

The Weekender

CHURCH WOMEN UNITED OF IONIA CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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IONIA — A popular bracelet being worn today asks the question "What Would Jesus Do?" In December of 1941 that question was being answered by church women across the United States who organized a national movement open to all Christian women who wished to manifest their unity through ecumenical fellowship. Faith in Jesus and service to the community were their guiding principles. Thus began the United Church Women movement as a department of the National Council of Churches. The World Day of Prayer, which began in 1887, would become a cornerstone for the organization and the women also established a May Fellowship Day and a World Community Day in November.

On March 8, 1958, seventy-five local women met at the First Christian Church and organized the United Church Women of Ionia. (In January of 1967 the name of the group became Church Women United as adopted at the national meeting.) Officers were elected for the Ionia delegation with the following churches being represented: Assembly of God, Berlin Center, First Christian, First Baptist, First Methodist, First Presbyterian, LeValley Methodist and Zion Evangelical United Brethren. The ladies held pot luck suppers, salad luncheons and teas. Their meetings included music and prayers and by 1959 they had assembled a choir. All day sewing meetings were held and flannel hospital gowns were made for children.



Courtesy

Church Women United today. Front row: Emily Laird, secretary, Carol Braun, vice president, Carol Shier, president, and Katie Fox, treasurer. Second row: Elinor Weisgerber, Elaine Rector, Helen Candice, Ardie Fuller and Alice Rasmussen. Last row: Rosie Ferris, Ruth Bennett, Hazel Krywanski, Thelma Walkington, Jeane Hawley, Phyllis Sypher and Rita Perry.

On March 4, 1960, the 74th observance of the World Day of Prayer was held and Mayor C. Anthony Balice issued a proclamation urging citizens to attend services or pause for a minute of prayer at high noon. There were 20,000 observances around the United States and prayers rose around the world in sixty languages and more than one thousand dialects.

May Fellowship Day of 1960 discussed the topic "Citizenship — Free and Responsible." Topics included a special education vote, the state constitutional convention, pressures of township governments, problems of agricultural folks and small businessmen, the city charter and the school situation. The ladies divided into "buzz groups" and "brain storming sessions."

On World Community Day in November of 1960 the emphasis was on U.S. foreign policy and the role of the individual in it. Women were encouraged to get out the vote. For Christmas, 1960, 790 white gift boxes were filled using 790 dozen cookies, 3,160 pieces of homemade candy, 790 popcorn balls and 12 bushels of apples. A bright colored ribbon tied up each box for delivery to inmates of the State Hospital, the Michigan Reformatory and the Michigan Training Unit under the direction of Acting Superintendent Richard A. Handlon. Home-bound women cards created Christmas cards to include with the boxes. The project continued for 10 years.

By 1961 the CWU added the migrant workers who came to the local area to assist with gathering crops to their circle of care and support. In 1962 the women were asked to mind the clothing center at the Ionia County Infirmary (known locally as the "Poor Farm.") They took up the task and each church took their turn as the ladies packed a lunch, their sewing supplies and if possible a portable sewing machine and set out to aid those in need, especially those affected by fire, storm or hard times. Blankets, toys, crutches, shoes, dishes, chairs, beds and lamps, as well as clothing were gathered and 300 persons were aided that first year. Newspaper clippings include mention of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Easton Methodist Women's Society and Muir Christian Church. A newspaper photo shows young Paul Barker helping to make popcorn balls with the Youth Council of Churches and the Pewamo FHA for the 1962 Christmas boxes.

Fellowship Day of 1964 considered the challenges faced by the homeless and those who were denied jobs because of skin color, religion or national origin. Prayers were said for those who were unemployed and those who labored without hope. At the 1964 state convention the membership was reminded to assume responsibility and leadership in the ecumenical movement and to be ministers, deacons, elders and leaders because "It doesn't do any good to say that 'war is terrible' when you don't do anything to achieve peace."

In 1968 the County Infirmary was dismantled to make way for the Ionia Recreation Area. The CWU May Fellowship Day offerings and pledges were used for the down payment on a house at 124 S. Jackson Street where the ladies could continue their mission. The doors of that first Christian Service Center opened on July 9, 1969. First Security Bank held the mortgage that was paid off at \$41 per month. To help with that payment, the CWU sought money from the Ionia Community Chest.



Courtesy

Church Women United package Christmas boxes at the Methodist Church, December 1964, for inmates at local institutions.



Courtesy

Hard work was rewarded for the ladies of Church Women United with thank you notes from the inmates for Christmas boxes.