

**SIXTY YEARS OF COOKEVILLE**  
**FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

By Allison R. Ensor  
Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN  
Sunday, 9 December 2012, pg. C-5  
'Cumberland Tales'

Thanksgiving Sunday 2012 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first worship service held in the present sanctuary of Cookeville's First United Methodist Church. I was a senior at Central High School then, and it was a time of great excitement for me.



The old church building at the northeast corner of Spring and Dixie had stood since 1895, though an addition had been built in 1910. By the 1940s, during the pastorate of T. W. Mayhew, there was a growing realization that the building was inadequate. At that time the church's parsonage stood just north of the church, at the southeast corner of Broad and Dixie. In 1943 the pastor's family moved out and

the former parsonage was turned into a Sunday school annex. I can remember being in the old parsonage at least once while the Mayhew family was living there and can also remember attending Sunday school there later on.

The first stage of the building plan was the removal of the old parsonage/Sunday school annex. This was accomplished in 1949 and work began on a new educational building, which was completed in the summer of 1950. It included Sunday school rooms, a parlor, a chapel, and a large room that was designated Fellowship Hall (now Jeff Wall Hall).

With the educational building in place, the demolition of the old church was at hand. The last service was held on Oct. 22, 1950, with a layman, John Holladay, the principal speaker. Worship services were moved to the new Fellowship Hall. There were no pews, of course; everyone sat on chairs. A small two-manual Allen electronic organ had been purchased to replace temporarily the church's Moller, for years Cookeville's only pipe organ, which went into storage. Virginia (Mrs. Louis) Johnson was the Sunday morning organist, and in the evenings "Miss Vera" (Mrs. Jeff) Wall played. Mabel (Mrs. Marshall) Perkins was the choir director for the morning services; on Sunday evening Jeff Wall led the all-male choir. At times I was called upon to substitute for Mrs. Johnson or Mrs. Wall. When "Brother Jeff" was away, the men's choir was led by Dr. L. T. Reeves, a local dentist. H. Thornton Fowler, who had replaced "Brother Mayhew," was the pastor until January 1952, when he was appointed to fill a midyear vacancy at McKendree Methodist Church in downtown Nashville. After some weeks of uncertainty, W. Bruce Strother was transferred from Kentucky conference and became the new pastor, beginning in March 1952.

The congregation had long been aware of what the new building was to look like. For several years the church bulletins included a drawing captioned "The church we are building." The church itself was rendered accurately enough, though the picture suggested that it would be set further back from Dixie Avenue and with much more green space than turned out to be the case.

Fellowship Hall continued as the place for Sunday services until November 1952, when the new sanctuary was ready. In it there were no stained glass windows and no organ pipes. Choir members would face each other across the divided chancel, and the altar stood against the rear wall. There was space for the organ console against the rear wall on the pulpit side. Otherwise the sanctuary was very much as it is today.

There were undoubtedly many preparations for the first service. The one I recall best happened on Nov. 18, when a group of men, including my father, moved the Allen organ from Fellowship Hall to the new sanctuary. They suggested that I try it out, and I was very pleased to think that I had sounded the first organ notes ever heard in that place. Although I noted at the time that "It sounds very fine," it was inadequate for such a large space. Nevertheless, it would have to do for the next several months, until the Moller could be installed.

The service on Thanksgiving Sunday, Nov. 23, was a very exciting one. The processional that day was very appropriate: "O Thou Whose Hand Hath Brought Us Unto This Joyful Day," using the tune for "Stand Up, Stand Up, for Jesus." At one point in the service a symbolic flame was brought from Fellowship Hall to the new sanctuary. An "escort of the flame" was composed of heads of various church organizations: trustees, Methodist Men, the Woman's Society of Christian Service, the Ladies Air, the Wesleyan Service Guild, etc. As the president of the Methodist Youth Fellowship, I was included in this group, its youngest member. The bringing of the flame was part of the ceremony for opening the church for worship, which also included the singing of "Faith of Our Fathers," a litany and prayer of Thanksgiving, and the choir's singing of the "Gloria from the Twelfth Mass," attributed to W. A. Mozart.

It would have been appropriate if Bishop Roy Short, then bishop of the Tennessee Conference, had been present; he was invited but was not able to come. (He was however, on hand for the dedication of the church some four years later, on Dec. 2, 1956). It would also have been appropriate if Thornton Fowler could have come, since he had done so much to raise money to build the new church, but he too was unable to be there. The preacher for the opening service was the Superintendent of the Cookeville District, S. Dewey Organ. On Sunday evening the preacher was T. W. Mayhew, during whose pastorate plans for the new church had first been made. At that time he was pastor of the East End Methodist Church in Nashville. The Walls were away, which meant that Dr. Reeves led the singing, and I played the organ. Eugene Johns, one of the church's principal soloists in those years, appropriately sang "Bless This House."

\*Read more 'Cumberland Tales' at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>