

# History of The Bennettsville Methodist Church Established 1834

Methodism came to Marlboro District over 50 years before the Bennettsville church was organized. The Methodist Society at Beauty Spot was organized before 1783. Itinerant circuit riding preachers preached in private homes until the first meeting house was built at Beauty Spot in 1783, about 2 miles northwest of the present town of Bennettsville. It is said to have been the first church built by Methodists in South Carolina. It was of native materials described as “logs, covered with long boards held in place by weight poles, and the seats were split pine logs.”

Bishop Francis Asbury held a quarterly conference there in 1788. He visited the congregation regularly for several years in his travels in the state and recorded the visits in his journal.

In 1810 a neat frame building was built at Beauty Spot original location. It served the congregation until a third church was built on the same spot in 1839. In 1883 a fourth church was built at a site about 2 miles east on the road to Tatum. It is no longer extant but the cemetery is maintained.

Until 1834 the Methodists in the town of Bennettsville worshipped at Beauty Spot. The town had been established in 1819 when the courthouse was moved from Carlisle. The town was growing and the members of Beauty Spot who lived in town found it inconvenient to travel two miles to attend church. On June 21, 1834 Col. William J. Cook conveyed one and a half acres of land on the main street about a quarter of a mile east of the courthouse to Trustees Thomas Cook, John J. McRae, William Dudley, John McCollum, Alexander J. Miller, James C. Thomas and Alexander R. Brown. The first church, a plain square building without steeple, portico or other architectural adornments, was built that year. It had a quadrangular roof ending in a sharp point at the apex. Two doors opened directly on the street and led directly into the body of the church. It was never painted. The bell was swung from a platform outside the church. The men and the women sat separately on opposite sides of the room.

The second building, a larger rectangular wooden frame structure, was built on the same lot in 1871. Joseph Lindsey Breeden was chairman of the building committee. The church had a half circular chancel with the words “THOU GOD SEEST ME” inscribed on the wall behind the pulpit.

There was no steeple, so the bell remained on the platform outside the church. Before 1872, there was no musical instrument used except a tuning fork or occasionally a cornet. Major B. D. Townsend presented an organ, but for several months, it was not used because some members believed it was an “instrument of the devil” and not fit for church services. Since its acceptance, organ music has been a vital part of our worship services.

The congregation grew and is said to have had the largest membership of any church in town. A larger building was needed so plans were made in 1899 to build a brick, gothic style, church. Construction was started in 1900 with J. L. Breeden again chairman of the building committee. It was completed in 1903. It was described as the most beautiful church east of Columbia. The woodwork was of the best quality. The sanctuary was the octagonal Akron plan with the pulpit in front of the choir loft with exposed organ pipes above the choir. The windows were gothic arch shaped with yellow tinted art glass. On the left side there was an annex that could be closed off with sliding doors. This was used for Sunday school and opened for overflow crowds

in the sanctuary.

In 1925, the L-shaped Sunday school building was built attached to two sides of the church. Mr. James O. Breeden was the Sunday school superintendent and overseer of the construction.

In 1955-6, the old sanctuary and annex were renovated to form the colonial style sanctuary with the divided chancel and the central altar. Mr. George B. Baughn was chair of the building committee. The exterior walls were left intact. The old art glass windows with gothic design were replaced with stained glass rectangular windows. The symbols in the windows were chosen to represent Old Testament teachings in the first window on the east side by using the ark of the covenant. The second window on the east shows Christ's birth with the nativity star. On the south side the Trinity is represented by the three leaf clover and orb and cross. The next window shows Christ's earthly teachings with the open Bible. On the west side, one window with a cup and grain represents the last supper and the final window has the empty cross with lilies as the base for the resurrection.

During the 1955 renovation, a chapel was created from a former classroom behind the sanctuary. The pews are from the 1871 church (they may be the original pews from the 1834 church, but we have no proof). The altar the chancel rail are formed from the 1900 sanctuary woodwork. The pulpit and chairs are from that period.

In 1973, a day nursery was begun. This has developed into our present child development center.

In 1976, a multipurpose family life building was built on a lot acquired from the Jess Myers family adjacent to the church on the east side. It contains a kitchen and small dining area-parlor, a basketball court which can be used for large church dinners and other gatherings, and a large stage. The upper floor is used for youth activities. The basement floor has an area used for skating and other children's activities. This building has been a strong arm in the church's outreach and ministry to the community. Dr. John May was chairman of the building committee.

The Milton Moore, Sr. family donated the lot behind the family center to the church in his memory in 1976.

In 1976, a new three manual Casavant Frères pipe organ was installed in the sanctuary to replace the organ which had been in use since 1903.

In 1978, renovation of the basement floor of the church building improved office space for the pastor, the staff and enlarged the day care area. The pastor, Rev. Paul McWhirter, did a lot of the carpentry work himself. At that time, the heating plant and electric wiring were replaced.

In 1980, a 100 by 300 foot lot adjacent to the Methodist Family Center was purchased from the Exum family to be used as a church parking lot.

In 1993, the chapel was redecorated.

In August 1999, Rev. James Hepler joined our staff as Director of Music Ministries. He has developed an excellent music program with choir, organ, handbells and youth choir.

In 2005-6, after lengthy planning, the church plant was extensively renovated, modernized and brought up to date with electric and plumbing codes. The state fire and day care regulations were met. Ron King and Ron

Woodbery chaired the building committee. We essentially have a new building within the original walls. The sanctuary maintains its 1955 appearance except there is now a vaulted ceiling with an area of the 1900 ceiling visible. The acoustics are much improved. On the first floor new church offices, pastor's office, finance office and a youth director's office were made. There is a combined conference room, library and archives room.

The entire child development center was updated. There are new separate entrances from the rear of the church to the office and to the children's areas.

On the second floor a music suite was established with office, practice rooms and music library. A "gathering room" is available for informal services and a place for fellowship. There is a bride's room adjacent to the sanctuary with all the amenities to prepare for weddings. The Billy Raley Classroom is not only used for Sunday School but also for committee meetings.

The third floor contains older children's and adult classrooms, the Sunday School office and a history room to house memorial plaques and other church history information. This is also used as a classroom when needed.

One of the most useful features is an elevator that makes all areas accessible to the handicapped.

Through the years, the church has been active with outreach programs for the community as well as carefully planned worship services, fellowship groups, youth activities, missionary support, attention to shut-ins, and many other activities. Our present minister, Rev. Dr. Ben Gafford, with his ready smile, excellent sermons, understanding our congregation's needs, and empathy is providing the stimulus we need.

Our current mission of First United Methodist Church is to offer a place for all people to have a relationship with Christ and one another through worship, Bible study, fellowship, and outreach.

Our vision statement is, "First United Methodist Church is seeking to know Christ and to be a church where people are nurtured in the faith with opportunities to share God's love.

by Dr. John May