Grace Episcopal Church

175 years of faithful service

1851 – 2026

Introduction

Milestones like an anniversary provide the opportunity to reflect. As Grace Episcopal Church of Chicago reaches its 175-year anniversary, there is an opportunity to highlight what has made this church so special.

In the parish's first 50 years, there were many significant steps taken to address the needs of the people of Chicago. However, the leadership of the church foresaw a time when Grace would not have the financial resources to continue and, in 1904, advocated for an endowment. The purpose of the endowment was captured in the following sentence from a report supporting the establishment of the endowment:

> The growing disposition to make the Church in all its ministrations as free as possible, to welcome all equally to its services, and, to extend a helping hand to all in need cannot be gratified without provision being made by those upon whom the duty rests.

Grace's mission statement captures many of the same sentiments regarding what we are about as a church. The mission statement is:

> Grace Episcopal Church is a place for imperfect, curious people who are looking to explore or grow their faith. We are a community of Christians working to better understand the world around us and the role that we play in creating a more fair and equitable society. We are agents of change striving to increase our visibility and impact in Chicago's South Loop neighborhood and beyond.

Seven generations ago, a small group of people decided to form our parish. As you read this historical account, one hopes that we are inspired to carry on the good work of the church so there is a 200-year anniversary.

The parishioners of Grace Episcopal Church of Chicago (Grace) have been visionaries, unconventional and, at times, irreverent while keeping their focus on service towards others. These attributes have enabled Grace to succeed where other churches have failed. Below is the story of how Grace overcame many obstacles and kept focused on helping others to provide 175 years of faithful service to people in Chicago.

The Beginning of Grace

Grace was established on May 19, 1851, forming the third Episcopal church in the city of Chicago. A group of parishioners from Trinity Episcopal Church found its approach to worship to be too "High Church" (ritualistic). These parishioners, along with Rector Cornelius E. Swope left Trinity to form Grace. While not initiated by Bishop Philander Chase, it is reported that the formation of Grace was done with his approval.

Grace began by holding services in a hall. By November 7, 1852, the first church building was consecrated. It was not some magnificent stone building but rather was affectionately known as the "little wooden box" at the corner of Dearborn and Madison streets. Membership in Grace grew and the parish began attracting some of the wealthiest business families in Chicago. During this time there was controversy because Bishop Henry John Whitehouse, who was from New York, had not yet moved to Chicago. The vestry offered Grace for the Bishop's church. Once the congregation found out, it absolutely refused to go along, and the vestry had to rescind the offer.

By 1857 Grace's membership had grown to 140. Land was purchased with the intention of building a new church. However, due to financial reasons, the old church building was moved to the new location and enlarged. The Reverend James DeWitt Clinton Locke, D.D. became Rector of Grace in 1859. He described the building as "run down" and that Grace was "rather a weak venture." However, with the stewardship of the Rev. Locke and his wife Adele, they would completely transform Grace, and improve conditions in Chicago, during his 36 years as rector.

For example, in 1862, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church was established as a mission of Grace. The mission became a parish in 1863. Also in 1862, the diocese was in debt. Grace's portion to the diocese to settle the debt was $460. Rector Locke wrote that while the vestry was usually obliging, they were "hard as the nether mill stone about this."

In 1864, the Grace church building at Peck Court and Wabash Avenue was described as a "hideous wooden building". Rather than spending time and resources improving the building, the Rev. Locke established St. Lukes' Hospital. He had visited a patient in the bug infested City Free Hospital. Soon thereafter he preached a sermon about the need for a clean, Christian hospital where the sick poor might be cared for. After the service, his wife and other women who had taken care of sick Civil War Confederate prisoners of war held at Camp Douglas in Chicago, waited for him. Their response was an unqualified acceptance of the idea of starting such a hospital and they asked the Rev. Locke to help.

Steps began the next day to form St. Luke's Hospital. The bishop was "cold as ice" about the hospital, but regardless, the Rev. Locke pressed on. He accepted the responsibility of being the president of the new hospital but credited that "noble band of women" for the hospital's success. For several years it was under the direct control of Grace. The first location was a story and a half house that held only held seven beds. After a few months, it was clear a larger facility was needed. The Rev. Locke had officiated at the funeral of the owner and proprietor of a noted house of bad character. He went to the house and spoke to the abandoned women plainly and earnestly of the sinfulness of their lives. The man that bought the house from the owner's heirs found it hard to rent "for any good purpose," so he agreed to rent it to the Rev. Locke and Grace at a cheap rate. In this house there was space for 18 hospital beds. Grace and St. Luke's Hospital continued to have a close relationship for many decades which greatly benefitted both institutions.

Grace continued to grow and by 1867 it was clear a new building was needed. Given Chicago's growth in a southern direction, a location between 14th and 15th Streets was selected. There Grace built its first traditional church building in the style of architecture prevalent in the thirteenth century. This building was at least partially financed by parishioners buying their preferred pew (they were issued a "Special Warranty Deed") and then paying mandatory annual assessments for the upkeep of the church.

Grace's buildings were spared by the Great Chicago fire of 1871 which stopped two blocks away. The church opened its facilities to the homeless and needy after the fire. Food was distributed, the chapel was cleared for people to sleep in, and the vestry room was turned into a clothing depot. The Rev. Locke took a pay cut from $6,000 to $2,000. The seats of the church were declared free. This was also the year St. Luke's Hospital moved to a larger building on South Indiana Avenue.

In 1876, a tornado irreparably damaged the spire of the church. It was removed and as of 1890, had yet to been rebuilt. A tower was built to replace it in the early 1900's.

By 1881, St. Luke's Hospital had grown such that it needed more room. Land was donated just north of the existing building on South Indiana Avenue for additional construction. Land was also donated on Michigan Avenue for additional space. In 1885, a new 65 bed hospital building was constructed. At this time, the Rev. Locke and his wife were instrumental in forming the St. Luke's Hospital School of Nursing.

Grace celebrated its 50th jubilee in 1901. The sermon for that occasion outlined the accomplishments of Grace in its first 50 years. Also, it was the beginning of a recognition that without an endowment, the future of the church was in doubt due to maintaining the building and other expenses.

The Reverend William Otis Waters became rector in 1903. By 1904, with his support, these financial concerns resulted in the establishment of a donor restricted endowment on Easter Sunday (1904 Endowment). The Hibbard family (William Gold Hibbard died October 11, 1903) made such a large donation that a Hibbard Memorial Chapel was built and consecrated on February 6, 1906. All the donors were promised that the principal would remain intact as a perpetual endowment, with only the income to be used for the maintenance and current expenses of the church. Earlier, in a codicil to her will, Elizabeth A. Straut left a third of the remainder of her estate to Grace. Her restriction was that the income must be used in connection with the general missionary, benevolent and charitable work of the church and not for ordinary current expenses.

The Fire of 1915

On Sunday September 26, 1915, the church building and the memorial chapel burned to the ground. By way of context, World War I had started in 1914 with the United States entering the war about two years later. Given these circumstances, it was decided to not construct a new building. Instead, the parishioners repaired the parish house that was also damaged in the fire and that is where Grace held services for the next ten years.

Also in 1915, St. James Episcopal Church, the first Episcopal Church in Chicago, was suffering financial difficulties. Within a week of the fire, Grace received a letter from Bishop Charles Anderson expressing his sympathy for the loss of the church buildings. He then proposed that Grace Church, Trinity Church and the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul should merge to form a cathedral parish and eventually build a new cathedral. While it appears Grace was initially receptive to the proposal, by November 8, the vestry had decided that the proposal could not go forward because of the endowments. A legal opinion, published in the January 1916 edition of the "Grace Church Visitor", found that the proposed merger was "impossible" due to the 1904 Endowment as well as the endowment formed because of the will of Elizabeth A. Straut. This legal opinion publicly rebutted the opinion of counsel for the bishop. The Rev. Waters put a note at the end of the opinion that he considered this the final word, he would stand for the honorable discharge of the sacred trusts and expected the support of the congregation. Another attempt to merge Grace with St. James in 1921 was also unsuccessful.

Grace had continued its close relationship with St. Luke's Hospital. In 1924, Grace accepted an offer to begin using the hospital chapel for its services. Grace also accepted the offer for Grace to build a traditional church building adjoining the hospital on South Indiana Avenue. On April 29, 1928, the cornerstone on the fourth Grace Church building was laid.

The physical proximity to the hospital was beneficial to Grace. The parishioners were dedicated to the work of the hospital. Membership grew and it attracted businesspeople who were involved in both Grace and the hospital. These were good times.

The hospital continued to grow and in 1956, it merged with Presbyterian Hospital to form Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital. In 1957, it moved to the West Side Medical Complex.

The hospital moving away created financial difficulties for Grace. In 1965, Grace decided to sell the church building which was costly to maintain. Grace bought a five-story office building at 33 West Jackson Blvd. This move was less than 2 miles north; however, it returned Grace to the Loop. The Lutheran Church had a presence in the Loop through a mission congregation named Christ the King Lutheran Church. Grace invited the pastors of that mission to the Services of Dedication. Although the pastors accepted the invitation, they also expressed their regret and that of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago in Grace's choice of location. It was their view that Grace's return to the Loop would appear as if Christians were in competition with each other.

The new location allowed Grace to better serve the businesspeople of Chicago. When the Rev. William Casady became Rector in 1979, he brought new energy to the parish. There were weekday Eucharists, concerts and educational programs. Under his direction, and in cooperation with the diocese, Grace developed a new outreach ministry to the business community. The Center for Ethics and Corporate Policy was set up with the mission to bring the resources of the Christian tradition to the moral issues that surround corporate decision making. Through the efforts of Rector Casady, Grace was also a founding member of Central City Housing Ventures, Inc. (CCHV), a non-profit, ecumenical endeavor of eleven downtown churches to rescue, renovate and create Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing. The Rev. Casady served as the first Executive Director.

Unfortunately, the hoped for revitalization of Grace by moving to the Loop did not occur. By 1981 it was clear that something needed to be done for Grace to overcome the financial and administrative burdens of owning such a large building with so many tenants with such a small parish.

Grace on Dearborn Street

The Rev. Casady led the move to Printers Row. By 1985, a three-story former commercial building was completely renovated and converted into a multi-purpose facility. Grace began using the award-winning loft space on the second floor for its services in December 1985. The space was described as modernistic yet reverential. It was designed not to be overtly religious, however if one looks closely, one of the metal braces on the timbers is elongated to form a Roman-cross shape. On the street level, a large open hall that is used for church and community affairs, offices and a kitchen were constructed.

In 1987, after the Rev. Jan Erickson-Pearson was called as pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church, Grace and Christ the King entered an agreement where the two churches shared Grace Place as well as exchanged pulpits. This allowed both churches to advance their benevolent goals during difficult financial times.

Grace Place continued to be shared by Grace and Christ the King when the Rev. Canon Edward W. Curtis was called by Grace in August 1991. By 1993, a new pastor arrived at Christ the King joining its administrative assistant to help witness in the Printers Row. Even with this collaboration between the two congregations, budgets remained tight.

By 1994, there were three congregations using the second floor: Grace, Christ the King, and Makom Shalom/The Community. (There is still mezuzah on the right-hand side of the door jamb coming into the sanctuary from the stairs.) A Grace Play Place was re-born with 50-60 toddlers at Grace Place over two week-day mornings. The parish also addressed a failing roof parapet, with a repair cost of $30,000. Later in the 1990s, there were discussions about the viability of Grace at Grace Place, including a survey of members to test their feelings about leaving Grace Place. The members decided to stay but learned more about the financial and administrative realities of operating a Community Center.

By 1997, CCHV along with other organizations, had finally become successful in constructing "The Studios" which was a new 170 room SRO at 1801 South Wabash Avenue. It was the first new SRO construction in Chicago in over 50 years.

In 2000, Grace partnered with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to build out the third floor into offices which had previously been used for storage. Other nonprofit, social justice organizations joined AFSC in using the third floor.

In 2007, Onnuri Presbyterian Church began holding services and leased space at Grace Place. Onnuri is primarily a Korean-speaking congregation.

In 2008, the First United Methodist of Chicago (FUMC) began operating Hope's Table Chicago at Grace Place Saturday mornings. Hope's Table is a ministry of FUMC that provides food, clothing, and hygiene items to those who are homeless or hungry. Hope's Table also provides periodic access to health care and social services.

In 2009, South Loop Campus Ministry began leasing space at Grace Place. It was a joint mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, LuMin (Lutheran Campus Ministry Network) and the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), offering a spiritual community for the students, faculty and staff associated with the universities and colleges of Chicago's South Loop.

In 2011, Grace Place hosted members of the Occupy Chicago initiative. The Chicago protests were in support of the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City.

In 2013, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Lakeview began holding services on Saturday afternoons at Grace Place. The HTLoop services allowed for Holy Trinity to have access to new congregants in the Loop without having to incur the cost and administrative issues of having its own building.

The Rev. Amity Carrubba became rector in August 2016, the first woman to hold the position. Under her leadership, the parish expanded its presence in the neighborhood. Community outreach included annual Pet Blessings and Grace's participation in the Printer's Row Lit Fest.

In March of 2020, Grace faced the impact of the global COVID pandemic that included barring assemblies of people to help reduce the spread of the disease. Grace quickly pivoted to an online service format. The pandemic further affected Grace as some members were unable to adjust to the new technology while others had to move out of the area to live with relatives because they had lost their jobs. Even with this loss of membership, plate and pledge revenue remained essentially the same.

To further honor the bequest of Elizabeth A. Straut, the Straut Legacy Fund was started in 2022. This fund takes a portion of the distributions from the Straut endowment and provides annual grants to nonprofit organizations.

In 2024, economic immigrants and asylum seekers were provided temporary housing near Grace and had become part of the parish. They were welcomed into the parish and, over time, more Spanish was incorporated into the Sunday morning service and parish meetings. In 2025, the federal government began an aggressive approach to immigration enforcement. Grace continued to serve these members at the risk of an immigration enforcement raid.

As Grace turns 175 years old, it is a relatively small (less than 100 members) yet vibrant parish. Grace realized over 60 years ago that a traditional church building was something the parish could not financially support. The combination of two endowments, rental income from the commercial building, and parishioner giving sets Grace apart from many other parishes and allows for more financial stability.

Equally important to the sound financial stewardship has been Grace's unwavering commitment to serving others. The scope of the projects has varied over the years, but the current focus is still on serving others outside the church. With this ongoing commitment, Grace is well positioned to continue on in perpetuity.

Major Events in the Life of Grace Episcopal Church of Chicago

1851 Grace is established because enough parishioners and the Rector left Trinity Church because its approach to worship was too "high church" (ritualistic).

1862 St. Steven's Episcopal Church is a mission of Grace, becoming a parish in 1863.

1864 St. Luke's Hospital is established by the Rev. Locke, his wife Adele and other Grace parishioners. In 1885, the St. Luke's Hospital School of Nursing is founded.

1900 Grace Vestry and parishioners have the foresight and willingness to make financial commitments to establish two endowments in the early 1900's to help ensure Grace survives in perpetuity.

1915 Grace survives a catastrophic fire that burns down the church and the Hibbard Memorial chapel. The parish worships in a repaired parish house for 10 years.

1916 Grace successfully avoids a proposal to be combined with other churches in a plan initiated by the Bishop. Grace also rejects an attempted merger in 1921. Grace is successful because the endowments belong only to it.

1965 Grace decides to sell a traditional church building and purchase a five-story office building in the Loop to better serve downtown and grow the congregation. The growth did not happen and in the mid-1980's the building was sold because it was too expensive and too hard for a small parish to manage.

1985 A move to a three-story former commercial building in Printers Row provided optimism that a combined community center (Grace Place) and sanctuary space would help grow the congregation and help the community.

1990s Grace Place helps other congregations have a presence in the Loop including Christ the King Lutheran Church, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Makom Shalom/The Community, Onnuri Presbyterian Church, and the South Loop Campus Ministry. Community activities included leasing the third floor to the American Friends Service Committee, the First United Methodist Church Hope's Table Chicago program, the Grace Place Meals are Urban Blessing (G.R.U.B.) program, various day care programs, and many others.

2020s Grace continues to show the attributes that has sustained it for 175 years. It is financially aware and lives within its means. During the COVID pandemic, it pivoted to an all-virtual format. It established the Straut Legacy Grant program and embraced asylum seekers.

Sources

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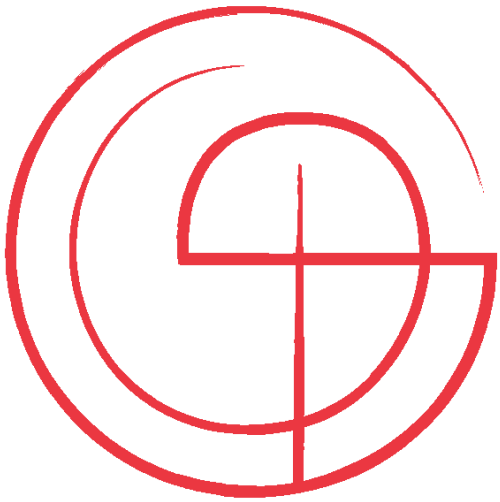

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