

**Hyde Park Community United Methodist Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

**A Brief History  
Of  
The Hyde Park Community United Methodist Church of Cincinnati, Ohio  
Consecrated September 25, 1927**

**Mt. Lookout M.E. Church**

The Mt. Lookout Methodist Episcopal Church (Mt. Lookout M.E.) was organized in 1879 by a group of 15 Methodists who had been meeting in neighborhood homes in Mt. Lookout, an eastern suburb of Cincinnati. In 1880, a wooden building on the corner of Observatory Road at Grace Avenue was constructed on land donated by John Kilgour "to be used for religious purposes, only." It measured 28 by 60 feet with a 72-foot tower and cost \$3,250 plus \$400 for furnishings. Later, a room was added to the back plus a shed and privy. The congregation grew and remained there until 1922.



**Hyde Park M.E. Church**



In 1907, a group of about 132 split-off and formed the Hyde Park Methodist Episcopal (Hyde Park M.E.) church. The Hyde Park group, composed of people living in that new subdivision north and west of Mt. Lookout, thought the church would grow faster if it moved to a building located in that fast-growing neighborhood. The Hyde Park M.E. church constructed a Greek Renaissance building at 2753 Erie Avenue next door (east) of the present-day branch of the Cincinnati public library. For about five years, it was a basement church until its completion and dedication in 1915. It had an Estey pipe organ, seated 300



and cost \$35,000. Both churches did well, but the Hyde Park church was more aggressive and by 1921 it had 325 members compared with 250 at Mt. Lookout M.E.

**Termites and a Tornado**

Everything went well for the two churches until 1917, when a tornado struck the Mt. Lookout area. Several houses on Grace Avenue south of the Mt. Lookout M.E. church were destroyed but the church was only damaged. While it survived the tornado, it was soon discovered that termites and dry rot had seriously impaired Mt. Lookout M.E.'s little wooden church building. About 1922, the building was no longer habitable as a church but was used for Sunday school classes, Boy Scout meetings and as a recreation hall. So, for a short-time the congregation met in the Hyde Park Masonic Hall, (formerly the Hyde Park Town Hall), then located on the northeast corner of Erie at Michigan Avenue. In 1966, that building was torn down to make way for the Shell service station which occupied that corner until about 2003 when it was demolished to make way for an apartment building with stores completed in 2006.



Less than a mile away, the Hyde Park M.E., comfortably situated in its new building, kept experiencing problems with the two furnaces. A furnace bowl was replaced in 1917, and in 1921, the other furnace would cost \$250 to repair or \$2,000 for a new system. The rear building foundation was also in trouble. The Sunday school was overflowing and parents were becoming discouraged about having their children in the basement Sunday school quarters.

**Merger on the Horizon**

Underlying all of this was the fact that the Hyde Park M.E. split from Mt. Lookout M. E. church was an amicable one. Everyone hoped that the churches would eventually reunite. In October, 1921 the entire Hyde Park congregation met with its Official Board which announced, "Word has come to us that the Mt. Lookout M.E. church is going to start a fund raising campaign to build a new Sunday school building. If that happens, all hope of a merger will be lost." There was much discussion on the possibility of merger and little dissent. Hyde Park's Board voted unanimously, "Merger should be considered seriously now." Five

members of the Mt. Lookout M.E. attended that meeting. It was not until the spring of 1922 that the Mt. Lookout's Board voted and agreed "we should effect a merger." Bishop Theodore S. Henderson appointed Rev. Warren J. Dunham in 1922 to pastor both churches until a merger was effected. That merger decision caused another split in the Mt. Lookout M.E. congregation. About 125 members, nearly half of its body, formed a Methodist Protestant church which located at 1227 Corbett Avenue in the Mt. Lookout neighborhood.

In August 1922, both the Mt. Lookout and Hyde Park congregations voted for the merger and it was consummated within a month or two. A committee representing both congregations was appointed to select a name for the church and decide upon a place for the new church building. The name chosen was "Mt. Lookout Hyde Park Methodist Episcopal Church" (only used for about a year) and the committee decided that the best location was at the southwest corner of Observatory Road and Grace Avenue, the site of the Mt. Lookout M.E. church.

### **Vision of a Community Church**

A major fundraising campaign began. It was led by an expert from Chicago who taught the church how to run such an effort. The goal for the first Every Member Canvas (EMC) in 1923 was to be \$250,000. That was an astronomical amount given that the church was accustomed to \$20,000 budgets with pastors' salaries ranging from \$1,800 to \$2,000. The kickoff for the three-week campaign was Sunday, December 2, 1923, "New Church Sunday." Rev. Warren Dunham's bulletin for that day included a secondary title, "The Community Church" and this statement:

"The church of the future will be a community church, not merely a place for worship, but a center of community activities and interests--a place to inspire the highest ideals of life--a place for children to work and play."

Therefore, we attribute to Rev. Warren Dunham, the idea for "Our Official Policy" statement inscribed on the bronze plaque adorning the east wall of the narthex. The topic for that morning was the Every Member Canvas to underwrite the construction of a new building. The \$200,000 mark was surpassed and the congregation was confident that, "This can happen, we must go forth."

### **Fire Strikes**

Amidst the jubilation, a tragedy occurred. On Saturday evening, January 5, 1924, the Hyde Park M.E. church building was engulfed by a ten-alarm fire and the inside was completely destroyed. Now, the two recently merged congregations which were growing and bursting at the seams had no place to meet. So it was back to meeting in the rented Masonic Hall, across Erie Avenue from the burned building.

### **State-of-the-Art Facility**

Rev. Earl Hoon came to Hyde Park M.E. in November, 1924. He was dynamic, courageous and inspiring. He envisioned that this new building would be among the best Methodist church buildings in the world. It would be patterned after the 13th Century cathedral in Manchester, England. The architects believed that for a building with those requirements \$500,000 would need to be raised. With over \$200,000 in pledges, ground was broken on March 1 and the cornerstone laid on September 13, 1925.

An October 30, 1925 letter seeking pledges signed by Anson C. Fry, Thomas H. Darby and Rev. Earl Hoon was titled "A message of Emergency and Present Opportunity." It went on to say "An unique and unusual building program for community-wide service of a practical seven-day-in-the-week sort is projected for Cincinnati...This calls for \$690,000 for site, building and equipment...To date \$403,602 have been pledged...valid only if a total of \$500,000 shall be pledged on or before midnight November 3...the foundations are in and the superstructure is rising...The main floors are being poured now."

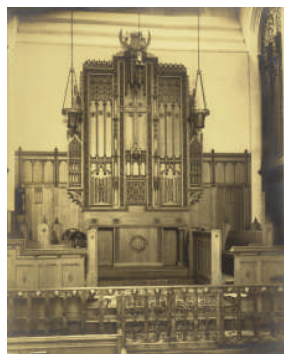
### **Campaign Leaves No Stone Unturned**

Solicitations were made door-to-door in the homes, businesses, offices, on the street corners and even to other churches. They started in the Hyde Park and Mt. Lookout neighborhoods, then to downtown Cincinnati—and last to anyone with money who would make gifts of that nature, from ten cents given by a paper-boy to James M. Gamble who gave \$25,000. They reasoned that since this was to be a community church benefiting the whole community, they would seek support from those standing to benefit. The \$500,000 was raised. The structure of 1927 cost \$685,000 of which \$285,000 had been paid before the congregation moved in and \$400,000 borrowed. In terms of current (2002)



dollars, the 430 members who started this venture would have come up with \$2,935,000 in cash for a building that cost \$7,055,000 with \$4,120,000 borrowed.

### Seven-Days-A-Week Program



The building was dedicated on September 25, 1927 in a series of events covering 15 days including three Sundays. Newspapers proclaimed the event in banner headlines and the Mt. Lookout/Hyde Park community participated in the celebration. In a front-page newspaper article, Anson Fry, a church trustee, stressed that the church owed much to the community. He noted

that three outside groups, one Jewish, one Catholic and one without a religious connection, had pledged more than \$100,000 toward the structure. Mr. Fry said

that the church would not wait for denominational lines to fall, but would open its doors seven days a week to all who wish to use the facilities and that programs would be provided for adults and youth. The idea was to attract people to the church in "non-churchy" ways.

The building included a theater with a projection booth and organ, gymnasium, handball courts and kitchen. After a few years, the handball courts were turned into meeting rooms for Boy Scouts. What is presently the Shirley Joy Memorial Library was originally the nursery school.



### Merger with Linwood M.E. Church

A merger with the Linwood Methodist Episcopal Church took place on September 14, 1930 when 248 members were received. Buses (later taxis) were provided to take members from the East End to services at the Hyde Park M. E. church. Linwood's building was located about a mile southeast at the northeast corner of Eastern at Linwood Road.



### Depression Tests Faith -- Angels Appear

Having fulfilled its dream of a new building with bustling programs attractive to youth and adults, the congregation was not prepared for the Great Depression. After only a few years neither its members nor supporters in the community, could make payments on the pledges they made toward the building. Delinquent payments caused the impatient bank to force trustees to personally guarantee the debt. For example, Anson C. Fry, who was president of Gibson Greeting Cards Company, obtained a personal loan at the bank secured by all the stock in his company. After the loan was paid, the bank refused to release the stock until the church solved its financial problems. The threat to evict the congregation from the building was not idle. One time before Easter, the bank threatened to lock up the organ before Easter services if interest was not paid. After the death of Judge Thomas H. Darby, whose Sunday school class attracted one hundred or more men each week, the bank refused to release his estate until the church paid more money.

To forestall litigation the remaining trustees loaned money to pay the note. In his notes, former Church Historian, Ken Ziegel, described all these trustees as "angels." They were:

Anson C. Fry  
Robert A. Cougill,  
Louise Darby, Executrix of the Estate of Thomas H. Darby,  
Urbane B. Gillette,  
Earl E. Kirkpatrick,  
Charles F. Lahke,  
Merrill C. Slutes  
Herbert N. West.

Money making ventures, such as chicken dinners were held to raise money. People who were members during that time tell of those (some mentioned above) who mortgaged or gave nearly everything they had to save the building. Children at the dinner table heard parents agonize over cutting something else from their lives so they could give more to the church. With little money for maintenance, church members stepped forward to repair, paint and maintain the building. As the congregation grew in size and the economy

strengthened, the debt was refinanced to another lender and ultimately repaid. An entry in the 1961 history described the debt repayment, "October 10, 1954 was the always-to-be-remembered date -- the culmination of a generation's positive actions, sacrifice and prayers, when as a reverent congregation watched, the mortgage was burned."



### **Growth in Better Times**

In 1948, Dr. Lynn J. Radcliffe assumed leadership of the church with the same aggressiveness as the pastor who built it. He re-inspired the congregation to reach for greater mission goals. Under his predecessor Rev. Charles Coulter (1944-1948), the idea for a single annual financial drive emerged as the EMC. Dr. Radcliffe refined the idea and it prospered. His powerful sermons summoned a wide community following, drawing members from throughout the area. The sanctuary overflowed on Sunday morning to the extent that a second service was instituted in 1951. Its debt manageable, the growing congregation directed its energies toward outreach, to missions and began thinking of ways to enhance the mortgage-free building. Beginning in 1951, the amber colored glass in the sanctuary windows was gradually replaced over 11 years by stained glass windows personally designed by Dr. Radcliffe who, after his retirement in 1961, also designed the chapel windows. The reredos and alter were moved about three feet to the south wall in 1959 providing more space in the chancel for the choir. In 1961, the Church Historian wrote, "the church has grown until it is now approximately 2,500...has three full-time ministers...average Sunday morning congregation is between 900 and 1,000...average church school attendance is between 500 and 600...There has been a diligent effort to maintain the spirit of the founders who felt this should be a church open to all persons in the community..."

### **Addition to Gothic Building**

Under the leadership of Dr. Emerson S. Colaw, an educational wing was dedicated May 15, 1966, nearly doubling the space, adding needed classrooms, offices and a chapel. Nearly all of the \$1.25 million cost was paid before the building was finished. With the conversational preaching of Dr. Colaw, the church expanded its outreach. A radio broadcast was begun in 1964 and programs were developed for the elderly, singles and divorced/separated which quickly filled the new addition. After attending a seminar in California which emphasized that to sustain growth, churches should identify needs and create programs to meet those needs he met with the Council of Ministries. A five-year plan was created. Goals were set and progress was to be measured. Market surveys indicated that the Hyde Park neighborhood had a high concentration of single persons and few churches reached-out to them. In 1975 associate Rev. Dale Guckenberger began targeting ministry to that community and by 1977 associate Rev. Paul Johnson was also involved. The program mushroomed and the church soon found singles in the sanctuary and classrooms, as members and leaders. This ministry is ongoing. The Building Endowment was established in 1976 to provide a perpetual fund for building maintenance. In 1979, under the leadership of Rev. David Miller, the Walk to Emmaus (originally Cursillio) was formed as a source of spiritual renewal in a three-day retreat setting. Membership at the church had grown to more than 3,100 when Dr. Colaw was consecrated Bishop in the United Methodist Church on August 31, 1980, the first such service held in the sanctuary of the Gothic building.



### **Transition**

Dr. Dale E. Bichsel arrived in November, 1980. Following two highly regarded pastors such as Lynn Radcliffe and Emerson Colaw was not easy, but he was up to the task. Programs were maintained and strengthened. Above all, he maintained a high level of worship, a diverse educational program, extensive social outreach and most importantly, a loving fellowship. In 1985, associate Rev. Karl Kumpf reported to the Charge Conference, "It's good to be part of this caring community. Ministry at this church is a team effort, not only among the professional staff, but among all the people of the church. The vision of ministry in this church is bigger than any one group or class or cause; it reaches out to the community, and to the world." In his annual report to the Charge Conference in 1983, Dr. Bichsel wrote, "We've grown in the types and varieties of programs we offer people...sometimes lack of space or money force us to revise our plans or defer to the needs of another group."



### **Administrator and Technology to Aid Ministry**

In 1984, Craig Miller was hired as the church's first Director of Administration. His arrival relieved Dr. Bichsel, his successors and other clergy staff from much administrative detail and freed them to be in ministry. After several years of studying and planning, the church installed its first computer system in 1986. It was an IBM System 36 which cost \$30,000. This provided efficiencies in management of accounting and membership records and production of mailing labels. That same year, Trustees rearranged space in the southwest corner of the 1966 Education Wing addition which created more space for offices and nursery school but decreased classrooms. Committees were also busy researching the possibility of a new organ, improving sanctuary lighting and installing an elevator. With strong staff and laity leadership in place to carry on these and other ministry projects, Dr. Bichsel retired in 1988.

### **New Ministries, Organ and Elevator**

Rev. Doug Mullins entered the church as Senior Pastor in 1988 amid gearing-up for an EMC and a capital funds program. When making his first report to the Charge Conference he said, "At Hyde Park, the EMC "was not viewed as a terrible task, but as a source of excitement and hope. It was an event! There is enthusiasm here! There is vitality here!" "We are...responsible about stewardship matters, funding our church...preserving...enriching...and caring for that which has been entrusted to us." In furtherance of those ideals, the Hyde Park Community United Methodist Church Foundation was formed on February 13, 1991 to support outreach above and beyond the operating budget. In 1991, the Job Search Focus group was formed and in 1992, the Stephen Ministry began. Staffed by laity with clergy advisors, both ministries are still helping others in times of personal need. In his Charge Conference Report for 1992, Pastor Mullins shared, "In order to keep...growth moving forward, we need to...solve our very sorry parking problem, encourage...8:00 Sunday morning worship...and [think] how each one of us might be a better, more effective evangelist."

Projects under way when Rev. Mullins started plus others, were completed. The elevator was installed and operating in 1989. Long-time member Charles Shear told the Church Historian, "I voted against an elevator-but was among the first to use it." Nine years of planning culminated in the dedication on September 25, 1990 of the Cassavant Frères Organ, Opus 3671. The services, which included a recital by Dr. Mark Shaffer, Director of Music and Organist, were attended by a congregation grateful for those who encouraged, aided and contributed toward fulfilling this dream.

### **Congregation Breaks-in New Clergy Staff**

When Don Dixon came as Senior Pastor in 1994 it was a complete change in the full-time clergy staff. He was joined by three associate pastors, Rick Adams, Jeaneatte Thomas Shegog who each stayed four years and Wade Giffin who was reassigned in 2002. Rick had been a missionary hospital administrator in Haiti, Jeaneatte, a recent seminary graduate and Wade, an assistant pastor. Pastor Dixon's report to the Charge Conference in 1995 highlighted things necessary for a church's stability and growth. "Parking" is first followed by "a singleness of purpose" and "modern music and use of media." He related that we do not boast of our lack of parking. We are diverse, yet we still love each other and young and old seem to like our music. Under Pastor Dixon's leadership, two new ministries emerged which continue: The Amos Project and Habitat for Humanity. His vision for ministry culminated in establishment of the Dixon Ministry Fund in 2008. The 1927 Gothic building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 7, 2009 shortly before Pastor Dixon retired in June 2009.

### **Columbarium Ministry**



A small group of members thought the church should have a Columbarium as part of its outreach and service to others. This project was not high on the priority list of most parishioners and few had serious objections if it did not affect the budget. Some thought the church should not be in the cemetery business and others wanted to preserve the church lawn. The Administrative Board, Board of Trustees and Charge Conference all gave permission for the project being assured it would not involve a general fund raising program and would not impact the operating budget. A Columbarium Committee was formed the members of which loaned the church money to construct the Columbarium. Its members were repaid with interest from sales of niches and spaces on the memorial wall.

Designed to be built in three phases, the first was dedicated on May 18, 1997 and the second on November 18, 2001, there are 228 niches and 180 spaces on the memorial wall.

### Chancel Renovation

The second major change to the Gothic building began in 1999 when the chancel was renovated. Such a project had been discussed for many years beginning before the 1960's. Various proposals emerged and one, a conceptual sketch dated 1969, was prepared by an architectural firm. Each had a common, insurmountable problem -- increased chancel space would decrease congregational seating. During those times nearly all seats were filled for every service. No one then, or even in the 1990's, wanted to limit the opportunity for anyone to worship at Hyde Park. But times changed and new demands were placed on the chancel for concerts, liturgical drama and innovative worship. Almost thirty years of dismantling a chancel not designed for such events had taken its toll on the furniture and fixtures. Choir members seated on folding chairs in the chancel aisles provided a cluttered look and a crowded feeling to some in the congregation.



After numerous meetings seeking congregational input, the project was undertaken with a few primary goals: Maintain the historic Gothic character, preserve the communion rails and Cambridge-Wheatley floor tiles and provide flexibility to accommodate anticipated uses. This was accomplished. One former member, who had not been in the sanctuary for ten years commented about the chancel, "Something is different--but I don't know what." The chancel's flexibility proved so popular that the Trustees had to set

limits on reconfigurations due to wear and tear on the furniture and staff time involved.

### Stair Tower Addition

The third major change in the building was the stair tower addition to enhance the south entrance from the parking lots. The former "back door" became a primary entrance with completion of the Education Wing in 1966 and was not accessible to the physically challenged. As with the Education Wing and Chapel, the original Gothic character in Bedford limestone was maintained. This addition was Phase I of a four-phase long-term plan. Later phases call for a two-story parking garage south and elevated gymnasium west of the stair tower. It received an award from the Tri-State Masonry Institute as the outstanding project for 2001.



### Long-Range Plan Developed -- Expansion Plans Reconsidered

Since the early 1950's the congregation has needed adequate parking. With full pews on Sunday mornings and greater numbers on Sunday evenings for the singles ministry, lack of parking limits ministry and growth. Most, if not all the pastors in the past 50 years have realized this.

In December 1995, the Trustees, with only a draft copy of the Vision 2000 Committee Report in hand, no long-term plan and without financial commitments, began to acquire houses in the block south of the church for possible expansion. Shortly thereafter, the Trustees were contacted and investigated property located at 3020 Erie Avenue known as The Monastery of the Holy Name, formerly a cloistered community of Dominican nuns. Before the Trustees could compile an offer, the monastery was taken off the market. After seven properties were acquired, Saving Grace, a neighborhood group formed to oppose such expansion, posted signs which read "Preserve Our Community! Methodist Church Stop Buying Homes for Expansion" throughout the neighborhood and distributed handbills to churchgoers urging a "NO" vote on further acquisitions. After considering alternate sites for ministry, the Trustees developed a "Long Range Facility Plan" in 1999 that called for expansion within the "footprint" on land at the corner of Observatory and Grace which includes some parking. The seven properties purchased were sold.

### Monastery Purchase Approved in Close Vote

In June 2001, Pastor Don Dixon announced the opportunity for the congregation to purchase 3020 Erie Avenue, The Monastery of the Holy Name. The purchase was recommended by the Church Council (formerly Administrative Board) and by the Trustees. Members who opposed this purchase generally feared splitting the congregation along "traditional" and "contemporary" worship lines and thought it unwise to spend \$1.2 million not



backed by pledges. In a narrow vote of 478 members attending a Church Conference convened in September, the motion to purchase was approved with 56% "For" and 44% "Against." Following painting, decorating, furnishing and installation of telephone and computer lines the "Erie Building" was ready for occupancy in May 2002. It houses a variety of activities including Youth Ministry, Home Hospitality Network, Awaken-the-Cities, Taizé services, the Walk to Emmaus, administrative and finance offices, and the church archives. A labyrinth on the north lawn was dedicated in 2009.

**Vision of 1927 Continues**

We can say with humble pride that the vision of this being "a seven-day-in-the-week community church" and "The program aimed at is of such breadth, purpose and atmosphere that people will rather 'be at church'" is alive, has branched out and continues to bear fruit for Christ's kingdom.