**THE CLEVELAND BAPTIST ASSOCIATION**

**150 YEARS IN MINISTRY**

**1832-1982**

The above sentence will serve to introduce a brief history of the Baptist work in the Cleveland, Ohio for the past one hundred fifty years. While we review the labors of men and women, we are really surveying the work that our Master have accomplished through His dedicated servants. To recall the past is inspirational. Our Savior said, “Others have labored and we have entered into their labors.”

For the most part, the early settlers who came to Ohio brought not only their worldly possessions, but also their religious convictions, their desire for education and passionate love of freedom. They came to the wilds of Ohio to establish homes and they brought with them the church and the school. Among them were many Baptists. So far as we know, the first person to preach the gospel in this State was a surveyor named Christopher Gist, whose denominational affiliation is not mentioned. On Christmas day 1750, he held a Christmas service for some Indians and White trappers.

The first Baptist to preach in Ohio was Chaplain Jones. He was a well-educated man holding degrees from Eastern educational institutions who, in addition to his religious degree fervor, was an intense Colonist and rather opinionated in other matters as well. When fashion changed and men began to wear long trousers, Jones declared in no uncertain terms that such garb for men was unscriptural and thus was sinful. He made three tours of Ohio studying conditions and preaching the gospel even more fervently than he declaimed against long trousers.

It was during the second tour in 1789, that Jones was present at the organization of the first Baptist church in Northwest Territory. It was the first Christian church of any kind in the Territory. A first meeting had been held I the Block House built by Major Stites at Cincinnati and the first sermon was preached by Chaplain Jones in December of 1789. Then in January 1790, the church was formally organized by nine men and women. The land for the church was donated by Major Stites who was baptized the next day after the organization. By this time, many settlers had arrived and among them were a number of Baptists who started struggling little churches in those first settlements. The Ohio Baptist Convention, with which the Cleveland Baptist Association has always been affiliated, traces its origin to this early work in the southern part of the state.

Although much has been written about the growth of the Baptist cause in the southern part of Ohio, there was also an important development in the Western Reserve under the leadership of Elder Azaraih Hanks, a representative of the Hamilton, New York Baptist Missionary Society and who was influential in the organization of a number of Baptist churches in the northeastern part of the State. Sometime between 1817 and 1820, Elder Hangs and his wife Keziah, moved from Chardon to Euclid, where on Thursday, April 27, 1820, the “First Regular Baptist Church of Jesus Christ in Euclid, Cuyahoga County, Ohio” was formed. This was the same town where in 1802, another Baptist, Joseph Badger, had found only one Baptist family. The Euclid Baptist Church became a member of the Rocky River Baptist Association in 1834, and it is the oldest church in our present Cleveland Baptist Association.

The Congregationalist and Presbyterians were first in establishing churches in the city of Cleveland, because this area was part of the Connecticut Western, and its settlers were predominately Congregationalist and Presbyterians. The First Presbyterian Church was organized in 1807 in what is now East Cleveland. It is still on the same site on Euclid Avenue, one block East of Nobel Road.

There are some interesting items about a few individual Baptist in the early days of Baptists work in Cuyahoga County mentioned by various sources, not all of which agree in every particular. There is no disagreement, however, that Lorenz Carter was the first white person to settle permanently in Cleveland. He came with his family and few relatives from Vermont, arriving in 1797. They were Baptists. Carter is referred to as being the most versatile Clevelander of the early days. Alphonso Holly, a Baptist, is mentioned as the first white boy born in the Western Reserve on April 3, 1900. However, another source claims that distinction for Charles Phelps Stiles, who was born January 23 1797 in Cleveland, which was part of the Western Reserve. Fanny Holly Miles, a Baptist, was the first bride whose marriage was recorded in Cuyahoga, County in may 1810. She was related to Lorenzo Carter. There is also the fact that Chloe Inches became the bride of William Clement on July 4, 1797 in a service performed in Carter’s cabin.

The grouping together of Baptist churches in areas was adopted early in the course of church life in the United States. Therefore, almost from the beginning of the founding of individual churches in and around Cuyahoga County, there was felt the need for close cooperation among the churches. Not only was this evident in their desire for fellowship among the churches and their members, but problems arose which no one church adequately solve. Where would a church find help in calling a new pastor? From whom would they seek assistance in financial matters? How would they solve the problems of what was correct Baptist polity in matters of controversy within the ideal congregation and the its dealings with sister churches in the area? How could new churches be founded in the growing frontier? These questions and many more, needed a body of Christians who could offer wise counsel and advise in accordance with Baptist principle of freedom on the individual conscience and the independence of the local congregation. Wise head and Christian forbearance under the guidance of the Holy Spirit were required, but not always at hand in the local church.

By 1832 there were enough Baptist churches in this area to warrant the formation of an Association. This took place in the September at Columbia Station, which was then known as Copokah, and Indian name for Rocky River. The Association carried the name of the Rocky River Association for many years. The founding meeting was held in the Methodist church, which was close to the shore of the river. The Presbyterians gave their assistance also, since the Columbia Baptist had been organized only a few months prior to the Association’s formation. The churches taking part were Columbia, Granger, Liverpool, Olmstead, Rockport, Royalton, and Norton. Of these, only the Columbia church remains to this day. To those seven First Baptist of Cleveland, Parma, Stronsville, Westfield, Medina and Litchfield. At the third meeting in 1834, the Euclid, Ridgeville, Huntington and Carlisle churches were received into the fellowship of the Association. Continued growth marked the life of the Association until at one time it included churches in many locations beyond the bounds of Cuyahoga County. However, in 1839, the churches in Lorain County were released to form the Lorain Association. During this period the Association changed its name to the Cleveland and Ricky River Association, then again in a few yeas, the name was changed to the Cleveland Baptist Association. The Association has always been an Association of the Ohio Baptist Convention, and in 1920, when the merger of the Cleveland Baptist Association with the Cleveland Baptist City Mission took place and the boundaries were realigned so as to include only the churches in Cuyahoga County, with the exception of Chesterland and Columbia which elected to remain in the Cleveland Association, and the Association became a separate administrative unit within the national denomination.

Going back to shortly after the middle of the 19th Century, it had become evident that a better arrangement should be adopted to deal the evangelistic and mission work, particularly among the poor folk and the unchurched in the city. Thus in January 1869, the Cleveland churches of the Association formed the Cleveland Baptist Union. From its inception the Union planted Sunday schools in many location in the city. Some of the great churches of our Association originated from these Sunday Schools. Later, the name of the Union was changed to the Cleveland Baptist City Mission Society. Then, as noted before, it merged with the Cleveland Baptist Association in 1920.

The Cleveland churches became thriving, wealthy, and progressive, assuming a strategic amount of leadership, so that by the mid 19th Century they represented the most flourishing region of the State. Leading citizens of the city were to be found in the First Baptist and the Euclid Avenue Baptist Churches and the voice of the Cleveland churches began to be heard at the national level. The Association was actively involved in the evolution of the denomination into the Northern Baptist Convention in 1907.

The establishing of Sunday Schools was an early concern for Christians of the Western Reserve and reflected the intense desire on the part of individuals and churches to reach the unchurched, with little attention being paid to denominational lines. In 1830, Benjamin Rouse and his wife, Rebecca, agents for the American Sabbath School Union of Philadelphia, arrived in Cleveland and rented a house for $91.00 a year. Fitting the front room as a book depository, they dispensed religious literature. Mr. Rouse organized a summer school named “Trinity” in 1830 and the first Methodist and the first Baptist Sunday Schools in 1833.

The first recorded meeting of Baptists within the limits of Cleveland proper was held in November 19, 1832 in the Academy. The following January, this small land broke the ice of Lake Erie for the first recorded Baptisms by immersion in the city. By February of 1833, this group was ready for the organization of the First Baptist Church of Cleveland, which continues to this day. A Sunday School Mission of First Church was started in 1846, and evolved in 1851 into the Erie Street Baptist Church, at what would now be 9th Street and Central. This church, of which John D. Rockefeller was a founding member and Sunday School teacher, became one of the leading churches in the city and was known as the Second Baptist Church and later as the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church, occupying two different buildings at East 18th Street and Euclid Avenue. This church was instrumental in founding many missions and chapels and is known for the distinguished preachers who graced its pulpit: Dr. Charles A. Eaton, Dr. W.W. Bustard, Dr. Ralph Walker, Dr. Edwin McNeil Poteat, Dr. Bernard Clausen, Rev. John J. Wilkes, and others. The decline of the residential area in the inner city and rapid growth in the suburbs, lead eventually to the closing of this church and its eventual demolition in 1961. The present offices of the Cleveland Baptist Association are adjacent to the site of this famous church at East 18th Street and Euclid Avenue.

In 1849, the people of First Baptist Church assisted in the starting a work for Negroes working in the household of the congregation. By 1851, this had blossomed into a full church and Shiloh Baptist Church in Cleveland became the first black church in the Association and apparently, the first black church in the larger fellowship which is now the American Baptist churches, U.S.A. and which currently has 903 black churches in its membership. Out of Shiloh came Antioch in 1893, Mount haven 1905, Messiah in 1927, and Fellowship in 1948.

Prominent leaders in civic affairs, in the professions as well as church leaders have come from the ranks of the loyal black Baptist churches. The same is true of the many ethnic and language churches. Both churches and their members have strengthened the Christian witness and Baptist principles in Cleveland. The contributions in service and witness have been substantial.

All the Cleveland churches were active in the anti-slavery movement and over the years, have been leaders in the human rights cause, and the Association asserted itself as a champion of the Social Gospel under the leadership of Dr. D. R. Sharpe. It tackled the social issues of the time: the need for organized labor; equal opportunities for all races in housing, education and employment; reforms in government, in the criminal justice system; better conditions and procedures at State institutions for the mentally ill; and the movement toward world peace. The more progressive stands the denomination was taking at the national level and strong roots here in our Association.

Baptist churches in Cleveland refused to remain provincial. No longer struggling for survival, they reached out to the community around them. Work as begun among the first immigrants for whom even the most back breaking, underpaid factory labor was in improvement over the conditions they had left behind. By the turn of the century, churches of our Association was working among the Germans, Welsch, Swedish and Hungarian people. The German work flourished with four congregations being formed and two missions sponsored by the mother churches.

World War I and its aftermath brought a new wave of immigrant labor in Cleveland and the Baptist response was an intensive one with the older churches taking the initiative in sponsoring work among the newcomers. At least 25 missions were established, much of the effort being directed towards the needs of the woman and children of the new American families. “Americanization” and Christian Friendliness” were key words in this work. The American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Women’s American Baptist Home Mission Society gave assistance so that trained workers could be provided to direct what was largely a volunteer effort. Our Association was heavily involved in the work as follows:

HUNGARIAN: First Hungarian, West Hungarian, Buckeye Heights (Buckeye and First later merged to form this Shaker Squire Hungarian Church), and Lee road, which started as a Hungarian Mission.

ROMANIAN: East on Holton, West on W. 57th Street, our present Romanian Church.

ITALIAN: East Boulevard and Woodland

RUSSIAN: A mission at Tremont and College; and the present Evangelical Baptist Church.

CZECHOSLOVAK: A strong church which sponsored missions, now the Scranton Road Baptist Church. Also a Slovak church on Tremont: Slovenian Mission on Superior; and a Bohemian Mission.

WELSH: The work which evolved into Trinity Church, now a part of Garfield Trinity Baptist Church.

LATVIAN: A Lettish Mission

CHINESE: A Sunday School program offered by the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church.

JEWISH: A Hebrew Mission sponsored by the Euclid Avenue Church.

GERMAN: Four churches and two Missions.

References also appear on the Bleeker Street Mission, the St. Clair Mission, the Josephine Mission of the Euclid Avenue Church, and work with the Polish and Swedish. The Christian Community Center a neighborhood Christian Center worked among the blacks in the Central District of Cleveland was under the well-known Rev. Sylvester Williams.

It is hard to assess the fruit of this vigorous outreach, since little of it remains in identification form. Some of the missions served their purpose and passed from the scene as the needs and situation changed. Some metamorphosed from Sunday School or Mission to full-scale church and some of these are still with us: Scranton Road, Romanian, Evangelical, Lee Road, and Garfield Trinity. Some retained their ethnic heritage, but moved into the more recently formed denominations of that background, such as the German churches. But one of the strongest fruits is the presence in almost all our white churches today of dedicated leaders whose parent became Baptist through the work of the missions, or who themselves came into the church through this door.

A whole new set of dynamics appeared after World War II, although there were some indications of changing church climate immediately after World War I. The assimilation of the earliest wave of refugee immigrants had run its course. This was followed by a wave of refugee immigrants, which is still in progress. As the inner city aged and people moved to the suburbs, the churches followed them. The forces during this period were on this move of the old and its establishing of new congregations to serve the rapidly developing new communities. The Association and the Home Mission Society aided substantially in this work, a typical example being the Covenant Church in Wickliffe, a product of the “Churches For New Frontiers” movement. Most of our new Association ventures during this period did not show lasting results. But the well established churches in the residential suburbs achieved there highest levels of attendance, support and activity in the post-war era. First Baptist Church of Greater Cleveland, Lakewood, Fairview and others became known across the denomination for the caliber of their leadership and program. The Association became increasingly a resource center for the churches, offering assistance in Christian education, leadership training, stewardship, organization, planning, camping and many other fields.

The racial turmoil of the 1960’s was especially poignant in Cleveland. The Hough riots underscored the fact that all of the evils of northern discrimination were present in our city in full measure. Because CBA had built strong bonds across racial lines over the years, it was in a position to respond to racial change better than other Christian bodies. The attention of the Association was turned to serving the black churches in every way possible and many of these churches came into the life of American Baptist Churches through CBA. These incoming congregations brought great strength and vitality in their worship, evangelism, and their stewardship, and they fortified the Association in its commitment to justice and equality.

The 60’s also brought a turning away from the church, an alienation from religion in its traditional forms. Cults, some of them extreme, arose and made concerted drives for the allegiance of the youth and of the disillusioned folk who had either left the old-line churches, or had never been members of any church. These troublesome years saw the beginning of urban blight and decline which continues through the 1970’s. Population trends reversed and we now serve a County, which has lost 25% of its population in ten years. Older churches soon found themselves struggling for survival; some of them over-extended in building and program. Ministry in these circumstances has been a matter of hanging on and intensifying the efforts to make the church relevant and vital in the life of the community. The Association has adapted its program the concerns of community life have become high on our agenda.

The Association’s participation in the Ecumenical Expression of the faith has been a welcome and essential part of our doing the Gospel. It has always been in the forefront of the cooperative work among the Protestant churches of Cleveland. As it has moved from a Federation of Churches, to the Council of Churches, and now the Greater Cleveland Interchurch Council, the American Baptist have provided more than their share of strong leadership, both lay and clergy. CBA remains committed to doing together those many tasks, which can be done most effectively by joint endeavor, and a substantial portion of the Association’s funding is directed into such work. CBA has a prominent role in the Inner City Protestant Parish (now the Inner City Renewal Society), and the West Side Ecumenical Ministry.

The concern for student work on Cleveland campuses has had Baptist participation from the start. It is now one of the significant Ecumenical ventures in which CBA is involved. Two of the staff of the University Christian Movement are shared with CBA churches, the Rev. Jeremiah Pryce, Antioch, and the Rev. Otis Newton, Damascus.

For many years, Cleveland Baptists had their own camp on Lake Erie west of the city, Camp Sharpe, and many young people received their inspiration for Christian ministry and service through this camping program. Since 1955, Cleveland has been linked with the churches of the Ashtabula and Akron Associations in the operation of Camp Koinonia near Geneva, Ohio. This has become one of the outstanding American Baptist camps and is used year-round by church and community groups.

Three times the CBA and the City of Cleveland have played hosts to the Northern Baptist Convention – now the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. The first time was in 1917, with the sessions held in the Hippodrome. At one session, 3,000 delegates voted unanimously for prohibition, upbraided the “vampires” hanging around army camps, and congratulated the Russian people for throwing off “the yoke of autocracy under the leadership of God.” The second meeting of the Convention was held in the Public Auditorium in 1930, and the third in 1942, also in the Public Auditorium. 1950 was the year the Baptist World Alliance met in Cleveland and Baptists from all over the world attended as delegates or visitors. The meetings were held from July 22nd to 27th. As we look to the future, The Association is directing much of its energy toward hosting the 1983 Biennial meeting of the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. once again.

The history of the Cleveland Association is deeply interwoven with the activities of the women of the Association, whose parallel structure not only provided vigorous programming for local church women’s societies, but also was a source of great strength to the total missionary outreach of the Association. Many of the strongest ties which have created the sense of identity and commonality in local Baptist work has grown out of the women’s work, and the Cleveland Council of American Baptist Women stands today as one of the leading units in the national organization. This work has been distinguished by the elevation of Mrs. Ruth (Wade) McKinney to be Vice President of the denomination, and Mrs. Emma (William) Hamilton to be President of the national organization of American Baptist Women. Both of these women of Antioch Baptist Church were active leaders and president of the Association women’s work. Through this work, also, ties have remained strong with the Ohio Baptist Convention. Of great credit to the women of the Association are their persistent efforts on behalf of the aged. Judson Park, one of the finest retirement facilities in the denomination, had its inception with the women of the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church who quickly involved women from all of the churches in this pioneering ministry.

The Association today has 39 churches in its membership and whole new configuration, with the majority of the churches and their members being black. Two congregations, Fidelity and Lee Road, went through the transition from white to black, all the other churches are predominately one race though fully cooperative in the Association’s integrated programs at all levels.

The headquarters are located in the Construction Center building at East 18th and Euclid, a location selected as being central and accessible to all the Association churches. Availability of committee and conference rooms, as well as adequate modern office facilities, enhance the ability of the staff to minister to the present constituency and to present a visible witness to American Baptist concerns in the metropolitan area.

The Rev. Stanley P. Borden, Association Minister since 1975, is the executive staff member and represents Cleveland Baptists in the national staff arena. Specialized program staff are shared with other positions, so that the small headquarters can provide as much service as possible. The Rev. Ray L. Schroder, as Minister of Mission and Promotion, encourages the churches in stewardship, supervises the many facets of the local mission outreach, and provides professional leadership in the area of finances and property. He is also Chaplain in CBA’s ministry at the Thistledown Race Track. The Rev. Wendell A. Brooker, Associate Minister at Fairview Baptist Church, serves in Christian Education and Youth Ministries for the Association. Ms. Rebecca Stitt is the Associate in Children’s Work, curriculum matters, and camping. The office is ably managed by Ms. Virginia Noyes, who is also elected secretary of the Association. She is assisted by Ms. Cheryl Danner, bookkeeper, and Mrs. Jeanne Eaton, secretary.

The story of this Association does not end here. This generation will determine the new thrusts by which the Cleveland Baptist Association will continue to be contemporary and relevant expressions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Lord of History.

 Rev. Herbert C. Hall Miss Mary Emma Harris

 Rev. Stanley P. Borden

August, 1982