

The Story of First Baptist Church

A Bicentennial History

By Charles Sparnecht

INTRODUCTION

This attempt to tell the story of First Baptist Church of Rochester brought a sense of both pride and wonder about the importance of our existence. Think of the thousands who have worshipped with and before us, having their spiritual and human needs met. Consider the millions of miles walked with Jesus, striving to understand him and to be more like him. Seeds of good works have been planted throughout the greater Rochester area. Remarkable people; some well-known, others less known but equally important are part of our history.

This “history” of FBCR is incomplete and in need of expansion, but the most exciting part of the story is to consider what the coming decades will be because great things are yet to come.

A document found in the archives titled “Salient Findings Concerning the Church” (author and date unknown) may be an apt starting point. It begins, “One cannot study the records and history of the church without being impressed by the preeminence and leadership of First Baptist Church of Rochester in the life of Rochester and in the national Baptist denomination. Outstanding ministers and distinguished laymen have made it produce a powerful impact and build a significant tradition and loyalty among its people. The wealth of such a tradition and reservoir of sentiment has produced a strong momentum which continues today.”

Why would a small group come together to form a church? It must be that something was lacking in their lives that needed to be taken care of. In the case of church formation there would undoubtedly be an outward looking plan to spread the word associated with their faith and blessings to a world in need. There would also be an immediate need to deepen their spirituality and make it grow.

Such a coming together would certainly have a universal impact, contributing to the well-being of their larger community. So it was, then when twelve folks met in Brighton on June 22, 1818, to form a church, the First Baptist Church of Brighton which would become the First Baptist Church of Rochester, and so it is that this church has contributed to the care of Rochester and the greater world. It is further evident that as significant as the contributions have been, the best is yet to come for this congregation.

SEARCHING FOR HOME

The United States had already by this time begun its obsession with development and expansion. Thomas Jefferson had negotiated the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, expanding the national territory by 820,000 square miles. Americans fought the British for a second time and

resulting from this “Second War For Independence” was a sense of security and a drive for national growth.

This security and the drive for growth would fuel the settlement and development of what would become Rochester. In 1817 various landowners including Nathaniel Rochester would join their land to form Rochesterville. The Erie Canal was begun that same year and the growth of Rochester was underway. Rochester became known as the first “Boomtown” and First Baptist Church of Rochester would grow with the area.

In the history of FBCR written by Reverend Kenneth Dean it is noted that on June 22, 1818 twelve people met to look to forming a Baptist Church. They were Amos Graves, Ira Sperry, Johnson Sperry, Laura Sperry, Sarah Terrey, Lydia Reynolds, Sally Sperry, and Jacob Kennedy. Oddly four of this group were excluded by 1826 for “breaking their covenant vows and violating church discipline.”

Over the next 137 years the church struggled through some very difficult times. In a sermon delivered by the Reverend J. W. A. Stewart on October 22, 1893, it was remembered that:

“During the first years of its existence the life of the church was far from vigorous; indeed there were times when it was almost threatened with extinction. For ten years they had no church home. For preaching they had to depend on the liberality of neighboring ministers, whose labor met little reward other than the satisfaction of doing good.”

Foremost among the handicaps was the absence of a home mentioned by Reverend Stewart. In its beginning there was no meeting house. The first structure to be called home was an eighteen by twenty-four foot schoolhouse on the current State Street; that would be followed by the city Court House where worship occurred in the courtroom.

Eventually the congregation was expelled from there by the sheriff because the Board of Supervisors ruled that they were of “no consequence.” Following this expulsion the next place of worship was in Hiram Leonard’s ballroom over a stable in the rear of the Clinton House Inn. In 1838 plans were made for building a new church on Fitzhugh and Church Streets in the city and services were held there beginning in 1839. This building was one of stone, costing \$18,000 and many considered this house of worship to be one of beauty. Part of that beauty certainly was the inclusion of Tiffany stained glass windows several of which were moved and included at the Brighton church. One was placed in memory of Emily Mudge Shedd by her children recalling “one who radiated so generously the light and cheer and warmth of heaven.” Another window was a memorial to Mr. and Mrs. Edwin O. Sage given by their four children.

THE CHURCH GROWS IN ROCHESTER

Augustus Hopkins Strong wrote that “These were small beginnings, but they illustrate God’s way of beginning small and ending large”. The next chapter of the church’s history saw the purchase of a wooden building on State Street which was of some considerable size but not enough to have a baptistery. Baptisms were held in the Genesee River. The church of “no consequences” now began to make itself known. Small beginnings became large.

The impact of revivals in led by Charles G. Finney was considerable, so much so area earned the name “the over district.” It is certain Rochester was still an underdeveloped, frontier at the time. It may have isolation of the frontier that people to new ways of at religion. A shortage of professional and established made average folks more welcoming of what some call religions.” Groups such as celibate Shakers at Sodus followers of Jemma Wilkinson who claimed to be female incarnation of Jesus,

Oren Sage
Part of Rochester’s history is the rapid growth of the city and the recognition of Rochester as America’s first boom city. An important part of that growth was the industry of shoe manufacturing. Arch Merrill, a Rochester historian wrote:
<i>“After the Erie Canal boom several shoe shops opened. In those pre-automation days, it is related that one proprietor, Oren Sage, at a given hour read to the cutters, hand stitchers and boomers who sat in a circle in one big work room. This probably was in lieu of a coffee break.”</i>
It may have been “in lieu of a coffee break” as Merrill said, but it is also known that in other businesses reading to workers and inviting speakers to discuss contemporary issues was used to help ameliorate the boredom of work.

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Oneida Community rose. The religious revivals that affected most of western New York led also to more traditional religious beliefs and the growth of churches. First Baptist was a beneficiary of this social and moral movement increasing its population by over two hundred new members. This growth both in the area in general and with this particular church would be instrumental in one of the very real contributions of this church of “no consequence.” The church was located on the west side of the river and was too small to accommodate the new growth, so fifty-four members left to form a new church on the east side; Second Baptist Church, now known as the Baptist Temple (which is now also located in Brighton). Before it was done in helping to create new places of worship, First Baptist would be instrumental in founding The Bronson Avenue Church which is now known as Calvary Baptist Church, Meigs Street which became South Avenue Baptist, the Memorial Mission Chapel which became Lake Avenue Baptist, the Park Street or Emmanuel Baptist Church and the Rapids Mission Chapel.

The story of the Lake Avenue Memorial Baptist Church and Society which became Lake Avenue Baptist Church as mentioned above is especially interesting. The land on which the church was built was contributed by FBCR’s Oren Sage. Sage also contributed substantially to the first building built there “a small mission chapel opened as a memorial to peace.” In fact when the church was first created the word Memorial was included in its title “in gratitude for the return of peace after the Civil War and also in gratitude that not one life had been lost in the Great Flood of 1865.” At the time Sage wrote, “My brother, I have made a good many paying investments in my life time but none that paid off like this.”

Later growth in that church required a larger facility so the original chapel was dismantled brick by brick and reassembled on Cameron Street where sixty Lake Avenue members formed the Lyell Avenue Baptist Church in 1890. The building now housed Cameron Community Ministries.

EARLY AND CONTINUING WORK OF FBC

For some years Presbyterians and Unitarians had been seeking to establish a school of higher learning. The Baptists, although aiming for a non-sectarian school that would provide education for all people were the ones that succeeded with the result the establishment of the University of Rochester in 1850. Also at that time, a need was perceived for seminarian education in the Rochester area and First Baptist's energies and efforts paved the way for the Rochester Theological Seminary (now the Colgate Rochester Divinity School) to be instituted here. There is no questioning the major contributions made by professors, theologians, and students to churches and Rochester in general provided by these educational institutions. "Small beginnings . . . that (would) illustrate God's way of beginning small ..." but growing large.

In a document to be found in the archives of First Baptist, titled "The Golden Years at First Baptist" the following is to be found;

"The First Baptist Church is the parent body of the University of Rochester and the Rochester Theological Seminary, but nowhere in any of the church records prior to the time of the establishment of these two schools is there any mention of either. No official actions of the Covenant Community refer to either school. The minutes of the trustees of the Society make no mention of either school. The history of the church contained in the records of the Sabbath School do not comment on the University or the Seminary. While the many secular histories and essays describing the beginning of these two institutions do give extensive documentation of meetings that were held at the church and outline the constant involvement of the leaders of the First Baptist Church on behalf of the educational enterprises, none of this was the official action of the church. In this profound, yet silent, truth – that the University and Seminary were the creation of the First Baptist Church—there is found the genius and meaning of Baptist life. The First Baptist Church was not a unique congregation. They were typical Baptists. But in the establishment of the University of Rochester and the Theological Seminary they did an unusual thing."

Please note that having done their work in such a silent and modest way made the work of this writer who sought to find validation that the church did indeed do this good work harder than it might have been. Fortunately this is not the only evidence of First Baptists' role. Lest there be any doubt consider the following words spoken in November of 1975 by W. Allen Wallis Chancellor of the University of Rochester at an event marking the opening of the university and the seminary.

"The large number of people who are benefitting from the University of Rochester today, the millions who have benefitted in the past century-and-a-quarter, and the numbers beyond estimate who will benefit into the indefinite future all owe a great debt to the First Baptist Church of Rochester"

There's an absence of much information about First Baptist Church of Rochester and slavery. It is likely that the records document more of the weekly events and thoughts of the church but it is somewhat disturbing to find no record of the church seeking to right the wrongs of that institution especially in a city like Rochester which is so associated with abolition. We know that before 1850 sixteen black citizens were members of FBCR. We also know that Oren Sage who was a very successful businessman and who was a deacon of this church was the vice-president of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society when it was formed. Unfortunately that is all that the archives have revealed. It is inconceivable to imagine that FBCR would have been deaf to the cries of abolition in Rochester or to the demands for equal rights for women. The area was known as one of social radicalism with the efforts of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony

well-known. Walter Rauschenbusch continued the ideals of the Social Gospel at the Rochester Theological Seminary.

First Baptist was very aware of its call to serve in making a better world both near and far. At one time the church was host to a speech given by Ida B. Wells which was attended by many including Susan B. Anthony. Ms. Wells had been traveling around the Rochester area giving talks condemning the brutal practice of lynching and this was evidently the subject of her speech that night.

The first Mission project of FBCR was in 1857. This organized a Sunday School at the corner of West Avenue and Prospect Street. Many other Missions were undertaken and at least eight became churches due to the direct or indirect work of First Baptist.

While in their downtown quarters, First Baptist not only aided the growth of other churches and educational facilities but one of its many notable members, Walter Hubbell formed the Hubbell Men's Bible Class. Mr. Hubbell was a lawyer for the Kodak Corporation and was George Eastman's personal lawyer. The formation of this Bible Class came at a time when new ways of reaching out to American society to foster greater morality. There were "Sunday Schools" created in many cities in the United States dedicated to this mission and Hubbell's became perhaps the best known and most successful. A document to be found in the archives of First Baptist reads:

"Walter S. Hubbell made for himself a national reputation by his teaching and conduct of the Hubbell Class . . . by no sensational method but by the simple exposition of regular Scripture lessons, accompanied by a cheery and hearty good fellowship."

Enrollment grew to over 1000 with average attendance of about 300.

Folks who attended other churches or no churches at all were the recipients of Christian influence and some became members of First Baptist. A tablet still in the church states that Walter S. Hubbell was for

"forty-two years a member and continuously a trustee of this church. Organizer and teacher of the Hubbell Class. . . who by his lovable personality and inspired Christian leadership made this class one of the greatest in the country and a lasting influence in the lives of thousands of men."

A second wing was later added to the church and named Hubbell Hall in honor of this man. When the church relocated to Brighton a wing was included also called Hubbell Hall and is used for many church related activities to this day. Small beginnings that were becoming large.

The church sent out missionaries to other parts of the world especially to Burma and what was then called the Belgian Congo. This commitment to service has been an important part of the congregation's existence and remains so; more will be discussed later.

MAJOR MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF FBC

125th Anniversary

FBCR celebrated 125 years of existence in 1943. Acknowledging the importance of those years, it was written, "First Baptist has had 15 pastors and 15 of its members have been

ordained for the Christian ministry. Nine men and women have entered the foreign missionary service and three the home mission service.”

Another statement of accomplishment written at the time went on to say, “What this church has meant to its members, the community and the world at large, cannot be measure, nor can the influence of its members on life of the city. We do know that we have a rich heritage.” The pride shown in these statements and the underlying commitment to adding to this heritage is evident and is part of who we are these seventy-five years later.

The celebration of 125 years for the church also pointed out that “The first mission project was in 1857 when the church organized a Sunday School at West Avenue and Prospect Street with J.F. Griffin in as Superintendent. May other missions were established in later years and at least eight of them became Rochester churches.”

World War II

Of course 1943 was a difficult year for the nation. Germany had invaded Poland four years earlier touching off World War II, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 and since that “day of infamy” the United States was, too, at war. At that time, the church had participated in what was called the Wayside Sanctuary and the church was open throughout the noon hour on Wednesdays with a minister made available. In this setting the July 28, 1943 Wayside offered prayer for those serving “the country and the cause of freedom”. Included was a prayer; “Teach us, O Lord, to see other lands and people by the light of the faith we profess.”

On November 7, 1943 a call was issued to increase giving to the World Emergency Forward Fund which included ministry to service men, aid for war prisoners and refugees, orphaned children and victims of bombing attacks. Also was mentioned that plans must be made for post-war emergencies.

The war remained an object of attention for FBCR. In May 1944 a reminder was issued “to keep letters flowing to those in the service.” In June 1944, on Father’s Day, fathers of men and women in war service were honored in the Hubbell Class. The talk acknowledged that war had impact domestically as well as internationally and looked forward to the day when it would end. Mr. Davison spoke on “Religion for Wartime – and Peace.” The class told of religious experiences of those serving the nation at home and abroad and how the men’s Bible class can serve them when they return.

Members of First Baptist were among those in combat and on September 26, 1944 word was received of the loss of Staff Sergeant John C. Milonas in Holland. It was noted that Milonas was a “former member of our (Hubbell) school and a constant attendant at the church services.” At the time, a plea was made “that God will over rule the mistakes of men to bring something better than patriotism and bigger than victory out of such service.” On October third a meeting of the Service Men’s Committee convened to address the need to offer Christmas gifts to service men and women.

In January of 1946 with the war ended, came a thank you from the War Relocation Authority. The church had made an apartment hostel for relocating Japanese-Americans. Thanks was offered to “the many who contributed time, money and household supplies . . .” to these people whose life was disrupted by the war and the false fear of Japanese-Americans. It was written that “Six different family groups have been served. Here for the first time since 1941 they have

been able to eat together and live as a family unit while they found a home and work in their new environment.”

A New Home

The twentieth century would bring new challenges to the nation, the community and to churches such as First Baptist. War, false prosperity, and years of depression brought decline. Church life in general was losing its dominant position in society. Youth were seen as beginning to revolt against convention and religion. The crises felt by downtown churches saw its members moving farther and farther into the suburbs. A study conducted by First Baptist found a number of factors making it difficult for a downtown church to survive in Rochester:

1. The strong centrifugal movement of residents toward the periphery especially among well-to-do families,
2. The obsolescence of housing at the heart of the city
3. The trend of the business section of the city has been eastward and has left the old central churches on the edge of the blighted skid row area centering on Front Street
4. The unusually heavy competition among downtown churches in Rochester. Rochester has kept alive more downtown churches for its size than probably any other city in the country
5. First Baptist has had a long history as a church for well-educated and prominent and this has reduced its mass appeal and kept it to some degree exclusive. Such people have a low birth rate and their children have a greater tendency to migrate to other areas.

In 1951 First Baptist made a momentous decision; to move out of the city and to build a new church in Brighton. A survey was conducted to determine the next chapter of church history and its report was made known on February 7, 1951. A unanimous vote was made to sell the old church property in the city and follow the population and needs of the suburbs, in this case to move to Brighton. The last service was held in the old church on June 24, 1951 and worship traveled to the Colgate Rochester Divinity School. It is interesting to realize that the divinity school that was nurtured in its beginning by the church would now nurture First Baptist for the next four years as money was raised and a new place was constructed. An article found in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle Newspaper of January 10, 1952 told of the future of much of the old church. Other churches were invited to “cart off anything they wanted that was part of the building.” Wrecking crews stripped the 133 year old wooden floor and the oak paneling Bethany Presbyterian Church took possession of the big church organ and the United Congregational Church acquired most of the pews. The building itself was now scheduled for demolition

An interesting find was made during the destruction of the old church; a bushel basket of Sunday school treasurers’ reports were found, according again to an article in the D&C. This was from one on January 21, 1952 titled, “Ham, Milk, Pickles, Pie; Oh Boy! Whatta Picnic” The article was based on records of a picnic which had been held on June 23, 1893 at Manitou Beach.

Please note that this would have been just one day short of the seventy-fifth birthday of First Baptist Rochester. An inventory, according to the article included:

- Can openers
- Lemon squeezers and lemons – 500
- Sacks (for sack races)
- Footballs (for prizes)
- A keg. . . . of 600 pickles
- 44 pounds of boned ham
- 40 dozen fried cakes
- Three gallons of milk
- A fishing rod (for a prize)
- 30 loaves of brown bread

One thousand invitations had been sent out and five women were paid one dollar a piece to “wash dishes, etc.”

A ground breaking ceremony was held on the property at the corner of Allens Creek and Clover Streets on May 13, 1954. At 3:30 of Sunday, October 24, 1954, a Date Stone Ceremony was held.

The spire was raised on January 10, 1954. Charles Deems was minister at that time and he wrote words that included the following:

“The first thing one sees from afar as he approaches our church is the spire. It rises from the ground where Sanctuary and Chapel meet. Graceful and symmetrical it stands catching rays of the sun by day, and in the darkness of night shining that all may see and think of Him whom no darkness can hide.”

In many ways this spire symbolizes the Christian faith and the aspiration of the Christian heart. The worship and work of the church on earth are evidence of our faith in Him who through His Son has called us into the service of the Kingdom. Our hope is not in the in the transience of life, nor in anything which can be seen, but in Him who above and beyond as well as within this mortal striving and struggle is Creator and Father, the Sovereign God.

As one considers the tower which forms the base, the lantern above, and the spire still higher, one thinks of the firmness and strength of foundations laid on Him who is the Foundation of all things; one thinks of form and beauty of spire expressing the beauty of holiness in Him who is “fairer than all the fair;” one thinks of the upward reach of human mind and spirit to Him who has breathed His spirit into us.

“Stand near the base of this spire. Let your glance travel upward and further still until it leaves the spire and sees the infinite sky. Overarching all our days is the infinite love and care of Him who made us, and for this ample world. Our lives are inconstant and inconsistent, lacking in spiritual beauty and symmetry. But this spire will say by day and night, in all seasons and all weathers, ‘there us One who is everlasting to everlasting. He is your light and your salvation. He is the strength of your life.’”

The church received a letter from a person who lived in the area who wished to remain anonymous. This person wrote:

“Ever since the steeple of your new church was completed I have been promising myself that some day I would write you to let you know how beautiful I think it is. And so, right now before starting the day’s work, which might lead to putting it off again, I’m going to do it.

I thought you would probably like to know that every morning as I drive by on the way to work, and again in the evening on my way home, I crane my neck out of the car window to take another look at it. I think this tall, slender spire would have been a credit to the great Sir Christopher Wren. Its beauty of line and graceful proportions never fail to give my spirits a real lift. I feel sure this lovely sight must do the same for others, too. And, in this troubled, mixed up world we live in today, that is good because:

*The church should have a tapering spire
To point to realms where sin’s forgiven
And lead men’s thoughts from earth to heaven.
. . . I like a tower.
It speaks of strength, of power –
An emblem the Church’s strength
To overcome the world at length.*

“If you would like to pass on the gist of this letter . . . please feel free to do so; but I’d prefer that you do so anonymously. . . After all I just wanted to say thank you.”

The Addition of the Chancel Cross

The stained glass cross in the chancel was given by Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert J. C. McCurdy to the newly built church in 1963. Mrs. McCurdy, a talented artist, designed the cross with the help of Mr. James O'Hara and many skilled craftsmen of Pike Stained Glass Studio.

According to the family, Mr. and Mrs. McCurdy loved flowers and their favorite was the Passion Flower. The design of the window was inspired by it. "Passion" of the Passion flower does not refer to love, but to the *Passion of Christ*. In 16th centuries, Spanish Christian missionaries this flower and adopted its unique physical structures the crucifixion.

With the Passion flower one finds radial filaments represent the Crown of Thorns. The ten petals and represent the ten faithful apostles. The top three represent the three nails and the lower five anthers five wounds.



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Looking at the cross, one can see a flower in the center and a number of purple points representing the crown of thorns worn by Jesus. Three leaf-like branches portray the Holy Trinity and the three upright marks are to symbolize Christ and the two thieves on Calvary.

Gil and Katie McCurdy, son and daughter-in-law of the original designer, commissioned to have the cross cleaned and repaired in 2004. Valerie O'Hara, daughter of James Pike and the current owner of Pike Stained Glass Studio, and John Bero, architect and preservation expert, worked together to preserve the cross as the magnificent symbol of passion that our church holds for Jesus, our Savior. It continues to inspire all who view it.

Printed in the Messenger are the following words from the minister, Charles Deems about the cross:

“Nothing in our new church surpasses in beauty the stained glass cross in the chancel. It was more than a happy thought which came to those responsible for it; for in beauty of proportion, design, and color it is evidence of inspiration from above. There is no Christian symbol as meaningful, and therefore none as appropriate, as the cross. It portrays the love of God for men, the dedication and vicarious sacrifice of the lord Jesus Christ. It reminds all who take the name “Christian” of the Master’s words, “if any man would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”

“This cross is unique. There is no ornate symbolism wrought into it, because none is needed. The cross itself is the symbol. The colors remind us that as light is “broken” or diffused through a prism, so the body of Him who is the Light of the world was broken on Calvary. The beautiful colors compose the “white” light, and the beautiful character of our Lord is composed of love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All of the qualities of “highest, holiest manhood” and deity meet in Him.

In common with Protestant tradition, no figure is upon the cross. He, who suffered its shame and agony, passed through death into life eternal. We revere and worship Christ, the living Lord, who said, “Lo, I am with you always.”

To each individual worshipper the cross will convey its own message. Stained glass, like music and painting, appeals directly to our emotions. Here is a symphony of color with the predominating reds and blues proclaiming the two-fold nature of our Lord, the human and the divined. And it will also say to us, “this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal a natured must put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There was sincere recognition that this move, while the right one, was one that was taken with a sense of commitment and even bravery, but always there seemed to be optimism and hope. One person declared, “. . . in the history of many churches a building campaign, or some radical change in the life of the church which summons the members to greater activity and self-denial has been a spiritual blessing.”

There was a radio broadcast at that time called “Main Street” hosted by Al Sisson. The show of October 21, 1954 on radio station WHAM addressed the promise of the new church. The following is from that show:

“Dr. Deems traced for us the meaning of a New Church in a New Area for that for that church. . . Such important objectives are in the program as A Need in the Community, A Place for all who choose to worship, a Place to carry on Religious Education, especially for the Youth of the community, and today, the Church has a much broader outlook, World-wide in fact. . . Plus all these important factors, Dr. Deems emphasized the importance of Friendship, A Church Home with interest in its People as a prime requisite . . . All these facets are a part of the story of First Baptist, and its plan for change.”

Anticipating the move to the new campus, the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle newspaper wrote on September 23, 1954, “. . . when the First Baptist membership moves into its handsome

new church . . . it will mark the beginning of a bright new chapter in a church history which began 136 years ago.” More acknowledgement of the significance of the move by FBCR was noted in the September 30, 1954 issue of the Brighton –Pittsford Post. That publication declared that “an added change of recent years is the recognition of broad concepts of religious education . . . emphasizing its community offering in religion, rather than a concrete, severe denominational intent.” The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle on September 23 made mention of the exterior, writing, “the exterior is over-sized hand-made white brick made by the same Maryland company that turned out the bricks for the White House.”

All of these mentions were, of course important but it was the words of Dr. Deems that captured the soul of the new edifice. He wrote,

“More and more, however, we shall be thinking not only of a new building, important and exciting as that is, but our part as individuals and as a congregation in the work of the Christian enterprise exceeds. Constantly we should be reminding ourselves that a beautiful building with many facilities is not enough. It would be unfortunate if having built as well as we are able we should look upon our church as a kind of interesting hobby or a pleasant social gathering place.”

All of the work, anticipation, and dedication came to some fruition with a week-long celebration of the opening of the new church. On that Sunday there was a service of praise with participation by ministers of other churches at 3:30 in the afternoon. The Reverend Wilbour Eddy Saunders, president of CRDS preached that day with yet another sign of connection between his institution and this congregation. Additionally there was an open house for members, friends and visitors from 4:30 until 8:00p.m. The following Wednesday a dinner was held for members.

When Dr. Saunders preached, he captured both the material and the spiritual blessings God granted to the congregation.

“This is no exquisitely beautiful church home where we come at the end of each week to enjoy our family comforts. This is rather a new workshop where superior tools demand an improved product. The loveliness of his sanctuary is so great it might for a moment seem that only ‘good’ people could with propriety fill its pews. How we shall miss the mark if this is not a place which attracts the profligate and the sinner to find here the gospel of a redeeming Grace which sent His Son not for the righteous but to call sinners to repentance”

These are interesting, challenging and inspiring words spoken to the church of the 1950’s given the history of FBCR – a church populated by some of Rochester’s leading citizens and the place of worship of so many clergy. The message is just as important now as we celebrate 200 years.

Addition of the Kaiser Wing

More building and dedication was in store when the ground breaking ceremony was made for the Albert D. Kaiser Educational building on September 25, 1960. Who was Dr. Kaiser?

He was born in Philadelphia on November 20, 1887, but was brought to Rochester by his family one year later. His father came here to take on responsibilities as a professor at the Rochester Theological Seminary.

Making his home in Rochester, Kaiser rose to become one of its most valued citizens. First it was off to Harvard where he received his medical degree and then home to begin his life as a

major contributor to the health of the community. In 1945 he gave up a lucrative career in pediatrics to become Rochester's health officer. His work included supporting the use of the polio vaccine. Dr. Kaiser served as the president of the Rochester Hospital Fund which raised eight million dollars for hospital construction. He worked hard to prepare the launching of the University of Rochester's \$10,700,000 development fund. It is likely that the energies he expended in these works led to his first heart attack. Continuing his good works, Kaiser became nationally known as a medical administrator and he continued his work in spite of his health.

Death came to Dr. Kaiser in 1955 as a result of a second heart attack. An article in the Rochester Times-Union newspaper called him one of "the most loved and admired (persons) of Rochester. The Rochester Academy of Medicine created a medal – the Albert David Kaiser Medal in his memory. The president of the University of Rochester, Dr. Cornelis W. de Kiewiet spoke of him, saying

“. . . he is deserving of an enduring memorial . . . the best memorial would be to ensure the continuation of his life's work. Ours is the duty to turn his modesty into fame, his reticence into a living memorial, his noble spirit into an enduring reminder of how a man can serve his God and his fellow man."

FBCR took one step in the spirit of Dr. de Kiewiet's words when it named the Kaiser wing. Hopefully knowledge of Dr. Kaiser's remarkable life will come to mind when our people enter that part of the church from time to time.

The funding for this addition was achieved through a capital funds drive and at the ground breaking it was announced that the target of \$225,000 had been reached in gifts and pledges. The new church along with this new addition was now to be paid for without the occurrence of any debt to the church. The Kaiser building was dedicated at the close of the worship service on May 5, 1961.

FURTHER WORK OF FBC

This was not to be a congregation that wanted to rest on its achievements. A report was issued by its leadership in November of 1960 and titled, "The First Baptist Church and the Challenge of the Future." The report began with those things to be grateful for"

- A new church building
- New, dedicated members
- Church school attendance was up
- There was increased mission giving (in relation to the current expenses our beneficence budget is one third of them)

Then the report continued to discuss what to anticipate:

"but we cannot allow church to remain where it is . We should create a greater sense of fellowship among our members not just in the sense of friendliness but a mutual commitment to each other and where our concern for each other shows itself in a readiness to bear one another's burdens."

The report continued that the church should "... work for a deeper understanding of our Christian calling. . . to be more alive to our Christian responsibilities in our neighborhood . . .

and to participated more fully in cooperative enterprises of the Baptist Churches in this area.” In this regard, one should consider the support FBCR offered missionaries and mission work in general. Some of these were:

- Dr. Donald Deer who was the son of a former minister of the church, Dr. Roy Deer, and translated the New Testament into the Kituba language which is widely used in central Africa and is the official language of the Republic of Congo. He became a theological professor at the Evangelical Seminary in Zaire. Among other contributions, the church bought a new VW squareback auto for his and his wife’s use.
- During the postwar years the church helped the Reverend and Mrs. James W. McBride to maintain a mission at Weirton, West Virginia in the Appalachians
- Dr. John Skoglund and his family represented First Baptist working in Bangalore, India. One of the ways he was helped was when the church provided car expenses to help get his students to church on Sundays.
- Dr. John L. Espy and his wife worked in Hong Kong
- A Board of Christian Service was instrumental in restoring and reselling two houses on Columbia Avenue in Rochester.
- Members of FBCR helped repair a home in Elmira after the devastating floods of 1972. Workers from the church were involved in painting and scrubbing. Additionally there were financial contributions of \$1926.50 made to facilitate recovery
- Also in 1972 and in response to flood recovery FBCR provided for the cleaning and repair of choir robes for First Baptist Church of Elmira.
- These examples, of course are not the end of the story of the generosity of First Baptist Church of Rochester.

The 1960’s would see a dramatic change in American society compared to the decade in which the shift to Brighton occurred. A civil rights movement emerged after the passage of 100 years from the Civil War and what many hoped would be the full citizenship of African Americans and more importantly the equal and just treatment of these people. The Civil Rights movement would see a period of schism that in many ways shook the nation and caused Christians to reexamine their ideas. Women sought new and equal status in the country. The war in Vietnam caused additional questioning. The Baby Boom Generation began to speak out and often to question organized religion itself. The Reverend Lee J. Beynon now the minister of FBCR was part of a panel that dealt with how clergy should deal with achieving integration. The question was posed whether Christians should participate in demonstrations and even civil disobedience. Reverend Beynon endorsed the American Baptist Convention’s stand encouraging its members to demonstrate concerns for equal opportunities by nonviolent resistance. He pointed out that FBCR has “encouraged and asked for fair employment practices and refuses to deal with organizations known to discriminate.” He went on to say, “the Christian owes his final allegiance to the law of God, and to it he must try to swear his ultimate allegiance. The common denominator of any action in Civil Rights must be from the service of love which will not tolerate violence.” Another voice that spoke to the discord of the time was that of Wilbour E. Saunders when he was serving as interim minister. He said, “When you enter the church, today, look at the cross before you! Ask yourself what it means! The world seethes with discord, vindictiveness, bitterness – Vietnam, Fight vs. Kodak. The church should be an instrument of God’s reconciliation, sowing love where there is hatred, righteousness where there is evil.”

Related to the war in Vietnam were a number of activities. The senior highs held a fund-raising pancake breakfast to raise money to cover a trip to Toronto. This was no pleasure outing as the purpose of the trip was to visit with church representatives who were in Canada to escape the draft. Several weeks of study of the issue of war and peace, the peace movement in the United States, issues of the Vietnam War and recent alternatives to the draft were to be completed. In fact two young men from FBCR had recently applied for Conscientious Objector status. The United Church Women set noon of each day as a time to pray for peace in Vietnam. On May 11, 1972 a workshop was scheduled to study the war. There was to be a need to be better informed about the situation in Indochina. The workshop was led by a professor from the University of Rochester. (the name of whom was not recorded)

Tragedy at FBC

All did not go smoothly for the congregation of FBCR and its minister. One event led to the darkest time in the history of FBCR. On December 29, 1966 the Reverend Lee J. Beynon committed suicide in the basement of the church. Reverend Beynon was the 17th pastor of the church, beginning his time in December, 1960. He received his formal education at several colleges including graduating with a BD degree from CRDS. He was praised for his “abilities as a preacher, as a pastoral counselor, and administrator.” While he was at a church in Holyoke, Massachusetts he was troubled by the degree of juvenile delinquency so he started a hot rod club to give a positive outlet for youths.

The years in which he served at FBCR were tumultuous ones for the United States. He had been active in the Civil Rights movement participating in the 1963 March on Washington. Along with several other Rochester clergy he was known to be seeking an understanding of the war in Vietnam and was working to find ways to a negotiated peace. There was harsh criticism of his work in these areas and he began to be harassed by his critics in the church by way of phone calls and anonymous letters. He was forced to get an unlisted phone number.

This harassment took its toll. A member of the congregation said that Beynon had been showing signs of pressure for some time. It was said, “He was a very sensitive man who tried to take the world’s problems collectively and individually on his own shoulders.”

The phone calls continued and so did Reverend Beynon’s resolve that the church must be involved “in social, economic and political decisions.” Opposition to him grew with some members advocating that the congregation withhold their pledge or reduce the amount of future ones. In November of 1966, he announced his intention to seek other employment but this wasn’t good enough for some. An anonymous letter was circulated falsely attacking Beynon’s character and urging that he not be “allowed to go” but be “put out.” The next month he took his life.

Brighter Days

The 150th anniversary of the church came in 1968. A letter sent out by Martha Lays told of the festivities to come to celebrate the 150 years. The letter advertised “a gala community

celebration.” It’s worth noticing now that both the current celebration - The Jubilee – and that of half a century ago deemed it important to make events community wide. The letter told of a pork and sauerkraut supper that would be held (\$1.50 per adult; \$.75 per child under 12) featuring “a real home cooked pork dinner with real live (emphasis in the original) mashed potatoes and gravy.” The sauerkraut was to be donated by the Silver Floss Company of Phelps, N. Y., there would be homemade pies and two men had been assigned potato mashing duty.

First Baptist had maintained a Nursery School using classrooms in the Kaiser wing, but demographics especially declining birthrates and increased inflation had changed affecting the efficacy of this endeavor. Additionally there were now no children of members of the host church enrolled in the school.

RECENT WORK

In more recent years First Baptist has maintained its commitment to service projects in Rochester.

Habitat for Humanity

One example is the involvement in Habitat for Humanity through the Brighton Coalition of Churches. Money is raised to help in the building of good housing for those in need in Rochester. Funds from the Mission budget of the church as well as from the sale of Easter candy, Thanksgiving pies and pecans are dedicated to the construction projects that come around every three years. Additionally church members pick up a hammer and help in the building efforts themselves.

Rochester Area Hospitality Network

This organization overseen by St. Paul’s Episcopal Church helps homeless individuals and families. They point out their mission as a “not-for- profit, interfaith, culturally competent organization that assists homeless families to achieve sustainable independence by supporting them with tailored services including shelter. . . “In the past FBCR has contributed funds to the organization, volunteers spent overnights at the facility to help with any needs that arose, provided meals, and staffed Saturdays at the Family Center.

Northeast Area Development

NEAD was established in 1965 as a “non-profit neighborhood based community development organization.” Members have worked at rehabilitating houses, supporting the Freedom School, making financial and other contributions to the school. Some house rehabilitation has been done by members of the church.

What if...?

Don't we all play the "what if" game from time to time? What if a wealthy relative we didn't even know we had left us a fortune? What if the series of numbers on a slip of paper matched the lottery and we were suddenly millionaires? What would we do with the money especially what would we do to improve the world? Pastor Brent couldn't promise us fortunes but he did promise that we could receive a one hundred dollar bill to put to good use to make a change.

A series of fascinating projects emerged. Some of them included Kid's summer snack packs for Cameron Ministry; diapers for Cameron Ministry infants; "I believe you" cards to send to women victimized by sexual assault; beautification efforts in the Beechwood Neighborhood; Center for Youth crisis nursery; St. Matthews closet clothing distribution; food and clothing for the Center for Youth Center, especially meeting needs of LGBTQ youth; delivery of geraniums to the Friendly Home. There will be and are projects emerging as of the time of this writing and the whole effort is leading to more engagement and development of Missional Community activities.

HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF THE FBC COMMUNITY

Elizabeth (Betsy) Ratcliffe Sayer

The daughter of Frances and John Ratcliff. She wrote that she attended Sunday School as long as she can remember and that the "taste of juice and saltines was so delicious". Betsy was in numerous Advent plays as an angel. She mentioned two particular memories of these performances; ribbon candy given out to the kids, and the time when she fainted during a performance. A creative way for learning the books of the Bible was engineered by her dad and grandfather. They made small pieces of wood for each book of the Bible as well as a small book shelf to house them. Betsy wrote "It was like a toy, as we put the books in order, painted and wrote the name of the book on the 'spine' of the piece of wood." She was baptized when she was 12 and mentioned some of the "kids" she went to Sunday school, with names known to the church like Steve McIntosh, Betsy Ginkel, Ron Trolley to name a few.

Her mom and dad were always active with mom cooking and serving with Martha Lays and dad always a dishwasher. Betsy told how she views it a great service that FBCR has a dedicated space for Troop 77 of the Boy Scouts and that her father was a Scoutmaster for the group.

Her grandfather, Frederic Andrews Ratcliff was instrumental in the building of the current church building.

The best part of the message from Betsy was when she wrote;

"My parents were/are a great example to me of serving and helping others and were always helping with a project or two, cleaning up the grounds, preparing meals, fundraising, etc. . . FBC will always be special to our family for the memories of baptisms, christenings, weddings and memorial services."

Dr. Richard Wien

Dick mentioned that he has been a member of FBCR for 13 years and that he was a member of the search committee for a new pastor. That statement covers a small amount of the time and efforts he puts in at the church.

The person Dick mentioned who has stood out in his mind is Esther Cable, saying that “Esther is an example to me of true disciple of Christ.” Dick pointed out that Esther and her husband had served as missionaries in the Congo but that “more importantly” she had been an advocate for Human Rights, serving for many years as a “court observer looking out for those who might not have the social capital to stand up for themselves.”

Audrey Batchelor

Audrey dates her membership at FBCR back to 1975 and considers her favorite memory to be “the wonderful people I have met over the years and being in the choir.” Among the many people Audrey has mentioned as being important to the church are;

- Millie Lewis and her husband for their support. The Lewis Fund has been so appreciated and Hubbell Circle meetings and luncheons at Millie’s home “were always special”.
- Katie and Gilbert McCurdy for their fellowship and beautiful cross in the sanctuary.
- Elinore Basnett for whom the library is named who Audrey remembered for her willingness to always participate and for her friendship.

Dr. Kenneth and Sally Dodgson

These comments come from Ken Dodgson but I chose to list them under the names of both of these unique people. Although Sally has moved on to whatever awaits us all, it is almost impossible to think of the Dodgsons as anything but a team.

Ken Dodgson dates his membership with FBCR back to the fall of 1945. This membership was interrupted from the spring of 1948 until 1981 when he and Sally returned from missionary duty to the United States. They became members then and remained members, until Sally’s death in 2017 and with Ken’s active membership continuing on. In 1940, while a student at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Dr. Dodgson was the Student Assistant Minister and Director of the Baptist Youth Fellowship. He points out that he valued the mentorship of then Senior Pastor Dr. William Davison for whom Ken felt great fondness and who he credits with helping to develop a public speaking voice. Dr. Davison’s “principles were simple –speak slowly, enunciate clearly, and project your voice to the person in the furthest pew.”

Ken wrote, “With respect to outstanding experiences, it occurred with Rev. Bowden’s presiding over Sally’s memorial service on April 1, 2017. His message was based on a conversation he had had with Sally, during which she had shared her thoughts about a series of four art pieces, depicting Toledo, Spain done in 1577 by the Greek painter, El Greco. The first

depicts Christ on the Cross. In subsequent paintings, the cross becomes smaller and the town of Toledo becomes more prominent. In the fourth painting there is no cross. Toledo fills the canvas. Sally's point was that the cross was still there. Pastor Brent built the service around that concept.

(NOTE: I have worked to place comments provided by members in this section without any intrusion by me. But in this most recent example I have to say that it is typical of Dr. Dodgson to have his "outstanding experience" centered on his late wife and her and his faith in Christianity.)

Jo Ann Trolley

When you read what Jo Ann has listed as the important involvements she has experienced at FBCR you might wonder how the church would have survived with her and her family. The Trolley's had recently moved to Rochester after spending two years in France where Richard Trolley had served as a dentist in the United States Air Force. They happened upon FBCR after searching the phone book for the nearest Baptist Church. The first Sunday in which they were in attendance they found themselves seated in front of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Strasenburg who greeted them warmly and offered a tour of the church and since Jo Ann was pregnant they highlighted the nursery and Sunday school rooms.

The Trolley's joined the church in January 1957, the same day that their baby Ron was dedicated. FBCR has remained Jo Ann's church for the past 62 years. The list of her involvements reads in part;

- Teaching youth Sunday School and then she was a first grade and kindergarten teacher in public schools she taught that age group at FBCR for many years.
- She was a leader and organizer of the Kendrick Club, a couples group that met monthly
- Jo Ann was a trustee.
- She served for a time on the Board of Christian Education and was its chair and organized the adult forum.
- She and her family attended Family Cluster groups each Thursday night in the late '60's and early '70's.
- She has been on three pulpit committees
- For twenty years she has added her voice to the choir.
- She served on the Lewis Fund Committee for 3 years
- Mrs. Trolley was the chair of the Hubbell Remington Circle and has assisted in providing health kits for the Cameron Ministry
- She was instrumental in starting a group for seniors of the church and this group has come to be known as Eldergarten

There are more contributions to add to this list, but one would seem to find that her greatest joys in being a member of this church would be related to family. All three of her children were raised in the church and two of them with their families have been members. Her daughter was married at FBCR. Husband Richard was as active as she serving on the Board of Ushers for some forty years. He and Wally Pensgen always cooked the hot dogs for church picnics. Her daughter was church clerk, son was vice-moderator and moderator and daughter-in-law has

taught Sunday School for eighteen years. Jo Ann and Richard received the Faith in Action award 15 years ago.

An important contribution to this narrative which she provided was this:

“In times of upset at church someone asked me why I stayed. I told them ‘this is my church. It does not belong to the minister. It is where my devotion lies; my friends are here, my memories are here; some of my family is here and my church family are all here.’”

Jack and Flora Holt

After they married, the Holts looked for an American Baptist Church feeling that they needed to be part of a “progressive” church “which fit with (their) values and (their) religious understanding of life. They then joined South Avenue Baptist and assumed leadership roles as they “continued to struggle with confronting the ‘moral ethical values’ which challenged” the times. The Love-Justice ethic was part of their mantra.

Unfortunately South Avenue had to close and the Holts, after some searching, found that FBCR was a good fit and they became members in 2003. The Holts now say they enjoyed Sunday Service and the outreach programs led by Pastor Brent Bowden. They say that their “relations with former and current members have meant a great deal...”

Cal Reynolds

Cal and his wife first came to First Baptist Rochester in 1998. They valued the warm reception they received and that they seemed to click with their new friends. Especially Sally Dodgson stands out in memory and the Reynolds say they will never forget her cordiality.

Cal has made it a work of joy to be the planter of trees on FBCR’s campus. There are those which he planted from seeds and saplings of English Oak. These oaks came from acorns that originated in England’s Sherwood Forest and now stand fifteen feet high. Thanks to Cal’s care including watering them in summers they are growing vigorously. Cal says that he enjoys trimming trees, bushes and flowering perennials on church grounds. Additionally there are six young white cedar trees transplanted from Saranac Lake in 2003 that are strong and healthy thanks to Cal’s nursing them through the years. Cal modestly stated that he has a green thumb!