

A Short History of Temple Baptist Church, 1923 - 2023*

In the aftermath of World War I and a great influenza epidemic, a small group of "dedicated" Christians in Wilmington determined that another Baptist church was needed at the eastern end of the city, an area known as "Carolina Heights." From their deliberations, on September 3, 1923, Temple Baptist Church was created with 184 charter members. Over the next five months, the homeless church held services in the New Hanover High School auditorium, Trinity Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant. On February 15, 1924, the church purchased the Christian Science Chapel at 17th and Market Streets for its first permanent location. Two days later, over three hundred people attended the first worship service. In the years that followed, Temple grew spiritually and materially. According to the church's historian for that period, "these were days of prosperity."

In the 1930s, the euphoria associated with the birth and rapid growth of the new church was challenged by the ravages of the Great Depression. Although burdened with great debt, through faith in God and the great "personal sacrifice of the members," the church endured. For Temple's tenth anniversary in 1933, Dr. Arthur J. Barton (1930- 41), the current pastor, wrote a history in which he acknowledged the difficulties of these years and lauded the congregation for its sacrifices and continued faith in God's guidance. In the years that followed, the church, indeed the entire world, was confronted with another crisis in the form of World War II. Temple contributed to the war effort in various ways providing food and other supplies to wounded soldiers, USO personnel, and even the liberated peoples of Western Europe. Despite the difficulties of the era, Temple Baptist Church continued to grow and prosper. In 1944, the mortgage on the church property was burned and Temple was for the first time in its short history free of debt. When Temple celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1948, the membership had grown to over seven hundred, while almost \$400,000 was earmarked for missions and other causes. Perhaps the most important decision Temple made during this era was to sell the property at 17th and Market to build a new church. The new site, which was purchased for \$20,000, was just a stone's throw away at 18th and Market. The New Building Fund Committee set about the task of drawing up plans for a sanctuary with a seating capacity of 750 and a Sunday School building which would accommodate 850.

Temple Baptist Church emerged from the chaos of World War II with a new sense of optimism. The God-directed decision to build a new church at 18th and Market would prove to be providential. As Temple looked to the future, the church's historian recorded that "disaster struck." On Sunday morning, March 16, 1952, the church was destroyed by a great fire. Although records and some other small items were salvaged, the church itself was considered a total loss. The membership, however, did not allow itself to be consumed

by despair. Services were held at St. Andrews Covenant Presbyterian Church from the day of the fire until the new church was ready for occupancy in November of 1953. Under the cornerstone of the new church was placed a copper box containing a list of members and some coins and newspapers of the day. As Temple's members entered the new church, they "expressed their gratitude to God that through His leadership their dream had come true." During this decade, Temple's visibility within the community was enhanced through radio and television ministries, the creation of a ministry for silent people, and salaried nursery workers who were employed to care for the many young children during worship services. The church also sponsored a Boy Scout Troop, a Cub Scout Pack, and an Explorer Unit, while its youth participated in local sports such as basketball and baseball. One of the most important developments of the period was the decision to use land donated along Highway 17 to create a mission in Ogden. The infant mission would soon become Ogden Baptist Church.

Temple's growth in the years that followed was truly remarkable. Not unlike the mythical phoenix which rose from the ashes to new life, Temple literally rose from the ashes to become a vibrant spiritual entity in the Wilmington area. On September 9, 1973, the church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. On this occasion, Dr. Del Parkerson (1969-81) lauded the pastors, staff, and membership of the first fifty years of the church's history for their leadership and perseverance during the time of the Great Depression, World War II, and the great conflagration of 1952. According to Dr. Parkerson, the church had "never stumbled or faltered" in the service of the local community and in its support of Christian missions around the world. By the mid-1960s, Temple's membership roll had grown to over 1400, while the average attendance in Sunday School exceeded 600. Even though the church fabric was relatively new, there were many improvements and occasional repairs. The pews were refinished, the ceiling raised, new carpeting and stained-glass windows were installed along with a magnificent pipe organ which took Temple's music ministry to new heights. Several young men were ordained to the ministry and a mission was founded in the Scotts Hill area which eventually became Scotts Hill Baptist Church. In other areas, the debt on the church was paid off and a note burning ceremony was held. Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the era was a commitment to build a Christian Activity Center. To that end, a fund-raising program called "Together We Build" was initiated.

The efforts of these years bore much fruit in the last two decades of the century. Under the leadership of Dr. James Whetstone (1982-2004), Temple's programs thrived for many years. Foremost among the accomplishments of the era was the purchase of ten acres of land at 17th Street Extension and George Anderson Drive for the construction of the Christian Activity Center replete with picnic shelter, ballfield, chapel, gymnasium, kitchen, and other appurtenances. For over twenty years, the CAC was the centerpiece of

Temple's outreach program within the community. During this period, Rev. Jimmy Rogers was called to be the church's Minister of Music. Rev. Rogers instituted a pageant called the "Living Christmas Tree" which became, arguably, southeastern North Carolina's most popular holiday attraction. Centered around a huge artificial tree which stretched to the ceiling with choir members as ornaments, this celebration of the Lord's birth attracted thousands of onlookers.

The last twenty-five years of the church's history have not been without significant challenges. Destructive hurricanes, an aging and somewhat smaller congregation, fiscal issues, and a serious pandemic have tested the church's resolve. Despite these problems, Temple Baptist has survived and continues to serve its own and the community in a variety of ways. Under the leadership of Dr. Mark Gaskins (2016-present), new outreach initiatives such as Helping Hands and the Engage ministries have been created, while Logan Cartwright has brought a fresh spirit to Temple's music ministry. The Board of Deacons continues to provide leadership for the church and assistance for its members. Women, always important in the ministries of the church, now serve side by side with the men as deacons. Recently, in response to the growing diversity of the Wilmington area, Temple, working closely with Rev. Ernesto Gomez, helped create an onsite Hispanic Ministry for the Spanish speakers of the community.

On September 10, 2023, Temple Baptist Church will celebrate a hundred years of existence. During that period of time, eleven full-time pastors and countless staff members and dedicated Christian men and women have labored to build a church which would serve as a base from which to spread the word of God throughout the Wilmington area. Any number of catastrophes---the Great Depression, World War II, the great conflagration of 1952, destructive storms, and a terrible pandemic among others--have threatened that work. Although bruised and battered at times, the church, through its faith in God, has persevered and continues to serve as a bright light in a troubled era. On the occasion of Temple Baptist's centennial celebration, we remember and honor the work of all those, past and present, who played a part in the realization of this dream.

Larry Usilton

*All quoted material can be found in the unpublished *Chronological History of Temple Baptist Church 1923-1998*.