

MAYFLOWER

Congregational Church

A Brief History

1958-1967

The very first entry in Mayflower's Church register is dated: "May 15, 1958." In understated simplicity, as though such events were routine, and with seeming disregard for the enormous task they were taking on, the opening entry reads: "A meeting of persons interested in organizing a new Congregational church was held Thursday, May 15, 1958, at 1874 Lake Dr. SE, East Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mr. Ralph B. Baldwin, acting as chairman, called the meeting to order."

It took fortitude and generosity to embark on this journey. Founding member, Julie Belknap (Mrs. Melvin) Baldwin, eloquently described the Christian principle of stewardship that moved so many early Mayflower members to extend themselves in giving in 1958 with these words:

"Possessions and money are nothing, absolutely nothing unless you use them wisely for the good of mankind. We are only trustees, custodians for the means that flow through us. I am sure the Lord meant it to be that way." And then, as though addressing the same sense of stewardship to Mayflower members yet to come, Julie Baldwin wrote, "I pray every day that Mayflower Church will hold fast to its very obvious destiny."

Mayflower's Church record shows that the founding members let no grass grow under their feet once they decided to form a new independent Congregational church rather than join with the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches. By June 4, 1958, scarcely three weeks after their founding meeting, Ralph B. Baldwin reported at the second meeting held at the Ladies Literary Club that the Mayflower sign was in place on the Robinson property, "and that a bulldozer had been clearing brush, and an architect had gone over the land once."

Voted for unanimously by those at the meeting on June 4, 1958, Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Bruce Masselink accepted a call to serve the congregation and needed only a place to lay their heads. On June 25, Mayflower bought a home at 645 Cambridge Boulevard to be the first church parsonage and where the Masselinks lived until 1973.

The first church service was held at Lakeside School on September 7, 1958. Who better than Melvin Baldwin to recall that very special Sunday morning with these words: "Some 297 people gathered together to worship God as charter members. They dared to believe that they could succeed as a truly Congregational church."

On May 21, 1961, four days after the third annual dinner, the cornerstone engraved with a giant "1960" was officially dedicated by the congregation in formal ceremonies. The cornerstone, to be found on the south side of the church's front doors, contains a variety of artifacts that the church's charter members wanted preserved for posterity. Three annual reports, from 1959-1961, the minutes of the first organizational meeting, letters offering and accepting the gift of land, and the entire membership list as of that special day are all in the hermetically sealed lead box inside the cornerstone. All that remained was for the doors to open on the first service to be held in Mayflower Congregational Church on Sunday morning of Christmas Eve. At the standing-room-only dedication service, Rev. Masselink led the congregation in a responsive "Call to Dedication" which concluded

with: "We, now, the people of this church and congregation, compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, do dedicate ourselves to the worship of God in this place and the establishment of His Kingdom among men."

1968-1993

Mayflower grew steadily over the coming years, and in 1968, a new education wing was completed in time to accommodate a record enrollment of 219 church school students through eighth grade. Dr. Masselink retired on June 30, 1972, and the first phase of Mayflower Church launch came to a close.

In the church bulletin, August 6, 1972, Rev. Maurice A. Fetty was listed for the first time as minister of Mayflower Church. Under his leadership, the church grew in membership, worship attendance and giving. In 1983, Rev. Fetty brought the 25th Anniversary Celebration Service to a climax with these concluding words of his sermon: "...we are to be the living church, a living temple with walls as wide as every church member, with boundaries which encompass every believer, with genuine building materials which endure the ravages of time, with living sacrifices of the self which transcend private goals and personal motives. ...Today, we sing... with robust faith, believing that some of us and our children and grandchildren will sing...twenty-five and fifty years hence..."

In the coming years, Mayflower also grew by offering a variety of new programs including, SAIL (Single Adventures in Living) and the Music Committee offered drama and fine arts. The music program included four vocal choirs and two handbell choirs. The cherub choir enrolled early 5-year-olds and children in the kindergarten program, while the Plymouth choir expanded to include youths in grades 1 through 5; the Pilgrim choir consisted of 6th through 12th-grade students. In 1986 Mayflower focused on its giving to Outreach and \$24,000 was disbursed. Rev. Fetty penned his final "minister's message" in the 1987 annual report, saying that after 15-1/2 years at Mayflower he was stepping down to accept a call from the Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) at Manhasset, Long Island, New York.

After about a year of hard work, the Senior Pastor Search Committee decided upon Rev. Dr. Kenneth W. Gottman of St. Louis as its choice for Senior Minister. Rev. Gottman came from a strong Methodist tradition in Missouri, and was, in fact, the son and grandson of Methodist ministers. Up to this point in its history, Mayflower had only ordained two individuals into the Christian ministry—Jud Bennett and Sara Fetty. However, during the same year Rev. Gottman became senior minister, two Mayflower members entered seminary— Jean Norris, and Professor Jonathan White – and both were ordained by our congregation.

1993-2005

In 1993, Barbara Carlson was elected as the first female moderator in Mayflower's 35-year history and a tradition was launched to elect male and female moderators in consecutive years. Early in the year, Eric C. Britcher joined the church staff in the first of several positions he would hold. Rev. Gottman soon moved to address needed facility upgrades and announced that "visionary benefactors" had already pledged more than \$1 million to help fund its proposals "to encourage the congregation to adopt the master plan," which it subsequently did at the February 2, 1999, annual meeting. A capital campaign was launched, and by the end of the year, it was able to generate its targeted goal of \$1.8 million in cash and pledges from 150 individuals and entities, enabling the church to schedule construction to commence in the spring of 2000. Early spring of 1998 saw the completion of the four-year organ and carillon rebuilding project, commemorated by a service of re-dedication. The organ was completely rebuilt and expanded to 92 ranks of pipes. This impressive \$207,000 project was finished debt-free, thanks to the generous support of anonymous donors. At the February 2, 1999, annual meeting, the congregation voted to expand Rev. Britcher's role as its newest Associate Pastor. In 1999 Mark Webb began his term of service as Chancel Choir Director.

Construction work finally came to an end in the spring of 2001 as the stunning new atrium was completed in

honor of Helen Bunker, who was the lead donor among a small number of visionary benefactors. On April 29, a grateful congregation re-dedicated the entire Mayflower facility at a special service. Also at this meeting, Pastor Gottman explained that when the dust settled and the books were closed on the master plan construction project and the capital fund drive by means of which it was financed, the church was over budget by \$550,000. Various proposals for dealing with this shortfall were discussed, but ultimately dedicated gifts were solicited at a special "Miracle Sunday" service, raising close to \$425,000 to reduce the debt.

Rev. Gottman resigned his position in 2004 and Moderator John Schneider said, "He left Mayflower a more active and caring congregation than he found it when he started his ministry with us. He made a significant, lasting contribution to our future." Mayflower membership had reached 818 by the end of 2004.

2005-present

In 2005, the Pastoral Nominating Committee was pleased to bring forward the Rev. Dr. Mark Barger Elliott, who had been serving as Senior Pastor of Riverside Presbyterian Church outside of Chicago. On August 28, Rev. Barger Elliott delivered his "trial sermon" and was enthusiastically voted by the congregation to serve as Mayflower's new Senior Pastor/Head of Staff. On this special occasion, Rev. Barger Elliott noted that "Mayflower Church is a congregation with a pilgrim spirit committed to sailing towards new horizons. We are in a wonderful juncture in our history. With new vitality, faithfulness, generosity, and commitment we see ourselves as a place to grow in faith, in love, in our outreach and as a congregation."

Over the past 14 years, Rev. Elliott has led the congregation in a season of renewed mission and ministry. Membership numbers soared over 1,000, worship attendance increased over 30%, annual giving increased by over 50%, and the endowment increased from \$650,000 to over \$2,500,000.

Outreach has also become a focal point of church activity as many Habitat homes have been built, Partners in Housing homes renovated, the housing of homeless families in our facility was sustained, and the proportion of our annual budget designated to Outreach increased dramatically from 0% to 15%.

A few other highlights include: In 2008 Mayflower celebrated its 50th Anniversary with a festive banquet at Meijer Gardens. In 2012 the congregation launched a successful and oversubscribed Capital Campaign to enhance and reconfigured the Atrium and Chapel to accommodate the growth in worship attendance and to better utilize the church facilities. In 2015, at an Annual Meeting, the Rev Lynn Barger Elliott joined the staff as an Associate Pastor. In 2018, in honor of Mayflower's 60th Anniversary, a second successful Capital Campaign was launched to relocate the playground, address necessary updates to the infrastructure, and build a new welcoming entrance/roof garden.

As Mayflower enters its 7th decade of mission and ministry it is currently working on its next strategic plan, Mayflower Vision 2022!

Senior Ministers

1958-1972 Rev. Bruce H. Masselink
1972-1988 Rev. Maurice A. Fetty
1988-1989 Rev. Robert Livingston, Interim
1989-2004 Rev. Dr. Kenneth Gottman
2004-2005 Rev. Dr. Robert Dahl, Interim
2005-2020 Rev. Dr. Mark Barger Elliott
2020-2021 Rev. Dr. Jonathan White, Interim
2021-2022 Rev. Ruth Bell Olsson, Interim
2021-2022 Rev. Steve Armfield, Interim
2022-2024 Rev. Dr. Shawn Bawulski

Ordinations of Mayflower Members

Judson Bennett – October 21, 1977
Sara Fetty – January 31, 1988
Jonathan White – May 17, 1992
Jean Norris – June 14, 1992
Nancy Bachelder – June 9, 1996
Ruth Bell Olsson – October 20, 2019
Steven W. Armfield – December 19, 2021

Organists and Choirmasters

1961-1961 Orpha (Mrs. E. Leonard) Galloway, Choir Director
1961-1962 Mr. Erwin LaHain, Organist
1962-1962 Marney Houseman, Interim Choir Director
1962-1967 Dr. Robert H. Hieber, Organist-Choirmaster
1967-1968 Marney Houseman, Interim Choir Director
1969-1969 William E. Gray, Organist-Choirmaster
1970-1970 William Lee Elliott, Organist-Choirmaster
1971-1971 Eloise (Mrs. Erwin) Johnson, Youth Choir Director
1971-1972 Charles R. Barry, Choir Director
1971-1972 Evalyn (Mrs. William M) Ridders, Organist
1972-1972 Steven Bass, Youth Choir Director
1978-1978 Homer Jackson, Organist-Choirmaster
1988-1988 Elizabeth G. Farr, Associate Organist-Choirmaster
1992-1992 Robert F. Farr, Organist-Choirmaster
1995-1995 Marguerite Vanden Wyngaard, Choirmaster
1995-2018 Jonathan Tuuk, Director of Music-Organist
1995-1999 Martin Werner, Chancel Choir Director
1980-2002 Ruth Nicely, Youth Choir Director
1999-2019 Mark Webb, Chancel Choir Director
2002-2019 Heidi Hertel, Youth Choirs Director
2018-present Julia Brown, Director of Music-Organist
2019-present Scott Bosscher, Chancel Choir Director
2019-present Abby Brooks, Youth Choirs Director

Material has been pulled from Mayflower History books.