

Haslett Community Church 50th anniversary  
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Churches are usually started by a denomination sending a minister out to a likely place. This church was started by people. They looked for a denomination by voting negatively as committees reported. When they found the freedom of Congregationalism and the kind of mission it offered, they looked for a minister.

They founded themselves and brought me to organize them. For two years we were people who knew how to run the PTA, the Scouts, the library, the Kiwanis and every conceivable organization except a church, and our attendance was 110% of our membership. We had fun learning together how to be a church and find our mission. This village had been served only by a fundamentalist church which our founders felt was too restrictive and narrow. Village gossip was that the new Community Church was merely the Saturday night square dance club meeting on Sunday morning.

At the end of Lent our first year, the chair of the Diaconate said: "Chuck you have given us good sermons on historic creeds but we don't want to hear about them ever again. We want you to preach about the reason we are here, to be a community church meeting the needs of real people in a real world in this time and place."

This church was founded by people who believed in not restricting minds, but in an open future, in choice. An old joke is, "A Congregationalist, when nailed down, moves over." It was easy for us to grow into a larger denomination, the United Church of Christ, UCC, which we took to mean "U Can Change". We were not very orderly people. But we got things done like buying property without having the money, building with plans that didn't fit tradition, Christian education that wasn't confined to rules, and love that knew no boundaries or limits.

Money is the language Americans speak and hear most clearly. The mission of this church was defined in our budgets in two ways. We planned for ten percent to the denominational program called Our Christian World Mission, OCWM, which put state, national and world missions all in one gift.

Secondly, we listed two token gifts to clarify our identity to ourselves and to our young people. We were dedicated to higher education by naming a gift to our denominational college, Olivet, only 40 miles away. And we clarified our wider horizon with a gift to an ecumenical organization.

But our mission was more visible in our life than in our money. Our mission was to serve the Haslett community. The people of this church worked to make these scattered homes a community and I was chaplain to the whole village. We held large vacation church schools for everyone in the elementary school, now the Vera Ralya Elementary school. Our youth group included youth of many denominations, not just our families. Our programs seemed more community programs than church programs. Boy Scout Sunday was a community event. Most of the school board were members of our church. We were prominent in school events and village events such as celebrating Memorial Day. Our mission was to be the people of God in this time and place. God sent us here to be healers in a fractured village. Isaiah says: "You shall be called the repairer of the breach the restorer of streets to live in." 58:12

I summarize our beginnings dramatically. A woman with a stillbirth was accosted by fundamentalists who said her sin caused the death of her baby. We, minister and people

of this church, surrounded her with love and mainstream theology to help her regain sanity. This church was given birth by people who knew how to play and pray while meeting human need with God's love.

This church stands on a glacial moraine, mostly sand and gravel. During excavation I had a sizable boulder set aside. On dedicating our building I used a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, (51:1) to be true to the God of the Jews who gave us birth. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug." I wanted to put the words in bronze on the rock but spending money for that didn't make sense. The long gone rock is a memory image of our heritage. We have the audacity to celebrate that we are a people liberated from slavery into freedom. We are proud of Hebrew prophets who demanded justice. From the rock of Judaism came a mainstream faith expanding into an ecumenical community.

This was first and foremost a community church. We celebrate a community of people who value and respect the other. This community treasures an interfaith non-creedal way of following Jesus.

In practical, realistic, hardheaded terms this means that we became involved in ecumenical events leading to interfaith growth and understandings. Our ancestors and our beloved departed are alive in us. Community now is community then. Community enlarged us, encompassed us and extended our horizons into eternity.

This church has always been ecumenical. Lansing Rabbi Philip Frankel was in our pulpit several times. This church was proud to have me be president of the Lansing Area Council of Churches, and president of the Interfaith Council on Religion and Race. The people in the Lansing area became aware of the United Church of Christ in the 1960's because of our involvement in open housing. We were a civic church sending me beyond this suburb to the larger Lansing area where most of our people worked. The stained glass window of Jesus leading the children toward the city interprets an outreach mission of Haslett Community Church.

The large windows with plain glass are a memory image of the meaning of this church. It seems hard to believe that in early building committee meetings they discussed meanings. One said, "We want the agenda of the church and the world to mix with each other". They decided to have large windows with plain glass so that our worship room would be open for visions of reality.

Examples of such reality are plentiful. One of our members on an MSU VietNam exploratory team before the war came home saying America should not be there. Our youth group spent an evening in a Negro church in the inner city of Detroit, and then hosted their youth group here so they could visit the state capitol. Couples who were rejected by other churches felt welcome to come here to be married. Roman Catholics who could not find a priest felt comfortable to come to me for confession. The doors were open to people regardless of their position in theology, politics, economics, sexuality, race, nationality or ethnicity. That wasn't said after long labored discussions and a vote, it just is the stark fact of who this church was from its beginning. It simply is the rock from which this church was hewn, the quarry from which it was dug.

This open nave with those windows gives visibility to a community church welcoming all. In the first decade we had 58 adult baptisms, 19% New Christians found Jesus here in an inclusive ecumenical family of love.

The Haslett Community Church is people living in the love of Jesus hewn from the rock

of justice known in prophetic history. Those large plain glass windows are a reminder that we are a community church open in freedom and dedicated to justice with love. On our tenth anniversary we all received certificates. Mine reads: "You care and we know it." Haslett Community Church is people caring about people flowing out of the rock of prophetic heritage.

How does this rock in history point this church into tomorrow? The freedom and openness of the past thrusts this church into involvement in issues - hunger, world population control, civil liberties, freedom, human rights and world peace.

III. This church stands on land which had been a thriving orchard for many years. 1956 had been a cold harsh winter so the ground was frozen hard as we prepared for ground breaking the first Sunday in March. Church youth had a bonfire all day Saturday where the chancel is now. We broke ground on the spot where we would be breaking bread on the communion table in a few months.

Our treasurer, Win Harrison, was an MSU professor teaching county agricultural agents. Each Spring he brought me a large booklet for us to celebrate a stewardship Sunday. It was not a money raising Sunday but an ecology Sunday long before most anyone had heard the word, or thought about environmentalism.

Win's son Jim has a picture of this cross on the jacket of his memoirs, perhaps because of his hours behind this cross in my office dealing with grief after Win's tragic death. This cross defines the mission of this church to serve Christ in the real earthy world of life and death. Jim's books are earthy. The Bible is earthy.

In churches where they hand out the bread, they say, "This is the body of Christ". Here the bread symbolizes the body of Christ more clearly because the bread is broken above an earthy orchard. It is organic, in a body, a community, given birth by people.

Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruit." The fruit of the vine poured at communion connects us to the environment. The lives of countless women and men from this church have blossomed into teaching, environmentalism, service professions, and improving the health and minds of others in ways beyond imagining. More young men than can be known were conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War. The numbers are staggering who work with the environment. Sunday school and worship here influenced people to careers in art, literature and education with impact around the world. Those in the business world are often in companies with environmental, humane sensitivities.

A bumper sticker says: "Bloom where you were planted." In this church the spirit blossoms from an orchard, to a communion table, out into a contaminated world.

Breaking bread at the table opens us to receive earthy beauty. The orchard blossoms into sensuous communion with ecological stewardship.

The future mission of this church is in practical programs such as your food bank and support for orphans which flow into creating peace and justice.

The orchard into communion table, into stewardship, is a timeless image from 50 years ago, and points into a timeless future.

The open glass into community, into ecumenicity with justice, is imagery from 50 years ago for an indefinite future.

Shalom!