

CENTRAL METHODIST CHURCH, MERIDIAN, BEGINS A NEW CENTURY

Celebrating the completion of 100 Years' service to Meridian, Central Methodist Church realized that the past century had seen many changes in the city and in its membership. From a small frame church, the physical plant had grown to an imposing air-conditioned brick structure with an adjoining educational building.

But there was more to be done. The interior of the church sanctuary had been unchanged since the building of the main building. Therefore, at a special quarterly conference on November 25, 1959, with Rev. J. Melvin Jones, then district superintendent, presiding, a Permanent Improvements committee recommended the beginning of an \$100,000.00 renovation program. A Building Committee, consisting of G. R. Gaillard, Chairman; R. M. Castle, vice chairman; Jack Malone, Dr. L. V. Rush, J. D. Tucker, Jr.; George Shannon, Mrs. C. C. Brown, and Dr. H. L. Rush, Sr. and Rev. R. M. Matheny, ex officio members, was appointed to oversee the project. To finance the enterprise a Fund Raising Committee was appointed, consisting of H. E. Sanders, chairman; Dr. D. R. Thornton, Jr., vice chairman; Jim Beebe, Marvin Williams, Dr. H. L. Rush, Jr.; W. H. Entekin, J. F. Egger, H. A. Shields, R. B. Deen, C. G. Parker, Emmett Curry, Dr. W. L. Thornton; with Dr. Rush and Rev. Matheny, ex officio members.

It was decided that the project would be financed by pledges, and on February 7, 1960 a special Pledge Sunday was held. The project was financed and preliminary plans were begun. The program would include: moving the choir area to a special acoustical cove, installation of new seating, replacing the single pulpit lectern with a new lectern and reading stand, erection of a memorial window behind the altar, installation of a new pipe organ console and renovation of the organ pipes, installation of new stained glass windows and painting of the whole sanctuary.

The project was begun, and on May 22, 1960, services were held in the remodeled sanctuary and on December 11 the new organ was used for the first time. Thus, Central Methodist Church prepares for a new century of progress and service for the Kingdom,

BEGAN AS A DREAM OF DR. RUSH

The centennial renovation project began largely as a dream of Dr. H. Lowry Rush, Sr. During his 10 years' service as chairman of the Official Board, his insights into the future of Central Church as a church of progress were manifested in this project. His dedication to its cause is a tribute to the congregation which he represents.

Rev. Robert M. Matheny has entered his second year as pastor of Central Church, and under his guidance the centennial program was planned and completed. He served previously as pastor of Leavell Woods Methodist Church in Jackson.

Rev. T. Brooks Hudson, associate pastor, is a 1960 graduate of Candler School of Theology, Emory University. He serves as Minister to Youth.

Other officials and staff members are: Miss Martha Wright, secretary, Miss Susan Weaver, assistant secretary and librarian; W. W. Porter, choir director; Mrs. Rudolph Matzner, organist; Mrs. C. B. Tyson, hostess; E. L. Summer, Lay Leader; A. C. Gossard, church school superintendent; Mrs. R. F. Weaver, president of the Woman's Society of Christian Service; John F. Egger, chairman of the Commission on Stewardship and Finance; H. K. Chafin, chairman of the Commission on Education; Mrs. M. L. Crook, chairman of the Commission on Missions; and W. H. Entekin, chairman of the Commission Membership and Evangelism.

FORMER PASTORS

Among the former pastors of Central have been: William Howie, R. H. Herbert, John L. Sanders, J. L. Daniel, T. Armstrong, Peter Haskew, C. C. Calloway, V. L. Hopkins, W. J. Reaves, D. W. Lewis, W. M. Lovelady, J. M. Wells, E. M. Means, Alexander McBride, R. S. Finley, S. B. Newman, W. E. M. Linfield, T. Y. Armstrong, R. Y. Rew, J. W. Ellis, Jr., E. McMeans, A. J. Coleman, W. K. Towles, J. S. Sampey, J. E. Freeman, Leroy Massengale, J. E. Newman, J. C. Rush, William Spillman, O. P. Thomas, William Mabry, J. Barker, John A. Ellis, J. T. Heard, R. J. Jones, Jr., E. H. Mounger, R. D. Norsworthy, Warren C. Black, C. G. Andrews, B. M. Drake, C. F. Evans, R. S. Woodward, Dan Scarborough, H. W. Featherstun, J. M. Weems, J. W. Lewis, W. B. Lewis, J. E. Carpenter, W. H. LaPrade, Sr., J. R. Jones, H. B. Watkins, J. Lloyd Decell, A. F. Watkins, B. L. Sutherland, L. L. Cowen, T. M. Brownlee, J. A. Smith, J. H. Nicholson, Roy H. Kleiser, W. A. Tyson, M. L. McCormick, B. M. Hunt, Robert M.

Matheny.

HISTORY OF CENTRAL CHURCH Methodism came to Mississippi from South Carolina in 1799.

Tobias Gibson, appointed by Bishop Asbury, coming by boat on various rivers, organized the first Methodist Church in the Mississippi Territory of Methodism at Washington, six miles east of Natchez. The Mississippi Territory embraced the present limits of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas. Moses Floyd came in 1803 as Tobias Gibson's helper, and the same year Lorenzo Dow arrived on the first of his visits to Mississippi. The Mississippi Annual Conference was organized in 1813 in the home of Newit Vick, for whom Vicksburg is named. He was a local preacher who had come from Virginia.

The next 20 years was a time of expansion and development, and by 1832 there were six districts in three states --- seven pastoral charges in Louisiana, 20 in Mississippi and 16 in Alabama, with 64 preachers receiving appointments. The territory in Alabama with some small portions along the Mississippi border was set off into a separate annual conference in 1832.

In Alabama Conference

Lauderdale County was in the portion of the Mississippi border in the Alabama Conference from 1832 to 1870. In 1839 Gainesville District was mentioned for the first time in the Alabama Conference Journal, and among the charges it contained the name of the Lauderdale Mission. It is thought Meridian was part of this mission or circuit.

In 1856 the Gainesville District connection disappears and the Macon District appears. Meridian is mentioned in 1859 in the Conference Journal, and alternated with Lauderdale for several years, hence we believe it was possibly a circuit.

In 1864, Alabama was divided into two annual conferences, and the Mississippi churches were put into the Mobile Conference where they remained until 1870 when all the Mississippi churches were placed either in the Mississippi or North Mississippi Conference. Meridian District has had a continuous history in the Mississippi Conference since 1870.

The "History of Methodism in the Mississippi Conference, 1846-1870" written by the Reverend J. B. Cain, and "Methodism in the Mississippi Conference 1870-1894", written by the Reverend W. B. Jones, a paper by Mr. 'Link' Brown, written for the Annual Conference of 1919, articles in the New Orleans Christian Advocate, and other papers, have furnished by basis of the remainder of this paper.

The deed to the first Methodist church building, lot and graveyard, filed October 23, 1852, shows that the property was obtained "for one dollar paid in hand to William Dearman" by Levi Barton, Ferdinand Snow, and James Arrington, trustees of the church of the Lauderdale circuit of the, Alabama Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. He deeded a parcel of land including a church house and graveyard, and the description, the deed and old map shows they were located on a Street between Ninth and Eleventh Avenues.

Old Church Site Sold

With every thought of Methodism in Meridian, with hands uplifted in gratitude, we recall the name of old Brother Dearman, local preacher, kind in heart, generous in spirit. He gave us a frame church and cemetery ground in the northeastern part of town. The old building seemed to have served its day and generation, and when the high tide of commercialism struck Meridian, the trustees sold the old church site and grounds. More than a thousand bodies were interred there, including many Confederate soldiers. The graves were leveled and the bodies were not moved, including that of the donor.

In 1860 a lot on the Northwest corner of 11th street and 27th Avenue was bought from John T. Ball. In January 1860, a deed was given, contracted for in 1859, for \$200, by church trustees John H. Gibbs, I. S. O. G. Greer, R. Y. Rew, L. Gould and James Watts. On it was erected a hand-hewed frame and log church building. Alexander McBryde, pastor. During the war this house was used for barracks, quartermaster and commissary department purposes. It was set on fire by Sherman's soldiers, but the fire was extinguished. When not occupied by the military, services were kept up by Confederate Army chaplains and circuit riders. Occasional services of the Protestant Episcopal Church were held in this building by Rector George Stewart.

The first quarterly conference for Central Church was held January 15, 1866. The Reverend O. P. Thomas, pastor; Reverend Silas H. Cox, P. E.; I. S. O. G. Greer, Dr. Lyman Gould and R. M. Herbert, stewards. Upon the old records many years ago, when the church rolls were being perfected, a name would be called, and the answer would be that "that brother went to heaven from the Shiloh Battle Field" — another name "He went to heaven from Chattanooga — another, "He was burned in the Battle of the Wilderness," etc. Over and over again there was to be found in the records the urging of fasting and prayer before the meeting of the quarterly conference.

Bought From Ragsdale

In Deed Book L page 261, there appears a deed from Lewis A. Ragsdale to J. H. Gibbs. I. S. O. G. Greer, R. Y. Rew, L. Gould and James Watts, trustees, O. P. Thomas, pastor, filed for record on April 1, 1867, for lots nine and ten in block 84, Ragsdale Survey, and in Deed Book T, page 160, lots 11 and 12 in Block 84, were filed for record on November 3, 1873. These can best be identified now by saying Niolon's Corner, at the intersection of 8th Street and 23rd Avenue. The frame and log church on the corner of 11th Street and 27th Avenue had become too small and the lots had been purchased, and the frame and log house was hauled by ox teams to the new location by Brother W. P. Montgomery, on credit. It is said that the receipt for \$110, that being partial payment for the expense of hauling paid him by R. Y. Rew, is in existence, but it has not been found by the church committee.

At the second quarterly conference 1867, under "What has been raised for the support of the ministry, and how has it been applied?" — we have the answer "Paid the Presiding Elder \$46, paid the preacher in charge, \$56;" and under the "Spiritual State of the Church" this answer: "we are greatly in need of a revival." In 1850, Meridian Station had 205 members. "The said frame log church building, like the Ark of the Covenant, had to move again and give place for a new stately edifice of brick and stone. Other oxen were yoked up, the first ones having long since gone from old age to the butcher. It was hauled by the 12 yoke of oxen through town, out Fifth Street, this time to West End to be used as a worshipping place by the Fifth Street Methodist Church.

In 1885 a building committee was appointed, \$17,000 promptly raised, and with other sums that came in, the building was completed, cleared of all debt, and at that time was considered the best in the Mississippi Conference.

Church Burned in 1913

There is on file a deed of trust from J. M. Ramsey, C. R. McQueen, R. M. Bourdeaux, G. C. Hall, W. C. Dobbs, W. G. Casteel, trustees dated November 3, 1873, in favor of Sam B. Watts and Ben Ormond securing an indebtedness of \$1,000 for money advanced and loaned to aid in the construction of the church edifice on lots eight and nine, Block 84, Ragsdale Survey, and conveys lots 11 and 12 which were recited in the deed of 1873 to be bought for parsonage property. Dr. W. C. Black was the pastor 1885-1888. This church was sometimes called First Church then changed to Central during his pastorate.

This church building burned the later part of 1913 during the pastorate of the Reverend John P. Jones and the work was carried on in the court house, city jail and other available places. There are many Meridian citizens who remember this fire and the next few years until the present building was erected under the dedicated guidance of Reverend Herbert B. Watkins, pastor 1916-1921, when he died. The Reverend John Lloyd Decell, later Bishop Decell, was, pastor in 1921-1924 and had the job of completing the church, with its magnificent pipe organ, so it could be dedicated on April 1, 1923.

Since that time the educational building just to the north of the main edifice has been added. It was planned by Dr. W. A. Tyson and erected and completed during the the pastorate of Reverend M. L. McCormick. In 1955-56 the sanctuary was air conditioned and renovated by the gifts of the congregation under the guidance of Dr. Brunner M. Hunt, pastor, and Dr. H. Lowry Rush, chairman of the Board of Stewards. The Quarterly Conference minute book of 1917 and 1918 contains a statement read to the congregation as to the reason for buying the five lots on the corner of 10th Street and 23rd Avenue. This building was the result of hard work through and after the World War I days. The educational building is considered a memorial to the brave men and women of this church who served in World War II. It is a meeting place for the church school for children and young people. It contains a beautiful ladies parlor and chapel seating 150 persons. It has lovely stained glass windows and a Hammond organ, and the pulpit furnishings were given by Robert Hall in honor of his mother, a faithful worker in bygone days.

Cemetery Lots Owned

The Central Methodist Church owns Lots 101 and 102 in Rosehill Cemetery to the left as one enters the

gates at the end of 7th street. They were bought by the First Methodist Church (later Central) in 1891 for the use of indigent preachers. A Miss Alice Woodward pays the yearly upkeep on the spaces where her mother and father, the Reverend Robert Southern, having been pastor of Central 1894-97, are buried there. Others buried in the lots are Ruth, a daughter of the Reverend M. M. Black, pastor of East End 1904, the Reverend and Mrs. Warren C. Black, the pastor of Central 1885-88; Dr. and Mrs. Charles Green Andrews and their son, Oscar Kearney Andrews. Dr. Andrews was pastor of Central 1889-92; Presiding Elder of the Meridian District 1897-1900, and secretary of the Mississippi Conference from 1865-1899 except for one session in 1880 when he was the president of the conference. Miss Cora E. Black, daughter of Dr. W. C. Black, was buried there March 14, 1888, the first one of the nine people buried on Rosehill Cemetery lots.

The Magnolia Cemetery Association in 1902 donated the south half of Lot 1, Sec. 21, to the Epworth League of Central Methodist Church, J. W. Weems, pastor, although the deed was not given until August 26, 1942, when Dr. T. M. Brownlee was pastor. On this six-space lot are buried the Reverend Joe D. Newsome, 1919; Mrs. Joe D. Newsome, 1942; and infant Mary Wilkins, 1923. The Reverend Joe D. Newsome was a superannuated preacher thought to have been a member of the North Mississippi Conference.

There has been an active Woman's Organization in Central since the first society was organized in December 1879 by four women when the Reverend E. H. Mounger was pastor. Miss Elizabeth (Betty) Hughes was sent out from Central to China in 1887 with the reorganization of the Woman's Missionary Society into the Woman's Society of Christian Service by the United Methodist Church. {This statement is in error. The reorganization of the Woman's Missionary Society into the Woman's Society of Christian Service took place in 1939 when three branches of Methodism were merged to form The Methodist Church}

The chairman of the State Sunday School Executive Committee says the first organized Bible class in the Mississippi Conference, if not in the entire South, was at Central Church, Meridian, with an enrollment of 60 members.

The Woman's Society of Christian Service of Central Methodist Church, Meridian, celebrated two birthdays, the 20th of the Society and the one hundredth of the church, at the "Heritage held recently in the Fellowship Hall of the church.

One of the many highlights of the program was the introduction of the charter members of the group and the presentation of the new members. The past presidents, including Mrs. W. B. Carr, president of the old Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and first president of the Women's Society of Christian Service of Central Church, Mesdames Jesse H. Graham, Herman A. Shields, C. M. Wascom, Nat I. Washburn, M. L. Crook, L. L. McAllister, James C. Floyd, Kelly Hobbs, Cecil Brown and the 1960-61 president, Mrs. R. F. Weaver, were announced and honored.

The Woman's Society of Christian Service, the "Twenty year old Debutante" was presented in an interesting program led by Mrs. Lee Priester. Following the program refreshments were served. White and yellow chrysanthemums against a cloth of Italian cutwork with yellow rose buds and "20th birthday" in yellow icing. Individually iced cup cakes in yellow and green completed the appointments.

Mrs. W. W. Heidelberg decorated the table and Mrs. T. I. Joynt decorated the cake prepared by Mrs. Fred Morgan. The coffee was served from a silver service by Miss Ella Ormond, formerly secretary of the Mississippi Conference Woman's Missionary Society. Mrs. Weaver served the cake.

The Woman's Society of Christian Service of this church has a total of 251 members organized in eight circles and a Wesleyan Service Guild.