

Preface

Histories are always subjective, no matter how much they strive to be objective. This history is written by the pastor of 34 years, 1981 to 2015, so the perspective may be far different than that of church members or outside observers. The reader hopefully brings a critical eye to these pages.

For every person named here, a hundred made Coronado the unique church it was and continues to be. May they serve to represent those not named. They are remembered with gratitude.

This was written at the request of my successor, Peter Cottrell, but it took six years to attain the distance necessary to writing history. So, it is completed in time to present to his successor, Lisa Degrenia.

Bob Brown June 2021

1904-1980 The Coronado Beach Roots

The little "Cape Cod" community of Coronado Beach in which the church was born in 1904 had evolved by 1981. "Coronado Community Church" was established after the construction of a one-room schoolhouse in 1903, for it began as a Sunday School class there. It was part of the Methodist Episcopal Church denomination, as distinct from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the split between the two having come before the Civil War. This hints that the congregation had roots in northern tourists and retirees. In 1939 the denominations rejoined to form The Methodist Church.

Between 1904 and 1907 a sanctuary was built on the southeast corner of Peninsula and Columbus, added onto until by the 1950s it had an apse (choir) and transepts (side wings), and a separate education building. During the 1950s it was served by a retired preacher W.C. Stewart) who did not drive. Coronado Beach merged with New Smyrna to become New Smyrna Beach during this decade.

In the 1960s the United Methodist Church was formed by merger of The Methodist Church and Evangelical United Brethren denominations, giving the church its current name. During the 1970s the church acquired the Coronado Beach Club on the corner of Peninsula and Flagler, which incorporates to its rear the original one-room schoolhouse in which the church began. As well, the Hospitality House on the southwest corner of Peninsula and Columbus, which would serve as fellowship hall, meeting room and offices at various times, was purchased.

1981-1987 The Cute Little Church on the Beachside

By 1981 Coronado was known as “the cute little church on the beachside”, with its small white stucco sanctuary, steeple and stained glass windows. There was one Sunday service nine months of the year (at 9:00 AM, because by 11:00 AM summer beach traffic over the two drawbridges made arrival impossible.) A second service at 11:00 accommodated a congregation that was more than 50 % larger in the winter. The 1981 Journal reported an average attendance of 265 and a budget of \$70,000. Church life revolved around worship, for there were few facilities or reason to bring folks together outside a UMW and small UMM group. The major outreach was CorMeth Day School, begun in 1970 with Joan Davidson as Board Chair and then Joan Harvey for decades as Director.

The culture of the church was not “Bible Belt” but “Yankee”, reserved, educated, thoughtful. They were committed to the church but their lives did not revolve around it. They were open to all kinds of people, but ignored all newcomers equally. They did not know each other (a trait that continues to this day), having in common only that they worshiped for an hour on Sunday and that many were there only seasonally. Typical parishioners were a retired couple, or a widow, living in a modest two-bedroom home on the Beachside. There was a scattering of families with children stretching to Edgewater, and an annual influx of “snow birds” to condominiums. Most people hailed from New England, upstate New York, and the Mid-west.

A consultant architect had been hired in 1980 to address issues of inadequate facilities. The original building had no plumbing, ceramic insulators, cracks in the 4-inch block walls, and no space even for the current congregation. When leaving, parishioners stepped directly onto the sidewalk next to Peninsula, with no place to visit. The architect (Nils Schweizer) identified two key issues: the congregation was not growing, and there was no space to build a new sanctuary. That twin message inspired two goals: grow the congregation and acquire more land. It was during this consultation process that Bob Brown was appointed June 1981 to Coronado.

A part of those goals, written into a resolution, was to attract more youth. When asked to define youth, a leader said: “people under 65”. It was a retirement church. (That same leader, later responsible for family night dinners, did not want children to attend because they were disruptive of her program!) But Coronado was unusual in that it not only said it wanted to grow, but meant it. Leadership was willing to relinquish key roles to newcomers. Money was committed to buying land needed for expansion.

In the winter of 1981-82 the CorMeth Beach Club was restored, adding heat and air conditioning! It has served since then variously as fellowship hall, youth building, coffee house, daycare for seniors (The Extended Family, under Volusia Council on Aging), and CorMeth Boutique. That visible restoration signaled vitality at the church, and began twenty years of continuous growth.

Schweizer recommended that we hire a local architect, Will Miller, a member of the church, to develop plans. It soon became apparent that without at least one or two more 50- foot lots, it was impossible to build. From 1981 to 1985 nothing could be purchased. In winter, aisles were filled with chairs and children were asked to sit in laps. During Holy Week 1985 the key homeowner agreed to sell, and plans could be drawn.

But not easily. The building committee went through 15 different versions of a master plan. Everyone wanted to save the old sanctuary for its charm. A new sanctuary had to sit on the site of the old one because there was still not enough land. The old sanctuary was not structurally sound enough to be made part of a new one. Relocation was considered, but the church's identity with the historic Coronado community, and presence of other Methodist churches on the mainland, argued against it. During its last year, the sanctuary had steel I-bars along the outside walls and rods with turnbuckles above the congregation's heads.

With much sadness, and some people leaving, the decision was made to raze the old sanctuary and build on the same site. This required worship in Coronado Civic Center from April 1987 to May 1988. A service of de-consecration was held Easter 1987. Carried from the sanctuary were the pulpit, altar, Bible, cross and many memories. Caxton Doggett, pastor 1939-1941, and other former pastors participated. Later that week the stained-glass windows were crated and the pews removed. It was as if the soul had left the building.

1988-2000 The Apple Pie Church

The new sanctuary opened Mother's Day 1988. The courtyard was designed specifically to bring people together, to mingle and talk as they never could before. The great oak was a surprise...only the architect had seen it before, because it grew behind the paint locker and garbage cans outside the kitchen door of the education building's Day School. The stained-glass windows returned, and the pews were placed in the same relative positions as in the old church. A side section and wider aisles for chairs allowed for winter expansion and future growth. The office, Sunday school, nursery and fellowship hall were under one roof for the first time. A year renting a civic center proved we could be the church without a building, but the new building showed we could be a better church with a building.

Our consultant architect once said that it takes years of prayer for a building to become a church. But with the old windows and pews and people, the soul had returned to the building.

A high profile and space for new activities led to further growth in attendance and program. Cookies and coffee in the courtyard encouraged people to mingle, discuss and make friends. Rooms for children under the same roof made a welcoming place for young families. "Pampers Parties at the Parsonage" made friendships for new parents as their babies played on the floor together. Mid- and senior- high youth groups took over the "Tree House". Adult classes on Sunday and during the week were possible. While there were few young professionals in the community, they gravitated to Coronado. The envious, pejorative and inaccurate label given Coronado by other churches was "that yuppie church."

But the greatest new source of strength was a wave of young retirees moving into Sugar Mill and other new areas on the mainland. These had been airline executives, plant managers, military colonels. They knew how to manage and plan. They were experienced, still energetic, and a part of the “greatest generation” that won World War II and went to church every Sunday. Their leadership was a powerful force.

Among them was Jim Flores, former Marine officer and executive with Eastern Air Line. Devoted to his faith and church, Jim would every Monday morning take an apple pie to every first-time visitor who had signed the registration pad. Virtually everyone thus visited would return. The Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church recognized Jim with the Denman Evangelism Award as the outstanding layperson in the state. Coronado was known as the “Apple Pie” church. Together with the efforts of Iona Hughes, variously director of music, program and congregational care, their outreach caused the Conference to recognize Bob Brown with the Denman Evangelism Award for clergy the following year.

A contemporary service was introduced, though the majority of the congregation continued to prefer what might be described as informal traditional service. Easter and Advent Cantatas required two performances to accommodate the crowds. Lectures and concerts were held on anything from “Gnosticism in the Gospel of John” to Elvis impersonators. Two children’s’ choirs each performed monthly in worship with a Christmas concert of their own. CorMeth Day School also had Christmas and graduation gatherings that filled the sanctuary.

Coronado had to constantly work to overcome the fact that it was a gathering of strangers. Drawing members across Southeast Volusia, there was no community cohesion. Seasonal visitors would come for the winter from the North, from the South for a summer month, or for a week-end from Orlando. A survey taken each February showed attendees from over 40 states, 8 Canadian provinces, Iceland, England and Germany. A visitor introduced himself as Moderator of the Church of Scotland; several Methodist bishops would visit on vacation. At times half the congregation were visitors. Occasionally one would complain that no one had welcomed them...the problem was that most of the people they saw were probably wondering why that person was not welcoming them!

Lay leadership under Dr. Bob Hammond and others began Disciple Bible Study, so that half a dozen groups were meeting weekly. Virtually every year a group of 8 to 48 would take a study tour of the lands of the Bible. Walk to Emmaus/Cursillo and their reunion groups attracted many. Keenagers (senior citizen group) met regularly. Circles of United Methodist Women were active. “Spiritual First Aid” courses were offered to all, and some were invited for continued training to join the Stephen Ministry program. Meeting space had to be reserved well in advance every day of the week.

The result was that while people still came to church primarily for the preaching and the music, they increasingly understood the biblical roots of their faith and what it means to put it into practice with their fellow parishioners.

Looking ahead, the Finance Committee established a thrift store in the CorMeth Beach Club building. Run entirely by volunteers, it eventually had 100 workers and a gross contribution to the general budget of over \$180,000. Vouchers were given for fire victims and homeless high school students. But perhaps more valuable, workers on each shift came to know each other as family. It was a “non-churchy”

interface with the community, and much counseling was done between the clothes racks. It became one of the best sources of interaction for a church always trying to get people to know one another.

A founding family of the church were the Longstreets, builders of the Riverview Hotel. Their granddaughters were Do Miller and Babe Paxton. Do attended faithfully, Babe every other Easter. Do died, then Babe, and Babe left her estate to the church, c. 1994. (For a brief shining moment, Coronado owned a bar on Flagler Avenue!) Wisely the decision was made, not to pay off the mortgage, but to establish an Endowment Fund. Various funds were set aside within the Endowment, including Missions, Scholarships and Capital Projects. Later Perpetual Pledges were introduced, by which members could make bequests that would provide permanent contributions to the general operating budget.

\$100,000 was designated for the Coronado Scholars, a college scholarship given each year along with a mentor to a promising but at-risk African-American eight-grader. The hope was that this would enable them to finish high school in a setting where there was little support for them to do so otherwise. Coronado had recognized that given the geographical, economic and cultural barriers of its location, the church would not be able to expand significantly beyond its Anglo roots. Therefore, every effort was made by scholarships, by participation in ML King Day, and in community outreach, to show that Coronado was supportive of the small and oft-ignored black community.

Special Worship on Sunday evening was a combined worship and dinner experience for the mentally challenged community, their families and caregivers. While many were integrated into other services, this gathering gave freedom and spontaneity to all. SEMAR, the Southeastern Jurisdiction ministry to the mentally challenged, recognized Coronado with its annual award.

Attendance continued to grow. A pattern emerged: solving a parking problem by purchasing land or even running a bus from off-site parking would create a need for more seats in worship. Solving the seating by removing doors to the fellowship hall or adding a service would create need for more parking. One winter a bus shuttled parishioners from overflow parking at the Coronado (later SunTrust Bank). Staff was asked to park away from the church. It was like digging a hole in a creek...it filled up no matter what you did. In all, Coronado purchased 26 parcels of land, most with houses on them. At the peak, winter saw a Saturday evening service, three Sunday morning services, plus Special Worship, with 1300 many weekends and 1900 at Easter. Late arrivals would be seated in rows of chairs in the courtyard or even the choir loft! A Master Plan was drawn up to add an Education Wing and, across Columbus, a multi-purpose building that could accommodate up to 800.

2001-2015 A New Millennium

The Master Plan was introduced to the congregation in morning and evening sessions. The morning was 9:00 AM, September 11, 2001. The trauma of that morning forced a delay in the project. When we were ready to move ahead the following year, the initial fund-raiser was held at 7:00 PM one evening; at 9:00 PM President Bush declared war on Iraq. The project never recovered from those psychological blows. Together with a recession, it meant that the larger building plan was abandoned, the education wing reduced in size, and then funded only by selling seven of the houses owned on the Columbus-Cedar block.

Volusia County was one of four “hanging chad” counties in Florida in the contentious 2000 presidential race. That was the forerunner of increased political divisions that churches could not escape. Together with several recessions and wars, a malaise spread across the society. Changes in Canadian insurance and dollar rules meant that the 10% of our winter congregation from that country disappeared, and an Icelandic contingent went away with an economic collapse there. Hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 inflicted damage to roofs, structures and livelihoods.

Of even greater consequence for Coronado was demographics. The young retirees of 1985 were by the early 2000s aging, dying or moving to be near their children. The generation that replaced them was less likely to go to church every Sunday, and might go to Costa Rica or Arizona for the winter. Families found soccer practice scheduled for Sunday morning. A “regular attendee” no longer meant once a week but once a month. The creek barely flowed, and the hole did not readily fill. Does one dig a well? Coronado reached its peak average weekly worship attendance at 1040 in 2001.

An informal study of the sixteen largest churches (over 500 average attendance) in the East Central District from 2000 to 2010 showed that eleven had dropped in attendance by 11 to 68%. Four, First Kissimmee, First Ormond, First Orlando, and Coronado, had declines of 40 to 48% during this period. Coronado’s attendance 2010 to 2015 stabilized in the range of 550 attendance. In hindsight, Coronado was fortunate in not affording a larger building. Also in hindsight, there was a failure to see the looming demographic cliff.

In spite of this decline, these years showed some of the most active involvement by members. Mission teams, study groups, worship teams proliferated. Three to five mission teams annually for over a decade traveled to hurricane relief in North Carolina, church building in Guyana and Honduras, and medical clinics in Mexico, Peru, and half a dozen other countries. The typical member spent more time on campus, on mission and with other members than ever before. A strong youth group developed as it had in the 1990s. Several who grew up in the church were deeply inspired by mission trips: Madisen Tager, who first went on a mission trip to Guyana as a nine-year old, carrying mortar with a broken arm, later lived for two years in Central America as director of the school Coronado supported. One taught in Honduras for a year and married there; one studied hydrology engineering for third-world water supply and directed a college mission program. one became director of immigrant legal assistance for the UMC.

“Wings of Grace” annual newsletter detailed the mission outreach in community and abroad. Several mission projects covered many years. Salud y Paz, a dental/medical clinic and school in Guatemala, was supported by funding and a mission team every year. Sister churches in Las Tunas province, Cuba, eventually numbering ten, were supported by pastors’ salaries, a tractor, water filtration systems, and

visits. The youth group went to Pura Vida mission in Costa Rica every summer. Hurricane repair trips across the Southeast spent years repairing flood and wind damage, with a trailer stocked with tools and supplies. Halifax Urban Ministries support gave food and financial aid. Coronado staffed and financed weekly homeless meals at First UMC. Volunteers worked in public schools, Boys and Girls Club and other Westside tutoring programs.

The enlarged and remodeled campus included a music suite used also for lectures, movies and meeting. The Day School grew from 50 to 75 and more preschoolers. The Hospitality House across Peninsula, was used for up to a dozen anonymous support groups for addictions to alcohol, nicotine, narcotics, overeating, etc.

Accustomed to growth in numbers and financial support through the years, Coronado's programming and budget increased annually. In the 2000s' attendance declined and financial support leveled off. Expenses for program and staff, however, continued to grow as involvement by the congregation grew. Eventually the trend lines crossed, and when they did, painful decisions were made. Loyal and long-serving staff were terminated, members were upset and angry.

Pledge campaign was moved to February when the most people were present. (Hurricane damage in October more than once was part of this decision). The story of the church ministries including a mission fair was integral to the campaign. Based on pledges and other anticipated income, a revenue budget was drawn up. Separately, and without knowing the revenue side, an expense budget was drawn up in April. Once the two were reconciled for a balanced budget, they were adopted and a new fiscal year began July 1.

Adjustment to the new realities were being made. Coronado had defined itself by a twenty-year record of unbroken growth in numbers and activity. Now it had to re-vision its identity and mission and come to a new understanding of what growth for the church meant. In 2010 the church was awarded a \$50,000 Renewal Leave by the Lilly Foundation. With the pastor gone for 16 weeks, the church undertook with a coach to discern the future. From 2010 to 2015 attendance (averaging 530 to 580) and income stabilized at a sustainable level. New creativity in worship, including video, emerged. Youth ministry became a strength. Leadership regularly discussed how to address eventual retirement of a long-term pastor. During this period there was also transition through three associate pastors...Esther Robinson 2003-2011, Anil Singh 2011-2014, Laura Berg 2014-. Bob Brown retired in June 2015.

Coronado Community United Methodist Church has seen remarkable change in its community and its own identity over the decades. Her strong lay leadership and sense of mission equip her to continue adapting to changes in society as God calls her into the unknown future.

