

## **HISTORY: FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF DALLAS**

First Baptist Church has been a pacesetter landmark institution in downtown Dallas since its founding in 1868.

In July of that year, eight women and three men banded together to form a fledgling fellowship following a two-week revival led by evangelist W.W. Harris in the Masonic Lodge at Lamar Street and Ross Avenue. Harris, nicknamed “Spurgeon” after the famous Baptist minister Charles Haddon Spurgeon, served as the church’s first pastor on a part-time basis while continuing to work as an evangelist.



At the time, Dallas was a booming frontier town of approximately 3,000 with a sordid reputation for gambling, violence and crime. Two or three earlier Baptist churches had struggled and failed, and another moved out of downtown. But with God’s providence, the church’s perseverance in its steadfast commitment to the Bible and strong preaching that applied its precepts for daily living, First Baptist continued to grow.

Over the next quarter century, First Baptist had seven more pastors. Early members of the congregation included the Rev. and Mrs. R.C. Buckner, founders of Buckner Orphans Home; and Mary Hill Davis, a longtime leader of the Texas Women’s Missionary Union, in whose honor the Mary Hill Davis Offering for state missions was named.

In 1872, the small congregation paid \$6,000 for its first building on Akard Street. And in 1891, workers laid the cornerstone for the present sanctuary, which cost \$90,000.

In September 1897, Dr. George Washington “G.W.” Truett became First Baptist’s ninth pastor, ushering in an era of unprecedented stability. Under Dr. Truett, the church grew from some 700 members to more than 7,000, making it the largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention.

As the congregation expanded, some members expressed interest in moving to the suburbs. “We will build up rather than out,” Dr. Truett responded.

Under Dr. Truett’s leadership, the sanctuary was remodeled and expanded – first in 1907, and again in 1925, when an education facility was built that now bears his name. In 1941, a second balcony was added to the sanctuary.

Dr. Truett served as pastor for 47 years. He was one of the most influential religious leaders in the country, drawing a crowd of 15,000 in 1920 to a speech he gave about religious freedom on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. He also helped found Texas Baptist Memorial Hospital, now known as Baylor University Medical Center. At Dr. Truett's funeral in 1944, 6,000 people filled the sanctuary to overflowing.

Later that year, after a short period of transition, Dr. Wallie Amos "W.A." Criswell took over as pastor and, like Dr. Truett, began to put his own, unique stamp on the church. Early in his ministry, he began to preach through the Bible, taking 18 years to complete the series. He championed the inerrancy of Scripture and wrote 54 books, including "Why I Believe the Bible is Literally True."

The Rev. Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Drive Life," called Dr. Criswell the "greatest American pastor of the 20th century." Jimmy Draper, former associate pastor under Dr. Criswell, said, "He was one of the easiest men to love I've ever been around."

Dr. Criswell inherited inadequate facilities and began a program of aggressive expansion. The church bought or built seven major buildings on six city blocks. Although relocation continued to come up as a topic of discussion, Dr. Criswell said, "We are downtown because we choose to be downtown."

Under his visionary leadership, the church formed many new ministries, such as Criswell College, KCBI Radio and First Baptist Academy.

Many well-known figures of American Christianity have been members of First Baptist, including the Rev. Billy Graham for more than half a century.

The completion of the Criswell Center, a multipurpose facility that cost more than \$48 million to build in 2006, solidified the church's commitment to downtown Dallas. And new Pastor Dr. Robert Jeffress, who was called in 2007, has only echoed that determination.

Like Dr. Criswell, he inherited aging buildings. And like Dr. Criswell, he has built on First Baptist's reputation as a beacon of Bible teaching while aggressively working to improve the church facilities.

"The finest facility in the heart of downtown Dallas ought to be a worship center dedicated to almighty God," said Dr. Jeffress.