

FBCM: A History of more than a church ...the roots of Lauderdale County and the City of Meridian played a role in early church

Tracing back the beginnings of First Baptist Church of Meridian involves delving into the birth of Lauderdale County itself.

Lauderdale County, named for Col. James Lauderdale, emerged in December 1833. In its infancy, families moved here and churches began to spring up across the landscape. In July of 1839, Oakey Valley Baptist Church — the first name of First Baptist Church of Meridian — was among those to form with the early settlers of the new county. The church began its mission in the Bonita area, near the south end of the reservoir. That location was near where the entrance of Willow Ridge Apartments off Highway 19 is today.

The first pastor of the church, Elder W.P. Carter, also served as a state senator.

That history will be celebrated this summer as First Baptist Church of Meridian invites the public to join them as they honor the 175-year history of the church. The church has scheduled several activities for July 12-13 to celebrate the milestone. An Open House will be held on Saturday, July 12, beginning at 2 p.m.; a program called "How We've Changed" will begin at 3 p.m. and will include a bus tour of Meridian. Reservations will be needed for the bus tour. They can be made at www.fbcmeridian.org. You can also call the church office at 601-484-4600.

On Sunday, the church will offer coffee and donuts at 9 a.m. and after the service at 10:30 a.m., a Sunday lunch will be held. Reservations are needed for that event as well.

"We invite the entire community — along with former members, family members and neighbors — to join us for this historic occasion," said Dr. Raymon Leake, who was served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Meridian since 1995.

Historic Roots

The early history of the church at Bonita was a good — but quick — one. As it grew, change was needed. Due to the growth of the congregation, the elders of the church decided to relocate to the hub of the area — the City of Meridian. They chose a plot of land near the present McLemore Cemetery on Fifth Street. The cemetery was named after the first settler of Meridian, Richard McLemore. During that time — from 1856-1859 — the church was led by Elder N.L. Clark, whose namesake later became Clark College in nearby Newton.

In 1859, the church changed its name to Meridian Baptist Church.

After the Civil War, the church moved one final time to its current location on 26th Avenue, which was at that time named Mississippi Street. At this location, the church has occupied four different houses of worship.

The first one was quite unique. Church members and volunteers moved a building from nearby Marion to downtown Meridian. In 1871, a two-story brick building with a steeple and bell tower was constructed. But it didn't last long either, as a fire destroyed the church in 1892. Church members quickly recovered. Before the end of 1892, a new one-story structure, also with a bell tower, was built.

The building wasn't the only thing that changed after the fire. After the new church structure was complete, the name was changed to First Baptist Church. Additions were made to the building between its initial construction until 1948. During that year construction began on a new educational building, which members eventually occupied on Mother's Day 1949.

History of Leaders

In its early days, the church was led by a number of outstanding and dynamic pastors, beginning with the first one, Pastor Carter, who also served as a state legislator. Elder Solomon Williams followed Clark and served as pastor from 1859 until 1967. J.B. Hamblin led the church for the next two years, followed by the short stint of J.L. Loyd and Theodore Whitfield in 1871. In fairly quick succession there were pastors Columbus Smith, J.C. Foster, W.B. Crumpton and C.M. Gordon.

The longest tenure of that time came with the leadership of Dr. J.W. Bozeman. Dr. Bozeman served as pastor from 1879 until his death in 1895. Also during that time, First Baptist Church member William Joshua David served as a missionary for the church in Africa. Upon his return, he helped start Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in 1891. Another local church, Calvary Baptist Church, was formed by a group of former First Baptist Church members during Pastor Gordon's brief ministry.

First Baptist Church's leadership continued to come from distinguished stock around the turn of the century. Former Mississippi College Dr. R.A. Venable followed Dr. Bozeman and served until 1907, when he was replaced by Dr. T.J. Shipman, who served until 1917. The following are other pastors and their dates of service during that time:

- Dr. R.J. Bateman, 1918-1922.
- Dr. L.R. Christie, 1922-1926
- Dr. Norman Cox, 1927-1931; 1939-1951

As Dr. Cox started his second term as pastor, member Georgia Mae Ogburn went to Chile as a missionary and served for 36 years until her retirement in 1976. Cox also saw the hiring of a music minister and a volunteer choir replaced the paid mixed-quartet that once supplied music during church services. Dr. Cox also led the construction of the current educational building and sanctuary. The education building was occupied in May 1949 and the sanctuary in 1951.

- Dr. H.C. Bass, 1931-1939
- Dr. Walter Moore, 1951-1959.

An accredited kindergarten was started in 1955 and served the community for 36 years. Two mission churches also were founded at Meehan and Lauderdale. Although the Meehan church folded after several years, First Baptist Church of Lauderdale continues to serve residents there.

• Dr. Leo Eddleman, president of New Orleans Seminary, served as interim. Due to his seminary duties, Dr. Lowry Compere, president of Clarke College, often filled in for Eddleman. P.A. Michel took over of the church's day-to-day needs until he left to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, Miss. Deacon Chairman George Ethridge assumed leadership responsibilities after that.

- Dr. Beverly Tinnin was called as pastor in May 1961. Dr. Tinnin brought Rev. John Laughlin as Minister of Music and Rev. David McCubbin, Associate Pastor and Minister of Education. Those three men served together for the next 25 years. Dr. Tinnin retired in 1987; John Laughlin resigned in 1988 for health reasons; and David McCubbin retired in 1996. During their tenure there were a number of improvements: the stained-glass windows were installed; an Educational Annex was built to provide classroom space for preschoolers, children and youth; the Educational Building was renovated and upgraded to include a choir suite, new office area and an enlarged library; an elevator was installed to access the second floor fellowship hall under the sanctuary. During this time, there were also growth in Sunday School attendance, revivals, mission trips, etc. Rev. John Armistead led in youth activities. When he left, Rev. Tommy Anthony assumed his duties in that role.

- Dr. Charles Myers, interim, 1987.

- Dr. Gary Bagley was called and assumed the pastorate in April 1988. Dr. Bagley led the hiring of Rev. Dough Haney as Minister of Music and Rev. Scott Bebout as Minister of Students. Dr. Bagley led the church to get out of the ministerial housing business. He began to plant the idea of "Restoring for Tomorrow" before he resigned in the 1990s to go into chaplaincy training in Georgia.

- Dr. Earl Kelly, interim, 1992.

- Dr. Leland Berg, 1993-1994. Dr. Berg attempted to restore the building program.

Current Leadership

Dr. Raymon Leake was called as pastor in November of 1995. He came from First Baptist Church of Picayune and brought his wife, Gloria, and as the church history notes state: "one weeping teenager who said her daddy, 'has ruined my life.'"

Lee Yancey became youth minister, Rev. David Bishop became minister of music, Rev. Stan Davis was named minister of education, and a new church logo was introduced — all in 1996. During that time, Miriam Chesney began playing the church organ and Barry Germany began playing the piano for the church.

Under Dr. Leake's leadership, the church shifted the ministry from a "come to us" to a "go to where they are" and to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only."

The past 25 years of the church's outreach saw missionary trips to Haiti, Mexico, Dominican Republic, India, China, Holland, Zambia, Bolivia and a various locations in America. For more than 10 years, church volunteers have journeyed to Trinidad on construction, sports camps, evangelistic, and special season missions. The Mohess Road Baptist Church has been enlarged and the church supports several "housing churches" as well as other outreach and medical missions. Each fifth Sunday is devoted to the Trinidad Mission Project.

In 2002, Wayne Polk was called to be the church's Director of Outreach, Ministry and Discipleship. Polk was key to the church's missional approach. Polk left in 2006 to start a new church in Canton, Ga. He later returned in 2011.

Rev. Matt Snowden took over as Associate Pastor of the church in 2007. Snowden left in 2010 to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas.

Yancey was followed by Rev. Brad Smith in 2001 and later Rev. Jason Brooks in 2004. In January of 2007, Abby Dennis came on staff as the first Director of Children's Ministries, a move seen necessary by the increased number of young families in the church. When Brooks left in 2009, Dennis took on the added responsibility of the Youth. She left in 2013 to begin teaching public school. Benjy Linder was recently named as the church's new Student Minister.

In 2010, Mrs. Walter Rogers (Ellen) began ministry responsibilities at the church. They include grief-share sessions for the bereaved and English as a second language classes. She also provides different church counseling needs.

Dr. Leake has been pastor of First Baptist Church for 18 years. His family of five has grown since 1995. His three children have given he and his wife, Gloria, nine grandchildren.

Bro. David McCubbin, Ward Calhoun Sr. and Freddie Carmichael contributed to this report.