

# A GENERAL HISTORICAL STATEMENT

It was one hundred and forty six years ago that the history of Wesley United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas had its humble beginning. The congregation of Wesley Church was established at the end of the Civil War for freed people in the Austin Area. On March 4, 1865, the Reverend Joseph Welch, Presiding Elder of the Texas District of the Mississippi Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, presided over the meeting at which Wesley was founded. This historical meeting was held in the basement of the old Tenth Street M. E. Church, South in Austin, Texas.

The next day following the founding of Wesley, the first Quarterly Conference of the new church was held. Engrossed in the annuals of history are the following men who had the honor and responsibility of serving as the first trustees of Wesley: Milton Wright, Thomas Merridy, Tom King, Simon Dedrick, Grant Woods, Henry Shelly, Samuel Hamilton, and Reverend Isaac Wright. Reverend Wright also enjoyed the distinction of serving as the first pastor of Wesley. This tenure of service covered the formative period from March 1865 to January 1868.

Perhaps inspired by the pioneering spirit exemplified by the members of Wesley, the newly organized West Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized on January 22, 1874. Included among the ministers present at the organizational meeting of the Conference was the first pastor of Wesley, the Reverend Isaac Wright.

Indicative of the spirit and enthusiasm by which the "Founding

Fathers" of Wesley were motivated is the fact that when the church was opened for membership, at least 275 persons accepted the call to Christian discipleship. Assisting the Reverend Isaac Wright on this memorable occasion were Reverends Friend, Spencer Hardwell, and John Boyd, each of whom subsequently served as pastor of Wesley. These ministers, along with Reverend B. F. Williams, provided ministerial leadership for the congregation during the nine years from the founding of the church until the organization of the West Texas Conference in 1874.

The first building in which to locate the church was erected under the leadership of Bishop Abraham Grant and Reverend B. F. Williams, who served as pastor in 1874-75. This church was located in what is now downtown Austin, on the corner of Fourth Street and Congress Avenue. One historical account of the Wesley of that day includes the following picturesque description:

"The dimensions were about 40x60 feet." The floor was of dirt. The steps were logwood. The seating capacity was small. The benches were made of slab board. There was a lamp irregularly kept, fastened to the side of the wall. When this lamp was installed in place of the individual candles, there was great rejoicing."

As Wesley progressed, it broadened the scope of its ministry of witness and service, with the result that the membership of the church increased tremendously. In less than two decades it was necessary for the members of the church to build a new and larger sanctuary. Thus in the spring of 1882, the cornerstone of a new edifice was laid for a new church at the corner of Ninth and Neches Streets. This building, containing approximately twice the floor space of the "First Wesley," was completed at an estimated cost of

\$22,000, exclusive of church furniture valued at over \$2,500. By late 19th century standards, the Wesley Church of 1882, a two-story structure built on the "Hill" against the Austin skyline, was certainly an imposing edifice of magnificent beauty.

The fact that this new church had a pastor's study, a library for Sunday School books and literature, and choir materials, as well as a six-room parsonage for the minister, indicates the church's broadened concept of its responsibility for the spiritual life of its members. The interest of the church in education is highlighted by the fact that for several years Samuel Huston College now Huston-Tillotson College held most of its classes in the church.

By the end of the second decade of the 20th century, not only had Wesley Methodist Church grown, but also the city of Austin had become a major urban community in Central Texas. There was a need to expand the facilities of the Austin Public Schools. Therefore, in 1928, the Austin School Board acquired the properties of the church for \$17,500. Earlier, under the ministerial leadership of the Reverend L. H. Richardson, the church purchased a plot of ground facing Hackberry, Navasota, and San Bernard Streets, anticipating that some day it would be used as a site for a "Greater Wesley."

Under the pastoral administration of the Reverend Dr. W. L. Turner, a new church ("Greater Wesley") was built at this East Austin location at a cost of approximately \$50,000. The realization of the goal of a Greater Wesley represented many years of sacrificial service and consecrated stewardship on the part of the members of the church, as well as the cooperation of the citizens of Austin. The final note on the sanctuary was retired in September 1943, under the pastorate of the Reverend Fred D. Young.

Wesley Methodist Church became Wesley United Methodist Church in 1968 at the time of the general church merge. Wesley United Methodist Church continued to be on the cutting edge of history and contributions to the Austin Community. Wesley United Methodist Church was the founding institution for the Austin Area Urban League, incorporated in the mid seventies, under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Freddie B. Dixon, Sr., First Board Chairman, Mr. Bertrand Adam, Mrs. Linda Moore Smith and Wesley members who served on the founding committee. Wesley United Methodist Church once again was responsible for a first. A Special Task Force was set up to help alleviate the high suspension rate of African American students in the Austin Independent School District. The Task Force met with the Austin Independent School District Officials and offered to do a joint venture project to alleviate the suspension problem in the public schools. Wesley obtained a private grant from the Kellogg Foundation and started the Wesley Center housed on the church grounds in co-operation with the Austin Independent School District. Texas Legislatures passed new laws regarding suspension centers in the public schools. The Wesley Center relocated to the Rosewood Elementary School later renamed the F. R. Rice School. Wesley United Methodist Church was proud to be a part of the history making events in Texas Public Education during the 80's.

Wesley United Methodist Church continued its pioneering spirit during the 80's in forming yet another Special Task Force headed by Reverend Dr. Freddie B, Dixon, Sr., members of Wesley and community leaders, under the auspices of the Forming the Future Bond Project of the Austin Independent School District. The purpose of the Task Force was to address the Court Order Decision for a new Kealing Junior High School in the Austin community. The African-

American community of Austin did not want the historical African-American junior high to be closed, so the task force was responsible for developing a plan of action for the construction of a new Kealing Junior High School. The Task Force presented a detailed Master Plan for the construction of a new Kealing Junior High to be located on the site of the old existing facility. The Master Plan for a new Kealing was adopted by the Austin Independent School District Trustees to be included in the Forming the Future Bond Package which was approved and passed by the voters of the Austin community. A Beautiful New Kealing Junior High School now stands as a model in Public Education for Texas and the entire world, and Wesley United Methodist Church, was once again proud of its service to the Austin community.

Wesley United Methodist Church during the 70's and 80's not only was concerned about community service but also, developed a Church Master Plan for renovating the historical church structure and acquisition of adjacent land properties. This Master Plan was begun in the early 80's with wide ranging ramification into the year 2000 and beyond. The Wesley United Methodist Church Family banded together, with pledges and contributions through the 80's to complete the task. The task was completed without borrowing or incurring any indebtedness, to the extent that over a period of 10 years, over \$200,000 plus was raised in cash by Wesley members, a "Herculean Effort." Adjacent properties were acquired during this period, and membership growth climbed to new heights. During this same period of time, a historic event took place on Sunday, February 13, 1983, a Service of Restoration, Rededication and Dedication of an Official State of Texas Historical Marker commemorating Wesley United Methodist Church under the auspices of the Travis County Historical Commission.

With the naming of Bishop Ernest T. Dixon, Jr., as the first African American leader of the Southwest Texas Conference. Wesley was honored once more in a historic event. His son, Dr. Freddie B. Dixon, Sr., pastor of Wesley United Methodist Church, led the Dedication Ceremonies on February 13, 1983.

In 1985, the highest of historic honors was bestowed upon Wesley United Methodist Church by the National Register of Historic Places, which recognized Wesley United Methodist Church as a National Site comparable to the White House and Lincoln Monument located in Washington, D.C. The United Methodist Church (Site No. 126) recognized Wesley United Methodist Church as a Historic Structure.

Wesley United Methodist Church continued to foster its then motto, "Enter To Worship -Depart To Serve." As we moved slowly but surely toward a more Christian fellowship, especially within Methodism, Wesley United Methodist Church was destined to play a leading role that was in keeping with her rich heritage.

In 1988 the Wesley Endowment Fund was established. The purpose is to provide educational stipends to Wesley youth graduating from high school and preparing to enter a school of higher education. To date approximately 55 students have received stipends of \$500 each to assist them as they further their education.

In 1998 Wesley embarked on a major renovation of its church structure. The renovation plan included roof replacement, repairing and restoring the stained glass windows in the church, installing a new French drain system, and the installation of a new HVAC system. Once these projects were started the membership decided

to add to the projects by renovating the downstairs area of the church, and a total renovation of the kitchen and bathrooms, making everything compliant with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). Additionally a new modern nursery was added to the project.

The various renovation projects total cost was over \$1 million. The membership borrowed \$500,000 and the balance was paid in cash. In two years the church has reduced the loan to \$350,000. The entire loan will be paid off in five years.

In 2003 Wesley United Methodist Church was designated a "FIVE STAR" Church by the Southwest Texas Conference the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a United Methodist Church. Wesley continues to carry its 5-Star church designation, and we continue to grow and develop outreach programs to serve our community.

A number of new projects have been completed since 2003. Our scholarship program has provided scholarships to children and grand children of members of Wesley. To date over 40 scholarships totaling \$20,000 have been awarded.

We have replaced the front steps and the front doors, new Pews and Carpet for the sanctuary. The Sound system has been upgraded.

New ministries have been added. We have added an educational director to develop programs for the youth and children of the church.

We have been designated as a "Welcoming Church".

Today, in the 21st Century, after 144 years, our church continues to grow and flourish spiritually, which is truly reflective of the current motto of Wesley United Methodist Church: "Where Faith Is In Motion!".

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## Church Pastors

- 1 \*Isaac Wright 1865-68
- 2 \*Brother Friend 1868-70
- 3 \*John Boyd 1870-72
- 4 \*Spencer Hardwell 1872-74
- 5 \*B. F. Williams 1874-75
- 6 \*Samuel Gates 1875-76
- 7 \*C. L. Madison 1876-78
- 8 \*Daniel Gregory 1878-79
- 9 \*C. L. Madison 1879-81
- 10 \*A. R. Norris 1881-83
- 11 \*Harry Swann 1883-85
- 12 \*Mack Henson 1885-89
- 13 \*P. M. Carmichae1 1889-91
- 14 \*C. L. Madison 1891-93
- 15 \*Andrew Foster 1893-95
- 16 \*John T. Gibbons 1895-96
- 17 \*A. M. Mason 1896-(Unexpired term)
- 18 \*Andrew Foster 1896-97
- 19 \*G. R. Bryant 1897-00
- 20 \*D. C. Lacy 1900-03
- 21 \*Moses Smith 1903-07
- 22 \*T. H. Wyatt 1907-10

- 23 \*L. H. Richardson 1910-14
- 24 \*J. W. Warren 1910-14
- 25 \*G. A. Deslandes 1918-20
- 26 \*A. D. Jacques 1920-21
- 27 \*R. M. Davis 1921-24
- 28 \*L. H. Richardson 1924-25
- 29 \*T. H. Wyatt 1925-27
- 30 \*W. L. Turner 1927-31
- 31 \*C. W. Whitiker 1931-41
- 32 \*V. A. Cooke (Assoc.)
- 33 \*G. A. Deslandes 1941-42
- 34 \*R. D. Young 1942-48
- 35 \*J. G. Owens 1948-52
- 36 \*R. S. Mosby 1952-58
- 37 \*O. B. Coe 1958-60
- 38 \*P. L. Woods 1960-68
- 39 \*J. Carruthers 1968-73
- 40 F. B. Dixon, Sr. 1973-94
- 41 Rosie L. Johnson (Assoc.) 1993-96
- 42 Sylvester E. Chase Jr. 1994-Present

\*DECEASED