

## **The Turn of the Century Years**

May 7, 1986, brought a new pastor to Mt. Sylvania. On this date Bro. Mike Dowd and his wife, Terri, and his son Brian joined the church on promise of a letter. Bro. Dowd is most remembered for his in-depth Bible lessons. His preparation was always evident. Timothy Easterling and Corey Homer were both baptized on March 12, 1989. In that same year in July, Bradley Van Dyke was baptized and on Christmas Eve Traci Burch was baptized. The following February 18, Steve Allen and D'Renda Croley were baptized. In August 1990, Jackie Croley had also been baptized. There were also other additions by letter and by statement. What a great time of God's blessings! In the May business meeting of 1991, Bro. Dowd submitted his resignation effective June 30, 1991.

Shortly before Bro. Dowd's departure, Felecia Hobson, Brian Easterling's girl friend moved her membership to Mt. Sylvania. They courted all during the next pastor's time at Mt. Sylvania. They were married shortly after Bro. Bob Griffith resigned Mt. Sylvania to take the pastorate of Lowell St. Baptist Church of Texarkana.

Bro. Bob Griffith had moved his membership and his family to Mt. Sylvania, August 18, 1991. Kimberly was his only daughter still at home. Bro. Bob and Sarah were able to buy a house in the community. It was not long until he was back to pastor in the general area, at Liberty Hill. Bro. Griffith related two memorable events from his time at Mt. Sylvania. The first was a deacon appreciation Sunday. At the time, the church had four deacons, Bro. Huey Crooks, Bro. Odis Homer, Bro. Tex Lilly and Bro. Randy Homer. Each was passing a milestone in their deaconship. It was a day to remember. The other day to remember was the 1993 Hopewell Association Annual Session. The deacons remembered it for the failed plumbing, but the pastor remembered it as a great day. There are poster boards of photos from both of these events on the bulletin boards in the Family Center. There was plenty of food and plenty of people to eat it.

Michael Thompson and his family came to Mt. Sylvania in the Spring of 1994. He had been pastor of Northcrest Baptist Church of Andrews, TX and an instructor and registrar at West Texas Baptist Institute of Midland, TX. The oldest son, David, did not come to Mt. Sylvania at the same time as the rest of the family, since he was in the middle of a six year commitment to the U. S. Marine Corps. Peter, their second son, was in the process of graduating High School in Andrews when Bro. Michael accepted the call to Mt. Sylvania. The

family did not move to Mt. Pleasant until after the close of the school year. Peter worked that summer at Hazelwood Furniture Store and then returned to West Texas in the fall to enroll at Texas Tech. Peter was only a three-month member of Mt. Sylvania.

Lawrence and Aaron became active at Mt. Sylvania and became part of the young people influenced by the love and pure Bible teaching of Mt. Sylvania. Lawrence chose his wife, Melissa, from the city girls of Mt. Pleasant. They were married in her parent's backyard, by the pastor of Trinity Baptist Church and soon became active in Nevill's Chapel. Lawrence eventually surrendered to the ministry and gave up his career in management at McDonald's and moved his family to Texas Baptist Institute in Henderson, TX. During his senior year he became a Missionary Baptist pastor in Shelby County and later began teaching in the Texas Baptist Institute in Henderson, TX in addition to his pastoral work. Mt. Sylvania had long supported that school and had chosen several of her pastors from her alumni.

Aaron Thompson graduated from high school in Mt. Pleasant and was an active part of the Mt. Sylvania family, but after graduation moved to Lubbock to live with his brother, Peter. Peter was active at Quaker Avenue Baptist Church and Aaron became involved there too. He also surrendered to preach in 2002, and moved to Henderson to study at Texas Baptist Institute. In 2006, he and his bride, Holly Brunson of Bogota were married at Mt. Sylvania. The service was officiated by Matt Golston, Aaron's pastor in Henderson. Peter, his wife, Leah and their young son, Landon, joined the Thompsons at TBI in January 2007. Peter, who had long been the music man at Quaker Avenue, now believes that his life calling is to be a pastor.

Timothy Easterling, Erica Findley, Aaron Lewis, Peter and Aaron Thompson were the team that Mt. Sylvania sent to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, GA. Bro. Michael and his wife, Judy, led out in this project and accompanied them on this journey. Erica is the granddaughter of Bro. Elmer Bidy and married a preacher, Bro. Kyle Sears, July 17, 1999. Aaron Lewis was the step grandson of Tex and Martha Lilly. Aaron became a coach in a high school in the Amarillo area.

Other teenagers of this generation were Corey and Molly Homer. Nelda Easterling served as their Sunday school teacher for many years. She was followed in this office by Tammy Homer. Corey also became a high school coach and teacher. Molly married J. R. Johnson July 17, 2004, whom she met in college at Troy State University in Troy, AL, where

she graduated after playing college softball on a scholarship. She is currently living in Georgia. They were married at the First Baptist Church of Mt. Pleasant, but this event was a major event for Mt. Sylvania.

Although Nelda Easterling became a widow in 2000, she continued to be faithful to her church, in spite of losing her mother and her husband to cancer, then suffering from empty nest syndrome. God provided her a loving husband, LeRoy Cooper, whom she married November 22, 2003. This wedding also took place at Mt. Sylvania. Bro. LeRoy was licensed to preach by Mt. Sylvania shortly after he was baptized at Mt. Sylvania, October 12, 2003. Except for a brief time when they went out to help establish a Baptist Cowboy Church in a town not too far away, he has served as the music director for Mt. Sylvania. He has also been used of the Lord as an aggressive soul winner and has officiated at a number of weddings and funerals.

The pastor's oldest son, Michael "David" Thompson, Jr. and his family have been a vital part of this church family for almost a decade. After his commitment to the U. S. Marine Corps, he brought his family back to East Texas. He began a career with the Pilgrim's Pride Corporation. After enduring many difficulties of bad life choices, he moved his four children back to Titus County and got hooked up at Mt. Sylvania. He moved his membership April 19, 1998.

After what began as a long distance courtship and God's magnificent provision, he married his second wife, Becky, October 6, 2001. She brought three children into their marriage and David set about to bond his blended family. All of these children, except Becky's oldest daughter, who remained in Arkansas, have been raised at Mt. Sylvania and are a major core of the youth program.

Between the pastorates of Bro. Griffith and Bro. Thompson, the church began making plans to expand. The only problem was land. A 3.16 acre tract immediately west and north of the building was owned by Linda Pace. Bro. Randy Homer had tried in vain to negotiate a purchase, but in June of 1994, Larry Reese, brokered a deal for the church to buy the land for \$5000. By the fall of that year a ground breaking ceremony was held in drizzling rain on the new property.

The church was poised to build a 40'X75' family center. Remodeling of the building that was currently servicing as fellowship hall and Sunday school rooms was also

undertaken. The only problem was that the drizzle turned to out and out rain and construction was delayed due to the wettest winter in some time. By the time the rain stopped, the church had raised \$35, 000. The outside structure of the building, including driveways, and the electricity were subcontracted. Tex Lilly and his son-in-law did most of the finish work inside the building. Many other church members, including the pastor, donated much labor. A crew including Larry and Sue Reese, Odis Homer and Bro. Michael, painted on a special floor surface. What a stinky mess that job was!

There was an active senior adult fellowship during this period who not only got together to play dominos (42 was their game), but were big into food fellowships. One is recorded with color snapshots. The hosts were Tom and Willie McKelvey. Others involved in these fellowships were Nannie Willson, Tennie Cox, Gladys Lewis, Mary Helen Reese, and Huey and Mary Crooks. T. A. Reese and Mary Helen and Tom and Willie McKelvey also met regularly for their own 42 fellowships. Members of this group were influential, as well as generous, in raising much of the funds for the Family Center. In fact there is a memorial plaque remembering Gladys Lewis, who died of cancer the same year the building was finished.

Gladys Lewis is another individual who was away from Mt. Sylvia for many years pursuing an education and a career. She graduated from the University of North Texas in Denton, TX, then known as North Texas Normal School. She was also an alumnus of the University of Southern California. She taught school for many years and returned to Mt. Sylvia from Greenville, where she had been an active member of Highland Terrace Baptist Church. She was added to the membership September 3, 1992.

Bro. Michael had become closely connected to Texas Mission Builders, a volunteer organization who donate their labor to help churches with building projects, during the time he was in Andrews. L. D. Wilson and others had come from East Texas and restructured a roof there. Over the course of Bro. Michael singing the praises of their work in constructing buildings for missions and churches, Tex Lilly became convicted that this was a work God was calling him to do. He took vacation time to work his first TMB job. Later he took early retirement from ArklaGas, where he had made a career in their construction department, to join the builders of TMB full time. Tex represented Mt. Sylvia at Round Rock, Longview, Logansport, LA, Kingsville and numerous other jobs. He, of course, was with them when

they did a remodel of a house for the use of the mission of Hickory Hill Baptist Church to the Spanish speaking people of Mt. Pleasant. Bro. Tex rode with Bro. Gary Griffith, pastor at Liberty in Blodgett, every week, and they became very close friends. Of course, it would not do, but that Bro. Michael also make one of the long journeys with Tex and Bro. Gary Griffith. Bro. Michael said he would never forget those three days at Round Rock.

In 2001, Mt. Sylvia assumed the sponsorship of Iglesia Bautista Betel Mission from Hickory Hill. Mt. Sylvia contributed greatly with the help of the churches of our associated work in paying off the \$42,000 indebtedness on the mission's first building and property. This property is located just inside the east city limits on State Highway 49 in Mt. Pleasant. Much good fellowship has been enjoyed between the members of this congregation and the folk at Mt. Sylvia. In addition to the youth meeting, they have enjoyed several joint fellowships. Martha and Tex Lilly, Ms. Judy and Bro. Michael were faithful in representing the interest of Mt. Sylvia and Betel at the quarterly Northeast Texas Missions Council, which has faithfully supported a major portion of Bro. Zepeda's salary, as well as the building and property in Mt. Pleasant.

It was also during this period that Mt. Sylvia began to support Texas Mission Development. This program provided grant gifts for building projects of member churches. Mt. Sylvia requested these funds and received them in the amount of approximately \$23,000 in the early days of construction of the permanent building on Highway 49.

Bro. Michael had taught for Northeast Texas Community College and Mount Pleasant ISD, in adult education. In addition to providing extra income needed to raise his family of four boys and later 10 grandchildren, his work with these programs helped many, young and older adults reach a goal of completing their high school credentials. When it was time to construct a permanent building for Betel, Bro. Michael took early retirement from MPISD, to work full time on this building project.

Donald Parr and his sons, Dustin and Drew, two of the teenagers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, did much work as this project began. Donald and his brother were hired to do the foundation work. However, Donald's efforts and dedication to completing the dirt work and later roofing and many other extras went beyond contracted services. With great love and dedication he guided his boys by example and great effort.

Again the services of TMB were called for, and they responded by coming. Bro. Michael never felt trained for the task of overseeing this job with TMB. There were many trips to the lumberyard to buy materials that he only hoped would be the right ones. But, nine months later he walked off the job, leaving it to be completed by Bro. Tim Zepeda and his people, knowing that God would be faithful to finish what God had begun.

A dedication of this building was held September 23, 2006. It was with great joy that the celebration of the completion of this building was enjoyed. Several members of Mt. Sylvia were present including Jan and Odis Homer and Martha and Tex Lilly. Tex had already had to quit his labors with TMB because of failing health. He did fabricate the handrails for the steps and ramps of this building, which was his final building project for Mt. Sylvia and TMB. The advice and counsel of Tex Lilly were greatly appreciated by Bro. Michael, who often leaned on his skills and wisdom.

The report on the financing of the building for Betel would not be complete without relaying the story of the “Mile of Nickels and Quarters.” This was the brainchild of Ms. Judy, as she was always called. Well not always. She was called by many, even foreign missionaries, “Mama T.” Anyway, in an effort to get the children excited about giving to missions, the visual aid of posting two signs that moved along CR 3250 from one mile from the church designated the amount of money raised in this campaign. When the program was proposed, Jan Homer said, “If the kids can raise a mile of nickels, we adults can raise a mile of quarters.” Many special mini projects, including Easter Eggs with money in them or Easter Eggs with pledges on notes in them, were hidden and found Easter Sunday 2006. The goal of \$20,756 was raised in a little over one year, and the signs moved week by week, or sometimes every two or three weeks, toward the church. On August 20, 2006, Mt. Sylvia celebrated the victory of having contributed more than this amount to the principle of the loan on the Betel building. With the outstanding balance nearing only \$90,000, the people at Betel enjoy facilities valued at \$260,000, meeting their own monthly mortgage payment and have regular attendance, greater than what is assembling at Mt. Sylvia. “To God Be the Glory, Great things has He done.”

Another descendant of B. F. Willson is Katie Lewis. She and Laylah Arnold, one of the oldest granddaughters of Bro. Michael are also among the teens to begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They can often be seen using their musical talents for the Lord at Mt. Sylvia. Sabrina Irwin,

also a granddaughter of Bro. Michael, is not a teenager yet, but is working hard to fill Mrs. Carrie Lilly's spot on the piano bench. The most recent descendant of B. F. Willson to be baptized at Mt. Sylvia, was Katie's little brother Matthew, who was the first baby born after the arrival of the Thompsons at Mt. Sylvia. He is now 12, going on to being a teenager soon. Another of the teens is Brian Irwin. He has taken a great interest in the research and writing of this book. Who knows, twenty five years from now you may be reading a history that he researched and compiled.

Other children in the church who are members or attend regularly, at the writing of this history, who have not been otherwise mentioned by name include Brandon, Daniel and Kaylee Thompson and Maggie Lilly. Their parents and grandparents are well known.

This story would not be complete without speaking of the babies. Bro Michael loves to paraphrase Tom McKelvey's quote of so many years ago, "The noise of the babies is the sound of hope for the future of our church." In 2006, Jacob Lilly, a fifth generation descendant of B. F. Willson was born. Jacob is also Maggie's brother. His mother, Tonya Lilly was recently elected as treasurer at the passing of Jacob's grandfather, the beloved, Tex Lilly. Tonya was saved at youth camp along with eight other campers in June 2000. Many of Mt. Sylvia's children and at least one adult, in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were saved at youth camp at Pine Springs, near Laneville, TX. 125 years later, the sound of babies and young children encourages the heart of the elders with a vision of hope for the future. For God is faithful from generation to generation.