

History of First Presbyterian Church Sumter

First Presbyterian Church of Sumter (then called Sumterville) was organized at a meeting of the Harmony Presbytery on May 29, 1823. The formation of the new church followed seventeen months of hard work by an evangelist from Vermont, Rev. Isaac Barbour. Prior to this time, Presbyterians in the village of Sumterville held their membership at Concord Presbyterian Church founded in 1808 and considered our Mother Church. Although the new church did not have a building of its own during its first seven years, regular services were held in the Baptist Church on those Sundays when the Baptists were not having a service. In 1830, the first church building was completed. Dr. Donald McQueen led the congregation from 1837 to 1879.

In 1880, Dr. Nicholas William Edmunds became our pastor and served for 25 years. During his compassionate pastorate, the membership grew from about 100 to over 500.

The present church sanctuary was built and dedicated on November 10, 1907, under the leadership of Dr. J. P. Marion. By that time, the membership had grown to 650. Dr. John Miller Wells became our pastor from 1923 to 1943 and was instrumental in helping establish four new outpost churches. Those churches were Fraser Presbyterian, Lemira Presbyterian, Pitts Memorial Presbyterian (now Swan Lake Presbyterian), and Holy Cross Presbyterian on Miller Road. Dr. Lewis Holladay Lancaster was called as a temporary supply pastor from 1943 until 1946. He then returned to China to resume his work as a missionary.

Dr. Richard R. Potter served as our pastor from 1946 to 1951. Under his leadership, the First Presbyterian Preschool began and continues to be a successful school in Sumter. In addition, extensive renovations were undertaken on the sanctuary including a redesign of the front steps, adding the stained glass window, a new organ and new carpeting. The red brick exterior was painted white.

Dr. Cliff McLeod succeeded Dr. Potter and served from 1951 until his retirement in 1978. During his ministry, the Education Building and the Earle Rowland Memorial Chapel were erected in 1957. In 1969, an elevator and the archway connecting the Education Building and the Sanctuary were added. By 1973, the church membership was 1,174.

In 1980, the church called Dr. Jefferson Aiken who carried the church through the reuniting of the northern and southern Presbyterian churches. Dr. Aiken and Associate Pastor Rev. George Jacobs led our church into numerous outreach and service projects including our role in creating United Ministries, Covenant Place and Samaritan House. Members of our congregation participated in building numerous Habitat for Humanity homes as well as pledging \$40,000 to help build a new sanctuary for New Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Dr. Ed McLeod, who served from 1995 to 2004, was instrumental in establishing the Disciple Bible Study and the International Missions Program that sent youth mission groups to Mexico. From 2006-2012, Dr. Mark Durrett's leadership as a Bible scholar established several Bible studies and expanded our mission trip ministry for youth and adults. After Dr. Durrett left, our church was led by our Associate Pastor Janie McElwee-Smith and Interim Pastors until Rev. Nicholas Cheek was called in 2016.

Rev. Nicholas Cheek came to First Presbyterian in 2016 with enthusiasm and spirit to expand programs and grow the church. Rev. Ashley Cheek became the Pastor of Family Life. Membership increased; the youth group participation was active and numbers grew. He started a series called Faithful Families whereby the entire church family could participate in Bible study and fellowship on Sunday nights during the fall and spring. Rev. Cheek initiated drive-through-ashes on Ash Wednesday. During his time here, the church began the Back Pack ministry to provide children in our community food for the weekends. He led the church family through the COVID-19 pandemic orchestrating live streaming of services and outdoor worship. He resigned in April of 2021.

Since that time, our church has had ministers serve as interims.

Reverend Joel Long was a bridge interim serving for six months. Our next and present interim is Reverend Bob Brearley.

During this year of 2023, our church is celebrating our 200th Anniversary. Many meaningful activities are happening in our church under the leadership of Rev. Brearley, Linda Hogon, Chair, and our 200th Anniversary Steering Committee.