

East Main Presbyterian Church History

Grove City, PA

Background

Presbyterians trace their history to the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation. Our heritage, and much of what we believe, began with the French lawyer John Calvin (1509-1564), whose writings crystallized much of the Reformed thinking that came before him.

Calvin did much of his writing from Geneva, Switzerland. From there, the Reformed movement spread to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. Many of the early Presbyterians in America came from England, Scotland and Ireland. The first American Presbytery was organized at Philadelphia in 1706. The first General Assembly was held in the same city in 1789. The first Assembly was convened by the Rev. John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence.

What is distinctive about the Presbyterian Church? Presbyterians are distinctive in two major ways: they adhere to a pattern of religious thought known as Reformed theology and a form of government that stresses an active, representative form of leadership provided by both ministers and church members.

East Main Presbyterian Church History

In 1879, the village of Pine Grove, Pennsylvania had a population of about 300 with a grist mill, a post office, a few stores, a hotel, a Presbyterian church erected in 1847, and a Methodist church dating back to 1840. The nearest United Presbyterian churches were Harmony in Harrisville, Scotch Hill and Springfield congregations.



On a suggestion from the Springfield congregation, it was arranged that Rev. W.B. Barr, pastor of that church, hold an occasional service in Pine Grove provided that the local members guaranteed a payment of \$100 per year. The spirit of going over the top, for which the Grove City community has been noted in later years, was shown by those early adherents whose subscriptions totaled \$154. But money and members were only two of the pioneer troubles. Roads, building, heating and

lighting had to be considered. Rev. Barr rode a mule from Pardoe to hold the first meeting on April 6, 1879. A second story room in the Pine Grove School House, [situated where McDonald's Restaurant is now located,] had been secured for the service. Rev. Barr chose for his text, "God's love for His Saints," Isaiah 9:15.

A second meeting was held in the school house after which the board of education notified the minister that on account of the capacity attendance the floor was sinking and that another place must be secured. After one more meeting, arrangements were made whereby the old Presbyterian "meeting house," then vacant, was secured. This building was located on a hill which was later graded down and is now the corner of Broad Street and Poplar Street. It was a building consisting only of outside walls and roof, with no floor or furnishings, just protection for the elements. During warm weather, outdoor services were held in the pine grove now occupied by the Penn Grove Hotel.



Encouraged by the success of these meetings, a petition was presented to the Butler Presbytery to organize a church in Pine Grove, Mercer County, Pennsylvania. Fifteen members and six supporters of the United Presbyterian Church signed this petition, pledging to pay a total of \$113 to support the church the first year. Presbytery granted the request and The United Presbyterian Church of Pine Grove was established. On Sabbath, September 9, 1879, communion services conducted by Rev. W.B. Barr and Rev. Robert Barnes were held in the old Presbyterian church. The church was incorporated on May 8, 1882.



As had been the custom, the church services were held in various rooms and in open air. When the first Pine Grove Academy building was built, later called Recitation Hall, the congregation secured permission to use the chapel room for their worship services for three years. In May 1883, they moved into their own church, a \$5,000 frame building on East Main Street on the same site where the Ivy Chapel building would be constructed ten years later. Also in 1883, the name of the church was changed to The First United Presbyterian Church of Grove City because the town changed its name to the Borough of Grove City. Nine years later, in 1892, this structure was destroyed by fire started by sparks from a nearby burning store building. Within seventeen months, in October 1893, that group of about 150 people had a beautiful red brick church built on the site of the burned wood frame building. They sang praise to the Lord; with happiness they rang the 900 pound recast bell from the original frame church on which was written the names of the pastor and the elders who were serving when the first church was built.



In October 1895, a petition was handed to the Session praying that the use of an organ be allowed in Praise Services. Because of the early United Presbyterian belief that no instrument but a tuning fork should be used in the sanctuary, it took three years to resolve this question; but finally the joy of organ music was brought into the sanctuary.

Within ten years after the brick church was built, the congregation had grown to 350 members with 170 in the Sabbath School. This ivy covered church was no longer large enough to meet the needs of the congregation. Therefore, a building committee was appointed in May 1907 and three lots across the street were secured for the erection of a larger church, the present house of worship at 120 East Main Street. The building committee was fortunate in being able to secure at a moderate price Hummelstone brown stone which, with a red tile roof, makes our church one of the most beautiful in western Pennsylvania.



The recast bell was removed from the brick church building and placed in the belfry of the stone church. The new stone church was erected at a contract price of \$32,600 plus \$2,000 for a pipe organ and was dedicated on July 11, 1909. Grove City College purchased the brick building and renamed it Ivy Chapel.

New members continued to join. The local church leaders dealt lovingly but firmly with some members by dismissing them because of failure to financially support the church, for drunkenness, or for membership in secret orders or trade unions. Others were dismissed because of fornication or adultery. Nevertheless, Sabbath School attendance continued to rise. For 44 years R.E. English (1906-1950) was Sabbath School superintendent. During the first fifty years of the church's existence, it grew from a membership of 28 to 933 with a Bible School enrollment of 565.



Just as the congregation in 1893 had outgrown the brick church later known as Ivy Chapel, the Sabbath School Department had now outgrown the educational facilities. After prayer and discussion, on April 12, 1950 a building committee was elected by the Session to study the possibility of a new educational wing. One year later the new addition to the church, costing \$195,000, was completed and in three years the mortgage was burned.

As the centennial for the union that created the United Presbyterian Church of North America drew near, talk of another union began. After numerous discussion groups were held followed by considerable study and prayer, the congregation voted against the union in December 1956. Butler Presbytery also voted against the merger; however, the General Assembly voted for the union. Consequently, a new denomination was established in May 1958 called The United Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. with over three million communicants. Because of this union, the name of the local church was changed to East Main United Presbyterian Church.

Growth within the local congregation continued. During this time the membership reached 1350 with attendance at communion services reaching over 1250. Our sanctuary was not large enough; worshippers were being turned away because of the lack of seating facilities. In July 1961, a building committee prepared for approval plans for remodeling and renovating the sanctuary at a cost of \$100,000. Plans were approved with the stipulation that an additional amount equal to 10% of the cost of the alternations be given to missions. The sanctuary was dedicated in December 1961 with permanent seating capacity increased from 680 to 980 with an overflow capacity of 1100.

During the 1970s several pastors and strong lay people guided the congregation in a thematic, in-depth program and in a new evangelistic program stressing Christ within oneself, proclaiming Him within the church to one another, and finally witnessing the congregation's beliefs in the community.

The first Presbyterian church in America was organized in the 1700s in Philadelphia. Since then the denomination has been characterized by numerous splits and mergers. One of those mergers occurred in 1983 reuniting the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (also known as the Northern Church) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (popularly known as the Southern Church) to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As a result of this merger, the local church changed its name to East Main Presbyterian Church in keeping with its new denominational affiliation.

The gymnasium on the second floor of the education wing was the only facility large enough for church dinners. As the congregation grew in number and the average age of the members continued to increase, the gymnasium was increasingly undesirable and inadequate in size. Therefore, in the late 1980s, the Session decided to build an addition that would extend the church's facilities from the education wing along Walnut Street toward Poplar Street. The main floor of this new facility would have a large multi-purpose room called Fellowship Hall, a kitchen and restrooms with access from Walnut Street and a street-level entrance covered by a portico off the alley on the opposite of the building. The basement level of the addition would house a sizable youth group meeting space, a small kitchen, restrooms, two meeting rooms and a utility room. The addition was dedicated in November 1991; however, the basement level was not completed until several years later.



In March 1995 a new and exciting chapter began in the history of East Main Church with many creative,

new programs as well as the continuation of many meaningful activities. A capital improvement campaign in 1996 provided funding for a new roof on the original part of the church building, refurbishment of the sanctuary, construction in the Fellowship Hall basement, and a new combination electronic and pipe organ. The organ was largely a gift from the estate of Alma Barnes. All of these projects were completed as the funds became available: a long-standing tradition at East Main. In keeping with another long-standing practice at East Main, memorial gifts were recorded in the Memorial Book located in a glass case in the narthex of the sanctuary rather than displaying commemorative plaques throughout the church.

Many programs were started at East Main in the 1990s including a prison ministry at the state correctional facility in Mercer, an expanded short-term adult and youth mission trip program, Shalom Cookie Company, Presbyterian Women, Feed My Sheep, Apples of Gold, Mothers' Guild, Angel Tree program support, and small group Bible studies. Many other activities continued in the church such as worship teams; adult, hand-bell, chime and children choirs; a New Life conference in the spring and many more. During this period, commitment and support of the missions program at East Main continued to grow with more funds given to an increasing number of missionaries around the world.

Around the turn of the century, East Main established a Long Range Planning Support Team. One of the first changes that came about as a result of their leadership was the addition of a second worship service on Sunday morning which is contemporary in worship style with a praise choir that provides the music and leads the singing. Another change was the addition of the Alpha program - a unique ten week evangelistic outreach which provides fellowship over a shared meal and a series of talks addressing key issues relating to the Christian faith, and another way to reach Grove City for the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we strive to serve the Lord at East Main Presbyterian Church, we are reminded that:

"In Christ we who are many form one Body... we have different Gifts according to the Grace given us:

... If it is teaching, let them teach,

... If it is contributing to the needs of others, let it be done generously,

... If it is leadership, let them govern diligently,

... If it is showing Mercy, let it be done cheerfully." -- Romans 12:5-8

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