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PHOTOS BY MATHIAS MATHEWS/JOHNSON CITY PRESS

West Main Street Christian Church, 246 W. Main St., is the oldest church building still standing in the city.

## Midtown churches among city's oldest

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The churches in downtown Johnson City all grew from humble beginnings.

First Presbyterian Church, West Main Street Christian Church, Downtown Christian Church and Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church are located within just a few blocks of one another. The four churches each were started within a period of two years.

On April 23, 1869, a group of 11 people who had been meeting in a school house organized First Presbyterian Church, 105 South Boone Street.

Construction on the church began in 1870 and by fall of 1872, Johnson City had its first church building. According to church records, First Presbyterian didn't have a full-time pastor throughout its first 20 years.

Rev. J.C. Cowan became the church's first full-time pastor in 1889, growing the congregation and making the first improvements to the building itself.

In 1935, a new sanctuary was completed and after discussions about relocating the church in another section of the city, a decision was made to keep First Presbyterian as an active and growing part of the downtown community.

Whether it's through support of 38 missionaries who serve all over the world or working locally with one of the many missions in the area, First Presbyterian has always been committed to serving people through mission work.

Rev. Louis Insaude serves as First Presbyterian's current pastor.

While First Presbyterian holds the distinction of having the first church building in Johnson City, West Main Street Christian Church, 246 West Main Street, holds a place on the National Registry of Historic Places as the oldest church building and school building still standing in the city.

Dr. Hezekiah Hankal, a respected black physician, purchased the property from Henry Johnson, who founded Johnson City in 1836. Both men were heavily involved in the development of the city.

According to city historians, Hankal became an ordained minister by Boone Creek Christian Church in February 1866 with the primary purpose of evangelizing newly freed slaves.

After establishing a number of churches in the area, Hankal set his sights on the Main Street property and began the Colored

### Christian Church.

The church acted a school house for black students, with Langston High School growing out of that ministry.

City historians said the church's name was changed to West Main Street Christian Church sometime in the late 1880s.

The church is still very active today and offers the Loaves and Fishes meal program on Saturday afternoons.

Downtown Christian Church's history dates back to the early days of the Science Hill school building, where the church members met from 1872 until 1879. The church, located at 335 East Main Street, was organized on Nov. 12, 1871, by a small group of who met in the home of William Hyter Young under the name of First Christian Church.

After meeting in the school, construction on the church's first building began, located near the present site at 124 East Main Street. The new location opened its doors Dec. 1, 1879. William C. Manpin, of the Boone Creek area, acted as the first pastor of First Christian Church.

Following a fire in 1905 that destroyed the church's original building, the congregation began meeting in Jobe's Opera House, which was located at the corner of Main and Spring streets. A year later, a new building was constructed at the present site.

According to church records, in 1971, the members of First Christian Church grew concerned regarding the new federal highway that was being constructed through Johnson City, fearing that it would jeopardize the property of the church. The members made the decision to build a new building in north Johnson City that had been purchased in the 1950s between Ronn Street and Mountcastle Drive.

Although a new location was under construction, a small group of the church's congregation made the decision to stay in downtown Johnson City, creating Downtown Christian Church in 1972, while the new location adopted the original name of the church.

The church has had strong ties to Milligan College and Emmanuel School of Religion over the years. Dr. W. Edward Fine has served as the church's pastor since 2001.

As businesses were moving out of downtown Johnson City and into the north side of the city, the congregation of Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church had to decide whether they would move or, like Downtown Christian, stay as a part of the downtown com-



Downtown Christian Church, 335 E. Main St.



The Melting Pot is one of the many services offered by Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church.

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