



St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church: A Centennial of Faith, Heritage, Community, & Resilience

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St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church is today a diverse, close community of people tied together by faith, family, and community. Yet these bonds are interwoven by generations of connecting threads that reach back to a large group of mostly young, Greek men that immigrated to America. These hardy men were determined to make a livelihood for themselves as well as to send financial support back to the families they left behind in the cities, villages, and islands of Greece. Their story is one characterized by struggle, resiliency, and the triumphs founded in the faith and fraternal bond of its members. It is a spirit of community that was given over to future generations as a sacred trust to be continually nourished and given renewed and dynamic life.

The Pioneers

The earliest account of Hellenes stopping through St. Louis dates back to 1860, when small numbers of transient Greek boatmen were noted in the U.S. Census as working on the banks of the Mississippi River. During the Civil War period, a Greek trader named Constantine Ralli set up a store near the riverfront, and in 1864 was appointed by President Lincoln as Vice-Consul of Greece to St. Louis, a title held for only a few years before he closed his doors and left the city.

A permanent Hellenic presence wasn't established until the arrival of a Greek from Smyrna named George Socrates Meletio in 1866, who eventually established a thriving seafood market in downtown St. Louis. He was followed by another entrepreneur in 1872, when Demetrios Jannopoulo moved to St. Louis after losing all his possessions in the Great Chicago Fire. Originally from Thessaly in northern Greece, he founded the Missouri Tent and Awning Company, which grew to become a national leader in the manufacture of canvass products. In 1890 Jannopoulo was named as Greek Consul to St. Louis, which had grown to become the fourth largest city in America.

Probably no more than a few hundred Greeks lived in St. Louis for any length of time before 1900. But during the first decade of the twentieth century the rate of immigration jumped dramatically. Drawn especially by job opportunities connected with the 1904 World's Fair, the number of Greeks living in the city soared from 75 in 1900 to nearly 2,800 in 1910 (a few of the local Greeks, like Marathon runner John Furla, even participated in the 1904 Olympics held during the Fair at the Washington University athletic field). As a headline in the *St. Louis Republic* noted in February, 1909, a "Greek Invasion of St. Louis" was underway. St. Louis had become a new metropolitan magnet for young Greek men seeking mainly low-skilled and trades work, whether as bootblacks, waiters, bellhops, fruit cart vendors, or railroad laborers.

Many of these young men had left a homeland beset by a failing agrarian economy, disproportionate tax burdens, and a lack of government stability, a situation so serious that one of every four Greek men sailed to America in the early 20th century. After disembarking for processing at Ellis Island, they boarded trains that took them to their final destination in cities across the East Coast, South, and Midwest. Many of those who stepped off the train at Union Station in St. Louis met up with brothers, cousins, or others they knew who preceded them to America. Some were also sponsored by what became notoriously known as padrones, men who underwrote the passage of Greek boys and young men on their way to America only to hire them out as cheap labor. Often, immigrants roomed in crowded quarters, sometimes up to ten or more living in a small apartment, sharing in domestic chores while saving their money.

The first efforts to meet the spiritual needs of these men were made by Greek Consul Jiannopoulo, who felt a duty to look out for the needs of his fellow countrymen. Prior to 1904, Jiannopoulo arranged for two priests from Chicago, Frs. Pegeas and Mandelaris, to alternate monthly trips to St. Louis to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and administer sacraments. But that year, working with a small group of established Greek immigrants, he organized the first Greek Orthodox Church in St. Louis, the Church of the Holy

Trinity (*Hagias Trias*). The new parish would need a full-time priest to pastor its flock, and Jiannopoulo had one at the ready – his father-in-law, 65-year-old Fr. Panagiotis Phiambolis, who became the first permanently assigned Greek Orthodox priest to serve in the state of Missouri. Even before his son-in-law called on him, Fr. Phiambolis had already left a significant mark in St. Louis when during a visit with his family on August 7, 1892 he celebrated the first Orthodox Christian liturgy in St. Louis at St. Luke's Chapel on 19th Street and Washington Avenue.

The new Holy Trinity parish found its home in a former Protestant church located on the northwest corner of 19th and Delmar Streets in western downtown St. Louis, which was rented for \$50 a month. The church was placed under the administration of the Greek Consulate – i.e. Jiannopoulo – and a circle of his Greek friends.

In the years following its inception, the Holy Trinity community found itself financially struggling. As a result, church members were assessed a required stewardship of \$6 per year in addition to Sunday offerings. Other fees were set up for the performance of various sacraments. But continued fiscal instability eventually led to dissension among the parish leadership and a split that saw the establishment of a second Greek Orthodox parish in 1911, named the Annunciation (*Evangelismos*), which rented space at 17th and Olive Streets, just several blocks from Holy Trinity. A priest named Fr. Vasilios Avramopoulos was assigned to celebrate services and shepherd the parish. But within just two years the infant church was forced to disband after the majority of its members returned to Greece to fight the Turks in the Balkan Wars.

By 1916 it appeared all efforts at reconciling divisions within the Greek community over where they would worship and how their church would be administered had failed. The community was ready for a fresh start, one not led by a few individuals, but by all the faithful working together.

The Founders

As the second decade of the 20th century wore on, still more Greeks immigrated to St. Louis, and by then an increasing number who had lived in the community a decade or more were laying down roots, either establishing their own businesses or finding more stable employment in area factories and shops. In 1917 this growing group of Greek entrepreneurs, in addition to tradesmen and those who found steady work beyond the low-skill jobs they took when they first arrived in St. Louis, decided to disengage from the first struggling churches and move away from the conflicts and irreconcilable

differences that enveloped them. An entirely new Greek Orthodox parish was created with the hope of moving in a more unified direction.

For thirteen years Holy Trinity parish had been founded and run by the Greek Consul and a small circle of paternal leaders as a cultural and religious obligation of the consulate to the young Hellenic community of St. Louis. Now, a new church was preparing to form, initiated by a larger group of rising, independent Greek immigrant men and their families who felt no need for self-designated leaders to be involved.

In what would be a momentous day, on Orthodox Palm Sunday, April 8, 1917, only two days after the United States declared war on Germany, a large group of immigrant Greeks met at Druid's Hall on Ninth and Market Streets in downtown St. Louis. They gathered to discuss options to the long-standing conflicts in the community, and determined that the only way was to chart a new path and create a new church community that made a clear cut with earlier factions.

They set out by charging a committee of sixteen with tasks that organizing a new parish would entail, and things began to move quickly. Among them were Konstantinos Hadgicostas; Naoum Stamatis Karandzas; Panagiotis Tsichlis and Antonios Melisaropoulos, grocers with storefronts in a two square block area of downtown called "Greek Town"; Nicholas Saganis, a marble cutter; Haralambos Anastasiou, a shoe factory worker; Konstantinos Paraskevopoulos, a candy store owner; Konstantine Galanis, a partner in the Olympia Movie Theater; George Demetriou; Athanasios Theophanellis, a restaurateur; Panagiotis Lenatsos; Kosmas Geormas; Marco Christo, a barber shop owner; Constantine Cassamatis, co-owner of the Gem Restaurant; George Pappademmas, who opened a coffee business; and Nicholas DeGerinis, a restaurateur.

Rather than appeal directly to the Holy Synod of Greece to appoint a priest, the committee moved to make direct contact with priests they thought might be interested and interviewed them. They decided to engage the services of Fr. Constantine Liakopoulos. The day after Fr. Constantine arrived, on Sunday, September 30, he wed Kalliopi Karandzas to John Kiorstsy - the first couple to be married in the still unnamed parish community.

Three days later, on October 3, the community met again at Druid's Hall. There they chose to name the new parish "St. Nicholas" after the fourth century bishop of Myra. They also confirmed Fr. Liakopoulos as the new parish priest as well as temporary chairman of the community. Panagiotis Tsichlis and Athanasios Velonis were respectively named temporary treasurer and secretary. When the meeting was

concluded, news releases were sent out to the press, proudly announcing the creation of a new Greek Orthodox community in St. Louis, one consisting “of the people, being administered by the people, and working for the people.”

On October 14 the parish met as a general assembly at Henneman Hall at 3723 Olive Street in midtown St. Louis to consider the findings of the organizing committee and elect parish leadership. Before assembly business commenced, Fr. Liakopoulos, almost too coincidentally, preached a sermon on “As you would have others do unto you, do you also unto them.”

The first order of business was to elect the first parish president, and the community chose Joseph Constantourakis, owner of Café Maxim downtown, who then led the meeting. The next item of business was to select a site for the new church. The parish committee had been fortunate to discover that Grace Lutheran Church on the city’s near north side was for sale. Located at the corner of Garrison and St. Louis Avenues, it was a moderate sized, rectangular brown brick structure with stained glass windows, a short steeple, and a basement gathering hall. The property came with an adjacent eight room home to serve as a rectory for clergy. The price was \$15,000.

On October 25, \$250 was given in earnest money to the realtor and the day was designated as “Founders Day”. A fundraising committee of twelve people was tasked to solicit funds for the balance. Serving on the committee were Dimitrios Bouyoukoglou, a dentist; Alexander Dendrinelis, a salesman; Daniel Apostolou, a shoe shiner at the Benton Hotel; George Blatsaras; Apostolos Glastris, a tailor; George Konstan; Dionysios Kitsos, an insurance salesman; Dimitrios Lambropoulos; John Katsinos; Panagiotis Anagnos, a grocer; Christos Gitchou; and John Frangoulis, who owned a meat packing plant in Madison, Illinois and founded Consumers Wholesale Grocers in St. Louis. The motto of the committee was “\$14,000 by December 1st”.

Donations grew to \$13,172 by December 16 - still short of the total cost of the property but enough to proceed with purchase and arrange a later payoff date. A cypress wood iconostasis used in Orthodox churches to demarcate the altar area from the rest of the nave where worshippers stood was ordered, as were two chanter stands.

After a dizzying eight months of organizing, fundraising, and purchasing property, the new church building was consecrated and dedicated on Saturday, December 22, 1917. A hierarchal divine liturgy was celebrated by Archbishop Germanos, connected with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Antioch. Assisting him was Fr. Liakopoulos and a Syrian Orthodox priest who came with the bishop. The liturgy was conducted in Greek

as well as Arabic. Representatives from other Christian churches in St. Louis were present as well, including Daniel Tuttle, the presiding archbishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States, who lived in St. Louis.

Throughout the service, numerous parishioners contributed money for the privilege of being the first to perform various tasks at their new house of worship, including opening the church door, lighting the first candle, ringing the bell, reading the Epistle, reciting the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, and passing collection trays, among other responsibilities. The Anastas family paid \$85 for the privilege of staying overnight at the church that evening for an all-night prayer vigil. By the end of the service nearly \$1,400 had been raised. The day was capped off by a celebratory banquet with tributes and patriotic speeches as America was preparing to send troops to fight in Europe on the side of the Allies in World War I.

But all did not remain well. Just a few weeks after the parish was consecrated, its first priest and the parish board were at loggerheads. Fr. Liakopoulos, who assumed he was serving under the authority of the Church of Greece, was confounded and outraged that the church board saw themselves as his employer, and was informed that he reported to them and not vice-versa.

Personalities clashed, and Fr. Liakopoulos added a new lock to the church doors, refusing to let members of the parish board enter, as well as condemning them by name in the middle of Sunday liturgy. In January, 1918 the parish council sued their priest to obtain repossession of the church property and break their one-year contract with him, which included a \$100 per month salary and a rent-free residence. Fr. Liakopoulos counter-sued, claiming the board had exceeded its authority over him and couldn't compel him to do anything. His orders, he claimed, came from the Archbishop of the Synod of the Church of Greece, not a board of laymen.

In Greece, parishes were not run under the leadership of boards but of the parish priest. The parish council form of church administration was an American and specifically Protestant form of church governance. But the court found that under Missouri incorporation laws, the parish council did indeed possess the authority to compel Fr. Liakopoulos to comply with their requests. It also meant they could remove him from his post, which they did, just six months after he moved to St. Louis with his family.

To say the least, it was an inauspicious beginning for the new parish. Suddenly the church needed to seek the services of another priest. They brought on Fr. Theodore Prousianos, who had served at the first Greek Orthodox church in Boston. Also, Fr.

Phiambolis of the former Holy Trinity parish, now nearly eighty years old, was still available to help celebrate liturgies and perform sacraments.

Despite troubles at the outset, the rhythm of parish life began to take hold. The first parish picnic was held on the feast of Pentecost, June 23, 1918, with an open air Divine Liturgy at Wallner's Grove and Café near the intersection of Gravois and Christy Avenues in South St. Louis, followed by lunch, singing, and Greek dancing. The proceeds raised at the picnic were applied to starting a Greek language school, which along with the church Sunday school was opened the following September.

As more Greek men not only settled in St. Louis but had left for Greece and returned with a spouse, by the late Teens Hellenic family life in St. Louis had fully taken root. Many Greek immigrant families began settling in neighborhoods near the Central West End. One area Greeks congregated was to the southeast of Forest Park near Manchester Avenue and Kingshighway Boulevard, living in tightly spaced brick houses and flats along Chouteau, Gibson, Arco, and Wichita Avenues. Another concentration of Greeks moved into an area of similar housing just over a mile north near Kingshighway and Delmar Boulevards, along Aubert, Enright, Bayard, and Fountain Avenues. Families living in these area formed enduring relationships with their fellow Greek neighbors.

While immediate and extended family formed the nucleus of Greek immigrant life and social support, the unique role of *koumbari* enlarged the network further. To attain the role of *koumbaros* (male) or *koumbara* (female), one must participate as a sponsor to a couple's marriage or be godparent to a child. Often the first role led to second, solidifying a special kinship bond to the next generation. In the Orthodox Church, the function of *koumbari* go beyond the role of "best man", "maid of honor", or "witness" and implies a lifelong personal commitment to a couple or child.

The rhythm of life's celebrations in the Greek community revolved largely around the Orthodox Church calendar. Important feast days such as the Annunciation of the *Theotokos*, Greek for "Mother of God" (March 25, which is also Greek Independence Day), the Dormition of the *Theotokos* (August 15), the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14), and Christmas-Epiphany (December 25-January 6, preceded by the Advent Season) were important periods involving prayer, fasting, and attending church services. But the highest of holy days on the calendar, Easter (Pascha), and the 40 day Lenten period leading to it, was outdone by no other festive celebration, and culminated to the triumphal declaration at Easter midnight liturgy of *Christos Anesti!* (Christ is risen!) and *Alithos Anesti!* (Truly, he is risen!). Families would gather in the

early morning hours after the liturgy, cracking red dyed Easter Eggs and feasting on lamb and a Greek version of lamb soup called magiritsa made with diced lamb remains.

For Greek immigrants, namedays - the day of the year on the church calendar commemorating the saint in whose name they were baptized - took on more significance than birthdays. On the nameday of a family member, it was common custom for Greek households in St. Louis to open their doors to visitors from the entire community, celebrating with food, music, and Greek line dancing.

Life's rites of passage were integral to the Greek community, which celebrated them with passion. Baptism and chrismation, a joint ceremony, welcomed infants into the Orthodox Church and created lifelong ties between the newly baptized and their godparents, who often gave their godchild his or her first cross and necklace.

Weddings were large and festive, and always distinguishable from marriages in non-Orthodox churches by several unique traditions: the wearing and exchange of floral crowns by the bride and groom; drinking from a common cup of wine; and processing with the priest around a temporary altar table three times. Wedding receptions might be held in the church basement or at nearby facilities like the Italian Fraternity Hall on North Vandeventer. A handful of white, sugar-coated almonds tied together in netting were distributed to wedding guests, meant to symbolize both the sweetness and bitterness that the couple would share throughout their married life.

When a Greek immigrant passed away, visitations were often held in the deceased's home, where the family held vigil. Prayers (known as the Trisagion) were read by the priest, and in a custom dating back to ancient times, women stood and wailed aloud in mourning over the dead, and even given tips for their efforts. For many years, Greek Orthodox Christians were often denied burial in local cemeteries maintained by non-Orthodox Christian church groups. The lack of options became especially problematic as the number of Greeks in St. Louis in 1919 approached 3,000. In September of that year St. Nicholas was able to obtain three acres set aside for its members at St. Matthew Cemetery on Bates Avenue near Gravois in the German "Dutchtown" neighborhood of South St. Louis. The ground covered enough area for 1,260 graves. Proceeds left over from the disbanded Annunciation church were applied to the purchase.

Greeks were an intensely social immigrant ethnic group. From the time they arrived in America, Greek immigrants sought out each other and established various "societies", "brotherhoods", "associations", and other fraternal-type organizations as vehicles for social interaction, talking politics, or making business and employment contacts. In

Greece the local *kafenion* (coffee shop) served as the gathering spot where men drank thick Turkish coffee and played board games, smoked pipes and cigars, and conversed about anything that struck them. In the culturally diverse urban centers of America, Greek societies not only formed the spokes in the hub of Hellenic social networking but also served as a means of both cultural preservation and a bridge to assimilation.

While Greek societies were not engaged directly in the worship life of the church, they were often instrumental behind the scenes organizing and promoting picnics, performances, and other events. Most of these groups were formed around the villages, cities, islands and other areas of Greece from which the members hailed. And so it was that Arcadians, Corinthians, Cretans, Kytherians, Messenians, Rhodians, Zakynthians, and Epirotians would create such formal native kinship groups.

Meanwhile, as St. Nicholas moved into the 1920s, changes and new challenges lie ahead. After a heart ailment led to the departure of Fr. Prouisianos less than two years after he started, the church was fortunate to secure the services of a new priest, Fr. Mark Petrakis. Fr. Mark arrived in St. Louis with his wife and young children in January, 1920. Unlike his predecessors, he came to accept and even promote some “American” traditions at St. Nicholas. Indeed, Fr. Petrakis himself had become “Americanized”. Having left Greece bearing the markings of a traditional Orthodox priest - long hair and beard, and wearing a black cassock, pectoral cross, and *kalimaokion* (a black, brimless hat) – soon after he arrived in America he cut his hair, trimmed his beard which eventually shrunk to a trimmed moustache, and began wearing a black clergy shirt and white collar. As lay Greek immigrants had sought to “fit in” to their new home by adopting American customs and dress, many Greek clergy were doing the same.

Worship in Orthodox Christian churches in the “Old World” was carried out with congregants standing through the entire service, often lasting more than two hours, with a handful of chairs and benches made available for the elderly and infirm. This worship tradition continued at Holy Trinity and at St. Nicholas, until Fr. Petrakis, in the face of harsh resistance from some church members, had chairs set up throughout the nave so that the entire congregation could sit during certain points in the liturgy, such as the homily. However one holdover remained: men and women continued to sit apart from one another. Women first were required to sit in the balcony, but eventually sat below on the left side of the church nave while men sat on the right side.

Though their names did not usually appear in connection with parish administration, the “behind-the-scenes” work of Greek immigrant women in the church was growing quickly. With Fr. Petrakis’ arrival Greek women were encouraged to form a new church

and community service organization, and in 1920 his wife, Presvytera Stellaniki, led the first women's benevolent society at St. Nicholas. Called "Elpis", the Greek word for "hope", its mission was to provide moral and material support to the needy in the community. By raising funds through hosting dinners and other activities, the women of Elpis aided new immigrants in getting settled, visited Greeks confined to hospitals, comforted the dying, and provided assistance to widows and orphans. They also helped cover funeral expenses for the poor, including many Greek bachelors who died in St. Louis with no family and little savings. The work of Elpis on behalf of the less fortunate made it the premier Hellenic and church-based charitable organization of its time.

In 1924 a new association of Greek men was established in St. Louis, one that was tied to a national movement. The American Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (AHEPA) was founded in Atlanta in 1922 in response to the harassment of local Greeks by native residents and the Ku Klux Klan. AHEPA's main goal was to encourage a more rapid assimilation into mainstream American society. English was the official language of the organization, and membership was open to non-Greeks as well. The St. Louis Chapter became the 53rd in the country, and took off right away.

In the early 1920s the young parish experienced a period of rapid growth. Reports were that the number of Greeks living in the St. Louis region, including Illinois, was approaching 7,000 and that up to 1,200 were members of St. Nicholas, a seemingly improbable number for a church of its size. With no other Greek Orthodox Church around, worshippers came from as far east as Madison, Illinois, and as far west as St. Charles, Missouri to attend services that began at 8:30 am on Sunday with Orthros service and concluded at noon following the Divine Liturgy and the sermon.

In a grand vision to meet the spiritual needs of so large a community and to make a significant impression upon the St. Louis' religious landscape, in January, 1922 St. Nicholas board president Alexander Antonopoulos and Fr. Petrakis publicly announced that the community would be erecting a new church building in the near future. Its design was to be based on the great 6th century Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (today Istanbul), one of the largest churches in the world and an architectural masterpiece that was converted into an Islamic mosque after the conquest of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks. A rendering was drawn up by the renowned architectural firm of Theodore Link, who designed St. Louis' Union Station. This "adapted" version took the shape of a Greek cross, with a colonnaded vestibule entrance and a signature great central dome supported by two attached half domes. Along with pews to seat 1,500, side balconies would be placed above the nave to

allow viewing from a higher level. The estimated cost would be, without interior icons and other sacred art, "at least \$200,000". The church would be financing the endeavor, according to a *Post-Dispatch* article, "...by floating \$100,000 in bonds... among the Greeks of the [area] and obtaining contributions." The report optimistically concluded that "it is expected that the new church will be ready before the year is over."

Such a plan required unity of vision and purpose, and it was clear that was not the state of leadership at St. Nicholas. As 1922 wore on divisions over national politics in Greece emerged, causing fissures among church members. In the meantime, donations plummeted and the church fell behind in its bills, including the priest's salary, and eventually a receiver had to be appointed by the court. In the midst of the dissention and chaos, in July, 1923, Fr. Mark left St. Louis to become pastor of Sts. Constantine and Helen church in Chicago, where he would serve for the rest of his life. His successor, appointed by Archbishop Alexander in New York, was Fr. Panagiotis Ermogenis.

In February 1926 the property was finally returned after the church board had reorganized. The new board president, Alex Vappas, was an accountant who for years afterward would keep watch over the parish books. Meanwhile, Fr. Ermogenis was recalled, and replaced by Fr. Theophilos Spyropoulos.

During this time, important changes in church governance had occurred. In 1922 the Greek Archdiocese of North America had been formed, which operated not under the Church of Greece but rather the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul. The Church in Constantinople was less directly involved in the political turmoil in Greece that had affected parish communities in America for years, including St. Nicholas and its predecessor churches. Administration was more formalized, and with the presence of a hierarch in America more direct administrative oversight was possible. Church properties were also eventually signed over to the Archdiocese, and ownership taken away from church boards of trustees and other more Protestant-styled governance models. Boards were still allowed to govern parishes administratively.

Just as all appeared to be back on track at St. Nicholas, a major catastrophe struck. On Thursday, September 29, 1927, the church was ravaged by the Great Tornado that ripped through the Central West End and Midtown St. Louis, killing 86 people, injuring 1,200 and causing more than \$20 million in property damage. While it was fortunate that no parishioners were hurt, the tornado demolished the church building, ripping off the roof and toppling the spire. Just a decade after it came into being, the St. Nicholas community was again faced with the challenge of finding a home.

Within several weeks of the disaster, the parish held a general meeting at the Italian Fraternity Hall and set up an executive committee to assess options for relocating the church. Until a new facility could be found, the church rented a former synagogue on the southwest corner of Enright and Kingshighway for one hundred dollars a month. Meanwhile, the executive committee examined several prospective church sites in the vicinity of the newer Greek settlements near the Central West End.

In July 1928, St. Nicholas welcomed a new priest, forty-eight-year old Rev. Demetrios Vainikos. Born in Northern Epiros and a married father of three, for the previous six years he led parishes in New York, Pennsylvania, and Chicago before moving to St. Louis. For a while, at least, the Greek community was united behind the common goal of building a new temple of worship, and the task would both test and strengthen their bonds as a community.

After reviewing options for a new church location a decision was made on March 1, 1929 with enduring consequences: to purchase a site located at 4957 Forest Park Boulevard near Kingshighway for \$27,000. Perhaps by more than coincidence, the property was next door to the home of Greek Consul Hector Pasmazoglou, who while not on the parish board played a behind-the-scenes role in the activities of the church.

Although the Stock Market Crash of '29 was just around the corner, for the time being the Greek community kept their focus on proceeding with collecting contributions and beginning construction. In a huge boon to the fundraising effort, the tornado-ravaged Garrison property was sold to the St. Louis Public Schools for \$27,500. Columbia Elementary School next door to the church had also been destroyed by the Great Tornado, and the school district decided to replace it with a new, expanded school building incorporating the old church property.

In the face of this unsettling time of transition, parish life continued. In an effort to strengthen participation in the worship life of the church, board trustee Gus Theodorow approached music master Spiros Safrides to organize a choir. St. Nicholas' cantors resisted the idea, and when others in the parish with voice talent declined, the trustees authorized Safrides to hire professional (non-Orthodox) voices at up to \$100 per month to help get the choir off the ground. It wasn't long before more parishioners joined.

The need to get started with a new building program became more urgent after part of the floor of the parish's temporary church location collapsed during Good Friday services on May 3, 1929. The congregation all scrambled together for the exit. Fortunately no one was seriously injured.

John Mavrakos, a Greek confectioner whose candies were well known to St. Louisans, chaired the construction committee for the new St. Nicholas. Plans for the new structure were drawn up by Chicago architect Ernest K. Eugene and Welch Construction was hired as the general contractor. Despite cost concerns as the depression set in, the parish selected to go with a rectangular structure with an interior featuring ornate colonnaded side aisles and a semi-dome over the raised altar area called the apse. The structure had no sub-ground basement, which saved on excavation expenses, but necessitated the elevation of the front entrance to three large double doors on the second story. This left parishioners to ascend a long flight of thirty-three steps from street level broken by two short landings, which surely appeared like a mountain to future brides in long wedding gowns and pall bearers carrying coffins in and out of the church during funerals.

Ground clearing began in December, 1930, and on a rainy Sunday, January 11, 1931, the cornerstone of the future church was laid. About 350 people attended the ceremony and \$2,400 was collected toward the construction fund. Work proceeded apace, and committees were formed to feverishly reach out to more community members for contributions. A women's group called the Friday Club worked hard to solicit funds, and many Greek societies and clubs held their own fund raising events. It was a period of "enthusiastic cooperation" according to one account of the time.

Construction was completed by the end of summer, and on Sunday, September 20, 1931, the doors to the new church were opened. A hierarchal service was led by Bishop Kallistos of Chicago, whose ecclesial see included the St. Louis area, as well as Fr. Vainikos and the priest from Sts. Constantine and Helen church in East St. Louis, which served a smaller community of immigrant Greeks in Illinois. After Orthros, the bishop led worshippers outside, where they processed around the church three times. Upon reentering the Divine Liturgy was celebrated for the first time in the new temple, followed by a reception given in honor of the visiting bishop. It was truly a triumphant moment for a community of immigrant Greeks who after the past 25 years bore the scars and callouses of creating a strong, sustainable community of faith in St. Louis.

The construction expense for the new church was \$104,815 and when the cost of the land was added the total came to \$132,315 - a giant leap past the \$15,000 paid for the first church on Garrison. However it wasn't long before St. Nicholas and the larger Hellenic community of St. Louis found itself swimming against the tide of economic decline brought on by the Great Depression. By the mid-1930s Greek-owned businesses, once a thriving presence in the city, were struggling and closing down. Among them were many storefronts in the "Greek Town" area of downtown. Elpis, the ladies

benevolent society, expanded its mission by helping many Greek families during the period, providing coal for heat, food, clothing, and transportation to local welfare offices. Although some Greeks received government assistance, on the whole the community exhibited a large level of self-reliance and sharing to cope with the deprivations of the 1930s.

As would be expected, the depression's impact hit St. Nicholas hard. Despite continuing to support a Greek school and a choir, as well as maintain an effective ministry to the community at large, a drop in donations became a huge concern as financial obligations on the building and the threat of foreclosure loomed. When the parish met for board elections in January, 1931, no one stepped up to run, and all those who were nominated begged off, explaining that personal hardships made it impossible for them to take on other responsibilities. Seeing no other options, the current board was empowered to personally reach out to others and appoint a successor board. The trial they faced was ultimately whether or not St. Nicholas would survive.

In February, 1933, the church failed to meet the necessary principal and interest payments on the bonds, which greatly increased the next payment due in August. The board held weekly meetings as well as frequent general assembly gatherings to find ways to make the payments. Dues were raised, and committees were established to find 50 people who were able to commit \$10 per month to the mortgage. Archbishop Athenagoras came to St. Louis in December in an effort to explain the plight of the community to the bank, with a dinner given in his honor by the community to raise more money. Still nothing done could meet the amount necessary to avoid foreclosure. Finally, the day came, and in August, 1934 the deed of trust that had secured the loan was foreclosed, and legal and equitable title was given over to Michael Ward, a bondholder through Tower Grove Bank. The parish board filed suit to stop the transfer, which bought the community precious time to try to raise funds.

From 1933 to 1936, different church committees and individuals met with representatives of Tower Grove Bank in an attempt to settle with the bond holders. Finally, in December, 1936, Thomas Manglis, chair of the parish finance committee, along with the church's attorney were authorized to settle the obligation. An agreement was reached on the nineteenth of the month for a settlement of \$36,000 in cash. In an extraordinary move that saved the St. Nicholas community from losing its house of worship, Manglis – a restaurant owner and bachelor - took out a personal loan in the amount of \$26,000 which, combined with \$10,000 that had been raised by the

community, was used to pay off the bondholders completely. The Board of Trustees celebrated the occasion by burning the bond certificates.

Soon after the bond indebtedness was resolved, the church discovered that the large two-and-a-half story house immediately to the west of the parish that had been owned by the Greek Consul was being foreclosed on and could be purchased for \$10,000. In order to pay the balance of Manglis' personal loan and apply the remainder toward the house, the church took out a smaller, more manageable \$25,000 note. For the next twenty years the house would serve as the church office as well as the principal gathering place for meetings of various church groups and Greek societies.

As the turbulent decade of the 1930s came to a close and the economy showed signs of improvement, the community began to "normalize". Weekday afternoon Greek School continued under the directorship of Mrs. Andreadis, a reporter for the Greek press. A regular "Sunday" School was established – held at first on Saturday mornings! Lessons were led by Fr. Vainikos in Greek with Gus Theodorow translating into English. Within several months lessons were moved to Sunday. The church was even able to resume charitable work such as when a drive was held to raise relief funds in 1940 to benefit victims of a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Turkey that killed nearly 33,000.

In 1938, hard feelings over a rift in the parish with Rhodian Society members led many in that group to leave and eventually establish the second, albeit smaller Greek Orthodox church in St. Louis, the Church of the Assumption. The matter prompted the St. Nicholas board to seek Fr. Vainikos' removal and request a successor, who arrived at the outset of World War II and at a time when a new generation of St. Nicholas parishioners were preparing to take their own part in forging the future of the church.

The Next Generation and Expansion

During the 1930s Greek immigration to the United States slowed to a trickle. The passage of restrictive federal immigration quotas coupled with the economic distress of the depression prompted more Greeks to return to their native land than come to America. Those who remained became further settled in their adopted homeland. And while old world ways persisted, a new generation was creating its own unique identity.

The 1940s proved to be a decade characterized by an increased commitment to church, community, and country by the members of St. Nicholas. It was during this time as well that the church underwent two significant transitions in pastoral leadership. In the

summer of 1942, a new priest arrived whom parishioners would come to call Fr. James. A diminutive man who resembled the silent movie actor Charlie Chaplin, he was born Demetrios Coucouzes on the island of Imbros. He came to the United States and was ordained a priest in 1940 in Lowell, Massachusetts, taking the name Iakovos (James).

By the time Fr. James arrived in St. Louis, the St. Nicholas community along with the rest of the nation had already turned its attention to the storm clouds of the Second World War. As the suffering of the Greek people by the invading Germans became known to the world, a nationwide Greek war relief effort was launched. At the motion of John Furla, the board of St. Nicholas and the church community reached out to all Hellenes living in the St. Louis region to solicit aid. Joined by non-Greeks moved by the courage and plight of the Greek people, including prominent business and civic leaders, the St. Louis Chapter of the Greek War Relief Effort raised \$400,000 toward the cause.

During his short stay during the summer of 1942, Fr. Coucouzes' warm, engaging demeanor won him many admirers at St. Nicholas. For what appears to have been the first time, he initiated a Bible reading group for adults at the parish. Held on Monday evenings, the class was regularly attended by more than 200 young and old church members. Fr. James also added Greek language instruction for adults.

To the great disappointment of the parish, the Archbishop called Fr. James to a new assignment as the Dean of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Boston. However the departing priest would not be leaving St. Louis for good. When he did return to visit, it would be in a different role - as Archbishop Iakovos, the spiritual leader of the entire Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.

Even as Greek immigrants worked hard to aid those living in their former homeland struggling against a brutal enemy occupation, when war finally involved the United States, the children of those immigrants stepped up to put their lives on the line for their country. Approximately 350 young Greek-American men from the St. Louis area were enlisted to fight in World War II. Some made the ultimate sacrifice. The first of these was twenty-six-year-old U.S. Navy Seaman second class George Themistocles Georges, who served aboard the *USS Oklahoma* when it was attacked and capsized, engulfed in flames, during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The impact of living during a time of world conflict that threatened both Greece and America had a tremendously galvanizing effect on the Greek community, whose common patriotism now came to characterize their self-identity. The old era of Greek national politics rending churches apart was gone. Even regional Greek affiliations,

while continuing, were taking second place to an overarching identity of Hellenism in general and the Orthodox faith more specifically. This dual identity of Hellenic heritage and faith would continue and be encouraged by the church for decades to come.

Replacing Fr. Coucouzes in 1942 was thirty-year-old Rev. Erineos Angelides, who arrived with his wife and two young children from Birmingham, Alabama. After coming to America a few years earlier from Constantinople, where he attended theological school, Fr. Erineos stepped into his role with enthusiasm. He strongly supported the parish's backing of the Greek American war relief effort. On the first anniversary of the invasion of Greece, he held a memorial service for Greek soldiers who gave their lives for their homeland that was attended by 700 faithful who together sang the traditional memorial hymn, "Memory Eternal."

Despite the turbulent backdrop of the war years St. Nicholas was experiencing a new level of vitality. Church donations improved, and in 1944 Fr. Angelides along with Board President John Leontsinis and others held a joyous ceremonial burning of the \$25,000 note taken out on the church. For the first time since it was formed St. Nicholas was debt free. New plans for the improvement of the church sanctuary were put in place. The first of these enhancements was revealed at Holy Friday services on April 14, 1944 with the unveiling of a beautiful new *epitaphios*, a large, two-tiered, table-like structure representing the sepulcher of Christ and processed around the church as lamentations are sung in solemn commemoration of the Lord's entombment. The ornate walnut and gold leaf piece was created by Nicholas Thomopoulos, a wood carver and member of St. Nicholas. He spent a total of 848 hours constructing it. Gus Athanasoulis and his wife donated nearly \$950 toward its completion.

Interior upgrades continued through the mid-40s as individuals and families purchased a series of stained glass windows at \$275 each. Depicting scenes from the life of Christ or the saints, the windows were installed on both exterior walls in the church nave. Then, in April, 1947 the St. Nicholas board under the leadership of President George Mertis approved plans for a new *iconostasis*, the wall of icons with a large central door opening to the altar area, as well as a new bishop's throne and two *proskynitatria* (icon stands mounted with a small dome and placed in the narthex). The total cost was \$40,000. Designed by Constantine Triantaphillou, who had extensive experience working on church interiors, the new fixtures, especially the ornately carved, gold leaf iconostasis, enriched the interior with a profound, even stunning sacred presence.

Meanwhile, as the church building had been renewed, parish life itself was undergoing renewal. After their service in the war had ended, many young Greek-American men

were able to take advantage of the benefits of the GI Bill, including a paid post-secondary education. For Greek households this often meant that a family member was able to attend college for the first time. Bringing to the church new knowledge, skills, and experiences acquired through their wartime service and educational opportunities seldom had by their parents, the young people of St. Nicholas possessed their own approach and vision to the potential of parish life, and pursued new church-based activities with enthusiasm.

Reunited at war's end, St. Nicholas' young cohort of veterans sought to keep the spirit and memories of their military service alive. In May, 1946, this group of mostly second generation Greek American men who served in the war met at the parish office building west of the church. After learning that a similar group of Greek veterans had organized an American Legion-type "post" in Chicago, the St. Louis group formed their own unit, naming it the American Hellenic Veterans Association (AHVA), Post No. 2. Like other Hellenic organizations, AHVA started its own annual social function, a Thanksgiving Eve dinner and dance. It would also work with and support St. Nicholas church in numerous ways over the years, beginning with setting aside a separate and unique area in the church section of St. Matthews Cemetery in 1950, where the St. Nicholas community's war dead could be interred and commemorated.

By 1948 St. Nicholas youth were not only ready to expand their church participation, but were supported in their efforts by a new generation of church leadership. In that year the St. Nicholas community elected a thirty-eight-year-old nightclub owner named Gus Coukoulis to lead them as Board President. Working together with the church's young adults, he helped facilitate the development of a revamped youth group called the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Youth Council, whose purpose was to provide "spiritual, educational, social, and physical training to the youth of the Greek community." The council had a broad program of Bible studies, athletics, social activities, a debate team, a variety show, and a newsletter.

The work of the Youth Council turned out to be hugely successful. St. Nicholas girls' softball and volleyball teams were begun (the former nicknamed the "Diamond Dolls") as was men's basketball and baseball teams. A former athlete himself while a seminary student, Fr. Angelides and his family cheered all the teams on from the stands. This explosion of youth activity at the parish was trumpeted in a new publication, the *St. Nicholas Herald*, a professionally written, edited, and formatted newspaper created exclusively by the young adults of the church. The bimonthly periodical was produced

in standard newspaper format, and distributed to the entire Hellenic community of St. Louis as well as out-of-town subscribers.

Under Gus Coukoulis' leadership, St. Nicholas continued to be highlighted in the greater St. Louis area. With a good sense for promotion and marketing, he organized several high profile events covered by the press, including parades down Market Street in observance of Greek Independence Day featuring St. Nicholas young adults dressed as Greek "evzoni" soldiers and a society event called "The President's Ball", held at the elegant Jefferson Hotel. Local dignitaries and civic leaders like the mayor of St. Louis were present. Coukoulis documented the events by hiring a professional photographer.

After the children of Greek immigrants returned from service, a future of school, work and the contemplation of marriage lay before them. Greek children by and large had been encouraged to find a future spouse from within the community, and on frequent occasion this happened. It was recalled by one parishioner that even Fr. James Coucouzes discouraged a Greek Orthodox member of the community from marrying an Orthodox Christian of Russian background! He relented when parishioners from his native island of Imbros asked that he reconsider. Still, it was clear that a new generation of St. Nicholas families was forming. While only six marriages had occurred in 1939 that number jumped to 36 in 1945.

With the population of St. Louis reaching an historic peak of over 850,000 in 1950, the next generation of Greek-Americans were finding homes away from the old congested neighborhoods where their immigrant parents had settled and where they had grown up. The urban flight that led to the post-war decline of the City of St. Louis took with it the last vestiges of neighborhoods where many Greek families lived. A revived economy, greater job availability, and lower mortgage interest rates offered to veterans further fueled the mass exodus. St. Nicholas now began its transition from a neighborhood parish to a regional church of commuters. It was a change whose ramifications would be felt into the twenty-first century, as the parish grappled with ministering to a congregation increasingly spread across the metropolitan area.

Fr. Angelides' untimely death from a heart attack at the age of thirty-eight in 1950 left St. Nicholas in a state of mourning as well as seeking new pastoral leadership. Later that year the parish was fortunate to receive the appointment of Rev. Dr. Nicon Patrinos, a scholar as well as a priest who obtained his doctorate in philosophy and the psychology of religion from Oxford. Among his most notable accomplishments was to bring together seven other Orthodox parishes in the St. Louis area to form the Eastern Orthodox Church Federation of St. Louis, whose mission was to foster a more united

Orthodox Christian witness in the community. The group organized occasional events and services that were held in common at one of the member churches.

Fr. Patrinos also played a key role in shepherding the organization of a new ladies benevolent society that would grow to play a premier role in philanthropic service at St. Nicholas. On Mother's Day, May 11, 1952, a group of 200 parish women formed the 291st chapter of a national church women's organization called the Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society (Philoptochos meaning "friends of the poor" in Greek).

The Philoptochos Society, or "Philoptochos" as it would simply be called, was originally organized by a group of New York area Greek women's benevolent groups who formed the nucleus of a larger federation of chartered chapters. The group formally became an auxiliary of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in 1931. Through the war years and beyond the national Philoptochos made substantial contributions to the founding of Holy Cross Theological School, to Greek war relief, and took the lead in purchasing property in Garrison, New York that would serve as a children's home and school called St. Basil's Academy.

Since 1932 St. Nicholas had tried to start a Philoptochos chapter but had been unable. Much of the delay had to do with objections from Elpis, which had already been serving the philanthropic needs of the community for years. The aims of both organizations were similar - providing aid and comfort to the poor, the sick, the aged, the homeless, and widows and orphans. Given this overlap Elpis hesitated at wishing to invite in a new group when it was presumed to not be necessary. But this time Fr. Patrinos, with a directive from Archbishop Michael, resolved the matter once and for all. Although Elpis hesitated to engage, the new Philoptochos chapter was formed anyway, and a new group of eager women set out to begin philanthropic work. Its first officers were a mix of younger and older women led by President Mary Avouris. Others included Marika Antonopoulos, vice-president; Bess Vassely, secretary; Kaliopi Masa, assistant secretary; Mary Coukoulis, treasurer; and Xan Tripolitis, assistant treasurer.

Growth in church programs continued to take off into the 1950s. The church choir, which had been under the able leadership of director Praxithea Frangoulis since 1932, continued to grow and take on new members, including many second generation and younger voices. Performances were given outside of church services, including at special occasions such as the President's Ball and the AHEPA May Festival Ball.

Sunday school programs continued to be held out of the small rooms of the church office building. The program was placed under the directorship of Lula Larandos

Leontsinis, a former city school teacher who was one of the first Greek-American women in the St. Louis area known to have earned a college degree.

Greek School continued to thrive, with enrollment reaching the hundreds. By the 1950s directorship of the program passed on to Betty Katsareas, a young immigrant woman who fled the Nazi occupation of Greece during World War II. In addition to language instruction, children performed sketches in Greek for their parents and sang traditional Greek folk songs. By 1958 a satellite Greek School was formed in southwest St. Louis County to meet the needs of many parish families who had moved to the suburbs.

In 1954 the St. Nicholas Youth Council was restructured under a new, national, archdiocesan affiliated youth organization called GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth of America). Although the activities of the locally founded Youth Council were a great success, it was now the trend that important church programs like those focusing on youth ministry be given a common structure and mission across the archdiocese.

During this thriving period of activity and growth the parish welcomed new pastoral leadership. In 1954 Fr. George Mastrantonis arrived in St. Louis from Chicago, where he was presbyter of St. Andrew Greek Orthodox Church. A scholar as well as a pastor, "Fr. Masters" as he came to be called, was a priest with broad ministerial vision. While in Chicago he and his wife, Presvytera Pareskevi, helped organize a group that assisted recent immigrants and the elderly called the Hellenic Foundation, as well as starting the Federation of Orthodox Churches of Chicago. Fr. Mastrantonis also began a far-sighted Orthodox publishing and educational venture called Orthodox Lore of the Gospel of Our Savior (OLOGOS – Greek for "The Word"), which published booklets and pamphlets on various topics from an Orthodox perspective – in English. He also led a building campaign for the growing Chicago parish, an experience which he would soon put to use to meet the growth needs of St. Nicholas.

After six years of leadership that focused on building youth programs, organizing community-wide events like the annual picnic on church grounds, and bringing positive region-wide attention to St. Nicholas and the Greek community, in 1954 Gus Coukoulis stepped down as President of the parish council. His successor was Dr. Gregory Zotos, a thirty-two-year old dentist who shared the vision with many younger parishioners that the church needed to expand to meet the needs of growing families.

As the World War II generation continued to marry and start families in increasing numbers, the church came to understand the necessity of allowing an Orthodox Christian to marry a non-Orthodox Christian. Once discouraged by clergy, "mixed"

marriages were welcomed by Fr. Masters, so long as the non-Orthodox spouse had been baptized in a church that professed a belief in the Holy Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and the couple agreed to raise their children in the Orthodox faith. Between 1955 and 1960 a total of 284 infants were baptized – an average of more than one child per week during the period. St. Nicholas' own "baby boom" was well under way.

With determination and resolve that had not been experienced since the construction of the church more than a generation before, a new study committee was formed to examine how church facilities could better accommodate the community's growth. While some on the committee felt that the church ought to investigate relocating to an entirely different site, it was understood that there were many members with strong attachments to the church on Forest Park, reinforced even more by memories of the many sacrifices made to build it. The best option, it was therefore concluded, was to enlarge the current church and build an adjoining community center.

It was an ambitious project. At first the building committee was charged to keep the cost of the expansion to \$300,000 and, after learning from over-extending credit in the past, to have the cash on hand to cover expenses before construction got underway. To the committee's disappointment and to the shock of many, the first architectural renderings submitted placed the cost at \$650,000! This prompted renewed discussion on whether the community should just move to a new location, and once again alternative sites in both St. Louis City and St. Louis County were considered. In addition, the modernist design strongly clashed with the traditional interior of the building.

Finding no good options for a different location, the church retained a new architectural firm, Raymond E. Maritz and Sons. The firm had designed many affluent homes in the Central West End, as well as local landmarks like the Municipal Opera Theater in Forest Park. The revised expansion design retained more traditional lines on the exterior, but makeover would still be substantial.

Gone was the long ascent of steps leading from the street to the church's doors. A street level entrance now led to a lower level narthex area where a wide flight of stairs could be taken to the sanctuary on the second level with additional steps leading to the choir loft. An elevator would be installed to assist those who needed it, thanks to a gift of John Mavrakos, who chaired the building committee. Two hundred additional seats were added to the nave, and the former front doors facing the street were replaced by three tall, brilliant stained glass windows, the center one featuring a full length icon-style rendition of St. Nicholas, an image which came to symbolize the church itself. The large, round, stained glass window of the Byzantine double headed eagle installed in

1930 remained, hovering over the new choir loft. The former first floor auditorium also would remain, but be sectioned off for use as Sunday school classrooms.

Just as important, if not more so, was the addition of the community center. As Fr. Mastrantonis wrote to the parish, "This Center, well equipped, would be the workshop for the betterment of our people. It will work seven days a week to fulfill the Day of the Lord." Spacious yet designed with multiple functionality, access was had simply by walking down a short corridor from the lower level nave, or through a long set of glass doors at street level. Church offices and a pastor's study were directly across from the street entrance, with a conference room and additional classroom space on the second level that would be used for Sunday School classes for older children.

A multipurpose gym and 1,000 seat auditorium with a stage was included to be the focal point of many future social functions and large worship services at the parish. An attached commercial grade kitchen could service large events, and an open air central courtyard would suit smaller gatherings and outdoor cooking. Bathrooms with showers and lockers were available when the gym was used for sporting events such as basketball or volleyball. Taken together, the new center not only accommodated parish growth but helped transform parish life.

The building campaign was launched and an ongoing program of funding solicitation events and related initiatives was put in place with the slogan "Not Equal Gifts... But Equal Sacrifice". A building committee of 116 men and women spanning all age groups and representing every church organization and Hellenic society was formed. Teams were organized to reach out to as many as possible. A "Greater St. Louis Hellenic Directory" was published by GOYA, complete with private and business addresses and phone listings of nearly 2,000 Greek-Americans living in the St. Louis area. The pocket-sized directory was a handy aid for reaching out to others during the building campaign. The campaign kicked off with 225 pledges from the community. The largest commitment came from the two-year-old Philoptochos Society, a pledge of \$10,000.

The expansion plan called for the demolition of the large house to the west of the church used for church offices, which now would provide the footprint for the community center. Another property two doors to the east at 4937 Forest Park was acquired for \$42,500 to provide temporary space for offices, classrooms and meeting rooms. The three story brick structure had housed the College of Mortuary Science, which had been recently foreclosed on by the IRS for failure to pay back taxes. As soon as the community center was completed, the building was to be raised to provide off street parking for church commuters.

The construction contract was awarded to Gutmann Construction. The project was to be completed in two phases, with the building of the community center done first followed by the expansion of the church. Archbishop Iakavos, who served the church as Fr. James Coucouzes in the summer of 1942, returned on August 28, 1960 to officiate at the ground breaking ceremony for the community center. By the time construction was completed in 1962, the total cost came to \$490,000. While the capital campaign was largely successful, with 712 individuals, families, and organizations contributing nearly \$300,000, a \$150,000 note held by Manchester Bank remained to be paid off.

Throughout the busy and demanding period of planning, fundraising, and construction in the late 1950s and early 1960s, parish life at St. Nicholas went on. Liturgies and holy days continued to be celebrated. Hellenic societies continued to play an overlapping role in church life. The Hellenic American Progressive League, the oldest Greek Society founded in 1919, continued to hold church-related outings at their 200 "farm" in House Springs, Missouri, where they also built a small outdoor chapel for prayer services. The annual church picnic was held for the first time on Labor Day weekend in 1955 on the church grounds. Eighty parishioners contributed money, food, and drinks, enabling the parish to net \$7,352.25. The event was just the beginning of what would progressively grow into a large community celebration spilling out into the neighborhood of the church and eventually draw people from across St. Louis.

In a sad development, before building could begin on the new church complex he worked hard to support, Fr. Masters became ill with Parkinson's disease and could no longer continue to celebrate the liturgy. Yet he would not let his disability affect his life as a scholar. After stepping down in 1959, he returned his attention to his OLOGOS publishing enterprise, which he had moved to St. Louis from Chicago. He was assisted in his endeavors by Veda Martin, an active church volunteer and parish secretary. In addition to numerous educational pamphlets, he went on to publish a bilingual Divine Liturgy service book, with each part of the liturgy explained in English with accompanying photos of the priest at the altar. He also published one of the first Orthodox Christian catechisms in English. He would maintain his scholarly pursuits until he died nearly thirty years later, assisted to the end in his work by Miss Martin.

Replacing Fr. Masters in October, 1959 was forty-two year old Rev. Constantine Andrews. A son of Greek immigrants who was born and raised in Denver, Fr. Andrews was the first American-born priest to serve at St. Nicholas. He was also one of the first graduates of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary at its original location in Pomfret, Connecticut. He came to St. Louis from St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Toronto,

where he took an active role in organizing GOYA and other youth groups, such as church-based Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

After construction of the center was complete, the first program was held in the new parish auditorium after liturgy on March 25, 1962 – a Greek Independence Day luncheon attended by over 600 people. On September 23, Archbishop Iakavos returned to preside over a formal dedication of the new facility. A grand banquet was held afterwards in the new auditorium, and for the third time in its history the parish celebrated a milestone in meeting the needs of a changing community.

A keepsake of the parish's accomplishment was a commemorative album, with a blue hardcover and a raised drawing of the new church complex as well as the St. Louis Gateway Arch, which was still under construction. The cover slogan "Partners in Progress" suggested the new St. Nicholas was in keeping with the revitalization of the City of St. Louis. But as the cover appeared to celebrate the future, its pages were meant to commemorate the past. With a history of the parish written chiefly by second generation church members George Frangoulis and Spero Boudouras, it was a tribute to the hard work their parents' generation had put into creating the foundation upon what had become a thriving community of faith and Hellenic heritage.

The 1960s continued to be a time of a spirit of parish renewal at St. Nicholas. "Third generation" Greek-American members at St. Nicholas, whose birth years coincided with the Baby Boom Generation, were coming up through childhood in a very different environment than their parents. Like their contemporaries across the United States, they were raised in a post-war period of rising affluence, where the level of deprivation their parents experienced during the Great Depression and World War II had long passed. Rather than live in brick two-story flats with eight feet of separation between each building, most were living in the open spaces of the sprawling suburbs, driving to church in the city with their parents each Sunday.

Old country customs, while kept alive by *yia-yias* (grandmothers) and the elders of the community, were yet another generation removed from the immigrant experience. A new popular culture of entertainment and fads propelled by mass media dominated the attention of children and youth. As is the case with most ethnic communities, the assimilation of Hellenic Americans into a broader "American" culture, starting with the first immigrants and taken further by their children, had with the exception of occasional exposure to Greek food, music, and dancing, been essentially completed by the third generation.

A large part of this assimilation had to do with the loss of the use of Greek language in the community as a means of passing along cultural meaning. While during the 1960s Fr. Andrews continued to celebrate the liturgy in Greek and delivered a sermon in both Greek and English, multi-generational exchanges between community members heard after church services during fellowship in the community center revealed the future direction of Greek language use. Older men and women continued as they always had speaking among their peers in Greek, as well as to members of the second generation who were able to maintain a conversation. On the other hand, second generation members spoke to one another in their native tongue – English – as well as to their children, who at best were raised understanding a handful of Greek words and phrases.

While a number of third generation children attended Greek School, their retention and daily use of the language was far less than their parents had been. The Greek School teachers at the time, Mary Critzas, and Michael Millonas, faced a large challenge. “Kyria Critzas” as she was known, would make rounds by Sunday school classes as well, teaching children the Lord’s Prayer in Greek or, far more daunting, the Nicene Creed. Mr. Millonas held occasional sessions with Sunday school children on the auditorium stage, attempting to teach children Greek liturgical hymns using phonetics.

Those institutions that had been the bearers of Hellenic customs, particularly the regional societies (i.e. Cretans, Epirotians, Kytherians, Rhodians, etc.) would maintain its membership through the second generation, but faced drops in active members as the years went on. Some would be replenished with a new group of later Greek immigrants that arrived to the St. Louis area after immigration quotas were eased in the mid-1960s, but would remain far lower than what the community experienced during the Great Wave of the early twentieth century. These immigrants, including a number of professionals and tradesmen, provided a smaller but continued living presence of the culture of the Greek homeland.

The church also managed to keep a degree of interest in Hellenic cultural studies alive by the introduction of Greek Letters Day, held each January and featuring a scholar who spoke on topics related to ancient or modern Greek history and culture. An early and regular lecturer on such subjects was Dr. George Mylonas, a noted professor of archeology at Washington University, who led excavation parties to Greece unearthing ancient Mycenaean and classical-era Greek ruins.

As the numbers of children and youth mushroomed, the activities of GOYA and its younger affiliate, Jr. GOYA were encouraged. By February, 1968, parish council vice-president George Pathenos presented a report on the need to retain a second priest who

was “young and American-born” and preferably a recent graduate of Holy Cross Seminary. The parish council unanimously approved the move, and the second priest would be assigned in an ongoing capacity as the parish’s pastor in charge of youth ministry. It remains a division of pastoral duties at St. Nicholas to the present day.

As the Youth Council had done two decades earlier, GOYA initiated various team sports activities and social functions, including holding monthly dances. But special focus was given to the spiritual dimension of the lives of young people as well, and how the church could fulfill those needs through participation in its sacramental life as well as through service to others. These messages made inroads with many youth, and beginning in the early 1970s inspired a group of young St. Nicholas men to ponder the vocation of the Orthodox priesthood. During the seventies and eighties a total of eight young men enrolled at Holy Cross Seminary. Six went on to be ordained as priests.

Other church members, particularly from the second generation, played influential roles over the years in the formation of third generation youth. Sunday school teachers from kindergarten through high school were particularly important in making a lasting imprint. Among these included Mary Zaman Angelides (Fr. Angelides’ daughter-in-law), Mary Zanetos, John Carnasiotis, John and Evelyn Peppes, Krena Nisiankis, Bill and Helen Leon, and Leo and Helen McDermott, among others. For over a half century, older children were taught by Harry Lemakis, a former active youth member himself whose sincere, forthright discussions of faith, family, and values endeared him to many. Students ended their high school level instruction with Veda Martin, whose lectures on the Orthodox faith and back and forth discussions with students became legend.

Young third generation members also joined the choir, and its youth predecessor, the junior choir. Under the direction of Audrey Guarino since 1957, the choir grew to thirty-five active members by the early 1970s, and continued to stand out in its vocal performance both during liturgy and at events outside the church. Two generations of family members often sung together, such as Tom Tsiminis, a member of the choir since it first formed in 1929, and his son Alex, who took over choir direction in 1971. Mary Frangoulis Dendrinelis, daughter of former director Praxithea Frangoulis, served as organist, a role which she would carry on for decades. Traditional Byzantine cappella chanting, usually sung by a two to three member cantor group, continued as part of liturgical worship, trading off responses with the choir. Chanting was often singlehandedly led by the sonorous and mesmerizing voice of Bill Savas, who continued in the role as head cantor for four decades.

By the mid-1970s changes were coming to both St. Nicholas as well as the Greek Orthodox Church in America. In a move with far reaching consequences that recognized the changing ministerial needs of a growing, American-born laity, the 20th Archdiocesan Clergy-Laity Congress held in New York City in July, 1970 approved the use of substituting English for Greek in the liturgy. The change was recommended by the conference liturgical committee headed by former St. Nicholas pastor Rev. Dr. Nicon Patrinos, who said the change was made with the hope “to make the liturgy as alive in the present situation as was for those who originated it centuries ago.” But while English was now allowed, the understanding was it would be applied based on the particular needs and development of individual parishes.

Such change, however, was hard to accept by many laity, even nearly half century after the great migration of Greeks to America had passed. At St. Nicholas, the introduction of English in worship would wait until after the appointment of a new parish priest, Fr. John Geranios, who arrived in St. Louis in October, 1973.

Ordained to the priesthood in 1944, Fr. Geranios served at parishes in four states until 1971, when he took an administrative post as the archdiocesan Vicar in New York and traveled extensively with Archbishop Iakovos. He arrived at St. Nicholas at a time when the parish membership stood at 818 families, one of the largest in the Midwest.

Fr. John’s use of English in about half the liturgy was both welcomed by mostly American-born parishioners who felt it gave them a clearer understanding of worship and frowned upon by others who saw it as a loss of Greek cultural expression as well as the perceived beauty of Greek as a language of worship. It was becoming clearer that in a culture where Hellenic ethnic identity began to diminish with each new generation, it was the Orthodox faith itself that would remain as the primary gift of the community’s immigrant founders to its progeny.

Fr. John also felt a special mission to take the Orthodox faith beyond the walls of the church to the larger community, attending interfaith gatherings and appearing on local television shows reminding clergy and laypeople of other faiths that the Orthodox Church was a unique, often overlooked faith in American culture. At the same time, he was also aware of the lingering impact of Greek politics on some in the community, particularly after the Turkish invasion of the island nation of Cyprus in July, 1974, which threatened war between Greece and Turkey and eventually split the island into Greek and Turkish controlled areas. Working with the longstanding Justice for Cyprus Committee spearheaded by Dr. Nicholas Matsakis, Fr. Geranios sought to raise public awareness of the plight of Greek Cypriots under assault by Turkey.

At the parish level, the annual Labor Day picnic continued to be celebrated in the community center and courtyard area, complete with carnival style game booths, Greek food, and Greek music and dancing by GOYA-age dancers in traditional dress. The event continued to draw larger crowds every year and was becoming an established holiday weekend attraction for the St. Louis metropolitan area.

By the mid-1970s, middle-aged, second generation parishioners from the World War II and Korean War eras had all but completely taken over leadership of the parish. Older members of the pre-1920 first wave of Greek immigration had mostly passed on. But parish council representation was opening up. In 1971 the parish elected the first woman to serve on the council, Veda Martin. She was followed two years later by Elva Tompras, another longtime volunteer who belonged to Elpis and the Daughters of Penelope (the women's auxiliary of AHEPA). The door was now open for more women to serve in parish administrative leadership. Non-Greek converts also began to serve on the council in the 1970s, an unlikely scenario just a decade earlier.

There were others who served the church daily as dedicated employees. Two were immigrants who from middle age to their final years had important behind the scenes roles: Harry Patakas, the parish custodian, and Steve Vangelakos, the church sexton. A diminutive and quiet man, "Steve" as he was simply known, would be present at virtually all liturgies, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and feast day services, directing people where to go with a kind smile and a motion of his hand.

The ultimate go-to person at St. Nicholas has been parish Executive Secretary Katherine Mylonas Ellis, who for over six decades has (and continues) to assist people with arranging baptisms, weddings, funerals, and responding to a myriad of other matters brought before her. Her knowledge of the community, including its many families, the issues it faced, and many other small details has made her the single best repository of parish memory.

After less than four years, in July, 1977, Fr. Geranios was called to a new assignment as the director of St. Basil's Academy in upstate New York. His replacement, it would turn out, was no stranger to St. Louis and the Greek community.

Growth, Diversity, & Challenges

Born and raised in St. Louis to a family of Greek immigrants who attended the Assumption church, at the age of seventeen George Nicozisin enlisted in the U. S.

Marine Corps. While serving overseas in 1946 with Allied occupational forces, he received a calling to the priesthood during a liturgy in a small Russian Orthodox church in rural China. After being discharged he enrolled in Holy Cross Seminary, where he became interested in church history. He went on to serve at several parishes across the country, and then was appointed Director of Religious Education for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese before being assigned as priest of St. Nicholas in 1977. Possessed of a scholarly mind, a welcoming heart, and a pastoral spirit, Fr. George quickly embraced his new role as shepherd of a changing community.

One of his most important initiatives was engendering a new spirit of worship. Although he at first scaled back the use of English, which some parishioners thought had been introduced too quickly, in many new ways Fr. George increased liturgical awareness and engagement by the congregation. For decades worship was carried out by congregants more passively. While expressing piety by making the sign of the cross and prostrations before icons or the Eucharist, during most of the liturgy worshippers stood or sat without moving their lips. Using recently published hymnbooks with phonetic Greek and English side-by-side, he encouraged everyone in the pews to sing hymns and repose, and not merely leave it to the choir. Prayers at the altar which were usually said quietly by the priest were now recited aloud for all to hear. Regular fasting from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays was encouraged as was more frequent partaking of the Eucharist. Fr. George also had the parish recite together prayers of confession and repentance in English before receiving communion, as well as advocate greater participation in the sacrament of confession. A new, higher level of parish engagement in the liturgical and sacramental life of the church was established.

His sermons were always well researched and conversational in tone but also declarative – calling his listeners to follow a path of faith in both word and action. His messages, while ultimately grounded in a moral of faith, were rooted in real life, often taken from the biblical experiences of Christ and the apostles or the saints of the church, but also others with compelling stories to tell. He frequently held American culture and fads to task for their shallowness, contrasting them with the deep, spiritual fulfillment found in living an Orthodox Christian life.

Fr. George had a particular interest in the spiritual formation of the parish youth, who during the 1980s were transitioning into a post-Baby Boom era of, in some cases, fourth generation descendants of the first immigrants. GOYA continued, but a new group called the Young Adult League was formed to minister to those over 18 years of age. For the first time, a great deal of interest was given to young people starting college,

especially those going out of town where there may be no Orthodox church to attend. Weekly church bulletins were mailed to students, and while home during the holidays YAL gatherings were held to further strengthen a sense of connectedness.

The task of ministering to youth had become an enormous one. Since the late 1960s this had been handled by a succession of young assistant priests. Inroads were made in the early 1970s with the arrival of Fr. Jim Pantelis, who helped foster increased youth turnout at GOYA functions. Later assistant pastors would be helpful as well, but a renewed spiritual focus was given when a yet to be ordained seminary graduate named Peter Anton arrived in 1980 as a lay assistant. Overnight spiritual retreats began, which focused on developing a life of prayer, scriptural reflection, confession, and regular participation in the liturgy. This work was continued by Fr. Nick Kasemeotes and followed by Fr. Paul Kaplanis, whose endearing style of interacting with youth of all ages made him and his wife, Presvetera Evi, like family during his eight years of service at St. Nicholas. Every assistant eventually moved on to new pastoral leadership roles, usually as head priest at another parish. Years later, Peter Anton was ordained a celibate deacon and appointed to an administrative position at the Patriarchate in Istanbul. Taking the name Tarasios, in 2000 he was elevated to the position of Metropolitan of Buenos Aires and South America, where he continues to serve.

Like Fr. Geranios before him, Fr. George promoted ecumenical contact with other churches and faith groups in the St. Louis region. He also participated in a revitalization of the Federation of Orthodox churches in St. Louis, continuing to encourage participation in pan-Orthodox events when held at one of the other ten Orthodox parishes in the area.

St Nicholas continued to benefit from the generosity of church affiliated groups and Hellenic organizations. Philoptochos continued to be at the forefront raising funds in support of the parish, the archdiocese, the seminary, St. Basil's academy, and a plethora of local charitable groups. Among the activities it hosted towards these efforts was an annual fashion show. The Hellenic American Veterans Association continued to support the community in various ways. In 1977 it put up the seed money to build the first full-sale parish library, a two-room space with ample shelving and a conference table located directly under the church altar. It was named in honor of Fr. George Mastrantonis. With an eye to the needs of future generations at St. Nicholas, in 1987 the Hellenic American Progressive League donated 50 acres of its 200 acre wooded land to the church, with the intention that it be used for the benefit of parish youth.

Establishing a place for older members of the Greek community to live independently was accomplished in 1980 through the work of AHEPA Chapter 53. Working with U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, the chapter was able to secure federal financial support of the construction of what by 1988 would be two elderly housing complexes located in south St. Louis County, the AHEPA 53 Apartments. The project was driven by a team of AHEPA leaders, including chapter presidents Leon Spanos and Deno Benos, as well as officers and members Lou Jemas, Stavros Millonas, Andrew Millonas, Sam Nakis, Nick Tharenos, and John Volas, among others.

Other new parish ministry activities were set in motion during the 1980s. An annual St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival was held to showcase the speaking skills and knowledge of the Orthodox faith by parish youth. The winner of each age group would go on to compete at the diocese level in Chicago, with a chance to enter the national finals. GOYA took annual trips to Fanari Camp in Wyoming. Working with Fr. Paul Kaplanis, the Young Adult League hosted a national conference of Greek Orthodox young adults in St. Louis in 1987 at the newly renovated Union Station. Intended as it was to be a gathering place for spiritual growth, it also became an occasion to make new friends with Orthodox young adults from around the country, or to possibly find a future marriage partner. Older members of St. Nicholas, now mostly represented by the children of the first immigrants, were an active group that was organized into a special ministry of their own, called the V.I.P.s., which regularly met for social activities and day trips. In addition, Fr. George led parish pilgrimages for the first time to the Holy Land, visiting sacred sites at locations where Christ and the apostles had walked.

As the church's activities grew, long needed renovations and updates were made. In 1984 two new Byzantine-style icons of the Transfiguration and Ascension of Christ were painted and placed in the small dome areas above the first and second floor narthexes, respectively. Church offices were completely remodeled and expanded, and a new meeting room was built on the second floor of the community center. In the Philoptochos Room, used for meetings and overflow space for auditorium events, a "children's chapel" was built into the west wall and a kitchenette area installed in the opposite corner. Even the parish's cemetery space required expansion. It was becoming clear that the community would eventually surpass the capacity of St. Mathews Cemetery, so to meet anticipated needs the church purchased nearly 1,000 additional gravesites at New St. Marcus Cemetery, about two miles south of St. Mathews.

While welcoming non-Greeks and non-Greek Orthodox into the community had become more socially accepted at St. Nicholas as time went on, the arrival of an entirely

new group of worshippers revealed some limitations to this hospitality. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Coptic Orthodox Christians from Ethiopia and Eritrea in East Africa fled poverty, famine, and civil war to come to the United States, with a large contingent of refugees immigrating to St. Louis.

Members of one of the oldest Christian churches whose ancestors accepted Christianity in the fourth century, Coptic Orthodox Christians (sometimes referred to as “Oriental Orthodox”) worshipped very similarly to the Greek Orthodox. Although different in theologically subtle ways, Eritrean immigrants discovered worship at St. Nicholas to be so similar to their own that they felt at home. One elderly immigrant woman described the liturgical service at St. Nicholas as “like being in heaven”. Some in the parish community, including Fran Demetre, Joanna Spanos, and Presvytera Sylvia Nicozisin, worked to assist the new immigrants, holding Bible studies and English reading sessions, and pulling together essential items for them such as clothing and household goods, and holding Christmas parties for the children. These acts of Christian charity, along with many others shown by a small but dedicated group of St. Nicholas parishioners, left a lasting impression on the Eritrean community that encountered an otherwise cold reception by some members.

As more East Africans began attending at St. Nicholas, some in the church thought it best to give the group a “space” of their own, suggesting they celebrate a separate weekly liturgical service at St. Nicholas on Saturdays, and that they obtain their own priest to lead them. Such an arrangement would be temporary until they could establish a separate church. While appearing on the surface to be thoughtful, it was clearly a move intended to separate the newcomers from the rest of the parish community. When they learned this, the new immigrants were stunned. So woven into their religious and cultural life was Sunday worship that moving it to Saturday was incomprehensible.

In what was a highlight moment in his pastorate at St. Nicholas, Fr. Nicozisin would have none of it. Taken aback by the cool reception of the new immigrants, he held firm against calls for separation. Mulagato Tefari, the first immigrant from Eritrea who arrived as a student studying at Washington University, recalled how Fr. George convened a meeting with Eritrean community members to assure them that he would be their advocate, emphatically declaring that there would be no separation between the groups “as long as I am priest of this parish”. Fr. George had an appreciation for the historic and religious identity of the Eritrean people that others in the parish lacked.

Today, over thirty years after the wave of Coptic Orthodox war refugees began to worship at St. Nicholas, twenty Eritrean families are listed on the parish membership

roster, while others who may not be counted as church stewards continue to attend on major church feast days. Thus far two Eritrean immigrant men have proudly served on the parish council and others on numerous parish committees. In addition, today the children and grandchildren of Eritrean immigrants attend Sunday school with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Greek immigrants who founded the parish, with whom they share a common Orthodox faith. In a step toward inclusiveness, the Lord's Prayer is recited during liturgy today in English, Greek, and G'heeze, the ancient liturgical language of the Eritrean Coptic Orthodox Church.

As the church moved into the 1990s, pressures of parish growth coupled with constraints of space around St. Nicholas mounted. For years, Barnes-Jewish Hospital across Forest Park Avenue from St. Nicholas went through what seemed like an ongoing period of renovation and expansion. In 1992 the church sold the former parking lot to the east that it owned to the hospital, which built a five story parking garage with the agreement that 400 spaces would be allotted for use by St. Nicholas parishioners on Sundays and up to 600 for Easter liturgy. Property owned by the parish on Forest Park had now receded back as far as it could go, with no further space for facility expansion. The longstanding opinion of some that it would be best to move St. Nicholas to St. Louis County, where most parishioners lived, resurfaced once more.

By 1996, after nearly two decades as pastor at St. Nicholas, Fr. George Nicozisin felt it was time to step down. He had led the parish with vigor, but over the years had suffered heart ailments requiring bypass surgery. He also soon found himself in the early stages of Parkinson's disease. "I'm 69, pushing 70," he told a local newspaper in August, 1996. "It's time to turn things over to a younger man." Although he retained a small office at the church and pastor emeritus status, he retired from priestly duties at the end of the year, as the parish awaited the arrival of its new spiritual shepherd.

Fr. Douglas Papulis was thirty-nine-years old when he came to St. Louis in January, 1997 with his wife, Presvetyera Christina, and their three young sons. Born and raised in the Boston area, he was valedictorian of both his undergraduate class at Hellenic College and his graduate class at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. He had just come off serving ten years as priest of the Church of the Dormition in Racine, Wisconsin, a lakeside community between Chicago and Milwaukee. When he arrived at St. Nicholas, it appeared there was much to be optimistic about. Parish ministries were well established and strong. But much had happened behind the scenes that concerned the future of the parish well before Fr. Doug's arrival, and was about to test the strength and endurance of the community's bonds as they had never been before.

About a year prior to Fr. Doug's appointment, the parish voted in general assembly on whether to proceed with one of two parcels of land for the future construction of a new St. Nicholas church. One proposal was offered by a group of affluent church members offering to pay for a parcel just over a mile up the road from Assumption church facing highway 270. Another property on Lindbergh Blvd. in Ladue was also recommended, but on vote neither property achieved the needed majority to move forward. Finally, Parish Council President Tom Whaley appointed co-chairs of a new long-range planning committee charged with finding property: Leon Spanos, a businessman who for many years supported obtaining new church property, and longtime parish council member, Philoptochos president, and Greek restaurateur Nicky Antoniou.

The committee reviewed 35 pieces of land before being informed by parishioner Jean Nakis of a 10.9 acre site that was undeveloped with the exception of an old frame farmhouse and small outstructure. The location had many advantages. It was near the geographic center of the St. Louis region, about a half mile west of the highway 64/270 intersection on Outer 40 Road. It was a high visibility site on a hill that could be seen by thousands of commuters traveling into and out of the city of St. Louis every day. Professional investment advisor and capital fund chairman Leo Catsavis negotiated the purchase price of the real estate at \$2.56 million.

Meanwhile, seeing that parish leadership was intent on purchasing new land and possibly moving to St. Louis County, a group of parishioners formed an organization called the Committee for the Preservation of St. Nicholas on Forest Park Boulevard. Chaired by lifelong church member Leo Pashos, the group consisted of more than fifty parishioners, most of whom had family roots in the church going back to its founding.

With what appeared to be irreconcilable visions of the future of St. Nicholas, divisions at the church broke out into the open. In an attempt to gauge where the community stood on purchasing land, in August, 1997 a survey was designed by research staff at an area college and sent to over 800 households on the parish mailing list, with three quarters (615 responses) received and scanned for analysis. The results were revealing. Nearly three fourths favored purchasing land for construction of a future church complex, with just over one fourth disapproving. Of those favoring land purchase, nearly 60% wanted to obtain a site in the "middle suburbs" of St. Louis County, defined as located between I-170 and Woods Mill Road, the area where the proposed property was situated. Sixty-three percent of all survey respondents said they would support funding the purchase of new land "above and beyond" their annual stewardship.

With what looked to be enough support, the parish voted in June, 1998 on whether or not to purchase the site on Outer 40 Road. With 62% of 586 voting in favor, the measure fell short by the two-thirds vote required for passage. The motion was again brought forward on the following month on July 12. This time the 66% vote had been reached for approval after some ballots were disqualified due to voters not being current in their church stewardship. The land was purchased, but issues persisted.

With rancor building within the community over the prospect of a move, the conflict widened to include the church hierarchy, local political players, and the press. Those opposed to the property purchase urged Metropolitan Iakovos of Chicago to prohibit it, arguing the land was too close to the Assumption, which was just over 2 miles away. The metropolitan allowed the purchase to go ahead, with the condition that the property be used as an investment and nothing be built there.

There was also extensive communication going on with elected officials and historic preservationists in the City of St. Louis. Members of the preservationist group made inroads in encouraging the city's Heritage and Design Commission to consider St. Nicholas for designation as an historic and cultural landmark, which also would mitigate the prospect of a future sale. The designation went on to be approved by the commission, despite opposition by the parish council, a vote of the general assembly, Metropolitan Iakovos, and St. Louis Board of Alderman President Francis Slay. At the same time, in Town and Country those with homes next to the church's new property publicly expressed concern over how future traffic and noise issues that came with having a church for a neighbor would adversely impact their quiet subdivision.

Local broadcast and print media closely followed the quarrels at St. Nicholas, posing the looming question of whether the community would leave the city for the greener spaces of the county. Arguing that the church was indelibly woven into the cultural and religious fabric of the city, a perception was presented that leaving its original home was tantamount to civic betrayal. The matter was regularly put in the public limelight by a widely read society columnist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

Many church members bemoaned the distraction property issues were having on the principal mission of the parish: nurturing the spiritual growth of a community bound together in Christ, the Eucharist, and their shared Orthodox Christian faith. Shortly after beginning his priestly ministry at St. Nicholas, Fr. Doug found himself attempting to pastor a church consumed in a tempest swirling everywhere, and which put his leadership to the test on a continual basis. A tense atmosphere bubbled under the surface, and some family members and koumbari experienced rifts over differences of

opinion on the property matter. People of like minds on the issue huddled together after liturgy in the parish fellowship hall to discuss the invisible elephant in the room. Fortunately, a new assistant priest and deeply spiritual man, Fr. Achilles Karanthos, was brought in to assist Fr. Doug and oversee the children and youth ministries - keeping them at a distance from the heated property issue.

The St. Nicholas community soon began using the property for parish picnics and other outdoor functions. The old frame farmhouse was sometimes used for meetings, but its interior was too small for large gatherings. While the parish campaign to pay off the land was largely successful, its future remained in question. Preservationists called for selling the property and using proceeds to put back into the maintenance and improvement of the Forest Park facility. Another group suggested selling and purchasing less expensive acreage several miles further west in Chesterfield, a move put to a vote and rejected. During the early 2000s the community continued to use the land strictly as an outdoor gathering venue. Then an unexpected event occurred which would propel the development of the property to the next level.

On January 4, 2004, a life-long member of St. Nicholas, Peter Leontsinis, passed away after suddenly falling ill and spending several weeks in a hospital intensive care unit. A sixty-nine year-old bachelor and retired architect, Leontsinis had worked as the municipal planner for University City. One of two children of immigrant parents Emmanuel and Maria Leontsinis, the latter having served as an early president of Philoptochos, Peter's involvement in church life had been largely passive, with the exception of designing the modern, outdoor prayer chapel at St. Mathews cemetery.

However Peter Leontsinis' anonymity was about to change. While still in the hospital, he met with his cousin and attorney George Leontsinis, who frequently represented St. Nicholas. Convinced of the church's need to build on the property for the benefit of future generations, Peter bequeathed the bulk of his estate to the church – what would turn out to be 1.2 million dollars.

Parish leaders viewed the Leontsinis estate gift as the “jump start” needed to finally initiate a community center capital campaign and construction program. After meeting with renowned church architect Steve Papadatos from New York, a design for a new community center and attached chapel was submitted for consideration by the parish. Spacious and modern while retaining some traditional elements, including the placement of large Greek Cross in a glass enclosed area above the entrance, the mostly masonry edifice was both warm and imposing, as well as expensive to build.

After a decade of debate and division, on May 20, 2007 the St. Nicholas community met in general assembly to take the kind of giant step it had done only three times before – in 1917, 1930, and 1955 - voting to approve a motion to proceed to build a spacious 32,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art community center with an attached, 100+ seat chapel for \$8 million. In addition, another nearly half million would be earmarked to the restoration of the church sanctuary on Forest Park, an expression of the community's continued commitment to its 77 year-old home. Metropolitan Iakovos of Chicago gave the necessary ecclesiastical go-ahead to the proposal.

To help meet the costs exceeding the Leontsinis gift (about \$6.5 million), an aggressive fundraising campaign was launched to build what came to be called the St. Nicholas Family Life Center, stressing its purpose to provide parish families with spiritual educational, and social engagement, as well as weekday worship in a state-of-the-art facility closer to where most parishioners lived. The renovation of the interior of the Forest Park sanctuary would be accomplished by parish member, professional artist, iconographer, and restoration expert Euripides "Rip" Kastaris.

A capital campaign committee was formed to reach out to as many in the community as possible for support. The title of the building campaign "A Light in the City, A Beacon on the Hill", was coined by Fr. Doug, and defined from the outset what would be the eventual creation a two-campus parish community. The informal motto of the fundraising effort, coined by Leon Spanos, was taken from the Greek proverb "*Fasouli to fasouli yemize to sakouli.*" ("Bean by bean the sack gets filled.")

A well-attended ground blessing at the property was held on October 21, 2007. But as if history was repeating itself, after numerous lead gifts and pledges were made, the campaign reached a plateau, and was followed in 2008 by the worst economic downturn to hit the United States since the Great Depression. Personal spending, including pledges, hit a brick wall in the face of economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, in addition to the Leontsinis bequest, others in St. Nicholas community stepped up with leading financial contributions.

In the face of the great financial burden before them, in June, 2009, clearing and grading of the site was begun by Paric Construction. Fortunately the parish took steps to contain cost. Design modifications were made to the original plan by local building architect Lou Chiodini, who advised the church at every step of the construction process. George Bude, a member of the building committee, successfully encouraged the church to finance through the sale of tax-exempt bonds rather than solely through a private bank note. The move would save the parish tens of thousands of dollars in upcoming years.

As construction on the Family Life Center was nearly half way completed, the church held its first event surrounded by an unfinished auditorium of exposed steel frames: a joyous traditional lamb roast luncheon complete with Greek music and dancing. By this time the parish had also welcomed a new associate pastor, Fr. Michael Arbanas, who with his wife Presvetyra Caroline and their three children arrived in November, 2008. With a beautiful artistic restoration of the St. Nicholas sanctuary completed that lightened the interior of the church and enhanced its ceilings, walls, and icons, the community held a magnificent ribbon cutting ceremony on May 22, 2010 at the new Family Life Center.

"For the longest time, this was presented as an either/or, go or stay," Fr. Doug told a reporter for the *Post-Dispatch*. "But the parish has realized it doesn't have to be that way. We can be a positive presence here in the city, even as the vast majority of our members live in West County." Through a new, two-campus presence, St. Nicholas is now able to better extend its ministry to those at a greater physical distance while maintaining an urban presence and the parish's popular annual Greek Festival, which has since grown to be larger than ever, to include the outdoor Taverna on neighboring property and "Athens on the Street" on Forest Park Avenue. While still attached to a loan, the flexibility provided the community through the addition of the Family Life Center has proven to be a boon to the entire parish and its many programs.

Indeed, has been a testament to the spirit of the St. Nicholas community as well as the pastoral leadership of Fr. Doug that over what may have seemed to some to be a long journey fraught with difficult challenges that parish ministries continued to be strengthened and even expanded. Spiritually centered, Christian growth and formation programs such as the Women's Faith Group, the Grief Support Group, the Handmaidens (Sunday service for girls), Cherubs (young children), Lenten Presanctified Liturgy Meals, and the Trout Lodge GOYA retreat are just some of these endeavors. In more recent years, through the initiative of Fr. Michael focused programs such as Family Nights, the Men's Morning Faith Group, the Blessing of the Pets, and the parish book club have added new opportunities for faith engagement. As it has for a century, the St. Nicholas community has shown that it weathers rough seas only to land ashore stronger than ever.

The Promise of the Next Century

The story of the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church has been the story of its people – God’s people – who from its founding by hardened, dedicated Greek immigrants has weathered hardships, stepped up to challenges of a changing community, and worked through divisions to reemerge together as one. As Orthodox Christians who believe the Lord’s Spirit is real and present in our daily lives, the community has truly been blessed by numerous accomplishments throughout many stages of its first century.

Even as these successes have been manifested in the beauty of the edifices that have been built, they are more importantly reflected in the work the St. Nicholas community does as God’s people: providing spiritual nourishment to its children and youth, those who are “cradle” Orthodox and those who are new or inquiring into the faith, as well as ministering to the needs of the elderly, the suffering, and those coping with sickness and grief. Beyond its walls, the church and its ministries have left a powerful and positive imprint on many lives in the St. Louis area, as well as throughout the nation and abroad - and it will continue to do so into its second century.

Note on Sources:

This history was the result of extensive research derived from various parish documents, programs, photos, and other materials contained in the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church archives. Other sources include books, archives, articles, newspaper accounts, court documents, U.S. Census reports, immigrant ship manifests, and numerous files and recordings in the author’s personal collection. Among those are many oral histories recorded of the memories of first generation and second generation Greek-Americans who lived in the St. Louis area and attended St. Nicholas.

The best single source about the early Greek community and St. Nicholas up to 1960 is the historical sketch written by George Frangoulis, Spiro Boudoures, and Fr. Constantine Andrews published as part of the church’s 1962 commemorative album. Additional work covering 1960-1992 was researched by George A. Souris for the 75th anniversary album. Other secondary sources used include the author’s published article “The Odyssey of the Early Greek Community in St. Louis,” and a graduate paper on the integration of Eritrean immigrants into the St. Nicholas community.

M.G.T.