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Landmarks: Union Presbyterian Church is tucked away among residences

By Bill Buell



Members of the Union Presbyterian Church sing a hymn during the Sunday morning worship service.

SCHENECTADY — The Rev. Henry W. Maier would recognize the building, but probably not the neighborhood.

The Union Presbyterian Church, built in 1904 in between Wendell Avenue and Park Avenue and just north of Union Street, is only a good stone's throw away from the Union College campus. But it's also an easy place to overlook if you don't know it's there.

Marilyn Leach, who's been attending Union Presbyterian for 42 years, knows exactly where the place is, but concedes that its location — in a residential neighborhood on a small side street — is a bit off the beaten path.

"I never realized what a detriment our location was, but we are kind of tucked back in there," she said. "I always liked it because my husband was part of the faculty at Union College and I guess I had a provincial approach to the place. But unless you knew it was here, you'd never see it."

First pastor

Maier was the first pastor in the history of Union Presbyterian. The congregation was formed in 1900 when 81 parishioners of the First Presbyterian transferred their membership to the new church. The group originally met at the Old Park Place Chapel and the Union College Chapel until the new building was ready to be occupied four years later. At that time, there were a few other homes on Park Avenue, and while Glenwood Boulevard, Parkwood Boulevard and Waverly Place had all been constructed just above Wendell, there were only a few houses built on those roads. There was also a stone quarry across Wendell from the church, and the nearby GE Realty Plot was just getting started.

Meanwhile, the Old Park Place Chapel, at the corner of Nott Street and Park Place since 1873, had been used as an outreach facility of the First Presbyterian Church, which was formed in the Stockade neighborhood prior to the American Revolution. By 1869, the State Street Presbyterian Church had been built to accommodate the growing congregation, and by 1900 another church was necessary as Schenectady's population began skyrocketing.

"The First Presbyterian thought they needed another church to serve the suburbs of Schenectady so they planted a new congregation right here," said Leach, referring to Union Presbyterian. "It wasn't a breakaway or a schism or anything like that. It was just the growth of the church that brought it about, and back then where we are now was the suburbs."

The new edifice was built on a 200-by-160 foot piece of land, purchased for \$4,500. The building is made of brick and white stone, with a large dome on the north side of the structure that replaces a more conventional steeple and covers most of the main sanctuary.

From the main entrance on Park Avenue, visitors walk down a hallway trimmed with dark natural oak, a motif that is common throughout the church. To the left is the main sanctuary, which seats 600 people, and to the right is Lang Lounge, a large meeting room named after longtime trustee Chester Lang.

Modern additions

A large stained-glass window is behind the pulpit, installed in 1968 to replace an older window. There have been renovations and additions to the building since it was constructed, and Dorothy Packard, who understandably could be partial to the way it looked in 1940, says that newer is better.

"I met my husband at Union Presbyterian, and we were married there more than 60 years ago," said Packard, whose

husband, David, died in 2007. “Still, I like it much better now than when I first went there. It was kind of dark and the organ pipes were across the front of the sanctuary. They just seemed to open it up more and some of the new glass windows allow in more light. Most everyone that comes in now comments, ‘what a beautiful church.’ It’s where I met my husband, so it will always be special to me, but it really is a wonderful building.”

An education building was added on to the Wendell Avenue side of the structure in 1954, and along with the major renovation work of the 1960s inside the church, plenty of exterior work was also done, including the removal of a number of ornate cornices, windows and a cupola that rested on top of the dome.

“The building has a huge, high roof, and we had to pay a pretty high price to get new shingles on that steep a structure,” said Dick Brainard, who has been a member since 1970.

“At one point they also put a drop ceiling in Lang Lounge just so they wouldn’t have to do a lot of painting and finishing above it, but then we started having some ceiling leaks. That cost some more money, and we decided to open it back up again, which actually worked better and really made it a much nicer room.”

Back in 1904, the very first sermon in the church on June 19 was delivered by the Rev. George Alexander, an 1866 Union College grad and senior pastor of the University Place Presbyterian Church of New York City. On that first evening there were four more speakers to help commemorate the church’s opening, and those sharing time in the pulpit included the Rev. A. Russell Stevenson of First Presbyterian in the Stockade and the Rev. George R. Lunn, newly installed at the First Reformed in Schenectady earlier that year.

Current pastor

Union Presbyterian has had six senior pastors in its 110-year history, most of that time being taken up by the Rev. Willard E. Rice (1940-65) and the Rev. Donald W. Stake (1966-2000). Its current senior pastor, the Rev. Ruth Kuo, is in her seventh year there.

“I was definitely impressed when I first saw the building, and I’ve always really enjoyed the sanctuary,” said Kuo, who attended Yale Divinity School and Princeton Theological Seminary. “It’s a nice combination of tradition with something a little more modern. It’s a very different, very unique building.”

Even though its mother church, the First Presbyterian, is part of the evangelical Presbyterian Church of America (which was formed in 1973), Union Presbyterian is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church USA.

“Even though our history started with the Presbyterian Church downtown in the Stockade, they were the ones who did not want to stay with the denomination and broke away,” said Kuo, who was born in Taiwan and moved to the U.S. back in 1970 with her family. “We are very open here to allow any group to come in and use our facility.”

“There was no schism between us and First Presbyterian,” said Leach. “We’ve always been a part of the mainline denomination, which is pretty moderate and progressive, rather than liberal, I think, and they went with the more conservative group.”

Sundays at Union Presbyterian begin at 9:30 a.m. with Sunday school for all ages. The traditional worship service starts at 10:30 a.m. and runs for about 45 minutes followed by a fellowship hour.