Community initiative has always played a major role in the continuing development of St. Christopher Parish. On February 26, 1922, Roy Swillum, Raphael Griffin and Frank Kosowski visited the Franciscan Fathers at the St. Roch Friary in Oak Forest, Ill., to discuss the feasibility of starting a new parish. They represented Catholic families living in the Midlothian district who found it difficult to attend Mass in Blue Island or Oak Forest and desired a religious education for their children. The group felt positive that they could build and support a church.

Subsequently, Archbishop George W. Mundelein created the parish of St. Christopher and placed it in the hands of the Franciscan Fathers on March 24, 1922. The Very Reverend Martin Strub, OFM. Provincial of the Sacred Heart Province designated Rev. Frances S. Eckholt OFM as the first pastor.

During the next month, the new parish rented the Community Hall on the second floor of the Woerheide building, 147th and Kolin for $10.00 a month. Sam Wilson's General Store, formerly Peterman's, occupied the ground floor. Originally, Woerheide farm workers lived in the building. Parishioners constructed a collapsible altar and the Franciscan Fathers loaned the parish a Chaplain's Mass-kit. Wooden benches, without back rests or kneelers, provided seats for 80 people.

Fr. Francis celebrated the first Mass on April 23, 1922. The congregation, 32 adults and 18 children, contributed $40.00 to the collection. Approximately 30 families, totaling 73 adults and 58 children, comprised the first parishioners.

Ten acres of land on the north side of 147th Street, two blocks west of Crawford, were purchased on August 23 from William J. Shedd. The Circle A Products Company began erecting a church in the third week of January 1923. During the next month, five men completed the 60 ft. x 30 ft. building, with ten foot outer walls and an open ceiling.
On March 4, 1923, Fr. Francis blessed the new church and offered the first Mass. The first person to receive Holy Communion was Mrs. Mary Daly of Oak Forest, who had donated the altar. The solemn dedication of the church occurred on June 17, 1923. Twenty decorated cars paraded down 147th Street to meet Archbishop George Mundelein at Western Avenue and escort him to the ceremony. Fr. Francis began religious education classes for 18 children of various ages, the majority of them preparing for their First Holy Communion.

The next spring work begun on a two-story structure, designed by architect Andrew Brisch, Sr. It consisted of a four room school downstairs and a convent upstairs. The Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Family, of Dubuque, IA, agreed to teach the initial enrollment of 60 pupils.

Four nuns, Sister Rosina Sudmeier, Superior, and Sisters Gerard Huckels, Cecil Roling and Eva Cox, opened two classrooms of the new school on September 3, 1924. Bishop Edward Hovan dedicated the school on Columbus Day. When it became necessary in November to use an additional classroom, Sister Emelia Pottebaum joined the faculty. The class of 1925 graduated Virginia Walsh, Daniel LaFond and Steve Bauer.
Rev. Gratian Kehrig, OFM became pastor in 1929. He envisioned a self-supporting parish. Despite the depression, the parish managed to pay the special assessments on the church property and $10,000 towards its debt. In 1931, Fr. Gratian initiated the custom of blessing cars in commemoration of St. Christopher. Vehicles parked on the church lawn for the blessing.

On the morning of September 17, 1935, a short circuit in the electrical wiring near the vestibule caused a fire, greatly damaging the church. The flames spread along the ceiling to the sanctuary, where the altar cloths and other combustible materials ignited. All the vestments in the sacristy and the parish records in the vestry were totally destroyed. The Blessed Sacrament remained unharmed because the solid metal tabernacle withstood the heat of the fire.

Parishioners made temporary repairs, but due to the existing debt, ecclesiastical authorities denied the parish's request to build a new church. Consequently, volunteers rebuilt and enlarged the church. Fr. Gratian celebrated Mass in the public school auditorium or Woerheide building until January 6, 1936. By September 1939, the church had new side walls, a vestibule and a tower over the main entrance. These improvements enhanced the appearance of the building and increased the seating capacity to 400.

The parish received its first assistant in 1942, with the appointment of Rev. Adalbert Smetana, OFM. His arrival made it possible to offer four Masses on Sundays. In July, of that same year, Rev. Clarence Piontkowski, OFM succeeded Fr. Gratian as pastor. Within two years, the parish paid the remainder of its debt. Fr. Clarence officially burned the original mortgage on November 18, 1945.

All this time, the priests still lived at the St. Roch Friary. This arrangement necessitated considerable amounts of travel for both priests and parishioners. They hitch-hiked, or commuted on the Rock Island or motored to the church for Mass, meetings, or sick call. Finally in 1946, the Sacred Heart Province purchased a two-story residence at 4233 W. 147th Street. The priests settled marriage cases in the parlor and kept the parish records on the dining room table.
In November 1947, the parish collected special funds to purchase a new altar. Fr. Clarence died from a sudden heart attack on March 11, 1948. Rev. Aidan R. Potter. OFM assumed the position of administrator and later pastor.

Fr. Aidan suggested an annual fund raiser celebrating the Feast Day of St. Christopher, July 25. Unfortunately, for the first two years, the carnival rides could not be scheduled in July, so the Fall Carnival ran for ten days in September. Eventually known as the Fiesta, the carnival would be held in July for the next 62 years.

Meanwhile, the school expanded by adding former Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) barracks, purchased from Thornton Camp. The fifth through eighth grade students were placed on double shifts during the four month relocation of the buildings. The upper grades also attended gym classes in the public school.

The idea for a driveway shrine dedicated to St. Christopher is attributed to Fr. Aidan. Members of the Holy Name Society drew up the plans and donated most of the material and construction work. Eugene Romeo, a well-known Chicago area artist, sculpted the figure's mold. Before a crowd of 3,000 people, Bishop William E. Cousins dedicated the concrete statue in July 1949.

Established in 1949, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), founded a Parish lending library, erected entirely by volunteer labor. In November, Saturday Religion School started for the public school children. For a nominal $.05 per ride, a bus provided round trip transportation for the students. They attended the 8:15 Mass, followed by an hour and a half instructional period, which included film slides, games or project work. By 1955, the program expanded to include 250 students.

The popularity of the vehicle blessings inspired the formation of a national Guild for Travelers in 1950. The group distributed pamphlets and commemorative decals during the car blessings. Motorists pledged never to start a journey without prayer, to obey traffic laws at all times, and to be considerate of all travelers.

The blessing of vehicles on the last day of the Fiesta began at this time. Each year, motorcycles, sport cars, bicycles, or emergency vehicles paraded to the shrine. The $1.00 Sunday dinners attracted many visitors to the Fiesta.
The continuous growth of the parish made it necessary to begin construction of a new school and rectory. The parish hired the architectural firm of Hermann J. Gaul & Sons. On May 20, 1951, the Rev. Monsignor E.M. Burke, Chancellor officiated at the ground breaking ceremonies for the school. The Very Reverend Eligius Weir, OFM, Provincial of Sacred Heart Province, laid the cornerstone containing a time capsule, on October 28, 1951.

As an important part of the financial program, the school children dropped pennies into glass block banks located in every classroom. The new school building, which opened in September 1952, included eight rooms, a gymnasium, assembly hall and a fully-equipped kitchen. The remodeled convent provided a residence for the additional faculty.

Samuel Cardinal Stritch dedicated the school on May 37, 1953. Six classrooms were added in 1955 and four more in 1959 to accommodate the increasing enrollment. The clergy moved into the new rectory on January 2, 1953.

Rev. Bruno Savage, OFM inherited overcrowded conditions when he was named pastor in 1957. Under his leadership, the parish finally received approval for the construction of a new convent and a brick church. The convent was blessed and the sisters held an Open House on April 19, 1959. The congregation gathered for the last Mass in the old frame edifice on April 10, 1961. Four days later, the Midlothian Fire Department burned it down.

The ground-breaking ceremony for the church, designed by Fox & Fox, was held on June 1, 1961. Joseph R. Mango, with the help of his office staff, designed the original altar and the church windows, depicting the sacraments on one side and the Seven Joys of our Blessed Mother on the other side.
Three stained glass windows from the old church were placed in the bridal and crying rooms. Lillian Kahne, a parishioner who used her husband and son as models, designed the large stained glass window over the main entrance to the church.

Parishioners attended Christmas Eve Midnight Mass in their new church. The Sisters sang at the 8:00 High Mass when daily use of the facility began on March 4, 1962. On May 20, Msgr. Burke blessed the new church bells, which had arrived from Heidelberg, Germany. The largest bell is named in honor of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of the USA, the middle one bears the title of the Blessed Trinity, while the smallest is dedicated to St. Christopher. Albert Cardinal Meyer formally dedicated the church on August 19, 1962.

St Christopher Church

The Holy Name headed another building project when insufficient space once again forced the school to expand in June 1955. Men, women and children of the parish volunteered their time and talents to erect a separate center unit, consisting of four classrooms and a small dentist office.

(Upit-D)

In 1969, Rev. Merald McCormick, OFM was assigned as pastor. He guided the formation of a Parish Council, consisting of religious and lay people. The practice of celebrating 7:00 P.M. Mass on Saturdays began on January 11, 1970. The following year, Fr. Merald started a program to deliver Holy Communion to shut-ins.

John Cardinal Cody relieved the Franciscan Order of its duties at St. Christopher Church in August 1972, and appointed the Rev. George Brown, a diocesan priest, as pastor. This change coincided with the Golden Jubilee of the parish. Parishioners observed the occasion with a special Mass, on September 10, 1972. The principle celebrant was Rev. Zachary Hayes, OFM, who had grown up in the parish. Afterwards, Cavalini’s, a local restaurant, catered a banquet.

A “change-out-of-the-pocket” collection financed the building of an outdoor shrine in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Located on the site of the old convent, demolished the previous year, the shrine was dedicated on October 2, 1977. The ceremonies included children leading the Living Rosary and the
solemn crowning of the statue with a floral wreath. Annually, First Communicants process to the shrine for the traditional May crowning.

Many remodeling changes updated the inside appearance of the church over the next few years. These changes involved the removal of the altar railing and various statues. The Holy Family statue was hung above the Baptismal font at the front of the church. The altar was moved forward and paneled wall was built behind it creating an oratory. The area was carpeted and a Risen Christ replaced the crucifix.

Often parishioners conceived ideas for improvements. Estelle and Paul Joschko, and Florence and Frank Demski, opened the Gift Shop on Ash Wednesday 1984. An accessibility ramp was built and the Reconciliation Room furnished. The Teen Center moved into the old library building.

The children of the parish became known as the “Brady Bunch” when Rev. Daniel Brady began serving as pastor in 1986. During this time, the program to train Lectors, Commentators and Extraordinary Ministers expanded. The SPRED, Marriage Prep, Baptismal Prep, RCIA, and other ministries formed, actively involving more people in parish life.

Realizing that all the parish buildings were at least 20 years old, the Building and Maintenance Committee established a special building fund. In recent years, major projects have included a new roof, a new gym floor and the repaving of the parking lot. The Christopher Room was completed for small group meetings.


A yearlong celebration marked the Diamond Anniversary of the parish. On April 20, 1997, Auxiliary Bishop John Gorman concelebrated Mass in honor of the occasion. At the reception that followed, nuns and priests once associated with the parish, reminisced with parishioners. Former and present choir members gathered on May 18, for a special concert.

In June, at a car blessing announcing the annual carnival, drivers received commemorative stickers. The 50th Fiesta displayed memorabilia and revived the famous spaghetti dinner. On the Feast of St. Christopher, Fr. Bill presided over a Benediction at the shrine. An ice cream social, sponsored by the Rosary—Altar Society, ended the evening.

Throughout the year, pictorial displays of the past decorated the vestibules of the church. The school children worked on special activities involving the last 75 years. Banners were hung along the streets adjacent to church property and prayer cards
depicting the large stained glass window of St. Christopher were distributed. On October 5, a dinner dance at the Martinique highlighted the end of the year.

Five years before the incorporation of the Village of Midlothian, St. Christopher Parish began its quest as a faith community. From the beginning, the parish has thrived on the initiative and hard work of its people.

St. Christopher is a community that:

Remembers, Celebrates and Believes.

The Windows of St. Christopher Church

7 – Sacraments
7 – Joys of our Blessed Mother
ASSOCIATES

Rev. Daniel Collins
Rev. Donald Cahill
Assoc. Pastor
Rev. Gale White, O.F.M.
Assistant
Rev. James Hyland
1994

Rev. James Presta
1993
Rev. Lawrence Rhode, O.F.M.
Rev. Leomcio Santiago
Rev. Michael Kieck

Rev. Patrick Lee
Rev. Patrick Marshall
Assoc. Pastor
Rev. Peter Fritz, O.F.M.
Rev. Ralph Sturms
ASSOCIATES

Rev Raymond Novak
Rev Reinhard O.F.M.
Rev Rupert Lutz O.F.M.
Rev Terrance Johnson
Rev Richard Williams
Rev Anton R Braun
Rev Vincent Costello
Associate Pastor
Rev. Ronald H. Henkel
Associate Pastor
Fr. Laurent Mbagana
We remember...  
We celebrate...  
We believe...