

The History of the Presbyterian Church  
In Oxford, Mississippi

By: Hugh Stephens

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors  
College.

Oxford  
April 2016

Approved by:

---

Advisor: Dr. Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez

---

Reader: Dr. Darren Grem

---

Reader: Dr. Robert Barnard

## **ABSTRACT**

A history of College Hill Presbyterian Church, First Presbyterian Church, and Christ Presbyterian Church of Oxford Mississippi. Research included interviews of the current pastors, old members, and founding members of the churches. Old church minutes, articles, and histories were also very helpful. It became apparent that there were geological, social, and theological issues that created a need for the three churches within the community.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. College Hill Presbyterian Church.....	7
3. First Presbyterian Church, Oxford.....	17
4. Race Relations within Oxford.....	28
5. The Presbyterian Schism.....	39
6. Christ Presbyterian Church.....	45
7. The Current and Future Churches of Oxford.....	63
8. Conclusion.....	77

© 2016  
Hugh Marion Stephens III  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## **Introduction**

The Church stands as an epicenter of social relationships for many Southern Americans. More than a building, it serves as a community where Christians gather, worship, and grow alongside one another. The truly remarkable thing is that for generations men and women have viewed the church not just as a community, but as a part of what makes them who they are. Families, traditions, and memories are all things that make up part of the Southern Church. It is part of their identity. The South holds deep roots of Christian tradition, and in many cases families can trace back the faith of their ancestors for over a hundred years through church minutes and lists of members. The history of faith in Oxford Mississippi Churches precedes all else.

Oxford, a small town in Mississippi, holds an enthralling history of Presbyterian churches harkening all the way back to 1835. The town instantly floods one's mind of thoughts of William Faulkner, James Meredith, the 1962 football team, and the University of Mississippi, but perhaps the richest history of the old town lies in the history of the Presbyterian Church. Oxford holds three Presbyterian Churches, two of which date back to the mid-1800s. Their stories are those of growth, change, conflict, civil rights, and wars. Oxford Mississippi has faced many social and economic trials, and

with the Presbyterian Churches of the town have had to deal with almost all of them along the way. Within the walls of those churches and the stories of those who call themselves the church lays a rich history.

The question does however remain of why, in a town that just recently reached 20,000 people, are there three Presbyterian churches? What types of different communities do they serve, and do they function as one unit? College Hill Church and Christ Presbyterian Church are both members of the Presbyterian Church in America, and First Presbyterian Church is a member of the Presbyterian Church USA. All three churches possess large congregations that have seen growth in the last several decades. Each church serves a different purpose within the Oxford community, and when the history of Oxford and the South in general is taken into consideration you can really begin to unfold Oxford Presbyterianism and understand the three churches more thoroughly. In the time and place that each church was created, Oxford had a necessity for them, and today, in 2016, each church still fills a niche within the ever-changing and growing community that is Oxford.

College Hill stands as a traditional and historic church seven miles outside of Oxford. This PCA Church teaches conservative reformed theology and adheres to the inherency of God. For those who want a PCA church that hosts traditional services with robes and the trinity hymnal, College Hill is a perfect fit. Christ Presbyterian is also a PCA Church, but it tends to more communally based. The services are not as traditional, and there is even a desire to be a multi-cultural church filled with all kinds of different cultures, people, and worship styles. Christ Presbyterian teaches the same conservative reformed theology that College Hill does, but the service style is more modern and

different. Many Presbyterians find this appealing, and in Oxford, a place with a diverse and accepting culture, the Church has grown very quickly. First Presbyterian is vastly different than the other two churches. There is really no relationship between the other two churches and First Presbyterian mostly because First Presbyterian is in a different denomination, the PCUSA. The PCUSA has more liberal theology and allows for things such as female pastors. First Presbyterian has a more eclectic type of theology that tries to relate to and face issues of social justice. The 950 members of the church prove that this is a community that Oxford needs. The three churches share common ties of the past, but the necessity for three different and separate Presbyterian Churches in Oxford still remains. Geology, social inclinations, and theological differences all point to the necessity for all three churches, a necessity that has remained present into the present day.

## **Chapter One: College Hill Church**

The history of Mississippi and the history of College Hill Church have been intertwined since the beginning. The coincidental history and the geography of the area gave birth to the first church in the Northern Mississippi. Mississippi gained statehood in 1817, but it was still seen as a wild wilderness not good for much and inhabited by Native Americans. By the 1830s however, it became a frontier flooding with people. Cotton, the most profitable crop in history, came with a price, soil depletion. The nutrients of the soil in old Southern states such as North Carolina and Virginia had been depleted so much by the mid-1800s that they found themselves unable to continue the supply enough cotton to meet the demand. The solution was to find new soil and Mississippi was more perfect than anyone could have guessed. The Mississippi Delta in particular had a soil filled with nutrients, which made it perfect for the growth of cotton.

In 1832 a man named John Coffee signed the Treaty of Pontotoc, which removed all of the remaining Chickasaw and Cherokee Indians from their land east of the Mississippi River in return for a land of similar size but poorer quality west of the river. Mississippi opened as the new Southern expansion, and cotton farmers moved in droves to try and seize the opportunity that the state yielded. In 1830 the population of



Mississippi was around 136,000, and by 1840 it reached 375,000. Migrants from all over America made their way South, and some of these migrants settled in College Hill.<sup>1</sup>

In 1835 a group “Came from Carolina to the new Indian Lands.”<sup>2</sup> seeking a new home where they could settle in and build a community. Another account claims that at least part of the group came from a church in Columbia, Tennessee called Zion Church. They were of Scottish descent, and had a deep Presbyterian history. Goodloe Warren Bueford, a settler from Columbia settled in North Mississippi first, and immediately upon arrival in North Mississippi, the group that followed began to lay down their roots.<sup>3</sup> Originally they settled in Yalobusha County, but Goodloe Warren Bueford, who had been to the place where College Hill is today, kept being drawn back to the beauty of the site. Eventually the group moved to the spot and bought up the land for \$2.16 an acre.<sup>4</sup> The most important aspect of the migrants’ lives was their faith, so naturally they established their church right away. The Church they founded in 1835 stands today as the single oldest Church in the history of North Mississippi. The Church came to be known as Ebenezer Church after their first minister, Ebenezer McCewen.<sup>5</sup> At first the congregation met in the houses of Alexander Shaw and Ralph Wallers. Several years passed by as the community grew and the Church became larger and larger. The community was excluded

---

<sup>1</sup> This information comes from the lectures of Dr. Casey in his History of Mississippi Class at the University of Mississippi.

<sup>2</sup> M. H. Thompson, “Immigrants Built Church: Settlers of College Hill, Miss. Arrived 84 Years Ago.,” *The Commercial Appeal*.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi* (Oxford Mississippi: Percy Publishing, 2008) 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Mississippi Churches Collection (MUM00300). The Department of Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, The University of Mississippi.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of the Interior: National Park Service. National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form: Historical Status for College Church or College Hill Church, Description, history, significance and other documents. Oxford, MS: 199.

from any other communication, and everyone in the community was also a member of the Church. In fact, for years no man who was not a member of the Church was allowed to buy property around Ebenezer Church in order to remain certain that the community was a pure religiously homogenous place.<sup>6</sup>

The 1840s brought enormous change to the Church. In 1840, seventeen members with seven slaves signed and put into place a constitution for the Church to rule and govern its members.<sup>7</sup> The community became much more organized, but still lacked a permanent structure for worship. However, in 1841, Ebenezer Church purchased twenty-three acres and began planning their church building. The cemetery was first thing to be established on the land where the church now stands. Francis Timmons later gave \$2,683 to construct the church building, and by 1845 the building was finished.<sup>8</sup> Astoundingly, if you visit the Church today, the building, which still holds services, is the same exact building that was constructed in 1845, and the pews and pulpit are the same ones in which 19<sup>th</sup> century Christians worshipped in. The only difference is that the servant balcony, which fell into disarray post Civil War, was removed though the doors are still visible, and several studies were added to the back of the Church years later.<sup>9</sup>

As in any traditional Presbyterian community, the school formed next. Presbyterianism holds a deep tradition of education. A school was absolutely essential for the college hill society, which at this time was not actually known as college hill due to the lack of a college. In 1841, the Ebenezer Church built a school. It was a humble school

---

<sup>6</sup> General Sherman the Chastening Rod.

<sup>7</sup> Church Bulletin 1996. College Hill.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior: National Park Service. National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form.

<sup>9</sup> Church Bulletin 1996.

built prior to the University of Mississippi that went by the name of North Mississippi College.<sup>10</sup> The school functioned in a very Calvinistic manner and served the community by teaching theology alongside regular schooling. Upon the Conception of the college, the Church changed its name to College Church.<sup>11</sup>

By 1850, College Church housed a community of thirty-one families as well as their servants. They were “doing well” financially, and the community thrived.<sup>12</sup> The Church was well established and served the College Hill community with a stern and consistent hand. College Church served primarily as a place of worship, but the ruling elders also kept firm accountability for sins within the church. The Church functioned as a school as well, and for the community, College Church was always at the center.

The early church minutes of College Church seem extremely monotonous, but hold very important evidence of the ruling elders’ primary function. Elders, in a Presbyterian church, make up the leadership of the community. They govern and make decisions for a church, and in the early College Church, elders were essential. In 1845, the minutes even remarked that “The office of ruling elder is one of great sanctity and high responsibility, and should neethor be conferred or accepted without mature reflection and prayerful consideration.”<sup>13</sup> Without elders, the early Church would have been a very different place.

First, it was elders who approved membership into the Church, and were therefore the gatekeepers of church membership. In July of 1845 for example, they admitted two new members “On the testimony of one of the sessions Mrs. Flinn was received as a

---

<sup>10</sup> Church Bulletin 1996. College Hill.

<sup>11</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> Church Books, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Church books, p. 9.

member. At the Same time on examination Mr. R. B. Davidson was received as a member.”<sup>14</sup> The elders were responsible for ensuring that only true Presbyterians seeking God’s holiness were admitted into the privileges of College Church. They did so over and over again in two ways, by examining and questioning potential members, or by receiving testimonies or accounts of elders from other churches. New membership consumes an enormous amount of the church minutes. It must have been an important process to the elders of College Church.

Elders’ primary function in the Church was discipline. Any time that a member was caught in sin, whether it be gambling, adultery, drinking, dancing, or swearing on a hard day of work, the session would be informed of the matter. The guilty party would then be brought before the session of elders for repentance or punishment. The most common punishment that the members received was the withholding of communion. They were prohibited from taking communion until they repented and the session deemed them to be living as a Christian once again. The session brought forth both white and black members. One example in 1852 states that “ The case of Joe (servant of WA Buford) was taken under consideration who having been twice cited before the session and not appearing. It was unanimously resolved to suspend him from church communion for contumacy.”<sup>15</sup> A man found in sin refused to repent, and so he had to abstain from communion. Discipline was important for College Church, and it was necessary to continue building the type of Zion that they sought. A place where their religious homogeneity would allow them to live a life focused around the church.

---

<sup>14</sup> Church books p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes, 27.

The Church minutes also contain renovations to the church, important sermons preached, and baptisms. The session served the church adamantly, but the focus was always on the worship of God. They did not perhaps serve perfectly, and many of the minutes show harsh punishments and judgment, but the session always tried to serve their community with a strong but loving hand. The elders' meetings were constantly filled with prayer and thanksgiving, and rarely did a meeting close without prayer whether the meeting was one of joy or frustration. In the first 50 years of the life of College Church, preaching was inconsistent and often times there was no pastor for at the church, but the ruling elders adamantly sought after the purity of their church with an unmatched fervor.

College Church continued on quite normally for some twenty-five years, but in the South during 1861 there was no escaping the cataclysmic, all encompassing, Civil War. By the end of the war, the Union Army had marched through most of Mississippi in their efforts to bring the Confederacy back into the union. College Hill's community was no exception. Battles ripped open the very earth that they were fought on leaving thousands dead at a time, but the effect on the South as a whole went farther than just battles. War requires more than bullets, guns, and uniforms, it also requires food, lodging, and firewood for burning. Since the war was fought almost entirely in the South, plundering the Southern states made up for any lack of supplies sent from the Union support. It is worth noting that Sherman for example, though he supported total war, told his troops not to take so much so as the civilians would not have enough to survive and plant the next year, but this rarely stopped hungry soldiers from taking whatever they

wanted to. College Church was one of the many places within the South to bear the burdens of a needy Union Army.

In 1862 30,000 of Ulysees S. Grant and William Tecumpsah Sherman's Troops made their way through College Hill on their way to capture the fortress that was Vicksburg.<sup>16</sup> They moved through, but about a third of Sherman's soldiers stayed behind and for a while, they inhabited the land. The soldiers took everything. They had, for so long, been living on poor rations that when they got the chance to feast livestock and other decent foods, they left almost nothing for the townspeople. Many citizens fled in fear for their lives, and those who stayed behind did so very reluctantly.<sup>17</sup>

The War brought fear into the College Hill community and the Oxford community as a whole, but the Union Army or rather the Union Generals actually held a great deal of respect for the Church itself. As they moved through Oxford, the Union troops did burn much of the town to the ground. They did plunder supplies and take from citizens as while occupying the town, but they respected the church building. Officers demanded that at least one attempt to burn the church down be halted, and that a fire started in one of the houses in the community be put out.<sup>18</sup> The Union army even held Sunday services as well as other meetings in the building that were led by the chaplain. However, even though the Union treated the community with as much fairness as possible, the College Hillians adored the Confederacy and loathed the men who had come

---

<sup>16</sup> Church Bulletin 1996. College Hill Church.

<sup>17</sup> "30,000 Yankees Encamped at College Hill," *Oxford Town*, August 11, 2005, 14.

<sup>18</sup> "30,000 Yankees Encamped at College Hill".

through their town. The cemetery behind College Hill Church even holds 20 deceased Confederate soldiers who died fighting for the glory of the South.<sup>19</sup>

Reconstruction and the turn of the century were very difficult for College Church. They lost many of their members to the war, and the church purse was very empty. They struggled to hold a pastor, but the little community continued to fight on. In 1910 the church was blessed with the steadfast service of W. D. Heddleston. He served the church for twenty-five and a half years up until his death in 1936.<sup>20</sup> He saw the church through many difficult years and in a letter to his wife after his death was said to be, “loved and respected by men of every creed, color, and position in life.” Heddleston certainly served College Hill well, but the church never really grew under him. In 1921 the church had about ninety-five members, four elders and four deacons, but in 1935 they were actually down to sixty-three members.<sup>21</sup> They also were not concerned with benevolence ministry until 1921 and supported no international missions until 1936.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Heddleston had an enormous effect on the community of College Hill, and it is also clear that in the early 1900s College Hill was still very much an internalized community separate from much of Oxford’s change and struggles.

In 1941 the church was back up to 81 members, and they even received a member from First Presbyterian in Oxford.<sup>23</sup> They remained in this range of membership for quite a while, and in 1958, they had 82 members<sup>24</sup> The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one

---

<sup>19</sup> M. H. Thompson, “Immigrants Built Church: Settlers of College Hill, Miss. Arrived 84 Years Ago.”

<sup>20</sup> Minutes 1, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes 1, 117 and 177.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes 1, 196 and 120.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes 2, 17.

<sup>24</sup> minutes 2, 202.

of great change in America. The Civil Rights movement took off, the cold war was looming large, and the Presbyterian Church even divided as discussed later. College Hill however remained a constant rock in North Mississippi. The minutes consistently only deal with issues in the church such as a new organ, new members, and other church issues. The conservative Presbyterian Church often did not talk about issues outside of the church simply because they believed that if it was not in the bible, it was not a matter of the church. It is unclear whether this is the reason that civil rights and other issues do not appear in the minutes, or whether it is because College Hill was separated from these issues. There was not even a mention of the PCA splitting in the 1973 or 1974 minutes. The only inkling of division came in October of 1973 when one of the pastors was sent to a Presbytery meeting about the “withdrawing churches”.<sup>25</sup>

With the millennium quickly approaching College Hill continued to function as a small historical church outside of Oxford. Though it was an enormous blessing to be such an old and historic church, it did not come without problems. When Tim Fortner arrived in 2001, there was no opportunity for fellowship outside of Sunday mornings posing a problem for the church since the days of all the members living within the community had long passed.<sup>26</sup> The church minutes were immaculately kept, and the history of the church is documented very well through them in the Oxford Public Library, but the role was never trimmed making it difficult to know the true number of members within the church. There are stories of people leaving Oxford for ten years and coming back to find that they were still members at College Hill. The turning of the new millennium would bring a change in sorts for College Hill as it brought them forward in organization and

---

<sup>25</sup> Volume 8, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Fortner.



fellowship. The core theology and history of the church would remain as a base on which to build up an even stronger congregation. For 181 years, College Hill has been a rock in the white conservative Oxford community, and it does not seem like they are going anywhere. The historical coincidence of the opening of a new frontier made the possibility of College Hill a reality, and the geographical placement enabled them to remain a separate community unchanged by the world around them clinging to a conservative theology.

## **Chapter Two: First Presbyterian Church**

About six miles South of College Hill Church lays the second oldest Presbyterian Church in Lafayette County, First Presbyterian Church. 1836 saw the organizing of the county, and in 1837, the town of Oxford, an old Indian territory, gained its namesake in hopes of drawing the attention of Southern leadership to make it a center of learning comparable to Oxford, England. 1841 brought the success of their plan as the state of Mississippi decided to plant their Flagship University in Oxford. By 1841 the town was becoming a well-developed community with the added benefit of a railroad station making it the center of commerce with a growing population.

The enormity of six miles in 1840 does not translate well today. It would be about a ten to fifteen minute drive today to drive from the town Square of Oxford to College Hill Church, but this was certainly not the case in 1840. On horseback the ride would take the better part of an hour and could very well be more. Rain could make it nearly impossible to drudge a wagon through the mud down to Oxford. College Hill remained very much its own community. They had their own stores, schools, and of course a church. They kept very much to themselves. They would have had to go to Oxford to get supplies every now and then, but it was nonsensical to make such a journey on a regular

basis when there was a community already in existence. They also were glad to not be a part of the busy and changing community of Oxford. There were even some in the beginning who would attend First Presbyterian unless the weather was bad. In that case they would attend College Hill because they could not get to town.<sup>27</sup> College Hillians liked their peace and separation.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, it would be difficult for members of the Oxford community to make their way to College Hill every Sunday for services. Thus, the need for a second Presbyterian Church in Lafayette County arose because two separate communities existed in what now seems to be one.

In 1837 a group of pastors presiding in Oxford saw the need for a Presbyterian Church in town, and as they met, discussing the needs and calling from God in an old carpentry shop, First Presbyterian Church of Oxford was born. Reverend Daniel Grey Preached a sermon on 1<sup>st</sup> Kings Chapter 18 Verse 21 called “How Long Halt ye Between Two Opinions”. The new church then brought in new members who had been part of the Presbyterian Church in other places, and elected elders for the church.<sup>29</sup> The monumental meeting ended in a prayer, and a new Church was established, the second oldest in Oxford being formed shortly after the Methodist Church.<sup>30</sup> In 1843, First Presbyterian acquired their first building for \$10.00. It was a simple building with a wooden frame and a slave gallery that presided on the same spot where the church is today.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Janie Friarson.

<sup>28</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume I* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, 1952) p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Outposts of Zion.

In 1841, James Weatherby became the first pastor of the church.<sup>32</sup> The Church had only thirty-nine members that joined in 1837, but it grew steadily often adding several members at a time as the town of Oxford grew.<sup>33</sup> Like College Hill, the minutes very clearly state the importance of elders in the church, their power, and their responsibilities. The elected elders of the two churches held very similar roles. In 1848, the University of Mississippi opened to students and professors. This was a colossal achievement for Oxford and for First Presbyterian Church. Church membership exploded with the addition of new students and especially new professors who were older and brought a new level of intelligence and prestige to the Church.<sup>34</sup>

College Hill and First Presbyterian certainly enjoyed a fantastic relationship. College Hill's minutes speak on the beginning of a new Presbyterian community and show the excitement that the elders had about collaborating with them.<sup>35</sup> In 1837 the churches even shared a pastor. Neither community had a full time pastor. The solution was to rotate every other week sharing the same one.<sup>36</sup> They likely heard many of the same messages and grew along side one another. They also made calls to the presbytery together striving to bring new pastors to the area.<sup>37</sup> Reliance on one another was essential while their history was still new, which proves that the necessity for two churches was truly based on distance rather than difference in ideology or theology.

Like College Hill, First Presbyterian experienced growth and prosperity in the 1850s, but they too were immensely affected by the Civil War. Young men left the South

---

<sup>32</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 5.

in droves of hundreds and thousands. The University Greys are a great example of a regiment that took the entirety of the men presiding in a community. What often goes unnoticed however is that hundreds of pastors also left their congregation to be Chaplains in the army. The war was an opportunity to bring men to Christ; one preacher stated, “How wonderful are the ways of God’s providence?”<sup>38</sup> for he believed that God was using this war to create more Christians, and this was actually not an inaccurate claim. One account found in the archives of the University of Mississippi claimed that 500,000 Confederate men were converted to Christianity, and those who were converted truly improved their behavior.<sup>39</sup> While this is likely a dramatic overestimation, pastors all over the South felt led to leave their churches to serve as chaplains. During the Civil War, the pastor of First Presbyterian answered his call to serve as a chaplain and left the congregation behind.<sup>40</sup>

After his departure or perhaps because there was a horrendous war going on, the quality of the church minutes deteriorated. Not much is clear about the church during the war except that Sunday School continued to happen and three elders essentially held the church together.<sup>41</sup> They would have visiting preachers whenever they could, but often times they simply had to go without. Most of the church’s male members went off to fight the war including several of the elders, and so when the Union came through Oxford they frightened the remaining citizens. Like at College Hill, Grant and Sherman’s soldiers marched through and many of them camped on the lawn of First Presbyterian. The

---

<sup>38</sup> Stubbs Collection, Christ in the Camp (MUM00438). The Department of Archives and Special Collections.

J.D. Williams Library, The University of Mississippi.

<sup>39</sup> Stubbs Collection, Christ in the Camp.

<sup>40</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 73.

<sup>41</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 10.

treatment of First Presbyterian was almost identical to that of College Hill. One Yankee soldier tried to burn down the church, but instead of his superiors stopping him like those at College Hill, it was a brave woman by the name of Jane Conkey Rascoe who saved the church building. “They set fire to the church and Mrs. Rascoe ran across from her house and put it out while they jeered.”<sup>42</sup> Though the Union soldiers burned much of the town square, they left the church standing partially out of respect and partially because of brave Mrs. Rascoe.

The end of the war meant an era of rebuilding for the Southern states. Buildings and homes had been destroyed or burned down, but the real rebuilding process consisted of a total social and economic rebuild. The Southern economy had made the dangerous mistake of believing that the price of cotton would remain constant and that the major industrial areas of both England and the north would continue to rely solely on the South for their textile demands. When the war started the South assumed that England would step to their aid, but instead they simply outsourced the growth of cotton to colonies in Africa and the Middle East. The South, though still a rich agricultural society growing hundreds of thousands of acres of cotton, fell behind because they could not sustain a large middle class without industrialization, and no large-scale industrialization occurred in the Southern states during the 1800s.<sup>43</sup>

First Presbyterian felt these affects both socially and economically. As the town of Oxford was rebuilt, there was little left over to give to the church, and beyond tithing the Church struggled to receive copious amounts of money. The dearth of economic resources, along with the disadvantage of being a small Mississippi town that was

---

<sup>42</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Lectures from Dr. Casey, University of Mississippi.

decimated by war, meant that the pastoral position was difficult to fill. One example states, “The church seems now to have had trouble in securing a pastor. Rev. E. O. Frierson was approached by the session to know if his family could live on a salary of \$1000, that being all that could be raised. Apparently he said no; at least he did not become pastor.”<sup>44</sup> For forty years, the church struggled to hold a minister for more than a couple of years. Pastors would take a call to Memphis, take more money at another church or simply turn down the offer of First Presbyterian. The minutes are not necessarily clear on exactly why many pastors left, but it is clear that for almost half a century no man held the job at First Presbyterian for more than a few years.<sup>45</sup>

1881 saw the conclusion of the building of the new church building, the same as the one standing today.<sup>46</sup> The old building, worn down by time and war, needed more repairs than were deemed worth giving.<sup>47</sup> The congregation, seeing that a new building made more sense rose to the cause, decided to start fresh. The new building put even more strain on the church financially and though it was a necessity, the new building made it difficult to hire and hold a pastor. An 1887 Presbytery meeting claimed that “five calls have been voted for as many different ministers and two others have visited the church yet it is still vacant.”<sup>48</sup> 1890s minutes show a very clear financial concern. The church had finally received a pastor, but had to ask him to lower his salary from the promised \$1500 dollars to \$1300 dollars.<sup>49</sup> He resigned two years later. The Church

---

<sup>44</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 11-12.

<sup>45</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 12, 15, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 15.

building, essential as it was, had left them in a financial conundrum that made running the church very arduous.

Had it not been for a dedicated group of elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, and women in the church, First Presbyterian could have fallen to the wayside. The congregation vigorously worked to ensure the church stayed together. In 1893, after years of pastoral issues, a young man named Reverend W.D. Heddleston took over as pastor of First Presbyterian Church. He studied at the University of Mississippi and attended the church during his tenure there. He also married a girl from Oxford, so it made sense for him to be appointed as the new pastor. Heddleston served the church faithfully for sixteen years. During his tenure the church faced a great deal of adversity including a large outbreak of the yellow fever which caused most of the town to flee taking of many residents including Brave Mrs. Rascoe, the woman who had put the fire out at the church, but the consistency of a permanent pastor helped the church to grow anyways.<sup>50</sup> In 1909 Reverend Heddleston ended his tenure with First Presbyterian to take a position with the University and to fill in preaching at other churches in the area, but the congregation prospered from his influence for many years to come.

The turn of the century marked a great deal of growth and change for the Presbyterian Church as a whole as well as for First Presbyterian church. The Church as a whole became much more mission focused as they began to reach out to the world at large. The world became more accessible to international missionaries who began to leave the states to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations of the world. First Presbyterian gave a substantial amount of money to Chinese missionaries during 1909,

---

<sup>50</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 17.



sent a missionary to Korea in 1911, and helped with local missions including the funding of a local YMCA at the University.<sup>51</sup> The mission work of the church at large continued to grow into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as did that of First Presbyterian.

By 1911 the church consisted of 230 white members and 81 black members. They had grown substantially since 1837, and many college students who were not members also attended services.<sup>52</sup> First Presbyterian also absorbed another small Presbyterian church in Oxford by the name South Street Church. It was another Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and after a meeting of the combined sessions the merger went very smoothly.<sup>53</sup> Though the church unexpectedly lost another pastor as he went to be a chaplain in World War 1,<sup>54</sup> the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was very prosperous for the church as a whole.

The 1930s were the most devastating financial depression that the United States has ever seen, and the history of First Presbyterian runs parallel to that of the South as a whole. Countless members were out of work including several University professors who were laid off.<sup>55</sup> The church found itself once again struggling financially, but they also lost spiritual leadership as members had to move away for work or were just crushed after being thrust into poverty because of the Great Depression. As the nation clawed itself out of the Great Depression so did First Presbyterian, and by the 1936 they were financially secure enough to purchase an organ. In 1937 the church celebrated a century

---

<sup>51</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Percy, *Early History of Oxford Mississippi*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 27.

of worship as a congregation that had been full of difficult times and times of joy at all time focused on worshipping the Lord.

The 1940s brought the church into its third major war since conception, World War II. The Church minutes do not contain much about the war, so it must not have had as an enormous effect on the congregation. They did not lose their pastor as they had in the Civil War and World War One, but they sent many in the congregation to fight for the American cause. Sacrifices, such as giving up church dinner to help with the shortage of supplies and giving large portions of money to the war cause, were certainly made, but during World War II the focus remained on missions, and the church continued to function as usual.<sup>56</sup>

The second half of the century, from 1950 to the turn of the millennium was, for First Presbyterian and for the Presbyterian Church at large very, important. The racial issues of the 1960s, the split of the Presbyterian Church, and the Ordination of women all became important issues that the Presbyterian Church had to address, and they are discussed in detail in later chapters. In 1953 the church funded the Negro Work Campaign, a Presbyterian ministry to try and help African Americans. In 1954, they integrated the congregation and allowed blacks to sit wherever they wanted in the Church.<sup>57</sup> First Presbyterian, decided very early on that their congregation would adhere strictly to the rulings and teachings of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, during a time when many Southern churches decided to split they remained loyal to the PCUS.<sup>58</sup> In fact, when the split occurred in 1973, the church history is focused more on

---

<sup>56</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 13-15.

<sup>58</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 36.

supporting the congregation, raising money for a funeral, and honoring boy scouts than it is on the recent split of the PCA. It seems that joining the PCA was never even an afterthought for First Presbyterian Church in Oxford.

Day to day church life dominated the focus of the church as time passed. First Presbyterian was a large Church, and as is common in large churches, the session had to find a way to focus on serving the community in groups in a way that remained personal but excluded none. They could no longer focus on each individual's life and sins as they had in the 1800s. They had to find new ways to minister and lead the congregation. The session began to focus less on the amount of members and focus more on how many of them were actually attending. In 1984, the church began to keep track of active membership, and calculated that there were 550 active members in the church.<sup>59</sup> The Church built a new Fellowship hall in 1988 that served as a place of fellowship and community for its members.<sup>60</sup> These became the focal points of the ministry of the Church, and whether it be through missions, service, small groups, or the preaching of God's word, the unity of First Presbyterian pushed it into the new millennium.

The new millennia however brought one of First Presbyterians most trying times. In 2001 Sam Marshall stepped down as the Head Pastor as he felt that his pastoral authority had been undermined. Part of the congregation supported the departure of Marshall while others disagreed, causing turmoil and strife within the congregation. The Church hired an interim pastor to try and heal the wounds of the Church, but numbers continued to deplete. One Easter Sunday the attendance was as low as fifty people, on Easter. In 2004 John Semmes was hired as the Senior Pastor, and he remains at First

---

<sup>59</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 86.

<sup>60</sup> John Semmes.

Presbyterian today. Semmes was hired for his skills in preaching and bringing high energy, and the stability of a new senior pastor quickly turned First Presbyterian around.<sup>61</sup>

First Presbyterian Church started in a carpentry shop in a young and undeveloped town, and as Oxford grew and changed, so did the church. The history of Oxford and the South molded the church into what it is today, a community focused on the solidarity of community through the admonition of Jesus Christ. Without the toils of war, the leadership of pastors, and the courage of a congregation, First Presbyterian would lack the longevity that it has today.

---

<sup>61</sup> John Semmes.

### **Chapter 3: Early Racial Relations**

The Southern Church has always been riddled with unique problems of race. The final eradication of slavery in the South led to animosity and segregation from white Southerners unmatched by any other region, and there is no better place to see the segregation of whites and blacks than in the churches of the Deep South. To this day, whites and blacks worship separately, and with differing styles and traditions.<sup>62</sup> Years of tribulation and the suppression of the black community left churches all over the South scarred with an unshakeable and difficult history. First Presbyterian and College Hill certainly do not qualify as an exception. Racial relations run in the veins of the history of these two historic churches, and although it may be messy and difficult to talk about, the true history of Oxford Presbyterianism cannot be understood without discussing race.

Prior to the Civil War both Oxford Congregations had very interesting racial separation. College Hill focused predominantly on farming, so unsurprisingly their community contained a large portion of slaves. The church minutes never actually refer to the black members as slaves, however, but rather as servants. The church building

---

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, Charles Raegan. *Judgement and Grace in Dixie Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*. Athens: U of Georgia, 2007. Print. 11.

itself was constructed almost entirely by the servants of farmers in the community.<sup>63</sup> Servants were allowed membership into the church where they could take communion, be called before the session, and be baptized, but they were not offered equal opportunities within the Church. They were seen as part of the church community, and prior to the Civil War the church contained about as many black members as it did white.<sup>64</sup>

These servants did not however have what would be considered full membership. Anytime they were brought before the session or mentioned in the minutes, they would be referred to simply as a servant to one of the specific white members rather than giving them a separate identity. There was also a separate balcony where the slaves would have to sit during services so as to separate them from the white people. The white members believed that admitting them into the church was their Christian duty to “teach those who do not know about salvation.”, so they allowed them to be communicate members<sup>65</sup> As far as slave owners went, it seems that the members of College Church treated their slaves well. One article claimed that when the Union army came through they pleaded with the slaves to come with them, but they opted to stay behind.<sup>66</sup> Whether this claim is valid or not it is impossible to tell, but it seems like a level of respect existed between the servants and their masters, but even so they were certainly not treated with equality or fairness.

First Presbyterian also had slaves in their community. They are mentioned several times, but unlike College Hill it is not acknowledged whether or not they were baptized

---

<sup>63</sup> minutes, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Church minutes, 47.

<sup>65</sup> minutes 22.

<sup>66</sup> Chastening Rod 107.

or allowed to be communing members. They certainly could have been, but no evidence clearly points either way. It is clear that they were in attendance for services however because the records clearly state that Blacks were required to sit in the back. Like at College Church, the black and whites had to worship together but separately. Instead of having a slave balcony First Presbyterian designated the back few rows of the sanctuary for the black people. First Presbyterian also held a second separate Sunday school for the black children so that, in all aspects of worship, they would remain separate.<sup>67</sup> Prior to the Civil War both College Church and First Presbyterian allowed black people into the church, however they received unequal treatment.

After the Civil War, the South was forced to entirely change their social structure. The freeing of the slaves and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment meant that, in theory, black men were American citizens. Much of the South however refused to acknowledge them as such because of weak federal enforcement in Mississippi. The former slaves found freedom to be much different than they expected. Not only were they still treated as dogs, but they also had no education, no money, and no real connections. Interestingly however, in Mississippi, they were essential to the economy. Without labor, an agricultural economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have been dead in the water, so an enormous percentage of the black population had no option but to become sharecroppers. They were “free” but the chances for social mobility were non-existent and wages were dismal. Black Southerners, and specifically Mississippians, found themselves in an agricultural rut relying on farming to drive a sluggish economy, yet being suppressed by a system that assumed black inferiority because farming was the only thing they were capable of.

---

<sup>67</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 10.

The black population of Mississippi was enormous, the greatest of any state in the union.<sup>68</sup> Prior to the Civil War, the land in North Carolina, Virginia, and the rest of the old Southern regions had gone infertile. As these farmers switched to tobacco farming, which required far less labor, or moved South, the slave force moved, almost in its entirety to the lower, newer Southern region. After the Civil War, all of these slaves were freed which meant that an entire new social class was created in a matter of months making the South the ignition point for race relations and civil rights movements.

The Presbyterian Church, unlike the Baptist and Methodist churches did not realign with their northern brothers after the Civil War. When war broke out, most of the major denominations split into a northern and a Southern church, but soon bridged the schism after the war ended. The Presbyterian Church, however remained separate. The PCUS eventually formed out of the Southern Presbyterian Church, thus holding its regional ideology much more than any of the other denominations presiding in the South.<sup>69</sup> Presbyterian Churches also held more of their black members than other denominations in the South. While black Baptists and Methodists often sought to form their own churches, Presbyterians often remained in the predominantly white churches.<sup>70</sup> Participation did not, however, mean that black members were treated with respect or equality. White Southern Presbyterians fervently controlled black church members and refused to give them any sort of leadership. In the late 1800s the PCUS developed separate presbyteries for black churches so as to separate the groups at General

---

<sup>68</sup> Lectures from Dr. Casey.

<sup>69</sup> Alvis, Joel L. *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*. n.p. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, c 1994., 1994 *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 4, 2016) 6.

<sup>70</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 7.



Assemblies.<sup>71</sup>The PCUS as a whole was rather progressive with racial issues. For example, in 1969, the General Assembly came to the conclusion that any minister, regardless of race, could vote on the Presbytery level.<sup>72</sup> The Southern Churches tended to be a much more slow to change, and in Oxford the two churches moved at different paces.

The post Civil War decades were an enormous transition period for the Presbyterian Churches in Oxford. New issues arose from the fact that black people finally enjoyed freedom to make their own decisions and worship the way that they wanted to. Interestingly, the decisions and circumstances of these post war churches shaped the way that they moved forward into racial relations in the future. College Hill assumed that the Church would continue to function as usual for its black members after the war, but that was not the case. The “Negroes opted to form their own Church”<sup>73</sup> The formation of separate white and black churches became a trend all over the South. Black Southerners formed their own churches where they could be participants and leaders in worship that focused on music and the Holy Spirit much more than white churches at the time did. There is no better place to see the segregation of whites and blacks than in the churches of the South. To this day, whites and blacks worship separately, and they worship with differing styles and traditions.<sup>74</sup> As the freed black people began to leave, as they did at College Church, the Southern churches began to be divided. At College Church the balcony that the black people had to sit in was so unused that it fell to shambles and was

---

<sup>71</sup> Joel Alvis, Religion and Race, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Joel Alvis, Religion and Race, 13.

<sup>73</sup> article 2.

<sup>74</sup> Wilson, Judgement and Grace in Dixie, 11.

removed. It seems that after the Civil War there were not any black members at College Hill.

First Presbyterian found themselves in a very different situation than College Church. They still seated the black people in the back of the church, but they also continued to minister to them. A ministry was established to reach out to African Americans, and hiring a black minister to reach out to the black community was even discussed.<sup>75</sup> In 1911, the church still held eighty one black members, which was an incredible feat considering the state of the South.<sup>76</sup> College Hill did not necessarily exclude black members, but First Presbyterian was sure to continue reaching out to and ministering to the black community during the late 1800s early 1900s era of reconstruction. Ed Palmer the pastor right after the Civil War decided that there should be no non-religious matter discussed from pulpit to address the issue of race in the church<sup>77</sup> Though the leadership ultimately decided not to preach on the racial issues that existed from the pulpit, they at least acknowledged that there were problems that desperately needed to be discussed.

The early 1900s were a difficult time for the church in the South. A Lost Cause mentality, often supported by the church, further diminished the relationship between black and white Southerners. The ideology was focused around a belief that the Confederacy was a heroic and just army that fought against unimaginable odds and just barely lost. Many felt that the North had cheated by cutting of supplies, and had that not been the case, the South and her truly superior leadership and army would have won. The

---

<sup>75</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 21.

<sup>77</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 15.

Lost Cause was often even supported by the Church. Pastors taught that after a time of subdual the South would once again find dominance. Many Southern preachers even taught on the South rising up and the chosen people of God, the Southerners, once again leading their own nation.<sup>78</sup> It is no wonder that segregation and division within the church grew during this time. The South as a whole experienced a new level of racial animosity as the country bubbled on the brink of a Civil Rights Movement in the South that would come only a few decades later. Oxford Presbyterian Churches certainly faced many of these issues, but it is fascinating to look at exactly how College Hill and First Presbyterian responded.

As Southerners dusted off their rebel flags to once again be flown, Oxford was certainly affected by racial issues. Race relations in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remain shrouded in mystery due to the fact that neither church contains detailed minutes containing information on such issues. It is however clear that the two churches took differing paths within the community. As Oxford grew, the ideals of the two churches, which had once shared a pastor, began to grow apart.

First Presbyterian Church began to have more liberal ideology than that of the country church seven miles away. By 1902 First Presbyterian established seven positions in the church set apart for the “teaching of negroes.”<sup>79</sup> Church membership grew substantially over the next several decades, and both white and black Mississippians joined the congregation of First Presbyterian in Oxford. Soon two hundred and thirty white and eighty-three black Oxonians claimed membership to First Presbyterian.<sup>80</sup> In a

---

<sup>78</sup> Wilson, *Judgement and Grace in Dixie*, 24-25.

<sup>79</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume I*, 21.

time of Lost Cause ideology in the deep South, numbers like that extend far beyond normal Mississippi congregations. It was not outrageously uncommon within the Presbyterian Church, but remember, it was not ten miles away in College Hill that the black members in the community had decided to create their own place of worship.

First Presbyterian, though not perfect, showed that whites and blacks could attend church together in a post Civil War era. It could have been because Oxford was a university town filled with the brightest minds of the South, or perhaps because the town Oxford was not as dependent on agriculture as much of the South was. The best explanation however comes directly from the minutes. The leadership First Presbyterian was embracing difficult issues and trying to face those issues head on. While many congregations ignored and avoided the topic of race, the minutes of First Presbyterian show constant deliberation, voting, and change. It was certainly not easy, and many times the vote did not go in favor of progress, but change did happen. The aforementioned seven teachers proves that there was a perceived need and willingness to take action within the community of First Presbyterian, but Black Oxonians were still treated differently. It was assumed that they actually needed different Sunday school teachers, and black people were still restricted to the back few rows.

College Hill on the other hand never really addresses the issue of race in their church minutes. Perhaps they were so separated from the problem that it never arose, or maybe they thought it inappropriate to preach any sort of politics from the pulpit. Regardless there is no real mention of African Americans after the turn of the century in the College Hill minutes. In 1962 there is no mention of the James Meredith incident, and it is rare to find race mentioned in the minutes of College Hill at all. While First

Presbyterian was truly wrestling with the racial divides of the South in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, College Hill, as a church, at least from the minutes, seems to avoid the conflict all together.

By the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement teetered on the edge of taking off. Racial issues could no longer be ignored. In 1953, First Presbyterian helped to fund something known as the Negro Work Campaign, a campaign by the PCUS to create more black churches, train more black ministers, and desegregate the denomination as much as possible.<sup>81</sup> In 1954, First Presbyterian took a huge step for racial relations in 1954 when the session decided that when black people came into the church they were to be seated with the rest of the congregation.<sup>82</sup> First Presbyterian strived forward as a progressive Church through the Civil Rights movement, but perhaps the best example comes from the 1962 forced integration of the University of Mississippi.

In 1962, a young man named James Meredith forced the integration of the University of Mississippi with the help of President John F. Kennedy. The South erupted as one of its last institutes of “Old South” heritage was being forced to allow black students entry. Riots were expected, and the Coast Guard under Kennedy’s orders were sent to Oxford to try and keep peace as Meredith enrolled in his classes. That night, as 30,000 guardsmen brought Meredith on to campus, enormous riots broke out killing two people in one of the darkest nights in the history of the town of Oxford.<sup>83</sup> During this time First Presbyterian made a bold stand that affirmed their stance on racial issues and racial integration.

---

<sup>81</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 30.

Reverend Murphy Wilds boldly faced his congregation on September 16, 1962, two weeks before Meredith enrolled, and delivered a message on a Christian's duty to the gospel during a time of tribulation such as the one that was to occur in Oxford. He first admitted and addressed that many of the members disagreed with allowing Meredith to enroll at all, but then goes on to preach on the Sermon on the Mount. He stressed God's call for his church to be peacemakers. "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Please note that Jesus does not speak to those who simply refuse to have anything to do with peace breaking. There is a positive angle here. It is an active word. Jesus is speaking to those who actively contribute to bring peace out of chaos, who realize they have a responsibility to mold and shape the existence of peace. But how can this be done in our present situation?" Wild goes on to tell his congregation to respect and assist the authority of the military and police in charge as well as several other peacemaking strategies. The Sunday after the riots he exclaimed more ideas of racial equality from the pulpit on communion Sunday. "Today is worldwide communion Sunday. On it we remember that in Christ we are one with all Christians of all nations and races the world over, that those who are one with Christians individuals immediately have the relationship of oneness with each other."<sup>84</sup>

A group of eight Churches came together before the Meredith incident and came up with a stance on the issue and how to address the Oxford Community. Interestingly, College Hill was not on the list of Churches that met on the matter. It could have been because their Church was outside of the town, but it is unknown why they were not a part

---

<sup>84</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 30.

of that meeting.<sup>85</sup> First Presbyterian acknowledged that these days and hours before the Meredith incident did not make up for the years of silence, by saying that “we as individuals were silent when we should have spoken”<sup>86</sup> That event certainly set First Presbyterian apart as a progressive congregation that was not afraid to enter in to world issues.

To this day, churches in Oxford struggle with diversity. Christ Presbyterian Church has the most diversity, and is most adamant about trying to create a Church that reflects the demographics of the community. Race played a large role in the history of Presbyterianism in Oxford. Though it was often slow and ugly, the racial wounds within the churches have begun to heal, but the South in the 1970s opened up new wounds, which have defined the Churches in Oxford and help to explain the necessity for three Presbyterian Churches. In 1973, the Presbyterian Church split.

---

<sup>85</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 29.

<sup>86</sup> Maud Morrow Brown, *Volume II*, 30.

## **Chapter Four: The Presbyterian Schism**

In 1837, the Northern Presbyterian Church was divided into two groups, the old school and the new school. Old School thinkers conformed strictly to the Westminster catechisms and confession of faith as well as the inherency of scripture and strict Calvinist doctrine while New School thinkers were more open to change and new, liberal ideology. An attempt was made to try and create resolutions for agreement but failed. Some of the old school elders found the new school churches theology to be flawed and frankly not Presbyterian, which this led to a split vote.<sup>87</sup>

At the general assembly of 1861, the issue of slavery was raised. Some of the Old School thinkers thought that this was unnecessary because the church should not meddle in issues of the government.<sup>88</sup> The idea came from the belief in the absolute inherency of scripture. Conservative Christians, mostly Southerners, believed that if the Bible does not explicitly mention something, then the church ought not to make a ruling on it, and it is not viewed as sinful. In the eyes of Conservative Christians in 1861 it was not sinful to

---

<sup>87</sup> Clements, Don K. *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. (Narrows, VA: Metokos,) Kindle Version 2006. Print. p. 2338.

<sup>88</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. 2469.



own slaves, and they considered unbiblical to say that it was.<sup>89</sup> They split and became Southern Presbyterians. This group became known as the PCUS after the Civil War, and the Church that remained in the North became known as the PCUSA.<sup>90</sup>

By 1870, the Northern Church had merged yet again, and the Southern Church viewed itself as the last truly Old School Presbyterian group. They held firm to the authority of scripture, the Westminster Standards, The spirituality of the Church, and the decentralization of power.<sup>91</sup> Throughout the 1900s issues of doctrine began to arise within the PCUS. Beginning with the questions for ordination, the Church began to have an abstract idea of what the true doctrine of the PCUS was. The ambiguity continued through many general assemblies until 1972. At the 1972 Assembly a paper was adopted which questioned the usefulness of the Westminster standards and Calvinist doctrine.<sup>92</sup> Liberal thinkers saw this as a step forward, while conservatives were outraged by this claim and saw it as a turning from the ancestry of the church as well as the truth of scripture.

Dr. Charles Dunahoo, one of the original pastors who split from the PCUS said, “the mother denomination over a period of years had so weakened its commitment to the Westminster Standards that we could no longer be a part of that denomination.”<sup>93</sup> A pattern of change over fifteen year within the PCUS had occurred, and those faithful to the Westminster standards tried to bring forth elders to try and stand up against the issues that were arising, but nothing seemed to work. Conservatives also felt that the PCUS

---

<sup>89</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 135.

<sup>90</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. 2469.

<sup>91</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. 2964.

<sup>92</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. 3020.

<sup>93</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. 3077.

seminaries had become less reformed in their teachings. Several groups formed to try and once again embed the PCUS with Conservative theology, but the PCUS was moving in a liberal direction and the majority of PCUS churches agreed in the direction that they were going. Furthermore, the PCUS was strongly considering a merger with the UPCUSA, which the conservatives saw as a terrible idea considering the differences in theology. The UPCUSA eventually did merge with the PCUS on the same day that the PCA was founded.

In 1972, many comparisons were made to the General Assembly of 1861. Conservatives still felt like the Bible was the source of all facts and truths. For example, what the Bible says about God, man, and sin can be taken as fact simply because they are in the Bible, and that is the inherent word of God.<sup>94</sup> Liberals began to draw truths from other places, and Conservatives saw believed that finding truth anywhere but from the bible diminished the facts and truths, which God had given to his people, using reason rather than divine will.<sup>95</sup> In one case, a professor at Columbia seminary was even adopting and teaching idea of Universalism.<sup>96</sup> It soon became clear that the Conservatives and Liberals within the PCUS would be unable to settle their differences. On December 4, 1972, the National Presbyterian Church in America, later known as the Presbyterian Church in America, was formed. Tim Fortner, a PCA pastor in Mississippi at the time said “It was scary and exciting all at the same time.”<sup>97</sup> Originally the denomination

---

<sup>94</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 135.

<sup>95</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Fortner, Tim. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 26, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Tim Fortner.

consisted of 41,000 members and 2260 Churches.<sup>98</sup> Seminaries such as Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson and Westminster Seminary soon became full of newly PCA teachers, and it was in these seminaries that the first PCA pastors were trained. The new denomination, though small, was led by a group of devoted and faithful men, but challenges did not take long to arise.<sup>99</sup>

The Founding of the PCA created significant conflict as well. It is impossible to talk about the founding of the PCA without bringing up the issue of race. Most Churches that conformed to the new PCA denomination did so because they disagreed in the liberal direction that the PCUS was going, but some of the churches in the South split over racial issues.<sup>100</sup> In 1954, many of the conservatives in the PCUS had tried to justify segregation citing Israel and Canaan being separated in the Bible.<sup>101</sup> There were several other racial arguments and references within the general Assembly before 1972, but they continued when the PCA was founded. The commission in Birmingham Alabama compared themselves to their Confederate ancestors who, in 1861, had asked similar questions, of the General Assembly. Though in 1972 the issues were not over slavery, conservatives did question whether or not the PCUS was fully submissive to the inherency of scripture. The issue of race makes the splitting of the PCA messy because it is often mingled with more justifiable theological reasons. There is no denying that the PCA had at least a hint of racial tension at its conception.

Merging denominations has always been a scary and risky challenge for assemblies to deal with, and the PCA had to deal with these issues very early on. The

---

<sup>98</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 136.

<sup>99</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. Chapter 13.

<sup>100</sup> Tim Fortner.

<sup>101</sup> Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 136.

Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod was a very reformed and homogenous denomination with the PCA, so a merger was soon considered. A statement in the 1977 General Assembly opened the possibility of a merger, and every preceding year included large discussions on the matter. Finally in 1980, the RPCES joined the PCA with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  vote from both General Assemblies.<sup>102</sup> This was significant for the PCA because it meant that they gained a seminary in Covenant Seminary as well as a college in Covenant College.<sup>103</sup>

In Oxford Christ Presbyterian Church and College Hill are both PCA while First Presbyterian stayed in the PCUS. Neither College Hill nor Christ Presbyterian went with the original exodus of the PCA, however. Christ Presbyterian had not yet been founded when the PCA split. Since its conception, Christ Presbyterian has been a PCA church. College Hill however was, up until 1987 a PCUS church. It is important to understand, that many conservative churches stayed in the PCUS to try and change the theology from within, and College Hill was certainly one of those churches.<sup>104</sup> It has always been far more conservative than First Presbyterian, and since it is a country church, there has been little push towards more liberal and progressive theology. It is also worth noting that when the PCA split the PCUS took a lot of their land back. In the PCUS the church and the land belong to the presbytery, so legally they had a right to take the land and buildings from the church body. Some speculate that fear of something along those lines might have been another reason that College Hill did not leave in 1972.<sup>105</sup> In 1983, the PCUS and the PCUSA merged the Southern and Northern churches into one

---

<sup>102</sup> Don Clements, *Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. Chapter 14.

<sup>103</sup> Tim Fortner.

<sup>104</sup> Tim Fortner.

<sup>105</sup> Tim Fortner.

denomination, the PCUSA. First Presbyterian remains under the jurisdiction of the PCUSA today.

First Presbyterian is the most progressively liberal of the Presbyterian churches in Oxford. For example, in the PCUSA women can be ordained as both teaching and ruling elders, homosexuality can be decided on a local basis, and the Westminster standards are certainly not the only acceptable ones. It makes sense that a town has both a PCA and a PCUSA church because the differences in theology are so significant, but Oxford has two PCA churches.

## Chapter Five: Christ Presbyterian Church

The 1990s mark an interesting time in the history of Oxford. The town began to receive recognition as not only a beautiful place with good food, but also a good place to live. Oxford found national publicity for example as one of the best places to retire, and the *Wall Street Journal* spoke of it as a sanctuary for Southern writers.<sup>106</sup> Before the turn of the millennia there were far fewer students, and even less out of state students. The town was still small, 1995 was the year that Oxford began to collect the trash of those living outside of the city. There was only one Mexican restaurant and one Chinese restaurant, but Oxford would soon grow. People slowly began to put down their roots in Oxford, and it became evident to many that the town would soon face enormous changes. Jeffrey Lancaster, the RUF pastor in 1995, bought a house on South Lamar for \$81,000, and by the time he left in 1999 it was worth \$350,000.<sup>107</sup> Many in Oxford, however, felt that growth comes at the expense of those who are already there, but the change was

---

<sup>106</sup> “Christ Presbyterian Church” (Letter sent to potential candidates to be called as pastor, Oxford, Mississippi)

<sup>107</sup> Lancaster, Jeffrey. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Phone Interview. Memphis, Tennessee, March 4, 2016.

coming, and it could not be stopped.<sup>108</sup> It was in the midst of this time that a group of men and women saw a need for a new church in Oxford. They envisioned a Church that taught reformed theology straight out of the bible while offering strong community and opportunities for fellowship. In their opinions, such a church did not exist in Oxford at that time. So began Christ Presbyterian Church.

In 1984 the Presbyterian Church in America planted a church by the name of Oxford Chapel in the town of Oxford. They met in a converted funeral home on North Lamar. A man named Bob Cargo was the Church planter and preacher during the Church's existence, and he was dedicated to adamantly preaching the word of God<sup>109</sup> Oxford Chapel saw growth for a short period of time, but unfortunately no sustainable community formed. The Church, being made up of predominantly College students, folded when Bob Cargo left.<sup>110</sup> The main demographic of the Church was young college students, which made raising funds for the church and retaining members nearly impossible. By the time that Christ Presbyterian Church was even a thought, Oxford Chapel had been gone for several years, but it had certainly left a mark on the students who had attended during their years at Ole Miss.

In 1994 and 1995 several of the students who had attended Oxford Chapel, now young professionals, began moving back to Oxford, and to their surprise found that the Church which they had loved, was no longer there. Oxford Chapel had, in a lot of ways, mirrored the meetings of a campus ministry called Reformed University Fellowship or

---

<sup>108</sup> Krueger, Rob. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 25, 2016

<sup>109</sup> Sanford, Terry and Doug. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 10, 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Rob Krueger.

RUF. A man named Mark Lowrey at Southern Mississippi University formed RUF in 1971. By 1973 RUF had a sponsorship from the PCA, and before long appeared on campuses all across the Southeast. The mission statement of RUF is, “More than just a ministry on the university campus, RUF seeks to be a ministry for the university. We strive to serve in this unique stage of a student’s life in the world they live in, exploring together how the Lordship of Christ informs every area of life.” In the 1980s, the ministry fostered a tight knit and God-seeking community. Many of the Christian men and women who were trickling back in to Oxford loved RUF, and its teachings had strongly influenced their theology and vision of a Church. Oxford Chapel as well as churches such as First Presbyterian in Jackson and Independent Presbyterian in Memphis reminded the young professionals moving back to Oxford of their days in RUF. Such churches were the cornerstones of the foundation of Christ Presbyterian Church because it was in these churches that they saw their vision for an ideal church realized. When they arrived back in Oxford, it seemed to them that no such church was to be found. A number of RUF people were moving back to town, but were not really attending College Hill, and they had not really found a church home.<sup>111</sup> The founders sought a church that taught and defended the types of theology they had learned in RUF and around the South, and no such place that suited their vision.

Doug Sanford, one of the founding members of Christ Presbyterian Church said about Oxford that, “When we moved back it was kinda like it hadn’t changed since we left. Nothing had really progressed, and spiritually it felt pretty flat.” Several of the men

---

<sup>111</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster



and women moving back to Oxford quickly realized that the type of church and the type of teachings which they had once known and now sought was nowhere to be found at that time in Oxford, Mississippi. Many of the big churches in Oxford felt as if they were just going through the motions and needed something to jolt them back into action. It did not take long for the idea of an all-together new plant to appear.

A new church plant made sense for more reasons than just a perceived spiritual drought. College Hill was, at the time, the only other PCA church in the area, and to many it felt like a small historical church that was out of town. It was a long-standing historical church where many of the members had their pew that they had been sitting in for decades, and if someone else was to sit in that pew, it would cause a fuss. As with the founding of First Presbyterian over 150 years earlier, location was a huge factor as well. Obviously no one still took a horse in and out of town, but it was still a burden to drive ten minutes down College Hill any time there was a church event. Jeffrey Lancaster said “a church plant in the town of Oxford would be strategic in terms of affecting the University and the townspeople who weren’t willing to drive out to College Hill”<sup>112</sup> The Presbyterian Church in the heart of Oxford was First Presbyterian, a PCUSA Church, which greatly differed theologically from those looking for a Church home, and it served a very different niche.<sup>113</sup> A PCA Church plant logically made sense in the town of Oxford.

There was also no real sense of community at College Hill for the young couples. There were certainly deep roots and history, and the church was close knit, but there were no Bible studies, small groups, or any opportunities for growth and fellowship, especially

---

<sup>112</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.

for young people.<sup>114</sup> College Hill, at that time, was essentially just Sunday School, and Sunday services. That is not to say that the pastor, Alan Cochet was not busy going and shepherding to his flock, he worked very hard to know and love his congregation. The congregation at College Hill was also very loving. Rob Krueger told a story of when his wife went in to labor the same day that they moved into their new house. The members at College Hill made sure they had everything they needed, including a fridge,<sup>115</sup> but there were just no opportunities for small groups, and that is what the new young couples sought.<sup>116</sup>

A couple, Jack and Libby Crawford, entertained the idea of planting a new PCA church prior to the actual founding of Christ Presbyterian, but the PCA had denied the request. When they spoke to the Presbytery about a new plant, the failed plant of Oxford Chapel, created enormous skepticism and hold back. The Presbytery decided that, as a requirement for a new church plant in Oxford, the church needed ten working, local couples who would be dedicated to serving and starting a new Church. At the time, the Crawfords did not have the ten couples needed, but by 1995, several Oxonians began to form a group.<sup>117</sup>

Jeffrey Lancaster, the RUF pastor at Ole Miss in 1995, was the man that was sought after to be the first leader of such a group. Lancaster was a reformed pastor who, at the time attended College Hill Presbyterian Church with his wife, Cathy. Several of the former RUF and Oxford Chapel members who had moved back to town approached Lancaster. Once they came to the conclusion that there was, in their opinion, no Church

---

<sup>114</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>115</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>116</sup> Tim Fortner.

<sup>117</sup> Doug Sanford.

that fit their needs and asked for him to begin leading a Bible study for them on Sunday Nights. They began meeting in February of 1995. At first no desire existed to form a church. The group functioned only as a Bible study, and Lancaster was a very gifted teacher. Rob Krueger and his wife MuWan enjoyed his preaching so much that prior to the Bible study they would, with his permission sit in the back of RUF meetings listening to his sermons even though some of Rob's students were in attendance.<sup>118</sup> Soon, however the Bible study desired more, and talks of a church plant began to arise. Lancaster says that the spirit was moving in big ways at that time because people outside of the Bible study began asking a lot of questions about PCA churches. He got one call from a law student asking if there was a PCA church in town. On another occasion, Johnny Barrett, a current elder at Christ Presbyterian, called him and asked about a church in the town. Neither of them knew about the Bible study or talks of a church plant. It also made sense to plant a church near the university that could draw in not only students but professors as well. Today Christ Presbyterian is full of both. Jeffery said that, "Actually, there was, at the time, informal contact with presbytery leadership and it seemed that the unanimous consensus was that there was a need for such a church plant"<sup>119</sup> A new church plant seemed inevitable, and Lancaster was the natural choice to lead.

The first step in the process, getting the ten couples to commit to planting the church, happened very rapidly. The group began meeting in Jack and Libby Crawford's basement on Sunday afternoons or evenings. At first they were only able to do a Bible study, which was led by Jeffrey Lancaster, because they had not yet received a commission from the PCA. This group began to call themselves Pinecrest Presbyterian

---

<sup>118</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>119</sup> Jeffery Lancaster.

because that was the name of the Threadgill's street,<sup>120</sup> and then when they moved into OUS, they used a room full of beanbags. They began to call their group bean bag Presbyterian. Lancaster led the group in choosing the name of their Church. They knew that they wanted to involve Christ in the name, and found also saw the value of having Presbyterian in the name, especially in the South.<sup>121</sup> The group came up with three ideas, and voted Christ Presbyterian Church as their new name. They continued to ardently hold their bible studies, and on April 30<sup>th</sup> they went before Covenant Presbytery. The document that they brought before the Presbytery read:

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

We the undersigned, have joined hands together for the purpose of establishing a Church at Oxford, Mississippi in affiliation with the Presbyterian Church in America. We affirm our strong resolve to carry this work forward, and in this spirit we petition the Covenant Presbytery to grant us mission status.

Jennifer C. Angle

Timothy R. Angle

John L. Barrett

Ev Barrett

Marianne Bradford

Jack Crawford

---

<sup>120</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>121</sup> Terry Sanford.

Libby Crawford  
Mary Dunbar  
Tom Dunbar  
Martha Elinger  
Muwon Kroeger  
Robert S. Kroeger  
Cathy Lancaster  
Doug Sanford  
Terry Sanford  
Rhea Tannehill  
Robin Tannehill  
Elizabeth L. Threadgill  
Timothy M. Threadgill<sup>122</sup>

The Bible study took its first step towards becoming a Church plant, but they did not avoid conflict all together. When College Hill Presbyterian learned that a new PCA church was trying to plant roots in Oxford, they disagreed with the necessity of another church. “They would have ideally liked for anyone that wanted to be a part of the Presbyterian Church to be a part of their Church in what they felt was the same place”<sup>123</sup> Three members of College Hill, The Kroegers and Cathy Lancaster, left College Hill to plant the new Church as well as Jeffrey Lancaster, the RUF pastor who led the group.

---

<sup>122</sup> “Mission to North America Committee Covenant Presbytery” (paper presented to presbytery to receive church commission, April 30, 1995).

<sup>123</sup> Doug Sanford.

There was a fear that Christ Presbyterian might try to poach members from College Hill, but that was never the intention of Christ Presbyterian. Lancaster said “There was an effort not to draw people from College Hill, that’s where I drew a line in the sand, but there was a hunger among young couples to have some close fellowship and people who heard about the group insisted on joining”<sup>124</sup> Christ Presbyterian was intended to be a whole other niche than College Hill, so the hope was to draw none of their members.<sup>125</sup>

College Hill was mostly frustrated that they were not asked to be the parent Church of Christ Presbyterian.<sup>126</sup> They wanted to help plant a new Church, but the founding members of Christ Presbyterian had a very different vision for the Church that they wanted in the heart of Oxford. College Hill was a beautiful historic church, very good at what they were, but not willing to change.<sup>127</sup> College Hill Church never really felt like it was a part of Oxford. The church was outside of town, invisible to the majority of the community that never made their way down Old College Hill road. It made sense to have a second body within the city limits.<sup>128</sup> A desire for new type of church that was unlike College Hill or any other church in the area arose, but some felt that having two PCA churches would be redundant. Not everyone felt this way, but it is interesting that there is an oddity in the presence of three Presbyterian Churches in such a small area. Why is it so rare that there is multiplicity within the Presbyterian Church, even in larger communities? Perhaps it is the church government within the Presbyterian Church that stifled the creation of new churches. For example, the MNA, Missions to North America,

---

<sup>124</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>125</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.

<sup>126</sup> Tim Fortner.

<sup>127</sup> Doug Sanford.

<sup>128</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.

helps in planting new branches of PCA churches, and without their approval it becomes very difficult to form a plant. Though a difficult process, the new members of Christ Presbyterian believed that this new church plant was the best thing for Oxford. After all as Jeffrey Lancaster said, “planting a church stimulates all the rest of the churches too.”

Christ Presbyterian desired the control of placing their own leadership in and setting the Church structure up differently than College Hill with more opportunities for fellowship and teaching directly from the bible. College Hill was also not very involved in the Presbytery, and Christ Presbyterian wanted to have Presbytery help and involvement.<sup>129</sup> An immediate impulse to call College Hill and ask them for help never arose within the founders of Christ Presbyterian. They received no offer from College Hill to be the parent church, and when College Hill found out about the Bible study, contention appeared within the congregation of College Hill. The Bible study was certainly separate from College Hill, however, and did not go through the session. They enjoyed the preaching of Lancaster, and it seems that they never really wanted any help from College Hill. Regardless, there was no direct evidence from College Hill that they wanted to daughter a church, so the founders of College Hill went about creating a church on their own.<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, the founders of Christ Presbyterian also made no real efforts to ask College Hill for assistance. Perhaps because of contention, but likely because of the different visions for a church, the founders never looked to College Hill for help. In fact it was not until the idea was beginning to be discussed on a Presbytery level that College Hill found out that the church was moving forward.<sup>131</sup> Eventually, the

---

<sup>129</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.

<sup>130</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.

<sup>131</sup> Tim Fortner.

members went before the presbytery who unanimously voted in favor of a new church plant in Oxford. A unanimous vote among Presbyterians is a rarity, and when the church passed there was a standing ovation. It seemed like yet another sign from God that Christ Presbyterian was making a good decision.<sup>132</sup> The animosity between the churches did not, for the most part, last very long. Soon they began to reach out to one another for joint conferences or socials, and today they still hold a welcome back ice cream social for all of the Ole Miss students on the first week back from summer vacation.

Christ Presbyterian wanted to be a church in town that really reflected the Oxford community. They wanted to be a church that actively taught and confirmed their theology in the heart of Oxford. They wanted to be a church centered around PCA teaching. College Hill was a young PCA church, fresh out of the PCUSA, and they were not very involved with the presbytery. The founders of Christ Presbyterian envisioned a different church more like the ones that they had found their roots in. They wanted a church that was involved with the PCA and strictly adhered to all of its ideology. College Hill, not being involved with the presbytery and having perhaps some remnants of lingering PCUSA theology within the congregation, did not seem like the place to foster such a community. They also wanted to be a church that better reflected the community as a whole whether that be racially or just the backgrounds that people came from. They wanted inclusivity for whoever walked through the doors of the Church. The congregation was, at that time, very young. The oldest member was Johnny Barrett, and he was in his early 30s, but the church desired to be a congregation of all ages that ministered to college students but was not made predominantly made up by college

---

<sup>132</sup> Jeffrey Lancaster.



students. More than anything they wanted a place for people to come and feel safe to be themselves. This absence would come through the difficult and ever-present task of creating multi-cultural church in which anyone would be able to feel comfortable worshipping.

Christ Presbyterian was young and energetic, but very poor. Membership had been growing rapidly because Jeffrey Lancaster was a phenomenal teacher and because so many old RUF folks wanted to be a part of this new Church.<sup>133</sup> The group knew it was time to call a pastor and eventually find a building in which to hold their services, but they needed money. The congregation decided to hold a fundraiser called “Mule Jail Fundraiser” named after the hunting camp where the event took place. They reached out to PCA churches all over the South in four states and thirteen cities.<sup>134</sup> The event became known as “chigger fest” by the new members of Christ Presbyterian because all of the men in the congregation got chiggers, yet somehow the women did not.<sup>135</sup> The congregation raised several thousand dollars, and by the end of the summer, they were ready to give call to a pastor.

The Congregation had grown far beyond the capabilities of a small basement, and in the summer of 1995 a new, temporary space was found. The congregation, still led by Lancaster, a volunteer, began meeting in the Oxford University School gym. They had to pay only \$75 month, and the gym served all of the needs they had at the time.<sup>136</sup> They held both Sunday school and morning services in the gym, and were growing week by

---

<sup>133</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>134</sup> “Mule Jail Fund Raiser Contacts” (paper presented to session showing a list of supportive churches, Oxford, Mississippi, July 1994).

<sup>135</sup> Terry Sanford.

<sup>136</sup> Doug Sanford.

week. Christ Presbyterian needed to hire a full time pastor who could lead the Church plant for the next several years. A committee formed and put together the process they would follow, their idea of an ideal pastoral profile, and questions to ask a candidate in an interview. The profile included things such as humble, willing to confess sins to men in his community, balanced, supporter of RUF and the University, and skilled in evangelism. The interview contained forty-three questions on everything from preferred styles of worship to outreach plans and how he would be a steward of his time. The Congregation of Christ Presbyterian was very careful and meticulous in the hiring of their first pastor.

Eventually the committee came up with eight names of men from around the South who they thought might be a good fit. They spoke with several of these men to get a feel for how they would fit into the vision of Christ Presbyterian Church, one of which was a man named Curt Presley, who was not, at that time called, but would come back into the story later.<sup>137</sup> Finally, the congregation penned a letter to Shane Sunn, a man whom many of them had known during their years at Ole Miss through RUF and who had, at one point in time, been the RUF pastor at Louisiana State University.<sup>138</sup> He accepted the call and became the first pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church, preaching his first sermon on Colossians 1:1-6 on October 15.<sup>139</sup> Christ Presbyterian continued to meet in Oxford University School Gym for the next year, and membership grew to somewhere around seventy-five people. Shane Sunn would preach at the top of the key facing the

---

<sup>137</sup> “Christ Presbyterian Church” (Letter sent to potential candidates to be called as pastor, Oxford, Mississippi)

<sup>138</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>139</sup> Rob Krueger.

backboard, and the whole congregation would fit between him and the base line.<sup>140</sup> Christ Presbyterian had grown to the point that they needed their own space.

The gym was always meant to be a temporary space, and not long after its conception, the Church needed its own space. Off of University Street, there was once an old skating rink/indoor driving range that was only being partially used. It had a large room and a very moldable skeleton, the perfect place for the small congregation to move in and begin to call home. At first the building was leased, but eventually enough funds appeared so that they could purchase it. Steve Trott, an architect in the community, then drew the design for the Church building. There was not enough money in the pot to bring in professionals to build the walls, lay the dry wall, and paint, but that was no problem to the men and women of Christ Presbyterian. They would simply have to do it themselves. Members of the church literally did demolition where needed, built every wall, and painted on every square inch of their new building. Churches from Jackson and Memphis sent down their youth groups on mission trips to help out, and soon the building was completed. “God built this Church, I still have no idea how to build a Church”<sup>141</sup> The Church had a pastor, a building, and a congregation, and for several years it continued to grow and support the Oxford community.

This period of time was very easy for the congregation, and in fact created a sort of naivety within the congregation. The new, young members threw around all sorts of amazing ideas, yet little was actually accomplished. The Benevolence ministry was, until 2001 almost non-existent, and much of the mission’s success was found through international students, and this was very much accredited to Bill McKenzie, a member of

---

<sup>140</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>141</sup> Terry Sanford.

College Hill. The body was also very homogenous. Rob Krueger said, “I was, at 42 years of age the oldest member in the pew” and then went on to say that “There were not many thirty plus singles, divorcees, bereaved, needy, or sick. We did not encounter many racial issues, and we had little in the way of mental health disorder or obesity.”<sup>142</sup> The Church was young, but that did make them immune to issues. They would soon face the passing of members and division amongst the congregation.

In 2000 the Church faced one of its most difficult times. On January 18 Shane Sunn, the first pastor of Christ Presbyterian, resigned and left Oxford. The problems began with a disagreement between Shane and the session on the process of sanctification. For well over a year the session, which included Doug Sanford, Johnny Barrett, and John O’Haver had been debating the right way to go about teaching sanctification. The Sonship movement immensely influenced Pastor Sunn. This movement was by no means heretical or blasphemous according to Presbyterian doctrine, but the idea was to focus so much on God’s grace that one would become obedient out of gratitude. Sunn feared that if you taught too much against sin it would inspire a works based faith. Sunn rarely preached strongly against morality, and many felt that the same thing was being preached over and over again with no real clarity.<sup>143</sup> The session also felt that pastor Sunn was extraordinarily talented at helping to plant a church and get it going, but because of his views on sanctification he was perhaps not the best fit for sustaining a Church like Christ Presbyterian.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>143</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>144</sup> Doug Sanford.

The session met with a Care Committee from the Presbytery to try and settle their differences, but eventually the committee decided that with the session unanimously in disagreement with the pastor, resignation was the best option.<sup>145</sup> The most difficult part was that the committee asked the session to not inform the body about the reasoning for resignation. When Shane resigned there were some who were very confused and angry. The session asked the body not to pry, but there were still some members who tried to gather all of the info they could to try and get the presbytery to drop the resignation. Interestingly it was mostly new members who had just started attending Christ Presbyterian who were the most involved.<sup>146</sup> Division occurred amongst the members of Christ Presbyterian, and the members went through a difficult time. When the time came to vote to accept or reject the resignation, an enormous thunderstorm broke out, and many of the members felt as if it was a bad omen.<sup>147</sup> Christ Presbyterian then entered a span of eighteen months without a head pastor. The preaching was irregular and many different guests were brought in to temporarily fill the spot. Eventually the wounds healed amongst the church, and though a few members decided to find a home elsewhere, things with Shane Sunn seem to have smoothed over with little effect on the congregation.

A committee soon formed to find the new pastor of Christ Presbyterian. A list was gathered, preaching tapes were sent in, and eventually the decision was made to call a Senior Pastor from McGee Mississippi named Curt Presley. Presley, who had said he was not ready the first time the job was brought to him in 1995, took the job this time around and moved with his family to Oxford in 2001. They settled in to the Church nicely, and

---

<sup>145</sup> Terry Sanford.

<sup>146</sup> Rob Krueger.

<sup>147</sup> Rob Krueger.

Curt remains the preacher to this day. When he arrived the Church was, in a lot of ways, settled by his calm and friendly demeanor. “It’s very hard not to like Curt”<sup>148</sup> By the grace of God the congregation did not split, but there was still work to be done.

When Curt arrived to the Church it still had a small, family feel to it. Most everyone active within the body knew everyone else. The church had only two full time staff members, Curt and a woman named Katrina who helped with day-to-day activity. No real bureaucracy existed. There were no deacons and only three elders and Curt at the age of forty-two outdated all of them. Youth made up the entire congregation, and only seven members were over 50. It took several older residents of Oxford stepping out of their comfort zone and taking ownership of a young church for that age barrier to begin to change.

There was also not much structure. The Church grew and did well, but the necessity for intensive strategic planning, structure, and communication had not yet arisen. There was no formal budget for the first couple of years that Presley was the Pastor. Since the church did not have deacons they did not have a benevolence ministry. All of this being considered, the fellowship was very strong. There were shepherding groups, bible studies, and prayer groups within the Church that brought the body together for growth and community.<sup>149</sup>

By 2010 the Church had grown to the point where the session saw it as a little-big church. Benevolence ministries began to take off, the number of elders grew to six, and numbers were up. More structure and planning were needed, but the congregation wanted

---

<sup>148</sup> Terry Sanford.

<sup>149</sup> Presley, Curt. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, March 1, 2016.

to keep the feeling of fellowship, which they had created all those years ago. Christ Presbyterian seeks to be a Church that is made up of believers walking side by side as they grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Even though it is a young church, it is a church that loves each other well, and wants to see the kingdom shining in Oxford. Christ Presbyterian started as a group of people who just ate meals together and talked about Jesus, and today they hope that at their core the community looks very much the same.

## **Chapter 6: The Current and Future Churches in Oxford Mississippi: 2016**

2016 is a time overwhelming opportunity in Mississippi. Rapid change abounds, and the population is rampantly expanding. Businesses, developers, and residents long to capitalize on the opportunities arising in Oxford, and new chances seem to appear every month. First Presbyterian, Christ Presbyterian, and College Hill Presbyterian still serve different parts of the Oxford community, and the necessity for all three has certainly not gone away with time.

Christ Presbyterian Church is both the newest Presbyterian Church in Oxford. Curt Presley is currently the Senior Pastor and Jamie Patterson is the Associate Pastor. The Church has four other full time staff members as well as several other part time staff members who coordinate everything from youth ministry to international ministries. The Church membership is around 300, and on Sunday mornings the sanctuary is packed to capacity. The Church still presides in the once skating rink golf shop combo, but it is definitely not the same little church that formed in 1995.<sup>150</sup>

The session of Christ Presbyterian is made currently made up of eight men who are elders, two teaching elders in Presley and Peterson and six ruling elders. The elders at

---

<sup>150</sup> Curt Presley.



Christ Presbyterian rarely struggle with contention, and by the grace of God, Presley believes them all to be men who are actively seeking after Jesus Christ.<sup>151</sup> The Church derives its spiritual qualifications from 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and required that nominations for elder be men who are “holy, self-controlled, able to manage their households”, as well as several other biblical qualifications.<sup>152</sup> The elders of Christ Presbyterian also have the responsibility of maintaining a shepherding group, or small group, which meets every two weeks to discuss the bible and fellowship. A diaconate, made up of nine men, has also been formed within the church.<sup>153</sup> There is a list of qualifications similar to that of the elders but more focused on service as the deacons are to really be the hands and feet of the church.<sup>154</sup>

In 2011 a strategic planning document was put together in order to eliminate confusion within the congregation and spur the church in the direction of a clear mission and goal. The statement of identity reads “By the grace, work, and power of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Christ Presbyterian is an in-town community of believers in Jesus Christ committed to glorifying and enjoying God according to the Scriptures through Christ-centered worship, the making of disciples, and acts of love and mercy”<sup>155</sup> The document goes on to add detail to the statement of identity by saying how the Church plans on doing each of those individual things. It includes

---

<sup>151</sup> Curt Presley.

<sup>152</sup> “Nomination for Ruling Elder” (paper presented to congregation anytime a new ruling elder is to be nominated, Oxford, Mississippi).

<sup>153</sup> Bulletin CPC

<sup>154</sup> “Nomination for Deacon” (paper presented to congregation anytime a new Deacon is to be nominated, Oxford, Mississippi).

<sup>155</sup> “Strategic Planning 2011-12” (paper presented at the strategic planning meeting, Oxford, Mississippi, 2012).

things such as knowing that the church serves a small university town, looking like the kingdom of God, having a high view of Scripture, and many other areas of service responsibility, condemning when necessary and opportunity within the church. The document effectively exposed the weaknesses within the church by providing guidelines that should be followed, and it helped to fix them by articulating the way that the church can and should follow such guidelines.<sup>156</sup> A survey was also sent to all the members of the church asking them to rate the church's performance in areas such as church life, services, teaching, and personal outreach.<sup>157</sup> It is clear that Christ Presbyterian found it essential to have structure and feedback to create the best and most influential church body possible.

Benevolence ministry has also taken off recently. The election of deacons helped to encourage more involvement and push the church to helping those in need within the Oxford community. A benevolence committee was formed, and under the leadership of a man named Otis Pickett, the committee was able to form a plan and begin making enormous impacts in the lives of Oxonians. International ministry both at home and abroad also became a fundamental piece of Christ Presbyterian's mission. In Oxford, a group of internationals meet at Christ Presbyterian every week to learn English with hopes that they might also learn the gospel. Christ Presbyterian also supports several different missionaries abroad such as Tony and Tracy Boyd, missionaries in Asia.<sup>158</sup>

Weaknesses within a church, or perhaps areas for improvement are difficult to assess. No one really wants to address them if they are honest, but any Church that says

---

<sup>156</sup> Curt Presley.

<sup>157</sup> "Christ Presbyterian Church Health Assessment" (Survey sent out to all members before the conception of the strategic planning document, Oxford Mississippi, 2012).

<sup>158</sup> Rob Krueger.

they have no areas of weakness is clearly blind. As Curt Presley put it “the biggest problem is that we’re a bunch of sinners”<sup>159</sup>, and when a church accepts this, they are bound to find at least one area of weakness. Presley sees two areas in which Christ Presbyterian needs improvement. Communication is the first thing that the session is currently trying to improve. Communication gets more and more difficult as a church grows, and though he feels like he knows all of the members through doing the inquirers class, Presley does not feel that all of the opportunities and teachings are made available to them the way that they should be. The church recently launched a new website which has been helpful, but there is still work to do. Another problem within Christ Presbyterian is busyness. Presley said that in a busy place like Oxford, it takes real effort and sacrifice to be involved in a church and pour into its community. There are so many things going on that even he cannot begin to be involved with all of them, but Presley prays that members of his congregation could find their own niche within the church, pour into Christ Presbyterian, and be fed by the community that is available.

Christ Presbyterian also thrives in several other areas. The original plan for Christ Presbyterian was to be a bible teaching church where Christ is the focus. Presley reinforced this by saying that “my opinion isn’t worth a hill of beans, its what God says that matters.” Christ Presbyterian ‘s teaching style is to simply march straight through he bible and find its wisdom there. The Church has also maintained a high sense of fellowship and community. There is always something going on in terms of bible studies, theology studies, prayer groups, and Church suppers, and most in the eyes of Presley, what is most important is that “we are willing to go after each other if necessary.”

---

<sup>159</sup> Curt Presley.

Fellowship has always been essential to Christ Presbyterian. It is one of the reasons they started a new Church, and it remains a strength for them today.

A niche and comfort within a church go hand in hand. Those who feel comfortable attending a church because of theology, style of worship, inclusion from the body, or style of clothes worn make up the niche of a church. Christ Presbyterian's goal as a church is to be nicheless. Presley relates it to a gumbo of different people. Just as gumbo is best when all of the flavors of chicken, rice, sausage, and okra come together to make one great pot, so the church must bring together all different kinds of people to make it the best it can be. The Church tries not to suit one age group, one race, one level of income, or one type of history, but rather seeks to be a beacon of Christ.<sup>160</sup> Christ Presbyterian even mentions in their strategic planning that they want to be inviting and look like the kingdom of God by not using insider language or abbreviations and being willing to adapt the style of music to try and make more people feel welcome.<sup>161</sup> They try to blend traditional and newer styles of worship to create a more welcoming worship experience for all. Christ Presbyterian does their best to serve Oxford as a niche less Church.

Christ Presbyterian will soon break ground on their new Church building. Great care is being taken in the design, feel, and finance of the new building, for a new building can completely change the structure of a church either positively or negatively.

“Someone, God willing, is going to preach from the pulpit at that new building fifty-two times a year, but that building is going to preach something about who we are to the

---

<sup>160</sup> Curt Presley.

<sup>161</sup> “Strategic Planning 2011-12”

community twenty four hours a day, 365 days a year.”<sup>162</sup> Currently a prayer team, financial team, and design team are being assembled, and the hope is that the congregation will be worshipping in a new building before 2018. The hope is that, though the church needs a new building to expand and grow, the DNA of the church will remain the same. The DNA being good community, fellowship, and bible centered worship, and that the new building will preach theology just as much as architecture by putting clear emphasis on what is important in the sanctuary, preaching and the sacraments. “We need to find out who we are and how to continue that as we grow”<sup>163</sup> Christ Presbyterian’s future is one of big changes, but hopefully similar family feeling and structure.

First Presbyterian stands today as a beautiful Church in the heart of Oxford, right on the square. When John Semmes took over, the Church was not in good shape. Membership was low, and the church did not seem to be thriving. Today, after a three-tiered plan that focused on education, worship, and fellowship, the church is thriving. First Presbyterian houses eight full time staff members. John Semmes is joined by one associate pastor with the hope of adding another in the near future. The session is made up of fifteen men and women that reflect the make-up of the church. They are young and old, new members and old members, and men and women, but they all share the common thread of a deep love for First Presbyterian. Elders serve three-year terms, with new elders being elected each year. When an Elder finishes their term, they are asked to take three years off before actively serving as elders once again. The session is the “board” of the church, and they help to make all of the big decisions such as whether or not to put a new \$20,000 roof on the church. Every meeting is opened with prayer and Bible study,

---

<sup>162</sup> Curt Presley.

<sup>163</sup> Curt Presley.

and Semmes says that once the rotation idea was accepted and put in to practice, there really have been no grandiose disagreements amongst the session. The session of First Presbyterian is made up of strong spiritual leaders of the church.

The mission statement of First Presbyterian reads: “Energized by grace, First Presbyterian Church of Oxford seeks to provide a hospitable environment in which to worship God; to know and demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ; with the help of the Holy Spirit to support, nurture and sustain all on their journeys of faith; and to serve as the hands and feet of Christ here and around the world.” It is a statement of inclusiveness, which is what Semmes sees as one of First Presbyterians strengths Semmes himself does not really see a need for a mission statement. To him a mission statement is just something that was brought over from the business world, and what is important is to show others the love of Jesus Christ. He said, “It is open, bring people in and show them what love looks like”<sup>164</sup>

First Presbyterian has a lot of great things going for them. They are a historical church that sticks to their roots, yet the congregation is very forward thinking. Perhaps not in the diversity of membership, but in theology and ideology, the church is very eclectic. It is full of educated doctors, lawyers, engineers, and as such is also blessed with phenomenal resources, both financially and in skill sets. Semmes also sees one of the church’s strengths being that there is no one belief that dominates the other. He teaches reformed theology, but there are people of all sorts of different beliefs within First Presbyterian. Semmes said, “there are as many theologically inclined as there are people

---

<sup>164</sup> Semmes, John. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, March 2, 2016.

who are social justice inclined.”<sup>165</sup> Semmes was adamant that at First Presbyterian no one is going to get enraged by someone in the church who has different beliefs than they do as long as they agree on Jesus. While both he and the associate are more progressively inclined towards social justice, he tries to just “throw a bowling ball down the alley” and reach everyone where they are. In doing so he rarely alludes to polarizing issues, but hopes to show Jesus to all those who come through the door, no matter who they are.<sup>166</sup>

First Presbyterian has one glaring problem in that they are running out of room. Two services are currently being held, and that is not enough. The Church is currently expanding its fellowship hall, but the sanctuary also needs to be expanded desperately. Unfortunately there is nowhere to go, but the church does own the city block to the left of the church (if you are facing it), so in the future they hope to develop in to the square. Semmes also sees a trend that is moving churches towards small group settings, and he hopes that First Presbyterian will begin to focus more on that area. Overall, Semmes hopes that in the future the core of the church will remain the same though he sees it having a few new faces.

First Presbyterian finds itself filling a necessary niche in Oxford. The Church holds very traditional services, Semmes wears a robe when he preaches, and music is done in a very traditional way. Many members relate to this style of worship because it is what they grew up with. Oxford, as a university town, is the cultural epicenter of Mississippi, and thus it brings in a more eclectic crowd. The PCUSA helps to fill that niche within Oxford, but even more so First Presbyterian as a church reaches out to those who might want a church that focuses more on social issues, progressive theology, and

---

<sup>165</sup> John Semmes.

<sup>166</sup> John Semmes.

inclusiveness. First Presbyterian's "eclectic theology" offers a place for those who might have an idea of what reformed theology is, but also want to focus on issues of social justice. The PCA church is much more conservative in its ideology, which can at times be construed as uninviting to those with a more liberal background or theology. Presbyterian fills a need for many Presbyterian residents in Oxford.

Racial relations have always been entwined with the history of churches in the South, and 2016 is no exception. Evangelical circles in the new millennium have been filled with talks of multi-cultural churches and reconciliation. Though churches are, for the most part, still very segregated. Still, there are examples such as Redeemer Presbyterian in Jackson that have bridged the racial gap with very diverse congregations. In Oxford, churches remain segregated for the most part, but it is interesting to look at how the Presbyterian Churches deal with such an important issue.

First Presbyterian Pastor John Semmes said that his church is probably 97-98% white, and he does not really see that changing. In fact, Semmes said that he did not really think that any churches could successfully bridge the racial divide in 2016. Mainline Protestant Churches are for the most part "lily White" and Semmes paraphrased Dr. Martin Luther King saying that, "it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." Semmes believes that at the root of the issue is the style of worship. First Presbyterian has a very traditional style of worship focused on preaching, and black churches tend to emphasize the spirit much more in their worship, which First Presbyterian does not. First Presbyterian would love to



have more ethnicities present within their church, but Semmes does not see it as a possibility.<sup>167</sup>

Christ Presbyterian is the most racially forward thinking of the three Presbyterian Churches in Oxford. On a typical Sunday non-white attendees make up approximately 6-8% of those present. While that is a low number, it is much higher than those of First Presbyterian and College Hill. College Hill typically has 0% while First Presbyterian is somewhere between 1-2%. Presley again mentioned the gumbo analogy, and how a good gumbo community takes all different kinds of people all stewing in the rue of the gospel. In 2016, there are no longer any people who are debating whether or not integration needs to happen; it is just a matter of how. Oxford is going to continue to grow, and people of all different backgrounds will find themselves in Oxford, and Christ Presbyterian wants to be a place where all of them can feel welcome. Presley is not exactly sure what the answer is, but the Church is actively seeking an answer. This March, Christ Presbyterian hosted a bible conference called "Race: Can We do Better?" hosted by Dr. Otis Pickett and Dr. Ellis. They spoke on why churches are segregated, and how it is more than just a racial issue. Presley thinks that one solution may be to hire an African American Pastor on staff at Christ Presbyterian. Doug and Terry Sanford both mentioned that for quite some time the youth group has been very diverse. It may take a blending of music styles. Presley said that we have been using the excuse of different styles of worship for far too long, and there is no reason that we cannot worship Christ together. Regardless, Christ Presbyterian is doing what they can to support the growth of

---

<sup>167</sup> John Semmes.

a multi-cultural community, and because they set the church up to do just that from their conception, they have the most diverse congregation of the three churches.

College Hill Church is at a very interesting time in its history. It seems to be a transition period where fewer and fewer of the original College Hill families remain in the congregation. The church as a whole still cares deeply for the history and its preservation, but there is not as much of an emotional attachment to that History. Justin McGuire is currently serving as the pastor at College Hill, and he said that he was pleasantly surprised when he came to the church that none of the members seemed to dig their heels in when it came to change within the church. Moreover the church was very evenly distributed when it came to age. McGuire, a graduate of Covenant seminary who arrived from Maryland in 2013 said that the church was a loving and open place when he arrived.

When McGuire arrived, there were a couple of things that needed to be addressed. The first went back to the idea of the transition. Since the church was mostly made up of people commuting in rather than those who lived in the community, McGuire felt that College Hill was not really reaching out to the community. The solution was to go door to door within the community and ask their neighbors how they could pray for them as well as invite them to services on Sunday. Another need that had to be addressed was the church role. It had gotten very out of hand, and had not been trimmed, likely, in decades. Just recently the elders have completed the trimming of the role into a true representation of Church membership.

The church has 163 communing members, obviously not including children, and visitors such as college students. Three people are on full time staff salaries, and two

others receive part time pay for church responsibilities. The Church has seven deacons and seven elders, all men who serve for life. The session could find no evidence of scripture suggesting that these positions were meant to be temporary, but to prevent the session from getting burned out every seventh year they are offered the option to take a break from service with the expectation that they will return. McGuire said that he is very blessed by his session because there is rarely any sort of contrition or frustration amongst them. The elders are, for the most part white men in their 40s-50s who seek to help lead the church and foster relationships within it. Each Elder is paired with a Deacon, and they preside over a shepherding group. This is mostly to be there to assist them and make sure that whoever is in their group is still involved in the church. The groups are not a Bible study like those at Christ Presbyterian, but help to keep the community together.

College Hill now offers an abundance of opportunities for growth within the church. Sunday school and Sunday services are just the beginning. There are several discipleship groups for both men and women led by older couples within the church, every Wednesday there is a church supper, the youth group is thriving under Luke Kuiper, the current youth director, and small groups are going to start up in the fall of 2016. The distance from town, while a struggle in the past, is also seen by many as a retreat. Most of the members are now communing with no generational ties, and find the beautiful land with its sugar magnolias to be a place where they can feel close to God. Opportunities are abounding at College Hill, and McGuire said that one of the strengths of the church is its hunger to learn and teach the word of God. The focus of the church is certainly on the understanding of God and deepening the relationships with him.

College Hill does have some blind spots. McGuire said that the community is very focused on deepening relationships with Christ, but it is a difficult environment for a non-believer. Furthermore, the Church is very much a lily white congregation. There is one Asian who is a member, but besides that there really is no diversity. McGuire said that they certainly desire to be a better reflection of the demographics of Oxford even if that does not mean that they are a multi-cultural church like Christ Presbyterian might desire to be. He said that no one in the church is purposefully putting out any auras of racism, but that perhaps by clinging on to certain aspects of the church's history and glorifying them, it might make some feel unwelcome. Even the church building itself could be a turnoff to those who grew up in the traditional church system and for one reason or another felt disconnected. Most of the community around College Hill is made up of African Americans, so when the church was going door to door, that was one way that they have tried to increase diversity and make other cultures feel more welcome, but it is certainly a battle of longevity.

College Hill fills a different niche today perhaps than the one it has filled in the past. McGuire said that he does not really see it as a country church bent towards their history. There are certainly those who see the church as a function of the community as much as it is a function of Christ, but that is becoming less common. McGuire said that the church is becoming more and more outward facing as it goes out into the community and helps those in need. The niche now is for those who already have some sort of relationship with God and seek after better understanding of his word. College Hill is a great place for those types of Presbyterians to deepen their understanding of the bible and reformed faith. It is a traditional setting. The church has a choir and McGuire preaches in

a robe. Tradition is certainly a part of College Hill's niche, but it does not make up the whole thing. College Hill is a church for those who have a deep desire to further their relationship with God through vigorous and detailed study of the bible.<sup>168</sup>

Christ Presbyterian, First Presbyterian, and College Hill have an interesting relationship within the community. College Hill and Christ Presbyterian are in the same presbytery. They function within the same community in the same denomination, so naturally they have a relationship with one another. They have the annual ice cream social together at Ole Miss, Presley and McGuire cross paths a couple of times a month, and seem to have a good relationship. The two churches even have some fluid members. It is not uncommon for people who once went to Christ Presbyterian to start going to College Hill or vice versa.<sup>169</sup> They attend and help to promote one another's conferences and events within their congregations.<sup>170</sup> First Presbyterian is a different story. They are in a different presbytery and a different denomination than the other two churches, and very rarely have any sort of relationship. One interesting observation from the minutes is that when the mosque opened in Oxford, First Presbyterian made a conscious effort to reach out to them, but there was no mention of the founding of Christ Presbyterian.<sup>171</sup> First Presbyterian actually has a better relationship with the Methodist and Episcopal churches in town, likely because of the closeness in proximity. The relationship between the churches is in a way essential to understanding the need for all three because it shows the differences between congregations.

---

<sup>168</sup> Justin McGuire.

<sup>169</sup> Curt Presley.

<sup>170</sup> Justin McGuire.

<sup>171</sup> Carole B. Haney, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume III* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, July 15, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The founding of Presbyterian Churches in Oxford has always started with location. College Hill would not be in Lafayette County was it not for the desire of Goodloe Warren Buford to return to the place where he saw so much beauty. First Presbyterian could have been one with College Hill had they not been so far away from one another. They shared a pastor, and the theology of the two was very similar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the distance kept the two communities separate. And in 1995, when College Hill formed there were several reasons to start a new church, but what those members really wanted was a, PCA church in the heart of Oxford. College Hill did not satisfy this need because they were so far away and the church and it was a traditional historic church. First Presbyterian, though in the very heart of Oxford, the square, had completely different theological ideas than they sought in the 1990s. In the time and especially the place that these three churches were founded, the make-up of Oxford supported their conception.

Today, it still makes sense for Oxford to house three Presbyterian Churches. Oxford is a vibrant and growing town full of many different types of people, and each church holds a niche for a different type of reformed Presbyterian. College Hill is the

traditional Church where they sing out of the trinity hymnal and the pastor wears a robe. Those who grew up loving such a setting and adhere to the conservative theology of the PCA find their home at College Hill. For Presbyterians who enjoy a more traditional setting with hymns and robes, but find themselves adhering more to the reason based, eclectic theology of the PCUSA might opt to attend First Presbyterian on the square. Still some agree with the PCA theology of the divine inerrancy of the scripture and they enjoy traditional worship but are willing to try guitar-based worship and perhaps some blended worship. They want to be a reflection of the community as a whole, and Christ Presbyterian is the community they choose.

Oxford will never be an easy place to understand. William Faulkner devoted hundreds of pages of literature to unfolding the mysteries of Mississippi. Part of its history certainly lies in her churches, and in Oxford the Presbyterian Churches combine for 381 years of history. They are integral to understanding Christians in Oxford, and each of them has a very special place in the community.

### Works Cited

1. Carole B. Haney, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume III* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, July 15, 2012)
2. “Christ Presbyterian Church” (Letter sent to potential candidates to be called as pastor, Oxford, Mississippi)
3. Christ Presbyterian Church: 1995 Proposed Budget” (Budget presented to the session, Oxford Mississippi, 1995).
4. “Christ Presbyterian Church Health Assessment” (Survey sent out to all members before the conception of the strategic planning document, Oxford Mississippi, 2012).
5. Fortner, Tim. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 26, 2016.
6. Franklin E. Moak and Maud Morrow Brown, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume II* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, 1987)
7. Krueger, Rob. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 25, 2016.
8. Lancaster, Jeffrey. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Phone Interview. Memphis, Tennessee, March 4, 2016.
9. Maud Morrow Brown, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume I* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, 1952)



10. "Mission to North America Committee Covenant Presbytery" (paper presented to presbytery to receive church commission, April 30, 1995).
11. "Mule Jail Fund Raiser Contacts" (paper presented to session showing a list of supportive churches, Oxford, Mississippi, July 1994).
12. "Nomination for Deacon" (paper presented to congregation anytime a new Deacon is to be nominated, Oxford, Mississippi).
13. "Nomination for Ruling Elder" (paper presented to congregation anytime a new ruling elder is to be nominated, Oxford, Mississippi).
14. Presley, Curt. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, March 1, 2016.
15. Robert Milton Winter, *Outposts of Zion: A History of Mississippi Presbyterians in the Nineteenth Century* (Holly Springs Mississippi: Published by author, 2014)
16. Sanford, Terry and Doug. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, February 10, 2016.
17. Semmes, John. Interview by Hugh Stephens. Tape Recording. Oxford, Mississippi, March 2, 2016.
18. "Strategic Planning 2011-12" (paper presented at the strategic planning meeting, Oxford, Mississippi, 2012).
19. "Things to Look for in a Pastor" (document created by session marking the characteristics they sought in a pastor, Oxford, Mississippi)
20. "30,000 Yankees encamped at College Hill," *Oxford Town*, August 11, 2005, 14.
21. Maud Morrow Brown, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Oxford, Mississippi: Volume I* (Oxford: First Presbyterian, 1952)
22. Robert Milton Winter, *Outposts of Zion: A History of Mississippi Presbyterians in the Nineteenth Century* (Holly Springs Mississippi: Published by author, 2014)