

First Change

A cloud appeared on the horizon. In the summer of 1920 Mr. Nicholas decided that he must complete his education and announced his intention to enter The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisville, Kentucky. The church persuaded him to postpone his farewell. But on July 24, 1921, Mr. Nicholas resigned as pastor and requested the congregation to desist from persuading him otherwise. He preached his last message in the church on the morning of August 28, but remained to preside over the ordination of his close college friend, Samuel Roy Orrell, who with his wife joined Oakwood that morning.

Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas with year old Mary Pryor and Mrs. Nicholas' mother, Mrs. Mary Petty, moved to Louisville where he served as pastor of the Franklin Street Baptist Church while attending the Seminary.

Mr. Nicholas died in St. Joseph Infirmary in Louisville on October 31, 1924, eight months prior to completing his education. During memorial services at his Louisville church seven adults accepted Christ. A Roman Catholic mass was also celebrated in his memory in the chapel of the hospital. The funeral was conducted from Oakwood Avenue Baptist Church with interment in Oakwood Cemetery in a section lovingly provided by the church membership. The widow with her three small daughters and her mother soon returned to Richmond where Mrs. Nicholas reared her family in Oakwood Avenue Baptist Church.

The Men's Bible Class erected a gold engraved marble tablet in Oakwood's sanctuary as a lasting memorial. It was unveiled over the door of the baptistery on his next birthday, May 24, 1925, by the two elder daughters, Mary Pryor and Julia May. Thirteen month old Virginia Mason was too young to attend. The tablet is now mounted on the wall close to the entrance of the first unit built on Gay Avenue.

Two months slipped by before Eddie Wilson Billings was found in nearby West Point, Virginia. Even then the State Mission Board had to help the struggling young church by paying a portion of the pastor's salary.

Mr. Billings served Oakwood as pastor from October 29, 1921 to February 22, 1931. He focused attention on the graded system of the Sunday School and more classes were organized. Policies were reviewed and changed during the Billings' tenure. In 1924 the church passed the rule that letters of dismission would be granted only to churches and not to individuals. During the same year the church notified the State Mission Board that the pastor's salary needed no further subsidization and all indebtedness was consolidated into one low interest note of \$16,000.

During Mr. Billings' ministry the Women's Missionary Society, with the organization of the Franklin Ray group, introduced the Circle plan. In 1926 the Every Member Canvas for financial pledges was conducted for the first time by the Finance Committee. This had formerly been a duty of the pastor.

Oakwood soon purchased a new communion service and donated the old one to the home church of the pastor's wife. In November 1927 it voted that only the Deacon Board could authorization use of the church and property for anything other than regular services. Richmond City Council in December cancelled an outstanding debt for an erroneous assessment of taxes on the church property during the years of 1918 through 1920; but the membership voted to pay a state tax for the same period because it was too small to "justify the expense and trouble of cancellation." In 1929 the pastor's salary rose to \$2,600 per year, and a second senior BYPU was organized.

In early 1931 a division in the membership occurred when the pastor became the object of sharp criticism and strong defense. Tempers flared; speeches were made; debates became heated. As a result Mr. Billings resigned on February 22. The church suspended its policy and presented the minister and his family personal letters of dismissal. The Finance Committee recommended severance pay of three months salary, and one member presented Mr. Billings with an envelope which was reputed to contain a gift of money from friends.

The divisive quarrel caused many members to leave the church in protest. The reduced membership and the lack of a pastor compounded the effect of the Great Depression on the financial status of Oakwood. There was reason to wonder if the church would survive.