

HISTORY OF THE STEVENSON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

According to the best available information, the first church services in Stevenson were held in the old frame Masonic Building located on the side of the mountain on what is now Mountain Street. The congregation was made up of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists. The congregation later built a brick church on Church Street as a union church for the three denominations. As the town grew, the membership of each began to increase, and in 1904, the Methodists erected their own building on property donated by Mr. B.R. Ellis, on East Main Street by the railroad.

The church thrived under the leadership of several different pastors of the North Alabama conference, and in 1940, it was proposed that a new church be built. Mr. J.A. Dennison made an offer of \$5,000 toward it if the project was undertaken. The members voted to accept the proposal. Committees of members were appointed to select and purchase a site for the building, to raise the finances, and to oversee the construction. Men serving on these committees were leaders in the community as well as the church, and were for the most part, members of old Stevenson families: G.H. Caperton, Guy Timberlake, E.K. Mann, E.O. Mann, I.P. Russell, and Mr. Dennison, founder and owner of Chickamauga Cedar Company, who had come to Stevenson from Maryland. His company produced a fine quality of oak flooring and he donated the flooring for the church. Through donations by church & family members, beautiful stained-glass windows were placed in honor and memory of loyal church members. The total cost of the building, \$24,500, was paid on its completion, and it was dedicated in a special service the next year in May 1942. Rev. S.W. Brooks was pastor at that time. Rev. Fred Johnson had been pastor when the project was undertaken.

Twenty years later, the education and fellowship facilities became inadequate, and primarily because of the efforts of James A. Mann, the congregation undertook the building of an annex to meet those needs. Consisting of Sunday school rooms, a nursery, kitchen and fellowship Hall, the annex was completed and dedicated on August 11, 1963. In recognition of the zeal and devotion of James Mann in planning and financing the building, and inspiring the members to follow his leadership, the addition was named in honor of him, the James A. Mann Educational Annex, after his death in an automobile accident in 1962.

Serving the congregation during this construction was Rev. Henry Ford, while Rev. Robert Murphree was the minister when it was dedicated. Both were influential and popular in the community and each remained here several years.

During the ministry of Rev. R.D. Pitts, 1971-74, the church recognized the need for a new and larger parsonage. On a lot near the church, donated by Miss Kathryn Armstrong, a four-bedroom brick house was built, which could more adequately house ministers with children. In the years since then several pastors assigned to us were without families, and some who did not choose to live in Stevenson. The parsonage, however, has been furnished and maintained to provide a comfortable home.

Since 1963, the church has had alternating periods of growth and decline in membership, but has consistently provided Christian education for children, youth, and adults of the community while offering inspiration and fellowship to all. The church has

always supported efforts to improve life for all people in the town, and continued to do so in 1977 under the guidance of Rev. Ted Peterson, who served the church since 1974.

The early 1980's brought some dissension among the members that was harmful to the spiritual well-being of the church. We had also suffered a loss of around three dozen members through transfers of several families by Avondale Mills. However, during the ministry of Rev. Robert Nance, (1982-88) fifty members were added to the church roll and there was some renewal, although unfortunately many of those quickly became inactive after he left Stevenson.

It was also during Rev. Nance's tenure that the church opened a daycare center in the James A. Mann Annex. It began on a small scale, but, due to the real need for such a facility in the community, it expanded to our capacity. It is the only state certified daycare center in town, and consequently has a waiting list of children whose parents want to place them there. Although the daycare has been a success, neither the membership nor church attendance has increased because of it.

In 1990, the church became a beneficiary of the estate of William W. Bogart, a former member, in the form of a Trust amounting to \$200,000. The trust was to be administered by a board of trustees chosen by the Administrative board, and was to be dispersed in accordance with certain restrictions dictated in the will. For the most part the church has tried to maintain the corpus of the trust, spending the income only for maintenance of church property, and once to acquire some adjoining property for possible future expansion. In times when our Treasury funds have run low, the availability of this money has made it possible to keep the church building and parsonage in good condition. The trust has indeed been a blessing for which we are deeply indebted to the late Mr. Bogart, and to his wife Polly, who was also a member.

The 1990's were a time of struggle for the Stevenson Methodist Church. There was still evidence of some dissension among the members, and there were a number of inactive members. Several unfortunate assignments of ministers came in succession, and the number of faithful had diminished significantly. In 1996, our first female minister, Rev. Amy Parsons Vaughn, came to us. In spite of some natural reluctance to accept a female pastor, she was popular in the community and succeeded in bringing back some members who had been inactive. Another woman pastor who stayed two years, Rev. Marjorie Palmer, followed Rev. Amy Vaughn.

In 2003, the church welcomed a young family to the parsonage; Rev. John Russell, his wife, Bess, a three-year-old son, Isaac, and later a daughter, Rachel. Rev. John was just out of seminary when he came here in 2002, a new Methodist and a transfer from another denomination. His youth and enthusiasm sparked new life and unity among the members. Evidence of this could be seen in new landscaping of the church grounds, and in the creation of a Prayer Garden between the sanctuary and the annex. The garden, with blooming scrubs, a wooden cross, and stone benches, provided a place of peace and beauty to all who pass by. The hard work by a group of dedicated members to accomplish this landscaping has inspired a feeling of hope and promise in the church in the early years of the 21st century

John Russell and his family left us in June 2005 to go to the Mission Field in Ghana. Though not financed by the local church, he went with our blessing and our prayers. Ten members had joined the church during his tenure. The group of members responsible for the landscaping and for the Prayer garden (calling themselves the Kudzu

garden club) have made more much-needed improvements to the church property including painting the upstairs rooms and making curtains for the youth rooms, laying tile in the foyer, and replacing fixtures in the bathrooms. The men and women of the group have done all the work with the costs raised through yard sales and donations.

Rev. Bill Stone and his wife, Betty, came to Stevenson in June 2005 and both of them, enthusiastic and genial, were heartily welcomed and taken into our hearts. Rev. Stone has made the youth programs the cornerstone of his ministry here, transporting community children to programs, services, church camp, and outings. He has made his services available to all members, especially visiting the sick, shut-ins, and nursing homes. He and his wife have made themselves a vital part of our church life.

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