



South Presbyterian Church

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
"The Church has Left the Building"

"Put us Where You Want us and Show us What to Do"

CELEBRATING A JOURNEY OF FAITHFULNESS

It should be noted that while South Presbyterian Church's history traces its roots to a Sunday School in 1849, New Life Presbyterian Church, which much later dissolved and joined South Presbyterian, began as a Sunday School 20 years earlier as Mt. Hor Presbyterian Church on the current site of Hillside Children's Center. Both churches represent almost 200 years of meeting the needs of those in their neighborhoods and building community through service, education and the arts as they have embraced a call to become more "missional."

1849 –

- Zachary Taylor is President of the United States of America
- Rochester has been a city for only 15 years
- Parents of West Brighton, a suburb of Rochester, felt the need for a Sunday School for their children as their teenagers were:
 - Sneaking into the inner city to join gangs
 - "Jumping boats" on the newly built Erie Canal
 - Hanging around the Crittenden Race Track
 - Roaming over to Oak Hill to hang around the Wolcott Distillery, where the University of Rochester football field is now located
- South Presbyterian meets every Sunday afternoon in a one-room, red brick schoolhouse on the northwest corner of the present Mt. Hope Avenue and Crittenden Boulevard (near Strong Memorial Hospital where CVS is now located in Collegetown but at that time close to the Crittenden Race Track in Crittenden Park)
(Later, Crittenden Park (aka Crittenden Driving Park, aka Crittenden Speedway) ran motorcycle and car races at the old Brighton Fairgrounds near Strong Memorial Hospital dating all the way back to 1905. [Read more.](#))
- As there are no street cars from Rochester to West Brighton, William B. Levet walks from his home in the city to the school on Sunday afternoons to start a Sunday School program for youth

1895 –

- The schoolhouse group votes to incorporate for the purpose of obtaining land and erecting a church building. The legal name of **The West Brighton Chapel Society** is decided upon, reflecting the Evangelical movement sweeping the nation

1899 –

- Sufficient money is raised to begin construction across from the schoolhouse on Mt. Hope Avenue on a lot donated by Mrs. Emmeline Bell Barker (where Starbucks now stands on Mt. Hope Avenue)

1895 – 1925 –

- Rochester grows into a bustling city. Of interest is that the Clinton Hotel had “steam heat with good stabling and sheds”

1919-1920 –

- West Brighton Chapel Society formally joins the Presbytery of Rochester, and the name was changed to the **West Brighton Presbyterian Church**”

1923 –

- West Brighton becomes part of the city of Rochester, New York

1924 –

- Mrs. Emmeline Bell Barker donates land for a larger building on the corner of East Henrietta Road and Stokes Street (now Fort Hill Terrace)
- Name changed to **South Presbyterian Church**
- Church activities for the community include: Youth groups, Young People's Society, Junior Choir, Senior Quartet, Boy Scouts, Vacation Bible School, and adult Bible study

1926 –

- The new church building, now the site of Community of the Savior, is constructed of red tapestry brick and trimmed with Norristone. After the church is completed and dedicated, weekly services are held both Sunday morning and evening, with an average attendance of 60-80.s

1930's –

- Even during the Great Depression and the challenges of diminishing income, church membership continues to grow. With those financial increases come new church programs aimed at strengthening both the spiritual and social lives of the congregation and its surrounding community

1935 –

- Marks the addition of a Young People's Society, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Men's Club and Ladies Aid Groups, three choirs (Adult, Junior and the Pioneer Choir) and celebration of the church's 40th anniversary

1937 –

- Two services every Sunday morning to accommodate all parishioners
- Sunday School membership is 200
- Total adult enrollment is 210, in addition to the youth

World War II –

- The young men of South Presbyterian Church serve in the Army, Navy or Marine Corps or were conscripted into the Merchant Marine or Coast Guard
- Young and old are active in Red Cross work, civilian defense, blood donation, bandage rolling or working long hours in various defense plants and other services connected with the war effort

1949 –

- Membership is 351, plus the children in Sunday School prior to their confirmation

Early 1950s –

- Another building expansion is completed in 1953
- Music program becomes paramount and remains so today
- 1954 membership is 526

1955 – 1960

- Adoption of Hungarian refugee who is housed by members of the church
- Membership in the church continues to grow to 732 in 1959
- Building addition is dedicated on March 13, 1960

Mid-1960s –

- Christian Education Department is established
- Choir makes a professional recording of selected church music
- Youth travel abroad to engage in various building projects

1970 –

Church addresses social issues through seminars, community forums, films, guest speakers and book groups. Actively debated topics include:

- Vietnam War
- Angela Davis
- Civil Rights riots, both in Rochester and nationally
- Women's Rights Movement
- Stonewall Rebellion
- Watergate
- Political unrest of the 1960s

1979 –

- Sponsors a Vietnamese family

Mid-1980s –

Continuing commitment to inclusion of all

- Physical accessibility accommodations are made to the structure
- Hearing loops are made available in both the sanctuary and social hall

1995 –

- Budget challenges begin due to declining membership (229 at the Annual Meeting)
- 70% of members have been members for at least 10 years, many for 20 to 25 years and some for even longer
- Sponsor two families for United States citizenship as refugees seeking asylum, traveling with them to Buffalo for examinations by the federal government; helping them secure housing and jobs for them and their families; teaching the adults how to drive; and walking alongside them as they become accustomed to their new country. Several of them remain in contact with church members today

The Millennium –

- The rich heritage of building community through education, the arts and social engagement continues into the 21st century as South Presbyterian remains committed to sharing the gospel of justice and peace offered by a loving and inclusive God

2009-2014 –

- Serve as a member of the **Collegetown Development** planning team alongside Rochester City Zoning, RGRTA Transportation officials, City Commercial and Neighborhood Development personnel, the Mt. Hope Business Association and neighbors. Church personnel are present at the groundbreaking for Collegetown in 2013
- Host a **neighborhood charrette** by the Community Design Center of Rochester to help the church determine the best use of the church property moving forward
 - 83 people attend, including:
 - Representatives of the national denomination and Presbytery leadership
 - Neighbors
 - Bankers
 - City and County department representatives
- The church sponsors an **Iranian man** for asylum in this country based on religious persecution. This man, a doctor from Iran who converted to Christianity at South and whose uncle had already been tortured and murdered by the regime in his native country, would lose his life if he returned to his homeland. Working with his attorney in Buffalo, we help him relocate to Florida where he remains today, practicing medicine as a naturalized citizen
- Celebrate with a family from Togo their citizenship status after they fled from war, lived in a refugee camp and ultimately become a treasured part of our community
- Fielded our first **all-Black Confirmation class** of four teens who live in the inner city but found their home at South. Today all are living in the greater Rochester area, having completed their bachelor's or master's degrees
- Throughout this period, the church recognizes that we are again being led to embrace the courage and faith of our forebearers, especially Mrs. Emmeline Bell Barker, and step out in faith by creating **the Acts of Faith Model of Ministry**, a 21st century adaptation of the first century church
 - An Act of Faith is an organic grass-roots group growing out of the needs and interests of the people. Just as Jesus went to the people and did not expect them to come to him, South Presbyterian decides to step out in faith, literally into the community
 - In 2014, we **sell our campus** to another church (the Free Methodist Community of the Savior) to become a **100% missional, non-centralized, multi-location conduit in the community for grassroots organizing around spiritual (and other?) needs**
 - Hold multiple worship services and other ministries at various community locations and/or virtually on different days of the week
- South completes a three-year process to become the first faith community in New York State to gain permission from the NYS Office of Mental Health for nine volunteers to lead biweekly worship services in the **Regional Forensic Unit located at the Rochester Psychiatric Center**
- Worship services take place at the Rochester Psychiatric Center, Charlotte Harbortown Homes, and St. John's Meadows, with Cobbs Hill Manor added to the mix in 2018

2015 –

- New Life Presbyterian Church, facing severe monetary and membership challenges, asked to join South Presbyterian in its new Acts of Faith Community. Over the next three years, the two groups thoughtfully and compassionately blended their congregations, supported by the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, and combine their resources from the sale of their buildings to continue ministry and expand the Acts of Faith to eight city neighborhoods and within the town of Brighton
- Two of the Acts of Faith become recognized as part of the **PC(USA)'s 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative**

2018 –

- New Life members join South members to create New Life on Monroe, a worshiping community at Cobbs Hill Manor (an assisted living facility); New Life Food Cupboard; the LOL Youth Group; and Monroe Milers youth running program.

2019 –

- In response to increasing requests for South to share its model with others around the country, the church creates an independent 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization, **Firebird Spirit, Inc.** (<https://www.firebirdspirit.org/>) to work with churches and nonprofit organizations in transition
 - Thus far, Firebird has partnered with churches in Los Angeles and New Jersey, as well as in the Albany, Utica and Rochester areas
- Rev. Swift writes and publishes ***The Church has Left the Building: A Case Study of One Church's Story of Transformation, Redefinition & New Life*** based on South's ground-breaking transformation
- 20 Acts of Faith in 2019
 - Church membership = 58
 - 5,926 different people participate in at least one Act of Faith at least once that year
 - 25,399 contacts with people in the community are made through our Acts of Faith, each time "bumping up against the Love of the Risen Christ through us"

Pandemic

The COVID pandemic challenges South as it did the rest of the world, but because of South's decentralized and multi-location ministry, it is relatively easy to slide seamlessly into an online presence:

- New Acts of Faith emerge: online Bible studies, Evening Prayer, social gatherings and book groups, hymn sings, and more
- One month into the pandemic, South hosts daily meditations and weekly worship on its new YouTube Channel. At least one Act of Faith is offered every day but Tuesday, many of which continue today
- Pioneer a DVD ministry to share worship with those who do not have internet access. DVDs of YouTube worship services are burned and delivered weekly to homes and institutions, including Rochester Psychiatric Center and Cobbs Hill Manor, for worship from home

Today –

With the end of pandemic restrictions and the resumption of in-person activities in 2022 and 2023, a new hybrid existence has emerged:

- Worship remains both online and in person; across all venues, average worship attendance is 150
- The average number of people involved in Acts of Faith in an average week during the program year is close to 200 and includes or serves people of any or no religious affiliation
- In 2022, with only **25 official members**, our **15 Acts of Faith (AoF)** reached at least **341 different people** in the course of the year. And while a small percentage participated in more than one AoF, this provided **6,068 contact points** where people "bumped up against Jesus" through us in person or on Zoom in this post-COVID world! When including our **2,433 YouTube views**, there are close to **8,500 opportunities** for the Spirit to work through us by touching the lives of others and sharing the Good News. Our regular online participants include members and non-members in Ithaca, NY; Utah; Arizona; Florida; North Carolina, and New Jersey.
- There are currently 16 Acts of Faith, including the newest, Soul Sustainability, a gathering of Gen-Z 20-somethings who are defining for themselves what it means to be a faith community, while focusing on how to contribute to the sustainability of their environment and how best to navigate the joys and challenges of modern living as young men and women of color.

Matthew 25 Congregation

National PC(USA) initiative, dedicated to:

Building congregational vitality by challenging congregations to deepen their faith by becoming actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world

Dismantling structural racism by working both collectively and individually to break down the systems, practices and preconceived thinking that underlie the discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color

Eradicating systemic poverty by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor

- Monthly work at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality provides food to those without sufficient food
- Online classes on White Supremacy helps raise consciousness about systemic racism; 30+ attendees from 4 states and 3 other locations in New York State

From then to now –

From its beginning as a Sunday School that grew into a church, until now when that traditional church rebirthed itself into a progressive and prophetic missional community reaching not only into the City of Rochester and Monroe County but to individuals across the country, some features have remained constant:

- Redefining what it means to be “Church”
 - Like the 1st century church, we are **building the road as we walk on it**
 - **Spirit-based, creative ministries** are designed to meet the needs of the larger community
 - Commitment to be **Ambassadors of Jesus’ justice-love and acceptance**
 - Moving from a single location on Mt. Hope Ave. (Monroe Ave. in the case of our New Life siblings) to encompass the entire city **wherever there is a need for or interest** in a bold, new, non-traditional kind of ministry
 - Non-building-based, **100% Missional ministry**, i.e., no centralized location but going instead to the people. Without a building to support, 100% of our income is directly related to supporting, educating, and ministering to others
 - Our governing body (the Session/Church Council) continues to explore what it means to have 2/5 of its membership live out-of-state
 - Throughout our history, we welcome the marginalized and feed those who need help – Jesus never turned anyone away and neither will we
 - Continuing commitment to **ecumenical and interfaith community**
 - Our New Life Food Cupboard in the Upper Monroe neighborhood partners with **Temple Beth Shalom**
 - Our Matthew 25 ministry to the hungry and homeless is in partnership with our Catholic Worker siblings at **St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality**
- Redefining “Worship”
 - What speaks to one may not speak to another. All of our Acts of Faith are equal in importance, including Sunday worship. We actively invite people to choose where they feel they “fit in”
- Redefining “Membership”
 - Our Acts of Faith are attended and led by members of other Presbyterian Churches, United Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, American Baptists, non-denominational believers, Bahá’í practitioners, agnostics and even one nonagenarian who identifies as an atheist but who is a Constituent Member of our Fellowship of Faith because, as she says, “I like the idea of being on a spiritual journey, and if I’m going to go anywhere, I want to go with you”
 - Members can join online. Current regular online participants live in Arizona, New Jersey, Florida, North Carolina, Utah and other parts of New York state

As we say in our Mission Statement:

It is the Mission / Vision / Calling of South Presbyterian Church to live out the command of Jesus: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in [my] way of life (Mt. 29:18, The Message).

We embody our commitment to being a missional church through the practice of our Acts of Faith Model of Ministry and fostering grassroots communities and programs that spread the love of the Risen Christ. We hold that all believers are the hands and heart, the embrace and healing presence of Christ’s love, acceptance, justice and joy in the world, and paramount to fulfilling that calling is the prayer we pray regularly: *“Put us where you want us, and show us what to do.”*

We are a little church that makes a big difference!

To God be the glory as we continue to write the story of South Presbyterian Church, celebrating 175 years of service and embarking on the second decade of trailblazing new models of ministry in the 21st century.

Gala Celebration

Day/Date: Saturday, September 23, 2023

Place: Third Presbyterian Church
4 Meigs Street | Rochester, NY 14607

Time: 1PM Discussion

Led by Susan Orr, Presbytery Leader for the Presbytery of Genesee Valley and featuring The Reverend Dr. Ray G. Jones, III Director of Theology, Formation and Evangelism for the PC(USA) from Louisville, KY

3PM Presentations and Reception

We are inviting the community leaders to join us in this celebration through presentations and recognitions

Participants from all the Acts of Faith will be represented to answer questions about their ministries

For more information

- South Presbyterian Church | PO Box 22782 | Rochester, NY 14692
- www.SouthPC.org/welcome
- Inquiries directed to:
Kevin Fuller, Director of Operations - office@southpc.org – (585) 271-5078

South Presbyterian Church is a proud member of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley (<https://pbygenval.org/>) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (<https://pcusa.org/>).

Articles about South from the international Presbyterian New Service:

<https://southpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PNS-Article.pdf>

<https://southpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PNS-Matthew-25-2019.pdf>

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/this-is-just-a-change-in-where-we-are-needed/>