

First Presbyterian Church of Edgewood: The Last 25 Years (1991-2016)

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During the 1990s, much of the focus of Edgewood's ministries and programming was on global mission, youth, and music. The Pittsburgh Presbytery began a partnership with the Synod of Blantyre in Malawi, Africa. The Edgewood congregation was partnered with the Mpiripiri congregation, and members traveled to Malawi to visit the people, deliver supplies, and help to construct their church building. The FPCE benevolence budget reflected a strong commitment to assist our brothers and sisters across the world. Over the next decade, missionaries from the congregation traveled to Alaska to teach bible school, New Mexico to work with youth, and Mexico to help build houses. Locally, the church was active with initiatives such as the CROP hunger walk, Habitat for Humanity, Wilkinsburg Community Ministry, and East End Cooperative Ministries. FPCE also made a commitment to specific outreach at Thanksgiving by hosting a free meal in the Social Hall and delivering take-out meals to senior citizens in nursing facilities and those unable to travel.

The youth program was very strong for a number of years. Sunday School classes shared in special worship services, put on elaborate Christmas pageants, and sang in youth and handbell choirs. The youth ministry program enjoyed great success with both junior and senior high fellowships, retreats, fundraisers, "lock-ins," dinner theaters, and even beach trips. Vacation Bible School programs ranged from intergenerational events such as Marketplace 29 A.D., to small group activities. Family ministries included all-church retreats at Camp Crestfield and Ligonier Camp and Conference Center.

As the merger with Wilkinsburg worked successfully over the years, it was determined that each church board would slowly be reduced in size to more accurately reflect the congregation. By the late 1990s, the Session made the recommendation to disband entirely the Board of Trustees, and to create a Property Committee and a Finance Committee as part of the Session. The size of the Board of Deacons was also greatly reduced from the large group of 24 created by combining the Edgewood and Wilkinsburg boards. Additionally, after Associate Pastor Walt Pietschmann left, it was determined that a greater need in staffing was to establish a Director of Christian Education to oversee youth and family ministries, and a Congregational Visitor to assist with pastoral care visits. As an expansion of this pastoral care, several members were trained and classes of Stephen Ministers were commissioned to reach out to all members of the church.

In the music ministry, the Edgewood Symphony Orchestra began a partnership in 1993 with the church where the sanctuary was used for several subscription concerts each year, serving as the ESO "home" in Edgewood for their performances. Choirs from around the Pittsburgh area, including the FPCE Sanctuary Choir, frequently joined for the holiday concert.

The first pipe organ of the Edgewood Presbyterian Church was installed in 1917 by Casavant Frères Ltd. company of Canada. This organ served the church until 1967 when, under budgetary constraints, the failing organ was replaced with a modest-sized Möller organ, built in Hagerstown, Maryland. The console from the original organ had been retained until funds became available for a new one. In quite serious condition, the console was finally replaced in 1978 with a generously sized 4-manual Möller console built to match the intricately carved oak of the sanctuary and organ case.

In 1992 the console was rebuilt with a new solid-state combination action which replaced the old, air-driven, pneumatic combination action. Less than two years later, the entire Antiphonal organ had to be shut down completely and it was apparent that substantial repairs were imminent. In 1998, a fundraising campaign began to rebuild the organ and purchase a keyboard. The Organ Fund Committee launched the campaign, "Music for the Millennium" on Easter Sunday, 1999.

In 2001, Peter Luley & Associates finished their painstaking task of seeing that the completed instrument is one of magnificence, a true statement to the wonder and majesty of Almighty God, whose praises First Presbyterian Church of Edgewood now sing with more excitement than ever before.

In worship, a desire to share in a less formal setting led to the creation of a Wednesday Night Worship service. The intimate gathering focused on a short message, contemporary or “praise” songs not found in the traditional hymnal, and lots of praying for specific situations or individuals. The service eventually came to be known as simply “The Edge,” and it enjoyed a strong core of worshipers and afforded the staff the opportunity to try new music, different worship styles, and even themes that might not normally work in a Sunday morning traditional service. The service took place in what was formerly the Chapel, a room converted into a multipurpose room to accommodate changing needs in Christian Education, that was for several years named “The Knowing Place,” and now is called “The Gathering Place.”

2002 brought about some significant changes for the Edgewood Church. Throughout the history of the congregation, members enjoyed long periods with pastoral tenures ending in retirements, and very little disruption to the flow of pastoral leadership – as one pastor retired, shortly thereafter, the next called pastor began their ministry. The Rev. Dr. Douglas Stevens announced his departure to move on to assist another congregation with an upcoming merger similar to what FPCE went through in the early 80s, which put the congregation for the first time in the situation of needing an Interim Pastor. After a summer of work, the search committee recommended the Rev. Rebecca Hickok to join Edgewood as Interim Pastor.

The interim period is a time for self-reflection and preparation for a new pastor. The Pittsburgh Presbytery gave several charges to Rev. Hickok as she began the interim ministry process, which included reducing the overall budget as well as aligning staff to more accurately reflect the size of the congregation, all while still honoring the long and rich history of a church known as the “community” church.

A Homecoming celebration took place in September 2003 to honor the 20th anniversary of the merger with the First Presbyterian Church of Wilksburg. Past members, pastoral staff, and friends joined in a special worship service where 25 and 50+ members were recognized, similar to what is planned for today’s anniversary worship.

As the pastor nominating committee began its work, FPCE began two initiatives through the Pittsburgh Presbytery: Generous Congregations and Project 6:15. The Generous Congregations program redefined how to approach stewardship in an attempt to move away from focusing as much on finances and pledges and move toward giving of time and talents. Project 6:15 was a presbytery-wide program designed to push congregations beyond where their current ministries were and to look to the future, studying the community, determining needs, working on self-reflection of ministries and programs, and creating a vision for the future.

It was through the work of Project 6:15 that Edgewood developed its current mission statement: Believing we are called together by God’s love through Jesus Christ, our mission as the First Presbyterian Church of Edgewood is to love God, to love each other, and to love our neighbors.

Also during this time, after some staffing changes, the Pittsburgh Presbytery awarded FPCE a grant from the Administrative Commission for Transformation. The purpose of this grant was to begin a new youth ministry program for the community, in the form of an after-school care program. FROGS – Friends, Reading, and Other Great Stuff – has enjoyed great success reaching students from the Edgewood Elementary school and surrounding areas since 2003.

June 2005 brought the presentation and formal call of Edgewood’s next settled pastor, the Rev. Michael S. Wilson. Pastor Mike served FPCE as pastor/head of staff until June 2012, when he joined his wife in Nashville, Tennessee, where she was called to serve a large church there.

During Rev. Wilson’s tenure, Edgewood welcomed members from the Mulberry Presbyterian Church, who made the difficult decision to leave their building. While a merger was never formally recognized, several of the Mulberry members joined Edgewood, and many special items from the former church were brought over to FPCE. The white baptismal font in the front of the sanctuary and the painting above the door in the south transept are on display to honor the ministry of Mulberry. FPCE also worked closely with a legal team and the Pittsburgh Presbytery to facilitate the sale of the large Mulberry Church building. For a brief period, the Mulberry Senior Center and Mulberry Ministries, Inc. took residence at Edgewood before deciding to end their programs.

Pastor Mike's musical background as a percussionist led to an interest in expanding the scope of morning worship. With attendance at The Edge becoming less consistent, the leadership decided to try a semi-regular informal service on Sunday mornings. Using the front of the sanctuary in a more performance-oriented manner prompted an application for another transformation grant from Presbytery, this time to install LED lights to brighten the "stage" area in front of the pulpit. After much experimentation over the next few years, it was decided to do what has now been called "Emerging" worship on the third Sunday of each month, while focusing on "Classic" worship the remaining Sundays. Several emerging services were held out on the side lawn in the summer months as well.

Facing another interim period after Rev. Wilson's departure, the search committee set to work and recommended the Rev. Michael P. Rucker as the next Interim Pastor of Edgewood. He began his ministry at FPCE in October 2012. Taking advantage of changes in policy by Presbytery, in December 2014, the pastor nominating committee recommended that Edgewood extend the call to Rev. Rucker to be the next settled pastor, moving from interim to permanent ministry. Since then, the Edgewood mission has continued with annual meals on the side lawn for community members, a new outreach program for community youth focusing on service called Camp SOS (Summer of Service), and strong discussion about the renovation of the aging building the congregation calls home, which may result in a completely redesigned program area of the building and updated heating and cooling systems. Musical events have continued with concerts by the ESO, visits from special musical guests, and an annual women's choral festival.

Throughout all of this time, the Presbyterian Women have been strong supporters of mission endeavors, holding flea markets and bazaars to raise money for those causes, as well as, praying for and with each other at meetings of the various Circles. Additional outreach programs that have been valuable parts of the FPCE ministry include small group Bible studies, a Grieving Space grief support group, Men's Group, Tuesday morning book club, and more.

As we celebrate 125 years of shared ministry today, who knows what the future holds for this church or the church as a whole. What is certain is that the Holy Spirit has been moving among God's children in this corner of the Kingdom called Edgewood for many years. Trusting in the power of the One who calls us to ministry together, anything is possible!