

Times for New Vision  
H. Sharon Howell, 1999 – present

In 1999 our nation was preparing for a new millennium. Many persons predicted dire events to accompany the coming of the new year. Bill Clinton was in his fourth year of his second term as President with Al Gore as Vice President. Rev. Sharon Howell was about to become the first female Senior Pastor at First Church in its 145 year history.



Sharon Howell

Sharon Howell is a Texan by birth, by education, and by accent. Though she was born in Seguin in south Texas, her family moved to Arp in east Texas when Sharon was about six. Arp was home for five generations of her mother's family. Sharon was the only child of Elizabeth, an elementary school teacher, and Joe Howell, an oil field worker.

Following her graduation from Arp High School she attended Tyler Junior College and then Austin College in Sherman, Texas where she earned her B.A. degree. She received a Master of Divinity with Honors from Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City in 1973.

Women clergy were not granted full clergy rights in the Methodist Church until 1956. When Sharon entered seminary in 1970 there were only three women in her class. 1976 was the first year that clergy women were elected as delegates to the General Conference. Sharon was one of 10 women clergy elected that year and the only female delegate from the South Central Jurisdiction.

Because Sharon was a pioneer in breaking gender barriers in the United Methodist Church, her career includes quite a number of firsts and onlys, including:



of

First clergy woman to serve as President of the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

First female delegate of the Kansas East Conference to General Conference, and in 1996 she was the head of the Delegation.

Currently, the only clergy woman in the Kansas East Conference to serve as senior pastor of a church with over 1000 members.

First woman to serve: as pastor of Edwardsville UMC, as senior pastor of St. Mark's UMC, and as senior pastor of Lawrence FUMC.

She began her formal ministry by serving 3 years at the Edwardsville (Kansas) United Methodist Church. From 1975 to 1980 she was Associate Council Director for the Kansas East Conference.

In 1980 became Director and then Vice-President of Student Recruitment and Alumni Development at Saint Paul School of Theology. She returned to Kansas to serve as Senior Pastor at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Overland Park. In 1987 she began 12 years in administrative positions within the East Kansas Conference as Director of Council on Ministries and District Superintendent for both the Ottawa District and the KansasCity District.

Sharon was no stranger to First Church having served as our District Superintendent for five years. In that role she had led Charge Conferences and preached at First Church on several occasions. She inherited a very active Church with membership ranging between 1600 and 1700 and with an annual budget of \$717,033 and no outstanding debt.

Early in her ministry in Lawrence, Rev. Howell made clear her vision for our Church when she wrote:

“My personal passion is mission beyond our doors. I have a dream that FUMC will become a mission leadership church of the Kansas East Conference. We have a history to inform us. We organized a Negro Sunday School for black refugees of the Civil War. We have welcomed Native Americans from our beginning. We converted the church to a morgue for victims of Quantrill's raid. In recent years we have initiated the Chippewa Swimming Pool Project and saw the annual conference churches match our challenge. The ‘Rebekah at the Well Project’ in Haiti is a vivid reminder that we are connected to the whole world. My prayer is that we prayerfully consider claiming at least one national mission and one global mission as ‘ours.’”

Sharon Howell was welcomed to First Church with flowers and song. The flowers were sent to her at the Kansas City District Parsonage in early April with a card that read, “From your new church family, Lawrence First.” The Leadership Team commissioned Mitch Todd to compose a welcome song, which he titled “All God's Children.”

Shortly after Sharon arrived, the roof fell in— quite literally! Cracks appeared in the ceiling plaster in the sanctuary and on inspection workers discovered major structural damage requiring extensive repair. A very tolerant congregation found new joy in worshiping in fellowship hall while the damage was repaired. To the surprise and thrill of all, the repair and remodeling of the roof and ceiling revealed some formerly hidden stained glass windows, including the dove of peace window on the south wall of the sanctuary.

In her report to Charge Conference in 1999 Sharon reported that her “first five months have been filled with active listening and immense learning.” She proposed that,

“During 2000 the Staff Parish Relations Committee and I will be evaluating our staffing number and ministry areas in concert with the goals and priorities for the next three to five years. We will be asking

- What ministry areas need more volunteer or staff time?
- Are we staffed for growth or maintenance?
- Are the number of support staff sufficient for the number of program and administrative staff?

- What program areas could be added with additional volunteer or staff time? For example, youth, adult, and young families.

In addition to the above mentioned mission and ministry goals, we are called to reaffirm our commitment to being a ‘downtown church.’ As we claim our presence at Tenth and Vermont for the next 150 years, we must begin to understand urban ministry and embrace our unique location and all the opportunities it provides. What does it mean to be a ‘good neighbor’ to the businesses, churches, and people who live all around us?”

The Leadership Team was completing its 3year term at the end of 1999. At that time Sharon was still uncertain about the future of the administrative structure for First Church and asked the Leadership Team to continue a fourth year through 2000. All were agreeable to do so. At the end of 2000 the Leadership Team was dissolved, ending a seven year experiment in alternative church governance at First Church.

Sharon named her newsletter column for the NEXUS, “Let’s Talk.” She frequently relinquished that column for items from staff or laity. In the January 12, 2000 NEXUS, Rev. Gustav K. Van Tassel offered “A thought to consider: A new year, century, and millennium have given all of us a chance to be reflective about our own gift of time that God has granted us – whatever its quantity – or quality.”

On Saturday, February 12, Methodist Men presented the First Annual Valentine Gala in Fellowship Hall. Tickets were “\$12 each (limited seating).” A reception was followed by dinner and entertainment.

In April 2000 our congregation was blessed with “A Perfect Love,” a musical presentation of the Gospel of John, directed by Mitch Todd and written by Greg Hildenbrand. This special musical grew out of the Mid-Morning worship service. Two evening performances were presented on April 16 and 20.

Easter Sunday, April 23, 2000, new timpani drums made their debut. “Given to the church in loving memory of Earl J. and Evelyn G. Wilson byson, Jim, of College Station, Texas, the drums were scheduled to be dedicated in January. The ceiling repairs have delayed this service, but Mr. Wilson wanted them to be used for Easter, and so we present them to the Glory of God – Hallelujah!”

May and June held rich musical experiences for members of our congregation. On May 14 the Chancel Choir joined with the choir of Plymouth Congregational Church and the Lawrence Civic Choir to present Beethoven’s “Missa Solemnis” at the University of Kansas Lied Center. Rob Reid directed the production. In mid June the Celebration Ringers played in the National Handbell Festival in Topeka ringing “The Nutcracker.” On June 25 the Civic Choir for Hiratsuka, Japan sang for the 11:00a.m. worship service. Hiratsuka is one of the Sister Cities of Lawrence.

May 2000 marks a sad note in our church history. After more than 35 years of continuous operation, the United Child Development Center (UCDC) was closed. The Leadership Team minutes of May 16 reported that:

“Sharon Howell and Jerry Niebaum updated the Leadership Team concerning the decision to close UCDC. UCDC has lost several teachers over a period of time and were in danger of losing more, so that the quality of care being given to our children was being seriously compromised. Several efforts to replace teachers lost and to hire a new director who was qualified were fruitless. The UCDC Board and the church staff found it impossible to meet expectations for licensure from the state and decided it was unwise to continue. Initially, it was hoped that the center could remain open until the end of May. However, additional staff losses necessitated closing immediately. The church then made serious efforts to inform parents about where there were other daycare openings in town. The Leadership Team and Administrative Board were informed by letter from Francois Henriquez [chair of Administrative Board] shortly after the decision was made by the UCDC Board and Church representatives.”

More about the history of UCDC may be found in a special section near the end of this publication.

In the NEXUS for June 28, Sharon Howell writes:

“Happy Anniversary! We are completing our first year of shared ministry together. As we begin year two, I’d like to offer some reflections and give thanks to God for the absolute honor and privilege of serving as your pastor.

You are a people of HOSPITALITY. Your welcome as I arrived and throughout the year has been overwhelming, inspiring and touching. Thank you for receiving me with openness and acceptance. We have moved from introductions to conversations about your lives, families, work, and hopes for this congregation. I am immensely BLESSED to share ministry with you.

You are a people of FAITHFULNESS. Your attendance in worship each Sunday is an impressive witness. Your participation in the educational ministries, programs, and mission outreach is a powerful testimony. Your financial steadfastness in love makes mission and ministry happen in Lawrence and around the world. Thanks be to God for you and the myriad expressions of faith you make each day.

You are a people of VISION. In 1855 twelve folks (just like you) formed the Methodist Episcopal Church. They had a dream of ‘growing’ a church in the new community called Lawrence. A church grew and moved from location to location. The current facility was opened in 1891, added to, updated and maintained by our forebears. Today you are updating and maintaining it again. You are also responding to God’s invitation to ‘grow’ programs so that more people can experience the life changing love of God through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for you and your vision of who FUMC can become.”

The June 13 minutes of the Leadership Team reported that the “Kansas East Conference Commission on Congregational Growth and Development has recently made a firm commitment of \$750,000 for the purchase of land on which a program facility under the direction of our church could be built. ... We will suggest to the Administrative Board that a Site Acquisition Committee be formed as soon as possible. A group separate from the trustees who will concentrate only on finding land will probably be necessary.”

On July 1, 2000 Wayne Turner, who had just retired from Bristol Hill, became our Pastor of Children’s Ministries. Wayne is certified in Christian Education.

On July 23 the Administrative Board unanimously adopted the following Program Facilities Committee recommendations:

## **FIRST IN THE FUTURE**

1. That we as a church significantly increase program and service offerings in four areas.
  - A. Children and youth
  - B. Persons in need
  - C. People without a church home
  - D. Members of First United Methodist Church
2. To continue to update and maintain the current downtown facility for current and future programs and services.
3. To buy land now and build a new program facility for many new programs and services, to host meetings and classes, and to provide parking and easy access.
4. To conduct a capital campaign to raise the funds for the downtown facility renovation, the land purchase (with the financial help of the conference), the construction of a new program facility, and the establishment of a deferred maintenance fund.
5. To establish a Congregational Development Committee to oversee specific planning.

The adoption of these recommendations set the direction for First Church for the next several years.

“It wasn’t quite like the beginning of Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities – 2001 in the life of First Church was in many ways the best of times.” wrote Francois Henriquez in his report for the Annual Charge Conference 2001: The Year in Review. Excerpts from his report follow:

- The Congregational Development Team led us through the development and adoption of a strategic plan, that sets forth our mission priorities– including ministries to our older adult members, to children and youth, to the unchurched, and to our neighbors downtown (especially those in need); ...
- Following our strategic plan, and after dreaming about it for at least a decade, we purchased 65 acres [actually 67] on the western edge of Lawrence that will be the home to a new Celebration Center, and other facilities that will help us do more in reaching out to our seniors, our youth, and to the unchurched;

- We continued our new partnership with the Kansas East Conference, under which they contributed \$750,000 toward our land purchase, and continued to subsidize the salary of our new Pastor of Congregational Growth and Development, Lee Johnson, who completed his first full year on our staff;
- We saw a complete restructuring of our children's Sunday School program, with a resulting explosion in both excitement and attendance;
- We saw our small group ministries blossom, with creation of two new Disciple Bible Study Classes, a Young Adult Group, a Steward Study class, the Good Grief support group, Dinners for Eight, Advent Study groups, and other study and fellowship opportunities.

2001 saw significant changes in children's ministry as mentioned in Francois' report. These are described in portions of Jane Rock's report to the Charge Conference:

The Children's Council adopted five visions for the immediate future for children's ministries at First Church. After 12 months of hard work and dedication from committee members and church leaders, we have begun the 'Touchstone Journey' that we hope will bring all of our children closer to God and our church. Specifically our visions included:

1. Begin an alternative time Christian Learning Experience. In September 2001, Clues Club began serving the Christian Education needs of our elementary age children.
2. Strengthen our Sunday School Program. ...our Sunday School rooms have been updated and equipped to best meet the needs of children in a Rotation Style Sunday School Program.
3. The Bible and Children: Third Grade children received six weeks of Bible instruction before they were given a very 'kid friendly' Bible on Children's Sabbath. ... One Sunday School rotation room concentrates on learning scripture, stories, and lessons of the Bible
4. An introduction to Church Camping. ... Several of our children spent a week at Camp Chippewa in the summer.
5. The nursery – the Nursery Room and care givers continue to meet the needs of our youngest members.”

To the Charge Conference for 2001 Rev. Sharon Howell reported:

“We have completed our 'first' capital campaign together. The total raised was \$1,145,000. What a faithful response to God's call for us to 'name disciples in the name of Jesus Christ.' As the capital campaign drew to a close, the Congregational Development Team, convened by Ann Keizer and the Site Exploration Team, convened by Rick Short, continued their intensive and intentional work. Their reports during the year lead to the adoption of a Strategic Ministry Plan for First Church that includes the program section: 'Touchstones of Faith' and a financial proposal.”

September 2001 gave us the first edition of First Edition, the newly named newsletter for First Church, designed by Candice Ranney. “Let's Talk,” the pastor's column, became “First Word.”

On November 11, 2001 First Church held “A Blessing of the Land and its People” on West Campus. The event is described in some detail in the section following this one.

Advent 2001 brought a new tradition to First Church, the Christmas Memory Tree. The Christmas Tree in the sanctuary is decorated with ornaments brought by members of the congregation in memory of a friend or family member who has died. In a special service the name of the person remembered is read as the ornament is placed on the tree.

Our congregation has long been aware of the opportunities and obligations for having our church in an urban location. In December 2001 the Administrative Board took a step towards embracing new ones. In the “First Word” Sharon writes about it this way:

“We are stepping out in faith as we grow and strengthen each touchstone ministry. We took a faithful step in mid-December when we extended an invitation to the Jubilee Café to move its mission outreach to our Fellowship Hall on Tuesday and Friday mornings. This seven-year mission of meal and conversation for persons in need of a healthy start meal and a safe place for a few minutes each week is staffed by volunteers primarily from KU student groups and organizations. Our very own youth have served at Jubilee Café on several occasions. Welcome Jubilee Café to THE FIRST PLACE in late January”

Jubilee Café outgrew its prior home, Parish Hall of Trinity Episcopal Church, and needed a bigger home. The Café, a fully licensed restaurant, serves from 80 to 100 meals each Tuesday and Friday morning to its guests, who are homeless and in need neighbors. It has been operating continuously for ten years.

The Children’s Ministry Council, chaired by Jane Rock, and Rev. Wayne Turner, pastor of Children’s Ministries introduced TOUCHSTONE JOURNEYS, a “rotational method” of ministry to children. The program has proven extraordinarily popular with children and their parents. In two short years attendance in children’s Sunday School quadrupled. On Sunday, October 10, 2004, there were 117 children in attendance.

Anticipating our celebration of 150 years of service, Sharon Howell wrote in 2002 that:

“Our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration will be in 2004/2005. Can you believe that our Lawrence community and our faith community will both be 150 years old? The Sesquicentennial Committee (it’s official name that I’m still learning how to pronounce) is co-chaired by Jerry and Judy Niebaum. The members are Dan & Carol Abrahamson, Judy Dailey, Phil & Phoebe Godwin, Sharon Howell, Ruth Ann Paddock, Ken & Rowena Pine, and Phil & Diane Stiles. You can expect a year of fun and celebration. One of the unexpected connections that has been made is with William Griffing, the great-great-grandson of the founding/first pastor of First Church, James Griffing. The Sesquicentennial Committee is hopeful that William Griffing will be able to join us as we gratefully remember those who took those giant ‘leaps of faith’ by offering their neighbors and friends an opportunity to experience God’s unconditional love through mission and ministry of First Church. Our theme is ‘Faithful Past, Prayerful Present,’

Promising Future.’ Thank you Sesquicentennial Committee for your leadership as we prepare to remember those who have been faithful with God’s future for 150 years.”

On Tuesday, June 18, 2002, Prairie Worship began on West Campus. A cross on the worship site was built by Kent Ely and Ben Mugridge. “Bring a lawn chair or a blanket, as well as a hat or an umbrella for shade. Our prayer is that through this casual half hour worship you will again experience God’s powerful presence.” A year later Prairie Worship was moved to Saturdays at 5:30p.m. with the same service repeated at 7:00p.m. on Sundays.

At the January 12, 2003, annual church conference a decision was made to request an associate pastor for First Church beginning July 1. A compensation package was also approved. Subsequently the Staff-Parish Relations Committee “submitted to the District Superintendent a detailed profile of the needs for an associate pastor.” On March 5 the First Edition was able to report that

“David L. Livingston has been named by Bishop Fritz Mutti as the associate pastor of Lawrence First United Methodist Church... David is a graduate of Baker University with a degree in political science and philosophy. He is a graduate of Saint Paul School of Theology and worked with youth ministry at Leawood United Methodist Church, as well as serving as the Kansas East Conference Youth Worker... David and Tracy will be moving to Lawrence in June with their cat named Tom. Tracy will be able to continue her work for the Northeast Educational Coop specializing in autism and assistive technology.”

David preached his first sermon at First Church on July 20, 2003.

Following a recommendation by Rev. Sharon Howell, in April 2003 Rev. Virgil Brady was installed as Pastor Emeritus of First United Methodist Church. Some of the details of ‘Brady Day’ are described in the section on Virgil’s pastorate at First Church.



Installation of Virgil Brady as Pastor Emeritus  
Sharon Howell, Virgil Brady, Elaine Brady, Jerry Niebaum, Bill Paddock

In his ‘ThankYou’ later that month Virgil wrote:

The Pastor Emeritus luncheon was going great. Greg Hildenbrand’s gift of song was perfect. Jerry Niebaum gave me two wonderful gifts: 1) my own parking spot accompanied by a couple rolls of quarters to cover the expense of the meters 2) my own personalized pastor emeritus business cards. At that point if Carol Abrahamson had sung her special ‘tribute song’ we could have gone home and that event would have been an A plus.

But at that point Lee Hedrick went to the podium to announce that Fellowship Hall was to be renamed, ‘Brady Hall.’ I lost it. For the next several minutes I have no recollection of what I did or said. I was overwhelmed. ...this honor tops the list. Elaine and I say thank you.”

**WELCOME HOME!**  
**By Greg Hildenbrand**

1. We come to this gathering from all walks of life,  
From every persuasion and role  
Many the voices that join in the song  
On this joyous day as we welcome you home!

*Refrain:*  
And we welcome you back to our family,  
And open our hands and our hearts to your needs  
We pray for God’s blessing on all that you do,  
May this fellowship be a family to you, welcome home!

2. Sometimes we’re called to serve others in need,  
Sometimes we need to be served;  
Sometimes our call leads us far from what’s known  
Sometimes we’re called to serve right here at home.  
*refrain*

3. At times we get angry, we disagree,  
At times we don’t live peacefully;  
But we spring from one God, from one Life on one earth,  
United in purpose as one family.  
*refrain*

Good ideas happen often. Finding the right leadership to implement them is often more challenging. Stephen Ministry was created in 1975 by pastor and clinical psychologist, Dr. Kenneth Haugyk. 'Christ caring for people through people,' is the motto of Stephen Ministry. In 2003 after much discussion by the Discipleship Council and with the leadership of Sharon Howell and Sara Wentz, First Church decided to move forward with our own local Stephen Ministry by sending volunteers to workshops.

In July 2003 Sara Wentz, Carol Abrahamson, and Linda Penny attended a seven-day Stephen Series Leader's Training Course in Ontario, California. Following this, a group of laypeople of our congregation undertook 50 hours of training in Christian caring skills under the guidance of these three leaders. Upon completion of Stephen Series training, our lay Stephen Ministers were commissioned into active caring ministries. They will work under supervision and will be available to care for people experiencing challenges in their lives such as hospitalization, grief over the loss of a loved one, loneliness, divorce, loss of a job, birth of a child, and many other life events. By September a first call for Stephen Ministry volunteers was given. Twelve laypersons answered that call and they were commissioned on May 9, 2004.

As First Church entered 2004 the excitement about new ministry on West Campus continued to grow. Writing in First Word, Sharon Howell noted that about two years ago,

“we purchased what we now affectionately call the ‘West Campus. It is an unbelievably gorgeous site with a stunningly beautiful view of Lawrence and Douglas County. The desire to develop the site to honor God’s creation known as the Kansas Prairie has taken many hours of consultation, planning, and praying. The design for the first building, The Celebration Center, is taking shape and you should see drawings, designs, even blueprints this fall. You will also begin to hear about the next capital campaign. ...

The early circuit riders came to the unsettled Kansas-Nebraska Territory without a clear vision of what God’s ministry would look like. Those circuit riders became the guiding pastors of this faithful congregation. Their ‘leap of faith’ in the name of Jesus Christ is the touchstone for our ‘leap of faith’ into God’s ministry on the West Campus. ... Jesus Christ never promised an easy path...he did promise to walk with us all the way.”

At this writing Rev. Sharon Howell is in her sixth year of ministry at First Church. She has committed us to our mission as an urban church. In our community Sharon is a member of the Cottonwood Board, the Housing Trust Fund Board, the Lawrence Ministerial Alliance, and the Senior Pastor’s Forum. She was a member of the Chamber of Commerce Lawrence Leadership class of 2004. In past years she has served on the Board of Trustees for Baker University, for Bethany Hospital [K.C. Ks.], and for Youthville in Newton.