

Sussex's 2nd oldest church celebrates 200 years

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Bonnie Hall marvels at the vision and forethought of the members of Harmony United Methodist Church who came before her. They thought to put the church on what is now the John J. Williams Highway, back when it was a country road to Millsboro.

"Our forefathers persevered," said Hall.

The members today continue to persevere. While development continues to build up around them, Harmony stands steadfast along the highway. Church members invite the community to join them on Sunday, Oct. 14, at 3:30 p.m. to celebrate the church's 200th anniversary at its annual homecoming service.

"Our slogan is, 'We've come this far by faith,'" said Wilhemina Stevenson, one of the celebration organizers. "That's an understatement."

Harmony was organized as a congregation of members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1818, when Eli Harmon, an elder in the community, left \$10 in his will to the trustees of the Harmony Meeting House "to build a church."

The actual building site has changed over the years, but not the organization. The current building on Route 24 had its cornerstone laid in 1940. Over the years



Harmony United Methodist Church in Millsboro is celebrating its 200th anniversary as a congregation on Oct. 14. STAFF PHOTO BY TAYLOR GOEBEL

the building has had some additions, a dining hall, new pulpit furniture, a choir room and indoor bathrooms.

It is the earliest established Methodist church within the Nanticoke community of Millsboro, according to the church history compiled by Robert G. Drainie, Sr. It is the second oldest officially organized congregation in Sussex County.

"Today that church, though small on the highway, serves as a beacon of hope to all who see it," said Hall. There are members in the church today who can trace their families back to many of the original trustees.

The celebration will actually begin with the regular church service on Sunday at 11 a.m. After the service there will be a luncheon at 1 p.m. where members of the community are invited.

"If you come, we'll feed you pretty well," said Stevenson.

The official celebration begins at 3:30 p.m. The featured speaker is the son of a former Harmony pastor, the Rev. David Hackett, a retired United Methodist minister. The celebration is also scheduled to include music from a special community men's choir that is made from members of Harmony UMC, Indian Mission UMC and Friendship UMC.



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IF YOU GO

Harmony United Methodist Church 200th Anniversary Celebration

When: Sunday, October 14. Church Service at 11 a.m.; lunch from 1 to 3 p.m.; Anniversary Celebration with music at 3:30 p.m.

Where: Harmony United Methodist Church, 27270 John J. Williams Highway, Millsboro

Hall said she's heard them practice and it is inspiring music.

Along with the music will be a presentation on the church history. That history includes some times that are not so harmonious.

In the late 1870s, the new preacher assigned to the church "advocated that church members mingle with former slaves and include them in their religious services." While some members embraced the idea, others opposed it and split from the church to build their own chapel less than a mile away.

"Back in the day our elders made a gut-wrenching decision," said Hall. The division in the church also created a division in families, she said. That divi-

sion can be seen in her own family that has members in the other three Methodist churches in the area that will take part in the celebration.

"What touches my heart is the community mass choir," said Hall. "It is an outward sign of the healing process (from that break so many years ago). It's a testament to faith."

The church members today say they plan to continue the vision put forward by their forefathers in creating the church. They support local food missions such as the Christian Storehouse, host annual men and women's days, hold an annual Homecoming service, a Native American Sunday, an annual Cemetery Rally, Vacation Bible School, and Soup and Word Ministry.

"It's a beacon of hope. It's a beacon of family," said Hall. "We try as best we can to keep tradition going, to continue with vision."