

Faith in a New Direction: Suburban Worship in Postwar Rapid City: 1945-1972

In the mid-1950s, the members of the First Congregational Church—the oldest church in Rapid City—were in crisis. Over the previous two decades, membership had grown from 500 in 1940 to over 660 in 1950 and approached 800 by the early 1960s. With the baby boom, Sunday school classes were packed. The basement was no longer big enough or conducive to fellowship. Moreover, the existing stone structure downtown on Kansas City Street, built in 1914, projected an image of the church that was stuck in the past, and many in the congregation felt it was time to make a change.²⁷³

The first step was awkward. Given the opportunity to sell before they had a building site or a design, the congregation made the decision to sell. For the next two and a half years, from 1956 to 1959, they met in the chapel of the Campbell Funeral Home while the Building Committee did its work.²⁷⁴

After acquiring a piece of property in a newly developed residential area off of West Boulevard, the committee traveled to Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Spencer, Iowa; and Boulder, Colorado to look at churches and interview architects. They also attended the International Conference of Church Architects to further their research. In the end, they chose the well-known Sioux Falls architect Harold Spitznagel to design a modern structure emblematic of the congregation’s increasingly suburban lifestyle.²⁷⁵

The Building Committee’s “Preliminary Statement of Requirements” for the architect spoke volumes about the ways in which they hoped the architecture would reflect the congregation. They wanted a building “that speaks to us, and to all who view it, in the language of our own time, a building that uses the materials of our day to express our own particular Congregational Protestantism with spiritual dignity and strength and beauty....” They wanted a design that was honest, simple, functional, beautiful and built “around our worship patterns and the life we live within our church body as a whole.” Sensitive to the site nestled just below Skyline Drive, the committee stressed: “The importance of view, of skyline and cloud patterns, and of surrounding terrain will help to make a distinctive setting for the church buildings.” Cherished symbols of their faith, from the crucifix to the organ to the belltower were important, but the committee hoped the architect would find new ways of expressing these elements in the design. “We do not wish a copy of some trite other denominational style,” the committee wrote. “We do desire a church of our day, deeply and

²⁷³ Henry Bradshaw, ed., *Glimpses of Our History: Celebrating 125 Years of the Ministries of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Rapid City, South Dakota*, (Rapid City: Clark & Greind Printing, 2011), 65.

²⁷⁴ Slide show script, 1961, First Congregational Church Archives.

²⁷⁵ Unsigned handwritten notes (Paul Fenske Printing Co. notepaper), no date. See also, Hazel Schwentker, [Memories, no date], First Congregational Church Archives.

simply expressive of our religious way of life, honestly functional, deeply inspirational, simply and beautifully designed to meet the needs of our day.”²⁷⁶

In choosing Spitznagel, the congregation was getting “one of our nation’s finest architects,” Rev. George Fisk later wrote. Spitznagel had attended the Art Institute of Chicago and earned his degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania.²⁷⁷ His work was widely recognized throughout the Upper Midwest. His design for the church reflected many of the characteristics of suburban church construction in the Upper Midwest in the postwar years. As historian Gretchen Buggein has noted, many members of the “Greatest Generation” had a sense that humanity’s destructive technology had outpaced spiritual development. To assert the constancy of their faith in the face of a modern world, suburban congregations embraced church designs that were streamlined and horizontal, and integrated the new materials of the age with the ancient feel of stone, wood, and stained glass.²⁷⁸

When the new First Congregational Church building was dedicated in January 1960, it represented one of the most iconic religious structures of the postwar era in Rapid City. Largely unchanged over the last six decades, it perpetuates the esthetics and the aspirations of the era.

The Pattern of Postwar Church Development

First Congregational Church was not alone in the postwar years. Across the United States, church membership swelled in the postwar era. In 1940, 49 percent of the population claimed some religious affiliation; by 1960, that number had risen to 65 percent. As residential construction boomed and Rapid City grew to the north, south and west, Mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church followed the community into these new neighborhoods.

Between 1945 and 1972, nearly two dozen new churches were built in Rapid City’s new suburbs. At the same time, long-established downtown congregations (Trinity Lutheran, First United Methodist, and First Presbyterian) renovated or razed their historic structures to build anew in the heart of the city. The boom began right after the war and built momentum throughout the 1950s. In March 1957, the *Rapid City Journal* noted, “More than half of Rapid City’s 45 church congregations are in various stages of developing building programs to accommodate growing membership rolls and increasing attendance at worship services, church school classes, youth programs, and weekday events.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Building Committee, First Congregational Church, “Preliminary Statement of Requirements,” no date. First Congregational Church Archives.

²⁷⁷ Dennis, “Post-World War II Architecture in South Dakota” (2007), 16.

²⁷⁸ See Gretchen Buggein, *The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

²⁷⁹ Paige Carlin, “Churches Show Vigorous Growth,” *Rapid City Journal*, March 11, 1958, 20.

The churches in the suburbs reflected the postwar concerns of their congregations. At the heart of the design was a concern for the postwar nuclear families who were the bedrock of the church community. L-shaped structures included the church sanctuary for worship along with above-ground wings to accommodate classrooms for Sunday school children and fellowship halls for multiple generations of parishioners. Unlike the basements of an earlier era, these spaces were illuminated with large windows that shed daylight on the faces of friends and family, and for the faithful, imbued the space with the warmth of the Holy Spirit. New materials, many of them developed to support the war effort, were now integrated into building design, including plywood, aluminum, precast concrete, gypsum board, wallboard, factory-built cabinets, tempered plate glass, laminates, and plastics. Deployed to accentuate the streamlined mid-century look in architecture and furniture, these materials accentuated the modern look, but often helped congregations keep construction budgets under control.

Just as the new suburban neighborhoods facilitated community interaction, with room for cars and children on bicycles, neighborhood shopping, and neighborhood schools, the new churches were designed to encourage fellowship and community. As West River Methodist District Superintendent Harvey Sander noted in 1959, many people preferred a neighborhood church.²⁸⁰ Large parking lots accommodated family station wagons and sedans in neighborhoods filled with blue collar laborers or service workers living in modest single-family homes.²⁸¹

The Need for Documentation and Preservation

Today, some of these Mainline and Catholic churches are still home to families who have been part of the congregation for several generations and who remain tied to the surrounding neighborhood. Other churches struggle to survive amid the general membership decline in Mainline denominations across the United States. Indeed, Christian Americans have gravitated to newer, larger, non-denominational churches with more contemporary praise worship formats and an expanded range of services for their congregants. In some cases, neighborhood Mainline churches have also been repurposed to serve as incubators for new charismatic and evangelical congregations.

Documenting the Neighborhoods

West Rapid City

Canyon Lake Methodist Church

²⁸⁰ Dick Rebbeck, "Rural Religion Has Rebuilding Pains," *Rapid City Journal*, November 8, 1959, 1-2.

²⁸¹ In her survey of postwar architecture in South Dakota, Dennis only highlights these downtown churches: Trinity Lutheran (Spitznagel, 1951), First Presbyterian (1952), Faith Lutheran (1957), and First United Methodist (1958), overlooking the migration of churches to the city's suburban neighborhoods.

When Methodists from across the state gathered for their annual conference in 1949, they met in Rapid City. Recognizing that the city was growing rapidly on the west side of town, they voted to establish a new Methodist church in the Canyon Lake area. To accelerate the launch of the new congregation, the Methodists purchased two and a half acres of land on Hillview Drive from the Department of the Interior—land that was made available in 1948 after the agency released surplus land after converting the Rapid City Indian School to the Sioux Sanitarium. (See essay on the Rapid City Indian School and Associated Property.) The Methodists then moved a small wood frame church building from Nowlin, South Dakota to the Canyon Lake area, renovated it, and began to worship.²⁸² On January 1, 1950, the parishioners, many of whom had been members of the First Methodist Church downtown, gathered for the first time in this building. The congregation began with 42 charter members, and their new church was formally dedicated in a ceremony in April 1951, more than a year after that first service.²⁸³

For the next seven years the congregation utilized this two-room structure while raising money to build a new church. In the spring of 1957, the architectural firm of Lucas, Craig, and Whitwam presented drawings for a new church campus. Construction on the first stage of this complex, which would include the sanctuary, a limited classroom, office space, and a full basement with kitchen and fellowship hall began in the fall of 1957 and was completed in 1958.²⁸⁴ Four years later, the church added a 12,000 square foot educational wing to accommodate the more than 500 Sunday School students. The project was designed by Kirkham, Michael & Associates, an engineering and architectural firm, and completed and dedicated in January 1963.²⁸⁵

Westminster Presbyterian

The Presbyterians began planning a new, West Side church at the same time as the Methodists. In September 1956, the National Missions Committee of the Black Hills Presbytery, working with the Board of National Missions, invited the Rev. Paul Fowler to survey the South Canyon-Canyon Lake area and to organize a new congregation.²⁸⁶ The group then purchased 13 acres across the street from the new West Junior High School (now known as West Middle School).²⁸⁷

Fowler set to work organizing the new congregation. In September 1956, he asked the school district for permission to rent a portion of the junior high school on Sundays for church services while the new church was under construction. The school district demurred;

²⁸² “Methodist Church Opens Here Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, December,

²⁸³ “Canyon Lake Methodist Church To Be Formally Dedicated Sunday, April 13, 1951, 3. See also, “Canyon Lake Methodists To Start Building,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 9, 1957, 3.

²⁸⁴ “Canyon Lake Methodists To Start Building.”

²⁸⁵ “Canyon Lake Methodist Okays Expansion Plan,” *Rapid City Journal*, February 8, 1962, 3. See also, “Bishop To Consecrate Canyon Lake Church,” *Rapid City Journal*, January 25, 1963, 9.

²⁸⁶ “Dedication Ceremonies Scheduled For Westminster Church Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 29, 1960, 4.

²⁸⁷ “School Rentals and Bond Sale Talked by Board of Education,” *Rapid City Journal*, September 12, 1956, 3.

it had adopted a policy that prohibited loaning or renting school facilities to partisan political or denominational groups.²⁸⁸

Undeterred, Fowler continued organizing and hosted the first meeting of this new congregation on February 17, 1957.²⁸⁹ Construction of the new church was already underway at that point and for the next three years as the 75-member congregation held fundraising meetings in the basement sanctuary beneath the manse. Finally, on March 27, 1960, members worshipped in the new church for the first time.²⁹⁰

The new church, designed by Aukerman and Mazourek, was completed in April 1960. It was one of Rapid City's most innovative new houses of worship. Its interior featured parabolic arch construction, with slopes and textures reminiscent of a gothic cathedral. Nevertheless, as the *Rapid City Journal* reported, "the lines of the building were conceived in such a manner as to present only clean definition without useless extras." Reflecting the modernist sentiments of the church's pragmatic congregants, the design was "keyed to efficiency, functionality and economy." "The buff face exterior of the building is combined with the open welcome of glass."²⁹¹

South Canyon Lutheran

Like other denominations, the American Lutheran Church monitored the growth of Rapid City on the West Side after the war. In 1954, the district mission committee authorized a survey of the South Canyon neighborhood to determine the potential for a new church. Five years later, Pastor Howard Bomhoff arrived to establish the new congregation. He held the first worship service on October 4, 1959. Seven months later, in May 1960, the City issued construction permits for the new church to be located at 4333 Brookside Drive. The church was completed and dedicated the following September. The L-shaped structure offered space for 300 worshippers on Sunday along with an office, a nursery, a "cry room," a kitchen, restrooms, and 14 classrooms. When the church was dedicated, it had 237 baptized members, 120 confirmed, and nearly 90 students attended Sunday school.²⁹²

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

Families living on the west side who were members of the congregation of Emmanuel Episcopal Church formed their own Sunday school in the fall of 1957. The group met initially at the Red Barn Restaurant in the early hours before the restaurant opened for lunch.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ "Dedication Ceremonies Scheduled For Westminster Church Sunday."

²⁹⁰ "Dedication Ceremonies Scheduled For Westminster Church Sunday."

²⁹¹ Ibid. Aukerman and Mazourek was a Rapid City firm that also designed the new YMCA in 1961. Jim Kuehn, "New 'Y' Center Nearer Reality," *Rapid City Journal*, April 23, 1961, 7. The company also designed the new wing of the State Game Lodge in 1964, Stevens High School, and the expansion and remodel of Bennett-Clarkson Hospital in 1971. See "Historic Game Lodge Grows," *Rapid City Journal*, June 7, 1964, 33; "Bennett-Clarkson \$900,000 project plan on schedule," *Rapid City Journal*, August 19, 1971; and "Many Involved in Construction," *Rapid City Journal*, May 1, 1970, 27.

²⁹² "South Canyon Church To Be Dedicated," *Rapid City Journal*, September 30, 1960, 22.

This group soon evolved into the congregation for a new church to be named St. Andrew's. The Episcopal Diocese had obtained land that once belonged to the Rapid City Indian Boarding School (see related essay), and in September 1958, the construction of the new church began. Much of the design and work was completed by volunteers, many of whom were professionals in engineering and construction. On November 23, 1958, the first worship service was held inside the still-unfinished building.²⁹³

Other Churches

Seventh Day Adventist (1950) – 4703 South Canyon Road
Canyon Lake Methodist (1950) – 3500 Canyon Lake Drive
Blessed Sacrament (1956) – 4500 Jackson Blvd

South Rapid City

On the south side of Rapid City, new homes went up quickly in the Robbinsdale district. As the new neighborhoods expanded, churches followed. Congregations were often incubated in people's homes or other facilities. When they were ready for a church building, thrifty congregations sometimes purchased and moved existing structures. Others erected new buildings that they hoped would reflect the neighborhood.

Southern Baptist Church

Rev. L.H. Roseman arrived from Batesville, Arkansas to organize the first branch of the Southern Baptist Church in Rapid City. He spent a year meeting with potential members in a home on East St. Francis Street. With a strong prospective membership, the church purchased 15 lots on the corner of Indiana and Oak Streets to build a three-unit church complex.²⁹⁴ The new structure was a hadite block and brick construction that included an auditorium and classrooms. Completed in the summer of 1954, the facility was envisioned as the first phase in a multi-unit complex that would eventually accommodate 700 children.²⁹⁵

Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church

In 1957, the Evangelical Lutheran Church founded a new congregation in Robbinsdale and began construction on Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, which sat across the street from South Junior High School (now South Middle School) at 17 Indiana Street. The first pastor, Rev. Harold J. Larsen, came to Rapid City from Tucson, Arizona. It was the third church he had started.²⁹⁶ Larsen conducted the congregation's first service on June 30, 1957 in the

²⁹³ Jo Parker, "A History of St. Andrew's Church," 1984. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church archives.

²⁹⁴ "Southern Baptist Church To Erect Building in City," *Rapid City Journal*, February 26, 1954, 3.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ "Faith Lutheran Church Started," *Rapid City Journal*, June 2, 1957, 3.

unfinished building. After the exterior was completed, members of the new congregation spent the fall “work[ing] together painting walls, tiling the floors, [and] building study bookcases and kitchen cabinets. They also completed the altar, pulpit, communion railing, bulletin board, and coat rack.”²⁹⁷ The church was formally organized and a constitution adopted in November 1957.²⁹⁸ Children accounted for a significant percentage of the new congregation, which included 165 baptized members, 82 confirmed, and 150 Sunday school students.²⁹⁹ The new building was dedicated in May 1958.³⁰⁰

South Maple Methodist Church

When a group of Methodists in the Robbinsdale area built a new church at Maple and Indiana, for example, they transferred their old church to a new congregation in Rapid Valley alongside Highway 40.³⁰¹ South Maple Methodist Church was designed by James C. Ewing, Jr. It opened for Mother’s Day services in May 1963. Built against a gentle rise near South Junior High School (now South Middle School), the church’s main floor included the work sacristies, offices, and parlor-nursery areas adjacent to the narthex. Underneath, at the ground level to the parking lot, the church proudly featured a “modern serving kitchen and a fellowship hall” that could accommodate 255 people at a banquet. The relatively simple rectangular structure was ornamented with hand chipped rock and faced brick on the exterior walls with a large stained-glass window facing Indiana Street.³⁰²

Rapid City Wesleyan Church

Three blocks away, the Rapid City Wesleyan Church was completed in June 1965 to house the combined congregations of Robbinsdale Wesleyan Methodist Church and First Wesleyan Methodist Church, which had been founded in 1942.³⁰³

South Park Congregational Church

In 1951, the new congregation of South Park Congregational Church was raising money to build its sanctuary. The building campaign brochure noted that the church “was planted in the heart of the new and growing suburb of southeast Rapid City, by means of a cooperative agreement with the major Christian communions of the city and state.” It thus reflected the ecumenical impulse that was an important element of the postwar era. The congregation described itself as “in the tradition of the Pilgrims and the Prairie Pioneers who valued freedom of worship and freedom of opportunity as their greatest treasure....” The design of the new church, according to the brochure, “speaks the language of worship in a

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ “New Church To Be Formally Organized,” *Rapid City Journal*, November 21, 1957, 3.

²⁹⁹ “Faith Lutheran To Dedicate Church Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, May 8, 1958, 20.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ “Church Moves to Rapid Valley,” *Rapid City Journal*, June 15, 1963, 10.

³⁰² “South Maple Methodist Consecration Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, June 6, 1964, 5.

³⁰³ See First Wesleyan Church, “[Our Story](#),” accessed March 15, 2021.

contemporary mood.”³⁰⁴ Vertical lines, a high roof, and a tall campanile appealed to tradition. Horizontal elements, however, and a cloistered entryway resonated with Prairie architecture and communicated a domestic feel that appealed to postwar families. Construction emphasized the need for education and services for children and youth. Groundbreaking took place in April 1954. By the time the church was open and fully operating in January 1956, the congregation had 197 members and offered Sunday school classes for more than 100 children.³⁰⁵

Other Churches

St. Paul’s Lutheran Church (1950) – Ninth & Fairview

First Baptist (1958) – Seventh & St. Patrick

Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (1962) – Fifth Street (see essay on Diverse Rapid City)

North Rapid City

In the postwar years, residential development north of downtown also expanded dramatically. Commercial development followed, and so did churches. In line with various formal and informal systems of discrimination, the Native community was concentrated in this part of town and various denominations opened churches that sought to serve Rapid City’s Native residents.

First Church of God

In 1951, the parishioners of the First Church of God erected a small frame, stucco, and stone building at Sixth and Denver in a working class neighborhood near Rapid Creek. In 21 years, it would be destroyed by 1972 flood. With capacity to house 200 congregants for worship, the church basement included a kitchen and was used for Sunday school classes, recreation, and meetings.³⁰⁶

St. Matthew’s Episcopal

St. Matthew’s Episcopal on Haines Avenue opened its doors for the first time to worshippers in 1952. The congregation, most of whom were Native American residents, had worked on the church’s construction.³⁰⁷ In addition to regular services at the church, the

³⁰⁴ “The South Park Congregational Church of Rapid City,” [Building brochure], 1951. South Park Community Church archives.

³⁰⁵ “History of South Park Community Church, 1951-1976,” nd. South Park Community Church archives.

³⁰⁶ “First Church of God Dedicates Building,” *Rapid City Journal*, March 31, 1951, 6.

³⁰⁷ “New Church Sets Consecration Rites,” *Rapid City Journal*, June 27, 1952, 3.

vicar, Reverend Levi M. Rouillard also conducted Holy Communion regularly at the Sioux Sanitorium.³⁰⁸

Sioux Baptist Chapel

In 1966, A.L. Davis, a Baptist missionary who had been working on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana, moved to Rapid City with his family and opened the Sioux Baptist Chapel, which began worship services in the old Community Hall in the Sioux Addition. In the spring of 1967, the congregation began construction of a small church at 1520 Haines Avenue, which was opened in October of that year. With its motto proclaiming, “The Savior for the Sioux,” the church was affiliated with other Baptist chapels on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and in Black Hawk, and Davis, a pilot, used a light airplane to travel between the church’s different locations.³⁰⁹ In the 1980s, the church changed its name to Haines Avenue Baptist (c.1981) and then to InterTribal Baptist (c. 1986), and the Northridge Baptist Church (1989). In 2007, the church building was lifted and moved to the Buffalo Chip Campground to make way for commercial development.³¹⁰

Knollwood Heights United Methodist

As new residential communities developed in North Rapid City, the Dakota Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, through its Conference Board of Missions, purchased seven lots on the corner of Milwaukee and East College Streets to establish a new church. Following the construction of a parsonage in 1960, Otto H. Lehner came to Rapid City that May to build the congregation and the new church. The main sanctuary was nearly complete when the congregation used the church for worship for the first time on December 17, 1961. A dedication took place the following March.³¹¹ Designed by William A. Schaefer & Associates of Minneapolis, who designed other churches around the northern Great Plains, the yellow brick walls of the structure give it an airy, modern look.

Other Churches

International Church of the Four Square (1951) – 927 E. Philadelphia
St. Isaac Jogues/Mother Butler – 221 Knollwood Drive
St. Therese of the Little Flower – 532 Adams Street

³⁰⁸ “St. Matthews Episcopal,” *Rapid City Journal*, October 3, 1952, 2.

³⁰⁹ Display advertisement, *Rapid City Journal*, September 13, 1969, 12. See also, “Sioux Baptist Chapel to mark 10th anniversary on Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, June 26, 1976, 9, “Baptists Will Build Indian Mission Chapel,” *Rapid City Journal*, March 18, 1967, and “Sioux Baptist Chapel as Church,” *Rapid City Journal*, January 4, 1969, 12.

³¹⁰ Dan Daly, “Cuatro Vistas under way on Haines Avenue,” *Rapid City Journal*, September 13, 2007, 15.

³¹¹ “Knollwood Heights Evangelical United Brethren Church Dedication Program,” March 25, 1962. Knollwood Heights United Methodist Church archives.

Documentation

Westminster Presbyterian



South Canyon Lutheran Church



South Park United Church of Christ



Faith Lutheran Church



South Maple Methodist Church



First Congregational Church



Emmanuel Episcopal Church



Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

