

In 1984, an ad hoc committee of the Columbia SC district of the United Methodist Church decided to start a new church in the northwest region of Columbia. Reverend Paul Wood, along with his wife, Kay, and daughter, Jane, came to Columbia and began to lay the groundwork for the new church.

Initially, Rev. Wood held planning meetings with potential members in peoples' homes. The actual worship life of the yet – unnamed United Methodist Church began on September 29, 1985 with a service in the Irmo Elementary School auditorium. Publicity and advertising referred to our fledgling church as “A New United Methodist Congregation forming in the Irmo – Harbison Area”. Another important event that occurred in September 1985 was the purchase of property located at 410 Harbison Boulevard. The South Carolina Conference New Church Fund's down payment and bank loan, as well as monies received from the sale of an abandoned church, all provided funds for that purchase.

On Sunday, October 27, 1985, the Sunday School program began. Two adult classes formed as well as three for young people: one for youth, one for elementary school children and one for preschoolers.

In November, 1985 Reverend Wood announced that it was time for the congregation to choose a name for the church. He requested that those making nominations refrain from suggesting names that were already being used by United Methodist Churches in the Columbia District as well as any name that honored a living person. Also, because of fear that the public might perceive our church as being formed exclusively for Harbison residents, he requested we avoid making suggestions that incorporated the name “Harbison”.

The church had no official members on its roll in December 1985 so all attendees -- including children – were allowed to vote. Twelve nominations were received and published in the bulletin and church newsletter. A vote was taken during the worship service on the first Sunday in December 1985. Susan Jennings, the communications committee chairperson, counted the votes and announced that there would be a run – off between the names “Grace”, “Faith” and “Church of the Good Shepherd”. The following Sunday a second vote was taken. Susan subsequently announced that there would be a second run – off between “Grace” and “Faith”. The third Sunday, December 22, 1985, a final vote was taken. At the

close of that service Susan chose an unusual way to reveal the name that had received the most votes. Instead of calling out the new name for the church, she asked that the congregation stand and sing “Amazing Grace”. Grace United Methodist Church finally had a name. Many found it difficult to sing the old hymn because they were also crying. “Our hearts rejoiced that our new church had a name” said charter member, Tom Harbison.

On May 18, 1986, Grace United Methodist Church was officially chartered with 107 Charter members. Some of these charter members not only remain on the roll today but also faithfully attend worship services and other activities of the church.

During Grace’s first year, local units of United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men and United Methodist Youth Fellowship were established. Nancy Hunsucker was elected our first UMW president; Sid Lester the first UMM president. Chip and Julie Priester served as Grace’s first youth leaders. They were later replaced by Peter and Sharon Manning and Sam and Alice Jones. Sam and Alice (who married at Grace) continued to serve until 2019.

Grace’s Vacation Bible School was initiated in August 1986. VBS was held at Union United Methodist Church that summer, in fact, it took place at Union every summer during the years the congregation met at Irmo Elementary School. Weeklong Vacation Bible School classes for all ages – including adults – were held in the evenings. It remains a tradition at Grace to host evening VBS classes.

Union United Methodist Church was very supportive of Grace in her early years. Along with three other churches, Union helped to pay the pastor’s salary. Many church and committee meetings were held at Union.

In August 1986, the debt on the land was retired and the congregation concentrated on raising funds to construct Grace’s first building. On April 2, 1989 a groundbreaking ceremony was held with Reverend Oscar Smith, Superintendent of the Columbia District of the South Carolina Conference, officiating. On October 15, 1989, with 233 members, Grace held her first worship service in the new building – a multi – purpose facility that conveniently alternated between serving as a sanctuary and providing Sunday School classrooms. It also housed an office for the pastor, a kitchen, two nurseries and a loft, which was most often used

by the choir for rehearsals. On December 3, 1989 a service was held to consecrate the new building, again officiated by Rev. Oscar Smith.

Unfortunately, surprisingly and for many different reasons, the size of our congregation decreased after the move into our new building. Rev. Wood was assigned to a different church by the SC Conference and left Grace in June 1990. He was replaced by Rev. Bruce Sayre, who was accompanied to Grace by his wife, Ann, son, Alan, and Ann's mother, Margaret Walker. A most unfortunate incident occurred right after Rev. Sayre became our pastor: Jennifer Honaker, a 15 – year – old UMYF member, was killed in a car wreck. Rev. Sayre and his family immediately stepped in to assist the grieving family and attempt to ease the sorrow felt by the entire congregation.

Paul Wood, known for his organizational skills and persuasiveness, felt very strongly that every church member should take an active role in the life of the church by chairing or serving on a committee. Bruce Sayre was cerebral and his strengths lay in his knowledge of and interest in the history of the Methodist church and its traditions. During Rev. Sayre's tenure an authentic Seder Feast was held and Fat Tuesday was celebrated. A strong emphasis was placed on the sacredness and spirituality of an infant's baptism. Adjusting to different pastoral styles was not easy for some members. 1994 and 1995 were two very difficult years in the life of the church and many prayers were lifted up for the revitalization and growth of Grace.

Rev. Sayre was assigned to a new church in June 1995. He was replaced by Rev. Edward L. McWilliams. Rev. McWilliams' wife, Anne, and her mother, Mildred Rogers, also joined our congregation. Rev. McWilliams – affectionately known as Big Ed – was a unique individual in the fact that serving as a minister was his second career choice. After many years of working in the banking industry, Big Ed returned to school to become a minister. Grace was his first church! Rev. McWilliams, best known for his sense of humor, love of working with children and youth, and highly contagious enthusiasm, was a perfect fit for a church wanting and needing revitalization.

Rev. McWilliams served as Grace's pastor from 1995 to 2000. During that time many folks were added to the membership roll. Committees became more

active. A part time secretary and children's choir director were hired and, although Grace had always been (according to Big Ed) "the best choir in South Carolina", its excellence increased with the hiring of Susan Ritchey as choir director. Roger Bryant became Grace's custodian, a position he continues to hold to this day. Money was raised to purchase a new electric piano and to pave the church's parking lot.

Outreach flourished under Rev. McWilliams' leadership. Grace funded and constructed a playground at Epworth Children's Home. Church members eagerly participated in Habitat for Humanity, Christmas in Lexington County, and Seeds of Hope. The UMYF was one of the strongest contributors/participants in the annual Crop Walk and Relay for Life.

Disciple I, II and III Bible studies were attended by many. The women's Brown Bag Bible study group began. Confirmation classes for children were extended to last several months and met weekly during the Sunday School hour. Revival services were held each September. And, it was during Big Ed's tenure that Grace's mission statement, "To know Jesus and to make him known to others", was created.

Change was on the horizon for Grace in the year 2000. Rev. McWilliams and his family left in June after being assigned to a new church. Grace's new pastor, Rev. Alex Stevenson, came to Grace accompanied by his wife, Melissa, and two daughters, Mary and Kaitlyn. Armed with a calm demeanor and excellent preaching skills, Rev. Stevenson tackled the challenge of following in the footsteps of the much – loved Big Ed. Because Rev. Stevenson supported programs already at work in the church, encouraged committees to complete their assigned tasks efficiently and independently, and cheerfully assumed all of his ministerial responsibilities, Grace did not suffer the pangs sometimes associated with a ministerial change. Alex, in fact, was and continued to be a humble role model for parents, husbands, children, youth and fellow Christians.

In June 2000, Grace purchased a new parsonage located at 2 Haven Ridge Court in the Chestnut Hill Subdivision. Furniture was purchased for the parsonage during the summer of that year.

Construction of a picnic shelter at the back of the parking lot began in early 2002. It was completed on February 10, 2002, and dedicated to the memory of Betty Askins.

Initiation of a Capital Funds Campaign also took place in 2002. Members were encouraged to make pledges and contributions were made beginning November 17, 2002 and ending November 20, 2005. The purpose of the campaign was to raise funds to pay off the mortgages of the existing church building and parsonage and to begin saving for erection of a new Sunday School classroom building. Grace's Sunday School program had grown to the extent that the senior high class was meeting in the nursery! In order to temporarily alleviate the problem of over - crowding, two portable classrooms were installed on the grounds of the church in 2003. These units were used not only for Junior and Senior high Sunday School classes but also for scouting and UMYF meetings. In 2003 land was also cleared behind Grace for expansion of the parking lot, necessary to accommodate the rapidly- growing congregation.

One year earlier than expected, the mortgage on the existing church building was paid off and a mortgage – burning ceremony was held on April 25, 2004. Happily, another mortgage was ceremonially burned on January 23, 2005 in celebration of satisfying the loan on the parsonage. Contributions received after the satisfaction of those mortgages were earmarked for the new Sunday School classroom building.

Ground was broken in early spring 2008 for the new education building. Mike Simpson, chair of the building committee, supervised its construction – which was completed in June 2009. Dedication of the new building was held on August 10, 2008. Having expanded its facility, Grace gained the opportunity to host craft shows, auctions, and garage sales; yoga and quilting classes; Girl and Boy Scout meetings; lunches for Salkehatchie summer service volunteers; numerous Bible studies and many Columbia District and South Carolina Conference UMW meetings.

Sadly, one of Grace's most faithful and active members, Odell Garner, passed away in 2008. A few months his death, a very generous amount of money was anonymously donated to Grace in Odell's memory. This donation, along with

offerings from the congregation, was used to renovate the multi – purpose building into a permanent sanctuary. New carpet was laid and walls were painted; furniture and paintings were purchased and placed in the narthex; and, best of all, pews were installed. Unbeknownst to the renovation committee, blue was Odell’s favorite color. God does work in mysterious ways – because the committee chose blue as the color for the pew cushions. Dedication of the new renovated sanctuary was held on August 9, 2009.

The 25th anniversary of Grace United Methodist Church was held on Sunday, September 19, 2010. All current and former members of Grace were invited to attend the 11:00 worship service and catered lunch that followed. The celebration continued Sunday evening at 6:00 PM with a “Grace Heritage” service.

In 2011, the church secretary’s job description was expanded to include financial record – keeping/accounting duties. This change required the employee to have a college – level business background. Bill Walker was hired to fill this position, as office manager.

Offering Safe Sanctuary training became required by all United Methodist Churches. All adults who worked with children had to pass background checks and, by completion of the training, become better able to ensure parents that supervision and education of children was always carried out with utmost care.

Alex Stevenson and his family left Grace in June, 2011, with his assignment to Central United Methodist Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Since Alex had served Grace for eleven years, many congregants could not remember a time when Alex was not the pastor! Grace, however, was ready and primed for someone new – and we were rewarded with the arrival of our first female pastor, Rev. Rebecca Wilkins. With Rebecca came her husband, Fred. The gender difference helped to alleviate the sadness of Alex’s departure, and that, along with Rebecca’s obvious strong faith and spiritual gifts, allowed for a smooth pastoral change. Rebecca immediately demonstrated enthusiasm for preaching the Word, encouragement for congregational involvement in worship, active leadership and musical talent. She challenged Grace to take a spiritual inventory, in order begin to determine the direction of her ministry in the 21st century.

The Natural Church Development Team, whose purpose was to identify Grace's strengths and weaknesses, was instituted during Rev. Wilkins' tenure. Elizabeth Nance – Coker was hired as music minister to lead the adult's and children's choirs. A third adult Sunday School class was formed for more in – depth Bible study. The United Methodist Women, its sister UMW Reading Program group, and the ladies' Brown Bag Bible Study group continued to grow in numbers. Unfortunately, the United Methodist Men's membership dwindled, and the chapter became inactive. Church members continued to be active in outreach opportunities, as in the Angel Tree Ministry and feeding breakfast to the homeless at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. Evangelism expanded with regularly scheduled movie nights – complete with popcorn! -- for church and community members. Sadly, the number of young families with children in the congregation decreased. It became a time to both celebrate and do some honest soul searching.

Rebecca and Fred Wilkins left Grace in June, 2014, with her assignment to Gramling United Methodist Church in Gramling, South Carolina. Rev. Walter Ballenger, and his wife, Cindy, arrived to take over the helm as Grace's new pastor. Walt immediately added his "Visitors Welcome, Members Expected" mantra to the top of the weekly bulletin. It was, once again, a time for change.

Under Rev. Ballenger's leadership, the United Methodist Men was reborn. Music not only filled the sanctuary between worship services, but was often an integral part of Walt's sermons. Grace took part in the Samaritan's Purse outreach program, where boxes were eagerly and enthusiastically filled and sent to underprivileged children overseas at Christmas.

Rev. Susan Ulmer replaced Rev. Ballenger in August, 2015, becoming Grace's second female minister. Kimberly Roberts returned to serve as children's programs coordinator, the first time someone was hired to serve in this position.

The 30th anniversary of Grace United Methodist Church was celebrated on Sunday, September 27, 2015. Only one worship service was held at 10:00 AM, and Rev. Paul Wood, Grace's first pastor, gave the message. A catered lunch followed in the fellowship hall.

Rev. Ulmer officially retired at the end of December, 2015. Rev. Murray Snow arrived in January, 2016 to serve as Grace's new pastor. Joining him was his

wife, Susan Ware – Snow and their dog, Hank. With his calm and gentle demeanor, Pastor Murray encouraged the congregation to invite three people to the worship service each week. His folksy, story – driven sermons, often centered on his love of fishing, enriched the lives of all. Members of the church and community alike found his “blessing of the animals” service very inspirational.

Under Pastor Murray’s leadership, the Grace 2020 initiative began. Unfortunately, local homelessness, domestic violence, petty crime, and national church shootings became issues that the congregation was forced to face. Security at Grace was enhanced for the safety of all.

John Chiles, a Grace church member and professional chef, began monthly cooking classes that are still very well – attended. Numerous Girl Scout troops continued – and still continue – to meet regularly at Grace. The Brown Bag Bible study group continued – and still continues -- to coordinate the lunch that is served to hungry Salkehatchie Summer Service volunteers every July. Our own, Sandra Love, was elected President of the Columbia District United Methodist Women. Wednesday night dinners, followed by prayer gatherings, once again, became well – attended events. Sadly, Oscar Stephens, our resident Seeds of Hope farmer, retired in 2018, however, fresh fruits and vegetables grown by two new local farmers are now sold at Grace during the summer months.

Funds were raised to replace the electronic piano and also to provide scholarships for Grace children to attend Asbury Hills summer camp. Congregants were, and still are, encouraged to join the \$1500 club by donating that sum to the church to help pay down the mortgage.

During the years of Pastor Murray’s leadership, the national and international United Methodist churches struggled with issues that came to be addressed by many Christian denominations worldwide, primarily those having to do with the inclusion of people who belong to the LGBTQ community. The question also arose about whether professing members of those communities should serve as United Methodist pastors or in other leadership positions. The choices regarding these issues were narrowed down to two – one being more conservative and more reflective of the church discipline and the other being more liberal, less reflective of the discipline, but more in line with the thoughts and

feelings of many people living in the United States today. At the international United Methodist conference held in 2019, the more conservative option passed by a very narrow margin. It is still too soon to see how this vote will affect Grace Church and our denomination in the months and years to come.

Pastor Murray and Susan left Grace in June, 2019, headed to a Trinity United Methodist church in the upstate. In their place, Pastor Rett Haselden, his wife, Lollie, and their two young children, Thomas and Wyatt, arrived. For those of us who had been attending Grace since its inception, it was both exciting and amazing to welcome a pastor who was the same age – or younger—than our own children! Pastor Rett challenges us each week with thought – provoking sermons, delivered to both children and adults alike. He encourages the growth of our spiritual lives by leading two weekly Bible studies.

Grace's building and equipment have begun to show their age. The air conditioner in the sanctuary was recently repaired as has the projector. Where congregants once excitedly contributed to the church budget for the purpose of building something new, they now find it necessary to fill Grace's coffers with funds that are used to fix and maintain.

It's still exciting to see Grace's congregation become more racially diverse. Sadly, when compared to previous years in our church history, the number of children and youth attending is low. Those numbers, however, sporadically increase when Grace members bring their grandchildren to the worship services. A few young families with their very precious little ones have joined us recently. We continue to see hope for the future.

In early 2020, an unusual and new disease appeared in China – believed to have transferred from bats to humans. It quickly spread out of China, into the United States and other countries around the world. The virus, classified as a corona virus and named Covid19, became responsible for a worldwide pandemic. In March, 2020, the governor of South Carolina ordered residents to shelter at home to prevent spread of the virus. Many businesses – including churches – were forced to close. Worship services, Sunday School classes, and life – as we knew it – ended.

Rev. Haselden, choir director, Mark Merritt, and organist, Cecile Barrington, continued to lead us in virtual worship services that were viewed at home. In – house worship began, once again, in June 2020, with strict regulations that included the wearing of mandatory facial masks. Most members preferred to stay at home to watch the worship services online. Virtual Zoom meetings allowed congregants to see each other during fellowship time, Sunday School, and committee meetings.

As of September 2020, conditions had not changed – which meant we couldn't celebrate our 35th anniversary in the usual fashion. Also, the decision was made to hold only one 10:00 AM worship service. In the midst of a pandemic, however, we were still able to proclaim: God is good, all the time! All the time, God is good!!

By September 2022, following the advent of Covid vaccines and boosters, mask – wearing practices were relaxed and we were, once again, able to safely return to services in the sanctuary and hold dinners and other activities in the fellowship hall. Some members and guests still opted to participate via Zoom. Sermon discussion groups, following the worship services, replaced the adult Sunday School classes. Finally, in 2022, United Methodist Women became United Women in Faith.

Grace UMC currently has 276 members. Although small in number when compared to other United Methodist congregations in the area, Grace prides herself on being a genuine church family whose members love and care for each other. Grace continues to be a church known for spirit – filled worship, outreach opportunities, outstanding music, education and fellowship programs for all ages, and people who are committed to fulfilling our mission: “to know Jesus and to make him known to others”.