

A HISTORY OF THE
WEST SIDE CENTRAL
CHURCH OF CHRIST
1915 - 1971

by

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Although the West Side Central church was the fourth oldest Church of Christ in Detroit, its beginnings can best be appreciated by briefly summarizing the origin of the Restoration movement in the city.

In 1841, Thomas Hawley, a native of Cause Castle, England, migrated to Detroit from Cleveland, Ohio, where he had been immersed by Alexander Campbell in 1835. Along with the family of William Linn, he began meeting for worship in his home in 1841. Soon they began meeting at a school building at Congress and Randolph and in 1846 moved to the State Capital Building, then located in Detroit. Subsequently, they met at various places including Fowler's School (also called the Detroit Institute) on Jefferson and St. Antoine avenues, the office of the Detroit Ice Company, and the courthouse on Campus Martius Street. In 1855, Alexander Campbell and D. S. Burnett paid a visit to the small group and delivered several public messages to them and other groups at a Lutheran church in the city.

Later, in the pages of the Millennial Harbinger, Campbell lamented that the Detroit group had no meetinghouse of its own or regular evangelist to serve the area. Perhaps as a result partially of his plea, the group was able to purchase in 1856 a small lot on the corner of Broadway and Miami streets; they later moved to Howard Street before settling down at Fourth Street and Plum in

1868. During these years they were served by no regular evangelist, but rather found edification in a mutual ministry which involved more than 64 of its members. Finally, in 1892, W. D. Campbell was employed as the preacher and over 400 additions were made to the group by 1900. Campbell later left for mission efforts in Canada and again in Detroit at the Vinewood church, before resuming his work with Plum Street, which continued until 1925.

This church was blessed with some great leaders during these years, such as J. S. Gray, president at one time of the Ford Motor Company, whose interest in the Biblical world took him to Palestine and Egypt where he could view some of the excavations then in progress for which he became a financial supporter and contributor. Another was Vernon C. Fry, one of the original stockholders of the Ford Motor Company, who donated the property at Hamilton and Tuxedo in 1918 where the Plum Street church has continued to reside until the present day.

As a result of such leadership, this congregation served as an important base for mission efforts. A Sunday School begun in a private home by Mrs. William F. Linn later developed into the Vinewood congregation. Another mission was started in the Girard Hall at 1491 Russell Street which culminated in the Cameron Avenue Church in 1903. Of additional interest was the mission started in Japan in 1898 by Otoshige Fujimori and F. A. Wagner, who were converted by W. D. Campbell in 1894.

W. D. Campbell and the Plum Street congregation were also to play an important indirect role in the establishment of West Side Central.

The Beginnings: The Warren Avenue Church of Christ (1915-1922)

While W. D. Campbell was engaged in protracted evangelistic meetings in England in 1912, the Plum Street church hired Claud F. Witty as their preacher. Along with his wife Minny, Witty had been formerly involved in starting congregations throughout the mid-west, an effort which they were to continue for several decades in the Detroit area. When Campbell returned, Witty remained with the Plum Street church as an evangelist and was instrumental in starting the Fairview church in 1914. However, on May 2, 1915, he separated himself from this great church and began a new work at a small rented building at 2138 Warren Avenue near Fourteenth with twelve other charter members. Alterations were made in the two-story structure and furniture purchased at a cost of \$1,150. For seven years they met at this location.

During this period the congregation grew in membership by several hundreds. In these same years Witty helped to establish other churches in the Flint area and the first churches among the Black community of Detroit which then existed west of Grand Boulevard and south of Tireman Avenue. This young church also provided support and encouragement for the starting of a congregation at Gratiot near Mt. Elliot.

Strangely, one of its darkest hours was also in this same era. In 1918, the Wittys were called to Harlan, Kentucky, to care for the sick and dying victims of the Great Influenza epidemic of that year, which killed an estimated twelve million. While they

Charter Members

Mr. and Mrs. Claud F. Witty

Miss Elizabeth Witty

Mr. and Mrs. A. W. Hastings

Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Seehoffer

Mr. and Mrs. Will Barr

William Snedden

Theresa Burt (McCallister)

Harry Urmev

Mrs. Will Barr *

*Claud Witty's membership records list Mrs. Will Barr twice.



were away, the Plum Street Church moved to a new location at Hamilton and Tuxedo and an effort began among some of the old members to consolidate the newer churches and continue meeting at the old location. This included Warren Avenue and without the Wittys being consulted, twenty-three of its members took some of the furniture at Warren and joined the new Plum Street group. Fortunately, the Wittys were informed of the effort in time, returning to Detroit to restore order and continue their effort in Detroit at that location.

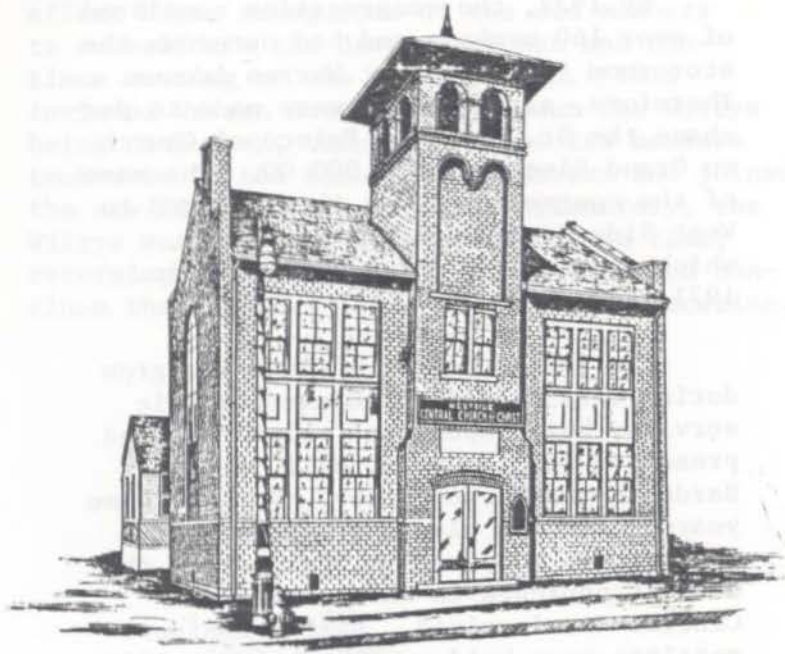


Grand River and Fourteenth

By 1922, the congregation consisted of over 160 members and had outgrown the storeroom facilities at Warren Avenue. Therefore, arrangements were made to purchase the St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Grand River for \$36,000.00. The name of the congregation was then changed to West Side Central Church of Christ, which it retained until its close in 1971.

The young church continued to grow during this period, with evangelistic services being sponsored which featured preachers such as S. H. Hall, N. B. Hardeman and Horace Busby. During these years there was also a great deal of emphasis on cooperative works among the Detroit churches in which West Side Central was involved. United business meetings were held monthly between 1920 and 1930, resulting in contributions of over \$21,200 which helped establish new congregations in Flint, Pontiac, Ypsilanti, Lansing and Windsor, as well as Chicago, Washington, D.C., and a foreign mission in Japan.

Two protracted evangelistic campaigns were also sponsored in 1928 and 1929 at the Masonic Temple in Detroit with N. B. Hardeman as the speaker. The total expenditures for this effort amounted to about \$6,000 of which West Side Central shared about \$1,000 of the cost. About 1,500 attended nightly these meetings and a paper called The Christian News was published for more than three years to publicize and



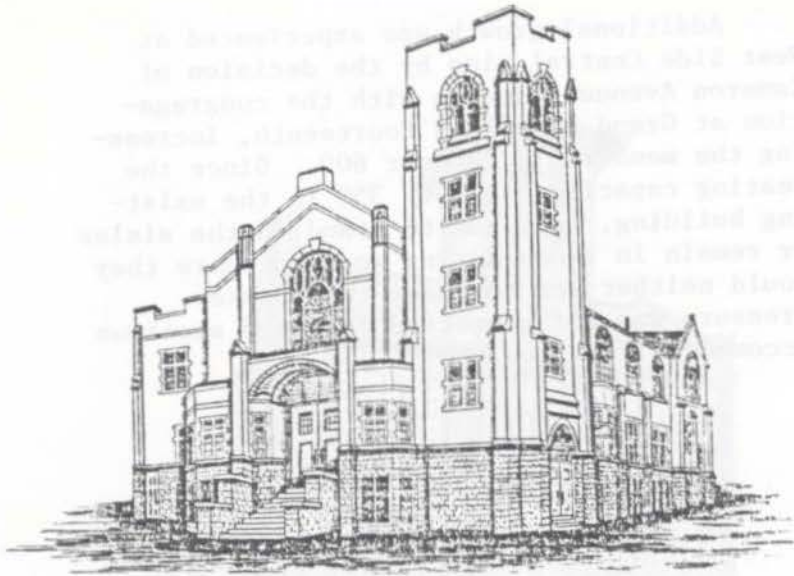
sustain the effort. As a result, more than 100 additions were made to the Detroit churches, with 45 of them placing their membership with West Side Central.

Witty was also continuing his own evangelistic efforts in these years. In 1924 he travelled to St. Petersburg, Florida, to hold an evangelistic meeting for a month which resulted in 63 baptisms. Four debates were also held in Detroit with Al Renner, a proponent of Atheism and Evolution, which were attended by more than 1,000 each night.

Additional growth was experienced at West Side Central also by the decision of Cameron Avenue to merge with the congregation at Grand River and Fourteenth, increasing the membership to over 600. Since the seating capacity was only 350 in the existing building, many had to stand in the aisles or remain in rooms during worship where they could neither see nor hear the speaker. Pressure was being exerted for more spacious accommodations.

Grand River and Kirby

On June 29, 1930, the Grand River Evangelical Church at Grand River and Kirby was purchased for \$80,000. Since this required a down payment of \$25,000, a heavy indebtedness was assumed during the depression years when the membership dwindled to about 350. Assistance came from an unexpected source, however, as the Missionary Society of the Christian Churches provided some funds to sustain the effort. The Wittys managed to raise the rest of the money by traveling throughout the city and securing several dollars from interested friends here and there.



The ministry of the church continued in full swing throughout this era with several interesting developments and events surrounding its members. In 1932, Roy Whitfield, one of the members, was sent to China to assist George Benson in his mission efforts in the Orient. In 1933 and again in 1936, Thomas Whiteman, then in his eighties, published two books of poetical meditations which he called "Youthful Memories." His beautiful deep bass voice could also be heard occasionally singing publicly even in those years over WWJ radio. Claud Witty, accompanied by W. S. Long, also responded to a request from the Federal prison at Milan, Michigan, where with the permission of the warden they taught Christ to Mrs. Ora Shannon and her daughter, Mrs. Katheryn Kelley, the wife of Machine Gun Kelley, and then baptized them in a large bath tub in the prison hospital.

The Witty-Murch Unity Movement

Among the significant efforts that Witty was involved in during these years was the attempt to eliminate the differences which existed between the Church of Christ and the Christian churches of the Restoration Movement, who made use of instrumental music in worship. This issue had ironically began in Detroit when in 1862, Richard Hawley and Colin Campbell pulled out of the Howard Street church with fourteen others to begin a new congregation at Jefferson and Beaubien with Isaac Errett as their "Pastor." It was their intent, among other things, to "practice their own opinions" with regard to the use of musical instruments. This group continues today as the Central Woodward Christian Church.

In 1931, Witty extended an invitation to the Grand River Avenue Christian Church at Allendale to meet with West Side Central for a period of three months to see if the two groups could unite. As a result, the Christian church at Allendale merged with West Side Central on July 1, 1931, bringing the membership total to the number of more than five hundred. In that same year, Witty was prominently involved in uniting a Christian church with the Port Huron Church of Christ. Both of these unions proved to be successful and permanent.

These attempts to unite the two churches eventually led Witty and James Deforest Murch, editor of the influential Christian church journal, The Christian Standard, to discuss plans to promote unity among their respective churches. Small conferences among the leaders of both groups were also organized elsewhere,

including Indianapolis, Indiana; Akron, Ohio; Los Angeles, California; and Columbus, Ohio. These discussions culminated in the "National Unity Meeting" held for the first time at the West Side Central Church on May 3 and 4, 1938. More than a thousand attended and heard major addresses delivered by H. H. Adamson, George Benson, and J. N. Armstrong of the Churches of Christ and W. R. Walker, P. H. Welsheimer and George Knepper of the Christian churches. These meetings continued on for some years throughout the country.

As a result of these meetings, Witty was frequently invited among the Christian churches as a guest speaker, appearing at the International Convention's Commission on Restudy, the Michigan State Minister's Meeting, the Butler School of Religion, Minnesota Bible College, and the North American Christian Convention. In addition, he became the editor of The Christian Tribune in 1941, a monthly journal formerly published by the now aged C. B. Clifton of Detroit. Witty immediately changed the name to The New Millennium Harbinger and promised that "every third or fourth issue will be devoted to the Unity Movements and will be sent to several thousand preachers of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ." In 1943, he also began to co-edit with James D. Murch the Christian Unity Quarterly, which was intended to provide further impetus to their "Approach to Unity." However, by the end of World War II, all of these efforts had ceased.

Although these efforts may be regarded as a failure, in all fairness to Witty and Murch, it must be observed that they never received any widespread support

or cooperation. Such influential Church of Christ papers as the Gospel Advocate and Firm Foundation, at first severely critical of the unity meetings, eventually preferred to just ignore the attempts for reconciliation. By 1948 the Christian Churches' Commission on Restudy was disbanded. The two Restoration churches subsequently went their own way with efforts to re-establish any unity program being revived only in recent years.

Some good was nevertheless accomplished. E. L. Jorgenson of the Church of Christ, who had led the singing at the first Unity meeting at West Side Central, later edited a hymnbook, Great Songs of the Church, which was published by the Standard Publishing Company for use among Christian churches. Ernest Beam, who earlier had held evangelistic meetings at West Side Central, started publishing The Christian Forum in 1950, in which he attempted to promote the spirit of unity begun by Witty. Friendly relations had also been established across the old walls of division in a number of areas throughout the country.

The End of an Era

On May 2, 1947, the Wittys, now in their seventies, were ready to resign from their ministry with the West Side Central congregation. For thirty-two years they had faithfully served the Christians in Detroit; their care and concern for all the members of the congregation they served is reflected in the careful register Claud kept of all the additions made throughout the years to the original thirteen charter

members. By 1947, this number had reached 2,229, although only several hundred were then attending West Side Central, the remainder being deceased, having moved elsewhere, changed membership, or "returned to the world." For years their home had served as a boarding home for migrant families who were seeking jobs in the automobile industry in Detroit and a "better life." When it overflowed, cots were set up in the church to handle the excess.

This love and compassion was reciprocated by the care the congregation provided for them. Earlier, in 1926, the Wittys were able to visit the Holy Land for three months with the "best wishes" of the congregation. Upon their retirement, the members at West Side Central presented them with a new home on Burgess Street and a new car. Thereafter Claud continued to preach occasionally for the Redford church until his death in 1952. Minnie, now in her eighties and almost totally blind, survived her husband by several years. They live on by fondness in the hearts of those who knew them.

Throughout his preaching career, Claud had been enthusiastic, positive and creative. He frequently arrived early for worship so he could sit in the front of the building and greet all those who entered. His speaking style has been described as somewhat odd and peculiar, for he had the nervous habit of clearing his throat often and seldom looked directly at the audience. Although his sermons

were brief, they were filled with powerful narrations of Biblical events, often ending with a quizzical, "Wouldn't it have been great to have been there?" His many debates also attest that he was a man of solid convictions, ready to defend what he believed.

In addition, Claud was a good student and amassed one of the largest libraries in the area, containing innumerable first editions. In 1940, he also published 500 copies of a book entitled Babylon Is Fallen, an interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel, Paul, and the book of Revelation, which he believed were being fulfilled by the events of World War II.

Witty was succeeded as minister of West Side Central by Bernie E. Bawcom (1947-49) and Paul Shaw (1949-50). Moreover, the church had been served well throughout these years by a number of officers. These included, as elders, Frank Dorsey, G. C. Bradshaw, and N. C. Scott; the deacons were William Harper, N. E. Salisbury, W. C. Push, E. V. Sutton, Everett Gibbard, Leslie Isenberg, Roy Alexander, Robert Montgomery, M. Pentecost, Elmo Rucker, John Smith, Weaver Watson, G. T. Dudley, W. D. Cox, Samuel Brown, and Paul Nickel.

Puritan at Ferguson

In 1949, the construction of the Edsel Ford Expressway forced the church to seek another location. With the \$97,500 the State paid for the property, the congregation managed to purchase the St. James Methodist Church building at 16900 Puritan at Ferguson. This beautiful colonial style structure had been erected in 1939 and was sold for \$85,000. West Side Central began meeting here in May of 1950 with Arthur Peddle as the minister.

Gerald E. Montgomery, a captain in the Detroit Fire Department and Director of its public relations, was later employed as the preacher in 1954. As a leading authority on fire prevention, he made many public appearances on radio and television in Detroit and nationally. When he left to serve as minister for the Southfield congregation, he was briefly followed by Rupert Warren in 1960 and Milton E. Truex in 1961-63. During this period, the congregation fluctuated around two hundred in number.

The mission effort of the congregation continued with a local radio ministry entitled "Words of Life" and support for the establishment of new churches at Tecumseh and Caro in Michigan, as well as foreign efforts in Nigeria and Korea. Assistance was also provided for the Mid-Western, Potter and Schults-Lewis orphan homes; the Home for the Aged at Romeo was also an important part of the benevolent program of the congregation.

During the decades of the fifties and sixties, those who served as elders



included Coy Green, Austin Gilley, Hardy Brightwell, Tom Evans, Herschal Dunn and Grady Scott; the deacons were Bruce Gibbard, Harold Grace, Lawrence Howell, Elster Mullins, Horace Jones, Homer Woodruff, Clifford Stephens and Bobby Senters. The remaining ministers were Doyle Earwood (1963-67), who also taught at Michigan Christian College, Perry C. Cotham (1967-70), later a faculty member at David Lipscomb College, and David Graf (1970-71). Evangelistic meetings had been held by such notable preachers as Ernest Beam, G. C. Brewer, Batsell Barrett Baxter, John T. Willis and Henry Speck.

As a result of the urban population shifts which characterized the late sixties, the membership at West Side Central dwindled to the forties by 1970. It was then regretfully decided to disband the effort and the last worship service at the building was held on October 31, 1971, bringing a close to the fifty-six years of the congregation's history. Everett Gibbard, who had become a member at West Side Central in 1920, was interestingly still involved in these proceedings over half a century later. Although the membership was subsequently dispersed throughout various churches in the Detroit area, the close ties which once united them has continued to bring them together annually for association and fellowship.

After the property had been sold to the Greater Community Baptist Church for over \$105,000, the congregation decided to contribute the proceeds to Michigan Christian College for the erection of a chapel on the campus. Instrumental in making these arrangements was Gerald E. Montgomery, who was then serving on the board of directors of the College.

Notes from the Dedication of the Chapel on August 13, 1978, at Michigan Christian College

Central Church included:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Beil, Beverly | Brown, Della |
| Black, Marie | Brown, Leola |
| Cadman, Volney | Brown, W. C. |
| Chapman, Willie | Brown, Martha |
| Conroy, Leta | Dugan, W. L. |
| Edwards, Irene | Dugan, Ora |
| Gibbard, Elizabeth | Dugan, Paul |
| Gibbard, Mark | Dugan, Robert |
| Gibbard, Robert | Dugan, William |
| Gilles, Maudie | Dugan, Joseph |
| Gilles, Dorothy | Dugan, Willie |
| Green, Harold | Dugan, Louis |
| Green, Mary Frances | Dugan, Fred |
| Green, Willie | Dugan, Fred |
| Graf, Carl | Dugan, Tom |
| Graf, Bob | Dugan, Willie |
| Graf, Willie | Dugan, Leola |
| Graf, Lida | Dugan, George |
| Hunter, Russell | Dugan, Fred |
| Lucas, Fran | Dugan, Edward |
| Lucas, E. | Dugan, Robert |
| Lucas, Willie | Dugan, Della |
| Lucas, Willie | Dugan, William |