



1762
to
2002



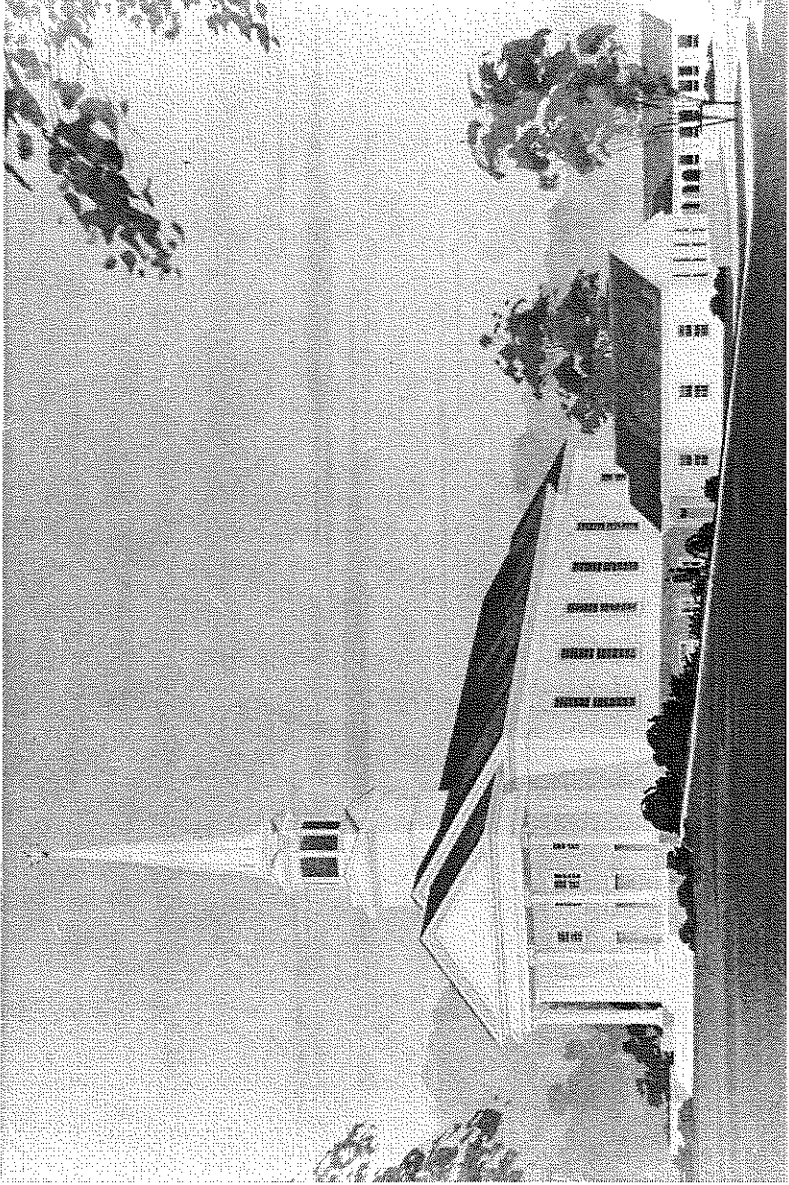
*A History
of the
First
Congregational
Church
of
Vernon*



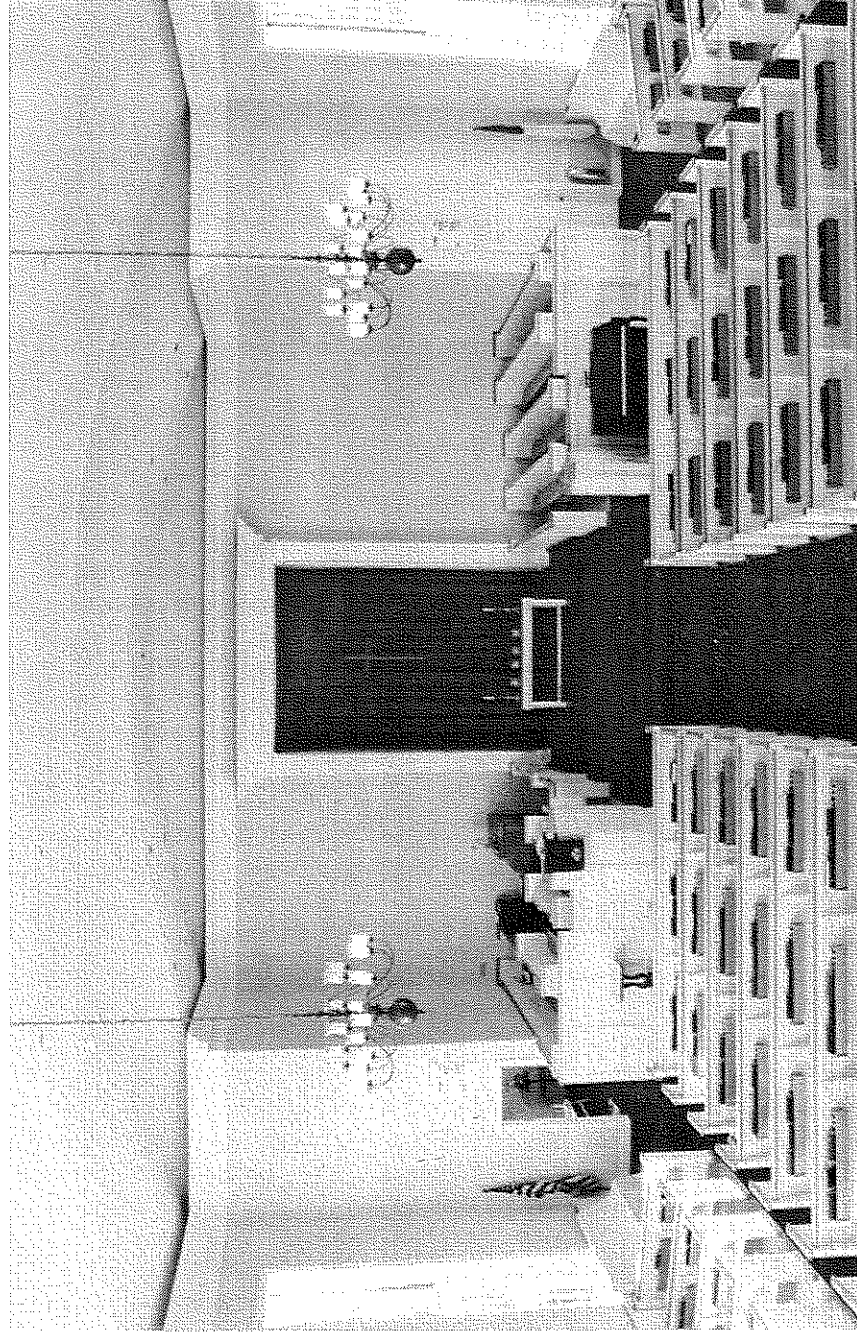
240th Anniversary
November 24, 2002

In honor of
Geraldine Risley Strong
Church Historian for the past 26 years

This booklet was made possible
through generous donations
given by the congregation.



**PRESENT CHURCH
MEETING HOUSE - 1966
KELLOGG HALL - 1957**



SANCTUARY OF PRESENT CHURCH

FIRST COVENANT

1762

You do now in the presence of the heartsearching God and this assembly, avouch the Lord Jehovah, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, to be your God, Redeemer and Sanctifier. You do freely and forever give up yourself (or yourselves) and all you have to him, humbly confessing your sins and depending wholly upon the merits of Christ for pardon and salvation. Taking the word of God as the only unerring rule of doctrine and duty, you do solemnly promise by the aid of divine grace, to walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, and honor your holy vocation by a life of piety towards God and benevolence towards men.

You do sincerely dedicate yourself (or yourselves) to the service of God in this church, and deliberately promise to submit to its watch and discipline; to walk with its members in Christian fellowship, and to labor for the promotion of its purity, peace and edification, till, in the providence of God, your special relation to it shall be dissolved.

With an affecting belief that your vows are recorded on high, and will be reviewed on the day of final judgment, do you thus covenant with God and this Church?

We then, as a church, (all the church members rise) do cordially receive you to our Communion, and promise to treat you with Christian affection, to watch over you with tenderness, and to beseech the Great Head of this church to enable you to keep the solemn covenant which you have now made. And may we all have grace to be faithful to God and to one another while we live, and be finally prepared through the Redeemer's merits, for admission to everlasting fellowship with those who shall be called to the marriage-supper of the Lamb.

PRESENT CHURCH COVENANT

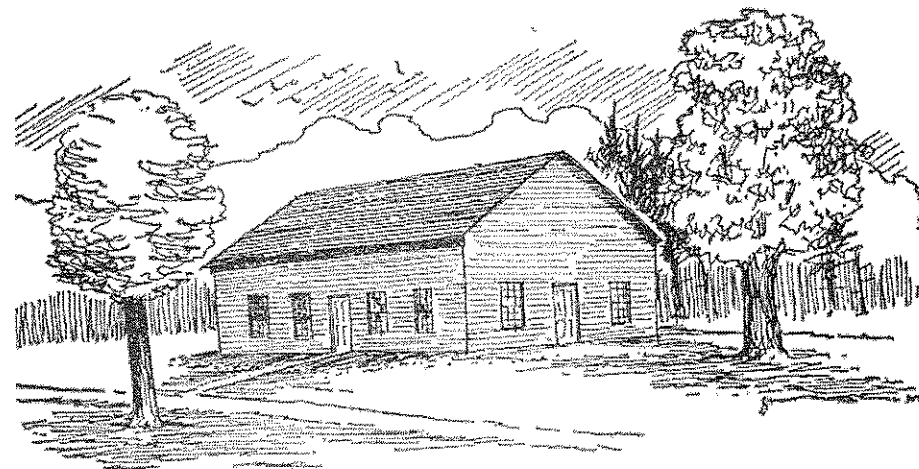
Adopted 1928

We confess our faith in God, our reverent love for Jesus Christ, and our willingness to be guided by the Spirit of God as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures and in conscience.

We associate ourselves together in this Church of Christ to bear witness in the community to the highest Christian ideals, and to keep before ourselves and others a vision of God and a knowledge of His ways.

We covenant with our Lord and one with another that, so far as in us lies, we shall follow the example of Christ and take for our rules of life the Great Commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself", and His new Commandment, "Love One Another."

We promise to walk together with our fellow members in faithfulness and Christian love, ever mindful of their welfare, and we promise that, so far as we are able, we will attend the services of this Church, observe its ordinances, share in its work and support, and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christians.



FIRST MEETING HOUSE
NORTH BOLTON (VERNON)
ERECTED 1762

OUR BEGINNINGS

The first inhabitants of this region were Native Americans of the Nipmuck, Podunk and Mohegan tribes. By 1637 European settlers had formed a little confederacy of three plantations in this area. The ecclesiastical history of Vernon begins with the settlement of the Town of Bolton which was incorporated in 1720 when a church was formed there. A Meeting House was built two or three years later.

Farming was the principal occupation of the first settlers, but as early as 1739, the power of the wild streams flowing through the valley here had been brought into use in saw mills, grist mills, and in iron works. Near to these, dwelling houses were built. And so, for many years before a church was established here in Vernon, there were people who were united in all civil and ecclesiastical relations with those who lived South of this valley. They helped us to found the church in Vernon¹.

Various petitions were made to the General Assembly to allow the parishioners to meet in different sections due to the inconvenience of traveling, especially in mud and snow, and sometimes because the Meeting House in Bolton was not large enough to accommodate all of those attending. In October 1760, the General Assembly of Connecticut granted a petition to form a separate parish called North Bolton. The new Ecclesiastical Society was formed from the north part of Bolton and the east part of the Second Society of Windsor. The following excerpts from the

minutes of some of the early meetings of the Ecclesiastical Society of North Bolton show that, when working by committee, things often took a while to get done (some things never change):

On November 12, 1760, First meeting of the Society, Isaac Jones, Moderator. John Chapman chosen clerk and treasurer. Voted to hold the Sabbath Day Meeting at David Allis' dwelling house till 1st May next.

May 15, 1761 – Voted to apply to the County Court for another Committee to affix a place to build a Meeting House. Voted to meet at David Allis' house the summer season.

September 23, 1761 – Voted to apply to the General Assembly for a Committee to affix a place to build.

November 16, 1761 – “Voted to hire a candidate to preach the gospel to us ye year in sewing.” Voted to meet at David Allis' until further notice.

December 31, 1761 – Voted sd. Meeting House to be 46 x 36 ft. with 22 ft. posts. John Chapman, David Allis, and Seth King appointed building committee.

March 10, 1762 – “Voted to send to ye Association for advice in order for calling a candidate upon probation”. A committee appointed to apply for a building lot of half an acre. Voted to shingle sd. Meeting House with chestnut shingles.

May 6, 1762 – Meeting House raised.

June 20, 1762 – First met in the Meeting House for divine worship.

July 1, 1762 – “Voted to call Mr. Ebenezer Kellogg to settle in ye work of ye ministry in sd. Society.”

November 24, 1762 – The Reverend Ebenezer Kellogg was ordained and the Second Church of Bolton (later to be known as The First Congregational Church of Vernon) was organized, composed of thirty-five members of the Church of Bolton.

List of Original Members

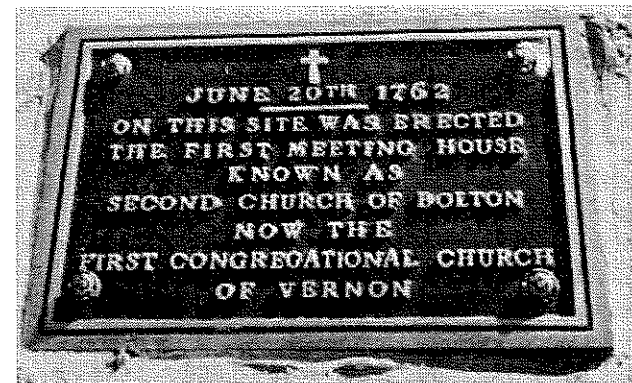
David Allis	Sarah L. Johns	Abigail C. Messenger
Elizabeth Allis	Isaac Jones	Nathan Messenger
Sarah P. Allis	Ann Thrall King	Damarius E. Olcott
Sarah Blackmore	Charles King	Dorcas Lyman Olcott
Abigail K. Bronson	Hezekiah King	Titus Olcott
Isaac Bronson	Sarah K. King	Lydia Cook Payne
Hannah K. Chapman	Seth King	Stephen Payne
John Chapman	Abiah Wright Knowlton	Jabez Rogers
Mary B. Chapman	Solomon Loomis	Ashael Root
Thomas Chapman	Experience Crippen Lord	Mehtable Root
Elizabeth K. Dart	Ruth Rogers Lord	Caleb Talcott
Thomas Dart	Eunice Marshall	

December 13, 1768 – Voted the Committee to provide a lock and key and bolts to fasten up the Meeting House.

“The Meeting House was situated on what is now Sunnyview Drive. The location was then known as ‘Meeting House Hill’. At first benches were used. It was not furnished with pews until 1770 nor plastered until 1774. The pews were square galleries on three sides and high above the stairs on each front corner was a pew for Negroes. The pulpit, on the north side, was elevated and over this a huge sounding board was suspended from the ceiling with a slender rod. This was a source of wonder to all who beheld it and the never-ending questions was, ‘What if it should fall?’⁴¹ A few years after the second meeting house was built, this original church building was removed to Rockville and made the east wing of the Frank Mill. It was later destroyed by fire.

In October 1962, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the church, a plaque was placed on Sunnyview Drive at the site of the first Meeting House. You will find the plaque on a rock ledge beneath a tree at the edge of the road between 45 and 49 Sunnyview Drive.

In 1808, the Town of Vernon was incorporated by the division of the town of Bolton. At that time, the Ecclesiastical Society and the church took the name of the new town and became the Vernon Ecclesiastical Society and The First Congregational Church of Vernon.



REVEREND EBENEZER KELLOGG OUR FIRST PASTOR

The Reverend Ebenezer Kellogg was the first pastor of the church that would become known as First Congregational Church of Vernon. He was born on April 5, 1737, in Norwalk, Connecticut. He was the son of Daniel Kellogg and great-grandson of Daniel Kellogg, one of the leading men among the early settlers of Norwalk. His mother was Eunice Jarvis of Huntington, New York. Mr. Kellogg graduated from Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1757. He studied theology under The Reverend David Judson of Newton, Connecticut, and was licensed to preach on May 28, 1760.

Mr. Kellogg accepted the call of the Ecclesiastical Society of North Bolton and was ordained pastor of the church then known as the Second Church of Bolton on November 24, 1762. The pastorate continued nearly 55 years. At its close, his friend, The Reverend Mr. Ephraim T. Woodruff of North Coventry, gave this testimony concerning his life and character, "As a minister of Jesus Christ, he obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. He was evangelical in his instructions and his preaching was known to be of a discriminating mind. His uniform character was that of a peacemaker. The church and congregation that had grown up in his care were commended for the remarkable harmony and union that had been uniformly maintained among them."

In his book *Cascades and Courage* George S. Brookes writes:

Affectionately known as "Priest" Kellogg, a scion of that sturdy stock which has given many distinguished men to the country, strong physically and mentally, he held his people with a vigorous hand and a lucid mind. A Puritan himself, he persuaded his people to become Puritans also.

The Lord's Day began according to the Hebrew manner at sunset Saturday night, because "the evening and the morning were the first Day" and ended Sunday at sunset. And woe to the luckless newcomer who drove out of the village after sundown Saturday night or drove into it before sunset Sabbath evening. Before sunset Saturday night, the mill was stopped and every room was cleared by busy workers. And on Sabbath evening, busy cloth packers prepared an invoice of goods for the early Monday morning team, market bound. For the young people, Sunday evening was courting time.

When Mr. Kellogg was called to the church, he was given a salary of £60 to increase £1 yearly until it reached £70. When federal currency was adopted, this amounted to \$233.33. He bought a house and farm and by his own labor and prudence raised a family and somewhat extended his possessions. Being a patriot, he served in the Revolutionary Army for independence from England. He missed only 12 Sundays in 55 years of ministry.

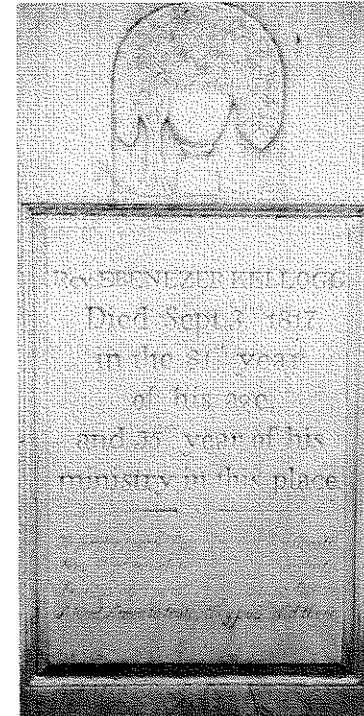
Mr. Kellogg's wife was Hannah Wright, a daughter of the Reverend Ebenezer Wright of Stamford, Connecticut. At the time of her marriage, she was the step-daughter of the Reverend Moses Dickinson of Norwalk, Connecticut. She died in

1807. The Kellogg's had three sons and three daughters. Their sons Ebenezer and Thomas settled in Vernon where they were leaders in the developing community. Son Daniel lived in Tolland and for a longer time in Hartford until his death. Daughter Hannah married Deacon Phineas Talcott and her sister Eunice married Dr. Scottoway Hinckley. Daughter Elizabeth died shortly before her third birthday. All of the men were active in government and prominent citizens of the town.

Dr. Brookes writes, "The saintly Ebenezer Kellogg always read his lengthy sermons. They were serious discourses, carefully setting forth the most important doctrines and duties of religion. The theology of the First Church was stern in theory and strict in practice. The children respected him and many called him 'father.'"

Mr. Kellogg wrote, "some few in almost every year have been induced to publicly profess religion" and he gratefully remembers the seasons of spiritual awakening in the years 1772, 1782, 1800, 1809, and 1815. On the fifty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, near the end of his life, he said in his sermon, "Time in its nature is fleeting. It bears all the living along with it. As to myself, the time of my departure is near at hand. And in view of the prospect of that solemn day, I am supported with a believing hope that I trust in my all-sufficient Savior, and that I have not labored altogether in vain among you."

Mr. Kellogg died on September 3, 1817 in his 81st year. The Reverend Ephraim T. Woodruff of North Coventry preached his funeral sermon. The stone that marks his grave is inscribed with the following:



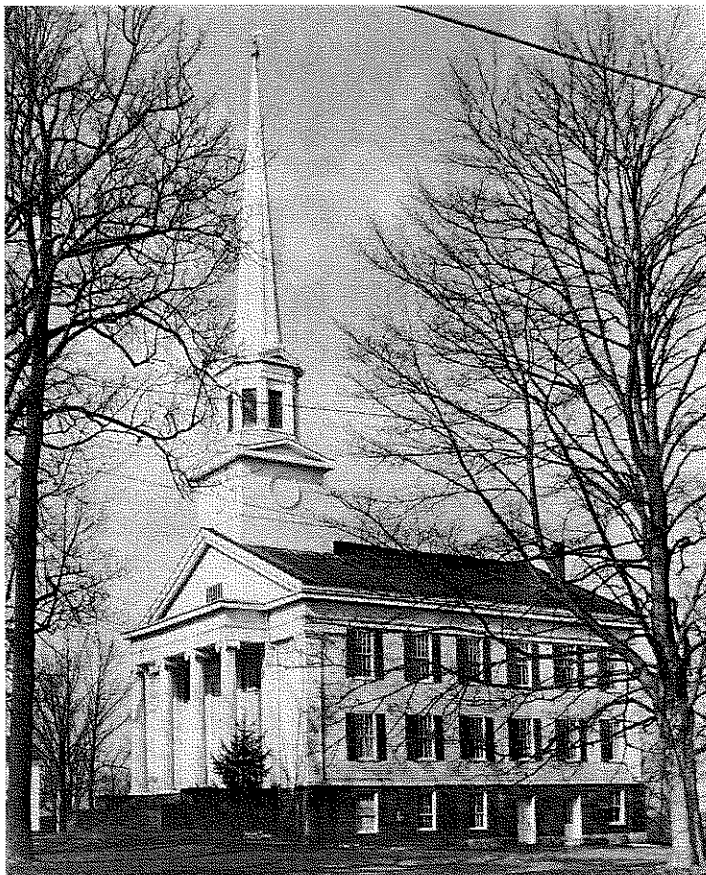
*"In yonder sacred house, he spent his breath,
Now silent, senseless, here he sleeps in death,
These lips again shall wake and then declare
A loud Amen in truths they published there."*

He was buried in the Old Burying Ground on Bamforth Road, Vernon, Connecticut. In 1936 the descendants of the George Maxwell -- Harriet Kellogg family arranged that the remains of the Reverend Ebenezer Kellogg, his wife and young daughter be moved from their original burial site to a private cemetery lot in Grove Hill Cemetery in Rockville, Connecticut. There is a long slab marking their original burial place in the Old Burying Ground.

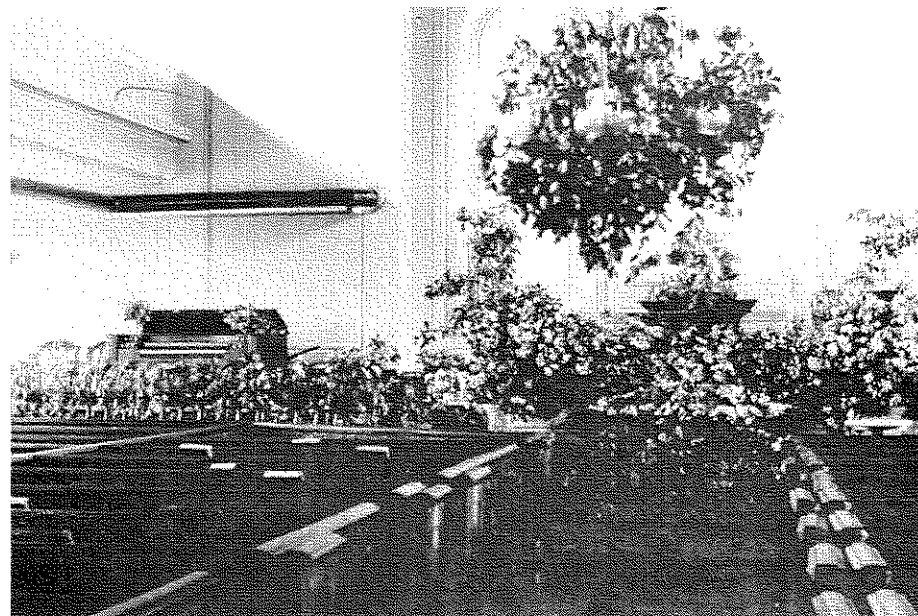
THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE

During the six year ministry of Rev. Amzi Benedict, the second Meeting House was built. In 1824 a meeting was held to select a spot on which to build. They "determined and fixed upon a spot on which said meeting house may be erected, being on land of Francis McLean, Esq., on the west side of the Hartford Turnpike Road between his dwelling house and the blacksmith's shop of Capt. Roberts about six rods west of said turnpike road, and between the second and third rows of apple trees from the south side of a young orchard, having stuck a stake on said spot".²

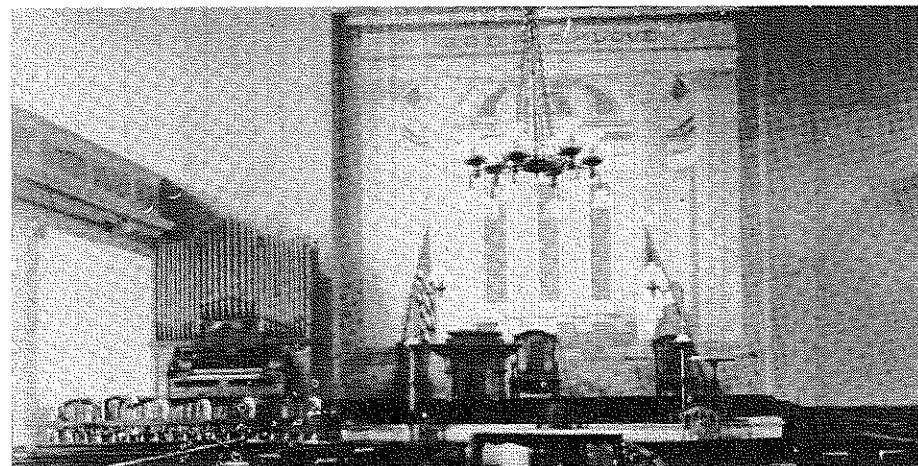
The meeting house was built in 1826. An excerpt from William Cogswell's history of Rockville comments that "the old and young were there—every one. The raising went on, one, two and three days, from noon till night; finally, with the aid of a barrel of rum, the raising was completed."³ The Meeting House was dedicated on April 4, 1827. The day following the dedication all the pews had been sold for a total of \$7,700. This was \$700 more than the cost of the building. In 1851 the Meeting House was moved back from the road a few feet, the columns and the spire were added, and it was rededicated.



THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE

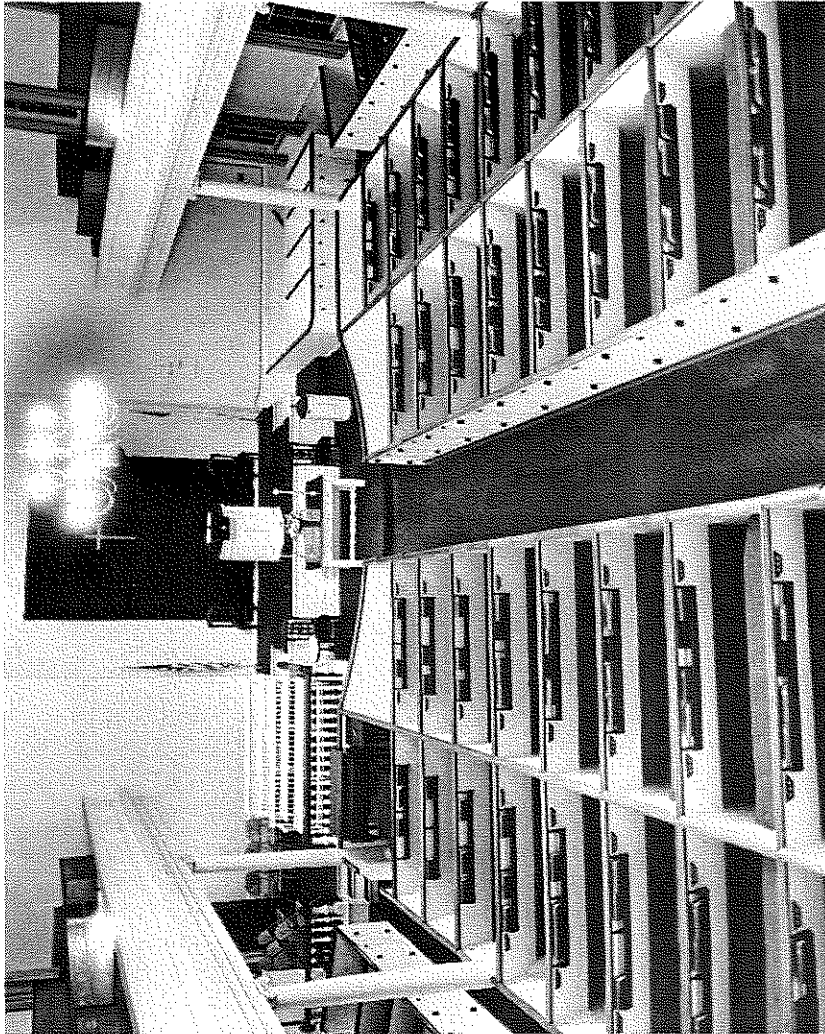


Sanctuary decorated with laurel for Children's Day, June, 1909. Note the oil lamps in chandelier, the stove pipes which went around length of church, and the organ which was pumped by the stick protruding from the right side.



Circa 1926 Note the painted scene in back of the pulpit and a reed organ with false pipes. The chandelier has been wired for electricity.

THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE



Sanctuary at the time of the
200th anniversary in 1962

PARSONAGES

At the organization of ecclesiastical societies and the establishment of churches, it was customary to secure a home for their first minister. This custom left succeeding ministers without a home and many had scanty resources. At length, the plan was adopted by the ecclesiastical societies of securing a parsonage. On April 26, 1833, the Ecclesiastical Society of Vernon purchased a home on Bolton road to be used as a parsonage. The house, still standing at 29 Bolton Rd., Vernon, served as the parsonage until it was sold on January 2, 1913.

The Ecclesiastical Society sold the Bolton Road property after Sarah Jane Butler bequeathed the house and property at 679 Hartford Turnpike, Vernon, to the church in 1912. The house was renovated and additional rooms were added in the 1960's and later on a garage and breezeway. It served as a parsonage until 1998. It stood empty for two years until our newly called Senior Minister chose to acquire his own residence. It was then decided to rent the house temporarily.

DAUGHTER CHURCHES

The village around the Rock Manufacturing Co. known as "Rockville" was rapidly becoming an industrial center. People moved there in order to live near the factories where they worked. They petitioned the church in Vernon to establish their own church in Rockville so they wouldn't have to travel so far to services. In October 1837, "with tender expressions of love and respect from the parent church, thirty-five members were dismissed, and with others, organized as the Second Congregational Church of Vernon. It was later known as The First Congregational Church of Rockville".¹ It stood where the present town hall Memorial Building now stands. It would later merge with the Second Congregational Church of Rockville to become Union Congregational Church. "The Vernon church lost just over 16% of its working members and this was a great loss.

Thirty years later (March 1867), forty-one members were dismissed from the church at Vernon and united in forming the Congregational Church of Talcottville. They gave as reasons:

- 1st - That they believe church privileges are needed at that place and are likely to continue to be more and more needed in the future.
- 2nd - It is their conviction that the cause of Christ would be more effectively served by the organization at the present church"

THE CONTINUING HISTORY OF THE CHURCH AT VERNON CENTER

After the formation of the daughter churches things continued to change. In the late 1800's the Ecclesiastical Society voted to sell a lot at the south side of the church to be used for a school. The school building was later used as a firehouse. This land and building were redeeded to the church in August, 1961. The firehouse, badly in need of repairs, was torn down two months later.

From 1886 to 1928 the Vernon Grange rented the "Town Hall Room" in the church basement. After 42 years a new Grange Hall was built across the street because the church fathers did not allow dancing and card playing in the church building.

In 1896, the church spire was taken down due to its decayed condition. A building committee was formed to raise funds to replace the spire and repair the church building. It took considerable time to raise enough funds because of a decline in membership.



**MEETING
HOUSE
CIRCA 1900**
Notice that
the spire
is missing.

The following quote from the 1903 Manual of First Congregational Church of Vernon shows some despair:

And now after the noble record of the past, the fate of so many of the hill town churches, from causes that are inevitable, has fallen upon the old mother church, that of a contracted parish, greatly lessened constituency and meagre material resources. But in her feebleness, she finds great comfort in the affectionate remembrance of her children who have removed to other spheres of usefulness and in many life-long friends, their occasional visits, their generous pecuniary assistance, and sometimes their return to spend declining years on these healthy, breezy, beautiful hills under the shadow of the venerable sanctuary. But best of all, because of the presence of Him who walks amid the golden candlesticks, the light of the Sacred Lamp of the Sanctuary still burns undimmed, faith clings to the old and well tested truths. The service of the remaining few, is often heroic, in its self-sacrificing fidelity; and soul-saving endeavor freshens its strength, by contact with His life, who has said, "I am with you always even unto the end."

Between 1910 and 1929 two furnaces were installed, the church was wired for electricity, and other repairs were done.

In 1929 an important step in the life of the church took place when the Ecclesiastical Society voted to turn over all its assets, as well as the church property, to the church membership and the church was incorporated.

The terrible hurricane of 1938 blew down the steeple and damaged the roof. The roof was later repaired but the bell stood "naked against the sky".¹ Unexpectedly, word came from Allyn and Robert Ford of Minneapolis that they were interested in restoring the steeple in memory of their parents who had been married here in 1860 and were active members of the church until they moved to Minneapolis. The work was completed in 1939.

From about 1923-1945 the church underwent a period of severe financial difficulty. The Ladies Aid Society "rendered able and quiet service".⁴ Many delicious suppers were served in the church hall. During this time it was voted to accept financial aid from the Missionary Society of Connecticut to help with expenses. George Brookes made this observation in 1955:

...this was not to be the end of a mighty history in an area where the Church had done its task. More recent history has proven otherwise. With the steady flow of population out from the city of Hartford and with the great influx of employment in the East Hartford area, and with the completion of an excellent four lane highway through Vernon to Hartford, a high priority has been placed upon life in the suburbs. The result of this situation has been the absorption of new life into the town and the Church, quite reversing the judgment of doom laid down by the unknown author of the manual quoted above. Great was the faith and

courage of the few who carried on in seeming sight of "the end". But the end had not come and it has rather proved to be "the beginning" of a new era in the history of "the old mother church" which was the cradle of our Town of Vernon.²

Until the mid 20th century the church had no indoor plumbing. Water had to be carried to the church in milk cans from nearby homes. When an artesian well was dug in 1949 we then had running water for the first time. In 2001 the church was connected to the town water system.

By 1957 educational space was badly needed. To make the building of an addition possible, pledges for a three-year period were made in the amount of \$53,000 and a \$20,000 mortgage was taken out. The new wing was named "Kellogg Hall" in honor of our first minister. The sanctuary was also renovated at that time and in 1960 the church kitchen was completely remodeled.

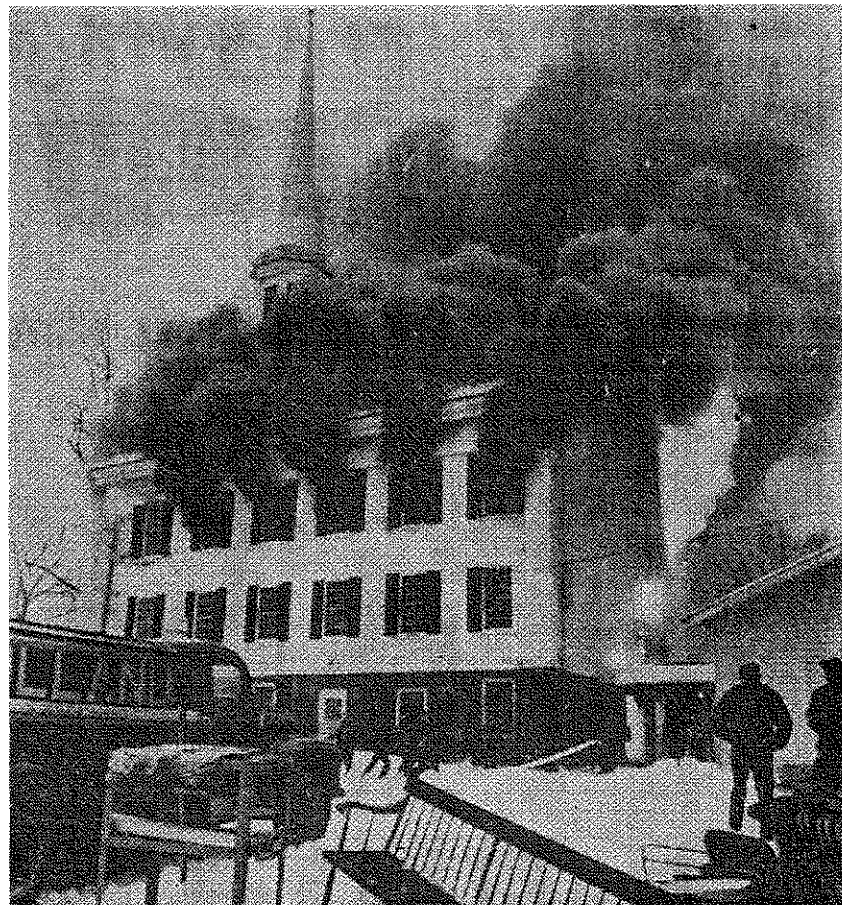
The last Christmas service to be held in the 1826 Meeting House took place in December 1964. Tragically, a devastating fire completely destroyed the building on January 23, 1965. The following eyewitness account of the church historian, Mildred Willes (who lived at the corner of West Street and Route 30), conveys the sense of horror and loss suffered by the congregation, but it also describes the spirit of the church that survived:

Although January 23rd dawned with a heavy snow falling, no one dreamed that it would be such a tragic day for our community. After waking from a restless nap, the fire-whistle blew and I looked out of my second story window to see which way the fire truck would go, as the fire house is located across the street. As it came out of the fire house, it turned down Route 30 and stopped before the entrance of the church, but did not move for some time. When it did start up, it turned into the driveway.

Becoming alarmed, I called the police and asked if our church was on fire. The reply was "Yes." I then asked if it was serious and the policeman replied, "I am afraid it is, Mrs. Willes." I then quickly called my young neighbor, Howard Denslow, who came over at once, and after putting on all the warm wraps we could find, we hurried through the deep snow down the road. As we neared the corner of Center Road, I saw the sky all red, and without thinking, I exclaimed, "What a beautiful sunset." I then suddenly realized that it was snowing-it could not be a sunset, but a sheet of flame etched against the sky. When I saw that, I knew that the church was doomed as no volunteer fire department truck and hose could ever reach that tall structure. By this time, hoses had been laid and were playing on the roof of Kellogg Hall to save that, if possible. People had gathered from everywhere and were crying on each other's shoulders, even if they knew the person or not.

I learned later that when the firemen tried to open the front door as that part of the church was not yet on fire, a great sheet of flame forced them back and they could not save the historic pulpit, sofa, melodian or tables.

While looking with horror at the raging fire, I remembered that the file of historical records was in the Secretary's office in Kellogg Hall. For years, I had them stored in my house and only just recently had taken them down to the church. I, then, in a loud voice called to Howard to see if he could get them out, so, with others helping him, he dashed into the building and actually did bring the heavy files out, along with the library books and piano. In the gathering darkness, not knowing one person from another, we finally got a friend's truck and, crossing the hose lines, they took them up into my garage. This took a super-human effort as my yard and garage doors were blocked with snow. It was truly wonderful that these priceless records were saved, even to the Book of Remembrance.



Everyone was nearly frozen by this time, but no one could leave and a great cry of despair arose as the historic spire fell with a crash backwards into the flaming building. Many people, cold and hungry and anxious to know if I was all right, as they knew what the church had meant to me and my husband and his parents and grandparents, came to the house, and soon the larder was empty of soup and coffee and cookies and food. People from miles around saw the fire and crash of the steeple and soon offers of help came in with everyone offering their churches. Before the evening was over, the minister, Mr. Lacey, and the church leaders had met at the parsonage and it was decided to meet at the Vernon Elementary School where classes could be held in the schoolrooms and the gym used for a sanctuary. An organ was loaned, hymn books were given and other essentials and the very next day the first service was held there.

Building committees and fund-raising committees were soon formed and our own John Cadman was chosen as the architect. Money poured in from everywhere, and with the pledges from church members, the insurance and gifts from individuals and churches, a new church soon rose from the ashes of the old. The design was as much like the old as possible, with all modern equipment. On the day that the spire was to be placed on the cone prepared for it, people gathered again on a snowy day in April to watch as a man swung far out in space to complete the dangerous operation.

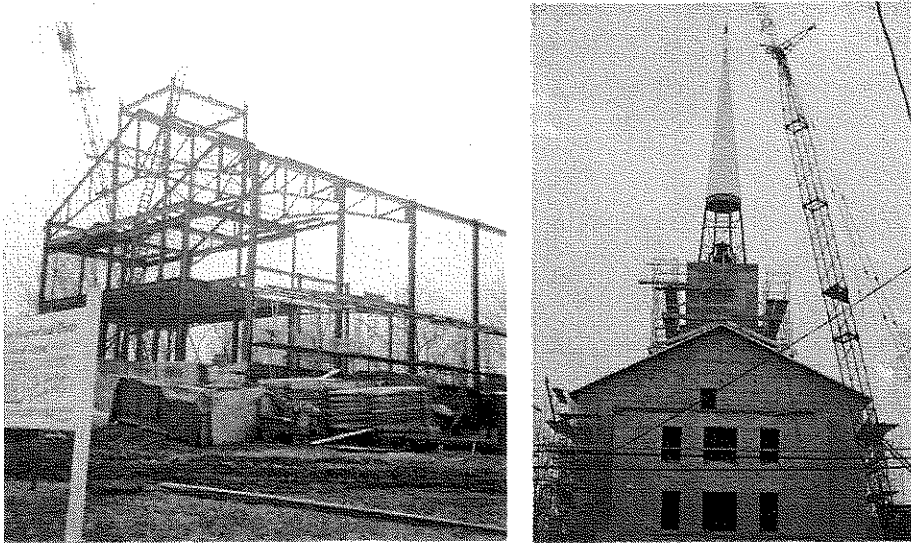
We should be the most thankful of people, for this tragic event united all people of the community and gave us a new, beautiful church in keeping with the best of New England tradition.



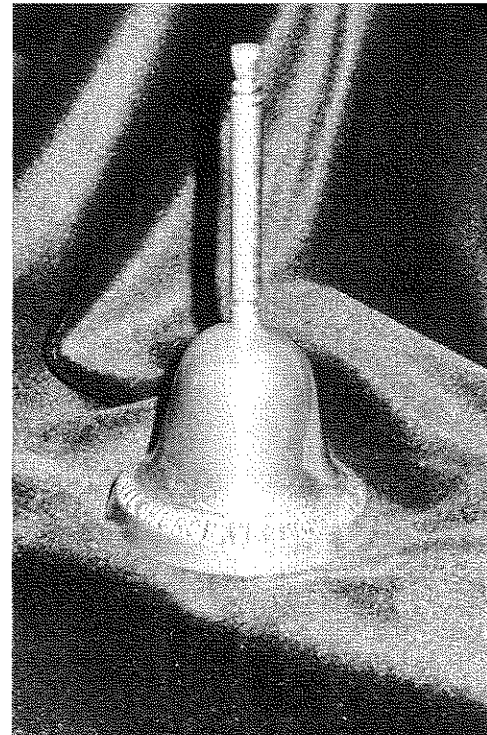
“We Are Without a Church Building, But not Without a Church”

THE NEW MEETING HOUSE

We continued to hold our Sunday worship services and Sunday School classes at the Vernon Elementary School until our new building was ready. On November 5, 1965 the church members voted to expend an amount of \$374,000 for rebuilding the church and adding an administration building of four rooms. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held two days later. Just one year after the groundbreaking our new Meeting House was dedicated on September 26, 1966.



The bell that now hangs in the steeple was donated by U.S. Envelope Corp. of Rockville. It was removed from the tower of their plant with the aid of a giant crane and transported to our new church building during the reconstruction in 1966.



To provide the congregation with a reminder of the old meeting house and to raise funds to improve the new building by enclosing the breezeway, twelve hundred small bells were made from the old bell which had cracked during the fire. Many of our church families still treasure these keepsakes.

In the 60's, we made a renewed commitment to our children by hiring our first Director of Christian Education in 1963. In 1966 a Minister of Christian Education was called to fill this position. Programs to reach the youth in the Vernon community were launched during the next few years. Vacation Church School was held jointly with Union Congregational Church of Rockville for several years starting in 1967. The next year, the Youth Fellowship opened a successful coffeehouse in Kellogg Hall.

By the end of the decade, we felt the need for an expanded ministerial staff and called our first Assistant Minister who served for three years, resigning the same year as our Minister of Christian Education. Our subsequent Assistant and Associate Ministers worked closely with our youth, with the Board of Christian Education, and with our Church School Superintendents. When our Associate Pastor went to three-quarter time in 1995, we reinstated the position of Director of Christian Education.

Some changes resulted from our developing awareness as society around us changed. In 1978 we changed our "Deacons" and "Deaconesses" to a male and female Board of Deacons, with all members sharing responsibilities equally. A visitation committee was formed to make contact with families newly arrived in Vernon as well as with inactive church members. As family configurations began to alter radically, our church offered programs and support groups to address the needs of families in the community. In the early 80's we joined the communication revolution by acquiring our first office computer.

A capital fund drive named "Mission 225" was held in 1987 in conjunction with the celebration of the 225th anniversary of the church. The success of this campaign provided funds for an elevator and other necessary modifications to make the church building accessible to the handicapped. In addition, we were able to make much needed repairs to the church building and established an endowment fund for local outreach.

In the early 90's a new sound system was installed in the sanctuary. It was decided in 1994 to put vinyl siding on the Meeting House to significantly reduce future maintenance costs. That same year we also purchased a 3.24 acre piece of property next to the church on Center Road for future use. Loans from ten church members provided the majority of the \$137,000 necessary for the purchase.

The 1990's also saw some significant new programs. A children's message became a weekly event during morning worship. A program about communion was implemented by the Board of Christian Education in 1993 so that children could understand and participate in the sacrament with their families. We now have Family Communion twice a year. A Parish Nurse program was started in 1995 as a complementary part of the Care Network under the Board of Deacons. It was reinstated in 2001 under a different format as a health ministry provided by a group of nurses in the congregation. In 1996-97 our church formed a Teaching Parish Committee to assist field placement students from Andover Newton Theological Seminary in learning about parish ministry. Members of the committee, trained by the seminary, provide guidance, direction, and evaluation for the student. Our ongoing role as a teaching parish has become a vital ministry of our church.

Since the beginning of her ministry here in 1991, Associate Pastor Cynthia Carr has been instrumental in raising awareness of ethical issues within parish life. She helped in guiding the ad hoc Ethics Committee in creating policies and procedures. In 1994, after three years of work, a policy on sexual exploitation was accepted by the church body. Signs attesting to our policy are posted in the church building. This work placed our church on the leading edge of Connecticut Conference churches in the area of ethics. The documents were requested by the conference to be offered as models to other Connecticut United Church of Christ churches.

The congregation was shocked and saddened in March of 1998 by the suicide of our Senior Pastor, William Sexton. He had admitted to clergy sexual misconduct. During the next two and a half year period, Interim Senior Minister, Susan Prichard, guided the congregation in its struggle to come to grips with what had happened. The process of healing led to the formation of a Safe Church Committee which periodically provides workshops and training sessions for our lay people who work with youth and those who serve as church leaders and committee members. In addition, an ad hoc Resolution Committee worked hard on a resolution concerning clergy sexual misconduct. It was presented and approved unanimously at the October, 2000 annual meeting of the Connecticut Conference of The United Church of Christ. Since then the Associations of the Conference have put procedures and policies into place requiring their authorized ministers to be trained in misconduct prevention.

In 1999, we grieved at the unexpected death of our beloved choir director, R. Leslie Childs. Our church has established a music scholarship in his name.

The Reverend Dr. Peter R.K. Brenner began his work as our Senior Minister in December, 2000. He has been enthusiastic in his support of developing our vision for the future.

As we begin the 21st century we have voted to establish a Memorial Garden on church property. The church also went on the Internet with an official web site in 2002.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

"Greatly interested in the welfare of the young, Reverend William Ely, our second minister, organized the first Sabbath School in Vernon in 1818. It was one of the first in Tolland County. It had under his superintendence a marked success."⁵ The children attended this Sabbath School in the original meeting house on the hill.

From the Tolland County Journal of May 23, 1867, a writer states: "When I commenced attending Sunday School, it was in the old church and schoolhouse which stood upon the summit of a hill northeast of where the present church now stands. The nearest house to the church was Mr. Nelson Skinner's, now Mr. Ephraim Pearl's. On the west side of the church was a great wood. The Reverend Mr. Ely was Superintendent. He had tickets with passages of Scripture printed on them and he gave them to the children to learn. He was a children's friend and was for many years secretary of the Tolland Sabbath School Union."

Built on this foundation, the Sunday School program has continued to flourish. Presently we have 180 children enrolled with an average weekly attendance of 100 students. For the past few years a very successful Vacation Bible School has been held jointly with Trinity Lutheran Church. Confirmation classes and Adult Bible Study continue to be vital parts of our church life. As in the past, the success of our Christian Education program rests with the dedication and hard work of many volunteers under the direction of our Director of Christian Education.

MUSIC OF THE CHURCH

The hymns ringing out over Vernon each day from our carillon are symbolic of one of the important ministries of our church, the ministry of music.

The first record of music in our church was from November 1761 when "two choristers were chosen." Although more choristers were added in subsequent years, it isn't clear if they sang as a regular part of worship apart from the congregation or served as song leaders for the hymns. The choristers seem to have been chosen and dismissed several times over the years until in 1792 a committee was appointed, possibly to procure a teacher. In 1799 a budget of \$45 was voted, a considerable financial commitment. The first choirmaster mentioned by name was Reuel Thrall in 1818. In 1826 there is mention of "the singing school," but no explanation of its intent.

To this day, music is a high priority. We have been fortunate to have had talented and dedicated organists and choir directors. The Senior Choir grew from those few early choristers to a regular membership of as many as 36 singers. In addition to the weekly anthems, our Senior Choir has presented large works and participated in festivals with other church choirs from the local area and Hartford. There is no mention of when the children's choir was first organized, but they have enhanced our worship over the years with as many as 25 young voices. In 1973 we obtained our first two octaves of hand bells. Today our Bell Choir plays with a full three octaves.

Although we have no record of when the first organ appeared, pictures from the early part of the 20th century show a hand-pumped organ in the sanctuary. When the church was rebuilt after the fire of 1965, an electronic organ was installed. In 1998, thanks to the impetus given by our pastor and with generous financial gifts from our members, we installed and dedicated our present state-of-the-art digital organ.

Music has been important to our congregation outside of worship, too. As early as 1949 the church had begun presenting musical revues and plays to the community on a regular basis. The musicals involved as many as 75 people and were a source of fellowship as well as fundraising through the 1980's.

Musical outreach to the community was revived in 2000. Our Director of Christian Education and Choir Director inspired the church youth to present annual performances of contemporary Christian musicals. These efforts continue to involve the young people of our church and the surrounding area, offering witness and outreach to the wider community. Wishing to expand on this musical outreach, the Board of Music initiated the concert series Music@First in 2002.

MISSIONS AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

"We are taught that through giving to others we show our love for God and Jesus. Clearly this is a teaching embraced by our congregation as is evidenced by the extent of giving described here."⁶ Those words, from the annual report of 1999, referred to the outreach programs revitalized in the last decade. However, throughout our history missions work has always been part of the life of our church.

In the first one hundred and fifty years of our history, people from our church went out into the world as missionaries to such far off places as Hawaii, Guatemala, Mexico, South Africa, western Africa, China, and Japan. Those who remained home worked diligently to support missions abroad. The earliest records we have of our missions work are found in the archives of the women's organizations of the church. In the early days, the women's groups were organized under various names which all indicate their dedication to missions work, such as the Vernon Female Benevolent Society, whose purpose was "promoting the advancement of religion" and the "promotion of benevolent purposes." In those days, as now, the women made items to sell to raise funds for foreign missions, and they collected and made clothing for those in need, including, as reported in 1837, "indigent young men" at Yale. As early as 1892 there is mention of working on a fair, an activity that became a vital part of our church life.

By 1940 the women's organization was called the Women's Council, but their focus still seemed to be on outreach. In those grim days of war, the women of the church worked to support the Red Cross and our servicemen. In the years following, and up to the present, they raised funds with many activities – food sales, Christmas bazaars, suppers, and more – and supported a wide variety of causes both local and distant. In 1947 they joined with the whole church to sponsor the Spatz family, war refugees from Romania.

From the church's annual reports beginning in the 1950's, we can trace the budgeted benevolence giving of the whole church. As the church membership grew through the 1960's and 1970's, the amounts pledged to benevolences and collected for special giving grew accordingly. The responsibility for the benevolence funds lay with the Board of Stewardship and Missions. Their emphasis for many years seemed to be on the annual pledge canvass; the distribution of benevolence monies was done primarily through the organizations of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, so specific recipients were not cited.

In 1968, in addition to the Board of Stewardship and Missions, a committee was formed which evolved into the Community Outreach Committee whose goal was "to inform the church on current social issues and to encourage members to become effectively involved in the community." This committee existed through the 70's, emphasizing projects which would support community organizations and particularly benefit the local area. These projects included collecting food and gifts for needy families through the Pantry Shelf, sponsoring a town-wide glass collection, presenting plans for a community day care center, spreading information about the Friendly Family program to host inner city children on summer visits to Vernon families, tutoring at Vernon Middle School, supporting Project Respite, foster grandparents, and many other worthy causes.

The church took steps to meet more community needs, reaching beyond the walls of our building. In 1972 we took the Sunday service live to our homebound members and to the residents of the Rockville Memorial Nursing Home (later Foxhill) via the Telephone Ministry. That outreach evolved into the Audio Ministry and then into the Communication Ministry. We also strove to meet another need of the local community by providing a home for the Hockanum Valley Day Care Center, which started in the fall of 1972 and continues to this day. In 1976 we did our small part to meet a need of the world community by sponsoring the Tran family, Vietnamese refugees. We found them a home and work in Vernon and provided support while they adjusted to life in the United States. A few years later, recognizing the growing number of divorces in our society, we began a support group for separated and divorced persons, and again several years later, in response to the special needs of blended families, we established a support group for stepfamilies.

In the 80's we continued to raise awareness and to support the mission work of the United Church of Christ while helping local agencies. We began giving Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets to those in need and helping in the local soup kitchen.

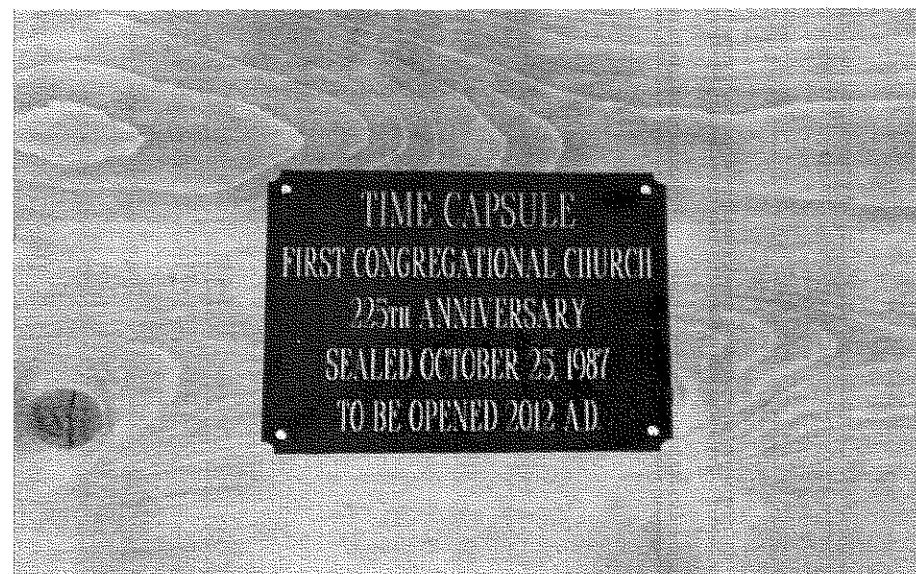
In the 1990's the church was energized to further outreach. This new commitment was evident in the disbursement of over \$18,000 of the "Mission 225" monies to establish The Local Outreach Endowment Fund. To our other mission activities we added a coat drive, the Christmas gift tree for local children, and support of Habitat for Humanity and Christmas in April. At the same time, the Board of Deacons began the Care Network to help those in our own church community. By 1995 we began to estimate the in-kind giving of the church. That year our estimate, combined with our monetary benevolences, resulted in a total giving of \$80,000.

Still, the church took on more. In 1996 an annual Church-Wide Mission Project was instituted. This special project was organized to focus on a different area of outreach in a four-year cycle: local, state, national, and global. Since its inception, the Church Wide Mission Project has benefited the Tri-Town Shelter, the Mark Twain School in Hartford, Habitat for Humanity, the Christian Appalachian Project in Kentucky, The Hockanum Valley Day Care Center, Safe Havens, Christmas in April, the Connecticut Children's Place, and an American Indian Ministry. Out of those projects, others have developed, such as the Reading Buddies Program at the Mark Twain School in Hartford.

During all of this time, the mission work of the Women's Fellowship, the Sunday School, and other church organizations also continued. The list of organizations this church has supported over the years is truly too lengthy to include here.

In the words of one of our members, "If the spiritual health of a church can be measured by its commitment to mission, our church seems to be thriving."⁷

THE TIME CAPSULE



As part of our 225th anniversary celebration in 1987, a time capsule was filled with memorabilia. The box was sealed and placed in the church vault to be opened on the occasion of our 250th anniversary in 2012.

The spiritual strength and faithful leadership of our church members, past and present, has sustained this Body of Christ over the past 240 years and will continue to sustain us.

Thanks Be To God!

MINISTERS

The Reverends:

Ebenezer Kellogg	1762-1817	A. A. Marquardt	1910-1912
William Ely	1818-1822	W. O. Shewmaker	1912-1913
Amzi Benedict	1824-1830	H. C. Beebe	1914-1916
David Hunt	1830-1832	H. C. McKnight	1917-1919
Chester Humphrey	1832-1843	C. E. Crawford	1920-1922
Albert Smith, D.D.	1845-1854	H. C. Mayhew	1923
Mark Tucker, D.D.	1857-1863	Milton Davis	1924-1925
Isaac Brush	1865-1867	Edward Eells	1925-1927
Reuben Stafford Kendall	1867-1871	Allan Gates	1927-1929
Amos S. Cheeseboro, D.D.	1871-1876	W. F. Tyler	1930-1940
Samuel G. W. Rankin	1876-1879	Sterling White	1940-1941
Bela N. Seymour	1879-1883	Norman Weed	1941-1942
Nathan Gibbs Axtell	1883-1885	William Booth	1943-1945
Wilder Smith	1885-1886	Woodbury Stowell	1945-1947
Andrew McIntyre	1886-1888	Brandon Griswold	1947-1949
Samuel Forbes	1888-1889	George B. Higgins	1949-1957
Luther Humphrey Barber	1889-1893	Rodman D. Cart	1957-1960
N. M. Larned	1893-1894	Phillip H. Ward	1960-1962
Homer T. Beach	1894-1896	Allison R. Heaps*	1962-1963
Frederick Alvord	1896-1897	John A. Lacey	1963-1989
W. W. Davidson	1897-1898	Melvin Williams*	1989-1990
Ferdinand Travis	1898-1900	William Sexton	1990-1998
William H. Teel	1900-1906	Ken Taylor*	1998
Nelson H. Wehrhan	1906-1908	Susan Prichard*	1998-2000
J. C. Willard	1909-1910	Peter R.K. Brenner, D/Min	2000-

*Interim

ASSISTANT/ASSOCIATE MINISTERS

The Reverends:

Randall Ferrara	1969-1971
Edwin Bartholomew	1971-1977
David Bowling	1978-1990
Robert Wright*	1990-1991
Cynthia Carr	1991-

MINISTER OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Rev. Betsy French Reed	1966-1971
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DIRECTORS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Helen Fischer	1963-1966
Albert Kim	1995-1996
Susan Campbell	1996-1999
Robert LaRochelle	1999-2001
Linda Shivers	2001-

MINISTERS RECENTLY ORDAINED AT FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF VERNON

Clarice Mitchell	ordained October 1999
Joanne Myer	ordained June 2001
Robert LaRochelle	ordained March 2002

*Interim

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- Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut, Vol. I*, reprint edition of 1861 volume. Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, 1967.
- Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut, Vol. II, 1860-1967*. Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, 1967.
- Ecclesiastical Society minutes and other written records and photographs from the archives of FCCV, including previous historical booklets and annual reports.
- Sweet, Lynn. "If the Books Could Talk." Video of talk given at the Women's Fellowship meeting of September 28, 1994. (This video, available in the church library, is a treasury of information about the history of the women's groups of FCCV.)
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- Manual of the First Congregational Church of Vernon, Connecticut, 1903.
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- Willes, Mildred S. *The First Congregational Church, Vernon, Connecticut, 1762-1974, Vol. III*. Privately printed for FCCV.

Endnotes

- ¹Mildred Willes, FCCV History Vol. III
- ²George S. Brookes, Ph.D., *Cascades and Courage*
- ³Harry C. Smith, *100 Years of Growth and Development*
- ⁴"Church History Tidbits"
- ⁵Manual of FCCV, 1903.
- ⁶Amy Shannon, FCCV Annual Report, June 1999
- ⁷Claudia Ayer, FCCV Annual Report, June 1997

This history was compiled by:

Joan Apel, Historian
Geraldine Strong, Assistant Historian
Judith Doremus
Catharine Foote
Cheryl Warriner, Typist

2002
CHURCH STAFF

Senior Minister	Rev. Dr. Peter R. K. Brenner
Associate Pastor	Rev. Cynthia Carr
Director of Christian Education	Linda Shivers
Field Placement Student	Nancy Allen
Senior Choir Director	Maire Cusson
Organist	Lorraine Dobson
Church Secretary	Nancy Young
Custodian	Earl Friedrich

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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