HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ST. MARK'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Florence Street, Augusta, GA

This narrative is written in an attempt to as accurately as possible put in writing the history of the St. Mark's United Methodist Church, Florence Street. This is important because there are two (2) United Methodist churches in Augusta, Georgia with the same name. In fact, in the North Georgia Conference Journal this church is listed as St. Mark's, Florence Street, the other church is located on Washington Road also known as St. Mark and it is on one of the chief streets of the city.

Because the historical documents have not been preserved in detail, it is difficult to give an accurate year by year account of the progress of this small black church. The St. Mark United Methodist Church was established back in the year of 1881. Traditionally the second Sunday of September has been celebrated as the birthday of this church. The year 1981 marked the one hundred anniversary of St. Mark on Florence Street. In the pages of the Augusta City Directory of 1982, St. Mark was listed with the colored churches in the Augusta area for the first time. Previously, it was listed among the white churches because it was difficult to determine which one was the black church and which was the white church or the information was erroneously reported to the city directory. St. Mark was located on 10th and Gwinnet Street before moving to its present location. St. Mark was in the Savannah District; Georgia Conference, Central Jurisdiction. It is now in the Augusta District, North Georgia Conference. The only church from the former Georgia Conference, Central Jurisdiction in the district. In 1971, St. Mark, after the merger of the old Georgia Conference, known as the North
Georgia Conference, was put in the Augusta district. While the Savannah district, all of the Methodist church activities was carried on such as Sunday School, Morning Worship, Weekly Prayer Service, Epworth League, Ladies Aid Society, Woman's Home Missionary Society, etc. Also, the Love Feast on Friday night before Communion on first Sundays was always done at our church. St. Mark has hosted many district conferences. All services were fairly well attended based on the membership of the church and the enthusiasm of the community. The Bible Schools that have been conducted by a church over the years have largely been attended in the summer time. As best as the record show, we find that Reverend John Kitchens, who lived at 561 Pine Street, was the first Pastor to attend the congregation. He was there for one (1) year. He was replaced by Reverend Anderson. Again, the city directory informs that during these fledgling years, services were held at 10:00 AM and 7:30 PM with Sunday School beginning at 2:00 PM. According to the 1886 edition of the directory, Reverend James Jackson was Pastor for 1885. Statistics and membership records for the earlier years are not available, however, it is safe to assume that because of the small number of members and poor blacks in the earlier years, St. Marks being a mission church, was not an attractive situation to most of the ministers who came to restore the Methodist/Episcopal image in this part of the Georgia Conference.

St. Mark, appears to be one of the several attempts by the Methodist/Episcopal Church to reestablish itself as the church of the South. But the days of reconstruction were very painful ones for the Northern Methodism. Following the abolition of slavery, many of the freedom men either joined the AME Episcopal Church, the Colored Methodist Church or one of the several Baptist churches that
had grown up in the black sections of the city. At the same time that St. Mark was organized, there were already five (5) Baptist Churches with very large memberships. Among these were Springfield, the oldest organized Baptist Church in America, Macedonia, Mt. Olive, Harmony and Central African Baptist.

The brief history of St. Mark, suggests that the birth of this black congregation was one such attempt by the Methodist/Episcopal Church to infiltrate the Augusta Community. After one hundred (100) years of toil, the results are far from satisfactory and could be classified as a failure. According to statistics within the local community, it is believed that approximately eleven thousand (11,000) blacks were living in the Augusta area at the end of 1880. The city directory gives a less number than that. However, even though a smaller number may be more accurate, it is safe to say that the missionaries of that day assumed that there were enough blacks for any city to make this promotional of St. Mark's worthwhile. It also seemed that Augusta was not a stronghold of northern methodism either among the blacks or the whites. One of the factors affecting the growth of St. Marks as a mission church, was the support given to the black Methodists of Augusta by the congregation of St. John Methodist Episcopal Church of the South. Out of this very large white church came the birth of Augusta's first Colored Methodist/Episcopal Church, known as Trinity CME Church organized in 1840. Not only did the whites at St. Johns give the negroes a church of their own, but in 1882 they were actually involved in the establishment of Paine College the first institution to be designed for the training of education of black preachers and teachers in Augusta. In a nutshell, there was no reason for Black/Methodist in the city to go anywhere but to the colored Methodist church or the CME Episcopal.
Another factor contributing to the slow growth of St. Mark is salary and other benefits paid to ministers. Many qualified and able preachers refused to come to the south because they could not support a family on the small salaries that were offered. Although, the Methodist/Episcopal church invested large sums of money in the south most of it went to large cities where successes of the missions were guaranteed by large number of followers. Augusta did not provide such a healthy climate, therefore, the missionaries quickly withdrew from the work without spending enough time to see that the church was firmly established. In 1939 the official minutes of the first sessions of the Savannah Annual Conference of the Methodist/Episcopal Church reported that the congregation, St. Mark, consisted of eighty five (85) full members and twenty five (25) inactive ones. There were five (5) teachers and twenty (20) students in the Sunday School. At the time the Pastor's salary was set for Six Hundred Dollars ($600.00) a year, plus its allowance for administrative expenses yet the Pastor Reverend S. D. Freemen received only Three Hundred Thirty Five ($335.00) as a salary and Sixty Eight Dollars ($68.00) for his other expenses. We must presume that the Conference made up the difference if at all. By 1944, on the leadership of the Reverend D. R. Cooper, St. Mark's congregation grew to one hundred twenty six (126) full members, eighteen (18) of these were received into the church that year. This was a forty eight percent (48%) increase in memberships over a five (5) year period. Under Reverend Cooper, St. Mark apparently reached its peak of this membership during this period. Between 1944 and 1960 the membership remained at one hundred twenty six (126) constantly. In 1962, Reverend Charles Mafetty reported a membership gain of ten (10) over a two (2) year period of time, but
since reaching this peak, the membership began to decline again. By the end of 1968 the membership of St. Mark was given at one hundred and thirty five (135). However, this period cannot be correct since the district office records the membership at only eighty five (85). The best records will reflect by 1976 the membership had climbed to one hundred and thirteen (113) and with the coming of Reverend Everett Ducree, it jumped to an all time high of one hundred sixty seven (167) by the end of 1977. By the end of 1979, the membership had again decreased to one hundred and fifty two (152). There are three (3) main reasons for this continued stagnation of the growth and movement in St. Mark. In the first place, this congregation was never established as a strong church. It was always located at the present frame building which is not at all attractive. The smallness of the congregation has not attracted the type of Pastors that it would acquire to build it up simply because the Methodist Church has not made the kind of financial commitment to insure the viability of the church. Coupled with this is the continuing use of student Pastors to fill the pulpit on weekends. This has been historical over the last ten (10) years except for the past couple of ministers. This means that the congregation has not had the kind of pastoral care and leadership necessary to help the church grow. The fluctuation in the statistical figures of membership will show the impact of the quality of ministers that we have had. The majority of the present membership have expressed a very short feeling about this situation. The second factor affecting the growth of St. Marks, is the salary offered to perspective Pastors. Apart from minimum salaries there were very limited benefits. The year 1972 marked a beginning of a new effort to provide meaningful ministry to the black community in the Augusta area. This
time the district took the initiative and focus on Barton Village Community in the southern section of the county. This area is a small black community of recently built homes as well as several new housing projects. This focus was put on the construction of the development of the minority community, yet, that was not the full focus of the conference to provide the leadership in the part of the ministry that could develop both churches at the same time, consequently the idea of the development of Barton Village was laid to rest. St. Mark is often referred to as the little church around the corner. It is the little church in the terms of building structure, but there are those who are a part of the membership desirous and dedicated to moving the church forward if any way possible. Some of the ministers who have served as Pastors of St. Marks are Reverend A. G. Stevens, Reverend T. Milton, D. R. Cooper, W. R. London, T.P. Griffin, Charles McFed, Ralph Allen, Phelemon Titus, E. L. Henry, Deconess Dr. Cecelia Sheppard, L. W. Strickland, Albert Gainus, T. H. Fisher, Jr., Earl James, Edward Ducree, Dr. Gerald Smith, Reverend Vince Miller and Reverend Oliver Thompson. There are several members who made financial contributions above the call of duty along with giving assets to the church. Mrs. Louise Morris gave the organ, rugs and other furnishings for the partionage. Dr. T. W. Josey, a lawyer friend took pride in leading the membership in financial drives to keep the church repaired. Mr. S. J. Willoughby, Mrs. Clara Jenkins, and Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Carter, Mr. and Mrs. H. L. Thompson and Mr. Sullivan Way, all gave of themselves to keep the church alive and progressive. These are some of the historical members of our church. There are many others who gave of their time, gifts and prayers and money for the ongoing progress of St. Marks Church. The list is endless. The desire to improve the physical plant has been constantly on the minds
of the membership for some time. In 1973 the administrative board under the leadership of Harvey Johnson, Chairman at that time, approved an improvement project. For this purpose a building committee was formed to begin to make necessary plans. The church was partially renovated with aluminum siding and carpentry. Our struggles have been long and hard but through the patience and prayers of the membership we have made some progress with the leadership and the trustees and the building committee of our church, air conditioners have been installed, new pews have been purchased from a fund raising program headed by Mrs. Betty Tindall.

Even though our history is not as glorious and glamorous as we might would like to have, it does reflect the patience and the attitude of Christian relationship of those who have stayed in the church in the struggling times. We believe that St. Marks Church can grow with the blessings of God upon us and patience to endure and work for Him at all costs.
St. Mark has some unique features, one, the ability to survive. In many churches who have struggled as we have, may have closed its doors. Some have endured. For the past ten years the work of our has been more less those activities laid out by the National church. They include regular church services, administrative Board meeting, council on ministeries and other activities.

Some innovations include revival occasionally, choir anniversaries, Homecoming, Men Day, Women Day, Laity Day, Xmas Gifts to the church, Birthmonth club and vacation Bible School.

Our members, either through voluntarism, or appointed usually take great pride in implementing the above programs.

Perhaps the strongest sub-component of St. Mark today is the United Methodist Women. It shows a great deal of initiative and voluntarism. Because of the cooperation among the grout some of St. Mark women have been elected to State and District offices or perhaps higher.

St. Mark strengths lie in the fact that there are those of us who are here and want to continue seeing st Mark grow are Devoured Methodist. Belief in the church in God and our Saviou and love of our brothers help us to keep St. Mark Alive......