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## DeWitt Community church celebrates its 200th year with concerts, book and outreach

Published: Thursday, October 28, 2010, 6:19 AM



**Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist**



Dick Blume/The Post-Standard, file photo, 1995

The DeWitt Community Church, 3600 Erie Blvd East, is marking its 200th year with a concert series that starts Sunday.

DeWitt Community Church – “a Christian church for all people” – is at a real and spiritual crossroads in its history.

The church, close to the eastern edge of the city of Syracuse, is celebrating its 200th birthday as a congregation this year and next with a new senior minister and a mission to renew the church’s vision. The observance began with a picnic on the church lawn. It continues Sunday with the first of a series of five ensemble concerts at the church by the Onondaga String Quartet of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra.

The orchestra notes its 50th anniversary this season.

“We have a long history of involvement,” according to Mark Sommers, DeWitt’s senior minister who came to the Syracuse area in November 2008. He points out orchestra members are part of the congregation – concert master Andrew Zaplatynsky is a player in the Onondaga String Quartet – and the orchestra used the DeWitt gymnasium as

rehearsal space for many years.

The minister says the church has about 1,800 members, a large congregation. He heads a staff of 20, including the Rev. Edwin "Ted" Taylor, one of his predecessors at DeWitt, who is pastor emeritus.



Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

This is the original DeWitt Community church that burned down on Sept. 17, 1886. It was located just north of Lansdown Road in DeWitt. It was originally built as a Presbyterian Church.

The church building went up in 1955, with additions in 1962 and 1968. It replaced earlier churches close by. The original DeWitt church, a Methodist congregation, was founded in 1811 in a local home. It's been part of the hamlet of Orville, and later the Town of DeWitt, ever since. The first church sat not far away. It burned in a fire in 1886.

"The church is historically Methodist," according to Mark Sommers, who comes from an American Baptist background. The congregation voted to end its affiliation with the Methodists in the mid-1980s, when the Rev. Alexander Carmichael, who was a Methodist minister, was minister. Today, DeWitt is a self-governing congregation with members from many faiths and social backgrounds.

"This is a big tent," the minister explains.

"There are a lot of good things going on around here," Mark said when I asked him about the activities of the busy congregation. DeWitt has a Stephen Ministry, to support families in crisis; a Friendship Ministry to connect volunteers with folks with special needs; a Prayer Ministry, a Prayer Shawl Ministry and a Youth Ministry. Not to forget a "Compassion Cooks" group. There are two services on Sunday and a third Saturday.

A committee from the church looks after the 1810 cemetery nearby.

### **If you go...**

**What:** The Onondaga String Quartet will perform the first in a series of concerts celebrating the 200th anniversary of DeWitt Community Church and 50th of Syracuse Symphony Orchestra

**When:** 3 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** DeWitt Community Church sanctuary, 3600 Erie Blvd East, DeWitt

Other programs: are scheduled Dec. 10, Feb. 26, April 10 and July 2011. An anniversary gala is Oct. 22, 2011 at the OnCenter.

The anniversary concerts will be Dec. 10, the SSO Brass Quintet; Feb. 26, SSO Woodwind Quintet II; and April 10, performance by the church's Chancel Choir with members of the orchestra. An outdoor concert by the SSO Percussion Ensemble is in July 2011.

On Nov. 21, the church is planning a program of music and a dinner that reaches out to Bethany Baptist Church, an historically black congregation in Syracuse. The main thrust of the event, according to Mark Sommers, is "to have a conversation so people will get to know each other," anticipating a relationship as sister churches.

DeWitt is planning to bring out a new history book about the church before Christmas.

Mark came to DeWitt from his native Michigan. His wife, Kathlyne is human resources director of a firm in Cortland. They have a daughter, Laura, a senior at the University of Michigan. Mark credits two of the men he followed at DeWitt, Alexander Carmichael, and Ted Taylor, with laying a foundation for the church he can easily step into.

Alex Carmichael, who died in 2005 at 93, retired after 42 years at DeWitt and 70 as a minister.

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