

Washington Plaza Baptist Church Celebrating 36 years in Reston

By Mary Yarbrough

IN THE BEGINNING...

It was the first church in the new town of Reston. Early that first year, February 1965, the Reverend William Scurlock came to Reston, called by the Mt. Vernon Baptist Association to be the pastor. The new church in Reston was the vision of William J. Cumbie, MVBA Executive Director, and the church, including the purchase of the property and the architectural and building expenses, was financed by the MVBA Board of Missions. Twenty-five churches of the MVBA underwrote the loan for the building.

That month there were 47 other "pioneers" of the new town in residence beside the Scurlock family. Building construction was slow, the plaza at Lake Anne was called Washington Square (as was the church in the beginning), and there were no other Baptist families in Reston.

After Bill Scurlock visited all the families in residence, the first worship service with 51 persons was held in the new but, as yet, unoccupied home of George and Peggy Janson on Orchard Lane. The congregation moved several times as it outgrew its meeting space or a new resident claimed the house being used, until finally finding a "home" in the Lake Anne Nursery Kindergarten over the Safeway at Lake Anne in December 1965.

By January 1966 there were 452 residents in Reston, but still only five Baptist families, so most of the early congregation had little or no Baptist background. The church drew many faiths, and continues to do so.

Memories of old members include the great snow of 1966, when all metropolitan services were

cancelled, but the Baptist congregation waded through drifts with true pioneer spirit to worship. Rev. Scurlock led the second Easter sunrise service in Reston at Waterview marina. He visited nearly every family as it moved to Reston, but said most of his contacts with the community of 900 were unstructured ones on the tennis courts, at the pool, during the Junior and Senior high school night programs, and on the plaza.

In January 1967 the congregation moved once again -- this time to Lake Anne Hall. Attendance rose to 80 to 90, with a growing spirit of enthusiasm in the congregation, and eventually a first financial campaign with the dream of a church building on the plaza became more realistic.

BUILDING A HOME

On July 30, 1967 a huge crowd attended the special service of groundbreaking and "dinner on the ground." Residents of Lake Anne watched through the construction fence as the tall modern structure grew slowly through the year. The doors opened for the first worship service on July 7, 1968. On July 14 the building was formally dedicated with the laying of the cornerstone and the congregation making its commitment.

A MINISTRY GROWS

As Reston grew, the ministry of WPBC extended, and the welcome spaces in the church building filled a real need in the community for the Village Preschool, AA groups, Scouts, senior citizens, etc.

Memories of Reston and WPBC would not be complete without recalling the gentle, long-haired youths called the "Jesus people," who met regularly and were fed in the summer Teen Center and Coffee House in the Plaza Room. Some Restonians now in their forties can remember the

guitar music, candlelight and coffee, daytime game room and friendly acceptance during those summers at WPBC. Some members who staffed and helped at the Teen Center in those years recall with fondness the high school crowd of 30 to 40 who sat on the floor in the Plaza Room for the week-night sessions. The young people -- sometimes 60 to 80 in number -- attended week-end retreats at Hunting Ridge in the Virginia mountains, with Bill Scurlock and other WPBC leaders helping them to learn skills in relating, communication, and acceptance of self and others.

PASTORAL TRANSITIONS AND THE GROWTH OF NEW MINISTRIES

During the years of his ministry at WPBC Bill Scurlock counseled many persons from the church and community, and led personal growth groups for adults and teens. He resigned his pastorate in late 1972 to concentrate on the field of pastoral counseling, and became Minister of Counseling at WPBC. He left that position and moved to Sedona, Arizona in early 1988, where he died in March 1999.

During the time of the long search for a new minister by the pulpit committee, Robert MacDicken and T.E. Miller were interim pastors.

Dr. Glynn Ford was called by the church from Temple Baptist Church in Alexandria and began his ministry at WPBC in September 1973. Under his leadership the church family built on its commitment to understand and care for each other, and "to give freedom and acceptance to grow and change and become." He believed that lay people should be trained to minister to the needs of the congregation, releasing the pastor for in-depth counseling. Many church leaders emerged to help in the activities of the church

commissions, which formed an outreach of education, mission and worship to the community. Activities and workshops were offered to the membership and community in areas such as communication and relating skills, understanding grief, dreams, self-understanding, marriage enrichment, etc. Many people came into the church, with non-Baptists still a high percentage of the congregation.

During its second decade, WPBC expanded its services into such areas as family reconstruction, parenting fairs, sexuality workshops, and Prison Fellowship dinners for inmates. Ongoing activities, which continue today, included Women's and Men's Retreats, the Dayspring Silent Retreat, Bible study, spiritual sharing, and meditation groups.

Today's six-week early-winter Grief Workshops, which Glynn Ford called "another way of having the church be a loving community," began under his direction, which he continues.

In 1979 Ken Jackson came as a seminary intern, followed by Mary Ann Sickles in 1980. Wayne Sickles took the position in 1981 and his job evolved to Pastor for Youth, Education and Visitation, to Associate Pastor. He resigned in September of 1989 to pursue work as a neuromuscular therapist.

A NEW MODEL FOR MINISTRY

In 1991 Dr. Ford preached several sermons on restructuring the church to become a community to help people grow in trust and faith and to "better facilitate the inward and outward journeys of our faith." He proposed to the church Council that they explore the idea of creating a new church model, to energize and renew the WPBC community. A Structures Committee met from March 1992 to June 1993. The congregation

adopted the new structure -- the Communion Group model -- in June 1993, and the transition began in March 1994. In the beginning there were 10 communion groups, formed around similar interests or personal types, to provide spiritual community in small, long-term groups, give representation for members in church decisions, and provide service to the church or the wider community. Today there are five: Noon Bible, Community Service, Spiritual Healing, Music and Arts, and Contemplative Prayer. Also in 1994 three new Councils, representing the Communion Groups, were formed: Spiritual, Human Resources and Prosperity.

In March 1995, Dr. Ford retired after 22 years as Pastor to devote his time to counseling. He continues to be active in the church and leads the Grief Workshops.

Paul Clark served as Intentional Interim Minister for a year and a half. In September 1996, pastoral candidate Sandi John met the congregation and was installed as WPBC's new pastor on December 8.

During her tenure, WPBC has participated in healthy church consultation with the Department of Church Health and Education of the D.C. Baptist Convention. With some members from the congregation, Sandi attended healthy church pastoral groups for more than three years, and says, "we are in the process of a vision and a plan for church health and growth." Weekly meetings of interested members, and congregational input, produced WPBC's statement of who we are in 2000.

In January 2001, at a Tri-Council meeting, Sandi John proposed that WPBC "dream and envision" future options for space. She explained her experiences with the need for affordable housing in Fairfax County, and proposed that the

church partner with others to construct a building on the land owned by WPBC behind the church to provide community space for more healing ministries, recreational activities, more flexible and handicapped-accessible worship space, and affordable housing for persons in transition from shelters, women leaving situations of domestic violence, or for persons with disabilities.

A series of meetings on the “building dream” continues to fine-tune the congregational vision, as WPBC works with Reston Interfaith and Faith Communities in Action.

A new style of worship also began in fall 2000, adding five minutes of centering prayer and contemplative outreach to the service.

A newly formed Worship, Music and Arts team has been formed to revitalize all aspects of music and arts in the entire worship direction, including the choir.

A web site to improve communication with members and to attract new members who use the internet is now in operation.

In the spring of 2001, a WPBC structures re-evaluation team recommended, and the church adopted, a significant modification of the organization of the church. It combined the three Councils (Spiritual, Prosperity and Human Resources) into one. It renamed the communion groups as “small groups.” It clarified the roles and responsibilities of committees and trustees, and emphasized the primary decisional power of the members and participants.

Continuing programs include: classes teaching “English as a Second Language”, which have been filled during the last three school years: “Exploring Life’s Meaning through Movies” which reaches out to the community and church members on a monthly basis; and a Taize-style worship service of singing, praying and silence

which is held monthly in a joint ministry initiative with St. Anne's Church.

In the winter of 2009, we welcomed a new pastor to our family, the Reverend Elizabeth Evans Hagan. She has made many strides in her first few years, from visiting and teaching about Israel, establishing annual church goals, to redesigning the website, just to name a few. The church will continue to grow and flourish during her tenure.