

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
JUNE 2009

An Account of the Bicentennial

The oldest among the 3,290 churches of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, is 200 years old this month. Unlike other entries in the official record of the church, this present document is not a record of church business meeting transactions but is, rather, a summary of the year-long celebration of the church's past two centuries. Bits and pieces of this extraordinary event may be found in numerous places, primarily in *The Messenger*, weekly newsletter of the church; this paper is written to provide in one place a short summation of activities in our official church records, kept locally and consequentially in Alabama Baptist archives in permanent form -- all in the interest of assuring survival of data in a brief narrative that may be of interest and convenient use to members as the 300th and later anniversaries are commemorated. (The little we know of our church's 100th anniversary is mostly gleaned from an article written by Pastor R. S. Gavin in the June 9, 1909 issue of *The Huntsville Weekly Mercury*; our fortunate circumstances render us able to provide a better record.)

Planning for the bicentennial began more than three years ago with the formation of a special committee headed jointly by Dr. William R. Lucas and Mrs. Dana Lee Tatum Jennings. Complete membership of that group is noted in an attachment that comes from the June 25, 2009, edition of *The Messenger*. This attachment is of unusual interest in that it lists many hundreds of church members who had individual roles in the planning and execution of the birthday celebration. This listing itself, beyond the present and other piecemeal accounts, conveys the broad range of bicentennial preparations, and thus is strong reason for its inclusion in this report.

Whereas the apex of the observance occurred, as one would expect, in the anniversary month, the preliminaries began a year earlier when Pastor Dr. David Hull, on sabbatical, arranged for the appearance of 10 notable Baptist pastors and educators on successive weekends during the summer of 2008.* At the same time a 24-page digest of the church's history was made available to members as a means of generating interest

* The 10 visitors, each of whom spoke in Sunday worship services on some aspect of Baptist history, were: Dr. Timothy George of Birmingham, dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School; Dr. Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, Winston-Salem, N. C.; Dr. Catherine Allen, Birmingham, author and missions advocate; Dr. William Hull, Birmingham, research professor, Samford; Dr. Wayne Flynt, history professor emeritus, Auburn University, Auburn, Ala.; Dr. Ralph Langley, FBC-Huntsville pastor emeritus; Dr. Ron Crawford, president, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Richmond, Va.; Dr. Mike Glenn, pastor, First Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tenn.

in the coming anniversary as well as the new hard-back history book that had been in preparation for several years for sale on the anniversary date. A thousand copies of the booklet were enthusiastically received by FBC members without charge.

In the last half of 2008, the membership was further readied for the observation by the publication in *The Messenger* of historical snippets prepared by the church's history committee members, a practice which continued for the next year. Late in the year the publication's masthead was remade to depict the celebration's theme, Hebrews 12: 1-2. The church's stationery was redesigned for the same purpose. As year-end approached, a detailed news release was dispatched to the state's 130 primary news outlets, most of them rural weekly newspapers which, as one wit quipped, were located next door to a Baptist church. This helped to generate interest in the event, and prompted numerous stories in the general as well as denominational press. *The Huntsville Times*, *The Alabama Baptist* and *Baptists Today* in particular were attentive to the anniversary. (FBC members were also given decals for placement on their personal cars to further herald the anniversary; they were widely used windshield corners and rear windows.)

Early in the new year huge, colorful quilted wall hangings, 12 by 18 feet in size, were displayed on the front wall of the sanctuary with the footprints imagery of the Hebrews theme passage depicted, there to remain for the remainder of the celebration. The hangings were created by a group of church members, which activity has been documented adequately in other places.

On January 18, the year's bicentennial events began. Late in the day the congregation gathered, many in 1809 garb, for the kickoff celebration, including costumes, games in the Christian Life Center, ample food and a historic program which featured episodes from the past and a demonstration of shape note singing from *The Sacred Harp* book. Attendance was large and enthusiastic--a second supper seating was required.

Earlier the same day, in the main morning service, extraordinary artistic expressions that had been in preparation for more than a year were unveiled -- five large paintings of the five houses of worship which had been occupied by Enon Baptist Church and its successor, First Baptist, for 200 years. The pictures, from the crude log structure on the banks of the Flint River to the spacious edifices on Governors Drive, were beautifully framed for permanent display in the corridor alongside the sanctuary. The paintings were expertly done by local artist Ed Starnes, a businessman by profession who has gained wide acclaim in the art community.

Another artistic expression, music, which has been of enlarged importance in the church's worship since the coming of energetic leader Billy Orton a decade ago, also has played an important role in the bicentennial celebration. Under Orton's direction two major performances were experienced in the spring as the June birthday approached. On March 1, the 150-voice sanctuary choir and the 45-piece church orchestra presented a specially-commissioned anthem, "Run the Race With Perseverance," written by Michael Cox, professor at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. On May 3, the

orchestra and choir, augmented by several singers from sister churches, presented Brahms Requiem, a difficult composition for which they had rehearsed for months, in remembrance of the saints, the “great cloud of witnesses,” who had preceded them in the church’s 200 years past.

The actual anniversary, June 3, 2009, occurred fortunately on a Wednesday, and the regular Wednesday night service was given over to the history committee, led by Jim Harrison, for the presentation of the new history book, “Leading the Way for 200 Years, The Story of the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, 1809-2009,” preparation of which had been under way for the previous four years. Harrison introduced the speaker, Dr. Bruce Gourley, interim director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., who told of his and the committee’s work in researching and writing the volume. An unusual, perhaps unique, feature of the book is the inclusion in each copy of a DVD recording of the church’s minutes, rolls, and other pertinent documents and numerous photographs, including the history volume published at the 175th anniversary. Several hundred of the 1,000 copies printed were sold to members that night, and the authored signed them as requested.

The June 3 program occurred on the eve of the opening of the annual conference of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, a national group of Baptist educators and historians, which was held June 4-6 at FBC, commemorating both the establishment of the first Baptist church in 1609 in Holland, and the Huntsville church 200 years later. About a hundred society members, representing primarily Baptist colleges and universities, attended the three days of meetings and presentation of papers, which were open also to First Baptist members. The final half day session June 6 was devoted exclusively to FBC and featured the sanctuary choir in a mini-concert, major speeches by David Hull and Bruce Gourley, and short talks on history episodes by three members of the church history committee, Jim Harrison, Eva Geiger and Joe Jones.

Then came the homecoming weekend which was the pinnacle of the celebration. Nearly 1,200 members, former members and friends of the church gathered at the Von Braun (civic) Center for a gala dinner, an elegant affair memorable for more than its exquisite table fare. The orchestra performed and other special music was presented from a raised platform on one end of the hall. Arriving guests were greeted by a large “placard,” scrupled in ice, hailing the church’s 200th anniversary. The hall itself was beautifully decorated, each table having a spike of fresh flowers and a bronzed table lamp/candle, the walls draped with dozens of heirloom quilts from the ladies of the congregation, and the centerpiece -- a 10-foot-tall birthday cake made for display, not consumption, displaying photographs, icons and other mementoes of bygone years, the latter representing many hours of skilled design and decorating work by members Dathern and R. D. Moon.

The pastor was a principal speaker as well as master of ceremonies, introducing many special guests. All four of the church’s living former pastors were present, two of whom, Dr. Allen Walworth of Florida and Dr. Dennis Wiles of Texas, spoke on this occasion, while the other two, Dr. J. T. Ford and Dr. Ralph Langley, were scheduled for

remarks later. It was, in short, a night of splendor, splendidly received by grateful participants.

The following day, Sunday, June 14, was the main worship occasion. The two Sunday services were combined into one, and preceded by a period of homecoming fellowship before the Sunday School hour. While attendance of residents was high that day--total attendance being a house full, 1,720-- it was complemented by the presence of many out-of-town visitors, former members, many of whom once had been members of FBC's youth/tour choirs stretching back 40 years; they had gathered the previous day for rehearsals under the leadership of former music ministers Joel Duncan and Kendell Smith, as well as Billy Orton. The "reunion choir" had presented a mini-concert prior to the main Sunday service. Then they, plus the normal sanctuary and youth choirs, and the orchestra provided the musical portions of the 10:30 a.m. worship service, altogether a conglomerate of more than 300 persons in the choir loft, offering a variety of pieces including a reprise of the specially-commissioned bicentennial anthem.

This service, televised regionally as usual, included remarks by the other two former pastors, both in their late eighties, Dr. Ford of Atlanta and Dr. Langley of Huntsville, the pastor emeritus. Both recalled highlights of their Huntsville ministries and were followed by Dr. Hull who preached on "The Footprints and the Foundation," which related the church's progression as merely a foundation to a more excellent service to the Lord in the future.

In the meantime, threatening weather interfered with "dinner on the grounds" plans. Three tents had been erected north of the fellowship hall to accommodate the almost 1,200 who had made reservations. The weather forced a hasty change -- four serving lines for the chicken and pork barbecue offering were established in the fellowship hall, and diners ate in jovial good spirit throughout the appropriately dressed dining room and in adjoining Sunday School rooms, with a few going doggedly to the tents provided, in spite of the light rain. The large crowd accepted the impositions genially -- it was a most unusual holiday.

Thus ended the climatic day of the observance. But that did not end the celebration. Several follow-on aspects will include a continuation of history committee members' history comments at Sunday night services, a hymn festival incorporating songs of the past, a ladies' luncheon and fashion show that will feature garments of long ago, and, closing out the year and the observance, the 25th presentation of the Living Christmas Tree, which will introduce still another specially-written composition commemorating the 200th birthday of Alabama's oldest missionary Baptist church.

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December 31, 2009

This day marks the conclusion of First Baptist Church's year-long observance of its 200th anniversary, as well as the years-long preparation for this event. In conclusion,

brief accounts are given of two major events that occurred in the final months of the observance.

On Sunday, November 15, a ladies fashion show and tea was conducted in the afternoon, featuring dozens of garments and dress modes of the past two centuries. The program was planned by an extensive committee headed by Mrs. Ann Bailey and Mrs. Betty Lankford; Mrs. Carolyn Miller offer a prayer, while Mrs. Nancy Morton provided piano music, and Mrs. Dana Lee Jennings was the master of ceremonies. About 225 ladies attended.

Thirty-five garments were modeled by 20 women, representing women's fashions through the church's life, divided into five segments representing the entire scope of the congregation's past years--such items as dresses, hats, wedding gowns, aprons and bonnets.

The final event was the presentation, a week before Christmas, of the church's celebrated Living Christmas Tree, choral music with an accompanying orchestra. It was the 25th presentation of this feature; the sanctuary was appropriately decorated in a silver motif, signifying the silver anniversary of the event, which was under the direction of Billy Orton, minister of music and worship. About 230 musicians--170 in the choir and 60 in the orchestra--participated. As in previous years six performances were offered, Thursday and Friday evenings, and Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings. The varied program included a specially-commissioned piece, "Come and Worship the Newborn King," by composer Camp Kirkland, of Nashville, Tenn.

Audiences overflowed virtually every performance, with a total estimated attendance of 12,000, perhaps the largest attendance in the event's history. This may have been due to the extraordinary publicity, including the program having been voted the top Christmas event in the area by readers of *The Huntsville Times*.

Joseph M. Jones, church clerk and historian