

"Our Story"

Acts 2:43-47 & Acts 4:32-35

Every story has a beginning. Our church's story is no different.

We could say it began on March 3, 1849, when the Oakland and Cambridge Presbyterian Church was officially formed.

We could also say it began way back in 1846, Dr. William Cargen with his wife, Mary Ann, and young son, James, immigrated from Scotland via New York, and settled on a homestead bordering the western shore of Lake Ripley.

During the winter of 1846-1847, he preached in the homes of the settlers and in a school house on Snell's hill.

In 1847 he built a one-story manse on land purchased from John Brown on the west shore of Lake Ripley toward its north end.

This basement manse with a door and two windows facing the lake and two windows in each end served as a living room weekdays and a preaching place Sundays until a church could be built. Mr. McMillan, who owned the land bordering Cambridge to the East, gave the land on the Oakland side of the county line, and a little white church with a platform across the entire front was built a little to the east of where the present church stands.

But that is not really where the story begins. You could say it really begins back in Genesis, when Abraham builds what is called a "Bethel" or stone pillar, which means in Hebrew "House of God" as an altar to signify a place where he experiences the sacred presence of God.

A place of worship, or sanctuary, looked much different back in the day.

During Moses day, God's "House" was an elaborate Ark in a tent-like structure that could be erected anywhere they found themselves on their journey through the wilderness.

David was the first to dream building a permanent structure to house the Ark of the Covenant, but that idea didn't happen until Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem.

Of course, it was destroyed and rebuilt, destroyed again and rebuilt again, before being finally destroyed around 70 CE. All that is said to remain of the Solomon's Temple is the Western (or Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem.

During the Babylonian Exile, the Jewish people began to gather in synagogues, which were really homes set aside for religious rituals.

Jesus, if you remember, who was Jewish, was connected to his local synagogue in Nazareth. On occasion he found himself at the Temple in Jerusalem.

As followers of Jesus, the outer courtyard or public space around the Temple was where these early disciples gathered for worship.

In the Book of Acts, we begin to learn the story of the birth of what was to become the "Church" though it looked nothing like the "church" we think of today.

We begin to get an image of the first gathering of followers of Jesus that we might call a "church" when Luke tells us: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

In telling their story, we remember that those first "Christians" had no building. They met in public spaces or people's homes. It was several hundreds of years later before the first structure known as a "church" building was built.

According to several sources, this one from Christianity Today (Nov. 12, 2008) "Unless claims for recent discoveries of early Christian meeting places are confirmed, the earliest building certainly devoted to Christian use is at Dura Europos on the Euphrates River in eastern Roman Syria. It was a house that came into Christian possession and was remodeled in the 240s. Two rooms were combined to form the assembly room, and another room became a baptistery—the only room decorated with pictures. Dura was destroyed by the Sassanian Persians in 256, ..."

That first church structure sounds similar to the first building, dugout in the hillside on Lake Ripley that became Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church.

Of course, neither the first "Christian" church building or the first structure known as Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church, like the Bethel's of the Bible, the Tent, the Temple, the synagogues, or any number of structures erected as places of worship, still exist today.

In 1969, when my father accepted the position of pastor at the Indiana Presbyterian Church in southern Indiana, there were 19 Presbyterian Churches in the old Vincennes Presbytery. By the time my father retired in 1994, there were only 4 still open. One of those was Royal Oak.

A small, country church, they were served by my father, until his retirement. I have very fond memories of that tiny congregation. Each year, they took up a special "harvest" offering, using it to help me pay off my seminary debt.

After my father retired, and without a pastor to serve them, they closed their doors. The old Royal Oak building still stands, but now it is just another tombstone of sorts, right next to the cemetery that still bears its name.

What is the purpose of Christ's "Church" and how is that different from the purpose of a church building?

Do you remember the old Sunday school finger saying: **"Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people."**

Except today when we open the doors, we notice there are hardly any people. This isn't just true of our situation. It is true of thousands of congregations.

Writing in the Christian Century magazine, Glen Guyton says: **"More and more people are moving away the church - not because they lack faith in God but because the church is no longer relevant to them. The church, not God, is the problem. In every generation, the church must change or die. It's our turn."** (Reawakened, the Christian Century magazine, May 2021)

Some of you know Mark Elsdon. He and his spouse, Erica Lui, have served as co-pastors at Pres House on the UW campus. Mark has a new book out, called: "We Aren't Broke."

He writes: **"Many Christian churches and related institutions in the United States are struggling or, in some cases, facing imminent crisis, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendance is down. Funding is harder to come by. People are no longer drawn to traditional church services and programming in the ways that they once were. Often, we feel broke and powerless to do much about it. We settle for doing more with less: Less money. Fewer people. Fewer churches."** (We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Ministry and Mission - Mark Elsdon)

Many congregations are wondering what their future will be, if they have any future at all?

If we are honest with ourselves, it is on our minds as well, though we would rather not have to think about it or even talk about it. And we must.

The Session has purchased Mark's book to read together and Mark has offered to join us for a discussion when we are done reading it.

Reading a book isn't going to magically bring people back to worship, increase our membership or help our financial situation.

We are still actively in the midst of a pandemic, and aging as a congregation. But we have this resource called a church building.

We have to take a honest, hard look at what our purpose is as a church, asking how we can use this building as an asset in this community. We really only use it on Sunday mornings, which seems like a waste of a valuable asset for in this community.

Is the purpose of our church simply to pay to keep the building open long enough for our funerals, with the last members closing shop? Or are there other creative ways we might serve Christ through the use of this building, sharing the space with others in the community?

Of community, Henri Nouwen said: **"The word community has many connotations, some positive, some negative. Community can make us think of a safe togetherness, shared meals, common goals, and joyful celebrations. It also can call forth images of sectarian exclusivity, in-group language, self-satisfied isolation, and romantic naiveté. However, community is first of all quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual**

knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own...."(Nouwen, Bread for the Journey, January 23)

I am not sure what you are feeling right now. Last Sunday, with our attendance being the lowest it has been, perhaps ever in the history of this church, 6, I went home pretty dejected. I know I am not alone.

We can be upset, angry, frustrated, confused, start blaming the situation on the pandemic or others, or we can begin to think creatively, reexamining our understanding of what it means to be Christ's church, and how we are called to use this building for the sake of the larger community.

Every church that has ever existed has a story, one that has a beginning and will in time, have an ending. But the story we love to tell isn't about a building called Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church. The story we love to tell is God's never-ending story of love that lives in and through the generations that have been and are still to come.

Amen.