

Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church
Celebration of Generations
1821-2011

Sunday, October 9, 2011

The History of Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church

The roots of Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church extend as far back as 1808 when Rev. Joseph Babb, pastor of Beaverdam Church, began preaching under a poplar tree about one mile east of our present location. In 1811 a parcel of land, 2.5 acres in size, was deeded for the purpose of a meeting house and burying ground. As a result, a church building was erected in 1815. The congregation operated as an arm of Beaverdam Church.

On December 29, 1821, 32 people were examined and regularly dismissed from Beaverdam Church to become an independent church. The Rev. Joseph Babb had moved to Alabama so the Rev. Samuel Brown was called as pastor. The name "Chestnutridge", originally spelled as one word, was chosen because the meeting house was built on a ridge covered with chestnut trees. During the 2 years that Rev. Brown was there, a great revival was experienced with 76 members being added with 20 of those by baptism. Rev. Babb was called back and served 18 years. During his ministry, the membership increased to 146.

The original building was replaced by a new one in 1833. The first mention of Sunday School was 1830. In 1842 the church discussed the "washing of feet" as an ordinance. However, in 1844, the proposed ordinance of foot washing was rejected. Between 1845 and 1888, pastor's salaries ranged from \$6.00 to \$68.00 per year. There were 2 springs affording water on the church grounds, and a member was paid \$2.00 a year to clean the springs and furnish one gourd to each spring each week.

In the early days, strict discipline was demanded. Drunkenness and dancing were the most common offenses. Striking with one's hand and malicious gossiping were also grave offenses. One male member was dismissed and reinstated four times. The offender was required to make a public confession before reinstatement.

Money was scarce during those early days. However, the minutes reiterate the fact that "this church is a mission-minded church." At times members were assessed 30 cents each to raise money for state missions. This mission spirit grew, and pennies and nickels were gathered in for the purpose of sharing Christ to the utmost parts of the world. Collections were taken up at each meeting using a long stick with a basket on the end for the collection plate. Before this time, they had passed hats to receive the collection.

Prior to this time, tuning forks were used for singing in the church. In 1882 the church purchased an organ in Greenville, South Carolina for \$74.10. They paid \$40.00 and the remaining balance was paid over time. During this same year. There was a great revival and 33 members were added.

The Women's Missionary Society was organized in 1884. The Sunbeam Band was organized in 1887 for the purpose of getting the children to help raise money to share the Gospel with the whole world.

In 1891 the church voted to put a fence around the cemetery. This was completed in 1892. Major changes were made to the building in the early 1900's. During these years Chestnut Ridge was in a field (or group) with other churches – one pastor supplying all churches in the field. In 1910 the field included Highland Home and Rabun Creek. From 1916-1917 New Prospect, Lanford and Langston comprised the field. For 1920, Beaverdam, New Prospect and Mt. Pleasant were grouped with Chestnut Ridge. Salaries ranged from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year and the pastor's time was divided among the churches in his group. In some cases, preaching was held only every other Sunday. The latter years of the 1800's and the early 1900's were characterized by steady growth accompanied by an increase in membership, rapid progress in teaching, training and missionary organizations. The Royal Ambassadors (RA's) and Young Women Auxiliary (YWA's) were organized in 1910 by Mrs. John D.W. Watts. The Girl's Auxiliary (GA's) was organized in 1917 by Miss Carrie Mae George (Mrs. McCuen Thomason).

The year 1921 marked the 100th birthday of the church. Records show that it was celebrated with an “all day dinner on the ground” meeting. At this time, the Kingdom Service Flag was presented. This flag represented persons either converted or ordained at Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church who had given their life full time to Kingdom Service. At that time, there were two Gold Stars for persons who had passed on and four blue stars for those still living. The membership of the church at this time was 167. A brief history of the Church was given and a former pastor gave a sermon titled “The Purpose for a Church” with the closing address being “The Responsibilities of Church Membership”.

In the latter part of 1932, the church extended a call to Dr. Alva B. Langston. He and his wife had been missionaries in Brazil from 1919-1932. He was a Laurens County native, having been baptized at the age of nine here at the baptismal pool at the church spring. He had been brought from his church, New Prospect, to Chestnut Ridge because they had no pool at that time.

On a Sunday morning in December 1935, while services were in progress, the church was destroyed by fire. The frame building with stained glass windows had a wood shingled roof and overhead stove flue. It is believed that sparks from the flue ignited the roof. There was no well (only a spring) and not even a ladder to fight the fire. Mrs. Eddie Lou Wallace wrote, “We just stood and prayed and cried as we watched our church building go up in flames. Before we left the ground that December day, plans were begun to rebuild.” During rebuilding, meetings were held in the Trinity Ridge School house for a period of two years.

Donations of money, saw timber, and labor from members and friends contributed to the quick construction of the 30ft. by 60ft. brick building with beautiful stained glass windows. The auditorium was on the top floor with a basement providing ten classrooms. The first inside baptistry was behind the pulpit. The choir was to the right of the pulpit. Two Sunday School rooms were on either side of the pulpit and baptistry. In August 1938, the “debt free” building was dedicated. On that day, a metal box was placed in the cornerstone. In this box were placed certain symbols of church life at that time. Contents included copies of Sunday School books, organizational books, together with a silver dollar coined in 1921, just one hundred years after the organization of the church. A

tuning fork, a much-treasured keepsake, which had been used to raise songs long before organs were installed, was placed in the box indicating the important role music plays in worship. This 1930's building served its purpose well for some thirty years. All organizations grew in members and so did the membership of the church. In 1944 the very first Vacation Bible School was held with over 75 children in attendance, plus a teaching staff of 15. Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church was written up in the Baptist Courier as holding the first Vacation Bible School in the Laurens Association.

In 1953 Dr. Langston tendered his resignation due to ill health. He had served the church faithfully and well for 21 years. His ministry may be marked as a great teaching ministry with 80 people joining by experience (profession of faith) and the membership growing to 218.

Soon after Dr. Langston's retirement it was realized that the church needed a parsonage. The site adjoining the church property offered by the Thomason brothers was chosen by great majority. The parsonage was completed in 1956 at the cost of \$12,000.00

In order to make some much-needed driveways through the church, cemetery and parsonage grounds, Mr. W.H. Gibbs and Mr. Wilburn Bolt both offered to give the church some additional land for cemetery use. Along with this extension, the church voted to establish a Cemetery Endowment Fund to provide for perpetual care for the cemetery. This fund was established by soliciting and accepting funds from individuals, groups and organizations without taking funds from the regular church treasury. This fund was to be invested and only the interest from it could be used for operations. These guidelines have been followed. A Standing Committee, made up of five church members who have reason to be vitally interested in the wellbeing of the cemetery and who are able to be reached and serve when needed, still operates under these Rules and Regulations with no help financially from the church treasury.

In early 1961 the church voted to remove the Military Service Flag from the sanctuary. Chestnut Ridge has 6 sons in the Revolutionary War, 9 in the Confederate War, 10 in World War I, 26 in World War II, 3 in the Korean War, and 5 in Vietnam. Only one out of all these made the supreme sacrifice of his life in WW I. Due to the worn condition of the Kingdom Service Flag, it was replaced by a plaque.

On October 10, 1965, Missionary Day was observed honoring Rev. Isam Earle Ballenger and his wife, Emma Kate (Katie) Thomason Ballenger. Chestnut Ridge has been blessed of God in that over the years He has seen fit to call a number into full time Christian service. The church felt that the spirit of missions was implanted in the heart of Katie Ballenger through the early years of her life here at Chestnut Ridge. Following a pastorate in Henderson, North Carolina, the Ballengers were appointed by the Foreign Mission Board to serve with the Baptist Union in Germany. In 1976 Isam was appointed Associate Area Director for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Soon thereafter, he was elected President of the International Seminary in Rushlikon, Switzerland. Following his tenure at the seminary, he was appointed Area Director for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. He later served at the newly established Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. In 2007, he and Katie ended 42 years of service to missions.

The 60's brought about crowded classrooms and little space for the entire congregation to fellowship together. The new educational building was constructed during the ministry of Rev. F.M. Julian, who served as pastor for eight years. This building housed 17 additional classrooms. The dedication was held July 28, 1968, "to the glory of God by whose favor it had been erected and for the purpose of Christian education."

Celebrating the 150th anniversary of the church, the recorded minutes read, "Truly it was a monumental day when some 475 to 500 members, former members, descendants of charter members, people with connections to earlier members and visitors converged upon Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church, Sunday, May 23, 1971 for her 150th Birthday. The day was characterized by great splendor, solemnity, deep spiritual awareness, and sweet emotional reminiscence. Men, women and children in early 1800 attire created a nostalgic atmosphere." The overflow crowd in the sanctuary necessitated a second performance of the presentation of the church's history that afternoon. The church in its past was presented in tableau, and the church in its present was presented by pageant. In these 150 years, one could readily discern the mission spirit of Chestnut Ridge from its infancy. Six ministers had been ordained by the church with Loyd Melton portraying himself in the pageant.

When our country observed its bicentennial birthday in 1976, the church again dressed in period attire and celebrated with an all-day service to show their patriotism. In the fall of 1976, the first pictorial directory was published. Adult Sunday School class pictures were made for the first time.

The church held a note burning ceremony May 1, 1977, to celebrate the paying off of a \$54,000 note on its Educational Building. This was a 20-year mortgage paid off in 9 years. God had richly blessed the church in this endeavor. A van committee was chosen to look into the purchase of a van suitable for the church's use. The church voted on August 14, 1977, to make this purchase. Youth 1 and Youth 2 Sunday School department, under the direction of Mr. Billy Wasson, presented \$760 to the church in a business meeting held January 1, 1978, to start a new sanctuary fund.

An Appreciation Day was held in June 1978, to honor three church members. Mr. J.C. Irvin had been a member for 62 years and served as a Deacon for 22 years. Mr. George Maxie Thomason had been a member for 57 years and served as Church Treasurer for 33 years. Mrs. Jeanette Cain had been a member for 43 years and had served as church pianist for 40 years, organist for 31 years and later as choir director. Sunday, November 19, 1978, was observed as Senior Citizen's Day. Twenty-three adult seniors were present and had their picture taken in the sanctuary.

January 29, 1984, the church voted to call Rev. Tony Crouch as pastor and he began his duties February 1, 1984. In the 1980's church membership grew substantially to a membership of 290. The need for a larger sanctuary was realized. The Survey, Planning and Building Committee recommended at the end of 1987 that the plans be developed by Ralph Walden & Associates and formulate a "master plan to be used in future building and renovation." They further recommended that the "Challenge to Build" program through the South Carolina Baptist Convention be used as a method of securing funds. This program would begin January 1, 1988, and end on Easter Sunday.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for building and renovation were held July 31, 1988. The ceremony was held in a unique way with a plow used to break ground and 2 ropes, which member took hold of and pulled to start the first phase of this building program. The new sanctuary would have 11,000 square feet and it was estimated to cost \$670,000. It would seat 310 people with 75 seats in the balcony. The church entered into this with

\$225,000 on hand and a three-year commitment from the congregation for \$275,000. Included in this construction were church offices, a choir and music complex and entrance/connector, relocated paved parking lots, and a landscaped and paved plaza between the buildings.

On October 1, 1989, a "Celebration of Praise" was held dedicating the first phase of the building program. It was a day of meditation, praising God, and giving thanks for His blessings. The new Allen organ from Case Brothers Music in Spartanburg was enjoyed for the first time. At this same time, the previous sanctuary was renovated and remodeled for use as classrooms and a fellowship area. The Sunday School records show that during the last quarter of 1992, the average attendance was 171. The next year for the same period, the average attendance was 217.

The church's 175th Birthday Celebration was held in 1996 in conjunction with the beginning of "Experiencing New Horizons" campaign. This program was the fund for Phase II of the master plan for the construction of the Education and Fellowship addition. This added 19,700 square feet at an estimated cost of \$1,750,000. Groundbreaking for this addition was held November 23, 1997 with church members standing on the outline of the building.

In 1998 the church began offering 2 worship services in order to accommodate a growing congregation and a variety of worship styles. Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church continued to be church that encouraged people to answer the call to Christian service. Jo Ann Campbell Brown and her husband, David Brown, were commissioned to full time service May 5, 2002, and are still serving as missionaries with the Baptist Global Response in Central America. Many members are involved in mission work both nationally and internationally. Annually, we have had teams serving in Romania since the late 90's. Our work has been both in northern and southeastern sections of Romania. Our first mission team to Liberia was in 2005. Steady progress has been accomplished in both countries and our hope is to continue this work. Additionally, we are taking a hands-on approach to missions, actively pursuing projects locally to give the experience of missions to church members as well as to serve the community.

Through the efforts and leadership of Rev. Tony Crouch, God has led us to build a new sanctuary and an adequate fellowship hall and educational space. Now it is this

generation's duty to be good stewards and followers to support the overall ministry of Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church. God has blessed us with a great church family. Many families like to go back to their roots to learn from whence they came and to preserve their heritage that the future generations may adhere to the values once received from their forebears. If a nation is not constantly reminded of the principles upon which it was founded, that nation soon ceases to exist. How much more should a church whose foundation was built upon Jesus Christ be constantly reminded of its past in order to secure this same foundation for its future?

It is well for each generation to look back to its sure foundation in order that it may not stray from its chosen path. God has greatly blessed us here at the Ridge with over 900 on the church roll. We pray that we will continue to serve Him and be attentive to His calling in our lives for all the generations to come.

- Composed by the Historical Committee at Chestnut Ridge Baptist Church, Sept. 2011
Helen Crisp, James Gambrell and Imo Jean Woods, Chairman