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ABOVE: More than a century after it was built, First United Methodist Church still stands at its location at Third and Grant in Liberal. The church itself will celebrate its 125th anniversary on Oct. 20 with a special service and meal. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

In a sod house in 1885, the home of Mr. and Mrs. G.W. Light, situated about a mile and a half southeast of Liberal, a Sunday school was organized which later developed into the First United Methodist Church of Liberal.

Mr. Light was the first superintendent, and it was in the same home that the first preaching services took place with the Rev. E.F. Reser serving as pastor.

C.M. Light, in his early boyhood days, was often sent by his father, G.W., with a mule team and wagon to meet Reser, who, like many early settlers, had no means of transportation. A portable organ, owned by the Light family, furnished the music for the services.

In 1887 a sod schoolhouse was erected on what is now the Burris Wright farm about one mile south of Liberal, and this building was used for Sunday school and preaching services.

The first revival meeting took place with the Rev. E.C. West, a resident of Oak City, a town about nine miles west of Liberal, and as a result of this meeting, a church organization was formed. The next spring marked the arrival of the Rock Island Railroad.

After the railroad arrived, in 1888, the townsite of Liberal was laid out, and lots were contracted in the block north of the old high school for the church.

J.B. Bradley was the first regular pastor. During his ministry, a tabernacle was built at that location, but hard times came and crops failed. Many settlers left, and the tabernacle had to be sold.

In 1889, the Rev. J.S. Tull came as the minister. He preached at several outlying points as well as in Liberal.

During Tull's ministry, the Presbyterians, who had also formed a church in Liberal around the same time, invited the Methodists to worship with them in their new church.

This plan was carried out for several years, and the two congregations worshiped together, alternating preaching dates. The bell, which the Methodists had purchased for their church, was given to the Presbyterians for their church.

The old Methodist building was sold for \$50, and Liberal at that time, and for a number of years, was on a circuit.

In 1911, with the church's membership increased, two temporary buildings were erected to meet the needs of the Sunday school, and a tabernacle type building was erected south of the church building.

The parsonage was moved back, turned around and faced the north on Third Street, the church's current location. The building was erected in one day with volunteer labor.

There were 45 members of the church working on the job, with an experienced carpenter, a Catholic, serving as supervisor. History of FUMC tells that the supervisor, had so much fun working on the project that he refused to take pay for his work.

In 1920, the Rev. A.E. Henry conducted the most dramatic service ever to take place in the Liberal church. Henry preached a sermon on the local Klu Klux Klan.

He spent many months gathering certified and documented information on the Klan, and when he was ready to deliver the sermon, he sent a written invitation to the Liberal Klan to attend.

They threatened the meeting, and so the church board asked for protection from the sheriff's office. Officers patrolled the south side of the building and stationed men throughout the inside.

No one was allowed to stand at the services and when all of the seats were filled, others were turned away.

Henry read every word of his sermon, so that he would have written evidence of every word he spoke. There was not a movement within the crowd during the entire service.

“It was such a dramatic and masterful denunciation of the Klan that it was a deathblow to the organization in Liberal,” historic documents of FUMC said. “Within very short time thereafter, the Klan folded up and left and has not been heard of from then until now in Liberal.”

In 1958, the church had grown so much that morning worship services were increased to two, and the second service was broadcast over KSCB Radio Station during Raymond W.O. Knowles preaching.

The church reached the top 10 in the Central Kansas Conference in Sunday school attendance and was in the top four or five in total giving to world service and missions.

The new \$264,000 educational wing was completed with formal opening on Jan. 15, 1961.

In 1969, under the guidance of the Rev. Vern Livengood, a remodeling of the church basement was initiated. The social, or dining, room was paneled and a parlor as created just to the south. The parlor was paneled and carpeted at that same time.

Also in 1969, the final payment of the debt on the education wing was completed, and the building was dedicated.

By 1979, attendance at FUMC, which had been on a decline, rose to 444 per Sunday, and giving to all causes more than doubled under the ministry of Paul Mugler.

Also that year, a foundation board was established, and property across the street was purchased. A house was removed, and the lot was used for parking space. A building on the property was used to house what is now the Methodist Care Center.

On Sunday, Oct. 20, First United Methodist Church is inviting the community to celebrate the church's 125th anniversary. At 9 a.m., there will be fellowship time and a tour of the church to remember the former location of Sunday school rooms and to see the displace.

At 10:30 a.m., the Rev. Mike Keating will lead a service with an old-fashion hymn sing. The service will be followed by a dinner at noon and closing ceremonies at 1 p.m.

Those hoping to attend need to RSVP by Oct. 13.

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