

First Baptist in the Twenty-First Century

Through our 150th Anniversary year, we have published articles about our church's history. I have written most of these articles, along with articles written by Howard Johnson and David Nethercott.

We now come to the most recent years of our church's journey. At this point, I am dispensing with third person reporting and simply sharing what I see as some of the more noteworthy events and activities of the church in the last 20 years. As they say, your mileage may vary.

In the spring of 1999, Susan and I were serving a church in Arthur, Illinois, when I received a phone call from Jack Cleasby. Jack said that he was chair of the search committee of First Baptist Church in Ames, Iowa. We were intrigued with the idea of serving in a college community and impressed with the church, and we wound up coming to Ames in the fall of 1999.

My immediate take was that this was a church rich in talent, resources, and possibility, but that years of slow numerical decline, which is so often the case for long-established churches, had made recent staff departures and the interim time of self-reflection that followed difficult.

Several things happened in the first couple of years to help turn things around. The choir moved permanently from the balcony down to the main sanctuary. Choir members sat in the congregation and then went forward to sing from the chancel steps. Before this, on a given Sunday, there might have been 60 in worship with a fourth of those in the balcony. This did not contribute to a feeling of togetherness and community. Still fairly new on the job, Mindy Phomvisay was (and is) a wonderful choir director. New singers, including students, joined the choir and our music program, as has long been the case, has continued to be a real strength of the church.

Along these lines, we began our Music Camp in the summer of 2000. My friend Mike Waltenberger had led a Music Camp at his church in Decatur, Illinois for a number of years and I had always thought that it was a terrific idea. We had few children in the church, no kids in the neighborhood, and we had not done a Vacation Bible School for several years. All of this made a special week with children difficult, but Ames is a community where parents want their children to be involved in the arts and we had a wealth of musical resources available, both inside and outside of our congregation. So we tried it.



That first year, I thought that if 15 kids showed up and nobody got hurt, then we would have tried something new and it would have been a success. As it turned out, we had 55 campers, only a handful of whom were connected to the church. Many church members contributed to the week by volunteering, preparing food, leading crafts, and recruiting campers. One church member paid the registration fee for every child who attended. I remember Lorene Hoover saying at the time, "This is the best thing our church has done in a long time." We are now looking forward to our twentieth Music Camp, and it has continued to be one of the significant ministries of our church.

Another early success was a growing sense of fellowship. For me, a memorable example of this is a Karaoke Night held in the church fellowship hall. A large crowd of all ages attended the event, which included a meal of Laotian noodles and egg rolls prepared by Aiddy Phomvisay's mother. Parents sang

with children, college students performed, the “Seventies Preservation Society” (those who went to high school in the 1970’s) sang “American Pie,” and Bob and Jenna McCarley, who grew up on either side of the Red River in Oklahoma/Texas, sang “Red River Valley.” The shared joy across generations, as well as the number of newcomers who participated, set the tone for a welcoming and caring atmosphere in the church.

Another idea that came out of a church planning retreat was a Fall Renewal Weekend in which we would invite a noted scholar or Christian leader to make presentations and preach on Sunday morning. Speakers included James Dunn of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs; Charles Kimball, author of *When Religion Becomes Evil*; Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest Divinity School; and Molly Marshall, president of Central Baptist Seminary. This was not so much a new practice for the church as a rekindling of a long valued connection between faith and intellectual life.



The results of these and other efforts was some numeric growth along with growth in spirit and congregational self-identity. The church had decided to make no decisions regarding its future for three years after calling a pastor. After three years, rather than considering the church’s survival, we embarked on a sanctuary renovation and facility improvement program called “Faith in Our Future.” This functioned as much as a statement of faith and spiritual commitment as a capital campaign. We installed air

conditioning and new carpeting, painted the sanctuary and other areas, built an ADA-compliant ramp, and installed a new electronic organ (the old pipe organ being beyond repair). A couple of pews were removed on each side to give more space between pews, the pews were angled slightly, and pew cushions were added. The chancel steps were made wider to facilitate use by the choir, and the built-in pulpit and lectern were replaced by portable ones that could be moved for events such as concerts or Music Camp. Fundraising for all of these projects exceeded our goal, and members put in many hours of labor. By this time, church finances had improved such that Rev. Susan Russell joined the staff as Associate Pastor.

With survival less of an issue, the congregation could now focus more fully on its ministry. Some other notable happenings since 2000 include:

College Students. In 2002, UCCM disbanded due to lack of funding. For First Baptist, this ended forty years of ecumenically sponsored campus ministry. This served as an impetus to put more energy into our own church-based ministry to students. Students and others took part in a renovation of our college student space on the second floor and we have offered a Bible Study/fellowship group for students and young adults, meeting either on Sunday mornings or as a Sunday night Student Supper. A church basketball team was both a fun activity and a means of recruitment for students and others. Students have served in all areas of church life: choir members, worship leaders, Church School teachers, deacons, and more. The connection between Iowa State University and First Baptist, which has existed since the very early days of our church’s history, continues to be important.



Mission Trips. We have sent work teams to our American Baptist Assembly in Green Lake, Wisconsin as well as served with a home repair ministry in East Tennessee, Bethel Neighborhood Center in Kansas City, and Murrow Indian Children's Home in Muskogee, Oklahoma. All of these trips have been intergenerational, with children, youth, college students, and adults of various ages participating. These experiences have been opportunities for learning, reflection, expanded horizons and growth. We are looking forward to a trip to assist with rebuilding efforts in Puerto Rico.



Community Involvement. First Baptist's long tradition of involvement in the community has continued. Recent examples include work with Habitat for Humanity, continuing leadership and involvement in Good Neighbor Emergency Assistance and Ames Ecumenical Housing, and participation in AMOS, a community organizing group. We have particularly supported ACCESS (women's shelter) and Primary Health Care (clinic for uninsured and underinsured). Our annual Great Day of Service in which community service projects are a part of our Sunday morning worship has been a way to connect the impulse for service with our worship.

Connections with Other Congregations. As has been the case from the very beginning, First Baptist continues to be an important congregation in our region and denomination. We have ranked second in our region and among the top 100 churches nationally in support to American Baptist United Mission, which is remarkable given the relatively small size of our church. First Baptist has been a significant participant in regional ministry and hosted the Mid-American Baptist Churches regional gathering in 2016.

Locally, we have partnered with other congregations in numerous ways and continue to lend a Baptist flavor to local ecumenical work. A few years ago we began an annual summer worship service at Brookside Park together with First Christian and Ames UCC-Congregational. Interestingly, these are the churches mentioned most often in previous articles spanning our 150-year history. Our organizing service in 1868 was held at the Congregational Church, and in the 1930's and 40's First Baptist and First Christian came close to merging.

Vision 2020. A visioning process was undertaken in 2012 using the Appreciative Inquiry method in which we conducted about 75 individual interviews. We were asked to share stories about our experience of First Baptist at its very best, and then brainstormed ways to build on the strengths of our church that were identified. Some of the results included working to offer more diverse music in worship; improving building accessibility, including a new rest room off of the narthex; and joining AMOS, a community organizing group that works for a more just community. Another result was an addition made to our identity statement. While this included several items, the most significant was the statement that LGBT persons are welcome to participate fully in our church. While this was more important to some members than others, after thoughtful discussion and prayerful consideration the revised identity statement was approved unanimously.

New Traditions. This includes:

- a “Worship Under the Trees” service on the front lawn at the beginning of the school year
- an annual Church Cook-Off that is a wonderful social event as well as a fundraiser for missions
- an Ash Wednesday service using Taizé music
- Super Bowl Party, which has become “a thing”
- a Children and Youth Sunday
- Great Day of Service
- Yuletide Orchestra involving members of all ages

- Pastor Dave Russell