Faith in a New Direction:
Suburban Worship in Postwar Rapid City: 1945-1972

Executive Summary
Membership in churches, synagogues, and other faith-based institutions grew dramatically across the country in the postwar years. Between 1940 and 1960, the percentage of people in the United States claiming some religious affiliation rose from 49 percent to 65 percent. Rapid City churches experienced this surge. As residential construction boomed and the city expanded, Mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church followed the community into new neighborhoods that sprawled outward from downtown Rapid City in every direction.

Between 1945 and 1972, nearly two dozen new congregations were formed and churches built in Rapid City’s new suburban neighborhoods. At the same time, long-established downtown congregations (Trinity Lutheran, First United Methodist, and First Presbyterian) renovated or razed their historic structures to build anew in the heart of the city. Meanwhile, around 1960, the Synagogue of the Hills was established to serve the small but growing Jewish community. Without a facility of their own, Jewish congregants met in borrowed space on Ellsworth Airforce Base and in church attics and basements for decades.¹

Christian churches in Rapid City’s suburbs reflected the postwar concerns of their congregations. The spiritual needs of the postwar nuclear family and the church community were reflected in the architecture of the building and site planning. L-shaped structures included a sanctuary for worship along with above-ground wings to accommodate classrooms for Sunday school children and fellowship halls for multiple generations of parishioners. New materials, many of them developed to support the war effort, were now integrated into building design and deployed to accentuate the streamlined mid-century look in architecture and furniture. Meanwhile, large parking lots accommodated family station wagons and sedans, reflecting the increasing mobility of the community.

Long run changes in the character and practices of the Christian community in Rapid City and the United States increasingly threaten the future of these postwar churches. The Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission (RCHPC) can take action to document this era and help residents understand how postwar religious practices helped shape the character of the community.

Historical Research & Narrative
In the mid-1950s, the members of the First Congregational Church—the oldest church in Rapid City—were in crisis. Over the previous two decades, membership had grown from 500 in 1940 to over 660 in 1950 and approached 800 by the early 1960s. With the baby boom, Sunday school classes were packed. The basement was no longer big enough or conducive to fellowship. Moreover, the existing stone structure downtown on Kansas City Street, built in 1914, projected an image of

the church that was stuck in the past, and many in the congregation felt it was time to make a change.²

The first step was awkward. Given the opportunity to sell before they had a building site or a design, the congregation made the decision to sell. For the next two and a half years, from 1956 to 1959, they met in the chapel of the Campbell Funeral Home while the Building Committee did its work.³

After acquiring a piece of property in a newly developed residential area off of West Boulevard, the committee traveled to Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Spencer, Iowa; and Boulder, Colorado to look at churches and interview architects. They also attended the International Conference of Church Architects to further their research. In the end, they chose the well-known Sioux Falls architect Harold Spitznagel to design a modern structure emblematic of the congregation’s increasingly suburban lifestyle.⁴

The Building Committee’s “Preliminary Statement of Requirements” for the architect spoke volumes about the ways in which they hoped the architecture would reflect the congregation. They wanted a building “that speaks to us, and to all who view it, in the language of our own time, a building that uses the materials of our day to express our own particular Congregational Protestantism with spiritual dignity and strength and beauty....” They wanted a design that was honest, simple, functional, beautiful and built “around our worship patterns and the life we live within our church body as a whole.” Sensitive to the site nestled just below Skyline Drive, the committee stressed: “The importance of view, of skyline and cloud patterns, and of surrounding terrain will help to make a distinctive setting for the church buildings.” Cherished symbols of their faith, from the crucifix to the organ to the belltower were important, but the committee hoped the architect would find new ways of expressing these elements in the design. “We do not wish a copy of some trite other denominational style,” the committee wrote. “We do desire a church of our day, deeply and simply expressive of our religious way of life, honestly functional, deeply inspirational, simply and beautifully designed to meet the needs of our day.”⁵

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² Henry Bradshaw, ed., *Glimpses of Our History: Celebrating 125 Years of the Ministries of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Rapid City, South Dakota,* (Rapid City: Clark & Greind Printing, 2011), 65.
³ Slide show script, 1961, First Congregational Church Archives.
⁴ Unsigned handwritten notes (Paul Fenske Printing Co. notepaper), no date. See also, Hazel Schwentker, [Memories], no date. First Congregational Church Archives.
⁵ Building Committee, First Congregational Church, “Preliminary Statement of Requirements,” no date. First Congregational Church Archives.
In choosing Spitznagel, the congregation was getting “one of our nation’s finest architects,” Rev. George Fisk later wrote. Spitznagel had attended the Art Institute of Chicago and earned his degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. His work was widely recognized throughout the Upper Midwest. His design for the church reflected many of the characteristics of suburban church construction in the Upper Midwest in the postwar years. As historian Gretchen Buggein has noted, many members of the “Greatest Generation” had a sense that humanity’s destructive technology had outpaced spiritual development. To assert the constancy of their faith in the face of a modern world, suburban congregations embraced church designs that were streamlined and horizontal, and integrated the new materials of the age with the ancient feel of stone, wood, and stained glass.

The Pattern of Postwar Church Development

First Congregational Church was not alone in the postwar years. Across the United States, church membership swelled in the postwar era. In 1940, 49 percent of the population claimed some religious affiliation; by 1960, that number had risen to 65 percent. As residential construction boomed and Rapid City grew to the north, south and west, Mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church followed the community into these new neighborhoods.

Between 1945 and 1972, nearly two dozen new churches were built in Rapid City’s new suburbs. At the same time, long-established downtown congregations (Trinity Lutheran, First United Methodist, and First Presbyterian) renovated or razed their historic structures to build anew in the heart of the city.

The churches in the suburbs reflected the postwar concerns of their congregations. At the heart of the design was a concern for the postwar nuclear families who were the bedrock of the church community. L-shaped structures included the church sanctuary for worship along with above-ground wings to accommodate classrooms for Sunday school children and fellowship halls for multiple generations of parishioners. Unlike the basements of an earlier era, these spaces were illuminated with large windows that shed daylight on the faces of friends and family, and for the faithful, imbued the space with the warmth of the Holy Spirit.

New materials, many of them developed to support the war effort, were now integrated into building design, including plywood, aluminum, precast concrete, gypsum board, wallboard, factory-built cabinets, tempered plate glass, laminates, and plastics. Deployed to accentuate the streamlined mid-century look in architecture and furniture, these materials accentuated the modern look, but often helped congregations keep construction budgets under control.

Just as the new suburban neighborhoods facilitated community interaction, with room for cars and children on bicycles, neighborhood shopping, and neighborhood schools, the new churches were

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7 Gretchen Buggein, The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015)
designed to encourage fellowship and community. Large parking lots accommodated family station wagons and sedans in neighborhoods filled with blue collar laborers or service workers living in modest single-family homes.⁸

The Need for Documentation and Preservation

Today, some of these Mainline and Catholic churches are still home to families who have been part of the congregation for several generations and who remain tied to the surrounding neighborhood. Other churches struggle to survive amid the general membership decline in Mainline denominations across the United States. Indeed, Christian Americans have gravitated to newer, larger, non-denominational churches with more contemporary praise worship formats and an expanded range of services for their congregants. In some cases, neighborhood Mainline churches have also been repurposed to serve as incubators for new charismatic and evangelical congregations.

⁸ [NOTE: In her survey of postwar architecture in South Dakota, Michelle Dennis only highlights these downtown churches: Trinity Lutheran (Spitznagel, 1951), First Presbyterian (1952), Faith Lutheran (1957), and First United Methodist (1958), overlooking the migration of churches to the city’s suburban neighborhoods.]
Documenting the Neighborhoods

**West Rapid City**

*Canyon Lake Methodist Church*

When Methodists from across the state gathered for their annual conference in 1949, they met in Rapid City. Recognizing that the city was growing rapidly on the west side of town, they voted to establish a new Methodist church in the Canyon Lake area. To accelerate the launch of the new congregation, the Methodists purchased two and a half acres of land on Hillview Drive from the Department of the Interior—land that was made available in 1948 after the agency released surplus land after converting the Rapid City Indian School to the Sioux Sanitarium. (See essay on the Rapid City Indian School and Associated Property.) The Methodists then moved a small wood frame church building from Nowlin, South Dakota to the Canyon Lake area, renovated it, and began to worship.⁹ On January 1, 1950, the parishioners, many of whom had been members of the First Methodist Church downtown, gathered for the first time in this building. The congregation began with 42 charter members, and their new church was formally dedicated in a ceremony in April 1951, more than a year after that first service.¹⁰

For the next seven years the congregation utilized this two-room structure while raising money to build a new church. In the spring of 1957, the architectural firm of Lucas, Craig, and Whitwam presented drawings for a new church campus. Construction on the first stage of this complex, which would include the sanctuary, a limited classroom, office space, and a full basement with kitchen and fellowship hall began in the fall of 1957 and was completed in 1958.¹¹ Four years later, the church added a 12,000 square foot educational wing to accommodate the more than 500 Sunday School students. The project was designed by Kirkham, Michael & Associates, an engineering and architectural firm, and completed and dedicated in January 1963.¹²

*Westminster Presbyterian*

The Presbyterians began planning a new, West Side church at the same time as the Methodists. In September 1956, the National Missions Committee of the Black Hills Presbytery, working with the Board of National Missions, invited the Rev. Paul Fowler to survey the South Canyon-Canyon Lake

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⁹ “Methodist Church Opens Here Sunday,” *Rapid City Journal*, December,


area and to organize a new congregation. The group then purchased 13 acres across the street from the new West Junior High School (now known as West Middle School).

Fowler set to work organizing the new congregation. In September 1956, he asked the school district for permission to rent a portion of the junior high school on Sundays for church services while the new church was under construction. The school district demurred; it had adopted a policy that prohibited loaning or renting school facilities to partisan political or denominational groups.

Undeterred, Fowler continued organizing and hosted the first meeting of this new congregation on February 17, 1957. Construction of the new church was already underway at that point and for the next three years, as the 75-member congregation held fundraising meetings in the basement sanctuary beneath the manse. Finally, on March 27, 1960, members worshipped in the new church for the first time.

The new church, designed by Aukerman and Mazourek, was completed in April 1960. It was one of Rapid City’s most innovative new houses of worship. Its interior featured parabolic arch construction, with slopes and textures reminiscent of a gothic cathedral. Nevertheless, as the Rapid City Journal reported, “the lines of the building were conceived in such a manner as to present only clean definition without useless extras.” Reflecting the modernist sentiments of the church’s pragmatic congregants, the design was “keyed to efficiency, functionality and economy.” “The buff face exterior of the building is combined with the open welcome of glass.”

South Canyon Lutheran
Like other denominations, the American Lutheran Church monitored the growth of Rapid City on the West Side after the war. In 1954, the district mission committee authorized a survey of the South Canyon neighborhood to determine the potential for a new church. Five years later, Pastor Howard Bomhoff arrived to establish the new congregation. He held the first worship service on October 4, 1959. Seven months later, in May 1960, the City issued construction permits for the new church to be located at 4333 Brookside Drive. The church was completed and dedicated the following September. The L-shaped structure offered space for 300 worshippers on Sunday along with an office, a nursery, a “cry room,” a kitchen, restrooms, and 14 classrooms. When the church was dedicated, it had 237 baptized members, 120 confirmed, and nearly 90 students attended Sunday school.

14 “School Rentals and Bond Sale Talked by Board of Education,” Rapid City Journal, September 12, 1956, 3.
19 “South Canyon Church To Be Dedicated,” Rapid City Journal, September 30, 1960, 22.
Other Churches
Seventh Day Adventist (1950) – 4703 South Canyon Road
St. Andrews Episcopal (1950) – 910 Soo San Drive
Canyon Lake Methodist (1950) – 3500 Canyon Lake Drive
Blessed Sacrament (1956) – 4500 Jackson Blvd

South Rapid City
On the south side of Rapid City, new homes went up quickly in the Robbinsdale district. New churches provided Sunday worship in these neighborhoods. Rev. L.H. Roseman arrived from Batesville, Arkansas to organize the first branch of the Southern Baptist Church in Rapid City. He spent a year meeting with potential members in a home on East St. Francis Street. With a strong prospective membership, the church purchased 15 lots on the corner of Indiana and Oak Streets to build a three-unit church complex. The new structure was a hadite block and brick construction that included an auditorium and classrooms. Completed in the summer of 1954, the facility was envisioned as the first phase in a multi-unit complex that would eventually accommodate 700 children.

In 1957, the Evangelical Lutheran Church founded a new congregation in Robbinsdale and began construction on Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, which sat across the street from South Junior High School (now South Middle School) at 17 Indiana Street. The first pastor, Rev. Harold J. Larsen, came to Rapid City from Tucson, Arizona. It was the third church he had started. Larsen conducted the congregation’s first service on June 30, 1957 in the unfinished building. After the exterior was completed, members of the new congregation spent the fall “work[ing] together painting walls, tiling the floors, [and] building study bookcases and kitchen cabinets. They also completed the altar, pulpit, communion railing, bulletin board, and coat rack.”

The church was formally organized and a constitution adopted in November 1957. Children accounted for a significant percentage of the new congregation, which included 165 baptized members, 82 confirmed, and 150 Sunday school students. The new building was dedicated in May, 1958.

As new neighborhoods grew up in Rapid City and in the Valley, churches followed. Some denominations built new churches and formed new congregations. Sometimes the churches they left

behind were repurposed for new congregations. When a group of Methodists in the Robbinsdale area built a new church at Maple and Indiana, for example, they transferred their old church to a new congregation in Rapid Valley alongside Highway 40.²⁷

South Maple Methodist Church was designed by James C. Ewing, Jr. It opened for Mother’s Day services in May 1963. Built against a gentle rise near South Junior High School (now South Middle School), the church’s main floor included the work sacristies, offices, and parlor-nursery areas adjacent to the narthex. Underneath, at the ground level to the parking lot, the church proudly featured a “modern serving kitchen and a fellowship hall” that could accommodate 255 people at a banquet. The relatively simple rectangular structure was ornamented with hand chipped rock and faced brick on the exterior walls with a large stained-glass window facing Indiana Street.²⁸

Three blocks away, the Rapid City Wesleyan Church was completed in June 1965 to house the combined congregations of Robbinsdale Wesleyan Methodist Church and First Wesleyan Methodist Church, which had been founded in 1942.²⁹

Other Churches
Grace City (1951) – 1302 Ninth Street
South Park Community Church (1955) – 2201 Third Street

North Rapid City
In the postwar years, residential development north of downtown also expanded dramatically. Commercial development followed, and so did churches. In line with various formal and informal systems of discrimination, the Native community was concentrated in this part of town and various denominations opened churches that sought to serve Rapid City’s Native residents.

First Church of God
In 1951, the parishioners of the First Church of God erected a small frame, stucco, and stone building at Sixth and Denver in a working class neighborhood near Rapid Creek. In 21 years, it would be destroyed by 1972 flood. With capacity to house 200 congregants for worship, the church basement included a kitchen and was used for Sunday school classes, recreation, and meetings.³⁰

²⁹ https://rcfirst.org/about-us/our-story/
St. Matthews Episcopal
St. Matthews Episcopal on Haines Avenue opened its doors for the first time to worshippers in 1952. The congregation, most of whom were Native American residents, had worked on the church’s construction.31 In 1966, A.L. Davis, a Baptist missionary who had been working on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana, moved to Rapid City with his family and opened the Sioux Baptist Chapel, which began worship services in the old Community Hall in the Sioux Addition. In the spring of 1967, the congregation began construction of a small church at 1520 Haines Avenue. With its motto proclaiming “The Savior for the Sioux,” the church was affiliated with other Baptist chapels on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and in Black Hawk, and Davis, a pilot, used a light airplane to travel between the church’s different locations.32

Christian Reformed Church
In 1965, just northeast of downtown, construction began on the Christian Reformed Church at 210 E. Philadelphia in 1962.33

Other Churches
International Church of the Four Square (1951) – 927 E. Philadelphia
St. Isaac Jogues/Mother Butler – 221 Knollwood Drive
St. Therese of the Little Flower – 532 Adams Street

General Bibliography/References


Henry Bradshaw, ed., *Glimpses of Our History: Celebrating 125 Years of the Ministries of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Rapid City, South Dakota*, (Rapid City: Clark & Grelind Printing, 2011).


Documentation

Westminster Presbyterian

South Canyon Lutheran Church

South Canyon Lutheran Church
South Park United Church of Christ

Faith Lutheran Church

South Maple Methodist Church
First Congregational Church

Emmanuel Episcopal Church (downtown)

Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
Real Life Church

Maps/Historic Photographs

Maps TBD
Potential Projects
The RCHPC could lead or partner in the following community history and historic preservation projects related to postwar congregations in Rapid City:

Church Archives & Histories
Many of the neighborhood churches developed in the postwar era are experiencing a difficult time of transition that could lead to a loss of historical memory. The memories of older members, who grew up in the postwar era, are fading or may be lost. Church archives may be discarded as a new generation or an entirely new congregation comes in. The RCHPC could work with the ministers and pastors in the community to collect, curate, and preserve these materials so that they will be permanent resource to the community. Younger members of the congregation could be encouraged to conduct oral histories with older members to facilitate intergenerational dialogue.

Architectural Guide to Churches
Neighborhood residents may walk or drive past the smaller postwar churches in their communities every day without knowing anything about the history and architecture of these structures. The RCHPC could help to increase neighborhood awareness and cohesion by working with residents to develop a guide or walking tour that helps residents and visitors learn more about their neighborhoods and understand how postwar church building reflected an important era in the city’s history.

Postwar Change and Downtown Church Modernization
After World War II, many of Rapid City’s oldest congregations, located downtown, renovated or completely rebuilt their churches. This included Trinity Lutheran (1946), First Methodist (1958), and First Presbyterian (1955). RCHPC may want to work with these congregations to preserve and protect the archives of these institutions and supplement existing walking tours of the downtown area with more information on the architects and congregations who planned these buildings.

West Side Churches and the Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands
Several post-war churches in Rapid City purchased federal land under a 1948 Act that divided up the property previously used by the Rapid City Indian School. In the last several years, a coalition of Native community groups in Rapid City has been educating churches about this history and working with them to find ways to remember this important history and support the process of community healing. The RCHPC could engage with these groups, acting as a liaison between the city, the churches, and community groups seeking to interpret this story, educate the community, and develop a memorial to children who died at the boarding school.

Community Resources
To develop the history and preservation of places of worship in Rapid City the RCHPC should work closely with the churches, synagogues, and other faith communities in the area.