The Little Church That Could

One hundred years ago, the Methodists of East Center were taking turns having church services at their homes. Later, after a schoolhouse was built, they held services there; however, Mr. and Mrs. Charles McClanahan and the other members were upset with sharing a building with other denominations and by also having church in a schoolhouse, which prevented the congregation from having extra church activities. In 1887, the members decided it was time to have their own church.

Mr. McClanahan jumped in with both feet. He and two other members, Mrs. John Dye and Thomas Bullock, carried a petition to the surrounding families to obtain funds to build a new, wonderful building. Wonderful because it would be their own church and could hold more church activities like Bible study, evening services, and carry-in dinners. Charles McClanahan and Mary Ellen, his wife, donated the land six miles east on Route P for both the church and cemetery. On April 11, 1887, the deed to the land was purchased for one dollar from the McClanahans. The name of the church was to be East Center Methodist Church. At last, their dream of having a church was going to be a reality!

The excited worshipers immediately went to work. The men and older boys began work on the building itself, while the children helped by running errands, getting whatever they needed. The women helped by having hot meals, the best that the farms could supply, and coffee for the men as they worked. The men and women pledged their time to work whenever they had time off from the fields and chores.

Finally in October, 1887, after working hard through spring and summer, the church was finished. It was a small building, 26 by 36 feet, mounted on oak blocks with walls 12 feet high. On each side of the building were three windows, and facing west towards the road were double doors that lead into the church. Across from the doors, viewing in, stood the pulpit and the furniture was crude and made from logs, just like families made when first building their homes long ago. In the center were two box stoves that heated the church and since there was no flue, the pipes ran straight through the roof. It was a small church, but it was theirs.

Feeling as though he had succeeded in his purpose at the church, the Rev. J. T. Kinsey felt reassured when leaving his
The ceiling in the basement of the church is not covered, exposing the original ax-hewn beams placed when the church was remodeled in 1913. Mr. McClanahan used an ax instead of a saw, because no one had a saw.

The interior of East Center Community Church continues today to provide a friendly, inviting welcome to all.

charge to the Rev. C. G. Hill, who took over September 10, 1887, and served two years.

Now that the congregation had a new church, Della Roberts, the church song leader, thought it was time for some new music. She decided the church should have an organ and immediately asked for donations. To her surprise, the funds were quickly raised. However, one member, who thought instruments were sinful in church, left and never came back.

A number of families came and went but the church attendance prospered, for awhile. Slowly the attendance and the church building deteriorated. People thought the church was going to collapse, until the Rev. C. H. Werner came to the church's aid.

When he first visited the church, in 1913, it was ill-kept. Windows were broken and the roof was in need of repair. It was not unusual to see someone inside with an open umbrella on a rainy or snowy day. One might guess that the church was once painted white, but one certainly could not tell by glancing, and the furniture was the original.

After talking with the members, the Rev. Werner decided it was time to either remodel or rebuild. He held a meeting at the church to decide what was to be done. Werner pointed out that the church should not only be important to Christians, but to non-Christians, too. The men at the meeting did not think that the improvements should exceed $400. At the next meeting, $550 was pledged and donated. Even people who did not belong or go to the church were getting involved. Everyone in the community was helping with the addition to the church.

On October 27, 1913, the Rev. Werner broke the ground for the new addition and work began. It was not unusual to see 20 to 30 men and boys working laboriously on the basement.

The plans for the remodeling were drawn by Oty Myers, a member of the community. The plans included a large basement for a heating plant, kitchen, and dining room, and also a large Sunday School room was added. The congregation

The McClanahans sold land to be used for a church and a cemetery for one dollar. In 1907 the family posed for this portrait: (sitting) Sarah, Robert, Mrs. McClanahan, (standing) Eula, Mark, Leo, Elmer, and Edith McClanahan.
wanted something modern, convenient, and attractive and that is exactly what they received.

By Thanksgiving, 1913, the basement was finished and the church held a Thanksgiving dinner. The enormous dinner consisted of roast turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, baked beans, pickles, pies, doughnuts, and coffee. After dinner, at 3 o’clock, the cornerstone was presented to the church by D. Hayden of Kirksville. The ceremony was conducted by the Reverends Werner, Moore of Macon, and Miller of Kirksville. An oyster supper was served later that evening.

To enhance the evening services, Dr. Halladay had carbide lights installed; until then, kerosene lamps were used. Dr. Halladay also provided living quarters for the Reverend and his wife, which was unheard of at the time.

With the money donated to the improvement of the church, the committee purchased new pews which gave the church the final touch. These pews are still in use today. They also purchased a piano and the organ, bought so long ago, was moved downstairs for the children’s Sunday school classes.

Now the large basement served more than one purpose. That next fall, an agriculture course was held, the young men’s Bible class held a lecture for over a thousand, and courses were held on household economics. Also, the women of the church organized a group called the Ladies Aid. They held bazaars and quilting bees, served food at auctions, and organized oyster and ice cream socials. They made money to supplement the minister’s salary.

The cemetery lies directly east of the church. The first grave, unfortunately, was the infant daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dye. The second grave was the young son of the McClanahans. Vera Winkleman, granddaughter of the McClanahans said, “One day, their son was watching his father repair the roof. At the same time his mother was making lye soap. While watching his father, the young boy was backing up, no one knows why. Anyway, he didn’t see the boiling kettle of lye and tripped and fell in it. Somehow he survived most of the night, but didn’t make it to morning. It’s terrible that such a tragedy had to happen to them or the Dyes.”

An unusual aspect of the cemetery is some of its inhabitants.

Mr. and Mrs. McClanahan are buried there, along with 11 of their 12 children. In 1979, Howard and Vera Winkleman and Lawrence and Imogene McClanahan moved all of the children’s grave markers from where they were first laid to rest to the East Center Cemetery.

Since 1913, the many members of East Center have kept the church in better upkeep. In 1948, electricity was installed which increased the night-time attendance. In the 1950s, the basement was reinforced and new siding was put on the church. Two years later, the ceiling was lowered and a gas furnace replaced the old stoves in 1960. New carpet was installed in 1975 and new steps leading to the front door were poured in 1977.

In 1979, American and Christian flags were donated. The American flag was donated by Olive McClanahan in memory of her husband, Marlen McClanahan. The Christian flag was from Mrs. Fortney in memory of her husband, William. Mr. Fortney’s children donated a wooden cross, hand carved by his son, Leon.

In 1981, the congregation bought East Center from the Methodist Conference for $3,000. It was rumored that the Conference was going to demolish the church. Now the church is called the East Center Community Church and they usually just have Sunday school. East Center has had Sunday school ever since the church was built in 1887, unless bad weather, lack of heat, high water, or snowbound roads have prevented it.

To celebrate the church’s 100th birthday, the members have held many dinners and sing-spirations. The first of these celebrations was on June 21, 1987. The church had a supper, history reading of the church, and a sing-spiration. On September 20, 1987, a carry-in lunch and sing-spiration was held. Bill Snyder brought his covered wagon and gave rides. On November 29, 1987, a Thanksgiving supper was held reminiscent of the one that was held in 1913, when the church was being remodeled.

In its 100 years, the East Center Community Church, with its ax-hewn beams and pews purchased in 1913, was very much a turning point in the spiritual, moral, and social lives of the many people of East Center Community. All the love and tenderness that has been bestowed upon it from its members, past and present, is still apparent today.

By Lisa Winkleman