

## SWEDISH HERITAGE SUNDAY CELEBRATION, December 10, 1995

Researched and written by Virginia Smith

### I. The Beginning

Today is a very special day as we take time to celebrate 122 years of our existence as a congregation. On December 11, 1873 to today, December 10, 1995, the Swedish Methodist Episcopal South was formally constituted, and from that early congregation our church is directly descended.

The church today is more of a typical Methodist suburban church, but signs and marks of the earlier heritage are still borne in many of the Swedish names of members and in the memories cherished by direct descendants of the founders.

Let us take a trip down memory lane and hear about our heritage. The name of our church has changed six times and I'm going to try to give you some "interesting" facts concerning them. I can't give all the names and details of each time period because of our time limits.

Mr. Carl Charnquist did not come to Texas for the purpose of starting a church. He and his family left Michigan in 1871 to come to Austin, and after a long and tiresome journey he and his company rested under a large oak tree at the edge of the city. It did not occur to him or anyone else that on that spot the first Swedish Methodist Church in Texas would be organized. Carl was the grandfather of Mildred Bengtson, who is still a member today.

Carl became organist for the Swedish Lutheran Church, but he and others felt their religious life to be unsatisfactory. Mr. Charnquist on persuasion of some people began to lead small groups of religious discussions and studies, and they met in private homes. This work soon took so much of his time that he left his work in the stone quarry and devoted his entire time to religious work. His preaching in Swedish started a revival, and those who were converted gathered around him as their leader. They called themselves by the Lutheran Brotherhood which should be an indication that originally there was no intention to establish a separate church.

Two problems faced this group: (1) how to secure an ordained preacher who might administer the sacraments and (2) where could they find a place to meet?

Before his move to Texas, while still in Michigan, Mr. Charnquist had been acquainted with some Methodists and had known about their church. In Austin, he met Dr. O. Fisher, a pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, who offered to assist him. So, Mr. Charnquist turned to Dr. Fisher, who recommended him to the annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, meeting in Bastrop, October 1873. Mr. Charnquist was approved as local preacher and was appointed as pastor to Swedish people in Texas. A missionary appropriation of two hundred dollars for his support was also granted. He persuaded the members of his group with whom he had been working to unite with the Methodist and his wife and ten others responded. The church was organized and growth of the congregation was immediate. A church building was erected on the northeast corner of Red River and Fifteenth Street. It was dedicated on the Day of Pentecost 1874 and served the congregation for 25 years.

## II. Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church 1880-1898

The congregation withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church South and united with the Methodist Episcopal Church. The two branches of Methodists had resulted in the 1844 split of the church over slavery. Following the Civil War, there was an agreement between the two churches about areas of operation, but because Swedish and German immigration so frequently occurred from northern states to Texas, the ties of the people were with the north.

By 1898, the congregation had outgrown the Red River Street property. A building at Thirteenth and Colorado was purchased for \$2,500.00 with aid by a loan from the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Two hundred dollars was spent on renovations and the church was dedicated on May 10, 1898. The name was changed to Central Methodist Episcopal Church.

## III. Central Methodist Episcopal Church 1898-1939

Electricity was installed and three art glass windows were added. (Note: these windows are the ones on the outside front of the church building facing Berkman Drive that are lighted at night. The fourth window is located at the back of the sanctuary.)

During this period 1908-1919 Rev. B. Howe and J. M. Ojerholm, the choir director at that time purchased the grand piano. The piano is a Ritmiller and is from Goltengen, Germany.

The pipe organ which is still being used was installed in 1923 at an initial cost of \$6,000.00. It was built by Henry Pilcher and sons of Louisville, Kentucky, and it was rebuilt and improved by Otto Hoffman in Austin when it was installed in this building. It originally had only nine ranks or sets of pipes. In the 1960's, it was expanded to 19 ranks of pipes and installed in a chamber in the front of the present sanctuary. Many pipes came from the Black Forest region of German, and the trumpet pipes came from Goltengen, the same city which our grand piano was purchased. By the way, his daughter, Julia Ojerholm, is a member of the church today.

These two instruments are today a part of the heritage of our church and tie us to generations that have come before and the many generations that will come to be.

During the early part of the church's life, nearly all services were conducted in Swedish and the life of the congregation served as a cultural and religious headquarters for immigrants to Texas from Scandinavian countries. By the early 1930's an all English program had been established and in 1937 the first non-Swedish speaking pastor, the Rev. W. O. Schultz was appointed.

The unification of three branches of Methodism in 1939 to form the Methodist Church led to another change in the name of the church. The word "Episcopal" was dropped and the church became Central Methodist Church.

#### IV. Central Methodist Church 1939-1954

In 1951 educational space was needed, so a building which had formerly been the Christian Science Church was purchased for the sum of \$60,000.00. When the State government required additional space for expanding, the church property which was across the street from the capital grounds was sold to the state for \$205,000.00. The congregation began looking for a new location that would serve the present and future needs of the church.

#### V. Memorial Methodist Church 1954-1968

When the move from the downtown area was made, the congregation changed the name to "Memorial" as a tribute to all deceased members.

The last Homecoming Service was held at the old church on July 1, 1956. Rev. J. W. Griffin was the pastor at that time.

A five acre tract at 6100 Berkman Drive was donated by the City Board of Missions of the Methodist Church. When negotiations with the state were completed, the old parish hall from the downtown property was purchased. This building was moved to the new location during the early morning hours accompanied by a party of church members. They made a celebration of it with a church breakfast. The one room structure was used for all church activities during the time of planning and construction of the new church building. The new church, built of Austin limestone, was completed at a cost of \$250,000.00 and the first service was held in the new building on November 17, 1957.

The sanctuary of the new building will seat 417 and it was furnished and equipped with carpeting, rheostat lighting, year round air conditioning, fine acoustics, and aids for the hard-of-hearing. The Fellowship Hall was immediately adjacent and it would provide overflow seating for another 200. New furniture for the pastor's study and reception room was provided as a memorial to early church members.

The formal opening service was held on February 16, 1958. The same church bell heard by it's founders was used to call to people to worship. Music was provided from the same organ which was brought from the old church building.

The church continued to expand its physical facilities with the construction of a parsonage at 6010 Dunbury Drive (adjacent to the five acre church property). Construction of the house by Richard Peterson Contractor was begun on August 22, 1956 and when it was finished, an open house was held on Sunday, January 13, 1957. Richard Peterson is still a member of Memorial.

A new educational building was added to the church plant, the ground breaking was held on August 16, 1964. It provided excellent accommodations for all ages.

## VI. Memorial United Methodist Church 1968-today

The last name change occurred as a result of another great merger of denominations. In 1968, the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church.

The congregation was fortunate to have Mr. Otto Hoffman, an expert organ builder and tuner, and a resident of Austin, available to maintain the organ. In 1971, he completely rebuilt the instrument and improved it. He presented the organ for dedication to the glory of God and in memory of former members.

The Carillon bells were soon added. They were controlled by an automatic arrangement and a time clock and may also be used manually. The cost of this installation was \$7,415.00.

An update in 1992-93 of the expansion of the organ and the beautiful pipes that you see today are a result of the leadership of Kent Burrell as a tribute to many memorials of the people of this congregation.

The last major improvement was the construction of additional facilities for educational use and a fellowship hall and remodeling of other parts of the plant. A choir room, a gymnasium, five large classrooms, and a completely furnished kitchen. A choir room was added and the old fellowship hall was remodeled to serve as a reception room, library, and a meeting room. The total cost was \$225,000.00

The building was formally opened on July 30, 1972. The members of the Women's Society of Christian Service took on the project of furnishing the new reception room.

It is too easy to give the history of a church simply by giving dates of buildings constructed or relocated. This happens because legal papers give us such dates, and special ceremonies mark them, but a congregation must be more than a series of buildings and a pastor's contribution is much more than his presiding over some building change or addition. We keep too few records of these contributions, and we have not discovered many ways of recording spiritual contributions.

We should also like to be able to list the lay persons whose leadership and membership has brought significant contributions and richness to over 100 years tradition. However, we would be fearful that we would omit some whose names should be there. Let us cite by one; O. J. Ojerholm, lay minister, choir director, and composer of anthems, and in his name, we express gratitude for the hundreds of nameless ones who have given part to the heritage.

Memorial Church is no longer just a Swedish congregation for it has taken on some of the marks of a typical Methodist congregation. However, it was clearly seen by the members of those who are of Swedish descent who were present for "Swedish Sunday", October 21, 1973, that the Swedish flavor is still present and proudly borne. Those who are now members may feel like one person expressed it, who is himself not of Swedish descent, "I like what you have given us. I hope some of the flavor lasts for years to come."

Rev. Jordan Mann said and I will close with his statement – "We do not want just to look backwards, but we look at our past in order to prepare for our future; we look back in order to go forward. We shall show our assessment of the value of our heritage as we invest what we have received and what we have experienced in plans for greater days ahead."