



The Federated Church of Hyannis

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The year was 1921. Rev Dr. Sarah Dixon had just completed her third year as Pastor of The Federated Church of Hyannis. It was a tremendous undertaking for any clergy person to merge two churches together into one. Sarah had successfully navigated one of the hardest challenges a Pastor could face.

She was the second woman ever to be ordained in Massachusetts. A young pioneering woman determined to break barriers and advance the rights of woman as a leader in the temperance movement, Sarah fearlessly leaned forward to push progressive thought and usher in a new era of enlightenment.

She nearly worked herself to death in her studies, gaining a PhD in Literature from Boston University while also being the first woman accepted into the Divinity School. Sarah had burned the candle at both ends, which may have led to her early demise later in life. Her vision for the future was so far ahead of her time, few could grasp the foundation that she and The Federated Church were laying.

The Congregational Church and the Universalist Church in Hyannis Massachusetts were barely hanging on independently. Sarah writes that because of the limited resources in the community it would be impossible for either church to call a well-qualified full-time minister. Both churches struggled to maintain the buildings that they had with only a handful of members in each church. It was decided in 1917 that both churches would give up their historical denominational identity and form a new church, The Federated Church of Hyannis. They would not be a Congregational Church or a Universalist Church, they would be an Interdenominational Church. In 1917 this idea of an Interdenominational Church was truly revolutionary. The concept was for The Federated Church to be a Community Church. As new people moved to the Cape, they would be encouraged to keep their denominational identity and personal doctrinal beliefs. The Federated Church would not require new visitors to change denominations to participate in the religious life of The Federated Church. All denominations would be welcomed, and the rites and sacraments of the church would be open to all. This was an extremely progressive stance for 1917.

Rev Dr. Sarah Dixon was not alone in this venture of establishing The Federated Church of Hyannis. Much of the ground work had been laid by the members of the Universalist and Congregational Church that architected this new type of church in Hyannis. It was 80 years or more ahead of its time. In the 1980's many churches became Non-

Denominational or Community Churches. The Federated Church of Hyannis became an Interdenominational Community Church in 1917. The difference between Interdenominational and Non-Denominational is that one recognizes the value of doctrinal beliefs from various denominations opposed to rejecting doctrinal beliefs of various denominations. This idea of Interdenominational was so forward thinking, it is still a revolutionary idea 100 years later.

Sarah was an accomplished Poet and wrote many poems about the Cape. In one of her early sermons, she composed a poem about the future the church in her book "Aim and Spirit".

Facing toward the future
Hearts and minds afire
Trusting God Almighty
With our heart's Desire.
We are not disheartened
We believe in Good
And the power of Love Divine
To heal the broken world.

Rev. Dr. Sarah Dixon wrote the following as the vision statement for the Federated Church.

"More than this, we look for the time to come when there will be but one church in our small communities and that a "Community" church which shall harbor in trust and unity the people of all denominations. Such a church would have a place for everyone who wanted to help on the world. No powers but what would be used, no problems but what would be solved. Respect for another's opinions, a fine sense of sympathy for another's failings, a quick and keen appreciation of another's worth would characterize its membership. No one would be scorned because of his beliefs, not one would be persecuted because of his doubts. All that would be asked is a desire to do good and to love God. The atmosphere of such a church would be freedom of thought, pursuit of knowledge, practice of spiritual power and a sense of brotherhood and fellowship."

The vision that Sarah had for the church was one in which all people of all denominational and non-denominational backgrounds could gather in unity for the accomplishments of combined service to the world in the name of Jesus Christ. The combined efforts of one plus one would be greater than two alone. Such forward thinking was revolutionary then and is still revolutionary today. A world that values the difference of opinions, respects the worth of all people, and strives to create something greater than self with such a vast community of thought.

I would propose that the idea that first established The Federated Church of Hyannis is an idea still worth having today. Whereas such teaching is so firmly grounded in the Gospel, the methods of the church may change but the message of Christ remains the same.