

ASHPOLE - CENTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rowland, North Carolina

Ashpole-Center United Methodist Church was formerly known as Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The exact date of Bethel's origin is unknown, but it certainly did come out of the tradition of the early nineteenth century preaching places by early circuit riders on the Bladen Circuit. There were at least two early Methodist Meeting Houses close to Ashpole Swamp attended by people of all races. In 1875, a congregation of non-white members led by Alexander Oxendine were separated from the Robeson Circuit and named "Pleasant Hill," though they had no preaching place.

Alexander Oxendine, and other "Pleasant Hill" trustees, purchased a church site on the southwest side of Ashpole Swamp in Thompson Township, eighteen miles from Pembroke, on February 5, 1880, from Lewis and Catherine McPipking (Deed Book YY, P. 130). Another deed for the same property was prepared for trustees B. H. Hunt, Alexander Oxendine and Henry Oxendine on September 21, 1904 (Deed Book 4-U, P. 517). This deed simply assigned the same church property to the Methodist Episcopal Church of Bethel, which was the northern branch of Methodism.

Some of the early pastors serving at Bethel were the Reverends Aaron Moore (1890), F. R. Lowry (1895) (1918), H. H. Lowry (1898), John B. Bridgers (1902), W. L. Moore (1906), W. R. Woodell (1908), D. F. Lowry (1914) and P. M. Locklear (1922). J. W. Smith (1928) (1944), J. A. Wilkins (1947) and Dewey Locklear (1948) were supply preachers. J. D. Stott (1942) was the first caucasian minister. Early travel for the preacher was by mule and wagon, horse and buggy, or simply walking. The Reverend F. R. Lowry was the first minister to drive a car.

The financial status of Bethel Church was poor due to poor economic conditions. The large wooden building erected to accomodate the growing congregation was hard to heat and maintain. Frequently the preacher got only what little was left over after expenses, rather than a set salary. The church did not have a bank account until the early thirties, when Willie Locklear was secretary and Jack Hunt was treasurer.

Sunday school for all ages was held in one room using various corners of the sanctuary as classrooms. The young children received a little card with a picture and a Bible verse on it each Sunday. Adults used mainly the Bible for literature. The old building was lighted by kerosene lanterns and heated with wood-burning stoves. A service activity was to hold wood-sawings to provide fuel to heat the church during the winter months. This is how it was in 1939, when J. W. Smith led sixty-five church members from Bethel, one of the five churches on the Bethel Circuit, into The Methodist Church when three branches of Methodism merged into one denomination.

As services continued to be held at Bethel, the building soon became dilapidated. Repairs were difficult and expensive to make. It was under the leadership of the Reverend J. D. Stott (1942) that financial requests for aid were made to the North Carolina Conference. The Conference viewed the building as being beyond help; furthermore, there was no easement to enter the property from the main road, so the congregation began looking elsewhere for a new location. Until one could be found, they moved several miles to the Ashpole School for worship services.

Land was purchased in 1942 from James R., Marie H. and G. M. Pate, on the east side of the road to McDonald, two miles north of Rowland. The construction of the new church called Ashpole-Center began while J. A. Wilkins and Dewey Locklear were pastors. A large two-story church was built with blocks and wood framing. Many steps led to the sanctuary on the second floor, with classrooms spread along the lotside walls. When D. F. Lowry was pastor, in 1958, he invited Dr. H. L. Johns from the Division of Home Missions office in Philadelphia to visit Ashpole, a visit which resulted in a \$500 grant to "complete the church building, four years old." Earlier grants already given by the national office in 1950 totaled \$1,800. With the new building and Lowry's leadership, the church grew.

Since there was no organized mens or womens groups, Mrs. Ophelia Lowry organized a unit of the Woman's Society of Christian Service. Sunday school classes became departmentalized, some committees were formed and the Sunday school became organized with local leadership. Church business was still open to any who wanted to attend. The Reverend Jackie Locklear followed Lowry in 1954 and served three years to be followed by D. F. again in 1957. Two years later, Collins Chapel was added to form the Ashpole Charge.

Harvey Lowry's twelve year period as pastor at Ashpole-Center (1961-1973) ushered in a season of reorganization, growth and expansion. The business of the church was conducted through the administrative board plan of organization. Finances were handled through appropriate officers using bank facilities. Activities flourished including a good youth program, choirs were organized and children's and youth ministries began including a Methodist youth organization. Although Harvey Lowry was not yet an ordained minister, people of all ages loved this good pastor and the membership grew to nearly 300 in this period. Most of this time, Pleasant Grove Church was on the two-point charge.

Questions arose not only about the suitability of the building for this new season of growth but it was declared too weak to support any kind of renovation. Additional land adjoining the eastern edge of the property was purchased in 1966 to accommodate a new building to be located on the top of the hill, behind the old structure. Ashpole secured an architect and Lowry organized conference resources behind a good local building committee. Six classrooms of 3,500 square feet and a new sanctuary of 2,400 square feet were designed by Sam Snowden for the congregation to cost over \$200,000. By the middle of 1975, the congregation had raised over \$49,000. The Ten Dollar Club provided \$15,000, Board of Missions \$10,000, National Division \$10,000, plus a \$75,000 loan. The Duke Endowment gave \$43,000 on the project and the opening service was held on February 6, 1977. It was the encouragement of Lowry, and his faith and confidence in the people that caused this successful building program even though he did not remain at Ashpole long enough to see the work done. The actual construction was begun during the pastorate of the Reverend T. R. Brady who shared his student pastorate between Ashpole and Branch Street, in Lumberton.

In 1977, Ashpole was placed back with Pleasant Grove Church under the continuing pastorate of the Rev. S. Dufrene Cummings, a student at Pembroke University and the son of the Reverend Simeon F. Cummings. The building program was completed, with the loan repaid, new and vital programs were begun and the revitalized Sunday school now served all ages with United Methodist literature. With Cummings' departure to

Duke Divinity School to earn his theological degree, the charge was turned over to the recently organized Robeson County Cooperative Ministry under the leadership of the Reverend Simeon F. Cummings. This Cummings was more than an administrator. He was a senior pastor providing the assistance of Bobby R. Campbell and Wilton R. Cummings and James Hunt to fill the pulpits of his seven churches. The church was growing again after 238 members were written off in 1971, leaving only fifty-one on the roll.

In 1982, the pastorate at Ashpole-Center changed again. The Reverend S. Dufrene Cummings, now graduated from the Divinity School, was reappointed to an Ashpole and Hickory Grove combination. Ashpole had 80 members with an average attendance at worship of 100. A second phase of construction was approved to include a fellowship hall, two classrooms, storage room and kitchen estimated to cost \$200,000. Ground was broken in October, 1984 into which went a new congregational commitment and a \$39,000 construction loan, \$20,000 grant from the Board of Missions, \$10,000 from the Ten Dollar Club and \$10,000 given by the General Church. The Duke Endowment generously provided \$48,500. Construction of this addition was completed in September, 1985.

The Reverend Bill J. Locklear is the present pastor, having begun in 1985. The fellowship hall has been furnished and attendance at the Sunday school and worship services is growing. The church membership now stands at 118. With the help of an Ethnic Minority Grant, Ashpole's music ministry has been strengthened with three choirs. Seven Sunday school classes serve the educational needs of the people. A nursery is provided. Age-level programs are active. Revivals are held twice a year. Special programs according to seasonal emphasis are held. A youth pulpit is provided each Sunday. Progress is assured by the broad range of family support for the church, probably the oldest Lumbee congregation in the North Carolina Conference.

Ashpole Center United Methodist Church formerly known as Bethel Methodist Church, was located between Rowland and Fairmont on the Ashpole Swamp. This local church served all peoples in the Rowland area. The exact date of its origin is unknown, however, at one time Bethel Methodist Church belonged to the Blue Ridge Atlantic Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

