

We Remember, We Celebrate, We Believe

Picture it, the southern “wick” of Westfield, March 15, 1765; the town forefathers gathered and decided to petition the town of Westfield and the colony of Massachusetts to establish their own town separate from Westfield. We’d like to think that the petition raised a few eyebrows but the discussions of such a break had been in process for some time. The folks in the “wick” knew they would also have to start a church and secure/pay for a pastor to make their petition a reality.

This beginning part of the history of the Church of Christ in Southwick, then the Congregational Church of Southwick, to now Southwick Congregational Church UCC is part of what we must remember. It is so important for us to know our roots to help us understand how we got to where we are today. So, as part of our time today, we *must* remember.

We remember the tenacity of the founders of what would be known as Southwick and how, with the help of Rev. Ballantine of Westfield, they secured the services of Mr. Abel Forward who was brought before a council of ministers, approved, and ordained on October 26-27 in 1773. In their little meeting house, as represented on the front of the bulletin, the Church of Christ in Southwick had its start. That little meeting house met the needs of the congregation for almost 50 years. The pastor was paid in food and meat; don’t get any ideas. Rev. Abel Forward served until he passed away in 1786. They were able to call Rev. Isaac Clinton in 1787 and he stayed until 1808. He saw Southwick through the dysentery epidemic that saw half of the population infected and the loss of 60 people, including five of the six children of Isaac and Charity Clinton.

Upon the departure of Rev. Clinton, it took thirteen years to call a new minister. That time was filled with fighting among the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc., before

the Rev. Calvin Foote was called in 1820. Things calmed down and a time of peace was in the area until the original church was destroyed in a fire that started by a candle not completely “snuffed” or by lightning. That necessitated yet another meeting house. The building where we are now seated was constructed, opened, and dedicated in November, 1824. Imagine, this building opened 200 years ago! The land adjacent to the church was owned by the church but stipulated for public use. To this day, the Town of Southwick maintains the area much of our yard.

The church continued to grow and a report from 1895 showed 80 members, 27 male, and 53 female with 82 children in Sunday School and 29 members in a Young People’s Society. Up until the “Church House” was built in 1924, all church suppers, entertainments, and celebrations were held in Town Hall, located in or near its current location. The celebration of the 150th anniversary allowed the church to raise some of the funds for the “church house” while the rest was mortgaged. The church was thrilled with the Sunday School rooms upstairs and the “grand” hall and stage downstairs with its beautiful kitchen. Improvements continued to happen.

Some upkeep to the church continued in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The population grew to the point that Sunday School had to go to double sessions! As the population of Southwick grew, so did the church as the membership grew from 159 to 400 during the “Baby Boomer” years. The back part of the “Church House” was added for more Sunday School rooms and to include a larger social hall.

These are all the great memories that we have! We know that our Ecclesiastical ancestors worked extremely hard to raise money and build what we have today. They laid the groundwork, figuratively and literally, to expand, grow, and now maintain. That isn’t to say that

we cannot grow or expand. We rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us. But today, we not only remember, but we also celebrate.

Today is truly a celebration. It is pretty much only in New England where we find churches that can celebrate a 250th anniversary. And Southwick Congregational Church loves to have a good party. We certainly know that we like to eat! But let's talk about how we celebrate. It is important that we come together, be it in a potluck mode, having entertainment with the Pitoniak brothers and Terry, setting up a karaoke machine, etc. It doesn't matter—as long as we're together. Lately, we have opened our doors to celebrate with others in our picnics, potlucks, pasta, and pizza with the Pastor. It is a good thing I like to eat, too!

While we will eat, it is good for us to celebrate with the town officials who have gathered, with our friends from First Congregational Church, our covenantal siblings from the Hampden Association and the Southern New England Conference, church members we haven't seen for a while, and our Congregational siblings we see almost every week. Celebrations are as old as time. We know that David danced with the Ark of the Covenant, Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, and Martha and Mary held a celebratory dinner to thank their good friend Jesus as he raised Lazarus from the dead. But not only do we remember and celebrate, but we do these two things because we also believe.

A few times a year we profess our faith that we believe in God, we believe in the Christ, and we believe in the Holy Spirit. We believe that we are not lucky but we are blessed! We believe that we received gifts in our spiritual Easter basket that include faith, hope, grace, and love. We believe that we are loved unconditionally by God, even when we can't quite grasp that concept. We also believe in our call to offer extravagant welcome, to fling open our doors and invite our neighbor in for a meal with cost or a mandate to bring something. We have shown our

belief in the Gospel message as we have shared our resources with charitable organizations while, at the same time, making sure that things around here stay up to date. We believe in the importance of making whatever contributions we can to our covenantal partners in the Hampden Association as well as the Southern New England Conference. We are believers!!

As we celebrate two hundred fifty years of Southwick Congregational Church we know that the Holy Spirit has guided us for without the love of our Trinitarian God there is no way that we could still be here today. So, my siblings in Christ, I ask you today to remember, to celebrate, and to believe.

“We remember how you loved us to your death, and we celebrate that you are with us here. And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord. We remember, we celebrate, we believe.”