

# **A Local History Of The Church Of Christ At Antioch**

In the late eighteen hundreds not long before the end of the Nineteenth Century an evangelist with the last name of Hamilton came to this area from Central Indiana to preach God's word. His efforts resulted in the beginning of Christians meeting to worship God in the community of Antioch in Eastern Hillsborough County of Florida. Why Brother Hamilton came to this area or any of the details of the beginning of the congregation are unknown to me. These are just the gleanings of the earliest memories of an elderly Christian born around 1900 that I spoke with years ago.

The early evangelistic efforts must have made quite a stir in the community in those days because even as recently as when I was a youngster some of the old-timers in the neighborhood still referred to us as "The Campbellites" after Alexander Campbell. This was not meant to be complimentary but at least they did understand that we were clearly a part of the restoration movement in believing that New Testament Christianity could be restored by teaching and preaching God's word without man made creeds.

Not long after the congregation began, a landowner whose last name was Simpson donated about four acres of land to the church as a location for the construction of a church building. I haven't read any documents that show the exact date of the construction however the elderly Christian that shared with me his early memories remembered clearly that in 1920 the building was already showing signs of age.

The original building was very small and built with narrow tongue-in-groove wooden planks as was typical of the era. It had just a small stoop on the front as an entrance. It must have been built before there was electricity in the area because I remember places along the walls to place lanterns. The seating was not wooden pews but rather very uncomfortable benches made from wooden slats. Many people brought cushions from home to make the benches more bearable.

In 1955 construction of classrooms, a baptistery and indoor bathrooms were added to the rear of the building using concrete blocks and are still part of the present building. To give you an idea of the size of the original building, the doors that now enter the classrooms were on the outside of the old building. In 1962 part of the land was sold to pay for construction of our present building. I wish now that we could have preserved the old building but at the time preservation wasn't on our minds, rather the excitement of having a new building and the challenge of filling it.

As recently as a few years ago, we expanded to the north side of the building for an additional classroom and moved the restrooms to make the auditorium larger. The remodeling was made complete with the purchase of comfortable padded pews that make quite a contrast with those original uncomfortable wooden benches.

The Antioch Church Of Christ is said to be the oldest continuous existing congregation of Christians in Hillsborough County. There has never been a split in the congregation such as has happened to others in years past but it has had more than its share of problems. There have been problems arising from doctrinal differences between individuals, personality conflicts and of course problems caused by sins of various members over the years. All of which I have witnessed and sadly a few I have shared in.

A wonderful blessing that has been showered upon this congregation is all of the great Gospel preachers that have stood in the pulpit. When I first began attending Antioch in 1958 there had been several regular preachers previously, one of which whose last name was Todd. At the time however when I started, the only preaching was by young men who were students at Florida College. In 1961 Wilbur Murray retired from his job in Tampa and preached regularly at Antioch for \$25 a week, all of which he placed back into the collection.

During the late sixties Wilbur Murray's son, Charles Murray began his noteworthy career of preaching the Gospel. In 1971 Thomas Thornhill began preaching regularly for Antioch. He worked a lot in the local community and was the only preacher that actually lived on the property in a manufactured home. During the middle seventies a very knowledgeable and energetic young man by the name of David West began his career at Antioch.

One of the most memorable preachers from the past was James R Cope who preached here during the late Seventies. James Cope was known all over the United States as a result of his work with Florida College in nearby Temple Terrace. When he retired he was president of the college. We loved him very much and he loved to preach and preach and preach. I can't help but grin when I look at the sign in front of our building. If you look closely you'll see we have listed not only our begin times but also the times for the services to end. Those times of services were copied from the old wooden sign that we had when James Cope was preacher. For Brother Cope a short sermon was at least 60 minutes so someone added the proposed ending times to the sign, not because the public needed the information but as a subtle hint for Brother Cope. James Cope mentored many young men attending Florida College by allowing them to assist with the work at Antioch. Most are now very capable Gospel preachers.

In about the year 1985, James Cope left Antioch to focus on beginning new congregations and we were blessed to have Philip (Phil) Roberts begin working with the Antioch congregation. Phil was a most beloved professor at Florida College and one of the most knowledgeable Bible scholars to have stood in the pulpit at Antioch. For a few years during the early Nineties Phil Roberts took a leave of absence to study for his Doctorate Degree and during that time he was ably replaced by Marty Pickup. After the two year absence, Phil Roberts returned and preached regularly until he lost his earthly life to cancer in the year 2005.

Beginning in the middle nineties we were blessed with the excellent preaching of Thaxter Dickey who shared the pulpit with Phil Roberts. Their work even overshadows the significance that Brother Cope had with the rich history of this local congregation of God's people. I count it a wonderful blessing to have had the opportunity to sit at their feet and hear God's word proclaimed. After the death of Phil Roberts, Thaxter Dickey continued with the congregation and David McClister began sharing the pulpit with him. At the time of this writing we continue to be blessed with excellent Bible teaching and preaching from David McClister and Thaxter Dickey. Both are Bible professors as well as wonderful preachers of God's word.

It is my prayer that God will continue to bless this wonderful little congregation.