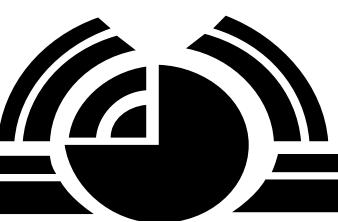


Squirrel Hill Historical Society



The History of the Sixth Presbyterian Church



If you look out the windows on the Murray Avenue side of the Squirrel Hill branch of the Carnegie Library, you will see 113 years of history. The Sixth Presbyterian Church, the most imposing structure on the four-corner intersection today, has stood through the years as history took place both inside and outside its doors.

It is a story worth knowing.

Why SIXTH Presbyterian?

From their Reformation beginnings, Presbyterians emphasized simplicity, and their churches were called just the Presbyterian Church. But when an area became big enough to have two of them, the easiest solution, and the one adopted in Pittsburgh, was to number the churches in the order of their formation. Sixth Presbyterian Church was the next church organized within the regional Presbytery after the fifth one.

Source: *The Corner Where You Are: A Sesquicentennial History of The Sixth Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh*, by David W. Miller, Pittsburgh, Sixth Presbyterian Church, 2000, Page 4



Sixth Presbyterian Church today

Historical Origins

Downtown Pittsburgh saw the start of the Sixth Presbyterian Church in 1836. That's when Robert Curling established the Fort Pitt Sunday School in the Curling and Robinson Glass Factory located at Franklin and Washington Streets just east of where Chatham Center and Consol Energy Center now stand.

Over the next 14 years it added services. In 1850 it organized as a church with 16 charter members. It erected a new building close by at the corner of Franklin and Townsend Streets, near the southern edge of the (former) Civic Arena parking lot.

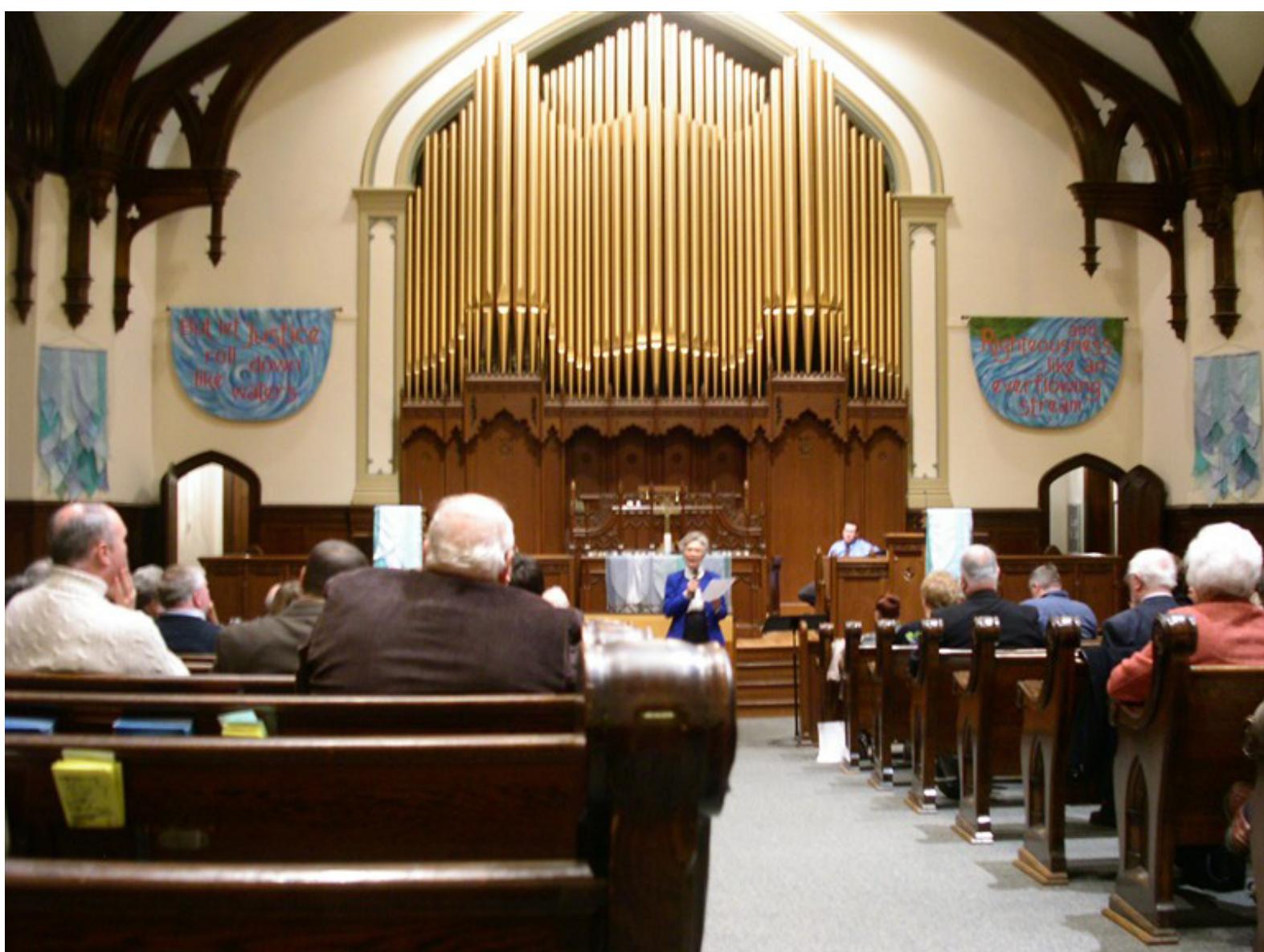


Sixth Presbyterian Church, Lower Hill, erected 1851

Conggregations and Change

The early church was theologically and socially conservative, but the presbyterian structure is one that adapts to change. Each church's members elect Elders who govern the organization and choose ministers.

In the 1850s, for example, “Old School,” or theologically conservative groups, felt organs were un-presbyterian and too ornate. Fifty years later, when the Squirrel Hill building was proposed, an organ was acceptable to most members (but some left).



The Casavant organ in the Sixth Presbyterian Church

Photo source: Website of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, photo dated April 24, 2006

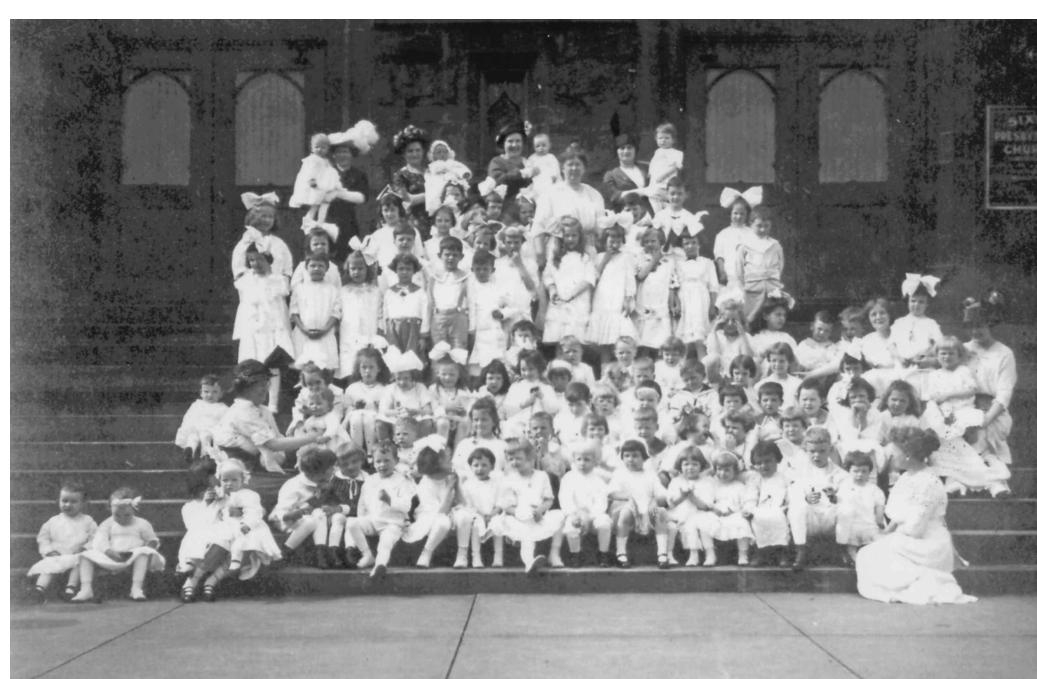
Going Where the Congregation Was Going—Relocating to Squirrel Hill

After 50-some years in the Lower Hill, fewer Presbyterians lived within walking distance. They had been replaced by newer immigrants—Italians, Jews and African Americans. Few of them became Presbyterians. Eventually the church building was sold to the Beth Jacob Jewish congregation.

The present site at Forbes and Murray was strategically located on a streetcar line that passed from Oakland through open fields. With transportation options, including early automobiles, middle-class families, some of them exceptionally affluent, began pouring into Squirrel Hill. Property was bought from Thomas Wightman. Ground was broken in 1902 and a church dedicated the next year.



Sixth Presbyterian Church in 1918



In 1916, the congregation numbered 650, and the Sunday School had 450 children.

[Click here to return to SHHS Museum Board Exhibits](#)

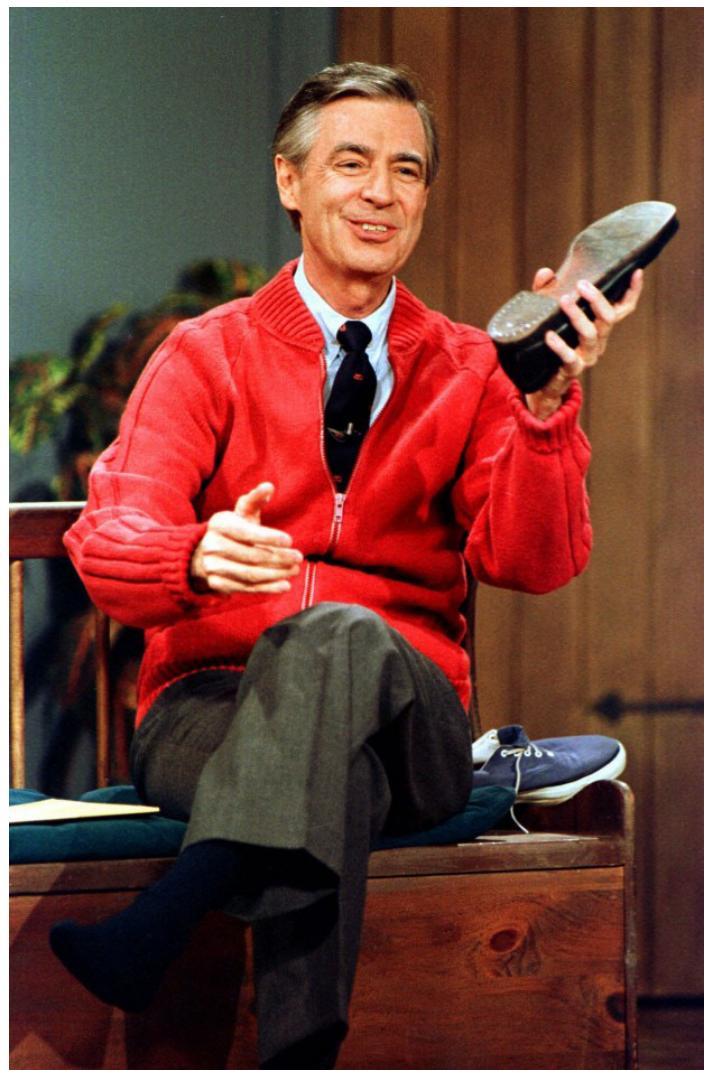
The Next 50 Years



Through the 1920s, the Depression, and World War II, the community thrived. In 1950, the congregation peaked at 1,216.

But the times were changing both in and outside the church.

Inside, the congregation still supported missionaries abroad and had multiple social and spiritual services, but it was also open to dissenting voices like those being heard in other religious organizations—voices, in the 1960s, questioning the church's relevancy, questioning sexual mores and demanding social



justice. A coffeehouse for youth (The Hobbit-Hutch), a Korean Fellowship social program and the purchase of an adjacent home for a youth mental health program illustrate the direction being taken.

Fred Rogers, “Mr. Rogers,” was an ordained Presbyterian minister with a mission for children’s communications. He joined the Sixth Presbyterian Church about 1967 and was a lifetime member.

A Great Location for Fast Food?



Outside, the ‘flight to the suburbs’ was in full swing. There were fewer Presbyterians in Squirrel Hill. By 1969 only a dedicated core remained. Rev. John McCall was installed as pastor in 1970 and remained for 33 years, bridging bonds between a more traditional generation and the newer members. Women were eventually given an equal status as congregation members and the orientation toward social justice issues became more pronounced. Although younger people were attracted, the number was not enough to offset those who passed away or moved away.

In 1981, the building was way too big and too much in need of maintenance. A choice was necessary. Solutions were proposed. The land was valuable. One proposal was to raze the Church and erect a high-rise for subsidized housing with a church facility within. Reaction to the proposal outside the congregation was mixed. The congregation voted to remain as a church at Forbes and Murray. Steps were taken to find a buyer for the vacant portion of the property, with the intention of creating an endowment fund to maintain the existing building. The actual sale did not occur until 1990, and building took until near 2000 to be completed. Rev. McCall retired in 2003 leaving an appreciative membership.

Sixth Presbyterian— A Look Back and Forward

For much of its history, Sixth Presbyterian has faced social and doctrinal issues that have defined it.

In the beginning, the biggest social reform issue was slavery, and antislavery sentiment aligned with the moral values of the majority congregation. Those who felt otherwise left the communion and joined more compatible churches. Other times a minister was not renewed should his views and the congregation not mesh.

In the 1920s the Sixth Church favored the prohibition of hard alcohol. In doctrines about membership and status, too, change was not imposed from the outside. As late as 1965, a majority of those at a congregational meeting were against the idea of having women officers. Like the attitude toward organs, that has changed, too.

From the 1960s on, the Sixth engaged in a ministry to homosexuals, and there became an awareness that Sixth was a congregation which would welcome gays and lesbians seeking a spiritual life. It was the first Presbyterian church to ordain gays and lesbians. For the past twenty years, Sixth Church has been actively involved in discussions over gender and marriage between same sex couples. Its involvement with its members has lead the Sixth to its present position.

After extensive discussions, the Sixth decided to affiliate with the More Light Network of Presbyterians. This is a sign of its active dissent from current denominational policy and an affirmation of inclusiveness. Many Presbyterian congregations are discerning their position on gender and marriage at this moment. The final chapter has yet to be written on this topic.

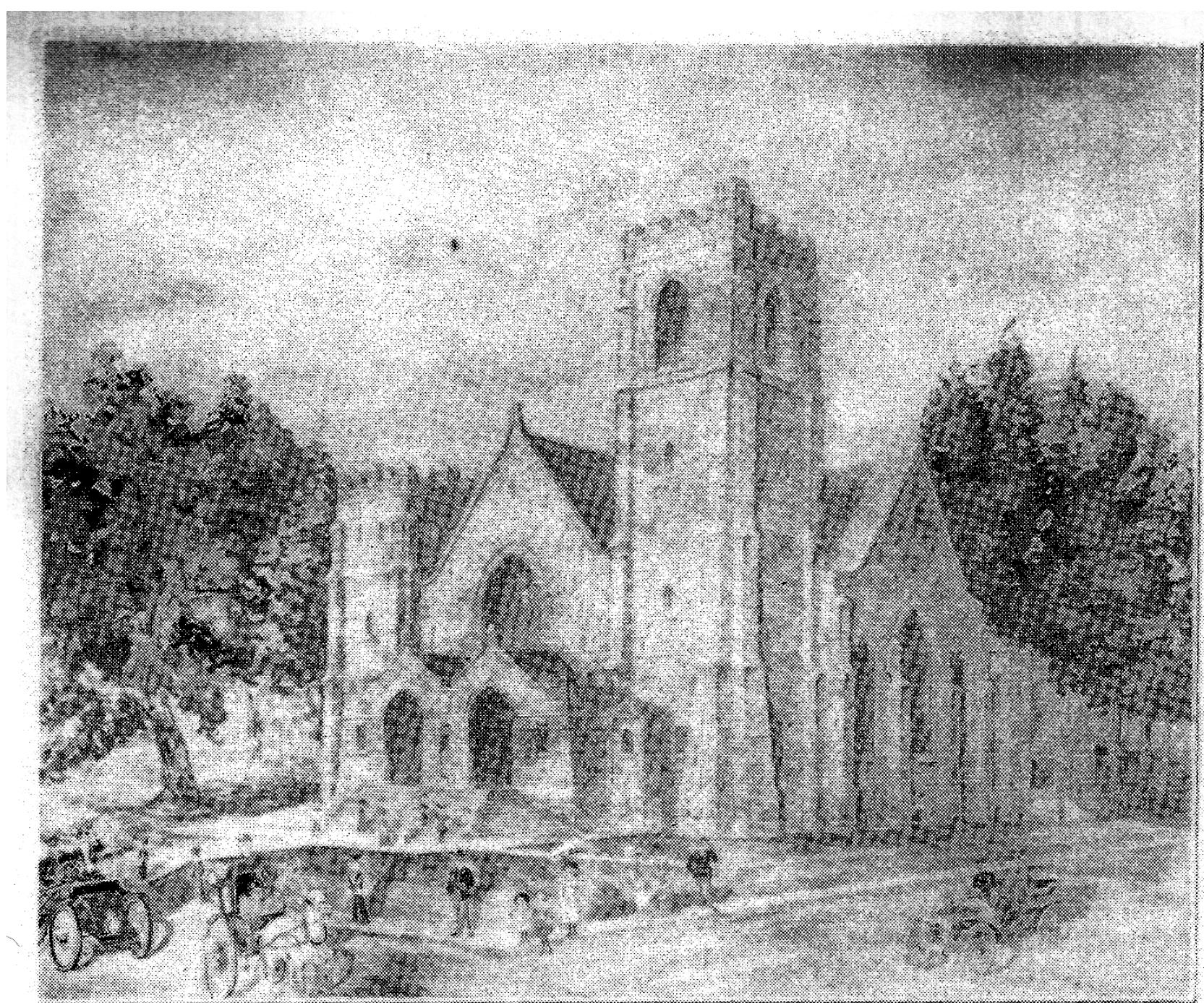
Rev. Dr. Vincent Kolb is the current minister of the Sixth's active congregation. The congregation works to be open to other thinking, some of it provided through The Fred Rogers Memorial Lecture Fund, which supports periodic lectures. These are often in collaboration with other congregations, schools and seminaries that bring in notable speakers. The Sixth Church has an active Sunday Worship, a Children's Church School for 3-year-olds through high school, Adult Bible Study, a Youth Mission (last year to Nicaragua), a recently begun Caring Ministry for the Elderly and Infirm, and more. The church website describes itself as follows:

"We are an open and affirming community of faith in Jesus Christ. At home in an urban neighborhood of many faiths, we acknowledge that we are not alone on the path to understanding God. In worship, study, and fellowship, we celebrate our Presbyterian roots and find joy in our diversity. We strive for the grace to love one another as we seek deeper understanding of life in the Spirit, working for justice and serving as stewards of God's wondrous creation."

The SHHS Used to Hold its Programs at Sixth Presbyterian Church.

This exhibit has presented the history of the Sixth Presbyterian Church, which has stood on the corner of Forbes and Murray since 1902 as history took place both inside and outside its doors.

The Sixth Presbyterian Church is also part of the history of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society. The SHHS held its meetings at the church for a number of years before moving to its present location at Church of the Redeemer.



Architect's conception of the new church to be built at Forbes and Murray