

Centennial Reflections

*Essays from the
Oakwood Historical Society*

A chronicling of Oakwood's religious Institutions

By Harry G. Ebeling

A stable community like Oakwood could not have prospered and grown in a Midwest environment without the contribution of churches. So it is with some caution and my fingers crossed in hope that I don't tread on any sensitive toes that I undertake to review the church growth of our city in less space than it took in "An Oakwood Scrapbook" in 2000.

In 1920, Christ Episcopal Church downtown established a mission "Children's Church" for the south Dayton families under Deaconess Fracker. Holding classes at Harman School until 1922, it then moved to the East Oakwood Club and in 1923 it rented storerooms on Park Ave. in the Fletcher Building. After raising \$10,000, it purchased a lot on West Dixon Ave. next to the alley and broke ground in 1925. Dedicated in 1926, the original church building now serves as the chapel. A 1939 addition permitted it to carry on its expanded role through the war years until it was able to purchase the Kling House for use as a rectory, and then in 1949, a gift of the Rike family allowed an addition to the north alley for an expanded church school and activities.

By 1957 they were ready to tear down the Kling house and build what we know today as St. Paul's main sanctuary. The garden between the buildings was dedicated to Jeanette and Warner Kiefaber in 1975 and in 1983 the Cloister and Columbarium were added through gifts from the L.M. Berry family. Although parking has been and continues to be a problem, the church remains a central place of worship for the community and a site for many weddings, funerals, church activities and community meetings.

Beginning at about the same time, the Oakwood Evangelical United Brethren Church was founded in 1926, and dedicated a chapel at 206 Hadley Ave. in 1929 on four lots it had acquired at the corner of Shafor Blvd. Experiencing growth, it erected a new sanctuary in 1929. After the struggle of the depression and WW II, the need was apparent in 1953 for an education addition to include a gym, chapel and classrooms. The merger of the United Brethren and the Methodist Churches in 1968 caused a name change, but it is still an active part of the community under the name Oakwood United Methodist Church.

Almost simultaneously, the Concordia Evangelical Church was founded in 1926 at 250 Peach Orchard Ave With sponsorship from the Missouri Synod, Lutheran Church of America, members met in a rented hall at fourth and Jefferson Sts. until its' first Chapel was dedicated in 1928. Suffering from the same problems of the depression that all churches faced, it continued to grow and by 1950 it began construction of its present sanctuary. Continued growth permitted the church to sponsor several other Missouri Synod congregations in the area in the 50's. Expansion of education and other programs demanded more space and the Education Building was added in 1962.

Today, Concordia sponsors a pre-school program, vacation bible school, Boy Scouts and serves the needs of changing family styles.

The Lutheran Church of Our Savior was established by the United Lutheran Church in America in 1941. First worshipping at the Far Hills Theater, they continued to meet wherever they could, even in the auditorium of Oakwood High School, through the war years. By 1948, they were able to build at the corner of Far Hills Ave. and Grandon Rd. In 1956 it was obvious that they needed more space and the Grandon Rd. location was not adequate. They were able to purchase the former Frederick B. Patterson home on Woods Rd. at E. Thruston Blvd. The home was available because it had been left to Miami Valley Hospital by the estate of Mrs. John A. MacMillan (founder of Dayton Rubber Co.).



Lutheran Church of Our Savior is former Frederick B. Patterson estate.

This was not a popular choice for the neighbors who, after failing to block the zoning application, went to court, and failing at Common Pleas Court, went to the Court of Appeals which decided in favor of the church in 1957. The 535 seat sanctuary and the social hall were completed in 1961 and the church has melded into the area successfully. The 31 room English Norman mansion on the site of the former "Far Hills" has been adapted to their use and a piece of history preserved. It provided space for the public school's latch key program in the 90's until the Lange School was able to address those needs in 2000.

At the time of the move to Woods Rd. by the Lutheran Church of Our Savior, The Miami Valley Unitarian Fellowship was established in 1958 to serve the needs south of town and because of some dissatisfaction with the leadership of the First Unitarian Fellowship on Salem Ave.. The timing was perfect because, in 1959, the opportunity to acquire the Grandon Rd. location was presented. About forty new members were willing to extend themselves to acquire the building. An active program of social activism and religious education attracted new members and space became a problem. In 1965 a new wing was added to accommodate the growing needs. In 1980 the lay-led congregation began discussions on the subject of retaining a minister, which was approved in 1985. After many years of growth and extension of its ministry, the

Fellowship built its new facility in Washington Township on Yankee Street in 2002 where it continues to grow and prosper.

Although it seems like yesterday, the Far Hills Seventh Day Adventist Church at the corner of Park Rd. only stayed in Oakwood from 1952 until 1992. Founded in 1895, the church built on the south of Dayton site to accommodate growth and the influx of new personnel for the Kettering Memorial Hospital. By 1992 they saw a need in the northern area of Dayton and moved to a new, larger site in Vandalia. The property was purchased by Karrington Communities who tore down the structure and built the present facility to serve the needs of the elderly. It now operates as Sunrise Assisted Living.

In 2003, the Chabad Center Jewish educational program for Orthodox and Hasidic Jews added to the religious life of the community when it moved to the former Unitarian Fellowship building at 2001 Far Hills Ave. It is not a church in the traditional sense, nor is it a synagogue. (Its name, Chabad, is pronounced with a silent "C" and a hard "h"). It is a center with no members but rather with participants and volunteers who number about 350. Its mission is primarily educational, offering youth and adult sessions throughout the week. They teach and interpret through strict and literal interpretation of the Bible and the Talmud. They do not drive cars on Saturday (the Sabbath), maintain a kosher kitchen and a dress code. They have built a playground for the children and can be seen walking to Saturday services along Far Hills Ave.

To fill out the needs of the Conservative Jews in the community, we now have Beth Abraham Synagogue which has recently joined us at Sugar Camp. Seeing a change in the pattern of living among its worshipers, the long established group bought and received approval for conversion of two buildings on 4.88 acres of the historic site. One contains any beautiful stained glass plaques of artwork from the former Synagogue. In March of 2008, the eternal light was extinguished at the Salem Ave. site and the twelve Torah scrolls were removed and drivencarried up the hill by over 300 members to the new Temple for installation in the Holy Ark. A shofar, or rams horn, was blown to signify the opening and closing ceremony. The formal dedication took place at a Simcha (Happy Occasion) on May 4.



Holy Ark of Beth Abraham synagogue, Oakwood's newest religious institution.

