

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EXCELSIOR BAPTIST CHURCH

Excelsior Baptist Church is believed to have been established in 1864. Land for the present site was sold to the church by Frank J. Ingraham and Remer Franklin in 1884. Remer Franklin sold three-fourths of an acre for \$17.50 and Ingraham sold one acre and one-fourth for \$35.50.

The original structure was a two-story wood-frame building, and the second story was the meeting place for a Masonic Lodge. The building was painted white; had wooden shingles; and a steeple and belfry. On Sunday morning before preaching, the bell was rung by means of a rope which hung down to the first floor; it could be rung on either floor.

The building was heated with a wood-burning stove on each floor; therefore, there was a brick stove flu on the outside wall. A terra cotta pipe or thimble ran through the wall into the stove flu on the outside.

Preaching was held twice a month on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Conference was held once a month on Saturday. Sunday School, known as Sabbath School then, was held every Sunday afternoon about 4:00.

It has not been determined at this time who the first minister was. The earliest records show that Rev. J. C. Brewton was pastor at Excelsior in 1885 and 1886. Years later Rev. Brewton organized Union Baptist Institute in Vidalia. This preparatory school later became Brewton-Parker College.

The Church and Masonic Lodge were burned in 1928. It burned one Sunday afternoon after Sunday School. A few items were saved—the piano; the silver Communion set; the Communion Table and two matching chairs; and three pulpit chairs of ornate woodwork.

During the time that the Church burned and was being rebuilt, members attended church in Pulaski. A white wood-frame sanctuary, with no Sunday School rooms, was rebuilt in 1929. This building was also heated with a wood stove. It was lighted by means of gas lights in the early years. In July of 1947, the deacons recommended that Sunday School rooms be built. The records indicate that the rooms were still under construction in 1952 and that the doors were finally hung in January of 1954!

Throughout its history, the building has continually undergone improvements and renovations. Records also indicate that Excelsior Baptist Church has always been active in the local Baptist Association and supported missions.

On May 3, 1984, disaster struck again and the church was destroyed by a tornado. The church held services for the next two Sundays at Butch DeLoach's packing shed. Then on Saturday, May 19, the ladies of the church met and cleaned the "old store building" on Fate DeLoach's property. The pews from the church and the piano were brought in. All the other contents of the church were stored there also. This was to be the church's new home for the next few months. The first service held at the old store building was on Sunday, May 20, 1984. The men temporarily installed additional overhead lights and a large fan. The building was quite cool all during the summer. On May 27, Sunday School was resumed. All classes except the adults met outside until the weather turned cold at which time they met in the cars!

The church started a ministry with the Mexican migrant workers during the summer of 1984. A summer missionary, Melissa Young, from Kansas helped with

Vacation Bible School. Classes were held outside, and six Mexican children attended as well as the church kids. Brother Moses Valdez, a Cuban-born Hispanic Missionary held a series of meetings at night for the Mexican workers. At least six Mexicans were led to Christ during these meetings. Brother Valdez preached in Spanish and sometimes brought Spanish movies. These meetings were also held in the old store building. The ladies of the church provided refreshments; enjoyed the Spanish singing; and even watched some of the movies! This was the beginning of the current Iglesia Cristiana Church.

For fear that it might get too cold in the old store building; the church moved its meeting place to Mrs. Christine Grices' outdoor kitchen on November 25, 1984. Sunday School was held for a few minutes each Sunday with everyone meeting in one group. The church was in the process of looking for a pastor at this time. Rev. Robert Murphy preached at Mrs. Christine's on December 2, 1984 and through the month of December. On January 9, 1985, the church called him as interim pastor and later as pastor.

Construction of the new church and present building was begun in September of 1984. The first meeting was held in the unfinished sanctuary on Sunday morning, December 23, 1984. The youth performed their Christmas play that night, and everyone enjoyed refreshments set up in the back of the sanctuary. The following Sunday, December 30, Sunday School was held for the first time in the new building even though the rooms were not finished.

The beautiful stained glass windows were donated by various families in honor or memory of loved ones. The Communion Table and chairs; pulpit furniture; and piano were refinished to match the new pews. The stately old pulpit chairs from the first church are in the pulpit area. The first Communion Table has also been refinished and is now in the preacher's study.

The educational part of the building includes a large social hall where the baptistry is located; commercial kitchen; two restrooms; a small office; pastor's study; and numerous Sunday School rooms.