

Richard Webb Recalls the Origin of the Montauk Community Church

What a busy, exciting time the spring of 1927 was! Carl Fisher's development of Montauk was in full swing—the Montauk Manor was nearing completion, the 7-story office building was opening, stores, houses, the Surf Club, Golf Club and Yacht Club were under construction, roads were being carved out of hills and valleys, and water mains and electric lines were being installed. The Shepherds Neck Village was being expanded to accommodate some of the personnel and their families who were supervising and performing the work. Surveyors, office personnel and hundreds of workmen were being housed in temporary bunkhouses and commissaries. The mood of the times could best be expressed by two words: Activity and Optimism. But there was no provision then for the year-round worship of God, although a few were attending church in East Hampton.

However, in the early spring of 1927, the Long Island Presbytery was active and optimistic about seeking religious leadership in Montauk. A survey was made to determine the denominational background of the people living and working in Montauk. The survey showed about 25% to be Roman Catholic and the balance divided among Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, and several other denominations, with Presbyterians in predominance. There seemed to be a real desire among the residents for organized year-round religious work.

The Presbyterian Board of National Missions engaged the Rev. E Hoyt Palmer to be the first minister in Montauk and agreed to pay half his salary for the first year and Presbytery paid the other half. Rev. Palmer's work started July 1st.

On the 3rd day of July 1927, sixty-two people gathered together for worship in the Montauk Theatre Building (between White's Liquor store and the Printing Shop). During the previous hour, twenty-seven children gathered for religious instruction, taught by adult volunteers. During the summer and fall, attendance at the worship services continued to increase and the Sunday school grew by leaps and bounds, indicating how great was the need for these services.

During the fall there were several informal meetings to discuss the organization of the church and the character of the work to be carried on, also what name to call the church group. Because several denominations were represented, it was decided that the effort should be interdenominational—a community of religious backgrounds; this gave a reason for the name selected: “Montauk Community Church.”

On January 17, 1928, The Presbytery of Long Island met with the congregation in the Montauk Theatre to organize the church. At this meeting forty-eight members joined the church by profession of their faith or by letter of dismission from other churches or by affiliation. Seven elders who had been previously nominated were elected, ordained and installed, thus officially constituting the Montauk Community Church.

From the very earliest days, this church has been blessed with a strong group of women—the Women's Guild—whose cooperation has been the strong right arm of the church. Their first social activity was a supper given in the theater on December 7th. In spite of a lack of equipment and facilities, 175 were fed and the proceeds, \$200, formed the nucleus of a building fund.

The men of the community met several times during the autumn of 1927 to plan social activities during the winter and spring, the proceeds to be given to the building fund. Arrangements were made to promote a series of eight Saturday night home talent entertainments at the Montauk Theatre in conjunction with the moving pictures. The series included a barn dance, vaudeville, children's night, etc. and ended in April with a minstrel show, which played to a packed house of about 350. The net proceed of the series amounted to \$400 which was turned over to the building fund.

Although the church group appreciated having the Theater in which to meet, the bare walls, poor lighting, uncomfortable seating and reverberating echoes didn't add much to the worshipful atmosphere of the services. Much thought was given to the provision of a new church building and to its size, location and how it could be financed. So as the summer of 1928 approached, a committee was formed to consider a suitable site for the new building and to arrange plans for financing the venture. Carl Fisher offered to give on acre of land wherever the committee decided, if they would agree to build within one year. The present site was the first choice of the committee. At first the thought was to build a small one room chapel to meet the immediate needs, but the optimism of the time assured that eventually, we would outgrow such a facility and that rooms should also be provided for various uses such as Sunday School, social activities, etc. The committee obtained the services of the Architect for the Board of national Missions, Mr. A.G. Lamont, a specialist in church architecture, to make preliminary drawings of a future group of buildings with special emphasis on the proposed first unit. In due time the preliminary drawings were presented and approved, although the architect's estimate of cost exceeded the amount tentatively agreed upon.

It was decided to hold a campaign for funds during the last two weeks in July 1928 with the hope of raising \$35,000. A professional campaign manager was employed and publicity prepared and sent out.

In order to be able to sign contracts and other papers, it was necessary to incorporate the church and to elect a Board of Trustees; so on June 17, 1928, incorporation papers were drawn, signed and recorded, and a group of men elected as trustees.

The final results of the campaign amounted to \$22,880 in gifts and pledges, including also the excavating and painting of the building by local contractors. Arrangements were made with Richard Webb, a local architect, to make the working drawings, details and specifications, and to obtain bids from contractors. A local contractor, the Pearson Construction Company, submitted the lowest bid of \$49,925. After eliminating unessential items and revising the specifications, the contract price was reduced to \$40,800. On November 12, 1928, the contract was signed and ground was broken for the new building. With great interest the people watched the building grow and on December 31, 1928, the cornerstone was laid with fitting ceremonies.

The men of the church volunteered to gather and cart the stones for the tower and it is interesting to know that many of these stones had formed the foundations of a house in Indian Field in which it is said the Montauk Indians held their religious services conducted at one time by Rev. Samson Occum. After a noble effort on the part of the contractor and the workmen, the building was ready for the first service on Easter Sunday, March 31,

1929. By the summer the Women's Guild had purchased furniture for the church parlor and dishes and silverware for the kitchen. The pews and chancel furniture designed by Mr. Webb, and given by members and friends in memory of loved ones, were installed. Mrs. E.P. Maynard gave the beautiful memorial window in the chancel in memory of her parents. Mrs. Maynard was born in the Third House and her parents were keepers of the sheep and cattle that grazed in Indian Field.

The Church House and Sanctuary were dedicated in a beautiful service on September 1, 1929. At this time, a little over two years after services started under humble circumstances in the Montauk Theatre, there was a splendid church building centrally located, adequately furnished and equipped to accommodate worship services, religious education programs, club meetings, theatricals, dinners, dances, community meetings—wholesome fellowship and entertainment of every nature. But the building was only half paid for; there was a mortgage of \$14,000 and bank notes to the extent of about \$9,000. The Long Island Presbytery very generously agreed to pay the interest on the mortgage and for many years the Board of National Missions paid half of our minister's salary. The prevailing spirit of optimism came to an abrupt end with the Stock Market crash in late 1929, and for the next ten years of depression the payments on the mortgage and notes proceeded slowly and with great difficulty. But thanks to the faith and courage of the Women's Guild, they alone were able to earn the funds to meet the payments on the indebtedness. And so by the grace of God, the mortgage was finally paid and burned on the 25th anniversary of the church in 1952.

Our ministers for many years lived in rented houses but in 1964 an adequate manse with minister's study was completed. A few years later, because the Sunday school had outgrown the facilities, it was decided to build a Christian Education addition which was completed in 1969.

Thanks be to God for his inestimable love in bringing us safely through the years, for the opportunities He presents us to give and serve; for His patience with our faults and failures, His comfort in our sorrows and for His assurance that He will be our personal guide both now and in the years to come. ALLELUIA!