

Although the first Greeks started arriving in the Springfield area as early as 1884, few chose to come as far as Springfield in those early days. Eastern Massachusetts and the New York area had Greek social groups already established and most would not leave the security of such a group. For the few who did come to Springfield in the ensuing years, life was difficult due to cultural and linguistic differences but jobs were available especially in the candy industry. With no Orthodox Churches at all in the area, some chose to worship occasionally in Episcopalian Churches while others chose Roman Catholic Churches. With the influx of many more educated Greek immigrants in 1905 and 1906, the community was finally able to come together to form a Greek society. The initial Pan Hellenic Society and another organization that tried to unite the Greek community soon disbanded however, for lack of interest. It was not until an attempt was made to establish a church in 1906 that the community finally united. Meetings were initially held over a shop in Stearns Square in the downtown section of the city. Eventually, a hall was rented at the corner of State and Maple Streets and the congregation was unofficially established. As this congregation grew, a more permanent site and name were needed. The issue of the name was a simple since most of the members (12 in all) on the steering committee were named George. The new Church of St. George finally celebrated its first Divine Liturgy on November 15, 1907 at a small brick house on Auburn Street. Coincidentally, Auburn Street was located just behind our present parking lot, where Route 91 passes by the Greek Cultural Center.

Although St. George was the only Greek Orthodox Church in Western Massachusetts, it was not long before the Greek Orthodox population in other surrounding cities increased dramatically. Another wave of immigration was initiated around 1912 upon hearing that Turkey would begin drafting tens of thousands of young Greek men. Cities like Constantinople (Istanbul) and Smyrna (Izmir) and regions all along the Mediterranean coast were still filled with hundreds of thousands of Greeks that had never left despite the fall of the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire 450 years earlier. Within fifteen years, there were other churches in Holyoke, Chicopee and Enfield, CT that drew from the original Greek population surrounding the North End Church.

By the 1920s, the Greeks of Springfield were joined by a sizable, Arabic-speaking, Lebanese Orthodox population. Together they grew and shared the church that, by then, grew to several hundred families. During the mid-twenties, at a time that saw many Greek communities dividing due to the politics in Greece (Royalists vs. Venizelists), a number of families from St. George started a new parish, the Holy Trinity Church. This parish was not with the Archdiocese as we know it now but with an independent Archdiocese with headquarters in Lowell, MA. Fortunately for the community and thanks to Archbishop Athenagoras who spent years reuniting communities throughout the country, the Holy Trinity Church did not last very long and everyone soon returned to St. George by the early 1930s. The availability of that church building on Carew Street, diagonally across from Sts. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church, was soon taken over by the Lebanese community which had grown to the point that they wanted their own church to worship in Arabic. For just over five years, we were separated again but it wasn't long before the Greek and Lebanese Orthodox Christians of Springfield was worshipping together at St. George Church, now in a larger building on Patton Street.

In 1938, the Archdiocese assigned Fr. Joseph Xanthopoulos to the parish which had experienced a considerable amount of turnover in the clergy. Fr. X., as he was affectionately known, was half Greek and half Lebanese and spoke Greek, Arabic and English fluently. For close to twenty years, he held the community together and dramatically increased the participation of the laity in various programs and ministries. In 1940, Fr. Joseph was approached by the leaders of the Memorial Church, a Congregational community in the North End, to buy their church, the rectory behind the church, and the large Parish House across the street that included classrooms, offices, and a hall for just \$40,000. Seventy years earlier, the church alone had cost \$100,000 to build. For the St. George community, it was a dream come true. As one of the most beautiful churches in the area, a landmark in the city designed by noted architect Richard Upjohn, the church building and parish hall would accommodate all of the space requirements of the flourishing community. The new church was renamed St. George Greek Orthodox Memorial Church, a name that remained for close to forty years.

During World War II and despite the Great Depression still lingering, the community put a significant amount of money into the redesign of the sanctuary, the nave, and the choir loft. As a Congregational Church, the choir and organ were located where the sanctuary is presently. Removing the tiered rows for the choir from the sanctuary and moving the pipe organ especially were significant tasks to overcome. Iconography was added to the ceiling and walls and some redesign of the Parish House across the street also took place.

On March 25, 1942, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Theotokos, a significant event in the history of not only St. George but also of the entire Archdiocese took place in the new church. Bishop Athenagoras Cavadas, the Bishop

of Boston, ordained the very first Greek American graduate of Holy Cross to the priesthood, Fr. George Papadeas. Holy Cross had been established only five years earlier in Pomfret, CT. The ordination of Father George was a cause for great celebration throughout America as all the efforts to establish a theological school in the United States were now producing fruit: Greek Americans serving Greek Americans in their newly-adopted country.

It was on Pascha morning 1944, however, that parishioners living in the area were awakened to the sound of sirens in Memorial Square. The church had caught on fire in the middle of the night as the result of a Paschal candle left burning in the choir loft and, by the time the fire department reached it, the entire rear of the church had been destroyed.

With the assistance of the church's insurance, reconstruction immediately began costing about \$75,000. New beams, walls and stained glass windows above the loft were constructed so as to match almost exactly what previously existed. By the end of the war, the community had finished their reconstruction and decoration and so, on September 30, 1945, the Church was officially consecrated by Archbishop Athenagoras. The names of hundreds of parishioners, living and deceased, were added into the marble altar along with the relics of martyred Saints presented by the Archbishop from the Patriarch of Constantinople.

As the community continued to grow into the 1950s, Fr. Xanthopoulos made the difficult decision to leave St. George. In 1957, Fr. Stephen Papadoulis was assigned to the parish. Fr. Stephen came to St. George from the Church in Manchester, NH. During his twenty-eight years of service to the community, Fr. Stephen became one of the most well-known priests in all of Western Massachusetts. He served on the Police Commission in Springfield and was a powerful presence in parish and ecumenical events. As a priest, his serving of the Divine Liturgy and his thoughtful homilies attracted many people to the community. As a member of the community himself, he enjoyed participating in athletic events like the bowling league and racquetball at the YMCA.

For the Lebanese community at St. George, worshipping in the liturgical Greek language was sometimes difficult. Still, for the great majority that remained active, the Orthodox Church would always be home no matter what language was spoken. In 1960, with the American-born Fr. Steve at the helm, Phil Ghareeb, a young man with natural leadership qualities, was asked to run for the Parish Council and represent the Lebanese community in all administrative affairs. For many, this signaled a new approach, a new level of acceptance and a hand of welcome to all the Lebanese people. Phil's sister, Olga Sabadosa, also served the community for more than fifty years as the Philoptochos president and as a member of the Executive Board for decades. Many, many others served St. George and continue to serve on various committees, in the Sunday School, and choir and to be active participants in the whole life of the Church. Together, they have contributed much to the parish including the enormous icon of Christ in the Church's vestibule.

One of the more memorable groups during Fr. Steve's years was The Olympians Drum and Bugle Corp that represented St. George all over the Eastern seaboard. Frequently winning awards for their precision and musical talent, the Olympians continued to draw in hundreds of young people from the Greek and local community for about twenty years. One of the highlights that many still remember was playing at the inauguration of President Lyndon Johnson in January, 1965. Many of the youth were also involved in various baseball and basketball leagues that were continuously amazed at the abilities of the church's youth.

As the turbulent 1960s and 1970s approached, the North End of Springfield was no longer the affluent place it once was when the church was constructed nor was it the place where many hardworking Greek immigrant families lived. Like many cities across America, Springfield saw its share of violence, riots, drug abuse, crime and deteriorating schools. The construction of two highways in the 1950s and 1960s very close to St. George took away the homes of many of the parishioners and thousands of others that had lived in Springfield for decades. Many chose to leave the city in favor of the quieter and more affluent suburbs. Fr. Stephen, despite all of these difficulties, continued to be a rock of faith, a very personable and highly respected member of the Greater Springfield community. In 1974, the boiler located just under the bell tower exploded into flames and a significant fire resulted that destroyed the walls and flooring around the church's entrance. Again, the church was fortunate to have sufficient insurance to cover the cost of repair and to replace the icon located just above the entrance door.

By the mid-1970s though, there was a movement afoot within the congregation to move St. George out of the city. A piece of land in the suburb of Longmeadow was purchased and the community began discussing whether or not to sell and to move. In 1977, a General Assembly was held in the Parish House that would change the community forever. When the final vote came to move to Longmeadow, one-third of the community voted in favor of the move.

The motion was defeated but, for that one-third, the move would take place. Thus began the Church of St. Luke in East Longmeadow.

For those still at St. George, the split in the community was bittersweet. While the division meant the devastating loss of over one hundred mostly young families, the people that remained were all those committed to the church's present location, its upkeep and its success. Archbishop Iakovos, who allowed the move but seemed to empathize with the parishioners of St. George, declared that the community would henceforth be known as St. George Greek Orthodox Cathedral and he made several of the most influential members into archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This is the highest honor that a layperson in the Orthodox Church may receive.

Another major development was the gift from the city of Springfield to the Church of a building that had once housed a branch of the city's library system. The old library, built by Andrew Carnegie in 1905, was given to the church for just \$1 as a grateful reward for remaining in Springfield. The old Parish Hall, purchased with the church in 1940, was abandoned and Springfield native, Christ Kamages, an architect, was hired to design an addition to the old library. By 1979, the building that included offices, a kitchen, a small hall and a gymnasium was completed and was named the Greek Cultural Center. The availability of land around the Greek Cultural Center also allowed the community to have a significant parking lot for the first time. The parking lot, in turn, allowed the community to host a large festival popularly known as Glendi. Many thousands of Greek and non-Greek residents of the city have attended during the three decades that Glendi has been held. Politicians running for the Mayor's Office, House, Senate and even the Presidency have made stops to mingle with the crowds and to take advantage of the enormous groups gathered.

By the mid-1980s, Fr. Stephen's health had deteriorated to the point where, in 1985, he announced his retirement. Fr. Peter Atsales, a native Bostonian, was assigned by the newly-installed Bishop Methodios to replace him. Fr. Peter, during his brief tenure, began the Bible Study group and was respected by many as a very bright and inspired man of God. Through the generosity of many parishioners, the Panagia Chapel was built in 1986 under his guidance to accommodate most of the baptisms and weekday services that take place. Robert Andrews, a Greek Orthodox Byzantine iconographer from the eastern part of the state was brought in to provide the chapel with a traditional Byzantine feel. His icons, which fill more than 30 churches across the country, were well-known at the time as he was working on the Transfiguration Church in Lowell.

Fr. Peter was accompanied by an assistant, Fr. Petros Gregory from Kansas City, a 1989 graduate of Holy Cross in Brookline. Fr. Petros, during his two years at St. George, was primarily responsible for the youth and young adults of the community, a function he performed well. He became very well-respected by many members of the community - young and old - as a kind and dedicated priest. Fr. Peter Atsales and his wife, Presvytera Loukia, left the community in 1991 to pastor a church in Miami, FL while Fr. Petros left St. George to take the Holy Trinity Church in Fitchburg, MA.

In 1992, Fr. Kyriakos (Kerry) Saravelas came to St. George from the Dormition Church in Somerville. Fr. Kerry was also a native Bostonian that grew up with Archbishop Iakovos as his mentor and priest. Fr. Kerry built up the Bible Study group into a thriving group of more than sixty parishioners from St. George and other local parishes. During his tenure, the enormous slate roof on the Cathedral Church and the rubber roof on the Cultural Center were replaced through the efforts of the Building Fund Board of Trustees. These two projects together cost hundreds of thousands of dollars that were not readily available. So, with the use of some monies from the Building Fund and the bingo night proceeds, the parish started a fundraising campaign that eventually acquired the funds to complete the project. The replacement of the blue carpet with a unique Byzantine red carpet in 2000 also was accomplished through the Building Fund's efforts.

Upon the completion of the above-mentioned roof project, the time seemed right to do away with the bingo that supported the community for over a decade. As time went on, the community realized that having bingo was not as lucrative as it once was. The damage to the building from all the foot traffic and the cigarette smoke was costing the community thousands of dollars a year. Many were also beginning to realize that the church should not be supported by outsiders gambling away their savings. So, as the number of workers from St. George also dwindled, Fr. Kerry helped to bring about the demise of the bingo nights and to begin planting the seeds for stewardship within the community. These seeds would take root years later.

Perhaps the greatest memories for many people during Fr. Kerry's tenure would be the two trips to the Holy Lands that he led from St. George. Filling a coach bus each time with members of St. George and other communities, the trips took pilgrims to all of the greatest sites including Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and the Dead Sea. For many, it was the trip of a lifetime and many continue to say it was the greatest experience of their lives.

As the parish was aging and many of the leaders of the Council and Building Fund were in their 60s and 70s, one of Fr. Kerry's primary goals was to build up the Council with some younger parishioners that would take the administrative duties from the older generation. New leaders for the Sunday School and the Philoptochos were among his accomplishments on that front.

In May of 2001, just as Fr. Kerry was planning to leave for a smaller parish in Newburyport, MA, the St. George community hosted Archbishop Demetrios to celebrate one hundred years of Orthodox presence in Western Massachusetts. Following the Divine Liturgy, a large banquet was held at the Sheraton in downtown Springfield. Clergy and members from other communities also joined His Eminence to celebrate the milestone.

In October of 2001, Father Christopher Stamas took the reins as the pastor and immediately began to concentrate on implementing the Bible-based stewardship system of giving. This would not only increase badly-needed income but, more importantly, the involvement of another generation. Being only 35 years of age, Father Chris was the youngest priest to serve St. George in nearly fifty years and so, his goal was build up and empower the younger generation of parishioners including the young children. Fr. Chris was raised at the Transfiguration Church in Lowell, MA and had been an assistant at St. Demetrios in Weston, MA prior to his coming to Springfield. In making the children a priority, the community soon realized that entire families benefited from a good Sunday School program. A new and innovative curriculum was also developed with an emphasis on the entire Orthodox Christian Tradition. The Sunday School, in Fr. Chris' early years, permanently added classes for high school students, showing them that education in the faith does not end as one enters adulthood. Along with the Pre-K that encourages children as young as three years of age to attend, the Sunday School has increased in size by almost 40% in recent years.

Membership began to rise overall within the parish and, with stewardship taking hold, the income increased by close to \$100,000 within a few years. The efforts of a new and active Stewardship Committee and innumerable parishioners are largely responsible for this progress. The increased income signaled for many an increase in faith and concern for the community. It also made many things possible – spiritual and material – that would contribute to the life of the Church. HOPE, JOY and GOYA programs were either established or complemented with greater parental involvement. The Greek School, which saw some dark days in the early part of the decade, has also increased in attendance with several new teachers, a new director, and members from other parishes attending our program as well. Later on, adult classes were added to the School to fill the desire some have to understand and/or speak the Greek language better.

The choir also began a program of renewal by welcoming several new members – men and women – into their midst. Through the efforts of the director and others, new binders and liturgical books were purchased that made transitions easier, especially for the newer members. The translation of many familiar hymns led to the use of more English in the choir and in various services since many in the parish are now coming to appreciate the hidden beauty within the hymns. Occasionally, entire services are held in the English language with non-active Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians being invited to see what the Orthodox Church has to offer.

Through the efforts of many people – young and old – the Ladies' Philoptochos Society began receiving rewards from Metropolitan and National Philoptochos Conventions for its new and innovative programs and its increased membership. These programs that include the implementation of stewardship for the Philoptochos, a community literacy program, an extensive monthly newsletter, and its constant pursuit of new and younger members to the board and general membership have shown others around the country that ministry is alive and well at St. George in Springfield.

In 2004, the Parish Council initiated an extensive renovation project totaling over \$1 million that sought to restore and renovate both the aging Church and Greek Cultural Center, now thirty years old. With the assistance of the Building Fund, an appointed Restoration Committee and countless parishioners, the painting of the entire interior of the Cathedral, the restoration of all the Cathedral's stained glass windows, the updating of the sound system and some iconography have all added to the worship experience for the parish.

In 2006, as the restoration of the stained glass windows neared completion, a special ceremony was held dedicating the window above the northern balcony to the priests that had served at St. George since the 1930s. Fr. Athanasios Demos, the chancellor of the Metropolis of Boston who represented Metropolitan Methodios, and Fr. Kerry Saravelas were on hand to celebrate the Divine Liturgy together with Fr. Chris. At the Dedication Luncheon, those who had known each of the priests well spoke about their contribution to the St. George community. It was a memorable day for all those who attended as the community was about to embark on its 100th Anniversary Year.

In 2007, as the community celebrated its 100th Anniversary, the people gathered several times to celebrate and remember the history that made the community what it is – an active and welcoming community of faithful people that love their Church. Special events were held in January and on the Feast Day of St. George in April that encouraged young people to share in the celebration as well.

In late April, the Panagia Chapel dedicated to the Nativity of Theotokos was consecrated by Metropolitan Methodios after an extensive renovation took place. A new throne, tile floor, rug, and Byzantine stained glass windows were added while the walls and ceilings were painted. An icon of the Pantocrator (Christ Almighty) was installed in September just before the start of Glendi 2007. In November of 2007, almost three hundred members of the community gathered at the Sheraton Ballroom to celebrate with Archbishop Demetrios the 100th year and the progress that has been made in all aspects of the community. Following speeches by the Roman Catholic Bishop, Fr. Chris and the president of the Parish Council, Archbishop Demetrios took the stage and left our hearts burning within us. Those who were there realized that our Church, despite the smaller numbers we once saw, is progressing in many ways nationally, regionally and locally.

As one hundred years have passed, the community has changed in many ways. While we are still very much a Greek Orthodox Church, the community is now made up of Orthodox Christians from several countries including Lebanon, Russian, Georgia, Romania, and, of course, from Greece. We have also welcomed many others from a variety of Christian traditions and more nationalities than we could ever count. We are now baptizing children that are from the fourth and fifth generation born in this country. Much has changed but one thing still remains the same: the Orthodox Faith and Traditions that have been with us and our ancestors for twenty centuries. As a Church of God, it is progress on the spiritual front that we continue to seek and to strive to accomplish as a community. With God's grace and the unwavering faith of the parishioners, that progress will continue for many years to come.