

HISTORY OF MYERS PARK BAPTIST

1942 A gathering of ten laypeople assembles at the Charlotte YMCA on a November afternoon to discuss the need for a Baptist church in Charlotte's Myers Park neighborhood. They dream for a new church "that would meet the needs of a community as they had never been met before." One month later, more than 375 people sign their names to the roll of the new Baptist church.

1943 Now worshipping in the main auditorium of Queen's College, the new congregation formally adopts the name "Myers Park Baptist Church" in a worship service on January 17th. Weeks later, the church opens its Sunday school with 267 people in attendance.

MPBC calls Dr. George DeWitt Heaton of Lynchburg, Virginia to serve as its first senior minister. Heaton's pastorate is marked by careful attention to Christian education, the sanctity of the family, and an ecumenical embrace of all modes of baptism. Heaton is also credited with bringing the tradition of the Free Pulpit to MPBC, saying: "A free pulpit is the very essence of religious and political democracy... A free pulpit means a stimulating ministry; a free pulpit means encouragement to break new trails in thought and action; a free pulpit is a great bulwark against tyranny."

Mrs. Alice Berman is hired as the congregation's first minister of music, becoming the first woman to serve in the church's leadership.

The Efrid family donates their 3.5 acre plot at the corner of Queens Road and Selwyn Avenue to MPBC for the purpose of building a gathering space for the congregation.

1949 With the First Baptist Church in America as the model, architect Hansel Fink is commissioned to build the new edifice. He designs the sanctuary in a cruciform design with a steeple measuring 169 feet high. In order to allow an unobstructed view of the cross, the pulpit is set to the side of the chancel at a full ten steps above the nave. In a bold gesture of ecumenical embrace, the baptistery is placed beyond the sanctuary walls in a small chapel just beyond the east transept.

1952 Construction of the new sanctuary is complete. The total cost of \$850,000 is paid in full before the dedication service on February 17th, 1952.

1953 In order to meet the needs of the church's rigorous focus in Christian education, the education building on Roswell Avenue is erected.

1954 MPBC hires its first minister of early childhood education. Hired before the development of public kindergartens, Rev. Bud Wilmont establishes the MPBC Through-The-Week School. In Wilmont's words, TTWS is established "because we didn't want the children to think of religion as a Sunday-only affair. We wanted it to be part of all life."

The congregation raises the money to send 39 African-American children to a summer camp operated by Ms. Anita Stroud.

1955 *Life Magazine* visits MPBC to showcase the church's innovation in Christian education. Their article compared the church to two other congregations, noting that MPBC "could serve as a model for other large churches with adequate financial resources."

1957 Dr. George Heaton resigns from MPBC to pursue ministry as an industrial chaplain and labor activist.

1958 Dr. L. Carlyle Marney is called to serve as MPBC's second senior minister. Dr. Marney's pastorate brought an emphasis on the development of a new humanity shaped by the person of Jesus Christ. Internationally known as a superb preacher, his extemporaneous sermons challenged hearers to deepen their theological acumen and to heed the call to realize social action. By the time Dr. Marney is hired by MPBC, he has already developed a reputation for preaching and writing against white supremacy in the deep south. Vocally

anti-racist, Dr. Marney saw the Christian church as a priesthood of all believers that works together, through Christ, to embody an ecumenical humanity that has been liberated from prejudice.

- 1961** Dr. Marney leads a group of seven ministers in a movement to integrate Charlotte by bringing black friends to lunch in the city's finest restaurants. Aggravated by the Christian church's delay in joining social causes, Dr. Marney once complained: "The conscience of the South has never been the institutional church. We've always gone along as we were hired to do."
- 1963** Stunned by the bombings of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, the Women of the Church issues a statement to the congregation calling for immediate action toward racial justice. Led by church member Betty Jo Hamrick, the statement decried: "The terrible reality of our indifference is upon us." Now was the time, Hamrick said, for the congregation to become personally involved in the peaceful movement toward desegregation.
- 1965** CBS broadcasts the MPBC Christmas Eve service live before a nationwide audience. Rather than delivering a sentimental Christmas sermon that many expected, Dr. Marney preaches amid the crisis in Vietnam about a universal ecumenism in his sermon "Peace, But Not Yet."
- 1966** With racial justice as the primary inspiration, MPBC approves a resolution declaring themselves to be "open to all and closed to none."

MPBC establishes an initiative called "Tenth Street Mission" in Charlotte's Piedmont Courts housing project.

- 1967** After assessing his medical needs in the wake of a heart attack, Dr. Marney resigns to rest and develop a new ministry for pastors at Lake Junaluska known as "Interpreter's House."
- 1968** MPBC calls the Rev. Dr. Raymond Eugene "Gene" Owens to serve as its third senior minister. Prior to coming to Charlotte, Owens was serving as a professor of theology at a Baptist seminary in Switzerland. Under Owens' leadership, MPBC continues to work toward social justice. The congregation maintains the racial consciousness developed with Dr. Marney while also exploring new interests such as the ordination of female ministers, LGBTQ inclusion, and the abolishment of the death penalty.

MPBC sponsors a school for migrant children. Church members Edith Collins and Mary Pinson serve as the primary instructors, and a dozen other church members are trained as to volunteer in the Hendersonville migrant camps.

A mere two months into his pastorate, Gene Owens walks down the center aisle of the sanctuary to collect signatures for a petition to end the death penalty in North Carolina.

- 1970** Lake Dickson, Mary Kratt, Mary Lib Laine, and Priscilla Upchurch become the first women to be elected onto the MPBC board of deacons.
- 1971** MPBC welcomes Temple Beth Shalom into the circular auditorium below Heaton Hall. Here they will gather each Saturday for worship over the next four years. This auditorium is hence known as Shalom Hall.

In addition to his frequent condemnation of the war in Vietnam, Dr. Owens preaches in favor of Forced Bussing as a means into full racial integration within the education system.

- 1973** Despite negative publicity, MPBC welcomes the openly lesbian Episcopal priest Carter Hayward into the Free Pulpit. Hayward then becomes the first openly queer minister to address the church.

Bonnie E. Cone is elected as the first female congregant to serve as the chair of deacons.

- 1980** Robin P. Coira becomes the first woman to be ordained by MPBC. She will later join the pastoral staff as Executive Minister.

- 1984** MPBC joins nearby Christ Episcopal Church in construction planning for Southminster Retirement Community.

- 1992** Dr. Gene Owens retires from the pastorate to become a lecturer in the UNC-Charlotte Religion Department.
- 1994** Fran and George Kerr lead the congregation to consider its response over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within the church. They begin a seven-year steering committee that hosts discussions, plays, and guest speakers to address the need for stronger inclusion and affirmation.
- The Rev. John Walsh becomes the church's fourth senior minister. Prior to entering the MPBC pastorate, Walsh served as chaplain to Harvard, Berkley, and Princeton universities, and as the chapel dean at Middlebury College of Vermont. Rev. Walsh is remembered for his pastoral presence and deep interest in Jewish-Christian relations.
- 1996** Rev. Walsh speaks at Charlotte's Temple Beth El in response to the Southern Baptist initiative to intentionally proselytize people of Jewish faith.
- Walsh's brief pastorate concludes, and he returns to university chaplaincy.
- 1998** MPBC departs from the national Southern Baptist Convention amid the denomination's fundamentalist takeover.
- The Rev. Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker is called to become MPBC's fifth senior minister. A nationally renowned preacher with a natural propensity for storytelling, Dr. Shoemaker is remembered for his stirring sermons, as well as for his steady guidance as the church learned to live more deeply into its inclusive mission.
- 2001** With Dr. Shoemaker's enthusiastic support, church members Fran and George Kerr lead the congregation into full affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community. In its "Statement on Gay and Lesbian Inclusion," the Church formally announces that its covenant phrase "Open to all and closed to none" welcomes all people into full participation of MPBC regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, age, economic status, or ability.
- The rehearsal hall is renamed "Berry Hall" in honor of former music minister Jim Berry. A graduate of Westminster Choir College, Jim Berry's tenure at MPBC lasted for 29 years.
- 2003** Funded through the generosity of the Cornwell and Spangler families, MPBC dedicates the Cornwell Center. The Cornwell Center is a health and wellness facility located just beyond Heaton Hall that serves more than five-hundred patrons each week. Its offerings include yoga classes, art classes, a fitness center, as well as various after school events and summer camps for children.
- 2005** MPBC commissions Charlotte artist Tom Shultz to create a prayer labyrinth for the church grounds. The finished work is entitled "Amaze," and it can be found along the exterior of the Cornwell Center.
- 2007** While MPBC ended its relationship with the national Southern Baptist Convention in 1998, the congregation continued to support the North Carolina Baptist State Convention through small donations designated for the children's hospital. This relationship came into question when the BSCNC passed homophobic legislation against gay-affirming churches. After hearing from both Dr. Shoemaker and lesbian deacon Nancy Walker, the BSCNC chose to expel MPBC from their fellowship.
- In addition to acknowledgement from the Human Rights Campaign, MPBC is recognized by the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists as an officially welcoming and affirming congregation.
- 2011** Believing that MPBC can help combat environmental injustice, church members Kate Green and Bob Thomason successfully lead an initiative to install twenty solar panels on the roof of the Cornwell Center.
- 2013** Dr. Shoemaker resigns from his pastorate in order to focus on his health.
- 2015** The Rev. W. Benjamin Boswell is called to serve as MPBC's sixth senior minister. Rev. Boswell's ministry is centered around a robust vision for social justice. His sermons are reliably concerned with the dismantling of white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, capitalism, islamophobia, and American exceptionalism. Under his leadership, MPBC has begun reevaluating its identity with the aim of becoming a greater witness to the radical justice of God.

2016 Preacher, Civil Rights activist, founder of the Moral Mondays Movement and the Poor People's Campaign, the Rev. Dr. William Barber preaches a "National Sermon on Race" during a special interfaith service at MPBC on the Sunday evening after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States of America.

MPBC adopts Statement on the Free Pulpit.

2017 Rev. Boswell named among "Seven to Watch" by *The Charlotte Observer* for testing the boundaries on race and social issues.

MPBC votes to contribute \$100,000 to the Charlotte organization Time Out Youth. The donation helps to offset the construction costs of a shelter for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in the Charlotte area.

MPBC begins hosting worship services with diverse musical genres such as Jazz and Rock n' Roll.

2018 MPBC celebrates its 75th anniversary, adopts the *Live Forward* strategic plan and engages in the Give Forward campaign to endow the campus facilities.

MPBC votes to contribute \$100,000 to affordable housing initiatives in the city Supportive Housing Communities, Urban Housing, and the Charlotte Housing Partnership.

2019 MPBC adopts Statement on Racism toward African Americans.

The first black woman to serve on the MPBC pastoral staff, Mia M. McClain is hired as Associate Minister of Faith Formation and Outreach.

MPBC invests \$100,000 into the Charlotte branch of Self-Help Credit Union, a national credit union that intentionally issues loans to low-income borrowers.

2020 MPBC develops and rolls out audacious, award-winning marketing campaign that boldly and creatively expresses the churches radical inclusivity.

MPBC implements response plan, closes for in-person worship and programming, and moves virtual in light of Covid-19 global pandemic.

MPBC provides full-day care at Cornwell Center to support CMS parents and students forced to virtual learning in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rev. Dr. Boswell implements "What Does it Mean to be White?" anti-racist spiritual formation course after the murder of George Floyd.

MPBC adopts Statement on Immigration.

2021 Rev. Dr. Boswell receives Charlotte's "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Medallion Award" for his social justice work in the city.

MPBC resumes in-person worship on Pentecost Sunday, though worshippers remain masked due to the Covid-19 pandemic.