

HISTORY OF VASS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Vass United Methodist Church has an impressive history that dates back to the year 1886, when religiously inclined early settlers of what is now Vass and the Cranes Creek community felt a need and were willing to sacrifice and work to meet that need.

Very few of the people had any means of transportation and the nearest churches were Union and Cypress Presbyterian, a Baptist church out from Cameron--each several miles distant--and Shallow Well Methodist three miles to the east. Most of those who attended had to walk.

A group of interested persons from the two communities decided to build a Methodist church within easier reach. William Johnson donated land a mile from the village and a one-room frame building was completed in 1886. The donor of the land did not live to see the completion of the building, so it was named Johnson's Grove Methodist Church in his memory. His grave is in the church cemetery which still bears his name.

Johnson's Grove was a growing institution from the start, with much interest in the Sunday School, superintended for the first 25 years by Angus Cameron (generally known as A. Cameron) and attended by various denominations.

Jewell Edwards McMillan, in a poem written some time ago, gives some of her little-girl memories of the place: a white church with a cemetery in front; two front doors, the left used by the men and the right by the women; oil lamps on small shelves placed high on the walls; a big black stove in the middle of the room; the sweet music of the old organ; each class in its own corner; ending with: "Here my Christian foundation/ Was securely, firmly laid./ As the years pass I ask God/ That the vision will never fade."

Names in the early enrollment included: Byrd, Cameron, Collins, Edwards, Graham, Johnson, McDuffie, McCraney, McFayden, Monroe, Patterson, Smith, Thompson, Wright and perhaps others, some of whom were transfers from Shallow Well.

Johnson's Grove was on the Manly Circuit along with Manly, Blue's Crossing (Aberdeen), Keyser, Hoffman and Old Hundred. During approximately the first quarter-century the circuit was served by: the Revs. M. A. Smith, H. M. Jackson, L. H. Chaffin, J. W. Crowson, J. H. Page, J. E. Thompson, G. A. Oglesby, E. G. Kilgore, D. N. Caviness, D. A. Watkins, and J. W. Bradley.

In 1911 a Vass Circuit was formed, composed of Vass, Cameron and Lemon Springs churches. The Rev. C. C. Brothers was the first pastor under this grouping, followed by the Revs. W. F. Trawick, W. B. Humble and J. E. Benson.

Found in an old church record book was a penny postal card addressed to Mr. A. Cameron, giving the Vass Circuit's assessment for 1913-1914. The total for the three churches was \$247 for all causes except the pastor's salary and the orphanage, for which no figures were given except it was specified that the orphanage was to receive one-tenth of the amount of the pastor's salary. Postmarked in Rockingham, the card was signed by A. McCullen, president, and L. Lee Grand Everett, secretary.

In early days members did not pledge as we do today. Conference set the assessments for the charge or church, and the local stewards or finance committee met and assessed the members as they thought they should or could pay. One undated assessment of an early year is among Johnson's Grove records. One man was assessed \$20 (he paid \$25), one \$10, one \$5, and others were asked for amounts ranging down to \$1.00.

The women, whose chief source of income was from butter and eggs, were asked for \$1.00 each as a rule; one was assessed 50 cents and three women and one man were not assessed.

As Johnson's Grove and the Vass community grew, it was strongly felt that a building with more adequate Sunday School facilities should be located in town. During Mr. Benson's pastorate, 1917-1918, a move in that direction was started.

On November 11, 1917, A. Cameron, W. B. Graham, Mr. and Mrs. W. J. Cameron, E. B. Thompson, G. S. Edwards, W.P. Davis and W. D. Matthews met to formulate plans. A. Cameron offered to donate a desirable lot in the center of town and it was decided to erect a brick building there. A steering committee was named: A. Cameron, chairman; Mrs. W. J. Cameron, treasurer; and W. D. Matthews.

An old deed has just been found and placed in the church library in which it is recorded that on February 20, 1917, Mrs. Caroline Byrd conveyed to A. Cameron in consideration of \$300 a tract of land containing an acre more or less. The description indicates that this land is the lot on which the church stands.

So successfully did the building committee and helpers work and so loyally did the members respond that in less than a year, May 1919, the new building with vestibule and sanctuary on the first floor and eight classrooms, furnace room and hall in the basement was completed, furnished and dedicated. It was gratefully acknowledged that the generosity of A. Cameron did much to make this speedy progress possible.

The Rev. Mr. Benson had shown much interest in the new building, but ill health forced him to resign before it was completed and the Rev. L. H. Joyner was the first pastor of what then became the Vass Methodist Church with Johnson's Grove membership. He was followed by the Rev. F. B. Noblett.

"Old Johnson's Grove," as it was lovingly called, was left standing for some time after its 33 years of usefulness as a place of worship, but it eventually went on the auction block and was bought by George H. Hilliard of Vass who used the lumber in building a home for his young family.

In 1923 Vass and Aberdeen became the Aberdeen-Vass Charge and for the next 30 years this connection continued. Ministers serving the two churches were: the Revs. E. H. McWhorter, W. V. McRae, G. B. Starling, W. C. Ball, L. M. Hall, S. J. Starnes, S. A. Maxwell, Daniel Lane, J. O. Long and T. J. Whitehead.

The Aberdeen church, Page Memorial, became a station in November 1953, and Vass joined West End under the pastorate of the Rev. E. C. Boulton until the following June, when Vass, too, attained station status.

As a station, Vass was served first by three Duke Divinity School students: Frank Wier, Walter C. Smith and J. B. Eskridge.

Under the leadership of Walter Smith an educational building costing \$33,000 was erected in the summer of 1955 and occupied September 10 of that year. It was dedicated by the Rev. O. L. Hathaway, district superintendent, on August 4, 1957. This added to the church's facilities four classrooms, a fellowship hall, kitchen and rest rooms.

The next project was a place for ministers to live. On a lot adjacent to the church given by the son and daughters of the late Mr. and Mrs. A. Cameron, a \$12,000 brick parsonage was built in the spring of 1957. It was furnished and ready by July 1 for the church's first full-time resident pastor, the Rev. T. Fant Steele, who served until 1961.

During the pastorate of the Rev. David L. Moe, 1961-1964, a children's building was erected, adding five spacious classrooms, a nursery equipped with built-in cribs and cabinets, a storage room and rest rooms.

The next pastor was the Rev. Charles W. Wooten, now deceased, who served the Vass church six years. The sixth year he was pastor of the Cameron church, also, a connection which continues.

The Rev. Chester D. Brown served the two churches for five years. During his stay the basement classrooms were painted and numerous repairs to the buildings were made.

The Rev. Joseph C. Parker was assigned to the Vass-Cameron Charge in 1975 and he is in his fifth year here. In 1976-1977 a complete renovation of the sanctuary was accomplished, made possible by a bequest made to the church by the late Rena Cameron Borst and other substantial gifts. Painting, new light fixtures, wall-to-wall carpeting, pew cushions, redoing of the altar rail and choir sections, new choir robes and a public address system have added much to the beauty and dignity of the sanctuary.

While it is impossible to measure the influence of the early Christians who sacrificed and labored to make Johnson's Grove and the Vass church possible, there is evidence that their dedication will be more far-reaching than they dreamed, as already five ministers have gone out from its membership.

First was the late Rev. B. C. Thompson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Bryant Thompson, who was engaged in the active ministry from 1916 until 1934.

The next three are third-generation members, their parents and grandparents having been active in this church. They are the Rev. Arthur L. Thompson, the Rev. Fred Davis, and the Rev. Angus McK. Cameron.

The Rev. Mr. Thompson is now retired and living in Southern Pines after a fruitful ministry of 41 years (1926-1967). He is a son of the late Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Thompson and a grandson of the Bryant Thompsons.

The Rev. Fred Davis began his ministry in 1950 and is now in his 20th year at Elizabethtown. His parents were Mr. and Mrs. Herman P. Davis and his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. W. P. Davis.

The Rev. Angus McK. Cameron, son of Mrs. Alton M. Cameron and the late Mr. Cameron, entered the ministry in 1951 and is now pastor of the Candor church. His grandparents were Mr. and Mrs. A. Cameron.

The fifth is the Rev. David Grissom, son of Mr. and Mrs. James Grissom, who moved to Vass when David was a small boy. He grew up attending the Vass United Methodist Church and married Miss Sue Wooten whom he met while her father, the late Rev. Charles W. Wooten, was pastor here. They are now stationed at Star.

A women's group was organized in the early twenties and it has been active through the years. There is a Methodist Men's Club, and a youth group for the Vass-Cameron Charge.

Through the years many valuable additions have been made to the church property, most as memorials to faithful members, others honoring persons still active. Included are: chimes, air conditioning, a Hammond organ, a Leslie organ speaker, a tract of land adjoining the church property, a Yamaha piano, altar ware, paraments, a baptismal font, tables, lecterns, altar vases, chairs, and other items.

An extensive landscape project is now well underway, including brick and block retaining walls, new walks, irrigation system, shrubbery and grass.

Many members no longer with us gave unselfishly of time and talent and each deserves to be mentioned. However, we can name only a few long-time workers: Edith Cameron Tyson, pianist-organist for about 50 years; Rena Cameron Borst, 40-year treasurer; W. Hollyfield Frye, teacher of the men's class for 35 years; "Aunt Sue" Cameron, who taught and loved the tots for some 25 years. Mr. and Mrs. Alex Smith served well as teachers for a time, then felt led to start a tabernacle which they hoped would reach some who were not attending any church. This they did, successfully.

Proud of their heritage, the present membership will continue to hold high the torch lighted by those who have gone before.

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This history was compiled by Mrs. S. R. (Bessie Cameron Smith), Historian of the Vass United Methodist Church.