

2020 Hindsight:
A Short History of The First Congregational Church of Darien

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I. Introduction

The First Congregational Church of Darien celebrated the 275th anniversary of the ordination of our first settled minister, Rev. Moses Mather, by publishing narratives of key events and people during 2019. These vignettes, which were found in Sunday bulletins, were taken from the oral and written traditions which have been passed down over the centuries. The Town of Darien's 200th anniversary followed in 2020 and the bicentennial celebration provided the perfect opportunity to edit and merge the monthly notes into a booklet. The church also decided to publish the tract on the internet to reach a broader audience.

II. Pilgrims' Progress

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Thus, to sketch a true history of our church from the very beginning, we'd have to start with the small group of the apostles. Yet, when you decided to take a look at this, you didn't expect to read a history of the early Christians, the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation or King Henry VIII's creation of the Anglican Church. Rather, you may wish to learn about our church's more recent history. To get there, we reach back to that same group we celebrate at Thanksgiving: the Pilgrims!

If you were in England in the 16th Century, you would worship at your local Anglican Church. There, you'd find the same set of seven sacraments, liturgy, church hierarchy and architecture that were in Catholic churches. The big difference? The King or Queen of England, not the Pope, was the head of the national church. Along came the Pilgrims, or Puritan Separatists as they were called then, who wanted to "purify" the Anglican Church of all its Catholic influences and get back to the basics. They thought everything in worship should be tied to the Bible and, accordingly, wanted only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, they hated the statues and stained-glass windows that they found in their churches. Were these things in the Bible? They said, "No!" Did these items distract you from worshipping Jesus? They said, "Yes!"

Queen Elizabeth I and her successor, King James I (yes, the same guy who commissioned the King James Bible), were not fans of these Separatists and their unusual ideas. Indeed, James was so intolerant of the Separatists that they began to fear for their own lives. Thus, they fled to Holland in 1609 to set up their own churches...which looked remarkably like our meetinghouse! Indeed, if you're ever in Amsterdam, do yourself a favor and check out the "English Reformed Church" that the Separatists established there. As in our church, you'll find no center aisle for Bishops to parade down, clear windows to let the sun in, simple wooden pews and no statues. The similarities will blow you away.

Unfortunately, Holland didn't work out for most of the Separatists. Although there was far more religious freedom, economic opportunities were few and many of the parents didn't like the influences on their children from the broader Dutch society. They began looking around for another opportunity...and that was in America! They'd get a clean start, spread the Gospel to the New World and do their best to convert the Native Americans to Christianity. Hence, the Separatists became "Pilgrims" when they hopped the Mayflower in 1620.

III. Coming to America

When the Pilgrims landed on the shore of Massachusetts, they had lots of concerns. What to plant? What animals could they catch and eat? How to deal with the Native Americans? One thing they didn't worry about was how they were going to worship God, for their services continued in the same manner as they had in Europe.

People would go to the meetinghouse twice on Sunday, once from 9 to noon and then again from 2 to 5 p.m. Work of any sort, even hunting for game, was forbidden on the Lord's Day. Prior to the morning service, according to an early letter, the people would assemble "each with his musket...place themselves in order three abreast, and [would be] led by a sergeant without beat of drum."

Once they reached the meetinghouse, the males sixteen and older sat in pews on one side of the sanctuary; the women and children sat on the other. Scripture would be read, the Lord's Prayer and extemporaneous prayers would be said, and the pastor would "prophesy." While no examples of prophecies are recorded, Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop noted that they were similar in nature to a mini-sermon, consisting of an exposition of scripture's spiritual application, together with an emphasis on Christian doctrine.

And, yes, voices were lifted in song. However, the music was nothing like the jazz fest we have in our meetinghouse today or even the formal hymns the Pilgrims once had in Church of England services. The Pilgrims were "people of the book" and, without musical accompaniment, they sang Biblical psalms. Many in the congregation were illiterate, so the worship leader would sing each verse of a psalm and the congregation would repeat that verse. One can imagine a Plymouth Colony meetinghouse filling with voices singing the 107th Psalm:

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy; And gathered them out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south. They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation."

The Pilgrims were successful in Plymouth County and were soon joined by others from across the Atlantic. They began to plant churches in Massachusetts and out into New England.

IV. Early Congregationalism

Each of the new churches in America selected their own pastor, resulting in what we now call "Congregational Churches." Congregationalism, according to historian James F. Cooper Jr., gave the early political culture of New England several important concepts: "adherence to fundamental or 'higher' laws, strict limitations upon all human authority, free consent, local self-government, and, especially, extensive lay participation."

Without any centralized authority, however, the early Congregationalists struggled to agree on common beliefs and practices. Add in the natural desire of these folks to explore new places and you had a lot of movement in New England. This is seen in our church ancestry, which can be drawn from Watertown, Massachusetts (founded in 1630), to Wethersfield, Connecticut (1635), to our mother church in Stamford (1641). Imagine, in a horse-drawn era, being a member of three different churches spread out over more than 170 miles in just 11 years!

Thanks to a land grant from the New Haven Colony, 28 families laid the foundations of what became The First Congregational Church of Stamford in the summer of 1641. The meetinghouse was a small, wooden building located at the junction of Atlantic and Main Streets in what is now Veterans Park. It was surrounded by fortress walls and further protected by a sentry on guard and four muskets at-the-ready, according to a Stamford church historian. Why? Fear of attack from Native Americans, who were not thrilled by the continuing encroachment on their lands.

The meetinghouse was the first "town hall" of Stamford as well as the first church building. Why? Congregationalism was the state church, ordained ministers were supported by taxpayers, and only full church members could vote in elections. How did you become a full church member? You gave a personal testimony in front of the entire congregation of a conversion experience, which showed you were saved by Jesus and, therefore, among the "elect" who was predestined for heaven. Yet, whether you were a full member or not, you had to attend church services, obey church laws and pay church taxes.

Today, in our mostly secular society, this kind of thing sounds nuts. However, at that time, the vast majority of people believed that government and the church worked hand-in-hand, providing people with the best means of worshiping God and forming a society that matched what Jesus would like to see. Just as importantly, in a world filled with kings and queens, Congregational Churches gave ordinary people a tremendous amount of power to make decisions and to hold their leaders in check. In short, our American democracy owes a great deal to the early Congregationalists.

Growing out of this Congregational tradition, 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.

V. A Church is Formed in Middlesex

If you were a resident of Middlesex, what Darien was called then, you would get up very early every Sunday morning, hitch your wagon to your horse, and drive down the King's Highway for a service in Stamford at 9 a.m. At noon, the preacher would excuse you, you'd find somewhere to have your lunch, then go back for another service between 2 and 5. Finally, after 6 p.m., you'd arrive back home. This was considered your "day of rest."

Grumbling about this arrangement went on in Middlesex for nearly 100 years. The winters were as bad then as they are now, so an exception to the daily Sunday routine was finally made by the Stamford church. In 1668, Middlesex folks were permitted to have winter worship services in members' homes, provided that they still followed the formalities practiced in Stamford. And, of course, they still had to make the trip to Stamford for the other nine months of the year.

Beginning in 1692, people in Middlesex began petitioning their brethren in Stamford to allow them to build their own meetinghouse, hire their own pastor, and avoid the ridiculous round-trip on the King's Highway every Sunday. They were met with a resounding "No!" Church leaders in Stamford had two major reasons for not allowing the Middlesex folks to depart. First, they did not believe that the people east of the Noroton River had the resources to properly maintain a meetinghouse and pay an ordained minister of the Gospel. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they knew that the departure of the Middlesex crowd would reduce their own church attendance and weaken their financial situation.

As one can imagine, things did not get better. A break-away group in Middlesex decided to stop worshiping in Stamford altogether. These individuals, according to a church history published in 2008, "assembled for the study (of the Scriptures), humiliation (self-examination as to how they felt to be in need of God's judgment and guidance) and prayer." Services, whether authorized or not by the Stamford church, were now being held in Middlesex year-round, albeit without an ordained pastor or meetinghouse. This went on for decades until the Stamford church finally threw in the towel in 1730. Provided that the people in Middlesex could "provide for the needs of a full-time divine including housing, horse and modest means..." the Stamford leadership agreed that they could form their own church. Rejoicing was heard throughout what would become Darien.

House worship continued throughout the 1730s. The Connecticut legislature, petitioned by 80 families, formed an Ecclesiastical Society separate from Stamford in 1737 and it was named Middlesex Parish. A meeting was held in 1739 in the John Bates homestead – now moved from its original location and known as the Bates-Scofield House of the Museum of Darien -- to raise taxes to build a meetinghouse.

The names of our earliest church leaders have been lost to history. However, a young Yale graduate who arrived in Middlesex in the 1740s would go on to become the most famous minister our area would ever have. His name was Moses Mather.

VI. Reverend Mather Takes the Reins

Moses Mather was born in Lyme, Connecticut, on February 23, 1719, and he came from a very distinguished family of clergymen in New England. He was invited to Middlesex to preach shortly after his graduation from Yale. After he delivered many sermons over the course of two years, it was decided to make him the church's settled pastor. On May 25, 1744, Mather accepted the terms of employment, with an annual salary set at 46 pounds, to be paid in silver or wheat, barley, oats, Indian corn, pork or beef at market rate.

On June 6, 1744, at 7 a.m., 25 men and 35 women formally accepted Mather as their ordained minister in their newly constructed meetinghouse. Incredibly, Mather would go on to serve as pastor for the next 62 years until his death in 1806 at the age of 87. He performed 921 baptisms, solemnized 361 marriages and admitted 258 persons to the church, while also being awarded a Doctor of Divinity Degree in 1791 from The College of New Jersey (now Princeton). He had four wives -- in succession, of course -- and several of his descendants are members of the congregation today. Shortly after his death, a friend penned the following account of Mather's personal appearance and his humor:

“He was a man of about middle stature, rather slender than otherwise, of a pleasant expression of countenance and free and easy in conversation. Dr. Mather...had a rich vein of humor [as shown in this story]: A local man who pretended to be a sort of half Quaker, half infidel, was a member of the vigilance committee in the Revolution. He was known to stir up trouble and found an opportunity as he rode along with Mather: ‘Your master, Jesus, used to ride an ass,’ he said, ‘so how is it that you ride a horse?’ ‘Because,’ Mather replied, ‘the only available ass is a committee man!’”

When the American Revolution began in 1765, Mather became an ardent supporter of the independence of the colonies. His sermons were known for patriotic zeal and most of his flock loved him. Yet, there were members of the church and others in Fairfield County who remained loyal to King George. Known as “Tories,” they regarded Mather with bitter hatred.

On August 3, 1779, five members of the congregation along with three other Tories seized Mather and his four sons and carried them away to New York as prisoners. Mather and two of his sons were released about a month later, but an even more severe trial was in store for him in the summer of 1781.

VII. The Raid on the Meetinghouse

Five years after the Declaration of Independence, raids in Connecticut and New York had become common. One week, men from the mainland would raid Tories' farms on Long Island, the next Tories would be clearing out Fairfield County homesteads. It got so bad that local women would hide their silver from the Tories in the Pine Brook (a stream that was subsequently renamed the Goodwives River for this reason).

Mather's "rebel preaching" grated on the ears of the local Tories. So much so that they began planning a raid on the meetinghouse itself. The Tories knew they couldn't do it alone, so they enlisted the help of their friends in the British stronghold of Lloyd's Neck, New York. On the evening of Saturday, July 21, 1781, more than 35 men crossed Long Island Sound in large whale boats, which had plenty of additional room for captives. They tied the boats up on the Fish Islands and used smaller craft to get to shore. There, they met with their Connecticut brethren and camped overnight in the swampy marshland near the current service plaza on I-95.

Their target? The Sunday morning service at the meetinghouse. Their goal? Pocketing jewelry and capturing Mather and the male patriots in the pews. However, a Tory scouting party determined that some of their most hated enemies had skipped morning worship, so they waited for the 2 p.m. service.

When the scouts saw that the pews were full that afternoon, they gave the go-ahead for the attack on what is now the most famous day in Darien history, July 22, 1781. Within minutes, Tories barged through the front doors, causing at least two members of the congregation to escape through the windows. Shots rang out and all hell had broken loose in the sanctuary. Legend has it that a parishioner named Sally Dibble defended a young boy from an armed Tory, a moment depicted on one of the walls of the Darien Town Hall auditorium. Mather quickly called for calm from the pulpit and, miraculously, no one was killed. Much weeping was heard as Mather and 47 other men, including future Darien founder Thaddeus Bell, were tied in twos and taken away.

The Tories marched their captives to the coast, then began transporting them out in the small boats to the Fish Islands. Yet, because of the delay back at the meetinghouse, they suddenly found themselves nearing low tide, which was at 6:04 p.m. that evening. The whale boats could not be refloated! The Tories and their captives were stuck on the Fish Islands as the sun began to set. Did no one think to bring a tide chart?

Meanwhile, an alarm had been sounded throughout Fairfield County. Patriots grabbed their muskets, gathered at the end of Contentment Island and began taking pot-shots at the Tories. Mather and the captives were moved to the far Fish Island for their safety, while the Tories engaged the local militia across the water. The tide finally rose and the Tories headed for Lloyd's Neck with their captives and stolen jewelry.

Imagine the scene that Monday as Mather and his flock were marched through Long Island towns. Mocked and likely spit upon, they truly were the suffering servants of the Revolution. Things didn't get better in a New York jail. Poor food and water, as well as exposure to the unpleasantness of an 18th Century prison, resulted in the deaths of six members of the congregation before Mather, Bell and the remaining prisoners were released.

Incredibly, despite this experience, Mather would return to the pulpit in December, 1781, and continue his anti-British sermons until Cornwallis's surrender to George Washington in Yorktown, Virginia, in 1783. At that point, many of the Tories headed for Nova Scotia and Great Britain, knowing that they'd face the wrath of their neighbors if they stayed. Mather, meanwhile, occupied our pulpit until his death in 1806. He is buried in the Brookside Cemetery in Rowayton and is memorialized on a tablet to the left of our pulpit.

VIII. Early 1800s: Troubled Waters

You'll recall that one of the huge benefits reaped by colonial Congregational churches was support from the state. Everyone in Connecticut – Christian, Jew, atheist -- had a portion of their taxes allocated to our church. Thus, other than raising funds for the original meetinghouse and wartime deprivations during the Revolution, our church faced no significant financial issues during its first nine decades of existence. That changed with the enactment of the Connecticut Constitution in 1818, when churches were cut off from state assistance. All of a sudden, the church had to go to each congregant to secure a pledge for the coming year, a practice which continues into the present day.

While the Stewards dealt with raising newly-needed funds, the Board of Deacons was faced with a crisis of their own. Folks began arguing over the nature of God in what became known as the "Unitarian Controversy." Congregations throughout New England fought over issues such as:

- 1) Is Jesus truly the Son of God or was he just a nice rabbi who taught good things?
- 2) Could the Holy Spirit be seen as a Person within the Godhead, or was that just how early Christians described how God moved in the world?

Today, a poll of our congregation would find people all over the map on such issues and

we're cool with that. People are welcome wherever they are in their spiritual journey. Back then, though? This was the kind of thing that split churches wide-open. People called "Unitarians" wanted to still read scripture, but no longer desired to worship Jesus. Traditional Christians, known as "Trinitarians," thought these Unitarians were nuts and wanted them shown the door.

Our church braved this contentious debate without breaking up. However, in Stamford you can still see evidence of this fight. Within a rock's throw of the downtown Congregational church building you'll find a Unitarian church. Yes, the break-away folks decided to build their meetinghouse where the Trinitarians could see it each Sunday. Nice.

Meanwhile, it was during this period that the people east of the Noroton River were permitted to break away from Stamford. The hero of this cause? None other than the aforementioned Thaddeus Bell. He led the charge in the Connecticut legislature for independence and, in 1820, our town was formed. Bell rejected calls to name the town "Bellville" and is credited with proposing the name "Darien" instead. He lived until the ripe old age of 91 and is buried in the Slawson Graveyard on Hanson Road.

IX. A New Meetinghouse and a Station on the Underground Railroad

Our original meetinghouse was found at the corner of Brookside Avenue and Old King's Highway, where the upper parking lot is found now. It was 50 feet long and 30 feet wide, including three galleries above the floor. It was also the place where the first town meetings of Darien took place. Yet, by the 1830s, it was described as "an old, rickety weather-beaten structure...but for its steeple, it might have been taken for some old deserted mill which had worn itself out in grinding grists for the natural instead of the spiritual body."

On April 25, 1836, a meeting was held to consider building a new structure adjacent to the old one. By December of 1837, our current meetinghouse was ready for worship, coming in at a cost of \$3,350.51, just \$47.09 more than the figure originally budgeted. In addition to New England frugality, savings were realized from the salvation of old timbers and windows from the old structure. Pews were rented at auction, with those at the front going for \$12 a year and ones at the back bringing in just \$1. Thus, if you want to sit in the expensive pews each Sunday, move to the front! In 1841, a 500 lb. bell made in Medway, Massachusetts, was installed in the church tower – the same one that rings today.

Rev. Ezra D. Kinney was installed as our minister on August 8, 1838. He led a number of revivals and added 178 new members to our church during his 21 years of ministry. During Kinney's pastorate, our first parsonage was constructed in 1859 just down the road from the meetinghouse at 581 Boston Post Road. Most importantly, Kinney was an abolitionist who moved the church to pass an anti-slavery resolution in 1839 which read:

“Resolved, That to buy and sell human beings and to hold and treat them as merchandise, or to treat servants, free or bond, in any matter inconsistent with the fact that they are intelligent and voluntary beings, made in the image of God, is a violation of the principles in the word of God, and should be treated by all Churches of our Lord Jesus Christ as an immorality inconsistent with a profession of the Christian Religion and (2) Resolved, That this Church regards the laws and usages in relation to Slavery which exist in many of the States of this Union as inconsistent with the character and responsibilities of a free and Christian people, and hold it to be the duty of every Christian and especially of every Minister of the Gospel, to use all prudent and lawful efforts for the peaceful abolition of slavery.”

Kinney went much further than the law allowed. Despite significant penalties for assisting runaway slaves, legend has it that he sheltered former slaves in our meetinghouse’s basement as part of the Underground Railroad. No written records were kept of this, of course, but the oral history of this was strong enough that Rev. Ronald Evans would lead school children on tours of our basement during his recent pastorate.

X. The Civil War and Late 1800s

Kinney was succeeded in 1860 by Rev. Jonathan E. Barnes. Shortly thereafter, the meetinghouse was expanded by fifteen feet at the east end – the change in the brick between the old and the new is still noticeable today. The extra space was used for the installation of our first musical instrument, a melodeon, which was a small organ popular in the time period.

When the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, our church was thrust into the Civil War. Rev. Robert Bell, in a sermon preached in conjunction with our country’s centennial celebration, said: “The North rose en masse to preserve the country from ruin, every community and almost every individual seeking to do what could be done. This town was not behind the others, nor the people of this church behind the other inhabitants. The pastor loved his country and encouraged his people and thought strongly of going himself. Out of this people of whom so many are past age, there went almost if not quite a quarter of the male members. And the ladies not only encouraged the men to go out but organized to perform useful labors at home. And many were the boxes they sent and liberal the contributions raised.”

Tragically, as noted by local historian Kenneth Reiss, twenty-five percent of the Darien men who served during the Civil War did not live to see the end of the conflict. One such soldier was Sgt. Charles Clock, a carriage-maker and member of our church. Sgt. Clock died of battle wounds in September of 1864 at the age of 27. After a funeral in our meetinghouse, his body was buried behind his family’s home on Brookside Road.

The pain from the war, unfortunately, was to go from the pews to the pulpit. Rev. Barnes went south to visit Darien men in Confederate prisons, including the notorious outdoor prison

camp in Andersonville, Georgia. Disease was rampant in such places and Barnes was exposed to cholera and other diseases. The war ended in 1865. A year later, weakened by all that he had experienced, Barnes died at the age of 38. The congregation honored him with a memorial tablet, which is found on a wall to the right of our pulpit.

A number of short pastorates followed Barnes's death, including that of Rev. Charles Walker, a veteran of the Civil War. His great-great grandson, Bob Fatherley, a current member of our church, tells the story of how Walker fell in love with a Darien woman, Alice Morehouse, only to be told by her father that she was too young to marry. Walker left town and helped found The First Congregational Church in Huntington, West Virginia. After two years, he returned to Darien and, with her father's blessing, married Miss Morehouse.

The Walkers lived long, happy lives, spending much of their time in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he was pastor of the Congregational Church and she was a highly-regarded writer of prose and poetry. They were among the first to popularize a new mode of transportation -- the bicycle -- and Walker was a pioneer in growing apples for local markets. Walker's resting place in Spring Grove Cemetery, next to his beloved wife, is honored with an American flag each Memorial Day due to his service in the Union cause.

XI. 19th and 20th Century Changes in Worship and Infrastructure

Congregationalists have sometimes been mocked by other religious folks as "God's frozen people" because of our insistence on traditions. Yet, we've had quite a few changes in our worship practices and buildings over the years.

For example, until 1848, we used real wine for communion. This was somewhat strange given that, in 1832, the church voted to require all members "to abstain from making, vending or drinking ardent spirits except as a medicine...and that we will never leave this work until it has been completed." One wonders why it took 16 years to implement this rule in the meetinghouse itself? Communion changed again in 1900, when the grape juice was served for the first time in individual glass cups, replacing the communal goblets used previously.

Back to the 1861 melodeon mentioned previously – it didn't last long. Just eight years later it was replaced by a pipe organ. This organ was hand-pumped and surely gave a workout to those providing our music back in the day. It was ultimately succeeded by an organ which was installed in 1928. This organ would last until 1996, when our present Walker organ was delivered from England. The installers were not happy, however, because they said the new organ simply could not take the heat and humidity found in New England summers. Thus, air conditioning was installed to allow the organ to stay in top shape. Secondary beneficiaries were the people in the pews!

Our ancestors didn't seem to worry too much about keeping cool in the summer, but they were concerned about how to keep themselves warm during the other three seasons. In the early years of the 20th Century there were still two wood-burning stoves in our meetinghouse – one in the back of the church, one in the center. Parishioners would use tongs to grab a piece of coal from a stove and place it in a “foot-warmer” which they would carry to their pews. This went on until the installation of steam heat in 1925.

You may have noted the classic light fixtures on each side of the interior walls of our meetinghouse, but have you thought about their predecessors? Until the installation of electric lights in 1911, the congregation was served by thirty oil lamps, each of which had to be cleaned, trimmed and filled by our sexton. The move to electricity was not without bumps, especially when it came to one evening wedding that year. As Francis Holmes was waiting for his bride to enter the sanctuary, the lights went out! The ushers ran around looking for candles and the wedding finally proceeded by candlelight.

The 20th Century brought other significant changes to our infrastructure, including the construction of the parsonage in 1923, Parish Hall in 1928, church offices, the nursery school and the Morehouse Room, which was named in 1948 for Captain Alan Morehouse, a descendant of Rev. Mather who was killed in action on D-Day. The church also bought the property across the street at 11 Brookside Road, which went on to become a home for the scholars of Darien's A Better Chance program for 35 years. In 2015, the church renovated the house and converted it into a second parsonage, and is now used as the residence for two of our ministers, Ben and Christine Geeding.

Keeping all of this infrastructure going? Our Board of Stewards, Church Council and individual volunteers. Roy Baharian was a classic example of someone who served on our boards and picked up a tool when needed. Whether the problem was in the meetinghouse's basement or kitchen, he could be found fixing it from the 1960s until his passing in 1999. We've also had amazing donors over the years, including an anonymous couple who purchased our Bosendorfer piano in 2008.

XII. Matters of Conscience and Social Justice

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.

Rev. Mather's patriotic sermons during the American Revolution, Rev. Kinney's efforts with the Underground Railroad, and Rev. Barnes's trips to Confederate prison camps to alleviate the suffering of Union soldiers have been previously documented. In the 20th Century, we supported our church members in both World War I and World War II, of course. However, even

before the U.S. entered the latter conflict, we organized a Refugee Committee in 1939 to join with other churches in resettling thousands of homeless Europeans. In our case, we helped find homes for persons of Polish, Russian and Romanian descent here in Connecticut.

Rev. Alfred Schmalz, our pastor during World War II, found himself in quite the conundrum. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the vast majority of Americans were eager to exact revenge. Schmalz, though, was a pacifist. During the war, he was not even permitted to serve as an “official” air raid warden in Darien because he had a conscientious objection to taking the oath to defend the country by arms. Despite this disconnect between pulpit and pew on the subject of war, he remained beloved by the congregation and served in our pulpit until 1969. His efforts towards pacifism remained unfulfilled. In 1950, 24 church members served in the Korean conflict, and at the time that Schmalz retired, 21 men were in the armed forces, including some in Vietnam. A tablet at the back of our meetinghouse honors Schmalz, whose 31 years in our pulpit make him second only to Moses Mather in the length of his pastorate.

When the Congregational Christian Churches were established in Cleveland in 1958 we were "Charter Members" of this new movement, which is now known as the "United Church of Christ." Our Church today is one of more than 5,000 churches and nearly one million members across the United States that make up the distinct and diverse community of The United Church of Christ (UCC).

Following cultural upheavals in the 1960s and the growing secularization of life in the 1970s, the church's focus moved from social fellowship to mission. The ABC House was a prime example of this. For decades, the church rented its house across the street to “A Better Chance of Darien,” a nonprofit organization which provides scholarships to academically talented girls of color from underserved communities, allowing them to realize their academic and social potential while living in Darien and attending Darien High School. The rent? One dollar a year. The program moved to a new, expanded house in 2014, and church members' support for this cause is still ongoing.

Under Reverend Evans, who served as senior pastor from 1985 until 2007, we were a clear and strong voice for open housing, inclusivity, the ecumenical movement and interfaith understanding, as well as human rights.

We were at the forefront of a movement to allow seniors to stay in their homes rather than reside in assisted care facilities. The Women's Association began a ministry to link trusted carpenters, electricians and other tradesmen to seniors in need of household repairs. This grew into the town-wide program “At Home in Darien,” which now has an office adjacent to the Mather Center on Renshaw Road.

The First Congregational Church of Darien's Board of Christian Outreach puts faith into action by making sure our church addresses the needs of others. The board notes that "our first priority is helping those who lack the most immediate, basic necessities, whether locally, nationally, or internationally. We promote permanent and systemic improvements in people's lives by contributing both financially and physically to hands-up programs."

For decades, starting in 1967, the church hosted the Darien Antiques Show, with the proceeds donated to over a dozen charities chosen by the Outreach board. When tastes changed, the Antiques Show was shuttered in favor of the Darien House Tour: Homes with Heart, which began in 2015. In its first five years, this event raised over \$300,000 for nearly 20 local nonprofit organizations which serve the disadvantaged, youth and elderly in our surrounding communities. In 2020, the two lead beneficiaries are A Better Chance of Darien and the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants.

Following the lead of Rev. Dale Rosenberger, who joined our church as senior minister in 2012, bringing his passion for leading adult mission trips and his vision for contributing to the world, we have also participated in Habitat for Humanity projects in Connecticut, the Caribbean and Central America over the past several years. With the financial and hands-on assistance of church members, homes have been built and repaired in economically disadvantaged communities. Similarly, our youth and their chaperones travel each June to do similar projects in a U.S. community in conjunction with other churches.

Finally, throughout the year, the church assists the underprivileged through smaller ventures such as "Food First Sunday" and "Soup or Bowl" on Super Bowl Sunday. During the holidays, members participate in Person-to-Person's Dove program, making financial contributions or food donations to help provide a full day of food at the holidays for seniors and families. We also give away 10 percent of all pledge contributions and a significant amount of our Easter and Christmas collections. In short, we are led by God not to look inward, but outward in service to the community.

As we move into the 2020s and beyond, what makes The First Congregational Church an amazing community of faith? Rev. Evans put it best when he said:

"Our church continues to personify the social conscience that has been 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."

Amen.