

A New Beginning

The History First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs

Providence Baptist Church was born in troublesome times: gold had recently been discovered in California. The population began to move westward. New states were joining the Union and there was the big question of Free States or Slave States.

In the little community of Dunwoody and down by the “Sandy Spring” there was conversation about the newly inaugurated President, Franklin Pierce, and his newly appointed Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis. People talked about the possibility of annexing Cuba to be a Slave State, thereby giving the South more representation in Congress. They were very interested in a new book by Harriet Beecher Stowe – a best seller called, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Some states had banned distributions of this book— making it all the more popular. The young men who read this book were soon to be the voters of 1860 and the soldiers of 1861.

Occasionally, the conversation around the brush arbor and the hitching posts would turn to higher things. The leader of these conversations always seemed to be a tall young man with a coal black beard. He was W.G. Akin, landowner, Baptist deacon, preacher, and one of God’s called leaders. He always spoke of the need for a house of the Lord for worship, fellowship, and prayer. God put it on Mr. Akin’s heart and he felt the need to set aside part of his own land for a church house. This land was near the present site of New Hope Cemetery in Dunwoody.

The first building was a one-room log cabin with red clay for mortar, built by slaves under the supervision of Mr. Akin. It was heated by a fireplace with a stick and dirt chimney. Logs were split into shingles for the roof, and split logs with peg legs were used for benches.

Providence Baptist church was constituted on the last Sunday of August, 1853 with eleven charter members:

Male Members

W.G. Akin Mrs. Akin
W.M. Johnson
W.C. Johnston
Joseph E. Walker
Samuel M. Johnson

Female Members

Elizabeth Johnson
Mary Johnston
Mary Walker
Harriet Densmore
Mary Reeves

Women outnumbered men in the churches then just as they do now!

Regular monthly services were held until April 1861, when the news reached Dunwoody that Fort Sumter had fallen and Jefferson Davis was calling for one hundred thousand volunteers.

The story of the Civil War is a sad part of the history of our country. That four-year struggle saw wasted lives, wasted lands, self-denial, sacrifice and poverty for many in the South. The end of the war in 1865 found the little congregation scattered in many directions.

The original church records kept so carefully and lovingly by Brother Akin were destroyed when his home burned and his family was forced to flee. His remembrances of the church’s origins had not left him, so he recreated the church records from memory.

In 1876 the few members still in the area met together and decided to hold a Revival meeting in a more central location. The area of Sandy Springs was chosen as the place to meet because of its water

and the shady landscape. The people around the community helped Rev. S.S. Bailey build a brush arbor. The revival meetings held here in the summer months were so well attended that it was decided to hold monthly services as long as the weather permitted. God blessed these efforts and led the people to build a new church house, this time of lumber, with boards straight up and down, and a drawn shingle roof. The brethren lovingly built all the church furniture. The property for the church was given by Mr. I.H. Wilson, great grandfather of Mrs. Marion Ennis, presently a member of this congregation.

From time to time, Brother Akin, now with a long gray beard, came back to preach the gospel among his old friends. In 1882, Rev. B.B. Sargent became pastor, serving until 1887. He had a long flaming red beard and a flaming spirit for the Lord.

In December, 1882, Brother G.W. Owens was ordained to the ministry, the first ordination from the Providence Congregation. Mr. Justinian Evins and Mr. B.F. Burdett were the first deacons to be ordained in the church. (Mr. Burdett was the grandfather of the late Maurice Womack of this church.)

In 1883, Providence organized and constituted a mission at Wallace's school house between Chamblee and Dunwoody; it was known as the "arm of the church." The same year the church joined the North Georgia Missionary Association, later transferring to the Stone Mountain Association and the Lawrenceville Association. We find from the records that they received and baptized members almost every day during the revival of the year 1883.

In November 1887, Providence Church invited all Baptist churches in our vicinity to meet in convention for the purpose of organizing a new association to be known as the Roswell Baptist Association. It was during this time that the church called Brother W.J. Wooten to become the pastor. Church records show that in October 1889, the church called Rev. A.H. Latimore as a new pastor. Two deacons were appointed to receive contributions on behalf of the former pastor, Rev. Wooten.

Brother Latimore was pastor when the first mention was made of Sabbath schools in the church records. Another item was adopted as a resolution in the minutes of the July conference of 1889: Whereas, we hear that there is to be erected near our church a distillery and Whereas, it may be possible that some of our Members having fruit may patronize said Distillery, be it therefore Resolved, that we advise them to have nothing To do with said distillery in any way whatsoever.

In 1894, Rev. T.T. Twitty came to be pastor, and the church voted to build again.

The new building boasted of having one front door instead of two, and a belfry with an iron bell to call the people to worship. The boards this time ran horizontally instead of vertically. It sat on rock piers, and the dogs that followed the wagons to church would crawl under the house to sleep – except for those times (always in a quiet, dignified part of Brother Twitty's sermon) when Fido and Spot would loudly quarrel beneath the pulpit. A deacon would usually slip out and negotiate a peaceful settlement.

In 1911 the church withdrew from the Roswell Association and united with the Atlanta Association, where it has remained active until the present.

During these exciting years of history, the Lord blessed Providence Baptist Church with a growing congregation, and consequently the building was outgrown. On May 8, 1938, ground was broken for the stone church building at the intersection of Mount Vernon Highway and Glenridge Drive. Due to wartime scarcities of materials, the church building was not completed until 1949.

Throughout the prior history of Providence Baptist Church, it had never had a full-time pastor. However, in 1950 Dr. L.B. Huston was called to be the first full-time, resident pastor. Mr. Guy Sewell and Mr. Robert Watkins gave the property for the pastorium, and Mr. George E. Coleman, Sr., was the builder for both the pastorium and the new church building. Mr. Coleman would accept no pay for his work on either project.

Dr. Huston had a true vision for ministry, leading the church to increase giving to missions. A newspaper story from the early 1950's shows him with a very young Martha Hairston, who had graduated from the Women's Missionary Union Training School (now part of Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY.) Dr. Huston had led Providence to provide full financial support for her through the Foreign Mission Board as she began a twenty-nine year long ministry in Brazil.

In 1955, a three-story educational building was erected which included a modern kitchen for fellowship dinners, a nursery and a church office.

As the church grew, so did the need for space. The church purchased the Burdett property on Mount Vernon and the Barfield and Johnson property on Glenridge Drive.

A photograph of Providence Baptist graced the cover of a home mission's magazine issue devoted to the subject of rural churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Dr. Huston served the church from 1945 to 1958. When he resigned in 1958, Dr. G.J. Davis came as interim pastor until the pastorate was filled by Rev. E.B. Shivers, Jr. He arrived at the end of December 1958 to begin his ministry in 1959.

During the twenty-one years of Rev. E.B. Shivers' ministry, the church membership grew. Sandy Springs was still growing. Other churches were formed in the area, so the church voted to change the name from Providence Baptist Church to First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs in 1962. Also, the Annie Houze Cook School which had been formed in 1949 was included as a ministry of the church. (Mrs. Cook was a long-time member of the church and was a retired first grade school teacher. However, her heart, mind, love and enthusiasm for children had not retired, and on April 11, 1949, the Annie Houze Cook Kindergarten was started with eleven boys enrolled; by the end of June, she had recruited ten girls. The school gave a real "head start" to hundreds of North Fulton County students.) The church also provided emergency classrooms during the time when the Hammond Elementary School had burned and was being rebuilt.

The new property purchased by the church included a vacant house in good condition, so the church asked the Foreign Mission Board if they would like to use it as a residence for foreign missionaries on furlough. The Foreign Mission Board responded favorably. What a blessing it has been to this congregation. Rev. and Mrs. Boatwright, missionaries to Japan, came to be our first mission house residents, and have been back with us several times on their furloughs. We have met other missionaries and their families: The Pennels from Indonesia, the Clarkes from Japan, the Stewarts from Japan, and the present residents, John and Jeanie Johnson from Brazil. The congregation feels a more personal involvement in missions through this ministry of the church.

The congregation, through prayer, feeling the need once again to enlarge, drew up plans to erect a new sanctuary and educational facility on the new property across the street from the old stone building. Sandy Springs, the little farm community, had begun to mushroom into a little metropolis; its population really exploded.

The new building was dedicated in November 1966 with a sanctuary seating 600, a library, parlor, large nursery facilities, choir room, pre-school office, and additional classrooms. In addition to the new building, the educational building across the street was still being used. This use of both buildings continued until April 1976, when the newest phase of the building program was dedicated: the Family Life Center. This multi-purpose building houses a modern kitchen, gymnasium, audio-visual room, crafts room, large Youth Sunday School Department, and two Adult Sunday School Departments with classrooms. This building can be used seven days a week as an outreach facility to the community as well as for our own membership.

In December 1979, Rev. E.B. Shivers retired and Rev. Ron Ervin, who was serving as Associate Pastor and Minister of Education, became Interim Pastor. In June 1980, Rev. Ervin was called by the church to serve as pastor. During his pastorate, the pre-school and Mother's Day Out programs were expanded to include daycare for children age 6 months through 5 years old. (Fulton County by now offered public kindergarten, so the need for Day Care for pre-school children was greater than for a nursery school-kindergarten ministry.) The name of the school was changed to Christian Day School of First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs in 1982.

Rev. Ron Ervin resigned in 1988; subsequent interim pastors were Dr. Don Aderhold and Dr. Hoffman Harris. Dr. John Connell was called and came as pastor in September 1989 and served until his resignation in June 1993. During Dr. Connell's tenure, the Christian Day School was closed. From 1993 until 1996, Dr. L. Don Duvall served as interim pastor. Rev. Keith Jones, accepted the call to be our pastor and began his ministry in February 1996.

During Rev Keith Jones's tenure a Brazilian Mission Church was established and English as a second Language classes were started. We also assisted the Sophia Academy in their growth by allowing them to occupy the East wing of the Family Life Center. During Rev Jones' tenure the church sanctuary was completely redecorated. In the busy year of 1997, the sanctuary building's main floor was redecorated. Repairs and upgrades to the church's buildings and grounds are continuing.

One of the most significant ministries adopted by the church recently has been the Bethel Bible School, started by Eleni de Melo to reach Brazilians resident in Atlanta with the gospel, and to disciple these new believers. This ministry was adopted as our Portuguese language outreach group in December, 1997.

Rev. Keith Jones resigned in June 2000. We were fortunate to have wonderful interim pastors. First, Dr. Carl Hart, served as interim from September 2000 until September 2001. Then Dr. Kenneth Day was interim pastor until November 2001 when Dr. Terry L. Quick accepted the pastorate. Dr. Terry L. Quick resigned in July 2009 and Dr. Kenneth Keene, from the Georgia Baptist Convention was the interim pastor until February 20, 2011.

On February 21, 2011, Dr. Kenneth Link was called to be our pastor. On August 5, 2012, Dr. Kenneth Link, resigned after much consideration.

On August 11, 2012, Joel Harrison, Executive Director of Missions for the Atlanta Metro Baptist Association came to preach as a visiting pastor and helped the church determine what direction they needed to go in finding a new pastor. Also, Joel was instrumental in helping the Deacons make some changes to the Constitution and By-laws as well as developing a Manual of Procedures.

On June, 23 2013, Rev. David Shivers, son of Rev E.B. Shivers, was called to become our pastor. His first service as our new pastor was August 11, 2013.

July 2014, The Stone Church at 590 Mt. Vernon Hwy NE, Sandy Springs, GA 30328 was bought back from the Northside Independent Methodist Church and renamed Providence Chapel.

It has been a long time since August 1853, when those eleven Christians gathered together to form this church, and we are still striving to do God's will here in our community and share the gospel around the world.

This history is a chronicle of memories: places, buildings, events and times we know about. But the most important story is that man has always hungered to worship God. Many times it has taken strange forms; however, the test of a church, God's own bride, is in its people, not its buildings and sanctuaries.

The people mentioned in the history of this church are the church of the past – our heritage and tradition. We are the church of the future. What will history record of us? We pray it will say that the people of First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs met the Lord here in this place, that they loved Him with all their heart, and soul and mind, that they loved each other because of Him, and that they shared His love with everyone they encountered.