

## St. Gregory's Episcopal Church

### Our History

The present church site was purchased before a congregation existed. With concurrence of the three Episcopal churches then existing in Long Beach as well as Bishop Francis Eric Bloy, St. Gregory's was founded in 1955. The Rev. Michael J. Francis was appointed Vicar of the new mission and the first service was held June 2, 1955 in the auditorium of nearby Minnie Gant Elementary School. St. Gregory's was selected as the name of the new church by its 31 member congregation.

Among its first officers were: Warden, Bill Dalessi; Treasurer, Glenn Martin; Clerk, Frank Morgan; Women's President, Marge Braswell; Sunday School Superintendent, Hattie Schroeder who was succeeded three months later by Les Lundeen; EYC, Becky Mason; and Altar Guild, Grace Morgan. Of these, Les and Harriett Lundeen, Bill Dalessi, Grace Morgan, and Helen Francis, Fr. Francis's widow.

In September 1957, ground was broken for construction of a multi-purpose building and church school facilities (St. Gregory's 1957, p6). The completed structures were dedicated by Bishop Bloy on February 23, 1958. Services were held in what was later to become Francis Hall using folding chairs. Children utilized benches outside for worship service then moved into classrooms for Sunday school. St. Gregory's operated as a self-supporting mission until 1965 when it formally attained Parish status at the annual convention of the Diocese.

Increased growth made it imperative that a church and additional classrooms be constructed. A vigorous building fund program was initiated enabling commencement of construction following Diocesan approval (St. Gregory's 1967, p6). The cornerstone was laid and the church site dedicated on April 16, 1967 when a ground-breaking and earth offering service was held. Church members brought envelopes with their names inscribed and containing a spoonful of earth from their gardens. The earth was deposited where the main altar now stands to symbolize that the congregation was providing the foundation upon which God's altar was to rest. Bishop Robert Rusack officiated at the blessing of the cornerstone on April 30, 1967. The envelopes that had contained the earth were placed in a copper box set behind the cornerstone as a "token of perpetuating the love and sacrifice that played such

an important role in building the new church” (St. Gregory’s 1992 p1). Contract costs for the new church and other facilities totaled \$237,000. This was for construction only; the goal was to have all church furnishings provided through special memorial gifts. Following is an excerpt from a report titled, *A Historical Reflection*

*Principal participants in construction and providing interior furnishings were: Anthony and Langford, architects; William J. O’Brien, general contractor; Sams and Sons, furniture; Judson Studios, design and manufacture of stained glass windows; Schwaim Studios, main altar and aumbry. Landscaping was by Donald Brinkerhoff and Associates, George DeVault, Christ Vandergeest, and Keeline Wilcox, Nursery of Anaheim.*

*St. Gregory’s News* (forerunner of the *Pen & Dove* newsletter) announced in its October, 1967 issue that Bishop Bloy would dedicate the new church at the 10:30 am service on December 17, 1967.

Special memorial gifts were: The pews, pulpit, lectern, baptismal font, main altar, aumbry, and stained glass windows. The chapel altar was built by church member Hank Thuet and replaced a card table that had served as an altar in the Minnie Gant School days.

Artists from Judson Studios designed the principal window, measuring 34 feet by 8 feet, which is seen upon entering the church. Its theme is the Lord’s invitation from the eleventh chapter of Matthew, “Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.” The baptismal window located in the chapel near the altar depicts our Lord’s baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. There are two windows at the rear of the chapel. One depicts the raising of the daughter of Jairus from Luke’s gospel, 8:40-42 and 49-56, and was designed to mark the healing services held in the chapel. The other depicts the wedding feast at Cana and honors the many small weddings held in the chapel. The window in the Narthex depicts the Lord with little children with the words, “Let the Little Children Come unto Me.”

At the rear of the church is the Resurrection window, which was dedicated by Bishop Bloy in 1979. It measures 25 feet by 8 feet and represents the Lord rising beyond the Galilean Hills accompanied by two angels with the caption “And He Shall Come Again.” The fourteen narrow-faceted windows are present on both sides of the church and chapel. The top of the first seven windows on the Gospel side, near the baptismal font have as their theme the

Passion of Our Lord while the bottoms symbolize the seven Sacraments. On the Epistle side, the top portions of the seven windows continue the theme of the death of the Lord and denote the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit on the bottom. Of special note, the fourteen windows were not included in the original plans with these themes in mind. The decision about what to do with them was made when it was recognized that they providentially allowed the depiction of the fourteen Stations of the Cross in faceted glass. The main altar of the church was manufactured in Florence, Italy and shipped to Long Beach for first assembly. The medallion in front depicts the Last Supper. The aumbry, anchored to the stone to the right of the main altar as one enters the church, was also manufactured in Italy by the same artist who did the altar.

Rather than affix credit labels to each memorial donation, it was decided to recognize these gifts with a special plaque. The plaque, located in the Narthex, duplicates the church floor plan and notes the exact location of each donor's memorial gift. It was designed by William Schwaim and manufactured in his studio. The black lines in the plaque are pieces of ebony inlaid with the other wood.

Records of the time reveal that several parishioners held church offices during that exciting period in the life of St. Gregory's. Among them and the offices they held are: Pete Dupaquier, Assistant Treasurer and Chairman of Finance; Les Lundeen, Church School superintendent; Mary Luebben, Girls' Friendly Advisor; Grace Morgan, Baptism Coordinator; Marilyn Steenbock, Senior and Junior Altar Guild directress; Bob Hart, Junior Warden; and Stan Steenbock, Senior Warden and Chairman of Stewardship(St. Gregory's 1992, p3).

St. Gregory's original Priest and Rector, Father Michael Francis was honored on October 29, 1978 by naming our parish hall , "Francis Hall," in a blessing and dedication service by Bishop Rusack. Father Francis retired in 1979 and was appointed Rector Emeritus. The parish honored him on December 15, 1985 when they celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination.

Upon Fr. Francis's retirement, a Search Committee was appointed and worked closely with the Rev. Canon Noble Owings and the Rev. Canon Richard Van Horn from Diocesan Bishop Robert Rusack's office to secure a successor. Following a nationwide search, the Rev. George McClaren was appointed by the Vestry to become the second Rector in the church's history commencing on September 1, 1980. A graduate of Philadelphia Divinity School, Fr.

McClaren was serving at St. Peter's Church in Butler, Pennsylvania at the time of his selection.

Parishioners faithfully underwrote the debt acquired in the 1967 building program and a special celebration was held May 15, 1986 to mark the ceremonial burning of the mortgage.

Fr. McClaren was named a Canon by Bishop Frederick H. Borsch in November, 1998, prior to his retirement in September, 1999.

#### Buildings and Grounds:

Planning a Bible Garden began in 1989 under the leadership of Betty Clement, and at present 86 of the 110 plants mentioned in the Bible are planted in the central courtyard of the church. The undertaking has prompted letters and visitors from around the world seeking information on the garden.

A remodeling program was completed in 1993. The office and Francis Hall were refurbished, a youth room was built, a conference room was enlarged, and the parish hall kitchen was modernized. Under the guidance of church member Janice Wright, an artist, beautiful banners were made and hung in Francis Hall. A columbarium consisting of 90 niches was installed at the rear of the church.

Discussion of our sacred space renewal began during 2012 as we were not ADA compliant and our lighting system needed improvement. We began the Capital Renewal Campaign led by Patrick McDonough and Robert Graham to finance the endeavor. We began the renewal project of our worship space in the fall of 2013. During the time of construction, all services were held in Francis Hall, and coffee hour was held in the Fireside Room after both services.

The results of this project were a welcoming spiritual home for all who enter. We installed new carpet, lighting, and tile on floor of the Chancel and Sanctuary, as well as changed the choir and clergy seating. An ambo is now used instead of both a lectern and a pulpit. The baptismal font was relocated to the back of the church. The Memorial Board previously in the narthex was refinished and placed in the Nave. The new worship space was dedicated by Bishop Suffragan Diane Jardine Bruce on February 23, 2014. She led the congregation in a fun and fitting rendition of *This Little Light of Mine*

reminding us to always let our light shine in the world. All in attendance were given a flashlight and were treated to a celebration lunch.

We have begun the renovation of our gardens to create a water-conserving, drought resistance environment. The plan was to use indigenous plants that require lower maintenance. There will be a screen of silver sheens which will reach about 15 feet. We are relocating our roses to create a rose garden behind the kitchen. The entry gardens include a cross made by Stan Carpenter and assisted by Bruce Graham. Our theme is *all things flow from the cross*. The gardens will be complete with the street gardens, which will include a stone courtyard, a cross, and three fruitless olive trees reminiscent of Gethsemane. All are mulched with pea gravel and river rock and accented by large boulders to enhance the image of the flow of God's love.

Plans for the exterior columbaria adjacent to the Bible garden were implemented. This will be located outside the nursery as a separate meditation space. The Bible garden will be reshaped to accommodate appropriate seating, and there is hope to create a labyrinth in the center of the garden.

In looking to update our facilities, we realized that we also needed to examine parish life. Thus, in 2013 the following task forces were formed: outreach, senior transportation, communication, and youth. These were successful in identifying needed areas of growth and activating members of our parish.

The Outreach Task Force became an official Vestry Committee in 2014, and all outreach activities became self-funding.

Personnel:

Father Stephen Williams became the third Rector of St. Gregory's Church in December, 2000. Father Stephen was born in Memphis, Tennessee. His education was in both parochial and public schools, and he holds an undergraduate Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Memphis. During his thirteen years as a professed monk in The Order of Holy Cross, he studied and received his Master of Divinity Degree from Trinity College, University of Toronto. On leaving the Order, he married his wife, Rachel, and they have one son, Richard and three grandchildren. Father Stephen served parishes in the Dioceses of Western Louisiana, Upper South Carolina, and Milwaukee before coming to us.

The Rev. Jane Jones became our Deacon in March, 2010. Father Stephen had worked here for a number of years alone. Bishop Talton conferred with him that the Deacon's job would be different in that her job is to take the church out into the world and the world into the church by creating programs to accomplish this task.

David Feit-Pretzer began his tenure as Director of Music and Resident Organist in August, 2004. David did his undergraduate and graduate studies in Choral Conducting at California State University at Fullerton. He had been involved either organizing, conducting, arranging, or accompanying a variety of groups including the Canterbury Carolers, the Master Chorale of Orange County, and the Californians. He is the president of the Orange County Chapter of the National Association of Church Musicians, a past National President of NACM, and Dean of the Long Beach Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. He has toured Europe with the Master Chorale and the University Singers from CSUF. In 2000, he led a group from First Presbyterian Church of Westminster on a tour of Germany and Austria with performances in Salzburg and Vienna. Several of his choral ensembles have participated in concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York.

#### Outreach:

The Feed My Lambs Program was reorganized in 2004 moving from St. John's in Willington to St. Luke's in Long Beach as they had well established feeding and shower programs for the homeless. We continue this ministry today through the dedicated service of Lurlie Edgecomb and her numerous volunteers. We are always collecting non-perishable food items, toiletries, and clothes for the people we serve. On the first Friday of the month, we prepare food to be served the following day at the facility.

The food bank expanded to host weekly grocery disbursements in 2007. Upon the recommendation of the Task Force in 2013, the food bank became self-sufficient, relying on monetary donations and food from parishioners. This program is currently managed by Bill Eldon and operates on the first Wednesday of the month.

The Men's Fellowship added to their outreach ministry by preparing meals for the Ronald McDonald House. Robert Graham was very instrumental in getting

this program going as he had been working with the hospital for a number of years.

Parish participation in outreach has increased with the barrel programs. We collect a variety of items in barrels throughout the year to give to the needy. Families will volunteer to decorate and organize a barrel for a month. In conjunction with the basic items collected through this campaign, we have been active in our Back Pack Drive for the Long Beach Mission, Soles for Souls, and Su Casa. The Youth has begun working with Covenant House in Los Angeles.

Holiday Giving and Alternative Giving programs began in 2011. The Alternative Giving program, stocking stuffers, and food baskets later evolved to include Adopt-a-Family program. Members of the parish either individually or in groups adopt families to provide food baskets for both Thanksgiving and Christmas as well as provide needs and pleasantries during the holiday season. We learn of these families through the Long Beach Multi-Service Center.

Music:

The organ in the sanctuary was digitized in 2005. The concert series Music at Four brings in outside artists as well as our own to perform monthly throughout the year.

The Music Ministry at St. Gregory's is active. The Chancel Choir participates in leading worship on a weekly basis and rehearses each Thursday evening at 7:30 p.m. They also sing a major concert on Palm Sunday as well as participating in the Holy Week services and two Easter Sunday celebrations. They sing a major concert at Christmas and once yearly sing Evensong. They also sing a mini-concert before the Christmas Eve service. The choir and friends also present a talent show annually in August.

The Voices in Bronze hand bell ensemble participates in the Sunday morning worship services on a monthly basis, sharing their artistry and musical expertise to enhance the worship experience.

The Music at Four concert series began in 2005 and is beginning its ninth season of presenting a wide variety of musical programs as an outreach to the

community. The series is funded by donations from those who attend the concerts and the St. Gregory's family. The new season brochure is presented at the choir talent show, and attendees are encouraged to make donations to support the program.

#### Christian Education:

Vacation Bible School was reestablished in 2007 by Elizabeth Pavlov with the help of Linda Dixon. Students ages 2-10 annually meet for one week near the end of July. The program is led by adults from our church assisted by students 11 and older. A week of Bible study, music, and games is followed by a presentation the following Sunday.

#### Groups/Activities:

The Episcopal Church Women have been a strong support of our parish since the beginning. A number of continued functions include the Christian Cove (a gift shop), a Holly Faire, rummage sales, and receptions for meetings, weddings, and funerals. Other active organizations have included: Marriage Encounter, a dynamic EYC, weekly Bible Study Group, St. Theresa's Bridge and Service Guild, and a winning soft ball team.

Rachel Williams and Martha Weston created a prayer shawl ministry in approximately 2000. The shawls are handmade and given to people in times of crises to remind them that God's love wraps around us in our time of need.

We adopted the Boy Scouts of America #117 in 2010. These young men meet in Francis Hall weekly. Jackie Gross is the key person. Linda Dixon is the church liaison. The scouts have served as an unintended outreach program as several adults and young men have joined our church as a result of working with us. They also participate every year with the Toys for Tots program.

The Parish Rummage Sale was reestablished in 2011. The vestry determines what will be funded by its proceeds. Anything that is left over either goes to the Holly Faire or to Bill Salazar who runs a thrift shop in Orange County that supports a homeless shelter. Absolutely all donations are used.

Our Parish Mardi Gras festivities were introduced in 2012 and kick off our Lenten activities. The sale of Mardi Gras beads help finance Vacation Bible School. Mardi Gras is on Shrove Tuesday when the Softball team hosts the

annual Pancake Supper. There is a small silent auction for special items, and we also crown a King and Queen. Throughout Lent on Thursday nights, there is Soup Supper, and dramatic programs held in Francis Hall.

Our Bishops' Luncheon began in the fall of 2012. The luncheon is a biannual event held in the name of our bishops. We invite local churches to attend. This event is held primarily for our senior members, and the speakers are chosen based on topics of interest for the attendees. We have had Fritz Coleman of KNBC and Geraldine Schipske to name a few guest speakers.

Father Williams and Deacon Jones initiated the first Vestry Candidates' training in 2012. This is a suggested prerequisite for running for Vestry unless the member has served previously or attended class before. It emphasizes the church's organization, the rules of convention, the laws and by-laws of the local vestry.

Our Newcomers Brunch became a biannual event in the fall of 2012. These are held after church to welcome all newcomers that have joined us within the past six months. The purpose is to tell our new parishioners more about the church and learn about them. Wardens and Clergy are present to welcome into the church.

#### Youth:

Tamera Benedict and Bari Stevens-Chapman became the new leadership of our Youth Group in 2012; Sean Wood joined the adult leadership team fall 2013. The Youth Group and Sunday school are open to all youth 9th grade and above; this includes younger, college age adults. They have about sixteen enrolled with about 8-10 attendees per week meeting every Sunday from 9:00-9:40 am. Their local outreach programs include Feed My Lambs Ministry and Covenant House, which supports homeless youth. They have made two mission trips to Nicaragua, one in the summer of 2013 when they took a total of six people including adults and one in the summer of 2014 when ten people attended. They have a blog site, [www.stgregoryyouth.com](http://www.stgregoryyouth.com), which highlights these mission trips. They also host car washes, babysitting days, Christmas gift wrapping, Christmas pageant narration, Haunted House & Fall Festival sponsorship, movie nights, lock-ins, and other fun activities throughout the year.

Closing remarks:

Father Stephen Williams announced his retirement in June of 2013. He will be retiring in February 2015 after 14 devoted years of service. He hopes you will take the opportunity to explore your own faith journey with us, if possible, or with another faith community.

With strong, committed lay leadership, which has always been and continues to be one of St. Gregory's greatest assets, we look forward to a new ministry and a new era of spiritual growth, following our mission statement:

Our Mission is

To Worship and Glorify God;  
To transform Faith into Action;  
To share Christ's Love with the People of our Church and Community.