

The Birth of A Church

In September of 1955, a young minister right out of seminary found himself appointed “not to a church, but a vacant lot—not even paid for.”

Rev. Gene B. Ferrell’s instructions: start building what would become a new Methodist Church. Armed with an outdated list of names and addresses, he began knocking on doors, inviting people to join. From Leonard and Bernice Nichol’s outreach Sunday School, he gathered 10-12 people, forming a small core. He also got a name: Asbury.

A small sum of \$1,500 was donated by the Church Club, a Methodist group. But with few people and fewer funds, the fledgling church didn’t have the money for a building. They were invited to share a temporary structure used by another new church, St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran. It was metal and pre-fab, affectionately called the “Tin Tabernacle.” This arrangement worked for a while, but after being officially chartered and incorporated, Asbury desired a place of its own.

A long skinny lot, 100 x 800 feet, on a dirt road in the Northeast Heights became available, but the young families who formed the congregation couldn’t afford it. So they canvassed nearby neighborhoods and collected as many members as they could, all the while exploring various ways to borrow money. Finally, they were able to hire architect Jason Moore. He was a member of Central Methodist and later went on to garner several awards for his work.

It was decided to build in stages, starting with the worship space. It was dubbed “Unit One,” and was an innovative A-frame design. A boiler and bathrooms would go in a small adjacent building. Classrooms and offices would be added later.

The design was pronounced “crazy” by potential lenders and curious passersby alike. But it had the most floor space per dollar. It was 90 feet long by 35 feet wide and several stories tall. Supporting arches were supposed to be steel, but were changed to laminated wood to save costs. At the east altar end, several small stained glass windows pierced a convex wall.

Opposite, on the west end, a plainer concave wall mirrored it. For natural lighting, a strip of curved translucent plastic ran almost the entire length of the roof, and radiant heat rose from hot water pipes embedded in the floor. A row of small windows on the long sides of the church provided extra light and ventilation. People entered on the west side through an offset door topped by more windows. Other accesses included a small door on the north and a sliding glass door on the south side. More buildings were planned: a fellowship hall, offices, and classrooms. It would form a church campus.

Unfortunately, Unit One cost too much, so the extra buildings were put on the back burner for years. Scant furnishings included curved pews that didn’t fit the rectangular building, a gray painted table for an altar, an old piano and some folding chairs. The Sanctuary was divided up into six classes for Sunday School with panels much like our present nametag boards. The noise, of course, had nowhere to go but up, and the din was unbearable at times.

However, it was literally a design ahead of its time. Proper sealing for the plastic skylight wouldn’t be commercially available for decades to come. Rain and snow at times came trickling down, and birds tap-danced on top.

But the strange-looking A-frame “barn” was now a permanent fixture on the Albuquerque landscape. Asbury rose nearly four stories and sat on one of the highest sections of the city. It could be seen for miles around.

The Sanctuary was dedicated July 21, 1957. Since then, many changes in the church’s layout have come and gone, as well as hard-working congregants and pastors. But Asbury’s purpose to serve the community and raise up new generations of Christians has been steadfast.

Happy Anniversary, Asbury!

Excerpted in part from *Building Minds and Hearts: The History of Asbury UMC* by Laura L. Carlson, 2005, Albuquerque, NM.