

HISTORY OF SOLID ROCK CHURCH OF WARREN

Solid Rock Church was formed in 2008, the result of a merger of Warren and Jefferson Center United Methodist Churches.

HISTORY OF WARREN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

In September of 1838, a Methodist circuit rider, Rev. Ezra Lank of Wayne County, Indiana, held services in a barn belonging to James Morrison. At the close of the meeting, he asked whether any other citizen would open his home for holding meetings. If a meeting place could be found, Rev. Lank would request that the church conference send a missionary to the township.

Mrs. Nancy Swaim offered the home of her and her husband, Simeon, two miles east of Warren, as a meeting place, and a class of seven members was started. The conference sent Rev. G.W. Bowers as a missionary.

A few years later, another class was organized in Warren under the leadership of Jason Brown, and the first class moved its membership to join the new class and form the Warren Methodist Episcopal Church. The congregation met in various school houses and vacant storerooms for several years.

In 1856, the church purchased two lots from Lemuel C. Ewart and built a white frame structure at the southwest corner of Third and Main Streets at a cost of \$1,200. This structure served the congregation for the next 40 years.

The need for a larger building became evident by 1895. The old frame structure was moved to a lot Second Street, and eventually sold to the United Brethren congregation, who remodeled it and moved it to First Street near the intersection of Main Street, using it as their church home until the congregation disbanded.

Under the direction of an architectural firm from Jonesboro, the new Methodist church was constructed, beginning in the summer of 1896, at a cost of nearly \$10,000. The March 11, 1897 edition of the Warren Republican describes the new building: "It is brick, of course, built in modern style, with basement, heated by furnaces, lighted by gas, and has a seating capacity of nearly or quite one thousand. The roof is slate, large circular windows in the two gables fronting on Main and Third streets, all the glass stained and arranged for beautiful and pleasing effects." On the pulpit was "a new bible ... made expressly for use on pulpits and is the best that could be bought." "The floor in the main part of the auditorium is covered with a good carpet and the seats are fine. The walls and ceiling are painted in pink and blue and present a beautiful appearance."

In 1956, extensive remodeling was undertaken at a cost of \$81,000. Fourteen new classrooms were built in the basement, and a new fellowship hall was built on the first floor with a well-equipped adjoining kitchen. In 1983, a ramp was constructed on the north side of the church.

In 1979, the Huntington County South Parish was formed, consisting of Warren, Jefferson Center, Majenica, and Mt. Etna United Methodist Churches. The parish disbanded in 1992, after which the Warren church retained its own pastor.

In 1986, a fire broke out in the area above the sanctuary and some redecorating was necessary. Due to the careful response of the Warren Fire Department, damage was minimal.

HISTORY OF JEFFERSON CENTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

There were two Methodist Episcopal churches in Jefferson Township, Huntington County, Indiana in the early 1920s, one at Pleasant Plain, two miles west of Jefferson Center, and one at Otterbein, two miles south of Jefferson Center. Both churches were struggling with declining enrollments and finances, due in part to shifting population as a result of the end of the oil boom in the area.

Changes needed to be made if a Methodist presence was to remain in the community, and the most obvious solution was a merging of the two existing congregations. The idea was not without controversy. Some were very much against the merger. A meeting was set to discuss a plan for merging, but as a result of dense fog only two families, one from each church, and the Pleasant Plain pastor, Rev. J. Floyd Seelig, showed up. As time went by, however, a union of the congregations seemed to be the only feasible solution, so in the early months of 1926 plans began to take shape.

The April 2, 1926 edition of the Warren Tribune noted the usual preaching service at Otterbein at 11:00, but also announced: "The merger of Otterbein and Pleasant Plain was declared Sunday by the District Superintendent, and will be effective upon adjournment of Annual Conference. The pastor leaves Tuesday for Conference at New Castle."

A new centralized school for the township had opened in the fall of 1924 in the southeast corner of section 16. All the grade schools in the township were closed with the opening of the new school, including Center School, located diagonally from the new school in the northwest corner of section 22. In April 1926, the Center School property was offered for sale by the township trustee. As the new school had become a center of life for families of the community, this Center School property seemed an obvious location for the new church building.

In May, 1926, the first trustees of the new organization, Elmer Endsley, C. L. Maddock, and Chester Holmes, purchased the property from township trustee Joseph Wiley for \$175. The building was then sold to Chester Holmes, who used the brick to build a garage.

Initial plans were to move the Otterbein church and demolish the Pleasant Plain church, but plans for a new building using lumber salvaged from the old buildings prevailed. Benjamin

Beaver of Majenica was awarded the contract to erect the building. The men brought their teams of horses, plows, and scoops and dug the basement and laid the tile drain. Concrete was poured in early June. Both of the old churches were taken down and lumber used in the new building. Boys were paid 10 cents an hour to pull nails from the boards. With much volunteer labor, the new building was completed by the end of the year.

Funding came from several sources. The Otterbein Chapel ground was sold for \$25 and the light plant for \$18. The Quarterly Conference designated proceeds from closed Methodist Episcopal churches at Lancaster and Plum Tree for this building project. On the day of dedication, January 9, 1927, \$4,500 of the total cost of \$5,900 was pledged. Much of the credit for the success of the project went to District Superintendent Dr. U.S.A. Bridge and the first pastor, Rev. John W. Borders.

During the construction of the new building, the merged congregation, now part of the Mt. Etna charge with the Mt. Etna and Majenica churches, met at the Jefferson Township school. The Warren Tribune on April 23 announced that Sunday school would be held in the high school auditorium each Sunday with Rev. J. W. Borders. The next preaching service would be Sunday evening, May 2. The attendance the previous Sunday had been 81 with a collection of \$3.96.

What is today considered a modest structure was, at the time of its building, a state-of-the-art rural church. The August 13, 1926 edition the Warren Tribune stated that "there is a large basement and the auditorium will be ample to take care of important meetings. Especially fine is the surrounding grounds which will have plenty of shade. When the building is finished and the old school house torn away the Jefferson Center congregation is going to have one of the most attractive homes to be found in Huntington County." The January 7, 1927, Tribune stated that "the material is a frame structure with a main auditorium, two Sunday school rooms and an Epworth League room with a basement under the entire structure. The equipment includes a furnace, electric lights, art glass windows, and is one of the best types of rural church structures." The Van Buren newspaper noted that "the new church is to be modern in every respect, being electric lighted and have class rooms, kitchen, dining room, etc."

Dedication Day

Dedication Day, January 9, 1927, must have been a festive day of celebration. Rev. U.S.A. Bridge, District Superintendent of the Wabash District, had charge of both morning and afternoon services. He was assisted by Rev. Jeppe Jenson, former pastor of the Otterbein Church, Rev. Floyd Seelig, former pastor at Pleasant Plain, the new pastor, Rev. J. W. Borders, and Rev. J. L. Gillard, pastor of the Van Buren Methodist Church.

The sermon for the evening service was given by Dr. Paul, President of Taylor University, who used as his text a clause from Psalm 23: "He restoreth my soul." The Warren Tribune observed that "the sermon was evangelistic in character, and was a fitting one for the beginning of a revival meeting, which since Sunday night has been in progress under direction of the pastor." Special music was provided by the Atkinson sisters, who were students at Taylor.

During the three-week revival which followed, 19 people were converted, and 12 rededicated their lives to the Lord.

The merger of the congregations was a new solution to an increasing problem of declining church enrollment in many communities. The Warren Tribune article stated: "This experiment in church consolidation is being watched very closely by the mission board and other officials of the conference to see if it does not offer a solution of the grave problem which is confronting rural churches all over the conference. Should it prove successful it will be tried out in other communities wherever conditions are at all favorable."

Church Life

From the very start, members were active in the life of the church. An article appearing in the Easter 1938 Jefferson Center News provided a detailed description of the church and its activities. Jefferson Center was on a three-church circuit with Mt. Etna and Majenica. Preaching was held every third Sunday evening and every third Sunday morning. Sunday school was held every Sunday. A three-week revival had been held the previous September, and revivals were an annual event.

Children's programs were sponsored throughout the year, and an offering was received to help "worthy young people" attend college. The young people were encouraged to attend Young People's Christian Institute at Epworth Forest.

The Ladies Aid numbered forty members, meeting each month for a social time and to quilt. They served banquets and managed sale lunches, with money earned being used to finance the church.

The Sunday school boasted seven classes, including the Beginner's Class (children from birth to age 8), the Busy Bee Class (ages 8 to 12), the Phydellis Class (junior), the Live Wire Class (young people), the Volunteer Class (young married people), the Men's Class, and the Ladies' Class.

Ground Improvements

A major effort to improve the church grounds took place in 1946, under the leadership of Rev. L. Keith Hanley. He and the trustees had made a measured drawing of the property and then met with Mr. R. B. Hull, a Purdue University landscape specialist. In November of that year 37 members assembled with tractors, wagons, scoops, and shovels and began work on moving drives, establishing parking areas, and planting over 100 trees and shrubs. During the noon hour of this first day, the women provided a noon luncheon in the basement. Their efforts were recognized in a book by Ralph A. Felton entitled *Men Working: A Study of Voluntary Labor Gifts*.

Huntington County South Parish

From the beginning, Jefferson Center had been on a circuit with the Mt. Etna and Majenica churches. In 1973, under the leadership of Rev. Bob Heckman, the Huntington County South

Parish was organized, with Pilchers Chapel joining the other three churches. A second pastor, Rev. David Black, was added, and for the first time each church had a sermon every week. (Previously, there was preaching two weeks out of three.)

Pilchers Chapel withdrew from the Parish four years later, and for two years the three churches were served by a senior pastor and a student or part-time pastor. In 1979, a new Huntington County South Parish was organized with the addition of the Warren church.

While the parish arrangement allowed the churches to cooperatively do programming which they would not have had resources to do individually, it was not an entirely satisfactory arrangement. The four churches shared two pastors, and there was often the feeling that the pastors' time was spread too thinly and that the needs of each individual church were not always being met. In 1991, the Warren church withdrew from the Parish in order to employ its own full-time minister. At the same time the Majenica church closed its doors. Jefferson Center and Mt. Etna now shared one full-time pastor.

In 1994, the Mt. Etna church employed a full-time pastor, withdrawing from its partnership with Jefferson Center. Jefferson Center was then pastored by part-time student pastors.

In 1999, with student pastor Kathie Jones completing her seminary degree, the church proposed to the Conference a plan for employing a three-quarter time pastor in 1999-2000 to be increased to a full-time pastor in 2000-2001. This plan was approved, along with the appointment of Rev. Jones to the church for this period of time. For the first time in its history, Jefferson Center United Methodist Church employed its own full-time pastor.

HISTORY OF SOLID ROCK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Solid Rock United Methodist Church was formed from the union of the Jefferson Center United Methodist Church and the Warren United Methodist Church. The two churches first worshiped together as Solid Rock on July 6, 2008, and the merger was officially recognized as of August 1 of that year.

Many months of discussion, deliberation, and prayer preceded the decision to merge. Both congregations had been seeking direction for the future of their ministries, facing challenges of declining attendance, aging congregations, and church facilities which were not handicapped accessible, not conducive to programming needs in the twenty-first century, and in need of ongoing maintenance.

A task force was appointed, consisting of members of both congregations, to study opportunities for cooperative ministries. This task force first met on January 17, 2007. While many members in each congregation had given consideration to the idea of a merger, initially the task force discussed numerous ideas for joint ministry and ways in which the two congregations might work together to become better acquainted. One of the first steps taken by the task force was to open communication between the congregations by publicizing events and inviting participation of each congregation in the activities of the other.

The task force was named "New Ministries Vision Team." Several meetings ensued, and input was sought from both congregations. While many expressed interest in pursuing joint ministries, the work of the committee moved slowly for lack of direction and uncertainty about how best to proceed.

The Decision

In June 2007, Administrative Council members of both congregations received letters advising them of an upcoming vote to determine whether the New Ministries Vision Team should continue its work or disband. The vote directed the committee to continue its work, with the understanding that no commitment to a merger had been made, only that more fact-finding would take place.

Many members of each congregation had deep roots in their home church. As discussion continued, it became apparent that, although the congregations could remain separate and participate in some joint ministries, only through a complete merger could the desired ministry goals be accomplished. For many, this idea took some time to accept. Throughout the process, meetings, discussions, and decisions were surrounded by prayer in both congregations as God's will was sought.

In early 2008, the New Ministries Vision Team felt the time had come for the congregations to decide whether or not to go forward with a merger. Both Administrative Councils agreed to hold Charge Conferences on the evening of March 18. Under the direction of District Superintendent Rev. Chip Gast, the Warren Conference was held first, followed an hour later by the Jefferson Center Conference. Both Conferences ratified the proposed merger, and the process which had previously progressed slowly now began to move steadily forward.

The Transition

Having made the commitment to unite the congregations, the next questions were "how" and "how soon?" Various scenarios were considered. Were either of the existing churches large enough to accommodate combined worship? Could the two congregations perhaps meet together at a third site once a month? Change was coming quickly. How soon would members of the two congregations be able to adapt and feel comfortable with a complete merger?

Warren and Jefferson Center United Methodist Churches held their first joint Administrative Council meeting on April 29, 2008. The main business of the meeting was to approve appointments to four new ministries committees. These included a Naming Committee, a Transition Committee, a Building/Site Committee, and a Capital Funds Committee.

By this time, Rev. Kathy Newton, pastor at Jefferson Center, had been appointed for another year. The Warren pastor, Rev. Mike Malone, retired from the pastorate, and Rev. Newton was appointed to pastor both churches.

In May 2008, the plan was for the churches to continue meeting in their individual locations, with Jefferson Center holding its worship service at 9:00 a.m. followed by Warren's service at

10:30. On July 6, the congregations would meet jointly at the Warren site at 9:30, then attend the Salamonie Summer Festival community service together.

Naming a new church

Ten members from each the Warren and Jefferson Center Churches were appointed to the Naming Committee. The committee met on May 4 and May 12, 2008. Over 80 names were prayerfully considered and discussed. Guidelines for naming churches were read and the following criteria were considered important for choosing a name for the new church.

- Welcoming (not too “churchy” to exclude the unchurched; appeal to all ages)
- Spiritual connotation (meaningful as a church name 50 years from now, not just a reflection of the present merger)
- Unique (not shared by another entity in the area, nor the name of more than two other UMCs in Indiana)
- Memorable (easy to pronounce, easy to remember, clear meaning)

Guidance was sought from the District Superintendent's office. The name should be followed by “United Methodist Church” and must be approved by the combined Administrative Council of the two churches. Caution was given: it was best not to have an all-church vote.

Committee members freely voiced their opinions. A paper ballot showed that one name was by far the favorite and stood out as fitting the criteria. Dave Spahr moved, Ron Neff seconded, and the sixteen members present voted unanimously by a show of hands to recommend to the combined Council: Solid Rock United Methodist Church. “Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock.” Matthew 7:24 (CEV)

The name was enthusiastically accepted at the May 20 meeting of the joint Administrative Council.

Two become one

Enthusiasm over the merger and the opportunities for combined ministry became so great that, by the June 17 meeting of the new Solid Rock Administrative Council, it was decided not to proceed with the plan of holding two services each Sunday in the two locations, but to begin meeting together permanently beginning with the July 6 service. The new congregation would meet at the Warren site in July and the Jefferson Center site in August, then alternate months.

Meanwhile, the work of the Building/Site Committee was proceeding. After considering several potential building sites, a parcel of land on Bennett Drive owned by Heritage Pointe was selected.

During the spring of 2009, both the Jefferson Center Church and the Jefferson Center parsonage sold. Pastor Kathy, who had continued to reside at the Jefferson Center parsonage, moved to the former Warren parsonage. The last service at Jefferson Center was held on May 31, celebrating 82 years of ministry to the community. The congregation would now meet at the Warren site until a new facility was constructed.

The Capital Funds Committee was also active during this time. At their recommendation, the Administrative Council approved a contract with Church Growth Services to conduct a capital campaign. The campaign was conducted in the fall of 2009, with a goal of raising \$400,000. At the conclusion of the campaign, commitments totaled \$556,000.

A new facility

Planning for a new building began at the inception of Solid Rock. An 11-acre tract was purchased on Bennett Drive. The congregation approved plans for the new facility on October 16, 2011, followed by groundbreaking on October 30. Construction was completed and the first service in the new building was celebrated on August 11, 2013, five years after the founding of Solid Rock.

Denominational realignment

Following years of disagreement within the United Methodist Church regarding the church's stance on the ordination of practicing homosexuals and homosexual unions performed within the church, as well as other concerns, the 2019 General Conference of the UMC approved a provision permitting churches to disaffiliate from the denomination and retain ownership of their property. This provision was set to expire at the end of 2023. A two-thirds vote of the members at a church conference would be required to approve disaffiliation.

In August 2022, Solid Rock undertook a discernment process, under the leadership of Pastor John Boyanowski and Church Council Chair Gary Walter, to determine what denominational alignment would enable Solid Rock to minister in the Warren community most effectively. Following numerous meetings, and much prayer and discussion, a straw poll was taken in October 2022. This vote failed to reach a two-thirds majority, due at least in part to concerns regarding disaffiliation costs.

A recalculation of disaffiliation costs was requested in January 2023. The new calculation resulted in a significant decrease. A second straw poll was conducted in February 2023. Results of this poll indicated that an official vote to disaffiliate would likely succeed. The official vote took place on March 14, 2023, with 80% of the 61 members in attendance at the church conference voting in favor.

More prayer and discussion followed regarding post-disaffiliation options. On April 16, 2023, 87% of the 45 members in attendance at a called church conference voted in favor of affiliating with the Global Methodist Church. The transition from affiliation with the United Methodist Church to affiliation with the Global Methodist Church took place on July 1, 2023. The legal name of the church became Solid Rock Church of Warren, Inc. at that time.