

A Golden Hill United Methodist Church History

Golden Hill United Methodist Church is currently comprised of members from four previous congregations, namely First Methodist, Trinity Methodist, and Washington Park Methodist plus Newfield Methodist, all very active Bridgeport congregations in the past. The first three congregations listed above united in 1970. Newfield Methodist had it's last service on July 4, 1982, merging with the other three congregation later that year.

The first Methodist Society in Bridgeport was organized in 1817. However, the First Methodist Church building was opened in 1823. A wooden structure at Fairfield Avenue and Broad Street. The building burned in 1849. A new brick structure was built and opened in 1850. This building served the congregation for nearly 80 years.

Among the communicants was an African-American lady, Miss Mary Freeman, who was baptized at First Methodist Church in 1858 becoming a member in full connection in 1864. Current interest in the Freeman family of that day has been aroused as plans are underway to run their residences into a African-American museum. The homes are located in Bridgeport's south end at Main Street.

Also another widely recognized lady in the First Methodist church was the blind hymn writer, Fanny Crosby, who moved to Bridgeport at the turn of the century. (1900) Her fun earl at the church in 1915 was the largest to date with the possible exception of P.T. Barnum.

In the 1920's the First Methodist building was deemed unfit for continuing occupancy and plans began for a new edifice at Golden Hill, Elm and Harrison's Streets (now Lafayette Boulevard). Great fund raising efforts were underway calling for personal sacrifices among the congregation. One very helpful contributor was Silvanus Locke, designer of the Locke Lawnmower and other important patents. He contributed \$ 25,000 which was a very substantial amount of money in 1926. In response to his generosity the social hall was named Locke Hall in honor of his family.

The new church, which was dedicated on October 13, 1929 is the present building. It is an impressive gothic structure which contains over 50 rooms. The chief architect was Harold B. Willis of Boston. Designer of the chancel widows and rose window was Wilbur Herbert Burnham. The Nave windows are memorial windows and follow the colors and patterns in their borders of the windows of the Chartres Cathedral in France.

For nearly 78 years the church had only two organists and choir directors, Mr. William Davenport and Dorothy Partridge. Each served nearly 39 years.

In 1853 a movement was begun by First Methodist members to create another Methodist congregation in Bridgeport. P.T. Barnum and General Noble gave a plot of land at Barnum and Noble Avenues for this purpose plus some subscription money. The first pastor was appointed in 1854. The church was first called the East Bridgeport Methodist Episcopal Church changing its name to Washington Park Methodist Episcopal church in 1871.

Trinity Methodist Church began as a mission on North Main Street in Bridgeport. The inspiration behind this effort came from Washington Park Methodist Church in 1873. In 1900 the property was exchanged for property at the corner of North Avenue and Remer Street which served the congregation until the merger in 1970.

Memorable was Trinity's organist and choir director who was born without eyes. He directed an outstanding choir and continually amazed all who knew him with his sense of humor, his positive outlook on life, devotion to his God and his capabilities in all areas. Professor Herbert Strout is remembered with great joy.

Newfield Methodist Church was situated in Bridgeport's East End. The movement for church began with prayer meetings in the home of residents which developed into a Sunday School. Finally a chapel was opened in 1872. A new church was built in 1906 at Stratford and Central Avenues. A destructive fire occurred in 1910, causing extensive damage. The valiant Newfielders made immediate plans for rebuilding, as the fire was raging. Andrew Carnegie gave half the cost for a new organ and the church members raised the money for the remaining expense.

Newfield featured a huge Sunday School in the 1920's and the 1930's which often had as many as 500 people on a Sunday. Every available space in the church was occupied.

The Rev. Jim Fitzgerald, a young pastor from Colorado, reenergized the church in the 1970's involving members in problems found in the East End. The doors remained open until 1982 when members united with Golden Hill United Methodist Church.

A Coordinating Council had been formed in 1970 made up of three Bridgeport churches and Methodist churches from surrounding area. The purpose was to minister to the inner city and Newfield benefited favorably from the Coordinating Council's programs.

The mergers of these four churches which make up Golden Hill has contributed great energy to the church strengthening our mission purpose. We are an inner city congregation which offers our facilities to many organizations and needy people. We have a mid-week service on Wednesdays at 6 p.m. which follows a community supper to which all people are invited. In the fall of 2000 we began contemporary services on Sunday evenings which have been very successful. Our congregation consists of all national, racial and economic backgrounds. Services are inspiring and challenging and music of superb quality. Church school classes are all ages and also cover a variety of social and personal needs.