

Colonial Heights Presbyterian Church, Portland, Identifying as Common Ground

Colonial Heights Presbyterian Church in inner SE Portland was chartered on January 18, 1961 as Colonial Heights *United* Presbyterian Church, changing to the current name on January 23, 1964, after a historical General Assembly voted on merger between denominations that had split over slavery during the U.S. Civil War to become The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 2018 we took the new identity, Common Ground, reflecting our current presence and witness of Christ's love more closely than the words "colonial" and "heights."

Three churches from three different cultural communities merged into the new chartered congregation: Scottish, Chinese (mostly Cantonese speaking people from Southern China, Guangdong province), and a 3rd which itself had been a merger of 3 churches, one started by Italian immigrants. Another had a Sunday School Department for deaf children. A 1964 Oregonian article on the dedication of the building reported that "the congregation has been interracial from the beginning. Chinese, Greek, Italian, Sicilian, Japanese, and other nationalities worship together."

Seven installed pastors served through July 31, 2022, when we ceased holding worship: Revs. Elwood B. Hunter; Stephen M.S. Lee; Kenneth R. Bomberg; Richard A. Weiss; William P. Borgman, Pastor Emeritus; David Hutchinson; and Linda Stewart-Kalen, Pastor Emerita. Ms. Shirley Tormey served part of a year as an intern from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

In gatherings we recognized our occupation on the ancestral shared lands of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Kathlamet, and Clackamas bands of Chinook peoples; the Tualatin, Kalapuya, Molalla, and many others who made their homes along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers.

We spent 2021 in an Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon cohort on structural racism, which assigned a task of researching property history. Rev. Linda Stewart-Kalen, pastor from 2005 – 2022, found records showing that neighborhood land became property under two grants from the Donation Land Claim Act of September 27, 1850. James E. Stephens and a family named Dobbins made initial claims to land in SE Portland. Gideon and Mary Tibbetts later took over the Dobbins' claim. CHPC was built in 1964, on land purchased with \$7,000 in seed funds in 1961. The lot held a large two-story frame home on a brick foundation and a smaller two-story house that was a converted barn. Later came purchase and then sale of a manse next door and sale of land to the south of the building.

When Rev. Linda Stewart-Kalen, came in 2005, she led us through a conversation helping us to focus on our how we might use our resources for ministry. We identified five Ministry and Mission Goals:

- Honoring Diversity & Support of Vulnerable Communities
- Strengthening Families & Children
- Increasing Stewardship of the Environment/Caring for God's Creation
- Promoting Music & the Arts
- Supporting Opportunities for Education & Nurture Across Generations,

Many ministries and objectives overlap. many relate to the hospitality experienced in our building and grounds as a place of healing for those who reported unhealthy experiences in previous churches. Our land has been a green oasis for the neighborhood, which has no nearby parks. We were the first Earth Care Congregation in the Presbytery, installed rain gardens and traffic berms, meditation stations with poetry boxes, a Peace Pole, planted trees and native plants, and became an Audubon Gold Certified Backyard Habitat and Pollinator Habitat.

In 2005 we became one of eight PC(USA) churches on the East side forming the Presbyterian Urban Network. We gathered for family outings, joint worship, and collaborated on ministry projects. A grant from Lake Grove Presbyterian enabled hiring a shared parish nurse.

Our commitment to artists and musicians is reflected in being a host site for the SE Portland Art Walk and our own Musicians-in-Residence Program, which provided practice, rehearsal, or teaching space for young musicians in exchange for sharing their talents in worship. Our Music Director guided them in understanding how music is offered in worship vs. performance music, equipping several to play in other area churches.

In 2007 we started the Reading and Reflection book group, which over the years evolved to include neighbors and friends who are Jewish, Roman Catholic, Atheists, and Nones. Our reading discussions triggered sharing of tender life stories within our trusted group.

In the 2010s we started a summer tradition of the Front Porch Party, inviting family, friends, and neighbors to join us for a feast featuring grilled, wild salmon and musical entertainment.

We helped build a Habit for Humanity home, helped host Daybreak Shelter that provided overnight housing and meals for houseless families with children. Joining with other PUN churches, we paid for rent and helped furnish an apartment for a houseless couple with a 3 year old and an infant.

In 2011 we celebrated our 50th anniversary with a Jubilee Worship Service. We completed remodeling of the sanctuary with new carpeting and modification of the chancel steps built from beautiful wood and added hand rails from reclaimed wood from our unused pews. We also had completed installing an ADA bathroom and other improvements. We took our Jubilee theme from Micah 6:8 "What Does the Lord Require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

In later years, a more organic style of education replaced traditional Sunday School for children, inviting children to light candles, pour the water into the Baptismal Fount, engage with the pastor during the Time of Wonder reflecting on the scriptures. We continued to offer child care and other activities for the youngest children who then wished to leave the Sanctuary.

Rev. Stewart-Kalen provided supervised visitation for children and family members separated by Child Protective Services. She and four other members supervised the work of community service workers assigned by the county & federal courts as an alternative to jail time. Those assigned to us were usually medically fragile and unable to serve in other settings.

The church has shared its building and grounds with other congregations, youth organizations, support groups, art groups and performing artists. Long time building partners include the Veterans Acupuncture Project, Hawthorne Family Playschool, and since 2019 Metropolitan Community Church has shared space with us. We've held summer art camps for children, slept incoming college students from Lewis & Clark and Reed College in the building while they explored justice and environment work in their new community.

We have ensured that our community understands we are a connectional church by faithfully making all per capita payments, mission pledges, supporting all of the PC(USA) special offerings and the Theological Education Fund. We heard reports from meetings of our higher councils, and often used scriptural based study materials from the denomination to explore issues such as marriage, gender and sexuality, mental illness, the call to care for refugees, and understanding other religions. We were active in Presbyterian Women and heard from many mission speakers. Rev. David Hutchinson, collaborating with Westminster Presbyterian, Portland, brought us into partnership with the Presbyterian church in Cuba. We also partnered with Kristie Van Nostran while she served as a Co-Worker in Central America..

Having the 2016 General Assembly meet in Portland was a rare opportunity for members to see the denomination at work. Volunteers from CHPC helped with set up, greeted visitors at the airport, sang in the choir at opening worship, and assisted with Communion. We hosted an Earth Care Workshop and were a Sunday worship service and lunch site for some GA visitors.

We have much to celebrate in 62 years of faithful ministry. Good things have happened in this place! In 2019 we became a Matthew 25 congregation. We have reached an amazing number of people, with over 1,000 different individuals/month present on the property before group events stopped in March, 2020, during the Covid-19 epidemic.

In March of 2020, all worship and in-person groups stopped because of the Covid 19 pandemic, but being the church did not stop. The pastor went on a learning technology curve while still responding to needs for individual pastoral care with members and building users. We connected on Zoom for session meetings and other gatherings. Covid took a toll here as with many. After significant loss of income, members drifting away, and deaths, the session saw that we lacked resources to sustain future ministry and requested that the presbytery appoint an Administrative Committee with Original Jurisdiction to partner with us in next steps. We hired a building manager to handle building and office needs. The AC called a congregational meeting on January 8, 2023 to vote on dissolving the congregation. Our request goes to the Presbytery January 18 at a Special Meeting called to address several items We recognize that as our physical bodies wear out and a time comes when we must let go of them, it is time to let go of this church body, and trust that in God that new life, good life, will come again out of this soil.

-Kate Belt, Ruling Elder, Administrative Commission