**WORCESTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**“Looking Backward and Moving Forward”**

On November 11, 1945, on the 50th anniversary of the completion of major renovations to the Worcester Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Frederick W. Church delivered a message to the congregation entitled “Looking Backward and Moving Forward.” In that spirit, as the church organization now moves toward its 175th anniversary and its third century, this booklet looks backward to outline the known events of those 18 decades of service and commitment, and provides a context from which to contemplate moving forward to the future.

The following chronology reveals the remarkably varied and even startling story of the church's origins and growth, encompassing both lean and abundant times; three distinct locations; interfaces with both the local Baptists and Presbyterians; and ministries either shared with, or originating from, East Worcester, Westford, Decatur, Elliott Hill and Tuscan.

**Beginnings; 1723-1841**

It took nearly 70 years from the time of the first recorded European penetration of this area until the organization in 1792 of the first religious institution in the eventual Town of Worcester, the Congregational Society of Christ -- later the First Presbyterian Church -- followed six years later by the First Baptist Church at the eastern foot of West Hill Road. It wasn't until 1823 that Elizabeth Champion formed the Methodist Society of East Worcester, served at first by local leaders and later by circuit rider preachers operating out of Westford. Methodists living in the less-populated West Worcester, which at that time seemed to include the area between Brighton and the Town of Maryland, had to rely on their eastern brethren, or on meetings of their private literary society named after Bishop John Emory, if they wanted to attend services in their own denomination.

This situation lasted until 1831, when the Emory Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Town of Worcester purchased land at the present location of the Second Baptist Church (132 Main Street) and constructed a church building there at least by 1836, when the West Worcester Methodist Episcopal Church was organized at a meeting over which its first pastor, Rev. Alexander E. Daniels, presided. Daniels, Martin Marvin and other circuit riders from Westford likely preached at both East and West Worcester.

The West Worcester Methodists apparently faced early difficulties, for in 1837 the Westford Quarterly Conference appointed a committee “to sell or rent the Methodist Meeting House in Worcester.” In the meantime, West Worcester Baptists had been meeting in the “Old Academy” building in Tusculum (near 215 Tuscan Road), having no name or formal organization, and had apparently been growing in number. The needs of both the Methodists and Baptists were met by the eventual sale in segments between 1839 and 1846 of the Methodist Church properties to the Baptists, and by the apparent eventual relocation of the Methodists to the “Academy” in Tusculum. The Second Baptist Church formed in 1841. There is no legal record of either the Baptists or the Methodists receiving ownership of the Tusculum building. Perhaps it was a private building which the groups either rented or used intermittently with the consent of the owner.

In 1841, the West Worcester church was set off from Westford and placed in another charge jointly with Decatur Hollow and Elliott Hill. The pastors apparently resided in Decatur and rode to West Worcester and Elliott Hill for services there. Some old Decatur and Elliott Hill records survive today in the historical archive of the present church.

**The “Old Church;” 1841-1871**

The “Academy” building in Tusculum, apparently occupied by the West Worcester Methodists at least by 1846, may have been the home of the church body for 25 years or more, and is often called the “Old Church.” It appears on 1856 and 1868 maps as the “M.E. Church.” There are, however, vague indications that the “preaching was first in the schoolhouse” and later in the former Academy. The sequence is not clear.

The weakness of the Tusculum body is attested by Conference acts in 1855 which again joined the East Worcester and Worcester church bodies into one charge. The strongest part was at East Worcester, which is where the pastors were based for the next 16 years. Possibly in response to this dependent status, a Methodist Society class is said to have been organized in the Red Schoolhouse in Tusculum in 1857, followed by the appointment of a committee in 1859 to solicit members and to propose a new church. Disagreement surfaced over the location of this “New Church,” with some members preferring to stay in Tusculum and others to move to the Worcester hamlet, which was the host of the new railroad depot and the object of boom-town expansion during and after the Civil War. A compromise finally emerged that the church building “should not be built any further than the Decatur Creek,” at a site which turned out to be the present one at 111 Main Street.

There are no known drawings or photographs of the “Old Church,” which was eventually sold and moved to either Railroad Avenue or Depot Street in Worcester.

**The “New Church;” 1871-Present**

Work began on the “New Church” in 1870 and concluded the following year on property purchased from Hamilton and Levantia Russ. The original building, still in existence as part of the main sanctuary, was a rectangle measuring 35 by 56 feet, with the main entrance in the front center and a bell tower atop the roof. Several photographs of this building's interior exist, but an 1890 lithograph and known exterior photographs are small and indistinct.

At this time (1871), while East Worcester and Worcester continued as parts of the same charge, the main part and the minister were moved to Worcester and its new building, fulfilling the designs of the 1857 and 1859 planners to have a greater church body and an improved stature. East Worcester eventually separated as an individual charge from 1883 to 1946. In 1883 Rev. J.D. Belknap thus became the first permanent pastor for Worcester-only, and he resided in a rented parsonage on the present Park Street. The Worcester Methodist Episcopal Church was incorporated on January 10, 1884.

With increasing membership, the church undertook a major remodeling and expansion in 1895. Sunday School rooms and a kitchen were added to the west, the sanctuary was enlarged, and stained glass windows were installed throughout. The present parsonage at 112 Main Street was completed in 1903. The church installed a two-manual Morey pipe organ in 1927. Further interior renovations took place in 1993.

Decatur again became part of the charge from 1917 to 1993, and East Worcester from 1946 to 2000, with Worcester-based ministers serving those churches during those periods.

The church added an “Educational Building” annex to its north side in 1956, and it purchased a “Mission and Ministry Building” in 2001 on the adjacent lot at 115 Main Street.

The church has witnessed much ecumenical activity in the past half-century, including merger on the national level in 1968 with the United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church. Locally, union services with the Baptists and Presbyterians were formalized in 1965. The Community Chorale formed in 1980, and the church yoked with the First Presbyterian Church in 2008.

**Toward the Third Century**

The Worcester United Methodist Church has emerged from its first 175 years with strength and vision. It has survived organizational, financial and membership stress during its early existence, a struggle for identity as a secondary part of ministries served first from Westford, and then from Decatur and East Worcester. Within a 30-year period in the nineteenth century it relocated from Main Street in West Worcester to Tusculum, and then back to its second and present site on Main Street. It has expanded its physical structure and its reach, achieving in the 21st Century a stable financial position and a strong and loyal congregation. On this firm foundation it is well positioned to move forward, as Rev. Church urged 65 years ago.