



## **History of First Congregational Church**

The founding father of FCC was Emilie Barnes Turner. She and her husband, Spencer, were members of the Madison Avenue Reformed Church. It was she who, on August 19, 1911, called on Clyde Nisbeth to broach the idea of a Congregational Church in Chappaqua. In less than a month (September 11) a small group - Clyde Nisbeth, Henry Pratt, Samuel Thompson, Dr. W. W. Mills, and William R. Coffee - had met with Mrs. Turner at her home, and agreed on a letter to be sent to residents of the community. They invited people to have an open discussion as to the advisability of starting a Congregational Church in Chappaqua. 30 people attended. Their enthusiasm led them to “gather the congregation” on January 21, 1912. The Rev. John Huber assisted the congregation.

During the next months and years, the new congregation, faced with limited membership and resources, worked to develop a meaningful program for the existing members and new members. They also planned how to finance and build a new structure for the worship and work of the church since they were worshipping on the second floor of a building.

At the first Annual Meeting on April 27, 1912, the following officers were elected: Deacons: Clyde Nisbeth, Henry Pratt, Dr. W. W. Mills, Warren Matthews, E.C. Haviland, Fred Sutton; Treasurer: E. R. Pratt.

The Rev. Tiffany Otis Barnes, a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan, provided ministerial leadership until his death in 1918. The Barnes Memorial organ in the stone church (the first location of FCC) was dedicated to his memory.

In April of 1912, the Constitution was approved and discussions began on construction of a new worship space. Property on the northwest corner of Orchard Ridge and King Street was purchased for \$2,700. Sufficient funds were raised by August, 1914, when the ground-breaking took place. The cornerstone containing a Bible, membership and Sunday school lists,

pictures, a church calendar, and local newspapers, was laid on October 24, 1914. The stone church (as it came to be called) was literally built by members of the church.

In 1930, the Rev. Galen Russell began a pastorate that focused on the importance of lay leadership. He and his wife were instrumental in sponsoring an interdenominational youth group for 15 to 25 year-olds known as the Hillside Club, the Men's Club of Chappaqua, Girl Scout Troop #1, and the Quaintance Club (predecessor to the popular Couples' Club of the 1960's) and other activities that served to attract many new members. His tenure ended in 1943. Under various ministers, membership increased by 50% and the budget grew to almost \$7000. Growth in the ensuing years forced the congregation to start considering finding a larger space. In 1945, a program was launched to fund the building of a new parish center.

The population increase (soon to be called the baby boom) caused the space-strapped church to send church school classes to the Friends Meeting House a block down King Street or the Baptist Church even further down the street. The arrival of The Rev. Dr. Ken Nye provided FCC with the impetus and excitement to embark on a project, which we now appreciate as our current worship space, at the other end of Orchard Ridge Road at Bedford Road.

**The chronology for the new property and building was as follows:**

- February 28, 1948 - Congregation authorized purchase of property - \$7,500
- February 28, 1949 - Authorization of fundraising campaign - pledges were \$79,000 received
- May 30, 1950 - Construction of parish center authorized - \$218,000
- April 29, 1951 - Ground breaking service
- September 23, 1951 - Cornerstone service for entire building (corner of Memorial Room)
- September 1952 - Parish center completed
- June 26, 1955 - Sanctuary completed

Many new classrooms for the church school and a new kitchen for the Women's Society fostered even more activity and growth at FCC. These spaces and the Parish Hall were well used to house fund-raising dinners, Boy Scout Troop #2, the Christmas Fair and Barn Sale.

By the mid 1950's, FCC had again outgrown its space and was holding two worship services and seating worshipers in the halls with loudspeakers transmitting the service to those who could not be accommodated in the Parish Hall. A church population of almost 1000 was worshipping in a space intended to accommodate about 250. In June 1955, a new sanctuary with an east-west aspect, a chancel for the organ and choir and link containing offices connecting it to the existing structure was dedicated. FCC became the social and spiritual hub of the Protestant community in the area.

Once the physical worship needs of the congregation were met, Dr. Nye, turned to improvement of its spiritual health. The Rev. Alfred D. Moore was called as Associate Minister of Visitation to assist Dr. Nye in ministering to the ever-increasing flock. In 1959, a much-needed increase in available church school space and the completion of office and choir and music rooms was undertaken. Membership had risen to nearly 1500 and Church School enrollment had swelled to almost 1000. In 1960, The Rev. Ed McLane arrived to sharpen the focus on Christian Education. He is perhaps most famous for his "Commuter Congregation" on the 7:05 train to Grand Central Station.

This era with its change of the area's demographics marked the end of the population growth at FCC and the retirement of Dr. Nye, who was replaced in 1965 by The Rev. Dr. Vernon Loescher whose tenure saw the revamping of the organizational structure of the church, establishing the Church Council as the main governing body and giving various boards the responsibility of managing various aspects of church life.

Dr. Loescher was replaced in the mid 1970's by The Rev. Richard Ryder. When Rev. Ryder decided to move to Florida in 1988, The Rev. Timothy Ives became FCC's spiritual leader, followed, in 2007 by The Rev. Tom Lenhart. Under Rev. Lenhart's leadership, in 2013, the church passed an Open and Affirming Statement, intentionally welcoming all people into our church. In 2014, the church called its first female Senior Minister and openly gay person, The Rev. Dr. Martha R. Jacobs.