



Celebration

October 9, 2022

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Established 1947

3209 Whitesburg Drive

Huntsville, Alabama

75 years: Our Journey to the Future

The Incomplete History of the First Christian Church Huntsville, Alabama

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) movement in Huntsville was launched in 1947 when a small group of local residents and a large delegation from the Athens Christian Church met at the Central YMCA in Huntsville. Concentrated efforts were begun to secure support to start a building fund from members, friends, and even non-members. The effort resulted in twenty-one members moving into the first Sanctuary on the corner of Alabama Avenue and Bob Wallace in 1948. Steady growth continued and in September of 1959, First Christian Church moved into its current location on Whitesburg drive. At the heart of this effort is Christ and a desire to spread the word and works of Christianity.

Founders

The founding members of First Christian Church were Mrs. Tom Jones (Joyce), and Mr. and Mrs. John P. Mealing, Jr., who led the group to secure the interest and support of an organized church in Huntsville. Joyce Jones, a native of Athens, Ala., had been an active member in the Athens church before her marriage to Tom Jones, a native of Huntsville. The other local residents present were Mrs. Tanner, Mrs. John Broadway, Mr. W.D. Reed, Mrs. Ashford Todd, and Mrs. Rigsby.

Timeline

October 13, 1947

The Reverend E.K. Beckett, Regional Evangelist for the United Christian Missionary Society of Indianapolis, Indiana, arrived on October 13, 1947, and immediately set the wheels of organization in motion. Prior pillars of strength were the Reverend Al Smoake, Athens, the Reverend Robert Glenn, Valhermosa Springs, and members of their congregations, who sustained the little Huntsville Church during its formative years and in its most trying times. Other supporters included the Reverend Harrison McMains, Atlanta, Ga.; the Reverend O.T. Foster, Florence, Ala.; the Reverend Percy W. Kohl, Regional State Secretary, and Dr. Pat Hamm, a local resident. Local supporters were Mrs. Walton Fleming, Mrs. Harrison Hooper, Mrs. Logan Kenney, Mr. R.J. Reed, and Mrs. James Elkins.

The problem facing the little congregation was that with only twelve members on roll was it feasible to even consider a building program? Moving with faith, an option was taken on a lot in Mayfair, a rapidly growing suburban area. The congregation faced the reality of having to strengthen the membership, secure additional finances, and consider permanent facilities in which to meet. Until this time, the "Upper Room" of the downtown YMCA was the temporary meeting place. The Reverend Beckett resigned as minister effective December 1947.

December 1947 - August 1949

The Reverend Dale Miller, a student at Vanderbilt University, and his wife Betty, arrived in Huntsville to serve as part-time pastor. Concentrated efforts were made to secure support to start a building fund from members, friends, and even non-members. The efforts resulted in twenty-one members moving into their first Sanctuary and twenty-five pupils into classrooms on June 13, 1948. These facilities were built at a cost of \$10,806 on the corner of Alabama Avenue and Bob Wallace, in Mayfair just off Whitesburg Drive.

The following month, the dedication was held in a series of three services: 11 a.m., 5 p.m., and the Huntsville Summer Union Services at 7:30 p.m. During the last six months of 1948, attention was focused on the development of a strong and centralized organization. Mr. Hugh Enfield was named temporary chairman of the congregation. He appointed a committee to draft a church constitution, which was adopted by thirty members in the fall of 1948. The year 1949 was characterized by problems; a shortage of money, slow growth, and a search for a new pastor because of Reverend Miller's resignation. Members totaled forty, and Church School attendance was forty-two.

August 1949 - 1950

The Reverend Kenneth Hughes of Taylorsville, Kentucky, accepted the call as a full-time pastor in August 1949, but his stay was short-lived, as he resigned in early 1950. Membership was forty-one, a gain of one.

January 1950 - September 1953

The Reverend Henry Jackson Forstman (Jack) assumed leadership as a full-time pastor. He and his young wife Shirley brought a youthful vitality to the congregation. The Church and Huntsville grew, partially because of the reactivation of Redstone Arsenal. Then a need for more educational space resulted in a fund to drive for a new wing (costing \$15,883), that was dedicated on September 9, 1951. The Church achieved financial independence with 132 in membership and a church School enrollment of 98.

September 1953 - June 1955

The Reverend William C. Howland, Jr., served as our full-time Pastor. The congregation voted to purchase a three-bedroom house on Locust Street as a parsonage for Bill and his wife Ann. An Allen organ was dedicated during Bill's ministry. Membership grew to 199 and Church School climbed to 125.

June 1955 - September 1955

The Reverend Gus Ferre, a Professor at Vanderbilt University School of Religion, Nashville, Tennessee, came to serve as Interim Minister from June 1955 to September 1955 after the resignation of the Rev. Howland.

September 1955 - December 1959

The Reverend R. Worden Allen, Jr., and his wife Lucile came to Huntsville. Under Worden's aggressive leadership, the Church continued to make remarkable progress. Within a year, two morning services were necessary. The congregation voted to sell the property and buildings on Bob Wallace to the Episcopal Diocese in late October of 1958 for the sum of \$37,500. Immediately, plans to build on our present spacious lot on Whitesburg Drive began. This strategic location was given to the church by the Walton Flemings. During this interim time of building, the congregation met in the Terry Heights Elementary School. Following the morning worship on Sunday, May 10, 1959, a caravan was formed to witness the laying of the cornerstone at the Whitesburg location. On September 20, 1959, the congregation moved into the \$144,000 combination Chapel/Fellowship Hall with dedications on October 4, 1959. That year, the membership totaled 330, and Church School averaged 175.

January 1960 - January 1970

The Reverend Dr. Harrison McMains and his wife Eunice, a native of Limestone County moved to Huntsville from Atlanta, Ga., where he had pastored the First Christian Church of Atlanta. The Church moved forward to even greater achievements. It is interesting to note that the Reverend McMains conducted a service in Huntsville on July 27, 1947, and later became pastor in 1960. Again, two morning worship services were necessary, and another building fund was started for \$65,000 for additional educational facilities.

The new wing, now named McMains Hall, was dedicated on July 28, 1963. That same year, the Reverend McMains received his Honorary Doctorate from Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. The third and final phase of the planned building program was realized when a building fund drive was undertaken to raise \$263,000. The present beautiful Sanctuary was completed and occupied in May 1967 and was dedicated on June 4, 1967.

July 1963 - August 1972

The Reverend Linda Lou Case Curwood served as the first Minister of Christian Education. First Christian Church, Huntsville had the honor of ordaining Linda Lou in 1971. Working with the laity, she developed a balanced program of education including a strong youth program, implementation of the Vanderbilt Series for adult education, and emphasis on Christian family living. In 1970, a folk-singing group began under the direction of Roy Rogers, choir director. In 1973, the group, named New Vibrations, took its first tour in a school bus to the Region of Kentucky.

January 1970 - 1989

The Reverend Dr. John M. Jackson and his wife Shirley along with two of their four children, Sally and Scott, moved from Park Hill Christian Church, North Little Rock,

Arkansas. John assumed leadership of the Huntsville congregation. Installed as pastor on March 8, 1970, Dr. Jackson continued the First Christian tradition of major ministry in the local community, Alabama/Northwest Florida Region, and the General church. A kitchen and parlor were added in 1982. The parlor, now known as the Joyce Jones Parlor, was funded in large part by the proceeds of pictures of her Siamese cat, Sambo that Joyce, a professional photographer, had taken and sold.

1973 - 1982

The Reverend Dr. Max Haskett and his wife Ann moved to First Christian, Huntsville, from Oklahoma. Max filled the redefined position of Minister of Christian Education and Youth. Mr. Haskett attended the Graduate Seminary at Phillips University and later earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School. During his tenure, Dr. Haskett extended the Christian Education Committee to include a new Kindergarten/Day Care ministry under the leadership of Sue Christiansen. In 1982, Dr. Haskett became Associate Minister and Director of Family Counseling at Woodmont Christian Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

April 1982 - 1987

The Reverend Tom Van Laningham joined the staff as an Associate Minister, serving with John Jackson. Coming from Chapel Christian Church, Winder, Georgia, Tom expanded age group ministries in Christian Education and developed membership activities. The Reverend Van Laningham married Patricia Gill, a young member of New Vibes and the congregation.

1987 - 1988

The Reverend Darrell Frink and his wife Ann came from Lexington Theological Seminary to join our staff. The Reverend Frink specialized in the areas of Christian Education and Youth Programming, as well as assistance with the worship services. He created an active drama group and began the four Sundays of Advent activities.

1988 - 1989

The Reverend Dr. Ed Coffman was called as the Interim Pastor upon John Jackson's retirement. Ed proved to be a most welcome fit for the congregation. He and his wife Carol made many friends in the congregation, later leading trips to the Holy Land with members of First Christian, Huntsville. Ed worked well with leaders and gave stability to the transition time. He told the congregation that his job was to "move the candle sticks." The Rev. Tom Van Laningham stayed on as the Associate Minister but was called to be Senior Pastor of First Christian Church, Atlanta, Georgia—now located in Tucker.

October of 1989 - 2001

The Rev. Dr. Harold Dowler was called from First Christian Church in Ardmore, Oklahoma. He began his ministry in October of 1989. Harold asked Ed Coffman to stay on to assist further in the transition, and Ed continued his excellent work until the middle of November. Dr. Dowler was called with a clear charge to lead in getting the facilities upgraded and reach younger families. His style of leadership was direct. By May of 1990, the congregation voted to authorize a \$1.5 million program to improve the facilities. Don Jones chaired the Building Committee with Bill Johnson as vice chair. Marie Martin, Pat Plunkett, Alan Spencer, Dale Thomas, Bob Cloyd, and Harold Dowler served as members.

The Rev. Dowler was instrumental in getting First Christian involved in the Habitat for Humanity program. First Christian provided leadership by example that gave Habitat a wide base of church support that turned the program in a positive direction for the city. The Rev. Dowler followed in the tradition of First Christian pastors and gave leadership within the city to Interfaith Mission Service and served as President of IMS for two terms and shared in the growth of this unique organization.

The age of the membership dropped each year as more and more young families came into the life of First Christian. At this time the congregation began the Mission Family ministry; Harold's wife Sue was one of the early conveners. It was also at this time that the Mission Statement was revised and became a part of the ministry of First Christian. The elders took "road trips" to Memphis, Nashville, and north Georgia. Harold initiated a program of volunteers who made a great difference in the ability of the office to conduct the business of the church.

Pastor's Class was a powerful spiritual exercise as families were engaged with their children during this time of faith exploring. Pastor's Class baptisms were conducted on Easter Sunday at a special service that was strongly supported by the membership. Two distinct worship times and styles marked the last years of the Rev. Dowler's ministry in Huntsville. Worship attendance remained strong between 325 and 365 but did not exceed the 400 mark on a regular basis

High points of Dr. Dowler's leadership with First Christian were the sanctuary renovation, the new organ, and the elegant stained glass windows designed by Conchita Reyes. The addition of the Education/Administration building and the strong connection in support of our Early Childhood Ministry were a blessing. "Mr. Harold," as the children called him, was well loved for his enthusiasm and laughter. His leadership in the city to alleviate racism gave us reason to celebrate many times with our partner church, Little Indian Creek Primitive Baptist Church. Carolyn Brown chaired the 50th Anniversary Celebration Committee in 1997, which brought many special persons to share in the festivities.

July 1990 - February 1997

The Reverend Jim Bottrell was called to be the Associate Minister with an emphasis in education. Jim and Ginny were friends of the Dowlers in Oklahoma. The two ministers were a very effective team. It was during Jim's tenure that our participation in the mission trips to Andros Island began.

June 1999 - August 2010

The Rev. Beth Thomason came to be Youth Minister

October 2000 - 2002

The Reverend Dr. William Curwood served as Interim Senior Minister. Husband of Rev. Linda Lou Case Curwood our past Youth Minister

July 2002 - June 2006

The Reverend Paul Koch called to be the Senior Minister

July 2006 - December 2008

The Reverend Dr. Robert Stegall served as Interim Senior Minister

January 2008 - May 2015

The Reverend Dr. Guy E. McCombs called as Senior Minister

July 2010 - September 2012

The Reverend Laura Stephens Reed came as an Intentional Interim Associate Minister

April 2011 - July 2012

The Reverend Christy Noren-Hentz came as Children's Minister. She had a memorable VBS as the theme was Harry Potter

September 2012 -

The Reverend Laura West called to be Associate Minister to Children & Families

August 2013 - May 2015

The Reverend Laura Stephens Reed came as a Youth Minister

September 2015 - August 2017

The Reverend Dr. Cameron Douglas served as Interim Senior Minister

August 2017 -

The Reverend Paul Allen called to be Senior Minister

The Mission Family Plan

A blue ribbon task force was asked to pursue how we might be better organized for the ministry God trusted to our care. Pete Peterson served as chair with Dale Griggs, Stephanie Moore Wieseman, Mary Dorough, Tennent Lee, and Roy Rogers. David Arrington was ex officio. This group, along with the Elders, developed our mission statement with the three key words: **Seek, Nurture, and Expand.**

The Mission Family Plan grew out of this task force and was presented to the congregation for an 18-month trial period at which time the congregation would vote to continue or to return to the functional committee plan. Each Mission Family is led by a convener, who is assisted by Deacons. Each Elder is assigned to a Mission Family to serve as spiritual leader and comforter. Mission Families are responsible for special activities in the Church. MFs organize the All-Church picnic, the Advent Faire, communion preparation and serving, contacting their members, care during times of sickness and death, birthday cards, shut-ins, and so on. The purpose of the MF is to make sure every member feels a part of First Christian.

The success of the Mission Family Plan has been a model for churches across the nation. The wisdom of First Christian was reflected in the fact that the Mission Family Plan was alive and growing and did not remain the same. Every two-year rotation saw improvements made based on experience.

Memories

1952 First Christian Church, Huntsville

by Margaret J. Vann

Begun October 1947 in the downtown YMCA

Build the first building on Bob Wallace, a small concrete block building. Soon added a wing and basement.

Early ministers were Dale Friers, Kenneth Hughes, Jack Forstman, Bill Howland, Warden Allen, and Harrison McMains [whose daughter was Nancy Stayman].

Joyce Jones was one of the charter members. We have a stained-glass window in her honor. Other early members were Helen Burns, Mrs. Jenny Camp, Mrs. Ashford Todd, Lee Boles

mother, Jane Scruggs Watkins, [she played our organ], the Fleming family, Topper Birney, Jean and James Rowell, Jerri and Lonnie Hightower, Carolyn & Lou Brown, Dottie & Bill Dale [they had 2 children then], Roxanna and Jack Burk, Emma and Bob Cloyd, the Martins, and Betty & Roy Rogers.

Many of these people are still members of this church and have played an important part in its growth. They served as elders, deacons and deaconesses, board members, CWF presidents, and Board chairmen. Some are still serving the congregation today.

The choir met every Wednesday as it does now, and I babysat for the Dales every Wednesday night for .25 an hour. The church didn't have childcare for the children of the choir members then.

My family moved here in 1952 [my father, in 1951 to work for the army; we waited until the end of the school year]. It was joked that when the Joneses all joined the church that the congregation doubled.

Because we were a small congregation the Chi Rho and CYF met together for Sunday school and evening youth meetings. Our youth leaders were fresh out of college, so we had a lot of fun. We hiked, had basket suppers, and met in the homes of our leaders. We didn't have all of the different groups that meet now.

Vacation Church School was not like what you are doing this week. Everyone in the church worked for the whole week. The youth did the outdoor activities: dodge ball, red rover, tug rope, a dry land version of alligator, drop the handkerchief, who's got the needle, and animal rhythm. What games do you play now? I don't remember it ever raining. Every child in the neighborhood was invited and seemed like they came. Refreshments were cookies and Kool-Aid.

We had lots of new children born into the church. We grew so much that we needed a new building, so we sold the Bob Wallace building. The Flemings gave us the land we are on now, and we built the first part.

The church kept growing, so we build the family area. It was our sanctuary and potluck meal room. The kitchen was very small. We had Boy & Girl Scout troops here too.

After I married, I attended Mack's First Methodist Church. But after he began working on his father's farm, we moved to the country and attended a small Baptist Church. I was not cut out to be a Baptist; so I started driving into Huntsville with the 3 children to attend my *home* church First Christian. I had never changed my membership. It has been my home ever since.

As a member I have had the opportunity to serve in various positions: deaconess, deacon, elder, chair of various committees, Children Worship and Wonder storyteller, Circle leader, VBS director, Moderator, representative to Regional church, and representative to the General Board of the Disciples of Christ.

Being a member, I have made some wonderful friends within the congregation. And in times of trouble found much comfort from my fellow members. I have heard sermons from all the pastors since and including Jack Forstman.

1951 Some memories of the early days of the First Christian Church
by Dorothy Dale Hughes

My dear friend, Margaret Vann, has asked me to jot down some of the things I remember about the early days of our church. In 1951, my husband, Bill Dale, and I moved to Huntsville to begin his first job following our graduations from the University of Tennessee. Our son, Barney, was a very active 2 year old at that time.

Bill had been raised in the First Christian Church in Paris, Tenn., and I had been raised by a mother who was a German Lutheran. Bill insisted we visit the Lutheran Church the first Sunday, and we visited the First Christian Church the second Sunday. Well, the Christian Church had no trouble winning out and we decided this was the church we wanted to join.

The minister then was Jack Forstman. He was young and this was the first church for which he was *the* minister. I spent an afternoon with him and his lovely wife, Shirley. Everything they told me about, from how they interpreted the Bible to how important children were to the church fit for me. I learned it was up to me to interpret what the Bible meant in the context of the time it was written. I was sold! It was a no-brainer: this was to be my church.

At that time there was no real choir in this small church. On the first Sunday, a man and his wife who were sitting directly in front of us sang with beautiful baritone and alto voices. Bill and I sang tenor and soprano. After the service, other members came up to greet us, and we decided to form a choir, setting a date for our first choir practice. One of those members who had already been wishing for a choir, Roy Rogers, offered to be the director. He and his wife, Betty, also sang tenor and soprano. Shirley Forstman offered to play the piano, a beautiful new one that was donated to the church by Mamie Todd. In just a few weeks the choir sang special music for a congregation of 20-25 people.

Music always played a big part in my family's lives. Before long I started a junior choir and later another choir for the youngest children. Marilyn Martin played the piano for these choirs which practiced Wednesday afternoons after school and often performed during the Sunday services. All our choirs performed for special programs throughout the years. Roy Rogers created The New Vibrations for the teenagers who were interested in taking an energetic form of musical ministry on the road to churches throughout the state. These kids would sleep nights in the homes of members of the churches where they performed.

Every year our church grew larger and before long, we knew we needed to build a larger church. A generous couple, Martha and Walton Fleming had a lovely home on a large piece of land on Whitesburg Drive. They offered to sell us a portion of their land and later they donated to us an even larger portion of land. Martha was particularly active in our church, always keeping the church women busy helping those who were less fortunate than ourselves. One year there was a

bad cotton crop and the people who pick the cotton, including children who were let out of school to help pick, were devastated. They had no money to buy food. Martha Fleming organized the church women to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at church members Nancy and Henry Erskine's Peggy Ann Bakery. Martha took lunches every day to the country schools to feed those children until the next crop could come in.

Bill became an elder in the church and I was active in the Christian Women's Fellowship. Eventually, I became an elder as well. Our church was very active in mission work. We met many wonderful people in our travels visiting Christian Churches in other countries and housing these folks when they would stay in our home when visiting the Huntsville Church. My five children grew up in this church. The time they spent in Sunday School, choirs, church camp, and youth groups helped form them into the fine people they are today. When I think of all the men and women who helped me raise my children and teach them what Jesus asked us to do to serve those in need, the church members who taught in our Sunday Schools and Summer Bible Schools I am forever grateful. The church continued to grow and a preschool was formed by Sue Christiansen and an offshoot of the child care department she and I had originated when the young mothers needed someone to watch their babies during CWF meetings. This preschool was very popular and children from all over Huntsville would fill the halls of the church during weekdays. Families would sign up their children to get on the list when they were born to be sure and have a spot in the school as soon as they were old enough. Sue loved children and one of her children is still a member of the church, Dick Christiansen.

So many members of the church were so active and did so much to keep our little church active in Huntsville. Eunice and "Mac" McMains, Carolyn and Louie Brown, Linda Lou Case, Jerri and Lonnie Hightower, Mary and Paul Scheppi, Margaret and Mack Vann, Doris and Tom Paul, Jean and Jim Patterson, Marie and Lloyd Martin, Marilyn Martin, Sue and Chris Christiansen, Joyce Jones, Jess and Henry Huff, Dean Ratliff, Leland and Jerena Belew, Geraldine and Ed Carr, Melinda and Mack Blackman, and Pat and Phil Blackman.

In 1996 when members of the church decided to purchase new stained glass windows for the sanctuary, Bill and I donated one. The choir donated one as well.

I am 94 years old now and when I think back to the early days when Bill and I were trying to raise our busy children, my church always shines first. When I knew my children were at church or were with church members, I knew they were in good hands. I count those among the many remembrances of that wonderful place on Whitesburg Drive where they were safe in the hands of ministers and all the church leaders who showed them what the Christian Church was all about. This church building has served three generations of church members who have helped me have a happy family and helped make the city of Huntsville the largest city in Alabama, according to the 2020 census, and ranked #1 in the 2022 US News and World Report's Best Places to Live.

1951 Bob Cloyd Remembers

Early church memories: the first church building was a small church on the corner of Bob Wallace and Alabama Ave. It took about three Sundays to find the church, as people were directing us to the Church of Christ at the then downtown location.

Early youth:

Topper Birney was a CYF member as well as Butch Sanders. Margaret Jones (Vann) were in Chi Rho youth group along with Richard Jones, Sally and Gay Fleming, Aurelia, and Pat Adcock. Roy Rogers was dating Betty Ray, daughter of Ray Jones Ford, and soon to become Betty Rogers. Jimmy Elkins, Huntsville High band director was the choir director. When he left, Roy Rogers took over as choir director. Jane Scruggs Watkins was our first organist.

Emma and I were attending the young married couples' class in a corner room just to the right as you entered the sanctuary.

Dottie Dale Hughes was sitting in the choir area, and her growing son, Barney, came running into the sanctuary from Sunday school area and said: "Mama, it is raining and you can use all of your new umbrella."

I remember Lloyd Martin treasurer was excited that we had underwritten our \$10,000 budget.

The minister at that time was the Reverend Warden Allen. He and his wife Lucille lived in the church parsonage across the street from Lloyd and Marie Martin on Locust Street. [Yes, the church owned a house for the pastors. Linda Lou Case Curwood lived there while she was our youth minister.]

The Reverend Allen and Walton Fleming were frequent golf partners. This probably had something to do with the Flemings donating the 4 1/2 acres on Whitesburg Drive to the church.

I was drafted into the army in June of 1953 and came back to Huntsville in August of 1954 Emma was expecting our first child, Dick. She was in Huntsville Hospital. I saw Roy Rogers at a nearby restaurant while waiting for the baby's delivery. Told Roy what was going on with Emma. Lou and Carolyn Brown visited us in the hospital.

Carolyn and Lou Brown had arrived in Huntsville the short time we were away. The church members we were friends with in 1953 were back, and we were all returning members.

1953 Remembrances

Carolyn Brown

We joined the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on Bob Wallace in August 1953. Jack Forstman was the first full-time pastor, but he and Shirley left Huntsville two weeks after we arrived to enter Yale Divinity School for his doctorate. Many wonderful ministers have been with us over the 75 years. Suanne was born one month later and was in church the next Sunday. Joyce Jones took her picture that Sunday.

In 1960 we went to two services, and then later sold the building and made plans to build on Whitesburg on land given to the church by Walton and Martha Fleming. What a struggle it was when we met in Terry Heights Elementary School. May 10, 1959, was a momentous day when we put the cornerstone on the church at 3209 Whitesburg Drive.

Lou and I enjoyed worshiping and working with many people on committees and singing in the choir. Suanne and Ken were old enough to enjoy singing with New Vibrations under Roy Rogers' leadership. I really appreciate and am thankful for all the wonderful teachers and youth sponsors who have been there for all my children: Suanne, Ken, Steve, and Annette.

I remember:

All the wonderful pastors through the years.

Making the Christmas wreaths from greens cut from the Paul's farm

Purchasing the Allen organ.

Bake and rummage sales.

Calling on new members and those sick.

Starting the quilting group in 1982 with Barbara Keller.

In 1970 our family was given a wonderful send-off with blessings when we moved to the Buck's County Philadelphia area. We were there for seven years. Lou took early retirement, and we moved back to Huntsville and started Available Plastics making PVC pipe. When we moved back, it was almost like we had never been away. The children were older. Suanne was married, Ken was working, Steve was helping the business get started, and Annette was finishing high school. I was very proud of Steve when he became active in the church, even becoming Moderator. Ken and Daphne were sponsors of the youth group for several years.

I want to thank everyone for being there for the family when Lou died in 2015 and Steve in 2016.

The church building is not the most important. It's the people sharing, worshiping, studying, and loving together; God's word; and living a Christ-like life

1957 Memories

Marilyn Martin

When we came to Huntsville from Tacoma Washington, in December of 1957 with our eight-week-old son, it was a small town surrounded by cotton fields. Finding a place to live was almost impossible, but friends helped and we found a duplex apartment on Meridian Street.

We began visiting church churches including First Christian, meeting temporarily in the Terry Heights School, while a new sanctuary was being built on Whitesburg Drive. The people we met there were so friendly and welcoming, which made us want to come back. It was only a few Sundays later that the new sanctuary now our fellowship hall was ready for worship.

Warden Alan was the minister. He had called on us in our home earlier. Two ladies, Joyce Jones and Francis Begley, had also visited. We were invited to attend a fireside chat at the home of Roy and Betty Rogers to learn more about the Disciples of Christ denomination and ask any questions we might have. There was also another couple present: Jim and Helen Daniels.

Many young couples were already members of the congregation: the Louis Browns the Carl Joneses as well as the Lloyd Martins, the Bill Dales just to name a few, also the Walton Flemings who had generously donated the land for our fellowship building. The Flemings along with their six children would feel almost an entire row! Other families also did their part in helping fill the seats on Sunday. There were special Sundays when extra chairs had to be brought into the aisles to seat everyone. We have really good fellowship dinners and social events. We were an enthusiastic and energetic congregation. I did mention we were mostly young!

Our choir was fairly large and was directed for many years by Roy Rogers, who never took any pay. It was a joke that each year he asked that his salary be doubled. We practiced hard, but we also had fun. We had some great parties.

I focused mainly on the early years, but there were the never to be forgotten wonderful years with Doctor Harrison McMains, Linda Lou Case Curwood, and Doctor John Jackson. I have had so much joy here at First Christian in happy times and have been comforted in some very sad times.

My roots go deep in First Christian Church and the memories of the wonderful Christians I have known here will always remain.

Memories of Dr. "Mac" 1960s Ginny Geddes Kennedy

Long-time members of First Christian Church probably remember my grandfather, the Reverend Harrison McMains, or "Dr. Mac" as he was often called. Maybe you remember his booming bass-baritone voice, his kind demeanor, and his delightful sense of humor. Perhaps you wondered if he was as delightful outside the church grounds as he was inside the sanctuary. Well, as his oldest grandchild I have to say no, he wasn't. He was even more amazing. Granddaddy retired in 1970, but maintained an active schedule as a substitute preacher and was busy with many civic organizations. Still, he always had time for us. When I was young, my grandparents lived on Franklin Street in the house with the blue windowpanes. Often in the summer, my parents would leave my sister Carol and me in their care. Grandma was often busy in the kitchen and while I loved exploring the vintage children's books in the big old house, if I needed someone to play with, there was Granddaddy. Grandma was an avid bridge player, but Granddaddy taught me all the important card games – Old Maid, Go Fish, Gin Rummy, Crazy Eights – games I was able to teach my son. We also played Scrabble sometimes and now I suspect he might have made up some words, but who was I to question Dr. Mac's knowledge.

There used to be two movie theatres in downtown Huntsville, the Martin and the Lyric. The Lyric has since burned down, but back in the seventies, it was where a lot of Disney movies were screened. Any time we wanted to catch the latest Winnie the Pooh or Herbie the Love Bug film, Granddaddy would walk us hand in hand down the bumpy brick sidewalk on Franklin Street to the theatre and watch the movies with us and the rest of the kids. On Fridays, Grandma's housekeeper, Lucille would make a big lunch (or "dinnuh" as Grandma called it.) After my sister and I had cleared the table, Grandma, my mom, and Lucille would settle in the den to watch their soap operas, *As the World Turns* and *The Guiding Light*. Carol and I would retreat to the upstairs bedroom to watch "Let's Make a Deal" while Granddaddy napped.

As I grew older I began to see him as so much more than a loving companion. He was more than the black-robed congenial figure in the pulpit with the booming baritone. He was an adventurer, a trailblazer, and a history-maker. His stories of his early life in show business touring with a Florenz Ziegfeld show enthralled me. I learned of his work in Atlanta in the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King, Senior. He met his more-famous son, but as Granddaddy said, "he was just a boy." He lived long enough to meet his first and only great-grandson, my son Geordie. "You're a fine-looking boy," he said. "Are you going to be a preacher?"

When my mom, Nancy McMains Stayman wanted to start bringing my two-year-old son to Sunday School at First Christian, I had no hesitation. The church and its people had always been an important and supportive part of her life, despite her ongoing struggles with mental illness. The church brought her joy and her work within the church community (that rummage sale!) was a glorious example of service. Geordie enjoyed Sunday School, youth group, mission trips, and participating in worship services (which I actually attended!) I give Mama credit for setting him off on the path of service that he continues to follow. No, he's not a preacher, but I am proud to say he is pursuing a Master's of Education in Counseling with a goal of becoming a therapist. I am grateful to First Christian for providing my wonderful granddaddy a pulpit from which to preach his inspiring words and share his humor, for serving as a welcoming place for my mother to serve, and for launching my son toward a goal of improving the lives of others.

Remembering 1963

Dick Christiansen

I first came to First Christian Church in 1963. Our family was visiting Huntsville cousins Dot and Morris Knight, who were members of the church. We fell in love with the city, soon moved here, and joined the church on our first Sunday.

Back then the sanctuary was what's now McMains Hall. There were no pews just rows of folding chairs. Up front, we had a lectern on the left and a pulpit on the right, with the choir, I believe, on both sides behind. The minister was the deep-voiced Dr. Harrison McMains. He was warm and friendly and had a wonderful sense of humor. That humor always worked its way into the sermons each week and was enjoyed by the congregation.

The choir director was a youthful Roy Rogers. He had come to Huntsville as a soldier and stayed to work as a civilian for the Army. But he never missed leading the choir on Sunday and rehearsing them on Wednesday. Roy was loved by everyone. His personality was magnetic, and like Dr. Mac, loved to laugh.

While Roy directed the adult choir, Hilding Holmberg directed the youth choir. Mr. Holberg had a men's clothing store downtown and was a classy businessman. I think he played a number of instruments and came well qualified to lead our little youth choir. It was a big deal when once a month we got to sing in front of the congregation with the adult choir. Like Roy, Mr. Holmberg gave freely his time all those years.

The church did have an active youth group led by Phillips graduate Linda Lou Case. She knew how to relate to young people. We all liked Linda Lou and her fun, positive approach to a Christian life. There were a large number of kids in our Chi Rho and CYF programs. Chi Rho was for junior high students, while CYF was for high schoolers. We met every week for Sunday

school and church and then came back that evening for youth group activities. Some nights in the Summer, after we finished at church, we went as a group to the nearby Whitesburg Drive-In Theater. The drive-in was owned by church members Martha and Walton Fleming. They were most generous with their time and money. They in fact gave us the beautiful acreage on Whitesburg Drive where we built the church. Martha and Walton had several children which helped to populate our youth group!

It wasn't long before we outgrew our sanctuary/fellowship hall and decided to fundraise for a larger sanctuary with classrooms underneath. I remember during construction we kids would go exploring each week to check on the progress. One time we made our way down what was to be one of the stairwells. We lowered ourselves onto pieces of debris over slippery gravel until we made it to our future classes. Don't recall how he got back out! It was an exciting day in 1967 when the building was completed.

In 1969 choir director Roy Rogers started producing Christian musicals with the high school and college kids. The "New Vibes," as they were called, toured and performed for churches around neighboring states. For most, it was the inspirational highlight of their Summer. Many parents used their vacations to go on tour with the kids and help make it a success. It took teamwork to pull off the productions, but the hard work really paid off. It was a true gift of music.

After Roy stepped down as choir director, Vivian Adkins continued the musicals along with directing the sanctuary choir. She was a high school music teacher and experienced theater director so knew what it took to continue making "New Vibes" the wonderful program it was.

As I look back on my years at First Christian, I'll always remember the women of the church working in the kitchen preparing meals for dinners in fellowship hall, for celebrations, or just for us kids before we went caroling or taking our place in the live manger up near Whitesburg Drive. There was a spirit of joy when the women were in the kitchen preparing care packages for college students. The kitchen was impressive and active. Minister John Jackson sometimes called us First Kitchen Church.

Dr. Jackson followed Dr. Mac [Harrison McMains] in the pulpit and remained our senior pastor for 19 years. He was responsible for starting our Early Childhood Ministry with Sue Christiansen, which Louise May turned into a city treasure.

There are so many memories that come to mind when we celebrate anniversaries. I think of the sassafras tree putting on its Fall color, the famous rummage sale, our community outreach program, Habitat for Humanity, our Boy Scout troop, the many musicians and soloists who shared their Godly gifts, the Christmas cantatas, the special Easter services, the installation of the new organ or the beautiful stained glass windows, all the pastors and associates and youth directors, and the Sunday School teachers.

As I recall my time at First Christian Church, I realize there's not enough space to list all of the members who meant so much to so many. I do think it is important to pay tribute to founding member Joyce Jones. Joyce grew up in Athens, a member of the Disciple church there. When she moved to Huntsville, she was the prime mover in getting First Christian organized. She was there the first Sunday when a small group of members met at the YMCA downtown, to the day we broke ground on Whitesburg Drive. 75 years later her Disciple dream lives on.

I say thank you to all who put their heart and soul into making First Christian the church it is.

1971 Memories

Anita McSpadden Wood

I moved to Huntsville in the summer of 1971 and started attending First Christian Church. At that time, the Rev. John Jackson was the minister and our congregation was large. I'm assuming over 500 members that translates to a large and active youth program (Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF)). We filled two pews every Sunday morning and Sunday afternoons before CYF were filled with football games on the front lawn which drew in other friends that stopped to join the fellowship and fun. During that time, Roy Rogers started a youth choir and several musicals - the birth of Young Vibes.

This is my church! My extended Huntsville family! My youngest brother attended Early Childhood Ministries (ECM) while Sue Christiansen was the director. And here in our beautiful sanctuary, I was baptized in 1973; my husband and I were married in 1975; then our daughter, Maranda, was christened by Harold Dowler in 1984. Maranda also grew up and was nurtured here in this - our church now. She attended ECM when Louise May was Director and Louise Johnson was Assistant Director. She went to Sunday School, was baptized, and was very active in all the youth programs with Stephanie Moore Wiesman, Sally Wilson, and Beth Thomason. She grew up with Natalie Sharp, Clint Sholes, Jonathan Shrou, Jonathan Hall, Ben and Mike Burger, Wade Mincher, et al. Summer camps, rummage sales, sleep-ins, mission trips, Vacation Bible School, etc nurtured and reinforced their spiritual growth and faith journey.

Attending and being a member of FCC for more than 50 years, I've had the absolute pleasure to hold just about all of the volunteer and leadership positions as most of you probably have as well - welcome to Discipleship! We train early starting them as acolytes very young! But where would I be without the wonderful disciples that have surrounded me along my faith journey? Our members, past and present, are God's gift and I treasure them all!

"God is surely in this place" is what we sing during worship and it is true. You can feel His presence and see it on each face. The music and soloists over the years have also been wonderful, to name a few: Becky Stuckey, Terry Pung, and Janie Clasgens to musicians that share(d) their talents like Kristi Hill, Kerry Williams, and Brad Clasgens. Thank you all.

Personally, and very thankfully, my church meets my needs! And what is a church but for the people? It's you! It's the Christian Women Ministries! It's the Bible Study and sharing our hearts with each other! It's worshipping together! It's seeing the babies and children each week! It's seeing your face that brings me to my church's doors weekly. Thank you and God bless you all!

1980 Memories

Cindy Burger

I cannot imagine my life without First Christian Church in it. Starting in 1980, when Dear Sue Christiansen gave me a bridal shower introducing me to the wonderful ladies at First Christian Church. These ladies were in time become my friends, my mentors, and my second mothers. Beautiful Louise May, offered me a job at the Early Childhood Ministries [ECM]. My boys were

all in school, and it was the perfect time for me to begin the career that I had majored in at Auburn University. The 18 years that I taught, were the best years of my life.

My parents had owned a restaurant and Sunday mornings were their busiest time, so I did not grow up in church. How blessed I was to be at a Sunday school class with Janice and Bobby Moore as our sponsors. That class did so much for me. I learned so much about the Bible and being a Disciple. My best friends came from that class, and the memories we made I will always be grateful for.

The church had the confidence in me to choose me for leadership roles that helped me grow and build up myself esteem; the ministers of this church were instrumental in teaching me and my soul what it was to be a Disciple. I even named my youngest after one of them, Dr. John Jackson. I had told Dr. Harold Dowler that I had that if I had another son his name would be Harold but, unfortunately, a fourth child was not in the cards.

I could go on and on but the bottom line is this church has blessed me and my family so much. My three boys were married by the Rev. Beth Thompson, who was the Youth Minister. She was also the minister at my daddy's funeral. Dr. Harold Dowler was the minister at my mother's funeral. Years later he was the minister that married my daddy and wonderful Lucy Stewart. God has blessed me with First Christian Church, 3209 Whitesburg Drive for over 40 years

The people in this church have truly been my church family still.

1984 Memories

Lee Watkins Boles

In 1955, my mom, Jane Scruggs Watkins, moved to Huntsville for a job at the Army Ballistic Missile Agency. Coming from a small town in Mississippi, she knew no one. She joined First Christian Church immediately and would often say "I was their first, and worst, organist." FCC gave her a home away from home, and even introduced her to her husband, Albert Watkins. In 1959, they moved to Athens, Alabama.

In 1984, I moved to Huntsville and started attending First Christian. The Young Adult group with Rev. Tom Van Laningham was especially meaningful during those years. Tom did a wonderful job of leading us in thoughtful discussions and we often met in members' homes. Tom asked me to teach Middle School Sunday School as my first volunteer job. What an eye-opener! Those boys are still my favorites. But they taught me a lot more than I taught them. Duffy and I were married by Tom and grew our family in First Christian. I am thankful for a loving church family that gave my children and their friends a firm foundation. So many friends have guided us along the way. We are thankful to be a part of this congregation.