

"IN THE BEGINNING..."

Late in 1931, in an old tobacco warehouse, then standing on the north-east corner of Hampton and Magnolia Streets, a gifted young evangelist, John Cowell, from Fayetteville, North Carolina, held an evangelistic campaign which lasted for nine weeks. There was no sponsor; crowds were small; and the results discouraging. But John Cowell was a praying man. Far into the night he was on his knees pleading for souls. He led the Christians who had rallied around him in a whole night of prayer. Gradually the warehouse began to fill and men began to come to Christ, until on the closing night of the campaign sixty persons responded to the invitation to come to Christ.

DEDICATED GROUP

John Cowell left behind a small but dedicated group of people intensely interested in Bible study and soul winning. These folk began to meet together informally in various homes for prayer and Bible study. These homes very soon became inadequate for the group, which grew in numbers and they met at various locations, the first being the Central School, then located on Washington Street between Hampton Street and West Liberty Street. Other locations were: upstairs over Condon's Bakery on Dugan Street (the building now occupied by Kimbrell's Furniture Company); upstairs in the Masonic Temple on West Liberty Street, located about where Brody's Department Store now stands (the old building was destroyed by fire); and then in a partitioned portion of the old Sumter Buick Company building, located on the south side of West Liberty Street, midway the block between Washington and Council Streets. It was at this location, 210 West Liberty Street that the group adopted the name of Scripture Testimony Mission.

SCRIPTURE TESTIMONY MISSION

The group wanted the Evangelist, John Cowell, to return to Sumter and remain and teach them. This being impossible, other noted men of God were called upon, including Dr. J. Harvey Farmer, later director of the North Africa Mission; Dr. H. Framer-Smith, for many years a professor at Moody Bible Institute; Dr. D. H. Dolman, described as a "saint of the Church of England;" Dr. and Mrs. J. East (Sale) Harrison, beloved minister and gifted author; Dr. Robert C. McQuilkin, late president of Columbia Bible College.

In between times, the group continued to meet for prayer and Bible study with various members of the group leading the study. These meetings were usually held at 8:00 A.M. on Sundays with midweek meetings on Thursday nights in order that everyone might attend his or her own church.

In July, 1934, a noted Bible teacher and business man, Mr. John W. Bramhall, came to Sumter. He taught and ministered to this group on a fairly regular basis for about nine and one-half years. This man of God was much in demand as a Bible teacher throughout the area.

In 1944, Reverend Nelson Malkus was called by the group to serve as pastor at Scripture Testimony Mission. He led the group for about a year and during his ministry the group was formally organized on August 26, 1945 with 20 Charter Members. These members were:

Mr. & Mrs. J. O. Barwick
Miss Mary Calhoun
Mrs. Claire Doby
Mr. Billie Doverspike
Mrs. Retha Fields
Mr. & Mrs. Robert E. Hodge
Miss Susie Hodge
Mrs. Elizabeth June

Mr. & Mrs. L. A. Lawrence
Mr. Moses Moore
Mrs. Ella Oliver
Mrs. Lester Rogerson
Mr. & Mrs. Geo. H. Rowland
Mrs. Claudia Russell
Miss Sallie Smith
Mrs. Essie Witherspoon

These members decided upon and were organized under a name suggested by Miss Mary Virginia Calhoun, BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH. Rev. Malkus, with the aid of Dr. Robert C. McQuilkin, wrote the first Church Constitution.

BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

About two weeks after the church was organized in early September, 1945, Reverend J. D. Howell, Jr. accepted the call to become pastor of this newly formed church. Pastor Howell, originally from Alabama, was educated at Bob Jones University and Columbia Bible College.

Under his ministry the membership increased and a larger meeting place was desperately needed.

Mrs. C. G. Rowland, Sr., gave to the Bible Fellowship Church the lot where it now stands. Plans were made for and a tent evangelistic meeting was held on this lot from April 29th through May 20th, 1951. During the closing service the lot was dedicated. Plans were formulated and the erection of the present sanctuary was begun later in the year. The Bible Fellowship Church sanctuary was dedicated in early 1952.

Rev. Frank Sells of the faculty of Columbia Bible College was called to preach the dedicatory sermon. His text for the day was to be Colossians 1:18 and his topic was "The Preeminence of Christ." Imagine his joy when he saw written in large letters behind the pulpit his text: "That in all things He might have the preeminence. Col. 1:18." Through divine guidance he had chosen the motto of Bible Fellowship Church as the theme for the first message preached in the new sanctuary -- Jesus Christ preeminent.

In addition to Bible study and salvation of souls locally, Bible Fellowship Church has maintained a strong Missions program; partially supporting missionaries in Africa, South America, Spain, Netherlands (Antilles), France, as well as Alaska and other States.

CHURCH PARSONAGE

The Lord blessed the ministry at Bible Fellowship Church and as early as September 1955, plans for a parsonage were discussed and the Official Board minutes indicate that prayer was continuing regarding this endeavor. The minutes further reveal that in January 1960 a Parsonage Building Committee was appointed to "consider advisability of parsonage plans." The parsonage was completed in the early 1960s. The members of this committee were: Bill Hancock, G. H. Rowland, Robert Hicks, Mrs. T. C. Steele, Mrs. J. E. Rogerson, Jr., and Robert Newman.

EDUCATIONAL BUILDING

After the building of the Sanctuary, Sunday School Classes met in the room now occupied by the pastor's study, the room now used as the choir room, the two class rooms under the balcony, in the balcony and in the sanctuary.

These accommodations were soon outgrown, so temporary buildings were brought in and placed on property adjacent to church property, located at the rear of the building now occupied by Elmore-Hill Funeral Home. These were placed together so that there was an assembly room, a nursery, and 7 class rooms. These rooms were used while plans were being made for an educational building.

The present educational building consisting of a large assembly room, an office, a kitchen, a nursery, a library, and 15 class rooms was completed and dedication services held on September 30th, 1965. Speaker for the dedication service was Mr. George W. Supplee, retired missionary to India for 30 years, then Professor of Missions at Columbia Bible College in Columbia, South Carolina.

Members of the Building Committee were Hazel Boyle, Chairman, Chester Blackmon, Lucius Lawrence, Robert Hicks and Robert J. Vetter.

THE NASH PROPERTY

In the year 1968, the vacant lot located immediately west of the educational building became available for purchase and the church was given first option to buy it. This offer was based on a cash purchase.

After much discussion and prayer with each member deciding what he or she could do, the decision was to try to raise the money for the property. Some members took money from savings; some just borrowed the amount of money he or she felt was a proper share.

The money was raised and the property purchased.

"WAY OF LIFE"

Beginning in 1948, Bible Fellowship Church sponsored the "Way of Life" broadcast which was under the direction of Pastor Howell. This broadcast was heard over Radio Station WFIG at 9:00 o'clock each Sunday morning and continued for 20 years.

This program was a comfort and an inspiration to countless shut-ins and the elderly throughout this area. It was discontinued shortly after Pastor Howell tendered his resignation as pastor of Bible Fellowship Church in 1968.

Pastor Howell served Bible Fellowship Church faithfully for 23 years.

PULPIT COMMITTEE

Soon after Pastor Howell's departure the Official Board appointed a Pulpit Committee to begin the awesome responsibility of seeking the man of God's choosing to recommend to the Church Board. This Committee was composed of Warren Carraway, Chairman, George H. Rowland, Robert Hicks, Mrs. John E. Rogerson, Jr. and Mrs. J. S. McClam.

INTERIM PASTOR

During the time that the church was without a Pastor, the Official Board contacted Rev. George Supplee who accepted the position of Interim Pastor at Bible Fellowship Church.

PASTOR

Early in 1969 the Pulpit Committee recommended to the Official Board the Rev. Emil Wittig be considered as Pastor of Bible Fellowship Church. He was extended a call from the church on February 16th, 1969. Pastor Wittig, who was educated at Columbia Bible College, began his ministries on July 6, 1969.

AWANA

Early in Pastor Wittig's ministry, the AWANA program was introduced. AWANA, derived from II Timothy 2:15, is an international Christian organization designed to lead a child to Christ and train the child to serve Him. It involves Bible memory, rank work, and physical activities and has reached many children in the Sumter area.

MIRACLE MANSION

In the early 1970s, Scott and Kitt Hill, then students at Columbia Bible College, now missionaries with World Team Missions in Madrid, Spain, served as Youth Directors at the church. Under their leadership, the church sponsored "Miracle Mansion" for the

youth, which was located in the building presently occupied by Elmore-Hill Funeral Home. One night each week the activities were open to all youth of Sumter. Hundreds came to join the Bible studies, eager to learn. Many of these young folk later attended Bible Colleges and are now active, full or part time, in the Lord's work.

RESIGNATION

Pastor Wittig tendered his resignation as pastor of Bible Fellowship Church effective June 8th, 1982.

PULPIT COMMITTEE

In October, 1982, after a revision of the Church Constitution, the Official Board appointed a Pulpit Committee to seek and recommend to the Board God's man to serve as Pastor. This committee was composed of: Warren Carraway, Chairman, Mrs. Sidney Hatfield, Mr. Chester Blackmon, Miss Ruth Weatherly, Mrs. Dwight Campbell, and Leslie Hill. Alternates were Bobby Whittle and Mrs. J. E. Rogerson, Jr.

PASTOR

In late December, 1982, the Pulpit Committee recommended to the Official Board that Rev. Lester R. Odom, Jr., Assistant Pastor, Harmony Church, Sumter, be considered to serve as Pastor of Bible Fellowship Church. Following the Annual Meeting in January, 1983, Pastor Odom was extended a call.

Pastor Odom, a native of Cedartown, Georgia, and a graduate of Columbia Bible College in Columbia, South Carolina, accepted the call and was installed March 6th, 1983.

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"THAT IN ALL THINGS HE MIGHT HAVE THE PREMINENCE." Col.1:18

*In December 1995
Atlanta, GA*

Rev. Larry Datsman

HISTORY

BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH
Broad Street at Salem Avenue
Sumter, South Carolina

(compiled November, 1982)
(revised July, 1983)