

## The Surprising Story of Christian Thomsen

In 1983, spurred by questions from a baptism class that included youth who had been baptized as infants, the deacons and then the Executive Council and church at large had a conversation regarding church membership. A provision in the by-laws allowed members of other churches who had been baptized as infants to join our church as associate members. Baptism by immersion was required for full membership. This was a common practice in ABC churches - but being Baptist, each church decided such matters for itself.

Conversation revolved around allowing such individuals to join as full members. This policy of "Open Membership" was also practiced in many ABC churches. With Open Membership, the church would continue to practice only believer's baptism by immersion, but to accept for membership those who had come from other traditions. The church came to adopt this position.

A very few members left the church over this issue – some because the church was so slow to adopt the new position, and others because they could not abide allowing full members of the church who had not been immersed.



*Christian Thomsen (on right) teaches Sunday School with class members Lawrence Zea, Faye Zea, George Webb, and Clara Webb.*

A long-time member, Christian Thomsen, was one of those who took issue with the new policy. Born in Denmark, Thomsen had been a member of First Baptist for 50 years, having joined the church in 1933. He was 86 years old and had been honored by the church by being named a life deacon.

Thomsen worked for many years in maintenance at Northwestern Bell Telephone and as a custodian at a power plant. He lived very simply and frugally in a small house and never owned a vehicle. He walked a mile and a half to church, sometimes getting rides from other members.

Despite his age and his longtime affiliation with the church, he left the church over the decision on baptismal requirements for membership and joined Campus Baptist, a very conservative neighboring church. As it turned out, Chris Thomsen still had many years ahead of him. He died in 1998 at the age of 101, having never married and with no children. To everyone's surprise, he left \$1.1 million to Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny (as reported in the January 8, 1999 *Chronicle of Higher Education*) and a "substantial sum" to Campus Baptist Church. (In a *USA Today* network article, Thomsen's friend and executor Craig Hastings did not disclose the amount given to Campus Baptist, but community members understood it to be equal to the gift to the Bible College.) Thomsen had been investing a portion of his salary in AT&T stock over many years and unbeknownst to everyone was a millionaire.