

First Methodist Church of San Benito History

Summary of Historic Significance

In 1908 the initial church in the nascent community of San Benito was the First Methodist Church. From its modest sanctuary serving a small membership, it was to grow into a major Christian institution. The spacious and beautiful existing sanctuary was erected in 1931. While it has served the congregants well, it is the ever evolving dedication and service of the congregants to the community which is most significant. The combination of spiritual and charitable outreach has played a formidable role in the betterment of San Benito and the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

The Methodist church was organized less than a year after the city of San Benito was platted. In December 1907, the first Sunday school in San Benito was organized at the J.A. McAtee home on Travis Avenue just behind the San Benito Hotel. At the time this was said to be the only Sunday school south of Corpus Christi. It represented several denominations and from it have come the Protestant churches and Sunday schools of San Benito.

On January 22, 1908, Rev. C.E.W. Smith, the Methodist pastor of Brownsville, organized the Methodist congregation of San Benito in a one-room schoolhouse at the rear of the Sam Robertson home. The seven charter members were: Mr. and Mrs. W.J. Warren, Mr. and Mrs. W.L. Freeman, Donald Freeman, and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Roy. Rev. Smith preached to the San Benito congregation once a month.

In the fall conference, this church was attached to the Mercedes pastoral charge with Rev. W.D. Williamson as pastor. The local congregation followed the school to a two-story frame building at the corner of Robertson and Travis Avenue with half-time pastoral service. In the fall of 1909, the congregation accepted the invitation to worship in the new Baptist Church building, which was just completed. The Methodist membership at that time was nineteen.

Rev. R.L. Pyle served as pastor from 1909 to 1911. In the summer of 1910 at the cost of \$6,000.00, the first Methodist church building in San Benito was erected on the site of the present building. It housed the congregants of the First Methodist Church of San Benito. Two lots, one being a gift, were secured at this most desirable location.

At the 1910 session of the Annual Conference, the San Benito and Harlingen churches were separated from the Mercedes charge and became two half-time churches. With the growth of the town and the congregation, a Junior Epworth League with sixty members was organized, then a Senior League. Conspicuous in growth and activity was the Young People's class with Judge Samuel Spears as teacher.

The San Benito church became a full-time pastoral charge in the fall of 1911 with Rev. W.N. Vernon as pastor. More than one hundred members were added during the year. Workers organized a Sunday school class in Rio Hondo. The Missionary Society bought an adjoining lot at the cost of \$1,000.00.

In November 1912, Rev. H.M. Ratliff became pastor and served two years. A parsonage was built at the rear of the church facing Hicks Street. By summer of 1913, the Men's Bible Class had an enrollment of sixty. To provide quarters, the class built the north wing of the church. Missionary special offerings for the Methodist Home and for the Mission and Training School were made for the first time. An Intermediate League with thirty members was organized.

Rev. C.M. Rabe became pastor in October 1914. Border conditions were such that the church lost more than fifty members, and church activities suffered reverses.

The six-year pastorate of Rev. J. Fisher Simpson began in October 1915. During the first year, there was a fifty percent increase in Sunday school attendance. A revival in 1918 resulted in more than 100 members joining the church. The budget system of financing, the every member canvass, and the appearance of the church bulletins were some of the innovations.

In 1919 the Senior League of fifty members had fifteen tithers. The Young People's prayer meeting each Tuesday night had sixty or more in attendance, some being service men from the San Benito post. \$8,000.00 was pledged to the Centenary Movement, and the offering for missionary work in Africa by the Epworth League indicated growing missionary spirit.

In 1920 the Sunday school made a record attendance of 407 with an enrollment of 569.

During the pastorate of Re. John C. Campbell, 1922-1924, the church became known as "The Friendly Church."

Rev. A.T. White, in his pastorate of 1924-1925, led the congregation in collecting \$1,000.00 for pavement in front of the church.

Two revivals, in which special work among the children was emphasized, were featured during the pastorate of Rev. T. N. Barton, 1925-1928. Sentiment for a new church building was being formed, and the pastor's sons made the first contribution to the cause.

During the ministry of Rev. C.E. Marshall, 1928-1931, the Brotherhood was organized, the Superannuate Pledge was paid in one year and seventy-three members were added.

February 14, 1930 the Building Committee was constituted with the following as members: A.L. Price, Cecil Morris, J.C. Yancy, C.W. Sullivan, H.B. Livingston, D.M. Young, W.P. Drake, J.T. Lomax, S.C. Sparks, E.H. Downs, F.W. Burgess, G.G. Henson, N.S. Monger, J.F. Ratliff, M.F. Benson, Paul Hornbeck, O.E. Gause, Jim Hollon, W.M. Carter, J.W. Fontenot, J.I. Horkman and G.W. Houghtling. By June 1st, there was \$50,000.00 pledged and plans were drawn. Robert L. Vogler of Edinburg was hired as the architect for the new church building. He utilized steel beam construction to make the spacious sanctuary. There was no need for pillars that would block the view. The general contractor was Meriwether and Sauers.

The Kilgen organ was installed, the only pipe organ in San Benito. It was a memorial to Col. Alba Heywood and his wife. Mr. Heywood was co-founder of San Benito.

The final worship service was held in the old church on Sunday, December 14, 1930. The next day removal of the old church building began. Work began January 1, 1931, on the new building. After worshipping in the high school building, the new church was ready for the first service on Sunday, June 14, 1931. Bishop Sam R. Hay preached at this service he said, "The Lord must have a lot of friends in San Benito to build such a beautiful building." Robert K. Reed played the new organ, which had been given as a memorial.

Rev. W.N. Carl came to San Benito as pastor in the fall of 1931 and remained for one year. The depression came about this time, and one of the banks closed on many funds pledged to the church.

Rev. S.C. Dunn came as pastor in 1932 and remained until 1935. In 1933 the Labor Day Hurricane did a great deal of damage to the church, particularly by water blowing into the building. Small payments were made on the church and fixtures.

Rev. C.O. Boatman came as pastor in 1935 and remained until February 1938. During his ministry, Bishop Paul Kern came to San Benito for a week of preaching. The debt on the pews, the light fixtures and organ were cleared during his ministry.

In February 1938, Harry Moore came as pastor for one year. During his ministry, his father, Bishop Arthur J. Moore came to San Benito to preach for a Union Revival. In addition to his preaching, he gathered with other Methodist ministers in the Wesley Bible Class of this church and drafted the Mission Program of the Methodist Church. After the close of the revival, he flew to Kansas City where the Unification Conference was held. When he presented the Mission Program, with a few modifications, it was adopted and has been used in the Methodist Church since 1939.

Dr. L.J. Rode was sent to the church in February 1939, and remained until February 1943. He was the first minister from the Methodist Episcopal Church to be assigned to a church that had been a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The church had marked growth in spirit and unity. Significant was the growth of the Downtown Sunday School Class which he taught, which surpassed the 100 mark in attendance by men who were not otherwise attending any Sunday school. The church debt was reduced to \$25,500.00, and the unity progress of the church group under his leadership prepared the way for the final liquidation of the church debt.

In February 1943, Rev. W.P. Carmichael came to San Benito as pastor. Rev. R.F. Curl, District Superintendent, with intimate knowledge of details concerning the debt contract, had negotiations well under way. The church building was in danger of foreclosure by the mortgage company. In March 1943, a committee known as the Victory Debt Retirement Committee was created, consisting of twelve laymen: J.A. Welch, W.F. Pitts, K.L. Lake, J.E. Thompson, Fred Graver, LeeRoy Crawford, D.M. Young, Fred Hartmen, O.E. Gause, J.I. Horkman, E.L. Ramsey, Sidney V. Neely, and the minister, Rev. W.P. Carmichael. By September 15, 1943, the full \$25,500.00 had been raised to pay the debt in full.

The church needed to be refinished before it was suitable for dedication. The church asked for one year to refinish the pews and decorate the sanctuary. On October 8, 1944, Bishop Frank A. Smith presided at the dedication of the church.

Dr. L.J. Rode returned to San Benito as pastor at the fall conference in 1944. Records show that he received approximately twenty members per year by baptism during the next four years. The church membership was 543 at this time. In February 1946 a Valley-wide Methodist revival was conducted and Dr. Paul Quillan and Mr. Walter Jenkins from First Methodist Church, Houston, conducted the revival here. Large crowds attended all the services. Shortly after this revival two of our young men, Verlon Fellers and Boyd Harris, volunteered for ministerial service. Both are still active in the ministry. In May 1948, the end of the church year, Dr. Rode retired from active ministerial service.

Rev. G.A. Schulze came to San Benito as pastor in May 1948 and remained until May 1953. The number of children in the public schools was increasing rapidly and the church was rapidly expanding in growth in the Sunday school and church membership. Records show that Rev. Schulze baptized twenty-five members on April 9, 1950 and more than fifty members came into the Church on the same date. During his five years of ministry, about 130 members were received by baptism. Several innovations came during these five years. The organization of a Sunday school class known as the Builders Class in November 1948 was one of these. On May 29, 1950 an adjacent lot with a house was bought for \$7,700.00 with \$5,000.00 in the form of a note. On August 18 the house was sold from the lot, and it was moved away. The old parsonage was torn down and much of the lumber was salvaged to be used in the new building. Mr. Pete Grether was employed to supervise the building of the new parsonage.

Memorial stained glass windows were installed in January 1948. Many have expressed their appreciation over the beauty of the windows. The windows had been given by individuals and families. The following were the donors: The large window with the Shepherd scene over the entrance was given by the E.J. Feller family; the large windows in the sanctuary were given by the following: Dr. and Mrs. W.J. Vinsant in memory of Lt. Wilma R. Vinsant; J.I. Horkman in memory of Mrs. J.I. Horkman; R.M. Patterson in memory of Ruby Patterson; Jesse, Earl and L.B. Welch in memory of Mr. and Mrs. L.R. Welch; Dr. Ralph and B.M. Gause in honor of Mr. and Mrs. O.E. Gause; Mr. and Mrs. LeeRoy Crawford in honor of Mrs. J.I. Horkman. Mr. and Mrs. LeeRoy Crawford donated two additional large windows, and Mr. and Mrs. K.L. Lake donated one of the large windows. The small windows in the narthex of the church were donated by Mr. and Mrs. W.F. Nelson, Mr. and Mrs. M.B. Hays, Dr. and Mrs. E.E. Dawson and Miss Ethel Johnson. A special dedicatory service was held on Sunday, February 8, 1948.

Rev. Arthur C. Peterson came to San Benito as pastor in May 1953 and remained for one year.

Rev. LeRoy Russell came to the church as pastor in May 1954 and remained two years. The entire church was air conditioned prior to April 30, 1956 at a cost of about \$9,000.00. Rev. Russell helped members organize to repaint much of the interior of the church.

In May 1956, Rev. A.H. Bankert was sent to San Benito as pastor and remained for three years. The pastor's study was moved from the church to the old garage on the ground floor. The floor

of the study was carpeted and the study was air-conditioned. During the latter part of 1958 a bequest was left to the First Methodist Church of San Benito in the amount of \$5,000.00. This was sufficient money to put carpeting in the aisles and in the pulpit area, remove the stained ceiling of the sanctuary, replace it with a beautiful white ceiling, and paint the entire sanctuary.

In May 1959, Rev. W.H. Marshall was sent as pastor and at the end of one year, he decided to retire from the active ministry.

Rev. Carl L.W. Israel came as pastor in May 1960 and remained for five years. The Trustees were organized to work more effectively. During his ministry the entire educational part of the building was repainted. One room in the upper elementary division of the building was equipped with new furniture purchased by Rev. Israel and his anonymous gifts. Bishop A. Frank Smith dedicated the church almost twenty years earlier. The membership of the church was slowly declining in numbers as it had since 1953.

In May 1965, Rev. Russell Heaner was sent to be pastor of the church. During the second year of his ministry, Bishop Arthur J. Moore, retired, was brought here with his song leader, Clay Milby, to preach for one week. People came from all over the Valley to hear Bishop Moore. Dr. Albert Outler was also brought to San Benito to speak at the Community Center as part of the study of the Ecumenical Movement. The first Lay Speaker's Training School ever held in the McAllen District was held here at San Benito. Twelve of our local lay people were qualified as Certified Lay Speakers at the fourth Quarterly Conference.

Rev. Ben T. Welch was sent as pastor in May 1967, and stayed until May 1972. On September 20, 1967, Hurricane Beulah caused roof and water damage to the church, and a number of repairs were made soon after the newest pastor arrived. Special choir programs began, which in the following years included Easter and Christmas Cantatas.

In October 1968 the Wesleyan Service Guild was chartered. This organization later became known as the United Methodist Women.

A San Benito Cooperative Ministries Association was formed composed of surrounding Protestant churches. Through this organization a joint Church School program was conducted with the All Saints Episcopal Church, First Christian joined the other two in a joint Vacation Church School. On January 21, 1968 the church celebrated its sixtieth anniversary with former pastor, Rev. Gus A. Schulze giving the sermon and Robert K. Reed, the first organist of this church, playing the organ for this special service. The program included a brief history of the church that was compiled by Mr. S.V. Neely. In Dallas, Texas, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren became the United Methodist Church.

In 1970 the first church pictorial directories were made.

In 1972 Rev. George Butchee II came to San Benito and was the youngest minister ever to serve this church. He and his wife Connie were there until June 1976. Under his direction a multi-generational church school was started. Sending letters of welcome to the Winter Texans who worship with us was initiated to encourage them to come back and bring others with them.

The sanctuary was completely carpeted as a gift from a church family, soon after it had been repainted. Major improvements were also made on the organ. Other gifts given during Rev. Butchee's ministry included the cushions on the backs of the pews, the brass altar set, the lighted cross, the chimes to the organ and the seasonal paraments. The first Christmas Bazaar was held and the proceeds were used to carpet the Fellowship Hall, both entryways and the hallway.

The youth of the church, under the direction of Mrs. Connie Butchee, made Chrismons and decorated the Chrismon Tree. In later years the women of the church continued the project.

In June 1976 Reverend Mary Elizabeth (Mimi) Raper came as the first lady minister of the church. During the second year of Rev. Raper's ministry, the Finance Committee adopted a new method of gathering pledges for the proposed budget called Pony Express. On September 24, 1977 Rev. Raper married Rev. Terry Dowdy in the church and a reception was held in the Fellowship Hall. Rev. Raper incorporated a children's sermon into the worship services, and also started a monthly newsletter. In 1978 Mr. Everett Betts died and left property to our church including the A.M.E. church building.

A program known as "Mother's Day Out" was begun in which non-working mothers of preschool children brought them to the church one day a week for supervised play to give the mothers some free time. In May 1978 with the cooperation of several other local Protestant churches, and Ecumenical Church School Class for high school youth started about this same time.

Rev. Elmer Beck came in June 1978 and was pastor until June 1982. During this period one church family began an on-going project of landscaping the church grounds. Several Bible Study courses were given during Rev. Beck's ministry. The United Methodist Men joined in some interdenominational meetings with the Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians and First Christians. The custom of involving women as greeters began. In 1981 the Crusade for Pensions for retired ministers was started. This church voted to accept their assessment of \$12,245.51 to be paid out by members in three years. An "Old Time Methodist Revival" was held in March 1982, with Dr. Ed Robb of Marshall, Texas, a nationally known evangelist, preaching. In June 1982 the Betts property was sold.

Rev. Charles A. Miller came to the church as pastor in June 1982. Shortly thereafter the United Methodist Men sponsored the reorganization of Boy Scout Troop #26. In November the first church-wide Thanksgiving dinner was held with one hundred six people attending. On February 20, 1983 Rev. Miller and Norma Jean Hunnicutt were married in the church with a reception in the Fellowship Hall.

The Co-Workers Sunday School Class began the custom of having covered dish supper parties once a month. In the fall of 1995, Mary Catherine Lovett, a retired school teacher and a descendant of a pioneer church family directed a "Mother's Day Out" program for a few years, using paid workers to care for children for half day sessions.

The church parlor was completely rebuilt with new walls, ceiling and carpeting. A new heating and air conditioning system was installed and the room was completely redecorated. This was all

done as a gift from a church family. As of November 1983 there are 258 on the church membership roll.

Rev. Bill Hughes served from 1986-1987 and built up the Council of Ministries that resulted in greater participation of members in church programs. Informal Sunday evening services were held with lots of gospel hymns. Bill's wife Liz was active in teaching mission studies in the United Methodist Women.

Music has always been an important element in the worship services. Before the new church was built, a small orchestra added beauty to worship. The pipe organ later was able to replace the orchestra. The entire community has enjoyed concerts and cantatas presented through the years. The Kilgen organ was completely renovated in 1999 and was dedicated to Ernestine Neely, church organist for many years. At age 96, she is on the 100th Anniversary committee.

The past 20 years have seen a growth in the service to the needs of the greater community. Rev. Carlos Cloyd was able to work with a young Methodist intern, Rev. John Feigans. They counseled many Hispanic youth and started Sunday evening praise services. The "Love Can Wait" program resulted in several youth promising to wait until marriage for sex. Kathleen Jordan served many years as church secretary and was helpful in starting a clothes closet for the needy in 1998, also annual Thanksgiving Baskets. She has become the official visitor to members who are hospitalized.

Rev. Brad DeHaven started an extra Sunday worship service at 8:30 a.m. Special short dramas were occasionally presented, directed by Jan Williams. When Rev. DeHaven was asked to move to a large church in San Antonio, Rev. Karen Boehk was sent to San Benito.

Rev. Boehk was active in community activities and encouraged members to invite people to church, especially Hispanics and other ethnic groups. She welcomed new members. She made an effort to help solve social problems in the community.

In 1991 The Christian Unity and Intra-Religious Concerns Committee co-chaired by Mary Hardy and Claude d'Hemecourt met with representatives of four other churches to organize the San Benito Food Pantry, Inc. This church has generously supported this organization with money and volunteers. There are now seven churches involved in providing food for emergency needs of the San Benito people.

In 2003 Rev. Jason Adams brought youth and vitality to the church program. He has helped teach Disciple Bible Study classes, as well as start up a new Adult Sunday School class. He has encouraged the members to volunteer for the many mission programs such as Masters' Builders, who repair homes for the needy here in the San Benito area. The church is recognized for its home and foreign mission work.

Bill Ballenger, a long time benefactor of the church, along with other church members, built a prayer chapel with stain glass windows similar to those in the church. It was dedicated February 27, 2000. He died in 2006, leaving an endowment for church betterment.

Rev. Danny Longoria has served as pastor to the Hispanic population in the community since 2002. He has taken into his flock fifty new members since his worship service has begun. Rev. Longoria conducts worship services in Spanish each Sunday at noon, as well as special Spanish Sunday School and Bible study. His Spanish classes have been helpful to many people. In October 2005 he and Rev. Jason Adams held the first Bi-Lingual Worship Service and 8 people joined that day. His ministry has grown to its current membership of sixty-seven.

The missionary work conducted by the United Methodist Women greatly benefit women and children throughout the world. A recent revival of the United Methodist Men is sure to help the mission of the church.

This church was an influence in the lives of several members who later entered full time church related professions. They include: Miss Gladys Steck, Rev. Boyd Harris, and Rev. Verlon Feller.

The Southwest Texas Conference pays the salaries for a Wesley Nurse and a Wesley Counselor. Arcie Aguilar has an office and telephone provided by the church. She is available for nursing advice and does diabetes and blood pressure tests in various locations. She also provides health education and bi-weekly exercise programs, and Conversational Spanish classes at the church.

Jose Mena also serves the area by counseling people in need. The church provides a private office space for him to help his clients solve their problems.

Winter Texans are an important part of the church body, serving as volunteers. Sharing their time, talents and money.

The Evangelism Committee visits new comers to the church, giving them a loaf of fresh bread and an information packet on the church and its programs and upcoming events.

Through the Nurture Groups, members and Winter Texans became better acquainted.

The church has a Prayer Chain that regularly prays for those who are ill or suffering. A Prayer Shawl Ministry was started by Linda Jewel in 2006. To date over 100 prayer shawls have been blessed in a special blessing service and been delivered to those in need.

The Health and Welfare Committee provides a meal for the families at the time of the funeral.

Good food is a tradition in Methodist churches. Volunteers have served a full breakfast to people coming for early church or Sunday school. Every month that includes a fifth Sunday, the United Methodist Women serve a simple Mission Lunch after the worship service. Donations are given to a local mission project.

The congregation of the First United Methodist Church has welcomed people into the church for the past 99 years. Besides ministering to the spiritual needs of people, the church has provided programs that could help families have a better life. The leaders of the church continue to look toward the future to better serve the community. The city of San Benito Administration offices moved into the Historic U.S. Post Office Building in the fall of 2006. This church, located across

the street is in a good location to serve the future spiritual, educational and cultural programs of the downtown area.

Pastors of the First United Methodist Church of San Benito, Texas

C.E.W. Smith January 1908 – November 1908

W.D. Williamson November 1908 – November 1909

R.L. Pyle November 1909 – November 1911

W.N. Vernon November 1911 – November 1912

H.M. Ratliff November 1912 – November 1914

C.M. Rabe November 1914 – October 1915

J. Fischer Simpson October 1915 – February 1922

John C. Campbell March 1922 – October 1924

A.T. White October 1924 – October 1925

T.N. Barton October 1925 – October 1928

C.E. Marshall October 1928 – November 1931

W.N. Carl November 1931 – November 1932

S.C. Dunn November 1932 – November 1935

C.O. Boatman November 1935 – February 1938

Harry Moore February 1938 – February 1939

Dr. L.J. Rode February 1939 – February 1943

W.P. Carmichael February 1943 – November 1944

Dr. L.J. Rode November 1944 – May 1948

G.A. Schulze May 1948 – May 1953

Arthur C. Peterson May 1953 – May 1954

LeRoy Russell May 1954 – May 1956

A.H. Bankert May 1956 – May 1959

W. H. Marshall May 1959 – May 1960

Carl L.W. Israel May 1960 – May 1965

Russell R. Heaner May 1965 – May 1967

Ben T. Welch May 1967 – May 1972

George E. Butchee II May 1972 – May 1976

Mary Elizabeth Raper May 1976 – May 1978

Elmer Beck May 1978 – May 1982

Charles A. Miller May 1982 – May 1985

William Hughes May 1985 – May 1989

James T. Miller May 1989 – May 1992

Carlos Cloyd May 1992 - May 1996

John K. Feigans 1994-1995 intern

Bradley DeHaven June 1996 – June 2001

Karen S. Boehk June 2001 – June 2003

Danny Longoria June 2002 -

John F. Teer June 2003 – August 2003

Jason E. Adams September 2003 -

Appendix of Pictures

1 – San Benito town, c. 1915

2 – Original 1910 First Methodist Church of San Benito

3 – Victory Retirement Committee, 1943

4 – First United Methodist Church of San Benito, 2006

5 – A stained glass window of the United Methodist Church, San Benito