Assumption Greek Orthodox Church History

75th Anniversary
1951-2026

Knowing our past helps us create a better future, so let us learn how our Madison Assumption Greek Orthodox Church started, and gained the rich religious and cultural heritage that it gives us today.

Immigration

Greek immigrants began arriving in Wisconsin in the early 1900s to find economic opportunity in America and to escape oppression (and then war) in Greece. Though many settled in the Fond du Lac area (for example, the Galanos and the Gust Grapsas families), Madison was an attractive place for immigrants as well. Among the first Greeks to come to Madison was Louis Russos, a native of Pylos in the Peloponnese. Louis arrived in 1902 and started a popcorn and peanut stand on Wilson Street. Later he opened a soda fountain and with the help of his wife made and sold homemade chocolates, ribbon candy, candy canes and other confections. Russos was successful in attracting Fost Choles to Madison in 1903, who worked first for Russos and then started a movie theater in Janesville before moving back to Madison to open a floral shop in the Park Hotel at 305 Carroll Street on the Capital Square.

During the Roaring Twenties, the Greeks who chose to settle in Madison focused largely on the restaurant business, the candy business and flower shops. There even came a time when it seemed as though every restaurant in Madison was owned by a Greek! (Well, every *good* one.) The Notes and Coynes families owned the *Coney Island; George's* was operated by the Gerothanas family; *U.W. Lunch* by the Margetis family. The *Spanish Cafe* was operated by the Demetros and Mallas families, and the *Olympic Cafe* was owned by the Nikitas family. *The Spanish Village* was owned by Macedonians, the Miker and Josheff families. The Russos family operated the *Cat and Fiddle*. *The Northwestern* was owned by Sam, Gust and George Grapsas and the Karabas family. *Bev's* was owned by the Sam Lulias family. *Nick's Restaurant* was originally owned by Nick Christakos, and he later sold it to the Aris Christ family. *Nick's* survived the longest of the early Greek restaurants, eventually closing in 2024.

There were also several confectioneries, hat shops and cleaners owned by Greek families. *The Butterfly Candy Store* was run by the Spyres family. Before they bought *Nick's Restaurant*, the Christ family operated the *Square Sweet Shop*. *The Badger Candy Kitchen* was owned by the Gust Galanos family and thrived for 77 years until 2002. *The London Hat Shop* was owned and operated by the Jafferis family. The Spyros Soldatos family, who had moved to Madison in 1928, opened a hat shop. *The Cinderella Dress Shop* was owned by the Playton family.

The area around the corner of E. Wilson St. and S. Franklin St. was Madison's unofficial Greek Town. Fourteen Greek families and eight Greek businesses were located less than ten minutes' walk from that intersection! Other Greek families lived where many immigrant families lived–Jews, Italians, Albanians and Sicilians–in the "Bush," the Greenbush area of Madison. Some Greeks also lived in the area bounded by King, Wilson, Blair and East Main Streets, on the other side of the Square, and some lived in the Spaight Street area.

During these early years, the Greeks that lived in Madison only had access to a Greek Orthodox Church community at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Fond du Lac. They went there for special services and occasionally on a Sunday for the Divine Liturgy. From time to time, Greek Orthodox priests would come to Madison to officiate at weddings, funerals and other sacraments. These services were held at Grace Episcopal Church on the Square.

World War II Changed Madison

During WW II the city became a training center for radio operators with 20,000 troops and instructors stationed at Truax Field. Among those soldiers were Greeks, Serbs, Russians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians and other Orthodox Christians who expected the same benefit that other servicemen had–religious services. The Army duly arranged for Orthodox priests to be brought in once a month to provide services and counseling to these Orthodox men who needed their faith more than ever as they prepared to fight in a war. But with the end of the war, those services stopped, and the Greek population in Madison missed having services locally.

The Beginning of the Madison Church

Ted Douros, an international law expert, and Louis Russos started talking about the possibility of establishing a Greek Orthodox Church in Madison, and they enlisted other local Greeks. Holy Trinity in Fond du Lac was opposed to the opening of a Madison church, thinking that it would hurt their own parish, so Chicago's Bishop Ezekiel was reluctant to authorize its establishment. Undeterred, Madison's Greek leaders decided in the late summer of 1951 to incorporate as the Hellenic Orthodox Community of Madison, Wisconsin. The signers of that charter were Fost Choles, Mary (Galanos) Douros, George Gerothanas, James Kallas and Sam Lulias.

In the end, Bishop Ezekiel did consent to the start of a Greek Orthodox Church in Madison. The bishop followed the Army's example and assigned a priest to come regularly, once a month, to provide services, which were originally held at Grace Episcopal Church. The ladies organized the Women's Hellenic Society and Bessie Lulias was named president.

Purchase of the Church Building

The next logical step was for the community to acquire its own building. Providentially, Sam Lulias heard that Bashford Methodist Church on 7th Street was going to build a new church. An approach was made and soon negotiations resulted in Choles, Gerothanas, Grapsas, Kallas and Lulias each guaranteeing a loan of $10,000 so that $50,000 could be raised to purchase the building. These early founders took a great financial risk to purchase the property. The first donation came from Assumption's Ladies Philoptochos Society, formerly the Women's Hellenic Society. The church was shared with the Bashford Methodist community until their new church was completed. As people from other Orthodox jurisdictions such as Slavic, Eastern Europeans and Middle Eastern Orthodox began arriving in Madison, they all congregated at Assumption for their services, but they worshiped separately, with the Greeks using the upstairs sanctuary and the Slavic and other Orthodox using the downstairs.

To begin converting the building into an Orthodox Church, the first task was to build an iconostasion and to purchase icons from Greece. The community came together to accomplish this effort. Tony Russos built a bishop's throne. Emanuel Fokakis painted the outside of the building and enlisted students to help paint the inside. The women began sewing altar cloths and altar boys' robes.

From 1955 to 1962, Fr. Benjamin Kolias from Milwaukee and Fr. Tsouris, Fr. Constantine Mager and Fr. D. K. Lolakas from Chicago came to Madison once a month to hold services, as the budget allowed. Jenny Kyriakakis, a university student from Fond du Lac, organized the choir. University students Nick Woodas, Alex Doumouras and Emily Gerothanas subsequently served as choir directors. The first Orthodox wedding held in the building was that of Constantine Gialallon and Carol Peterson, followed in 1957 by that of long-standing Assumption members Sam and Anna Fatsis. The first baptism was for Haralambos Hopkins and the first funeral was for George Nasopoulos (Notes).

The First Full-time Priest - Father Nicholas Katinas - 1963-68

In 1963, the community asked the new Bishop Meletios to assign Fr. Nicholas Katinas to Madison. However, at the last second, Fr. Katinas was assigned elsewhere. Cynthia Fokakis, the church's first female board member (and later, Dane County's elected Clerk of Courts), wrote a letter to make our case to the Archbishop. As a result, Fr. Katinas was rerouted to Madison. Cynthia's talents thereafter became essential to the church office.

When Fr. Katinas arrived at Assumption, he informed the community that all Orthodox Christians would be celebrating the Liturgy together upstairs in the sanctuary. This was a remarkable decision on the part of a Greek Orthodox clergyman, and it is one of the primary reasons that our church is multi-ethnic today. Fr. Katinas was an enthusiastic priest. He founded and led student groups at the university and reached out to other Orthodox faithful. He also helped organize dinners, expand our Greek Fest and add Greek dinner dances in an effort to build a church community. He quickly made friendships with all of the leading clergy of Madison, civic leaders, and political and business leaders. He made sure that all knew there was an Orthodox community in Madison.

During Fr. Katinas' tenure, a Serbian American named Michael Boro Petrovich, a Russian and Eastern European history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the son of a Serbian Orthodox priest, joined Assumption Church and took on the role of choir director. (Interestingly, he was also one of America's top intelligence liaisons in Yugoslavia during WW-II.)

During these early years, a community picnic was held once a year at Hoyt Park. This picnic would evolve into Greek Fest, a fundraiser and celebration of Greek culture for the Madison community. Greek-style chicken, roasted lamb and shish-kebabs were prepared for sale. The Ladies Philoptochos Society baked pastries and knitted afghans to sell, raising thousands of dollars to help the church meet its operating budget. In 1968 Fr. Katinas was reassigned to Chicago Heights, IL, and would eventually move to Dallas, Texas.

Father Anthony Gergiannakis - 1968-1973

In 1968, Fr. Anthony Gergiannakis was assigned to Assumption. He was born in Crete and schooled in the prestigious Greek Orthodox seminary in Halki. While in Madison, he continued his education at the University of Wisconsin and, at the same time, led Assumption's youth program and Greek school.

Fr. Anthony came with a great deal of zeal and quickly worked on building programs for the campus community and the young people of the church, welcoming Orthodox students from all jurisdictions. He took an active interest in camps and other youth projects. He had the

ability to recognize the potential of the church president, Dr. John Mangos, who he helped prepare to become our next priest.

During Fr. Anthony's tenure, the church bought the adjacent hardware store to use for Sunday School. Then, as the church continued to grow, Fr. Anthony and Dr. Mangos led discussions on building or buying a new church. Land had been purchased on University Avenue and architectural plans were developed by parishioner and architect Bill Nahirniak. Building costs, however, were becoming exorbitant, thus no construction began.

In 1973, after five years in Madison, Fr. Anthony was transferred to Toronto, Canada. There he became Bishop Anthony and he led the development of Greek high schools and other programs. From Toronto he moved to Denver and then to San Francisco, where he became Bishop of San Francisco and later, Metropolitan Anthony of the Dardanelles.

Father John A. Mangos, MD - 1973-1975

A native of Thessaloniki, Greece, Dr. John joined the University Hospital in Madison where, as a pediatrician, he was leading the fight against cystic fibrosis. With Fr. Anthony's guidance, Dr. John became a deacon, and he eventually became Rev. Dr. John Mangos through a program called Priest with a Lay Profession that had been established by his Eminence Archbishop Iakovos.

Fr. John and Presvytera Rae had four young daughters. He worked full time at the hospital, conducted research, and read new scientific information, all while finding time to shepherd the growing flock of Assumption. He set a wonderful example of always making time for God, our church and our fellow man. In 1975 Fr. John accepted the position of chief of pediatric pulmonology at the University of Florida, and later he was chairman of pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio.

Father George Dounelis - 1975-1980

Subsequently, Fr. George Dounelis from New Jersey was assigned to Assumption. Fr. George and his Presvytera Kathryn enthusiastically ministered to the spiritual needs of our community and did so with love, patience and strength which were reflected in his guidance and pastoral care.

The First Renovation

Alex Frunza was a member of our church who had fled communist Romania. As he was escaping Romania, he promised God that if he survived, he would build a church. Alex spent time in Germany where he met his wife Martha and then went on to South Africa, New Zealand, and finally America. But he never forgot his promise to God.

While working as an architect with Torkelson Architectural firm, Alex approached Tom Frangos, Assumption Church council president, with an idea and a plan to modify and expand the church. His plan included doubling the church’s size, replacing the mechanicals, putting on a new exterior, linking the church to the annex for a Sunday School, and adding a dome, an apse and a nave.

The parish council accepted Alex’s plan and soon they had the support of the community. The parish house was sold, and parishioners pledged to a capital campaign. Greek Fest money was set aside, and the Ladies Philoptochos Society contributed. Soon there was enough to

start the renovation. The church was closed and temporarily moved services to the chapel at Edgewood College. Fr. George and Tom Frangos guided us through this process and held us together as we slowly watched our church partially demolished and then rebuilt. Parishioners worked on the project as well, helping design what we needed for the kitchen, choir and Sunday School. The parish council discussed the design of the iconostasion along with other icons with Bishop Timotheos and with David Giffey, an iconographer and parishioner. With the parish council's blessing, the parish decided to undertake David's projects, and the beautiful adornment of our church began.

Alex Frunza was instrumental in bringing down the costs by negotiating with the contractors, and they were very generous to us. Sullivan Construction Company donated approximately $22,000 for the window work. Hooper Steel Company donated the steel dome construction at a cost of $14,000. The Torkelson firm took half of its normal fee. (Mr. Torkelson became an honorary parishioner because of his generosity to our church!) The pews, icons and altar were kept and new carpeting, air conditioning, a wheelchair lift, offices, kitchen and storage were added–a beautiful mix of old and new!

In 1977 after the renovations were completed, Kent Topitzes was baptized. A few weeks later, Serge and Delilah Ledwith were married. And later**,** Bishop Timotheos consecrated the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church.

In 1980, Fr. George was reassigned to Kimisis Tis Theotokou Church in Holmdel, NJ, close to his and his wife's families.

Father Andrew Koufopoulos - 1980-1982

Fr. Andrew Koufopoulos joined us in 1980. He and Presvytera Bonnie, a burn unit nurse, made Madison their home. Father Andrew was a native Pennsylvanian. He encouraged and supported David Giffey in continuing to adorn the walls of our church with his beautiful icons.

Father Joseph Tzougros - 1982-2008

Following the departure of Fr. Andrew, Assumption was served by a string of substitute priests. One of these was Rev. Joseph Tzougros. Fr. Joe had been a choir director at St. Demetrios Church in Jamaica, NY since age 18. On his first day, he led the choir during the ordination of a priest, after which Archbishop Michael prophetically told him that he would one day be a priest! Years later, his dream of becoming a priest would be realized when the Archdiocese created a Priest with a Lay Profession Program, and he applied and was accepted. He was a Quality and Industrial Engineer for General Electric Medical Systems in Milwaukee. With the blessing of His Grace Bishop Timotheos of Chicago and Archbishop Iakovos of the Archdiocese in New York, Fr. Joe was ordained a deacon in April of 1975 and then elevated to the priesthood in August of 1977. After his ordination, he was an assistant to Fr. Angelo Kasemeotes, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, while also serving as youth director and a priest on loan to meet the needs of the diocese.

One of the parishes Fr. Joe served was Assumption, and with the blessings of then Bishop Iakovos and with Parish Council President Nick Topitzes' recommendation, he became the sixth priest of Assumption. With him came Presvytera Vasiliki and their three children: George, Joseph, and Corinna. Under Fr. Joe's leadership, our parish more than doubled in size and moved from a dues-based system to a stewardship program.

Fr. Joe was our longest serving priest, whose tenure lasted 26 years. His devotion to his congregation and natural ability as a shepherd created a dynamic community that flourished under his care. And living in Waukesha, fifty miles away, did not dampen his ability to serve us. Being the only Orthodox church in Madison, many Orthodox from other jurisdictions came to Assumption. He created an open attitude that welcomed all ethnicities as well as non-Orthodox spouses. His commitment to our parish was shared by Presvytera Vasiliki, who lovingly assisted in every aspect of his role and who served as volunteer church secretary and church bulletin editor.

The youth were very important to Fr. Joe. Many young boys served in the altar, with as many as fourteen serving during the Anastasi Service. Fr. Joe affectionately called his altar boys the "God Squad". During his time at Assumption, the YAL (Young Adult League) and GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth Association) ministries flourished. The GOYA, under Margo Schmidt's leadership and Fr. Joe's guidance, raised funds by having car washes, rummage sales, and wreath, candy and koulourakia sales to support major trips to Project Mexico, the Orthodox Spiritual Retreat Center in Wyoming, St. Basil's Academy, and to Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina to help rebuild houses with Habitat for Humanity. They also went to Tarpon Springs one year for the annual Blessing of the Waters. Locally, our youth were involved in building houses with Habitat for Humanity in Madison, volunteering as bell ringers during the Christmas season for the Salvation Army and conducting food drives for the River Food Pantry. Our GOYA also attended the annual Diocese Junior Olympics in Chicago with coach Joe Schirmer for several years. And three of our acolytes had the opportunity to visit Holy Cross Seminary in Boston. In addition, a JOY group (Junior Orthodox Youth) met for monthly recreational activities. They learned Greek dances and performed at our Greek Fest.

Through the years, along with his church responsibilities, Fr. Joe was involved with University Religious Workers, the Orthodox Christian Fellowship and was a member of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Wisconsin Clergy Syndesmos, Chicago Clergy Syndesmos, and Diocesan Council. He was the first advisor of the newly formed Orthodox Christian Women's Association of Wisconsin. And he mentored aspiring priests, guiding them as celebrants of the Divine Liturgy.

His mystical voice elevated the Divine Liturgy, which was recorded on a CD in 2003 with Psalti Leonidas Fafalios chanting, Fr. Joe's son, George Tzougros, directing a choir of over forty singers, David Giffey reading the Epistle and Ted Lulias reciting the Creed. Fr. Joe's sudden departure due to health issues shocked and saddened our community.

Father R. Michael Vanderhoef - 2008-2020

The next priest was Fr. Michael (Rick Vanderhoef) who grew up at Assumption and was the first non-Greek priest of our church. His grandparents, Ukrainian and Russian immigrants Michael and Paula Grygorenko, were very active members of our parish and his mother, Anna Vanderhoef, was a choir member. Fr. Michael was inspired by the church at a young age and was, in fact, born on Pascha in 1972. Growing up he had a passion for the church and especially for church music and eventually received a Bachelor of Music in organ performance from the University of Wisconsin followed by a Master of Arts of Library and Information Studies. He regularly played the organ and directed choirs at Lutheran churches in the Madison area during his college years. Fr. Michael also had a beautiful voice, sang in the Assumption choir and assisted Fr. Joe as a chanter and helping out with the many services during Lent. He attended Holy Cross Seminary in Brookline, MA and was ordained to the diaconate and later elevated to the priesthood in 2008.

Fr. Michael and his wife Presvytera Tricia kept our church active and welcoming to all nationalities, following in the footsteps of Fr. Joe. During this time, there was a surge of Greek families arriving in Madison and energizing the community. Fr. Michael was comfortable with the Greek traditions of our church but embraced all the traditions of our pan-Orthodox community. He began the custom of having congregants recite the Lord's Prayer in their native languages. He helped decorate the “koubouklion” with fresh flowers to represent Christ’s tomb during Holy Friday. Fr. Michael worked remotely in his position as librarian for Information Services at Holy Cross while serving as Assumption’s priest. His primary calling was to serve the Assumption community and the Madison ecumenical community as an Orthodox priest and understood this to be an offering of unconditional love. While serving as Assumption’s priest, he was the chaplain of the Association of Church Musicians, chaplain of the area hospitals and a member of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. He co-taught Byzantine Chant at the Sacred Music Institute of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese. Fr. Michael was a living example of kindness, goodness and acceptance, shining the light of Christ in all circumstances. His sudden death in January 2020 of a brain aneurysm at the age of 47 greatly grieved our community.

Fr. Christodoulos Margellos - 2020- current

The Very Reverend Archimandrite Christodoulos became our eighth priest on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 8, 2020, facing the challenge of the COVID pandemic. Fr. Chris has been a priest for over twenty years and came to us from St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Oaklawn, IL. He celebrated only one Divine Liturgy with his new congregation of Assumption on March 14th before the church was shut down during the COVID pandemic. He continued to celebrate the Divine Liturgy with the assistance of chanters Benny and Saed Akkawi, Niko Helser and Michelle Bayouth, stationed on either side of the solea. A remote camera was set up so that parishioners could celebrate the Divine Liturgy virtually on YouTube from their homes. (This practice is continued today for those who are homebound.) This remote worship lasted until the summer**.** Then a limited number of parishioners were allowed to come to church services, restricted to wearing masks and remaining six feet apart. The choir resumed singing during the Divine Liturgy in the Fall of 2021.

Fr. Chris is an enthusiastic servant of Christ and in 2023 planned to take a group of parishioners to the Holy Land. Just before their intended departure the Israeli war broke out and the trip had to be canceled. He is now planning a trip to Mt. Athos, Greece, for any male parishioners interested in visiting the monasteries there. Fr. Chris has a wealth of knowledge about church history, the Church Fathers and saints, facilitating delivery of very thoughtful sermons. Fr. Chris had begun religious study lessons and engaged parishioner Peli Galiti, PhD from UW, as a women’s spiritual leader. Our church continues to flourish under his guidance.

Fr. Chris is responding to the heightened interest in Orthodoxy of young people who are being introduced through podcasts/social media. He is instructing over forty young adults individually, guiding them into the Orthodox Christian faith. Under Fr. Chris’ guidance, a YAL (Young Adult League) and a Veterans Ministry were recently established. He has mentored Fr. Christopher Whatley, from the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition, who has been a substitute priest in Wisconsin and recently was assigned to Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Fond du Lac.

David Giffey, Iconographer

David Giffey was raised as an Irish Catholic on a farm near Fond du Lac Wisconsin. As a conscientious objector, he served in the Vietnam War as a photojournalist. After the war he

explored other religions, finding his way to Mt. Athos in 1977, where he converted to Orthodoxy and was inspired to become an iconographer. In the early 1980s, he moved to Madison and was welcomed into the Assumption community. Besides adorning the altar, sanctuary, narthex and exonarthex as our resident iconographer, David served as a Sunday School teacher, youth leader, and mentored our youth in writing essays and painting icons for both Assumption and Metropolis Oratorical Festivals. One of Assumption's youth, Michael Goodfriend, David's stepson, won the national oratorical competition in NYC the first year of the festival! David also served in the altar for numerous priests and as a chanter under the guidance of Leonidas Fafalios.

David Giffey spent over forty years painting the icons of our church. For his enormous contributions David was formally recognized by our church community with a banquet in his honor, and a beautifully bound book depicting his icons was published. His quiet, unparalleled example of life as a servant of God greatly influenced the people and youth of Assumption. He died in 2024 at the age of 82.

The Choir

Assumption Church choir was organized in 1963 and accompanied by Bessie Lulias and later Kathy Grapsas Hogan on the organ. In 1965, Michael Petrovich, a UW Russian and Eastern European History professor, volunteered to be the choir director, and brought the choir to the next level. He also brought to the choir his wife, Dushanka, and their daughters, Vera and Nina. At Assumption, while developing a strong choir, he undertook the task of arranging traditional Byzantine liturgical music into four part a cappella harmonies that were stimulating and challenging but attainable to modest church choirs. The Petrovich Liturgy was first sung in 1972 at the Greek Orthodox Diocese Choir Federation in Chicago. It was also featured at later annual conferences of the Choir Federation at Assumption in Madison in 1987 and at St. Nektarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine, IL in 2025. Dr. Petrovich also encouraged other talented musicians who had joined the choir as university students. Three of them, Nick Maragos, John Revezoulis and Peter Tiboris also composed liturgical music that is used by Orthodox choirs throughout the country today. His influence extended beyond the church and into his university classes, his WHA on-air lectures through UW Extension, his "fireside chats" with university youth about Orthodoxy, his community work with Rotary and as the director of the Madison Philharmonic Chorus.

Under the leadership of Michael Petrovich, Assumption's choir quickly became recognized as one the top Greek Orthodox choirs in the Midwest. Tragically, Dr. Petrovich was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer less than a year after his semi-retirement from the University of Wisconsin and passed away in March 1989**.** One of his many legacies was that while suffering during his illness, he took the time to mentor a new director, George Tzougros, the eldest son of Fr. Joe. Since 1988, George has led the choir in elevating worship through the beautiful Petrovich a cappella settings. Under his direction, the choir honors the rich tapestry of sacred hymns in multiple languages and features the compositions of prominent masters including Nicholas Maragos, Peter Tiboris, John Revezoulis, Tikey Zes, Nancy Takis and Kevin Lawrence. Through the last six decades, Assumption has been blessed with many talented and dedicated choir members who attend weekly practices and sing during the Divine Liturgy each Sunday and on Feast Days. Some members have been singing for as long as sixty years!

George Tzougros has contributed to the music ministry of the church locally, regionally, and at the Chicago Metropolis Federation level for more than forty years. He has held the position of President of the Diocese Choir Federation and led the combined choirs of the Diocese of

Chicago at Grant Park on the historic occasion of the visit of His All-Holiness Patriarch Demetrios. George has led the Metropolis Choir conference two additional times. He was honored with the Patriarch Athenagoras Distinguished Service Award in 2022. George currently holds the position of Executive Director of the Wisconsin Arts Board.

Chanters

Leonidas (Lenny) Fafalios has faithfully served as our primary chanter, volunteering at Assumption since 1975. He learned about chanting as a young boy in Chios, Greece and later while attending Holy Cross Theological Seminary. In 2025, Assumption formally honored Lenny Fafalios for his fifty years of dedicated service as a chanter. Through the years, others who have assisted with chanting include Nicholas Zabit, David Giffey, Peter Petropoulos, Subdeacon Wayne Blue, Patrick Kinder (Fr. Patrick), Rick Vanderhoef (Fr. Michael), John Soloninka, Panayiotis Steele (Fr. Panayiotis), Majd Akkawi (Fr. Nektarios), Benny Akkawi, Saed Akkawi, Demetri Kanellakos, George Tzougros and many others. Currently Benny and Saed Akkawi have taken a more prominent role as chanters. In 2026 Benny and Saed began teaching weekly Byzantine chanting lessons with as many as twenty participants.

The Fire

In the early hours on a morning in February of 2002, a lighted candle fell from a candle stand in the narthex and ignited a fire that caused over $20,000 damage. The fire broke windows into the sanctuary, spreading a sooty film onto all the icons including the dome icon of the Pantocrator. Peter Schoennmann of Parma Conservation, art conservation experts from Chicago, created a solution that would remove the soot without removing the glazes and colors of the icons. He and David Giffey worked methodically for countless hours, using cotton balls to wipe every square inch of the icons, and using scaffolding to remove the soot in the dome. During the restoration, services were held in the church hall and, fittingly, services were resumed in the Sanctuary on Palm Sunday. The full repair and restoration cost over $85,000.

The Second Renovation

In January of 2008, AGOC agreed it needed two additions: handicapped access and a more permanent solution to the Sunday School rooms that were originally built on a shoestring budget and tucked away in a dark corner of the building. Blackhawk Church on Whitney Way had come up for sale. The idea to purchase it was intriguing and it was brought to the community and a vote took place. The decision to move lost by nine votes. We made the commitment to stay on the East Side. It has proven to be the right decision since then, as the city's master plan was developed to gentrify East Washington Ave. In the past 25 years, it has done just that.

As a result of the vote, the decision was made to develop a renovation and expansion plan for our church that would accommodate these two objectives. A big obstacle in developing a plan was Bill’s Key Shop on the south side of our building. The parish council had approached the owner at various times to purchase it, but the owner was not cooperative. Peter Andreakos, a council member at the time, decided to give him one more chance. He developed a relationship with the owner by taking him out to breakfast on Sunday mornings and listening to his story. And by having this relationship with him, the owner softened and gladly sold AGOC his property. There were gas tanks and other toxic waste deposits on the property from former businesses. Spiros Fafalios, parishioner and environmental engineer, volunteered to oversee the toxic waste removal. Parish council members Conn Choles, Bill Margetis, Bruce

Hansen and parish council president, Maria Molzahn, led the planning, and in March 2015, a renovation plan was presented to the community.

The design was by David Ferch Architects of Madison, with Roberts Construction of Madison overseeing the project. The total quote from both the companies came to $1 million. Conn Choles and Bill Margetis led the fundraising effort to which the community pledged $600,000. The rest was mortgaged. At this time, membership was stable, but we were taking on a big financial burden. Greek Fest revenues, a two-day festival at this time, were used to make up the difference between our stewardship commitments and our expenditures (operating expenses, mortgage and our dues to the Metropolis).

In 2016 our church received a generous, posthumous donation by John Forsythe, a quiet, unassuming elderly parishioner who was not raised in Orthodoxy, but who had embraced it years earlier at the Monastery of St. Nektarios on the Island of Aegina. John taught English there and lived frugally, and in doing so, he accumulated enough savings to bequeath $1.2 million to Assumption. Part of this donation was used to pay off the mortgage and renovation of the parking lot.

The renovation was a remarkable accomplishment, with construction being monitored daily by Nia and George Choles and their son Conn Choles, assuring a smooth and seamless construction of this beautiful addition.

Greek Festival (Greek Fest +)

Our celebration of Greek culture was originally held at Hoyt Park as a church picnic with parishioners and invited guests. Chickens were baked by the Choles family at St. James Church and hauled to Hoyt Park by Marvin Peterson and Michael Grygorenko. Raffle tickets were sold by parishioners, and the grand prize was a TV from TV Lenny donated by Stanley Skoumbouris. It moved to Warner Park for several years and became a church festival which was also open to the neighboring community. Hundreds of people throughout southcentral Wisconsin came to our festival and learned words like loukoumathes, gyros, baklava, diples and kafeneion. They ate Greek food, danced Greek dances, and even learned how to speak some Greek!

Eventually, the church festival became unwieldy at Warner Park with difficulties getting food there, setting up, and dealing with the unpredictability of the weather. (It was a risky fundraiser–dependent on the weather on that single day!) In addition, we felt it should be held on our church grounds. In the mid-1980s the decision was made to move the festival to our church and renamed it Greek Fest + to display our multi-ethnic membership and our most precious possession - our church and its faith. We were now able to offer church tours and present to the public the beautiful icons that adorn the walls and ceilings of our church. In early 2000 we expanded it to a two day festival which featured a food line with the delicious lamb, chicken dinners, spanakopita, tiropitakia and Greek Salad, overseen by Telly and Beth Fatsis, gyros from the *Parthenon* restaurant, an enhanced Philoptochos bake sale, live Greek music and dancing and an agora.

For many years, Greek Fest+ was a two-day fundraiser the third weekend in July, which supplemented our church's operating budget. It was interrupted during the COVID years and in 2024 it was moved to the second Saturday of September and became a one-day festival again. We were also now fiscally secure with the endowment of John Forsythe. Greek Fest+ is an event that connects our community. It has become one of the best attended ethnic

festivals in Madison, grossing up to $75,000, thanks to all the hard work by our church's countless volunteers.

Service to our Community

We are grateful to the various members who have shared their time and talents through the years to serve on our church council. Besides attending monthly meetings, this twelve-member council ushers during all the services, manages the financial affairs of the church and the maintenance of the building, operates fundraising events such as Greek Fest+ and feast day meals, communicates the business matters of the church to the community and overseas voting by our membership for large purchases. In October 2026, a vote took place to purchase the house on 7th Street next to the parking lot for $365,000 and passed. It will be used to increase our parking lot and space for our Greek Fest +.

In addition to the church council, many other parishioners generously serve at our church. The Bucket Brigade is a group of women who clean the church weekly; other women volunteer in the office; while other parishioners focus on electrical, plumbing and structural issues. We even have members doing the never-ending upkeep and enhancement of our beautiful garden beside the church along 7th Street. Luther Gette, while he was a member of our community, took on that task, and with his departure Joe and Jane Schirmer have stepped up. The Handy Helpers, John Soloninka and Mike Smith, would for years do various maintenance jobs at parishioners' homes at no charge with the request that parishioners make a donation instead to the church. We are blessed by so many members committing so much time to the "behind the scenes" services that are a valuable contribution to our community.

Philoptochos

With membership of over sixty women, our chapter has been the Philanthropic arm of Assumption for decades; serving our church, our local community and contributing to the national and international programs of our National Philoptochos. We are a dynamic group of women, blending our rich tradition of service with modern innovation, from computerized record keeping to streamlined online ordering for our bake sale, virtual fundraisers and digital volunteer coordination.

Our annual bake sale, Baklava Plus, held the Saturday before Thanksgiving, connects our baking traditions with our ability to fundraise for our Philanthropic endeavors. The proceeds from this event fund the bulk of our national obligations and contributions to local programs as well as giving us the means to represent AGOC at national Greek Orthodox Church and Philoptochos functions, keeping us up to date on the initiatives and recommendations of the National Organization.

On Baklava Plus baking days, women come together at our church hall and kitchen to create and learn how to bake the myriads of Greek delicacies offered, such as spanakopita, keftethes, baklava, koulourakia, kourambiethes and paximathia. Others bake their preferred recipes at home. Along with baked goods from Sweet Connections Greek Bakery in Chicago to fill the gaps, and a kafeneion where patrons who come to pick up their orders can stay and have a cup of coffee and a pastry, Baklava Plus has become a one-of a-kind bake sale in the Madison area, netting over $30,000.

We also host the Vasilopita Dinner in January of which the proceeds go to St Basil's Academy and the Greek Independence Day dinner in March to support Greece and Cyprus. Our other National Obligations include International Orthodox Christian Charities, Ecumenical

Patriarchate, Orthodox Christian Prison Ministries, Holy Cross/Hellenic College, and Cancer Fund, to name a few.

Besides our national obligations, some of the local programs receiving our contributions are River Food Pantry, Dane Co. Diaper Bank, Salvation Army, Porchlight, the Goodman Center, YWCA, YMCA, Veterans for Peace, Root 2 Rise, Way Forward Resources, 6:8 Circles, UW Hearts to Hands, and Madison Reading Project. For many years we provided meals for the Men's Shelter at Grace Episcopal Church and more recently at Ronald McDonald House.

Philoptochos also serves as a beacon in our church community by hosting coffee hours after Sunday Divine Liturgy, the August 15th Name's Day Vesper Reception and the Pan-Orthodox Vespers reception during Lent; by providing confidential financial assistance to parishioners requested by our priest, preparing koliva for memorials, offering 40 Day Blessing bags, making Easter baskets for the homebound, cleaning the sanctuary and hall, and keeping the kitchen and church hall clean and well equipped.

In all our work, Philoptochos members try to remain true to Matthew 25:40 "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

The Medal of St. Paul

The medal of St. Paul is the highest honor given by the Archdiocese for **"**outstanding service and commitment to our Church of America". Five Assumption parishioners have been bestowed this award. In 2013 at Assumption, Fr. Michael presented the first ones to *Leonidas Fafalios* (Lenny), chanter and acolyte and to choir director, *George Tzougros*. In 2014 three parishioners received their awards at the Clergy-Laity Conference in Madison: *George Gialamas,* major archdiocese and Assumption benefactor for many years*; Mike Smith,* church building maintenance and repair, council member, and usher; *John Soloninka,* chanter and acolyte, choir member, council member, building maintenance, supplies management.

AHEPA

AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) Chapter #369 serving the greater Madison area, was chartered in 1974 and had a large following led by John Scocos, Ted Cappas, Les Mork, John Scocos Jr., and currently Nick Fatsis. The chapter has always contributed to the needs of the church with the most notable being monetary donations to the iconography. And every year AHEPA awards high school graduates from the parish with a check to supplement their continuing education expenses.

Greek School and Greek Independence Day Program

From 1980 to 2000, Elene Patenaude led these programs and, with the help of other mothers such as Katherine Galanos, Cathy Grapsas and Kathy Hogan, taught the children of the church the basics of the Greek language, customs and traditions. The students sang the Greek Kalanda (traditional Greek carols) at nursing homes, and every Independence Day (March 25th) they would recite Greek poems and perform Greek dances in traditional clothing. Vicky DiGiovanni and Kristi Papadopoulous taught and directed a children's Greek dance troupe wearing traditional costumes and performing at Greek Fest for many years.

Voula Kodoyianni and Thanos Tsioles led the program from 2000-2005, and from 2005-2011 various UW students taught Greek language lessons. In 2011, Ilektra Kourouri, originally from Ioanina, Greece, moved to Madison and volunteered to be the director of the Greek School

Program, offering classes to all age groups and coordinating the Greek Independence Day Program. In 2026, she resigned and Zoe Schirmer will be the next director.

Sunday School & Youth Programs

The Sunday School has had many teachers to serve children from ages 3-18 through the years. Our current Sunday School teachers are: Athena Daniolos, Maria Heide (3-4 yr olds), Susu Akkawi (K-1st grade), Niki Storck and Maria Tsioles (2nd-4th grade), Korinna Hansen and Evonne Siampos (5th & 6th grade), Benny and Saed Akkawi (7th-12th grades). Historically, Sunday School has occurred during the Divine Liturgy, but in 2018, the Sunday School starting time was changed to begin after Communion and continue through much of the coffee hour so that children can experience the Divine Liturgy. Sunday School participation has ebbed and flowed through the years. Currently at our church's 75th anniversary, there is a robust turnout of 44 students.

Today, under Fr. Christodoulos' guidance, Susu Akkawi, our Sunday School and youth director, has developed a variety of programs that correspond with the church calendar. Some of the offerings of these monthly gatherings are open to all families, including classes for making prosforo, koliva, and artoklasia; decorating gingerbread houses at Christmastime; attending pumpkin patches, snow tubing, ice skating, urban air park and family picnics; helping the community with local food drives to the River Food Pantry and volunteering at Second Harvest Food Bank. She has also arranged a children's corner in the Narthex with a library of Orthodox books for check out and some toys for the children to take a break from the pews but still be connected to the worship.

As we reflect on these past 75 years, let us remember the men and women who, through their talents and generosity and by God's Grace, have given us this gift of community, and with love and humility continue in their footsteps.

May their memories be eternal.

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Adapted by Patti Cameron from Assumption's 50th Anniversary History written by Nick Topitzes, with assistance from Lisa Beneker and many other long-standing community members of the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church.