

APPENDIX M

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VILLAGE CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REMEMBER -- REJOICE -- RENEW
A Brief History

The Village Chapel Presbyterian Church was first promoted by the Reverend J Moody McNair, Minister of Chapels of the First Presbyterian Church, Payne Brown, and Donald L. Cork. The First Presbyterian Church of Charleston supported the new outpost and on August 18k 1946, voted to purchase the building site at 39th Street and Venable Avenue for the new Church.

On September 15, 1946, Dr. McNair conducted a service of worship at the Horace Mann Junior High School with 47 members present. The new Church continued to meet in the school building until August 1, 1948, at which time services were moved to the clubhouse of the Charleston Boat Club. The fledgling congregation was to meet in t his rather unorthodox setting until completion of the new Church building.

Guidance for development of the new Church was provided by a Council, for it was not as yet a constituted Church. Members of the council included Dr. McNair as moderator, John C. Artur, Doyne B. Berlien, Payne Brown, Joe F. Burdette, Elmer H. Dodson, Carolyn H. Cork, Donald L. Cork, Majorie S. Kraus, Robert B. McCue, John Mendenhall, Leroy Osborn, Violet S. Pitzer, Joseph S. Soto, Fred Work and Kenneth Wrenn. This core of individuals continued to sustain the Church through its early development, and their names are indelibly inscribed in the history of Village Chapel.

With guidance from the Outpost Committee of the Session of the First Presbyterian Church, the Council appointed a building committee. Donald L. Cork, Chairman, Leroy Osborn, Fred Work, and Dr. McNail were charged with oversight of the building project. Financed with contributions from First Presbyterian, a grant from the Home Mission Advance Fund of Kanawha Presbytery, and contributions from the Village group and interested friends, the Church, as constructed was valued at \$85,000.

Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on May 8, 1949. As part of the ceremony, “a large pan was placed in the newly broken ground and the congregation filed by, dropping in their contributions for the new Church. The offering received totaled \$1,470.

In the two and one-half years since the first service and despite difficulties of holding Church and Sunday School in a school building and a clubhouse, the congregation had grown from 47 to 95 adults with a Sunday School enrollment of 214.

During the six months the building was under construction, members of the Church, under the direction of Friend Cochran constructed tables, shelves, cabinets and other items to furnish the Church. Many hours were spent creating the pulpit, pulpit chairs and communion table. Church records indicate that Sally Brown, the wife of Payne Brown, donated a leaf from the family’s dining table for use in constructing the mahogany top of the

communion table. During this time a choir was organized, a piano was donated for the Sunday School, and an electric organ was purchased for the sanctuary.

The first service held in the new building was held on November 6, 1949. Fifty-five new members were received into the Church. Three children, Elmer Denison Dodson (Denny), Janie Martin and Andrew Chevalier Cork were baptized. The "Cradle Roll" at this time listed the names of 40 children under the age of three.

The following Sunday, November 13th, a worship service was held at 2:30 p.m. after which an open house was held for all the Presbyterian congregations and other friends in the valley. As part of this event, the builder, H. B. Agsten, presented the keys of the Church to Dr. McNair. Printed in the program for this occasion was a note by Payne Brown that read in part:

Last Sunday as a group of us met here to get the Church ready for the first service, it was like Christmas. We were hanging curtains instead of stockings. The men brought in the pulpit, just completed . . . Evergreens came from yards to the Church lawn. There was a sense of excitement. We were moving in. It was Christmas and a new home . . .

The policy of the First Presbyterian Church was to encourage its outpost missions to Organize as soon as it was practical to do so. Therefore, the Village Chapel, with the sanction of the First Church, petitioned Presbytery to complete the organization of the Church. On March 26, 1950, the Village Chapel was formally organized as a Church. On this glorious occasion the membership was 242 and the new Church had the distinction of being the largest Church ever organized in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.

The first meeting of the Session of the Church was held on March 28th. At this first meeting, it was decided to hold the charter membership open until April 23, 1950. A meeting of the congregation was held to decide on the official name of the Church and the "Village Chapel – Presbyterian" was adopted. The charter membership of the Church was closed with a membership of 276. A budget of \$10,614.50 was adopted for the first year, 1950-51. Receipts that year totaled \$19,000.

On May 7, 1950, a pulpit committee recommended to the congregation that Dr. McNair be called to become the first minister. This received unanimous approval and on September 10th, Dr. McNair was installed.

The young Church continued to flourish and by 1951, the membership had grown to 358 with a Sunday School enrollment of 460. In 1950, Mary Hague, with the support of Dr. McNair, opened a kindergarten in her home. The next year it was moved to the basement of the Church. This program provided quality pre-school education for hundreds of Kanawha Valley children until the spring of 1988.

The Church and Sunday School building had been designed so that an additional 30 feet could be added to the sanctuary and another floor to the Sunday School as the need arose and funds became available. Throughout the summer and winter of 1951, attendance continued to increase taxing accommodations to the utmost. Through a tithing program and gifts from friends of the Church, funds were raised for expansion. In April 1952, construction of a second floor to the Sunday School building was begun at a cost of \$15,207. About this time, a Manse Committee proposed the purchase of a six-room house at 3822 Noyes Avenue. This property was purchased at a cost of \$21,000 and was first occupied by the McNairs in April 1952.

In June 1953, Miss Kathryn Hickman (now Kathryn McCrary), a graduate of Queens College, was employed as the first Director of Christian Education.

In 1954, Dr. McNair accepted a call from the First Presbyterian Church in Sarasota, Florida. His successor was the Reverend Hugh F. Ash, an Army Chaplain with the Airborne Unit at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. A graduate of King College in Bristol, Tennessee and Princeton Theological Seminary, he served as Captain of the Fort Campbell Pistol Team.

Under Dr. Ash, Village Chapel continued to grow and soon there was the need for two worship services on Sunday mornings—one at 9:00 and the second at 11:00. At the same time, the Sunday School was “bursting at the seams,” and in order to alleviate crowded conditions the property at 3810 Venable was purchased to be used as additional Sunday School rooms until such time as a more expansive building program could be undertaken.

Village Chapel became a social hub for the surrounding community. Early in its development, it served as a meeting place for many organizations. In the mid-50s Village Chapel sponsored four Girl Scout troops, two Brownie troops, two Boy Scout troops, and a Cub Scout pack (five dens). The Church sponsored boy’s baseball and basketball teams, girl’s tennis teams and a rifle team for teenage boys.

An important addition to the Church in 1954 was the Nelle R. Dodson Memorial library established to honor the mother of Elmer R. Dodson. With the assistance of Ms. Lucy Steele, a noted Church Educator, Elmer and Polly Dodson were able to duplicate the collection held by Ms. Steele’s home Church, the First Presbyterian Church of Raleigh, North Carolina. The library offers a very fine collection of Christian literature. With the death of Mr. Dodson in 1982, the library was renamed the Dodson Memorial Library.

In May 1955, the first edition of what soon became the “The Villager” was published by the Senior High Fellowship. This newspaper is still published bi-weekly and continues to provide important information for the congregation and friends of the Church.

By 1956, the membership at Village Chapel had grown to 612. Church School attendance averaged 360 on Sunday morning. The Women of the Church had nine circles meeting monthly. The Men of the Church held monthly dinner meetings.

In February 1959, Dr. Ash resigned. The Reverend James R. Kennedy, formerly of Hinton, became pastor. With the continued growth of membership to 684, the need for a larger sanctuary became increasingly evident. In November 1960, a campaign resulted in pledges of \$126,000 to fund a new sanctuary, choir room, kitchen, and parlor. Construction began in July 1961 with completion the following year. The new sanctuary, designed to seat four hundred, was dedicated on July 8, 1962.

The new sanctuary was described as a “blend of materials from many sources.” The stained-glass windows are of Blenko glass. The laminated beams of the sanctuary came from Arkansas. The red-oak pews were manufactured in North Carolina out of West Virginia wood. A newsman of the time noted, “In the Village Chapel Sanctuary is visible evidence of inspiration. We know that it is inspired for the simple reason it inspires. It elevates. It exalts. It lifts one up. To enter it, in short, is to have a spiritual experience.

Throughout the ensuing years, Village Chapel continued to provide a meeting place for youth and community groups. In 1968 the Charleston City Parks and Recreation Department began a Teen Canteen each Saturday evening from 7:30 to 10:00 in our Fellowship Hall to provide recreation for the young people of the Kanawha City area. That same year a study clinic was set up as a pilot program at Village Chapel.

In 1968, Mr. Kennedy resigned and was replaced in 1969 by the Reverend Conrad Crow. Mr. Crow came to Village Chapel from Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife, Carolyn and children, Terri Lynn, Marshall and Charles.

Dr. Crow remained at Village until 1982. During those thirteen years, the Church continued to provide a nurturing environment for youth and to contribute to the work of the Greater Church. In 1972, the congregation provided \$4,000 to support the work of Dr. Alan and Alma Gordon and their family as missionaries to Brazil. The Gordons continued in this ministry until their retirement just this year. In 1973, Village Chapel celebrated its 25th year.

In 1980, a drive was undertaken to replace the organ. A committee which included current members, William Coffey, Don Pitzer, Kathryn McCrary, Terry and Carolyne Perrine, spearheaded a capital fund to raise \$125,000 for purchase of a pipe organ. In August 1981, the Reuter Organ Company of Lawrence, Kansas delivered (in pieces) a 21-rank pipe organ. Installation began in October, culminating in a dedication and recital on November 29th.

On April 19, 1982, Conrad Crow announced that he had accepted a call to the Great Bridge Presbyterian Church of Chesapeake, Virginia. Until a replacement could be found, a number of interim ministers served the Church, including the popular Dr. William Benfield.

On September 4, 1983, Village Chapel welcomed its fifth full-time pastor, the Reverend W. Frank Mansell, Jr. With his wife Joan and their son, Frank, the Mansells came to us from the Buntyn Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Over the years to the present time, Village has served an important role in providing a caring and vibrant community of faith. It continues to be a center for youth and community activity. It provides activities for families and senior citizens. It is a survivor—in August 1988, the Church was struck by lightning and suffered severe damage to all but the sanctuary. The members of the congregation pulled together to rebuild the physical Church and in doing so, strengthen the ties within the membership. It is a “giving” Church as it continues to open its doors to be of service to the community as is reflected in the generous allocation of contributions to benevolence in the annual budget and to the many service projects the congregation undertakes. In this year of celebration, the congregation provided over \$40,000 and the necessary labor to construct a Habitat House as a gift to the community. The face of Village has changed. Of the 276 charter members, only eighteen are still counted in the current membership. It is sad to note that many of the individuals so vital to this Church have come to the end of their lives in recent years.

Today, on this glorious occasion, as we pause to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Village Chapel Presbyterian Church, we Remember its history, we Rejoice in the accomplishments of these 50 years, and we look to Renew our vision as a Church poised to continue a ministry of service and caring into the new millennium.

Sandra S. Bowles
March 26, 2000