

# Celebrating 175 years and looking for more

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Independence, MO — There's excitement galore these days at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which is celebrating its 175th birthday on July 3 and 4.

The church has been an Independence landmark since it was organized on July 4, 1835, in the log cabin home of Oliver and Ann Caldwell, with 35 members, eight of whom were slaves.

The frontier town of Independence was in its infancy when the congregation moved out of the Caldwell home in 1836 and into a one-room log building at Lynn and Walnut streets, just two blocks south of the public square.

As Independence grew, so did the church, whose members were in agreement the Holy Bible would be their only "guide and rule in faith and conduct."

A brick structure was erected some 18 years later on property at nearby Main and Short streets, and the Campbellites, as they were called, worshiped there 55 years before constructing a much larger building in 1909 at Pleasant and Kansas streets.



The new 1,200-seat church, with its Neo-Roman architecture, was short-lived. On Feb. 22, 1918, the church went up in flames and wasn't completely rebuilt on the site until 1926. A three-story educational unit, with a chapel and administrative office, was constructed on the east side of the church in 1957.

Excitement for the milestone anniversary, whose theme is "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," soared Jan. 31 when the church launched the first of its "Celebration Sundays" with a

historical program presented by the Shrou family – Norris, Brenda, Robert and Steven.

The program, entitled "This Church of Blessings: A Celebration of First Christian Church of Independence," was "kind of a skit that started at the beginning of church history and went clear through the present day," says Senior Minister Amy Lignitz Harken, who goes by her first name.

The 175th celebration, Amy says, will celebrate the past history of this stoic church, where Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone – founders of the Disciples of Christ movement – preached. But the past won't be the emphasis.



"We do want to remember the past ... and celebrate that, but we want to look forward to the 200th (anniversary) and where we want to be 25 years from now," Amy declares, noting First church plans to "start a vision process of looking ahead at the next 25 years and (determining) where we want to be and get a vision so we can put some things in place and make them happen."

Judy Stanley, who with her husband Neal is co-chairing the anniversary celebration, says the church is eager to get this visioning (process) going.

“You either do it or die,” she explains. “(The church) chose not to die.”

Judy, who grew up in the church, says she hopes the year-long celebration will remind the community and those attending the celebration “what this church has accomplished, what we have done, where we are going and what we are going to accomplish.”

Calling the church she has pastored the past four years a dynamic one, Amy says “things are moving, things are growing, things are happening” at First church, whose doors are open to anyone seeking spiritual or physical help.

“There are a lot of people with special needs who just kind of find us and seek us out,” Amy says. “They are always welcome.”

As for the legacy of First church, Amy believes it is “making Christ’s love real to the community,” which she traces back to Alexander Procter, who pastored the church for more than 40 years and was the voice in his day for education, for women’s equality and for social justices.

“He was a huge voice ahead of his time on social justice issues,” she says, “and I think today we continue to be a voice for love in the community and welcome all here.”

First church has reached out in love to the community by allowing Palestine Missionary Baptist Church to use its chapel on Sundays for worship while looking for a

permanent home, by providing shoes, coats and clothing to needy Independence schoolchildren through Tabitha’s Closet, by letting Jackson County use Fellowship Hall for its well-baby clinic and more.

The Rev. Jill Standley Sullins, pastor of Eastgate Christian Church, will preach Feb. 28 at the next “Celebration Sunday.” Services are 8:30 and 10:45 a.m.

“This is a real good example of somebody who grew up in the church, who has multiple generations in this church and now stands on the brink as a young, new minister with her whole future ahead of her,” Amy says.

Also bringing “Celebration Sunday” sermons are two former First church pastors, Dr. Tim Murtaugh (April 25) and the Rev. Frank Everett (June 27). They will preach at both morning services.

July 3 is a day of celebration with many activities planned, including an on-going evening picnic dinner in Fellowship Hall beginning at 5, followed by a celebration service featuring music, recognitions and special guests. Also, members will participate in a service of rededication to First church, its mission and programs. Everyone is invited to attend.

Saturday morning has been set aside for a time of reunion and reconnections for all members, former members and all those with ties to the church.

Throughout the day, various reunions will be going on involving former Sunday school teachers, choir members and musicians, CYF’ers and their sponsors, as well as Boy Scout members and leaders of Troop 229, which the church sponsors, and Drumm Farm boys who attended Sunday school and worship as a group.

First Christian Church has been an Independence landmark since 1835, with members first worshipping in a log cabin home, eventually moving to a much larger building that burned down in 1918. The current church, which replaced the building after the fire, is at 125 S. Pleasant St. in Independence, and was completed in 1926, with additions in 1957.

A full house is expected for the official Fourth of July anniversary celebration that begins at 10 a.m. Dr. Joseph A. Jeter, preaching professor at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, will deliver the sermon.

Jeter is a renowned Disciples minister and an expert on Alexander Procter, known as the “Sage of Independence.” Following the service, which also includes special music, birthday cake and ice cream will be served in Fellowship Hall.

The congregation and its pastor extends a cordial invitation to the community to attend any or all of the celebration festivities.

**For more information about the various reunions and activities, call the church office, 816-252-6100.**