

The History of Sanford Bible Church

By Clara Sauls

The sixties were also turbulent times in churches. Members were grumbling and murmuring about the liberal inroads into the mainline churches. Even Catholics were unhappy, because their services were being conducted in English instead of Latin. Many church members left their denominations. Some quit going to church. Other folks rolled over and played dead and just accepted the liberal pap they were being fed.

Clara and John Sauls did not know the Bible, but they did know politics. And they recognized the liberal political messages that were spewing from the pulpit. They discovered that a percentage of their church donations was going to the liberal National Council of Churches which they did not wish to support.

During a quick weekend trip to South Carolina, they went to John's old country church in Jamison. The preacher there was preaching from a BLACK BOOK, and it seemed to them to be alive. We asked that preacher how we could get someone to preach like that to us down in Florida. It turned out that the preacher there at Prospect Church was Rev. Lynn Corbett, President of a fundamental denomination called The Southern Methodist Church. We became close friends of the Corbetts. Mr. Corbett did get us in touch with a Southern Methodist preacher in Stuart, Florida, who came and preached to a group of us who had pulled out of various churches. Our first meetings were held in Mr. and Mrs. Leon Duffy's home at 2462 Sanford Avenue.

In 1964, our group became The First Southern Methodist Church of Sanford, Florida, Inc., and started meeting in the Sanford Women's Club building downtown. Several from our group would customarily attend the Annual Conferences of The Southern Methodists. The Saulses attended Conferences in Nashville, Mobile, Valdosta (Georgia), and Jacksonville. We were very connected to the denominational headquarters in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in John's home county. John was put on a number of boards of the denomination, including the Conference Relations Committee (The Big Boys), the College Board, etc.

In 1965, our church group wanted to build our own building. The committee in charge of selecting land for the building was composed of Leon Duffy, Bun McCall, Randall Priest, and John Sauls. These men went to see Mr. W. A. Leffler, retired President of Chase & Co., and asked him if they could view some of his properties to see which parcel they would like to purchase from him. Mr. Leffler was in sympathy with our church, so he gladly complied. After viewing the lands, the men chose four lots on Sanford Avenue with one lot in back to Palmetto Avenue. The men went back to Mr. Leffler and told him they would like to purchase the five lots. They told him they would like to pay cash for the lot on which the church building would be built, because you could not put a mortgaged building on a mortgaged lot. Mr. Leffler said: "There won't be any mortgage on any of it." He gave the church the five lots. One year later, Willie Leffler came into our office and said that his father wanted to give the church the five adjoining lots to the church property. So, the church ended up with eight lots on Sanford Avenue backed up by two lots on Palmetto Avenue. I might add that the depths in all of the lots are oversized.

Mr. Durward Knight served as the group's pastor for two years, and then he provided a man to be our next pastor. That man was Chuck Bennett. Chuck and his wife June came to enter the

Missionary Training Center of New Tribes Mission in Oviedo just across Lake Jessup from Sanford here in our county. Chuck Bennett preached God's Word, in our church, from the Bible. John, John, Jr., and I had been faithful members of the First Methodist Church in downtown Sanford for years. The Bible was not really taught there; and, indeed, hell was ridiculed from the pulpit as was the "amen corner." But in our new group, Chuck Bennett told us about a real, burning hell to be avoided. I learned that unsaved people went to hell for eternity. I had thought I was "saved", but I was not even sure what that was. I did not want to go to hell. My hang-up was that I thought you got saved, and then you could lose your salvation. I thought you lost it and got it and lost it and got it. I asked different ones: "What sins will unsave you?" I figured there would be about a half dozen or so real bad sins that would lose you. So, I thought I would write those few sins down and make sure I avoided those. I got no answers to my questions. I finally asked June Bennett: "What sins will cause me to lose my salvation?" She nonchalantly replied: "Oh, you don't lose it once you get it." Wow! I mulled that over for a few days, and then I said to myself: "That's fine. You don't lose it once you get it. But have I got it in the first place?" I got down on my knees on that old green rug in my dining room and asked the Lord to save me, and He did. That was November 18, 1967, the day that I was born into God's family by faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My dear husband came under conviction and was also saved on May 31, 1969, a year and a half after my own conversion. God tells us:

"Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." — II CORINTHIANS 5:17

That verse certainly became true in Clara's and John's lives. We became soul winners and changed people indeed.

Within every patriotic American their beats the heart of a pioneer. In the real pioneer spirit, the men of the church commenced clearing the land for the proposed church building. They worked evenings and Saturdays clearing the virgin swamp. The women gave them cold drinks and snacks and took pictures. The men received architectural drawings from some Baptist friends. A Catholic neighbor volunteered to be contractor for the building. After all, he would have to look at it from his home. John Sauls was a businessman. He made sure that everything was done legally and according to code. It so happened that State Road 46, a few hundred feet to the south of the church property, was being widened at that time. John Sauls spoke to a friend of his who was involved with the project. The contractors were glad to have a spot so close to their project on which to dump their fill dirt. The church received the fill dirt which was mostly lime rock (white clay). More fill was donated by the contractors who were building the new Court House. The Sanford Bible Church building went up in 1965 and was dedicated to the Lord about Thanksgiving time that year.

A bond of mutual friendship was formed between our church people and the New Tribes Mission people. For long periods of time, different missionaries would fill our pulpit Sunday after Sunday. We received excellent teaching in Sunday School, church, and the Tuesday night meetings at the Oviedo Boot Camp. We also listened to very good Christian programs on local radio stations. At times, we would travel to other cities to hear special speakers. But there is nothing like being in the Word of God one's self. Clara soon fell in love with the Bible; and, for years, she spent eight hours a day in the Word. John also began to study the Scriptures. We both became teachers. Clara has two published books.

soul winning and other ministries than they did in going to denominational conferences. No one else in our church was interested in going to those conferences, so we could no longer be Southern Methodists. We legally changed the name of the church to Sanford Bible Church while still loving our family and friends in the Southern Methodist movement. John became Elder and Sunday School teacher of Sanford Bible Church as well as President of the Corporation not for Profit. Cassia Baptist Church insisted on ordaining him, since he preached there on occasions when they needed him. Ken Johnston, Chairman of New Tribes Mission International gave the charge at the ordination ceremony. John was a member of the President's Council in connection with his jail ministry. He preached at the Seminole County Jail (John Polk Correctional Facility) on Sunday mornings before Sunday School. He had a preaching ministry at Lakeview Nursing Home every Thursday afternoon and loved the folks there. Clara taught teens and ladies Sunday School classes at S.B.C. She was also church secretary.

John Sauls stated many times: "I would rather be a Christian even if this life was all there was." It was a life of dedication to the Lord. John's ministries flourished. Sanford Bible Church was a small church with a big outreach. Our John Sauls Agency also became the office for Sanford Bible Church. Christian friends were always welcome. It was said of John: "John Sauls was God's man in God's place when The New Tribes Mission was moving their international headquarters to Sanford, Florida."

Yes, we liked our life.