

A Brief 60-Year History of the Community Presbyterian Church in Mountainside

In February of 1954, a group met to see if there was interest in having a Protestant church in town. By April 1, the group had canvassed the town, with the result that a need for such a church was determined, with Presbyterian representing the favored denomination.

The first worship service was held at the end of April at Deerfield School, conducted by Rev. Delwyn Rayson of the Presbyterian Synod of New Jersey and attended by 120 adults and 30 children. In the summer of 1954, the residence at 287 Garrett Road was purchased for use as a manse.

The formal organization of the Community Presbyterian Church of Mountainside occurred on October 10, 1954, with 205 charter members from 105 families. Later that month, Rev. Rayson was installed as the first pastor. All of this happened within eight months!

An anonymous donor gave four and a half acres for the building of the church, and in December 1955 the congregation gathered for the groundbreaking for the sanctuary. Just one year later in December 1956, the congregation gathered again to dedicate the new sanctuary.

The following year, the Garrett Road manse was sold, and the current manse at 1449 Deer Path was purchased.

Organizations began immediately, with a Chancel Choir, Junior Choir, Carol Choir, Sunday School classes, Junior and Senior High Fellowships, Bible study and adult discussion groups, Women's Association, Men's Club, Doubles Club, and Scout Troops all in full swing within the first few years.

With Sunday School classes meeting in members' homes, on Saturdays, and in double sessions at the church, it became clear that more space was needed, and in September 1959 a new building program began. The new addition added over 4,000 square feet for the Christian Education program and was completed in November of 1960.

Rev. Rayson accepted a call to the Church of the Crossroads in Honolulu, Hawaii, in late spring of 1960. In October of the same year, the congregation voted to accept the recommendation of the Pulpit Committee to extend a call to Rev. Elmer Talcott who began his pastorate in January 1961.

Pianos and a second-hand Wurlitzer organ provided music for services until the magnificent Aeolian Skinner pipe organ was installed and dedicated in May 1968, with the second phase of the organ development program completed in the early 1970s, resulting in the beautiful and inspirational organ we have today.

The initial Memorial Garden was dedicated in the spring of 1971, and throughout the years additional walls have been added, with careful attention to grading and landscaping, to create a beautiful resting place for the remains of church members and beloved friends. The addition of stone benches and memorial teak benches make the Garden today a peaceful place for prayer and meditation.

Discussion of starting a Day Nursery School to serve the community began as early as 1960. Throughout the years, the fully accredited Nursery School has become a vital resource in the community and a generous partner to the church.

For the church to be standing today in good repair speaks to the enormous, ongoing maintenance program, spearheaded by the Trustees. From minor leaks to major heating systems, roofing issues, or matters electrical, in all areas problems were met and solved, often with the generous labor of church members.

After many dedicated years of service, Rev. Talcott asked for early retirement, planning to use his time to work for peace. Rev. Robert Taylor served as Interim Pastor until September 1, 1986 when Rev. Christopher Belden became the third pastor of Community Presbyterian Church.

In all its 60-year history, the church, vitally aware of its Christian mission, has reached out to serve and witness in the larger community, and, at the same time, has ministered to its members' spiritual, emotional, and social needs.

Our outreach has helped settle an emigrating family in Mountainside, has fed the poor, has housed the homeless, has responded to disasters near and far, has supported civil rights workers in Mississippi, has aided both hospital and prison chaplaincies, has been attentive to the needs of battered women, rape victims, and bullied children, has emphasized Church World Service and One Great Hour of Sharing, while continuously welcoming all and opening our church to many community groups.

Christian nurture of children and adults has been a constant. Sunday School classes, confirmation classes, Youth Fellowships, Christmas pageants and summer musicals, Vacation Church School, and teenage groups who raised money for a sewing machine for a cause in South India, aided an East Harlem Parish, sponsored a child in South America, and helped build a Habitat for Humanity house all speak to ways in which our children learn the joy of God's love and Christian community.

Discussion groups, open forums, Lenten series, Women's Association Circles, and Bible study in a variety of formats throughout the years have all given formal structure to Christian learning, while an amazing number of social events have provided fellowship and community for our church family.

Music has been a vital part of our church from the very first worship service when the choir and congregation sang, among other hymns, "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine". Always an adult choir (even before there was a chancel), there have been as many as four children's choirs designated by age. An intergenerational hand bell choir has further enriched our church services. We have enjoyed the music from pianos, a harpsichord, the magnificent pipe organ, guitars, flutes, a harp, chamber ensembles, and, on occasion, large orchestras. Choirs from Bucknell, Bloomsburg, and Duke have given concerts here, and in recent years residents of Mountainside have joined our Chancel Choir in the Community Concert series.

In 2012 our church participated in a nationwide church revitalization project, Jeremiah's Journey, which in Mountainside became known as The Voyage. This two-year effort involved church members' ideas and responses in looking at our past, our present, and our future, culminating in the following Vision Statement: "Inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Community Presbyterian Church in Mountainside welcomes all children of God with open arms into our church family. We respond to the ongoing and changing needs within our community, offering a church home that helps us experience God's love and sing God's praises."

May this vision for our church accurately reflect and respect the years of Christian dedication, enthusiasm, planning, and outreach begun in 1954, and may it guide this church and serve faithfully our community in future years.