

Our Church History in the Words and Memories of the Faithful

For where two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I am among you.

– Matthew 18:20

History begins with a point in time and a place. Our church had its beginnings in the 1920's. In 1926, in the village of Allen Park, a group of Methodists and Presbyterians met on Sunday mornings in the one and only school. Lapham School Number 9's building rested on the corner of Regina and Allen Roads. Folding chairs and a pine podium transformed the gymnasium into a church meeting site. A lay reader, Mr. William Zook, under the guidance of the Methodist Board of Missions, led the group.

When the Presbyterians outnumbered the Methodists, they came to the amicable agreement that the Presbyterians would remain and the Methodists would relocate to a northern suburb. In 1929 the Presbyterian Board of Church Extension assumed guidance of the mission church. The first service under its direction was October 1st of that year.

Charter member Charles Pretty recalled his first Sunday attending church in May 1930. "When my wife, Viola, and I attended services, there were only six people at the school—so we made it eight. Chief Wilford Riley, the village police officer, arrived in uniform having just come off duty."

Allen Park's official U.S. census reported 994 people in 1930. Mostly an area of farmers, the community was starting to see newcomers arrive from Southwest Detroit. The Kane family was among them. Jeanette Kane (Durand) recalls her mother's concern about raising her family in Detroit. She pressured her husband to relocate. On a Sunday drive they ended up in Allen Park and decided to stop right there. "People told my mother she was crazy to move out that far," Jeanette recalled. "I remember walking down to Elsie Teaks' farm on Englewood for eggs and milk."

Neighbors on Cleveland Avenue directed the Kane family to the church in the Lapham School. "That's how it worked, by word of mouth. We got new members by asking friends to come along."

Part-time minister Rev. John Snook led the mission church from 1930 to the spring of 1931. Dr. Frank Knowles, a retired pastor, became the first full-time minister in May, 1931. One of the first children he baptized was Faye McGirr (Nelson).

About 75 members continued to meet in Lapham School. It was the height of the Depression. Quite often the offering did not meet the \$10 per week that was the church budget. The Presbytery continued to support the mission church. On March 20, 1932, the Allen Park

Presbyterian Church was formally chartered. This event was a sign of hope for many in the dark days of the Great Depression. In the words of Jeanette Durand, "They were hard times, very hard."

In 1936 Rev. Kenneth Neigh, fresh out of seminary, replaced the retiring Dr. Knowles. His time was one of rapid growth both in the community and APPC. The handsome bachelor had no car. He literally ran from house to house introducing himself and inviting people to come to worship. Jeanette remembers Rev. Neigh as a good preacher. She also remembers how exciting it was when Rev. Neigh stopped teenager Jeanette and her girlfriends to show them the ring he would present to his future wife, Jane. "Right there on Cleveland Avenue! We were all so excited."

Faye McGirr (Nelson) attended Sunday School during this period. "I recall the Superintendent of the Sunday School was the Chief of Police, Chief Wilford Riley. Chief Riley was a very solid citizen and took a great interest in the youth of the church and Allen Park. Our church was always blessed with very devoted and stalwart members. During those early days the thought was always to set an example for the young people and to extend the church's outreach to all of Allen Park. I believe one of the reasons that Allen Park is the city that it is is due in large part to those early Presbyterians."

The wise man built his house upon the rock.

– Matthew 7:24

Outreach resulting in increased members and Dr. Neigh's leadership erected the first building, a portion that is now the Fellowship Hall. The cornerstone was laid on November 12, 1939. Dedication took place on March 3, 1940. In addition to pledges, which ran several years and needed a renewal, the ladies of the church entered into a marathon of fundraising. Mrs. Joseph S. (Hazel) Campbell remembered everyone working together to accomplish the goal. "Twenty to thirty women met in one another's homes planning dinners and creating items to be sold."

In 1946 Marion Brush (Mitchell) was a teenager. She remembers Kenneth Neigh's preaching. "He was a dynamic speaker. The sermons were so relevant and interesting you never wanted to miss one."

Dr. Neigh accepted a call to McCormick Seminary in 1946, the first stop in many distinguished positions in the United Presbyterian Church.

Another luminary was called as Pastor January 1, 1947. Rev. Wanzer Brunelle, wife Marie and children Gaylord, Karen and Gerrit arrived in Allen Park during the post World War II boom. Construction clogged the streets and people poured in, attracted by jobs and affordable housing. This was also the period of building expansion for the original church. The first addition was dedicated in March of 1950. The construction of the chapel followed in 1952.

Ceil Pretty recalls, "Wanzer Brunelle was a one-man 'Welcome Wagon' as he evangelized door-to-door—meeting, greeting and building church attendance and membership. He had unbelievable energy and enthusiasm and never forgot a person's name after one meeting! Perhaps it was that skill that helped him convince newcomers to take on 'Opportunities for Leadership'."

Stella Migliore joined the church during this exciting time. She states, "Wanzer Brunelle recognized that it was important for new members to bond. The new members' class was immediately charged with forming a women's circle or couples' group. He was a master at getting people involved. He also was at the forefront in welcoming women as Deacons and Elders. He encouraged it."

Faye Nelson states that shortly after marrying Larry in 1950 Wanzer said to her, "Faye, I'm starting a new couple's club at the church called the DUALS. I want you and Larry to come Sunday night to our meeting." So, they became DUALS.

It was evident that a new building was needed. The boiler room, kitchen and dining room stage were pressed into use as classrooms. On March 1, 1957, the cornerstone was laid for the current sanctuary, offices and classrooms. Church school enrollment blossomed to the historical high of 1,500 and membership was 2,200. There were multiple services, choirs and many fellowships.

Virginia Murt recalls her father, Roy Guy, being very active on the building committee. "In a conversation with Graydon Harris years later, he told me of the many hours they spent making it the beautiful building it is today."

By the 1960's congregants were worshipping in the new sanctuary. There were 2,609 members, church school attendance was 1,500 with a teaching staff of 126. There were fellowships, youth groups, Men's Council and Women's Association. There were six choirs. The MacDonald family donated our pipe organ, a musical treasure, in 1962. Margo Brandt remembers, "My dad (Mel Brandt) was holding my hand and walking me into the Choir Room for the first time. I was in fourth grade and joining Girl's Choir directed by Cathy Eades (Drapeau) and accompanied by Beverly

Sheptack (Edwards). I fell in love with Cathy and singing right at that moment."

APPC's role in the community has always been evident. Many community groups found a home at the church. Social issues in the late 60's and early 70's — the Detroit riots and the Vietnam War—affected the church and the ministry. But they were not disruptive. Dr. Brunelle said, "We faced the issues and didn't try to avoid them." As many as 90 young people were in the armed forces and the church supported them with letters, gifts and prayer. The Church and Society Committee of the Session also worked many hours counseling young men who sought conscientious objector status.

Boy Scout Troop 1051 transferred the title to Camp Wakanda to the church in 1970. A camping program and camp renovation and development, which continues today, ensures that people of all ages can find spiritual sustenance in a beautiful setting near Gaylord, Michigan. Thousands of campers will recount tales from camp decades after the experience.

The mid-70's saw a leveling in population growth and in church membership. Older members retired and moved away. Their children were entering college and relocating where employment took them. The city had reached capacity. Few vacant lots remained. Gloria and Levon King directed the children's work of the church from 1972–1977. They remember the sharp drop off in church school attendance. In response to complaints about low attendance, Rev. Bill Colwell said, "God does not call upon us to be successful. He calls upon us to be faithful."

In 1979 Rev. Brunelle announced his retirement. He was named pastor emeritus and lauded for his thirty-two years of service.

Rev. Dave Swinehart, who had been associate pastor since 1970, was installed as pastor on January 27, 1980. In choosing from among the church's own ranks, the Search Committee felt they had a man who could handle the pastoral duties, have a good rapport with all age groups in the congregation, and one who had a deep commitment to the community.

Barbara Pretty remembers Rev. Swinehart's arrival in 1970. "Roger Sweets and I were the first students elected to the Board of Stewards in high school. One thing we did was to help with the interview process for the new youth minister. His name was Dave Swinehart. He went on several of the work camps with us and we had a lot of fun."

A sower went out to sow...

– Matthew 13:4

The church celebrated its 50th anniversary on March 20, 1982. At the time there were 731 children in the church school and 1,070 members. Phyllis Jones remembers buying gold material from every fabric store in the area for the festivities.

The most significant event in the 80's for the denomination was the reunification in 1983 of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern) with the United Presbyterian Church (Northern). The two groups had been separated since the Civil War. The combined denomination became known as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The 80's heralded another milestone for APPC. Our church welcomed seminary intern Barbara Nish and our first ordained woman minister Rev. Wendy Bailey.

Rev. Kellie Bohlman and Rev. John Caster joined us in July 1992. Six months later they held us in their embrace as our world turned upside down when Rev. Swinehart died. Our search for a new head of staff ended in the summer of 1994 with the arrival of Rev. Mark McDonough, his wife Maggie and children Kate, David and Peter. He created a time of stability. Within

a month of Rev. McDonough's arrival, Rev. Caster accepted another call. His successor, Rev. Kirk Miller and wife Jen arrived in the summer of 1996. We rejoice that their three children, Pearson, Emery, and Sophie have been born and baptized into our church family.

Rev. Mark McDonough kept a balance between keeping the traditions held dear and introducing thoughtful new ideas. The three pastors shared a collegial relationship and worked harmoniously. His creativity and confidence in staff led to new and exciting endeavors. Rev. McDonough initiated a pulpit exchange in the summer of 1999 with the Rev. Purvis Campbell from Northern Ireland. Rev. Kirk Miller stepped boldly forward and took our high school youth on an international mission trip to Mexico in 1999. His vision was to have an international mission experience every four years. In 2003 he led a mission to Northern Ireland with youth from our church and St. Frances Cabrini Parish. A mission trip is planned to Peru for the spring of 2007.

Rev. McDonough remained for five years before accepting a position at McCormick Theological Seminary.

*I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.*

—Psalm 89:1

Rev. Douglas Blaikie accepted our call. He arrived July 6, 2001, with wife Jean and children Andrew, Christopher, and Daniel. A month later Rev. Bohlman accepted a call to Rosedale Gardens Presbyterian Church in Livonia, Michigan. Rev. Melodie Jones, a recent seminary student, answered our call. She was ordained as minister of the Word and Sacrament at APPC on September 15, 2002.

Our current pastors, Doug, Kirk and Melodie continue our rich traditions and challenge us to begin new ones. All three create opportunities for different generations to come together and learn from one another. Anne Winslow recounts one of her treasured memories stemming from a new opportunity, "I was fortunate to be able to go on the first adult mission trip to Arizona and Mexico in 2003. It is an experience that the seven of us will never forget."

From camping programs, to Worry-Free Wednesdays, pig roasts, block parties, Faith Flight church school curriculum, improvements to Camp Wakanda, youth adventure challenges and adult and youth mission trips, these are the activities that allow us to fulfill our call to be disciples.

As we live each day it is hard to imagine that our personal biography is becoming history. Arnold Toynbee in the preface to "A Study of History" ventured this observation: "To change shape is the very nature of history because it is in the nature of history to go on adding to itself." Jeanette Durand expressed it more personally. Rev. Jones, Norm Goode, Ruth Holmes, Stella Migliore and Fern Brandt spent nearly two hours asking about her recollections over the years as the oldest and longest church member. Near the end of her taped interview she said these profound words, "When I was growing up in the church, I did not realize I was the church's future. Now I'm the only one left in the future. My friends are all gone – died or moved away... I just love to see the young people. They are the future church."



In the year 2007 we reflect on the past seventy-five years and look to the future. APPC has truly been blessed. Ceil Pretty says it best as we consider those who have led, “We have been blessed by the presence of outstanding ministers and leaders. Each person has contributed their own specific talents at just the necessary time, evidence of God’s presence in Allen Park.”

Our fellowship and outreach have touched lives in ways we cannot know and in ways that church members have shared in written memories and interviews.

“It has been a great church journey for my family with the Lord leading us all the way.” **Dorothy Hensel**

“The people of this church have been a great part of my life and I’ve loved being a part of it.” **Barbara McIntyre**

“My life in the church has been ‘a two-way street’—giving and receiving. I am sure that the scale always tipped to receiving.” **Virginia Murt**

“I want to wish each and every person who worshipped, worked, laughed, cried and just entered our doors—Happy Birthday—we never would have made 75 years without all of you.” **Virginia Horvath**

And finally, “The doors are always open. You are always welcome.” **Jeanette Durand**

I am indebted to past church historians who have helped to write our story, but especially to Irene LaNoue and Norm Goode. Thank you to all who wrote memories over the past year for the 75th Anniversary Committee, especially those I quote in this narrative. Quotes from Wanzer Brunelle, Hazel Campbell and Charles Pretty were taken from the 50th Anniversary publication. Thank you to Jeanette Durand, Marie Brunelle in memoriam, and Paul and Velma Hill who agreed to taped interviews. A grateful acknowledgement goes to Rev. Melodie Jones who conceived the project out of her love for this congregation and her sensitivity to historical preservation.

– Mary Lou Provost, March 2007



Charter Members

Mr. and Mrs. L. R. Ballard

Mr. and Mrs. L. H. Bartholomew

Mr. and Mrs. E. F. Behm

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bintliff

Mr. and Mrs. K. H. Bowles

Mr. and Mrs. William Brink

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Buchanan

Miss Elizabeth Campbell

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Campbell

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Carpenter

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Clark

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Mrs. J. R. Dobson

Mr. David J. Jeffries

Miss Jeannette Kane

Mrs. Samuel Kane

Mr. Bruce Knowles

Mrs. Frank P. Knowles

Mr. and Mrs. Orvel Lankin

Mr. and Mrs. Robert McIntosh

Mr. George McIntosh

Mr. and Mrs. Alex Michie

Mrs. F. O. Miller

Mrs. Clyde Morford

Miss Adella Norton

Mr. and Mrs. Floyd Norton

Mr. and Mrs. Lambert Pfeiffer

Mrs. Marian G. Pittman

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Mr. and Mrs. Charles Pretty

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Mr. and Mrs. Wilford Riley

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Mrs. Vera Rogers

Mrs. Juanita Ross

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Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Stone

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