

# *God's Faithfulness*

A HISTORY OF  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF OPELIKA

1866-2016



*For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

*Psalm 100:5*



On the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of First Presbyterian Church of Opelika, we celebrate a great accomplishment not of our own making. It is difficult for us to have a full appreciation for the struggles of those who have gone before us. The church has survived Civil War Reconstruction, world wars, and civil rights unrest, in addition to its own internal struggles. As we reflect on these past times, we are struck by the Lord's faithfulness to this congregation of believers. It is with thanksgiving for God's sovereignty and preservation that we remember this history.

On December 15, 1866, eight individuals organized The Presbyterian Church of Opelika. They were assisted in this endeavor by a pastor and an elder from New Harmony Presbyterian Church near Waverly, Alabama. The new church was located in Opelika in the center of a newly formed county named for General Robert E. Lee. The small town of around 500 was recovering from the devastation of the Civil War, but despite poverty and destruction, the group remained steadfast to follow the Lord's calling to establish a Presbyterian church.

The following is an exact copy of the minutes of the first organizational meeting:

*Opelika, Ala.—Dec. 15th, 1866—The Rev. R. Nall and Joseph Grier, Ruling Elder in New Harmony Church, appointed by the Presbytery of East Alabama, a committee to organize a Presbyterian Church in this place according to the request of John G. Smith and Martha his Wife, Joseph Phillips and Elisa his Wife, Givens Dunbar and Jane R. his Wife, R.S. McLelland and Louisa A. his Wife met for that Purpose, in the Baptist Church on the evening of Dec. 15th, 1866. The way being clear, the organization was effected by the Election of John G. Smith and R.S. McLelland ruling Elders, and Joseph Phillips deacon. Mr. Smith was ordained, and installed and Messrs McLelland and Phillips were installed, they having previously been ordained. The Church to be known by the name of the Presbyterian Church of Opelika. R.S. McLelland was chosen clerk of the Session.*

These minutes are the earliest documented record of the church. No further known record would be made of the newly organized Presbyterian Church until August 8, 1869.

Despite having no regular or called minister, the church held services with the help of the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Montgomery, the Reverend George H. W. Petrie. He was assisted by his son, the Reverend George Laurens Petrie, the Reverend G.R. Foster of Evangelist East Alabama Presbytery, and the Reverend R. Nall of New Harmony Church. Most of these inaugural meetings were held in the First Baptist Church of Opelika. The first new church member, Mrs. Ann Kennedy was received by the Session at that time.

*Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.*

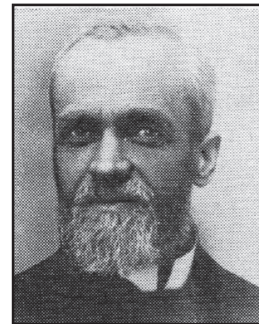
*Psalm 127:1a*



*The Presbyterian Church of Opelika, 1871*

The year 1871 was significant in the life of First Presbyterian Church. The church began plans to build a permanent structure. A 100 x 200-foot lot was purchased for the sum of \$125. It was located at the corner of Calhoun and Tallapoosa Street (now 2nd Avenue and 9th Street). This plot of land was bought in the names of the church's first trustees—John G. Smith, J.B. Campbell, R.S. McLelland, and W.B. Shapard. Soon thereafter, construction began on the building that would face Tallapoosa Street. The structure was a clapboard building with a bell steeple, surrounded by a picket fence, and cost \$1,881.

On October 15, 1871, the new church called its first pastor. The Session minutes contain the following entry, a “unanimous call to the Reverend Claudius Augustus Baker for his full time to the Opelika Church at a salary of One Thousand dollars (\$1,000) per annum to officiate as Pastor” was given and accepted. The Reverend Baker was born in Walthourville, Georgia, in 1839 and was ordained in the South Alabama Presbytery at age 24. He served the church as pastor for two terms and a total of 19 years. The Reverend Baker and his wife raised two orphan relatives. Joe Dean, Cathy Dean Gafford, and Roberta Haden Greene are current church members who are the descendants of these two children.



***The Reverend  
C. A. Baker***

On April 13, 1872, the first narrative was given by the Session. The report entitled The State of Religion, gives us a glimpse of the challenges facing the fledgling congregation. The report reads as follows:

*No regular preaching of the Word up to November, consequently the several objects for benevolence were not presented up to that time, and we were also building a house of Worship which required a degree of self-denial and energy, as well as perseverance to accomplish. Which we have so far forwarded as to make it comfortable we hope to finish it the present years providence permitting. In October we called Rev. C.A. Baker to take charge as Pastor, since Nov. 1st we have had the preaching of the word regular to an attentive, listening and apparently interested congregation. We have kept up a weekly*

*prayer meeting. But with sorrow we say it; it has been poorly attended and few heads of families in the congregation hold family worship. We have adopted the weekly contribution system for the cause of benevolence. Our Sabbath School has been kept up since the last annual meeting of Presbytery, we think with increased interest and members, although perhaps our school does not count any more in numbers, we claim that it is all our own, none borrowed from other denominations—it is truly a Presbyterian School. The Sabbath School children contribute for the different objects of Benevolence. To sum up we feel encouraged to believe that our Church and Sabbath School under the care of our Great Shepherd and Master is in an interesting condition.*

The Session had a desire for the children of the church to learn Biblical principles. Guidelines and rules were established in the Sabbath School. Rule seven states: “Session is deeply impressed with the importance that the officers and teachers of the Sabbath School keep constant in view the great and to be attained, viz the bringing of the Scholars to the saving knowledge of Christ, and their nourishment and growth in the faith of the Gospel.” As Sabbath School grew, so did the church and community during the first part of the 1870s. In 1871, a report stated 40 children attended Sabbath School, although the number of church communicants was reported at 21. With the first revival in December of 1873 came the addition of eight new members and by 1875 membership reached 66.

By April 1875, the difficulties of post-Civil War Reconstruction were ongoing. At one point Opelika had two distinct political groups, and had two mayors serving at the same time. The conflict worsened, and one group called the state militia from Montgomery to keep the peace. The church also had its troubles, including the excommunication of one member for drunkenness. Another member was tried before the Session, Presbytery, and General Assembly for cursing on the streets. At this point, there was a steady decline in membership. By 1876, the church used only two Sundays of the pastor’s time, and as the record states, the church experienced a “slacking up of religious zeal... that the cares of this world have had, in some instances, an

unfriendly effect on the ardor of the Spiritual Affections. Some seldom come to the house of God, and never to the prayer meetings.”

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without  
wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*

*Hebrews 10:23*

The loss of members took its toll on the congregation. According to the records of the Women of the Church, “The year 1879 finds the church still deploring its lack of interest in spiritual things. The loss of three members by death, two of whom were ruling elders seems to have cast a gloom, hard to recover, over the church.” Total communicants at that time were 61 and would eventually dwindle to 43 in 1885. The pastor’s salary was reduced to \$840 per year at the Reverend Baker’s suggestion. Even this was more than the small group could pay, and it became necessary for the pastor to divide his time with the church in Auburn. The salary was further reduced to \$450 annually to keep the church from being in debt. On June 23, 1885, the Reverend Baker resigned to accept a call to Gainesville, Georgia. However, he would return to the Opelika Church in March of the following year and under his leadership the church began to show signs of revival.

In 1888, the church began a Women’s Missionary Society, a Children’s Missionary Society, and a Ladies Aid Society. Due to the efforts of these groups, contributions increased to foreign missions and donations were given to help clothe orphans at the Presbyterian Children’s Home in Talladega. The April 1893 Session report described the church as being in an active, healthy condition with 51 members and 40 scholars in the Sabbath School. During this year, a series of meetings were held by the Reverend J.M. Evans, Synodical Evangelist, resulting in 27 new members. The Reverend Baker remained pastor until his death on August 7, 1893 at which time the church had a period of mourning for 30 days. The church is certainly indebted to the faithfulness of the Reverend Baker as he pastored the church through its early years.

In October of 1894, church records show the Reverend G.W. Bull served the Opelika and Auburn Churches as supply pastor. The Reverend Bull remained at First Presbyterian Church for the next two years. The April 1894 Session report mentions the organization of a summer Sabbath School for the black community. This effort was spearheaded by J.L. Dean along with the pastor and other church members. Attendance at the Sabbath School began with 15 members and grew to 70 members of all ages. A church for this community was later organized and built on Lockhart Street in 1897. This structure was torn down in the 1960s during Opelika Housing Authority's Urban Renewal Program.

The Reverend J.J. Woll became the new pastor in October 1896, and served until 1899. Like his predecessors, he preached one Sunday a month in Auburn. In 1898, there were two members admitted by profession of faith and 15 admitted by transfer of membership.

In 1899, the church was 33 years old. It was incorporated and had a new name, First Presbyterian Church of Opelika, Alabama (FPO). The house and lot adjacent the church were purchased for use as a manse (a name referring to the residence of a Presbyterian minister). The property was located where the current sanctuary stands. The purchase price was \$1,200.

*Come and see what God has done:  
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.*

*Psalm 66:5*

The beginning of the twentieth century brought signs that the church was flourishing. On July 1, 1900, the Reverend E. P. Davis became pastor with a salary of \$800 and took up residence in the new manse. The Session was requested to consider building an annex to accommodate Sunday School (formerly Sabbath School) classes that had grown in membership to 211. New committees such as Pastor's Aid, Sunday School, and Music were started to help with the operation of the church. The Christian Social Service was established to visit the jail, the factory, and the poor house.



During 1903 the Sunday School annex was completed. This is the present-day, two-story building attached to the rear of the chapel (original sanctuary). A youth group known as the Christian Endeavor Society was begun, and organized youth activities continued over the years under various names. Two years later, Dr. Davis accepted a call to a church in South Carolina.

The Reverend K. L. McIver served as the pastor for the next three years. The several Ladies Societies within the church were active in mission work and aid. In 1908, the church called the Reverend W. D. Burkhead from Lexington, Virginia, to become its next pastor. The April 1909 report showed 116 communicants and 179 scholars and teachers in Sabbath School. Discussion about moving and remodeling the church appears in the May 1912 records of the Clerk of the Session. The church building was moved, turned 90° to face 2nd Avenue, and had towers and a porch placed on the front. The two-story Sunday School annex was attached to the rear of the sanctuary. The exterior



*Sanctuary facing 2nd Avenue*

was brick-veneered and the interior was remodeled and refurbished. The church met at the nearby Episcopal Church during renovation. The project began in 1913 and was completed the following year.

*Oh give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name;  
make known his deeds among the peoples!*

*Psalm 105:1*



*Interior of Sanctuary until 1950*

First Presbyterian Church was fifty years old in 1916 with 85 members and 114 enrolled in Sunday School. A decline had occurred not only in membership, but also in giving. The Presbytery wrote to the Session in March 1916 concerning the church's failure to contribute to all causes. The truth was that there were only 12 male members at the time who were able to contribute. The Session considered it noteworthy that the church was able to sustain itself, especially considering its \$3,000 building debt.

On September 16, 1918, the church suffered the sudden loss of its leader. Church records state that “Dr. Burkhead, our beloved Pastor, while doing some work in his yard fell asleep, never to wake any more on this earth.” Following his death, there were four short pastorates: the Reverend J. D. Wallace, 1920–1921; the Reverend A. F. Laird, 1921; the Reverend H. P. McClintic, 1921–1922; and the Reverend W. B. Doyle, 1922–1923. During this time of rapid pastoral change, there was little growth, and by 1925 church membership had declined to 83 and Sunday School scholars and teachers dropped to 63. However, the church had been able to pay off the remaining debt incurred by the move and remodeling improvements, and by 1922 it was beginning plans for a new manse. This project was completed in 1923 at a cost of \$5,112; the manse was located just behind the church building and faced 9th Street. It served as home for the pastor and his family until 1956. It is now a part of the church facility and connects to the Fellowship Hall, but it is still recognizable as a bungalow-style dwelling with a front porch.



*Bungalow-style Manse built in 1923*

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us,  
but to your name give glory, for the sake of your  
steadfast love and your faithfulness!*

*Psalm 115:1*

In November 1925 the Reverend R. M. Mann of Clio and Pea River Churches of the East Alabama Presbytery accepted the call and began a twelve-year pastorate. During his service, membership rose to 95 and Sunday School enrollees and teachers to 103. In these years of the Great Depression every annual report shows the Ladies Societies of the church active in maintaining and advancing the ministries of the church. The Reverend Mann died in January 1938. Upon his death the church and the town paid tribute to him, for he was very involved in civic as well as church work. Mrs. Mann continued to live in Opelika and remained active in the church. Both the Reverend and Mrs. Mann are buried in Rosemere Cemetery in Opelika.

Several months after the Reverend Mann's death, the Reverend A. C. Windham arrived from LaFayette, Alabama, to begin one of the longest periods of ministerial services ever held at First Presbyterian



*Women of the Church, 1950*

Church of Opelika. Global events during these years had a tremendous impact on the local congregation. For example, in 1941 a member wrote, “With the coming of the great world conflict called World War II there has come a consciousness of spiritual values—an awakening of the need of real Christian endeavor in the lives of all. The Women’s Auxiliary has along with the other departments of the church administered to those needs. It has become a channel as never before, into which its members have poured their worship, their prayers, their gifts, their talents, that God may know that they are aware of the perils of civilization, the lack of real consecration, and above all—the need of God in all things of Life.”

Membership in 1953 rose to 166. By 1956 the church continued to grow and needed to expand its facility. A large one-story room was added to connect the main building and the manse. This room was designed to serve as a gathering space for Sunday School and for social functions. A modern kitchen was included. A new manse was built on Bonita Avenue in Opelika, and the old manse was converted into rooms for classes and offices. A plan for a rotating board of deacons was adopted in 1959. Each of the twelve deacons would serve four years with three deacons retiring at the end of every year.

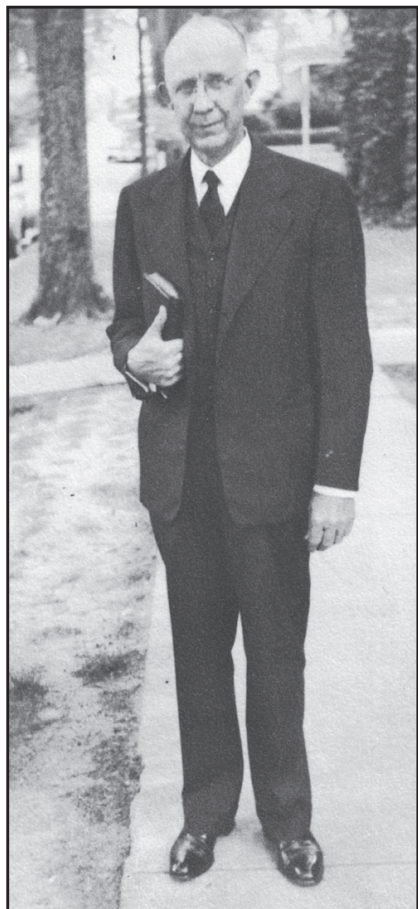
*For by grace you have been saved through faith.*

*And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

*Ephesians 2:8-9*

The church received with sadness the resignation of Dr. Windham in October 1960 due to failing health and elected him to the office of Pastor Emeritus. He died the following year. Surely all the pastors of First Presbyterian Church Opelika have been used by the Lord to influence many lives during their service here, but sadly, records tend to be dry and deal mostly with statistics. However, in the record of Dr. Windham’s service there is more information about the influence he had on his congregation. Three young members, William

D. Hines, Starlus Rigell, Jr., and William E. Dudley, became ministers, and Joanne Smith T became a medical missionary. Years later Winston Smith T, an FPO member who served as Moderator of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley, chose to open one meeting with a devotional as a tribute to Dr. Windham:



***Dr. A. C. Windham***

*more likely disguised as something else, something more palatable and entertaining.*

*But, for me, what others call dry, dusty doctrine is the Christian faith—the faith through which we are saved, the faith we live by and, someday, the only thing we will have to hold onto when we die. And perhaps because I sat so many Sundays and had it preached to me so persuasively, I, too, love Ephesians where the Christian faith is set out so succinctly, so distinctly, so thoroughly and so majestically.*

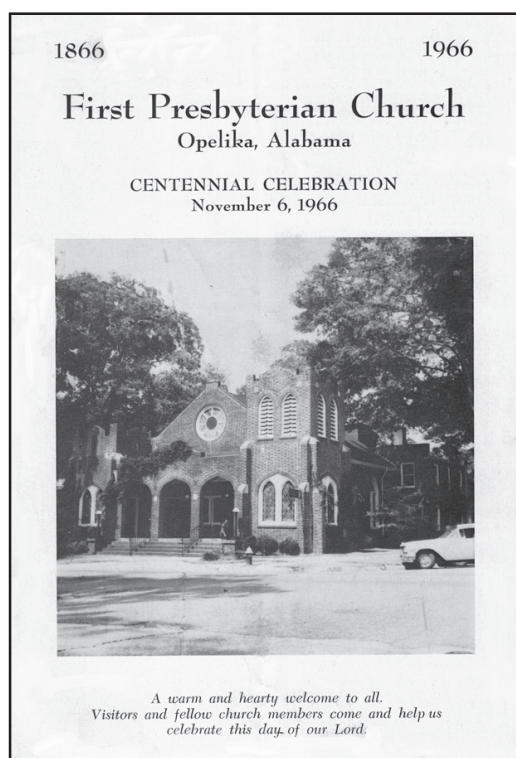
*Dr. Windham was a learned man... (He) never made the big time as far as Presbyterian preachers go. He only served four small churches during his career. One of the many things I remember about him was how in the late fifties—before there was such a thing as a civil rights movement—he solved the question of integration with his statement to a hesitant and undecided Session that ‘Of course, we won’t refuse to seat someone because of their race, and of course, we will serve communion to everybody’. I know...what his favorite book of the Bible was. It was Ephesians. I know because...about every fourth sermon came from Ephesians. I was raised on Ephesians and I was raised on doctrine. Today, doctrine has an unfavorable connotation. Doctrine is old and dusty and dry and outdated. When it’s preached at all...it’s either apologized for or*

*My grace is sufficient for you,  
for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

*2 Corinthians 12:9*

The Reverend John Henry Knight became pastor in 1961 after the death of Dr. Windham. During John Knight's eleven-year service, the church brought to a close its first 100 years with a centennial celebration honoring the years of faithfulness by our Lord. Membership reached 244 during 1966.

The early 1960s brought growth to the youth ministry at First Presbyterian with a committed group of high school students led by a member of the congregation. A highlight of the youth's activities was the Rock Eagle Missions Conference. This event, held annually in Eatonton, Georgia, was led by seminary students from Columbia Theological Seminary. The youth attending the conference heard outstanding speakers and had the opportunity to meet with Presbyterian missionaries from across the world. A clear presentation of the gospel was given and many students answered the call of Jesus Christ over this weekend. The Lord also used the FPO youth program to bring young people to the church. Howard Shockley was invited to join this group and subsequently became a member of FPO. He would later go into the ministry, eventually serving as the Stated Clerk of the Mid-Atlantic Presbytery in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.



***Program of the Centennial Celebration***

*But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever;  
You are remembered throughout all generations.*

*Psalm 102:12*

Although FPO was growing, national events were having a substantial influence on our denomination and within the local church. This was a time of great unrest in our nation and society. While the news was filled with civil rights protests, opposition to the Vietnam War, and campus riots, the denomination was facing challenges of its own.

The First Presbyterian Church of Opelika from its beginning in 1866, had been a part of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. (PCUS), also known as the Southern Presbyterian Church. By 1973, this denomination had taken a liberal course and was heading toward union with an even more liberal denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, USA (UPCUSA), or the Northern Presbyterian Church. However, FPO had always supported the conservative, traditional, and reformed doctrines of the church. It was these doctrines which were being altered, ignored, or removed by the denomination.

Many of the members, along with the Reverend John Holmes, who followed the Reverend Knight in 1972, felt that the time had come for FPO to withdraw from its original denomination, the PCUS. Although most of the members shared the same theological views, a minority of members felt that FPO should, with the Lord's help, continue "the fight" against the wrongs by staying in the PCUS.

This disagreement to leave the denomination came down to a vote by the FPO congregation on November 11, 1973. The PCUS agreed to dismiss the church from the denomination if 75% of the membership was for the motion. The vote, however, was only 66% in favor of leaving the PCUS. The majority then departed along with the Reverend Holmes to form a new church and join a new denomination. The minority group continued to be the First Presbyterian Church but decided to divide the church's assets about equally with the majority. FPO retained the church buildings and sanctuary. There were 180 departing members, and approximately 104 members remained on the church roll as 1974 began.



The search began for a new pastor. The Reverend Maurice Steinberg came from Atlanta each Sunday for several months as pulpit supply and worship continued on a regular basis. In 1974, the Reverend William Johnston, a graduate of Fuller and Columbia seminaries became the next full-time pastor. These were rebuilding years, and under the Reverend Johnston's leadership the church membership grew to 148 in 1975. The church budget was \$34,072 with 10% set aside for benevolences. In anticipation of the need for space, the church purchased the former hospital building located on the corner of 9th Street and 3rd Avenue. This is the site of the present-day parking area.



*Former Hospital, corner of 3rd Avenue and 9th Street*

International events presented the church with opportunities for service. At the time of the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the church responded to the need for accepting refugees. FPO shared support with Trinity United Methodist Church for three refugee families. A joint committee was formed to find them housing and jobs. One of the families was disciplined by a church member on Sunday nights, and in November 1976, this family was received into the church by baptism and profession of faith. They remained in Opelika until their oldest son graduated from high school and then moved to Texas. In November 2016, the mother of this Vietnamese family, Mrs. Ngoc-Huong Huynh, wrote a letter to the church summarizing her family's experience

in Opelika with FPO. Her letter concludes with these remarks: “After 40 years in the U.S. we are still so thankful for all the help and kindness of the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church in Opelika and of other congregations in the Opelika/Auburn community. We pray for other refugees in this world, so that they too would find compassion and kindness in the house of God and would find lasting peace through the teaching of Jesus. May God bless all who bring love and kindness to those who are less fortunate.”

The Reverend Johnston received a call to go to Lilburn, Georgia in 1977. Once again, FPO was seeking a new minister. In the following interim, the church was blessed to have the Reverend Harry Fifield fill the pulpit. Dr. Fifield, who retired from First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, served FPO from 1977 to 1978.

In 1978, the Reverend Jim Bankhead began his ministry at FPO. He had been on staff at Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. He resigned that position to begin 21 years of ministry to



*The Reverend Jim Bankhead*

the Opelika congregation. Many young families joined FPO during these years, and many of those same families would be instrumental in leading the church through turbulent days ahead. As a result of the growth, one wing of the former hospital was renovated to accommodate the need for Sunday School classrooms.

The FPO women were active in many worthy causes, among these the support of foreign missions. The women made over 900 White Cross bandages to ship to Bulape Hospital in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

They also supported the prison ministry and the Presbyterian Children’s Home in Talladega.

The 1983 budget was set at \$85,462. A church member wrote, “This represented a tremendous challenge for the congregation, but was a very hopeful sign that purse strings were being loosened for the causes of the Church.” The church had many opportunities to practice generosity during this time and implemented a new tradition. The

Sunday after Thanksgiving “was given over to the congregation for their opportunity to tell things for which they were thankful.”

Under the Reverend Bankhead’s leadership, the church developed a strong youth ministry. Members of the church volunteered to lead the young people, and the youth participated in the summer program “Fun in the Sun. Many FPO youth and leaders came to Christ at these events. The church continued to grow and in 1979 membership reached 225.

Perhaps the most significant event which affected the future of FPO during the Reverend Bankhead’s tenure occurred not in Opelika, nor even in Alabama. It was at the meeting of the 121st General Assembly of the PCUS in Atlanta in June of 1983. The merger of the PCUS with the UPCUSA was finalized, and First Presbyterian Church of Opelika became a part of a new denomination—The Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA). In February of that year, FPO was one of 22 churches in the John Knox Presbytery to cast a “No” vote against the merger. The “Yes” vote carried 77–22. In response to the denominational merger, a long-time member wrote in January 1984, “...the Church is weathering all misgivings and qualms and experiencing progress in all realms—spiritual, giving, enthusiasm and attendance. If the merger is of God, the new denomination will flourish.”

*Let us then with confidence draw near  
to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy  
and find grace to help in time of need.*

*Hebrews 4:16*

In 1999, the Reverend Bankhead was called to serve in Texas again, this time in Amarillo. For the seven years following the Reverend Bankhead’s departure, there were several short-term ministers beginning with the Reverend Marc Macintire, who was an ordained Baptist minister permitted to serve by special arrangement with Presbytery. The Reverend Robert Butler of Midway, South Carolina followed the

Reverend Macintire. During the absence of a permanent pastor, several interim and supply pastors were needed to fill the pulpit of FPO. The church owes a debt of gratitude to these ministers, especially Kevin Flannagan, Director of East Alabama Youth for Christ, who provided consistency in preaching and ministering to the congregation. Over these seven years the church saw a dramatic decline in membership.

There were very few visitors during these years. People in the community commented that they thought the church had closed. To members, the future of FPO looked hopeless. Sunday School was occasionally canceled because the few families with children were out of town. It was not unusual for there to be less than 30 people in worship on any given Sunday. In 2006, the Chairman of the Committee on Ministry from Presbytery asked the church to consider hiring a pastor with another church who would alternate Sundays. The committee had great concerns that FPO would not be able to offer a salary that would reach the minimum requirements. Ironically the church had faced these same challenges in 1885.

In an effort to attract new members, the Session discussed using different worship styles. Elders visited other thriving churches in the area to see what they were doing that could be incorporated into the service. Contemporary music, the use of video clips, and a casual worship service were a few of the recommendations. One member described this time in the church saying, “without clear leadership in the pulpit, FPO was experiencing an identity crisis.”

Even though circumstances looked bleak, the Lord continued to work through the church in various ways. For example, the church was able to offer its facilities to another ministry, Harvest Evangelism, for their worship services. The small group of members remained faithful to missions. After a visit from Paul Tanner, a missionary to Tanzania, the church raised money to begin a water filtration project to help the Rangi people. The church faithfully supported Traveling Light, a prison ministry, and Casa Hogar Orphanage in Reynosa, Mexico.

Though few in number, the members were deeply dedicated to one another and keenly aware of concerns that arose in the lives of their fellow Presbyterians. Lynne Schwarzauer, a member of the church, became the administrative assistant and served faithfully, becoming the “lifeline” of the church, often when no one else was there.

This was also a time that the Lord brought to the church many people with desperate needs. An FPO family, with the support of other church members, cared for the infant twins of a single mother until she had the means to provide for them. The church helped to provide housing for a couple who would have otherwise been homeless. Vacation Bible School was organized for underprivileged children. There were numerous times that the Lord sent people who might have been otherwise overlooked in a larger congregation. As the Lord used the members of the church He also grew their faith. A member reflecting on this time said, "I have no doubt that the years of what appeared to be a slowly dying church was actually a time of rebirth. The Lord was using each moment to grow us to depend on Him. We were pruned and shaped. It was a difficult time, but very necessary and timely so as we look upon the miracle of recent years we know it is His work not ours. And we were privileged to see it happen."

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation,  
be constant in prayer.*

*Romans 12:12*

After a season of waiting on the Lord, in November of 2006 the congregation unanimously voted to accept the recommendation of the Pulpit Nominating Committee to call the Reverend Jay Scott Bowen, Jr. as pastor. He had just completed his Master of Divinity at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts. He previously served Signal Mountain Presbyterian as youth intern under the leadership of Dr. William Dudley, a covenant child of FPO during Dr. Windham's pastorate. Dr. Dudley was instrumental in helping with the FPO pastor search.

The Lord was beginning an amazing change at First Presbyterian of Opelika. Initially, the Session had to meet weekly regarding the many needs of the church including administrative changes, worship, and Christian education. A class was begun to educate prospective members about the doctrine and beliefs of the church. All members were

refreshed in their understanding of Reformed faith and what it means to be a Presbyterian. During the first nine weeks under the Reverend Bowen, eleven new members joined. The total membership at the end of 2006 was 111.

Even though the desire had been to remain with the current denomination and be the conservative voice, it became evident that the theological differences were too great. In a church history record, the Reverend Bowen writes, “A look at Session minutes suggests that in reality, discussions about leaving the PCUSA extend as far back as 1982. Yet it was in February of 2007 that active and intentional steps began towards dismissal... After a period of prayer and discussion, all elders voted to move forward with the process.” For almost a full year the church thoroughly examined the issues facing the denominational change and on January 27, 2008,



*The Reverend Scott Bowen*

First Presbyterian Opelika voted to leave the PCUSA and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Seventy-eight members voted to join the EPC, eight voted to remain in the PCUSA. Negotiations with the PCUSA continued over the next few months to form a dismissal agreement suitable to all parties. The following August the request for dismissal from the PCUSA was granted, and FPO began its affiliation with the new denomination. Quoting the Reverend Bowen, “It is the basic conviction of this congregation that we exist under the unwavering authority of Scripture as the only rule for faith and life. This move aligns us with a network of churches that believes the same thing, and a denomination that will stand with us on those things we call ‘essential’ to the Christian message... The EPC affirms the fact there are certain essential truths about which the Bible is very clear. These are not up for us to decide or debate.”

Changes occurred quickly for First Presbyterian Opelika after joining the EPC. In 2009, there were 131 members and the church staff

expanded to include the Reverend David Bailey as assistant pastor and licensed professional counselor. The Reverend Bailey received a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Counseling from Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He partnered with FPO to begin the counseling ministry, Restoration Counseling. By 2010, the number of people in worship averaged 161 and discussion began in Session meetings about “reaching capacity for Sunday Worship Service, and options for additional space.” The need for an early Sunday service was discussed and begun in January of the following year.

Through the years there had been many prayers and entreaties to God for the growth of the church and for the gospel to be preached. The Lord provided the gift of sound biblical teaching and it was through this that individuals, families, and college students were drawn to the church. Many of them became an integral part of the congregation and assumed leadership roles. Small group Bible studies began and Sunday School received the structure it lacked for so many years.

2011 was a year of tremendous growth. The church was also blessed with an increase in contributions and in the first six months offerings totaled \$173,249.99. Financial gifts from 2010 to 2011 increased by \$98,000. Mission giving was not only increased and broadened, but the elders expressed the desire to “truly partner with the ministries the church supports.” A search began for a Director of Music and in June, Shane Martin was hired to fill this new position. At the end of 2011 with a membership of 236, the church started to make concrete plans for a new sanctuary. A building campaign entitled “Sow, Build, Grow” began in November of that year.

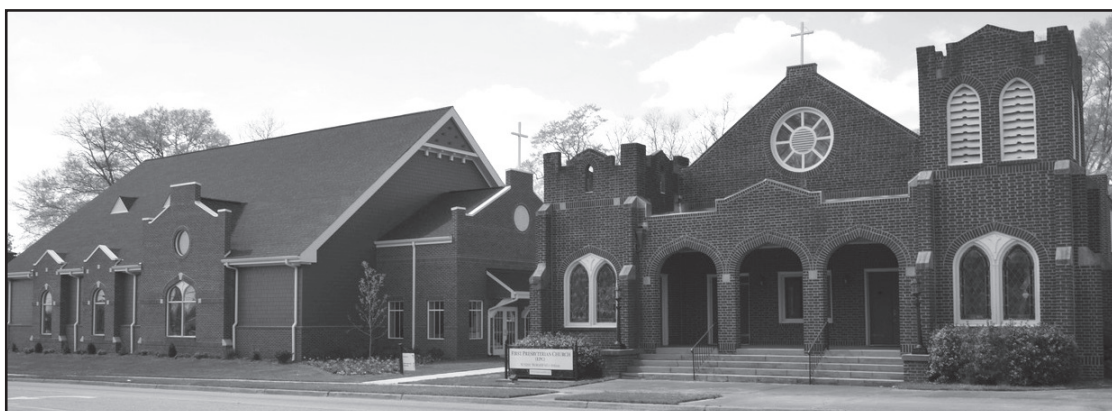
In the fall of 2012, the Reverend David Bailey expressed his desire to enter full-time into the counseling ministry and limit his pastoral duties. The church began the process of searching for a new associate pastor whose primary focus would be the assimilation of new members into the life of the church. By the end of the year, membership had grown to 320 with an average of 355 at Sunday worship. It was evident that the sanctuary was inadequate to meet the needs of a rapidly growing congregation. Groundbreaking for the new sanctuary took place on December 2, 2012.

In March of 2013, the church voted to call the Reverend Robert Tansill as Associate Pastor. The Reverend Tansill received his Master of

Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and previously served as Associate Pastor at First Congregational Church in Hamilton, Massachusetts. He began his ministry at FPO on July 1 of that year.

*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, 'Till now the Lord has helped us.'*

*1 Samuel 7:12*



*First Presbyterian Church of Opelika, present day*

After months of anticipation the new sanctuary was completed and on August 18, 2013 the dedication service for the new sanctuary was held. The congregation sang “Standing on the Promises of God” as a dedication hymn that day to remember that First Presbyterian of Opelika could stand on the promises of a faithful God who had brought them to this point. They could look forward to many years ahead in the beautiful new facility that the Lord provided. The church continued to grow and included members residing in Lee County, the surrounding counties, and even Georgia.

2014 was a year of challenge for FPO. In August of that year, the Reverend Bowen announced his acceptance of the call to become the Senior Pastor at Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church in Tennessee.



Although the bond with the Bowen family was strong, the church looked forward with confidence to the provision of the Lord. The following month, Shane Martin resigned to accept a position in Mississippi, and Lynne Schwarzauer announced her plans to retire after many years of serving the church.

While the church searched for a senior pastor, the Lord provided able leadership through the Reverend Robert Tansill and the Session. The church continued its commitment to gospel-centered teaching through preaching, small groups, and Sunday School. The members of FPO remained involved in many ministries including those to college and international students. Growth at FPO continued and the total membership reached 385 that year.

Early in 2015, the opportunity arose to purchase a home on the corner of Tenth Street and Third Avenue, adjacent to the church property. It was evident to the congregation that the additional space was needed for adult Sunday School classrooms. This facility would also offer an area for a growing youth program and committee meeting rooms. The “White House” was purchased in April with funds bequeathed to the church by Barbara Nelson. Miss Nelson had been a faithful member of the church who died prior to the arrival of the Reverend Bowen.



*White House*

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.*

*Psalm 103:1-2*

In July 2015, the church called the Reverend Noah Kiser as Senior Pastor. The Reverend Kiser received his Master of Divinity in 2010 from Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. Prior to his call to FPO, he served as Associate Pastor of Lakemont Presbyterian in Augusta, Georgia. Under the leadership of the Reverend Kiser the church continued to thrive. The Session implemented a new Shepherding Program. According to Elder Gary Page, “FPO’s Session recognizes that it is accountable to God for the church’s life and ministry and more specifically, for the people He has entrusted to us.



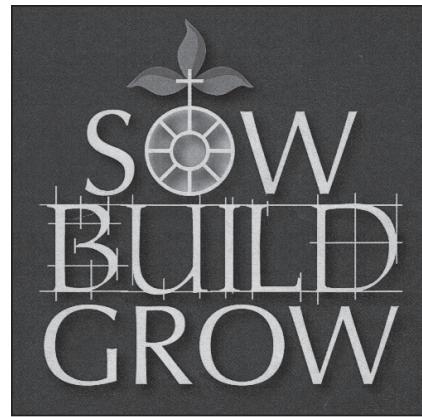
*The Reverends Noah Kiser and Robert Tansill*

The elders decided to formalize its relationship with our body of believers through aligning member family units to a ruling elder. Each elder will serve as a shepherd, guardian, and overseer to his ‘fold’.”

As the Lord continued to bless the church with many young families the lack of space for children’s ministry became a concern. In the fall of 2016, the Session presented the second phase of the “Sow, Build, Grow” campaign and it was approved by the congregation to raise funds for a children’s educational wing. The new building will extend from the present sanctuary and be located on the lot behind the fellowship hall.

Over the past ten years the church staff has grown to include new positions necessary to accommodate the needs of a growing church. We are grateful for the talents and faithfulness of the members who have been hired for these jobs: Ginger Ryan, Lisbeth Chapman, Jimmy Lynch, Sam Street, Chris Cornett, and Daniel Wells. We are also very thankful for Faye Morgan who for the past 30 years has cared for the interior of the church.

Church histories often contain only the names of pastors. We must remember, however, that their ministries can only be accomplished in partnership with ordinary members. We don’t know all of the contributions that individuals made over the years, but we do know that the Lord used these people to carry out his plan for First Presbyterian of Opelika. The Lord has by his surpassing wisdom and grace faithfully preserved his church.



***FPO Building Campaign***

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.*

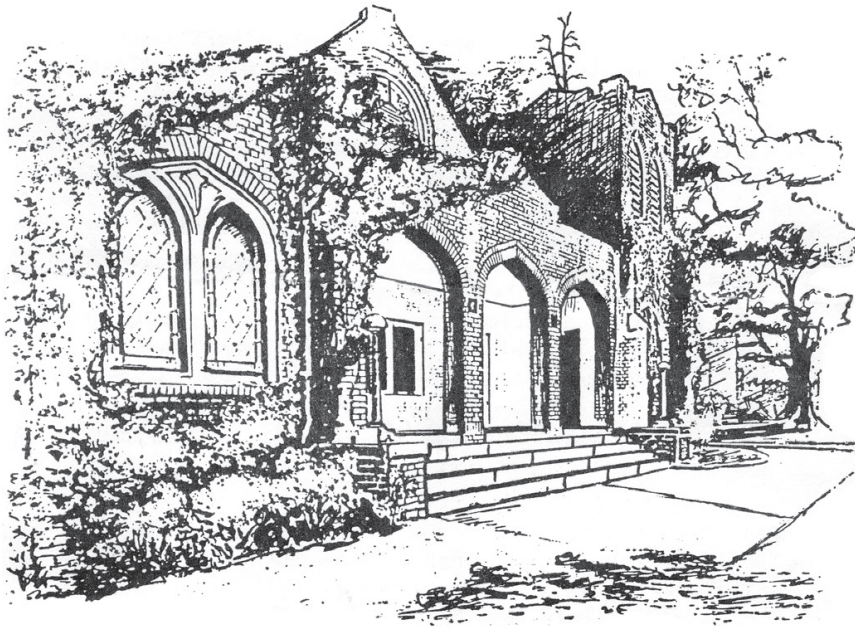
*“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”*

*Lamentations 3:22-24*



“To know our FPO story is to know a first-hand testimony of the truth of Lamentations 3:22-24 displayed in the life of a church family in Lee County, Alabama. Ours is a story that confirms the steadfast love of Jesus and His never ending faithfulness. He has been our portion for the last 150 years, and we look forward to the next 150 years with Him as our portion still. May He continue to use us to grow His family, a family daily hoping in Him alone!”

—The Reverend Noah Kiser



*The summary of The First Presbyterian Church of Opelika's 150-year history is a compilation of work. Special thanks goes to Mr. Joe Dean and his committee who spent many hours researching the church history for the first one-hundred-year celebration. Much of the information about the early church years came from the centennial booklet published in 1966.*

*The quotes from the early church records remain in the original form. The spelling or wording was not altered.*

