

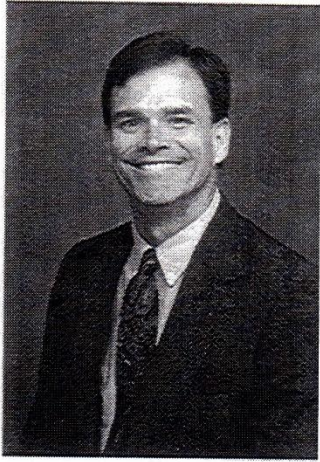
1896 ♦ 1996

A Century of Service

RIVERDALE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
JULY 7, 1996



Chronicle of the First One Hundred Years



FOREWORD

By Rev. David R. McNeilly
Pastor
Riverdale Presbyterian
Church, 1996

Hello!

Since I have been the Pastor of Riverdale Presbyterian Church less than 1/10 of its 100 years of ministry, I felt somewhat lacking when it comes to introducing a new historical overview and welcoming everyone to our Centennial Celebration! However, I can say thank-you to our new Church Historian, Norman Cary, for doing such a wonderful and accurate job of recounting our past—both recent and ancient! I'm sure all will enjoy the fruits of his effort as we look to our future.

I also can say thank-you to all who served so ably on our Centennial Planning Committee! Their names are all listed below and only they know just how much time and effort was involved in preparing for this celebration. I know, however, what fine people they are and what a pleasure it has been for me to work with them—but then, when people of faith gather together to serve, what can one expect but fellowship and celebration?

Welcome to all!

And may our Lord continue to bless us as we look to our second century of worship and ministry!

Centennial Planning Committee

Bill Cammack

Nancy Cammack

Virdelma Cairncross

Marna Cary

Norman Cary

Jackee Clark

Linus Clarke

Ruth Dungan

Aileen Hogue

Rebecca Jenkins

Bruce Kerr

Janet Kerr

Lois Prince

Gail Ragan

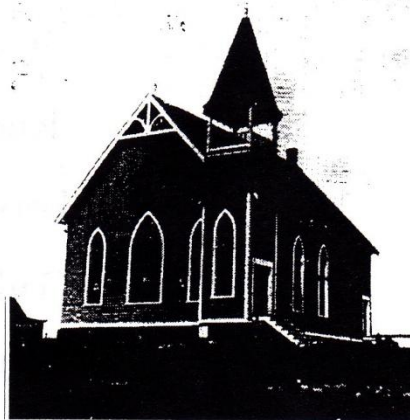
Rebekah Weir

IN THE BEGINNING. . .

In 1896, Riverdale, MD, was a small community of 30 or 40 homes clustered about a stop on the B & O Railroad midway between the towns of Hyattsville and Berwyn. It was surrounded by farm land, and was bordered on the west by the main thoroughfare connecting Washington and Baltimore, now US Route 1 but in those days a narrow dirt road known locally as "the pike". Washington then was a city of about 150,000 people.

The beginnings of Riverdale Presbyterian Church can be traced to a series of prayer meetings organized by Ms. Nannie Fowler and held in three or four private homes in the village of Riverdale, MD, in 1895. This led to the establishment of a Sunday School of 49 people on 2 February, 1896, which met in a hall over a store building in Riverdale. Preaching services by various visiting ministers once or twice a month were begun about the same time. In April, 1896, a petition for organization of a church, bearing 22 signatures, was presented to Washington Presbytery. The petition having been favorably acted upon, a committee of Presbytery, appointed for the purpose, organized the Riverdale Presbyterian Church, with eight members, on July 6, 1896.

Solicitation for funds for a church building was begun at once. By April, 1897, sufficient funds were on hand to warrant beginning work on the building. That same month Reverend M. Porter Snell, a retired minister living in Anacostia, became the first stated supply (acting pastor). Reverend Snell officiated at the ground breaking on April 22, 1897, and the cornerstone laying on May 2, 1897. Articles of incorporation



The First Church Building Erected in 1897

were adopted on June 24, 1897, showing 11 members, the majority of whom were women. A loan of \$1,500 was obtained from the Hyattsville Building Association and work progressed on the building. The builder was Mr. Herbert Roby. On Sunday, December 19, 1897, at 3:30 PM, the building was dedicated.

But now difficulties set in. Dr. Joseph C. Ellis and his wife, two of the original members of the church, resigned, attendance declined, and pledges toward the building fund went unpaid. By September, 1898, the financial situation appeared so hopeless that the congregation approved a proposal to turn the property over to a newly founded Baptist Church of Hyattsville. However, the Baptists did not accept. Reverend Snell resigned. Elder Fred A. Preston, one of the founding members of the church, characterized this period as "the darkest days of our church."

On November 27, 1898, at the request and direction of Presbytery, Mr. Frank L. Middleton, an elder in the Fourth Presbyterian Church, and a resident of Berwyn, assumed charge of the affairs of the congregation and Sunday School. With the help of his mother-in-law, Mrs. Henry P. Viles, he conducted preaching services and Sunday School every Sunday for about 15 months. Mr. Middleton continued to preach every Sunday up to May, 1904, and Mrs. Viles served as superintendent of Sunday School until June, 1904, and continued to assist in the work of the school until her last illness in 1914. The five and a half years of effort expended by Mr. Middleton and Mrs. Viles prevented the loss of the church property and the possible extinction of the church. The Sunday School increased from 38 to 125, 48 members were added to the church roll for a net of 34, a Ladies Aid and Missionary Society was organized, and many other new activities started.

Music has always been an important part of the life of Riverdale Presbyterian Church. It had its beginnings in 1899, when a choral society was founded by Miss Bessie Fowler and continued under the direction of Mrs. F.C. Burrhus. The old piano was exchanged

for an organ from the Berwyn Church. In 1901 a band was started under Dr. S. H. McMillan and in 1903 a six piece orchestra under his direction began to play regularly at church services.

THE FIRST FULLTIME MINISTER

By this time the congregation felt able to undertake the support of a minister and on May 27, 1904, Mr. David A. Reed, a young man who had been in charge of Bethany Mission in Washington, became stated supply. On September 9, 1909, when Mr. Reed had completed the requirements for ordination, he became the first installed minister of Riverdale Presbyterian Church. He continued until July 31, 1913, when he resigned after a period of nine years.

During Mr. Reed's pastorate, the membership grew from 34 to 96 and the Sunday School increased from 95 to 296. Monthly teachers' meetings were instituted; evangelistic meetings were held; and in 1907 the church debt was paid off. Then a series of improvements and additions to the church property began. A furnace replaced the old stove and the building was wired for electricity. New pulpit furniture and a new carpet were acquired. By 1912 the Sunday School growth caused the addition of a new wing to the church, a large room in the attic and a partial basement.



The First Church Building, Circa 1912

After Reverend Mr. Reed came Reverend Abbott Lee Waite, installed as pastor December 9, 1913, and resigned October 1, 1914. Records do not show who filled the pulpit during the next nine months but that the work went forward is attested by the fact that in March, 1915, the session asked the Presbytery to admit Clifton J. Hicks as Riverdale's first candidate for the ministry. From July 1915 to July 1918, Reverend Ralph W. Hand served as pastor, increasing the membership from 96 to 162. About the time the United States entered World War I, Mr. Hand resigned and the church requested permission for Professor William C. Myers, a member and active worker since 1911, to supply the pulpit. This arrangement continued to September 1922. He also served the church at intervals before and after. He also founded and taught a young married couples Sunday School Class which has continued through the years and still bears his name.



Rev. David A. Reed
Pastor, 1904-1913



Prof. Wm. C. Myers
Pulpit Supply 1918-1922

From October 1922 to June 1923 the Reverend John W. Turner, a retired minister, filled the pulpit, followed by Reverend John K. Lynn. He left in March 1924. He was followed by Reverend William H. Topping, who served to December 1, 1926. During Mr. Topping's tenure, membership increased from 137 to 172. The first manse, at 4711 Riverdale Road, was sold and the second manse, on what is now know as Queensbury Road, was purchased.

REVEREND CUSTIS COMES TO THE PULPIT



Rev. W. Keith Custis

On December 1, 1927, the congregation authorized extension of a call to Mr. W. Keith Custis, a young man from Dayton, Ohio, who was at that time a member of the senior class at Princeton Theological Seminary, in Princeton, NJ. He served as pastor-elect until graduation, commuting every other weekend from Princeton to Riverdale. He was installed as pastor June 19, 1928, and continued to serve in this capacity for 41 years. During Mr. Custis' first year, 42 people joined the church, bringing its membership to 199. He began classes on church membership for both young people and adults, began publishing a weekly newsletter, and made a number of other innovations, including the first Vacation Bible School.

In the meantime, this young bachelor had met the secretary of the Reverend Mr. Duffield, and two years after he arrived at Riverdale Presbyterian Church he married Miss Pearle Drew, who served the church 40 years along with her husband. For many years she did the church's secretarial work and helped with the church school and the women's work. Two sons, David and Donald, were born. The family lived at the third manse, located at 4603 Rittenhouse.

Despite the Depression, the church moved forward. A Mr. Lawrentz M. Larson gave the church a reed organ. Mrs. Madeleine Boshier was named the first woman deacon. A Men's Brotherhood was organized, which sponsored the first Boy Scout troop with Louis W. Carter, scoutmaster. In 1938, Mr. Gustavus Warfield became Riverdale Presbyterian Church's second candidate for the ministry. The membership grew to 300. During this period, there was much activity in the music program at Riverdale. Prior to 1936, the special music at Riverdale was a quartet. In that year,

Mrs. V.G. Baldwin started a youth choir, which served as the chancel choir. She took no money for herself, but insisted that the young people (4 in each section) be paid fifty cents a week for attending both rehearsal and Sunday service. A separate fund for a pipe organ was raised. On December 10, 1939, it was dedicated, with church organists, Mrs. Jessie Blaisdell, Francis Bowie, and Dr. William A. Turner, playing.

Then came World War II. In support of the members of the church in the military, Mrs. John P. Williams headed a committee which compiled a list of 153 members, 63 overseas, and sent them a small church paper called News Flashes. In August, 1942, John H. Houdeshel became the third candidate for the ministry from Riverdale Presbyterian Church. In 1943, one of the youth members of the church choir, Aileen Williams, took over the choir. She also started a junior high choir and a junior choir. There was also a men's choir.

After the war, church membership continued to expand; by 1947 it had risen to 620. With the great increase in membership, a wide doorway was cut between the sanctuary and Sunday School room, loudspeakers were installed and two morning services were held at 8:30 and 11:00 o'clock. The Cumings Class for adult women was formed and taught by Mrs. Winifred Cumings. It met at the manse and the Myers class met in the Community hall over the Riverdale firehouse. Lacking space in the church building, the trustees built a room onto the manse so that the office could be moved out of the pastor's dining room. A full time paid secretary, Miss Ruth Vial, was employed, and also assisted with the young people. Youth retreats were held each fall and one was organized for the men of the church. In May, 1948, Miss Hedwig Nabholz became the first young woman from Riverdale Presbyterian Church to enter full time Christian service. She went on to graduate in religious education, married a fellow student, Robert C. Lodwick, and they became missionaries to whom the church gave special assistance through the years. News Notes, a monthly church newsletter, was

started in 1948, and in January of 1949, a Board of Deaconesses was organized to assist in making calls and a Visitation Evangelism commission was established.

A NEW BUILDING



The First Church Building, Circa 1953

It had become clear in the late 1930's that the church building was too small to meet the congregation's and the community's needs. In 1937 a committee was appointed to consider a site for future building purposes. In March, 1939, the church purchased three lots in University Park at 44th and Wells Parkway. Dr. Joseph S. Caldwell headed a building fund committee whose goal was \$40,000. Restrictions on materials and labor prohibited erecting a new church building during the war years. Contributions continued, however, and Charles M. Talley was employed as architect to design a building. By December, 1947, the building fund had reached \$48,000. In October of 1947, the lots on 44th Avenue were traded for four others at Queens Chapel Road and 43rd Avenue and four others were purchased. However, by this point, the postwar building boom was in full swing, prices soared, and the original estimate of \$40,000 for a new church building had now risen to \$200,000. After much prayerful consideration and meetings, the congregation approved a campaign to raise another

\$50,000. The cash was raised and on October 23, 1949, the ground was broken for the first unit of the new building, which included the present sanctuary, offices, and fellowship hall. The cornerstone was laid on April 16, 1950, and the first worship service and dedication was held on October 8, 1950. In order to get the new building, compromises had to be made such as eliminating a steeple, accepting obstructing posts in fellowship hall, and continuing to use the old church building for part of the church school for five years. Voluntary cars supplied a shuttle service between the two buildings.



At the Corner-Stone Laying Service April 16, 1950

A GROWING CHURCH

The new building stimulated growth and brought new activities. By the end of 1951, membership had reached 901. A new married couples class, called the Mariners, was formed, a softball team was organized, a summer church family camp was begun, and church family nights were instituted. The church library grew. The church organ had been moved and enlarged with five new ranks of pipes, thanks to a generous gift from an anonymous member. In 1950, Riverdale Presbyterian Church became the sponsor of Boy Scout Troop 214, a harmonious association which continues today.

In 1952, the congregation approved the employment of our first Director of Christian Education, Miss Shirley Harris. She resigned in January of 1953, and a year later Miss Isabel Sampson of Havre de Grace, Md., was appointed to take over the directorship, a task which she performed for the church until 1970. She took charge of all the youth work, the Junior and Senior High Fellowships, recruiting and training of church school teachers, the vacation church school, the Wednesday evening recreational program during the summer months, and the youth retreats. "Sammie", as she was called, quickly endeared herself to all, young and old alike.



*Miss Isabel Sampson
Director of Christian Education
1954-1970*



*Rev. Donald E. MacFalls
Assistant Minister
1959-1966*

To mark the 25th anniversary of Reverend Custis' installation as pastor, the congregation voted to go ahead in June, 1953, with plans for the second unit of the church building, the church school building. A successful campaign for \$25,000 cash enabled the ground to be broken on Sunday, May 16, 1954 and the building was dedicated in November of that year. The old church building was sold at this time to another congregation; it accidentally burned down in the late 1950's. The current East-West Highway (MD Route 410) goes through part of the site of the old church.

The membership had increased to over 1000 by 1955; this increase in membership brought some changes. Two church services and two sessions of the church school had to be started. Reverend Daniel D. Swinney, a retired minister, was added to the Church staff as Minister of Visitation. During this period many Bible study and prayer groups were in operation. The Women's Auxiliary became the Women's Association. A Hungarian refugee family was adopted. The organ was further enlarged with a substantial gift from Mr. A.S. Thurston. Three new choirs were added for young people and children.

In 1958, on Mr. Custis's 30th anniversary of service, a testimonial of love and appreciation was given to Mr. and Mrs. Custis, along with a gift of a 90-day trip to the Holy Land and Europe. The church charter was revised that year and the Board of Deacons divided into two sections, men and women, discontinuing the Board of Deaconesses.

By 1959 the membership had increased to over 1200. The manse on Rittenhouse Street was sold and another manse was purchased at 7105 Wells Parkway. In December of that year, Donald Drew Custis, the son of the pastor, became Riverdale Presbyterian's Church's sixth candidate for the ministry. Mr. Swinney retired from the church; the church then hired a full time assistant minister, Reverend Donald E. MacFalls in May of 1959. He preached his first sermon at Riverdale on June 28, 1959. He was a very popular and dedicated minister, for seven years assisting in the worship services, making calls on church members, and working with young adults, career and college age, in their activities and fellowship.

During the next five years the membership rose to 1376. Francis J. Kinney, Jr. was taken under the care of Presbytery as the seventh candidate for the ministry from the church. The first Strawberry Festival began in 1960 and has been held annually ever since. The



*Rev. Jerry C. Gustin
Assistant Minister, 1967
Associate Minister, 1971*

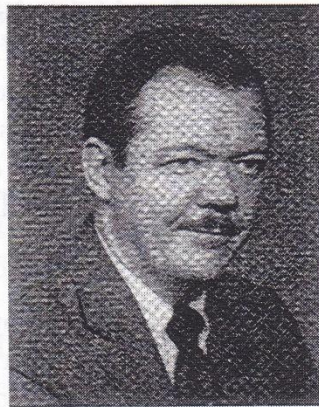
house and lot adjacent to the church property on 43rd Avenue was purchased in 1962; a Cuban refugee family was sponsored in 1963; a youth club was organized for meeting and dinner each Wednesday afternoon. In 1963, after Aileen Williams Hogue resigned, Alice Zahnizer took over direction of the choirs. On Sunday, June 16, 1963, the church honored Reverend Custis on his 35th anniversary and started a fund for a purchase of a house for his retirement. In 1964 the church honored Miss Isabel

Sampson on her 10th anniversary at this church and presented her with a new car.

Following Mr. MacFalls' resignation, which became effective on September 1, 1966, enabling him to return to school to work towards a doctorate, the church sought and found Reverend and Mrs. Jerry C. Gustin. Mr. Gustin was installed as assistant minister on January 22, 1967. Also on December 1, 1967, the church employed Reverend J. Edward Kidder, retired, as Minister of Visitation. He continued to serve until a new pastor was called in 1970.

A TIME OF CHANGE: RIVERDALE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1969-1996

There have been many changes in the ministry of the church since 1969. The resignation of Mr. Custis as pastor came in 1969, effective on the completion of his 41st year as pastor on May 28, 1969. Immediately after Mr. Custis's retirement, wheels were set in motion to find a



*Rev. Willard C. Mellin
Pastor, 1970-1986*

new senior minister. During the succeeding 12 months the administration of the church was carried on efficiently and effectively by Mr. Gustin, Miss Sampson, and Dr. Kidder. On March 8, 1970, the church voted to call Reverend Willard C. Mellin, Jr., from the First Presbyterian Church of Akron, Ohio. He assumed his duties as pastor on August 1 1970, and was officially installed on October 4, 1970. In the next few years, there were many changes in personnel. Dr. Kidder's resignation became effective on August 1, 1970. Miss Sampson's resignation was effective on June 30, 1970, and she began her studies on her master's degree in the fall. She was honored with a special program at the church on July 19, 1970, commemorating her 16th year of service. A new assistant Pastor, Reverend David R. Warren, was installed 24 September 1972 (he became associate pastor in May of 1980). Reverend Gustin resigned as associate pastor on 1 October 1974. Reverend Mellin served as pastor until his resignation on 31 December 1986. Reverend Warren resigned as associate pastor on 30 June 1988. On 11 September, 1988, Reverend David R. McNeilly was installed as pastor.

A continuing concern for Riverdale Presbyterian Church over the past thirty years has been a slow decrease in the membership of the church. From 1964 to 1970 the church continued to hold its own in membership but the church school enrollment, which had once been over 900, dropped. The community had changed, with fewer families with children, with more apartment dwellers, with the addition of at least six new churches within a few blocks of our church, and with our church giving up some of its members to four new Presbyterian churches in the area, two of which were co-sponsored by Riverdale Presbyterian Church. The problem was not unique to Riverdale, but is one that is shared with many of the churches of traditional denominations nationally. It was not until 1993 that the church had its first upturn in membership since 1963. Since 1993, membership has stabilized at an active membership of around 400. Recent changes in the demographics of Riverdale Presbyterian indicate a possible improvement in this sit-

uation. In the past several years, the proportion of the membership of the church between the ages of 25 and 45 has increased significantly. This has meant a considerable influx of families with small children, which is an encouragement for other families to join. The reduction in membership and the changes in demographics have brought about changes in the ministry of the church. In 1988, with the departure of Reverend Warren, the position of associate pastor was abolished because of the reduced size of the congregation. In 1985, with youth Sunday School attendance at a low point, the position of Christian Educator was abolished; with the number of children in the congregation on the increase, it was reestablished in 1989 with the hiring of Ken Strohm and, two years later, the hiring of his replacement, Dr. Carolyn Fink. There has also been an increase in church programs for parents of children 18 and younger.

In 1973, the congregation began a new chapter in the history of the church when it offered a home to the First Korean Presbyterian Church of Maryland. Over a period of 22 years, until 1995, when First Korean Presbyterian Church moved to its own facility on Kenilworth Avenue, the two churches shared a building and periodically worshiped together. This sharing was an enlightening and rewarding experience for both congregations.

Music has continued to play an important part in the worship of God at Riverdale Presbyterian Church. The chancel, youth, cherub, and bell choirs have continued to assist in worship on Sundays; other members of the congregation share their musical talents when needed. One of the major issues facing the music program at Riverdale in this period was what to do about the organ. The organ installed in the new church in 1950 had been built in 1931 and had been originally purchased for the old church in 1939. By the late 1980's it had become increasingly difficult to repair. After a major fund drive, a new organ was purchased and dedicated on November 3, 1991.

As the "new" church building has gotten older, increasing attention has had to be paid to its upkeep, maintenance, and improvements to meet the needs of the congregation. Dedicated Trustees and other church members have worked hard to keep the church in good shape and to raise the funds necessary to make such improvements as air conditioning, new carpeting in the sanctuary, the installation of an elevator for the handicapped in 1984, and the renovation of the sanctuary necessary for installation of the new organ in 1991.

Over the last two decades, Riverdale Presbyterian Church has expanded its outreach to the community beyond its long-time support of missionaries and various charitable organizations. In 1977 members of the church began the Side Door Coffeehouse, a program which continues today. At the Side Door Coffeehouse (one Saturday night a month during the winter months), members of the church and the community put on a play and serve inexpensive refreshments. The proceeds go to benefit Help By Phone. In 1987, one room on the first floor of the education building was converted to an emergency shelter for homeless needing temporary lodging. Since 1990, one week a year, during the winter, the church serves as a shelter for homeless men as a part of the Safe Haven program. In the 1990's, teenagers in the youth program have participated in week-end service trips to assist various charitable and service oriented community support groups.

As Riverdale Presbyterian Church reaches its centennial year, it continues to serve its members and the community in Christian love and brotherhood.

(Note: Of necessity, this brief summary omits specific mention of many people who have played an important role in the history of the church. To them we extend our humble apologies and our sincere appreciation on behalf of the membership. Norman M. Cary, Jr., editor)

Acknowledgements:

Many people have assisted in the preparation of this publication; while space precludes listing them all, I extend my thanks to them. I am most appreciative for the help of Virdelma Cairncross, who helped me locate many old church records, and for the assistance provided by Dick Hays, who has helped with the layout for two of these brief histories of the church. Special recognition should go to my predecessors, the late Louise J. Hinton and Clarence M. McMillan. Mrs. Hinton wrote a complete history of the church up to 1964; Mr. McMillan wrote the history brochure for the 75th anniversary in 1971. Much of this history is taken directly from both of these publications. Without their excellent work, this brochure would not have been possible.