

BEHRENBURG LEGACY FOR THE CHANCEL SPACE

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In 1958, First Presbyterian was bursting at the seams. Like most mainline churches living in the aftermath of World War II, people flocked to worship, joined in mass, became part of a church like one would own a car, have a telephone. It was what you did.

Thomas Weber, the church historian who accounted for the life of FPC Metuchen as it celebrated our 250th anniversary, completed his history in 1967. After the 250th celebration was complete, a moment where congratulations were also extended to Dr. A. Behrenberg for completing his 25th year as the minister, there was a great sense of completion, a sense of realizing a future no one would have imagined. Describing the growth by comparison, Weber wrote this:

By the end of 1950, Dr. Berenberg had received more members in eight years than James Mason in his entire span of almost half a century.

There is much to learn and ponder concerning the explosive growth of the church from 1945-1967. How they grew; what they built; how they gathered: all intriguing. Yet, the one description I enjoy most of Weber's history was his account of the sanctuary remodel and the building of the Christian Education Wing. He wrote this:

This great decade of dramatic growth was climaxed by the largest single undertaking in the history of the church, the forward movement of 1958.

After a series of meetings and gatherings it became apparent by this time that the original siding of the old frame church needed rehabilitation if it was to survive as a building. It was proposed that the exterior of the church be resurfaced in brick, and a new bell tower and steeple added in front. The new plans were approved for submission to the congregation, with Thomas Ainslie as general chairman, Miles Oppenheim and Ralph Preston as co-chairman of the finance committee, and Saxon Palmeto and Reuben Hager as co-chairman of the building committee.

The financial goal of the project was ambitious: \$250,000. This represented a figure three-times the annual operating cost of the church. In our dollars, we would need to raise \$3,000,000 to match this. The conclusion of the campaign was successful, and their faith and dedication continue to bless our congregation and community.

In the coming year we will seek to remodel and renovate much of the work completed in the sanctuary in 1960. There will be a new chancel design; there will be a renovated organ with a new counsel; flooring, substructure and pew renovations will also be seen. There are other parts to the plan, but these are the large ones.

In the dedication of the new sanctuary in 1960, Dr. Behrenberg congratulated the congregation for their faithfulness, but he was also a bit caustic about the design and décor of the past. He called it "ugly." Having read many of his sermons, I can assure you this was part of his personality and pulpit style. He was bombastic. I offer his comment for two reasons. First, I don't believe our sanctuary is ugly; I see it as a wonderful expression of modern and ancient sensibilities; it is very Protestant; and, it is primarily a "preaching" pulpit, high and elevated. Each Sunday I am mindful of how much I am in his design. While, not my style, worthy of appreciation none the less. Second, I offer his "ugly" comment because we will seek not to reject the past, but to find our space born anew.

The last design was essentially in place for 65 years. Imagine not changing the furnishings of your home for 65 years. It is time to find the future of the church as we are faithful to our past. This is an amazing moment in the life and history of the church. Someday the next Thomas Weber will speak of the new Social Center, the Food Pantry Expansion, the renovations to the education building with a new school, and, I trust, a remodeled sanctuary. I believe the next historian will praise the faithfulness of this generation, your generosity, and mostly how you made a way for the next generations of First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen.