



A BRIEF HISTORY OF WEBSTER BAPTIST CHURCH

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November 1940

Revised
March 1954 August 1960
August 1967

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One spring day in the year 1809 there gathered in a room above a wagon shop located on the Ridge in the vicinity then known as North Penfield a group of thirteen earnest Baptist folk. With the consent of the Ontario and Penfield Baptist Church, which was located near the lake in the town of Ontario, and of which all were members, they had assembled for the purpose of organizing a branch of that church in their own community. This they proceeded to do, electing as moderator Elder Jason Corwin, and clerk, Asa G. Felt, and adopting articles of Faith and Practice, nineteen in number, which stated what they believed.

During the following months under the leadership of Elder Corwin, a former pastor of the North Penfield Church who had been forced to leave because of dissension and difficulties arising from the "Anti-Masonic Movement, this little group grew until it numbered fifty, which was considered sufficient to warrant their becoming a separate Church. At their request a council of neighboring Baptist Churches convened on November 10, 1830, and after due deliberation recognized them as an independent Church under the name North Penfield Baptist Church. This name was retained until May 1846, when it was changed to Webster Baptist Church, the north part of the town of Penfield having become a separate township called Webster, in the year 1840. Within a year the new church joined the Monroe Baptist Association and sent delegates to the Annual Meeting.

By the spring of 1832 a frame meeting house, with a seating capacity of three hundred, costing \$2000, had been erected on the site of our present building and the Church was in a thriving condition. It was not long before a Sabbath School (1835) was organized and missionary work begun in the form of a substantial subscription for the American and Foreign Bible Society

in 1836.

The Covenant meeting held an important place in the Church of that day and records of these meetings afford an insight into its conduct and activities. The meetings, usually well attended, were held monthly on Saturday preceding Communion Sunday and were a preparation for that ordinance. The faithful members attended for prayer and to relate their Christian experience and spiritual growth. For those who appeared indifferent or negligent of Church and Christian duties, a committee consisting of pastor and a deacon, or deacons alone, was appointed to call and ascertain their spiritual condition, reporting same to the Church and advising what action if any, should be taken in each case. A favorable report brought recommendations of leniency such as "exercise forbearance", or "continue labors", but an unfavorable report was likely to meet more drastic action and the withdrawal of the hand of fellowship for such reasons as use of profanity, defrauding creditors, drunkenness, lying and slander, covetousness, Sabbathbreaking, neglect of the brethren or conduct unbecoming a Christian was not uncommon. A person who confessed guilt and mended his ways was restored to fellowship if true repentance was indicated. Frequently business differences, family difficulties, and social misunderstandings were aired at the Covenant meeting and the advise and judgment of the brethren sought in their settlement. The Covenant meetings were held regularly (even when the Church was without a pastor) from 1830 through 1896, less regularly until 1904 when they were combined with the mid-week prayer meeting.

The office of deacon appears to have been one of definite responsibility not only for the spiritual life of the Church but for the financial and general welfare. Practically no mention of trustees is made in the early records. Neither was it considered proper for women to have any part in the conduct of Church

business, and the mention of a singing school is the only reference that gives a hint of the social life.

The first salary provided for a pastor was \$300. a year, which was raised by an 'average' or assessment on the property of Church members so that "one shall not be eased and another burdened." This method, together with subscriptions, was used for many years to raise Church funds. If the 'average' was paid on time a 3% discount was sometimes allowed, but if deferred until necessary for the collector or a deacon to call in regard thereto, a 3% collection fee was frequently added. If it was still not forthcoming a promissory note might be demanded. Pastor's salaries were supplemented by donations of food, fuel, or whatever could be used in his household. The records of 1836 give this enlightening paragraph regarding the yearly salary of the janitor: "Voted to give \$15. for sweeping the meeting house once a week, making fires when necessary for meetings and wash the house twice in one year and take charge of the meeting house gates and yard." Some later records include furnishing the elements for communion as part of the janitor's service.

A bell, the first in the village, was purchased for the meeting house in 1851. It was used not only for Church services but also was tolled for funerals, indicating the age of the deceased by the number of times tolled. For this there was a charge of \$2. Boys ringing it for a 4th of July celebration during the Civil war cracked it, and it was some years before it was replaced by the bell which we now have.

In the spring of 1855 it was decided to dispose of the old meeting house and put in its place one of field and cobblestone construction. The frame building was given over to "Brother" Spencer Holt with the understanding that it was to be maintained as an academy for at least five years, remaining under Baptist supervision. It was moved to a site on Corning Park and

used as Webster Academy until destroyed by fire in 1872. Much of the work of preparing the grounds and drawing the stone for the new building was done by members of the congregation and most of the field stone was donated by citizens of the community. The cobblestone was gathered on the shores of Lake Ontario from Sea Breeze to Lakeside. After each heavy rain or wind storm which would drive the waves up on the shore so that they were washed clean, the beach was combed for stones of just a certain size and shape. Placed on barges the stones were rafted to landing places and thence hauled by wagons to the Church. Groups of young people both boys and girls, used to go to the lake to assist in the work of gathering the stones, and the contract price of \$150 for delivering the same at the Church was donated by the parties concerned, three Curtice brothers and Horace Holt, toward the payment of the Church debt. Covenant meeting was held in the basement of the new stone Church on March 22, 1856, and the building was completed at close of that year, and dedicated on January 1, 1857, with suitable all-day services. At this time the Church was growing rapidly and before the outbreak of the Civil war had a membership of 252.

The passing years saw improvements made in the Church building from time to time. As the old wood-burning stoves had given way to furnaces, they in turn were discarded for steam heat. A baptistry was constructed in the sanctuary, a pipe organ was installed which was used for nearly 60 years. The method of raising funds by an average on property was discontinued in favor of the sale or rental of pews. The pews were appraised by a committee in such a manner that the rents would cover the expenses of the Church. Then on a specified day they were sold to heads of families, to be occupied by that family only. Should one or more persons desire the same seat, it was sold to the highest bidder. This period also saw a trend toward more liberal views and co-operation with other Churches of the village.

A parsonage was built on South Avenue, in 1886, and

it is of particular significance that the committee named to solicit funds to finance the work were all women. From the records it would appear that this was the first time ladies of the Church were named to participate actively in any matters of Church business, although there was then a women's organization called the "Ladies Mission Circle." Since that time there has been an active society of women contributing much to the welfare of the Church and particularly the Missionary work.

The turn of the century found the Church building in a sad state of deterioration and inadequate for the needs of the congregation, and during the year 1902, the interior was completely renovated. A new roof was put on, heating plant installed, leaded glass memorial windows put in, sanctuary redecorated and the basement modernized so that it could be used for social activities as well as Sunday School and prayer meeting. All was done without incurring any debt and it was a gratified and happy people who attended the service of rededication in February 1903, for through hard work and sacrifice their fondest hopes had been realized.

Nineteen young men were called to the colors from this Church in 1917 and 18, ten of whom saw service over-seas and all of whom returned to their families and friends. The period of depression which followed the war was reflected in the life and activities of the Church and there were times when courage almost failed. But, as a communication to the Monroe Association had stated some thirty five years before, when times were trying, "by grit, grace and gumption" there were those to stand by until the dawn of a better day.

The 100th birthday of the Church was celebrated May 11 - 13, 1930, with appropriate services, both public and for the Church family, and a second century of work began. One major improvement took place in 1938 when an Aeolian Pipe Organ, with eight organs combined, was

installed, a gift from the W. W. Chapin family in memory of William Wisner Chapin and Elizabeth Lyon Chapin. To provide chambers for the 8 organ units, it was necessary to make extensive alterations at both the front and the rear of the sanctuary. Memorial gifts, other donations, and much hard work by the men of the Church made it possible to complete the task without incurring debt. The dedication service was held Sunday, November 20, 1938. The bapistry painting (an idealistic portraya of the Jordan River) adding so much to the beauty and serenity of the sanctuary, was the gift of Mrs. Lucretia (Dayton) Hartung and was prented to the Church on Palm Sunday of the following year.

Beginning in 1937 and continuing for II consecutive years evening vesper services, sponsored by this Church and conducted by the pastor, were held at Webster County Park during July and August. These services featured many prominent guest preachers as well as local pastors, and excellent musical talent was provided.

Over forty men and women from our Church saw military service during World War II. Of these, First Lieutenant Alan E. Hermance did not return, having made the supreme sacrifice while engaged in air action over Germany. When at the close of the war, this Church had successfully raised and oversubscribed its quota to the World Mission Crusade of the Northern Baptist Convention, in testimony of our affection and esteem our gift of \$5,500 was dedicated to the memory of this son of our Church.

In the summer of 1946 the Church dome was struck by lightning, shattering the belfry with damage to the roof and adjoining organ chambers so that extensive repairs were required, the cost of which fortunately was covered by insurance. Further renovation at this time, included renewal of weakened roof supports, homosite shields for organ chambers, copper lining for the bapistry, and painting of the exterior of the

building.

For some time it had been increasingly apparent that some rules of government or by-laws were needed in order that the Church might function more effectively. In 1951 after an exhaustive study by the pastor and Church boards a constitution was drawn up and submitted to the membership for action. At a special meeting held November 28, 1951, this constitution was adopted. Subsequently in 1964 it was extensively revised and amended providing the more adequate rules and guide lines by which the Church is presently goverened.

In 1951-52, the entire interior of the Church building was redecorated in modern trend, the sanctuary and upper halls by professional painters, the other rooms by groups and individuals of the Church with materials donated. Tile flooring, installed in the foyer and upper halls, was also a most welcome improvement. The following year the parsonage was modernized, converting two rooms into a large attractive living room, and modern caninets counters, new tile floor and gas range transformed the kitchen. The basement was provided with laundry facilities.

During the preceeding decade the community which the Church served, formerly predominately rural, had been changing gradually and was now rapidly becoming a community of suburban homes. While the Church membership had increased only moderately during this period, the facilities of the Church School were becoming quite inadequate. Recognizing its responsibility toward the youth of the parish, after many months of study and planning, and a fund drive resulting in pledges of \$22,000, the Church voted in March 1957 to erect a Christian Educational Building, at an approximate cost of \$67,000, to be located at the rear of and adjoining the Church edifice.

The approved plans for a split-level 36' X 80'

building of masonry construction provided for class rooms and an assembly room on the lower level, large recreation or dining hall and kitchen on the second floor with class rooms above the kitchen at one end of the building and pastor's study and Church office above the dining hall at the opposite end.

Ground for the structure was broken with appropriate ceremonies on Easter Sunday, April 21, 1957, following the morning worship service, excavation began the following week, and though much interior finishing remained to be done, the building was dedicated November 24th of the same year, a little more than one hundred years after the dedication of the cobblestone building. The outside painting and all of the interior finishing and decorating in the new building was accomplished through the "do-it-yourself" efforts of members of the Church and congregation. Individuals, families, groups and organizations enthusiastically assumed responsibility for specific projects such as installing ceilings, laying tile floors, building cupboards and shelves, painting and other items of finishing and furnishing the various rooms. The work proceeded as rapidly as funds for material became available from various sources bringing final fulfillment of the plans which had been undertaken and carried through in a spirit of dedicated co-operation.

In a brief ceremony at the morning worship service, May 29, 1960, memorial gifts of tower lights and a new pulpit Bible from the family and friends of Edith Merhoff Bowman, a faithful member of the Church for 37 years, were presented to the Church and dedicated. The Bible, a Revised Standard translation of the King James Version, handsomely bound in red leather, with clear easy-reading type and gold edged pages, replaced a very old Bible, gracing the pulpit with rich new beauty. The tower lights, arranged in pairs at the base of each of the eight columns supporting the dome, were installed to turn on automatically each evening for a period of three hours, displaying the beauty of the unique tower (newly

repaired and painted) and since they may be seen throughout the area, serving as a beacon for the church.

By 1963 it had become imperative that some repairs be made to the cobblestone building especially in the narthex area. The sanctuary was also in need of redecoration and much basement space badly needed for class rooms was being wasted because of poor arrangement. After many months of intensive study of all factors involved it was decided to undertake a complete renovation and modernization of the building. To this end in the summer of 1964 a campaign for funds was authorized and initiated which resulted in pledges amounting to \$85,000. Although this sum was insufficient to cover the cost of the project, called the Restoration Program, a congregational meeting held May 26, 1965, approved the project at a cost of \$138,000, authorizing the church to borrow funds to supplement the pledged amount and to let the contract immediately. In about two weeks the work was under way with the re-enforcement and repair of foundation and walls.

Corresponding with the exterior architecture of the building the sanctuary was restored in the Greek Revival tradition. The major items of work here included the installation of acoustically treated ceiling and new lighting system, removal of a rear partition between the sanctuary and an adjoining room to create a gallery (thus providing additional seating), lowering of choir loft and chancel area, sinking of organ console below floor level and new bapistry with well appointed facilities. In modern trend, yet reflecting the traditional, new padded pews, matching chancel and choir area refurnishings, wall to wall carpeting and four burnished brass multi-light chandeliers completed the sanctuary renewal. The same decor was used throughout the narthex area and basement corridor leading to the Education Building. Changes accomplished in the basement provided cloak room, church offices and pastor's study adjacent to the narthex and three class rooms with modern facilities for age groups crib nursery thru kindergarten. For the

convenience of persons for whom it was impossible or difficult to use the stairs an elevator with outside entrance and access to sanctuary, dining room and basement was installed on the south side of the building.

By December 1st the project was completed and a week end of dedication and thanksgiving was observed with a banquet on Friday evening, service of baptism and communion on Saturday evening and formal dedication at the Sunday morning service followed by open house in the afternoon and a service of music by the choir in the evening.

While engaged in physical renewal the church was also intent on a renewal of Christian witness through new and creative forms of ministry. The year 1966 saw the development of ideas which resulted in the opening of a book store in a small room adjoining the dining room where everyone in the community could purchase "paperbacks" from a large and diversified supply, the purchase and installation in the Education Building of 35MM projection equipment, making possible an extensive film ministry, and the undertaking of a Ministry in Industry. The purpose of this pioneering ministry, somewhat vague at its inception, was to help men in industry and business relate their Christian faith to their work and to discover ways in which the church could minister to those involved in industrial life. Working full time in a large local industry and also serving the church a specified number of hours each week the young minister who had served as youth minister the previous year and who was ordained in the church in October was called on vote of the church to become Minister of Industry.

At the Annual Meeting of January 1967 it was voted to dispose of the parsonage on Park Avenue and to give the minister a housing allowance in addition to his regular salary thus allowing him to choose the type of housing which he and his family preferred. Actual sale of the

property was approved by the church April 2 and completed immediately thereafter.

Contributing to its stability and continuity since the turn of the century with its increased emphasis on the social life within the church have been the Young Peoples Society, ladies' organizations and "Sunday School" with organized classes. As early as 1890 there was a Youth Fellowship and since that time, with brief exceptions, such an organization has been active. Fore-runner of our present Women's Association, now functioning under the group plan were two organizations, - a Women's Missionary Society and the Ladies' Aid. The Beers' Bible Class for adults, named for its founder and teacher, the late Rev. George A. Beers, was organized in 1906 and was active for some forty years. The World Wide Guild, a missionary society for teen age girls, was organized in 1912 and continued active until 1963 and the Philathea Class organized in 1920, has functioned continuously and is still very active. Faithful teachers and forward-looking leaders have worked tirelessly through good times and bad to provide the best for the youth of our church and community.

In the 137 years of its existence this church has had 39 pastors, the average pastorate being about three years, - the longest, that of the late Rev. Bernard C. Schehl, 13 years. The present membership is 421. It is interesting to note that one of our long time members Mr. Clifford Scribner, is a fifth generation direct descendent of a charter member, Abram Foster.

Though time has brought many changes, our purpose remains steadfast, - to build the Kingdom of God here and throughout the world.

