**50 years ago…**

**…. did you know?**

Fifty years ago, when John Calvin Presbyterian Church was being organized, did those first visionaries have any idea the strength of the new church they were creating; how it might be tried and how it would overcome destruction and turmoil? Surely they would be proud of the strong faith of the church they created and its role helping the surrounding community. While the stories are still painful in the hearts and minds of the members who lived through the tough times, these stories need to be told to help us remember who we are and what we are made of. In August 2000, the first pastor at John Calvin Presbyterian Church left after 33 wonderful years. Three months later, on November 21st 2000, an arson fire destroyed the sanctuary, the offices, and several classrooms…everything familiar was gone. How can a church move forward without a pastor and without a building? Fortunately, this congregation understood that through adversity, they needed to continue to “be” a church. Without a pastor or sanctuary, Thanksgiving services were held in the Fellowship Hall (luckily a separate building), just two days later! The congregation quickly rose to the challenge of dealing with the legal and insurance issues, to plan and rebuild the church, even expanding its usefulness to the greater community. Worship continued to be held in the Fellowship Hall for the 2 years it took to rebuild, served by interim and part-time pastors. With God’s grace and the widespread help from members, friends, and churches all over, John Calvin Presbyterian Church was able to survive. Two important items survived the fire. One was the charred cross which had been the most striking feature of the former sanctuary. It now hangs over the entry door to the new sanctuary. The other was the panel of stained glass windows depicting an historic account of God’s Grace. The windows could no longer withstand the weather and now grace the entry into the narthex. Both are reminders of a congregation overcoming adversity, and growing stronger in the process. Then, on August 29, 2005, just 5 years later, Hurricane Katrina hit the New Orleans area. The church buildings took in 1-6 inches of water, creating significant floor and wall damage. Most of the office furniture was destroyed, file cabinets got wet and the contents destroyed, and computers were damaged. Throughout the buildings, all of the carpet had to be replaced, sheetrock cut out, replaced and repainted, the lower parts of the pews refinished, and completion of extensive mold remediation. Yet, unlike with the fire, this time nearly every member of the congregation suffered similar damage – some much more severe, and some less. The church had to hold together and rebuild while the entire congregation was individually doing the same. Most church activities were curtailed initially, but the first Worship service after the storm was held on September 18, 2005. Due to the heroic efforts of members of the congregation, the church was up and running less than 2 months after Katrina, and the Playschool within 3 months. In fact, through members were individually dealing with their own losses, they reached out to the community to offer additional help. 50 years ago… …. did you know? On Wednesday October 12, 2005 the church began offering a hot meal to anyone who needed it. Most of the homes surrounding the church had taken on floodwater, too. People had to gut their homes and most did not have an operable kitchen for months. The church put up signs and spread the word that every Wednesday evening, hot meals were available to anyone who wanted them. Teams of 3-4 members each served one Wednesday a month, setting up the Fellowship Hall, preparing and serving dinner, and cleaning up afterward. There was no program during the meals, Pastor Harry Brown offered thanks, then the people gathered would visit with each other – sharing the stories of what had happened to them, and networking to find repairmen. “We became one big family supporting each other.” Some evenings, the church accompanist, would play the piano for everyone’s entertainment, often with folks joining in to sing along. The story goes that one evening she brought a colleague from Pat O’Brien’s to play along with her. The players played and the group joined in singing, everyone having a great time. The Fellowship Hall became “Pat O’Brien’s West” for an evening. The Wednesday Night dinners started out serving 70 people or so each evening, rising to a maximum of about 120, then tapering off to around 70 after a year. These meals continued from October 2005, through December 13, 2006 – all while the members themselves were cleaning up and rebuilding their own lives. The generosity and faith spirit of the members of John Calvin Presbyterian Church didn’t stop there. Within a month of the storm, the Fellowship Hall was being used to provide housing for volunteers coming to New Orleans to help with the clean-up. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) offered its resources early on to connect volunteers from churches and organizations across the country to those needing assistance in New Orleans. These groups needed a place to stay for the week or 2 they came to the area, and our Fellowship Hall became one of those spaces. Yes, you read correctly, dinners were provided to the entire local community in the Fellowship Hall while it was being used to sleep volunteers! Something like 80% of the congregation were out of their homes for at least a month following the storm. Many people lived in the upstairs of their two-story homes for months with just a small fridge and a microwave. While it took many people nearly 2 years to get their homes fully repaired, there are a few who are still completing repairs 10 years later. In that first year, 20% of the congregation permanently relocated out of the area. In the next 4 years another 10% permanently relocated. In just 5 years, the congregation experienced 20 years of the change that a congregation would expect under normal conditions. Yet, here at the 50 year mark, the congregation is thriving – a blend of the new and the original. The mission statement reads, “Freed by the fire, renewed by the flood, and empowered by the spirit, we strive to move Christ’s mission forward by going deeper in faith and farther in mission with our community and world.” This says it all. Next month…Outreach then and now. This place just doesn’t keep still!