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First Presbyterian Church of Stamford

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**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF STAMFORD (AKA THE FISH CHURCH),  
DESIGNED BY LEGENDARY ARCHITECT WALLACE K. HARRISON,  
NAMED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK**

NOTE: The First Presbyterian Church and Highland Green Foundation will be holding a socially distanced press conference with the church as a backdrop on Thursday February 18, 2021 at 10am. Representative Jim Himes and others involved in the landmark designation effort will attend and share brief remarks on the significance of the award.

STAMFORD, CT – February 12, 2021

The First Presbyterian Church of Stamford, aka the Fish Church, has been named a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. While the sanctuary, designed by legendary architect **Wallace K. Harrison** (best known for projects such as Rockefeller Center and Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts), was dedicated in 1958, the congregation has been anchored in the Stamford community since 1853. This welcome designation comes at a time the church is launching a \$7 million capital campaign to preserve the church's main structures, the sanctuary, and the carillon tower.

The unique sanctuary lies at the heart of the congregation's ministry and mission. The diverse and inclusive congregation has a long history of outreach and service to the Stamford community, reflected in the after-school programs, active partnerships with area not-for-profit agencies, and the leadership role of its staff in community service organizations.

The sanctuary, dedicated in 1958, is internationally acclaimed as a masterpiece of modern art and architecture. Inspired by the 13th century Sainte-Chappelle chapel in Paris, architect Wallace K. Harrison succeeded in his intent to impart the emotional impact of a gothic cathedral in a modern American church. Harrison pioneered the use of *dalle de verre* glass within the thin shell walls. The carillon tower, dedicated in 1968, is a free-standing tower designed by Harrison to house the church's bells.

*LIFE Magazine* hailed the sanctuary as “lofty and luminous” when it was dedicated in March of 1958 and selected with three other contemporary buildings by MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) as heralding “a new direction in Modern expression.” In its first three years, the new sanctuary attracted over 300,000 out-of-town visitors.

“We are deeply grateful to receive this designation,” said the pastor, the **Rev. Dr. David R. Van Dyke**. “It’s an affirmation of the vision and commitment of those who came before us here to imagine and then build this architecturally daring space of remarkable beauty dedicated to the worship of God. It is also an affirmation of Wallace Harrison’s architectural brilliance. This small—for him—project provided an opportunity to utilize the fullness of his talent, artistry, and faith. My hope is that this designation will entice more people to come see what this “Fish Church” is all about and who we are seeking to be as a community of faith. We are indebted to the Highland Green Foundation for spearheading this effort on behalf of the church and especially to Wes Haynes, whose time and expertise was instrumental in making this a reality.”

Highland Green Foundation was established in 2011 to support community outreach activities focused on architectural preservation, education, and the arts—all on the campus of the First Presbyterian Church.

“We very much appreciate the support from the community during our years-long effort to receive this designation,” said **Robert Anstine, Campaign Chair and President, Highland Green Foundation**. “We thank the Board of Highland Green Foundation, staff and members of the Fish Church, as well as local, state, and federal officials who have all been strong advocates. The impact of weathering on the sanctuary’s glass panels is the major challenge to the building’s stewardship, which is a key reason for the Capital Campaign. It is a multi-phase project over several years to correct water leaks, fix related damage to ensure the integrity of the sanctuary for the future, as well as maintain the Maguire Carillon Tower and enhance external lighting.”

#### **More about architect Wallace K. Harrison:**

First Presbyterian’s sanctuary has evoked awe in worshippers and visitors since 1958. The building’s unconventional angular form surprised the community, earning it the nickname of Fish Church while under construction. But that was not its central idea. A soaring, acoustically responsive space bathed in mottled blue light was what architect Wallace K. Harrison envisioned when he asked the building committee, “Have you ever thought what it would be like to live in a giant sapphire?” Today, this beautiful space continues to capture everyone’s hearts and imagination.

Harrison brought together an international team to collaborate in realizing his vision. The sanctuary’s contemporary materials and structure express the reverence and mood of sacred gothic architecture without literally copying specific details. The *dalle de verre*—chunks of colored slab glass embedded in mortar and featured in three massive wall assemblies—narrates the central tenets of Christian belief. The fragmented representational figures, composed in the style of Fernand Leger, a close colleague of Harrison, are set within intense polychromatic abstract fields. Widely published when it opened, the Fish Church introduced *dalle de verre* to the United States and monumental modern architecture to Stamford.

Harrison was at the peak of his career in 1952 and had been featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* when he received the commission for First Presbyterian. The magazine noted that his buildings were better known than he was. These included Rockefeller Center, where he was instrumental in its planning and execution, his iconic design for the Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939 New York World's Fair, his post-war design for the Alcoa headquarters in Pittsburgh, the first aluminum-clad skyscraper, and his work as lead architect of a team of international 'consultants' on the planning of the UN headquarters in New York City, then approaching completion, which demonstrated the first use of a glass curtain wall in a skyscraper. Harrison had also worked on less visible projects at a smaller scale including low-cost housing using pre-cast concrete in central America during World War II. His work, as a whole, demonstrated his strong interest in technological innovation and great skill at collaborative master-planning, but he had never designed a church. First Presbyterian attracted Harrison as a welcome break to engage at a more personal level compared to large-scale projects like the UN nearing completion and Lincoln Center just starting up.

First Presbyterian Church of Stamford is located at 1101 Bedford Street, Stamford, CT 06905; 1.3 miles north of the Stamford Metro-North station and I-95.

Highland Green Foundation is a 501(c)(3) supporting community outreach programs focused on education, music and the arts, and preservation, all on the campus of First Presbyterian Church of Stamford.

#### **WEBSITES LINKS**

First Presbyterian Church of Stamford

[www.fishchurch.org](http://www.fishchurch.org)

Highland Green Foundation

[highlandgreenfoundation.org](http://highlandgreenfoundation.org)

Capital Campaign

[Capital Campaign - Highland Green Foundation](#)

National Historic Landmark Nomination

[The Fish Church NHL Nomination](#)

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