

Indian Hill Visit

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“Are we there yet?” Children ask that question of their parents, but on this occasion the queries came from Presbyterians and Episcopalians impatiently and inquisitively putting the question in a different way to members of Indian Hill Episcopal Presbyterian Church in suburban Cincinnati. The motto of Indian Hill Episcopal Presbyterian Church is from John’s Gospel: “That they all may be one.” Episcopal Presbyterian Dialogue members on a visit to the church were asking pressing questions in an effort to see how far we have come in fulfilling Jesus’ prayer for unity among those who would follow him.

The church was founded in 1947 as a partnership among Cincinnatians seeking a summer respite among the hills above the city. The beautiful neo-colonial church, situated on fourteen acres of a beautiful piece of property that might resemble one’s fantasy of the Garden of Eden, recently called the Rev. David Hawley as the Presbyterian part of the pastoral team. Already in place for over three years is the Rev. Pat Merchant, who felt called to be a part of a congregation of Episcopalians and Presbyterians, but after a few months in place, wondered at times how to keep straight in her mind, “Am I Episcopalian or Presbyterian today?”

After the third meeting of the Presbyterian Episcopal Dialogue early this year the members agreed to go to a sight at their next meeting where Episcopalians and Presbyterians have been living and worshipping together side by side. From its very beginnings the vision of the church has been to serve together in one congregation while retaining a roster of members separately for the two communions. The governing body is a Vestry Session composed of eleven members in each denomination. Aside from the nominating committee having to make sure that there is an equal number of members on a slate of nominees each year, neither the clergy nor the members ask who are the Episcopalians and who are the Presbyterians.

During a freewheeling discussion with members of the church, Freda Gardner, Dialogue co-chair of the visiting committee asked, “What distinguishes this church?” A member responded with the answer, “It’s where you feel immediately accepted.” That’s a common answer people give as to why they are members of a particular church. Yet, this is a unique parish. Though the analogy eventually fails, this relationship is like a marriage. Episcopalians and Presbyterians retain their identity under one roof. They make contributions to both the local Episcopal diocese and the presbytery. Those preparing for membership classes have to decide whether they’ll be confirmed by the Episcopal bishop or become a member of the Presbyterian Church. There is a third alternative that people are discouraged from choosing: becoming a member of the Indian Hill Corporation, which avoids deciding on membership in either Communion.

In the earliest formative stages of its life before it became a worshipping community, Presbyterian and Episcopalian women conducted Sunday school classes for their children during their summers in Indian Hill. So, Christian education is very important in this church’s life, as is music. Tibby, who has been a member for over thirty years,

coordinates the music program using hymnals from both churches at different times during the year. Adult education is equally important, and members spoke of stimulating forums for the adults as a part of their educational formation.

Worship is varied, though. The church has an 8 o'clock service of the Holy Eucharist, Rite II, from the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* each Sunday morning. At 9:30, the service is called Family Worship, and the focus keeps in mind children as well as adults. The 10:30 service focuses more on the Ministry of the Word. For example, one Sunday, the title of the service was "Presbyterian Morning Worship." On another Sunday, this service was "Morning Prayer" from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The liturgy varies from Presbyterian morning worship that may include The Lord's Supper from the Presbyterian tradition, to the Episcopal rites of the Holy Eucharist. The leadership roles of the clergy during worship vary as well, as they share in preaching and serving as liturgist.

Worship prepares the membership of the church for its ministry in the community and beyond. There is a vital jail ministry involving a significant segment of the church, and social outreach has been a core value of the membership from its inception. It was evident from the comments of several members that the church sees that their ministry extends to the larger community.

We might now go back to the question, "Are we there yet?" No, the goal of full visible Christian unity has not been reached here at Indian Hill. However, this congregation of Episcopalians and Presbyterians has gone a long way on the journey toward reaching that goal. The people of Indian Hill Episcopal Presbyterian Church serve as an example for all those who are striving to fulfill the prayer of Jesus, "That all may be one."