

CHURCH BICENTENNIAL

Mt. Zion UMC gears up for the big 200

By Patricia Lait
Citizen Journalist

The members of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church are gearing up for upcoming events to celebrate the church's 200th birthday.

"We have recently paid off a \$1 million mortgage and will be burning the note and burying a time capsule at a special homecoming service Sunday, Sept. 27," said Barbara Ennis of Mt. Zion's History Committee. The service will feature a play written by Todd Johnson, "Voices of the Past," which consists of eight monologues from early church personalities.

Tim Stevens, a third generation member of Mt. Zion, also wrote a drama that will be presented at the church Saturday, Sept. 26 at 7 p.m.

The founding of Mt. Zion

With a current membership of about 500, Mt. Zion traces its origin back to the year 1809 when a young man, John Leach, built the church for his wife, Susan. Before their marriage, she had been an active member of the Methodist Society in Virginia. When her husband brought her to her new home in Johnston

County, she was sad to have no place to worship. So John set aside two acres from his plantation, built a one-room log cabin church and dedicated it to his new bride.

The congregation quickly outgrew the building, and a larger structure of hand-hewn pine was built in 1815. It caught fire sometime around 1840 and was replaced with a new building that would serve the congregation for the next 100 years.

For the first 60 years or so, the church was not served by a single pastor. Instead, the congregation relied on preachings from a group of consecrated men of God, the Circuit Riders. These men traveled from community to community and held weekend services from early Saturday through late Sunday evening.

Because these men only visited the community once a month — sometimes only once every quarter — Mt. Zion started a Sunday school program. Bible study began Sundays at 8 a.m. and continued until twilight, with only a short break for lunch.

The addition of Johnston Academy

Following the establishment

of the church, the people of the community desired an institution of higher learning and created the Johnston Academy on the grounds of Mt. Zion. The school offered language, music, teacher training education, art and college-level liberal arts.

Students came from Smithfield and other nearby communities and boarded with families in the Mt. Zion area. Mary Susan Leach Parrish, sister of John Leach, established a scholarship fund to help finance the education of many students at the school.

The trustees of Johnston Academy turned the leadership of the school over to the county in the early 1900s following the establishment of a state school system, and the school was sold in 1939. Today Mt. Zion continues to support Methodist colleges and encourages its members in their pursuit of higher education.

Staying together through tough times

Families were hit hard financially in the years following the Civil War and during the Great Depression. The people of Mt. Zion, however, refused to close the church doors and joined together with sister churches in the early 1900s to combine services, share preachers and make repairs as needed to the church building.

Today, this unity continues as the congregations are brought together by special events such as revivals, weddings, organized softball games, Boy Scouts and funerals.

By the end of World War II there was a drive for a new sanctuary. Proceeds from the sale of Johnston Academy, along with contributions totaling \$17,000, were used to build a Gothic-style cathedral. Completed with stained glass windows and natural pine woodwork, the building was debt-free at its dedication service June 24, 1951.

An annex was added 10 years later with five classrooms, a



JACK NALES, CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mt. Zion United Methodist Church member Betty Ross helps make a quilt to celebrate the church's bicentennial. The quilt will be on display Sunday, Sept. 27.

kitchen, two half-baths and a fellowship room. A parsonage was built and furnished in 1965 on the grounds just north of the church buildings.

Continued growth through the present

As the church membership continued to grow, so did the need for additional space. In 1991 a two-story addition provided pastoral offices and 11 new classrooms. The kitchen was remodeled, and parts of the annex and hallway were removed to create a more spacious fellowship hall.

Construction for a 416-seat

sanctuary began in 2001 after the purchase of additional property. Wood from two massive oak trees that were removed from the property was used to build the cross that now hangs above the pulpit in the new sanctuary, which was consecrated in a special service Aug. 25, 2002.

Pastor Leonard Rex is the current pastor of Mt. Zion at 15772 Hwy. 50 North. Sunday worship services are at 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. with Sunday school for all ages at 10 a.m.

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Rachel Tart, left, and Carolyn Stevens work on the quilt, which will be presented during Mt. Zion United Methodist Church's bicentennial celebration.

The evolution of a church

Mt. Zion UMC has seen a lot of changes since it was built in the 1800s. Take a look back at the church during its progression.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The original Mt. Zion United Methodist Church was a one-room log cabin and was built in the early 1800s by John Leach as a place of worship for his wife.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A new, ancient Gothic style cathedral was built in 1951 from proceeds from the sale of Johnston Academy and from contributions.



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Mt. Zion UMC has undergone additions since the construction of the new cathedral, including a two-story add-on for classrooms and offices and a 416-seat sanctuary.