

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH
of the
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Of PARK RIDGE
1909 – 1979 (and updated)

By Marion L. Briscoe

Note: Owing to changes in the overall body of Methodism, certain name changes have taken place over the years: the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the United Methodist Church.

When our family moved to Park Ridge from Newark in 1907, there was no Methodist church in town. Because they had been Methodists in Newark, my parents sought out Methodist churches in the vicinity. We visited both in Pearl River and Hillsdale. (Believe it or not, in those days the Erie Railroad ran trains at intervals within the day, even on Sundays!) After having missed the homebound train on several occasions and having been put to the necessity of walking home along the railroad tracks, my mother, Lou Methudy Briscoe, developed a mental refrain, “We must have a Methodist church in Park Ridge!”

One day this determined lady astonished the Pearl River minister, Rev. Washington Irving Dice, with this question, “How do you go about starting a church?” The outcome of this consultation and several subsequent meetings of people of like mind brought about this beautiful result, that on Sunday afternoon, September 12, 1909 (by chance my parents’ tenth anniversary!) there was held the first worship service of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Park Ridge. And where did this event take place? Significantly enough right here in Leach’s Chapel, now our Pascack Historical Society Museum! At three o’clock Rev. Dice preached, a quartet besought the Lord in song, “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”, and the life of our Methodist Church had been launched.

Before another week had passed, a more nearly permanent church home had been found, and we resumed our services on the second floor of the Century Hook and Ladder Company building on Broadway where our Triboro Ambulance is now housed. By the way, it was not unusual for the town fire alarm system to spring into action (the great iron hoop and hammer that some will remember), for several dedicated firemen to tiptoe out of the worship service, and for the equipment to go rolling out the room beneath us.

In those early days, Sunday was a very busy day. Walking or using horse drawn carriages, our people gathered for morning worship, went home for dinner, returned for Sunday School in the afternoon, went home for supper, only to return in the early evening for the Epworth League meeting, followed by the evening church service.

It was in this period, early November 1909, that the District Superintendent of the Methodist Church came to preach and to receive into formal membership the sixteen original members of our church. I should like to mention by name these blessed sixteen,

since some of you will recognize them lovingly: Mr. Mrs. Calvin B. Briscoe, Mr. and Mrs. Adney Post, Mrs. Anna M. Pender, Richard Pender, Lillian Pender, Florence Pender, Frances Pender, Mrs. And Mrs. Edwin Graves, John Wesley Hagan, Mr. and Mrs. John Collier, Mrs. John Nelson Jersey, and Captain Jenkin Rees. At this same service the first baby was baptized, John Warren Jersey, infant son of Mr. and Mrs. John Nelson Jersey. (With reverent memory, let me mention that, in November 1978, this “baby” died at age 69 after a long and useful life.)

Before the young church was three months old, there had been formed two organizations that persisted to this day, seventy years later: The Sunday School and the Woman’s Auxiliary of which my dear mother was the first president.

The growth of the adult fellowship and the Sunday School necessitated the finding of larger quarters, and in December 1911 we moved to an empty store in what was known as the Sappah Building on the northwest corner of Kinderkamack Road and Madison Avenue in Park Ridge. In an effort to make a store look more like a church, energetic members pasted on the large windows translucent paper which gave the impression of stained glass. I shall always remember this temporary sanctuary lovingly because it was here that, after studies with the pastor in a probationers’ class, I was received into membership in the church.

In the minds and hearts of the members there had always dwelt the purpose of having a church building of our own. Steps in this direction were taken in 1911 through the acquisition of land where our Methodist Church now stands on the southeast corner of Highview Avenue and Berthoud Street in Park Ridge. At that time it was a wooded area and that summer afforded a splendid environment for picnics and other outings. Excavation for the church basement soon began, and on a memorable fall afternoon, November 5, 1912, with Bishop Nicholson of the Methodist Church presiding, the cornerstone was laid. While that significant stone can still be seen as one approaches our church, we in the fellowship prefer to think in terms of Ephesians 2: 20-21: “Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord.” After this, the superstructure rose quickly and, on Sunday, May 4, 1913, the first service was held in the new sanctuary. For some time the conditions under which we worshiped were far from ideal. In the window frames, sailcloth did duty for glass and billowed inward with every gust of wind. During the fall months stained glass windows were installed. Most of these, as their inscriptions indicate, were presented by members of the church and organizations as loving tributes to relatives or friends. For many months the uncovered inner surfaces of the tiles formed the walls of the sanctuary. Between the rough floor boards rose chilly draughts which a great iron stove, goaded to its limit, could not completely convert into balmy summer zephyrs. In the meantime, the basement had become the “all purpose” room of the church, housing the Sunday School and providing a setting for all our social activities.

Our history unfolded under God’s guidance in the ensuing years, and in 1917 a parsonage was erected on the Berthoud Street side of the church property, and the current pastor and his wife moved in. Years later, when this comparatively small house ceased to

accommodate comfortably the larger families of the pastors, we acquired an attractive and more commodious house on DeGroff Place; this continues to be our parsonage. Note: This second parsonage was sold and the “old” parsonage “restored” in 1956.

Within the years that followed circumstances made it possible for us to increase our land-holdings by acquiring the two pieces of property adjoining our church property on Highview Avenue. This acquisition permitted us to create a badly-needed parking lot and to feel more secure about later expansion.

While many improvements were made through the years in the church building, certain needs became more and more evident. Our next construction project came about in 1954-1956 when we undertook the erection of an education building on Berthoud Street between the church and the original parsonage. Following ground-breaking ceremonies in March 1954, the project materialized encouragingly as a result of the labors of dedicated workers, lay and professional, and under the watchful eyes of many “sidewalk superintendents” and camera buffs. In December 1956 an impressive dedication service was held, and we, who had “made do” with cramped quarters for a long time, moved unbelievably into the “wide open spaces” of our “dream-come-true.” This larger building not only opened up new possibilities for ourselves in the areas of fellowship, education, and youth activities but also made it possible to share these facilities with such community groups as the Park Ridge Branch of the Pascack Valley Hospital Auxiliary, the Pascack Woman’s Club, Boy and Girl Scouts, and a cooperative nursery. Note: Today we share our building with AA, Community Counseling, and music lessons.

It has been our pride and joy. Now, in 1979-80, after twenty-three years of intensive use, our Fellowship Hall is undergoing renovation, and we are looking forward to even more happy, constructive use in the years ahead.

Within the full seventy-year extent of our church’s life, 1909-1979, we have been served by twenty-two pastors. Our current pastor, Rev. Curt W. Garrett, is No. Twenty-two. Note: An updated list of pastors follow. In the early days, some of the pastors were still theological students and their pastorates were short. However, here is a strange thing, strange and quite wonderful even to me who have known them all. No matter how short or long a time each pastor served, he left an indelible impression upon the fellowship. They baptized our babies, married our youth, buried our dead, and built themselves in very real, personal ways into our lives and into the structure of our church. So, I say, “God bless them, one and all!”

From the very beginning of our church’s life, we – pastors and people – have been believers in and practicers of ecumenism. Many special-occasion services – Thanksgiving, Advent, Lent – have seen Christian friends from our local churches worshipping the one Father of us all in a single sanctuary. A heartening development in our Triborough in recent years is the warm, constructive relationship of our local clergy – the Protestant ministers, several Catholic priests, the rabbi – in an increasingly meaningful Clergy Association.

In our church, as in others, the significant factor in its history is the people who constitute the fellowship. Think of all the people who channel their efforts through the Church program in the course of seventy years! The children of the early years are the dedicated officials of the middle years and the snow-crowned honored seniors of the present. “One plants – another tends – still another reaps” and the cycle keeps on and on. It behooves us of the current fellowship to adopt two attitudes – to kneel in honor of the dear people whose efforts have put us where we are today and, in turn, to continue to “sow” dependably so that future generations may “reap” richly.

This United Methodist Church, whose seventy-year history we have just reviewed, has put its central purpose into words; now we must depend upon God, who has been our Guide and our Empowerer through seventy years, to help us fulfill this purpose in the years ahead: *“God being our helper, we purpose to help our members to achieve a close, deeply satisfying relationship with their Lord, to aid them in self-esteem, group relationships, and leadership, and to provide avenues for outreach into the community and the world for meeting material needs and for witness to the Living Lord.”*

“The United Methodist Relay” – September 1981: Tower Dedicated – The Park Ridge Congregation this Summer dedicated the new church tower, topped by a cross. The heavenward extension was given and built by friends in honor the late Miss Marion L. Briscoe for “her many years of love of, concern for, devoted service to, and leadership in the continuing ministry” of the Park Ridge church. A daughter of one of the founding families, Miss Briscoes’ life has paralleled the church’s years.”

The Record of Pastorates
in the
United Methodist Church in Park Ridge
1909 – 2008

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|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Glenn E. Mangun | November 1909 – April 1910 |
| 2. David Otis Cowles | April – 1910 – April 1912 |
| 3. Charles B. Roach | April 1912 – March 1913 |
| 4. Gilbert Q. LeSourd | March 1913 – September 1914 |
| 5. Charles B. Ketcham | September 1914 – October 1915 |
| 6. Wilbur D. Gray | October 1915 – June 1915 |
| 7. Jefferson N. Simmons | June 1918 – April 1919 |
| 8. Henry A. Hoyt | April 1919 – September 1919 |
| 9. Addison W. Hayes | September 1919 – May 1920 |
| 10. William W. Winams | May 1920 – October 1922 |

11. Parker B. Holloway	October 1922 – March 1930
12. Ralph E. West	April 1930 – May 1933
13. Donald S. Campbell	May 1933 – June 1938
14. Gross W. Alexander	June 1938 – April 1940
15. Frank Wade Smith	April 1940 – April 1945
16. Robert C. Lintner	April 1945 – June 1947
17. Richard C. Swift	June 1947 – May 1950
18. Norman W. Walz	May 1950 – June 1961
19. Donald D. Ostroth	June 1961 – June 1966
20. W. Wesley Williams	June 1966 – June 1970
21. David J. Bort	June 1970 – June 1973
22. Curt W. Garrett	June 1973 – June 1980
23. George W. Kaslow	June 1980 – June 1988
24. Kenneth L. Smith	June 1988 - June 1995
25. Jun Yoshimatshu	June 1995 - Present