



Church of the Covenant: An Historical Overview

Historical Roots: Second Presbyterian (1844–1920)

Of the 58 charter members of Second Presbyterian Church, 53 were dismissed amicably from First Presbyterian.

First church building completed in 1852, subsequently burned to ground (1876); new structure completed (1878) located at Prospect and E. 30th – one block south of Euclid Avenue, Cleveland’s “Millionaires’ Row” and home to its most prominent members.

At instigation of the Rev. Paul Sutphen (1895–1920), 2nd’s Men’s Club founded (1915) the Playhouse Settlement – later to become The Neighborhood Association (1919) and Karamu House (1940) – to address “moral conditions and social needs” of African American migrants settling in the Central-Woodlawn neighborhood. The Settlement became an autonomous member of the Welfare Federation of Cleveland in 1919, but 2nd Church and its successor, Church of the Covenant, continued to support financially and as trustees into the 1950s. Some of Covenant’s first African American members were associated with Karamu House.

Offered services in French from 1906 until 1915 for “the little French-speaking population of the city: teachers, waiters, cooks, servants, etc...and the lovers of the French language, who did enjoy to hear the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ preached in that beautiful language.”

Assumed financial care and governance of the Italian Mission, established in Little Italy in 1888 to serve Waldensians (dissenters from the Roman Catholic Church who had emigrated from the Italian Alps), erecting a combined church, Sunday School and manse on Murray Hill Road in 1907. St. John’s Beckwith Church continued offering services in Italian and English until 1955, when Church of the Covenant, the successor of 2nd Church’s trusteeship of the Beckwith Fund (see below) ceased its sponsorship and transferred the congregation (and Beckwith Fund) to the Presbytery.

Historical Roots: Euclid Street (Avenue) Presbyterian (1853–1906)

Fourteen members of First Presbyterian left “in a spirit of goodwill” in 1851 to organize a Sunday school that would officially become Euclid Street Presbyterian in 1853.

Located at Euclid and E. 9th, the congregation began building in 1852, but the building remained unfinished until 1871. The building was derisively called the “church of 40 corners” because of its pretentious design and need for periodic and costly renovation.

At a meeting on February 1, 1854, the congregation resolved “that at all elections in this Church the female members shall be entitled to vote.”

In a sermon two weeks after his installation on May 10, 1854, the Rev. Joseph Bittinger denounced the proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would open the possibility of extending slavery to the Kansas-Nebraska Territory. “Pray against slavery, but open the territories, and will that keep it out? You have no right to leave anything to Providence, which you can do...Prayer against evil begins where work against it ceases, and not before.”

Historical Roots: Beckwith Memorial Presbyterian (1885–1906)

Established by 2nd Presbyterian, whose longtime elder T. Sterling Beckwith had established an endowment fund according to which the Session of 2nd Presbyterian was to build a church whenever income reached \$10,000. The church(s) were to be named “Beckwith” and the pews were to always be free.

Beckwith Memorial Presbyterian organized with 23 charter members and occupied a small brick chapel completed in 1883 at E. 107th and Deering St. adjacent to Case School and Adelbert College – an area which the rapidly expanding city would engulf and transform into Cleveland’s “second downtown.”

Evangelization efforts in East Cleveland as far as the intersection of Euclid and Superior necessitated a larger church building which was built next to the smaller chapel and dedicated in 1892.

The Rev. Albert J. Alexander installed in 1901, adopted “evangelization” as the keynote of the church’s work, establishing a mission on the Heights that, in 1905, became the nucleus of Cleveland Heights Presbyterian (today known as Forest Hill Presbyterian).

Historical Roots: Euclid Avenue and Beckwith Memorial Churches Merge to form the Euclid Avenue Presbyterian Church

A proposal to unite the Euclid Street (Avenue) and Beckwith Memorial Churches approved by both congregations in November, 1903, but the merger was not finalized until November, 1906, to form the Euclid Avenue Presbyterian Church. Following merger, met separately for worship until May, 1907, when they united for services in the Beckwith Church until 1911.

Cleveland’s population was expanding eastward into the Heights.

The Euclid Avenue Church was located in a rapidly developing downtown business district and authorized a committee to locate and examine sites suitable for new church edifice. In November, 1906, the committee reported five available properties in the University Circle area near Wade Park, a fashionable residential neighborhood. In early 1907, purchased a site on Euclid Avenue east of Flora Stone Mather College for \$62,000 and authorized competition for the design of a new church building. Ground for the new church was broken in June, 1909, and the new church was dedicated in 1911.

Total cost of land, building, furnishings and fixtures came to \$395,147, while the sale of the downtown property, set aside as a building fund, realized \$300,000. In February, 1910, trustees authorized drawing up a plat of the pews in the new building showing values that could be assigned “in case the same shall be rented.” Pews assigned in exchange for voluntary contributions until January, 1917, when all seats were made and remained free.

Director of Music (1911-1928) was also professor of music at Mather College of Western Reserve University. Moved collegiate vesper services, programs of prayer and music held each Sunday afternoon from Harkness Chapel to the church.

A General Endowment Fund was established (1906) from a gift in 1903 to the Euclid Avenue Church and a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the church property.

Historical Roots: Second Presbyterian and Euclid Avenue Presbyterian Churches Merge to form the Church of the Covenant

By 1920, Cleveland’s African American population had grown from 8,448 in 1910 to 34,451. Most settled in the Central-Woodland neighborhood adjacent to 2nd Presbyterian Church. In 1915, 2nd Church spent over \$40,000 for improvements to its facilities. In 1919, the subject of relocation further east arose and three localities were discussed – Shaker Heights, Cleveland Heights and union with the Euclid Avenue Presbyterian Church in University Circle. “Cleveland’s business and civic elite” served on the 2nd Presbyterian Church committee that, together with representatives of the Euclid Avenue Presbyterian Church, crafted the merger agreement forming the Church of the Covenant in 1920.

James D. Williamson, president of Euclid Avenue Presbyterian’s Board of Trustees, who had pastored the Beckwith Memorial Church from 1888 to 1901, suggested the name Church of the Covenant – theologically the “covenant” referred to the promises God made to people, as recorded in the Bible, and also

the name of an agreement between the parliaments of Scotland and England in 1643 to extend and preserve Presbyterianism.

The Agreement of Consolidation was approved unanimously by the Euclid Avenue congregation and overwhelmingly, but not unanimously, by the congregation of 2nd Church. Some 2nd Church members favored a move but thought the new church should be built elsewhere, others objected to the name of the merged congregations. Others objected to the union because the new church would be “too far away”; others on the grounds that the church “is needed and can do more good where it is.”

The Cleveland Plain Dealer observed that the merger marked “one more step in the migration of Cleveland inhabitants toward the outskirts of the city.” A letter to members of Euclid Avenue Presbyterian, written by church officers informing them of the proposed merger, held out a promise “of a metropolitan church of dominating influence in molding the moral and spiritual life of our city, and of ability to do large things for the work of Christ in the world.”

Church of the Covenant: The Early Years

Alexander McGaffin (Euclid Avenue Presbyterian) and Paul Sutphen (2nd Presbyterian) shared pastorate equally; each designated “Associate Pastor.”

First sessional committees included Pulpit, Bible School, Men’s Work, Music, Italian (oversaw St. John Beckwith Church) and Playhouse (though supported by the Community Fund, it remained of interest to Covenant congregation “all the trustees being [former] 2nd Church people”).

Supported directly missionaries in central Brazil and Laurel Hospital in rural North Carolina. Locally the church supported the Harkness Fresh air Camp, a children’s camp in Willoughby operated by the Presbyterian Union. The Women’s Guild presented clothing and money to the Associated Charities, East End Neighborhood House, the Jewish Orphan Asylum and the Phillis Wheatley Association.

Engaged director of religious education to oversee an enrollment of 565 children and 148 adults, overseen by 60 teachers (1923-1924).

Offered “collegiate membership” to out-of-town students” without impairing membership in their home churches.” The hour for vespers changed from 4 to 5 o’clock after polling college students. Hosted baccalaureate and commencement exercises of the College for Women and Case School of Applied Sciences, McGaffin and Sutphen preached baccalaureate sermons and acted as chaplain at commencements – Session expressed disapproval of college football games on Thanksgiving Day.

Vesper services continued as regular part of the church program. A double quartet was added to the choir.

Established a Committee on Memorials and appointed the curator of paintings and decorative arts of the Cleveland Museum of Art as chair – a position held for three decades – overseeing aesthetic installations of plaques, stained-glass windows and other memorials.

Pastorate of Philip S. Bird (1928-1948)

Urged congregation to forsake its “comfortable nooks” and “walk the streets where poverty walks,” even while offering support to the city’s elite ([church leaders] formed “an interlocking directorate; the people who ran the church also ran the city.”)

Opened doors of the sanctuary each weekday “for Rest, Prayer and Meditation.” Remodeled the chancel and constructed a chapel in the east transept. At the dedication (1931) a block of seats were reserved for the Cleveland artists and craftspeople who had worked on the project.

In addition to continued support of the Laurel Hospital, added direct support of other missionaries in China and India.

Initiated Covenant League for Service numbering over 400 volunteers (in 1933) giving assistance to 15 social service agencies (hospitals, nursing homes, settlements), by helping individuals or giving office help.

"[Covenant is] a church...where the emphasis is on service and where there are church people of education and capacity to serve." – Gertrude Cody Wheaton, social worker, 1931.

Set up kitchen as part of the county-wide "Share the Surplus" campaign, canning fruits and vegetables for distribution to those in need.

Endorsed need for increased funding of community agencies in Cleveland. "Churches?" Bird asked, "Make them Sunday morning clubs with an occasional opening of the gates for some pious gathering...and you are turning your backs on the greatest job ever put to you." (Easter, 1933).

"Dr. Philip Smead Bird's flaming denunciation of the private greed and public callousness upon which the sweatshop flourishes is the kind of help most needed to stir public opinion against this industrial evil." – The Cleveland Plain Dealer editorial, 1933.

Led formation of Cleveland Peace Committee (1936) "to change attitudes toward war, to educate for peace, to strengthen and unite peace forces, and to provide the opportunity to work for peace rather than sacrificing for war." Covenant provided office space, without charge, for the committee and its part-time executive for 12 years.

During WWII, Covenant turned over its dining room and kitchen, without charge, to Western Reserve University for the use of Army Air Force cadets undergoing training and operated a lounge for the cadets.

Formally adopted (1943) Western Reserve University as a major field of service, hiring an assistant minister specifically for the purpose.

Established (1947) Covenant Weekday Nursery School, from the beginning open to children "without regard to ethnicity or creed."

The newly appointed organist and director of music (1928-1944) favored music of the Romantic and late Victorian periods, which dominated in morning and vesper services. The Singers Club, Oberlin a Cappella Choir and other vocal groups participated in vesper services. The original Moller organ replaced (1931) by a four-manual E. M. Skinner instrument. The third director of music (1944-1956) introduced more contemporary music and enlarged choir to 40 members, most of whom were professional singers, allowing performance of larger works.

Augmented endowment from time of merger, which had included principally the Sutphen Fund and Beckwith Fund.

Bird died on July 11, 1948, from a cerebral thrombosis, while still in office.

Pastorate of Harry B. Taylor (1949–1966)

Congregation largely middle class and highly-educated, increasingly drawing members from adjacent Western Reserve University and Case Institute of Technology.

Established (1950) Student Christian Union to provide interdenominational fellowship and ministry to Protestant college students, donating office space and support services.

Added medical missionary support in India and Thailand.

Initiated Couples' Club, Covenant's Men's League, Westminster Fellowship (for youth) and Tower Fellowship (to meet needs of single young adults).

Increased pastoral staff to three full time ministers, instituted double services of Sunday morning worship and hired full-time director of Christian Education, administering children, youth and adult divisions of church school, leadership education programs, adult seminar groups (which met between services).

Elected (1957) first women elders. A member of Covenant became the third women to be ordained (1957) as a pastor by the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.

Received first African-American member (1951). At a meeting of Session, an elder posed the question: "Are we going to end up turning all this – indicating church property – over to a black congregation?" The Session adopted (1954) the following resolution: "We...approve without reservation the present attitude and

practice of the ministers of our church in promoting non-segregation on account of race, nationality or color and offering full communicant membership and fellowship to all who may desire them."

Hosted an interfaith service (1955) in observance of the tercentenary of the first Jews to arrive in the New World.

Launched (1956) a capital campaign to underwrite physical improvements, including the conversion of the organ into a two-console, 5,798-pipe instrument. The front lawn paved over for a parking lot.

To cope with geographically dispersed membership, inaugurated (1953) "parish zone plan" – 60 zones, each with a leader appointed to maintain contact and to report special needs.

Appointed (1960) State of the Church Committee to appraise health of congregation revealing overall satisfaction with ministry and program, but suggesting "a very broad gulf between the membership's contentment with things as they are, and the ministers' aspirations for a Covenant program of increasing vigor, dedication and effectiveness."

In a sermon (1960), Taylor predicted the coming decade would present "stringent tests" – "We...must not become self-righteous because we are racially integrated...the numerical extent of integration in our fellowship here is not really great enough to provide an acid test of our acceptance in radical depth the principle's implications."

Taylor and Bruce Klunder, executive of the Student Christian Movement, protested racial segregation in the Cleveland public schools (1964), "shocking some church members and inspiring others." (Klunder was accidentally crushed to death protesting at a school construction site.)

Formed Social Issues Workshop (1965) to address social problems in Hough.

The fourth organist and choir master (1956-1970) introduced music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods in morning services and vespers and staged costumed dramatic performances in the nave of the church. The E.M. Skinner organ refurbished and expanded to ninety-nine ranks (1959) and a rear gallery organ installed.

Established (1965) Covenant Counseling Center to provide professional counseling (outside the realm of ordinary pastoral care) on fee basis. Taylor relinquished church administrative duties but continued to fill the pulpit.

Taylor submitted his resignation to Session on February 15, 1966.

Pastorate of Albert L. Jeandheur (1967–1988)

"We are next to the ghetto, in the center of a modern university, and just down the hill from suburbia, where, it seems..., we draw people who do not want to hide in suburbia, but want to use the strength they have to help and to heal." – Covenant News, November, 1969.

Long time primarily fellowship groups disbanded and new groups formed around mission tasks – Welfare Task Force, Garden Valley Mission Group, Peace in Vietnam, Alienated Youth, and Candidates and Issues forums – all organized under the session's Church and Society Committee.

Hosted 800 Poor People's Marchers when they stopped in Cleveland on their way to Washington (1968).

Hosted (1968) 250 clergy and laypersons to form Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam to map plans for opposition to the war and to expand draft counseling at local high schools and colleges. Session permitted draft counseling at the church. High School students tolled a bell at the close of worship each Sunday, sounding it once for each soldier killed in Vietnam the preceding week "as both a memorial for those who had died and as a reminder to others that they should pause and reevaluate their own feelings about the war."

Installed (1968) the 47 bell McGaffin Carillon. In a Statement of Concern in the worship service on December 22, 1968, Covenant's Clerk of Session, speaking on behalf of "the thirty-six thousand children who needed Covenant's help to find warm clothing" stated "You must understand that to a child in the inner city,

white racism means that you can spend more the \$50,000 on bells which come all the way from Europe...and pay a choir to sing to you of the glory of God... while he has no shoes...Dearly beloved, you do not have to shout 'nigger' to be a white racist."

In response to the National Guard shooting of Kent State students (1970), the Session voted to "halt business as usual" and devoted all regular programming, study groups and seminars to the subject of the national crisis and opened the church's doors to meetings of concerned groups.

Constructed a new education-community building (dedicated in 1971) and extensively renovated Beckwith House. Hosted, in addition to regular church activities and its early childhood program, meetings of AA, a cancer research committee, a Zen meditation group, a CWRU study course on women's liberation (in 1971), weekly meetings of the Japanese Christian Fellowship, opened the sanctuary each Sunday afternoon to the Cleveland Korean Church.

Began broadcasting highlights of the worship service (1975) on WDKO-FM and then WCLV-FM and initiated (1978) advertising in newspapers and on radio.

Introduced liturgical dance, Service of Tenebrae on Maundy Thursday, annual Christmas pageant. The fourth director of music (1970-1974) was the last full time director for the succeeding three plus decades.

Completed (1974) Covenant Columbarium in subbasement beneath sanctuary's west transept.

Started (1976) Covenant Cache thrift shop.

Initiated mission partnership in Pakistan.

Began annual observance of Thanksgiving Day in conjunction with congregants of the then Epworth-Euclid Methodist Church and The Temple-Tifereth Israel.

Sponsored, with 10 other eastside congregations, the Wholistic Health Care Center located on the lower level of the Education-Community building (1978; closed 1980); sponsored the city's first food co-op; organized East Side Ministry (1973), which provided Christian Education for mentally disabled children and adults.

Initiated signing of services of worship and adult seminars for people with hearing impairment.

With other area congregations, formed Euclid University Cluster to work with Hough, Fairfax and University neighborhood residents to access basic services and promote ecumenical religious cooperation. The Euclid University Cluster would later give birth to East Side Interfaith Ministries.

Session endorsed the General Assembly's "Peacemaking: The Believers Calling" (1980), placing peacemaking at the center of the church's mission denomination-wide.

Under the jurisdiction of the Session's Outreach Commission (1978), initiated task forces on peacemaking, which addressed the nuclear arms race, and Central America, which addressed American policy in that region, and hunger, supporting a hunger center that, by 1985, was serving almost 4,000 persons each month, and South Africa, arranging a mission partnership with a community organization in the Transvaal region and advocating for the end of apartheid. A contingent of church members, loosely banded together under the name "Alternative Christian Views", disagreed with some positions taken by the church's task forces. Session declared a moratorium on advocacy and engaged a consultant (1987) to help resolve conflict within the church membership.

Jeandheur submitted his resignation to Session on May 10, 1987.

Pastorate of James F. Dowd (1989–2003)

Acknowledged, in a Plain Dealer article (1989), Covenant's architecture and music as "part of God's gifts," adding, "but we also must not forget the needs of people in neighborhoods like Hough...Social justice, he said "forms a basic teaching of our faith."

Initiated opportunities for fellowship: session/new member dinners, Feast and Fellowship suppers, Family Connections (a social and educational program for families with young children), an annual talent show and Valentine's dinner dance, Sunday breakfasts, and the Ash Wednesday communion supper.

Racially integrated the pastoral and professional staff.

The organist and director of music re-introduced an ambitious concert series, in addition to providing music in morning worship.

Provided leadership, volunteers, building space and funding for renewal of campus ministry, United Protestant Campus Ministries (UPCaM).

Expanded Covenant Early Childhood Programs, initiated tutoring at John Hay High School, Saturday Tutoring at the church, and tutoring at Daniel E. Morgan School, and established a standing committee of Session to address systemic issues related to the problems experienced by Cleveland Public Schools.

Supported the formation of Early Childhood Options, a not for profit child care program offered at other sites and in private homes throughout Greater Cleveland.

Established the church's website.

Returned pastoral staff to three full-time ministers.

Became a founding congregation of the East Side Interfaith Ministries (ESIM), which became Interreligious Partners in Action of Greater Cleveland (InterAct), and of the Cleveland Ecumenical Institute for Religious Studies (CEIRS).

Introduced the Education for Ministry (EfM) and Stephan Ministry programs.

Expanded Confirmation process and introduced annual youth mission trips.

Took leadership role in denominational efforts to ordain LGBT persons. Affiliated with the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, a denomination-wide coalition of congregations seeking to make the Presbyterian Church (USA) proactively inclusive.

Hosted South African pastor through the Synod's Ecumenical Parish Associate program and initiated mission partnership in South Africa.

Introduced the Healing Circle for both congregational and community members.

Established the Philip Smead Bird Memorial Fund (1989) and the Anniversary Fund (1994), augmenting the Consolidated Endowment.

Launched Second Century capital campaign (2000-2001) to restore exterior fabric of building, the rose windows, reredos and other interior fixtures. The Campaign included a contribution of \$150,000 to the Presbytery's Partners in Christ's Service campaign.

Renovated the bell tower and provided accessibility improvements to bell tower plaza and entrance.

Renovated and expanded the Aeolian-Skinner organ, including new console, by Holtkamp Organ Co. of Cleveland.

Conducted congregational surveys regarding Sunday services of worship. Although response largely affirmed the continuing the service as is, considered development of a second alternative worship service.

Dowd retired in 2003.

Pastorate of Robert J. Campbell (2005 –)

"A cathedral, shall we say a grand church as this, is never finished," said Campbell, "Just like human perfection we strive for and can never attain, this church will be ever changing, ever growing, sometimes crumbling, but forever a legacy reaching to touch God. It is not stone nor even a place of prayer, but a continuum of creation, a beautiful work that, pray God, will never end."

During the interim between Jim Dowd's and Bert Campbell's pastorate, Session determined that Covenant Early Childhood Programs no longer served a need in the community and closed the Center. The education and community building was repurposed to house the church school and the Interfaith Center, donating offices, common area, and a dedicated multifaith worship room for CWRU's Muslim Student Association, Newman Catholic Campus Ministry and United Protestant Campus Ministries.

Established the Ministry Initiatives Committee, a standing committee of Session, to provide oversight of internal and external mission and ministry emphases identified in the 2003 Mission Study and to guide implementation of initiatives identified in 2012.

Stephen Ministry expanded to include service to patients at UH's Rainbow Baby and Children Hospital and Seidman Cancer Center.

Returned to full-time Organist and Director of Music.

Introduced participation in the annual Holiday Circle Fest.

Expanded choral and instrumental collaboration with Case Western Reserve University musical ensembles and with the Cleveland School of the Arts.

Initiated Covenant Choir choral intern position.

Re-introduced periodic Sunday vespers services and introduced weekly Services of Caring (later Midweek Music and Meditation).

Established position of Chaplain and Director of Student-Community Ministries for outreach to students on the campus of Case Western Reserve University.

Established position of Coordinator of Family Ministries (Family Matters/PACT) for outreach to families with young children.

Initiated mission partnerships in Albania and Liberia.

Created Covenant University and Community Ministries, a non-profit providing a home for programs serving the university and Greater Cleveland community, currently including Covenant Student-Community Ministries, Saturday Tutoring Program, Grafton Correctional Institution Community Service Program, and Community meals, a program of the former InterAct Cleveland.

Hosted the national Covenant Network of Presbyterian's Conference (2009) and introduced to the PC(USA) General Assembly (2010), through the Presbytery of the Western Reserve, an overture amending the denomination's constitution to include ordination of LGBT people.

Relocated columbarium to All Saints Chapel, created for the purpose in the west transept of the sanctuary.

Established Covenant Lecture Fund endowment.

Carried out extensive renovation of the sanctuary including restored pews, new flooring, wiring and lighting and sound system.

Installed Newberry Memorial Organ in the rear gallery.

Discontinued EfM seminar groups (2012), having graduated 74 people since 1998.

Initiated a Preventing Gun Violence Task Force in response to the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December, 2012.

Church membership residentially dispersed over 39 metropolitan Cleveland zip codes.

Sources:

"Church with a Conscience: A History of the Cleveland's Church of the Covenant 1844-1995," Carol Poh Miller (1995)

Church of the Covenant Session Minutes, 1995-2013.

Prepared by Laury W. Larson
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The Church of the Covenant · 11205 Euclid Avenue · Cleveland, Ohio 44106
216.421.0482 · CovenantWeb.org

An Open and Affirming Community in the Heart of University Circle