

# The History of Central United Methodist Church

Our church began in 1901 when several people who resided in or near Lenoir City expressed a desire for a church of their faith, the Methodist Episcopal. They conferred with Rev. John Wesley Cardwell, who was then Pastor of the Ebenezer Charge of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and asked for his preaching services. Rev. Cardwell added the group to his charge as a "preaching place", and preached for them once per month. The church had no building of its own; but the members were permitted to meet in the original First Baptist Church building on "C" Street until they could construct their first building.

One old record states there were 30 charter members but only list the following names: Mr. and Mrs. J. Monroe Grubb, Mr. and Mrs. John Griffiths, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Grubb, Mr. and Mrs. Edd K. Spraker, Mr. and Mrs. I. B. Babb, Miss Maggie Babb, Miss Lillie Babb, Mrs. J. J. Duff, Mrs. Will Cassady, Miss Josie Cassady, Mrs. Cal Hayes, Mr. Walter Spraker, Miss Rhenda Sherwood, Miss Paralee Lyles, and Miss Caroline Lyles.

At the following annual conference in 1902, the "preaching place" became a part of the Loudon Circuit then served by Rev. W.S. Grant.

From a Tipton, Indiana newspaper article dated February 24, 1902, it was learned that money to help build the first church was donated by an individual, Abe Kemp, through Tipton Main Street Methodist Episcopal Church. The program was known as "The Frontier Plan". In articles furnished to Central Church from Main Street Church is a copy of a letter from Rev. W. S. Grant to a Brother Bridge stating that "In answer to your questions will say we will have a very neate (sic) little church at Lenoir City, It is worth about \$1500.00. Seats from 350 to 400 people. We have just closed a very successful revival in it. We have 41 members with more to follow soon. Last Sunday was the fourth Sunday that we have met in S.S. We had 10. I think by next Sunday we will have 80 or 100. The outlook is fine."

In 1903 the Rev. Grant appointed J. Monroe Grubb to help select a site for a church building. The Lenoir City Company donated a site at 201 B Street and First Avenue. The first trustees for the property and building funds were: J. Monroe Grubb, I. B. Babb, and E. K. Spraker. A one-room frame church building measuring 32 X 50 feet was completed by late 1903 on this site. The building was dedicated in 1904 by Dr. J. M. Melear. J. M. Grubb served as class leader and later as Sunday School Superintendent until his death in 1930.

Although he also served another church concurrently, the Rev. T. H. Conner was considered the first full-time minister. He came to the church in 1906.

A Ladies Aid Society was organized in October 1907 with dues of five cents a month. In 1908 the minutes record that "women will be fined one cent for talking during the meeting when not in connection with the meeting" . The Society was very active and among other things conducted "an ice cream and oyster supper" on January 4, 1908. The first funeral to be held in the church was for Avery Jackson Duff, who died on September 11, 1909. Weekly prayer meetings began in 1910.

In 1911 under Pastor C. K. Mahoney, the original building was enlarged to meet growing needs for the Sunday School by adding frame additions to both sides and expanding the basement to accommodate Sunday School classes for the children. At this time, a change was made to the front entrance and concrete steps were constructed. The cost for this addition was \$2,600.

In October of 1939, a uniting conference was held in which the Methodist Episcopal Church; the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and the Methodist Protestant Church were reunited as the Methodist Church after almost one hundred years of separation. With the reunification of the Methodist Church, there were now two congregations of the same church in Lenoir City; therefore, it was necessary to rename each church. On November 5, 1939, suggestions by the congregation were placed in a sealed box from which the Official Board selected the name Central Methodist Church.

The beginning of the present church building took place in the spring of 1940 when the Rev. T. O. Marshall drew up plans and specifications for a new educational building. These plans were adopted by the Board of Trustees composed of S. B. Grubb, R. H. Baker, R. G. Cardwell, Sr., S. H. Monger, A. H. Gibson, Walter Soward, C. M. Ingram, Mrs. J. W. Cardwell, and Mrs. T. E. Ghormley. Construction began with a gift of \$1,000 from the Ladies Aid Society.

The educational addition was a two-story concrete and masonry building which was connected to the back or chancel end of the frame church at that time. This educational addition extended east along First Avenue to the alley. Entrance to the addition was from the back of the chancel in the sanctuary. This addition, containing over 2,000 square feet of classroom space, was constructed for only \$2,500. The low cost was made possible because of the volunteer labor provided by the church members. Rev. Marshall, also a carpenter, served as working foreman. Other volunteer labor, for the most part, was from Mrs. Marshall's high-school-boys' Sunday School class. Other members, carpenter Arthur Gibson and brick mason Walter Babb, Sr., completed the construction crew.

The total cost of the addition was raised from the membership by the time it was completed. The dedication was held on October 5, 1941, by Dr. J. M. Melear who had dedicated the first church building in 1904.

A second addition to the education building was completed under the pastorate of the Rev. W. F. Ledford, appointed as pastor in 1951. Of special interest is that Rev. Ledford started and ended his active ministerial career at Central Church, receiving his first appointment in 1910 and retiring from this church in 1954.

In 1947, all remaining frame sections of the church were razed, contracts were let, and construction was started on the major portion of the present facility, which includes the sanctuary and fellowship hall, additional classrooms and lavatories, and the first full kitchen. This work was started during the pastorate of Rev. Roy I. Reese who was appointed in 1946. However, the inside of the addition was not completed until after the Rev. Charles W. Salmon was appointed in 1949. It was during this period that Lenoir City School Superintendent J. Guy Buckner permitted the congregation to meet in the Nichols School auditorium at the northwest corner of Second Avenue and "C" Street, now a parking lot.

Contracted cost of this major portion was \$75,000. Sunday, May 7, 1950 was the first Sunday in the new sanctuary. Bishop Roy H. Short dedicated this major addition and "burned the note" in 1957.

The third addition to the educational facility was erected in 1961 during the pastorate of the Rev. John R. Manney at a cost of \$32,000. It included space for six large classrooms, a chapel, lavatories, and a week-day kindergarten room. The low cost of the addition was due mostly to the diligence and personal labor of the contractor, Ed Rader.

A short time after the third addition was occupied a remodeling project was completed which moved the pastor's study and the church office from the basement into new offices in the 1940 addition. The old office space was converted into a choir room. Two children's classrooms were also moved to another section of the educational addition. The cost of this work was about \$4,600 and was constructed with volunteer labor.

In 1968 the church bell tower was added at a cost of \$6,000, The tower had been omitted during the main construction of the sanctuary. It was primarily paid for with memorial gifts. Roy H. Baker served as chairman of the building committee, Glenn Ellis as architect, and Adair Clarke as contractor, with the Rev. J. Ray Stuart as pastor. The original church bell, which had been stored, was installed in the tower.

The first parsonage was built next to the church in 1913 while the Rev. M. C. Bruner was pastor. In 1955 it was replaced by one located at 612 G Street under pastors Paul E. Brown and John M. Sutton, who replaced Brown during 1955. In 1977, while the Rev Fred Gooden was pastor, a new parsonage was purchased at 1304 East First Avenue.

In July, 1968, the church became a part of the United Methodist Church as a consequence of the General Conference held in Dallas, Texas at which the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church were joined.

In October of 1988 ground was broken for a multi-purpose Family Life Center under the pastorate of Rev. Jerry Fleenor. Rev. Jack Brown was pastor when the building was completed. This facility includes a basketball court, kitchen, fellowship area, stage, multimedia equipment for a contemporary second service on Sunday, and several classrooms. This center was constructed at a cost of \$460,000 and was consecrated by District Superintendent John Trundle on July 8, 1990, when Neville Hammer, Jr. was pastor.

At a Charge Conference on May 18, 1997 members voted to move the church to a new location on which they would build a new church facility. At a Charge Conference on April 15, 1998, members voted to purchase twenty-three acres located at the intersection of US Highways 11 and 321 in Eaton Cross Roads. This property was purchased and, on May 31, 1998, was dedicated at a special assembly of the church members at the site. Brewer, Ingram, and Fuller Architects, Inc. was hired to draw the plans for the new, larger church facility.

On Celebration Sunday, April 23, 2000, more than \$912,000 was pledged by 200 families toward building the new facility. The Holston Conference contributed \$250,000 as partial payment for the land. We celebrated our 100th birthday on Saturday and Sunday, May 5-6, 2001.

The number of charter members is unclear but probably were between 20 and 30. This grew to 41 the following year. By 1911, membership had grown to 235, and it was 315 in 1925. By 1939 the membership had grown to 371. Throughout the 1940's and 1950's, there was a membership of around 500, reaching a peak of 517 in 1965. As the national trend showed a decrease in membership, our membership followed the trend, falling to 426 in 1990.

In the early 1990's the congregation wanted to reverse trends and began offering a larger variety programming and ministries that appealed to broader section of our community. During this same timeframe, our worship attendance has increased from 191 to 574. In 1996, to accommodate overcrowding at the 11:00 worship service, we began an early service with a contemporary style. Membership increased to 454 in 1993, 634 in September 2000, and 660 in 2003 at the time that we relocated to Eaton Crossroads. As of May 2007, our membership is 876. Presently, both our services continue to grow with Easter attendance topping 1,000 for four consecutive years.

While the worship services have grown so too have other ministries of the church, Sunday School classes offer a wide variety of Christian education, small groups are available for various Bible studies throughout the week, and there are a growing number of mission and service opportunities available.

During its 100-year history, Central has given ten of its members to the Methodist ministry: Revs. John D. Babb, Newton Eblen, Rupert R. Ghormley, Noel H. Cardwell, Raymond E. Cardwell, Wilford Gustin, James Spraker, Robert Pardue, Perry Mason, Sam Johnson, and Julie Wilburn.

After 38 years in Africa in the missionary field, Rev. Doug and Elaine Crowder have retired to Lenoir ty where they have joined the Central Church family. Rev. Crowder is now the Congregational Care Minister.

Today, Central continues to be intentional in providing a myriad of Christian activities that provide opportunities for the individual to experience a closer relationship to Jesus Christ. We believe that God's love is experienced through worship, explored through study, expressed through fellowship and service, and extended to the world in Jesus' name.

Last revised June 2007.