

# The History of North Decatur Presbyterian Church 1955-2005

1955-1959

In 1950, the Atlanta Presbytery acquired a triangular piece of land at the intersection of Medlock Road, North Decatur Road, and Scott Boulevard near Decatur, Georgia. Interested community members held a meeting at the home of Mary and Dick Ellis on June 21, 1955, to discuss the formation of a new church. Other community members present were Arline and Searcy Slack, Jr., Fern and Lonnie Williams, and Roberta Tindall. Representing the Session of the Decatur Presbyterian Church were Searcy Slack, Sr. and the Reverend John Keels, Associate Pastor. Ruth Smith was not present but made known her desire to be a part of the venture. The group met under the direction of Dr. Franklin Talmage of the Presbytery office.

Six months of intensive visitation, prayer and study groups in homes, and much other groundwork followed under the direction of Dr. Talmage. Ruth Smith's home on Clairemont Road became a sort of headquarters and many brainstorming sessions were held there. Financial support and encouragement came from the Decatur Presbyterian Church and the Druid Hills Presbyterian Church.



North Decatur Presbyterian Church was officially organized on October 27, 1955, and the charter was closed on December 4, 1955, with 101 communicant members and 58 baptized children. The first three elders elected on a rotary system were Dick Ellis, Bob Hall, and Searcy Slack, Jr. The first deacons were Smith Gower, Leroy Howard, Ed Robbins, Warren Rollins, Jim Stewart, and Cliff Zimmerman. All were elected for four-year terms.

On November 6, 1955, the first morning worship service was held at Medlock School with Dr. Talmage preaching. Sixty-two adults were present and a nursery was provided for children. Church school began the first Sunday in December. Playpens were stored at the school, but all other supplies were carried back and forth, including all teaching materials and washable rugs for the nursery. The Women of the Church was organized in November 1955, and the Men of the Church in August 1956.

Frank Brown and Gene Randolph served as seminary interns during 1956, and supply ministers served until William E. (Bill) Newton was called to be the Pastor beginning in October 1956. An office was rented on Medlock Road and a manse was purchased for Bill and his family on McCurdy Way near the church site.



The members were dreamers — establishing a committee to explore the possibility of a weekday kindergarten even before a building committee was appointed. The members were activists — backing the pastor as he, along with other religious leaders in the Atlanta area, signed a Manifesto to maintain public schools even as the governor of the state was vowing that “the schools would be closed before they would be desegregated.” A number of members joined in presenting a petition from parents urging that the schools be kept open. NDPC was ecumenical — joining with North Decatur

Methodist and Scott Boulevard Baptist churches for occasional joint services. North Decatur was active — entering in the YMCA church league in 1957 and over the years participating in baseball, basketball, and volleyball. North Decatur Presbyterian Church was a vibrant new member of the community.

After an enthusiastic *Sacrifice to Build* Campaign, the Education Building, designed by Barker and Cunningham Architects, was completed in the spring of 1958 and dedicated on July 13, 1958. Jim Stewart chaired the building committee. Much attention was given to space requirements for children and sturdy furnishings for church schoolrooms. In March 1959, an article in the Atlanta Journal/Constitution referred to this building as the most modern one in the Atlanta area.



A weekday kindergarten, modeled after the highly successful one at Decatur Presbyterian Church,

opened in September 1958, under the leadership of member, Frances Thompson. Virginia Lovelace became the music director and continued in that capacity until her death in 1979, also serving as church organist for thirteen years. A strong educational program was the hallmark of the church from its beginning. Every nook and cranny of the building was used on Sunday mornings for church school. On Easter 1960, over 400 attended the two worship services and 348 were crammed into church school classes.



During these early years, Bill Newton endeared himself to the congregation and the community by his efforts in getting to know members, visiting widely in the community, and training others

to be effective visitors and leaders in the church. The congregation was diligent in visiting new and prospective members, meeting each week to go out in teams.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus and on December 4, 1955, NDPC closed its charter membership list. A new era was begun in both cases. In some ways the late fifties have been described as a golden, uncomplicated time. It was a new age of transistors, gadgets, electric can openers, electric blankets, electric floor polishers, and the first push-button phones. The depression was over for many—the wages of 60% of the people put them in the middle-class bracket. It was truly the age of the suburbs and the installment plan. The age of Dr. Spock had come and fathers were taking a lively interest in their children. The baby boom caused the birth rate to soar. The Soviets announced Sputnik and later a dog in Sputnik II caused the U.S. national superiority to be questioned. In 1957, Central High School in Arkansas was integrated by force, and in 1960, the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins occurred and the passive civil rights movement began.

Frisbees became a passion in 1957, followed by the hula-hoop craze in 1958, when the John Birch Society also was organized. The fifties often were compared to the 1920s; hence the theme of the 1957 church birthday party was *The Roaring Twenties*. The Pill was approved for use in the U.S. in 1960 and the sexual revolution began. TV shows were very often family affairs and quiz shows became popular. Johnny Carson began his climb to fame and Steve Allen was popular.

The sign, *A Contemporary Church Serving the Contemporary Christ in the Contemporary World*, appeared on the Scott Boulevard corner of the church property. Shortly thereafter a picture of the sign and Bill Newton appeared in the Sunday issue of the Atlanta Journal/Constitution. After preaching at North Decatur, Dr. Kenneth Foreman published provocative articles in *The Presbyterian Outlook* about the sign. Some felt NDPC was a breath of fresh air on the religious horizon.

## 1960-1969

After four years of dedicated leadership, Bill Newton left North Decatur in October 1960. At that time the membership had grown to 378 and the budget was \$54,656 with 15% going to benevolences. Two additional lots on Blackmon Drive with houses were purchased and appropriately named the Brown House and the Gray House because of their paint color. The McCurdy Way manse was sold and a new manse on Park Lane was acquired. Pete Hay served as Interim Pastor until October 1961 when Thornton W. (Tony) Tucker was installed as Pastor. He and his wife, Joanne, and sons, Bill and John, were warmly received and became active participants in the life of the church.

NDPC was selected as a typical suburban church to help develop, use, and evaluate the *Covenant Life Curriculum* for the entire denomination. Many members attended laboratory schools to learn how to teach children and youth. One or two



laboratory-trained teachers and at least one male teacher in every classroom was attempted. People from other churches came to observe some of the church schoolteachers. The Education Building, the Gray and Brown Houses on Blackmon Drive, and later the first floor of the



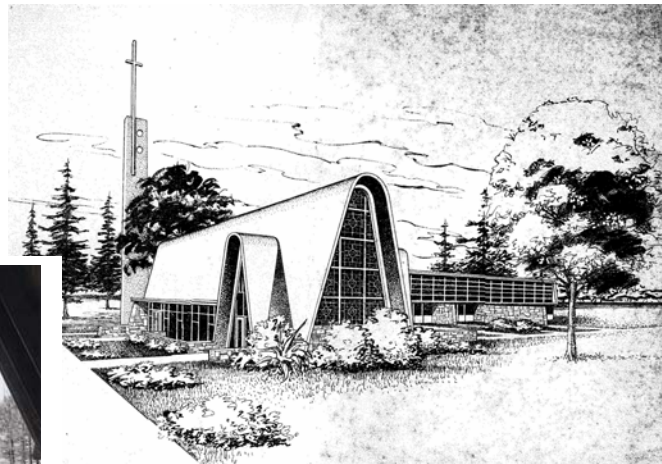
Sanctuary Building were crowded every Sunday morning during the church school hour.

Mary Ellis, who had been serving as head of children's work at NDPC and reporter to denominational headquarters, was asked to write five books of the *Covenant Life Curriculum* for fifth and sixth graders and for third and fourth graders. She also taught workshops to train leaders at a number of places throughout the denomination; thus the good things that were working at NDPC were shared with the larger church.

Vacation church schools were held regularly in the summer and for several years, day camps for older elementary children were held on a nearby farm owned by a member of the Decatur Presbyterian Church. To share its good experiences with the African American community in Kirkwood, for several years NDPC took the fifth and sixth grade children from Kirkwood and North Decatur to the farm for a second Bible School in an integrated situation.

During this time, a Scout hut was erected at the rear of the Education Building and many scouting groups used the church facilities. Searcy Slack Jr. was the long time scoutmaster of the Boy Scout troop and at one time seven Girl Scout troops, one large Boy Scout troop and several Cub Scout troops met regularly at the church.

An *Onward Then Ye People* Campaign to raise money for a Sanctuary building began in October 1964 and was co-chaired by Ed Jones and Ben Hood. Jim Stewart again chaired the building committee with a large group of helpers and a great amount of input from the congregation.



Barker and Cunningham, Architects, completed the design sketched in when the Education Building was designed. At the groundbreaking in June 1965, the congregation stood single file outlining the shape of the Sanctuary building at the site where the Sanctuary was built and still stands. The first service in the Sanctuary was October 2, 1966.

The following years were a period of much-planned visitation and assimilation of new members. The church grew from 330 members in 1961, to 552 members at the end of 1969. Donna Rooney became the Director of Christian Education in September 1967, and worked tirelessly to provide an outstanding program for the children, youth, and adults.

Although NDPC could easily have become an ingrown church with an active program of nurturing and caring for its own members, Tony Tucker pushed the congregation to become concerned about the larger community. Some members began to work with a committee from Scottsdale on community improvements for that area, including the improving of traffic control, installing a stoplight, and campaigning for better street lighting and security in the area.

A number of worship experiences were exchanged with African American congregations at West Hills, Radcliffe, and the Church of the Master Presbyterian Churches. Under Donna Rooney's leadership, some of the youth volunteered to work with handicapped children at the Davison School on Saturday mornings. NDPC helped start and participated in Manna, which later became Meals on Wheels, and many youth and adults began participating in walks against hunger. Numerous church members helped begin a tutoring program for underachievers at the Medlock School.

Over the decade, the church gave financial and prayer support to several missionaries: Dr. Randy and Mary Malone in Ecuador; the John Ellington family in Africa; the Rion Dixon family in Haiti; and the Larry Richard family in the Middle East. Their letters and furlough visits were welcomed.

The first two women elders, Ruth Smith and Janie McCutchen, were elected in 1966, and the first two women deacons, Pat Bent and Frances Pledger, were elected in 1968. In February of 1968, the church was honored to have pastor Tony Tucker and elder Burt Vardeman, selected to be members of a group of seven ministers and six laymen from the Atlanta Presbytery to participate in a unity dialogue with Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Long Island, New York, entitled *Operation Understanding*.

Following a very fruitful ministry at North Decatur, the Tuckers left in August 1969, to accept a call to a church in Charlotte. Tom Jones became the Interim Pastor for NDPC.

The sixties decade has been called the age of dissent and the age of assassinations, but it also was an age of contradictions. Long hair and mod dress became the "in" thing with youth. In church the bouffant hairdos of the women brought an end to the era of hats and white gloves. In the midst of bell-bottoms, miniskirts, and anti-establishment ideas, there was a yearning for brotherhood and peace as the Vietnam War raged.

The wave of sit-ins and marches of the Civil Rights Movement was finally and painfully bringing about changes. Over 70,000 participated in marches in spite of the large police presence and force. The Voting Rights Act passed in Congress in 1965, and NDPC rejoiced. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, and NDPC took note as the environmental movement was launched. Medicare also began. In 1969 the anti-war movement peaked and 250,000 marched on Washington, D.C., including some NDPC offspring. The nation was thrilled as the

U.S. landed men on the moon. The late sixties also spawned the Woodstock festival and the Manson murders. Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* and, yes, that book found its way into one of the adult church school classes. Harper Lee's new book, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, was a must-read, and Vance Packard's, *The Waste Makers*, was mentioned from the pulpit and in adult classes. Youth of the church and nation were enamored with the Beatles, Elvis Presley, and Engelbert Humperdinck. *Moon River* by Johnny Mercer and *Strangers in the Night* by Frank Sinatra became new favorites. *The Sound of Music*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *West Side Story*, and *The Graduate* were all topics of conversation or humming.

In 1963, the church birthday party included its own rendition of *Puff the Magic Dragon*, *If I Had a Hammer*, and *Blowing in the Wind*, with its own Peter, Paul, and Mary and Joan Baez. In 1965, like other nightspots in Atlanta, the birthday celebration had Go-Go Girl cages and honored two of the church matriarchs, Ruth Smith and Roberta Tindall, with keys to the church. In 1966 there was a take-off skit based on the spy programs on TV. Instead of the CIA, it was CLC (Covenant Life Curriculum) investigating NDPC. In 1967, hats were tipped to the hippie movement and NDPC had the hippiest birthday celebration of all. Moving into the new Sanctuary led to a birthday party of "wedgeheads" (translation: those wearing hats shaped like the new sanctuary) all with cricks in their necks from looking backward at the choir.

## 1970-1979

Early in 1970, Larry Kennon came as the church's new pastor. All welcomed him, his wife, Marsha, and their three children. A period of innovative forms of worship, begun in 1969 under the leadership of Tom Jones, was continued. Clowns, balloons, outdoor worship, current popular songs, dance, and drama were employed freely. An active drama group was formed in the church. Some of the plays performed before overflowing audiences were: *Our Town*, *Christ in the Concrete City*, *The Cup of Trembling*, and *Boy With a Cart*. A dessert-theatre group also was formed. The books and plays of Bonhoeffer were studied; liturgical teams were begun.



These were also the days of increasing unrest over the Vietnam War, abortion rights, and Watergate. Larry provided countless hours of counseling for concerned youth and adults in the church and the community. A number of members moved to other churches and a real budget crisis occurred. Even so, the church continued to be involved in Manna and in a drive for a daycare center in Scottdale. In November 1972, Larry Kennon was granted a leave of absence; Donna Rooney resigned in December, and Larry resigned in August 1973. Cas Robinson served the church very ably as Interim Pastor during Larry's leave of absence and after his resignation.

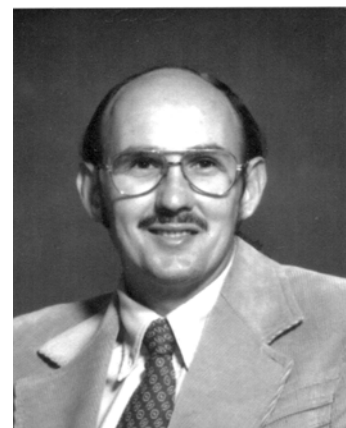


Under the leadership of Nelda Hollender, a preschool enrichment center opened with the help of volunteers in the Scottdale community. This was followed by the establishment of a kindergarten program in 1977. Later the Scottdale Day Care Center opened and was funded by United Way in 1979. Nelda was the first director. North Decatur worked closely with members of the Traveller's Rest congregation in these endeavors.

In January 1973, a Sunday ice storm paralyzed much of metropolitan Atlanta as electrical power was out for five days in certain areas. Elders Clyde Ware and Dick Ellis, finding power on when they checked the church, immediately sent out a message on the radio that lodging, heat, and food were available at North Decatur Presbyterian Church. Hearing the message on the radio, members sprang into action. With no preplanning and no committee in charge, families emptied their freezers and refrigerators, volunteer cooks appeared, and North Decatur became a shelter, even establishing an infirmary for those who had the flu. NDPC assisted groups ranging in size from 25 to 70

with games, a TV, a ping-pong table, and many volunteer helpers, including Eleanor Richardson, the state representative for the area.

Seminary student, Mary Jane Cornell, spent a summer as student intern and continued working with the youth of the church until she graduated. The Park Lane manse was sold. On May 19, 1974, Joe Harvard was installed as North Decatur's pastor. He and his wife, Carlisle, and young children, Rebecca and Bankston, became a very important part of the church community. Under Joe's leadership, North Decatur experienced a time of healing and a renewed sense of unity. New member dinners were held in the Harvard's home. Carlisle introduced the idea of Salt Shakers — a rotating supper group of 8-12 persons that meets in members' homes for a three-month period each year. Salt Shakers was, and continues to be, an excellent way for new members and older members to get to know each other.



A women's liberation class became a part of the church school curriculum. Book club groups met in the mornings and evenings, and NDPC hosted numerous food and health fairs. Many members served as hosts for Christmas International House, sponsored international students year-round, and volunteered at Villa International—the Presbytery's ministry of housing and hospitality for international visitors. Summer Sunday morning brunches became a wonderful time of fellowship for family groups. A Special Friends program was initiated, pairing each child in the church with a special adult friend.

The Summer Vacation Church School was discontinued and replaced by a children's musical production. A criminal justice committee, under Joe's leadership, set up a Friends Outside Program with the Stone Mountain Correctional Institute. Members of the church visited the inmates and befriended them as they were discharged. NDPC also was quite involved in the work of the Decatur Cooperative Ministry (DCM). A Senior Fellowship and Service group was organized and met monthly for lunch and program. This group has continued to the present.

In 1976, the unicameral system of church government was adopted with one governing body — the Session. The seminary intern for the summer was Lib McGregor Simmons, who continued working with the youth until she graduated, and Nancy Miller became a part-time Director of Christian Education.

In 1977, the DeKalb Farmer's Market opened across the street from the church, resulting in increased traffic that led to hazardous driving and parking conditions. The church tried to be a good neighbor by providing a room at the church for the Farmer's Market employees to have lunch. In return the church often was gifted with produce for special events such as Food Fairs.

In 1978, the first Advent Festival was held. It was a huge success and is still an annual event. The 1970s were days of political action for NDPC. Letters to Congress and to our state legislators were ongoing projects, which continues in the present. Under Joe Harvard's leadership, visits to the Georgia State Capitol were encouraged.

In 1979, the first church-wide retreat was held at Unicoi State Park. This became a yearly tradition at North Decatur, although locations changed over the years.

Banners became a part of the décor during worship. Sporadic warfare with the pigeons outside the Sanctuary was finally solved when member Ed Castleberry placed a replica of an owl on the roof, though it is still mistaken by some as a religious icon.

In 1979, as part of the Task Force on Hunger of the Presbytery, Burt Vardeman was one of a delegation of three sent to Ghana in Africa to investigate the possibility of a project there. North Decatur, therefore, has a vested interest in PATH (Presbyterians' Answer to Hunger), which was an outgrowth of this trip.

North Decatur rejoiced when member, Joanna Adams, came under the care of the Session as a candidate for the ministry while attending Columbia Theological Seminary. She was ordained in 1979 as Associate Pastor at Central Presbyterian Church. No one dreamed at that point that in less than eight short years, she would return to NDPC as senior pastor.

Events in the nation and world influenced the life of the church. In 1970 the first Earth Day was celebrated. The voting age was lowered to 18, and North Decatur began electing young people as elders and asking them to serve on church-wide committees. Helen Reddy recorded *I Am Woman* and the music found its way into the worship service with the words printed in the bulletin. The green revolution with its increased food production was welcome news to those interested in hunger programs. North Decatur worked with St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in helping Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees resettle in the Brown House and Gray House on

the NDPC property. One of the refugee families joined the church and one of the women worked in the nursery. America celebrated its bicentennial, and North Decatur celebrated one-tenth of a bicentennial in 1975.

Jimmy Carter from Georgia was elected president and NDPC members were among those attending the inauguration in Washington, D.C. Member Gretta Dewald participated in President Carter's Peanut Brigade and became Head of the Women's Division of the National Democratic Committee during the Carter administration. When Carter pardoned draft resisters, NDPC rejoiced with the young men who had informed the Session of their status as conscientious objectors.

The birth rate of 15-17 year-old mothers began to rise sharply even as *The Waltons* was a hit on TV. Mass suicide in Guyana and the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Iran horrified the nation and the church, but North Decatur celebrated the recognition of true Christian service when Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The first functioning gene was synthesized and the first test-tube baby was born. Christianity and Medical Ethics became a topic of church school class discussions. *Hee Haw* was on TV and one birthday party was a take-off on that program, complete with NDPC's own Junior Samples. *In The Family* played to large TV audiences, so it was natural that a birthday celebration was a take-off on Edith and Archie Bunker as foibles of the church. *Saturday Night Fever* became *Sunday Morning Fervor* at North Decatur. T-shirts with messages became the in-thing and NDPC responded with beautiful banners and T-shirts.

During the late seventies, five refugee families were sponsored and housed in the Brown and Gray Houses on Blackmon Drive. After many discussions, the members of the church decided to sell, and then have moved, the rented house on the corner lot and the Gray House. The Brown House remained as a home for families in transition from homelessness, under the auspices of the Decatur Cooperative Ministry. This program is ongoing in 2005. The vacant lots became a fenced-in play area for children of the church and those in the After-School Care Program.

## 1980-1989

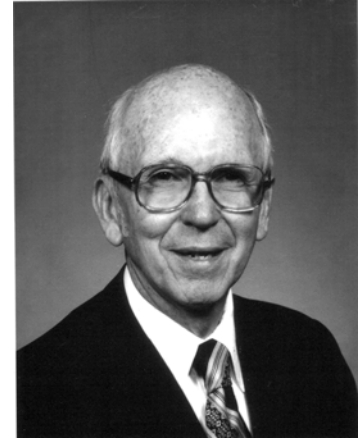
Many changes took place at North Decatur in the 1980s. After 22 years of continuous service to the community, the weekday kindergarten closed when public school kindergartens began in DeKalb County. Baptized children were admitted to the Lord's Supper, and training for parents and young children prepared them for this step. The program of children's choirs was discontinued.

After six years of outstanding leadership and service to North Decatur, Joe Harvard and his family left for Durham, North Carolina in August 1980. Charlie Cousar and Doug Hix served ably as Interim Pastors for a year.

In 1980 North Decatur had a chance to buy a pipe organ from a church that was replacing its existing organ with a new one. Plans for the purchase of the organ were underway when it was discovered that the asbestos in the Sanctuary was an environmental hazard and had to be

removed. Plans for an organ were put on hold as the church moved again into the Education Building for worship in March 1981 while the asbestos was removed.

In the midst of this turmoil, Albert C. Winn and his wife, Grace, came to North Decatur in August 1981. NDPC was blessed to have such experienced leadership from the former President of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and chair of the General Assembly Committee, which wrote The Declaration of Faith. When Al arrived, he was the only full-time person on the church staff with part-time Educator, secretary, choir director/organist, and sexton.



Even as money was raised to renovate the Sanctuary, outreach programs continued with members volunteering at St. Luke's kitchen, the Clifton and Central Church night shelters, DEAM, and Christians Against Hunger in Georgia. North Decatur Presbyterian Church was very aware of what was happening in the world during the 80s. AIDS was identified and the virus discovered in 1984. An AIDS taskforce was formed in the church; sermons and class discussions about ways the church could be involved occurred. A number of African American boys and youth were killed in Atlanta and North Decatur looked for a way to provide a safe place for children after school; thus the After-School Care Program was started, which is still in operation. This ambitious After-School Program was successfully launched with the help of North Decatur Methodist Church and Scott Boulevard Baptist Church in August 1981, and the program continues in 2005 to serve children in the Medlock community. The movie, *Ghandi*, was a huge success and NDPC created a peace taskforce and heard many inspiring sermons on peacemaking from Al Winn.

On May 2, 1982, the congregation again worshipped in a safe and slightly renovated Sanctuary. During all this, Al challenged the church to work for peace and justice through challenging sermons, prayer groups, and sending letters to representatives in Congress. Grace Winn spent much time reorganizing the church library and working with a committee to reorganize the church kitchen.

Two young men who had been in the church since childhood were ordained as ministers in 1983 and 1985: Frank Vardeman and Taylor Phillips. Also in 1983, the northern and southern branches of The Presbyterian Church became one — the Presbyterian Church in the USA. NDPC members were heavily involved in this historical meeting that took place in Atlanta. NDPC rejoiced for the unification, but was saddened to lose 23 of its active members when the national headquarters moved to Louisville, Kentucky.

Henrietta Wilkinson was called as Director of Christian Education and later was ordained as Associate Pastor in 1984. Under her leadership, the interior of the Education Building was painted and church school attendance increased. In 1985 a grand piano for the Sanctuary was bought as a memorial for Virginia Lovelace, Clyde Ware, and Lucy Ellis Parker, all of whom

were musicians and had been active church members, contributing greatly to the music program of the church.

Ramps, outside lights, marked parking spaces, and railings made the church buildings more accessible for all. In the summer of 1985, North Decatur celebrated the last mortgage payment by the burning of the Sanctuary mortgage papers.

Under Al's leadership, members were deeply interested in what was happening in Nicaragua and blue crosses symbolizing civilians killed by the Contras were erected on the church lawn. In 1986 a homeless task force, working with several other churches in the community, opened the Sanctuary Shelter at the Baptist Center on Memorial Drive with overnight facilities for five families. NDPC members became deeply involved in providing food, counseling, and help in finding jobs for the guests in this shelter. Rudy and Juanita Velasco spearheaded this effort. NDPC also joined other local Presbyterian churches to a regular assignment on Sunday evenings to feed the hungry at the Druid Hills Presbyterian Church shelter. During this time of community outreach, members also became involved in Prison Ministries with Women, which was organized under the leadership of member, Barbara Gifford.

After wonderful years of leadership and service, both Al Winn and Henrietta Wilkinson retired in June 1986. Soon after their retirement, North Decatur honored them for their years of service by designating them as Pastor Emeritus and Associate Pastor Emerita.



Clyde Miller served as Interim Pastor until Joanna Adams became Pastor on January 26, 1987. Joanna's husband, Al, and teenage children, Elizabeth and Sam, became active members of NDPC. A very successful Storytelling Festival involving the whole church was held that summer. Anna Brown was called as Director of Christian Education in September 1987, and Jim Cogswell became Parish Associate in early 1988. He faithfully carried out a ministry to seniors until 1995.

In 1988, the After-School Care Program was expanded to include a summer day camp for children, providing a much needed service to the Medlock community.

Garrison Keillor and Lake Woebegone Days were popular, were quoted in the pulpit and became the theme of the 1986 birthday party. Miss Liberty got a facelift and so did the church. NDPC closely followed the Iran-Contra hearings, rejoiced when the Berlin Wall came down, and celebrated free elections in Poland. Members chuckled over *Driving Miss Daisy* and saw themselves in the theater and movie versions of the Atlanta story.

Soon after the opening of the Sanctuary Shelter on Memorial Drive, some of the North Decatur volunteers were dismayed because there was no place for the children to go each morning when the shelter closed. Under the leadership of Joanna, members began exploring the possibility of starting a day care center for these children. Several community leaders and members from other churches became involved. A site was found on the property of Columbia Presbyterian Church

and in the summer of 1988, a day care center called Our House was launched. The center continues in 2005 to be a very successful and much needed ministry. Through the years and today members have served on the board and as volunteers. Currently, in 2005, North Decatur member, Carolyn French, is serving as the Chairperson of the Our House Board.

Also in 1988 the annual church retreat was held at Unicoi State Park with over 200 attending. New member dinners were enjoyed at the pastor's home, NDPC undertook the sponsorship of a Russian immigrant family, and some members participated in the homeless march in Washington, D.C. In 1989 North Decatur purchased a digital organ and began a three-year capital funds drive to finance much-needed repairs to the buildings, including a new roof.

## 1990—2005

Under Joanna's leadership, close ties were developed between North Decatur and a church in Esteli, Nicaragua. Many visits back and forth occurred in the 90s. NDPC member, Bob Leslie, played a leading role strengthening this relationship.

A Women Together group for the NDPC women began meeting monthly for dinner and fellowship, and a Men's Breakfast group, also began meeting once a month. Both groups still meet today. Volunteers remained busy at the Food Bank, Sanctuary Shelter, Habitat for Humanity, and Our House.

A new program, Initiative for Affordable Housing, Inc. was established by NDPC and St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in 1990 to provide permanent affordable housing to homeless and low-income families. Beginning with one family and a house rehabilitated with all church volunteers, Initiative has grown to become a nonprofit agency that offers housing and social services to the homeless, homeownership opportunities, senior housing, affordable apartment units, single family construction, and housing for special needs populations. Through the years, Initiative has rehabilitated 50 houses, many of which have been sold to qualified low-income purchasers, and renovated or built 355 units of multifamily housing in four different apartment complexes.

Members of NDPC have played active roles in guiding the agency over the years with service on the Board of Directors, in addition to providing Angel Tree Christmas presents for the program families, hosting a Christmas party for the families, and providing a back-to-school supply event for the program children in August. Many individual church members have mentored and supported the Initiative families by offering additional help in finances, literacy, parenting, and home repairs classes. North Decatur member, Lisa Wise, has served as Director for this program from its inception.

Joanna, while serving as our pastor, also served on the Assembly Committee which wrote, *A Brief Statement of Faith.* After four years of dynamic leadership and church growth, Joanna Adams resigned in 1991 to become the pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta.

Neal Kuhlhorst served as Interim Pastor until Agnes Norfleet was installed as Pastor on June 26, 1992. Agnes's husband, Larry Arney, became an active member of the church, serving on the Session, in the Choir, teaching adult church school classes, and serving on several important committees, including the renovation of the Education and Sanctuary Buildings and the addition of the "Connector" that joins the two buildings. The church rejoiced with Agnes and Larry over the births of sons, James in 1993 and Winston in 1995.



Children's and Youth programs grew under Anna Brown's leadership. The Middle School youth went on a gleaning trip to Johns Island and the high school group participated in annual work trips to places such as Tampa, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Appalachia, Arizona, the Dominican Republic, and Hungary. Both groups had retreats, "lock-ins," and participated in Youth Sunday each spring.

Members of the congregation sponsored trips to flood ravaged towns in middle Georgia; the summer Vacation Church School returned and included the community children in the summer camp program.

For many years North Decatur served as a place of worship for a Taiwanese congregation and later a Korean congregation. Each congregation finally was able to move into its own building. While these congregations were using the North Decatur facilities, NDPC experienced friendly relationships and occasional joint meetings and fellowship with each group.

Victor Floyd became the music director in 1994 and the music program blossomed — youth musicals, an enthusiastic adult choir, a handbell choir, and two children's choirs that were first reorganized under the direction of Barry Davies and then under the direction of Beth Grimshaw, our seminary intern. The children have attended the music conference in Montreat since 1994, and Christmas musical programs by both children and adults were eagerly anticipated events. The grand piano in the Sanctuary was replaced.

During the mid-1990s, an environmental fair and a mission fair were both held to educate and recruit volunteers, a new playscape for preschool children was installed. Other highlights of this decade were a visit by Rene Castellanos from the Presbyterian church in Cuba and the selection of Burt Vardeman as the Outstanding Senior Adult of the Greater Atlanta Presbytery.

In the spring of 1995, during the worship service and at a reception following the service, North Decatur recognized and honored four couples in the church for their 50 years of ministry and 50 years of marriage—Walter and Clare Baldwin, Bill and Ella Banks Boyle, Jim and Peggy Cogswell, and Al and Grace Winn. The four men had attended Union Seminary in Richmond together, and they and their wives have been close friends over the years. The Baldwins, Boyles, and Cogswells had a combined 62 years of service as missionaries in Japan; the Winns had served at Stillman College, Louisville Seminary, and pastorates in Virginia and North Decatur. It seemed providential that these four couples were all part of the North Decatur community,

where they continued to be actively involved. It was, indeed, a joyous celebration for the entire church. Shortly after this, Jim resigned as Parish Associate and he and Peggy moved to Black Mountain, North Carolina.

In October 1995, NDPC had a thrilling fortieth birthday celebration. On Sunday morning during the worship service, all of the former pastors except Bill Newton were able to attend and speak for a few

minutes about the church during his/her years as pastor. Many former members came for worship and lunch and to enjoy the many displays and scrapbooks.



Even as the nation was involved in the Gulf War in the early 90s and then enjoyed prosperity in the Clinton years, there was turmoil over the impeachment of the president and the suspense of the 2000 election. However, NDPC continued many programs of outreach, deleted a few and added others. It also was during this time that Woody Hickcox began his “biscuit ministry” of baking fresh, homemade biscuits every Sunday for the NDPC community.

In 1996 came the resignation of Anna Brown, who had served more than eight years as the very capable Christian Educator, having done an outstanding job with the educational and youth programs. North Decatur was fortunate to be able to find interim and part-time students and interns from seminaries to lead the Christian Education program, as well as scores of dedicated members who served the church well. Lee and Tim Read, Kathy Beach-Verhey, Jay Hodge, Jamie Gabler, and Marilyn Hedgepeth worked with our children and youth programs while a search committee for a new DCE was at work. Edye Bender joined the staff in July 1998 and served ably as DCE for three years while her husband, David, attended Columbia Seminary. When Edye left in 2001, seminary student intern, Michael Kirby, worked with the youth during the summer. That fall the church again turned to seminary students — Eric Dillenbeck as Interim Youth Minister and Lisa Eye as Interim Educator — while a Search Committee for a new DCE (later changed to an Associate Pastor search) was working. In the fall of 2002, Eric Dillenbeck was named Educator and seminary student, Ellen Dunn, became Director of Children’s Ministry. Finally, in 2003 Eric Dillenbeck was called and ordained as Associate Pastor and assumed major responsibility for Education, Youth, and Congregational Community Life. His wife, Amy, joined the church and choir, and the church welcomed their daughter,

Anna, in 2003 and son, Sam, in 2004. During all these years the Education and Youth programs have flourished.

The youth continued participating in the Montreat Youth Conferences and Mission Work Camps each summer, including trips to Guatemala and Jamaica, and in 2005 to Pittsburgh to help build a Habitat house. Youth Sunday continues to be a highlight each spring as is the reception of the confirmation class. Beginning in 2001, the current class of communicants participated in a special five-month study program in preparation for confirmation. Anne Apple, Libba Fairleigh, and Sarah Erickson have provided the leadership in these classes along with dedicated mentors. A communion education class is held each fall for first graders and their parents to prepare the children to take communion. Bibles are presented to third graders and a Children's Bible is taken to new babies. Training is held each fall for children in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades who wish to participate in the worship service as acolytes. In 2003, elementary children began sponsoring the Souper Bowl on Super Bowl Sunday during which donations are collected to feed the hungry.



The Adult Education Committee has planned stimulating and interesting classes for adults including Bible Study, Spirituality classes, study of interesting books or topics, and discussions of topics such as homosexuality, violence, gun control, war, and peace and justice.

In 2000, NDPC charter member, Mary Leith Ellis, was honored at a reception for her years of work and outstanding contributions to the Christian Education program at NDPC, and to the larger church through her writing of curriculum material and for her leadership in Education Workshop and on Presbytery Education Council.

Seminary student, Jane Fahey, served as Summer Intern in 1999 and was hired in the summer of 2000 as Acting Head of Staff during the Pastor's sabbatical leave. Jane gave the church outstanding leadership.

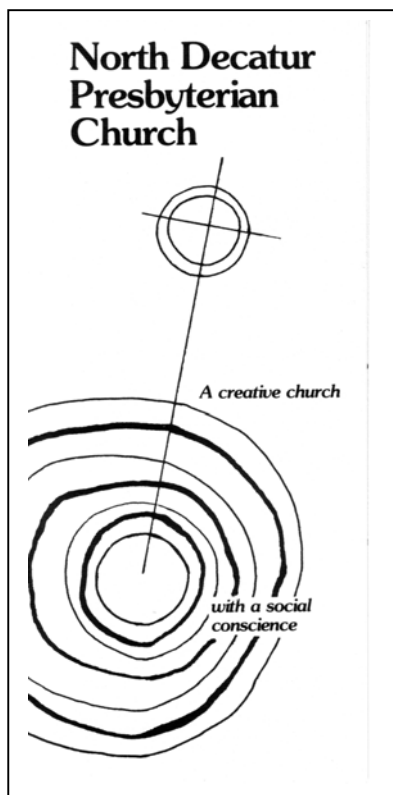
North Decatur continued having an excellent music program. Victor Floyd continued as the beloved and able organist and music director until the summer of 2000. Ted Munn served as music minister from 2000-2002, followed by Eugene Martin as Interim Music Director and Sarah Martin as the Interim Organist. In January of 2004, Jamie Shiell began as Minister of Music and has developed an outstanding music program with children's choirs, a handbell choir, and an adult choir. Instead of a regular youth choir, a group is formed when a youth musical is to be performed. *Cotton Patch Gospel*, *Malice in the Palace*, *Once Upon a Parable*, and *It's All Relative* were recent big hits by the Youth Choir. Recent performances by the children's Carol Choir include: *Francis*, *The Poor Little Man of God*, *Midnight Miracle*, and *The Christmas Story in Scripture and Song* that also included the Preschool Praise Choir. In spring 2005, the Children's Choir presented *100 % Chance of Rain*. The Adult Choir provides music leadership each Sunday and performs special music programs at Easter and Christmas. They recently performed Mozart's Requiem to a standing-room only crowd in the Sanctuary.

Another important addition to the church staff during the past decade was Bill Boyle who was much loved as the Parish Associate for Senior Adults. He served ably from 1998 until 2004. Sadly, North Decatur said goodbye to the Boyles as they moved to Black Mountain, North Carolina in 2004.

In 1997 the church said a sad farewell to Al and Grace Winn as they moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Brown House, used as a transition house under the auspices of DCM, was renamed “The Winn House” in honor and recognition of the Winn’s years of ministry and service to NDPC, the community, and the church at large.

Members of the church continued to participate in many community ministries — Initiative for Affordable Housing, building Habitat for Humanity houses, Our House, Hunger Walk, AIDS Walk, Common Ground, Sunday night suppers and Christmas goody bags for the homeless at Druid Hills Shelter, and hosting a refugee family from Kosovo, the Pilichi family. In 1997 Juanita Velasco gave a Community Ministry Commemorative Plaque to record North Decatur’s history of involvement in outreach ministries.

For many years until 1998, North Decatur participated along with other churches in feeding and providing shelter for homeless families at the Sanctuary Shelter on Memorial Drive. A new area of community service became available when Hagar’s House — a shelter in Decatur operated by DCM (Decatur Cooperative Ministry) for homeless women and their children — opened in 2001. Currently North Decatur is responsible for one week every six weeks for preparing and serving evening meals and supplying weekend overnight hosts for guests there. About 40 volunteers are recruited for each week of service.



North Decatur also has continued involvement in world missions. In 1997 Barbara Gifford went as a Mission Volunteer to Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka, Alaska. Not only have the youth continued to go on mission trips in the states or abroad each summer, but the NDPC adults have had several trips—first to Esteli, Nicaragua, but more recently to Guatemala and Cuba. North Decatur has continued celebrating mission season each year, giving members the opportunity to learn about problems and service opportunities in particular countries or areas of the world. In 2003, Dr. John Cobb from the Claremont School of Theology led a workshop on Pax Americana and Consumerism in America. In 2005 the focus was on Hunger in Atlanta and throughout the world. A highlight of this study was a workshop on microfinance projects as one example of Christian response to global hunger/poverty, led by Terry Provance, Director of

Oikocredit. Members of the church also have financially and prayerfully supported member, Jan Heckler, in her work in Africa with World Literacy Initiative, which she started several years ago.

Members of North Decatur, along with the rest of the nation and world, were shocked by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2002. Weekly prayer meetings were held at the church for several months and special forums on the Middle East occurred. As momentum seemed to be building for bringing the perpetrators to justice by war with Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, there was much tension and controversy at North Decatur. The Session endorsed a resolution from the Peace and Justice Committee of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta against the invasion of Iraq. The Peace Not War Committee of NDPC was actively involved in trying to persuade our government not to go to war by hosting a letter-writing campaign and a witness for peace on the corner of Medlock and Scott Boulevard each Sunday after worship. Many members participated but others were opposed and felt the demonstrations should stop, especially after our nation was actually at war. Finally, with leadership from the Pastor and the Session, a well-attended forum was held with open discussion, which helped participants to see both sides of the issue. The demonstrations were discontinued.

Members of North Decatur have enjoyed many and varied times of fun and fellowship, including after-worship receptions, potluck dinners, yearly church-wide retreats, an annual Fun at the Farm cookout at Kent Leslie's family farm, an annual picnic at Glenwood Park to kick off the fall program, an advent festival and an alternative gift fair at Christmas, stewardship dinners and birthday celebrations, trips to the Braves games, and many other special occasion celebrations. The NDPC Take-A-Hike Hiking Club was organized in 1998 and interested members hike together once a month during the school year.

Under Agnes Norfleet's leadership, two church-wide campaigns were held. The *Preparing the Way* Campaign raised funds for a much-needed renovation of the Education Building and to provide new lighting and carpet for the Sanctuary. The campaign also included the building of the "Connector" between the Education and Sanctuary buildings that provided four additional rooms for educational and other purposes, handicapped restrooms on each floor, and an elevator that goes from the first floor to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor choir loft. The Connector also provided a place to list names of those whose ashes have been placed in the Memorial Garden and a good view of the garden from both first and second floors. The Outreach component of the campaign financed the renovation of the Brown House, a \$20,000 contribution to CEPAD (a ministry of the evangelical churches of Nicaragua working together in development, emergency relief, and peacemaking) and a \$10,000 contribution to Columbia Theological Seminary's Capital Campaign.

The other church-wide campaign was held in 2004-2005 to purchase a long-wanted pipe organ as a gift to the church for its fiftieth birthday. By 2004 a new organ of some kind was desperately needed. The Session approved the recommendation from the Pipe Organ Committee, first chaired by David Bothwell and later co-chaired by Libba Fairleigh and Linda Curry, to purchase a pipe organ to be built specifically for the Sanctuary. The congregation was so excited that the amount for the organ was over-subscribed, which enabled the church to make some needed changes in the choir loft and in the Sanctuary to enhance the Sanctuary's acoustics. The Outreach part of this campaign was that a tithe of money contributed would go to enhance music programs in Nicaragua and in the local community. \$10,000 was sent to Nicaragua via Bob Leslie in the fall of 2004; in May 2005, \$5,000 was given to enhance the music program at Medlock Elementary School, where North Decatur first met for worship and church school while

the Education Building was under construction. Other local groups budgeted to receive money for music programs are: the Scottsdale Child Development Center, Initiative for Affordable Housing, Hagar's House (DCM), Our Lady of Perpetual Help Hospice, Presbyterian Homes, Philips Tower, Druid Hills Shelter, and Harmony Choir.

Under Agnes' leadership, planning for the fiftieth birthday began in mid 2004 with a committee ably co-chaired by Cindy Hays and Debra Robinson and with many members of the church involved. Debra Robinson expertly led the group for the final five months of preparation and implementation. Three charter members are still in the church — Turk and Ruth Fritts and Arline Slack — and two of the baptized children when North Decatur was chartered — Carol Ellis Morgan and Virginia (Ginny) Slack, all of whom are active members.

North Decatur began celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in mid-November of 2004. Displayed in the narthex each week were memorabilia including pictures, church bulletins, newsletters, and current events representing one year in the history of the church—thus a different display each week for 50 weeks. Juanita Velasco was responsible for this bit of North Decatur's history. Fran Mohr provided a timeline in the Fellowship Hall depicting important events in the histories of the world and NDPC and sponsored decade-appropriate receptions highlighting NDPC's ministries during that decade. Appropriate foods were served and dress typical for the decade was encouraged. Cindy Hays and Carol Tveit wrote a column in the newsletter each week recounting interesting things from the church archives. Chris Hilsabeck created a video of NDPC's past and vision for the future to be debuted at the birthday celebration, and Woody Hickox designed the special birthday logo.

North Decatur also celebrates its history of having excellent preaching — Bill Newton, Tony Tucker, Larry Kennon, Joe Harvard, Al Winn, Joanna Adams, and Agnes Norfleet. All of the former pastors were invited to the 50<sup>th</sup> celebration in October and four of them also agreed to preach during 2005: Larry Kennon in January, Joe Harvard in February, Al Winn in April, and Joanna Adams in May. Newer members knew what a great preacher Agnes was, but older members were happy for them to hear and know what wonderful preaching that members of North Decatur have heard all through its 50 years.

On Saturday night, October 29, 2005, a program was planned that included the active participation of the former pastors, an organ recital, the presentation of a hymn commissioned for NDPC's 50<sup>th</sup>, and the dedication of the pipe organ. During the church school hour on October 30, 2005, former pastors spoke about their years of service at North Decatur, and Cliff Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly and formerly a clergy affiliate member of North Decatur, was scheduled to preach at the worship service, followed by a catered luncheon.

It was during all this preparation for the 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration that the church learned of Agnes' resignation to become pastor of the Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. It was with great sadness that the church told her and her family farewell at a reception on May 22, 2005. Agnes was a wonderful pastor, leader, and friend for 13 years, having served twice as long as any former pastor. In July James (Jim) Irwin accepted the call to serve as the Interim Pastor. A Transition Team, chaired by Fran Mohr, was formed to discern the congregation's dreams and wishes for North Decatur and for a new pastor. The Transition Team

also had the responsibility for securing nominations and presenting the congregation with a slate of members to begin their service on a Pastor Search Committee in the spring of 2006.

The church has been blessed over the years in being the church home for literally hundreds of ordained and lay church professionals who were retired pastors or missionaries, those who worked at Presbyterian Center, Presbytery Office, or Columbia Theological Seminary, and for the many Columbia Seminary students who worshipped with NDPC regularly and whom served as interns, part-time employees, or volunteers in many capacities. In 2005 two seminary students were under care of the Session—Leigh Jones and Jennifer Derise.

North Decatur members and pastors have participated as leaders in Presbytery and General Assembly. Pastors and elders have attended all Presbytery meetings, many serving as chairs or members of Presbytery councils and committees. The Presbytery of Greater Atlanta elected Burt Vardeman as Moderator in 1973 and Martha Vardeman in 1980. More recently both Libba Fairleigh, clergy affiliate member, served as Moderator in 1996 and Agnes Norfleet in 1997. At the General Assembly level, pastors and elders have served as commissioners and on various committees. As early as 1958 the Atlanta Presbytery elected Jim Stewart as commissioner to General Assembly, Dick Ellis in 1966, Ruth Slack Smith in 1969, Burt Vardeman in 1972, Martha Vardeman in 1975, Joe Harvard in 1979, Ruth Schmidt in 1991, Agnes Norfleet in 1998, Alice Hickox in 1999, and Libba Fairleigh in 2002.

North Decatur is thankful not only for pastors who have led the church, but also for all the faithful laypersons who have worked and served diligently over the years. As the church celebrates its fiftieth birthday, we are thankful for all of God's blessings over these years as we honor the past, celebrate the present, and dream of what the future holds for this congregation.

The current **Mission Statement** describes North Decatur this way:

“North Decatur Presbyterian Church is called by God to be a community of faith and worship, dedicated to Christian Education and nurture so that we may go into the world to serve, work for peace and justice, and share God’s love with all people.”

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The Session in September of 2004 adopted a **Vision Poem** for North Decatur Presbyterian Church, stating the hopes for the future, based on the past and present:

**G**od gathered a community of the faithful  
From the neighborhood  
And planted a church at the intersection of life and faith.

Inspired by the worship of God,  
Rooted in Christian Education,  
Shaped by reaching out in ministry and mission,

We followed God’s lead to form a church  
-a Sanctuary where we praise God in wonder, awe and love,  
-a home where we are nurtured by the word,  
-a haven where music lifts our souls and renews our spirits,  
-a safe space for all God’s children to learn, to question and to grow,  
-a place to rest, to be comforted, and to celebrate,  
-a community striving to discern and respond to God’s call for our lives.

God calls us  
-to welcome all who would join our journey of faith and service,  
-to keep the promises we make at baptism,  
-to share our blessings in joyful communion,  
-to reach out to those among us and to those we do not know,  
-to be unafraid to go to risky places in love, with hope,  
-to witness to the love of Christ by serving our neighbors in need,  
-to work for justice and be peacemakers in a chaotic world.

God is calling us to new places in faith and mission,  
And to ministries not yet imagined.

We seek to follow Jesus Christ,  
Empowered by the Holy Spirit,  
Emboldened by the love of God.

I have enjoyed bringing the history of North Decatur Presbyterian Church up-to-date for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary; but in doing so, I have made extensive use of the two excellent previous histories of the church—Emily Campbell Boland’s history of the first 25 years and Mary Leith Ellis’ history of the first 40 years.

Martha Hay Vardeman  
Member since 1965