

Annual Gathering – State of the Region Address 2017

The region archives state, “On October 18, 1827, John Quincy Adams was President of the United States, DeWitt Clinton was Governor of New York, M. Brown Jr. was President of the Board of Trustees of the village of Rochester. This was the day delegates from nine churches met in the Court House of Rochester to organize the Baptist Union of Rochester and Monroe County, Incorporated.”

The nine churches, in order of their formation year were First Baptist Church Penfield, First Baptist Church of Parma (Now Hilton Baptist), Greece Baptist Church, West Henrietta Baptist Church, First Baptist Church Rochester, Ogden Baptist Church, East Penfield Baptist Church, and First and Second Baptist Church Sweden.

“From its beginnings, the Baptist Union declared its interest in mission.” The first collective mission effort was to raise \$1,000 to give Bibles to 17 million Burmese.” Just imagine. It is likely that those who have immigrated to the US in recent years had ancestors who were recipients of those Bibles.

The first African American church to join the region was Third Baptist Church in 1843. A German Baptist church was established in 1851.

One of the first justice stands was made in 1853... “Resolved that we most heartily deprecate the existence of that so-called law of our land, which compels members of some of our churches to flee from this so-called liberty to seek their freedom in a foreign land, and that, so long as this or any other law exists by which our brothers and sisters are made merchandise of, we will consider ourselves bound with them.”

“In the early 1900s there was growth of Women’s Missionary Societies. Contributing greatly to the development of women’s mission work was Mrs. Helen Barret Montgomery. Mrs. Montgomery was a woman who thoroughly lived her faith and it opened many avenues in her life. She was the first woman elected to the Rochester School Board, the first woman to become President of the Northern Baptist Convention, and the first woman to be licensed as a minister of Lake Avenue Baptist Church.”

Polish and Italian missions were developed in the 1940’s.

Pouring over the Annual Reports we would recognize many names as these churches remain today. But there are also names which are unknown to Baptists of the current age. Names such as Hamlin Baptist, Andrews Street Baptist, East Avenue Baptist, North Baptist, Fernwood Baptist, Christ Polish Baptist, Walker Baptist, Atlantic Avenue Baptist, First Italian, North Murray, as well as others.

These names remind us that we are all here for only a season. The key is to make a difference for Christ during our season.

Today there are many new names to us: Common Ground, Peace Community, First United Bloomington, two University Baptists (MN and OH), United Granville, Kingdom Come, Historic Parsells, Crescent Hill, Judson Memorial, Minnesota Lisu, Rochester Chin, Rochester Karen, St. Luke Missionary Charlotte NC, FBC Keystone at Citrus Park, First Baptist Moorestown, FBC Ithaca, FBC Painted Post, Good Shepherd.

These names remind us of God’s continuing work of reconciliation and renewal.

For the greater share of our history the total church membership hovered in the high 20s to the high 30s. In the last 20 years that number has steadily grown to the high 40s.

Executive Ministers have been Alfred Isaac, Albert DeMott, Hale Thornberry, John Craig, Harrison Williams, Hugh Morton, Carroll Turner, Ken Williams and Alan Newton. In two years or less you will have a new name to add to this list. Already a Transition Committee has been appointed and is working to help determine the region’s leadership needs for the future.

I share this to help us remember that the roots of this region are deep. I hope you also recognize a bit of the DNA of this region, which was apparent from its founding. From the beginning, this has been a diverse region, a region with a passion for mission, for justice, for freedom.

The region was committed to higher education, establishing the college in Brockport, the University of Rochester and Rochester Seminary (now Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School).

The region was committed to serving seniors through Fairport Baptist Home and the poor through Cameron Community Ministries.

We carry the past with us into the future. But what of the future?

Rev. A W Beaven at the one hundredth celebration said, “We realize...how splendid have been the achievements of the past; the daring and sacrifice of our forebears have made the present achievements possible. To be worthy of them, we, in turn, must be as courageous and daring in preparing for the future as they were in their day.”

I couldn’t think of more appropriate words to challenge us today. “We must be courageous and daring.”

Beaven also gave two challenges, which interestingly have been primary concerns of the current Executive Board.

First, we should increase the social contacts between the members of our churches. He warned, “we fail to have opportunities to get together and get acquainted as we should. The results of this will be a lack of solidarity in we continue it.”

Beaven continued, “we cannot maintain our place and carry on our work unless our churches are more aggressive in reaching the unchurched.”

Focusing on these two goals would greatly serve us our churches.

Fortunately, we live in an age where social contacts are so possible and available. Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Zoom are only a few of the tools, which can be used to strengthen our ties. Rachel McGuire, one of our region pastors is creating a new network of collaboration through CRCDS that holds great promise for us.

The second goal, of reaching the unchurched is a much more difficult challenge for most of our churches. Every single church in the region is concerned with growth. We want our churches to grow. But we are hesitant to reach out beyond ourselves. But know who is good at this? Our children. I can’t tell you the number of times I have visited region churches and have received the most genuine welcome from children and youth in your churches. Why is that? I think it is imperative that we figure this out and learn to replicate what they are doing. As adults, we use the Sunday morning fellowship time to do church business or to catch up with friends. We want to add to our flock, but largely ignore them on Sunday mornings. Sunday morning is the opportune time to reach out. Furthermore, we may want to consider spending more time outside the church than inside it. And we must encourage our pastors to spend more time in the community building new relationships because that is where the unchurched are. Having your pastor spend all her or his time taking care of the flock in the church will not result in growth.

Let me close with a few more words from the past, “Long ago it was said that we ‘should attempt great things for God and expect great things from God.’ This is a great time in which we live. We have had a great past. We have great resources. Dare we do less than attempt great things for God?”