

AVON WESLEYAN CHURCH HISTORY 1927 TO 2018

Mrs. Mary Magee moved to Avon in 1927 and soon after invited some ladies to her home to pray. Like the early church in Acts 2, these women began to meet in each others' homes and devote themselves to prayer. Minutes of these meetings list their concerns, and God's answers--lost people saved from sin and sick people miraculously healed. These faithful and fervent women became known as the Avon Prayer Band.

In 1934, this group and their families began meeting in the home of Minnie Schlottman for Sunday services. When it became crowded, they rented a hall on Genesee Street, and they also met in the Livingston Hotel. They had no official denomination and no official pastor. Services were conducted by members and by students and faculty from nearby Christian schools.

In 1938, they purchased the Edward Sandle building at 70 West Main Street from the Odd Fellows for \$1,000.00. These were the arrangements: \$100 down and interest-free payments of \$20 per month. There would be no penalty if a payment could not be made. They were to pay as much as they could, whenever they could, for as long as it took to pay the debt in full. Can you imagine terms like that? But this was the 10th year of the Great Depression, and, even with these generous provisions, it took both faith and determination to pay it off.

They set up the main floor of the building as the sanctuary. The basement was used for Sunday School rooms and the 2nd floor would become the parsonage for the pastor. They called their little church, "The People's Tabernacle" and a supply pastor, Rev. C. T. Matthews, served for one year.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Magee consulted with the Rochester Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church about becoming part of that denomination. In October of 1941, the parsonage was finished, and the Rev. Mrs. Bertha Ketch became the first official Pastor of The People's Tabernacle. In 1944, the last payment was made on the building, and The People's Tabernacle officially organized into a Wesleyan Methodist Church. There were four charter members: Mary Magee, the prayer warrior, Alex Watson, the financier who helped produce the down payment, Elida Jaggard and Marion Clements.

The next matter of business was Missions, and so it was also in 1944 that the Wesleyan Missionary Society was formed. Besides praying for Missions work, the Missionary Society began early on to support full-time missionaries and benevolent endeavors. Some projects that they supported over the years were Hephzibah Children's home, an orphanage in Georgia, Brainerd Indian School in S Dakota, Kamakwie Hospital in Sierra Leone and medical work in Haiti.

They also didn't waste any time in reaching out to their own community and in offering opportunities for spiritual training for children and adults. In July of 1945, the church hosted its first Daily Vacation Bible School, and, in 1948, the church opened its library. In June of 1949, the Young Missionary Worker's Band was organized. By 1950, the last year of Rev. Ketch's pastorate, there were 24 full members.

Rev. Philip Birchall assumed the pastorate in 1950 and moved his growing family into the parsonage. Ken Shafer remembers liking this young pastor with the big smile. He said the Birchalls had several children when they came to Avon and "they left with a couple more". It must've been a little crowded in that little upstairs apartment with a family of six or more.

Rev. Charles L. Messick was our 3rd pastor and served from 1953-1958. I say "our" because church history was about to become personal for me. It was during this time that my parents began to attend. Mom told me that Rev Messick preached very good sermons, and Ken remembers that he worked full-time at Allen-Bailey Tag Co. while also putting in full time hours as the Pastor.

In 1958 Rev. Stanley Lawrence accepted the position. In March of 1959, the Lord "laid it on the heart" of Rev. Lawrence to build a new building to house his growing church. And as he prayed, God impressed on him a location - the corner of Genesee Street & Pine View Heights. Rev. Lawrence, or Brother Lawrence, as he was called, began to go to this property daily to pray over it. Early one morning, as Brother Lawrence stood there, head bowed, eyes closed, deep in prayer, a police officer stopped to ask if everything was all right. He answered the policeman, "Yes, I'm just praying over the church that will be here someday." The remarkable thing was that the property wasn't even for sale.

The church moved forward in faith. In April of 1959 they opened a building fund with a deposit of \$46.00, and, in July, the church began setting aside the first offering of every month for the project. In September of 1959, the lot was purchased for \$2,000.

The following year, on July 31, 1960, we broke ground, and the first service was held in the sanctuary on May 21, 1961. Aside from the restrooms, the lower level was still unfinished.

In 1965, the Lawrences retired, and Rev. Roy R. Straub took up the work. The Straubs moved into a rented residence, and the former church building was sold for \$9,000. Work continued on the lower level of the church, completing a kitchen, fellowship hall and Sunday School rooms that could be adjusted in size by opening or closing multiple folding "walls".

In 1967, work began on a parsonage on the other side of Pine View Heights. With much volunteer labor by the pastor, who didn't let a leg brace hinder him from climbing ladders or pushing a wheel barrow, and by every able and willing church attendee, it was completed at a cost of \$20,000 and dedicated in 1968. These accommodations were roomier than the 2nd floor at 70 West Main. The basement was used for a youth room and additional Sunday School rooms.

In 1968, the Wesleyan Methodists merged with the Pilgrim Holiness denomination, and the resulting union was called the Wesleyan Church. In 1970, our local congregation was incorporated under the name, "Avon Wesleyan Church". In this age of acronyms, it is more frequently referred to as AWC.

As the church grew, and the children of the 60s became the teenagers of the 70s, we had plenty of space, but we needed more staff and organization. In 1970, the church board voted to hire a Youth Leader for the teens and a Tots Church Program was organized for its younger members.

In 1973, we had lots of young children in our congregation who were excited about church and inviting their friends. Even in those days before seat belt laws, you could only put so many extra people in the family car, so AWC purchased a school bus, painted it orange and a new ministry began. Sunday mornings, the bus would go to Harper Park, the Glen apartments and wherever else someone was in need of a ride and gather up kids, teens and some entire families. The bus was also used for Vacation Bible School, to take church families to crusades in Rochester, and teens to rallies and concerts. It was a familiar sight for 6 years, until we replaced it with a 15 passenger van in 1979.

Once again we needed more space, so a plan was devised to add 3 stories to the front of the church, then flip the sanctuary around so the new main entrance would take you into the back. The foyer area would become the platform, and the new larger foyer would be in the addition.

June 18, 1974 the project broke ground, and it was completed and dedicated in April, 1976. Along with the hired professionals, approximately 5,000 hours of donated labor kept the cost affordable and provided bonding opportunities for our families as they worked alongside each another.

Even though we completed 3 major building projects from 1970 to 1976, please don't think we were just about construction. The church often held evangelistic services during this time, with guest speakers and music groups, like the Shorb Brother Quartet, the Jeremiah People or ensembles from Houghton College.

The Youth program was also thriving during this time. The teens raised money with monthly paper recycling drives, participated in local Youth for Christ rallies, had regular Bible studies, attended Christian rock concerts and worked on humanitarian projects. In 1972, they traveled to Corning to help with the clean-up after hurricane Agnes.

Rev. Edwin (Ted) Roloson became the pastor in 1980 and served until 1985. During this time, the church reached out in door-to-door evangelism and hosted services for the large Spanish speaking community, mainly seasonal workers at the Bird's Eye Plant. The church van was making runs on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, and often on Saturdays for youth events as well.

On September 16, 1984 we celebrated our church's 50th anniversary, thanking God for all that had transpired since 1934 when the Avon Prayer Band began Sunday meetings in Minnie Schlottman's home.

In 1985, Pastor Gerald Wright, Jr. accepted the call of God and the church to serve at AWC. The parsonage mortgage was burned in 1986, the addition to the original church building was paid off in 1988, and the church became debt-free. This meant more of our money could be directed to missions, benevolence projects and spiritual enrichment opportunities. Scholarship programs were started to help our students afford to go to Christian colleges.

The children and teen programs had begun to crowd each other in the lower level. The third floor of the addition was still unfinished and served as an attic. In 1991, plans were approved, accumulated junk was tossed and the area was transformed into youth ministry space.

At this time, the church was hiring ministerial students as part-time Youth leaders. These students came for a year or two, did an excellent job, then graduated and left the area for full-time pastorates elsewhere. The teens were frustrated with this constant transition and sense of loss.

In 1997, Garrett Herdter, a student at Roberts Wesleyan College, became the youth ministry leader. Garrett made a promise that he would stay until the younger members of the group graduated. This was a major turning point, both in spiritual growth and in numbers. What started as a group of 10-15 grew until close to 75 students were attending the Wednesday evening program.

In the area of adult ministry, Rev. Wright sensed the need to clarify and balance the 5 Biblical mandates of the church: worship, outreach, discipling, ministry and leadership development. The church began

to study the book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, and teams of lay leaders were organized to help groups move systematically through steps of spiritual development.

And again, the church grew, and what had seemed like an enormous piece of property back in 1959 was no longer sufficient for our needs. In 2,000 the church approved a recommendation from the board to pursue relocation. Rev. Wright was considering and praying about retirement and began to feel that a younger pastor might be better suited for the major transitions that lay ahead.

After 19 years of faithful service, Pastor Wright retired in 2004. Rev. Bradley Strange accepted the opportunity to lead a sometimes reluctant congregation through change. Attendance was now 240, which exceeded the seating capacity of the sanctuary, so we divided into two Sunday morning services. A building committee was formed to purchase property and begin designing a larger facility.

In 2006, Rev. Strange and a team from AWC went to Guatemala after an October hurricane created mudslides that buried an entire village while the people slept. That trip began an ongoing relationship with the Guatemalans, and AWC sent teams again in 2007 & 2008. Since 2011 a team has gone yearly to assist the ministry of Impacto, a Christian organization there.

Also in 2006, we purchased 27 acres of land in Caledonia on the corner of West River Road and Route 5. Later that same year, Pastor Strange resigned and Rev. Daniel (Dan) Jones became our next pastor, serving from 2006-2015. Pastor Dan initiated the practice of skipping church one Sunday a year to do service projects. The theme for that day became, "Don't go to church, Be the church." And under his leadership, we moved forward with developing the property, now known as the 4 Corners Campus, and exploring creative ways to use it for ministry until we are ready to build there.

In 2008, we hired Pastor Daniel Blowers, fondly known as Pastor B, to be our children's pastor. He continues to teach and mentor our kids, nursery through 6th grade, as well as provide support to their parents.

In 2010 we invited the community to our first Live Nativity Hayride, setting up a tent for some shelter and renting portable toilets.

In 2012, we constructed a Ministry Center/pavilion big enough that we can all meet together occasionally, since we still divide for services on Sunday. It's still pretty cold waiting in there for the Live Nativity hayride, but at least the restrooms are heated. And it seems we are always building something. The Bible-time village that the ride goes through now has a small home for Mary, a guard shack, a platform for the Heavenly Host and a stable large enough to house the Holy Family, a donkey, several sheep and some chickens.

In 2015, Rev. Peter Maclauchlan became our current lead pastor. He and the church board have been seeking direction as to what God would like our church to look like in 10 years, and what steps we need to take to get there. As you can tell from our history, we are builders. But, we are also pray-ers. We began as a women's prayer meeting, and we still believe that fervent prayer is the key to what lies ahead for AWC and for all the churches of Avon as we hold out God's grace to a world who so desperately needs it.

I endeavored to make this a true, accurate and interesting 10 minute account of our history. I definitely failed in keeping it to 10 minutes, but I hope that I have not skewed any of the details. I am deeply indebted to the prior historical accounts I had access to. Many of them were by unknown authors, but I can credit the following: Shirley Faisst, Florence Bailey,

Pastor Gerry Wright, Pastor Dan Jones, and Pastor Pete Maclauchlan. The church website was also helpful and the photos are beautiful. I personally spoke (or communicated electronically) with individuals who attended "back in the day": Ken Shafer, Carol Clements, Mary Weaver and Hilda Clark. I included some of my own recollection, and I also verified details and collected additional information from the following: Bob Reynolds (Live Nativity), Geri Brewer (Missions Projects), Margaret Cappello and Andy Britton (Guatemala Trips) and Dan Reynolds (Bus ministry, Building Projects, Youth Program and just about everything else). And, because I truly believe prayer is essential, I thank the LBA for praying me through this. If you find anything to be in error, PLEASE LET ME KNOW so I can make corrections, as this information may be referred to in future, and false information must not be perpetuated. Thank you. Gloria Reynolds, March 18, 2018