

AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The first meeting of what was to become the Christian church of Iowa City was held soon after Jesse Higbee, a farmer and lay minister of the Christian church of Pennsylvania, came to live in Johnson County in 1855. Mr. Higbee and his father-in-law, David Neumire, gathered their families and neighbors together at Higbee Grove southeast of Iowa City and began to conduct services in a little school house there. Soon they were holding church services every Sunday, the two men taking turns preaching.

In Iowa, Mr. Higbee's enthusiasm attracted families from Iowa City as well as from the surrounding farms, and the church began to grow. There are 65 names on the earliest membership list, and the Sunday school was said to be "very strong".

Not much information about those early days is available, but we do know that elders and deacons were "ordained by prayer and imposition of hands". Baptisms took place in the Iowa River, the custom being to use any convenient small river or stream for baptizing.

We can assume that there were problems in those days, too. On an old list of members, columns for "deceased, dismissed by letter, fallen away from church" were found. Dismissals were made after solemn discussions by the elders, for such reasons as drunkenness, non-payment of debt and habitual failure to attend church services.

In 1863 the church was organized officially with 84 charter members. That same year the congregation was delighted to be able to buy a building "in the center of Iowa City" for its church. The Johnson County History describes it as a square, blue-grey, painted brick building, and it already, in 1863, had an interesting history. The Methodist Protestants had built it in 1841 on one of the quarter-blocks reserved by the Territory for the use of churches and Governor Lucas had participated in the Cornerstone laying. The Methodist Protestant denomination was never very strong in Iowa City, and they disbanded and put their building up for sale. Colonel Kimball Porter, a staunch Christian church member, bought it for \$1,300 and promptly resold it to the church for \$800.

The church had several ministers between 1863 and 1872, when Dr. S.E. Pearre was called to serve. He was the first pastor to encourage church participation in state and national organizations.

Dr. Pearre's wife, Caroline Neville Pearre, was known only to a few people when she came to Iowa City, but in the ten years she was here her name became well-known to Christian Church men and women all over the United States. Through her hard work and dedication church women got together and formed a missionary society to collect money for missionary work abroad. The first year, \$430 was raised, by the tenth year they had raised \$17,000.

The church women were active and enthusiastic and in 1900 a group of them formed an organization called the WMB's. The initials stood for Women's Mission Board, but the ladies always claimed they stood for We Mean Business and indeed it seemed as if they did. These women raised money for the church, served large meals on many occasions, cleaned and supervised the kitchen, helped the needy and RAISED MONEY for the church. In a short period of time the WMB's raised enough money to order the pipe organ for the church.

Church pledges were nearly always paid by the week, and for several years were collected faithfully and sometimes personally by the Treasurer, Mr. Guzeman. The story goes that if a deacon was absent from Sunday morning services, the Treasurer might show up at his place of business on Monday morning and say "I didn't see you at the meeting yesterday, Brother_____. I've come for your pledge."

Sometime between 1916 and 1917 a one-story addition was built on the back of the church, which included a large kitchen and several Sunday school rooms which were heated with coal-burning stoves.

During the Great Depression, the church like many other institutions suffered from the financial crisis. Banks closed and people had no way to pay their pledges, Sunday offerings were small and there was nowhere to turn to for money. As a result the church turned to the barter system, men did repair and carpenter work and the women cleaned the church as a way of paying off pledges.

In 1935 the depression began to loosen its hold and problems of the church eased a little. But church attendance remained low for several years often falling below 100 on Sunday mornings.

In 1938 a celebration on the 75th anniversary of the church was planned to revive church spirit. Eight weeks of special sermons with topics ranging from "Our Beginnings" to "Why We Celebrate" were planned. The guest speaker on March 27, the climax of the celebration was Dr. Charles C. Morrison, editor of The Christian Century, from Chicago. Many visitors, including former pastors were present. There was special music in the morning service and in the evening a colorful historical pageant written by Professor Marcus Bach was performed.

An 85th Anniversary celebration took place in March, 1948 with a special service, a large family-night dinner and some historical skits.

An interesting innovation in the life of the church came about when the Board voted to create the office of "Elder Emeritus". This title was to be accorded to men who over the years had served the church faithfully and well both as elders and in many other capacities, too. Up to this time three men have received the designation Elder Emeritus: Phillip Norman, Elwin Shain and Otis McKray.

A search was begun for a person trained in religious education who could plan and supervise the church's student work and also assist with the Sunday school. A well-qualified person to take charge of the Campus Ministry and the Christian Education program was soon found in Miss Sally Smith.

In 1959, construction was begun on a new two-story educational unit. It was completed at a cost of \$110,000 and dedicated in a special service on Sunday, October 2, 1960, attended by many out of town guests.

Plans were made for the Centennial Year, the highlight of which would be a pageant depicting the history of the church. Sons and daughters of former pastors sent their reminiscences; older members contributed fascinating bits of data; some early furnishings of the church were collected; and costumes and hymn books of earlier days were unearthed from trunks. A most attractive plate decorated with a drawing of the church was ordered as a memento for church members to purchase. On March 28, 1963, the pageant was given in the sanctuary for an audience of nearly 300 people. Sally Smith wrote the script, based on the historical facts gathered during the Centennial Year, highlighting the church's progress through 100 years of great change.