

**THE
EATON TON
STORY**

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The Beginning

The church of Christ had its beginning in Eatonton in 1968 as the result of missionary work accomplished by George W. Polk of Macon and John Mills of Byron. After the initial groundwork had been laid by brethren Polk and Mills, the work was continued for four years by a series of full-time preachers. During this period of time, the church did not have direction, and by the end of 1972 the work in Eatonton had floundered and died. The church for a period of weeks ceased to exist in Eatonton.

A New Direction

At this point, John Mills returned to Eatonton for the purpose of re-establishing the work of the Lord. A Business Meeting of former members who had moved away was called, and the decision was made to continue with the work of rebuilding on an integrated basis, in view of the fact that one-half of the population of Putnam County, in which Eatonton is located, is white and one-half of the population of Putnam County is black.

A five-year plan of work was designed and prepared in written form, signed by the current and former trustees of the property. The plan envisioned a great work in Eatonton, as well as the planting of the church in surrounding towns which did not have a church. The plan was made operational in the spring of 1973. Two 1960 Chevrolet 54-passenger buses were purchased and a three-week Tent Campaign was scheduled.

Meanwhile, Larry Murdock, the preacher for the Baldwin church in Milledgeville, was engaged in a home Bible study with a young Black lady named Frances Waller Crawford. We were contacted by brother Murdock and asked concerning the possibility of Frances worshipping with us, if she should be baptized. Our answer was, "Yes, of course, she can worship at Eatonton!" Thus, Frances became the first Black person to become a member of the Eatonton church. During the three-week Tent Campaign, seventeen more souls were baptized and the Eatonton church was headed in a new direction — a direction that would result in the baptism of at least 500 precious souls in the period that followed!

Satellite Ministries

The new plan for the progress of the Eatonton church involved the planting of the church in the surrounding area. The view was the the Eatonton church would made greater progress if sister congregations were planted in the surrounding areas. Thus, later in 1973, Tent Campaigns were conducted in Sparta with five baptisms, Greensboro with six baptisms, and Washington County with thirty-eight baptisms. New churches were established in each of these counties. In the beginning, the new congregations met at various hours, but their times of meeting stablized in a few months. The Eatonton church met in the morning. The Greensboro church met at noon. The Sparta church met at 3:00 P.M. and the Washington County church met at 6:30 P.M. In the months that followed, nice meetingplaces were constructed in all of these three new counties. Great works continue to this day in these locations. Additionally, a new work was begun in Fort Valley.

Further Developments

In 1974, another three-week Tent Campaign was conducted in the parking lot of the church building at Eatonton in which there were sixty baptisms. This was accomplished with graded services and classes under multiple tents and using the church building. Several teachers and preachers were used.

Building Improvements

With this increase in the Eatonton church, necessary improvements were needed in the Eatonton church building. A large and beautiful 250-seat auditorium was created by removing numerous partition walls. One large classroom was created by combining three smaller rooms. An addition to the rear of the building housed a nursery, office, foyer, and two restrooms. Three unique classrooms were created by the setting up of three old school buses on concrete blocks like mobile homes. The seats were removed; they were carpeted and heated totally electric. These improvements completed Stage I of the building program at Eatonton.

Oconee Bible College

With the number of conversions in the area rapidly increasing, concrete plans for the development of these new Christians became increasingly important. The Bible teaches that we are to "make disciples" by baptizing and by teaching (Matthew 28:19-20). The "baptizing" of the Great Commission was being performed. If, however, disciples were to be made of those who were baptized, great emphasis also had to be placed on the "teaching" aspect of the Great Commission. Into this void came Oconee Bible College. Founded in September of 1975, Oconee Bible College began with night classes at the Eatonton and Greensboro church buildings. In 1976, Oconee Bible College

expanded into a full-time program of study. In January of 1976, twenty-three and one-half acres in Putnam County were purchased for development as a combination Bible college/Bible camp campus.

The Lord has greatly blessed the efforts of Oconee Bible College. A modern Library-Administration Building has been completed and serves as the base of operation for five clusters of students during the 1979-80 school year. The cluster locations are Eatonton, Greensboro, Madison, Sparta, and Ludowici.

Oconee Bible College is now a four-year degree-granting Bible institution, conferring the Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in Bible and Church Education. The two-year Associate of Arts degree is also conferred in Bible and Church Education. In addition to the degree programs, Oconee Bible College also offers the one-year Certificate of Biblical Studies and the three-year Graduate of Theology diploma. Oconee Bible College is NOT a correspondence institution; credit is granted only on the basis of standard contact hours with the instructor in a classroom situation, requiring homework, tests, term papers, and outside reading. Our program of study is, however, extended to clusters of students in missionary areas of Georgia.

in both church buildings and public buildings. The result of our offerings since 1975 has always been more students than we anticipated. For this favorable response, we are thankful!

This concept of developing disciples in this highly controlled educational situation using a standard Bible college curriculum has proven to be highly successful. The new congregations have become increasingly stable without the influx of tremendous sums of outside money. The concept of "Theological Education by Extension," adapted to the American culture, provides tremendous opportunities in the area of adult Bible education. We encourage more churches to consider this route of "making disciples."

Oconee Academy

In developing a new congregation, the Christian school is very important. Oconee Academy had its beginning in 1977 and has been a tremendous blessing to our work. We accept students Kindergarten through Grade Twelve, including adults. A system of "Individualized Christian Education" is used in which John Mills serves as "Advisor," and Ann Mills and Trisha Dietrich serve as "Tutors." The curriculum is very simply organized into Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Bible, and Church Education. The student studies each subject one full school day each week. Financially, the plan is very simple: The teachers teach for FREE and the students attend for FREE. (Small registration and library fees are charged.) The total enrollment in Oconee Bible College and Academy during the Spring Semester, 1980, stands at twenty-one (21) students.

Oconee Bible Camp

Another exciting aspect of the Eatonton work has been our campmeetings. Since 1973, we have regularly spent week-ends and full-weeks together in a camp situation. Some of our best teaching has been done at campmeetings. Now we are developing our own campground in conjunction with Oconee Bible College.

Bus Ministry

A great bus route operates at Eatonton. Begun in 1973, Route #1 still comes to the church building loaded every Sunday with babies, children, teenagers, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The Eatonton church has successfully used a dress code from the early stages of its bus ministry. To this is attributed to a large degree the success of their bus ministry. The riders come dressed beautifully and in most cases their behavior is superb. The Eatonton church believes that there is a correlation!

In the event that a behavior problem does arise, an adult or older teenager sits on a "kitchen stool" in the center aisle at the rear of the pews in the auditorium. (The Eatonton auditorium is arranged with $\frac{1}{2}$ pews and $\frac{1}{2}$ open space. The open space is used for folding chairs during large crowds and for folding tables and chairs during the school year for Bible College clusters.) The monitor then moves the child who is not behaving properly to a pew in the back of the auditorium. This leaves the open space between the larger group and the one who has misbehaved. Usually, this solves the problem and the one who has misbehaved generally responds to the invitation, asking the church to forgive them of the sin of disturbing the service. Rebellious children are counseled after services are concluded and carried home in a separate vehicle, not on the bus with the others. If needed, conferences are held with the parent upon the return to their home.

The result is wonderful worship services and Sunday School classes are conducted every Lord's day. There is great excitement about coming to church. The word of God is preached, sin is openly attacked and condemned, and many people respond to the invitation each Sunday for either baptism or restoration.

Someone asks, "Don't bus routes flourish for a while and then run their course and die out?" Not necessarily! Our Route #1 started seven years ago and is still going strong. Last Sunday, fifty-five rode this bus, and on the previous Sunday fifty-nine rode this bus route. The longevity of a bus route is dependent on the continued interest of the bus workers (John Mills is the driver of Bus #1), proper dress, and good behavior, combined with good preaching and teaching that condemns sin and exalts godly living in Christ Jesus.