

A SHORT HISTORY OF DES PERES CHURCH*

Des Peres Presbyterian Church was organized in the latter part of March, 1833 by Rev. William Potts and Dr. Ingruham in the dwelling house of Rev. Glanville (Methodist), which was rented for the occasion. It was one of the first Presbyterian Churches to be organized west of the Mississippi River. During 1834, three acres of land were donated, one acre each by David Small, David Hartshorn and Stephen Maddox, for a building site for a Church and graveyard. The church building was commenced in the year of 1834 and progressed "...so far as to be enclosed." The walls were of stone, two feet thick; approximately ninety could be seated, and the little church was of "simplicity of line, enduring quiet, dignity and beauty." It is now one of the oldest landmarks in St. Louis County.

In the troubles that distracted the church and which culminated in a division in 1837 into the old and new school bodies, this church "cast its lot with, and has recognized the ecclesiastical authority and control of the old school church." From 1837 to 1874 the church received 161 new members by letter and on profession of faith. In 1874 only 44 remained on its roll. There are no official church records from the date of its organization to 1897.

In May, 1874, the ceiling of the church, which was kept in place by heavy timbers, gave way and came down with a crash, wrecking almost the entire building. The walls were, however, not much injured," and the next day the members of the church met and decided to repair the house as soon as it could be done. This was accomplished with "commendable zeal" and in the following September "the little congregation had the pleasure of again entering their house of worship, very much improved in appearance in its interior arrangements." In 1882 the church bought two acres of land near the church building and erected upon it, a handsome parsonage. The largest active membership, prior to 1900, consisted of 44 members.

Socials were held every month in the summer (and care was taken to pick a time when the moon was full) on the church, or a member's, lawn. A hay wagon was sent to Kirkwood or to the end of the Clayton car-line to pick up people who came to the events from town. The Ladies' Aid, organized in 1908, raised money by making and selling aprons (25¢-50¢), sunbonnets (35¢) and quilts (\$1.25), basket suppers and ice cream socials. Approximately \$80.00 per year was raised in this way of which the ladies contributed \$5.00 monthly toward the minister's salary of \$500.00 per year. Old records tell us that the church purchased their first organ in 1910 for \$30.00. Two members drove down to 12th Street in a mule-drawn wagon and brought the organ back in a terrible storm. (This organ was sold later for \$3.00.)

According to available records, Des Peres Church never had a regular pastor until the installation of the Rev. Mr. Chalmers Henderson in early 1955. However, few churches were blessed with better preaching". Over the years some of the finest ministers in the area held preaching services in the church, acting as stated, pulpit supplies and serving as moderators of the Session. The historical continuity of the church was maintained by devoted elders and the concern of Presbytery. Although there were only three active members on the roll in 1944 when Rev. Herbert Watson, Superintendent of Home Missions for the St. Louis Presbytery, served Des Peres Church, as many as 100 men from the community attended his Sunday Men's Bible Study Class. (To a great extent, students and faculty members of Eden Theological Seminary served in the ministry of Des Peres Presbyterian Church. At the time of Mr. Henderson's call in late 1954, there were 36 members on the roll. Through the substantial support of Presbytery and Central Presbyterian Church and new growth in the area, a new building was erected on Clayton Road at Geyer Road. The congregation moved into this building in June of 1956. Continued growth in the congregation necessitated completion begun in 1961. Dedication of the sanctuary took place on June 3, 1962. At that time the Rev. Mr. Wm. Richard Huey had recently become the new pastor, and remained until September of 1969.

Under Mr. Huey's leadership, the church grew to a membership of 450. But perhaps the most significant aspect of his work was the establishment of the Block Partnership Program which brought Blacks and Whites together in a successful effort .to revitalize poverty areas in the inner city of St. Louis, As this program has progressed, some significant strides have been taken in breaking down barriers of suspicion and mistrust that existed in the community.

In 1970 Robert W. Tabscott became the minister of Des Peres. Under his leadership the congregation has continued its active involvement ina strong social ministry. In 1972 a cooperative medical clinic with residents of public housing in Cochran Gardens was opened for service.

The church has also grown in its outreach to families living in the Ladue-Kirkwood area. Moreover, the Session has continued to seek a broad ecumenical ministry with congregations in the area.

But perhaps one of the most outstanding features of Des Peres is in the area of worship. The congregation has continually sought to recover the deep and meaningful dimension of the worship of God through a shared ministry. Every effort is made to involve the people in the worship and work of the church.

Historically, Des Peres has had a significant ministry. Faced with the demands of urban and suburban life, the members of the church have constantly sought to make Christian faith relevant to life. It is an exciting history that continues to be written.

*This document is from a circular prepared by church staff in 1972.