

# HISTORY OF GETHSEMANE EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Written and Researched By Dr. Gretchen Harvey

It could be said that Gethsemane Cathedral and the City of Fargo grew up together. In September of 1871, the Northern Pacific railroad announced its intention of crossing the Red River at the site where Moorhead and Fargo now stand. Within a month of the announcement, two tent communities sprung up in Fargo: "Fargo on the Prairie" and "Fargo in the Timber." With the railroads came missionaries and Fargo enjoyed its first Episcopal service on August 29, 1872, the Reverend Joseph A. Gilfilian, Rector from Brainerd, presiding. Early church services were held in a Northern Pacific dining tent for a congregation made up of mostly railroad employees and their wives. Although tent services proved tolerable during summer months, North Dakota winters compelled the growing congregation to find a sturdier structure in which to share communion. In 1873, Fargo Episcopalians began meeting for worship in "Pinkham's Hall," located at the corner of Front (Main) and 3<sup>rd</sup> street, until money could be raised to build a church of their own. Known as "The Church of the Crossing," this mission church served a congregation of about 20-25 regular attendees.

B.F. Mackall, a young druggist living in Moorhead, was an important lay leader for Fargo's growing congregation. In addition to helping raise money to build a church proper, Mackall led regular prayer services during those times when an ordained Priest was absent. By the summer of 1874, less than two years after the first Episcopal service was held in Fargo, congregants had raised enough money to begin building themselves a permanent church. Newly named Christ Church, it was completed in 1875 and located at 204 9<sup>th</sup> St. South, on land donated by General George W. Cass. Within the next few years, Christ Church was blown off its foundation, rebuilt, granted parish status, and renamed Gethsemane church. The booming agricultural economy of the 1880s led to growth in church membership (188 members in 1881), the addition of vested choir, and to structural additions including a vesting room, stained glass windows, a bell tower, and a pipe organ.

After the missionary district of North Dakota was formed in 1883, Fargo was chosen as its See City. Bishop W. D. Walker, North Dakota's first bishop, began publishing the "North Dakota Churchman" in 1886 (renamed the "North Dakota Sheaf" in 1902). He is also famous for outfitting a Pullman railroad car as a traveling mission church in 1890. Called "The Church of the Advent" and "The Cathedral Car of North Dakota," Bishop Walker used the car to minister to the diocese for about a decade until the costs of maintaining the car were no longer practical.

By the 1890s, Gethsemane's congregation had outgrown its church, which by this time had also been badly damaged by wind and had once again been blown off its foundation. Ambitious plans to build a new cathedral out of red sandstone were made and then altered due to the onset of a national economic depression. In the end, a new cathedral was built, but it consisted of a wood-frame building resting upon a sandstone foundation. The new cathedral was unique in that it possessed decorative wooden features, normally made of stone, to duplicate the original plans for a cathedral in the gothic revival style. Some 300 people attended the new cathedral's first service on February 11, 1900. It would be another thirteen years, however, before the cathedral would be debt-free and able to be consecrated.

In 1980, Gethsemane Cathedral was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Tragically, after renovation efforts got out of control, the cathedral was burned beyond repair on September 12, 1989. In short order, the congregation rallied and on May 18, 1991, ground breaking began for a new Gethsemane Cathedral, located at its current site at 3600 25<sup>th</sup> St. South. Like its predecessor, Gethsemane Cathedral's architecture is unique. Also, the spirit of that young druggist, B.F. Mackall, continues; volunteer lay and ordained ministry flourishes at Gethsemane Cathedral. The people continue to give generously; the "new" Cathedral became debt-free in January of 2003. Our church is historic, but it is always new, as long-time members and new arrivals in the Fargo Moorhead area expand Cathedral ministries by offering their time, treasure and talents to the glory of God.