

OCBC History – Buildings, Causes, and Some Wonderful People

What led to the founding of the church?

We were a “daughter church” of the First Baptist Church in the Central Square area of Cambridge, founded in 1817. It had become too crowded, and it was voted that the new church should request what was then called “dismission” from the First Church in 1844. Some members of the new church felt that as Baptists they didn’t have as much status as did the established Unitarian, Episcopalian, and Congregational churches in Harvard Square (Old Cambridge, the oldest and most affluent section of the city), and that by naming the church as *Old Cambridge Baptist Church*, they would declare they had arrived in that area of town.

Who are the people (laity and ministers) who stand out in the story of your church? What contributions have they made?

In its first hundred years alone, OCBC had called 10 pastors. In the interest of brevity, those mentioned here have served from 1935 onward.

The Rev. Sam Miller, 1935-1958 – Themes: Worship as the essence of church, importance of the arts (drama, poetry, etchings), transcendent reality of God in everyday life, social justice, service to students, the elderly, and service members. A “poet of prayer” and an intellectual, he later became Dean of Harvard Divinity School. Two of his sons were killed in WWII. Congregation grew to 300.

The Rev. Ernst “Ernie” Klein, 1959-1974 – More liberal than some members, his theology was based on spiritual accountability via social justice actions. Lay ministry was encouraged. When the “question authority” youth movements surfaced, OCBC was ready to change with the times. An early performance of *Godspell*, ministries to street people, more diverse and progressive services, the formation of Common Place in 1973 (an alternative intentional living community made up mostly of OCBC members and which continues to this day), a commitment to women’s leadership and gender neutral language called for by a women’s group called *Sojourners*, civil rights actions, and antiwar activities were front and center. Ernie also encouraged the arts, and was himself a talented visual artist of woodcuts, drawings, and stained glass. Doug Koch, a still active member, came at this time and held titles including Associate Pastor, Minister in Christian Education and Celebration, and Liturgical Artist in Residence. Many of the older members left because of the use of the sanctuary to shield anti-war demonstrators and membership was about 150.

The Rev. Linda Brebner - Called as a part time Pastor, Linda shepherded the church after Ernie Klein became ill. It was a time of “Working in the Wilderness” and a “Time of Healing,” with much soul-searching on some questions raised during Klein years, similar in processes to a Transition Team. She was a strong preacher with an interest in social justice as well.

The Rev. Monica Styron – An ecumenical leader and spokesperson for many social justice issues like shelter and food for homeless people, she had a gift for the personal dimensions of healing, even while “fighting the good fight.” She attracted many young people and was a dynamic presence. Her coming out as a lesbian and the church’s 1983 declaration that it was “Welcoming and Affirming” were brave acts at the time. So was OCBC’s leadership in becoming a Sanctuary church for a then-undocumented trade union activist from El Salvador (“Estela”) and its historical biblical interpretation of sanctuary, calling it an allegiance to a higher law which demanded protection for the oppressed.

The Rev. Meg Hess, 1988-1990 - Not formally called as an “intentional interim” pastor, Meg helped the church to work around feelings about recent congregational controversies.

The Rev. C. Irving Cummings, 1990-2011 – A progressive Christian in the prophetic tradition, his sermons often referenced “empire” then and now, in terms of allegiance to a higher authority than Rome or the current U.S. government. Also committed to social justice, especially gay rights, environmental justice, antiwar actions such as participation in Veterans for Peace, the arts, and an embrace of all faiths (including Muslim) as allies, his worship services and other activities displayed a creative and sometimes playful approach. But his sermons were deeply historical and intellectual. An out gay man (and former Presbyterian, as were Monica Styron and Linda Brebner), he was a founding member of AWAB in 1993, supported the gay marriage equality campaign. During this period, Sunday School teachers were paid, as was a much loved and capable and long term building administrator, Javier Negrón, who came in 2004, along with and his staff, Angel Tirado and Victor Morales. Volunteer pastors, Jean Chapman and Nancy Willbanks ministered to homeless people and to youth and families, respectively. A new choir director (now Minister of Music), Thomas Jones, built on the work of former director/organist Arthur Hoch, and inspired the choir to new levels of professionalism. A forty-year lease with a new renter, the renowned Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, helped keep church functioning. The \$220,000/year rent led to a spate of building renovations and a firm financial footing, along with an administrative challenge on how to share the building’s main spaces. The church also took on a commitment to environmental justice and sponsored an extended family of refugees from Cameroon.

The Rev. Meg Hess, 2011-2013 – Hired as an Intentional Interim Pastor this time around, she brought her training as a Pastoral Psychotherapist to assist the congregation in reflecting on its history, dynamics, priorities, ways of functioning, mission, and identity. She has served tirelessly with both the Transition Team and the Pastoral Search Team (along with Moderator Nancy Moorehead). Her caring counseling one-on-one, her administrative juggling, and her story-telling talents as a preacher, have been crucial in leading and comforting the congregation at this time of change after twenty years with our previous pastor. She also shared her skills as a labyrinth facilitator who has offered her labyrinth walks as a spiritual practice of walking meditation and healing reflection.

The laity took part in many vital functions of the church as well.

Many members and friends were active in social change projects such as Sanctuary for Central American immigrants, immigrants’ rights, service to the homeless, veterans,

and college age youth, refugee resettlement. Church members and friends have contributed to feminist worship services and inclusive language, missionary activity, pastoral and musical service, church historians, and more. A few stand out.

The Derry family - Brothers Arthur, Cecil, and Malcolm, along with their sister Evelyn and Malcolm's wife Peg, undertook untold labors for good at OCBC. Rev. Sam Miller once referred to the Derrys as the "Derry combine." The Derrys' mother was raised in the First Baptist Church of Central Square (OCBC's "mother"), and although she found it hard to leave the old church, about 1894 she moved to OCBC. Either Arthur or Cecil served as church clerk from 1942 – 1957, and Malcolm became treasurer in 1945, until 1957, when Arthur became treasurer. Arthur retained this position until his tragic death in a car accident, along with his wife, in 1965. Cecil wrote a history of the church from 1844-1944, with special mention of the work of the church's women. He was a much loved, charismatic speaker and a revered Latin and Greek teacher at Cambridge Latin High School.

Pauline Swift – A member for well over fifty years, she led Task Force on Civil Rights, which spent a great deal of time studying, collecting files, writing letters, and engaging in direct action. She was thoughtful and prayerful, but then she took action, on numerous picket lines and in many demonstrations, some resulting in her arrest. Her name lives on in an annual Pauline Swift Award given to a member of the community who has shown equal dedication to peace and justice. She is known for meeting police at the door during a 1970 antiwar riot in Harvard Square, barring them from entry and declaring the building a sanctuary for wounded protestors.

Martha Jane Hackett – A very longtime member who recently left us, at least on the physical plane, Martha Jane had been Moderator, Almoner, a leader on the Finance Team, TABCOM representative and board member, and midwife in more ways than one. She delivered babies in the Chinese community and the congregation, and touched many individuals with personal "snail mail" notes offering prayers and comfort. The daughter of Baptist Missionaries in Burma, she made frequent (and dangerous) trips there and supported an orphanage, her lifelong dream.

Thomas Jones – Our Minister of Music has overseen the music program at OCBC since the fall of 2002. Along with organist/pianist Kathy Maskell, he has turned an all-volunteer choir into a professional sounding group. An internationally known baritone singer for over three decades and an adjunct vocal instructor at Harvard University for 24 years, he brings considerable musical and pedagogical skills to his work as a choir director. For members of the choir, it is his patience, his caring prayers for each person, and his passion for excellence in music that has made the choir a place of privilege. Even so, an oft-heard phrase is "It's a worship service, not just a performance." He produces annual special services Christmas Eve (with a chamber orchestra) and Easter (with a brass ensemble) and organized a choir CD entitled "Total Praise." He has also led the choir on three choir-related trips: New York City, Turkey and Greece, and Italy.

Jim Wallace (anti war, racial justice, immigrants' rights, housing equity) and Julia Wallace (all of those issues plus befriending homeless and undocumented and transgender

individuals, dangerous trips to El Salvador to contact families of immigrant friends, a fierce “green” consciousness) contributed to the church for decades. Jim (widowed and now married to former member Renee Seale) and daughter Ginny Wallace Greene, who has been active in pastoral care and special outreach to our current families from the Cameroon, still carry on the Wallace family’s spirit and legacy.

Notable guest preachers and speakers have included Phillips Brooks, Paul Tillich, David Tracy, and Harvey Cox, who is also a notable member of the congregation. In one of our more colorful stories, Yoko Ono, accompanied by a silent John Lennon, sang at OCBC in 1973 while attending a women’s conference.

There are significant turning points in the life of every church. Please identify your turning points with a statement of their significance and an approximate date. Some examples follow:

“Through our common life of prayer, worship, and spiritual development, we are enriched and sustained as we follow the example of Jesus and extend ourselves to the world, working for social, economic, and ecological justice, celebrating life through the arts, and welcoming all those who are seekers.”- OCBC flyer

In recent years, there have been three major points of (ongoing) change: social justice actions, arts expansion, especially music, and the restoration, expansion, maintenance, and stewardship of the building.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

Since its earliest days of opposition to slavery, OCBC has been known for “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” It has often interpreted the gospel of Jesus as allegiance to a high order than the state, or even “the Empire,” whether it occurred in Roman times or in our contemporary United States, whenever government policies go against the basic precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. In a few cases, this view has resulted in surveillance by the FBI and possible break-ins by the government during our 1985 declarations of Sanctuary for “undocumented” Central American immigrants. These instances are a point of pride, not shame, for many members of the congregation.

A pioneer among churches who are welcoming and affirming of gay and lesbian (currently GLBT) people, OCBC has supported gay rights openly since 1983. We helped co-found AWAB in 1983, but many people from OCBC were active well before that in the precursor organizations within TABCOM and ABC. This stance was a continuation of a longstanding social justice legacy, which included and still includes combating racism, protesting the Vietnam War, supporting the equality of women in the world and in worship services, giving energy to the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s and immigrant rights today, and an active “green” conservation policy. Together, these legacies of resistance and activism function to give OCBC and its individual members an identity.

There are many references to this legacy in the paragraphs above on recent pastors, but a few more details are noted here. All of them continue to this day, but the dates below are when they were a primary focus.

1. CIVIL RIGHTS/BLACK LIBERATION

From 1963, to this day, OCBC has been active in racial justice. Ernie Klein went to the civil rights march in D.C., where parishioners Harvey Cox and Paul Chapman were sent to jail. And in 1968, the church gave \$50,000, "no strings attached," to the Community Development fund, which was to be used for "black self-determination." Fifty years later, an active Racial Justice Group encourages increasing the church's multicultural membership numbers and is networking with like-minded churches to support modern day "New Jim Crow" which work to erase prison inequity for people of color and protect minority voter registration in the face of a national backlash.

2. ANTI WAR and PEACE

In October 1969, OCBC offered sanctuary to Eric Mann, the leader of the Weatherman, who wished to explain his opposition to the Vietnam War before giving himself up to the police. In April of 1970, a violent antiwar riot in Harvard Square spilled over into the OCBC sanctuary, which served as a temporary first aid station and sanctuary. Members of the church participated in many marches against war and its human and financial waste, from Vietnam days to the current "operations" in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have been active in supporting Veterans for Peace.

3. FEMINISM

In the early 1970s, a group of women who called themselves Sojourners began to meet in the church's tower room and claim political leadership within the church. The feminist movement was challenging ideas of male leadership and gender based assumptions, and this group focused on a radical re-imagining of faith, implementing gender equality in the church and the language of worship, and welcoming sexual minorities. The women's and lesbian liberation movements overlapped in many ways, and more women in the church were coming out as lesbians. Not only was at least one woman, Betsy Sowers, inspired to enter the ministry at this time, several women ministers, settled, interim, and part time, have carried it on. The language of worship itself was transformed to make it more inclusive of a female and/or gender neutral deity.

4. SANCTUARY for CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES

On December 4, 1984, OCBC became host to Estela Ramirez, an El Salvadoran trade unionist who was arrested and tortured on three separate occasions between 1981 and 1984 for her work. She took up residence in OCBC's chapel for two weeks, where she was constantly surrounded by at least two "vigiling" members from OCBC who were trained

in how to handle the very real threat of INS action. The congregation remains dedicated to today's undocumented immigrants, who are often fleeing persecution by U.S.-backed dictatorships. Before and after this event, OCBC had supported and refugees, "undocumented" or not, including a pro-democracy family from Chile, who had to flee after the military coup there.

Just as Martin Luther King Jr. used Amos to critique the white establishment of his day, OCBC's works are filled with references to scripture. Like many of the other churches in the Sanctuary Movement, they drew much of their strength from the biblical tradition of sanctuary, specifically referencing Deuteronomy 19:10: "And...let no innocent blood be shed in the land which the Lord your God is giving you, or else the responsibility for that blood will fall upon you." This verse arises time and time again in OCBC's conversations about their involvement with the Sanctuary Movement. Two other passages also occupy prominent places in OCBC's conversations about Sanctuary, Matthew 22:37-40 and I John 4:18-21. According to OCBC's statement of purpose, the congregation was acting "in the love that Jesus said sums up the Law and prophets. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. (And)...love your neighbor as yourself.'"

5. GAY AND LESBIAN and LGBT LIBERATION

OCBC's theological interpretation of these same texts were crucial to its decision to become involved in the project of LGBT inclusion. The Daughters of Bilitis, an early and important lesbian group, rented office space in the church for years. The church's involvement began in the 1980's when the congregation's pastor, Monica Styron, started a gay and lesbian support group. In 1983, according to Grace Peters, Monica approached Grace about producing a statement of "welcoming and affirming" congregation in 1983. Adopting this status in 1983, years before most of the progressive congregations in Harvard Square, meant that OCBC was placing itself in a vulnerable position, and the congregation's further leadership within American Baptists Concerned meant that OCBC ran the very real risk of having its standing in the ABC (USA) revoked. While she was pastor, Monica came out as a lesbian. In 2013, AWAB (Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists) added its 88th member congregation. We continue to urge the American Baptist denomination to go on record as accepting LGBT people.

MUSIC and THE ARTS

Thomas Jones's tenure as choir director and Minister of Music (see above) has drawn in many new members and continues to engage the congregation. Doug Koch's playing of the Himalayan singing bowls during our congregational prayers transport us to a sacred and prayerful place.

The Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, which has filled the walls of the church for much of the week since 2000, has lent its talents to the congregation for special services, like the Palm Sunday dance "sermon." Our mutual publicity exchange has helped both groups

increase their attendance records. Scott Fraser, the JMBT Administrator has been a tireless garden steward.

Many members of the congregation have brought their skills and gifts to the church as well, as visual artists, soloists, musicians, and poets.

BUILDING

Our very first meeting place (1844) was located at Lyceum, Hall, near today's Harvard Coop. We then purchased a 12,000 sq. ft. lot land from Harvard University for \$3,006.40 and built a white clapboard Greek Revival church "at the corner of Broadway and Kirkland Street" (now Harvard's Littauer Center) in 1845. This same church building exists today, after it was moved down Mass. Ave. by a team of horses over a 21 day period in 1867. After its second church incarnation as the North Prospect Congregational Church, it became part of Leslie University, which intends rebuild the steeple as it was in 1906.

Back in Harvard Square, our current Gothic Revival stone building was designed by architect Alexander Esty and completed in 1870. It makes a striking sight in the middle of busy Harvard Square, its tower pointing to the sky. It has undergone decades of renovations and additions, many of which were done with volunteer labor. Some were planned and others were not. One of these unplanned additions took place after a fire in 1889. After the fire, the organ was placed behind pulpit, the memorial chapel was altered, and the now refurbished striking Tiffany window in the Parish Hall (facing Mass. Ave) was put in.

Since the church is almost 170 years old, there have been dozens of building improvements. Tower restoration projects took place in 1870, 1906, 1947, 1962, 1988, 1993, and 2008. And the first organ, installed in 1938, was repaired over the years, and was most recently redone (all except the wooden console) in 2000 with some original giant pipes and a MIDI (electronic) interface, which organist Kathy Maskell uses to great effect.

The addition of the Memorial Chapel was a major project. Now its jewel toned modern stained glass window by Joseph Ferguson installed in 1962. These windows were given in memory of several people, including Samuel Howard Miller, Jr., and Albert Studley Miller, two sons of Rev. Miller who were killed in WWII.

The basement offices were renovated in the last ten years, and more recently, all major large rooms on the first floor have been transformed into a weekday dance company for the Jose Mateo Dance Theater in 2000. This multiracial and multiethnic dance company was named as Boston Dance Alliance's 2012 dance champion. The partnership with them has allowed us to complete tower renovations, construct a permanent handicap access ramp, and establish a more secure financial footing than we have had in years.

Besides housing our administrative offices, the basement is filled with social justice groups who rent office space at below market rates. Today these include the Homeless Empowerment Project, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force,

and the Adbar Ethiopian Women's Alliance. In past years, they served Women for Women in Lebanon, the Middle East Center, Big Brother Association, Pequod counseling center, Cambridge Tenants Organizing Committee, and several Central American support organizations like NECAN, NICA, CISPES, and CASA (Central American Solidarity Association). "If this building could talk," it would tell stories of many community events and benefits over the years: Composers in Red Sneakers and Stan Strickland, Martin Luther King, Jr. concerts, Native American Pow Wows, Noam Chomsky lectures, crafts fairs, and gay dances, bisexual conferences, 12 Step meetings, and more. Jose Mateo Dance Theater's annual "Dance for World Community" involves church members, who host a booth and welcome people to the lovely garden and grounds.

OCBC was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, and was awarded a grant from the Massachusetts Historic Commission for roof renovations in 1998. Our building has recently "gone green," even though many Earth Day services and events have always been part of the church's calendar. To deal with our flooding tendencies, we commissioned Rainwater Recovery in 2006 to conduct rainwater off the roof and into a large underground tank located under the parking lot to be used for landscape plantings. We have also joined the Cambridge Energy Alliance. Our refurbished stone Mass. Ave. entrance now leads members and visitors into the church Mass. Ave. via a wide, welcoming walkway. And surrounding all four walls is a beautiful garden, lovingly tended by volunteers Grace Peters and Scott Fraser. In December of 2010, a new handicap accessible entrance was added. Accessible bathrooms and refurbished sanctuary windows were also recently added, in conjunction with JMBT.

Marcia Deihl, rev. 11-9-14

[Information taken from four main sources: Cecil Thayer Derry, "A Brief History of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church, 1944-1944," Keith Metzger, "Old Cambridge Baptist Church, 1844 . . .1969: A History of the Quarter Century 1944-69," Sherri Tucker and Jo Bower, "Meet the Angel of OCBC," 1989, Doug Koch, Search Team document from 1990, and "Holy Risk: Old Cambridge Baptist Church and the Sanctuary Movement," a thesis by Joseph Woolf. Also used were notes from a participatory congregational event in 2012 called The Wall of History.]