

# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

*"Downtown by history and by choice"*



## Sesquicentennial Snapshot No. 7

### Our Church in Crisis Times:

#### Whither the Downtown Church, Relocate or Remain?

The most far-reaching crisis ever faced by Durham's flagship Presbyterian Church and by every one of its members involved neither war nor an economic depression. Rather, the crisis confronting the church in 1958-1960 presented a stark question: remain downtown on the site of the church since 1876 in a changing city or relocate to the burgeoning suburbs? As **Rev. Kelsey Regen** succinctly phrased the issue: Relocation would be, he said, "the most significant and difficult venture in [the church's] entire history." To remain at its historic site, however, the church would need to "maintain an adequate and effective downtown ministry [that] may well prove to be a more difficult and precarious venture [because it would require] "an institutional ministry to the neighborhood." Resolution of the question would ultimately lie with the congregation, but multiple actors would be involved in the politics enveloping the issue.

A major actor was the church's Long-Range Study and Planning Committee, composed of 29 officers and members of the congregation, and chaired by local businessman **Harry J. van Straaten**. Established by the Session in 1958, its five subcommittees reported on plant and facilities, membership demographics, Durham religious affiliations, residential trends, and development of new facilities. Hardly had the van Straaten Committee gone to work than the Granville Presbytery's Church Extension Committee weighed in with a plan to establish a church in the city's leafy suburbs. That church might be a relocated First Church, or it might be a new church. Blindsided by the unilateral action by the denomination's higher courts, the Session responded by seeking a delay in any implementation of the largely rural Presbytery's plan. At that point, the Atlanta-based General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States stepped in with an expert consultant, **Harold Hyde**, Secretary of the Department of Survey and Church Location, Division of Home Missions, Board of Church Extension of the PCUS. The Hyde Report in January 1960 together with the subcommittee reports provided the basis for the influential and closely reasoned "Report of the Long-Range Planning Committee" (Clark-Hill Report) authored by **Elder Arthur Watts Clark** and **Deacon Watts Hill, Jr.**

The several plans emphasized common causes, some internal to the church and others external to it. The church's physical plant had long been a problem. For years, Christian educators had been beating the drums for improved Sunday School facilities. The 1913 Round House fronting on North Roxboro Street featured fifteen classrooms perpetually overcrowded by 55 teachers trying to teach 412 students in confined spaces that compared unfavorably with those available in other churches.



### PHOTO NO. 1 - Packed Third Grade Sunday School Classroom

Little relief had been afforded by the 1950s renovation of the sanctuary basement to provide classroom space in that high humidity environment. The Round House's condition was not the only shortcoming. Deferred maintenance over the previous three decades marked by the Great Depression, World War II shortages, and a postwar Baby Boom generation all contributed to physical plant deterioration in a church with a membership then approaching 1000.

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### PHOTO NO. 2 - Antiquated Church House Kitchen

External factors also weighed heavily on the decision-makers. Demographic changes linked to land use conditions and their impact on the urban landscape disfavored, at least in the short term, downtown institutions. Offsetting a declining urban center were the many attractions of low-density suburban living following the end of wartime gasoline rationing and the availability of building supplies. Attractions included financial incentives: relaxed mortgage regulations, the G.I. bill's housing provisions, tax deductions. Push factors included city public school integration in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's historic 1954-1955 decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the dramatic impact of urban demolition launched by the federally funded Durham Redevelopment Commission which began life in 1958. Its bulldozers would eventually remove 4,057 households and 502 businesses and reconfigure the downtown street system with a web of one-way streets including Liberty Street and the widening of North Roxboro Street, both streets adjacent to the church. Urban renewal would await the passage of decades.



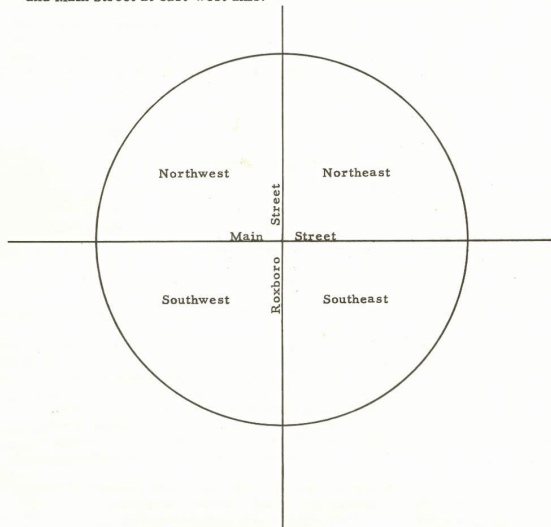
The cities near Northeast Quadrant and especially its Southeast Quadrant where few First Church members resided were largely populated by African Americans who suffered the impact of the over promised renewal project. Thus, the white population, including First Churchers, flowed to the suburbs in the city's Southwestern, Northwestern and even the far Southeastern (RTP) Quadrants. This migration portended important demographic changes for the downtown and for First Church. For Hyde, the situation could not have been clearer. Church members, especially those with children and who provided more than two-thirds of the church's pledging resources, actually lived in the Southwest Quadrant while an older segment of the congregation populated the Northwest Quadrant. Neither populations were well served by old First Church or by the former mill **chapels turned churches situated along an east-west axis from Fuller Memorial (now Durham Rescue Mission) at Alston Avenue to Trinity Avenue** with its new Christian Education building to **Blacknall** off Ninth Street on the west. **Northgate Church** (now **Iglesia Presbiteriana Emanuel**) on North Roxboro Street several miles north of First Church, had been founded in 1944. Its sanctuary had been completed in 1953 and served the far Northeast Quadrant while **Mt. Bethel** served Presbyterians in the far Northwest Quadrant.

Church Membership

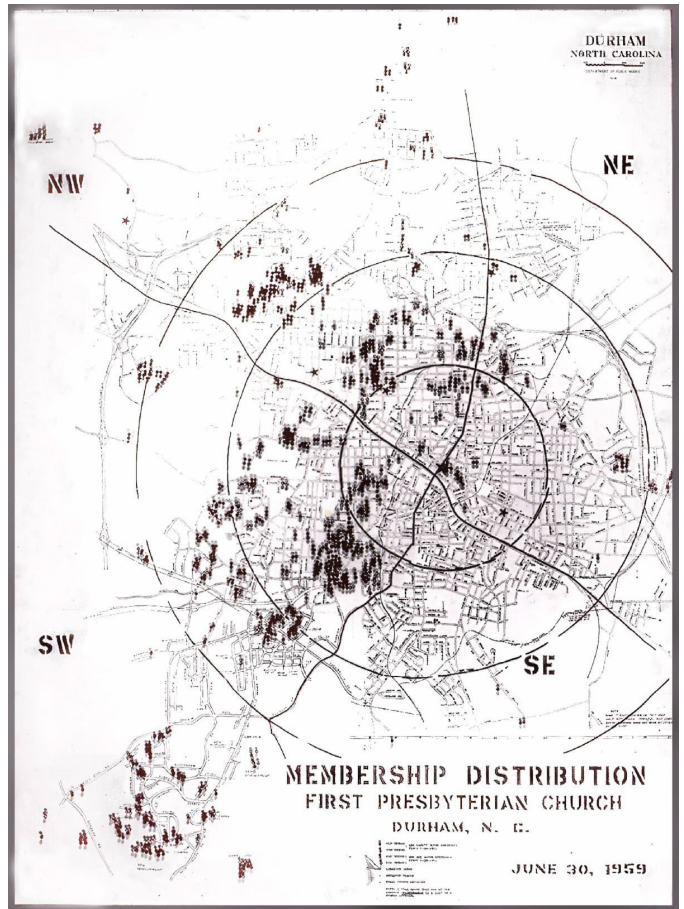
Active Membership  
(June 30, 1959)

	Number	Percent
Living in southeast quadrant *	4	.3
Living in northeast quadrant	63	6.7
Living in northwest quadrant	319	34.3
Living in southwest quadrant	544	58.7
	<u>930</u>	<u>100.0</u>

\* Quadrants are divided by Roxboro Street at north-south axis and Main Street at east-west axis.



**PHOTO 3a. Quadrants Map**



**PHOTO 3b. Membership Distribution among Quadrants**

The apparent need for a Presbyterian presence in the Southwest Quadrant provided either by a moved First Church or a new church led Hyde to declare that “all sentiment must be rung [sic] out and the decision made purely from a factual and business-like approach.” Costly repairs to the existing physical plant at 305 East Main Street would not stem the exiting of members to an assured new church in the Southwest Quadrant. Therefore, he recommended that Old First relocate to a site south of Forest Hills Park. Faced with the Hyde Report and by a determined Granville Presbytery, the Clark-Hill report, nevertheless, advanced four recommended options. Significantly, the first, and apparently favored option and one decried by Hyde as ignoring demographic projections, proposed remaining downtown but to make vast improvements in the physical plant at a projected cost of \$700, 000 so as to create “a superior downtown ministry.” The other three options all involved new church development with the second option including minimal renovations to Old First. Option No. 3 called for actual relocation of First Church to a new and major facility in the Southwest Quadrant at a cost of \$875,000, a sum partially offset by sale of the Roxboro and Main Street site and transfer of the church’s endowment. The fourth option, a variant of No. 3, accommodated congregants in the near Northwest Quadrant with a new church while the cost of relocating the flagship church to the Southwest Quadrant was reduced to \$500, 000.

Whatever option was selected, the Clark-Hill Report stressed the necessity for a “prompt, clear and unequivocal decision [that would reflect the will of] the overwhelming majority of the congregation.” Confronted by the pronounced position of the denomination’s higher courts, the reality of the dramatically changing urban environment, the stark demographics and the acknowledged shortcomings of the church’s existing physical plant, the Long-Range Planning Committee acted. It endorsed Option No. 3 and on June 27, 1960, a joint meeting of the

governing boards approved by lopsided margins that option with only a solo dissenter among the Elders (15-1) and another among the Deacons (23-1). A summer of conversation faded into early autumn and on September 13 the congregational meeting convened to vote on the unamendable third option endorsed by the boards. It would be a binary vote (yes-no), but first the unexpected happened. Downtown residents **Robinson Everett**, a Deacon, and **Elder Charles Hicks** launched vigorous challenges to the favored option. The result was a less than “overwhelming” congregational vote, 207-139 (approximately a 60-40 percent split). The ambiguous outcome left in doubt both the fate of the church’s Main Street property and its Watts endowment should a “saving remnant” seek to remain at Old First.

In the wake of the divided vote, Rev. Regen, harboring doubts about First Church’s future in a changing city, announced his resignation after nineteen years as shepherd of the Durham flock and left to accept a pastorate call from the First Presbyterian Church of Richmond, VA. Meanwhile, in early 1961, the congregation was invited to complete a questionnaire to which 74% responded, their responses processed by IBM Data processing and collated by able Church Secretary **Maxie Honeycutt**. Of the four options presented, respondents favored the relocation option (No. 3) by a plurality of 35%, but significantly nearly two-thirds favored remaining at 305 East Main Street under various conditions ranging from no or minimal plant improvements to major improvements.

The climax to the years long controversy over the fate of our downtown church occurred on December 17, 1961, when in a historic congregational meeting, members unanimously voted both to rescind the decision made nearly fifteen months earlier to relocate to the Southwest Quadrant and to make substantial improvements in the existing physical plant. The improvements would include demolition of the Round House and its replacement by seventeen spacious classrooms in a new Christian Education building, an enclosed foyer connecting the church house to the sanctuary, church house renovations centered on the kitchen, and an expanded parking lot.



**PHOTO 4**  
**Farewell Round House 1913-1963**

Shortly thereafter, in September 1962, a new suburban church was organized at the old Hope Valley Public School and on May 26, 1963, Westminster Presbyterian Church held its first worship service. Among the members were fifty-five dismissed from the membership roll of First Presbyterian Church including some who had been leaders at the flagship church. By 1967, worshippers gathered in the new Fellowship Hall off Old Chapel Hill Road and twenty years later in an

adjacent brick house of worship. Meanwhile, those remaining at Old First underwent a time of testing during a stressful two-year long “pastorless state” as Women of the Church Historian **Hazel Leathers** put it. Yet, the rescinding decision of 1961 provided some relief because, as she noted, that unanimous decision “made for harmony of thought and unity of action that relieved our unsettled state.”

By Peter G. Fish,  
Member, 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee