

University Presbyterian Church Chapel Hill, North Carolina



A Brief History

For over two hundred years Presbyterians have been actively involved in the university, community and spiritual life in this unique chapel of learning and healing on a wooded hill in central North Carolina.

The devotion to education of the Scottish Presbyterians in North Carolina has played an influential role in the birth and nurture of the nation's first state university during its first two centuries of service. When the North Carolina Constitutional Convention met in Halifax in 1776, a few months after the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, it was this commitment to education that resulted in Article XLI that stated "all useful learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more universities." Presbyterians were likewise involved as political leaders, as members of the Board of Trustees, and as faculty when the University of North Carolina was chartered by the Legislature in 1789; when the site for the University was chosen on a hill in Orange County where an Anglican chapel existed; when in the fall of 1793 the cornerstone of Old East was laid and lots were laid out and sold in Chapel Hill; when the first student arrived in February 1795; and when the first graduation exercises were held in July 1798. Many of the early professors at UNC were Presbyterians from Princeton University, and from 1795 to 1868 the first three presidents of the University were Presbyterian (two being ministers.)

In the twentieth century Presbyterians have continued to play a major role at the University as faculty members and leaders. Notable among these have been Dr. Francis P. Venable, professor of chemistry, UNC President, and ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church for almost half a century; Dr. Frank Porter Graham, professor of history, Presbyterian elder, UNC President and later United States Senator; and the Rev. Dr. Bernard Boyd, a beloved and inspiring professor of religion.

There was little activity in establishing churches during the first several decades of chapel Hill's existence because of the small population and the required participation by students

in the Sunday morning services at the University chapel (now Person Hall). Faculty members usually preached at these services and townspeople attended.

The Presbyterian Church was organized in 1829 with meetings initially being held in various homes and university buildings. During the early days of the church there were no full-time ministers, but ministers on the faculty served as stated supply. One of these was the first UNC president, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Caldwell, a Princeton graduate who had been ordained in New Jersey prior to coming to North Carolina in 1796. Another was the Rev. Dr. Elisha Mitchell, a Yale graduate who was professor of mathematics and natural philosophy and an explorer after whom Mount Mitchell was named. He was ordained by the Orange Presbytery shortly after arriving in Chapel Hill in 1818 and preached for the rest of his life in the community.

Episcopal, Methodist and Baptist congregations were organized and then built churches during the 1840s and 50s in response to the growing population of the village and to the revival preaching of the era. The Presbyterians also were inspired to build their own sanctuary and in the mid-1840s purchased from the University for \$200 a one-acre lot just across Franklin Street from the University campus. As one of the conditions of the purchase, the leaders of the congregation agreed not to compete with the required University Sunday forenoon services for students. This restriction soon became moot when the University Trustees abolished mandatory chapel attendance for students, but it was not until the 1950s that the congregation's ownership of the land was finally established by a quitclaim from the University.

The Rev. Dr. James Phillips raised almost \$4000 from citizens around the state to build a sanctuary during several summer vacations from his teaching at the university. The first building on the current site was completed and dedicated on September 23, 1849. The ceremony was a community affair with the Methodist and University services suspended so that all could attend.

In the pre-Civil War years, the church had a gradual increase in membership and in 1859 called a full-time minister, the Rev. John B. Shearer, who later became president of Davidson College.

By 1860 the University had one of the largest enrollments of any university in the country. While the University remained open during the Civil War, the number of students and faculty declined significantly. The politics of Reconstruction, however, resulted in withdrawal of state support for the University and its closure from 1871 until 1875. This led to the exodus from Chapel Hill of many of its citizens and numerous members of the congregation. The church became quiescent, although Sunday Schools for both black and white children were maintained and visiting ministers occasionally delivered the sacraments.

It was largely through the statewide lobbying efforts of a Chapel Hill resident and Presbyterian, Cornelia Phillips Spencer, that the University reopened in the fall of 1875. It was she who rung the bell in South Building when the telegram came that the Legislature had appropriated the funds necessary to reopen the University. Both the community and the church began to revive, although slowly. During the 1880s and 90s the membership of the church remained in the high 20s, but by 1900 there were 63 members on the rolls.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the church again appeared to be in decline and was without a minister most of the time. This decline was reversed with the calling of the Rev. William D. Moss, a Canadian who first came to Chapel Hill for a year during 1904-5 from a Congregational pastorate in Nova Scotia. He returned to Chapel Hill from another pastorate in 1912 and served for some twenty years. Although unorthodox in his Christianity, he was a man with great charm and particular appeal to the young. He was said to have shared the intellectual leadership of the community with UNC President Edward Kidder Graham and Professor Horace Williams. "Parson" Moss, as he was affectionately known in the community, increased the church's influence with the students and in 1929 the congregation's membership rolls reached one hundred for the first time.

During Parson Moss' pastorate the original sanctuary was rebuilt with a gift of \$50,000 from James Sprunt of Wilmington as a memorial to his wife. The new sanctuary seated 348. Behind it was a two-story building with a church parlor, two Sunday school rooms, a kitchen and a pastor's study. The building was completed and dedicated in 1920.

Following a brief pastorate by the Rev. Donald Stewart in the 1930s, the Rev. Charles M. Jones was called to the church. Jones was a charismatic Tennessean who had studied at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond before leading a small church in Brevard, North Carolina. He served from 1941 to 1953 during a period of significant growth (299 members on the rolls by 1950), but also of continuing controversy. He was beloved by many, but opposed by others for his liberal social gospel views and lack of attention to church doctrine and sacraments. Following a period of bitter conflict during the Presbytery's investigation of Mr. Jones, a number of members of the congregation followed him out the door to establish the new non-denominational Community Church in Chapel Hill. Another Presbyterian church was also formed in the community at the time, but dissolved after a short period of time with most of the members returning to the Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. Dr. Robert McMullen, a wise and kindly interim pastor who was a retired China missionary and had survived a Japanese prison camp during World War II, led the congregation during a rebuilding phase. In less than a year the lost church membership had been replaced twice over and the Sunday School enrollment had almost doubled from 108 to 206. He was instrumental in returning the church's governance from the Presbytery

back to the congregation and in training and installing a new group of officers who would call a new minister and start the period of growth that lasted through the rest of the century.

At the end of the interim pastor's 18-month stay, a new minister was installed in 1954 who would lead the church for 27 years through the turbulent Vietnam War and civil rights eras as well as through the rebuilding of the sanctuary that burned almost to the ground in the devastating Ash Wednesday fire on the night of February 20, 1958. The Rev. Vance Barron, a graduate of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, had served as a U. S. Navy chaplain during World War II.

Following the sanctuary fire of 1958 the congregation returned to the early chapel Hill tradition of meeting in university facilities. After the Student Center and Fellowship Hall were finished in 1959 the congregation used it until the new sanctuary was completed and dedicated in November 1962, four years and nine months after the fire.

In the 1950s and 60s the growth of church programs and of membership (to 500 at the time of the fire and to 712 by 1962) mandated consideration of colonizing a second Presbyterian Church for Chapel Hill. The church had the support of Presbytery in this effort and was able to obtain a plot of land in the Estes Hills section of town. The new Church of Reconciliation began meeting in September 1966 with some 60 members from the Chapel Hill church and was formally organized the following February. At this time the Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church changed its name to the University Presbyterian Church.

During the tenure of Barron's immediate successor, the Rev. David Hoffelt, the chancel was renovated in 1983 with the installation of a Robert Sipe pipe organ and the membership increased to more than a thousand.

Following the solid interim stewardship of the Rev. Robert Keever in 1990-91, the leadership for the better part of the last two decades has come from the Rev. Dr. Robert Dunham. He graduated from Davidson College, the Union Theological Seminary and the Yale Divinity School, and was called to University Church in 1991 after two pastorates and service as a campus minister at Auburn University. He has served with several effective teams of ministers and staff across the years. The first pastor to join him was the Rev. Lynn Stall, who served as Associate Pastor from 1992 until 2000, with primary responsibility for congregational care. In 1994, she was joined by the Rev. Ollie Wagner, who became the church's first Associate Pastor for Campus Ministry, under a new configuration of leadership for the Presbyterian Campus Ministry. Other splendid pastors have come since then: Diane Janssen Hemmen (1997-2007); Mindy Douglas Adams (1999-2006); and Anna Pinckney Straight, who joined the staff in 2008. Sallie Verner served ably from 2000 to 2010 as Staff Associate for Education and was succeeded later that year by Heather

Ferguson. Thomas Brown brought his extensive talents to the church as Minister of Music in 2002.

Another major expansion of the church facilities at the current site began in the mid-1990s under Dunham's leadership with a capital fund-raising campaign that raised some \$2.1 million, ten percent of which was committed to outreach projects locally and abroad. The first phase of the facility improvement, completed in 1998, consisted of the renovation of the Fellowship Hall and other church school and office facilities; the addition of new electrical, heating and air conditioning utilities; and the removal of barriers to the handicapped.

The second phase, completed in the fall of 1999, added a new multi-purpose structure that is used for classrooms, for lectures and for receptions and other events. This addition extended the church building toward Franklin Street and the University and the session appropriately named it Vance Barron Hall in recognition of his quarter of a century of leading the church to serve both the town and University communities.

A major mission of University Presbyterian Church has always been the ministry to university students. Since 1849 this ministry has been both spiritual and symbolic as the church's sanctuary completes the north quadrant of the quadrangle formed by Old West, South, and Old East Buildings on the original campus of the nation's first state university.

During the last century Pastor Moss and his successors as ministers have attracted an increasing number of students to the church's worship services and programs. Since the completion of the Student Center in 1959 the church has had a physical facility in which to conduct programs specifically for university students. With support from the Presbytery and area Presbyterian churches, the Presbyterian Campus Ministry has a dynamic program open to all university students with activities ranging from worship services, Bible studies and weekly dinners to international mission trips.

Since the mid-century the church has had a succession of dedicated ministers to students and since 1994, an associate minister with primary responsibility for the campus ministry. In terms of length of service and influence on the students, outstanding leaders have been Harry E. Smith (1953-60; 1962-68), who later became President of Austin College in Texas; Milton Carothers (1973-82), who became Presbyterian chaplain for students at his alma mater, Florida State University in Tallahassee; and Ollie Wagner (1994-99) who left in the summer of 1999 to become Chaplain at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas; Caroline Craig, (2001-2007), and John Rogers, who assumed the ministry in 2008.

In 2011, as the University Presbyterian Church marks 163 years of ministry on this site, it is a vibrant and growing congregation of more than 1400 members. Its congregation, like those it serves, represents a diverse and exciting mix of University students, staff and

faculty; townspeople from the Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Research Triangle area; and a growing number of retirees from varied backgrounds, geographical areas and spiritual experiences. It has a dedicated and talented ministerial and church staff who – along with elected congregational leaders and numerous volunteers – provide a rich variety of worship opportunities, pastoral care, and educational experiences to meet the needs of such a diverse community. Pastoral care is provided both by the ministers and by programs in the congregation such as the Stephen Ministry and AIDS Care Teams. The educational and music programs provide opportunities for learning and involvement for all ages. A significant benevolence budget, augmented by a cadre of dedicated members who contribute their time and energy, supports mission services locally, nationally, and internationally. The Presbyterian Women – who have played a major role in the church since its earliest days – have a dynamic program with activities ranging from circle Bible studies to providing meals for the bereaved. Finally, the church facilities are maintained in excellent shape, though the church’s leadership continues to explore better ways to utilize existing space for growing programs.

Note to Readers: This brief history was written by William W. McLendon on the occasion of the sesquicentennial celebration of University Presbyterian Church, published by University Presbyterian Church in September 1999. It was updated in early 2011 by the Rev. Dr. Robert E. Dunham. For additional copies, contact:

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