

## **HERE WE RAISE OUR EBENEZER**

### **Frontier Settlers and Itinerant Preachers, 1818-1831**

In 1815 the Mississippi Territory was a vast area of woodlands filled with wild game, scattered Native American tribes, and an abundance of natural resources stretching south of Tennessee from the boundary of Western Georgia to the Mississippi River. In that year a few hearty pioneer families began settling on a high bluff on the south side of the Black Warrior River near the falls. A few families joined them in 1816 and in 1817, the United States Government formed the state of Mississippi and the named the remaining territory between Georgia and Mississippi, the Alabama Territory. The name and the reputation of the new territory held an attraction and throughout 1817 wagon trails were cut to the area of the falls and the semblance of a village began to emerge which took the name, Tuscaloosa, meaning "Black Warrior." By January of 1818 there were almost 300 people living on this bluff. Still leafless trees and numerous stumps dotted the landscape, but little grass. In this rainy month men, women, and children could sink up to their ankles in the mud. The frontier was not for the dainty.

Perhaps a minority of these tough pioneers had been active in their churches back home but survival seemed the order of the day for the present. Among these early settlers were 32 year old Benjamin Higginbottom and his 28 year old wife, Rebecca. They surely had packed their church letter in their belongings as they left their native Virginia. Ben was a farmer who practiced medicine on the side, though the latter was not a very lucrative profession. But he likely discussed religion with other area residents from time to time and, by the fourth Saturday in January of 1818 he had asked those Baptists he had identified to meet at his house to organize a church. The frontier pattern was that itinerant preachers would come into town on Saturday afternoon, conduct a business meeting, then preach. The next morning they would preach again, eat lunch with someone in the congregation and leave town. Thus it was perfectly logical that this new congregation was organized on Saturday, January 24, 1818 in Ben and Rebecca's sitting room. We have no idea how many joined with them that day but the little congregation that would one day grow into the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa was constituted as the Ebenezer Baptist Church, a name that would last for fourteen years. Two itinerant ministers met with them that day to examine the new body of believers concerning their doctrine and loyalty. Rev. Nathan Roberts, at 43, had come from Virginia by way of Knoxville and Rev. James Baines, at age 39, had come from Chowan County, North Carolina by way of Athens, GA. Both men would help to establish the Bethel Baptist Church on Watermelon Road later in this same year. But on this cool January day they were constituting the first body of believers of any kind in the Western portion of the Alabama Territory. This fledgling church elected a bright 24 year old surveyor-engineer named Collin Finnell who came from Columbia County, GA as its first clerk and by April they had given a call to Nathan Roberts to be its first pastor. Collin Finnell would, incidentally, be the one who would lay out the streets of Tuscaloosa in 1821.

By October of 1818 when Ebenezer Baptist and the newly formed Bethel Baptist Church on Watermelon Road joined with eight other new churches in Central Alabama to form the Cahawba Baptist Association, Ebenezer had 53 members. It is believed that Ebenezer planned and perhaps began to construct a new meetinghouse before the end of the year and when the Cahawba Baptist Association held its 1819 meeting, it was in the

new Ebenezer structure. The location of this earliest church building appears to have been at the west end of the block now owned by P. E. LaMoreaux and Associates on Fifth Street in Tuscaloosa.

It was the nature of the frontier that people came and people left because they heard of some other location with more potential. Nathan Roberts left by the mid-1820's for Mississippi and it was later reported that he had gone over to the Church of Christ. Ben and Rebecca Higginbottom later moved to Tishomingo County, Mississippi and even later to Clark County, Arkansas where Ben died in 1860. Rebecca moved after Ben's death to McNairy County, Tennessee.

The next four pastors were all itinerants, pastoring often two, three, or four churches at a time. They were likely limited in terms of formal education and they usually accepted a call for one year at a time. All were what we today refer to as bi-vocational pastors.

Daniel Brown was born in Virginia, did mission work in Kentucky, and moved to the Tuscaloosa area in 1816 to work as a blacksmith and ferry operator. He helped organize Ebenezer in 1818 and became the second pastor for about a year around 1821 at age 65. Three years later he was elected the second president of the Alabama Baptist Convention. His daughter, Nancy, married the young church clerk and surveyor, Collin Finnell, and among their descendants are Mary Alice Gross Kemp and our former church organist, Bill McCain.

The next pastor, Thomas Baines, was a younger brother of James Baines who helped organize Ebenezer. Thomas was long associated with the Bethel and Philadelphia churches in Tuscaloosa County and he was elected the first moderator of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association. Before he died he moved to Choctaw County, Mississippi and is today best known as being the great, great grandfather of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Present members, Becky Woodman Turner, and her son, Brian Turner, are direct descendants of Rev. Thomas Baines who became pastor of Ebenezer at age 34.

The fourth pastor was Rev. Hosea Holcombe who came at age 43 and likely traveled from Jefferson County to serve the church. While there is no record of great accomplishment while he was at Ebenezer, he had a heart for missions and for the state to the extent that he has been called the Father of the Alabama Baptist Convention, a body which he revitalized when he became its president in 1833. Holcombe was pastor of Ebenezer when Tuscaloosa became the Alabama state capital but there are no records indicating any significant growth in the church at that time. There were only 62 members of the little church toward the end of 1827.

In 1828 Rev. Robert Marsh came to serve the Ebenezer Church but was also pastor of the Grant's Creek Church at Fosters at the same time. Every indication is that he was diligent worker. By the end of 1829 Marsh had baptized forty-seven and the membership was all the way up to 103. Marsh was still pastor in 1831 when the state located the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa and employed the erudite, ordained Baptist minister, Dr. Alva Woods as the school's first president. Woods immediately joined Ebenezer and by the fall of that year, he was a messenger to the Cahawba Baptist Association. It is certain that Dr. Woods had a strong influence in the direction the church took in the next few years.

Three significant events took place during the life of Ebenezer between 1820 and 1830, namely, a sizeable group of members leaving in 1830 to organize the Hopewell

Baptist Church five miles east of town, the sending of William Martin, a “colored preacher,” as a messenger to the association for five consecutive years, 1824 through 1828, and finally, the purchase of a lot in 1830 at the corner of Seventh Street and Twenty-fifth Avenue (now Lurleen Wallace Boulevard) as a site for a future meetinghouse.

### **THERE WERE GIANTS IN THOSE DAYS Farmers, Shopkeepers, Educators, and Theologians, 1832-1860**

Imagine the plight of the pastor or deacons in a church when its newest member is a Harvard graduate with a Seminary degree who is also an ordained minister. Dr. Alva Woods brought the finest classical educational attainable with him when he became president of the University of Alabama in 1831. Rev. Robert Marsh was the pastor when Woods and his wife joined Ebenezer that year, but Marsh resigned at the end of the year. There is no way to tell if Woods’ arrival led to Marsh leaving. But certainly Woods had heard the finest Baptist ministers in the country and had high expectations. Added to this was the expectations of occasional Alabama legislators who would visit the church.

In 1832 Ebenezer, the Baptist church in a bustling town which was the state capital, voted to change its name to Tuscaloosa Baptist Church and T. W. Cox, of whom almost nothing is known, became pastor and served through 1834. Records show that Cox left soon for Texas and became moderator of the first Baptist association organized in that state. There was no pastor listed in the report to the association for 1835 and it is known Dr. Woods filled the Tuscaloosa pulpit from time to time. In 1836 a young James H. DeVotie came from South Carolina where got some theological education to be pastor of the Tuscaloosa Church. He had stayed a year in Montgomery and had been criticized for his marriage to “a young lady devoted to fashion.” Perhaps in the capital city of Tuscaloosa, this would not be noticed as much. DeVotie was energetic and dynamic and perhaps had a preaching style which satisfied Dr. Woods. In 1837 Dr. Woods helped to establish a Baptist college for girls in Tuscaloosa called the Alabama Female Athenaeum. The first president was a brilliant Baptist minister from Virginia by way of Philadelphia, Dr. John Leadly Dagg. Dagg and his wife joined the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church upon their arrival and, along with the Woods, were among the most active members. While Woods had well-crafted sermons, Dagg was a thinker of the highest magnitude. In our time he is known as one of the most influential Baptist theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the best writer of all the Baptist theologians. Imagine being in the place of twenty-four year old James DeVotie trying to spiritually feed men like Woods and Dagg. Under some duress Dr. Woods left the University of Alabama in 1837. But Dagg would remain for seven more years over the Alabama Female Athenaeum.

When President Woods left, the University sought Dr. Basil Manly Sr., pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina to take his place. The Charleston church had the reputation as the most renowned Baptist church in the South. Manly had gone there as pastor when he was still in his twenties and distinguished himself. In contrast with Dr. Woods, Manly understood the South. And he understood Baptists in the South. He accepted the Alabama Presidency and like the Woods, the Manly family affiliated with the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church upon arrival. It is obvious that Dr. Manly

and Dr. Dagg became friends and perhaps together held the local church to the highest standards. But their reputation as academicians did not nullify the evangelical spirit that swept the area in 1837 through 1839.

The revival fires seem to have begun out in Coker at the Big Creek Baptist Church in the fall of 1837. When Pastor William Hood of Big Creek gave an invitation following his Saturday evening sermon on November 11, six persons expressed their faith in Christ as candidates for baptism. A revival spread throughout the following week and the stirring of God's spirit resulted in 95 individuals walking the aisles to confess their sins and profess their faith in Christ in a period of eight days. Those who witnessed this Pentecostal moving of the Spirit never forgot it. More walked the aisles at the regular services in December and January so that an amazing total of 115 were added to the church in less than two months and 110 of these were by baptism.

Shortly after the Big Creek experience an 1838 revival started at the Tuscaloosa Presbyterian Church, then spread to the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church for a month, and finally it spread to the Methodist church. Tuscaloosa Baptist reported 59 additions, fourteen by letter and forty five by baptism, and many of those were University students, some of whom became prominent Baptist leaders in the coming years.

Again in the summer of 1839, the Big Creek Baptist Church had a four-day revival in which forty-one more were baptized into the church. By 1841 the Big Creek church had 183 members while the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church, with 143 members was the second largest church in the region. When the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association was formed the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church for some reason chose to remain in the Cahawba Association for several more years, but in 1839 the Tuscaloosa Church requested to withdraw from its old association and affiliate with the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association where it remains to this day. Yet for a number of years, the Big Creek Church at Coker (now Coker Baptist) was the largest church in the Tuscaloosa Association.

Despite the great harvest of souls in 1838 and 1839, Rev. James H. DeVotie found himself in conflict with Dr. Basil Manly, to the extent that he left the church in 1840, moved to Mobile, and began selling shoes. He was no doubt discouraged. Yet, through the advice of an older minister he went back into the ministry, pastoring the historic Siloam Baptist Church in Marion, and while there he helped raise funds to start Howard College (now Samford University) in Marion and led in the establishment of the *Alabama Baptist*. Years later Rev. DeVotie's oldest son, Noble Leslie DeVotie, who was once a youngster in the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church, was the first casualty in the cause of the Confederacy. He was a young Chaplain in February of 1861 when he tripped as he was coming off a steamer and drowned in Mobile Bay.

In 1841 Tuscaloosa Baptist Church had outgrown its first sanctuary and began constructing a new edifice on the lot it had purchased back in 1830 at the corner of Seventh Street and what is now Lurleen Wallace Boulevard. It was at the other end of the block from the Christ Episcopal Church and faced in the same direction. It had a front portico and two large columns supporting the gabled roof. There were two front doors and two aisles which led to the front. There were probably two Sunday School rooms behind the sanctuary and their doors opened out on Seventh Street. The goal seems to have been to have the church completed when the new pastor was to arrive in January of 1842.

The new pastor, Henry Talbird, was 30 years old, a native of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina who had just obtained a strong theological education in New York and accepted the call in Tuscaloosa as his first pastorate. He had to be ordained here in order to begin his pastorate in February of 1842. Dr. Manly was a bit skeptical as to whether the young man could adequately fill the role as pastor. But at the end of one year the church voted to keep Talbird and substantially increase his salary. Instead, he left for the First Baptist Church of Montgomery which he pastored for nine years prior to becoming a professor of theology at Howard College briefly before being made President of the school. In 1862 Talbird left Howard to become first a Captain of an Alabama Confederate company and then Colonel of the 41<sup>st</sup> Alabama Infantry Regiment in which he served in many battles with distinction. He later left the state but continued in the ministry.

When Talbird left Tuscaloosa, it should be no surprise that the church called a third consecutive South Carolinian as its pastor. The influence of Dr. Manly who came from that state was as strong as ever when 27 year old Thomas F. Curtis arrived in Tuscaloosa in March of 1843 to begin his ministry. The father and brother of young Rev. Curtis were founders of Limestone College near Spartanburg and the family was well known in Baptist circles. About the time that Thomas Curtis arrived in Tuscaloosa, Richard Furman also came from South Carolina. No name in Baptist ranks stood higher. Young Richard was grandson of the noted Dr. Richard Furman, distinguished Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston following the American Revolution, first president of the national Baptist body known as the Triennial Convention, and the man for whom Furman University was named. Young Richard's father, Wood Furman, was a college president in his home state and Richard came to Tuscaloosa with credentials as a teacher. He and his wife also joined the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church where Richard was soon elected as Church Clerk. He also taught at the University of Alabama.

It now appears that a question raised by the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church in 1844 eventually led to the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. The question drafted by Richard Furman was raised with the Alabama Baptist Convention: "Is it proper for us at the South to send any more money to our brethren at the North, for missionary and benevolent purposes, before the subject of *slavery* be rightly understood by both parties?" The state convention turned the question over to a committee, headed, by all people, Dr. Basil Manly. Manly, a slave holder himself, contacted the Home Mission Board of the national convention, they passed it on to the Foreign Mission Board, and they replied that they, in no way, would appoint a slave holder as a missionary. As a result of this response, a meeting of Baptists from slave holding states was called in 1845 to meet in Augusta, Georgia. And there the Southern Baptist Convention was organized. The venerable Dr. Manly was named to be the head of the Home Mission Board of the new convention and the headquarters were established at Marion, Alabama, the Baptist center of the state. Of course, Dr. Manly had all he could take care of with the University of Alabama and he soon resigned his new appointment. But it indicated the esteem to which he was held.

In February of 1844 Dr. and Mrs. John L. Dagg left Tuscaloosa for Georgia where he would become Professor of Theology and President Pro-tem of Mercer University. The Mercer trustees had wanted Dr. Basil Manly as their president and he held them off for a while before declining. Yet he recommended his friend, Dr. Dagg, who became one

of Mercer's most outstanding presidents. Today there is no way to measure Dr. Dagg's influence on the church at Tuscaloosa because little is written about it. But there is reason to believe that he wielded considerable influence.

Rev. Thomas F. Curtis worked hard and the church at Tuscaloosa had 167 members by the end of 1843, the most it would have for a long time. Curtis faced difficulties with discipline in the church, with the inability of the church to keep up his salary, and with the growing body of believers of African descent whom some church leaders thought should be taught separately from the white members. Dr. Manly liked young pastor Curtis as his pastor but privately expressed that Curtis did not hit sin hard enough, nor was he strong enough on evangelism. Pastor Curtis left in 1848 to teach theology at Howard College and in the early 1850's he was elected Corresponding Secretary of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

With a vacant pulpit in the Tuscaloosa Church and young Basil Manly Jr. just returning home from Princeton University where he studied for the ministry, the church moved to call him in October of 1848. He declined and in November the church called Rev. Azor Van Hoose, a native of Tennessee, to be the pastor. He had studied briefly at Howard College but lacked the polish of a college graduate. His salary was contracted at \$500. but he doubted the church could pay that, so he declined. Soon young Dr. Basil Manly Jr. agreed to serve the Tuscaloosa Church from February to December of 1849. He would leave Tuscaloosa to become pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. He would later become a founder and professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for many years and would also serve as President of Georgetown College in Kentucky. He became the founder and first head of the Sunday School Board in 1863 and composed at least twenty hymns, some of which were in his early Baptist Hymnal known as *Manly's Choice*.

Azor Van Hoose was again called to be pastor of Tuscaloosa Baptist and served from 1850 through 1852. When he left, the church voted on Joshua Hill Foster, a devout young man from Fosters, Alabama to become the pastor. He had graduated at age twenty from the University of Alabama at the top of his class and had lived for some years in Tuscaloosa where he was already active in the church. He was ordained by the Tuscaloosa Church and while he had a strong love for teaching he served the church well for one year. The church was remodeled during that year with the ladies taking the lead. Foster would later serve as a Professor at the University of Alabama and as President of the Alabama Central Female College which was situated in the old Capitol. While Foster was pastor of other churches in the area for brief periods, he was a towering figure in the Tuscaloosa church until his death in 1904. Foster was the first pastor born in Alabama.

In 1855 the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church called 28 year old Archibald John Battle as its new pastor. Son of a prominent Georgia Baptist, Dr. Cullen Battle, A. J. graduated from the University of Alabama in 1846 and the next year married Mary, daughter of the distinguished Dr. James Guild of Tuscaloosa. Young Battle, standing six feet tall was an imposing figure in the pulpit. Dr. Manly, his mentor, left the presidency of the University in 1855, but A. J. Battle remained as pastor through 1856 and then returned to serve the church again in 1858 and 1859. Like so many of the pastors under the influence of Manly and Dagg, Rev. Battle went on to become a distinguished educator, serving as the President of both Judson College in Marion and Mercer University in Georgia. J. K. Barry was pastor briefly from January through November of 1857 but little is known of

him. He was pastor in the late 1840's in Erie, Pennsylvania, then was a pastor in Illinois before coming to Tuscaloosa. He did help organize the Tuscaloosa Central Female Institute and served as a trustee, but he reportedly left in November of 1857 headed back to Illinois.

When A. J. Battle left in 1859, young Charles Manley, son of Dr. Basil Manly Jr. was invited to become the pastor following his graduation from Princeton. Like his brother, he had grown up in this church. By the time he entered the pastorate the church had 275 member, the majority of which were African American. He had a fine education and the wisdom passed down from his father. But he would have no experience to prepare him for the challenges he would be facing in the 1860's.

### **THERE WAS DARKNESS OVER ALL THE LAND The Great War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877**

The first year of Charles Manly's service to Tuscaloosa Baptist Church seemed to be a fulfillment of his great promise. Forty-seven people were added to the church and thirty-nine of those came by baptism. And the prosperity of the 1850's meant that the financial status of the church seemed to be improved.

At the same there was an anxiety in the land. The church agreed to a day of prayer and fasting on Friday prior to the first Lord's Day in November of 1860. This was just prior to the national general election in which names of Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, and John C. Breckinridge were on the ballot. The general consensus across the South was that it would be a national tragedy if Lincoln were elected. Yet, despite the prayers of many thousands of Southerners, Mr. Lincoln won as the first Republican President of the U. S. and the talk of secession began to fill the air. Within five weeks South Carolina had seceded from the Union and by February of 1861 the six other Deep South states had seceded as well. On February 4 delegates from these seven states met in Montgomery, AL to establish the Confederate States of America. They would choose the most experienced leader in the new nation, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, to be the President of the new nation and for a brief period Montgomery would be its capital city. Basil Manly Sr. would lead the prayer at the inauguration of President Davis.

Tuscaloosa would find itself right in the middle of a new nation with a new president. And with the powder keg of Ft. Sumter being ignited in April of 1861, four new states joined the Confederacy, the capital was soon moved to Richmond, and war was part of every conversation across the South. Church members saw many members go off to war and their prayers were focused daily on their loved ones. Charles Manly told his father that the church was getting behind with his salary and the church had become difficult to serve. By 1863 the church decided to have just one business meeting per quarter rather than the traditional monthly meeting because of the poor attendance.

The members anxiously awaited every tidbit of news from the war. In the early years the news was often encouraging. But following the first week of July in 1863, when the North won enormous victories at both Gettysburg and Vicksburg, it began to appear that the South was struggling. Despite the fact that war was on the minds of everyone, it rarely showed up in the church minutes of Baptist meetings. The only reference to the war in the minutes of Coker's Big Creek Baptist Church was in April of

1865 when a simple statement read, "There being a Yankey Rade in the neighborhood there were no services held for this month." Indeed, the war came to Tuscaloosa when Union Gen. John Croxton brought his Cavalry troops across the bridge into Tuscaloosa, engaged University Cadets in town and then went on to set fire to most of the University of Alabama campus. On a very sad note, Deacon Benjamin Farrar Eddins of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church was the only citizen of Tuscaloosa who died in the defense of the town when Croxton's Raiders came to town. He had served in the war under former pastor, Col. Henry Talbird, before coming home because of poor health. He was leading a "home guard" of boys and older men when he was killed at age 52. In this same month General Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant. Other armies quickly fell in line. General Dick Taylor surrendered his Army of Alabama and Mississippi at Citronelle, Alabama on May 4, 1865 and the war, for all practical purposes was over. Survivors were coming home tired and many were crippled. Many other were buried far from home. The South was faced with the task of rebuilding.

Money to pay Charles Manly was scarce and the Tuscaloosa Church voted to start up the old pre-war practice of renting pews in order fund the pastor's salary. But even that was not enough and by July of 1871 Rev. Manly had asked the church permission to serve with Joshua Hill Foster as a co-head of the Alabama Central Female College in Tuscaloosa. The church approved and he held both positions for the next two years. When Manly left Tuscaloosa in August of 1871 he moved to Tennessee where he again pastored a church and served as President of Union University, a Baptist School. Later he moved to Greenville, South Carolina where he served a church and was President of Furman University. In his latter years he moved to Lexington, Virginia where he was pastor of the Lexington Baptist Church which was renamed Manly Memorial Baptist Church in his honor. There he ministered to students of both Washington and Lee University and Virginia Military Institute. He became known as "the most universally beloved man in Lexington."

When Rev. Charles Manly took over the church in 1859 there were around 275 members and when he left in 1871 there were only 113. The decrease does not reflect his leadership so much as signs of the time. Most all of the members of African descent had left the church to form the First African Baptist Church.

Following the war the church building was in such a state of repair that some were afraid to use it. The body could not afford a new building but voted to make repairs so that the building was safe. During the repairs the church worshiped in the concert hall of the nearby female college.

In January of 1872 Rev. William H. Williams was called to be the new pastor, coming from the Staunton, Virginia Baptist Church. Williams had been baptized into the First Baptist Church of Richmond by Basil Manly Jr., had served as a chaplain in the Civil War and by 1868 had become pastor of the historic First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina. As the result of a revival in May of 1872, Rev. Williams baptized nineteen into the Tuscaloosa Church and things were off to a good start. But the difficulty of reconstruction meant that money was scarce and that the church had a struggle to pay the pastor. As with earlier pastors, it was agreed that Williams could teach at the female college to supplement his salary. A major event the following year came when the church hosted the annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist Convention and Williams was one of two delegates from the church to the convention. In all the church

made progress prior to the fall of 1877 when Williams left Tuscaloosa to become pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charlottesville, home of the University of Virginia. From there he went to Missouri where he served as editor of the state Baptist newspaper until his death.

### **COMFORT YE, COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE Toward Stability Following Reconstruction, 1878-1892**

When President Hayes entered the White House early in 1877, he chose to get on with the nation's business and end Reconstruction and the federal occupation of the South. The South would then begin to put people back in power in each state who were in leadership before the war. Historically they were called the Bourbons and they systematically devised ways to keep those of African descent from voting. Still there was hope that a new day would dawn when righteousness would come to the land and real hope would have to come through a spiritual renewal within the body of Christ.

In the latter part of 1877 the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church extended a call to a bright young minister who was doing graduate work at the University of Virginia following his graduation in the previous spring from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina. At age 27 he was only the second Alabama born pastor in the church's sixty year history, his home being near Dadeville, Alabama. William W. Sanders had made a splendid speech at his graduation from Southern Seminary back in May, being introduced by Dr. John A. Broadus, the prince of Southern Baptist Theologians of his day. So the expectations for Sanders, a Howard College graduate were high. He had already pastored the Baptist churches of Union Springs, Alabama and Walhalla, South Carolina as he took the Tuscaloosa pulpit for the first time on January 6, 1878. He had a winsome way about him, was eloquent in the pulpit, and gracious to all he met. It was a shock, therefore, when some of the members learned that their young minister was having some pain even in the late spring and that he was in considerable discomfort in the pulpit by July. The church gave him some time off to recover but by October he relapsed and decided to seek the mountain air of Virginia for its healing. He left Tuscaloosa on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October for Lynchburg, seemingly feeling better along the way. But the terrible word reached Tuscaloosa on Thanksgiving Day that the young minister had gone to his heavenly reward at age 28. Members could not forget his last sermon in Tuscaloosa on the words from the Master, "Follow Thou Me."

On learning of Pastor Sanders' death, the local pulpit was draped in black, and in front of it was placed an evergreen anchor above which was a somber cross and a glistening crown. The description stated that "around the walls and upon the chandelier are interlaced emblems of our dark night and his bright day" The young minister's body was taken from Virginia to Dadeville for burial in the Sanders Family Cemetery. But the church planned a fitting memorial service for Sunday morning the 8<sup>th</sup> of December. It was conducted by Dr. Joshua Hill Foster, the former pastor who was now the leading spiritual mentor in the church. The Tuscaloosa Newspaper indicated that Dr. Foster's text was from Acts 11: 24 where he compared the young minister to Barnabas. Letters from friends and acquaintances of Brother Sanders were read and then special letters were read from the two previous pastors, Rev. Charles Manly and Rev. W. H. Williams,

sending expressions of their tender sympathies during this time of “sore affliction.” The newspaper concluded by describing the service as a most impressive and solemn occasion.

The pulpit which is used today in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa is a memorial to the young pastor. The inscription simply reads:

1878

“Follow Me”

Pastor

W. W. Sanders

Called Up Higher

President John F. Lanneau of the Alabama Central Female College and an active member of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church expressed the sentiments of the church best following the memorial for Pastor Sanders. He penned these words, “Sore, indeed, is our bereavement. Who now will take our beloved brother’s mantle, tenderly gather the smitten flock, bind up the broken hearts, and lead us on to the Good Shepherd?”

By December of 1878 the church had already contacted a promising young minister who was pastor of the Eufaula, Alabama Baptist Church and he agreed to start his work as pastor in Tuscaloosa in January of 1879. He was 34 year old Oliver Fuller Gregory of Charleston, South Carolina. He had grown up, been baptized, and ordained by the great First Baptist Church of Charleston where former Tuscaloosa pastor William H. Williams had served. Gregory had been a cavalryman in the Civil War but felt the call to preach after the war and served smaller churches for six years before moving to Eufaula. The Tuscaloosa Church had 169 members when he arrived but he learned that 52 of these lived elsewhere so that the active membership was just a little over 100. He set up a church committee to study this problem. A sad note occurs in the ministry of Rev. Gregory when he is confronted with rumors of a derogatory nature. The church closed ranks around the pastor and investigation proved the rumors to be false. Yet it was so uncomfortable for Gregory that he left in a little over a year. He later served churches in South Carolina, Staunton, Virginia, and Montgomery, Alabama before going to a community church in Baltimore which he served for a number of years. He was so beloved there until the church was renamed Gregory Memorial Baptist Church. He was best known in Southern Baptist ranks as Secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention from 1880 through 1918.

In June of 1880, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Chattanooga began his service in the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church. At age 40 he was one of the church’s more seasoned pastors in a number of years. His name was James Madison Phillips and his ministry in Tuscaloosa was quite fruitful. Among those he baptized during his ministry were Henry Bacon Foster, lawyer son of Dr. Joshua Hill Foster, and Thomas Garner, later affectionately called “Uncle Tom.” These two men together gave around 120 years of service to the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church, filling nearly every major office in the church.

Pastor Phillips was long remembered for honoring an elderly deacon shortly after he arrived. Deacon C. A. Hester had been ordained back in the 1830's when Pastor DeVotie served the church. Now, in 1880, he was a shut-in and Rev. Phillips led the congregation over to Deacon Hester's house to administer the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, a touching tribute to a faithful servant.

It must also be noted that the church lost a very valuable member in 1882 with the passing of Richard Furman who is believed to have served as clerk for at least a quarter of a century. He was the clerk who wrote the question sent to the state convention in 1844 which led to the establishment of the Southern Baptist Convention. He was a valuable pillar of the church for nearly four decades.

Under Phillips' leadership the church developed a more sophisticated organization, taking out papers of incorporation and selecting a board of trustees. It also developed a detailed operating program and provided for the selection of appropriate committees. Once this structure was in place the church began serious talk about building a new church. The old church was in great need of repair and was on a corner where it could not expand. Thus it seemed miraculous when Mrs. Sallie Moody Purser, one who grew up in the church, let it be known that she was interested in giving the church a lot on Greensboro Avenue for building a new house of worship. The details were worked out and the deed was signed and recorded on June 28, 1883. Before the signing of the deed the church had already found a buyer for the old church, the Allen and Jemison Warehouse Company which purchased it for \$2,500.

There are few existing records which chronicle the procedure used to construct the new building. J. R. Ryan of Chattanooga, perhaps someone Pastor Phillips knew well, was employed as the architect. And to the surprise of many, Rev. Phillips resigned effective March 1, 1884 to assume the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Henderson, Kentucky. God blessed his ministry there as 325 were baptized into the church during his four years there. His talented wife, Lucie Dayton Phillips, also became a gifted writer, publishing a novel with a Christian theme, and writing for the Baptist Sunday School Board for twenty-five years.

Thanks to Dr. Joshua H. Foster the church secured a new pastor to come on board almost immediately. Dr. Foster's only son-in-law was Professor Joseph M. Dill, an active member of the Tuscaloosa Church who was ordained as a deacon in 1884. Dill's younger brother was Rev. Jacob Smiser Dill, pastor of the Union Springs Baptist Church who agreed to assume the pastorate on March 1, 1884, just as the building program was in full swing. Dill was born in Carlowville, Dallas County, Alabama and was only the third pastor of the Tuscaloosa church who was a native Alabamian. But he had impressive credentials and was the son-in-law of Dr. I. T. Tichenor, the head of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention which had now moved from Marion, Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia. Tichenor was an organizational genius who had held pastorates of the First Baptist Churches of Montgomery and Memphis before assuming the presidency of what is now Auburn University. The Dill name was well known but the Tichenor name was even better known in Baptist circles.

Meanwhile, the new sanctuary began taking shape on the corner of Eighth Street and Greensboro Avenue in Tuscaloosa. In June of 1884 the local newspaper reported that "The Baptists are putting furniture in their magnificent new brick church." It was said that there seemed to be no flaw or defect, "except the front doors seem to be a little

too wide for their height.” He added that there were numerous windows with swinging sashes and figured glass. A beautiful spire adorned one corner and a belfry the other. The church was built to seat 600 or more persons.

Dr. Foster and Pastor Dill began planning well in advance for the dedication of the new church which was already planned to coincide with the annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist Convention in Tuscaloosa. The convention would meet on July 17 through 20 and the dedicatory sermon would be delivered on the Sunday night of the 20<sup>th</sup> with the invited guest speaker being the distinguished Baptist, Dr. Basil Manly, Jr., former pastor and Professor of Old Testament at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The local paper stated that “the name of Manly possesses for Tuscaloosa and vicinity an irresistible charm. It is felt that that name would be most appropriately connected with the dedication of our new house of worship.”

It was a grand occasion as homefolks and visitors filled the new sanctuary to hear the noted Theologian who was once a hometown boy. It was reported that the sermon was “exceedingly appropriate and engaged the close attention of the entire congregation.” There was a special pride among the women of the church that they had raised the money for the grand chandelier which hung in the Lord’s new house on Greensboro Avenue. But the church was equally as proud of its new indoor baptistery, the first in the history of the Tuscaloosa church. The first baptism took place before the dedication. On Sunday evening, July 20, Pastor Dill baptized Nora Reid and Fannie Long. All previous baptisms had been held in the waters of the Black Warrior River.

One of the disappointments with the new building was that by October the roof was already leaking. This was a problem that would continue to plague the church. At the same time the church was still having difficulty paying the pastor, often getting behind with his payments. For example, in November of 1885, the financial report indicated that the church was in arrears \$406. on the pastor’s annual salary of \$1000. The struggle continued throughout the decade of the ‘80’s.

Rev. J. S. Dill resigned as pastor in February of 1888 to become the pastor of the First Baptist Church of LaGrange, North Carolina. He later served the church in Fredericksburg, Virginia and from 1903 to 1911 he was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bowling Green, Kentucky where he wrote the biography of his father-in-law, Dr. Isaac Taylor Tichenor.

In May of 1888 Rev. David Marshall Ramsey arrived to assume the pastorate of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Church. At age 30 he brought with him his new bride of three months, coming from Kentucky where he had served a church and completed his studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Ramsey was a native of Greenville, South Carolina and had graduated from the University of Richmond. Under the leadership of this personable and compassion young minister the church began to grow. The church soon purchased a pipe organ which it got for the bargain price of \$1,600. Some had opposed the purchase of an organ because of repairs needed on the roof. But the ladies of the church said they would pay for the repairs if the men would purchase the organ. Young Rev. Ramsey was an effective pastor. The church membership was 190 when he arrived and up to 290 when he left four years later to become pastor of the Citadel Square Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Even later he became the president of the Women’s College of Greenville, South Carolina. In October of 1952, Dr. David M. Ramsey was invited back to speak at the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa and he spoke

at both the morning and evening services that day even though he was 95 years old at the time. He died in Greenville in August of 1957, two months short of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## **I AM AMONG YOU AS THE ONE WHO SERVES** **The Dawson Years, 1892-1924**

Lemuel Orah Dawson was born on a Chambers County, Alabama farm fifteen days following General Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Grant at Appomattox, Virginia in 1865. He grew to manhood during reconstruction, attended Howard College at Marion, and the Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He did further study at the University of Berlin in Germany. He was only 27 years of age and married for two years when he and his young bride came to Tuscaloosa to accept a call to the Baptist church as its pastor in 1892.

Some members could recall that Dawson was the same age as young W. W. Sanders was when he came to the church fourteen years earlier. There was that same affection for the people and the same passion for the gospel. But no one could ever imagine that Pastor Dawson would remain at the church for 32 years. The longest previous tenure was the twelve years Dr. Charles Manley held from 1859 to 1871. But Dawson not only seemed to become the pastor for the church but the town of Tuscaloosa and the University of Alabama. People were drawn to him in a unique way. To get some understanding of Dr. L. O. Dawson, it is helpful to get a glimpse of his college experience. As a student of Howard in Marion, Alabama, his pastor at the Siloam Baptist Church was Dr. A. C. Davidson from Missouri. Dr. Dawson later wrote these words about Dr. Davidson:

*"You know, he was my college pastor. To me he was a man sent from God to touch my life at its most important period. In everything he was my ideal. As a pastor and as a man, I have never seen any greater than he. He loved the boys with a genuine shepherd heart, and in return they lavished on him their extravagant affection and youthful enthusiasms. In all those years his influence has been felt in my life, and whatever good I have done, his hand was in it all. He never can die as long as one of these boys lives.*

People in Tuscaloosa responded to Dr. Dawson the way the Howard boys responded to his old pastor in Marion. He viewed each person as a unique individual created in the image of God and one who could do great things for God if his or her heart was in tune with the heart of God. As one man put it, people were at first attracted to Dr. Dawson and then to Christ. He was out among the people every day and the growth of the church reflected that. In his first year, the church received forty-two new members, fifty-one in the second year, and sixty-nine in the third. He was equally at home with the common laborer, or the poor and destitute as he was with a university professor or a wealthy businessman. The Tuscaloosa Baptist Church had 290 members when Dr. Dawson arrived and by 1900 it had passed 500. And it was about this time that the church began to call itself the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa.

On February 28, 1904 First Baptist of Tuscaloosa lost one of the most influential members in its eighty-six year history. Dr. Joshua Hill Foster, Sr., former pastor and

spiritual guide to many pastors over the years, died and was buried in Tuscaloosa's Evergreen Cemetery. Dr. Dawson later wrote these words describing Dr. Foster:

*Joshua Hill Foster, Sr. was one of Alabama's strong pillars of church and state. He was a man of great learning tempered with equal greatness of common sense and humility, and the home in which his children grew to maturity was typical of all that was best and most beautiful in the South when chivalry, courtesy, kindness, and honor were the most prized possessions of the people.*

L. O. Dawson led in a number of mission ventures in the Tuscaloosa area. In 1899 a mission was established on the south side with the Tuscaloosa church furnishing a chapel. It remained a mission for about twenty years before becoming Southside Baptist Church. In 1904 Dr. Dawson helped to organize the Holt Baptist Church. But few could imagine the impact of the next mission project. With Dr. Dawson's blessing some of the members offered their homes as space to start a Sunday School out near the University of Alabama campus. Then First Baptist member F. W. Monnish funded the building of a structure to house the Sunday School and some space for worship. Good leadership was available and on January 1, 1911 this mission project developed into a church and it was named for Mr. Monnish' deceased son. It was called the Sage A. Monnish Memorial Baptist Church. Later the Monnish family asked that the name be changed to Calvary Baptist Church, one of the strongest Baptist churches in the area today.

In 1909 several members of First Baptist left to establish Rosedale Baptist Church but the records are not clear as to how much financial support was given. About the same time there was talk of establishing a mission in West End. Dr. Dawson himself led in the purchase of a West End lot so that a building might be erected for the mission. Records show that the building was completed in 1915 but West End did not formally constitute itself as a church until 1938.

During the Dawson Era there were a number of successful revivals, but none greater than the one in 1906 when Dr. H. M. Wharton came down from the Brantly Baptist Church, the largest church in Baltimore, to lead a revival that lasted four weeks. Wharton was both a dynamic pastor and evangelist who had spoken at the funeral of Dwight L. Moody in 1899. Rarely had Tuscaloosa people heard such eloquence and people crowded the church nightly expecting great things to happen. The Revival began on Monday, April 16, and lasted through Sunday, May 13. One came by restoration, seventy-two moved their letters, and 118 gave their hearts to Christ and were baptized into the church. Almost no one had ever seen anything like it.

Again, in 1915 Dr. Dawson brought in Dr. George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas to lead in a two-week revival. An outpouring of the Holy Spirit led nineteen persons to move their membership to First Baptist and seventy-eight to make a profession of faith in Christ, a great boost to the fellowship of the church.

Thomas W. Palmer exerted a strong leadership role for many years at First Baptist Church. He was a brilliant young math professor at the University of Alabama who was born in Wilcox County in 1860. Shortly before he turned 24 he was ordained as a deacon in 1884 and was almost immediately made a trustee of the church. But it was in the Dawson era that his leadership skills came to the forefront. Dr. Dawson understood the role of the Sunday School in growing a strong church and when Thomas W. Palmer became Sunday School Superintendent, he exerted great energy and enthusiasm. The

growth that came led Palmer to push for an education building long before one could be built. And even though Dr. Thomas Palmer left in 1907 to become the president of Alabama College in Montevallo, it was his vision that eventually led the church to build a fine new education building by the close of Dr. Dawson's tenure.

During his long tenure at First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa, Dr. Dawson had many chances to go elsewhere with offers from churches able to pay a higher salary and he was even offered in 1902 the presidency of Howard College. But he turned all offers down because he felt his work in Tuscaloosa was not completed. He always seemed surprised when any honors came his way. Yet he was honored as a natural leader. In Tuscaloosa he was on the Hospital Board and served as President of the Rotary Club. He was active in the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association and from 1921-1923 served as President of the Alabama Baptist Convention. He was a Howard College Trustee and a trustee of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was also a founder of the Baptist Young People's Union (B.Y.P.U.) in the Southern Baptist Convention and its president for ten years. But Dr. Dawson took just as much pride in that the members of the First African Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa called him their "assistant pastor."

Dr. L. O. Dawson knew that the church struggled financially many times during his pastorate. But he was a man of faith who urged the church to have a vision of what it could be for God's glory. By 1920 the growth of the Sunday School had led to embarrassing space problems. The need for a new educational building was critical but how would the church pay for it? Dawson's belief was that if the question was whether to build immediately or wait on the money, the answer would always be to build. He said, "It is a spiritual problem rather than a financial problem. It is that we build a home large enough to contain the blessings of God or that the blessings of God will be made small enough to fit what we now have." In April of 1920 the W.M.U. President went before the deacons and reported that on the past Sunday there were 580 people in Sunday School and no place to put them. Mrs. Pelham Brown asked the deacons "to covenant in prayer to God to show some way to solve this problem."

In July of 1920 a motion was made that a study committee be appointed to determine the feasibility of building an education facility. This committee was appointed and contacted the Sunday School Board and one of the best church architects to be found. On January 2, 1921 the committee gave its recommendation to build to the rear of "our present church building a complete modern Sunday School building of sufficiently large proportions to accommodate a thoroughly graded departmental school of not less than 1,200." The committee also recommended that the pastor appoint a building committee with the authority to employ an architect and prepare complete plans for such a structure. Dr. Dawson appointed this committee immediately and they soon hired an architect from Chattanooga. The major problem after that was where to put the building. There was much debate before it was finally concluded that it would be placed behind the existing church.

In December of 1922 the church decided not to hire a contractor. Rather it hired Dr. N. O. Patterson to oversee the project. The original plans were for a four-story building but Patterson worked out an arrangement to bring it down to a three-story building. Ground was broken in October of 1923 and the new building was formally opened for use on December 1, 1924. Dr. N. O. Patterson considered it "the greatest building of its kind in the whole Southland."

On May 11, 1924, just when the new Educational Building was taking shape and the church was excited about its future, Dr. L. O. Dawson announced that he was resigning to become a Professor of Bible and Church History at Howard College in Birmingham. The church exerted great effort to persuade him to stay but he felt that he had concluded his work in Tuscaloosa. He was 27 when he came and he was leaving at age 59. There were 290 members when he came and 1519 when he left. He baptized 1,241 over that period, far more than had been baptized by the previous twenty-one pastors combined. But Dr. Dawson never wanted the spotlight on himself and he would consistently point to those in the church whom God used in extraordinary ways. For example, he wrote a book commemorating “a father and a son,” Dr. Joshua Hill Foster and his son, Judge Henry Bacon Foster, two towering figures in the life of the church who encouraged him in countless ways.

Dr. Dawson was a beloved professor at Howard College but he felt that he should still be about the work of the pastor. As a result he organized the Edgewood Baptist Church in Homewood south of Birmingham and was its pastor for twelve years. Upon his death in 1938 the church unanimously voted to rename the church as the Dawson Memorial Baptist Church. Today it is one of the great churches in the state of Alabama.

In 1939 there was a strong desire among citizens in Tuscaloosa to erect a memorial to Dr. Dawson. Some suggested that this be placed on the front lawn of the First Baptist Church. Others pointed out that he belonged to the city and that a spot in the city be set aside for this monument. Today that granite marker with a bronze memorial plaque stands on Queen City Avenue, a firm reminder of a true man of God who once served this entire city.

### **HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION Toward Depression, War, and the Post-War Years, 1925-1961**

As First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa prepared for the post-Dawson years, they knew the L. O. Dawson had led the church in a marvelous way and they had the potential to call a strong pastor to build on the foundation the Lord had given through Dawson’s ministry. The church extended a call to Dr. M. E. Dodd, popular pastor of the Shreveport First Baptist Church, but he declined the invitation. Then one day Dr. Joseph P. Boone, Secretary of Baptist Student work for the Texas Baptist Convention was invited to speak at the Alabama Baptist Convention in Marion and someone invited him to visit the Tuscaloosa church on a Sunday night following the convention. He was invited to the platform and said a few words at the close of the service, but that was enough to convince the pulpit committee that he was the right man and the church called him to be its new pastor. He assumed his new role on February 1, 1925.

Dr. Boone set out to bring order to a fairly loose-knit church organization and he was determined to get the church out of debt. When he arrived the church had an operating deficit of over \$4,000.00, owed \$90,000. on the new educational building, and had committed to building a new pastorium. In that first year under Dr. Boone’s leadership there were 192 members who joined the church and financially the church was blessed. It was moving substantially toward paying off the debt, at least until the Great Depression came upon the country in 1929.

Because Dr. Boone was so committed to student work in Texas, he wanted to establish a Chair of Bible at the University of Alabama. With the cooperation of Dr. George Denney, president of the university, he was able to do this and eventually a Department of Religion was established as a result of this early venture. For several years Dr. Boone filled the Chair of Bible position.

Dr. Boone was a vital part of discussions to begin a new work in the Forest Lake area and he was a strong supporter of missions in general. Despite the Depression the church continued to grow. It had to make adjustments to its debt-retirement plan, but things were going well when Dr. J. P. Boone left to become the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Macon, Georgia in 1933. It was said he “ushered in a new era in the life of the church.” The membership stood at 2,149 members when he left. Dr. Boone kept close ties with this church, however, since his daughter, Frances, had married Dr. Charles Abbott, Jr., a young deacon in the church.

Dr. Boone left the church in December of 1933 and the pulpit had been filled by the first of February, 1934. The new pastor came highly recommended from the Sunday School Board in Nashville for whom he worked. But a real plus for Dr. Powhatan W. James was the fact that he was the son-in-law of Dr. George W. Truett, the “Prince of Preachers,” and the long time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Dr. James began his ministry in the midst of the Depression but earnestly tried to lead the church in paying off its debts. Interestingly, during his tenure at First Baptist, he wrote the definitive biography of his world-famous father-in-law, Dr. Truett, and it was widely purchased throughout the Southern Baptist Convention.

As much as it may not be acceptable to the thinking of our present church, the deacons acted as a Board of Deacons when Dr. James arrived. Most of the church business was handled by the deacons. But it was obvious that tithing was not a top priority even among the deacons in 1934. Dr. James preached a sermon on tithing in October which inspired some of the deacons and in the very next deacon’s meeting, twenty-six of the twenty-nine deacons present agreed to start giving ten per cent of their income to the church. Eight years later a three-month tithing campaign was carried out in the church which led the way to a successful debt-retirement effort. On May 10, 1942 a jubilant mortgage burning ceremony took place in the church and in May of 1943, the last of the notes made to the bank were redeemed. The church was out of debt for the first time in the memory of many of its members.

In the late 1930’s two new churches were established in the area with the help of First Baptist. These were the West End Church which had been a mission for a number of years and the Forest Lake (once known as Pounds Lake) Church.

Two valuable “pillars” of First Baptist Church died during Dr. James’ tenure. One was Judge Henry Bacon Foster. This extraordinary man and son of Dr. Joshua Hill Foster ran for mayor of Tuscaloosa at age 27 and won. He later served in the state legislature, local courts, and as a Justice of the State Court of Appeals. At the same time he was chair of deacons at First Baptist for 25 years, Sunday School Superintendent for 12 years, and Moderator of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association for 25 years. One of the monuments of his life was his valuable history of the aforementioned association when he was around 70 years of age. Foster, a Colonel in the Alabama National Guard, died on Armistice Day of 1939. The other member of the church with long and valuable service was Tom Garner who resigned in June, 1942 as director of the choir after 57 years in that

post. Most members could not remember when he had not held the position. In addition Garner was Church Clerk for many years as well as the secretary for the deacons. He died in 1944.

Dr. James was remembered for his "Loyalty Campaign" which he launched in 1939. The aim was to get every member of the church in every service of the church for a ten-week period. Dr. James closed the campaign with a revival in which he preached. The campaign seemingly stimulated great interest among the membership.

Dr. James had seen the church through most of World War II. Almost every family either had a member who was called into military service or knew someone who was involved in the war effort. Prayers were continually being offered up for the troops and particularly the men from the area and the church.

Dr. Powhatan W. James resigned on December 31, 1944 to become President of Bethel College in Hendersonville, KY. In June of that year his father-in-law, Dr. Truett, had died in Dallas. Dr. Truett's tenure at the great church in Dallas was from 1897 to June of 1944, an amazing forty-seven years. A few members could remember Dr. Truett coming for a great revival in 1915 but many remembered that he was a visiting minister in the pulpit at First Baptist while Dr. James was pastor. The late Margaret Gross McCain (mother of former organist, Bill McCain) once recounted the time when Dr. Truett got down and played marbles with her in her yard when she was a little girl.

When Dr. James left, he took Miss Molly Clippard with him. She had been the church secretary for sixteen and a half years. She also edited the church bulletin, served as the church bookkeeper, and was Church Clerk. Her service was very noteworthy and it was difficult to find persons to fill all the roles she had filled in the church. Dr. James served the church for eleven years, the third longest tenure of any pastor in its history.

In April of 1945 a pastor search committee recommended that the church call Dr. N. D. Timmerman, a native of South Carolina, and more recently pastor of the First Baptist Church, Bartlesville, Oklahoma to be the new pastor. Prior to Bartlesville, he had been pastor of the First Baptist Church of Clarksdale, Mississippi and the church still calls him one of the finest pastors they ever had. Prior to Dr. Timmerman's arrival the church scheduled quarterly business meetings which were not always held because so much of the business was handled by the deacons. Pastor Timmerman immediately called for monthly business meetings. And within a year the deacons began bringing all their recommendations to the church in its business meetings, a major step forward and a practice which is continued over sixty years later.

A major move of the church under Dr. Timmerman's leadership was to employ an educational director, Thomas Halsell (later pastor of the Alberta Baptist Church), who gave great assistance to the pastor and helped to develop a graded Adult Sunday School with three different departments and a superintendent over each department. Other innovations under Dr. Timmerman were the organization of a Brotherhood in 1947 and the broadcasting of Sunday morning services on a regular basis over local station WJRD in 1948.

The financial condition of the church was apparently improving following the war, but far too much money was going into constant repairs on the church that had been built in 1884. There was talk of a new sanctuary for the future. But Dr. Timmerman had a great desire to start a mission of First Baptist in the Loop Road area, later to be known as the Loop Road Mission. Pastor Timmerman conducted a tent revival in that area in

the summer of 1948 and soon a Sunday School was begun on a lot First Baptist had purchased. As a First Baptist building fund was established for the mission which was now being called Circlewood, Dr. Timmerman pledged to give \$50.00 per month out of his salary toward the project. The building was begun in June of 1949 and the building was opened for its first service in February of 1950. Circlewood immediately called a full-time pastor with the Alabama Baptist Convention paying part of his salary, the people of Circlewood paying a second part, and a third part coming from the First Baptist Missions fund. Circlewood Baptist became an independent church in December of 1952 when all property was deeded over to them.

Meanwhile, in January of 1949, Dr. C. E. Abbott reported to the deacons a very sad bit of news. Dr. N. D. Timmerman had been diagnosed with leukemia in an acute stage. The deacons assured that the pastor would get the best possible treatment. But the pastor died within four months, the final news of which brought great sadness to the church. Dr. Timmerman had accomplished much in his brief four years in Tuscaloosa. A funeral was held at the church on May 7 and his body was taken back to the family plot in Edgefield, South Carolina for burial.

Dr. Joseph P. Boone, a former pastor, was employed as interim pastor and remained in place until a new pastor was on the field in February of 1951. Meanwhile, during the interim period the church undertook a renovation of the education building which was now twenty-seven years old and in need of repairs and alterations. Although the final figures are not available, it was estimated that the renovation would be in the range of \$40,000.00.

The new pastor arriving in February of 1951 was Rev. Lucius B. Marion, Jr., coming from the Charleston Heights Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He did not have a doctorate but was noted for his forceful preaching and this had an impact upon the church almost immediately. Attendance was noticeably increased with 880 in Sunday School on the first Sunday in June. Also Training Union attendance went over 200 for the first time that fall. Talk was revived concerning a new sanctuary and it was determined that the first Sunday in each month would be designated as "Building Fund Sunday" with special offering envelopes placed in each pew.

In 1952 the church launched an ambitious music program when they called a full-time Director of Music. John Rogers came in March and organized a fully graded choir program. Although this did not continue after he left the church, it did lay the foundation for the program that is in place now over fifty years later.

In November of 1952, the financial report showed that there was \$32,294. in the building fund. Money continued to come in and by the time the church chose to take action in June, 1954, there was \$66,000. in the fund. At that time the church voted to build a new church building at a cost of around \$350,000. and they pledged to have half the amount in hand before launching construction.

With the strong preaching of Rev. Marion and the prospects of a beautiful new sanctuary, great enthusiasm was obvious in the church. An attractive picture booklet was published for the membership highlighting the deficiencies of the old sanctuary and it challenged the people to support the building program. In late 1954 the church chose a building committee of 58 members and the committee soon employed Charles McCauley of Birmingham to draw up the plans and supervise construction.

By the time the preliminary plans were complete, the goal of \$175,000. had been reached and, upon the acceptance of these plans by the church in December of 1954, the architect was asked to have detailed plans ready by April of 1955. At this same time the church determined that its old pipe organ was beyond repair and voted to purchase a new Mohler organ for a price of \$41,000. The old harp and chimes would be repaired and added to the new organ for an additional \$775. A second major decision about the new building came when the church decided to use the stained glass memorial windows from the old sanctuary for the new church. Because the new windows would be larger than the windows in the old church, a stained glass framing had to be designed for each window in order to accommodate the old windows.

With half of the bid price of \$402,996.00 available, the ground breaking for the new church was held on December 9, 1956. Little did the church know that there would be a sizeable delay in getting the steel for the new structure. It finally arrived in June of 1957 and the cornerstone ceremony was led by Pastor Marion on August 27. The fiscal side of the building project progressed quite well and by the time the church moved into the new building, almost \$400,000.00 had been raised. With added expenditures the final cost went well over \$500 thousand but the church only had to borrow \$145,000.00. to completely furnish the building.

Those who have been members of First Baptist can still remember that first Sunday in December of 1958 when the congregation met in the magnificent new church for the first time. The people rejoiced to see a new sanctuary dedicated to the Glory of God which would seat around 1,350 people. Peggy Hinton Hogue remembers entering the sanctuary that morning as a little girl and it was so full they had to sit in the balcony. She remembers tears coming down her mother's cheeks. When she asked why her mother was crying, her mother said she was so overcome to be in such a beautiful new facility. Peggy Hogue also remembers being in the first group of people baptized in the new baptistery a few Sundays later. The pastor spoke in that first morning service and Dr. Frank Rose, President of the University of Alabama, spoke in a community service in the afternoon. Throughout each night of that first week the church had outstanding speakers from across the Southern Baptist Convention in continuance of the celebration. These included Dr. Harold Seever, Pastor of the Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Dr. Courts Redford, Executive Secretary of the Home Mission Board, Mrs. R. L. Mathis, President of the Southern Baptist Women's Missionary Union, and Dr. Baker James Cauthen, Executive Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board. In addition the Howard College and Judson College Choirs, among others, provided outstanding music.

While the new church was in the early stages of construction, Arnold Avery was elected Sunday School Superintendent, a job he would hold into the 1970's. And he would work with the Minister of Education, Wayne Craig, to establish a fully graded Sunday School program.

After the completion of the new building, the church had the foresight to develop a Forward Program of Church Finance. It was a carefully planned program whereby the people would pledge a certain amount of giving to cover the entire year and it had such good results that it became an annual feature of the church program. Dr. C. E. Abbott and Mr. Bob Roddy successfully headed up these early Forward Programs.

In the latter part of 1960 and the early part of 1961 the church experienced some internal difficulties. Rev. Lucius Marion resigned in April of 1961 to accept the pastorate

of the First Baptist Church of Clarksdale, Mississippi and Wayne Craig left the church to further his study at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The church needed some time to heal and an interim pastor, Dr. Arthur Jackson, from Georgia was brought in and provided outstanding interim leadership.

**WITHOUT A VISION THE PEOPLE PERISH**  
**The Visionary Leadership of Drs. Randall, Lance, and McKee, 1962-Present**

**I. The Randall Years**

In a search for a new pastor in 1961, the pulpit committee criss-crossed the South and Southwest in its search for the right man, often utilizing a plane provided by a member of the church. In the end they found the right man, God's man, just ninety miles away. On unanimous recommendation of the committee, the church voted on January 21, 1962 to call Dr. Clarence Cecil Randall, 38 year old Pastor of the Highland Baptist Church of Meridian, Mississippi, to be its new pastor. Dr. Randall began his tenure in Tuscaloosa on February 19, 1962. Dr. Randall's warmth, sound preaching, and his God-given ability to relate to people seemed to bring just the kind of healing the church needed at this time. Dr. and Mrs. Randall had four children, three sons and a daughter. The word leaked out that he had initially wanted to be a minister of music before he felt God's call to the pastoral ministry. But the church greatly benefited from his beautiful tenor solo voice. People were continually urging him to sing solos, which he did much too infrequently to suit many. And soon after he arrived he brought in a man to be his minister of music who had originally planned to go into the pastoral ministry. Eugene Price was also a native of Mississippi with a warmth, a love for God, and a love for people which drew people to him. Then about a year later, the church called Carl Wells, another Mississippi native to become its Minister of Education. He soon proved himself to be one of the most effective leaders in his position in the state. And the church loved having his wife, Eleanor, who had a beautiful solo voice and was an anchor in the choir.

A project that had earlier been put on hold was now given the green light. There was a need for the renovation and air conditioning of the educational building. The price for this project was around \$330,000. It was a time in which Sunday School classes had to find places in town to meet. But there was great rejoicing when the beautiful new interior was opened to the public on August 8, 1963. The office suite became the nerve center of the new building on the first floor. A small library had a central location by the welcome center. And the second floor had a spacious choir rehearsal room, spacious robe rooms and a large office for the minister of music. A chapel and a dining area were widely used. Above all, there were Sunday School department meeting rooms surrounded by well-lighted classrooms. The church was investing in the future.

In the late 1960's the church began telecasting its Sunday morning service while continuing the radio broadcast over a strong local station, thus reaching many homes throughout the area. Also, outstanding revivals were held by the church which brought many people to a knowledge of the Lord. About that same time Dr. Tommy Russell began a Special Ministries Department that has been widely recognized among Alabama Baptists and has been a great blessing to both the leaders as well as those families served.

In 1968 the church celebrated its 150 anniversary with a well-planned program which lasted throughout the entire year. In January Dr. Gilbert L. Guffin, author of the January bible study book, *The Gospel in Isaiah*, came from Samford University to teach the book. Among others brought in that year were Dr. Baker James Cauthen, Executive Director of the Foreign Mission Board, and Dr. W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. In addition, an excellent history of First Baptist Church written by historian and Baptist minister, Rev. Quinton Porch, was made available to the church membership that year. Porch was Professor of History at Judson College for many years until his retirement around 1990.

Under Dr. Randall, a true servant pastor, the culture of the Deacons began to change. For many years it was second nature to speak of the Board of Deacons as though they were a Board of Directors. Soon the deacons were asked not to use the word *board* and to refer to themselves as the Deacon Body. Still there was an underlying perception was that the business of the church was business. For the most part it was businessmen who were consistently elected as Chairs of the Deacon Body. In the 1940's and 1950's Charlie Gross and Stanley Park Sr. were often elected to this highly visible leadership position. Both were Godly men who always had the best interest of the church at heart. The former was an attorney and the latter a businessman. But moving into the 60's and 70's, the deacons tended to rotate the chairmanship between three men, Jim Money, J. C. Faulkner, and Bob Roddy. Mr. Money was an accountant and the other two were successful businessmen. Each were solid leaders and likeable but some raised the question as to whether there might not be other leaders among the deacons. Still each man provided his own unique style of leadership and the church was blessed as a result.

During the 1970's there were two significant building projects taken on by the church. A member of the church had anonymously provided money for the construction of a chapel. But there were a significant number of members who believed that there was a more critical need for an activities center which would be especially designed for youth activities. In 1971 the church voted to proceed in that direction and by February of 1972 the architect's plans were completed and the ground was broken on the northeast corner of the block on which the church was located. The church body watched proudly as the new building went up and it was a beautiful day of rejoicing when the doors of the new building were first opened for viewing on a Sunday afternoon in 1973. No one expressed any regret that this building had taken precedent over a new chapel. Ed Dykstra was added to the staff as Youth Minister/Activities Director with his office being in the new building. Sometime later the building was renamed as the Family Life Center.

Talk of a proposed chapel building never died, however, and in the latter part of the decade serious discussions led the church to vote in favor of building a chapel on the northwest corner of the block on which the church is situated. It was determined that the architecture of the chapel would blend with the architecture of the church building. The chapel with a full basement of classrooms, a reception room with a kitchenette, and a suite of administrative offices was finally approved in August of 1981 and the project proceeded quickly. The church took great pride in the new chapel, a chapel parking lot, and the landscaping surrounding the area when the new facility was opened in 1982.

In May of 1981 the church added a new staff position, that of Childhood Education Director and Ms. Dianne Thigpen of Cleveland, Mississippi became the first

member of the ministerial staff. This was the beginning of a dynamic children's ministry which has kept First Baptist Church at the forefront of Alabama churches in such work.

Dr. Randall was pastor of First Baptist during the height of the Civil Rights era and provided strong leadership. One morning Sunday morning in the late 1960's two black gentlemen attending a convention in town came to the 11:00 A.M. worship service. Before the service an usher told them that there was a church for them down the street and they immediately left. Dr. Randall heard of the incident just before he came into the sanctuary for the service. At a strategic point in the middle of his sermon, he stated very emphatically, "this is not my church, and this is not your church, but this is God's church and whoever chooses to worship here is welcome." Soon the church began inviting the state high school all-star teams in both basketball and football to come and worship with First Baptist in the summer week when they converged on Tuscaloosa to play the state all-star games. Each year the black population on these teams was higher than the previous year, but the church, for the most part, graciously welcomed the athletes.

Back in 1969 Minister of Music Gene Price resigned to return to Mississippi and Jim Robertson was soon employed and continued to build on a strong foundation with graded choirs, a variety of musical ensembles, and a program of training soloists. When Jim Robertson resigned in 1976, Ron Wilson, a graduate of Samford University and Southwestern Seminary was employed. He continued to build a strong Worship Choir and his wife, Mary An Wilson, headed up a strong children's choir program.

Also, in the late 1970's the church brought Rev. Vial Fontenot, a pastor in Grand Isle, Louisiana, to be the new Youth Minister and Activities Director at First Baptist. He immediately became a vital member of the staff and has probably held more different staff positions at the church than any other individual.

On November 10, 1982 Dr. C. C. Randall gave the church his resignation to accept a position as Roland Q. Leavell Chair of Evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. A beloved pastor, Dr. Randall served the church for a little over twenty years, second in tenure only to another beloved pastor, Dr. L. O. Dawson. On the day the Randalls left the church, they stood in line for well beyond two hours as hundreds filed by to give them good wishes, many of them tearful good-byes. When the author went through the line, Dr. Randall said, "make sure the next pastor is a good pulpiteer, this town needs one." Dr. Randall was a humble man who saw his strength as loving and shepherding the people. He never thought of himself as a great preacher.

## **II. The Lance Years**

When Dr. Rick Lance was around 29 years of age he came to conduct a revival at First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa. At the close of the revival Dr. C. C. Randall thanked the young minister for coming to be with us and then he turned to the congregation and said, "I predict that one day this young man will be elected President of the Alabama Baptist Convention."

When the Pastor Search Committee of nine persons was formed in December of 1982, they examined the qualifications of more than seventy-five candidates for the position over the following months. But they came down to Dr. Rick Lance, 32 year old pastor of the First Baptist Church of Cullman, Alabama, as the man they believed was chosen by the Holy Spirit to be the new shepherd for this Tuscaloosa flock. He preached

his first sermon in Tuscaloosa on June 19, 1983 and was enthusiastically received and unanimously elected as the new pastor. Dr. Lance began his ministry at First Baptist in July and there was perceptible growth in Sunday School attendance and church membership almost immediately. Interestingly, in the fall of 1983 Dr. Rick Lance was elected as First Vice President of the Alabama Baptist Convention at an unusually young age for such a position.

It was immediately obvious that Dr. Lance was a voracious reader and used his strong biblical background, together with his knowledge of current events, to present meaningful messages consistently. Many church members noted that he was not only very articulate but eloquent, never using any notes in the pulpit. During this period many young couples

As a leader Dr. Lance took the position that the pastor could not do everything and that it was very important to have a strong, well-trained ministerial staff. He relied heavily on the experience of Carl Wells as an Associate Pastor for Education as the church entered the Sunday School Growth Spiral on January 1, 1984 with 1,750 enrolled and 700 in attendance. By September 1, 1987 the church had won six Golden Eagles for Sunday School growth from the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. First Baptist became the first church in Alabama and one of the few in Southern Baptist life to get six Golden Eagles as the enrollment by September of 1987 was 3,173 and the attendance was 1,313. By 1991 the church had received its thirteenth consecutive Golden Eagle.

During the 1980's the church invited Ron Lewis, a leading church growth consultant, to come to Tuscaloosa and discuss what First Baptist should do to reach the greatest number of people. He suggested that the church purchase as much property as it could in the surrounding blocks in order for the physical plant to accommodate the growth it anticipated. In 1983 the church added property in the block north of the one on which the sanctuary is located. As a part of the property the church got the Clancy McQue Restaurant and agreed to honor its seven year lease. But it opened much needed parking space. Buildings on the east side of Twenty-Third Avenue at the corner of Seventh Street were purchased and remodeled for the use of the Youth and the College ministries.

For the years the church would have purchased the Coca Cola Bottling Company property across Eighth Street from the Educational Building. But there seemed no chance for such a deal. The church got the chance to purchase the lot directly across from the First United Methodist Church on Greensboro Avenue and converted it into a parking lot, naming it for Herman Burchfield, one of the church's benefactors. Next the adjacent property consisting of the Burns and Burns law offices was acquired and converted into classrooms for the singles ministry. Then, unexpectedly, the Coca Cola property came available, pending details of an exchange for land and a building out from downtown. With this matter resolved, the church then owned all of that block except the County School Board property on the southwest corner. The church at last had the land it had long envisioned for a new Childhood Education Building. Even before it was torn down the Coca Cola Building was temporarily utilized for the International Ministry.

The church had bought into a culture of growth but it continued to emphasize reaching people for Christ. And how was this done? Regular visitation, a vital Sunday School, conversational English classes for Internationals, a dynamic Vacation Bible School, a strong graded choir program, and the Living Christmas Tree. The "tree" was

purchased in the late 1980's and, utilizing the skills of many people, it was advertised as the gift of First Baptist to the West Alabama Community. Minister of Music Ron Wilson changed the format each year and large numbers of people came, not only from the greater Tuscaloosa area but from surrounding counties. It became an outstanding outreach instrument for the church.

As the church grew, the reputation of the pastor also grew. In November of 1990, Dr. Rick Lance was elected President of the Alabama Baptist Convention at its annual meeting in Mobile. He was only 39 at the time but it fulfilled the prediction of Dr. C. C. Randall approximately ten years earlier. According to tradition he was again elected in 1991 and served a two-year term. He worked to emphasize the strengths of Alabama Baptists and led the convention in avoiding controversies that had caused deep divisions in some other state conventions. Dr. Lance brought considerable experience to the state position, even at his early age. He had served on the Administration and Personnel Committee of the state convention, he had been a Samford University Trustee for two years, he had been a member of the Foundation Board of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary for a year, and he had been a Trustee of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for five years.

In the early 1990's the church voted to fund the Children's Building as a three story building with the first two stories given over to children's activities and the top floor available for young adults who, for the most part, would be the parents of those children. Portions of the top floor were finished later but when the new building was dedicated in 1993, many were saying it was the finest children's facility among Baptist churches in Alabama. The church can be thankful for leaders in the past who had such a vision for its younger generation.

Dr. Lance had the leadership continually provided by Carl Wells and Ron Wilson in Christian Education and Music when he reached his twelfth anniversary at First Baptist. He brought back Vial Fontenot after several years he spent as a pastor and Vial provided coordination for both the College and Singles ministries. In the 1990's Scott Reynolds was added to the staff as a dynamic young Youth Minister. In 1996 Carl Wells retired after giving tremendous energy and talent in his position for 23 years, the church brought Rev. Ricky Michaels from Athens, Alabama to lead the education ministry of the church. Ricky was personable and the membership responded quickly to his leadership. He also filled the pulpit on occasions.

In 1998 Dr. Lance turned in his resignation upon his call to become the Executive Secretary of the Alabama Baptist Convention with its headquarters in Montgomery. The church took pride in that convention leaders recognized the leadership Dr. Lance provided at First Baptist. At the same time many were saddened that he and his family would be leaving Tuscaloosa. He also made the decision to ask Mary Sue Bennett, his Administrative Assistant at First Baptist to function in a similar role in Montgomery and she accepted. It became apparent that as the church looked toward the year 2000 and a new millennium, it would also be a new era for First Baptist of Tuscaloosa.

A search committee was soon put into place and they, under the leadership of Dr. Tommy Russell, asked that the church be in daily prayer that the Lord would bring His man to the church to provide both the leadership and vision that was needed for a new century. In the meantime, the church secured the services of Dr. Charles Carter, Pastor Emeritus of the Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, to be Interim Pastor.

The church fared well during this period as Ricky Michael led in the day to day operations of the church and the church, in turn, enjoyed the dynamic preaching of Dr. Carter. The attendance dropped very little and the number of baptisms actually rose in 1999. During this interim period the personnel committee asked Ron Wilson to move from the music ministry to become the Minister to Senior Adults.

### **III. The McKee Years**

Around March of the year 2000 the word was leaked out that the Pastor Search Committee was about ready to make a recommendation to the church but the name they intended to recommend was kept quiet. But soon the new pastor was introduced to the deacons and wives one evening and he had the opportunity to field questions about his style of leadership and his vision for the church. The man God had brought our way was Dr. Gil McKee, 40 year old pastor of the Highland Baptist Church in Florence, Alabama. Following his first sermon in our pulpit, the church voted unanimously to accept Dr. McKee with the full blessing of Dr. Carter who knew Dr. McKee's father well. In the days ahead the church had the privilege of getting to know the new pastor's wife, Sharon, and their children, Jason and Holly.

As the church got to know him there was no question that the new pastor came to the pulpit well prepared with sound Biblical preaching. He was also warm and personable and got to know the congregation very quickly. David Warren also came from Florence to be the new Worship Leader. A good spirit was developed in the choir and an enthusiasm for the new music he was introducing. The youth ministry was growing under Scott Reynolds and the children's ministry was still strong. And the college ministry was growing under the innovative direction of Tim Simpson who had come into his position while Dr. Lance was pastor.

At the same time the church was undergoing some of the same tensions that were being felt in congregations across the nations. And the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa was not exempt from these tensions. They often centered around what would be called the "music wars" or the "worship style wars." A solution that was reached for several years was to have the early service become the Traditional Worship Service and to let the late service at 11:00 A.M. become the Contemporary Worship Service. The accommodation was a reasonable one based on the fact that older adults still preferred to sing hymns while the younger adults and youth leaned toward praise music and the more contemporary sounds.

Within a year after Dr. McKee came, Ricky Michael left First Baptist for a similar position at a church in Montgomery. Vial Fontenot moved into the position of Minister of Education and after the departure of Ron Wilson around 2002, Carl Wells was called out of retirement to head up the Senior Adult Ministry. The church was confident in the leadership of both of these capable men.

When the differentiated worship services were established, it was also determined that it would be better for the church to have just one Sunday School. It had been functioning with two worship services and two Sunday Schools for many years. But the new idea seemed to work well and has continued in place to this time. The Sunday School "hour" would fit between the 8:30 and the 11:00 A.M. worship services.

Soon Dr. McKee recommended that Vial Fontenot be allowed to utilize his strengths and his passion in a new staff position, Minister of Missions and Ministry. Scott Reynolds, now Dr. Scott Reynolds, was placed over Adult Education and Chip Riley was placed over the Youth Ministry.

Another move that had quite an impact on the church was the calling of Rev. Bob Gladney to the position of Executive Pastor. This freed Dr. McKee of major administrative responsibilities and allowed him to focus on preaching and the pastoral ministry. All staff and personnel positions were subject to periodic evaluations. Bob Gladney took a firm position that the church should be a good steward of the Lord's money and expect the best out of all its employees.

Under the leadership of Dr. McKee and Rev. Gladney the church moved forward to build a major new facility which today is called the Multi-Purpose Building. It included a state-of-the-art kitchen and serving facility with a beautiful new Fellowship Hall, many beautiful and comfortable Sunday School and meeting rooms, and a Music Suite which is comparable to the finest in the state. The church moved into this outstanding facility in 2004 and it has been a great blessing to the church and its ministries.

During this time the church has been able to bring in dynamic leadership to strengthen every area of the church program. John Lowe was brought in as Minister to Students and he brought with him his passion to see young people give their lives to the Lord and he has been ably assisted by Dusty Jones, the Student Ministry Associate. Beth Yates brought a wealth of expertise in the area of Childhood Education after having served at the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi and she has a strong desire to see parents of children involved in the ministry. The children's ministry has been greatly blessed through her leadership. And in 1905, after David Warren left for a church in Huntsville, Alabama, the church called Matt Rouse from the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi to become the Minister of Music. He has won the hearts of the church in his leadership of worship and has greatly upgraded the choir programs, ably assisted by Pam Gross who directs the children's choir program. And he has also upgraded the orchestra under the leadership of Andy Pettus. Lecretia Mitchell was called from Marietta, Georgia to come and provide valuable leadership in the area of preschool ministry as the Preschool Ministry Associate.

In recent years the church heard the voice of its youth and recognized that the youth needed adequate space for worship and activities. The church adopted a "Touching Tomorrow Today" Campaign to fund this facility to be built where the old Education Building, built in 1924, was to be torn down. Today, in 2008, that facility is being built with a connection to the Children's Building across Eighth Street. And the Lord is to be praised for providing this space for the future generation and the leaders of tomorrow.

In the past two years First Baptist has helped to sponsor the North River Church, developed across the Black Warrior River under the leadership of Dr. Scott Reynolds and he has been ably assisted by several families from First Baptist who joined him in that exciting mission venture.

As Dr. Scott Reynolds left the church, the church called Joe Armour, a man from Tennessee who was highly recommend, to be its new Minister to Adults and Outreach. He has brought vision, energy, and a love for people to the position and has become a vital member of a dynamic leadership team at First Baptist.

Rev. Vial Fontenot has shown an amazing vision in missions leadership annually as he has provided global mission opportunities for members of First Baptist that could not have been imagined a generation ago. He has also built on the passion brought to the International Ministry by pioneers like Dr. Betty Hollingsworth and those who joined her in those early days like Lillian Hinton, Paul Vining, and Martha Golson. Today the church has a strong Hispanic ministry and a Chinese Church that meets every Sunday morning in the Chapel under the excellent leadership of Dr. and Mrs. James Wang.

Approximately a year ago Rev. Bob Gladney left First Baptist as Executive Pastor to assume a similar role at the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi. As the church searched for someone to fill the position in which he so ably served, the Personnel Committee turned to Kris Sullivan, a very active member of First Baptist with strong business experience and asked him to serve the Church as Business Administrator. He prayerfully accepted the role and, as a Godly man who understands the dynamics of good management, he has already been a blessing to this congregation.

In April of 2008 Dr. Gil McKee celebrates his eighth anniversary as pastor. He has been faithful to preach the Word, to point people to Christ weekend and week out, and to love the people of First Baptist. His vision for what this church can be has borne fruit and God has certainly blessed his ministry and that of the outstanding leadership team with which he has surrounded himself. Yet the vision must belong to the membership of the church as well. For we make up the church. Our vision must be a vision of servanthood and service. And above all we must have a vision to carry out the Great Commission of our Lord.

I now let my mind wander back to that January day in 1818 when a few Baptist believers met in Dr. Higginbottom's cabin, somewhere within walking distance of our present church. There is certainly no way they could have imagined what their meager efforts could produce over a period of 190 years. But God be praised that there have been faithful men and women in this congregation through the years that kept coming, kept serving, kept giving, kept praying, and kept praising their Lord and Savior. They let their light, the light of Christ, so shine that God has been magnified and honored through their lives. As a result, the church has become a lighthouse in a world that still loves darkness more than light. And I, for one, am humbly grateful for the opportunity I have had to be a member of this local body of Christ over many years. I have had the privilege of weeping when my fellow believers wept and rejoicing when they rejoiced. And what greater rejoicing can there be than when we see new Christians brought into the kingdom of God and mature into loving, giving, and serving believers? Is this not what the church is all about?

R. L. Guffin  
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