

**The Joint Venture
of
The Wilton Presbyterian and St. Matthew's Episcopal Churches
Wilton, Connecticut**

The Joint Venture between Wilton Presbyterian and St. Matthew's Episcopal began in the late 1960's, in the high and heady time of post-Vatican II ecumenism. And it has been going strong ever since because of

- our common faith that Jesus Christ is head of the whole church (not just one denominational part of it),
- our holy hope that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that this joint venture is but a foretaste of the Kingdom of God we shall all one day enjoy together
- the common love of God that seals our relationships with one another ever more deeply day-after-day, week-after-week, year-after-year.

There are three clear, recent witnesses to the security and vitality of this joint venture.

The first is that throughout their long, sometimes arduous deliberations and efforts in authorizing, planning, and building its new sanctuary, never--not even once--did Wilton Presbyterians consider the option of building anywhere but on this campus we share with St. Matthew's Episcopalians.

The second is that the first financial contribution to the WPC Sanctuary Fund was given by an Episcopalian and that, without the ongoing spiritual prayers and personal cooperation of the Episcopalians, this sanctuary would not have become a reality.

The third was the sheer joy on November 21, 2004 when Wilton Presbyterians and St. Matthew's Episcopalians worshipped together in WPC's new sanctuary in a service whose Eucharist was celebrated by Bishop Alfredo Ramos-Orench of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut.

In short, we have lived, worshipped, and worked together for so long and so genuinely that we simply cannot imagine being separated!

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE JOINT VENTURE: TWO REMEMBRANCES

The Birth of the Venture – How did it happen in Wilton?

Courtesy of The Rev. Stephen Parker, Rector of St. Matthew's Parish (1977-1993), in his Ecumenical Adventure (October, 1990)

The fledgling Presbyterian Church under its dynamic first Pastor, W. Stewart MacColl, had first worshipped in the music room and then the gymnasium of Cider Mill School since the fall of 1961. The Church was more than ready for a typical church home, but years of worship in the gymnasium had formed a decidedly particular people, not particular about architecture, but filled with zeal for mission. There developed within that core of Presbyterians a pride in understanding that the Church was the people gathered and their purpose was to be active and alive in the world. The WPC parishioners needed to build, but they did not want to exhaust their physical resources on physical structures. If they were to have a church building, first they would serve the mission of the church beyond their walls, reaching into the local community but also very importantly into the world. Mission initiatives from Norwalk to Maine to Africa have been a source of joy and strength to them.

In 1968 and 1969, Presbyterians began purchasing ground in preparation for building a new structure. Time, circumstance and creative imagination altered the traditional path. Roger Douglas, Rector of St. Matthew's since 1966, had become good friends with Mr. MacColl. Each was known as an 'idea man' with a reputation for being willing to do things outside the convention of his own denomination. Conversations between key leaders of each church followed.

What brought St. Matthew's to this unusual table? St. Matthew's was a church already more than a century and a half old when the discussions with the Presbyterians began. Its location then was on Route 7 just north of the Wilton Town Hall. St. Matthew's was founded in 1802, had been moved twice, but by 1970 it had occupied the church building on Route 7 for more than one hundred years. Despite the beauty of the church, it was plainly not large enough for the growing town. Three services on Sunday could not accommodate the growing congregation; the church school needed to be bused to different locations. There were many who would feel a keen loss of the familiar church home. A few would not make the transition.

There were initial denominational roadblocks as well. Episcopal Bishop Walter Gray was wary if not pessimistic. The Presbytery was equally gloomy, fearing that the small size of Wilton Presbyterian would make it likely that it would be swallowed up by the more established Episcopal parish. Roger Douglas remembers well the meeting in Bishop Gray's Hartford office in which St. Matthew's Emery Ayers and Richard

Thurston “shepherded the Bishop” into seeing it their way. Likewise, the Presbytery may have underestimated the energy and resolve of these few Wilton Presbyterians.

And so under the courageous leadership of the Reverends Roger Owen Douglas and W. Stewart MacColl, the die for the ‘Joint Venture’ was cast. WPC indicated its willingness to go ahead and so did St. Matthew’s. A new era had begun.

Therefore, an unlikely marriage emerged, forged partly by convenience and partly by a holy hope laced with some naiveté among very sophisticated people. No one really knew how it would work out. That it happened at all is a testimony to the strength of human hope and courage over the almost equally strong human need to hold on to what is known and secure, particularly in matters of the preservation of religious institutions.

Beginnings of the Building: A Special Gift Saves the Project

Courtesy of W. Stewart MacColl, Pastor of Wilton Presbyterian Church (1961-1979), in his Random Memories of W. Stewart MacColl about Early Times at the Wilton Presbyterian Church (September, 1996)

Marshall Thompson seemed a peculiar person to lead the joint building campaign of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. He was a Baptist from head to foot, with a broad smile and corny jokes. Would he fit in Wilton? Could he help two churches with a joint campaign for a common building (a first in fundraising as far as he or we knew)?

The answer was soon obvious. He could and he did. There were carefully designed brochures, well structured dinners, organized calling on all members of both churches and, best of all, huge excitement. The Presbyterians had doubled their proposed goal...Enough money was pledged on both sides to make the building of the joint facility seem possible.

Then the construction bids were received. The Presbyterian part would be \$30,000 above the total of pledges and the amount the session had calculated the church could safely borrow. The elders decided that it was not prudent to continue. The church would have to withdraw from participating in the joint enterprise. A congregational meeting was called to meet at Zion’s Hill Methodist Church to hear the recommendations of the session. Elder Clarence Banning prepared slides for the presentation. He and his fellow elders were convinced that their decision was correct. The building could not go forward.

Two hours before the congregational meeting, one of WPC’s members, Ruth Husted, called Stewart. She had heard of the amount that was needed. She would provide the entire sum as a non-interest bearing loan to the church, and then she would reduce the

loan by a yearly gift until it was completely eliminated. Would Stewart please take her offer to the session before tonight's congregational meeting?

The session met an hour before the appointed time for the general gathering. The elders heard the generous offer of Ruth Husted. They quickly approved the loan and changed their recommendation.

Elder Clarence Banning began his presentation to the congregation with the charts that had been prepared. He proved conclusively that the church could not go forward without borrowing beyond what seemed safe to the elders. Then he told of Ruth's generosity and how that had changed the session's recommendation. Now it could offer a motion to proceed with the joint facility. The congregation joyfully and unanimously approved the recommendation. The Doxology was sung. The building was begun.

THE PRESENT OF THE JOINT VENTURE

Wilton Presbyterian Church is an ecumenical experience. "We are blessed by a special relationship with St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, and are challenged to clarify and enrich that ecumenical experience. We are more than two congregations sharing program and space. Indeed, we are all sisters and brothers in Christ."

That was one of the mission statements of WPC's Session in the early 1990's. And it is the very first introduction we share with new members as they join WPC even now.

We share space: Our church complex is the most immediately visible symbol of our joint venture with St. Matthew's. The two congregations share a campus of ten acres as a condominium association. The Presbyterian and Episcopal sanctuaries are owned by the respective individual churches. Everything else—from the building and grounds to the copy machine and toilet paper—are held in common and managed by a Wilton Episcopal Presbyterian Corporation (alias, WEPCO) Board of Directors. This Board is comprised of an equal number of Presbyterians and Episcopalians. The physical complex itself is maintained by a custodian and managed by a common Facilities Coordinator who (among other things) schedules the functions and meetings of both congregations as well as community groups.

We share Christian Education together. The Church School for children (pre-school through grade 7) and our adult education programs are overseen by two joint committees: The Joint Children's Christian Education Committee (JCCEC) and the Joint Adult Education Committee. Each congregation employs a Church School Coordinator who is the key staff person in this ecumenical church school venture.

We share youth ministry: A Joint Youth Ministry provides program activities and spiritual formation for both Presbyterian and Episcopal young people. Guided

cooperatively by staff members from each congregation, this Joint Youth Ministry includes activities for senior high students (Koinonia and Katalysta support groups, Senior High Fellowship, and annual mission trips to Washington, D.C. and rural Maine) and for Middle schoolers (7th-8th Grade Fellowship and Sexuality Seminar) and Sixers.

We share mission: An annual Gift of Christmas catalogue of gifts is but one example of a major shared mission project of both congregations.

We share worship: During the year we worship together on select occasions that allow us to celebrate various aspects of our joint venture, including our children, youth, and music ministries. During the summer we worship together alternately in WPC's Memorial Garden and in St. Matthew's Nave to renew our hospitality with one another. Here, we use liturgies combining the best of both worlds—Reformed and Anglican—in witness to our common Christian beliefs.