

History of First Baptist Church

1873 to 1998

The First Baptist Church of Greensburg was the direct outgrowth of a Bible School begun in 1863 by *John Mensch*. The formal organization took place on April 5, 1873 in Park's Hall in Ludwig. (Now the 6th Ward of Greensburg). The building still stands on the left corner at the intersection of Hamilton Avenue and West Otterman west-bound.

Most of the charter members came by letter from Big Sewickly Baptist Church, six miles South of Greensburg. *John Mensch* was elected the first Church Clerk. It is interesting to note *that David S. Turney*, a life-long member of this church until his death in 1999, was the great-grandson of *John Mensch* and the grandson of *William F. Weaver*, one of the founders of this church.

In the 1870's, there was a body of water at the bottom of West Otterman Street where Gayville now stands called Zeller's Pond. In 1873, our first pastor, *Brother R. C. Morgan (1873-1874)*, officiated at the baptism of fourteen candidates in Zeller's Pond. It was the first Apostolic baptismal service Greensburg had ever witnessed. It made a lasting impression on an outdoor congregation of 1500 people.

Dr. Morgan wrote to the historical committee of our church in 1923 from his home in Glendale, California. He reminisced about his meetings held in Ludwig. He remembered, "*the late Frank Cowan at the meeting with his picture camera and publishing the pictures in Frank Cowan's Illustrated Paper*" He also wrote "*On Sunday, after my morning sermon in Irwin, I rode on horseback through storm and sunshine, heat and cold, for the afternoon service in Ludwick then back to Irwin for the evening service. Thank God I had a constitution like New England granite, often drenched to the skin through all the service, but nothing daunted or phased me in my zeal for the Master..*"

In our attempt to relate the past to the present, we note the fact that the first baby enrolled in the Cradle Roll Department of our Bible School was *Henrietta Simpson*. (foot note: *It is ironic that Miss Henrietta Simpson was called home the day this piece was written (March 19, 1998) Henrietta was ninety-five years old. She was baptized in 1916. She served in many capacities and as secretary of the Board of Trustees as recent as 1973.*)

Dr. Andrew Jackson Meek, our third pastor, came at a transition time in the life of our church. The church members had worshiped for seventeen years in a frame building converted from a produce

warehouse just a short distance from where the first organizational meetings were held. Ludwig had ceased to be the center of Greensburg's growing population, so the church bought a property on Vanneer Avenue and then traded it for the site at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Third Street. By then, services were being held in the Y.M.C.A. hall in the Kuhns Building. (*Later to be known as the Troutman Building*). Worship continued there during the construction of the new church building on Pennsylvania Avenue. Finally, the new church building was dedicated on June 7, 1896.

Incidentally, our fiftieth anniversary history credits *Dr. Meek* with writing the hymn "*The Solid Rock*" which was sung at the cornerstone laying of the Greensburg, Derry, and New Kensington churches. The composers credited in print with writing the lyrics and music both died when *Dr. Meek* was just a young boy. The writer wonders what the histories of Derry and New Kensington have to say on the subject.

The mortgage on the original church building at Third Street and Pennsylvania Avenue was lifted and burned in 1907 after only eleven years. By 1912, the congregation had grown so large that elaborate plans were adopted to build a new church on the then-present site. However, due to the outbreak of World War I, the plans were temporarily abandoned. They were revived when *Dr. Henry Joseph Whalen* (1916-1927) became our seventh pastor. Instead of building as proposed, however, a new site was purchased at Third Street and Maple Avenue. (*If you stand on the right corner of Third and Maple as you face Maple, you will be looking at the property described.*) It was during this pastorate that we bought our first parsonage. It was located at 425 Chestnut Street in Southwest Greensburg. It was home to *Dr. Whalen* and then to *Dr. Roger H Williams*, our eighth pastor until his retirement in 1956.

Fund-raising plans were put in place to build, but again the plans were changed to remodel due to the economic picture in 1929. The building was renovated and a Sunday School unit was added at a cost of \$55,000. In 1963, we bought the former Peoples Natural Gas building adjacent to the south side of the church. Also in 1963, a three year capital funds campaign was conducted to re-build at the Pennsylvania location. At the end of the three years (in 1966), *Mr and Mrs Charles Leslie*, long time members of our church, offered to sell only to us, a large parcel of land in Hempfield Township at a sacrificially low price. The condition of the sale was that the property must be used as the site of a new church built by First Baptist.

Amid the turmoil of whether to move or stay, our new Pastor Number Ten, *Reverend George H. Davidson* arrived. It was not an easy situation, but he had three great things going for him: previous business experience before entering the ministry, an ability to bring people together in their adversity,

and the ability to convince them to go with him as he followed where God was leading. In 1967, the church voted to purchase the land offered. *Under Reverend Davidson 's* leadership, a Building and Plans Committee was established chaired by *Walter H. Smith*, a member with exceptional experience and skills in management and organization. Everyone became deeply involved and committed. It was not known at the time, but it would require that commitment to remain focused for fully nine years to reach the goal.

Finally, on April 28, 1974, ground-breaking ceremonies were held at our present location and our new church building was dedicated to the glory of God in a beautiful service on April 27, 1975. We decided to refinance some of our debt in 1976 by offering eight year Trust Bonds in 26 denominations of \$1000, \$500, and \$100 to bear interest at 6% per year. Almost \$46,000 was raised through these bond sales.

As we struggled with our debts, about two years later, we burned our mortgage, redeemed the bonds, and were debt-free. All this was made possible through a large and generous bequest of *Anna Mary Pollins McGovern*, a long-time member of First Baptist. To cover such generosity with one sentence does not do the act justice, but more will follow.

History is a collection of related facts, sometimes interesting, sometimes boring, but history is always revealing. The related pieces of the development of our church home makes one realize how God works in our lives to bless those who follow. May we always remember those who lovingly sacrificed so that we could enjoy and rejoice in God for the blessings we have today.

ANNA MARY POLLINS MCGOVERN

Anna Mary Pollins McGovern was born in Greensburg on January 20, 1897. She was baptized at the First Baptist Church in Greensburg on February 14, 1907. *Anna Mary* was a faithful, life-long member of this church and of her first love, the Amoma Sunday School Class.

Upon her death on February 27, 1977, it was revealed that she had left her entire estate to her church. Her life-long friend, *Henrietta Simpson* was named administrator of the estate. As was mentioned previously, it was through her generosity that the location we occupy today was completely debt-free in about three years after completion.

Not only were the mortgage and outstanding bonds retired, but the paving was finished, the carillon was purchased, the *Davidson* love gift provided, and \$16,500 was allotted to Missions. *Gertrude Phares*

reported to the Board of Trustees the Missionary and Stewardship's proposal for allocation and it was approved. In the final accounting, the total estate amounted to almost \$160,000.

Uppermost in the minds of the church family was what would provide a fine and fitting memorial to the memory of our dear friend and benefactor, *Mrs. Anna Mary McGovern*. There was a unanimous desire to beautify our baptistry in keeping with its purpose. *Mrs. Mary Lea Elliott* and her son *Tim* had a friend who was a talented Christian artist. At the October, 1977 quarterly business meeting, the church took action to implement the memorial. The beautiful mural that provides the backdrop for our baptistry was dedicated September 17, 1978:

Chris Phares - Moderator - presented a statement of background.

Dr. Lawrence T. Slaght -Interim Pastor - presented the artist.

Artist John M. Markulin - presented the mural.

Vernon Frazee - Chairman - Bd. of Trustees - accepted the mural.

Dr. Slaght offered the dedicatory prayer.

Joe Ewing - Diaconate Chairman - led the dedicatory response.

The Senior and Junior choirs directed by *Forrest Moore* and accompanied by organist, *Helen Williams* each presented beautiful anthems.

Hopefully, when the panels are open in preparation for a baptism, this piece will serve to bring the observer into an even closer relationship with the event and its meaning.

The tenth pastor of our church was *George H. Davidson*. Much has been written about him in developing the history of our physical church and its location today in 1999. *Reverend Davidson* was born in Camden, New Jersey. He graduated from Eastern Baptist College with a Bachelor of Arts degree, and was also granted a Bachelor of Theology degree from Eastern Baptist Seminary. He served five pastorates before coming to Greensburg from First Baptist Church of Ellwood City, PA.

George and his wife *Myrtle*, along with their three children, *Dean*, 19; *Don*, 16; and *Ruth*, 14 were introduced to the church family at an informal reception on February 12, 1966. On Sunday, February 13, *Reverend Davidson* preached his candidate sermon. Immediately following, a congregational meeting was held and the invitation was unanimously extended to *George* and he accepted. As the saying goes, '*...and the rest is history.*' "

Reverend Davidson as our Pastor was a dedicated man of God who preached from the Bible. His leadership was unassuming yet assertive. He was a skilled communicator and arbiter who loved discussion, but really disliked being drawn into an argument. He had a great sense of humor but one had to pay attention. *George's* love of good food (especially dessert...) was only surpassed by his love of all sports. He was an excellent bowler and really liked baseball.

As has been mentioned, *Pastor Davidson* had a good sense of business, having spent some time in the business world before being called into the ministry. He also served as the co-chairman of the \$850,000 Capital Funds Campaign for the infirmary at the Baptist Home for Western Pennsylvania three years before his pastorate began in Greensburg.

Reverend Davidson felt strongly that a person wishing to join First Baptist should not be prevented from doing so because he or she had not been baptized by immersion. Through his efforts, the Constitution was amended to provide for Associate Membership with two restrictions: 1) could not hold office on the Board of Deacons, and 2) could not represent our church at the Biennial Convention. It was during *George's* tenure that the congregation voted to leave the Pittsburgh Baptist Association because we felt our interests would be better served away from the metropolitan Pittsburgh area. A committee was formed to meet with various other Baptist churches to consider forming a new association. As a result, the First Baptist Church of Jeannette joined with us to form the Laurel Baptist Association of American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware. The Association came into being in August, 1976, and the following officers were elected:

Moderator: *Curtis Craig, Jr.* Jeannette

Vice Moderator: *Earl Ramsey* . . .Greensburg

Clerk: *Chris Phares.* Greensburg

Treasurer: *Mary Lea Elliott.*Greensburg

Regional Nominating Rep: *Rev. John Pro.* . . Jeannette

Regional Board: *Rev. George Davidson* Greensburg

George had the conviction that he was following God's plan for our future. This conviction, his expertise, and good luck worked together to locate us where we are today. The Pastor's good luck was in having the right leaders in the right place at the right time:

Moderator: *David Turney*

Chairman, Bd. of Trustees: *Vernon Frazee*

Chairman, Building Council: *Walter Smith*

Chairman, Finance Committee: *Clarence Geckle*

Chairman, Plans & Construction: *Billy Strickland*

However, in the middle of this energy-depleting activity, God intervened. *George* could no longer take the stairs on the run, two at a time. He scheduled a complete physical, and was told that open heart surgery was needed. Early in 1972, the operation was performed. In those days, the procedure was not very common. This writer remembers an account related to him that reflected the faith and graciousness of *Reverend Davidson*. Surrounded by concerned family in the hospital room just before going into surgery, *George* smiled at them and said, "*Please do not worry. I can't lose. If successful, I'll wake up to your smiling faces. If not, I'll be with those I have loved and missed for so long.*" The surgery was highly successful, and *Reverend Davidson* returned to the pulpit the middle of May, 1972. Plans got back on track for the new church, and on April 28, 1974, ground breaking ceremonies were held, and the new building was dedicated April 27, 1975. Two years later, the mortgage was burned and we were completely debt-free.

In July, 1977, *Reverend Davidson* announced his intention to retire at the end of the year. Subsequently, the church members voted to grant *George* and *Myrtle* a generous love gift to enable the purchase of a retirement home in Bradenton, Florida. A farewell reception was held on January 27th, and on January 28, 1978, *Reverend Davidson* preached his final sermon as Pastor of our church. The sermon was titled, "*Finally, My Brethren.*" It was a sad day for the church family and the beginning of a new chapter in the history of First Baptist of Greensburg.

The Pulpit Committee, led by *Joe Ewing*, worked diligently from the middle of July, 1977 until August, 1978 seeking a candidate who would ultimately become the eleventh pastor of our church. The Committee found in the course of their search that potential candidates would rather buy a home and build equity in it instead of living in a church-owned parsonage. As a result, consideration was given to selling our parsonage.

Reverend Frank E. Girdwood was presented to the church in August, 1978 and was unanimously called to serve as our Pastor. His family consisted of his wife *Sue* and their children *Lisa* and *Steve*. The *Girdwood's* wanted to live in their own home, so the parsonage at 89 Northmont St. was put up for sale, and a \$25,000 loan was granted to *Reverend Girdwood*. Only interest at 5% was to be paid on the

principal monthly. The principal amount of the loan would be due ninety days after the completion of his ministry at our church.

The first full year of *Frank's* pastorate was getting acquainted as Pastor and people. He visited in over two hundred homes of our church family. He became active in the Greensburg Ministerial Association and established a friendly relationship with the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. He initiated the consideration by the church of the Bethel Bible Study series, a four year cycle of study with layperson involvement in the last two years. It was also in 1979 that our church opened its doors to the Child Development Center - a government-subsidized center dedicated to helping children with learning and other disabilities. We rented certain rooms to them for offices and shared our Sunday School space on the second floor of the Educational Wing with them for a monthly rental. This relationship continued for thirteen years until the need of both parties for additional space and changing government regulations made it necessary for the CDC to secure new quarters in Delmont.

Our church hired our first Minister of Christian Education in November, 1981. After much prayer and many months of searching, *Reverend Judith Daniels* was called to fill the position. She was installed January 24, 1982. Her close friend, *Reverend Larry Waltz* from the staff of Philadelphia brought the evening message. The Bethel Bible Series got off to a running start with the completion of the first year of a two year training program by the Pastor and eleven teacher-trainees. This program was to result in a strong Bible literacy that has continued to serve our church well.

Reverend Girdwood was a strong advocate of a one-board church, as was our interim pastor, *Dr. Slaughter*, who published a book on the subject. It did not take place during their tenure, however.

During this period our church's Vacation Bible School reached its peak under the guidance of *Judy Daniels* and the leadership of *Virginia Ewing*. After ten years of faithful, effective service as pastor of First Baptist, *Pastor Girdwood* submitted his resignation on July 20, 1989 to accept the call to the First Baptist Church of Waterbury, Connecticut effective October 1, 1989. *Frank, Sue, Steve, and Lisa* have remained in close contact with their many friends in our church, and *Steve* even made *Don Weightman* his father-in-law by marrying *Debbie Weightman*. *Frank and Sue* honored us by attending and taking a large part in celebrating our 125th anniversary home-coming event. Thank you! You are ever in our prayers.

If ever there was a "man for the time" it was *Reverend Dr. Cary Ballbach*, who served as interim pastor.

In September of 1989, a pulpit committee, under the able leadership of *Charles Bernatt*, was formed and at a special meeting of the Board of Trustees on May 24, 1990, he presented a profile of a candidate unanimously approved by the Committee with a request for approval of the package by the Trustees. At the time, the profile was thought to be quite vague, but it was approved. When the name of the candidate was revealed to be *Reverend Dean A. Davidson*, the son of our former pastor, we understood why. Most of us would have recognized the identity because we had followed *Dean* since his college days.

Dean preached his candidate sermon on July 8, 1990. Immediately following, the church voted unanimously to extend the call. *Dean* and his family accepted. *Reverend Davidson* preached his first sermon as our twelfth and present pastor on August 26, 1990. He was formally installed in an impressive ceremony on September 23, 1990, at which his father, *Reverend George Davidson*, presented the "Charge to the Pastor."

Dean has served us now for nine years of spectacular movement and change that the majority feels has been the greatest move to serve the Lord and our community in the history of First Baptist. We are governed by a new Constitution which features the one-Board concept under the leadership of Council. We have become even stronger in our home and foreign missions giving. Two Sunday services, one a contemporary and the other a traditional have been instituted which appeals to our church family in addition to attracting new, unchurched visitors who may become members of our church family in the future. The most outstanding growth has been in our Community Outreach Ministries. Under the leadership of *Dean* and Council and implemented by many dedicated members, we actively and directly financially support seven ministries: Baptists Against Abuse, New Baby Ministry, Seeing Eye Dogs, Troubled Youth Ministry, Prison Ministry, Food For The Hungry, and All God's Children.

What a future for the First Baptist Church of Greensburg as we approach the new millennium!

(Compiled and Written by Chris Phares for 125th Anniversary of First Baptist Church of Greensburg, 1998)