As Max Long recalls it, safety concerns were what led to the decision in 1965 to tear down the original First Christian Church building at 612 N. Buckeye, which had been upgraded with a second story just 10 years earlier.

“They got worried about the bell tower, thinking it was unsafe,” says Max, who started attending there more than 60 years ago. “I can’t remember who tore it down. The bell tower took a week to tear down; the rest of the church went right down. The bell tower was strong.” The building that went up in its place has been in use ever since. The church will be the stop on the Homes Tour where refreshments will be available.

The congregation is one of the oldest in Abilene. Its first recorded activity was in 1872, the peak of the brief cattle boom that transformed Abilene from an outpost to the county’s largest city.

Church records show that on July 28 of that year a minister from Illinois held a service in the home of Andrew F. Hart. Mr. Hart had just homesteaded a quarter section of land at Jeep Rd. and 2800 Avenue – the paperwork is dated July 1, 1872. (The Kansas Horticulture Report in 1886 lists Mr. Hart as planting one of the first fruit trees in Dickinson County in 1872.)

A decision was made following the service to start meeting in the Livingston School House. Eighteen months later, the church filed its official charter. By 1877, the congregation had 58 members.

At some point, the church started meeting in a building at NE 5th and Buckeye, where Danner Funeral Home is today. Details surrounding the construction of that building are difficult to gather because records at the Dickinson County Historical Society have been closed to the public since this summer.

Online fire insurance maps for 1884 show a one-story rectangular wood-framed building on the northeast corner of 5th and Buckeye labeled “Christian Church.”

Two years later, Grace Reformed Church built a brick and stone building across Buckeye to the west. It was razed in 1931.

Christian Church records say that in 1887 and 1888, as the church was preparing to build its own building at NW 7th and Buckeye, the congregation shared the new church building with Grace Reformed Church.

First Christian’s new church was completed in 1888. An early photograph (year unknown) shows that originally it did not have a bell tower.

Christian Churches from their earliest days have been known for avoiding denominational affiliations. Pastor Jason Kohler says that they seek to emulate the earliest church.

“The idea was to go back to the beginning of the church, like you find in the Book of Acts in the Bible, and try to be that church,” Jason says. “Whatever precedents we find in the Book of Acts have a lot of influence on us.”

When the National Council of Churches formed 70 years ago, there were efforts to recruit the

Christian Church. Some of the congregations became affiliated with the Apostles of Christ, which is a member church.

The Abilene congregation chose not to.

“I think every other church in town, as far as I know, is tied to a denomination,” Jason says. “Being independent has some great strengths, but it has its challenges. It’s a little more of the independent spirit.”

The Longs joined the church when they moved to Abilene from Wichita in 1956. The congregation had a reputation for its youth outreach, which continues to be a focus today. “I remember us as being one of the first churches to start Vacation Bible School,” says Edna. They remember it as being welcoming also. That’s a quality the church continues to promote. “I think we are a very friendly church,” Jason says. “that’s one of our strengths. We try to be very real. Authentic is what we shoot for.”