

## The History of Parsells Avenue Community Church

The history of Parsells Avenue Community Church is tied to the history of three congregations.

The first was called the Memorial Presbyterian Church, incorporated in 1872. Its beginnings are described in the "History of Rochester and Monroe County, New York, from the Earliest Historic Times to the Beginning of 1907" by William F. Peck (Pioneer Publishing Company, 1908):

*Memorial Presbyterian Church began as a mission of the Brick Church in 1869, in what was then a sparsely settled portion of the city. The first services were held in number 18 school building and other available quarters until a permanent location was secured at the corner of Hudson Avenue and Wilson Street. Here a brick chapel was erected and dedicated November 20th, 1870, at a cost of \$11,000, including the lot. On January 1st, 1871, Rev. Gavin L. Hamilton began his labors as the first minister in charge, being called from his ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Pittsford to take charge of the new work. Under the leadership of Mr. Hamilton the mission soon aspired to be organized as a church, and on January 19th, 1872, this was effected, with fifty-four charter members. The early years of the life of the church were attended with difficulty and the future of the project was often in doubt. The pastorate of Mr. Hamilton terminated in December, 1874. After being shepherdless for nearly a year the church called to its pastorate Rev. Chas. P. Coit, of Baltimore, Md., who began his labors on November 21st, 1875. Under his ministry the church grew until a new edifice became necessary, and in 1881 the chapel was enlarged into the proportions of a commodious church and dedicated on December 18th of that year, free of any debt, at a cost of \$9,500.*

*Thus far the steady hand of the Brick Church was constantly felt in sustaining the young church with large financial backing. But in 1882 the church assumed self-support. Soon the growing congregation made it apparent that more room must be provided, and in May, 1882 [sic; it was actually 1892], the building was taken down and reconstructed as it now stands with a combined seating capacity of about 1,500. The new church cost about \$34,000, and was dedicated March 19th, 1893. After nearly twenty-five years of constant labors, Dr. Coit resigned the*

*pastoral office and the relation was dissolved April 1st, 1900. Rev. J. Lyon Caughey, who succeeded next to the pastorate, was installed January 3, 1901. He was called to the pastorate of the Harlem Presbyterian Church of New York City, and closed his labors in Rochester June 11th, 1905. Rev. Fred J. Tower, the present pastor, was installed January 4th, 1906, coming from the Presbyterian Church of Carthage, Ill. The membership of the church is constantly growing and now numbers over 700. The energies of the congregation are now directed toward the clearing up of the remaining indebtedness of \$8,000. Memorial Church is planted in the heart of a large and needy section where several foreign nationalities are represented and where the gospel ministry is insistentlly demanded. It has a field which calls for a broad application of Christian doctrine both to individual life and to social conditions.*

The second was Parsells Avenue Baptist Church, which was started in 1892 when a woman by the name of Mrs. A. N. Rogers and a friend organized a Sunday School class in the kitchen of Mrs. Rogers' house on Hayward Terrace (now called Hayward Avenue). This class grew to over fifty members and outgrew the house. The class met at various locations until the group could raise enough fund to buy a lot on the corner of Oswego Street (which is now Chamberlain Street) and Parsells Avenue. They called themselves the Parsells Avenue Baptist Society, and they built a chapel on the lot in 1894. The name was then changed to Parsells Avenue Baptist Church when it was incorporated in 1895. The church was a branch of Second Baptist Church (which was founded in 1834 and renamed the Baptist Temple in 1924) until 1899, when it became an independent church (still affiliated with the Northern Baptist Convention, now called the American Baptist Churches of the USA). In 1901, the congregation expanded the chapel. A new church building was built in 1916, and the old chapel continued to be used for Sunday School until an education annex was built in 1925.

The third was East Side Presbyterian Church. The first service of that church was held June 23, 1901, at the corner of Chamberlain Street and Hayward Avenue (three blocks away from the Baptist church, going south on Chamberlain Street).

Let's go back to the "History of Rochester and Monroe County" book from 1908:

*In the latter part of 1900, the Presbyterian Union of Rochester decided to establish a Presbyterian church east of North Goodman Street. February 21st, 1901, in response to letters of request from the union, Rev. Chas. P Coit, D. D., formerly pastor of the Memorial Church, entered upon the work of calling upon the various Presbyterian people in*

*that section and interesting them in the proposed new church movement. February 27th a neighborhood prayer meeting, led by Dr. Coit, was held in the home of Mrs. Emil Ludekens. Preaching services were afterward held in the home of Miss Emma V. MeLean and in the office of the Rochester Fire Works Company on East Main Street, and on March 17th the Sunday school was organized, Rev. J. B. Stillson, the founder of the Moody Mission School of Chicago, offering the opening prayer. On April 22d, 1901, the Presbytery, by a commission, organized the church, consisting of fifty-two members with the following persons as elders: John M. Copeland, Clayton J. Parkhurst, Frank R. Raymond, Chas. J. Wagner. On May 20th articles of incorporation were adopted, the name chosen being the "East Side Presbyterian Church of Rochester." Six trustees were elected at that meeting. One week later the Presbytery formally installed Dr. Coit as pastor of the church. A building was erected on the newly purchased lot, corner Hayward Avenue and Chamberlain Street, and services began to be held June 23d. In the latter part of 1902, a Y. P. S. C. E. was organized. The work was well conducted by Dr. Coit, and at the close of his pastorate, June 30th, 1905, the church membership was 122. At a meeting of the congregation held March 25th, 1905, Rev. Paul Moore Strayer, pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church, acting as moderator, Rev. A. D. D. Fraser, of Lockport, was unanimously elected as successor to Dr. Coit. December 10th he preached his inaugural sermon, and on January 2d, 1906, he was installed pastor of the church by a commission of the Presbytery. The mortgage remaining on the church property was burned on May 22d, 1906, when nearly all the clergymen of the Presbyterian churches in the city gave appreciative remarks. On account of the rapid growth of the church and Sunday school, at a congregational meeting, February 13th, 1907, plans were approved for a new and larger edifice, work on which will soon begin. The membership of the church is 175.*

Notice it says work "will soon begin" on a new building. Well, that building was completed in 1909 (designed by Henry Larzelere of Rochester). It was located on the corner of Parsells Avenue and Denver Street (just two blocks from the Baptist church, going east on Parsells Avenue), and the congregation's first structure was torn down. The 1909 structure was later expanded; the rear section is the original building, and the sanctuary and tower were built in 1925-26 (designed by architects Bohacket & Brew of Rochester). The pipe organ, an Opus 560, was built by the Skinner Organ Company of Boston and was installed in 1925. It has 3

manuals (keyboards) and 1,556 pipes and 24 stops. It is still in its original condition (it has never been modified).

Meanwhile, Parsells Avenue Baptist Church also expanded its building in 1925 (as noted above).

In 1939, Memorial Presbyterian Church voted to merge with East Side Presbyterian Church, forming the East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church. It's ironic that Dr. Coit left Memorial Presbyterian to help found East Side Presbyterian – and eventually the two churches would merge. Anyhow, the merged congregation kept the building on Parsells Avenue (the one still in use today). They sold the building on Hudson Avenue.

Both Parsells Avenue Baptist Church and East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church thrived in the 1950s and 1960s, contributing to the well-being of the neighborhood around them. Their community involvement helped start many needed programs, including the neighborhood action group NEAD (North East Area Development, Inc.), which is still a vital organization in the northeast area of the city.

By the late 1960s, however, change in the neighborhood affected the two churches. Both churches lost members who were not being replaced, which caused them to reexamine the facilities they occupied. Individually, they could no longer afford to repair or maintain their larger buildings. Therefore, in June 1974, the churches agreed to meet and discuss the situation. The congregations slowly merged, combining services during the summer of 1975.

The intent of the union was to better provide for mission to the neighborhood, so that they did not have to sink all of their resources into the two congregations, supporting two pastors and two huge church buildings. The decision was made to occupy the Presbyterian building at Parsells Avenue and Denver Street (another merge, and this, yet again, was the structure retained). The Baptist property was sold to a neighborhood organization: the East Side Community Center, which is now called The Community Place of Rochester. (Here's another irony: the East Side center started at the East Side church building and moved to the Baptist building, and the Baptists moved to the Presbyterian building.)

In September 1975, the two congregations officially merged under the name "Parsells Avenue Community Church." They held their first service on Sunday, October 5, 1975. Rev. Dr. Ronald W. Richardson (pastor of the Presbyterian congregation) and Rev. Dr. Stanford Bratton (pastor of the Baptist congregation) became co-pastors. In August 1976, Dr. Richardson relocated to another state and Rev. Dr. Bratton became the sole pastor. In 1989, Rev. Dr. Bratton also relocated and Rev. Robert Morgan became the pastor.

The church maintained support from both denominational affiliations: American Baptist Churches USA and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

In the 1980s, the church shared its space with Iglesia Evangelica Hispana, a small Spanish Church in the community that needed worship space. Also during this time, Parsells participated in a Haitian Resettlement Project. Under the direction of Lionel Honorat, the Haitians were provided with counseling, language classes, housing, clothing and advocacy.

Other projects and programs included the Neighborhood Housing Service, Scout programs, day care, nursery school, Girls club, drama groups, baseball teams, and Y-sponsored activities. The church was an active participant in mission offerings, the North East Church Cluster, the CROP Walk, and a Saturday School (which began in 1989).

The 1990s saw new opportunities in areas such as technology and science, and the church began a Computer Lab and a Science Club. The Saturday School thrived and provided opportunities for children to receive breakfast, participate in extra-curricular activities and engage in Bible Study. There were also block parties, clothing drives, a praise team (under the direction of Linda Morgan), meal programs, and a host of other activities.

Parsells Avenue Community Church has continued to support the neighborhood and collaborate with organizations, agencies and neighborhood groups. Youth have participated in events sponsored by the Monroe County Youth Bureau, City of Rochester, Teens Advocating Nonviolence, as well as partnered with The Community Place of Rochester, area churches, the Beechwood Association, and NEAD.

In April 2007, Rev. Robert Morgan retired after 18 years of dedicated service, moving with his wife to Savannah, Georgia. The Board of Sessions began the search for a new pastor.

In December 2007, after many interviews and support from the denominations, Rev. Dr. Peter E. Grinion became the new pastor of Parsells Avenue Community Church. In 2008, Dr. Grinion led an intensive plan to renovate and revitalize the building, championed by the American Baptist Men of the Rochester/Genesee Region. ABMen called it a "church makeover."

In June 2009, the congregation held a worship service celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building's original 1909 completion.

In 2010, the covenant between Parsells and the Presbyterian Church (USA) was dissolved and Parsells Avenue Community Church became solely affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA. Also in 2010, our building became officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places.