

Faith through the Generations

The History of Wesley United Methodist Church

Wesley United Methodist Church of Oshkosh is in reality a story of four faith communities joining together in union to proclaim the Good News of Christ. These churches include The German Methodist Episcopal Church, The Second Methodist Episcopal Church, Bethel Wesleyan Church (1925), and Park Presbyterian. In the year of 1918 Tenth Street Methodist Episcopal church formed as the result of a merger between these three faith communities. The story of this Union had its start during the fall of 1915 when a united preaching mission was held in Oshkosh. Of the twenty protestant churches cooperating in the mission, three churches emerged to be consolidated into one church. Under the leadership of Rev. J.P. Koeller, pastor of the German Methodist church, and Rev. Carr of Second Methodist church a federation of these two churches was formed in September of 1918.

German Methodist Episcopal Church

The story of Wesley UMC goes further back to the 1850's. The German M.E. Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin was organized in the year 1856, by the Rev. John C. Rinder. It enjoyed a steady growth for many years. The first church was erected in 1867 at a cost of \$4,318. When fire destroyed the greater part of Oshkosh in 1875 this church was also reduced to ashes. Late in the same year two lots with a dwelling on the corner of Tenth and Nebraska Streets were purchased for \$1,300. The new church was erected at a cost of \$6,700. This was the church home for thirty-two years. In 1908 the church was rebuilt at an approximate cost of \$7,900. In 1900 a new parsonage was built. A furnace, electric lights, gas, and a bathroom made it a modern home, which was greatly appreciated by the pastor and his family.

From 1913-1918 Rev. J.P. Koeller pastored the German Methodist congregation. It was during his ministry that he led and guided the subsequent union with 2nd Methodist church and Park Presbyterian to form Tenth Street Methodist which later became Wesley United Methodist Church.

Second Methodist Church

In 1867 while Rev. J.M. Walker was Pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Oshkosh, the question was lifted about organizing an English speaking Methodist congregation on the south side of the river. The women members of First Church, living on the south side, organized a "Ladies Aid Society" to raise the needed funds to establish a new congregation.

The Second M.E. Church of Oshkosh was built in 1868 at the corner of Eleventh and Minnesota Streets. Prior to the building of the church the society held its meetings in the Neff Hall, which later became the South Side Armory. Following were the charter members: Mr. & Mrs. H. S. Boynton, Mr. & Mrs. L. A. Rollins, Mr. & Mrs. Whitely and Mr. & Mrs. Silas Jones. Eighteen pastors looked after the spiritual welfare of the Second M.E. Society.

In the early turn of the century our nation was gripped in the fervor of spiritual renewal. It was from these evangelistic efforts that Second Methodist Church continued to grow. During this time Second Methodist and the German Methodist Church began to work cooperatively together for the sake of the kingdom. One such effort was the Sunday school boat excursion up the Fox River where more than 600 men, women, and children (most from the south side of Oshkosh) enjoy a day of fun and celebration on the steamer "Leander Choate." Rev. White and later Rev. Carr worked hand in hand with the people of the German Methodist church in cooperative neighborhood fellowships.

Along with developing common ministries there were very serious financial challenges facing many of the churches in Oshkosh, especially during World War One. In reality, like the German Methodist Church and Park Presbyterian, it was very difficult to give adequate financial compensation to the pastor. If anything it was this challenge to make financial ends meet that accelerated Second Methodist Church interest in a possible union. One of the leading voices in this possible merger was Dr. Franklin Pfeiffer.

Then came the United Hart and MacGann Tabernacle Evangelistic Campaign which lasted for seven weeks and in was there that Second Methodist, German Methodist, and Park Presbyterian took an active role. As J.P. Koeller wrote of this experience;

"All differences in regard to language or doctrine seemed to disappear as the heat of the battle became more apparent; and before the smoke had subsided the natural, or should I say, the supernatural good sense, suggested that the three struggling churches become one!"

After the Campaign talk over church union began culminating in a vote between the two congregations where over 90% of the laity was in favor of the merger. It was at this time that that transfer of the Tenth Street Congregation to the Wisconsin Conference from the German Methodist Conference. Locally the proper legal steps were taken, incorporation papers signed, new officers elected, and all affairs of the church turned over to the new trustees and official board. When the congregation from the Second Methodist Church came over to Tenth Street, their trustees first rented to and then sold the church on Minnesota and 11th to the Reformed Church Congregation (later became Bethany UCC) for \$5000. Beginning with just 35 people Second Methodist Episcopal Church united with their largest membership of 171 souls.

Tenth Street Church

A federation of the two churches was officially formed in September, 1918. The name of the German M. E. Church was changed to Tenth Street M. E. Church. After a year's successful operation of the federation the quarterly conference petitioned the Chicago German Annual Conference for the privilege of permanently uniting the Second and Tenth Street M. E. Churches with the request that the new organization come under the jurisdiction of the Wisconsin conference. This permission was granted, pending the final transfer of all interests to the Wisconsin conference by the General Conference Committee on Conference Boundaries, which met in Des Moines, Iowa in May, 1920.

Even before this union was completed, the official board of the Federated Churches extended a most cordial invitation to the members and friends of the Park Presbyterian Church to unite with them in worship and work, since the latter organization was thinking of disbanding. The majority of the membership of that church began attending the Tenth Street Church. On the evening of October 26, 1918, a cordial welcome and reception was accorded all new friends of the church, including both the ones who came from the Second M. E. Church and those from the Park Presbyterian Church.

Rev. Wiese stated in 1920 concerning the New Tenth Street Church;

“We are proud of our new church organization. We predict a prosperous and successful future for the New Tenth Street M. E. Church. It should be one of the great factors for righteousness in our community. We predict that it will be, especially since the men have organized themselves into a Club to promote the spirit of brotherhood, and to get back of every uplift movement in the community. God bless the New Tenth Street M. E. Church!”

The Second Presbyterian Society was organized in 1895. At first they rented the church of the Wesleyan Methodists, on Knapp Street. Later a building was purchased, and moved to the new location on Ohio Street and South Park Avenue. The name was changed to Park Presbyterian Church. After the merger the property reverted back to the First Presbyterian Church of Oshkosh.

The church prospered and grew under the leadership of Rev. Wiese, but there were many challenges that he and the congregation had to experience.

Again in the words of Rev. Wiese:

“We had barely entered upon our duties when the flu epidemic hit the country, including Oshkosh. Churches and schools were closed. It seemed as if the smell of death was in the air. The pastor spent most of his time visiting about from home to home, especially where there was illness. It was a miracle that so few of our people died. It seemed as though the pastor and the family was immune, but in January of 1919 it struck us. By the aid of Mrs. Elske and Mrs.

Rath, who took care of us in the parsonage and the Buelow family and Schnell families who took care of our children for two weeks, we managed to pull through.” For eight years Rev. Weise faithfully served the Tenth Street congregation in which he shared as being among the happiest in his ministry.

It was during the tenure of Rev. Wiese that Bethel Wesleyan Church closed its doors and the majority of the congregation of was integrated with Tenth Street. Bethel for a period of time was under the wing of Tenth Street, consequently the transition was quiet easy for the congregation.

Rev Wiese was succeeded in September of 1926 by the Rev. C. Kurtz, who came from Waterford, Wisconsin. The growth of the church necessitated much remodeling which was done in 1926. While the basement was being placed under the church the congregation held its services in the star theater for the four months previous to the Christmas season. That year Christmas held a real meaning to the congregation when they resumed services in the remodeled 10th street church. The renovation project includes not only a new basement, but also an extension to the choir loft and the installation of a new pipe organ. A great part of the funding for this endeavor came from a donation made by Nathan Payne. The C.R. Meyer and Sons Company, who had furnished the German Methodist Church with Sunday School Superintendents for twenty-five years, had also done all the building and remodeling to Tenth Street Methodist Church.

Along with being the pastor to the congregation, Rev. Kurtz also became the choir director, which as Mrs. Helen Kurtz related. “His boldness in his presentation of simple gospel messages won admiration of the community and many folds of other denominations had good words to say about him.”

Rev. Kurtz pastorate, however, was short lived and in September of 1928, Rev. Authur Bennett became the pastor of the church and served until September of 1931.

In September of 1931 Rev. Allen was appointed as the new pastor to Tenth Street Methodist in the heart of the depression. Even with such financial challenges under his leadership Tenth Street Methodist Church was on its way of becoming the largest Methodist congregation in Oshkosh. He was instrumental in setting up several organizations which grew to become an integral part to the growth and vitality of the church. It was through Rev. Allen’s leadership that a youth group was established along with a boy scout troop and young adult fellowship. It was also during his tenure that the front of the church was remodeled, which included the removal of the steeple.

In September of 1938 Rev. Douglas Anderson became the new pastor. It was after that the Men’s group became active in the life of the church. In 1942 the church debt was paid in full and a formal service was conducted for the public burning of the mortgage. At that time Tenth Street Methodist became the largest Methodist congregation in Oshkosh. It was known in the community for its “wonderful Tenth Street spirit” and it began gaining recognition throughout the city. It’s outstanding choir under the direction of Mr. Breese, its aggressive program of scouting led by Carl Martin, its wonderful Sunday School program, its active participation in the religious life of the city, its on-going worship, study, and fellowship were evidence of their

vitality. As Rev. Anderson said of Tenth Street Methodist church; “Tenth Street Church was meeting the responsibilities to its constituency while extending its influence as a parish church.”

It was also during this time that an event of historical importance for the Methodist church was taking place. Officials of the three major Methodist denominations, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church held a uniting conference in Kansas City in 1939. Through their unifying efforts the Methodist Episcopal Church was now the Methodist Church. The Wisconsin Area of the Methodist Church came into being with its own Bishop in 1944.

Before Rev. Anderson left for a new appointment in May of 1946 the church completely redecorated, inside and out. Rev. Marlin Smith became the newly appointed pastor in June of 1946. During his pastorate the three Methodist Churches in Oshkosh were drawn closer together in common ministry. A series of Union services throughout the year gave these three Methodist communities an opportunity to get to know one another. Rev. Smith was instrumental in organizing the adult fellowship, which for many years was an active ministry in the life of Tenth Street.

In June of 1950 Rev. Clarence Kelly was the newly appointed pastor to Tenth Street Methodist. Rev. Kelly's focus was on the Christian education of the congregation. Also the Chancel Choir was re-organized with Marcille Simm as the director and H.A. Romberg as accompanist. On March 22, 1952 a special quarterly conference was called for the purpose of naming a building committee to begin a building program. It was evident to everyone that the current Tenth Street Church building was filled beyond capacity. Something had to be done! Roy Moore was selected as the chairperson but was transferred out of the state. Myron Clark was chosen to succeed him. Other members of this committee included Charles Roe, Orie Liechty, Dwight Orr, James Dougherty, Paul Cocharan, and Ronald Cambell. This committee laid the foundation for the constructing of a new church on the corner of Florida and Georgia. But before that the committee made a comprehensive study of Tenth Street and came to the conclusion that something had to be done. It was agreed that if Tenth Street Methodist Church was to adequately serve God and His people in the city of Oshkosh, the congregation had to expand its present facilities in some way. So in 1953 the Church Board voted to conduct a fund-raising campaign.

James Dougherty wrote this appeal to the congregation in 1953; “Now is the time as we are the generation selected to build for the future of Tenth Street Methodist. Whatever form it will take, our new building will have in it not only physical materials (brick, stone or glass, but a part of each one of us.” It was with this spirit that Tenth Street Methodist moved forward to purchase property on the corner of Georgia and Florida. Under the new leadership of Rev. Daniel Stahmer (1954-1960) Tenth Street consecrated the new building site with a re-enlistment service on October 2, 1955. Also with a congregational vote the new name for Tenth Street Methodist was now Wesley Methodist Church. During the service Rev. Koeller and Rev. Stahmer shared two brief messages.

Over the next several years the members and leadership of Wesley UMC worked diligently to move on the new church building.

Wesley Methodist Church

As the result of the efforts of so many, in October of 1960 a formal ground breaking service for the new Wesley Methodist Church was held on the corner of Florida and Georgia. This was an exciting time for the five hundred member church. Rev. Lee D. Smith the district Superintendent of the Watertown district was present as well as Rev. Earl Allen (31-38), Douglas Anderson (38-46), Rev Stahmer (54-60) and the new pastor at that time Rev. Allen McCaul. After the worship service at the old sanctuary on 10th and Nebraska a car caravan went to the ground breaking ceremony. On Easter day April 2, 1961 the newly built Wesley Methodist Church held its first worship service! Bishop Ralph Alton officiated at the consecration ceremony along with Rev. McCaul.

As was stated in the Wesley Church publication “A Charge to Keep”:

“Today we stand upon a summit from which we look backward with gratitude to the past and forward with high hopes to the future.

In humility we recognize that many who have gone before us have made this day possible through the devotion to the cause of Christ and this church. Each of us, in retrospect, recalls someone whose rich and living faith has been a bright inspiration to us as we found our way into the life of the church. Beloved among these was the Rev. J.P. Koeller who for over forty years poured into the church he loved his rare vitality and fervor. To him we dedicate our fellowship hall to be known as Koeller Memorial Hall. His memory bridges the past and future, for this sight were firmly set upon accomplishment which we celebrate today.”

With the congregation now residing in their new facility, life at Wesley Methodist Church was getting use to the new surroundings. Finally, Wesley Methodist Church had room to grow and expand its ministries. Between 1960-1967 these was a succession of pastor that served the faith community. Allen McCaul served from 1960-62, Rev. Ray Heilborn 1962-64, and Rev. John Thompson (1964-67). In June of 1967 Rev. James Vahey was appointed to the church, which brought needed pastoral stability to the Wesley congregation. In 1968, the United Methodist Church was established with the union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren. It was then that our names officially became Wesley United Methodist Church.

In 1979 Walt Wagner was appointed to Wesley UMC and served until 1983. In June of 1983 Bruce Fenner served as the new pastor and it was under Fenner's leadership that the groundwork for the construction of the sanctuary (Phase 2) came to fruition. And under Rev. David Steffenson (1988-92) and the hard work of lay people like Adolph Binder, the dream of a new house of worship finally became a reality!

This dream for a new sanctuary began on that day when Tenth Street Methodist decided to move to the corner of Florida and Georgia Street. The decision was made at the time to build the education wing and add the sanctuary soon thereafter. The anticipated short period of time to start the construction on the sanctuary was put off. Unfortunately it was for 30 years. However, during this period of time, a building fund was established and grew with the support of loyal hopefuls until finally a decision was made to start planning for construction of the long dreamed house of worship.

Several designs for a building were considered and scrutinized by an established building committee until in January of 1990 the congregation of Wesley United Methodist church voted to go ahead with the plans for our new sanctuary. The official ground breaking was held May 5, 1990 and construction started in mid-July. The period of construction proceeded with very few problems and this congregation had the thrill of worshipping in their beautiful new sanctuary on February 17, 1991. The sanctuary was consecrated on April 28, 1991.

After the construction of the new sanctuary Norman Bude was appointed as the new pastor to Wesley where he led Wesley through a period of paying off the sanctuary's mortgage. In 1998 Rev Mark S. Klaisner was appointed to serve the Wesley faith community. It was just at his arrival that the church celebrated the paying off the sanctuary debt.

Wesley United Methodist Church continues to be a light to the Oshkosh community. For 150 years generation after generation has enriched and empowered the ministry of this congregation. We the people of Wesley United Methodist Church look forward to embracing our next 150 years of service to Christ! The reality is that there is much yet to be done, and in the spirit of Christ, and genuine love for each other which His love teaches, we will build a future for Wesley United Methodist Church which will always uphold our proud heritage.