

Modern History

1993 - - -

After nearly 19 years with its doors closed, in early August 1992 Fred and Adelia Isenhower met with John Blackburn, president and general manager of Linville resorts, to discuss the feasibility of reopening Wee Kirk for the following summer season. John noted Linville had around 30% members of various Presbyterian churches. Martha Guy, then president of Avery County Bank and long time Wee Kirk trustee assured Mr. Isenhower there were funds remaining in the Wee Kirk account to fund necessary repairs to reopen.

Fred Isenhower then met with Rev Caroline Gourley of the Western NC Presbytery in Morganton and having visited Linville she agreed Wee Kirk could provide a meaningful ministry for the area. She assumed the responsibility of obtaining ministers for the 1993 summer season. Fred Isenhower selected an apartment near Sugar Mountain as the first "Manse". On September 6th a meeting with Linville "Presbyterians" met to discuss reopening and the decision was to proceed. The following year on May 12, a letter to Linville and Grandfather members was sent out announcing the first service would be held on May 30th at 9:00am. Reverend Gourley led the first service which was attended by 12 people, including the minister and organist. In fact, the attendance was so small, Terry and Frances Young invited the whole congregation to their house for brunch.

Services for the summer of 1993 went from May 30 until August 29 and featured 10 different ministers. John DeBevoise, a minister a First Presbyterian in Gastonia, conducted two services at the time and has since returned for most seasons through 2021, making him the longest serving guest minister.

Through the continued efforts of Fred Isenhower, Wee Kirk struggled forward. Fred solicited Martha Guy, Terry Young, Mark Johnson, Peter McKay, and Tom Cookerly but attendance remained small, averaging only 18 persons per Sunday.

In a letter dated January 10, 1997 from John MacLeod of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina to Tom Cookerly, John MacLeod questioned if Wee Kirk could continue, since attendance was so low and collections were not sufficient to cover the bare expenses of Sunday services. A meeting was held in Martha Guy's office in Newland to discuss whether the church had a future. In addition to Martha Guy, attendees included Rev. Odell Smith of Arbordale Presbyterian, Rev. Tom Phillips of Banner Elk Presbyterian and Mark Johnson and Tom Cookerly of Wee Kirk. Together they decided to give the church two more years to see if things might turn around.

A steering committee consisting of Peter McKay, Mark Johnson, and Tom Cookerly drafted a "save Wee Kirk" plan. Terry Young, John Blackburn, Harrison Chapman, and Martha Guy were also solicited to help, with Terry and Frances Young providing extraordinary service. Peter McKay was selected as the first chairman. Peter had assembled the names of Presbyterians at

Linville and Grandfather clubs and he along with Mark Johnson and others contacted these Presbyterians and asked for a \$500 pledge. The group raised approximately \$20,000, which was used to paint the church and make necessary repairs.

Peter McKay oversaw obtaining ministers, Mark Johnson headed finances, and Tom Cookerly was in charge of Outreach. Peter with the help of Terry Young secured 12 prominent ministers for the summer of 1998. The ministers stayed at members residences and the attendance for services increased to an average of 83. The housing for the ministers proved unsuccessful so Mark Johnson was asked in late 1998 to approach Alan Dickson, chairman of Linville Resorts, about securing land to construct a Manse.

The property adjacent to Wee Kirk contained a small block house that had previously been occupied by Peggy Touchstone, director of the Linville equestrian center. Linville agreed to lease the property to Wee Kirk, rent free, and permitted the construction of the Manse, provided that if Wee Kirk were to cease to operate as a church the house and property would revert to Linville Resorts, Inc.

Under the leadership of Charlie Bradshaw, the cost of the Manse was oversubscribed and construction began in late 1998. The house was a typical "H" design and built by Chestnut Construction. In late June 1999, the Manse was dedicated and Dr. Terry V. Swicegood of Myers Park Presbyterian presided over the dedication. Judy Bradshaw was instrumental in staging and decorating the Manse and continued to supervise the upkeep for many years. The excess funds were invested in the Presbytery Foundation and has been used for the upkeep of the Manse.

With the Manse available, it became easier to attract outstanding ministers and their families. The attendance continue to grow with members from Linville, Grandfather, Linville Ridge, and Hound Ears. Also each Sunday we would see some not associated with one of the resorts in the pews.

Tom Cookerly instituted an Outreach program designed to focus on the "neediest kids" of Avery County. This program was and continues to be well supported by Wee Kirk members and has had a profound effect on Avery County. Tom also hired Jamie Fish to play the bagpipes for a few weeks which turned into an every Sunday tradition. Liza Bagby contributed a new organ to replace an earlier one that featured John Blackburn as organist. Cissy Schull became the new organist and music director and under her leadership a very meaningful music program was developed. Cissy continues today to volunteer her services frequently having Lana Donovan on the keyboard for special music.

The church continued to grow and prosper. George Dunn began assisting Peter McKay in securing the ministers and continued to do so until his death in 2016. This important task was then assumed by Kelly Graves. With the growth in attendance, averaging between 100 and 130, it became apparent that new restrooms and storage was needed.

In 2012, the new addition, under the superb leadership of Toto Williamson and Charlie Bradshaw, was easily funded. This addition provided with new restrooms as well as tape ministry and storage. Work on the addition was done by 4 Forty Four Construction of Blowing Rock. All pews were removed and refinished, and new flooring was installed. In slightly reducing the alter area as well as eliminating the old restrooms, Wee Kirk's seating area increased by 25 percent.

The ministry continued to expand with a website, weekirk.org, developed and supported by Howard Freese, tape ministry led by Kathy Gray and Albert Myers, lemonade on the lawn, church picnics, and online pictorial director, and an expanded music program with an occasional men's chorus and the talents of Lana Donavon on the keyboard. Linville office staff provides valuable services in administration and of course we receive excellent support from the Western North Carolina Presbytery through its leader Reverend Bobbie White.

In 2018, Charles Gray, the then head of the church's steering committee, put together a 25 year celebration gathering to commemorate the "rebirth" of Wee Kirk. With food and singing a grand time was had by all. David Thompson painted and had reproduced a wonderful portrait of the church and framed copies were given to a number of those who played a large part in the church's modern history. The web site's Photos has a separate section dedicated to this celebration.

2020 was a challenging year for everyone and the church was no exception. Services were cancelled until July 7th and were resumed at Linville corporations Camp Yonahnoka. We were able to provide recommended spacing and masks were required. With no organ at the camp, Lana Donavon brought her keyboard every week and provided us wonderful spiritual music each Sunday through the end of the season.

As we look to 2021 and beyond we see a bright and promising future. We are back in our beloved little church, the church that has become a cherished part of the lives of so many who enjoy the wonders of summer in the North Carolina High Country. During 2022 Wee Kirk had the joyous experience that many churches have, two(2) infant baptisms. To quote Reverend Caroline Gourley when she first came up from Morganton in 1992 to visit the church, "Wee Kirk is a little gem."