

Clerks' Tip of the Month A Pause for a Little History



As Stated Clerk, one of my most important jobs is preserving the records of the presbytery—which records include those of dissolved and dismissed churches. Trinity Presbyterian Church, then in Bethesda, dissolved in 2014. I received its records, and recently I went through them (boxes and boxes) to prepare to ship them to the Presbyterian Historical Society. What a treasure trove! I found so much of interest—indulge me if I am boring.

Trinity (Bethesda) has in its provenance the bones of other churches—Unity Church, Gunton-Temple Memorial, and Gurley Memorial. Among Trinity's records was an account written in 1909 of the beginnings of Gurley Memorial:

“At the close of the Civil War the hills north of Florida Avenue (then known as Boundary Street) were covered with great frame hospitals, with a large cavalry camp on the site of Howard University... Southward from Florida Avenue, market gardens and green fields stretched away for a long distance until the houses of the city were reached. At the intersection of Seventh Street and Florida Avenue there was a little group of houses, and by 1867 the street car line had been built from this point to the river, with barns for the horses and cars at the south east corner of these streets.”

The account goes on to explain that Mr. David McClelland and his wife, lifelong members of the New York Avenue Church, represented to their pastor, the Rev. P.D. Gurley, the need for a Sunday School near the new car barns. The Sunday School then formed met in a room in the upper story of the stables. “The uproar of the cars, the stablemen and the drivers and the odors of the place coming up from the room below seem more picturesque to read about long after the event than they were to experience at the time. The Rev. Dr. Gurley will always be remembered as the pastor of Abraham Lincoln and when a few months later he died his name was given to the school and has been continued to the present day as the name of the church.”

The Trinity trove doesn't always paint such a bucolic picture—and does not always concern Trinity or its forbears. There were several newsletters circa 1949 to 1952 from a church in New Jersey that I will forward to the PHS. There was also another item, a letter, that, as far as I could tell, has nothing to do with Trinity, although I found it very interesting.

In 1915 the session of the Central Presbyterian Church, Presbytery of Potomac, wrote the Presbytery of Washington City, “knowing the spirit of friendship, comity, and cooperation that has existed for so many years between the members of the two presbyteries,” but “unwilling to believe that the situation brought about by the facts herein stated has come to the attention of the Presbytery of Washington City and meets with its approval.” Then comes a list of ways in which churches of the Presbytery of Washington City had located worship spaces near Central Presbyterian, culminating in a tent for worship set up in a field near Central in the summer of 1915.

The restraint, civility, and willingness to attribute good intentions to the other party shown in this letter is a model for us. (Reference Don Meeks' sermon at the 2018 General Assembly and his Covenant for Pursuing Unity in Times of Disagreement)

The letter continues: "We are unwilling to believe that there could be any intention to injure the Central Church or interfere with its work in the field it chose when that field was not served by any Presbyterian church. Convinced as we are that the effect of the maintenance of Sunday evening services by the Church of the Covenant so very close to the Central Church, when so many needy places are available for tent services, has not occurred to the brethren of the Church of the Covenant and of the Presbytery of Washington City, we submit this statement of the situation for such consideration and action as you may think the relations between the Presbyteries and the cause of Presbyterianism in this community may deserve. The Session of the Central Church has no right to protest to or make a request of the Presbytery of Washington City. It merely transmits this statement in the belief that the Presbytery's apparent acquiescence in the location of the tent is due to the fact that its attention has not been directed to the resulting conditions."

The outcome of this situation is not contained in the records I received. I like to think that the Church of the Covenant found another lot for its Sunday evening summer tent services.

If you have a tip you think others could use or a topic you would like information on, please let me know at scoe@thepresbytery.org.

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