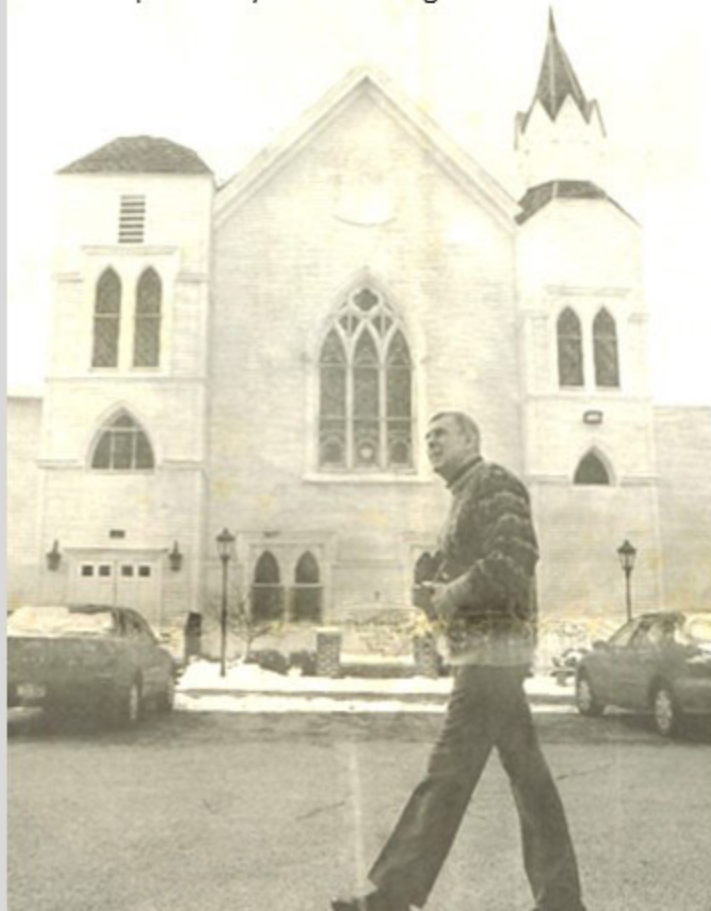


Mighty house of God



Tribune photos by Jim Prisching



The little church that could is celebrating more than 100 years—and growing.

By Michele K. Mellor
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Over the course of more than a century, the small but mighty Ridgefield-Crystal Lake Presbyterian Church has endured a hailstorm that broke its church windows, gusty winds that knocked its steeple to the ground and a congregation that dwindled to 15.

Still tucked away in a rural countryside with a tall white steeple peeking over treetops, the church has managed to keep its small-town charm while embracing the needs of a modern-day congregation.

On Sunday, the congregation celebrated its 161st birthday with members recalling its rich history. They met for a traditional potluck supper and sang hymns that have spanned the decades, and songs that will usher in new contemporary services in September.

"The sanctuary has remained basically the same," marveled Jodie LeFevre, who grew up in the church. "That's probably what we love about it. It's got that little-church-on-the-prairie feel."

The congregation was founded in 1839 as the Vir-

*Tribune article dated
February 8, 2000*

ginia Presbyterian Church and is one of the oldest in McHenry County.

"What became known as Ridgefield was what they called the Virginia Settlement," said Nancy Fike, director of the McHenry County Historical Society.

Fike said anti-slavery sentiment was one of the reasons settlers from western Virginia came north, working with Congregationalists until they were able to organize their own church.

Over the years, the structure, built in 1872, has seen additional construction and modernization over its roughly 3-acre plot. At one time, a second, taller steeple rose from left of the main entrance, but heavy winds in 1906 tore it from the church, and it was never replaced.

"This is one of the few older churches that has the sanctuary upstairs," said Ernie Dunn of Crystal Lake, a 25-year member.

The church once had an outside staircase, but an elevator added in the late 1970s now allows access for the handicapped. In the early years, women were hands-on members, often shoveling coal to keep members warm during services.

At the turn of the century, a Ladies Aid Society quickly became the backbone of the organization, funding building maintenance and church programs by hosting chicken suppers, meticulously tracking every penny expended.



Ridgefield is among few churches with a sanctuary upstairs.

The older members talk about the days when membership had fallen to a little more than a dozen in the 1940s, and there was talk of closing the church. Rebounding to 400-strong since those bleak days, church historian Joan Black of Crystal Lake said, "We have a very young congregation with many, many children and infants."

Rev. Doug Loving, pastor since 1971, agrees.

"This is really a new congregation," Loving said.

Over the years, Loving has seen a change in the way religion fits into modern lives.

"One of the challenges for the church is that it is no longer the center of society," he said. "It has to earn its way into people's lives."

Toward that end, the church now boasts a Kingdom Club Sunday school that allows youngsters to learn a Bible lesson the traditional way and through interactive biblical software in the computer lab.

Since May 1999, Loving has been joined by associate pastor Won Ho Kim, who will facilitate the addition of a third Sunday service to meet growing demand.

Youth and adult choir programs are another powerful draw, and continued success in attracting new worshipers has the church looking to buy more land for development projects.

"We're looking to expand," Loving said.