



1953 - 2018

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AT VPC

By Clarissa Thomasson, Gary Youngberg, Sheryl Morford

Dear VPC Church Family:

Sixty-five years ago, Venice Presbyterian Church began its life and mission as a band of faithful saints gathered to worship the Lord Jesus in a borrowed funeral chapel. I've always been captivated by the fact that from its very beginning, VPC has – in the face of death – boldly proclaimed that Jesus Christ offers Kingdom Life!

We give glory to God that in an era when many North American congregations have experienced decline, Venice Presbyterian Church continues to shine the light of Christ brightly as, with God's help, we are fulfilling the great ends of the church:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- The maintenance of divine worship
- The preservation of the truth
- The promotion of social righteousness
- The exhibition of the Kingdom of the Heaven to the world (from the Presbyterian Church USA Book of Order)

This history of Venice Presbyterian Church reminds us of God's faithfulness over the past sixty-five years. This narrative wonderfully describes how buildings were built, musical instruments were acquired, programs began, and mission partnerships developed. There are many names on these pages—many of them the names of pastors whom God called to shepherd this flock (of whom I'm deeply honored to be included). It would be impossible to chronicle all the men, women, and children who were part of God's story at VPC. We can only imagine the multitude of saints in heaven whose lives have been impacted through this community of faith!

With gratitude for all that God has done, we look forward to all the ways Venice Presbyterian Church will continue glorifying God as a disciple-making outpost of kingdom life.

Christopher J. Romig
Senior Pastor

Soli Deo Gloria

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AT VPC

The year was 1953. Venice was not yet an island. It was not yet a retirement destination, a winter retreat, a haven for “Spring Breakers,” or a Mecca for the rich and famous. But Venice had already been discovered by The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in 1925, the Kentucky Military Institute in 1932, and the Army in 1942 for an air base. So why not bring in a Presbyterian Church?

Tired of traveling over thirty minutes to her church in Sarasota, Eva Zeigler asked her pastor, Rev. B. Lowery Bowman, to help her form a church in the Venice-Nokomis area. Reverend Bowman took the request to the Home Missions Committee of the St. Johns Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church U. S. Approving the action, the committee granted a charter for the new church.

A notice was posted in the local newspaper inviting anyone who wanted a Presbyterian Church in the area to meet in the Robarts-Shannon Funeral Home chapel on West Miami Avenue to organize the new church. Nine interested Presbyterians showed up for the first meeting. The organizational service was held on March 22, 1953, when Rev. B. L. Bowman gave the dedicatory sermon and presented the new church with its charter. The roll was closed at twenty members: Ormsby and Dorothy Hampson, Ferrell and Ruby Robinett, Whitney Robinett,

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Alice Bright, Helen Youngberg, Eva Ziegler, Grace Belcher, Robert and Marjorie Brady, Edward and Esther Milliman, Mr. and Mrs. Carter Warren, David and Nellie Williams, and Leslie and Nina Washington. Two elders, Ormsby D. Hampson and Ferrell Robinett, were elected. Robert W. Brady and Edward M. Milliman were made the first deacons.



The congregation was young, and money was scarce. A donated bread basket was passed to collect \$3.00 a week for the pastor's gas to Venice. "I was the only member with a small child," Helen Youngberg remembered. "For a short time, he was the entire Sunday School." Eventually a children's choir was formed, and Helen reminisced, "We had to make the choir robes out of bed sheets."

In 1954, the Reverend Robert I. White was called to be the new minister of Venice-Nokomis Presbyterian Church. Now

the church needed a permanent home. G. Norman Robinett found the present church site of eight and a half acres on Firenze Avenue—just south of the Rialto. The property, which had been part of the Venice Army Air Base until it was closed at the end of World War II, was purchased at a cost of \$27,500 through a gift from St. John's Presbytery.

With funds meager and the permanent congregation small, the members planned a “Drive-In” church where parishioners and vacationers alike could attend from the comfort of their own autos. Once the idea was approved, the congregation hired Harvard graduate, Victor A. Lundy, as the architect. The Outdoor Worship Center was a wooden structure two stories high with a room for Church School on the lower floor and an open area for the pulpit, organ, and choir on the upper floor. The structure faced a Garden Sanctuary and featured glass doors which could be opened during the service. Total cost of the Worship Center was \$7,500.

The first worship in the new “drive-in” church was in March, 1954. Worshipers drove onto the grounds, parked facing the Worship Center, and affixed speakers to their cars. “I remember fiddling with the speakers to make them work and having to move to a new parking space. I also recall having mosquitoes in the car!” remarked Alice



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Sleasman. Once worshipers were in place, the glass doors were opened, and the service took place on the upper level. The young church got a boost the next year when Life Magazine ran a three-page spread on the outdoor church and its young pastor, Rev. Robert White, in its April 18, 1955, issue. (The VPC church Archives still has an original copy of the magazine.)



The original charter, granted on February 11, 1956, was for a 99 year corporation and called for five Trustees, President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer. By this time, however, with membership at 100, the small structure was becoming a hazard. Mary Edmondson recalled that “when there were a lot of little people close to the edge of the second floor outdoor worship center, you would kind of stand there and hold your breath!” In addition, the congregation had begun to feel isolated in their autos and wanted a place to gather after services.

Bill Edmondson remarked, “A decision had to be made about having church when there was a storm because the organ on the upper floor would get wet and after a few chords would go ‘WEE-EEE-EEE.’”

Helen Youngberg also remembered when Sunday School classes were held on picnic tables around the church grounds, both rainy days and pine sap often presented problems. It was clear a new area for fellowship was needed.

Construction of Fellowship Hall—the core of the present sanctuary—took two years—from 1957-1959. The contractor was George Youngberg, Sr., who had helped engineer the city of Venice for The Brotherhood in 1925. The new structure measured 90 by 40 feet overall and was covered by an arch-domed roof—supported by laminated wooden arches shipped from Wisconsin. The ends of the structure were set with stained glass—while the sides were sliding glass doors. With its pointed arches, vaulting, and timber framing, it was often referred to as a “Quonset hut.” Despite its design, it provided the necessary room for offices, Sunday School, and congregational dinners. The total cost of the new building was \$78,000. Upon comple-



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tion, it was hailed as a boon to the congregation as it provided a kitchen, rest rooms, offices, and room dividers.

The use of the new Fellowship Hall drastically changed only a year later, however, when in September, 1960, Hurricane Donna raged across Florida—leaving considerable destruction on both coasts. The small “drive-in” church was one of the casualties when high winds took out the glass. Although the structure was quickly rebuilt, another storm, Alma, damaged it again. When the insurance company refused to insure the building further, it was clear that a more permanent chapel was needed.

An Activities Building—east of Fellowship Hall—was already begun when Donna raced through Venice, and was completed on February 1, 1961, to house a nursery-crib room and the Sunday School rooms. The same year, members, Betty Dunaway and Mary Edmondson, founded the Presbyterian Day School.

On September 1, 1964, a Church House building was opened at the end of the Activities Building to provide office space, additional classrooms, a kitchen, dining area, meeting rooms, library and maintenance room.



65th Anniversary 1953 - 2018

With a generous gift of over \$25,000, from parishioner John B. Eichenauer, Fellowship Hall was then converted into the new sanctuary—with a seating capacity of 230. The exterior of the new chapel remained intact, but the interior was remodeled with olive-green carpeting, driftwood stained oak pews, and antique gold cushions. Members Ida Beake and Alice Sleasman fashioned diamond-shaped stained glass ornaments depicting Christian symbols from pieces of broken glass caused by the construction of the west wing. (These ornaments now hang in the windows of our present library.) The new sanctuary was equipped with both air conditioning and heating and a new sound system—which could transmit the music and sermon to any still attending in the Garden Sanctuary.



The new sanctuary was used for the first time on Sunday, August 8, 1965—while the original little glass “drive-in’ church was donated and carried away to become a cottage on Thornton Island in Charlotte County. John Sleasman reported, “The building was purchased by Lou Danklefs. I helped him raze it to be trucked to the Englewood area—where it was placed on a

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boat and moved to a small island to be rebuilt as a house.”

By this time, there were fifteen elders and fifteen deacons. An Associate Minister, Rev. Richard A. Brand, was added to assist Rev. David Bowles in 1968. Rev. Brand was succeeded by Rev. James H. Huffaker in 1972. Rev. Chester Armentrout was hired as Minister of Visitation in 1976, and served for over eleven years—leaving January 1, 1988.

By 1974, membership exceeded 730 with increasing activities for adults and children. By 1977, the membership total was nearing 800—making the 250 seat Chapel inadequate. In order to keep the basic worship structure, two additional wings were added for seating, with a narthex, office space, a music room, and rest rooms. The new Sanctuary, which now seated 550, was dedicated on April 2, 1978.

The following Sunday, April 9, 1978, the Schulmerich Bell Tower and the Carillon were dedicated. The Bell Tower was a congregational memorial to the memory of G. Raymond Grubbs, the original sound engineer who had assembled the first carillon on the roof of the drive-in church and had been so instrumental in the building and maintenance of the original church. The forty-foot tower weighed over 5,000 pounds and cost over \$13,000. The twenty-five bell carillon housed within the tow-



er was a gift from John and Pearl Conard. Chimes could be played from the new Moeller organ, which contained 1,017 pipes. The new organ was dedicated on April 16, 1978. Music Director, Edward Linzel, led the Chancel Choir in a concert to honor the occasion.

The program for the Dedication and Thanksgiving in April, 1978, listed the names of hundreds of people who had contributed to the many memorials. Their names are currently listed in the Church Memory Book, which is displayed in the church narthex—along with names and photos of more recent donations.

After twenty years of service, Rev. David A. Bowles left as Senior Pastor on January 31, 1979. He was subsequently given the title “Minister Emeritus.” The Rev. J. Sherrick Gilbert served as Senior Pastor from July, 1979 until August of 1980. Rev. Sheppard Dean Lawrence succeeded Rev. Gilbert as Interim Minister of the Venice-Nokomis Presbyterian Church until March, 1981.

The Rev. Benjamin J. Jacobson became Senior Pastor on March 1, 1981, and served until 1996. As a scholar of Biblical history, Rev. Jacobson drew parishioners from all over the area through his sermons and increased the congregation from 931-1370 during his service.



At this time, other changes were taking place in the Presbyterian Church itself—as well as in the Venice-Nokomis Presbyterian Church. In June, 1983, the Presbyterian Church US united with the Presbyterian Church

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(U.S.A.)—with which the Venice-Nokomis Presbyterian Church became affiliated. On May 21, 1986, the church officially changed its name to the “Venice Presbyterian Church.” With the new increased congregation, the Sanctuary was further enlarged in 1988 to accommodate over 800 worshipers.

Along with the growing congregation came a need for additional pastors. In 1985, Rev. Dr. John Thompson became the new Minister of Pastoral Care—serving until his retirement in March 2002. Remaining a fixture at Sunday worship, Dr. Thompson continued to attend Venice Presbyterian until his death in 2009.

On February 1, 1988, Rev. Ralph Wagner was called as “Minister of Membership.” “Old Timers” still recall the humorous banter provided by the team of Rev. Thompson and Rev. Wagner—which often kept the congregation in stitches. Rev. Wagner retired in 2001, but remained a visible fixture in the congregation until his death in 2018.

The 1990’s brought additional congregational growth, new staff, and a new building. With many young families in the church, Rev. Dr. Susan DeWyngaert was called in 1991 as the “Associate Pastor for Family Life.” Rev. DeWyngaert served in that capacity until 1997—until she was called as Senior Pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Sarasota.

To meet the need for additional meeting space, a Congregational Life Center was built just east of the Activities Building. The new building had two stories—with a parlor, classrooms, a youth room, meeting rooms, kitchenette facilities, restrooms, and elevator service. (Now the Staff Office Building). Ground-breaking took place on September 18, 1994—with dedication on March 5, 1995.



When Rev. Jacobson retired and was bestowed the title of “Pastor Emeritus” in January, 1997, Rev. W. Edmund Carver became the Interim Pastor on February 2, 1997. In August, 1997, Warren Apple became the Director of Music Ministries—serving until 2011 when he was called to Covenant Presbyterian Church in Ft. Myers, FL.

On March 22, 1998, Venice Presbyterian Church celebrated its 45th anniversary with a booklet chronicling the history of the church—written by forty-five year member, Dottie Kimmeling. On September 1, 1998, Rev. Richard R. Ollinger was called as permanent ‘Senior Pastor’—serving until October, 2001. Also in 1998, David A. Elton was called to serve an internship as “Director of Youth and General Ministries.” Upon receiving his M. Div. degree, Rev. Elton began a permanent position on January 30, 2000, as “Associate Pastor for Family Life.” Rev. Karen Carl was called on November 18, 2001, as the “Associate Pastor of Membership” and continued serving until moving to Michigan in January, 2004.

On May 1, 2002, Rev. H. G. Wardlaw, Jr. became the Interim Pastor and Head of Staff at Venice Presbyterian Church. To assist with congregational care, Rev. Glendora “Dusty” Taylor was hired as “Minister for Visitation” in 2003 and served in that position until 2008.

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The congregation celebrated Venice Presbyterian Church's 50th Anniversary in March of 2003 with a celebration on the grounds highlighting various church committees and activities. The occasion was accompanied by a pamphlet of church history to date—titled “Celebrating 50 Years.” (Copies of the book written by Clarissa and Neill Thomasson are still available in the church archives.)

Rev. Wardlaw remained until Rev. Christopher Romig was installed as Senior Pastor on November 30, 2003. Rev. David Elton stayed on as an Associate Pastor until he received a calling to head his own church in Texas—leaving on June 18, 2005.

Three part-time pastors were hired over the next few years. Rev. Howard Taylor became “Minister for Missions” in September 2004—instituting mission trips to Arizona, Haiti, and Guatemala—and continued serving until 2014. Rev. Burke Johnson was hired as the “Minister for Member Care” on August 1, 2005—later becoming “Assistant Pastor” and serving to the present day. Rev. Chuck Moffett was hired as “Minister for Equipping” on October 1, 2006, and served until he became the Chaplain at Bay Village of Sarasota in 2012.



With increased membership came the need to increase and modernize the Sanctuary. At the Annual Membership Meeting in March, 2006, the congregation approved extensive plans for the renovation, which were to include: extending the back wall of the Sanctuary to provide more seating; re-designing the air conditioning system; expanding and relocating the rest rooms; building a new pulpit, communion table, baptismal font, and Sanctuary cross; installing a new sound system for both the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall; expanding the Library; upgrading the fire safety and emergency system; and adding a glassed-in observation room for parents with small children.

Renovations began in July, 2006, under the supervision of Warren Apple with the breaking down of the organ pipes, which were sent to Zimmer Organ Company in North Carolina—along with the organ the congregation had purchased from Calvary Baptist Church in Clearwater, Florida. While the Sanctuary was under renovation, Zimmer custom-designed the new organ from parts of the old organ and the Calvary organ—using the existing pipes. The “new” organ was comprised of ninety-three stops and was able to play the entire audible spectrum and to produce timbres from trumpets to strings.



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During the Renovation, roof repair and outside structure sealing were necessary additional expenses. With the visit to Calvary Baptist, the Sanctuary Enhancement Committee found that the church was also selling their pews, which Venice Presbyterian quickly purchased and trucked to our Sanctuary to be installed once the new floors were in place. Current members were allowed to visit the Sanctuary before the new floor tiles were laid and allowed to inscribe their favorite Bible verse with Magic Markers near their accustomed seats (now under the current floor tiles.) At this time, a large stained-glass window was also installed above the back entryway. By Advent, 2006, the Sanctuary was ready for services. (The names of the multitude of parishioners donating items to the newly-renovated Sanctuary can be found in the Memory Book located in the church narthex.)

After David Elton left, Rev. Ruffin Stepp was hired as “Associate Pastor of Mission and Family Ministry” on June 17, 2007. Rev. Stepp was instrumental in adding new programs for children, youth, and family and for adding new young families to the congregation.

With increased membership, Rev. Lyn Olson became “Pastor for Community Life” on March 22, 2009—serving until her retirement in 2017. From New Member classes to Presbyterian Women studies, Rev. Olson also presented sermons and served at funerals. Rev. Todd Reinschmidt was called on January 27, 2013, as the “Pastor for Next Generations.” In this capacity, Rev. Reinschmidt led mission trips, coordinated children’s Sunday School, and led a youth program for students from sixth grade through high school.



In 2011, the Library and Archives were moved to two renovated classrooms at the end of the Activities building. The Glass House was also re-configured from classrooms to a welcome café for Sunday mornings. In 2013, additional renovations were made to Venice Presbyterian Church—when the Narthex was further enlarged with an information desk, water wall, and shell cross designed by Mary Jo Perkins. A chapel was added to the north side of the narthex, and a music suite was added to the south side of the Sanctuary. A soundproof mother’s room was also added beside the audio-visual area.



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On May 29, 2013, the Schulmerich Bell Tower was moved to provide room for a drive-by circle at the front entrance. In 2014—once the Bell Tower was secured—additional lighting and sidewalks were added to the parking lot. In addition, a Yamaha piano and organ were added to the chapel and video screens were installed in the Sanctuary, new flooring was laid in the Fellowship Hall and a new Kawai Baby Grand piano was added. Also in the plans was the renovation of the Memorial Gardens, which were redesigned and lovingly re-configured by members of the congregation—with an addition of a cross and butterfly garden. Dedication for the new Memorial Gardens took place on November 1, 2015. By 2016, a lighted cross was added to the entrance.





Having been spurred by the Pastor Search Committee’s vision for the church to “Know Christ and to Make Christ Known” when calling Rev. Romig in 2003, the congregation has become active participants in a multitude of outreach programs—both locally in Venice and globally—and continues to introduce new programs to engage members.



A large part of Venice Presbyterian’s contributions demonstrate the compassion of Christ to the poor, hungry, and homeless. The “Three Cents a Meal” program was started by the International Presbyterian Women in response to their concern over World Hunger through the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP). Visits to serve meals to the Mission Peniel Migrant Farm Workers in Immokalee provide a meaningful experience. At Thanksgiving and each spring, church-wide food drives collect food for the South County Food Bank. Parishioners actively serve with the Laurel Civic Association, the Center of Hope, and Community Assistance Ministry at Trinity Presbyterian Church.

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Reaching outside the immediate community, Venice Presbyterian members participate in several mission opportunities. In 2006, parishioners participated in a mission program to Chinle, Arizona, to conduct Vacation Bible School to children at a predominantly Navajo church. While there, they repaired the church roof, repainted the Fellowship Hall, and replanted four gardens.

In July of 2006, under the leadership of Howard Taylor, several members traveled to Ouanaminthe, Haiti, to help with worship, teach English, read stories, and provide craft projects for up to 240 children. Also in 2006, a mission trip to the Church of Transfiguration in Guatemala City started a long-term commitment to the people of this area under Eric and Cynthia Estrada with their effort to take in and educate orphan children from surrounding areas and to build and maintain a hospital in the area. Yearly visits to Guatemala are on-going with mission groups installing stoves in local homes under the direction of Jim and Lois Weeks.

Member Frank Ebetino began a service in 2006 in San Pedro de Marcoris, Dominican Republic to conduct eye exams and provide eyeglasses for up to 228 adults and children who had never had an eye exam. Following this trip, Ebetino paid the same visit to Ouanaminthe, Haiti—serving 250 adults and children.

In 2006, Agape Flights moved to a hanger at the Venice Municipal Airport, which almost immediately engendered the help of members of Venice Presbyterian. Agape is a non-profit Christian Ministry which cares for the spiritual and practical needs of 315 missionary families throughout the Caribbean—from delivering supplies to bringing missionaries back to the states for medical procedures.

Introduced by Rev. Romig and a team of volunteers in 2009, the ‘Buddy Break’ Program is part of “Nathaniels’ Hope,” which is a national program begun in 2004 by Tim and Marie Kuck in memory of their late son. The program is offered on a Saturday once a month to provide loving care for children aged 3 to 16 with “Special Needs,” and their siblings to give a much-needed three hour break to the parents. Parishioners are paired regularly with special children to offer fun and creative activities—as well as a loving acceptance.

In 2015, Venice Church joined with 13 other Venice congregations to begin the national program called “Family Promise.” Through “Family Promise,” parents who have lost their homes and are facing financial problems are taken in a week at a time by the various churches involved. Parents and children alike are fed dinner and allowed to stay overnight in the provided facility. By day, the children are taken to school—while the parents receive help in planning their finances and applying for jobs. The goal is to place each family in their own dwelling as soon as possible.

Church members also work with Habitat for Humanity to build affordable homes in the Venice and North Port area for low-income families. The families in the program must work alongside the volunteers to provide “sweat equity” and gain an appreciation for their new homes.

In addition to caring for others in need, Venice Presbyterian has several programs to help our own—or neighboring—individuals who are facing a tragedy or overwhelming situation. The church has trained teams of “Stephen Ministers,” who are available on a one-to-one basis to provide confidential emotional and spiritual care for parishioners faced with their own crisis or difficulty. The motto is “Christ Caring for People through People.” Venice Presbyterian’s “Transitions” team begins

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meetings several times a year to provide a support group for those suffering grief—through death, illness, life change, etc. Joining with 40 churches, businesses, and donors in the local “Pregnancy Solutions” in 2015, Venice Presbyterian members donate diapers and other necessary supplies to help pregnant women and new mothers—making it possible for them to keep and care for their new arrivals.

In 2016 and 2017, Venice Presbyterian participated in the “Alternative Gift Market” for the Christmas season. Participants may choose an international charity of their choice, make a donation in the name of a loved one, and send a card detailing the gift in the name of the loved one.

Musically, Venice Presbyterian has also contributed to the community through the Community Fine Arts Concert Series—sponsored by the church during the “Season” each year. Well-known musical groups—as well as the beloved team of Chris and Karen Romig—perform on Saturdays in the Sanctuary and often remain to participate in Sunday worship. God called Andrew Galuska (2012-2013) and Glen Olsen (2014-2017) to lead the church’s worship and music. Picking up the reins in 2017, Jamal Sarikoki, the new Minister of Music and Worship Arts, has added his own voice to Sunday services—while conducting both the choir and guest vocalists and instrumentalists.

The most recent musical accomplishment has been the additions of the new Allen organ and Steinway piano on April 15, 2018. Both instruments were paid for through donations from the congregation when it became apparent that the organ bought from Calvary Baptist was no longer viable.



Christine O'Brien joined the church leadership in February, 2017, as VPC's first "Executive Director." The congregation is excited to welcome Carolyn Wilson in April, 2018, looking forward to her ordination and installation as VPC's ninth Associate Pastor.

With Rev. Romig's new commission of each member as a "Disciple" and the church's new vision—approved by the Session in 2017—"To Glorify God as a Disciple-Making Outpost of Kingdom Life" it's clear new Christ-driven changes will surely be in the future for Venice Presbyterian Church, which has come a long way in its sixty-five years. Ever mindful of its humble beginning, however, the church still retains a Memorial Garden on the site of the "drive-in" church.



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