

Church History of Thomas M. Thomas Memorial Presbyterian Church

In 1899, a freshly minted theologian from the Lincoln University School of Theology arrived in Chester, Pennsylvania. A sense of purpose accompanied his presence. Enlightened by his studies and armed with a dream, this young theologian set out to establish the first Negro Presbyterian church in Delaware County. This entrepreneurial spirit lived within Thomas M. Thomas. He spared no effort in his quest and wasted no time in making his purpose known. He encountered encouragement and pessimism from both enthusiasts and detractors alike. However, through perseverance and hard work he was able to convene his first church meeting. From this humble beginning would later arise the T.M. Thomas Church.

The first meeting had nine people in attendance and was held in the home of Mrs. Hanna Purnsley on Welsh Street. Each week witnessed a steady growth of followers. Initially, the meetings took place in various members' homes, but within a relatively short period of time these accommodations were quickly outgrown. As a result, Rev. Thomas set out to secure alternative arrangements for their weekly meetings; the new meeting place would be in the Old City Hall Annex in Chester. On the six month anniversary of moving to these new quarters, an organizational meeting was held to formally and legally establish the areas of the first Negro Presbyterian Church in Delaware County, Fifth Presbyterian Church. The committee responsible for the organization of the church and the induction of Rev. Thomas as its first pastor were Dr. Mowery, Rev. Dr. Hodge, Professor Wright, (all faculty from Lincoln University), Rev. Tully of Media, Pennsylvania, and Elder George Black of Chester.

Having realized the fruits of his labor in establishing his first church, Rev. Thomas set his sights on locating a permanent structure that would be a reminder and a legacy for generations to come of the struggles and joys that the original founders overcame in establishing the Fifth Presbyterian Church. The search for a permanent residence would take five years to become a reality, but on October 6, 1910 the Philadelphia Presbytery built the Fifth Presbyterian at 3rd and Norris Streets, where it remains to this day. Witnesses of the charter included Messrs. Tilghman Hudson, Macy Duke and Ellison Clinton, all of Chester. Opening day dedication was performed by Dr. Isaac Rendall, President of Lincoln University. Richard Nugent became the first Ruling Elder with Thomas Hudson as the first Deacon. The name on its hallowed walls is a memorial to the perseverance and hard work of its first minister, Rev. Thomas M. Thomas. As a result, the official name of the building is the Thomas M. Thomas Memorial Presbyterian Church. The present day structure was deeded to the church under the auspices that it would always remain Presbyterian by denomination.

In 1924, Fifth Church convened the first summer vacation Bible School in this Negro community. The concept was obtained from a recent trip to England by Dr. A.L. Lathem of Third Presbyterian. His pioneering efforts were modeled after the British system and introduced in his church as well as Fifth Presbyterian. Under this system, church study would be conducted each summer for five weeks. Each student would be awarded diplomas for attendance, deportment and scholarship. The first group of graduates was Marguerite Fortune, Beatrice Kelly, Emerson Stanley, Elise Thomas and Beatrice Harmon. (This material is taken from a comprehensive study completed in 1979 by Mary Morgan, Mary Jackson and Beatrice H. Fluellen.)

Fifth Presbyterian Church had become a reality, far exceeding even the original dream first conceived by Rev. Thomas. The young pastor's accomplishments were many. He had married Mary Nugent, a member of a prominent Chester family. The fruits of that union produced a son, Richard Nugent Thomas. He orchestrated the sale and introduction of the first pipe organ to a local black church and established the first Black Vacation Bible School, modeled after the British system. In addition, he acquired considerable real estate holdings which were used to supplement the growth of Fifth Presbyterian and its programs. Yet, despite his material wealth, Rev. Thomas remained both humble and astute to the needs of a growing community. In response to the growing needs of the Chester community, he established the Chester Industrial School (CIS). The primary focus was to teach printing skills to local artisans. However, the school also offered sewing classes twice a week to individuals who wished to learn. Among the first students at CIS were Mary Duke (Morgan), Louise Kelly (Brown), Sara "Mother" Duke and William J. Newman. Mr. Newman was lauded daily in the Chester paper for his efforts.

As the local church continued to grow, so did the need for additional officers. Ola B. Kelly was elected by the congregation as an elder establishing her as the first female Ruling Elder in the state of Pennsylvania. At the time of her election, she had been superintendent of the church's Sunday School. It was in large part through her efforts that the enrollment was so high. She virtually collected children from every street corner, avenue and alley as she made her way to church each Sunday. However, Ola was not the only family member to distinguish herself among the congregational members. Her sister, Mamie McClendon Thomas (Aunt Mamie) was the church's first organist. The first Sunday after the new organ was installed she presented an oratory, "Under the Palms", which was sung in concert with the choir under the direction of Perry Felton. With an admission price of \$0.25 the congregation raised enough money to do some repairs on the church building. Aunt Mamie may have been Fifth Church's first organist, but not the last. Over the years there have been many well qualified organists who continued to carry the mantra first established by Aunt Mamie. In consecutive order they were: Thomas Ford, Dr. H. Motley, Sara Hunt, Emma Mears, Evelyn Kennedy, Myrtle Jackson, Alice Kelly (daughter of Ola B.) and Ruth Kennedy who continues to serve in that capacity to this day.

In 1923, Mary Jackson (Aunt Molly) with the collaboration of T.M. Thomas brought the concept of a Women's Day event. This community craft concept was first conceived in Ayers, Maryland, Aunt Molly's home town. With Mary Duke Morgan as her co-chairman, Mary Jackson held the first Women's Day event on March 29, 1925. The rally was a smashing success and netted the new church a total of \$40.00. In today's terms, that would represent several thousand dollars.

From its humble beginnings, Fifth Church today remains an integral part of the Chester community. The church today is a legacy to the perseverance and hard work of Rev. T.M. Thomas and his many followers who have contributed their time and effort over the years. In the late 1930's with declining health, it became obvious that Rev. Thomas would no longer be able to carry the full weight of the pastorate of "Little Fifth". Consequently, he accepted the assistance of a young senior scholar from Crozer Theological Seminary in Upland, Pennsylvania. The young man's name was Chilton Christian, formerly of Little Rock Arkansas. Rev. Thomas retired in 1938. To mark the event a testimonial banquet was held in his honor at Douglass Junior High School. Many dignitaries came to speak of Rev. Thomas'

accomplishments and their high regard for the accomplishments that he had achieved. Rev. Thomas died on December 28 of that same year.

Before he retired, Rev. Thomas had encouraged the Rev. John Dillingham to consider Presbyterianism. The effort was a testament to this success. Immediately following Rev. Thomas' retirement, Rev. Dillingham was ordained as the second pastor of Fifth Presbyterian Church. Rev. Dillingham was a graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to entering the ministry, Rev. Dillingham had greatly contributed to several areas of public life. He was a college professor who traveled extensively through Europe in his work with the YMCA. In addition, he was a renowned author and lecturer. However, his greatest talent and legacy to Fifth Church were his organizational skills which he used diligently during the four years he pastored.

One of his first accomplishments was completed in 1940 with the establishment of the Brotherhood and the Westminster Progressive Circle. In the same year he also directed and acted in a dramatization of the First Forty years of the church. These accomplishments would set the tone during his four year tenure. In addition, he is credited with digging out the church's basement, paving the floor with cement and installing lavatory and water facilities. The present day structure is a credit to his hard work and efforts. Once the basement facilities were complete he convinced the Philadelphia Presbytery to hold their meetings in this facility. In addition, he is credited with working with other leaders in the Chester area to establish the west branch of the YMCA. This facility was not completed before his departure from Fifth Church, but it is a testament to his abilities.

TMT Ministers in order of years served:

Name	Years Served	
Rev. Thomas M. Thomas	1899-1938	1 st Installed Pastor
Rev. Dillingham	1938-1942	2 nd Installed Pastor
Rev. William L. Buffington	Moderator 1942	
Rev. Leroy Patrick	Jun 1942 –Dec 1950	3 rd Installed Pastor
Rev. Mark Wilson	Spring 1951- 1954	4 th Installed Pastor
No Minister	1954-1956	
Rev. Euton Williams	1956-1964	5 th Installed Pastor
Rev. William Edward Johnson	Mar 1965-1968	6 th Installed Pastor
Rev. Carroll Douglas Jenkins	Oct 1968-Apr 1971	7 th Installed Pastor
Rev. Johnnie Monroe	Sep 1971-	8 th Installed Pastor
Rev. J. Jerome Cooper	Moderator 1986-1988	
Rev. Joan Campbell	Moderator 1986-1988	
Rev. Barbara N'Dovie	Interim	
Rev. James A. Jones	Nov 1988- Mar 1991	9 th Installed Pastor
Rev. Arthur J. Honore'	Moderator 1991	
Rev. Dr. Shelton B. Waters	Interim Aug 1991 – 1994	
Rev. Joseph I. Steele	Nov 1994 – October 2006	10 th Installed Pastor
Rev. Frank Stephens	Moderator 2007-2008	
Rev. Richard C. Dalton	Interim January 2008	

Church Organists in order of years served:

Mamie McClendon Thomas (Aunt Mamie)

Thomas Ford

Dr. H. Motley

Sara Hunt

Emma Mears

Evelyn Kennedy

Myrtle Jackson

Alice Kelly (daughter of Ola B.)

Ruth Kennedy

Juanita McLemore

Henry Pyatt

Highlights

October 6, 1910 Presbytery builds TMT at 3rd & Norris Streets

1924 First Summer Vacation Bible School

March 29, 1925 Mary Duke Morgan and Mary Jackson co-chair first Women's Day

Ola B. Kelly was elected by the congregation as an elder establishing her as the first female Ruling Elder in the state of Pennsylvania.

December 28, 1938 Rev. Thomas M. Thomas died

Kiddie Kanteen First Day Care Center