

HISTORY

OF

THE FIRST FREE WILL BAPTIST CHURCH OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

First Freewill Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia had her inception as early as the late 1940's in the minds of a few people who had come to Savannah from Tattnall County during the war years to work in war-connected industries. Having decided to make Savannah their permanent home, they were eager to see a Free Will Baptist Church established locally where they could attend regularly and to call their spiritual home. They had attended either the Glennville or Ebenezer Free Will Baptist Church making it impossible to return to worship due to their working schedules. A degree of permanence was desired in their church life, especially for the benefit of the children, who needed to be in Sunday School every Sunday and brought up in a stable church atmosphere.

The leading families in these discussions were the Lemuel Purcells, the Rudolph Andersons, the Russell Brewtons, the R.E. Kicklighters, the Winton Driggers, the Arthur Anthonys, John Blanton, and Ike Blanton. These families approached the officials of the South Georgia Association with their desire to establish this church and were advised to get in touch with the Home Missions Board of the National Association. They suggested to the Board that Savannah was ripe for a strong Free Will Baptist organization. The South Georgia Board strongly seconded that suggestion to the National Board and offered to help finance the undertaking if something could be done immediately.

While these plans were being discussed, arrangements were made to use a church building on the corner of Victory Drive and Montgomery Street as the meeting place until other arrangements could be made. A revival with Rev. Damon Dodd and Rev. Louis Moulton began on Monday, May 24th. The organizational meeting at which the First Free Will Baptist Church of Savannah was officially constituted was held on Sunday evening, May 31, 1953. Thirty-three people presented themselves as charter members. H.O. (Lemuel) Purcell (chairman), Rudolph Anderson, and Russell Brewton were chosen as Deacons of the new church with R.E. Kicklighter and John Blanton as Honorary Deacons. Rev. Dodd left for another commitment and Reverend Louis Moulton continued the revival for another week. After this two week revival, the families were informed that the church they were using was being sold and we could no longer use the building for worship. Mr. and Mrs. Lethridge Kicklighter readily offered the use of their barn, located on Quacco Road, for church services. Reverend Sammy Wilkinson, a student at Freewill Baptist Bible College, was called upon to supply as pastor for the

summer months. On July 22, 1953, the church purchased property on Skidaway Road for \$2000.00 with the help of Lemuel Purcell who used his money for the purchase. The men of the church, with Lemuel Purcell leading the way, began the work of clearing and preparing the site at once. The first building, a concrete block structure, was completed and occupied in November 1953. Reverend Louis H. Moulton accepted the call to pastor the First Free Will Church of Savannah. He came on the field October 1, 1953. He came with his wife, Mildred, and son Louis (Buck) Moulton, Jr.

The Lord's blessings were on the young congregation from the very beginning of its life as a church. While under Reverend Moulton's dynamic leadership, it got off to a running start. New members were added and the people responded well financially. A full program of denominational endeavor was instituted and soon the church was assuming her responsibility among other Savannah churches as well as in the South Georgia Association and the State Association. It is noteworthy that the church was well received in the city and rapidly won a good name in the community of fundamental churches as a Bible-preaching, Christ-honoring congregation. Reverend Moulton enjoyed a most successful ministry for nearly five years. When he resigned the pastorate in May 1958, the church had matured and was well established as a permanent organization.

Reverend Damon C. Dodd, who was living at that time in Winter Haven, Florida, was called to the pastorate succeeding Reverend Moulton. He came on the field in July 1958 with his wife, Sylvia, two daughters, Marilyn and Barbara and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Woods. In September of that year, Reverend Bobby Jackson conducted a revival and the Lord gave a most bountiful harvest of souls. Many people of the community were saved and united with the church. Attendance in all services increased to the point where

All the facilities were completely outgrown. During the latter part of September, the congregation voted to add a thirty-five foot extension onto the existing building and by the end of November it was completed and occupied. The men of the church did most of the work. The first Sunday, on which the new addition was used, there were 232 people in Sunday school. Soon after the first of 1959, a contract was signed for the construction of a new sanctuary. Work began immediately and the first services were held in the new structure on the last Sunday in July of that year.

The following months were a time of tremendous growth. During one period that lasted more than a year, salvation decisions were made in almost every service. Church membership increased, Sunday School attendance peaked at 260, and a spirit of revival prevailed almost constantly. First Free Will Baptist Church of Savannah enjoyed the distinction of being the largest church of her denomination in the State of Georgia.

A beautiful piece of land had been given to the church by one of her members and in the early part of 1961, the church voted to sell the parsonage property on Pine Tree Road and build a new house on Ferguson Avenue, near Montgomery Crossroads. This was considered an ideal site for a new parsonage. It was completed in August of 1961 and the pastor and family moved in during the latter part of that month.

Brother Dodd served as pastor of the church through December 1962. Upon his resignation, the deacon board and church, through much prayer, sought God's will for a new pastor. As a result, Reverend Henry J. Van Kluyve came as pastor in 1963 with his wife, Virginia and two sons, Johnny and Ricky. During the interim, Evangelist Tom Hamilton of Homerville, Georgia served as pastor. The church is much indebted to him for the wise leadership he gave during this difficult time.

During Brother Van Kluyve's ministry, the church sold the island property that had been donated to the church by Carl Schultz. With these proceeds, the property on Vicksburg Avenue was acquired to build a new parsonage next to the church. Bro. Van Kluyve left in January of 1967 to assume the position as Director of Deputation of our National Foreign Missions Department.

Reverend Rolla Smith came from Nashville, Tennessee in February 1967 with his wife, Agnes, and two daughters, Linda and Beth to pastor our church. During his ministry the present parsonage was built and the sanctuary renovated. Brother Smith left in May 1973 to assume a pastorate in his native state of Missouri. He later served as General Director of the National Foreign Missions Department.

Reverend Billy D. Hanna assumed pastoral responsibilities in June 1973. Brother Hanna came immediately after his graduation from Free Will Baptist Bible College with his wife, Beverly, daughter, Christy and son, Brad. He left in November 1978 to assume the pastorate of Trinity Free Will Baptist Church in Bowling Green, KY. He has since returned to Georgia where he has been pastor of the First Free Will Baptist Church of Albany for over ten years.

Reverend Bill Robinson came to Savannah in February 1979 accompanied by his wife, Helen and daughter, Laura. They had three other children who had already left home. They were Ron, Robert, and Linda. During his time, the church was remodeled including the padding of the pews. Under Brother Robinson's ministry, the church continued it's strong emphasis on denominational giving, particularly to Foreign Missions and to the Bible

College. He left in June of 1985, and is now retired and serving as interim pastor in Bainbridge, GA.

Reverend Randy Corn succeeded Brother Robinson. He moved to Savannah with his wife, Joy and sons, Benjamin and Paul. Brother Corn will be remembered for his outstanding teaching ability and his extensive collection of books. New bookshelves were constantly being built for the pastor's study. Brother Corn left in June of 1991 to assume the pastorate of the Bethel Free Will Baptist Church in South Roxanna, Illinois.

Reverend Roy Harris, his wife Diane, and children, Aaron and Missy joined our church family in June of 1991. Brother Harris resigned in June of 1994 to assume the position of Public Relations Director at the Free Will Baptist Bible College. He is now the director of the College's relocation program. During Brother Harris' time of service a new computer was bought for the church office. The church also purchased property on St Johns Avenue to house the Youth and Music Minister.

Reverend Glenn Poston along with his wife, Sarah and children, Brian and Ron, came to pastor in August of 1994. Brother Poston lived and pastored in Tennessee for almost 20 years before moving to Georgia. A few months after his arrival, the church embarked on a remodeling project of the sanctuary. The work was completed in March of 1995. The church was saddened when Brother Poston resigned in December of 1997 to return to Antioch, Tennessee. His last Sunday was December 30th.

After Brother Glenn's resignation, a pastoral search committee was formed to start the process of looking for a new pastor to lead the congregation. Reverend Damon Dodd was contacted to see if he had any recommendations. Brother Dodd, who at this time, lived in Norman Park and was a member of the Cool Springs FWB Church, recommended his pastor, Reverend Steve Hughes who had been serving the Cool Springs Church since January 1992. Brother Hughes, originally from Alma, Georgia, graduated from the FWB Bible College in 1982.

Brother Hughes came with his wife, Marcia and son Stephen to interview and preach on the first Sunday in January of 1998. The following Wednesday, January 7th, the church called him as its next pastor. During the transitional month of January, Reverend Damon Dodd returned and served as interim pastor. It was a great blessing to have him back with us. Brother Hughes assumed the pastorate during the first week in February of 1998. Having grown up in the South Georgia Association, his knowledge of our church made him feel at home. And indeed, Brother Steve and his whole family became a beloved part of our church family. Three children were added to Bro. Steve's family during his pastorate. We welcomed into our

church family, Hannah, Samuel, and Rachael.

Brother Hughes actively impressed upon the congregation of the need to expand our Sunday School space and fellowship area. A building committee was selected and an architectural rendering for this expansion was procured. However, it was decided that the present Sunday School/Fellowship building be upgraded to bring it into compliance. Before the work was completed, Brother Hughes tendered his resignation. His last Sunday was September 17, 2006.

The pastor search committee wasted no time in contacting Reverend Donnie Burke. His first Sunday in the pulpit was October 15, 2006. We are pleased to have Brother Burke, his wife Susan and his children, Tyler, Brandon, and Katie join our fellowship.

The church has been blessed throughout its history not only with good pastors but also with talented and dedicated individuals working in the area of music and Christian education.

5

They have rendered an invaluable service to our church and to the cause of Christ.

Brother Bill Reagan, a native of Savannah, was the first Minister of Music and Education. He served under the ministry of Bro. Dodd.

Brother Rolla Smith was blessed by having two talented daughters. Linda and Beth helped in the area of music until Leroy Scudder assumed the position of Minister of Music and Education. Larry Gunnoe who served with Brother Smith and Brother Hanna followed him. Danny G. Thomas, who is married to the former Bobbie Brewton of our church, came in May 1976 and served until 1980.

From 1980 to 1984, Tony Adams served as Music Director, and Mark Stripling served from 1986 to 1990.

Trent Walley came to the church in July 1991, with his wife, Jennifer, serving as pianist. They left our church in December 1996 to go to the Central FWB Church in Detroit Michigan to serve as Director of Youth and Music. Lee Smith worked in the church in these areas for a while during 1997.

Our church is very fortunate to have had Phyllis Kruse, an accomplished musician, to serve as church pianist and choir director from 1998 to 2002. Warren Baxter, a church Deacon, led the congregational singing until Justin

Marker came in June of 2000 to serve as Minister of Youth. He took over leading the singing. We were saddened when Justin tendered his resignation in August of 2001. Phyllis resigned shortly after.

At the present time, we are seeking the Lord's guidance in our search for a Minister of Youth and Music. In the interim, we are pleased to have Danny Mock serving as our church pianist and choir director. Wayne Anthony, our Sunday School Superintendent, leads the congregational singing. We appreciate the tireless effort put forth by Danny Mock, Wayne Anthony, and Faye Anthony for their contribution in keeping our music program going.

This is but a brief synopsis of the history of First Free Will Baptist Church of Savannah. From the beginning, with thirty-three charter members until the present, many precious souls have been touched for God's glory. Neither time nor memory will allow all to be told, for only in eternity will the complete story be revealed and finished.

(This material was taken from the 42nd Anniversary Booklet and edited to bring it up to date as of November 25, 2006) 2006 Editors: Linda Anthony Lee with Winton Driggers.