Centennial Temple Talk
Grace in the 1930s

Today's Centennial Temple Talk will highlight the 1930s, a time of deprivation and suffering during the greatest economic calamity in our nation's history, the Great Depression. It was a time of massive layoffs and high unemployment, banking panics, declines in productivity, and increases in poverty and homelessness. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was first elected president in 1932 and began to implement governmental stimulus and relief programs in hopes of stabilizing the economy. Looking for inexpensive escapes from reality, Americans turned to radio programs, music, dance marathons, board games, and movies to provide entertainment and distractions.

In the 1930s, Grace was still a mission church seeking to become a thriving congregation. Her first pastor, the Reverend Henry Schroder, resigned in November of 1931 and was replaced one month later by the Reverend Carl B. Caughman. During this time, according to accounts, "there was a close fellowship that helped members and Winthrop students deal with the gloom of the Depression." Twenty-two new members joined the church during Pastor Caughman's two-year tenure.

Grace's third pastor, the Reverend W. J. Roof, began his pastorate in April of 1934, placing an emphasis on young people and the community. Pastor Roof strengthened relations with Winthrop by organizing the Lutheran Student Association on campus. He and his wife offered their house as a "home away from home" for many students. He began the Light Brigade and Luther League for the youth at Grace. By being active in the community and serving as President of the Lions Club for two years, Pastor Roof also drew attention to Grace, which was known at the time as the "Little Stone Church".

Like many churches during the Depression, there were times when Grace was unable to pay Pastor Roof's salary. Members of the congregation shared crops from their gardens with the pastor, as well as canned and preserved food. Others, when able to purchase groceries for their own families, often bought food for the Roof family as well. As stated in one history, "creative compensation kept food on the table; dedication to the Lord's work kept the pastor in the pulpit". Pastor Roof resigned in January of 1938, to accept another call; however, upon retirement, Pastor and Mrs. Roof returned to Rock Hill in 1959, and he "assisted in the services at Grace from time to time" until his death in 1962 at the age of 81.

Life-long member of Grace, Richard Denton, who was baptized by Pastor Schroder in 1929, shared many personal memories of Grace in an oral history account in 2017. Mr. Denton recalled that in the 1930s, “it was a challenge to increase the congregation and pay on our debt. One time when we were in danger of losing the mission, other congregations were eyeballing a possible opportunity to obtain the nice piece of property.” He also stated that “the church was heated by a coal furnace which had to be attended by one man, with two large return vents down the middle aisle, which sometimes would tangle a lady’s high heels.” Another memory was that “the choir room was next to the chancel where they would dress. They cracked the door open and sang a call to worship tune to begin the service. Then they proceeded to the choir area.”

Dr. Henry Smith Petrea, the fourth and longest serving pastor, began his 16 years at Grace on March 1, 1938. By the end of the 1930s, the country was recovering from the Great Depression, and financial recovery was also occurring at Grace. At this time, the congregation had a debt of $3,600 with an interest rate of 6%, which was refinanced to 2% and repaid in full 9 years later.

Challenging times were again on the horizon. The world watched in trepidation as Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, beginning the war in Europe, which would soon spread to the United States and across the globe as World War II.