

A Brief History of Market Square Presbyterian Church

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Market Square Presbyterian Church

Market Square Presbyterian Church has served Christ and community for over two centuries. The church was established on February 16, 1794 when a session was formed and the congregation gained its independence from its parent congregation, Paxton Presbyterian Church. Composed of Harrisburg residents, the new church began evangelizing the local community and distant world. In 1816 the congregation started the first Sunday school in Harrisburg. In 1831 Mary Ann McKinney, a church member, set off with her new husband, William Alexander, to begin evangelizing Hawaii (the basis of the James Michener novel, Hawaii, and the movie based on the novel).

Through the mid-19th century, Market Square Church slowly expanded, building three church edifices by 1860. Yet this prospering congregation also confronted divisions--within its membership, the national Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, and the nation during the Civil War. A few church members left the congregation in 1858 to form, with the aid of Market Square Church, a separate Harrisburg African-American church, later known as Capital Presbyterian Church. As an outgrowth of a schism in the national Presbyterian denomination, other members split from Market Square Church in 1858 to form Pine Street Presbyterian Church.

Market Square Church greatly expanded its mission work in Harrisburg and the wider world during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The church drew hundreds of people into the congregation and Sunday school, which taught religious lessons to children of members and non-members alike. The congregation helped establish four Presbyterian churches in Harrisburg. It also created the Lochiel Mission, primarily a Sunday school, as a mission program for workers and their children in the southern part of the city. The congregation sponsored mission efforts for other groups in Harrisburg, such as Chinese and Italian immigrants. In addition, various church groups supported mission work for Native Americans, Inuits, and Mexicans in the United States, and in far-flung lands such as Persia and China.

Since the early 20th century, Market Square Church has diversified its mission to Harrisburg and the wider community. In 1931 the congregation began broadcasting Sunday services over local radio station WHP and furthered its radio outreach to the Harrisburg area in 1962, establishing a Christian radio station, WMSP.

By the early 1970s, Market Square Church began to lose substantial numbers of members, particularly as Harrisburg lost population to the surrounding suburbs. Yet the congregation continued to broaden and deepen its mission work in the Harrisburg area. In 1974 Market Square Church commenced its Korean-language ministry, helping form a Korean-American congregation, which in turn spawned the organization of the Harrisburg Korean Presbyterian Church.

In 1977, Market Square Church helped establish a center for Vietnamese refugee settlement in south central Pennsylvania. This center evolved in the International Service Center, which has helped refugees from around the world who have resettled in our area. With funds gained from the sale of WMSP in 1988, the congregation contributed more money to housing and feeding the poor in Harrisburg and mission efforts in the United States and abroad. Thus Market Square Presbyterian Church has continued its 205-year history of serving Christ and the community.

Addendum

The year 2010 marked the 150th anniversary of the construction of our present church sanctuary. The formal dedication occurred on March 18, 1860, and on March 7, 2010, Market Square celebrated 150 years of being the church on the square.

Following a celebratory luncheon, Susan Bockius, a design consultant with Willet Hauser Architectural Glass in Philadelphia, gave a special presentation. Ms. Bockius has been associated with Willet Hauser for 10 years. She attended Moore College of Art in Philadelphia and for 10 years maintained a free-lance graphic arts and illustration practice. Willet Hauser was established in 1898. Over the years, it has completed window projects for churches, synagogues and other buildings throughout the United States and overseas. One of its earliest projects was the Cadet Chapel at West Point; others include the Arlington National Cemetery Chapel, the Washington National Cathedral and St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City.