The origins of the community of Kearney date to the construction of Fort Kearny in 1848, when the post moved from its original site near Nebraska City, to the central Platte Valley. It had become clear by then that the Platte River was the highway into the West, which had multiple terminal points. In the late 1840s, the most important of those destination points were the gold fields of northern California. The Episcopal Church had virtually no presence in the West at that time since the area was not open to settlement, and missionary districts could be established only where a territorial (federal) government had been created. The first Episcopal Church presence at Fort Kearny came under the auspices of missionary Rev. James DePui, who had been appointed by Missionary Bishop Jackson Kemper. Kemper was the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church, and he reported in October 1853 that he “had been requested by the proper authority” to secure the services of two inestimable Presbyters as chaplains,” one each for Fort Laramie and Fort Kearney. Both clergymen, he noted, “are most respected by the officers of the army and will be most useful.” Fort Kearney and Chaplin DePui were mentioned in the missionary journal Spirit of Missions in subsequent years, but only through 1855, after which the journal does not mention either clergyman or either military fort. And neither chaplain ever submitted a report to the Spirit of Missions. Originally from Pennsylvania, Rev. DePui was listed as Chaplain for “St. James Church [at] Fort Kearney, Indian Territory,” in the Virginia Theological Seminary School Catalogs until 1860, when he returned to his home in Pennsylvania.

After Rev. DePui departed Fort Kearney, the fort and its immediate surrounding area had no Episcopal presence until late in the summer of 1861, when Bishop Talbot stopped at the fort on his return from a mission trip through Colorado. There he read services to such a small congregation that
it made “his heart sad.” Most of the soldiers were on the Plains fighting Indians, and the bishop made no mention of any clergy. Two years later in November 1863, the same bishop stopped at Fort Kearney on his return from a seven-month mission trip that took him from Nebraska to New Mexico, then on to the Utah and Nevada before returning to Nebraska City. It was seventeen degrees below zero when Bishop Talbot arrived at the fort on the last leg of his wagon and stagecoach trip. On November 29, he reported reading prayers to a full congregation of “officers, men, and the few ladies resident there.”

Any Episcopal Church activity near Kearney had been conducted at the fort. This was the case despite the fact that for several years after Nebraska Territory was established in mid-1854, a small village called Kearney City (referred to as Dobey Town because of its buildings’ construction materials) was situated not far from the military site. It had actually been established by several Omahans, including George L. Miller and James Boyd. Bishop Talbot made no mention of the village when he stopped in 1863, and church and journal records make no mention of the Episcopal Church in Kearney City until the early 1870s. Bishop Talbot had returned to Indiana in 1865, elected to serve as Indiana suffragan diocesan. At the same General Convention in October 1865, Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson, then from St. James’ Episcopal Church in Chicago, was elected Missionary Bishop of Nebraska and Dakota, a district substantially reduced in size from the area administered by Bishop Talbot.

Dobey Town gradually failed as use of the trails declined with construction of the railroad. In 1871, Anselmo B. Smith surveyed and plated a community called Kearney Junction. As settlement of Western Nebraska increased, Kearney Junction was incorporated in 1873. In 1874, the town was named the seat of Buffalo County. At the Annual Council in late-August 1874, Bishop Clarkson gave
his consent and appointed officers for the Mission of the Good Shepherd in Kearney. But the bishop’s diocesan budget for missions in 1874 was only $1,150 – and he had exhausted it. His standing committee was clear that the appropriation was for the Diocese of Nebraska’s entire mission program, and was not to be used solely for construction of new buildings. Missionaries’ salaries were also paid from that budget, and the clergy’s needs were paramount for him. Bishop Clarkson explained that he would like to immediately build a church in Kearney (and some other towns), but when asked, he was compelled to respond, “I have nothing now to give, and can make no definite pledge.” However, Kearney seemed to be a logical locale for establishing a mission church. The town had been the site of a Union Pacific railroad camp, and in 1872, it became the location at which the Burlington and Missouri Railroad joined the Union Pacific. The town had recently been named as the county seat of Buffalo County, and the community was a base of operations for cattle ranchers in areas north and west of the town.

When it was founded in 1874, Church of the Good Shepherd reported six communicants and five families, numbers not uncommon among Nebraska missions in that era. The mission at Kearney was apparently not growing because the bishop did not report making a visit to Kearney for the purpose of confirming new parishioners, although he did so at several other new missions. And parochial reports indicate that the communicant numbers remained stagnant. However, in 1882, the small congregation began to grow. On January 3, 1881, Bishop Clarkson had ordained to the diaconate Rev. George Greene who worked hard among his contacts in the East to raise funds to construct a building for Good Shepherd. He succeeded, and in early 1882, two lots near the Presbyterian Church were purchased, and a contract was issued to Green and Tingley for construction of the new building, designed by Boston architect Ion Lewis. It was described as “a mixture of the
Gothic and Queen Anne style. . . . [that] will give a tasty and unique appearance, . . . entirely different to anything in the city.” Parishioners from churches in New York City presented the font, a communion service, a Chancel Bible, prayer books, and choir books.

The Church of the Good Shepherd achieved parish status under Rev. Greene in 1883. It was thus eligible to be remembered with a window placed in the cathedral clerestory when the cathedral was constructed that year. Rev. Greene left the diocese shortly after the Kearney church came into union with the diocese, perhaps going to the Diocese of Minnesota at Faribault. Shortly thereafter, Rev. Robert W. Oliver was called to serve as rector of the small parish. Born in Scotland, Rev. Oliver had come to Nebraska in 1868, at the behest of Bishop Clarkson to serve as head of the new Nebraska College in Nebraska City, recently established on the land originally purchased by Bishop Talbot in 1860. The congregation continued to grow, and at the Annual Meeting at Easter of 1888, they voted to change the name of the parish to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. Being an Episcopal clergyman in the nineteenth-century West required not only a theological understanding of democracy as interpreted by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, it also necessitated personal relationships with “deep pockets” in the East that could be tapped when the slim Western financial resources ran dry. Just as Rev. Greene had solicited donations from his Eastern friends to build a structure in 1882, so too did Rev. Oliver in 1888 when he sought to retire the mortgage. The names of many Episcopal churches in Nebraska were changed from their original mission organization names to reflect the names of the Eastern congregations who contributed to the fledgling prairie parishes. However, it is unclear if that was the case with the name change for the Kearney parish.

Bishop Clarkson had died very suddenly in March 1884. After several months and tremendous consternation among clergy and lay delegates, Rt. Rev. George Worthington was elected
to fill the role in November 1884. Bishop Worthington really did not like the multiple, necessary, and arduous trips into the western part of the state, and by 1889, he was asking his clergy to draft a resolution to sever the less populous western part of the state from the established Diocese of Nebraska. Initially unconvinced, the clergy finally went along with his request, and the 1889 General Convention established the Missionary Jurisdiction of the Platte. Elected to serve as its Missionary Bishop was Rev. Anson R. Graves. The vestry of St. Luke’s offered Bishop Graves the use of a house, and when Bishop Graves accepted, St. Luke’s effectively became the district’s pro-cathedral and Kearney its headquarters for the next two decades. Bishop Graves, established multiple new congregations, and opened the Platte Collegiate Institute in Kearney. In direct contrast to the position taken by Bishop Worthington in the eastern part of the state, Bishop Gravers urged western Nebraska congregations to give parish voting rights to women and to allow them to serve as parish officers. Additionally, in 1902, the missionary district assumed control of the Hospital Association of Kearney, renaming the facility St. Luke’s Hospital. After Rt. Rev. George Allan Beecher succeeded Bishop Graves in 1910, Bishop Beecher moved the district’s headquarters to Hastings in 1913. Although it was no longer the pro-cathedral, St. Luke’s continued to grow along with the Kearney community. But the efforts of the Kearney’s earliest communicants, as well as the connections to the East made by Rev. Greene, are memorialized in the clerestory of Trinity Cathedral as the Church of the Good Shepherd.