

The History of Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church

January 7, 1887 – June 23, 2019

Throughout its history, Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church (CHUMC) has been a member of a church charge, which is a group of 3-4 churches that share a minister. At the Grassy Creek revival in 1887, Chestnut Hill community members met at the recommendation of the pastor leading the revival and established the Chestnut Hill Baptist and the Chestnut Hill Methodist churches. Each met once a month and many community members attended the services of both. CHUMC's services were the 3rd Sunday of the month from the early 1900s until the 1960s. CHUMC became part of the Mt. Zion charge which included Mt. Zion in Piney Creek (just across the river in Alleghany county), Transou of Laurel Springs, and Nathan's Creek of Nathan's Creek.

Until its closure by the Appalachian District UMC, CHUMC was an example of "circuit riding preacher" heritage. Automobiles have dramatically reduced transit time resulting in a gradual transition from one service a month to 2 times a month to weekly services. Mt. Zion membership and support resulted in a dividing of the charge. Mt. Zion now supports its own pastor. The pastor for CHUMC, Nathan's Creek, and Transou worked as a bi-vocational pastor providing a weekly worship service at each church. He resided in the parsonage built in the 1930s next to NCUMC. Pastor Rob Brooks, who also served Ashe County as the Director of Ashe Outreach Ministries, served the charge for 17 years and was replaced by Rev. Joseph Kesserling Augustine from India.

In the early 1900's, Chestnut Hill was one of the largest Methodist churches in Ashe County. Two significant events occurred that dramatically reduced membership. Young adults of the Chestnut Hill community left early in World War II to join the service or join war support service efforts. Few that left CHUMC returned except for visits, as there were few jobs available in the area and the small farms could not support multiple families.

The second event was a dam on the New River purposed by Virginia's Appalachian Power Company in the late 1960s. If the dam were to be approved, a large portion of the CHUMC community would be under water or lake front land, which would be acquisitioned by the power company. Many believed that fighting the dam project would be useless and sold their lands to the power company and resettled elsewhere. A group of local residents banded together and worked for most of a decade to save the South Fork of the New River and their family farms. The dam project was finally stopped when the New River was included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1976, due to its unique history and Indian artifacts.

Few returned and large portions of the land were resold over time. A significant portion of the area is now used as second homes for vacation or part-time residence during warm weather by retirees.

The variegated green stain glass windows in the brick structure developed cracks in multiple panes and half the windows could no longer be raised for airflow during the summer months. A building fund was raised through honorariums to replace the windows with double hung, double paned glass in 2015. Brass plaques were installed under the windows to remember life membership and/or support of Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church. Those recognized are:

- Bill (deceased) and Faye Caldwell (current member)
- Edith Pierce Jones (deceased)
- Samuel “Bruce” and Ruby Douglas Ward (deceased)
- Stephen and Della Moxley Ward (deceased)
- Roy and Anne Caldwell Wallace (deceased)
- George and Blandina Ward Yale (deceased)

All those who are deceased, except for Edith Jones, are buried in the Chestnut Hill UMC Cemetery located west of the Church building and parking area. The first burial was the infant son of William and Emma Sturgill in November 1906. The land for the church and cemetery was purchased in 3 parcels on October 22, 1894, December 26th, 1925, and June 11, 1962.

The portion of the Lucy Pierce Bell estate bequeathed to Chestnut Hill UMC was used to establish a North Carolina Foundation Fund for the maintenance of the Chestnut Hill UM Church and Cemetery in perpetuity in August 2001.

The church used outhouses until 2005 when the original brick vestibule was replaced with a larger foyer and two restrooms. The addition was funded through a matching funds grant from the Duke Foundation. Edith Pierce Jones donated the steeple after the foyer was completed.

Two enhancement projects were approved and completed as Eagle Scout projects by Luke Mallette and Jordan Ashe. Both young men are relatives of long time attendees of CHUMC. Luke Mallette raised funds for and built the planter, bushes, and flagpole that is located in the cemetery. The flag appears above the horizon as you approach the church on Martin Gambill Rd. He completed his project in 2013. Jordan Ashe headed the construction of a memorial garden to the left of the pedestrian gate on the east side of the cemetery, 3 benches located throughout the cemetery, and 3 picnic tables next to the memorial garden. The picnic tables have allowed the church to occasionally resume the practice of “dinner on the grounds”.

The Appalachian District UMC announced they were closing the church on January 17, 2019. The final service was held on Decoration Day for the cemetery on Father’s Day, June 23, 2019. The members that remained established the Chestnut Hill Community Cemetery Association (CHCCA) to oversee the operations and maintenance of the cemetery. The small group of members established Chestnut Hill Community Church that meets in the homes of the members.