

## Providence Assembly of God ~ History of the Faithfulness of God

### In the Heart and Home

In 1981, God moved on the heart of Courtnell Francios to start a church in New England. He met with the Superintendent of the Assemblies of God (among others), and God clearly led him to Providence, RI. Initially, the church began as Bible study at his home on Alabama Avenue in the Washington Park section of Providence. Pastor Francois said the first scheduled Tuesday night Bible study no one showed up. So he and his family, Ann Marie (his wife), Melissa (age 4) and Dexter (age 6) prayed. The next Bible study about 17 people showed up.

### On Broad Street

When attendance hit 54, the group had outgrown the home Bible study, and on September 6, 1981, moved to 967 Broad Street, a storefront location at the corner of Broad and Thurbers Ave., which is currently a Spanish nightclub. The church consisted of one large room, which was utilized for everything from Sunday School to worship services. Sister Mobray has vivid memories of coming to Sunday School with her children and seeing "little Kim Jackson," a young teenager, standing up on a box teaching all of the students. It was at this location that the first Vacation Bible School was held, attracting 200 children. At that time, the storefront location was right next to a bar and often men would wander into the sanctuary by mistake. Once when Brother Lunsford and Sister Sadie were doing special music, a gentleman came and laid money on the piano as one would do in a nightclub, not realizing he was in a church service!

### Faith of Our Fathers

After about a year, the storefront church building was put up for sale, so Pastor Francios inquired with a realtor about purchasing it. The realtor suggested that the congregation consider the purchase of a real church building, and recommended the property on Elmwood Avenue, which was currently for sale. At that time there were 35 members, who prayed together, and took a sacrificial offering to come up with the needed down payment of \$150,000 to purchase the property at 353 Elmwood Avenue on November 5th, 1982. To God be the glory! The membership at that time consisted of the Jackson family, the Willises, the Mobray family, the Francois family, the Araujo family, Floyd Brown, Joanie Gibau, Sadie Mayes, Joank Niels and Meredith Wynn, many of whom are still active members of the congregation.

## God's Hand Already at Work

It is interesting to see how the hand of God had been working to prepare the Elmwood Avenue property for P AG. Originally built in 1909 by the Elmwood Avenue Congregational Church, their congregation had been pastored by the same man for 40 years, and on his death, the congregation had dwindled to 40 elderly members, who felt they could no longer sustain the building. In 1955, because of the creation of Interstate 95, First Presbyterian Church, then located on Clifford Avenue, was due for demolition and needed to relocate. The State of RI bought their property on Clifford Ave. for \$80k, and they purchased the Elmwood Ave. church for \$25k and put \$50k into renovations. For a point of reference, at that time, one could purchase a house for \$4k, so quite a bit of work was put into the building! Over the years the neighborhood began to change, reflecting changes in the city. First Presbyterian's largely Scottish congregation was not prepared to change with the neighborhood, and by the time the P AG congregation was in need of a new site, so was the First Presbyterian church. In 1982, they made a decision to merge with the Congleton Street Presbyterian Church in Cranston, who was also facing demographic changes and the dwindling membership forming Faith Presbyterian Church. They chose to relocate to 499 Hope Road in western Cranston in a neighborhood in closer alignment with the makeup of both congregations. Their library contains some of the history books of the renovations during the reconstruction of the Elmwood Avenue building during the renovation in 1955. To remember the Elmwood Avenue building, the congregation brought the round stained glass of their beloved church to their new home. (This opening is the skylight in the hallway of our overflow area between the church offices and the sanctuary that was repainted to look like stained glass during Christmas in April in 2004.)

## Growth on Elmwood Ave.

How mighty our God is! For a group of 35 members to step out in faith and take over such a large building took a lot of faith and much elbow grease. Just as when the Presbyterians took over, the building needed some work. On November 5th, 1982, the P AG family moved into the building on Elmwood Avenue. According to Sister Willis, they all worked together to prepare the old building for the Lord's work; her husband especially "worked like a beaver" to get everything ready. Unlike the Presbyterians, they did not have a nest egg of money to work with or the luxury of time. They had service on Broad Street one Sunday, and on Elmwood Avenue the next. There was such joy, however, to worship in a sanctuary with real pews and an organ. Sadie Mayes, the worship leader and choir director was delighted to have so much more to work with.

The church started growing, and lots of people started coming. According to Sister Jackson, a

study was done and we were one of the fastest growing churches in New England. Church services were held twice on Sundays (morning and evening) as well as on Tuesday evenings. People went out witnessing regularly and the church continued adding to its numbers. Staff was added. Pastor Keith Chase was brought on as the first assistant pastor, and his wife Minnie became the pastor's secretary.

### Ministries Over the Years

Over the years we have had a variety of ministries added to the work of PAG. We had an active ministry with students from Brown University, and Pastor Berkely and Michele are connections from that ministry. We had an active nursing home ministry at one time. In November 1987, we added the Soup Kitchen and a ministry to the homeless. That year we also added the Steel Drum band. In 1990 we installed the baptismal and relocated the organ. In 1993 we began to broadcast our services on TV in a program named Hope for All, which ran on local cable access until 2004.

Many ministries started and continue to flourish today, including the youth program, boys for Jesus, Missionettes, and Married Couples. We remember fondly the many who have given so much time to our Lord and to our neighborhood and to our congregation. There are many names that come to mind as we list the saints who have served on staff at PAG over the years: Gordon Libby, Joe and Ruth Nieves, Patrick O'Laughlin, Iris and Derrick Colon; Frank Samanine, Ed Thomas, Lee Willis, Ellis Penn, Natasha Mobray, Rudy Moseley and Charles Berkley.

On September 10, 1995, we were able to burn the mortgage. What a celebration to be debt free and wholly own our building.

### The Second Season

In July 1998 Charles Berkley was called to assume the leadership of PAG. Pastor Berkley had been in the church for a while, serving as a member, running the Soup Kitchen, being a deacon, then as assistant pastor. He took a season off and on his return, it was clear that this was God's location for him. His initial sermon from Haggai 2 spoke of the reconstruction of the temple and of God's promises of the rebuilding process and the glory to come. Under his ministry we have seen lots of reconstruction:

Of the mission and vision—we have a clear direction and purpose and are working to see that accomplished

Of the people—we have grown and changed as a congregation as we have gained a large multinational congregation

Of the church government—we have reorganized into elders and an administrative board to better allow people to function in their gifts and serve the people

Of the building—neglected projects are completed and our building looks wonderful inside and is soon to be completed on the outside

We have become a church that is known for its strengths in so many areas: preaching, teaching, youth, outreach, missions, friendliness, music, children, compassion, all standing on God's word and the power of His strength. We see ministries available to each one in the congregation and will empower people to start something if a need is felt. We continue to be a resource to the community as we totally rely on Him.

### For the Future

Who knows what God has in store for us next? In looking back over the history of P AG, it is exciting to see the second generation of those who founded the church taking leadership positions as the Jackson children and Natasha Mobray step out in ministry, following in the legacy of their parents. It is amazing to watch what God is doing in the lives of the children today who come week after week to Sunday School and Children's Church. Sometimes it feels like P AG has a revolving door where people come and stay with us for a season, get their blessing and leave. It is evident, however, that God is always at work while they are here, and when they return they acknowledge that. It is our part, as His body, to be faithful to continue at the work to which He has called us. We don't know with who and how He is going to use us: whether it is the homeless prostitute coming to Soup Kitchen, the refugee just off the plane, or the kid from the neighborhood. We need to keep on reflecting Him in the ministries He has called us to. In 2004 our theme was The Best is Yet to Come. In looking over what God has been doing all along, it just seems to get better and better, doesn't it? To God be the glory.

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:4-6*

— Jean Marrapodi