

## **The History of Cowan First Church of the Nazarene**

By: L. Jarod Pearson

In order to understand the history of Cowan First Church of the Nazarene, we must first consider the history of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement of the 19th Century.

The Wesleyan aspect of the movement traces back to John Wesley, a 17th-Century clergyman from England who led a spiritual awakening to emphasize repentance, testimony, and discipline. John Wesley was instrumental in the development of Methodism; however, the teachings and influences of John Wesley were carried far beyond Methodism itself. The Church of the Nazarene is one example.



The Holiness aspect of the movement was a 19th-Century phenomenon where Wesleyan tradition met a renewed emphasis on purity, personal perfection and entire sanctification. The holiness movement helped reenergize the spread of Methodism in North America, but it also helped fuel the growth of Baptist, Pentecostal and even Presbyterian movements, particularly in rural areas. The Nazarene Church is a successor to this movement in the American religious landscape.

The Wesleyan-Holiness movement was highly visible in various parts of the country and Tennessee was no exception. By the end of the 19th Century, there were dozens of Holiness and Pentecostal churches throughout the nation with a common heritage. In the early 20th-Century the various groups pulled together to form a common body and fellowship. In 1907, the common body was officially consecrated as the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene.

Congregations in the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions were already organized in Franklin County before the unification took place. Soon after unification new churches started taking root under the Nazarene identity. The first meeting of the newly organized Nazarene congregation in Cowan took place in 1917. The group met in the former Boiling Fork Baptist Church, itself a historical landmark dating all the way back to the Year 1826. The Baptist congregation at Boiling Fork had long since disbanded and the building was vacant at the time.

The congregation, formally named Cowan First Church of the Nazarene, was organized in 1918 by Rev. S. W. Strickland. There were thirteen charter members: Mrs. Ed Cowan, Mrs. Ella Hartford, Mrs. Haith Jernigan, Mrs. J.B. Sargent, J. W. Sargent, Mr. and Mrs. Reese Farris, Mrs. Cowan Kinningham, Mrs. J.S. Rollins, and Mr. Ben Moseley.

The new church building was completed in 1919. The white wood-frame building featured a gabled roof with a left offset front door and stoop. There was also a right offset tower topped with a bell cupola. The first worship service in the new building was held on Sunday July 6, 1919.

In 1951 the church building was completely remodeled. In this phase the tower with the bell cupola was removed, the front door was relocated from the left offset to the center, and all of the exterior walls were covered in red brick. Sadly, the renovated structure caught fire on November 24th, 1954. The fire was contained, but then it started again and ended up destroying everything except the exterior brick walls. The incident was blamed on a faulty coal burning furnace.

The congregation met during reconstruction in a borrowed church building on North Hodges Street (that stands today as the New Birth Church of Jesus Christ). The outside brick walls were salvaged, but the roof and was an entirely new structure. The first service in the reconstructed building was held on Easter Sunday, 1955.

Cowan's population was in a slow decline for the next few decades, but Cowan First Church of the Nazarene experienced steady growth in that frame of time. In 1970 the church acquired a house on Elliott Drive to serve as a parsonage. Thereafter the old parsonage next door to the church was combined with a newly constructed annex for added classroom and fellowship space. In 1985 the sanctuary was expanded with a larger choir loft and additional pew space.

Cowan First Church of the Nazarene has provided many great civic leaders and town benefactors throughout its history. Every year the congregation host missionaries and other dynamic speakers as well as the annual revival. Cowan's first Spanish-speaking congregation meets there as well. The church is also a founding member of the Cowan Ministerial Association.

#### **Other interesting facts about Cowan First Church of the Nazarene:**

Two ministers in the Nazarene denomination grew up in the Cowan church: Rhett Butler, a youth minister in Lebanon, Ohio, and Will Mackey, a pastor in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Mrs. Peggy Nelson, a long-time member of Cowan Nazarene Church, lived for 32 years with Lou Gehrig's disease and was homebound for more than 25 of those years. However, she never missed church because the members at Cowan First Church of the Nazarene delivered video-recordings to Peggy week after week!

Rev. Carlos Sparks served two terms as pastor of the Cowan Nazarene Church, the first one from 1958 to 1967 and the second from 1989 to 1994. During his first term as pastor, Bro. Sparks served as Mayor of Cowan, president of Cowan Commercial Club, and co-founder of the Cowan Christmas Parade. He is also the author of several books, one of which received a favorable review in the *New York Times*: "Growing Up in Simple Ridge", published in 1980. (Copies of Rev. Sparks' books can be checked out at Cowan Branch Library.)

*The information used in this article was gathered and published by Rev. Wayne Morris who collected documents and interviewed some of the older church members. Other contributions were made by Rev. Norman Cox and by Mr. John Butler.*

