

A Short History of

Pullen Memorial Baptist Church

The Founding Of The Church

A mission of First Baptist Church was begun in South Raleigh in May, 1884, under the leadership of John T. Pullen. It was organized as “Fayetteville Street Baptist Church” on December 28, 1884. Over the entrance of the newly-constructed frame building was the exhortation, “Prepare to meet thy God.”

Outgrowing the original building, the congregation moved up Fayetteville Street to a new and larger structure. Over its entrance was the phrase, “God is love.”

The strong lay leadership in the early days included John T. Pullen (who often conducted services in the absence of a pastor), C. T. Bailey, George Ball, Sylvester Betts, T. W. Blake, W. E. Fann, and W. P. Baker.

A series of short-term pastors (usually one to three years) included O. L. Stringfield and L. E. M. Freeman.

Five days after the death of John T. Pullen on May 2, 1913, the congregation

renamed itself “Pullen Memorial Baptist Church.”

The Church In Transition

Stability of pastoral leadership began with the coming of J. A. Ellis as pastor on August 6, 1919. Ellis was the first of Pullen’s pastors to make frequent application of the gospel to controversial social issues.

New lay leadership began to emerge as people like R. L. McMillan, “a young lawyer who recently located in Raleigh,” joined the church.

The congregation was already debating moving to a location in Cameron Park when its building was destroyed by fire on April 22, 1921. Two weeks later they began holding services in Pullen Hall, on the campus of N. C. State College (now N.C. State University).

On February 11, 1923, the congregation entered its new building on the corner of Cox Avenue and Hillsborough Street,

planning to minister to students at N. C. State, Meredith, and the Governor Morehead School. (That building is now the office and educational area of Pullen.)

The same year that they began to rotate deacons, 1927, the congregation also approved the election of women as deacons. In that year they chose four, no other women were elected until 1950!

After ten years at Pullen, J. A. Ellis resigned to go to First Baptist Church, Sherman, Texas.

The Church Shaping Its Traditions

The church called E. McNeill Poteat, Jr., who began his work as pastor in September, 1929. At the time he was a missionary-professor at the University of Shanghai. Musician, poet, and scholar, his major preaching emphasis was on what came to be called "Social Christianity."

With a spirit of ecumenism uncommon in Baptist churches, in April, 1933, Pullen began to accept as "associate members" people who came from other denominations, giving them all privileges of membership except "voting and holding office."

Poteat took ecumenism a step further when he was one of three Baptist ministers who helped organize the North Carolina Council of Churches in October, 1935.

Concluding his ministry at Pullen on September 5, 1937, in order to become pastor of Euclid Avenue Baptist Church in Cleveland, Poteat preached on his favorite text: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

Lee C. Sheppard succeeded Poteat on November 6, 1937. Sheppard was a quiet man who did not like controversy, but whose forthright words on war and on race attracted attention beyond the church. It was he who led the church to adopt a covenant that, while in form it resembled the traditional Southern Baptist Covenant, in content was significantly different.

Geraldine Cate became choir director in February, 1944, and held that position for forty-one years. Under her leadership, the best in church music became standard for Pullen, and Pullen's worship service took on a distinctive character.

Betsy Wooden, who had been a member of Pullen since childhood, became church secretary in the fall of 1948, and was a stabilizing force in church life, retiring in 1980.

Sheppard resigned in October, 1947, to become pastor of First Baptist Church in Columbia, Missouri.

The Church Renewing Itself

E. McNeill Poteat returned to Pullen in November, 1948. He and Geraldine Cate

developed a new pattern of worship that incorporated litanies, prayers, and responses from the broader Christian community.

Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church in New York City delivered the sermon in the service dedicating the new building on October 29, 1950. The sanctuary evoked a new understanding of worship:

- ❖ The divided chancel called for a more liturgical service.
- ❖ The new organ (dedicated in October, 1950) challenged choir and congregation.
- ❖ The stained glass windows (dedicated in December, 1952) inspired reverence.

A new openness led to the real beginning of the practice of electing women as deacons in 1950 (Miss Mary Yarbrough, Mrs. E. N. Peeler, Miss Carolyn Mercer, Mrs. Roy Medlin were the first).

The calling of Carolyn Massey marked a new seriousness about Christian education and established a permanent staff position of minister of education for the church.

W. W. Finlator, called to be pastor in July, 1956, after the death of Poteat, helped solidify Pullen's reputation as a "liberal" church by his preaching on controversial issues and publicly taking unpopular stands—on race, organized

labor, war, and capital punishment. He often spoke at denominational meetings and was active in the American Civil Liberties Union. A public figure, he was often quoted in the news media.

In a new constitution, adopted in April, 1958, the church declared itself open to all people regardless of race, and affirmed the acceptance into full membership of Christians who transferred membership from other denominations. The latter action led to the unsuccessful efforts made in the early 1970s to oust Pullen, along with a dozen other churches, from the Baptist State Convention.

A new denominational relationship was established with Pullen's affiliation in 1967 with the American Baptist Churches.

The coming of the Method Day Care Center to Pullen in 1973 established a new outreach to the larger community.

After several years of contact with Coventry Cathedral in England, on October 30, 1977, Pullen was designated a center of the Community of the Cross of Nails.

W. W. Finlator, pastor since 1956, retired in June, 1982.

Mahan Siler became pastor in August, 1983. With a background in counseling, he brought a new emphasis on pastoral care which was reflected both in his preaching and in his personal relationships.

The Church Moving Into The Next Century

In December, 1984, with an eye to the future, the church celebrated its centennial.

In the mid 1980s, Pullen moved, with some difficulty, into the use of inclusive language in its worship services and educational programs.

A sister-church relationship was begun in 1986 between Pullen, an almost exclusively white congregation, and Martin Street Baptist, an almost exclusively African-American congregation.

In 1988 a sister-church relationship was established between Pullen and the First Baptist Church of Matanzas, Cuba.

Emmaus House, a residence for homeless men making their transition to financial stability, was opened due in large measure to the efforts of Paul Carr and Lawrence Highfill, along with many other Pullen people.

The church engaged in two self-studies, "The Mission of Pullen" in 1988-89, and "Pullen 2000" in 1994-1995. The latter study, most of which took place while Mahan Siler was on sabbatical, was directed by Pat Levi and Jim Powell.

After lengthy discussion and prayer, Pullen endorsed unqualified acceptance of homosexual Christians and their full participation in the life and work of the church in 1992. Within the year Pullen was excluded from the Raleigh Baptist

Association, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

While Mahan Siler served as pastor, the needs of the church community continued to change, and the church staff grew to include a minister to children, minister to youth, minister to the community, and a church administrator.

Mahan Siler retired in June, 1998, and Linda McFadden became interim pastor.

Jack McKinney was named pastor in 2000. After eighteen months at Pullen he recommended that the church consider calling Associate Pastor Nancy Petty to serve alongside him in a two-pastor model of leadership. The congregation spent several months discussing the merits of a co-pastorate before voting on April 21, 2002 to make Nancy Petty its first female pastor. ❖

For more information on the history of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, please consult *Our Heritage and Our Hope*, a look at the first 100 years of the church's history, covering 1884 through 1984, and *An Inclusive Church in a Time of Conflict*, which updates the history of Pullen from 1984 through 1996. Both books are written by Roger H. Crook, former chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy of Meredith College and a member of Pullen for more than forty years of its history. Copies of the books are available in the church library.