

# A Brief History of Broadway Presbyterian Church

(1825 to 2000)

**Congregation Organized: April 20, 1825**

Bleecker Street Presbyterian 1825-1854

Fourth Avenue Presbyterian 1855-1910

Broadway Presbyterian 1912-Present

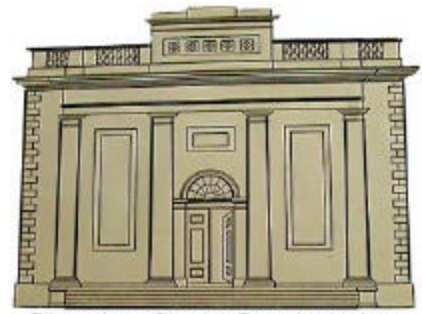
<b>PASTORS</b>	<b>CHURCH</b>	<b>PASTORATE LIVED</b>	
<b>Matthias Bruen</b>	<i>Bleecker</i>	<i>1825-1829</i>	<i>1795-1829</i>
<b>Erskine Mason, D.D.</b>	<i>Bleecker</i>	<i>1830-1851</i>	<i>1805-1851</i>
<b>Joel Parker, D.D.</b>	<i>Bleecker, Fourth</i>	<i>1852-1863</i>	<i>1801-1873</i>
<b>Howard Crosby, D.D., LL.D.</b>	<i>Fourth</i>	<i>1863-1891</i>	<i>1826-1891</i>
<b>John R. Davies, D.D.</b>	<i>Fourth</i>	<i>1892-1898</i>	<i>18??-19??</i>
<b>Walter D. Buchanan, D.D., LL.D.</b>	<i>Fourth, Broadway</i>	<i>1899-1934</i>	<i>1859-1934</i>
<b>John H. McComb, D. D.</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1935-1959</i>	<i>1898-1981</i>
<b>Stuart H. Merriam</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1961-1962</i>	<i>1925- *</i>
<b>Charles S. MacKenzie, Th.D., Ph.D., L.H.D.</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1964-1966</i>	<i>1924- *</i>
<b>J. Roger Hull, Jr., D.M.</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1968-1977</i>	<i>1937- *</i>
<b>Max Deal</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1979-1982</i>	<i>1938- *</i>
<b>Carl D. Rosenblum</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1983-1998</i>	<i>1940- *</i>
<b>Walter B. Tennyson</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>2000-Present</i>	<i>1964- *</i>

## ASSOCIATE PASTORS INSTALLED BY CONGREGATION

<b>W. J. McKettrick</b>	<i>Fourth (Hope Chapel)</i>	
<b>Charles Stelzle</b>	<i>Fourth (Hope Chapel)</i>	<i>1898-1903</i>
<b>Dean Foose</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1968-1971</i>
<b>Abigail Evans</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1974-1976</i>
<b>Debra Given</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1990-2000</i>
<b>Bernard Mathew</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1994-1995</i>
<b>Moira Ahearne</b>	<i>Broadway</i>	<i>1996-Present</i>

*Wendy Stoddard and Bruce D. Johnson compiled this brief history for Broadway Presbyterian Church's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The contents are based primarily on Rev. Roger Hull's doctoral dissertation. Framed photos of the pastors and church facilities are located in the Parish Hall and hallways.*

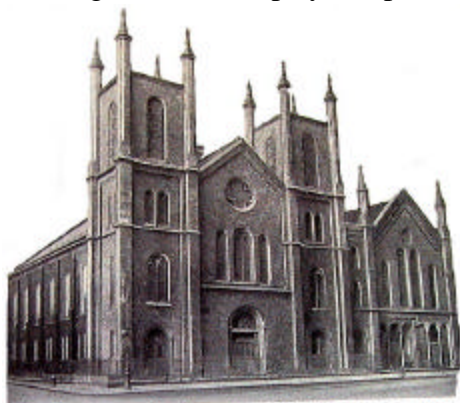
In the December of 1822 a young pastor proposed to the Presbytery of New York City that he begin a “Sabbath School” on the “edge of the wilderness” known today as Greenwich Village. The Presbytery hired him, without pay, as a missionary to the saloon-sodden neighborhood where the recalcitrant residents “were found reduced by intemperance to beggary, wretchedness, and death.” After working there for two years, **Matthias Bruen** (1825-1829) gathered his tiny flock of 10 persons and formally established the **Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church** on April 20th 1825—this congregation eventually became Broadway Presbyterian Church. A first edifice was built in 1826. Its cornerstone quotes Revelations 21:23 “It’s lamp is the lamb.”



Bleecker Street Presbyterian  
1825-1855, near Broadway  
First Edifice of Congregation

The little group struggled through its first few years but, eager to promote social justice, managed to launch a “reformation stage coach line” which did not permit the delivery of mail on the Sabbath, nor the delivery of people to bars, nor the employment of those who imbibed. The motivation for such a campaign was not only holy obedience to God’s Word, but to restrain the “lustful avarice” of a city’s developing economy.

Rev. Bruen passed away in 1829 and was replaced by Dr. **Erskine Mason** whose pastorate (1830-1851) included the founding of Union Theological Seminary and a blossoming of the young congregation from 46 to 300 members. This was a time of deep division within the Presbyterian denomination over the issue of slavery and ecclesiastical innovations, such as allowing women to pray in public and abolishing pew fees, introduced by the great revivalist preacher, Charles Finney. When the denomination split, the more liberal faction formed their own General Assembly and Erskine Mason became its stated clerk.

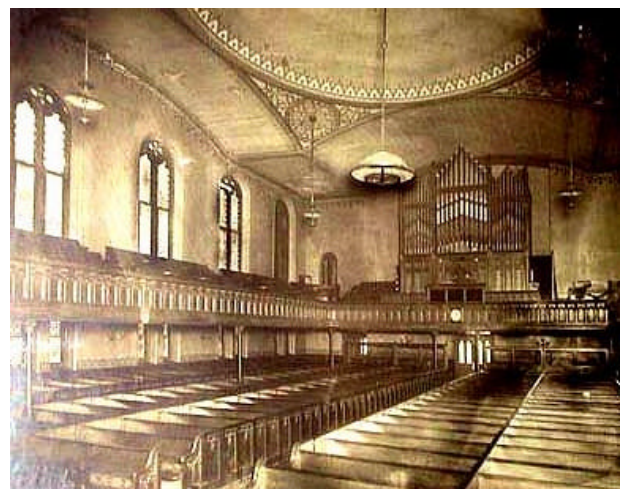


Fourth Avenue Presbyterian 1855-1910 (at 22nd St.)

Street.” The congregation changed names to **Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church**. Parker resigned in 1863.

In 1852, after the death of Dr. Mason, Dr. **Joel Parker** (1852-1863) was called as the third pastor Parker, a former associate of Charles Finney, was himself a fiery preacher and believed that “it is the duty of Christians to Evangelize the whole world immediately.” His 11-year pastorate was plagued by “much difference of opinion over ‘the management of both the temporal and spiritual interests of the church.’” Amid internal controversy, 38 of the 69 church families followed Parker uptown to a “new and better residential location at Fourth Avenue and 22nd

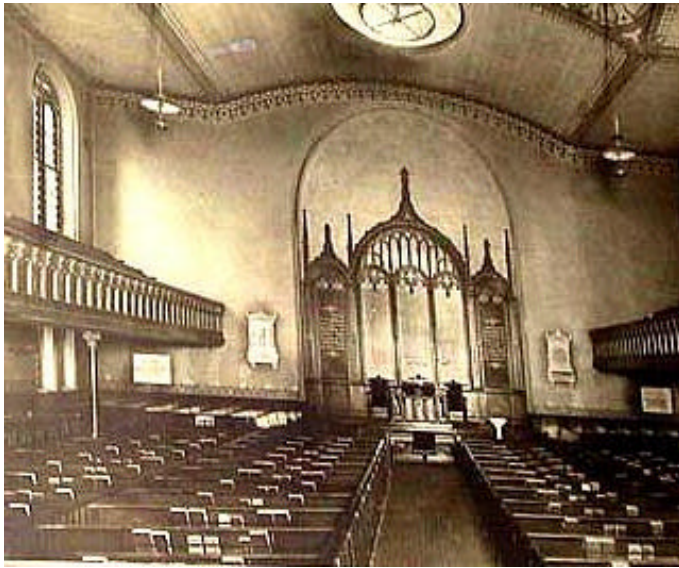
Dr. **Howard Crosby** (1863-1891) was a dynamic leader building the congregation from 280 members to an enrollment of 1400 by the mid-1880’s. He founded both the Hope Mission Chapel (located on East 4th Street near Avenue C) and Grace Chapel (East 22nd Street) for work among the immigrant poor. His Society for the Prevention of Crime managed to briefly suspend the sale of alcohol in all city saloons. Ever vigilant over the welfare of the flock, in 1885 the Fourth Avenue Session sent a letter to the congregation warning them to shun a new threat to the sanctity of the Sabbath: the Sunday newspaper. As a Greek scholar, Dr. Crosby also had a part-time job:



Chancellor of New York University.

Dr. Crosby was instrumental in the severing of ties between Union Theological Seminary and the

Presbyterian Church. A staunch defender of the “complete verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures,” he became the primary opponent of Union’s Professor Charles Briggs who was eventually convicted of heresy by the General Assembly for his views that the Bible was a historically and culturally molded document. Dr. Crosby served the congregation with unflagging energy until his death on Easter Day in 1891. *The New York Times* memorialized him as a man who had “done more than any other single individual in this generation to check vice in its most offensive forms.”



The pastorate of Dr. **John R. Davies** (1892-1898) was characterized by declining membership and increasing financial strain. Members were moving “uptown” to preferred residential areas and, by 1897, average Sunday attendance had shrunk to 275. The Grace and Hope Chapel missions became difficult to support; the Grace Chapel was sold in 1898. The idea of relocating began to percolate in these difficult years.

The first remedy, however, was to merge with Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church in order to recover enough strength to remain at the Fourth Avenue site. Dr. **Walter Duncan Buchanan** (1899-1934) came with the merger agreement, becoming the congregation’s sixth pastor. The financial burden did not lift, however, and the decision to relocate uptown was made in 1909, once again in an environment of dissent. The congregation purchased its present site in November 1910, laid the cornerstone on March 16, 1912 and held its first worship service at the **Broadway Presbyterian Church** on November 10, 1912.



**Broadway Presbyterian 1925 (when new)**

Dr. Buchanan’s particular interest was preserving the purity of the Christian faith as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy developed in the early 20th century. His concentration led him to develop the five “fundamentals” of faith, a measuring rod that determined a person’s authentic Christian confession. These pertained to the infallibility of Scripture, the virgin birth, the atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the authenticity of miracles. Harry Emerson Fosdick, argued that a person might be a sincere Christian without embracing all the doctrines prescribed by the Fundamentalists. After much disputation and several battles in Presbytery, Fosdick was forced to

resign from the Presbyterian Church. John D. Rockefeller supplied a new pulpit for this popular preacher—and Riverside Church was built.

In 1929, Buchanan and Gresham Machen, disturbed by the growing liberalism in the Presbyterian Church withdrew from the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty and founded the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Dr. Buchanan's theological zeal redirected the general mission of Broadway Presbyterian Church away from social concerns toward issues of doctrinal orthodoxy. The Hope Chapel was sold to a Jewish synagogue. The Broadway congregation thrived, growing from 250 to over 1400 members. Buchanan contributed the church's organ, the bells in the tower, and a trust fund of \$75,000 to be used "for the ministry of Broadway Church as long as its preaching was deemed to be in accord with the Westminster Standards."

Dr. **John McComb** (1935-1959), Broadway's seventh pastor, was theologically a premillennialist—believing it was futile to ameliorate the inevitable evil of the world. He preached sound doctrine with the hope of saving a few souls. McComb and the Session became increasingly alienated from the Presbyterian denomination as a whole and with the New York City Presbytery. Broadway ceased all financial contributions to Presbyterian missions and programs, and refused to participate in Presbyterian projects. Dr. McComb's pastorate saw great fluctuations in membership from a starting point of 460 to a high of 800 at the beginning of World War II, down to a low of 150 at the time of his resignation in 1959. Dr. McComb's involvement in a radio ministry and absences for speaking engagements coincided with a growing disenchantment. His theological inflexibility and autocratic leadership cast an increasingly bitter flavor in his relationship with parishioners. Later he admitted, "the time for change had evidently come."

Dr. **Stuart Merriam** (1961-1962), theologically conservative but ecclesiastically more moderate than McComb, was selected by the congregation in a unanimous vote in 1961. The New York City Presbytery initially approved Merriam's call, but subsequently set up an investigation with the result that Merriam's call was rescinded and the Session removed. A standoff continued until the General Assembly upheld Presbytery's action with regard to Merriam, but ordered the Session reinstated.

Dr. **Charles S. MacKenzie** (1964-1966), a "warmly evangelical" man, was unanimously elected by the congregation in April 1964. His brief pastorate was characterized by several initiatives along with an attempt to develop lay leadership, so that the congregation itself would own and maintain the ministries of the church. To that end, MacKenzie established several working committees and new ministries to neighborhood teenagers, seniors, and university students. The membership grew to 217 from a low of about 100. Dr. MacKenzie resigned his pastorate after two and a half years of service and accepted a call in California.

The Rev. **Roger Hull, Jr.** (1968-1977) arrived at Broadway early in 1968 and began to build enthusiastically on the foundation laid by MacKenzie. Rev. Hull's first year set the tone for his ministry when Broadway opened its doors to the students and faculty of Columbia University during the demonstrations of 1968. His theme of Broadway as an "open door" encouraged the use of church space to many neighborhood groups for a variety of purposes. The membership of Broadway was transformed as members accepted and provided strong lay leadership. During the 1970s, the congregation first elected women as elders, who lent their time, energy, and money to strengthen the congregation. Several new ministries were launched: an outreach program for neighborhood youth directed by Rev. **Dean Foose**, a University Christian Fellowship, the hiring of the Rev. **Abigail Evans** (our first female clergy) as Associate Minister for University work, the establishment of the Student Christian House, a Saturday evening coffee house, the Visiting Scholar program, the West Side Ecumenical Ministry to the Elderly, and the Broadway Presbyterian Cooperative Nursery School.

Coinciding with all this activity was a high rate of turnover in membership. Although the numbers remained stable during his 11-year pastorate (about 225), the membership also grew

younger, which may account for Broadway's ability to sustain such a dramatic expansion without actual increase in membership.

Dr. **Max Deal**, had a brief pastorate (1979-1982) during which the established programs moved with their own momentum, the strongest being the University Ministries and Student Christian House. The congregation began to turn its attention toward issues of social justice and opened its doors to the Columbia and Union students who wanted to offer free meals to the poor and homeless, beginning a soup kitchen ministry and Community Lunch Program.

The arrival of the Rev. **Carl D. Rosenblum** (1983-1998) brought a new burst of energy during which the number of church committees mushroomed as the church became more involved in running the Lunch Program, in justice issues, and in maintaining the Nursery School, the Student Christian House, and the University Ministry. Expansion was followed by a consolidation of efforts as congregational energy became too heavily taxed. Rosenblum's pastorate saw the Nursery School close and re-open, the closing of the Student Christian House and the University Ministry. The Lunch Program was transformed from a simple three day a week meal program to a five-day work readiness program for people in recovery, and was separately incorporated as Broadway Community, Inc. The deferred maintenance of the 1912 building also made its presence known. Much time and energy were required to raise funds and oversee renovations. The church-owned business building was renovated; increased rents provided stable funding for the congregation.



BROADWAY ENTRY 2000

The issue of sexual orientation became a focus for the national Presbyterian Church and this congregation during Hull's pastorate, and resurfaced when Rev. Rosenblum came out as a self-affirming gay man in June 1994. Some members were deeply troubled by this development and choose to leave. Others supported the pastor, leaving the congregation weakened but intact. Session narrowly affirmed national Presbyterian policy of allowing ordained homosexual ministers to remain in service provided they did not seek out same sex partners. His pastorate ended in 1998 when Session noted the continued decline in membership and felt it was time for a change. The interim pastor, Philip Newell, associate pastors, **Debra Given** and **Moirra Ahearne**, church staff, active leadership on Session, Deacons, and Trustees, and a pastoral nominating committee prepared the facility and congregation for a new pastor.

Rev. **Walter B. Tennyson** (2000-Present) was installed on September 17, 2000. His pastorate began as 13 new members joined in December of 2000. In 2001, the church developed new directions for its musical program reflecting the diversity of the Christian tradition, including African-American Gospel and Spirituals, Classical European, Appalachian Folk, and the Christian "World Music" of the Iona Community. As the Presbyterian debates on sexuality continued, the Session reaffirmed its 1997 "Statement of Welcome" and voted to defeat the Presbyterian constitutional prohibition of gay and lesbian ordination. In Nov. 2001, a kitchen fire and resulting smoke damage resulted in the insurance company cleaning and repainting the entire church facility. The trustees and church staff have completed many other renovations that greatly improved the physical condition and

appearance of the Sanctuary and Parish House. The facility will support an expanded ministry in the future.

Broadway Presbyterian Church members, as active Christians, will need to apply themselves to practical theology, seeking out new ways to understand how to make the gospel a relevant message of love and transformation in a religiously, ethnically, and culturally pluralistic city. The love and healing ministry of Jesus is universal and timeless, encompassing the personal, theological, political, and historical.