

Quincy

When a building is this unique, totally recognizable and located at a major crossroads, it is easy to pass by it, take it for granted, and not really see it. I urge you to really stop and look at this beautiful architectural icon in order to see it from all angles.

Regardless of your creed, whether you are an atheist or an avid Christian, just let this architectural treasure speak to you. First of all, the building is a symphony of circles—curving archways, round turrets, cone-shaped rooftops, a rounded 183-foot tall bell tower—all features echoing elements of the medieval monastery. What's more, the building has about five different faces, each one different. It also has doors on all sides, both a safety feature in case of fire and the architect's intent to embrace all directions at this corner crossroads. Inside, circles dance in every direction. Monumental curved arches lift up to vaulted ceilings that reach up further still to three huge circular rose windows. The central pulpit looks out to a "theater-in-the-round" set of pews placed in concentric semi-circles. These circles create invitation.

Why is this architecture here?

No known documentation suggests how or why the First Church selected Amos P. Cutting, except to say that he was an accomplished New England architect who loved the Romanesque Revival style as much as he loved bell towers. In fact, the same year

Cutting began the design of First Church, he built the New Hampshire State House Library, a building with a very large bell tower, until it was removed in 1966.

The building you see today is the culmination of a three-centuries-old evolutionary process in building and sustaining community. Community evolves out of intention. The growth of that community took many architectural forms, from a simple log house in 1685, when Old Dunstable stretched for 200 square miles, to the stone edifice you see today.

Architecture shapes space, and gives an identity to place. In the case of the First Church, the 124-year-old stone building is testament to the continuity of craftsmanship and design. It also reflects continuity in the community that currently gathers in this, its 10th "meetinghouse" in three centuries. As such, the sustaining of community through decades or centuries requires deliberate determination to identify, and overcome obstacles, a need for communication to build relationships and community, a resilience to see beyond the confines of the present moment.

There were of course many moments of division during the past 333 years. Sometimes it was something as seemingly incidental as words and wording: how to state a creed as in the case of the third meetinghouse. Sometimes it was politics or civic issues, such as the shifting of state lines in 1741. Sometimes it was controversy, plain and simple. After holding services in Ephraim Lund's barn during 1746, Jonathan Lovewell and others built a meetinghouse in 1747 at their own expense

and were allowed to sell the wall pews for their own benefit. The fourth meetinghouse was built a few rods north of what was known as the "Old South Church in Dunstable."

The fifth meetinghouse was built in 1754 in front of the Jesse Esty Tavern. The sixth meetinghouse was built in 1812—more expensive and modern, known as "Old South" which had a bell and a tower painted white. In 1825, the Nashua Manufacturing Co. erected a meeting house on Olive Street, the seventh meetinghouse. In 1834, the eighth meetinghouse was built on Main Street between Pearson Avenue and Park Street by a stock company with the capital of \$10,000, divided into 80 shares. The next meetinghouse—"Old Chocolate"—was a brown-painted second-story wooden structure built over a stone and brick first story and basement used for stores. In 1870, Old Chocolate burned, replaced a year later by the ninth meetinghouse built on Main Street.

In 1892, a movement toward building a new church began, spurred by a substantial gift from Lucy Spalding of a lot of land at the corner of Concord and Lock (Lowell) streets, with the stipulation that a house of worship was erected there.

At the same time, Mary P. Nutt donated \$5,000 for a nine-bell chime designed and made by E.W. Vanduzen Co., of Cincinnati, Ohio, to be installed in the new bell tower. In 1892, The First Church applied to Directors of the 1893 World's Fair held in Chicago, for the bells to be entered into the competition. The original nine-bell chime, heard by millions of visitors, won

first class medal at the fair. In July, 1893, six bells were added to create a 15-bell chime. In 1894, the "New First Congregational Church" was completed.

Circles, crossroads and community—all three come together in the church on the hill. Would that we could aspire to comprehend the nature of community—and how to initiate and sustain it in many divergent aspects of our daily life—as reflective of the circle.

There are no hard edges in a circle. Circles bring us together—around a campfire, or a round table, where relationship begins on equal footing between all parties. Circles represent inclusion, openness, flexibility, abundance—and the idea of circling around a common purpose or a common set of values. We are wealthier when we share. Through sharing, we create the energy of solidarity. There are reasons that so much diplomacy between disparate parties begins with a discussion about the shape of the table where negotiations will take place. The circle invites eye contact and offers no hierarchy or specific order or preference as to who speaks first.

In addition, sustainable community involves observing, noticing and tapping into the gifts and potential contributions of everyone in the community. As Wayne Dyer reminds us, "Abundance is not about something we acquire. It is something we tune into."

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