

20 Questions About Bethel for Homecoming

(This list was first prepared for Homecoming in 2001 but we thought it might provide some interest for today's service as well.)

1. What does the word “Bethel” mean?
2. What was the significance of “Bethel” in the Old Testament?
3. Where, and under what circumstances, did Bethel Church have its beginning?
4. What has been called “the most historic piece of furniture in the Florida Conference” and why?
5. When did Bethel Church settle at its current location?
6. What is the oldest date on a marker in Bethel Cemetery?
7. How long has the current pulpit been used at Bethel Church?
8. When was the current church building constructed?
9. What minister served Bethel Church for the longest period of time? What is unusual about his ministry?
10. When did Bethel Church celebrate its Centennial?
11. What is the “Youth Building”?
12. What is the “Bishop’s Chair” and what happens when you move it?
13. What minister stood on a box behind the pulpit while preaching?
14. For how many years has Bethel’s bell announced meetings at the church?
15. Who built the current Fellowship Hall? When? Who presided at its dedication?
16. What minister used a vertical extension on the pulpit while preaching?
17. When was the last time Bethel’s pulpit was used outside this church and what was the occasion?
18. How many are currently on Bethel’s membership list? What was Bethel’s largest membership, and when?
19. How many angels can sit on Bethel’s pulpit?
20. Does Bethel Pond have a bottom?

Answers to 20 Questions About Bethel

1. What does the word “Bethel” mean?

Bethel comes from the Hebrew term for “House of God”

2. What was the significance of “Bethel” in the Old Testament?

It was the place at which Jacob saw angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven, “Jacob’s ladder”. Jacob built a monument there and called the place “Bethel” because it was at the doorstep of God’s House

3. Where, and under what circumstances, did Bethel Church have its beginning?

The territorial capital for Florida was established in 1825 among the “Old Fields” of the region’s Indians. Itinerant Methodist preachers were active in the area and a meeting-house, called Trinity, was built on “Two Hundred Foot” street, a buffer for the town from both fires and Indians. Life in the city was not particularly healthy, especially during the summer months; so large gatherings in the countryside became popular at those times. Bethel’s history indicates that it marks its beginnings by one of these meetings on the banks of Bethel pond during the summer of 1834. A similar meeting was also noted in August of 1835.

4. What has been called “the most historic piece of furniture in the Florida Conference” and why?

An early description of Trinity Church noted its stark furnishings, dominated by a “queer-looking semi-circular pulpit”. Behind that pulpit, in February 1845, Bishop Joshua Soule called to order the first meeting of the newly formed Florida Conference of the Methodist church. That pulpit is the furniture to which the question refers. It’s also the pulpit that is currently in use at Bethel.

5. When did Bethel Church settle at its current location?

The church history records the names of ministers serving this area from the year 1838 forward, with meetings being held in homes and in “a small log school house...situated about a mile north of the current Bethel Church”. On March 17, 1847 a deed for two acres of land “on which to erect a Meeting House” was given to a group of trustees of Bethel by Joseph and Thirza Hale. A “small frame church was built...on the site where the Sunday school rooms are located today”.

6. What is the oldest date on a marker in Bethel Cemetery?

The easy answer comes from a book in Bethel’s library: The Cemeteries of Leon County Fla., compiled and published in 1978 for the nation’s bicentennial by local historian Joy Smith Paisley. According to it, the 1826 birth year of Elizabeth Barineau is the earliest date on any monument. The earliest date of death is Aug 20, 1877 for Florence L. Crowder, the 3-year-old daughter of A.H. & M.A. Crowder. I leave you the task of locating the markers on which these dates are found. Of course many of the graves are unmarked.

7. How long has the current pulpit been used at Bethel Church?

The earliest written account of Bethel’s history says that this is unknown, but the history notes on the back of Bethel’s bulletin, which were prepared by church and neighborhood historian Thelma Royce, indicate that it was placed in Bethel church around 1895.

8. When was the current church building constructed?

The current church building was begun in 1909 but it “remained unsealed” until the Summer of 1945 when the interior was finally completed with the help of the “Board of Missions and Church Extension” and Trinity church. An interior renovation took place in 1960 and the most recent changes to the structure were made in 1970 (with the addition of the narthex and interior modifications) and 1972 (with the placement of the steeple).

9. What minister served Bethel Church for the longest period of time? What is unusual about his ministry?

From the sheet that you have of Bethel's recent ministers, you see that C.C. Smith served the longest of these, for 11 years between 1920 and 1934, and the church history verifies that no other minister served as long, dating back to 1838. A surprising fact is that he was a lay person from Trinity, not an ordained minister. But the church history remarks: "more credit belongs to him for his heroic and saving labors during this time than he is ever likely to receive. But for him, so far as we can now see, Bethel Church would have ceased to be."

10. When did Bethel Church celebrate its Centennial?

Not when you might think, considering that we are celebrating 134 years since the 1834 camp meeting on the banks of Bethel pond. At least there is no record in our written history of a centennial celebration in 1934. Actually, the written history doesn't mention a centennial celebration at any other time either, but a notation on a picture taken at the 1962 homecoming indicates that it celebrated the "115th Birthday of Bethel Methodist Church". This would put the 100th in 1947, one hundred years after the deed was given for the land on which Bethel is now located. The earliest church history that we have was written in the front of a membership book begun in 1947. That history indicated that the time period recorded was "from 1834 to October 12, 1947". So, I think the 1947 Homecoming was probably a Centennial celebration.

11. What is the "Youth Building"?

The church history notes that, during the year 1946-47, the "Youth Fellowship Group" worked at raising money and beginning construction of "The Community Center", a building "intended to be used for community and church purposes". The two-story structure was completed with meeting/dining area above and kitchen/gathering area below and was the site of many church/social events over the next 34 years or so. In fact, nestled behind the double doors at the back of the current Fellowship Hall, it continues to serve as the meeting place for the services of our current youth group.

12. What is the "Bishop's Chair" and what happens when you move it?

I'm not sure whether it was ever an "official designation", but the middle chair behind the pulpit has always seemed to me to be appropriately styled to be a "bishop's chair" and with the history of the pulpit, the name seems to fit. Actually, it was a gift from a "friend of the church", John Sullivan, and nothing is known of any other historical significance. (Pat Singletary has an interesting story about how it was acquired, but I am never able to remember the details of it...she will have to write it down sometime.) Oh yes, if you try to move the chair, the top of it is likely to fall off, and if you pick it up, the casters fall out. (Actually this "feature" of the chair was eliminated several years ago.)

13. What minister stood on a box behind the pulpit while preaching?

That would be Rev. Les Jackson, who was a retired chaplain when he came to Bethel with his wife Aggie in 1978. They were both short in stature, but that didn't seem to affect Aggie's playing the organ so much as Rev. Jackson's ability to look the congregation in the eye while delivering his sermons. During the year that he was here, Rev. Jackson built the storage counter now in the fellowship hall and installed insulation and paneling on the walls of the parsonage.

14. For how many years has Bethel's bell announced meetings at the church

This is kind of a trick question...actually the bell has almost never announced meetings at the church. It is more likely to have announced that a service was over and that children were tugging at the rope, while parents (for some reason embarrassed to have the neighborhood know that something was happening at the church) tried to pull them away. If you dig down to expose the top of the concrete footing, you will find the date 4/14/79. when the bell was put in place on the framework built by Donnie Abbott. Though the bell is much older than that, it was purchased just a few months earlier from Paul Bryar's Junque & Treasure shop on Gaines Street. (Paul Bryar was also a popular weatherman and announcer for a local

TV station.) The purchase was prompted by a remark of Aggie Jackson, wife of Rev. Les Jackson, that "all this little country church lacked was a bell".

15. Who built the current Fellowship Hall? When? Who presided at its dedication?

While minister Russell Bean provided the encouragement, Delma Monfort served as the contractor, and retired bridge-builder Wm Bennett acted as overseer and brought in much of the skilled labor, the entire congregation (and many "friends of Bethel") had a part in the actual construction work. From the digging of the foundations, to the shingling of the roof, the men, women, youth and children of the church all took part. The date on the front corner of the porch is 12/23/80, but the "pay as you go" project (from funds collected in a concrete block placed in the narthex by Rev. Bean) took more than 2 years to complete, beginning in 1980. The dedication took place on April 17, 1983, with acting Bishop Earl G. Hunt presiding. District Superintendent Thomas G. Mitchell was there also, as was his son, T. Glenn Mitchell, who was Bethel's minister at the time.

16. What minister used a vertical extension on the pulpit while preaching?

There may be two answers to this. The first would be Joe Stiles. When he came to Bethel in 1985, he found that the top of the pulpit was too far away to comfortably read his notes. A portable extension was built that provided a work surface about 4-5 inches higher as well as a storage compartment under it for books and notes. It was eventually retired to the "attic" over the narthex after Joe left in 1992. (I think Joe's wife Barbara may have continued to use it during the two years that she served as Bethel's pastor after Joe was moved to Calvary UMC.)

17. When was the last time Bethel's pulpit was used outside this church and what was the occasion?

The date was Feb 6, 1995 and the occasion was the celebration, at Trinity downtown, of the 150th anniversary of the organizing meeting of the Florida Conference. The conference had actually requested borrowing the pulpit for display/use in Lakeland but conversations with a furniture restorer raised fears that the pulpit may not fare well with the jostling of the move. (It's interesting to speculate whether the pulpit was borrowed for a similar, Centennial celebration service at Trinity in 1945 and whether that may have influenced the assistance Bethel received with the finishing of its interior in 1945, and the placement of the altar, communion table and pulpit chairs at Bethel by Trinity in 1946.)

18. How many are currently on Bethel's membership list? What was Bethel's largest membership, and when?

The number on the current membership roll can be determined from the list in the church directory. At the beginning of the year there were 62 names. During the year Betty Pafford and Edna Tessein graduated, leaving 60 at this time. The 166 members that were on the roll in 1991-92, while Joe Stiles was minister, is likely to be the record. There are no membership lists for Bethel's early years.

19. How many angels can sit on Bethel's pulpit?

There is probably no definitive answer for this, though I have seen at least three sitting on it at one time... that was during one of the Christmas programs when the pulpit was turned around so that the curved recess of the back could serve as a "stable" backdrop for the Holy Family. The younger angels were perched on the top of it to keep them from wandering too far from the action.

20. Does Bethel Pond have a bottom?

A story told by Miss Beulah at Heritage Sunday services informed us that, in the early years of the last century, children might tell you that it most certainly did not...on the authority of their parent's word...a myth born of those parents' fear for their children's safety. However some of the young ones here today know differently as they have walked on the bottom of Bethel Pond in recent years. (Don't try that after the service today as the bottom has once again submerged, to await another of the 15-25 year cycles when area lakes and ponds mysteriously disappear.)