

300th Anniversary History

In preparing this history, we are grateful for Deacon Brown, Edward Gumprecht, and Henry McNulty, writers of previous histories for other major church anniversaries, who provided the many facts and figures necessary for such an undertaking as this, and to Richard Eppler, current historian, who has documented the last twenty-five years of our history.



Thinking back 300 years to the days when this church was founded, one of the hardest parts is imagining ourselves back in colonial Connecticut. Museums, historical societies, books, magazine articles, TV and movies can give us a flavor of the times, of course, as can a visit to Old Sturbridge Village or other recreations of American history. But it is still quite difficult for the modern mind to imagine what life was like back then.

For one thing – in fact, a major thing – there was no separation of church and state. The state was the church; the church was the state. They were one entity.

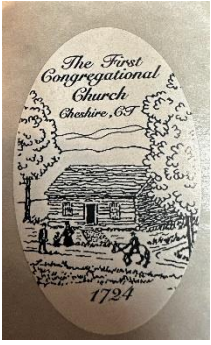
Our history began with the settlement of New Haven and the founding of First Church of Christ in New Haven (called Center Church) on the green. Part of that congregation moved to Wallingford and founded First Congregational Church of Wallingford. Eventually, the farmers in the western part of Wallingford wanted their own town, and Cheshire was established. The settlement was called Fresh Meadows, beyond the River (meaning the Quinnipiac River).

The farmers in Fresh Meadows really wanted their own *church*. They were tired of having to trek over the hill once a week on the Sabbath to the church in Wallingford. And make no mistake that every single week, without exception, this is where the farmers and their families went. For they were absolutely church-going people. Also, the men folk had to make the journey for mid-week church votes.

As early as 1718, West Farmers complained to the General Assembly that they lived so far from Wallingford that they deserved to be a separate parish. At that time, the answer was no, but four years later it was voted to allow a preacher to hold services on the west side of the Quinnipiac for three months, in the farmers' homes. The Reverend Samuel Hall was the preacher.

The first meeting of the West Society was held in the spring of 1723. Those who lived here – something in the neighborhood of 45 families – voted to petition the General Assembly to be a village of their own. Despite some opposition from Wallingford, the petition was granted, and New Cheshire, as it was called, became a separate village in December of 1724.

It is not absolutely certain why this name was chosen. As far as can be determined, no one who lived here made a specific request for the name Cheshire. Apparently, the Assembly more or less picked the name at random – understanding, of course, that in this case “random” means an already-established place name from England. Then there is the suggestion that Thomas Brooks, a town leader at the time, wanted the name because his family had come from Cheshire, England. The sources differ on this point.



For the inhabitants of New Cheshire, the first question was: Where to put the meetinghouse? Several spots were proposed and there was quite a lively debate about the correct spot. Our colonial ancestors didn't want to have to walk or ride too far each week. It took more than six months to come to a decision, but finally the choice was made. A meetinghouse 40 feet long and 30 feet wide, without a steeple, was constructed at what is now the corner of South Main Street and Lanyon Drive. To imagine this church, think of a small barn. One door, no backs to the pews, no heat. No organ, piano or other musical instrument. Although this is not absolutely certain, it is likely that the building was unpainted. And very likely there was no cross displayed; to our colonial ancestors, displaying the cross was thought to be too Popish. It is said that in winter, during breaks in the service, the congregation would go to nearby homes to warm themselves at fireplaces. Then back to the service, which lasted for hours.

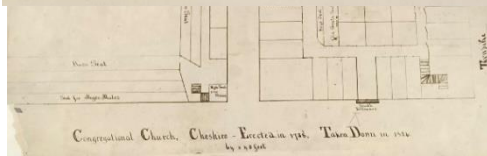
Seating in this sanctuary was not what you would imagine. All those who held titles as civil magistrates or military officers got the best spots, then seating was decided by amount of taxes paid (the more taxes, the better seats). Men sat on one side of the church, women on the other - in the order of rank of their husbands or fathers.

The first minister was the man who had preached among them before New Cheshire was a town: the Reverend Samuel Hall. He was pastor for an amazing 43 years, not counting the time before the church was formally established. During his pastorate, the town suffered the dreadful smallpox epidemic of 1732, in which one of his own sons, a baby also named Samuel, died. More than a quarter of the population caught the smallpox, and about 4 percent of the town died. To put this in terms of today's town population, imagine an epidemic so severe that, in one year, more than a thousand residents of Cheshire died in a few months.



Five years later, by 1737, Cheshire's population had increased and it was evident that it had outgrown its 40-by-30 meetinghouse. The second meetinghouse, which stood on the front of the church green, east of the soldiers' monument, was built in 1737 and 1738. It was more than double the size of the first church, 64 by 45 feet.

Some of the wood from the first church was used in the second. It had a turret on the north end, and in 1790 this was taken down and replaced by a steeple with a 700-pound bell that rang at noon and 9 at night, which was curfew-time.



Samuel Hall had 13 children. The youngest, Abigail Hall, married John Foot, who graduated from Yale and studied theology with his father-in-law. In 1767, he succeeded Samuel Hall as pastor, and he too served this church an astonishingly long time, even longer than Mr. Hall: 46 years. Thus, the first two ministers of this church were here a

total of 89 years.

Even in retirement, Mr. Hall continued to preach from time to time. In one of his most memorable sermons, from late 1775, he exhorted the young men of Cheshire to come to the aid of the American patriots by marching to Boston to drive out the British. He died in 1776, just five months shy of seeing Cheshire be a part of the United States of America.

His successor may have had a long tenure, but it was by no means untroubled. Eleven years after his ordination, several prominent members of the church had him brought before the Consociation of New Haven County on a number of charges, many of which seem ridiculous to us today. For instance, a member of the

church called on Mr. Foot and he didn't offer him a glass of cider. That he apparently accidentally stated that Adam built the Ark; that he showed favoritism in criticizing children, depending on which family they belonged to. And that he prayed with his eyes open. (There is a story that the New Haven elders asked how the parishioner could know that Mr. Foot's eyes were open during prayer - unless his own eyes were open as well.)

The Consociation dismissed most of the charges and suggested that Mr. Foot take a little more time in sermon preparation so as to be sure to put the right name of the builder of the ark, and to be a bit more considerate of the feelings of his brethren, but he was not removed as pastor and, in fact, stayed in that post another 35 years.

The thirty-three men that have been senior minister of First Congregational Church were a most interesting and devoted group of ministers, most beloved by the congregation and instrumental in the growth and continued health of the church.

By one hundred years after the founding of the church, it was determined that the congregation had again outgrown the church building, and a third meetinghouse was planned. That is our present building, designed by David Hoadley, whose churches can also be seen in Litchfield - practically a twin of ours - as well as Southington and Milford. It was completed in 1827.

It was also the scene of tragedy. Jesse Brooks was killed when one of the large corner posts slipped and crushed him. Once again, wood from the second meetinghouse was used in the construction of the third. In such a way, timbers from the very birth of this church act as a sort of wooden DNA, physically carrying on as a presence in each successive building.

The first settled pastor to officiate in our present meetinghouse was the Reverend Joseph Whiting. He was said to be an eloquent speaker, and after he served our church, he was a professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Michigan, where there is a large monument to his memory. It was he who built the house we now call the Whiting House. For many years this house did not belong to the church, and in fact was the residence of the headmaster of Cheshire Academy. But in the 1970s we bought it and the back yard, where the Japan chestnut tree is, back for the church's use.

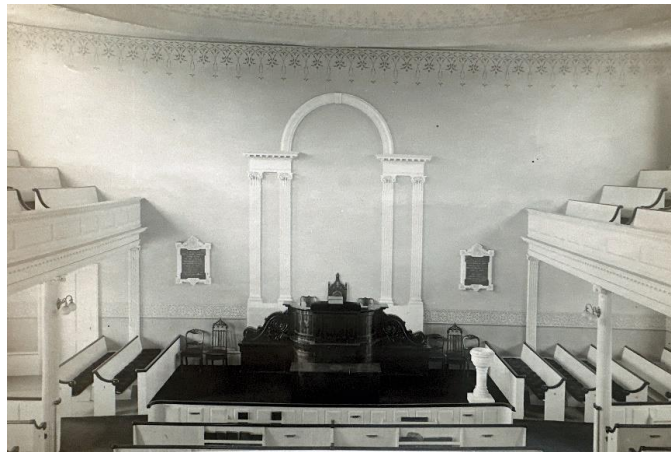
In 1857, a bolt of lightning literally tore through the church, entering at the northeast corner and passing out a window on the other side, tearing up the floor as it went. In repairing the damage, many changes were made to the sanctuary. The pulpit, which had been on the east end, was moved to the west end, the seating was reversed, and the choir loft moved back to the east side of the sanctuary, where it is now.

At this time, the question of slavery was hotly debated in America. The Reverend David Root, who was in the pulpit just before the beginning of the Civil War, was an ardent abolitionist and a fiery anti-slavery preacher. It should be noted that both the second and the present meetinghouses had so-called slave pews or slave boxes way at the back of the sanctuary, where slaves could attend services but not be seen by most of the congregation. So in the thirty-something years between the building of the third meeting-house and Mr. Root's pastorate, the church had gone from a lifestyle that accepted slavery to one that loudly denounced it. Such were the great changes of those times.

And so from the 19th century into the 20th - Pickett, Towne, Wolcott, Isham, Baldwin, Hoyt, Newlands, Stackman. Each of whom, if he were here today, could tell stories about the transformation of both Cheshire and the church in the industrial age and the turn of the century. For many of those years, ecumenism was either unheard-of, or heard of and despised. In 1829, the church voted "to open the doors of the meetinghouse to no other denomination of Christians for worship," and apparently this was enforced for many years.

The 200th anniversary of the church was held in September 1924, with a gala celebration attended by several former pastors, a pageant, and other events. These years saw the pastorates of the Reverends J. Herbert Bainton, Waldo Savage, Donald Finley, Thomas Pardue, William Tuck as Associate Minister, and the co-ministry of Edwin Lincoln and Wayne Sandau.

For a wedding on June 26, 1895, this picture shows the same frescoed arch, with the addition of the plaques to the memory of the Reverends Samuel Hall and John Foot on either side. The plaques are now on the opposite wall of the Sanctuary.



Probably taken in the 1940's, this view of the front of the Sanctuary shows the permanent Brooks memorial arch. The marble baptismal font, a gift of Alexander Doolittle in 1904 and later presented to the Church of the Epiphany, may be seen at the right.

The earliest photo of the pulpit, taken in 1867, shows what must have been the original frescoed wall behind it. A communion rail is visible in front of the pulpit, which does not show in any succeeding photos.





This photo was taken of the sanctuary decorated for a wedding on April 27, 1886. Note the new design behind the pulpit, done in fresco.

So much happened in those years. The final Sabba-Day houses and horse sheds, long a fixture on the south side of the sanctuary, were removed. The church green was improved. The parish house was built. The room at the rear of the sanctuary became the chapel and was dedicated to all from the parish

who lost their lives in World War II.

In 1966, the steeple, whose supports had begun to decay, was replaced by an exact replica. In 1968 the Victorian frescos were removed and the sanctuary was returned to its colonial style. The original pulpit was also restored. First Church became a town leader in the ecumenical movement. The church choirs saw unprecedented growth.

Cheshire, too, saw much growth in that period, as the sleepy farm community became more and more suburbanized.

The next quarter-century saw for our church years of stability; of service to the community, the country, and the world; and of substantial growth. In those 25 years, when mainline Protestant denominations such as ours have been, in general, on the decline (some would say in crisis), the rock steady success and increase in both membership and attendance of First Congregational Church is worth noting.

In this decade, among the accomplishments of First Church have been the calling of our first female pastor, the Reverend Lillian Daniel, as Associate Minister in 1993; our hosting of the Tercentennial Interfaith Celebration for the town in 1994, and the establishment of the First Church Nursery School in 1995.

Associate Ministers who served during this period included John Thomas (who later went on to become the President of the United Church of Christ), Scott Sanders, Boardman Kathan, Lillian Daniel, and Richard (Rick) Dacey.

Interim ministers who served between pastorates included Charles Duey, Barbara Libby, Caroline Murphy, David Colton, David Buchan, and Mark Montgomery.

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The New Millenium

With the retirement of long-time Senior Minister Wayne R. Sandau, the church looked to redefine the way forward with a process called "Envision." The final report of the program called for four focus areas: welcome, community, care, and discipleship. A Greeting Ministry was formed and a concentrated effort was made to be a "welcoming" congregation with greeters present on Sunday mornings and all church events, new signage, etc. A Parish Care Committee was formed to meet the needs of the parish with a Meal Ministry for those returning home after hospitalization or illness, a Ride Ministry, a Card and Friendly Visitor Ministry to reach our homebound parishioners and Stephen Ministry was established with several members taking the fifty hours of instruction required. Important progress was made in the goal of becoming a welcoming church.

In 1998 annual youth mission trips to work on homes of the poor and/or aged in various areas of the country were begun by Associate Minister, the Rev. Rick Dacey and have been continued by our Directors of Youth Ministry.

In 2001 the Rev. Richard Dacey was called as Senior Minister. In 2002 the Rev. Alison (Watrous) McCaffrey was ordained and called as Associate Minister.

The church continued to prosper during this period and the music program continued to grow under the direction of Joseph D'Eugenio. Joined by members of the Greater Middletown Chorale and orchestra, major works were performed for Memorial Music Sunday services, including a premier of Peter Niedmann's *New Every Morning*. The choir also sang with the Chorale in *Letter from Italy, 1944*, a New American Oratorio by Sarah Meneely-Kyder, a Grammy-nominated composer, and Nancy Meneely, a noted poet, both Connecticut residents. They wrote the compelling two-hour oratorio in collaboration with Joe, telling the story of how the war had affected their father. Music on the Green was well received by the community and many joined our congregation for the annual Lessons and Carols service.

As part of the Rev. Richard Dacey's sabbatical in 2004, a pulpit exchange with the Rev. Graeme Gardiner of West Epping United Church in Sydney, Australia was a wonderful experience for our congregation. It also led to the Rev. Dacey accepting a call to the West Epping Church at the end of 2006.

At this same time, Rick Dacey offered a challenge to the congregation to take \$500 and increase it 3-fold by some kind of outreach project. As a result, an outreach mission to Malawi was created by Amy Webb Mower in 2002 with the help of a group of parishioners which actively continued until 2015. This mission helped over two hundred young people attend high school. Many were able to go on to higher education. Two students in particular named Promise and Foster were given financial aid to attend college. They graduated in the United States and then found ways to financially and educationally help others in their Malawi community. Amy, with Robin Sellati and the committee's help, raised over \$80,000 over the course of thirteen years through benefit concerts, silent auctions, and various fundraisers. Aside from helping with education, mosquito netting, baby

formula, and fertilizer were purchased as well to help ease the most urgent needs of the five villages they were working with.

During this time, the church committed to capital maintenance projects of remediating the properties of asbestos, lead paint, and radon, having the parsonage rewired, purchasing new boilers, etc., and a "YUTES" Praise Band, drawing youth and adult musicians from the youth groups, played for various services.

On December 14, 2008, the Rev. Jeffrey D. Braun was called as Senior Minister.

The Rev. Alison McCaffrey organized an adult mission trip along similar lines to the youth trip, traveling to Gulfport, MS, to work on hurricane damaged homes, and the trips continued for several years.

A Church Columbarium was constructed near the chestnut tree in 2010 with 49 plots available for parishioners to purchase. Urns for the ashes are provided and are made by a Connecticut potter. The Columbarium Governing Committee provides perpetual care of the Columbarium at no cost to the church.

In 2010, after two years of planning, fourteen members and friends set off in late June, for Oberammergau, Germany to see a performance of the Passion Play. Only performed every ten years, the play involves 2,000 residents of this little Bavarian town, who spend three years preparing for their roles. The group also visited Italy, Switzerland, and Austria before arriving in Oberammergau for the play.

In 2013 the church voted to renovate and upgrade the Aeolian-Skinner organ. After final adjustments in October of 2015, its capability was demonstrated with an organ recital by three local organists - Allen Conway, John Coghill, and our own Joseph D'Eugenio. Renovations were also undertaken in the Chapel to make it a more usable worship space.

The ministers began offering "Ashes on the Way" on Church Drive on Ash Wednesday morning and it has grown to over three hundred people now stopping for ashes and a blessing.

In 2015, for the first time in over a decade, we again became a teaching church with student Interns from Yale Divinity School. In addition to our usual outstanding choral music, instrumental music was added on principal holidays - strings on Easter and brass on Christmas Eve. The Scripture by Heart group, led by the Rev. Alison McCaffrey, continued with the passion story from the Gospel of Luke on Palm Sunday.

The Rev. Dr. James Campbell began work as our Senior Minister on January 20, 2018, and was formally installed as our 33rd settled senior minister on April 22.

Also, in 2018 the Executive Board proposed and conducted a capital funds drive to finance a Parish Hall Revival, to add restrooms, storage, and a small office where the stage had been, and new lighting and air conditioning. Bids for the work were solicited, a contract signed, and the work completed and dedicated by the Spring of 2019. It is used for Sunday services during the Summer.

On March 31, 2019 we dedicated the last surviving slave pew, in memory of that unfortunate aspect of our early history. During part of the service, the names of slaves who lived in Cheshire were read. It was moving to have some of their descendants join us for the service.

Like everything in 2020, the work of the church was impacted by the restrictions imposed to control the spread of the world-wide Covid-19 virus. On March 15 the Sunday service was switched to a virtual service. An outdoor in-person Sunday service began on August 2, and continued until the end of October, when the service moved inside with limited attendance until November 22, when it reverted to a virtual service.

For Christmas, the Rev. Alison McCaffrey organized *Journey to Bethlehem*, a walk past several outdoor stations where church members portrayed the Christmas story.

The coronavirus impacts continued into 2021. Until Palm Sunday the weekly Church service was limited to a virtual service. On Palm Sunday the service resumed an outdoor in-person service on the church green. Over the Summer the services moved to the air-conditioned Parish Hall, and in the Fall back to the sanctuary. These services were live-streamed to benefit those concerned about the safety of attending in-person, or who have moved away from the Cheshire area.

Restoration of normal church activities continued in 2022. Except for a brief period of online only services in the Winter, we resumed in-person Sunday services, but with live-streamed services for those unable to attend in-person. Our Music program returned to pre-Covid levels. Memorial Music Sunday featured two choral anthems and a duet. Our Annual Festival of Carols filled the sanctuary, which had not occurred for a few years.

On December 11, 2022 we remembered that 300 years ago a small group of our former members received permission to hold services in what became Cheshire and they welcomed our first minister, the Reverend Samuel Hall.

Unlike the smallpox epidemic of 1732, this Covid pandemic had only ninety deaths in the town of Cheshire that now numbers over 28,000 people.

For over 80 years, this church has been a teaching church welcoming student interns (called Parish Associates) from Yale Divinity School and Andover Newton Theological Seminary who were learning about parish ministry. In 1990 a celebration of our 50 years of participating in this program was held with many interns returning or sending greetings. Interns from 1940 to the present include: D. Ray Lindley, Virginia Phelps, Edgar Weber, Albert Seely, Frank Snow, Ralph Hagopian, Louis Riley, Hugh Flescher, John Schutz, Mary Ann Wilner Neevel, Levering Reynolds, David Sarles, Charles Wrye, Kyle McGee, Kenneth Brown (deceased), Mark Collier, John Hay (deceased), John Barrett, Edwin Peterson, Clifton Kirkpatrick, Arthur Gafke, Donn Morgan, Clinton Terry, Diane Knight, David Peterson, Paul Kropp, Charles Watkins, Thomas Craig, J. Richard Sherlock, Richard Shoup, Gary Harke, Richard Whittington, Samuel Roberts, Stella Roberts, Kendrick Norris, Emmajane Finney, Kitty Funkhouser Garlid, Kenneth Frazier (deceased), Elizabeth Tobie, Jeanne Maguire Brenneis, George Haskins, Marcia Lapp (deceased), David Rennard, Sally Swearingen, Richard King, Barris Malcolm, Priscilla Lawrence, Nancy Leckerling, Hendrick Pillay, Laura Price, Ian Rex, Bruce Ford, Roger Brooks, Bonnie Black, Samuel Dexter, Atessa Afshar, Caroline Murphy, Adam Eckhart, Ruth LeBar, Georgene Indorf, Lynda Bigler, Lisa Horst, Elliot Munn, Katrina Manzi, Oliver Mesmer.

In the early 1950's, when our Church School attendance on Sunday mornings reached 400+ students, Parish Associates Albert Seeley and Frank Snow were given the part-time positions of Director of Religious Education. The first full-time Director of Christian Education Cynthia Dennett was called in 1966, followed later by Elizabeth (Betty) Floyd (deceased) who served from 1973 to 1982, Peggy Dickinson (deceased), Karen Kaczynski, Deborah Gravell, Carroll Cyr, and Dawn Marchand. Interims in this period were: Martha Lape and Lauren Overlock.

In the 1980's, Yale Divinity School students Lynn Boettger and Deborah Hobart were hired to lead the Junior and Senior High Youth Groups. Prior to this, leaders were volunteers from the congregation or Parish Associates. In the following years: Beth Burton, Laura Whinfield, David and Anne McBain, Christopher Henry, Sue O'Connor, Glenn Root, and the Rev. Matt McCaffrey and Roger Olander as Interims, led the Youth Groups. For a number of years now, Todd Skrzyniarz has led the groups with the help of congregation members.

The early church had no musical instruments but the psalms were sung on Sundays. In the 1864 records, we see that Miss Carrie Hotchkiss was hired for \$25 to play the Melodian for the year and then Miss Nellie

Baldwin was paid \$200 in 1884 to play the organ. The next mention of Choir Directors and Organists we see are in the 1938-1957 era: Doris Eastman Rigney, Urban Tyack, Mrs. Louis MacKey, Rosalie Fentzloff and Mrs. Wayne Rollins. Some of the women taught at neighboring colleges as well. Concerts were given by the senior choir in the auditorium at the town hall and were very well attended.

Other directors mentioned later were Mrs. George Carlson, Elise Moody, Helen Bray, Mrs. John N. Brown, Alvin Lunde, Egbert Ennulat, Philip Prince, Gretchen Stein, Ruth and Hans Bauer, Maria Coffin, Roger Claiborne (ISM), Kevin Daly, Stephen Tappe (ISM), E. Davis Wortman, III (ISM), Sharon Sasse (ISM), James Casey (ISM), Scott Gunn (ISM), Bryan Campell (ISM), Gary Snowbeck, Joseph D'Eugenio. Handbell Choir Directors in the 1990's were Jennifer Diemer and Marianne Beckmann.

(Note: ISM is Institute of Sacred Music at Yale Divinity School)

We must pause here to acknowledge the fact that we most likely have missed the names of some church members who belong in this history. For that, we apologize.

It seems fitting to conclude with this from the 275th Anniversary History (with minor changes!) –

What would Samuel Hall, Joseph Thomson, Thomas Brooks, John Hitchcock, Timothy Tuttle, Joseph Ives, Benjamin Hotchkiss and the others in that first congregation three hundred years ago say to us, if they were to magically visit today? My guess is that they would be dumbstruck, even if they could somehow comprehend the electric lights and organ, the microphones, the video setup, and the four-wheeled horseless vehicles parked behind the building. Certainly, the form, the length, the order of worship and other aspects of our service would be alien to them, let alone the fact that we dare to allow women and men to sit next to each other in the pews.

But we would find points of commonality. Stumbling over only a few word changes, they would join us in the Lord's Prayer. They would – again, taking into account the language – immediately recognize the scripture readings. The message from the pulpit would seem unaccountably short to them; they would probably think of a twenty-minute sermon as a good warm-up to some real preaching. But they would be familiar with pastoral exhortations to turn away from the ways of the world and follow the example of Jesus Christ.

And in the end, I think they would be glad that after so long the Word is still being preached here in New Cheshire. They would look with satisfaction on the string of no fewer than 33 senior ministers, who, from generation to generation, have led the faithful in worship. And with us, they would thank God.

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And now, let us close with prayer:

Great God, we give you thanks for the pioneers who so many years ago built a meetinghouse here to worship you as a community of the faithful. Although today we celebrate the passage of time, we praise your timeless presence. Lord Jesus, our light and example, we praise your unceasing leadership of this church over the centuries. Be present always with us, sending your Holy Spirit to direct and bless this congregation. Guide and protect those who will follow us in this place, so that your name may be praised by those yet unknown to us. For it is in your name that we pray. *Amen.*

MINISTERS

Samuel Hall.....	1724 - 1767
John Foot	1767 - 1813
Humphrey Perrine.....	1813 - 1816
Roger Hitchcock	1820 - 1823
Luke Wood	1823 - 1826
Joseph Whiting	1827 - 1836
Erastus Colton	1838 - 1843
Daniel March	1845 - 1848
Daniel S. Rodman	1849 - 1854
Clement W. Clapp.....	1855 - 1857
David Root.....	1858 - 1860
John S. C. Abbott	1860 - 1861
Charles Little.....	1862 - 1865
Cyrus Pickett	1866 - 1867
Joseph H. Towne	1867 - 1868
John M. Wolcott.....	1869 - 1876
Joseph Isham	1877 - 1882
Elijah C. Baldwin.....	1882 - 1890
James P. Hoyt.....	1890 - 1900
Robert W. Newlands	1901 - 1906
Carl Stackman.....	1906 - 1911
Von Ogden Vogt.....	1912 - 1916
Chalmers Holbrook.....	1916 - 1920
J. Herbert Bainton	1920 - 1940
F. Waldo Savage.....	1940 - 1951
Donald W. Finley	1951 - 1954
Roy M. Houghton (interim)	1954 - 1955
Thomas E. Pardue.....	1955 - 1964
William C. Tuck	1958 - 1962
Edwin R. Lincoln.....	1963 - 1975
Wayne R. Sandau	1965 - 1999
John H. Thomas	1975 - 1980
Scott M. Sanders.....	1983 - 1985
Boardman Kathan.....	1986 - 1991
Lillian Daniel	1993 - 1996
Richard (Rick) Dacey	1996 - 2007
Alison G. McCaffrey.....	2002 - present
Jeffrey D. Braun	2009 - 2015
James P. Campbell	2018 - present

Interim Ministers from 1992 to the present were Charles Duey, Barbara Libby, David Colton, David Buchan, and Mark Montgomery. Donna Cassity served as Associate Minister for Parish Care in 2004 and Parish Care interim in 2005.

Words from Our Senior Minister Following Jesus for 300 Years – and Beyond

The 300th Anniversary of any American institution is worthy of note, especially in a throw-away culture like ours. But the anniversary of a church is especially noteworthy during this time of precipitous decline in organized religious life. What's more, to reach this milestone as a congregation, and to still be vital and vibrant, is no small feat indeed.

I have often wondered why the First Congregational Church of Cheshire continues to thrive when so many other faithful congregations do not. I have not come to any easy conclusions, but of this I am certain: what we are today is no guarantee of what we will be in another 20, 50, or 100 years. Will we still be strong and vibrant? Will we be a shell of what we once were? Will we exist at all?

These kinds of questions are natural for those of us who love this particular congregation. But, to some degree, questions about our institutional future are not of primary importance as followers of Jesus. Faithfulness to the Gospel has always been about the supremacy of the present. So, the question becomes: are we following Jesus where he leads us in 2024?

This is a vital question at every juncture of a congregation's life. And it is an urgent question at this moment in our national life, and in the life of the planet: are we following Jesus where he leads us now? If so, what does that look like in a perilous time of national division, with the dangerous rise of so-called "Christian Nationalism"? How does our following Jesus in 2024 make a difference for a planet under siege? How does our decision to follow Jesus today actually change the lives of the poor, the outcast, the misunderstood, the marginalized, the hated, and the abused?

If in this 300th year our congregational decisions and actions are guided by following Jesus in our own day, then we can confidently leave the questions about First Church's future in the hands of the One who holds the future; the same One who gives us the blessed gift of an abundant life, right here, right now.

The Rev. Dr. James Campbell
Senior Minister

The 300th Anniversary Planning Team

Christine Fitzmaurice, Co-Chair
Rev. Alison McCaffrey, Co-Chair
Rev. Dr. James Campbell
Joey Ekberg
Karen Gravino
Martha Lape
Christine Pittsley
Robin Sellati
Martha Triplett Strollo
Rev. Dean Warburton

The drawing of the first meetinghouse on page 2 was done by June Webster, artist and church member, for a stewardship campaign."
