



Bells of Prayer, Acts of Mission: The History of Parkway United Church of Christ

Every Sunday at PUCC, bells are rung during the Lord's Prayer and actions are taken in support of mission. Worship, prayer, and mission are the themes as we consider the history of Parkway United Church of Christ.

The congregation got started in November 1838, when a small flock of German immigrant farmers led by Rev. Louis Nollau (a former missionary among the native Americans), established the German Evangelical Church, Des Peres. Initially, Sunday worship occurred at homes or in other churches. It eventually moved to three different log cabin churches and, in 1871, services began at the brick sanctuary now known as our historic sanctuary.

In 1885, a 687-pound bell was installed, and a tradition began. The bell rang three times as the Lord's Prayer was recited during worship so farmers in the field, unable to attend church, could stop and pray together with the congregation. The bell-ringing tradition continues today—a connection with history, and an affirmation of the centrality of worship and prayer.

Our congregation has engaged in community outreach and mission from its earliest days. Rev. Nollau, the church's founding pastor, also founded the German Protestant Orphans Home, later known as the Evangelical Children's Home, and now known as Every Child's Hope. Every Thanksgiving, children from the home would sing at the church's Thanksgiving Eve Service, and the farmers in the congregation would fill the orphanage truck with produce, canned fruit, and apple butter and jellies from the season's crops.

Every Child's Hope continues today to "look after the welfare of the children and families who need it the most" and Parkway has always reached outward to care for the needs of others in its community and the world. Our mission outreach includes, but goes far beyond, United Church of Christ denominational missions. Parkway members have taken active leadership in outside missions like Habitat for Humanity, local food pantries, the International Institute of St. Louis, and scores of others.

In recent years, the church has further broadened and strengthened its mission work by partnering with other religious congregations, including its neighbor—the Shaare Emeth reform Jewish congregation.

Even as our congregation maintained its central focus on worship, prayer, and mission, our church has changed in many ways. Its name changed in the late 1800s to Zion German

Evangelical Church, and then, after the 1957 denominational merger that created the United Church of Christ, to Parkway United Church of Christ.

For many decades after its formation, the church served primarily German immigrants and German-Americans, and services and confirmation classes were conducted in German. Maintaining the church was a community endeavor. Each year, for example, it was the duty of confirmands' mothers to scrub the church floor, before each annual confirmation Sunday. Using their own lye soap from hog water, cooked in a big black kettle, the mothers would away scrub a year's accumulation of dirt and mud.

Some things, of course, have changed a lot. At one time, men sat on one side of the church and women sat on the other. In recent times, the congregation adopted a highly inclusive congregational statement, expressing welcome to "all persons, regardless of race, ethnic, or socio-economic background while respecting differences of gender, marital status, age, sexual orientation, and mental and physical ability." In 2008, we expressly made ourselves an "open and affirming" congregation welcoming the LGBTQIA community into full participation.

Children have long been an important part of the church. The first Sunday School was built in 1911. In 1963 a new much larger educational building was opened, on the west side of Ballas Road across from the sanctuary.

In the late 1990s, the congregation built a new sanctuary onto the education building, giving the church its current modern and unified facilities on the west side of Ballas road. The new sanctuary, opened in 1998, was enhanced with a Quimby Pipe Organ in 2001 and stained glass windows in 2003.

Since 1998, the building, organ, and windows have been different from what preceded them. But the essentials at Parkway have remained unchanged. The bells still ring during the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, and the congregation still reaches out every day of the week to bring help to those in need.

