

A HISTORY OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH READING, PENNSYLVANIA

In 2014, First Presbyterian Church of Reading, Pennsylvania, observed its 200th anniversary. For all but the first 34 years, the stately stone Gothic church has occupied a prominent site in the heart of Reading. Originally a settlement along the Schuylkill River, Reading grew into a flourishing industrial and railroad city, then declined as the population moved out into the suburbs, and now struggles toward revitalization. The welfare of all established city churches is tied in large part to the image and the realities of the city.

The Old Academy

In 1812, one zealous young man, a Reading banker named John McKnight, envisioned a Presbyterian church that offered sermons in English, not German, the predominant language in the borough and the existing churches. He engaged the interest of John Ferguson Grier, a friend in Chester County. With the help of Grier's uncle, the Rev. Nathan Grier, a congregation was established in 1814 by the Presbytery of New Castle and four elders were ordained. With meager resources, the young congregation met in the Old Academy, a school where John Grier, now ordained, served as a teacher five days a week and the pastor on Sunday.

“The Old White Church”

After nine years, the growing congregation built a church on the north side of Penn Street. Painted white, with two wooden pillars in simulated marble, it was known as “The Old White Church,” although officially, the First English Presbyterian Church. It could have fit inside the present church sanctuary.

In 1829, the Rev. Grier helped establish Washington Presbyterian Church by the personal donation of two log cabins as a place of worship for African-Americans. In that same year, at age 45, John Grier died suddenly after a dramatic revival meeting in the church conducted by the famous firebrand reformer, the Rev. Charles C. Finney. From January to May 1829, Rev. Finney stayed on as supply pastor in the Old White Church. Other supply pastors and two permanent pastors served in the next 16 years as the membership grew to 198.

“A new and more commodious church”

The Rev. Dr. Elias J. Richards, the fourth permanent pastor, led the way to the construction of a grander stone edifice, modeled after churches in New York City. Its bold Gothic design emphasized the pointed arch and a 95-foot crenelated bell tower. Completed in 1848 at a cost of \$24,000, this building has remained the home of First Presbyterian Church.

Major renovations and additions have occurred in several main phases. In 1883, during the Rev. Wallace Radcliffe's tenure, new additions were a Johnson organ which filled the whole rear balcony and an ultra-modern Sunday School wing in place of the old lecture hall. Later changes have coincided with the service of other strong pastors.

Renovations of 1948, 1956, and 1964

During the pastorate of the Rev. Dr. Robert MacLeod Campbell, the sanctuary changed completely with the removal of the balconies on three sides. In their place, six stone pillars and arched trusses supported the raised, vaulted ceiling. A new M. P. Moller organ was installed at the front, along with new pews and hanging lantern lights.

In 1956, during the Rev. Dr. Richard Stroman's years, the Education Building was added on the south side of the church, where Reading's City Hall had once stood in close proximity. The remainder of that site is the small urban park where a corner sign now identifies the church.

The final phase of major upgrading occurred in 1964. A wrap-around one-story addition on the north side of the church provided administrative offices, a library, a hallway from the rear entrance to the expanded narthex, and a small enclosed garden. Demolition of the 1883 Sunday School addition allowed for the addition of classrooms, a parlor with a kitchenette and a dumb waiter to the main kitchen below, and the enlargement of the chancel. The refurbished Moller organ was moved inside the chancel, and the choir loft now faced the congregation. New stone window frames were installed, as well as many amenities. The two items removed from the final plans were a chapel and an elevator.

Other physical improvements

By 1969, brilliant stained glass windows created by Latvian artist Leonids Linauts replaced the deteriorating 1866 ones. In the following years, women of the church stitched needlepoint pew cushions that echo the window colors.

In 1989, the limestone-based fieldstone and cut red sandstone masonry was restored to its original appearance with the removal of ivy and weathered deterioration. Since then, interior renovations have included tiered theater seats in the Youth Room, electric chimes, sanctuary display screens, renovation of the upstairs children's room, and redecoration of the parlor.

Current status of the property

The major physical changes in the church occurred during times of economic certainty and of growth or stability in membership. As the inevitable process of aging occurs, the maintenance of an old church steadily impacts the church budget. Weather-related damage in the winter of 2014 required extensive repairs and fueled concerns in some quarters about the burden of maintaining this property. Additionally, a pressing concern is the problem of handicap access to the lower level. Although architectural/engineering plans for the installation of an elevator exist, any decision about going forward is stalled in the emotional debate about location.

In the past year that debate has been diverted into the effort to establish a satellite rental location outside the city for week-day or -night activities, especially those involving youth. As of February 2015, the opening of that place, to be called "The Well," has been delayed by code-required renovations in the Borough of Wyomissing.

Financial stability

First Presbyterian Church has always been able to rely on generous financial subscription by its members. In the Old White Church and the early years of the new church, the sale of pews and an annual rental fee provided for operating expenses. Except for a short period in the 1870s when a monthly voluntary collection was tried, the pew rental system continued until 1947. Although at times the finances of the church seem to have been in a delicate state, energetic Trustees always managed to meet expenses. Over the years many large family gifts and memorials have contributed significantly—the 1883 organ and pews, for example, as well as all the Linauts stained glass windows.

Membership and programs

Like other 19th- and 20th-century churches, First Presbyterian Church developed a substantial congregation: 471 members by 1871; 406 in 1889 even after dismissing 187 members to form Olivet Presbyterian Church; 603 members in 1903; 594 as recently as 2005.

Interest in activities grew along with numbers. The presence of many groups for all ages—Junior Christian Endeavor and King's Daughters in earlier years; the Mother's Society, the Men's Club, boys' clubs, girls' clubs, Boy Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls in later years—all these and many others give the strong impression that the church loomed large in the social life of members well into the middle of the 20th century.

Concern for the Christian education of children and youth has never flagged. The first Daily Vacation Bible School in the city originated here. In the 19th century, efforts to extend the original Sabbath School into missional work throughout the city waxed and waned as churches developed their own Sunday Schools.

The Church School at First Presbyterian has always remained intact. Dedicated volunteers assumed leadership until the hiring of a Director of Christian Education in 1974, a position later changed to Director of Children's Ministry, now a part-time post. In recent years, strong leadership by the Director of Youth Ministry has attracted teenagers and young adults to a variety of programs, including mission trips in the United States and to international locations.

Music over the years

Organ music has always glorified the worship service at First Presbyterian. The acquisition of a new organ has been a source of pride: the Johnson organ in 1883; the Moller organ in 1948 and its refurbishing in 1964; the Patrick J. Murphy installation in 2006.

Choir music gained prominence under strong directors. Raymond F. Bechtel's Junior Choir of fifty children sang regularly on Sundays and performed famously throughout the area in the 1940s. Bechtel also developed a Senior Choir, which has become a staple of the music ministry. Donald Reber introduced a Christmas eve program of anthems, a Twelfth Night service, a concert series, and the community "Sing Messiah" event.

Currently, the worship service has blended music—that is, both classical music presented by the choir together with the organ and also contemporary soft-rock hymns and modern music performed by the Worship Team of vocalists along with piano, guitar, and percussion.

Development of mission programs/interests

The impulse toward generosity beyond the church, that deeply seated value in the Calvinist tradition, has been a recurrent thread in the history of this church, sometimes pronounced, sometimes somewhat obscured.

In 1914 it was reported that First Presbyterian Church had augmented the spiritual resources of the city by giving it "the Y.W.C.A., the Reading Kindergarten Association, the Beulah Anchorage, and the Law and Order Society."

In 1968, this church joined six other congregations in creating the Southwest Christian Ministry, an agency no longer in existence that was dedicated to helping the immediate neighborhood with specific services, including a clothing center, a summer youth program, and a free health clinic.

Current outreach efforts are now led by the Missions Team. Dedicated effort has gone into clarifying and focusing their direction. Funds and energy are divided between support for local and international efforts, as presented in detail in a later section of this study. Their goal of engaging every member of the congregation in ministry aims to demonstrate our connection to the four core values identified this past year during the strategic planning process with TAG Consulting.

Observations about the 2-mile circle

Demographic studies of the area within a 1- or 2-mile radius of the church confirm the observations that can be gathered by driving through the area—that much of this section has attracted low-income, ethnic people.

About two-thirds of the circle lies east of the Schuylkill River. The northern section includes government buildings, the remains of the commercial strip on Penn Street, the new Civic Center and under-construction luxury hotel, banks, and other historic churches. Farther north are residential blocks or mixtures of small businesses and rowhouses.

The southern section of the circle that includes First Presbyterian contains Reading Area Community College, the Goggleworks, the Imax theater, and four well-maintained Reading School District buildings; but also blocks of run-down, low-income rental housing, federal high-rise apartment buildings, and old factories.

The section of the circle across the river to the west contains the prosperous West Reading commercial area, the Reading Hospital complex, the Reading Public Museum, and a section of affluent homes.

Much is often made of the fact that members of First Presbyterian Church live beyond the 2-mile radius, that this is a “drive-in” church. Since the 1960s, only one or two members of the congregation have lived within walking distance or even in the city. However, a number of members are employed in the city and many others attend events or frequent restaurants within the target area. Nevertheless, concern for safety in the city has been offered as one reason for declining membership.

Conclusion

Two hundred years after John McKnight and John Grier led the way, First Presbyterian Church is still here, a church planted in the heart of a small town that turned into a city that changed dramatically in the last 25 years. There have always been challenges; those challenges have always been met. The congregation has a well-grounded faith that God has a plan and will never forsake them.