

# MVLP Gather Round E-News - Issue #19

May 21, 2020

This is the nineteenth issue of our E-newsletter, "Gather 'Round," to call us together through the internet to share news and needs and stories with each other. If you have a tale to tell or a perspective to share, please send it on for the next issue!

## ***The Buildings Are Closed; The Church Is Open!***

*Back issues of "Gather 'Round" E-news are available on the Moosup Valley Church website, thanks to our webmaster, Pat Safstrom. Go to [moosupvalley.church](https://www.moosupvalley.church) and click on the tab at the top of the page.*

### **Mt. Vernon Streams Sunday Service**

Worship Sunday, May 24, will be on the MVLP Facebook Live page, streaming from the Moosup Valley Church at 12:30 p.m. The theme is, "God Is God, and I Am Not." <https://www.facebook.com/MVLPspirit/?ref=bookmrks>). Order of Worship is attached.

### **First Christian Church of Coventry (the Rice City Church)**

*Thanks to Sonja for this history from "The Churches of Foster: A History of Religious Life in Rural Rhode Island," by Margery Matthews, Virginia Benson and Arthur Wilson.*

The prominence and influence of the Rice City Church on the spread of the Christian denomination in western Rhode Island and nearby Connecticut can hardly be overstated. Elder Douglass Farnum, a revival leader who had received a great deal of publicity, was invited to preach in Rice City in 1812. People from near and far came to Rice City for salvation. Kneeling they repeated the 26th verse of Acts II: "And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). This was the beginning of the Christian Church in Coventry, and Farnum returned to Rice City many times. At the time of the revival the Christian Church was only an embryo and would not become recognized as a national body until 1820.

While the foundation for the Christian Church in western RI was led by the charismatic Elder Douglass Farnum, an enduring structure was built by James Burlingame. Baptized by Elder Farnum in 1812, he soon began preaching and was ordained in 1821. In 1824 he was called to reorganize and restore the Christian Church of Coventry. Having found his calling, Elder Burlingame devoted his life to conducting an itinerant ministry in Coventry, Scituate, Foster Center and Connecticut, frequently traveling over 40 miles a

day, preaching in three different places. In those days pastors were rarely paid salaries so, to support his large family, he depended on donations, his farm and teaching school.

The golden age of the church called Christian was from 1810-1840. During that century there were churches or fellowships at Rice City, Foster Center, Moosup Valley, Mount Vernon, Clayville and Rockland in Scituate. Rice City, with 450 members, had the largest membership ever registered by any church in the area.

### **The Christians**

*They were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26)*

Of all the United Church of Christ traditions, the Christian Churches were most uniquely American in origin and character. In Virginia, Vermont, and Kentucky, the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s stirred the hearts of quite disparate leaders and their followers with the impulse to return to the simplicity of early Christianity. The first group was gathered in 1794 in Virginia by a Revolutionary soldier, James O'Kelley. He, with many other Methodists, left the church over their objection to bishops. Methodism, they felt, was too autocratical. They wanted the frontier churches to be freed to deal with the needs and concerns that were different from those of the more established churches. They declared that the Bible was their only guide and adopted as their new name, the Christian Church.

A few years later, at Lyndon, Vermont, Abner Jones and his followers objected to Calvinist Baptist views. In 1801, they organized the First Free Christian Church, in which Christian character would be the only requirement for membership, and in which all who could do so in faith, were welcome to partake of the Lord's Supper. Christ was seen to be more generous than to withhold Communion from all but those who had been baptized by immersion. Jones was later joined by Baptist Elias Smith, who helped to organize a Christian church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and began publishing, in 1808, the Herald of Gospel Liberty. Smith's paper became a means of drawing the separate Christian movements together.

With a minimum of organization, other churches of like mind were established and the movement became known as the "Christian Connection." The "Connection" had been organized in 1820 at the first United General Conference of Christians, during which six principles were unanimously affirmed:

- Christ, the only head of the Church.
- The Bible, sufficient rule of faith and practice.
- Christian character, the only measurement for membership.
- The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience.

- The name "Christian," worthy for Christ's followers.
- Unity of all Christ's followers in behalf of the world.

Farmer Richard Waterman was concerned that this new denomination was moving into western Rhode Island, along with Free Will Baptists, and were preaching that all were “saved.” He thought there should be a little more “fire and brimstone” and left \$500 in bank stocks to pay for “Calvinistic Baptist preaching” within two miles of his homestead.

It is through the interest from that initial investment – the Waterman Trust – that Pastor Bob and I are compensated.

### **The Christians Led the Way: First to Ordain a Woman!**

*By Rev. Richard H. Taylor, Historian*

By looking at one of her photographs you might perceive Ellen G. Gustin as a serious prim and proper Victorian woman. She was. But she was much more as well.

She was a revival preacher. A series of meetings she held in 1877 at the Christian Church in Westerly, Rhode Island, caused such a commotion in town that it got national attention in an article in the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*. The local Church responded by calling her as their pastor.

But she was also the inspiration for the first known case of a denominational religious body changing its language to be gender inclusive. Ellen Gustin was the third woman to receive full ordination in the Christian denomination. (Her actual ordination service was at the church to which she was called in West Mansfield, MA.) While some women had been ordained earlier, those were often by *ex parte* councils that did not grant full standing in a denomination.

At the request of a local church, the September 1869 meeting of the Rhode Island and Massachusetts Christian Conference agreed to her ordination; the vote was taken at the Broad Street Christian Church in Providence, just up the street from Beneficent. What is even more astonishing is that the very next item in the Conference's minutes votes "to alter the constitution so that the feminine gender be coupled with masculine wherever it occurs."

Ellen Gustin served over twenty-three years as a pastor to three different churches. For many years she was the only ordained woman in New England. But a great passion of hers was Foreign Missions. The American Christian Convention began its first foreign work in Japan in 1887. Within a year a Women's Board for Foreign Missions was formed, with Gustin as the first Corresponding Secretary. Later she gave long service as the President of the Board.

Writing her annual report for the 1902 national Convention, she coupled her evangelical Christianity with a passion for women's rights. She says there can be "no more encouraging sign of greatness of a people, community, state, or nation socially or politically, than the elevation of its women." Writing nearly two decades before women had the right to vote, she uses her report to honor women scientists, authors and those in "halls of legislation, the professions of law, medicine, and theology [where women] have had their honored representatives."

**A Bit of the Past** (*Provided by Jeanne Lavoie*)

From "Pleasant Places in Rhode Island"

*Published about 1890*

"Rice City, wee hamlet as it is, makes a pretty picture as we come upon it over the rising road, the hard level turnpike running through it. Two huge elms towering over the whole place before the big square. Southward facing, house known as the Hutchinson Place [originally the Rice Tavern], birthplace of Judge Matteson. The little white church here was known for years as the Christian Church, and their own Elder Burlingame, the first licensed state temperance lecturer, preached for 65 years. It was this church that the old slave attended who is remembered still in the walled field known as the "Jack lot."

"Jack was a slave kidnapped in the old fashioned when the slave trade most flourished, brought direct to Warren from the Guinea Coast with a young girl companion. He was brought to Foster, where he proved a faithful and willing servant, though he never spoke but two words of the English language, which were, singularly enough, the two ones for a foreigner's tongue, was January and February. Jack had a deeply religious nature, and managed to convey the ideal of his wish to join the church, for he was an adept in his invented sign language. Being examined by the church worthies, he gave them to understand that his religious beliefs were similar to Richard Waterman, a leading citizen. This was satisfactory, and the old slave was admitted, and thereafter took part in the Conference meetings with great enjoyment, rising and repeating "January," and "February," numberless times with much solemnity and satisfaction.

"Jack worked hard, saved his money, bought himself and his kidnap companion, married her and ended his days in a bit of a home in the old Jack lot."

**What Rice City Church Means To Me**

*By Michelle DiBiasio*

In the span of 24 months I lost both my mother and my father. A few weeks later my beloved dog died. I lost my village. I was lost.

I remembered years ago worshipping at Rice City Church with Mary Knowlton, who invited me to join her. I remembered how small and intimate the service was and how welcomed I felt. God works in mysterious ways, and I was led back to Rice City Church.

This church has become my family. Pastor Bob has been amazing. He has changed my life. Everyone there genuinely cares for each other and looks out for each other.

I am so grateful to Pastor Bob and my church family. I feel saved.

**Special Prayers:** Please hold in your heart and prayers...

- Carl's cousin, The Rev. Mindy Reed, who is being scheduled for ablation for her atrial fibrillation, and her partner is going in for cataract surgery and possible corneal transplant.
- Joanne is home and continues her slow but steady progress in healing from brain surgery.
- Phyllis Dexter is hoping to have a stint put in soon.
- Janice Reynolds is in need of healing and strength in her legs.
- Everyone in the Sroka family has been retested for COVID-19, and they are awaiting results. All are feeling much better.

### **Gather 'Round for Bible Study**

Both Rev. Betsy and Pastor Bob are leading Bible Study. Here's how to participate:

**Psalms:** Tuesday & Friday mornings at 10:00 a.m. with Betsy, reading and discussing selected psalms and the Easter scriptures by Zoom. Contact [BetsyAldrichGarland@gmail.com](mailto:BetsyAldrichGarland@gmail.com).

**Philippians:** The Rice City Bible Study has finished the Gospel of John and decided to focus on Paul's letter to the Philippians when they met on Wednesday. They have discovered that an old fashioned teleconference works just as well for them. Wednesday evenings at 6:30 p.m. with Bob by telephone. (Send Bob your phone number, and he will call you.)

### **The Day Will Surely Come...**

In anticipating our being able to return to our churches (with fewer than 20 people and modifications), hopefully soon, we will need gloves, masks, sanitizer, and wipes. Pastor Bob has bought masks to supplement the ones you have made. If you have leads on other supplies, please let me or Pastor Bob know. We may never be back to "normal," but the day will surely come when we will be back in our pews.

### **Closing Reflection**

*We often make our faith too complicated. The Christians attempted to make it less so. I love this poem by Mary Oliver, which says it all:*

## **Mysteries, Yes**

*By Mary Oliver*

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous  
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the  
mouths of the lambs.  
How rivers and stones are forever  
in allegiance with gravity  
while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds will  
never be broken.  
How people come, from delight or the  
scars of damage,  
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those  
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say  
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,  
and bow their heads.

**Offerings** may be mailed for:

**Mt. Vernon** to Ron Allen (116 Barbs Hill Road, Greene, RI 02827),

**Moosup Valley** to Pat Safstrom (76 Moosup Valley Road, Foster, RI 02825),

**Rice City** to Phyllis Dexter (53 Moosup Valley Road, Foster, RI 02825).

**Mt. Vernon Larger Parish** to Scott Knox (150 Foster Ctr. Rd., Foster, RI 02825)

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