

## **Longevity Has A Purpose: Oldest Church Building Was Named After Its White Paint**

*Published in Tulsa World 06-23-07 by Reporter Bill Sherman*

Brother Dean Stafford preached Sunday on I Corinthians 13, the love chapter, in what is believed to be Tulsa County's oldest church building.

Stafford has pastored the small, close-knit congregation for 40 years.

For most of its 132 years, the small country church at 12222 S. 129th East Ave. was known simply as the White Church, because it was painted white at a time when most buildings in the area were not painted.

The property has gone through various name changes and construction projects, but has been a church since 1875.

For the past six decades, the congregation now known as Grace Assembly has met there, surrounded by fields, trees and an old cemetery.

On a typical Sunday, two or three dozen people attend the church, many of them longtime members.

"We're just a big family," Stafford said.

Stafford's earliest church memories are of attending the White Church with an aunt and uncle in the 1930s when he was 5 years old. Even at that time, the church had been around for more than 60 years.

He was born in 1933 in a house on a fruit farm just a couple miles from the church, and except for a short stint in California as a boy during World War II, he has lived his entire life a few miles from the historic church.

He married the former Dixie Ann Tattershall, also from that neighborhood, in 1952 in the White Church.

Stafford's family history at the church goes back beyond his memory, or records he knows about.

He does know that the church building, which was founded by Presbyterians, was sold for \$150 in 1928 to three of the church trustees at that time, one of them his uncle, C.O. Stafford.

And he knows that when his parents moved from California back to Broken Arrow after World War II, they found the church boarded up.

It was his mother and future mother-in-law who took a crowbar to the boards, cleaned up the church, and asked the Rev. O.W. Webb, pastor of the then-thriving Beams of Light Tabernacle in Tulsa, to provide someone to preach to the congregation.

In those years, the White Church was known as a mission congregation of Beams of Light.

Beams of Light was the lead church in a group of churches called the Full Gospel Grace Fellowship.

The Rev. Bob Yandian, pastor of the Tulsa mega-church Grace Church, formerly called Grace Fellowship, came out of Beams of Light.

Stafford said that over the years, a succession of ministers came to the church.

"We've had those that lasted one service, those that lasted a few weeks, and those that lasted a few years," Stafford said.

That succession ended on March 10, 1967, when the congregation asked Stafford to be pastor of the church.

At 34 years of age, and a student at the former Gleaner Bible school in west Tulsa, he did not feel qualified.

"I told them no, but said I would come and teach them what I was learning in Bible school," Stafford said.

For the first five years, he did not call himself pastor of the church.

This March, he celebrated his 40th anniversary as pastor there.

During the Civil Rights movement, a phone call convinced him he needed to change the historic name of the church.

In a strong New York accent, a woman said she had driven by the church, and saw the name.

"Does that mean only white folks are welcome there?" she asked.

He assured her that was not the case, and then persuaded church leaders to rename the church Full Gospel Grace Assembly.

Later Full Gospel was dropped from the name.

The name White Church remains on a historical marker in front of the church, however, and just two weeks ago, a woman called Stafford and said she and her husband were looking for a church where black people are not allowed.

"This isn't the church you're looking for," Stafford told her, explaining that blacks are welcomed, and occasionally preach at the church.