

"The members of every congregation should be familiar with its history. God's dealings with them ought to lead them to avoid former mistakes, to be warned by former failures, and to be inspired by former victories. The past throws a flood of light upon the present and the future." -former Bellefield pastor William J. Reid.

As a relatively young member of Bellefield, I have often wondered about the history of the building in which we worship our Lord each week. The next time you enter the sanctuary, take a moment to look around. A magnificent dome rises nearly 80 feet above us, high above our songs of worship and prayers to our God. Four giant arches tower over each of the four sides of the sanctuary. Beautiful colors filter through the ornate stained-glass windows to our left and right, as each window pieces together the truths found in the Bible. The wooden pews we sit in each morning have been occupied by thousands of believers before us - certainly there is a story to uncover about this house of worship.



Looking for answers, I turned to the book "History of the First United Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pa. 1801-1901," which provided a fascinating historical account written by one of our former pastors, William J. Reid, who pastored our congregation for 40 years from 1862 to 1902. And to clarify, Bellefield Presbyterian Church has only been called by its present name since 1967, when two congregations were joined. Prior to this, the church family here was known as First United Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh for most of its history.

In the late 1700's, Pittsburgh was a small frontier settlement, site of the Revolutionary War-era Fort Pitt. A small but growing town, Pittsburgh was a mission field for two missionaries who were sent here in response to a petition from Scotch-Irish emigrants in the U.S. to the Associate Synod of Scotland requesting for them to send ministers. From this beginning, the Presbytery of Pennsylvania was established.

Two hundred years ago, on November 24, 1801, our congregation was organized with the ordination of its first elders. In the first seven years, the congregation met in the Court House downtown. At times, there were two services on Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

In the year 1818, "serious difficulties" arose in the congregation. They "had their origin partly in the introduction of new tunes in public worship, but especially in the 'giving out' of two lines instead of one." The music director would call out the words of the song for those who either could not read or did not have a hymnal. "Some members of the congregation thought it better to read two lines. Others bitterly opposed the change. It seems a small thing to cause estrangement and enmity among Christian brethren, but it is a well established fact that many of the bitterest controversies in the Church have been

about matters of minor importance." Thankfully, these difficulties were overcome.

Bellefield has seen leaders who have invested much of their lifetimes in its ministry. One early pastor, Dr. Robert Bruce, spent "six or seven weeks tossed upon the Atlantic, and ten days or two weeks traveling across the almost untrodden paths of the Allegheny mountains, in order to reach primitive Pittsburgh." Dr. Bruce pastored the congregation at First United for 38 years. In addition, he served as principle of Western University (present-day University of Pittsburgh) from 1820 to 1843. He then established Duquesne College, and served as its president until his death. Dr. Reid writes of Dr. Bruce: "Remembering the work he accomplished in edifying saints, in converting sinners, and in instructing the young, we must feel that it is impossible to overestimate the influence he exerted [in the Pittsburgh community]."



By 1851, a new church building was constructed for a total cost of \$11,500, including furnishings. In 1853, the congregation decided to send its first missionary to India, which required \$600 per year. By grace, Bellefield continues to support missionaries who spread the Gospel throughout the world.

As Pittsburgh grew to become an industrial metropolis, the face of the city changed, and the leaders of our congregation knew that they were again at a crossroads.

"One great hindrance in the work of the congregation in later years was the growth of the city, and the changes which such growth compelled. In the neighborhood of the church [which was downtown], business houses crowded out the homes... The members of the congregation were scattered in all directions, and it became more inconvenient for them to attend the church in which their fathers worshipped."



The congregation decided that they would build a new building in Oakland, which was a quiet, less developed community, because over 200 members lived there. The old church building property in downtown was sold for \$90,000.

The congregation bought land from the Schenley family- a lot 140 by 225 feet. There were many competing designs for the new building, and the contract for construction was \$55,000. The groundbreaking was held May 11, 1898, and the cornerstone was laid July 23, 1898.

"Among the articles placed in the stone were a history of the congregation and a list of its members; photographs of the old church and of the Oakland chapel; a volume of sermons [from two pastors] ... [various Christian magazines, minutes of Presbyterian General Assembly, etc]; and the daily papers; a map of Pittsburgh and Allegheny; a collection of internal revenue stamps."



Upon completion, the total cost of the building including furnishings: \$110,000. It took one year and four months to construct, and the building was dedicated the September of 1899.

The church's centennial celebration was held on November 24, 1901. With the completion of a brand new building, a growing membership, and an evolving university community, it must have been an exciting time for ministry. The centennial celebration included a musical program and remarks by men who had been a part of the church family for many years.

Below are excerpts of the remarks of John G. Brown, D. D., who was a friend of the church for 62 years. Brown baptized, married, and buried many church members over the years. His words were spoken a century ago, but they apply to us today. Please consider them, reflect on them, and let it be our sincere hope that they will encourage us to go forward courageously in our service to God's kingdom here at

Bellefield as we enter the third century of God's work in this church.

John G. Brown, D.D., said, "And yet, during all these years of conflict and turmoil, of upheaval and change, of progress and excitement in the world around it, this congregation, starting out few in number and limited in resources, has moved on and on, peacefully and calmly, ever widening in its influence, ever deepening in its attachment to the sublime principles of its profession, ever seeking to advance the cause and kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, ever striving to bring into fuller realization the angelic refrain heard by astonished shepherds upon the star-lit plains of Judea, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good-will to men.'"



Brown continues: "[This congregation] can look back upon the past with gratitude and with a faith strong in God, and with the love of Christ in its heart; it can look out confidently upon the 'mist-clad plain' of the future, ready to accept, to do and to endure what the Master shall appoint. Standing between the yoke and the alter, it is ready for service or sacrifice, as God may require."

Brown, concludes: "And now, my Christian friends, my prayer is that you will go on and on, ever growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and when another hundred years shall have passed away there will be another, a more glorious and more triumphant celebration. Go forward, trusting in God; go forward, seeking the influence of his Holy Spirit; go forward, guided ever by his Holy Word, and may the God of peace who brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."