

The History of St. Anthony Catholic Church

St. Anthony's Catholic Church is a growing, active community of people dedicated to their parish and to the Risen Christ. The maturing of the parish has been significant in the last forty-seven years. Prior to 1967 the Catholics of Lincoln County were served by the Paulist fathers, who worked from Winchester, TN, and served 13 counties. As early as 1910, Mass was being celebrated on occasion in Fayetteville in the home of Bridget McKenzie. In 1967, the Glenmary Home Missioners assigned two priests to the Diocese of Nashville. One priest was to serve the churches in Shelbyville and Lewisburg, and the other to serve Pulaski and Fayetteville. The first pastor of the Pulaski and Fayetteville parishes was Father John Carrigan. He resided in Pulaski.

In Fayetteville, St. Raphael's Parish (now St. Anthony parish) was formed as a mission of Immaculate Conception Church in Pulaski. St. Raphael Parish acquired a barracks type building on the Ardmore Highway for Sunday services. It was a small building, with a seating capacity of 30-40 people. It had no restroom facilities or rooms for religious education classes, but provided an initial Catholic presence in Lincoln County. In 1968 the parish purchased a small lot on Wilson Parkway, which was to be a potential site for a new parish location.

Father Carrigan was replaced by Father John Otterbacher in 1970. In January 1971, under the leadership of Pastor Otterbacher, the first Parish Council was elected. The members were Leo Bussart, Quentin LaPrad, Fred Laracuenta, Al Presti, Estelle Smith, and Gary Wolf. This Council discussed what options were open to the parish: build a new building on the Wilson Parkway site, expand the existing facilities on Ardmore Highway, or share facilities with another church in the community. The parish elected to look for shared facilities with another church in the area. In late 1971 an agreement was made with St. John's Presbyterian Church on Huntsville Highway to share their facilities and to develop a joint religious education program. The pastor of St. John's, Rev. Charles Danner, expressed the eagerness of his congregation to cooperate in this unique ecumenical arrangement. In December 1972, the combined religious education program began. Father Otterbacher was a pioneer in paving the way for people of different faiths to share beliefs, work together, and grow in their faith. For the next ten years the two communities worked together.

In 1972 a new pastor, Father Kent Lewis, was assigned as the pastor for the Pulaski and Fayetteville parishes. He established a residence in Fayetteville. The first Christmas Midnight Mass was celebrated in Fayetteville.

Father Dennis Holly was assigned as Pastor in 1973. The first dialogue between the Catholic and Episcopal churches was held in November of 1973. The Parish Council adopted a resolution in 1977 to look for property that would provide a residence for the pastor, which would also allow a place for meetings, and a sanctuary for the Blessed Sacrament. However, a suitable facility was not found. In addition to serving on the Parish Council, members of the parish were becoming more involved with parish life. In 1978 the practice of having a coffee social after Mass was started. In 1979, Ministers of the Eucharist began serving at Mass. Later that year a youth program was started, and young people began serving as acolytes.

Father George Mathis was assigned as pastor in 1979. In October 1980, the First Annual Harvest Happening, a fund raising event for the parish, was held on the Court House Square in Fayetteville. It included a bake sale, crafts bazaar, rummage sale, and food concessions. In later years, it was expanded

to include games, spaghetti dinners, and other events. The Harvest Happening, now traditionally held at the church on the first Saturday in October, continues to be the church's largest fund raiser, and now involves many parish members in year-long planning and preparation. In 1981, the Ladies Altar Society was formed. In September of 1981, Father Mathis conducted a parish renewal that provided greater parish unity, as the planning for a new Catholic Church for the Fayetteville community was ongoing. As a group, the parish worked diligently to raise sufficient money to purchase land and to commence construction on the church building itself. Foundations, funds, and individuals were solicited for contributions. During the fund raising phase a woman contacted the church, and offered a very large donation, to be granted anonymously, provided that the new church was named for St. Anthony. Her wish was granted in June 1982, and the change of the parish name to St. Anthony was approved. In June 1982, the parish purchased approximately five acres on the Huntsville Highway, subject to the approval of Bishop James D. Niedergeses. The property included a small frame house that would provide a residence for the pastor, and a four-car garage to use as a work and storage area, and provide meeting space for gathering after Mass. The parish sold the property on Wilson Parkway, and on Sunday, August 8, 1982, ground was broken for the new church, the first Catholic Church ever built in Lincoln County. The next month the Parish Council voted to include a new rectory in the building program. In the meantime, renovation of half of the garage area was being done by volunteer labor to provide a space for meetings and small socials.

Members of the parish were also volunteering their time to craft stained glass windows designed by the pastor, Father George Mathis. Another parish member cut the pieces for the wood silhouette of the Risen Christ that adorns the wall near the altar. In the fall of 1982, religious education classes began using the small frame house and converted attic space in the garage. The pastor also lived in the house and maintained the parish office there.

On February 6, 1983, Father George Mathis celebrated the first Mass in the new St. Anthony Church. On May 18, the Church was dedicated in a Mass celebrated by Bishop Niedergeses. On June 12, the parish held an open house to invite the community to come and see its new facilities. Members of St. John's Presbyterian Church were supportive during the transition period. The enthusiasm of the St. Anthony Parish members continued as programs expanded. A monthly church newsletter was started in April 1983, which was named "The Window". An electronic organ was donated to the parish by the nephew of Rev. Mathis and a choir was started. Father Mathis was reassigned to the Office of Personnel Directorate for Glenmary in the summer of 1983.

Father Tom Field was assigned as pastor from his parish in Fayette, Alabama in 1983. In the summer of 1984, the Glenmary Sisters, with a group of young volunteers, began an annual visit to the area to conduct Summer Bible School for the children and assist with other activities of the parish. The parish became more active in community affairs. With the leadership of Pastor Tom Field the parish entered a float in the community Christmas parade in 1983, which won a first place trophy. Since then, the parish has participated often and has been rewarded with additional trophies. The parish hosted the United Church Women's World Day of Prayer in 1984 and participated in community Easter and Thanksgiving services, as well as making annual donations to the Good Sam Program, Hannah's House, and assisting needy families at Christmas. Father Tom Field began participation in the local Ministerial Association to be more responsive to community concerns. In the summer of 1986 the parish provided facilities and some volunteers for the first Summer Youth Camp for mentally challenged youngsters, which was attended by 25 children. The Glenmary Sisters provided the leaders for the Special Kids' Camp with much support from other churches within the community.

The willingness of parish members to donate their time and energies to improving the parish has been exceptional. One parish family landscaped and maintained a rose garden at the front of the church. Many members donated countless hours to renovate the small house on the property, to complete the new rectory, and to build a 1600 square foot addition to the Social Hall. The new facility has been named Memorial Hall and provides a meeting area, kitchen facilities, and parish office space. The Memorial Hall was dedicated by Bishop Niedergeses at a Mass in August 1986. The small "yellow house" used for religious education classes was remodeled in 1988 with new windows and vinyl siding. Other monies were donated to purchase a used pipe organ for the church, and volunteers have worked to restore the organ and install it. The organ has been used for church services since August 1987 and was formally completed in March 1988. The Prayer Line, a telephone link between members, was established to respond to special prayer needs of the parish and community.

Father Tom Field was reassigned and Father Tom McElhinney was assigned as pastor in September 1991. Father McElhinney's tenure saw many changes in St. Anthony physical plant and grounds surrounding our church. The first concerned land acquisition. The owner of a parcel of approximately five acres adjoining the east of the existing church property offered to sell that land to St. Anthony which doubled the parish land area. The second change was due to growth in the congregation. The parish had grown from 48 families in 1973 to over 150 families by 1995, requiring a significant increase in the church size. While the growth increase was gratifying, the parish once again began the long and difficult journey of facility expansion. A pledge drive was begun in October 1995 to determine if the parishioners would support the expansion in order to obtain the necessary financial commitments from Bishop Kmiec for the project. After engaging an architect and receiving bids, Bishop Kmiec approved the construction contract on September 30, 1997. During the year-long construction project our church services were "cozy" Masses held in the Memorial Hall. The dedicated ingenuity of the parishioners made it a very suitable worship space, with members pitching in with rearranging chairs and moving walls after each Mass to make room for CCD classes and then re-setting up the church after CCD. The first Mass was celebrated in the significantly enlarged Sanctuary space on September 13, 1998. As in the past, much work was done by dedicated parishioners, and contributions were made by all. Outside of the construction contract, parishioners participated in re-installation of the pipe organ, installation of floor tile in the vestibule, installation of the beautiful crucifix and the Stations of the Cross, re-installation of the "Risen Christ" figure, a new Baptismal font, other numerous interior decoration tasks, and exterior landscaping, in addition to numerous other smaller items. In addition pews were obtained to replace the chairs of the previous church. The stained glass windows fabricated by parishioners for the original church were retained in the enlarged Sanctuary space. The day after Passion Sunday, April 10, 2001, Father Tom McElhinney passed away, very unexpectedly, in the rectory. Death was determined to be from natural causes. For several months Glenmary provided visiting priests to conduct Sunday Masses.

In August 2001, Glenmary assigned Father Francois Pellissier as pastor for St. Anthony Parish. Father Francois spoke fluent Spanish and the parish immediately saw a significant increase in participation and attendance by the Hispanic community that had significantly increased in the Lincoln County area. Masses were occasionally conducted in Spanish, and some of the Spanish heritage began to be celebrated within the parish. Father Francois also provided significant services to the Hispanic community at large, and provided Mass services in Spanish in other Diocesan locations. Under Father Francois's leadership more formal training was provided for all areas of lay ministry and additional parishioners began participating in lay ministry. Fr. Francois also established a special Mass for the homebound conducted each month. The homebound are treated to a luncheon following the Mass. Father Francois re-invigorated the Parish Council and established active committees to assure that

Church functions would be accomplished competently, including conducting Word and Communion Services in the absence of a Priest, which is becoming more likely with the existing shortage of priests within the Diocese. Father Francois also sought to increase the level of participation of the adults and CCD members in continuing religious education. He instituted a summer "Lectionary based" CCD program to continue the religious education of the young during the summer months to show that the "faith life" is not just a part-time endeavor. He encouraged the adults to participate in "Lectionary Based" faith sharing conducted each Sunday after Mass. The continued growth in the parish has shown the need for additional space for CCD classrooms and other parish functions and the Parish Council has established a priority to begin planning for a "Parish Life" center as an addition to parish facilities. The faith journey continues as St. Anthony continues to grow along with the Lincoln County area.

St. Anthony parish has grown and prospered under Glenmary leadership since 1967, to the extent that we no longer met the "mission area" criteria of the Glenmary Home Missioners who are "impelled by the Holy Spirit to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the forgotten regions of the United States." Beginning in August of 2003, Glenmary will no longer staff the parish of St. Anthony, and in the future Diocesan or other order priests will be provided as pastor for St. Anthony.

On August 10, 2003 a celebration honoring the thirty-six years of pastoral service to this parish by the Glenmary Home Missioners was conducted. Many of the past priests who had served as Pastor for St. Anthony were able to attend and to share their memories with the parishioners. Bishop Edward Kmiec also attended to offer the Diocesan thanks to the Glenmary priests who had served at St. Anthony for the Diocese.

Following that ceremony Bishop Kmiec officially installed Father Jose Kariamadam C.M.I. as the new pastor for St. Anthony Parish. When installed as pastor Fr. Jose told us "At the heart and center of the word CHURCH is UR (You are). You are the Church. Fr. Jose gave his best efforts at being a pastor, peace maker, facilitator, and spiritual leader. During his time at St. Anthony, we celebrated the "Silver Jubilee" of the establishment of St. Anthony parish. Major repairs to the Church roof and supporting columns were also accomplished. After many years of waiting, a beautiful exterior statue of St. Anthony with additional signage was placed at the entrance to the Church. The Church, Memorial Hall, and Rectory were repainted and additional other improvements made to keep the facilities updated. Fr. Jose remained as pastor for over 9 years, until February 28, 2013. During this period St. Anthony also completed the initial planning steps for an envisioned future "Educational Facility" for the conduct of religious education classes. One of the last actions was the completion of installation of a Columbarium (for interment of cremated remains) which had been generously donated by parishioners Ed and Barbara Becker. Fr. Jose was reassigned within the Diocese of Nashville, to the Clarksville, TN parishes.

On March 3, 2013, Fr. George Panthananickal C.M.I., was installed by Bishop David Choby as the new pastor for St. Anthony parish. After the Mass and installation, Bishop Choby blessed the new Columbarium and the remains of Ed Becker were interred as he had passed away during the final phases of the installation efforts. The members of St. Anthony parish look forward to continued growth with enthusiasm and hearts open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The parish has been beneficiary of many gifts from outside sources that have helped the Parish to expand its programs and activities. Through the activities of the parish, a family of members has been formed, which in 2013 continues to grow. As a body of Believers, the parish works to reflect the loving concern of Jesus Christ in their daily lives. To be one with Christ and community is a unifying desire of St. Anthony's Catholic Parish.

St. Anthony Memorial Hall

In response to the need for additional space for parish, religious, and social functions, an addition was added to the existing Social Hall in 1986. This parish effort was dedicated to the honor and memory of deceased family and friends who have gone before us, and was highlighted by generous donations of labor, material, and financial contributions, and was completed much sooner than thought possible. The deceased are honored on a Memorial plaque prominently displayed in the Hall. Since St. Anthony is a growing parish, an on-going need exists for a "Building Fund" to continue maintenance and improvements to keep our facilities functioning and presentable. Contributions to the building fund are an excellent way to commemorate a loved one and contributions can be made at any time. A special commemoration can be made by having a name-plate installed on the plaque in the Memorial Hall. A customary \$300 donation is requested. The Memorial Hall also houses the Father Tom McElhinney Memorial Library, a collection of his books donated to the parish after his death. The Memorial was dedicated on August 10, 2003 as part of the ceremony celebrating the thirty-six years of Glenmary Home Missioner support to the parish.