

## A Brief History of The United Church on the Green in New Haven

### Principal Dates:

- 1639 Formation of the First Church of New Haven (Center Church on the Green)
- 1742-1759 Formation of the White Haven Church
- 1771-1774 Formation of the Fair Haven Church
- 1796 Union of the two as the Church of Christ in the United Societies of White Haven and Fair Haven (later called North Church)
- 1826 Formation of the Third Church
- 1884 Third and North Churches join as the United Church
- 1960 United Church approves membership in the United Church of Christ

**Preface.** As this chronological outline suggests, the history of the United Church on the Green is complex and often confusing. To make sense of it, it is important to understand the frame of mind of Connecticut's early settlers. The English Puritans were a part of the Reform tradition within Protestantism. Strongly influenced by John Calvin, they believed in the authority and centrality of the Bible; in the priesthood of all believers – the equality of all persons before God; and in a return to the simplicity of the gospels. They condemned the Church of England as corrupt and left England in the early 17th century to find religious freedom and to found their own theocracy in Massachusetts.

There's a certain contradiction here. Each individual was to interpret the Bible for him or herself, yet the Puritans' established church had the authority of the state. It didn't take long for individuals in the Massachusetts Colony to question that authority. Individuals and groups started to break away or to be evicted, and even some women claimed the right to their own interpretations. New Haven was founded by John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton, two such dissenters.

The First Church of New Haven (now Center Church on the Green) was the establishment church and civil authority, founded in 1639 (only nineteen years after the Pilgrims first set foot in Plymouth). Church and state were one and it didn't take long for dissention to manifest itself. The New Haven church was marginally more tolerant than what they had left in Massachusetts, so dissenters were not hanged or exiled – they simply formed other churches. (Note that the word "church" means the body of people, not necessarily the building, which was called the meeting house.)

Given this background, it may be easier to follow the rather chaotic history of this particular congregational church in New Haven.

**Division of the First Church.** About 1730 Jonathan Edwards the elder started a revival in Northampton, Massachusetts the first step towards the "Great Awakening". The movement spread and was increased to religious frenzy by George Whitefield, who visited New Haven in 1740.

Thirty-eight "New Lights", as the converts of Whitefield and his followers were called, petitioned the annual meeting of the (First) church for separation in December 1741. No action was taken and in January 1742 the New Lights took advantage of the "Act of Toleration" and appealed to the County court for the right to worship apart without incurring penalties. For more than seventeen years they struggled to establish themselves, supporting the new organization voluntarily, and obliged also to pay taxes to the First Church. By this time Congregationalism in Connecticut, to which New Haven

now belonged, was established and the New Lights, though allowed to worship elsewhere, legally belonged to First Church until civil authority should grant otherwise. Many went to jail rather than pay the taxes. A "Separate" church was formed in May 1742 by an "ex parte" council of New Light ministers. In 1748 to provide for the support of a minister, sixty-one people formed a society by voluntary compact. When these nominal members of First Church became more numerous than its Old Light members, they proceeded to vote their minister in as the one for the whole church and their meeting house as the place of worship. The First Church then petitioned the Legislature for a division of the society and its property in 1759.

The new body, now completely organized, independent and recognized, and numbering 179 members, was for some unknown reason called the "White Haven Society". Early records describe the church as "being in very broken circumstances a number of years, sometimes having preaching, sometimes being destitute". For attempting to preach to them "within the limits of the First Parish", Dr Finley, afterwards president of Princeton, was driven from the colony as a vagrant, under a new law against "itinerant preachers". Nathan Beers, later a victim of the British invasion, coming to New Haven to join this church, found feeling so bitter that no one would transport his effects from the vessel and he was obliged to hire a farmer to do this. Students at Yale were forbidden to worship in "Separate" meetings. In 1744 when a wooden building was erected, the New Lights were refused a place on the public square. Their building, called the Blue Meeting House, because of the exterior paint, stood on the southeast corner of Church and Elm Streets and the Old Lights protested against it as "a public nuisance". Attempts to cut its timber at night necessitated a watchman during its construction.

**Formation of the Fair Haven Church.** During the ministry of Jonathan Edwards the younger 1769-1795 the stormy history of the parish repeated itself. Seventy men seceded, dissatisfied with the dismissal of his predecessor, Reverend Samuel Bird. "They were aggrieved and uneasy" over Dr. Edwards' doctrines and alienated by his personality, and his dry and metaphysical preaching. A new church was formed in 1771 and the corresponding society in 1774. Again the name, "Fair Haven", is unaccountable. They were allowed, however, to put up a meeting house on the Green, approximately on the site of the present United Church.

**Unions of the Fair Haven and the White Haven Churches.** Vacancy in the pastorate of the Fair Haven Church and the departure of Dr. Edwards from the White Haven Church paved the way for reunion of the two bodies in 1796. The word "United" appeared here in the name the "Church of Christ in the United Societies of White Haven and Fair Haven", shortened to the "United Society" when the properties of the two were joined in 1815.

**A Famous Speech Delivered in the new church.** Abraham Bishop, son of a deacon of the church, was invited to deliver the annual Phi Beta Kappa oration at the Yale Commencement of 1800. Instead of the learned discourse usual to this occasion he prepared a political campaign document. The college refused to accept the oration, but it was given in the Blue Meeting House before a great crowd. As this speech was against the existing union of church and state and the political power of the clergy, the church to the extent at least of permitting it to be given in its building, was true to its past. Success in this movement would complete the separation of church and state, partly begun by acts as the formation of the White Haven Church.

**Pastorate of Reverend Samuel Merwin (North Church) 1805-1831.** The first long ministry in the re-united church was that of Reverend Samuel Merwin. The membership, which had dwindled to 150, was increased after several revivals by more than 850. In 1812 it was decided to build a new,

brick meetinghouse instead of repairing the “decayed condition” of those belonging to the two former societies, in which worship was held alternately. The lumber was brought from Middletown by water, the commander of the British blockading squadron granting safe transport on learning that it was intended for a church. The building, the present one, soon known as the “North Church on the Green”, cost nearly \$33,000. It is believed that Ebenezer Johnson, Jr. made preliminary plans for the Meeting House, and David Hoadley was responsible for building it. This building is one of the best existing examples of the ecclesiastical architecture of the period, and is recorded in the archives of the Historic American Buildings Survey, Department of the Interior. Thirty four drawings are in the Library of Congress.

**Pastorate of Reverend Samuel W. S. Dutton (North Church) 1838-1866.** Like Jonathan Edwards, Mr. Dutton was opposed to slavery, concealing fugitive slaves in his house and helping them to escape to Canada. In 1839, 53 Africans were kidnapped from West Africa and sold into the slave trade. The Africans seized the ship in Cuba, killed the captain and some of the crew, and ordered the two Cuban owners to sail to Africa. La Amistad and her “cargo” were seized near Montauk Point, Long Island, and towed to New London harbor. The Africans were held in a New Haven jail on charges of murder. North Church members, including brothers Simeon and Nathaniel Jocelyn and attorney Roger Sherman Baldwin fed and clothed the captives and campaigned for their release. They even hired a ship to steal the captives away to freedom, if necessary. In 1856 the Kansas Rifle Meeting was held in the church, presided over by Henry Ward Beecher. Eighty men leaving to save Kansas from slavery, were pledged twenty-seven rifles from the pulpit. And later in this church was held the funeral service for Captain E. B. Lines, son of the leader of the expedition, who was killed in the Civil War. In 1850 many changes were made to the interior under the direction of Sidney Stone, a member of the church, and architect and designer of the Third Church

**Another Division and Reunion of Churches.** In 1826 a “Third Church” was formed by people from First and North Churches. Its longest and most distinguished ministry was that of Reverend E. L. Cleaveland [Third Church], 1833-1866. Growth of the city away from the central squares and the establishment of other churches made advisable the union of the Third and North Churches in 1884 into a new body called the “United Church”.

**United Church.** The first pastor, Reverend Theodore T. Munger, 1885-1901, known as author and leader in the movement to liberalize theology, was successful in bringing together divergent parts of the church. He emphasized the responsibility to the city of a church whose house of worship stands upon the public square. Under his ministry the church achieved a steadily widening influence in the city and in the university.

During the ministry of Reverend Artemas J. Haynes, 1901-1908, the theological creed was removed as a requirement for church membership.

During the First World War, Reverend Robert C. Denison, 1909-1920, represented the church in relief work in the Balkans.

During Dr. David Weinland’s ministry 1964-1976, United Church underwent renovations returning the sanctuary, as nearly as possible, to its original appearance in 1815. A new tracker type organ was also purchased at this time. In 1971 Black Panther leader, Bobby Seale was on trial for murder in New Haven. United Church opened its doors to offer safe haven for protesters.

In 1989, during Reverend John Hay's ministry, 1980-1991, United Church on the Green became "Open and Affirming" with a statement promoting the rights of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals (LGB) . In 1991 United Church passed its first Environmental Resolution.

In 1992 Reverend Louise Higgenbotham, 1992-2006, became the first female pastor of United Church. At this time the church also hired the first openly gay associate pastor, John McIver Gage.

During Reverend John McIver Gage's ministry, 2006-2014, United Church extended a radical welcome to all parts of the of the community through social media and involvement in the community, thus increasing the diversity of the congregation. In 2007 the church rededicated itself to this vision of a Just Peace Church; in 2008, it renewed its Environmental Resolution; and in 2009, the congregation reaffirmed its commitment to LGBT rights by adding the T for transgender.

## MINISTERS

### **White Haven Church:**

John Curtiss 1749-1751 (not installed)  
Samuel Bird 1751-1768  
Jonathan Edwards 1769-1795

### **Fair Haven Church:**

Allyn Mather 1773-1784  
Samuel Austin 1787-1790  
Hendricus Dow 1790-1792 (not installed)

### **North Church:**

John Gemmil 1798-1801  
Samuel Merwin 1805-1831  
Leicester A. Sawyer 1835-1837  
Samuel W. S. Dutton 1838-1866  
Edward L. Clark 1867-1872  
Edward A. Hawes 1873-1884

### **Third Church:**

Charles A. Boardman 1830-1832  
Elisha Lord Cleaveland 1833-1866  
Daniel S. Gregory 1867-1869  
David Murdoch 1869-1874  
Stephen R. Dennen 1875-1884

### **United Church:**

Theodore T. Munger 1885-1900  
Artemas J. Haynes 1902-1908 (not installed)  
Robert C. Denison 1909-1920  
Edward A. George Minister in Charge 1920-1921  
Samuel C. Bushnell Acting Minister 1921-1923  
Richard Clapp 1923-1947  
James Lenhart 1947-1952  
Alexander Winston 1953-1961  
Jack Curtis Harris 1962-1964  
David Weinland 1964-1976  
Arthur H. Koistl 1976-1979  
John Hay 1980-1992  
Louise Higgenbotham 1992-2006  
John McIver Gage 2006-2014  
Bonnie Scott 2014-2019

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