



**Middlesex Parish Meetinghouse built in 1744**

First Congregational Church of Darien

Our History & Traditions: Then & Now

The Congregationalist tradition began with Robert Browne, the first Protestant dissenter to the Church of England. He maintained the right of individual conscience, and held that each local church should be allowed to determine its own beliefs. Inspired by him, the Puritans attempted to recreate the early church, as they imagined it, from the scriptures. Some remained within the Church of England.

Others did not. These independent-minded dissenters sought religious freedom first in Holland, then the American coastal wilderness. When the Pilgrims came to these shores and stepped off their ships, they brought with them a distinctive faith, steeped in the Calvinist Reform movement but also deeply non-conformist. They professed their faith through an irreducible minimum and a maximum – the local congregation. Covenant and community would be their guides.

Frustration with the christian church they had experienced, led them to design their churches in the New World without the trappings that they felt kept them from Christ's message. No center aisle was to prevent parades of clergy in elaborate costume. Clear windows rather than stained glass were a deliberate choice to see the needs of others and were a vote for transparency and openness - not just in management of their affairs but in actual visual connection to God's natural world and to any passersby that might be curious. There were to be no icons or objects to worship in the church to distract you from God's voice or from concern for your neighbor. There was to be no altar; rather a simple pulpit to hold a bible/sermon/or notes - and may have hidden a foot warmer! And that simple pulpit kept the worship and the word in front of and in sight of the congregation. Each to look into the eyes of their neighbors, see God in those present, and join as a group, a congregation, in prayer and gratitude to our God.

**In this place**, services of worship in the care of our "mother church," the Church of Christ (Today's First Congregational Church in Stamford), were conducted in various Middlesex homes as early as **1668**! It was a long way to travel to present day Stamford especially in the winter. "Winter Church" services were often held in homes [in present day Darien] before the establishment of our congregation as an autonomous daughter of that congregation. During those decades however, and at least as early as **1692**, requests were made to the parent congregation to allow those residents east of Noroton River to establish their own congregation. Stamford was reluctant to let us go fearing it would weaken the parent congregation and with our not having the population or funds to "settle" a resident minister.

Such requests were repeatedly made (reference can be found in the Annual Reports of the Stamford Church), and repeatedly refused. "We shall never let you go as you are a part of our very hearts..." Some families never went to worship in Stamford - because of distance more than any disagreement - but assembled themselves with other families for "study (of the Scriptures), humiliation (self examination as to how they felt themselves to be in need of God's judgement and guidance) and prayer."

It was out of these regular meetings for worship - winter and summer - that an ever stronger desire for an "Ecclesiastical Society" (a gathered congregation to follow after the ways of the Christ - "church") developed. The annual requests to the parent church Annual Meeting were met with the same negative, but loving response. It was

not until several years of very bad winters of flu that killed many, many people up and down the coast that the Stamford Church relented. Their response began with the same words as often repeated before: "We shall never let you..., but if you can settle a minister (provide for the needs of a full-time divine including housing, horse and modest means) we shall encourage you but never let you go from our hearts as we are and ever shall be, one in the Lord, Jesus Christ."

Recorded meetings for worship independent of Stamford took place in present day Darien at least as early as 1730 and formal minutes record this fact as taking place in November of **1736**, the date to which the Connecticut Conference of the UCC properly dates our **founding**.

In **1737** the Connecticut legislature, petitioned by 80 families, declared an Ecclesiastical Society separate from Stamford to be formed and called **Middlesex Parish**. In 1739 a meeting was held in the John Bates homestead [now moved and known as the Bates-Scofield House of the Darien Historical Society] to raise taxes to build a meetinghouse. In **1744** our church was officially organized as the **Church of Christ in Middlesex**; the community called it's first "settled minister" with the ordination of **Moses Mather**, a man of 19 years who was teaching at Yale College; and the first meetinghouse, a white wood frame building, was built. Well situated on the King's Highway, the post route between New York and Boston, the meetinghouse was not only the first center of Christian worship for the community, it also served the spiritual needs of countless travelers.

[Politically the area of Middlesex Parish remained part of Stamford until **1820** when **Darien** received its charter to be an independent town. The name "Congregational" Church was a very late entry, used only to distinguish our congregation for the later established Darien communities of faith. When the **Congregational Christian Churches** were established in Cleveland in **1958** we were "Charter Members" of this new movement [now known as the "United Church of Christ."] Like many New England churches we kept the name "Congregational" for two reasons:

1. it denotes our polity [syn: church government] of every member having an equal vote with the highest authority - under The Word of God (the Bible) and Jesus Christ - being the congregation as a whole.
2. We liked to link ourselves to the first Christian congregations (the Pilgrims and others) who came to our shores.]

By 1836 the Church had outgrown its frame meetinghouse. In **1837** a new and larger brick meetinghouse, in the Greek Revival style, was completed adjacent to the original meetinghouse; in **1841** the bell was installed in the church tower [recently restored and still in use]. The center pulpit and unadorned design of our Church is typical of New England. Anyone who steps into the meetinghouse today can sense the long history, rich tradition, and peaceful feeling maintained by its simplicity.

From 1744 to the present we have called 22 settled ministers - please refer to a wooden plaque on the wall at the back of our Church. Our first minister, **Moses Mather [1744-1806]** was in the pulpit for an astonishing 64 years. Other ministers serving 20 years or more were: **Ezra Kinney [1839-1859]**, **Alfred Schmaltz [1938-1969]**, and **Ron Evans [1985-2007]**.

Our church has always been known for an admirable and forward looking social conscience that has made us regional leaders, not just for decades, but for centuries - with ministers and members serving our congregation, town, country and our world. Because we are committed to the sacredness of individual conscience, our Church has often taken a stand for justice despite existing community custom and civil law.

In the eighteenth century, we objected to England's unjust control over her colonies. **Reverend Mather** was known as a distinguished scholar and a leading citizen - his descendants remain in our congregation today. As a patriot during the Revolutionary War, Reverend Mather was imprisoned twice. The second time, along with 50 members of the congregation, when a band of British soldiers and Tory sympathizers raided our church during a Sunday Service and transported the prisoners by boat to Long Island [Town Hall auditorium mural depicts the arrest.] Rev. Mather and the majority were eventually released but six died in the New York prison. Rev. Mather died in 1806 and is buried with his three wives, that consecutively had predeceased him, in the Rowayton cemetery.

In the nineteenth century:

- **1806-1818** Our **first Sunday School** begins.

- **1859-1866** Church enlarged 15 feet at the eastern end – [seam still visible.]

- **1861-1869** A melodeon, the first musical instrument in our church, installed in the front gallery [later replaced by a two-manual pipe organ, pumped by hand.]

- **c.1875** A seedling from the famous “**Charter Oak**” in Hartford is planted on the grounds next to the Church [the Evans’ bench now sits beneath it.]

Our church protected and assisted runaway slaves in their quest for freedom by way of the "Underground Railway". **Reverend Jonathan Barnes [1860-1866]** served the parish throughout the Civil War and visited military prisons, advocating more humane treatment and improved medical care – a marble memorial tablet was installed on the eastern wall of the church by his congregation.

In the twentieth century:

- **1923 Parsonage** built. [improved several times, most recently in 2007]
- **1928 Parish Hall** built as well as a proscenium to replace the former plastered arch behind the pulpit - and a new organ [that was to last for almost 70 years] installed.

In World War II, 92 men and women from our church served in the armed forces. In 1948, the **Morehouse Room** was named in memory of **Captain Alan R. Morehouse**, a descendant of Rev. Mather, who was killed in action on D-Day at Normandy in 1944.

During **Reverend Schmalz’ tenure [1938-1969]**, Darien experienced the greatest growth and transitioned from a small town to an upscale commuter community. Ethnic and religious exclusions had existed in Darien for decades. Our church was in the forefront of breaking down those barriers.

- **1950** Land purchased [on which 11 Brookside Road now stands - donated since 1980 for \$1.00 annually to A Better Chance in Darien for use as a residence - and on what is now the lower parking lot.]
- **1952** Upper parking lot built [believed to be the site of first meeting house; and on which a tennis court had existed from 1914]
- **1955** Residence and land to the east of Parish Hall purchased and altered to accommodate Church School classes and living space for staff.
- **1958** Demolition of above and building of 10 classrooms and chapel for the Church School.
- **1960** **The First Congregational Church of Darien Nursery School** authorized by vote of The First Congregational Church of Darien as a self-supporting yet non-profit entity.
- **1967** The first **Darien Antiques Show** begins a tradition in our church.
- **1968** Constructed: administrative wing [2 minister's studies, office, choir

robing room, and youth room plus 4 more classrooms for the Church School.]  
**The Celia Duncan Library** given in memorial by **Wilbur Duncan and Family** and reconfigured in the space of the former church office [across the hall from the library, the current treasurer/church school director's office is in the space formerly used as the study for the Senior Minister]

Under **Reverend Evans [1985-2007]** we were a clear and strong voice for open housing, inclusivity, the ecumenical movement and interfaith understanding, and human rights.

- **1996** New **Walker organ** installed, choir loft and meetinghouse renovated, handicapped access provided with a new southern entrance into the meetinghouse.
- **1990's** Development of the **Memorial Garden** with Church donations, and dedicated in 1999 as a gift from Robert and Jean Croll and Family.

In the early part of the 21st century, 273 years later, we still exhibit the traits of:

- New England frugality, independence, hard work, and yankee ingenuity
- a love of community and a willingness to serve
- an understanding of “barn-raising, lend a hand interdependence”
- great admiration and appreciation for music.

- **2007** Parsonage improved
- **2008** New Bosendorfer piano installed.
- **2009** Church Kitchen completely renovated.

We are a Church family who have communicated difficult ideas in civil discourse with a deep and abiding respect for each other as independent individuals. We have listened carefully to each other with open hearts; we are better for it and have often learned and grown because of it.

We have always been generous with our time, talent, and our treasure. We give to our community, country, and to our world - and we have always done so.

- We give through civic and public organizations as individuals.
- We give so many uncounted and unrecorded kindnesses to each other through Church Friends.
- Many of us contribute our time and energy to teach our children; to serve on our boards and committees; and to care for and communicate with our members.

- For the annual rent of \$1. our Church gives a home to A Better Chance in Darien.
- We give away 10% of all pledge contributions; 100% of all of our numerous special collections throughout the year; and all of the income from the Mission Endowment Fund.
- We give away our entire Easter and Christmas collections.
- Proceeds from the weekend Annual Antiques Show help to support our Church, as well as nearly 20 local charities chosen by the Board of Christian Outreach. A Better Chance in Darien has been chosen as the beneficiary of the 2009 Preview Party proceeds.

This has always been a wonderful place to learn and share what you have experienced about God without feeling insignificant or uninformed. Our services are open to all, and we maintain a strong commitment to the ecumenical movement and to interfaith understanding. Our members govern this Church by consensus - we have no bishop or governing authority above us except God - we choose our own ministers, and in fact, consider all members to be ministers.

Our Church continues to personify the social conscience that has been a part of our history from its inception; continues its tradition of generosity and outreach; and continues to welcome anyone seeking peace, grace and the desire to live a Christian life.



