to serve as rector on January 15, 1950. During Father Thayer's tenure the church saw a period of great growth. Church school enrollment reached a high of 270. The following year it soared to 333 and then 440. Guilds and other groups within the church grew and were strengthened.

In 1951 the Marr Memorial organ was installed. The sacristy was enlarged and a memorial fund was established to be used

for vestments, furnishings for the altar, sanctuary, and sacristy as needed.

In the fall of 1953 Ascension sponsored a new start mission at Christ Church, Castle Rock, Colorado. Father Thayer and Ascension's curate, Father Charles D. Pitkin, served alternately there for three years until the mission achieved parish status. Father Pitkin became Christ Church's first priest in 1957.

The first step toward the later extensive building program was taken in May, 1956. The property immediately north of the church was purchased and converted to church use. Later this house was torn down to make room for the new Foster Building. A parking lot was installed on 6<sup>th</sup> and Williams. A lending library was started. Finally, in spring of 1958 it was decided to undertake a building fund campaign. Members of the parish pledged whatever they were able to give. Additional property north of the church was purchased. The house at 630 Gilpin was converted into duplex living quarters for the curate and the custodian.

All were ready to proceed with the plans for the new building. Fisher and Davis were named architects. Rodney Davis, the primary architect, was a member of the congregation. It was decided to name the building the "Henry S. Foster Educational Building" in honor of Father Foster, beloved Rector Emeritus.

The ground breaking was on Ascension Day, May 7, 1959. The building included All Saints' Chapel seating 80, a church school chapel, twelve large classrooms, a library and reading room, a chapel sacristy, a crib room, a janitor's storage closet, cloakrooms, and five bathrooms. One of the last services conducted by Father Thayer as rector of the church was the dedication of the Henry S. Foster Educational Building.

In 1960 Father Thayer was elected Suffragan (assistant) Bishop of Colorado. In 1969 he became the seventh Episcopal bishop of Colorado and served until his retirement in 1974.

Following Father Thayer was The Reverend Laurence Spencer who came to the church in 1961. He had served at St. Michael and All Angels Church in Mission, Kansas. His tenure at the Church of the Ascension was from January, 1961 until 1972. He and his wife retired to live in Cañon City, Colorado.

During the turbulent 1960's, The Reverend Jerry McKenzie served as curate. Father Spencer gave him two important duties. He was asked to revitalize the high school youth group and to run the Sunday school. He established a Friday night music, dance, and socializing event, which he named "The Inn." He found a rock band composed of East High School students who performed in the parish hall every Friday night. This popular, weekly event attracted church and neighborhood teenagers as well as many nonmembers.

In 1967, Father McKenzie became one of the chaplains at the University of Denver. This was followed by a position as chaplain at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Father McKenzie, who currently lives in Cortez, Colorado, remembers church rummage sales where armed guards were hired to protect sale items in the church. Among the items donated were pieces of jewelry, which were sold to raise money. This jewelry was acquired from friends and acquaintances of Mrs. Arthur Fisher, wife of the church architect. She would invite them to tea and talk them into giving their old jewelry to the church.

Membership and attendance was very strong during the 1960's. Three morning services were held. The most highly attended was the middle service, which attracted mostly families. The late service attracted more elderly members and some teenagers.

The Reverend Robert Burrows served a short term as rector after Father Spencer retired. During his tenure, the first girl acolytes in the Diocese of Colorado, Helen Dolmas and Jane Anderson, performed their duties. Marcia Stackhouse and Kay Woods were named deacons in the church. Changes were beginning to take place.

The Reverend James H. Short, "Father Jim," was called to be the next rector after having worked for three years in the office of Living The Good News, a church school guide for teachers, that rented space in the church's basement. Father Jim served the church for 21 years from 1980 until his retirement in 2001. He and his wife, Barbara, raised their five children, Jay, Jeff, Ryan, Barrie and Robyn in the church.

Pastoral assistants, Father David Wilson and Father George Castano, joined Father Jim during the 1980's in ministering to the congregation.

After having been the associate rector of St. Mark's Church in Denver, Father Dave helped Father Jim by teaching classes and conducting Bible study on Wednesday nights. He became the pastoral representative for the Diocese of Colorado at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Hospital. His wife, Dorothy, said that he had had a varied career, "but God kept pulling him in to becoming a priest."

Father George served the parish of St. Peter and St. Mary in Denver for 18 years. Upon retiring in 1989, he came to the Church of the Ascension as a pastoral assistant. He performed weddings, baptisms, funerals and celebrated the Wednesday noon Eucharist. Father George fashioned the lovely wooden cover for the marble baptismal font. Today, his Fridays are spent telling stories to the children of Bright Star Early Learning Center.

Father Jim has many memories and stories to tell about his time at the Church of the Ascension. Among them were: the

service changed from Rite I to Rite II; the altar was moved out from the back wall so that he could face the congregation; the Christmas pageant in the early 80's saw the church become a sort of Bethlehem where straw for the live animals ended up in all nooks and crannies of the sanctuary; the blizzard of 1982 was so severe that only seven people showed up for the Christmas service that Sunday; the church finally got cushions for its hard oak pews. Years before this, the kneelers had fortunately been given padding. Again, in the early 80's, Dr. Bill Humphrey and his wife, Peggy, prepared a wonderful Seder dinner in order to explain the meaning of the Jewish Passover. A rabbi who had become a Christian gave an interesting account of that holy event.

In the early 90's several serious crimes had been committed in the Capitol Hill area causing racial tension in the community. These crimes prompted the Church of the Ascension to spearhead six "prayer walks" to counter the problems that had arisen as a result of these crimes. People from many churches and denominations participated in these walks. Ultimately, serious crime on Capitol Hill dropped 25%.

The church was also the headquarters for the "March For Jesus" annual event. These walks from Cheesman Park to Civic Center Park were interdenominational, too. In the late 90's, Palm Sunday was celebrated with a procession around the blocks of Gilpin and Williams Streets. Members of the congregation, carrying palms, followed The Colorado Youth Pipe Band. This practice has continued and has been well received by the neighborhood.

For several years a summer service and potluck picnic were held in Little Cheesman Park. Arrangements had to be made in advance to make sure the sprinklers wouldn't come on and surprise the worshipful attendees.

A group of talented members of the choir and congregation formed a Drama Ministry. They performed in plays and



musicals under the direction of people like organist/choir director Tom Manion and choir member, Dorothy Percy. The group made their costumes and designed and built the scenery.

In 1999, the church commenced a new service to the children in the larger Denver community by founding Bright Star Early Learning Center. Church facilities are used for the center, and members raise money and volunteer time to help the children. Bright Star serves Department of Social Services children as well as the neighborhood children.

The church has also welcomed a variety of nonprofit entities and community groups to utilize church facilities free of charge or for small fees to cover maintenance costs. A few examples include the following: Friends of the Children of Viet Nam, Alcoholics Anonymous, MetroCaring Food Bank, and the Colorado Youth Pipe Band.

The Colorado Youth Pipe Band traveled to Glasgow, Scotland in 2000 to participate in the world bagpiping championships. The group won 11<sup>th</sup> place in the Novice Juvenile Division. Five of our parish children, Maureen Mahoney, Morgan Johnson and Drew, Mike and Lindsay Parker, were among those who attended and took part in the event. Several of Ascension's young people participate or have participated in the band. The band has instructed 250 youngsters over a period of 15 years.

In the early 90's, a faithful parishioner by the name of Gloria Sorley died and left a large bequest to the church. It was thanks to this money that the church building underwent a major interior restoration project. A room in the parish hall was dedicated to her as the Gloria Sorley Room. This room is used for meetings and classes.

When Father Jim retired, a search committee was formed and an interim rector, the Reverend Sara Balcomb, was hired. When she became ill, the Reverend Merrie Need took her

place. The church was well served by these two outstanding women priests.

In September of 2002, Father James Harlan became the ninth Rector of the Church of the Ascension. Father Harlan is a Colorado native and a lifelong Episcopalian. As a child he attended the Denver churches of St. Michael and All Angels, Christ Church, and Ascension. While attending the University of Colorado, where he earned a B.S. degree in Business Administration, he served as Assistant Youth Director at St. John's Cathedral in Denver. He went on to become Director of Youth Ministries at St. John's, a position he held for three years.

Father Harlan received a Master of Divinity degree in 1994 from Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

He was ordained a deacon and then a priest in December of 1994. He served as Assistant to the Rector at the Church of St. Michael the Archangel in Colorado Springs from 1994 until 1997 and then went on to serve as Rector of the Church of St. John the Baptist in Breckenridge, Colorado until September of 1999. After this period he served a three-year ministry as a U.S. Navy Chaplain with the Seabees. During his tour he ministered to Navy personnel all over the world.

Within the Diocese, Father James has served as Chair of the Commission on Youth Ministry and as a member of the Board of Examining Chaplains. He currently holds an adjunct faculty position teaching Anglican Liturgy at the Iliff School of Theology and chairs the Bishop's Task Force on Human Sexuality.

He is married to the former Elizabeth June Shaffer of Granby, Colorado whom he met while both were students at The University of Colorado. They have one daughter, Hannah, who was born in Breckenridge in 1999. Father James and his

wife, Eli, are thrilled to be living and working in Denver; surrounded by a lifetime of family and friends; and, most importantly, within a lively and loving parish family that is beginning its second century of Godly ministry in the heart of Denver.

The Reverend Tom Long, an Episcopal priest and professional counselor, now serves as Father James's pastoral assistant. Father Tom occasionally preaches and conducts the Eucharist and serves in other capacities as well. He and his wife, Beth, are a welcome addition to the church.

The Reverend Bobbie Girardin, "Deacon Bobbie," has joined the pastoral team at the church. She preaches occasionally, serves at the altar, reads the Gospel, coordinates the Lay Eucharist Ministry program, and focuses the congregation on outreach issues and opportunities to serve the world, especially the needy and the poor. In 1999, she started working at a battered women's shelter where she ministers to the needs of the women who live there. Her husband, Kerry, serves the church in many capacities, including the role of vergier.

Now, as we enter our second century of service to the people of Denver, many exciting things are taking place.

The choir, under the direction of Mrs. Sandy Tighe, is expanding. A bell choir and praise team have been formed and steps are being taken to research renovation of the church organ.

Our Christian Education Directors, Barbara Watson and Hazel Stevens-Price, plus the Sunday school teachers are developing a Montessori-type classroom based on "Godly Play" stories. The goal is to help children become more fully aware of the mystery of God's presence in their lives.

Our beautiful church building was awarded Historic Landmark designation by the city of Denver on April 19, 2004. This

honor was due to the hard work of parishioners Patsy Steele, Kathleen Reilly, Stephanie Johnson, Father James, and preservation professional, Nancy Widmann. Nancy did all the necessary research for the landmark application. Grant money received from the Capitol Hill Urban Neighborhoods (CHUN) organization enabled the congregation to make application for historic status.

We know there are many future challenges the Church must meet. However, the history of the Church of the Ascension has proven that a loyal, strong and loving congregation will continue to grow and thrive in the community, worshipping God with great thanks for all His blessings.

Recently, Father James wrote in the parish newsletter, ACTS,

*“We worship, then we celebrate what we’ve done, not in and of itself but as evidence of God’s powerful work in and through those who’ve gone before. And we celebrate that, not to sit on our laurels or dwell on the past, but to gain inspiration and vision for the work God will have us do in the next 100 years.”*

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*The Church of the Ascension is a communion of faith,  
bound together in our worship, fellowship, and ministry,  
uplifted by the Holy Spirit, and committed to sharing and  
growing in Christ's love.*

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