

A Parish History

St. Matthias' Episcopal Church began as a mission of St. Mark's Shreveport in 1950, the first meeting being held March 19, in the Venus Theater on Lakeshore Drive, with the Venerable John Lee Womack, Priest-in-Charge. Arranging the service of Morning Prayer was Mr. Ralph Pierce. Altar Guild was Mrs. A. H. Phillips; Organist, Mr. Clarence Pope; Choir Leader, Miss Jeanette Khoury; Acolytes, Clifford Stacks, Urbahn Phillips and Frank Pierce; Assistants were T. B. Herndon, Jr. and James Douglas, students studying for Holy Orders.

St. Matthias grew rapidly into a second temporary meeting place at the Exhibit Building on the Fairgrounds and then on to the first location at Exposition and Hardy Streets where a Parish Hall and Chapel were dedicated April 22, 1951. January 1953 St. Matthias achieved parish status with the Rev. John Lee Womack as first Rector. There were 54 charter members.

The 1953 choir consisted of Gladys Hartgrove, Isabel Barkett, Charles Bradley, Ernestine Harmon, Barbara Hunt, Frank Pierce, Katherine Sandefur, Betty Brenning and Elizabeth Nelson. Father Womack served the new parish until February 1955 and was followed in July 1955 by the Rev. William Bradley Trimble who served as Rector until August 1962. On June 18, 1961 the new church building was dedicated at Exposition and Hardy. The Rev. Jack Dempsey Russell was Rector from November 1962 until August 1969.

The fourth Rector was the Rev. Ralph Nelson McMichael from April 1970 until April 1986. During this time St. Matthias continued to grow and plans were made in the mid-1970's to buy property in West Shreveport. The acreage on Lakeshore Extension was purchased May 22, 1975. St. Matthias' first Deacon, William C. Graff, was ordained March 5, 1977. Phase I of the buildings on Lakeshore Extension was begun in November 1979, and the first service was held in the new Phase I facility on May 25, 1980, Feast of Pentecost. At this time the church staff consisted of Father McMichael, Rector; the Rev. Deacon William C. Graff; the Rev. Deacon Kenneth R. Dimmick; Ms. Maurine Locke, coordinator of missions, and Ms. Phyllis Orbaugh, organist and parish secretary.

In 1980 over 100 parishioners were involved in various mission projects, including The Pines, Westwood Nursing Home, and a mission church in Reynosa, Mexico. St. Matthias' commitment to tithe - that is, to "give away" ten percent of the church's received pledges - to mission projects was established at this time. In July, 1981, the Rev. Robert Kenwood Cooper came to St. Matthias as Curate and served until August 1983. The Rev. Kenneth Ray Dimmick served as Curate from June 1984 until January 1987.

Construction on the church building and office wing, Phase II, began February 24, 1985 and the first service held in the new building was on April 13, 1986. The stained glass windows and the Christus Rex from the first location are now incorporated into our current church building. The altar rail from the original church was made into the Pascal Candle stand, and bricks from the demolished Venus Theater comprise the walkway from the drive to the bell tower.

On October 1, 1986, the Rev. Robert K. Cooper became St. Matthias' fifth Rector. He served until October 1989. The Rev. William J. Echols was Curate from June 1987 until October 1989 and served as Priest-in-charge from November 1989 until August 1990.

Subsequent clergy serving the parish were the Rev. Dale D. Coleman, August 1990 to June 1996; the Rev. Paul W. Bigger, June 1996 to January 1997; and the Rev. John W. Raish, February 1997 to December 2006. Curates were the Rev. Reid Hensarling, July 1992 to June 1994 and the Rev. Morgan S. Allen, from June 2003 to June 2005.

Currently Fr. Bill McBride, who served as Priest-in-charge during the search, has accepted the call for the mantle of pastoral leadership at St. Matthias. Fr. Ben Songy (Priest assistant) will continue to help with the day to day operations of the parish as he has previously.