

## HISTORY OF THE HART BRANCH

Because one man hearkened to the counsel of the Lord, the lives of many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been blessed with a church building and a close knit “church family” which opened the way for future changes in Oceana County, Michigan, some of which could never have been predicted in the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake.

June of 1979 Dr. Ray Tracy (a family practitioner), his wife, Pam and their two children moved to Hart. The nearest place of worship was 20 miles to the north—Ludington, a beautiful renovated old church building. Ray served as 1<sup>st</sup> counselor to President Bob Newman. One day Ray approached President Newman with the impression that a new branch should be formed in Hart. President Newman answered in the negative. Ray asked him to please pray about it. Sometime later President Newman told Ray that he was right; the Lord did want a branch in Hart. President Newman took this request to President Goodwin, the Stake President, who, unfortunately, had the same immediate reaction as did President Newman, but was asked to pray about it. The Hart Branch was then on its way, for President Goodwin was in tune with the spirit of the Lord. He wanted a branch in Hart.

It was unofficially called a Twig for in the beginning it functioned as a dependent branch but July 12 1981 the first meeting was held as an official Branch. Unofficially, January 25, 1981, with Dr Tracy as the new branch president, the handful of members met for the first time in the lobby of Dr. Tracy’s office on east Main Street. Marian Jacobs’ pump organ was transported each Sunday to provide music accompaniment. Harold Jacobs and his son Mark served as counselors. President Tracy conducted, first speaker was Mark Jacobs, and concluding speaker was Ellis Visger.

June 1981a new meeting location was secured at the old Hart Middle School. They were allowed to use the gym, hallways, and library. Primary was held in the hallway. The gymnasium served as the chapel. Pam Tracy loaded up her van with all necessary materials each and every Sunday, which was a daunting task.

September 1984 another location was secured at the Seventh Day Adventist Church building in Shelby on east 6<sup>th</sup> Street. Members and visitors were met by the larger than life winged angel mural behind the podium. The rent was \$175.00 per month for Sunday summer use and \$225.00 for winter. The congregation numbered 55 to 65.

February 1989 the congregation moved back to Hart into the old Tate Funeral Home on the corner of Dryden and Lincoln. The parlor and viewing rooms served as the chapel with the podium in the far corner. The hard wood floors and metal folding chairs made for quite a noisy sacrament service with families sitting together with their 22 active primary children. The kitchen served as a Sunday school room, the embalming room made a “lovely” young women room, the basement (affectionately called the dungeon) was perfect for the priesthood, the upper story rooms were almost sufficient for the primary and relief society. And, the Branch President finally had an office—upstairs.

The congregation was made of new converts, lacking leadership knowledge. The Lord solved that issue by calling four families on missions to the Hart Branch. From the Muskegon Ward Ron and Shirley Wehl, Al and Pam Geisler (with four primary age children), Dave and Lee VanKammen, George and Mildred Morris served faithfully from 1988 to 1992 until the stake president sent them back to their home ward. With leadership needs still an issue several years later the boundaries changed to include Montague.

Rodney Stovall was sustained and set apart as the second Branch President after the release of Dr. Tracy April 1986. Brother Stovall converted in April 1982. Georgine Frees (2<sup>nd</sup> RS President of the Hart Branch) introduced him and his wife, Judy to the church. As a contractor he was building a deck for her. She invited the missionaries to help, and, as they say, the rest is history.

1989 President Stovall could see the end of his reign as branch president quickly approaching and because the congregation was still made of new converts without leadership skills, the replacement options were few to none,

so he prayed for brother Rodney (Butch) Kurzer to move back to Michigan. A convert himself (baptized by Dr. Tracy) in 1979 he was sent west by his Bishop from his student ward at Michigan State University to find his bride. Dr. Tracy again followed the counsel of the Lord and invited Butch and his new family to visit in December 1989. While at the Chicago temple with the branch he and his wife, Maren, clearly received the message they were to move to Hart. They arrived Feb 2, 1990 with their two young sons. He was sustained as Branch President April 22, 1990. Stake President Kent Price issued the call.

October 1989 an unusual event happened in the life of the Hart Branch. A family of four moved in. This was unheard of. Dr. Douglas Brown had just completed his doctor of chiropractic medicine and with his wife Carol followed the counsel of the Lord and bought a practice from a local chiropractor. Members of the Hart Branch were serving in multiple callings at the time and yet the new members, Doug and Carol did not receive callings for several months, just because move-ins never happened! Dr. Brown was to be the next Branch President. He received the call January 1996 from Stake President Charles Stoddard.

Membership in the Hart Branch was growing and a new building was desperately needed-- and wanted. An average attendance of 110 for one quarter was required to qualify for a phase 2 building. All branch members worked diligently inviting family and friends. Some provided transportation to willing "investigators". All the efforts paid off. Property was purchased with ground breaking ceremonies taking place November 7, 1991. Construction began and move in date was August 1992 at 2852 72<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. *Side note: property had been purchased years before in Shelby, thus, the branch was called the Shelby Branch, but building criteria changed over time so the property was no longer suitable.* Across the street is a golf range and only a quarter mile to the north is a cemetery. To the east the property connects with the Hart Public Schools and to the south is a pleasant residential subdivision.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> phase building has always been a blessing to the members for weddings, funerals, celebration parties, and classrooms. The members have enjoyed coat racks, locking closets and cabinets, three pianos and one organ, a rostrum with a permanent podium. The chapel serves dual purposes with curtains to separate the rostrum from the cultural hall. Individual chairs are in place for Sunday worship and removed for cultural hall activities. The branch president has a private office. The kitchen is fully stocked. The library has a regular locking door! And, the baptismal font keeps everyone close to home with no more traveling 40 miles to Muskegon for all the convert baptisms Hart has been famous for.

A large number of Hispanic converts were baptized into the branch and formed a Spanish speaking congregation February 1992 which met every Sunday afternoon. Jaime Sefuentes served as the leader until circumstances changed and the Spanish Twig dwindled away in the fall of 1993. At its highest attendance, 30 to 40 individual members and investigators would be present. Members of the Hart Branch filled in where needed for priesthood ordinances and music.

April 2001 President Brown was released and in his place was a temporary transplant from the Muskegon Ward who lives in Whitehall. Gene Logan served until November 2006. President Logan was baptized April 9, 1995, converted by the Lord through his future wife, Laura. It might be worth mentioning here that Bruce Walborn from the Hart Branch was also temporarily transplanted to serve as Branch President for the Ludington Branch simultaneously.

Next branch president was Warren Walborn, son of Bruce Walborn. He served from November 2006 to October 2008. Brother Walborn was baptized at age eight, a few years after his parents and sisters were baptized. He spent his life vacationing in the Hart area and moved to Hart with his wife Karen and their five daughters in 2002.

Larry Thompson served as Branch President from October 12, 2008 until November 10, 2013, a convert who for many years refused to attend church because he "didn't want a calling". He served faithfully and humbly and touched many lives.

The building was constructed in such a way that as the branch grows in numbers an extension to the east will result in a chapel separate from the cultural hall. Never was it imagined how that might happen but in March 2013 the Ludington building was condemned and the Hart building was shared with that congregation until November 10, 2013 when the two branches merged into one, and the branch that began as a twig grew into a ward—the Hart Ward. The Ludington Branch President suddenly evolved into the bishop. Bishop Mark Olmstead serves the new Hart Ward, a convert himself, married to a generational Mormon girl, Heidi. With their four children, the family is a wonderful example of living a Christ-like life. Each branch had been averaging an attendance of about 60 and that number more than doubled with the merge. The Hart Ward has two sets of missionaries, one serving in the Ludington area and one in the Hart/Shelby area. There is a hope and a dream that the chapel will become a reality by 2017.



Dr. Tracy's Office



Hart Middle School



Seventh Day Adventist Church Building



Old Tate Funeral Home



Pioneer Trek



Current Phase 2 Building on 72<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in Hart



Congregation at current building 1996

Significant tidbits that made the Hart Branch unique:

Each willing person held multiple callings, as many as four or more was not uncommon.

Activities were always a fabulous event for this intimate group of church friends. The Pioneer Treks and picnics were always enormous celebrations and never to be missed. The most memorable took place July 1995. The trek began at the Tracy farmhouse and proceeded through the Pentwater Plains where they slept under the stars. They reached “the promised land” at Cedar Point Park on Lake Michigan. Many “challenges” and “obstacles” were overcome.

The Hart Branch made claim to fame in the Church News December 23, 1995 when the Young Women submitted an answer to How to feel peace and contentment today, rather than always looking toward the future. Also, in The September 1996 Friend when the lives of two young boys, Kendon and Damen Kurzer were highlighted.

The Hart Branch has sent out 13 young missionaries, all returning with honor. No senior missionaries—yet!

Nine scouts received their Eagle Awards.

13 Young women earned their Young Womanhood Recognitions. After earning her Recognition, Nicole Brown went on to earn a second.

Early morning Seminary began after the primary age children grew into young men and young women, and successfully continues today. Meeting places have included the church building, Shelby High School, Jerston, Inc., and Hawken Energy (the latter two being the businesses owned by the instructors).