

First Presbyterian Church 60th Anniversary

Article by Rev. Joyce Yanishewski
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Sixty years. That is how long First Presbyterian has been an integral part of West Fort and now Thunder Bay. It seems that I would be the least likely person to be asked to write something to mark the occasion. As interim moderator I have only been closely associated with the church for little over a month, though as it turns out I have either known or met the last five ministers of the congregation in my own church work. I met Rev. Yeon Wha Kim and Rev. Sydney Chang when I was a ruling elder living in Alberta and participating in the life and work of the PCC on committees. When I came to St. Andrew's here in Thunder Bay, I met Rev. Jim Patterson a few months before he moved from Geraldton and I met Rev. Mark McLennan at a General Assembly. Finally, I was inducted at St. Andrew's one week after Rev. Susan Mattison was inducted at First. We were both newly out of seminary, Susan from Vancouver School of Theology and I from Knox College, Toronto.

In my time in Thunder Bay, as part of the work of the Presbytery of Superior (PCC) and as a colleague of Rev. Susan, I can say that I have some knowledge of the congregation, but it wasn't until I set about writing this letter to acknowledge this anniversary of the church that I really delved into learning more.

There are some people with significant family history and some with shorter histories that have been a part of my conversations in the last couple of weeks, and I have been aided by a small book on the *History of Presbyterianism in Thunder Bay and District (1869-1980)* written by Harcourt T Johnston, the brother of Rev. Dr. Agnew Johnston, long time minister at St. Andrew's in Thunder Bay.

Now, I am not about to go into a long and detailed history of the congregation as, even with some research, I feel less than qualified, but what the reading and listening to stories has shown me is that First Presbyterian's roots in the community are deep. First Pres. was actually the *first* Presbyterian Church in Fort William and West Fort. There was a school house that had been used for Sunday school and some worship at the foot of Donald Street, but First had the first building that could actually be called a church, when it came to the Presbyterians anyway. So, though we commemorate this sixty-year anniversary of the church building, First Presbyterian's history is much longer and broader.

What has become evident to me at this time in the church's history is the resiliency of the congregation. First has gone through many variations of itself. There have been times of celebration as new buildings were opened and dedicated. The present building is the third church building for the congregation. But there were times when the congregation worshipped in schools and, even at one time after 1925 when the building had gone to

the United Church of Canada, the continuing Presbyterians rented a room in a store. There were just as many times when the congregation was struggling to maintain itself as a presence in the community with a building as there were "good years." Which really give me reason to ponder as to what God is up to with First Presbyterian in our own time. This congregation has gone above and beyond at so many junctures, overcome so many obstacles, has been a good community partner over and over again, and because of this I am confident that whatever the future holds the people of the congregation will know what to do.

At this time, we celebrate the dedication of a building that happened 60 years ago, but more than that we celebrate a resilient congregation, a people, that have been a beacon of hope and light closing in on one hundred and fifty years. May God bless the church and the congregation and use us in our time to bless others.

Linda Rydholm also shares more tangible memories of the congregation and its ministry from the building and congregation that we now celebrate at the corner of Walsh and Grey.

As a child, I recall worship and other church activities at the 1st Pres Church building at the corner of Brock and Edward streets - but it became too small for the growing congregation in the late 1950's. While the new church was being built, worship was conducted in the former Grey Park Elementary School which was located across from the construction site. It was quite exciting to move into the larger facility - dedicated on April 11, 1961.

I shall have to do research to determine when the congregation of "First Presbyterian Church, Fort William" was formed. It was prior to St Andrew's, but I do not recall the date.

Ten years ago, the 50th Anniversary of the church building was celebrated with a weekend of activities - members' artwork and ethnic clothing decorating the sanctuary and church hall, potluck supper & curling on Friday night, catered roast beef dinner and talent show on Saturday night and a guest speaker (former minister Rev Jim Patterson and wife Brenda) at Sunday service, followed by a luncheon downstairs in the church hall. First Pres had sponsored many refugees over the years, and a reporter attended from the Presbyterian Record and wrote a big report with photos, featuring refugees and their comments. It was a great weekend which provided fond memories.

There are ups and downs in church life - especially during the Covid pandemic. Compared to the 50th Anniversary ten years ago, First Pres is currently in a "down". It is hoped that by the end of the seven months Transition on September 30, God's will for the future may be clearly discerned and followed by the congregation. Meanwhile, may prayer and stewardship continue as we venture forward in faith!