

A Brief History . . .

The
First Presbyterian
Church

Charleston, W. Va.

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Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say rejoice. For indeed we should rejoice when we consider God's goodness to us and to our church through the years that have gone before.

We look upon our past with thankful hearts; to the heritage that is ours, to the bedrock upon which this church was founded, and to those Christian men and women who helped to make it the church it is today.

The work and influence of this church in the sheltered valley long ago could be likened to the flicker of a tiny candle that has, through the years, grown into a mighty beacon, sending its light into the far corners of our foreign field.

One hundred and thirty-four years ago when Charleston was only a little village of 500 people with no paved streets or bridges and the leading hotel or tavern, as it was then called, charged 12½ cents a night for lodging and 25 cents for meals, it was then that Colonel David Ruffner, one of the leading citizens of the time, was very much interested in the educational and religious development of the community. For that reason, he donated a tract of land on Hale Street, from Virginia to Quarrier, for its use. The Quarrier Street section was donated to the President and Trustees of Mercer Academy, and the Virginia Street section to the Society of Presbyterians for a church.

Mercer Academy was built in 1818. Dr. Henry Ruffner, a son of Colonel David,

the church and have been Episcopalians ever since.

In 1868, Reverend N. G. Geddes became pastor. In that year a young man by the name of John Calvin Barr came to Charleston. He taught in the Charleston Institute and had charge of our Sunday School. He assisted Mr. Geddes by preaching every other Sunday. In 1872, Mr. Geddes' health failed and he was forced to resign, leaving Dr. Barr in full charge of the church.

After the Civil War, the General Assembly—the governing body of the church—was divided into a Northern and a Southern Assembly. Our church had not decided to which they wished to belong. Dr. Barr was a man of firm convictions and he refused to become pastor of the church until it had affiliated with one or the other.

On March 14, 1872, two rolls were prepared. One was placed on either side of the door and as the congregation entered they were to sign according to their choice. One hundred and fifty-three preferred the Southern Assembly and 23 preferred the Northern Assembly. It was agreed that the church divide. The 153 were given the church and they had to build a manse, and the 23 were given the manse and had to build a church. The manse was the same one that was used by the Kanawha Presbyterian Church for years. They later built their church and that was the beginning of the Kanawha Church. The 153 who were given the church had to

build a manse. They became The First Presbyterian Church, our church, and Dr. Barr was the first pastor. Since the division in 1872, we have had only four pastors — Dr. Barr, Dr. Thompson, Dr. Alston, and Dr. Vick.

In the early eighties, the Ladies' Aid Society was organized and a few years later the Home and Foreign Missionary Societies' Mite Socials were held at the homes of members. The admittance was 5 cents and the hostess furnished the supper. They were recorded as being quite a success. I don't know whose success! Certainly not the hostess'. Either the guests or the church profited, I feel sure.

And here is a tip to our Second Vice-President: If you ask any of these women to help with family-night dinners and they refuse, just say — "You never had it so good! Your grandmother had the whole congregation to her home for dinner and only got 5 cents a head."

In the late eighties, the first building became inadequate and a second and larger one of stone was built on the corner of Hale and Quarrier streets where the Mercer Academy had once been. The Ladies' Aid helped with the financing of the building and much of its furnishings. The second building was dedicated in 1890 and Dr. Barr continued as pastor until 1902 when he felt that he needed an assistant. It was then that Dr. Ernest Thompson was called from Louisville, Kentucky, as co-pastor. In 1908, Dr. Barr re-

signed as co-pastor and became Pastor Emeritus until his death in 1911. Dr. Thompson became full pastor in 1908. From the turn of the century in 1900 the Ladies' Aid Society became quite active and continued so until 1920 when the Circle Plan was adopted.

Well do I remember as a little girl the meetings of the Ladies' Aid. The old sewing machine would be oiled and brought down into the parlor for the meeting and from 20 to 30 ladies would meet to sew on checked gingham aprons that they made for sale. One lady would sew busily on the machine, others would sit and baste by hand, others would just sit. Times have changed but human nature hasn't. At the end of the meeting, elaborate refreshments were served. Several times during the winter, bake sales were held in a downtown store, and cakes, pies, and doughnuts sold. One day a cake was sold to a man whom one of the ladies believed to be a gambler. Much discussion followed and, as a little girl standing by listening, I decided a gambler was some kind of a dreadful person who was not supposed to eat good church cake.

Between the years of 1902 and 1915, during Dr. Thompson's pastorate, the church grew so rapidly that our second building was outgrown and this present building was erected and dedicated June 27, 1915.

We thought we had a building that would always meet our needs, but in the early thirties our new Church School Building

was added. Our church was expanding in every way and mission churches were increased in number and our foreign and home missionary programs strengthened.

In 1920 our various Women's Societies were combined into one known as the Women's Auxiliary and using the circle plan. The new idea met much opposition at first and Dr. Thompson was asked to use his influence toward its adoption. Two ladies held out to the very last. Each of them being very active in her particular society, they were very much opposed to the new idea. They opposed it to the bitter end. Finally, one of them was told that she and only one other lady were against the new plan. Then she said, "Well, if the other person is who I think it is, I will give in." So the Auxiliary and circle plan commenced with only one enemy.

Dr. Thompson retired in 1938 and became Pastor Emeritus until his death in 1946. In 1938, Dr. Wallace Alston accepted our call and was our pastor for six years. Our church continued to grow and our Chapel was completed during his pastorate.

In 1944, Dr. Alston accepted a call to the Druid Hills Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and we were without a pastor until November of 1945 when Dr. George Vick became our pastor, having accepted our call from the First Presbyterian Church of St. Joseph, Missouri.

In the past seven years our work in every

department has advanced amazingly. We now have an enrollment of 3,040 members, 1,578 enrolled in the Church School, 90 in our Week Day School, two services every Sunday morning, four outpost churches organized, and seven candidates for life service.

We have increased our benevolent giving. We are proud of our past and present.

What do we plan to do with our future? Are we going to just accept our blessings and do nothing about it? "Faith of Our Fathers Living Still." Is that faith living still in the heart of each of us? Can we say with the Psalmist of old, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" We sometimes complain that the church is too large, that there are plenty of others to do the work. Does that excuse us from our failure to keep the faith living in us as individuals?

We hear that all the church thinks about is spending money. Can a town of 3,000 run without money? Do we realize that the money spent for current expenses of the entire church and church school, Men's work and Women's work, and church expansion has been nearly \$10,000 less than the amount given to benevolences this past year?

We love our church and we are proud of its accomplishments, but let us remember — and it is a sobering thought — that the Bible says, "Him to whom much has been given, much will be required."