

Parish History

The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer has deep roots in Cleveland County. While the first Episcopal services “in this place” were held by the Rev. E. M. Hill, in charge at St. Luke’s, Lincolnton, between 1842 and 1844, services were held irregularly until November 1858 when the Parish was organized and a church was built. In February of 1860, the Rev. C. T. Bland made a single entry in a Parish Register: “Today I laid the cornerstone of The Church of the Redeemer.” The church, located on the corner of South Lafayette and Graham Streets, was consecrated in September 1863. Rev. Bland left the parish in 1862 and for the next 20 years the Rev. W. R. Wetmore came from his home in Lincolnton to hold services. Diocesan records reveal that the Church of the Redeemer was cut off from the Diocese in 1868 presumably because services were held infrequently. The Rev. E. A. Osborne took charge in 1885 and wrote about the church “It is sad beyond expression to see the forlorn condition of the work at this place. The church is in a state of dilapidation and the congregation gone down to a mere handful, and they much discouraged. This condition of affairs has arisen mainly from the results of the war, which swept away almost everything in the way of property belonging to the few members who were here at the time, leaving them poor and helpless.” Under Osborne’s leadership a church school was organized and repairs were made to the building.

A diocesan missionary, the Rev. A. W. Phelps, came to Redeemer after Osborne’s departure in 1891. The church building continued to deteriorate with the last services held there in 1899. It was torn down and a replacement built on the same site and consecrated in 1906. Few entries about Redeemer are found in the Mission Register until 1922 when Miss Emma Frick completed a history of the parish. Miss Frick provided strong lay leadership from 1906 until her death in 1928. Membership in the parish increased, particularly in the church school. Even today Miss Frick is considered the “mother of Sunday School education” and generations of Redeemer children have grown up honoring her by placing flowers on her grave at Sunset Cemetery each Mother’s Day.

1929 through 1937 proved to be dark years for Redeemer with declining membership and limited lay leadership. In 1940 a private business leased the land on which the church stood and the building was moved to West Marion Street on the site of a funeral home. The arrangement allowed Redeemer members to continue using the building on this site. The chapel stands today and was the site of the 125th celebration of the parish’s founding. The first service in the “new” church was held in February, 1941.

Redeemer has been served in the years since by a number of gifted priests who shared their talents with the parish:

- The Reverend Tracy Lamar served as Vicar from 1942-1944 and grew the membership to 53 communicants.

- The Reverend Boston Lackey served from 1946-1948 during which time communicants increased to 62.
- The Reverend Dr. W. H. Anthony was called as Vicar in April, 1949. On Bishop Henry's advice the church built a rectory for a resident priest and Dr. Anthony worked to expand the membership of the church. Under his leadership ground was broken for a new church building in November 1950 with consecration occurring in 1951. That building is the current chapel on our campus. In January 1952 Redeemer applied for parish status in the Diocese of Western North Carolina and was approved at the Diocesan Convention in May of that year. Dr. Anthony was called as the first rector of the church and served until his retirement in 1954.
- The Reverend Roland Whitmire served at Redeemer from 1954 until 1966, leading the parish in great activity and growth – the formation of Scout troops, the formation of an EYC program and the outreach of annual preaching missions. Under his leadership a new rectory was purchased and membership grew to 195 confirmed persons.
- The Reverend R. C. Johnson accepted a call in 1967 and emphasized youth and outreach through community involvement until his resignation in 1970.
- The Reverend John Richard McDonald came to Redeemer from the Church of the Good Shepherd in New York in December 1970. Under his tenure a new Parish Hall was constructed which included space for church offices and a library. Rev. McDonald purchased the rectory for his residence and led the parish in years of spiritual growth until his retirement in 1979.
- The Reverend Thomas Nelson Rightmyer came to Redeemer in August 1980 from Asheboro, North Carolina. Under his leadership the members of Redeemer worked together to make improvements in the church buildings, in church programs and in fellowship activities for the parish while sharing their talents in community endeavors. Rev. Rightmyer served until June 1989 with Redeemer at that time having 190 communicants.
- The Reverend Eugene Cavis McDowell, ThD was called to Redeemer in 1990 from All Souls Church in Asheville. Redeemer experienced a growth in parish and diocesan participation under his leadership especially in the development of the "Towel Ministry" in collaboration with Deacon Chris Greer. This ministry challenged the youth of the parish and the diocese to work with identified families across the diocese who had need of repair work on their homes. Rev. McDowell shared his love of the outdoors with the parish as well leading trips to camp, rock climb and raft the rivers of beautiful western North Carolina. Under his leadership a new church building including nave and parish hall was constructed and consecrated. At his resignation in April 2006 there were 326 communicants in the parish.
- The Reverend Valori Sherer, DMin was called to Redeemer in 2010 from St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Cadillac, Michigan. The development of the Shepherd's Table and Food Pantry ministries were the highlights of her years at Redeemer. Mother Valori, as

she was known, encouraged spirituality through practical ministry and local service and used her talented singing and chanting to enrich our worship. There were 190 communicants in the parish at her resignation in January 2016.

An important feature in the church's history occurred when the Redeemer Trust was established in 2003 by Mrs. Nancy Blanton, born out of her love of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer. The trust received its initial funding in March 2007 according to Mrs. Blanton's will with a goal that the gift would be perpetual. Mrs. Blanton's intentions were as follows:

- The money gifted should be held intact in perpetuity.
- There would be no allowance for use of the portion of the trust principal.
- The trust would provide investment income from which the church could benefit.
- This investment income would be directed to the maintenance of the Chapel, music programs, youth programs and outreach ministries.

Since the inception of the Redeemer Trust, others have gifted to the Trust in various ways. Another passionate Redeemer parishioner gifted and oversaw the design and completion of the beautiful columbarium and adjoining garden. The garden is in memory of Joseph Edwards Walker, MD. The landscape and gardens must be maintained continually. A living gift to the Trust was made for this purpose.

When the church found itself in a time of financial limitations, another parishioner gave an undesignated gift with no stipulations. It was specified that the Board of Trustees of the Redeemer Trust could approve that these funds be used as deemed appropriate to benefit Redeemer.

Gifts to the Trust benefit the finances, religious programs, and acquisition and maintenance of the beautiful and historic facilities of the Church of the Redeemer. These gifts may be living gifts or testamentary gifts. The Trust accepts both general and special purpose gifts as well.

Redeemer's modern social conscience that had been developed by Fr. Gene was focused on our local community. Throughout the hardships of the economic recession and the realities of the changing role of church in the lives of Americans, Redeemer remained a faithful Episcopal presence in our community.

Beginning as a humble mission and developing into a parish serving all of Cleveland County, the Church of the Redeemer in 2018 awaits the coming of new leadership. Members of the parish are mindful of the challenges ahead and eagerly await God's guidance in the selection of a new Rector who will support us as we go out into the world to love and serve God.