

Parish Profile

St. John's Episcopal Church

Odessa, Texas

“And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” From the song by Peter Scholtes with additional words and music by Carolyn Arends





The Parish Profile of St. John's Episcopal Church Odessa, Texas

The Vestry Charge

In June 2008, the vestry of St. John's Episcopal Church appointed a search committee consisting of nine persons from vastly diverse backgrounds, yet bound together in the love of God, to engage in a search for a new rector. In order to furnish this search committee with tools to aid in that endeavor, we asked our diocesan deployment officer to help us gather information and ideas from people throughout our parish in order to create a parish profile and determine what calls us to love and serve the Lord in this place, what has made us who we are, and the ways we serve our neighbors and our God.

Method

We held a "Town Hall" meeting Sunday, July 27, 2008. We worked to identify just what it was about St. John's that excites us, our hopes and dreams and the goals we hope to reach while striving to achieve those hopes and dreams, and finally, what attributes we require in a rector that would enable him/her to assist and lead us in that endeavor.

No parish springs into a community full-blown without drawing nourishment and inspiration, coping mechanisms and attitudes from its environment. We knew that our search committee would need in its arsenal a "snapshot" of the city of Odessa and its surrounding communities. We considered where St. John's parishioners live, the predominant means of livelihood, the way that people here amuse themselves, how much it costs to live in this place. Perhaps one of the most important questions: what attitudes would a newcomer likely encounter once she/he moves in and begins to work to achieve parish goals?

With that in mind, we include a concise history and present-day description of the city and people of Odessa, and some important anecdotal information, both about the St. John's family and about Odessa and its surrounds.

In conclusion, we present a commentary and summary of the most-named priorities listed in answer to the following questions:

1. What excites you most about St. John's Episcopal Church?
2. What are your hopes and dreams for St. John's future?
3. What goals do you have for achieving those hopes and dreams?
4. What attributes do you want in a rector?

About Odessa, Texas

Vital Statistics

Geography

Odessa is located in Ector County, halfway between Ft. Worth and El Paso on Interstate Highway 20. The town sits in the heart of the Permian Basin, the 100,000 square-mile inland sea that existed in Permian times. The Permian Sea was unusual in that it was vast and relatively shallow and left unbelievable riches as it retreated with the earth's upheavals. Look in any direction in Ector County and you'll see pumping units. Three of the state's major geographical regions meet here – the High Plains, Trans Pecos and Edwards Plateau. These areas tend to have short grasses, sparse and usually scrubby tree growth, and limited rainfall. Odessa is approximately 2,851 feet above sea level.

Culture

Odessa has two community theaters: the Permian Playhouse, and the Globe Theatre, which is a replica of the Globe in Stratford-on-Avon; and some world-class performing artists. Odessa's Ellen Noël Art Museum is next door to the Presidential Museum, both of which sit on the southern border of the University of Texas of the Permian Basin campus. Odessa is also home to the Midland Odessa Symphony and Chorale, the Parker House Ranching Museum and the historical White Poole House.

Odessans are proud of their fine arts and their outstanding performing artists, but they are also comfortable laughing at themselves. They call their city the jackrabbit capitol of the world. For years, Odessa was home to the world's largest jackrabbit—a 10-foot fiberglass statue bought and paid for by the city—that refused to stay in one place. The rabbit was light enough that pranksters kept kidnapping it. Now, Odessa has jackrabbit statues peppered throughout the city, created by Odessa's artists.

A civic organization, the Chuckwagon Gang, a 250-strong branch of the Odessa Chamber of Commerce feeds barbecue to governors and presidents and hungry hordes (anywhere from 200 to 50,000 at a time) serving as cookin' and grinnin' ambassadors for Odessa.

Schools

There are twenty-eight public elementary, six junior high and two high schools, including several nationally recognized campuses. There are a variety of private parochial schools in both Odessa and Midland including St. John's which serves students from pre-school through grade school.

Higher Education

With a large proportion of St. John's parish either actively employed as educators or coming from professional and educational backgrounds, it's a given that educational opportunities would be of interest to prospects drawn to affiliate with this parish. Odessa offers a wide range of academic programs through its community-based Odessa College, the four-year University of Texas of the Permian Basin, and Texas Tech's University Health Sciences Center. All three enliven and enrich the entire region, through ongoing performing arts, fine art exhibits, health care fairs and community outreach projects.

Especially noteworthy is the ongoing John Ben Shepherd leadership Institute lecture series, which is free to the public. Newsmakers, lawmakers, academic giants and other world policy movers and shakers discuss their ideas and answer questions from the state in the UTPB auditorium.

Recreation

Whether rock bands or rock collecting, skeet shooting or ice skating, spectator sports or solitary hiking, there's hardly a day on the calendar when you can't find some fascinating pastime going on in the Permian Basin. Learn to cook or learn to sing. Spend a day hidden from the world at the most unremarkable landmark imaginable, Odessa's meteor crater, or make your way to Dos Amigos' and listen to the cowhands talk about riding bulls. Odessa also has a professional hockey, in-door football, baseball, and soccer teams.

The History of St. John's Episcopal Church

In 1911, the Episcopalians conducted their first official liturgy in Odessa's Methodist church, and in 1925, Episcopalians began to meet regularly, with a priest coming from Big Spring sixty-five miles away. Mission status was granted in 1939, and the Odessans brought in a church from McCamey, an hour's drive south, which they placed on property donated by Mr. and Mrs. L.E. Lasseter. To this day, an occasional McCamey old-timer will mention that those Odessa Episcopalians stole McCamey's church.

The secondhand church must have worked well, because in the late 1940s, the parish found another secondhand building, an old U.S. Army airfield barracks from the West Texas town of Pyote, and used it for a parish hall and Sunday school rooms.

In 1950, St. John's was granted parish status by the North Texas Missionary District. It would be 1958 before the Episcopal Diocese of Northwest Texas was approved by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

Meanwhile, the St. John's parishioners were building a community of worshippers bent on betterment. They built a bigger, better, parish hall in 1953, and on Christmas Eve, 1954, the new church was dedicated by St. John's second rector, the Rev. Lawrence Berry. St. John's Episcopal Day School was begun on lots donated by the Lasseters in 1955.

The next few decades saw steady growth in education and outreach. The day school added a first grade.

As Odessa grew eastward St. John's tight-knit little parish grew and amoeba-like, began to change in form and size. Land was bought for another church building on Odessa's east side, and St. John's initiated a one-parish, two-church concept to accommodate the needs of parishioners living on the other side of town. St. Barnabas Chapel was dedicated in 1973.

St. John's parish outreach continued to grow in response to the changing needs of a maturing parish. The Seabury Retirement Center was opened in 1984. St. John's Episcopal School had grown to serve pre-kindergarten through sixth grades under the prestigious Carden curriculum.

St. John's celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1989, but lost its long-time rector, Donald Hungerford, who retired at the end of the year.

The Rev. C. E. McIntyre stepped in as interim rector until the search committee found a new rector a year later.

In 1992, regular Sunday services were discontinued; yet the outreach of St. John's pantry continued.

The Rev. Leslie Gregory and the parish of St. John's initiated a women's prison ministry. In response to the need for Hispanic Episcopal services, St. John's Church began the first regular Sunday liturgy in Spanish of the Diocese of Northwest Texas.

Meanwhile, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church was officially recognized as an independent entity.

In 1996, St. John's called the Rev. Laura Sellner, and St. John's once again began to celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday in English, along with the Spanish language services, which would continue to share the church until the Mission of San Miguel built its church house.



Our Worship

St. John's celebrates Holy Communion every Sunday, with Holy Communion and Healing services on Thursdays at noon. There's a men's prayer breakfast one Saturday each month, and Wednesday Lenten soup suppers.

For those searching for a place where they can explore their spirituality without having to pass a belief test, there is no better opportunity than the late night Christmas Eve service, known to Episcopalians as "Midnight Mass." It's sensory and holy, smoky and mystical, filled with beautiful music and flickering candlelight and a peace that can fill your soul to overflowing. Our moving service draws guests of many faiths from across the community.

For families with young children or who for one reason or another would prefer an earlier time, the early evening Christmas Eve Eucharist will be just as heart-melting and lovely—with kids reenacting that holy moment in a more convincing fashion than professional actors ever could.

The Episcopal Church's next greatest attraction (after its friendly and intellectual approach) is arguably its appeal to the senses, and St. John's parish never misses a chance to teach our faith through total immersion in the story.

Whether it's the ashes on our foreheads at Ash Wednesday, or the palm leaves we wave as we march around the church to begin Holy Week, the anguish at the foot washing and stripping of the altar, or everyday acts of worship—kneeling and standing, genuflecting and bowing, we know in a very physical way that we are people loved by God.

St. John's does them all--the St. Francis Day Blessing of the Animals, EYC lock-ins and Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Holy Name, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, July 4th, and Thanksgiving Day, and we reinforce these lessons of God's love in the children's daily Chapel services at St. John's Episcopal School.



Our Buildings

Episcopalians tend to hang onto things, don't they? You walk into an Episcopal Church or chapel and you're likely to be struck with that peculiar atmosphere that hangs around much-prayed-in buildings. You get the feeling that the presence of the Lord really is in that place, as tangible as old photos, bulletins, altar hangings, prayer book language.

Perhaps that's why, when it comes to our structures, we are so deliberate. We want them to be beautiful, and sturdy, and welcoming, not only to the kids learning how to serve as acolytes, but to the troubled looking for solace, to the stranger looking for a home, to the long disaffected who have come back seeking forgiveness and direction as they start to change their lives.

St. John's buildings give you a sense of that welcome, whether you first enter the nave, remodeled in 2005, where we hold most liturgical services, or the completely new and utterly lovely St. Francis Chapel, situated on the northern edge of the narthex, where you walk in past the columbarium housing the cremains of St. John's families and a sitting statue representing Jesus, while light streams through a stained glass mural of St. Francis blessing animals. In true Episcopalian fashion, nothing is wasted, yet the overall atmosphere is warm and welcoming, serene and restful, always sending out the message to come into this holy place with the full assurance that you may lay down your burdens, rest and pray. That's what we're here for.



Chime Choir practice



Adults have Sunday School discussions too.



Valentine's Day dollar dessert auction action picks up—Winner is the last one to hand over a dollar bill.



Coffee Hour is enjoyed by the Parish following worship every Sunday

St. John's Episcopal School

St. John's Episcopal School teaches the Carden Curriculum of academic study and accommodates children in pre-K through grade six, under the tutelage and care of thirty faculty/staff members.

While we are justifiably pleased at the role the school's academic standards play in preparing our youngsters to become exemplary community leaders of the future, it should be noted that St. John's Episcopal School is known throughout the community as just that—a parochial school with a firm Episcopal underpinning.



St. John's children enjoy daily chapel.



Fr. McIntyre teaches



Our Ministry and Outreach

St. John's includes very active Acolyte, Eucharistic, Usher, Music, Adult Sunday school and Youth ministries.

Parish Food Pantry

Our twice-monthly distribution of food to low-income individuals and families has been going on since 1984. Our pantry is supplied with basics from the West Texas Food Bank, with necessities such as fresh milk and bread purchased locally. We issue appeals regularly for toothpaste and toothbrushes, soap and shampoo. Our clientele is overwhelmingly Hispanic, elderly and too often handicapped through age-related symptoms.

In addition to the twice-monthly regular food distribution, St. John's Parish also distributes Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets.

Seabury Center

St. John's Lay Eucharistic Ministers, ECW, Episcopal Youth Group and other pastoral volunteers strive to make the older adults at the Seabury Center the focus of special prayers and volunteer efforts. Each year the Seabury residents' names, clothing sizes and clothing wishes are typed on cards and St. John's parishioners choose residents to buy and wrap Christmas gifts for. Although this festive holiday gets the most publicity, the Seabury residents look forward throughout the year to visits from St. John's volunteers, who bring love and laughter, and who listen as well as pray with these older adults who mean so much to us.

What Excites Us Most About St. John's?

Our small, very diverse family

At our town meeting, the overwhelming response was the way we embrace the diversity of our people. In such a small parish, it would be easy to split up in cliques and factions, but through the miracle of our love for each other and our commonsense acceptance of reality, this seldom happens.

We are family. We are black and brown and white, ranging in age from infants to near-centenarians.



We are family, with memories of all sorts of occasions—baptisms, Saturday rehearsals, Sandwiching in UTO appeals and ushering and greeting parishioners on Sundays.

Our Hopes and Dreams

We would like to attract more young families to St. John's—young families with new ideas, new challenges, and perhaps new ways of meeting those new challenges. This desire was voiced loudly by our older adults at the meeting.

We would like to have a youth minister and a music minister and we want to schedule more activities that bring the entire parish together. We want to continue our outreach to the Seabury Center ministry, and, in general, to our older adults, many of whom we can still depend on for inspiration and lively conversation, but who physically can no longer make it to church. St. John's youth has been active in doing yard work and house repairs for older St. John's adults.

Our New Parish Rector will be—

We want a rector now! One who will possess a sense of humor and will understand and delight in our own skewed sense of humor. The new rector will be a leader, and a deep listener with an open mind, enthusiasm and an ability to keep confidences. Good management skills are also important. This rector won't hesitate to ask for help, or to be generous in offering help.

They will also have experience with youth ministries, pastoral ministry, deep convictions and can nevertheless be flexible and tolerant. They will delegate authority without losing site of goals or responsibility.

Finally, we hope our new rector will be a good preacher, as well as a good practitioner of that preaching.

These, then, are our dreams. This is our prayer.