

Girard Alliance Church History

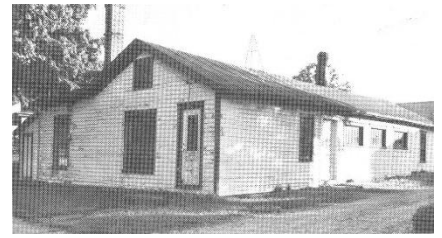
It was the early teens of the 20th century. R. B. Ellenberger, a bold, young student from the Missionary Training Institute in Nyack was passionate about Jesus' words. He had sensed God's call on his life. It had only intensified with his classes and chapels. He knew it wasn't a matter of waiting until he finished school so he served the Lord in a variety of ways on weekends with gospel teams in the city and in local churches. But the school year was coming to a close. He had been praying that God would use him over the summer to reach lost people; that the Lord of the church would give wisdom, bold direction, strength and the necessary finances so that he could win the lost and return to school. The Lord kept impressing him that there were people in a small, West Erie community that needed to hear the good news of Jesus. As he came home for the summer he visited Girard and the Lord seemed to confirm that He indeed wanted Mr. Ellenberger to preach the gospel in this community. But where? Checking around the community brought no open places to meet. The Lord provided a tent where young Ellenberger could fulfill his calling.

Curiosity about this young college student got the better of a number of townsfolk so they went to the tent in West Girard to hear the young preacher. This humble effort resulted in lives being transformed as God rewarded His obedient young servant with spiritual fruit. Those who came to Christ that summer were encouraged to attend a local Alliance church but the closest was in downtown Erie. A few attempted the trip, but rugged Erie winters made it very difficult. This young missionary would have one more summer of tent revival meetings after his senior year before the beginning of World War 1 and Ellenberger leaving for Africa as a missionary.

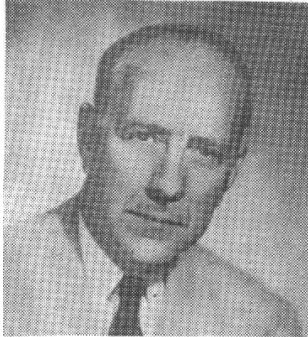
The vision for the lost of the West Erie County seemed to die after that. Years went by. God continued His work of reminding His people of unreached people in Girard. Florence Cornell Anderson had been raised in Girard and was living in Erie. A half dozen years had passed since young Ellenberger had left for Africa. God was answering his prayers to raise up new people to take the gospel to the small community he had preached in. Florence shared her burden with others who were part of the work of God at the Erie City Rescue Mission. They targeted Sunday evenings of the summer of 1920. Girard once again was experiencing street meetings in the park near the current borough building. The results of those meetings were rather sparse in 1920; and again in 1921. Was it God's will that they continue? Or did He have another place for them to preach the good news? They decided they would try once more in the summer of 1922. Florence Anderson and her husband began a weekly cottage prayer meeting when a number of residents in Girard interested in the deeper truths of the Christian life asked for more teaching. God was at work! It seemed that the opportunity was opening for more than summer street meetings and a cottage prayer meeting.

Rev. Harvey of the Erie Gospel Tabernacle had been interested in the outreach. He had attended and spoken at some of the meetings. The Andersons shared their burden for Girard and West County with the members of their church and they began praying together for a more permanent site. Meanwhile, God had been working in the heart of John Koford, a man who had attended the meetings and owned some property and buildings on Chestnut Street. He had a building that had been used as a bakery that was now vacant; the Lord had told him to offer it to the church for the exorbitant fee of \$1.00 a year. The original thought was to provide a meeting place to hold Sunday School for the children of the community. The meetings were held in the afternoon so they wouldn't conflict with those attending other churches. The work of the

fledgling church was organized under the leadership of Mr. Anderson who would be supervised by Rev. Harvey.



The little church wasn't through struggling, however. Some of those who had helped organize the church for Sunday School, morning and evening services couldn't persevere under the pressure of the struggling new work AND that of their home



church, so they left. Suddenly, the full weight of the Girard mission rested on just a few; but they were the RIGHT few! They wouldn't give up! They believed that Jesus, the Lord of the church, still wanted this lighthouse for West Erie County to continue to shine its light in Girard. While the next few years were difficult, they were fruitful as people came to Christ, one by one...and the little church began to grow ever so slowly, until in 1925, with great faith AND joy, they called their first resident pastor, Rev. Benjamin Lewis. What a BOOST for their morale. They loved Mr. Anderson...he had been faithful; but now God answered their prayer for someone who could devote all of his energies to

teaching, preaching and training them to let their lights shine in Girard and the surrounding communities. After Rev. Lewis arrived they were legally organized as a congregation.

Mr. Koford sought to make the building as pleasant as possible. That involved tending the only source of heat for the small building, a pot belly stove in the corner. The cozy warmth of the stove combined with the warmth of fellowship brought memorable services. In 1928 Rev. Lewis felt God's call to another place of ministry and it seemed that the little congregation would again face hard times. But the Lord provided a young single lady, Emma Harlemert, on her way



to marriage and the mission field to help the church through the following year from 1928 to 1929. God used her in many ways. An early church member, Dorothy Wagner, remembers having a sore throat that was closed up, Emma praying for her and her throat opening up immediately. That wouldn't have been possible if her mother hadn't been invited to church by Bessie Warner, who also invited the Dunns to church.

When Emma left, another single lady, May Benjamin, stepped forward to serve. May would also serve for only one year until she accepted God's call to serve as Dean of Women at the Missionary Training Institute at Nyack. By now the church had a pulpit that proclaimed the centrality of Christ in worship and life. It said, "Sir, we would see Jesus"and Jesus was proclaimed faithfully week after week.



Little half circle benches were brought in to continue the church's passion for children's ministry. Senior saints remembered dedicated teachers like Lottie Shepherd and Lola Foglebaugh who had scrapbooks for the kids in S.S. and invited the children to their houses to eat glorified rice. They also remember LONG services...two **hours** long; Viola Stewart's brother, Orville, passed out during one long service and warmth of the little building. They now had theater seats to sit on for services. They remember two weeks of services, every night, with Daddy Weston, a well-known Alliance evangelist.

They continued their tradition of street meetings in the summer. During one of the meetings, Viola's parents came out of the hardware store, were invited to what was now known as the tabernacle on Chestnut, and were saved. Several generations later, her family members are still following the Lord because of God's work at the tabernacle on Chestnut.

When May Benjamin left for Nyack, the little congregation of 50 wondered what would come next. God was already working on that and a short time later Rev. James Davey came to Girard as the next full time pastor. He would serve the church until 1933. Once again the little church on Chestnut Street was stabilizing as a congregation.



Throughout the years, this congregation has enjoyed the musical gifts offered by members of the church to the Lord. More of the gifts started to develop under the next pastor, Rev. Harold Best, who came to the church later in 1933.

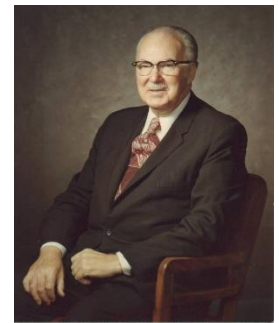


Even though the tabernacle on Chestnut was small there was an area that came to be known as the orchestra pit. The orchestra was led by the new pastor, an accomplished violinist, or Janes Jacobsen, who played the trombone. Usually a church needs a fairly sizeable church for an orchestra, but the little church was blessed. Agnes Moore Blood, Earl Shultz and Eleanor Shepherd made up the violin section; Mary Jane played the banjo, Polly Harrison and Viola Stewart played the trumpet, Mr. Scott was a one man

clarinet section, Olin Ryan completed the reed section on saxophone, Ruth Drury played Trombone or piano, and, Claude Shultz, Sunday School Superintendent, played the drums. Worship was vibrant and joyful.

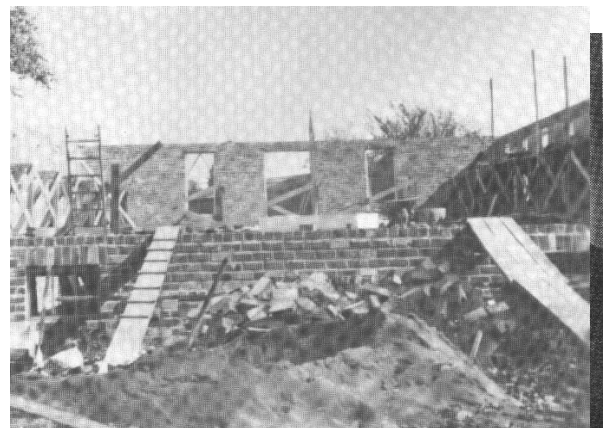
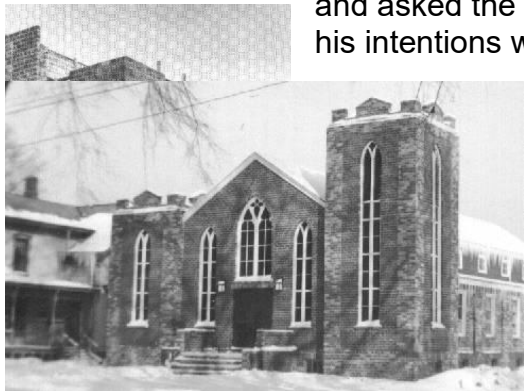
It became apparent that the little church with no parking lot would have to consider moving. A large house with adjoining property became available on Rice Avenue.

Everyone agreed so they began to make arrangements to purchase the property. Once they had the property, they had a much bigger hurdle: how to fund a church building. They prayed about it. There were long governing board meetings discussing the options. Finally, Bill Sydow, a governing board member said: "We've talked about this building long enough; here's the beginning for the building" as he laid a \$5.00 bill on the table. From that small beginning, God began to build faith in the people that He would provide their every need. About that time, God called Rev. Best to another work in Sharon, PA. God had used him to help energize this young congregation but God was ready to bring another gifted pastor to take the church through the next stage.



Dr. Charles Shaw, former missionary to Palestine and, trained architect came as pastor the next year. He immediately began drawing plans for the new building. A chart was put up in the church that was supposed to be filled up as people were encouraged to buy bricks to build the new church. One day, Rev. Shaw was on his way to Brown Memorial Hospital and he was delayed because of construction on Route 20 and the bridge into Conneaut. Workmen were tearing up the brick surface. The pastor pulled off to the side of the road

and asked the foreman what his intentions were for the piles of brick. "Probably just get rid of them was the reply". Well, can we have them? the preacher asked. Yes,



if you find somebody to haul them, was the reply.



Rich Schmidt was approached by a friend from the church and agreed to haul them for the church. People hauled bricks in the trunks of their cars, pickups or any way they could. The problem was, the bricks were covered with tar, cement and oily sand. They didn't have the money to pay someone to clean the bricks; it would have to be done by volunteers. The whole church would have to get behind the project. The pace at which things were moving at this point was exciting for the congregation...they had waited so long. But the plans were ready; God had provided the bricks, so they broke

ground in 1939. Work began in earnest. The Sunday School offering was taken. They'd ask if anyone had anything they'd like to give toward the new building, and they'd pass the plate again. A chart showed how many bricks would be needed for this wall or that wall and men, women and children would show up from 7-9:30 each evening to try to stay ahead of the masons in cleaning bricks. Work was slow. But the little group was determined to finish the work God had given them. Slowly but surely the building began to take shape. The men of the church had dug the basement, and the masons followed with the foundation and walls. Then the work on the main floor of the tabernacle was completed; the walls and towers followed. The roof was completed. The building was dedicated to the glory of God in 1942. Dr. Shaw would serve the church for three more years until he felt called to another work.

Rev. Karl Gottschling accepted the call as pastor in 1945. Rev. Gottschling's gifts at the piano became one of the highlights of the services. A favorite the congregation never tired of hearing was the song, "Master, the Tempest is Raging" during which you could picture the storms of life. The basement was still dirt and unused when the new pastor came. It was finally finished with cement in the late 1940s. Rev. Gottschling served the church for 11 years until 1956 when he felt called to a different work.



Rev. Bill McCart came as the new pastor. Rev. McCart will be remembered for a keen sense of humor and encouraging the involvement of the church in the work of Edinboro Conference Grounds.

In 1960, Rev. John Pugh came to Girard to lead the congregation. His musical gifts, along with his wife's, brought many moments of blessing to the congregation. His dignified and gracious manner strengthened the congregation and blessed the community. Rev. Pugh and his wife served this church for eight years.





Rev. Milford Dolby served the church from 1968 – 1971 when God called him to serve with the Billy Graham Films.

The next pastor was Rev. George Richter. The Spirit had moved in various ways through the years as faithful men of God brought various strengths to the church and as dozens of faithful lay men and women carried out the work of God



here in Girard. Rev. Richter's strength seemed to be evangelism and the Spirit of God wanted to do a special work in the 70's. It was during this time that the church doubled in size and the Lord gave us the vision for a Christian Academy. After seeking the Lord, the congregation broke ground for the family center in 1978 and formed Girard Alliance Christian Academy in 1979. Suddenly, the use of the building was dramatically increased as the training of children and young people went from



several hours on Sunday and Wednesday, to thirty hours of training throughout the week. Rev. Franklin Klein was the first principal of the Academy. Multiple teachers were hired, including a young math teacher by the name of Dale Shatto. Dale would follow Rev. Klein as the principal and would successfully lead the school for a number of years. Rev. Richter felt that the work God had called him to do in Girard was complete, so he followed God's leading to another ministry.



Rev. Wilbur Junker accepted the call to the church as pastor. Rev. Junker soon discovered the challenge of leading a church with a Christian school. He worked to strengthen the ministry of the Academy and leave the legacy of a strong school before God called him to a new work in 1984.



In November, 1984, Clyde Davis accepted the call to pastor the church. At 32, he was one of the youngest pastors to ever serve the church. His wife, Jenny, their 3-year-old son, Ryan, and their 5-month old daughter, Colleen, joined him in the new ministry.



In the spring of 1985 we changed the name of the church from Girard Gospel Tabernacle of the Christian and Missionary Alliance to Girard Alliance Church.

It became apparent that unless we started planning for the future the church might stop growing and our mission to reach people in this area would have to be abandoned.

A planning committee was started; they were in contact with a builder who recommended that a new sanctuary be built parallel to Rice Ave. When this was presented to the congregation they asked, "Why would we want to hide a new sanctuary behind an old house? Don't we want people to be attracted to attend the church by seeing it from Rice Avenue?" The Planning Committee abandoned that idea and went back to the drawing board.

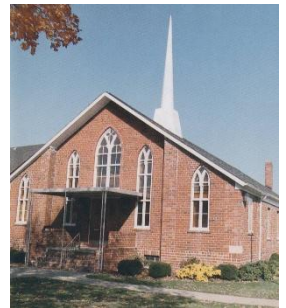
They began working with an architect in Meadville and a desirable plan soon emerged. Several on the committee thought it would be nice to have a sanctuary with surround seating, but the architect said it wouldn't look right. The plan looked attractive, so we decided to proceed. Meanwhile, the staff of the church was growing as Greg Haueter accepted the call as youth pastor. 9 months later the church accepted the challenge to help plant a black church in Erie and have Kelvin Walker join the staff.



With the suggestion of one of the founding fathers that we consider going to two services and with the addition of a minister of worship we decided that the Lord had made the planning and leadership of those services possible. In September 1988, we began having two morning worship services each Sunday morning.



The next year we held a special banquet at Lake Shore Country Club and presented the building to the congregation. The giving to the building fund picked up dramatically and it seemed that we were well on our way to seeing a new dream realized. In 1990, to prepare the building for the anticipated addition and correct the longstanding roof leakage problems, the towers were removed and a new roof was put on the original building. A steeple added the finishing touch along with a blacktop parking lot.



Dave Jeffery was appointed as our Planning Committee Chairman. The church continued to grow at a rate of 5-10% per year and a new plan was developed for a sanctuary

Greg Haueter was married, and called to a new ministry. Kelvin Walker answered the call to serve a church in Virginia. Interviews began with young men for the position of assistant pastor and in 6 months we interviewed 16 candidates. The church extended a call to one candidate, but he felt God leading him in another direction. Another prospect seemed interested, but accepted the call to plant a church in Philadelphia. The church heard that the church planting ministry in Virginia wasn't going well and invited Pastor Kelvin and Doni to return to GAC, which after prayer, they gladly did.

The church parsonage took on a new role as the Davises built a home and moved out of the parsonage. The parsonage became the youth center and office building for the expanding ministry. In 1992 the new doors and steps were installed on the front of the church and the awning was removed to create a more inviting entrance for our guests.



Two years later, the Academy was bursting at the seams and asked the church if they could build an addition on the back of the Family Center which would give them four large classrooms for a middle school. The church agreed to the project even though the state required the church to do \$45,000 worth of improvements to bring the original church building up to code. The church also needed classrooms for the expanding Sunday School and other ministries. Once again Kelvin felt called to leave Girard and to serve Allegheny Center Alliance in Pittsburgh and a farewell was held on September 11, 1994)



Cory Koos started as an interim assistant 9/18/1994 as we waited for the arrival of Mark Lynch as the new minister to our youth.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, for even though we missed Kelvin it seemed that God was leading and providing for our needs as a church.

Mark Lynch was installed as youth pastor 1/8/1995, married Michelle, followed by a reception 6/15/1996.

On Father's Day, Cory transitioned to Minister of Pastoral Care.



The Lord continued to build His church in Girard.

He opened the way for representative of Cogun they had a new set of that included our interest



Dave Jeffery to meet with a Industries. It wasn't long until plans that included a redesign in angled sanctuary seating.

The staff moved back into the old building, the youth center was torn down, and on a cold November Sunday in 1996 we broke ground for the current sanctuary.



Little did we know HOW wet that winter would be; they were to begin construction on Monday, and we had 15 inches of wet snow Sunday night.



It seemed we would never get out of the ground, but after a redesign of the foundation and a long winter, we were up and running again.





The beams came,

and a lot of framing and lumber was added to complete the work.



The building was slowly getting closed in.



And then the brick work.



But there was still a massive amount of work to finish the interior



Landscaping only added to the beauty



Those who attended remember the seemingly endless wait for the sanctuary lights; but finally they came,

The pews weren't far behind



Finally, as a testimony to God's faithfulness, in January 1998 the new sanctuary, offices and nurseries were dedicated to the glory of God.



Originally, one of the purposes of building the new sanctuary was to have one worship service. After prayerful consideration the Elders felt that the congregation was accustomed to two worship services and that we should continue the same in the new sanctuary. The level of excitement was high and the services grew in attendance. That spring there was a sense that a change needed to be made in the pastoral staff. Pastor Cory was released from the staff. In the midst of so much change with the new worship area, the congregation was divided on the change. A service of healing and restoration was held on July 26. Pastor Cory accepted the call as Pastor of Glenshaw chapel in Pittsburgh and the congregation held a farewell for him and his family on August 16. A farewell for Mark and Michelle Lynch was to follow shortly on September 27.



Thankfully the Lord had prepared a recent graduate of Toccoa Falls College, Jerry Ester, to accept the call as our new youth pastor; he was installed on October 11th with this wife, Joanne, and his four children beside him. What followed were skiing/tubing events at the Peak, Girard pool parties, One Way Riders (a motorcycle group) along with the Ester family puppet ministry, Narrow Road crew. Pastor Jerry's preaching was also very relatable. He would serve the church for 6 years before accepting the call as the Edinboro

Camp Director. He continued to attend GAC with his family.

2000 was a major year for GAC. Dale Shatto accepted the call to Houghton Academy; a farewell was held on July 30th as the search began for his successor.



Rev. Barry Shaffer was installed as the new principal on August 27, thankfully in time for the new school year. Rev Shaffer was an experienced preacher and musician, whose ministry was also enjoyed by the church. He would serve the Academy for two years.



It would be a year until David Kennedy accepted the call to be the principal. He also served for two years.



In September of 2005, Karen Brumagin began her ministry as principal. She would serve until it was decided with low enrollment and a month and half of fasting and prayer in early 2011 that the Lord was leading us to conclude this ministry. This was a very painful decision for the church. The Academy had been a primary outreach ministry to young people in the community and a large part of the ministry focus of the church for more than 32 years!

Another major ministry of the church was the annual venison dinner, started by Chuck Senzel, which grew to 350 in attendance and was considered by well-known speakers of similar events to be one of the best in the country. The 26th (and last) dinner was held in 2014, after which it was felt that this ministry would need to conclude. Thankfully, as the Lord closed the door on these two ministries, other ministry opportunities were discovered (i.e. kids fun night for the community and flashlight tag for youth).

Before the turn of the century, a fellowship for senior saints (55 and older) was started called "Best-agers". They traveled to different locations every month, with occasional events at the church. The 55+ group started while the Best-agers were still meeting with a desire to reach "younger" seniors. Later they became the Prime-timers.

Others ministries included archery shoots, Messiah's Messengers (young adult Bible study with a focus on Jewish background for followers of Jesus), Band of Brothers (weekly men's Bible study), JOY (weekly women's Bible study), Pinewood Derby, Men's softball and volleyball, Women's volleyball, Called to Action, Book club, Purpose Drive Life groups, Single and Parenting Group, Moms and Tots, LIFE groups, couples home fellowship, Moms in Prayer, Ladies Alone ministry, GriefShare, SingleCare, DivorceCare, knitting/crocheting group and Baking Ministry (pies to first time visitors). Connect was started to greet guests as they came to worship.

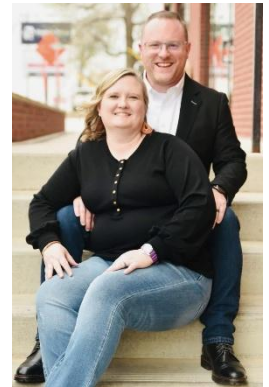
Alliance Women actively supported our missionaries in prayer, fellowship, a stamp ministry and more with monthly meetings. Sunday School met weekly, training children, youth and adults in the Word of God. Groups were sent to the Dominican Republic to build churches. There was a drama ministry for several years. A number of individuals were sent around the world on mission trips...medical, evangelistic, mission training, youth home mission trips and

much more. Multiple people were sent as vocational pastors and missionaries. The pastor's prayer shield team met every Sunday morning at 7:00 AM to pray for him and all who would come to worship. These are just a sampling of some of the ministries the Lord led the GAC family to use to be His hands and feet to those in need and to make disciples. Multiple members of the congregation used their talents every week to lead us in worship, run the sound system, greet people as they came for worship, maintain the building, and so much more.



Graeme and Hope Watson were married in September, 2001. Little did we know that he would help with the youth ministry the following summer and eventually become the youth pastor. Graeme took the youth group to N. Ireland, his home country. He started flashlight tag, which became very popular, attended by hundreds of youth in the area. Pastor Graeme and Hope resigned in August of 2007.

Justin Burns was installed as assistant pastor on February 13, 2005. He worked with the children's ministry and helped with the preaching ministry. He married Julie in August and they would serve until he accepted the call to a Michigan church in March of 2007.



The youth ministry was led by members of the church while the church began a search for another youth pastor. The search took longer than expected. Thankfully the volunteers didn't quit and on November 30, 2008, Pastor Lamech Marsh was installed as the new youth pastor, with his wife, AnneMarie, at his side. He immediately began assisting in the preaching ministry, revitalizing the youth ministry and participating in the leadership of the church.

Just before the church began praying about the continuation of the Academy Ministry, an elder brought up his concern about the children's ministry of the church and suggested we consider hiring a children's ministry director. After prayerful consideration, AnneMarie was hired as our part time director. The old sanctuary was renovated to create an atmosphere for children with great involvement by volunteers from the church family. It became apparent rather quickly that -the director's position was more than a part-time job. The congregation was challenged to increase their giving to cover the cost of a full-time director, which they quickly did. A year later, renovations were begun in the basement of the original building to make room for our growing youth ministry. Imagine their excitement when they had their first meeting on March 26, 2010. Pastor Lamech was ordained on March 13, 2011. Bible Jam became the new name and format for children's Sunday School on January 22, 2012. Outlet was started for young adults...You and Me Forever for Marriage enrichment.

In 2013 there was a meeting to consider renovating the sanctuary to move the organ speakers to the edges of the platform, provide solid walls for video projection, install wains-

coting and a stained glass window. The motion passed and construction was completed in 2014.

In February, 2017 Pastor Clyde told the Governing Board and Elders that after lengthy, prayerful consideration, he felt led to retire as Senior Pastor under the leadership of the district team leader, Rob Douglas. The church leadership was trained by Rev. Douglas for several months on how they should approach hiring a new pastor. By summer, they were ready to consider resumes/candidates. After looking at three resumes, they asked Pastor Lamech to be the first candidate. That Sunday evening, they asked him if he would be the next Senior Pastor of GAC. He prayed through this decision with AnneMarie and told the church that he felt led to accept this position. The church had a farewell service and dinner for the Davises on September 24th. Pastor Lamech was installed as the new senior pastor on October 1st.

Not too long after Pastor Lamech was installed as the new senior pastor the search committee began to look for a youth and young adult pastor to fill the vacant position. After much discussion and prayer, after a three month process including candidate interviews, the Governing Board and Elders extended the youth and young adult pastor position to Mr. Tyler Puharic, which he accepted the position and began on January 21, 2018.

Pastor Lamech knew that Girard Alliance had a rich history and those who came before him served God faithfully. There was no doubt in his mind that God had done and was going to do a mighty work in and through the church and community. Pastor Lamech cast a vision for the G.A.C.- three simple words...ENGAGE ENABLE ENHANCE. The heartbeat of these words was to see a desire for relational authenticity. A church, God's people, engaged with one another in relationship, fellowship and stewardship. God was continuing to provide his wisdom and purpose upon Girard Alliance, even through the transition of new pastoral and clerical staff. In the Spring of 2020, the U.S. Government issued a lockdown due to the widespread pandemic that was occurring from COVID-19. Sunday, March 13th was our last in service for a few months.

At that time, we had no other option but to worship from our homes. We would record our messages and provide them each week for over four months. Praise the Lord, we kept our ministries going during this time. We saw many people attend our "drive thru" easter egg hunt in April. There were other services and ministries that we continued to provide even during the lockdown that seemed very beneficial. When we assembled back together for in person worship- we as a leadership and staff decided to transition to two services for the time being. We decided to have our Christmas Eve Candlelight service. We still wanted to provide a safe place of worship for our church and community. The Governing Board and Elders assembled together throughout months of prayer and consideration of how we function and continue to be good stewards and God's servants even through this pandemic. We saw much transition but one highlight during the pandemic was that we saw 10 baptisms and multiple families commit to church membership. AnneMarie and Tyler, continued to provide strong numbers in children and youth ministry events. We emphasized the importance of wanting to be the "hands and feet of Jesus" in the midst of this widespread pandemic.

Over the last five years, since the pandemic, God has worked and moved in and through Girard Alliance Church. We have seen people surrender their lives, be baptized and follow him. The vision for G.A.C. is still intact—Engage Enable Enhance, although it may look a little different the desire is still the same—to love God, love people and live out the Gospel to advance His kingdom!

Above all, the hope and desire of Girard Alliance Church still holds to this day. That we rely on the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, through the confidence of the completed work of Jesus Christ to draw more and more people to God. We are trusting that God will do a mighty

work in the future as He has done in the past. We echo the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk that prayed:

“ Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known;” (Habakkuk 3:2)