

Upper Merion Baptist Church
formerly First Baptist Church of Bridgeport, PA.

585 General Steuben Rd, King of Prussia, PA 19406
167 years from 1850 to 2017: 110 in Bridgeport, PA; 57 years in King of Prussia, PA

Origin: The Rev. William Smith, a Baptist resident of Norristown, PA, started services in the Bridgeport school house on 2nd Street, July 1846. By May 1847, a “Sabbath-school” was established with twenty children. The First Meeting House was built from June 1849 at 330 West Fourth Street (then Holstein), which is owned presently by Terry and Linda Cooper. Seventy-five students transferred to the new Sabbath School. The church was formalized Feb. 20, 1850 with Rev. Smith as first pastor. On March 19, 1850 the church was recognized by a council of representatives of area churches. In October of 1850, the church was admitted to the Philadelphia Baptist Association (founded 1707). Affiliation was made later with the Central Union Baptist Association. Early baptisms took place in the millrace of the Jones and Wright grist mill at the end of River Bridge, even when ice had to be broken. Renovations of 1899-1901 brought pointed Gothic-style windows and an indoor baptistery.

The Second Meeting House was built 1960, first service July 30, 1961, as the the Upper Merion Baptist Church and Education Sunday School Wing, on more spacious six acres in King of Prussia, at corner of Valley Forge Rd. (Rte 23) and Gen. Steuben Rd. The Education wing is also home since 1970 for the community **Upper Merion Baptist Nursery School**.

The Third Meeting House: The present sanctuary of Upper Merion Baptist Church (Paul E. Lederach, Jr., architect) was built next to the 1960/61 building, with dedication May 23, 1982. Two memorial faceted glass windows with O.T. and N.T. themes enhance the interior (Edward J. Byrne Studio, Doylestown). Some of the historic Bridgeport church furniture is still in use. The 1961 sanctuary was renamed Fellowship Hall, a multi-purpose space for meetings, special events, recreation, and hosting community groups. This structure, redesigned after a fire of 2005 and re-dedicated Feb. 2006 (Phil Detweiler, Contractor, of Paul F. Detweiler and Sons), has a window from the Bridgeport church, donated by the Coopers, and a new faceted glass Cross Window, created by Edward J. Byrne of Doylestown, designer of the 1982 windows.

Music: There has been an adult choir since the 1850’s and an occasional children’s choir since 1893. The Rogers organ was re-installed in the present 1982 sanctuary from the 1961 building, with chimes donated by Mr. and Mrs. Earl Kutz in memory of their parents. The Tower carillon was given for the 1982 building by the Estate of George and Lillian Davis. The Minister of Music, David Maness (ret. faculty Eastern University), has directed the present choir for over forty years.

Ministry: From 1850 to 1960, twenty-four pastors served the Bridgeport Baptist Church (+ two interims). From 1960 through 2008, five pastors served the Upper Merion Baptist Church (+ four interims). All were men. The most recent sixth pastor, the Rev. Kathryn Eagles, served October 2009 to retirement in June 2016. Since 1977, UMBC has provided training for at least nine Pastoral Interns, of which two have been young women, and had a woman Associate Pastor in 2008.

Missionaries: The church supports American Baptist Convention Missions (National headquarters, Valley Forge, PA) with numerous church members who have been or are currently serving in the Caribbean

(including Haiti), Cuba, Chile, Africa (Congo), India, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia, and Okinawa. Support also goes to the Murrow Indian Children's Home in Oklahoma.

Programs: Present Sunday School classes, held before 11 a.m. church, support various age groups from infant child care through Jr. church, and several adult classes. There have been Jr. High, High School and College ministries, and in past a Wednesday Night prayer and study service. The monthly newsletter is titled, "The Hilltop". Web site: www.umbc.org.

Reaching out to the community: The early Bridgeport church made an effort to reach the "outstations" of King of Prussia (3 miles) and Merion (2 miles). A bus was acquired in 1948. **Weekly Radio Ministry** on WNAR "The Sunday Meditation" occurred for 12 years, Oct. 1946-1958, under the Rev. J. Elwood Bauers and the Rev. John H. Walker, with voice and brass quartets. Rev. Bauers also had a prayer ministry at **Abrams Chapel** on Henderson Rd. A **Drive-In Church**, under Rev. Dr. Richard L. Schultheis was established from 1966, at the **Valley Forge Drive-In Theatre** on Allendale Rd. where presently Costco. During the summers of 1971-1977, after closure of the theatre, Rev. Schultheis led an 8 a.m. **Community Drive-In Worship**, on the commercial **King of Prussia Mall parking lot** near Gimbels (now JC Penney), from a portable platform and pump organ. Sound traveled on wires in the asphalt to the car radios at 640 on the dial. By the Bicentennial year of 1976, two services, at 8 and 9 a.m. were given for community and travelers at the Mall, before the regular church service at 11 a.m.

Additional Outreach past and present: Street corner ministry, Bridgeport; Sunday Breakfast ministry of Philadelphia; E.A.P.E. ministry in inner city; the Philadelphia Race Track Ministry; Millcreek Mission, Phila. (monthly dinners); French Creek Christian Center, Franklin, PA; Camp Swatara, Bethel, PA; the Baptist Children's Services; UMBC Nursery School; Boy Scout Troop # 551; Cub Pack # 557; Gideons; two AA groups; Youth and College groups, incl. mission trips; Mothers-Babies Play Group; Music Ministry (Choir and Praise Team); One Night at a Time; Norristown State Hospital; Manor Care (elder programs); Christian musical group recitals; Vacation Bible School and playground; church softball team; participation in Race for the Cure; quarterly Blessing Bags (groceries); two annual Outflow Saturdays focused on the community; and a current "Penny Project" for needy children. **Encuentro Latino in Coatesville, PA** was established by members Rev. and Mrs. Carlos Peralta ca. 2002, with support from the UMBC congregation. For three years through 2016, seven to ten UMBC members have been part of a **Cuba Mission** in February) to help the sister El Cristo Baptist Church, El Cristo, Cuba, with supplies and labor to rebuild its church building. Fellowship Hall was the temporary home for a least two Chinese churches in the 1980's. In May 2012, the **Evangelical Formosan Church of Philadelphia** began sharing the UMBC facility with classes and services in Fellowship Hall on Sundays. There are joint services on special occasions.

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