

## FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH

By Joe Whitten

Friendship Baptist Church has recently called Nicholas Gandy to minister to their members and the community. In a recent interview he gave his vision for Friendship: "I am here pastoring Friendship because I saw God at work in the life of His people here and felt compelled to join Him. I see in the New Testament God's vision to extend the kingdom of God to all peoples, in all places, for the glory of God and the salvation of sinners. In the coming months, I intend to prayerfully dialogue with the Friendship family to learn how we can best pursue that vision from St. Clair County to the uttermost parts of the earth." Bro. Gandy invites all to join in the pursuit of that goal.

Friendship Baptist Church was organized on January 17, 1858, by "...the scattered members of the Baptist denomination holding letters from the different churches."

Meeting to constitute the new church were John Dickey, James Truss, Hezekiah Moor, Henry Inzer, and P. S. Montgomery, clerk. These men found the body of believers to be orthodox and constituted a church with the following charter members: Samuel B. Crow and wife Sarah, John George and wife Adeline, Belinda Smith, Adeline Donahoo, Belinda Pruitt, and Marion Grogan. They named their church "Friendship" and adopted the Articles of Faith and Rules of Decorum. Samuel Crow and John George were the first deacons.

Revivals, sometimes called protracted meetings, have always been a part of rural life, and Friendship held its first one in July, 1858, receiving as members James Rowen and wife Sarah Rowen, Coll Cockran and John Daral, all by experience [of faith in Christ]. Also received these, A. B. Bowman and wife Elizabeth Bowman, by letter."

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a well-known revivalist was Rev. J. S. E. Robinson. An outstanding Baptist preacher in St. Clair County, he knew the Scriptures so well that when giving his text he rarely looked at the Bible. He often pastored four churches, preaching once a month at each. Once, after an especially noteworthy revival at Friendship, he was asked if it were true that he had converted sixty souls during the revival. His answer rang out, "I never done it, sir! The Lord done it!" Such was the preacher Robinson.

C. J. Donahoo, who attended this church in the 1930s, described the old building as being large enough to hold 300 or more. The ceiling was quite high and ceiled with beaded lumber. Oil lamps hung from the ceiling, and on the wall were lamps with reflectors which intensified the light and shielded the wood from the heat. In the corner was the organ box where the pump organ could be stored. The benches were made of several long planks—flexible planks that could pinch when someone shifted positions; therefore, worshipers had to be on guard about this danger. The house was heated by a large pot-bellied stove that sat toward the front. On the

rostrum were three lecterns: one was the pulpit and the smaller ones of each side were decorative. Sometimes they held a glass of water for the preacher. At the foot of the rostrum was the mourners' bench. Many were the souls who found salvation and comfort there at that bench at Friendship Church.

In the 1950s when the church decided to build a new sanctuary, Carl Layman was hired to "tear down the old church and build the new church at a wage agreed upon by the building committee and Bro. Layman." A wood-frame church was built. Some years later it was bricked, and other additions and remodeling have been carried out at various times.

As the community grew and attendance at Friendship increased at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the church realized that in not too many years they would need a larger sanctuary. So, with that in mind, the building fund was started. Gradually the fund increased to \$150,000. A building committee was appointed consisting of Jim Baker, Tim Seals, Don Walker, Frank Morris, Donald Ray Walker, Ron McGaha, Mike Chappell, and Sue Washington, secretary. Although Ray Rogers was not on the building committee, we must salute him for his enthusiasm and faithfulness to the building project.

Plans were discussed, drawn up, agreed upon and construction began. Tim Seals acted as construction supervisor. On the announced work days during the building, practically every member of Friendship had some part in the construction of the new building.

Two groups from other areas came and worked with us: Carpenters for Christ, from Leeds, and Campers on Mission, made up of men and their wives from various places in Alabama. Without the dedication of these men, the sanctuary and fellowship hall would not have been completed in so little time. Friendship will forever be grateful to these folk whose love for Christ gave them a part in the ministry and mission of Friendship Baptist Church.

Moody Baptist Church donated benches from their old sanctuary. The finish on these was refurbished and polished, and Dale Sumeral and his crew did the upholstery work. Chairs for the choir loft were covered in the same fabric.

The ten stained glass windows were donated in honor or in memory of people loved by the members of the church.

The sanctuary was ready for the Easter Sunday morning worship service, April 20, 2003; and on that Sunday night the choir presented the musical *The Love of Jesus*. The fellowship hall was completed in time for Don and Bennie Sue Walker's 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary on May 18, 2003.

The official dedication of the new sanctuary was Sunday morning, June 22, 2003. An open house

and reception was held during the afternoon.

On Sunday, January 20, 2008, Friendship celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> birthday. Certificates were presented to the church by Dr. Lonette Berg, director of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, and Bro. Ben Chandler, Director of Missions for the St. Clair Association. Gov. Bob Riley had sent a certificate which was read and presented to the church. Bro. Billy Hunt brought the morning message. A covered dish lunch was served in the fellowship hall.

The very name, Friendship, has a comforting sound and calls to mind the Scripture which tells us we have a friend who is closer than a brother. We are also reminded that Christ was a friend of sinners, and that we Christians, having friendship with Christ, must reach out to those in sin and bring them to the One Who can save. Friendship church has ever done this and shall continue to do so through the coming years.

To God be the Glory.