

HISTORY OF FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Mrs. Jo Rutherford compiled much of the accumulated history and this information is paraphrased from hers.

In 1957, Fred Davis moved to Avon Park as an employee of Florida Power Corp. Finding no Christian Church in the area, he and his family met with other Christians with the idea of founding one. In the meantime, they drove to Lake Wales to attend services. Along with Ray Eiford and Ralph Fisher of Lake Wales, he consulted with Kenneth Bain, minister of Wauchula Christian Church. This core group and George Beckham and some other Avon Park residents selected January 5, 1958 for their first service. The "Christian Progress" noted 15 in Bible school, 23 at morning worship, and 16 at evening worship--32 different people attending. John Scott, Lake Wales' pastor led the services.

Thirty members chartered this first church; namely; Mrs. Lucy Sikes, Fred & Pat Davis, Stanley E. Skillin, Mr. Ruth Burescia, B. M. Loris, Mary Davis, Mrs. Mary Finlayson, John & Mildred Scott, George & Carol Beckham, Bonnie Beckham, Donna Ragsdale, Mr. & Mrs. Paul Ragsdale, Mr. & Mrs. W. E. Sykes, Karen Sykes, Paulette Sykes, Frances Beckham, Charlene, Jimmy & Charles Burescia, H. J. & Hazel B. Hein, Raymond & Addie Ward, William M. Turner, Gladys Johnson.

Bill Turner led services until he went to Japan as a missionary and Pastor Bain from Wauchula held services early morning or early afternoon for a long time.

In April 1961, a small church building at Pine & Fairfield (now Pine & Delaney) was purchased for \$5,000 from the Christian Scientist congregation and services were moved from the Long Air Conditioning building. The heating/ air conditioning system was improved and a sign added. Different temporary pastors including Charles Ballard and Don Weldon ministered during this time.

In February 1963, pastor U. S. Childs was minister for a short time after which attendance dwindled and dissolution was discussed; however, Kenneth Bain and Jack Melendy of the Wauchula church advised them not to do this so the church continued.

From February 1964 to February 1965, Bill Neely served as weekend minister. The young people purchased and presented the church with a Christian flag and an American flag in 1964 that were used at least through 1986. In time for the Youth Group's 1964 Christmas Cantata, the Youth had purchased our first piano for \$400. This, too, was used for many years, moving to the next church building. During Pastor Neely's ministry, the church grew so much, expanded facilities had to be considered. Following Pastor Neely's resignation in February 1965 and without a minister, some men met with representatives of the Wauchula, Lake Wales, Ft. Myers and Cape Coral churches for guidance and were pledged their support if Avon Park wished to continue, which they did.

Pastor Stanley Johnson was our next weekend minister beginning in November of 1967 and serving until September 1967. Due to increased attendance, on March 6, 1966, it was voted to sell our present building and to buy the Smith Funeral Home from the

Stephensons for \$25,000. Options to buy additional property necessitated a bond issue of \$30,000, which was sold within 60 days and the property at 1011 W. Walnut St. Attorney Hue E. Nunnallee handled all legal work at no expense to the congregation. They also agreed to incorporate the church and in 1966, its first officers were elected: Granvill Legan, Chairman of Trustees; George Beckham, Vice-Chairman of Trustees; Fred Davis, Secretary-Treasurer, with Pastor Stanley Johnson. This transition could not have been accomplished without the leading of the Holy Spirit and the assistance and encouragement of Bros Jimmy R. Cox; Wauchula Christian Church; Harry Thomas, Ft. Charlotte; Max Smith, Lake Wales; Howard E. Ray, Kissimmee; Bob Hargrave, Cape Coral of their respective Christian Churches.

The first service in the new building was May 15, 1966 at which time a baptistery had been installed, a cross was installed over the entrance, the exterior and interior had been painted—all accomplished by people of the congregation. A dedication service was held Jan. 8, 1967. Dr. Olin W. Hay presented the message to fewer than 200 in attendance.

In 1967, Pastor Johnson recommended we hire a full time minister. Pastor Clifford Dance was offered the position for \$75 per week and residence in the two-bedroom apartment that had been used as weekend residence for previous pastors. During Pastor Dance's ten-year tenure, a new Junior Dept. classroom was added by enclosing a carport; a new Bible class with 18 young adults was meeting in the parsonage; additional property to Camphor St. was purchased; and several social event nights were begun for fellowship.

In 1971, Alice Pilson, a professional librarian of the congregation, started the church library. In 1973 four Bible school classrooms were added for a cost of \$8,000.

In 1975, Pat Simon started the first choir and served as its director and in 1976, Glen Ruffner donated choir robes in memory of his wife, Louise. A total of \$10,000 of the \$30,000 debt had been retired and there was talk of building a new sanctuary and establishing a church in Lake Placid or between Sebring and Lake Placid. Pastor Dance suffered a heart attack in 1975 but returned to fill the pulpit until April 24, 1977 when he retired after 40 years of ministry—almost ten in Avon Park.

From October 2, 1977 through February 1983, Pastor James S. Click, Jr. became full time pastor. The \$20,000 bond debt had been retired and the April 8, 1979 congregational meeting voted to construct a 100 ft x 50 ft. sanctuary building. A loan of \$75,000 would supplement the Building Fund. Glen Ruffner served as chairman of the board at the time. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held just two months later on June 24, 1979. On March 2, 1980, the new sanctuary, seating 340, was dedicated with over 200 attending to hear former pastor Stanley Johnson give the message and Kenneth Bain give a review of the church's history. The old sanctuary now houses the classrooms and Fellowship Hall.

On February 17, 1980, four Lake Placid couples from Avon Park Christian Church began a new congregation in Lake Placid—subsequently becoming Eastside Christian Church.

Avon Park assisted not only financially in the start-up of this new congregation but donated a communion table, three pulpit chairs and a pulpit.

S. C. Couch began his ministry on May 8, 1983 and during his tenure the kitchen was completed. In 1984, thirty-two members left to start a new congregation in Sebring, FL where Pastor Couch served as their pastor at an early morning service in Stephenson-Nelson Funeral Home for some time.

In 1984 a church bus was purchased and 1.4 acres of property across the street (west on Camphor) was purchased. On April 28, 1985 the mortgage was burned having been paid off in six years instead of the intended fifteen. The parking lot was sodded and additional improvements made to the facilities. In 1986, Pastor Couch instituted Sunday worship services at Reflections on Silver Lake, which practice continues today under the direction of Pastor Jim Click.

Pastor Bill Raymond began ministering to the congregation in 1992. Through his ministry and that of his wife, Peggy, who not only served as secretary but headed the Women's Ministry, a new construction project which permanently joined the Fellowship Hall and the sanctuary, enlarging the sanctuary, church offices, nursery, choir room and adding classrooms was begun in 1996. It was completed in the spring of 1997 and an open house was held April 20, 1997. Again the Lord blessed and the \$300,000 mortgage was retired in about 26 months—much less than expected.

In 2000 a new sound/media system was installed which allowed for congregational singing without hymnals and the projection of upcoming events. The pastor's sermon could also be highlighted.

Bill and Peggy Raymond said "good bye" in July of 2007. On September 16, 2007, we were blessed to welcome Pastor Greg and Teresa Ratliff who continue to minister to us at 1016 W. Camphor, Avon Park, FL.

It is impossible to recall ALL the people who have, with God's help, ministered to First Christian Church, Avon Park. We have enjoyed the ministry of several youth pastors: Mike Murdock, Kasey Kuyper, and Steve Bishop. There have been outstanding choral directors, accompanists, communion servers, nursery workers, library assistants, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, maintenance persons, and those who have served as Elders and Deacons throughout the years. The congregation at First Christian continues to adhere to the teachings of the First Testament church and to minister to any and all in our community through benevolence offerings, missionary offerings, contributions to the Church Service Center to name a few. The Women's Ministry hosts three functions a year and the Men's' Prayer Breakfasts minister monthly to the men of the congregation.