

## Easton United Methodist Church History

The first church building of the Easton Community Methodist Episcopal Church, as it was then called, was built in the spring of 1868 at the site of the current Easton Cemetery on North Johnson Road. Land for the church was donated by the Snell family costing \$3,000 and on July 4, 1868, it was dedicated by Rev. Johnson of the Flat River Circuit. The church was 35x50 feet in size and was white with colored glass windows, that stood near the road on top of the hill. It was heated by two large stoves and lighted by kerosene lamps along the walls. The organ and choir were situated at the left of the platform at the front with the pulpit in the center. There were two rows of pews with a center aisle between. The church bell was rung for every service and at the death of a member. The number of times the bell rung, told the age of the member. The sheds for the horses were located at the southwest corner of the yard. The membership was large and covered a 6-square mile area. Prior to this building, the congregation met in a schoolhouse, and can be traced back to 1839.

In 1881, the church referred to above there were 25 members: Wm Bradford, class leader and Supt. of Sunday School, and trustees, A. A. Hull, Wm. Bradford, S. T. Minard, T. E. Conner and Samuel White. School had an average attendance of 5 teachers and 50 scholars.

In August 1918, the church was struck by lightning and the pulpit, altar bible, and a few pews were all that was saved, most of which now reside in the current building. As the bell fell from the burning belfry, it gave one final clang.

Families prominent in the church at that time were S. T. Minard, Thomas F. Conner, Wm. Bradford, Albert Stebbins, Irving Stebbins, George Stebbins, Jacob Snell, Joseph Snell, George Snell, Daniel Hunt and Noah Bishop.

Some of the ministers serving the church during these early years were Rev. Buell, Rev. Gibbs, Rev. Vanderwalker, Rev. Tuttle, Rev. Kenyon, Rev. Birdsell and Rev. Nicholson.

Several efforts were made to build a new church after the first was destroyed but none of the plans materialized until Rev. F. P. Frye was called from Iowa to this pastorate. Services were held in the Dexter school house. In 1926, the people voted to build on land donated by Mr. Hiram Brown. This new location was at the corner of Potters and Johnson roads. At that time, the Ladies Aid and Mrs. Hiram Brown each subscribed \$500.00 to begin the building. Much credit must be given to Rev. Frye for His leadership on planning and supervising the construction of the church. The building was completed in 1926 and dedicated the following January as the Easton Community M. E. Church. (We are indebted to the Michigan Christian Advocate for this information.) We know that many donations of labor and money as well as many chicken dinners served to the public by the ladies helped in the completion of this project

Early in its history, the church was part of a three-point charge composed of Easton, Orleans, and Dildine. The church was later affiliated with the Saranac pastoral charge until 1959 when the congregation was pastored largely by lay speakers until

1966. In 1966, the church joined the five-point charge of Fenwick, Palo, Vickeryville, Orleans, and Easton.

In 1963, the Women's Group started the project for obtaining an organ for the sanctuary. Donations from the W.S.C.S., the Clara Metzgar memorial fund, several individual's generous contributions, and proceeds from a ham supper and bake sales, made this possible, so that in May of 1963 the instrument was dedicated to Mrs. Metzgar, who served as church organist for 52 years, and to Frank Covert, a devoted member and lover of church music. Participating in the dedication were District Superintendent, Rev. Keith Avery and Eula Dodds Frost, guest organist.

In 1962, another cooperative effort resulted in the church siding being scraped and painted by the church men and our pastor, Don Howard. Then again in 1971, another coat of paint was added. It was made possible with contributions from the congregation to have steel siding put on in 1978. Both men and women of the church were involved in the 1961 and 1981 projects of refinishing the sanctuary floor, which made necessary the removal of all the heavy oak pews before sanding and finishing could be done.

During the years, many improvements have been added from time to time; a new furnace in 1954, folding curtains in the basement to provide more Sunday School class rooms, new well in 1960. Prior to this time, water was brought to the church in cream cans by individuals. Many articles have been added to both the exterior and interior of the church with money received as memorials and gifts. Some of these are the red maple trees, flowering tree and shrubbery, park benches, steeple, steeple light, mercury light, white birches, storm windows, ceiling fans, storage shed, front doors, wooden cross, altar cross, pictures, hymnals, Bibles, flags, pulpit, piano and organ lights, clocks, conference tables, altar table, library, books, office furniture & equipment, candelabra, pulpit chairs, offering- plates, sound system, altar scarves, silver tea service and trays, pew cushions, two pianos, silver chalice, Yamaha key board, artificial Christmas tree, Sunday school supplies, plant stands, baptismal font, unity candle, kitchen and rest room remodeling, vacuum cleaner, classroom furnishings, kitchen stoves, music stand, lamps, kitchen appliances, communion sets, and tables for the dining room

The need for adding to the structure had been felt for some time before actual building plans were formulated in the spring of 1967, when Rev. Kline was our pastor. After voting on and receiving final approval of plans, work got under way in September. It progressed rapidly and though the rooms were not completed, they were utilized for the Christmas program that year. Completed in the early months of 1968 were additional classrooms, rest rooms, and a remodeled and enlarged kitchen with additional sink and cupboards. again, this was achieved through the cooperation of everyone - the men planted a field of corn for a money-making project that year and the ladies served public dinners monthly during that time and committees donated much time and effort to the project. Dedication of this addition along with several gifts and memorials was made in October 1968. The additional room opening onto the chancel was named The Stebbins room in memory of Harold Stebbins through the donation by Mrs. Wilma Stebbins.

A custom continued each year from 1969 was the Garden of Memories on Easter Sunday when flowers from donations filled the church and were later distributed to the sick and shut-ins in the community. In 1974, new lights were installed in the sanctuary and prior to the 50th anniversary celebration at the church held on October 10, 1976, an extensive refurbishing of the dining room with new windows was completed. This was one phase of an extended improvement plan.

The church has had a varied affiliation with other charges. We were associated with the Saranac Community Church until 1959, when they expressed their desire to have their own minister and no longer be a part of a two-church charge. It was at this time that a group of four met with our District Superintendent, Dr. Maurice McLean to discuss our future. He told us that as long as we had an active Women's Group and Sunday School, that the Conference would provide us with a minister.

During the year of 1959 and 1960 we were pastored by a lay minister, Don Meikle, who with his wife and family of small children brought new life and interest to Easton. From this time to 1966 we were pastored by lay speakers, when we were added to a 5-point charge including Fenwick, Palo, Vickeryville and Orleans. This meant that we saw our minister, Rev. Ralph Kline every two weeks with lay speakers filling in for him while he pastored at other churches on the circuit. In 1970, the Zion United Methodist Church shared their pastor with us and we became part of a 2-point charge. This followed the merger in 1968 of the EUB (Zion) Church with the Methodist Church changing the name to United Methodist.

Also at this time our Women's Society of Christian service (W.S.C.S.) became the United Methodist Women (U.M.W.). In 1978, a tape ministry was begun for those unable to attend worship services, and a coffee fellowship following the service was also started in this year.

November of 1978 saw our Sunday School chosen as a representative of smaller Sunday Schools in the Central District and was honored at a special meeting in Grand Rapids for the year's accomplishments. Due to a growing need in Missions, a Hunger Pot collection was begun on the last Sunday of the month.

During 1979, the Reach Out and Touch group, composed of many active members, started a landscaping project to add flower beds, parking space and picnic grounds. In 1981, they sponsored a trip to Gatlinburg, Tenn. and while there purchased new dishes for the kitchen, the purchase partially financed by a spaghetti supper.

During the spring of 1979, the land adjacent to the church to the east, owned by the Covert family, came up for sale. After several discussions, it was decided by the church membership to purchase the seven acres. Church members held a drive and raised a down-payment of \$1,000.00. The remaining \$6,000.00 was paid off by members' donations paid monthly to the bank on a loan secured and backed by Tom Baylis over a period of four years. A mortgage-burning ceremony was held on Feb. 6, 1983. This purchase made possible the expanding of the picnic area and instead of going to Bertha Brock park for our annual picnic, we invited the Zion people to picnic with us on our grounds.

Later, through a memorial fund from the Wilma Stebbins estate, a storage building was constructed on true picnic grounds to house picnic tables and the riding mower which was needed for the additional yard mowing.

For a little over a year, our church had a part in sponsoring, along with other churches in Ionia, six young Vietnam refugees. This relationship proved to be a good experience.

For some time, the men's groups, from surrounding Methodist churches had met together for breakfast and fellowship on a once-a-month plan. In 1981, plans were made to sponsor a Fall Festival to be held in August. People from the Zion, LeValley and Berlin Center churches were invited to share our picnic area. Plenty of food was made available by all. Furnishing and later softball games and children's games were enjoyed. An evening musical concluded the festivities.

In 1982, the First Methodist Church of Ionia was added to the UMM group and in 1985 the First Christian Church of Ionia joined the fellowship.

After working and serving breakfasts from our kitchen the Men's group decided that the kitchen should be remodeled and enlarged. A benefit sale was held to help finance it. That added to donations from the Women's' group, members and friends and with donated labor, made possible the completion in 1983. The kitchen was expanded to include the room to the north, new cupboards, an island work space and a pass-through window to the dining room. Members of the Women's' group did the painting. A new ceiling, wall paneling and floor tile were installed along with updated electrical outlets and lifts. On February 6, 1983, an appreciation dinner was served followed by a mortgage-burning and kitchen dedication ceremony in the afternoon. A few weeks later linoleum tile was laid in the rest rooms and adjoining hall.

In the Fall of 1986, Zion United Methodist Church expressed a wish to have their own minister and not be on a 2-church charge. The change was made on November 1 with Easton retaining Rev. Kathryn Williams as our minister.

A need for a larger sanctuary, dining space and more class rooms was expressed in late 1983. Another need was for a barrier-free entrance to the church for those incapacitated. In early 1984, a questionnaire was sent out to the congregation with a Yes or No answer required as to their feelings for building an addition to the church. Three fourths of the replies were affirmative. A building fund was started and a building committee appointed to formulate Plans for proceeding with the project. Many hours were spent in securing plans and blue prints that met the required approval of the engineers and District Building and Site Committee. The estimated figures for building the basement and shell for an addition 44' x 70' was \$95,650.00 and if we wanted only a basement the cost would run \$53,467.00. Miracle Sunday pledges, public roast beef suppers, raffle projects on smaller items and unsolicited money gifts accounted for enough to construct the basement, with a loan from Ionia Independent Bank to finance building the shell. On August 11, 1987, District Superintendent Charles Garrod met with us for Church Conference meeting, when the final vote was taken on whether to proceed with the project. There was a unanimous vote to build. Ground breaking was done on August 16, with Rev. Kay Coombs and Building Committee Chairman, Phil Jones turning the first shovel of dirt.

Construction was started with the digging of the basement by Larry Daniels on August 17. Concrete work was done by Karl Rusnell and the building construction by William Overbeck. The new section of basement was used on October 3, 1987, when our fourth annual roast beef dinner was served to the public, the proceeds used for the building fund. The beautiful stained glass windows that line the sanctuary were added in 1992. Most recently, updates have been made to the parking, a new covered pavilion, and interior improvements and landscaping.

Many of the customs that are still part of our church family were established during this time of growth between 1969 and 1979, including the Garden of Memories, audio taping the worship service, and the "Hunger Pot" to give to various missions. The majority of the furnishings, windows, sound equipment, and many items in the landscaping were added using Memorial gifts from faithful friends who have passed away over the years, including the church steeple which was added in 1984.

Though most of the history speaks directly of the physical structure of the church, Easton's heritage truly lies in the hearts of its congregation. Easton is "my church" to countless families and the connections to the past run deep. We have members who are second and third generation. We strive to make this a community place of worship, where everyone can come in, sit down, join the family, and praise God!

\*\*\*\*\* (This history is a collaboration of resources such as recollections of former members and residents of the community, the Christian Advocate, other news items, church bulletins and personal diaries. Assembled by the church historian, secretary and church members.)