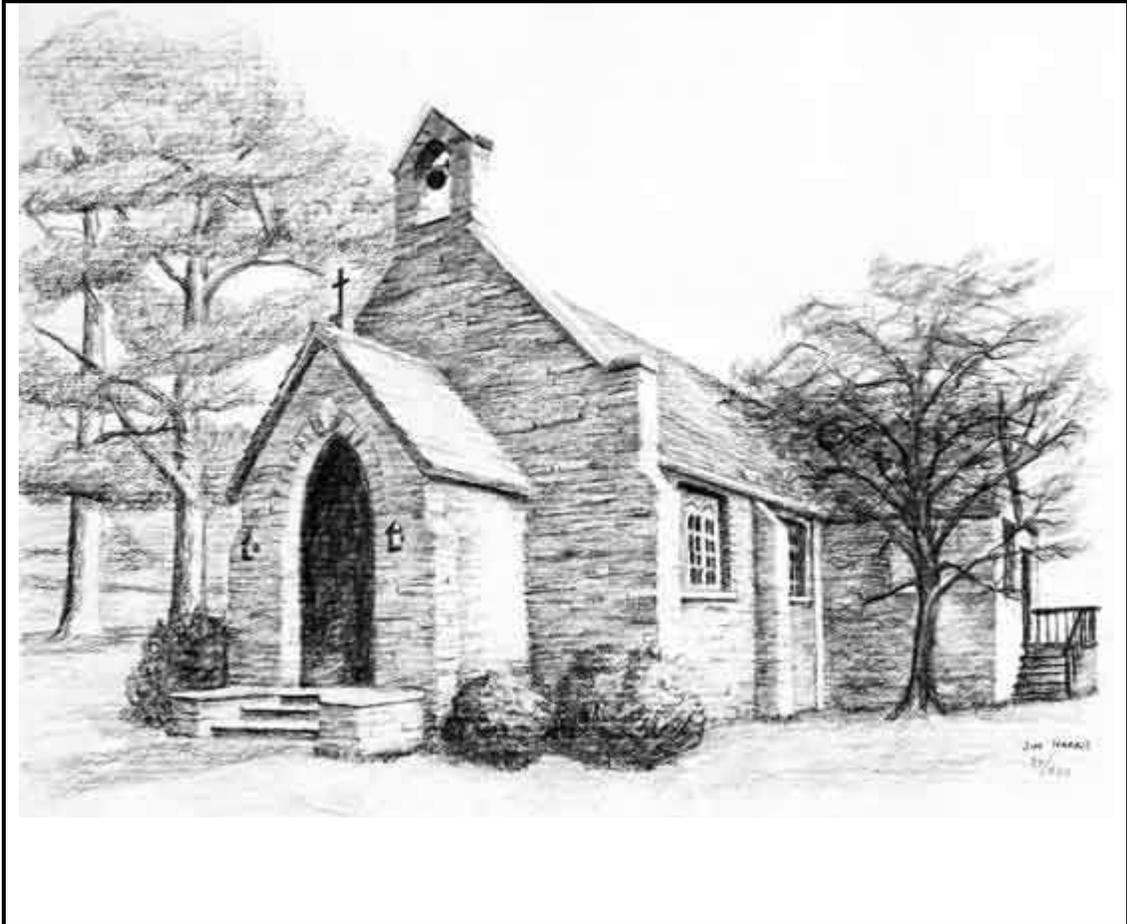


# CHRIST CHURCH



## ONE HUNDRED YEARS

by Juanita Kruse

June 1990

1990 is a significant year for Episcopalians in this small corner of the world.

In 1790, a tiny handful gathered to take steps to reorganize and revitalize our Church in this state. From that meeting in Tarboro have grown three healthy and vital dioceses encompassing more than 250 congregations and 75,000 baptized members.

Around 1890, the determined conviction of one lone Churchwoman, Frances Swift Hearne, prevailed upon the Bishop to send a priest to minister to Episcopalians in Stanly County. From that beginning, the Episcopal Church in Stanly County took root and slowly grew, becoming today a strong and vital parish.

Dr. Juanita Kruse has written an excellent history of this community of faith known as Christ Church. I am deeply grateful for her commitment to this project, and for the countless hours required for its completion. She has been ably assisted by the resource materials of Elmina Hearne Surratt, collected through the years, and the more recent efforts of Barbara Ward. My special thanks to those who have contributed so much of themselves to the technical side of this venture: Dorothy Allison, Cathy Melesh, Meaghan Lusk, and Rebecca McKeon. Many thanks to the photographers in our midst, especially to Marie Chivington, who has sensitively and imaginatively portrayed parish events and persons.

These one hundred years have been marked by struggle, upheaval and deep joy. My prayer for this congregation is that we may look back with a sense of thanksgiving; look ahead with a renewed sense of abiding hope; and live now with the abiding presence and power of God guiding our every step.

The Rev. Philip R. Byrum

# Part I

## The Early Years—to 1939

Built of native stone, Christ Church is a beautiful little cruciform structure graced inside with a deep red carpet, dark wooden pews and beams and filled with colored light from the stained glass windows in the sanctuary. With over 300 members, it is the only Episcopal Church in predominantly Baptist Stanly County.

The dearth of Episcopalians in the area probably stems, in large part, from the colonial period when there was no bishop in America. The Church in England was slow to send clergy to North Carolina, and colonists who wished to be ordained had to make the difficult and expensive trip to England. The experience of James Moir, arriving in Edgecombe County in 1747, was fairly typical. He found “a great number in the county had turn’d Baptists for want of a clergyman.” Other protestants had clergy; Anglicans did not. No wonder Anglican numbers dwindled.

The American Revolution struck a further blow at the Church in North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Much of its financial support had come from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, a British organization; during and after the Revolution that source of revenue was cut off. War and social upheaval also led to the loss of Church property. In spite of laws passed in the General Assembly for its protection, “the Church gradually lost its glebes and even its church buildings.” Even with the creation of an independent and self-perpetuating American Church in the 1790s, the situation in North Carolina—and, indeed, all of the South—continued to deteriorate. A few faithful laymen held scattered parishes together, but it was an influx of “zealous clergymen from beyond North Carolina’s borders” which led to a revival—some say rebirth—in the Episcopal Church in North Carolina in 1817 when the diocese of North Carolina was formed.

Stanly County did not, however, participate in this 1817 renewal. Local records suggest that the first Stanly County Episcopalian was Frances Swift, whose family fled to Albemarle in 1863 when Union soldiers destroyed their home in Plymouth, North Carolina. “Miss Fannie” was the only Episcopalian in her family, but after she married William Harrison Hearne in 1873, they raised five daughters, four of whom were Episcopalians. Happily, Mrs. Hearne’s efforts to establish an Episcopal presence in Albemarle coincided with a wave of missionary zeal in the diocese. Between 1880 and 1900, fifty-eight new churches and chapels

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the Episcopal Church in North Carolina before and shortly after the American Revolution comes from *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1959*, edited by Lawrence Foushee London and Sara McCulloh Lemmon.

were built. Twenty- five missionaries were busy introducing the faith all over the state, often to people who had never heard of an Episcopalian—which must have included many of the over 10,000 people who lived in Stanly County in 1880.

One of those engaged in such mission work was the Reverend C. J. Curtis, who appears to have been the first Episcopal clergyman to hold services in Stanly County. When he was Evangelist of the Convocation of Charlotte from August 1, 1886, to the end of December 1887, one of his primary duties was to serve scattered Episcopalians beyond the reach of existing parishes. Due to the efforts of Mrs. Hearne, he found such a group in Albemarle where he reported one communicant and five other baptized persons. His first visit<sup>2</sup> is recorded in an undated fragment of a local newspaper:

“Rev. J. C. Curtis, an Episcopal divine from Charlotte, preached a series of sermons here, beginning on Friday night. This was something new to most of our citizens, but the Rev. divine was greeted by a fair and attentive audience. On Sabbath night, the youngest child of Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Hearne was baptized. Mr. Curtis’ sermons were well taken and ably presented.”

Of his own efforts in this field, Curtis noted that the “visible results” were small, “due, in great part, to the very short duration of the visits of the Evangelist, and the necessarily long intervals between them in so large a field, and partly to the fact that there is in each locality so very little material to work upon, recognized as connected in any way with the Church, while the whole force of the community is in every case against any growth.” Nevertheless, he thought this kind of work was beneficial in that “the Church has, by this means, been looking after her scattered members, and has had a favorable introduction in many new points where she has never been known before.”

There is no record of an Evangelist in the Convocation of Charlotte after Curtis. In 1891 W. R. Wetmore, Dean of the Convocation, lamented the lack of one, but the Dean, himself, made as many evangelistic visitations as he could. He did not, however, specifically record any work in Albemarle, though the tiny congregation held together and probably grew after the railroad came to Albemarle in 1891, followed in 1896 by Efir Manufacturing Company and in 1899 by Wiscassett Mills. Albemarle, by 1900, had a population of 1,382 and Stanly County had over 15,000 people.

In 1901 the Albemarle congregation came under the care of the Reverend Edwin A. Osborne, the new Archdeacon of the Charlotte Convocation, who was specifically charged to direct missionary work under the bishop’s supervision.<sup>3</sup> On March 13 the congregation received its first episcopal visitation from Bishop Cheshire who specifically mentioned Albemarle, along with Huntsville in Yadkin County, in his next Address. These places, he said, were not included in the list of

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<sup>2</sup> The total number of visits he made is uncertain.

<sup>3</sup> The diocese was divided into three convocations for this purpose, the Convocation of Charlotte, the Convocation of Raleigh, and the Convocation for Work Among Colored People.

parishes and missions, but in both “we have a number of faithful people, for whom I am hoping in the near future to make some regular provision, and who are ready to co-operate to the utmost of their power in the permanent establishment of the ministrations of the Church....” Such regular provisions were not made for sometime, but until 1911 Archdeacon Osborne held occasional services in Albemarle, augmented, until 1908, by services conducted by the Reverend Francis J. Murdoch, rector of St. Luke’s Church, Salisbury.

Osborne’s annual reports to the diocese suggest that he believed sufficient attention was not being paid to Stanly County. He mentioned Albemarle several times, deploring the lack of any minister or church building there. In 1911, in particular, he pointed to Mooresville, Hamlet, and Albemarle as places where “the Church should be planted and buildings erected.” “Our people in all these places,” he pleaded, “are poor and need help.”

Whether or not they received such help is not recorded, but the Reverend William H. Hardin succeeded Osborne as Archdeacon in 1912, and some growth took place during his tenure, doubtless in part because Stanly County continued to grow, reaching a population of 27,429 in 1920. A second railroad, built across southern Stanly County in 1913, contributed to this, as did construction of the Badin and Narrows Dam, begun in 1913 by the French-owned Carolina Aluminum Company, which sold out to Alcoa in 1915. The giant aluminum plant then constructed in Badin has since provided many members of the Episcopal Church in Stanly County. For example, in 1917 ten of the fifteen communicants reported in the county resided at Badin. This small congregation probably met regularly under lay leadership because an active Woman’s Auxiliary made a report to the Board of Missions in 1923, but records of services are only sporadic, as when the Reverend Theodore Andrews, rector of Grace Church, Lexington, reported holding one service and celebrating Holy Communion at Albemarle in 1917.

The connection with Grace Church must have continued, however, because Archdeacon Hardin reported that an unorganized mission had finally been established in Albemarle on Palm Sunday, 1924, with the Reverend Wilmot S. Holmes, rector of Grace Church, giving three evening services each month and the Archdeacon providing a morning service with celebration of Holy Communion on the third Sundays. At this time the congregation numbered 28 baptized persons, among them 14 communicants.

They met in an old Presbyterian church<sup>4</sup> downtown after the Presbyterians moved into their new church earlier in the year. Archdeacon Hardin called the new meeting place “a very comfortable and commodious building, ideally located for church purposes....” He believed that, “with some slight alterations and repairs,” it would “meet our requirements for many years to come,” and he advised the purchase of the property, “which can now be had for \$5,000,

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<sup>4</sup> The wood frame Presbyterian church, built in 1901, was located on the southwest corner of First and North streets diagonally across the intersection from First Presbyterian’s new church completed in 1924. The original frame building is no longer existent.

provided the deal is closed without too great delay.” He also reported that \$1,500 of the amount needed was already in sight.

Only tantalizing vignettes of the life of the congregation during this promising period can still be glimpsed. In 1925 Mrs. Mary Alice Bybee was the eight-year old daughter of church member, Mrs. Alice Mabry Starr. Mrs. Bybee remembers the old Presbyterian Church as a “little wooden building.” She says she called Father Holmes “the circuit rider” and recalls that he spent the night at her grandmother’s old hotel when he came to Albemarle. She also remembers that it was around 1925 when Dr. Edward Porcher Brunson, a very active church member, came to Albemarle. Mrs. Bybee broke her leg that year, and he was the new doctor who set it.



First Presbyterian Church  
where services were held in the mid 1920's

It would also appear to be this period that Mrs. W. T. “Ada” Shaver described in the tape she made of her memories in 1980. She spoke of the women of the church making dolls and napkins and selling them at bazaars to raise money. Such fund-raising efforts seem to have been fairly successful because Miss Mary Mabry, who was secretary of the Woman’s Auxiliary at the time and who later wrote a short account of the church’s early history, reported that at least \$3,000 of the \$5,000 building goal had been raised. The little mission appeared to be well on its way towards acquiring its own building.

Yet this promising situation changed abruptly in 1927 when some key families moved away, and regular services were discontinued due to loss of members. That does not, however, seem to have been the only problem. Already in October 1925, in a letter to Bishop Penick, the Reverend Mr. Holmes referred obliquely to “local conditions, which make it more than ordinarily difficult and not overly pleasant to serve.” He added that he “would not shirk it for that reason,” but he could “see very little hope in continuing the mission on a frequent basis.” This may or may not refer to some irregularities in the administration of the building fund. Not much is known of the episode, but it seems the treasurer of the building fund unwisely invested the money in a new business that failed, and the money was lost. This may be one of the reasons that shortly thereafter the diocese became more rigorous in insisting on the bonding of treasurers and why, when there was once again a building fund in 1937, the mission committee required three signatures on all checks. Archdeacon Hardin mentioned another difficulty in his report for 1926 when he lamented financial hardships affecting the missions in Rowan, Iredell, and Stanly counties. The people there, he wrote, “have made an earnest effort to meet their financial obligations to the Church, which would no doubt have been done without exception, but for the abnormally low price of cotton, which was their staple crop.”

In any case, regular services with a clergyman did not resume until 1935. What happened in the interim is not clear, but the little congregation appears to have gone on meeting faithfully. Miss Mary Hearne, who was not an Episcopalian but who later played the piano for services, believes that the group met in the American Legion Hut at that time, and Mrs. Bybee remembers occasionally going to Charlotte to church.

In 1935 the Reverend John F. Hamaker, rector of Calvary Church, Wadesboro, became priest-in-charge of the mission, which would soon be named Christ Church. On 13 May 1935, he wrote to Mr. J. T. Oxford indicating that he had set the date for a second service and that Bishop Penick had “indirectly given his approval, both privately and publikly [sic], to our efforts for Albemarle.” He also indicated that the Bishop had “indirectly offered assistance in the matter of transportation costs.”

Under Mr. Hamaker, the new mission flourished, reporting forty-one baptized persons, twenty-five communicants, and a church school with two teachers and two pupils in 1936. The Woman’s Auxiliary was reorganized by Miss Emma Hall of Charlotte, and the mission mailing list includes many names which would continue to be important in the life of the church for some time to come, among them Mr. J. T. Oxford, and Mrs. C. A. Ritchie, and her children, Catherine and Coy, Jr.

Mr. Oxford was one of the leading lay spirits of the time. He served as treasurer and is also remembered for his mission work in the community. He was known to go out and get children and bring them to Sunday School. Employed by Wiscassett Mills, he organized services at the plant and is said to have almost lost his job for taking too much time out from work for the purpose. Luckily, his employer liked him and allowed him to hold his services if he would limit them to a certain time.

The Coy Ritchie, Jr., on the 1935 mailing list was only five years old at the time, but he is currently the senior lifelong Stanly County Episcopalian. Coy says he didn’t know there was any other church but Christ Church until he was fourteen; his mother, Mrs. C. A. Ritchie, saw to that. She also made beautiful craft items to sell at church bazaars, and some of the women of the church remember how much fun it was to visit her and what wonderful things she always had to eat. The men seem to remember her better for the delicious wine she got from her first cousins for use in the service. Some of them tried to persuade her to get them some for private use—but to no avail.

In 1937 Mr. Hamaker retired early for reasons of health and was succeeded as priest-in-charge by the Reverend Frank E. Pulley, who was also rector of Calvary Church, Wadesboro. Parochial reports during his tenure record as many as fifty-three baptized persons, thirty-two communicants, and a Sunday School with fifteen pupils. The bishop also licensed lay readers at this time, one of whom was Edward L. Gehring, who would prove to be a leader in the church and the community for several years to come.

“Eddie,” as those who remember Mr. Gehring refer to him, taught high school when he first came to Albemarle. Miss Jessie Ashby once asked him to go to the wine store and get some wine for the church, but he replied, “You know I can’t do that! I’d get fired from my job.” Mrs. Shaver, in her reflections, remembered what a great deal Eddie did for the church. She said she tried to help him find a good girl to marry, but he soon found Doris on his own.

During these years the congregation was still meeting in various places, primarily, it would appear, in the American Legion Hut, but serious plans were made for building a church. The Reverend John A. Wright of Raleigh conducted a preaching mission in Albemarle, and gave \$100 for that purpose. The first step was to purchase a lot. The minutes of a congregational meeting held 16 March 1937 record that “it was unanimously decided to purchase that lot east of the Teeter residence on Pee Dee Avenue. Said lot being owned by the Home Builders’ Association, priced at \$1,000, but being offered to us at \$800, the Association thereby making a donation of \$200 to the Mission.” The \$800 was obtained from a trust administered by Bishop Penick and set up for the use of Christ Church by Mrs. F. J. Murdoch, Sr., of Salisbury. Her husband had conducted occasional services at Albemarle from 1902-1908.

Mr. Pulley terminated his charge in Albemarle on 31 August 1939 after accepting a parish in Leesburg, Florida. This marks the end of an era. The congregation had grown from the little group of six that met with Mr. Curtis in the 1880s to over fifty. It had passed through auspicious times of growth and discouraging times of decline and trouble. It had never, in all these early years, found a permanent home. Yet a few faithful people had continued to meet Sunday after Sunday in whatever space was available and to prepare the way for the period of growth and building that was now to come.