

History of the First Presbyterian Church Cottage Grove, Oregon

On the first "Sabbath in July, 1855," twenty two settlers living in the Cottage Grove area gathered "to build themselves into a God-fearing community resembling in part, the places they had left," naming themselves the Coast Fork Congregation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

The organizational meeting took place east of the present Currin Railroad Bridge, in a schoolhouse under an oak tree on the "banks of the picturesque Row River." Early records show that the church met in a variety of places, often in schools, scattered from Latham to Walker to Cottage Grove.

The church was part of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a missionary church that followed the westward movement across the county. It favored the revival taking place in America, and insisted on ordaining men who did not meet the educational standard of the Presbyterian Church but could help meet the crying needs of the frontier communities for more ministers.

In 1873, the congregation decided to build a permanent building. Together with the lodge of the Good Templars and a gift of land from the Hazelton family to both organizations, a building was built on Main Street in Cottage Grove, south of the current bridge. It served both groups, with the Templars on the second floor and the church on the first floor. The church portion of the building was shared with two other congregations, each meeting on different Sundays.

In 1906, after ninety-six years, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church reunited with the parent body and the Cottage Grove church property was transferred to the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. The church was known thereafter as the First Presbyterian Church of Cottage Grove.

Numerous ministers served the pioneer church only with preaching. Most worked without pay, but took whatever might be given to them. The first regular pastor arrived in 1888, The Rev. W.V. McGee.

In 1891, the Ladies Aid Society was organized, supporting efforts of the church by raising funds through bazaars and serving meals. The funds helped support the pastor and to fund the new church building and its furnishings.

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In 1892, the first full time minister, C.A. Wooley, was installed and a new church building was completed, which stood on the corner of Seventh and Locust (now Adams). In all, twenty-four different pastors served until 1947.

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In 1947, the Rev. D. Hugh Peniston arrived and remained as pastor for 32 years, the longest ministry in the church's history. Under his ministry, a number of important initiatives began.

- The first Every Member Canvass was conducted.
- The first pipe organ was purchased.

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- A manse was purchased near where a new church would be built.
 - Mission received new emphasis, supporting projects near and far: mission work in India; at New Mexico's Menaul School; a school in Sitka, Alaska; and Lewis and Clark College in Portland.
 - Professional choir leadership enhanced worship and music offerings.
 - A building committee and fund drive were undertaken, culminating in the present building at Third and Adams, dedicated in 1951. Designed by the renowned architect, Pietro Belluschi (a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright), it continues to attract the attention of architects around the world.

Our facility is beautiful and welcoming and is on the National Historic Registry. It is considered to be one of Belluschi's most beautiful church designs. The smallest church he designed, it was built of lumber milled in Cottage Grove and donated by a long-time member. Over the years, the building has been maintained and some updating done, keeping the original integrity of the structure and design.

The church celebrated its first 100 years with a grand celebration in 1955. "The church ceased being a small struggling local organization and took its place as part of the world church," states a 1955 History of the First Presbyterian Church.

A new level of scholarship and preaching began under the pastorate of Hugh Peniston. Educational programs attracted children, young people, and adults on Sunday morning. An innovative program for elementary and junior high students met after school on Wednesdays. Youth met on Sunday evenings with summer and winter retreats to Santiam Lodge. Weekday study groups for women and evening couple's groups were led by the pastor.

Youth hikes led by the pastor attracted not only our youth, but also other youth from Presbytery, staying overnight in the Fellowship Hall. Church members fed and transported the youth to the mountains.

Women expanded their outreach in mission and study through the Women's Association and four "Circles." They hosted many events, such as a fall harvest dinner for the community and a homemade ice cream social in the courtyard, and they published a cookbook. One circle sewed banners to hang in the sanctuary highlighting the seasons of the church year, as well as a banner for our church using the symbols carved on the bell tower.

Commissions composed of congregational and session members were formed to do the work of the church.

Outreach programs to the local community were held in the church:

- Head Start was housed for a number of years in the Fellowship Hall.
- The Montessori School used the nursery rooms for over 10 years, providing the first early and preschool education in Cottage Grove, jointly using the space with the church.

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- A low-income county housing facility received meals prepared in the church's kitchen. Meals were also delivered to seniors at home. Accommodation for shared use by church members was key to its success.

PACT, an organization of Presbyterian Churches in Eugene, Springfield, and Cottage Grove, provided educational opportunities for teachers, joint festivals for church holidays, exchange of pulpits, and joint mission projects.

Endowments were established to provide income to replace pledges of those who had died yet wanted to provide future support for the church. Other endowments were established to support mission, early education, and music.

Building low-cost and senior housing was an effort led by the pastor, with members serving on the boards of Rainbow Village in Springfield, Jefferson Park, and Witherspoon Court in Cottage Grove.

The pastor and a congregational member who owns a mortuary began a new ministry of personalizing the funeral service, holding many of the services in the sanctuary.

Cluster groups of members met in homes once a month for many years. The groups included all ages, and bonds were formed that continue today.

Differences concerning the Vietnam War and the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s were resolved without loss of membership.

The Rev. Hugh Peniston retired in 1979.

Many social relief agencies in Cottage Grove owe their genesis to efforts of the First Presbyterian Church during the 1980s and 1990s. Our members continue to serve on their boards.

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Community Sharing, one of the most significant organizations in the community today, was formed in the early 1980s with dedicated leadership from church members and the interim pastor, the Rev. Sandra Sohn (in coordination with the Methodist pastor).

A clergy couple, The Rev. Joan and The Rev. Gene Huff served as pastors in 1982–1983.

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In 1983, a new long-term relationship was formed with the Rev. Ben Dake. Under his leadership, the church continued to support social justice issues and provide aid to vulnerable citizens in the community.

- South Lane Mental Health was formed after a woman with mental illness was discovered living in the church. Today it continues as a vital agency providing mental services plus a live-in facility. The Rev. Doug Still, Parish Associate, led this effort with the pastor, which included a gift of property and house by a member of the congregation.

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- The church joined the Sanctuary movement, housing an El Salvadorian widow and her three children in the church for several months before helping them relocate to a house in Eugene.
 - The church joined with five other churches in Cottage Grove to bring a displaced hill tribe family from Laos to Oregon.
 - The church provided space for the Family Relief Nursery, an outreach agency for abused children and their families. Later the church provided funds and a gift of land through Witherspoon Court for a new facility located near Witherspoon Park.
 - The church became affiliated with the "More Light Church" organization.
 - Koinonia time, held during the worship service, became the model for pre-school and elementary Christian Education.
 - The pastor taught Christian Education classes after worship for adults and led youth on summer back-packing trips.
 - The church supported the farm worker movement and became a "green church."
 - A Fall Festival of music and poetry readings was introduced, open to the public.
 - Hand bells enlivened worship with both adult and youth groups ringing.
 - Youth attend workshops in Ashland and have played for other congregations.
 - The church housed the Parent Partnership program and the WINS program.

The church celebrated 150 years as a congregation in 2005 with a memorable dinner, which included city officials and the publication of A Leap of Faith, written by Pastor Emeritus, Hugh Peniston.

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In 2008, the relationship with Rev. Dake was dissolved.

From 2008 to 2009, there were two year-long Stated Supply pastorates by the Rev. David Crow and the Rev. Rob Elder. From 2009 to early 2013, the Rev. Shereda Benfield served as Stated Supply. The three pastors supported the congregation and guided it through troubled waters.

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During the three years under Rev. Shereda Benfield, a warmth and visibility was brought to church members by her many visits to those in turmoil and those who needed a kindly touch.

- As pastor, she provided a public face by attending numerous community functions and events, broadening the church's visibility in the community.

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- Deacons increased their outreach to the church's eldest members and shut-ins with special luncheons, baskets at holidays, visits, and birthday cards.
 - The pastor and deacons served Communion once a month at an assisted living facility, part of a new ministry.
 - Children and youth received one-on-one attention.
 - The pastor and lay members led study groups for adults.
 - Small group participation was encouraged and developed through neighborhood gatherings.
 - The church building was filled with candles and flowers reflecting a caring and welcoming presence to all.
 - A three year capital campaign commenced, leading to the remodeling of the restrooms, the Friendship Hall and the restoration of the chapel area to its original use.

Our congregation was blessed with the continuing leadership of interim pastors John Ailstock and Bruce Cameron to help us prepare to call a new full-time pastor. In late 2015, we called Karen Hill to begin her ministry with us.

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Our ability to offer our lovely and comfortable space as a place of worship is one of our great blessings, as is our 150-year history of leadership and social activism within the Cottage Grove community (and beyond). It is important to note that the building and sanctuary were designed to capture the vision of the congregation, past and present.

That vision: As we worship and support each other in community and spiritual growth, we also look into the courtyard, over the fence to the wider community of Cottage Grove, the nation and the world, where our mission draws us to serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

Note: The summary of the first one hundred years was taken from the booklet written in 1955, *History of the First Presbyterian Church*.