

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DENTON

Historical Narrative researched and written by Charlotte D. Nabors for Texas Historical Commission THC subject marker application, Denton County (1997)

The town of Denton was organized in 1857, for the purpose of placing the county seat in the center of the county.¹ The Baptists and Methodists had organized congregations around the area, though none had erected buildings, meeting in public buildings instead.² Brush arbors were built in the summer to hold revivals. People would come to these great revivals and camp out for two weeks at a time.³ From this custom, the name "camp meeting" was derived.⁴ Often worship was disturbed by an unexpected visit by a roving band of Indians. It was a common sight to see arms carried to church meetings.

The various churches began to meet in the Masonic Hall on Sundays during the 1860's. Each denomination had a Sunday in the Hall. It has always been accepted that the First Christian Church was organized May 27, 1868, however, the first issue of the Denton Monitor issued on May 30, 1868, announced that the Methodists held their meetings on the first Sunday; the Cumberland Presbyterians met on the second Sunday; the Christians met on the third Sunday with Terrell Jasper, pastor; and the Baptists on the fourth Sunday.⁵ This would indicate that the First Christian Church was an organized and actively functioning group well before this accepted birth date.

¹ C. A. Bridges, History of Denton, Texas (Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1978), p. 68.

²Ibid., p. 105.

³Ibid., p. 78.

⁴Ibid., p. 185.

⁵Ibid., p. 105 and 106.

Elder Terrell Jasper of Holford Prairie, Denton County, was the leader of the group that organized the Christian Church. Among the charter members were D. J. Eddleman, John J. Lovejoy, Jr., C. W. Geers, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Egan, Captain and Mrs. J. H. Degan, Dr. G. W. Hughes, Mr. and Mrs. Gideon Cook, Mrs. Hollen M. Clark, and Mr. Matthews.⁶

All of the churches continued to meet in the Masonic Hall until 1871 when Cumberland Presbyterian built a building on the corner of West Oak and Boliver. The Methodist Episcopal, usually call Southern Methodist, followed in 1872, with a building located in the area between the present Sanctuary and Cole Chapel of today's First Methodist Church. The First Baptists erected their first church house on the south side of West Hickory. On August 2, 1876, the First Christian Church obtained the north half of Block 15-the block now occupied by the Police Station.⁷ On this lot facing North Elm, presumably in 1876, they erected a separate house of worship. It was a small frame structure with a moderately high belfry.⁸ This building was later moved to a lot on West Hickory diagonally across the street from the site of the church buildings remembered by present members of the congregation at Piner and Hickory.

By 1892, attendance had fallen off and for a time regular services were no

⁶Ibid., p. 105; Various records of the Church and its member, First Christian Church, Denton, Texas.

⁷Edna Haynes McCormick, William Lee McCormick A Study in Tolerance (Dallas, Texas: Book Craft, 1952), p. 89.

⁸Bridges, History of Denton, Texas, p. 155.

longer held. John W. Marshall, an evangelist was called to hold a "meeting" for the congregation. The church was greatly strengthened as a result of these meetings, and at the close, Marshall was called to be pastor.⁹

During the ministry of John Marshall, a portion of the membership formed the Pearl Street Church of Christ in 1893. C. C. Yancey, in his history of the Church, remembers that the split was brought about by a disagreement over a choice of pastors, not over the use of the organ in the church. The organ had become a part of the service some years before the split and the vote to have the organ had been unanimous.¹⁰

In 1902, the congregation filed for and received a charter from the State of Texas and legally became "First Christian Church of Denton, Texas". This charter was signed by J. W. Ripy, Dr. C. Lipscomb, C. C. Yancey, P. J. Beyette, S. K. Hallam, and M. P. Crowder. One of the provisions of the charter was that the management of the affairs of the church should be under the control of a Board of three trustees. The first trustees appointed were J. W. Ripy, Dr. C. Lipscomb, and M. P. Crowder.¹¹

During the summer of 1902, a temporary tabernacle was built on a lot at Piner and Hickory and the congregation worshiped in this building until it was torn down in preparation for the new brick building. The court house was used as a place of worship until the new building was completed. Allen Wilson of Indianapolis, Indiana,

⁹1933 Ledger given by C. C. Yancey containing his history of the church, First Christian Church, Denton, Texas.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Various Church Records, First Christian Church.

one of the foremost ministers of the brotherhood, preached the first sermon in the new building, November 20, 1904.¹²

In October, 1915, T. H. Matthieson of New Zealand, was called as pastor of the church. Early in his ministry, an examination by competent authorities revealed the building was unsafe. The official board and the congregation decided not only to repair the old building but to erect a commodious and up-to-date Bible School annex. A. C. Smither of St. Louis, preached the first sermon in the remodeled building July 8, 1916.¹³ The Church property at that time represented an investment greater than any church in the city. During World War I, the Bible School annex served as headquarters of the Red Cross.

Sunday, May 12, 1918, the church met in a great homecoming to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its organization. The last of the money necessary to pay off the indebtedness had been raised. Albert Erwin, chairman of the Board handed the mortgage to Mrs. S. J. Fling who was approaching her eighty-first birthday and had been chosen by the Board to apply the match. As the congregation saw the mortgage go up in smoke, they rose and sang "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow".¹⁴

Another Red Letter Day occurred in May, 1924, during the ministry of J. M. Perry. Four hundred and eighty-five people attended Bible School that Sunday.

Numerous repairs were made to the building; but in 1939, the building was

¹²1933 Ledger, First Christian Church.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid and Various Church Records, First Christian Church.

declared unsafe and the old building was condemned and sold to a wrecking company. The congregation met elsewhere until a new building could be constructed. The building used some of the material from the old building including the stained glass Memorial windows. A box of items that had been in the cornerstone of the earlier church was placed in the cornerstone of the new church.¹⁵

One of the highlights in the history of the church was the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee in 1943. This was a three day celebration from May 23 to 26. Dr. Graham Frank of Central Christian Church in Dallas, and Dr. Clifford Weaver of First Christian Church in McKinney, were speakers.¹⁶

On January 16, 1944, there was another mortgage burning ceremony at which time the church was cleared of debt. Mrs. G. W. Ballard, the longest member of the church, struck the match. W. K. Baldrige, Treasurer, held the note. W. B. Peters, chairman of the Board, and G. L. Messenger, pastor, also took part in the ceremony.¹⁷

Immediately the church began a campaign for future development called "The Church of the Future". In 1954, the decision was made to relocate the church facilities. The members of the congregation began a "Magic Box" savings program. The Fulton Street site was purchased in 1956, with money from the "Magic Boxes". The present building was built in 1959. Designed by O'Neil Ford, it is unique in its form of construction and in its symbolism. The concrete roof is a hyperbolic

¹⁵Various Church Records, First Christian Church.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

paraboloid supported by the foundation and ten columns, rather than the walls. The five concrete columns on each side of the sanctuary symbolize hands lifted in prayer. The ridges and valleys of the roof symbolize hands folded in prayer. The cross above the communion table was designed and crafted by Miss Marie Delleney as a gift in memory of her mother. The cross is constructed of Italian Smalti mosaic, a process of fusing wood, 14K gold, and glass to form mosaic pieces.

The antependia, hangings or screens before an altar, were dedicated Sunday, March 7, 1976. The eight needlepoint panels depicting seasons of the Christian religion were designed by Judy Oelfke of Ft. Worth and crafted by Mrs. James Dougherty, Louise Graham, Mrs. Hugh Ayer, Mrs. Lloyd Bennett, Mrs. Charles Sanders, wife of the minister, Mrs. John McKenzie, and Mrs. Gene Smith.

The most recent addition to the church is the Reuter pipe organ. Dr. Dale Luttrell and Dr. Janet Luttrell led a drive to raise funds for its purchase in 1990. Under the leadership of Mr. Randolph (Randy) Robinson, a year later, the handmade organ was installed and dedicated.

In 1968, the church congregation celebrated its 100th anniversary. In 1984, the 25th anniversary of the present building was another cause for celebration.

A history of church buildings is, in truth, a story of love and dedication of people--individuals, families, small groups and large groups; of men, women, and children. The history of the First Christian Church of Denton is an ongoing story of the advancement of the Kingdom of God and the teachings of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a story of ever changing faces but never changing purpose.

This congregation has always been a forward looking group. In 1957, recognizing the great contribution of women, the church elected seven women to serve as deacons. They were Mrs. Ted Lewis, Mrs. Ernest McCray, Mrs. Flake Williams, Mrs. Boyd Armstrong, Miss Mildred Hodges, Mrs. Olive Johnson, and Mrs. Bruce Coates. Mrs. George Hendricks became an Elder in 1977. Mrs. W. K. Baldrige was the first woman to be named trustee. Then in 1991, with great expectations, the church called Dr. Charlotte Nabors and Dr. Oran Nabors to serve as co-pastors. This call was an opportunity for the Nabors' to serve one church together and another first for this congregation.¹⁸

The observance of this One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary is like other anniversaries in this church's long history. It is a brief pause for remembering past accomplishments and those that made them, and a time to renew the spirit for the work ahead.

¹⁸ibid.

Sources Consulted

1. Bridges, C. A. History of Denton, Texas. Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1978.
2. McCormick, Edna Haynes. William Lee McCormick A Study in Tolerance. Dallas, Texas: Book Craft, 1952.
3. Denton, Texas. First Christian Church. 1933 Ledger given by C. C. Yancey containing his history of the church.
4. Denton, Texas. First Christian Church. Various records of the Church and its members.