

Westminster Presbyterian Congregation Celebrating 125 Years of Faithfulness

Westminster Presbyterian Church's 125th anniversary celebration is about faithfulness -- not only on the part of generations of families who have called the local congregation home, but also about God's faithfulness in seeing this family of Christians through 125 years of growth and challenges.

Along with being a nostalgic observance and opportunity for reflection, Westminster members and Pastor David Cook are hoping that the event will also launch another 125 years of faithful service to God and God's blessings on the people of Westminster.

According to genealogy buff Jim Sterrett, who delved into the church's history as part of the anniversary celebration preparation, Westminster's history actually begins long before 1875, when a group traveled to Philadelphia to purchase land on which to build a church. The first log church was built at Glebe [along Swamp Road, outside of Mifflintown], with construction halted as a result of skirmishes with the local Indians. In 1763, at the end of the French and Indian War, construction was completed and services were held at Cedar Spring Church for all Presbyterians on the east side of the Juniata River.

In 1791, John Harris laid out the town of Mifflintown, providing ground for a Presbyterian church and cemetery. Sometime around 1799, the congregation decided to abandon the Glebe church and two congregations were formed -- Mifflintown and Lost Creek.

The Mifflintown group built a stone church at the corner of Main and North streets [on property that has now become part of the cemetery], while the Lost Creek congregation built a small house of worship in an oak grove one-half mile from McAlisterville. Although worshipping in different facilities, the group was considered one church.

The small Mifflintown church was used until 1838, when a brick church was built on the opposite corner.

According to church records and newspaper accounts, in June 1875 a committee of the Presbytery officially formed two congregations from the local church, and the Mifflintown and Lost Creek congregations became independent of one another.

On October 9 of that same year Rev. Sherrard was installed as the congregation's minister, and Westminster Presbyterian Church was officially established.

On July 11, 1879, the church building at the corner of Main and North streets was damaged by a tornado and rendered unfit for use. On August 5, the Mifflintown congregation decided to lease the Doughmann property on Washington Avenue and erected a chapel.

Rev. L.Y. Hays was the pastor when the present church building was constructed, at a cost of \$17,000. A dedication service was held January 23, 1887, at which time Rev. Hays "presented the question of the extinguishment of the church debt," which stood at \$2,400.

According to newspaper accounts of the time, under Rev. Hays' skillful presentation, the questioned subscriptions [donations] rolled in so quickly that within a half hour the debt was paid off.

On the Thursday evening preceding the dedication service, the church's organ committee held a recital to introduce the church's magnificent new pipe organ into service. A basic admission fee of 50 cents was charged, with reserved seats going for 75 cents. Recital performers included a quartet of singers and an organist from Harrisburg.

The congregation settled in and continued to worship peacefully in their handsome church building until the spring of 1917, when fire broke out in the rafters and center ceiling and the church suffered much smoke and water damage.

Another fire struck on the Third Street side of the building in 1940, with minor damage reported, and in 1954, a tornado blew the church's spire and bell tower to the ground, killing one passerby and injuring another. The church tower was rebuilt, without the steeple.

In 1956, a church school annex was added for nursery and primary children, and a major refurbishment of the church and manse took place in 1992 and 1993, at a cost of \$125,000. The trustees borrowed \$75,000 for the project, and as a result of the church's successful annual caramel candy project, initiated by member Larue Betlyon, and other projects, as well as the support of the congregation, the debt was paid off in 1996.

Now, as the Westminster congregation celebrates God's faithfulness through 125 years of ups and downs, it prepares expectantly for many more years of service and spiritual growth.

The anniversary celebration will include three days of music, recognition, praise and worship, beginning

with a service Friday, September 29, from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. Among those participating will be Pastor Cook and former pastor Louise Reynolds, along with several of the church's officers. Elder Russ Gobeille will share the church's history, and Elder Nonine Cranston will lead a hymn sing. Other special music will be provided by a chamber trio.

A Saturday evening service, from 7:00 to 8:30, will include music by the Shirk Quartet and other musical selections, the recognition of church generations, a hymn sing and a display of church memorabilia. Those attending are invited to wear old-fashioned garb. Refreshments will be served following the service.

Friday and Saturday celebrations lead up to the big day on Sunday, when worship will begin one-half hour earlier than usual, at 10:00 a.m. [with no Sunday school]. Sis Stump and Ruth Welsh will perform a piano-organ duet and other special music will be provided by vocalist Vic Primak, Rev. and Mrs. David Miller, Joy Shirk and Ben Marasco.

Pastor Cook will serve his first communion to the congregation during the Sunday morning service.

Anniversary celebration committee chair Bobbi Miller will be the mistress of ceremonies for the Friday and Saturday evening services, and will assist Pastor Cook during the Sunday morning service, which will be followed by a fellowship meal.

All friends and former members of Westminster are invited to this special observance, as the congregation celebrates 125 years of God's faithfulness and looks forward to what Pastor Cook believes will be an exciting time of growth.