

## **Gwynedd Square Presbyterian Church history – the First 25 Years**

### **By Diane Butt**

The Gwynedd Square Presbyterian Church is the result of a dream of many area residents for whom the Presbyterian way has deep significance. It was also the result of a concern of the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. that the denomination be represented in a wide area which, previous to World War II, was largely Pennsylvania Dutch in character and where no Presbyterian witness had been established.

In the latter part of 1958, the Philadelphia Presbytery purchased a nine and a half acre tract on which was a well-built stone house, now the manse. It was in this house, late in December of that year that the Reverend Donald F. Shaw, who had been called by the Presbytery to be the organizing pastor, met with six other couples in an informal get-acquainted meeting. Arrangements were made with the Upper Gwynedd School District to rent the old school auditorium on West Point Pike. We were on our way.

The year 1959 started with a group of dedicated Gwynedd Square Presbyterians removing tons of obsolete highway equipment, school desks, and just plain junk. Other chores included cleaning, washing windows, painting, preparing a pulpit, installing a choir rail with curtain, and placing chairs for the congregation. Then came the happy day with our first worship service on February 15, 1959. We all felt so proud and happy with the thrill as if a new infant had been born. On June 14, 1959 we had our Service of Organization with 117 charter members.

From then our thoughts and ambitions concentrated on a new church home with a successful fund raising canvass, in the fall of that year. The year closed with a membership of 135.

On January 24, 1960, the Reverend Donald F. Shaw was installed as the first duly called Pastor. The Philadelphia architect, Harold E. Wagoner, prepared building plans which were approved by the congregation and followed by bids and the letting of the contract. On August 7, 1960, ground was broken for the first unit with the appropriate ceremonies immediately following the services in the old schoolhouse. A motorcade of the congregation led by a police escort proceeded to our new location about a mile and a quarter from the West Point Pike site. Mr. Shaw dug the first shovelful of dirt to break the ground for our new church edifice. However, severe winter weather delayed progress on the building for about three months, much to the discomfiture of an impatient congregation. The year 1960 closed with a membership of 164.

1961 was a busy year with building, landscaping, and furnishing. Much of the latter was supplied by neighboring congregations, not all of whom were Presbyterians. Some of the furnishings were provided as gifts and memorials by members and friends of the church. It was somewhat heartbreaking to leave the old schoolhouse auditorium. However, here we were on September 24, 1961, the day of dedication and consecration of the chapel of our first unit. The upper level contained seating for 180 people in the

nave, 45 in the overflow, 25 in the choir, a pastor's study, and a general church office. The lower level contained a fellowship hall, subdivided for classroom space, an additional classroom, a kitchen, doubling as a classroom, the boiler room, and washrooms.

Presbyterian interpretation and emphasis indicated to those who designed the chapel that:

"There is no place for an altar. The communion table, sometimes confused with the altar, should be free-standing and so placed that all worshippers, including the choir and pastor, shall face it. Further, it should be placed upon the common level, symbolically indicating common and equal participation of all in the common meal. Its place should be permanent and not subject to relocation like an ordinary piece of furniture.

"The reading and the interpretation of the Word (preaching) are different facets of the same function, and are well combined in a central pulpit, located that all may hear and see well, including the choir. Thus, symbolically, the preacher may 'speak for God.'

"The choir is not a performing group, but rather is a part of the congregation, to be situated that it may easily lead congregational singing and responses. This has dictated a side location on the main floor, facing both pulpit and communion table.

"The Baptismal Font should be placed in full view of the congregation on a common level, symbolic of the total acceptance of the newly baptized into the fellowship of the congregation of believers.

"The cross, central symbol of the faith, should be kept visible at all times, and hence has been placed in an off-center position on the wall facing the congregation."

A second unit was to provide facilities for an expanded educational program. Two other future units in the master plan provide the final large sanctuary and a larger fellowship hall with additional educational facilities.

The guest speaker on this day of dedication was the Reverend Dr. Eugene Carson Blake. The following Thursday evening was open house for members and friends of the congregation. On a Sunday evening in October the organ and furnishings were officially dedicated followed by a recital on the organ. The year closed with 207 members.

1962 started off with reorganization of the different church and church school departments. This was deemed necessary because we had more space in our new building and this space was laid out to accommodate the different departments. At the

same time we needed more teachers and equipment. All in all, there was nice cooperation on the part of the congregation to get all departments functioning properly. Our choir was quite active. Outstanding was the presentation of Brahms Requiem on Pal Sunday afternoon. There was real concern regarding our fixed financial obligations, and operating and maintenance expenses during this year. Membership had now reached 278.

Nothing new or sensational occurred through the year 1963; just concentration on our responsibilities. Haunted by a shortage of finances, careful planning and scheduling was imperative. Our membership passed the three hundred mark, closing the year with 306.

We went along rather smoothly through 1964 except for a special congregation meeting held at noon on Sunday, December 6 to resolve a short fall in our financial obligations. Membership was now 323.

We started off 1965 nicely and calmly. Then on February , Mr. Shaw notified the Session of a call from the Tenafly Presbyterian Church. At a congregational meeting on March , Mr. Shaw was released from his responsibilities to Gwynedd Square. A committee on Pastor Selection was elected, and the hunt started, culminating in a call being sent to the Reverend Paul A. Corcoran. Mr. Corcoran was duly installed as our Pastor and spiritual guide by the Philadelphia Presbytery on Sunday, September 12, 1965, in the presence of the congregation and its guests, including invited nearby clergy of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish faiths. The year closed with 333 members.

1966 was the first full year of Mr. Corcoran's pastorate. Continued growth, especially of our church school which increased 60%, presented a real problem of space. Church membership at year's end stood at 361.

When the church was designed, the architect provided for a series of additions that could be constructed at appropriate times. By 1967 increased church attendance (there were now 412 members) and crowded church school classes compelled the congregation to act on an expansion plan. Gwynedd Square's previous debts had to be consolidated and a plan to refinance the building developed. In April a special Building Fund Drive was conducted. On November 5, 1967, a ground breaking ceremony was held to mark the start of the construction of the new addition.

Just as the congregation was growing, now 426 members, the number of children enrolled in the Christian Education Program was also growing. In 1968 there were enough active high school students to make it possible to form a Senior High Fellowship. A further indication of the church's interest in providing quality programs for its children was the announcement that Boy Scout Troop 303 (which is sponsored by the church) would soon have its first Eagle Scout. During this year we sponsored, as a church, a couple from Bulgaria, Peter and Krassy Raichev. They were the guests of Art and Bea Samson until an apartment was found, a shower given to help furnish it, and Peter started his job with Philco-Ford Corporation.

The first official event of our Tenth Anniversary was our Annual Congregational Meeting, held on Wednesday evening, December 11, 1968. A film history of our first ten years was shown. Other events were held in the spring including a special service, picnic, and family night supper. 1969 also saw the new two-story education wing being used by the church school. The new addition was put to further use by permitting the Easter Seal Society to conduct their school for handicapped children on the premises. This was a relationship which was to be expended and to last for many years. At the end of the year Gwynedd Square had 451 members.

In 1970 the new Christian Faith and Action educational system, with a complete set of curricular materials, had been phased into the church school program in grades one through ten. The teachers had been working to familiarize themselves with their new materials during the preceding year. In an effort to have church school classes that would better meet the needs of each age group, additional classes were added for students in the third, fourth, seventh and eighth grades. An adult discussion group and Bible study class were formed. Membership increased by 7% to 481.

A number of the 481 members of the church were deeply involved in activities that affected the community. The Board of Deacons served as a clearinghouse for communications with the Montgomery County Housing Coalition. They helped the newly formed North Penn Fish/Interfaith Emergency Service by finding emergency housing for families in temporary need, and developed a town meeting for the Emergency Task Force on Welfare Reform, where U.S. Senator Schweiker was the main speaker. In September 1971, the North Penn Chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons began meeting in our church. This was another indication of our policy of making our facilities available to community groups.

For the first time since the church was founded there was a drop in membership, when the Session completed the revision of the roll and removed the names of inactive members. In December 1972 there were 440 enrolled members. The Worship Committee worked hard to involve a large number of members in the worship services. By the end of the year 39 people had served as lay assistants and 44 had been greeters. There were 22 people involved in teaching in the church school.

As part of the church's effort to offer a stronger program for its high school students, Ed Salo, a student at Princeton Seminary, joined us on a part-time basis in 1973 to work with the young people in grades nine through twelve. He was followed in 1976 by Victor Wilson, Craig Miller in 1977, Jennifer Byler in 1980, Andrew Ross in 1982, Virginia Leopold in 1984, and Douglas Elder in 1985. In 1972 and throughout 1973, members helped many of the people in Wilkes-Barre whose homes had been inundated by the Susquehanna River. The church also used its property as collateral to provide bail for people who were accused of non-violent crimes and were waiting trial. Six years later, the law concerning bail was made more lenient to assist the type of person the church was helping, so the project was no longer needed. During the interim, twenty people

had been helped by the church. The building was repainted for the first time in eleven years. At the end of the year there were 463 members registered with the church.

In 1974 the session felt that there were a large number of people listed as members of the church who had not been active for sometime. After calling on these people, it was found that 51 of them did not want to continue as members and their names were removed from the rolls. This left the church with 406 members. It is interesting to note that even though this was the smallest number of members in eight years, giving was up by 11% for the year. The Easter Seal Society established an Explorer Scout Post at the church for handicapped young men and women. A Cut Scot Pack sponsored by the Society had been meeting at the church for two years.

Information in the mass media concerning the plight of the people in Vietnam encouraged the congregation to sponsor two Vietnamese, Trung Kien Tran and Thang Nguyen, for admission to the United States. Special funds were raised to help meet their resettlement costs. Within two years Trung and Thang had become quite independent. (Update – Than is married and is living in the area. Trung is still single and working his way around the United States.) At the end of 1975 there were 424 members of the Gwynedd Square Presbyterian Church.

During 1976 we had a revitalization of the music program with the addition of Louise Gerdemann as director. As a beginning to many welcomed changes, the children's choir was divided into two groups: Cherub and Junior Choirs. Near the end of the year, the Board of Deacons found that there was more money than was necessary in the Deacon's Fund. These funds were used to assist local families meet emergencies. The Session approved a plan developed by the Deacons to use the extra funds to sponsor a Clean Water Project in the village of Ngulu, Indonesia. By December 1978 the goal of \$5,300 had been met to support four water-related projects in Indonesia. There were 417 members at the end of the year.

Even though membership did not increase significantly, with 434 members at the end of 1977, there was a marked increase in weekly attendance. The Worship Committee did an in-depth study of the various parts of the Sunday service. New worship books were purchased to provide additional congregational participation in the service and to present a greater variety of hymns.

The Christian Education Committee felt that a new curriculum would enhance the church school program. The shared approach curriculum was selected because of its content and the fact that it offered the teachers four different approaches they could use. The four curricula were "Knowing the Word," "Interpreting the Word," "Living the Word," and "Doing the Word." As the material was set up to run in three-year cycles, the booklets were able to be reused. 1978 also saw the birth of a new publication, "TAGS" (Together at Gwynedd Square) specifically for members to share their faith with each other in writing. At the end of the year the church had 459 members and by June 1979, (Anniversary month), 472 members.

An outdoor service was held on June 17, 1979 to celebrate our Twentieth Anniversary. We were pleased to have the Reverend Donald F. Shaw, the first pastor, and many of the charter members join us for the service. Following the service there was a picnic and fun for all. The Fine Arts Committee (made up a 28 women) completed two magnificent quilted wall hangings, which were dedicated in June. The members of the committee who planned the events surrounding our anniversary were: Douglas Simons; Chairman, Charles Simonson, Vi Geiger, Mott Linn, Sr., Bea Samson, Caroline Carey, Jean Weber, John Dalrymple, Sarah Weber. The property Committee decided to undertake the complete painting of the church. It had not been done since 1973. While the exterior was to be done by professionals, the interior would be refurbished by members of the congregation.

1979 also saw us sponsor our first two Cambodian refugees, Sam and Samon On, for admission to the United States. The Church and Community Committee of the Deacons under the direction of chairman, Jay Clough, reaffirmed their support of the refugee program in the following ways: with time and talents, financially, through helping them to find employment, and by support from the congregation. At the end of the twentieth year, there were 459 members.

1980 was Mr. Corcoran's fifteenth year as pastor here at Gwynedd Square. The year also saw the completion of the renovations to the organ and the purchase of a piano for the Sanctuary. The time for Children's Church was reduced to give younger children the opportunity to attend part of the worship service with their parents. The Interpretation and Stewardship Committee of the Session split to make individual committees of Property, Membership, Mission Interpretation, and Finance. As the Membership committee completed its first year, they had achieved a good grasp on their responsibilities. They had begun maintaining the Church Roll in cooperation with the Clerk of Session, arranged to contact members who seemed to be "drifting away" from active participation, made calls to visitors of our church, and assisted in the orientation of new members. The refugee project continued and grew, providing housing (the manse as one source), jobs, tutoring, and other services, as needed. In early December we were one of the hosts of the North Penn Hospital Auxiliary's Christmas Caravan with the choir providing some of the special music and the women of the church providing refreshments. The ear of 1980 closed with 449 members.

During 1981 the youth groups, under the direction of Jennifer Byler, adopted foster grandparents at the Gwynedd Square Nursing Home and entertained them by posing as a band of clowns sharing Christ's love through action rather than words. They also raised money to sponsor two foster children who live in the Philippines. Church school enrollment was 155 with a staff of 16 teachers. Twelve Kononia groups were started by the Mission Interpretation Committee. These groups were formed as study and fellowship groups meeting in members' homes. All active and inactive members of the church were contacted and invited to join (a few groups are still active today). Our refugee resettlement program expanded again during this year to include friends and relative of previously sponsored refugees. Vacation Bible School was held for the first time in many years. The end of the year statistics showed 452 members on our rolls.

The community Lenten services took on a new meaning this year because of the life-size cross made by Edward Klavon and his sons. Each week this cross was carried into the host church. Also during 1982, the Reverend Lois Goodman was employed to help the pastor with visitation one day a week. Miss Goodman was able to visit each new visitor and provide them with information about Gwynedd Square. In addition, she paid visits to church members who were inactive. In the fall a letter was sent out to all women of the church informing them that the Women's Association was undergoing a change. Accompanying the letter was a questionnaire asking the women about the ways in which they would like to serve. As of January 1983, the new organization became the Women's Association of Gwynedd Square United Presbyterian Church of Lansdale, PA in the Philadelphia Presbyterial and are a part of the National Association. Our Association has indicated verbally and in writing their willingness to accept the purpose of contributing through service, gifts, or prayer to the work of the association and to act on Christian concern in the company of God's people everywhere. The Property Committee was working hard, as usual, during the year. A concrete ramp was added to aid the handicapped in getting into the building. The heating system was refurbished in the hopes of making the building more comfortable during the colder months. Total membership for 1982 was 456.

1983 was a very busy year, both for Presbyterians in general and Gwynedd Square in particular. The Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America voted on reuniting into one body. On February 22, 1983, all the presbyteries of the PCUS and the UPC voted on the subject of reunion. The outcome was: UPC, 122 in favor and 0 against; the PCUS, 39 in favor and 8 against. It was now assured that the so-called northern and southern Presbyterians would become one church and be known as the Presbyterian Church (USA). It had taken 113 years to be reunited. In May the General Assemblies of the two individual groups met in Atlanta, Georgia to ratify the vote of its presbyteries. The Session notified the general membership of our church's desire to help fulfill a dream of Paul and Leila's to visit the Holy Land. What a complete surprise when the trip was presented to them. They left on April and returned, May, with many memories and pictures and a promise to go again. June saw the first of our Cambodian friends, Hay Seng Ea, baptized into Christianity and become a member of Gwynedd Square with the rest of the Confirmation class. The Church Band with 15 members played for the first time at the outdoor worship service. Paul published his book entitled, "With All Due Respect, Humorous Insights on Holy Happenings." Of course it was considered number one on the best seller list with our congregation as we could all see ourselves in one or another of his stories. In September special attention was given to our Cambodian friends' spiritual needs as well as their physical and personal needs. Under the leadership of Sandra Levine, the first Cambodian Sunday School Class was started. In the fall, the Headstart Program began using the Christian education wing five days a week for their classes. This busy year ended with 465 members.

A special worship service on Sunday, June 10, 1984, started a week-long calendar of events in celebration of our Anniversary. The order of worship duplicated as much as

possible the Service of Organization held on June 14, 1959. The hymns and scriptures were those used in that service. On Tuesday evening, June , we held a Anniversary congregational banquet at the Family Heritage Restaurant. The evening's program included musical selections by the choir, a sing-a-long, a special matching gift presentation to the newly-born Japanese Christian Church, introductory remarks by Paul Corcoran, and our guest speaker, The Reverend Donald Barnhouse. A special outdoor service and picnic were planned for Sunday, June . Inclement weather, which forced everything inside, failed to dampen our spirits or appetites. A special slide program was put together and shared by Nancy Weber. Everyone had a great time while trying to identify people and reminiscing 25 years at Gwynedd Square. The committee members for the Anniversary were: Herb Nannen; Chairman, Nancy Weber, Debbie Barr, Elizabeth Kinsey, Tom Hartmen, and John Drenning. Harvey Reynolds became our first fulltime Building Manager in September taking on all of the responsibilities for the upkeep of the church building. Janet Cardy was appointed Church Historian by the Session because of a growing concern that the history of Gwynedd Square could be lost if not organized in one place under the responsibility of one person. Paul and Leila Corcoran had such a wonderful time on their first trip to Israel that they went back a second time for a 3 ½ week stay at the beginning of October. 438 members were on the church roll at year's end.

The really big event in this year of 1985 was the pulpit exchange between Paul Corcoran and the Reverend Derek Richmond. Mr. & Mrs. Richmond (Derek and Mavis) arrived from the summer from West Wickam, Kent, England on June . The exchange had come about through mutual friends. The congregation in England to which the Corcoran's went is the Emmanuel United Reformed Church, a combination of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of England, located in a southern suburb of London. The area is said to be very similar to that of North Penn. June was our official greeting of Derek and Mavis at the traditional outdoor worship service and picnic. During the time the Richmond's were here, in addition to Derek carrying out the pastoral duties, he and Mavis had a chance to visit many of the families in the congregation on a social basis to get a flavor of American family life – magnets on the refrigerator doors and all. They also did some extensive sightseeing and saw most of the places where George Washington slept. A social hour after church each week gave us an opportunity to become acquainted with the Richmond's. September we said our goodbyes to them at a picnic, following the morning worship service. After leaving us, and before returning to their home in England, Derek and Mavis took some time to visit other areas of the country. It was a most enriching experience for all.

There were other happenings during 1985. This was the first time we appointed two Princeton Seminary students to work in the church. Douglas Elder worked with the youth in the Junior and Senior High Programs and Edward Washington directed Adult Education and assisted Paul on visitation. There was a special fund raising drive by the Interpretation and Stewardship Committee which helped finance a new roof for the church. Orff instruments were purchased mainly from the donation made to the Florence Breitmeyer Memorial Fund. These instruments are being used by the children's choirs as another aspect of the children's music experience. There was a

special offering collected to aid families left homeless as a result of the confrontation between Philadelphia Police and the MOVE organization. The Women's Association refurbished the Nursery. In 1985, we embarked on a new major fund raising campaign in support of a mission within the Presbytery of Philadelphia called "The Partners in Mission, A Call to Faithfulness." This campaign is designed to achieve five major objectives: to assist our congregations, to reach out to communities, to develop and support leadership, to administer to older adults, and to provide facilities and equipment. Each of these objectives focuses on an important aspect of our Presbyter's mission and each, once accomplished, will enrich the lives of God's people within our midst. The giving goal is \$18,000. Total membership for this year, 443.

Here we are! We have finally arrived in 1986. Thus far, since the beginning of our church's commitment to a refugee project, we have sponsored 50 Cambodians and co-sponsored 16. Hay Seng Ea became a U.S. citizen on May . Paul Corcoran announced his retirement on February , effective July of this year (1986).