

# Celebrating God's Faithfulness



By Melinda Hemphill

"Celebrating God's Faithfulness," the theme of our 175th anniversary in 2023, has been the constant truth as we have experienced the guiding hand of God's Word in our lives personally, in the congregation, and in this growing community. Just like in the 1830s when Scottish settlers from South Carolina came to the previously-Creek lands and began worshiping in rural Coweta County in 1836, God's faithfulness and character are the same yesterday, today, and forever. Some of those early families were the Young, Bowers, Walthall, Leslie, Stewart, Hunter, Tolbert, Bryson, Chalmers, Russell, Johnson, and Carmichael families. Some of those families still have descendants as current members of White Oak. As we have observed the Septaquinquacentennial since formally organizing in 1848, we have continued to celebrate God's faithfulness.

When we had the Psalm Sing and Ice Cream Social in August, I thought about how it must've been in the last two decades of the 1800s when Rev. John L. Hemphill was pastor at White Oak, before there was electricity or air conditioning, before there were any buildings on the property besides the small, rectangle sanctuary that was built in 1896, before hymnals and instruments aided the congregational worship, and as the local area was much more rural than even today. I was thinking of people I knew across the decades who have now gone on to be with the Lord, what their experiences would've been as they sang "Better Than Silver and Gold" or "Every Day I Will Bless Thee." It wasn't until this congregation was 100 years old that White Oak members began singing hymns, and on this night we began the singing with "Great is Thy Faithfulness" after a Call to Worship from Lamentations 3:22-23. Senior Pastor, Rev. Dr. John Cook, spoke about the Psalms being the early hymnal and songs used in worship of the Lord. These were the songs Jesus would've grown up on and sung in worship, and they were often quoted during His last week on earth. Lynne Dodds spoke about how she grew up in this church and that her mother had been the choir director for years. Mrs. Sue Young Hunter used the Bible Songs for choir specials in weekly worship.

"Let Them Praise His Name" ("number 26 in the back") and "The Praises of Heaven and Earth" (what I call the Jehovah song) praises the LORD from Psalm 148 and are favorites of this congregation. My husband's grandfather (grandson of the aforementioned pastor) had a favorite song that was sung at his funeral, "Under His Wings." For all of our military family members, Psalm 91 has always been a comfort. The evening ended with sweet fellowship time as friends and families enjoyed homemade ice creams, often including fresh local strawberries and peaches. This was also the night we received our new anniversary t-shirts and aprons. Other memorabilia of this special year includes Christmas tree ornaments, a commemorative cookbook, and a family tree document for the church library.

Throughout the year the congregation enjoyed its annual traditions like women's ministry brunches, Vacation Bible School (including space in the program for special needs children), men's choir on Mothers Day and Veterans Day, women's choir on Fathers Day, Reformation Celebration, Wreaths of Remembrance, Breakfast Supper (Sunday night after Thanksgiving when the men cook), Wednesday Night Connect, trips to Bonclarken for retreats, camps, Synod, and World Focus, Christmas "Lessons and Carols," caroling in





nearby neighborhoods and to shut-ins, and the weekly Bible studies and Sunday School classes for all ages. We have been blessed by the visits of missionaries (Galletas, Cochrans, Van Dalens, Wittes) and have heard of God's work across the globe. We've seen saints gone on to glory, and we've welcomed new members of all ages, including the privilege of baptizing covenant children and adult converts. The Lord's Supper continues to be served using a 100-year-old Communion set, and devoted bakers regularly prepare the bread using a Scottish shortbread recipe.

God has been faithful as this congregation was starting a large building project as the Covid-19 pandemic was becoming an obstacle to our meeting in person for worship and events. He walked us through an inconvenient and trying time yet the planning and construction of our new Christian Education building continued, and it opened in January 2023, just in time to kick-off the 175th anniversary. The historic sanctuary also underwent a beautiful restoration. During the height of Covid, the congregation merged its two service times into one and began holding worship services in White Oak Hall in order to provide adequate space to stay healthy and still meet. While many congregations suffered with the loss of members and attenders, White Oak grew, continued to give financially, and spread the Gospel in person and through its YouTube channel. God's faithfulness has been shown in years past as well when White Oak Hall (gym and large industrial kitchen) opened in 2006 and with every other facilities upgrades, paying off new construction and remaining debt-free. God has provided scholarly and godly pastors all along the way, both Senior and Associate Pastors. Our current Associate, Rev. Ronny Hull, received his ordination and installation in January 2023, another important start to this anniversary year.

Finally October 22nd arrived, and it was like a homecoming day! Families returned to their roots, and Rev. Tom Shoger preached at both the 8:30 and 11:00 services. The choir loft was more full than usual as former members returned to be part of the celebrations. We sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness" as a congregation plus other favorites from the Psalter and Bible Songs. Rev. Shoger used Philippians 3:12-16 as the text for his "Pressing On!" sermon, using Paul's running analogy and encouraging everyone to consider the goal of going forward. The question was asked, "Are my best years ahead of me or behind?" We were challenged to keep moving forward, to learn from the past, yes, but to move forward after this 175th milestone. The afternoon of celebrating continued with a well-attended lunch in White Oak Hall, a multi-generational media presentation where members were interviewed, a poem written and read by Rev. Winston Skinner about an ancestor, J.Y. Carmichael, and a challenge by 175th Committee Chair, Mark Dodds, to continue investing in the church and pray for its influence in the community, including praying for the Elders, the Deacons, the Pastors, the nursery, Sunday School teachers, and the several committees. Rev. Hull read the Commendation from Georgia's governor, recognizing White Oak's contributions to this community for 175 years. When asked what makes White Oak different, what makes it appealing to those searching for a church in the current cultural climate, it was said, "Something that really stands out about White Oak is the personal connection and the fellowship." Like others have agreed for generations, it is home!†



Rev. John Lind Hemphill and the 1897 sanctuary of White Oak ARP, Senoia, GA.