

PLANT CITY CHURCH OF GOD

ROOTED

For 100 Years



*"...they will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord for the display
of his splendor."*

Isaiah 61:3

1917-2017



Roots

THANK YOU for the opportunity to tell the amazing story of what God has done through the ministries of the Plant City Church of God. It has been a privilege to discover and pass on the accounts of how God raised up faithful men and women committed to biblical truth and Jesus' Commission to go and make disciples. Their lives are inspiring and worthy of celebrating!

The story recounted here is based on best available sources, including interviews, census records, church minutes and other official documents, as well as numerous publications. Of course, no history is ever complete, and there is much more that could be told. Countless people and events are not included, because historical details are lost to the passing of time. Limitations of space exclude other worthy accomplishments and ministries.

As one who has observed the PCCOG carefully in recent months, it is obvious that you care deeply for your heritage; and, you desire to know and honor your roots. Yet, on the occasion of your centennial, you are more than ready to obey God's call to make a difference in twenty-first century lives.

—David G. Roebuck

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“The **FRUIT** of the **RIGHTEOUS**
is a tree of life
and he who wins **SOULS**
is wise.”
Proverbs 11:30

This tree represents a sampling
of the countless seeds planted
by PCCOG over the last century
from which the Lord has gifted
His church with apostles, prophets,
teachers, pastors, and evangelists.
To God be the Glory!

Confident that Jesus is building his church, each General Assembly welcomes new congregations. Here the eighth Assembly is meeting in Cleveland, Tennessee, in January 1913.



“I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH”

*“And upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”
(Matthew 16:18b KJV).*

WHEN CHURCH OF GOD members and friends gathered as a General Assembly on October 31, 1917, they rejoiced with news of what God was doing among their now 309 congregations. They saw their 31-year-old movement as fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that He was building His church and no forces, including hell itself, could prevail against that church. Although they believed the church had experienced low ebb during the “Dark Ages,” God was at work among them restoring His church in the last days. According to the Minutes of their meeting, “The songs and shouts and beautiful fellowship told of the happiness and love that existed among those present.”

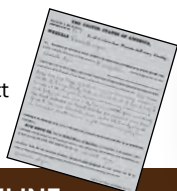
Thirteen representatives from Florida were among those attending the General Assembly in Harriman, Tennessee. State Overseer Sam C. Perry resided in Wimauma, which had become the headquarters for the Florida congregations. Although the names of other Florida attendees were not recorded, no doubt there were others from Hillsborough County, and very likely some from Plant City.

The records of the thirteenth General Assembly indicate that Florida reported 59 of the total 309 Church of God congregations—more than any other state. The report further reveals that during the previous year, the Church of God had organized nine new congregations in Florida. Included among those new churches was

a Plant City congregation identified as “The Oaks.” Plant City resident Mrs. A.B. Haworth was clerk, and the congregation included 12 members.

Passing time and fading memories have obscured many of the details surrounding the establishment of the Plant City Church of God. Yet, the spiritual hunger, evangelistic efforts, and personal sacrifices of many gave birth to this ministry with roots deeply planted in rich Florida soil. One hundred years later, God has rewarded that hunger, effort, and sacrifice. The ministry of the Plant City Church of God has branched out into many places in the world, borne much fruit, and with God’s grace looks forward to a hopeful, blessed, and fruitful future.

1842
Armed Occupation Act provides free land for homesteaders



1846
First official record of Seminole settlement is called Ichepuckesassa



1849
Post office is established at Ichepuckesassa

1860
Post office at Ichepuckesassa is renamed Cork after region in Ireland



PLANT CITY TIMELINE

RESTORING GOD'S CHURCH

The hunger to be part of Jesus' promise to build His church is the deepest root in the Church of God Movement. This hunger was the heart of our birth on August 19, 1886, when Richard Green Spurling preached a sermon calling for the restoration of God's church. At the conclusion of his sermon, he invited those gathered to sit "together as the Church of God."

A small congregation met that Thursday in the Spurling family's grist mill on the banks of Barney Creek in Monroe County, Tennessee. Eight responded and established a congregation they named "Christian Union." Perhaps they could not imagine in 1886 that their ministry would reach to Plant City, Florida, and 183 nations and territories of the world. Yet, they believed their actions were significant as they inaugurated a new stage in the restoration of God's church.

Obeying the Great Commandment; Fulfilling Christ's Prayer

The Christian Union was born with a commitment to obey the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor and with a desire to fulfill Christ's prayer that His disciples might be one (John 17:20). As a licensed Baptist minister, R.G. Spurling had struggled with the limitations his particular Baptist tradition created for the Christian church. The Landmark Baptist Movement taught that only certain Baptists were in God's church, and his local Baptist congregation insisted he break fellowship with other Christians. Knowing God's church was greater than the Landmark Movement, Spurling surrendered his preaching license and began to study and pray for restoration of a New Testament church.

Supported by his father, Richard Spurling, R.G. Spurling concluded that too many churches valued creeds and tradi-

"As many Christians as are here present that are desirous to be free from all men-made [sic] creeds and traditions, and are willing to take the New Testament, or law of Christ, as your only rule of faith and practice; giving each other equal rights and privilege to read and interpret for yourselves as your conscience may dictate, and are willing to set [sic] together as the Church of God to transact business [as] the same, come forward."

—R.G. Spurling

tions above the New Testament. He recognized that restoring God's church would require a return to the New Testament and an emphasis on biblical love. Using railroad terminology common in his day, Spurling described the New Testament

church as traveling on two rails: "love of God" and "love of neighbor." Because many churches had replaced the "golden rails" of love with narrow rails of human creeds and traditions, his 1886 sermon and invitation called for a return to the New Testament and the golden rails of love as the only means of bringing about Christian unity and restoration.

The Christian Union

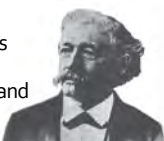
The eight people who responded to R.G. Spurling's invitation to sit "together as the Church of God" organized a local congregation they named Christian Union. R.G. Spurling also established other congregations in Monroe and Polk Counties. When his family sold their Barney Creek mill, he moved near the Hiwassee River and continued to pastor a Christian Union congregation there. Later he purchased a farm at Turtletown, Tennessee, where he also built and operated a grist mill. Relocating to Turtletown put Spurling only four miles from the Camp Creek community in Cherokee County, North Carolina. It was in Camp Creek that God brought an extraordinary revival of holiness to the mountains.



Richard Green Spurling, with his wife, Barbara, called for establishing the Christian Union in 1886.

1883

Henry Plant purchases charter to planned Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railroad



1883

J.T. Evers purchases land and apportions it into business blocks for what becomes Plant City



1883

Railroad line from Tampa opens



1884

Name changes from Cork to Plant City

A Revival of Holiness

In 1896, four evangelists preached a ten-day revival at the Shearer Schoolhouse in Camp Creek, North Carolina. They proclaimed the necessity of holiness and challenged listeners to seek the experience of sanctification. "Given to much prayer and fasting," they preached earnestly, and throngs of people responded. Church of God Historian Charles W. Conn wrote, "Almost from the start of the meeting, the altars were filled with repentant sinners and seekers for the experience of sanctification. Many skeptics of holiness were convinced, and many more rough-living sinners were converted."

William Franklin Bryant Jr. was one of the Camp Creek residents who attended the revival. Bryant and his wife, Nettie, were members of the Liberty Baptist Church, where his father was a deacon. Although Bryant had been saved at age

fourteen, he found himself continuing to struggle with sin. Earning his living as a farmer and sometimes bootlegger, Bryant hungered for God to do a cleansing work in his life. During the revival, he was amazed when those claiming sanctification went to people they had wronged and made their relationships right. He sought God for the same kind of experience in his own life. After much struggling, dying to his "selfish nature," and forsaking everything, Bryant was sanctified one morning while riding his horse.

Following the revival, Bryant led services and Sunday school for those who had accepted the holiness teaching. According to the earliest history of the Church of God, "The people earnestly sought God, and the interest increased until unexpectedly, like a cloud from a clear sky, the Holy Ghost began to fall on the honest, humble, sincere seekers after God. . . . One

after another fell under the power of God, and soon quite a number were speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." The Lord had done an extraordinary work in their lives, but they did not yet have a Pentecostal understanding of their experience. Yet, according to Conn, it would be some time later before they understood "the doctrine, person, and nature of the Holy Spirit."

Their Camp Creek neighbors did not respond positively to claims of sanctification, and many religious and civic leaders persecuted the holiness believers. The Liberty and Pleasant Hill Baptist Churches excluded forty of their members for the "modern theory" of sanctification. When the community barred the holiness believers from the Shearer Schoolhouse, Dickson Kilpatrick gave them property to build a place to worship. Attempts to destroy the building with fire and dynamite failed,

W.F. Bryant (seated with Bible), with Nettie and their children, led the holiness believers following the revival at Shearer Schoolhouse.



1885
Plant City is incorporated

1886
Richard and R.G. Spurling organize Christian Union (later Church of God) in a mill in Monroe County, Tenn.



1896
Holiness evangelists preach a revival at Shearer Schoolhouse in Cherokee, N.C.



1899
Indiana native A.J. Tomlinson settles as home missionary in Culberson, N.C.



A.J. Tomlinson (back row with beard) established his *Samson's Foxes* ministry in Culberson, North Carolina, in 1899. The ministry included a school, orphanage, and clothing distribution center.



so 106 leading members of the community dismantled the church and burned the logs. Realizing the proper response was of utmost importance, Bryant wrote, "We lay on our faces and cried to God to keep us sweet and let us do nothing to grieve the Holy Ghost . . . [and] we asked for the signs to follow us more and more."

The persecution was often violent as their enemies polluted their wells, burned several homes, shot at them, and sometimes beat them. On one occasion, about 25 armed and masked "night riders" surrounded the home of Ross and Emelyne Allen where the holiness believers were worshipping. The mob demanded that the services stop, or more people would be beaten and more homes burned. When Emelyne kindly offered an invitation to come inside, they refused and became even angrier. In the face of their fury, she replied with firmness that the worshipers would not stop the meetings until God was finished with them. She exhorted the would-be assailants, "There's no cause to

hide behind masks when I know every one of you. You are our neighbors.... Take off your garb, I'll fix you a good dinner." Her loving-kindness disarmed the mob, which slowly dispersed into the darkness.

Having suffered the pain of rejection by their churches, the holiness believers were reluctant to become part of another church. Continuing persecution, the lack of pastoral leadership, and doctrinal distortions scattered many of them, until R.G. Spurling convinced Bryant to organize the Camp Creek believers into a local church.

R.G. Spurling and R. Frank Porter set a church in order in Bryant's home on May 15, 1902, with sixteen charter members. They had experienced both the power of revival and the ravages of persecution. Convinced of the necessity of sanctification, they named themselves the Holiness Church. The new congregation called R.G. Spurling as their pastor, which brought them into the movement he had begun in 1886.

A New Leader

Spurling served as pastor of the Camp Creek congregation until June 13, 1903, when the church received several new additions, including A.J. Tomlinson. A native of Indiana, Tomlinson had a Quaker background and drunk deeply from holiness wells. In 1899, he settled in nearby Culberson, North Carolina, as a missionary to the mountains of eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia.

In Culberson, Tomlinson founded a school, Sunday school, a clothing distribution center, and an orphanage. As a means of appealing for support, he published a four-page periodical titled *Samson's Foxes*. The periodical featured news about divine healing and holiness, as well as appeals for help for the "mountain missionary work." He envisioned the children he ministered to as potential firebrands of the gospel among the Appalachian people.

When Tomlinson covenanted with the Holiness Church at Camp Creek in 1903,

1899

South Florida Holiness Association builds tabernacle at Pleasant Grove Camp Ground near Durant

1902

Holiness Church (later Church of God) is set in order in W.F. Bryant's home at Camp Creek, N.C.



1903

A.J. Tomlinson joins the Holiness Church at Camp Creek

1904

A.J. Tomlinson moves to Cleveland, Tenn.



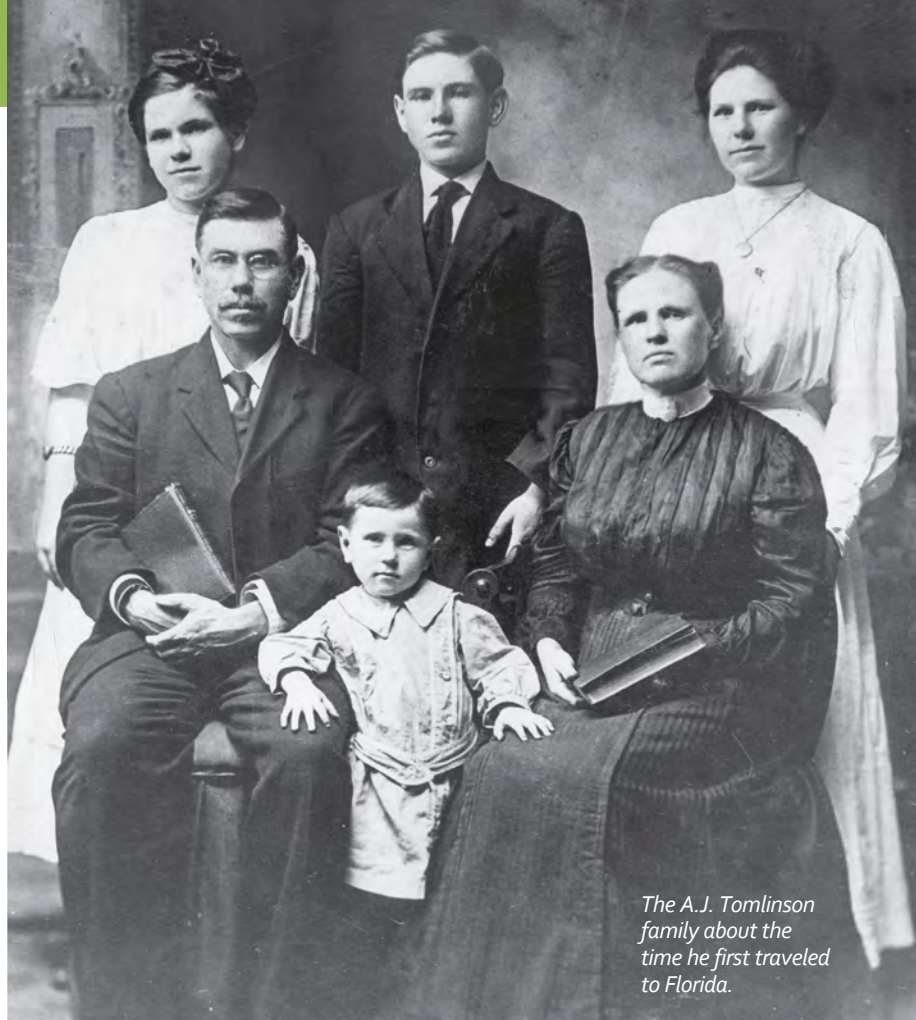
the congregation already knew and loved him, so they immediately ordained him as pastor. But Tomlinson understood that a vision to be part of the church Jesus is building could not be contained within the Unicoi valleys and mountainsides. He soon sought to establish other congregations, and ministry opportunities began to develop in east Tennessee. Success there, as well as good schools and a north-south railroad, led to his relocating to Cleveland, Tennessee, in 1904—fifty miles to the west of Culberson. Although it would take more than a year and a half, he immediately began work to establish a local church in the small town.

THE DEVELOPING MOVEMENT

While living in Cleveland, Tomlinson continued to pastor at Camp Creek, as well as several other congregations. He later wrote in his book, *The Last Great Conflict*, "Near the close of 1905 the work had so prospered that there began to be a demand for a general gathering together of members from all the churches to consider questions of importance and to search the Bible for additional light and knowledge. Accordingly arrangements were made and the meeting called." Twenty-one delegates gathered in Camp Creek on Friday and Saturday, January 26 and 27, 1906, in the private home of J.C. and Melissa Murphy. That first General Assembly included representatives of congregations from North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.

Finishing the Great Commission

Evangelism weighed heavily on the hearts of General Assembly delegates in 1906. Except for Tomlinson, it is unlikely that many of them had ever traveled far; but they knew the Scriptures, and they knew that Jesus had commissioned His disciples to make disciples as they were going into all the world. They recognized



The A.J. Tomlinson family about the time he first traveled to Florida.

that money spent on tobacco could better be used to spread the gospel, and they suggested that new Sunday schools could be tools for planting churches.

Their discussion of evangelism included what has become the most memorable language of that Assembly. A season of consecration ended with "consideration of the ripened fields and open doors for evangelism." Responding to the needs of the harvest, "strong men wept and said they were not only willing but really anxious to go." With tears in their eyes and a hunger to reach the lost, the delegates committed "to press into every open door . . . and work with greater zeal and energy for the spread of the glorious gospel of the Son of God than ever before."

At the conclusion of their business, they recommended an annual Assembly

for "a closer union and fellowship of all the churches. . . for the promotion of the gospel of Christ and His Church. . . as the providences of God and His Spirit may direct." Their meeting established the most basic and authoritative governing body of the Church of God. Known today as the International General Assembly, this biennial meeting brings together delegates from around the world to continue to fulfill the call of R.G. Spurling to sit together as the Church of God.

Delegates to the second Assembly, which met at the Union Grove Church in Bradley County in 1907, changed the name of their movement from the Holiness Church to Church of God. Choosing the name Church of God reveals how deeply the desire to restore God's church was rooted in their DNA. Desiring a scriptural

1906

First General Assembly of Holiness Churches meets in home of J.C. and Melissa Murphy at Camp Creek, N.C.



1907

Second General Assembly meeting at Union Grove in Bradley County, Tenn., adopts the name "Church of God"



1907

F.M. Britton preaches Pentecostal message at Pleasant Grove Camp Ground



1908

G.B. Cashwell preaches in Cleveland, Tenn., and A.J. Tomlinson receives baptism with the Holy Spirit

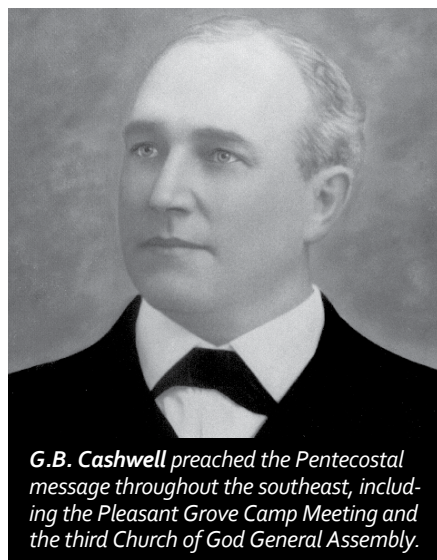
basis for all their decisions, delegates based the name change on 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1, where Paul wrote “unto the church of God which is at Corinth.” Their Minutes recorded that “the decision was made harmoniously.”

EMBRACING THE PENTECOSTAL MESSAGE

Although Church of God believers had experienced a powerful move of God following the 1896 Shearer Schoolhouse revival, they had not yet developed a Pentecostal theology. Having heard about the Azusa Street outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Los Angeles, Tomlinson became deeply hungry for the experience. Toward the end of 1907, he corresponded with G.B. Cashwell who had traveled to Los Angeles and experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Cashwell was preaching the Pentecostal message throughout the southeastern United States, and Tomlinson invited him to Cleveland to preach at the third General Assembly in January 1908.

While Cashwell was preaching in the Sunday morning service, Tomlinson fell to the floor under the power of the Spirit. He later remembered, “My mind was clear, but a peculiar power so enveloped and thrilled my whole being that I concluded to yield myself up to God and await results. . . . As I lay there great joy flooded my soul. The happiest moments I had ever known up to that time. I never knew what real joy was before. . . . Oh, such floods and billows of glory ran through my whole being for several minutes!”

While lying on the floor that morning, Tomlinson experienced a vision in which he preached around the world. His experience revealed the urgency of reaching the lost in the last days. Pentecostal fire was for a purpose—empowering and enabling the church to win the world for Jesus Christ. Tomlinson’s life and ministry, and



G.B. Cashwell preached the Pentecostal message throughout the southeast, including the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting and the third Church of God General Assembly.

the ministry of the Church of God were radically changed.

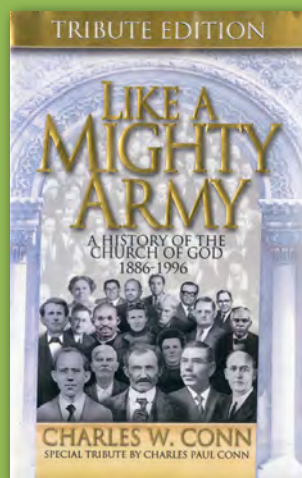
Rapid Expansion

Following Tomlinson’s Spirit baptism in 1908, he filled his journal with descriptions of Pentecostal worship. Preaching, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, healings, and casting out demons were common experiences. Evangelism,

along with caring for the poor and needy, became ordinary activities for the Church of God. On March 8, he wrote, “The Spirit indicated that workers were to go out from this place, north, east, south and west and said, ‘separate unto me those whom I want for the work whereunto I have called them.’ . . . The Book of Acts is being reproduced.”

Tomlinson’s hunger to reach the lost continued to expand. On March 16, he preached using a homemade map of the world. In late March and early April, he took a preaching tour that included missions in Ohio and Indiana and concluded in Florence, Alabama, where Tomlinson organized a Church of God congregation.

The Church of God was now established in four states, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. For the rest of his life, Tomlinson’s mission was to preach the message “back to Pentecost,” which for him included the restoration of God’s church. It was that message he carried to Florida when he left Cleveland for Tampa on April 28, 1909. Florida became his greatest harvest field, and changed the face of the Church of God. ■



HERITAGE RESOURCES

Learn more about early Church of God history:

- Beaty, James M. *R.G. Spurling and the Early History of the Church of God*. Cleveland, TN: Derek Press, 2012.
- Conn, Charles W. *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God, 1886–1996* (Tribute Edition). Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2008.
- Phillips, Wade H. *Quest to Restore God’s House*. Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2014.
- Tomlinson, A.J. *The Last Great Conflict*. Reprinted, Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 2011.

Circa 1908

Bertie Harrison visits brother in Hillsborough County and receives baptism in the Holy Spirit

1909

General Assembly selects A.J. Tomlinson as first general moderator (later general overseer)



1909

Sam C. Perry invites A.J. Tomlinson to preach at Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting



1909

T.L. McLain accompanies A.J. Tomlinson to Tampa where they establish first COG in Florida





South Florida's developing railroad enabled church leaders to easily travel to camp meetings and other appointments. A.J. Tomlinson is left and T.L. McLain is second from right.

FLORIDA SOIL

"When You said, 'Seek My face,' My heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek'"
(Psalm 27: 8 NKJV).

THE CLICKING AND CLACKING of wheels along the southbound rails must have been music to A.J. Tomlinson's ears as he reflected with joy on what God was doing in the Church of God. Taking his first evangelistic trip to Florida in 1909, he could not help but rejoice that the young religious movement he was leading was experiencing tremendous growth. At the start of that year, Church of God ministers reported working in twelve communities in Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia. Just prior to his travel to Florida,

he had organized the first congregation in Alabama, and a Church of God minister had preached a revival in Mississippi.

Certainly, the events Tomlinson recently witnessed greatly encouraged the leader of this expanding Pentecostal Movement. Much had changed in what began as small congregations in the Appalachian Mountains pledged to restore God's church. Those who had sought the face of God were now transformed by an experience of sanctification and empowered by a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The work was increasing so much

that in January the General Assembly had selected Tomlinson as their general moderator, soon to be called general overseer, with responsibilities between Assemblies. The Spirit had said "Go," and Tomlinson was taking the gospel farther south than ever before. It seemed as if Jesus' promise to build His church was being fulfilled before Tomlinson's very eyes.

CAMP MEETINGS

At the invitation of the South Florida Holiness Association, Tomlinson and fellow minister T.L. McLain boarded a

1909

A.J. Tomlinson preaches at Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting and brings many into COG



1909

Edmond and Rebecca Barr travel to Bahamas

1910

R.M. and Ida Evans (left and near right), with Carl Padgett, join the Barrs in the Bahamas



1910

COG begins publishing Church of God Evangel



southbound train on April 28 on their way to Hillsborough County and the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting. As the nineteenth century came to a close, tension over a holy life versus accommodation to “worldly” practices developed throughout many mainstream denominations. As a result, hundreds of thousands joined holiness denominations such as the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.) and the Church of the Nazarene. Alongside these denominations, regional associations built campgrounds and hosted camp meetings promoting holiness.

Camp meetings emerged as people took time from their ordinary routine and gathered in outdoor temporary settings to socialize and worship. These gatherings were especially prominent in the Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the nineteenth century when outdoor fervent preaching led to many thousands of conversions. Camp meetings usually included three services each day: morning, afternoon, and evening. They focused on salvation and spiritual growth, so there was an emphasis on prayer as spiritually hungry people sought the face of God and prepared their hearts in expectation of their corporate worship.

Campgrounds typically included a preaching shed and enough ground to

“About 400 campers, including men, women and children.

Great crowds came to the meetings who did not camp. The last day some estimated it at 6,000 in attendance. They came on foot, horseback, buggies, wagons, and automobiles.

God gave me great liberty and boldness in preaching. Weeping, shouting, visions, dancing, music under the power as well as music and singing in every service. The people were carried by the Spirit from weeping to shouting and vice versa, like the waves of the sea. Their voices many, many times sounded like the falling of many waters. The preaching was under the power and demonstration of the Spirit. I give God all the honor and glory.”

—Diary of A.J. Tomlinson
May 27, 1913

Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting

erect tents for sleeping and meals. The shed was often little more than a roof to protect from the rain and sun with a preaching stand or stage at one end. Large camps might set up additional preaching stands or tents for alternative services as well. Over time, regular attendees built simple cabins, and retirees sometimes took up permanent residence.

PLEASANT GROVE

By the end of the century, camp meetings were most prominent among holiness groups. Among those holiness organizations, the South Florida Holiness Association built a camp at the site of a local Methodist Church about a mile from Durant, Florida. The association hosted camp meetings each May and October and invited renowned preachers such as Bud Robinson and W.B. Godby to fill the pulpit. Trees and tents provided shelter for the earliest meetings, until the association built their first tabernacle in 1899. Attendees were expected to bring their own bedding and could choose whether to pay for food service or prepare their own.

In *Memories of My Heart*, Mayme E. Williams described the Pleasant Grove Campground, “Not many people who attended camp meeting built cabins in the early days. They put up shelters or used



The Pleasant Grove Campground

1911

General Assembly appoints J.A. Giddens as first Florida state overseer (now administrative bishop)



1911

Pentecostal World-wide Mission Band travels to Bahamas



1912

A.B. and Elma Haworth with his sister, Alda “Bertie” Harrison, work to establish a COG mission in Plant City

1912
Bertie Harrison holds Sunday school on porch of Robinson House in Plant City

1912

A.J. Tomlinson holds tent meeting in Plant City

tents. If buildings were erected, they were rough in construction and unpainted. Comfort was not a prime need, since they would not be spending much time there anyway.”

Williams further described the scene at Pleasant Grove: “Prayer went on day and night, in between services. There was a lovely wooded area out in front of the campground, and women went in one direction to pray, while men went in another. Soon you could hear strong intercession going up each afternoon as prayer ascended for the night service.” She continued:

There was a loft in the old Tabernacle, where some of the men slept. Long before day they would descend the ladder to the altar, and soon their bass voices would be resounding across the campground. Soon, the ladies would join them, and prayer continued until the eight o’clock breakfast hour. Sometimes the bell would have to be rung a number of times before their praying came to a halt.

A holiness church met at the campground, and special speakers held revivals there throughout the year. Yet, it was the spring and fall camp meetings that brought large crowds by train and by wagon from great distances. A 1908 notice in *The Bridegroom’s Messenger* informed readers that the camp was “one mile from Durant Station, on the Seaboard Air Line Railway, and about nine miles from Plant City, which is on the Atlantic Coast Line Railway.”

V.P. Simmons reported traveling the 50 miles from Frostproof, Florida, to Pleasant Grove in a mule-drawn wagon with enough food and supplies for the ten-day meeting. He went in October 1907 to check for himself reports that Pentecostals had taken over the camp meeting. Met with extraordinary hospitality he wrote, “Through all the ten days



The Pentecostal World-wide Mission Band ministered at the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting in October 1910 before traveling to the Bahamas the next February. Here the band is in the Bahamas along with R.M. Evans (holding baby) and Ida Evans (standing right).

BIRTH OF CHURCH OF GOD MISSIONS

THE FIRST TO BECOME Church of God missionaries were among those A.J. Tomlinson credentialed before leaving Pleasant Grove in May 1909. Black Bahamian Edmond S. Barr had immigrated to Florida in 1893 to find work. In Florida, Edmond met and married Rebecca Clayton, who was born somewhere along the Florida/Georgia line. When Tomlinson credentialed them as evangelists on May 31, 1909, they became the first-known persons of African descent to hold ministerial credentials in the Church of God. Receiving a call to ministry during the fall Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting, Edmond and Rebecca Barr immediately realized the importance of taking the Pentecostal message to his homeland.

Also as a result of the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting, the Barrs were acquainted with Robert and Ida Evans. Robert was a retired Methodist minister, who had been baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pleasant Grove, and Ida had been a housemother at Southerland College. Despite their retirement, they too caught a vision of the harvest and partnered with the Barrs to take the gospel to the Bahamas.

As was typical of their practice, camp meeting attendees raised an offering to support the Barrs’ travel to the Bahamas. In November 1909, Edmond and Rebecca Barr arrived in Nassau and began preaching. The Evanses, along with Carl M. Padgett, joined them on January 4, 1910. Together these five became the first members of the Church of God to take the gospel outside the United States. Their partnership represented the growing breath of the Church of God: it was multinational with citizens of the United States and the Bahamas; it was multiracial with persons of both European and African heritage; it was multigenerational with both older and younger participants; and it included both male and female ministers.

Recognizing the importance of the newly established work in the Bahamas, Tomlinson organized a group of ministers into a musical band that traveled throughout the Bahama Islands from February to April 1911. The band offered support to the ministry in Nassau, as well as visiting several out islands.

1912
Roy Miller is beaten for preaching in Plant City and never fully recovers

1914
First service is held on Church of God Camp Ground in Wimauma on May 21



Circa 1914
COG members in Plant City worship in brush arbor near Whitehurst and Boot Bay Roads



1916
The names of F.M. Rogers and his wife, Miriam, appear as Plant City residents on *Church of God Evangel* subscription list



so much of that treatment was accorded us, with the many invitations to dinner that we became concerned lest we would have to haul much of our provision home again....” Simmons concluded, “Tell me, please, where the critic that under such hospitality could write or say bitter things about the Pentecost believers? Well may God bless them for they seem to try to bless everybody else. There is sanity in all their oddities, joy in their hearts, and Christian charity in all their conduct.”

Serving as pastor of the holiness church on the campground, as well as president of the South Florida Holiness Association, Sam C. Perry invited Francis Marion Britton, to bring the Pentecostal message to Pleasant Grove in 1907. Gaston Barnabus Cashwell also preached there on several occasions. From Pleasant Grove, many holiness ministers and members took the Pentecostal message back to their congregations.

It was likely Perry who invited Tomlinson to preach in 1909. Tomlinson arrived at Pleasant Grove on May 21 to open the spring camp meeting. On his way from Cleveland, he stopped in Tampa, where he and McLain conducted a tent meeting

THE WIMAUMA CAMPGROUND

THE PLEASANT GROVE Campground became an unofficial headquarters for ministry in Florida. Several leaders of the campground joined the Church of God, and early state overseers listed Durant as their mailing address. Seeing the value of the campground, Tomlinson lobbied the Board of Trustees to give the property to the Church of God. When they declined, the Church of God looked for another location to call home.

Local lore credits future General Overseer Zeno Tharp and his brother with noticing an ideal place for a gospel tent while swimming in Lake Wimauma. State Overseer W.S. Caruthers arranged to purchase the site, and moved the Durant congregation to Wimauma. Tomlinson dedicated the new campground, including a 70 foot-by-70 foot tabernacle, on May 25, 1914. Worshiping today in the fourth tabernacle on that site, the campground is the oldest in the Church of God.

Dedication of Wimauma Campground on May 25, 1914



HERITAGE RESOURCES

Read more about Pleasant Grove and Wimauma:

- Jeter, Jerry J. “100 Years of Florida Camp Meeting.” *Church of God Evangel*, June 2009, 22-23.
- Tomlinson, A.J. *Diary of A.J. Tomlinson, 1901–1924*. Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 2012.
- Williams, Mayme E. *Memories of My Heart*. Honolulu: Orovan Books, 1988.

for more than two weeks and organized a Church of God congregation with “about 20” members.

While at Pleasant Grove, Tomlinson preached most of the three services each day, and his diary overflows with descriptions of the worship. On more than one occasion, he emphasized the necessity of restoring God’s church and encouraged everyone to join the Church of God. By the time Tomlinson concluded the camp meeting on Sunday, May 30, he had received 174 members into the Church of God, ordained six bishops and six deacons, and licensed seven evangelists to preach the gospel. Many of these new

Church of God members and ministers took their experiences to their nearby communities and established other congregations. Among these were Arcadia, Largo, and Midway.

Although the historical record is obscure, no doubt some of the 174 new Church of God members lived in or near Plant City. For the next several years, they worshiped in congregations such as at Pleasant Grove with the hope of eventually planting a congregation in Plant City. This hope was encouraged by Tomlinson’s return visits to the Pleasant Grove camp meeting and surrounding communities. ■

1917
Isaac Henry Marks is pastoring COG mission in Plant City

Circa 1917
John Thomas provides location to worship in an oak grove on Joe Sanchez Road

1917
Elma Haworth is clerk at The Oaks

1917
Minutes of General Assembly meeting in Harriman, Tenn., includes The Oaks at Plant City in list of Florida churches



Circa 1918
Isaac Shirley is pastor



PLANTING "THE OAKS"

"They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor" (Isaiah 61:3b NIV).

THE STURDY TRUNK of an oak tree supports large spreading branches and magnificent canopies of leaves. A mature tree provides shade and harvests of acorns to nurture surrounding life. What may not be obvious to those who enjoy its shade is a well-developed root system strengthening and sustaining the tree. While an oak tree can grow from a mature acorn, the best way to ensure growth of a new tree is to transplant a seedling. A seedling will appear to develop slowly for several years. Yet, what the observer sees as slow

progress above the soil actually provides time for development of a root system necessary to support a grown tree and ensure needed moisture and nutrients. These roots include a taproot for initial growth and a fibrous system extending far beyond the tree itself.

Some who heard the Pentecostal message at Pleasant Grove lived in and around Plant City. Like the development of an oak tree from an oak seedling, an outside observer might not have noticed the developing root system that would eventually support and sustain the vibrant

congregation that has nurtured Plant City for a century. The earliest Church of God members in Plant City worshiped for several years with believers in Durant, Tampa, and other communities. Yet, with the evangelistic efforts of the A.B. Haworth family, Alda B. Harrison, A.J. Tomlinson, Roy Miller, Robert and Ida Evans, and others, a small band began to develop a root system that supports today's congregation. By 1917, their efforts had developed into a congregation which reported to the 13th General Assembly as "The Oaks."

1918

The Oaks acquires the property where it has been worshipping on Joe Sanchez Road

1919

Miriam Rogers is clerk



1920-1921

G.L. Watson is clerk

1922

Lillie Driggers is clerk

Circa 1923-1925

George Wilson Sanders is pastor



NURTURING ROOTS

The extended family of Arla Bowman Haworth and his wife, Elma Lee Haworth, were vital to the development of the Church of God in Plant City. From Tennessee farming families, the Haworths relocated to Plant City within the first decade of the twentieth century. Along with Arla's brother, David Weldon Haworth, and their sister, Alda Bertie Harrison, this extended family had profound influence on the development of the Church of God in Plant City, the surrounding Hillsborough County, and beyond.

D.W. Haworth and his wife, Minnie Eldora, relocated from Tennessee to Bloomingdale to farm. They participated in the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting where D.W. served as corresponding secretary and as clerk of the Durant Church of God. The Durant congregation held the membership of many who lived in surrounding communities where a Church of God had not yet been set in order, such as Plant City.

Of those early Plant City evangelistic voices, none was more influential than Alda B. Harrison, the sister of D.W. and A.B. Haworth. Bertie, as she was called, was the wife of a Presbyterian pastor in Ohio. Distraught over the death of their infant son William, she traveled to Florida to rest and recover. Her brother D.W. introduced her to the Pentecostal blessing at Pleasant Grove, and seeing first-hand Pentecostal manifestations in a cottage prayer meeting, she began to hunger for the experience.

Bertie's husband William was not pleased to hear she was seeking the Pentecostal blessing. Not understanding Spirit baptism, he responded by letter, "I'd rather bring you home in your casket." Undaunted, she continually sought the blessing for three months. She later wrote that while in a worship service one

evening, "I was impressed to stand on my feet, and as I arose, the glory of God came down and filled my soul, and I began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance."

Harrison visited Florida often, and, for much of 1912, worked to establish a mission in Plant City. She recorded, "We had the pleasure of laboring in Plant City, Florida, almost a year. My brother A.B. Haworth and his wife and I started a mission there. We had splendid success, but the more success we had for God the more the enemy raged."

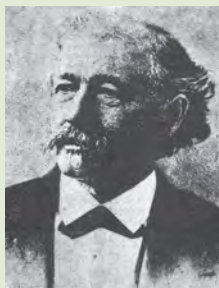
How did the Enemy rage? Roy Miller also assisted with the Plant City mission. At only 21, Miller was quickly developing as a minister of the gospel. In 1910, he evangelized throughout Florida with

A.J. Tomlinson, and he accompanied the Pentecostal World-wide Mission Band to the Bahamas in 1911. Although he was from Tennessee, Miller fell in love with Floridian Lula Williams, so he stayed in the Sunshine State to evangelize and to marry Lula. During his ministry at the Plant City mission with the Haworths and Bertie Harrison, a mother and daughter received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The mother's son became angry about these events and publicly threatened to kill Miller if the mission services did not cease and Roy leave town.

One night as Miller was about to leave their place of worship, he turned back to ask for prayer saying, "I feel in the Spirit that there is danger ahead." After prayer, he confidently testified to those gathered

THE BIRTH OF PLANT CITY

THE EARLIEST COMMUNITIES near what is now Plant City were a Seminole village, Ichepuckesassa, meaning "place where tobacco grows," and Salem. Hillsborough County seemed best suited for small produce and cattle farmers, and the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 provided 160 free acres for those who cleared a small portion and resided on it for at



Henry Plant
(Photo courtesy of Plant City Photo Archives)

least five years. Within about a decade, a post office, store, school, and the Salem Baptist Church served the developing area. Because of the difficulty of spelling and pronouncing the Seminole Village name, the postmaster renamed the community Cork in 1860. As more farmers and additional businesses settled, transportation became a major challenge. Getting an ox-cart of produce to Tampa and returning with needed supplies could take three days.

The future changed when Connecticut businessman Henry Bradley Plant purchased the charter to the planned Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railroad. Tampa businessmen purchased land at the proposed intersection with the Tropical Florida Railroad, and began to lay out a town that became the new center of life for the area. The railroad line from Tampa to what is now Plant City opened in 1883, allowing travel all the way to Jacksonville via Sanford by 1884. Residents incorporated Plant City in honor of H.B. Plant in 1885. According to Mark W. Kerlin, Plant City began with "350 residents, thirteen business houses, a post office, a school, and two churches." By 1920, a diverse economy supported a population of 3,729. (See Mark W. Kerlin, "Plant City, Florida, 1885–1940: A Study in Southern Urban Development," Master's Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2005.)

1923
New municipal government chooses Forest Park as name



1925
H.L. and Flora Trim preach revival, resulting in establishment of second COG congregation in Plant City

1925–1926
John Connatser is pastor

1925
The Oaks congregation decides to relocate to a "hard road"

1925
Florida legislature abolishes town of Forest Park



around him, "I am ready for whatever may happen." Minutes later as he walked home, the angry brother attacked from behind a tree. He pushed Miller to the ground and savagely beat him. Miller repeatedly tried to escape the pounding, but was thrown back to the ground. Tomlinson later wrote about the incident: "It has been said that Roy never saw a well day from that time until his death" the following summer.

Tomlinson and other Church of God ministers supported the endeavor to establish a Plant City mission. Following the Pleasant Gove Camp Meeting, Tomlinson arrived in Plant City on June

ALDA B. HARRISON AND YOUTH MINISTRY

ALTHOUGH ALDA B. HARRISON remained a faithful spouse to a Presbyterian minister, the Church of God credentialed her as an evangelist in June 1912. Over time, her husband saw the change in her life and encouraged her ministry. She was instrumental in encouraging the development of a national youth program called Young People's Endeavor in 1929. That same year she began publishing a youth magazine, *The Lighted Pathway*, which the Church of God later adopted and continued publishing until 1990.



Bertie Haworth, shortly before marrying William Harrison. Her ministry in Plant City provided vital roots for the Church of God.



Roy Miller was savagely beaten for his ministry in Plant City.

12, 1912. The day after his arrival, he recorded in his journal, "The sun is shining but the ground is full of water." It was not until Friday, June 14, that the ground had dried enough to erect a tent and preach his first sermon. When Tomlinson left Plant City on June 20, the services continued under the leadership of E.E. Simmons, who was living in Durant.

Miriam Rogers was among those Plant City residents who provided essential resources for the mission and later growth of the Church of God. Rogers was married to Francis Marion Rogers, and they had 13 children. Francis worked as a farmer and day laborer, while Miriam operated a boarding house on South Drane Street.

This was the former Robinson House, which was Plant City's second hotel. Miriam was a Baptist when she came in contact with the Pentecostal message and joined the Church of God about 1911. Other members of the Rogers family also contributed to the local congregation.

The first Church of God General Assembly in 1906 had extolled the value of Sunday schools. Not only should every church have a Sunday school, but also Sunday schools could be a step toward planting churches. Early in 1912, Bertie Harrison began a Sunday school on the large porch at the Robinson House that Miriam Rogers managed. Members of



Miriam Rogers operated the Robinson House where she provided support for early ministry in Plant City. She later served as clerk of *The Oaks*.

1926

The Oaks COG purchases lot 12 of Carey and Walter subdivision on Palmetto Avenue in area of Plant City known as Forest Park

1926

New camp meeting tabernacle is built at Wimauma



1926

M.D. Fletcher purchases The Oaks property from church for \$140

1926

Congregation dedicates building on Palmetto Avenue, and two Plant City churches unite





The Oaks Church of God was located in a grove of "turkey oaks" here at 4306 Joe Sanchez Road.

the Rogers family conveyed that it was Miriam's teenage daughter, Mamie, who suggested the idea of a Sunday school on the porch to reach Plant City youth.

R.M. and Ida Evans also nurtured the establishment of a church in Plant City. Best known for their missionary work in the Bahamas, after returning to Florida, they settled in Plant City and lived in the Robinson House.

SECURING A PLACE TO GROW

As the number of Spirit-filled believers increased in and around Plant City, they needed a regular place to worship. Perhaps as early as 1914, they constructed a brush arbor on scrub-brush covered land near what is now the southwest corner of Whitehurst and Boot Bay Roads. They may have chosen this location because

it was available at no cost, or perhaps because it was far enough from town to minimize complaints about loud and boisterous worship.

For more than a century, brush arbors were common worship structures. Along with protecting from sun and light rain showers, they were inexpensive and easy to build. They also provided a space outside of a traditional church building that allowed the curious to attend without the stigma of entering into a Pentecostal house of worship.

When it came time to secure a more permanent place of worship, John Thomas gave about two and one-half acres of land about four miles from town along the road to Joe Sanchez's house. Visitors to 4306 Joe Sanchez Road must completely reimagine the scene where today's graded,

paved, and straight road conceals the reality of a century ago. In 1917, a rough, crooked trail wound its way through a thick grove of red oaks growing on a sandy rise that provided some elevation during heavy rains. Rattlesnakes were more at home than people. Commonly referred to as turkey oaks or scrub oaks because of the shape of their leaves and the sandy terrain where they easily grow, the grove of oaks provided the first name for the local Church of God, which became known as "The Oaks." While the exact date The Oaks Church of God was set in order is unknown, *General Assembly Minutes* record that Elma Haworth was the first church clerk, and there were 12 charter members.

It was at least the summer of 1918 before the congregation began constructing a permanent house of worship. A letter

1926–1927
Brother Woods
is pastor

1927
Clifford Tindle
becomes clerk
and treasurer



1927–1928
Miller Leroy Vaughn
serves as pastor



1928
Vernon Rogers
is clerk



from "Your unworthy sister, M.L. Morgan" in the June 15 *Church of God Evangel* informed readers that the Plant City congregation intended "to build a place of worship." Soon a small rough-wood building welcomed members and visitors. An outhouse and water pump provided some creature comforts, while a nearby home may have served as a parsonage. Over time, the congregation developed a cemetery with wooden crosses marking the graves of loved ones. Regrettably, no photographs have survived to help us visualize those small beginnings, so we rely on a few printed documents and recollections passed from generation to generation.

NOURISHED BY SCRIPTURE AND SPIRIT

Beulah Jones was among those who became part of the congregation while they met in the brush arbor. Her influence on the Plant City Church of God is repeated with respect and admiration. Family tradition recalls she came to the Lord about 1900 and was baptized with



Beulah Jones became a member of Plant City Church of God while they worshiped in a brush arbor. Oscar did not join until the 1930s. She supported the church in many ways, including fundraising for the Ladies Willing Workers Band and bringing others, such as Herman Sears when he was an infant.



The William and Lucy Tindle family joined The Oaks Church of God. Members of this family continue to serve the Plant City Church of God faithfully.

the Holy Spirit near the time the Pentecostal message was preached at Pleasant Grove. Known for her wisdom and constant prayer, when others criticized authority, she insisted that her role was to "love and pray."

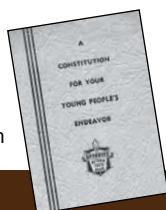
"Sister Jones conveyed to her grandson, Frank Gales, a present Elder of the Plant City congregation, that the Church of God was often referred to as the "holiness church," which described both their theological commitment to sanctification, as well as their hunger to obey God in all things, including dress and behavior. They so much wanted to please God, they willingly sacrificed anything that might reflect this world or call attention to self rather than to God. Wanting to show absolute obedience to their understanding of Scripture, new converts dropped rings and other jewelry into the offering so that they left with a satisfied conscience.

Those who attended Church of God services worshiped enthusiastically with all their being. In response to the move of the Spirit, they expressed their joy with shouts of praise. For some, running and jumping was a natural reaction to the presence of the Spirit. Jones testified that although it was loud and demonstrative, such worship was always done in such order that those present sensed the guiding of the Holy Spirit.

Outsiders did not have such spiritual discernment, and they often criticized the Church of God for their teachings and behavior. Such criticism did not hinder Spirit-filled believers, however. Jones acknowledged that when outsiders falsely called them kooks, holy rollers, and even snake-handlers, she was tempted to respond in anger. Yet, she understood that love rather than anger was the appropriate response. Those who believed in the moving of the

1928-1929
W.R. Hadsock is pastor

1929
COG establishes Young Peoples Endeavor based on work of Alda B. Harrison



1929
Alda B. Harrison publishes *The Lighted Pathway*



1929
C.P. Keene becomes clerk and treasurer

1930-1932
L.R. Alderman serves as pastor

Spirit, laying on of hands for divine healing, and deliverance from the bondage of sin did not let those without knowledge of the things of God deter them.

EARLY PASTORS

Although no official list has survived, researchers surmise that Isaac Henry Marks, Isaac Shirley, George Richard Sanders, and John E. Connatser were the earliest Plant City pastors. Too few sources remain to be sure of the exact years they served the congregation, however. A letter from R.M. Evans identifies I.H. Marks as pastor in 1917. At that time, Marks was receiving his mail at the home of A.B. and Elma Haworth. Before becoming Pentecostal, the Kentucky-born minister was known for playing the fiddle at dances. Like many pastors at the time, he did not have a long tenure at most of the churches he served, including The Oaks. Beginning in 1920, he frequently preached at General Assemblies, and their *Minutes* describe his sermons as powerful, effective, and inspiring.

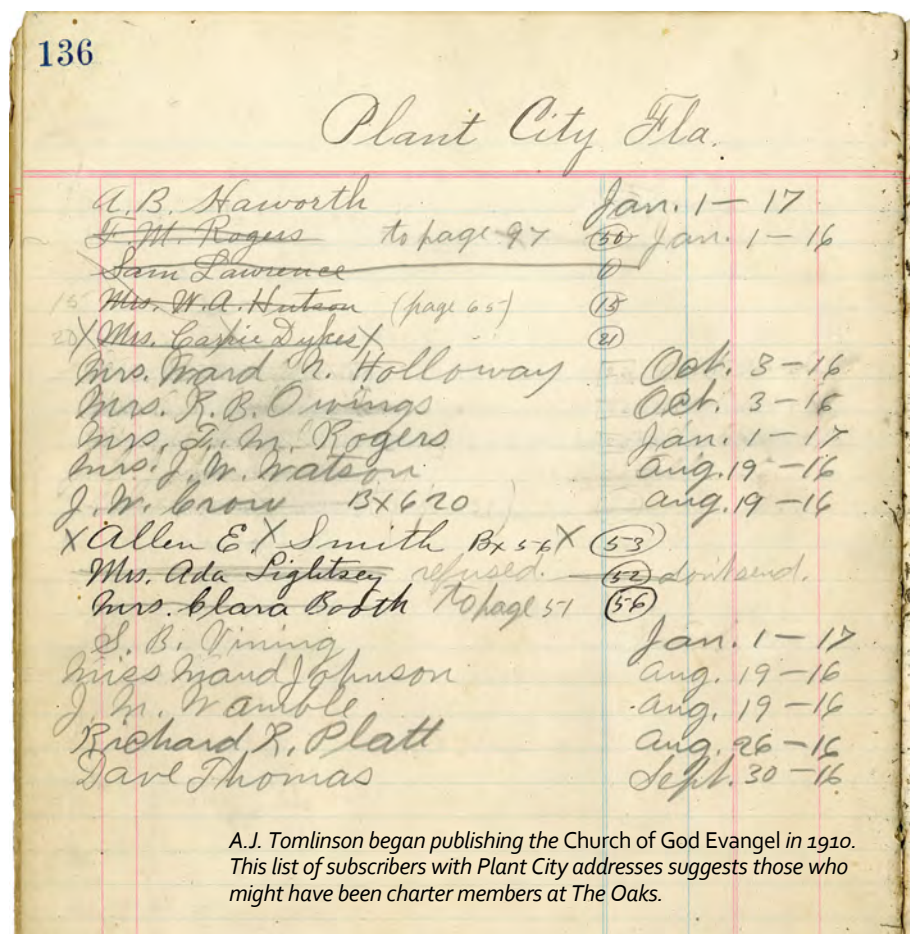
During the earliest years, some congregations did not have appointed pastors, others had pastors who served more than one church, and most pastors were bivocational. Isaac Shirley was bivocational, and at various times farmed or worked as a laborer. In a 1922 letter to General Overseer Tomlinson, he reported that he owned a saw mill, which had occupied most of his time. Written from Zephyrhills, Shirley hoped to sell the mill and devote his time to ministry.

George Richard Sanders likely pastored The Oaks from 1922 to 1925. When the Church of God credentialed him as an evangelist in 1920 at the age of 70, he had been a member for less than a year, having previously been a Free Will Baptist minister. Shortly after receiving his credentials, he wrote to the *Evangel*, "I am old

and not very strong in body, but I want to do all I can while here." Pastor George and Aletha Sanders' daughter, Rosia Lee, married Clifford Tindle, and many of their descendants have been vital to the life of Plant City Church of God.

John E. Connatser was in the retail grocery business until he decided he could not sell everything a grocer was expected to sell if he wanted to live a holy life. The Church of God had a high standard for ministers, and one question on his ministerial application was "Do your wife or children use chewing gum?" Connatser's truthful "Yes" evoked a letter from General Overseer F.J. Lee stating that

although gum was not a sin, it is "best for our people not to partake." Connatser responded to Lee, "Your letter at hand and contents carefully noted. And by way of explanation, I wish to state that I have taken the matter up with my wife about the use of chewing gum, and she is perfectly willing to discontinue using it, and has promised not to allow the children to use it." One description of his ministry reported, "He is certainly a consecrated man of God; so willing and ready to do anything that will upbuild and lift up the case of Christ. (But we believe he is happiest when in the midst of a big revival.) He can sing, preach, and pray. He never



1931
Raleigh Fletcher
is Sunday school
superintendent



1932-1934
J. Martin Baldree
serves as pastor



1935
Loran V. Hall
is pastor

1936
General Assembly
recommends every local
church establish a Ladies
Willing Workers Band
(now Women's Ministries)



gives out and is always on the job at the appointed time." The Church of God credentialed Connatser as an evangelist in March 1925, and he likely served as pastor in Plant City from 1925 to 1926.

REACHING BEYOND THE GROVE

The Church of God grew rapidly in Hillsborough County and throughout Florida, because members and ministers never limited their vision to their own communities. In May 1917, R.M. Evans informed readers of the *Evangel* that those in Plant City were assisting in mission work in nearby Antioch. An Antioch family desiring to establish a congregation in their community requested Plant City pastor Isaac Marks to set up his tent in Antioch to preach evangelistic services. Evans, and no doubt others, attended the Antioch meetings to encourage the work there. Evans reported, "The preaching was very clear and in the power of the Holy Ghost; the experiences were clear and satisfactory. Five were baptized in water."

The Plant City congregation, as well as individual members, supported numerous ministries and missions beyond their doors. R.M. Evans often sent offerings for missions at home and abroad. S.B. Vining sent substantial offerings to support the Evangel Building Fund, as well as to home missions. The regular "Orphanage Report" in the *Church of God Evangel* noted various gifts from Plant City for the newly established orphanage in Cleveland, Tennessee. Along with congregational offerings, Brother and Sister George Sanders sent green beans and a box of squash, Mrs. M.L. Morgan sent a box of garden seed to the orphanage, and Mrs. T.W. Fletcher sent a cash offering.

MAKING PROGRESS, FACING CHALLENGES

Early statistics show slow but steady growth in the young congregation with 37 members by 1923. A May 1925, *Evangel* article, "Making Good Progress," reports that pastor John Connatser led a



Standing at the original site in front of a "turkey oak," Herman Sears and M.D. Fletcher Jr. discuss the history of The Oaks Church of God.



George R. Sanders became a Church of God evangelist in 1920 at age 70 and later served as pastor at The Oaks.

three-week revival at The Oaks. District Overseer Williams from Tampa preached some of the services, and Tampa members came to support the work. The article rejoiced, "We had large crowds most every night and also had good behavior. God's presence and power were with us most every service in a marvelous way. There were several healed by the mighty power of God. Sometimes we were rejoicing, and sometime we were mourning, but it takes all these things along together to manifest the mighty power of God." The reporter concluded, "I also wish to say that our Sunday school has taken on new courage and zeal and is coming to the front."

1936-1938
L.R. Alderman is
pastor for second time

1937
PCCOG members regularly
participate in COG training
opportunities such as this
Bible School at Wimauma



1938
E.O. Kearce
is pastor

1938-1939
J.M. Hodge
is pastor

1939-1940
C.M. Phillips
is pastor

Yet, by 1925, The Oaks congregation was forced to face the undeniable reality that their remote location made it difficult to reach the people of Plant City. Not only was four miles a long distance where few people had motorized vehicles, but the poor road conditions complicated the situation. Perhaps because of the distance to The Oaks, some Plant City residents desired to have a church closer to home.

At least by May 1924, a small group of people began meeting in town, including some whose membership was at The Oaks. In early 1925, H.L. Trim and his wife, Flora, held a revival in Plant City. According to one report, results included "two saved, six sanctified, and two received the Holy Ghost. . . . A church was set in order with 17 members." The 1925 *General Assembly Minutes* reports this congregation within Plant City with Ella Johnson as clerk, as well as The Oaks where B.G. McLin was clerk.

Something had to be done, or The Oaks faced disbanding their fledgling congregation. During a church conference in December 1925, members made a momentous decision—the church would relocate to a "hard road." Although it is not clear if he and his young wife Lillian were members of The Oaks at that time, Mathew Daniel "Buster" Fletcher agreed to purchase the church's property. Already owning 40 acres, he did not need more; but, he was committed to do his best to keep the doors of the church open. His purchase allowed the congregation to move to town. They located property and salvaged some of the old building to begin constructing a new house of worship on Palmetto Avenue in the Forest Park community. ■

THE OAKS CEMETERY

M.D. FLETCHER JR., who grew up on and now owns the property at 4302 Joe Sanchez Road, remembers about a dozen graves marked with wooden crosses. When news of Interstate 4 was announced, at least four bodies, including that of Pastor George R. Sanders, were moved to other cemeteries. Two graves remain visible in the Fletcher yard, but locations of others are lost due to the deterioration of their crosses. The only marked grave is that of Mary Iris Dykes, infant daughter of Carrie Dykes and granddaughter of F.M. and Miriam Rogers. Her head stone reads, "Gone but not forgotten." Adjacent to Mary's grave is an unmarked grave that Fletcher family tradition suggests is that of "Doubting Thomas," whose full name has been forgotten.

Miriam Rogers' unmarked grave is believed to be on the east side of the Fletcher's yard. Miriam died December 12, 1925, at age 73. Mrs. Connatser penned an obituary in the *Church of God Evangel* describing Miriam as "a quiet, gentle woman who lived and died in the faith.... She will be greatly missed in the church where her good testimony and loving face was an inspiration to many."



Two of about a dozen graves remain visible in what was The Oaks Cemetery and is now M.D. Fletcher Jr.'s front yard.

1941–1944
B.W. Watson
is pastor

1944–1946
A.M. Sapp
is pastor



1946–1948
L.H. Alford
is pastor



1948
General Assembly
adopts Declaration
of Faith





*A day of celebration
at the Forest Park
Church of God on
Palmetto Avenue*

GROWING MINISTRIES AT FOREST PARK

*“Let the trees of the forest sing, let them sing for joy before the LORD”
(1 Chronicles 16: 33a NIV).*

MEMBERS AND FRIENDS of the Church of God in Plant City set aside an entire day to joyfully sing and praise the Lord on Sunday, June 6, 1926. It was dedication day! State Overseer J.A. Self preached the sermon, the band from the Tampa Church of God provided music, and dinner on the grounds nourished the body during the all-day spiritual feast. Not only did the congregation dedicate

their new building on Palmetto Avenue to the glory of God, but also the other Plant City church, organized the previous year, officially joined their hands and hearts to merge with the ministry that had been The Oaks.

During the preceding months, Pastor John E. Connatser had led The Oaks in purchasing lot 12, which measured 50' wide and just over 147' deep, in the Carey and Walter subdivision of Plant

City. Using some of the lumber from The Oaks house of worship and utilizing many hours of volunteer labor, the congregation built a small wood-frame building that seated about 100 people.

With their relocation from The Oaks, they also adopted a new name. For two years, from 1923 to 1925, a small community west of Plant City had its own municipal government known as Forest Park. Because the new building was

1948–1952
L.R. Alderman serves
as pastor for third time

1948–1952
H.L. Chesser is first
COG general overseer
from Florida



1950
New sanctuary
facing Lemon Street
is completed



1952–1954
Carl Godwin
is pastor



constructed in that community, the congregation would be known as the Forest Park Church of God for many decades.

Just as a forest is more substantial than a small grove of oaks, Forest Park was a fitting name for a congregation now ready to extend their ministry. Located on the northwest corner of Palmetto Avenue and Lemon Street, the Forest Park Church of God was positioned to reach into nearby neighborhoods, downtown Plant City, and the surrounding communities. As the Forest Park congregation grew, they eventually purchased an entire block plus four lots between Palmetto and Oak Avenues, as well as Lemon and Plum Streets. Constructing additional facilities as the Lord provided, the Plant City Church of God utilized this property until the move to Mud Lake Road in 2003.

CONTINUING PERSECUTION

Relocating to town not only brought the congregation closer to a harvest of lost souls, but it also increased the persecution they experienced. To some degree, the isolation of The Oaks had protected them from the ignorance and misunderstanding of many. At Forest Park, worship could not be hidden from the disdain and

accusations of detractors. Such criticism is not surprising. The congregation held lengthy Sunday night services, as well as long and frequent revivals. Hot summers and open windows exposed their enthusiastic worship to outsiders. And worship they did. Exuberant expressions of joy and thanksgiving frequently punctuated the air. Although members may not have had many material comforts, they freely partook of the fullness of the Spirit. Their joy overflowed in enthusiastic singing, boisterous shouting, and joyful dancing in the Spirit. In response to the congregation's "joyful noise," neighbors sometimes called police to control the enthusiasm. Seeing no laws broken, those commissioned to enforce the law had no choice but to leave the congregation in peace.

In response to persecution, Forest Park members trusted that their godly lives would be an example of God's love to unbelievers. God honored their faithfulness and, as in the Book of Acts, "added to the church daily such as should be saved" (2:47 KJV). The *Church of God Evangel* reported a testimony in February 1927 rejoicing and saying, "The Church at Plant City, Fla., is advancing rapidly. We can see the Church as she rises and shines."

What might outsiders have seen as they observed the Forest Park Church of God? Space limits us to a few examples of faithful members living the gospel in their daily lives, a congregation hungry for revival, extraordinary music, excellent preachers and teachers of the Word, ministries reaching within and without, and building expansions accommodating growing ministry that extended the reach of the congregation.

FAITHFUL LIVING

Beulah Jones was among those from The Oaks who continued to faithfully serve the Lord. She was unfailing in her prayers for her husband's salvation, her desire to bring others to the Lord, and her commitment to serve God wherever she was needed. Although Beulah became part of the Church of God while the congregation was worshipping under a brush arbor, her husband Oscar did not immediately respond to the gospel. Yet, after about two decades of faithful prayers and consistent witness, he too gave his heart to the Lord. When Herman Sears was born near the Jones's home in Slab Town, Beulah persuaded his parents to let her take him and his siblings to the house of

As attendance grew, Sunday school rooms were added to the back of the Palmetto Avenue sanctuary.



1954–1956
W.O. Crews
is pastor

1956–1962
W.B. Sumner
is pastor



1958
COG inaugurates *Forward in Faith* radio program with Bennie Triplett as announcer



1958
National Youth and Sunday School Department honors Plant City with Silver Shield



worship. Twenty-eight years later, he too came to the Lord as a result of the ministry of Beulah Jones and others. When the congregation determined to build a second and then third sanctuary at the Forest Park location, she along with many other women tirelessly sewed bonnets and quilts to raise funds for each new building.

Matthew Daniel “Buster” Fletcher and his wife, Lillian, were also examples of faithful members of Forest Park. Buster went more than 23 years without missing Sunday school. Stricken with blindness during much of this time, he believed his example of consistent attendance was a testimony to others. Honoring his determination not to miss a single Sunday, the congregation brought Sunday school to him during a brief hospitalization.

A HUNGER FOR REVIVAL

Pages of the *Evangel* and the Church of God’s *Florida State News* are filled with accounts of Plant City revivals. The church was hungry for the presence of God and deeply desired to reach the lost. Just a few examples illustrate how important revivals were to both the spiritual life of the congregation and as outreach to the community.

REACHING SLAB TOWN

EARLY FOREST PARK evangelistic efforts were especially effective in a nearby neighborhood called Slab Town. The slang and somewhat derisive name referred to the high number of houses utilizing the unfinished slabs a lumber mill freely gave to customers purchasing finished lumber. Use of these slabs reduced the cost of building a home, but also signaled the lower economic status of residents.

Seventeen members of the Grimes family were baptized in Moore Lake in September 1950, following a summer revival.



On June 18, 1930, Forest Park began a revival with Evangelist S.C. Chambers that lasted for two and a half weeks. After only two nights in the church building, they erected a tent in downtown Plant City for their services. According to Pastor L.R. Alderman,

We had much opposition against putting the tent up in the town, but God was in the move. The battle began, and God did bless our souls. The power would fall, and the saints would shout and dance and speak in other tongues. Sinners were convicted and fell in the altar and prayed through to victory. I don’t know for sure how many were saved, but 12 received the Holy Ghost, ten came into the church, and 13 were baptized in water.

Delton Alford, who spent his early school years at Forest Park, remembers, “it seemed like we were always in revival. One revival lasted six weeks. We went every night for six weeks!” He also recalls how effective such revivals were. Often the hundred-seat sanctuary was packed, the choir loft filled, and some were sitting in open windows. One five and a half week revival with Brother and Sister J.W. Sullivan in 1939 concluded “with 40 baptized with the Holy Ghost, 53 baptized in

water and 47 received into the church.” An August 1942 *Evangel* reported a three-week revival led by Evangelist Randall Geren: “His messages are freighted with power from on high, waking the sleepy, reviving the saints, stirring the sinners and arousing the community round about. Nine were sanctified, seven baptized with the Holy Ghost, 20 saved, and several added to the church.” Pastor B.W. Watson reported an ongoing revival with Evangelist Colon T. Dunn in July 1944. Spiritual results of the “greatest revival in five years” included 25 saved, 20 sanctified, and 16 baptized with the Holy Ghost.

Revivals often encourage church members to personally reach out to family and friends who do not know the Lord. Following a 1950 revival, Walter Caraway skipped lunch one day to invite his childhood friend Tommy Grimes to church. Although Grimes had grown up in an unchurched family, was a professional gambler, and would have to be carried due to muscular dystrophy, he felt he had little choice but to accept the invitation. God transformed Grimes’ heart and life that day. He immediately gave up cigarettes, alcohol, and gambling, and began seeking the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

1960
Brownie Colkmire is honored as COG YPE President of the Year



1962–1964
Don Anderson is pastor

1964–1966
Philemon Roberts is pastor



1966
COG begins Family Training Hour

1966
J.T. (Jake) Roberts is pastor



Tommy Grimes also began praying for his family. His sister Barbara Jean “Bobbie” Goodson was saved in July, along with her husband, James Nathaniel, in August. In September 1950, Pastor Alderman baptized 17 members of the Grimes family in Moore Lake. By 2017, 52 family members had followed Christ. Among them were two ministers and many local church teachers. Walter Caraway, who initially invited Grimes to church, also responded to a call to ministry soon after the 1950 revival.

A.J. and Dora Duncan led a two-week revival in 1971. A.J. had retired from pastoring in Florida; and Plant City was Dora Tindle Duncan’s home church. Those present remember it was well attended and many spiritually hungry people received the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The *Florida State News* reported 48 saved, 59 filled with the Holy Ghost, 33 baptized in water, and 34 joined the church. Herman Sears was among the 13 men baptized with the Spirit. He later became a credentialed minister and Church of God



L.H., Tanis, Delton, and Thelma Alford about 1948. L.H. served as pastor from 1946 to 1948 and again from 1970 to 1978, during which time the congregation built an educational building and their third sanctuary in the Forest Park community.

pastor, and he has also served the Plant City church in countless ways, including Sunday school superintendent, member of the Church and Pastor’s Council, and Christian education director.

EXTRAORDINARY MUSIC

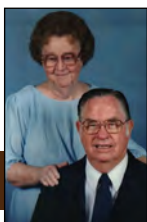
Music is an important aspect of Pentecostal worship, as was the norm at Forest Park. Each year when the Tennessee Music and Printing Company produced a new convention songbook, the church eagerly anticipated learning the new songs. With extended time to worship on Sunday nights, the choir often sang six or seven songs with frequent repeats of favorite choruses. Services also featured soloists, duets, trios, quartets, and other configurations of “special” music. No doubt the singing, as well as preaching, attracted visitors and created an atmosphere for the Spirit to convict sinners.

When L.H. Alford returned for his second tenure as pastor in 1970, the Forest Park choir was organized, practiced regularly, and enjoyed the accompaniment of several instruments. Soon Lemuel Miller became the first full-time minister of music. The new sanctuary constructed in 1975 was especially designed for music, including a large choir loft, a spacious

Homecoming in 1965 in front of the second sanctuary, which faced Lemon Street



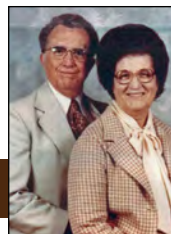
1966–1970
C.D. Harris is pastor



1968
Florida COG honors Ulma E. Young as Sunday School Superintendent of the Year



1970–1978
L.H. Alford is pastor for second tenure



1971
A.J. and Dora Duncan lead revival, during which many receive baptism with Holy Spirit



stage with room for keyboards and other instrumentation, and an excellent sound system.

Through the years, Forest Park benefited from the excellent accompaniment of long-term musicians such as Doris Fletcher and Virginia Griffin, as well as musically talented pastors. Perhaps best known was Arnold Godwin, who served as pastor from 1986 to 1988. A singer, songwriter, and recording artist, Pastor Godwin was a favorite vocalist wherever he ministered.

TEACHING AND PREACHING THE WORD

A brief notice in a December 1930 *Evangel* described the Forest Park church as “ever-growing,” expressed appreciation for Raleigh Fletcher’s leadership as Sunday school superintendent, and noted that the Young People’s Endeavor was being built up. Such commendation was an early reflection of what has become one of the most important aspects of Church of God ministry—careful attention to teaching and preaching the Word of God.

Abundant historical moments demonstrate this attention to the Word. When the Church of God in Florida held a statewide Bible reading contest in 1932, Plant City won the “banner.” A February *Evangel* article reporting the contest commented that the church was more interested in Sunday school than in picking and packing strawberries. Such commendation demonstrated that everyday life did not detract from an essential spiritual discipline. Two months later, the Forest Park YPE prevailed in a Scripture quoting contest with the Lakeland Church of God.

Delton Alford remembers that Sunday school was a “big thing” while his father L.H. Alford was pastor. Great teachers taught the Bible effectively, and the pastor



The Lemon Street sanctuary, dedicated in 1975, included a spacious stage suited for excellent music such as this Christmas program.

gave considerable attention to teacher training. With Plant City’s location an easy drive to Wimauma and Tampa, church leadership and teachers took advantage of training opportunities the Church of God provided at the state and national levels, as well as opportunities others might offer.

The Plant City Church of God has been blessed with many great preaching pastors, including Mitchell Corder, who served from 1992 to 1998. When Pastor Corder stood behind the pulpit his first Sunday, he related that God gave him a specific message for Plant City: “I don’t know what God is going to do, but I know God and ‘It’s gonna be good!’” That affirmation “It’s gonna be good!” became the church’s anthem. Pastor Corder cared deeply for the spiritual growth of the leadership and the congregation. Church and Pastor’s Council meetings included “Devotions and Development,” and he reports that God spoke to

him to change his preaching style to that of a teacher/preacher. His obedience led to immediate increase.

REACHING WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Along with regular revivals, quality educational programs, and extraordinary preaching, the Forest Park Church of God provided many ministries to serve members and touch the community. During World War II, Rosia Lee Tindle utilized the *Evangel* to invite soldiers to attend services. The church gladly provided transportation to those in need, including a vibrant bus ministry for many years. Today’s children’s pastor, Greg Davis, first attended Plant City Church of God as one of those bus riders.

Former Pastor Carl Allen remembers a tremendous youth ministry during his tenure. Under the leadership of Philip Grimes, Plant City youth sponsored

1974–1975
Lemuel Miller
is first Minister
of Music

1975
Forest Park
COG dedicates
educational facilities
on March 9

1975
Forest Park COG dedicates
brick sanctuary on corner of
North Lemon Street and
Oak Avenue on June 22



1978–1981
John McClendon
is pastor



1980
Brownie
Colkmire
is clerk

spiritually nourishing activities that also appealed to those outside the community. Among those, the youth hosted community events at the nearby Strawberry Festival Exposition Hall with guests, such as the Power Team, whose ministry highlighted martial arts to share the gospel. Also during Pastor Allen's tenure, the congregation began an annual Thanksgiving dinner as an expression of care to the community. These dinners included special musical guests who packed the armory where they were held.

The story of any Church of God congregation is incomplete without recognizing the contributions of women's ministries. From the time of Jesus, women have been a majority of Christians and have been vitally important to the ministry and mission of the church. Often women combine their domestic skills and aesthetic intuition to raise necessary funds, provide needed ministry, and offer nurturing fellowship. First known as the Ladies Willing Workers Band, Forest Park women frequently worked hard preparing and selling

delectable food such as fish dinners, chicken dinners, and fried pies. The Farmers Market was a great place to find hungry stomachs and build friendships with those who did not yet know Jesus.

Forest Park women were at the heart of many ministries, including prayer, visitation, teaching, Mother's Day banquets, and others too numerous to list. Among recent ministries, Ilene Sears organized an annual Table Talk. Hostesses create unique table decorations and invite church and nonchurched friends and family to a banquet cooked and served by men. The evening includes a special speaker and raises funds for missions or other named projects. Over 200 women attended the first Table Talk in 2001, and monies raised went toward the kitchen of the planned Mud Lake Road facility.

RECOGNIZING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

WHEN THE Church of God National Sunday School and Youth Department initiated a recognition program, they honored Plant City with their highest award in 1958—the Silver Shield. This award indicated that Forest Park's Sunday school met the denomination's highest standards of quality and effectiveness. Both state and national Church of God ministries have honored Forest Park teachers and leaders as well. In 1960, the Church of God honored Brownie Colkmire as the national Sunday School Superintendent of the Year. In 1968, the Church of God in Florida selected Plant City's Ulma E. Young as Sunday School Superintendent of the Year. Two decades later in 1987, Florida selected three leaders for superlative achievement:

Michael Grimes as Sunday School Superintendent of the Year; Norman Blanton as Family Training Hour Director of the Year; and Bobbie Goodson as Teacher of the Year.

Such recognition affirmed what Forest Park members already knew. Donald Bennett remembers the impact of the education program from the time he first started attending Forest Park in 1964. Teachers such as Bruce Glass, Bobbie Goodson, and Martha Nell Grimes

insisted that he know the Bible as the basis for Christian life. He recalls, "They helped me to grow through their teaching, their example, and their persistent emphasis on the Bible." Not only did this change his life, but Bennett attributes aspects of the Church of God's ministerial and lay training curriculums he has developed at the International Offices with lessons poured into him at the Forest Park Church of God.



Emphasis on the Bible by Bobbie Goodson and other Plant City teachers has influenced the global Church of God through the ministry of Donald Bennett.



EXTENDING OUR REACH

As the Lord blessed, the Forest Park congregation needed new and larger facilities for worship, teaching, and outreach. The first expansion was a Sunday school addition to the back of the sanctuary, but by the mid-1940s more space was necessary. The church purchased adjacent property, moved the first sanctuary toward Plum Street, and began raising construction funds. With pledges being paid in 1949, the congregation constructed a new sanctuary facing Lemon Street. Occupying the new facility in early 1950, they remodeled the former sanctuary for educational space.

Additional growth in the 1970s led to constructing both a new education building and a new sanctuary in 1975. The congregation dedicated the new brick sanctuary paralleling Lemon Street on June 22, 1975. General Overseer Wade H. Horton preached, and the dedication program proclaimed the Forest Park Church of God as "A church where Christian fellowship prevails and souls find God." ■

1981–1986
James Alfred Proctor is pastor



1982
Herman Sears becomes Christian Education director

Circa 1982
Forest Park COG changes name to Plant City Church of God



1984–1991
Lee Burnham is associate pastor



1986–1988
J. Arnold Godwin is pastor





J.D. Woodside and the Plant City choir lead worship on Easter Sunday 2017.

LOVE FINDS A WAY

*“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love”
(1 Cor. 13:13 NIV).*

MINISTRY ABOUNDED on Lemon Street during the decade of the 1980s. The congregation adopted the name Plant City Church of God, rather than Forest Park, and utilized the spacious and contemporary worship and educational facilities constructed in 1975. In a pictorial directory, Pastor J. Arnold Godwin described Plant City as “Central Florida’s most exciting church.” He rejoiced in the “vigorous, closely graded educational ministry, energetic choir program, and dynamic Spirit-led worship.”

Along with exciting and growing ministries came the realization that the Lemon Street property limited future ministry. Pastor Carl Allen and church leaders recognized that central Florida was growing and the church must be prepared for the harvest the Lord was bringing to them. Under Pastor Allen, the church purchased 29 acres on Mud Lake Road.

Although Pastor Allen and Pastor Corder encouraged enlargement of ministry, the Church of God called them to other fields before relocation could be realized. Their vision proved prophetic,

however, as central Florida and the neighborhoods around Mud Lake continued to develop.

When Pastors Robert and Lisa Herin arrived the first week of October 1998, they were already familiar with the congregation and its ministries. While serving as Florida’s evangelism director six years earlier, he had preached at Plant City several times during the pastoral selection process. Additionally, their son Torrey had been the Plant City youth pastor for the previous two years. Realizing the church’s great potential, they

1986
Bob Russell
is minister
of music



1987
Florida COG selects
Norman Blanton
as FTH Director
of the Year



1987
Florida COG selects
Bobbie Goodson as
Teacher of the Year

1987
Florida COG selects
Mike Grimes as Sun-
day School Superin-
tendent of the Year

1988–1992
Carl E. Allen
is pastor



adopted the motto—"Love Finds a Way." Shortly after their arrival, an invitation to breakfast with Joe Newsome led to an extraordinary agreement with the Strawberry Festival. The festival agreed to purchase the Lemon Street property, but allow the congregation to remain there until construction was completed on the Mud Lake Road property.

BUILDING FOR MINISTRY

"Building that church was the easiest thing I ever did," Robert Herrin recalls. He quickly adds that it was easy because of the quality of the building committee that oversaw the planning and construction process. Dennis Hunter chaired the committee, which included men with extensive construction experience. Steve Nelson, Jeff Hughes, G.C. Stanaland, Mark Jet, Bob Rayburn, Bob Sherman, and Randy Bridges served on the committee. Of course, new construction requires fundraising, and the congregation pledged \$750,000 under the leadership of Frank Gales.

Beginning with the pastors and staff, along with input from other ministry leaders, the committee developed a "dream" facility. Then, with the help of Dykes-Johnson Architects and McCullagh & Scott Construction Company, they finalized a projected \$4 million construction plan. Hunter recalls that on the very last day of the design process, the church asked for the addition of the Soul'd Out youth facility. Completion of the youth building required hands-on labor by Youth Pastor Mike Nelson and church volunteers, but when construction was finished, the Plant City Church of God moved into a 41,000+ square-foot facility for worship, fellowship, and administration, as well as the 7,500 square-foot youth ministry center.

Confident of the Lord's leading, the Plant City congregation broke ground at

ROBERT AND LISA HERRIN

ROBERT AND LISA HERRIN'S first Sunday as pastors of Plant City Church of God was October 4, 1998. Serving through January 2017, their more than 18 years of pastoral leadership is by far the longest of any in the hundred-year history of the congregation. Robert recalls that the text for both his first and last sermons was: "For I am determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2 KJV).

The Herrins came to Plant City from the Regency Church of God in Jacksonville, Florida. He had served in numerous ministries, including state overseer of Indiana and Virginia, youth director of Georgia, and state evangelism director of Florida. Due to the passing of Frances Crowley, Lisa had also served as Florida's Women's Ministries director.

Robert and Lisa describe the Plant City congregation as a healthy church with a great balance of ages and interests, deep fellowship, and support that energizes rather than depletes pastors. They arrived in 1998 convinced that Plant City was an amazing church, and they departed in 2017 believing that "the sky is the limit" as God blesses the congregation. Quick to give credit to members and staff for the church's extraordinary ministry, they also honor previous pastors.

According to the Herrins, Plant City Church of God is a congregation of not just hearers of the Word but also doers of the Word. This is reflected in robust discipleship ministries such as Sunday school and children's church, in deeply devoted men's and women's prayer groups, and in outreach efforts such as Pregnancy Care, BUY A TREE. CHANGE A LIFE., and many more. Robert credits Plant City's support of over 28 local and foreign missions to the prayerful efforts of its Missions Board led by local church businessman and church board member Earl Burkett.

Lisa is thankful for the many Connect Groups that developed around the interests and callings of members such as Nursing Home Ministry, Grief Share, and Divorce Care. She also believes that Women's Ministries at Plant City are an influential model for other Church of God congregations. In an era when Women's Ministries activities were often divided by age groups, under Lisa's leadership, Plant City brought generations of women together under the umbrellas Heart 2 Heart and Sister 2 Sister.

The Herrins are thankful for their ministry at Plant City and optimistic about the future. "We had an 18 and a half-year honeymoon there," Lisa reveals appreciatively. Concerning the leadership of the Robinsons, Robert affirms, "We knew this was the couple.... Plant City will be better and greater. It is happening."



Robert and Lisa Herrin served as lead pastors of Plant City Church of God from 1998 to 2017.

1990
COG Lay Ministries inducts Mike Grimes into the Hall of Christian Excellence

1990
Heart of Florida Youth Ranch opens



1990
COG purchases Mud Lake Road property

1992-1998
Mitchel Corder is pastor



1992
Benny Hodges is Christian Education director



2103 Mud Lake Road on January 12, 2003. Due to the careful planning of the building committee, as well as the speedy work of the construction company, the congregation dedicated their new facilities to the Lord on November 9. Church of God General Overseer R. Lamar Vest preached the dedication sermon, and Youth Pastor Mike Nelson led the dedicatory prayer.

STABILITY, GROWTH, AND TRANSITION

The new buildings on Mud Lake Road provided opportunities for the growing church to cultivate additional ministries. A review of the booklet given to newcom-

ers reveals well-developed Sunday school and Inner-Act Wednesday programs, 23 on-campus discipleship opportunities from Connect Groups to Scuba Diving, and 17 other service and outreach ministries. Whether one is involved in handbells, sewing, Bible study, prayer, worship arts, sports, First Impressions, missions, Men of Action, media, Operation Compassion, Academy of the Arts, or Words as Worship Writers, Plant City Church of God is a place to love God, connect with people, and serve the world.

Well past the age of 70, Pastor Herrin began to consider the prospect of retirement. "It took me five years to retire," he recalls. There was much work to do, the church was growing, and he had great support from the congregation's Board of Directors. When retirement arrived, he knew the timing was right, and a choice couple was succeeding him and Lisa.

On the first Sunday of February in Plant City's centennial year, Robert and Lisa Herrin anointed Jeffrey and Carla Robinson for the church's second century

LOVE, CONNECT, SERVE

ON ITS CENTENNIAL Anniversary, the vision of the Plant City Church of God is "Love God, Connect People, and Serve the World." This ambitious aim reflects the heart of those who call Plant City home.

Along with Lead Pastors Jeffrey B. and Carla Robinson, J.D. and Angie Woodside serve as Executive and Worship Arts Pastors, Pastors Scott and Nikki Campbell lead Soul'd Out Youth Ministries, and Greg and Billie Jo Davis serve as Children's Ministries Pastors. Directors include Susan Gales, who oversees Business and Finance, and Cheryl Johnston in Christian Education. The congregation is also blessed with the support of Sherry Soddors as the Robinsons' Executive Assistant, Greg Sumner as Accounting Assistant, and Bacogie Luke as Office Coordinator.

Under the leadership of Christian Education Director Cheryl Johnston, each month perspective members are invited to the first segment of the church's Roots Track, the pastors breakfast where they can connect with the pastoral staff, learn about the many ministries of the church, and begin to explore opportunities for service.

The January 12, 2003, groundbreaking ceremony at the property on Mud Lake Road included: from left, Flora Wallace, Noah Herrin, Robert P. Herrin, Amanda Richardson, and Dennis Hunter.



1993

Mike Nelson joins staff as children's pastor and later serves as youth pastor



1995

Greg Davis joins staff as children's pastor



1996

Torrey Herrin joins staff as youth pastor and later serves as executive pastor



1996

Noland Colkmire is elected member of Florida Youth and CE Board



of ministry. Members and friends are excited about what the future holds. Along with this excitement is the realization that transition continues. The sanctuary and educational facilities are filling. Although there is room on the church's property to build, this will require strategic planning, sacrifice, and the Lord's blessings. Thankful for what God has done and optimistic about the future, Pastor Robinson and the Board of Directors have commissioned Dennis Hunter to reconvene the building committee as God blesses the Plant City Church of God. ■



Pastors Robert and Lisa Herrin (right) in an anointing service for new Lead Pastors Jeffrey and Carla Robinson, along with their daughter, Lily, on February 5, 2017

BISHOP EPHRAIM REAVES, FAITHFUL SERVANT

UNTIL THE LORD RETURNS, the passing of his faithful servants is among those inevitable transitions. Bishop Ephraim Reaves went to be with the Lord during Plant City's centennial year. Born in 1921, and baptized in Mud Lake at the age of 13, Reaves was first ordained by the Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of Truth. He became a Church of God minister in 1978. During his lifetime, he and his wife, Naomi, established three churches, including the Calvary Community Church of God. Following retirement, he made Plant City Church of God his home.

Bishop Reaves served his country well as he did his God. From 1942 to 1945, he was an aircraft mechanic with the famed Tuskegee Army Air Corps. The Tuskegee Airmen served with distinction during a time when black Americans were considered inferior and unable to do the same work as white service personnel. Faced with the prejudices of that time, Reaves remembered of his segregated squadron, "We had to do double the work and get half the pay, but God blessed us."

Despite the bigotry and hardships Reaves and other black Americans faced, the love of God showed in every aspect of his life. In 2016, he told *Focus Magazine*, "The Bible says we are only here for a season so use your time well. Be real, keep a clean mind and practice kindness.

Trust God to fight your battles, and know his Word." Cheryl Johnston described Reaves as "absolutely crazy in love with Jesus—a real gentleman and a happy soul."

In recent years, Bishop Reaves received numerous accolades, including being honored at Plant City's Ninth Annual Black Heritage Festival and receiving the Governor's Veterans Service Award presented by Florida Governor Rick Scott in 2014.



Bishop Ephraim Reaves enjoying lunch at Fred's Market Restaurant following the Veterans Day Celebration on November 11, 2016. (Photo courtesy of Focus Magazine)

1996

Keith Barron is elected member of Florida Evangelism and Home Missions Board



1998–2017

Robert and Lisa Herrin are lead pastors

2000

Susan Gales joins staff as bookkeeper and later becomes chief financial officer



2000

Strawberry Festival purchases Lemon Street property





PCCOG looks to the future, while celebrating a century of witness to central Florida.

#PCCOG . . . FRESH, FLOURISHING, AND FRUITFUL . . . UNTIL HE COMES!

"They are like trees planted along the riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water... Their leaves stay green and they never stop producing fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8 NLT).

by Pastor Jeffrey B. Robinson with Cheryl Johnston

JOYCE KILMER PENNED, "Only God can make a tree," and Jesus declared, "I will build my church!" As God builds His church, The Oaks seedling He planted 100 years ago has thrived to become Plant City Church of God which still longs to "flourish like a palm tree . . . grow like a cedar . . . be

planted in the house of the Lord . . . flourish in the courts of our God . . . bear fruit in old age . . . be fresh and flourishing and to declare the Lord is upright" (from Psalm 92:12-15).

Plant City Church of God is a vibrant congregation, a tree faithfully planted by the Lord through the countless seeds

sown by faithful sowers over the last century, and a testament to the biblical truth that those who plant and those who water are united together over the decades in their purpose to glorify God who ultimately yields the increase. So in 2017, seeds are still being sown and a fresh vision to reach an increasingly diverse harvest still

2001
Annual
Table Talk
for women
begins

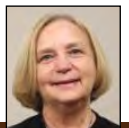


2003
Groundbreaking
at Mud Lake
Road property
on January 12



2003
Dedication of Mud
Lake Road facilities
on November 9

2004
Cheryl Johnston
becomes Christian
education director



MEET THE ROBINSONS

SINCE PLANT CITY Church of God traces its origins to a Sunday school on the front porch of the Robinson Boarding House, it is ironic that the pastors called to lead the church into its second century are . . . the Robinsons.

Natives of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Phenix City, Alabama, respectively, Pastor Jeffrey B. and Carla Jane Robinson came to Plant City Church of God in February 2017 from Indianapolis, Indiana, where they had served as Administrative Bishop for the Church of God.

Pastor Robinson graduated from Lee College in May 1986 and from Georgia State University with a Master's of Business Administration in 1989. In July 1988, he married his college sweetheart, Carla Jane Miller, a pastor's daughter from Maryland, who also graduated from Lee College in 1986.

Growing up in a pastor's home, Carla's life and perspectives were shaped through a wide variety of cultural, economic, and geographical areas of the United States, from Southern towns to Northeast urban communities and from rural schools to inner-city, all-girl institutions. Such life experiences, along with her previous employment as Event and Meeting coordinator for Sales Technologies, Inc., have equipped her to connect with people from every background.

After an initial ministry role as a summer youth pastor in South Carolina in 1986, Jeff submitted to a divine call into full-time ministry and evangelized in the Southeast while attending graduate school and serving on staff at Mount Paran Church of God in Atlanta. First licensed in 1987, Pastor Robinson became an ordained bishop with the Church of God in 1994 and is a third-generation Church of God minister.

During 30 years of ministry, Jeff and Carla have served two churches in Tennessee; ten years as pastor of the Rockville (Maryland) Church of God; and 15 years in administrative ministry. The Robinsons served four years as Evangelism and Home Missions director for the Delmarva-D.C. Conference followed by five years in Bismarck, North Dakota, where they served as Administrative Bishop and Women's Discipleship president respectively of the Church of God North Central Region.

Pastor Robinson served 14 years on the Church of God General Assembly Board of Parliamentarians and as a member of the International Evangelism and Home Missions Board from 2000–2008. After serving one term on the Church of God Publications Board, he was appointed to the Lee University Board of Directors in 2012, where he presently serves and particularly enjoys. Pastor Jeff has led or participated in ministry trips to Ghana, Liberia, Uganda, Kenya, Jamaica, and Guatemala.

In addition to her roles as a State Women's Discipleship leader, Carla has served local churches as minister of music, Children's Ministries director, and Women's Ministries leader. Carla's ministry is marked by a unique blend of real life humor, transparency, and practical application of the Word through which she is a popular speaker in churches, conferences, and retreats across the country.

The Robinsons have one son, Stone, and two daughters, Abigail and Lily Marie. Stone and Abby are sophomores at Lee University, and Pastor Jeff and Carla became empty nesters this year when Lily joined her siblings as a freshman at Lee. All three of them are happily connected to their new home in Plant City and the PCCOG family.

Pastor Jeff and Carla love doing life as a team! Whether it is pastoral or administrative ministry, or tag-team teaching the Wednesday night Pastor's Bible Class, the Robinsons are side-by-side, leading, loving, and pouring into the lives of the people around them.



Abigail, Jeffrey, Carla, Stone, and Lily Marie Robinson are happily connected to the PCCOG family.

2004
COG Lay Ministries inducts Bobbie Goodson into Hall of Christian Excellence

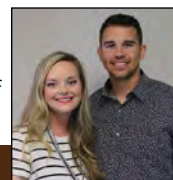


2006
J.D. and Angie Woodside join staff as worship pastors with executive pastor responsibilities added in 2016



2010
Orlando hosts first COG International General Assembly held in Florida

2012
Scott and Nikki Campbell join staff as youth pastors



guides the congregation to dream big and to “Love—Connect—Serve.”

God has strategically located Plant City Church of God near I-4, U.S. Highway 92, and State Road 60 where community planners project exponential growth over the next two decades. New industries, residential developments, and a midtown business district will contribute new folks to call this winter strawberry capital of the world “home.” The church already receives first-time guests each week who have recently

moved to the area and, thankfully, many report they have also found their new “church home” at 2103 Mud Lake Road.

As members linger longer after services to connect and share, anticipation for the church’s even brighter future shines through the smiles and laughter heard in the classrooms, hallways, and lobby. Guests frequently comment on the worship and love of God they experience at PCCOG; in fact, God is building the congregation through those seeds of love!



JOURneys Women's Ministries inaugurate a new future for PCCOG women.



Pastor Robinson and Ryan Nichols celebrate the continuing power of God to transform lives.

Such organic root-deepening and branch-spreading experiences will birth even more opportunities for ministry. As faith is strengthened through love and connectivity, personal service increases as everyone devotes their God-given talents to build up the body. This is certainly happening at Plant City Church of God! More and more folks are stepping up to volunteer as the church explores and implements fresh methods to take the gospel outside the church walls and into its fertile community. So, channeling this dynamic energy is a top priority for this “can do” and “let me help” congregation as it embarks on its second century.

As God builds PCCOG, He is sending more and more people with deep needs—spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically—reflective of the last day’s culture. In order to connect with all kinds of people with all kinds of needs from all walks of life, the church will develop strategies and employ whatever methods to serve “practically, hands-on, and face-to-face” to meet those needs.

A noteworthy example of such hands-on ministry is the number of Plant City Church of God volunteers who participated in Plant City’s and eastern Hillsborough County communities’ acts of amazing grace when Hurricane Irma recently blew through the region. The level of concern, assistance, and hospitality that poured out from generous hearts revealed an opportunity for the church to establish a disaster relief strategy and team to respond to the immediate needs of area residents, known and unknown, with offers of physical help, food, necessities, and comfort.

The weather incident set off fresh alarms to the congregation to become a stronger force for good in the community by becoming more involved with the City of Plant City’s community-wide efforts

2012
BUY A TREE. CHANGE A LIFE begins in Homestead, Fla.

2015
Sherry Soddors joins staff as administrative assistant to lead pastors



2017
Jeffrey and Carla Robinson’s first Sunday as lead pastors is February 5

2017
PCCOG Soul’d Out Youth Ministry travels to Guatemala for missions work



and charitable cause events, partnering with law enforcement agencies and first responders, as well as reaching out to its most needful neighbors. In the days ahead, PCCOG will seek to shoulder responsibilities alongside of Plant City's leadership and will dig deeper, invest broader, and point those in need even more directly to our Source for help.

Plant City Church of God will seek to intentionally increase diversity in the congregation. Cross-cultural connections make everyone's faith journey more interesting because "two are better than one." As the branches continue to spread from such life-enriching experiences, God will increase tolerance, understanding, and love for one another, enabling the tree's leaves and lives to be even more vibrant, colorful, and alive.

Better serving the area's vital Hispanic and migrant-worker population is a specific goal. Simple strategies recently initiated are birthing fresh vision for possible Spanish and English language classes for children and adults, as well as cooking classes and job-skill instruction for adults. Such outreach efforts will also benefit the church's strong missions involvement in Latino countries.

Plant City Church of God has always realized that the Church is so much more than a building; it is about the people! Yet, throughout the congregation's history, building programs have been a major theme. And as the church enters its second hundred years, it finds itself with limited ministry space and is poised again to launch a physical plant expansion once the Lord opens the doors and provides the means to do so.

Roots already run deep here in this agriculture center of Florida, where it seems everyone either knows or is related to each other. Plant City Church of God has many third and fourth generations of

humble families worshiping together. God will continue to build His church, however, with people from every walk of life, as long as the old tap root remains deep in the water of life, members stay rooted in faith and built up in Him, and the congregation keeps growing in grace. In this way,

the PCCOG tree will stay fresh and green, fruitful, and productive.

Deep roots, sheltering branches, and light-wielding leaves—these will be PCCOG's legacy. As God leads . . . as God plants . . . as God builds . . . and as always, for His glory! ■



Youth Pastors Scott and Nikki Campbell—Five years of homegrown Soul'd Out leadership.



J.D. and Angie Woodside—More than a decade as executive pastor and worship arts pastor.



Children's Pastor Greg and Billie Joe Davis—27 years and counting!

2017

Greg Sumner joins staff as accounting assistant



2017

Bacogie Luke joins staff as office coordinator



2017

PCCOG celebrates Centennial Anniversary, October 14-15

Today and Tomorrow
PCCOG continues to make disciples for the Kingdom of God



Bearing Fruit Until He Comes!

“...like a tree planted
by streams of water, which
yields its fruit in season and
whose leaf does not wither...”

Psalm 1:3

