

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD**

NRIS Reference Number: 09000539

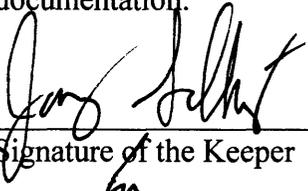
Date Listed: 7/7/09

Property Name: Idlewild Presbyterian Church

County: Shelby

State: TN

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper  
en

7/7/2009  
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

Section 10: Boundary Justification

The following as hereby added to the nomination as a boundary justification:

“The boundaries encompass the buildings and land historically associated with Idlewild Presbyterian Church.”

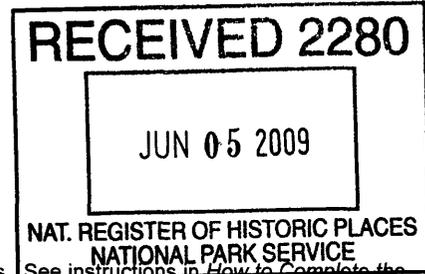
The Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office was notified of this amendment.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

- National Register property file**
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)**

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form



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This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1750 Union Avenue N/A  not for publication  
city or town Memphis N/A  vicinity  
state Tennessee code TN county Shelby code 157 zip code 38104

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)  
E. Patrick McHugh, Jr. 6-3-09  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:  
 entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet  
 determined eligible for the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet  
 determined not eligible for the National Register  
 removed from the National Register.  
 other,  
(explain:)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper Jim Shurt Date of Action 7/7/2009

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal
- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	1	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

Historic Religious Resources of Memphis

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion/Religious Facility  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Religion/Religious Facility  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Gothic Revival  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

foundation Concrete  
walls Stone  
roof Slate  
other Wood, Limestone, Marble, Stained Glass  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)  
See Continuation Sheet

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

**Period of Significance**

1925 – 1928

**Significant Dates**

November 21, 1926

**Significant Person**

(complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Awsumb, George, Architect  
Buffaloe, B.E., Contractor

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):** N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Memphis Room of Memphis Public Library

Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
Name of Property

Shelby County, TN  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property** 2.2 acres Northwest Memphis 404 NE

**UTM References**

(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>15</u>	<u>773062</u>	<u>3892247</u>	3	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	4	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Griffith C. Burr, Jr., House & Properties Committee; Brian Beadles, Historic Preservation Specialist  
organization Idlewild Presbyterian Church; Tennessee Historical Commission date January 15, 2009  
street & number 331 Inkberry Lane; 2941 Lebanon Road telephone 901-682-2673; 615-532-1550  
city or town Memphis; Nashville state TN zip code 38117; 37214

**Additional Documentation**

submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A **USGS map** (7.5 Or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
- A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO) or FPO for any additional items

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Idlewild Presbyterian Church, c/o Betty Anne Wilson, Chief Administrative Officer  
street & number 1750 Union Avenue telephone 901-726-4681  
city or town Memphis state TN zip code 38104

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 203

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Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
Shelby County, TN

## Narrative Description

Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee is an excellent example of a Gothic Revival church designed by architect George Awsumb. The church, built in 1926, features a sanctuary and L-shaped education wing that wrap around a central cloistered garth (courtyard). A school building constructed in 1960 is minimally attached to the north facade of the education wing. The building complex contains 47,487 sq. ft. and occupies a prominent 170' x 297' site along Union Avenue. The building is constructed of stone from an Arkansas quarry that varies in color from cream to rust, with stone trim for doors, windows, arches, tracery, and sculpture carved from Indiana limestone. The steeply pitched gable roof is clad in slate from New England and has parapet walls. Woodwork throughout the church is oak. The cost of construction and furnishings was \$637,073.<sup>1</sup> Steps up to the entrances and garth from Union Avenue are interrupted by an intervening terrace. The church retains the vast majority of its original materials and details and has a high level of integrity. Due to its age, the 1960 school building (and connecting hallway) is considered non-contributing.

Foremost amongst the many notable features is the bell tower that rises 120 feet above the west transept of the sanctuary. The tower features traceried openings and traditional Gothic carvings known as "grotesques" among its many symbolic details. The plan of the sanctuary is shaped like a Latin cross, and the gable ceiling, framed with timber trusses, displays colorfully painted ceiling tiles. Extensive daylight shines through stone-trimmed stained glass windows. Sanctuary aisles and corridors throughout are floored with random pieces of marble. The entire complex consistently employs the same vocabulary of Gothic forms and building materials, which contributes to its impressively coherent and craftsmanlike architectural character. The first worship service was held in the as yet unfinished building on November 21, 1926.

The south façade of the sanctuary faces Union Street and contains the main entrance and a large stained glass unit with elaborate stone tracery. The main entrance, composed of two sets of double doors, is recessed twelve feet in a pointed arch opening that is seventeen feet wide. Each end of the pointed arch rests on three small columns. The tympanum above the entry doors has four panels that each contains two blank lancets. Separating each panel is a small niche. The entry bay is outlined with a decorative molding. Flanking the bay are two large buttresses that are topped by small spires. The stained glass window unit above the main entrance has six lancets and intricate stone tracery that forms a variety of rounded shapes. This window is recessed in a large pointed arch opening that is twenty-five feet high and eighteen feet wide.<sup>2</sup> Above the window unit are a series of eight, five feet tall pointed arch panels and a central niche with an elaborately carved projecting base and hood. This row of panels is twenty-four feet wide.

<sup>1</sup> Perre Magness. *The History of Idlewild Presbyterian Church*. Memphis, TN. pg. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 76.

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Shelby County, TN

The southernmost bay of the east façade has a gabled roof that projects up higher than the roof line on the rest of the façade. Stairs lead from Auburndale Street to a set of double doors in a pointed arch opening. The entrance is a smaller version of the one on the south façade and has a carved tympanum with a carved cross at its center. Above the entry is a stained glass window unit composed of two lancets and decorative stone tracery in a pointed arch opening. North of this bay are four bays that contain stained glass window units with three lancets and decorative stone tracery in pointed arch openings. Each bay is separated by an engaged buttress. The next bay to the north is the projecting face of the south transept. The corners of the transept have engaged buttresses and a large stained glass window unit is centered in the wall. The window unit has the same characteristics as the others with five lancets. A continuous stone belt course runs the entire length of the façade.

The rear (north) façade has a central, slightly projecting bay with a large stained glass window unit. The bottom of this bay has three small rectangular window units. East of the central bay is a small projecting section that contains a rectangular opening with five casement windows. Unadorned secondary entries flank the central bay, and a continuous stone belt course runs the length of the façade.

The southern half of the west façade is similar to the east façade with a gabled narthex bay and four stained glass units separated by engaged buttresses. The second buttress from the south contains a stone from the Great Wall of China. The west façade also connects to the ambulatory and the education wing. This façade is also dominated by the tower that rises from its northern end. At its base, in the corner formed by the west façade of the sanctuary and south façade of the education wing, is an outdoor pulpit. The pulpit features a carving of a pomegranate, which symbolizes resurrection.<sup>3</sup> Above the pulpit is a stained glass window unit similar in design to others found on the sanctuary.

The tower is twenty-nine feet square at its base and one hundred twenty feet high. Rising above the roof line, each side of the tower has a large recessed opening with stone tracery, but no glass. Above this opening is a set of three open panels with pointed arches. Directly below this row of panels are four small carved figures, or grotesques, that represent various professions. The south side of the tower has a carpenter, architect (a caricature of George Awsumb), historian, and miser. The east side has an athlete, alchemist, scholar, and painter. The north side has a stone cutter, monk, philosopher, and metal worker. And finally, the west side has a farmer, preacher, student, and draftsman. The outside corners at the top of the tower also have carved stone figures. Each of these figures is ten feet high and represents the writers of the four gospels.<sup>4</sup> The southwest corner is Saint Matthew with a winged cherub, the southeast corner is Saint Luke with a bull, the northeast corner is Saint Mark with a lion, and the northwest corner is Saint John with an eagle.

<sup>3</sup> Symbols in Christian Art and Architecture. <http://wegast.home.att.net/symbols/>. Web site accessed 3/4/09.

<sup>4</sup> Magness, pg. 76.

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Shelby County, TN

The L-shaped education wing extends west from the north end of the sanctuary's west façade and forms two sides of the garth, or courtyard. The remaining two sides of the courtyard are formed by the west façade of the sanctuary and an ambulatory, which consists of a series of pointed arch openings separated by engaged buttresses. An in-ground columbarium was added to the north edge of the ambulatory in 2005.

The south courtyard façade of the education wing has paneled wood and glass double door entries set in pointed arch openings on each end of the façade. The western entry features the carved faces of two of the children of George Awsumb, the building's architect. The carved face of his daughter, Georgianna, is at the bottom of the label mold east of the door and his son Richard Norman is west of the door. These figures were carved by C. M. Berglund. Between the two entries are five pointed arch window openings separated by engaged buttresses. The second floor has a series of four window units each composed of four casement windows. A stone sill course runs below these windows.

The south façade of the education wing facing Union Street has a two bay front gabled section on its western half. The first floor has two sets of three rectangular, fifteen pane, leaded glass casement windows topped with fixed nine pane windows. The second floor has two sets of three casement windows, and the third floor has a set of two casement windows. East of the front gabled section is a double door entry in a pointed arch opening. Above the entry is a stone panel and a set of two casement windows. East of the entry the first floor has a set of four casement windows topped by single fixed windows and the second floor has a set of four casements. A continuous stone sill course runs below the first floor windows.

The west facade of the education wing is divided into three main sections. The southernmost section has two floors and is recessed and lower than the rest of the facade. The first floor has a set of four casement windows and a set of two casements topped with fixed windows. The second floor has two sets of three casements and a set of two casements. A continuous stone sill course runs along the entire facade.

The central section of the west facade is three stories and is three bays wide. The central bay projects slightly and is capped by a flat roof. Each floor has a set of four casement windows. The first floor windows are topped by rectangular fixed windows while the second floor windows are topped by arched windows. The outer two bays of the central section are capped by gabled roofs, and each floor has a set of three casement windows. The northernmost section of this facade has the same features as the central section except that it has a visible basement level containing two sets of three casements and a single set of four casements. The central and northern sections are separated by a single bay that contains an entry on the first floor and sets of casement windows on the upper two floors.

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The north facade faces a service alley and the 1960 school building. The west end of the facade has a three story bay window section. The first floor contains tall, narrow window units with colored glass set in an abstract pattern. These windows were done in 1961 when the interior space was converted to a chapel. East of this section is the one bay wide connector between the original building and the 1960 building. The connector has a set of five casement windows and large plate glass windows on its main level. The connector is open on the first floor to allow traffic to pass in the service alley. East of the connector is a series of casement windows set in pointed arch openings with stone tracery on the first floor. The remainder of the facade has casement windows similar to those found elsewhere on the education wing.

The 1960 school building is rectangular in plan and is minimally attached to the north facade of the original building. The east and west facades share similar characteristics. The north and southernmost bays have a glass and metal entry on the first floor covered by a cantilevered canopy. Above the entry are nine glass plate windows set in a metal grid. The remainder of the facade is a series of glass plate windows units composed of two large glass panes above two smaller panes. Each set of windows is separated by vertical stone trim.

The north facade of the school has three main sections. The outer two sections each have a single window unit on each floor similar to those found on the east and west facades. The central section has a series of five pointed arches. The outer two have large window units with central metal and glass entries. The central section and the outer two sections are separated by recessed sections. Due to its later construction date, difference in architectural style, and physical separation, the school building and connector are considered a non-contributing building.

## INTERIOR SPACES:

The narthex extends the full width of the sanctuary, with entrances from the south, east, and west. It has a slightly vaulted ornamental plaster ceiling and marble-tiled floor, which continues into the sanctuary along the aisles. The partition common to the sanctuary space has sets of three stained glass windows with carved stone frames and trefoil tops. Two stairwells on the east and west ends of the south wall provide access to the balcony above. Three sets of wood six-panel doors with glass panes in the upper panels lead north to the sanctuary. Double doors lead to the center aisle and single doors are at the side aisles.

The cruciform style sanctuary has nine vaulted wood arches supporting the gabled roof that rises to a height of sixty-five feet. The arches separate the worship space into bays and rest on stone columns capped by stone corbels that receive the wood arches; the columns separate the nave from the side aisles. Each corbel has a different carved symbol taken from church history; the many symbols incorporated into the carved stonework were intended to convey to congregants the stories of the Bible that, in the era of the Middle Ages, most people could not read. The ceiling between the wood arches has multi-color acoustic tiles hand painted in various patterns with muted tones. The stencil patterns used to paint the ceilings were also designed by George

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Awsumb. The side aisles are defined by an arcade of pointed arch openings and a plaster ceiling. Above the side aisles is a triforium gallery. The triforium is lined with sets of four openings containing trefoil designs. Above the triforium is a wood cornice topped with carved leaf ornamentation. Artificial lighting is provided by large suspended candelabra chandeliers. The 1200 seats are provided by two columns of original wood pews with seat cushions on a carpeted floor, both in the nave and the transepts. Additional seating is in the balcony.

The chancel is recessed to provide space for the communion rail, pulpit, the elevated organ, and the choir loft divided by paneled wood (oak) partitions. The organ pipes are exposed on the sides of the chancel. Elaborate carved wood organ screen on the east and west walls of the chancel include free-standing carved figures of Bach, Handel, Charles Wesley, and David holding his lyre. These figures were carved by Mr. Alois Lang, chief carver for American Seating Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan. American Seating Company furnished all the pews, choir screen, pulpit screen, communion table, and organ screen, and Mr. Lang supervised the production of all the carved woodwork.<sup>5</sup>

To the sides of the chancel are the session room to the east and a storage room to the west. The session room has an ornamental plaster ceiling, textured plaster walls, and wood paneled wainscot. Casement windows with stone trim are in the north and east walls. Wall sconces and chandeliers provide artificial lighting.

To the west of the sanctuary is the dining room (T. K. Young Fellowship Hall). The dining room has an elevated stage at the east end and kitchen at the west end. Flooring is wood parquet, and the ceiling of the dining room is framed by massive wood-clad beams and exposed wood joists, with intricately painted acoustic tiles similar to those in the sanctuary between the joists. Walls are textured plaster with wood paneled wainscot. Air supply grilles were installed below the windows in 1956 in wood-paneled cabinets. Casement windows set in pointed arch openings with stone tracery are in the north wall and the south side is open through pointed arch openings to a marble-tiled main corridor that connects the sanctuary to the west entrance. These openings contain stained glass and wood paneled doors that slide on vertical tracks to separate the dining room from the hall. A bank of steel casement windows in the characteristic stone frames employed throughout the building, with trefoil tops and glass panes in soft colors, separates the corridor from the garth.

At the west end of the main corridor are the administrative offices, parlor, and, down a set of steps to grade level, the entrance to the Trippeer Chapel. Formerly a primary classroom, this bi-level space next to the west entrance from Evergreen Street was converted, in 1961, to a chapel seating 110 persons. The original classrooms were designed with balconies for small groups, reflective of the Presbyterian teaching philosophy, that open onto the two-story space adjoining.

<sup>5</sup> George Awsumb. "The Symbolism of Idlewild Presbyterian Church." Available on microfilm 1243 at Tennessee State Library and Archives.

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An organ was installed on the balcony in 1971. Painted acoustic tiles used elsewhere in the church building are incorporated into a coffered ceiling. The major feature of the space is the faceted glass window behind the elevated podium along the north wall (which faces the service alley and thereby avoids introduction of a disparate element on a highly visible exterior facade). The faceted glass window was designed by Jacoby Studios in St. Louis to incorporate religious symbols. The chapel is used for early Sunday worship services, weddings, and funerals.

Across the grade-level entrance corridor from the chapel is an elevator installed in 1991 to provide handicapped access to the main level of the building.

West of the main corridor where it turns to the south along the administrative offices is a large parlor, one corner of which was modified to house the elevator. The parlor has textured plaster walls, wood parquet flooring, and wood coffered ceiling. Casement windows on the west wall provide natural light, and seating areas are defined within an area created by free-standing wood-clad columns.

On the second floor (see Map 2) are the choir practice room, strock room, Room "21M", library, pastor's office, and offices for professional staff, as indicated on the floor plan. These spaces have carpeted floors and plaster ceilings, and are configured almost entirely as originally constructed, with the exception of the introduction of fluorescent lighting and air conditioning diffusers. The strock room and choir practice room contain balcony spaces that hold smaller rooms originally used for classrooms. The Harlan Room on the north side of the second floor serves as a large meeting room; it has a high three-bay cathedral ceiling framed by arched trusses with tie beam and king post elements and exposed purlins with acoustic tile between. Lighting is coved indirect fluorescent, which is a modern modification and supplements chandelier fixtures. Restrooms have pink marble flooring, marble wainscoting, and marble toilet partitions. Doors are glass and wood paneled throughout the complex. Some of the interior doorways also have transoms with stained glass.

The 1960 building contains mainly classrooms and a gymnasium. The corridors and classrooms have concrete block walls and acoustical tile ceilings. Large horizontal glass panes are in the top of the walls separating the corridors from the classrooms. This allows natural light to pass between these spaces. The main east-west corridor has a continuous bank of plate glass windows on its south wall that look out on the rear facade of the original church building.

The largest interior space of the 1960 building is the gymnasium, which features a dramatic ceiling composed of five pointed arches. The ceiling contains acoustic tiles painted with vibrant colors in a regular pattern. The north wall contains two window units that stretch from the floor to the ceiling. These units also have metal and glass doors that lead outside.

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Shelby County, TN

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**INTEGRITY:** The integrity of the original design is intact, and except for minor modifications made in 1956 when the heating and air conditioning system was installed and in 1961 when a classroom was converted to a chapel, the building complex is virtually the same as the original construction. The interior has been modified to accommodate changes in space function; however, great care has been taken to use materials and methods of construction consistent with the original building. Carillon bells have been added to the bell tower (1982) and a new organ installed for the sanctuary (1989).

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Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
Shelby County, TN

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## Statement of Significance

Idlewild Presbyterian Church is eligible for listing in the National Register under criterion C as an outstanding local example of a Gothic Revival church building. Designed by Memphis architect George Awsumb, it was constructed 1925-1928. The stone edifice contains an imposing tower, sanctuary, and an education wing that wrap around a cloistered garth. The intricately crafted stone, woodwork, and stained glass contain various signs and symbols of Christian faith.

The most authoritative document on the subject, *A History of Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee, 1890-1990*, describes its construction as follows: "The structure going up on Union Avenue was watched with much interest by all of Memphis. For the new building, Awsumb had envisioned a grand stone church in the Gothic style, which was to become known as The South's Cathedral of Presbyterianism."<sup>6</sup>

Idlewild was designed by architect George Awsumb (1880-1959)--a Norwegian by birth who came to the States at the age of four, and received his formal architectural education at the University of Illinois. After graduating he won a design scholarship that enabled him to travel in Europe. Then in 1921 he came to Memphis after winning a national competition for the design of a civic auditorium (Ellis Auditorium). After locating in Memphis he formed a partnership with Charles Pfeil known as Pfeil and Awsumb. Other notable works in Memphis by Awsumb include Humes High School (NR 7/12/2004), South Side High School, Brownlee and Sweeney Halls at LeMoyné College (NR 11/09/2005), and the International style Baron Hirsch Synagogue (NR 7/11/07 as part of Vollintine Hills Historic District).

Some of Awsumb's other church designs share some similarities to his design of Idlewild. First Presbyterian Church in Paducah, Kentucky and First United Methodist in Montgomery, Alabama both have cruciform plans with a tower rising from a transept and are built of the same kind of stone walls, limestone trim, and slate roofs. First United Methodist also contains a cloistered garth and randomly patterned marble floors. These churches were designed after Idlewild and show how the building influenced Awsumb's later designs.

Idlewild Presbyterian Church originally organized as Park Avenue Presbyterian Church on June 2, 1867 with nineteen members. In 1891 it merged with another church, built a frame church building at the corner of Peabody and Barksdale for \$1,676 and became Idlewild Presbyterian. On June 22, 1895 the frame church building was moved to the corner of Union and McLean in order to be closer to streetcar service.

The church soon outgrew the small frame building and plans were made to construct a larger brick building. The original frame church was moved to the back of the lot and a Romanesque Revival church building designed by the firm of Jones and Furbringer was built in 1909. The congregation

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<sup>6</sup> Magness, pg 31.

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of Idlewild Presbyterian continued to grow rapidly and by the onset of the 1920s it became apparent that expansion into a larger building was again necessary. On November 13, 1921 the decision was made to form a committee relating to building a new church building. After much debate about the location of the new building, it was reported on April 8, 1923 that the site had been chosen and purchased.<sup>7</sup>

As construction was about to begin, Idlewild's pastor, Dr. William P. Neilson, passed away from an ongoing illness in 1925. During his four years as pastor Idlewild's congregation almost doubled in size and plans for the new building had become all but reality. He was replaced by George Stanley Frazer who served at Idlewild until 1929.

Construction on the church began in the fall of 1925. The first worship service was held in the unfinished building on November 21, 1926. That afternoon the public was invited to tour the new buildings under construction. Choirs from six different churches in Memphis provided music. Photographs and visitor sign-in sheet from that day were deposited in the cornerstone, which was laid a week later on November 28, 1926. The education building officially opened on September 25, 1927. An article in "The Idlewild Church Tower," a monthly church publication proclaimed the opening and also mentioned that the tower was not yet complete. The original organ was installed in 1928 by the Skinner Organ Company of Boston. After years of work the sanctuary was officially consecrated during a service held on September 16, 1928. "The total cost of the building, including furniture, fixtures, building and lots, was \$637,073.70."<sup>8</sup>

In 1958 a one million dollar campaign was begun to expand the church. At this time George Awsumb was engaged in the firm Awsumb and Sons. He designed the new addition, but passed away in 1959 before its completion. His son Wells Awsumb then completed the work. The addition is minimally attached and designed to match the original building in terms of materials even though the design is decidedly more modern.

The great level of ornamental detail found throughout the church was executed by several highly skilled craftsmen. All of the woodwork in the sanctuary was supervised by Alois Lang of the American Seating Company. George Awsumb met Mr. Lang while visiting Lang's hometown of Oberammergau, Germany for its decennial passion play in 1910. In addition to its passion play, the village of Oberammergau is famed as a center for woodcarving. Lang began his training at the age of 14, and in 1890 at the age of 19 he moved to Boston where he carved elaborate mantelpieces. Shortly after 1900 he relocated to Manitowoc, Wisconsin to work for the American Seating Company, and later the company moved his division to Grand Rapids, Michigan. Lang became well-known as a prominent ecclesiastical wood-carver. An article in a 1946 newsletter states that "recently the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters presented him with a

<sup>7</sup> J. P. Young. "Narrative of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church." 1930. Available on microfilm 1243 at Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Magness, pg 37.

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special award for his contribution to art in Michigan.”<sup>9</sup> His work can be found in numerous churches around the United States including Rockefeller Chapel, Chicago; National Shrine of the Little Flower, Royal Oak, Michigan; All Saints Church, Pasadena, California; and Church of the Incarnation, Great Falls, Montana.

The stone work was done by several craftsmen. In an article written about the symbolism found in the church’s carvings George Awsumb wrote, “they were fortunate in securing Mr E. Dux, who had shortly before been brought to Memphis by the Tri-State Ornamental Plaster Company and who spent a great deal of time working out the very beautiful models for many of the fine pieces of carving now installed in the church. Mr. Thomas C. B. Reardon and Mr. Frank O. Pisani were finally secured by the Christie Cut Stone Company of Memphis to complete the carving for the church. Mr. Reardon is a man of great experience in this kind of work, having had charge of all the carvings on the Washington Cathedral some time before and personally executed many of them.”<sup>10</sup> The cut stonework was produced by the Christie Cut Stone Company. The slate roof tiles were supplied by Rising and Nelson Slate Company and were installed by J. Dermon of Memphis. The painted ceilings found in the public spaces were designed by Awsumb and executed by the decorating studio of Arnold and Stubbe on Acousti-Celotex tiles. An advertisement for the tiles in a 1931 issue of *Architectural Forum* proclaims that the tiles are suitable for painting. The chandeliers were likewise designed by Awsumb and were made by Walter G. Warren Company of Chicago. The stained glass windows were made by the George Hardy Payne Studios in Patterson, New Jersey.<sup>11</sup>

Additional information about the people involved in the construction of the church was found in 1988 during renovation work on the organ. A piece of wood was found by the organ chamber on which the following was written: “A.H. Melton – Born Jan. 27, 1905. This is the 27<sup>th</sup> day of October 1927. Idlewild Presbyterian Church. Almost all of the tile and brick were laid by me and my helper Booker Elliot. The contractor was B.E. Buffaloe and his Associates. The architect was Mr. George Awsumb. Mr. C.C. Stanfil was the superintendent in charge. All stonework was in charge of Mr. Ed Condra.”

The carved wood and stonework contains a plethora of symbolic qualities. At the bottom of the wood arches supporting the ceiling are eighteen stone corbels carved with grapevines and symbols of church history. The symbols include two crossed swords on a shield symbolizing St. Paul, the Greek letters Chi, Rho, and Alpha and Omega symbolizing Christ as the beginning and end, arrows and carpenter’s square symbolizing St. Thomas, a phoenix over a flame symbolizing the resurrection, and a ship symbolizing St. Jude. The wood carving on the pulpit contains figures of Martin Luther and St. Augustine of Hippo, and the canopy over the minister’s seat has figures of

<sup>9</sup> American Seater newsletter. March 19, 1946. Available at [www.carvinginnyc.com/sowc%20chapter%209.htm](http://www.carvinginnyc.com/sowc%20chapter%209.htm). Web site accessed 3/10/09.

<sup>10</sup> George Awsumb. “The Symbolism of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church”.

<sup>11</sup> Magness, pgs 75 - 85.

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John Calvin and John Knox. Below the organ screens are carved stone panels with a star above a serpent twined around a globe representing God's presence in a sinful world. An adjacent panel contains a cross and a butterfly representing eternal life and the redemption of mankind.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the religious symbolism, more personal details can be found. The tower contains a carved caricature of Awsumb and the trim on the doorway in the garth contains carved depictions of two of his children. Awsumb believed that it was important for the ornamentation in the church to express a deeper meaning. In a 1934 interview Awsumb expressed that, "ornament is one of the really vital phases of church design. When the ornamentation becomes meaningless, the church is no longer alive."<sup>13</sup>

An award citation presented to the church by the Southern Architectural and Industrial Arts Exposition in 1929 read "Idlewild Church has no ivy-colored walls or worn thresholds, but the nature of the materials and the minute attention given to design and color-blending suggest something of what one feels walking about the cathedrals of England. For here, too, we have strength and dignity and the mellowed effect of maturity without decay."<sup>14</sup>

In 2000 the Memphis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects awarded the building the Design of the Decades award as best design for the decade 1920-1929. The commendation was a further affirmation of the significance of the building's architecture in the Mid-South area.

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<sup>12</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the symbols and carvings found throughout the church see Perre Magness. "A History of Idlewild Presbyterian Church 1890-1990." or George Awsumb. "The Symbolism of the Idlewild Presbyterian Church." Available on microfilm 1243 at Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>13</sup> "Architects Select 10 Designs of the Decades." *The Commercial Appeal*. Sunday, January 23, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Magness. pg 75.

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## Boundary Description

The building site is at 1750 Union Ave. in "Midtown" Memphis. The property is defined by parcels 017045 00011-00019 as depicted on Shelby County Tax Map 139 C shown below.



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## Photographs

Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee

Photographs by Frederick Toma and Brian Beadles  
Digital files at Tennessee Historical Commission

South facade, facing north.  
1 of 30

Main entry, south facade, facing north.  
2 of 30

East facade, facing west.  
3 of 30

East and north facades, facing southwest.  
4 of 30

North and west facades, facing southeast.  
5 of 30

West facade, facing east.  
6 of 30

Sanctuary from balcony, facing north.  
7 of 30

Sanctuary, facing north.  
8 of 30

Sanctuary, facing south.  
9 of 30

Sanctuary, facing west.  
10 of 30

Sanctuary, facing north.  
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Sanctuary stained glass.  
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Narthex, facing west.  
13 of 30

Narthex facing north.  
14 of 30

Narthex looking into sanctuary, facing north.  
15 of 30

Hallway looking into dining room, facing northwest.  
16 of 30

Dining room, facing northwest.  
17 of 30

Hallway, facing south.  
18 of 30

Chapel, facing north.  
19 of 30

Painted ceiling tile.  
20 of 30

Painted ceiling tile.  
21 of 30

Parlor, facing northwest.  
22 of 30

Choir practice room, facing northwest.  
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Harlan Room  
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Connector between church and education building, facing east.  
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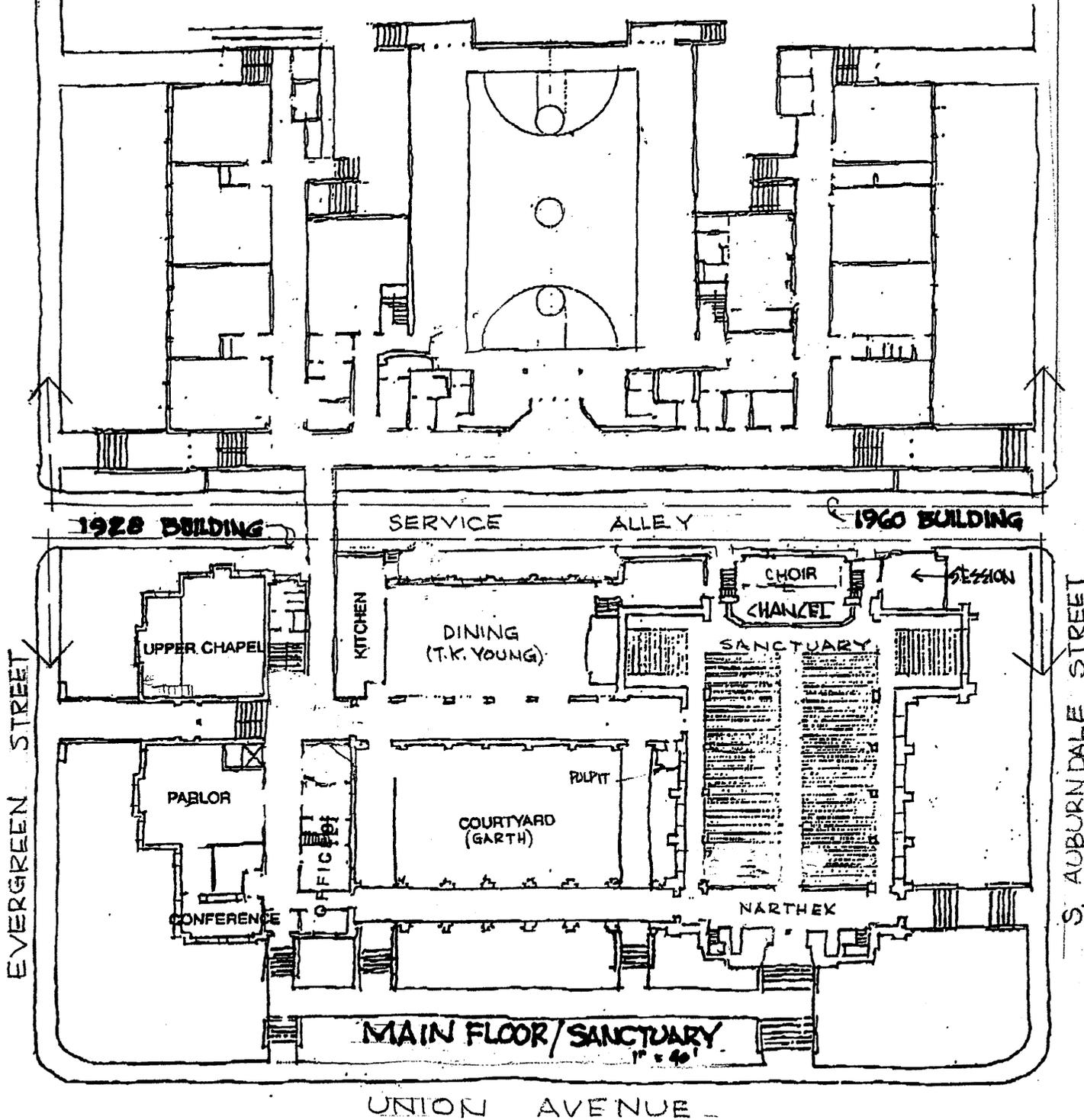
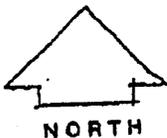
View from connector, facing east.  
26 of 30

Southwest corner of education building, facing northeast.  
27 of 30

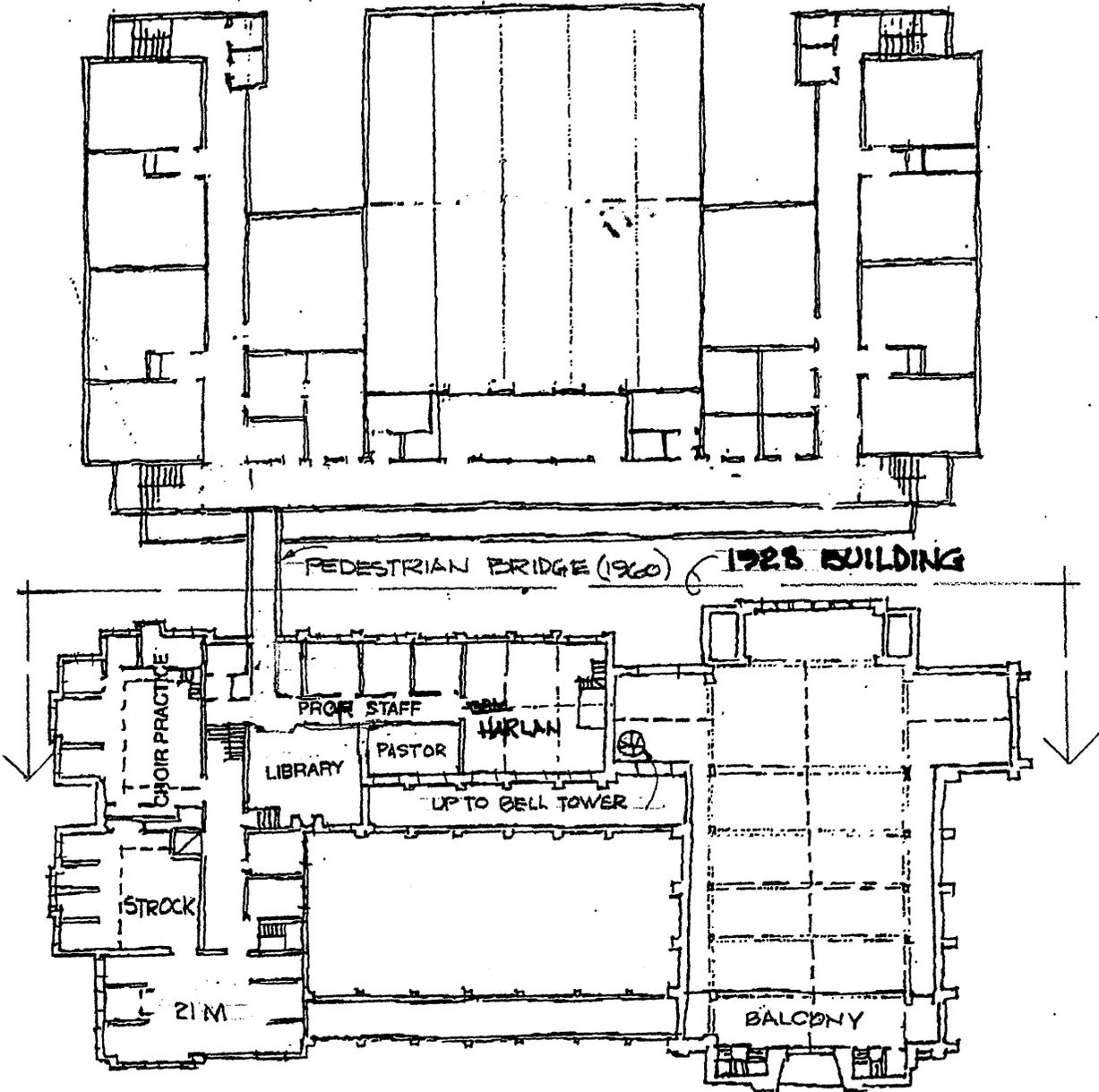
North facade of education building, facing southeast.  
28 of 30

Classroom in education building, facing northwest.  
29 of 30

Gymnasium in education building, facing north.  
30 of 30



(1)



SECOND FLOOR/BALCONY  
1" = 40'

