

Walking By Faith  
Psalm 66:1-12  
2 Corinthians 5:1-9

Well, here we are. Potwin Presbyterian Church has made it to its 135<sup>th</sup> birthday. It has been a long road, but one that has been marked by one consistent factor.....trying to remain faithful to our call from the Lord. We have been walking by faith, all these years.

Here is a brief history of Potwin Presbyterian Church:

July 5, 1887--The Rev. Neill D. Johnson, a missionary of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church came to the young city of Topeka to establish a church here. He gathered together a group of interested persons and they purchased a lot at Huntoon and Polk Streets for a cost of \$4,200.

February 3, 1889—the first unofficial worship service was held at Bennett Flats apartments at 1132 Western and the next Sunday a Sunday School was held there as well. This building is still in existence across the street from Holiday Park, and ironically, Mark and Sarah Burenheide own this building and are working to keep it in good shape to preserve its history as well!

May 5, 1889—By this date the congregation had grown large enough to justify the organization of an official congregation and the church came into being as the First Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Topeka. Its first worship service and communion were held on this date. By November of 1889, the first building was built at the Huntoon and Polk location. This building is no longer there.

1900—As the congregation looked around them, they found many churches in their immediate vicinity. They determined that they wanted to move to an area that was underserved by churches, staying true to the concept of evangelism—sharing the good news. In surveying the city, they determined that the area that is now Potwin, Kenwood, and Ward Meade needed a new church. The only church in the area at that time was the Swedish Baptist Church at what is now 1008 SW 8<sup>th</sup> Street, and at that time all of their services were held in the Swedish language. (This church is still in existence as West Side American

Baptist Church, one of Potwin's mission partners in the neighborhood.) Therefore, this area was chosen as the home of the new church.

January 1901—The congregation moved to a new small white frame church at the junction of what was then 5<sup>th</sup> and West Streets, now 5<sup>th</sup>, Washburn and Willow. It was at this time the name was changed to Potwin Presbyterian Church.

It was also around this time that many of the Cumberland Churches were reabsorbed back into the PCUSA. We voted to go back into the main denomination, though the pastor at the time noted that they felt rather like out of wedlock stepchildren in the situation!

September 1924—The church had grown so rapidly over the ensuing years that we needed a larger building. Therefore, a fundraising effort was launched to build this building. The small church was demolished, and the red brick building was built on the same footprint at a cost of \$66,000. While the building was being constructed, the congregation met at Potwin Elementary School.

1958—Potwin Church has always had the education and well-being of children at the heart of their mission. We had developed a strong Christian Education program and had reached out to all the children of the neighborhoods around us and invited their participation. This resulted in such a large group of children coming to the church each week that the Session determined that more space for Sunday School classes was needed. It was at this time that the 1958 Education Wing was constructed.

May 2022—Since the church had declined in number of members and resources, it was decided to sell the building to Potwin Lofts Inc. This is the company of historic preservationists Mark and Sarah Burenheide. They have converted the 1958 addition into apartments and leased the 1924 building back to us. Potwin Church continues to do mission and service in the neighborhood and community, and plans to be at the confluence of Willow, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and Lane for the foreseeable future. Praise the Lord!

Before I continue, I would like to consider something for a moment. We started life as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church. This makes us, as they say, a bit of a horse of a different color, and I am going to bet many of us don't know anything about that splinter denomination, so let's learn together.

*At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Presbyterians on the frontier (then, places like Kentucky, Tennessee, etc.) suffered from a shortage of educated clergy willing to move to the frontier beyond the Appalachian Mountains. At the same time, Methodists and Baptists were sending preachers with little or no formal training into frontier regions and were very successful in organizing congregations. In order to have clergy for their churches, the Cumberland Presbytery in Kentucky began ordaining men without the educational background required by the PCUSA. This was bad enough for the denominational leaders, but what was even worse was that the presbytery allowed ministers to offer a qualified assent to the Westminster Confession, only requiring them to swear assent to the Confession "so far as they deemed it agreeable to the Word of God." At the time, ministers were required to swear total allegiance to the Confession just as it was, and so this conditional wording set off quite a firestorm of debate. Eventually, the group that became the Cumberland Denomination was expelled from the PCUSA over these issues. There is historical evidence in the writings of several of the founders that indicate they did not believe the split to be permanent and certainly did not anticipate a long-standing separate denomination.*

*The new denomination was quite forward thinking for its time.*

*In 1826, Cumberland Presbyterians established Cumberland College in Princeton, Kentucky, in order to better train their candidates for the ministry. Although very much a frontier institution, Cumberland College was one of the first colleges in the United States to accept women as students.*

*In 1889, Cumberland Presbyterians were the first body in the Presbyterian or Reformed traditions to ordain a woman as a minister.*

*Cumberland Presbyterians were also early to ordain African Americans to the ministry.*

*By 1900, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was the third largest Presbyterian or Reformed body in the United States and was rapidly growing.<sup>[3]</sup> After making revisions to the Westminster Confession in 1903, the PCUSA proposed reunification with the CPC. The Cumberland General Assembly voted by a significant majority for the union in the 1906 meeting.<sup>[3]</sup> As a result, a large number of Cumberland congregations re-entered the PCUSA in 1906. Some, however, did not, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church still exists as a separate denomination today.*

Think of this. Our beginnings are in a church started by people who went to the wilderness where they encountered a way of life very different than back in the big cities of home. There they were able to look at the status quo, see how it wasn't working for their situation, and make faithful changes to the formal system. They started out life led by laity. They believed that all were welcome to the table. Their motto was "whosoever may come." We here today stand firm with the PCUSA, but we also show signs that our roots come from the Cumberlands as well. The history of this specific congregation reflects this. We will do well with these roots as we go forward into a very different future than what our immediate predecessors faced or imagined.

Also, think about all the rest of history that this congregation has lived through since that May 5<sup>th</sup> so long ago. WWI. The flu epidemic of 1918. The Great Depression that began in 1929. WW II and subsequent wars. The Civil Rights era, COVID not to mention things like the coming of electricity, phones cars airplanes, space rockets and computers ---and all the joys and tragedies of daily life for those who were and are a part of this community of faith. There were times when it looked like the doors would close, but God wasn't finished with us yet.

And so, we begin today on our 136<sup>th</sup> year of existence with these questions. How long will we exist as a congregation? How many years do we have left? Only the God who has walked with us all the way knows the answer to these questions. Truth is, when God says our work is done, we will be done. But hopefully until then we will do our best to be the Kingdom here on this strange little corner of earth. You heard the Potwin Spirit Singers sing an anthem about how our Biblical ancestors walked by faith. Our story joins with theirs.

May we always walk by faith, not by sight. Lord, let it be so, Amen.