

First Congregational Church of Darien The Church with A History

Our church, and Congregationalism itself, grew out of the English Puritan movement, which rejected the authority of the established Church of England and led to the emigration of “separatists” and “dissenters,” to the New World -- beginning with the Pilgrims landing in Plymouth, Mass. in 1620, and continuing with the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and then the New Haven Colony several years later. Then, as now, Congregationalism was based on a direct relationship between God and worshipper with no intermediaries, a commitment to serving the local and wider community in matters of mission and conscience, and extensive participation by members in church governance without outside interference.

The histories of The First Congregational Church of Darien and the Town of Darien are inextricably bound together. In fact, there would have been no town without our church. Middlesex, as the area now known as Darien was then known, was part of the Stamford Parish until 1737, when the Connecticut legislature formed Middlesex Parish and allowed local residents to erect their own church and effectively begin to self-govern. This was followed by a meeting two years later 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.



Oldest-known photo of the church, circa 1860

In 1744, the church called Moses Mather, a recent Yale graduate from a distinguished family of clergymen that included Cotton Mather, to be its first settled minister. His terms of employment included an annual salary of 46 pounds, to be paid in silver or wheat, barley, oats, Indian corn, pork, or beef at market rate. That same year the church erected its first meetinghouse at the corner of Brookside Ave and Old Kings Highway, where the church’s upper parking lot is now found. Fifty feet long and 30 feet wide, with three galleries above the floor, it was also the place where the first town meetings of Darien took place.

Rev. Mather would go on to become the most famous minister our area would ever have, serving as pastor for the next 62 years until his death in 1806 at the age of 87. He would also go on to be at the center of the best-known event in Darien’s history -- the British raid on the meetinghouse during the Revolutionary War,



The arrest of Rev. Moses Mather

During the American Revolution, Rev. Mather became an ardent supporter of Independence, preaching patriotic sermons beloved by most of his flock but bitterly opposed by a few. The Tories in the congregation who opposed Rev. Mather’s ardent support for independence enlisted the help of their friends in the British stronghold of Long’s Neck, on the other side of Long Island Sound. On July 22, 1781, the British and their local supporters broke into the sanctuary during the 2:00 p.m. Sunday service and imprisoned Rev. Mather and 47 other

men. Tragically, six of the prisoners died in their Long Island prison before Rev. Mather and the other men were released.

The church's monopoly on the area's religious life in Darien came to an end in 1818, with the enactment of the Connecticut Constitution, which ended the practice of state support for local churches. This meant that Congregational churches needed to go to their individual members and convince them to pay their bills through "pledges" of financial support, a practice that endures until today. Then in 1820, a member of our Congregation, Thaddeus Bell, led the effort to formally sever ties with the city of Stamford. When the state legislature finally granted independence to our community, Bell rejected calls to name the town "Bellville" and is credited with proposing the name "Darien" instead, after the isthmus of Darien in Panama.

By the 1830s the original meetinghouse, where the first town meetings of Darien had taken place, was being described as "an old, rickety weather-beaten structure" and members began to lobby for a new house of worship. To that end, the building in which we now worship was built in 1837 at a cost of \$3,350. Savings were realized by salvaging old timbers and windows from the old structure. In 1841, the church installed a 500 lb. bell in the church tower -- the same one that rings today.

Also in the 1830s, the church became a local leader in the anti-slavery cause under the leadership of Rev. Ezra Kinney. Abolitionism grew out of the "Second Great Awakening," a revival movement that reinvigorated Christianity in the Nineteenth Century. Rev. Kinney not only led a number of revivals, but at a time when abolitionism was considered a fringe movement, he also moved the church to pass an anti-slavery resolution in 1839 that declared that buying and selling human beings "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."



*Rev. Ebenezer Platt,
Minister 1825-1833*

When the Civil War came in 1861 the church sent nearly a quarter of its male members to the Union cause, some of whom did not live to see the end of the conflict. One of those casualties was the church's new minister, Rev. Jonathan Barnes, who went south to visit Darien men in Confederate prisons, including the notorious outdoor prison camp in Andersonville, Georgia. During these visits Rev. Barnes was exposed to cholera and other diseases. In 1866, a year after the war ended, the weakened Barnes died at the age of 38. The congregation honored him with a memorial tablet, which is found on the wall to the right of the tablet.

The Civil War era also saw an expansion of the meetinghouse, which grew by 15 feet at the east end -- the change in brick 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 at the time. Just eight years later it was replaced by a hand-pumped pipe organ that lasted until 1929. Our next organ lasted seventy years. Our present Walker organ was delivered from England in 1996. The installers insisted that the new organ would not long survive the heat and humidity of the New England summers, which is one of the reasons the meetinghouse is now air conditioned.



Sunday School picnic, 1897

The Twentieth Century brought other significant changes to our infrastructure, including the construction of the parsonage in 1923, Parish Hall in 1928, and, over the next several years, the church offices, kitchen, and nursery school. The Morehouse Room was named 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, 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, youth center, and an office space.

The Twentieth Century also saw a realignment of American Congregationalism into a loose federation of churches with shared values and goals. When the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical Reformed Church merged in 1958 to create the United Church of Christ (UCC), we were charter members of this new movement. Our church today is one of nearly 5,000 churches and one million members operating under the UCC umbrella. Although we continue to operate independently, the UCC provides important spiritual leadership, guidance, and resources, including opportunities to social concerns across our shared wider community.



Rev. Alfred Schmalz, our second-longest serving pastor, leading worship, 1940's

Starting with Rev. Mather's patriotic sermons during the American Revolution and continuing through Rev. Kinney's abolitionist leadership, Rev. Barnes' trips to Confederate prison camps, and into the 21st Century, First Congregational Church has been known for a social conscience that has made us regional leaders for centuries. With ministers such as Alfred Schmalz, Ron Evans and Dale Rosenberger leading the way, we have served our congregation, town, country, and world.

In 1939, for example, the church organized a Refugee Committee to join with other churches in resettling thousands of homeless Europeans, helping find homes for persons of Polish, Russian, and Romania descent here in Connecticut. Then in the 1970s, the church helped establish the "A Better Chance of Darien" organization by renting the house at 11 Brookside to the new organization for only one dollar a year. The program provided 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. When the program moved to a new, expanded house in 2014, church members continued to support the cause by serving on the board and providing financial support.

The church was also at the forefront of a movement to allow seniors to stay in their homes rather than reside in assisted care facilities. The church's 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."

For decades, starting in 1967, the church hosted the Darien Antiques Show, with the proceeds donated to over a dozen charities chosen by our Board of Christian Outreach. In 2015, the church launched the Darien House Tour. In its first five years, the event raised over \$300,000 for nearly 20 local non-profit organizations which serve the disadvantaged, youth and elderly in our surrounding communities.

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 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 were 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. And following the devastating impact of Hurricane Maria, we hosted two fundraisers to help build a community center in the mountain village of Mariana Puerto Rico, the area where Maria first came ashore in 2017

Today we continue to spread Jesus' message of love and servant leadership through our active mission or "outreach" efforts. We distribute to our outreach partners ten percent of all pledge contributions, much of our Easter and Christmas collections, and the income for numerous special fundraisers. Through our "Food First" Sundays and participation in Person to Person's Dove program we collect and distribute significant amounts of food. We hand out turkeys and hams at food pantries on significant holidays, serve meals to and entertain neighboring immigrant and refugee families, and volunteer for social service agencies in Fairfield County. In short, we are led by God not to look inward but outward in service to the community – the same principle we've followed for 275 years.



*Thanksgiving grocery bag donations
to Open Door Shelter*



Wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!