

Tabernacle Church of Christ



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WHEN the first settlers came to Bartholomew county in 1820 and 1821, they represented many communities and many religious organizations. Those of the same faith soon commenced to seek each other out and to meet together in the log cabin of some one of their members on the Lord's Day. Among the first of these organizations was the Baptist church, which was known as Hope and which, when its members became numerous enough to raise a log church for religious services exclusively, was located on the corner of the farm of Benjamin Irwin, where New Hope Christian church now stands. Leading member of this church was Joseph Fassett, who was ordained as a regular minister in May, 1824, and who preached in all the Baptist churches of the county and occasionally in some of those outside its borders. It is noteworthy that a Baptist church was not organized in the city of Columbus until 1852 by members of the various country churches surrounding the city, who lived in Columbus but attended the services of the rural churches.

In the period between 1823 and 1830, Alexander Campbell, who was at that time a member of the Baptist church, having been compelled to leave the Presbyterian church on account of his advocacy of baptism by immersion and other teachings not authorized by Presbyterian practice or their confession of faith, published the Christian Baptist and sent it to all ministers of the Baptist church throughout the country. This publication came to Joseph Fassett, as to others, and he was much interested in the editorials written by Mr. Campbell, and, in the articles contributed to the magazine. He soon found himself heartily in sympathy with the movement to restore New Testament Christianity in its doctrines, its ordinances and its practice, and wove his views into his sermons to the Hope Baptist church with such effect that in 1829 the White Water Baptist Association appointed a committee to investigate the position of the Hope church, having learned that it was openly asserting that the congregation should find in the Scriptures its sole source of authority and not in the articles of Baptist faith.

In September, 1829, the committee, appointed by the association, reported that, while that body had no power to dictate articles of faith to the churches, yet they had a right to require of the churches in their fellowship a satisfactory expression of their faith and that they resolved that the Hope church should be required to present a more explicit summary of her belief than to say in general terms that it was based on the Bible, or be dropped from the fellowship of the association. The delegates, or messengers, as they were called, from the Hope church, retired from the association meeting and on the next Lord's Day, the first in October, 1829, they solemnly renounced the Baptist name and henceforth decided to be known as Church of God in Christ in New Hope. They continued to meet monthly, as the Baptists did, until July, 1830, when they adopted the Scrip-

tural practice of breaking bread each week. Joseph Fassett had indoctrinated his congregation so thoroughly that only one couple declined to go into the new organization. They were given a letter of commendation to the neighborhood church on Flat Rock, which was organized in 1821.

The charter members of the New Hope church were, in addition to Joseph Fassett, Benjamin Irwin, Joseph Van Meter, William S. Jones, Samuel Crittenden, Daniel Singer, John Irwin, Rufus Gale, Hiram Troutman, and their wives. This number was soon increased by the addition of William A. Washburn, John Terrell, Havilah A. Chenoweth, Joseph Robinson, and their wives. Some of these moved later to Columbus, and residents of Columbus soon began to be numbered among the members but, as in the case of the Baptist church, no separate organization was established at the county seat for several years.

After about ten years a frame structure replaced the log building at New Hope, and in 1841 a frame building was erected in Columbus near the present entrance to the Mooney tannery. Services were alternated between New Hope and Columbus for more than ten years. When a brick building was erected on Jackson street near the northeast corner of Fifth and Jackson about the same time, or in 1853, the frame building was destroyed by fire, and the members continued to use the Jackson street building for more than twenty years. The Methodist church was on a corner immediately south, and Joseph Mounts has told the writer that, on a summer day, when all windows were open and the late John B. Cobb was preaching in his very subdued tones in the Christian church, the stentorian voice of the Reverend Joseph Cotton could be heard above anything that Mr. Cobb was saying.

A formal and separate organization was not completed in Columbus until July 22, 1855, when the Christian church of

Columbus was organized with sixty members. This building was sold in 1879 when the building known as the Tabernacle on Lafayette avenue, then Mechanic street, was erected during the pastorate of Z. T. Sweeney. The Tabernacle, when completed, was considered one of the most handsome church edifices in southern Indiana and is said to have cost \$23,000.00. Shortly after its completion, a Sunday School convention was held in Columbus, and members of the church from all over Indiana gathered to admire the new home of the congregation.

In 1937, William G. Irwin and Linnie I. Sweeney purchased the block known as the Railroad Square or Commercial Park from the Pennsylvania Railroad and presented it to the congregation as a site for a new church. The first architect for the new building, Mr. E. B. Gilchrist, of Philadelphia, having suffered a nervous breakdown and given up the work, Mr. Eliel Saarinen, of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, the world-famous Finnish architect, was chosen to prepare plans, which are about completed.

The members of the New Hope church were all very earnestly interested in their spiritual welfare, and many of them were quite capable of speaking on the Lord's Day in the absence of Joseph Fassett, who was visiting or organizing churches in Bartholomew and Johnson counties. Benjamin Irwin was one of these and often solemnized marriages. He later moved to Columbus and was a member of the legislature from Bartholomew county, representative of his congregation at state conventions, and a member of the committee which, in 1850, organized the Northwestern Christian University at Indianapolis, now Butler. He was an older brother of John Irwin, father of the late Joseph I. Irwin. Three of Benjamin Irwin's grandchildren are present members of the Tabernacle congregation: W. Howard Irwin, Mrs. Nicholas Stewart and Mrs. Don Frazee. John Irwin moved from Bartholomew to Johnson county at an early day, but his

son, Joseph I. Irwin, returned to Columbus in 1846 and took a leading part in every activity of the church from that time on, serving for many years as a member of the board of Butler University and enjoying a number of political honors. Joseph I. Irwin's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are active members of the Tabernacle.

Rufus Gale, of the charter members, was one of three brothers (Daniel, Isaac and Rufus) who came from New England with Joseph Fassett. They entered land at what is now known as the Lowell bridge and built a dam and flour mill there, naming the site Lowell in honor of a town in Massachusetts from which the Gales originally came. Mrs. E. E. Arbuckle, of the Elizabethtown Christian church, is a descendant of Rufus Gale.

Judge William S. Jones, another of the charter members, was one of the leading citizens of the county in his lifetime, was the father of the late John L. Jones and grandfather of Mrs. Henry J. McGinnis. Hiram Troutman was father of Nelson Troutman and grandfather of Alvin Troutman, who attends New Hope and Tabernacle churches at the present day. Joseph Robinson has descendants in the Tabernacle church congregation at the present time, and it was at his house that Joseph Fassett spent all the later years of his life. Joseph Robinson married Martha Ann Gale in 1836, Joseph Fassett performing the ceremony.

Joseph Fassett was a most interesting character. He came to Bartholomew county from Connecticut, where he was married early in life to a woman who developed an incurable appetite for alcoholic liquors. After endeavoring in vain for years to break her of this habit, he obtained a legal separation, which, however, he never considered a Scriptural ground for divorce, and came to the west, where he never married but devoted himself to the upbuilding of his community. He was a successful farmer, a teacher (Joseph I. Irwin was one of his pupils), a minister, and

a physician, sympathizing with the revolt against what was known as the old school medical fondness of his day for using calomel, or blue mass, and blood-letting as its chief remedies. He became a Thompsonian doctor and practiced that profession with an office in the front room of the Robinson house, until his death. Joseph Fassett's will is noteworthy. He evidently believed in sustaining the dignity of the ministry as a profession and had frock coat suits made to order to wear when he appeared in public. He bequeathed one of these suits to Samuel Griffith, Sr., of the Nineveh neighborhood, who was an elder of that church and evidently not able to provide himself with the attire which Joseph Fassett felt his presiding over the service required. He left his overcoat to Samuel Griffith, also. His residuary estate he left for the support of the Gospel, to be delivered to the preachers of his congregation or to the American Christian Bible Society, at the discretion of his executor. Joseph Fassett died in 1849.

After he had assisted in the organization of churches at Burnsville, Jonesville and Hartsville, he went up into Johnson county, where William Irwin, brother of Benjamin and John, and a minister of the Baptist church, had embraced the reformation, a few years after the organization of the New Hope church. William came down from the Nineveh neighborhood in Johnson county to persuade his brothers Benjamin and John to give up the "Campbell heresy" but, after several visits and days and nights of argument with them and with Joseph Fassett, was himself convinced and organized the Nineveh Christian church in 1832. He and Joseph Fassett organized churches at Bluff Creek and other places in Johnson county in the next few years. William Irwin lived and died in the Nineveh neighborhood. With him lived his mother and father, Joseph O. Irwin, a soldier under General Anthony Wayne of the Indian wars, which ended in the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794.

After Joseph Fassett, the New Hope and Columbus churches were under the pastoral care of William Edmonston, a promising young man, graduated from Indiana University, who soon died of tuberculosis; of William A. Washburn, Henry R. Pritchard, John B. Cobb, John Brazelton, J. B. Crane, Z. T. Sweeney. Z. T. Sweeney's ministry was noteworthy, extending over a period of twenty-five years, when he retired from pastoral work and spent the remainder of his life in dedicating churches, delivering special addresses and in other like work. He was on leave of absence a part of that time to preach a year at Augusta, Georgia, and preached later in Richmond, Virginia, and in New York City. In 1889, he was appointed by President Harrison as Consul-General at Constantinople and traveled extensively while holding that position. He was president of the International Commission of Disciples of Christ and was Commissioner of Fisheries and Game under three governors of Indiana. When he came to Columbus, the congregation numbered about three hundred. At the conclusion of his ministry, there were considerably over a thousand members. He was succeeded as minister by E. B. Scofield and then by E. B. Widger, who shortly left the church with some of its members and organized the Central Christian church on Seventh street.

This congregation continued to be active for about twenty years, when it disbanded, and its members again took membership with the Tabernacle, their building being sold to the Concordia group of the German Lutheran church.

Following E. B. Widger as minister came A. J. Frank and Harvey H. Harmon. In 1905, William Henry Book, of Virginia, was called and continued to minister to the church for twenty years. Following him came Martin B. Miller, also a southerner, and he was succeeded by William E. Sweeney, nephew of Z. T. Sweeney. W. E. Sweeney served as pastor during the year 1929,

when he resigned to accept the pastorate of the Broadway Christian church in Lexington, Kentucky, where he still ministers. Early in 1930 the congregation extended a call to Thomas K. Smith, then minister of the Miles Avenue Christian church, of Cleveland, Ohio. The present resident membership of the church is fifteen hundred, with some four hundred and fifty other members absent from the city who have not yet placed their membership with other congregations.

Among the well-known ministers who have preached occasionally at the Tabernacle are A. W. Conner and S. M. Fowler (who came during absences of Z. T. Sweeney), Isaac Errett (who was the dedicator in 1879), Love H. Jameson, John C. Miller, O. A. Burgess, Jabez Hall, A. I. Hobbs, H. W. Everest, F. D. Kershner, R. H. Miller and Edwin R. Errett. Among those who have held notable evangelistic meetings are Benjamin Franklin, Knowles Shaw, D. Pat Henderson, John A. Brooks, J. Z. Tyler, W. F. Cowden, John S. Sweeney, S. M. Martin, Percy Cross, W. H. Sheffer, Wallace Tharp and James Small.

The Tabernacle has always taken active part in the state organization of our congregations. At the meeting at Indianapolis in 1839, Joseph Fassett and J. H. Terrell were delegates and reported a membership of one hundred seventy-five at New Hope and Columbus. A meeting of the state organization was held in Columbus in 1846 and again in May, 1911.

During the pastorate of W. H. Book, the late Marshal T. Reeves contributed liberally to the work of the state missionary board, of which Mr. Book was a member, and launched the system of dividing the state into evangelistic districts. Mr. Reeves bought a new Ford car for each of the evangelists chosen and kept up his contributions until he felt that the work should be self-sustaining.

It has been mentioned that Z. T. Sweeney was president of

the International Convention, and it may be added that he was present at all the national meetings of the church during practically all his active career and was one of the most influential figures on each occasion.

T. K. Smith is a member of the State Missionary board at the present time and of the executive committee of the International Convention, as well as of the commission to restudy the Disciples of Christ. He was president of the North American Christian Convention in Indianapolis in 1937.

Membership of the Columbus congregation is particularly active in church organizational work. George Roland was instrumental in organizing and endowing the Bartholomew County Christian Missionary Association, which has as its object assistance of the rural churches in the county. The late James Small was the first evangelist of this organization and did notable work throughout his service. Other evangelists were H. A. Tritt and William Chapple. The association continues to function and to give assistance to those of the rural churches having their membership and financial ability depleted.

The Tabernacle congregation is noteworthy in the brotherhood for the amount of its contributions to missionaries, benevolent and educational enterprises, reporting regularly each year a larger amount of contributions to these through its mission fund than is paid out for local expenses.

The Christian Foundation, organized by Marshal T. Reeves and other members of the congregation, was chartered in 1921, and handles trust funds committed to it for religious, educational and benevolent purposes. Six of its nine trustees are on the Tabernacle roll: William G. Irwin, G. L. Reeves, Hugh Th. Miller, Mrs. Nettie Sweeney Miller, Charles M. Setser and T. K. Smith. On the Butler University Board of Directors are W. G.

Irwin and Hugh Th. Miller. In past years, Jos. I. Irwin, Z. T. Sweeney, Linnie Irwin Sweeney, M. T. Reeves, G. L. Reeves, Marshall Hacker, Fred Doeller, W. H. Book and C. M. Setser were members. Jos. I. Irwin and his two children contributed large sums to the endowment of Butler.

In the early years of the Tabernacle, religious bodies everywhere were quite antagonistic to each other, and the new movement for Christian unity seemed to sharpen this spirit among the religious bodies from whom members were coming into it, so public debates were held on points at issue, in which great interest was manifested. The first one held in Columbus was a discussion on baptism between William M. Brown, of Kentucky, representing the Disciples, and Reverend Joseph G. Monfort, Presbyterian minister. This was held in the old brick court house in 1838 and was largely attended. Another debate was held in the old frame church on Fifth street between Elder Jacob T. Wright of the Disciples and Reverend Erasmus Manford, Universalist, on the question, "Do the Scriptures teach the final Holiness and Happiness of All Mankind?" John B. New, of Vernon, father of John C. New, later publisher of Indianapolis Journal and Treasurer of the United States and grandfather of Harry S. New, United States Senator and postmaster-general, was presiding officer on this occasion. Abraham Hammond was a local lawyer who later became Lieutenant-Governor. He and Joseph Fassett were moderators. In the brick building on Jackson street in 1854, Henry R. Pritchard discussed before a large audience with William W. Curry, Universalist, the subject of Hell. When the Mormons sent missionaries into the county, Joseph Fassett engaged their apostle in a debate on Mormonism.

In the fall of 1850, Alexander Campbell, who was one of the best known men of his day and always spoke on his travels before secular and legislative bodies, as well as religious meetings, took

a trip through Indiana. In his report of the trip, he states that on Wednesday, November 6th, he arrived in Columbus from Madison by the new railroad and delivered three addresses to assemblies of "brethren and friendly aliens." On Wednesday morning, he spoke on the "Superlative, Personal and Social Grandeur of the Lord Jesus, as the Oracle of God." Wednesday evening, he spoke on the "Education of Man as a Son of Earth and Heir of Heaven." And he further developed the theme of the latter address at nine o'clock on Thursday morning, occupying all his time until the arrival of the train from Madison. He was at the house of W. F. Pidgeon, of the Columbus church, during his stay. No sooner had he taken the train at the station than the engine and part of the train ran off the track, and Mr. Campbell, as well as other passengers, received a very severe shock, but no serious harm.

Early in 1861, Alexander Campbell traveled extensively in Indiana again, accompanied by Isaac Errett, and was met at Columbus by W. A. Washburn and A. C. Crane. Mr. Errett reports: "Resting a while in Brother Crane's hospitable mansion, we repaired at eleven o'clock to the commodious house which our brethren own here, accompanied by Brother Henry R. Pritchard, a name of honorable fame on the list of Indiana preachers—. We had heard much of the backward condition of the cause in Columbus, but we must say that at no point did we meet heartier welcome or a more cheering response to our appeals. If the church is behind, it is surely not for lack of means to make it otherwise. The Washburns, the Cranes, the Irwins, the Cobbs, and others whom we saw there, have the ability and we cannot but believe, the heart to put the cause on a good footing. They have a good house, wealth, men of good judgment and superior worth. Brethren, do not let the banner of salvation trail in the dust!"

After leaving Columbus, Mr. Campbell, who was accompanied by Isaac Errett, who gave his life later to the Christian Standard, proceeded to Edinburgh and then to Nineveh. He then returned to Edinburgh and proceeded to Indianapolis.

The membership of the Tabernacle congregation is a cross section of the city of Columbus and the county of Bartholomew. In it are skilled mechanics and factory executives, active and retired farmers, merchants and their customers, public school teachers and their pupils, doctors and their patients, lawyers and their clients, bankers and their depositors, artists and artisans, clerks and stenographers, public officials and the voters who elected them. In the present membership are the judge of the Circuit Court, the mayor of our city, the principal of the high school, the Girl Scout Commissioner, the president of the Foundation for Youth. It is a true democracy, a happy family.

The present officers (1940) of the Tabernacle Church of Christ are: Elders: H. A. Beaman, E. L. Berry, James Boyle, Edwin G. Crouch (Secretary), Hugh Th. Miller (President), J. G. Mounts, S. R. Perry, J. N. Rust, Robert E. Walesby. Deacons: W. W. Adams, Frank Boone, Sam Calvin, Yandell C. Cline (President), Frank Cummins, R. W. Davis, Deryl Foster, Marcellus Foust, Carl Fox, Z. M. Garlock, Wallace Goeller, William F. Goeller, Chester Hager, Floyd Haislup, Stanley Hendershot, Delmos Holmes, Abner Hunter (Vice-President), George Julian, Harry S. Kinney, Karl Lay, Robert Lay, Malcolm Mattox, Fred Pancake, Ross Pearce, Robert Reeves, T. Earl Robinson (Secretary), William Ross, James Russell, Richard Schowe, W. H. Scott, Stanley Shaw, Ernest D. Snider, Kenneth Snively, Paul H. Stambaugh, Forrest Thompson, Howard Wright. Deaconesses: Mrs. Marie Carmichael (President), Mrs. Estella Cummins (Vice-President), Mrs. Leona Davis, Mrs. Ray Hammond, Mrs. J. W. Hartley, Mrs. George Julian, Mrs.

Joseph Mounts, Mrs. Ross Pearce, Mrs. S. R. Perry, Mrs. Paul Stambaugh, Mrs. Carlos Vail, Mrs. Lola Winger (Secretary).

The elders, deacons and deaconesses are elected for three-year terms (one-third of them each year). At the expiration of the three-year term they are not eligible for re-election for one year. This system of rotation in office has been in force at the Tabernacle for nearly fifty years. The trustees are G. L. Reeves, Wm. G. Irwin and Hugh Th. Miller. One is elected each year for a three-year term but may be immediately re-elected at the expiration of his term. The church treasurer is William G. Irwin, elected annually, and the church clerk is the church secretary, Miss Grace Poulton. The Bible School superintendent is J. R. Rees; secretary, Miss Ida Bray; treasurer, Riley Jones. All officers named up to this point are chosen by the congregation at the annual church night early in December. They are nominated on a ballot submitted to the congregation the last of November.

The Tabernacle Bible School was organized in 1865. Records of officers chosen are incomplete, but among its superintendents have been John George, Jos. I. Irwin, Dr. Price, J. M. Pritchard, M. T. Reeves, W. B. Treadway, Allen Denison, B. M. Hutchins, G. L. Reeves, T. A. Moore, W. G. Irwin, T. A. Bruce, Samuel Sharp, H. C. Deist, Norval Hege, M. I. Virden, T. Earl Robinson, J. R. Rees.

The president of the Women's Missionary Society is Mrs. Leona Davis; of the Young Ladies' Mission Circle, Mrs. Casper Haas; of the Ladies' Aid Society, Mrs. O. B. Anderson. President of Hi-E (High School Christian Endeavor) is John Thompson. Choir director and organist is E. Wayne Berry; associate director, Claude C. Smith. Mrs. Harriet Weed is director of the children's choir. The third choir is the Young People's Choral Society, of which John Budd is president. Ray Weed is president of the adult choir. The adult classes in the Bible School all are

organized, as are some of those in the intermediate department. Dan Thurston is custodian of the church building.

Since the Ohio river flood of 1937, when refugees were quartered in the west end of the Tabernacle, as in other churches of Columbus, the so-called unified service has been used. In this the church service comes first (at ten o'clock) and is followed immediately by assembly in Bible School classes. This plan resulted at first in a slight decrease in the class attendance, but at once brought a large increase in the church attendance. The mid-week meeting is held on Wednesday evening and is addressed by the minister, though special programs are frequently arranged. The evening Lord's Day service begins at 7:30 from April to September, inclusive; at seven o'clock from October through March. Everyone who reads this booklet is cordially invited to attend each of these services.

—*Hugh Th. Miller, 1940*