First Christian Church Reaches the Century Mark

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When the first railroad from outside the Valley reached Harlingen in April 1904, there were few inhabitants and no places of worship. In September of 1905 the little school house which Hill built next to his home (at what is now the site of Casa de Amistad) is also is used for Sunday School. Periodically a circuit rider or missionary minister provides a service. The snail-paced growth in population makes the establishment of various denominational churches very slow in the early years.

In 1906 A.T. White, pastor of the Brownsville Methodist Mission Church, and W.H. Petty, Baptist State Missionary of San Benito, occasionally hold services on Sunday afternoons. The latter would walk along the railroad track to Harlingen and back to San Benito. John S naveley, a farmer and leader of the Quaker faith arrives in 1908. He later will be named superintendent of the Union Sunday School, which holds classes in the Tabernacle on Van Buren. The Union Church is the outgrowth of people of several denominations to have Protestant services despite the lack of otherwise organized parishes. On March 23, 1908 Pope Pius X converts the Vicariate of Brownsville into the Diocese of Corpus Christi.

A significant step forward occurs on March 28, 1909 when ten Baptist Christians of Harlingen led by two Baptist ministers organize the Missionary Baptist Church which is to become the First Baptist Church. The congregation meets in “borrowed” places until 1911 when a small, flat-roofed building at 517 E. Van Buren is acquired and made into a meeting place.

It is in 1909 also that members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church commence building a wooden church on East Jackson Avenue. It, however, is never completed by the Adventists as the minister is killed by the collapsing structure in a rare tornado. By public conscription, the building was later completed so people in Harlingen might have another place to worship. It was shared by several denominations over the coming years as well as serving as an early public school building.

The year 1910 is a seminal one for Harlingen churches. The Presbyterians and Methodists organize and the Catholics construct a mission structure that one day will become Sacred Heart of Mary Immaculate. The First Christian Church is organized by 31 members on February 9, 1913. They meet in the Central Ward School auditorium. Their leader was the principal of the high school. Among its charter members is 29 year old Miss Paul Hill, who would teach Sunday School. Others are her sister Annie Rooney Hill, Mr. & Mrs. John Myrick, Mr. & Mrs. L.K. Shipp, Mr. & Mrs. C.H. Finnegan, Mr. & Mrs. S.A. Thompson, Mr. & Mrs. W.G. Stewart, Mrs. C.L. Ogan and daughter Lois (their family operated an early Harlingen hotel), Miss Lucille Shipp, Mrs. T.L. Phillipps, and Mrs. E.H. Adams. It uses the old Seventh Day Adventist building at 4th and Main Street as its sanctuary around 1913-14. This was purchased for $400. J.W. Rhone of the feed store, S.A. Thompson who is a banker and later mayor, and John Myrick who is the city's first lawyer are later to gift the lot at 710 E. Jackson and loan $1,800 for the erection of a parsonage. In the future this five-room house is sold to Mrs. Mildred Griffeth for $2,250.

The Harlingen First Christian Church is but one that grew from a movement commenced in April 1804. The initial group called themselves “Christians” and believed that adherents or Disciples of Christ should endeavor to follow the will of Christ as could be discovered in the New Testament. Beliefs are an individual matter with every congregant free to form his own conclusion or interpretation. Acting on this matter to the fullest, the Harlingen Church become independent in 1968 when it voted not to be affiliated with any other organization.

The organization was fitfull for several years until John C. Myrick and his wife Mary moved to town in early June 1915. Myrick brought all together, reorganized the church, and helped preach as the members utilized the Presbyterian Church in which to hold its services. He also preached in other nearby Valley towns. The Christian Church found a place of its own by purchasing the old Seven Day
Adventist property on Jackson at Fourth Street.

A huge step forward was taken with the 1926 erection of a new church on the corner of Van Buren and Third Streets. Built at a cost of $40,000, it allowed the congregation to expand as well as the Church's influence.

As the Church continued to grow and its sanctuary show its age, it decided to build a new building. On April 20, 1958 the First Christian Church sanctuary at 13th and Tyler, and designed by Fort Worth architect William C. Bugance, Jr., is dedicated. By 1973 this, an educational unit, parsonage, and youth center whose construction started in March 1969 are valued at $500,000.

Over the decades the church has had too large a number of members prominent in the community to single out by name without inadvertently overlooking someone. Fellowship, Boy Scout support, Christian Endeavor, Choir, Revivals, Retreats and much more have been the positive contributions of the church to itself and the community. On its 100th Birthday, we extend Happy Golden Anniversary Wishes to an important community partner.