

Immaculate Conception Parish, Elma

Early pioneers of Elma in Howard County were attracted by employment in the Chicago Great Western Railroad roundhouse. They attended Saint Patrick's Church west of Elma, where Father Francis J. Gunn was pastor. Father Gunn established Immaculate Conception Parish in 1887. The parish first used a hotel and then a town hall for Mass. In 1892 Father Gunn became the first resident pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish.

In 1892 the foundation for a church was laid on property donated by Lemuel Potter. The church was ready for dedication in the summer of 1902. The 600-seat structure was made of brick with white stone trim and slate roof. The interior was frescoed by George Satory, a prominent church decorator of that era.

In 1906, a school was built on property near the church. Immaculate Conception Academy, consisting of 12 grades, was opened on May 6, 1906 and staffed by the Cedar Rapids Sisters of Mercy. In 1925, a large downtown building was purchased and remodeled. Businesses occupied the first floor and the parish hall was on the second floor.

The 1960s were a turbulent decade for the Church and the people of Elma. On May 15, 1968, a tornado devastated the town, severely damaging the church, school and parish hall. The hall was used as a temporary church until a church could be built. The high school closed in 1968 and the elementary school closed in 1969. As the sisters no longer occupied the convent, its furnishings were auctioned. The Mercy Sisters had served the parish for 63 years.

In 1970 the school was razed and a new church built on that site. The exterior is brick offset with native panels around the entrances. The interior is of split-face block and customized woodwork. Seating for 325 is arranged in a semicircle. The basement is the church hall. The church was dedicated in 1972.

The Elma community has a strong pro-life conviction. Our Faith Formation Program is combined with Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernard's Parishes and classes are held in Lourdes. Parishioners are active in the Rosary Society and ACCW. The community benefits from its relationship with the other parishes of Holy Rosary Cluster.