

# NEIGHBORS

## Celebrating history

### Community Presbyterian Church marks 125 years

By Mike Wilkinson  
Staff Writer

For many of the members of the Community Presbyterian Church, thinking of the past is a pleasant experience, one that brings warm remembrances of days that are no longer here.

The pace was slower then, as slow as horse-drawn carriages. Family and friends were nearer and the church was a more central fixture in the community. Food was taken from the fields, not huge grocery stores.

Traffic now whips by down four lanes, a restaurant is on nearly every corner and just a few Wheeling families run farms. The congregation and the church have survived such cosmetic changes, including their own, a new sanctuary and church opened in 1962.

On Sunday, the church will mark its 125th year in the community, ready to embark on the future, build from the successes of the past and begin a second 125 years in the community.

During his sermon Sunday, Pastor Steve Minnema will remind the congregation of the story of Ezra and the people of Israel who returned to Jerusalem from exile, only to find their city in ruin. But Ezra urged the people to stay away from grief and instead to turn their thoughts to joy and the future.

**LIKE EZRA AND** his people, Minnema says the church must look at today's and tomorrow's challenges with joy, rather than looking upon the loss of the past with sorrow.

"That's what we have to do here; celebrate the past without the grieving," Minnema said. "Because you can't bring it back."

Now the congregation of more than 200 strong must use its history, and the body of experience that comes with it, to build the future and reach out, Minnema said.

"That's the real struggle," Minnema said. "Do your roots sustain you or do they choke you?"

**BASED ON HIS** observations, Minnema is convinced most parishioners will celebrate the future as much as they may revel in the church's past.

"I think fellowship keeps coming up as the thing that means the most to people," Minnema said. "This town used to be a place where everyone knew each other. That's changed now...but the church provides a certain sense of continuity."

The church's constant link to an ever-changing community was most evident several years ago when a fire destroyed a number of apartments in the Wildwood Apartment complex on Dundee Road, just up the street from the church. The church took in a number of people left homeless by the blaze, provided food and shelter and gave the people the opportunity to continue.

"It convinced a lot of us that we could make a difference and people could benefit from that," Minnema said.

**IT WAS A** lesson that wasn't lost. Now, the church offers English as a second language classes to more than 40 people, while providing a well-baby service for area mothers, Minnema said.

Much has changed for the congregation since it was formed in 1864 by a group of German farmers who needed a church once they settled in the area. When they first organized, the 24 German-born founders decided their Lutheran bent made them a Lutheran church. They decided to call themselves the German Evangelical United Reformed and Lutheran Church.

But practicality is a virtue, and when the Reformed denomination couldn't provide funding for the venture, the congregation changed direction and approached the Presbytery of Chicago. Funding was approved, and in November, 1864, the congregation elected deacons and elders and the Zion German Presbyterian Church was



Community Presbyterian Church Pastor Steve Minnema and his congregation will celebrate the church's 125th anniversary Sunday. (Staff photo by Richard Bajjalieh)

formally founded.

For the church's first 50 years, services were conducted in German, reflecting the overwhelming population of German-speaking farmers who settled in the Wheeling area in the 19th Century.

**IN 1875,** THE Chicago Presbytery asked the church to submit its minutes in English. The congregation declined. In 1896, the pastor wanted to use English

during Sunday school. Again, the congregation said no while generating funds for German lessons for children during the summer.

The church even changed to the Galena Presbytery because of its German background. After agreeing to conduct services and business in English, the congregation again joined the Chicago Presbytery and dropped the word German from its title.

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# Church —

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It wasn't until 1918, during World War I, that the congregation voted to conduct services in English and rejoined the Chicago Presbytery. Finally, in 1948, the congregation got its current name when it replaced Zion with Community.

Community Presbyterian has been a leader in other areas, with the church electing women to leadership positions in 1938, ahead of many other congregations.

**AS DEVELOPMENT RACED** around and through Wheeling, church leaders had another decision to make: when and where to put a new church. Although membership was declining from a high of more than 500 in the 1950s, the congregation knew the area's continued development would produce new members. They decided the old church, standing on Dundee Road, just west of Milwaukee Avenue, was no longer large enough to handle the expected growth.

Then, in December, 1962, the church opened its new

building on Highland Avenue in Old Wheeling. A classroom addition was opened in 1979, leaving the church in its current configuration. While the growth never produced the waves of expected new members, the church still survived. The old church was later moved to Chamber Park, where it is used as a community center for the Wheeling Park District.

The church has always opened its arms to the community and served many people who didn't consider themselves Presbyterians. Because Community Presbyterian was the only Wheeling church for nearly 100 of its 125 years, the church became the home to many Protestants who settled in the area.

But then, like now, the church decided that many of its neighbors, who didn't have many churches to choose from, should be part of the congregation. It has been that question, whether to accept change and welcome strangers, that the Community Presbyterian Church has continually answered affirmatively.