THE GEEZER MURALS

Faith, Art, and the Story of First United Methodist Church

Created by members of the congregation, these two murals brought together the symbols of Christian faith and the history of Methodism in Manhattan, Kansas. Although they later appeared in separate locations throughout the church, they had been conceived as a pair and shared visual elements that connected their stories.

A Shared Beginning

The murals began with two large rolling dividers discovered in the church choir rehearsal room. The dividers had originally been built for United Methodist Women, probably in the late 1960s, to serve as backdrops for a reception table. For many years they stood in Fellowship Hall near the kitchen. Their fronts were covered in draperies, and their backs were made of chalkboard and bulletin-board material so they could serve several purposes.

After completing the Easter diorama, which was then in the narthex, church members Oscar Larmer, Bill Cool, and Mel Chastain wanted to work together on another project. They looked throughout the church for a suitable place to gather and encourage fellowship. Fellowship Hall offered space, but its walls were plain and did little to express the meaning of the Christian faith or the Methodist tradition. The group considered painting images on windows, support pillars, and other wall spaces, but none offered the right setting for the project.

The two rolling dividers offered a solution. Each could accommodate a mural measuring approximately four feet by eight feet. The panels could be displayed in Fellowship Hall when appropriate and then rolled back into the choir rehearsal room when not in use. The plan called for two related murals: one devoted to Christian and Methodist symbols, and the other to the people, places, and events that shaped Methodism in Manhattan.

The murals were designed in 2009, work began in earnest in 2010, and both were completed in May 2012. They were placed on the rolling dividers in June 2012.

The Artists and Contributors

Oscar Larmer, Bill Cool, and Mel Chastain formed the central creative team. Larmer, a retired faculty member and former head of the Department of Art at Kansas State University, was the project's lead artist. His watercolor work was represented in collections throughout Kansas and the Midwest, and his landscapes were widely recognizable. He developed the conceptual designs and was responsible for transforming the group's ideas into finished visual compositions.

Cool and Chastain brought research, practical skills, and artistic collaboration to the project. Cool, an architectural engineer and longtime church member, researched the dimensions, materials, and details of the historic church buildings represented in the Church History mural. Chastain contributed to the design and painting of many images, including several symbols and historical details. The project also benefited from the contributions of other church members and friends.

Dick McChesney assisted with the border of the Christian Symbols mural. Jim Coffman, a former dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University, shared his knowledge of horses and contributed to the image of the circuit rider. Darrell Brensing built the matte-black wooden backing and frames that held the murals on the rolling partitions. The work was a collaborative effort, and the fellowship that grew among the participants became an important part of the project itself.

How the Murals Were Made

Each mural was painted on a four-by-eight-foot plywood panel that was reinforced, framed, and primed. The artists used acrylic paint, along with faux-painting techniques to suggest the appearance of stained glass. Magic markers were used to create the stained-glass leading around the borders and throughout the diamond-shaped backgrounds. Several coats of varnish were applied to protect the finished work and enhance the colors.

The design of the two murals was intended to make them feel like a unified pair. Both used a border adapted from the stained-glass windows in the church sanctuary, with blue, yellow, orange, and green details. Both also featured a Gothic-shaped arch behind the central figure. The arch recalled stained-glass windows from the 1909 church sanctuary at the church's site at Sixth Street and Poyntz Avenue.

The original stained-glass windows were removed and stored for many years in the coal bunker beneath the sanctuary. One window was restored and placed in the East Wing when that part of the church was designed and built in the 1990s. Photographs of another window, taken by Bill Cool while it lay in pieces in storage, helped the artists reconstruct its appearance for the mural. The Gothic arch and the images within it became a visual link between the two works.

Mural One: Christian Symbols

The Christian Symbols mural grew out of an earlier design for a large mural at the base of the staircase in the Harris Activity Center. That concept centered on the purpose of the space as a place for young people to gather, worship, develop projects, and grow into young adults. The symbols in the mural were selected for their significance to Christian faith and, in particular, to the Methodist tradition. Many were drawn from stained-glass windows that were already present in the church sanctuary.

The symbols were arranged around a central image of Jesus welcoming children. Unlike the other images, which sat within the decorative border, Jesus and the children extended in front of it. The artists gave this image special prominence because it expressed the heart of the Christian faith: Christ was their Savior, and they were his children. The image was adapted from the large stained-glass window at the south end of the sanctuary, behind the balcony.

The Symbols and Their Meanings

Roman crosses and quatrefoils — The cross is the central symbol of Christianity. The circles represented eternity, while the quatrefoil shape symbolize the four evangelists. The border and diamond-shaped background were adapted from the original sanctuary windows and reproduced for both murals.

The Bible and scroll — Placed in the upper-left portion of the mural, the Bible represents the Word of God and the importance of Scripture in the life of faith. The image was adapted from one of the stained-glass windows along the west side of the sanctuary.

Flame and cross — The flame and cross represent the Methodist Church. The image was painted by Mel Chastain and reflects a symbol also used in Methodist Church materials and furnishings.

The dove — In Christianity, the dove represents baptism and purity. It also recalls the baptism of Christ, which was foundational to Christian faith. The mural's image was reproduced from the original stained-glass artwork found in the previously owned Harris Activity Center (HAC).

The Ten Commandments — The tablets appears in a circle in the upper-right portion of the mural. They balance the Bible and scroll on the opposite side. The tablets were painted by Oscar Larmer, while Mel Chastain added the background and the circle, which represented eternity.

The King's Guard with Chalice. This image is one of a group of forty symbols found in the sanctuary windows—twenty on each side of the sanctuary. The repeated image of a helmeted guard led some to call it the 'King's Guard.' The group of symbols represent the four evangelists, the twelve apostles, symbols of general nature, the four major prophets, the twelve minor prophets, and symbols of the Old Dispensation. The guard with a chalice, wheat stalk, and grapes was selected for this mural because it represents communion and the enduring bond with Christ. Mel Chastain painted the image.

Crown, cross, and palm leaf — Adapted by Mel Chastain from a window at the south end of the sanctuary balcony, the crown represents Jesus, the King of Kings. The cross is the symbol of Christianity, and the palm branches represent Christ's return to the Holy City.

Baptismal cross — The Roman cross appears on the lid of the baptismal font. Oscar Larmer painted this image for the mural.

Jesus welcoming the children — This is the most prominent image in the mural and one of the most significant images in the church. Oscar Larmer selected and rendered the image, adapting it from the large stained-glass window at the south end of the sanctuary. The composition placed Christ in front of the border and background, emphasizing his central place in the life of the church and the Christian faith.

The stained-glass window behind Jesus — The Gothic-shaped window behind Christ is a reproduction of stained glass from the 1909 sanctuary. Its shape and imagery connected the mural to the congregation's history and provided a visual counterpart to the arch behind the central figure in the Church History mural. Mel Chastain painted the border and the images within the arch.

Mural Two: Church History

The Church History mural celebrated the people, places, and events that shaped Methodism in Manhattan. Its story began in 1855, before the city itself had taken shape, when a group of pioneers traveled up the Kansas River aboard the steamship Hartford. The mural's images were selected for their importance to the history and development of the Methodist Church in Manhattan. Much of the historical research came from a history of the Methodist Church in Manhattan written by historian and church member Homer Socolofsky.

The composition began in the upper-left corner with the Hartford's journey and continued through images of early church buildings and the people who helped establish the congregation and the wider community. The central figure was John Wesley, founder of Methodism. He was flanked by Joseph Denison and Isaac Goodnow, two influential figures in the early development of Manhattan and the Methodist presence in the region.

The Images and Their Stories

The circuit rider — Circuit riders were essential to the growth and spread of Methodism in America. Ministers often traveled on horseback from one congregation to another, serving several churches across a wide area. The image in the mural was developed with help from Jim Coffman, whose knowledge of horses contributed to the accuracy of the rider. Mel Chastain painted an early version, and Oscar Larmer later refined the proportions and completed the image.

The steamship Hartford — In 1855, the Hartford carried nearly eighty passengers, provisions, several prefabricated dwellings, and at least one prefabricated general store from Ohio toward the Kansas River. The travelers hoped to establish a settlement near what is now Junction City. The ship traveled around several times before finally ending its journey a few blocks west of the First United Methodist Church campus as it then stood. The mural depicted the Hartford in daylight, with provisions visible on deck, rather than at night as shown in an earlier stained-glass image. The final image was based on a painting by Michael Boss, titled 'Hard Aground on the Kaw River in 1855,' using dimensions provided by Sonie and Al Liebler.

The Hartford bell and flag — The Hartford Bell still existed at the time this history was written and is housed at the Riley County Historical Museum and Isaac Goodnow House. The word 'Hartford' did not appear on the ship itself, but Mel Chastain added it to the mural for clarity. The flag behind the ship contained thirty-three stars, representing the number of states in the Union when the Hartford ran aground in 1855. The Hartford Bell later hung in the belfry of the main tower of the 1880 church and was rung each Sunday.

The stone-carved First Methodist Church logo — The limestone logo, bearing the letters C, E, and M and the number 1, was believed to have originated as a cornerstone of the 1909 church. When that building was torn down, the cornerstone was made into a monument with a stone base and cap and placed near the corner of Sixth Street and Poyntz Avenue. After the East Wing was completed, it was moved to its location between the East Wing main entry and the courtyard. Bill Cool researched the dimensions and details of the church structures shown on the right side of the mural; the finished images were considered among the most accurate depictions of those buildings in Riley County.

The earliest church building — The congregation's first church building stood at the location later occupied by Seven Dolors Catholic Church, at the corner of Pierre Street and Juliette Avenue. It could seat approximately 300 people, reflecting the confidence of the early founders in the future growth of the church. Mel Chastain painted the image using an early sketch preserved in the church archives.

The 1880 church — The first Methodist church building at Sixth Street and Poyntz Avenue was built in 1880 for $9,186. It seated between 500 and 600 people and was enlarged in 1896 for an additional $4,500, doubling its seating capacity and adding a third floor. Its cornerstone, dated 'First M. E. Church Erected A.D. 1880 Enlarged A.D. 1896,' was then located on the second floor of the sanctuary above the choir area. The building was badly damaged by the 1903 flood and by a dynamite explosion. The mural included a three-dimensional model created by Bill Cool to help document the original structure and its later changes.

The 1909 church — In 1909, the church underwent a major transformation costing $10,000. The work included new exterior walls, new upper-floor windows, and a higher roof to provide a balcony. Only the two original towers and some first-floor walls and windows were retained. The main tower was later shortened. A wood-frame annex was added in 1912 for Sunday school and other activities. The building served the congregation until 1925, when the next church was ready. The 1909 church's Hartford Bell was later moved to the Harris Activity Center and then to the Riley County Historical Museum. A carved limestone window frame was also salvaged and is now in the museum. Two large stained-glass windows were removed and stored in the old coal bunker beneath Fellowship Hall; they were underwater during the 1951 flood.

The 1926 church — The church then in use was built between 1925 and 1926 and dedicated during a five-day celebration, October 10–14, 1926. Construction and furnishings cost $137,909, including more than $10,000 for the pipe organ. The sanctuary seated slightly more than 1,100 people. The building suffered damage from the 1951 flood, lightning strikes, and major hailstorms. A stone cross with a Kansas sunflower at the center was struck by lightning in 1982 and knocked from the south wall. It was replaced with another cross, and the original was displayed as a monument in the courtyard south of the East Wing. The cornerstone at the southeast corner read '1855–1925,' marking the span from the beginning of Methodism in Manhattan to the beginning of services in that building.

The East Wing addition — Completed in 1999 at a cost of just over $2 million, the East Wing added office space, a library, handicap access, and an elevator. The stained-glass window above the main entrance came from the 1909 church. It was one of two windows from that building that had been stored for years in the coal bunker. Bill Cool painted both the 1926 church and the 1999 addition for the mural.

The People Who Helped Shape the Community

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, stands at the center of the mural's story. Oscar Larmer painted his image using archival photographs and paintings, refining the pose through several versions until it matched the composition. The final image shows Wesley holding a closed Bible in one hand.

Joseph Denison and Isaac Goodnow appear beside Wesley. Both played significant roles in the development of early Manhattan and in the establishment of the Methodist Church. Denison served as pastor of the church and president of the university. Goodnow made numerous trips east to raise funds for the church, the university, and the community. Goodnow was among the early settlers who helped establish Bluemont College, which later became Kansas State University. Mel Chastain painted the images of Denison and Goodnow from archival photographs and paintings in Anderson Hall on the Kansas State University campus.

The stained-glass image behind Wesley is another link to the congregation's past. The original window from the 1909 sanctuary had been removed and stored. Bill Cool photographed the pieces while they were in the coal bunker and painstakingly reassembled the photographic segments to create a guide for the image reproduced in the mural.

Two Murals, One Story

The Christian Symbols mural and the Church History mural tell different stories, but they were designed to belong together. Their shared borders echo the stained glass of the sanctuary, and the Gothic arches behind their central figures recall the church's historic windows. One mural reflects the beliefs and symbols at the heart of Christian worship; the other honor the people, places, and journeys through which Methodism took root in Manhattan.

Together, the murals celebrated the faith, creativity, knowledge, and fellowship of the people who built and shaped that congregation. They were works of art created by church members for their church—a visual reminder that its history was made not only of buildings and dates, but also of shared faith, service, and community.