

The Southwest Central Legacy

Central Church of Christ

In 1903, the first congregation of Churches of Christ was begun in Houston at the Katy RR tracks and Houston Avenue, just 2 blocks from one of the newest congregations in Houston, the Impact Houston church. In 1915 a second congregation was begun in a neighboring town, known as Heights.

In late 1917, G. A. Dunn and several other members of the Heights and First congregations first met to make plans to start a centrally located congregation. These brethren saw that a central congregation was needed to reach more people living in parts of the city where congregations weren't already established. After initial plans were formulated, meetings were held for a few Sunday afternoons in various halls in the downtown area. Then on the first Sunday of 1918, the music hall of Thos. Goggan Co. became the congregation's meeting place. The Chamber of Commerce hall was next used as the place of worship, followed by the Banquet Hall of the City Auditorium.

One of the first elders of the new congregation and its minister was G. A. Dunn. Mr. Dunn was an uncle of the late Claudia Ferguson. His brother James Dunn, Claudia's father, succeeded him in as Central's 2nd preacher.

The members started a fund to purchase a lot and build their first building. By 1923 they had selected a site at Drew and Albany streets. A building was completed and first used for worship in April 1924, at which time the congregation had 69 members. Within a few years, the new building was

outgrown. First the congregation leased a two-story house next door for classrooms, then in 1935 another building was completed. But by the late '30s, the elders were looking elsewhere for a site for a completely new church plant.

Central had many far-reaching ministries during the '30s. For example, work was begun with the students at Rice University, plans were adopted for helping the poor, and the first regular radio Bible class by churches of Christ was begun. By 1938 membership had passed 300.

It seems that nearly everything started happening at once back in 1939 and '40. First, the congregation secured the entire 4100 block of Montrose for a badly needed new plant. Second, Burton Coffman, who was to become one of the brotherhood's best known ministers, joined the work of the congregation. And the church branched out into missionary work as never before.

In 1940, for instance, workers were being supported in Boston, Australia, Mexico, China, and Southern Rhodesia. The congregation was also working among Houston's Hispanic population.

In 1941 the congregation moved into its first building on Montrose.

But 1941 also brought World War II. Central responded quickly by appointing an elder, Fletcher W. Dailey, Sr., to work in coordinating the congregation's efforts with those of the Red Cross.

By 1945, when membership passed 800, two separate services were

necessary to accommodate the congregation on Sunday mornings. And crowds would swell even more at war's end. That same year, the second and third units of the Montrose plant were completed and occupied, and plans were being made for still further additions.

Despite such a gigantic building program, Central was spending more money than ever for actually teaching the Gospel. In 1946, in addition to local efforts, ministers were being supported in New England, Australia, Colorado, Mexico, and New York State. Considerably more than half of the congregation's budget was going into teaching efforts.

The complete salaries of two ministers in Mexico, the Figueroa brothers, had been added to the mission budget in 1946. The final stage of the Montrose construction began in 1946. Opening ceremonies in the completed plant were conducted on December 7, 1947.

Once settled in its new quarters, the congregation certainly didn't sit back and rest on its laurels. Plans were already being discussed for a home for the aged, an orphanage, several educational projects, radio activity, and other tentative projects.

In Houston, Central participated in church planting. First to come was the Riverside Church, later known as MacGregor Park, established in early 1950 by Central. And most of its first members were from the Central congregation.

In 1951 all eyes were on Mexico as the building in Monterey was completed. More than 100 Central members

attended opening services over the Labor Day weekend.

Receiving enthusiastic support were the Herald of Truth radio broadcasts, which were first beamed nationwide in 1952. In the same year, Agustin Figueroa, supported by Central, became the first full-time minister of the church in Mexico City. Also, work was completed on the dormitory and classroom building at Torreon Bible School.

In 1955, Central members played significant roles in starting another Houston congregation -- Southwest. That congregation began worshipping in '56 with about 100 Central members among their number, including elders, deacons, and Paul Easley, Central's former associate minister. The congregation also established two new programs during '55. One was a new educational department for shut-ins, the other a "Dial-a-Daily Devotional" telephone recording.

After many months of planning, a lot for the Christian Home for the Aged was purchased in 1957. The first construction was filled almost immediately, and a 78-bed addition was on the drawing boards. This addition was completed in December 1965 and a further addition was constructed after that.

Another type of personal ministry -- the cottage meeting -- was especially popular around 1957. A significant reason was the use of colored filmstrips prepared by associate minister Jule Miller. In less than 18 months, 59 persons were baptized.

By the time Central moved into the 1960s, its mission work included Torreon, Monterey, and Mexico City,

Mexico; Salzburg, Austria; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Caracas, Venezuela; Ibaraki, Japan; and US works in Houston; Bellville; Buffalo, Wyoming; Westfield, New Jersey; Manhattan, New York; Herald of Truth, several Bible chairs, and homes for children and the aged.

A "Training for Future Service" program, later called the Houston Institute for Biblical Studies, had also been started. It provided college-level courses on church leadership and Bible subjects in evening classes for local area adults.

The Bering Drive church was started by Central in 1962. The Westbury congregation was formed a year later, and although Central was not responsible for its formation, one of its elders and several deacons and other members accepted the challenge of this new work. An extensive hospital visitation program was carried on by the church in the Texas Medical Center and the other hospitals in the city.

In 1964 works included the Drew Street Mission, then the completion of the University of Houston's Religious Center, and last the opening of a small student center near Rice University.

Member workers in the Drew Street Mission taught Bible classes daily to different age groups and helped to provide clothing, food, furniture, medical attention, and counseling to residents. Many Central members, along with some from other Houston congregations, took part regularly. Central contributed \$10,000 toward the construction of the A. B. Bruce Religion Center on the University of Houston campus, thereby securing the perpetual right for Churches

of Christ to maintain an office and teach on campus.

Southwest Church of Christ

Southwest Church of Christ had its origin as a mission project of Central. Planning began in 1954 for an expansion in the southwest part of town. A committee was formed to plan for, purchase land, and construct the facility.

In May, 1956, on a Wednesday night, the first meeting was held with members sitting on boxes in an unfinished auditorium, now the Fellowship Hall, illuminated by construction drop lights. 110 attended the first service. That first building included the current Fellowship Hall, kitchen, room 111, and some storage areas. The congregation opened with 3 elders, 25 deacons, and Paul Easley as its first minister. Easley had been associate minister at Central.

Growth was rapid. The first facility expansion began during that first year with the current office complex being constructed originally as classrooms.

The membership in 1957 included an attendance of nearly 500. A two story education building was constructed in 1958. In 1959 the membership required 3 Sunday morning worship services with 2 Bible class periods and 2 Sunday evening assemblies with an additional Bible class time.

Paul Easley resigned in 1959 and was replaced by Clifton Rodgers. The congregation continued to grow, so plans were made for the current auditorium and supporting nursery and classrooms. \$250,000 in bonds were sold out in 12 days that October. The building was occupied in 1961. One innovation in the

building was the size and scope of the nursery. At this point in the history of Churches of Christ, nurseries were not widely accepted nor their ministry valued.

This was also a period of expansion for the church in Houston as Southwest sent members to help start the Sharpstown church in 1960 and Westbury in 1963.

Jule Miller joined the congregation as Minister of Personal Evangelism in 1960. There were 125 baptisms that year. Bible School grew to over 600 in 1961. The first Homecoming was held in 1960 with 971 attending.

In 1962, there were 8 elders and 49 deacons. Southwest envisioned growth in the Northeast, so it supported Bob Scott to begin a church in Albany, New York. Several members moved to Albany to assist in the new work. Southwest had a part in the formation of the Clear Lake church in 1963, and the Bible class attendance was 95% of morning worship total!

A highlight of 1965 was the formation of the Christian Child Help Foundation in conjunction with other congregations, lead by Central and Southwest Church. Bob Cogswell was the chairman of that formative meeting. Ministry at the Medina Children's Home and the Drew Street Mission further illustrated the congregation's care for children.

The current teen room was built as the Service Center. It was originally constructed as a place to store and renovate donated goods in order to offer relief to victims of crises such as hurricanes. Through the years it has served in a variety of capacities,

including being classrooms for our Elementary School grades, medical mission storage, and currently as a teen facility.

In 1972, Southwest began a ministry to the neighborhood known as the Southwest Christian Day Care and School. This Day Care ministry continued until 1987, and at one time was the largest licensed Day Care in Harris County, serving 140 children each day.

Three homegrown missionaries were supported during the 70s. Terri Hoch married Adrin Fletcher and were supported in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the early 70's. Adrin is currently preaching for the church in Munday, TX. Glynn Langston has been supported in France and Ireland and now ministers through Braille and the short wave radio around the world. Mary Banister served in Germany where she subsequently married Carl Drehsel. She is an administrator with Pepperdine University's Heidelberg campus.

Following a visit by Dr. Henry Farrar in 1977, Southwest became involved in the work of the African Christian Hospitals Foundation. Southwest became a storage and forwarding agent for donated medical supplies to hospitals in Nigeria, Ghana, and Haiti. Through the years, the church sent 7 of its members to work at a hospital near Aba, Nigeria.

Southwest Central Church of Christ

In March, 1983, Mother and Daughter, Central and Southwest, joined forces to form the Southwest Central church. The idea of a merger had been discussed for the previous 4 years as the philosophies of the two congregations

were compared and numerous studies were conducted concerning their futures. Precipitating the final decision was the resignation of Southwest's preaching minister and the sale of the Central church property to retire the debts of the Christian Home for Aged. The merger of the two congregations seemed an ideal solution to the needs of the two congregations.

The new congregation's immediate outreach, sparked by the relentless ministry of Marie Banister, was the Churches of Christ Medical Center Chaplaincy, now called Lifeline Chaplaincy, an outreach which has become the premier chaplaincy ministry of Churches of Christ. Through its ministry we care for the spiritual and physical needs of patients and are instrumental in providing training to ministry students from Christian universities. The chaplaincy was housed on the second floor of the education building until it moved into its own facilities in 2002..

Southwest Central has been in a position of transition for the past few years. We have been led by God to stay where we are and minister to our neighborhood. There was a time when we struggled to reach certain types of people "out there," primarily yuppies who did not live around our facility and who were often insecure in our neighborhood. We simply could not compete with the suburban church in providing the environment that they wanted. We now have opened our eyes to the masses who live at our door, who may not share our own cultural background, but who need the Lord regardless. Our strongest ministry in past few years has been toward our

neighborhood, and especially youth from this neighborhood. We have come a long way toward being a "color blind" congregation extending the grace of God to all. Instead of wishing we were a suburban church and trying in vain to live that way, we have accepted the challenge of urban ministry.

We have offered Neighborhood Enrichment Seminars to spread the aroma of Christ across the area. We have hosted Alcoholics Anonymous, exercise programs and weight loss programs as well as offering weekly tutoring for neighborhood school children. We participate with area churches in the Braes Interfaith Ministries, an interfaith food pantry and one of our members leads in job placement for that group. Other members volunteer with the Hospitality Apartments in the medical center as we provide free housing to patients and their families who are in the Texas. Our members are leaders in efforts with the inner-city ministry of the Impact Houston Church. We formed a corporation, Heirborn Ministries of Houston, to provide employment and job skills to youth and have established a scholarship fund to help our youth with college expenses.

Many other things could be mentioned - the countless cups of water offered, the random acts of kindness, the letters and calls of encouragement, the VBSs, the mission trips, but these highlight the 80 years of ministry in the name of God.

Southwest Central is a special place made up of special people who love the Lord with all of their hearts and who seek His will in their lives.