

HISTORY OF OUR LADY GATE OF HEAVEN CHURCH – 1946 to 2016

1946: Noted Chicago developer, **James Merrion**, chooses swampland East of Stony Island and between 95th and 103rd streets to be the site of a development designed to be ‘a suburb in the city’. The prairie swamp is cleared and filled in with slag from nearby steel mills. In his desire to keep the homes affordable, especially for young families, Merrion makes the duplex the predominant form of available housing. The outer area of the neighborhood is known as Jeffrey Manor, while the inner part with the suburban cul du sacs is called, Merrionette Manor. *Merrion donated five acres of land in the center of this new community to the Archdiocese of Chicago for the establishment of a church and school.*

1947: *Rev. Gerald Scanlan* is appointed by **Cardinal Stritch** to begin organizing the people in the Manor to form a church.

1948: The Maritime Union Hall, on the Southeast corner of 100th and Crandon, is purchased and used as the first Parish church, which opened as *Porta Coeli, ‘Gate of Heaven’*. *The OLGH Church community celebrates their first Sunday mass at this ‘storefront church in May, 1948!* The construction shack used by James Merrion’s company is used as the first parish center. Over the years it became known as *‘the Club House’*, serving the church for over 30 years as a social center and classroom.

1949-1951: Under Fr. Scanlan’s leadership, the first parish buildings are built on the present site. Two small brick buildings (the present-day pre-school building) formed the first OLGH School. They were exteriorly joined to another small building (the East half of the present rectory), located at 2338 E. 99th St. **In 1951** the buildings, including the present church space and eight additional classrooms at 2330 E. 99th Street, were *consecrated by Samuel Cardinal Stritch*.

1952-1963: *Rev. Thomas Goldrick*, former associate pastor of St. Laurence Church, became pastor of OLGH. During his tenure, the remainder of the present parish plant is constructed. This building served as the first Convent for the *Sisters of St. Joseph, which served OLGH for many years*. The sisters soon outgrew their home, and in **1957** they broke ground for *the present Convent building on 2311 E. 98th Street*. The need for expanded space during this time of ‘The Gate’s’ history was critical. *Enrollment in the school in 1955 was over 380 students, and the parish swelled to 1500 families.*

1965-1976: As in many other neighborhoods throughout the city of Chicago, the racial and ethnic make-up of Jeffrey Manor changed during these years. Mostly Catholic White European-American families were replaced by African-American families, many who were of Christian traditions other than Roman Catholic. This was a great period of transition for OLGH parish. The Manors Community Action Committee was formed in 1970, in part to keep the neighborhood integrated, was one of various ways in which OLGH was at the center of community and social development in the neighborhood. It did not achieve their goal; *by 1971 'the change' was virtually complete.* **The size of the parish shrank dramatically**, but the school's enrollment staid relatively stable due to the fine reputation OLGH School in particular and Catholic schools in general enjoyed. In the face of these challenges, the small but vibrant parish community responded with a variety of efforts, many of which were inspired by the then-recent Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). Among these efforts, was using the school as an instrument for evangelization and inviting new families into the church, and greater lay leadership through organizations like the **OLGH School Board**, the **Women's Club** and the **Gatekeepers**. *In 1970 Dorothy Hammond and Alberta Wilson founded and taught in our Pre-School Program in the Little School. The Little School also housed the Mary Alyce School for Retarded Children.* In response to Vatican II's call for the laity to be more actively engaged in transforming the wider community, OLGH continued to develop as Jeffrey Manor's leading institutional instrument for community organizing, whether it was helping to develop block clubs or larger organizations like the *Merrionette Manor's Home Improvement Association*. The **'Club House'** was at the center of many social activities for young people in the Manor; hosting everything from dances to basketball camps led by *former Harlem Globetrotter, Mel Davis*. Unfortunately, the building sustained a fire in 1974 and was never rebuilt. *Also in 1971 our parishioner, Mr. Walter Brown started the first Cub Scout Troop in the Manor. Years later he moved to assist with Boy Scout Troop 736 of OLGH, which had many male parishioners who became Scoutleaders through the years.*

Sisters from the Servants of Mary (Servites) of Ladysmith, Wisconsin began serving the church and school in 1971. It was a long, blessed and fruitful relationship that would continue for over 20 years.

Priests who served during this time included: Rev. William Clark (1965-1968), Rev. William Meagher (1968-1971), and Co-Pastoring> Rev. John Lynch & Rev. Frank Tobin (1971-72), Rev. John Lynch & Rev. John Rosemeyer (1972-73) and Rev. John Lynch & Rev. Donald Cahill (1973-1974).

The 25th Anniversary of Our Lady Gate of Heaven Church was celebrated with great joy on March 31, 1974 with renewed felicitations from John Cardinal Cody, Archbishop of Chicago! Our parishioner, Beverly Roberts was one of the first African Americans to serve on Cardinal Cody's Archdiocesan School Board.

1976-1987: *Rev. Thomas Cima* served as Pastor during these years. Under his leadership and with the assistance of many parishioners and *pastoral associate, Linda Jung*, the church and school continued to develop and expand their ministries. Lay Leadership of the parish continued to grow with four parishioners going through the *Lay Ministry Training-Certificate Program from the Archdiocese: Sheila Adams-1983, James Ivory-1984, Pamela Ivory & Delois Harris-1986*; and through the establishment of our **Parish Council** (one of the earliest such bodies in the Archdiocese), also through the development of new ministries including the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). OLGH continued to be at the center of community organizing efforts in the community with parishioners like *Josephine Bradley* (for whom Bradley Park is named). Fr. Cima, himself worked diligently with the *United Neighborhood Organization (UNO)* for many years keeping OLGH in the forefront of our Jeffrey Manor Community. The **schools' enrollment was over 300 as late as 1978**; and as in many other Catholic schools, *lay teachers became 'the rule, rather than the norm'*. Also in 1983 OLGH opened a *Food Pantry* that continues to feed those in need in the community in 2016.

In 1987 Fr. Cima was reassigned to pastor at St. Victor Church in Calumet City, IL and was replaced by *Rev. John Zimmerman (1987-1988)* and later some administrators (1988-89). During this period of transition there was an increasing demand for lay leadership to help run the parish smoothly and through the direction of people like our parish Secretary *Delois Harris* and members of our Parish Council, that demand was met.

1989-2012: In 1989, facing a shortage of available diocesan priests and the possible closure of OLGH Church due to the Archdiocese's looming financial crisis, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin asked the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph to assume pastoral care of OLGH Church & School. The Capuchins assigned *Rev. Brian Braun, OFM Cap, former pastor of the consolidated St. Justin Martyr Church in Englewood (renamed St. Benedict the African-West) as our pastor (1989-1993)*. Fr. Brian initiated what is perhaps his greatest legacy to us and the Archdiocese**Stewardship of Time, Talent & Treasure*, shortly after arriving. Through the stewardship effort, Sunday collections for the year rose from \$29, 000

in 1989 to over \$72,000 by 1996. People were also asked to tithe their time to the church; so from then on, lay members of the church did everything from: visit our sick brothers & sisters as ministers of care, to serving as volunteer church secretaries, to filling pot holes in the church parking lot. Fr. Brian asked **Loretta Tribble** to form a **Hospitality Committee** so that parishioners and friends could have fellowship after Mass and also serve food for parish celebrations and funeral Repasts. He firmly believed that *'If you feed them, they will come'*. With parishioner volunteers serving as architects, to experts in church furniture restoration, **the church**, under the leadership of Fr. Brian, underwent a **Major Physical Renovation Transformation in 1992**. *Also in 1989 OLGH's Parish Outreach Team was instrumental in encouraging community residents to run for seats on the newly instituted Local School Councils; especially with team members like Ada Reddick, Johnnie Shaviers & Winona Truitt.*

In 1993 after completing and blessing the church renovations, Fr. Brian was succeeded as pastor by our former seminarian, newly ordained priest, **Rev. John Celichowski, OFM Cap (1993-1997)**. Fr. John continued the legacy of our community's involvement with parish plant development and liturgical innovations established by his predecessor, with the help of the many fine lay ministers who served the church for many years. Also **in 1993** our parishioner, **Mary Etta Davis became Principal of our school**, initiating a variety of programs, including the establishment of a state-of-the-art computer lab; built with funding from State Farm Insurance. During this period, **the Day Care** (begun in the 1970's) was officially incorporated into the School as **OLGH Pre-School, under the direction of Johnnie Shaviers and Ella Samuels**. Though enrollment was significantly lower than in the 1970's, OLGH School continued to serve as a critical educational institution in the community. **Under the leadership of Fr. John and community members of the Jeffrey Manor Revitalization Committee, the Local Public Library was expanded from a storefront to its current building on 100th Street & Oglesby.**

In 1994 the Jeffrey Manor Community Revitalization Council (JMCRC) reviewed the 50 year history of the community at their first Annual Awards Dinner on 2/25/1994. The Vice-President and one of its founding members was Mrs. Beverly Roberts. A number of our parishioners received Awards at this celebration: Marian Byrnes founded the Committee to Protect the Prairie in 1979 and the Citizens United to Reclaim the Environment, which led the way for her to head the Southeast Environmental Task Force. She with Alice Harris coordinated the Jeffrey Manor Crime Watch. She was also Chair of JMCRC's Commercial & Institutional Development Committee. After Marian's death in

2010, the Van Vlissingen Prairie that she fought so hard for was renamed in her honor, the **“Marian R. Byrnes Natural Area”**. **Johnnie Shaviers & Josephine Bradley** worked tirelessly to get Jeffrey Manor parks cleaned up and improved in the early 1980's. After Josephine's death, Johnnie led the effort to have Bensley Park renamed the **Josephine Bradley Park**. **Lela & Willie Coleman** were actively involved in organizing & structuring the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) and working with the Park District officials to improve Bradley Park. **Patricia & Greg Boughton** received awards for their **Team Leadership in Scouting**. **Greg Boughton** would continue to sponsor the troop with his assistant, **Mr. Norwood Banks**, on & off from 1989 until his death in 2004, the last scoutmaster. His wife, **Patricia Boughton** also sponsored a Girl Scout troop along with **Dawn & Darcine Tribble** in 1990. She eventually became one of the leaders of the **Teen Club (TNT)**. Other programs were offered at OLGH for the youth of the community during that time: **Rites of Passage programs ‘Sankofa’** ran by **Mawuli Davis** and **Karate classes ‘Good Champs’** ran by **Darrien Winder** that continues on today in 2016.

On **March 29, 1994** **Catholic Charities** held its first public information meeting at OLGH regarding their proposal to sponsor a 75-unit apartment development for low income senior citizens in the 2300 block of 99th Street on the open land of OLGH's property. **The building was finally completed in 2014** after the hard work and leadership of **Fr. Mel Hermann, OFM Cap** and the parish's **Finance Council & Parish Council**, in cooperation with **Catholic Charities**. The building complex was named, **Porta Coeli**.

In 1997 following Fr. John's tenure as pastor, **Rev. Kevin Covert, OFM Cap** was assigned as our pastor (1997-1998).

The 50th Anniversary of OLGH Parish was celebrated on May 3, 1998 with Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I. Archbishop of Chicago officiating!

In 1998, **Rev. Mel Hermanns, OFM Cap** was assigned as our pastor (1998-2012). Fr. Mel, like Fr. Brian, came to us with a wealth of experience, working for many years in the African American community, having a charism for our heritage and legacy, a loving heart for all people of all ages, a collaborative and discerning spirit for the laity's involvement in church leadership and empowerment of the laity's gifts to become self-supporters in the running of our church. Fr. Mel worked with the Parish Council and Finance Council setting up orderly practices for the running of the parish. He supported all ministry efforts to empower *new people*, especially our youth & young adults for education & growth into **music ministry**,

liturgical dance ministry, youth & young adults club, lectors, communion ministers, altar servers, etc. He also worked with a group of Christian ministers in the Jeffrey Manor area ecumenically, tackling issues of : gangs, drugs, need for employment and other concerns that plagued our neighborhood. ***The doors of the church continue to be opened to this day (2016) for people fighting the demons of addiction through the HRDI, a government residency program for female addicts, housed in OLGH's Convent Building on 98th Street.***

In 2003 The Knights and Ladies Auxiliary St. Peter Claver organizations were instituted at OLGH. Robert & Gloria Russell were very instrumental in getting this organization for our parish. The first Grand Knight was Sir Knight, Abraham Wallace-KPC Council 378 in September 2003 and the first Grand Lady was Lady Patricia Tripp-KPCLA Court 378 in November 2003.

Other organizations were formed here and there throughout the years: Seniors Club-Winona Truitt & Gloria Russell, Teen Club, Youth & Young Adult Club-Stefani Hicks, and a Men's Club.

Sadly, after five years of trying to keep our school open, Fr. Mel and our Parish Council's School Committee had to **close our school doors in June 2004**. This came as a result of the country's low economy which manufactured the loss of employment, loss of homes and facilitated families leaving our community and a low enrollment for our school.

In 2009 Robert Russell became the 5th Lay Minister to be certified for our parish. Parishioners: Pamela Ivory, Broderick Irby and Yvonne Adams became certified through the three year Archdiocesan Program for Bible Study.

2012-2016: After 14 years of service to OLGH Church, ***Fr. Mel was taken away from ministerial duties as a priest*** by his order, the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph and on the orders of Cardinal Francis George **on 9/09/12**, quite unexpectedly to OLGH parishioners and to Bishop Joseph Perry, Vicar of Vicariate VI.

In November, 2012 Cardinal George assigned Rev. Maurizio Binaghi, MCCJ (Camboni Missionary) and former pastor of St. Martin de Porres Church on the Westside, as our first Administrator (2012-13). He was reassigned after serving seven months at OLGH. ***Bishop Joseph Perry assigned Rev. Mark Kalema, pastor of Our Lady of Peace Church, as our second Administrator (2013-2016).***

On **July 27, 2014 Bishop Joseph Perry** sent a letter to OLGH Church stating that consolidations & mergers would be taking place in Vicariate VI-B. Pastors in Vicariate VI-B had begun conversations about these issues in January 2014 and were now ready to begin talks with the laity in the Fall of 2014. Fr. Mark Kalema informed parishioners that *we would remain open and be clustered with Our Lady of Peace, St. Philip Neri & St. Bride parishes*. He asked the Parish Council, the Finance Council and five At-Large parishioners from OLGH & OLP each to come to a meeting to discuss the issues related to the clustering on 10/13/14 at OLP. A second meeting with the same group from the two parishes was held on 11/25/14 at OLGH with Bishop Perry officiating. Bishop Perry decided that it would be better to begin with smaller steps for our clustering: OLGH & OLP would merge and SPN & St. Bride would merge, instead of grouping the four parishes together right away. The two parishes were asked to form one Joint Parish Council (JPC) and also to come together for a Joint Mass on the first Sunday of each month, alternating the sites, to help bring the two communities together.

As we enter **February 2016**, having gone through one year of the merging process requested by the bishop, we can truthfully say that it has not been a smooth venture. Both parishes have lost parishioners on the JPC and from the parishes themselves for various reasons. Both parishes are now jeopardized due to our low numbers.

OLGH Church has been the cornerstone of the Jeffrey Manor community for the entire time of its existence. Its programs and activities have extended far beyond the walls of the church to embrace every aspect of life in our community. Our parishioners have been involved in fights against corporate polluters, violent crimes, as well as beautification efforts and leadership in all matters of concern to this community. The church currently hosts the monthly meeting of the Manor Community Council, an umbrella group of the neighborhood block clubs that have organized to address concerns of the Jeffrey Manor/Merrionette Manor area.

We now await the news from the Archdiocese regarding this next phase for our parish, an **Archdiocesan Strategic Plan (Renew)** with an outlook towards **2030** that 100 parishes will probably close, consolidate or merge by then due to the shortage of priests, the decline of parishioners and the aging of most of our church buildings.

OLGH Church has now come full circle! To Be Continued!

Respectfully submitted on 2/23/16 by:

Dr. Sheila Adams – Parishioner and Minister of Music

Additions submitted by **Mrs. Patricia Boughton** – Parishioner and member of the Joint Parish Council.

Selected Information Sources taken from:

1. The 25th Anniversary Booklet – Silver Jubilee 1974
2. The 50th Anniversary Booklet – Golden Jubilee 1948-1998
3. The document, “*A Brief & Imperfect History of Our Lady Gate of Heaven*” by Fr. John Celichowski, OFM Cap
4. The Jeffrey Manor Community Revitalization Council NEWSLETTER, vol.2, No. 1; May 1994