

The History of First Church of Christ, Scientist, Rome, Georgia

Compiled and written by Thomas Day, First Reader

On the Occasion of the Centennial Celebration

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In the days when the ladies of Rome wore long skirts that swished the ground as they walked, men wearing top hats were considered quite fashionable, and the sight of people riding in horse-drawn carriages was quite common, a small group of believers formed what is today known as the Christian Science Church in Rome, Georgia.

It appears that as early as 1895 there were some people in Rome who were interested in Christian Science, one of whom was Miss Eva P. Thompson. It was through Miss Thompson that several others heard of Christian Science and had the privilege of reading some of its literature. In 1895, a woman by the name of Mrs. Hattie Holland came to Rome from Atlanta, Georgia, and she became the first Christian Science practitioner in this city. Mrs. Holland took up the healing work and it might be said that interest in Christian Science began with her coming to Rome. There were a number of wonderful and outstanding healings through the ministry of Mrs. Holland, and several persons healed by her remained to give thanks and later became charter members of this church. Mrs. Holland moved out west about 1905.

Around 1901, a lady named Mrs. Fannie Bellamy came to Rome from Atlanta, and she invited those interested in Christian Science to her home to hold services. Those early Christian Scientists also rented rooms in the Masonic Temple and held services there for a time. After a two or three year stay in Rome, Mrs. Bellamy moved back to Atlanta, and it was not until 1904, when Mr. and Mrs. James Hanan moved to Rome from Illinois, that a Christian Science Society was organized.

On January 26, 1904, nine people assembled at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hanan to organize the Christian Science Society of Rome, and to elect directors, clerk, and treasurer. These charter members were Mr. James Hanan, Mrs. Rosa L. Hanan, Mrs. Etta F. Kilgo, Mrs. Louisa E. Forsyth, Mrs. Elizabeth Clemmons, Mrs. Amelia C. Abernathy, Mrs. Florence Edmondson, Miss Eva P. Thompson, and Mrs. Minnie Moreno Sledge. Today, we honor these charter members for their courage in standing for what they believed in a time and place when and where differing forms of religion were not readily accepted, and for their trust in the words of St. Paul, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Mrs. Hanan was a Christian Science practitioner, and during the time the Hanans resided in Rome, the church services were held in their home. In February of 1904, the subject of a Reading Room was brought up for discussion, and the Hanans also kindly offered a room for that purpose. The offer was gratefully accepted and beginning on February 8, 1904, the Reading Room was opened every afternoon, except Sunday, from 2:00-4:00 p.m., and it was kept by different members of the society. At the next business meeting on April 4, the subject of a lecture was brought up for discussion. All members were in favor and agreed to work to that end. Meanwhile, visitors came to the Reading Room, church services were advertised in the newspaper, and interest grew. By Communion Sunday in July of that year, four new members joined the society and their names were added to the church book.

On July 4, 1904, at a meeting of the society, it was unanimously voted to organize the church and a committee was appointed to write the by-laws and to obtain a charter. On August 17, 1904, the charter was obtained for First Church of Christ, Scientist, Rome, Georgia, and notice was sent to the Christian Science Journal to change the listing from a society to a church. At the same time the members unanimously voted to invite Mrs. Sue Harper Mims, a pioneer Christian Scientist of the south, to deliver their lecture. Mrs. Mims accepted the offer, and on October 2, 1904, the first Christian Science lecture in Rome was given to a large crowd of people at the opera house in town. It was a huge success! One church member wrote, "We feel that our church members and all of Rome have been greatly blessed by this beautiful demonstration, and that good, greater than we can now realize, will come from it." This member was correct. The congregation and the church continued to grow and it seemed as if the Reading Room could not keep enough copies of the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy, available.

About the time the Hanans left Rome around 1906, a woman named Mrs. Mary Fort Thomas was healed in Christian Science and united with the church. Mrs. Thomas, along with two other members, Mrs. Sledge and Miss Thompson, were class taught by Sue Harper Mims. Mrs. Sledge had arrived in Rome about 1900 and was an earnest student of Christian Science, and she was also a practitioner in Rome for many years. Other early practitioners associated with the church were Mrs. Carrie Young, from 1906 to 1911, and Mrs. Lona C. Kirkland from 1913 to 1917.

From the time the Hanans moved away from Rome until 1921, services were held and a Reading Room was maintained in the best available rooms to be rented in town, moving when necessary or advisable, and the church continued to grow throughout those years. At times there seemed to be problems with the necessary funds to meet the expenses of the church, but those devout Christian Scientists just leaned a little stronger on the Sustaining Infinite and trusted in those ever comforting words by their beloved Leader, Mary Baker Eddy, "Divine Love always has met and always will meet every human need." Thus the financial needs were always somehow available.

In 1920, steps were taken to own a church home. Mr. F.L. Forster came to Rome from Indiana about 1917. He did not unite with the church here, but he was grateful for a healing in Christian Science prior to his coming to Rome, and he was the instrument for help in building a church home. Mr. Forster offered to make a liberal cash donation toward the purchase of a lot for the building if the members would contribute the balance. He also offered to finance the building of the church and with his business experience, supervise the construction. The donation of \$1000 was given and the balance of the price was contributed by the members. A lot was purchased for \$2000, just one block off Broad Street, Rome's main street. On November 18, 1921, the cornerstone was laid. The service, held at 7:00 a.m., was simple and impressive. Mrs. Elizabeth Clemmons was First Reader and Miss Minnie Rowell was Second Reader. The Bible and all the works of Mary Baker Eddy were placed in a hermetically sealed box over which was laid the corner stone. Construction was swift and on Christmas Day, 1921, when the blessed feeling of "on earth, peace, goodwill to man" hung mightily in the atmosphere of Rome, the first service was held in the beautiful new church, T model Fords lining the street in front of the edifice.

In January of the new year, the church clerk wrote in retrospect,

In looking back over the past year, my mind is filled with thankfulness and gratitude to God. Much error has been uncovered and much, very much, good has been done. We have had the vision and we "acted as possessing all things" when we took that progressive and decisive step toward getting our church home. It was wonderful that we even had the courage to do it. Now we have our own lot with only \$200.00 owing, which soon will be met. Then when that is done, do not let error creep in and make us hesitate. Let us carry

our vision and build no matter how simple it must be. Our members do not seem to have increased, but our steadfast earnestness has and it is a quality spiritually rather than numbers that our church needs. Through the coming year we shall continue to grow in grace in all ways and in all things, seeking first the kingdom of God. We must strive to uphold the church officers, attend faithfully the services and business meetings, not because we ought to, but because we want to; and we all feel what our Leader has so beautifully expressed, "Father, where thine own children are, I love to be." So, let us go forward seeking to serve God by carrying on His work and joyfully laboring in His vineyard.

The attractive new church building did not go unnoticed by Romans and it seemed to cause new interest in Christian Science. Curious and inquiring people wanted to know more about this untraditional form of religion. At times the building was filled with people, and in the summers of those pre-air conditioning days when the windows were raised, people would sometimes stand outside to listen to what was being read or said inside.



The Rome church made it through the Depression of the 1930s and progressed and stayed active and prayerful through the conflicts of World War II in the 1940s, and flourished into the 50s. The church has always had talented and willing Readers and capable and devout directors to fill positions in the organization.



During the 1960s, Mr. Robert Rounsaville, grandson of Mrs. Elizabeth Clemmons, purchased the lot adjacent to the church and donated a large sum of money toward the construction of a lovely building which would serve as both a Sunday School for the children and a Reading Room for the public.

The church continued to flourish and attract new members throughout the 1970s and 1980s. At the end of the 1990s, as we stood on the threshold of the 21st century, things began to change and this church faced the most serious decline in membership and attendance in its history. The very few members left were devastated, but they turned to Divine Principle for support and leaned on the omnipotence and omnipresence of Divine Mind for direction and guidance. The answer to our prayers could be emphasized in the words of scripture from Hebrews, "Fail not to assemble yourselves together," and so we continued our services and continued to pray, trust, and listen. Apparently God was not finished with the church in Rome, for He sent us laborers for the vineyard. New faces were seen in the congregation and new names were added to the church book.

Today, as we members come together with you, our friends, on this the celebration of our 100th anniversary on the eve of this holiday of National Thanksgiving, words simply cannot express the gratitude that we feel in our hearts. We love our church and we are so happy to be a part of its centennial. We are grateful to each of you for coming and we are grateful to our past members for all of their good work in contributing to the success of the church.

Today, of course, we do look back with thanks to our humble beginnings in the homes of fellow church members and we are so grateful for the growth of our church through the years. At this time, however, we also look to the future, of which we have confidence and certainty that it will be good. We also look forward to future church growth, activity, and development; and last, but certainly not least, we look forward to being a better blessing to our fellow man and to the community in this city of Rome.

Thomas Day