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New Hope marks 100 years in Katy

Barker Church's oldest members reminisce about the early days

By **KIMBERLY PIÑA**, *Chronicle Correspondent*

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New Hope Presbyterian Church at 1350 North Mason Road in Katy recently celebrated the church's 100th birthday. The Rev. Belinda Windham, left, honored the three oldest members: Anna Baker, 90, center; Altha Dimon, 96; and Glen Fry, 87.

Suzanne Rehak/For the Chronicle

Atha Dimon remembers when she used to walk a mile down a dirt road to get to church on Sunday mornings. Sometimes, a neighbor would cut across Dimon's pasture to pick her up in a horse and buggy.

"There wasn't any traffic on the road, of course," said Dimon, 96, who started going to First Presbyterian Church of Barker in the 1950s. "It was an hour or more before there were three cars going down the Katy highway."

More than 50 years ago, the First Presbyterian church served as a missionary church in the small town of Barker, west of Houston. One general store provided for Barker's surrounding farms and ranches and residents often traveled by railway rather than brave long journeys on unpaved roads.

Referred to as the Barker Church by its original members, Dimon said it served as a community center for everyone. The church was founded Nov. 19, 1906 and most attendees did not become official members, she said.

"It was a church that you didn't join — you just went and supported it," said Dimon, a daughter of Maud and E.H. Marks.

Today, vehicles of all types crowd the now-paved Katy Freeway and Katy's open fields have developed into shopping centers and subdivisions. While some residents and a post office are still in Barker, the town now resembles a neighborhood.

The small wooden building of Barker Church has moved from its original location on Barker-Clodine Road to private property owned by Maudine Marks. But the church's roots and history remain in the foundation of its successor, New Hope Presbyterian Church, in Katy.

Located at 1350 N. Mason Road, New Hope church celebrated its 100th anniversary last weekend. A special centennial service honored Dimon, along with Anna Baker and Glen Fry, who are New Hope's oldest members and original members of the Barker Church.

Baptized in 1922 in the Barker Church, 87-year-old Glen Fry said he has been a member forever — or at least since the era when Katy was considered rural.

"We used to be so far out in the country you couldn't find us," Fry said about the Barker Church. "We had 25 or 30 people come to church and that was a big crowd because no one really lived out here."

The westward expansion of Houston caused a decline in the importance of the Barker Church as a centerpiece of the small community, according to church records. By early 1974, the church had only 40 members and decided to relocate further west.

In 1977, five acres at Mason Road was purchased with assistance from the church's Presbytery and plans to construct a new church building began.

Since it was no longer located in the town of Barker, the church was renamed New Hope Presbyterian Church in 1978 and members moved into the new building in 1980.

Historical records, pictures and newspaper clippings about Barker church are being collected for a scrapbook documenting the church's history, said Bill Weldon, communications elder at New Hope.

Most of all, Weldon said the historical anecdotes shared by the church's original members are what he hopes the congregation will remember.

"We've got a history that a lot of the newer members didn't really know about," said Weldon, adding that about 200 people attend New Hope. "Ms. Baker, Ms. Dimon and Mr. Fry have stories all the time, and we want to get as much of the history as we can from them."

As New Hope's pastor for only eight months, the Rev. Belinda Windham said she's excited to be part of the congregation's milestone.

"It's, of course, great to come into a church with such a longstanding history," said Windham, who accepted the leadership position after a yearlong search by the congregation.

Windham said the remarkable aspect of New Hope is that it had only two other pastors before she came.

"It's a sign of stability," Windham said about New Hope's leadership. "Pastors come and go much more quickly in most churches."

Before Windham, the Rev. Marcia Miscall served as New Hope's pastor from 1995 until 2005. The Rev. William "Bill" Schulenberg was New Hope's first pastor and Barker Church's last pastor documented in church records.

When the Barker Church started a century ago, Anna Baker said pastors were hard to come by. No official minister led the church, and weeks would pass without a Sunday sermon, she said.

"When I was first joined the Barker church, we never had a regular preacher," Baker said.

The reverends H. Olmstead and J. Marshal Janes served as ministers at Barker Church, according to church history.

When Schulenberg retired from New Hope in 1994, Baker, who sat on the pastor search committee, said she sought his guidance on finding a suitable replacement. Instead, Baker said he gave her advice regarding men's involvement at the church.

"He said, 'The women are running the church. Until you get the men organized in the church, you will not grow,'" she said. "I got the men's group organized and they do wonderful."

Baker, who celebrated her 90th birthday in September, said she continues to meet with the women's group weekly, helps with craft activities, and folds and mails the church newsletter.

While her involvement at New Hope has slowed down a bit, she said nothing will keep her from attending Sunday school or missing a sermon.

"I'm going to stay here until they put me in the wooden box," Baker said.

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