

FAIRFIELDS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH HISTORY

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When John Wesley sent lay preachers to America, it was not with the intent of starting a new church. But the timing was ideal for that purpose, for a spirit of revolution had been growing for several years in the English colonies. On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence officially proclaimed the intent of the colonies to sever their ties from their mother country. It was then that Wesley made the decision to allow the American preachers to organize themselves into a separate denomination. In a meeting held in Baltimore, at Lovely Lane Church, on Christmas Eve of 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church was established. Francis Asbury became its first bishop, and general superintendent of the church.

Methodism had begun in Virginia in 1774, but did not reach the isolated Northern Neck until May of 1785. Francis Asbury had been invited to visit Colonel Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, which was in Westmoreland County. Arriving in Lancaster County by ferry from Urbanna, Asbury spent a night (or possibly two) in Lancaster, then went on to Westmoreland to visit with Carter. This is what Asbury wrote in his journal:

Perhaps the providence of God led me this way, that I might see and learn to pity the state of the people in the Northern Neck of Virginia I have been sensibly affected with their situation.

A few weeks later Asbury formed the Lancaster Circuit, which included all the counties of the Northern Neck. Two circuit riders, the Reverends Joseph Everett and Lewin Ross, were sent to develop and serve this circuit. Within the first year they had established twenty-seven preaching places throughout the Northern Neck. Many of them eventually became churches.

One of those preaching places was in the Fairfields area where services, at first, were held in a barn. On January 11, 1787, Asbury recorded, "Rode through the snow to Fairfields. Here a Captain R. had turned the people out of the barn in which worship was held." The following year, on Christmas day, 1788, Asbury wrote, "I preached in the open house at Fairfields." [An open house was a brush arbor, a crude shelter with corner posts and a roof structure covered with branches. It provided some protection from the sun, but little more.]

Two early converts to Methodism were John and Jemima Lansdale, who owned a plantation in the Fairfields area. On August 11, 1789, the Lansdales gave an acre of their land to a group of trustees: Daniel Haynie, Isaac Webb, Samuel Harding, John Blundall, Cuthbert Elliston, Thomas Schofield (of Northumberland County), and John Degges (of Lancaster County). The land, described as being "bounded on one side by the main road leading into Hacks Neck, and another side by the main road leading into Hulls Neck," was to be held in perpetual trust for the exclusive use of "those preachers known by the name of Methodists." On that land, at least three successive buildings were erected, the last one in 1849. The church still owns that acre of land today. It now is part of Old Fairfields Cemetery.

In late September, 1790, the Reverend William Hill arrived in Lancaster County. His aim for the visit was to try to revive the Presbyterian denomination in the lower Northern Neck. Over the next several weeks, Hill preached wherever he could in both Lancaster and Northumberland counties, keeping a journal of his activities. In that journal, he reported that he preached at "Fairfields Meeting-house." This means that in the year since the land was given, the Fairfields Methodists either had erected a meetinghouse on the land, or that there had been one on the land when it was deeded to them.

Each year, from 1785 through 1795, two circuit riders were sent to the Northern Neck. As the number of preaching places grew, the ministers would organize the people into groups, called classes or societies. By 1790, records of the

annual conferences show that there were 1,013 persons “in Society” on the Lancaster circuit. One of the two preachers would begin to travel the circuit, and the second preacher would follow two weeks later. Each of them would visit a preaching place daily, hold a worship service, and then a class meeting. That night, they would spend the night with one of their parishioners, then get up early the next morning to ride to the next preaching place. The circuit riders had no fixed place of residence. They carried their wardrobe and their possessions in their saddlebag. At the completion of the circuit, they would take one day off, to do their laundry and take care of business or personal matters, then began the circuit again.

In 1796, the Lancaster Circuit was transferred out of the Virginia Annual Conference and into the Baltimore Conference. This was because the people of the Northern Neck had closer economic ties to Baltimore, by way of water, than to the rest of Virginia.

The next mention of Fairfields is found in the extant records of the Lancaster Circuit. On July 26, 1817, “Fairfields Chapel” is named as one of the preaching places on the circuit. And on an old map of lower Northumberland County, believed to have been drawn in the 1820s (and contained in the archival materials at the Library of Virginia), M.M House is shown at the precise location of the acre at Edwardsville. Obviously, the initials stand for “Methodist Meeting.”

In 1809-10, the Reverend Benedict Burgess was appointed to Lancaster Circuit. During that appointment, he met and married a local woman, and settled in what now is Burgess, which was named for him. He remained active as a "local preacher," and also became involved in a reform movement that sought lay representation in the decision-making for the denomination. He and several other local men, one of whom was John Lansdale, Jr., attended a Reformers' Convention in 1828. On the first Sunday after their return, the minister in charge expelled them from Fairfields Church. On Christmas Day of 1828, under the leadership of the Reverend Burgess, a separate congregation was organized at Fairfields. In time, this separate congregation united with the newly-formed Methodist Protestant Church, and the people of Fairfields were divided. For a time, Fairfields continued as a preaching place on the Lancaster Circuit, and ministers from both the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Protestant circuits used it.

In 1835, the records of the Lancaster circuit show that the circuit riders still preached at Fairfields. In fact, Fairfields was responsible that year for the sum of \$75. for the expenses of the circuit.

A listing of the members of a quarterly conference, held in 1839, of the Heathsville Circuit of the Methodist Protestant Church includes the following persons: Thomas Taylor [then the minister], Benedict Burgess, Samuel Walker, James M. Smith, William Harding, Cyrus Harding, Hiram Harding, Noah N. Cockrell, William E. Jett, John Lansdale, Thomas W. Hughlett, Henry Sutton, Thomas Douglas, Luke Ball, Walter Morrison, John Ingram, William Moore, Robert Esk-ridge, James Snow, Samuel Burgess, M. B. Cralle, Daniel Headley, and William Wilson. Although the list does not match the names of the members with their church, it is likely that the following were members of Fairfields: Benedict Burgess, Noah N. Cockrell, William E. Jett, John Lansdale, Robert Eskridge, and Samuel Burgess. Samuel Walker, Walter Morrison, and William Moore also might have been Fairfields members.

In the 1840s, controversy over slavery had become a major issue both in the secular world and in various denominations. Unable to resolve their differences, the Methodist Episcopal Church split into north and south branches and the territory was divided. Most of Virginia was assigned to the southern branch, but because of its long-standing economic relationship with Baltimore, the Northern Neck was assigned to the Baltimore Conference, the northern branch. In 1847, the Methodist Episcopal churches on the Northern Neck "seceded," contrary to

agreement, and united with the southern branch. Official complaints were registered, but nothing ever came of them. It is likely that the Fairfields Methodist Protestant congregation considered that this was the ideal time to take action to claim the church property.

A new brick church, funded entirely by the Methodist Protestant congregation, was erected on the "joint" property in 1849-50. After a brief legal skirmish between the two congregations, the court awarded legal ownership of the property to Fairfields Methodist Protestant congregation in 1850. By this time, the Heathsville Circuit of the Methodist Protestant had grown to include the following congregations: Fairfields, Ebenezer, Forrest Chappel [later called Smyrna], Heathsville, Wicomico, Union Church, Hacks Neck [later Afton], Shiloh, and Liberty Chapel.

The new brick church was plain and simple in design. A rectangular building, it had two doors on the front, as was the style of that era. One door was for the women and one for the men. They opened into a narthex with twin stairways, one on either side, which led to the balcony, and a door into the sanctuary. Inside the sanctuary, there was a center aisle with pews on either side. Men usually sat on one side of the aisle and women on the other, although occasionally young married couples would sit together near the center aisle. The youth of the congregation preferred to sit in the balcony, which ran around three sides of the interior and was four pews deep.

Within ten years, the congregation had outgrown the new brick building. They discussed lengthening it, as they could not accommodate all the people, but there is no evidence that this was done. It is likely that the Civil War put those plans on hold. Then, after the war, they lost a significant number of their members when their black members left to form a separate congregation. There are no extant records that detail just how this came about, but it is likely, as in other local black congregations for which records do exist, that the black members requested that they be allowed to take positions of responsibility and leadership in the church, or, if that was denied, that they be given letters of dismissal for the purpose of forming their own church. The church that the former members of Fairfields formed was first called Fairfields Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Today, it is Galilee United Methodist Church.

By 1870, the Heathsville Circuit of the Methodist Protestant Church had lost Union Church [located at what is now called Village], and Shiloh [probably in Balls Neck]. Some of the members of the remaining churches on the circuit began to favor a union with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In November, the circuit sent Littleton Cockrell as their delegate to the Annual Conference to cast the vote of the circuit for that union. That vote was on the winning side of the issue. The Virginia Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church disbanded to unite with the southern branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church. But shortly thereafter, Fairfields and some of the other local churches rejected that decision for them-selves, and requested of the Maryland Methodist Protestant Conference that they be admitted. Their petition stated that they disapproved "of the church union proposed," and declared themselves "firm adherents to the Methodist Protestant Church." Joining them in that decision were Afton, Wicomico, Liberty, and a few members of Heathsville and Smyrna. The majority of the members of Heathsville formed a new congregation and eventually erected the white frame building that now is the Heathsville United Methodist Church. The majority of the members of Smyrna organized Edgely Church and put up a new building at the intersection of Davis Mill Road with Route 202. All that remains of Edgely are the front steps, the gate posts, and the cemetery. The former building of Heathsville Methodist Protestant Church is now used as a law office. Today, Fairfields, Afton, Wicomico, and Ebenezer are the only four remaining former Methodist Protestant churches of the Heathsville Circuit.

The Maryland Methodist Protestant Conference accepted the request from the "firm adherents," and appointed a pastor for the greatly-diminished circuit. This relationship continued for nearly seven decades.

Between 1881 and 1901, the membership of Fairfields grew to 207. Wicomico had 106, and Afton, 80. In that same period, Liberty had 47, Smyrna had 42, and Heathsville had only 15. The last of the latter three churches closed its doors in the 1930s, leaving a three-point charge, then called the Northumberland Charge. Today, Fairfields and Afton comprise the Northumberland Charge.



Old Fairfields Methodist Protestant Church. This picture probably was taken several years after the congregation had moved to Burgess. The building eventually was dismantled, and the bricks used to build a beachfront cottage nearby.

Over the years, the land around the church lot had changed hands. In 1906, it was purchased by William H. and Rosa Dodson. The following year, the church purchased additional land from the Dodsons and received a deed for a parcel of land that included the lot on which the church stood.

In 1921, it was determined that Old Fairfields was beyond repair, and that a new building would be erected: not at Edwardsville, but at Burgess. This was not a unanimous decision by all the members, as there was a significant number who did not want to change the site of the church. Eventually, several members and their families left the church and united with other congregations in the area. On November 18, 1921, a small parcel of land at Burgess was purchased (for half its market value) from Miss Mamie Koenig and Mrs. M. E. Sydnor. The land was part of the estate called Versailles, which formerly had belonged to Colonel Samuel Burgess, the son of the Reverend Benedict Burgess.



Fairfields United Methodist Church, 1926-1992. A few copies of a color print by member/artist Mary Lou Hann are still

By the early 1900s, the members of Fairfields realized that they had lost their knowledge of how they had obtained their land. They were reasonably certain that there had once been a deed, but no one living had seen it. A search was made in the county records, but the deed was not found. [As it turned out, the deed had not been indexed in the general index.]

In 1923, the conference sent the Reverend Clayborne Phillips to what then was the Northumberland Charge of the Methodist Protestant Church. The Reverend Phillips was experienced in building new churches, and knew that he had been sent to oversee the construction of Fairfields' new building.

The Reverend Phillips' son, Leroy

available. [Used with permission of the artist]

Phillips, was a young student who was majoring in architecture. His father shared with him some ideas that he would like to have incorporated in the new building and asked if he could draw some plans. Leroy did so, creating a Gothic Revival style building, which he drew on a piece of cardboard. The church was built using that sketch as the only building plan. No blueprints were made.

Under the Reverend Phillips' supervision, the finest master builders in Northumberland County were hired, and top quality materials were selected. From a shipbuilding company on the Eastern Shore, contoured and radiused pews (of butcher block construction) were ordered. The church was completed in 1926, and stood until 1992.

The three main branches of Methodism united in 1939, and Fairfield's became Fairfield's Methodist Church. Another union in 1968 made it Fairfield's United Methodist Church. And the principles of a stronger voice for the laity that had created Methodist Protestantism were adopted.

On January 10, 1992, members of the church were awakened by phone calls informing them that their building was in flames. It could not be saved; within a few hours nothing remained but rubble.

In the following days, even more shocks remained to be faced by the members as they learned the circumstances that led to the burning of the building. But, undaunted, they quickly began planning for the future. An important first step was taken on February 23 when they began meeting at Fairfield's Elementary School.

The next four months were busy ones, as the members worked together to accomplish the necessary tasks to enable them to collect the insurance money and meet the various deadlines. Through the generosity of two members, Harry and Ellen Alexander, adjacent land was purchased and held until the church was in a position to legally take possession of it. A local architect drew plans, and put together a report for the insurance company on the replacement costs. The church members truly learned the meaning of the word family during those difficult days. They were united in their goal, to see Fairfield's Church rebuilt, and learned that with reliance upon God



The Reverend Marion Paul White, 2003. This photo was made shortly before he was appointed to his twelfth year as pastor of the Northumberland Charge.

the seemingly impossible can be accomplished.

On July 1, Fairfield's welcomed the Reverend Marion Paul White as its minister. His first official act was to sign his permission for rebuilding, and a contract with the architect/contractor. Two months later, in a celebration service attended by a large number of well-wishers, ground was broken on August 30, 1992 for the new building.



Thirteen months after the contracts were signed the church was consecrated in a joyful service attended by several hundred people. Before long, the church began a full schedule of activities and prepared for growth. In January 2003, eleven years after the fire, Fairfield's United Methodist Church was strong and healthy. Membership growth had been phenomenal; it was necessary to enlarge the sanctuary by about

Fairfield's United Methodist Church, 2003. The congregation consecrated and dedicated this building in August of 1993. Ten years later, the sanctuary was enlarged because of the growth in membership.

50 seats.

In the meantime, the United Methodist Men erected a large and attractive pavilion. Later, they converted the open pavilion to an attractive and comfortable activities building which they turned over to the church for multiple uses. Since then, it has been used for parties, dances, picnics, and dinners. Successful Vacation Bible Schools have been held there. The building also is available for rent by individuals, and is offered free of charge to some organizations (such as Alcoholics Anonymous).

In addition to the Activities Building, there is also a playground, gazebo, and walking track, all for the use of church members and the community. In March of 2005, we had to say goodbye to our beloved M. P. White, who was retiring. As interim pastor, the Conference appointed Eddie Barnett, whose tour of duty as an Army chaplain in the Middle East had just ended. While there the convoy he was in came under attack. We came to love him in the few months he was with us.

At Annual Conference of 2005 Eddie was appointed to a church in Roanoke, and the Reverend Brant Hays and his wife, Barbara, came to serve the



Members Carolyn and Reggie Shaw relax at a fifties-style sock hop party held at the Activities Building.

Northumberland Charge. They served the church from July 2005 to June 2009. Brant grew up in Oak ridge Tennessee (also known as the Secret City) where the Atomic Bomb was developed during World War II. Brant's ambition was to be a major league baseball player when he got the call for the ministry. He spent many hours

preparing his sermons often intertwining his personal experience. Barbara with her musical and educational background lent her talents to the children. She told them biblical stories often having them act them out. Together they were a much beloved team. They both supported the many activities of the church. During the Fall festivals they would dress as clowns and entertain the children. Brant was the driving force behind the establishment of this WEB site.

Reverend Hays was succeeded by Reverend John Jones in July 2009. Reverend Jones had served as the minister of the Methodist Church on Tangier Island in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. He was accompanied by his wife Sherry and their two sons. Every minister leaves a memorable mark on the church they served. Reverend Jones encouraged, urged, prodded the congregation to dust off their personal bibles and bring them to church. Here again his wife Sherry was instrumental working with the children. Reverend Jones worked closely with the Trustees to bring about several physical improvements to the church grounds and the church office. He personally led an investigation into the use of solar, wind and thermal energy to power and cool the church. Although neither was used the knowledge gained may very well serve the church in the future. God works in mysterious ways. When Reverend Jones and his family departed for their new assignment, many of Fairfield's United Methodist Church's members decided to join our sister church, Afton United Methodist Church in Ophelia. Afton was suffering from a declining membership and finances. The infusion of new blood brought about new leadership and increased finances.

In July 2012, Reverend Seonyoung Kim joined Fairfield's United Methodist Church. Although she was only with us for two years she was loved and respected by all. It is difficult to tell the reader about her, because if one says that she was as close to an angel as an earthling can be, she would look that person directly in the face, and say quietly, but not in a scolding tone, "You should not say that." Pastor Kim had no favorites. Everyone was her favorite. If she wanted to give a gift to someone, she bought the exact same gift for everyone in the church. She apparently has a gift from God: a sixth sense that informs her if someone in her flock is hurting, either emotionally or physically. She then finds the words and the way to comfort them and bear the pain. (I discussed this with a colleague and he agreed with me. He then said, "Carolyn, the word that you are looking for is "empathy." Pastor Kim not only recognizes another person's pain. She feels their pain, and shares it with them.") She worked with the Methodist Men with their fund raiser for the Light Street Improvement Project that provided indoor plumbing and electricity to one of the poorer sections of Northumberland County. When it came to "giving" she explained in simple terms how she increased her giving to the church by a small "sliver" each year. Pastor Kim was a blessing to Fairfield's, and we didn't want to give her up, but we take comfort in the knowledge that God is using her to help others. Reverend Kim is now a District Superintendent.

Our next pastor was the Reverend Moses Kwon Hong Min. He was born in South Korea in a Christian family. He attended the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul and graduated in 2006, with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Two years later, in America, he enrolled in Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D. C. where he received his Master of Divinity degree in 2011. From there he traveled to Texas to attend the Dallas Theological Seminary where, in 2013, he received another Masters degree in Bible Study. It was there that he met the beautiful Grace Kim, the daughter of a Baptist minister. Grace Kim has a deep background in the Christian faith. Her studies led her to a bachelor's in piano performance and she is pursuing a master's in Christian school education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. At the Virginia Annual Conference of 2014, Moses was commissioned a Provisional elder of the Virginia conference and appointed to serve the Northumberland Charge. His first day in the pulpit at Fairfield's United Methodist Church was Sunday, June 29, 2014. In January 2015, Grace and Moses were married in the Wesley Chapel of the Methodist Theological seminary in Seoul, Korea. They are now the parents of little Joseph. *[Insert added to take the 'pastors' section of Carolyn Jett's remarkable history to 2018: Moses served through June*

2017 when he was appointed to a Korean church in Norfolk VA.

His replacement is the Reverend John Wright who joined us on July 2, 2017. He and his wife Kay have two grown children. Raised near Princeton WV, John got electrical engineering undergraduate and Masters degrees at Virginia Tech. He worked at Naval Surface Warfare Center and retired in mid-2017 to accept appointment at Northumberland Charge and, as such, serves Fairfield and Afton UMC as pastor. As a layman he began participating in prison ministry with the Epiphany program for juveniles and also the UMC's Volunteers In Missions where he served in the US, Peru, Costa Rica and Mexico. This seemingly tireless man has been very well received at Fairfields where he not only is pastor but also sings tenor in the choir and actively supports our programs and functions.]

As our predecessors worked to establish this church, so we, the members and constituents of Fairfields, have worked to continue it. For ours is a precious heritage, one not to be taken lightly. It is our privilege and responsibility to keep Fairfields United Methodist Church "a sign of God's love in our community."