

The History of Heritage Methodist Church

It's been more than a hundred years since Methodists in Ligonier dedicated their new church on the Diamond. On the outside, the church was strong and durable with walls of blue stone, oak doors, and a bell tower tall enough to hold the town clock. It was built to be a landmark. On the inside, it was serene and peaceful. A place where one could feel the presence of God. It was a place to practice the doctrine of Methodism. Over a century later the church building still stands strong and its ministry continues to be inspired and directed by the spirit of God.



John Wesley
(1703 - 1791)

The Methodist doctrine, developed by John and Charles Wesley and friends in England, was introduced to the Ligonier Valley well before the Heritage Church was built. The first Methodist Episcopal Church was established in 1788 and authorized by a letter from John Wesley that was sent from Bristol, England. The Valley was part of the Redstone District, which included all the territory west of the Allegheny Mountains from New York to Virginia. Two circuit riders served the territory to baptize the young, marry and bury the faithful, and spread the gospel among the frontier believers.

Eventually, some of the early Christians wanted a more structured religious experience and a place where they could worship together. They chose Jacob Shaw's house in what is now Cook Township where Shaw, with his wife, three daughters and a friend, formed the first congregation.

By 1790, the little congregation had moved to the farmhouse of Robert M. Roberts, whose son would later become a Methodist Bishop. *

The congregation moved several more times. Then, in 1829 on a lot that cost \$20, they built a one-room structure at the corner of Church and St. Clair streets where Calvary United Methodist Church now stands. By 1850, according to a letter written by Junior Pastor Dr. H.L. Chapman and published in the *History of Westmoreland County*, the congregation numbered 75. Dr. Chapman wrote that the church "...was situated on a back street" and was a place "for cows to rest quietly at night. But the edifice was by no means favorably located for securing attendance of the general public, and only the most faithful members, as a rule, found their way there for divine service." Although Dr. Chapman frowned on the location of the church, he had kind words to say about the residents of Ligonier. "In no community of its size," he said, have I ever found so many people of solid character, intelligence and exemplary conduct."

The growing congregation soon needed a new church. Some members wanted to keep it on the side street because of "precious memories." Others, like David Boucher, owner of a large tract of land south of town, wanted a more visible location. According to Dr. Chapman: "Mr. Boucher's choice, as well as my own, was a lot on one corner of the public square, in the center of the village. In order to influence the decision, he offered a moderate sum for the church to be built anywhere, but five times as much if it should be built on the public square. This offer had a great influence and practically secured the location ... "at the corner of Main and Market streets on the Diamond. A two-story brick church was built there in 1857 -the first date on the Heritage cornerstone-with the sanctuary on the second floor and the social room and classrooms below.



The Original Methodist Church
Built on the Diamond in 1857

According to the *History of Westmoreland County*, a revival during the first winter after the church was built brought in 106 new members and more than doubled the size of the congregation. By the turn of the century, it was apparent that the 1857 church was no longer large enough to accommodate the growing congregation. In the spring of 1901, the congregation began debating the need for a new church. At first the trustees rejected the idea, but the congregation held a special meeting and, according to the *Echo*, "almost unanimously decided to build a new church edifice the coming summer (1902). The plan is to erect a new, modern church at a cost of about \$12,000" on the corner of their lot on "Diamond Park." In August 1901, a contract to build the new church for \$15,175 was awarded to Peterson, Risheberger and Nixon. The *Echo* reported that this price did not include, among other things, the pews, carpet, and furnishing. The Building Committee estimated the total cost to be \$19,000. The newspaper said, "The edifice will be a magnificent stone structure and will be an honor to our Methodist brethren and a credit to the town."

The blue stone for the exterior walls came from a quarry on the Byers-Allen Lumber Company property above Rector on Laurel Mountain. A sample was on display in L.B. Weller's store on the Diamond. Church records say that the stone was donated free and "hailed reasonably" by the old P W & S Railway. The old church was torn down, and the brick parsonage next to it was moved south on Market Street to make way for the new structure.

The Sunday bulletin printed on the 25th anniversary of the new church identified the "committee in charge of the operation" as L.B. Weller, Josiah Brant, J.H. Murdock, **Mrs. Henry Denney, and Mrs. Frank Marker. The bulletin said, "The whole church was consulted in every important matter so that all were thoroughly informed as to what was being done. Of course, as always in a matter of that kind, differences of opinion resulted, and sometimes the committee has things said about them 'that were not in the Discipline.'"

The Cornerstone Is Set

The cornerstone of the Methodist Episcopal Church was set in place on a rainy Saturday afternoon April 19, 1902. The Ligonier Echo reported that 300 people "representing all the denominations of town" witnessed "this first service in the erection of the new and magnificent church edifice." They saw Carlo Mosini, foreman of the masons building the church walls, put in place the cornerstone which holds a metal box that contains the following: a Bible, Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1900, Methodist Yearbook of 1902, copies of newspapers from New York, Pittsburgh, Greensburg, and Ligonier, a copy of Illustrated Historic Ligonier Valley, a photograph of the former church, names of church officers, members, subscribers, some United States coins; and an Italian coin given by Mr. Mosini. During the service "an opportunity" was given to those attending to contribute to the new church. "The people greatly responded," according to the Echo, "and \$146 was raised." A list of names of these last-minute contributors was also included in the box.



In 2003, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the dedication of the Methodist Church, the time capsule was removed and the contents were put on display in the Fellowship Hall.

Some of the items that were placed in the 2003 time capsule included an 1807 Hymnal, Two 1849 Hymnals, 1905 Sunday School Record Book, 1930's Sunday School Song Book, Ligonier Echo dated July 2003, Greensburg Tribune, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and a Vacation Bible School t-shirt that had been signed by the June, 2003 Vacation Bible School participants.

The new Methodist Episcopal Church was designed to seat 600. An Audience Room with curved pews and a Bowl floor in the front of the sanctuary would seat 320. Moveable partitions separated that area from the Lecture Room and Infant Sunday School Room in the rear. A small balcony was built over part of the Lecture Room. Floors were covered with Body Brussel carpets. There were electric lights. The community eventually raised \$400 to offset the additional cost of making the bell tower nine feet taller than planned so it could hold the town clock. A "Pittsburgh

Gentleman," according to the Echo, donated the clock and a one-thousand-pound bell made by the Chaplain Fulton Foundry in Pittsburgh.



On the last Sunday in July 1903, just 15 months after the cornerstone was set, the church was dedicated to the glory of God. The morning service attracted 700 worshippers. Hundreds attended an afternoon service, and in the evening 600 more were present for the third service of the day. Former pastors, ministers from the other churches in Ligonier, missionaries, the president of Allegheny College, the editor of the Christian Advocate, and many other notables attended and participated in the services. Because the cost of the new church was \$25,000, and the congregation raised only \$22,500, they passed the collection plates again. At the end of the last ceremony, they had collected more than \$3,400 - enough to finish paying for the church with about \$900 remaining. The extra money was used toward the purchase of the first

organ. The pastor during the building project was the Rev. N.G. Miller, who retired at the Annual Conference following the dedication of the church.

How We Got Our Name

The Methodist Episcopal Church; the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and the Methodist Protestant Church merged in 1939 to become the Methodist Church. In 1968, the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church – itself the product of a merger between the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Church – to form The United Methodist Church. Before 1968, our church was called the First Methodist Church of Ligonier. When the merger occurred, the Conference said each United Methodist Church should add another name at the beginning of its title. At the Charge Conference on February 12, 1968, Floyd McConnaughey suggested the word "Heritage," which was agreed upon by the members. On May 10, 2023, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to adopt the name Heritage Methodist Church, after breaking away from the United Methodist denomination in a disaffiliation vote in April 2023 and joining the Global Methodist denomination.

The Heritage Organ

The first pipe organ was installed in the Methodist Church in August 1905 by the world renowned Moller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland. The cost of the organ was estimated at \$3,000, half of which was paid by industrialist Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie, who retired and left for Scotland two years before the Heritage Church was completed, began donating money for church organs as early as 1873. By 1919, he had contributed more than \$6 million toward the purchase of 7,689 organs -including the one at Heritage. In 1927, the magnificent chime section was added to give the organ a broader function in the church service.

By the summer of 1979 the organ had been returned to Moller three times for extensive changes and repair, and a decision was made to buy a new Moller pipe organ with an antiphonal organ to be placed at the rear of the Sanctuary. On Sunday, March 14, 1982, the new organ was dedicated debt-free. In 1995, in memory of organist Ralph Kurtz, the choir purchased the cymbalstern for the organ. The set of bells was purchased from the Allegheny Pipe Organ Company for \$1,300. Fred T. Finn, who served as president of the Heritage Choir, spearheaded the project.

Updates and Additions

In 1960, the church consecrated a new educational unit that was built with the same blue stone from the same quarry on Laurel Mountain. Lawrence Clawson, chairman of the Building Committee, helped to select the stones and haul them to the site. A new parsonage was built on Mellon Street, and pastor Benton McKee and his family moved in during the fall of 1961. The old parsonage, which had been moved in 1902, was torn down and the rest of the educational wing with classrooms, lounge, chapel, and church offices was completed and dedicated September 26, 1965. Fifty new members joined the church that year. Many other changes have been made to the church during the past 100 years.



The Chancel in 1960

The following renovations were done during a major remodeling about 1970:

- The balcony and the stairs leading to it were removed
- The wooden floor in the rear of the sanctuary was removed, the floor raised, and pews installed
- A pillar that stood in the middle of the sanctuary between the front and rear sections was removed (prior to that, brides had to use a side aisle to get to the altar)
- The moveable partition that separated the front and back sections was removed

- The stained glass windows were removed and taken to Johnstown where Pastor Ben McKee's father cleaned, re-leaded, and reinforced them
- The sanctuary ceiling was varnished.

In addition, an outside ramp entrance was built for the Fellowship Hall. The heating system was changed from coal to natural gas, air conditioning was added, and countless other repairs and improvements were made. Along with regular collections, the projects were funded with proceeds from hundreds of dinners, sales, and other events.

Renovation Project - 2019 to 2020

In 2015, after years of minor and sometimes major maintenance, the Trustees Committee recognized that we could no longer delay performing a major renovation to upgrade and improve the 1961 Education and Community Building and revise the electrical system requirements of the Sanctuary. A preliminary Building Committee was formed to review what steps were needed to proceed. It was determined that the first step was to form a Capital Campaign Committee, which was chaired by Finance Chairman, Mr. Thomas Shearer, to



raise the anticipated funds while eventually engaging the services of an architect to render drawings and a proposal for contractor bids. The Congregation and church leadership were surveyed to determine their vision for a renovated building and were kept advised of the progress of the project in semi-annual and annual update meetings. Mr. Ron Wagner, Chair of Trustees, and Mr. Thomas Shearer served as Co-Chairmen of the new Building Committee as fund-raising events and congregational sales were held and local foundations were solicited to help us achieve our goal to improve the facilities that are utilized by so many civic and community organizations. The final plans were accepted and the congregation voted in June 2019 to proceed with a \$1.4 M project to renovate the facility to accomplish the following improvements:

- Complete electrical system upgrade
- Elimination of moisture issues
- Installation of energy efficient windows
- Installation ADA restrooms and a new ADA South Entrance
- Installation of an internal elevator

- Reconfiguration of floor space
- Addition of an accessibility ramp to the Fellowship Hall
- Modernization of the Fellowship Hall kitchen used by Meals On Wheels
- Elimination of all old wiring in the Sanctuary
- Modernization of the Lounge Kitchen



Fellowship Hall Ramp

Construction began in October 2019 and a newly renovated structure was dedicated debt-free on October 18, 2020 with Pastor Frank Hodges, Pastor John Flower and Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koi Koi presiding over the service.

New Denomination



In early 2022, it had become apparent that a majority shift had occurred within the United Methodist Church to more liberal interpretations of the Bible and there existed a distinct lack of accountability by church hierarchy for deviations from the current UMC Church Discipline. A team was organized to research and explain to the congregation what had been happening within the UMC in recent decades and as far back as the 1972 General Conference. Major disagreements in fundamental theology, stated doctrine and biblical teachings and beliefs combined with the acceptance by society in general of same sex marriage had caused a rift between the progressive or more liberal-minded congregations versus more traditional congregations.

Heritage United Methodist Church voted overwhelmingly to disaffiliate from the UMC on April 16, 2023 and voted on May 10, 2023 to join the Global Methodist Church, thereby preserving the traditional Wesleyan position on strict adherence to Biblical teachings and doctrine. At that same meeting on May 10, the name of the church was changed to Heritage Methodist Church, upholding the long-standing tradition of maintaining a traditional Methodist congregation on the Diamond in Ligonier.



Today, Heritage Church is far more than the stone, mortar, wood and steel that holds it together. It is a place where generation after generation has found peace, love, and the joy of worship as well as lasting friendships and fond memories. Thousands of sermons have been preached from its pulpit. Its Sunday School classes have studied the word of God in the scriptures. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals and other important events in the life of its congregations have occurred within its walls. It has supported missionaries, donated food and clothing to the needy, and opened its doors to the community.

Most of all, however, Heritage Methodist Church is a place where Christians can find hope in the world and in their personal lives through the grace of a loving God.

**Robert Richford Roberts, who became the sixth – and youngest – Methodist Bishop, moved to the Ligonier Valley with his parents and nine brothers and sisters around 1785 when he was seven years old. His father, who served in the Revolutionary War, bought 400 acres in the Valley and built a rough cabin for his family. When Robert was 14, according to one of his biographers, he had a “spiritual awakening.” While he was “in the fields about sunrise suddenly there came over him a great feeling of cheerfulness and need of a change of heart.” He became a minister, and in later years he preached in churches in Baltimore, Alexandria, Georgetown and Philadelphia. He became a Bishop in 1816 and spent much of his later life in the Midwest where he was instrumental in founding Indiana Asbury University, now DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana.*



***The Spirited Mrs. Denney - According to the bulletin printed on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the new church, the two women on the "committee in charge of the operation," Mrs. Henry Denney and Mrs. Frank Marker "undervalued their own worth to the enterprise, (and) modestly resigned from active participation in the proceedings of the committee." But Mrs. Denney, apparently a strong-willed and affluent member of the congregation, made some decisions even though she was not on the committee. She came to the church when the workmen were laying a pine floor in the vestibule. She wouldn't have that. So she paid to have it replaced with the terra cotta that is still there today. She came to the church again just as they were finishing the wainscoting and the ceiling-all in yellow pine. She was upset, so she sent to Pittsburgh for craftsmen who "grained" the pine and made it look like fine oak. She paid for that, as well.*