

The Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church: A Presbyterian Mountain Church in East Tennessee.

By Colleen Trenwith

2009

The *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church* sits in a quiet, remote cul-de-sac off the old Erwin-Asheville road near Flag Pond. This is in a corner of East Tennessee which is in the heart of some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in America; a valley which runs parallel to the new interstate, I-26, but is hidden from the busy highway by the layers of tree-covered hills which stand between. South Indian Creek flows beside the old road as it winds through the narrow bottom-land, creating a sparkling, refreshingly restorative welcome to the few travelers who would take the time to leave the interstate for a few miles of their journey. If one took the Flag Pond exit off the interstate, one would immediately see five signs which have been erected on the side of the road, pointing the way to churches in the area, mostly Baptist, but all within the small geographical region of Flag Pond and Rocky Fork.

None are quite as intriguing, however, as the sign for a Presbyterian Church at Rocky Fork, further down the old road. There is obviously a story to be told when a Presbyterian Church, established in 1901, has been dedicated to the memory of a woman named Jennie Moore, in what is historically a very remote part of East Tennessee.

The Presbyterian Church *was* very active in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the South, establishing schools and churches, and supplying congregations in remote areas such as this with ministers. Today's Presbyterian Church in Appalachia, in the larger towns and cities, is largely an elite church with a fairly formal style, highly educated clergy, a set order of service, and a traditional approach to the music in their church services using the Presbyterian hymn books, and

usually accompanied by organ and piano. The *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church* is unique. It is a small mountain church with a fascinating history, which has served the people in the rural community of Flag Pond and Rocky Fork well, and has not only managed to accommodate and preserve the culture of the mountain folk, but it has greatly enriched the community since its inception in 1901.

“In the month of July, 1898, the attention of the Rev. H.P. Cory, Sabbath School missionary for the Presbyteries of Holston, Union and French Broad, was called to Flag Pond, Tennessee, as a good point at which to locate a day school and institute such work as the Presbyterian Church seemed fitted to do.” (J.M. booklet) A school building and a teacher’s home were built, the materials supplied by the people in the community and with the help of generous gifts from people outside the area. Mrs. Nettie McCormick was one such contributor, the wife of Cyrus McCormick who had invented the famous mechanical reaper and established the International Harvester Company in Chicago, in 1847. By 1901 regular preaching services were taking place in Flag Pond, and the school was beginning to grow. “In March 1901 the way seemed clear for the formation of a Presbyterian Church, and accordingly on Sunday, March 10, 1901 a church was organized by the Rev. H.P. Cory, who had been appointed by the Holston Presbytery to do this... The church consisted of 25 members.”(ibid)

The church at Flag Pond itself discontinued in 1916, but the work was continued a few miles down the road at Rocky Fork, as the *Rocky Fork Presbyterian Church*. Also in 1916, Mr Hiram Birch was elected an elder, was ordained and installed for the work of the church. He had been on the mission field for three years, “during which time he worked closely with Miss Jennie Moore, who in 1903 was transferred to Rice Creek, Tennessee after three years of work among the Sioux Indians at Good Will, South Dakota. When she arrived at her new post, she learned that

a small-pox epidemic was sweeping this mountain community, and that it was impossible to carry out her program. Her assignment was then changed to Rocky Fork.”(ibid)

Mrs. Louise Treadway, the oldest present member of *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church*, was born in 1924 in a two story house which is near to the church. Her grandfather had been an elder in a Presbyterian Church, and her father was an elder in the *Rocky Fork Presbyterian Church*. Her mother was educated at Orland-Bell College, and her father at Tusculum College. She relates the story of Miss Jennie Moore’s arrival at Rocky Fork in 1903:

“Jennie Moore came here when she was a young lady, about 30 years old. There wasn’t anything but a creek bed. No roads or bridges, just a wagon trail which came up from Erwin. They sent her to start a school. She came into just a wilderness... at just a young age. She was a beautiful person. She had it really hard coming into a wilderness and starting a school. She lived with some of the people in the community. She started to get some of the men to go up into the mountains to cut lumber to make a school house for her, and they built a one-room school. They told her she might get thirteen pupils on the first day of school. She started with a three-month school and she begged and coaxed folks to send their children, and on the first day, I believe that she got about twenty-four (children), and they were just sitting on nail kegs and benches. They didn’t have desks or anything. The next year she had an eight-month school and she had a salary of \$200.” (Treadway)

Jennie Moore saw much potential in the children in this rural region, and saw what they might become if they had the opportunity. She petitioned for funds, and appealed to friends for contributions of money and clothing. “Many of her young people, while desperately poor, possessed fine minds and the capacity of leadership; ability often their only equipment.” (J.M. booklet) On April 24 1924, Miss Moore herself talked about her time at Rocky Fork:

“More than twenty years ago I came to Rocky Fork for a stay of three months, so you can see I’ve extended my time. We began with one room - a combined school and church house. We were told we could get together thirteen pupils (all we could

expect), but on our first opening day we had twenty-four, and fifty-eight by the end of three months. The next year...we had an eight month school, with 98 pupils seated on boxes, crates and nail kegs. Mr Louis Gentry gave us land, and the men went into the forest for lumber. Everybody helped, and some of the men labored for 52 days to give us better quarters. One little boy gave us 2 cents, the first money received. With this I bought a postage stamp, and the letter it carried brought us back a reply with \$45 toward the good cause.” (ibid)

Mrs. Treadway remembers her first days at school when, every day of the week, “Miss Moore” would fix a big pot of soup, or potatoes and pinto beans at her house to make sure the children had a hot lunch. “Everybody loved her so much. Even the bootleggers were afraid of her...they were afraid of what she would think of them. She was a grand person. After the county took over the school, she taught in the school for the county for another 12 years.” After that Miss Moore worked in the Community House, then she organized a dispensary with nurses who served in the community, and she “would go with the nurse up in the hollers to help deliver babies....she would ride a horse or a mule. She organized a sewing club for the women and they made all their quilts. She had a store, and if there were needy people she would make sure they got shoes.” (Treadway)

Miss Moore was asked in 1926 how many young people she had “picked off the mountain sides and out of these valleys and sent to school?” She replied, “Yes, I can tell you exactly. I have sent 263. They have gone to the Asheville schools, to Dorland-Bell, to Washington College, Tusculum, Maryville and Yale.”(J.M.booklet) She said that out of that number there were forty teachers. She retired in 1933, and returned in 1942 for the dedication of the church under its new name, *The Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church*, renamed, of course, to pay tribute to the memory of an exceptional person who had influenced many lives, and who was responsible

for a rich educational heritage in this quiet little valley, never forgotten by the folk who lived and were educated there.

Prior to the arrival of Miss Moore at Rocky Fork in 1903, several Presbyterian ministers served the community including the Revs. Jere A Moore, J.A. Irvine, C.A Duncan and H.P Cory. From that time until 1947 there was a succession of Presbyterian ministers who served the church, the longest stay being approximately six years. In 1947 the Rev. Robert S. Williamson, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, began his ministry at Rocky Fork, which lasted for 28 years. He and his wife, Myrtle, worked together in the *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church*, as well as the preaching missions at Big Branch and Hog Skin. While ministering to the spiritual needs of the community, Rev. Williamson established a budget for the church, established an envelope-tithing system, and was responsible for turning the congregation from having a mindset of dependency on support and gifts from outside the church, to an independent congregation which was self-supporting. Rev Williamson's oldest daughter, Becky Shealy, who is now the Moderator of Deacons in the church, commented, "He felt that this was Biblically correct. It was a way of starting them (the congregation) giving to missions. He wanted the church to be more mission-minded. As the years went by and Presbytery was changing, then they wanted the smaller churches to be self-supporting, and the money *they* (the Presbytery) had contributed, stopped."(Shealy) Rev Williamson had preempted this move by the Presbytery, and set the church well on the road to being self-supporting, setting the pattern for a solid, secure future. During their time in the church, a new manse was built. They moved from the old two story white house at Rocky Fork near the church, into the new brick house, and they raised a family there.

Myrtle Williamson originated in New Jersey, was educated at Maryville College, near Knoxville, Tennessee, and came to the church at Rocky Fork as a newly-married minister's wife

in 1949. She ministered to the congregation alongside her husband, teaching Sunday School and caring for the congregation with a true heart of love. Rev. Williamson suffered a heart attack and passed away in 1975, but Mrs. Myrtle Williamson continued to serve Christ by her ministry to the church congregation for many more years. She passed away in 2000. Two of their daughters, Becky and Kathy and their families, are present-day members of *Jennie Moore Church*.

The story of the boy who gifted his two cents to Jennie Moore for the work at Rocky Fork, is reminiscent of the humble beginnings of the Presbyterian Church's missionary work in America. "In 1707 the General Presbytery adopted the following resolution: That every member of the Presbytery supply neighboring desolate places where a Minister is wanting, and opportunity for good offers."(Spinwall) At the first meeting of the Synod of Philadelphia, an offering was collected to "raise funds for pious uses. It was the just sum of eighteen pounds, one shilling and sixpence. The first Itinerant Missionaries, three in number, were appointed in 1722."(ibid) They were sent out for up to three months, not to preach to established congregations, but to preach, ordain elders, instruct in discipline, establish mission stations, and visit regularly until the people were formed into organized churches. It is heartening to realize that most of the first Scots-Irish settlers in East Tennessee, even though they were far away from home, and finally free from the religious control and hierarchical practices of the Church in Northern Ireland, still felt a deep need to be a part of a church, or at least some sort of small supportive congregation, to have ministers to perform the Sacraments, to conduct funerals and weddings and to preach the Word. The Great Awakening in the early 1800s had brought a sense of spiritual renewal into the South. This, along with the pioneering push to the west of the Allegheny Mountains, meant that there was a real and urgent need for ministers wherever communities were established. However, as author of *Presbyterians in the South*, Ernest T. Thompson pointed out, "Presbyterians were handicapped so far as numbers were concerned by

the high educational standards which they required of their ministers... Presbyterianism, with its intellectual demands of an elaborate creed and its high standards of education for its ministry, was at best restricted in its appeal. It was never able to reach and to stir the common folk as the Baptists did.” (Thompson) Many of the settlers who were pushing further south and to the west were not too concerned as to whether or not a preacher or minister had scholastic qualifications. As a result, many began their own churches (mostly Baptist) with a member of the congregation taking it upon himself, or “feeling the call” to preach and to lead the community in matters of religion.

Much credit needs be given to the Presbyterian Church for its determined reach into Appalachia in the early years by its seminary-educated pioneers. Thompson has written that “the Scots-Irish would have been lost to the Presbyterian Church if it had not been for a vigorous missionary activity on the part of the North and East.” (Thompson) Many traveled by horseback into the most remote areas, carrying saddle bags full of books, and preaching to small communities. One such man was the Rev. Samuel Doak. Born in 1749, educated for the Presbyterian ministry at the College of New Jersey, which is now Princeton Theological Seminary, Doak was influential and effective in the East Tennessee region in particular. The “hardy people with whom he took up his abode were able to appreciate his learning and religion as much as they admired his adventurous and indomitable temper; and the stern, hard, God fearing man became one of the most powerful influences for good throughout the whole formative period of the Southwest.” (Crawford) He organized the first Presbyterian Church in Tennessee, called the *Salem Presbyterian Church*, near Jonesborough, made frequent preaching trips to scattered settlements, and reputedly organized twenty-five churches in East Tennessee in his lifetime. Doak’s legacy includes the founding of the Martin Academy, later to be named Washington College, near Jonesborough TN. His son, Samuel W. Doak, founded Tusculum

College in Greenville, TN, which would be graced by the presence, many years later, of some of Miss Jennie Moore's eager students. Doak was later to become the spiritual inspiration to the *Overmountain Men* at Sycamore Shoals in 1780, as he preached to them and prayed for them before they marched into the battle against the British, at Kings Mountain. (Crawford) The early Presbyterians had a concern not only for the education of adults, but also for the education of children, and they would always try to establish a school alongside the church, such as the school at Rocky Fork.

It is worth returning to the observation that many of the early Scots-Irish settlers felt the need for a minister in their community. Many sent "commissioners" hundreds of miles north, "supplicating Synod and Presbyteries to supply them with the ministrations of the Word of God. And both Synod and Presbytery were diligent in meeting, so far as their limited resources would enable them to do it, the appeals which came to them for help." (Graham)

In the year 2005, a retired Presbyterian minister from Bristol, Tennessee, responded to a call to the *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church* to supply *them* with the "ministrations of the Word of God." More than that, after a long period of the short-term supply of preachers and ministers, the church had the need for a "pastor" with a pastor's heart who would love them, and also a need for the experience of the security of a more long-term relationship with the one who would answer the call. The call was responded to by Reverend Dr. Elmon Brown. Dr. Brown, a highly educated man with a B.A. in History from Samford University in Alabama, a Masters degree in Divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Doctorate in Divinity from the Presbyterian, Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, and a lifetime of experience in the study, the preaching and the teaching of the scriptures... arrived in the sweetest little mountain church in Rocky Fork, East Tennessee with a membership of

approximately 40 people. Dr. Brown and his wife, Karla visited the church several times before the congregation made it official that they would like them to remain in their midst.

The experience of preaching in a remote rural area was not new to them. Dr. Brown had once preached a revival, and then later returned to preach in the coalfield town of Hurley, Virginia, in Buchanan County, which was “so isolated, that in the War Between the States they said that, if you could get to Hurley, Virginia, either side, North or South, you were home free. Neither side was going to go back in there to find you.”(Brown) As a Baptist minister in the earlier years Dr. Brown had been involved in some very large churches, but after he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister his involvement was mostly with smaller churches. Presbyterian churches are typically smaller than Baptist Churches in the South. Dr. and Mrs. Brown felt “called” to the *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church*, and went there as “temporary supply.” They now have no desire to be anywhere else. The *Jennie Moore Church* is a part of the national body of the Presbyterian Church (USA), is affiliated with the Synod of Living Waters, and the Holston Presbytery, Tennessee. The Presbyterian Church (USA) holds Reformed Calvinism as central to its theology. The Presbyterian Book of Order and the Book of Confessions are their guidebooks, and most follow the Lectionary Passages as guidelines for the weekly scriptures. Their services are generally formal, they sing from hymn books, and there is some liturgy in their order of service. Dr. Brown spoke of the responsibility of the minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA): “We take certain vows in the Book of Order, and what we are basically saying is that we will be true to the basic tenets of the Church.”(Brown) He said that this brings in the matter of interpretation, as the “basic tenets of the Church” are not set out as such under a *heading* in the Book of Order. The freedom to interpret, as he and his colleagues constantly seek to do, both individually and collectively, and the fact that there is discipline and there are boundaries in place, gives a Presbyterian minister in a mountain church the liberty to

use his discretion and his mind. There were definite mountain traditions in place in the *Jennie Moore Church* when the Browns arrived.

“It says in the Book of Order that we have a latitude in our conscience, that we can deviate some, and still not be heretical. One of the things I like about being a Presbyterian is that you can use your mind. You can read whatever you want to read, and make up your mind about it, under God. Worship the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus added the word, ‘mind.’ I don’t like a legalistic approach to religion... dos and don’ts.”(Brown)

Many of the members of the congregation of the *Jennie Moore Church* are of a Baptist background, and, although some have been “sprinkled” true to the Presbyterian teaching, a tradition in the church has been full immersion baptism in the creek below the church. The Presbyterian form of baptism is “sprinkling”, or “infant baptism” in which Dr Brown has believed, and which he has practiced as a Presbyterian minister, but rather than allowing this to cause any conflict, Dr Brown is erring on the side of love, understanding and acceptance. Traditionally in the *Jennie Moore Church*, a person will be asked how they want to be baptized and the person’s preferred method will be used. He has the wisdom to realize that legalism is the last thing a congregation needs.

“I try to start from a standpoint of loving them... It’s a cultural thing. They have been brought up to believe that immersion is the only baptism, so they are going to be immersed. Mountain people, even though Presbyterians....Bob Williamson was here for 28 years, and he reached people... it’s this old ‘Christ and Culture’ thing, and when there’s conflict with Christ and culture, almost without any equivocation, culture will win. You can balance it until you run up against what you and your parents and your great grandparents have done all these years, and *culture* will win.” (Brown)

As a theologian and a teacher, Dr. Brown is accustomed to referring to twelve or thirteen versions of the Bible when preparing sermons, and he found when he came to the *Jennie Moore Church* that the folk were accustomed to using only the King James Version; another tradition in many churches in Appalachia. He has no intention of bringing any major changes to the Church. He uses the King James Version for the scripture readings in the morning services, as the congregation has this version as their “pew Bible”, and they share in the readings. The focus of the Sunday evening meetings is more on the *teaching* from the Bible, and Dr. Brown is able to refer to other versions of the Bible at times such as those. He posts the Lectionary Passages, the sermon title, and the hymns for the next Sunday on the church bulletin board every week, and adheres to the Book of Order and Book of Confessions, as he has always done. His education is appreciated, and the knowledge of the heritage of Jennie Moore and the seminary-educated ministers they have had down through the years, is a matter of great pride, especially for the older members of the congregation such as Mrs Treadway. “There’s one thing I’m so thankful for, that they always furnished us with good educated preachers. There are just three Presbyterian Churches in this county (Unicoi), Erwin Presbyterian, Rock Creek Presbyterian and... I *still* call this *Rocky Fork*, but it’s *Jennie Moore Memorial*. To be a Presbyterian preacher you have to have been through seminary. I was always thankful for that. How fortunate we are. Sometimes up in these mountains we can get preachers, and they don’t know what to preach on... everything but the Bible.” (Treadway)

Another mountain church tradition is *foot washing*, and it may be surprising to many that *foot washing* is in the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship. For the first time in the life of the church they had a very moving *foot washing* on the Thursday evening before Easter, 2009.

One cannot separate a mountain church from its people, and for such as Dr. Brown and his wife, Karla, Rev. and Mrs. Williamson, and Jennie Moore herself, to come into a church in a

small valley in the mountains, it is the people themselves that draw out of them the ability to go the second mile in ministry. Jennie Moore rode on horseback and crossed streams several times to get to Rocky Fork, and often caught a ride on a lumber tram which followed the ridges of the mountains back towards Erwin, to purchase supplies for her people. Becky Shealy spoke about the experiences her mother and father had in their days in the church: “I know, when I was younger she would be called on to give shots to cows and the different animals... My Dad did quite a big Bible School ministry. He would drive in his car for two hours, I guess, before Bible School and two hours afterwards picking kids up.” The “kids” were not only from the *Jennie Moore Church*, but were from any and every church in the area, a tribute to both the legacy of Jennie Moore herself, and the Williamsons’ heart for home missions.

Because of the nature of the mountain people of Appalachia and their strong culture, there is an exchange between minister and congregation, a sense of a mutual place of learning, each teaching the other that which is important to them, which results in a leveling effect between pulpit and pew. This does not only take place within the church building in the mountains, but is lived out in the community, in homes, over a cookout fire, at the birth or death of a family member, or while trout-fishing in the creek. In this way the *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church* is typical of the mountain churches in Appalachia. Being a part of the Synod of Living Waters and the Holston Presbytery does not force a mountain church to conform to the image of all other churches in the same Synod or Presbytery, or the minister to conform to the same mold as the other ministers. The *Jennie Moore Church* is not typical of all Presbyterian churches in many ways, but from its inception until the present day, has maintained all of the quality, the appreciation of higher education, balanced and well grounded theology, balanced and well grounded mountain culture, and “sense of place” in the mountains which is now the embodiment

of the vision and foundational work of all of the Presbyterian pioneers, both clergy and missionaries, who first walked and rode their horses into Appalachia with the Word of God.

Works Cited

1. Crawford, Earle W. *Pioneer Missionary in East Tennessee: Samuel Doak*. Washington College Academy. 1980.
2. Graham, James R. *The Planting of Presbyterianism in the Northern Neck of Virginia*. The Geof Norton Publishing Co. 1904.
3. J.M. Booklet. *Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church Booklet*. Myrtle Williamson, Editor. 1983
4. Spinwall, Rev. J.A. *What is Presbyterian Law?* Presbyterian Board of Publication. 1882
5. Thompson, Ernest Trice. *Presbyterians in the South. Vol. 1*. John Knox Press. 1963

Interviews:

1. Brown, Reverend Dr. Elmon. BA, M Div, D Min. Present Pastor of Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church. (Interview, April 5th, 2009).
2. Shealy, Becky. Moderator of Deacons. Associate Degree, Medical Secretary (Steed College, Johnson City.) Life Member of Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church.

(Interview, April 23rd, 2009)
3. Treadway, Mrs. Louise. Life Member of Jennie Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church.

(Interview, April 3rd 2009)

