

# THE HISTORY OF GROVE CHURCH

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Our congregation traces its origin to 1817, when Benjamin J. Harris divided into lots the land now generally bordered by Park Avenue and Belvidere, Cutshaw, Roseneath, Cleveland, and Cary streets. At that time, that area was in Henrico County, and represented one of the first of Richmond's suburban developments. Mr. Harris gave to the area the name Sydney.

Many Baptists in Sydney continued through subsequent years to travel into Richmond for worship with First Baptist Church, whose building then was located at Twelfth and Broad streets. As these Baptists grew in number and in devotion, the fruits of their faithfulness led to formation of the church of which Grove Avenue Baptist Church is the embodiment today.

Not surprisingly, Grove was conceived in prayer. Sydney Baptists began in the autumn of 1854 to meet for prayer at the home of William Hendricks on Park Avenue near the former location of Richmond College. Usually they were led by students from the college.

Out of these prayer meetings grew a Sunday School which came eventually to be known as "Sydney Section." Not long there-after, in June of 1855, a large open-air meeting was conducted at Allen's Grove, on Grove Road. The purpose of this meeting was to raise funds for construction of a building for worship, study, and fellowship for the Baptists of Sydney Section. When that building was completed a short time later, the congregation was authorized to become the Sydney Section of First Baptist Church, and accordingly was organized on January 18, 1858.

Following the Civil War, members of the church resumed use of the building and in November 1865 undertook the steps necessary to establish their Sydney Section congregation as a fully recognized church. Three years later, on March 1, 1868, delegates from First, Second, and Grace Street Baptist churches affirmed the Section's aspiration.

Subsequently, the congregation adopted the Ecclesiastical Principles, Rules, and Covenant of First Baptist Church, and Sydney Baptist Church was born. Formal recognition came at a worship service conducted by First, Second, Grace, Belvidere, and Leigh Street Baptist churches, with Dr. J. Lansing Burrows, a pastor of First Church, preaching the sermon.

Despite the faithfulness of these early years, the church grew only modestly, owing evidently to the remoteness of, and lack of reliable transportation to, its building. By 1876, membership was ninety-three members. Given these factors, the church decided to relocate to a building at the corner of West Main and Harrison streets, and in 1883 became West Main Street Baptist Church.

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## THE MOVE TO GROVE AVENUE

This move as with our own move of the mid-1970s enabled the church to grow in membership to 362 by 1890. In January of that year, the church's deacons recommended "speedy action" to build on the front of the lot at West Main and Harrison; however, in May, the church voted to sell the West Main Street property and to purchase a lot on Grove Avenue a decision to change the congregation's name to Grove Avenue Baptist Church having on March 6 preceded that anticipated action. The new building was dedicated just over a century ago on November 30, 1890.

Little more than a decade later, Grove suffered the loss of its building in a fire. Little was saved, but, as records of the time state, "the faith and courage of the people" remained. With these assets, the church undertook to construct a new building, worshipping in the meantime in the chapel of Richmond College. In only a year, in October 1901, the church's new building was completed. A quarter-century later, this new structure was destroyed by fire but, in fidelity to their heritage, Grove's members determined to rebuild and a new structure was in place within a year.

Through the succeeding decades, Grove Avenue Baptist Church experienced expansion, growth, and adversity--the experiences typical to every church of the Body of Christ. By the 1950s, membership had increased to over 1,900, but there followed a steady decline that continued until the mid-1960s. That the church during late 1964 and much of 1965 was without a pastor indicates the nature and extent of the difficulties then being encountered. Following a study in early 1970 of the causes of this apparent stagnation, the church concluded that the Lord Jesus was calling for a move to yet another location, one more accessible to rapidly-growing residential areas. Groundbreaking for the church's present building at Parham and Ridge roads was conducted on May 2, 1976; construction began on June 13, 1976; little more than a year later, on November 20, 1977, the church met for worship in its new and its present-building for the first time.