

THE COMMUNITY CHURCH

*A BRIEF HISTORY OF
ROTHBURY COMMUNITY CHURCH*



WRITTEN BY DAN TODD
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“... I will build my church...”

Matthew 16:18

“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

Psalm 127:1a

Decades ago, some folks were moved by the simple notion to instruct their children in the knowledge of God and His Word. Probably they had no idea they were founding a work to last for decades that would become the church home for many hundreds of people up to today. But obedience to the Lord does lead to unexpected and wonderful results. We who are Rothbury Community Church benefit from the foundations faithfully tended by our church forefathers.

Sixty years ago tiny rural Rothbury, Michigan, situated just south of the hilly fruit-growing region of western Michigan still patiently struggled upward from the depression years. In the early 1940's travel was not so convenient as we know it in 2004, and people of Oceana County did not just jump in their cars to drive 10 or 20 miles to the store or to church. The people who lived in the village of Rothbury did their business here, socialized with their neighbors, sent their children to school here, up through eighth grade anyway. No one had much money. Everyone in the village eked out a living the best way they could.

Rothbury was in farming country and the village and people who lived here primarily served the outlying farm community. The railroad, not the highway, was the epicenter of town then. It was around the railroad crossing that gravel-surfaced Winston Road was lined with coal yards, feed store, bean and potato warehouses, pickle canning factory, lumber yard, hardware store, blacksmith shop, and the community center. Out on the highway crossroads was Webber's Garage, Sam's Grocery Store, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church building.

The Methodist Church, which had stood on the north side of Winston Road on the rise just east of the Carlton Creek valley, had burned down. That left only the Seventh Day Adventist and the Catholic churches in Rothbury. But Christian mothers in the village knew that training in the scriptures was essential for their young children.

Mildred Longnecker was one such Christian. Mildred, mother of two young children, met with her friends Esther Clements, Florence Eagles, Nita Squires, and Iola Ramey, who were also young Christian mothers to discuss what could be done to provide Bible teaching for their children. One of the basic issues was where to hold the lessons. The Grant Township Hall, out a ways on Winston Road, on the corner of land owned by Oliver and Mildred Longnecker, was not used on Sundays and was available. The usage was negotiated, setup was initiated, communications made, and five families met for the first time to teach the Bible to their collective dozen kids.

Faithfulness and simple adherence to God's Word proved attractive, and the Sunday School grew as other families – the Cooks, Johansens, Storms, Christians, McGarrys, Webbers, Pepings, Lohmeyers, Lohmans, and Krulls brought their children to the burgeoning little flock. It was getting crowded in this old Township Hall. If the Lord was going to keep adding to their numbers – and it was obvious that He was – a bigger space was needed.

There was another building in the village that was not being used at that time. The Seventh Day Adventist Church had ceased using their building located just off of U.S. 31 not too long before due to declining membership. It seemed to make sense to put it to use. More negotiations led to the three-

year old Sunday School finding itself in a more spacious facility. Spacious, but spartan. The building was pretty bare, with no electric lights, no pews, and only an old pot-bellied stove for heat. February of '46 was cold and the little group huddled around that stove, brought closer in spirit as they drew close to the stove's warmth.

As fellowship grew closer, the people knew that the Lord was leading them to a further step. This was a local church in the making, and it seemed to be happening by itself. The adults needed to be fed as well from God's Word; that meant a qualified, trained pastor, was needed. The families in this post-depression rural community did not have the money to support a fulltime pastor. A part time pastor, who had other means of support seemed like the best option. Besides, a part time pastor fit nicely with the frugal ways of the Rothbury people.

Mr. Bruce Charles from Muskegon, was known to some in the church and he was brought in to be the first part time pastor, meaning he would preach on Sundays, perform all necessary weddings and funerals, oversee the church board, all for a few dollars a week. Otherwise, church business was seen to by the church board. As it was women who founded the church, women also continued a strong presence in church governance. The first few board terms were comprised of about half women and half men. Mildred Longnecker, Florence Eagles and Blanche Christian were among the women who served on the board in the 'forties. Women also continued to be in charge of the Sunday School (Lena McGarry), and summer Bible School (Hattie Yarwood). Men also served on the board, but the men most often took on the physical duties – construction, maintenance, procuring supplies. There was a lot that needed to be done to their new meeting place, and when the opportunity arose to buy the building in February of '46, the call to fix the place up grew. Firewood for the stove had to be supplied and the stove had to be moved. A concrete porch was needed; the building needed painting inside and out. Electric lights were needed, and a sign was needed out front with the pastor's name on it.

Within the next few years more major projects were undertaken on the property, as the men and women of the church faithfully continued their work. The men dug a basement under the church and a used coal furnace was purchased for \$35 from the Montague Methodist Church. Oliver Longnecker put up money for the purchase of used pews from the old Montague VFW Hall. The church found a unique method for refinishing the pews: each family took one home, scrubbed it with lye, and re-varnished it.

From the beginning, Rothbury Community Church, as it was being called, believed strongly in working with what God supplied, and staying out of debt. The church kept exceedingly precise records. The balance was always small, but was always "in the black". Donations - \$27 here, \$53 there, sometimes a great faith gift of \$100 – were duly recorded by the church treasurer, as were the expenditures (\$30 for the pastor on Sunday, \$27 for "church improvements", official approval to purchase a coal shovel, broom, fly bombs). In those days, the church would, as many other churches did then and do now, resort to fundraising projects to pay for improvements. An ice cream stand set up on U.S. 31 during the 4th of July celebration took in \$24. The Building and Finance Committee, dividing Rothbury up into the "Lawson district", village district, and East Rothbury district, went door-

to-door and collected \$297 toward the building cost. Families from all over Rothbury – Protestants, Catholics, and non-churchgoing alike made donations, and their names were faithfully noted by the treasurer.

Always the paramount concern was faithfulness to God's Word. The folks of the church were not the least interested in anything fancy or showy, no passing fad ever carried them away from their steady obedience to the Bible and dependence on the Lord. When the Lawson School teacher asked to use the church building for the school Christmas program, there was discussion. It was decided that if the school's intention was to use the building as a "community hall", the request would be turned down. If the program was "religious" in nature, it would be allowed. After follow-up questioning of the teacher, the request was denied. This was the Lord's building, and even community spirit was not a good enough reason to depart from its sanctified purpose.

Not that the church was isolated from its community. Independent of all authorities save the Lord and the scriptures, small in number, and devoid of large funds and large donors, Rothbury Community Church obeyed the call of the Lord to reach out into the community. The time for Sunday services in the summer was adjusted to accommodate the vacationers at nearby Jack and Jill Ranch, and a shuttle service was provided. Lena McGarry, Sunday School superintendent, faithfully led the summer Bible School outreach. And always, expansions and improvements in the church building were undertaken with an eye toward presenting a warm and welcoming sanctuary to all visitors. Through the '40's and '50's the men procured and installed better church windows and a church bell, a better coal furnace, a better quality piano, better lights. The outhouses were renovated and the old coal bin was cleaned up and made usable for activities. The church also pledged 10% of its funds toward missionary support. Abe and Dee Koop, of New Tribes Missions were among the earliest missionaries to be adopted by the church in the 1950's.

Although the men and women of RCC always embraced a do-it-ourselves-for-less philosophy, a trained pastor brought in from elsewhere was always a must. The record of RCC's part time pastors reflects the ethic of the congregation. The church benefitted from the dedicated and selfless service of numerous men, including Bruce Charles, Jacob Bos, Raymond Roelof, Kayle DePoy, Lester Potrafka, Dennis Fries, and David Montes. Many of these part time pastors undertook a fulltime workload to serve the congregation however needed. In all kinds of weather, often travelling from Muskegon and further (in pre-U.S. 31 expressway days), these men met the pastoral needs of Rothbury Community Church as needed throughout the week, often after completing their "day job". The tradition of part time pastors continued throughout the '60s and '70's until the fall of 1979 when William Krogel was called on to be the first fulltime pastor.

Church growth in RCC was never explosive, never aided by a reliance on programs designed by the experts. Multiplication was organic – people were drawn to the hospitality, the humble, hardworking character of the people, and especially the sense that here were men and women seeking only to follow the Lord and obey the scriptures. In the late 1970's the church that was "home" to many of the Christians in Rothbury was overflowing. Over one hundred people often attended services in a

space that would fit half that number. The other half of the attendees had to sit out in the foyer and listen intently. The building could not be added onto much more in its available space. Still, the leaders insisted, if the Lord wanted a new building for His church, he would provide the funds. The church board came up with a plan for the building and the means of fundraising, and when it was time, the word was put out to the congregation: give as the Lord moves you to. Within two months the money was provided. The location for the new church facility was back to its roots in a way, on land donated by the Longnecker family, almost atop the old Methodist Church location.

True to its ways, Rothbury Community Church's new building was constructed by the energy and abilities of its own members. Men and women of the congregation were gifted in all of the construction skills that were needed, with Louis Buffinga, a retired builder, overseeing the process. In 1982, the work was completed.

The last services were held in the old Rothbury Community Church that spring. That building still stands today, now the back storage area of Rothbury Hardware. From the east side the church windows are still clearly identifiable. The building had served the church throughout its maturing years, through the 1940's, '50's, '60's, and '70's.

The new building began its service to Rothbury Community Church in spring of 1982 in the most fitting way. Its very first service honored one of RCC's most faithful pioneers, one who was there at the very beginning and strove with it as it grew up. For on March 7, 1982, the memorial service for Mildred Longnecker was held at the new Rothbury Community Church building.

Afterword

Since 2004 God has continued in his faithfulness to Rothbury Community Church as we seek to bring glory to him alone. There are still many members who can recall the stories laid out in the previous pages, and they can add a few more of their own if you take the time to ask them. A legacy of biblical fidelity has been passed down to the current generations that make up the membership of Rothbury Community Church, and as it stands today, that legacy will be found in the next generation as well.

Upon reading the story of Rothbury Community Church it becomes apparent that not only has much changed with the church family, but the surrounding community has changed as well. Instead of coal yards and trains, there is a major paved bike path. Instead of beans and potatoes, there is gas and donuts being sold along Winston Road. Instead of a pickle canning factory, there is a steel plant employing many.

While the times change, we can be thankful to God that he and the Gospel do not. “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8). It is the task of Rothbury Community Church to continue in the footsteps of our forbearers as we seek to be faithful in investing biblical truth in the next generation and to reach out to those around us who need to know Jesus as their Savior. May he enable us by his Spirit to be steadfast in that calling.

JAMES ENNS & BRYAN WOLFF

2013



Fulltime Pastors

1979-1982	William Krogel
1983-1992	Clifford Powell
1988-Current	James Enns
1993-1995	Michael Hendricks
1996-1998	Steven Best
2001-2005	Roger Rose
2002-2008	Jonathon Ruse
2007-2011	Daniel Pflug
2009-Current	Bryan Wolff

Current Building History

1982	Building on current property <i>(sanctuary, classrooms)</i>
1987	Expansion on west side of the building <i>(kitchen, fellowship hall, and classrooms)</i>
1993	Expansion on north end of the sanctuary <i>(offices, youth room, and sanctuary expansion)</i>
2000	Expansion on east side of the sanctuary <i>(classrooms)</i>
2011	Expansion on east side of the building <i>(classrooms, family center, offices, etc.)</i>

Our Purpose and Vision

Evangelizing the Unsaved

- Living Righteously
- Building Relationships
- Communicating the Gospel

Equipping Disciples

- Preaching the Word
- Teaching the Word
- Applying the Word

Edifying the Body

- Connecting People
- Activating People
- Serving People

Exalting God

- A Pure Heart
- A Prayerful Life
- Corporate Worship

Our Pillars

- Centered on the Truth (2 Tim 4:2)
- Confidence in Prayer (Eph 6:18)
- Caring about People (Gal 6:10)
- Committed to Holiness (1 Pet 1:15)
- Called to Serve (Gal 6:7)
- Controlled by God's Spirit (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:22)
- Connecting and Sharing the Gospel with nonbelievers
(Matt 28:19-20)

“Becoming Committed Followers of Jesus Christ”

