

50th Anniversary History

***The United Methodist
Church of Monroe
1973 – 2023***



***Celebration Day
October 8, 2023***

A Message from Pastor Chuck Schif

Greetings and *thank you* for being a part of our 50 year celebration! By just holding this document in your hands, you become part of the *life* of the United Methodist Church of Monroe. Much more than a building, UMCM has always been a gathering of God's people tracing back to the 1800's, as you'll read in the following pages. How is that possible? I believe, and I trust you will find as well if you've had the privilege of spending any time at all in this sacred space, that it is only through the presence and power of God, and the willingness of God's people to give of themselves to provide a place to praise the name of Jesus.

While it took many years, and many people, to get us where we are today, the culture of dedicated service still remains here at UMCM. From the moment you step into this place, you truly understand what *being the church* really means. Driven strictly by the laity, members created and cultivated our first Church Garden, providing not only multigenerational fellowship and learning, but fresh produce and herbs for the congregation and local food pantries. Our laity-led "tech-team" continues to ensure that our worship can not only be enjoyed in-person, but is also streamed live and on-demand for those needing to plug-in to their church family remotely. Finally, the countless hours volunteered in the upkeep and repair of the grounds and property continue to be a blessed ministry of the laity. While one can arrive at a Sunday service and enjoy *being served* and recharged after a draining week, the members of UMCM *do not come to be served, but to serve*.

In short, I am honored to be a part of this amazing church family. Before every service, when the liturgist/acolyte, with their lit candle lighter in hand, asks me "*Are you ready?*", I always point to the flame that they hold in front of them and say, "*We follow Jesus, so if He goes, we go.*" Thus, as we read of all the legends that have toiled and sweat, shepherded and loved, praised and comforted, may we give thanks for the *good and faithful servants* that have come before us, but continue to truly follow the one *good shepherd* that holds our future, and the future of UMCM.

Where He leads us, we will follow.

-Pastor Chuck Schif

Pastors of The United Methodist Church of Monroe

1973 – 1974	Reverend L. David York
1974 – 1978	Reverend Dennis Wagner
1978 – 1981	Reverend Louis Leone
1981 – 1996	Reverend Frank Denton
1996 – 1999	Reverend Karen A. Burger
1999 – 2003	Reverend Cheryl Driscoll
2003 – 2004	Reverend Richard Griffin
2004 – 2005	Reverend Dr. Donald H. Kirkham
2005 – 2013	Reverend Gregg Gabor
2013 – 2018	Reverend Martha Epstein
2018 – 2019	Reverend Mark T. Allen
2019	Reverend Caroly Gibson
2019 – 2021	Reverend Ed Dayton
2021 – Present	Reverend Chuck Schif

East Village Methodist Church - 1811 - 1973

By 1818, the Methodists had organized over 50 societies in all parts of the state. Property was donated by John Wilcoxson for the East Village Methodist Meeting House in 1811. Later, in 1836, a society began in Upper Stepney, and the Stepney Methodist Episcopal Church was dedicated in 1839.

The United Methodist Church of Monroe was formed by **combining** the congregations of the **Stepney Methodist Church** and the **East Village Methodist Church**. In 1973, fifty years ago, the new congregation began worshiping in our present church building.

The East Village Methodist Church was attended by the farming community of East Village, Connecticut. It was at one time part of the Long Hill, Sandy Hook, and East Village Charge; a pastor served all three churches.

East Village Methodist Church was known for its Turkey Suppers; everyone helped! Marion Ferris notes that they were so well attended that they sometimes ran out of water! Strawberry shortcake suppers were prepared by the men's club. At Christmas, all of the children in the Sunday school got a box of candy and an orange. Christmas plays were a tradition at East Village. Sometimes at Easter the children in the Sunday school were given plants to take home. Then, as the months grew warmer, the Women's Society planned for their summer Lawn Festivals.

According to Dolores Ovesny, these Lawn Festivals included the sale of baked goods, such as pies, fudge, jams and breads. The ladies wore hats they made. Games for children were provided, such as "fishing pond," and "wet sponge" – throwing wet sponges at brave volunteers!

Family picnics were also a church tradition. So was Vacation Bible School.

During the 1960's, talent shows were held in combination with members from Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, the Monroe Congregational Church and St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

Each year, in the spring, a Children's Day was held. In addition, the youth group was active. In the 1960's, some of their activities included bowling, cleaning the church yard, touring the Methodist Home in Danbury, and a trip to New York City to attend a Folk Music Service. Later, the youth led their own Folk Music Service. Our historical records indicate that six persons from East Village Methodist Church went to hear the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. speak! In 1966, six of East Village's children attended our Methodist camps.

The laity of East Village played a prominent role in the leadership of ministries and care of the church. One active member, Jack Zimmerman, preached on several occasions when the pastor was away. Peggy Smith served as Financial Secretary of the church for a long time and says it was a "small, friendly church." The men of the church built the education building, which housed the children and teens. The East Village Church was given to the Monroe Historical Society in 1966. The Education building was sold in 1973 for only \$28,000.

Dolores Ovesny shared with us that her great-grandfather was one of the pastors who served East Village! She became a member of East Village in 1947, was married there in 1955, and her children were baptized there. She and other current church members remember their years at East Village with great love, joy and a sense of accomplishment.

Stepney Methodist Church - 1839 - 1973

Stepney Methodist Church was known in the community of Stepney, Connecticut, for many wonderful programs. It was located on the Stepney Green next to the cemetery and across from the Stepney Baptist Church, in the building currently known as "Our Lady of the Rosary Chapel." Each fall, in October, the church hosted Chicken Pot Pie dinners. In the early years, these potpies were cooked on a wood stove and two oil stoves to the light of an oil lamp. Harvest Fairs were also held on the Green, with the youth group running the games. The Sunday school hosted an Annual Halloween Party. Rummage sales were held in November by the women of the church. In the late 1960's, the church held "Hillbilly Fairs" as well.

Many years the women also hosted a Christmas Bazaar. The women gathered regularly in the early years at the home of Mrs. Gesner to make quilts together, which were sold by the church. Mabel Blankenship remembered helping the women tack a quilt when she was thirteen years old. Later, the "Friendship Circle" met at Mary Waterman's house and Millie Chase's house. They were involved in the church fairs, making items to sell. At one time the women of the church were divided into two groups, one older and one younger.

Each year at Christmas, the Stepney Methodist Church displayed a nativity scene on the Stepney Green. Our members remember Christmas pageants, including the pageants organized by Reverend Clark and his wife. Others recounted how Mrs. Beverly Blakeman crocheted clothing for dolls, which were then given out to the children at Christmas. Many remember Christmas caroling and skating on Beardsley Pond.

In the warmer months, baseball games were held on Stepney Green. Strawberry Festivals were held in the summer with delicious baking powder biscuits served with strawberries.

The Stepney Methodist Church and the Stepney Baptist Church worked closely together throughout their history. Neighboring churches on the Green, they held joint Easter services, rotating from one church to another. They also held cooperative Vacation Bible Schools.

The Youth Program at Stepney Methodist Church was a strong one. Hike and Ruth Wells led the youth group for many years. The youth held Spaghetti Dinners, Pancake Breakfasts, and other events for the whole community. The youth group was divided into three levels: Senior, Intermediate, and Junior Youth.

Some of our senior members have shared some fond memories of particular events in the life of Stepney Methodist Church. For example, Roberta Kempfer and Vivian Millard remember the Reverend R. "Lincoln" Caswell, Pastor of Stepney Methodist Church from 1938 – 1939, who dressed up regularly as President Lincoln, his "lookalike."

Roberta Kempfer remembers the Reverend Charles Whitemarsh, who performed her wedding. She also remembers sending her daughters to Brownies and Girl Scouts in the basement of Stepney Methodist Church. She notes that the church was the "center of our activities."

Curtis Sears remembers the Reverend Wendell Clark, who returned to Stepney Methodist Church as the former Pastor to officiate at the wedding of Curtis and his wife, Ruth, on June 5, 1932. Curtis was twenty years old, and his wife was twenty-one. Reverend Clark had introduced them when Curtis was working for Reverend Clark's father in Massachusetts. Curtis knew Reverend Clark before he became Pastor of Stepney Methodist Church.

Curtis remembers donating donuts from his Donut Shop, located where the Stepney Liquor Store is now, for food sales at the church. Church members remember Curtis' pumpkin donuts fondly!

Curtis' daughter, Ruth Lynn McMahon, remembers memorizing the Books of the Bible and the 23rd Psalm in Sunday school. She remembers attending youth group and having a great time, under the leadership of Hike and Ruth Wells!

Mabel Blankenship remembers the formality of dress at Stepney Methodist Church. No one wore slacks to church then; hats and gloves were the order of the day. Mabel noted that her father, Robert Bevans, served as the custodian of Stepney Methodist Church for \$1 per Sunday! His duties included stoking the stove to heat the church!

The church celebrated its 100th Anniversary with the production of a commemorative plate. These plates were sold for \$7 each. One of these plates has been sent by Reverend Burger to collectors in Tennessee whose collection has been willed to the Drew University Methodist Archives.

***The Formation of the United Methodist Church of Monroe - 1973 - 2023
As told by The Reverend L. David York, Pastor 1965 – 1974 - at the 25 Year Celebration***

The beginning of the United Methodist Church of Monroe is really a history of meetings, and meetings, and more meetings. Official Boards and Commissions and Trustees met many times to review hopes, plans, details. One major step toward the new building was the decision of the members of the East Village and Stepney Methodist Churches on March 18, 1970 to merge and form the United Methodist Church of Monroe. This was not a quick or easy decision and had involved a lot of discussion, planning and prayer. Another step along the way was the formal groundbreaking which took place on Sunday, October 29, 1972 with construction beginning soon after that event. Two months later, in December 1972, since we had been able to sell the Stepney Church to the Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement, the combined congregation temporarily moved in with the members of the Stepney Baptist Church. For ten months, the two congregations used the Baptist facilities on a cooperative basis, which usually worked out. One exception was that the energy of our MYF members occasionally was bothersome to some of the older Baptist members! The end of the beginning chapter of our present congregation was on October 5, 1973, when a Certificate of Occupancy was given for the new building.

As the Pastor involved in all of this transition, I had a varied schedule. Along with many others, many nights were spent in long and sensitive meetings. Many other informal discussions took place before and after those meetings. I think the most interesting aspect was my various preaching schedules. While we were sharing the facilities of the Baptist Church, Reverend Yusko and I would literally pass each other on the stairs as we were exchanging places in the sanctuary. At one time we employed Allen Farabee, a student assistant pastor from Yale University, who would preach one Sunday in one church while I preached in the other and then we would switch the next Sunday to the other church, and so on. Another time I would preach at Stepney and then drive across town to East Village for the other service ... with the Monroe Police observing my cross-town dash!

While we are observing the significant development of our church building, I think it is important to remember that in the midst of this project we were still maintaining and developing an active church school and mission program. We had an active Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) which did service projects and weekend retreats; the church was also supportive of the Community House, a youth center for Monroe teenagers, something which our town still needs to develop. Other church members were members of the Board of Education and the Town Council. Our church encouraged housing for the elderly, and Harriet Underhill championed that project to the point that Underhill Drive in High Meadows is named in her honor.

There are many stories that could be told, but I think two reports from the March 1974 Annual Meeting contain the essence of the process. Miss Gerda Lex was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and part of her report is as follows:

“This year the Board of Trustees has again been involved in much discussion, negotiation, decision-making, and, very often, “gentle prodding.” Although still sharing facilities with the Stepney Baptist Church, our dream of a new building began materializing in May 1973 when we started our search for the guarantors for the mortgage. In the meantime, work began on the building during which time there came a waiting period for bank approval for the mortgage until certain requirements were met. Finally after overcoming a well problem came the time for Consecration Day which was on September 30, 1973. Many people helped in its preparation by clearing around the church and moving furniture and other equipment from their various locations. Recently, a new stove was purchased for the kitchen because of the efforts of the ladies who

planned the Harvest Festival. Still to be completed are some necessary paving, landscaping and outdoor lighting.

Not only did we see the completion of a church, but this year also saw the beginning of a new parsonage. After bids were sent out and plans were received, it was decided that the most acceptable was from Arbor Homes – a raised ranch with garage, which includes everything except a well and septic tank at a cost of \$31,000. This plan was approved by the Conference Committee, which deals with this area. Until the East Village house could be sold, we had to ask the Conference for \$35,000 to help with financing. The contract was signed and work began. The house, it was decided, will be hooked up to the existing wells at the church. Unfortunately, due to many delays, this construction is not yet completed.”

John Young was the Chairman of the Church Building Committee, and his full report for the year is as follows:

“The Church Building Committee has had a very frustrating, but most gratifying year. We have seen our new church blossom out of the ground into a beautiful new building.

Our frustrations were many as we watched the builder move slowly forward. Materials were late in arriving, and when they finally did arrive, the workmen were on another job and it took time to get them back at our building. Our worst problem was getting sufficient water to make the church operational. Last spring we had so much water we had to have thousands of yards of gravel placed in the drive area to make it passable for trucks and equipment. In the summer we drilled for water (twice) and could find none. While Kiddie Campus held its Open House one Saturday in late summer, we were busy setting and blasting both wells with dynamite with the hopes we could loosen enough rocks to get enough water to open the church.

Even though we were reasonably successful with our blasting and were able to get pumps installed, Kiddie Campus opened (late) with hoses to supply them with water.

The final frustration was, again, water; pipes in the attic area froze and cracked one cold day. When they thawed, we again had more water than we knew what to do with.

Hopefully, we now have a new building with most of the problems solved and that with some additional work on the grounds, parking lot driveway, and finishing touches on the interior, we will all have a church we can be proud of and place to come to and enjoy all the programs of the church.”

This summary of the years leading to the opening of our present building can only touch upon the incredible commitment of many individuals to see the mission and ministry enriched by the development of such a facility. I am proud that in this process we did our best to keep before us the ultimate purpose of our effort, which was to develop a caring, supportive mission-oriented fellowship of believers and seekers. May the next 25 years, and many more, be as productive as the first 25 years have been.

Sincerely,

L. David York
Pastor, 1965 – 1974

***The Formation of the United Methodist Church of Monroe - 2023 Addendum
As told by The Reverend L. David York, Pastor 1965 – 1974***

My most vivid memory of the construction of the church building is when there were about six of us standing near the two new wells with each of us holding three loaves of dynamite in our arms. When the well blaster had arrived, he ran a primer cord through the loaves and then grouped them so we could each give them to him as he lowered them into the well. For a few minutes it seemed that there was a thin line between life and the afterlife! For the record, the blasting did eventually give us water for the new building.

This is symbolic in some ways of our life for the last 50 years ... this congregation has tried in a lot of ways to get things done. From Crop Walk to Habitat for Humanity to feeding the homeless in Bridgeport to Covenant to Care to Mozambique and to many other projects, our church members have tried to be up front and be in the action. We have reached out as we have seen needs within our congregation and community and where possible provided help as needed.

Our next decade began with an active interest and involvement in the Appalachian Service Project during the pastorate of Rev. Mark Allen. A number of activities were planned involving our teen youth and adults who were supportive of the project. Meetings with neighboring United Methodist churches and their youth were held with the ultimate trip to Appalachia with several of our youth and adult chaperones on their one-week service project.

The Rev. Ed Dayton came to our congregation in 2019....and so did the pandemic ! Rev. Dayton had a dual charge serving both Monroe and Long Hill United Methodist Churches. He would conduct a Sunday worship in Monroe and then run down to Long Hill where he would conduct a second service. A number of activities were held involving both congregations, one of which was a combined confirmation class and some youth group activities with both churches. With the ongoing COVID pandemic, a number of changes occurred especially with our Sunday services and other events being transmitted electronically, also known as being Zoomed. This separation was difficult for the sense of community that was the goal of our church's life together.

Two years later in 2021, the Rev. Charles Schif took over the pastoral leadership with in-person services and the continued electronic transmitting of our services and some meetings. Some activities have been reactivated while observing the pandemic precautions in the process. Early in his pastorate, Pastor Schif developed two weekday morning Zoom spiritual sharing groups where persons found a deeper understanding of their personal faith. Gradually more persons attend Sunday worship and other events while pandemic safeguards are still in mind.

The twenty-first century is certainly different than prior times and we can hope and pray that this congregation can work together to understand the many challenges of our time and build a faith community that will be supportive and creative for our membership.
May God's peace go with us in our journey together.

L. David York