

The Story of St. George Eastern Orthodox Church in Kearney, Nebr. 1953

By Very Rev. Nicholas A. Nahas

*Transcribed as handwritten by Fr. Nahas
by Marci Duryea, 2000*

Thanks are due to Fr. Paul Hodge at St. George, Kearney, for his help in editing.

Editorial notes are in parentheses (). For clarity, corrections have been made to some original misspellings; they are enclosed in brackets []. Other misspellings have been left but are also in brackets because meaning is elusive. And finally, many of the spelling inconsistencies can be attributed to Father Nahas' grasp of English.

1903 – 1953

I father Nicholas A. Nahas Dean of St. George Eastern Catholic Orthodox Church, do here by write down the History of this Church, as I did optain, the stories from many older man and woman, so it may be some service to thos who may come as active and enterested in said Church.

Some time about 1898 to 1903 when the City of Kearney Nebr. was in good boom, as it was thought by many of the Nebraskan to be the Capital City for the state. Many newly emmegrat to U.S.A. from Syria made their way to Kearney, where most of them was farmers or work to farmers, as most of them had come from farming [areas] in Lebanon or Syria, know by names, Fih El Koura, Dir Mimas Marjayoun, Fourzel, and Tripoli.

It was said more then fourty Orthodox families and twenty [Melkite] Catholic, whom in their beleave are similar to thos of [Orthodoxy], this group of good Christian felt the need of a Church where they can practese their faith in their own [being] wish.

By that time only three Syrian Orthodox Churches were in U.S. New York, Toledo and Boston, the father from Toledo Ohio by name [Archimandrite Meletios Kazoum], came to Omaha on a visit, he was invited to Kearney by Mr. Gabreal Shada to Christ[en] many children.

In his coming and tiching, the folks want for a Church grow and was well planted in theirs hearts, he serve two Sunday in Cotton Mills School, which then was close and for sale.

In April 1903 they organize the St. George Society and raise {125.00} One Hundred and Twenty Five Dollars and bought said school, had move it to the corner of 14th Street and 3rd Ave. near by the Court house, littel by littel, the

School was turned to a Church. So the Kearney Church became the fourth in America. (*Actually the fifth; see below.*)

Father Nicholas Yanney [Ordination]

By that time, [Archimandrite Raphael Hawaweeny] was the head of the Syrian branch of the Eastern Catholic Orthodox Church in North America, which then a Missionary Only. They ask him to send them a priest. He told them, they may elect one of them. Nicholas Yanney was then the most capable and well posted in his [Orthodoxy] and well [liked] by all.

They elect him to be ordained as their priest and he send to New York to learn more about be ordained.

(*At this point in his journal, Fr. Nahas pasted an article from the Kearney Hub, from 6 March 1953*):

St. George Orthodox Church To Note Golden Anniversary

In the year 1903 a small group of people immigrated from the Oriental land of Syria to America, seeking freedom of worship. Settling together in the city of Kearney, they founded the St. George Orthodox Church and organized an Orthodox Society. A total of \$125 in donations was received at the first gathering.

With continuous donations this small group raised enough money to purchase the Cottonmill School moved it to 14th Street and 3rd Avenue, and remodeled it into the first Orthodox Church in Nebraska, and the second Syrian Orthodox Church in the United States. (*Factually incorrect; St. George, Kearney was the fifth Syrian Orthodox Church in the U.S.*)

Devoting much of their time and effort to the promotion of the church were Reverend Nicola Yanney, John A. Shada and brothers, Gabriel and Moses, Mike Hayek, George Abood and brother Amen Abood.

(*Fr. Nahas here adds a handwritten note:*) "Beside those names in the Hub there was also Abraham Shada, [Charlie] W. Shada, Abood George Abood, [Charlie] Abood, Ferris BoLafy, Simon Yanney, Elias Jagger, Abdo [Janho], and his brother Mitry John Shwery, Abraham Milham, as well Abraham Matta, Beshara Shamas also Diaybas, Albert Simon, George Yanney, Saloom Kouri, George Basil, Salama Kouri, Shakoura Toma."

In 1917 the church was moved to the present location of the St. George Orthodox Church, 15th Street and Avenue G. Later, in 1923 the building was sold for a private home and the erection of the present church was begun.

Father Nicola Yanney was ord[ain]ed as the second priest of a Syrian Orthodox Church in the United States of America by Bishop [Raphael Hawaweeny]. He served as the first priest of the Kearney congregation until his death in 1918.

Reverend Elias Hammaty succeeded Reverend Yanney and served until 1922. Michael Yanney, nephew of Reverend Nicola Yanney, was then ordained

and served the congregation several years until he was ordered to Sioux City, Iowa's Orthodox Church. Reverend Thomas Aboudley followed by several temporary priests served from Reverend Yanney's time until our present priest Very Reverend Archpriest Nicholas A. Nahas, of Beaumont, Texas. [Reverend] Nahas has served the congregation faithfully for seven years. Many improvements to the church have been made under his guidance.

The St. George Orthodox Men's League functions today under the following officers: Vernon G. Yanney, president; Roy C. Abood, vice-president; Eli George Shada of Ansley, treasurer; and George Abraham, secretary. Members of the Board of Trustees are: Nicholas J. Shada and William George of Lexington; Bill Abood, John W. Shada, Carl Deeb, Camel Abood of Kearney; George W. Shada, Ansley; John Jacob, Willow Island; and Mike Shada, McCook.

The Women's Society of the church has Elvena M. Atkins, president; Helen Shada, vice president; Mary Yanney, secretary; and Lily S. Shada of Ansley, treasurer.

For the past several months the League and the Society have been making plans for the celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the church, to be held April 19th, 1953.

The public is invited and welcomed to visit the church any time they desire during the morning and afternoon of April 19. A morning church service will be held at 10:30 a.m. at which time several guest clergymen will assist Father Nahas in the mass. * *End of Kearney Hub article* *

Time and Date

In December 1903 the School was bought and kept there for a while, then by Jan or Febr 1904 was moved to corner 14th and 3rd ave. I was not able to find when Father Yanney was ordained, But on the first Page of this Book where he himself use this as Wedding Record it show he was [practicing] his orders on or before July 5 - 1904.

The Church was not in near by Syrian homes whom most of them was resedent on the South East part of the City – there fore it was not handy in the Freez wather, snow or rain to come to the Church, it was then when Abraham Kouri visited Kearney and put the idea, that the Church should be move where it will be more convenient.

Father Nicholas Yanney serve very faithfully his Church and Congregation till his death in Nov. 1918. (*He died during the Spanish Influenza pandemic at the end of World War I.*)

Then father Elias Hamati from Boston Mass. was ordaned and send to Kearney, he serve here till 1922 – by then father Michael M. Yanney a nephew to father Nicholas Yanney took charch of the post, till he was moved to Soux City Iowa.

On his days the old Church was sold to a home now on the corner of 11th St. and Ave. H. and the present Church was build, mostly by good faithfull Christians and Orthodox hands, such as thos:

Simon A. Simon, Elias A. Shada, [Charlie] G. Shada, Nicholas Gabreal and his sons, E.K. Yanney, Fred and George Malooly, [Charlie] George and his brothers Simon and Sam, Mousa Saada, Nicholas Saada.

The fathers who had serve in Kearney Church

- 1 Nicholas Yanney, of Fih El Koura
- 2 Elias Hamaty, of Afas Deek El Koura
- 3 John Saba, s[h]ort time, of Fih El Koura
- 4 Micheal M. Yanney of Fih El Koura
- 5 Athenasios Rabbay of Batroun El Koura
- 6 Thomas Boudely of Eitha El Foukas
- 7 Melteois Shalhoob of Douma
- 8 Nicholas Hussan of Eitha El Foukas
- 9 Mike Deebea, short time, of [Rachaia] El Wady
- 10 Nicholas A. Nahas of Tripoli Lebanon
Whom he came here by ordor of Most Rev. Metropolit Antony Bashir on Dec 7 – 1946, He is the writer of this History.

I wish to give the [credit] as I had been told by many to
Father Nicholas Yanney as founder
Father Michael M. Yanney as builder
Father Thomas Boudely for the Basement work

School and other activity

In Jan 26 – 1919 the first Sunday school was organize under the lea[de]rship of Simon A. Simon, [Rase] George, Mary Hayek, Mike M. Yanney (father Yanney now) and many other good Christian in a book with Miss Mary Hayek it show the attending number run to 73 young men and women, where we can read that the average in come from fees run to 312.00 a year and the Church collecting run between 30 to 40 Dollar a Sunday.

By 1930 the Church was still under debt of some like 1862.00 and we can read that the Church was free from debts in 1932. Where as – we read that the Ladies Society was organize on the 3rd day of Jan 1916 with Jim Joseph {Yacoub Zarif} [mother] presedent. As also we can find that the [pews] or seats was bought from the Episcobel Church in July 1926 but never finish payment on till 1927.

Father Nahas Days

March 1946, I had been thirty years in the service so I ask his Grace Metropolitan Antony Bashir to let me go on retirement, from St. George Church in Houston Texas. He did, and went on long vocation to the West Coast, and upon my return to my home 2305 Laurel Ave Beaumont Texas, was a letter from his Grace said – he is in need my service, either in Canton Ohio, or in Kearney at least for the Holy Days 1946-1947. I choose Kearney because small congregation at last directive.

Arrived in Kearney Dec first 1946 found the Church in need of much decoration, and many things to be done.

First of all I trust in God to help us to make the [Iconostasis] as it should be, with God help and believer support, we decorated it with all its needs of very beautiful Pictures [Icons] which cost about Eighteen Hundreds dollars, then we found the Roof to be rebuilt that cost 475.00, after that in 1948 we want [an] for the Kitchen, including stove, a new [mouren] sink was installed that cost 310.00. In 1949-1950 a new gas system was put with 1225.00.

By then we found if we close the Balcony and [Wall] it up to the ceiling we will save much heat we done so and this cost 310.00.

In this days 1953 the Church will celebrate the Golden Anniversary, we are now fixing much of repairs and a new door to the front this will run up to 400 or 500 dollars.

I feel it is my duty to witness, that the same few families in Kearney and those in nearby are really good to their Church, to that I wish you interested to read on each of the Pictures the name of the donator.

In January 1953 We decide to celebrate our Church Golden Anniversary in Memorial of those who had put their shoulder together to build a Church with all their poor and need to support their family – yet they felt a need for a Church.

May God rest their souls in his Heaven when we agree to have the [Celebration] on April 19 - 1953.

(St. George Eastern Orthodox Church of Kearney, Nebraska celebrated its centennial year in 2003.)