

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COVINGTON BIBLE CHURCH

By
Linda Ross

Before the first signs of life as a church, and not yet having a name, God, being the Lord of history, and because of His all seeing providence, knew. . .we were to be.

The Covington Bible Church grew out of a series of Bible Studies which were attended by a group of believers from the local Grace Brethren Church. These Bible Studies were led by Dr. Lester Pipkin, who later became the church's first pastor, and Rev. Bob Guilich, both of Appalachian Bible Institute. In much the same way as the birth of our nation, this small group of Christians, seeing the necessity for an independent government of the church, held meetings and gatherings and passed resolutions favoring the formation of a new church.

While using God's word as the basis of their structure, this congregation became The Independent Bible Church, later changed to The Covington Bible Church. It was the first independent church in this area. It is not "affiliated governmentally with any religious denomination or association, but will cooperate in promoting the work of Christ." (church constitution). It stands without apology for the full inspiration of the Bible.

The Covington Bible Church was founded in the Fall of 1954, and for a time it was housed in temporary quarters on the corner of Rayon Drive and Jackson Street. Baptismal services took place at area rivers and streams. The Rev. Lester Pipkin, President of Appalachian Bible Institute, traveled back and forth from his home in Whitesville, WV, to be the acting pastor. Assisting him were Bob Sizemore and Midge (Cary) Perdue, both students at Appalachian Bible Institute.

In January of 1955, Rev. and Mrs. William Powers came to the field and stayed with us until April, 1957. On July 22, 1956, groundbreaking services were held on our lots at what was then known as Virgesmar Heights, with Rev. Lester Pipkin as guest speaker. Rev. Powers turned the first shovel of dirt.

After the basement of the church was finished, a dedication service was held. William Hamner was the speaker for that occasion. The congregation met there until the upper story was completed in 1959. The pews, which remained in service until the erection of the new auditorium, were purchased from the Edgemont Presbyterian Church for \$200. The following are the names of our former pastors who followed Pastor Powers, and the years that they served:

Rev. and Mrs. Burl Wagoner - 1957 to 1963
Rev. and Mrs. Joseph S. Ogburn - 1964 to 1968
Rev. and Mrs. Robert Farwell - 1968 to 1970
Rev. and Mrs. Wallace Smith - 1971 to 1973

We have had many pastors through the years whom we have grown to love in the Lord and have learned a lot from one another. Only God knows the prayers that are yet being answered, that have gone up from the hearts of these men, for their flock here at The Covington Bible Church.

In June of 1973, a young pastor from Chicago, IL, stood behind our pulpit--we were his flock. Howard Merrell and his wife Kathy (also from Chicago), newly graduated from Appalachian Bible College, came to Covington by the direction of God. Although they were young, as the saying goes "looks can be deceiving" and so it was true of our pastor. With his dedication to God, his ambition, and his concern for lost souls, he brought with him new ideas to be used for the glory of God. Along with his sword (the word of God), he was given another tool that has proven to be the most helpful to him, his very talented wife. Since her father was also a minister, she must have had some idea of the job ahead of her. Not to mention the two baby boys (Chad and Chris) that they were blessed with later on, and we all know, that can be a challenge in itself!

The years following the pastor's arrival, after the necessary "growing pains", brought a period of growth in the church. To make room for the larger classes, walls were torn down from inside a building belonging to the church which had been used for rental property. It was given the name "Fellowship Annex". Besides having the classrooms, a small room was set aside for visiting speakers and missionaries (a Prophet's Chamber). Because the "Annex" has a kitchen, it has been used for the Men's Prayer Breakfasts and numerous banquets of the church. We as a church family have enjoyed the fellowship received there, so the name chosen seems to have been appropriate!

Still in need of additional space, on March 9, 1980, once again groundbreaking ceremonies took place, but this time, the shovel being in the hands of Pastor Howard and Kathy.

For the purpose of getting the construction under roof, Kenny Mayo, missionary appointee with Hiawatha Baptist Missions was hired as supervisor. Working along with the men of the church through the summer months, Kenny and his family lived in their mobile home on the church property until his job was finished.

We set aside Saturdays for our work days. The ladies prepared the meals and everyone enjoyed our time together. Building the new addition brought out many talents that were put to use. Sometimes the jobs consisted of just plain "dirty work" accomplished by people not afraid to "roll up their sleeves" to get fully involved.

Kenny proved to be both an excellent worker and a motivator of others as well. During the ten weeks or so Kenny was with us, the building was "put under roof", all the basement floors were poured and much of the framing for interior partitions was completed. Kenny's absence was sorely felt after he left in July, but the project

continued. The Hercules fire and accompanying lay-off was a trial to our faith as a church as well as to many individuals. It came just at a time when the end of our building fund was in sight and we were considering a bank loan. This inability to make financial plans slowed the project for six or eight weeks but even during this time, work continued.

A step of faith was taken when the congregation agreed to borrow \$25,000 for the completion of the building. This allowed us to purchase materials for the interior work which occupied us through the fall and winter months.

It is to the credit of the people of the church and to the glory of God that the bulk of the work on the building was accomplished by the people of the church. With the exception of the masonry and the finishing of the ceiling in the auditorium, and Kenny's help, all the work on the building has been accomplished by God's people at the church.

Because part of our church constitution reads "to spread the gospel to all nations", we are supporting missionaries both by prayer and financially in many parts of the world. Some of them were people who were lovingly and consistently taught the word of God by faithful preachers and teachers, then obeyed God's will for their lives, and have gone out from The Covington Bible Church to fulfill The Great Commission.

Dr. Cary (Midge) Perdue is a professor at Asian Theological Seminary, Manilla, the Philippines. As a student at A.B.I., Cary was involved in the founding of Covington Bible Church.

Rev. Ralph Green is Word of Life Representative for the state of Virginia. A Boys' Home boy, Ralph was saved as a teenager in the Covington Bible Church.

Mr. and Mrs. Cary Perdue, Sr., were part of the original nucleus. Until their retirement, Cary served as Maintenance Director and Kate as Head Cook at Appalachian Bible Institute.

Appalachian Bible College, formerly Appalachian Bible Institute, in Bradley, WV, has played a great part in our church's past. We are pleased to support its ministry in training minds and hearts for God's work.

There are a number of other missionaries which we support and have grown to love who did not start here as these did, but are nevertheless a part of us: Rev. Norm Niemeyer, Area Secretary for parts of Asia and Africa with T.E.A.M.; Lonnie Hodge in Bolivia with New Tribes; Kenny May with the church building arm of Hiawatha Baptist Missions.

Also, several men who are now pastors began with us here at Covington Bible: Bobby Sizemore - pastor of Elkview Baptist Church near Charleston, WV; Buddy Caviness - pastor of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church of Luray, VA; Albert Stewart - Galilee Baptist Church, Chicago Heights, IL.

These things have been mentioned, not to show what great things people have done, but to remind us to be very thankful for the blessings of God, and for where He has led us. Although He has brought us this far, our work for Him is not yet finished. We should ever be mindful of these words taken from our church covenant, written at our very beginning:

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, we do now in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as the body of Christ, We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality, "TO BE ZEALOUS IN OUR EFFORTS TO ADVANCE THE KINGDOM OF OUR SAVIOR!"

In planning for the activities of our Dedication Sunday, I thought it would be appropriate to present a brief history of the church. A written summary seemed to be the best alternative since our time during the services will be largely taken up with rejoicing in the present and challenging for the future. Linda Ross took the time to compile this history of the church using information gleaned from old documents and conversations with some of the "old timers". To this work of Linda's, I added the section on the account of the construction of the new building and the listing of our missionaries and pastors who have gone out from or are supported by Covington Bible Church.

If we have missed some important matters or gotten something wrong, please forgive Linda and myself. We are relative newcomers and weren't around when most of this was happening.

--Pastor Merrell