

SANDY PLAINS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Brief History

At the turn of the century, Sandy Plains community of Robeson County, North Carolina was sparsely settled, principally with Indian families. Transportation was by horse and buggy, mule and wagon or on foot. Community life centered around the church, a place to worship, to "catch up" on community news and see friends and neighbors. Most Indian families were tenant farmers, however, some owned their own land.

Community leaders - Allen Ransom, N.P. Cummings, Colonel Johnson, John W. Oxendine, Alex Chavis, Everett McNeil and others saw a need to establish a church in the community to foster community and spiritual growth. Thus in 1904, Sandy Plains Church was founded. The first church was constructed as a "brush arbor" on the Bryant D. Oxendine farm near the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. This first church utilized logs for seats, pine boughs, holly and grape vine for a roof. The indomitable spirit of man and an abiding faith in God Almighty were their walls. Truly the spirit of oneness flowed from their voices across the open land as they offered Thanksgiving to their Creator. The sounds of voices without musical accompaniment, invited neighbors to join in the creation of a dynamic community built around their church.

Services at the "arbor," continued for two years and in 1906 Colonel and Emma Johnson gave one acre of land, ¹two and a half miles north of Pembroke on Union Chapel Road, for a permanent church site.

On this site a second "brush arbor" with sawdust floor was constructed and Sunday services continued as new members joined this growing, dynamic congregation. Church membership grew beyond the capacity of the "arbor." With a small amount of money on hand, members gave trees for building

(1) Deed Book 5C, page 403, September 4, 1906

materials. The women of the church, standing beside their men shoulder to shoulder, provided the sustenance as several "old fashioned barn raisings" resulted in a 26' x 30' wood frame building known as "Sandy Plains" Church. (See original sketch by H.G. Brayboy.) The interior was unfinished with large wood structural columns on each side of the center aisle. Pews for the new church were donated by a neighboring church, the Chavis Church, and the pulpit set consisted of a double seater and two chairs covered in black leather. These furnishings were purchased from D.G. Best and Sons, Lumberton, for the sum of \$35. The church was heated by a "pot bellied" wood heater and the choir sat to the right of the pulpit, opposite the "amen corner" which was on the left.

With a new structure completed, church elders turned their thoughts toward spiritual growth and God, in his wisdom, sent a dynamic pastoral leader, Rev. William Luther Moore. Rev. Moore provided outstanding leadership and direction to the growing congregation for some six years, 1906-1912. Rev. Moore, a man with many God given gifts, talents, and possessed by the Holy Spirit provided direction to this young congregation.

During Rev. Moore's tenure at Sandy Plains, the church was part of the Robeson Circuit which included Prospect Church and Thessalonica. He was assisted throughout the charge by Rev. Rufus Woodell and Rev. D.F. Lowry. Conference journals record that Rev. Woodell served with Rev. Moore from 1909-1912 and Rev. D.F. Lowry from 1912-1914. The journal further shows that N.P. Cummings, Mrs. Emma J. Johnson, Colonel Johnson, Mrs. Henrietta Ransom, Mrs. Anna Belle Oxendine, Everett McNeil, Newberry Jacobs, John Oxendine, and Alex Chavis were charter members of Sandy Plains.

By the end of 1913, Sandy Plains was recognized as one of the leading churches in the Coast District, Blue Ridge Atlantic Conference. Conference journals record that on January 18, 1914, the first Quarterly Conference was held at the church. The Rev. J.H. Warren, District Superintendent was the

presiding elder for the Conference and L.H. Moore was secretary. The Pembroke Pastoral Charge was established consisting of Sandy Plains, Prospect, and Thessalonica churches with the annual salary for the charge fixed at \$200. The record shows that the property valuation of all three churches was \$2,500. Delegates to the Quarterly Conference, which had responsibility for church planning and direction, were Rev. D.F. Lowry, A.B. Smith, Allen Ransom, Colonel Johnson and George Pevia.

The need for new ministers in the Pembroke Charge was evident. Rev. W.L. Moore was reappointed pastor for Sandy Plains in 1915 and under his tutelage Mr. N.P. Cummings received his Exhorter License. Mr. Bryant Oxendine, N.P. Cummings and C.B. Brayboy constituted the Administrative Board of the church. By this time the Sunday School had grown to four classes and Sunday attendance was averaging 15 people. Sunday offerings were averaging \$.15 to \$.25 reflective of the economic conditions of the community. However, the original goal of the church, to serve as the center of community life, continued.

During the early 1920's, Sandy Plains status as part of the Pates Circuit or Robeson Circuit is unclear. The records indicate that in 1920, Sandy Plains was a member of the Pembroke Parish and Rev. P. Mahoney Locklear, Rev. J.W. Smith and Rev. D.F. Lowry served the two to four churches in the parish on a rotating basis.

As the national church structure was evolving and changing and in 1924, Sandy Plains along with other Indian churches in the circuit became affiliated with the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church. Dr. E.E. Quigley was given responsibility for oversight of all Indian churches throughout the Methodist Episcopal Church. Dr. Quigley exhibited a warm feeling for Indian people and their needs, particularly the Lumbee people. He instituted a program of sacrificial giving within the Indian churches, whereby the National Methodist Mission Board would contribute \$2 for each \$1 raised

locally. The Indian churches responded to the challenge and funds for Indian scholarships and new facilities were now available. Mrs. Docia C. Lowry, daughter of Mr. N.P. Cummings and Ms. Liddy Locklear, daughter of Rev. P. Mahoney Locklear, were provided scholarships to attend college in Kansas City, Kansas.

During the period of 1920-33, pastoral leadership was shared by Rev. P. Mahoney Locklear and Rev. D.F. Lowry, with Rev. P.M. Locklear as primary pastor. Also, Ms. Davidson served as a Deaconess in the Indian ministry. Mr. N.P. Cummings, Mr. Ben B. Oxendine and Mr. C.B. Brayboy continued as leaders of the church. In 1928 Mr. L.H. Oxendine, a public school teacher, was appointed Sunday School Superintendent. His leadership brought excellence in the Sunday School, and the church continued a slow but steady growth. The Rev. J.W. Smith succeeded Rev. P. Mahoney Locklear as primary pastor and by 1940 membership had grown to 40. With average Sunday attendance above 25, the small wood church was bulging at the seams. Church leaders and members began discussing expansion. In 1943, a Building Committee of C.B. Brayboy, L.H. Oxendine, Oscar Cummings, N.P. Cummings and Everett McNeil were appointed to plan for expansion of the church facilities. Actual construction did not begin for several years due to World War II and construction materials as well as money was scarce. Young men of the community and church served their country. Burton R. Brayboy, son of C.B. Brayboy, a native of the community and church was killed during service.

Rev. D.F. Lowry was appointed pastor, November 1948. He was known as "Mr. Church Builder." As plans for construction moved forward, the women of the church - Ms. Stella Jacobs, Ms. Docia Lowry and others, were raising money through plate sales, box suppers, and quilting bees. Also, preaching rallies were held to raise funds. The annual "Harvest Day" became a tradition and continues today as "Homecoming." Because of the success of

the many fund raising events, on Sunday, January 1, 1949, Rev. D.F. Lowry, H.G. Brayboy, Lewis M. Cummings, and Oscar Cummings outlined and staked the foundation for the new church building.

Construction began in the spring of 1949, but progress toward completion was slow. Grants were made available from Duke Endowment and the North Carolina Conference to assist in the building program.

Mr. Redell Jacobs was appointed Church Treasurer in the early 1940's, a position he held until his death in 1973. His records provide a meticulous chronicle of growth in attendance and increases in sacrificial giving.

The Sunday School, under Mr. L.H. Oxendine's able leadership, continued to grow. Church membership had reach 60; average attendance was 30. Weekly giving had reached record sums of \$15 - \$20. Finally, after three and a half years of struggle, the building was completed and new church pews were delivered and installed September 1951. The newly completed structure consisted of the sanctuary, four classrooms, and two additional classes in the sanctuary. Mr. Gus Locklear, Sr. was appointed assistant Sunday School Superintendent that year.

Rev. D.F. Lowry's tenure as pastor ended in 1955. Rev. Jakie Locklear was appointed pastor in June 1955. Sandy Plains was now part of the Wilmington District, North Carolina Conference. The following year, two additional classrooms were created by partitioning a small, corridor-like space behind the pulpit. The role of the youth and women in the church was changing from attendance to participation in church leadership.

The conference recognized the importance of this leadership development. The Division of Christian Services, of the Methodist Women Society for Christian Service sent Ms. Alta Nye (Oxendine), Ms. Martha Schlabach, Ms. Joan Kiernan and Ms. Rebecca Moddlemogg, as Deaconess and Church and Community Workers to assist in leadership development, especially among women and youth. Nurtured by these four church workers, Sandy Plains

established a WSCS and MYF organization within the church. Programs for Vacation Bible School, children and youth activities, and involvement in Conference activities provided an atmosphere conducive to Christian growth.

Jerry Cummings and Joy Brayboy (Locklear) were added as youth representatives to the Administrative Board, which included Mr. L.H. Oxendine, Mr. Lloyd Demery, Mr. H.G. Brayboy, Mr. Oscar Cummings, Mr. Stanly Cummings, Mr. and Mrs. R.D. Jacobs, and Mr. Gary Clark. During the period, Indian youth accepted the challenge of Christian service. The Plainsman, a gospel singing group, was formed and a number of young people entered seminary, which we will share later in our history.

The winds for social change--a change so profound that the church could not ignore its consequences--were being felt in Robeson County as throughout the United States during the early 60's. Truly a man for the times, Rev. Robert Mangum was appointed lead pastor for the Sandy Plains Circuit in June 1963, assisted by Rev. Oscar Cummings. The new circuit included Branch Street, Hickory Grove (Marlboro County, SC) and Fairview (Dillon County, SC). Rev. Mangum's commitment to a ministry that went beyond the pulpit was evident early in his tenure. He was instrumental in establishing a tri-racial task force to bring awareness of the socio-economic problems of Robeson County and served as a member of the same. Rev. Mangum's concern for people and his commitment to a social ministry brought systemic changes to Robeson County that still remain. A major accomplishment of the task force efforts was the establishment of Robeson County Church and Community Center in 1969. The purpose of the Center was to provide "the whole gospel for the whole person in the whole community with the whole church."

Growth and change were not limited to the greater community alone. So in 1970 new building projects were introduced. The sanctuary was renovated and facilities such as a fellowship hall, kitchen, nursery, bathrooms, offices, and additional classrooms were added. The second constructional

component consisted of a new parsonage. Land for the parsonage was given to the church by Ms. Doretta (Johnson) Demery. Funds were provided by Duke Endowment, North Carolina Conference and the congregation. Now two generations of the same family had given generously to the church in order for it to continue to serve the community. The growth of Sandy Plains' membership continued and by this time had reached 167 members with annual giving reaching \$20,000. In 1976 the building indebtedness of \$28,000 was paid. Rev. Mangum's ministry at Sandy Plains ended, and the Conference appointed Rev. Milford Oxendine, Jr., who served from 1976 to 1978.

In June 1978, Rev. Simeon Cummings, Coordinator, Outreach Ministries, North Carolina Conference, was appointed Director, Robeson County Cooperative Ministry. The Charge included Sandy Plains and Branch Street. In 1979, five other churches were added to the Robeson County Cooperative Ministry, namely, Ashpole Center, Collins Chapel, New Philadelphus, Fairview and Hickory Grove. Sandy Plains provided and shared pastoral leadership for these small churches.

Sandy Plains was home for Rev. Cummings. Because of his love for his home church and the small churches, he gave himself diligently in strengthening and developing building programs and leadership. The churches received a fresh vision for trained leadership and ministry. Also, Sandy Plains provided office space for the cooperative ministry and leadership.

Sandy Plains, mature, confident of its role in community life and leadership, undertook another major building program in 1980 under the capable leadership of Rev. Cummings. The masonry exterior of the church sanctuary and classrooms were bricked and five classrooms, one additional office and addition to the Fellowship Hall was constructed. The original bell tower was replaced and a new steeple was added while retaining the bell for historical purposes. The cost of the building program was \$120,000. Because of generous grants from Duke Endowment and the United Methodist

Church, this beautiful building was made possible. However, the building expansion claimed the life of a long time member and contractor, Mr. Lewis M. Cummings. His death was the result of a fall from the church roof. Mr. Cummings was the son of a founding father, N.P. Cummings and brother of Rev. Simeon and Stanly Cummings.

Rev. Cummings retired and now serves as part-time Coordinator, Southeastern Jurisdiction Association for Native American Ministries. The purpose of the Association is strengthening and developing Native American ministries in the Southeast.

Sandy Plains United Methodist Church sought not only direction, new leadership, and revitalization of its role in the community but spiritual reawakening as well. God appointed His servant, Rev. Jerry Lowry. Under the leadership of Rev. Lowry, movement of the church in all fronts was and still is evident. With Sandy Plains, still sharing its pastoral leadership it became a part of the Native American Larger Parish which was established in September 1986 to replace the Robeson County Cooperative Ministry. In spite in sharing its pastoral leadership, the church still continued to move forward in almost every area of ministries. For example, church membership increased by one third since 1986 and financial giving exceeded \$75,000 in 1987, an increase of 30% over 1986.

Sandy Plains historically has been in missions to other small struggling United Methodist Churches. For many years, the church has funded and yet denied itself of full-time pastoral leadership. They have allowed their pastors to administrate and serve in various capacities in these small churches. For example, they are now a part of the Native American Larger Parish Ministry which consists of Lighthouse, Coharie, Collins Chapel, New Philadelphus, West Robeson, and Sandy Plains United Methodist Churches.

Throughout the history of Sandy Plains, the laity have always carried the marks of dedication,, patience, endurance, faithfulness and a deep commitment to their church. Mr. Foster Jacobs, son of Charter member, Mr. Newberry Jacobs, was named Lay Person of the Year at the 1988 Rockingham District Lay Rally. He is typical of many of our lay persons.

Developing and training church leaders has also been a major strength of Sandy Plains as was mentioned earlier. In 1915, Mr. Neil P. Cummings received Exhorter License. The purpose of receiving Exhorter License was to give a lay person rights to speak and lead services in the absence of the pastor who would visit his church once or twice a month. Other church leadership have surfaced in the past years, namely, the Reverend Oscar Cummings, Lay Pastor, who served as pastor of the Branch Street, Fairview and Hickory Grove United Methodist Churches. The Reverend Simeon F. Cummings, who is a retired member of the North Carolina United Methodist Church Conference. Mr. Harold Jacobs, Diaconal Minister of Music and Education, is now serving at Prospect United Methodist Church. Ms. Pamela Baker Lineberger, a former Church and Community Worker, who is now Associate Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries on the North Carolina Conference Council on Ministries, United Methodist Church. The Reverend S. Dufrene Cummings, who serves as pastor of Branch Street United Methodist Church. The late Reverend Titus Locklear, served the Lighthouse United Methodist Church, Aberdeen, North Carolina and later transferred back to the Baptist and served New Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, North Carolina. The Reverend Tryon Lowry, who serves as a part-time local pastor at Collins Chapel and New Philadelphus United Methodist Churches which is part of the Native American Larger Parish Ministry. Sandy Plains United Methodist Church is to be commended for the role she has played in helping these persons in answering their call to the ministry.

The strong role of the laity of Sandy Plains United Methodist Church still continues through the decedents of the founding fathers and early church leaders. Some of these leaders are:

Mr. Gary W. Locklear, Chairman, Administrative Board,
son of Mr. Gus Locklear, Sr.;

Mr. Jerry Cummings, Committee on Finance, Chair., and
Ernie Lowry, Church Finance Secretary,
grandsons of Mr. N.P. Cummings;

Mr. Bruce Jacobs, Committee on Trustees, Chair.,
grandson of Mr. Newberry Jacobs;

Mr. Hampton Brayboy, Sunday School Superintendent, and
Ms. Joy Brayboy Locklear, Education, Chair.,
son and daughter of Mr. H.G. Brayboy and
grandchildren of Mr. C.B. Brayboy; and

Mr. Ricky Johnson, President of United Methodist Men,
great grandson of Colonel and Emma Jane Johnson.

In conclusion, Sandy Plains United Methodist Church has an unlimited and unrealized potential for the future. But the church must keep its priorities in order. It must seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. This must be the number one goal; loving God and the neighbor. And if this is the number one goal, the church will continue to reach the unchurched and unsaved persons; will continue to increase in membership through nurture and effective discipleship; will show forth its love to all who enter into Christian fellowship; and continue to extend its witness through mission and sacrificial giving and service, Sandy Plains will be one of the greatest United Methodist Churches in United Methodism.