

A Charge to Keep:
A History of Pittman Park United Methodist Church

C. David Thompson

Chapter 1 Sacrifice, love and joy

“Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come from miles to watch you burn.”

John Wesley

On a warm spring evening in May 1956, a small group met in the downtown fellowship hall of Statesboro Methodist Church to consider an issue that had been debated within the congregation for several years – whether or not to break from their home church and form a new church – a facility not landlocked by downtown businesses and free of the disruptive rumble of passing cars, trucks and buses.

A few years earlier, Statesboro Methodist Church Pastor J. Frederick Wilson had challenged his congregation to build a new sanctuary. A building committee was organized with J.B. Johnson and Dr. A.B. Daniel as leaders, but the committee’s deliberations made it apparent there were two opposing lines of thought: one in favor of demolishing the old sanctuary and rebuilding on the site; the other desiring a move from the downtown location.¹

It was the heyday of “The Tourist City,” as Statesboro promoted itself, with thousands of travelers passing through town daily on one of two

crowded north-south highways along the east coast, U.S. Highway 301. The outskirts of town were dotted with motels, tourist courts and campgrounds, each vying for business. Their signs proclaimed amenities that today are taken for granted: “Air Conditioned,” “Pool,” or “Free TV.” Some had restaurants on the premises, but in an era when fast food was just taking hold - and then only in urban America - local restaurants specializing in barbecue, family fare or even “The World’s Worst Apple Pie,” which drew the curious to Franklin’s at the intersection of Highway 301 and U.S. 80, which ran west from Savannah inland.²

Many of the regulars who made the seasonal trek from north of the Mason-Dixon Line to Florida for the winter and then back had their favorite stopovers. The signs were really for the uninitiated. Aside from the motel and restaurant trade, a whole generation of local teens earned substantial sums by busing tables or serving as parking valets in the crowded eatery lots.

Statesboro’s economy was flourishing, but there was a downside. The downtown congestion grew so bad that some thought traffic should be re-routed via a bypass road – a suggestion met by strong opposition from businesses that depended on trade from the visitors.³

Bennie Herring, then a new member of Statesboro Methodist, had moved to town from Louisville, Ga., with her husband, Dr. Ken Herring, to open a chiropractic practice. Herring said that the noise from traffic just yards from the front door of the sanctuary was so disruptive that it was one major reason consideration was being given to moving the church elsewhere.

“As I remember, we came in `54 on a Thursday and we came to church that Sunday at First Methodist, and the next Sunday we

joined. This was in, of course, early '56. They had a general meeting because they had to repair a roof that was leaking. We went and they wanted to formulate a plan to get this job done. It was the heyday of tourism and – up and down that street – you couldn't even sleep in church much less hear what the preacher said. There was no air conditioning. Anyway, it went on and finally somebody said, 'Well, maybe we ought to think about moving the church.' Oh, my goodness! Mr. Sherman, who was the principal at the high school, got up. He was a stocky fellow with a receding hairline and his face was so red. He said, 'Whoever said that idea was born in hell!' I never heard talk that like that in church. Later on, people started talking about it and thought maybe we *ought* to have another church."⁴

Nearly the entire church agreed that Pastor Wilson had been right about the need to build. The divide was over *where*. There were discussions, but no definite plans for construction. The congregational factions – those who wanted to stay downtown and those who favored a move - were locked in a stalemate."⁵

Minutes recorded at the May 16, 1956 gathering state that 55 families were represented and that they were present “to test the strength of feeling of the group as to forming a new church.” The meeting opened with a prayer by Dr. Zach Henderson. Dr. A.B. Daniel was elected to chair the meeting and R.L. Cone, Jr. served as secretary. Dr. Daniel asked others to express their thoughts.⁶

Dr. Henderson made “an inspiring talk” about the formation of a second church, stating that Statesboro Methodist had not grown in

proportion with the city. He felt the need for a “family church based on preaching and fellowship” and ended his talk by saying that if it was decided to try to form a second church, the matter should be brought before the Fourth Quarter Conference of Statesboro Methodist the very next evening. That would require a resolution asking for the permission and blessing of the mother church.

W.M. Adams felt that a new church should be formed, but on a basis of love – not on a split. He said he thought Statesboro Methodist was large enough to form another church.

Local businessman Shields Kenan said that those present should try to work together with other members of Statesboro Methodist to solve the problem of location, but that the church should remain united. Every means should be explored to reach agreement, he said.⁷

Bennie Herring recalls attending the meeting:

“We met upstairs in the fellowship hall. Garland Black was there with his little hand adding machine. They said, ‘All right, everybody who is interested, each family group get to yourselves and put down what you can pledge because if we’re going to start a church we need to know first if we can provide the money for it.’ We’d always given to the church as liberally as we could. Back then, you didn’t make a pledge – you gave periodically. We put down an amount. He added it up and he said, ‘Get back in your little groups, this is not going to do it.’ We thought, well, we’re Christians we might as well take the plunge. I handled finances in our office. Sometimes the part for the church would not be there until the middle of the week. Or it might be – we

were open until Saturday lunch – well, sometimes the first patient would pay it, you know? But it always came. We never missed a meal.”⁸

W.M. Adams recalled the spirit of giving that existed among the charter members:

“When we polled each of our prospective members by a slip of paper so to test our financial strength for an annual budget, we came up with some \$30,000, and by the end of the first year we had pledges paid of \$41,000. By the way, the preacher’s salary was \$6,000. There were many of us who signed those pledge slips who even surprised ourselves by being able to meet them. There was sacrifice and there was love and joy in the giving.”⁹

Who actually called the organizational meeting to gauge interest in a new church is uncertain, but physician Dr. A. Bird Daniel certainly played a part. Dr. Daniel authored a May 29 memo distributed to prospective members of the new congregation:

TO: All persons interested in the proposed New Methodist Church

RE: A letter to inform you of events to date

1 – A group of some sixty units or families have already signified their desire to become charter members of the proposed New Church.

2 –The District Committee on Locations has (on 5-26-56) approved the creation of a New Church in the Statesboro area and has approved our prospective location.

3 –It remains now only for Bishop Moore to give his approval and undoubtedly that will be done and we will have a pastor

assigned to us this conference year. The formal establishment of our church will then take place, presumably in July.

4- You re requested not to participate in any campaign to recruit members; however, if you know of anyone who is definitely interested and who earnestly desires to be united with us, please expend a cordial invitation and bring them our next meeting as outlined below.

5- There will be a meeting of the posed New Church group on Friday evening, June 1, at 8:00 M.M. in the Social Hall of the church. You are urged to be present and help in this solution of many that cannot wait. Among the items to be discussed and decided are:

- a - The name of our church
- b - A Procurement of a home for the pastor
- c - A suitable place in which to meet until we can build our new church
- d - And other items

Sincerely yours,
A.B. Daniel ¹⁰

“What was so moving about it ... Dr. Daniel had always been a Methodist, but I think this was something that was like rebirth for him,” said Bennie Herring. “He was just fired up about it.” ¹¹

Another figure influential in forming the new church was Dr. Zach S. Henderson, president of Georgia Teachers College, now Georgia Southern University. Henderson had served ably as dean under former President Marvin S. Pittman, and was the obvious successor upon Pittman’s retirement in 1948.

Despite his imposing six-feet four-inch height, Henderson was a soft-spoken, unassuming and genial person. People who knew him for decades said they had never seen him lose his temper. Henderson devoted his life to education and served 21 years as dean of the College and 20 as

president. Like many other prominent figures in Georgia Southern history, his background was rural. He was born January 24, 1902 and reared in tiny Gillsville, Ga. After early education in the local public schools, he attended Piedmont College – a small, struggling Methodist college in Demorest, Ga., whose students sometimes bartered cows to pay for their education. He graduated with honors in 1922 and lettered in three sports – baseball, basketball, and football. He later earned an A.M. at Columbia Teachers College, conducted postgraduate work at the University of Chicago and was awarded an honorary LL.D. from Piedmont.

The mid-sixties desegregation of Georgia Southern was peaceful compared many other Southern colleges, largely because of Henderson’s quiet, calm leadership.¹²

add here ulysee mosley’s description of first day at college being greeted by Henderson.

By the time Statesboro Methodists began discussions of forming a new congregation, Henderson had held his presidency for eight years.

Henderson’s predecessor, Marvin S. Pittman, also played a major role in the founding of a new church, though unknowingly. He was arguably the most colorful and influential figure in the institution’s first half century. Prior to assuming office, Pittman was already a nationally known figure in rural teacher training. As president of Georgia Teachers College, he drew the ire of Jim Crow-era state political leaders because of his alleged opposition to the sitting governor. Though never publicly active in politics, Pittman was dismissed from office in 1942 by the state Board of Regents because he was, according to the bombastic race-baiting Gov. Eugene Talmadge, “teaching communism” – a reference to Pittman’s Columbia University training - and using “Jew money” to undermine societal values. The latter referred to funds

that Pittman obtained from the Rosenwald Foundation to construct a badly needed new college library.¹³

Pittman was reinstated after a statewide outcry that resulted in reforms that lessened political meddling in Georgia's University System governance and ending direct gubernatorial influence in higher education. By all accounts, Pittman was scrupulously honest and careful to avoid impropriety, but he was nonetheless a shrewd investor, purchasing significant local acreage, including a large parcel across the road just east of the college.

Any happiness Pittman might have felt at retirement was short-lived. His son, Marvin S. Pittman, Jr., had earned degrees from Duke University and the University of Chicago and served as bomber pilot and navigator during World War II. Shot down over Germany, he was twice captured and he twice escaped from prison camps. He became part of the Yugoslav underground, and was picked up by the Russians near Vienna at the close of the war.

After the war, the younger Pittman joined the faculty of the University of the Philippines. During the Christmas holidays of 1949, he and another professor traveled into the Igorot County, Ifugao subprovince. On Christmas day, 95 kilometers north of Baguio, the two men were speared to death by a band of Ifugao headhunters.¹⁴

President Pittman continued, however, to be active in the field of education, serving as a member of a special commission on rural education that was sent to West Germany by the U.S. War Department. He worked in South Korea under assignment of the U.S. Army to help organize South Korean teachers' colleges and departments of education, served as an educational consultant to the Institute of International, and headed a special mission for technical assistance to Costa Rica.¹⁵

He died unexpectedly at home of a heart attack in February 1954 and his wife, Anna Terrell Pittman, inherited his estate, which included some valuable real land holdings.¹⁶ She left Statesboro soon after her husband's death and returned to her home state of Indiana.

Bennie Herring recalled:

“Of course, Dr. Henderson had always been a Methodist. He was very concerned, too. When it came down to it, everybody was on some committee. And I think this was the secret to it. Every body wanted to be on a committee, and a group was on a committee to find a place. Well, they looked at different places and the next meeting somebody said, ‘How about way out yonder across from the college? Who owns that?’ Dr. Henderson got up and said, ‘That belongs to the widow of Dr. Pittman. She lives in Indiana and I shall write her.’” The next week he came back and said, ‘She said if it’s for a church, there’s no charge.’ It would be given. Well, we were just elated. Of course we started planning the building. We were on a committee for that.”¹⁷

Just like that, the new church had its land – an 8.7-acre tract within walking distance of “the College” and an existing small housing development built on land that had been Pittman property called “Pittman Park.” Also adjacent to the church property was a brand-new subdivision, Edgewood Acres, built to accommodate employees of the new Rockwell manufacturing plant just outside the city.¹⁸

At a May 16 meeting, resolutions were adopted for presentation to the Fourth Quarter Conference of the Statesboro Methodist Church, petitioning

the formation of another Methodist Church in town. The Committee on Locations of the Savannah District ratified the action of the Conference and approved a location on the Pembroke Highway (Fair Road).¹⁹

On May 25, the Fourth Quarterly Conference approved the resolutions and by unanimous vote gave its blessing to the proposed new church.²⁰

Two days later, the Committee on Locations of the Savannah District ratified the action of the Quarterly Conference and approved a location on the Pembroke Highway (now Fair Road). On June 1, 1956, the new church group, representing some 104 families, met in the Statesboro Methodist Church social hall and took the following steps:

- Declared the name to be Pittman Park Methodist Church
- Organized the new church in strict compliance with the Methodist Discipline
- Leased a home for the new pastor and his family
- Adopted a temporary budget and provided for the receipt of funds
- Contracted with Georgia Teachers College for the use of Marvin Pittman Lab School facilities as a temporary home
- Elected two delegates to the South Georgia Annual Conference to be held in Waycross, Ga.²¹

Delegates from the new congregation attended the conference in June 1956, and heard Bishop Arthur J. Moore read “Pittman Park Methodist Church” in the list of Charges with The Rev. Lawrence E. Houston, Jr. assigned as its first pastor.

Chapter 2

A Closely Knit Group

“When ye have attained a measure of perfect love, think not of resting there. You cannot stand still; you must either rise or fall. Therefore the voice of God to the Children of God is, ‘Go forward.’”

John Wesley

Dr. Daniel distributed a memo on June 9, informing members of the pending arrival of The Rev. Lawrence Houston and his family. A home had been rented “on the west side of Vista Circle”²¹ in Statesboro and the parsonage committee was “...providing for their arrival in every respect” and alerted members that they might be “asked by this committee to help in certain of these preparations...”

He went on to announce that on the evening of June 15, 1956 at 8 p.m. at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Henderson, there was to be an informal reception to welcome the Houstons.

Finally, Dr. Daniel urged everyone to be present at the first service on the morning of June 17 in the Marvin Pittman Laboratory School Auditorium so that all might sign the church roll “which will greatly facilitate our pastor in obtaining transfer of our church letters.”²³ Later that year, the congregation would gather for a few weeks in the college’s McCroan Auditorium as renovations were ongoing in the lab school.

On June 16, the new pastor met formally with members of his church leadership as the executive committee of the Building Council gathered at the home of Dr. Daniel. The Rev. Houston passed out leaflets to committee chairmen with information about their various assignments and asked that each study their problems and plan carefully. The Rev. Houston also stated that if the questionnaires were filled out and returned to the National Council of Churches of Christ, they would study them and give the new congregation

guidance about its needs as to square footage of new facilities and, when plans were completed, they would critique or offer suggestions.

Dr. Daniel outlined the duties of the various committees and future plans. He urged all committees to meet and make their recommendations to executive committee so that a meeting of the General Council would be called and the plans presented for their approval.²⁴

Dr. Daniel's communication with Anna Pittman had progressed to the point of initiating the legal paperwork to transfer ownership of the land to the church. In addition to the 8.5 acres she was giving, Mrs. Pittman was considering selling additional acreage to the congregation.

P.O. Box 512
Minocqua, Wis.
July 11, 1956

Dear Dr. Bird,

Your letter of July the third has just come, it was addressed to Minotua, Wis. and wandered around quite a bit before reaching Minocqua. I thank you for all of the interesting information that it contains. I know that you have met many difficulties and that the way has been hard for you and your loyal associates. If it were not for inspired, dedicated leadership such as yours there would be no adjustments to meeting the problems of a new age. It has taken both faith and courage for you to "carry on."

I note what is said in the trust clause of the church's discipline and am willing to abide by the decisions that have been readied thru the experience and wisdom of the church leaders thru the years. We can discuss the details later when the property is about to be transferred.

In own thinking I am inclined to sell the section of the property that I own, to the church, but since it was our plan to give the property to our little grandson, Marvin, I want to discuss the matter with Catherine when she returns this weekend. If that

acreage were divided into lots as my other property is, it would be worth the twenty thousand now. If it were held for another ten to fifteen years and planted with trees, it would bring much more. I shall let you know early next week about our decision. I have had many offers for the purchase of that piece of land, but have always refused them because I felt I would not be carrying out Mr. Pittman's plan. I know that he would have wanted to give part of it for a church, and, Catherine did too.

The membership of the church is certainly promising. I trust that all will go well with such fine people who are undertaking a sincere, dedicated religious service.

I am pleased and grateful that my husband's name is part of the church's name.

With my very best wishes for your continued success, and greetings to your family, I am

Sincerely,
Anna T. Pittman²⁵

With an agreement to meet at Marvin Pittman Laboratory School, the Georgia Teachers College connection had again come into play. The Laboratory School was a campus-based elementary and middle school – part of the county school system - yet with a special relationship to the college. Education majors were able to observe teaching techniques and conduct research at the school throughout their academic careers and many college faculty members were considered faculty of Marvin Pittman School as well.

With the assistance of President Henderson, the first church service was held in Marvin Pittman School Auditorium on Sunday, June 17, 1956. Sunday school was held at 10:15 a.m. with church at 11:30 a.m. and an evening service at 8 p.m. At the morning service, Pittman Park Methodist

Church was officially constituted by The Rev. Anthony Hearn, Savannah District superintendent.²⁶

“It was a real religious experience to attend the first church service at Pittman Park with 257 in church school, 228 at morning worship, and 137 at evening worship,” the *Statesboro Herald* quoted Dr. Henderson.²⁷

According to W.M. Adams, “After a short time of organization we were privileged to have our church school and worship services at the Marvin Pittman School. Our attendance was almost perfect. If someone missed a service, he or she was deluged with telephone calls to find out who was ill. If someone stumped his or her toe, Pittman Parkers rallied to him or her. We were a closely knit group.”²⁸

Mrs. Pittman’s land was surveyed on July 19, 1956 and the results mailed to her. Later that month, she wrote to A.B. Daniel regarding the pending transaction, the naming of a road in her honor, and a decision by the church not to purchase an additional 10 acres she owned:

Box 512
Minocqua, Wis.
July 31, 1956

Dear Dr. Bird,
I have your letter and the plats of the church site and my property. The plats are as were proposed when we discussed the property lines last February. You may proceed with the next steps in the transaction. I am writing [attorney] George Johnston to-day telling him that you will go to him for whatever legal procedure is required in the transaction.

I think that the decision of the church not to purchase the additional land is a wise one. The debt will be heavy enough as it is. We are glad to retain ownership. It gives the next generation a little piece of earth to stand on if all else goes.

I thank you for the time and thought you have given to keeping me informed about the progress of the church.

I am sure that all of you who have this fine project on your minds and hearts can choose a better name for the new street than I can. My very best wishes for the continuing success for the excellent Christian service that is being undertaken.

Sincerely,
Anna T. Pittman ²⁹

The allusion in Mrs. Pittman's letter to the question of a "name for the new street" reflected a decision by the Finance and Stewardship Commission to request Mrs. Pittman's permission to name a new road that divided the church property and the Pittman Park housing tract in honor of her – the former Anna Terrell. Hence, the road was dubbed Terrell Drive.³⁰

The Georgia Teacher Retirement System (TRS), like most retirement funds, invests employee and state contributions to the fund in what its directors deem to be conservative and reliable investments to ensure its solvency. President Henderson, knowing this, contacted the TRS and set up a meeting between himself, Dr. Daniel and The Rev. Houston with state officials to discuss the possibility of the new church obtaining a loan for construction of Sunday school rooms and a small chapel.³¹ Building a full sanctuary and fellowship hall would come later.

W.M. Adams recalled the church's presentation to the TRS loan officials in Atlanta in hope of obtaining funds for the initial construction project:

“Our representatives appeared before the Loan Commission of the Teacher’ Retirement Fund to secure \$190,000 to build a portion of the facilities. The chairman of the Commission came out of the meeting and informed us that they were not going to lend us the \$190,000 – but they *were* going to let us have \$267,000 to complete the church.”³²

Bennie Herring also remembers the delegation’s visit to Atlanta:
“Dr. Henderson said he knew about the TRS so he and Dr. Daniel and Lawrence Houston, our first pastor, went to the TRS with the plans we were first going to build Sunday school rooms and a chapel. The TRS guy said, ‘Why don’t you build the whole thing? We’ll lend you the money.’ We about fell out. We had to make payments in January and July. It was quite a chunk. It always came up to it. That was beyond what you were giving to the church. It was amazing, right away.”³³

The Building Committee had investigated architectural firms and settled on that of Barber & McMurry in Knoxville, Tenn. The company submitted plans that were subsequently approved. The next step was to advertise for contractors to bid for the construction.

The Official Board of Pittman Park heard the winning bid announced at its meeting of March 23, 1958. Plans and Construction Committee Chairman Claude Howard reported that three bids were received. The low bidder was Benning & Benning Construction of Atlanta at \$356,735 for the sanctuary, chapel, Sunday school wing and fellowship hall. The committee met with the contractor the previous week was able to modify the plans with no reduction in quality for a savings of about \$17,000. Dr. Henderson asked

for the opinion of the Board and a show of hands of those who were in favor of going ahead as planned. The majority felt the church should proceed. The Rev. Houston told members that the Methodist Discipline required there to be a called Quarterly Conference and Church Conference in one week's time at which time the recommendation of the Building Council would be presented to the entire church.³⁴

Benning & Benning's T.R. Benning, Sr., had a special affinity for Pittman Park. Upon the Tenth Anniversary observance, his remarks were printed in the June 25-26, 1966 worship service bulletin:

“I started building when I was 16 years old and have been in business ever since. Without reservation I can say that I have enjoyed building Pittman Park Church more than any other job I have ever done. My relationship, through the building committee, with the people of the church, and with the architect were enjoyable and smooth. I shall always hold Pittman Park in the highest esteem.”³⁵

What the bulletin did not say was that Benning made it possible for the church to construct the entire plant with the money it had borrowed. There was agreement on the sanctuary, Sunday school rooms, fellowship hall and kitchen, but the chapel was in doubt for months. Then Benning stepped in.

“The contractor on the job liked the people of Pittman Park, and they didn't think they could afford the chapel and they were going to leave the chapel off,” said Pittman Park member Pete Powell. “As they got on down further and further, he donated that chapel.”³⁶

Moreover, Benning gave a \$1,000 gift to the church every year until his death in the early 1970s. His son and business partner, T.R., Jr., led the

business until he died in 2011 at which time the company went to grandson Ted.

The leadership of the new church met and finalized plans with Barber & McMurry for a “contemporary style” sanctuary with a seating capacity of 450, a chapel with a capacity of 80 and a Sunday School plant of 17 rooms. There was also a room at the rear of the chapel with a seating capacity of 100 plus a fellowship hall attached to the church that seated 200 at tables. The entire structure was to be built of “St. Joe” brick rather than stone, as was the other option.³⁷

A cross of stained glass panels, reaching 34 feet at its highest point, would adorn the sanctuary wall facing worshipers, each panel depicting a scene from the last week of Christ’s earthly life. The altar would contain a wooden depiction of the “Pelican-in-her-Piety,” an ancient symbol representing the legend of the pelican feeding her children with her own blood and flesh in time of famine.³⁸ A large cross of Indiana limestone would be set in the floor-to-ceiling windows at the rear of the sanctuary.³⁹

The construction contract with Benning & Benning was signed April 21. The Pittman Park church building was formally sanctioned, architectural plans approved and financing secured.

A sign, erected at the broad, grassy construction site, read, “Building for the Glory of God.”⁴⁰

Chapter 3

The High Calling

“No person should be denied the privilege of organizing and building one new church. Everyone at some time in life should experience the joy and the thrill of his venture. What a fellowship! What a joy divine!”

W.M. Adams

April 23, 1958. The press release from the Rev. Houston to area media read:

For Immediate Release

Pittman Park Methodist Church, Statesboro, Georgia, will break ground for its new sanctuary, education building and fellowship hall on Sunday afternoon April 27 at 3:30 P.M. The service will be held at the proposed building site in the Pittman Park Sub Division. All members and friends of the church are urged to be in attendance at this significant service.⁴¹

Arriving slowly at first, the crowd of families grew until most of the congregation of some 300 was assembled on the open eight-acre expanse of acreage of what was then the southeastern edge of Statesboro. The Rev. Houston turned the first shovelful of earth to applause and smiles all around. Looking on just behind and to the right of the pastor was a young boy, Remer L. “Brad” Brady. Forty years in the future, he would return to Pittman Park as The Rev. Brady – the church’s eleventh pastor and later assistant to the bishop for connectional ministries for south Georgia Methodists.

“It was a thrilling experience to watch the construction,” according to W.M. Adams. “Many mornings after midnight, someone would call me and ask if I were awake. Believe it or not, I was awake. We were all excited. What a thrill every minute of the way.”⁴²

New members were joining with frequency as services continued on the college campus. Lawrence Huff came to Statesboro to join the college faculty, bringing with him his wife, Elouise and their two daughters. Elouise

would later become church secretary, a capacity in which she served for 20 years:

“Not long after Lawrence had accepted a teaching position at Georgia Teachers College in 1958, we received a letter from the Rev. Lawrence E. Houston, Jr., inviting us to visit Pittman Park when we got to Statesboro. We moved to Statesboro the latter part of August with our two elementary school-aged daughters, Celia and Catherine. We visited the Pittman Park congregation, the first Sunday we were in town. The second Sunday we were there, Lawrence, Celia and I joined along with Herb, Dede and Billy Bice, Roger and Carolyn Parsons, and Pat and Speed Thompson. Catherine was placed on the preparatory roll. There was excitement that day when 10 new members were added to the church roll! The Pittman Park church building was not complete, and the services were held in the auditorium at the Marvin Pittman Laboratory School. The auditorium was not air conditioned, the gnats and mosquitoes were in abundance, and one made good use of the funeral parlor fans. The services were inspiring and the people were warm and friendly. Almost immediately we felt at home.”⁴³

The issue at Statesboro Methodist, now First Methodist, of where to build its new sanctuary was settled with the amiable parting and the mother church moved forward with its own plan to replace the old plant. A committee was formed of members from both churches to equitably divide funds that had already been raised for Statesboro Methodist’s original

building program. Pittman Park's share came to \$18,795.44.⁴⁴ The Pittman Park Official Board minutes of May 18, 1958 note that Plans and Construction Committee Chairman Claude Howard would represent Pittman Park at a special service at First Methodist Church of Statesboro that marked "the beginning of their building of a new sanctuary."

A July 17, 1958 report from Zach Henderson to the Pittman Park congregation praised their work to that point:

"It is so! It's not just a dream. In two years, the Pittman Park Methodist Church has made almost unbelievable progress. This fourth quarterly report for the year 1957-58, including summaries for the two years, and a drive out the Pembroke Road for a look at the progress being made on the new church plant is proof the dream is becoming a reality..."

In two years we have contributed approximately \$100,000, awarded the contract for the construction of the new church plant, joined the family plan of the *Together Magazine* which makes it possible for every family to receive the magazine monthly, organized a Men's Club, and participated in every aspect of the quadrennial program of the Methodist Church.

In the years ahead there is much work to do. In the words of Paul, we must continue to 'press on' in our work of the high calling of building our church."⁴⁵

The 1957-58 year had seen membership grow from 298 to 317, and the church was providing a \$5,700 salary for the pastor and \$1,200 for a secretary. It rented a parsonage for \$1,200 in addition to providing funds toward Methodist expansion Day, Education for ministerial students, support to the Methodist Home, leadership training, funding for Methodist colleges and other expected items.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, as the construction at Pittman Park was ongoing, the congregation continued to meet in the Marvin Pittman School Auditorium. A typical Sunday worship service is reflected in an early worship bulletin listing Lawrence Houston as pastor, Mrs. Zach Henderson as assistant choir director and Mrs. Albert Davis as church secretary. The cover of the bulletin included the text, “Christians that worship together work together.”

The service that day included a prelude, “God is Love” by Stephens, a choral introit, “Create in Me A Clean Heart,” and hymns “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling and Lord Jesus I Love Thee.” The congregation recited The Apostle’s Creed and heard The Rev. Houston deliver a message appropriately titled, “How We’ll Do It!”

The bulletin also listed activities for the week, including Methodist Youth Fellowship, before the evening service and choir practice at the home of Mrs. Henderson. “Again, may we urge anyone who may wish to sing in our Church Choir to be sure to come to this rehearsal!” was a request. A “Congregation Ready for Loyalty Dinner” was set for the following week at a local restaurant, Mrs. Bryant’s Kitchen, and the bulletin announced that “Dinner invitation acceptances indicate one of the greatest gatherings in the short history of Pittman Park Methodist Church... The Loyalty Dinner is free – and we mean it!”⁴⁷

The fact that the congregation had no permanent building did not deter members from carrying out activities expected of a Methodist congregation. A Pittman Park Women’s Society of Christian Service had formed and was taking on projects that included sending clothes for Hungarian relief and hosting Bible studies. Methodist Youth Fellowship was in full swing with separate groups for older and younger youth. A Missions Committee met and organized monthly meetings in July of 1958 to plan outreach to the

community and beyond, and a Membership and Evangelism Committee organized to help keep new members coming in. Sunday school classes were organized at the earliest days of the congregation and a Men's Club, the precursor to today's United Methodist Men, was formed.

The support of foreign missions was already ongoing, evidenced by an annual contribution to support a missionary couple in the Belgian Congo. The Rev. Houston apologetically explained in one letter to foreign missions pastor Ernest E. Tuck of New York City that the congregation, being new, could "only" afford to contribute \$1,000 that year,⁴⁸ equivalent to a \$7,717 contribution in inflation-adjusted 2011 dollars. Belgian Congo missionaries Mr. and Mrs. David Walker were the first recipients of overseas mission support by the Pittman Park church.

From the outset, Pittman Park also reached out to the students of Georgia Teachers College. Not only were ads placed in the student newspaper, *The George-Anne*, inviting the students to worship services, but some of the men of the congregation used their own cars to ferry students to church.⁴⁹ In September 1956, a chapter of the college-aged Wesley Foundation began functioning by having members of the Pittman Park congregation waiting in dormitories at Georgia Teachers College to meet incoming students. The Rev. Houston asked that all members "practice personal evangelism, that is, to be on guard at all times to contact potential members and new people who move to town, and to be especially cordial to the college students."⁵⁰

There were times, in fact, when student attendance seemed to rival the local membership. At one February 1957 Sunday service, there were 247 in morning worship. Eighty-five of them were GTC students.⁵¹ Official Board minutes from 1956-1958 reflect that The Rev. Houston, ever mindful of the

danger of lost momentum, urged Board members to make an effort to rally the congregation to church every Sunday. He also reminded the Board in advance of the times when attendance was likely to need an extra boost, as when he told the group to “be present for services . . . as most of the students from the college would be away for the weekend.”⁵²

Bennie Herring recalled:

“The excitement and the willingness – It was certainly, we all felt – meant to be. First and foremost, the land was given, then the money was allotted for the whole plant. . . . By the time the building was being built, we’d go drive by there on Sundays.”⁵³

William “Pete” Powell, is a contractor who, along with his wife Patty, would later join Pittman Park Church. He recalls living just down the street from the building site – close enough that he could watch the progress from his front yard. He would also take the occasional walk through the site, and with the eye of a man in the building trade, he noticed the exceptional brickwork and the fact that the large arched beams on the sanctuary interior were raised the old fashioned way.

“They built that thing without any cranes,” said Powell. “They raised all those beams with a gin pole and ropes.”⁵⁴

Finally, the week for which everyone had waited patiently had arrived. A special service was planned for May 31 and an open house was set for the community that afternoon. Comments were sought from The Rev. Houston by both Statesboro newspapers of the day, *The Bulloch*

Times and *The Bulloch Herald*. He was quoted extensively in stories announcing the first service in the new building:

“For almost three years, the congregation of the Pittman Park Methodist Church has been about the task of building the kingdom of God in this place. It has been a thrilling experience! While a school building can never take the place of a lovely place of worship, nevertheless, we have found excellent temporary facilities in the Marvin Pittman School... This year of construction of the new church plant has been one of harmony and progress. I think two words characterize the building effort: Leadership and followship. Capable leadership in the field of church architecture, coupled with superb lay leadership in the area of stewardship and finance, has paved the way for a successful building program. The fine leaders of the contracting firm and the keen interest of every workman has brought forth the comment many times, ‘You have a fine building – the workmen have taken pride in their work.’ Followship has been the other key word in this venture... Pittman Park Methodists have sought the finest leadership in this endeavor and have followed it. I await with keen anticipation the opportunity to carry on our work and worship in this lovely building for the Kingdom must continue to grow.”⁵⁵

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