

44. Pruth

Holy Ascension Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The Prut River in Western Ukraine originates at the foot of Mount Hoverlia—the highest mountain in the Ukrainian Carpathians—and flows 240 kilometers through southern Galicia and Bukovyna before joining the lower Danube near its Black Sea estuary. The river eventually serves as Ukraine’s western border with Romania and Moldova. Holy Ascension Church is located in the Pruth School District, established in 1909 by area pioneers. In some 1950s correspondence with the Consistory, the congregation was referred to as “New Pruth” to distinguish it from the nearby Luzan church, also within the former Pruth School District.

The founders of Holy Ascension Church were pro-Ukrainian members of St. Dymytria Church, then under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Mission. As early as 1920, Ukrainophile members of the Luzan Church invited Father Dmytro Stratychuk to celebrate a liturgy in their sanctuary. However, the majority opposed having a priest from the newly organized Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOC), leading to a split within the community between the nationally conscious Bukovynian farmers and those influenced by the Russophile ideology promoted by the Russian Orthodox clergy.

On February 12, 1921, Rev. Lazar Gherman and Rev. I. Kusey celebrated a Divine Liturgy at the one-room Pruth schoolhouse after being barred from using St. Dymytria Church by pro-Russian Orthodox members. Subsequently, Fr. Kusey held occasional services at the homes of UGOC sympathizers, gradually strengthening the Ukrainian Orthodox presence at the expense of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1930, Fr. Kusey’s successor, Fr. I. Mayba, celebrated two Divine Liturgies in the Pruth district, demonstrating that divisions within the St. Dymytria congregation persisted.



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On February 13, 1931, forty-two residents of the Pruth district—not all of whom were members of St. Dymytria Church—initiated the formation of a Ukrainian Orthodox congregation at a meeting held at the Yuri Fedkovych National Home (locally known as Pruth Hall). This hall served as the congregation's worship space until a dedicated church could be constructed.

Land for the church, situated kitty-corner from the Pruth Hall, was purchased from William Prosteby with funds from donations, membership fees, and loans. Steve and Mary Samoil, who began teaching at Pruth School in 1929 and were active in the Fedkovych Society (Steve as President and Mary as a play director), played key roles in fundraising and membership drives. By August 1931, enough funds had been raised to begin construction in late summer. Volunteers worked under the direction of head carpenter Ivan Mnoholitny, with members earning \$1.50 credit per day towards their membership by donating labor.

Construction paused in November due to cold weather but resumed early the following year. An impressive cruciform structure took shape, featuring a large central dome, two small domes over the narthex and sanctuary, and twin towers flanking the facade, each topped with similarly sized domes. The first service, led by Fr. D. Stratyчук, was held in May 1932, even as interior work continued. The sanctuary was completed in June, and Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich consecrated the church on Ascension Day. That same weekend, August 6-7, 1932, the Second All-Alberta Convention of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church convened, attracting some 400 delegates and faithful.

Growth and Challenges

At its inception, the congregation had just seven member families and eighteen sympathizers, though membership later grew to twenty-seven families. In 1936, Rev. I. Hykawy reported that Pruth was among the better-off congregations in Depression-era Alberta.

However, by 1940, formal membership had declined to eight families due to rural depopulation and economic hardship. This decline likely explains why the church's interior was never elaborately decorated. The sanctuary was simply walled off and adorned with icons to create an icon screen, and the church's walls and ceiling were left largely unornamented—though at one time, stars decorated the ceiling (since painted over). To this day, the church does not have electrical power.

In 1952, the congregation reported holding five services with six paid members, and in 1953, six services were held despite membership declining to four. Nevertheless, the faithful persevered.

In 1982, Holy Ascension Church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a Divine Liturgy officiated by Reverends S. Semotiuk and J. Puk. A plaque honoring the founding members was blessed, with Mrs. Rachel Skakun and Mrs. William Prosteby in attendance. By 1990, the congregation was celebrating eight liturgies annually.



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Priests

I. Kusey (1922-1928)
I. Mayba (1928-1932)
D. Stratyчук (1932-1936)
T. Horbay (1936)
I. Hykawy (1936-1938)
L. Berezitsky (1938-1941)
S. Symchych (1941-1943)
A. Chrustawka (1943-1944)
M. Fyk (1944-1945)
H. Wasyliw (1945-1950)
I. Triska (1950-1955)
D. Luchak (1955-1957)
S. Stoliarchuk (1957-1963)
I. Hykawy (1963-1969)
O. Olekshy (1969-1971)
P. Hnatiw (1971-1974)
S. Semotiuk (1974-1977)
S. Soroka (1970-1980)
P. Bodnar (1980-1982)
M. Bowa (1982-1984)
O. Hudema (1984-1988)
J. Puk (August 1988-1994)
J. Plewa (1994-?)
B. Ambrosie (2003-present)

Location and Feast Day

South of Willingdon, west of Secondary Highway 857 and south of Secondary Highway 657 at NW 11-55-15 W4, County of Two Hills. *GPS Coordinates:* 53.744090, -112.133138 | Their *Feast Day* is celebrated on the Thursday of the fifth week after Easter.

Founding Members

William Kalancha
Kassian Skakun
John Orlesky

Cemetery

Located just east of the church at cemetery coordinates: 53.744106, -112.121212



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