

**The Story of
The Historic Parsells Church
in Rochester, NY**

by Bob Kern

As of April 5, 2015

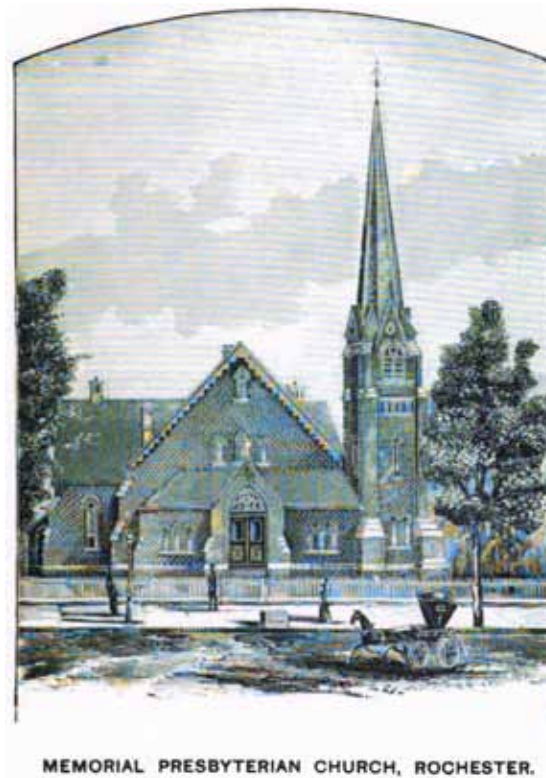
The Story of The Historic Parsells Church

The history of The Historic Parsells Church can be traced back to 1869 and linked to six previous congregations on the east side of Rochester, NY.

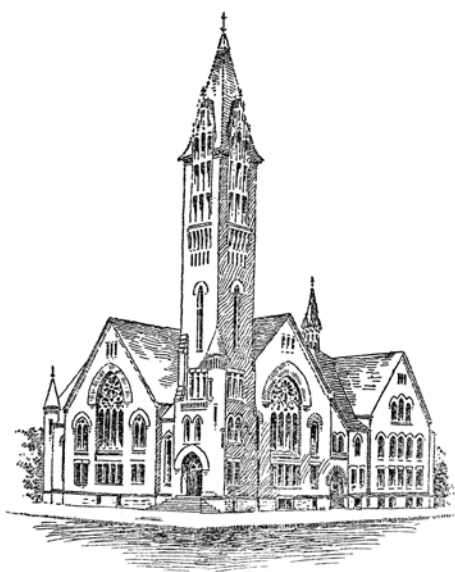
Memorial Presbyterian Church

Memorial Presbyterian Church started out in 1869 as a mission of the Brick Presbyterian Church (now called the Downtown United Presbyterian Church). A small group began holding Sunday School classes in School #18, which had recently been built. The next year, 1870, they bought some land at the corner of Hudson Avenue and Wilson Street, where they built the Memorial Mission Chapel. The first pastor was Rev. Gavin L. Hamilton, and under his leadership, the organization was incorporated on January 19, 1872, and renamed Memorial Presbyterian Church. Rev. Hamilton served at the church until spring 1875.

Rev. Dr. Charles P. Coit became the next pastor and served in that position for 25 years, from November 21, 1875, until March 25, 1900. During his tenure, the congregation grew steadily. In 1881, the chapel was enlarged into a church (as shown below).



Even that became too small, so in 1892, they razed the 1881 edifice and constructed a larger one on the same site. That building was dedicated on March 19, 1893, and still stands at Hudson and Wilson. Today it's the home of First Genesis Baptist Church. On the next page are a drawing of the building and a photo of the sanctuary as originally constructed.



When Dr. Coit started at Memorial, there were 70 members; he left the church with a membership of 530.

Rev. Dr. John Lyon Caughey became the next pastor. He was installed on January 3, 1901. Under his leadership, the membership of the church increased to 707 and half of the indebtedness of the church was cleared. That debt was incurred because soon after the building was dedicated in 1893, a financial depression struck the nation. Also during Dr. Caughey's pastorate, sheds were built adjacent to the church to accommodate 35 teams of horses (horse and carriage being the typical mode of transportation at the time). He concluded his ministry in Rochester on June 11, 1905, going to the Harlem Presbyterian Church in New York City.

Rev. Fred J. Tower was installed as pastor on January 4, 1906. During his pastorate the remaining debt on the building was completely wiped out and the congregation burned the mortgage on October 5, 1909. Rev. Tower's last day at Memorial Church was May 29, 1910. The membership of the church reached its highest total in Rev. Tower's second year, growing to 757 people.

Rev. William W. Stoddart was installed on April 20, 1911. He served at Memorial during a time of transition. That's when the first actual church was built in Irondequoit. The United Congregational Church (now called the Irondequoit United Church of Christ) dedicated its building on January 22, 1911, and in the following months, about 80 Memorial Presbyterian members who lived in that town started attending services there, closer to where they lived. Rev. William W. Stoddart's pastorate ended on June 7, 1914.

Rev. J. Canfield Van Doren was installed on December 10, 1914. The church prospered under his leadership and contributed more to missions during his pastorate than any other. In 1922, Memorial Presbyterian conducted the largest Vacation Bible School in Rochester. Rev. Van Doren accepted a job in New York City in 1924.

As time went on, more and more immigrants settled in the neighborhood and Memorial Presbyterian ministered to a diverse population. Rev. Theodore T. Hays arrived in November 1924 and soon began a specialized outreach. He established a Friendship Center in the old church parson-

age on January 1, 1925, where people of 17 nationalities were taught the fundamentals of good citizenship. That ministry spanned 14 years.

The church was built with a very tall tower. However, years of wind and weather had caused the tower to wave instead of point; it was considered unsafe and so it was shortened in 1930 to the truncated square tower seen on that building today (as shown below).



Parsells Avenue Baptist Church

Parsells Avenue Baptist Church was started in 1892 when a woman named Mrs. A. N. Rogers and a friend organized a Sunday School class in the kitchen of Mrs. Rogers' house on Hayward Terrace (now called Hayward Avenue). Her husband, Andrew Rogers, became superintendent of that Sunday School. The class expanded to over fifty members and outgrew the house. The class met at the Glen Haven Depot (where the Regional Transit Service has its headquarters today) until the group could raise enough money to buy a lot on the corner of Oswego Street (which is now Chamberlain Street) and Parsells Avenue. They called themselves the Parsells Avenue Baptist Society, and they built a chapel on the lot in 1894 (as shown at right).

The name was then changed to Parsells Avenue Baptist Church when the organization was incorporated on April 25, 1895. Mr. Harry R. Greaves served as the first pastor of the new church, from May 5, 1895, until November 1, 1896.



On November 22, 1896, Mr. Joseph B. Travis became the next pastor. The church was a branch of the Second Baptist Church of Rochester (which was founded in 1834 and renamed the Baptist Temple in 1924). On September 12, 1899, two important events occurred. Parsells became an independent church, separate from Second Baptist, and Joseph Travis was ordained.

In 1901, the congregation expanded the chapel, basically doubling its size (as shown below).



Next, Rev. S. Fraser Langford came to serve as pastor, starting on June 5, 1904. In 1907, Rev. Langford rallied the community to create a place where children could play ball in the neighborhood. This led to the creation of Webster (Avenue) Park. He also wanted to build a large church building, but that was not to be until years later. Rev. Langford served for 5 years, until 1909.

Rev. Elmer E. Knapp became the next pastor in 1910 and resigned in September 1913, citing ill health as one of the reasons.

Rev. Frederick G. Reynolds became pastor in December 1913, when there were 250 members at the church. A spirit of hopefulness and vigor was awakened, new members came into the church every month, the Sunday school grew rapidly, and the finances increased. The chapel could not accommodate the people, and the idea of a new building was revived.

A new sanctuary building was built in 1916, and the old chapel continued to be used for Sunday School until an education annex was completed in 1925. The first picture on the next page was taken in 1924 and the old chapel can be seen in the background. The second picture was taken in 1927 and the education annex can be seen in place of the old chapel.



By the time Rev. Reynolds had concluded his pastorate on November 19, 1927, the church membership had swelled to 800.

Rev. Dr. Oren Baker became pastor at Parsells on April 15, 1928. He would be a valuable aid to the life of the church for many years to come. In 1935, Rev. Baker earned his doctorate and he left Parsells to work at what is now called Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School.

Dr. Jeffrey Livingstone came to the Parsells pastorate on February 2, 1936. He worked hard to eliminate the remaining debt on the building, and a mortgage burning ceremony was held on March 28, 1947 (as shown below).



In the spring of 1952, Dr. Livingstone resigned to become assistant pastor of Lake Avenue Baptist Church. On April 25, 1952, the Parsells congregation had a farewell reception for him and his wife.

Rev. Dr. Clarence Gilbert was installed on October 12, 1952. The church had an extensive youth program for decades, with a large Sunday School based on the public school model. The education annex had a large gymnasium and generations of youth in the Beechwood neighborhood grew up playing basketball and other sports there. Under Dr. Gilbert's leadership, the use of the gym reached its fullest potential. After an active ministry, Dr. Gilbert preached his last sermon at Parsells on November 18, 1956.



Rev. James Bennett (shown above standing on the right with the open hymnal) was installed on September 8, 1957. In 1960, the church launched a five-year remodeling campaign which modernized the whole complex, including major changes to the sanctuary. Rev. Bennett served until September 1961.

Rev. Dr. Robert Willett was installed as pastor on Sunday June 10, 1962. During Dr. Willett's pastorate, the remodeling was completed. On May 5, 1963, the church held a formal dedication of the renovated chancel and the memorial gifts which had been purchased. The Parsells Baptist Nursery School began in 1965. That same year, the congregation dedicated a newly-created chapel in honor of former Parsells pastor Dr. Baker. Rev. Willett served at Parsells until December 31, 1971.

Rev. Dr. G. Stanford Bratton was called to the Parsells pastorate in 1973, and he would take the church to the next phrase in its history.

East Side Presbyterian Church

In December 1900, the Presbyterian Union (a subsidiary of the Presbytery of Rochester) decided to establish a church east of North Goodman Street. Organizational meetings and services began the following February, and East Side Presbyterian Church was formally organized on April 22, 1901. Dr. Coit, formerly of Memorial Presbyterian, was the founding pastor.

The congregation purchased a lot at the corner of Chamberlain Street and Hayward Avenue (three blocks away from the Baptist church, going south on Chamberlain Street). There they constructed a church building, where services were first held on June 23, 1901. It was a really small building, and it was enlarged a few months later, with the expansion being dedicated on December 22, 1901.



OUR FIRST CHURCH HOME. ERECTED SPRING OF 1901



OUR CHURCH AS ENLARGED AUTUMN OF 1901

Dr. Coit retired in 1905. He was succeeded by Rev. A. D. D. Fraser, who led the church in a period of growth. The building became entirely inadequate for worship and Sunday School. In fact, in 1907, the Presbyterian Union described the place as nothing more than a “shed.”

In 1909, the congregation laid the cornerstone for a new building at the corner of Parsells Avenue and Denver Street (just two blocks from the Baptist church, going east on Parsells Avenue). The new edifice, designed by Henry Larzelere of Rochester, was completed in 1911 and the “shed” was torn down.



Rev. Fraser served until 1910, and Rev. Arthur Clements took over as pastor in 1911. Rev. Clements oversaw the dedication of the new building. Rev. Clements’ pastorate, unfortunately, was cut short when he drowned while fishing at Irondequoit Bay on October 16, 1915, at the age of 38.

After the untimely death of Rev. Clements, East Side hired Rev. Francis L. McCauley on January 17, 1916, and he began his work at the church in February. During Rev. McCauley’s pastorate, the need for another expansion became clear. Church membership increased from about 200 to about 500.

In the fall of 1924, however, Rev. McCauley resigned after nearly nine years of service to accept a call to Silliman Memorial Church of Cohoes, NY. This partly halted building plans.

On February 17, 1925, East Side Presbyterian Church called Rev. Dr. Donald Chappel to be the next pastor. Dr. Chappel encouraged the East Side church members to continue what had been started during the previous pastorate, and so work continued on the building plans.

Thus, the current sanctuary and tower were built in 1925-26 (designed by architects Bohacket & Brew of Rochester), and the 1909 portion of the building was converted into classrooms and office space for the growing Sunday School. The church's pipe organ, an Opus 560, has 3 manuals (keyboards), 24 stops, and 1,638 pipes. The instrument is still in its original condition (it has never been modified).



Dr. Chappel served at East Side until 1928. Rev. Frank W. Hill was called to East Side in January 1928 and he was officially installed on September 29, 1929; he retired in 1934 because of ill health.

Rev. Sinclair Tebo was installed as pastor on May 13, 1934.

East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church

Even though Memorial Presbyterian, through its Friendship Center, ministered to many people of many nationalities, the church did not have enough members with sufficient financial means to sustain itself.

So, in 1939, Memorial Presbyterian Church voted to merge with East Side Presbyterian Church, forming the East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church. It's ironic that Dr. Coit left Memorial Presbyterian to help found East Side Presbyterian – and eventually the two churches would merge. Anyhow, the merged congregation kept the building on Parsells Avenue (the one still in use today) and sold the building on Hudson Avenue.

Rev. Tebo and Rev. Hays both served as co-pastors of the newly merged church. When Rev. Hays retired in 1940, Rev. Tebo continued to serve until 1943.

Rev. Kenneth Slorpe began his pastorate at East Side Memorial in March 1943 and served until 1951.

Rev. Robert Loyer then became pastor toward the end of 1951. While Rev. Loyer was at East Side Memorial, the church held a mortgage-burning ceremony on November 11, 1955, to mark the end of payments on the 1925 building addition (as shown below).



After Rev. Loyer left East Side Memorial, the church selected Rev. Charles J. Hooker, Jr., to be the next pastor.

In 1965, Rev. Hooker joined Rev. Joseph D'Aurizio, then of the Catholic Family Center, in creating North East Area Development (NEAD), which is still a vital organization in the northeast area of the city.

In 1967, East Side Community House (which later became Eastside Community Center) moved into East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church. Several years later, the center also started using the gym in the Parsells Avenue Baptist building.

Rev. Hooker moved to Pennsylvania in 1969, and he was succeeded by Rev. Dr. Ronald W. Richardson in 1970.

Parsells Avenue Community Church

Both Parsells Avenue Baptist Church and East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church thrived in the 1950s and 1960s, contributing to the well-being of the neighborhood around them. By the late 1960s, however, demographic changes in the neighborhood affected the two churches. Both churches lost members who were not being replaced. Individually, they could no longer afford to repair or maintain their larger buildings. Therefore, in June 1974, the churches agreed to meet and discuss the situation. The congregations slowly came together, combining services during the summer of 1975.

On September 28, 1975, the two congregations officially merged under the name "Parsells Avenue Community Church." The new church held its first service on Sunday, October 5, 1975.

Dr. Richardson (pastor of the Presbyterian congregation) and Dr. Bratton (pastor of the Baptist congregation) became co-pastors.

The intent of the union was to better provide for mission to the neighborhood, so that they did not have to sink all of their resources into the two congregations, supporting two pastors and two huge church buildings.

The decision was made to occupy the Presbyterian building at Parsells Avenue and Denver Street. The Baptist property was sold to East Side Community Center, which is now called The Community Place of Rochester. Thus, the East Side center moved from the East Side church building to the Baptist building, and the Baptists moved to the Presbyterian building. The Baptist building is shown on the next page in the 1980s (on the top) with bricks where windows had been, and then (on the bottom) as it looks today.

While this merger was occurring, the old School #33 building on Grand Avenue (around the corner from the Baptist church) was razed. The land where the school once stood, with the help of Parsells Church, became Grand Avenue Park in 1976.



In August 1976, Dr. Richardson relocated to another state and Dr. Bratton became the sole pastor of Parsells Avenue Community Church.

The church maintained support from both denominational affiliations: American Baptist Churches USA and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

In the early 1980s, the church shared its space with Inglesia Evangelica Hispana, a small Spanish church in the community that needed worship space. Also during this time, Parsells participated in a Haitian Resettlement Project. Under the direction of Lionel Honorat, the Haitians were provided with counseling, language classes, housing, clothing and advocacy.

Other projects and programs included the Neighborhood Housing Service, Scout programs, day care, nursery school, Girls club, drama groups, baseball teams, and YMCA-sponsored activities. The church was an active participant in mission offerings, the North East Church Cluster, and the CROP Walk.

In 1989, Rev. Dr. Bratton accepted a job offer in Buffalo and Rev. Robert Morgan became the next pastor.

The church started the Christian Saturday School in 1989. The Saturday School thrived and provided opportunities for children to receive breakfast, participate in extra-curricular activities and engage in Bible Study. The school existed until 1997.



There were also block parties, clothing drives, a children's choir, meal programs, and a host of other activities.

As the 20th century ended and the 21st century began, the church embraced technology to minister to the youth. The church began a Computer Lab in 2001, which was later expanded into a community technology center.

The church also collaborated with local organizations and agencies. Children and youth participated in events sponsored by the Monroe County Youth Bureau, the City of Rochester, and Teens Advocating Nonviolence. Parsells also partnered with The Community Place of Rochester (formerly Eastside Community Center), area churches, the Beechwood Neighborhood Coalition, and NEAD.

In April 2007, Rev. Morgan retired after 18 years of dedicated service, moving with his wife to Savannah, Georgia.

In December 2007, after many interviews and support from both denominations, Rev. Dr. Peter E. Grinion became the new pastor of Parsells Avenue Community Church. In 2008, Dr. Grinion led an intensive plan to renovate and revitalize the building, championed by the American Baptist Men of the Rochester/Genesee Region. ABMen called it a “church makeover.” Below are before and after photos of the kitchen.



In June 2009, the congregation held a worship service celebrating the 100th anniversary of the building's original 1909 completion.

In 2010, the covenant between Parsells and the Presbyterian Church (USA) was dissolved and Parsells Avenue Community Church became solely affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA. Also in 2010, the building became officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

During the summer of 2012, Parsells Church partnered with Immanuel Baptist Church to cultivate a community garden in the vacant lot at Parsells Avenue and Denver Street. On September 30, 2012, the two congregations came together for a "garden party" to praise God for the beautiful flowers and the bountiful harvest, joined by folks from the neighborhood and other American Baptist churches in the area.



In succeeding years, the number of gardens increased to three, spread out in vacant lots throughout the neighborhood.

Realizing the financial burdens of maintaining a large building (mainly the cost of heating it) were taking their toll on the small congregation and wanting to maintain (and expand) ministry to the neighborhood, in the fall of 2014, the church began to consider a potential merger with Christ Community Church of Rochester, upon the suggestion of Rev. Alan Newton (executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region).

On December 21, 2014, both churches held congregational meetings to vote on the issue. The vote was exactly the same in each congregation: unanimous, with one abstention, to approve the merger between Parsells Church and Christ Community Church of Rochester.

Dr. Grinion's last day at Parsells was on March 15, 2015. The next day, Rev. Washington became the pastor of both congregations. On April 5, 2015, the two churches came together as one.

Christ Community Church of Rochester

Christ Community Church of Rochester (C3) began in June 2010 as a response to a watershed moment in the life of Rev. Marlowe V.N. Washington.

After serving 5½ years at Baber African Methodist Episcopal Church, on June 19, 2010, Rev. Washington ("Pastor Marlowe") was asked to transfer to a church in Jamaica, Queens, NY. He declined the offer, choosing instead to remain in Rochester.

That evening, he called a meeting to bid farewell to his congregation. Several people said they would support him wherever he and his family went. The next day, Father's Day, June 20, 2010, 31 people gathered at 10 AM at the Youth for Christ building at 1 Favor Street for 90 minutes of song, praise, and prayer. This led to the formation of a new congregation.

On Reformation Sunday, October 24, 2010, at 3:30 PM, 225 people filled the Youth for Christ building to witness the first official worship service of Christ Community Church of Rochester. On that day, 20 people joined the church.

C3 began as an independent, non-denominational church, but the members knew they didn't want to stay unaffiliated for long. After a two-year process of prayer and introspection, the church formally petitioned the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region for membership. On February 10, 2013, the delegates of ABC/RGR met at the Baptist Temple and voted to admit C3, officially recognizing the congregation as a member of the American Baptist Churches USA.

C3 continued to meet at Youth for Christ on Sunday mornings. However, as the church evolved, the congregation desired to move from the Corn Hill neighborhood to one of the most depressed areas of Rochester, the northeast section, to provide a stronghold on social and political activism, and to help eradicate violence and poverty.

So, on April 6, 2014, C3 moved to 1119 Joseph Avenue, near Norton Street, and signed a one-year lease.

In the fall of 2014, at the request of Rev. Alan Newton, ABC/RGR executive minister, C3 and Parsells Church started to seriously discuss a possible merger of the two congregations.

On December 21, 2014, both churches voted to merge, and plans were then underway to facilitate that. During this process, two combined worship services were held, one on December 7, 2014, at Parsells, and the other on January 11, 2015, at C3.

As the lease on the Joseph Avenue building would end on March 31, 2015, it was decided that the two congregations would permanently come together for worship and ministry on the first Sunday of April. It was evident to all that God was working His purpose out in this venture.

The Historic Parsells Church

The Historic Parsells Church launched on Resurrection Day, April 5, 2015, with a sunrise service at 6 AM, followed by a breakfast at 8 AM and the inaugural service at 11 AM.

As mentioned, this is the result of Parsells Avenue Community Church and Christ Community Church of Rochester coming together as one, under the leadership of Rev. Marlowe V.N. Washington. The two congregations recognized the sense of meaning and history in each name, and so elements of both were retained as the new entity became The Historic Parsells Church: A Dynamic Christ Community. The new name and slogan were offered as praise to Jesus Christ, the Name Above All Names.

Roll Call of Pastors

Memorial Presbyterian Church



Rev. Gavin Lindsay
Hamilton
(1872-1874)



Rev. Dr. Charles Pierpont
Coit
(1875-1900)



Rev. Dr. John Lyon
Caughey
(1901-1905)



Rev. Frederick J.
Tower
(1906-1910)



Rev. William Wright
Stoddart
(1911-1914)



Rev. J. Canfield
Van Doren
(1914-1924)



Rev. Theodore T.
Hays
(1924-1939)

[List continues under East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church]

Parsells Avenue Baptist Church



Rev. Harry R.
Greaves
(1895-1896)



Rev. Joseph B.
Travis
(1896-1904)



Rev. S. Fraser
Langford
(1904-1909)



Rev. Elmer E.
Knapp
(1910-1913)



Rev. Frederick G.
Reynolds
(1913-1927)



Rev. Dr. Oren Huling
Baker
(1928-1935)



Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Daniel
Livingstone
(1936-1952)



Rev. Dr. Clarence B.
Gilbert
(1952-1956)



Rev. James W.
Bennett
(1957-1961)



Rev. Dr. Robert L.
Willett
(1962-1971)



Rev. Dr. G. Stanford
Bratton
(1973-1975)

[List continues under Parsells Avenue Community Church]

East Side Presbyterian Church



Rev. Dr. Charles Pierpont
Coit
(1901-1905)



Rev. Alexander D. D.
Fraser
(1905-1910)



Rev. Arthur B.
Clements
(1911-1915)



Rev. Francis Leroy
McCauley
(1916-1924)



Rev. Dr. Donald M.
Chappel
(1925-1928)



Rev. Frank Webster
Hill
(1928-1934)



Rev. Sinclair
Tebo
(1934-1939)

[List continues under East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church]

East Side Memorial Presbyterian Church



Rev. Sinclair Tebo and Rev. Theodore T. Hays (co-pastors, 1939-1940)



Rev. Sinclair
Tebo
(1940-1943)



Rev. Kenneth L.
Slorpe
(1943-1951)



Rev. Robert
Loyer
(1951-1960)



Rev. Charles J.
Hooker, Jr.
(1960-1969)



Rev. Dr. Ronald W.
Richardson
(1970-1975)

[List continues under Parsells Avenue Community Church]

Parsells Avenue Community Church



Rev. Dr. G. Stanford Bratton and Rev. Dr. Ronald W. Richardson (co-pastors, 1975-1976)



Rev. Dr. G. Stanford
Bratton
(1976-1988)



Rev. Dr. Robert L.
Morgan, Jr.
(1989-2007)



Rev. Dr. Peter E.
Grinion
(2007-2015)

[List continues under The Historic Parsells Church]

Christ Community Church of Rochester



Rev. Marlowe V.N.
Washington
(2010-2015)

[List continues under The Historic Parsells Church]

The Historic Parsells Church



Rev. Marlowe V.N.
Washington
(2015-present)