

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SERVICE AND WITNESSING

An address by Bernard Titey at the centennial service of RADFORD CHRISTIAN CHURCH on January 10, 1999

Seems like it was only yesterday!

You may recall a couple of weeks ago when Randy Lemon asked if I had been around when it all began one hundred years ago. It sometimes seems that I was!

In 1969, I drew the short straw and won the opportunity to review the first seventy years of this church body. Well, it has happened again. Since we will be covering thirty more years, I would expect you to allow me half again as much time. There are numerous incidents from our past we would like to talk about but with one hundred years to cover, we will just have to leave some of it for later. With the centennial celebration going throughout this year, perhaps there will be other opportunities.

In preparing this presentation, I have relied largely upon notes which were left by Mrs. Bessie Bocoek. I have tried to fill in around these with thoughts from my own experience and recollections which, after all, covers almost three-quarters of the time considered. Your memory of some of these events may be different from mine. If so, FORGET IT!! I have the floor and in this case, my version prevails!

Today, I will try to relate this story to you not so much from the perspective of bare historical fact but rather as an attempt to draw a picture of what we are and how we got to the position we now occupy. History is not an abstract subject but it is a living account of actual people and events which shape our lives and channel us from one point to another. It is how we view this account of people and events which allows us to learn and profit from it. Too many kids in school fail to take this perspective of history and suffer from this failure. There is a modern tendency to disregard the past. We do so only at our own peril. Just last week, the result of the standards-of-learning tests in our schools was released and it showed a dismal lack of knowledge in history. Of all subjects covered, history was the worst. I think this indicates our society in general is far too prone to disregard what is in the past and in doing so has abandoned much of our heritage and valuable lessons to be learned from the past. It is of critical importance that we not only know what has gone before but that we also understand it. In order to accomplish this, we must be able to inject ourselves into these by-gone situations - to personally experience them. History must be made real and this can only be done in your mind. So, help me today. Be there! Know these people and experience these events. This is living history!!

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Our church story pretty well parallels that of our community. Radford started as a railroad town and the community sprang up around the railroad shops, hi just a few years, the iron industry moved in a few miles upriver and a new community started to develop there.

There was only one church in this entire end of town. That was Bourne Memorial Methodist Church which was in the building now occupied by Dick Davis' law offices. I believe Wanda Humphrey's desk now sits in the spot which was their old sanctuary. My great-grandparents were charter members of the group which formed that congregation which is now known as Central United Methodist Church.

The people coming in with this new industry set out to build a functioning community here and one of the obvious early needs was a place to worship. If you preferred something other than a Methodist church, it wasn't easy in those pre-automobile days to get to the Disciples church which was growing in the other end of town. The Christian Church was a natural for this community. The Snowville church had been thriving for a number of years, with some rather close ties with the Barton Stone/"Racoon John" Smith movement which was taking place in

Kentucky. This had led to the establishment of a congregation in East Radford and their influence extended to these newcomers in our section of town.

Since I suggested you place yourself in historical events as they happened, come with me to a meeting which is taking place in early spring of 1899 - exactly one hundred years ago. We are in the old McCormic store building out on Second Street just beyond Pendleton where the Graham storebuilding now stands. We are probably sitting around a pot-bellied stove to break the chill of this early spring morning. The gathering is small and members of the Me Wane family are obviously the organizers of the session. The Me Wanes are an old foundry family. While some of them were getting Lynchburg Foundry Company started in Lynchburg, these Me Wanes were here running the local foundry for Glamorgan Pipe which was to sell out to Lynchburg a few years later.. Robert Me Wane is in charge. C. P. Me Wane and his wife are there as well as one of the Me Wane sisters, Mrs. J. C. Hurt and her husband. These Hurts are the grandparents of our late police chief Jimmy Whitt who grew up in this church and was a childhood friend of several of us. I would make the point that these were not strangers to us. This group of friends meeting together on that day are people with whom we can identify as friends today.

Mr. And Mrs. E. C. Grayson were the parents of Eugene Grayson who was known by many of you as our Commissioner of Revenue for the city for many years. Mrs. Florence Shanklin and her husband, Ed, were the parents of the late Ed Shanklin, an employee of the post office and known by many of you. I remember Mr. Shanklin well, bringing his Sunday newspaper to church. He would sit hi the small alcove to the side of the entry steps and read the funny papers during preaching. There were others present but these are the only positively identified names at that first meeting.

This informal group soon enlisted the aid of W. S. Bullard who was pastor of the First Christian Church in East Radford. The congregation was organized and Mr. Grayson served as the first chairman of the official board. The following year - 1900 - The Rev. Bullard conducted a revival during which a number of new members were added. One of these was a Mr. Rush Miller who became Sunday School Superintendent and who donated an organ to the group. So here you have it - a storefront shelter to house them - a minister to bring the message - an organ to help praise the Lord with music and the Radford Christian Church was off and running! What more was needed to praise God and to carry out His work in west Radford??

Well, you don't rest on your laurels but strive to grow and prosper. In 1903, land was purchased here on Second Street between Carter and Page and plans were begun for a permanent church home. The purchase included 200 feet fronting on Second Street and extending back to the alley along with a parcel extending from the alley to Third Street. The total price was \$100 - one-third down and one-third hi each of the next two years - at 6% interest. In later years, the parcel fronting on Third Street was sold. Later still, we purchased an additional lot on the corner of Second and Page which gave us our present property boundaries of the entire block on Second Street from Carter to Page and extending back to the alley.

By this time, their group was four years old. Mr. Bullard had been replaced at First Christian by a young minister whose name is among those you must remember. He was P. P. Hasselvander. As Mr. Bullard had done before him, he also served our new congregation in a part-time capacity. It was his daughter whose death was mentioned in our prayer list a couple of weeks ago in case you wondered just who is Pearl Hasselvander Thomas. He was a builder, having led the construction of the old First Christian Church building on the corner of Second Avenue and Fairfax. He set out to build a small brick chapel on the recently purchased land at the spot now occupied by our parsonage. Only a few years passed until larger quarters were needed and Rev.

Hasselvander supervised the construction of a major expansion to the chapel. The new House of Worship was dedicated in November 1910 with Ashley Johnson, President of Johnson Bible College, preaching the dedicatory sermon. At this time, the official board was composed of four elders; Mr. Grayson, Mr. Hurt, Mr. Griener (father of Myra Lawrence and Virginia Hilton, the lady who was here last Sunday telling of walking across the railroad bridge from New River to get to church here when she was a child), and Mr. Conrad (father of Jim, Ocie, Annie and Delmos and known to me as Uncle Billy).

Deacons were Roy Hurt, Charles Hurst (Curtis' father), Walter DeHart, R. V. Cox, Emmett Long, C. E. Grubb and E. E. Shanklin. Mr. Greiner was board chairman, Mr. Grubb was treasurer and J. T. Whitt, son-in-law of the Hurts, was clerk. During this period of time and soon after, a number of families had identified with the church which continue to impact upon us today - Boyds - Godbeys - Worrells - Bocoeks - Ferrells - Midkiffs - Parrishes - Donneleys - Clements - Hines - Youngs - Howells - Tilleys - Take a look at these names of the 1899 church and then look at the names of those keeping our church going in 1999. Very little has changed over one hundred years. The names of the 1899 church are pretty much the same as those of the 1999 church.

I will ask you to again venture with me into the past. It is early Sunday morning on New Years' Eve - December 31, 1922. We are out on the church lawn where we feel the agony and frustration of these people as we watch our beautiful church building - dedicated only a dozen years ago - be consumed by flames. We hear the old bell clanging its death knell as the belfry collapses and it falls to the earth. As we return to the present, we must still feel the pain and heartache.

If I may digress for a moment for story about that old bell - many years passed during which nothing was ever said about the church bell. Since a bell was not place in the new building, it slipped from peoples' minds and memory. Several years ago, Ed Francis told a group of us he knew where the bell was if we were interested. Ed led us to the home of Julia's parents up on Fourth and Ingles Streets and there in the Howells' back yard, buried upside-down in the earth, was our bell being used as a petunia bed. We retrieved it, took it to the foundry where it was sandblasted and it has been on display here on our front porch since that time - a true link with the past!

While the fire destroyed our building, it certainly did not destroy the church! Quite the contrary. The congregation was reinvigorated. On that same morning, they moved a block out the street and had their morning service in the old Wayne building at the corner of Second and Boiling. I owned that old building a few years ago before it was torn down. I probably would have treated it with more respect had I known at the time that it once served as our church home!

Plans for rebuilding were begun that day and Rev. Hasselvander again entered the picture. He was preaching in Bluefield at the time but came back to Radford to draw plans and supervise the construction of our new church. To my mind, he was a good builder but a lousy architect! A building couldn't be more sound than this one but the plan was terrible. Most of you remember the steep steps. You could hardly get in or out, especially with a body when there was a funeral. You remember the dark, dreary hole which is now the bright, cheerful Godbey Hall.

In the fall of 1923, the cornerstone was laid with appropriate Masonic ceremonies. The basement was finished first so that services could be held there while the above-ground construction continued. Before it was finished, Virginia Showalter Howell became the first person to be baptized in the new structure. The building was dedicated - free of debt- on June 15, 1930.

It is a good thing the debt was retired because at this time, we were going headlong into the great depression. Our church and so many of our people came upon desperately hard times over the

next few years, as did our entire nation. In 1934, Jim Conrad took over as treasurer, a responsibility he was to perform so well for the next forty years. It is an especially hard job to be treasurer when there is no money in the treasury! Jim's books at the end of February hi 1934 showed a balance in the treasury of 35 cents with - get this, Dennis - \$38.87 still owed on the minister's salary, including that for the month of February. Eddie Mosely was the minister at that time. Eddie was to play a very important role in the life of our church over the next several years, really continuing as long as he lived. He was one of our great friends and benefactors.

hi spite of adversity and hard tunes, we managed to survive the depression and were again on the threshold of great progress when we became engulfed in World War n. This had a severe impact upon us as it did the entire nation. Forty-rune young men were taken from our congregation to serve our country in the military services. I was among them as I enlisted in the Marines as a seventeen year old. Sad to say, four of these young men did not return. Giving their lives for their country and for then" beliefs were Bill Worrell, Bill Whitt, Eldon Young and Forest Nelson. I hope our church and our nation never falters in our efforts to honor them.

As the war raged, the life of our church continued here on the home front, hi 1942, Mr. Brisson was called as minister. With no living quarters available, the Brissons moved in and set up housekeeping hi the basement of the church. This was the second time this had happened. Ernest and Madeline Worrell had occupied these same quarters briefly when he first came to town in 1939. It was obvious our next and greatest need was to secure a parsonage if we were to expect to attract and hold a minister. Fund raising was begun. Perhaps some of you remember the paper bricks were sold to raise money for the project. The powder plant was going strong, other local industries were flourishing and money was plentiful - at least much more plentiful than at some other times in our history. Fast progress was made and the Julian Linkous family moved into our new, modem parsonage in 1945.

The post-war period showed renewed activity and growth. We who were coming home from the war started families and suddenly the baby boom was upon us. The programs and facilities of our church were to reflect this growth, hi 1956, while Bob Tatlock was minister, we greatly increased our available space by construction of our educational building. It was completed and dedication services were held on November 11,1956. It is coincidental that this was on the Armistice Day holiday which, incidentally, followed the anniversary date of the founding of the Marine Corps!!

We kept talking about building needs and sanctuary improvements but not doing much about it. We even discussed building a completely new sanctuary but nothing came of these talks. Then in 1974, following a troublesome period within our church, another of our critical milestones was reached. I hesitate mentioning troublesome times but, after all, we did have them and that is part of our heritage, too. Fortunately, we have been blessed by never having seriously troubled times with deep and bitter animosity between our people. That just hasn't happened. This period was a mixed blessing for us, but a blessing, none-the-less because it brought us Dr. John Sutzenfield. He had just retired as minister of a church in Lynchburg which he had served for fifty years and which had grown to a membership of two thousand people. He came to us as interim minister. The first thing he did when he got here was to literally tear our church apart. He was a wise old man. He recognized the need to place something before us to pull us together and get us working toward a common goal. Before we knew what was happening, he had us gutting the interior and tearing out the whole back side of our building and we were not really sure of exactly where we were heading.

Again, we moved to the basement for our services. Well, many of you were here at the time and you know the results. We ended up with the beautiful sanctuary we enjoy here today - in my opinion, one of the nicest in our town. Our beautifully renovated sanctuary was dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1977. The ministry of Dr. Suttentfield is certainly one of the periods to be remembered in our church.

Our most recent chapter began in 1988 with the call of Dennis Martin. Dennis' ministry of more than ten years is substantially longer than the continuous tenure of any other minister to have served us. This period has brought several program developments which are significant. We have employed a youth director and the program to develop people who will carry this church through the next century goes forward. Perhaps one of the most significant changes has been the inclusion of our female members as Elders and Diaconite. This move of inclusion and enlightenment is extremely important as it enlarges the potential for effective leadership for our church and for its mission in our community. With Dennis' leadership, we have maintained an effective church

program during a time when this is a most difficult task and one in which many congregations have failed. We finish this first century on a note of optimism and look to the next century to be one of progress and success in continuing to serve the community and, most important, to serve our Lord.

In the year 2099 when someone stands here and gives a review of the first TWO hundred years of the life of this church, I pray the performance of this congregation at this time will be remembered in a very positive way. Incidentally, I don't expect to be the person to deliver that message!!

Somewhere in a small corner of Heaven (assuming that Heaven has corners) I feel there is a small gathering of spirits looking upon us today. Among this group of spirits, you might find Phillip Hasselvander, Eddie Mosely, Alfred Clifton - there would be Maizie Worrell, Bessie Bock and Graannie Tilley. John Godbey and Ocie Pugh would be there as would be newcomers Glada Hall and Judy Anderson and so many others we could name. I believe they are looking with approval upon what Radford Christian Church has become. They poured themselves into this church and became as much a permanent part of it as the bricks and mortar which form our walls. Let us learn from them. Let us match their dedication, their love and their devotion to this church shown in their one hundred years of service and witnessing.