



# 65. Willingdon

## Holy Spirit Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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The Holy Spirit Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Willingdon traces its origins to the early years of the village, which was established in 1928 with the arrival of the railway. Many of the village's residents were devout Bukovynians, and the need for a church became increasingly evident. On December 17, 1932, a meeting was held to elect a church board and formally establish the congregation. That evening, 29 attendees paid 25 cents each to become official members.

Initially, services were held in private homes or at Willingdon School. By 1935, liturgies were being celebrated there monthly. Due to the economic hardship of the Great Depression, funds were limited, but on December 17, 1936, the congregation purchased a lot for a church. On February 21, 1937, a special meeting was held to initiate the collection of building materials. That winter, members began hauling wood to the site using horse-drawn sleighs from sawmills north of the village. However, progress was slow, as indicated by an exchange of letters in August 1937 between the congregation's secretary, S. Samoil, and the Consistory.

### Struggles and Growth

During this period, the shortage of clergy posed significant challenges. Services were conducted from Vegreville, which proved difficult, especially in winter when road travel was nearly impossible. A Sunday liturgy required a four-day commitment from the priest due to train schedules, and arranging last-minute services for funerals was nearly unfeasible. The congregation pleaded for a dedicated priest, even securing a house for lease in mid-August 1937, urgently requesting a decision from the Consistory.

While the Consistory commended the congregation's initiative, it noted that Willingdon did not yet have a church. Encouraged by this response, members wrote again in January 1938, requesting building plans. They were advised to contact Ivan Svarich in Edmonton. Construction of the church foundation finally began on November 3, 1938, under the supervision of Ivan Mnoholitny, who was contracted to oversee the sanctuary's construction. Fundraising efforts were led by the Natalia Kobrynska Branch of the Ukrainian Women's Association of Canada.

The completed cruciform church featured a large central dome, smaller domes over the apse and narthex, and two small domes on the towers flanking the façade. Fr. I. Hykawy celebrated the first liturgy in the new church, which was formally consecrated in July 1939 during an episcopal visitation by Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich on Pentecost Sunday.

### Securing a Resident Priest

Determined to establish permanent pastoral care, the congregation purchased a home in the village on April 8, 1943, to serve as a rectory. This investment benefited surrounding congregations as well. Fr. Symchych was relocated to Willingdon shortly afterward, and in August 1943, the Consistory hosted a regional conference attended by Archbishop Ioan Theodorovich. However, Fr. Symchych was soon reassigned as a chaplain in the Canadian Army. Holy Spirit Church began experiencing a decline in membership and services.





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In March 1947, the congregation requested Fr. Symchych's return, but he had chosen to continue his pastoral work in Vancouver. By 1951, concerns were raised about declining youth participation, similar to trends at Sts. Peter and Paul Church in nearby Andrew. The situation improved with the appointment of the newly ordained Fr. Dmytro Luchak, whose energy revitalized the congregation. By 1953, Holy Spirit Church reported 25 members, 15 sympathizers, and 15 liturgies that year. That summer, on July 24, they hosted a visitation by Metropolitan Ilarion, marked by an evening prayer service.

With the support of Dobrodiika Jane Luchak, the congregation introduced new cultural and educational programs, enhancing both its appeal and community involvement. In March 1955, the Edmonton Journal featured an article on a dramatic group from Holy Spirit Church performing the three-act play *Youth Will Ne'er Return* in Vilna, starring Fr. and Dobrodiika Luchak. At the time, the church school and *Ridna Shkola* (Native School) held weekly classes attended by 40 students.

### Challenges and Adaptation

When the Consistory attempted to transfer Fr. Luchak to Vegreville in 1955, the congregation protested, delaying the move for two years. Even after his departure, Holy Spirit continued thriving. By 1960, membership had grown to 60 families (160 individuals), with 40 children in church school and 24 enrolled in Ukrainian school.

However, the congregation lacked a cemetery, relying on members to make their own burial arrangements. In the late 1950s, Holy Spirit Church negotiated with St. Mary the Protectress in Borowich to share their cemetery. In 1958, an agreement was reached, requiring an annual fee of \$25 for access. However, unexpected complications arose, prompting the Consistory's head, Fr. Semen

Sawchuk, to intervene in October 1959 and resolve the matter.

By 1961, membership declined to 48 paid members. The congregation requested reduced budget allocations, citing overdue membership fees. Monthly liturgies continued, but maintaining a resident priest became increasingly difficult. In 1964, the church celebrated its 25th anniversary, but by 1968, membership had fallen to 15, stabilizing at this level for several years.

Fr. Ivan Hykawy served as resident priest from 1963–1969, despite his family remaining in Vancouver. In 1967, he wrote to the Consistory expressing concern over prolonged separation from his family, but he remained in Willingdon until relieved in 1969.

### Final Years and Relocation

By the late 1970s, the congregation had dwindled to a dozen aging members. In 1978, the Willingdon Parochial Committee requested approval to purchase the rectory. The church remained part of a regional parish district but eventually lost its resident priest due to financial constraints and a clergy shortage. In 1983, long-time member Dmytro Karbashewsky warned the Consistory that rival sects and the Russian Orthodox mission posed a growing threat to Ukrainian Orthodox churches in the area.

Despite these challenges, Holy Spirit Church continued holding periodic services into the 1990s. However, maintaining the sanctuary with limited funds and volunteers became increasingly difficult. As demolition loomed, an opportunity arose that preserved the church's legacy.

All Saints Ukrainian Orthodox Church in St. Paul had been conducting services in a cultural complex, intending to build a separate church. Recognizing financial limitations, they opted to purchase and relocate Holy Spirit

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Church instead. On March 26–27, 2004, the church was carefully transported to St. Paul, traveling at a maximum speed of 35 km/h. Power lines had to be temporarily lowered along the route, and additional height adjustments were made to clear the North Saskatchewan River bridge. Once placed on its new foundation, the church was linked to the cultural complex with a covered walkway, making winter access easier.

On September 18, 2004, Holy Spirit Church was rededicated and re-blessed at a hierarchical liturgy led by Archbishop John. Today, it stands as a testament to the enduring faith and resilience of Alberta’s Ukrainian Orthodox pioneers.

## Priests

**Priests:** (1932–2000) Multiple priests served, including:

- Fr. D. Stratyчук
- Fr. I. Hykawy
- Fr. S. Symchych
- Fr. D. Luchak and others



## Cemetery

Members used the Borowich / Boriwtzi churchyard cemetery after 1959, as Holy Spirit Church never established its own burial ground. (See photo next page).

## Location and Feast Day

Formerly in the Village of Willingdon, at the southwest corner of 51 Street and 53 Avenue, County of Two Hills. *GPS Coordinates:* 53.830698, -112.118117 | Their *Feast Day* is the Monday after Pentecost (Green Holidays).

## Founding Members

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|---------------|---------------|
| Dr. Boykowich | W. Lupul      |
| N. Babiuk     | W. Pidruchney |
| P. Demchuk    | N. Radesh     |
| Dr. Goresky   | J. Sembaliuk  |
| J. Kuzuk      | N. Shewchuk   |



The former *Holy Spirit Church* from Willingdon is now *All Saints* in St. Paul, Alberta.



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The original Holy Spirit church at its current location in St. Paul.



The cemetery at the Borowich / Borowtzi church.