

# A CENTURY OF FAITH AND ACTION

The Ravenna United Methodist Church

1903-2003



By the Congregation

## INTRODUCTION

This history of the Ravenna United Methodist Church recognizes its 100 years of service to God and its community. It attempts to place the church in a local and national context, and it tries to understand the church as a human institution. It is a narrative and interpretation of the church's development. It is a candid analysis of its changing circumstances.

Because this history is the history of a congregation, its purpose is to present a collective portrait and not to glorify individuals. Except in one or two instances, people are named only because they represent a significant circumstance in the life of the church. Many people contributed countless hours and gave substantial funds to the church during its first century. Their contributions are deeply appreciated. A pastor list is included for the information of those interested.

The Congregation of the Ravenna United Methodist Church

APPENDIX ONE

THE PASTORS OF THE RAVENNA CHURCH\*

H. J. Hartsell .....	1903-1906
Henry Carlyon.....	1906-1909
S. C. Benninger .....	1909-1915
George C. Curry.....	1915-1917
Robert Asa Smith.....	1918-1919
George W. Beck.....	1919-1924
William L. Hoffman.....	1924-1931
W. H. Hodges.....	1932-1942
Wayne Sprague .....	1942-1946
David L. Rothweiler.....	1946-1954
John Johnson.....	1954-1959
Louis V. Martin.....	1959-1966
Fred Hunt .....	1966-1970
Edward C. McClurg .....	1970-1981
Edward F. Altes, Jr.....	1981-1987
Joyce O'Connor .....	1987-1991
Amy Starr Jennings.....	1991-1993
Jan Bolerjack.....	1993-1998
Ruth Geiger.....	1998-2002
David Valera .....	2002 –

\*In several known instances, a new pastor's arrival and assumption of duty did not immediately follow the departure of the previous pastor. The appointments themselves may have been continuous. In any event the list presented here has long been accepted as valid.



## APPENDIX TWO

### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

A historian of the Methodist movement once wrote that “too much writing on Methodism commences with the assumption that we all know what Methodism was, and gets on with discussing its growth rates or its organizational structures.” This history, except for its reprinting the historical chapter from *This We Believe*, is as guilty of that assumption as any other. The brief annotated bibliography that follows is intended to provide the interested United Methodist with a starting point for a study of Church history and doctrine beyond what is available in brief summaries or pamphlets.

#### *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*

This volume is a detailed statement of the doctrine and organization of the Church. It explains the duties of all groups within the Church structure and how they shall function. It contains a thorough index. It is revised periodically.

#### *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church*

A guide to the Church’s position on all social, economic and political questions from accessibility to the zero option. It is organized by topics and subtopics. The index is excellent. The book is revised from time to time.

#### David M. Buerge and Junius Rochester, *Roots and Branches: The Religious Heritage of Washington State* (1988)

A survey of the religious culture of the state including Native American and Asian religions. It does not deal extensively with church doctrine but does place all religions in national and regional contexts, and assesses the interplay among religions.

Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger, eds., *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (2001)

A multi-authored volume that begins with the American Revolution and ends with the Civil War. It effectively does what its title suggests, by demonstrating the impact of Methodism in many areas of life, from preaching styles to popular publication. It is a corrective to studies that emphasize the influence of social change on religion at the expense of the influence of religion on society.

*The History of American Methodism* (1964)

This is a massive, three-volume study with a large number of editors and authors. It is a comprehensive treatment of the development of Methodist theology, practice, schisms, and reunions, including those of the Methodist Protestant Church. It is somewhat dated in its interpretation and its coverage. It ends before the union that produced the United Methodist Church. It is contextually rich.

Erle Howell, and Chapin D. Foster, ed., *Methodism in the Northwest* (1966).

This book is included here because it is often cited as the authority on regional Methodism. It has its strong points, for example, its positive view of Native American religion. On the other hand, it is almost completely devoid of theological or doctrinal considerations and often reads like a compilation. It is conceptually naïve, depicting Methodism in an onward and upward struggle to eventual triumph.

Ravenna United Methodist Church owes its 1903 founding in part to two men who were not Methodists. They were Henry L. Yesler and William W. Beck. Yesler, a pioneer lumberman, investor, and politician, belonged to no church and scoffed at organized religion (some ministers responded by praying for his soul). Yet Yesler believed in the Bible as a guide to life. His profligate generosity, one of his several eccentricities, extended to institutions, churches included. The Yesler Sunday School building, where the beginnings of the Ravenna congregation first met, probably was Yesler's contribution to the area's spiritual life.

The Sunday School was located on NE 50<sup>th</sup> Street between 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 37<sup>th</sup> Avenues NE. It sat just north of the Town of Yesler, which Yesler and his nephew founded in 1888 to provide a community for workers at their forthcoming sawmill on Lake Washington's Union Bay. When the little group first met Yesler himself had been dead for a decade. The Sunday School site today is in a residential area in the southern part of the Bryant neighborhood.

Before introducing the second non-Methodist, the reason why this Methodist group evolved into a full-fledged congregation should be examined. Very little about the group is known. Superficially it was no different from six other Methodist Protestant "preaching places" or Sunday Schools that sprang up around Seattle at about the same time. Only Ravenna and one other, Seaview Methodist Protestant Church in West Seattle, long survived. One reason for the survival of what would become Ravenna was the faith of its congregants. Another was the belief of the Rev. T. P. Revelle of the First Methodist Protestant Church that the small preaching place would amount to something more.

Presumably the Rev. Revelle organized the group at its request. At the time his First Methodist Protestant Church was a thriving congregation on Capitol Hill. It descended from the famous pioneer "Brown Church" at Second Avenue and Madison Street in what is now

downtown Seattle. Legend has it that the Brown Church, when completed in 1865, enticed away most of the worshipers at the Methodist Episcopal “White Church.” In any event the congregation grew and ultimately constructed an impressive Romanesque stone edifice seven blocks south and one block east of the present Volunteer Park.

While there were reasons of faith for the early 1903 meeting between the worshippers and the Rev. Revelle, they were not the only ones. The terrible economic depression of 1892-98 had lifted, Seattle had become a major rail and port city, and the area comprising the present Ravenna, Laurelhurst, Bryant, and University districts was poised for growth. Much of it was annexed to the city in 1901. A streetcar line, a steam launch service from the foot of Madison Street on Lake Washington, and the University of Washington’s move to its new campus, all events of the 1890s, forecast these later developments.

Things moved quickly after the Rev. Revelle appeared. Either then or soon after, the preaching place became the Yesler Sunday School building. But not for long. This is where the second non-Methodist, William W. Beck, or the Rev. W. W. Beck as he was often known, came in. Beck, a Presbyterian divine, was one of those devout people who came to Seattle to do good, of course, but also to do well. After arriving in the area in 1887 he bought 300 acres of land, founded a town named Ravenna, and established a park, also called Ravenna, at its southern edge.

By 1891 Beck had opened the Seattle Female College in a wooden, churchlike building at the northeast corner of NE 57<sup>th</sup> Street and 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE. The edifice faced 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue almost three blocks east of the present eastern boundary of Ravenna Park. From the surviving photographs it appears to have occupied three lots. Its architecture was vaguely Norman, with a



projecting three story tower at its center. Its first floor was pleasingly asymmetrical. A second story huddled beneath a high gable roof. A pinnacle above the tower capped the composition and lent an ecclesiastical appearance to the whole. Houses occupy the site today.

Beck's problem was his bad timing. He opened the Seattle Female College at the peak of an economic boom, just before the country tumbled into what was called the "depression of 1893," although, as we've seen, the financial collapse began earlier and lasted a lot longer. The final year for the Seattle Female College was 1895. After 1895 the building stood vacant except for an occasional renter. Beck busied himself with developing his property and operating Ravenna Park, charging an admission fee for the use of its picnic and recreation areas.

Then Beck and the fledgling Methodist Protestant group found each other. Later in 1903 the preaching place moved from the Yesler Sunday School to Beck's building. The Methodist Protestant Board of Home Missions sent a minister, who arranged for a temporary church



organization in October. The Rev. H. J. Hartsell became the first pastor in December, ministering to a congregation of fourteen charter members of the Ravenna Methodist Protestant Church. About the same time, apparently, Beck the Calvinist and his Arminian

tenants agreed on the sale of the building, then known as the "Red Church."

During the years after 1903 the Ravenna neighborhood began fulfilling its earlier promise of growth. Only two Methodist churches served the larger area, Ravenna and the University Methodist Episcopal. Since the two differed mostly in their stance on church hierarchy it was probably as easy for most Methodists to join one as the other. The Ravenna church prospered and its congregation developed a full program of activity, if one clue from early 1911 is an indication.

On the evening of Thursday, February 2, worshippers had just concluded a prayer service when a fire broke out and spread rapidly. Nothing could be done to save the Red Church, strange as it may seem to later generations accustomed to strict building codes, on-site fire extinguishers, nearby fire hydrants, and efficient fire departments. In 1911 the closest hydrant was a mile from the Red Church.

Most of the worshippers were either still inside the building or just outside it. Assisted by neighbors, they carried about \$2,000 worth of furniture to safety. They saved most of the furnishings before the spreading flames made salvage efforts too risky. The neighbors also cut down some of the dormant, desiccated trees surrounding the Red Church to keep the fire from igniting other buildings. The Red Church was a complete loss, estimated at \$6,000. To render the value of the furniture saved in current dollars the amount would have to be multiplied at least twenty times. The 1911 value of the building and its remaining contents would have to be multiplied perhaps as many as 150 times to express their contemporary replacement cost.

Whatever the loss, it was devastating. Although it is a truism that a congregation is people and not a building, a congregation must meet somewhere. The destruction of its meeting place, the commodious Red Church, symbolized the end of the formative years of the Ravenna Methodist Protestant Church.

A fellow Methodist came to the rescue of the stranded congregation before the night of February 2 was over and the embers of the Red Church were cool. The Rev. Hill of the University Methodist Episcopal Church offered the use of his building. The Ravenna congregation may have met in the University church for a short while. Soon it found a temporary location much closer to the Red Church site, the second floor of Sumner's store at the northwest corner of NE 55<sup>th</sup> Street and 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE. That building has since been demolished.

Meanwhile plans went forward for a new if much smaller church at the southeast corner of NE 60<sup>th</sup> Street and 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue NE. The building was ready for dedication on the afternoon of September 24, 1911, less than eight months after the destruction of the Red Church. The Rev. J. M. Gill of the First Methodist Protestant Church on Capitol Hill continued his congregation's association with the Ravenna church by preaching the dedicatory sermon.

The new church was a simple frame box, its plain exterior relieved by an entrance and bell tower at its northwest corner, facing an unpaved, unsidewalked 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. A high gable roof dropped low over the north side, its wide eaves forming a porch behind the bell tower. The tower's battlements lent a Gothic quality to the otherwise unpretentious building. The land sloped away from the church on the west and south and, after a slight hump in the ridge, toward the east as well. These were the areas where most house construction was occurring in the Ravenna neighborhood. For that reason it was called "the Little Brown Church on the Hill."

The church was pleasant enough and its appearance, if unprepossessing, left no doubt of its mission. But it was what the congregation could afford, not what it needed. The cost of the lot and the building together was \$4,500. A comparison is instructive. The ceremonies at the

Little Brown Church on the Hill played a barely audible second fiddle to the dedication on the same day of the new Providence Hospital, a million-dollar building. The church would, nevertheless, serve its congregation for almost twelve years. The increasing number of worshippers and their activities justified the assertion of a 1964 article in the old *University Herald* that “during this period, Ravenna population increased rapidly and since no other church served the community, the ‘Little Brown Church on the Hill,’ . . . began bursting at the seams.” Credit for the rising membership should also be given to the Wesleyan doctrine that God’s grace is freely given and that all people have the freedom to accept it through Jesus Christ. The hard work of the congregation in surveying the neighborhood and encouraging attendance could also be mentioned.

Sunday School formed an important part of the church’s activities. In 1915, for example, the men’s Bible Class became a member of the International Sunday School Association. The men’s Bible Class had a charter membership of fifteen but the whole Sunday School program was much larger. Total attendance at the time of the move to the Little Brown Church “was about fifty,” as S. C. Benninger, then the pastor, remembered it. If later ratios between Sunday School attendance and the size of the congregation are any guide, the full adult membership would have been near fifty also. Despite the church’s membership situation resembling somewhat a revolving door, the rising number of new members was impressive.

In 1918, the first year for reliable figures, 35 new members enrolled. Nineteen nineteen saw forty-six join. The years of World War I and the frightening influenza pandemic of 1918 were, despite the death and suffering, good years for the Ravenna church. If the congregation suffered any combat deaths during 1917-1918, they are unrecorded.

On a clear January 2, 1916 (the war began for Europeans and their colonials in August 1914), 148 turned out for Sunday School, 3 times the attendance of less than 5 years before. The weather influenced attendance. A prolonged snowy period brought the number of attendees down to 80 on February 6. The Sunday following Easter, a beautiful April 30, attendance soared to 196. These impressive figures fell into the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s early in 1919. The dropoff occurred, probably, because of lingering fears of the “flu.” The 1918 influenza strain hit young people especially hard. Church records do not attribute any adult worshippers’ deaths to the disease.

The church did well financially, sometimes with the help of the Board of Home Missions. The Rev. Benninger’s salary is a good indicator of the church’s improving finances. When the Rev. Benninger arrived at the Red Church in March 1910 his monthly salary was a less-than-princely \$12.90, “and for some months the Board of Home Missions paid all current expenses.” The “expenses” the Rev. Benninger referred to were his own, for his annualized salary of \$154.80 would not have kept his family alive except in the most hardscrabble, subsistence circumstances. At the time an especially industrious “common laborer” as they were then called, might make \$500 to \$600 a year if he were lucky enough to be employed full time. Even with the burden of the new church, the congregation soon began paying the Rev. Benninger’s expenses. From 1913 through 1915 his salary, not including expenses, rose from \$35 to \$50 per month.

The good times continued for the Ravenna congregation despite high prices in the immediate postwar era and a brief recession in the early 1920s. In 1920 the church received 14 newcomers, but the pace of new member growth picked up the next year, when 31 joined. Thirty joined in 1922, and another 30 in 1923, the last year for the Little Brown Church.

The Ladies' Aid Society, a forerunner of the United Methodist Women, was active and growing. Major events produced large turnouts. In November 1920 the group hosted a luncheon at the new parsonage. Members were instructed to bring a guest, resulting in an attendance of forty-eight and three new members. Two piano solos, a reading, and a vocal solo provided the entertainment. A March 1922 meeting called in part to gather money and goods "to help a needy family" attracted 29, among whom were 5 visitors. Fifty-four members attended a November 10 meeting charged with "preparing articles" for the church bazaar.

The popularity of the Ladies' Aid, and, indirectly, the growth of the church, is reflected in its membership. At the beginning of 1922 the group enrolled 18 members. By the beginning of 1923 the roll had swelled to 63. The Ladies' Aid grew because it accomplished things. The society members visited the sick, sometimes leaving flowers or plants, conducted a "social" at the church each quarter, did sewing and mending for charitable causes, welcomed "strangers" at church, encouraged them to sign a register, and made follow-up visits to their homes. All day meetings, not uncommon when few members worked outside the home, usually were given over to special projects such as preparation for the church bazaar. The 1922 bazaar was held December 8 and 9, and despite "disagreeable" weather and snow-covered ground, netted \$103.18. It was a good sum at the time.

The Ladies' Aid was not all work. Besides entertainment from members, each of the women at the March, 1922 meeting told "of some funny experience in her life." At the October meeting, among other diversions, they played games and listened to "two selections" by three girls from "the Bryant School Orchestra." The Ladies' Aid meetings also encouraged the members' spiritual awareness. Meetings sometimes opened with a hymn ("What a Friend We

Have in Jesus” was one favorite), and usually with a scripture reading and a prayer. Bible study and other prayers were offered at some meetings.

The church’s “bursting at the seams” -- exemplified by the Sunday School and the Ladies’ Aid -- had to be relieved either by expanding the existing church or by building a new structure. Early on the congregation made its decision when it purchased ground at the southwest corner of NE 60<sup>th</sup> Street and 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue NE, across 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue from the existing church. It is probable that the Board of Home missions helped with the purchase. In 1920 the first building on the site, the parsonage, was completed. It was a large home with two stories and a basement, but its bungalow design fit the dominant domestic architecture of the district. The parsonage rested at the south side of the grounds, well away from the corner where the new church edifice would rise. The ground breaking for that building ushered in a new chapter in the life of the Ravenna Methodist Protestant Church..



The building dedicated in 1923, with some remodeling and updating, still serves its membership. For a neighborhood church built in the early 1920s, it is relatively lavish. A small congregation, even though the existing building was “bursting at the seams,” could not afford to move from what was little more than a shoebox into such a spacious edifice. Doing so required an “angel,” and, inferentially, the “angel” was the pastor’s brother, who was none other than the secretary of the Board of Home Missions. Both Pastor George W. Beck and his brother, the Rev. Dr. Charles H. Beck, nevertheless exhibited great faith in committing themselves to such an undertaking. The congregation shared their faith.



The ground breaking was the first ceremonial step toward the new building. On the afternoon of Sunday, September 10, 1922, the congregation and its well-wishers gathered for the ceremony. One measure of the congregation’s faith -- the “outside” help notwithstanding -- was breaking ground before opening the construction bids on the new building. Based on the plans



already prepared, it was “expected to cost, completed and furnished, \$35,000.” The expectation, as it developed, was justified.

Because the ceremony was scheduled for September, plans were made to hold it indoors in case the onset of the rainy season interfered. But the rain held off and the groundbreaking took place outdoors, on the site of the new building. Pastor George W. Beck spoke, not surprisingly, on “Ground Breaking.” The pastors of the Seaview Methodist Protestant Church and the First Methodist Protestant Church brought greetings. The Rev. Dr. O. E. Tiffany, the president of Seattle Pacific College, delivered the principal address.

Ecumenicism was the order of the day. Not only did the president of a college funded by Free Methodists give the major address, but the executive secretary of the Council of Churches added his greetings to those of the others. The University Presbyterian Quartet sang two numbers. It was a far cry from the early 1860s, when Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal ministers could not agree on sharing a pulpit. An opening prayer, a scripture reading, songs by the Ravenna choir and congregation, and the benediction rounded out the program.

A contemporary pastor could sympathize with Pastor Beck’s duties that day. He conducted the 11 o’clock service, preaching on “Mutual Encouragement for a Great Work,” presided over the ground breaking, then conducted the evening service, where the subject of his sermon was “Living Temples.” Perhaps a contemporary audience would have found the schedule tedious, but 1922 was early in the age of mass popular entertainment, when lengthy programs were tolerated.

At some point in the proceedings a member of the congregation, Elizabeth Nancy Harris, turned the first shovel full of earth, and ground was broken. The shovel she used is on display at the church. The gilded blade bears the inscription, “This Shovel was used at the Ground

Breaking New Ravenna M.P. Church Sept. 10, 1922.” Gothic lettering on the handle, from Nehemiah 2:20, reads, “ The God of Heaven, He will prosper us, Therefore we His servants will arise and build.”

The new, capacious red brick church rose quickly in a “traditional” style. A bell tower facing 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue dominated the exterior. Ocular windows in the tower, above the cornice line, drew the eye upward toward the square wooden cap, decorated with round-arch ventilating windows and topped with a finial at each corner. There was no steeple. A local architectural firm, Lawton & Moldenhour, drew the plans. The senior member, George Willis Lawton, worked for and with other Seattle architects before founding an independent practice, then associating with Herman A. Moldenhour in 1922. Ravenna was an early contract for the firm, if not its earliest. Lawton and Moldenhour dissolved in 1928 after Lawton’s death, but Moldenhour went on to become the architect for the Port of Seattle.

Inside the Lawton and Moldenhour edifice, the central room was, of course, the sanctuary. It comfortably seated 250 worshipers. Its principal architectural feature, both from within and without, was a large rounded, arched window on the north façade, facing NE 60<sup>th</sup> Street. Smaller windows repeated the motif on both the west and north sides, where Sunday School and meeting rooms occupied the first and second floors, and on the east side, facing 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue NE. The east side windows provided the principal natural light for the sanctuary.

The west wall of the sanctuary separated it from the primary Sunday School rooms, but roll-up doors in the wall could be raised to provide overflow space on special occasions. Readers of the *Seattle Daily Times* were assured that “every bit of space in the new church has been utilized for some purpose, the building including among its features twenty-two classrooms; a large, well-lighted basement given over to Sunday School classrooms and a social

hall with motion picture facilities (the *Times* overlooked the projection booth in the narthex), and a stage; rest rooms, a pastor's study, and a church parlor.”

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* commented on the new church's "perfect ventilation," declaring it to be "one of the most modern in the city." The new building cost over \$35,000, not too much more than the congregation's expectation.

One gauge of the new building's importance was the audience it attracted on dedication day, Memorial Day, May 27, 1923. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Hamilton Lewis, the President of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, came all the way from Washington, D. C. At the time the Rev. Lewis's one-way trip required some three days by fast passenger train. The Rev. Charles H. Beck, whose Board of Home Missions would help retire the mortgage on the entire property in four years, arrived from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



The presence of two renowned ministers lightened the Rev. George Beck's duties on dedication day. The Rev. Lewis preached the sermon in the morning, while the Rev. Charles Beck preached at the evening service. The 3 p.m. dedication consisted mostly of music and reading letters of congratulations from former pastors and from various ministers. The dedication festivities continued for the rest of the week. On Monday the church gave a public reception in the social hall for the Revs. Lewis and Charles Beck. The next evening the Bryant School Orchestra and Chorus held forth during a "Community Night." The Christian Endeavor followed that Friday with a "Young People's Night."

Then the congregation began life in its new building. The neighborhood continued to grow around the church. Concrete sidewalks dating from the 1910s were one indication of the extension of city services even if the street remained unpaved. The Ravenna congregation participated in the changes, selling the land under the Little Brown Church on the Hill to the Seattle School District. A portion of the present Bryant Elementary School and its grounds occupy the property. The old Ravenna church building was sold to the Roman Catholics and moved to the site of the present Assumption Church.

As the Ravenna neighborhood grew, so did the scope and pace of observable change around it. Those changes would interact with the faith and works of its congregation to determine the future of the Ravenna church.



The Ravenna congregation continued to belong to the Methodist Protestant Church until 1939. In that year the Methodist Protestants rejoined the Methodist Episcopal Church, together with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The three organizations combined as the Methodist Church, a name used until 1968.

Between 1923 and 1939 the congregation would experience its own heady growth combined with an unprecedented prosperity and an amazing outpouring of affordable consumer goods through the 1920s. Next came a scarifying economic depression and a loss of membership. As the depression eased in the late 1930s the congregation again grew in numbers, only to face the outbreak of the second global conflict within its corporate lifetime.

As ranks of bungalows, Tudors, and the occasional Colonial Revival filled the Ravenna streets, so the church grew. The stereotype of the 1920s, that it was a “Jazz Age” given over to joyriding in roadsters, wearing raccoon coats, drinking bathtub gin, and turning from religion to fashionable skepticism, is hardly borne out by the wave of newcomers entering the church. Forty-five full members joined in 1924, and an equal number the next year. Nineteen twenty-six saw forty-one received into the fellowship. Thirty-three came in during 1927 and 20 in the Methodist Protestant centennial year, 1928.

In 1928 the Ravenna church celebrated the centennial with other Methodist Protestant churches. The centenary was somewhat arbitrarily chosen, for 1828 was the year of the second General Convention of Methodist Reformers where plans were laid for a new church. The church was not organized nationally until its General Convention in Baltimore, November 1830, when the name "Methodist Protestant" was chosen.

As an anniversary directory of the Ravenna church explained Methodist Episcopalianism, "laymen could not vote upon any question in any church meeting," but their protests against the arrangement went unheeded. "The bishops and other members of the clergy refused to grant them the . . . power to vote and help make the laws of the church. So the laymen, and ministers who believed in Representative Church Government, were expelled, driven out, and forced to form a new denomination, which they did." The reformers were devout Methodists who "only wished to change the form of church government." This explanation glossed over some dimensions of the quarrel but it was an adequate explanation of why the Methodist Protestant Church emphasized lay participation, and why its titular head was a president and not a bishop.

The Ravenna church's range of activity comported with a dynamic growth that brought full membership to 240. Sunday's religious services began at 9:45 a.m. with a "graded Bible school" having "classes for all ages." The worship service began at 11, with a "community gospel song service and sermon" at eight in the evening. The mid-week prayer meeting began at eight on Wednesday evenings. Two missionary societies, a "community men's Bible class," and the Ladies' Aid Society continued active.

The Ladies' Aid again exemplified the growth and involvement of the church. The group continued its traditional activities, such as visiting the sick. Music figured in meetings, as when, in April 1924 "the ladies were entertained by piano selections by little Arthur Smith."

Transportation arrangements for an August lawn party some distance from the church belie the idea of a nation on wheels by the mid-twenties. The women appointed a committee “to take care of trucks for taking the people out” to the party. Those who “have cars and will furnish them” were asked to bring other members “who have no way” and were “too feeble to walk” to church to meet the trucks. After the business meeting “the men of the church began to arrive.” Seventy people sat down to the evening meal. Games followed; a “dressing contest,” a “potato carrying contest,” and a “nail driving contest.”

The Ladies’ Aid was so successful that in January 1925 it divided into three circles and the larger group met quarterly. Once a year during summer the entire Ladies Aid met for a picnic in Ravenna Park, long since purchased for public use. The parsonage became a special Ladies’ Aid project. When the Rev. Beck and his family left the church in 1924 the group purchased furniture offered by Mrs. Beck, then cleaned the house before the Rev. William L. Hoffman and his family arrived. When the Hoffmans came they found food supplied by the Ladies’ Aid. When Mrs. Hoffman wanted a couch the group bought one for \$17.50, “payable in payments of \$4 per month.” In February 1926 the Ladies’ Aid received two bids for “painting and tinting the parsonage,” and accepted the low bid of \$125. Lest the low bid seem inordinately inexpensive to the contemporary reader the high bid was \$132!

The greatest monetary contribution of the Ladies’ Aid was the \$500 it raised to help retire the mortgage on the church property. In 1927, seven years after the initial land purchase, the Methodist Protestant Church owned land, parsonage, and church edifice free and clear. Its (renamed) Board of Missions donated a significant amount, or as Ravenna’s anniversary directory put it, “helped materially in the payment of this debt, and also in helping finance the local budget, for which the Church and community at large are deeply grateful.”

Thus the Ravenna church ended the 1920s in an enviable situation. The mortgage was paid off. The membership boomed. An astonishing 84 full members joined in 1929. The country boomed, too. Car production was one index of prosperity. In 1921, in the depths of the postwar mini-recession, 1,468,000 new passenger cars were sold, moving total car registration to 9,212,100. In 1929, an amazing 4,455,100 new cars sold, a record that stood for 20 years. Total registrations were 23,120,800, while the number of all motor vehicles approached 27 million. Sixty percent of American families owned cars. It's probable that fewer Ravenna families would have had to depend on trucks or the autos of others for a ride to a lawn party in 1929.

The prosperity did not last, for the church or for the country, as national economies spiraled down into a global depression. The U.S. stock market crashed in October 1929 and, despite rallies, continued to slide for several years. New car sales slumped in 1930 and 1931, bottoming out at 1,103,500 in 1932. The Ravenna church suffered, too. A year book published in 1933 or 1934 listed 164 members versus the 240 of 1928, a decline of 39 percent. The decline is not surprising. Accounts of the Great Depression abound with tales of once-prosperous families losing their homes to foreclosure, of families forced to surrender their independence and move in with relatives, of families embarrassed by reneging on their pledges to churches and other charitable or community organizations, and of families too proud or too self-conscious to appear at public functions in threadbare clothes.

Difficult as the times may have been for some Ravenna families, they were not so pressing for the church itself. There was no mortgage debt. The 1920 parsonage and the church building completed in 1923, could go without updated fixtures or remodeling. Some maintenance could be deferred. At the church, activities expanded or changed to reflect the smaller membership or the attractions of popular entertainment. A "Junior Church" service at 11



a.m. paralleled the regular worship. Community programs during the “social season” from October to June replaced the Sunday evening service, a probable casualty of the declining membership. A monthly “Church and Community Night” on first Fridays was added. A monthly membership meeting was added to the Sunday School board’s monthly gathering, while a “Brotherhood” meeting was a possible replacement for the men’s Bible Class. Two missionary societies had become one, but the Ladies’ Aid Society remained strong.

The Ladies’ Aid continued its traditional activities, calling on the sick, holding bazaars and bake sales, greeting “members and strangers” at the church door on Sundays, and picnicking at Ravenna Park. Quilting, if not an altogether new activity, expanded during the 1930s. One concession to the economic depression was heating “the little chapel upstairs” with a wood stove while the women of Circle 3 did their quilting. Circle 3 members exchanged Christmas gifts among themselves, the 1934 gifts “not to exceed 10¢.”

Circle 3 of the Ladies’ Aid bought items for the church with some of the money raised, a “large potato masher” for the kitchen in 1933, “15 serving trays at 15¢ apiece” in 1940. In 1935 and again in 1939 the members contributed “toward the purchase” of a Christmas turkey for the Rev. W. H. Hodges and his family. Gifts for a member on her birthday, a going away party for a departing member, and contributing to the “General Aid” picnic at Ravenna Park were typical outlays.

Spiritually rewarding as all the activity within the Ravenna church was, it would be profoundly influenced by events outside its organizational orbit. The first of these was the merger of its parent Methodist Protestant Church with the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The lengthy and sometimes halting progress toward the merger culminated in 1939, when on May 10, the three churches united to form The Methodist

Church. The Ravenna Methodist Church was now linked with the other two major Methodist groups in a much larger, stronger body.

The gradual lifting of the Great Depression was enormously significant. One measure of returning prosperity was new car sales, 3,717,300 in 1940, not as spectacular as 1929's nearly 4,500,000, but much improved over 1932's little better than 1,100,000. The prosperity was based to an extent on rising defense spending, which probably engendered some ambivalence in Methodism. By the end of 1940 the United States was moving closer to involvement in the global war that began for Europeans in September 1939.

Whatever individual reactions were within the Ravenna church toward issues of unification, prosperity, and war, there was no doubt that the church shared in the return of "good times." In 1940 church membership had recovered to 224. The number was below the 240 full members of 1928, but was comfortably above the 164 of 1933-34. The total enrollment in all departments of the Sunday School reached 303. Unfortunately Ravenna was charged with the largest "deficiency" in payments to the Annual Conference and other bodies among the churches of the Seattle-Tacoma district. Nevertheless, individually and collectively the membership returned its blessings to God, the Ladies' Aid contribution alone being \$406.

Moreover, the land and buildings of the church now belonged to the congregation. In 1938 the Methodist Protestant Church deeded the property to Ravenna. That property was valuable at 1940 price levels. The church declared the parsonage and its contents to be worth \$3,000, the edifice, \$40,000. Thus did the church enjoy material abundance and survive economic stringency to face the fresh challenges ahead.



The years from 1941 through the mid-1980s were years of maturity for the Ravenna congregation. The 1941 to mid-1980s period divides at the early 1970s, when the church began its slow decline from a range of 225 -- 325 members to 95 in 1987. The reality of Ravenna's situation was more apparent in retrospect than it was at the time. That was because the church maintained a full program of children's, youth and adult activities. Services were well attended up to the early 1970s.

Some national and local trends reinforced the satisfactory outlook from the perspective of the Ravenna congregation. Although it was by no means an era free from anxiety, the 1941 – 1987 period was one of unprecedented prosperity, material abundance, and huge population growth. The years of World War II are remembered as years of rationed food, clothing, automobile tires, and gasoline, and of a nearly complete absence of new consumer durables such as cars and refrigerators. Some of the “sacrifices” now seem quaint: people nurturing “victory”

gardens on plowed-up park land and vacant lots, or using wooden pencils and their erasers clinched together with thick paper, not steel.

But for all the memory of “enforced austerity” the good times rolled on. Full employment, whether in the armed forces or in civilian occupations, was a hallmark of World War II. Combat deaths or serious wounds and injuries were horrible whenever they occurred, but were extraordinarily low for the United States compared to other major warring nations. If Ravenna lost any members to war-related death or incapacitating wounds, those incidents are not recorded.

After World War II prosperity continued for many, despite “limited” or “small” wars, periodic recessions, a general inflationary trend, and deepening United States involvement in foreign affairs. Now and then, comfortable Americans “discovered” poverty, became involved in the civil rights movement, were caught up in popular environmental crusades, applauded or deplored the expanding reach of the federal government, reacted to one “energy crisis” or another, or worried about the multitude of other issues facing them.

Nevertheless, prosperity roared ahead. The United States was, by global standards, a fabulously rich country. The Ravenna area reflected the nation’s comparative wealth, population growth, and burgeoning prosperity. After 1940 it could be considered secure and mature. Houses from the 1920s and 1930s sat on their characteristically narrow lots, and the scrim of forest trees visible in early photographs was long gone. Nevertheless, many vacant lots remained, especially in the area north of NE 55<sup>th</sup> Street and east of 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE. Young war veterans and their families soon filled those lots with “crackerbox” frame houses. They were small by the standards of the well-off of the 1920s but superior to a lot of depression-era and wartime housing.

The post World-War II era is correctly regarded as the age of the suburbs, however the generalization overlooks the early growth experience of in-city areas such as Ravenna's. The area bounded roughly by NE 85<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, Union Bay on the south, Sand Point Way on the east and Roosevelt Avenue on the west was the prime source for the Ravenna church's membership, although with some competition from the University, Wallingford, and Sand Point Methodist congregations. In 1940, 27,070 people lived in the area. Ten years later the population rose to 39,429. The substantial increase corresponded approximately to the growth of the Ravenna congregation. The numbers rose from 224 in 1940, and from a slump down to 157 full active members in 1947, to 253 in 1952. It was a busy congregation. By 1964 the Methodist Youth Fellowship, a "Faith, Fun, and Fellowship" group of young marrieds, and the "Laugh After Forty" group for older couples were active. The latter two groups helped with "the repairs and beautification of church and grounds."

As always the women of the church were active and achieving. Most of their work could be considered traditional. At the same time the local organization was drawn into a growing web of changing structure and focus. With the 1939 unification came the conflation of the Methodist missionary societies and the local Ladies' Aid societies into the Women's Society of Christian Service. The 1968 consolidation of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren brought no change in name or function of the women's organization at Ravenna. In 1972, however, the name changed to United Methodist Women, uniting all women's church activities into a single entity. The change signified the women's growing commitment to mission work, both locally and internationally.

The United Methodist Women developed from substantial organizational change at the upper levels of the Methodist, Evangelical United Brethren, and United Methodist Churches.

These restructurings drew the Ravenna UMW into participation in the annual meetings of the Pacific Northwest Conference and of the Seattle District United Methodist Women. The emphasis on missions led to a connection with the Campus Christian Ministry, while a growing ecumenicalism inspired ties to Church Women United.

Meanwhile the Ravenna UMW continued its local, church-based work, sewing costumes for a Church School program, conducting an annual picnic, and hosting an annual potluck lunch. The annual bazaar continued to contribute to the group's activities, the 1979 effort bringing in \$1,178. The previous year the UMW donated to missionary work among the Nooksack Indians, and in Mexico, Haiti, and Brazil. In September 1982 a missionary from Guatemala spoke to the group while wearing a Guatemalan dress and displaying artifacts from that country. Indicators of change in the world outside were individual and group protests against "pornography" in video games and on television. As before, meetings were made spiritually meaningful through prayers, devotions, and singing.

The men were active, too. In 1947 the Men's Club organized and drafted a constitution. The Methodist Men received a charter in 1956, and by 1964, "a group of men" was conducting "a Bible Study and prayer service each Tuesday evening." The men's bowling team, the Ravens, won the tournament sponsored by the First United Methodist Church in 1956-57 and again in the 1971-72 season.

Family entertainment brought together both genders and all ages. Doris Jones fondly recalled the 1959 Halloween costume party in the basement fellowship hall, attended by some 40 adults, as well as children. Because all those present wore costumes, the party became a contest to guess the identity of the person behind each disguise. At last only a "mystery woman" remained unidentified. Finally someone correctly surmised that the "mystery woman," dressed

convincingly in a mask, wig, dress, and large-size women's shoes, was none other than Pastor John Johnson!

The growing congregation paid considerable attention to its physical home. In addition to routine maintenance on parsonage and edifice, the worshippers financed such necessary if unexciting improvements as a new roof and a new furnace for the church building. More



inspiring was the installation of a new Moller pipe organ in 1948, an improvement requiring some remodeling of the choir loft. Later, maroon wall-to-wall carpet was added to the sanctuary. The choir received new maroon robes to match. The most far-reaching remodeling occurred in 1972, in the late afternoon

of the Ravenna church's physically vigorous years.

The extensive alterations reflected fundamental changes in the life of the church. By 1970 the number of full members had fallen to about what it was in 1940 or 1950. Membership in the Sunday School (by then called the Church School) was declining to the vanishing point. The roll-up doors between the sanctuary and the main floor Sunday School area would not be needed for overflow from the auditorium. Nor would the Sunday School area be required for its intended purpose. The glazed front doors were worn and provided little security. The altar space no longer expressed emerging ideas of the relationship between pastor and congregation at

Sunday services. The communion rail closed off access to the altar, and isolated the pastor from the flock.

The architectural firm of Steinhart, Theriault & Anderson prepared several studies, none of which was followed exactly. The upshot of the agreed-upon changes imposed a solid wall between the sanctuary and the former Sunday School area. In the sanctuary a split communion rail allowed access to the altar and facilitated communication between pastor and congregation, while it eased the congregation's participation in the service.

A pulpit built into the communion rail during an earlier remodeling was removed in favor of restoring the original, smaller pulpit. The former Sunday School area was converted into a parlor with a small kitchen. The glazed front doors gave way to solid wooden doors. Gradually the church's activities focused on the sanctuary and the parlor, while the generous spaces of the second and ground floors were left to desuetude.

The reality was that, at some time in the 1970s or early 1980s the Ravenna church reached the point at which it could not or would not readily renew itself. Pastor Edward Altes (1987-1991) was not the only person to recognize the problem.

He was, however, the only one with the authority to galvanize the membership. "He faced head on the need for the congregation to open itself to growth or close the doors of the church." During the decade of the 1990s and beyond a succession of pastors and lay people would respond to the Rev. Altes' challenge.





From the late 1980s to the present the Ravenna church focused on increasing its membership, participants in Sunday worship, and finances. The results were modest at best. Membership fell from 95 in 1987 to 34 in 2001-2003. The Sunday School, especially on the children's and youth level, was small in the late 1980s and miniscule by 2003. The finances were parlous in 2003 despite donations from various groups who were granted the use of space in the edifice, space no longer needed by the congregation. There was serious talk of selling the 1920 parsonage to escape its potential financial drain.

An analysis of efforts to meliorate the decline at Ravenna demonstrates the congregation's faith, determination, ingenuity, and insight into the problems of the church. A candid "Church Profile" from the "Transitional Finance Committee" presented in 1991 capped five years of close study of the situation.

The Church Profile categorized the issues facing the congregation. In summary they were 1) A changing neighborhood increasingly populated by people significantly younger than the congregation, and of Catholic parents attracted to the nearby Assumption School. Some childless younger people were drawn to the neighborhood by its affordable housing. Their priorities did not include joining a neighborhood church. 2) A congregation more theologically conservative than its neighborhood. 3) A complacent congregation, “more homogenous over the years,” and composed of people “who had known each other a long time.”

Pastors fed the complacency. From mid-century to 1987 they were “theologically conservative,” a stance attracting some parishioners who were “dissatisfied with the more liberal trends of other area United Methodist Churches.” Whatever gain Ravenna experienced on that account was offset by an increased spiritual distance between the church and its neighbors.

“Finally the church began to face the reality of an increasingly alien neighborhood and its own decline. Younger adults would visit, find no one of their age group and generally not return.”

While the Church Profile analyzed the situation skillfully, it perhaps placed too much blame on the assignment of pastors nearing retirement. It was more nearly correct in its criticism of recent (from its perspective) congregations. So far as pastors entered the picture, as early as 1931 the Methodist Protestant Church appears to have accepted the notion of Ravenna as a pasture for the nearly-retired. The Methodist Church generally continued the practice. The situation did not necessarily result, however, in the church receiving pastors who were dull or insensitive.

The 1964 *University Herald* article credited Pastor David L. Rothweiler with not only adding membership, but also with reinvigorating traditional church activities. During the Rothweiler years the number of active full members rose from 157 to 267 and enrollment in Church School from 218 to 396, with an average attendance of 140. The youthful Louis V. Martin (1959-1966) was neither somnolent nor nearing retirement. Under his leadership the membership climbed from 307 to an all-time high of 335 in 1962. Then it began falling slowly, dropping to 325 during his last year. The Church School, enrolling 161 children and 80 youth in 1960, slipped to 69 children and 53 youth in 1966.

Such declines suggested that something else than the failure of superannuated pastors was afoot. Other numbers imply that as early as the 1960s, younger church participants with growing families were moving away from the Ravenna neighborhood. During the Rothweiler years there were 15 baptisms in 1948 and 21 in 1953. In 1965, under Martin, there were only 3. In 1953 an astounding 141 full members transferred out of the congregation and in 1955 another 56 left for other Methodist churches. That such losses were even partially replaced is a tribute to the vitality of pastors and congregation.

What may be concluded from all of this is that membership fluctuations at Ravenna were not necessarily traceable to complacent pastors. Other local, regional, and national trends were significant, although they did not necessarily determine the situation at Ravenna. Considering those trends will be deferred until after a look at later Ravenna developments, including the efforts beginning toward the end of the 1980s to reverse Ravenna's numerical and financial decline.

If any pastors and congregations should be blamed for the decline of Ravenna's fortunes, they are not those of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. The blame belongs to the pastoral

leadership of the Rev. Fred Hunt (1966-1970) and the Rev. Edward McClurg (1970-1981), if, indeed, the blame should be placed on pastors. The congregations, if blaming congregations is legitimate, should share in the culpability. In 1967, the first full year of the Rev. Hunt's pastorate, membership stood at 324. By 1970 it had dropped to 226, with an average Sunday worship participation of 101. When the Rev. McClurg assumed the pulpit, membership was 214, but by 1974 it had fallen below 200. In 1976 membership was at 145 but average attendance remained at 101. Five years later the total full membership had dropped by only ten but average attendance had plunged to sixty-four.

In retrospect the era from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s was the time during which the



church could have renewed its vigor.

During those years the membership base, though declining, was still an adequate platform from which to launch a renewal. Some people recognized the problem.

In 1978 a member of the United Methodist Women "suggested we work harder on getting new members," and others may have voiced similar concerns. There was, however, no directed effort from pastors or congregation to reverse the trend.

Whether or not a sustained membership drive during the 1967-1981 period would have made a difference in the life of the church is unknowable. What is knowable is that the inaction of those years left the effort to a much-diminished congregation.



On the financial side, the Ravenna congregation of the 1990s made efforts to right the fiscal ship. It asked for and received a reduction in its apportionment, the money allocated for Annual Conference and other beneficial support. Pastors were reduced to one-half or three-fourths time, and the amount paid from the church's coffers proportionately reduced. Bake sales, plant sales, and rummage sales continued their contributions to the church budget.

The Lyle Griffin Holmes bequest of \$45,429.65 was used to retire a loan from the United Methodist Foundation of the Northwest for a new roof, and for other purposes. Several groups such as the Portage Bay Big Band and the Co-Operative Preschool made donations in return for the use of space in the church. None of these expedients solved Ravenna's financial problems. Ironically, property inflation in Seattle meant that the cash-strapped church owned an edifice, parsonage, and land valued at \$1,060,800 in 2001.

During the late 1980s and after, dedicated, hardworking congregants gave practically all their free time to attempt to stanch the outward flow of memberships. They greatly expanded the

church's "outreach" program by calling on neighborhood residents, telephoning neighbors with requests to attend church, and holding "Sidewalk Sundaes," outdoor ice cream socials designed partly to increase interaction with neighbors. An intergenerational group in the church was designed to acquaint old and younger participants with each other's concerns and perspectives. These efforts made no long-term difference, as the membership continued to erode.

The church also became, and remains, a "Reconciling Congregation," meaning that it welcomed all persons regardless of their sexual orientation. While the change was an important step forward, recognizing that all people are children of God and able to receive His grace, it did nothing to increase membership in the long run. Nor did advertisements in various publications have any noticeable positive effect.

Over the decade and more of struggle the membership took comfort in what were, unfortunately, a series of false dawns. A Conference decision to stop using Ravenna as a way-station for male pastors near retirement and turn instead to a series of younger women pastors was hailed as a breakthrough by some. Recruitment of new, younger congregants with special skills or interests was affirmed as a positive sign. Temporary increases in membership, giving, or Sunday participation were noted with enthusiasm. The continuation or revival of sports teams was considered a definite drawing card for younger people.

Those initiatives ultimately made little or no difference. Programs depending on the skills or interests of one new member languished when that person lost interest ("burned out") or moved on. Attracting younger people, the congregation discovered, was a double-edged sword. Younger people with families to raise and house mortgages to pay could afford to give much less to the church than well-off older people. In addition, they were more geographically mobile.

One by one the new initiatives foundered. One promising development, the “Soul Kids” children’s choir, was drawn mostly from the Bryant Elementary School across 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue NE. When the school was closed for renovation, the “Soul Kids” declined. The school reopened in 2002, and some children expressed interest in reviving the “Soul Kids.” The small congregation could not, or would not, add the burden of restoring the “Soul Kids” group to what was by then an almost overwhelming list of responsibilities.

Traditional activities suffered as well. In 1992 the United Methodist Men stopped meeting on a regular basis. In 2001 the women of the church abandoned the rummage sale. The choir barely survived, as did the Sunday School.

The meager results of so much dedicated effort were greatly disappointing to the involved members of the church. Finger-pointing blamed uninspiring or unfocused sermons, or a lack of an aggressive ministry. (These problems vanished with the pastoral appointment of David Valera in 2002.) Others blamed fellow congregants who insisted on having their own way despite the need for consensus. A 1995 church document reported that “there might have been some sexual misconduct among the lay Sunday school staff in the 70’s that broke that family apart.” It blamed the possible misconduct for the resulting “downward spiral in membership and financial giving.” The fact that “so few are doing so much” was itself a source of frustration.

While the congregation looked inward for the sources of its problems, not all of them were in fact internal. As the active members were well aware, part of the difficulty lay in the changing religious affiliation of newcomers to the Ravenna neighborhood. The 1991 Church Profile, as already noted, pointed to the growing number of Catholic families. Three nearby Jewish congregations also served as magnets for worshippers in that faith. Two of them were Orthodox, encouraging their participants to live within walking distance because of strictures

against unnecessary driving on the Sabbath. Beyond those considerations, the population of the area from which Ravenna could be expected to draw its membership had stabilized at about 40,000 ever since the census of 1950. If the residents were representative of Northwest regional trends, relatively few of them had any interest in traditional organized religion. On the national level, most of the growth in Christian churches was largely limited to the Catholic and various Pentecostal faiths, and the nondenominational “megachurches.”

Other national trends were not encouraging. The median Sunday attendance at churches affiliated with a national religious body was 75 in 2001. Between 2000 and 2001 the United Methodist Church lost 0.51 percent of its membership. The loss was slightly higher than in previous years, a loss varying from 0.40 to 0.50 percent per year. The UMC, the third largest church in the United States after the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, was in no danger of expiring, but the outlook for growth was not promising.

To return to local circumstances, in the early twenty-first century the Ravenna church could be proud and grateful for a century of service to God. At the same time it had to recognize



that an abundance of faith and a profusion of good works would not by themselves assure another century of continued service.



The best hope for Ravenna appeared to be a slow rebuilding of membership and finances through continued effort. The effort would include a determined commitment to reach out, by example rather than by moves born of an evident desperation. Nominal Protestant Christians and the unchurched in the neighborhood remained the best hope for a rebirth of the church and its mission.

