

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Established 1885

WAYCROSS, NC

By

Keith Throckmorton

Today, as I recall those wonderful childhood trips to Waycross, I would be remiss if I did not share a memory; memory of a lifelong and permanent place in the Waycross community that has been and will always be a part of my life. That place is Trinity Methodist Church, established 1885 and located on Trinity Church Road approximately one mile from Waycross. Trinity Church, after all, was a house of worship when there was actually a small town at Waycross. Back then it was simply Trinity Methodist Church.

The movement that would become the Methodist Church began in mid-1700 within the Church of England. The "United" Methodist Church was created in 1968 when the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church joined together and the birth of a new denomination evolved as the United Methodist Church.

For 125 years, families of the Waycross community have worshiped there. This church has been the site of many weddings and funerals, including those of my loved ones' from Waycross. It had witnessed the once thriving Waycross community, which were a number of small businesses, become for the most part, a memory. The only business that remained was J.W. Merritt's Grocery, Established 1919. The other stores had long since disappeared. My childhood visits are just special recollections to me now. However, Trinity Church is still a reality to me now as it will be always.

I have attended several churches in my adult life, and there are only two that hold such an extraordinary place in my heart. One is Stukeley Hall Baptist Church, Established, 1947, in Richmond where I attended as a child. The other is Trinity United Methodist Church, where I attended with my family, on those summer vacations to the Merritts' at Waycross. No two churches or members could be any more different than Stukeley Hall Baptist and Trinity Methodist Church however, the presence of the LORD could be equally felt in both.

I recall the summer heat at Trinity during services; there was no air conditioning until later years. Uncle Buster (John Wright Merritt) served as an Elder there. I remember Uncle Buster sitting in his chair on Sunday mornings, dressed up in his navy blue suit, studying his Bible...preparing for Sunday worship. My parents, Aunt Bonnie (Uncle Buster's wife), Cousins' Oakelee, Dorian Jay, and Althea would go to worship there. Never could I escape the constant teasing from Cousin Althea about Patricia (Watson) as

she attended church there also. I reflect on Uncle Buster's tales of family rides on Sunday afternoons after church in the horse drawn John Deere Wagon and how great that must have been.

Stukeley Hall Baptist Church in Richmond, on the other hand, was a small brick structure with several class rooms. The interior was plain with no ornate features. There were no trees and a grass lawn surrounded it. The community was rural and a number of homes surrounded the church. All of the roads were paved and there were no farmlands. Our food was purchased from grocery stores. The women of the church stayed home, for most part, to work as homemakers. The men worked for various employers in Richmond. Their only association was at church on Sunday. We children had no chores to perform. Our time from school was spent playing.

On the other hand, Trinity Church was a single large, white, wooden structure of the 1885 period. There were no additional classrooms or attached buildings. The pulpit area was separated from the church with rustic pickets and railings which were very dark in color, probably stained in a Mahogany color as were the benches. About half way down the center isle on the right, two of the benches were quite a bit shorter than all the others. This was necessary to make space for the large pot-bellied wood burning stove that provided heat in the winter months. I can still see that black stove pipe going up through the ceiling and roof; the scent of wood smoke is just a memory now.

Beautiful trees on the grounds and a very old cemetery separated the church from the sandy road in the front with forests and farmlands on the sides and rear. The cemetery dated back to long before the church was built as evidenced by the dates on the tomb stones. Trinity Church was a reflection of those wonderful, hard working people of the Waycross community. The members of this church all worked together as farmers during the week. They grew tobacco, corn, peanuts and cotton. The children worked equally as hard, during their out of school times, with their parents. Their survival as farmers required hard work from every one in every family; on Sunday, they would worship together.

They grew most of their food; chickens for eggs and later chicken and pastry when they could lay eggs no longer. Milk cows for milk, cream, butter, buttermilk and clabber and as meat for the table. Pigs strictly for food were plentiful and little of the pig was discarded. The lard rendered from the fat of the pig was a precursor to all the fancy oils we now find on the shelves at the food stores. Fresh vegetables were grown in abundance during the warmer months. For winter Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes were stored in a "Potato Hill," vegetables and meat canned in Mason jars; meat was preserved as salt or sugar cured.

It was obvious to me these farmers realized in a special way that their survival depended on worship, prayer, and closeness with the LORD. The human bonds that are formed by a community that lives together, works together, survives together, and worships together is how I believe God intended all of us to live. As I think back, this is probably the greatest lesson I have learned in my life. The values learned in life's struggles of those farmers with their love and dependence on their LORD for survival was such an example to me; and one that I will never forget. A lesson such as this must be experienced...it cannot be taught from books.

Some changes in the church building have taken place over the years. The original multi-paned glass windows have been replaced with twelve beautiful stained glass windows that allow a breathtaking display of light to filter into the sanctuary; the dark mahogany benches have been replaced by light stained Oak pews that are softly rounded and with carved detail; the pulpit is separated from the pews by a handsome ornately carved Oak balustrade. The entire pulpit area is carpeted in a color, most likely named "Crimson Folly."

However, to me the most moving and inspirational addition is this. On the wall behind the pulpit and between two stained glass windows hangs a breathtaking oil painting of Christ at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane...it must be at least 10 feet by 14 feet in measurement! Other changes that have taken place at Trinity Church is the addition of an educational building of which the floor plan was drafted by my wife, Patricia; the addition of white vinyl siding, central heat and air. Trinity Church Road is now paved but there have been no other changes in the surrounding area.

Trinity United Methodist Church continues to hold a special place in my heart and be a special part of my life. My wife, Patricia is a lifetime member there. We were married at Trinity Church on June 15, 2002. We continue to attend family reunions and the annual fundraiser that includes dinner followed by an auction of crafts and baked goods. We attend weddings and funerals of loved ones. I always enjoy seeing the members and their families on those occasions. A few still remember me from those long ago years.

I have always found time to stop at Trinity Church in my travels, even when I have been alone. I visit the church cemetery where my loved ones' have been laid to rest. On those occasions, I can almost hear the quiet voices of my departed loved ones speaking softly to me and blending with the gentle breezes as they pass through the leaves on the trees surrounding the church. I find a particular peace with myself when I leave.

Patricia and I have vowed to live to be 106 years old and die in each others' arms. When that time comes, for each of us, we will be laid to our final rest in that cemetery in the shadows of Trinity United Methodist Church.

The numbers are fewer now, the tithes and offerings are less and the hymns are not as loud. Yet the heart of Trinity Church remains the same. I can only say thank you Lord for making Trinity United Methodist Church and the Waycross community a unique part of my life with a special place in my heart.