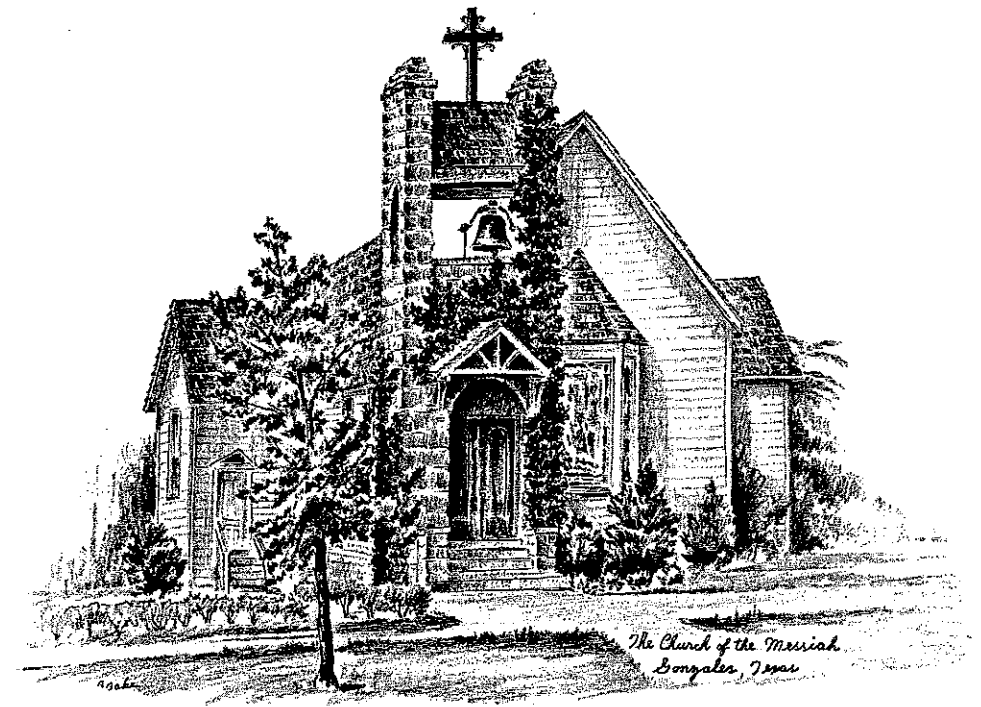




The History of The Episcopal Church of the Messiah

BY

THE REV. RICHARD G. URBAN

**A HISTORY OF
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH
GONZALES, TEXAS**

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1981

FOREWORD

It is a great privilege for me to serve as the rector of the Church of the Messiah as it celebrates this very special occasion, the 100th anniversary of the Consecration of the Church building. It means a great deal to me and my family to be a part of this community of faith and to have a share in the history of this parish as it continues to unfold. I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Rev. Richard Urban who labored many hours and with great devotion to prepare this history. Both his ministry preceding mine and his friendship have made my tenure here very pleasant. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to the members of the parish and especially to the Vestry for their love and support as we have worked together in this part of God's vineyard. I take this opportunity to recognize our current Vestry: Mr. W.B. Thompson, Senior Warden, Mrs. Marilyn Price, Junior Warden, Mrs. Donna Gray, Treasurer, Mrs. Emily Smith, Secretary, Mr. Edward Andrews, Mr. Ray Lee and Judge Henry Vollentine. My prayer is that we will continue to minister together with Christ as the head of our body, so that, when the 200th anniversary of the Church consecration is celebrated, they may say, "Surely the Lord was in this place!"

The Rev. Edmund L. Dohoney
Rector
Easter Eve, 1981

A HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH

The Episcopal Church first officially came to Texas shortly after the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836. The Church Board of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States sent two missionaries in 1838, to Houston and to Matagorda. In that same year, the Rt. Rev. Leonidas Polk was consecrated Bishop for the Arkansas Territory and the Republic of Texas, in effect the first Bishop designated by the American Episcopal Church for a foreign field.

Just when the Episcopal Church became active in Gonzales is uncertain. Probably the nucleus of a congregation was created by immigrant families from the British Isles who brought their Anglican convictions with them. It seems certain that services of the Episcopal Church were held in Gonzales by the early 1850's. By this time the Rt. Rev. George W. Freeman had been consecrated Bishop of the Indian Territory and the State of Texas. He visited Gonzales in May of 1853, accompanied by the Rev. J. Ward Dunn of Lockhart. It is apparent from the Gonzales Inquirer that the Rev. Mr. Dunn came to Gonzales several times to conduct services. Sufficient interest was shown so that by 1855 the Church of the Messiah in Gonzales was listed as a parish in union with the Diocese of Texas. The Rev. R.S. Dunn was ordained and assigned to the church. By 1856 the parish listed seven communicants; and the Bishop, in his address to the Annual Convocation, notes that "at Gonzales, May 22, 23, 1855, I preached twice and confirmed five persons, four of whom, it is worthy of remark, were physicians."

Although for many years the congregation of the Messiah had to meet for services in various buildings, most frequently the Methodist Church, there was some growth. By 1860 statistics indicate that there were 23 communicants and a Sunday School of 7 teachers and 30 children. It is of interest that the annual report of the number of baptisms noted that there were 3 infants and 6 colored infants.

In 1874 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, recognizing the great extent of Texas, created the Missionary Districts of Western Texas and Northern Texas, each to be under the supervision of a Missionary Bishop. The Church lost no time in naming a Bishop for this area (Western Texas) and chose a young man, then a Rector in Atlanta, Georgia, the Rev. Robert W.B. Elliot. When the new Bishop arrived in his jurisdiction that same year, he found 12 congregations that could be called active, one of which was Gonzales. Of these, only five had church buildings; and Gonzales was not one. However, there seems to have been enough interest and growth in the next few years to encourage the congregation to begin steps that would lead to the construction of a church.

In June, and again in October, of 1879, the Vestry of the Messiah appealed to the Common Council of the City of Gonzales for permission to use land on East Avenue for church purposes. This was in accord with previous action by the Common Council in which such permission was

granted to other church bodies to use land under the control of the city.⁽¹⁾ The Church was granted the use of Lots 2, 3, 4, and 5 of Block 46 of the inner city of Gonzales for the purpose of building a church. (Appended to this history is a copy of the minutes of the Common Council in which the above action is taken). This permission was to continue in effect as long as the land was used for church and school purposes. These lots are situated in the 700 block of St. Louis Street. Actual building was begun in 1880.

During the construction of the church, which continued into the following year, the Bishop visited Gonzales several times, possibly to encourage the congregation in their undertaking. In his report to the Annual Convocation of the District of Western Texas (1882) Bishop Elliot reported that during 1881 he visited Gonzales several times, confirming in all 24 persons. The Bishop also reported that on one of these visits, April 27, 1881, he consecrated the new church building. Also present for this momentous occasion were the Bishop of Northern Texas, the Rt. Rev. Alexander M. Garrett, the Rev. N.B. Fuller of Luling, and the Rev. F.R. Starr of Victoria. This important event in the life of the Church of the Messiah was also reported in the Gonzales Inquirer of April 30, 1881, referring to the previous Wednesday.

The Church building is of wood construction, with coupled stone foundation. Much of the building material was brought in from Florida and the Gulf coast by ox-cart. The finishing wood is of rare Guadalupe walnut from the local river bottoms. In recent years when material like it was desired for the new Communion Rail, the only stand of this wood was found in Quebec, Canada. The pointed arch stained glass windows, which date from the 1880's were probably imported and are quite rare. This is the oldest Church building in Gonzales and is probably the oldest building in the city which has been continuously used for the purpose for which it was originally intended. The bell tower was in the center of the east end of the building, and the base of the tower constituted the main entrance to the church.

The Gonzales Inquirer of January 20, 1883, has the following note about the bell: "The Episcopal Church has had a new bell placed in the tower, of which the members brag considerably, and sleepers and sinners will be called to praise and prayer on the regular Sabbath mornings which that society has appointed for worship. The bell is from a celebrated bell foundry, and has a B flat tone, and weighs 600 pounds without the attachments which weigh some 200 pounds more, being the largest bell between Houston and San Antonio."

(1) East Avenue is a term used to designate an area, one block in width, bound on the south by St. Louis Street and on the north by St. Lawrence Street, extending from the center of the city eastward 3 miles. This is an area which, along with a similar area running north and south and known as North Avenue, was set aside in the 1831 original plan of Gonzales for public use only. These areas have remained as designated. The names are preserved in the names of the two elementary schools. This land has remained under the control of the City Council and has been leased to churches and schools and for other public uses. Thus, the land on which the Church of the Messiah and the Parish House and Rectory are built belongs to the City of Gonzales.

It will be of interest to insert here an item from Bishop Elliot's address to the 8th Convocation of the Missionary District, May 18 - 22, 1882, a large part of which is in the form of a diary: "En route to Indianola, preached at night in the Church of the Messiah, Gonzales, and confirmed four persons: was assisted in the service by the Rector, the Rev. Mr. Fuller.

"When it is remembered that last year there were only nineteen (19) communicants in this parish, and that today there are over fifty (50), and that the increase has not been the result of immigration, because Gonzales has felt comparatively but slight impulses from such a source, being one of the old and well settled counties of Texas, and that the additions have come from citizens long resident and much respected, we have devoutly to thank God for these times of refreshing which have fallen upon this portion of our work, and the rector is to be congratulated upon this great, sudden, but healthy growth — there is every mark about it of true spiritual vigor. The remarkable development of church life has been followed by the demand for more frequent services, to which I have already alluded, and which has led to the division of the field between Messrs. Fuller and Ticknor. The cheering results of this year have caused me to turn to the entry under Gonzales made seven years ago, during my first visitation of Western Texas, it was as follows: 'January 6, 1876 — Visited Gonzales, but as they had not received my letters, and the weather being wretched, no service was held! I remember it well. The Rev. Mr. Carrington and myself drove down in his buggy, from Lockhart, 35 miles, in a wet norther. The wet norther lasted spiritually sometime. We had no church building, no organization, no lot — nothing. But there were some Christian souls there that never gave up, and behold the faithfulness of the pastor and people. May God be praised for the brethren who have been added unto us.' "

The earliest local parish record we have is a Vestry Minute Book covering the time from February, 1882, to December, 1901. Members of the Vestry in 1882 were: Jas. T. Mathieu, Dr. J.C. Jones, E. Dudley, John Darst, W.H. Atkinson, Ed Titcomb and George Swift. Within a year Mr. Swift was replaced by F. Richartt. Problems recorded range from the ever-present one of finances to such a matter as animals, apparently chiefly horses, in the churchyard. In an effort to prevent having unwanted livestock in the church yard, the Vestry directed that locks be placed on the fence gates and be kept locked during the week. A name that still appears in the annual budget of the parish is that of Mr. C.C. Guppy to whom the Vestry voted to extend its thanks for "his efficient aid and donation of work upon the chancel furniture." (February 1882)

By 1883, having completed the church building, the Vestry turned its attention to planning for a rectory. In October of that year, a committee was appointed to act in conjunction with a like committee of the ladies to collect all the money possible with a view to beginning the construction of the rectory at an early date. Previously the Church of the Messiah had been served by clergy from other churches within reasonable traveling distance. In May of 1884, the Vestry moved "that the Secretary give official notice to the Rev. N.B. Fuller that he had been called as Rector of this parish for the

ensuing year, on the following terms, to wit: "The Bishop of Western Texas to pay \$450.00 and the congregation of this church to pay \$550.00 making a total of \$1,000.00 per year. Services to be held by the Rector each Sunday in the year." The Rev. Mr. Fuller accepted this call and continued to serve until 1886. It should be noted that apparently the Rev. Mr. Fuller had been serving as Rector for two years previously, though perhaps it should be assumed that this had been in a combined relationship with the church in Luling. It may well be that this closer relationship between priest and people was the stimulus needed to further plans for a rectory. In reading the minutes of the Vestry meetings, it is easy to see the difficulties in acquiring sufficient finances to complete the rectory, which would in turn help to show why progress seemed slow. However, evidence that the building had been completed by 1886 is apparent from the minutes of May 1, 1886, in which the Rev. Mr. Fuller was again called to be Rector, this time with stipend plus the use of the rectory. In the minutes in action relating to the construction of the rectory, we find the name of Mr. Remschel, who was to be paid for materials and for work done. His descendants are still in business as Remschel Brothers Lumber Company.

While still a young man, age 47, Bishop Elliot died in August of 1887, after making a lasting and valuable contribution to the life of the church in Texas. His successor was the Rt. Rev. James Steptoe Johnston, who was consecrated in January of 1888 and immediately began his work in the Diocese. In May of 1889, the 15th Annual Convocation of the District met at the Church of the Messiah with Bishop Johnston presiding. The local congregation had grown to 72 communicants.

Despite this growth there was some difficulty in supporting the clergy. This is evidenced by the fact that, in February 1890, the Rev. Francis R. Starr, then living in California, was called to be Rector with stipend as follows: \$300.00 from the Church of the Messiah and use of the rectory, \$300.00 from the Church in Luling, \$300.00 from the Diocesan Board of Missions. The Rev. Mr. Starr accepted and served for six years. Throughout the decade of the 1890's, there was difficulty in maintaining the finances in a viable condition. Even such a matter as trying to raise a necessary \$12.00 to complete payment to Mr. Remschel was a problem. That the church continued to maintain a full life was due in no small part to the members of the Vestry, many of whom had served for many years. In 1895 on the death of the long time Junior Warden, James T. Mathieu, a moving memorial resolution was adopted, testifying to the great esteem in which he was held. Members of the Vestry were: Dr. Jon. C. Jones, W.M. Atkinson, W.P. Fischer, A. Kleine, Jr., E. Dudley, F.B. Baker and Ed Titcomb.

A proposal relating to the church building received considerable discussion during the latter years of the last century and eventually led, though somewhat indirectly, to an interesting action by the parish. First, a word or two of background. Liturgically speaking the Altar end of the church building has always been considered the East end, even though it may face some other direction by the compass. This is due to the long established and ancient custom of facing east, toward the rising sun, for worship. The Church of the

Messiah is so built that the Altar end faces West. It seems that there were some who would have liked to change this. In late 1897, the Vestry voted that the matter of changing the church building to face in the opposite direction be indefinitely postponed. The following March, the Ladies Guild proposed that the interior of the church be rearranged so that the Altar would be in the east end. This the Vestry approved with certain definite provisions: First, that the Ladies have the cash in hand (estimated at \$250); that the tower be left as it was; that the main entrance be at the west end; that all plans be approved by the Vestry; and that it be understood that the Vestry would not be expected to furnish any money. It was some two years later that bids were received for the proposed change. Since they were much larger than anticipated, the ladies decided to postpone the change indefinitely. This was not, however, the end of the matter. In 1901, at the suggestion of the Rector, the Rev. Charles F. Kite, the congregation voted to use the money collected for changing the church building to purchase a lot in the northern part of the city to be used as a Sunday School and Chapel of Ease.⁽²⁾ A Sunday School and services were conducted for several years. In 1912 the Vestry voted to sell the property. The Sunday School Superintendent, Mr. Baker B. Hoskins, was instructed to visit the Mission and to urge those attending to come to the Sunday School in the mother church. No further record is available, but it is to be assumed that it all worked out as desired.

In 1905, under the leadership of Bishop Johnston, the Missionary District of Western Texas became the Diocese of West Texas; and the Church of the Messiah became a part of the Diocese.

The story of the parish in the 20th century is one of slow growth and changes marked primarily by the change in clergy tenure. The Rev. Mr. Kite was apparently an Englishman as he writes in 1901 from England that he cannot return to his work as Rector as the climate in Texas was too severe for him. As early as 1911 considerable attention was given to the matter of the Rectory, whether to repair the present building or to build a new one. We can believe that the real problem was one of obtaining the necessary finances. There were those who felt the cost of repair was too great for the value of the house. However, a new Rectory was built. The Rev. Benjamin S. McKenzie, who was Rector from 1913 to 1919, in his report to the Diocese for the year 1914 writes: "This has been in many respects the greatest year in the history of the parish. As handsome and commodious a Rectory as can be found in the state has been built and paid for, Parochial and Diocesan obligations promptly met, and generous offerings made for the missionary work of the church." This fine building still stands and serves as a comfortable home for the clergy families. Incidentally, there is a picture of the first rectory as it looked in 1909, courtesy of the then Rector, the Rev. L.L. Williams.

We would have difficulty verifying some actions of the parish if it were

⁽²⁾ Chapel of Ease — from the Church of England, a mission conducted by a "mother church" without a priest-in-charge and supported, at least in part, by the mother church for the financial ease of chapel attendants. This lot is situated on the north side of the 600 Block of Wells Street.

not for our annual Diocesan Journals. From them we learn that in 1928 the Rector reported that the Church "was rebuilt and new furnishings added." This included a change in the outward appearance. The cruciform plan of the building was completed, including a room for the organ pipes and motor. The tower was moved from the center of the east end to the southeast corner of the building and offset. This new tower was built of stone from the Maurin Quarry near the community of Dilworth in Gonzales County, and it became the new entrance. The site of the former tower was made into a bay which became the baptistry with a beautiful stained glass window. New choir stalls and pews were added as well as other furnishings. An asbestos shingle roof was added also. (A list of furnishings which were given as memorials and as gifts is appended to this paper.)

One Rector of the Messiah, The Rev. Mason Hurd, gained some recognition when in 1935 he was the author of the lyrics of an anthem dedicated to Major Theodore Staunton Lee, one of the "18 defenders of Gonzales." The music was composed by Mrs. Lum (Naomi) Ollre, then organist of the church and a granddaughter of Major Lee.

What surely must have been long desired and much needed, a beautiful and very useful Parish House was built in 1951-52, largely through the help of Mrs. Sue Houston.

As the years have passed, the congregation has slowly increased until it reached its present strength of approximately 100 communicants, which has been maintained for some time. The parish has acquired a certain financial stability through the help of gifts from several parishioners which are maintained as endowments. With the continued dedication of all members, the Church of the Messiah looks forward to many years of fine service to God in this community.

APPENDIX

Copied from the Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Gonzales, Texas, and from the records of the County Clerk of Gonzales County.

Gonzales, Texas, June 10th, 1879

At a regular meeting of the Common Council held this day there were present: H.W. Branch, Mayor; Samuel Cox, L. Burchard and John Jobe, Aldermen, when the following proceedings were Had:

Be it ordained by the Common Council that a lease is hereby granted to the Episcopal Church to lots No. 3 and 4 in Block No. 46 of the inner town of the City of Gonzales, for the purpose of building a church and for church purposes. They are to Have and to Hold the said property so long as it is used for public worship, provided said property be improved and built upon within 18 months from this date.

Gonzales, Texas, October 14th, 1879

At a regular meeting of the Common Council held this day, present: H.W. Branch, Mayor; Samuel Cox, L. Burchard and John Jobe, Aldermen, when the following proceedings were had upon application made by the Episcopal Church for the remaining south half of Lots No. 2 and 5 of Block 46 of the inner town of the City of Gonzales, for Church and school purposes. The same was granted to the Episcopal Church for the purposes mentioned, so long as it is used for purposes above named.

State of Texas

County of Gonzales

We hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of the record of the proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Gonzales.

Given under our hands this 14th day of October, 1879

Signed H.W. Branch, Mayor

John Jobe, Secretary

State of Texas

County of Gonzales

Before me, D.D. Jones, clerk of the county court in and for said county, personally appeared H.W. Branch and John Jobe, who are to me personally known, and acknowledged that they signed, executed and delivered the foregoing instrument of writing for the purpose and consideration therein specified.

WITNESS my official seal and signature, at my office in the city of Gonzales, this 18th day of October A.D. 1879.

Signed D.D. Jones

Clerk C.C. G.C.

by Ed Titcomb, Deputy