

Education Building

The Education Building, which faces Royal Street and the interior courtyard, was the first new structure erected by the congregation in over 120 years. New in 1957, it has already served the congregation for over half a century.

The Education Building was dedicated on June 12, 1957, eight years to the day after the first worship service was celebrated by the re-established congregation in 1949. When planning for the new building began in 1956, the congregation numbered just over 600 members, with 300-plus students enrolled in Sunday School classes. A building was planned that would accommodate the needs of a congregation of 1,200 members, but a year after its completion, Session Minutes note — “Contrary to expectations, the matter of space for the Church School [in the new Education Building] is already a critical problem!”

The first plan for an Education Building as a supplement to space gains that occurred with the restoration/refurnishing of Flounder House was made in 1955 by the architect Frank W. Cole, a member of the congregation. The structure he proposed was a mirror image of Flounder House, with its rear wall along the south property line (bordering what is now a parking lot). The structure’s relatively narrow flounder-style design enabled the historically open view of the Meeting House from Royal Street to be retained. The two flounder-style buildings were to be connected by an arched brick arcade paralleling Royal Street, which would have created an open courtyard similar to the one that exists today. Based upon a desire for more usable space in the new building, a second plan was developed, also by Frank W. Cole. This second plan, which produced the building we have today, mirrors the architectural style of the Meeting House rather than Flounder House.

Alterations to the interior of the building have occurred several times during its half century of use. Most notable was the renovation undertaken in 1993 — the courtyard entrance was reconfigured to include a set of two curving stairs rather than the original single stair; Fellowship Hall and the kitchen were renovated; and the exterior ramp down to Fellowship Hall from the courtyard was added. Nonetheless, today’s structure would be quite familiar to anyone who had attended its 1957 dedication. The building includes the large meeting room named Fellowship Hall and a kitchen on the lower level. The first floor includes an office and four rooms; the second floor accommodates six rooms; and the third floor, two rooms and storage. The third-floor space, now commonly referred to as “Heaven,” remained unfinished until 1989, when several other interior renovations were also made. The image of the Education Building in the ground-breaking brochure includes dormer windows in the roof, indicating that the architect planned the third floor as fully usable space from the outset — three decades later that plan was fulfilled.

The Education Building is filled to capacity on Sundays with classes and with child care in the nursery during worship services. It is abuzz weekdays as well, filled with eighty children plus teachers from the Meeting House Co-operative Preschool. The Co-operative Preschool is the successor to the kindergarten and pre-school programs that have been operated at the Meeting House since a kindergarten program was established as an extension of the religious education

program of the Church¹ by Louise Maechtle in 1954.¹ The mission established for the building by the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Phifer at its dedication continues to reverberate — “While our new Education Building will be used in various ways by our entire congregation, its most important and regular use will be for the purpose of teaching our children those attitudes toward God and man that shall make them finer people and, through them, shall make the world at least a little bit better place. It is not a little thing to have a part in such a program.” (Old Presbyterian Meeting House 1957).

FOOTNOTES

¹The kindergarten that was conducted in Flounder House during its first three years of operation evolved into the Meeting House Co-Operative Preschool in 1970, when Alexandria and Fairfax County both began to offer kindergarten classes in their public school programs.