



The sanctuary following its 2025 exterior restoration

**The Story of First Presbyterian Church
of Cranford
*175 Years of Faith and Community***

1851 - 2026

*The 175th Anniversary
Celebration Committee*

*Karin Burk
Phyllis Dunlop
Kristine Farley
Charles "Chuck" Goodfellow
Donna Graziano
Larry Imboden
Betsy Kluge
Laura Simone*

First Presbyterian Church of Cranford Celebrates 175 Years of Faith and Community

by Laura L. Simone

Long before Cranford had its own church building—or even its own identity as a town—families traveled by wagon, horseback, or on foot to attend worship in neighboring Westfield, then known as the West Fields of Elizabethtown. The roads were rough, the trip was long, and worship often occupied most of the day. Yet week after week, people made the journey because faith and community mattered deeply to them.

Over time, however, something became increasingly clear: the growing community along the Rahway River needed a church closer to home. That realization led to the founding of First Presbyterian Church of Cranford in 1851, beginning a story that has unfolded alongside Cranford’s own growth ever since.

Today, as the church celebrates its 175th anniversary, the story is not only about buildings or milestones. It is about people whose faith helped meet the needs of their own time while laying a foundation for the future.

In the mid-19th century, Cranford, then known as Craneville, was a rural village of farms, mills, and dirt roads. Presbyterians and Methodists, who had sometimes met for worship in a local schoolhouse, joined together in January 1850 to establish what would become Union Chapel. Land was donated by Josiah Crane, plans were drawn, and within a remarkably short time, the chapel was completed.

On March 3, 1851, worshippers gathered for the first service in “Union Chapel,” located near what is now Alden Street. Just a few months later, on June 26, 1851, the First Presbyterian Church of Craneville, Essex County, NJ, was officially formed.

At the time, the church seated fewer than one hundred people. It would not stay that way for long.

As Cranford grew during the second half of the nineteenth century—fueled in part by the arrival of the railroad—the church grew alongside it. New families arrived, Sunday School programs developed and music became an increasingly important part of worship. The church’s centrality to community life deepened. The original Union Chapel quickly became too small.

In 1869, a second church building was constructed on Springfield Avenue at the corner of N. Union Avenue. But even that building would eventually prove too small, leading to the construction of the church’s third and current sanctuary in 1894. With its distinctive Richardsonian Romanesque architecture and prominent towers, the building became a familiar landmark in the center of town.

Yet one of the most important chapters in the church’s history would come much later—in the middle of the twentieth century—through a vision that extended beyond worship services alone.

Under the leadership of Reverend Robert G. Longaker, the church entered another period of expansion that helped shape its modern identity. Recognizing that church life was about more than Sunday mornings, Longaker and church leaders envisioned spaces where people of all ages could gather throughout the week for Christian education, music, service, and community life.

That vision led to the construction of the Education Building in 1950, Fellowship Hall in 1956 (later renamed Bates Hall in honor of Elizabeth Bates, the church’s first female Elder) and Memorial Hall in 1968.

For generations of Cranford residents, Bates Hall has been a familiar destination. Inside its walls, church members have gathered for dinners, youth group activities, and holiday celebrations. It has also been shared widely with the broader community. Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, basketball clubs, and community organizations like the College Women’s Club have all found a home there.

Memorial Hall further expanded the church's ability to serve the community by creating dedicated space for church offices, meeting rooms, education programs, and music ministry. Together, these additions reflected a forward-looking understanding that churches thrive when they become active centers of community life.

That mid-century vision continues to shape the church's mission to serve others in practical and meaningful ways.

Since 1956, the Nursery School, founded by church member Helen Klase Baldwin, has welcomed young children into a caring and nurturing Christian learning environment. And in 1990, with the founding of PrimeTime School-Aged Childcare by church member Virginia Waters, the classrooms found new life as a school aftercare program for families in town.

Bates Hall is always busy—not just with PrimeTime, basketball and Scouts—but also with our meal ministry, the Cranford Elmora Soup Kitchen. Volunteers gather twice a month to prepare 350 meals for those experiencing food insecurity. Long tables fill with sandwiches, fresh fruit, conversation, and shared purpose as people of all ages work side by side in service to others.

The idea for a program to feed the homeless and hungry sprouted during a Bible study at the Elmora Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth. When that church closed in 2004, First Presbyterian Church of Cranford formally adopted the program as a mission of the church. Since then, the Cranford Elmora Soup Kitchen has continued to serve the community, recently surpassing 166,000 meals served.

Generations of families have passed through the church's classrooms, pews, and gathering spaces. In this recent photograph, Elder Jim Weisgerber helps his young granddaughters ring the church bell donated 175 years ago by founder Josiah Crane—a small but powerful reminder that the church's story continues to be carried forward, from one generation to the next.

In 2025, that commitment to both history and future generations took visible shape through a major exterior restoration of the church's 1894 sanctuary. The project carefully returned the building's architectural details to their original appearance, restoring features that had been altered over time and preserving one of Cranford's most recognizable landmarks. The restoration was honored jointly by the Cranford Historical Society and the Cranford Historic Preservation Advisory Board, recognizing not only the building's architectural significance, but also the congregation's continuing investment in the life and history of the community.

The buildings may have changed over time. The town certainly has.

But the desire that first inspired Cranford residents to establish a church closer to home—a longing for connection, faith, and community—remains very much alive today.



RINGING JOSIAH CRANE'S BELL IN 2026

Explanation of the 175th Anniversary Crest

The 175th Anniversary Crest draws inspiration from one of the church's most recognizable treasures, the stained-glass Dove Window. The dove, representing the Holy Spirit, appears upright with outstretched wings that reveal the number 175. Above it is the crown, a symbol found throughout the church's windows representing Christ the King.

The overall shape reflects the Holy Trinity, echoing the concentric circles found in both the Dove Window and the church's 150th anniversary design. The straw-colored border and blue interior are drawn from the Dove Window's color palette, while the typography offers a more contemporary interpretation of the classic style long associated with the church.

Created by graphic designer Matthew Simone, the crest blends historic and contemporary elements, creating a visual connection between the church's 150th and 175th anniversary celebrations as shown below.



This updated crest honors the faith of those who came before us while looking forward with hope to the generations yet to come.

Church Leadership and Staff

Ruling Elders and the **Teaching Elder** provide spiritual leadership and oversight for the life of the church, including worship, mission, stewardship, and the care of our facilities and resources.

Steven Baker – Personnel, School Oversight
John Bayard – Visitors and Members
Karen Cassidy – Adult Spirituality, Service & Mission
Matthew Englert – Nominating, Finance/Stewardship
Katherine Jones – School Oversight, Youth
Al Simone – Nominating, Finance
Mary Van Horn – Preschool and Children
Jim Weisgerber – Personnel, Building & Grounds
Dyanne Wyrick – Outreach and Events

Treasurers, Counters, and the Clerk of Session are appointed by the Session to support the church's ministry through faithful financial management and record keeping.

TREASURERS

Lou Koehler
Fred Fitzgerald
Skip Winter

CLERK OF SESSION

Donna Graziano

COUNTERS

Mark Oricchio
Jeff Berns
Carol Berns
Betsy Koehler

*We remember with gratitude the life and service of **Mike Dyrek**, who faithfully served as a member of the Treasury Team for 36 years.*

Deacons extend Christ's care through ministries of compassion, including visitation, sending greeting cards, communion preparation, food pantry collections, and hospitality through Sunday fellowship.

Carol Berns
Jeff Berns
Karen Bruno
Alyssa Englert
Kristine Farley
Fred Fitzgerald
Elise Gish
Beth Keat
Betsy Kluge
Connie Paccione
Kate Ryan
Ed Towery
Missy Weisgerber

Staff

Pastor/Head of Staff – Rev. Jin Bae
Office Administrator – Carol Thee
Director of Family Engagement & Communications – Laura Simone
Organist – Robert Grube, Jr.
Director of Choirs – Dr. Tyrone Clinton, Jr.
Director of Youth Ministry – Kayla DeNigris
Director of Children's Ministry – Alanna Clayton
Director of Preschool Ministry – Emily Weisgerber Fuentes
Director, Helen K. Baldwin Nursery School – Laura Gardner
Director, PrimeTime Afterschool Program – Lisa Decker
Assistant Director, PrimeTime Afterschool Program – Chris Jorn

Long-Term Missions of the Church

For 175 years, the heart of First Presbyterian Church of Cranford has been our mission to love our neighbors as Christ loves us. From providing a home for Scouting, to nurturing young children, supporting working families, and feeding those in need, these missions grew from needs within the community and continue to make a lasting impact today.

- Boy Scouts (Troop 80) — 1928
- Cub Scouts (Pack 103, now Pack 137) — 1931
- Helen K. Baldwin Nursery School — 1956
- PrimeTime School-Aged Child Care — 1990
- Cranford-Elmora Soup Kitchen — 2005

Christian Education

To develop into mature disciples of Jesus Christ, we must continually grow in our knowledge of God's Word and learn to recognize His presence in our daily lives. We support Christian learning through the following ministries:

Scripture Seekers - Sunday In-Person and Zoom Bible Study led by Elder Mark Oricchio, who has faithfully served as teacher and facilitator of this Kerygma-based Bible Study for 14 years.

Bible Reading Together - Wednesday Bible Study by Zoom led by Rev. Jin Bae.

Confirmation – Faith Formation for youth in grades seven and up.

Middle and High School Youth Group – Fellowship, Service, and spiritual growth for teens and tweens in grades 6 and above.

Preschool and Children's Sunday School – Age-appropriate lessons that help children discover God's love and learn the stories of our faith.

Young Adult Bible Study - Coming soon

Music Ministries

We sing and ring to the Glory of God under the direction of Dr. Tyrone Clinton, Jr., accompanied by Robert (Bob) Grube and our dedicated volunteer musicians. Through music, we enrich worship, proclaim the Gospel, and offer praise to God.

A special thank you to Bob Grube, whose extraordinary gifts as organist and pianist, have blessed our congregation since 1965. For more than six decades, his faithful ministry has inspired worshippers and enriched the musical life of our church.

Current Music Ministries:

- Chancel Choir
- Jubilee Bell Choir
- Children's Choir

| Chancel Choir | Bell Choir | Children's Choir |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Eun Young Bae | Karen Bruno | Riley Englert |
| Karen Bruno | Mary Bruno | Elisabeth Gish |
| Karen Cassidy | Karen Cassidy | Rory Gish |
| Geoffrey Carlson | Phyllis Dunlop | Emma Goldberg |
| Phyllis Dunlop | Hayden Flinchum | Abigail Jones |
| John Duryee | Tamry Lowery | Victoria Soos |
| Hayden Flinchum | Grace Owens | Mekenna Tyree |
| Betsy Koehler | Mary Petty | Moriah Tyree |
| Alex Hechevarria | Alfonse Simone | |
| Tina Hechevarria | Connor Wyrick | |
| Beth Keat | Dyanne Wyrick | |
| Evelynn Keat | | |
| Stella Oh | | |
| Lynn Pinto | | |
| Alfonse Simone | | |
| Laura Simone | | |
| Connor Wyrick | | |

Prayer Chain Ministry

Prayer is our direct line to God. Founded by church member Linda Thorn more than 40 years ago, it continues today under the faithful guidance of Kristine Farley and Clementina Hechevarria. The Prayer Chain ministry connects more than 150 people committed to lifting others in prayer. Prayer requests are collected during worship, by email, online, and by text message, then shared electronically for immediate and collective prayer.