

History and Organization of the Everglades Presbyterian Community Church (Now Everglades Community Church, Everglades City, Florida)



The spiritual needs of the frontier territory of the future Collier County were met as early as 1888, when Rev. G.W. Gatewood journeyed to Everglades on a scouting mission for the purpose of "surveying the field" for the benefits of establishing a church. Soon after, Rev. Gatewood sent Rev. H.S. Miller to Everglades to organize and take charge of the early church, which was erected at Halfway Creek and had a congregation of 60 members. The church grew, and Rev. Miller was succeeded by Rev. Gatewood, who lived locally with Capt. George W. Storter, and thus was the first residential pastor.

All went well until the church was destroyed, and religious services were moved to the schoolhouse in Everglades until it was blown away. A new church was erected. This church was also used as the school until it, too, was destroyed.

By the time Barron G. Collier arrived in the early 20's the church had become very weak and membership waned. In 1925, in October, Dr. J.F. Sheppard, Synodical Executive of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., was asked to secure a Pastor. Reverend Gerrett Koyker of Perry, Iowa, was in charge in 1925, and started the work. Regular services were held every Sunday. On January 31, 1926, Dr. Sheppard again visited the field, who together with the pastor organized a Presbyterian Community Church (although not enrolled in the Southwest

Presbytery until a meeting in Fort Myers on April 9, 1926) with 21 charter members, and under the following covenant,² "Accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord over our lives, we covenant together to establish and perpetuate His Church among us, for the perfection of our own Christian lives and characters, the enrichment of fellowship, the moral and spiritual uplift of our community and the saving of the world to him. Accepted on our confession of faith with our interpretation of the sacraments unimpaired, and with all the rights of private prayerful interpretation of the Scriptures assured, but looking to the Presbyterian Church for nurture and support, we promise to be subject to that form of discipline provided by said church in the management of our affairs. We covenant to love and fellowship each other in Him, trusting for the richer inheritance of His Redeemed in the church triumphant"².



Barron Gift Collier
1873-1939

The Board of Elders organized by electing Daniel W. McLeod, E.W. Russell, Clerk, Elders: Otto Neal and J.E. Peterson. Board of Trustees organized by electing Judge George W. Storter as Chairman, Henry Ploeger, Treasurer, Board members, H. I. Knowles, Miss Marion Lund, Mrs. F. C. Duncan, and James. Lo Howell.

The Elders were duly ordained and installed in their office by the Pastor, Rev. Garret Koyker on Sunday, February 7, 1926. Thus started the Everglades Presbyterian Church, hopeful for great things, confident of a rapid growth with the development of the community. Later that month, Rev. Koyker left and Rev. Janles L Glenn replaced him. The church held services in the Community House, interrupted only by hurricane floods in September 1926 and the fire of June 1927, until construction of the present church was completed before July 21, 1940).

When Rev. Glenn came to the area, the only church building that existed was a mission at Chokoloskee. This mission did not have a resident pastor, so he served

there, as well as regular preaching appointments at Collier City (Marco and Caxambas) and Naples. He received some relief when a church was organized in Naples with its own pastor. Rev. Glenn also had services for the blacks until they organized their own church in June 1927, in the presence of Mr. Barron G. Collier and other company officials. He frequently visited the construction camps along the Tamiami Trail preaching to State prisoners working under direction of the state highway department. Chapel services were held at the Everglades School every Monday morning. Rev. Glenn helped get the school on the accredited list. Little religious work had been done among the Seminole Indians of Collier County. Rev. Glenn chaired the committee on the Indian Presbytery of Southwest Florida and considered teaching English to the Native Americans. Many Pastors come and went. Not until May 3, 1939, did the elders and trustees meet with Pastor Arthur P. Vaughn and brought up the prospect of building a church. They agreed to research the feasibility of securing a suitable site and donations to cover the costs. May 14, 1939, they put the matter before the membership. At this meeting it was explained that Mr. Collier's engineer and manager David Graham Copeland, would recommend to the Lee County Land Company that they donate the land for the church building. A church committee was formed to handle the matter.⁴ This committee met in May and appointed two subcommittees: Committee of Plans and Blueprints⁵ and Finance Committee⁶. The Finance Committee canvassed employees of the Bank of the Everglades, the Collier Corporation, and the Courthouse for subscription. They also canvassed for general subscriptions and tentative pledges. Mrs. James T. Gaunt pledged \$500, and Mr. Raymond Cail pledged \$250. as well as his services as construction superintendent.

At the Committee meeting of June 23, 1939, at the Everglades Inn, floor plans similar to the Clewiston Community Church were presented by J.H. T. McGee. All committees were then reorganized, established were the Equipment Committee and the Construction Committees. July 10, 1939, Mr. Copeland was present at the Building Committee meeting, he announced that a deed was being prepared by the Lee County Land Company to donate a lot in the Southeast quadrant of the Block in Everglades opposite to the Courthouse lot⁷. which would be the same size of the Courthouse lot. The Lee County Land Company also agreed to furnish materials at cost, permit the use of their equipment and machinery at no charge, and fill the lot after the foundation was completed. The gift, however, came with strings attached. Conditions of the deed included that the church be erected on or before October 1, 1940, and that it "shall be used wholly as an undemominational church." If the church failed to comply with any of the conditions, the premises, including any improvements, would revert back to the Lee County Land Company without necessity of any action. By July 16th this deed was delivered to the church. Attorney W.Z. Platt drafted a church charter. The proposed charter was presented

to the Session and it was voted to authorize the attorney to proceed with incorporation. Construction began in August or September 1939. First bills being paid September 19, 1939

Dr. A.P. Vaughn, at the close of the morning service on July 21, 1940, tendered his resignation as pastor, due to the fact that the congregation was now "occupying and enjoying (its) new church building, which should become the home of a growing religious interest and work, and also a center for cooperation of all groups in community welfare effort. For this new advance, it would seem suitable that you have the aid of a new minister."⁸

On March 14, 1951, Everglades Community Church officially renounced jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church. Proper notice by resolution was recorded on April 26, 1951, with Collier County Circuit Court. This resolution was signed by the Board of Trustees and, in part, stated that a denominational church was claiming authority over it, so it resolved that "the Everglades Community Church... recognizes no denominational body as having authority over said church," and "... recognizes the congregation of Everglades Community Church as the only source from which it will receive orders or directives..."



Photographed May 26, 1957 - Courtesy Florida State Archives Photographic Collection

However, in a letter dated October 22, 1959, from the Presbytery of Southwest Florida, there still was confusion as to whether or not the church was Presbyterian or nondenominational, stating that "many of the present trustees are not members of the Presbyterian Church, as required by our (the Presbytery's) constitution, and have no desire to be, considering themselves to be members of a nondenominational or Community Church."⁹ There also was a dispute as to the ownership of the church's property, which was of vital concern due to the reversionary clause in the deed from Lee County Land Company. Not until February 3, 1977, was the church notified by the Presbytery that it would be recommending removal of the Everglades Community Church from the rolls of the Presbytery without prejudice..."¹⁰

This was done regionally at the September 22, 1977, meeting in Ft. Lauderdale whereat the Presbytery "overtured" to remove the church and renounce all rights to its property. The 190th General Assembly (the national body) met in San Diego in May of 1978, and the overture was recommended to be approved at their September 28th regular meeting, an August 14, 1978, letter further stated that a quitclaim deed would be issued to the property for the sum of one dollar (\$1.00) plus costs and expenses of said transfer. The Presbytery continued to pursue a per capita apportionment of \$5.75 per member, because their position was that the church was technically under Presbyterian governance until voted otherwise at the September meeting. The church voted to refuse payment, remaining steadfast that it was nondenominational, so it had no moral or legal obligation to pay. This per-capita dispute was over a total fee of \$54.70.

1. Charter Members: Judge G. W. Storter, S. P. Slonaker, Mrs. G. w. Storter, Mrs. C. L. Collier, L. H. Knowles, Guy C. Johnson, Mrs. L. H. Knowles, Mrs. Guy C. Johnson, Mrs. F. C. Duncan, J. E. Peterson, Mrs. Erwin H. Berry, V. M. Messer, Mrs. L. M. Haynes, Mrs. w. A. Horton, D.W. McLeod, Otto Neal, Mrs. D W. McLeod, Mrs. F. J. Frankenhoff, E. W. Russell, Henry Ploeger, (Miss Louise Thayer, affiliated member)

Recognition to our wonderful ladies of this church serving in office as Treasurer was Mrs. Louise Collier Jinkens, assistant treasurers, Mrs. Sidney Brown, Mrs. A.B. Webb. Louise Jinkens and sister Sarah become members October, 10 1937. We honor a wonderful and lovely lady, Mrs. Louise Jinkens.

Sources:

2. Under Covenant-Session Minutes, Page 1
3. From old Sessional Record as approved by Chairman D.W. McLeod and attested by Clerk E.W. Russell
4. D.W. McLeod, Joseph M. Bryan, James T. Gaunt, Mrs. Bertha Duncan, Mrs. M.S. Pender, Mrs. A.B. Webb (with F.J. Frankenhoff and Ernest Bridges added

later by common consent).

5. Mrs. A.B. Webb, Raymond Cail, Dr. Vaughn, James T Gaunt, and J.M. Bryan 6. J.M. Bryan, Ernest Bridges, James T. Gaunt and Raymon Cail 7. Session Minutes dated August 27,1939

8. Church session minutes which included Dr. Vaughn's resignation 9. Letter from E. Crawford Williams to Rev. Charles T. Martz, D.D.

10. Letter from Executive Presbyter Charles E. Hurst to Rev. Horace Thomas

This brief history was researched by Chris Ammerman, Wally and Jean Barton, Helen Bryan, Rachael McBeath and Keri Reay and is available in printed form by writing to the church office at:

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