

Christ Church, United Methodist

A Church on the Edge of an Apocalypse

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Christ Church, United Methodist in Troy, New York is a church with a long history. Its beginnings are traced as far back as 1793. Its history includes many highlights as this church served the city of Troy. However, the most exciting elements of this history are the many turning points. There have been six apocalyptic¹ moments for this church. These were moments that changed this beacon of hope in profound ways. Each moment was marked by the fear of an approaching end. More importantly each moment was marked by the resolve and determination of the laity and clergy to see beyond the end, to a new beginning.

The first apocalyptic moment came as the society was in its earliest stage. In 1793, there were a number of Methodists gathering for prayer services in local homes. By 1795, Troy was placed on the Cambridge preaching circuit with thirteen people regularly attending the prayer meetings. The class grew during the turn of the century but soon changed.

“The prosperity and growth of the Troy society were for several years sadly checked by the death, change of residence, and the declension of others through intemperance and sin. In 1802, the Rev. Elias Vanderlip, a traveling preacher, then on the Pittsfield circuit, became so discouraged, it is said, with the degenerated condition of the society, that he ‘tore up the class-paper and withdrew the appointment.’²

This appeared to be the end of the Methodists in Troy. Without clergy support a church would be impossible to establish. Many left the society. This did not deter the Troy Methodists. As bleak as the future looked, a small number of committed Methodists

¹ The term apocalypse in this context is best defined by Catherine Keller as having a “looseness of self-reference, it means to connote always both an interpretive and a material set of collective habits, always some tense coupling of hope and despair – always an end of some world and a corollary.” (Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

² Joseph Hillman, *The History of Methodism in Troy, N.Y.* (Troy: Joseph Hillman, 1888), 15.

continued to gather for prayer. Led by Caleb Curtis, he opened his home to the meetings and gathered with several women during this dark period of Methodism in Troy. Caleb Curtis' daughter Phebe tells the story of this period in her book *Rise of Methodism in Troy*, a text that has been lost. Joseph Hillman has included many quotes from this text, including her account of this period in Troy.

The class dissolved, the appointments abandoned, dissolution seemed to reign. When in the midst of all this darkness, which seemed to rest upon the beloved names and cause of Methodism, there was one who in the agony of his soul sent up appeals to heaven which the family altar and the private retreat only witnessed.³

She continues to give an account of how her father kept Methodism alive in the hearts of a few dedicated Methodists by inviting itinerant preachers to come and preach in his home.

The journey was not easy and few in the village of Troy knew that the Methodists were still meeting. Hillman retells the story of John Wright, who in 1804 emigrated from England. Wright was a Methodist and so he asked around the village if any knew if there were any Methodists meeting to which he was told that, "the last member of the Methodist society had been sent to state's prison."⁴

In 1805, three long years after Elias Vanderlip tore up their class-paper and withdrew their appointment, the Rev. Elijah Chichester witnessing the dedication of these few Methodists, offered to reestablish a class in Troy. The Methodists of Troy had averted their first potential end, it was an apocalyptic moment and a turning point for the Methodists.

³ Ibid, 15-6.

⁴ Ibid, 16.

With great enthusiasm this small gathering of Methodists officially incorporated on November 29, 1808 as the Methodist Episcopal Church of the village of Troy. They immediately began the task of seeking a permanent location for their meetings. They agreed on a plot of land on State Street, originally part of the farm owned by Jacob D. Van der Heyden. Because of Van der Heyden's generosity to the Presbyterians and Baptists, to whom he had donated land for their meeting houses, it was decided to approach Mr. Van der Heyden to request the donation of this land for the purpose of erecting a Methodist meeting house.

When he was approached it was found that he was not only unwilling to part with the property but personally opposed to the project of the society, asserting that the Methodists had no need of a meeting-house.⁵

Once again the Methodists of Troy were faced with an apocalyptic moment in their history. Jacob Van der Heyden owned much of the village of Troy. In fact, he believed the name of the village should have been Van der Heyden. He even addressed his mail for most of his life "Van der Heyden, alias Troy."⁶ It would seem that this one man had the power to exclude the Methodists from building in the village of Troy.

A popular physician, Dr. John Loudon, became interested in the plight of the Methodists. He agreed that he would intercede on behalf of the society. Dr. Loudon had an advantage over others in the society; he was the brother-in-law to Jacob Van der Heyden. Dr. Loudon was so engrossed by this negotiation that he had a dream in which "he saw a large flock of pigeons fly over the village and settle down on the proposed site of the

⁵ Ibid, 24.

⁶ Maria Bucciferro, "Troy got its name 190 years ago," Troy Record, 6 January 1979.

meeting-house.”⁷ He interpreted this dream as an indication of the future prosperity of the Methodists at that site. After some debate, unrecorded in historical documents, an agreement was made between the Methodists and Jacob Van der Heyden. On December 25, 1808 an agreement was signed to sell the property for “\$500, demanding, however, the payment of an interest annually of \$35 until the property was possessed by the purchasers.”⁸

Eight days later a subscription was begun to build their first meeting house. It took two years to complete the building, as funds were slow in coming. In 1811 they began to hold services in the building, although the building still required some additional work to be finished. At this time there were nearly 100 members of the society.

Once again the Methodists had averted what seemed to be a catastrophic event. Through the undying vision of Dr. John Loudon their dream of a church in the village of Troy became a reality. This was the second apocalyptic moment for this church.

The following six decades were marked by rapid growth of both the Methodist society and the village (later, city) of Troy.⁹ The chart below illustrates the growth of both the community of Troy and the Methodist society. As the Methodists grew in number additional churches were started throughout Troy. Members of the original State Street church organized many of these churches. By 1860 there were nine Methodist churches

⁷ Hillman, 24.

⁸ Hillman, 24.

in Troy. In addition to State Street Methodist Episcopal Church there was North Second Street (later named Fifth Avenue), Congress Street (later named Trinity), Third Street, Levings Chapel, Albia, North Troy, German, and Zion.

	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Troy ¹⁰	50	1200	3895	5264	11551	19334	28785	39235
Methodists State Street ¹¹	--	30	120	256	487	1012	842	906

Figure 1. Troy Population and State Street Methodist Episcopal Church Membership

As rapid growth occurred in both the city and the Methodist churches, nothing seemed impossible. In 1858 the Methodists, with the help of others, launched an ambitious venture to build a University.

Troy University was established in 1854, in brief competition with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. This imposing structure was built in 1858 and the college opened that fall with sixty students.¹²

It appeared that anything the Methodists ventured thrived. The city of Troy as well was at its height of power. It was a powerful industrial center for the Northeast. As the Civil War began many Troy industries produced goods for the Union army. Several Troy industries provided horseshoes and ammunition. At the same time “the collar and shirt

⁹ Robert Anderson, interviewed by James Fenimore, 17 December 1998.

¹⁰ Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *History of Rensselaer Co.*, New York (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1880) 167.

¹¹ Hillman, 287-292. These numbers reflect members of the following churches: State Street United Methodist Church, North Second Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Congress Street Methodist Episcopal Church, and the German Methodist Episcopal Church of Troy.

¹² Rachel D. Bliven, Robert N. Andersen, G. Steven Draper, Eva Gemmill, Hughes Gemmill, Joseph Parker, and Helen Upton, *A Resourceful People: A Pictorial History of Rensselaer County, New York* (The Donning Company: Virginia, 1987) 51.

industry, begun in Troy and spread throughout the country, came to produce over 90 percent of America's detachable collars and many of its finest shirts."¹³

The great prosperity and wealth of this city was about to be challenged during the worst disaster this city has seen to date.

The Great Fire of 1862 began on May 10, when sparks from a locomotive set ablaze the covered bridge of Rensselaer and Saratoga Railroad. A northwest gale spread the flames quickly that Saturday starting shortly after the noon hour. Although fireman from as far as Albany fought the giant fire, by evening it had claimed five lives, including that of a blind man, and 507 buildings, not including barns and outhouses. It devastated seventy-five acres of Troy's downtown from Federal Street to Congress Street, and from River Street as far as Eighth Street and part of Ninth Street...The damage added up to \$2,677,892.¹⁴

All of the Methodist churches of Troy escaped damage by the fire, although State Street Methodist Episcopal Church narrowly escaped. Rebuilding began immediately and by November of that same year the entire central city was rebuilt.

During this same period the Methodists great venture in academia was failing. Troy University was having severe financial problems. Although enough funds were raised to construct the building, insufficient funds were raised to endow the University. Within a few years the school was in serious trouble. In July 1862 one of the mortgage holders commenced to foreclose on the University. Desperate to save the floundering institution the trustees sought a financial savior.

The trustees, at this crisis in their affairs, renewed their efforts to induce the friend to whom they had been so confidently looking for aid, to interpose to save the institution from passing out of their control, and secure it permanently for the purposes for which it was founded, urging upon his attention the fact that it must

¹³ Ibid, 57.

¹⁴ Ibid, 61.

be done immediately, if ever. Down to the very day of the sale they received encouragement that he would do so, and entertained not only strong hope, but confident expectation, based upon assurances which were entitled to the fullest confidence, that this object would be accomplished, and the university relieved from embarrassment, amply endowed, and placed beyond the reach of further pecuniary difficulties. In this confident expectation, however, they were ultimately, to their utter surprise, wholly disappointed.¹⁵

The trustees were forced to sell the University buildings and close the school. Their hopes were shattered by their loss of a financial savior in Daniel Drew of New York. Drew, who was quite encouraging about helping the Trojans, abandoned them in their greatest hour of need.

With all of these disappointing moments in Troy history, the Methodists refused to become discouraged. The Methodists of State Street were now in their second building, a large brick structure built in 1827. It was quickly becoming too small to accommodate the Methodists. With remarkable optimism and eagerness the State Street Methodists embarked on a new building campaign. In what Joseph Hillman named the “Last Church”¹⁶ for the Troy Methodists, a church of gigantic proportions was designed and constructed. It included seating for 900. The gothic structure was completed and dedicated on March 30, 1871.¹⁷ Its 175 foot high spire towered in the Troy skyline. The building was constructed of blue limestone and is today a magnificent sight. The building was dedicated by Bishop Matthew Simpson. This was not the work of a church worried about what the future might be like. The Methodists who had the vision to construct this impressive structure were certain that Methodism was here to stay. They

¹⁵ Hillman, 325.

¹⁶ Ibid, Front Cover.

¹⁷ James Fenimore, *From Meetinghouse to House of God* (S.T.M. Thesis, Drew University, 1993), 63.

clearly believed that the future would hold great things. They had to believe this. For a church of 352 members¹⁸ to build a structure that could hold 900 was truly an act of faith. In addition, it was not just a structure that was large; it was a structure with great attention to detail. The cost of this building was staggering for its day. The average cost of a Methodist church in the 1870's was \$3274.¹⁹ Yet these Trojans built a structure at a cost of \$125,000. They truly were oriented to a future that they believed was very bright.

Unfortunately the future was not as bright as many envisioned it would be. Membership never attained 900. The State Street Church grew significantly over the years and peaked in 1925 at 829.²⁰ Then came a steady decline after 1925 that would continue until current days.

With the advent of the automobile in the 1920's the urban Methodists were trying to grow with little success. There were nine Methodist Churches in the city of Troy and many more on the outskirts of this city. In the city of Troy major changes were under way. This period represented a large growth of development of new homes.²¹ Many of these homes were not near State Street Methodist Episcopal Church. The situation for the Methodists was by no means desperate. Each of the congregations were surviving, however rising costs and aging buildings were making ministry more difficult to continue. From some unknown origin the suggestion came to merge several of the

¹⁸ Hillman, 295. This number reflects only the membership of State Street Methodist Episcopal Church and not the members of the churches who would become Christ Church, United Methodist.

¹⁹ Fenimore, 98.

²⁰ Frederick A. Shippey, "Trinity Methodist Church Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Church, Troy, New York: A Study of Church Trends and Characteristics 1900-1964," (Drew University: Madison, 1964), 21.

²¹ Andersen.

Methodist Churches. It was believed that their increased size and decreased buildings would be beneficial to the Methodists. Three churches chose to merge, State Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Fifth Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church²², and the German Methodist Episcopal Church. Earlier in 1879 the Third Street Methodist Episcopal Church merged with State Street Methodist Episcopal Church giving the State Street Methodists a small gain that year.

The merger of these three churches occurred in 1925 and is recalled by an unknown member of State Street Methodist Episcopal upon the 125th anniversary of the church.

Time passed on with greater or less success to Methodism in Troy, until the year 1925 when the mother church grew lonesome for her children and it was decided to unite the congregations of State Street, Fifth Avenue and the German Church under one head whose name should be the Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Episcopal Church. The first united service was held September 13, 1925 with Bishop Adna Leonard presiding, assisted by Rev. Otto Houser and Rev. Sherman Rouse.²³

Once again the Troy Methodists averted the apocalyptic bleakness that confronted them and with a proactive step were able to continue to provide a beacon of hope for the city Troy.

As we move forward in history we approach the fifth apocalyptic moment for this church. Demographics were rapidly changing as the urban landscape was reshaped. Industries once the pride of Troy were laying off thousands of workers and moving operations

²² Fifth Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church was formerly known as North Second Street Methodist Episcopal Church. It's name was changed after the city of Troy changed the numbering of the streets. Second Street became Fifth Avenue.

²³ Unknown Author, "To the Pastor and People of State St. Methodist Episcopal Church," 1939.

closer to their source of raw material.²⁴ For the textile industries, a major industry of Troy, that meant jobs leaving Troy for the south. For the beer brewing industries it meant moving to the mid-west. With significantly fewer opportunities for jobs, especially for the immigrant populations, people moved and the once proud city was looking tired and abandoned.

Population shifts affected the churches. By 1964 there were seven Methodist churches in the city of Troy all of which were declining in membership. Two of these churches State Street-Fifth Avenue Methodist Church and Trinity Methodist Church commissioned a study by Frederick A. Shippey, a Professor of Sociology of Religion at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. The purpose is outlined in the Foreword of this document written by Dr. Lawrence Larowe, District Superintendent of the Bennington-Troy District of the Troy Annual Conference.

These two churches already have had a long and distinguished history of Christian fellowship and activity in Troy. However, recent years have brought sweeping changes in the city's life which have affected all of its institutions. Often these modifications have been corrosive to the churches of all denominations. Recently it has appeared wise that the two congregations noted above join together in order to continue a strong Christian witness and service during the years to come.²⁵

This document carefully avoids drawing a final conclusion about the question of merger. That is left to the reader. However, reading the collected information in this allows the reader only one conclusion. Without merger there is no future for these congregations. But these two congregations were once connected. Trinity Methodist Church began in

²⁴ Andersen.

²⁵ Shippey, Forward.

1832 when a class was organized to meet in the home of Isaac Hillman.²⁶ Hillman was a prominent member of the State Street Methodist Episcopal Church and it is unclear why he began his own class meeting and eventually a separate church. The only detailed history of the period is written by his son Joseph and the details of his departure from State Street are carefully omitted.

With steady decline in the city of Troy and the Methodist Churches there was an inevitable need to seek merger once again. In the table below are the figures of the population of Troy as compared with the membership of State Street-Fifth Avenue and Trinity Methodist Churches.

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960
Troy²⁷	60,651	76,813	71,996	72,763	70,304	72,311	67,492
State St-Fifth Ave²⁸	981	1135	1065	768	657	469	460
Trinity²⁹	423	360	451	465	454	377	314

Figure 2. Troy Population and Membership of State St.-Fifth Ave. and Trinity Methodist Churches. During the period of 1900-1964 Trinity Methodist Church lost 27.2% of its membership and State Street-Fifth Avenue lost 61.2% of its membership.

As the Methodists pondered their future and the impact a merger might have on their membership the city of Troy was also contemplating its future. The city's downtown shopping district was rapidly decaying. As industries left so did the supporting

²⁶ Hillman, 105.

²⁷ Shippey, 3.

²⁸ Ibid, 21. This row includes Fifth Avenue, State Street and German Churches who formed State Street-Fifth Avenue in 1925.

²⁹ Ibid.

businesses that thrived on thousands of workers in the heart of the city. People and businesses were flocking to the suburbs.

In an effort to bring new life into depressed cities and to help downtown shops compete with suburban shopping centers, the federal and state governments instituted urban renewal grant programs in the late 1960s. The Troy Urban Renewal Agency was created by the state legislature in 1966; they began demolishing hundreds of old buildings soon thereafter and offered the cleared land for new construction.³⁰

The Urban Renewal Agency had the potential to revitalize an aging city. Hundreds of properties were purchased at a cost of tens of millions of dollars. One area was cleared of sixty-three buildings to make room for the Uncle Sam mall, but once the land was cleared the federal and state funds were stopped. The city could not afford to build this mall without the state and federal funds. For many years there was what was commonly referred to as “the hole” in downtown Troy.

Many people were angered with the city officials who were in favor of the Urban Renewal project. The Renewal was more of a destructive force, laying to waste the rich history of a once great city. One writer refers to it as:

Troy’s worst disaster was the ill conceived “urban-renewal” period of the late 1960s and early 1970s that was responsible for most of the destruction of large chunks of Troy’s history.³¹

Others would claim the state and federal agencies that promised the money for renewal are the ones to blame for “the hole.”³² After the mall was completed it still could not

³⁰ Bliven, 174.

³¹ Don Rittner, *Images of America: Troy* (Charleston: Arcadia, 1998), 128.

³² Andersen.

compete with the suburban malls and the Troy Urban Renewal Agency failed to renew the city as hoped.

Trinity Methodist Church was faced with a decision. It was clear something needed to change. The leadership of the church came with two possibilities. “In 1964 a long-range planning committee considered possible options of uniting with other Protestant churches of the Ida Hill area or with the Fifth Avenue-State Street M.E. Church.”³³

After careful study of both of these options a decision was made:

The move was based on a demographic survey of the city and the two congregations by Frederick A. Shippey which pointed to solution of problems and renewals of vitality in reunion.³⁴

What had appeared to be a bleak end for these two churches turned into a new beginning for them. As individual churches they struggled to survive, but combined they had the strength to revitalize the “mother church of Troy.” The year before their merge Trinity Methodist Church recorded 308 members and Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Church recorded 381.³⁵ By combining they doubled their membership. They chose their name to be Christ Church.

For so many of today’s members of Christ Church the merger of 1965 was the most significant event they had witnessed. Many of the faithful members of today are products of one of the two churches that merged. Often members will identify themselves by the

³³ Christ Church, United Methodist, *Methodism in Troy, New York Bicentennial Commemoration 1794-1994 and Great Day Of Methodist Singing*, New York State Archives, Albany, New York. Church History.

³⁴ Frank Sherry, “Church Merger Recalls History of Troy Methodists,” The Troy Record, 8 May 1965.

church they came from. This is more often the case with members of Trinity Methodist Church, whose identity may have been obscured by the loss of their building. Many of the “holy relics” of the church were transferred and integrated into the State Street building. An entire chapel was constructed using the sacred objects from the Trinity church.

As difficult as it may have been for the Trinity members to leave behind their church building, they certainly were not lost in the new church. From the beginning Trinity members retained many important positions in the new church. One former pastor commented, “The merger of those churches was perfect, the Trinity folk left their building and took over the State Street church.”

Over the next thirty years Christ Church continued to minister to the city and for a period were very active in the community. Much of this is credited to their former pastor, the Rev. Dr. Maurice Drown. Mickey, as he is known, was a young energetic pastor who was involved in the community of Troy. During his seven year tenure at Christ Church he was president of the Troy Area Council of Churches and president of Joseph’s House, a food pantry and shelter for the needy.

Although the church had fine leadership over the past decades, it continued to decline at a steady rate. Even the merger could not provide the strength for the church to grow. It would seem that the decline of the city and the relocation of members to the suburbs combined to make the growth of Christ Church nearly impossible.

³⁵ Shippey, 21.

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
Membership	541	531	439	394	389	409

Figure 3. Membership of Christ Church 1970-1995.

It has been said that to understand Christ Church you must know its history and the history of Troy.³⁶ Having reviewed some important highlights of these histories it is time to turn to the current identity of Christ Church. In July 1997 a transition occurred as the pastoral leadership changed. The previous pastor The Rev. C. Joseph Ingraham was retiring after serving twelve years at Christ Church. It was as if the church itself was planning its own retirement as they prepared to celebrate their pastor's retirement. The church had received two major losses only a year earlier. The first was the death of Dr. Larry MacDonald the patriarch of the church. Although Larry was young he had the unique ability to bridge the gap between the generations and to rally support for the ministry of Christ Church. His death has left a gaping hole in the congregation which, to this date, has not been filled.

The second loss for Christ Church was the departure of Janet Douglass the Assistant Pastor. Janet, a volunteer who was trained as a local preacher in the British Methodist Church, was the glue that held the ministries of Christ Church together. She ran many of the important ministries of the church and was the sole impetus for new ministries. She

³⁶ Ron Tinkler. Interviewed by James Fenimore. 15 October 1998.

was forced to leave the country during the process of her application as a permanent resident alien.³⁷

These losses were devastating for the congregation. As their new pastor I came into a church that was grieving over the losses and desperately wanting to be transported to the past to avoid confronting this painful reality.

Worship followed the new *Book of Worships* patterns. It included many traditional elements and was often filled with responsive readings and unison prayers. The music was traditional hymns and severely limited. Rev. Ingraham was a convert of the liturgical reformation that returned worship to a more ancient pattern. His services were well structured and comfortable to visitors and members with Roman Catholic backgrounds. The music ministry was diverse, including a handbell choir and voice choir. The music selections were often original scores written by the Music Director. The membership was not enthusiastic about the use of synthesizers and guitars in worship, and some of the “overly-enthusiastic” music selections.³⁸

³⁷ Janet Douglass returned to this country and Christ Church, February 1998 and has been a valuable asset to the ministry of this church.

³⁸ The church has a long history of despising “new” instruments. Joseph Hillman records the following story of interest. “The use of musical instruments in the church, it should be known, was not approved by its early members and no little opposition was shown to the gradual innovations that were made to support the congregational and choir singing with such instruments as the bass viol and organ. At one time, the singers in the church attempted to introduce the use of a bass viol and obtained a player to bring one to church for a rehearsal. Seeing the objectionable instrument in the gallery, while on his way to class-meeting, Isaac Hillman took his pocket-knife and cut the strings of the viol, thereby defeating the purpose of the ambitious choristers.” (Hillman, 60).

In July 1997, there were only two strong groups in the church. Each of these groups has a deep history in the church and has provided fellowship for their members. The first is the Up-and-Comers. This group began in 1946 as Marjorie Douttiel writes of the history:

During the Troy Conference of 1946, it was requested that the churches try to organize Young Adult groups for the ages of 21-35. Dr. Elden Martin, our Pastor, asked Jack and me if we thought we could start such a group. We did a lot of telephoning and by the fall of '46 a group was formed.³⁹

Over the years this group has been the primary source of fellowship for the church. They hosted many parties and outings over the years and continue to do so even to this day. In addition, the members of this group have raised many thousands of dollars to make improvements to their beloved church.

An interesting note about this group is that although they started in 1946 as a fellowship group for young adults they have long since changed that mission. Several of the original members of this group (who at the time were young adults) are still active members of the group. In fact, with the exception of two or three persons, this group has no young adults in its membership.

The second important group for Christ Church is a loosely organized group calling themselves the Bazaar Committee. The Bazaar Committee is a fundraising group that plans and runs the annual bazaar of the church. The group, also calling itself the craft group, meets weekly for several hours to make the crafts they sell each year. The group is made up of women primarily and serves as a strong fellowship and support group. In

³⁹ Marjorie Douttiel, *The Up-and-Comers: A Short History*. Church History.

fact, this gathering has replaced, in many ways, the United Methodist Women's gathering at Christ Church.⁴⁰

These two groups formed the core of active ministry groups at Christ Church in July 1997. They were outside the actual structure of the church. The committee structure followed the large church model outlined by the *Book of Discipline*. This included a separate Administrative Board and Council on Ministries. In addition to these committees there were the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, Nominating Committee, Trustees, Finance Committee, Membership Committee, and Missions Committee. The Administrative Board meetings were well attended with an average of 30-40 at each of the quarterly meetings. Their primary function was to care for the administrative tasks of the church. The Council on Ministries met infrequently and had an attendance of 4-10. Their primary task was to program and coordinate the ministries of the church. As of July 1997, the Missions Committee had not met for over five years. The membership committee had only met a few times over that same period. Ministry at Christ Church had ceased.

The administrative tasks of the church were in much better shape, but still weak. The weakness was caused in large part to a decade long conflict over the building of a handicap ramp. Almost every meeting during those years spent some portion of its time focusing on this tension-filled issue.

⁴⁰ A United Methodist Women's group exists at Christ Church but is made up of only four or five women. It is said that the women of the craft group were part of the UMW but the older leadership of the UMW refused to allow the UMW to be changed from its traditional activities and structure, so these women left the UMW and formed the craft group as their alternative.

The Trustees had been charged with the construction of the ramp and by July 1997 they were at a standstill. The Trustees were divided over two different plans for the ramp and could not come to consensus. The naïve new pastor offered a solution. He suggested calling a special Church Conference after worship to ask the preference between the two plans. A date was set and the chair of the Trustees planned to lead the congregation through the plans. At the last minute the Trustees chair requested that the pastor officiate this meeting. The meeting was divisive and explosive. Emotions were strong and opinions were openly expressed. A plan was overwhelmingly adopted, although many were troubled with the decision. That day ended a decade of tension in the church. Within a few short months the ramp was built and the most explosive issue in the church was silenced.

During this same year the Council on Ministries met weekly for a month to develop a new committee structure for Christ Church. They studied various models including the model in the *1996 Book of Discipline*. In the end they defined their own structure, and it was adopted by the entire church spring 1998. The new structure simplified the committee structure and refocused the church's energy to ministry. The Administrative Board and Council of Ministries were combined to form the Church Council. The Church Council's primary task is "To make disciples of Jesus the Christ."⁴¹ To do this the Church Council is broken into four sub-groups: Reaching and Receiving, Relating to God, Nurturing in Discipleship, and Sending Out. Each of these sub-groups act as teams focusing on the church as a whole and working to enhance their stage of the primary task.

The Church Council meets monthly and continues to function as primarily a ministry team and secondarily as an administrative committee.

Through this process of restructuring there have been a number of new ministries that have been quickly developed and implemented. There are five ministries that stand out as important examples of the new ministry Christ Church is involved in.

Through the Church Council we have begun a ministry that was attempted several years ago, but failed to be implemented. The ministry is called Tele-Care ministry. It is a nurturing ministry of Christ Church that reconnects our church by training a number of Tele-Care ministers that call upon each family of the church and ask how they are doing. Through this ministry we have been to reconnect our membership and learn the needs of our members. Possibly the greatest aspect of this ministry is that it is a ministry of the laity, by the laity.

We have added a monthly Hand's-On Mission Project of the church. The Sending Out Team regularly plans and implements opportunities for all church members to join together and work together on a Mission Project. These projects are local mission projects that allow the members to move beyond the stone walls of Christ Church and go where ministry is needed. We encourage these events to be family oriented so that children and youth are given the opportunity to serve as well.

⁴¹ Matthew 28:19.

We have extended our reach into the world with a new CyberMinistry. We have developed a Web Page and are constantly improving upon it as we seek to make the Web more than an electronic billboard, but rather a tool to build community. We offered an experimental Online Bible Study last fall and plan to offer another on Revelation this Spring. We are planning to offer Sunday worship live on the Internet by broadcasting services on our Web site. Christ Church is blessed with a number of Computer Scientists and computer enthusiasts who are eager to push the boundaries of the cutting edge.

A new ministry grew rapidly from its inception last spring. We have developed a social justice program that seeks to provide computer technology for the poorest children of our community. The program called Computers for Kids is run in conjunction with the ecumenical agency of the city, Troy Area United Ministries. Together we offer the opportunity for persons and businesses seeking to upgrade their computers a place to donate their old systems. With a core of volunteers, our church rehabilitates these computers and installs appropriate software for the children. We then seek nominations from the local church and social agencies of the city for children who are deserving of receiving these computers. We plan to give away 25 complete systems in 1999.

A final important new ministry is the Discipleship Cell Group. A dedicated group of church leaders meets once a month with the pastor to reflect on issues that confront us as disciples of Christ. The group was formed to strengthen a group of laity to provide the leadership this church will need in the future. All of the members of this group are forward thinking and future oriented members of Christ Church. The meetings consist of

reflection on the topic of the month and then a time of prayer for those in need in our congregation.

All of these five ministries are vital ministries that in one way or another reflect the primary task of the church, to make disciples of Christ. But these ministries are only affecting a small number of the church population. The primary connection with the congregation, worship, was relatively untouched.

During the fall of 1998 it was decided to begin to make changes to the traditional worship so important to so many people. The changes were not meant to exclude these members for whom traditional worship was so meaningful. They were planned in an effort to reach out and “package” the age old gospel message in a way that younger generations might be attracted to.

The traditional worship of Christ Church has been an important feature of this church. But of equal importance has been the church’s dedication to young adults. One of the most important ministries of Christ Church has been the Wesley Fellowship a gathering of college students from Russell Sage College, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Hudson Valley Community College. Throughout the years this has been a place of vital importance for young people as they study. The last Wesley Foundation was several years ago and there is little hope of revitalizing it.

In a recent visioning process for Christ Church, members clearly stated that they wanted our church to do more to reach out to young families and young adults. The words have been clear but the actions have been minimal. It is unclear how much change would be accepted to make Christ Church more appealing to young adults. Many long for the days when the church naturally attracted young adults. Others are convinced we need to make radical changes to reach out to a generation that is missing from many churches.

A gathering of lay and clergy have begun to plan an event in January 1999. We have developed four worship experiences that are radically different from our normal worship. Experiences that appeal to the young adults planning them. With great publicity and fanfare we plan to launch these services and evaluate their merits.

We have labeled these services as experimental worship, designed for young adults. We have planned two preparatory services for the congregation so that all might understand what we are doing, but we continually fear the reaction of those for whom change is difficult. Christ Church has a long history that rarely opens itself to change.

Christ Church is on the edge of an apocalypse. The world as many of the members know it, is no more. We are perched on this edge awaiting the next step. We know what is behind us, we have little knowledge of what lies ahead.

I believe that we are currently entering the sixth apocalyptic moment for Christ Church. Each of the five moments discussed above, allowed the church to move forward in ways

that they could not have imagined. Who would have guessed in 1804 that the Methodists would ever have such a presence in Troy after their class dissolved?⁴² Those few Methodists who met on their own did. They saw the other side.

Who would have guessed that in 1808 a church would be built on the site chosen even though Joseph Van der Heyden refused to give land to the Methodists?⁴³ Dr. Loudon did. He saw the possibilities of the Methodists even before he was a Methodist.

Who would have believed that after the twin disasters of 1862 of the Great Fire⁴⁴ and the closing of Troy University⁴⁵ that the Methodists would not only survive but also thrive by building a church to seat 900? Those 352 members believed in the future enough to make that leap of faith.

Who would have believed that in 1924 when membership was declining and Methodist churches were failing that there was a future for Methodism in Troy? The leadership of those merged churches believed that this was possible. They made the hard decision to join churches once separated by schism and ethnicity, and in the end they gave life to this church.

Who would have believed that in 1964 as Trinity Methodist Church and Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Church were declining out of existence a merger would fuel their

⁴² Hillman, 17.

⁴³ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁴ Bliven, 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 51.

ministry for decades to come? The faithful members of those churches understood what the future could hold.

Today we stand at a new moment in our history. The membership has declined slightly, but more importantly the membership is aging. The average age of the members is growing. If the trends continue it will only be a decade or so and this church will no longer exist.

More important than the current reality of Christ Church’s situation is how they respond to it. It is clear that almost all understand that this is a church that is coming to an end. What is not so clear is what lies beyond this end. After polling many members of this congregation about the future I have found that this is the distribution using Berdyaev’s Russian Eschatological Continuum⁴⁶:

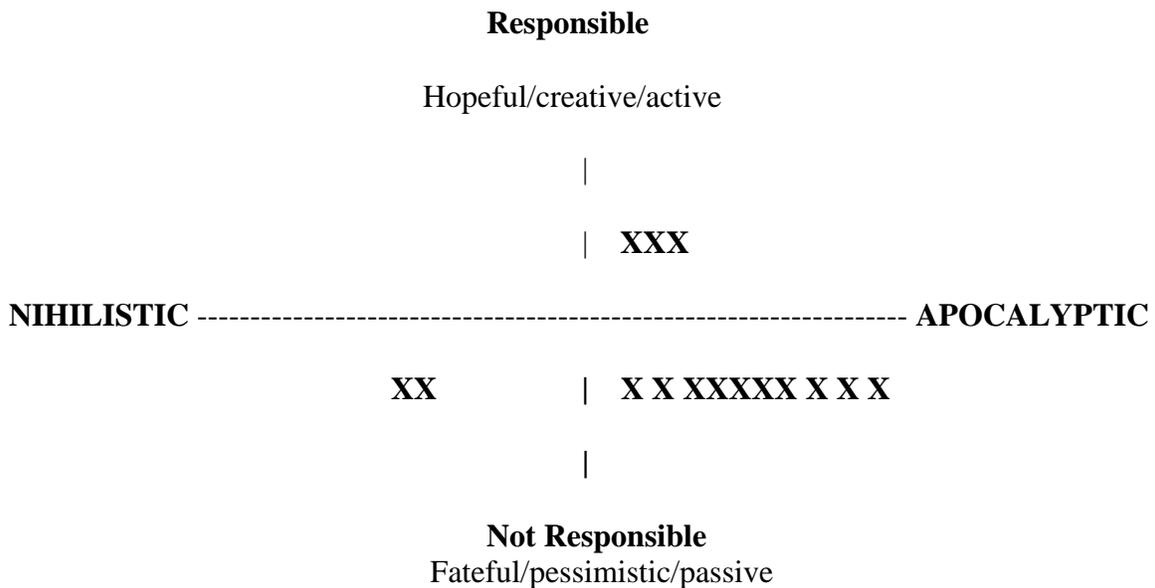


Figure 4. Berdyaev’s Russian Eschatological Continuum.

⁴⁶ Michael J. Christensen, Lecture for D.Min. Class #7, “The Chernobyl Prophecy in Russian Apocalyptic Eschatology,” Drew University, 2 November 1998.

This matrix represents the beliefs of a handful of members of Christ Church toward the future of this church. Almost all believe that an end is near and believe in that end. And only a few are working toward creative solutions to moving beyond that end. Most are fatalistic, believing they have no power to change the future.

The future of this church depends on their ability to move beyond the current crisis and see the approaching end not as a conclusion but as a new beginning for God's redemptive work to continue.

To survive the present crisis (whether Soviet communism or the Chernobyl apocalypse), Christianity must recover its eschatological perspective. It must face the End, not as something in the future but presently "at hand." The Second Coming (parousia), according to Berdyaev, like all creative acts, "happens in existential time, outside the time of this world, in a flash of the present; it knows neither past nor future." And yet, the End of this world is a divine-human event.⁴⁷

As we recover our eschatological perspective, we can begin to see that the future is not something to be feared but welcomed with open arms. Even the End is not the End for eschatological Christians. The End is only a transition of time.

Our perspective toward the end is critical to our future. How we embrace apocalyptic moments defines our ability to minister in the post-modern age. Despair is contagious, it can spread throughout a church rapidly, if allowed. But hope is infectious and when those who have the hope can get close to the hopeless, they can be nothing but infected.

⁴⁷ Michael J. Christiansen, Lecture for D.Min. Class #11, "Eschatology and the Local Church," Drew University, 8 December 1998.

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