



## First Presbyterian Church FAMILY HISTORY SERIES



*Why God selected our FPC family for centuries to be and remain a powerful beacon of light we do not know. We only know what Christ tells us.*

*"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last." JOHN 15:16*

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*Seeking Christ; Sharing His love*

### **PART FIVE**

## THE PAST 100 YEARS

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The turn of the Twentieth Century brought with it many challenges for our nation and for our family of faith. A number of our members were called up to serve in the military during World War I. "Everyone did something for the War," recalls Cordelia Baldwin, whose great-grandfather was the Rev. Dr. George Armstrong. As the soldiers returned following the war, many became very active in the life of First Presbyterian. It would seem that the war, if anything had strengthened their faith.

In the 1920's the current Catacombs served as the church's Fellowship Hall and Kitchen. As membership grew, the church recognized the need for more space for worship and Christian education. In 1928 the second education building addition was completed, which included what became the chapel, library and restrooms.

The fall of 1929 saw the Wall Street crash that brought on the Great Depression. Hard times visited virtually everyone in the congregation. Like the early church in Acts 4:32, those who had material things shared with those in need. Cordelia Baldwin recalls her mother telling her family, "No one needs more than one sweater. We will give your second one to someone who has none."

As tough as the times were economically, God continued to bless the growth of First Presbyterian. The 1930's had a great expansion of the church's youth ministry, coming to be seen as one of the largest in Norfolk. Not surprisingly, it drew young people from churches of many different denominations.

In the 1940's, for the first time, the church began regular radio broadcasts of FPC's worship services. Being a congregation in a military town, meaningful opportunities for sharing Christ's love and grace abounded as the nation was again thrust into war with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Second War totally engulfed every facet of life of the members of FPC. Servicemen who attended worship were without exception taken home for lunch with families of the church. On one occasion early in the war, church members paid for the youngest sailors on a British ship in Norfolk to go to a two-week Christian summer camp. Twelve FPC members gave their lives in the war; a plaque honoring their sacrifice for their country is mounted in the church narthex.

From the late 1950's and well into the decade of the 1960's, the City of Norfolk was embroiled in a period of significant racial turmoil. The neighborhoods surrounding First Presbyterian fell into decline and blight. The congregation made an effort to alleviate the problems of the poor. Anyone



coming to the church who needed a meal was fed, and the kitchen was kept stocked with food just as it had been during the Great Depression. As an outreach to the local children, a homework club was established three afternoons a week. The children were tutored and given snacks by members of the church. An empty lot owned by the church was used as a playground through a partnership with the City of Norfolk. A “Well-Baby-Clinic” also utilized space provided in the church building several days a month.

From the early Nineteenth Century when First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk first built its own church building, the congregation has taken seriously Christ’s command to spread the Good News and make disciples of all nations. FPC has been instrumental in starting fourteen new churches in Hampton Roads.

In a period when other churches in Ghent decided to move to the suburbs, First Presbyterian made the conscious decision to stay. A report from a special committee formed by the Session believed that FPC could best serve Christ by remaining in its present location. With the decision to remain, the church acquired additional properties to expand the parking lot so that members who had moved to outlying areas could continue to find accessible parking when they came for worship.

However, there was danger in remaining an urban church during this turbulent period. First Baptist Church of Norfolk (which was then located on the corner of Raleigh and Moran Avenues) was fire bombed and reduced to rubble. By God’s grace, First Presbyterian was never damaged in this time of racial strife.

In 1959 the Commonwealth of Virginia closed the secondary schools in Norfolk to avoid racial integration. Significantly, the Session voted in February 1961 that “admission to the sanctuary should not be denied to anyone sincerely interested in his spiritual welfare and desiring to have a part in our services. It is also our opinion that no regulation should be adopted that would appear to bar anyone from joining us in worship.” The Session went on to say that an African-American visitor should be seated at or near the front of the church. (At the time, most African-Americans were forced to sit at the back of buses used as public transportation, so FPC’s action was clear in its rejection of segregation.)

By the mid-1970’s, FPC membership was experiencing strong growth. To address the need for more space, “The Fourth Century Campaign” was undertaken. Construction of the new Fellowship Hall, a new Kitchen, Commons, and several new educational classrooms was completed in 1978. At this time, a new outreach of the church was expanding that would soon require even more space.

First Presbyterian Church began “Mothers’ Morning Out” one day a week as a ministry for new mothers in the congregation in 1978. As time progressed, Pam Fairchild initiated a Preschool Program, which began very small with a half-day class for 2-year-olds on Tuesdays and Thursdays and a half-day program for 3-year-olds on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

By 1981 the Preschool had grown so much that Jean Russell, wife of Pastor J. Shepherd “Shep” Russell, was hired to serve as its Director. Under her leadership, the Preschool flourished, and the existed facilities became so overcrowded that a portable classroom was parked parallel to the



church building. Another capital campaign helped build a new wing for the church, with the first floor dedicated to Preschool use, and the second floor was for Adult Sunday School use. The Preschool was then able to offer its Christ-centered program to even more children.

The 1990's saw First Presbyterian begin a new emphasis on local missions. In 1992 FPC first partnered with the Norfolk Emergency Shelter Team (NEST) to give 60-80 homeless people a warm place to stay at night for one week during winter months, with the church offering building space and over a hundred church volunteers to care for them. Other churches and synagogues would take turns throughout the rest of the season.

The current FPC Soup Kitchen was started in 1993. Each Saturday 50-100 people in need of a nutritious hot meal are served. Dozens of volunteers are regularly involved in this ministry, and they rotate their service throughout the month.

In the late 1990's FPC had a vision for a contemporary worship service. Expecting about 50 people to be interested, the service was scheduled to be held in the Chapel. Word spread, and the week before it was scheduled to begin, a decision was made to move the worship space to the Fellowship Hall as it became clear that the number was going to overflow the seating of the Chapel. Its first Sunday in 1999 saw more than 200 in contemporary worship and has grown to over 300, maxing out its space and becoming an impetus for the "Growing In This Love" capital campaign launched in 2005. In addition to the 9:30 contemporary service, the church continued to have two traditional services, one at 8:30am and one at 11:00am.

A time of war and uncertainty visited America again with the terrorist attacks in Washington, DC, and New York City on September 11, 2001. That evening First Presbyterian held an interdenominational prayer service at the Harrison Opera House to seek the Lord's face on that tragic day. The congregation kept military members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq in prayer as well as sending Bibles and notes of encouragement. The Preschool made care packages that were sent to help children in Afghanistan and demonstrate God's unfailing love for them.

In the first decade of the Twenty-First Century, under the leadership of Senior Pastor Jim Wood, First Presbyterian developed a vision for becoming a missional church. Thus began the expansion of ministries not only in the vicinity of FPC, but across its community, nation and the world.

FPC members started the Park Place Child Life Center a couple miles from the church to reach out to the urban children of Park Place with the love and hope of Jesus. During the week, dozens of volunteers come to help the children with homework with an emphasis on developing long-term relationships with the youth. Christ-centered programming on Saturdays includes art, dance and karate classes

Our family of faith began mission trips in Central America. Teams participated in ministry projects in Honduras and Guatemala. In 2001 a more long-term relationship was developed between Vida Joven Nicaragua (Young Life Nicaragua) and First Presbyterian Norfolk. This important ministry introduces youth to a personal relationship with Christ and seeks to raise up godly leaders for the country. Mission teams of 20-50 people traveled to the Vida Joven camp to help build construction projects on the property, to run a medical clinic & Vacation Bible School for the local villages, and to install clean water systems.



Around the same time, long-time Presbyterian missionaries Drs. Richard and Judith Brown, served many years in medical missions in the Congo (the former Zaire) and later Kenya. They were members of FPC and received a portion of the financial support from our congregation. As the AIDS pandemic began to rage across Africa in the late 1990's, the Browns began the treatment of HIV+ patients. When anti-retroviral medications became available as a result of financial support from the US and the World Global Fund, the Browns saw the great need for clinics that would be able to treat the patients and distribute these life-saving drugs.

The Holy Family Centre on the grounds of Nazareth Hospital became the center of their work just outside of Nairobi, Kenya. In 2005 a small mission team from FPC visited the Browns to discern how FPC could become more involved in their work. From that visit began a strong relationship with Nazareth Hospital and First Presbyterian Norfolk as the "Tree of Lives" ministry was launched to share the Good News of Jesus relationally and incarnationally in this important project. Senior Pastor Jim Wood decided to spend his six month sabbatical (September 2005-February 2006) at Nazareth to help strengthen ties and during his stay numerous members of the congregation visited to lead surgical/medical teams, to install clean water systems and to lead children's ministry. The Tree of Lives ministry expanded its reach to encompass all these ministries as well as pastoral counseling, hunger ministries, and mentorship programs for young men and women as they entered adulthood.

As He has demonstrated in the more than three centuries of the history of First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, the Holy Spirit is continuing to use the FPC family as His hands and feet to share the love and grace of Jesus Christ in word and deed in our community, nation, and world.

**We should leave no less a legacy for future generations than was left for us.**

"For the Love of Christ urges us on..." 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14

*Presented by FPC Long Range Planning Committee in conjunction with our Growing in This Love capital campaign.*