

First United Methodist Church of Schuylkill Haven Church History...

Our present church building was dedicated to the Glory of God and consecrated by Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, resident Bishop of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church at a service of worship on May 15, 1983. The District Superintendent, the Reverend Dr. B. Burns Brodhead, assisted the Bishop in that service.

However, let us now enter into a time tunnel and see the footprints and legacy that ushered our church, First United Methodist Church, Schuylkill Haven, into this new chapter of its history.

We are indebted to our forefathers and foremothers who served with faith and courage through the years, and for our heritage, which has led us to this moment in history.

Our attention goes back beyond 1850, when a pioneering Methodist group, hoping for increased growth, became organized. Land was purchased, and in 1853 the first Methodist Church in Schuylkill Haven was erected. The space is now numbered as 417, 419, and 421 East Main Street. The two-and-a-half story brick building was 45x60 feet. It was used for Methodist worship only until 1862. At that time, the Methodist group came to an end. The church was sold to the newly organized St. John's Reformed Church congregation for \$405.

We have recently experienced, as did these early forefathers, that the church building may be gone, but not the faith. Although the congregation disbanded, a small nucleus of members kept their loyalty to Methodism, hoping for its return. They worked for this goal until 1876. Details of this period are sparse and reasons for failure are not clear. There were sporadic attempts, briefly appearing successful, to establish a Sunday School and conduct prayer meetings. They flourished briefly, but developed no further. By 1877, there was no mention of Schuylkill Haven Methodists at the Quarterly Conference. Thus, the second period of Methodism ended in Schuylkill Haven.

For 26 years, there was no recorded activity. In 1902, new foundations were established by new hands, and Methodism in Schuylkill Haven, entered a new era.

Our present congregation traces its origin directly to a meeting held on March 13, 1902, in the home of J. F. Bast, of 37 St. John Street, with Dr. William McDowell, District Superintendent, in attendance. His later report to the Annual Conference indicated that on the above date, he organized a new society in Schuylkill Haven. Also, that they had bought a lot and were making arrangements for the erection of a building. He described the new enterprise as "starting with great vigor, 72 members received on probation, and appointment of a pastor requested." Among this group and others added within a few days, were the names of Snayberger, Bast, Thomas, Becker, Bowen, Dowdle, Boyer, Reed, Kerschner, Emerich and Freed.

On Easter Sunday, March 30, 1902, Reverend Charles T. Isenberger preached his first sermon in Metamora Hall. (This Hall is located above the Detweiler Funeral Home.) Under his leadership, the group forged ahead and our beloved St. John Street Church was built, with dedication taking place on November 9, 1902. The building cost \$7,000. Within a few years, a new parsonage was provided and the mortgage on the church was burned.

Rhoda Thomas Pritchard and Ruth Thom Rutter were the first persons baptized in the church. Charles Lendle and Alice Susan Berger were the first couple married in the church.

At this time, we will make no effort to detail our entire church history, but recognize that in church life, as in human lives, there were ups and downs, but on the whole, Methodism had at last gained a foothold in Schuylkill Haven.

Since 1902, with the appointment of our first Pastor, Reverend Isenberger followed by the 28 pastors who have since served our church, including our present Pastor, the Reverend Doctor Christopher Fisher, appointed in 2005, we have experienced continued growth, spiritually, missionally, and in fellowship. In our history we have had one associate pastor, Reid S. Thomas, Jr., appointed for a short length of service. We have had four youth directors since 1994. Our current youth pastor is the Reverend Kristopher Perry.

As the need became more evident for larger accommodations, 11.72 acres of land were purchased by the church at Orchard Avenue and Saylor Streets, in Schuylkill Haven, in 1968 at a cost of \$19,000.

In 1974, the first phase of the anticipated relocation project was started, with the erection of a new parsonage. On June 15, 1975, the new parsonage at 600 Orchard Avenue was formally consecrated. Shortly thereafter, Pastor Theodore Ochs, his wife Pauline, and six children took up residence in the new split-level parsonage. The old parsonage was razed due to its poor condition on December 9, 1976.

The St. John Street facility continued to be crowded to capacity with a membership reaching 415. Consideration was given to expansion, but due to the national economy, inflation, etc., a new church building did not seem plausible, at the time.

A decision was made by church officials and the congregation that a modular unit would be purchased and installed next to the church, where the former parsonage had been. This would allow additional space for educational and fellowship purposes.

On November 19, 1980, about 8:45 a.m., a fire of unknown origins ignited the main church structure on St. John Street, resulting in its total destruction. Many church members tearfully witnessed the disappearance of our beloved church that had served us so well for 78 years, through worship services, weddings, baptisms, confirmations, lay witness missions, and sacred concerts. The reality of the total loss of our facilities caused expressions of disbelief and dismay, and underneath the varied emotions, there arose a determination to rebuild and go on.

The rebuilding of our church on another location had been discussed for years; this catastrophic event made the decision for us. Insurance proceeds aided in the new chapter of the church's life.

The Lay Witness Mission weekend scheduled for beginning just two days after the fire was not cancelled, but went on as planned. Community facilities were made available, and the Mission services proceeded using the Schuylkill Haven Middle School facility, and church members' homes for group meetings. The dinner planned for 125 was attended by 200. It was evident that church members were truly 'fired up' and inspired to move ahead. The Youth for Christ Center, 44 Dock Street, was used for services beginning in November 1980. There appeared to be signs of God's spirit outpouring upon us, revitalization was evident, in the Share groups, Sunday evening Bible study, and the increased Youth participation. Members came with buckets and rags to prepare this temporary facility as our new place of worship.

On March 1, 1981, the congregation voted to proceed with planning for construction of a new church. George Kulp was appointed Building Committee Chairman, and with his committee of interested members, set about selecting an architect and a type of church facility that would suit the needs of the congregation. Preliminary drawings for the First United Methodist Church to be built on a 4.132 acre site on Saylor Street, were presented to the congregation on June 1, 1981, by Don Klinger Architect, of Millersburg. They chose a colonial style brick. The anticipated completion date was set at April 3, 1983.

A Building Fund Campaign took place under the guidance of Juanita Locker Ivie, of the Board of Global Ministries from October 8th to the 21st. Dr. Herbert C. Rubright, Sr., served as general chairman for the Executive Committee for the Christian Responsibility Fund Campaign. By the grace of God, the congregation known as the First United Methodist Church of Schuylkill Haven, moved into the new facility **DEBT FREE!!!**

Since 1983, the church has added 28 parking spaces, thus having the largest parking lot of any church in Southern Schuylkill County area. We have added a large enclosed sound proof comfort room at the rear of the sanctuary thus allowing families with young children to worship in a relaxing environment and atmosphere. We also added a large lighted sign on the front lawn of the church property. The sanctuary was also enhanced with a large wooden Lord's Supper Mural which graces the rear wall of the sanctuary. It is well known and people come from other congregations to view it.

In 1992, the church added an early service of worship (8:00 a.m.) to accommodate our growing numbers and provide multiple occasions of worship. In February of 1997, an additional worship Service - a Saturday night Contemporary Service was started. Lay Leader Brian J. Reading was assigned the roll of coordinator. Mike & Joanne Forbes were selected to provide the music for this service. The Saturday Night service has been used as a model for other churches in our area who are attempting to provide such a service.

During the latter part of 1998 - the Administrative Board authorized the Board of Trustees to begin research and study to re-locate the church offices located on the second floor of the church to a more accessible place with a larger capacity and more modern setting. Miller Brothers Construction Company of Cressona was contacted for a sketch and drawing of the proposed area. The Committee worked diligently during the summer - and asked for a Charge Conference to be called in September 1999. The Congregation cast a unanimous vote to proceed with a two-level extension project to our current building. The addition was completed in 2002.

A request from the Tower South (High Rise) Tenants Council was made to our church to provide a regular traditional worship service for the residents of the facility in order to minister to the spiritual needs of those unable to attend regular church services. As a result of that request, in June of 2009 a Sunday evening worship service was added and is held at the Tower South on Parkway in Schuylkill Haven. This service is being provided as a gift to that community from the Schuylkill Haven FUMC's Christ Servant Ministry Program. The planning and coordination team is composed of Moffette and Mary Tharpe and Ted Staller (from FUMC) and a representative from the Tower South. To date, there are six pastors and 10 lay leaders who present the "message" and 12 people who provide the music.

In 2016, the church added an elevator for use by those in need.

In 2019, the church combined the 8:00 a.m. traditional and the 10:30 a.m. contemporary services into one blended service at 9:00 a.m.; also added was a 4:00 p.m. GenZ service to reach the younger generations.

In March of 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the church began live-streaming the Sunday morning service. At this time, the Saturday evening and GenZ services were put on hold. In late summer of 2020, the Saturday evening service resumed and a new service = the Haven Family eXperience (A Family Worship Experience) also known as the FX service was started as an outreach to the community on a Sunday morning at 11:00 am and was held at Bubeck Park in Schuylkill Haven and moved to Fellowship Hall In November due to the colder weather.

As you can see, God has been good and generous and faithful to us. We hope to be faithful to the blessings we have received. We also want to pass on the gift of faith and hope to a generation yet unborn. Praise be to God!