

## FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF DENTON

Historical Narrative researched and written by members of the First Baptist Church Historical Committee for Texas Historical Commission THC subject marker application: Esther R. Broome, Mary Earp, Lavon B. Fulwiler, Marjorie Lynn Hall, Donnie Holt, R. B. Neale, Jr., Mattie Frank Pierce, Merwin Taylor, Esther Thames and Cliff Feeler, Staff Liaison. Denton County (1997)

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## Its Historical Significance

An essay prepared by the Historical Committee of the First Baptist Church as the church approaches the 140th anniversary of its founding.

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Because citation of the source and page number of every detail recorded in this brief history of the First Baptist Church of Denton, Texas, would quickly become tedious, the Historical Committee wishes to express at the beginning its deep appreciation of each source listed in the bibliography; the several books cited there and numerous conversations and interviews with long-time members of the church have provided an excellent background for understanding the development of the church. The committee acknowledges with special gratitude the superb research and clear reporting done by Professor L. P. Floyd, the author of the history of the first century of the church; the current essay has drawn extensively from Professor Floyd's valuable book.

## **THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF DENTON, TEXAS**

### **Its Historical Significance**

When twelve Baptist men and women met on an early-spring day of 1858 in the year-old city of Denton, Texas, to organize a church, they surely considered their action significant for the entire new community in a county most of whose earliest settlers - - from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas - - were Baptists or Methodists. However, it is unlikely that the founders foresaw how extensive the influence of the church, whether religious or social or educational or governmental, would become in the city, in the state, and in Baptist endeavors at various organizational levels. As the church membership has increased over subsequent years and decades, the congregation now known as the First Baptist Church of Denton has contributed to the overall welfare of numerous persons in the church and in the city of Denton; indeed, through its participation in denomination-wide programs and events and through sending and supporting missionaries who have served in the United States and abroad, the church has exerted great influence and so has come to merit historical recognition as a vital organization in the city and county of Denton.

Designated as the Union Baptist Church upon its founding in 1858 in the log cabin Denton County Courthouse on the north side of Denton's downtown square, the church was called the Denton Baptist Church by 1876. About 1880 it was renamed the First Baptist Church of Denton. Since its establishment almost 140 years ago, it has been affiliated with three localized

associations fostering inter-congregational cooperation: the West Fork Association for approximately the first ten years of the existence of the church, the Shiloh Association by 1868, and the Denton County Baptist Association since the organization of that entity in 1886. In each association it has provided not only participation but also important leadership, especially in the role of moderator, and has so carried the influence of the church outside the town in which it was established.

Under the guidance of many dedicated pastors, the number of them ranging from twenty-four to twenty-eight according to various written and oral accounts, the church has grown in membership over the years from the original twelve persons to more than 2,000. In the first decade of its existence the group doubled its membership, and in its second decade it counted seventy-eight persons on its roll. During subsequent decades steady growth continued, as did the influence of the church and its members on the community.

To account for this steady progress is to trace the major achievements of the church under the direction of various pastors. The Reverend Holdman, probably H. S. Holdman, seems to have been the first pastor. He rode horseback from Sherman to serve the church in the first year of its existence. After meeting in the Masonic Hall and later the Cumberland Presbyterian Church through three pastorates until 1873, the church acquired property and constructed its first building, a white frame building topped by a steeple, facing east on Cedar Street at West Hickory Street where Bank One's main local facility now stands. The church opened in 1897 during the four-year leadership of the Reverend Abner Fitzgerald. During his ministry the church established a Sunday school, apparently in cooperation with churches of other denominations. Members understood the need to teach the Bible, especially to children.

In 1879, when the Reverend R. E. Wood was pastor, a signal step forward was the organization of a Ladies Aid Society, which was to become the Woman's Missionary Union in 1888. The society and its successor strongly encouraged the support of missionary service both in Texas and elsewhere, particularly in foreign countries.

Led by the Reverend S. A. Beauchamp, the Reverend J. A. Moore, and the Reverend J. T. Jenkins from 1879 to 1887, the church maintained its outreach to other churches of the Baptist denomination. Brother Beauchamp twice played leadership roles in this outreach: first as the moderator of the Shiloh Association and later as the moderator of the Denton County Baptist Association.

By the time of the pastorate of the Reverend J. B. Cole, who served in the mid-1890's, the church membership had increased so much that it required a new building. The fine new edifice built in 1897 accommodated 400 persons. It was constructed on the lot at the corner of Cedar and West Hickory, but unlike its predecessor, it faced West Hickory. The Woman's Missionary Union raised money to provide wall-to-wall carpeting for the sanctuary.

A significant accomplishment during the pastorate of Dr. W. C. Lattimore from late 1897 to 1909 was the organization of the Dorcas Society, forerunner of the Young Women's Association. Dr. M. T. Andrews, pastor from 1909 to 1912, instigated the grading of the Sunday school by departments according to ages and encouraged support of the Baptist-sponsored Buckner Orphans Home near Dallas. The church and its leaders continued to show concern for young people and children as well as for its adult members.

The brief but effective nine-month service of Dr. B. A. Copass as pastor in 1912 and 1913 led to an increase in membership from 677 to 727. The three-year pastorate of his successor, Dr.

M. E. Hudson, oversaw the organization of a mission Sunday school on East Hickory at Blount Street, now incorporated into Bell Avenue. During these two pastorates the superintendent of the church Sunday school on West Hickory was Dr. William Barrett Bizzell, president of the College of Industrial Arts, which became the Texas Woman's University. Dr. Bizzell is representative of many administrators and professors in the city's two institutions of higher learning who have contributed to the effective service of the church.

In 1917, the second year of the pastorate of the Reverend F. H. Watkins, the church building on West Hickory Street burned to the ground. With it were lost valuable church records. Brother Watkins led in planning for and constructing the third church-owned home of the congregation. The church purchased a lot on West Oak Street east of the current North Carroll Boulevard and there built a beautiful brick building fronted by tall Greek columns. Because the edifice was constructed during World War I, steel was unavailable; nevertheless, the church confidently proceeded with its plans and in September of 1918 held its first worship services in the new facility.

The ten-year period of service by Dr. W. C. McClung from 1920 to 1930 encompassed the organization of a Girls' Auxiliary and a Royal Ambassadors unit for boys. Men of the church founded a Brotherhood group, and women continued their service to the congregation through work in the Sunday school and the Woman's Missionary Union, which instituted offerings to support missionary endeavors of the Southern Baptist Convention. Religion-based activities for both children and adults were numerous and effective. It merits note that during the McClung pastorate two young women who had grown up in the First Baptist Church became missionaries; in 1923 Misses Ray and Ione Buster, who were sisters, began long tenures of service as Baptist

teachers in Brazil.

The pastorate of Dr. Karl H. Moore from 1931 to 1934 is notable for extensive repair work to the church building constructed without steel in wartime and for the pastor's beginning a men's Bible class for war veterans. It is a credit to the pastor and the church that in the Depression members maintained their interested participation in the activities of the city. During this era Mayor J. L. Wright, a loyal member of the church, provided optimistic guidance for a city which was truly a center of achievement.

Dr. J. D. Grey, pastor from 1934 to 1937, moved the Veterans' Class to a downtown theater and changed its name to the Downtown Bible Class. The move served as an outreach to men throughout Denton. That Dr. Grey subsequently became pastor of the large First Baptist Church of New Orleans and president of the Southern Baptist Convention attests to his expertise in the pulpit and his recognized abilities to guide a convention of thousands of churches throughout the nation. That he returned to Denton from time to time to preach on special occasions bespeaks his love for the First Baptist Church of Denton and his recognition of its significant role in Baptist work.

The nine years from 1937 to 1946 during which Dr. Frank Weedon led the church became a time of service to the community outside the church itself. In this period the church established the Fowlkes Memorial Mission on East Mulberry Street; the West Side Baptist Church, later known, in new quarters, as the Towne North Baptist Church; and the Ruddell Street Mission, later the College View Baptist Church. In addition, the Weedon pastorate was a time of the completed payment of debt on the church building. The Reverend Paul Stevens served twice during this period as assistant pastor; a high Sunday school attendance of 1647 persons, both



children and adults, resulted from the efforts of both the pastor and the assistant pastor. Dr. Stevens later held the office of president of the Southern Baptist Convention Radio and Television Commission; building on his experience in the pastoral ministry in Denton and elsewhere, he found with modern technology new ways to spread the Word of God to millions of people.

Especially notable of the pastorate of Dr. Roger D. Hebard from 1946 to 1952 was the construction of a new three-story education building adjoining the north side of the building constructed in 1917 and 1918. Also during Dr. Hebard's ministry the church organized the Southside Mission on property later sold to the Highland Baptist Church. An active young member of the church at this time was Keith Parks, president of the Baptist Student Union at North Texas State Teachers College, now the University of North Texas; Dr. Parks, who later was a foreign missionary through the Southern Baptist Convention and who for many years headed the missionary work of the Convention, now serves as Global Missions Coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Through Dr. Parks, the influence of the First Baptist Church has reached people in many countries around the world.

During the service of Dr. L. B. Reavis from 1953 to 1955 the church organized its first graded choirs under the direction of Carroll McMath, a devoted member who for many years was band director at Denton High School. The church began the Center Point Mission just south of Denton. It purchased additional property north of the church campus. And it sponsored a special Youth Week with member Bill Pinson, president of both the student body and the Baptist Student Union at North Texas State Teachers College, serving as youth pastor; since 1988 Dr. Pinson has served as Executive Director of the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a position of great responsibility and influence. Also in this era Bill Moyers, active in Baptist

student work at North Texas, was a deeply committed member of the church; his later service as Press Secretary to President Lyndon B. Johnson and his widely renowned career as a broadcast journalist and author have carried his knowledge to a grateful public.

From 1955 to 1984 Dr. L. L. Armstrong guided the work of the church. The institution of two morning worship services under his leadership dates to 1956. The celebration of the centennial of the church in 1958 brought to Denton many former members who had moved away; the celebration was highlighted by the publication of The First 100 Years of the First Baptist Church by Professor L. P. Floyd, a long-time and deeply dedicated member of the church who was chairman of the Department of Chemistry at the institution now known as the University of North Texas. And the institution at the Denton State School of a Christian education program led by Mrs. Kate Payne expressed the concern of the church for the spiritual needs of clients at the school.

The 1961 purchase of property on Malone Street and the construction thereon of a new church plant constituted a major achievement during Dr. Armstrong's tenure as pastor. In 1966 the congregation held groundbreaking activities at the site, and on December 10, 1967, the first worship services were held in the new building. Subsequently an additional structure was planned and was erected on the church campus; the Armstrong Christian Life Center, named in honor of the pastor, was completed in 1976. In that same year the church began its ministry to single adults under the leadership of Glenn Herrington. Somewhat earlier in the Armstrong years Mark Hannah, an active church member, became Mayor of Denton and served admirably in that capacity.

That the church continued during Dr. Armstrong's pastorate to be aware of the need for

more churches in the region is evidenced by its establishing in 1963 the Center Point Mission, later the Center Point Baptist Church, and in 1978 a mission on Teasley Lane which became the Southmont Baptist Church. The recognition by the church and its pastor of the importance of foreign missions was manifested in the 1977 commissioning of Dr. Vi Marie Buster Taylor, who was a member of the church as a teenager and a young woman, as a Southern Baptist Convention missionary associate for Hong King and Macao. A few years earlier Bob and Nora Stanley, also members of the church, had been commissioned to serve in the Philippines, where they remained for some years before going to Richmond, Virginia, where Mr. Stanley was a journalist for the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Following Dr. Armstrong's retirement early in 1984, the church called Dr. Wayne Blankenship as pastor. Dr. Blankenship served until the summer of 1996, when he accepted a position as Executive Vice President of First Priority of America, a religious outreach to youth based in Nashville, Tennessee. This most recent pastor's twelve years' service encompassed a focus on ministry to families by deacons of the church and an intercessory prayer ministry which has served not only members but also the larger community and which has offered assistance to persons in other cities and states. Under Dr. Blankenship's leadership two new churches were established in Denton -- Northeast Baptist Church and North Metro Church -- and one was established at Trophy Club south of Denton. Dr. Blankenship also guided the planning and construction of major additions to the main building of the church: a new fellowship hall, additional pre-school space for an important ministry of the church, and a new youth area. Thus the church continued to meet known needs of the community.

The work of the Sunday school, as in earlier pastorates, remained important both for

religious education of persons of all ages and for coordination of personal services to church members and the community at large. The work of the women in the church continued to stress the need of support for missionaries. In addition, both women and men have provided compassionate service to persons in Denton's international community through a highly effective program in English literacy.

As a search committee seeks the successor to Dr. Blankenship in early 1997, the church members remain dedicated to providing religious, social, educational, and historical services to the community in which they dwell. They gratefully recognize the valuable contributions of earlier members -- the founders, the pastors, the professional staff members, the deacons, the Sunday school teachers -- to the effective participation of the church in the life of the community.

The First Baptist Church of Denton has been a vibrant force in three local Baptist associations and has provided leadership to statewide and nationwide Baptist organizations as well as domestic and foreign missionaries. It has occupied seven different buildings, four of which it has constructed and owned in three distinct locations. And it has served its city under three names, the present one of which has been its designation for almost 120 years.

Cognizant of the vital role which the First Baptist Church has long played in the history of Denton and Denton County and which it continues to play in 1997, its members consider it appropriate that the church be granted an historical marker commemorating 140 years of dedicated service. Such recognition will pay tribute simultaneously to the foresight of the founders and to the efforts of pastors and members throughout the life of the church.

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