

Care for the Church We Share

II Corinthians 8:1-15

Thirteen years shy of two centuries ago, in the early decades of the 19th century, a small group of Noankers organized an adult Sunday School class meeting weekly at the village schoolhouse. They were members of the Fort Hill Baptist Church, who concluded the convenience of gathering here on the peninsula for their weekly Bible study was preferable to walking two and a half miles inland to the area near the current intersection of Route 1 and Groton Long Point Road. It's quite likely they were some of your ancestors if your lineage includes names like Palmer, Rogers, Latham, Wilbur, Morgan, among others who populated this underdeveloped seaside hamlet.

It's not to say convenience was the only inspiration for launching this Sunday School in 1826. The village economy was based on boatbuilding and fishing—a combination that tended to employ the coarsest guttersnipes along the New England coast. A little God-given salvation in local souls was good for business on earth as it was in heaven. So by 1831, a weekly worship was arranged for Sunday afternoons, led by one of the Fort Hill pastors from a church soon to be renamed as the Second Baptist Church of Groton. The interest in this religious endeavor grew exponentially within a few years once the revivalist spirit swept through and converted all but one of the residents of Noank, who pledged their loyalties to the Baptist movement and the mother church on the hill. While the state established Congregationalists were claiming the upperclass centers of Groton and Mystic, the evangelical Baptists were effectively dredging the bowery of Noank.

By 1841, a meetinghouse was built on the present site to accommodate the weekly religious services. Within the year, it was decided to turn this Noank mission into an entirely new church for the village. In January 1843, the Noank Ecclesiastical Society was organized, consisting of villagers and boat-building itinerants. Two months later, 223 members left the mother church on Fort Hill and swelled the ranks of the Noank congregation. As Noank historian, Claude Chester, told it,

Included in this number were two men who had served as deacons in the mother church and who continued to act in that capacity in the new church—Deacon John Palmer, Sr. and Deacon Ebenezer Rogers. It was a group of very wonderful people whose Calvinistic theology led them to adopt the motto: “God’s Providence is mine inheritance.” It seemed that God must have “sifted the entire colony to find the grain fit for this planting.” The entire history of sacred service does not furnish a finer example of devotion than that which characterized these plain, simple people, who in faith, laid the foundations of this church.¹

And there you have it—how this church came to be.

One might wonder if our founders ever imagined we’d still be telling their story nearly two centuries later while carrying on the legacy of their labors. Dreamers and visionaries often have no sense of what their descendents will be like or how far down into the future what they establish will survive.

Certainly, it’s often true that a building itself will last longer than the congregation that occupies it, but in our case, we’ve had at least three meetinghouses that have served as the spiritual home for generations of Noankers. What was erected in 1841 lasted until it was sold in 1866 and moved across the street to be used as a residence (apparently a common destiny for old church buildings in Noank).

¹*Noank: Celebrating a Maritime Heritage*, Noank Historical Society, 2002, pg. 55.

This occurred a year after the church had split over the issue of slavery, with Elder Charles Weaver (Debbie Bates' ancestor) and the abolitionists forming the American Union Church and building their own meetinghouse immediately adjacent in what is now our upper parking lot. Once again, from Mr. Chester:

Seventy-two members withdrew from the church and planned to build a church on what is now the south parking lot. The mother church with her Southern sympathizers tried by sometimes unethical means to prevent this plan from being put into effect. But all of her efforts failed, and as a last resort, the church called a council of all the surrounding churches, trusting that the very weight of argument might induce the seceding members to reconsider.

There was no provision in the village for the accommodation of horses for those who would come as delegates, so the church had placed at strategic points about 40 hitching posts. The morning of the great council came, and to the great dismay of the council, not a single hitching post could be found. One very keen man who is not living now, but who had three boys in the village, had organized a group during the night and had uprooted every hitching post and had hidden them so skillfully that they were not found for a long time. It was rather ironic that they had been placed underneath the American Union Church, which was partially built, and they were used as fuel to help provide heat for the first winter. ²

In spite of the fact that the church had split into two, the Noank Ecclesiastical Society and the American Union Church both did well, in part from the national revival that came following the conclusion of the Civil War. This is why the original meetinghouse no longer sufficed, as even the former "Copperhead" congregation grew, requiring a larger place to worship. So they sold the building as I said, moved it across the street, and built a new house of worship on this site. This is what the historical record says about that:

The new building was erected at a cost of \$10,390. This amount did not include furnishings or the bell. The new church was dedicated December 18, 1867. Appropriate services were held morning, afternoon and evening of that day. This time the church showed an enrollment of 320 members.

² Ibid., pg. 56.

It was a larger, finer structure in every way than that of the American Union Church, which stood less than 100 feet away, and in which regular services were being held by the group which had seceded from the mother church. The new building was 40 by 60 feet and 22 feet from the floor to the ceiling, with galleries on three sides and a lecture room underneath the main building. There was a recessed pulpit. A choir loft was in the rear gallery, and there was a small cabinet organ...Although many of the finest singers had gone with the American Union Church, there still was a very fine choir. The building was heated by two hot air furnaces *[which had often been confused with the preacher's lectern and pulpit]*.³

Eventually, the two congregations reconciled (perhaps because Emancipation had settled the slavery issue and mother church had nicer accommodations). But reconciliation came with a few rules about the newly built worship setting:

In order that the immaculate appearance of the sanctuary might be preserved, some rather unusual precautions were taken. At the annual meeting of the Ecclesiastical Society, January 1868, it was voted that three tithing-men be appointed: "to see that the House shall not be defaced by the careless use of tobacco or in any other manner and that printed notices of this order be posted in the Church."

At the same time it was also voted: "that the slips (pews) be sold at auction on Thursday, January 9, 1868 and that no slip be sold for less than \$4.00." (This indicated the privilege of using the pew for one year.) The middle seats in the center aisle were those which brought the highest rental price. There were six reverse seats, as they were called, three on each side of the pulpit and these were the free seats.⁴

It should be noted that the back rows closest to the exit were also considered cheap seats, which is why even to this day they continue to be the most populated!

I'd love to go on with some more of the history of this place, but my intention is not to make Claude Chester the preacher of the morning! The point of this storytelling is that it allows us to connect with those in the past who made great sacrifices to establish and continue this church and its ministry. We also can appreciate their

³ Ibid., pg. 58.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 59.

character and to realize the investment they made to provide a place of worship in the center of this village where we continue to gather generations later. Literally, thousands of people have considered Noank Baptist Church their spiritual home and they have, in turn, passed the plate endless times to ensure that the ministry continues and the property is well-maintained. In other words, the challenge we face in the present to support this ministry is no different than those who have gone before us; what we inherit from them is fruit of their efforts and, like them, what we pass onto a future congregation is the Christian faith and a love for a church that has been the sacred place for so many.

This church has weathered many storms throughout its remarkable history—some that arrived in the form of hurricanes and winter gales that impacted the meetinghouse itself and some that came in the conflicts between people and the hardships of life that affected the outlook of the church. In virtually every generation since our founding in 1843, this congregation could have become dispirited and closed the doors for the last time. Our forbears could have given up or gone elsewhere when they were overwhelmed by disasters or broken-hearted or bitterly angry over disputes. Some, indeed, chose to do that. But many remained, set some new priorities, and found a way to go forward, joined by others who came and found this to be a special place for them.

For 170 years, Noank Baptist has been a blessed community of Christ because *we care for the church we share*. For the significant moments of our lives—from birth to baptism, from marriage to death—sacred milestones of our lives—this has been the setting,

carefully preserved and maintained by those who love this place and its people. This church has accomplished much in the name of Christ and done many remarkable things over the course of time for the sake of this community and region—so many positive and meaningful exchanges in endless lives and households. It never has been easy, but as the Gospel song goes, “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.”

Our responsibility is to do the same—to do our part—to step up to the challenges that we face and to make the same deep, profound, and sacrificial investment as did those who came before us. This isn’t just a casual relationship we have with this church that we can let slip away; it has been and continues to be a significant part of our lives, as we are among that great cloud of witnesses who have carried each other, and married each other, and buried each other in the love of Christ from one generation to another! For almost two centuries, this ministry housed in a building erected on ledge rock has held firm and strong against the buffeting winds of time. That’s the legacy we stand upon today when we consider how we’ll manage to go forward into the future.

So who are we in this generation to dismiss and forget those who have gone before us for almost 175 years, or those who could well come after us, that somehow our generation has decided we no longer have the means, the ability, the heart, or the desire to give of our very best in order to keep this church going forward into future generations? What could we ever say to our children or grandchildren or anyone else’s children that would legitimately excuse us of responsibility if we had to dramatically cut back on this

ministry or even allow it to end altogether in the next few years because we no longer consider it important enough to care for it? Is that the legacy we want to leave—that within our lifetimes we are willing to give up and close our doors?

Everyone knows churches all over America are struggling because financial support is voluntary. Nothing is guaranteed from year to year. We don't charge dues, or market products, or sell tickets, or receive foundation grants to keep going. We rely entirely on the goodwill of those who are touched by the ministry—the generosity of each one and also the mutual sense of responsibility we have to it. Each of us are called to care for the church we share by deliberately, not casually, and generously, not meagerly, considering what we will do to invest in this ministry. Even if we don't know exactly what the next year will bring, we trust in God, don't we? We pledge what we can with the intent to fulfill it to our best ability. That's the only way we are able to make a sensible budget—to maintain staff, to fund programs and missions, to take care of our property, and to do the things that have made Noank Baptist Church special and worthwhile over the years. All of this happens when in the spirit of Christ we care for the church we share.

Generations have done it before us. We've inherited their legacy, their dreams, their faith, and their willingness to sacrifice. Many of you sacrificed to rebuild this meetinghouse 50 years ago following the Christmas Eve fire; you also invested greatly in the ministries that produced the Mystic River Homes, Noank Group Homes, and many other outreach programs of the church. In each situation, questions always arose as to how it could be accomplished.

Yet, we've come this far by faith, from 1843 to 2013, leaning on the Lord. That's our challenge for today and the days to come: will we effectively support the ministry of this church so that we will continue what was begun nearly two centuries ago?

The Stewardship Task Force invites us to respond in the way each of us feel led, with the option to pledge or not pledge. No one but the Financial Secretary will know what any of us are willing to give out of respect for privacy. But they do ask you, if you are able, to come forward with your pledge card and with your heart's desire to help us keep this ministry strong. They gratefully ask us to do what members and friends have done for generations: to love, support, and care for the church we share!

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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