

First Church of Christ, Scientist
Fairbanks, Alaska

History

1903 – 1950

Christian Science was first introduced to Fairbanks by Mr. Robert W. Tompkins in 1903. Mr. Tompkins, while living at Dawson, Yukon Territory, had been healed of tuberculosis in its last stages by reading a copy of Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, by Mary Baker Eddy. Filled with inspiration and gratitude for his wonderful recovery, he decided to devote his life to Christian Science healing.

His desire quickly took practical form. With the help of two other men at Dawson, both members of The Mother Church, Mr. Tompkins loaded a scow with food supplies and brought it down the Yukon. These staples were sold at a good profit in the new mining town of Fairbanks, where Mr. Tompkins decided to settle.

Two lots were staked out in the town site, near the present location of Seventh Avenue and Barnette Street, and on each lot was built a log cabin. Mr. Tompkins took one cabin for a dwelling. The other was simply furnished and on the front door was placed a sign, "Christian Science Reading Room".

The cabin was stocked with Christian Science literature, which at that time was often six months in arriving. Mr. Tompkins served as Reading Room attendant and worked tirelessly as a practitioner. Many healings began to be evidenced, among them rheumatism, pneumonia, cancer, alcoholism, smoking and profanity. During this period, the faithful worker was praying that another member of The Mother Church would come to live in the community so that public services could be held in accordance with The Mother Church Manual. In answer to this prayer, Mrs. Ella R. Parsons arrived to stay.

The first public services were held in the summer of 1906 with seven persons attending. Services were held regularly and soon Wednesday evening testimony meetings were included. A Thanksgiving Day service was held that first year. Two members of the congregation walked twelve miles through temperatures of 50 degrees below zero to attend.

The healing activities of these loyal pioneers brought so many to the little cabin that it was necessary to enlarge it to more than twice its original size. Literally hundreds of people first found there an understanding of God and Christian Science.

On April 18, 1913, the first regular meeting of the Christian Science Society, Fairbanks was held. There were 22 charter members in the Society.

Arrangements were begun in July 1914 for the first free lecture on Christian Science to be given in Fairbanks. The lecture was delivered in July 1916. Mrs. Lillian M. Erwin became the first registered practitioner in Fairbanks about 1922.

The purchase of the next church site was made in March 1925 from the Board of Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The edifice on the property was used as it stood for a number of years and was remodeled in 1933.

On July 5, 1933, First Church of Christ, Scientist, Fairbanks was incorporated and became a recognized branch of The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts.

In 1937, the building was destroyed by fire. Several local churches offered the use of their facility for the purpose of holding Christian Science church services. The edifice was replaced in 1940 and dedicated free of debt on June 25, 1950.

1950 – 1989

In 1959, the City of Fairbanks' plan for downtown urban renewal included the property where the church was located at 603 Third Avenue. Urban Renewal authorities informed the members that the church would have to be moved. The church was paid \$45,000 for the lot and the cost of moving the building.

The need for a new location was met when the membership voted to buy a lot at 811 First Avenue for \$12,000. The property was part of the Huldah Ford Estate and included an abandoned two-story log structure which had originally been the home of E. T. Barnette, the founder of Fairbanks. The old building was dismantled and removed.

Mr. Ed Osborne, a member of the church executive board and a licensed architect, drew up plans for establishing the church at the new location. Arrangements were then made to move the two-story frame building five blocks on a truck with a flat bed during the early morning hours of July 23, 1959. The church, designed by member Mrs. Christine Pfund in 1938, made the trip with every timber and window intact.

During the transition, church services were held at the Masonic Temple, located next door to the new location on First Avenue. Additional work that

summer included the installation of new siding, rock work on the front of the building, and landscaping.

In a ceremony on October 15, 1959, the cornerstone box from the former church location was opened and current copies of Christian Science periodicals and the branch church bylaws were added to the contents. Members of the executive board who guided the successful moving of the church, and were present at the ceremony, included: Mr. Harvey O. Haggard, President; Mr. H. Wesley Redhead, Vice President; Mr. Edward Y. Osborne, Treasurer; Mrs. Marie Fate, Clerk; and Mrs. Mildred Nerland. At that time, the church had two practitioners: Mrs. Leron Marks and Mrs. Fannie Joyce.

The new location placed the church on the street which parallels the Chena River. In early August 1967 the rains began and by the 14th of the month the river had overflowed its banks. The water continued to rise until it was six feet above flood stage. Additional flooding was caused by the Tanana River on the southside of town. The downtown area was under water and thousands of people were evacuated from their homes.

More than six inches of water covered the main floor of the church, damaging the hardwood floors and the organ. The crawl space under the church was filled with water for more than a week and the steam heat was out of order.

The flooding, which began on a Monday, made it impossible for the Wednesday night meeting to be held. In spite of the fact that the telephones in the city were not in working order, seven members arrived at the church on Sunday morning for the service, which was held upstairs in the Reading Room. Several members came prepared to read the Lesson.

During the following weeks, members and friends cleaned the mud and silt from the downstairs rooms and pulled up the rugs and hardwood floors. Large, portable heaters were set up to dry the flood-soaked building, since the heating system was still inoperable. Volunteer help and the loan of equipment came from the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Anchorage and financial aid was given by The Mother Church.

When it came time to replace the floor covering, new carpeting was given to the church by the Nerland family. The ingenious tinkering of one member restored the organ to working order. Members Harvey Haggard and Leonard Peyton spent many long hours in the muddy crawl-space under the church to repair the heating system.

Throughout the years, the church has continuously maintained the Sunday School and Reading Room, and has distributed thousands of periodicals locally as

well as to remote sites. The church-sponsored lectures have been increased to two each year. The first Christian Science College Organization at the University of Alaska was started in 1962 and continued until 1964. The group was reorganized in 1970.

The need for a ground floor Reading Room, Sunday School rooms and a nursery prompted members to make plans for a 30 by 36 foot addition to be attached to the back of the church in 1984. For many years, members contributed to the Sunday School Building Fund and it was that money and a generous grant from The Mother Church which helped to finance the project.

Contractor Grafton McClintock began Phase I of the building on June 19, 1984. Ongoing donations by members and friends made it possible for the frame structure to be completed that fall. Also, the exterior of the new addition was painted, the parking lot surfaced and a cement sidewalk installed.

Phase II, which included the interior of the building, was completed by member Doug Jenkins in 1986. The children's room was ready for use in January, the Sunday School in June and the Reading Room in July.