

# First Presbyterian Church of Bartow

## Our History

Someone has suggested the term "history" might well be spelled "HIS-story" this serving as a reminder of the sovereignty of Christ in controlling the march of events not only in the world but also in His church. Is there a pen that can record the glory and grace of God wrought in the lives of those saints gathered together in worship as the First Presbyterian Church of Bartow? The pen and written expression would fall far too short, and with that in mind this brief history of the church will touch only the highlights of organization and its physical genesis through the years.

After the American Civil War efforts were made by the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Church to organize congregations in Central Florida. Rev. William Gordon Flagler Wallace, a circuit riding minister for



*Hughes Opera House*



*Polk County Court House 1887*

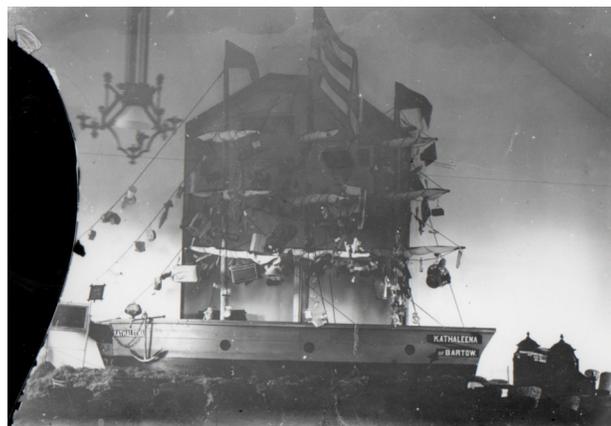
the Presbyterian Church U.S. (South), gathered six persons in February 1882 to establish Bartow's First Presbyterian Church. They became the third established church in the fledgling municipality. Worship was held at Hughes Opera House and the County Court House on Main Street. Services were held monthly. That same year Bartow struggled to find 25 voters in order to meet State requirements for incorporation as a town.

Plans soon followed to erect a new church building on a lot in the middle of town but owing to the financial depression of the Southern Presbyterian Church a building loan could not be secured. The Methodist and Baptist churches had been blessed by the noteworthy gift of twenty acres of land each from Bartow's early benefactor and "Cattle King" Jacob Summerlin enabling them to complete building projects. The congregation turned to visiting minister Rev. A.W. Sproull a Missionary representing the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America who not only offered funding by the Northern Assembly but also regular scheduled weekly services. The two Presbyterian denominations North and South were racing to plant churches in communities throughout post-Civil War Florida.

What followed was a formal reorganization on July 26, 1885 under the auspices of the Northern Presbyterian Church. This organization took place in the borrowed sanctuary of Bartow's First Methodist Church. Rev. M. Waldo was the temporary pulpit supply to the newborn church for about six months. The congregation still worshipped in the Opera House and the ladies of the church held fund raising events collecting \$100 to purchase an organ and hymnals.

The Rev. Samuel Hair took the reins of spiritual leadership in 1886 and began full time ministry to the Bartow congregation. The church secured a loan from the Northern Presbytery and purchased the corner of Florida Avenue and Stanford Street from William Hampton Johnson for \$700. It was the site originally chosen for the church in 1883. An additional \$2,200 dollars was raised by the congregation, businesses, and charitable friends enabling construction of a new church building. The church was designed by Ruling Elder M. M. Dunlope. Timber for the church was cut locally and hauled by oxen to Bartow's first sawmill located on South Mill Avenue. There the arboreal bounty was turned into boards, studs, & shingles for the House of the Lord. The first Session meeting and Sacrament of the Lord's Supper were both held on March 28, 1886. The formation of the first Ladies Aid Society and the first child born into the congregation, Charles Dunlope, capped off the momentous year.

January 1887 witnessed the congregation worshipping within the walls of Bartow's newest church building. It consisted of a 36 x 60 feet auditorium, vestibule, hammered-rolled glass windows, and bell tower resplendent with gothic arches. The church was painted white. Chandeliers of ironwork held coal oil (kerosene) lanterns giving a warm illumination to evening services. On November 23 the local newspaper reported that Elias Overman presented the church with a bell for the steeple and by Sunday December 18th it was heard calling the faithful to gather. Christmas was observed in the church in a memorable fashion. A large scale ship was constructed in the sanctuary laden with presents suspended in the rigging.



*Christmas 1887*

The church was officially dedicated on May 20, 1888 complete with a small pipe organ and eight-day clock. The choir consisting of five members sang two anthems. Rev Dr. Sproull delivered the Dedication Sermon followed by the Dedicatory Prayer rendered by Rev. Hair. Regular services were held every Sabbath morning and evening. A well-organized Sunday School and Wednesday evening prayer meeting

rounded out the formal ministry.

Rev. Hair died the following year in June 1889 leaving the small church without a pastor. It was a severe blow followed by sixteen members petitioning to withdraw their membership in order to form another church allied to the Southern Presbyterian denomination. Their request was politely denied. By the time a new pastor Rev. George Case arrived in 1890 ten of those sixteen members had withdrawn and organized themselves into the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Our church soon recovered from the loss of members and both churches began to grow.

Statistical reports for those years closing the nineteenth century reveal a mission-minded body. Home Missions, Foreign Missions, and Sabbath School works were in the forefront. Donations were routinely made to the Presbyterian Relief fund, colleges, and to the Freedmen (African Americans freed from slavery). The 1890's saw the introduction of a rotary system for Elders and the conclusion of a worship question that "the congregation should sit for prayer and stand for praise." Regular Services, Baptisms, and Communion reflected the stability of the community and the church.



*Remodeled Church 1907*

In 1904 the congregation petitioned for and received transfer to the Southern Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church in the United States). Membership stood at 56. Minutes of the annual Congregational Meeting in 1908 reflect that the church received a collection plate from Mrs. Lizzie Dial and a Communion table from the Ladies Aid Society. Through the many years of the church's existence the Women of the Church were instrumental in securing not only needed finances but also those items necessary to the conduct of worship and ministry, hymnals, organs, Bibles, even the final payment in 1912 of the church's first Manse were blessings of God's reward to their faithfulness.

The church continued to be a pillar in the religious life of the community through World War 1 and into the roaring 20's. Plans for a new church building were discussed and committees formed but nothing materialized. In 1928 a two-week revival was held being the fourth recorded since the founding of the church followed by a rise in membership to 133. The same year both Men's and Women's Bible Classes were reorganized and the choir was singing at both morning and evening services.



*Rev. Billy Sunday (right) & Song Leader Homer Rodeheaver (left) 1919 Revival Service*

An all-time record of 130 communicants coupled with a Sunday School membership of 158 heralded the beginning of the 1930s. It was a decade remembered for the economic depression. The men organized into an auxiliary group known as "the Men of the Church." Systematic Bible study, hymns of praise and thanksgiving were the central features of services.

Through the perseverance of Rev. Dr. Jerome C. Jones, the church was instrumental in the establishment of the Bible in Public Schools program making a tremendous contribution to the spiritual welfare of the community. During those hard times money was scarce and the congregation was small. Nonetheless a major undertaking was commenced and completed. The church building was realigned in a North-South orientation from the original East-West position. The bell tower was dismantled and removed. The exterior was remodeled with brick and stonework creating a beautiful gothic arch over double doors on the southern facade. Arched windows completed the work. Twelve Sunday School rooms encompassing all ages and a parlor were added across the north side. A unique design feature was utilized which left the 1887 sanctuary intact. The 1932 structure simply framed over the original church leaving the original 1887 interior with only slight modifications. Through the provision of God's Grace an increase in membership and new campus were testimonies to His Blessing in the midst of adverse times.



First Presbyterian Church Sanctuary 1932

World War II burst upon the Nation deepening the spiritual life of the church by humility and service to each other and the community. Shortages were the normal routine and often the minister made local pastoral calls on a bicycle. Christian love was continually manifested in both word and deed. The purchase of a "new" used pipe organ from Florida Southern College highlighted the decade.

At the close of the war the vision of peace centered on the world stage. A vision for the propagation of the Gospel to the "outskirts" of town centered on the church's new pastor Rev. Dr. William B. McSwain. A program of door to door witnessing, invitations, and activities with the neighborhood youth evidenced a need for a church on what was then the southwest edge of town. An outreach Sunday School program held on

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Sunday afternoons was begun. The youth ministry was followed by preaching in a member's house located on Dudley Avenue. The vision had become reality. In 1946 First Church sponsored and built a small chapel at what was then the west end of Stuart Street. The mission eventually it grew into its own and was established as McLeod Memorial Presbyterian Church in 1951. The church was built on land donated by long time member Mary Stewart McLeod and named in honor of her parents. The adjacent McLeod City Park was also a gift from the McLeod family. The late 1950s witnessed congregational efforts in evangelization realized an upsurge in membership. Additional land was purchased and plans for a complete renovation of the church incorporating the original 1887 sanctuary was begun.

An educational building, church offices, library and modern courtyard was completed in the early 1960's. Cottage prayer meetings, visitation, migrant outreach programs, disaster relief, and organization of a weekday kindergarten evidenced the people's desire to Christian charity. First Presbyterian in conjunction with the Baptist and Methodist Churches organized the Church Service Center to assist in food, finances and clothing those in need. An extension Sunday School class was begun in the predominately black and Hispanic community of Gordonville. Support for Florida Presbyterian College and Columbia Theological Seminary was pledged and the church sponsored a Boy Scout Troop. The close of the turbulent 1960's witnessed the first man on the moon and the first women elected to positions of leadership in the church as Deacons.



Remodeled Exterior, 1962

In the mid 1970's a new pipe organ was purchased. Diced bread was substituted for whole loaf in the communion service. Outreach to the community, choir growth, and diversification in Sunday school literature was effected. New programs were instituted under the leadership of Rev. James E. McNaull some of which were Sunday morning services at the Detention Center for Delinquent Youth; a pastor's discretionary fund to assist those in need; a nursery program "Mother's Morning Out"; a program from senior members of the church titled Keenagers; marriage enrichment weekends; youth programs; church sponsored softball teams; continued sponsorship of missions; and special choral programs was evidence of congregational enthusiasm in the work of the Lord.

In March 1981 Rev. William Mulcay, a former missionary to the Congo, joined the church staff fulfilling the duties of Associate Pastor. Later that year the church was notified of the union of the Northern (Presbyterian Church in the United States of America) and Southern Presbyterian Churches (Presbyterian Church in the United States) once again reuniting the ties with the Northern Assembly.

In 1982 the church celebrated its centennial with the publication of a church history and a special Centennial Sunday celebration. Another outreach ministry of support to Beth El Mission for migrant farm workers located in Wimauma was undertaken.

Since 1996 the vibrancy of the church continues under the pastoral care of Rev. Jim Hatch. Bible study, worship, youth activities, and prayer lead in church dynamics. The church sponsored two Habitat for Humanity homes which were completed in 1998. Other projects include ministry to senior citizens through the Volunteers in Service to the Elderly (VISTE) program, organizing and supporting a Walk to Emmaus Community (Heart of Florida Walk to Emmaus) and a Food Ministry (Grace Diner) serving hot meals weekly for those in need. In 1999 construction of a new sanctuary and administrative complex commenced. The 1887 Sanctuary was dedicated for the new purposes of a fellowship hall and multipurpose building.

The dawn of a new millennium witnessed the completion of the new Sanctuary. The cornerstone was laid on November 19, 2000 and the sanctuary dedication took place on Sunday, August 26, 2001.

The cornerstone of the new Sanctuary has inscribed in granite these words:



First Presbyterian Church 2000

*JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF BEING THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE  
THIS STONE TO THEE IN FAITH WE LAY  
TO THEE THIS TEMPLE, LORD, WE BUILD  
THY POWER AND GOODNESS HERE DISPLAY  
AND BE IT WITH THY PRESENCE FILLED*

This then is our prayer that all who worship with us will be blessed and filled by the very presence of Christ Jesus.

The twenty first century brought forward many doctrinal issues within the denomination prompting First Presbyterian's pastor and elders to involvement in church government and committees both at the Presbytery level and the General

Assembly. After ten years these issues continued to break faith with the Word of God and a move to unite with another reformed assembly was undertaken.

On June 1, 2016 the First Presbyterian Church of Bartow became the 280<sup>th</sup> congregation in the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). The new denomination's focus on adherence to the Word of God, missions, growth, reformed faith, and evangelization in the light of Jesus Christ were in line with the foundations of the local church.



ECO

A Covenant Order  
of Evangelical  
Presbyterians

An early church history records, *"In God's business the past stimulates the present to make the future an even stronger witness to His will and way. I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord. Psalm 122:1"*.

The Grace and Love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ continues to bless and change lives at First Presbyterian Church of Bartow.

Our history then is truly HIS story. To Him alone be all Glory, all Praise, and All Honor.

— Wm. Lloyd Harris