

Updating!

First Baptist Church of Camden, S.C. Recent History—The Past 25 Years

An in-progress manuscript by Joan A. Inabinet, © 2010

(Responses and contributions of additional information are invited - please send them to inabinetauthors@gmail.com.)

After *His People: A History of the Camden (First) Baptist Church* was published in January 1985, a report in a 1987 church conference referred to the book and challenged First Baptist members to follow the lessons of its past. Summarizing these, Lark Wyers stated for the Long Range Planning Committee: “The church has been blessed with strong pastoral leadership and an active concerned congregation seeking God’s leadership.”

The committee encouraged the church to move forward in that same spirit. In the quarter of a century since the publication of *His People*, the church has continued as challenged. In 2010, recognition of the bicentennial of the church’s charter marked 200 years of pastors and congregations “seeking God’s leadership” and, as the logo of that year stated, “celebrating God’s faithfulness.”

The 175th Birthday

In 1985, the First Baptist history publication was but one event celebrating the church’s 175th birthday, with a number of other activities involving member participation. These were highlighted by special services on Sunday, September 8, 1985. Morning worship was led by the church’s former pastor from 1967-70, Dr. Frank Crumpler, who was serving as Director of Specialized Evangelism, Home Mission Board. Guests in the evening worship included delegations from two churches that had figured prominently in the church’s history. Greetings from the pulpit were voiced by the pastor of the High Hills of the Santee Baptist Church, mother church of the Camden church. The message and the music were presented by the pastor and the choir of Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, most of whose founding members had been part of the old Camden church.

The Messenger for the week of the special service included Pastor Jim Goodroe’s observation, “It is exciting to be part of a church that celebrates 175 years of history, yet is filled with excitement over the opportunities of the present and anticipation about the prospects of the future!” In the same bulletin, Music Minister Mary Rome Foster thanked Dot Newman and Mickey Litchfield for their fine service to the congregation and choir during the past year while the church was seeking an organist. She went on to compliment their recent choice: “I welcome Janis Rivers as she becomes Church Organist.” Rivers, who had been serving as Day Care Director, thus began a long period of service to exercise what Foster called her “gift of musicianship.” In 2010 Janis Rivers is still faithfully serving as church organist.

The Old Bell

One of the significant historical activities in 1985 was the restoration of the old steeple bell as a memorial in a meditation garden on the church grounds. The bell, with a history less clear at the time than has since been discovered, had been removed years earlier as the church salvaged or gave away as souvenirs some parts of the old sanctuary

when the building was being removed from its site at the corner of Broad and Lafayette streets. For a time, congregational enthusiasm for the new sanctuary (the present one), which has modern carillon bells, dimmed memory of the heavy, single-tolling old bell. In fact, the bell's location was unknown at the time the church history went to press and was not remarked upon in that source.

When the bell was returned to the church during the year of its 175th anniversary, interest was high among older members who recalled the tolling of the bell for weddings, funerals, church services, and other special events. Some recalled the ringing of the bell, along with the town-tower bell and the other church bells in Camden, to celebrate the end of World War II. It was also known that in early times the church bell had been used to alert the community to dangers such as fire or flood. The old bell had been a familiar sound throughout Camden for more years than anyone could remember.

In 1985, when the bell—with its clapper now stilled—took its place in the new garden as a memorial, note was made of the year “1838” emblazoned on its side to record the date it had been cast. However, in 1985 it was thought that the bell had come to the Camden church many decades later than its casting date. The local history, Kirkland and Kennedy's *Historic Camden: Eighteenth Century*, published in 1925, states that in the scarcity of supplies at the outbreak of the Civil War, “The bells of the Camden churches were taken down for casting cannon.” In the twentieth century it was believed that, with other bells across the South used for that purpose by the Confederacy, the antebellum bells of Camden had been melted down.

Research pieced together in recent years, however, shows that while the Camden church bells were shipped to Charleston in 1861, they were in fact later returned to their owners. The July 31, 1863, issue of the *Camden Confederate* reported the bells had not been needed for casting and had been recently returned, the Methodist bell already having been hung back in its old location. (Possibly the Camden bells had gone to Archibald Cameron's Charleston foundry, which was damaged by fire in late 1861, after which it concentrated on other types of casting and produced few cannons.)

Thus now clearer is the history of the Camden Baptist Church bell, which is the oldest artifact of First Baptist history now on the church grounds. On a side near the top of the bell, letters cast in it are easily read: “E. Force New York 1838.” Research shows the bell was cast in 1838 by the foundry of Ephraim Force in New York City (Lower Manhattan) of bell metal, a specialized bronze alloy of brass and tin, which produced a resonant vibration when rung. A similar bell cast by E. Force in 1838 hangs in the steeple of the historic Stone Church in Oriskany Falls, New York. Another 1838 E. Force bell was originally mounted on the *Rahway*, a New Jersey steam locomotive, and is now preserved in the U.S. National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Camden Baptists presumably hung the newly-cast bell with great pride in the belfry of the wooden sanctuary they built in 1836 at the site of present 1111 Broad Street. The return of the bell was likely an occasion for rejoicing during the difficult Civil War years. For four additional decades and into the twentieth century, the bell rang from its original belfry through downtown Camden. In 1908, the bell was removed to the church's third sanctuary, the brick church at the corner of Lafayette and Broad, from which it tolled for nearly six more decades.

[*Photo cutline*: Pastor Jim Goodroe, dressed in period costume for the occasion, spoke in a ceremony to dedicate the garden and bell, and thanked members Lewis F., Lottie, and Robert R. Anderson for donation and execution of the wrought iron craftwork that assured safety and security for the bell in its new role as a memorial.]

More in 1985

In September 1985, First Baptist was the setting and its musicians were performers in the East Coast premier of a new musical, *Jubilate*. A lengthy article in the Sept. 25 *Chronicle-Independent* invited public attendance. The 65-minute performance comprised the whole of the Sunday morning worship service with its combination of contemporary gospel and classical pieces. Composer-arranger Mark Hayes of Kansas, Missouri, was the narrator and pianist. His friend, First Baptist minister of music Mary Rome Foster, directed the church choir, joined by a 20-piece orchestra.

The newspaper said of Foster, “Before becoming minister of music at First Baptist, she was a full-time concert artist, traveling to various churches each weekend. She has sung for massive audiences at church conventions and at Crystal Cathedral in California. She still continues on the concert circuit as much as her position at First Baptist will allow.”

Church member Scott Rush, a senior music major at the University of South Carolina and a performer in area symphonies, was instrumental coordinator. Among other member-musicians were Max Rush, acoustical guitarist; Mickey Litchfield, pianist; and Janis Rivers, organist. Interests in developing a church orchestra were strengthened by the performance.

Another special milestone was noted in 1985 when for the first time First Baptist’s total mission offerings exceeded \$100,000. Overall accomplishments evaluated by the South Carolina Baptist Convention gave the church recognition in the *Baptist Courier* as one of the “top 30 churches in South Carolina.” A period of growth and change continued as the church reached out in ministry at home and beyond, also expanding worship opportunities to include an early Sunday morning service during the school year.

The late 1980s

In April 1986 a revival, “Good News America,” brought to the pulpit an International Crusades representative. Afterward, 20 persons expressed interest in an evangelistic crusade in Zimbabwe. “First Baptist was approached for this specific project because it has missionary connections in Zimbabwe,” said the September 22 *Chronicle-Independent*, since “one missionary couple had spent a year’s furlough in Camden.” That month five First Baptist members who felt themselves led traveled to Harare, Zimbabwe, for a week-long evangelical crusade in two South African churches. They were Mary Lee Addis, Woodie Dixon, Forest Murphy, William Smyrl, and Dick Stucker. Church members encouraged their efforts through supplies, offerings, and prayers.

New technologies developing in society brought change, challenges, and additional options to the local church as well. In 1986, after several years of study and consideration of committee recommendations to computerize church recordkeeping, members voted to select the first computer and software system. The processes of installation, training, and transitioning to new equipment and new procedures followed in

the months ahead. About \$25,000, part of which had been set aside the previous year in anticipation of such a purchase, was budgeted for initial computerization expenses.

Planning for new spaces and renovating old spaces commanded attention. In February the annual Sweetheart Banquet was held in the cafeteria at Pine Tree Hill School, with a variety show, “Red Heart Review.” Church members readily recognized the need for social space on their own grounds and were looking forward to providing it someday after other needs were met.

For some time renovations had been going on to the West Educational Building to bring the old building up to the standards of the new East Educational Building and the sanctuary. Alan Watts, in charge of the committee for renovations, quipped in his concluding conference report that it had been a tough job, but not to worry—he “didn’t lose any hair over it.” Church members, knowing the numerous building challenges and long familiar with the chairman’s balding pate, chuckled for some time over his good-humored comment.

With expanded new and modernized facilities serving a growing membership, pastor Jim Goodroe and deacons discussed observations that the Sunday morning worship service was generally filled. There was, therefore, little space for continued growth in worship attendance, the service that potential members most often visited in their introduction to the church. In April, on motion by the deacons, a special church conference voted to add an 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning worship service for part of the year. The dates for the additional service were roughly after Labor Day to Memorial Day, that range representing the highest attendance period of the year, when school was in session and fewer families were on vacation.

Other work began in 1986 to update or create policy and procedure manuals for maintenance and use of the many facilities of the church. Audio-visual director David Cook headed several efforts to bring facilities up to date with new technology. New space also gave opportunity for new organizations, such as a Clown Ministry under Donna and Bruce Stevens. In November, on nomination of the Search Committee, the church called Rolla Bradley as Minister of Education and spoke of opportunities to be derived from renewed energy of additional new leadership.

In 1987 the pastor and new minister of education brought to the attention of church committees information received through the Convention of a widespread “disturbing trend” of lower average attendance in Sunday Schools. It was a trend they said church workers needed to be aware of, despite First Baptist’s recent growth, since Sunday School attendance tended to keep families involved with the church over the long term. In the following years, local statistical studies provided information to guide planning for outreach and educational ministries.

After the trial periods of holding two worship services had expired, the church voted to repeat the effort for a similar period the following year, again noting that the 11:00 a.m. service was “basically full.” Over time, recognition was made that the early service was attracting a growing number of senior citizens, by nature early risers glad to start their day, and services began to adjust to meet varied needs and interests.

Other efforts to draw attendance from worship services into Sunday School included having church ladies serve breakfast snacks like doughnuts and juice to persons enroute between buildings. The church purchased a 38-passenger bus from Wateree Baptist Church to aid in transporting persons to services and church activities.

The 1988 budget included a salary and job description for the position of a Childcare Coordinator, as uses of new space expanded to meet member and community needs. Daily childcare by trained workers in a Christian environment had developed to witness the church's concern and support of family life conditions.

Also in 1988, on motion of the minister of education and Eric Brown for the Social Services Committee, the church voted to join the Christian Community Ministries, which was helping locally to feed the hungry. The Women's Missionary Union coordinated some of their many mission activities with needs such as food for soup kitchens. During the summer, Youth and Leadership groups helped conduct a Day Camp at Clearwater Cove on Lake Wateree for children aged 5 through grade 6. Puppet and clown ministries were active in these efforts also.

By this year, the Southside congregation at 200 York Street, which had been a mission of First Baptist for a number of years, had matured to the point of financial independence and requested the sponsoring church to clear the Southside title, an action allowing it to control its own property and acquire funding for expansion. First Baptist in conference voted to do.

Several members and associates of First Baptist were pursuing work on foreign missions fields, with the local church and its mission groups providing some needs from time to time. In 1987 Kenn Shirley and wife Gail left for the mission field on the Ivory Coast. At their request, the church bought a generator and motorcycle for them. In 1988 First Baptist provided residence in their furnished "missionary house" in Camden to furloughed missionaries to Malawi—Herman and Joy Russell and children. At the request of Gene and Jean Phillips in Zimbabwe, the church purchased bicycles for three pastors there.

In 1989 First Baptist licensed Don Craven and Rob Goodroe to preach and endorsed Robert Pettyjohn to the seminary. In 1990 the church licensed Barry Rush and the following year ordained Don Craven.

In these years of promise, watching young men from the church go to larger fields of service, First Baptist rose to another challenge. In the summer of 1989, the Rev. Ron Taylor, pastor of the Trinity Southern Baptist Mission in Lugoff, appeared before First Baptist members in conference. Born in Camden, Rev. Taylor was formerly a pastor at Kershaw. He requested that First Baptist become the sponsoring mother church of Trinity as it became chartered.

The Trinity mission had begun the previous November, and since then had been holding Sunday School and morning worship at Lugoff-Elgin High School. The mission currently had 31 members and 53 enrolled in Sunday School, and wanted to acquire property and grow into a church of its own. In its beginning, Trinity had been sponsored by the Lugoff Friendship Baptist Church, but recently that congregation had lost its own pastor and did not feel capable of continuing to sponsor Trinity. Lengthy discussions considered First Baptist's own commitments and implications of moving into another community, perhaps appearing to "compete" with other churches, but vote in the end favored the request to assist Trinity in its steps to becoming a church.

Challenges faced First Baptist and its members, like many other people in South Carolina, when Hurricane Hugo brought widespread destruction to the interior of the state in September 1989. Besides some extended disruptions to families' lives and homes, there were damages to church property that required repairs that took place over several

months time. It was a period when people pulled together, helping one another recoup from the difficulties.

The Early 1990s, Closure of Rev. Goodroe's Tenure

In 1990, new Minister of Youth Jackie Gibbs arrived with wife Geri from First Baptist in Harlingen, Texas. In 1991 the church employed its first director for the children's ministry, Martha Startup. Formerly, areas of responsibility for youths of all ages had been handled by one person, but the church was now placing more emphasis on programs to reach young people. Patterns of church attendance had been examined, using conference and local evaluations that predicted lessened growth and projected a membership decline in the coming decade, with lower church attendance. Younger people, it was pointed out, were less likely to attend church than older people.

On recommendation of the church council, First Baptist became "one of the first churches to strategize" a plan to counter the decline. Various parts were implemented from 1990 and 1991. One of the strategies was to structure different worship services to different age groups. For older people, traditional worship at 11:00 a.m. was planned to follow a traditional Sunday School, with an earlier contemporary worship scheduled at 9:45, followed by a contemporary Bible study at 11:00. So that all age groups could mingle at times, beverages and light finger foods were offered between services, and a church-wide fellowship was scheduled weekly. Schedule adjustments were gradually made based on congregational reactions to the experimental offerings. Other considerations included shifts to contemporary styled curriculum units for Sunday School, more drama and casual conversation in teaching, and more congregational singing during services.

In 1991, the church bid farewell to pastor Jim Goodroe and his family (wife Nancy and sons Rob, Randy, and Ryan). After seven years' service in Camden, Rev. Goodroe was called to pastor the First Baptist Church at Sumter. The Aug. 16 *Chronicle-Independent* described accomplishments of his pastorate: two-thirds of the long-range goals adopted in 1987 had already been accomplished, a debt of \$500,000 had been paid off, and \$160,000 had been set aside for a new expansion project. The congregation was said to be "still deciding the extent of commitment to fund a family life center" on adjacent property acquired for that purpose. Rev. Goodroe said, "The new building will be one of the projects the new pastor will oversee."

Referring to changes during the past seven years, Rev. Goodroe pointed out that while 50 to 60 families once active in the church had left the area during the past seven years, 600 new members and 200 baptisms had been added to the church. Most of the new members, he said, were not from Camden but from Lugoff, and the church's only billboard was placed in West Wateree, where the county's population was expanding.

Rev. Goodroe commented that the church had also become more involved with other religious organizations, such as helping Trinity Baptist in Lugoff find sanctuary funding, and more than doubling contributions to the Kershaw Baptist Association. The church had also made physical improvements, painting the sanctuary, installing new carpet, adding cushions to the pews, and computerizing the church administration.

The Beginning of Rev. Hancock's Service

While the search committee was at work looking for a new pastor, the Rev. Burt Williams served in the interim. In church conference December 8, 1991, a change to previous operations was approved. Previously, the church had always owned its parsonage, and residence in it at church expense was part of its payment to the pastor. Following lengthy discussion, it was agreed that the new pastor to be called would be given the option of living in the parsonage, but if he did not chose to do so, he could select his own residence. In the later case, the church would sell the parsonage, and the new pastor would have the first option to purchase it, at market value.

In the interim, growth continued in the Trinity Mission work. On February 12, 1992, the Building Committee of Trinity Baptist Mission met with First Baptist members to present their building plans for a church of their own, to outline a schedule for progress, and to request prayers for their success. The *Chronicle-Independent* reported March 31, 1993, that Trinity, a “new work” church sponsored by the First Baptist Church of Camden, had awarded a building contract for a sanctuary of its own on S.C. Highway 34 in Lugoff. Construction, to begin in April, was to be completed in nine months. The mission had begun with nine members four years earlier and, meeting on weekends in local school buildings, had grown to a present membership of 126 with a Sunday School enrollment of 147. It was, the paper said, “rapid growth for any new church meeting in a non-traditional setting.”

In church conference February 19, 1992, Nancy Kalutz, chairman of the Child Development Committee, addressed another outreach effort of First Baptist, its child care program. She stated, “As the statistics of single parents and two working parents rise in our nation, the issue of quality care for children becomes more and more a critical issue in our society. First Baptist was a local pioneer for church-based Christian child care. We are working every day to ensure that our Center is an extension of the Christian home through the extended family of God, and reflects the ministry goals of First Baptist Church.”

At the same conference, Cletus West reported that the church’s 48-passenger bus had been upgraded to meet new safety and mechanical requirements of the S.C. Highway Department. The church’s two primary vans would need replacement in two years. The bus transportation program faced regular challenges in serving an expanded area, an increasing membership, and diverse ages.

From 1992, when the first children’s minister left, until May 31, 1994, Pat Kelly was employed as Interim Director of Children’s Ministry. Social-event programs continued to encourage young families and children in living Christian lifestyles. In 1992, the Valentine Banquet was attended by 155 adults, while 30 children were given a separate party of their own at the church. Family Night Suppers averaged 165 week. The Cadet Ministry, serving students at Camden Military Academy, had 78 boys enrolled in 1992.

In a regular First Baptist Sunday morning service June 21, 1992, the Rev. Bruce E. Hancock preached a trial sermon, following a drop-in reception at the church the previous evening. The motion to call him as pastor was readily approved by the congregation, and effective July 26 Rev. Hancock, with wife Pat and daughters Meredith and Erica, became part of the church family. With degrees in industrial management from Clemson University and in theology from the Southeastern Baptist Seminary, Rev.

Hancock had been pastor of the Front Street Baptist Church in Statesville, North Carolina, for the past six years.

November 1, 1992, the new pastor was the moderator at a church conference when Bill Brown reported for the Finance Committee that, “Through October, we are approximately \$59,000 under the \$787,000 budget for 1992.” The 1993 budget was therefore being proposed at a more modest amount, approximately \$48,000 less than the budget of the previous year. The proposal was unanimously approved.

In 1993, in another financial action, the church agreed to sell the Lyttleton Street parsonage to the pastor. It is still his home in 2010. Over the years, through donations and purchases, the church has acquired several properties contiguous to its sanctuary. These have allowed the church to expand its grounds for buildings and parking and have provided opportunities for the church to host furloughed missionaries and families with living space in “missionary homes.”

In church conference in early 1993, Sunday School Director Bob Pettyjohn was pleased to report that in 1992 average Sunday School attendance had increased over the previous year for the first time in five years, and attendance in the most recent two quarters were much improved over the same period in the last few years. (The average attendance in 1987 was 582 and had dropped yearly to a low of 534 in 1991, but went up in 1992 to 541.) “We have an excellent trend started and we want to keep it going,” the director said. He complimented the effectiveness of the Wednesday night visitation ministry for reaching out to others to attend. Specifically he cited training for greeting visitors, providing name tags in departments, and encouraging teams to keep in touch with members.

When an ice storm hit the community March 14, 1993, Sunday School attendance registered its lowest at 388, but July 4 it soared to a new high at 768 when the first “Celebrate Freedom” service attracted crowds to share in patriotic observations. Clowns, pageantry, and music were part of the fun and fellowship, which continued at a meal served in the lunchroom at the new Camden High School. Very shortly planning began to hold a similar patriotic service on July 3 of the following year. Another special program in 1993 was presented at First Baptist in October, when the traveling musical evangelist group Liberated Wailing Wall, representing the international group Jews for Jesus, presented the Christian message through “Jewish gospel music.”

Also in 1993 Rolla and Genevieve Bradley departed for mission work in India, and the WMU raised money for a Romanian orphanage and locally donated to the Rev. Johnny Smith’s homeless shelter to feed children lunch when school was out. The church fixed up its second missionary home for another missionary family. Sunday School attendance had its highest quarter attendance in the past six years. The use of prospect cards and personal contacts were credited with results.

In 1993 Bill Howard was approved to be called as minister of music. Pat Kelly was serving as interim director of children’s ministry when the church decided to employ a part-time children’s minister. Throughout 1994, however, the search committee was unsuccessful in finding a suitable candidate.

Other highlights of 1993 included Trinity Mission’s beginning its steps toward constitution, their worship attendance having increased by 50 percent. Trinity members continued to be carried on membership rolls during the process, from 1994-1995. The current address of the church is 1062 Ridgeway Road, Lugoff.

For 1994, having finished the previous year in good financial shape, 16 percent over budget, the church adopted a budget of \$870,000. The Real Estate Committee recommended further purchases to enlarge the church property for future expansion, and ideas began to evolve regarding building and program possibilities ahead. The lot at the corner of Highland and Walnut was purchased and the church donated the house on it, provided it be moved, to the Rev. Johnnie Smith's Helping Hands Ministry. In January of the following year it was moved to a new lot on Campbell Street to be used as a temporary shelter for families who have lost their homes. The church also purchased another property on Lafayette Street.

Young people were involved in a number of activities in 1994. For example, some older youth during the summer attended the National Acteens Convention in Birmingham for studies on topics like gangs, race relations, homosexuality, and sexual abstinence. The children's choir, His Kids, presented a musical to the church in December.

The WMU quarterly report for the end of 1994 also reflects seasonal activities, some of them involving youths. Women of the church hosted a Salad Luncheon for World Hunger, with proceeds going to Kenya. GAs and RAs adopted families for food and gifts in December, and Acteens with Baptist Women gave a Christmas party at Willow Lane. The WMU also sent gifts to five missionary families, prepared over 100 prisoner kits, and sent gifts to the State Hospital, Willow Lane, and the Karesh Wing.

185th Birthday

A number of activities in 1995 recognized the 185th anniversary of the church's constitution under the theme "Celebrate Our Heritage." A high-attendance service was held July 16 with six former staff members and some of their families present, among other former and present members, for the occasion. During the Sunday School period, former interim Rev. Burt Williams, met with adults for Bible study and reflection in the sanctuary. Children met in Fellowship Hall for a presentation by the "Puppet Love" team. Services were followed by a meal and fellowship at the Camden High School lunchroom. On display at the event were entries in a Heritage Day poster contest for children. Under Dot Hendrix, the Young at Heart had also compiled a book of home remedies, recalling life in earlier times.

Several historical blurbs were published in various issues of the *Messenger* to highlight key points of the church's past, and in that publication, too, Bill Howard urged members to "glorify our Lord in thanksgiving for the marvelous Christian heritage the 185 years our church existence represents."

A letter dated June 29, 1995, was published from Director of Missions Dr. Cleatus Blackmon and the Rev. Bobby Wallace, association moderator, that described the impact of the First Baptist Church:

Kershaw Baptist Association is especially grateful for your faithful participation in our association's life and ministry. You have expressed your flagship status in generous practical support, spiritual leadership, and caring encouragement that have strengthened our fellowship and services...

You do indeed have a heritage worthy of celebration! Planted and cultivated by some of the foundational leaders in South Carolina Baptist life, you

have grown into a strong congregation, demonstrating the presence of Christ and exerting a powerful influence for our Lord in our community, our area, our state, and, yes, our world.

Education Minister Rolla Bradley paid tribute on July 16 to the “heritage of mission work” in reporting that 22 members of the church had just returned from a mission in Romania. Other members, he pointed out, were also serving that year in Thailand, Haiti, and Kenya. The Romania Mission Team included the following: Lesley Addis, Mary Lee Addis, Kevin Avant, Sterling Babic, Ami Bryant, Melissa Cockrell, Thomas Davis, Joyce Dixon, Kathy Faris, Kristi Faris, Phillip Gerrald, Geri Gibbs, Jackie Gibbs, Becky Graham, Holly Hall, Wesley Herndon, Lara Jones, Michelle Myers, Rhea Robinson, Jamie Schoolfield, Tanner Smyrl, William Smyrl, Eric Toole, and Jennifer Ziegler.

The year which had celebrated numerous highlights had begun with the human sadness felt by the loss of a deeply respected Christian friend, one who had inspired and encouraged many church members with her service here and during her faith-filled, four-year battle with breast cancer and her final home-going. The January 6, 1995, *Chronicle-Independent* announced that, “The Rev. Mary Rome Foster died nearly one year after being ordained. She was 47.” The former First Baptist minister of music was employed at the time by the Richland Memorial Hospital as a chaplain to Palmetto Hospice. She had been ordained January 9, 1994, by the Kathwood Baptist Church in Columbia, where she was then a member. As the newspaper stated, “In answering her call to the ministry, Mrs. Foster confronted an official policy of the Southern Baptist Convention that states women may not be ordained.” Her friends at First Baptist remained numerous, and her positive influence lingered.

In early 1995 the church again advertised the position it had created over a year earlier for a part-time Children’s Minister but had been unable to fill. The pastor’s wife Pat Hancock offered and was accepted for the position, which she still holds in 2010. Linda Graham was then serving as Children’s Center Director. Geneva Allen, who at mid-year 1995 had completed 26 years of service in the church office, is still serving as Financial Secretary in 2010.

Late 1990s

Several actions from 1996 and 1997 bore significant influence on the church as it presently operates in 2010. Sunday School director Bob Pettyjohn reported that by 1996 over 150 persons were committed to the new Touch Ministry under leaders Pat and Larry Godwin. Personal contacts were organized under the ministry to reach out to prospects and the unchurched, as well as to members.

The basic structure of the Touch Ministry was explained at church conference. Those involved were meeting monthly on the first and third Monday night for a light supper, after which “some pray, some write cards and letters, some make calls to absentees and prospects and those in need, and some go out for visits. There is something for everyone to do.”

The on-going Iron Men Ministry also involved a growing number of men in the church who were seeking to enrich their spiritual lives through Bible study and service. In practice with the group’s observation, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens

another,” the men prayed and studied together to deepen spiritual awareness and strengthen Christian resolve.

In 1996 the church property again extended outward with purchase of a lot on Kaybee Court and another on Highland Avenue, the latter intended for renovation as a replacement missionary house. The Building Committee was also organized under general chairman David Cook and general vice-chairman Bob Pettyjohn. Earl Ziegler was in charge of plans and construction; Elaine Brown, furniture and decoration; and Don Avant, finance.

In June 1996 the church made initial approvals of fundraising and construction contracts that continued throughout the rest of the decade as a major part of its work under the “Arise and Build!” program. The Long-Range Planning Committee in January 1997 urged a forward look, with chairman Bob Pettyjohn voicing the committee’s concern that, “As First Baptist continues to move toward becoming a regional church, our infrastructure needs to be strengthened.” Long-standing needs for fellowship space and for adequate classroom facilities were to be addressed.

Pastor Bruce Hancock stressed in a January 17, 1997, *Chronicle-Independent* article: “The new buildings we are planning are not ends in themselves. Rather they are tools to help us fulfill our mission to glorify God through worship, evangelism, discipleship, ministry and fellowship. They will enable First Baptist Church to grow and expand her ministries to reach more people for Christ.”

In April 1997, with an approved loan of 3.5 million dollars, the church voted to proceed with Phase I of the plan for construction of a Fellowship Building, a Children’s Center Building and Connector to West Building, and preliminary renovation of the West Building. The May 30 *Chronicle Independent* reported the groundbreaking ceremony the previous Sunday with the following participants: youngest member Joshua Sorrells and eldest member Cassie James; chairman of deacons Tom Peach; “Pastor Bruce”; building committee chairman David Cook; youth representative Rhea Faris; and building committee member Tim Kistemaker.

At mid-year 1997, with receipts reported up 11 percent from last year, the church was able to add more than anticipated to its Arise and Build fund. By January 21, 1998, the site prep had been completed for the Children’s Building, although the site work on the Fellowship Building—which had been scheduled for the previous November—continued to be delayed by weather.

Meanwhile, extensive work was underway to update the policies of the various programs of the church. Bill Barrett, chairman of the Constitution Committee, reported to church conference his finding that “Our Constitution, By-Laws, Policies and Procedures have not been updated since 1990 and some have never been church approved.” Keeping orderly records of the organization of church work was deemed of importance, as was improving its buildings. Various portions of the constitution, by-laws, policies, and procedures were updated in the next few years, the result of much discussion and consideration during the process of revision. Each change was brought before church conference for congregational vote and recorded on a computer file. Dick Lackey chaired the committee when Barrett’s term ended. Work to keep the records current continues to the present.

For the Fourth of July 1997, the First Baptist music ministry planned a special community treat, a large-scale free public concert in Rectory Square. Those attending

were invited to bring lawn chairs, blankets, and picnic baskets. Bill Howard directed the performance “Nation...It’s Time to Pray” with the church orchestra and two choirs—the sanctuary choir and the Voices in Praise youth choir. In all, 155 voices and 35 instrumentalists performed.

By late 1997 missionaries Pam and Bob Parker had arrived for a several-months stay in the missionary house. Dorothy Johnson, president, regularly reported on WMU work at church conferences, detailing the group’s involvement in mission activities. At the April 1998 conference, support for the Arise and Build program was also reported excellent: “Thanks to faithful giving and weather delays” the church had thus far had to borrow no money, and “lower interest rates allowed re-negotiation of the loan at nearly a one percent difference.”

By late 1998 new Minister of Education Evan A. Smith was at work. A Georgia native and seminary graduate, he had been serving in a similar position in Portsmouth, Virginia. First Baptist had been without a minister of education for a year and a half.

The Children’s Building was dedicated February 21, 1999, with a worship service featuring a children’s choir and a youth parade. Afterwards children released in the air balloons containing invitations to their Sunday School classes. Each of the two floors of the new building was 12,000 square feet, with an atrium to connect it to the West Educational Building. The new building included two crib rooms and 14 classrooms on the first level, with a colorful Noah’s Ark mural painted in the hallways by Lugoff artist Sherry Davis. The second level included 12 more classrooms, a kitchen, and a multi-purpose room for 100.

By the month the Children’s Building was dedicated, over one million dollars of Arise and Build donations had already been received of the nearly two million dollars pledged. September 1, 1999, the Fellowship Building was complete, and it was officially first used October 1. The building, 10,000 square feet, included a commercial sized kitchen to serve a number of social functions. Trustees were Nancy Ogburn, Jerry Toms, Jim McGuirt, Bob Bair, and Gigi Davis. At the time, West Building renovations were underway to “convert vacated children and preschool rooms into useable youth and adult space.” Although major construction work was being contracted, much completion work was done by church volunteers.

Through the years of much focusing on facilities, the Touch Ministry continued keeping in personal touch with prospects and members. In 1999 nearly 100 youth and adults of the church went on a variety of missions in the USA and abroad, many of the opportunities organized under the Rev. Jackie Gibbs. Prayer partners at home supported each person on a mission.

Potential dangers to missionaries as well as the powers of prayer were made real to First Baptist members through the harrowing 1999 experiences of Gene and Jean Phillips in South Africa. After 40 years on the mission field in Zimbabwe, the missionaries had retired to Camden in 1996 and become members of First Baptist. They volunteered to return to Africa in December 1998, to coastal Lesotho, where the following January they were abducted by a gang of thieves. After they escaped and returned to work, an auto accident during stressful political conditions again jeopardized their safety. First Baptist friends followed their situation with prayers.

Other matters came before the church, including a 1999 Resolution Against Video Poker that called on every member and citizen of Kershaw County 18 years old and older

to register to vote, and to vote No on the November ballot that proposed legalizing the new form of gambling. In the same year discussion was underway on the most appropriate way to word “what we believe at First Baptist.” At the November church conference, the minutes of the July conference were corrected to note approval of a motion to include in the church constitution “basic beliefs” rather a “statement of faith.”

In the 21st Century

By spring of 2000, renovations had been completed and new spaces were in use for church activities. The new Fellowship Center, unlike any space the church had before, offered new opportunities. The GAs earned over \$1,000 serving a chicken bog, and the money helped 30 girls attend Camp LaVida in the summer. A covered dish supper accompanied a churchwide prayer retreat in May. The Silvertones, a group of singers aged 55 or older, directed by Shirley Warren, performed at church suppers and gatherings, especially those of the Young at Heart. The Long-Range Plans for 2001-2005 were to “keep reaching out with ministries,” including those to youth, the handicapped, and the community’s growing Hispanic population.

Soon after the church completed its new buildings, Les Addis brought a motion from the deacon body in August 2000 that First Baptist sponsor and build a house for the Habitat for Humanity program. The following July 2001 deacon chairman Dick Lackey repeated the recommendation, stating \$30,000 donations would be needed, with work to begin in the fall. Lackey and Jackie Gibbs were to chair the work. The plan was approved with no opposition. Another activity that year was participation in the Jesus Video Project, by which a copy of the religious film about the life and ministry of Jesus was directed to every home in South Carolina through a mailing July 1.

At the end of September, Jackie Gibbs relinquished his duties as minister of youth, but stayed on staff until mid-November to continue responsibilities undertaken for the Habitat for Humanity house. He and his family then moved to embark full time on their “Slip Disc” ministry to which they felt called. The Gibbses manufactured Frisbee-like game discs imprinted with scriptural messages and distributed them to youths they met in the course of witnessing. The Rev. Chris Hanley, a young man who had grown up in First Baptist, was employed part-time as Interim Youth Minister until a new full-time employee could be hired. The WMU tried a new activity for children at the end of October, “trunk or treat,” to insure safety for children by setting up safe places to find treats in the trunk of cars in the church parking lots.

In late 2001 bats were discovered living in the church steeple, and efforts to remove them for sanitary reasons revealed a leak in the steeple that needed to be fixed. Because the leak had been in existence a long time before its discovery, a repair bill of nearly \$350,000 was assessed and completion of the work extended for several months. In January 2002 Jerry Toms reported that the Arise and Build program had received more money than its original goal and the overage had been applied to the church debt. In February, a victory celebration recognized the completion of pledges. All bills on the Habitat house by then had also been paid.

Effective in 2003, the church changed the operation of its missionary house from the home it owned on Highland Avenue to the home it owned on Lee Court, since the later was a larger structure with two baths instead of one and could better accommodate families. The WMU reported over \$35,000 donated to the Lottie Moon Christmas

offering during the past holiday, and in 2003 collected food and funds for Iraqi relief. On March 2, 2003, Dub Moore, chairman of the search committee for a “minister to students” introduced Brent Kendall and family to the church. Following his giving his personal testimony, he was called.

Later in the year, the church considered and adjusted housing allowances for its various ministers and heard reports on the growing Hispanic ministry. Several classes in English language use were being taught on Wednesday evening in the West Building, and the recently formed Kershaw Baptist Associated Hispanic Council was planning a Hispanic Fair.

By 2004 the Wednesday night Hispanic ministry was attracting an attendance of 35-40 persons weekly. It was just one of a number of mission activities carried out in the year. Under leadership of Paulette Munn, the “second annual Egg Hunt” for residents at Wateree Villa was well attended in the spring. In June the missionary house was prepared for the residency of the Gestring family. Mission groups prepared health boxes to be given to Iraqi families by Arab Christians. A group of WMU members continued knitting blankets for new babies in First Baptist families; the number of blankets given to new arrivals in the past three years was reported at 55. When the pastor reported that new regulations declared it “unsafe to transport children, youth and adults on the vans we now have,” fundraising began to secure \$50,000 for improved transportation for the bus ministry.

By the following year, Roger Smoak announced that the \$50,000 goal had been reached to purchase a bus, and training arrangements were being made for the CDL license that drivers would need to drive the bus. Safety requirements of another nature were also being addressed by the church. Background checks were being required of all persons who worked with minors or special needs people. The church agreed to implement the initiation of investigations through a professional company, anticipating 300 checks would have to be made initially.

Mission work moved forward. In October 2005 Steve and Cathy Warren were living in the missionary residence, and Omar and Maria Arango were living in the church’s other house on Highland Avenue. Maria Arango was serving as pastor of Jehovah Jireh Church, ministering to Hispanic people. Both of the Arangos were attending First Baptist’s Wednesday night classes learning English as a second language. The importance of such classes was described in church conference: “Many Spanish-speaking people in this area may not be here long term. If we reach them, when they go back they can take the gospel with them.

English as Second Language (ESL) classes continued to grow at the church on Wednesday nights, with weekly attendance in 2006 averaging 50. Its purpose was described: “Our draw is ‘Come learn the English language.’ Our goal is ‘Come meet our Risen Saviour.’” ESL teachers included Fernando Vidal, Jean Phillips, Robert Kaczmarek, Bethany Kaczmarek, and Joan Reconnu.

The January 2006 church conference had pointed out that the recent Lottie Moon offering would have special meaning for First Baptist as “this offering will directly help support our own international missionaries Chris and Karen Hanley.” The Hanleys, a Camden family and members of First Baptist, were reported to have completed a safe trip and to be settling into their new home in east Asia.

Additionally, the Warrens, who had been living in the church's missionary home, had returned to the Czech Republic, and Robert and Bethaney Kaczmarek, missionaries to Lithuania, and their children had moved in. In 2007 church youth helped paint renovated facilities in the community's transitional housing for women and children, New Day on Mill. Late in the year, Patsy Waters spent two months on a mission with a Baptist medical clinic in Africa.

In October 2006 the church added a new section to its policies and procedures, a section related to its new website, part of growing use of the computer. One of the website's purposes was to help the church keep in touch with and reach out to "current, potential, and former members" and to "missionary, traveling members," as well as to "web surfers looking for a church." Cindy Nooe, during a three-year mission in Africa, updated church members, who were praying for her, with information she posted on her webpage. In 2007, a new WMU on-line group, My Mission, organized under Melody Johnson to communicate by way of computers. Also that year, after study and recommendation of a special committee, the church agreed to retain a full-time independent support company to keep the church's computer needs updated.

In 2005 when the Long-Range Planning Committee presented goals for the next five years, observation of the church's 200th anniversary in 2010 was anticipated. Committee chairman Jack Crayne recommended setting aside "a day for special celebration and thanksgiving to God for his goodness and blessings to us" and setting as a goal "the retirement of our indebtedness through budget funds and a special emphasis by the year 2010." Financial planning during these years proved a challenge, however, and economic hard times in the nation began to be reflected in church collections. When the church budget began coming up short in 2007, cautious persons urged prudent spending decisions.

Opinions favored, however, pursuing opportunities which arose to acquire neighboring properties to enhance facilities and improve programs carrying out work of the church. In 2007 First Baptist purchased a property on Walnut Street to add much-needed parking space, and took steps to auction off and remove the house on that lot as well as a Lafayette Street house. The following year the church purchased another property and house on Highland Avenue.

In 2008 the Long-Range Planning Committee made a motion in church council to move forward in the next two years with Phase 2 of the building plan "conceived 14 years ago." The major focus was to be the construction of a Youth Activities Building. The Committee remarked, "Facilities for youth are woefully inadequate." Although the church operations continued efforts to keep expenses down, First Baptist in 2010 continued working toward the goal of a Youth Activities Building.

As missions work continued in 2010, the church members were urged to pray daily for its fellow members "serving our Lord in various places within our state, nation and world." These included: Mike and Debbie Baker, Indonesia; Wes and Beth Gestring, South Africa; Chris and Karen Hanley, South Asia; Neill and Margit Mims, South Asia; Barry and DeeDee Rush, Campus Crusade, Florida; Tanner and Audrey Smyrl, Belgium; Steven and Cathy Warren, currently stateside; and Dewy and Carolyn Wetherby, India.

In recognition of the 200th anniversary, the church decided to give (rather than receive) "birthday gifts," and to give those gifts to the community. For example, in one project, the church held a wish list drive for the Community Medical Clinic of Kershaw

County, with individuals, including children, collecting and donating medical supplies from band-aids to antiseptics. A truckload of supplies was gratefully received at the clinic, which provides free healthcare to the uninsured of Kershaw County.

As a long term project during the year, the church accepted responsibility for the building of a Habitat for Humanity house at 1447 Gordon Street in Camden. Habitat for Humanity is a Christian housing ministry that “invite[s] people of all backgrounds, races and religions to build houses together in partnership with families in need.” Numerous First Baptist volunteers worked to help frame, side, finish, paint, and landscape the home. For one intensive, highly organized weekend, several hundred First Baptist members took part in the Kershaw Baptist Association Repair Blitz. Members participated in financing or working on housing repairs to seven local houses “in desperate need of repair.”

As the church in 2010 anticipated its Bicentennial recognition service September 19, other activities—such as preparing displays of items of church memorabilia, updating the written history of the church, and making the published history available online—reminded members of First Baptist’s past and present. Records of more than two hundred years of the faithfulness of individual members provide inspiration. The evidence of God’s blessings to His people illuminates their faith.

Sources: Camden Archives (newspaper clippings, etc.); First Baptist Media Center (files and archival holdings); First Baptist Office (minutes of church conferences, etc.); interviews; member contributions; author’s records

(Responses and contributions of additional information are invited. See previous online page.)