



The parish house and church of the former Siloam United Methodist Church, in West Philadelphia. It is now the home of the New Fellowship Baptist Church.

Forgotten Churches: Siloam UMC, West Philadelphia

by Allee Berger (2012)

Editor's Note: This article commences a series which will profile churches that no longer exist as United Methodist congregations. The author of the following study is a Philadelphia native, and a first year graduate student in the Historic Preservation program in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. The following article has been adapted from a paper Allee wrote for a course on archival research.

Located near the southwest corner of Woodland Avenue and 70th Street, the church and parish house of the New Fellowship Baptist Church stand as neglected reminders of Paschallville's history, and to the history of Philadelphia Methodism. The gothic stone church built by the Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church in 1871, and its Queen Anne style parish house erected in 1887, retain echoes of a time when both the church and neighborhood flourished with residents and a thriving community. The parish house provided a home for the church's many pastors until the end of the twentieth century. The history of Siloam is that of fluctuating funds, debts and membership, until the mid- to late-twentieth century, when the church set down a path of steady decline. Despite sporadic periods of success and decline, the church – now the New Fellowship Baptist Church – continues to serve the community as it has done since its inception in the early 1830s. As of 2012, however, the future of the New Fellowship congregation is uncertain. Both buildings are in an alarming state of disrepair, and continue to dilapidate as funding becomes increasingly scarce.

ORIGIN OF SILOAM

Missionary work in the Paschallville neighborhood can be traced back to the travels of early Methodist circuit riders who traversed the Philadelphia region in search for settlements and their (hopefully) impressionable residents. Through the establishment of Sunday schools, congregating in the homes of neighbors, and the deliberate building of churches, Methodist congregations began visibly to speckle Philadelphia County during the second quarter of the 19th century.¹

By the early 1830s, local Methodists saw the need for a place of worship for children who were unable to travel the distance to Mt. Zion ME Church in Darby, then the nearest Methodist congregation. In 1832, the Siloam congregation had its beginning through the leadership of Isaac C. Yocum, Sr., who established a Sunday school in a house on Island Road near Gray's Ferry Avenue.² Primary pastoral care was in the hands of David Gardiner, a local preacher and Yocum's brother-in-law, who lived in the Island Road house, and who later entered the regular ministry with the Philadelphia Conference.³ The Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church (originally called Kingsessing) was added to the appointments on the Radnor Circuit in 1834, when it was carved out of the old Chester Circuit. Records from 1836 showed ten charges on Radnor Circuit: Radnor, Siloam, Darby, Grove, Charlestown, Salem, Mt. Pleasant, Valley Forge and Phoenixville.⁴

The congregation increased in membership, and soon the small house was not suitable for worship; for several years, they met in a small schoolhouse on the north side of Paschall Avenue. In 1834, Dr. Henry

¹See Harold C. Koch, *The Leaven of the Kingdom; the Amazing Growth of Methodism in the Philadelphia Conference, 1767-1968* ([Ephrata: Science Press, 1983]), 23-24.

²*Ibid.*, 25; and Charles F. Eggleston, *Centennial History and Centennial Anniversary Program of the Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church* (Pamphlet, 1934), 2, in the file at Historic St. George's United Methodist Church, Philadelphia.

³"Start Work on Siloam Sunday School Building," July 20, 1924, newspaper clipping under "Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church," Campbell Collection, vol. 17, page 92, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Rev. David E. Gardiner joined the Philadelphia Conference in 1840, was ordained a deacon in 1842 and an elder in 1844. He served appointments to the Brandywine Mission, Attleborough (Langhorne) Circuit, and in Stroudsburg, Columbia and West Chester, where he took ill and died in November 1847. Remembered as "a popular and useful... minister of Christ," Gardiner was buried in the cemetery beside Darby's Zion ME Church. *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1848), 10-11.

⁴Eggleston, 3.

Paschall, who had been instrumental in developing Kingsessing Township decades before, assisted the Siloam congregation in acquiring its first property. In March of that year he conveyed a lot at the corner of Paschall Avenue and Mud Lane (now 72nd Street) to the congregation for seventy-five dollars; the original trustees were Morris Powers, Thomas Riley, Isaac Yocum, Alexander M. Kunkley, David E. Gardiner, Thomas A. Roe and William Roberson.⁵ Work commenced on a first church building in 1837, which was dedicated by Reverend James B. Ayers, who had charge of Radnor Circuit, 1838-1840. A description of the first church survives:

The Church was of stone, about forty feet square, two stories in height, the second story being the audience room, and the first floor being divided into two class rooms and a Sabbath School room... there was a high railing down the center of the room, dividing it in half, and the men all sat on one side and women on the other. There was a mourners' bench in the front row with a very high back. There was a queer high pulpit hung up against the rear wall, large enough for only two men, with a door or gate to shut them in.⁶

The first record of Siloam's Sunday school membership was preserved in the circuit minutes of February 1846, when assistant preacher George Lybrand reported "one superintendent, 9 teachers, 60 scholars, [and] 160 books in library."⁷ The next year the name Siloam first appears in the minutes; and in 1848 a charter was obtained with the state of Pennsylvania for "the Methodist Episcopal Siloam Church of Paschalville in the County of Philadelphia."⁸ Siloam became a separate

⁵Eggleston, 2. The lot was a portion of 11 acres Paschall had purchased from Philip Price on April 20, 1790 for 136 pounds, "At a stone for a corner being a corner of Kingsessing Schoolhouse lot thence north forty-ninety de- [degrees] road to a stone in the middle of the road leading from opposite the Kingsessing Church towards Upper Darby thence by the middle of said road north seventy-four degrees thirty minutes west fifty-five perches to a stone thence by said Paschalls land south fifteen degrees forty-five minutes west forty perches and six tenths of a perch to a stone being also a corner of said schoolhouse lot thence by the same south fifty-four degrees forty-five minutes east twenty-four perches and three-tenths." Deed of Sale, April 20, 1790, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Deed Book D.39, page 397; Philadelphia City Archives, Philadelphia.

⁶Eggleston, 3.

⁷Ibid., 6; conference minutes only record aggregate numbers for the circuit.

⁸Ibid.; the church was first called Kingsessing, then for many years it appears in the conference minutes as Paschallville, and later as "Siloam, West Philadelphia." There was another Siloam ME Church in the Kensington section of Philadelphia.



An early 20th-century photograph of Siloam ME Church.

charge in 1859. Its first solo pastor was Rev. J. P. DuHamel, whose salary was set at \$350 a year.

After the Civil War, the farmland that defined Paschallville was increasingly divided and subdivided into building lots by outside land speculators. Conforming the rural land and arbitrary road system to the city's grid proved to be difficult, due to the topography and to the well-established land-use patterns that resulted from the many farms.⁹ Despite the obstacles, Paschallville slowly began to transition from an agricultural identity into a more industrial setting. This transition, and the division of land, enticed potential buyers who were seeking large lots, with the intent of building freestanding dwellings at an affordable price.

⁹Anne E. Krulikowski, "A Workingman's Paradise:" The Evolution of an Unplanned Suburban Landscape," *Winterthur Portfolio* 42:4 (Winter 2008), 243-285; and *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 4, 2011).

A Recollection from 1844

Siloam actually was set apart briefly as a stand-alone appointment in 1844, when it was still known as Kingsessing. Pastor John A. Roche (1813-1898), who had charge of the church that year, left a brief account of his tenure of two years in the neighborhood. The following is excerpted from Rev. John Alexander Roche, Autobiography and Sermons (New York: Eaton & Mains, [1898]), 122-123:

In 1843, I was sent with C. J. Crouch on Radnor Circuit, just on the edge of Philadelphia. Brother Crouch, as the older preacher, was in charge. It was, from its location and membership, an interesting circuit. Here I remained one year, making my home in Kingsessing. On the 17th of August, 1843, I was married by the Rev. James Smith, Jr., my Presiding Elder, to Miss Mary Caroline Osler, of Gloucester City, NJ... She was with me on the circuit from August 17th till Conference. The circuit had about fourteen appointments, and some of them, especially Radnor, were of the early preaching places in the days of Bishop Asbury. Salary, of course, was small, and that year I was compelled to spend more than I received, and thus drew on private means. But souls were saved. As Conference approached it was suggested to make Kingsessing a station, though it was only a small village, and I was spoken to about serving the place.

In 1844, I was appointed to Kingsessing as a station. I was living in the circuit and had no need to remove. I collected money for them outside the community, and though my salary was about two hundred and eighty dollars, my wife saved fifty dollars, and we lived as well as ever and had help in the family. We never took boarders, as some have felt constrained to do. We had an excellent revival. Thus I was in this place two years. Though I went to it as a station for the first time, there was no doubt among the people as to supporting me. A petition was prepared to ask for my return, if the law of the Church would allow it.

As it turned out a return was not allowed, and in 1845, Kingsessing was re-attached to Radnor Circuit, until finally being permanently set off as an independent charge in 1859.

With a vast selection of available lots to choose from in 1866, the Siloam congregation purchased a lot at Woodland Avenue and 70th Street for one thousand dollars, for a new church home. Taking the lead in this new effort was Rev. J. R. T. Gray, a young and enthusiastic preacher who had charge of Siloam, 1866-1868, and who raised some \$8,000 for the project during his tenure. A cornerstone laying ceremony was held on July 8, 1867, led by Bishop Matthew Simpson, but the work went very slowly over the next several years. The stone church, which still stands today, finally was completed and dedicated on May 7, 1871. According to an early description:

The new church had but the one main room. There was no pipe organ, only a small reed organ. The pews were home-made pine benches, painted a sickly yellow, and were warranted to give one a backache in less than half an hour. These continued to keep the brethren awake in the sanctuary until Brother Miller's time, when... handsome pews were installed along with the new organ.¹⁰

The population of Paschallville consisted of families who had lived in the area for multiple generations, and whose ancestors were typically Irish Protestants and Catholics, British and German.¹¹ As the turn of the twentieth century approached, the demographics of Paschallville became more varied, consisting of Russian Jews, Italians, Catholic Lithuanians, Poles and migrants from the south.¹² With a considerable number of working class families stretching across the newly divided building lots, one would think that the Siloam congregation would have benefited from this increased population. This was not the case at first; with more families settling in Paschallville, a wider range of religious beliefs led to the building of more religious institutions in the area.¹³ The religious diversity made it more difficult for Siloam to increase its membership, which until the early 1890s never reached beyond 200.

¹⁰Eggleston, 9; Brother Miller would be Rev. B. F. Miller, who served as pastor 1907-1911.

¹¹Krulikowski, op. cit.

¹²Ibid.

¹³An article in the *Philadelphia Methodist* of March 5, 1907 states that between 1898 and 1907, the number of established congregations in the community grew from four to thirteen.



The parsonage, or parish house, in an early twentieth century photo.

THE PARISH HOUSE

Nevertheless, Methodism in the Philadelphia Conference continued to expand, even though pastors only served for a brief one or two years at a time. This rapid changeover of pastors drove Siloam towards the construction of their own parish house within their property lines in 1887. Parish houses were not used until the mid-nineteenth century as circuit riders traveled heavily around the region conducting extensive missionary work. Preachers often boarded with church families around the circuit, or were responsible for housing themselves through their personal funds.

As settlements became permanent and grew into communities, preachers also began to settle and remain for longer periods of time. As preachers became permanent in Paschallville, a parish house for Siloam was still not a priority. Pastors were financially responsible for housing themselves elsewhere. In the church's quarterly conference of June 1837, the issue regarding the housing of the pastors was raised and, at the 1838 Conference, it was decided that the church would help purchase the

furniture for the pastor as a compromise. By 1840, church records began to show that the circuit stewards paid the rents of the parish house, but what parish house and where is unknown.¹⁴ Before building their own parish house, Siloam rented property from various community members in Paschallville until 1887. By mortgaging the church, Siloam was able to appropriate the necessary funds to build a parish house on the lot at Woodland Avenue and 70th Street.

Today, despite the serious state of disrepair that has befallen the parish house, this building retains an impressive degree of integrity. Architecturally, there remains evidence of character-defining elements of the Queen Anne style. The Flemish bond and ornamental brick molds provide unique decorative accents as well as a narrative of those materials and their application. As a middle-class urban congregation, the design and positioning of the parish house signify that the church wanted to appear well-to-do in Paschallville. Thematically, this parish house serves as an example of the overall importance of parish houses and how they benefited the community, as they were an extension of the church. In relation to Paschallville, the parish house, in tandem with the church, is one of the many links in the neighborhood's history considering many influential residences and public figures were associated with Siloam throughout the years. Demolishing the parish house would eliminate one of many vital links that tell the historical narrative of Paschallville and the Methodist faith.

SILOAM'S GOLDEN ERA

In 1894, the congregation began work on an expansion to the rear of the church, as the congregation "felt that the church was not taking proper care of the younger element," and so this addition was to "serve as a community center as well as a school."¹⁵ A cornerstone-laying ceremony was held in September of that year, led by Rev. J. R. T. Gray, who had been pastor when the cornerstone for the church was laid in 1867. The dedication of the new chapel and Sunday school building took place on December 15, 1895, led by Bishop Cyrus D. Foss, and Presiding Elder Frank B. Lynch, assisted by Rev. (later Bishop) Thomas B. Neely, and other clergy, including the pastor, Rev. William A. Ferguson.¹⁶

¹⁴Eggleston, 4, 14.

¹⁵"Start Work on Siloam Sunday School Building."

¹⁶Eggleston, 12.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Siloam was experiencing dramatic growth. A correspondent to the conference newspaper in 1907 reported,

In the last few years the migration from other parts has brought Methodist people in great numbers so that the membership now numbers over four hundred and fifty, with corresponding Sunday School and Christian Endeavor Societies, Senior, Junior, and Intermediate. The necessary development of the property cost an outlay of \$40,000 to bring it up to its present efficiency.¹⁷

Siloam's greatest prosperity occurred in the years just prior to World War I, during the pastorate of Rev. Albert M. Witwer, Sr., who served from 1912 to 1917. An article in the *Christian Advocate* (New York) of November 14, 1915 declared, "During the last three years Siloam, West Philadelphia, has had a marvelous growth. With the reception of five new members on Sunday last, the total number received in that time crosses the four hundred mark, with fifteen others on probation." Overall church membership exceeded 800 by 1917, and that same year, Sunday school enrollment peaked at 1,237 students, the highest on the South Philadelphia district.¹⁸

With one last building boom during World War I and the 1920s, Paschallville established itself as a suburban neighborhood. An influx in population was due to "hundreds of temporary residents" who came "to work in war industries," as well as more migrants from the south who had previously settled in the neighborhood and had every intention of staying.¹⁹ With the parish house sheltering Siloam's many ministers, the church mimicked the successes of the neighborhood and in 1924, the congregation built a state-of-the-art Sunday school building and auditorium, under the leadership of Rev. Alvin L. Copper. The new addition was dedicated with a gala, two-week-long celebration in January of 1925, featuring nightly services and special sermons and addresses by Bishop Joseph F. Berry, seven former pastors, and a son of the church who had become a prominent member of the conference, Rev. Dr. C. Lee Gaul.²⁰

¹⁷*Philadelphia Methodist*, March 5, 1907.

¹⁸Eggleston, 16; and *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1917), 189, 191.

¹⁹Krulikowski.

²⁰*Dedication Services of Sunday School Building, Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church, Jan. 11th to Jan. 25th 1925* (Pamphlet, 1925).

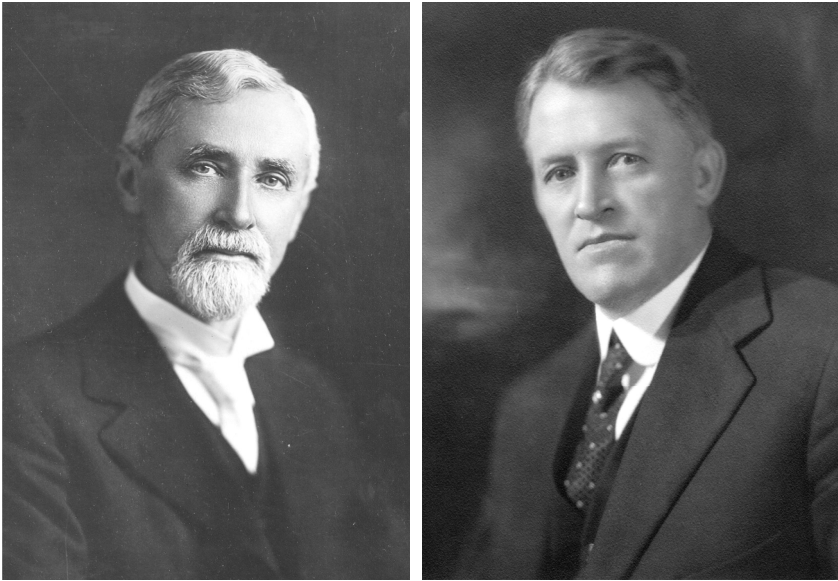
An Explosion Makes Siloam “a Desolate Edifice”

On Monday, July 26, 1897, Siloam’s sexton John Schofield entered the church to open it for an evening service, and he smelled the distinctive odor of gas. “Thoughtlessly, he struck a match in the hope of locating the leak,” an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted, and the building was rocked by an explosion that shattered seven stained-glass windows, including a huge memorial window on the front wall, ripped doors from their hinges, damaged ceilings and walls, and left pews and woodwork singed. “Just how the sexton escaped with his life is a mystery,” the reporter noted, adding that “the pulpit and the organ took fire, but the prompt assistance of the neighbors and the arrival of the fire engine soon extinguished the flames.”

Pastor John T. Swindells reported that the congregation had already been struggling under the weight of a heavy debt, and while they were “facing this disaster with a heroic front,” the people “must receive outside assistance at once, or board up their auditorium for an indefinite period... A visit is all that is needed to show that Siloam Methodist Episcopal Church... is indeed a desolate edifice.”

The community came together to help. “One of the blessings arising from the seeming disaster has been the practical sympathy expressed by people of all creeds and of no creed.” Within a week of the explosion, a public meeting was held, led by the pastors of local Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches, and community members pledged more than \$1,200 toward the repairs. Another \$550 was raised through a lawn festival organized by a committee drawn from a variety of local churches. The restoration cost some \$2,500, and included a new metal panel ceiling and new stained glass windows, and was completed by the end of the year. The church was reopened for worship on January 2, 1898, beginning two weeks of celebratory services, which featured former pastors and other dignitaries. Sunday school Superintendent Isaac C. Yocum (grandson of the church founder) reported hopefully, “Old Siloam, which has a history of over 63 years, has taken on new life, and is doing good work in a neighborhood which holds good promise for Methodism.”²¹

²¹The story of the explosion and reconstruction, and these quotes, may be found in the *Philadelphia Methodist* issues of July 31 and August 7, 1897, and January 22, 1898; and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of July 26 and August 3, 1897, and January 3, 1898.



Left: Rev. John T. Swindells, who was the pastor of Siloam in 1897 when the sanctuary was shattered by a gas explosion. Right: Rev. Albert M. Witwer, Jr., pastor from 1912 to 1917, during a time of explosive growth. Witwer left Siloam in 1917 to work in Europe with the YMCA during the First World War. His son, A. M. Witwer, Jr. also served as the pastor of Siloam in the late 1940s.

In 1934, a grand 100th anniversary celebration was held, during the pastorate of Rev. Edward A. Bawden. For two weeks in November of that year, special services were held each night, which brought back former pastors and members, guest choirs and special speakers, including Bishop James C. Baker of California and Joseph M. M. Gray, Chancellor of the American University in Washington DC. A detailed history was written and published by member and Sunday School Superintendent Charles F. Eggleston. The publication noted that some seven Methodist churches had been founded out of Siloam: Elmwood, Fernwood (later East Lansdowne), Woodland Avenue, Clearview, Calvary, Olivet, and Springfield Avenue (later Berry-Long). Siloam also sent as many as twelve young men into ordained ministry, including David E. Gardiner from the early days, Rev. C. Lee Gaul, and Rev. Clifford P. Fatcher, who became a US Army Chaplain in World War I.

Charles F. Eggleston, Esquire

Among the most prominent lay members of Philadelphia-area Methodism during the early twentieth century was Charles Fellows Eggleston (1868-1941), a member of the Siloam ME Church. The son of a Methodist preacher, and a University of Pennsylvania-trained attorney, Eggleston served more than three decades as Siloam's Sunday School Superintendent, beginning in 1903. He also served on various boards and committees for the Philadelphia Conference, as well as for the larger denomination. He was an elected lay delegate to several General Conferences, including the uniting Conference of 1939, which saw the reunion of the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had divided over slavery in the 1840s.

Eggleston was also an historian of American Methodism, and one of the authors of the 1937 history of the Philadelphia Conference, *Pioneering in Penn's Woods*, published by the Philadelphia Conference Historical Society. A tribute published in the 1942 conference journal, stated that Eggleston "was so important to the Methodism of his day, his life and services deserve a written biography... No layman among us in recent years has made such valuable, constructive contributions to the varied interests and life of the Conference as this distinguished layman." At his funeral in 1941 in Siloam Church, Bishop Ernest G. Richardson was among those who paid tribute to his memory; another was Rev. George Henson, who wrote "We shall miss him more than words can tell."

In 1934, Eggleston wrote a detailed history of Siloam ME Church for its 100th anniversary celebration, noting that by that time, the congregation was already suffering from the effects of the Great Depression. But he ended with a hopeful note, which may also serve as a fitting epilogue to this story of a forgotten congregation:

Our hearts warm with gratitude as we review the heroic work of our forefathers in Siloam, their courage, their faith, their zeal for souls, their grasp upon the eternal verities. And as we view their lives we would highly resolve that we shall, by the grace of God, carry on the work... and still maintain the spreading flame of God's unbounded love.

SUBURBAN FLIGHT AND DECLINE

Paschallville continued to flourish into the 1930s, when the area began to decline and the population shrank, leaving behind the families who did not have the means to relocate. These years brought with them urban blight and a decline in affluence. The specific reasons for the neighborhood's decline are many and varied; however, the Great Depression and the advent of post-World War II suburban development contribute to the most prevalent explanations. With Paschallville in their rearview mirrors, families sought life elsewhere. Siloam felt the effects of these debilitating events and, unable to recover, the congregation began to decrease in members. By the 1960s, the disparaged state of Paschallville became apparent to city officials, and the solution was weighted towards demolishing vast portions of the neighborhood and starting afresh.²² With the razing of 2,500 structures, the Eastwick Urban Redevelopment Project began the process of clearing the land to make way for modern housing units, strip malls, light industrial facilities and expansion of the infrastructure.²³ Somehow Siloam was spared, and the church and parish house continued to serve the community.

By the late 1980s, the active congregation of Siloam consisted of about a dozen or so members, most of whom were in their seventies;²⁴ none of them lived in Paschallville, and they commuted from outside the area to congregate in the church. Many residents of the neighborhood were now African Americans, and the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference did not have resources to redevelop a new congregation among the resident population. As recalled by the congregation's last pastor, Rev. Amy Smith, "the people were just tired;" they decided it was time to turn the work over to a church that was already reaching out to the local community, the New Fellowship Baptist Church, which had begun renting space in Siloam in the summer of 1989.²⁵ At a Church Conference held on May 17, 1992, the remaining members voted to disband the

²²Krulikowski, op. cit.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Reverend Vaughn Wilson, personal conversation, November 22, 2011. The 1990 *Journal of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference*, page 13.442, reported Siloam to have 63 full members on roll at the end of 1989, with an average Sunday worship attendance of 17.

²⁵Reverend Amy Smith, personal conversation, March 27, 2012; and "Agreement Between Siloam United Methodist Church and New Fellowship Baptist Church," document dated July 8, 1989, on file at the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Office in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

congregation. In early June, at the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference's annual meeting, a resolution was adopted to discontinue Siloam and sell the assets, "with thanksgiving to God for the one hundred fifty-eight years of faithful witness and ministry in Christ's name."²⁶ The closing service of worship was held on June 21, 1992, led by Pastor Smith. The people sang the hymns, "The Church's One Foundation," "For All the Saints," and "How Great Thou Art." At the close of the service, the pastor declared,

This congregation, named the Siloam United Methodist Church, was organized as part of Christ's holy Church, and of the United Methodist Church. It was God's gift for a season, and it has accomplished its purpose. We declare that it is no longer a United Methodist congregation, and is now disbanded. But Christ's holy Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time...

In December 1992, Reverend Vaughn Wilson purchased the Siloam Church complex on behalf of the New Fellowship Church for \$280,000.²⁷ Reverend Wilson resided in the parish house for two years but was compelled to move, due to consistent criminal activity and harassment from neighborhood misfits. The parish house was then rented to two different tenants until finally being abandoned around the year 2000. The last tenant destructively stole copper pipes from both the parish house and church, and removed a majority of the parish house's windows, leaving the frames empty.²⁸ Reverend Wilson was reluctant to go into further detail regarding the destruction of the parish house caused by the last tenant and spoke solemnly about the house's demise.

Today, the church and parish house are in serious need of substantial repairs. Due to the lack of funding and the sizeable amount of money required to rehabilitate the two structures, Reverend Wilson is forced to act rationally to serve the needs of his congregation. As soon as funds allow, the parish house is slated for demolition to allow for construction of administrative offices for the New Fellowship Baptist Church.

²⁶*Journal of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference* (1992), 4.242.

²⁷Agreement of Sale, dated August 24, 1992, on file at Eastern Pennsylvania Conference office, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

²⁸Reverend Vaughn Wilson, personal conversation, November 22, 2011.