

Death and New Life: A Case Study of Union Chapel Baptist Church

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April 6, 2018

My Introduction to Death and New Life

In April 2013, I began service as Director of Missions of TCBA. During my second week on the job, a member of the association's administrative team took me to visit the building of the former Union Chapel Baptist Church, a congregation that had disbanded the previous year. Upon disbanding, the church turned the property over to TCBA. What I saw at Union Chapel amazed and touched me.

The building, an older structure that could seat perhaps 75 people comfortably (on olive-green padded pews), had sat empty for nine months. The church seemed frozen in time. It looked just as it did the day the last pastor of the church turned out the lights and locked the door for the final time. Even the attendance board, so common in rural churches and displayed prominently at the front of the sanctuary, had been meticulously kept up to date, with the attendance of their last Sunday School class dutifully noted: "Attendance today: 2; Attendance a year ago: 5." The offering plates were still on the Lord's Supper table, and Baptist Hymnals (1991 edition) were still in the pew racks. The piano (out of tune) and the electric organ still played. It was as if the Rapture had come to Union Chapel before anywhere else!

The poignancy of what I saw stirred my heart. Here was a place where the word was preached and souls saved. It was a church with a history (I found old Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and offering records dating back to the 1920s). Here, couples were united in holy matrimony and loved ones committed to eternity. The faithfully attending members had just moved from their pew to their plot in the cemetery just across an iron fence. The once-alive church had died.

As I dove further into my responsibilities as Director of Missions and became familiar with the association's churches, I began to see many small, struggling churches within our fellowship. I could not help but wonder: how many Tri-County Baptist Association churches are "Union Chapels-in-waiting?" God was using Union Chapel Baptist Church to lead me to the conviction that one of my primary tasks as the new leader of our association would be to develop a strategy to assist struggling churches regain health and become vital Kingdom outposts in their communities.

A Tri-County Church That Died: Union Chapel Baptist Church

Union Chapel Baptist Church was birthed in 1893 in rural, far northeastern Christian County. It began as a "union church," a facility-sharing arrangement not uncommon in the

Ozarks at the time. In a “union church,” congregations representing two (or more) denominational affiliations would share the same church building, each group worshipping on alternating Sundays. The “Union Chapel” consisted of Baptist and Presbyterian congregations, the Baptist group meeting on the third Sunday of the month.

Two factors eventually led the Baptists to build their own building. First, the Baptist group outgrew the Union Church building. Second, the Baptists felt that since they were providing most of the financial support of the Union Chapel building, they should be able to build their own building, exclusively for their use. Thus, in 1944 the new “Union Chapel First Baptist Church” building was built and dedicated—not 100 yards from the old “Union Chapel” facility that they had shared for decades with their Presbyterian neighbors.¹ A long-time pastor in the association reports that the Baptists’ decision to build their own facility caused a rift in the small, tight-knit community.

Sources of information about UCBC, that can shed light on the church’s history and hopefully factors related to the church’s demise, are church minutes, information gleaned from interviews with former UCBC pastors, and interviews with TCBA people knowledgeable about the church, particularly in the church’s last years. In addition, one can learn much from the statistical data contained in Associational annual reports, which are available from the late 1890’s.

Written church records: Some church minutes survive from as far back as the 1920’s and 1930’s. The church clerk, however, showed a preference to using pencil while taking notes during church business meetings, and the passage of time has rendered these documents for the most part illegible. This potential treasure trove of information about the church in its early decades is thus rendered useless as a means of learning about the life of the church.

Interviews: I spoke with two of Union Chapel’s former pastors. On July 24, 2017 I interviewed the church’s last pastor, Rev. Fred Overly. Rev. Overly served the church as supply preacher and then as pastor from the mid-1990’s until the church closed in 2012, and provides valuable insight into the church’s final years.

On August 14, 2017, I spoke with Rev. Winston Burton who served as pastor of Union Chapel Baptist Church from 1968 to 1975. Union Chapel was Rev. Burton’s first pastorate;

¹ The rock-faced old Union Church building, completed in 1902 (and, according to the stone marker on the front of the church, rebuilt in 1945, a year after the Baptist group dedicated their building), still stands a short distance from the Union Chapel Baptist Church. While the lawn around the building is cared for, by all appearances the building itself is no longer used for worship.

interestingly, from available records it appears that he had the longest continuous tenure of any pastor that served the church in its 115 year history, other than the church's final pastor, Rev. Overly. Rev. Burton shared fascinating tidbits that provide color to our knowledge of life at Union Chapel in that period. In addition, I spoke with two long-time pastors in the Tri-County Southern Baptist Association with knowledge of UCBC and its last years.

Statistical data: For the purposes of this summary, I examined four key statistical indicators: total membership, resident membership, Sunday School attendance, and baptisms. The only existing source of statistical information from the church are annual report books from the Christian County Baptist Association.² (Unfortunately, since the church closed, the Missouri Baptist Convention eliminated UCBC's statistical data from the MBC database.) The earliest report book available that mentions UCBC is from 1896. Prior to 1950, only total membership and numbers of baptisms were reported. From 1951 to 1960, resident membership was added. From 1961 to 2006, all four of the key statistical indicators were reported.

Before discussing what the statistics reveal, it is important to note inherent weaknesses in the statistical record. First, the data provided gives an incomplete picture of what was happening at UCBC, since we only have numbers for all four indicators after 1961. In addition, the church did not report in every area every year, even post-1961, leaving gaps in the available information.

In addition to incomplete statistical information, sometimes the data itself is suspect. For example, total membership numbers can be affected by removing from the membership list people who had moved away from the church's field of ministry but never formally changed their membership ("cleaning the rolls"). This makes total membership numbers somewhat unreliable to know what is actually happening in the church.³ Also, experience shows that many churches tend to report areas such as worship attendance rather optimistically. Finally, there is no statistical record for UCBC after 2006. Starting in 2006 the association did not include statistical data in the annual minutes, so we have no statistical record of what was happening in the church in the final seven years of the church's life other than the church's baptism certificate booklet, and the church Sunday School attendance board left hanging in the church after the church closed.

² In 1975 the Christian County Baptist Association merged with the Stone-Taney Baptist Association to form the Tri-County Southern Baptist Association.

³ This apparently happened just a few years before the church closed. In 2003, the church reported total church membership as 74. The next year, in 2004, that number dropped to 17. The 2004 number seems to be closer to reality; for those same years, resident membership in 2003 was 14, and in 2004 was four.

In spite of the weaknesses in the statistical record, the numbers we have tell a story and are essential to understanding what was happening to this church that died. In order to begin to understand this, I examined every associational annual from the late 1890's and developed a table that summarized the statistical data from the church, beginning from 1923 (30 years after the church's founding). Taken together, the statistics and interviews give a compelling (if sometimes contradictory) picture of a church that was born, ministered in a community for 115 years, and then died.

Union Chapel, Decade by Decade: Countdown to Death

Years 1923-1932: The "Roaring Twenties" was a decade of growth for the church. Total membership grew from 22 in 1923 to 62 in 1932, an increase of 182 per cent. In 1924, 20 baptisms were reported, and the church baptized eight people in 1930, representing 28 total baptisms for the ten-year period.

Years 1933-1942: This ten-year period saw a significant decline in membership. Total membership in 1934 peaked at 72 individuals. Within two years membership had dropped to 35 and by 1940 total membership stood at 31. By 1943, however, reported membership had climbed back to 53. The ten-year period thus saw a 57% decrease in membership during the course of the decade, and ended the period with a 26% loss overall. During this same period of time, the church baptized seven individuals in 1933, three in 1934, nine in 1941 and three in 1942, totaling 22 baptisms—six fewer than in the previous decade of growth.

What happened in UCBC that the number of members dropped so precipitously? As mentioned earlier, one possibility is that the church "cleaned their rolls." However, Rev. Overly, the church's last pastor, made a comment provides another explanation. Sometime in the 1930's or 1940's, the church took a stand against an un-remembered moral issue in the community, which resulted in many people in the community having a poor opinion of the church.⁴ Did the church lose members due to this controversy, the roots of which are lost in the mists of time? This is the first of several periods of significant membership loss over the course of the church's life—and perhaps a telling portent of things to come.

⁴ Interview with Reverend Fred Overly, July 24, 2017.

Years 1943-1952: In this 10-year period, church membership remained relatively stable, with some growth, from 53 in 1943 to 58 in 1952. The church baptized more people in this period than in either of the two previous decades, 31 baptisms in the ten-year period.

Significantly, during this period, UCBC made the decision to construct their own building for worship, for reasons earlier specified. I make two observations from the statistical data and information from interviews: first, the construction of their own building for worship did not give the church a significant increase in membership. Second, the number of baptisms reported did not give the church a corresponding increase in members either. What happened? One explanation is that by building their own building, the Baptists “broke communion” with their Presbyterian neighbors with whom they had shared the Union Church. This, added to the difficulty of the previous decade, could have made adding to their membership rolls more difficult.

It would seem logical to assume that in a decade when the church baptized 31 people, church membership would grow by a corresponding number. However, this did not happen. One explanation could be that the church baptized new people, but was ineffective in assimilating the new people into church membership. Another possibility is that the church did, in fact, assimilate the new people, but others leaving the church offset the numbers of new members. It may be significant that the statistical data does not include how many people the church lost in that period. It is possible that the 31 baptisms just barely overcame a significant loss of people due to broken relationships with the community.

Years 1953-1962: During this period, two remarkable things happened related to overall church membership. First, there was a 38 per cent decrease in total membership (20 individuals) in the one-year period between the years 1952 (58 total members) and 1953 (38 total members). Second, after that decrease, the rest of the ten-year period showed 76 per cent increase in total membership, from 38 in 1953 to 67 in 1962. Resident membership dropped from 55 in 1960 to 45 in 1962. Average Sunday School attendance was 37 in 1962. The church baptized 21 people in this ten-year period.

Years 1963-1972 (40 years prior to closing): Total membership grew from 62 in 1963 to 75 in 1972, with a peak in total membership of 87 in 1960 and 1970. Resident membership numbers show wide fluctuation in this period. In 1963, resident membership was 51, and in 1972 had dropped to 42. During this period, resident membership peaked at 60 in 1966 (the largest number of resident members recorded in the church’s history). A year later, however, resident membership fell to 48. By 1971, the number of resident members had dropped to 39. Sunday School attendance shows wide variation as well, with a peak of 61 in 1967

(corresponding to the peak in resident membership of 60 in 1966) to a low of 24 in 1972. The church baptized 32 people in this period.

It was during this period that Rev. Winston Burton came to serve as pastor. His recollection of this time was of a harmonious church that was very supportive and encouraging to him as a young pastor.⁵

Years 1973-1982 (30 years prior to closing): Total membership numbers in this ten-year period show extreme fluctuation, leading one to suspect that the church made errors in reporting, for at least two of the years. In 1976, total membership was 88. The following year, however, that number dropped to 32 and the year after that, 34. The following year, however, total membership was 84. Resident membership climbed from 46 in 1979 to 58 in 1981. However, following this peak in resident membership in 1981, the numbers reported for this category begin to drop precipitously—a drop from which the church never recovered. Sunday School average attendance reported a peak of 60 in 1977. However the year prior (1976), Sunday School attendance was only 28, and two years later was 31. Baptisms in this period totaled 52, the greatest number of baptisms ever recorded in the history of the church. The majority of those baptisms occurred in two years, 1976 (18) and 1982 (14). The high baptism numbers in 1976 seem to correlate with the spike in Sunday School average attendance numbers in 1977 of 60. This spike in baptisms occurred during Rev. Burton's tenure. He relates that during the first five years of his tenure, no one got baptized in the church. Then, in his last year there, 15 were baptized. The two years of high baptisms also seem to correlate with the peak in resident membership of 58 in 1981. Former pastor Overly states that in the early 1980's "the church was a growing work of God."

Years 1983-1992 (20 years prior to closing): Although in this ten-year period total membership seems to decline slightly, the church experienced a steep decline in in resident membership, Sunday School attendance and baptisms. From the peak in resident membership of 58 in 1981, by 1983 it was 39, and by the end of this period in 1992, resident membership was 20. Sunday School attendance in 1983 was 30, but by 1992 had dropped to 11. In the entire ten-year period the church baptized nine people, and from 1988 to 1992 baptized no one.

⁵ Rev. Burton's account of how the church chose him as pastor shines a light on how some rural Ozarks churches chose their pastor. The parents of Burton's wife's were UCBC members when the church was in a pastor-less period. "They didn't have a preacher and they needed a preacher, and my father-in-law suggested to the church that they call me as pastor. Well, I preached there for three Sundays. Later I was at the church at a family reunion, and my father-in-law came up to me and told me 'You're it!' They had chosen me by casting lots."

Years 1993-2002 (10 years prior to closing): The overall decline from the previous ten-year period continues, but to a lesser extent. Resident membership in 1993 is 20, and in 2002 is 15. Sunday School average attendance in 1993 is 12, and by 2002 is 10. There were no baptisms in this period. Total membership numbers reported were 81 in 1993 and 74 in 2002. Pastor Overly states that, when he began service at Union Chapel in the mid-1990's, the church had taken on the characteristics of a "family church" and that his role was basically that of a chaplain to the remaining family in the church. By 2002 the church officially called Overly as pastor, but in his words "death was well on its way by then."

Years 2003-2012: The last ten-year period of the church's existence takes on the feel of a "death watch." Annual Church Profile statistics are available only through the year 2006, for reasons earlier described. Apparently, the church did a "roll cleaning" of membership numbers during this time, because total membership dropped from 74 in 2003 to 17 in 2004. Resident membership was 14 in 2003 but by the next year was only four. Sunday School average attendance in 2003 was 14 but by 2006 was six. From the Sunday School attendance board that hung in the front of the church, we learn that Sunday School attendance in 2011 was five. On the day the church closed, two people attended Sunday School. From church baptismal records we learn that the church baptized three people in 2005. These were the last people baptized by the Union Chapel Baptist Church.

An interesting note is that during this period, church insisted that Overly agree to officially change the name of the church to "Union Chapel Southern Baptist Church." It seems that the remaining members feared that Overly (a graduate from an independent Baptist college), would take them out of the Southern Baptist Convention. (This seems somewhat like "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic"; in their last years of life, the concern was denominational affiliation, not the Great Commission. However, by that time, survival was probably not an option.)

During this period, the church was, in Overly's words "literally dying"; the remaining deacon, aged 93, died of cancer, as did that deacon's wife. Two other women in the church died of cancer as well. In fact, it seemed that many people in the church were afflicted with cancer; Overly states simply that "they all died." The last two remaining members moved to a nursing home, leaving only Overly and his wife.

According to Overly, the decision to finally close the church was in some ways difficult, and in others ways easy. The decision was difficult because Overly had been trying to be optimistic, hoping that the church would turn around. His failing health, however, made it impossible for him to do much more than preach there on Sundays. The decision to close the

church was easy in that the only ones left in the church were Overly and his wife (the last two members of the church having moved to a nursing facility). Tri-County Baptist Association assisted with support and encouragement, and getting information about what the church could do to pass the property on to the association.

Overly admits that he was unsuccessful at getting any new people, especially young people, to attend UCBC. Interestingly, when asked what, if anything, he would have done differently, Overly stated “Knowing what I know now, I’d have bought a cowboy hat and a horse.” The church was located in “horse country” where many people raise horses. In fact, Overly comments that two ladies would often ride to church on horses.

Union Chapel Baptist Church: A Post-Mortem

Why did Union Chapel Baptist Church die? As in any church closure, there are internal as well as external factors. Even with the limited information available, seven internal factors and two external factors stand out.

Internal factors that contributed to the church’s demise include:

1. Decreasing worship attendance;
2. Aging membership;
3. Loss of members by death;
4. A survival mentality (wanting the institution to survive without any change, as evidenced by the remaining few members’ insistence that Reverend Overly agree to officially change the church’s name to “Union Chapel Southern Baptist Church” to ward off any possibility of a change in denominational affiliation);
5. The “Triple Elder Effect” (an older church, with an older membership, and an older pastor) making it difficult to draw younger people to the church;⁶
6. The church became a “family chapel,” further isolating itself from the community.
7. The church failed to reach out to the community in ways that made a viable connection. Census information shows that the community surrounding the church was growing in population during the same period that the church was in decline.⁷

⁶ Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2009), 56.

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/phc-3-27.pdf>;
<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jst/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=D>.

In addition to these internal factors, at least two external factors played a role in Union Chapel Baptist Church closing its doors.

1. There was apparently at least one instance in its history where the church experienced a rift with the community, probably resulting in a negative impression of the church among the residents of the tight-knit rural community.
2. According to Rev. Overly, many of the family farms in the community consolidated into larger holdings that were converted into pastureland.

Union Chapel: Dry Bones Live

Although the property had little apparent commercial value, TCBA listed the property with a realtor, with two prices: \$60,000 if the buyer wanted it for other than religious purposes and \$40,000 if a church decided to buy it. Our thought was that if it sold, we would use the money for missions projects. For a year and a half, we had no serious offers. I would visit the church periodically to check on the condition of the place. Surprisingly, even though the property was essentially abandoned and not watched, there was no evidence of vandalism. On one occasion, we even found a five-dollar bill someone had slipped under the front door! And every time I would go, I would leave an offering in the offering plate that sat silently on the heavy oak wood communion table. It seemed God was preserving the place for something—what, we did not know.

One day in the middle of a million other things, I got a phone call from the pastor of the Nazarene church in Seymour, Missouri, approximately 30 minutes from Union Chapel. It seems that the Nazarene denomination was making an emphasis on starting new churches, and to that end the Seymour Nazarene church had been holding a Bible study in a community near Union Chapel, on a Thursday night in a borrowed Pentecostal church. That arrangement, however, was becoming problematic. A woman from the host church began attending the Nazarene Bible studies, and had the habit of speaking in tongues during the study—causing somewhat of a theological dilemma for the good Nazarenes! The pastor from Seymour had a question for me: would TCBA be willing to rent the Union Chapel church for their Bible study?

Intrigued with the request, I and a group of our TCBA leadership met with the Nazarene pastor and his leadership at Union Chapel's building one evening, to pray and to talk about what might be done. It turned out that the Nazarene pastor and several of his leaders had attended Vacation Bible School at the Union Chapel church as children. Many of them still had family connections in the community, and had family members buried in the cemetery adjacent

to the church. We left the meeting that night with a definite sense that God was “up to something.”

Soon after that meeting, TCBA’s Administrative Team made the decision not to rent or sell, but to give the property to the Nazarene church. We felt convicted that “freely you have received, freely give.” What a blessing to turn the deed and the keys of a building that once housed a vibrant but later silent church and ministry to a group of believers with a vision to make that building a place where the Gospel was proclaimed once more in that community!

Concluding Thoughts

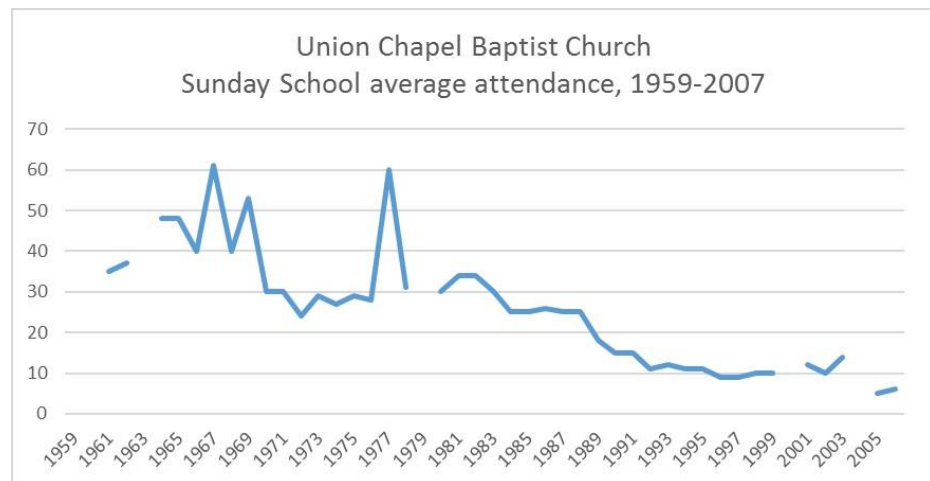
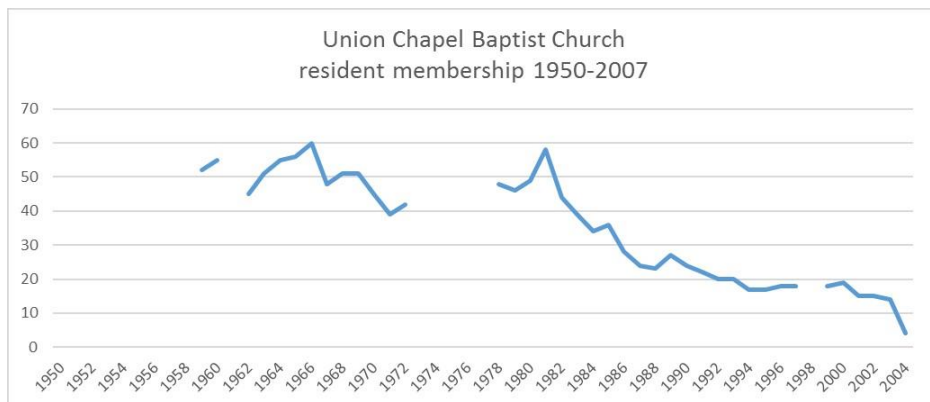
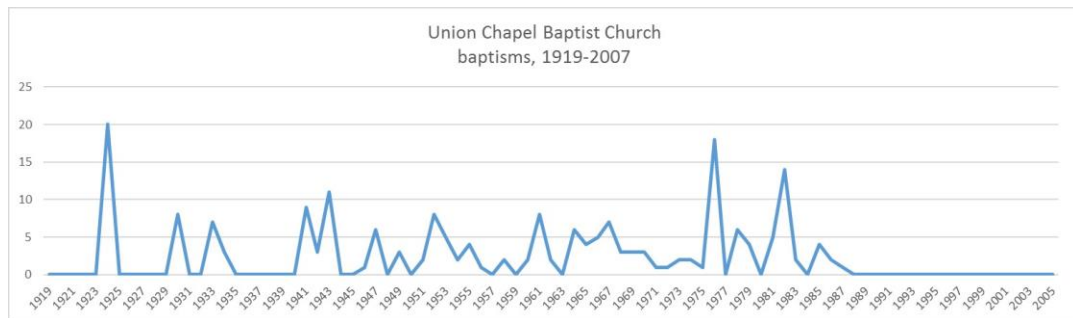
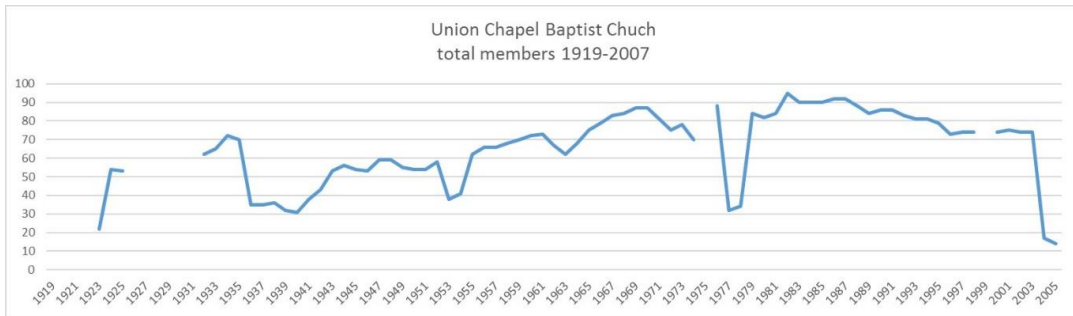
Union Chapel Baptist Church, though closed, became the ground from which a new church was born—and became my introduction to church revitalization in Tri-County Baptist Association. As a new Director of Missions, I looked across the TCBA landscape, and to my chagrin saw what seemed to be many “Union Chapels-in-waiting”—churches with dwindling attendance, mostly in rural outlying areas, with little signs of vibrancy or hope. I wondered: if the Lord allows me to continue as Director of Missions in TBCA, how many more churches will turn out the lights, lock the doors, and bring me the keys in the next five, ten or fifteen years?

Union Chapel was a small, rural church. However, as I look at Tri-County Baptist Association churches as a whole, I have come to realize that the need to revitalize plateaued and declining churches is not just a matter for small, rural churches. In every area of our association, from rural to suburban regions, in small and large churches, one can find plateaued and declining churches. The need in Tri-County Baptist Association is a comprehensive, customizable strategy to assist churches get off the plateau and out of decline, and back to renewed vigor and vision.

Did Union Chapel Baptist Church die? Rev. Burton told one anecdote that leaves one with the conviction that, although the organized entity ceased to exist, Union Chapel’s influence in the lives of the people who came to Christ there continues to this day. Rev. Burton relates that the pastor who followed him lived next to a man and woman whose names were Dan and Laura Hopper. Laura was Roman Catholic, and the Hoppers did not regularly attend church anywhere. The pastor was not shy to invite the Hoppers to church; finally, they agreed to visit. Because of the pastor’s insistent invitation, Laura Hopper placed her faith in Christ while attending UCBC. Later, they moved to Rogersville, Missouri and joined First Baptist Church (where Rev. Burton was serving as pastor) of that town. Laura, a school principal, now serves as that church’s VBS director. In addition, she leads the church’s Christmas ministry called “Journey to Bethlehem,” attended by thousands from all over Missouri and beyond.

So, did Union Chapel Baptist Church die? In one sense, yes. Yet, hearing Laura Hopper's story, one wonders how many other people's lives were changed and still have an impact for the Kingdom of God, all because of a little country church whose light shone bright for a while before finally going out. The Lord Jesus made a promise, referring to His universal Church: "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18 ESV) It is true that as an assembly of believers, UCBC ceased to exist. But His promise, in the context of this little church that died, rings true. In spite of Union Chapel's death, its ministry continues in the lives of people the church touched over the decades. Their lives are touching others, most of whom have never heard of Union Chapel. The "church" died. Yet, God's church lives on!

Statistical profile: Union Chapel Baptist Church



Photos: Union Chapel Baptist Church and Union Chapel Church of the Nazarene

Union Chapel Baptist Church



Union Chapel Church of the Nazarene

