

MORSEMERE COMMUNITY CHURCH

A Brief History



Compiled by Lauren Maehrlein

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Dedicated to our pastors and members,
past and present.

Morsemere Community Church had its origins in the fall of 1921. A Sunday School was organized by the Rev. Albert Hall Marion, of Leonia, who recognized the need for Christian education in the rapidly growing area of Morsemere, Bergen County. Morsemere was never an incorporated entity, but is a neighborhood that straddles the northern border of Ridgefield and the southern border of Palisades Park.

Meeting first in a private home at the corner of Broad and Maple Avenues, the Sunday School had no permanent home for a year until, on Rev. Marion's prompting, a missionary affiliate of the



Methodist Episcopal Church helped those interested in purchasing our current property and constructing a portable building.

Our first pastor, Mr. Albert Allinger, a seminary student, dedicated the structure on 8 October 1922, and the following Sunday, 94 years ago, the Sunday School began its program with 25 students. Following Sunday School a worship service was held, accompanied by music played on a donated reed organ.

For the next four years the congregation grew and the “temporary” structure was bursting at its seams. Perhaps by heavenly intervention, Mother Nature took it upon herself to force the congregation to consider a more permanent venue. A storm, described alternately as a hurricane, cyclone, tornado, and tropical storm, hit the northeast on 17 August 1926, and the little church was reduced to a pile of tinder. Bowed, but not broken, the fledgling congregation met in the local grammar school for two years while funds were collected to rebuild. In that short time the pile of rubble was replaced with the beautiful edifice we worship in today.



Dedicated by the now Reverend Allinger in October 1928, Morsemere Community Church was ready to face the future. Morsemere has always striven to be an inclusive, community church. As such, despite its gratitude to the Methodist Episcopal Church, Morsemere severed its ties with the ME Church in 1927, becoming non-denominational, a truly “community” church.

Over the next 15 years the church promoted peace, racial understanding, and justice. Rev. Allinger, however, still felt the pull of the Methodist faith and left to pastor a Methodist church in 1938.



The Rev. Louis W. Schneider was Rev. Allinger’s successor. Despite his objection to war in general, he disagreed with his draft deferment as a pastor. He believed that if other young men were being called into service he should, too. Rev. Schneider left Morsemere to register as a conscientious objector and spent the duration working for the cause away from the battlefield.

In 1942 Rev. Walter A.R. McPherson came to Morsemere and guided us into an affiliation with the Congregational Christian Church. This descendant of the church of the Pilgrims allowed us to remain autonomous, yet still have a large support system to provide us with help and guidance. Rev. McPherson pastored the congregation through the war years, encouraging fund drives and austerity pledges. He even had his installation celebration cancelled as an unnecessary extravagance.

Rev. McPherson led Morsemere for 16 years during a time of great growth and change. Changes were made in the size of the congregation and in the physical building. When he arrived the sanctuary had no pews, just banks of folding chairs. And the beautiful stained glass windows were only installed the Christmas before his retirement. In celebration of the windows he had the church lights kept on during the Christmas season so that passers-by could enjoy their beauty. Rev. McPherson was among those who worked towards the building of the Sunday School and fellowship wing, though he wasn’t here to see it built.

Demonstrating their respect and appreciation for all that he had done for Morsemere, upon his departure, the Official Board named Rev. McPherson Pastor Emeritus.

In 1958 a newly ordained minister, Rev. James H. Ameling took over the helm at Morsemere as a single man. He led the congregation through a major growing pain – the building of the Sunday School/fellowship wing in 1961/62. Due to space constraints previous to the expansion,

Morsemere's Sunday School needed to have two sessions. The older children met before the church service and the younger ones during. With the grand opening of the addition in 1962 all children were finally able to attend classes at the same time.

By 1962 Rev. Ameling had a wife and a growing family and needed to move on. Morsemere reached out to a very well respected, though newly retired, minister, the Rev. Dr. Russell D. Custer. Dr. Custer had formerly been president of the New York Synod of Evangelical & Reformed Churches and had been instrumental in the merger of denominations that resulted in the United Church of Christ.

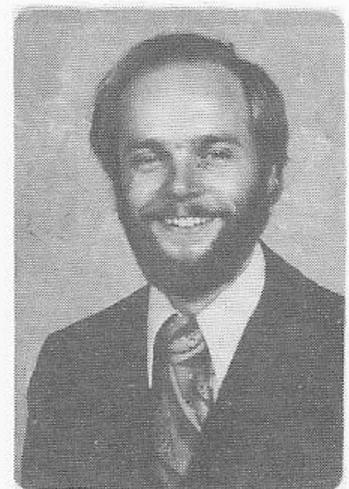
Where Rev. Ameling had been youthful and full of new ideas, Dr. Custer was a loving and comforting force in the beginning years of major social change. In 1964 Morsemere, under his



Dr. Custer with the 1964 confirmation class

Custer's retirement was postponed for five years as his steady but progressive leadership left a positive mark on the church. Another youthful minister, Rev. Edgar H. Coxeter with his wife and two little girls, came to Morsemere in 1968 fully embracing the social changes occurring in the country. Rev. Coxeter had his finger on the pulse of the young and quickly revitalized the Youth Group which had been dormant for a few years. He attracted teens from within and without Morsemere and, like those pastors before him, preached and worked

guidance, officially became a part of the United Church of Christ, which has allowed us to continue our independent nature, while being part of a large and supportive organization. Dr.



JD REV. EDGAR COXETER

for peace and justice. Unfortunately, he soon realized that supporting a family in Bergen County required more income than a pastor's salary.

Rather than leave for greener pastures he proposed becoming a part-time minister so that he would also be able to pursue another vocation. Unfortunately, the board wasn't yet ready for such a change and rejected his proposal on the grounds that Morsemere needed a full-time pastor.

Rev. Neil Swanson arrived in late 1969. Like Rev. Coxeter, he was young and enthusiastic, and he and his wife were blessed with twins in 1970. Within a few years, however, Rev. Swanson felt the pull to a different religious tradition and joined the Christian Scientists, leaving Morsemere in 1972.

In the 1970s the quiet neighborhood that had been a sparsely populated area in need of a Sunday School, had grown up and changed. High house prices drove the children and grandchildren of long-time members away to more affordable suburbs, while high taxes sent retirees south. Although still very vibrant, for the first time Morsemere was not growing. Civic and social events pulled in all directions and the newer residents in the area mostly sought a Catholic church. Morsemere little knew when they hired Rev. Ronald Wunsch, with his young wife Lynne, in 1973 that he was to be our last full-time pastor. When Rev. Wunsch chose to join the US Army as a chaplain in 1975, Morsemere was at a crossroads. Maybe now was time to call a part-time minister?

We found a solution from an unexpected place. Rev. James Handley of the nearby Grantwood Congregational Church UCC, suggested our churches be yoked – sharing a full-time minister for the two small churches. This was an idea that combined the best of both worlds: We would still have a full-time minister, but would share his salary. Grantwood was a long-time friend and sometime partner of Morsemere. Sharing a minister made financial sense, plus it would enable us to provide more robust programs and have a sister church for support.

The proposal was quickly agreed to by both churches. Rev. Handley's original plan to close and sell one church to more economically serve the congregations was, however, tabled for a later date. Sadly the good pastor wasn't able to see his plan become fully implemented, as he died very suddenly in an auto accident, at the young age of 42, less than a year later.

Once again we reached out to a retired minister. The affable Rev. Alfred Wyckoff gave us time to recover and find exactly the right person to lead our congregations. A good fit was found with Rev. Raymond Kostulias. He and his wife, Mary, with their two little girls, moved into Grantwood's parsonage and fully joined in fellowship with both congregations.

Rev. Ray's arrival energized us. We sponsored variety shows, bazaars, and Sunday School picnics, and the long defunct 20/30 Club, of young adults, was revived and renamed "Sunday Night Live." But Rev. Kostulias' intention was to bring Rev. Handley's plan of uniting the two churches to fruition. Despite the best efforts of the pastor and church leaders, neither congregation was yet

ready to give up their edifice. Over the next several years, two votes were taken but the premise was defeated, and most of our cooperative ventures were discontinued. We went back to separate Sunday Schools and no longer held monthly communion exchange services, but continued our yoked relationship with our shared pastor.

When, after eight years, Rev. Ray moved on, Morsemere and Grantwood came together to continue their yoked partnership. In 1986 we called the newly minted Rev. Mary S. Perkins. She was our first female pastor and the first of our pastors to come to theology as a second career. Pastor Mary incorporated her love of fine art into everything she did. Her sermons were often illustrated by the works of the great masters and lesser known artists. For fifteen years, until her retirement, she pastored both Morsemere and Grantwood, as we once again grew closer in our Christian journey.

As the new millennium dawned and Rev. Mary retired we turned to two unorthodox choices to lead our congregations. Scott Hamilton was not an ordained minister, but was filled with the love of Christ and the desire to inspire us to fully embrace all God's people. As a gay man with a life partner and a charismatic speaking ability both Morsemere and Grantwood took him to heart. When financial and family concerns necessitated his return to his native Oklahoma, we grieved.

During Scott's tenure Grantwood Church, plagued with a shrinking and aging membership, closed its doors after serving the residents of Cliffside Park and its surrounding area for 100 years.

Although it wasn't in the way that Rev. Handley had envisioned decades earlier, Morsemere



Mr. Scott Hamilton and Rev. Mary Perkins

welcomed them with open arms and our two small congregations were fully merged.

Morsemere had started out as a Methodist church and for a while we revisited those roots with our next minister. Rev. Kevin Newburg, an ordained Methodist minister, was teaching at Drew University when the opportunity arose to provide interim coverage while Morsemere searched for their next pastor. The minor doctrinal differences proved no problem as Pastor Kevin became our preacher and teacher. After four years, he became Rev. Dr. Newburg and we celebrated with him and his family. Then, just as we were fully comfortable with the arrangement, Dr.

Dr. Newberg was called by the Methodist hierarchy to pastor his own Methodist congregation.



Rev. Hyo-Jung Kim

One year ago Morsemere called Rev. Hyo-Jung Kim to lead us, hopefully to our 100th anniversary in 2021. Pastor Kim, born in Seoul, Korea, but raised in the US, is revitalizing the Morsemere Community Church by bridging the cultural gap between our long-time members and the newest residents of the Morsemere community.



Rev. Dr. Kevin Newberg and a new member