

PARTNERS IN CHRIST'S SERVICE



First Presbyterian Church

Mt. Pleasant, Michigan
1971 - 1996

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History of the First Presbyterian Church
of Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

Volume II 1971 - 1996

by

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and

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Chapter 1

A Silver Spire, part-one of this history followed the history of First Presbyterian Church of Mt. Pleasant into its Centennial Celebration in 1971. Part-two continues with the history at this point and shares church activities over the next twenty-five years.

The church held its Centennial Celebration on October 17-24, 1971. This celebration signaled the end of a fruitful 100 years of worship and service and also the start of a future filled with promise and expectations.

The October 17 church service honored former pastors and women from the congregation who had entered religious careers. Wanzer Brunelle (Allen Park, MI), George DeWitt (Seminole, FL), Ken Cutler (Deerfield, IL), and John Peter (Lancaster, PA) were the pastors taking part in the service and the women honored were Margaret Purchase and Lois Winterburg Meyers. The theme of the composite message was "Memories and Challenges." "The Church's One Foundation" was the processional hymn and "God Be With You" was the recessional hymn. Dorothy vonReichbauer sang a solo, "How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings." The day was a joyous affair as members of the congregation and former pastors exchanged greetings and reminisced over past years in the church. A dinner was catered by the Embers and Fellowship Hall was filled with 247 people. A highlight feature was the "Burning of the Mortgage" of the Watson Road Church.

Levi Dees composed special music for the occasion, "Centennial Anthem," with words by Mary Irvine - Dorothy vonReichbauer performed the solo. Cathy Pishos, Margo Bushey, and Tom Fowler presented trumpet accompaniment. Flowers for both the October 17 and 24 services were given by the family of Mary S. Doughty, a charter member of the church, and husband, Wilkinson Doughty, an early and long time Session member, and their son, Ralph and his wife.

Monday, October 18, honored the women for whom circles had been named: Adeline Green, Sylvia Hawkins, Marie Brunelle, Gertrude DeWitt, Alice Cutler, Zelle Bishop, Gratia Brooks, Mabel Doughty, and Jessie Grambau. These women were either a pastor's wife or a long time leader.

On Wednesday, October 20, past and present officers of the church were honored. Dr. Louis Evans, retired Minister of First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, CA (largest church of the Presbyterian denomination) was the speaker. Evans had been a charter member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and was the author of six books. He was to return to the church on several subsequent programs in the near future.

The students were not forgotten. Saturday, October 23, was designated University Day and members of the congregation and their guests were invited to visit the Dialog Coffee House. That evening the Christian folk musical, "Natural High," was sung in Pearce Hall on the Central Michigan University campus.

The final day of the celebration, Sunday, October 24, honored men, formerly of the congregation, who had gone into the ministry.

Speaking at the morning service were Gaylord Brunelle (Port Huron, MI), Peter Russell (Swartz Creek, MI), John Osborn Sr. (Rosebush, MI), Bruce Theunissen (Philadelphia, PA), and Allen Sager (Kinde, MI). That same evening Floyd Dain and William Franklin presented the history of the church through pictures, movies, and words. This was based upon their history of the church's first 100 years A Silver Spire.

This same year were the additions of steeple lighting and the lighting of the parking lot. The lighting did much to add beauty and safety to the church facility. One might easily project that this lighting symbolized a bright future for the second 100 years of the church.

The church continued its emphasis on mission. The need for this had been emphasized in 1968 when the church's Social Action Committee was formed. It had formerly been included under the Christian Education Committee. The first positive action of the committee had been the vision and stimulus to form a day care/nursery for preschool children of low-income families in Isabella County. Linnea Eber first talked of this program. Although the program became a community project with its formation in 1969, the First Presbyterian Church maintained a close liaison with it. It was named the Isabella Child Development Center.

The church gave financial support the first two years and has provided the meeting place for the Center ever since its inception. Presbyterians who had been instrumental in the formation and early administration of the program included Linnea Eber, Evelyn Greenwald, Jane Meyer, Reed McGee, Irene Otteman, David Kerr, Dorothy Theunissen and Bill Theunissen. Bill was Chairman of the Board of Directors for the first twenty-five years of the I.C.D.C.. Other Presbyterians who later dedicated years of volunteer service on the Board of Directors included John Wolf, Claudia Wood, Maryann Serier, Harriet Abrahamson and Beverly Ketcham. Many women of the congregation volunteered in the transportation of the children and as clerks in the resale Thrift Shop which has been the Center's primary means of financial support. The I.C.D.C. has "graduated" over 1000 preschool low-income children during its first twenty-seven years of operation - certainly a worthy mission of the church.

The committee continued to be known as the Social Action Committee until 1982 when it became the Outreach Committee; then Mission Outreach/Peace Committee in 1987; and finally the Social Justice and Peacemaking Committee in 1992. The committee has always been concerned with examining the many social problems facing society at all levels, from local to international, and then determining the church's role in alleviating these problems and their causes. The mission projects either carried out or supported by this committee and the church have been many. A few of them would include World Hunger, 2¢-a-meal program (Costa Rica), Peacemaking Program, Habitat for Humanity, Reverend Guy and Monique Bakaert medical mission in Cameroon, One Great Hour of Sharing, Women's Aid Service, Christmas Outreach, Family Counseling Service, Sexuality Study, Camp Giliad, Association for Interfaith Ministries to the Developmentally Disabled (A.I.M.), and sponsoring a refugee program. The latter program took place in 1979-81. There was strong congregational support and many volunteers to work with this program. After two years of planning and delays, the Nou family arrived in Mt. Pleasant and the church worked closely in support of them. One of the projects was working with black students on the C.M.U. campus. In 1971, a family night supper was held to which all C.M.U. black students were invited. These students

presented a skit depicting life styles of the inner-city black community. It was an eye-opener for attending members of the congregation. A meeting of black faculty and real estate representatives was arranged to discuss housing problems.

The church continued its support for people choosing to study for the ministry. Included in those recommended to Presbytery have been Craig Rackliffe, Steven Ross, Robert Bellinger, Bruce Brooks, Dale Austin, Robert Malseck, Richard Woodward, Pat Latus, and William Peterson.

In 1971, the Reverend John Osborn was hired as Visitation Minister. In the same year, the university student singing group affiliated with the church, the Maranatha Singers, was presenting its musical, "Natural High." Over the next eight years the group performed "Show me," "Bring Us Together," "Festival of Praise." and "If My People." The group presented an up-beat approach to religious music and presented programs throughout the state, plus several trips to distant states. It was directed by Marilu VanDam, the Reverend David VanDam's wife.

At the start of 1972, the church membership roll numbered 1036. In November, eighty-five of this number were moved to an inactive status. Church School enrollment totaled 413, and there were 402 local families in membership (157 out of town). There were eight women's church circles with approximately twenty-five members each.

The Senior High fellowship, known as The Webb, was going strong. Included in its activities were a skiing weekend, a trip to Beaver Island, and a trip to both Mackinac Island and Wilderness State Park. Fifteen students attended Explo-72 in Dallas with 80,000 other youth. In November 1971, the First Presbyterian Church had started a Saturday night recreation/canteen program for all teenagers in the community. It was held in the basement of the church and was under the direction of Christian Education Director, Gae Emerton. It was called The Wagg. Members of the congregation acted as weekly chaperones. Activities were varied and the program proved very popular. The last meeting of The Wagg was April 14, 1973. It had to shut down because of the problems related to malicious destruction, drinking, etc. - most of it in the parking lot and much of it by out-of-town visitors. An attempt was made to reopen it in October 1973 under the name of The Place but was short-lived due to a repetition of the same problems. The Junior High fellowship was named The Seekers. The high school age Cadet Choir totaled twenty-five and usually sang at the 9:30 AM service. Youth of the church continued to play an active part on the administrative boards. Included in this group would be Kim Carlson, Tamara Hewlett, Greg Croftchick, Lynda Ramseth, Sara Myers, Greg Dening, and Jennifer Dening.

Other activities in 1972 included a return visit by the Reverend Dr. Louis Evans and the United Presbyterian Women hosting the Spring Presbyterial of over 400 women. The organ was reconditioned. The Social Action Committee sponsored a community-wide panel on abortion which attracted a large audience and stimulated much discussion. The Session approved the formation of Boy Scout Troop #628 at the church. Wayne Moore and Fred Phelps did the necessary background work and the latter acted as scoutmaster. The troop proved very successful until it was dissolved in 1981.

Joint services were held with the First United Methodist Church in the summers of 1972 and 1973. On November 19, 1973, a potluck dinner

was held to recognize the years of service by J. Elmer Graham and Gerald Poor. The Synod of Michigan had purchased a home on South University Avenue to be used by university students. It was under the direct supervision of the church. It was named The Dialog. A review of its 1974 program demonstrated university student involvement at its peak. Included were retreats, Share Group, Married Students Group, weekly discussion groups ("Christian Family"), Friday night music and entertainment, Saturday night speakers, summer ministry and program, and the Maranatha Singers. The Dialog remained active until the program was discontinued in 1980-81.

After years of planning, the Hand-Bell Choir began playing on December 1, 1974. This same year the Session approved a Director of Disciple-Making; Charles Romine volunteered for the position. April 1975 saw the beginning of the first Institute on Evangelism and Disciple-Making. There were twenty-three individuals working with Romine, and the objective was to develop a few qualified laborers or spiritual shepherds able to personally minister to the needs of others. Unfortunately, the church did not foresee the problems that this action would cause in the future. The group developed into the Covenant Community which was the primary cause of the serious church split five years later. The Reverend Malcolm Brown had introduced the idea of a Covenant Community and Session approved the concept of a meeting on August 31, 1977. Mr. Brown stressed that it would "provide an opportunity for those who desire to deepen their commitment to Christ and to another, and to serve Our Lord." One of the stipulations for those involved would be "to honor and submit to the Elders." This group is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

The church's outstanding organist, Mary Lou Robinson, left and Dr. Steven Egler was hired to replace her. At this period John Tousley was in his sixth year of directing a very successful adult and youth vocal program at the church. Dr. Egler was to remain an integral part of the church's music program for the next twenty-plus years.

In 1978, Jane Ramseth and Marion Phelps were active in establishing Girl Scout Troop #207 at the church. The church became actively involved with Trinity United Methodist Church in sponsoring Pioneer Girls and Christian Service Brigade (boys) programs. Some of the younger members of the church had formed a slow-pitch softball team that competed in the community.

For many years, dating back into the 1960's, the House Church Membership by Zones concept had been in place. As an illustration, in 1978 the community was divided into thirteen zones, each under the care of two Deacons who were entrusted with calling on members and the responsibility for related zone activities such as Home Church Meetings.

The church was increasing in size which created a greater challenge in maintaining effective communication and close fellowship. The years 1979-80 presented the greatest challenge that the church was ever to face.