In early 1953 several Catholic families of the Chugiak area became weary of the long drive to the Holy Family Cathedral in Anchorage, and decided to build a church in the Chugiak area. Plans were drawn for a 24 x 40 foot long Church, to be built by volunteer labor. The project developed rapidly until the “news” of a new church reached downtown. It seemed as though no one had informed the bishop in Juneau that he was to receive a new church, which was not in diocesan development plans. Unfortunately, this slight oversight led to an immediate end of the “Chugiak Church”. Even without a church, the local parishioners were determined to gather in the local community. They borrowed priests from the military and located a meeting room.

The first Mass ever held in the area took place on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, 1955. Frs. Gaefell, a pair of twin military chaplains, said Mass in the Chugiak Volunteer Fire Company’s Hall. The Altar consisted of a sheet of plywood on two sawhorses, and the Military Mass Kit was provided for the services. Masses and Catechism classes were held periodically on several occasions over the next few years.

On August 28, 1957, the Most Reverend Dermot O’Flanagan, Bishop of Juneau, established the new parish of St. Anthony, which included the Eagle River/Chugiak area South of the Eklutna River. The Priests of St. Anthony soon began to visit the Chugiak Area, and with the help of the Catholic Ladies Altar Society of Chugiak, many inquiry classes, Catechism sessions, and many other activities helped to bring the Catholics of the area together. This same year saw the acquisition of a plot of land at mile 14 on the Glenn Highway, which was to become the site of St. Andrew Church.

Several years of increased growth and activity finally led to the construction of a 34 x 64 foot basement foundation on the land. Easter Sunday, April 14, 1963, Fr. Robert L. Whelan, S.J., said
Mass in the new Church. Bishop O’Flanagan solemnly blessed the new Church on Sunday, May 12, 1963, and the people of Chugiak/Eagle River had their Church.

For five years the area remained a mission of St. Anthony Church. Priests from several parishes came to Eagle River to say Mass. Finally on October 16, 1967 Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan, Archbishop of Anchorage, designated the area North of Ft. Richardson and South of the Matanuska- Susitna Borough as the Parish of St. Andrew. The next day Monsignor Francis A. Cowgill was appointed the first pastor of St. Andrew.

In less than four months the Reverend Joseph E. Shirey, S.J., was appointed to his first pastorate at Saint Andrew. Fr. Shirey was replaced by Fr. Peter Houch, O.S.B. on June 7, 1972. During these years a small mobile home and a miniature “Husky House” were obtained for Priest housing.

Fr. Peter found himself involved in the construction business as the parish built their own social hall in the Chugiak area near the Senior Citizens Center. A 14 acre plot of land had been donated by the Thomas family in memory of Fr. Conwell. The building was designed with the first floor social area, with a large
kitchen, on which a second story Church could be added in the future.

In January of 1976 Fr. Alfred W. Giebel became the current pastor of St. Andrew. By now the mobile home and the Husky House were becoming a serious maintenance problem and it was decided to build a rectory on top of the church basement.
This project was rapidly completed. By now it was also obvious that the existing Church population had outgrown the small basement church.

But there was still plenty of room for Fr. Giebel’s array of Turkey’s, chickens, and Llamas on the existing property.
By early 1980 plans were underway to build a major new church building on the property in Eagle River. Even before the Archbishop gave his official approval on August 12th the brush and trees on the building site had mysteriously disappeared. Footings were started on August 16th and a team contractors and parishioners rapidly completed the block work. Most of the remaining construction was accomplished throughout the winter by a devoted parishioner labor force of men, women and children.

The day before St. Andrew’s Feast Day Fr. Giebel was practicing “flying” off a man lift and proceeded to break his arm. Communion was served more slowly for the next few weeks.

Other parishioners managed to drive frontend loaders through the foundation wall, fall off scaffolding, suffer various cuts and bruises, and even knock down trusses. But through it all, the Lord continued to look over His flock and protect them from any major catastrophes, probably with a slight grin on His face. Before the sheetrock went up all parishioners were given the chance to come in and write their family names and whatever else they wanted to on the exposed studs throughout the new Church. There is a rumor that a stray electrician was sheet-rocked into the ceiling and wanders the rafters at night. But this has not been confirmed by reliable sources.

May 27, 1981 Archbishop Hurley, all the previous priests of St. Andrew, and a multitude of other priests dedicated the new St. Andrew Church. A crowd of nearly 500 parishioners participated in the event and enjoyed the first of many social affairs in the new parish hall, named and dedicated to Fr. Conwell.
In this whole process the Chugiak area was not showing the same signs of growth as Eagle River. And since we now had our own Parish Hall, the “old” Parish Hall in Chugiak was sold. Thus, Fr. Conwell’s name was transferred to the new building.
Because of the new building, the need for more parking for the Parishioners, picnic grounds for the families, and a volleyball court for the big “children” of the parish, the beloved chicken coop and Llama house, sadly, had to go. St. Andrew quickly became an “urban” church, with landscaping, and handicap access.

In the fall of 1984, School Sister of St. Francis, Sister Camilla Menting came to serve St. Andrew Parish in Religious Education and became a valuable member of the Support Staff of the Parish. She served us well for 25 years.
In July of 1989 Fr. Giebel was transferred to St. Benedict’s parish in Anchorage, where he would be able to fulfill his dream of establishing a Catholic High School. Fr. Leo Desso took the reins of St. Andrew. After 10 years he retired to Montana and then another Leo (Fr. Leo Walsh) took over in July of 1999.

Fr. Walsh was “home-grown”, coming to us from a large, well-established Anchorage family, where he was raised. He attended the seminary at The Pontifical North American College in Rome. Again, as our Parish was growing, we saw the need for larger worship and parking space. Also with only one priest and four weekend Masses the workload was arduous. In 2000, land was donated and plans for a new church began after a monetary commitment from parishioners and support from the archdiocese. The “new” St. Andrew called for a 27,000 sq ft. building that seats 1200 parishioners in a beautiful and awe inspiring environment. Construction began in 2005.
A large gala fund-raiser dinner/auction occurred in the Nave toward the end of construction. Some of this money went to our first Rose Window above the altar. Some of the statues, including the Risen Christ crucifix, the altar, and the stained glass windows from the old church on Artillery Rd. were brought over and placed in our new Church.

It was completed and dedicated on St. Andrew’s Day November 30th, 2006.
Soon after moving into our new church, Fr. Leo was transferred to Washington D.C. to become the Associate Director of Ecumenical and Inter-religious affairs. During Fr. Leo’s time away in Washington to build Ecumenism, we were blessed with several other priests including: Frs. Scott Garrett, Andrew Szymakowski, Justin Dzikowicz, Jaime Mencias, Eric Wiseman and Ben Torreto. In January 2010 Fr. Steven Moore and Fr. Joseph McGilloway stepped in until Fr. Tom Brundage became our “permanent” parish priest in August of that year. For the next five years Fr. Tom gave us some much needed stability, instituted 24-hour adoration, the Special Education Masses and classes. And St. Andrew prospered.
In 2015 Fr. Tom was transferred back to his home diocese in Wisconsin. Fortunately we had a deacon ready for ordination: Fr. Arthur Roraff. Archbishop Roger Schwietz was also ready for his required retirement at the age of 75. Thus, both the Archbishop and Fr. Arthur came to St. Andrew in June of 2015.

In 50 years, St. Andrew has grown from a few dedicated souls fighting for a meeting area into one of the fastest growing parishes in the diocese. Our church now seats 1200 and has approximately 3056 registered parishioners...

History is a profound teacher of wisdom and love. In this too short synopsis of St. Andrew’s history we see the growth and development of our parish. We see dedication, we see love, and we see hard work. But we may sum up each of the virtues by a simple but profound word ‘Faith’. In perspective, the history of St. Andrew parish didn’t start 50 years ago. It started centuries ago with the very preaching of the Gospel by the Savior Himself.
Pastors of St. Andrew Parish

Archbishop Emeritus Roger Schwietz
Fr. Tom Brundage
Fr. Steven Moore
Fr. Ben Torreto

Fr. Leo Walsh
Fr. Leo Desso
Fr. Alfred Giebel
Fr. Peter Houck
Fr. Joseph Shirey SJ
Msgr. Francis Cowgill
Assistant Pastors/Pastors in Residence
Deacons

Deacon James Hostman
Deacon Jim Lee
Deacon Mark Merrill
Deacon Jon Hermon