

HISTORY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF ROWAYTON

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In the Beginning

A meeting was held by David Cudlipp, William McKenzie and Benjamin Jutten, who constituted the Baptist Ecclesiastical Society of Five Mile River. The date was June 24, 1855, and they resolved "... to associate ourselves together for the purpose of buying and holding property for the use of the Baptist Denomination worshipping at present in the building known as the South Five Mile River School-house." (sic)

On January 1, 1859, the Society held its first annual meeting and on June 4th, the building committee was authorized to "fit up the store-house on the lot owned by the Society as a house of worship." (The location was 15 Cudlipp Street.) Then on July 10th another meeting was held to organize what became known as the Five Mile River Baptist Church. Sometime between April and October 1860, the building was opened for public worship; it was dedicated on August 15, 1860.

Thus, the roots of The United Church of Rowayton were established.

Nine years after the Baptist Church was officially organized, the Third Methodist Episcopal Church Society came into being with a one-room building at the corner of Rowayton Avenue and Maple Street, later renamed Pennoyer Street in honor of Elias Pennoyer, who donated the land. Having been through several remodelings, the present United Methodist Church stands on the original site.

Between June 1891 and early 1892, the Baptist property passed from the Baptist Ecclesiastical Society into the possession of a newly formed society, the Rowayton Baptist Church. Having outgrown its Cudlipp Street building, a new church was built at 210 Rowayton Avenue and dedicated September 3, 1905. Josephine Crow provided this property and then purchased the vacated site.

In reality, the movement for a union church in Rowayton goes back 150 years, since the first house of worship was really built as that. There ensued a period of heated denominational controversy, which led to a split and eventual formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Next Chapter

In 1925, members of the Rowayton Protestant faiths talked about a union. But nothing came to fruition largely because of conditions decreed by the Methodist Episcopal Church hierarchy requiring membership in what was then known as the New York East Conference, which included portions of Connecticut. This requirement was unacceptable to those desiring a single church to serve Rowayton. Interestingly, several former ministers of the two churches expressed their preference for a union church -- one not affiliated with either of the present denominations.

New Beginnings

In June 1945, just before the end of World War II, the Reverend Donald Wesley Emig came to Rowayton to serve as minister of the Methodist Church. Newly graduated from Yale Divinity School, he had been appointed by Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, head of the New York East Conference.

Both the Methodist and Baptist churches had minimal memberships and an inability to attract the many newcomers who had just discovered Rowayton. And so, three years later another union effort began with a

community meeting on April 23, 1948. A committee composed of four Baptists, four Methodists and three at large was appointed and subsequently conducted a professionally designed survey which concluded a) there should be a union church, b) it should be denominational and c) it should not be either federated or one of the two present denominations. A majority of residents and members supported the plan.

Mr. Emig (as he often referred to himself) was instrumental in helping the union movement's progress, and in June 1949 the Rowayton Church Union Committee submitted a plan for a united church under denominational auspices, but neither Baptist nor Methodist. Both congregations warmly endorsed the plan at their annual meetings. Pending ratification by the Methodist Conference, the two denominations began operation as The Rowayton Churches on July 1, 1949, with Donald Emig as pastor and services held at each church on alternating Sundays.

Despite ongoing negotiations with the Methodist Conference leaders, the property matter could not be resolved since the bishop refused to allow giving up the deed to the property on Pennoyer Street. Meanwhile, the Connecticut Baptist Convention and Rowayton Baptist Church continued their wholehearted support of a denominational union church. The possibility of becoming affiliated with other Protestant faiths, including the Presbyterian Church, was looked into, but presented their own 'structural' problems.

The United Church of Rowayton is Established

On April 10, 1951, an agreement was "made and entered into" by the Rowayton Baptist Church -- a Connecticut ecclesiastical corporation -- to convey its property to trustees named in the document, for the establishment of a "United Church in Rowayton." (The property was later given outright by the estate of Josephine Crow.) Then on April 29, 1951, The United Church of Rowayton, Incorporated was granted its charter by the state of Connecticut. Shortly thereafter, we were formally accepted into the fellowship of the Congregational Christian denomination, which became known as the United Church of Christ after the former's 1957 merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

For the first five years, congregational worship was held in the old Baptist building, situated just west of the present church property that at that time was being held in trust. The church proved to be successful, and the deed to the property was signed over to the United Church on its fifth anniversary, May 1956.

During the pastorate of Donald W. Emig, the community and church continued to grow. The Meeting House was built in 1955 to serve both. By 1958, growth was such that members wanted to have a new House of Worship that would be a symbolic bridge between God and humanity. A building committee was formed, architect Joseph Salerno was chosen, and in just six years later the House of Worship took shape. It was dedicated on September 30, 1962. Salerno won top design honors from the American Institute of Architects.

This was followed with construction of a Parsonage on church property, with completion in July 1964. Then the United Church Nursery School had its initial session on October 3, 1966, with 16 children enrolled. And an organ comprised of 26 ranks and 1,494 pipes replaced the limited-range and worn-out electronic instrument at Christmastime in 1978. There was a dedication recital on March 11, 1979.

Perhaps the Reverend Emig's crowning achievement was the culmination of a 12-year effort to establish affordable housing for limited-income senior citizens. After having lost out on many available properties, the Rowayton Senior Housing Corporation gratefully accepted a three-acre hill-top parcel from the Church and ground was broken on Don's 60th birthday, October 5, 1980. Residents began moving in during late October 1982; Hill Top Homes was formally dedicated on December 5th of that year.

At the 34th Annual Meeting on May 19, 1985, Donald Emig read a letter in which he announced "my plans to resign ... on or about November 1, 1985, in order to enter into retirement ..." His 40-year ministry in Rowayton was celebrated with a community-wide ice cream social at the Rowayton Community Center on October 20th and the incorporation of The Emig Foundation (established for charitable and educational

purposes) in his honor. He conducted his last service on November 3rd.

An era had come to an end. Sadly, Don wasn't able to enjoy the pleasure of retirement for very long; he died in Rhode Island Hospital (Providence) in early April 1988.

The Next Chapter

On July 20, 1986, the Reverend John Steven Livingston preached his candidate's sermon, after which a special Church Meeting took place to consider calling him as our new pastor. The vote was enthusiastically unanimous, and when asked to return to the sanctuary, John and his family were greeted with thunderous applause.

A new era had begun. On September 3, 1986, John S. Livingston became the second pastor in our Church's 35-year history, and on Sunday evening November 16th, he was installed in a moving service.

The outstanding musical gift that John and Judi Livingston have brought to our Church has been a wonderful experience for all. The combination of their unique talent with that of Marsha Hall, who's been our music director since 1978, is most inspirational. Not only do they enhance worship services, their special performances – whether for a holiday celebration or to raise funds for a church project – have been a treat for one and all.

The year 1992 marked the first Giant Tag Sale, an event that has become a major, annual fund raiser and a day of great camaraderie among its participants.

In 1993, two of our flock -- both graduates of Yale Divinity School -- were ordained in our Church. Long-time member Heather Steele Hopkins' ceremony took place on February 28th and was followed by one for Mark Lang Heilshorn on November 14th.

The church continued to grow, and it found itself needing more room for offices, offices, classes, and other events. The result was the creation of a Capital Fund Drive at the May 15, 1994, Annual Meeting of the Congregation. It was comprised of these three phases: 1) immediate replacement of heating systems and sanctuary carpeting plus repair of organ bellows, 2) refurbishment of and major addition to the Meeting House and 3) construction of a new front entrance to the narthex and walkway to the Meeting House.

On September 24, 1995, the recently completed Memorial Garden was dedicated, and just a week later the architect's plans for the expansion of the Meeting House and new entryway to the House of Worship were unveiled. Also in October, the Reverend Rhona Kochman became our Minister of Christian Education and Spirituality.

Despite the fact that the property across the street had been purchased many years ago to protect our view of the Five Mile River, it wasn't until 1997 that a group appointed by the Executive Council got together, cleaned up the land, planted bulbs and other flora, placed benches beneath the huge silver beech tree and installed a sign. It said "Emig Park." How appropriate. The Park was dedicated on October 5, Donald Emig's 77th birthday.

The Church's first Jazz Vesper Service occurred in April 1998. It was organized by David Snyder, a double bass player par excellence (He is a member of our church and The Fairfield County Art Ensemble). The service morphed into a Jazz Worship service – held at our regular 10:15 Sunday worship time – in 2007 and continues to this day.

Among the most exciting announcements of the decade was one made at a special Congregational Meeting on August 2, 1998, when we were informed that the Church had been bequeathed close to \$1,000,000 by the Kathleen Gillespie Trust Fund. The Gillespies joined the United Church in 1955 and left Rowayton in the early 1960s. They lost a son during their years here and apparently the Reverend Emig provided great comfort to them. What a magnificent way of saying thank you. Then another substantial bequest was made

in late 1999, this by Jane Brown, in an unexpected amount of \$500,000. So, as the 20th Century neared its end with the Church in its 48th year of existence with little or no major financial assets, we suddenly became twice blessed. Both funds have been prudently managed by our Board of Household Concerns and have accrued nicely.

In 1999, we began to hold July and August worship at 9:15am by the gazebo in Rowayton's Pinkney Park, overlooking the Five Mile River. Usually, John Livingston conducts services during July and other local pastors handle the rest.

The 21st Century

The year 2000 kicked off with a year-long celebration of our 50th anniversary as a Congregation.

In late summer 2000, Debbie Beaudry was hired 2000 to become director of Christian education. She was instrumental in building the educational program with a resultant 50 percent enrollment increase over the previous year.

The 50th jubilee started on Sunday, April 29th, 50 years to the date of being granted our charter by the state. After a large cake with 50 lighted candles was carried to the altar by Moderator Joanne Brown and Clerk Michael Ziegler, these former moderators, listed in chronological order served, gathered round: John Reiners, Philip Penberthy, Thomas Richardson, Michael Ziegler, Alan Wyland, Frank Kuffel, Thomas Robinson and Michael Poler.

Reflections were offered by John Reiners, a charter member and first Church School superintendent, Philip Penberthy, who served on the House of Worship Building Committee and the Reverend John W. Emig, elder son of Bette and Donald Emig. Afterward, a very special Fellowship Hour featured enlarged photographs from the past and a spectacular '50' ice sculpture, which enhanced the tasty refreshments provided.

Festivities continued on May 19th, when Judi and John Livingston, with Marsha Hall, presented an enrapturing performance called "Celebrating 50 Years of Broadway."

The celebratory year neared its end on March 17, 2002, with Choir Reunion Sunday and a glorious 50-voice offertory by 32 present and 18 former members. Then Director of Music Marsha Hall arranged a special music program of Senior Choir voices and guest instrumentalists on April 28th for the culmination of our anniversary year.

The year 2002 saw other noteworthy matters unfold, a significant one being the May 5th celebration of John Livingston's 15 years as our pastor and 20 as an ordained minister. Worship was conducted by the Board of Deacons; other participants were a confirmand, John's brother, chair of the former Search Committee, the moderator and four members of the clergy who had a direct connection to John. After this unique service, a reception, including luncheon, was held in the Meeting House, at which time a number of people shared remembrances.

Debbie Beaudry's unexpected resignation brought into focus the expanded responsibilities of the director of Christian education and, with her help, evaluation of the situation. It was concluded that the position now required a full-time person. Carla Dietz Carroll became a full-time staff member in time for Rally Day.

As the year drew to a close, the Board of Deacons announced an expansion of its Visitation Committee into the Caregiving Ministry to supplement John Livingston's pastoral caregiving. Nineteen members volunteered for this ministry and attended an all-day training session in January 2003. Deaths, moves, and resignations have depleted the original group, but the ranks have been replenished from time to time with new volunteers.

Recognition and celebration of Marsha Hall's music ministry took place during worship on November 23rd. The music program has grown tremendously under her devoted leadership, with a variety and scope

appreciated by all. At the reception following, the Senior Choir sang a parody of "There Is Nothing Like a Dame" (from "South Pacific") retitled "There Is Nothing Like Our Dame."

Pastor John Livingston took his well-earned sabbatical during May and June, which he 'started' by conducting the May 2nd Confirmation Sunday service. Then he led the Service of Remembrance on May 30th and participated on June 13th with recognition of graduating high school seniors and awarding of Jonathan Peter Wildman Scholarships. Continuing to 'enjoying' his sabbatical, John, along with his wife Judi, Marsha Hall and most of the Senior Choir -- dubbed "The United Church Broadway Ensemble" -- presented "Something About Life" on two nights in mid-May. This was the Livingston's sixth musical offering with Marsha's collaboration. During the rest of John's sabbatical five of our members and a close clergy friend delivered "Profiles in Faith" messages.

An incredible statistic surfaced with the departure of long-time members Gary and Tom Richardson in September 2004. For 34 years, Gary was involved in or directly responsible for our outreach benevolent contributions totaling almost a million dollars. Amazing for a church our size, or any church for that matter! Both she and Tom chaired and served on many Boards and Committees, including the House of Worship Building Fund Drive back in 1960 and most recently the 50th Anniversary Committee. Tom also served as lay leader and moderator in the early 1970s.

The Reverend John Livingston's 20 years as our pastor and 25 as an ordained minister were celebrated enthusiastically on September 17, 2006. A banner was created that said, "20 Years - United in Love" and depicted the contours of our unique House of Worship. Also, a book of memories and a special commemorative plate were presented, but best of all was a very large check, thanks to the contributions of our Family of Faith.

The United Church of Rowayton is involved in many types of outreach. 20% of the previous year's pledges used to be given to the Board of Christian Outreach to be donated to local social service groups (later, that amount was changed to an equally generous fixed amount). In 2005, the Board of Christian Outreach (BOCO) started a program of preparing and serving dinners at the nearby Open Door Shelter. Over the years, BOCO has also responded to those affected by catastrophic disasters, e.g. earthquakes and hurricanes, offered numerous mission trips, and hosted a Volunteers Fair.

The Prayer Shawl Ministry, initiated in April 2006, meets on a regular basis to knit shawls for shut in or ailing members of our community.

While serving as our Director of Christian Education, Carla Dietz attended Yale Divinity School, and after graduation in 2008 was called to become our Associate Pastor. She was subsequently ordained here that September.

To fill a void, several forms of adult education were initiated, including Thursday noon Bible study and an ongoing series on Sunday evenings called "Saving Jesus." And for high school Juniors and Seniors Pastor Livingston has begun Tuesday evening sessions dubbed "Talk It Over."

In 2008 Joanne Brown and Ann DiLeone took over the reins of the Caregiving Ministry as co-chairs since founders Heather Hopkins and Holly Adams were no longer able to continue their roles. Heather had become an interim pastor and Holly was finishing her studies at Yale Divinity School while serving at the First Church Congregational Church in Fairfield.

Our first stand-alone Silent Auction took place in April 2009 with 28 Church members organizing and directing the event. Exceeding expectations, it was a huge success and became a semi-annual event.

Having graduated from Yale in May 2009, Holly Adams was ordained here on January 10, 2010. She served as a chaplain and interim pastor and later was installed as the Senior Pastor of the United Congregational Church in West Norwalk on October 13, 2013.

In May of 2009 an *ad hoc* Committee was formed to determine if we should become an Open and Affirming

Church, i.e., open and affirming to all people regardless of race or sexual orientation. A confidential survey was issued that elicited an excellent and positive response and at our 59th Annual Meeting on February 6, 2011, all 145 members present - without any discussion - voted in the affirmative!

An unusual fundraiser called "Somehow . . . Someday . . . Somewhere" was performed on May 20, 2011 by members of our Church family spanning all ages and featured music from Broadway to Pop to Country. Marsha Hall directed the program that included Pastor John Livingston, his wife Judi and the Senior Choir.

John Livingston's 25th anniversary as our Pastor was celebrated on October 30, 2011. As each person arrived for worship, she or he was given a small flag that said "Celebrating 25 Years With John." Clergy friends spoke during the service; the celebration continued during Fellowship Hour and featured the Senior Choir singing special lyrics written to the tune of "My Funny Valentine."

The United Church of Rowayton's House of Worship was dedicated on September 30, 1962, and in 2012 - 50 years later to the date - we celebrated that significant event in the life of our Church. Twelve Charter Members of the original 318 were still alive, but only one - Myrtle Eleck - was able to attend. The Norwalk Hour (as it was then named) headlined an article in 1962: "Boldly Modern Rowayton Church Hailed as Inspiring and Practical." In culmination a time capsule was buried and is to be opened in 25 years, on September 27, 2037.

On April 21, 2013, another celebration occurred with the Caregiving Ministry reaching its 10th anniversary. As Pastor Livingston pointed out, "Today we show our gratitude for those who have been trained as part of this vibrant ministry, and rightfully so."

Since 1986, Judi and John Livingston, with Marsha Hall's superb accompaniment and direction, have presented six concerts for benefit of our Church. Their seventh, held after a nine-year interval, took place on November 9, 2013, and was titled "The Finale." For the most part, they presented songs from Broadway musicals, and did so marvelously.

Tributes were paid to Associate Pastor Carla Dietz on September 29, 2013, before she delivered her last message to us. Carla had announced her resignation several weeks earlier because she had accepted a call to become pastor of a church in Worcester, Massachusetts. In her 11 years with us, she contributed significantly to Christian education programs for our young people.

On April 6, 2014, Sally Stansbury, a member of our Church, was introduced during worship as our new Director of Christian Education. With a background of many years heading up Sunday school and youth groups at other churches, she has plunged into her new role with gusto.

Anchors, the pre- and early teen after school group, traces its beginnings to 2016.

In the autumn of 2018, the church celebrated Marsha Hall's 40 years of service as Director of Music.

The COVID-19 epidemic struck, and we gave our last in-house worship service on March 8, 2020. We began offering pre-recorded, virtual worship services that attracted a world-wide audience. Live services resumed on May 16, first with an outdoor service and then with services held in our House of Worship.

In August 2020, Bill Peltz was hired as the church's first Communications Director.

In October 2020, John Livingston suffered a stroke.

On October 1, 2021, Lou Froelich stepped down as Business Manager. He continued on as Assistant Treasurer. Bill Sarr became our Business Manager and Treasurer.