

a new church on the corner of 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Kanawha Avenue. The new building was formally dedicated on December 10, 1950, though a sign on the front of the church identifies it as the South Ruffner Presbyterian Church with the date, 1948. Today, signage in front of this structure indicates it is now the “Hope Church” with services on Sundays at 9:30 AM and in smaller letters below this it indicates it is the South Ruffner Presbyterian Church with Sunday services at 11AM.

The **WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH** was started in 1919 as a mission church, again with the support of the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston, to serve a growing Kanawha City community of glassworkers and their families. Meetings were held in the Owens Club Room, which suggests that these took place at the Owens-Illinois Glass Plant. In October 1923, church members began meeting in a home located at 2511 Kanawha Avenue in the South Ruffner area just five blocks from the South Ruffner Church. The Sunday school and church services were held at this location until completion of the church building at its long-term location in 1925. This building was financed by members of the First Presbyterian Church and the Kanawha City Church and was officially organized on August 25, 1925. Westminster celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the year 2000 and would be celebrating its 100-year anniversary in 2025. Services continued at Westminster until its closure on December 24, 2019. With its closure, several of the Westminster congregation members transferred their church membership to Village Chapel.

**SOUTH PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH** was built in South Park, another area of Kanawha City--a small community of about two hundred families located in the southwestern area along the narrow valley of Venable Branch, a very small stream which flows to and empties into the Kanawha River in the vicinity of 29th Street. Organized as a “mission” under the direction of Dr. J. Moody McNair, and the First Presbyterian Church, it became South Park Presbyterian Church on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1946, with forty-two charter members. Currently, South Park is still an active church and over recent years has participated with Village Chapel to engage in church and community activities.

## **VILLAGE CHAPEL - IN THE BEGINNING – THE 1940s**

Village Chapel was first conceived in 1946 in the minds of Reverend J. Moody McNair, then the Minister of Chapels of the First Presbyterian Church, Mr. Payne Brown, and Mr. Donald Cork. Enlisting the support of the officers of Charleston’s First Presbyterian Church and several interested Kanawha City laymen, these founding fathers were authorized to proceed to establish an “outpost”. The sponsoring Church, First Presby, voted to purchase a building site at the corner of 39<sup>th</sup> Street and Venable Avenue.

Guidance for the development of the new church was provided by a Council, because it was not yet a constituted church. Members of the Council included Reverend McNair as moderator; John C. Arter, Doyne B. Berlien, Payne Brown, Joe F. Burdette, Elmer H. Dodson, Carolyn H. Cork, Donald L. Cork, Marjorie S. Draus, Robert B. McCue, John Mendenhall, Leroy Osborn, Violet S. Pitzer, Joseph S. Soto, Fred Work, and Kenneth Wren. This core of

individuals continued to sustain the church through its early years, and their names are indelibly inscribed in the history of Village Chapel.

The Council appointed a Building Committee composed of Donald L. Cork, Chairman, LeRoy Osborn, Fred A. Work, and Dr. J. Moody McNair, Ex-Officio. A Finance Committee was composed of Joseph F. Soto, Chairman, Earl H. Bailey, John C. Arter, Payne Brown, John Mendenhall, Kenneth Wrenn, Friend C. Cochran, and Robert G. Massey. These committees, under the guidance of the Session's Outpost Committee of the First Presbyterian Church, developed plans which resulted in the financing and building of the new church. Property for the proposed church, valued at \$85,000, was financed by contributions from the First Church, a grant from the Home Mission Advance Fund of the Presbytery, contributions of the Village group and other contributing friends.

Martha McNair Shell, the daughter of Reverend McNair, shared this story: "Mother told us that while out in the car one day, she and Daddy (Reverend McNair), were at a stop light in Kanawha City and Daddy pointed to a corner lot and stated 'There ought to be a church there,' thus the birth of the Village Chapel where it stands today." (Letter from Martha McNair Shell, January 27, 2000).

On **September 15, 1946**, through the courtesy of the Kanawha County Board of Education, the first Sunday school classes and worship services of the new congregation were held in the auditorium of the Horace Mann School with forty-seven persons present for the initial service. With a rental agreement in place with the Board of Education, services were conducted by Reverend McNair, and attendance grew to an average of 132 each Sunday. Over time, other activities evolved, including two Women's Circles, numbering approximately thirty-five members each, two Brownie Scout troops and a Junior Choir.

On **April 12, 1948**, the Reverend J. Moody McNair, minister at First Presbyterian Church, wrote the following letter to "Friends" though there is no indication in the historical notes of who these individuals might be:

It is time for our big forward step toward the proposed church at 39<sup>th</sup> St. and Venable Ave. I know you will be grateful for the opportunity to take this step with us, and thankful God has made it possible for you to do so.

It is needless for me to point out to you the real need for a church at this strategic place. I think we all realize the great opportunity we have for glorifying God by going forward. We are confident that He will bless what we are doing and will do. His Cause is a glorious Cause and He honors us by asking us to undertake the task for Him. We cannot but rise up and say, "Here am I..."

Let us keep in mind the fact that 18 months ago we had no sabbath school and no morning worship. On September 15, 1946, 18 months ago, we started with 46 people.

We now minister to over 225 in a school building which was not designed for religious purposes. Even in the face of these difficulties we have grown.

NOW - The day of march has come. God's command is "Forward!"

NOW - Approximately \$100,000 is needed for the first unit which will comprise the chapel and religious education building.

The First Presbyterian Church purchased the lot at a cost of \$10,000 and supplied ministerial service for eighteen months. On August 1, 1948, the Kanawha County School Board ruled that the Horace Mann School "will no longer be available for religious services, hence you see the urgency of the situation.'

On completion of the first unit, it is our hope to have an organized self-supporting church.

It is our desire that the first unit be erected debt free so that the step above can be put into effect. This church is to be a church ministering to the West end of Kanawha City and the major portion of the funds must come from those whom the church will serve.

As one that Christ has blessed in many ways throughout your life, will you not now show your gratitude to Him by making a generous pledge to His Church? By this pledge you will be honoring Him with your substance and providing a church home for hundreds yet unborn. This pledge is so designed as to cover a two-year period, from June 30, 1948, to June 30, 1950.

Thank you in His Name and may His grace and peace be with you always, I am  
Your Pastor,  
J. Moody McNair

After the fledgling Village Chapel congregation held worship services at Horace Mann for nearly two years, the Board of Education ruled that it would no longer be possible to lease any public-school building for religious services after August 1, 1948. As a result, Village Chapel was no longer permitted to use the school for worship services. Following this decision, the group moved to the clubhouse of the Charleston Boat Club located on the bank of the Kanawha River near 35<sup>th</sup> Street. Charter members relate that the Club's "refreshments" were covered to create a more appropriate setting for Sunday morning services. Martha McNair Shell shared the following regarding the church meeting in the Boat Club, "Our family would go over on Sunday morning before worship service to clean up the place. I distinctly remember feeling very wicked when I helped pick up beer cans and threw them away during our clean-up duty!" The congregation continued to meet in this rather unorthodox venue until the new church construction was completed in the fall of 1949.

Excerpts from a charter member's (Ditty Mendenhall) letter recalling the church's beginnings remembers "the Sunday Dr. McNair pulled from his pocket a wrinkled \$1.00 bill from Bob Phillips (owner of a restaurant on McCorkle Avenue behind the church site) to start the building fund" and "when the boys in Harold Miller's Sunday School class finally succeeded in slipping a nickel in the juke-box between Sunday School and church"!

Harry Brawley, in his autobiography, I Boppy, wrote:

In 1947 the First Presbyterian Church sponsored a new church in Kanawha City at Venable Avenue and 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Preliminary services were held in Horace Mann School beginning in September of that year. The Rev. Moody McNair, an assistant pastor at First Church, served as the minister. The new church was a success from the very beginning. People of all faiths, including one Muslim family, were interested in having a church in their community, especially for their children. Services were held in the school building for a time and then moved to the Boat Club near the Kanawha City Bridge. The school board was afraid other religious groups would begin asking to use school buildings on Sundays. Having services in the Boat Club, where beer was sold, bothered some members. Beer cases were stacked and covered by a white cloth to form a podium. Boppy began teaching at the beginning of the movement to build the new church. When services were moved to the Boat Club and the objections were heard, Boppy said, "If Christianity could change the cross from being a symbol of execution and death into one of salvation, I'm sure we can sanctify a few beer cases on Sunday. That seemed to pacify the members who were objecting."

Ground-breaking ceremonies for Village Chapel were held on **May 8, 1949**. After the worship service, a large pan was placed in a hole in the ground and those present were invited to pass in review, donating any contribution they wished to the cause. A generous contribution was received in the amount of \$1,470.

In the two and one-half years since the first service and despite the 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.

Donald Cork, Chair of the Building Committee, included the following in the Bulletin for the Ground-Breaking Service:

Plans for a proposed church building and Sunday school unit were initiated by the Council under the guidance of the Board of Elders of the First Presbyterian Church, and in the promotion of that plan the Church purchased the present building site.

The working drawing for the proposed building prepared by Glenn Hancock, architect, and the Financing Plan developed by the Council were given final approval by the Board of Elders on April 29 of this year, and by the congregation of the First Church on

May 1. A contract for the construction was immediately entered into with H. B. Agsten and Sons.

It is proposed that upon the completion of the building, the persons associated together as The Village Chapel shall become duly organized and constituted as a Presbyterian Church, U. S.

The Reverend J.M. McNair, D.D. observed in the same Ground-Breaking Service Bulletin:

The Church is nothing less than the body of Christ—the organism to which He gives spiritual life and through which He manifests the fineness of His power and grace. The Church cannot be defined in human terms. It is the great company of persons whom Christ has saved, in whom He Dwells, to whom, and through whom, He reveals God.

He who is the life of nature and of humanity reveals Himself most fully in the great company of those who have joined themselves to Him by faith. Union with Christ is the real purpose of the Church. This alone transforms the sinner into a Christian, and this alone makes possible that vital and spiritual fellowship between individuals with constitutes the organizing principle of the Church. The same divine life which ensures the pardon and the perseverance of the believer, unites him to all other believers. The indwelling Christ makes the Church superior to and more permanent than all humanitarian organizations, they die, but because Christ lives, the Church lives also. Without a proper conception of this sublime relation of the Church to Christ, we cannot properly appreciate our dignity as Church members. It is a partnership, but a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born. May this Church be a refuge where His children can find not only fellowship, pardon, and grace, but where they can also find peace for their souls.

In the six months while the building was under construction, a group of church members constructed tables, shelves, cabinets and other items of furniture. Several members of the church spent many hours making the pulpit, pulpit chairs, and a communion table. The lectern which is now located in the street-side entry to the narthex is a piece of the original furniture built by Friend Cochrane and other men of the church. 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 (located where the Fellowship Hall is currently).

During construction of the new church a note in the bulletin reminded the membership: We are sure that you have watched daily the progress being made on our new church. It is a great satisfaction to each of you personally to know that this will be your

church. It will be yours because it has come into being by your consecrated efforts and your constant loyalty . . . Please continue to visit the construction project daily and say with justifiable pride, “That’s my church!”

The building was completed, and the initial service was held on **November 6, 1949**. At this memorial service, Dr. McNair’s sermon subject was “The Glory of the Church” and after his sermon, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was celebrated. At this service, fifty-five new members were received. Of these individuals, thirty-four new members were received by letter, nineteen by profession of faith, and two by re-affirmation of faith. Three received Bibles for memorizing the Catechism of the Presbyterian Church. Three children – Elmer Denison Dodson, Janie Martin, and Andrew Chevalier Cork were baptized. The “Cradle Roll” at this time listed the names of forty children under the age of three.

A worship service was held on Sunday afternoon from 2:30 – 3:00 on **November 13, 1949**, to celebrate the Dedication of Village Chapel followed by an open house for all Presbyterian Church congregations throughout the Kanawha Valley to see the newly completed church. The program included the presentation of the keys to the new Church by the builder, H. B. Agsten, and an address by the Reverend George H. Vick, D. D. of First Church.

Printed in the program was a note by Payne Brown that read in part:

Last Saturday, 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. Some had brooms. The mop had a busy evening. A jeep made many trips for chairs. 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. It was like fixing for a wedding. We all walked about and admired the building and the furnishings and the organ. We had seen such things before, but this church is OURS . . .

It is ours who are here today. Ours, because today we are from the First Presbyterian which initiated the enterprise. Ours, because we are friends and neighbors who have given separately of our money and our time. Ours, because some have had three years of working and of waiting. Ours, because some have just come to take part in this work. Ours, because some are just now deciding that here is the place for us, here is something worthwhile to which can devote our best efforts and time, and prayers—here we can put our best because here we find The Best.

This has been an expensive enterprise. Already the First Presbyterian Church and its members have given directly to this work about \$20,000, besides furnishing to the Home Mission Committee the funds from which to put \$5,000 here. The Church stands committed to \$5,000 more and so does the Home Mission Committee. The owner of the Village Apartments made a contribution. The people of The Village

Chapel have already raised over \$15,000. They confidently expect to meet, over the years, their obligation for \$20,000 more. Expensive—perhaps but look at the value! Ask anyone who has had a part and see the joy which has followed!

The new church, erected and furnished at a cost of \$75,000, had a membership of 239 at the time of its dedication and was pastored by Dr. McNair, who instituted and supervised the building of the edifice as an outpost of First Church. It was the fourth to be built under his supervision – the others being Elk Hills, Walnut Valley, and South Park Presbyterian churches. The original Village Chapel structure was comprised of a one-story building with a basement which would provide facilities for offices, meeting rooms, and Sunday School. A larger area to serve as the church sanctuary (now the Fellowship Hall) was connected to the previous structure. The total budget for the church for 1950-51 was \$10,614.50 with \$4,000 designated as the pastor's salary. Budget data for 1951-52 included \$4,000 for the pastor's salary, \$1,440 for rental of a manse, a pastor's annuity of \$388, and an auto allowance of \$300!

## **VILLAGE CHAPEL IN THE 1950s**

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, Village Chapel, with the sanction of the First Church, petitioned the Presbytery to complete the organization of the proposed church and on **March 26, 1950**, was formally recognized as a Church. On this glorious occasion the membership was 242 and the new Church, designated officially as Village Chapel Presbyterian Church, had the distinction of being the largest Church ever organized in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A.

The first meeting of the Church Session was held on **March 28, 1950**. At this 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 "Village Chapel – Presbyterian" was officially adopted. The charter membership of the Church was closed with a membership of 276. A budget of \$10,514.50 was adopted for the first year, **1950-1951**. Receipts that year came to \$19,000, an amount well over the budgeted amount!

A Pulpit Committee comprised of seven individuals including Mr. Fred Work, Chairman, Miss Susan Cork, Mrs. John Mendenhall, Mrs. Julia Martin, Mr. P.J. Moore, Mr. Donald Pitzer and Mr. Joseph Soto recommended to the congregation that Reverend J. Moody McNair be called to become the first minister for Village Chapel. This received unanimous approval. The Pulpit Committee was authorized to issue a call to Dr. McNair, who accepted the call on **June 1, 1950**. Prior to this time, Davis and Elkins College conferred a doctoral degree upon him so he could be referred to as Dr. McNair.

Shortly after the formation of Village Chapel, The Kanawa Knews, Official Bulletin of the Women of the Church of Kanawha Presbytery, Synod of West Virginia announced: CONGRATULATIONS! It is with real joy that we welcome the Women of the Church of the