

History of The National Presbyterian Church

The National Presbyterian Church looks back proudly on more than two centuries years of spiritual service to the people of the nation's capital. The church's rich heritage, which has evolved through four congregations since 1795, reflects the contributions of Presbyterians to our city and nation.

It is fitting that the beginnings of America's federal city and government are associated with the foundation of a Presbyterian church. Many Pilgrims who came to America followed the teachings of John Calvin. The Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, president of Princeton University and descendant of Scotland's preacher-patriot John Knox, inspired members of the Continental Congress to sign the Declaration of Independence.

According to church archives, most of America's Presidents -- from James Madison, forward -- have attended services at National Presbyterian or its predecessor congregations. Other leaders who have worshipped with these congregations over the years include Queen Elizabeth, Mother Teresa, President Dwight David Eisenhower, numerous vice presidents, Supreme Court justices, secretaries of state, other cabinet officials and members of Congress.

Of course, the success and ministry of these congregations throughout the church's history is based not on the involvement of the prominent but on the faith, courage and sacrifice of many thousands of people whose contributions are immeasurable.

This tradition of faith goes back to the early years of the White House's construction when stone masons held worship services in a carpenters' shed on the grounds of the Executive Mansion. By 1795, the group had begun to call itself St. Andrew's Church, and Rev. John Brackenridge was installed as its minister. The members met in private homes until 1800 when they used a frame building at 10th and F Streets, NW. Two years later Brackenridge resigned. Mention of St. Andrew's Church in the records of the period ceased that year. However, the small group persisted, meeting at several places between 1802 and 1811 -- a school on East Capitol Street, a Masonic Lodge, and the Supreme Court chamber in the basement of the unfinished Capitol.

Era of THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Members from St. Andrew's formally organized First Presbyterian Church in 1811, with Reverend Brackenridge returning as pastor in 1812. With contributions from James Madison and James Monroe, among others, a frame structure was erected. This "Little White Church under the Hill" was located on John Marshall Place (between C and D Streets) on the south slope of Capitol Hill where the Rayburn Building, office of the U.S. House of Representatives, now stands. The first service was held on June 20, 1812. When the British burned the Capitol in August 1814, the church was spared despite its proximity.

The church continued to grow and by 1821 had 114 members. In 1827, under the leadership of the Reverend Dr. Reuben Post, First Church erected a fine brick edifice on 4½ Street, NW, which stood for over 100 years. With vigorous lay leadership and exceptional ministers, the First Presbyterian Church grew in membership and Christian influence throughout the 19th Century.

In 1853, the Reverend Dr. Byron Sunderland began a distinguished 45-year tenure as senior minister. In 1857, he began to preach in favor of the abolition of slavery, a courageous act in a city that was essentially a conservative Southern town. The Presbyterian denomination then split as Southern presbyteries seceded as a body. Although "Old First" was at the time a member of the Virginia Presbytery, one of the seceding groups, a vote of the church's congregation was split. As a result the church was not attached to any presbytery for five years. In 1862, it became part of the Philadelphia Synod.

A friend and advisor to Abraham Lincoln, Sunderland served as Chaplain of the Senate during the Civil War and again in the 1870s. Among his many contributions to the Presbyterian denomination and Washington was his role as a founder of Gallaudet University. In 1866, Dr. Sunderland allowed Frederick Douglass, noted American abolitionist, to speak from the church's pulpit when no other local venue could be found.

Presidents John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Ulysses S. Grant and Grover Cleveland worshipped at "Old First." Dr. Sunderland performed the marriage ceremony of President Grover Cleveland and Frances Folsom at the White House. Orators of the day who spoke from the church's pulpit included Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, The Reverend Dr. Henry Ward Beecher and The Reverend Dr. T. DeWitt Talmage who later became senior minister of the church, and editor of the Christian Herald.

By the early 20th century First Presbyterian's neighborhood had become commercial, and its members were increasingly dispersed around the city. The government renamed 4½ Street "John Marshall Place" and acquired the church site to erect court buildings. The congregation worshipped there for the last time on May 11, 1930.

Era of THE CHURCH OF THE COVENANT

The urban growth that ultimately led to the destruction of the old First Church gave rise to many other Presbyterian congregations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Church of the Covenant. On March 11, 1883, eleven elders of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, meeting in the home of Supreme Court Justice William Strong, formed the nucleus of Covenant Presbyterian Church. Officially organized on October 13, 1885, with 57 members, this congregation acquired a strategic site at the intersection of N Street, 18th Street, and Connecticut Avenue, heart of a fast-growing and affluent residential area. On June 28, 1887, the cornerstone of the Romanesque stone church was laid. The first service was held there on September 25, 1889. It was dedicated January 6, 1901, after the debt on the structure was paid. President Benjamin Harrison and inventor Alexander Graham Bell were among the new congregation's worshippers.

The Church of the Covenant flourished with strong lay leadership and a succession of pastors whose reputations extended throughout the denomination and the nation. The Reverend Dr. Teunis S. Hamlin, a fine preacher, was also a dedicated community leader and helped secure a site for George Washington University. He served as president of the Board of Trustees of Howard University for many years.

Covenant members were active on many fronts. In 1885, its women founded the Society of the Covenant, which through its successor organization, The Women's Association, has operated continuously to this day. In 1886, members of Covenant founded the Peck Memorial Chapel as a mission outreach church in Georgetown, which provided vocational education for minorities and disadvantaged youth. One of Covenant's early missions (1908) was to establish a tuberculosis clinic in Beirut, Lebanon.

Under the Reverend Dr. Charles Wood, pastor from 1908 to 1928, Covenant's membership grew to 1,800. Dr. Wood, an outstanding preacher, organized and was the first president of the Washington Federation of Churches.

Era of THE COVENANT-FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It was with this strong Covenant congregation that First Church elected to merge. It chose Covenant rather than another Presbyterian congregation largely because of the movement for a national Presbyterian church in Washington.

Numerous proposals for a national church had been presented to the General Assembly throughout the 19th century. In 1923, a commission was authorized to explore formally the possibility of a national church in Washington. In 1930, the Church of the Covenant was selected to "furnish the congregational nucleus about which this National Church should be organized." It was understandable that the congregation of the now-demolished First Church with so rich a history should move across the city and merge with Covenant in June 1930.

The Senior Minister of the combined Covenant-First Presbyterian congregation from 1930 to 1946 was The Reverend Dr. Albert Joseph McCartney. He won admiration for his leadership through the difficult years of depression and war. Undaunted by the setbacks of these times, Dr. McCartney never ceased advocating a great national church.

Era of THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dr. McCartney's efforts were rewarded when the General Assembly officially designated Covenant-First as "The National Presbyterian Church." It was publicly so proclaimed in services attended by President Harry S Truman on October 19, 1947. The bronze tablet he unveiled now hangs outside the Chapel of the Presidents.

The Reverend Dr. Edward L. R. Elson, who succeeded Dr. McCartney in 1946, worked tirelessly to inspire the entire denomination to the potential for Christian witness and service by a national church. His parishioner, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom Dr. Elson baptized in 1953, supported him enthusiastically in frequent meetings with denominational leaders. Working closely with Dr. Elson, The Reverend Dr. Thomas A. Stone began a ministry to enlarge and expand the Christian Education programs.

Over the years, the once fine residential location on Connecticut Avenue became the site of many office buildings. Church leaders were torn between desires to remain in a strategic "downtown" location where they had worshipped for 77 years or to move to a spacious site farther from the city center -- where new facilities could allow a wider range of religious, educational and cultural activities. The obsolescence of the building was a factor in selecting a new location.

In January 1966, the congregation acquired the former Hillcrest Children's Center on Nebraska Avenue in northwest Washington. For three years, while its new complex was being built, the congregation worshipped in Capital Memorial Seventh-Day Adventist Church at 3150 Chesapeake Street, NW.

Designed by ecclesiastical architect Harold E. Wagoner, the dramatic new Neo-Gothic church complex featured a main sanctuary seating 1,260, a chapel, and a soaring carillon tower. The church's cornerstone was laid by former President Eisenhower on October 14, 1967. The congregation first worshipped in its new home on September 7, 1969.

The year 1969 also marked the opening of the National Presbyterian School, a private school that now serves preschool through sixth grade. Open to all faiths, it is one of Washington's finest independent schools.

When Dr. Elson retired in 1973 to devote full time to his duties as Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, he was succeeded as senior minister by the Reverend Dr. Louis H. Evans, Jr. Dr. Evans' leadership ensured that the National Presbyterian Church continued to grow. During his tenure, significant new programs included the NPC Family Camp, which evolved to the present All-Church Retreat, as well as Wednesday Night Alive, a mid-week worship and class session. The church's outstanding music program continued to thrive. The church and school facilities were expanded with more classrooms and a new activities center. A columbarium was added to meet the needs of the congregation for consecrated memorial space.

Dr. Evans was assisted by several talented associate pastors over the years. Among them were the Reverend Dr. Peggy T. Cantwell, National's first woman clergy, who helped spur an era of growth in nurture programs and membership, and Rev. Clarence Payne, who assumed administrative duties on Dr. Evans' departure.

Following Dr. Evans' retirement in 1991, The Reverend Dr. Bryant M. Kirkland became interim minister. Dr. Kirkland provided inspirational preaching and leadership, sustained morale, and built membership.

In March 1993, National called The Reverend Dr. M. Craig Barnes as senior pastor. Dr. Barnes was known for his dynamic preaching and thoughtful writing. Assisted by three associate ministers, The Reverend Lynne Faris, Dr. Jeff McCrory, and Dr. Harry Winsheimer, Dr. Barnes led a growing congregation of over 2,000 members for almost a decade. Dr. Barnes resigned in 2002 in order to return to writing and teaching at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

The Reverend Dr. Thomas A. Erickson came to National as Interim Senior Minister in August, 2002. Following a distinguished career, he nurtured NPC's worshipping congregation through biblically based, Christ-centered preaching in the Reformed tradition.

In August, 2004, Dr. Gareth Icenogle was called as Senior Minister/Head of Staff. He was assisted in his duties by a new Executive Pastor the Reverend Dr. Douglas A. Learned, and the Reverend Eunice T. McGarrahan. Dr. Icenogle left NPC in the fall of 2008.

Pastor-in-Residence The Reverend Dr. Earl F. Palmer preached and taught at NPC through 2010. In March, 2011, Interim Senior Pastor the Reverend Patrick J. Willson was called to the NPC pulpit. And in August of that year The Reverend Dr. David A. Renwick became the new Senior Minister of the congregation.

The heritage of National Presbyterian Church is now well into its third century with creative programs for children, youth, and adults; a strong parish network; and far-reaching mission efforts. The congregation continues to pursue its vision of a ministry of grace, passionate about Christ's mission in the world.

President Eisenhower's Membership in The National Presbyterian Church

In preparing for his first Inauguration, General Dwight David Eisenhower asked the Rev. Dr. Edward L. R. Elson, pastor of The National Presbyterian Church, to conduct a private pre-Inaugural service of dedication in the Church on the morning of January 20, 1953. The President invited only the Vice President, members of the Cabinet, members of the White House staff, officials of the Inaugural Committee, and their families to share in this service -- a total of only 181 persons. Following the 20-minute service, the President-elect went to his suite in the Statler-Hilton Hotel, sat down at a table, and on a yellow pad wrote a brief prayer with which he began his first Inaugural address. The spirit of the man and the language of the prayer profoundly moved people everywhere when he said,



"Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby and by the laws of this land."

President Eisenhower had long considered completing his identification with the Church as an active communicant member of a particular congregation. The matter was discussed with Dr. Elson on several occasions prior to his Inauguration and several notes were exchanged between the minister and the nation's new leader. On February 1, 1953, the President and Mrs. Eisenhower were received into full communicant membership of The National Presbyterian Church. They appeared before the Session of the Church in the Board Room off the N Street entrance of the old church. Having been a member of the Presbyterian Church from childhood, Mrs. Eisenhower was received on reaffirmation of faith from her Denver church. It not being the practice of President Eisenhower's parents' church to baptize infants, the President therefore made his personal profession of faith and received Christian baptism, kneeling on the prie-dieu provided for that purpose. At the service which followed, President and Mrs. Eisenhower received Holy Communion for the first time as members of this congregation and were publicly acknowledged as two members of a class of fifty new church members.

During the eight years which followed, President and Mrs. Eisenhower were unfailingly present at church service and they entered wholly into the life of the congregation.

President Eisenhower gave personal leadership in developing the new National Presbyterian Church and Center. While President he enlisted the support of Presbyterian laymen and he personally contributed to the project. It is fitting that the Chapel of the Presidents is dedicated to him.