



A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. MARK'S

In 1903, Rev. Edward Vicars Stevenson of Grace Episcopal Church in Plainfield placed a notice in the local newspaper inviting interested “colored Episcopalians” to attend a meeting to discuss a how to provide church services for colored people. Thirteen people responded to this call, starting the “Grace Church Mission.” Segregated services for colored people were held on Sunday afternoons at 5:00PM, in the parish house of Grace Church. By 1908, the mission had separated physically from Grace Church. The colored people conducted their church services at the Masonic Hall on West Front Street and Madison Avenue until 1910. From 1910 to 1922, they worshipped at the Plainfield Masonic Hall on St. Mary’s Avenue.

Grace Church had thirty-seven families on its “Colored Mission Roll,” and they hailed from the Mid-Western States, the Deep South and the West Indies. In 1914, the congregation severed all ties with Grace Church, received the status of a diocesan mission and adopted a new name, “St. Mark’s Mission”. The church was given the name St. Mark’s because this was the saint day closest to the day the mission began.

In the early 1920’s, the Pittis family of Grace Church donated land and a prefabricated church for the congregation. In 1922, however, through the hard work and sacrifices of the parishioners of St. Mark’s, construction of the church and rectory buildings began. The ground-breaking ceremonies of the church building were held on October 1, 1922. The Bishop of New Jersey dedicated the church building, and the Archbishop to the West Indies preached the sermon.

On Christmas Day 1946, the parishioners applied for full union with the Diocese as a self-supporting Church. Effective January 1, 1947, the church began paying its rector a full stipend, without assistance from the Diocese of New Jersey’s General Convention. Previously, the priests serving during the early years stayed only brief periods between two to four years. In later years, only three rectors administered church affairs: Edward L. Braithwaite (1948 – 1957); Eugene Stedson Smith (1958 -1970) and Leroy Austin Lyons (1971-2012). Unlike the previous rectors, Braithwaite, Smith and Lyons brought with them experience, maturity and diversity.

In 1978 under the leadership of Fr. Leroy Lyons the church moved from East Third Street to its present facility on Park Avenue. This began the evolution of the church from a marginal parish bordering on mission status to one of the largest parishes in the Diocese of New Jersey, with a communicant roll of over 400 families.

As a result of the move St. Mark's was able to expand its Christian outreach. For example we have worked with the Interfaith Council for the Homeless of Union County (Homefirst) in addressing the housing needs of displaced persons. The church also spawned a Community Development Corporation (CDC) which has been instrumental in providing a highly effective SAT Prep program, a Math and Science Club for younger children, and a well-regarded Summer Enrichment Camp (AGAPE) for area youths.

People remain at the center of this parish. Encouraging spiritual growth was the core of Fr. Lyons' ministry, as evidenced by the numerous people for whom he has served as mentor: The Rev. Laughton Thomas; The Rev. Abeoseh Flemister, ordained as a priest in Liberia; Robert Turner, now a deacon at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Metuchen; Theodore (Ted) Moore, now a deacon at Grace Episcopal Church in Plainfield; Clive Sang, now a deacon at Trinity Episcopal Church in Cranford; The Rev. Amy Cornell, recently ordained priest and Rector of Grace-St. Paul's Church in Mercerville; and the late Bert Ottley, (Seminarian).

St. Mark's has an army of talented and committed people. We are no longer housed in the small white clapboard church on East Third Street. We have grown in membership, facilities and structure, and are now a complex and dynamic organization. Through this evolution, we are proud that we have maintained many small church values. We are making our presence felt in the community and plan to continue this outreach in the future.

The Rev. Canon Leroy A. Lyons retired in 2013 after 42 years of faithful service to St. Mark's. After a lengthy search, we welcomed our new rector, the Rev. Angelo S. Wildgoose, to lead this vibrant congregation into its next phase of its evolution in service to God, our members and the community around us. Fr. Wildgoose began his tenure as St. Mark's rector on January 1, 2016.