

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. Others joined them in 1816, and in 1817 the United States government formed the state of Mississippi and named the remaining territory between Georgia and Mississippi the Alabama Territory.

The name and reputation of the new territory held an attraction, and throughout 1817 wagon trails were cut to the area of the falls. The semblance of a village began to emerge which took the name Tuscaloosa, meaning Black Warrior. By January 1818, almost 300 people lived on this bluff. Leafless trees and numerous stumps dotted the landscape, but there was 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. Among these early settlers were 32-year-old Benjamin Higginbottom (also spelled *Higginbotham* and *Higginbottam* in various resources) 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, although the latter was not a very lucrative profession. He likely discussed religion with other area residents from time to time, and by the fourth Saturday in January 1818 he had asked those he had identified as Baptists 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 the Higginbottoms that day, but the little congregation that would one day grow into the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa was constituted as Ebenezer Baptist Church, a name that would last 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, 43, had come from Virginia by way of Knoxville, and Rev. James Baines, 39, had come from Chowan County, North Carolina by way of Athens, Georgia. Both men would help establish 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, Georgia as its first clerk, and by April they had called Nathan Roberts, with his wife, Abigail Bishop Roberts, as their first pastor. Collin Finnell would, incidentally, be the surveyor who would lay out the streets of Tuscaloosa in 1821.

By October 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. Ebenezer planned and perhaps began to construct a new meetinghouse before the end of the year, and Cahawba Baptist Association held its 1819 meeting 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.

The nature of the frontier was that people came and people left because they heard of some other location with more potential. Nathan Roberts left by the mid-1820s to go to Mississippi, and it was later reported that he had joined 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. After Ben's death, Rebecca moved 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 with his wife, Mary Polly Pemberton Brown, and their children to work as a blacksmith and ferry operator. He helped organize Ebenezer in 1818 and in 1821 became the second pastor, at age 65, for approximately one year. 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, along with his wife, Mary, was long associated with the Bethel and Philadelphia churches in Tuscaloosa County and 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. Although 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. The little church had only 62 members toward the end of 1827.

Pastor Holcombe's wife, Cassandra Jackson Holcombe (known as Cassie), was known for her missionary zeal and vision and was responsible for organizing the first missions organization of this young church.

In 1828, Rev. Robert Marsh came to serve Ebenezer Church but was also pastor of Grant's Creek Church at Fosters at the same time. Every indication is that he was a diligent worker. By the end of 1829, Marsh had baptized 47 new believers and the membership was 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. 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: a sizeable group of members left in 1830 to organize Hopewell Baptist Church five miles east of town; William Martin, a colored preacher, was sent 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 education 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 were the expectations of Alabama legislators who occasionally 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. 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 Dr. Woods filled the Tuscaloosa pulpit from time to time. In 1836, a young James H. DeVotie came from South Carolina, where he had attained 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 establish a Baptist college for girls in Tuscaloosa called Alabama Female Athenaeum. The first president was a brilliant Baptist minister from Virginia by way of Philadelphia, Dr. John Leady Dagg. Dagg and his wife joined Tuscaloosa Baptist Church upon their arrival and, along with the Woods family, were among the most active members.

While Woods had well-crafted sermons, Dagg was a thinker of the highest magnitude. He is known as the best writer of all the Baptist theologians and one of the most influential Baptist theologians of the 19th century. Imagine being in the place of 24-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 remained for seven more years as president of Alabama Female Athenaeum.

When President Woods left, the University sought Dr. Basil Manly, Sr., pastor of 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 university presidency and, like the Woods family, the Manly family affiliated with Tuscaloosa Baptist Church upon arrival. 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 between 1837 through 1839.

Revival fires seem to have begun in Coker at 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 and were presented as candidates for baptism. 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 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, revival started at Tuscaloosa Presbyterian Church in 1838, then spread to Tuscaloosa Baptist Church for a month and finally to the Methodist church. Tuscaloosa Baptist Church reported 59 additions, 14 by letter and 45 by baptism. Many of those were University students, some of whom became prominent Baptist leaders in the coming years.

Again in the summer of 1839, Big Creek Baptist Church had a four-day revival in which 42 new members were baptized into the church. By 1841, 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 in 1833, 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. For a number of years, however, 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. While there, he helped raise funds to start Howard College (now Samford University) in Marion and led in the establishment of *The Alabama Baptist*, the state's Baptist newspaper.

Years later, Rev. DeVotie's oldest son, Noble Leslie DeVotie, who was once a youngster in Tuscaloosa Baptist Church, was the first casualty in 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 in 1830 at the corner of Seventh Street and what is now Lurleen Wallace Boulevard. It was on the opposite end of the block from 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 with doors opening onto Seventh Street. The goal seems to have been to have the church completed when the new pastor was scheduled to arrive in January 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 to Tuscaloosa as his first pastorate. He had to be ordained here in order to begin his pastorate in February 1842. Dr. Manly was a bit skeptical about 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 increased his salary. Instead, he left for 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 41st Alabama Infantry Regiment in which he served with distinction in many battles. 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 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 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 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. Richard's father, Wood Furman, was a college president in his home state, and Richard came to Tuscaloosa to teach at the University of Alabama. He and his wife also joined Tuscaloosa Baptist Church where Richard was soon elected as Church Clerk. .

It now appears that a question raised by Tuscaloosa Baptist Church in 1844 eventually led to the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. Richard Furman asked of 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 Dr. Basil Manly. A slaveholder himself, Manly contacted the Home Mission Board of the national convention. They passed the question on to the Foreign Mission Board which returned the answer that they, in no way, would appoint a slaveholder as a missionary. As a result of this response, a meeting of Baptists from slaveholding 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 was established at Marion, Alabama, the Baptist center of the state. Of course, Dr. Manly had heavy responsibilities with the University of Alabama, and he soon resigned his new appointment, but this initial honor indicated the esteem in which he was held.

In February 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. But 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 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 1850s was elected Corresponding Secretary of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

With a vacant pulpit and young Basil Manly, Jr. just returning home from Princeton University where he studied for the ministry, the church moved to call him as pastor in October 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 per year, but he doubted the church could pay that, so he declined.

Soon young Dr. Basil Manly, Jr. agreed to serve the church from February to December of 1849. He left Tuscaloosa to become pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. He became a founder and professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for many years and later served as President of Georgetown College in Kentucky. He was the founder and first head of the Baptist 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 called Joshua Hill Foster, a devout young man from Fosters, Alabama to become the pastor. He had graduated, at age 20, 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. Rev. Foster was ordained

by the church and, exhibiting 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 served as a professor at the University of Alabama and as President of the Alabama Central Female College which was situated in the old Capitol building. 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 the mid-1850s, Deacon John L. S. Foster came to the Tuscaloosa church from Grant's Creek Baptist Church at Fosters, Alabama. He was an uncle to Pastor Joshua Hill Foster but was even better known because his daughter, Martha Foster Crawford, was the second Alabamian to go to China as a foreign missionary. Miss Foster heard a clear call from the Lord to go to China as a missionary, but she knew she could not go as a single young lady. Sometime in 1851 a young man from Kentucky named T. P. Crawford showed up at her door because someone had directed him to her. He had the same burning desire to reach China for Christ. He almost immediately proposed marriage to her, but they had to admit they did not love each other.

Finally, after much soul searching, family discussion and tears, the young couple got married three weeks after they met. Dr. Basil Manly performed the ceremony and the couple spent their honeymoon at the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention where Martha, at age 21, told of her call before that great assembly. The couple arrived in China after an ocean voyage of more than 100 days. Martha Foster Crawford served in China from 1852 till her death in 1909. She had a profound impact on many younger missionaries to China, including Lottie Moon.

In 1855, 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 Guild, 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, Battle went on to become a distinguished educator, serving as 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 about him. He pastored in the late 1840s in Erie, Pennsylvania, then was a pastor in Illinois before coming to Tuscaloosa. He helped organize the Tuscaloosa Central Female Institute and served as a trustee, but he reportedly left in November of 1857 and returned to Illinois.

When A. J. Battle left in 1859, Charles Manly, son of Dr. Basil Manly, Sr., 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 members, the majority of whom were African American. Manly had a fine education and the wisdom passed down from his father, but he had no experience to prepare him for the challenges he would be facing in the 1860s.

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 39 of those came by baptism. The prosperity of the 1850s meant the financial status of the church improved.

At the same time, there was 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 1860. This was just prior to the national general election in which the 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 talk of secession began to fill the air.

Within five weeks, South Carolina had seceded from the Union, and by February 1861 the six other Deep South states had seceded as well. On February 4, delegates from these seven states met in Montgomery, Alabama to establish the Confederate States of America. They would choose the most experienced leader in the new nation, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, to be President of the new nation, and for a brief period Montgomery would be its capital city. Basil Manly, Sr. led the prayer at the inauguration of President Davis.

Tuscaloosa found itself right in the middle of a new nation with a new President. With the powder keg of Ft. Sumter being ignited in April 1861, four new states joined the Confederacy. The capital was soon moved to Richmond, and war was part of every conversation across the South. The church 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 1863, when the North won enormous victories at both Gettysburg and Vicksburg, it began to appear that the South was struggling. Despite war being a topic 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 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.

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, and he was leading a home guard of boys and older men when he was killed at age 52.

In the 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 others were buried far from home. The South was faced with the task of rebuilding.

During his pastorate, Charles Manly married Mary Esther Hellen Matthews in 1864 and they raised nine children, six girls and three boys.

Money to pay Charles Manly was scarce, and the church voted to start up the old pre-war practice of renting pews to fund the pastor's salary. Even that was not enough, and by July 1869 Rev. Manly had asked

the church's 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. Almost 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 disrepair that some members were afraid to use it. The membership 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.

The influence of the Manly family included Basil, Sr., and Sarah's daughter, Abby Manly Gwathmey (Mrs. W. H.) who served as the third national President of Woman's Missionary Union, extending that missionary zeal that had been part of the church from pioneer days.

In January 1872, Rev. William H. Williams was called as pastor, coming from the Staunton, Virginia Baptist Church. Williams had been baptized into 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 1872, Rev. Williams baptized 19 into the Tuscaloosa church, and things were off to a good start.

The difficulty of Reconstruction meant money was scarce, and the church struggled to pay the pastor. As with earlier pastors, the church agreed that Williams could teach at the female college to supplement his salary. The following year, 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 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 in 1877, he chose to get on with the nation's business and end Reconstruction and the federal occupation of the South. The South began putting people who were in leadership before the war back in power in each state. 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, Tuscaloosa Baptist Church extended a call to a bright young minister who was doing graduate work at the University of Virginia following his graduation 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 60-year history, his home being near Dadeville, Alabama. William W. Sanders had made a splendid speech at his graduation from Southern Seminary, being introduced by Dr. John A. Broaddus, 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. 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 healing.

Sanders left Tuscaloosa on October 12, 1878 for Lynchburg, seemingly feeling better along the way. But word reached Tuscaloosa on Thanksgiving Day that the young minister had gone to his heavenly reward at age 28. Members remembered 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.

The church planned a fitting memorial service for Sunday morning, December 8, 1878. 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 special letters were read from 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 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

John F. Lanneau, President of the Alabama Central Female College and an active member of Tuscaloosa Baptist Church, expressed the sentiments of the church following the memorial for Pastor Sanders: 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 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 1879. He was 34-year-old Oliver Fuller Gregory of Charleston, South Carolina, who 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 church had 169 members when he arrived, but he learned that 52 of these lived elsewhere leaving the active membership just a little over 100. He set up a church committee to study this problem.

A sad note occurred in the ministry of Rev. Gregory when he was confronted with rumors of a derogatory nature. The church closed ranks around the pastor and an investigation proved the rumors false. However, it was so uncomfortable for Gregory that he left in a little more than 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 that 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 1880, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, James Madison Phillips, became pastor at Tuscaloosa Baptist Church. At age 40, he was one of the church's more seasoned pastors. Phillips' ministry in Tuscaloosa was quite fruitful. Among those 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 approximately 120 years of service to 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 in the 1830s when Pastor DeVotie served the church. When Rev. Phillips came to the church, Hester was a shut-in. Rev. Phillips led the congregation to Deacon Hester's house to administer the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, a touching tribute to a faithful servant.

The church lost a valuable member in 1882 with the passing of Richard Furman who is believed to have served as Church Clerk for at least a quarter of a century. A valuable pillar of the church for nearly four decades, 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.

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, 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.

Details were worked out, and the deed was signed and recorded on June 28, 1883. Before the signing of the deed, Allen and Jemison Warehouse Company purchased the old building for \$2,500.

Few records exist 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. To the surprise of many, Rev. Phillips resigned effective March 1, 1884 to assume the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Henderson, Kentucky. God blessed his ministry there with 325 new members baptized during his four years there. His talented wife, Lucie Dayton Phillips, was a gifted writer, publishing a Christian novel and writing for the Baptist Sunday School Board for 25 years.

Thanks to Dr. Joshua H. Foster, the church secured a new pastor 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, Rev. Jacob Smiser Dill, pastor of the Union Springs Baptist Church, 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. He had impressive credentials and was the son-in-law of Dr. I. T. Tichenor, 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 more familiar in Baptist circles.

Meanwhile, the new sanctuary began taking shape on the corner of Eighth Street and Greensboro Avenue. In June 1884, the local newspaper reported: The Baptists are putting furniture in their magnificent new brick church. The writer said 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 preparing 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 17-20, 1884, and the dedicatory sermon would be delivered on Sunday night, July 20th, 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 home folk and visitors filled the new sanctuary to hear the noted theologian who was once a hometown boy. *The Tuscaloosa Gazette* reported that the sermon was exceedingly appropriate and engaged the close attention of the entire congregation. The women of the church were especially proud that they had raised the money for the grand chandelier which hung in the Lord's new house on Greensboro Avenue.

The church was equally proud of its new indoor baptistry, the first in the history of the Tuscaloosa church. The first baptism took place before the dedication. On Sunday evening, July 20, 1884, Pastor Dill baptized Nora Reid and Fannie Long. Previously, 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, 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. For example, in November 1885, the financial report indicated the

church was in arrears \$406 on the pastor's annual salary of \$1,000. The financial struggle continued throughout the decade of the 1880s.

Rev. J. S. Dill resigned as pastor in February 1888 to become pastor of First Baptist Church of LaGrange, North Carolina. He later served a church in Fredericksburg, Virginia and from 1903 to 1911 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 1888, Rev. David Marshall Ramsey assumed the pastorate of Tuscaloosa Baptist Church. At age 30, he brought his new bride of three months, coming from Kentucky where he had served a church and completed his studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Ramsey was a native of Greenville, South Carolina and was graduated from the University of Richmond. Under the leadership of this personable and compassionate young minister, the church began to grow.

The church soon purchased a pipe organ for the bargain price of \$1,600. Some members 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. Church membership was 190 when he arrived and up to 290 when he left after four years to become pastor of Citadel Square Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Later, he became president of the Women's College of Greenville, South Carolina. In October 1952, Dr. David M. Ramsey, by then 95, returned to First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa and spoke at both the morning and evening services. He died in Greenville in August of 1957, two months before his 100th 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 15 days after 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 Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. After further study at the University of Berlin in Germany, he was only 27 and married for two years when he and his young bride came to Tuscaloosa to accept a call as pastor to Tuscaloosa Baptist Church in 1892.

Some members recalled that Dawson was the same age as young W. W. Sanders was when he became their pastor 14 years earlier. Dawson displayed the same affection for the people and the same passion for the gospel that they admired in Sanders. No one could ever imagine that Pastor Dawson would remain at the church for 32 years, the longest previous tenure being the 12 years Dr. Charles Manly held from 1859 to 1871. Dawson became the pastor for the church but seemingly also for 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, a glimpse of his college experience is helpful. As a student at Howard College in Marion, Alabama, his pastor at 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 Dawson's first year, the church received 42 new members, 51 in the second year and 69 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. Tuscaloosa Baptist Church had 290 members when Dr. Dawson arrived and by 1900 it had more than 500. 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 86-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 of town with the Tuscaloosa church furnishing a chapel. It remained a mission for about 20 years before becoming Southside Baptist Church. In 1904, Dr. Dawson also helped organize 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 near the University of Alabama campus. 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 named for Mr. Monnish's 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, and it remains one of the strongest Baptist churches in the area today.

Several members of First Baptist left the church in 1909 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 led in the purchase of a West End lot so a building could be erected for the mission. Records show that the building was completed in 1915, but West End Baptist Church did not formally constitute as a church until 1938.

In 1909, Mrs. Fleetwood Rice led out in the organization of the Woman's Missionary Society (later renamed Woman's Missionary Union). In her home, she entertained at a social in the form of a Japanese tea, symbolic of the spirit of foreign missions. She was greatly encouraged by Mrs. L. O. Dawson and Sallie Moody (Mrs. David I.) Purser. The new group was formed even though some did not want to give up the Ladies Aid Society formed in 1888 under the leadership of Mrs. David M. Ramsay, the pastor's wife. The former organization emphasized benevolence, but the new group, becoming much more conscious of missions after reading *The Alabama Baptist* and new books on missions, began to absorb the older Ladies Aid Society.

There were a number of successful revivals during the Dawson era, but none greater than the one in 1906 when Dr. H. M. Wharton came from Brantly Baptist Church, the largest church in Baltimore, to lead a revival that lasted four weeks. Wharton was 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 crowds gathered nightly expecting great things to happen. The revival began on Monday, April 16, and lasted through Sunday, May 13. One person came by restoration, 72 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 Dr. George W. Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas to lead in a two-week revival. An outpouring of the Holy Spirit led 19 people to move their membership to First Baptist and 78 to make professions of faith in Christ, a great boost to the fellowship of the church.

During this time, 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 followed

led Palmer to push for an education building long before one could be built. 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 service 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 in 1902 he was even offered the presidency of Howard College. But he refused all offers because he felt his work in Tuscaloosa was not completed.

Dawson always seemed surprised when any honors came his way, yet he was often 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 County 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 served as 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 1920, the WMU President, Mrs. Pelham Brown, went before the deacons and reported that on the past Sunday there was insufficient space for the 580 people in Sunday School. She asked the deacons to covenant in prayer to God to show some way to solve this problem.

In July 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 locate the building. There was much debate before it was finally concluded that it would be built behind the existing church.

In December 1922, the church decided not to hire a contractor; rather, Dr. N. O. Patterson was hired to oversee the project. The original plans were for a four-story building, but Patterson revised the plans, making it 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 during that period, far more than had been baptized by the previous 21 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 a pastor. As a result, he organized the Edgewood Baptist Church in Homewood, south of Birmingham, and served as pastor for twelve years. Upon his death in 1938, the church unanimously voted to rename the church 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 a monument 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 memorial. A granite marker with a bronze memorial plaque now 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 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 First Baptist Church of Shreveport, but he declined the invitation.

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 afterward visited First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa on a Sunday night following the convention. He was invited to the platform and said a few words at the close of the service. That was enough to convince the pulpit committee that he was the right man, and the church called him to be their 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, 192 members joined the church, and the church moved 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. 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. Adjustments were made to its debt-retirement plan, but things were going well when Dr. J. P. Boone left in 1933 to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Macon, Georgia. The membership stood at 2,149 members when he left. Dr. Boone kept close ties with the church, however, since his daughter, Frances, had married Dr. Charles Abbott, Jr., a young deacon in the church.

After Dr. Boone left, Dr. Powhatan W. James was called as the new pastor, coming highly recommended from the Sunday School Board in Nashville for whom he worked. A real plus for Dr. 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 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 among the deacons in 1934. Dr. James preached a sermon on tithing in October which inspired some of the deacons, and in the next deacon's meeting 26 of the 29 deacons present agreed to start giving ten percent of their income to the church. Eight years later, a three-month tithing campaign led to a successful debt-retirement effort. On May 10, 1942 a jubilant mortgage burning ceremony took place in the church and in May 1943, the last of the bank notes were redeemed. The church was out of debt for the first time in the memory of many of its members.

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

Two valuable pillars of First Baptist Church died during Dr. James' tenure. One was Judge Henry Bacon Foster, the son of Dr. Joshua Hill Foster. He became mayor of Tuscaloosa at age 27 and later served in the state legislature, local courts and as a Justice of the State Court of Appeals. At the same time, he was chairman 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 writing the history of the association when he was approximately 70 years old. 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. Most members could not remember when he had not held that 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 by preaching a revival. 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, particularly the men from the area and the church.

On December 31, 1994, Dr. Powhatan W. James resigned to become President of Bethel College in Hendersonville, Kentucky. In June of that year, his father-in-law, Dr. Truett, had died in Dallas after having served his church from 1897 to 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 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 more than sixteen years. She also edited the church bulletin, served as the church bookkeeper and was Church Clerk. Her service was 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 1945, a pastor search committee recommended that the church call Dr. N. D. (Norman Douglass) 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. 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 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 building that had been built in 1884. There was talk of building a new sanctuary, 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. Construction was begun in June 1949, and the first service was held in the new building in February 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 1952 when all property was deeded over to them.

Meanwhile, in January 1949, Dr. C. E. Abbott reported to the deacons a sad bit of news. Dr. N. D. Timmerman had been diagnosed with leukemia in an acute stage. Even with the best possible treatment, the pastor died within four months, a great sadness for the church. Dr. Timmerman had accomplished much in his brief four years in Tuscaloosa. His funeral was held at the church on May 7, 1949, 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 called in February 1951. Meanwhile, during the interim period, the church undertook renovation of the education building which was now 27 years old and in need of repairs and alterations. Although the final figures are not available, it was estimated that the renovation cost approximately \$40,000.00.

The new pastor arriving in February of 1951 was Rev. Lucius B. Marion, Jr., from Charleston Heights Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He did not have a doctorate but was noted for his forceful preaching which had an impact on the church almost immediately. Attendance was noticeably increased with 880 in Sunday School on the first Sunday in June. Training Union attendance went over 200 for the first time that fall. Talk revived concerning a new sanctuary, and the first Sunday in each month was 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 1952, the financial report showed \$32,294 in the building fund. Money continued to accumulate and by the time the church chose to take action in June 1954, the fund contained \$66,000. 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 challenging 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 1954, the architect was asked to have detailed plans ready by April 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 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.

Two women were instrumental in saving the stained glass windows from the old church to be used in the new sanctuary, Mrs. Jack Montgomery, wife of a University of Alabama professor, and Mrs. W. K. E. James, who had grown up in the church and was the wife of a local ordained minister. These ladies purposed in their hearts that they would save the old windows. When they approached the architect for the new building, he had no plans to use them. The architect for the project changed, however, and the ladies approached the new architect about using the old windows. While he was cool to the idea, he eventually relented and the windows were saved. The church owes a debt of gratitude to these courageous ladies.

With half of the bid price of \$402,996.00 available, the groundbreaking 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 1957, and the cornerstone ceremony was led by Pastor Marion on August 27, 1957. 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 was well over \$500,000, but the church only had to borrow \$145,000.00 to completely furnish the building.

Many members of First Baptist can still remember that first Sunday in December 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 having to sit in the balcony because the main floor was so full. She remembers noticing tears coming down her mother's cheeks. When Peggy asked why she 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 baptistry a few Sundays later.

Pastor Marion spoke in that first morning service and Dr. Frank Rose, President of the University of Alabama, spoke in a community service in the afternoon. Each night of that first week, the church had outstanding speakers from across the Southern Baptist Convention continuing the celebration, including Dr. Harold Seever, Pastor of Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile; Dr. Courts Redford, Executive Secretary of the Home Mission Board; Mrs. R. L. Mathis, President of Woman'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 1970s. He worked 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 results were so positive that it became an annual feature of the church program. Dr. C. E. Abbott and Mr. Bob Roddy successfully directed 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 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 1961, the pulpit committee criss-crossed the South and Southwest in its search for the right man to be their new pastor, often utilizing a plane provided by a member of the church. 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 Highland Baptist Church of Meridian, Mississippi, to be its new pastor. Dr. Randall began his tenure in Tuscaloosa on February 19, 1962. His warmth, sound preaching, and God-given ability to relate to people seemed to bring the kind of healing the church needed. Dr. and Mrs. Randall (Dot) had four children, three sons and a daughter.

Word leaked out that he had initially wanted to be a minister of music before he felt God's call to the pastoral ministry, and the church greatly benefitted from his beautiful tenor solo voice. People continually urged him to sing solos, which he did much too infrequently to suit many.

Soon after Dr. Randall 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.

About a year later, the church called Carl Wells, another Mississippi native to become its Minister of Education. He soon proved to be one of the most effective leaders in his position in the state. 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. The air conditioning of the educational building needed renovation, but the price for this project was around \$330,000. 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 large choir rehearsal room, spacious robe rooms and a 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 1960s, the church began televising 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 for mentally challenged adults 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 150th anniversary with a well-planned program which lasted throughout the entire year. In January, Dr. Gilbert L. Guffin, author of the January Bible study, *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 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, the underlying perception was that the business of the deacons was business. For the most part, it was businessmen who were consistently elected as chairmen of the deacon body. In the 1940s and 1950s, Charlie Gross, an attorney, and Stanley Park, Sr., a businessman, were often elected to this highly visible leadership position. Both were godly men who always had the best interest of the church at heart.

But moving into the 1960s and 1970s, 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 1970s, two significant building projects were begun. A member of the church had anonymously provided money for the construction of a chapel. However, a significant number of members believed 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 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 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, with the architecture of the chapel blending with the architecture of the church building. Plans for the chapel with a full basement of classrooms, a reception room with a kitchenette and a suite of administrative offices were 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 1981, the church added a new staff position, Childhood Education Director, and Ms. Dianne Thigpen of Cleveland, Mississippi became the first female 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 children's ministry.

Dr. Randall was pastor of First Baptist during the height of the Civil Rights era and provided strong leadership. One Sunday morning in the late 1960s, 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 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 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.

In 1969, Minister of Music Eugene 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 Baptist Theological Seminary was employed. He continued to build a strong worship choir and his wife, Mary An Wilson, directed the children's choir program.

Also, in the late 1970s, the church brought Rev. Vial Fontenot from Grand Isle, Louisiana, to be the new youth minister and activities director. 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 more than 20 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 more than two hours as hundreds filed by to give them good wishes, many of them with tearful good-byes.

When this 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 approximately 29 years old, 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 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 75 candidates for the position during the following months. They decided that Dr. Rick Lance, 32-year-old pastor of First Baptist Church of Cullman, Alabama, was the man they believed was chosen by the Holy Spirit to be the new shepherd for this Tuscaloosa flock. He and his wife, Pam, accepted the call, and 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 Sunday School attendance and church membership grew 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.

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

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 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 1980s, 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

sanctuary. As a part of the property, the church got the Clancy McQue's Restaurant and agreed to honor its seven-year lease. This property provided 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 college ministries.

For years, the church attempted to purchase the Coca-Cola Bottling Company property across Eighth Street from the educational building, but there seemed no chance for such a deal. The church purchased 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 outside of town. 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 was committed to 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 1986 and, utilizing the skills of many people, it was advertised as the gift of First Baptist Church 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 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. Dr. Lance 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. He 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, had been a Samford University trustee for two years, had been a member of the Foundation Board of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary for a year and had been a Trustee of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for five years.

In the early 1990s, the church voted to fund the children's building as a three-story building with the first two stories used for 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 people thought 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.

The Heart-to-Heart Women's Ministry was established in 1993, emphasizing spiritual enrichment and fellowship. It did not replace but rather complemented the existing missions emphasis of the WMU. In the fall of 1998, these two women's organizations merged to form First Ladies Missions and Ministry with the goal of involving all the women of the church.

Dr. Lance had the leadership continually provided by Carl Wells and Ron Wilson in Christian education and music. When he reached his 12th anniversary at First Baptist, he brought back Vial Fontenot after several years service as a pastor, and Vial provided coordination for both the college and singles

ministries. In the 1990s, 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 and occasionally fill the pulpit. Ricky was personable and the membership responded quickly to his leadership.

In 1998, Dr. Lance resigned to become the Executive Secretary of the Alabama Baptist Convention with its headquarters in Montgomery. The church was pleased 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 asked Mary Sue Bennett, his administrative assistant at First Baptist to function in a similar role in Montgomery, and she accepted. 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 Don Norton, asked the church to 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 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 enjoyed the dynamic preaching of Dr. Carter. 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 2000, the pastor search committee was ready to make a recommendation to the church, but the name of the candidate they intended to recommend was kept quiet. Soon the prospective 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 Highland Baptist Church in Florence, Alabama. Following his first sermon in our pulpit, the church voted unanimously to call Dr. McKee with the full blessing of Dr. Carter who was well acquainted with Dr. McKee's father. 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.

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 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. 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. They often centered around what would be called the "music wars" or the "worship style wars." A solution for several years was that the early service would be the traditional worship service and the late service at 11:00 A.M. the contemporary worship service. This accommodation was a reasonable one based on the fact that, generally, 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 in 2002, Carl Wells was called out of retirement to lead 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. The church had been functioning with two worship services and two Sunday Schools for many years, but the plan for one Sunday School seemed to work well and has continued in place to this time. The Sunday School hour 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 led 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 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. He has been ably assisted by Dusty Jones, the student ministry associate. Beth Yates brought a wealth of expertise in the area of children's ministry 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.

In 2005, after David Warren left for a church in Huntsville, Alabama, the church called Matt Rouse from 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. 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. As this history is compiled in 2008, that facility is being built with a connection to the children's building across Eighth Street. 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 North River Church, developed across the Black Warrior River under the leadership of Dr. Scott Reynolds. He has been ably assisted by several families from First Baptist who joined him in that exciting mission venture.

When Dr. Scott Reynolds left the church, Joe Armour, from Tennessee, came highly recommended as 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.

In 2007, Rev. Bob Gladney left First Baptist as Executive Pastor to assume a similar role at 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, an 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 celebrated his eighth anniversary as pastor. He has been faithful to preach the Word, to point people to Christ and to love the people of First Baptist Church. 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. Above all, we must have a vision to carry out the Great Commission of our Lord.

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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 who 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.

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. 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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