

Trinity United Methodist Church

Hackettstown, NJ

A history of the 1888 Sanctuary

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Some fifty years after Trinity's official beginning in the 1830s it was starting on its third sanctuary building. This speaks to our church's significant growth and development over this time. It was also a period of great changes in our country and Trinity was working hard in many ways to stay responsive to its times; a new sanctuary was one of them.

A sanctuary is a place where we worship and praise God. Its design and use reflects the mission and ministry of the church. This has been true throughout the ages. Yet, each generation, each century, has expressed its understanding of worship, mission and ministry in different ways. We can think of the house churches of the first centuries that celebrates the family of the church, to the soaring cathedrals of medieval Europe which causes our eyes and hearts to turn toward heaven. Each has in its own way reflected the mission and ministry of the church as well as the way we worship and praise God. The 1880s turns out to be the beginning of one of the great church-building eras in our country's history. Reflecting on the ways we worship and praise it is worth noting that John and Charles Wesley created three primary documents which they felt defined the essence of Methodism; Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley's *Standard Sermons* (52 of them), and their 1789 hymnbook. These are all documents designed to be used in worship, either collectively or privately. And documents which call the worshiper to hear the Word, sing the Word and act on the Word. Worship and praise in action. Our sanctuary's very design reflects that importance.

In 1885, during the pastorate of the Rev. John Munroe, the decision was made to build a new church of "brick . . . adapted to the needs of our growing society . . ." With a building fund and plan established the second church was taken down in 1887 and the current sanctuary was built on the same spot. The new building was dedicated on June 6, 1888 and cost \$28,000. As mentioned above the 1880s was the beginning of a great church building period for the Methodist Episcopal Church. Within the

next decade the denomination would be building the equivalent of two churches a day. To assist this growth a board of Church Extension complete with a division of church architecture was started. The board actually created a catalog of church sanctuary designs. Local churches could look through the catalog, select a church design and the Architecture Office would send out the basic designs which a local architecture and builder could use to create the local church. While the first catalog was issued in 1888, many of the plans had been circulating for several years. Our church's design is very close to plans found in that catalog.

In response to the needs of a changing society many within the denomination were re-thinking how the church building, and especially the sanctuary should be re-designed to have the greatest impact on the ministry of the church. Church members realized that the sanctuary was not just for Sunday morning anymore and that it would be used by the church for a variety of purposes throughout the week.

Here is church architect George Kramer writing of the 'Ideal Church.' In this article he is summing up a decade of work on church design. See if it sounds familiar.

"The Ideal Church should minister to the whole [person]: spirit, mind and body; should preach, teach, heal and reach the spirit through the body and mind. To accomplish this the church must break from the conventional traces and introduce new methods. Let innovation follow innovation....

"The auditorium should therefore be provided with seating semi-circular in arrangement, or may be pulled out to the elliptic. On the center of the one side facing the seats should be a platform for the speaker; the seats should rise as they recede from the platform and will form concentric curves, every one facing the pulpit squarely. For access and egress there must be a commodious passage, entirely around the pews next to the outer wall, with inner radiating aisles dividing the seats into convenient lengths. The proper height of the platform, the incline of the floor as well as the intersection of levels with incline, must be determined by rules governing the laws of acoustics and sight. Necessarily the floor will assume the form of a half bowl, hence called "bowed floor," with certain distance from the pulpit and the space back of seats level . . ." (George Kramer, *The What How and Why of Church Building*, 1897, pp. 49-59; taken from *Methodist Experience in America*, volume 2, p 451-2)

If you've ever wondered why the sanctuary was built the way it was, here is the explanation. It was considered the most modern and practical way to do things. And Trinity built its sanctuary at the beginning of this trend. This style would be replicated across the country for the next 20-40 years. There is at least one other example of this pattern in the Musconetcong Valley; in Washington Borough.

Our building is an eclectic structure in the Italian-gothic architecture, after the Roman Renaissance style. The architect was M. Oscar S. Teale of New York. Hear how the Hackettstown newspaper reporter described the first visit to our sanctuary:

" . . . it is the inside of the church that causes one to exclaim: "How beautiful!" Coming in at the western entrance, two folding doors lead from the vestibule into the auditorium and at the left a massive, elegant square stairway leads to the gallery. Entering the auditorium, one of the handsomest church rooms in the State meets your eye. The floor is carpeted with a heavy body Brussels carpet of an olive shade, making a very pretty contrast with the heavy cherry seats, with their cushions of peacock blue."

The broad open front of the sanctuary allowed everyone to see the choir, the pastor or whatever was taking place at the front of the church. It was like a stage for the purpose of worship and instruction. In an era before microphones it was important that everyone had a clear view of the pulpit area. This made it easier to see and to hear the pastor. The original sanctuary was painted in a green shade (as discovered during the 2008 remodeling) with what appeared to have been a variation on the fleur-de-lis or some similar pattern. The style was not uncommon in that time period. There was also a chandelier with thirty electric lights hanging from the center of the ceiling. The large Catherine-wheel, or Rose, stained glass windows on the sides of the building were simple and functional. The pews were made of cherry wood and appear not to have had kneelers in them. If so that was a further sign that Trinity was following the current trend, as kneelers, used during prayers, had been used since the 1850s through the 1870s but had fallen out of fashion. The Methodist newspaper in New York - the *New York Christian Advocate* - within the next 5 years would have one or two articles bemoaning the loss of their use in general. The cushions were filled with horse-hair. It is also worth noting that one of the entrances to the church lines up with the street

leading to Centenary College. For many years the Centenary students would be lined up and walked down that street on Sunday mornings, enter the church via the bell-tower door and participate in worship. It was easy and practical to get the students into the church!

It is worth noting that on the day of dedication in June of 1888 there was a special fund raising activity to help pay off the remaining debt of the new building. Here is the report of the fund raising event taken from the Hackettstown newspaper.

"The congregation showed [it was supportive of making pledges to reduce the remaining debt] . . . and a murmur that was dangerously near applause arose when Dr. Whitney announced a subscription of \$1,000 from W. W. Gibbs, of Philadelphia, and \$500 from Alfred Sully. That opened the ball, and three more \$500 subscriptions quickly followed. Then came two of \$250 each and [further pledges were made for] a grand total in all of \$6,080. After this announcement it was decided to adjourn for dinner [in good Methodist fashion], and with "Praise God" and the doxology the congregation dispersed . . ."

What is interesting is that at least one person from Philadelphia pledge \$1000 toward retiring the debt. Other donations quickly followed. Speakers from New York City were also involved in the program. We need to remember that Hackettstown, first by the canal and then by the railroad, was connected to both major metropolitan areas. It is fascinating to see people from those areas take an interest in our church and our community. We were not an isolated place. We had major contacts in the two major cities, we had electric lights and in the 1880s we built a church with a seating capacity for 1,000 or so people. It is entirely possible that we generated our own power for the lights. On the last night of the dedication the newspaper reporter mentions that we had trouble bringing the lights up at the beginning of the service due to a technical problem with the generating brushes ". . . but when they did come the effect was grand. They came slowly, and as their light rays began to steal through the dusk, the soft, subtle motion of a thousand waving fans [hand fans being used by the congregation to keep cool] lent a weird charm to the scene."

In the 1960s the sanctuary was remodeled. Under the influence of Vatican II many churches re-thought their style of worship. The renovations at the front of the sanctuary were done in a

reformation-era theme. The pulpit was raised with steps leading up to it and a light designed to look like a sounding-board was installed above the pulpit. An 'arbor' or 'screen' was placed in front of the choir area. The chandelier was removed and in its place a large flat set of lights covered by a diffuser was installed - affectionately known in later years as 'the mother ship.' The sanctuary was painted a lighter color and the pews were painted white - which interestingly echoed a New England preaching-house theme. The original horse-hair pew cushions, already well-used, were kept.

But as the membership grew in the 1980s and 1990s so did the programs of the church. The need for more flexible space and the use of technology became apparent. After six years of planning the sanctuary was once again renovated in 2008. The pews were physically removed from the building, their coat of paint removed, the cherry wood restored and new cushions were installed. New lights, carpet and an updated electronic sound system were installed. A new chandelier, similar in style to the original, was installed replacing the 1960-era center lights. Support beams and columns were painted in detail, by church volunteers on scaffolding. The colors were selected to match the hues seen in the windows. During the repainting of the walls the decorative stenciling that once ran across the front horizontal wall and around the arch was uncovered. Cost prohibited its presentation and after many photos it was again painted over. The arbor or screen was removed between the choir and the sounding-board style light was removed from the pulpit area. Also some of the pews were removed in the front right corner to accommodate our bell choirs, children and youth choirs as well as other aspects of the church's programs. The total renovation cost were about \$800,000 and took 5 months.

It is worth noting that the front of the sanctuary, designed over one hundred years ago, still has room for our praise bands and other events - such as the Christmas pageant. Worship and praise still at the heart of Trinity. It is perhaps a witness to those planners and designers of the 1880s that our sanctuary still serves us to this date. There is even wall space to display images and text from our LCD projectors which now assist us in worship. Every seat still has a good view of the front and the front accommodates a variety of worship modes and styles as well as lending itself to other meetings and events in the life of the church.

Wednesday was indeed a red letter day in the history of the Methodist Church in Hackettstown. It was the day set apart for the formal dedication of their beautiful new church to the worship of Almighty God.

The edifice is 96 by 60 feet on the foundation line, is built of brick and trimmed with red granite. The building is of Italian-Gothic architecture, after the style of the Roman Renaissance, with many of the graceful lines of the present century added to modernize the whole... But it is the inside of the church that causes one to exclaim: "How beautiful!" Coming in at the western entrance, two folding doors lead from the vestibule into the auditorium and at the left a massive, elegant square stairway leads to the gallery. Entering the auditorium, one of the handsomest church rooms in the State meets your eye.

It was an hour before the time set for the services that the people began coming from all directions, and at 10:30, when Prof. Thomson mounted the stool for the organ voluntary, the house was comfortably filled. The pulpit and choir enclosure were indeed a bower of beauty. The new and exquisite furnishings were only heightened and magnified by the elegant display of rare and beautiful flowers from the conservatories of Alfred Sully under the direction of whose gardener they were tastefully arranged.

The program, arranged with happy effect for such an occasion, was carried out without variation. The participants were the Pastor, Rev. J. A. Munroe, Presiding Elder Hammond and Dr. Whitney, and every part was effectively taken. The excellent work of the choir added greatly to the triumphs of the day.

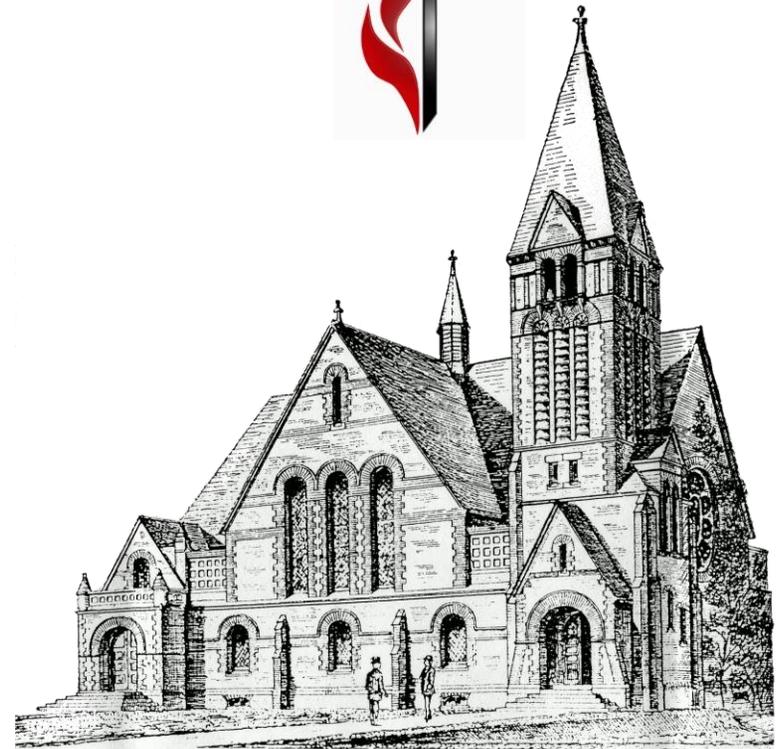
(NOTE: The church was completed at a cost of \$28,000.00, including pews and organ. The cornerstone was laid July 14, 1887 and the church was dedicated June 6, 1888.)

Notable Dates & Events In Trinity's Sanctuary History

Today we celebrate the anniversary of the 3rd sanctuary in Trinity's history. Notes below relate to all three:

- 1833 The first sanctuary was built on the current site. A 40 x 48 frame building, it had 2 front doors – one for men and one for women. This building still stands on Maple Street.
- October 4, 1859 The second sanctuary on the site was dedicated; a white spire building.
- April 24, 1876 The church board made a motion "that Brother B.P. Cole be a committee to spend a sum not exceeding \$150 in removing the bodies from the old church yard and purchasing a lot in the (Union) cemetery (for relocation)." Subsequently, about 50 bodies buried behind the Main Street sanctuary were relocated making room for future sanctuary expansion.
- June 6, 1888 The current sanctuary was built and dedicated.
- 1943-1952 At some point during these years the organ pipes behind the choir loft were removed.
- October 29, 1953 Sanctuary re-opened after a 6 week "re-decorating and facelift" project. The congregation worshipped at Whitney Chapel at Centenary College during this period.
- 1969 A major renovation of the sanctuary, including lighting, painting, etc. The congregation worshipped at Whitney Chapel during renovation.
- 1982 Lighting struck the building. The electrical charge destroyed the organ and left a burn mark on a balcony pew, still visible.
- 1984 A new cross was placed on the wall above the choir loft.
- June 12, 1988 Sanctuary re-dedication on its 100th birthday.
- 2008 Re-opening of the sanctuary after a 5 month major renovation.
- September 22, 2013 Celebration of the 125th sanctuary anniversary. This is also the 180th anniversary of the founding of the congregation.

Text of History Trinity United Methodist Church Hackettstown, NJ



SANCTUARY 125TH ANNIVERSARY
1888 – 2013