

## Second Congregational-Church United Church of Christ, Memphis, Tennessee Celebrating 150 Years of Worship



Second Congregational Church, the sixth oldest black church in Memphis, was chartered by 21 enterprising, visionary and determined individuals in 1868. The church was an outgrowth of missionary work of the Congregational Church after the Civil War through the American Missionary Association.

Reverend W. W. Mallory, the church's first pastor, conducted services in a frame sanctuary built by David C. Woodruff, a Memphis contractor whose family worshipped at the church. The original church, built by African American contractor, David Crockett Woodruff, was on South Orleans Street at Linden Avenue close to LeMoyné Normal Institute, which was established several years later, and which was also built by Mr. Woodruff.

Throughout their more-than-a-century existences, the church and school have enjoyed a close relationship in both geography and faith.

Two traditions established by the earliest members of the church were an insatiable thirst for knowledge and a commitment to good citizenship. To talk about Second Congregational Church is to talk about its faithful members and leaders. And to talk about its early members is to talk about the development of Memphis' black religious, cultural, business, professional and educational establishments.

One of the most prominent ministers in the church's early years was Reverend Benjamin Albert Imes, pastor from 1880-1892. Reverend Imes was considered the best educated minister in all of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Memphis. He was born of free black parents in Pennsylvania in 1848 and held two degrees from Oberlin College (Oberlin, Ohio). While in Memphis, Imes was involved with a group that aggressively pushed for integration of public facilities. They were met with harsh resistance from the white power structure. This resistance resulted in a series of race riots in the 1880s. On the religious side, Rev. Imes served as assistant moderator of the National Congregational Church Council and in 1881, was an American delegate to the International Congregational meeting in London, England. His accomplishments are considerable as this was during the post-Reconstruction era, when the climate in the South and America was not particularly favorable to blacks. In recognition of Rev. Imes, The Tennessee Historical Commission erected a historical marker which stands on the front greensward of Second Congregational Church.

Others who have served the church as minister include the Reverends George Virgil Clark, George McClellan, J. J. Scott, Frank Sims, L. C. Fisher, H. C. King, Harold Kingsley, Russell Brown, DeMond, Dokes, Fletcher Bryant, James A. G. Grant, Peter Cooper, Arnold Pickney, William Watson, John Charles Mickle, Ed Goode, Leroy James, Charles Dorsey, Otis Higgs, Glenwood Roane and Joshua Harper.

Along with the clergy, families have been a mainstay of the church throughout its existence. Some families have been associated with the church from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and have had successive generations as members. Many have occupied high places in Memphis and American society. One early family, the Benjamin Woodsons, have bloodlines that have been traced to President Thomas Jefferson via a liaison with Sally Hemings.

Many black landmarks, public institutions and facilities are named for pioneering members of Second Congregational Church. Hamilton High School was named for Green P. Hamilton, a noted educator, historian, author and civic leader. He wrote two early 20<sup>th</sup> century books: *The Bright Side of Memphis* (1908) and *The Beacon Lights of the Race* (1911). L. E. Brown Park in South Memphis was named for Lawyer E. Brown, also an educator, who had the distinction of being the first black in the

public schools to be paid \$100 a month. Foote Homes Housing Projects, located in South Memphis, was named for a member, Attorney William Henry Foote.

Some other noted early members who accomplished much include Philip Nicholson, born in 1846, who was known as one of the wealthiest black planters in the South. Nicholson acquired 360 acres of prime land in the southern part of Memphis and established a farm specializing in fancy produce. John Love, a postman and musician, founded the Letter Carriers Orchestra, the first of its kind in the country, which travelled throughout the United States. At his death during the Great Depression in the 1930s, Love left Second Congregational more than \$30,000. Love Hall, recently demolished, was named in his honor and was the site of numerous church and community activities as well as at one time a voting site for area citizens. Taylor Hayes, an early member, was proprietor of the old T. H. Hayes and Sons Funeral Home, which until its closing in 2010, was the oldest continuously operating black business in Memphis. Fred Hutchins, a postman, a noted violinist, a celebrated party thrower, and author wrote the church's history in 1968 in honor of the church's centennial. He served as the church's treasurer for more than a half century. Dr. George Jackson, Oberlin educated, was Memphis' first black pharmacist and the first black to receive a pharmacy degree from the University of Michigan. He established his pharmacy on Beale Street in 1893. A Tennessee Historical Commission marker is placed at the site of this business. Some other early pioneers and contemporary members of note include the Wellington Joneses, the Ridley J. Andersons, the Andrew Gillises, the Nathaniel Dixons (five generations), the David C. Woodruffs (five generations), the Clowers family, the Wayman Wilkersons, the Lafayette Branches, Dr. Juanita Williamson, the A. K. Smiths, the H. H. Kennedys, the Edwin Joneses, the Green Fort Pinkstons and the Hubbard family among many others.

Also, in more recent times, people like Dr. Hollis Price, the first black president of LeMoyne-Owen College, was the first black to be named Moderator of the United Church of Christ, the church's highest lay position. The street adjacent to the church is named in his memory and a Tennessee Historical Commission marker was erected in his honor and stands in the front yard of Second Congregational Church

And the late Mary Alice McWilliams, a former president of the Memphis Education Association and a noted longtime Memphis educator taught many students who went on to occupy important roles in Memphis and America. Among her former students are those who have become mayors, college presidents, superintendents, executives and other leaders of distinction. Mrs. McWilliams was also a United Church of Christ leader quite active in Conference roles related to women and issues of justice.

But the church's distinguished history was forged by all—noted leaders and worker-bees that put time, money and sweat equity into the church. Though always a small church, Second Congregational boasted a membership of 210 with 90 enrolled in Sunday school in 1908. In 1914, LeMoyne Normal Institute moved from Orleans to its present location on Walker Avenue. Members of Second Congregational followed, as the population shifted eastward. The cornerstone for the Second Congregational Church at 764 Walker Avenue was laid in 1926. While the new church was under construction, members worshipped in Steele Hall on LeMoyne's campus. The current church opened its doors for worship at 764 Walker Avenue on Sunday, February 5, 1928. The rare curved custom made (by Buddy and Wise of Jackson, Tennessee) solid oak pews cost \$1,800; light fixtures came from Bry's Department Store; and other touches were bought to make the sanctuary one of Memphis' most attractive.



The building was built and designed by members of the church, including Washington Vance, a brick mason, contractor Frank Nesbit and architect Harold Smith. The church cost nearly \$40,000 and has withstood tornadoes, earthquakes, economic recessions, ice storms, blizzards and hard times. The

attractive art works that grace the north wall were gifts from a member, Mrs. N. M. Watson and were done by LeMoyne College resident artist, Reginald Morris.

In 1982, the church was listed in the Tennessee and National Registers of Historic Places by the United States Department of Interior. The church has the distinction of being the oldest unaltered church in Memphis designed and built by black artisans for a predominantly black congregation.

Having had both black and white pastors thru the years, Second Congregational Church has historically been active in promoting better race relations in Memphis. Until recent times, it also had the distinction of being one of the city's few integrated churches. Many of the white and black members of the church came from the faculty of LeMoyne.

About our denomination, in 1931, the Congregationalists merged with three smaller denominations to form the Congregational Christian Churches. In 1961, Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged to form the United Church of Christ. Older churches, Second Church included, often continue to use their original names.

Regardless of name, Second Church has had a most distinguished past and deserves a distinguished future. The next chapter of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries of Second Congregational Church must be written with glory to God. It will take growth and commitment of current pioneers to make that happen.

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