

## One Hundred Twenty Fifth Anniversary of Mena First Baptist Church

October 30, 2022

Presented by Linda Gandy

One Hundred Twenty Five Years old! What? Oh, no no, I am not 125 years old! Mena First Baptist Church is 125 years old. Well, let's see how our church got it's start.

The tiny, new town of Mena was established in 1896, nestled in the beautiful, God-created Ouachita Mountains. In that same year, 7 people from different places felt a strong urging from the Lord to journey to this new town for the specific purpose of establishing a Baptist Church. God called Charles and Laura Stilson from Hammond, Louisiana, Bro. W.W. Cleaver and his sister from Hot Springs, Arkansas, Joel Shands from Union Hill, Indiana, Ty Clark from Lamar, Missouri and Mary Emma Dickover also from Lamar, Missouri

Now, in 1896 folks didn't have comfortable push-button cars for travel. They rode in horse-drawn- buggies or horse-drawn wagons, BUT those 7 people answered God's call, packed their bags and they came! you know? It seems quite clear to me that God intended to have a Baptist Church here from the very beginning of this new, tiny town of Mena.

On February 21, 1897, Mena First Baptist Church was organized with those 7 people being the charter members.

Bro. Lee Compere served as our first pastor. He preached his first sermon on August 8, 1897.

In 1903, our second pastor, Bro. William Strandburg led in organizing Acorn Baptist Church.

In 1911, Mena First Baptist Church had 357 members on roll. During that same year, those members met in the small wooden building they had constructed at the cost of \$60.00, which, by the way, included the cost of oil for the lamps. Well, the reason for this meeting was to discuss a problem they had. Oh, it was a good problem, they had outgrown the space that small church offered. The township of Mena gave the church a parcel of land and those members got busy. They used bricks from the old Kansas City Southern Railroad Roundhouse that had been torn down and built a much larger church on the corner of Church and Ninth Street. That congregation served Mena and the surrounding areas faithfully for the next 50 years. I grew up in that church, from the Beginner's Department on up, and I have many precious memories of that time, BUT, I am still not 125 years old!

Our church has had 21 pastors. In 1936, Bro. L. D. Summers was our pastor and he led in the construction of our Ebenezer, a Monument to Freedom. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Inside Ebenezer is a small vault. It contains church memorabilia, and articles of local and national events. Bro. Summers requested that Ebenezer be opened every 50 years and the contents displayed before placing those contents back in the vault for another 50 years. In 1986, we opened Ebenezer for the first time and the contents were put on display for a week in this auditorium. New things were added and then placed back in the vault and sealed for another 50 years. Now, I am going to save you the math and tell you that the vault will be opened again in 2036, IF the Lord doesn't come first!

In 1950, we had a group of members who were deaf and longed to know what our pastor was saying to the congregation during church services. We organized the Silent Bible Class and had a person do sign language for them. Oh, my, what a joy for them and how they blessed the rest of the congregation. They always had a sparkle in their eyes and a smile on each face. They were very faithful in attendance until the last one of that group passed away.

Also, in 1950, we began broadcasting our Sunday morning worship service over radio station KENA. That broadcast has been done weekly since that time.

On November 1<sup>st</sup> our church dedicated a new church building located on the grounds of the old Central School. We are worshipping in that building today. My parents attended all six grades at that school as did I.

During the years, we established 2 missions that became churches, Dallas Avenue Baptist Church and Calvary Baptist Church.

We have had people from our church to become foreign missionaries. Some of them are Jim Philpot and his family who served in Mexico, Karr La Miller Dickens and her family served in the Philippines. Karr La being the daughter of Bro. and Mrs. Dillard Miller. By the way, Bro. Miller was our longest serving pastor to date, that being 27 years. James Edward Hampton grew up in this church. His family were very active in church work. Our church ordained James for the ministry. Later, he and his family served in Africa for over 33 years. His sister married Dean Newberry who was the first pastor of Dallas Avenue Baptist Church. I spoke to James Edward and his wife, Janell last week and they asked me to convey their greetings and best wishes for a blessed and wonderful day on our church anniversary.

1970, PCDC, an acronym for Polk County Development Center got its start in our church. They asked permission to use a few Sunday School rooms and the Fellowship Hall. We gladly gave consent and they used those rooms for several years. Later, they moved to the old skating rink where they are today.

1973, our Youth Choir made a tour of several states where they assisted Home Missionaries in conducting street Bible Schools. They also helped in building and repairing mission facilities. One highlight of their tour was to perform a patriotic gospel program on the steps of the National Capitol in Washing D. C.

1998, We started Ninth Street Ministries serving people of Polk County who had no medical insurance. On that one day of the week, about 140 meals were delivered and about 76 people received medical help. That same year some members of our church made a mission trip to Romania. They made personal contact with the people there, witnessing to them as they handed out Bibles and tracts in their own local dialect.

1999, a medical group from our church returned to Romania. The group treated about 50 people each day and handed out 1200 pairs of glasses. One elderly Romanian lady shouted, " I can see!! Now, I can read my Bible!"

2001, a mission trip was made to China.

In 2008, we started Mission Mena, giving assistance to the needy of our community by providing food, clothing and spiritual assistance.

2009, a devastating tornado struck Mena causing extensive damage. Our church had considerable damage, but we served as the base headquarters for the Red Cross, Salvation Army, The Arkansas Baptist Relief Team, Tyson and other groups. These groups provided tarps, cleaning supplies, personal items, food and assistance in many other ways for which people expressed deep gratitude.

We became involved with Fresh Start, a program for expecting mothers and new mothers.

Handbells and a musical ensemble became a part of our worship service.

We established a new pre-teen program for fifth and sixth graders.

During the past 125 years, Mena First Baptist Church has been very active in many other ministries and services, but I have mentioned only some as I felt sure as you were getting ready to come for Sunday School and church, that you had not planned to stay all day!

In conclusion, I want to read from Romans chapter 10, verses 13-15 which are the verses that those 7 charter members chose as their foundation. Now, I told Candace that the scripture reference was Romans 15, verses 13-15, but I was mistaken. It is Romans 10, verses 13-15.

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed ? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they believe without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!

Thank you.