

From the Archives

Fiber Arts . . . more than 125 years of uninterrupted commitment

by Greg Duncan

As one of your co-archivists, part of my work involves becoming familiar with and knowledgeable about the thousands of documents, images, and artifacts that make up our church's archives—a collection that is quite rare for a local church to possess. Recently, I came across two wonderful images from 1966 showing members of the First Church Sewing Group gathered around a table, busy at work in what is now the Ralph Fanning Room.



You may have noticed that the 2025 version of the Sewing Group has recently taken on a new name—the Fiber Arts Ministry—and below is a photo of the vibrant group as it exists today, with its work facilitated by long-time First Church member Sarah Giffen.



Left to right: Jane Weddle, Ramona Moenter, Gary Glover, Deb Anderson, Kristin Bandy, Janice Taft, Marti Rideout, Melissa Kulwicki, Geneva Rice, Jackie Dean, Karen Sterrett, Sarah Giffen, Facilitator

Knowing about the group's recent rename and coming across the well-preserved 1966 photographs got me wondering just how long this group has been part of the life of the church. From earlier, more general research, I knew the group was active during the 1940s, and I had assumed its members were offering their labors of love in support of the World War II efforts. But when did the group actually begin?

Documents in our archives are housed in archival, acid-free boxes designed to protect and preserve them. Each year of First Church's life is represented by one to three of these boxes. So, to answer my question about when the group actually began, I started working my way through the boxes year by year, beginning around 1940 and moving backward.

Before continuing that backward march, it's important to understand the immense scope, reach, and influence that the women's organization has had at First Church—essentially from the very beginning. As far back as the Civil War, the women of First Church were organized and deeply engaged in efforts that contributed to the well-being of the congregation and served the greater good of the wider community. Dr. Washington Gladden, senior minister from 1882 to 1914, was generous with his praise and gratitude for the women's tireless support of congregational life and their leadership in addressing community needs. Eventually known as the Women's Guild, this organization became a broad umbrella under which many ministries were formed, supported, and coordinated. The sewing group was one such branch—and it was substantial enough in its own right to have sub-groups within it.

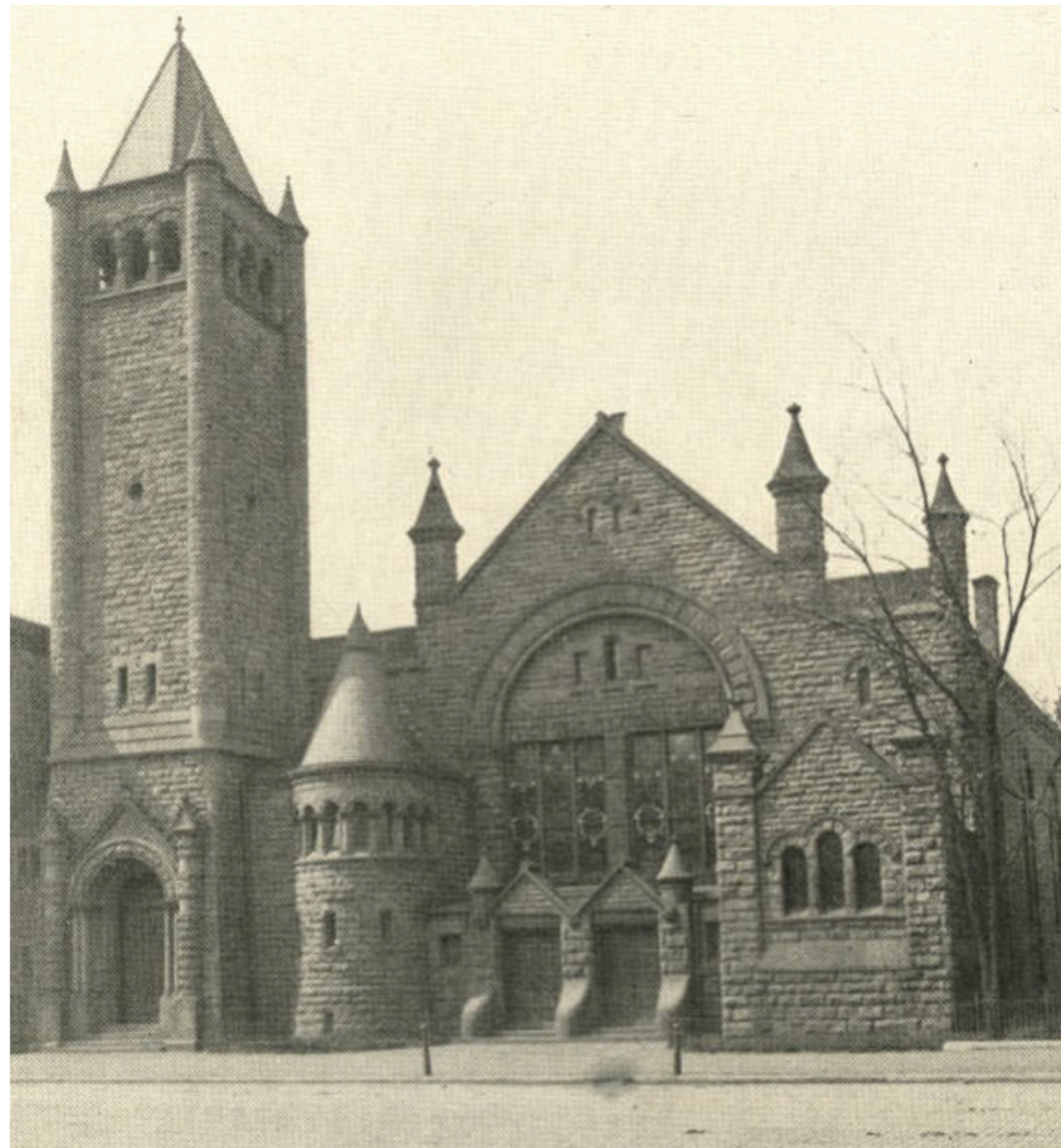
A report on one such sub-group was noted in the November 1935 issue of *First Church News*.

THE VAN METER GROUP

The Isadora Van Meter Group meets on the third Thursday of each month to sew for local charity projects. This Fall the women are collecting used clothing, renovating it if necessary, and also making new garments for some very worthy Columbus families. Upon investigation it was found that in many families children were not able to attend school because of the lack of clothing. Already the group has outfitted several youngsters.

The need for warm clothing is becoming greater because of the cold weather and it is urgently requested that anyone who has any articles of apparel for men, women or children which they can give will bring them to the church.

All women who are interested in this project are urged to attend, share in the work, and enjoy the fellowship. Luncheon is served at 25c the plate.



First Congregational Church as it appeared in 1928

In April 1928, *First Church News* reported that the all-day sewing groups provided linens for the Gladden Community House, as well as draperies and pillows for the Pleasant Hill School in Tennessee. But most of their work supported a First Church-sponsored registered nurse serving at the Kate Ford Whitman Hospital in Fenchow, China. Boxes of garments made by the sewing groups were sent overseas, along with bandages and dressings fashioned from old bed sheets collected by the Women's Guild.

And in the February 1928 *First Church News* issue, a Needlework Guild is mentioned.

Annual Reports
and
Financial Statements
of the
First Congregational Church
Columbus, Ohio
1919

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Church and Society,
Wednesday, January 7, 1920, at six o'clock.

From the Annual Report of 1919, we learn that church member Mrs. Walter Hill "has charge of the Sewing Class [at Gladden Community House] and takes great pride in the work of this group of young ladies."

In 1915, reports from the Women's Guild noted that many ladies of the church attended three "thimble parties" hosted in private homes, along with ten all-day sewing meetings held at the church.

Preserved in the Women's Guild records is a 1908 report, written in the recorder's own words and handwriting:

Report of the Women's Guild
for
Nineteen hundred and eight

The girls' sewing-class meets
Saturday afternoons with Mrs
Freeman and her faithful corps
of teachers, most of whom are
members of this church. The
Episcopal and Catholic church-
es are both represented in this

4.

field of endeavor.

In the 1903 report of the Guild, it was reported that 75 ladies of the sewing group had attended one of the thimble parties.

And that is where the documented evidence of the sewing group ends. However, when reading the 1903 report of the Guild, there's a clear, if unspoken, understanding that the sewing group was already a vigorous assembly of deeply committed women whose work brought love and care to many—and that it certainly wasn't newly formed in 1903. These reports further affirm Gladden's assertion about the inestimable value of the women of First Church.

Quite a legacy of love, devotion, service, and Christian fellowship! Congratulations, Fiber Arts Ministry, for keeping the flame alive and glowing brightly!

