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Beemerville church celebrates 175 years



Photo by Elisa D. Keller/New Jersey Herald
The choir of the Beemerville Presbyterian Church performs during the church's 175th anniversary celebration Sunday. As part of the celebration, many church members opted to dress in period costumes from a variety of different eras. Historical artifacts, including photos, newspaper clippings and documents were on display throughout the fellowship hall.

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By ELISA D. KELLER

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WANTAGE -- Surrounded by cheerful parishioners in period garb, the Rev. Charles Jenkins described Sunday's special afternoon celebration of Beemerville Presbyterian Church's 175th anniversary as a merger of two of his favorite subjects -- history and religion.

Founded in 1834, the church was built during Andrew Jackson's presidency.

"That means that this church has been here for 75 percent of our nation's history," Jenkins said.

As part of the celebration, many church members opted to dress in period costumes from a variety of different eras. Historical artifacts, including photos, newspaper clippings and documents were on display throughout the fellowship hall.

A narrative history of the church, compiled through research and interviews, was written for the event by Lori Space Day and read by church members in six segments throughout the program.

"The history of the Beemerville Presbyterian Church is as rich and colorful as the stained glass windows that surround us," read Roger Jinks at the beginning of the celebration.

The historical essay followed the church's development from a small stone building designed as a joint location for members of Beemer Church, the Old Log Meeting House, and Clove Church in Sussex, to today's renovated facility, which includes a fellowship hall added in 1994.

"This was basically a one-room church," said the Rev. Beverly Karr-Lyon, who served as the church's pastor from 1988-97. She laughed as she spoke about her first day at the church, when she was given a key to the Beemerville Fire Department across the street -- the closest location with bathroom facilities.

"We have wonderful memories of being here in Beemerville," Karr-Lyon said, reminiscing about Easter Egg hunts, line dancing lessons, and regular visits to the Space Farms office next door to utilize their copy machine, just feet away from the occasional snake or lion cub. "I never knew what I was going to find."

The Rev. Robert Walters, who served as interim pastor from 1997-2001, fondly remembered his time spent in the church decades earlier as a young boy, particularly when he would ring the church bell to signal the beginning of service.

"Beemerville has always been in my heart and always will be in my heart," Walters said, pointing out the spot where he was confirmed more than 50 years ago. "I remember that so well. The Beemerville Presbyterian Church really took care of my Christian formation. Who said you can't come home again?"

During the celebration, former Sunday School teachers, church organists, church treasurers and church clerks were recognized with small gifts. Music was performed by the First Presbyterian Church of Sussex Bell Choir, and the Beemerville choir led a number of hymns.

Individual musical numbers included a duet of "You Are the Potter" by Stephanie Jacobs and Janet Jenkins, and a solo performance of "The Power of Your Love" by Coleen Havens, accompanied on the piano by her daughter Clarissa Havens.

Mayor Parker Space spoke briefly during the event, offering congratulations from the township committee and his own personal reflections on the anniversary.

"I got married here. Lots of family events have taken place at Beemerville Presbyterian Church," Space said.

The Rev. Carl Lazzaro, who led the church from 1985-87, thanked the church for teaching him self-restraint and control during his time there, and recognized the determined nature of the congregation, even when faced with closure.

"We continued to grow and we made it," said Lazzaro, pointing out the number of dedicated members who have passed on during the church's many years.

"If they only knew the legacy they gave this congregation," he said. "God bless this church. It'll be here long after I'm gone."

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