



Church History

Humility, Persistence, Courage and Faith. These are the attributes that come to mind when one reflects on the chronology of events in the history of the University United Methodist Church, which grew out of a merger of three Churches.

The ideal for the first Church (Simpson) was conceived by a small group of committed persons under the leadership of Rev. Daniel Allison who held services in a small wood frame house on 6th and Broker Alley (now 15th Street). This commitment was confirmed on November 18, 1874, when the first Church was named Coke Chapel. At the end of Rev. Allison's Pastorate, Rev. Marshall Taylor assumed leadership through the appointment of the Annual Conference.

By 1879, Simpson Church grew to a membership of one hundred and sixty members. Also, in that year a division of eighty-eight members went out and formed a mission church, which was later named Barnes Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church.

Under the pastorate of Reverend S.G. Turner, Simpson purchased their first building for \$400. The old German framed church building was blown off its foundation during a storm at the location on Massachusetts Avenue and Cherry Street. The church took on the laborious task of moving the building to 1st and Howard Street (now 1000 block of Missouri Street); in the area called Blake Woods, where two lots had been purchased. The church opened in 1889 where the congregation worshipped until 1899.

Reverend G.A. Sissle was the pastor and under his leadership the church continued to grow in membership and activities. Consequently, the old building was razed and construction began on a new state of the art church building. The temporary absence of a building necessitated worshipping under a tent on a vacant lot just north of 11th and Missouri street until late fall, while the new church was being built. The opening of the church marked another milestone in the history of Simpson. Worship was held in this building from November 1899 until January 1918, at which time the Youngmen's Prayer Band was organized. This Prayer Band later became the YMCA, which grew to be the largest YMCA in the world for Negro males.

On a cold winter evening on Sunday, January 13, 1918, sadness fell over the congregation as their beloved church burned to the ground during a great industrial fire. The flames from the fire could be seen for miles. Pastor P.T. Gorham and members gathered and prayed for help from heaven and offered praise for a new church for their fiftieth anniversary. During the building process for the fourth church, services were held in the Senate Avenue Presbyterian Church and at the Pythian Hall on Senate Avenue.

Simpson rose from the ashes and at the cost of \$60,000 the new church building opened. "To God Be the Glory!" Another sad event hit the congregation in 1921, when Reverend J.S. Bailey, the second pastor of the newly erected church died on August 28, 1921

During the era of the Ku Klux Klan reign in Indiana, Simpson Church became one of the leading churches in the city and the largest church in the Lexington Conference. Under the leadership of Rev. W.J. White, the church grew to a membership of 1,397 and an average Sunday School attendance of 150. Six of the original members of the church were still living when the church celebrated it's fiftieth anniversary. This included Attorney J.T. Hill, the first African-American lawyer in Indianapolis..

In 1955, the Indiana Conference gave the Lexington Conference a church building located at 30th and Capitol Avenue (Capitol Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church) under the leadership of Reverend J. Inman Dixon. A decision was made that Simpson would relocate to this location. Not all the members were thrilled about the move, thus, there was a second division. Many members stayed at the 11th and Missouri location, which was dedicated and named Gorham Methodist Episcopal under the leadership of Reverend G.N. Hardin. In 1957, An out-post Church was established at 40th Street and Capitol Avenue, later becoming Christ Methodist Church. The building later became the Masonic Hall located across from IPS #43.

In 1966, the three congregations (Simpson, Gorham and Christ) merged to become University United Methodist Church under the leadership of former Gorham pastor Reverend George Rice. It was really not a merger but a reuniting. Church services were held at the 30th and Capitol location. The church dreamed of moving further north into the Butler-Tarkington area (42nd and Clarendon Road), thus the name University. After many meetings, it was decided that the Butler area would not be feasible. At that time the neighborhood association felt that the area was not ready for a "new" black church.

In 1968, the Methodist Church merged with the United Evangelical Brethren Church and became the United Methodist Church.

In 1969 the ground was broken for the building of a new church. In 1970, the cornerstone was laid at the present location, 5959 Grandview Drive, where we are now. In 1972, University's Child Care Center was opened with two children and a staff of four. The congregation continued to prosper under Rev. George Rice.

In 1977, Rev. Harry Coleman took over the pulpit as Pastor. Rev. Coleman is best remembered for his love of the church and his successful leadership in the business and financial matters of the church. In 1991, Rev. Coleman became District Superintendent for the Indianapolis West District.

June 1991, Rev. Charles Hutchinson became the third pastor of University United Methodist Church. He made University more aware of mission priorities and the importance of Sunday School. University became known as "A Church with A Warm Heart and a Personal Touch."

1999 ushered in a new era as Reverend Dr. Frank Moore became the pastor. "Doc" brought a spirit of the original Methodism and the "Spiritually Alive Creed". He encouraged members to use their Bibles. He was involved with all parts of the church ministries.

In 2013, we were blessed with Reverend Brian Williams. His hope was that together we reclaim our rich heritage as disciples of Jesus Christ and people of University Church to engage and empower the community with God's love. He encouraged the congregation to build relationships outside the church through mission.

Our current pastor, Rev. Dr. L. Wayne Smith, took over the leadership of University United Methodist Church in July 2016. The Vision: Knowing God, Connecting Disciples, Growing In Faith and Going Out To The World. November 2016, Rev. Dr. L. Wayne Smith led the congregation in worship in celebration of the 142nd Anniversary of University United Methodist Church.

"To God Be the Glory for the Things He Has Done!"

Submitted by Sondra Rogers, Church Historian, 2016