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FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF TAMPA:  
THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS 
by Elaine Novak

Established in April 1900, First Christian Church (FCC) of Tampa stands at the threshold of its centennial year with a rich history of achievement. The fledgling Church of fourteen charter members has grown and flourished along with the community in which it resides. Situated at 350 Hyde Park Avenue since 1927, First Christian Church is a landmark of English Gothic architecture, overlooking the Davis Islands Bridge near Bayshore Boulevard. The red brick structure and its peripheral property extend for a half-block on Hyde Park Avenue and a full block along DeLeon Street. It is an impressive edifice, with stained glass windows, steeple bells, a large education annex, and a library of over 9,000 volumes. Its story, however, began humbly.

Turn-of-the-century Tampa was reputedly a rough-and-tumble town marked by the legendary rowdiness of the soldiers stationed there during the Spanish-American War. Despite this, a religious spirit quietly prevailed, as did the decorum of Victorian mores, particularly with regard to the roles of women who were expected to confine their activities to the private sphere of the home. However, voluntary service to the community increasingly provided an outlet for middle-class and elite women.

So it was that Lena Shackleford, the wife of Judge Thomas M. Shackleford, became the catalyst for the establishment of Tampa’s First Christian Church. After making a bold and impassioned plea at the State Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Jacksonville, Lena Shackleford provided the impetus for the Church’s organization in Tampa by procuring its first minister, Dr. D. S. Colyer. On April 2, 1900, upon Mrs. Shackleford’s return to Tampa with Brother Colyer, the following fourteen members convened for the first time as First Christian Church: Judge and Mrs. Thomas M. Shackleford, Mr. and Mrs. L.M. German, Mr. and Mrs. J.E. Oglesby, Mrs. J.O. Weatherwax, Mrs. W. A. Morrison, Mrs. P.P. Culbreath, Mrs. Viola Driver, Mrs. G. F. Monroe, Mrs. W.F. Lucas, Mrs. Nellie T. Boyd, and Miss Nora Harmon. Church services were initially held in a room above Tibbett’s Corner Store at Franklin Street and Lafayette (now Kennedy) Boulevard, while the congregation focused its efforts on a building program.¹

During its early years, the Church moved often in an ongoing effort to provide adequate quarters for its growing membership. In July 1901, a little over a year after its founding; First Christian Church dedicated its first small tabernacle at the corner of Florida Avenue and Scott Street. Within a few years, a new and larger sanctuary was constructed at the northwest corner of Henderson and Florida avenues. However, by 1912, with Tampa’s population passing 40,000, First Christian Church was outgrowing its premises. Soon property was purchased for a larger, more centrally located worship site at Marion and Twiggs streets, and in March 1913, a new church building was dedicated at this location. FCC remained there until the mid-1920s, when the property was sold and the present site developed.²

Today’s church on Hyde Park Avenue opened its doors in January 1927 at a cost of approximately $250,000. Described on postcards as the largest and most modernly equipped
Christian Church in the South, the Church housed a $10,000 state-of-the-art Midmer-Losh organ, paid for by the Ladies Aid Society. More than an impressive and inspiring structure, however, it was a welcomed new home for a congregation whose membership surpassed 800 in the 1920s.  

During the formative years of the Church, despite limited avenues for personal income, the women of First Christian Church contributed substantially both to the mission of the Church and to its financial stability. With women comprising eleven of the fourteen founding members, both a Ladies Aid Society and a Christian Women’s Board of Missions were established in 1900 at the time of the founding of the Church. Early fund-raising projects initiated by the women ranged from customary bazaars, at which homemade items from sweets to sunbonnets were sold, to creative Kitchen Kabinet Koncerts, where young women of the Church performed musical concerts, using instruments improvised from kitchen tools. Other events to raise money included boat excursions along the Manatee River and Tampa Bay. The profits from such ventures provided a solid foundation for the Church’s early building programs and charitable endeavors.

Through the years, the women of Tampa’s First Christian Church have continued their support of countless benevolent activities with thousands of hours of volunteer service. Especially prolific and far-reaching have been the local, national, and international charitable efforts of the Christian Women’s Fellowship (CWF). Organized in 1951, CWF continued the work of its
From 1913 to 1925, the First Christian Church used this building at the corner of Marion and Twiggs streets. A sign on the building announces that the Church was building a new tabernacle at the corner of Hyde Park Avenue and DeLeon Street.

Photograph courtesy of FCC.

predecessor, the Women’s Council, which was a 1929 consolidation of various earlier women’s societies within the Church. The following list of beneficiaries, randomly chosen from FCC annals, exemplifies the diverse interests of this organization during the course of one CWF year (1953): Tampa Child Evangelism Fellowship, United Church Women of Tampa, Florida Chain of Missionary Assemblies, Drew Park School for Retarded Children, Salvation Army, Drew Field Tuberculosis Hospital, Old People’s Home, Florida Avenue Children’s Home, West Tampa Boy’s Club, and Girl Scout Troop 55, which the Church sponsored.

Foremost in service among early FCC women was the Church’s founding member, Lena Shackleford. Still respectfully referred to as Mrs. Shackleford by those who remember her, she undertook numerous Church and community roles, including treasurer of the Ladies Aid Society, vice-president and circle leader of the Women’s Council, member of the FCC diaconate, board member of the YWCA, and founder of the Tampa Women’s Club. Her multifaceted work also earned her the State Federation of Women’s Clubs gold medal in 1961 (at the age of 99!) for the most substantial contribution to the service of women in Florida in fifty years.

Numerous other women have also distinguished themselves in serving the Church. One, Pauline Love Johnson, is a former public school teacher who has been an FCC member since 1923. Mrs. Johnson’s innumerable service-oriented positions have included state representative
and local president of the Chain of Missionary Assemblies, board member of Church Women United, two-term Church CWF president, diaconate member, local president and state board member of the PTA, and FCC Biblical instructor for nearly fifty years. Also noteworthy, and still active as a CWF and diaconate member, is eighty-one-year-old Margaret Walstrom, who served for thirty-three years as summer camp director at the Christian Church Conference Center in Silver Springs and for sixty-seven years as a Sunday school teacher at FCC. Through the years, Mrs. Walstrom also held positions as president of the Church CWF and president of the Hillsborough County Pre-school Association, and she actively served as a Red Cross and Recreation Department volunteer. Yet another exemplary woman is Louise Coleman, FCC elder emeritus, whose diverse Church and community leadership roles included president of the Tampa CWU, three-term Church CWF president, chairperson of the Church elders, director of the YWCA, and two-term president of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the American Business Women’s Association. In honor of her longtime community service, Mrs. Coleman was also named 1982 Distinguished Member of the President’s Roundtable of Organizations of Greater Tampa, an organization representing twenty-seven major, non-profit organizations. Another example of long service is Mary Napoli, a former Hillsborough County principal and teacher (for forty-three years), who became the first female chairperson of the FCC board and currently serves as Church CWF vice-president. She has won recognition as Lay Woman of the Year and as a volunteer for American Cancer Society’s Reach to Recovery.⁶
Among the numerous CWF members who have contributed countless hours through the years were a number of women who called themselves the Sew and Sews. This talented, and seemingly tireless, group gathered each week for twenty-four years to sew for the needy, donating nearly 7,400 handmade outfits to charitable organizations such as the Clothes Closet, a community clothing distribution center organized by the interdenominational Church Women Unite. They also created innumerable miscellaneous items, from knitted preemie caps for hospital newborns to crocheted lap robes for nursing and rehabilitative center residents. Others, like Pauline Johnson, Ruby Bozzell, and Jenice Orr, have served for years with other CWU members as Clothes Closet volunteers, gathering, sorting, and distributing thousands of clothes and other necessities to the city’s poor. Still others donated their time visiting and assisting the homebound, the number of which has been recorded in the annals of the CWF, with one year’s visits totaling 9,650.7

During the early years of the Church, as in society, the leadership roles of women were generally limited to ladies organizations, but the First Christian Church has since been in the vanguard of social change with respect to gender equality. In the 1980s, Emm Williams became the Church’s first woman elder, although prior to that time women had served as members of the diaconate and, since the earliest days, as religious teachers. Today, FCC women serve in all aspects of congregational life, not only as teachers, deacons, and elders, but also as board members/chairpersons and ministers (with two of the three staff ministers being female).
William G. Brorein
Through the years, men have also contributed to both the mission of the Church and the development of the community through myriad charitable and civic-oriented pursuits. Early on, men held the positions of leadership both in the ministry and on the Church board. Later, with the organization of the Christian Men’s Fellowship (CMF), the organizational counterpart of the CWF, they further utilized their leadership and service skills by supporting Christian and community outreach ventures. During the middle decades of the century, under the leadership of the late John Grady, former FCC and state chairman of the CMF, as well as chairman of the Church board, the CMF spearheaded the establishment of the Christian Church Conference Center and campgrounds in Silver Springs, Florida. More recently, the CMF reorganized as the Disciples Men and redirected its efforts towards interdenominational and interracial activities. The Disciples Men, united with other church-affiliated men’s organizations, volunteered at such diverse projects as fundraisers for public television (WEDU) and building programs for Habitat for Humanity. They also initiated an ecumenical liaison, known as the Christian Service Brotherhood, with the men of Beulah Baptist Church and Zion Lutheran Church. Finally, one of the FCC men’s most enduring endeavors has been the organization and sponsorship of Boy Scout Troop 4, which was chartered in 1916 and remains active today as the oldest Boy Scout troop in the Southeast.\(^8\)

Among the men active in the early life and growth of First Christian Church were a number of influential Tampans. First and foremost was Judge Thomas M. Shackleford, who as a charter member provided valued service and support during the earliest and most critical years of the Church. Teacher, deacon, and elder, Judge Shackleford also served his community with distinction as City Attorney of Tampa from 1900 to 1902 and as Florida Supreme Court Justice from 1902 to 1917. Another FCC member whose ideals and benevolence extended well beyond church walls was William G. Brorein, the founder/president of the Peninsular Telephone Company (now GTE). In addition to holding the positions of elder, teacher, benefactor, and multi-term chairman of the First Christian Church Board, he served the community as president of the Tampa Board of Trade (now the Chamber of Commerce), president of the Family Service Association, president of the Gasparilla Carnival, founding member and long-term president of the South Florida Fair, president of the Rotary Club, and board president of the YMCA.\(^9\)

During the critical days of the Depression, Dr. Elwood C. Nance assumed the pastorship of the Church, diverting its foreclosure and reestablishing its solvency. In his seven-year tenure at FCC from 1930 to 1937, as throughout his lifetime, Dr. Nance was renowned as a Church and community leader. He served as president of the Florida League for Intercultural Education, board member of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, chaplain of the Lion’s Club, president of the Hillsborough County League for Better Schools, president of the Tampa Ministers Association, State Chairman of the March of Dimes, and president of the University of Tampa from 1945 to 1957.

Since the 1930s, the men and women of First Christian Church have continued to pursue their mission of service to both the Church and the community-at-large. In the 1940s, they opened their doors and hearts to members of the military based at Drew Field and MacDill. During the 1950s, First Christian Church initiated the popular Hillsboro Drive-in Church that allowed people to attend worship services in their cars. The following decades brought the community’s first religious classes for exceptional children and, more recently, active support for such
community resources as the Divine Providence Food Bank, Meals on Wheels, and the Emergency Food Pantry, as well as continuing traditions like the fifty-year-old program of holiday food baskets for the hungry.

From fourteen charter members in 1900 to a membership of over 1,700 by mid-century, Tampa’s First Christian Church remains numerically one of the largest Christian Churches in Florida. Moreover, it has propagated its spirit through the active sponsorship of several Tampa-area churches: Northside (now Central) Christian Church (1928), Peninsular Christian Church (1953), Hillsborough Christian Church (1955), University Christian Church (1957), Brandon Christian Church (1966), and Primera Iglesia Cristiana de Tampa (1992). In its first hundred years of existence, First Christian Church of Tampa has established itself as a religious institution committed to the spiritual life of its members and the welfare of the larger community.


2 White, History of First Church, 79-80.

3 W. D. Hearne, “Whole Church is Back of Whole Program,” The Tampa Christian (Tampa, Florida: First Christian Church, 1934), 7; Hariette Baker, The Women’s Work, ibid.,

4 First Christian Church postcard courtesy of the University of Tampa Archives; E.L. Robinson, History of Hillsborough County, Florida (St. Augustine, Florida: The Record Company, 1928), 149.

4 Annual Minutes of the CWF, compiled in The Christian Women’s Fellowship and Former Women’s Organizations from 1900-1953, ed. by Neva A. Shriner, 51.

5 Tampa Tribune, January 23, 1961, January 21,1990; Mary Claire Crake, “In Unity There is Strength: Women’s Clubs in Tampa During 1920s,” Tampa Bay History, 11 (Fall/Winter, 1989), 5-6.

6 Personal Interview with Pauline Love Johnson, May 12,1998; Personal Interview with Margaret Walstrom, May 4, 1998; Personal Interview with Louise Coleman, May 7, 1998; Personal Interview with Mary Napoli, May 5, 1998; Miscellaneous papers, First Christian Church (FCC) Library Files; Tampa Tribune, October 24, 1977; July 3, 1982; Sandra Jakeway, CWF Laywoman of the Year (Speech delivered to First Christian Church CWF, May 9, 1998).

7 Emm Williams, History of the Sew and Sews, January 1997, FCC Library Files; Annual Minutes of the CWF, The Christian Fellowship and Former Women’s Organizations from 1900-1953, ed. by Neva A. Shriner, 47.


11 Personal Interviews with Roslin Springer, Roger Harvey, and Mary Napoli, May 3 and 6, 1998; Miscellaneous Papers, FCC Library Files.