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Founding members of what became Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ meet outdoors in the summer of 1912. At right is the church's first pastor, the Rev. Dr. Franklin Noble.

100 Years of Rock Spring Church From a Rural Crossroads to the Wider World

By SARA FITZGERALD

On the night of January 8, 1912, a group of neighbors living near the Vanderwerken stop on what was then the Great Falls and Old Dominion Railroad's trolley line to Great Falls Park gathered in a home to consider organizing a church. The previous year, the families, drawn from the communities of Franklin Park, Vanderwerken and Jewell, had organized a non-denominational Sunday School that met at the home of A.H. Dadum. But now the group wanted a preacher, and they knew that if they wanted to find a good one, they should affiliate with a denomination.

After much discussion, it was decided to put the matter to a vote. Each person was asked to specify which denomination he preferred. But participants could also indicate their second and third choices, with the votes weighted accordingly.

The result was, according to an early church document, "quite a surprise."¹ The Congregational Church drew 42 votes, followed by the Presbyterians with 16 and the Episcopalians with 6.

As the story was passed down within the congregation over the next hundred years, it always emphasized that the vote might have been impacted by the wintry weather conditions. "There had been speculation prior to the meeting that the church might become Episcopalian as several people with that denominational background were interested in the new church," the authors of the church's 50th anniversary history wrote. "That particular night was an unusually cold one and people have thought that possibly the denominational affiliation was designated Congregationalist because those with hardy New England backgrounds, perhaps with Congregational leanings, turned out to vote whereas those with Virginia Episcopalian persuasion, unaccustomed to such rigorous weather, stayed at home."²

But it's also possible that Congregationalism was everyone's second choice. On the subsequent ballot, the participants voted unanimously to seek to affiliate with that denomination, giving birth, 100 years ago, to the church that became known as Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ.

At the time, Walker Chapel, at 4102 North Glebe Road, was the only white congregation serving the area of North Arlington bounded by the Potomac River, Lee Highway, and Falls Church (Calloway Methodist Church, an African-American congregation, was already established at its current site at 5000 Lee Highway).³ Although Walker Chapel was just over a mile away, it was thought

to be too far to travel over the rutted roads that led from the Vanderwerken stop. But the Walker Chapel congregation offered the Vanderwerken group the gift of an unused chapel behind their building, provided that they would raze it and move it. T.B. Jewell, a large landowner, donated an acre of land on Little Falls Road near Jewell Road. And Clarence Hunter, the uncle of one of the church's charter members and a skilled carpenter,



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The church's first home- "Neighborhood House."

was willing to supervise a group of church members who were prepared to erect the building.⁴ Between the ground-breaking for the church on May 17, 1912, and the following November, services were held outdoors in a grove of trees at the home of N.J. Jewett. Remarkably, over those months, "(R)ain occurred during the hours of service on only one day, and then but a slight shower!"⁵

The building where the parishioners of Vanderwerken Congregational Church gathered looked more like a house than a church building. Steps led to a front porch, and inside, a large room with a fireplace was the setting for services, Sunday School and community gatherings.

From the start, "Neighborhood House" served as both a church and a community center. Eliza Sewall and her daughter, Mrs. Herbert Hunter, started a kindergarten. The first Boy Scout troop in Arlington County, Troop 106, was organized and began holding its meetings there.

In 1915, five members of the church's Ladies' Guild met for a picnic at Great Falls to discuss creating a memorial for their good friend, Carrie M. Rohrer, who had recently died in childbirth. One woman noted that the children in the community needed to have better access to good books, because the closest library was then at Seventh and K streets NW in Washington. After some discussion, they decided to honor Mrs. Rohrer's memory by establishing a children's library in her name.

The first books were stored and checked out of a market basket, and then moved to a closet in Neighborhood House. By 1920, adult books were added, and by mid-1926, the library, the first that was open to the public in Arlington County, contained more than 1,300 volumes.⁶

The ways in which Neighborhood House could be used by the community were subject to debate in the congregation's early days. But a resolution approved in October 1919 seemed to settle the matter. The congregation voted to resolve:

While the title to the property known as Neighborhood House is held by the trustees of the Vanderwerken Congregational Church, that it is a neighborhood center, social as well as religious;

That the fact that Divine services are held in the building on Sunday in no way adversely affects the use for community purposes on other days;

That to effect this one of the purposes for which the building was originally constructed, the fullest encouragement be given to the use of the same for community and neighborhood affairs of propriety such as entertainment, moving pictures, club meetings, citizen meetings, Boy Scout and Girl Scout meetings, and church for regular attendants and supporters of the church.”⁷

Back then, “as far as one could see,” the neighborhood surrounding the church consisted of “open farm lands.” Service on the train line was irregular. “It is doubtful,” a church history noted, “that the passengers on many commuter lines ever boasted that service was delayed while the operator bagged a few rabbits, as was said to have happened on the Old Dominion run from Georgetown to Great Falls.”⁸

But from the vantage point of mid-century, the congregation recognized its debt to the railroad. “Without it,” the 50th anniversary church history noted, “the church would never have started and would have had trouble surviving. It brought the ministers and a large part of the congregation to services which were scheduled according to the timetable of the railroad. It also transported the entire congregation to Great Falls to the annual church picnic.”⁹

The congregation was also fortunate when it found a retired pastor living nearby with his adult daughter. Rev. Dr. Franklin Noble had previously served the Falls Church Congregational Church, which had been forced to disband because of declining attendance. Although he was unable, because of his age, to attend many night meetings or attend to pastoral duties at night, he helped connect the congregation to their newly chosen denomination. Within two short years, he made such an impression on the young adults in the church that they decided to name their Sunday School class after him.

The church continued to struggle for its first 20 years, relying on a succession of part-time pastors. Still, the crash of 1929 had little impact on the church, perhaps because so many of its members were government employees. The church’s annual report for 1931 noted that “notwithstanding the economic depression, receipts, operating expenses and benevolences were the largest in the history of the church.” The next year, the church made the momentous decision to call its first full-time pastor, the Rev. Paul Hunter, a recent semi-

nary graduate from River Edge, New Jersey.

Hunter was to serve the church for the next 24 years. During that time, he grew from a slightly awkward seminarian to an acknowledged community leader—and his church grew along with him, from a few dozen in the pews when he first arrived to a membership of close to 500 by 1953.¹⁰

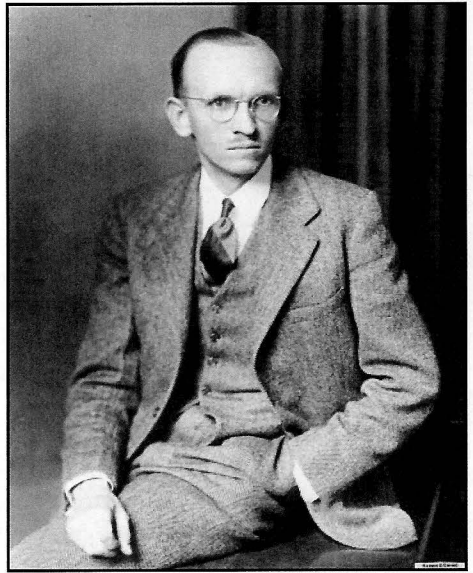
Throughout the Depression and for some time afterward, the church was partially supported by contributions from other churches and its denomination. 1933 turned out to be a particularly difficult year. For the first and only year of its history, the Rohrer Library reported no income, and fewer books (by one volume) on its shelves than the year before. The challenges were complicated by the

closing of the People's State Bank in Cherrydale, where most of the church accounts were held. For a time, the church did not have a bank account, and Hunter was paid directly out of the Sunday offering. Hunter later recalled "trying to raise money for a very special project in 1933 and one very fine family actually breaking a piggy bank in order to give what they had."¹¹

By 1940, the congregation resolved to construct the core of the brick sanctuary building where it still meets today. The Building Committee requested a "New England meeting house form utilizing indigenous early Virginia architectural design and materials," and James Morris McHugh, the church member who served as the project's architect, provided just that.¹² With the construction of the new building, the congregation decided to adopt a new name, Rock Spring Congregational Church, after a nearby geographical feature.

Seven years later, a technical adviser of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, touring the United States for ideas for rebuilding churches destroyed during World War II, said of McHugh's architectural design: "Of all I've seen, this church comes nearest to meeting present day requirements in England. This I can use." McHugh provided the blueprints.¹³

The New Deal and World War II brought many changes to Arlington County, many of which were shaped by Hunter and other church members.



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The Rev. Paul Hunter was the church's first full-time pastor.

During the war years, Virginia Stitzenberger, Elizabeth Campbell and Lois Smith got into a discussion in the “meat line” at the grocery where they went to cash their ration coupons. They shared their own sense of isolation and their need for a place where their pre-school-age children could make friends and attend school. They approached Paul Hunter and his wife, Leone, about starting a cooperative preschool at the church. With the support of the Hunters and the rest of the congregation, the Rock Spring Cooperative Nursery School opened as the county’s first cooperative preschool in 1944. Virginia Saegmuller Knull was hired as the first teacher, and the Hunters’ youngest child, future Arlington County Board member James Hunter, was one of the first students.¹⁴

That interest in better educational opportunities manifested itself a few years later when church leaders joined with other young civil servants in the county to work to improve the Arlington schools. As *The Saturday Evening Post* described the episode in a 1950 article, “The members of the State Assembly at Richmond, which meant the Democratic organization, picked a circuit judge, who named the members of a school trustee electoral board, which in turn chose a five-man school board.”¹⁵

But by May 1946, the young newcomers had had enough. They formed the Citizens’ Committee for School Improvement, which endorsed Hunter, described as “an able local minister,” for a vacancy on the school board. “But,” in the words of the article, “the trustees named another candidate, despite a barrage of letters to the local papers and mass meetings at which a more democratic method of selecting a school board was demanded.”

More than a year later, the committee eventually prevailed, after the General Assembly approved a bill permitting Arlington voters to decide whether they wanted an elected school board. According to *The Saturday Evening Post*, the committee’s victorious election in the fall of 1947 “was the climax of an uprising in which the citizens . . . outwitted and outworked the strongly entrenched Democratic county organization. They were not fighting corruption in either the school board or the county board of commissioners. They were struggling against lassitude, which made it all the harder.”¹⁶

But there was still unfinished business in Arlington County. As the same article described it:

“Not so much has yet been done for the schools which serve the county’s relatively small Negro school population of 900. Though some of the worst conditions at the colored junior-senior high school have been remedied, badly needed new classrooms and laboratories are still in the drawing-board stage. In consequence, many of the Negro children in the county go to

school in Washington, where they are required to pay tuition. Virginia state law requires segregation.”¹⁷

As new subdivisions sprang up along Williamsburg Boulevard in the post-World War II building boom, Rev. Hunter was often the first person to show up at the front door after a new family moved in. As the late Eugenia “Gene” Schultheis described it, only a few days after her family moved into their house on North Edison Street in 1954, “when everything was in a mess. . . somebody was at the door, and here was Paul Hunter. . . . He introduced himself and asked if he could come in and we began talking. It was very natural and comfortable.”¹⁸ Between 1940 and 1953, the post-war Baby Boom also pushed the number of Sunday School registrants at Rock Spring Church from 82 to 450.¹⁹

The population boom was also marked by a boom in construction at the church. In 1948, the congregation built a new parsonage next door to the church at 4969 Rock Spring Road. In 1950 it constructed a new brick building on the Little Falls Road side of its property to replace the original Neighborhood House. And in 1955 the sanctuary building was enlarged to add transepts and more office and classroom space.

But with the changes in Arlington also came changes in the congregation. “The community was becoming affluent and complacent, and perhaps the Rock Spring congregation was similarly inclined,” the church’s 50th anniversary history reported. Hunter challenged that attitude in a sermon entitled “The Dissatisfied Church,” and within a few months, in mid-1956, he announced he was resigning to accept a call from a less-affluent church in Jersey City, New Jersey.²⁰

Jim Hunter later recalled: “My interpretation of Dad’s decision to leave Rock Spring was that before he completed his ministry, he wanted to spend some time in an inner-city church. It was sort of a call or mission he felt. . . . It was very difficult for him to leave Rock Spring Church and [it] was done in utmost secrecy. I remember I was instructed not to breathe a word to anybody.”²¹

When Paul Hunter died in 1973, the bulletin for his memorial service observed, “More than any one person he gave to Rock Spring a style of its life together that has remained to the present.”²²

As Hunter’s successor, the Rev. Sidney Lovett, put it, Hunter “framed” the church’s ongoing “involvement in civil rights and social action.”²³ And, indeed, for the next half century, the church and its members continued to provide leadership to many local social action initiatives.

After Virginia adopted its policy of massive resistance in the wake of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education*, the church, under Lovett’s leadership, worked with other like-minded Arlingtonians to keep the Arlington public schools open and to comply with the court’s decision. During this time,



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Church growth led to the expansion of the brick Sanctuary building in 1955.

Neighborhood House provided a place where black civic associations could meet with white civic associations, in defiance of Virginia's so-called Massenburg Bill, passed in 1926, that mandated segregation of public assemblies.

Rock Spring member Gerie Davis was among those who accompanied the African-American students who sought to integrate Stratford Junior High in the fall of 1957, but she recalled that her own trip was not successful.²⁴ After the Arlington schools were fully desegregated in 1959, Lovett and other church members were among those who protested the segregation of other facilities in Arlington, including the old Glebe Theater on Glebe Road. They also helped organize a Human Relations Council to focus attention on the persistence of segregation in the county. Later the church joined with members of Calloway Methodist to operate an integrated Vacation Bible School during the summer months; the program attracted 150 children and a volunteer staff of 50.²⁵

Lovett recalled that during his ministry, church leaders encouraged him to "get out in the community and defend the things that we have started and want to preserve in the community," such as making sure that the Northern Virginia Family Service, Planned Parenthood and Arlington County itself were well run. During his tenure, he served on the boards of the Family Service and the Northern Virginia Mental Health Association, as vice president of the Council of Churches of Greater Washington and as president of the Arlington Ministerial Association.

During the ministry of the Rev. George Booth, who succeeded Lovett in 1967, church members, including Anna Barber and William Knull, sought to develop more hands-on opportunities for responding to social concerns. The subsequent organizations included For Immediate Sympathetic Help (FISH), which was started at Rock Spring on Easter Sunday 1967, Arlingtonians Meeting Emergency Needs, the Arlington Food Assistance Center, and organizations created to promote affordable housing. In 1973, Ellen Bozman built on her experience with the League of Women Voters, the Arlington Planning Commission—and as the first woman to serve as president of the Rock Spring Church Council—to seek election as an Arlington County Board member, a position she held for a record 24 years before her death in 2009.

Throughout the church's history, actions often grew out of a period of focused study. For instance, in the late 1970s, the congregation organized a four-session series on "The Care of the Dying," which featured Georgetown University oncologist Dr. Josefina Magno, then a recognized leader in the nascent hospice movement. At one of the sessions, it was suggested that Woodlawn Elementary School could be transformed into a hospice. By 1978, the Arlington County Board, under Bozman's leadership, approved the funding for the Hospice of Northern Virginia to take over that space under Magno's direction. State Delegate Mary Marshall, also a member of Rock Spring, helped the facility navigate the process to become certified under the Medicare and Medicaid programs.²⁶

Later, during the ministry of the Rev. Charles L. Wildman, the congregation began an in-depth study of the issues surrounding homosexuality, and, in 2000, adopted a statement that affirmed that people of all sexual orientations were welcomed into the full life and ministry of the church. In 2007, the congregation voted to amend that statement to "invite all people to share fully . . . in affirmation of personal life passages, including ceremonies of holy marriage for all couples regardless of gender."

Wildman also continued his predecessors' history of engagement with the community, including two years of service as president of the Arlington United Way and service on the Arlington County Detox Shelter Commission. Before his retirement in 2008, he was recognized by the Arlington Kiwanis Club with its Distinguished Service Award.

Today, under its current senior pastor, the Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer, the congregation continues to seek ways to engage with the community, even as that "community" has spread beyond the farms of yesteryear to now encompass the globe. Rock Springers still provide volunteer and financial support to many non-profit organizations in Northern Virginia, but with the passage of time, new opportunities have also emerged. For instance, on the

tenth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, members of the Dar Al-Hijrah mosque, located off of Leesburg Pike near Culmore, were invited to join Rock Springers in worshipping at the church. Since then, the two faith communities have continued to reach out to each other and to try to build a stronger relationship.

As the population of Arlington County exploded in the early 1940s, there were some early Rock Spring members who were afraid that the friendly spirit of their small, country church would inevitably be lost. But Nelson Jewett, one of the parishioners who had helped to erect the first clapboard church building, provided a reassuring perspective. He wrote:

For the past years we have not lost sight of the future. Projects have been and should continue to be judged by their effect on a future measured in centuries rather than single years. When this was stated thirty years ago it sounded fanciful but after a passage of one-third of one century, it can be appreciated. We are located in a strategic situation the value of which could not then be realized.²⁷

Jewett added that it appeared that the church's location at Rock Spring and Little Falls roads "was under Divine Guidance." Then he concluded, "We should make certain that our continuing course of action follows His Will."²⁸

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References

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- ² Rock Spring Congregational Church, *The First Fifty Years: 1912-1962*, 1962, p. 1.
- ³ See <http://www.gbgm-umc.org/calloway/index.html>, accessed June 15, 2012.
- ⁴ *The First Fifty Years*, p. 3.
- ⁵ "History, Articles of Faith, Covenant and Constitution of the Vanderwerken Congregational Church,"

p. 5. *The First Fifty Years* said that the congregation *never* experienced a rainy Sunday between May and October 1912.

⁶ *The First Fifty Years*, p. 7; Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County*, 1959, p. 190.

⁷ *The First Fifty Years*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17; "The Plan for Completing Rock Spring Church," brochure, circa 1953, Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ Archives, p. 1.

¹¹ *The First Fifty Years*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Making History*, Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ, 1987, p. 24. This book was authored largely by Virginia Stützenberger, one of the founders of the preschool.

¹⁵ Henry F. and Katharine Pringle, "Are We Letting Our Children Down?" *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 13, 1950, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Interview with author, July 9, 2000, cited in *On Foundations Firmly Laid: 100 Years of Rock Spring Church*, Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ, 2012, p. 24.

¹⁹ "The Plan for Completing Rock Spring Church," p. 1.

²⁰ *The First Fifty Years*, pp. 38-39.

²¹ Interview of James B. Hunter by Marion T. Suter, July 1, 1987, "Oral Histories, Rock Spring Congregational Church United Church of Christ, 1985-1987," p. 61.

²² "A Service of Worship in Memory of the Reverend Paul Rutherford Hunter, pastor emeritus, Rock Spring Congregational Church United Church of Christ, February 25, 1973," Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ Archives, Memorial Services Programs File.

²³ Rev. Sidney Lovett, remarks delivered at "Celebrating Our Past: A Time for Sharing and Remembering," Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ, May 19, 2012.

²⁴ Interview of Gerie Davis by Miriam Maxwell, February 6, 1985, "Oral Histories," p. 45.

²⁵ *On Foundations Firmly Laid*, p. 91.

²⁶ *Making History*, pp. 114-15; *Congressional Record*, Volume 143, Number 112 (Friday, August 1, 1997), "Honoring Hospice of Northern Virginia, Hon. Thomas M. Davis, Extensions of Remarks, pp. E1592-E1593.

²⁷ *The First Fifty Years*, p. 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*