

PASSING THE HAT

When Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. accepted the call as minister to Mountain Brook Baptist Church following a two year search, it was an exciting time for everyone in our church family. We had enjoyed able leadership under our interim minister, Dr. Mabry Lunceford of Samford's Religion Department, but our church was reaching its teenage years and was waiting expectantly for what the future could bring. Dr. Nelson believed our church growth was limited by the size of our Chapel. This had been addressed prior to his move and now with a building committee in place, the vision for a new Sanctuary soon started to become a reality. But Dr. Nelson did not want only brick and mortar for us. He wanted us to embrace the fullness of Christ and, in his words, make our church "a lighthouse of evangelism, a schoolhouse of Christian growth, and a toolhouse of love and service." It was a daunting challenge. We faced several obstacles. We had to pay off the debt from the Educational Building. Then we had to incur another debt in order to make a temporary worship space in the Fellowship Hall. Sadly, this meant no more Friday Night Skating in the Fellowship Hall for me, but the good news was that we were bursting at the seams. Looking back, I know that it was a happy time for our church.

Before my dad passed away, I was asking him about times past, and he shared this story about seeing God at work. In June 1963, after finally paying off prior debt, the building fund committee met to discuss how to pay for a Sanctuary. They decided to make their own pledges before going to the Deacons and later the church. Believing in the vision of the pastor, faith in God, faith in each other, and faith in the future, they decided to "pass the proverbial hat" with each committee member dropping in a piece of paper stating the amount he was pledging. The total of the pledges was \$185,000, a very encouraging start. But then the committee chair asked each person to pray very deliberately and sacrificially about the commitment each had made. They were searching for God's guidance; were any of them able to give God more? The hat was passed for a second time. When the Deacons' meeting was held two nights later, the building fund committee reported that \$211,000 had been pledged...and this was enough to make a beginning. From that pledge, people went to work to design the Sanctuary. All the time, the building fund was slowly growing.

For their abiding faith, for their leadership, and for their perseverance then and now we can all give thanks. In our 75th year, looking to the past but pressing on to the future, we reflect on those words that were included in the dedication of the Sanctuary, March 26, 1967:

The building in which we worship speaks for itself. It is beautiful, worshipful, and enjoyable in so many details. But let us determine that our emphasis now will be upon deepening the spiritual life of our congregation. We shall not be satisfied until the depth of our Christian faith reaches into every home and every life of our community. Prayer and faith have brought us thus far. They will bring the blessings of God upon us continually. We shall not stop until the last of the lost of the least of this community and the world come to Jesus Christ. ("The Message of the Church," Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr.)



Mary Holcomb Scott

Top: The parents of the Holcomb children, John H. Holcomb Jr. with his wife, Frances Holcomb.

Bottom: This Christmas Card features some familiar faces you might know—the Holcomb siblings! From left to right on the front row: Beth Holcomb Frey holding John Holcomb III, followed by Mary Holcomb Scott and Susan Holcomb Acker (sister-in-law to Joyce Ratliff). Barbara (Babs) Holcomb Walker is in the back row.



MARCH 17, 2019

WE'VE A STORY TO TELL
75th Anniversary Memories of Mountain Brook Baptist Church

CATHERINE BRYANT ALLEN

Catherine Bryant's remarkable life story begins in the East Lake/Woodlawn area of Birmingham literally on the border of the campus of Howard College. She and her family attended Ruhama Baptist Church, which operated almost as a subsidiary of the college. Many college students attended Ruhama Baptist Church and a number of Howard College faculty members were involved in teaching and ministry.

In GAs and other church classes, children and youth were repeatedly admonished to look for God's leadership to discern and follow God's plan for their lives. Catherine took this command seriously and decided to use her talents as an accomplished wordsmith to be a missionary journalist—to write about missionaries and missions work. While still in high school, where she was editor of the Woodlawn Tattler, Catherine had the audacity (a very strong lifelong trait) to ring up Miss Alma Hunt, the head of the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), an auxiliary organization to the Southern Baptist Convention that publishes literature for women and children. Catherine requested to be hired as a writer for the GA magazine published by WMU. Miss Hunt is reported to have politely suggested that Catherine should perhaps go to college, get some missionary experience, and come back in ten years or so.

Always one to follow good advice, Catherine enrolled at what had become Samford University at its new campus in Homewood. She quickly became editor of the Samford Crimson and dutifully spent a less than pleasant summer in rural Illinois as an actual missionary.

Back at Samford, she caught the eye of a handsome and dashing young professor recently relocated from Pennsylvania, Dr. Lee N. Allen. Lee came to Samford from the faculty of Eastern Baptist College (now Eastern University), though he had gotten his doctorate degree from the University of Pennsylvania while he had been teaching at Eastern. In the presence of our own Dr. William E. Hull, Lee asked Catherine for their first date, and they were married the summer before Catherine's senior year.

As Catherine was graduating from Samford, Miss Alma Hunt contacted her and asked that she join WMU as an editor of the Sunbeams magazine. Catherine accepted and rose steadily through the ranks at WMU, including promotions to executive management and eventually to Associate Executive Director.

Notably, Catherine always took careful steps to prepare herself for any opportunity. Upon being hired as editor of Sunbeams, she enrolled in special courses in Early Childhood Learning. As a new executive at WMU, she spent her weekends in Atlanta, earning a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Emory University in 18 months.

Along the way, Catherine:

- Authored her first book, the definitive study of Lottie Moon entitled "The New Lottie Moon Story" (available in our church library)
- Taught writing to Liberty National executives
- Led a controversial denominational study on the roles of women in Baptist churches, a study that called for greater recognition of the roles and contributions of women
- Became the first woman to address the graduating class at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Openly, vehemently, and effectively opposed denominational efforts to limit and even eliminate any and all leadership roles for women in Baptist churches

After Catherine left WMU in 1989, she worked with Samford to lead their Sesquicentennial Celebration in 1991. She also served as President of the Women's Department of the Baptist World Alliance from 1990-1995, leading conferences worldwide to enhance Baptist ministry to women. After her time at the Women's Department, she helped found Global Women, a new organization that also provided missions and ministry opportunities as well as networking and leadership opportunities for women worldwide.

Through Catherine's perseverance, Mountain Brook Baptist Church has partnered with Baptists in Russia, China, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East to expand the missions footprint of Mountain Brook Baptist Church all over the world.

The Allen family has grown over the years—son Leland and his wife Traci and their two daughters, Lane and Mary Lee; and daughter Leslie. The Allens joined the family of Mountain Brook Baptist Church in 1976, and they have enriched our church life in many ways. Lee and Catherine have taught Sunday School for many years, often together; they first taught a three-week orientation class for new members and later co-taught a well-attended couples' class. Lee is a Life Deacon and also served as our Church Moderator for many years. Catherine is also a Life Deacon, and she was the first female Deacon to be ordained at Mountain Brook Baptist Church. In addition, Catherine has written most of our weekly publications celebrating our 75th Anniversary. Catherine is uniquely qualified to contribute to such a task given that Lee and Catherine co-wrote the 1994 50th anniversary history of our church titled "Outward Focus" and updated it in 2014 for the 70th anniversary with the title "Higher Ground."

As a church and as a denomination, we are indebted to Catherine Allen for a lifetime of dedicated service.

Note: As noted above, Catherine has written most of the weekly tributes to the many people who have contributed to the life and history of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. She was not aware of this story about her life being included in this week's publication and did not authorize this effort. Any and all errors and omissions must therefore be attributed to this author, who chooses to hide behind a shield of anonymity.

Top: The Allens have traveled around the world together sharing the good news of the gospel. Here, they are pictured riding an elephant in north Thailand in January 1999. Bottom: Catherine and Lee Allen were married on August 24, 1963 at Ruhama Baptist Church in Eastlake near the old Howard College campus. This photo was taken on the front steps of the church.

