



1938-1948

## “Old things are passed away”

B. Frank Hall

**E**ven before Dr. Smylie resigned in March of 1937, the officers of the church had begun preparing for his successor. In November, 1936, the joint boards of elders and deacons selected a committee of five officers to choose “the man who, in their judgment, is best qualified to meet the requirements of the pastorate in our church.” A year later, they presented their choice to the congregation. He was Dr. B. Frank Hall of North Carolina.

Benjamin Franklin Hall, born in North Carolina in 1908, was regarded as “one of the most brilliant and promising of the younger ministers in the Southern Presbyterian Church.” He was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Davidson College and the youngest man to earn a Doctor of Theology degree from Union Theological Seminary. He had pastored a missions church in Morehead City, North Carolina and had written numerous articles for the denomination on youth programs, an interest that continued during his years at Central.

Dr. Hall struck a note of optimism as he began his pastorate on the second day of the new year, 1938. “Together,” he wrote, “we begin, with this New Year, a new era in the life of our church. Old things are passed away, old discouragements are forgotten, old sins of sloth and faithlessness are put behind us. All things are new.”

The whole church seemed to share in this optimism. Long remembered for his engaging pulpit style, Dr. Hall charmed the combined Sunday School classes when they joined to welcome him. He “gave us a splendid talk - one which held the attention of old and young and had a message for both,” enthused Ninon Harper. “From now on,” she added, tongue-in-cheek, “we shall look to Dr. Hall to iron out all the kinks in our school.” The Session pledged to Dr. Hall “our full, wholehearted, sincere, and earnest support in his work...”



*Benjamin Franklin Hall.*

Central settled into a period of tranquility and steady growth. The church still labored under tremendous debt, but as the depression eased, it was gradually reduced. In 1941, Congregation B’Nai El settled its debt to Central for \$50,000. In 1942, money was found to employ a Minister of Education, Mr. Herman Schuessler.

The Second World War forced some changes on the church. Because of fuel rationing, the building was heated only on Sundays and Tuesdays. Because of food rationing, the dinner usually held before the annual congregational meeting was cancelled in 1943. Several Sunday School teachers were called up for military service, and by 1945, over 100 men and women from Central were in uniform.

The world-wide conflagration also caused Central to begin to think beyond its own horizons. In his message for the new year, 1945, Dr. Hall wrote in the church newsletter, *The Centralian*:

*There is no longer the slightest use in trying to deceive ourselves about the state of civilization we have known. Reluctant though we may be, we have to recognize death when we see it; and the world we used to live in is as dead as a dinosaur ... This war has wrought a revolution in human affairs more drastic than the overturn of Rome, or the death of feudalism, or the industrial revolution... What has happened?*

*Just this: we have failed to face the fact that we long have suspected, that in our civilization, so comfortable and satisfactory to us, there were certain elements that were anachronistic and others that were eternally wrong. For instance ... caste and discrimination and the kind of cut-throat competition that exalts selfishness and denies mutual responsibility were always wrong, even though glorified by the order we called American. Now, the stresses of this titanic war have revealed weaknesses hitherto invisible and widened cracks heretofore disregarded. The new world will not be built out of crumbling material. For better or for worse it will be really new. It will be better if we apply to its building the genius of enlightened Christendom. It will be hideously worse if we deny our responsibility, and insisting on something that can never be, let the real world be fashioned by unchristian forces.*



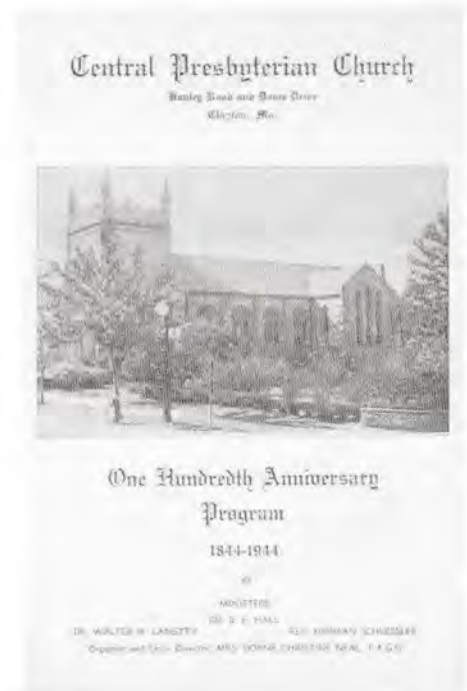
Lifelong Central member Major Oscar W. Rexford, Army Air Corps, was among many members who served during the war.

Dr. Hall stressed the need for increasing cooperation and unity among denominations. “There is nothing,” he wrote, “that ought to keep apart

people who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The future is for Christians, not for the divisive denominationalists. 600,000,000 Christians, as one in Christ, and everyone members one of another, would cause evils that seem impregnable to crumble overnight.” Consistent with his beliefs, Dr. Hall engaged in numerous interdenominational activities, in addition to ministering to Central. He was elected president of the Metropolitan Church Federation of Greater St. Louis in 1945 and in 1948 served as head of the Missouri Council of Churches.

While Dr. Hall was attending the World Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Geneva, Switzerland in August, 1948, the Session abruptly announced his resignation, citing poor health as the singular reason for the decision. From the family summer home in North Carolina, Mrs. Hall told the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* that her husband’s health had been impaired by overwork and that, “pending full recovery, he has no plans for ministerial work.” The church was stunned and saddened by the news. Eight months before, Central had celebrated Dr. Hall’s tenth anniversary as pastor. Membership had grown to over 1,400 during his tenure, and the debt had been significantly reduced. Dr. Hall had been hailed as a man of “dynamic personality... possessed of boundless energy and a depth of understanding that has lightened the burden of his parishioners uncounted times...” In April, 1948, he had presented a comprehensive plan for reorganizing the church staff and improving Central’s physical plant. The church was poised to move forward and there was no indication that Dr. Hall would not be there to lead the way. Yet as summer faded into autumn, he was gone. There were no goodbyes or farewell dinners.

The Halls returned to North Carolina and, notwithstanding his wife’s comments to the press, Dr. Hall did return to the ministry.



*Anniversary Program, April, 1944. In the midst of the war, Central celebrated its centennial with week-long festivities.*