

Why Did the Church Change Its Name?

By 1928 both Hiawassee Academy and the church were doing well, although the church had no building of its own. The school was well respected. Graduating students could enter most colleges without an entrance exam. The church was growing in numbers. But then, disaster struck. In August it was discovered that the Treasurer of the Home Mission Board had embezzled almost a million dollars from the fund that supported the mountain schools. The exact amount was \$909,461.00. In 1928 a million dollars was like maybe 20 million in today's terms. Clinton S. Carnes was an experienced and skilled accountant, but it was discovered later that he had a criminal record and should never have been allowed in such a trusted position.

The loss left the Home Mission Board with an embarrassing and overwhelming debt – a debt which, coupled with deepening depression, caused havoc, not only with the Board, but with the Convention as a whole. Those seventeen mountain schools were the first to feel the crisis as the decision was made to get out of the school business. Hiawassee Academy was sold to the Towns County School System and became Towns County High School. The selling price was \$1,000 for the school buildings and fifty acres of prime land in Hiawassee.

On January 12, 1929, Dr. McConnell died at the age of 72. His family attributed his death to the shock of what had happened. He was pastor of Druid Hills Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia at the time. Had he lived with his normal youthful vigor, he may have found a way to save his beloved school, but that was not to be. Dr. McConnell's funeral was said to be the largest ever in Atlanta at the time. Louie D. Newton, then editor of the Christian Index said, "We have lost a great preacher, a loving minister, a true friend, a glorious leader."

It took a while for the effect of these events to sink in for the church, but by 1930 there was no denying that a new church home had to be built. They could not continue to use the school as their meeting house. Rev. Frank Loyd who, as a friend of Dr. McConnell, had been a teacher at the school since its inception in 1887. He had also been elected pastor of the church on five different occasions. It was Frank Loyd who immediately saw the church's need and insisted on reserving two of the fifty acres of the school's land for the church. Those two acres were the old McConnell home place where Ferd McConnell had grown up.

It was still far from certain whether the church could pull itself together and actually build a new building. With the Great Depression in full swing, money was scarce. Frank Loyd wrote a weekly column in the Towns County Herald in which he, week by week, described the slow progress.

The church minutes of July 9, 1933 state without elaboration that the church voted to change its name to McConnell Memorial Baptist Church in honor of Dr. F.C. McConnell. Those minutes do not reflect who made the proposal or why, but it is easy to assume that it was Frank Loyd who conceived the idea as both a way to honor his friend, Dr. McConnell, and a way to raise funds for the new building. Shortly after the name change was voted on, Frank Loyd wrote letters to as many people outside the church as he could think of, requesting donations in Dr. McConnell's memory. He was surprisingly successful. A list of contributors shows names from all over the country who gave "because they knew and loved their great friend, Dr. F.C. McConnell." Many of the contributors gave more than once as the building proceeded. Frank Loyd was elected pastor for the sixth time during the construction. The building was not fully completed until 1939 when its dedication was announced in the Towns County Herald on August 17th. Frank Loyd died five days later on August 22nd. He was 82 years old. It was as if he willed himself to live until the building he worked so hard for was finally completed.