



First Presbyterian Church

Much of the following historical information is taken directly from “*In The Beginning*” a report on the beginnings of the church written by Barbara Hunter Johnson who has given her gracious consent to have it used here. Mrs. Johnson is a charter member of First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland and a long time resident of the Northeast Georgia Mountains. Mrs. Johnson’s Erwin grandparents were instrumental in the founding of Clarksville Presbyterian Church and Cornelia Presbyterian Church, and Mrs. Johnson has a great interest in church histories of Northeast Georgia

Additionally, the whole story of First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland could not have been written without the assistance of Reverend Jeff Hutcheson who shared his memories, photographs and newsletters supplied by Valerie Richardson and Adele Page and information in the Church History Book organized by various members of the Church.

It has been updated for this website page.

IN THE BEGINNING:

For years there was no organized Presbyterian Church in Cleveland although there were Presbyterian Churches in nearby communities. In 1996 the question was asked “Why is there no Presbyterian Church in Cleveland?”

SOME SPECIAL MINISTERS

Dr. and Mrs. Wade Bell retired from Grace Presbyterian Church at Panama City in 1993. Before their retirement home in the Sky Lake Community of White County was completed, Dr. Bell served as interim pastor at Clarksville Presbyterian.

Dr. and Mrs. Bell became active members of the community and among friends they met were several new residents to Cleveland who had strong Presbyterian backgrounds. Again the question: Why is there no Presbyterian Church in Cleveland?

Dr. Bell related the interest to New Church Development Committee (NCD) for the Northeast Georgia Presbytery, and he was asked to arrange a meeting to determine if there was any interest in a Presbyterian Church in Cleveland. The Reverend Charles Cook, Executive Presbyter, asked him to arrange a meeting time and place, and suggested Dr. Bell place announcements in the local papers and local radio.

Dr. Bell did as suggested, not knowing if there would be more than the few who had initially shown interest. He sent out six letters to people who lived in the Cleveland area, ran announcements, reserved a meeting room and waited. His letter of February 27, 1996 stated that a meeting would be held at the Western Sizzlin Steakhouse Restaurant on March 17, 1996 at 5:00 pm. He stated that the Northeast Georgia Presbytery was interested in the possibility of a Presbyterian Church in Cleveland and the single purpose of this initial meeting was to determine interest and look at the opportunity for a church.

Thirty-eight people attended the meeting. Many were Cleveland Residents. Some came from nearby churches out of encouragement or curiosity. A few people without a church home attended.

Presbytery then asked Dr. Bell to arrange a worship service and on October 13, 1996, The Seventh Day Adventist Church was reserved and a worship service was held. Dr. Bell made all preparations for the service: music, borrowed hymnals, even refreshments served after the meeting for fellowship. Attendance was good and most members of the Committee on New Church Development also attended. An inspirational sermon was delivered by the Rev. Charles Traylor of Bellaire Presbyterian Church in Evans, Georgia.

At this meeting Dr. JoAnn Manley, chair of the New Church Development Committee (NCD) described the interest at Cleveland as being “proactive” in that the community contacted Presbytery through Dr. Wade Bell and asked for Presbytery to act in their community. The usual process for the establishment of a new church is that Presbytery determines the need for a church to be started in an area of growth; visits the community to explore interest; and the community reacts to Presbytery’s action.

A second worship service was announced by Presbytery for the evening of Nov. 24, 1996. At this service Dr. Manley appointed a Steering Committee to continue the work of organization. She appointed the Rev. Cliff Rigby of Gainesville as chairman of the Committee and others were elected or volunteered from those in attendance.



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With the responsibility of arranging this service and the election of a Steering Committee Dr. Wade Bell's pre-agreed involvement with the organization of the Cleveland Church was concluded. He had responded to local interest in a Presbyterian Church and he had responded to Presbytery leaders to gauge and follow interest in Cleveland. Then he was off to serve as stated supply at Homer Presbyterian in Banks County.

THE COMMITTEE

Chairman: Reverend Cliff Rigby, Presbyterian minister of Gainesville, Georgia. Rev. Rigby said of the committee: "It was clear from the beginning that committee members were strongly committed to forming a Presbyterian Church in the Cleveland area. We began our meetings with prayer and scripture study, then proceeded to our planning process following the guidelines and policies of Presbytery's NCD and the influence of the Holy Spirit. We prayed for Divine guidance, dedicated our work to the Lord and preceded with the confidence we were doing His will".

Mrs. Emylie Foster: Emylie and her husband John moved to the Cleveland area in 1967. Together they have given years of service to Presbyterian missions, including sponsoring two sisters through their entire stay at Thornwell Home and the establishment of the Laotian Ministry at Cornelia Presbyterian Church.

Mr. Scott Glenn: Businessman: Scott, his wife Trudy and their son moved to Cleveland from San Antonio, Texas and showed an immediate interest in the new church forming.

Mr. Jim Hiers, Attorney: Jim and his wife Barbara were active Presbyterians in Atlanta. They bought and remodeled a historic home in Cleveland, spending portions of their time in Cleveland before their complete retirement.

Mrs. Johnnie Katherine Sulc: "Kay" and her husband, Reuben, served the Presbyterian Church both in the United States pastorates and as missionaries to Brazil for 20 years. The Sulcs retired to Cleveland but did not retire their call to ministry.

Mr. Jim McDaniel, Attorney: Mr. McDaniel, a widower, came to Cleveland in semi-retirement. A part-time law practice and his interest in real estate kept him busy.

Mr. Eric Wall, Business Controller: A major factor in bringing Eric and his Wife Christie to Cleveland was the environment for rising children. Eric attended Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta.

The selection of these dedicated, talented individuals to the Steering Committee has been attributed to Providence Himself. From that evening of November 24, 1966, the organization of a Presbyterian Church in Cleveland moved steadily forward. The committee began meeting in early January 1997 and met every other week until the first worship service was arranged with all necessary factors in place.

On March 19, the letter went out announcing the initial worship service for the Presbyterian Church at Cleveland to be held on April 6, 1997. The committee obtained permission from Father Ron Fuchs of the St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church for the temporary use of their sanctuary at the 11 O'clock hour on Sundays.

The announcement of the Steering Committee that Dr. C. Charles Benz had committed to serve as pastor brought excitement to all who knew him. Dr. Benz was the organizing pastor previously for two churches: Lakewood Presbyterian in Jacksonville, Florida which reached membership of 1000 under his leadership and the Mountain Presbyterian Church in Union County Georgia reaching a membership of 100 in the small mountain community.

Dr. Benz had surely earned his retirement. Surviving both heart disease and cancer, Charles Benz, with his wife Peggy, retired to Cleveland in 1989, bringing four generations of family to the home they named "Benzoo". As soon as his health improved, he offered his services to the Northeast Georgia Presbytery to do pulpit supply, an interim pastorate, speaking, or wherever there was a need. It is a tribute to his dedication to ministry that he would continue service when he was well provided with the comforts of retirement.



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Dr. Benz offered to serve as pastor, without salary, for one year. Although limited by age and health against doing daily and extensive home visitation, he committed to Sunday Services, office hours and hospital visitation. Dr. Benz brought to the committee the twofold experiences of founding churches and a life of successful ministry. His advice was needed and sought. In the person of Dr. Charles Benz, the fledgling church, newest in Presbytery, started in a small mountain town had the opportunity of hearing each week an excellent quality sermon by an outstanding minister.

CHURCH

Over seventy people attended the first service on April 6, 1997 held at St Paul the Apostle Catholic Church located on the Helen Highway (75). The congregation was a wonderful mixture of ages and stages. Families, singles, retirees and youth attended. Those who came in support and those who came to join were equally enthusiastic on that Sunday. Dr. Benz chose as his sermon topic the old, old story, "Jesus Christ is Lord". Adding to the interest of the first service the committee pledged to give 10% of the offering to Presbytery for Presbyterian programs at home and around the world. In addition they would give 1% to the Presbyterian Fund for Theological Education. The First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland Church began with a *Mission and a Tithes*.

On Sunday July 6, 1997 in St. Paul the Apostle Catholic church sanctuary, the Presbyterians held their first communion, This is how, in the Spring of 1997, the Gathering of Presbyterians in Cleveland Georgia became a church. A church not yet chartered, a church not yet named, but by its purest definition, a church indeed. Over the next months the congregation shared pleasant outings, joys in the birth of new children, concerns for the ill, and shared sorrows for those who died. In this way the members became a church family.

Before a month elapsed, the need for a youth worker was evident. The committee called Michelle Hill to the part time position as children/youth worker. Mrs. Hill was a graduate of the University of Georgia with a degree in Early Childhood Education. Michelle moved to Cleveland from Gwinnett County in 1996 with her husband, Dennis, and their three children. Her dedication to children was matched by her ability. With the addition of Michele as first staff person, the church could now offer Sunday School, Friday night Youth group meetings in her home and exciting outings for the young people. First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland had a *Youth Program*.

The next youth director was Dena Allison and following her was Tracy Howell who was with the church for about five years and was instrumental in starting the LOGOS program. In 2006 The Reverend Teresa Franklin accepted the position of Educational Director.

MUSIC

In the beginning, Mrs. Nancy Rucker, an experienced church musician, offered her services without salary for an indefinite period of time as the church grew. Helen Presbyterian had new hymn books and graciously gave their older hymn books to the Cleveland Church. Music, so important to worship, was provided before the first service was held.

Sometime in 2000, Greg Thomason, brother of member Bob Thomason who is well known for his hand crafted musical instruments, volunteered as choir director and filled this position until 2005. Carl Hummer currently is organist/pianist. The time came when Greg was no longer able to continue traveling from Gainesville to serve as choir director. Following Greg Thomason the position of Music Director is ably filled by David Arvold who has inspired and led the choir and congregation in music. Worship at First Presbyterian Church has been greatly enhanced by the musical talents of these leaders.

CHARTER:

On Sunday, November 30, 1997 First Presbyterian Church was chartered by the Northeast Georgia Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church United States of America. This very special service was held in the auditorium of White County High School. Joining in this special service were many ministers and members from local churches including the Laotian and Catholic Priests. Several ministers came in Scottish attire and the Laotian minister came in his native dress. A copy of the complete service is appended at the end of this history.

Once the church was chartered, elders were elected and ordained. The first elders were: Class of 1998 Kaye Bryan, Emylie Foster and Cynthia Johannsen. Class of 1999: Eric Wall, Jim Hiers* and James McDaniel*. Class of 2000: Scott Glenn, Stanley Thompson and Bruce Morgan*.

* Previously ordained



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MINISTER:

First Presbyterian Church was blessed by the leadership of Dr. Wade Bell and to have as volunteer ministers Dr. C. Charles Benz in the beginning, followed by Dr. William (Bill) Hines. These excellent ministers **gave** of their time to the fledgling church.

In 1997 the congregation felt it was ready to call a full time pastor and formed a pulpit search committee. Committee members were Dick Baker, Adele Page, Ann Chard, Dot Bell, Bill Bryan, Dennis Hill, Perry Dillard, and representing the youth groups, Adrian Page. Some may say that the calling of the minister was merely chance or good fortune, however the members of First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland believe the Holy Spirit was at work in the circumstances leading to the call of The Reverend Jeff Hutcheson to fill the pulpit and lead the developing new church. Recommendations made by The Reverend Charles Cook included The Reverend James Choomack to see if he would have an interest in filling the pulpit. Reverend Choomack had accepted another position, but he knew Jeff from working with him in Florida and recommended him for the position. Reverend Hutcheson was contacted to see if he had an interest in working with a newly established church. Jeff did have an interest; discussions followed and in January 1999 arrangements were made for Jeff to lead the worship service at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Georgia and there the pulpit search committee listened to the sermon and had lunch with Jeff and his wife, Sherri, to further explore his filling the pulpit at First Presbyterian in Cleveland.

In February 1999 Jeff received a telephone call from Dick Baker asking if he would accept the call to First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland. Jeff asked for two weeks to consider, but in two hours he had made up his mind and called back to accept. Jeff held his first worship service on May 19, 1999. His installation service was June 27, 1999, assisting in the service were Dr. Joann Manley, Reverend Wade Bell, Dick Baker, Reverend Michael Chaney, Carolyn Bell, Reverend Glenn Small and Reverend James Choomack.

Reverend Jeff Hutcheson continued to lead the First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland until mid 2009. His sermons, filled with imagination and enthusiasm, attest his love of God and his conviction that "God is here at work in this church, in this community in Northeast Georgia", and that His work is being carried out by each member through missions and activities of the church. The Reverend Hutcheson frequently told the congregation that "it is no accident that you are here; God has a purpose for each of you". Reverend Hutcheson was aided in his work by his wife, Sherri who worked quietly in support of the many programs of the church.

Reverend Hutcheson received his Doctorate in Divinity in 2008. In the fall of 2009 he left to fill a position in Illinois as a Presbytery Executive.

Later in 2009 Dr Roe Callaway filled the pulpit as the interim minister. He and his wife Paula are special people to this congregation.

First Presbyterian Church has twelve elected elders and twelve elected deacons. The church has 185 members and continues to grow.

THE BUILDING

After meeting in the Catholic Church for one year, the present location was purchased. The Mauney House, first a long time residence and then a well known restaurant located at 147 North Main Street became the home of the First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland. As a point of interest on April 5, 1998, the first anniversary of the Church, the worship service was in their own building, the historic Mauney House in Cleveland. The total debt was retired and the mortgage burned in 2005.

In a special service on Sunday, October 29, 2006, nine-year-old First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland broke ground for a new sanctuary and remodeling of the current church building (the historic Mauney House) into an educational wing and church offices. The new building designed by architect Jim Dipzel and will be built by Ron Cantrell who also built St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in Cleveland. Construction should take about one year and plans are to dedicate the new sanctuary on the ten-year anniversary of being chartered. The service was moving and special. The choir and pastor were led in procession the front of the church to bagpipe music played by Joe Cash. The Reverend Ken Meeks, General Presbyter NE Georgia Presbytery, spoke on behalf of Presbytery for the Blessing of the Project. The choir, pastor, and congregation then processed to the groundbreaking site at the front of the current sanctuary to Amazing Grace played on the bagpipe. Jeff ceremoniously broke ground for the new sanctuary, marking another highlight in the history of the First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland.

CONCLUSION:



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From her study of church histories, Barbara Johnson has noted that “the spirit in which a church is founded stays with that church”. The spirit of First Presbyterian Church is warm, welcoming, caring and sharing. This is reflected in the **mission statement** of First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland which is:

*The First Presbyterian Church of Cleveland is a fellowship of committed Christians who seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in worship, study of the Word and outreach. Our objective is the advancement of the Kingdom of God in ourselves, our families and our community through listening for the call to serve, learning and following His commandments and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This statement is summarized by the phrase: **Preaching, Teaching and Reaching through Listening, Learning and Loving.***