

## Dr. Ronald Wells and the Move to Campustown, 1946-58

In 1946, Rev. J. Harold "Pop" Gamble left Ames for a pastorate in Binghamton, NY. The time without a pastor was an occasion to revisit the conversations between First Baptist and First Christian regarding the possibility of a merger. Such conversations had taken place between the denominations at the national level, and there was encouragement from the Northern Baptist Convention to pursue such a possibility. While there was support for such a merger, in the end the two churches decided to continue their ministries separately. The effect of a merger on connections and support from denominational churches around the state for student ministry entered into the decision. First Baptist eventually called Dr. Ronald Wells of Bridgeport, Connecticut as pastor.

Dr. Wells, who grew up in Cleveland, had ties to the church. His grandparents lived in Ames and were members of First Baptist; his grandfather served for 24 years as a deacon. As a boy Wells would spend time in Ames during the summer and attended the church. When it came time to go to college, he enrolled at Iowa State College in Animal Husbandry. Interestingly, he did not attend First Baptist while at ISC but instead taught Sunday School at Collegiate Presbyterian, in part because it was close by and the Baptist church was downtown. Feeling a call to ministry rather than farming, he transferred after two years to Denison College, a Baptist school in Ohio. The president of Denison had been pastor of his home church, and his mother had moved there from Cleveland to work in the school cafeteria. Wells graduated from Denison and went on to Crozer Seminary (where Martin Luther King, Jr. would attend and where Wells would one day be president).

After seminary, Wells served the church in Bridgeport and while there earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Columbia University. He was highly recommended for the pastorate in Ames by Lou Feder, Director of Student Work for Northern Baptists. His skills were a good match for the church, which already had land and was planning to build a new church near the campus. Like Rev. Gamble and Rev. Davidson, Dr. Wells and his family lived in the top floor of the Roger Williams House, with the church office and student center on the first floor.



*Dr. Wells speaks at church groundbreaking ceremony*

In 1949 the downtown church was sold to Fareway. The church and old parsonage were demolished to make way for a new downtown grocery. A groundbreaking service was held at the 200 Lynn Avenue location and while the church was being constructed, Sunday morning services were held at the Iowa State Memorial Union, with all other meetings and activities taking place at the Roger Williams House.

Dr. Wells served as church minister and college student pastor, but he also served as fundraiser and architectural consultant, while also teaching religion and philosophy classes at Iowa State. Before the move was made to the new facility, the Roger Williams House was sold to Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, which continues to use the house today.

Fundraising for the new building was a major effort. Informational meetings and fundraising efforts were held in locations around the state. The Iowa Baptist Convention and the Northern Baptist Convention (after 1950 known as the American Baptist Convention) supported the effort, particularly through financial support for student work. After a year of worship at the Memorial Union, the first

service was held at the new church on Maundy Thursday in 1950. The Dedication Services at the new building included numerous speakers, including Mr. J.C. Penney, a leading Baptist layman.

While the new church was now built, there were insufficient funds for the parsonage, or to completely furnish the building. Church members did much of the finish work, and the Wells family lived on the second floor of the educational wing. David Wells remembers it as a fun adventure, with the down side that he had to clean his bedroom on Saturday night so that a Sunday School class could meet there on Sunday morning.

The Wells were not the only family living in the building. In 1950 Elza and Arturs Zvirbulis, displaced by the war from their home in Latvia, became sextons of the church and continued in that role through much of the 1950's. They lived in rooms on the lower level of the church.



*Elza and Arturs Zvirbulis*

While work was in progress on the new building, Dr. Wells was approached by the American Baptist Convention and asked to serve as Director of Christian Higher Education for the denomination. Lou Feder, who had recommended Dr. Wells for the position in Ames, was retiring. Wells replied that he could not leave the church in the middle of a building effort. The search was put on hold for a year until after the building was completed, and in the end Dr. Wells accepted the position. One of the last things Wells did in Ames was to officiate at the wedding of Howard Johnson and Patricia Larsen, who are yet today active members of First Baptist.



*Rev. Malcolm Haughey*

Fundraising continued to finish the building. In 1952, new pastor Malcolm Haughey and his family arrived and moved in to the new parsonage, attached to the building. Rev. Haughey arrived at a time when mainline Protestants were riding the wave of post-war growth and enjoying high levels of church participation. Denominational funding for student ministry made it possible to hire a second staff member to work especially with college students. Betty Willis became Director of Student Work in 1953, followed by Associate Pastor Frank Murdock in 1956. The Roger Williams Club continued to draw large numbers of students, but the loss of the Roger Williams House – their own “place” – made a difference. Another difference was the eventual loss of students who came to ISC as a result of the GI Bill.

From 1953 to 1955, with national church attendance rates at a historic high and with additional staff resources at First Baptist, Sunday School attendance doubled from 100 to 200. Several of the church's new members in this era were Baptists from the south who came to Ames to teach or study (there was no Southern Baptist church in town.) This cohort proved to be some of the more dedicated and progressive-minded members of the church.

In 1957, Rev. Haughey was called to serve as pastor of First Baptist Church in Berkley, California – another church in a university community. The new pastor, Stan Borden, would face a far different cultural situation as First Baptist entered the 1960's.