

# First Covenant Church History

## 1889-Present

First Covenant Church started as a small group of Swedish immigrants who found other like-minded Swedes and formed the Swedish Christian Mission in 1889. Although small, it nevertheless developed a Sunday School and Young People's Society.

In 1909 revivalist preacher Rev. E. August Skogsbergh became pastor of the Swedish Christian Mission, and began holding revival meetings. The intent was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to Swedish immigrants in fast-growing Seattle. Large numbers of young Swedes attended these revivals and the little congregation grew very large, very fast. In response, it changed itself and built a new, larger sanctuary. By 1911, over 2,000 immigrants regularly attended services at the new Swedish Tabernacle.

In the 1920s, the focus of the church changed from revival meetings aimed at transient, young Swedish immigrants, and instead focused on making the Swedish Tabernacle a settled, prosperous church. Many members lived within five miles of the church, especially going east toward Lake Washington. Under pastors Paul Rood, Gust E. Johnson and Fritz Hjelm, the Swedish Tabernacle offered a full program of Sunday morning and evening worship, Sunday School, midweek meetings, bible studies, women's groups, missions programs, bible camp at Lake Sammamish and Covenant Beach, social events and youth programs. In 1930, this successful church had 480 members, with 225 attending Sunday School and 33 in Confirmation.

Between 1925 and 1942 the church adapted again to new realities. To retain a second generation, the congregation needed to leave behind its Swedish immigrant ways and become an American church. The issue of ethnicity was resolved as leaders adapted church services from Swedish to English. Efforts were also aimed at those in the church's surrounding community (Otelia Hendrickson was the "city missionary") and to people in China and Alaska. During World War II, the church adapted itself again to another new situation, and under Pastor Erick Gustafson, the church had a significant wartime ministry to servicemen.

The generation from the Mission Covenant Church, which came to maturity after World War II was thoroughly American, erasing vestiges of their parents' hyphenated past. They moved into new houses in the outlying areas of Seattle and its suburbs. In 1953, they changed the name of their church from the (Swedish) Mission Covenant Church to First Covenant Church. They also intentionally sent many members to grow new churches in outlying areas (Hillman, Highland, Factoria/Newport, Interbay, Mercer Island, North Seattle/Shoreline). What once had been a revivalist and ethnic church had again adapted itself and become prosperous, successful American congregation under the pastoral care of Edwin S. Johnson and Allen Wickman.

By the mid-1950s, the leadership of First Covenant Church was questioning the adequacy of the building and the viability of the church's location in order to be successful and large.

Between 1959 and 1971 a series of reports (e.g., Who, Where, Why, Are We? 1961) and actions dealt with redefining First Covenant Church:

- Where should it be located?
- To whom should it minister?
- Did the building constructed in 1911 for revival meetings have the right facilities for the needs of the 1950s, namely, educating and nurturing families and children?

Church leaders wondered if Pike Street was the right place for the future of the congregation. The slow social and economic erosion in the Pike and Pine corridor was evident. Church membership peaked in 1951 at 673 members, with 300 in Sunday School and 90 babies, but the numbers declined by the end of the decade. An increasing number of members no longer lived near the church, but commuted from new city and suburban neighborhoods.

From 1961 to 1968 there were several failed attempts to buy land in residential neighborhoods and build a new church. In 1964 Rev. Roy Erickson became pastor, with his top priority to resolve questions about the church's location and program. After four more years of not finding a new location, the congregation voted in 1968 to stay at Pike and Bellevue, remodel the existing building (1970-1971), and be a church on the edge of downtown. That settled the question of location.

For the next thirty years the church tried to create programs to carry out its mission as an urban church. These efforts took two directions based on a changing understanding of "urban." First, in the 1970s and 1980s "urban" meant providing social services for the poor and vulnerable. Second, in the 1990s "urban" also meant including the upscale residents of the church's neighborhood as participants in church life.

Today, First Covenant is once again adapting to changed circumstances, and becoming a strong urban church. The mission for First Covenant Church is to change lives for Jesus Christ, nurture all of its members, and help its members to serve others, both in its immediate vicinity and throughout metropolitan Seattle. The challenge is to develop programs, alter priorities and equip people in order to do that.