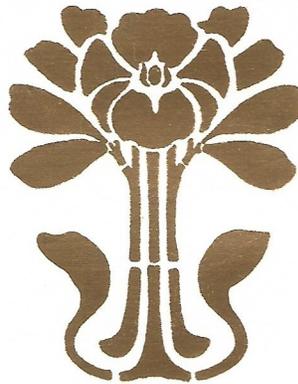


March We Onward



A Centennial History of the
First Baptist Church of
Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

1889 - 1989

By
Kenneth Moore Startup, PhD

Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, was much like any other Sunday morning near Christmas. Sunday school children talked excitedly of the holidays and Christmas surprises and treats. Ladies chatted before their classes about Christmas chores, the cooking, company coming, a little more shopping to do. Men loitered together in small groups in the church vestibule reminding each other of how bleak Christmas-time had been in recent years. They expressed gratitude that business was improving, times were better. Everyone enjoyed the carol singing during the worship hour. The pastor offered a sermon appropriate to the season. The service concluded, men, women, families, made their way to warm homes and Sunday dinner. All seemed tranquil in Walnut Ridge and in the other towns and cities across America that Sunday morning. Half a world away the skies had erupted in death and destruction over the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Pacific.

As the members of First Baptist gathered for their evening service, they expressed shock, tinged with disbelief, at the day's events. Prayers were offered for the president and the nation. The following day the Congress declared war on the Axis powers. The apparent suddenness of America's entry into the war was stunning. The citizens of Walnut Ridge had been aware of the rising tensions between the United States and the Axis — and much of the world had been at war since September, 1939. But, still, no one seemed prepared for so jarring a transition from peace to war. Men and women of Walnut Ridge would have been even more astonished had they realized how profoundly the war would impact the economy and routine of their community.

Within six months of the war's beginning, farmland and woodland north of the town was transformed by the construction of massive air base which would serve as home to thousands of servicemen. The members of First Church realized their opportunity and obligation to minister to those stationed at the base. In August, 1942 the church appropriated the funds necessary to prepare a "lawn" party for the "soldiers". And the pastor, C. G. Davis, asked the church to consider purchasing a loud speaker for use at sidewalk services. Certainly the sidewalks of Walnut Ridge were busy during the war years. Servicemen jammed the town night and day. They came from all over the country with their diverse, exotic accents and cultural values. Many of the young men were anxious and often lonely. Some found a place of encouragement and spiritual renewal in the First Church. Members often opened their homes to the servicemen providing good meals and good conversation. For many members, befriending a young man stationed in Walnut Ridge helped lessen the longing and anxiety they felt for their own sons who were away in distant camps or theaters of war.

Near the end of 1942 the church opened a reading room for the servicemen. The space for the reading room came at the expense of the Sunday school program which was again growing in the early Forties. New families were moving to Walnut Ridge to work on the air base or to take advantage of the economic opportunities provided by the base. Many of the newcomers joined First Baptist. Most members took the constricted, cramped classrooms in stride. It was wartime. Everything was in short supply, flour, gasoline, and, as it turned out, Sunday school space. The space problem would have been less severe had "the hut" still existed, but that structure had been demolished in 1941.

The church membership expanded, so too the church budget, from 3600 dollars in 1941 to 7500 in 1944. The dramatic increase was the direct result of new families and new money from the base. Improvements in the sanctuary — long overdue — were accomplished. Fresh paint, new floor coverings, window repair, and the addition of an attic fan made the building more attractive and comfortable. And the church was able to resume its tradition of significant support for missions. In 1943, 1800 dollars, thirty percent of the budget went to benevolence and cooperative missions.

But these positive developments masked a serious problem. The pastor and several members were at odds, so much so that a number of deacons had requested the pastor's resignation. The pastor

complied. At the next regular business meeting the issue surfaced before the entire congregation. A motion passed asking the pastor to withdraw his resignation and requested that the deacons, “rescind actions taken against the pastor.” The resolution further stated, “we hereby pledge our entire support and cooperation in any effort to prevent friction between church, deacons, and pastor if the above stated proceedings (the original request for Davis’ resignation) are rescinded as we request.” Despite the church’s recommendation, the pastor decided it was best to leave. This difficulty between Davis and certain members should not be over emphasized. Even the Apostles disagreed among themselves, sometimes to the point of separation. But the conflict should not be ignored. If nothing else, the event makes clear the reality that prosperity and growth are not invariably productive of harmony. Indeed, there may be as much — or more — danger of dissension in good times as in those times of stress and want. Vigilance, humility, and kindness are required at all times to avoid potentially divisive quarrels.

With Davis’ departure the church turned to D. Blake Westmoreland of the First Baptist Church of Morganfield, Kentucky. The call was extended to Westmoreland on February 11, 1945. Judge E. H. Tharp, aged and valued leader in the church, reminded the congregation of the considerable distance Westmoreland would be moving. He suggested that the church offer 100 dollars to assist the new pastor. The motion passed. Mrs. Bridges, a member of the pulpit committee, also recommended that the church grant the pastor a two week paid vacation annually. Again, the motion passed. Clearly, the congregation hoped to make Westmoreland feel welcome and secure.

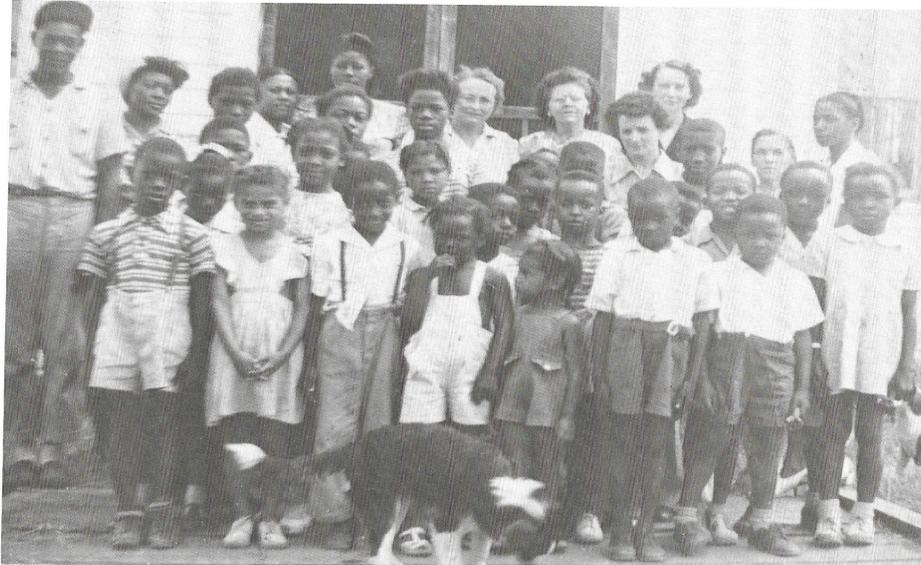
In April, 1945 the new pastor, his wife, and their twins arrived in Walnut Ridge. The Westmorelands were immediately popular. In May the church voted to renovate the pastor’s study. And soon, a screen porch and floor furnace were added to the parsonage.

Westmoreland brought great intensity and energy to his pastorate. He envisioned a dramatic future for the church and he challenged members to share the vision. He especially pressed for a building program. Within six months of his arrival, the church committed to a major construction effort. Plans were drawn for a new house of worship and an educational facility. The idea was to build in two phases. There was a note of caution in the church’s decision to build. Such caution derived from the terrible trauma the church had endured in the 1930’s as a result of its construction debts. Still, the cautious tone of the resolution should not obscure the church’s determination to improve its physical facilities. And the church’s facilities were in need of attention. Sunday school space was inadequate even after the closing of the servicemen’s reading room. The sanctuary increasingly revealed signs of age, despite recent cosmetic improvements. Consequently, the building plans were approved and contributions to a building fund slowly accrued.

As the church moved toward the construction of new buildings, a plan was proposed and approved which modified the church’s leadership structure. New committees were created, old ones were discarded. Westmoreland specifically recommended that no member serve on more than one committee. The recommendation reflected the pastor’s keen interest in every phase of the church’s life. He wanted a voice in the mechanics as well as the ministry of the church. Most members found Westmoreland’s intimate, involved, aggressive style of leadership reassuring and salutary. An effective preacher, constant visitor, visionary, and planner Westmoreland also found time for significant involvement outside the church. In 1946, Westmoreland began teaching two mornings each week at Southern Baptist College. The college was only five years old and needed the services of the talented, energetic pastor. The church approved of Westmoreland’s service to the college.

The church included the college in its budget in 1945 and authorized a special offering for the school the next year. The church had periodically supported other schools during its history. The proximity of Southern would prompt a more consistent pattern of support in the future. The relationship

between the college and the church was further strengthened by the church's temporary sponsorship of a mission on the college campus after the school's relocation at the air base in 1946.



In the mid-1940s, several ladies from First Baptist conducted a Vacation Bible School at the Hazel Street Baptist Church. First Baptist ladies included in this photograph are: Mrs. Ara Rodgers, Mrs. Pearlie Wilcoxson, Mrs. Polly Allison, and Mrs. Nell Westmoreland.



This is one of the earliest photographs of the Men's Early Morning Bible Class. It was taken in 1947. Included in the photograph are: Jack Rainey, B. L. Dinkins, Harold Boyd, Roy Meadows, Rev. D. Blake Westrnoreland, E. K. Riddick, Bill Anderson, Dr. H. N. Chambers, Grover Elkins, Gilbert Rainey, Bernard Matthews, Bill Iean, I. D. Stewart, Warren Miller, Lester Kell, Addison Rainwater, George Henry, Dave Norwood, Homer Kell, Mr. Ramer, Alvin Wilcoxson, Mr. Woolridge, Denver Hall, Carl Moore, Bunk Allison, Matt Dodd, Lindsey Woodring, Larry Sloan, Mr. Cullett, Russell Rainey, Van MoCullough, Robie Berry, Pat Patterson, Herman Phillips, Red Adamson, Iudge A. S. Irby, Oscar Blackford, Keiffer Campbell, R. D. Burrow, Ed Henry, Enos Tolson, A. W. Wilcoxson, Ed Auldridge, Gardner Long, and W. C. Bryan.

In April, 1948, Blake Westmoreland resigned as pastor of First Church. His tenure had been successful. Notably, the construction of the educational building was completed during his tenure. Shortly before his departure, Westmoreland led the church in a ceremony to dedicate the new building. He reminded the congregation that the building was “so constructed to last”. He explained that he was not referring simply to the mortar and steel used in the physical construction, but rather he believed the Walnut Ridge church and its ministry were built to last, grounded upon a sacrificial faith and a vision of service to Christ and his Kingdom.

The dedication of the educational building was a joyous and inspirational occasion, a high moment to conclude Westmoreland’s pastorate. And yet, Westmoreland’s departure was tinged with disappointment. His great goal, the construction of a new sanctuary remained unrealized, though the church had determined to pursue the project. He encouraged the congregation to press forward with their construction plans after his departure.

Seibert Haley succeeded Westmoreland as pastor. During his three year tenure the church continued to raise funds for a sanctuary while members also contributed toward the elimination of the indebtedness incurred in constructing the educational building. The church had financed a significant portion of its building cost through the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. In its origins the church had depended upon the support of other Baptists through their cooperative giving to missions, in its maturity the church again benefited from the cooperative spirit among Baptists. Certainly, the church had played its cooperative part faithfully through the years and had thereby assisted many churches and missions across the nation and around the world.

Haley’s pastorate ended in 1951. On his last Sunday the church collected a special offering sufficient to eliminate its remaining construction debt. With Haley’s departure the church turned again to Blake Westmoreland. He was gratified by the church’s second call. He expected the church to proceed now with the construction of the sanctuary.



This photograph is similar to one that appeared in the Times Dispatch. It was taken on August 11, 1947 at the groundbreaking ceremony for the educational building. Among those in the picture are: Mable Bridges, Mrs. W. C. Bryan, Mrs. C. E. Elkins, Ed Henry, with the shovel, Mrs. Herman Philips, Flossie Bridges, Mrs. Len Downen, Eva Woodring, Mrs. Ada Craven, Mary Burrow, Mrs. John Hill, Mrs. Bob Graham, Ruth Baker, Bobbie, Merle Shields, J. D. Stewart, Mrs. R. D. Patterson, Gilbert Rainey, Mrs. Thomas Gardner, Jack Rainey, Dr. Chambers, L. E. Watkins, and Glover Rice. The children in the front row are: Susie Wilcoxson, Ann Fitzgerald, Martha Frances Rainey.

Westmorland and many members believed the old house of worship was largely beyond repair. The building lacked adequate seating and choir space. There was no good place for an organ. Ventilation and air circulation were poor. But the final decision to demolish the sanctuary was not easily made. Some in the fellowship had a profound sentimental attachment to the building. They had found God's grace within its walls, or seen a loved one profess faith at the altar. The worn aisles recalled joyous marriage processions and the measured steps of pallbearers. Children — now mature leaders within the church — remembered their fathers kneeling in prayer at the mourner's bench, interceding with God for the lost and distressed. For many, the old sanctuary was a treasured memorial. But necessity dictated a change and the church went forward with a program to demolish and replace the old house of worship.

In April, 1956 the congregation entered the new sanctuary. It was a plain, functional building, its construction represented much sacrifice and prayer. The completed structure gave testimony to the spirit of confidence and unity within the fellowship. Westmoreland was jubilant. Pastor and members worked with determination to fill the new facilities. The church grew steadily. By the middle of 1957 a Sunday school attendance of 325 was commonplace. The Early Morning Men's Bible Class was one of the most successful organizations in the church. The membership and leadership of this class were aggressive in reaching out to those without a church home. The class routinely found innovative ways to recruit members and draw attention to the church. On April 3, 1958 the class was featured on the front page of the local newspaper. The photograph and brief story carried the headline, "Hoxie, Walnut Ridge Firemen Honored By Early Morning Bible Class". Over one hundred members and guests were present for the breakfast and Bible study. During the preceding summer the class had sponsored the presentation of the film, "A Mighty Fortress," produced by the Billy Graham Association. The following summer the class provided church and community with the opportunity to see the Graham film, "Mr. Texas". Movies in church were quite a novelty and large crowds attended the screenings. Successful events — like the Graham films — encouraged the sense of optimism and progress which marked church life in the late Fifties.

The mood of optimism so evident in the church, also marked the national mentality during the era. The nation, after years of economic turmoil and war, seemed comfortable and confident. But serious problems lay just beneath the tranquil surface of the time, these problems periodically intruded with a force that demanded attention.

In the South, the civil rights movement shattered the tranquility of the late Fifties. Arkansas was in the very forefront of the crisis. Rumors of violence and social disruption charged the atmosphere of 1957. Probably most white Arkansas Baptists wanted nothing more than to turn away from the tormented questions of race relations. Surely the mind of the Arkansas Baptist family was deeply divided on the issue of civil rights. It was a bold step when several prominent leaders of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention recommended that a special offering be collected in 1957 for the black Arkansas Baptist College. In retrospect the move may seem innocuous, timid, but in 1957 the recommendation threatened considerable disruption within the Baptist community. Blake Westmoreland asked the people of First Church to participate in the offering to demonstrate that the Walnut Ridge congregation stood for racial harmony and against mindless and unchristian racial hostility. Westmorland knew the heart of his church. This is not to say that most members were aggressive proponents of civil rights, but rather that they were unsympathetic to overt racial repression and abuse. Too often the white southern churches of the 1950s and 1960s have been criticized for failure to take a more aggressive stand for civil rights. Such criticism is perhaps justified, but it should also be recognized that even small gestures, like the special gift for a black school, helped to check the

tide of hostility toward blacks.

Westmoreland resigned as pastor in September of 1957 to accept the call of the First Baptist Church of Brownsville, Tennessee. With Westmoreland's encouragement the Walnut Ridge fellowship called William H. Heard as the new pastor. He and Westmoreland were close friends, they had been roommates in seminary. Heard served the First Church for nearly a decade. His tenure was marked by a steady pattern of growth in numbers, programs, and financial resources. Vacation Bible Schools, Christmas and Easter cantatas, revivals, the Week of Prayer, paced the church year. Stability and routine characterized the life of the fellowship. Digressions from the established cycle — intrusions into the ordered pattern — were rare. Such an intrusion occurred in December, 1957 when the high school burned. The church offered its facilities to the school board and the board accepted. For months high school classes met at the church. Disruption of the church's normal activities was minimal. And certainly no one in the fellowship objected to the school's presence.

In September of 1959 the church celebrated its seventieth anniversary. Dr. H. E. Kirkpatrick, pastor from 1917 until 1922, delivered the commemorative sermon before a large audience which included numerous guests. The church's historical committee also distributed a brief survey of the church's history to the congregation. Hundreds participated in the "family dinner" which followed the morning service. It was one of the great days in the life of the church. Five years later the church enjoyed a seventy-fifth anniversary celebration. The high point of the day came in an afternoon service when the congregation gathered to "burn the note of indebtedness" on the new sanctuary. Blake Westmoreland had returned to participate in the day's events, and he was given the privilege of lighting the note.

These special celebrations reflected the church's sense of stability and maturity. The church felt that it had a past worth commemorating, worth preserving. This sense of its historical significance is characteristic of an institution which feels comfortable with its identity and confident about its future. It is significant that there had been no fiftieth anniversary celebration, but then the church's circumstances in 1939 had not seemed particularly promising, only a short time before questions had been raised as to whether the church should even attempt to call a minister. How different the mood was in 1959, and in 1964 as the church gathered to celebrate its past and look forward confidently



This picture was taken during the morning worship service, April 1, 1956. The occasion was the dedication of the new sanctuary. The pastor, D. Blake Westmoreland, served the church from 1945 until 1948 and again from 1953 until 1957. Doris Hoofman is leading the choir.

to its future. Not that the church was free of all challenges and problems, certainly the church needed to beware of complacency which often emerges in times of stability and so easily leads to stagnation. Fortunately, the potential for complacency remained unrealized. A new generation of leaders had emerged in the postwar era and they determined to move forward. These aggressive, forward looking members found a minister with enthusiasm to match theirs in Jim Tillman who followed Heard as pastor in March, 1966.

Tillman led in the inauguration of numerous new programs and ministries. Early in his pastorate he recommended the creation of a Church Council to assist him in the development and implementation of these new features of church life. Tillman worked at introducing more people into the leadership structure of the church, believing that such a policy would lead to stronger support for church ministries. The Church Council represented this broadening of the church's leadership. Similarly, Tillman's recommendation that the deacons serve on a rotation basis, opened that important body to more men in the church. These modifications in the church's leadership structure were only two among the many changes at the church during Tillman's pastorate. In 1970 the church launched an ambitious children's ministry which included a day care program and a Kindergarten. For high school age youth, Tillman instituted a "fifth quarter" program — socials after football and basketball games. These gatherings drew as many as 100 young people. An aggressive outreach for college students was equally successful. The involvement of so many young people in the life of the church created an unmistakable tone of exuberance.

What was true of the Walnut Ridge church was true of many churches across the nation in the late Sixties and early Seventies. A massive surge of religious interest among the young, sometimes designated as the "Jesus movement," had begun in the mid-Sixties. Millions were ultimately touched by the movement and churches with effective youth outreach programs, like the Walnut Ridge church, found their fellowships enlivened and enlarged by the zealous young people.



Rev. T. O. Spicer and the Early Morning Bible Class.

Row 1: T. O. Spicer, Jr., Pastor; Raymond McNutt, Noble Cutsinger, Clyde Wiles, Paul Kirkpatrick, Louis Tolson, K. O. Crane, Grover Gent, Bill Tolson, and Buster Cude, Class President.

Row 2: Iohnnie Andrews, J. O. Pace, Arthur Carter, Bill Dame, Larry Sloan, E. E. Roberts, and Richard Spurlock.

Row 3: Devoe (Rosei) Foley, Chester Pulliam, Thurlo Davis, Leo Davis, Marvin Hibbs, S. C. Slatton, C. E. Gilliam, Robert Montgomery.

Row 4: Truman Moore, Clarence Miles, Frank Baker, Clyde Puckett, Robie Berry, Dan Harrison, and Troy Parrish.

The accomplishments of the Tillman years were sustained by increased financial support from the membership. In 1968, the church ended the year with a budget surplus, the first surplus in the church's history. And members were giving to a Building and Expansion Fund. The church had authorized this fund in 1968 in response to increasing interest in new building projects. A number of members envisioned a new sanctuary. The current sanctuary was little more than a decade old, but some members were disappointed in the structure. Notably, the sanctuary was acoustically deficient. As early as 1962, the church had employed a professional consultant to recommend a solution to the problem. For a church with a long tradition of quality in its music program, the acoustical problem was a substantial matter. The church was still undecided and uncommitted to a new building program when Tillman resigned in 1972.

Throughout T. O. Spicer's tenure as pastor, 1972 to 1977, the church continued to discuss and debate various building proposals. Everyone seemed to agree that new construction was required. And there was general agreement that the major building projects should be accomplished in a "phased" process. The idea of a "phased" plan, spanning several years, had been formalized during Tillman's pastorate, but the church was unable to agree on the sequence of the projects envisioned. Some members favored the construction of a new sanctuary first, followed by a new educational structure; others advocated a reverse sequence; still others believed a parsonage should be the first new construction project. This disagreement continued through the Seventies and into the Eighties. Generally, the disagreement was amiable. Pastors, committee chairmen, deacons, and interested members exercised considerable restraint in advocating this plan or that plan. Consequently, the church was spared the serious fragmentation that has often followed similar debates in other churches.

The church did agree on one construction project during the mid-Seventies. In 1970 the church had begun a mission project in east Walnut Ridge. To house the mission the church purchased a decrepit schoolhouse and began a major remodeling — virtual reconstruction — of the building in order to provide a comfortable, stable location for the mission congregation. The driving force behind the project was the church's Mission Committee led by its chairman, Truman Moore. The committee was able to secure the services of Dan Harrison, teacher in the religion department of Southern Baptist College. Harrison, the mission's pastor, was also an excellent carpenter and mason. He did most of the actual remodeling. The church ultimately purchased the entire block at the mission location and constructed a new building on the site.

Frank Shell followed Spicer as pastor of First Church in 1977. He was a keen promoter of missions and challenged the church to do more to support the spreading of the Gospel. Shell did not merely advocate larger offerings for mission causes, he also called for a willingness to serve in missions. During one mission emphasis message he asked those willing to commit themselves to missionary service to come forward and sign a statement publicly acknowledging their commitment. Thirty-one members responded to the challenge, and within a decade eleven of those fulfilled their pledge.

In June, 1977, the Men's Bible Class began its thirtieth year. Blake Westmoreland, who had established the class, returned for the commemorative service. Unquestionably, the class had played a pivotal role in the life of the church and the community during the post-war years. As the Men's Bible Class celebrated a generation of service, a newer organization, the Baptist Young Women began a concerted drive to increase membership and expand its usefulness. Young women had been actively involved in mission groups since the turn of the century, but the BYW represented a more clearly defined role for the church's younger women. During the mid and late Seventies the BYW earned a respected place in the church's family of organizations. Like its parent organizations, the Ladies Aid

Society and the Woman's Missionary Union, the BYW blended missions study with active community service.

The church's music program expanded in 1978 to include a hand bell choir. This innovation strengthened an already mature and diverse music ministry. The adult choir provided the foundation of the church's musical program. Members expected and received carefully prepared special music each Sunday from the adult singers. And the choir usually performed two cantatas each year. The choir was often called upon to provide music for funerals as well. Children's choirs developed the talents of the church's young. High school age musicians had their own choir which performed periodically for the church.

Professional ministers of music had been a feature of church life since the 1950s, and their contribution to the church's music program was substantial. But just as a pastor must ultimately depend upon the supporting efforts of lay leaders, so too the success of the church's music ministry devolved largely upon several dedicated and talented lay leaders.

Despite the very positive progress in many areas of the church's life during the Seventies, the decade was not without a troubling dimension. Notably, the era was marked by a gradual decline in Sunday school, training union, and worship attendance. This decline persisted even though pastors and many concerned members labored to reverse the trend. Gerald Bounds, who served as pastor from 1982 until 1986, devoted much of his pastorate to enlistment work. Under his leadership the church went forward with an intensive evangelism training program. The church also conducted a community-wide census — an enlistment strategy which the church had used on several previous occasions since the Fifties. The church fellowship was strengthened by the programs, a number of dramatic conversions resulted, and the church gave clear testimony to the community of its continued commitment to evangelism. But these efforts did not immediately correct the enrollment and attendance problems. In some measure these attendance and enrollment problems defied traditional solutions because they were grounded in a much larger circumstance, the static nature of the community's population. Some members, however, stressed the need for a more rigorous commitment to a consistent program of visitation and outreach.

The Eighties were clearly to be years of challenge. The heart of the church was strong, its character resilient and mature. In 1987 the church called Ron Sanders as pastor. During his first year of service the church committed to a building program. The successful completion of the proposed plan was still to be realized as the church entered its second century. While the church moved toward the dramatic expansion of its physical facilities, the traditional ministries and programs of the church afforded opportunities for spiritual growth and Christian service. As always before, devout men and Women of the fellowship faced the future, with all its uncertainties, determined to persevere in service to their Lord and his church.