

## Pastors who have served the Royal Oak Community United Methodist Church

1866-1867	Francis A. Mercer	1933-1937	Claude H. Thompson
1867-1868	James Higgins	1937-1938	Charles L. Reiter
1868-1871	J.L. Shipley	1938-1941	Charles I. Flory
1871-1872	A.P. Dolly	1941-1942	Charles Cummings
1872-1874	J. R. Van Horne	1942-1943	Richard Buckingham
1874-1876	R. Smithson	1943-1944	W.E. Daughtery
1876-1879	George Lightner, Jr.	1944-1947	Rollan E. Ferry
1879-1881	G.H. Simmerman	1947-1950	Maxwell Roberts
1881-1883	W.A. McDonald	1950-1960	J. Thomas Price
1883-1884	A. Poe Boude	1960-1964	A. James Blundon
1884-1888	J.C. Thrasher	1964-1967	Harvey B. Flater
1888-1889	J.C. Simmons	1967-1971	Carlton M. Harris
1889-1893	J.W. Mitchell	1971-1974	William Fitzhugh, Jr.
1893-1896	C.K. Millican	1974-1976	Charles R. Green, III
1896-1899	L.G. Martin	1976-1981	Robert M. Price
1899-1903	J.W. Beall	1981-1984	Garry O. Parker
1903-1906	H.L. Myerly	1984-1989	Lawrence E. Staton
1906-1908	J.M. Anderson	1989-1994	Paul Bennett
1908-1909	J. Thomas Price	1994-1995	Fred Bahr
1909-1911	W.D. King	1995-1999	Barry Ball
1911-1914	William Melville	1999-2003	Jim Sipes
1914-1916	J.S. Keene	2003-2005	Paul Sherwood
1916-1920	R.L. Wittig	2005-2009	K.C. Lee
1920-1922	Gordon Smith	2009-2017	Christopher E. Pettit
1922-1925	R.V. Whitehurst	2017-2019	Joshua Berry
1925-1933	J. Alexander Rood	2019-	Tim Poly

# **Roots of the Royal Oak Community United Methodist Church (1<sup>st</sup> edition)**

***Written by Jenny Lewis, Church Historian***

The Royal Oak Community United Methodist Church, may at first glance, seem like just any other country church, one of the many that sprang up during the eighteenth century, but it is unique in that it has a sometimes complicated history, intertwined with local folklore, yet it is still deeply rooted in the start of the American Methodist movement.

## **The Beginning**

The first Methodist itinerant preachers, sent as missionaries by John Wesley himself, began to preach on the Delmarva Peninsula in 1770. By 1777, they had reached Talbot County. Their task was not an easy one, as they encountered fierce persecution from non-believers and those who thought them to be "Tories." Even those with loyalties to the other denominations, including the Anglican church, often made life difficult for the travelers. Many of these early preachers were physically attacked, and some like Joseph Hartley, as happened here in Talbot County, were jailed for not taking loyalty oaths to the state (Williams, 1984). Nevertheless, these missionaries pressed on and continued preaching with the goal of saving all souls, regardless of social standing, religious background or race. They rapidly established Methodist societies that would eventually become churches.

The most famous of these itinerants, Francis Asbury, superintendent and later Bishop of the Methodist Church in America, was actually the one who planted the seed for our church in 1783. While preaching at the home of local politician and land owner, Henry Banning, Banning's wife, Araminta felt conviction under his preaching. Asbury mentions this in a 1796 journal entry in which he has stopped to visit the Bannings once again on his way from Wittman's Bayside Chapel (Asbury, 1821). In the History of Talbot County Vol I, it is explained that Banning and his family had been brought up Anglican and Banning was a vestryman at St. Michaels Parish until Asbury's first visit in 1783. After his wife's conversion to Methodism, Banning himself decided to convert (1915). In Vol II, Samuel Harrison jokes that Banning's wife was then "canonized," by the Methodists for her hospitality to the traveling preachers (1915). This hospitality has indeed been mentioned by others like the Rev. Thomas Smith, who was assigned to the Talbot circuit in 1804. On June 8th of that year, he preached at Royal Oak, and then went home with "much esteemed brother H. Banning." Rev. Smith writes in his journal that, "I was kindly received, and I had a home while on this circuit." (Dailey, 1848) This journal entry is also a glimpse into the growing congregation at Royal Oak. According to Rev. Hallman, in his book, "The Garden of Methodism," the early Methodist meetings in Royal Oak were held at the Bannings' home (1949). However, Smith's account of returning home with Banning suggests they may also have met at other society members' homes as well (Dailey, 1848). These meetings were the very start of Royal Oak Community UMC.

In August of 1808, Henry Banning donated a parcel of land to the trustees of the Sardis Chappell, now known as St. Luke's in St. Michaels, "for the encouragement of religion and learning." The trustees, which included Pastor Arthur Rigby, James Jones, Thomas Townsend, Charles Rigby, Joseph Esgate, Joseph Hopkins and Richard Dawson, built a new church on the property, that was originally known as Sardis or Royal Oak Chappell. A schoolhouse was also built on the property per Banning's request. The location of the chapel and school was on the current Royal Oak road, near the "toe of boot" of Oak Creek, about 1 mile north of the main intersection at Royal Oak. In 1845, Major John Dawson and his wife Mary (formerly Robson), added a parcel to this property, and a new church was built in 1846 (Leonard, 1985). An additional adjoining parcel was transferred to the trustees in 1848 by William Townsend. At this time the trustees were listed as Townsend, Benjamin Kirby, Jesse E. Shannahan, Stephen Leonard, Philamon T. Pastorfield, John L. Hopkins and Richard H. Adams, several of which would become trustees of the future Harmony M.E. South church (Leonard, 1985).

During this period, Methodist camp meetings on Delmarva were still going strong despite the sentiment that their popularity and effectiveness were waning (Williams, 1984). A quick look at summer editions of the Baltimore Sun shows that they were still occurring from Kent to Somerset as late as the 1850s. Steam ships left the major ports of Baltimore for camp meeting destinations on the Eastern Shore, each one packed with 800 to 1,000 people. Royal Oak was one of these destinations, with ships landing in what is now Oak Creek, and attending the events right on Major John Dawson's property (Camp Meetings, 1842). Blacks and whites traveled and worshiped together at these dawn-to-dusk services (Ho, For the Great, 1856). The emotionally charged events were credited with converting hundreds at a time. So many were overcome with the spirit that it was necessary to create a new system where "awakened sinners," came to the front of the crowd to the altar, to avoid constant disruptions in the service. This practice evolved into the "altar call" still very much used in protestant churches today (Williams, 1984).

**CAMP MEETINGS —**The Centreville Sentinel states that the Methodist Episcopal camp meeting, which is to be held in Piney Neck, commences on Monday next, and continues over a week.

**There is to be a camp meeting for the Methodist Episcopal church (for Talbot circuit) near the Royal Oak, in the woods of Major John Dawson, to commence on the 11th of August**

The Harford Republican states that the camp meeting for East Harford circuit, will be held on the land of Wm. Allen, Esq, commencing on Friday, the 31st inst.

*News clipping from The Baltimore Sun, July 24, 1842*

**FOR CAMP MEETING.**

**HO! FOR THE GREAT ROYAL OAK CAMP MEETING!**

The large, fine and solo Schooner **GEORGIA**, Capt. Pearson, having unequalled Stateroom and Berth Accommodations, will again leave the corner of Pratt and Light streets,

On **THIS (Saturday) EVENING, 16th inst.**, at 10 o'clock, for the large and beautiful Camp Grounds at **BAY SIDE, ROYAL OAK**. Every arrangement has been made for persons intending to visit this Camp Meeting.

The forward cabin and deck reserved exclusively for **COLORED PEOPLE**. We are prompted to do this by request of a large number of Colored People who acted so orderly and gentlemanly on last Saturday night, going to Tobacco-stick Camp Meeting. We have promised them again to run to the Bay Side Royal Oak Camp for their especial benefit. Tickets will be sold only at the boat before starting. Let no one buy a ticket elsewhere, as we are determined to stop the frauds upon them as were practiced by some unprincipled men last Saturday night, not connected with the boat.

Come early and secure your tickets, as we were compelled to start before the time last Saturday, in consequence of the boat becoming too crowded.

Tickets 75 cents; colored persons 50 cents. 11\*

*News clipping from The Baltimore Sun, August 16, 1856*

## **The Church Separates; Harmony is Formed**

Though Methodists separated into the M.E. and M.E. South conferences in 1844, primarily over the issue of slavery, the Methodist churches of Talbot did not separate until after the Civil War. The meeting of those M.E. leaders wishing to leave was held at Rev. Plummer's home in Easton. An older member of the church, Mr. Walter H. Thompson, was said to have been urged by his fellow members to go to the meeting and argue the futility of leaving the Church, now that the war was over and slaves had been freed. The attendees of the meeting merely waited until Mr. Thompson had left, and then voted to pass the resolution anyway. Thereafter, an official county convention of the M.E. South was held, also at Easton, at the home of Samuel Shanahan, officially forming the Easton church. Royal Oak, followed since its group of members had already secured property for their church (Leonard, 1985).

In a deed dated August 11, 1866, the property where the Harmony M.E. South would be built was purchased from Thomas Bruff Leonard, and Philip T. (P.T.) Pastorfield for \$120, and was transferred to Stephen Leonard, Nicholas B. (N.B.) Leonard, P.T. Pastorfield, Washington W. Kell[e]y, Richard Adams, James Cox, and Joseph S. Robson, for the purpose of a meeting place for the Methodist Episcopal South congregation. The property, on what was then called Ferry Neck Road, required the cooperation of Leonard and Pastorfield, as there was a road running through both lots, created by travelers on their way to the ferry, who were attempting to take a shortcut around the legendary "Royal Oak." This of course being the massive white oak tree from which the village got its name (Leonard, 1985). The Royal Oak is believed to have been on the site of what is now an antique store on the east side of Royal Oak road. This store

was once P.M. Pastorfield's store, and later Albright's. Pastorfield's father, P.T., is believed to have cut the oak down in the late 1860s, as it was reported to have died in 1858, and had become a nuisance to travelers. Pastorfield provided half of the land that the future Harmony M.E. South was built on, and his son was a trustee (Leonard, 1985).

As a side note, there are many legends concerning the oak, the most famous being that it was hit by two British cannonballs during the war of 1812. This has since been disputed, and it is believed that the cannonballs were found at separate locations, one of them possibly being Henry Banning's property, and the other 2.5 miles away, closer to St. Michaels. The cannonball at Banning's was said to have passed through a chicken house, killing a Chanticleer and 3 to 4 of his "wives." Regardless of their true origin, the cannonballs were hung from the oak for many years, as a symbol of pride, but eventually they disappeared. Though missing for many years, the cannonballs were recovered and returned by a relative of Banning's from Delaware in 1884, and hung outside of Pastorfield's store (Leonard, 1985). They eventually made their way to the Royal Oak Post Office, where they are today.



*P.M. Pastorfield's store and the British cannonballs, also the site of the Royal Oak (photos taken from T-910, Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form for Pastorfield's Store, courtesy Mike Luby Collection)*



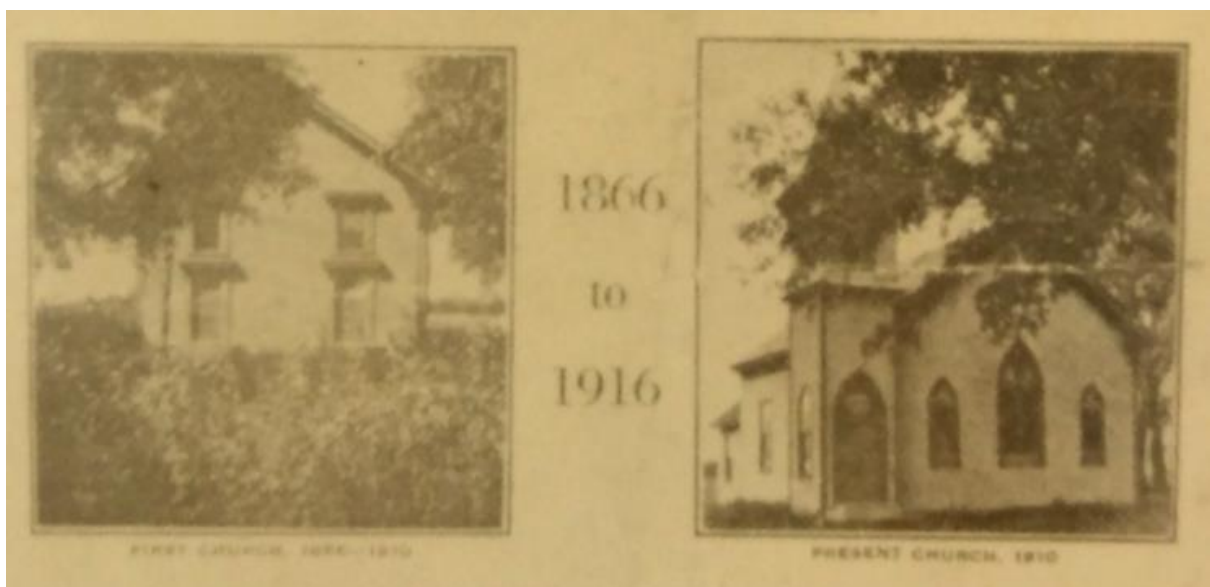
*Current view of the Pastorfield store, now an antique store (photos taken from T-910, Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form for Pastorfield's Store, courtesy Mike Luby Collection)*

Another significance of the Royal Oak, was the formation of the “Hearts of Oak,” local farmers banded together into a militia prior to the Revolutionary War. The group, led by Henry Banning, was said to have met under the oak, and eventually became the 38<sup>h</sup> regiment active during the Revolution in 1776 (Harrison, 1915).

In 1866, the Harmony Methodist Episcopal Church South was officially formed, and later that year the sanctuary we currently use was built. The certificate of incorporation, which hangs in the current fellowship hall, was signed and witnessed on September 12, 1887, by trustees James Cox, Stephen Leonard, Charles Leonard, N.B. Leonard, R.B. Frampton, Spedden O. Harris, P.M. Pastorfield, Charles E. Fairbank, and W.W. Kelley. Francis A. Mercer was the first pastor (Harmony, 1867). According to Talbot Rev. Mercer was appointed to Royal Oak at the Methodist Episcopal South conference in Alexandria in 1866. He and a group of laymen organized the church along with churches at Hillsboro and Trappe, thus forming the Talbot Circuit of the Baltimore Conference, East Baltimore District of the M.E. South Conference (Minutes, 1867).

The details of the church's history have been partially obscured, due to fact that the name “Harmony,” was not well known outside of the area, nor was it listed in the M.E. South Conference minutes. In fact, Rev. Hallman, in his comprehensive listing of Delmarva Methodist churches (1949), shows church leadership for a “Royal Oak M.E. South,” only from 1884 on, which was the year in which it became part of the “Royal Oak Charge,” (see below). F.A. Mercer and the trustees from the 1866 Harmony incorporation letter, are in the book though, but shown under “Talbot M.E. South” (1949). This was most likely because it was listed as the “Talbot Circuit” in the M.E. South Conference minutes for 1867. In the historical notes portion of Hallman's book, he again lists a “Royal Oak Methodist Episcopal South,” but the entry says

that he has been, “unable to have letters of inquiry answered, nor could we learn any of its history” (1949). However, thanks to the “Historical Sketch,” included in the program for Harmony’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1916), we do have a brief history of church growth, leadership and improvements during that period. The program was put together by P.M. Pastorfield and Rev. R.L. Wittig, so we will have to credit them as authors of this sketch for now. Their document explains that in 1872, another church was organized at Bayside (Wittman), and became part of the Talbot circuit. In 1884, Bayside and Harmony were split off, and they became the new Royal Oak charge. Rev. J.C. Thrasher became pastor, and several improvements were made to the building during his stay, such as paint and updated lighting. In 1891, a third church was added to the circuit after St. John’s M.E. South church was built at Tilghman. This became known as the “Royal Oak – Tilghman circuit.” The actual name “St. John’s” was found in the Hallman text, as it was simply referred to as “Tilghman” in the sketch.



*From the program of the 1916 anniversary celebration of Harmony M.E. South Church*

In 1898, the Sunday School room was added onto the church, and in 1911, the most dramatic renovations yet were completed at a cost of \$2,500. These renovations transformed the building into the one we recognize now, complete with steeple and stained glass.

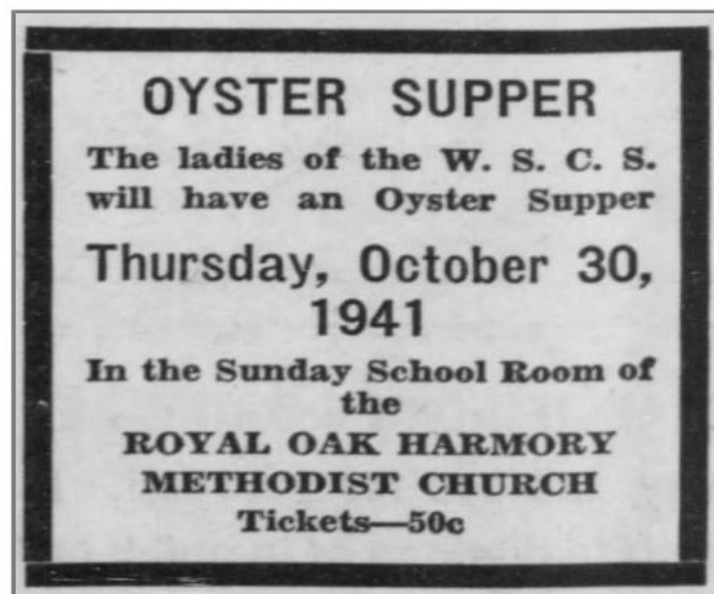
While Harmony was growing and changing, the Royal Oak M.E. church was doing the same just a mile down the road. This is also where our history begins to get a bit murky, as we do not know the details of how the Royal Oak Methodist Episcopal Chapel (sometimes referred to as “North”), came to be located at the corner of present-day Bellevue and Royal Oak roads. Though Rev. Hallman, former superintendent of the Peninsula Conference did much research on both churches for his book, it was still unclear to him whether a new church was built on the property, or if the church building was actually moved from the original property (1949).

Samuel Harrison, wrote in 1915, in his History of Talbot County Vol. II, that the church was moved from the 1846 location, closer to the village of Royal Oak and “extensively improved in order that the old Methodists might compete on equal terms with the southern church.” There

also seems to be some confusion in the literature over which church was the “South,” as seen in Christopher Weeks' “Where Land and Water Interwine, An Architectural History of Talbot County.” A picture of the church on the corner, is listed as being the “South” church. However, the book does date the structure circa 1785, which would support the theory that the church was built on site (1984). Some of this confusion is likely caused by the fact that many of the records involved were harder access until recent years when Google, genealogy groups and government agencies began the bulk scanning of documents for online use. Another book, “Around St. Michaels,” by Christina Vitabile, also dates the corner structure around 1875, and also incorrectly identifies it as the church built by Confederate sympathizers. She does, however, include an interesting bit of folklore concerning the dissension among the Royal Oak Methodists: many of those siding with the South, allegedly refused to enter the church through the front door, which would mean passing under the Union flag. They were said to have entered the church through the windows in protest (2007). Though, if this did occur, it would have had to have happened at the church's original location a mile away.

### **Methodists Reunite**

In 1939, The Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, which had broken away in 1830, decided to join together again under the name of “The Methodist Church.” Of course, it was more difficult than that – the three groups had begun planning this unification as early as 1916 – but they were finally united again, for the first time in over a century (World War, 2012). The Methodists of Royal Oak followed suit, of course, and were able to get back together with their neighbors for worship and fellowship. The newly combined congregations chose the Harmony building where we are located now, and started using the name, “Royal Oak Harmony Methodist Church,” as seen in the ad below from the *Star Democrat* [October 10, 1941]. It was sometimes also referred to in announcements as, “Harmony Royal Oak Methodist Church.” Then in 1943, the church name was officially changed from Royal Oak Harmony Methodist to Royal Oak Community Methodist (The Royal Oak, 1943).





## **Growth Begins**

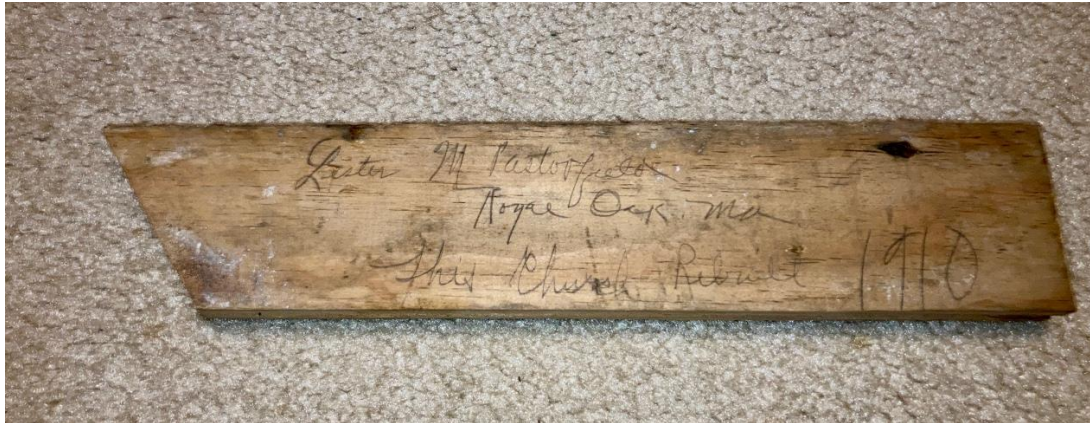
From 1944 to 1947, over \$3000 worth of repairs were made to the church building. This included an electric organ, a new roof for the church and Sunday School, plus a lot of painting, and new furnishings. The greatest additions to the church came in the 50s and 60s when a new addition was added – a “modern” kitchen, plus restroom facilities were added. Under Rev. Carlton Harris, the church voted to become a one-charge church in 1970. Additional Sunday School rooms were also added to the building at this time. In 1972, the church complex expanded with the purchase of the adjacent property and house from Lucy and Lester Pastorfield. This house became the church parsonage. The 80s and 90s showed great wear and tear on the property. In the early 1990s, work was completed on the Sanctuary and Belfry. In addition, a major renovation project was undertaken. This included a two-story addition that featured a much larger Fellowship Hall and an expanded Sunday School area. Time took a toll on the parsonage and in 1998, it was razed to provide more parking space. A building fund was created and by 2003, the church broke ground for the current parsonage. The parsonage was completed and dedicated in 2004. The early 2000s saw a decline in membership due to the aging congregation. During this time, we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of multiple members of our church. The upkeep of the property also became more than what could be handled. In the Spring of 2008, in an attempt to attract younger people, a Contemporary Service was added. This included modern Christian music with a casual feel. Chris Pettit became Pastor in the summer of 2009. With Pastor Pettit’s arrival, the church saw a total transformation. Most of the church property was cleaned, painted, and slowly fixed. The Contemporary Service was merged with the Traditional Service to create a blended, multi-generational service that we have today. We continued to fine-tune the worship service over the years and a live Praise Band was added.

With a “Big Dream” goal of reaching 100 kids for Christ, the church began a focus on youth ministries. Since setting that goal, we have reached and surpassed that goal of 100 kids. In 2015, Robyn Allen was hired to serve as a part-time youth pastor. The church formed strong ties with St. Michaels Middle High School. We sponsored guest speakers for several years and in 2016, the church began a middle school and a high school chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at the school. Church Members Robyn Allen, Brad Frost, and JR Burkhardt began meeting at the school during lunchtime with 100 or more kids weekly. On October 2, 2016, we officially celebrated our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a tree planting and Celebration Service.

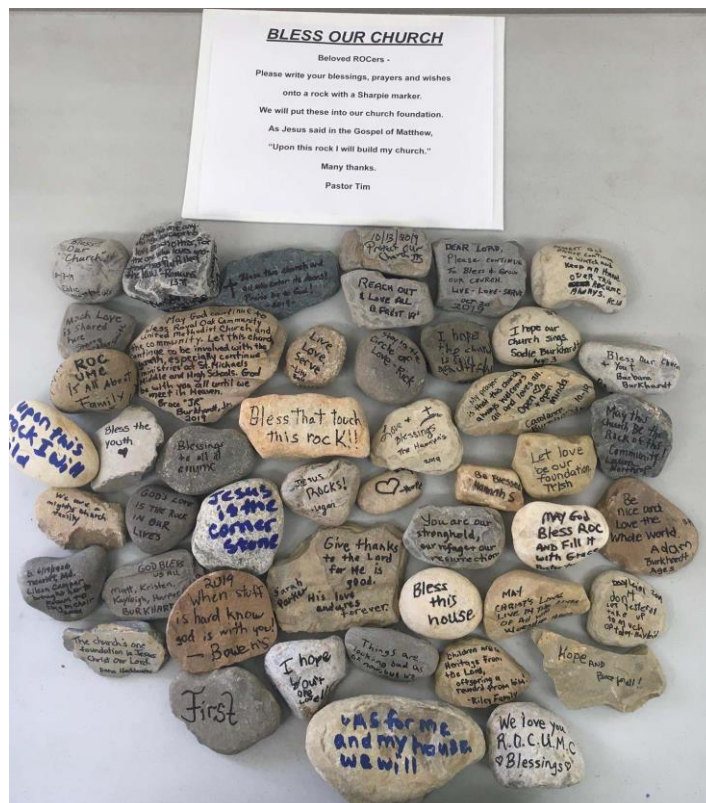
## **The Next 150 Years Begins**

In 2017, the Sanctuary foundation became a major concern. A matching fund campaign was started and a few large donations were given. This allowed us to replace one of the foundation walls that was starting to deteriorate, as well as floor supports. With one wall completely rebuilt, our attention shifted to the structural integrity of the remaining three foundation walls of the over 100 year old Sanctuary. In the summer of 2019, Pastor Tim Poly became our Pastor. It was decided that we really needed to address the remaining foundation walls. Money was graciously given to the church to replace the remaining three walls of the Sanctuary’s foundation. While removing the century old foundation, a signed

piece of wood was discovered by the contractors. This encouraged Pastor Tim to create a time capsule to be placed under the Sanctuary. Large stones were distributed for church members to write notes of encouragement on. The large stones were all placed in a bucket and sealed up. The bucket was placed under the Sanctuary for future generations to discover.



Above: Piece of wood found from the Sanctuary foundation. The writing says “Lester M Pastorfield Royal Oak, MD this church rebuilt 1910”. Below: Rocks included in the time capsule created when the church foundation was rebuilt in 2019. The time capsule was placed under the Sanctuary when the foundation work was completed.



## **A Pandemic changes how we worship**

In the middle of March 2020, a worldwide Coronavirus/COVID-19 Pandemic struck. Our in-person church service and activities came to a sudden halt. Luckily, we had already installed the systems to broadcast the Sunday Worship Service on Facebook Live and YouTube. We had also already initiated online giving. Our congregation was not allowed in the building, but they were able to continue to worship through watching the Sunday Worship Service live on the internet. The Pandemic forced us to rethink how we did ministries and several new outreach ministries were created, such as our Food Pantry. Our traditional community outreach ministries were reformatted to function in either virtual or “drive-thru/pick-up” formats. Several online ministries were created to continue the work of the church. These ministries were broadcasted 5 days a week. We began 9am “Joy in the Morning” fellowship/devotion sessions, Noon Devotions, and 6pm Bedtime Bible Stories.

In October of 2020, after more than 6 months of virtual worshipping, we opened the Sanctuary for in-person worship. Plexiglass was put over the pulpit and tech area. Pews were marked off to comply with State of Maryland regulations of 6 foot social distancing. Temperatures were checked as worshippers entered and they were required to wear face masks during the worship service. While we did return to in-person worship services, we did not resume any other aspects of in-person ministries, including our coffee hour/fellowship time. Worship continued in this fashion for several weeks until the number of COVID-19 cases in our county spiked. After Thanksgiving, we once again returned to virtual church broadcasts. We have continued in that format up to this point. The Pandemic has solidified for us that the church is a body of believers, not a building. While the building may have been closed, the church has continued to actively worship together and minister to the community.

As we reflect back on the more than 150 years we have been here, we praise God for bringing us to this point, but more importantly, we look towards the future with hope for what God has in store for our church. The church has become known as the hands and feet of Christ in the Royal Oak/Bay Hundred area and beyond. We are optimistic that the seeds of faith, planted during this time, will bring about continued growth of our church community and strengthen our mission to Live, Love, and Serve as disciples of Jesus Christ!

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