

Historical Highlights of Morningside Presbyterian Church 1925 - Present Atlanta, Georgia

The story of Morningside Presbyterian Church – indeed of any church – is far more than the story of its pastors. However, organizing our history into chapters organized around the ten Ministers of Word and Sacrament who have served our congregation as senior pastor offers a convenient way to think about our history.

REV. CARL McMURRAY 1926 – 1932

Ordained in the Presbytery of Atlanta in 1925 as assistant pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Rev. McMurray was assigned to do a neighborhood census for starting a Sunday School in the Virginia-Highland area. The resulting Sunday School began in July 1925, in a bungalow at 415 Morningside Drive. Morningside Presbyterian Church was officially organized in November 1925, and Rev. McMurray installed as the first pastor in February 1926.

That May, ground was broken on new construction for a sanctuary and classrooms. That building, now numbered 1350 North Morningside Drive, is presently used for condominiums.

Rev. McMurray, a graduate of Presbyterian College (BA), the University of South Carolina (MA), and Princeton Seminary (ThM), after resigning his position at MPC, went on to earn a Ph.D. at Edinburgh University, and to spend five months at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. When he left MPC, Rev. McMurray had grown this brand-new church to a membership of 401.

REV. DR. SAMUEL MORRIS 1933 – 1937

A graduate of Erskine College and Columbia Theological Seminary, Rev. Morris spent his early career serving in South Carolina, where he preached to inmates of the South Carolina Penitentiary. From 1901 to 1930 he served as Secretary of Home Missions for the Southern Presbyterian denomination. During his tenure, membership in that denomination grew from 250,000 to more than 500,000.

In 1934, Rev. Morris offered his resignation due to health issues; however, his resignation was not accepted. John B. Dickson, still a student at Columbia Seminary, came to MPC as co-pastor.

Rev. Morris officially resigned again in January 1937. He was granted *Pastor Emeritus* status that March, and died in May 1937.

REV. JOHN B. DICKSON 1937 – 1943

Rev. Dickson, originally from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, completed his studies at Columbia Theological Seminary and began serving as Morningside's senior pastor upon the resignation of Dr. Morris.

Under Rev. Dickson's leadership, church buildings were renovated and a new pipe organ was installed, plus the mortgage on the new building was retired. That in hand, he led the foundation of a Building

Fund for the erection of a new church down the street at 1411 N. Morningside Drive – the church we worship in today.

Other achievements during his tenure include the building of a cottage for young people at Camp Smyrna and establishing the office of Director of Religious Education at MPC.

REV. DR. ARTHUR VANN GIBSON
1943 – 1972

During Dr. Gibson’s long and distinguished term of service at MPC, our church and denomination – and our world – underwent a period of unprecedented change. Our new minister brought scholarly accomplishments – Davidson College (BA), Union Theological Seminary (BD) and Presbyterian College (DD) – to the pulpit, along with outstanding leadership skills.

After the turmoil and the losses of World War II, he oversaw construction of our building at 1411 N. Morningside Drive during the period from April 1948 through October 1949. The building was crowned with its steeple in 1956/1957.

At the end of 1957, Dr. Gibson was one of 80 Atlanta ministers to create, sign and publish the “Manifest,” a call for communication between races, maintenance of public schools, and obedience to the law and the courts. This historical and courageous document was a milestone toward upholding equal civil rights for all races.

Dr. Gibson also was a leader in religious programming in the media and was the first American clergyman to receive the prestigious Peabody Award for religious broadcasting. On the radio, his shows were “The Pastor’s Study” and “The Midnight Minister”; “The Pastor’s Study” moved to television on WSB-TV.

As a side note, the outreach ministry of the church until the late 1980s was done through the Sunday School classes and the Women of the Church groups. Each group had a constitution, bylaws and a separate bank account. For example, MPC’s archives contain records for the Kitchen Class that began in 1926 and ceased operations as the Fellowship Class in the 1980s. They did a variety of good works such as collections and working with community groups – even to supporting individual children at the Thornwell Home and School for Children; however, none of this activity is reflected in church finances, Session minutes or the church bulletin.

MPC also led in recognizing the contributions and value of women as church leaders. In December 1965, Mrs. W.R. Jordan was ordained as an elder, and Pearl Weathers was ordained to the office of deacon.

Morningside Presbyterian’s church membership had continued to grow along with its leafy in-town neighborhood, reaching a maximum of 1058 members in 1960. However, by the mid-sixties, neighborhood and church alike were threatened by the proposed route of I-485, “The Presidential Parkway,” right through the heart of the community. The church manse at 798 Cumberland Road was taken for part of highway construction, as were the homes of a number of church members. Others fled to the suburbs, not wishing to live next to a freeway, or, unfortunately, in some cases not wishing their children to attend integrated city schools. The Morningside community mounted a vigorous protest against the unnecessary highway that lasted into the 1970s, after which the neighborhood began to rebuild, albeit with some new park space where homes once stood.

REV. DR. C. CHARLES BENZ, JR.
1973 – 1980

Dr. Benz was one of two ministers in the nation to receive the newly-created Doctor of Sacred Theology degree from Columbia Theological Seminary. He did his undergraduate work at Presbyterian College (BA)

The Rev. Dr. E. (Eleanor) Joyce Rimes, who received her BA in Religion from Stetson University, her Master of Divinity from Columbia Theological Seminary, and her Doctorate of Ministry from Union Theological Seminary, became the first woman in the Atlanta Presbytery to serve in a full-time ministerial position when she became our associate pastor.

We began serving our longest-running outreach program, Meals on Wheels, in November 1979.

During these years, the church also undertook improvements to our sound system and repairs to the organ.

REV. LARRY CROCKER
1981 – 1984

A graduate of Presbyterian College (BA) and Columbia Theological Seminary (MDiv), Rev. Crocker served during a period when controversy around construction of I-485, which would have bisected the neighborhood, was beginning to have negative effects throughout Morningside.

As an outreach effort during this time, the congregation began staffing the homeless shelter established by Morningside Baptist Church. When Rev. Crocker left to return to South Carolina, “Perky” Daniel, an intern from Columbia Theological Seminary, stepped into a leadership role in the life of the congregation which led to her being called to the pulpit.

REV. ELINOR PERKINS “PERKY” DANIEL
1984 – 1993

Rev. Daniel began at MPC as Student Pastor for Christian Education. A graduate of Agnes Scott College (BA), she continued her theological education while serving as senior pastor (the third woman in our presbytery to do so), receiving her Master of Divinity degree in 1986.

Outreach initiatives during this time included establishing a connection with the Open Door Community Center and, in 1989, Morningside’s first of many Habitat for Humanity builds.

During part of her term, Dr. Lawrence Bottoms served as parish associate. Dr. Bottoms’ notable career included serving as the first black moderator of the Presbyterian Church in US (PCUS), also known as the Southern Church, serving as Secretary for Negro Work for the Presbyterian denomination (1953–1964), and pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur.

After leaving MPC, Rev. Daniel earned a Ph.D. in English from Georgia State University.

REV. A(NNE) COILE ESTES
1993 – 2000

Originally from Decatur, Rev. Estes came to Morningside after graduation from the University of Georgia, Emory School of Law and Columbia Theological Seminary (MDiv) by way of Charleston, South Carolina.

She oversaw significant renovation of the church building, funded through the sale of some of our unused property. One of her favorite outside ministries was the Thornwell Home and School for Children, serving on its Board of Trustees.

A highlight of her tenure was her wedding to attorney Michael Mears, to which the entire congregation was invited.

A major achievement during this period was the establishment of the church-run Morningside Presbyterian Preschool in our facilities, despite declining church membership and ongoing financial pressures.

REV. DR. JOANNA M. ADAMS
2004 – 2010

At a crucial time in MPC's history, the church was blessed with the acceptance of our call by Rev. Joanna Adams, one of our denomination's most notable and celebrated ministers. She had returned to her home in Atlanta after several years co-pastoring Chicago's large and historic Fourth Presbyterian Church, assuming it was her time to retire from parish ministry. Instead, she took MPC from 118 members to more than 400 and inspired and directed our first-ever capital campaign, *A Time of Promise*, which resulted in a more than \$2 million construction and renovation project.

As a result of *A Time of Promise*, ongoing damage from 31 points of water intrusion were finally corrected, allowing – among other things – an end to frequent repainting of the sanctuary and restoration of the magnificent Wicks pipe organ. Even more importantly, the work created a new entrance – the Welcome Center – as well as an elevator connecting all four levels of the church (including the Fellowship Hall), and restrooms on the main level, all of which make church functions accessible and welcoming to everyone.

Another hallmark of Rev. Adams' ministry at Morningside was encouraging the use of "listening" and "visioning" sessions for all the church's constituencies to develop multi-year strategic plans. Part of the church's spectacular growth is due to joint efforts between the pastor's office and the lay leadership to identify congregational needs and find ways to meet them, for example, in building children's programs. An explosion in the size of our Vacation Bible Schools, children's choirs and a new summer Mission Camp resulted from these efforts.

Morningside also benefited from Rev. Adams high profile in the city of Atlanta and the denomination. After her graduation from Emory University (BA), and Columbia Theological Seminary (MDiv) (her honorary DDiv was bestowed by Davidson College), she served Atlanta congregations at Central Presbyterian, North Decatur Presbyterian, and Trinity Presbyterian before her move to Chicago. She has been the preacher for the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (USA), "The Protestant Hour," "Day One," the PC(USA) Peacemaking 2000 Conference, numerous conferences at Montreat, the Chautauqua Institution, the Memorial Church of Harvard University, and numerous Presbyterian gatherings and ecumenical events around the country. In July 2005, she preached in Washington, D.C.,

at the National Cathedral in observance of Georgia Day. She also was honored as Georgia's Woman of the Year.

Rev. Adams was one of the creators of our denomination's confessional statement, "A Brief Statement of Faith," and a co-founder of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, working for full inclusion of all believers. Her honors, speaking engagements, publications, board memberships and trustee positions are numerous and international. Rev. Adams became MPC's *Pastor Emerita* in September 2011.

REV. DR. BARON A. MULLIS
2011 – present

A graduate of the University of North Carolina (BA) and Princeton Theological Seminary (MDiv and DMin), Dr. Mullis served churches in Indianapolis and Charlotte, including a pulpit exchange in Scotland, before being called to MPC. To see and hear more about Dr. Mullis, visit our Church Staff page.

A recent all-congregational survey found widespread satisfaction with our church, particularly in the areas of worship and music. Building on the success of "visioning" programs in the past, MPC's leadership is deepening the dialog with members and friends to discern a new five-year strategic plan for the church.