

Stevens Memorial United Methodist Church: Humble Beginnings, A Glorious Past, A Continuing Presence

Stevens Memorial United Methodist Church of Harrisburg ceased to exist April 18, 2004. When its membership peaked at 2290 in 1953, Stevens Memorial was the largest membership church in the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church. The year 1953 also marked the dedication of the Stevens Memorial \$131,000 Christian Education Unit – debt free within 3 years after it was consecrated in 1950. It was the practice in Methodism to consecrate a building when it was erected, and to dedicate it only when the entire debt had been removed.

But 1953 was also the beginning of a gradual decline in the life of Stevens Memorial Church and the surrounding neighborhood. Reading the conference journals with 20-20 hindsight, one can see the handwriting on the wall – for 1953 was the last year for Ridge Avenue Church in downtown Harrisburg, and 1954 marked the first appearance of Calvary Church in the suburbs.

To its credit, Stevens Memorial Church continued to be an effective witness for Christ to the very end. During its final years Stevens Memorial opened its doors to various ministries serving the immediate community and sponsored annual street fairs emphasizing neighborhood pride and the desire of the church to make a difference in people’s lives. In addition, the congregation maintained its building with pride, repairing and remodeling as if they planned to remain well into the future. As a result, our Hispanic congregation in Harrisburg, Iglesia Emmanuel Metodista, is able to move into an excellent facility – and has even chosen to incorporate “Stevens” into its name and become Stevens Emmanuel UMC.

The material transferred to the conference archives when Stevens Memorial ceased to exist reveals a congregation that was vibrant to the end. Indeed, a research paper analyzing the final years of the congregation could provide valuable insights for other inner-city congregations facing similar situations. Hopefully the “semi-success” of Stevens Memorial will prove to be a stepping stone between established inner-city congregations pulling out in the midst of dissension and decay and remaining to incorporate neighborhood residents into a unified body of growing Christians.

In his sermon celebrating the transfer of the United Methodist property and ministry from Stevens Memorial to Stevens Emanuel, Bishop Neil Irons preached on the prophetic transition from Elijah to Elisha as recorded in II Kings 2. Just as Elisha asked of Elijah. “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me,” the Bishop prayed for a double portion of the spirit of Stevens Memorial to fall upon Stevens Emmanuel.

To state and celebrate the origins of the Stevens Memorial Congregation, we present the Historical Record as preserved on the opening pages of its original 1869-1889 membership book. The material was entered as it happened, with the handwriting and style changing each time different persons added to the record. An asterisk is used in the printed account that follows to indicate the beginning of a new entry – which was generally made each March, just prior to annual conference and the beginning of a new fiscal year.

The entries cover the period from the struggling beginnings of the congregation until its incorporation on firm ground in 1886 as the Thirteenth Street Methodist Episcopal Church. The congregation was renamed the Rev. Benjamin Fletcher Stevens Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, for a previous pastor, when the present building was erected in 1907.

To orient the reader, we preface the Historical Record with the description of the inscribed Lochiel Communion Set. The set has been on permanent display at the conference archives since it was re-discovered and displayed at annual conference about ten years ago. The description provides a broad overview of some of the persons, places and events mentioned in the Historical Record.

Lochiel Communion Set

This communion set was presented to the Lochiel Methodist Episcopal Church by Mrs. William Calder September 13, 1868.

When the Pennsylvania Steel Company was formed in June 1865, William Calder and other Harrisburg businessmen raised the capital to locate the company in what later became Steelton. Soon furnaces and communities sprang up in the area. Grace ME Church in Harrisburg sponsored mission congregations in Baldwin [Steelton] and Lochiel. The former group met in the dining room of the General Boarding House until their first building was erected in 1869; in 1877 they relocated to Fourth and Pine Streets and eventually became the First Methodist Church of Steelton. The latter congregation, located between Harrisburg and Steelton, worshipped in a company-owned building.

When the Lochiel furnace burned in 1872, the business was acquired by a Presbyterian who arranged for the services to be conducted by a clergyman of that denomination. Mr. and Mrs. Calder and most of the Lochiel ME members then transferred to the class meeting in the Mt. Pleasant schoolhouse at Mulberry and Crescent Streets. In 1873, William Calder purchased the property at Thirteenth and Vernon Streets and resold it to the “Allison Hill ME Church.”

The original 1873 structure was replaced by the present sanctuary in 1909. Over the years the congregation has been known as Allison Hill, Mt.

Pleasant, Grace Mission, and Thirteenth Street. Today they are the Stevens United Methodist Church.

Historical Record

* The first class of church members was formed in Lochiel during the fall of 1868 by Rev. George G. Rakestraw, who at that time was pastor of the St. Paul ME Church in Harrisburg. Brother Josiah McCloud was appointed leader. In the same year, the first class was formed in Baldwin by the same preacher, and brother Martin Davis appointed as leader. In March 1869, Lochiel and Baldwin were formed into a new charge and Rev. John Stringer appointed the first pastor, Rev. R.H. Pattison DD being presiding elder.

During the spring of 1869 the ME Church was built at Baldwin and dedicated June 27th by Rev. R.H. Pattison DD, assisted by Rev. C.I. Thompson, Rev. G.G. Rakestraw and Rev. J. Stringer. The church cost near \$4000.00. At the time of dedication a debt of some \$1200.00 remained.

When the charge was organized there were in all twenty-five members and four probationers. The infant society, though poor and weak, had to struggle against numerous difficulties and oppositions. At the end of the first conference year there were thirty-five members and ten probationers.

* In March 1870 Rev. W.C. Johnson was appointed to this charge. During the year encouraging revival meetings were held both in Lochiel and Baldwin. Before the close of the year the membership in Lochiel was greatly diminished through the removal to other places of many connected at that point. At Baldwin there were but few removals and some accessions, so that at the end of the year the aggregate membership was about the same as at its commencement, there being in all thirty-six members and fifteen probationers.

* At the conference session held March 1871, the Baldwin appointment was made a separate charge and Rev. J. Sayers appointed pastor. Allison's Hill was added to Lochiel, and Rev. W.C. Johnson was appointed preacher in charge. On Wednesday evening May 10, the first class in Allison's Hill was organized at the house of Mr. John Herman, eighteen persons having signified their willingness to unite.

* At the conference session held March 1872, Rev. F.E. Church was appointed to this charge. During the year the Lochiel furnaces burning down, they passed into other hands – who holding to the Presbyterian faith desired a preacher of their own denomination. At the close of the year Lochiel was dropped.

* At the Chambersburg session of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, the city of Harrisburg by the action of the General Conference of '72 having passed into the hands of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, held March 1873, Rev. T.S. Wilcox Jr. was appointed to Allison's Hill charge. He found upon the record the names of 20 members and one probationer. Rev. Thompson Mitchell DD being presiding elder of the district.

* In the latter part of August 1873, the piece of ground on the corner of 13th and Vernon Streets – 149 by 120 – was secured by Mr. William Calder from Mr. James Thompson and by him sold to “the Allison’s Hill ME Church.” The cornerstone was laid, the official body having changed the name of the church to “the Mt. Pleasant ME Church,” September 27, 1873, by Rev. W.C. Johnson. The work on the building progressed rapidly until it was under roof, when the charge was crippled by the panic so that the force was very much reduced, keeping but one or two men at work through the winter.

By the blessing of Divine Providence, the building was completed and dedicated to the service of the Almighty God on May 15, 1874. The congregation was quite small. The day was beautiful and weather very warm. Dr. Holmes, pastor of Grace ME Church, preached in the morning on “Faith.” Dr. Hamlin, the presiding elder of the district, in the evening on “The Necessity of Counting the Cost.” The collections were ably conducted by the presiding elder; they resulted in the aggregate in connection with what had been raised before to \$4000. The building cost \$4500 – leaving \$500 unprovided for.

This church, beautiful and attractive, as well as a great blessing to the community, will stand as a monument of the self sacrifice and beneficence and benevolence of these who, under the blessings of High Heaven, are now known as the Mt. Pleasant ME Church.

* During the conference year ending March 30, 1876, a large subscription (some \$1700) remained on the books unpaid, it being considered impossible to collect any money during the reigning financial crisis. At Cumberland Valley Camp Meeting a subscription was secured amounting to about \$250, which was nearly all paid to the trustees to assist the church, and beyond this was there no money collected or paid over during the year. The pastor at the above date gives it as his opinion, based upon what he has been able to gather of information, that the said Mount Pleasant ME Church is so failed financially from the fact that the people have not so much religion as they have money.

* And now at the close of another conference year, I do this day March 20, 1877, add a hearty amen to the above. H.N.W.

[No entry for 7 years.]

* At the conference session of March 1877, Rev. William V. Ganoe was appointed pastor. He remained in charge but one year, his labors, however, being attended with great success during his brief stay.

At the following conference, March '78, the pastor appointed was the Rev. John Stine, who also remained in charge but one year.

Rev. Daniel Hartman was appointed pastor of the church in March 1879, and was re-appointed the following year. About the close of his first year, in consequence of the debt still resting on the property, amounting to about \$6000, it was sold at sheriff’s sale, the purchaser being Mr. William Calder, from who the lot had been purchased. By his permission the society

continued to worship in the church, without payment of rent, until his decease, when his heirs gave the same permission.

Upon the recommendation of a joint committee, consisting of three members from Grace Church Harrisburg and three from Mt. Pleasant Church, the conference of March 1881, which met at York, changed the name from "Mt. Pleasant" to "Grace Church Mission" and appointed the Rev. George M. Hoke pastor, who was re-appointed the two following years, thus remaining in charge until March 1884.

* The end had in view in the change of name referred to in the preceding paragraph was this – viz., that Grace ME Church might take this charge under its fostering care. To further this object, the joint committee mentioned above passed resolutions addressed to the Quarterly Conference of Grace Church commending to it "Grace Church Mission" as a needy and worthy charge, and asking that the said Quarterly Conference take action looking towards the rendering of pecuniary assistance to said charge. These resolutions either miscarried or, if they reached their destination, were not acted upon.

In March of 1884 a communication was received by the recording steward of this charge from the Quarterly Conference of Grace Church stating in effect that it was deemed inexpedient to make an official grant of money to this charge, but further, that this charge might, if it would, canvass for subscriptions among the members of Grace Church. To some extent this privilege was used, about twenty dollars having been thus collected during the conference year 1884-85.

C.V. Hartzell was appointed preacher in charge by Bishop Harris in March 1884. A four-weeks meeting held in December and January resulted in the conversion of 16 souls and 13 successions to the church on probation.

The estate of William Calder, deceased, was divided in the fall of 1884, by which division Mrs. Kate Calder Turner became the possessor of the property occupied by this society. The pastor in January '85 waited upon Mrs. Turner and endeavored to make arrangement by which we might have a certain tenure of the building. Mrs. Turner said that she was not there prepared to make or receive propositions touching the disposition of the property, but would soon grant me a second interview where, she thought, a satisfactory arrangement might be made. Up to date (March 1885), this promise has not been redeemed. Mrs. Turner has in the meantime gone to Colorado (where her husband, Rev. William Turner, is pastor of a Congregational Church) and we are simple "tenants at will."

In view of the uncertain tenure of the church and its effect on attendance at the services in the church, as well as on the finances, it was resolved at the adjourned Quarterly Conference held March 9, 1885, that the charge could not obligate itself to pay more than \$350 or \$400 salary during the next conference year. The salary paid in 1884-'85 was \$434, a deficiency of \$71.

* The Huntingdon conference of 1885 appointed Rev. Horace Lincoln Jacobs pastor, this being his first charge. The first Quarterly Conference, April 11, estimated salary at \$475 – \$50 of which was for room rent – both of which were paid in full. At this Quarterly Conference the pastor reported the probationers as doing well, the Sabbath School increasing in numbers and having an average attendance for the quarter of 155. By the second Quarterly Conference, July 4, the average attendance had increased to 173 and the pastor had become superintendent. This quarter 4 members were received by letter and 4 on probation; 2 letters had been granted. The third Quarterly Conference convened October 3, and the fourth March 5, 1886. At the latter it was stated that the Sabbath School had met all its expenses and had a surplus in the treasury, and had increased its library fund. There had been 50 conversions, 4 received into full connection, 3 by letter, and 27 on probation; 1, sister Poffenberger, had died. All collections had been taken, and the amounts in the majority of cases were the largest yet lifted, that of the Missionary being \$45.00. At the close of the year there were 84 full members and 47 probationers.

* The annual conference of 1886, held in this city, reappointed brother Jacobs for a second year, Rev. H.C. Pardoe being presiding elder. The board of trustees at this time was composed of representatives of each Methodist church in the city – viz., William J. Adams, Lewis Kinter, John W. Leedy, J.J. Miller, Jacob Seabourn, H.S. Sourbeer and E.Z. Wallower. This board met March 5, 1886, organized, asked for a charter, and decided that hereafter the charge formerly known as Allison's Hill, Mt. Pleasant, then Grace Church Mission, should bear the corporate name of Thirteenth Street.

