

# 2013 Was Our Bicentennial Year !

*1813-2013*

Covenant Presbyterian Church holds the distinction of being one of the very first churches in Butler. When the city founders met on March 8, 1803 to plot the county seat, the site of Covenant Church was designated simply as the “church lot” and since the time of its clearing has served no other purpose. On April 7, 1813, the Rev. Mr. John McPherrin was installed as the first minister of “The Presbyterian Church” -- or simply "First Church" -- of Butler. Since then there have been several name changes and three fires in Covenant’s history. At first, the congregation held services in the county courthouse until a stone meeting- house could be constructed on the church lot in 1815.



A second building on the original site was built of handmade red brick in 1833 facing E. New Castle Street (originally E. Mifflin St.), a major thoroughfare in the city in those days. The church cemetery was located just north of the church where the Butler Jr. High School now stands. In 1862 a new church was built to replace the 1833 structure after it was destroyed by fire. The reconstructed church was built of the same red brick, very similar in design, except that the length was extended twenty feet and a balcony and belfry were added. Another major change was made at that time to relocate the front entrance so that it faced E. Jefferson Street to the south (as it does today). In 1874 an elegant, tall steeple was added and the interior enlarged. Also at that time the handsome, red brick was painted, probably for waterproofing but also because in those days there were no good methods for cleaning brick which had become soot-stained from the increased use of soft coal for domestic heating and for factory furnaces.

Up until the mid-1900's the congregation was called "First Presbyterian" and for a number of years claimed one of the largest memberships in the presbytery (more than 1,200 on the active roll in 1955.) Later the name was changed to "Covenant" (in 1962) and though the membership has declined precipitously in recent decades, the traditions and commitments of the church members have helped them to remain a strong influence in the community.

Missions, both foreign and local, have always been a passionate priority of the church. The Presbyterian Churches of North Butler, Summit, Unionville, Second (Calvary, now dissolved), East Butler, Lyndora and Faith Presbyterian churches were all "daughter" churches of ours. Over the years, the congregation has actively supported missionaries in all parts of the world, including China, India, Iran, and Japan, Thailand and Russia.

Fewer than twenty ministers have served the church since its founding nearly 200 years ago. The first minister was the Reverend John McPherrin, who served from 1813 until his death in 1822. He was followed by the Reverend John Coulter (1823-1833); the Reverend Loyal Young, D.D. (1833-1868); the Reverend William I. Brugh, D.D. (1869-1871); the Reverend Charles H. McClellan, D.D. (1872-1878); the Reverend William T. Wylie, D.D. ( 1879-1881); the Reverend William E. Oller, D.D. (1882-1909); the Reverend William R. Craig, D.D. (1910-1922); the Reverend S. Wilmer Beitler, D.D. (1923-1942); the Reverend Carl W. Bogard, D.D. (1942-1970); the Reverend Samuel J. Phoebus (1961-1972); the Reverend Robert D. Taylor (1970-1973); the Reverend Donald G. Campbell, D.Min. (1976-1984); the Reverend Steven J. Hamilton, D.Min.(1985-2001); the Reverend Monica C. Hamilton (2001-2003); and the Rev. James E. Swanson, Ph.D. (2004-present).

The Honorable Walter Lowrie, son-in-law of the first minister, the Reverend John McPherrin, served in the United States Senate from 1819 to 1825, then as Secretary of the United States Senate until 1836 when he became the Secretary to the Foreign Missions Board of the Presbyterian Church.

During the Civil War, the church served as a station on the Underground Railroad, providing protection for slaves making their way North.

The underground chamber where the slaves were hidden is still visible in the church basement, and arrangements may be made for individual or group visits. The church's concern for minorities has always been strong, and the church sponsored a refugee Vietnamese family in the 1970's.

Women have been an integral part of Covenant Church through the years. The "Women's Missionary Society" was active as early as 1848. The Alice Wick Missionary Society, the Young Women's Missionary Society, the Dorcas Circle, and the Eve Circle all flourished in their day. Full participation came in 1966 when the first women elders, Alice Johnston, Margaret Ashbaugh, Muriel Thompson, and Jean Lloyd, were elected.

Through its two centuries of witness, Covenant Church has valued outstanding preaching, excellent music, Christian education for all ages, and service to the community. The congregation has been blessed so that they can be a blessing to others – sheltering the slaves, feeding the hungry, nurturing the children, welcoming the "different" and the addicted, enlightening the curious, and glorifying God in word and deed.

Music has been vital to the worship at Covenant Church. The Moller organ, installed in 1947, was refurbished in 1999 through the generous gift of Helen Ferguson, and rededicated at a worship service on September 19, 1999, which included an organ recital by David C. Daugherty, the Director of Music at that time. In addition to seasonal community recitals (Advent, Lent, and New Year's), Covenant has hosted musical events such as a joint concert by Slippery Rock University Choir and Pittsburgh jazz-composer Joe Negri, a performance by the Harmonic Brass from Germany, and other unique cultural offerings.

Education has always been important in the life of the church, beginning as early as 1836, when William Campbell, Jr. was elected Sunday School Superintendent. The addition of an attached educational wing was made possible by a generous gift from Mr. A.D. Sarver in 1938. The Sarver wing is now used for staff offices, meeting rooms, a small chapel, and classrooms for the Butler Montessori School and a popular preschool music program, *Kindermusik*. The large Fellowship Hall in the basement is used for banquets, dinners, dramas (on a large, lighted stage), and monthly distributions of food through the "Covenant Cupboard."

Each Sunday morning a unique and intriguing Adult Sunday School Class, "The Seekers," meets for wide-ranging presentations and lively discussions of matters theological, historical and cultural. A newly renovated church library, dedicated to the memory of Al and Arlene Pugno, offers a comfortable setting for reading, research, reflection and conversation.

Covenant Cupboard Food Bank, which began as a Deacon Project sometime before 1958, was formally established on December 19, 1977 as the first "food cupboard" in Butler County. Today there are many more food banks in the city and county, but Covenant continues to serve a significant segment of the population (over 6000 individuals in 2006). Those who have served for a time as "director" of the Cupboard include: Jesse Hoffmeister, Charlie Thompson, Lester Dunmire, Orville Nicholas, Sam Peters, and David Blewett. Together with volunteers from other local churches, the members of Covenant Church demonstrate compassion and caring for the hungry by serving free meals as part of the Butler Area Community Dinners outreach; Ellie Walchesky and Connie Brown are two of the most recent coordinators of the 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday community meal served in conjunction with Faith Presbyterian Church at another sister church, St. Andrew's Presbyterian.

Covenant has for many years been a welcoming venue for community groups, providing meeting space for the Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and others. Most recently, since 2006, the church has joined in support of the Butler Emergency Relief Initiative to coordinate assistance for many unmet community needs, including utility bills, housing, prescription medication and transportation.

Through its 200 years of sacred worship and dedicated work, the First/Covenant Church community of believers has valued outstanding preaching, excellent music, Christian education for all ages, and service to the community. From its historic beginnings in 1813 until today, our mission has been to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to minister to our neighbors with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.