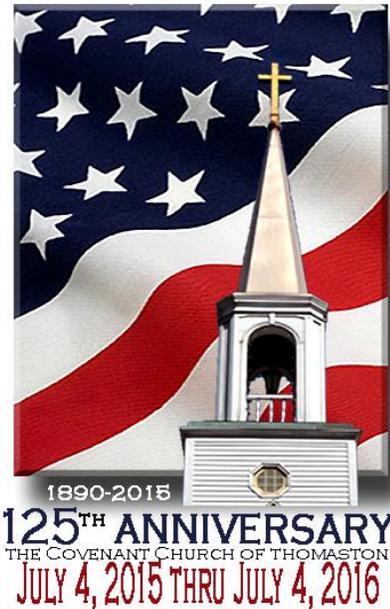


History of the Covenant Church of Thomaston

125 Years

Before 1890 (about 1870-1890): Revival was particularly evident in rural Sweden during these years when economic hardship created a particular urgency – the need for employment and economic security. Population growth and limited opportunities combined to build pressures resulting in migration to the manufacturing centers and new agricultural lands in the United States. Word spread rapidly across the Atlantic, and brothers and sisters and neighbors followed one after another, until large segments of a community were transplanted to another locale in the New World. Thus, of the forty Swedish immigrants who joined the Thomaston church in its first five years, twenty-three came from a small village named Glimåkra in the province of Kristianstad in southern Sweden, with three others coming from neighboring villages. Most of these people found employment in the Seth Thomas Clock Company or Plume and Atwood Company or worked as maids for the well-established citizens of the town.

At the same time, not just in Thomaston, but in various other towns, other small Swedish churches were forming as well. Eventually they joined together to become a denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church in America (established in 1885 just five years before this church was formed).



1890-1911: On a Wednesday evening (October 22, 1890) in a home still standing on Williams Street, nine men and five women witnessed the birth of a church. One, a visitor, the Reverend Edward Poole (“Pohl”) assisted, offering experience acquired at a similar event two years earlier in the neighboring community of Collinsville. Peter and Karna Holm, a middle-aged couple who had emigrated to Thomaston, provided their home as birthplace and considerable spiritual encouragement. The remainder of the charter members were unmarried

young people who had recently arrived from Sweden filled with the Spirit of God and eager to start a mission work among the Swedish immigrants in Thomaston. Their names were Nyberg (two sisters), Carlson, Swanson and Holm (five of them), Johnson, Agren, Nilson and Peterson, names as Swedish as the “Skånska” dialect most of them spoke.

To these people, the local church was the living representation of the body of Jesus Christ. Thus only those who had experienced spiritual rebirth could rightfully belong – only those who were living “the separated life” could share in its fellowship. Since a living faith is based on the testimony of the Word of God, only the Apostles’ Creed was written into the bylaws and the church has remained non-creedal. And since the

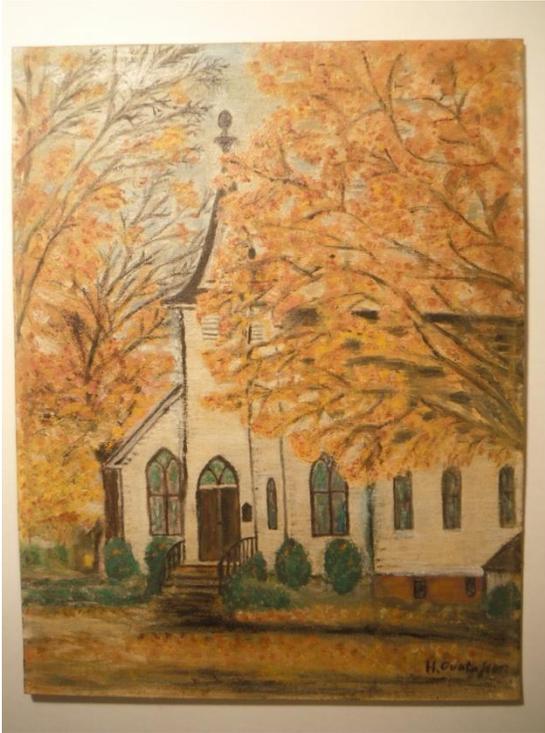
discipline of the local fellowship was considered a sufficient instrument of church government, the congregational form of polity was adopted and practiced. Thus, the form and substance of this new body took shape quickly, as an elder, two deacons, and a board of five members were chosen, the bylaws adopted, and the first sermon preached from the eleventh chapter of Acts, verses 19-26.

The Swedish Evangelical Emanuel Church of Thomaston, as it was officially named, was one of sixty-two similar churches that sprang up between 1879 and 1900 in concentrations of Swedish immigrants in the towns and cities of Northeastern United States. All had a common spiritual origin – the revival which had swept Scandinavia between 1850 and 1890. A pietistic reformation, this revival fed on a discontent with the cold formality and worldly conduct tolerated in the Lutheran State Church. Many of the converts left the church. Others maintained membership but fellowshipped apart, studying the Bible and living a “faith in life” rather than in form.

The major portion of the story of the early life of the church is the story of the response of its members to these two events – revival and immigration. Revival precipitated, in varying degrees success, an internal transformation in the life of the individual member and the congregation. Immigration, with its accompanying cultural shocks, forced adjustments to a new and strange way of life. Both combined to shape the program of the church, the nature of its outreach, its traditions – and its successes and shortcomings. One result was the establishment of a strong association between ethnic tradition and spiritual experience. The lessons of the new spiritual life had been communicated in the mother tongue and it was within the fellowship of one’s own kind that a certain measure of security from the uncertainties of a new environment could be achieved. It became quite natural to consider “Swedish” and “Christian” to be almost synonymous. This, which a first provided a measure of strength, was to become a major problem for the second and third generations.

For its first two years, the young fellowship met in the town hall, the Congregational Church, or in members’ homes. This proved to be an unsatisfactory arrangement, and in August, 1891, the members decided to build a house of worship. A subscription campaign was conducted among the members, churches in neighboring town, and townspeople and land on the corner of Grove and Clay Streets was donated by the family of Aaron Thomas, descendent of the founder of Thomaston. The design and construction were simple – a large room with raised platform, and in the basement an apartment for the pastor, custodian or other member willing to pay the \$4 monthly rental. Not until 1911 was the basement remodeled into a meeting place.





The style and degree of comfort of the new church building was consistent with the austere expectations of people with limited resources and dedication to careful stewardship. A cast-iron stove provided varying extremes of heat, depending on proximity to its wood-fed fire box. Straight-back chairs were the only other furnishings except a set of handmade platform furniture contributed by one of the early pastors. Even the corporation of the church had to borrow \$550 to complete the building for its first use in October 1892. Another significant event of the fall of 1892 was the calling of the first full time pastor at a salary of \$30 a month, plus housing in the church basement. Summer services were conducted by the members themselves. The “order of worship” was simple: three or four hymns and an extemporaneous sermon preached by the elder or a deacon.

Offerings were not regularly taken until 1899, when the board decided to take an offering and make announcements before the sermon. This non-liturgical background with its love of simplicity and spontaneity was to be recalled many years later when pressure for formalization of the order of worship stirred apprehension among some of the brethren. No one in this modern-day controversy suggested, however, a return to a situation where hymn selections were called from the audience or even lustily begun by a member “moved by the Spirit.”

Pastors and Affiliations: The succession of young ministers who served the church in its early years received their training in either of two seminaries, the Chicago Theological Seminary, which had a Swedish department, or in the North Park Seminary in the same city. Later, all the pastors were to come from North Park. This represented increasingly close ties with the Evangelical Covenant Church of America. Official affiliation was not voted until 1948, but in 1891, the church joined the Eastern Missionary Association, an organization of Swedish-American churches along the Eastern Seaboard, which joined the larger body in 1921.

The major reason for the slowness in becoming nationally affiliated came out of a sense of loyalty to another church group – the Connecticut Conference of Congregational Christian Churches. In 1891, the expense of building a church and calling a full-time pastor placed a considerable strain on the resources of the small congregation. Assistance was offered by the Congregational Church Home Missionary Society, an arm of the American church interested in supporting just such projects. The congregation united with the Congregational Association of Churches and maintained this union until 1948. Aid in the form of partial payment toward the pastor’s salary was received until 1925 and, as a consequence, the church became unofficially known as the Swedish Congregational Church.

These two denominational ties were the major influences determining the theological character of the church. The democratic polity of the Congregationalists shaped its form of government and the evangelical spirit of the “Covenanters” its doctrine. The emphasis on individual responsibility in matters of faith and conduct based on the

sole authority of the Scripture had its roots in both movements. It is noteworthy that in its seventy-five years of history the church has never experienced theological dissension or major doctrinal differences of opinion. The founding fathers took their convictions seriously but a sense of mission in building the life of the local church kept them relatively immune from the winds of theological controversy that swept through many churches in this period.

Early Church Life: The life that evolved was a busy one, consistent with conviction that the church was the center of man's activities. Modern day readers will note the lack of social alternatives as an explanation for the full calendar of weekly activities, but more than this, there existed a sense of urgency of mission and dedication of purpose. Sunday was the Lord's Day and was meant for worship, for fellowship and instruction in the Word. Thus, two or three services plus Sunday School was the normal Sunday program. At first Sunday School was only for adults, but by 1899 the children were included. The Sunday School hour followed the morning service until 1936, when the present pattern was established.

For many years two midweek services were held and on Saturday nights the young people met to discuss such topics as "The Role of Women," "The End Times," and "Who Deserves More Caution, Friends or Enemies." And there was always work to do around the church. Maintenance, repair, and even construction were undertaken by volunteer labor. In 1905, when the parsonage was built, and in 1911, when the basement was remodeled into meeting rooms, it was the men of the church who provided much of the skill and labor.



The social life of the church in its first quarter century was much more important than it is today. Suppers, ice cream socials, holiday festivals, picnics and Ladies' Aid or Sewing Society meetings were regular calendar events. The naturalized Americans made a big affair of the Fourth of July with patriotic speeches, fireworks, and a prominent display of the United States flag. This tradition was continuous except for a few years when rain postponed the event. A picnic was held each year from 1891 through 2012, when the church decided to discontinue the tradition. Much was made of both religious and secular holidays – Christmas and New Year's activities, mid-summer "fests," Thanksgiving, and corn-roasts and outings for no particular reason except to provide social outlet for the family.

The spiritual highlight of the year was the special "Mission Week." Sometimes held in both the spring and fall of the year, these missions were planned as the main evangelistic outreach of the church. Visiting ministers brought the challenge of the gospel in a direct appeal to the "lost" or the "backslider" and could exhort the faithful in a much more objective fashion than the local pastor.



Many who later became members of the church were "brought into the kingdom" at

these times and no doubt these emphases provided much of the vitality of the church.

Women's Groups: One activity that has changed to a considerable degree during the years has been the women's organization. In its early years, it was called the Sewing Society, with the purpose of raising money through the sale of sewing handiwork. The big social events of the year were the semiannual auctions at which the articles made at the other meetings were sold. Open to all, and usually with an out-of-town pastor as auctioneer, the aprons, towels and doilies changed hands to spirited bidding prompted by the lively chatter of the auctioneer. In a pre-mass-entertainment era, there were few events that could compare to the excitement of this affair.

Evidently this method of raising money for the church received increasing criticism, for in 1907, after some discussion, the Sewing Society was replaced by the "Hjalpförening," with monthly dues of fifty cents per family. This "Aid Society" met once a month, with the whole family invited, and involved a short program of music and literary readings and an abundance of coffee and refreshments. Another transition took place in the 1940s and 1950s when the Women's Missionary Association, which eventually became the Covenant Ladies Circle, was organized and an occasional family night replaced the earlier social affairs. In later years, the name was changed to Covenant Women Ministries, which was shortened to Women Ministries early in this new century. The local group still seeks to serve the social and spiritual needs of the church's women while addressing some of the serious issues of concern to women. In addition to our denominational connections, they locally support Thomaston's Social Services to families, Susan B. Anthony's shelter for women and children fleeing abusive family situations, and a mission to seafarers staffing ships that visit New England's ports, along with other outreach projects.

1911-1929: As the church entered into its third decade, the pressure of change began in subtle ways to affect the pattern of its life. Immigration from Sweden diminished and ceased altogether during World War I. Five young men from the congregation joined the crusade in Europe to save democracy and at home, the people experienced the effects of influenza and inflation. The latter resulted in a series of raises in salary for the pastor to \$135 a month and corresponding increases in the budget. Reminders of world suffering and unrest appeared regularly in treasurers' donations to "Armenian Relief," "War Sufferers' Fund" or "China Relief Fund." The immigration phase of the life of the church thus ended and the church was thrust into a new period with new and bigger problems.

The physical appearance of the church, too, reflected the effect of modern innovation. Electric lights were installed in 1906 at a cost of \$15, a furnace replaced the cast-iron stove in 1910, and opera chairs replaced the straight-backed chairs in the same year. Parishioners replaced horses and buggies with automobiles and the church "barn" became a "garage." The hitching posts disappeared. Most important, a new generation of American-born sons and daughters reached adulthood in the church and had children of their own, providing a new challenge for the leadership.

Here change became difficult. The first leaders of the church were young Swedes, young enough to serve as leaders for two or more generations. (The first American-born Chairman of the church wasn't elected until 1956.) They had been motivated by the heat of revival and the struggle involved in the new life. Their sons, who inherited the privileges secured, but without paying a similar price, were not considered to have earned the right to leadership. The second generation was not equipped to

minister to the first generation and the Swedish-born members found it hard to trust themselves in a second language. Ministers who preached equally well in both languages were difficult to find. Biblical exegesis came much easier in the native tongue. In a real sense, the challenges to faith and conduct in the troubled '20s and '30s presented themselves in the English language. Thus, it was not nostalgia or lethargy that hindered the change to English but a conviction that the old language was safer and that in too rapid a transition, something valuable would be lost.

The change was inevitable, however. No new immigrants came after 1924 and additions to the church roll came mainly through regularly-held confirmation classes. The Bible in English was introduced into the Sunday School in 1918 and all classes were conducted in English by 1928. Regular worship services in English were begun in the same year. By 1937, most services were conducted in English.

1930-1945: During the '30s and '40s, the program of the church varied little. Neither did the membership change much from an average of sixty-five. Sunday services were held both morning and evening, with a Sunday School for youngsters through high school age. Midweek services settled to a Wednesday routine and Aid Society was held once a month on a Friday. A Young People's Group met monthly in the homes of members and occasional special events continued to provide social fellowship for the church families. At both special and regular services much prominence was given to worship in music. Choirs and string bands had been formed earlier in the century, but in this period were especially accomplished. The Thomaston string band performed in other churches and earned a reputation of being a skilled and spirited group. At home, one or the other of the groups (with overlapping membership) was expected to perform at most meetings.

This depression/war period meant hard times for church members. During periods of unemployment, uncertain income provided scant means for the support of the work of the church. Rather than take a cut in pay, the pastor volunteered to return a sizable portion of his salary to meet the expenses of the church. Much sacrifice was required, but also the spirit of brotherhood was demonstrated as mutual aid was given in the form of employment on members' farms and a sharing of means. Another form of sacrifice was experienced in World War II when eleven young men joined the armed forces and served at home and overseas. Fortunately, as in World War I, all came home, although several bore the wounds of the war.

1945-1965: As the war marked the end and beginning of so many things, it marked the beginning of a third stage in the life of the church. The pattern of American mobility established in the war continued and new families moved to Thomaston and some old families moved out. Many of the young veterans acquired college educations under the G.I. Bill and settled elsewhere, while others took jobs in Thomaston and, as a part of settling down, sought a new church home. The Swedish traditions meant little to the third generation and, unlike their parents, they attached little value to marrying within the ethnic group. Most of the young men and women of the church who married in the years after World War II married "American" mates and thus demonstrated their own complete Americanization.

This rapid change in the nature of the community and the potential membership of the church stimulated evaluation of the programs of the church, its image, and its very name, the "Swedish Congregational Church," no longer seemed apropos. With stronger and stronger ties with the national Covenant denomination, it was not "Congregational" and the ethnic designation had less and less relevance. Since 1945, only English had been used in the services. In 1949, the name of the church was changed to Mission Covenant Church. In 1962, the word "Mission" was dropped

giving us our present official name, the Covenant Church of Thomaston. More and more names of many ethnic origins appeared on the rolls, so that by 1950, the church was transformed to a community church, maintaining its evangelical concerns but, in true ecumenical spirit, reaching out to all the people of Thomaston and beyond.

Between 1946 and 1962, the church was served by five young pastors, each dedicated to the program of renewal and each contributing in a unique way to the changes wrought in this period. New programs for all age groups were introduced: Boys' and Girls' Clubs, later reorganized into Junior and Senior Hi-League; a Young Mothers' Club, and a Men's Brotherhood. The social program retained the Fourth of July picnic and the mid-summer meeting and corn roast, but added a men's steak fry, family nights, and a major event, the fall Smörgåsbord, to which the community was invited.

In 1948 a Daily Vacation Bible School was started and continued to be conducted by the church each summer. Later on, several churches in the Thomaston area joined together in sponsoring a community Bible School. The Sunday School expanded to include all age groups and its membership increased rapidly. Membership classes were formed to admit new members into the fellowship. By 1957, the congregation numbered 90, with approximately another 110 in the Sunday School. This expansion created a space problem and discussion of relocation or rebuilding became an important topic in the early '50s.

In 1950 the young people in the church solved one problem temporarily by completely remodeling the kitchen and furnace room. In 1951 major repairs to the parsonage were made, costing nearly \$4,000, more than the original cost of the building. This project postponed church building plans for several years, but by 1954 the problems became serious and plans were begun for a major expansion. Relocation and construction of a new building were considered but were set aside in favor of total rebuilding of the original structure. In 1955 a Building Committee was appointed, an architect was selected, and work was begun in November of 1956.

The first stage of the project, costing \$48,000, was virtually completed by February of 1958 and a dedication was celebrated on June 15. Two wings with two levels each were added at the rear of the church to form a T. These provided much-needed classrooms, an office, a fellowship hall, a modern kitchen, and restrooms. The second stage, involving completely remodeling the sanctuary, the steeple, and the entrance, was begun in 1961 and completed in 1962. The cost of this project was \$44,000. All that remained of the original church was some foundational walls. Even these would not be recognizable by the founding fathers.

1965 to 1990: Over the next several years, other changes were made to the physical plant. In 1980, the entire building received aluminum siding and in 1990, as a large project commemorating the church's centennial, the congregation rebuilt the sidewalks at the corner of Grove and Clay.

As the congregation grew in numbers and as more new members were drawn from outside the original Swedish community, it became evident that more ways of keeping the church family in touch were needed. In the 1970s, the monthly newsletter, the "Covenant Contact," was begun to supplement the weekly worship bulletin. In the 1980s, an office for the volunteer secretary was made in a tiny classroom just off the Sanctuary (next to the organ). Secretarial duties grew and the position eventually was converted to a paid, part-time position. The office was moved

closer to the Pastor's Study in one of the small classrooms in the north wing. Soon sermons, worship bulletins and newsletters were written and reproduced by means of computers and photocopiers. As the church approached its centennial year, a new means of communication came into use: the internet. Prayer concerns once passed among the congregation by word of mouth or by telephone soon began to go out electronically as well.

Recognizing a need for further attention to the youth of the church and the town, the church hired a part-time youth ministries director in 1989. The youth programs included Bible studies, organized youth events, service projects, and personal discipling. CHIC, the denomination's triennial youth event staged in Colorado and later in Knoxville, Tennessee, became a recurring goal. The gathering is intended to encourage and equip students through speakers, music, recreation, and Bible study and high-schoolers are eligible to attend only once during their high school years. As consistent attention was focused on youth group continuity and participation grew, the church enthusiastically raised funds for them to attend CHIC, establishing a process in 1996 for raising the funds needed for the trip over the course of the intervening two years so it need not be done all in one year.

Camp Squanto, part of the East Coast Conference's Pilgrim Pines camp and conference facility in Swanzey, New Hampshire, provided wonderful opportunities for summer camp experiences for children and youth. As the costs of attending grew, the congregation began fundraising annually to provide "camperships" for those needing assistance. Weekend retreats at Pilgrim Pines, offered annually for different age groups throughout the rest of the year, became regular events.

Note of interest: In 1981, the idea of "repurposing" the parsonage was suggested. While this idea received little serious attention when it was offered, the issue would become significant as the church began its second century.

1991-1998: The church has always shown its love for music from the early days of the string band and on to investing in an organ, a salaried organist and a salaried



choir director. In the 1980s, a volunteer Praise Team, self-accompanied by guitars and various other instruments, was formed in response to changes in contemporary Christian music. Since then, the worship services have gradually undergone a blending of music styles, sometimes more formal with the choir singing a prepared anthem, and sometimes less so with the Praise Team leading the congregation in singing. From time to time both groups have been included in the same service, this practice increasing over time. During the summer months, various individuals and groups provide special music for the services, demonstrating the richness of the musical abilities within the congregation. In 1991 this love for music spilled over into a children's choir, the Joyful Notes. The group flourished for several years, peaking

in 1995 and 1996 with presentation of two musical productions themed on memorizing Scripture through song.

The church's original concerns for missions have continued and evolved through the years. For many years, the Sunday School children contributed to the support of the children of a Covenant missionary family serving in Taiwan. More recently, the Sunday School's giving has been devoted to individual third-world children through the administration of Compassion, International. In 1991 the church as a whole began to re-emphasize its focus by creating a targeted Missions and Evangelism committee. After several years of promoting vigorous missions activity, this committee was upgraded to the status of a governing Board in 2000. The church's missions activities from this time have included, for example, annual purchase of new clothing for specific children identified by Thomaston's Social Services for the beginning of the school year (New Beginnings), annual purchase and giving of Christmas gifts for children who have a parent in prison (Project Angel Tree), as well as for needy children throughout the world (Operation Christmas Child), "spot-funding" for various short-term missionaries, equipping local members and friends for short-term missions projects (Haiti, Alaska, Operation HomeFront right here in Connecticut, and others), and regular support for two "children of the church" who accepted God's call to live and work as missionaries in other lands. For a brief few years, until it ceased operation, the Korean Covenant Church in Torrington depended upon members of the Thomaston congregation to provide Sunday School classes for the English-speaking children of that church. In 2013, the Evangelical Covenant Church established a denominational partnership with World Vision on behalf of children of the Congo. Many members of the congregation responded with long-term commitments to the appeal to sponsor individual children as their villages were targeted for development projects in health, education, and economic opportunities.

Sadly, the beginning of the church's second century saw the end of a long-lasting tradition. Begun in the 1950s as a fund-raising project, the annual Smörgåsbord in November involved almost everyone in the congregation in the complex activities of planning, promoting, scheduling, preparing, serving, and cleaning up afterwards. Dozens in the church had grown up as young "runners," ferrying platters and dishes of meats, breads, and desserts, etc., up and down the stairs, moving on to become servers and food-preparers and dishwashers. The Smörgåsbord became an event much anticipated within the community. Eventually, however, as the generations which had initiated the annual production passed on, there came a time when the church reluctantly decided to stop, giving its last full presentation of the traditional feast in November of 1991.



Many in the congregation felt that the church had lost a major unifying feature: the Smörgåsbord had required the combined efforts of almost everyone to succeed. For

a few years (1994-1997), a reduced program in the form of a Lucia Festival in early December was produced for the community. Again, this required wide-spread participation from the congregation to produce traditional Swedish foods and activities (songs in Swedish, children dancing, an appearance by Lucia), but the new event failed to measure up to memories of the Smörgåsbord, plus the scheduling created problems: it needed to occur much closer to Christmas, on the weekend nearest to December 13. This imposed additional pressures during an already-full season.

Just as the church was trying to decide about phasing out the Lucia festival, the Town of Thomaston began to create what would become a community-wide tradition. "Light Up the Town," occurring on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, drew people from Thomaston and the surrounding area into downtown Thomaston with many attractions in welcome of the Christmas season. As a test to see how it would fare, the church offered a "cookie walk" feature to complement the Christmas theme. The congregation created pounds and pounds of home-made cookies for sale. Women Ministries began to develop a complementary craft and Christmas tag sale. Soon other local crafters, members of the congregation and/or youth groups also were using the opportunity to present their wares. Enhanced with free coffee and hot chocolate as well as Christmas music, the Cookie Walk and Craft Sale soon became a favorite stop for members of the community.

One hundred years before, the First Congregational Church of Thomaston had been very supportive of the newly-established Swedish Evangelical Emanuel Church. In the 1990s, this relationship was re-affirmed and strengthened as the two churches began to collaborate on shared summer Vacation Bible School programs, each church hosting in alternate years. This plan carried over to alternating some shared worship services during Lent, specifically Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday.

By 1996, with average weekly attendance of 120, two worship services were being held on Sunday mornings, with Sunday School classes for children and adults between the services. While some positions of leadership still were filled by descendants of the original immigrant families, those descendants were thoroughly American. Additionally, as more members hailed from various ethnicities and from the surrounding communities, more leadership positions were filled by newcomers. It was clear that we had changed from the "little Swedish church on the corner" to a genuine community church. While our foundational Swedish pietistic heritage and our immigrant history had greatly shaped who we were and how we had gotten there and continued to impact our key beliefs – the centrality of the Bible along with personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord – being Swedish no longer dominated our church culture.

Several upgrades to the physical plant were undertaken in the '90s, most notably re-carpeting the sanctuary and re-roofing the main building.

1999-2015: On the brink of the new millennium, 1999 proved to be a transition year in the life of the church. As had been hinted at back in 1981, our American culture and economy had begun to change people's thinking about parsonages and providing housing for pastors and their families. When Pastor Tim Olsen was called to serve the congregation, the church worked out a salary agreement which allowed the family to purchase their own home. This left the parsonage unoccupied and the congregation began to consider and discuss its best use for the future. Also in that year, as the country of Yugoslavia began to self-destruct, thousands of ethnically-Albanian Muslim refugees began to flee the conflict, ending up in United Nations

refugee camps outside the area known as Kosovo. As the nations of the world began to consider where these refugees could live, the United States established regulations for sponsorship of refugee individuals and families by Americans. The congregation recognized an opportunity provided by having the empty house next to the church and investigated the program.

Consequently, a refugee family was moved in during the summer of 1999 and the church made contacts and gathered whatever was needed for this family of six who came to America with only the items they could carry in a few suitcases. During the



rest of that year English lessons were arranged, the younger children were enrolled in school and jobs were found for the parents and the older children. By the end of that year, as they became established in the community, they moved to their own apartment. Shortly after, the church learned from them of another refugee family, cousins of the original family, who wanted to relocate from the West Coast to Thomaston. Although the church continued to interact and support the first family, sponsorship of the second family was not considered. (The

later family had been sponsored in Seattle and had chosen to leave that sponsor.) However, the church did allow them to live in the parsonage for a few months in the spring of 2000 until they found an apartment. Then, again, the parsonage was vacant.

Thus it was a clear and definite blessing that the parsonage was empty when a fire was started in it one night in August of 2000 and the house was burned beyond recovery. Although it was said to be a case of arson, no suspect or motive was identified. However, it now seemed clear to the congregation that God intended for the church to do something different with that part of the property.



Through much prayer and thought and discussion, the church reached agreement to build an educational wing, including new kitchen and fellowship spaces. An architect was hired and plans were approved. The projected costs were staggering – \$350,000 – and the congregation soberly examined their faith and their personal finances to ascertain whether or not they believed the church could take on such a debt. Faith prevailed and the mortgage was arranged. A ceremonial groundbreaking took place on the Sunday in October of 2001 which was closest to our founding date of October 22. Actual work on the foundation, however, began the following spring, and for thirteen months the church eagerly watched the new structure unfold.

Finally, all was ready, and in time for the church to host Vacation Bible School in July of 2003. September's Sunday School classes started in the new rooms and an official joyful dedication was held on October 19, 2003. In a short while, it was decided that the acoustics in the new Fellowship Room made it uncomfortable for large groups. This was addressed by replacing all the panels for the entire dropped

ceiling. At this time, only one piece of the construction plan remained to be completed.

Back in 1958, the two new wings added at that time had been constructed with low-pitched roofs – in other words, essentially flat. These had developed leaks from time to time which had been addressed as they happened, but the main problem with them in New England is the snow that piles up with successive winter storms. It became a regular winter chore for hardy individuals to climb up there and shovel off the snow. In more recent years, snow blowers had been hazardously man-handled to the roofs to do the job. Building the new educational wing presented an opportunity to correct this at last. The South wing was directly connected to the new addition, so its roof line had been designed to connect the old to the new. However, the North wing retained its flat roof. An agreement was made with the builder to hold back funds to install a peaked roof over the unmodified North wing at a later time. This was completed three years later in 2006.

Seven years later, and only twelve years after taking on the original mortgage, the congregation had repaid the entire loan to the bank and the mortgage was ceremonially burned in November of 2013.

As the American culture has grown more complex and the pace of life has accelerated, the limited financial resources of many congregations preclude hiring ordained staff beyond one pastor, even when the pastoral duties are simply too great for one person to accomplish well or efficiently. The Evangelical Covenant Church developed a program for equipping lay individuals to come alongside their ordained pastors to minister within their congregations. These “bi-vocational pastors” are officially licensed volunteers, retired or working in other careers, who undergo significant educational instruction by the denomination and deliberate mentoring by their churches’ local ordained pastors. As assistant pastors, they are able to focus on particular aspects of the overall pastoral load. The Covenant Church of Thomaston’s first such lay pastors began serving in 2004 and 2006. Each person, after serving the congregation for a few years, moved on, one to a different state after officially retiring from his paid career, and the other to a more distant part of Connecticut. More recently, two current members of the congregation have recognized calls from God to serve the church in this way. In 2012, a Pastor for Congregational Care was approved and entered the program. This person’s primary focus is the needs of the church’s elderly, widowed, and home-bound to keep up with home maintenance chores and small repairs. In 2015, a Pastor of Visitation was approved and entered the program. Her primary focus is spending time visiting with, listening to, and praying with and for those who are sick or home-bound.

An additional means of keeping pastors equipped to serve and preventing burnout from a heavy pastoral load is a sabbatical leave. This church granted its first three-month sabbatical to the current pastor in 2009 after he had served with the congregation for ten years (plus unbroken long service elsewhere also without benefit of any sabbatical). He reported to the congregation that the time was used to great advantage for spiritual refreshment and restoration and to re-prioritize his commitments. The time also served to strengthen the church body as individuals stepped up to fulfill certain responsibilities while the pastor was away.

As the church approached its 125th year, several more projects and repairs to the physical plant were accomplished. In 2007, an additional attempt was made to solve a long-existing mildew problem inside the west and north foundation walls of the older section. Curtain drains were installed outside those walls, and a dehumidifier

was installed in the Fireplace Room, but the problem continues unresolved. In 2010, the ceilings in the Sanctuary and the North wing were insulated. All the windows in the older section of the church were replaced, some in 2010 and the rest in 2011. Also in 2010, the Office Manager's office in the North wing was remodeled and doubled in size by removing a wall between two small rooms and installing a closet. The older of the church's two furnaces was replaced with a new gas-fired furnace.

Then, in the fall of 2011, three severe storms in close succession resulted in sewage backing up to a level of three inches in the new Fellowship Room and kitchen. Serious mold put that section of the church off limits and out of commission for several months. As the mold was being remedied, the church's insurance provider decreed that the church must install an expensive backflow valve in the sewer line between the church and the church's nearest neighbor to prevent any future occurrence. This was an unplanned-for financial shock, but the congregation was able to produce the necessary funds and the valve was installed.

The Evangelical Covenant denomination has developed a program, the Vitality Pathway, to help churches evaluate the overall health of their organizations and to work systemically to improve identified areas. In 2012, the Pastor and a few leaders within the congregation began to investigate the possible appropriateness of the program for this church. The denomination's appointment to the East Coast Conference of a local facilitator prompted the church to cautiously undertake the process, beginning with a workshop to evaluate the organization's present state of health. The two main goals of the program are to help churches to be healthy and missional. These are defined as "pursuing Christ" and "following Christ's priorities." In the initial workshop in 2013, the participants identified this church as a "stable" church. While this initially felt pretty good to the participants, the remainder of the workshop clarified that stability is impossible to maintain – a stable church must become more vibrant or it will gradually decline into ineffectiveness.

The Vitality Pathway is not meant to be a "quick fix" but a gradual process and a shared spiritual journey. During the first two years, a Vitality Team met regularly and accomplished certain tasks. These tasks included sending the Pastor and three people from the team to a national Vitality Pathway seminar given in Minnesota, assessing the needs and resources of the church and the community, discerning a Biblical Story for the church, creating a Relational Covenant for times when we don't agree, and frequently sharing key aspects of the program, as well as the team's progress, with the congregation.

A group drawn from the congregation met to select the church's Biblical Story. The passage chosen was Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to everyone as he had need. Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple court. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This story was selected because it includes all of the themes identified by the group as key to our story: maintaining unity, continuous prayer, rebuilding, trusting in God

(which isn't easy), concern for others, not judging, discipleship, and welcoming others to our church and to Christ. It illustrates us when we are at our best, and provides an inspirational vision for our future.

A different group drawn from the congregation met to work out a Relational Covenant:

A Covenant for Our Life Together

Let our interactions with others be based on Colossians 3:11-17

"...Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And over all these virtues put on love..."

Listen to each other with empathy, patience and respect.

Offer to help and support anyone who is in need.

Value each other with God's love.

Encourage each other to grow in faith, love and wisdom.

We prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit in all situations.

The Vitality Team wrapped up the bulk of its work during the late winter and spring of 2015 and a new team is being called to begin the Pathway's next phase, Strategic Planning.

While it is unclear yet where God will lead the church on the Vitality Pathway, during this same past few years, other changes indicate the congregation's willingness to consider different ideas and new ways of operating. A Trailblazers youth group for students in Grades 4 to 6 was started in 2012 and continues strongly. A younger group for students in Grades 2 and 3, Pathfinders, now meets monthly. In 2013, the timing and coordination of the worship services with the Sunday School program were examined and a new schedule was tried for 2013-2014. Evaluation of this trial resulted in eliminating the second service for 2014-2015 and starting both Sunday School and worship a bit earlier. More small group studies are meeting during the week and more church family meals are shared. A monthly non-traditional worship service for handicapped persons has begun and is growing. The church's young adults are planning and implementing a new outreach to the community centered on the newly refurbished Potter's House, formerly the Fireplace Room. There is a sense of positive momentum as the church observes the milestone of its 125th Anniversary and begins the next phase.



Fourth of July, 2015

(Original history compiled by Kenneth Lundberg, with additions in 1990 and 2015.
This version edited by Ruth Johnson)