

*In February, 2010, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North Hills asked me for some information regarding the move of the R.P. church from its location on the North Side (Central-Pittsburgh congregation) to Ross Township (North Hills R.P. Church), a move that was culminated in 1963. The following is my story.*

Reformed Presbyterian Church of North Hills  
North Side to Ross Township  
James D. Carson

I arrived in Pittsburgh with my wife and two sons in January, 1958 as the pastor-elect of the Central-Pittsburgh Reformed Presbyterian Church. (C-P).<sup>1</sup> In April, 1958, just three months after my arrival, the Pittsburgh newspaper headlined an Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) project to form the new Allegheny Center. Their report and accompanying map indicated that our church building would be taken by eminent domain. Needless to say, that news had not surfaced in the call upon me to be the pastor of the congregation. I was just 28 years old!

The installation service was held on February 13, 1958. Participants in the service were: Rev. David M. Carson, Dr. S. Bruce Willson, Dr. J. R. Patterson, Rev. Kenneth G. Smith, Dr. D. H. Elliott, the latter three were former pastors.<sup>2</sup>

The C-P congregation was the result of the merger, in 1928, of the former Eighth Street R.P. church , located in the Golden Triangle and the Central Allegheny R.P. Church, located on Pittsburgh's North Side, an area formerly called Allegheny. The C-P building itself was a large structure: stone walls, beautiful stain glass windows, Sabbath school rooms on two levels, wonderful oak pews and doors, seating capacity of about 300 with additional seating in a side room, a lower level containing a gymnasium, complete with shower facilities with marble separating walls, a fellowship hall, and kitchen. Although the church had no off-street parking, it was unthinkable that the URA would want to demolish that 29 year old structure.

The church building was constructed on what was called the "Akron style" floor plan.<sup>3</sup> The style was fading rapidly in popularity to the point where architects were designing corrections to the floor plan.

---

<sup>1</sup> The arrival had been delayed for several weeks due to the hospitalization of both sons in Children's Hospital in Los Angeles with a staphylococcus infection. That is a whole different, although fascinating, story.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. D. H. Elliott became the pastor of the Eighth Street congregation in 1926; then of the C-P congregation until 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Though relatively unknown today, the Akron Plan Sunday school was a popular type of religious building that developed in the late 19th century in response to the nation's growing educational movement. The design was named for the city of Akron, Ohio, where the plan was first used in the First Methodist Episcopal Church (Lewis Miller, Walter Blythe, and Jacob Snyder, 1866-1870). Thousands of Akron Plan Sunday Schools were built throughout New York State and the country between 1870 and the First World War. The main feature of the Akron Plan is a large open space, the "rotunda," surrounded by smaller classrooms on one or two levels. These classrooms open onto the rotunda by means of folding doors or sliding shutters. In large churches, the plan may have included as many as 25 classrooms, contrasted to smaller rural churches with only two or three classrooms on each floor. Although many Akron Plan Sunday Schools still exist, most have been modified to accommodate contemporary needs. Most frequently, rotundas have been adapted for use as social halls, day-care centers, theaters, or musical recital halls. The numerous classrooms surrounding the central space often house church offices or social service counseling rooms.

church building plans were made to renovate Akron style buildings. Even though fading in popularity, it worked well for the congregation so no renovations of the C-P building were ever contemplated.

Having just arrived on the scene, I depended heavily on the wisdom, experience and knowledge of the officers of the church. The attitude was to “wait-and-see”, not an unwise move in the light of government projects. Over the course of the next months and years, it became increasingly clear that the URA was on an irreversible course of action.

Plan A was to stay where we were, if possible. Plan B was to have a back-up plan should we be forced to move. As the months went by, it was more apparent that Plan B would be needed.

What would Plan B look like? One of the options suggested by the URA was for us to purchase property close by, across the park, and rebuild in the same community. Part of the difficulty of that suggestion was that since the church building had been constructed, new zoning laws had been enacted which required off-street parking. It was determined that in order to build a structure of comparable size, we would need a footprint about four times the size of the building. To have followed that suggestion would have meant the expenditure of money for land, leaving nothing for any new construction.

The congregation had a previous history of significant contact with the community and it was then, as now, an area in need of the Gospel. Should the congregation in effect abandon the North Side? And if so, where to go?

On May 4, 1961, some boys broke into the church building looking for money, no doubt. They found their way using matches for light, to the pastor’s study closet, in which there was a detailed model of the church building covered with a very dry cloth. Perhaps unintentionally, they started a fire, which did much damage to the study, with smoke damage throughout the building. On a personal note, the beautiful wood desk in the study, which was manufactured the year that the building was built, was declared by the insurance company as a total loss. I asked the officers if I might have it; they agreed, I took it home and refinished it and it is now in the home of my daughter, Becky Phillips, in Beaver Falls. That desk and I share the same year of origin!

The fire came at a time in the negotiations between the URA and C-P where it was deemed unwise to put a lot of money into the building, so the necessary repairs were made, and PPG people were brought in to determine how to get rid of the smoke odor and stain on the sanctuary walls. They never did fully succeed.

Elder Knox Young’s wife had a history of reading through the Bible each year. Mr. Young adopted the plan for himself. In 1961 the pastor and session launched a program “Read it Through in ‘62” Bible reading program. Calendars with daily Bible readings were printed – this was in the literal “cut and paste” era – that took much time unimaginable in the modern use of computerization. The pastor’s sermons were taken from part of the Bible reading for the preceding week; evening services dealt largely with the overview of Bible books and prayer meeting topics considered similar sections of the Bible reading. Progress reports by the congregation were turned in on a monthly basis. My diary says that 35 persons completed the program of reading through the entire Bible during the year. Some continued the practice in subsequent years. Later we considered a new slogan for another year “Read it More in ‘64”, but that was never carried out.

In spite of the unsettled situation with respect to the URA, congregational work continued. Preaching services were held without interruption. Baptisms were performed, new members joined the congregation, weddings were held, the seminary used the facilities to house the seminary students and classes for a semester during renovation of the seminary facilities from September-December, 1960, church meetings

including a memorable Psalm Sing at Thanksgiving time in 1962, were held. The pastor's family was growing with the addition of a third son and then a daughter.<sup>4</sup>

The official congregation action was taken on April 18, 1962 to sell the building. My diary says: "Decision to sell the church building for \$228,000; and to seek a new location outside the city." Forty-eight years later that seems like such a small amount, but in 2010 dollars it would be \$1,618,617.

The membership of the congregation was located in the larger North Side area and generally to the north of the city, as far north as the Gibsonia area. A building committee was formed, chaired by Elder Lavern Bish. Elder H.E. McKelvy, then a retired school teacher, was very active in the plans and discovered property available on Thompson Run Road, in Ross Township, on which there was a strawberry farm with a home dwelling. Ultimately it was purchased.

An architect, Francis Swem, who had done work for the R.P. Home and would do considerable work for the R. P. Seminary, was hired. My recollection is that the contact with Mr. Swem came through Elder Knox M. Young. Mr. Swem met with the building committee, took us to see other buildings which he had designed. Over time plans were drawn up and the present building was constructed. The contractor was Mr. Chet Fowler (any old-timers remember the Fowler motel on Route 19 north of Wexford?)

The congregation voted a budget of \$185,000 for the purchase of land, construction of a building, including landscaping, and the building/purchase of a parsonage (\$1,314,163 in 2010 dollars). Much valuable legal counsel was given by Mr. Charles McKissock, a member of the church. His service in dealing with the URA was invaluable.

While church services would be held in the C-P building until early December, 1963, the last BIG Pittsburgh Presbytery (as it was known then) event in the building was a Psalm Sing the night after Thanksgiving in 1962. The building was filled to capacity with more than 300 in attendance. It turned out to be a fitting farewell to a building that would soon be demolished.

So there was a lot going on! Regular services were continuing. The building committee was working hard on plans, meeting with the architect on a regular basis. Discussions were carried on with the URA and contracts were signed. The church parsonage at the time was located at 328 Dunlap Street, off of Perrysville Avenue. It was felt that a different parsonage should be found closer to the new church building under construction. Again, it was Elder McKelvy (if memory serves me well) who located a house for sale at 123 Sycamore Drive, just around the corner from the church. The new parsonage was bought in April, 1963, our family moved in May, in time to welcome the birth of our 4<sup>th</sup> (and last) child in August. Her baptism, on October 27, by Dr. David Carson, Becky's uncle, was the last baptism in the C-P church building.

In February, 1963, the name of the church was officially changed to "The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North Hills."

On September 20, 1963 (Friday), a Homecoming service was held in the C-P building, with 175 in attendance. The old cornerstone box was opened.

On September 22 there was a Homecoming worship service. Former ministers participated: Dr. J. Renwick Patterson, Dr. E. Clark Copeland, Dr. Kenneth G. Smith. In the afternoon, the cornerstone of the North Hills church was laid. Items included: Bible, Minutes of Synod for 1962, copies of the Pittsburgh

---

<sup>4</sup> Doug, now principal of Beaver County Christian High School; Ken, provost at Geneva College, Tom, a nurses' teaching instructor in Bellingham, WA; Becky Phillips, Director of Family and Church Relations, Geneva College.

Press and Post Gazette for September 21, church bulletins, pictures of the church, signatures of the Bible School people on that day, a Blue Banner, programs, etc. Doug Carson put the Blue Banner in.<sup>5</sup>

The first worship service was held in the new building on December 15, 1963. The dedication of the building was held on January 26, 1964. Participants included Charles Skuce (Memorial Park UP); Robert Lamont (First Presbyterian, Pittsburgh); S. Bruce Willson, President of RPTS; E. Clark Copeland, former pastor; Melville K. Carson, father of the pastor. David Armstrong was appointed as assistant to the pastor and worked diligently in outreach programs. A visitation program touched base with 2000 homes in the following months.

The last worship service in the C-P building was on December 8, 1963. On the following morning members of the church and friends from other churches gathered to take from the building what would be useful in the North Hills building, or in other churches. Some time before this, contact was made with the stained glass company that had installed the beautiful windows and they determined there was no way to save the windows, except for the small, rectangular framed windows that could be opened for ventilation. These windows were removed and taken to the North Hills building. In the following days, the demolition of the building was completed.

That is the story as I remember it.

I would only add my personal reflection on those days 5 decades ago. That young 28 year-old pastor with a young wife and two boys has now become an 80 year old retired minister with 4 children, 12 grandchildren, 1 great grandchild and the second expected any day now. My wife Dottie lived long enough to hold our first great grandchild, which was a great joy for her; she is now enjoying the “fullness of joy” in the presence of the Savior.

While most of us were initially opposed to the URA plans, I believe the Lord’s hand was directly involved in moving the church building away from that location. The Allegheny Center area was a difficult field. The Christian and Missionary church, pastored by Rev. Frazier was a strong church; that congregation is still a strong voice in the community. Others churches have not fared so well.

The Lord allowed the congregation to have essential unity in the process: acceptance of the realities; agreement as to sale and purchase prices, support for the move and hard work in the establishment of the congregation in Ross Township.

In God’s gracious providence, the money received from the sale of the C-P building was sufficient to purchase property for the new church building, construct the building, purchase a parsonage – all debt free. This reality alone underscored the wisdom of moving to the present location.

Now, 45 years and more since the first service was held in the “new” building, I rejoice to see what God has done through the years. Few in number are those who were members of the congregation in 1963, but the Lord has brought conversion and transfer growth to the point where a daughter church is being planted in Gibsonia. Others, who were members at the time of the move, and many who came along later, have moved to other places of ministry. The congregation should be thankful for the steadfast mission of the congregation for nearly a half century.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1963 was a momentous year. June: The Supreme Court ruled that Lord’s Prayer and Bible verses unconstitutional in public school classrooms; Aug 28: Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech; Nov 22: John F. Kennedy assassinated, C.S. Lewis died; 15,000 American troops in Vietnam