A BRIEF HISTORY OF
TWO CONGREGATIONS:

Urban and Rural Perspectives of God's Loving Kindness



"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

— Matthew 16:18

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

— Matthew 18:20



Watercolor interpretations of the original cover drawings

H. Walter Townshend

Original History • 15 September 2024

URBAN AND RURAL PERSPECTIVES

A Called-out Assembly

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Matthew 16:18

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Matthew 18:20

This is brief overview of the work of the Holy Spirit and our provident God and His loving kindness in the body of Belcroft Bible Church (BBC) and Mount Oak United Methodist Church MOMC).

Ekklesia is a Greek word defined as "a called-out assembly or congregation." Ekklesia is commonly translated as "church" in the New Testament. For example, Acts 11:26 says that "Barnabas and Saul met with the church [ekklesia] in Antioch."

And in 1 Corinthians 15:9, Paul says that he had "persecuted the church [ekklesia] of God." The "called-out assembly," then, is a congregation of believers whom God has called out of the world and "into His wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). The Greek ekklesia is the basis for our English words ecclesiastical ("pertaining to the church") and ecclesiology ("the study of doctrine concerning the church").

Church is an Anglicized version of the German kirche, which itself seems to have come from the Greek kyriakon, literally, the place of the Lord (i.e. "the Lord's House"). Regardless of precise etymology, we, as people, are a spiritual building founded on Christ.

But the problem is that our minds don't think spiritual building first and foremost when we hear the word "church."

We think address. We think carpet. We think bricks and mortar. We become like Israel, thinking of a shining temple on a particular mountain in a particular place.

So, we end up with church as someplace we go, rather than who we are.[i]

Thus begins the story of a body of believers in the then nascent city of Bowie, Maryland in a growing URBAN area that would see the body of believers move from "kirche" to "kirche," or church to church.

And it will be the story of a RURAL body of believers who also went from kirche to kirche, even suffering the devastating impacts of fire.



PRAYER • FELLOWSHIP • THE WORD

Belcroft's Beginnings

So, how did Belcroft Bible Church begin?

A man named Bob Eden provides a perspective:

Saturday morning men's prayer breakfasts were held regularly in Bowie in the mid- to late-'60s. Groups of 10 to 30 men met at the Holiday Inn, Red Lion Cafeteria, or Charcoal House to study the Word, hear Christian book reviews and pray. Some of the leaders were Bob Cleath[1], a writer for Christianity Today, Dr. Watson Pindell,[2] then of the Prince George's Community College, and other able men. The meetings were enjoyed and presented opportunities for spiritual growth to the many who attended.

One February morning in 1968, three men, John Ehlers, of Annapolis, Don Grove of Bowie, and Bob Eden... stood outside the Charcoal Inn after one of the breakfasts lamenting the fact that such fellowship was not carried over and enjoyed in a local Bowie Church....Mr. Ehlers suggested that we invite those like-minded to join in a non-denominational fellowship to meet in Don Groves' home (K section of Bowie) on Sunday March 3, 1968. Don and Bob agreed that the idea was good and the Lord could lead in that fellowship and any that might follow.

At the first meeting, approximately 25 were in attendance....

The meeting made it clear that God was leading the group to form a local visible assembly of believers to minister in the Bowie area. The spirit of the meeting was that Bible teaching, mutual edification, fellowship, and outreach should be primary. Basic Bible doctrines would be adhered to but denominational distinctives, forms, and modes with which most of us were somewhat weary would not be emphasized.... The... concise and un-entangled teaching of the Word has been the hallmark of the church from the beginning. Fellowship and a real concern for the fellow believer and the stranger at the door have also been marks of the assembly.

The following Friday (March 8) an organizational meeting was held. The interim name of the fellowship was "Westminster-Patuxent Church." This name was soon changed to Belcroft Bible Church - "Bel" for Belair (Bowie) and "Croft" for Crofton as suggested by Mrs. Esther Templeman.[3] [4] [5] The word "Bible" was added to emphasize by the name the book that provides the basis for the church's existence, mission and hope.

At the meeting... Dr. Robert Cleath, a very capable Bible teacher, was elected the interim Pastor. Don Grove was appointed to secure a place to meet.

[Selected portions from "Belcroft Bible Church, Brief History", written by Bob Eden, ca. 1984]



THE SETTING OF BELCROFT'S BEGINNING

The World of 1968

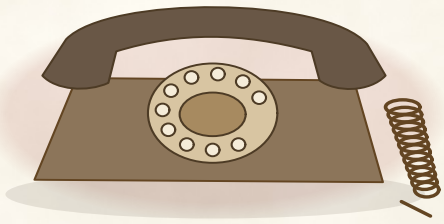
Here are some other economic facts from 1968 to help set the stage:

Average Cost of new house:	$14,950.00
Average Income per year:	$7,850.00
Average Monthly Rent:	$130.00
Gas per Gallon:	34 cents
Average Cost of a new car:	$2,822.00
Movie Ticket:	$1.50
Federal Hourly Minimum Wage:	$1.60

And, what was taking place on the world stage, and even here locally:

- April 4th Martin Luther King, Jr. is shot and killed by James Earl Ray
- U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, "Bobby Kennedy", was assassinated at the age of 42 on June 5th.
- The Intel Corporation is created by Gordon Moore[6] and Robert Noyce.
- Anti-Vietnam War protests throughout the western world
- The first Big Mac goes on sale nationwide in McDonalds, costing 49 cents
- First ATM installed; Emergency 911 telephone service[7] is started in the USA; Air Bags invented: Apollo 8 orbits the Moon, becoming the first manned space mission to achieve the feat; Riots, Looting & Burning in Washington, D.C.; and, Lava Lamps first introduced...

1968



BEECHTREE LANE • BUILDING AND DEDICATION

A Place to Gather

Belcroft Bible Church went from a small gathering in a private home, to a house church on Sussex Lane in Bowie.



In the early 70s, the church purchased land on Beechtree Lane in Bowie, not far from Maryland's crossroads, U. S. Route 50 and U.S. Route 301

Stories abound about the building of the new church building. Here is Paul Perry on his bulldozer, which he bought and renovated specifically for this task. The legend is that after the church was finished, he sold the bulldozer for a profit. Great stewardship!

The church building rises...

And on June 6, 1971, a service of dedication for the new building was held.





In summary form, we next consider the permanent pastors that have served Belcroft Bible Church.

TEACHING • DISCIPLESHIP • FAITHFUL MINISTRY

Shepherds & Servants



First is **Dr. Gerald Wheatley**, who passed away on August 14, 2019, in Lees Summit, Missouri, was still preaching at his assisted living facility, and you may find his sermon audios online at Summit Woods Baptist Church. It is interesting to note just two things about Gerald –this tweet from the pastor of Summit Woods Baptist Church: "Honoring a faithful elder today—made Capranica's spaghetti for one of the most faithful men I know--Gerald Wheatley—he and Nadine [his wife] are treasures." Also notable is the bio of Dr. Jack Eggar[8], who accepted Jesus Christ at the age of 17 and cites that former pastor, **Dr. Gerald Wheatley** of Belcroft Bible Church in Bowie, Maryland, "discipled him soon afterward and served as his early mentor in ministry." Dr. Eggar President/CEO of Awana International from 1999-2016, which each week serves more than 1.5 million children and youth and 250,000 volunteers who participate in Awana. Over 12,000 church Awana programs operate in the U.S. and over 10,000 more internationally.

Next is **Dr. Clinton Foraker**, who last served in ministry as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Rising Sun, Maryland. He has served as a professor of homiletics and practical theology at both the college and graduate school levels not only in the United States, but also in Canada and the nation of Hungary. He was also founding member of the new denomination – the Evangelical Reformed Presbyterian Church.



From 1989 to 1995, **Mark Crocco** served as Pastor of Belcroft. With a Bachelor's degree from Philadelphia Biblical University and a Masters of Divinity from Grace Theological Seminary, Pastor Crocco was faithful in the exposition of God's Word. He now uses those precepts and enduring values in his work with the business community as owner of Integrity Leadership Development, Inc., in Douglassville, Pennsylvania.



Pastor Jim Schuppe, the longest-serving pastor to-date at Belcroft served the flock for 16 years.[9] In the last sermon he preached during his tenure at BBC he spoke about the church being a home for ministry and a place for maturity. He challenged the congregation not to say, "So Schuppe's leaving: Who's going to minister?" Because, the answer is: There are no laypeople in churches; we are ALL ministers.

After Pastor Schuppe's retirement, over the next four years Belcroft Bible Church was asking God and the fellow congregants: Why is this taking so long? What is the Pastor Search Committee doing? What are the elders doing? Why did that pastoral candidate change his mind? This [whatever "this" happened to be] isn't happening because we don't have a pastor?

And all the while our long-suffering, sovereign and gracious God was saying, "Trust me! Hear my voice! Serve me and my church gladly.... For through it all, he was weaving a beautiful tapestry, which brought us an under-shepherd for Him, and a co-laborer with us.

PASTORAL MINISTRY AND ROOM TO SERVE

Leadership & a Growing Church



On January 3, 2016, our newest pastor, **Matt White** and his wife, Amy, with their children (now numbering 5!) came to lead and serve us. After a year's observation and understanding of the church and its people, Pastor White set about to revitalize the church with numerous sermons on the biblical elements of and responsibilities for elders, deacons and a focus on expository preaching. He guided the congregation from a congregationally led body to a body led by a plurality of elders, serving in tandem with the deacons in biblically-defined roles.

Originally from West Virginia where he grew up enjoying God's great outdoors being surrounded by mountains, rolling hills, and dairy farms, Matt has over twenty-six years of practical ministry experience and holds degrees from Appalachian Bible College and The Master's Seminary.

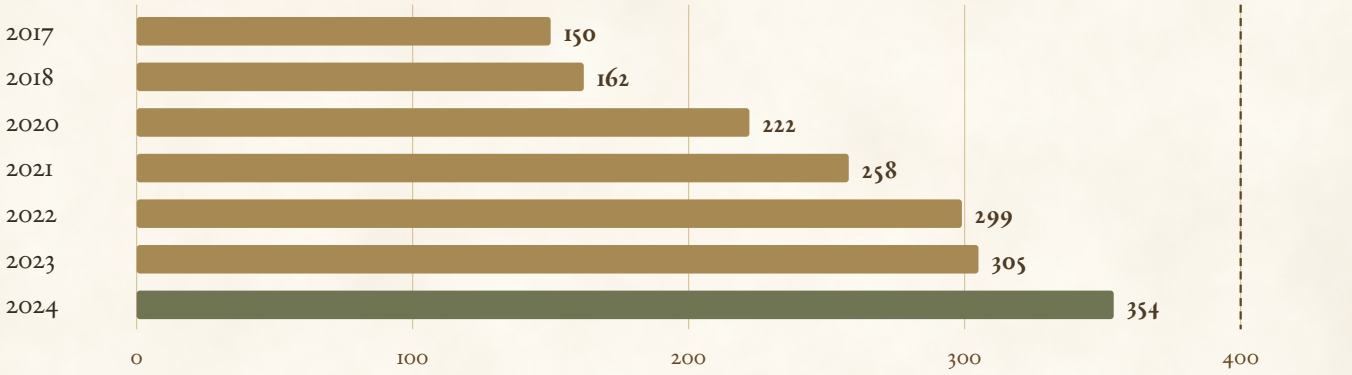
Before coming to Belcroft, Matt served in multiple churches in West Virginia and prior to coming to Belcroft was an associate pastor for 10 years at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, where John MacArthur is the Pastor-Teacher.

The body at Belcroft continued to grow, and the chart shown here indicates that the number attending brought a great strain on the physical space to accommodate all who were coming, especially critical in available classroom spaces.

Belcroft Bible Church

Total Average Attendance

2019 - 2020: COVID



COVID is retained as a source annotation, not plotted as zero attendance.

capacity, 400

Adjacent classroom walls at the rear of the sanctuary were removed to expand seating, and deacons constructed movable partitions to regenerate temporary classroom space when needed.

The Elders secured the services of an architect to develop a master plan for the property, with concepts for building additional sanctuary and classroom space, an expanded foyer, installation of an elevator and more.

The Elders also began to scour the immediate area for other space for relocation, as well as investigating the costs and practicality of adding temporary classroom space at the existing site.

ORIGINS IN A CHANGING AMERICA

Mount Oak • The Rural Story

All the while the church body was in fervent prayer for God to both lead and guide in its decision-making.

And that brings us to the acquisition of Mt. Oak Church, a church started nearly a century and a half ago.



Mt. Oak United Methodist Church was originally built in 1881 and has undergone numerous modifications in the intervening years—surviving a serious fire in 1935—and significant expansion in 1994.

1881

What else was happening in America in 1881:

• For the second time in history (after 1841), the country had three different presidents in one calendar year: Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and Chester A. Arthur.

• The American economy had been flourishing for three years straight, but in autumn 1881 it quietly shifted toward recession. After several years of bumper crops, American agriculture suffered a general setback. The wheat harvest fell 22 percent in 1881 alone.

• Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell form the Oriental Telephone Company.

• Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" opens in Madison Square Garden.

• American Red Cross is established by Clara Barton.

• It is the middle of the “Gilded Age”

• Film Director Cecil B. DeMille is born

How much did things cost?

• Average house price: $2,200

• Average annual wage: $545

• Loaf of bread: 4 to 6 cents

• Dozen eggs: 20 cents

The congregation began at McKendree[ii] Methodist Church, located at Newton Hill, just east of the intersection of Mitchellville Road and U. S. Route 301.

LAND • LOCAL CHURCHES • ITINERANT MINISTRY

A Permanent Home & a Wider Circuit

Jonathan Thomas Walker and **Samuel Peach** were active leaders at McKendree. They and others saw the need for a church nearer Mitchellville, since a large part of the McKendree congregation came from the Mitchellville and Woodmore areas.

Land was obtained from Mount Oak Farm, owned by **Charles and Mary Clagett**. The Mount Oak name was given the church because of the source of the land. However, the deed contained covenants that if the property ceased to be used for a church building, the land reverted to the previous owner. In 1901 the land was deeded outright to the church by **Miss Corilla W. Milliken**, great aunt of Corilla Clagett. The church now had a permanent home.



Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church South, c. 1900

Methodism began with circuit riders, preachers who travelled by horseback (and later by automobile) from place to place. Unlike clergy in urban areas, Methodist circuit riders were always on the move. Many circuits were so large that it would take five to six weeks to cover them. By 1839 the denomination had grown to 749,216 members served by 3,557 traveling preachers and 5,856 local preachers.

Mount Oak was on a circuit, too, with pastors serving many churches with services held on alternating Sundays, both mornings and afternoons. Mount Oak was on a circuit with Patuxent[iii] [Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South, founded in 1882] and Forest Grove.[iv]

Mt. Oak became a one-station charge in 1939 with **Pastor Claude H. Thompson**. It was served first by **Pastor David Thomas** from 1881-1883. Most pastors were on a circuit for 2-3 years before being reassigned. **Pastor George Anderson** served the longest at Mt. Oak, from 1967-2001.

TWO CONGREGATIONS • GOD'S LOVING KINDNESS

One Continuing Witness

By 1998, their church body grew to an average weekly attendance of 900 with a thriving youth and children's ministry. However, for various reasons, attendance declined. In March 2023, **Mt. Oak United Methodist Church** voted to disaffiliate from the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church[v] and had until December 31, 2023 to make specified payments to the Conference. In September 2023, Mt. Oak reached out to BBC for assistance and in late October, the Mount Oak congregation voted to approve the sale of its property and furnishings to BBC. By God's grace and a team of dedicated professionals, the property closing occurred on 15 December 2023.



Now, what were the "called out ones" in an urban setting have come to meet in a place where "called out ones" in a rural setting began assembling nearly a century and a half ago.

By God's provident hand, and great loving kindness, His word is still being proclaimed, in spite of all that has happened in the histories of these two congregations, only 5 miles distant from one another.

As the prophet Isaiah declares:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Hebrews 13 joyfully proclaims:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

THE EARLY FELLOWSHIP AND ITS TEACHERS

Historical Notes • 1–2

The original numbered and lettered notes are gathered here in full. Their identifiers match the references in the narrative.

1 Research indicates that Robert L. Cleath was an Editorial Assistant at Christianity Today from Sep 1966-Nov 1967.

2 Watson Pindell also wrote Milestones to Immortality, a 32-pqge book in 1988 with a forward by Dr. James Kennedy. The publisher's forward states, "Dr. Pindell wrote the biography with a special focus on Lincoln's spiritual journey. He inspects several key events in that light, and gives us some insight into how Lincoln thought and made decisions. It becomes abundantly clear that Lincoln was a deeply melancholy man, with an intense consciousness of his own limitations and mortality, and his own personal need for God's guidance and strength. His obituary from 1991 states:

> A memorial service for Dr. Watson F. Pindell, retired president of Prince George's County Community College and a former school official in Baltimore, will be held at 8 p.m. today in the chapel of Bonnie Blink, the Maryland Masonic Home, 300 International Circle in Cockeysville. Dr. Pindell, who was 84, died Wednesday at Manor Care Ruxton Nursing and Rehabilitation Center after a long illness. He headed the Prince George's County school in Largo from 1966 until his retirement in 1971 and then taught for several years at Washington Bible College/Capital Bible Seminary, where he was a trustee emeritus at his death. He graduated from the Johns Hopkins University with a mechanical engineering degree in 1928. He taught mathematics and physics at Boys' Latin School until 1949 and then moved to what was then Patterson Park High School, where he coached football, wrestling and tennis and became vice principal. He was named vice principal of the Polytechnic Institute in 1958 and remained there until 1963. After serving as associate professor of mathematics and dean of the Evening Division at Essex Community College, he became administrative dean of what is now the New Community College of Baltimore. He also taught courses at Towson State University and the University of Maryland in College Park. Born in Baltimore, he was a 1925 graduate of Polytechnic Institute, where he played on the football team. He won letters in football and track at Hopkins. He earned a master's degree in education from Loyola College and a doctorate from the Teachers College of Columbia University. In addition to teaching at the Bible college, he taught Sunday school at Timonium Presbyterian Church, where he a member of the Christian businessmen's committee. He wrote "Milestones to Immortality," a book about the spiritual life of Abraham Lincoln, and was writing similar works on Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee when he became ill.



BELAIR • CROFTON • COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Historical Notes • 3–5

3 The Belair Estate by the time of William Woodward Jr's death, had grown back to 2,280 acres (9.2 km2) and was purchased at auction by Levitt and Sons in August 1957 for $1,750,000. Levitt used the building and the stables as corporate offices as they developed their suburban housing development, "Belair at Bowie." Crofton Development Company: The company considered picking an English name for the new town that "sounds well and implies that this is a pleasant place to live." It ended up picking the name "Crofton", named after a small township in Cumberland County, England. The English town was originally called Croft-town, derived from the word "Croft", as the town standing upon the Crofts.

4 "Crofton, Reston (both established in 1964) and Columbia (1967) are all communities created from visionary plans. Reston was designed as a futuristic community to serve commuters to Washington, D.C.; Columbia, of course, was developed by Jim Rouse, a Maryland-born developer who created it as a diverse, progressive community with an abundance of community-based services provided through the Columbia Association. Crofton, on the other hand, was developed by Hamilton Crawford, a Louisiana-based developer who envisioned a private, gated community with private Baptist schools. He wanted an exclusive community that would, in his words, "provide a haven from the racial turmoil that is beginning to stir in the country." Also, "Newcomers are shocked to learn that people of color were not permitted to buy homes in Crofton. They are also surprised to learn that we had private roads, private water treatment and sewage plants, private trash collection and a private security force — which required one to show a car key fob, emblazoned with the Crofton symbol and individually engraved number on its back, in order to go through the gates, one on Route 3 and one on Route 424 (at Duke of Kent Street), which closed at 5 p.m." ... and... "Crawford saved two lots for himself on Edgerton Place. He sold one in the early '70s, and we built on the remaining lot, finishing the house in 1979. I have always felt it was ironic that we found a local builder who had, prior to that point, only built for black families in rural areas of the county. He did a brilliant job and, when the county inspector (former Chief of Permits and Inspections Spurgeon Eisemeir) finished his review, he left an approval note taped to the window saying, 'It is a long time since I have seen such a well-built house.' How ironic that Crawford would not allow blacks to buy in Crofton, but a black contractor ending up building an incredible house on what had been his land." From "Q&A with Crofton Community Activist Marsha Perry" by Mark R. Smith, Editor-in-Chief, The Business Monthly, August 6, 2014.

5 So now you have a church named for two planned communities that would include such people as former Vice President Spiro Agnew, future New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick, whose father coached at the Naval Academy; B&O railroad businessman Johns Hopkins, the founder of Johns Hopkins University and Hospital; notorious information-leaker Edward Snowden who attended Crofton Woods Elementary and Crofton Middle School, as well as Arundel High; 'N Sync member JC Chasez; singer Eva Cassidy; and, singer, actress and television personality Kathie Lee Gifford—among many others.

SOURCES AND FURTHER HISTORICAL DETAIL

Historical Notes • 6–9 & i–iii

6 Gordon Moore developed Moore's Law: Moore's law is the observation that the number of transistors in a dense integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years. The observation is named after Moore, the co-founder of Fairchild Semiconductor and Intel, whose 1965 paper described a doubling every year in the number of components per integrated circuit; and, projected this rate of growth would continue for at least another decade. In 1975, looking forward to the next decade, he revised the forecast to doubling every two years. The period is often quoted as 18 months because of Intel executive David House, who predicted that chip performance would double every 18 months (being a combination of the effect of more transistors and the transistors being faster).

7 Political enthusiasts travel to Washington and finance types can visit Wall Street, but for emergency dispatch buffs there's Haleyville, Ala.: the site of the very first 911 call. On Feb. 16, 1968 was the first ceremonial 911 call between Alabama Rep. Tom Bevill and Alabama state House Speaker Rankin Fite.

8 From the section, Notable Alumni of Louisiana Baptist University and Seminary: Dr. Jack Eggar accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior on January 27, 1970 at the age of 17. Dr. Gerald Wheatley, former pastor of Belcroft Bible Church in Bowie, Maryland, discipled Jack soon afterward. Dr. Wheatley also served as Jack's early mentor in ministry. Dr. Eggar earned his M.A. from LBU in 1979 and his Ph.D. in 2006.

9 Of possible interest is Pastor Schuppe's last sermon at Belcroft, found here: https://youtu.be/vhTca3vnoK8

i Adapted from https://ofshepherdsandsheep.com/2017/02/26/ekklesia-or-kirche-or-why-words-matter/

ii William McKendree (July 6, 1757 – March 5, 1835) was an Evangelist and the fourth Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the first Methodist bishop born in the United States. He was elected in 1808. William was born in King William County, Virginia, to parents of Scottish ancestry. As a young man, McKendree served in the Virginia militia during the American Revolutionary War. He entered the ranks as a private, but eventually served as an adjutant in the commissary department. He was present at the siege of Yorktown and the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. After the war, he returned to private life. William was converted to Christ in 1787. Shortly thereafter, he began conversing with his friends on the subject of the Christian faith and making them the subjects of his fervent prayers. He soon volunteered to take part in public religious meetings, and his addresses produced a powerful effect.

iii This is Trinity Methodist Church, located in Woodwardville, MD. On August 23, 1875, local resident, Abram Gambril Woodward was named the first postmaster of "Woodwardville," operating the post office out of his general store.

COMPLETING THE ORIGINAL RECORD

Historical Notes • iv–v

iv “In 1854, today's Chapel Two was built and became known as Forest Grove Methodist Episcopal South when the church broke away from slave-owning parishioners separated from the church at Old Fields. Later, during the Civil War, Union soldiers used the base's historic chapel as a headquarters' command post and a Union Army respite. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a letter giving the go ahead to secure nearly 5,000 acres of Prince George's county land for an airfield. The federal government purchased the cemetery and church when Camp Springs Army Air Corps Base expanded in 1943....The church was renamed Andrews Army Air Field Chapel in 1947 and renamed "Chapel Two" in 1957 after Chapel One was erected on the west side of the base.”
https://www.jba.af.mil/News/Article/337212/historic-chapel-two-155th-anniversary-1854-2009/

v “The unprecedented exodus of the faithful from the United Methodist Church is one of the biggest developments in recent church history. In the span of just two years, ending in December 2023, more than 7,000 American congregations left the church. Those congregations included some of the denomination’s largest churches....Those churches were finally fed up with the mainline denomination’s refusal to stand by its clear doctrine and discipline on the issue of homosexuality. By the time the schism came, the issues covered the entire LGBTQ waterfront, including same-sex marriage, openly LGBTQ clergy, and a range of related issues.” From “The exodus of the faithful: The United Methodist Church loses more than a million members—in a single day” Jul 5, 2024 https://albertmohler.com/2024/07/05/the-exodus-of-the-faithful-the-united-methodist-church-loses-more-than-a-million-members-in-a-single-day/

Presentation note: Historical wording, quotations, names, dates, figures and source references are retained from the supplied 15 September 2024 history; they have not been updated or fact-checked for this edition. Archival photographs remain source photographs; the color cover scenes are artistic interpretations of the original drawings.





Original cover illustrations

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